**EPHESIANS**

**“Will the *Real* Church Please Stand Up?”**

It’s Month #22 as we body surf through the de-mystifying of all 66 books of this tome which in the 5th century was first called the Bible.

Written by 40-some authors, in three different languages, over 1,600 years, it defies the 2nd Law of Thermodynamics by holding to one subject –- God’s loving, unwavering pursuit of us sinners in order to have a peaceful, personal relationship with us now and forever.

The 39 books of the Old Testament, divided into The Law (The Torah), The Prophets and The Hagiographa (holy writings), capture history from Creation to Christ’s birth 2,000 years ago. The 27 books of the New Testament consist of the Gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke, John), the Acts of the Apostles, the Letters to the early churches and the Revelation. The NT opens with the earth-birth of God the Son, wearing #2 in the Trinity’s lineup, and concludes with the sweeping, prophetic vision God gave John about the last days on Earth as we know it followed by eternity as God knows it.

Is the Bible a divine safe to be cracked only by holy Houdinis? Or is it still user-friendly two millennia after its Leading Man exited this planet? Is it a reliable roadmap for rational people like us?

A client/bud recently e-mailed me, “What you BELIEVE about God will determine what you DO and HOW you live. Furthermore, what you DO reveals what you BELIEVE about God, regardless of what you SAY.” Only *clients* and Liz can get away with that tough-love talk!

When it comes to values in the 90s, there’s enough skepticism to fill the Titanic. People don’t know WHAT to believe. Most are “absolutely” convinced there is no “absolute truth!” Once Pilate, Roman governor of occupied Israel, asked Jesus (under arrest and about to be crucified), **“What *is* truth?”** (John 18:38)

We concede that it’s the opposite of a lie. Even Wolf Blitzer knows that. But WHO decides what’s truth? Jesus said, “I am the Way, *the* Truth and the Life.” Can He get away with that! Was He lying?

In his *The Artful Dodger: A Skeptic Confronts Christianity*, Alan Scholes writes: “My dad stared at me .... ‘Are you trying to tell me God will send a man to hell, even though he's lived a good moral life, just because he didn't happen to believe in Jesus Christ?’ …

"’And what about all those people who never even heard of Jesus Christ or the Bible?’ he said. ‘Do you really think it's fair for a man who was not aware of the Ten Commandments or the Golden Rule to be condemned by laws he never knew existed?’ … I simply cannot believe in a God who would be so unjust!’

“… My dad was (and is) the most moral and good man I have ever known. …Was it really fair for God to condemn a good man like my dad, just because he couldn't accept all the doctrines of Christianity?

“… (later) I picked up a book called *Death in the City* written by a contemporary Christian philosopher, Francis Schaeffer … (who) quoted a portion of Paul's letter to the Romans (ch. 2): ‘We know God is right when He judges people who do such things as these. But you, my friend, do these very things yourself for which you pass judgment on others! Do you think you will escape God's judgment?’

“Schaeffer explained with the following illustration: Imagine each baby is born with an invisible tape recorder hung around his neck. Imagine these are special recorders that record only when moral judgments are made. … whenever a person makes such a statement as ‘She's such a gossip,’ or ‘He's so lazy’…

“The scene shifts, and we see all the people of the world standing before God at the end of time. ‘God, it's not fair for You to judge me,’ say some. ‘I didn't *know* about Christ. No one taught me the Ten Commandments. I never read the Sermon on the Mount.

“God speaks. ‘Very well. Since you claim *not* to know My laws, I will set aside My perfect standard of righteousness. Instead I will judge you on this.’ And as He pushes the button on the recorder, the person listens with growing horror as his own voice pours forth a stream of condemnation toward those around him...’She shouldn't be doing this.’ ‘He was wrong in that’ -- thousands of moral judgments.

“When the tape ends, God says, ‘*This* will be the basis of My judgment: how well have you kept the moral standards you proved that you *understood* by constantly *applying* them to those around you. Here you accused someone of lying, yet have you ever stretched the truth?’ … And every person will be silent. For *no* one has consistently lived up to the standard he demands of *others*.

“… Looking back on my years as a student at San Francisco State, …the radical students who proclaimed ideas farthest from those in the Bible were the quickest to complain about hypocrites in the church. … I saw that God had taken this universal moral value and turned it around on man as the basis of his accountability.

“… One evening I watched TV with both fascination and repulsion as an evangelist laid out in graphic detail every Bible verse that speaks of the horror of eternal separation awaiting all who disobey God. ’Why does the Bible have to say that some will go to hell?’ I thought.

“… But a new thought occurred to me: What *did* I wish God were like? … Did I really want God to smile down on the Charles Mansons and Adolph Hitlers and say, ‘That's okay, children. Do whatever turns you on, as long as you're having a good time?’

“No. If He were like that, I couldn't respect Him, much less worship Him. I realized I, too, was guilty of inconsistency. What I really had been wishing was that God would grade ‘on the curve,’ with the cut-off just below my behavior and that of my friends, so that we would be accepted, while all those ‘bad people’ would not.

“I really had only two choices: I could demand that God lower His standards so far that everyone, no matter how evil, would be accepted (in which case He would cease to be a *moral* God), or I could take Him as He is, *a holy, just and fair judge* who *must* hold men responsible when they violate what they know is right.

“At about the time I was wrestling with these ideas, my dad began to read the Bible seriously for the first time. Gradually he, too, began to

realize that God was not unfair and inconsistent, but that he, my

father, was the one (along with the rest of humanity) who was

hypocritical.

“During his study my dad began to pray, ‘God, I realize I haven't been as good and moral as I thought. I accept Christ's forgiveness and salvation. Now You show me what to do and give me the ability to do it.’

 “… my father discovered in his own experience the truth of the words that Jesus of Nazareth spoke about Himself nearly 20 centuries ago: ‘For God sent His Son into the world, not to pass sentence on it, but that the world through Him might be saved. Whoever trusts in Him is *never* to come up for judgment; but whoever does *not* trust in Him has already received his sentence, because he has not trusted in the name of God's only Son. And the ground for the sentence is this, that the Light has come into the world, and yet, because their actions were evil, men have loved darkness more than the Light.’”

Now let’s turn from what *others* say *about* the Bible to hear what it says for itself -- as our “book of the month club” continues.

**Paul’s letter to the EPHESIANS:**

**Belief and Behavior –- Chicken and the Egg?**

We’re in that New Testament neighborhood called “The Epistles.” These 21 letters were written mostly by Paul with a few chipped in by Peter, James and, hey, Jude also.

Paul was born named Saul. As a Jew who was also a Roman citizen, he enjoyed the best of both worlds, having been born about the same time as Christ. He was a highly educated, distinguished theologian and member of Israel’s high court, the Sanhedrin.

After Jesus was crucified, resurrected and returned to heaven, certain Jews began persecuting those who worshipped Christ. Saul quickly became a leader of this anti-Christian cabal. But miraculously God froze Saul in his tracks and revealed Himself to this distinguished Hebrew celebrity. Saul experienced a radical conversion. Even his name was changed (to Paul), and he entrepreneured a new strategy.

As the first Christian missionary, he set out to tell Gentiles everywhere that now they, like the Jews, could have a personal relationship with God, walking through life with Him having had their sins totally and forever forgiven.

Ephesus was a city in western Asia Minor (Turkey), east of Athens across the Aegean Sea. In that day it was known as “the first and greatest metropolis of Asia.” With its famous Temple of Diana, it boasted a 50,000-seat theatre, the world’s largest.

Paul made two extended visits to Ephesus where he taught the Good News of the Gospel. He wrote this letter to his fellow Christians in Ephesus (and other cities) during his first imprisonment in Rome about 62 A.D., shackled in chains there for daring to preach about Jesus. In this letter, perhaps the finest book in the New Testament, this beloved apostle spells out the basic beliefs of the Christian faith, the assets of our spiritual portfolio (chapters 1-3), then gives us (chapters 4-6) a framework for behaving according to our vast spiritual wealth. Walking the talk –- what a concept! Paul says it’s actually possible for us to *live* what we *believe*, thereby transforming every single relationship we have!

Check this out -- Paul says our blessings should determine our behavior. (HIT THE PAUSE BUTTON!!) This is a breakthrough since all other religions teach that our behavior determines our blessings!

Paul paints God’s grand plan to ultimately bring *everything* together in Christ, showing how we can actually participate in this mega-idea. In Ephesians Paul speaks of Christians as “the church,” “the body of Christ.” Instead of referring to a denomination he gives us the balloonist’s aerial view of the worldwide throng of believers, celebrating their unity in Spirit, not their diversity in doctrine.

Paul speaks of the Christian as being “*in* Christ.” Now *that’s* *really* being “tight with God.” Says Paul, God’s equipped us with *all* we need to live in the here and now. It’s not a progressive spiritual staircase, like getting Boy Scout badges. When we, by faith, accept Christ as our own Savior, instantly He downloads every spiritual blessing that He ever intends to give us! It’s not a Frequent Flyer Club where the more we worship Jesus, the more points we score with God.

In the first chapter we catch Paul’s amazement that we ordinary, sin-flawed humans could actually be chosen by God, bought back out of sin, and placed into His forever-family. As we read chapter 1, let’s create a mental balance sheet. On the left side is what God has done for us. On the right is what we’re to do for Him. **Let’s read ch. 1.**

The key verses of Ephesians, maybe the entire Bible, are next as Paul sees each Christian as a building block in this incredible structure God’s constructing, this “Body of Christ.” Each believer plays a vital role. For the first time in history, there’s a sea change: **God is no longer found in a building. He resides instead within those who love and follow Him!** **Let’s do ch. 2.**

Next we learn that God has a “killer app,” a super “secret” He’s hidden from mankind until He revealed it through Paul. What an honor for this former Jesus-persecutor!! verses. **Now chapter 3.**

Metaphor-mad Paul has so far likened Christ’s believers to a body, a temple and a mystery. Now he says the Christian is a totally new *creation*! In Paul’s second letter to his mentees in Corinth (2 Corinthians 5), he tells them, “(Jesus) included everyone in His death so that everyone could also be included in His life, a resurrection life, a far better life than people ever lived on their own. Because of this decision we don’t evaluate people by what they have or how they look. We looked at the Messiah that way once and got it all wrong, as you know. We certainly don’t look at Him that way anymore. Now we look *inside*, and what we see is that anyone united with the Messiah gets a fresh start, is created *new*. The old life is gone; a new life burgeons! Look at it! All this comes from the God who settled the relationship between us and Him, and then called us to settle our relationships with each other.” **Let’s read chapter 4.**

In chapter 5 Paul throws another metaphor at us to describe the Christian’s relationship with Christ. It’s that of a husband and wife. Here we find that dreaded verse about wives submitting to their husbands. Let’s see, however, what the total context is and get……”the rest of the story.” **Now ch. 5.**

Unable to resist symbolism, Paul reaches for one more, that of a soldier preparing for battle. **Finally, let’s read chapter 6:1-20.**

In Ephesians our guy Paul’s done his best to give us six pictures of what the Christian life is all about – a body, a temple, a mystery, a new self, a loving spouse and a soldier. Thus equipped, Paul sends us out into the fray with his commencement address in 4:1 – “As a prisoner for the Lord, then, I urge you to life a life worthy of the calling you have received.”

Nevermind the circumstances you may find yourself in today, Paul encourages us not to lose heart, not to forget that we’re an important member in the body of Christ, a critical element in God’s master plan. He says there’s a war going on, and those who stand with Christ are on the winning side!

His Deal

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