

Mission of ONE

Biblical spirituality in a world without a tangible church

Prologue – What is a Legitimate Church?

When I first began writing **Mission of ONE** over 20 years ago, I focused on what I had learned about becoming ONE with God as a person. I was newly remarried, optimistic about the future personally, yet lost once again in the search for the true church or fellowship founded by the 12 disciples of Jesus/Yeshua.

I wrote many pages and organized this developing book into three parts as noted in the Preface, which mostly dates to 1988. I essentially completed the first two sections but bogged down in the third about the practical aspects of “Christian Life” in a church fellowship context, unresolved. Something was missing.

I was not at peace or conclusive in my search or my thoughts and did not know why. My problem was not one derived from a lack of personal experience, nor from lack of philosophical construction of an ideal from the New Testament, but I could not resolve the two with the reality I had experienced or noticed that other believers had experienced. When I was very active in public Christian ministry, the most common question I heard from those who attended the meetings we sponsored concerned recommendations for (or how) to find a good church. I did not have a very good, honest answer that provided any specifics. Other evangelists agreed.

That fact is problematic all by itself. After all, had not Yeshua/Jesus said, “...I will build my church, and the gates of Hell will not prevail against it?” (Matthew 16:18) So I assumed that there had to be at least one organized Christian church that was His. Yes, I am quite aware of the issues surrounding the first part of this quoted verse. Was Peter to start the church? Was he the rock or was Yeshua the rock upon which it was to be founded? History overflows with this question.

The best answer for me turned out to be simpler than all of those many volumes of theological study, discussion and polemic. The only legitimate Church of God is the one composed of the righteous saints who are no longer mortal. (Revelation 20:4-6; 5:10) In other words, no organization of mortals may constitute the truly legitimate Church of God. As I will cover later, God tried a church of mortals called the nation of Israel, the church in the wilderness. (Acts 7:38) God had no reason to try to organize another body of humans into a religious body under priests or otherwise named religious professionals. The whole reason for God’s Spirit to walk the earth as a mortal person was to birth an immortal body of believers. The process comes by faith in and the experience of the resurrection. Yeshua did not sacrifice himself for a bunch of loser scumbags but to give eternal life to righteous practitioners of faith according to his Word.

But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to myriads of angels, to the general assembly and church of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God, the Judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood, which speaks better than the blood of Abel. (Hebrews 12:22-24)

I am fully convinced that God has worked through some church organizations in spite of themselves to accomplish some of his purpose on earth. I am even more convinced that spiritual fruits have been born by God’s Spirit at work in the lives of numerous individual persons. Many members of various church denominations and service groups have served God faithfully despite their church affiliation. Most, no doubt, believed they were rightly expected to be members of their churches, but that does not mean that they were correct. God bears fruit by faith and his grace, not by theological purity or human character judged by society as righteousness.

At the same time, this revelation makes it much easier to understand and accept the egregious sins, hypocrisy, apostasy, torture of innocents, financial rape and tyrannical oppression committed by church organizations and/or by the seemingly endless panoply of offending and corrupt religious authorities. All of the bad things that others and I have experienced in church not longer threaten

Mission of ONE

Biblical spirituality in a world without a tangible church

faith because those church organizations, their structures, goals, services, missions, leaders and servants were all built by fallible human beings for God but not by him.

The evil deeds were done, the lies taught and innocents deceived, by mortal fleshly beings. Many had themselves been led astray and used by the Great Liar and Deceiver or his demonic agents. But remember, God was never in those organizations. He was in some of the people, and he simply found some he could work through. I will easily grant that probably most chosen vehicles of God's efficacy were much more admirable, humble and honestly seeking to do what was righteous than the false prophet Balaam, yet Go was able to deliver his message through him – despite himself and his greedy treachery, too. (Read Numbers 22-24 for the main story about Balaam. Then read some of the other references to him in the rest of the Bible.)

In short, I believe that Paul and his disciples founded Christianity. It was their churches that survived and joined together as the Orthodox Catholic Church under the aegis of Roman Emperor Constantine. Certainly the Bishop of Rome had status, because Rome was the old capital of the Empire, but it was the imperial connection that really made the early catholic believers Roman.

All Christian churches have fronted themselves as God's representatives, but that was something that they took upon themselves contrary to God's purpose. I believe that most lay people have done this in sincere error - probably most of their leaders, too. Why? Because Christians have simply followed their pastors, who had followed their teachers, and so on for almost 2,000 years back to Paul. Naturally, any New Testament analysis or perspective on church structure, purpose and fellowship included all of the letters of Paul and Paul's disciples.

The conversion of the persecuting Saul of Tarsus to Paul the Apostle to the Gentiles is the cornerstone of organized Christianity. In fact, Paul was the earliest adopter and promoter of the "Christian" brand beginning in Antioch. (Acts 11:26) Virtually all Orthodox and Protestant churches accept the authenticity of Paul's conversion vision and personal revelation from Jesus. Paul's individual and conflicting testimony is the sole witness of what he experienced spiritually. Others did indeed testify as to what Paul said about his visions and messages from Jesus, and they confirmed Paul's strenuously devoted proclamation of the gospel for which he suffered greatly.

The Intercessory Lord's Prayer

John 17 records Yeshua's prayer for his disciples just prior to his crucifixion. This prayer reveals the primary outcome that Jesus desired for us as he lay down his life for those who were his then and now. You should read the whole chapter in order to understand the Son's high priestly desires for those who believe and call on his name. This prayer more than any other chapter of Scripture inspired my search to understand, which is partially reflected in this book.

"For their sakes I sanctify Myself, that they themselves also may be sanctified in truth. I do not ask on behalf of these alone, but for those also who believe in Me through their word; that they may all be one; even as You, Father, are in Me and I in You, that they also may be in Us, so that the world may believe that You sent Me.

"The glory which You have given Me I have given to them, that they may be one, just as We are one; I in them and You in Me, that they may be perfected in unity, so that the world may know that You sent Me, and loved them, even as You have loved Me.

"Father, I desire that they also, whom You have given Me, be with Me where I am, so that they may see My glory which You have given Me, for You loved Me before the foundation of the world.

"O righteous Father, although the world has not known You, yet I have known You; and these have known that You sent Me; and I have made Your name known to them, and will make it known, so that the love with which You loved Me may be in them, and I in them." (John 17:19-26)

Mission of ONE

Biblical spirituality in a world without a tangible church

Yeshua warned that the teaching Word and unity he sowed on earth would very quickly be attacked by the Enemy, who would spread a different seed. The similar appearance of young tares and wheat represents the confusion of early appearance. The crop appears to be one, but it is not. The true fruit of each plant only becomes apparent in the judgment, but the field ceases to be one crop, destroying its unity, once the bad seed was sown and took root.

Jesus presented another parable to them, saying, "The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a man who sowed good seed in his field.

"But while his men were sleeping, his enemy came and sowed tares among the wheat, and went away.

"But when the wheat sprouted and bore grain, then the tares became evident also.

"The slaves of the landowner came and said to him, 'Sir, did you not sow good seed in your field? How then does it have tares?'

"And he said to them, 'An enemy has done this!' The slaves said to him, 'Do you want us, then, to go and gather them up?'

"But he said, 'No; for while you are gathering up the tares, you may uproot the wheat with them.

"Allow both to grow together until the harvest; and in the time of the harvest I will say to the reapers, 'First gather up the tares and bind them in bundles to burn them up; but gather the wheat into my barn.'" (Matthew 13:24-30)

Did the Enemy deceive and use Paul to sow a false gospel? I have belatedly, unhappily, come to the conclusion that the answer is yes. But Jesus tells us not to condemn those who do not understand this point. As humans, we are to love our neighbors and leave it to God to pass judgment determining who has born the true fruit of faith, which is at its core a loving (forgiving) righteousness. Remember, to be forgiven, we must forgive others. (Matthew 6:14-15) But that does not mean that we should hide our eyes and refrain from acting on the truths we understand.

Paul did not Know Jesus / Yeshua

Since Paul did not know Jesus, he does not quote the Savior directly from experience. He does not repeat what Jesus taught and did as in the gospel accounts. Rather in net net effect, Paul puts words in the Lord's mouth by using rhetoric and reason to explain the theological meaning of Yeshua's birth, life, death and resurrection. Paul also mixes in his own interpretation of the Law as applies to ethical and moral living or social responsibilities. The authority he claims is his own mystical experience with Christ; therefore, a reoccurring theme of Paul's letters is self defense. This is true both in regards to his personal legitimacy as an apostle as well as to his gospel's divine validity as authoritative from God.

Throughout his letters, Paul struggles to provide proof and objective, verifiable witnesses because he has none that carry enduring conviction. Many respected New Testament scholars believe that later editors, sanctioned by the churches Paul founded or controlled, papered over the differences between Paul and the church at Jerusalem – in other words, between Paul and the original disciples who had actually lived with Yeshua when he walked this earth in the flesh.

Furthermore, Paul makes it absolutely clear in Galatians 1:11-23 that he did not learn anything from the authorized 12 disciples who had spent over three years with Yeshua, which was amazing since those years with Yeshua in the flesh were the only approved "seminary" education to qualify someone as an apostle. (Acts 1:21-22) Even the book of Acts, which was probably written by Luke as part of Paul's favorably apologetic legal defense in Rome, cannot hide the fact that Saul's contentious presence created public disturbances and/or divided fellowships wherever he went. His was not a unifying **Mission of ONE**, and that observation became the turning point in resolving the completion of this book.

Mission of ONE

Biblical spirituality in a world without a tangible church

Often considered the latest New Testament book to reach its final format, Acts in particular is cited as an important example of the attempted harmonization of the Christianity founded by Paul with the fellowship of faith in Yeshua that grew up around the original and only true (as in, live-with-Jesus-seminary graduates) apostles in Judea.

Paul's teachings were more popular and acceptable, so they required legitimization by later generations. Particular focus was aimed at reconciling Paul with Peter in order to provide binding authority for the new hierarchal priesthood that capitalized on Paul's missionary success. Generations later, this same hierarchy authorized a few versions of what constitutes or makes up the biblical library of books or canon. In other words, they determined what writings of the first centuries following Jesus' death should possess the divine authority of Scripture, the Holy Bible.

Since their teaching creates and supports an episcopal hierarchy, Paul's letters dominate the New Testament providing the foundational theology of what is known as Christianity as he developed his **personal** interpretation of Jesus' exemplary life and teaching. Thus, all Orthodox Catholic and Protestant Churches based their authority on Paul's evangelism, letters, doctrine and interpretation of both Bible and gospel.

Like everyone else born into a Christian environment, I had grown up accepting the canonicity of Paul and his writings without question. Like almost everyone else, I had suppressed or rationalized what was confusing, contradictory or embarrassing about Paul as a person and his some of his written pronouncements. At times, Paul comes over as downright arrogant to the point of pressing his opinions on others as divine or almost divine dictates.

If legitimate churches are composed of immortals perfected in Messiah, even I am excluded, although I do anticipate in faith to one day attain such blessing. Since a rejection of Paul's legitimacy as a genuine, Godly authorized apostle puts much Christian tradition doctrine and practice into question, I must first expand on how Christian churches founded by Paul and his disciples do not rest on a legitimate foundation.

Consequently, I came to the uncomfortable conclusion that I must totally re-evaluate how to use Paul's epistles in my search for ONEness with the Creator God of Israel. So Part Three becomes a written discussion of what one should do with the epistles of Paul as a dedicated, sincere follower of Jesus/Yeshua. What role do they play in a life seeking to conform with the express and true Image of the Father born with mortal flesh within the dimension of historical time on earth?

Yeshua, not Paul, is the ONE way to eternal life, the reoccurring theme of the Bible that provides a sensible explanation for how God wants us to live. It explains the ONE covenant including: the chosenness of Israel, Jesus' life, death and resurrection, the mysteries of eternal judgment and the purposed goal for human identity transformation as the essential prerequisite to eternal life.

Now you have a choice. You may begin with Part One in order to take the historical thought development journey, or you may go directly to Part Three to continue this Prologue's topical discussion. I have not edited out my earlier references to Paul's insights and teachings written when I believed them to be authoritative Scripture on par with the "Old" Testament. As stated above, my opinion has changed in that regard, but I cannot put how to you briefly here and make any sense of what I wish to communicate without telling the whole story as I lived and thought it.

My hope is for the reader's faith to be challenged and strengthened, not destroyed. At best, I can only give you my best, most honest analysis and explanation. Anything I can write will fall short of the truth we will all learn when attaining an audience with ultimate reality. Remember, any scholar honest in his or her work has always considered Paul's letters difficult. I now consider them major obstacles to God's primary purpose for human life. I invite you to read why I have come to that conclusion in Part Three, but suggest you take Parts One and Two to get there.