



The Divine Plan of the Ages

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INSIDE:
Hidden Things of Darkness Brought to Light

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Hidden Things of Darkness Brought to Light

One of the signs that we are living in the *end times* is that everything that is hidden will be revealed. When the Lord returns he will "...bring to light the hidden things of darkness...[and] make manifest the counsels of the hearts..." (1 Corinthians 4:5) The consequence of lifting this dark shroud of secrecy, which for centuries has gone unchecked, is that everything that can be shaken will be shaken, at every level—**political, financial, religious and social.** Haggai 2:6-7

THERE is no question that the prophecies of our time are in process of fulfillment as we witness one scandal after another eroding the very foundation of society. Presidents have been impeached, corrupt financial practices of corporate giants like ENRON and WORLD COM are televised worldwide, and nothing is too sacred for scrutiny; even church leaders have not been spared....

Unprecedented Church Corruption

Indeed, the suppressed child abuse scandal within its priesthood has propelled the Catholic church to unprecedented media notoriety. *Time Magazine* estimates 2,000 priests are currently accused. *The New York Times* quoted one attorney who said he "...fields between 100 and 200 calls a day from survivors [former victims], about half of whom are breaking their silence for the first time." As a result of this and so many other scandals, the entire professed Christian community has become soiled in the eyes of the world.

How Did the Church get so Out of Control?

Members of a particular parish were recently asked what they were going to do about the indefensible scandals happening in the church. One demoralized member said, "Well, what can we do? We are only the congregation. This is up to the bishops to handle." Here is where many professed Christians have failed in their understanding of the Scriptures. God set forth that the order and discipline of the church is up to the congregation and not a hierarchy.

When God directed the Apostles to establish the early church, they set in place a *checks and balance system* designed to protect them from *wolves*—those who would injure the flock. Those who were considered the elders or bishops in the church were actually elected by a vote to be the servants of the flock. "And when they had ordained them elders in every church and had prayed with fasting, they commended them to the Lord." (Acts 14:23)

The term *elders*, as seen in this text includes evangelists, pastors and teachers. At the present time this term *ordained* generally refers to a ceremony of installation, but this is not the original significance of the Greek, *kirotoneo*, used in this text. The Weymouth translation renders it: "...they selected Elders by a show of hands..." This and several other translations show the real intent of the scripture, which was to elect church servants by a vote of the congregation.

The practice of self-governing was commonly held in the early church. Choosing pastors and teachers from among one's own body of believers, as led by the spirit of God, is sanctified common sense. Who would know better the exemplary lives of those in their midst than the

The order and discipline of the church is up to each individual congregation, not a hierarchy.

congregation? But the majority of congregations today are sent pastors and priests from a governing body disconnected from the congregation. This implies that the congregation does not know what is good for them. It exhibits a total lack of confidence in the holy Spirit of God to rule in the church and disregards the instruction of the church to handle their own affairs. It also holds the congregation in bondage to sectarian control.

Lord, or Shepherds, of the Flock?

In fact, it was within only a few centuries after the founding of the early church that certain bishops arose who usurped control and altered the proper role of shepherds to the flock, as they then became *lords* of the flock. Submissive to their demands, the timid sheep allowed themselves to be controlled, and thus arose the unscriptural concept of *clergy* and *laity*.

There soon resulted a hierarchy of clergy, and the church put faith in a system of

imperfect men, rather than in the only true, stable and perfect heavenly Father and His only begotten Son. How contrary this practice is to the admonition of Peter to the elected elders of the early church: "Feed the flock of God which is among you, taking the oversight thereof, not by constraint, but willingly; not for filthy lucre, but of a ready mind; Neither as being lords over God's heritage, but being ensamples to the flock." (1 Peter 5:2, 3) There is only one Lord of the flock—all others are to be servants of Him and servants of each other.

Serious Consequences of Ignoring Scriptural Council

One serious consequence of turning over control to a hierarchical system is that when the governing body of pastors and priests senses a threat, it struggles to keep the status quo at all costs. Thus, serious transgressions are hidden from the flock that these might not disturb them. *Time Magazine* observed, "When Cardinals are created, they take a vow before the Pope to 'keep in confidence anything that, if revealed, would cause a scandal or harm the church.'" This is a well-meant, but serious disregard of the Scriptures, which state that it is far better to acknowledge sin in your midst and root it out that the whole might not suffer.

Early church congregations were admonished as a body of believers, led by the holy Spirit, to handle behavioral problems themselves. Note how the Apostle Paul stresses the responsibility of the congregation in matters of immorality in their midst: "...if any man that is called a brother be a fornicator, or covetous, or an idolater, or a railer, or a drunkard, or an extortioner...put away from among yourselves that wicked person...Know ye not that we shall judge angels? how much more things that pertain to this life?" (1 Corinthians 5:11-13; 6:1-3) Thus, it is clear that the congregation is to take responsibility. We are to remember that a little leaven of sin can affect a whole community, and as soon as anything unhealthy is detected, the congregation should lovingly, yet firmly, take corrective measures.

“Touch Not the Unclean Thing”

Yes, the community of believers was to keep a high standard. They were given the example of the nation of Israel as to what would happen to them if this admonition were ignored. The downfall of Israel in the time of her kings was that she mingled with *the people of the land*—allowing their pagan practices to pull down the standards which God had set for her. This failure to be sanctified or set apart from *the people of the land* has contaminated Christianity today, as they have admitted into their midst the worldly minded. This does injury, not only to the congregation, by lowering their standards, for the average will be considered the standard, but it also injures the *strangers*, by causing many of them to believe themselves thoroughly safe, and needing no transforming of character. It lowers the standard of doctrine also, because the minister who realizes that at least three-fourths of his congregation would be repelled by the presentation of the *strong meat* of truth, withholds the same, and permits those who need the strong meat to grow weak and starve.

God’s advice through the Apostle Paul to those who find their congregations in such moral decay is very severe, but critical for spiritual survival in this evil day. *“Be ye not unequally yoked together with unbelievers: for what fellowship hath righteousness with unrighteousness? And what communion hath light with darkness? ...for ye are the temple of the living God... Wherefore come out from among them, and be ye separate, saith the Lord, and touch not the unclean thing; and I will receive you, and will be a Father unto you, and ye shall be my sons and daughters... Having therefore these promises, dearly beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from all filthiness of the flesh and spirit, perfecting holiness in the fear of God.”* 2 Corinthians 6:14-18; 7:1

The day in which we live is spoken of as *an evil day* and *a day of thick darkness*. Temptations abound in every corner. But Christians should be a shining light, setting the highest standards for society. They should not come down to the level of the world, but should set themselves apart from it. As the Jews profaned the name of the Lord by careless living amongst the Gentiles, so there is great danger of Christians profaning His name by careless living. This has not only corrupted the congregation, but it has also brought reproach to the name of their God. When speaking of the time of our Lord’s return, the Apostle Peter presented a question: *“Seeing that all these things shall be dissolved, what manner of persons ought ye to be in all holy conversation and*

godliness?” (2 Peter 3:11) Are we setting the example, or are we drifting helplessly with the current of this present evil world? Are we being able *ambassadors for Christ?* 2 Corinthians 5:20

Morality: Absolute or Relative?

Indeed, every *hidden thing* is being brought to light by the fire of God’s indignation, as He forewarned: *“The fire shall try every man’s work of what sort it is.”* That is, not every congregation’s work, but every *individual’s* work shall be tried. And as the testing fire spreads, the light of truth goes with it—greater knowledge brings greater responsibility. Reprehensible crimes being revealed in Christian churches today should awaken professed Christians everywhere to take personal responsibility not only within their con-



gregations, but especially within their own lives.

Today, rather than consulting the Scriptures on moral issues, Christians often resort to psychology and human reasoning, which, if not guided by the Word of God, tends to make sinful behavior relative to contemporary society deeming it *“not so bad.”* Often, it is concluded that there are no absolutes which Bible believing Christians must follow.

But, is morality relative? Has God changed His position on homosexuality, adultery and other practices?—Of course not. Yet, life styles such as these are not only common in some congregations, but Christians who oppose such behavior are considered unloving and bigoted. It is not *“politically correct”* to point out scriptures which reveal God’s position on such subjects. But, the Scriptures are absolute and positive that certain life style choices being condoned today in the church are an abomination in God’s eyes. *“Mortify therefore your members which are upon the earth: fornication, uncleanness, inordinate affection, evil concupiscence, and covetousness, which is idolatry: for which things’ sake the wrath of God cometh on the children of disobedience...”* Colossians 3:5, 6

The Power of Suggestion

Greatly at fault for today’s increasingly lower standards is the media. The most popular television programs feature fun-loving people living in thoroughly sinful conditions. Society has developed a desensitization to sin by the suggestions thrust at them hourly through media exposure. Entertainment sources of every kind bombard the mind with powerful suggestions. Sinful behavior unheard of before is now made to appear as normal behavior. The power of the media to create anything imaginable from the sensual to the devious is titillating the psyche with images of demonism, violence, perversion and sensuality.

What is more, we are now living in a time when several generations of children have been brought up by the examples they see in the media. Children, the most suggestible of all, spend hours, mesmerized in front of the television, movies, the internet, computer games and books which thrill and excite their untrained minds with sinful suggestions.

“Be Sober, Be Vigilant”

The sincere Christian will fight against these snares of the adversary and seek every means to overcome his wicked influence in the church, the home and the heart. *“Be sober, be vigilant; because your adversary the devil, as a roaring lion, walketh about, seeking whom he may devour: Whom resist steadfast in the faith...”* (1 Peter 5:8, 9) The Apostle Paul speaks of this as warfare: *“Put on the whole armour of God, that ye may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. For we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places. Wherefore take unto you the whole armour of God, that ye may be able to withstand in the evil day...”* (Ephesians 6:11-13) *The evil day*—this implies that in this end time there will be the most severe trials ever known to God’s people, and that they will have the greatest need for the whole armor of truth and righteousness.

Before the Christian, our Lord sets the very highest ideals: *“Be like unto your Father in Heaven”*—not that Christians can ever be all that the Father’s character expresses, but that this is to be the ideal, or aim in life. God assures them that he will judge them, not according to their success, but according to their endeavor to live up to their ideals and the sacrifices they make in order closely to attain those ideals. *“I therefore so run, not as uncertainly; so fight I, not as one that beateth the air: but I keep under my body, and bring it into subjection: lest that by any*

means, when I have preached to others, I myself should be a castaway.” 1 Corinthians 9:26, 27

So that we might not be discouraged in the fight, the Apostle Paul assures us that he, too, struggles with his flesh. *“For I know that in me (that is, in my flesh) dwelleth no good thing: for to will is present with me; but how to perform that which is good I find not.”* (Romans 7:18) Since only that which is good or perfect could truly be acceptable to God, and since all of our efforts at warfare could never really make us perfect, it is clear that we are only acceptable to the Father by the covering robe of Christ’s righteousness. We must constantly go to the throne of grace that we might find forgiveness for our unintentional failings and strength to overcome them. Hebrews 4:14-16

Knowledge Necessary to Overcoming

While God created man with a good conscience—the ability to determine accurately what is right and wrong—sin has depraved this conscience. In order to have a *“conscience void of offense toward God and toward man”* the conscience must be trained in righteousness. Acts 24:16

The Apostle Paul admonished his brethren, as they were not giving proper heed to the doctrines for this training: *“For every one that useth milk is unskillful in the word of righteousness: for he is a babe. But strong meat belongeth to them that are of full age, even those who by reason of use have their senses exercised to discern both good and evil.”* (Hebrews 5:13, 14) Note here that one must have a keen perception of *good and evil* in order to fight against it. To *“keep ourselves unspotted from the world,”* we must seek divine aid by appropriating to ourselves the instructions, encouragements, and exhortations of God’s Word. The Scriptures refer to this as a cleansing work, progressing throughout our entire Christian course—the *“washing of water by the Word.”* Ephesians 5:26

Blessed is the Man that Endureth Temptation

Our Father in Heaven seeks a godly seed to one day bless all the families of the earth. (Galatians 3:16, 29) *“Blessed is the man that endureth temptation: for when he is tried, he shall receive the crown of life, which the Lord hath promised to them that love him.”* (James 1:12) Only the tried and faithful will live and reign with Christ, their heavenly bridegroom. They will have the blessed privilege of teaching the world righteousness in the thousand year Kingdom of Christ. (Isaiah 26:9) *“Brethren, give diligence to make your calling and election sure: for if ye do these things, ye shall never fall: for so an entrance shall be ministered unto you abundantly into the everlasting kingdom of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.”* 2 Peter 1:10, 11

Though the present experience with sin and evil is very bitter, in the future the world will profit eternally and be recovered.

Evil of Noah’s Day a Mirror Image of Today

Conditions today are reminiscent of the days of Noah: *“...wickedness of man was great in the earth...every imagination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually.”* (Genesis 6:5) Luke confirms that our day will be a mirror image of this time: *“As it was in the days of Noah, so shall it be also in the days of the [return of the] Son of man.”* Luke 17:26

Our *present evil world* (Greek: *aion*, age or dispensation) is coming to an end.

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(Galatians 1:4) Under the Lord’s judgment the corrupt systems are disintegrating and will soon be replaced. To the extent that churches have been involved in the evil practices of this world’s corruption, they will come under this judgment of God, as well: *“...my determination is to gather the nations...to pour out upon them mine indignation...for the earth [all levels of society] shall be devoured with the fire [destruction] of my jealousy.”* Though this is a fearsome time, note that this prophecy doesn’t end there: *“For then will I turn to the people a pure language that they may all call upon the name of the Lord to serve Him with one consent.”* (Zephaniah 3:8, 9) Even though the corrupt systems are burned up, note that the people survive to learn a pure language and serve the Lord wholeheartedly.

Certainly, all have been *born in sin and shapen in iniquity*, and as slaves to sin, we are unable to pull ourselves out of degradation. God permitted this painful condition, knowing that it would be an everlasting lesson to teach the bitter consequences of disobedience. And he has provided a glorious plan for the world’s recovery through His beloved Son. Jesus Christ *tasted death for every man* and this *ransom for all* will be accomplished *in due time*. (Hebrews 2:9; 1 Timothy 2:3-6) No more will mankind be bound by sin, weakness and ignorance. They will profit eternally by their experience with sin and its terrible effects. In God’s kingdom, all will be taught to discriminate between right and wrong and in the end, most will choose righteous obedience. Isaiah 26:9

“And I saw a new heaven and a new earth: for the first heaven and the first earth were passed away...And I, John, saw the holy city, the New Jerusalem [Christ and his Church], coming down from God out of heaven, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband, and I heard a great voice out of heaven saying, Behold, the tabernacle of God is with men [those who will learn righteousness], and he will dwell with them, and they shall be his people.” Revelation 21:1-3

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