

Religious Experiences

By Joe Slater

Does having a “religious experience” save you (or prove that you are saved)? Some religious groups require one to relate a religious experience; then they decide whether that experience shows the person is saved and should be granted membership. How does this compare to the New Testament record?

In Acts 2, the Jews in Jerusalem definitely had a religious experience! “And suddenly there came a sound from heaven, as of a rushing mighty wind, and it filled the whole house where they (the 120) were sitting . . . And when this sound occurred, the multitude came together, and were confused, because everyone heard them speak in his own language.” (2:2, 6.) But even though it was supernatural, that “experience” didn’t save anyone!

When the apostles preached the gospel, 3000 believed and responded in repentance and immersion, thus receiving salvation.

Who can deny that Saul of Tarsus had a religious experience in Acts 9? “Suddenly a light shone around him from heaven. Then he fell to the ground, and heard a voice saying to him, ‘Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?’” (9:3-4.) Contrary to popular belief, this experience didn’t save Saul. God sent Ananias to tell him what to do; Saul “arose and was baptized.” (9:18.)

Cornelius certainly could lay claim to having a religious experience. An angel of God appeared, telling him to send for Peter. (Acts 10:1-6.) But that experience didn’t save him! Peter told him “words by which you and all your household will be saved.” (Acts

11:14.) Cornelius and his household obeyed the gospel just like all the others. (Acts 10:47-48.)

Even if you had a supernatural experience today (which you won’t), that wouldn’t save you! “Arise and be baptized and wash away your sins, calling on the name of the Lord!” (Acts 22:16.)

— Justin, TX

“Having been born again, not of corruptible seed but incorruptible, through the word of God which lives and abides forever, because ‘All flesh is as grass, and all the glory of man as the flower of grass. The grass withers, and its flower falls away, But the word of the Lord endures forever.’ Now this is the word which by the gospel was preached to you.” (1 Peter. 1:23-25.)

TAKING GOD AT HIS WORD

By Danny Tunnell

We take people at their word if we trust them. Shouldn’t we be taking God at His word because we trust Him? It is impossible for God to lie. (Hebrews 6:18.) It is impossible for God to deceive, and He and His word are inseparable. (John 1:1.)

Lying did not start with God, it started with Satan. The devil invented lying. He is the father of lies. (John 8:44.)

It takes faith to believe in the supernatural power of God, to believe in things we haven’t seen. (Hebrews 11:1.) The things that are seen are temporary, but the things which are not seen are eternal. (2 Corinthians 4:18.) We are to walk by faith and not by sight. (2 Corinthians 5:7.)

It’s imperative that we take God at His word in regard to creation. “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.” (Genesis 1:1.) Satan has viciously attacked the first verse of the Bible. He knows if he can cast doubt on that he can destroy faith in the rest of the Bible.

When we take God at His word about the creation, then the other supernatural things in the Bible are

easy to believe. Yes, God parted the Red Sea. He took down the wall of Jericho with a shout. He protected Daniel in the den of lions and the three Hebrews in the fiery furnace. He caused an ax head to float. (2 Kings 6:6.)

Israel came out of 430 years of Egyptian bondage. After all that abuse in Egypt, among those former slaves, perhaps two or three million, there was not one feeble person among them. (Psalm 105:37.)

How is that possible? With God all things are possible. (Matthew 19:26.)

Take God at His word. Yes, Jesus anointed the eyes of the blind man with clay, and told him to wash in the pool of Siloam, and he came seeing. (John 9:1-7.)

We need to trust the Lord with all our heart, and not lean on our own understanding. (Proverbs 3:5.)

Take God at His word. Jesus came to give us life, and to give it more abundantly. (John 10:10.) All things work together for good for those who love God, and are called according to His purpose. (Romans 8:28.) God will supply all your need according

to His riches in glory by Christ Jesus. (Philippians 4:19.) The Greater One is inside you. (1 John 4:4.) It is our faith in God that is the victory that overcomes the world. (1 John 5:4.)

Taking God at His word is a matter of trust. We don’t have to understand something to believe it. To believe God functions supernaturally is a matter of trust. It may not make sense to our natural way of thinking.

A fellow I know rented a car. After leaving the rental agency, he noticed the gas gauge registered empty. It was supposed to be full, so he took the car back. He was told at the agency that there was a problem with the fuel gauge. When the gauge registered empty it was actually full. He had to make a decision: “Do I trust what they are saying?” He decided to trust them and take them at their word. He trusted them more than what he could see at the moment. He believed what they said was true. His trust proved to be well-placed and he was able to drive on to his destination.

It takes faith to take God at His word and to trust Him in what He says.

— Miami, OK

Old Paths

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“ask for the old paths” (Jer. 6:16)

UNDERSTANDING THE CHURCH OF THE BIBLE

By Mark Lindley

The term “church” is a term that has many different meanings today. Some may use the word “church” to refer to a building. For example, “I’ll meet you at the church,” which means I will meet you at the church “building.” Another may use the term to refer to a specific denomination. A person might say, “In my church we believe in having women preachers.” The word church, in this sense, would obviously refer to one of the denominations which have women preachers. (cf. 1 Timothy 2:8-13.)

It would be helpful for all of us to go to the Bible and consider how the word “church” is used in the Scriptures.

1. “Church” refers to the universal body of believers who have obeyed the Gospel: “And I say also unto thee, That thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.” (Matthew 16:18.) Jesus was not referring to brick, mortar, or wood. Rather, He was referring to the universal body of believers. Paul used “church” in this same sense when he penned: “Husbands, love your wives, even as Christ also loved the church, and gave Himself for it.” (Ephesians 5:25.) Christ loved the universal church, all believers everywhere.

2. “Church” refers to local congregations: “Then had the church rest throughout all Judea and Galilee and Samaria, and were edified; and walking in the fear of the Lord, and in the comfort of the Holy Ghost, were multiplied.” (Acts 9:31.) Notice that the “churches” had rest. The reason was that Saul of Tarsus was no longer persecuting those congregations. The term “churches” here refers to the different congregations of the Lord’s one universal church. Paul also used the term in this way: “Paul, called to be an apostle of Jesus Christ through the will of God, and Sosthenes our brother, unto the church of God which is at Corinth. (1 Corinthians 1:1-2.) Notice that the “church” to which Paul referred was the local congregation of believers which met in the city of Corinth.

However, the term “church,” in the Bible, never refers to a Protestant denomination. Look at the pages in newspapers where the names of churches are listed. See if you can find in your Bible the list of denominational church names that you see in the newspaper. You will not find them.

The reason denominations are not mentioned in the Bible is that they were started by men long after Jesus built His church in the first century. (see Acts 2:1-47.) Any church which started after Acts, chapter 2, is too late to be the church of Christ. “Salute one another with an holy kiss. The churches of Christ salute you.” (Romans 16:16.)

— Ripley, MS

THE CHURCH: PERFECT YET IMPERFECT

By Dalton Key

Questions simple to put forth are not always so simple to answer. Consider the question, “Is the church of Christ a perfect institution?” The answer could just as easily be “yes” or “no,” depending on your perspective.

The church described in the New Testament is both divine and human; built and bought, cleansed and sanctified of heaven, yet comprised of people. The church’s divine side has always reflected the majestic wisdom and absolute perfection of God. (Ephesians 3:10.) The human element, that aspect of the church concerning humans such as you and me, has been - from the very beginning - anything but perfect.

Why were the epistles penned? Were they not written, largely, in order to correct the errors, difficulties, and people-problems of the first-century church? Look again at the Corinthian and Thessalonian letters. Here were congregations of the church built upon the foundation of Jesus Christ, and thus perfect in purpose and divine design. Yet they were fraught with glaring and obvious imperfections, many of which make our more modern-day problems look wonderfully benign by comparison.

The church of our day is likewise both perfect and imperfect; perfect in divine purpose and God-given instruction, yet imperfect in human performance.

As we come to acknowledge and embrace this dual nature concerning the Lord’s Body, we will find ourselves in a better position to understand one another. Some among us, considering only the divine side of the church, refuse to admit the possibility of an “imperfect church,” and label as heresy any suggestions at change. Yet we must admit that while the church needs neither structural nor doctrinal improvements, she is ever in need of betterment with respect to the labor and love, the faithfulness and zeal of her members. Others among us, who choose to see nothing beyond the church’s human side, scoff at the very mention of the Lord’s “perfect church,” and seem content to allow us to join the ranks of manmade denominational bodies from which Scripture urges we must remain distinct. And again, while it is true that as fallible people we need improvement in many areas of means and methods, plans and projections, we must never forget that the church is already perfect as designated by New Testament Scripture and doctrine. We should not - we must not - go beyond what is written.

In short, God is perfect; we are not. The church as purposed, planned and presented by God is perfect. She requires no restructuring, no fundamental improvements, no elemental changes. But from the perspective of frail and fallible humans such as ourselves, the church will always be, as all of us are, in need of constant and ongoing improvement.

NOTHING IS REALLY OURS

By Bobby Key

God is the sovereign creator and owner of all things. God created all things, upholds all things, and gives all things.

“In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.” (Genesis 1:1.)

“The earth is the Lord’s and all its fulness, the world and those who dwell therein.” (Psalm 24:1.)

“‘The silver is Mine, and the gold is Mine,’ says the Lord of hosts.” (Haggai 2:8.)

Of course we Christians belong to God not only because He made us and cares for us, but also because He redeemed us, and because we have voluntarily and gladly given ourselves to Him. “Or do you not know that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you, whom you have from God, and you are not your own? For you were bought at a price; therefore glorify God in your body and in your spirit, which are God’s.” (1 Corinthians 6:19,20.)

We are stewards or trustees of what we have and what we are. There is a difference between ownership and possession. As between man and man, we may claim to own things; but as between man and God, we own nothing. God owns all things. We may use those things we possess, temporarily, but ultimately all will be returned to God and an accounting must be rendered.

God has never given a deed to any of us for anything. We brought nothing into the world and we can take nothing out, hence we are not absolute owners of anything.

The doctrine of stewardship is taught from Genesis to Revelation. The words “steward” and “stewardship” may be found over twenty times in the King James version of the Bible.

“Moreover it is required in stewards that one be found faithful.” (1 Corinthians 4:2.)

— Deceased

“You are worthy, O Lord, to receive glory and honor and power; for You created all things, and by Your will they exist and were created.” (Revelation 4:11.) “Now godliness with contentment is great gain. For we brought nothing into this world, and it is certain we can carry nothing out. And having food and clothing, with these we shall be content. But those who desire to be rich fall into temptation and a snare, and into many foolish and harmful lusts which drown men in destruction and perdition. For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil, for which some have strayed from the faith in their greediness, and pierced themselves through with many sorrows.” (1 Timothy 6:6-10.)

EDITORIALLY SPEAKING . . .

“O WE OF LITTLE FAITH?”

By Dalton Key

One might understand the inclination for worry of late. 2020 has been an unusually trying year. Yet still, we are commanded of heaven to lead lives removed from worry.

As divine commandments go, this one is rarely mentioned or understood as such. The Scriptures, though, are both forthright and unambiguous concerning this too-often sidestepped issue of worry, about which Jesus Himself said clearly, “Do not worry.” (Matthew 6:31.)

Notice that Jesus did not merely advise His followers against worrying excessively; He mandated against worrying, period. Sometime later, the inspired Paul wrote, “Don’t worry over anything whatever.” (Philippians 4:6, Phillips.)

Heaven’s message is inescapable: Christians are warned against worrying. Full stop.

When discussing this matter with other Bible students, whether in a Bible Class or as part of a more private conversation, an interesting question is often posed. “What about concern? What is the difference between concern, which is necessary to a productive life, and worry, which is clearly condemned of heaven?” The question may be the result of genuine curiosity. It may be an attempt to avoid the Lord’s expectations. But regardless the motivation, the question deserves an answer.

Both worry and concern are alike in that they require a certain, focused attention directed toward a situation of interest. While there is certainly nothing wrong with holding interest for the “nuts and bolts” of life and living, this interest can easily morph into a consuming, life-draining preoccupation. Concern, which is normal, too often becomes worry, which, for the Christian, should not be.

Here lies the fundamental difference. Our cares and concerns are easily cast aside. “Casting all your care upon Him, for He cares for you.” (1 Peter 5:7.) Our worries, though, take on a life of their own, taking control of us. The word “worry” comes to us from a Middle English term meaning, “to strangle.”

When concerns begin consuming us, strangling our very souls, we have entered the dangerous domain of worry.

But there is more. The Lord, in His condemnation of worry, reveals the real root of the problem with the words, “O you of little faith.” (Matthew 6:30.) Faith may be involved in a healthy attitude of concern, but it has nothing at all to do with worry!

Simply put, worry is concern permitted to control us in the absence of faith.

As we focus on life’s problems, real or imagined, we have a choice to make. We may choose to obsess over them, allowing them to dominate our minds and strangle our very thoughts; or we may choose to live as people of faith, casting our cares upon the Lord.

**I Will Give You Rest**

By Thayer Salisbury

We could view it as a hopeless catastrophe -- the end of our nation as we have known it, perhaps the end of the church as we have known it. Or we could view it as an unusual opportunity.

Opportunities for evangelism often increase in times of stress. Peter tells us that we should always be ready to give an answer to the one who asks us concerning the hope that we have. (1 Peter 3:15.) If we remain calm when others are stressed, we are more likely to hear such a request.

In the early 1960s, not many people were asking about our hope. Everyone was hopeful and expectant. Our nation was going to put a man on the moon by the end of the decade; the UN was going to end the practice of warfare; and the civil rights act was going to end racism once and for all. Everyone was hopeful, and it was in some ways harder for the Christian faith to stand

out. But in this time of stress, the calm, composed and hardworking Christian will be noticed.

Let us not be among those who practically worship political leaders. More government will not provide the solution to the world’s problems. Racism and war are caused mainly by spiritual defects. The most important solution will be in changing hearts, not laws.

Jesus gives us rest. Let us rest in his promise. When, in the midst of this stressful world, we rest in Jesus, our hopefulness will be notable. We will then have opportunity to explain the source of our peace, contentment, and hope.

The virus has caused stress, and the stress is our opportunity.

— Toledo, OH

THE BOLDNESS OF THE APOSTLE PAUL

By Milton Smith

One of the qualities that the apostle Paul seemed to possess in great measure was a display of boldness. So impressive was Paul’s courage that Luke often felt compelled to write about it in the book of Acts. For example, when Sergius Paulus was listening with great interest to Paul’s preaching, a sorcerer named Elymas was intensely contradicting what the great apostle to the Gentiles was saying. Luke tells us that Paul “looked intently at him,” and said, “O full of all deceit and all fraud, you son of the devil, you enemy of all righteousness, will you not cease perverting the straight ways of the Lord?” No doubt, when Paul “looked intently at him,” he was showing great boldness in the face of opposition from this evil practitioner of the dark arts. (Acts 13:6-12.)

While Paul was standing before the Sanhedrin accused of things worthy of death, an angry mob had just shouted “away with him.” (Acts 21:36.) But we are told that Paul “looking steadfastly at the council” and said, “Men and brethren, I have lived in all

good conscience before God until this day.” (Acts 23:1.) That response took boldness. This was not the language of a man who was guilty of wrong doing. Without a doubt, Paul showed the calm expression of an innocent man on this occasion. How cruel the action of the chief priest was when he told those standing nearby to “strike him on the mouth!” I have sometimes wondered what it would have been like to have seen Paul’s facial expressions through all of this. My guess is that there was probably something in his face and eyes that was well calculated to impress even his accusers.

Paul often demonstrated particular characteristics that would suggest that while he possessed self-reliance and calmness, he also showed an overpowering demonstration of boldness. For the Christian, boldness comes as a result of having confidence in what we believe and a full trust in Jesus Christ. Paul once made this request of the members of the church at Thessalonica: “Finally, brethren, pray for us, that the word of the Lord

may run swiftly and be glorified, just as it is with you, and that we may be delivered from unreasonable and wicked men; for not all have faith.” (2 Thessalonians 3:1-2.) May we all have that same quality of boldness that this great apostle often demonstrated throughout his life.

— Tulsa, OK

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