

## What is Real Religion?

What is the real gospel?

What causes people “in Christ” to feel they must exclude others from the table of the Lord in order to maintain what they sincerely believe is the true Gospel? What does the New Testament teach about who we fellowship?

It seems to me that there is a small group of verses used as justification for actions which exclude others, but there are far larger volumes of teaching which promote unity and reconciliation . For example John's words condemning those who do not preach “**this doctrine**” have been used to make a separation between those who think they have the one true gospel, or “the truth” and those they believe are in error.

*“If there come any unto you, and bring not **this doctrine**, receive him not into your house, neither bid him God speed; For he that biddeth him God speed is partaker of his evil deeds “ (2 John 10,11).*

When it comes to excluding people we have to be careful that we are really acting as God intended and not taking verses out of context.

To quote another author concerning 2 John 10,11...

*“ This is one of the more prominent "twisted scriptures." It has become the handle for every factional tool used to pry apart the living stones in the temple of God. It is the murderous knife employed to dismember the body of the Lord. It was written by the apostle of love to protect the flock of God from the prowling wolves who sought to seduce them through denial of the foundational fact that Jesus came in the flesh. It is now used to convert the sheep into snarling dogs, snapping at each other over every stray scrap of doctrine. It has substituted the law of the pack for the love of the flock.*

*No other passage so well illustrates the danger of ignoring the context. That the leaders of religious thought in some sects should have been betrayed into adopting an interpretation which makes unity impossible and renders ridiculous their vaunted claim to respect for the authority of the word of God...Any use of the written word which makes impossible the fulfillment and realization of the prayer and purpose of the Living Word is abuse and misuse. We can never regain our integrity as scholars until we repudiate the partisan explanation which makes every vagary of thought and dissent an occasion to destroy the fraternal relationship created by the blood of Jesus, and stab love dead at our feet.*

*What is "the doctrine" which is so transcendent that one who does not attest to it must not be allowed to enter the house, nor be given a greeting on the street or in the marketplace? Or, looking at it from the opposite position, what is it that, when advocated is so heinous and so poison to the fellowship, that to merely salute its opponent is to make one a participant in **his** vicious works? To this question a medley of things is contributed by factional voices. Every trivial idea which has been magnified out of all proportion to its value and worth is exalted to the status of the doctrine which is to preclude hospitality and make all greeting a violation of the Word of God. So ludicrous are some of these that it serves no good purpose to even mention them.*

*The depth of one's love for the family of God can be determined by the relative value of those things which will cause one to sacrifice it or to break up the relationship. The triviality of those*

*views elevated to a higher station than the family ties created by the blood of the cross is indicative of the shallowness and superficiality of thought eating like a pernicious cancer at the heart of a wonderful fellowship created by God and inaugurated by the indwelling Spirit.*

*Who can believe that the apostle who wrote more about brotherly love than any other man, would recommend that we refuse entrance to our homes to those saints who disagree with us over some of the things about which we debate? What sane reasoner can actually conclude that to greet a brother who disagrees with us about these matters is to become a participant in some "evil deed"? The very absurdity of such a conclusion renders obnoxious the common usage of the passage by expositors who should know better. "*

And so this writer has stated that to twist such a scripture and misapply it, kills love and the real message of the gospel. In fact John is speaking about the importance of love in the context of this passage, and the importance of recognising that Jesus came in the flesh in all His humanity, and that if people can't understand such a simple message and are bent on making trouble and division then they should be avoided so as not to destroy the message of love which Christ brought... in fact a warning against the ones who undermine the work of others and don't show love and who cut people off... they are the ones to avoid.

Jesus never condemned people for a misunderstanding of doctrine the way that some do in this age. His condemnation was saved for those who thought they were better than others and for those who oppressed others. It is interesting that Jesus did not correct the disciples for their misunderstanding about demons... nor their thought that they saw a ghost walking on the water... Jesus emphasised that real doctrine is how we live and not just the list of creeds we profess.

The practice of disfellowship is another cause for serious concern. It seems to be copied from the "Campbellites", however the term "withdraw fellowship" does not occur in the Bible. One of the verses used as justification for such action occurs in

2 Thess 3 v 6

*"But we command you, brethren, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you withdraw from every brother who walks disorderly and not according to the tradition which he received from us"*

To quote another Brother,

*"The KJV expression "walketh disorderly" has been used by religious purists to expel anyone who doesn't measure up to their standards, doctrinal or behavioural.*

*In the Thessalonian context we can see that the NIVs translation "every Brother who is idle" is a reference to the problem of idleness in Thessalonica (many retired people supported by the Romans and granted tax exemption)...It is almost impossible to imagine how the tangled maze of disciplinary action – accusation, boycott, disfellowship, and congregational exclusivism – has grown out of this passage. When authoritarians seek justification for their bullying attitudes they undoubtedly find that the words "withdraw yourselves" provide a handy tool to satisfy their divisiveness and they appropriate them as a weapon in the arsenal of factionalism."*

I think it is a misunderstanding of what the real gospel is that has caused such verses to be misapplied. The doctrines of men have always been a threat to overshadow the gospel which

Jesus preached...the amazing “Good News” which gave men encouragement and hope and shone as light in darkness... Jesus calls us to let the true light of the world shine out and not be overwhelmed by darkness. He says that we are the light of the world by our “GOOD DEEDS” rather than our pure theology (*Mt. 5:16 “Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven.”* )

Yet over time some have developed such a long list of what they consider first principles that it may take a year of study for a person to be considered to have enough knowledge to be baptised. This in itself has caused some to question whether in fact this long study of head knowledge before baptism can be really what God intended.

This list of requirements is perhaps because we are seeing baptism as a schooling of people into a denomination rather than converting desperate sinners to Christ as their saviour.

The argument has been used that things were different in New Testament times so baptisms could be much quicker than today because they were not confused by so many different religions. If this were true the New Testament couldn't be an example to us, it would just be a historical record of no value. But surely the 21<sup>st</sup> Century ecclesia is called to be a reincarnation of the 1<sup>st</sup> Century church. Different religions abounded back then just as they do today, and even the Jews held many false doctrines – they misunderstood who Messiah was to be, and they believed in the myths of the immortal soul and a personal satan.

The New Testament baptisms were shown to us as examples, not as exceptions. Strange how all the quick baptisms in the New Testament are quoted by some as being exceptions, yet the isolated examples of casting others out have been used as weapons against our fellow believers.

The real gospel does not drive people away, does not oppress others or need to be guarded or buried in the ground. The real gospel is about a better way, as different as light is to darkness. We are not contaminated if we break bread with someone who has done something wrong, if that were true we would all be contaminated, imagine asking all sinners to leave the meeting... who would be left?

Fellowship is more than just breaking bread, they are two different things and are listed as such in Acts

#### Acts 2:42

*“And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.”*

Some have taken verses about casting others out, and being exclusive out of context... it was never what Jesus intended. His focus was always on bringing back the lost sheep. His warnings were about the ones who would scatter the flock.

Judgments have sometimes been made about others that they are not “bona fide”... that they are “wishy wahsy”...that their eternal salvation is in jeopardy because they do not understand the “true gospel” or that the one baptising them is jeopardising their salvation because they don't have enough “knowledge”.

What is this knowledge that we need? The New Testament warns about the Gnostic type worship of head knowledge to know God. The real Gospel is not how it has been defined over the centuries by men – the real Gospel is found in the Gospels.

Each account of the four Gospel records confirms that Jesus taught the Gospel.

Matthew 4 v 23

*5 “And Jesus went about all Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, preaching the **Gospel** of the kingdom.”*

Mark 1 v 14,15

*“Jesus came to Galilee, preaching the **Gospel** of the kingdom of God”*

*“The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand. Repent, and believe in the **Gospel**.”*

Luke 4 v 18

*“ The Spirit of the LORD is upon Me, Because He has anointed Me To preach the **gospel** to the poor; He has sent Me to heal the brokenhearted, To proclaim liberty to the captives And recovery of sight to the blind, To set at liberty those who are oppressed”*

John 1

*“In Him was life, and the life was the light of men. 5 And the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not comprehend it... He came to His own, and His own did not receive Him. 12 But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, to those who believe in His name: 13 who were born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God. “*

These verses show that what Jesus lived and taught was the Gospel. He was the word and in Him is life.

The best summary of first principles is given by Jesus himself in the “Sermon on the Mount”... and the best understanding of what the real gospel is gained by looking at the words Jesus taught and the things he did. He gave us examples to follow. He ate and drank with the outcasts. He broke bread with them in their houses he had fellowship with them... and the pharisees despised Him for it. He shared His bread with Judas at the last supper, this was not an exception... it was another example to us. Paul endorsed what Jesus preached, he did not set out to redefine the gospel but to preach the same gospel and give advice about local situations based on the gospel Jesus preached.

The apostles doctrine was Jesus doctrine, they were the same. Paul said “be imitators of me as I am of Christ” and then later “imitate me”

Jesus warned about the basic gospel being added to, and about the traditions of men gaining hold. A fear some seem to have is that if we deviate from the traditions developed by men, that the true gospel will go down the drain... yet the real fear should be whether we have deviated from the gospel taught by Christ and have sunk into traditions of men.

Nearly all the baptisms in the New Testament give that impression that they occurred within hours of a person wishing to be baptised... that it was the realisation that they needed to be saved, and the understanding of what Jesus and God had done for them and a very basic understanding which was enough.

Jesus said “Come to me and learn”... not “Learn and come to me”. No-one can make another be born of the spirit or have faith... it is from God. No amount of head knowledge can transform our hearts... but seeing love at work in others can help.

Below are examples of New Testament Baptisms...there are no examples given in the Bible that lengthy head knowledge is required prior to baptism...nor even club rules to gain membership.

NT baptisms

John 3

26 And they came to John and said to him, “Rabbi, He who was with you beyond the Jordan, to whom you have testified—behold, **He is baptizing, and all are coming to Him!**”

John 4 v 1

Therefore, when the Lord knew that the Pharisees had heard that **Jesus made and baptized more disciples than John** (though Jesus Himself did not baptize, but His disciples), 3 He left Judea and departed again to Galilee.

Compare to

Matt 3 v 5

Then Jerusalem, all Judea, and all the region around the Jordan went out to him (John) and were baptized by him in the Jordan, confessing their sins.

(All Judea and Jerusalem went out to John, and Jesus disciples baptised more than John did... so combined it must have been a great number)

Acts 2

1 When the Day of Pentecost had fully come, they were all with one accord in one place. ...

14 But Peter, standing up with the eleven, raised his voice and said to them, “Men of Judea and all who dwell in Jerusalem, let this be known to you, and heed my words. 15 For these are not drunk, as you suppose, since it is *only* the third hour of the day. ...

36 “Therefore let all the house of Israel know assuredly that **God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ.**”

**37 Now when they heard *this*, they were cut to the heart**, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, “Men *and* brethren, what shall we do?”

7 38 Then Peter said to them, “**Repent, and let every one of you be baptized** in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. 39 For the promise is to you and to your children, and to all who are afar off, as many as the Lord our God will call.” ...

40 And with many other words he testified and exhorted them, saying, “Be saved from this perverse generation.” 41 Then those who gladly received his word were baptized; and **that day**

**about three thousand souls** were added *to them*. 42 And they continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in prayers.

Acts 8

36 **Now as they went down the road**, they came to some water. And the eunuch said, "See, *here is* water. What hinders me from being baptized?"

37 Then Philip said, "If you believe with all your heart, you may."

And he answered and said, "**I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God.**"

38 So he commanded the chariot to stand still. And both Philip and the eunuch went down into the water, and he baptized him.

Acts 9

18 Immediately there fell from his eyes *something* like scales, and he received his sight at once; and he arose and was baptized.

Acts 10

34 Then Peter opened *his* mouth and said: "In truth I perceive that God shows no partiality. 35 But in every nation **whoever fears Him and works righteousness is accepted by Him**. 36 The word which *God* sent to the children of Israel, preaching peace through Jesus Christ—He is Lord of all— 37 that word you know, which was proclaimed throughout all Judea, and began from Galilee after the baptism which John preached: 38 how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power, who went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with Him. 39 And we are witnesses of all things which He did both in the land of the Jews and in Jerusalem, whom they killed by hanging on a tree. 40 Him God raised up on the third day, and showed Him openly, 41 not to all the people, but to witnesses chosen before by God, *even* to us who ate and drank with Him after He arose from the dead. 42 And He commanded us to preach to the people, and to testify that it is He who was ordained by God *to be* Judge of the living and the dead. 43 To Him all the prophets witness that, through His name, **whoever believes in Him will receive remission of sins.**"

44 While Peter was still speaking these words, the Holy Spirit fell upon all those who heard the word. 45 And those of the circumcision who believed were astonished, as many as came with Peter, because the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out on the Gentiles also. 46 For they heard them speak with tongues and magnify God.

8 Then Peter answered, 47 "Can anyone forbid water, that these should not be baptized who have received the Holy Spirit just as we *have*?"

Acts 16

13 And on the Sabbath day we went out of the city to the riverside, where prayer was customarily made; and we sat down and spoke to the women who met *there*. 14 Now a certain woman named Lydia heard *us*. She was a seller of purple from the city of Thyatira, who worshiped God. The Lord opened her heart to heed the things spoken by Paul. 15 And when she and her household were baptized, she begged *us*, saying, "If you have judged me to be faithful to the Lord, come to my house and stay." So she persuaded us.

## Acts 16 - The Philippian Jailer

31 So they said, "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and you will be saved, you and your household." 32 Then they spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all who were in his house.

**33 And he took them the same hour of the night and washed *their* stripes. And immediately he and all his *family* were baptized.**

## Acts 19

3 And he said to them, "Into what then were you baptized?"

So they said, "Into John's baptism."

4 Then Paul said, "John indeed baptized with a baptism of repentance, saying to the people that they should believe on Him who would come after him, that is, on Christ Jesus."

5 When they heard *this*, they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus.

## Act 22

'Brother Saul, receive your sight.' And at that same hour I looked up at him. 14 Then he said, 'The God of our fathers has chosen you that you should know His will, and see the Just One, and hear the voice of His mouth. 15 For you will be His witness to all men of what you have seen and heard. 16 **And now why are you waiting? Arise and be baptized, and wash away your sins, calling on the name of the Lord.'**

## 1 Cor 1

17 For Christ did not send me to baptize, but to **preach the gospel, not with wisdom of words, lest the cross of Christ should be made of no effect.**

18 For the **message of the cross** is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God."

These verses show the urgency that the early apostles felt for baptism once they believed.

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