

# Critical Issues Commentary

A BIBLICALLY BASED COMMENTARY ON ISSUES THAT IMPACT YOU

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## BEREANS AND TRADITIONS

BY BOB DEWAAY

*“And the brethren immediately sent Paul and Silas away by night to Berea; and when they arrived, they went into the synagogue of the Jews. Now these were more noble-minded than those in Thessalonica, for they received the word with great eagerness, examining the Scriptures daily, to see whether these things were so.” (Acts 17:10,11)*

*“All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness; that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work.” (2Timothy 3:16,17)*

It was Paul's practice to go first to the Jews when he entered a new city. This was his procedure: *“And according to Paul's custom, he went to them, and for three Sabbaths reasoned with them from the Scriptures, explaining and giving evidence that the Christ had to suffer and rise again from the dead, and saying, ‘This Jesus whom I am proclaiming to you is the Christ.’” (Acts 17:2,3)* The idea of a Messiah who suffered and died was contrary to common Jewish Messianic expectations. Therefore it required sound Biblical evidence and careful explanation to convince first century Jews that Jesus, who had been crucified, was the Messiah. Paul provided this. Most of the Jews in Thessalonica reacted with hostility to Paul's message (Acts 17:5-7). They were not about to have their beliefs challenged by Paul's teaching no matter how much Biblical evidence was presented.

This provides a background for the commendation of the Jews of Berea. They had no tradition of believing that Messiah would suffer either. The difference was in their attitude toward allowing their own beliefs to be challenged by Biblical evidence. They were willing to with open hearts and minds, “search the Scriptures.” Because of their love for the truth, many of these Jews believed on Christ (Acts 17:12). To this day, the

term “Berean” is used to describe those who love the truth and willingly search the Scripture, even if it means having their own traditions overturned by Biblical evidence.

In this article, we will discuss the application of this “Berean” attitude to our own traditions as Christians. It is never a comfortable thing when someone challenges ideas that we have held dear. Clearly not all challenges are correct; people who are in error challenge true beliefs. How do we know, however, if the challenges that come to our comfortable traditions are from God or not? Furthermore, beliefs come in “packages” or systems. Ideas are connected to other ideas to reinforce one another and provide systematic answers to the big questions of the faith. Often challenges to certain beliefs are actually challenges to our whole way of living and believing. Certainly that was the case with Paul's challenge to the Bereans. The core of their Messianic hope was being questioned, and actually overturned. Jesus who had been rejected by the Jewish leaders was now being embraced as the true Messiah.

### “THAT'S NOT OUR TRADITION”

Since our natural tendency is to quickly reject those who suggest that beliefs we have held dear are in fact in error, it

takes special grace from God to embrace the Berean attitude and search the Scriptures, allowing them to speak to us. Someone might be telling us the truth, even though he or she is from another “camp.” Parochialism is the basic attitude shown by those in Thessalonica. They reasoned: “These people are upsetting our world, let's get rid of them” (see Acts 17:6,7). The Bereans attitude was: “Let's search the Scriptures to see if there is any evidence for what these Christians are saying.” Let us discuss how these two approaches apply to how we learn from one another as Christians.

As we publish articles over the years, we occasionally get letters where previously happy readers demand to be removed from our mailing list. The reason? We have been found to disagree on one point of doctrine. A recent letter like this said, “I have enjoyed your articles, but I must ask you to remove me from your mailing list. I am a Berean and I do not agree with your Calvinism.” The letter did not specify which particular doctrine put me in the camp of those who do not search the Scriptures. Since I do not promote John Calvin *per se*, I assume that the reaction was to my understanding of certain passages that teach election or perhaps perseverance. What troubles me is how this type of response tends to isolate us from discussion of the issues or interaction with Biblical passages. This is the essence of parochialism.

We have received similar letters, many even more troubling. One person wrote that not only must I immediately remove him from our mailing list, but that I was never to write him or contact him in any manner whatsoever. Why? I quote from the New American Standard Bible rather than the King James. This is sad. There is a better approach, one that takes a look at

the evidence and is willing to study about the matter of Bible translations. Parochialism is not about being denominational or non-denominational. It is an attitude that says in essence "we are right because we are us."<sup>1</sup> It mitigates allowing the Scriptures to teach us and correct errors in our system of theology.

One further example of this is even more prevalent in our day. It is the practice of justifying a belief by saying, "In our tradition we believe . . . ." The statement itself is innocuous if it is merely descriptive. But when used in the context of being the sole, necessary, and sufficient justification for a belief, it stifles learning or correction. For example, I overheard a conversation at a seminary where one person told another, "I have consulted many commentaries on Matthew 16 and have not found one that said binding and loosing was about binding demons." The response was as follows: "That's because Pentecostals have not written the commentaries. In Pentecostal tradition this is about demons." In effect, this response is saying that we have no access to what Jesus meant when He taught about binding and loosing and that the commentaries are just telling their tradition and I am telling mine. This is tantamount to giving up hope of learning the truth. Everyone is allowed their traditions but one must wonder what has become of learning the truth? This is a tolerant version of parochialism that plays well with the contemporary mind-set. Yet in it one's traditions do not allow the Scriptures to correct them.

### THINKING SYSTEMATICALLY

There is an approach that some take to avoiding parochialism captured by the statement, "I have no systematic theology, I follow the Bible only." This sounds pious, but is it true? When I hear that, I often ask, "Do you believe in the Trinity?" If the answer is "Yes," I respond, "Then you have a systematic theology." This approach fails to see that systematic thinking is a major aspect of how we learn the Bible and grow in our faith. A system of beliefs gives us a framework for understanding what sort

of world in which God has put us.

Consider the word "Christ," for example. When you read that word in the New Testament, what does it mean to you? The word is loaded with connotations. It means literally "the Anointed One." It signifies the Jewish Messiah. But the Scriptures are rich in providing an understanding of the Christ. We know about His preexistence from all eternity, His deity, His humanity, His sinless life, His death for our sins, His resurrection, and His ascension. Mature Christians who have been trained in the Scriptures bring along all of this and incorporate it into their understanding of the word "Christ" every time it is found in a passage. This illustrates how we think systematically and how theology becomes systematic.

If we had to start with a blank slate every time we encountered any concept, we would be paralyzed. Our ability to learn and respond requires consistency and uniformity. For example, the difference between little children and adults in relation to how they learn is very much influenced by systematic thinking. To small children, everything comes to them as particular experiences or pieces of data. They have no conceptual framework into which to place them. This framework is gradually built through life. Similarly, to the new Christian, often everything in the Bible is new and every verse is supplying new information. As the Bible is studied, the particular truths build a system of thinking as our minds are renewed by the Holy Spirit and the Word of God. The system of thinking provides a foundation for understanding the various truths of the Bible.<sup>2</sup>

Some have used the analogy of reading a new book to illustrate this point. If you read a paragraph in the middle of a new book, you would be unlikely to make much sense of it. As one reads a book, a concept of what the book is about develops. This concept of the type of book and what the main idea is helps in absorbing the sentences. This was driven home to me the first time I read *The Great Divorce* by C.S. Lewis. I read over half the book without comprehending it. I just did not "get

it." It seemed to be a story about a bus ride to some place that was not like anything in this world. Finally, about three fourths of the way through, I decided that it was about heaven and people who did not end up there who were paying it a visit. I had to start the whole book over and then it made sense. We have to have a systematic understanding to make any sense of the sentences and paragraphs. The Bible is no different in that regard.

Systematic approaches to worship have benefits. They provide stability and order. For example, in Israel God instituted a system of annual feasts and required that they be kept. These feasts served many purposes, including prophetic ones. But they also kept the Israelites together as a distinct people with a common history that they celebrated, much like the Lord's Supper does for Christians. Some contemporary groups relish spontaneity to the point that they deem anything orderly or repeated in Christian worship to be the enemy of the Holy Spirit. I do not see how anyone knowing the Bible could assume that the Holy Spirit and God's work among His people would create continual disorder. The first thing we learn about the Holy Spirit in the Bible is in Genesis 1:2, where the Spirit of God moves over the formless void and progressively creates order from chaos. Paul taught, "*But let all things be done properly and in an orderly manner*" (1Corinthians 14:40).

Systems have value in connecting our faith to other believers throughout church history. The good and the bad of church history can help us. We can learn that certain heresies arose long ago and were rightly rejected, helping us identify the same heresies in our day. We can also learn from those who articulated the faith in various circumstances. Nothing in church history can serve as our final authority. Only the Bible can do that. Nevertheless, some formulations of the faith are well written and Biblical. For example, several of the documents that came out of the Christological controversies of the fourth century marvelously explain the person of Christ and the doctrine of the

trinity. If we chose to reject their conclusion, we would need good Biblical reasons for doing so. Most contemporary cults (such as the Christology of the Jehovah's Witnesses) are merely promoting heresies that existed long ago.

### SEARCHING THE SCRIPTURES

Parochialism takes the good things we have discussed about systems and systematic thinking, and institutionalizes them into a tight, all encompassing structure that is deemed to be the only true way of knowing and serving God. In my opinion Roman Catholicism is like this. The teaching of Rome has developed beyond the Scriptures to institutionalize not only certain truths, such as the trinity, but many errors. Traditions of the Roman church stand as authoritative to those who are members, even if these traditions are far removed from the Scriptures. The sad result is that for millions of Catholics all around the world, what the Scriptures say about anything in particular is of little interest. The point is that systems can stifle searching the Scriptures if they are wrongly held.

We need to search the Scriptures and love what they have to say on every point to which they speak. No matter how many years any of us have studied the Bible and no matter how well we know its truths, this does not diminish one bit our need for further study. For example, the whole of the person of our Lord in His being and work is so great that we cannot fully comprehend Him. We can spend a lifetime studying all the Bible says about Christ, yet look forward to learning more when we finally see Him as He is (1John 3:2) and learning even more throughout eternity. Searching the Scriptures confirms and strengthens true beliefs.

Careful, consistent, and comprehensive study of the Scriptures grounds our faith in God's self-revelation rather than the traditions of men. What if some historical document of the church actually succeeded in articulating everything important about the faith? There are some very good ones. Would it be adequate to read some denomination's

confession, understand it, and swear allegiance to it, affirming that every thing it says is true? Never! Whether intended by their leadership or not, many Christians do just that and that alone. They learn what is necessary to join a group and determine that they agree with the group's creeds. That is the only decision necessary. From then on, they merely recite what they are told and remain loyal to the group. This is not the same as being a Berean and searching the Scriptures daily. Traditions are not adequate to be the basis of our faith and may have the unintended side effect of invalidating the Word of God (Mark 7:7-13).

We need to search the Scriptures to correct false beliefs. We all have some, no doubt, because we are not omniscient. This is no excuse, however, for failing to seek the truth. I hear people say, "No one has all the truth." Then they use that as an excuse to hold any false belief they

like while refusing any Biblical evidence to the contrary. Of course, if we are sincere at all, we think we are right about what we affirm to be

true. The only way to correct errors in our beliefs is to allow them to be challenged by the facts. The facts we are concerned with in theology are the truths of God's Word. Once the process of searching the Scriptures ceases, the process of correcting inadequate or false beliefs ceases. I would be naive to think that in all that I believe on every matter that touches the Scriptures, I need no correction. However, I shall continue to teach and preach what I believe, continually studying the Bible so that God will enrich true beliefs by making them fuller and deeper and correct any false ones. None of us should let the fact that we do not in ourselves have all of the truth in perfect and pristine form ever stop us from studying or back off from contending for the faith.

### PAROCHIALISM AND LEARNING

Parochialism will always be attractive to many people because of its utter simplicity. Rather than the painful process of making many decisions about all manner of issues of belief and behavior, they merely make one decision: which group to join. The decision is that everything about this group is what they are going to hold to, and they shall just trust that it is right. If someone questions the beliefs of people who approach their faith this way, they merely send them to the church authorities, or consult the creeds. This issue is not about being denominational versus non-denominational. Some of the most extreme examples of parochialism I have seen have been in small, non-denominational groups. One person has created his own system of answers for everything and dictates it all to the flock. Nonconformity on any point is not tolerated.

The process of learning is paralyzed when we have made one decision to join and thereafter refuse to interact seriously with dissenting views. I love studying theology and have learned much by

going into a rigorous academic environment where many do not share my views and interacting with scholarly Bible believing teachers who may hold different views on various matters. I remember meeting another man a few years ago in a seminary class on theology and agreeing with him on most doctrines. The class was examining a whole spectrum of theological perspectives — some far afield from ours — interacting with them, critiquing them, and doing serious research on various topics. My friend was disappointed because he wanted a class taught only from our own perspective that only reinforced our systematic theology. I felt just the opposite. I love going toe-to-toe with capable people who see things from a different perspective, point out the flaws in my arguments, and bring Scriptures to bear that I may have not

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considered. I really do not get that much from only being spoon-fed what I already believe, and that in a parochial setting.

There is, I believe, an anti-scholastic bias in much of American Evangelicalism which contributes to parochialism. The idea is that someone figured out all this “theology stuff” long ago, so why keep rehashing it? This bias is contributing to the therapeutic

approach that is so common. One decision is made — which group to join — that settles all matters theological. Now life is about getting one’s needs

met. Ironically, ecumenism and parochialism have found a way to exist nicely in our post-modern culture, though they are technically polar opposites. The way they coexist is that everyone is given the right to choose a group to join, and that settles the truth issues. We agree that everyone’s tradition is correct for them. Once that is settled, theological disputes are moot. Thus, we can privately be as narrow and parochial as we desire, as long as publicly we do not try to correct anyone else. This is the trend not only in theology, but modern politics. What is “true” just is not that interesting to many people.

#### LISTENING TO DISSENTING VIEWS

Another paralyzing aspect of parochialism is that it engenders an attitude that refuses to consider dissenting views. This is a common practice among those of us who are conservative in our approach to the Bible and theology. I think it explains some of the letters I get from readers. The fact that people feel they must break off all further dialogue with me because they disagree with me on one point saddens me. One issue that regularly elicits this response is the issue of God’s sovereignty in salvation or man’s free will. It is understandable that this causes consternation because how we understand this influences everything we read in the Bible. I have been on both sides of this issue. For sixteen

years of my Christian life, I saw free will as the key to understanding the problem of evil, salvation, and redemption history. A belief like this one — that influences all of our other beliefs in some way — is not easily changed. Then, in 1986, I agreed to teach verse by verse through Romans, carefully considering every passage. It took three years. By the end of the process, my commitment to free will, as I previously understood it, had been dashed on the rocks of God’s sovereignty. Now I am on the other side of the issue.

I share this not to delve into this particular issue, but to discuss how we interact with dissenting views. To this day, some of my oldest friends still disagree with me on this subject. People I hold in high regard cannot embrace the idea that God chose certain individuals from before the foundation of the world. It was interesting that a couple of years ago I was asked to debate an Arminian at an apologetics meeting. I never back away from the chance for a good, irenic debate, so I agreed. The other man agreed with me on total depravity and the perseverance of the saints, leaving only three points to debate. The rest boils down to whether God chose us out of His own gracious purposes or whether He foresaw that we would choose Him. Either the eternal purposes of God or the choices of men in history determine who the elect are.

The interesting thing about the debate was that most of the people there were on my side, with the exception of a number of people from our own congregation! That did not make me feel bad at all. People whom I consider my best friends do not agree with me on this point. What is important is that we keep searching the Scriptures together, prayerfully, seeking to know the way of the Lord more perfectly. I would get no joy out of demanding that everyone agree with me because I am the pastor. What we agreed upon long ago was

that we would teach the whole counsel of God and study the Bible together, verse by verse. This we do. I teach the universal call passages just as passionately as the ones on election. If they are in the Bible, we must take them seriously.

#### CONCLUSION

This brings us back to the Thessalonians and the Bereans. One group refused to even listen to evidence, they just wanted those who disagreed to be banished from their city. The other searched the Scriptures. The comfort that was gained by Thessalonian Jews in silencing the message came at a high price, the price of coming to the knowledge of the truth. The Bereans had a more difficult task, they had to study daily. Not only that, what they were studying upset their whole system of belief concerning the person and work of Messiah. But they gained the knowledge of the truth and eternal life in Christ.

Being Bereans does not mean that we never have a solid, systematic understanding of God’s truth as revealed in His Word. It means that we take on the role of life-long students. The following is the essence of what I believe to be a God honoring approach that will help us be like the Bereans while still holding onto a systematic understanding of the truths of God’s Word.

- \* Hold firmly to, and contend for, the faith once for delivered to the saints (**Jude 1:3**);
  - \* Always search the Scriptures on every matter;
  - \* Do not assume you are right on every point without allowing serious challenges;
  - \* Read the best works of those who disagree and take their arguments seriously;
  - \* Study the Bible, verse by verse, Old and New Testaments throughout your lifetime;
  - \* Realize that we all have a systematic theology, but never let a system stifle learning and study;
- With this approach we shall avoid the extremes of ecumenism and parochialism. We will become life long disciples, growing in the grace and knowledge of

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the Lord.

#### END NOTES

1. This is grammatically incorrect, but I use it here for emphasis because it has more impact than the correct “we are right because we are we.”

2. This means that Bible study is both deductive and inductive. It is deductive in the sense that our sys-

tematic understanding of basic truths causes us to deductively know that certain interpretations are untenable. Even if the language of a given passage might lend it self to such an interpretation, our knowledge of theology keeps us from getting off track. For example the passage in Matthew 24 that says that the Son doesn't know the day or hour of His return, only the Father,

could be construed to say the Son must not have the nature of eternal God (i.e. not omniscient). But we resist this interpretation because our knowledge of the deity of Christ does not allow us to deduce this. But our study must be inductive also, that is examining every passage in particular and allowing the data of the Bible to correct and inform our systematic theology.

## THE "W.W.J.D.?" PHENOMENON *Evangelism or Liberal Ethical System?*

BY RYAN HABBENA

We've all seen 'em. They have been the “fashion fad” of many in and outside the church over the last few years. They began to appear on wrists in the mid-90's, and the “W.W.J.D.” craze is still going strong. These bracelets abound to the point where it's hard to watch a professional sport without seeing them on the wrist of at least one of the competitors.

For the few who *haven't* been exposed to this widespread phenomenon, “W.W.J.D.” is an acronym for “What Would Jesus Do?” The purported purpose of these bracelets is this: that one would be reminded to pattern one's life after the example of Jesus. When encountered with life's dilemmas, one is to look at their bracelet and ask themselves the question “W.W.J.D.” for ethical guidance. While, undoubtedly, some common good has come from this movement, there is a need for the Evangelical church, who adhere to essentials of the historic Christian faith, to understand the historical origin of this contemporary fad.

#### THE LIBERAL UNDERTONES OF “W.W.J.D.?”

In the 1890's, a man by the name of Charles Sheldon penned the famous book *In His Steps*. *In His Steps* is a novel that follows several fictitious people from various backgrounds in their quest to follow Sheldon's ethical model. In

the novel, Sheldon's characters are challenged with ethical situations in which the overarching question is continually asked: “What Would Jesus Do?” Thus, it is from this novel that both the ethical system and promotion of such (i.e. “W.W.J.D.” bracelets) are derived.

However, Charles Sheldon was not one who clung to the historic essentials of the Christian faith. Such beliefs as the deity of Christ, the virgin birth, and the resurrection, were *at best* seen in an apathetic way in Sheldon's ministry. Timothy Miller, in his biography of Charles Sheldon, makes the following observations: “Yet, Sheldon was no conservative; he was, for example, capable of jettisoning parts of the Bible he found less than useful. He hinted at skepticism of doctrines many conservatives would find essential – the virgin birth, to name one – and readily accepted higher criticism of the Bible.”<sup>1</sup>

Miller further states: “Theologically, there is no way to classify Sheldon other than as a liberal .

. . . Sheldon managed to stay out of the bruising fray between liberals and conservatives throughout his lifetime. At the peak of the battle, in the 1920's, the prolific pen of Sheldon was silent on the issue.

Nowhere in His writings is there to be found a comment on the Scopes trial, for example, or on Harry Emerson Fosdick's polemics, although he believed in evolution and was not far from Fosdick on many issues.”<sup>2</sup>

Therefore, the “W.W.J.D.” ethical system, being pioneered by a man who

*at best* neglected many essential doctrines of the Christian faith, has distinct liberal roots. The question then arises: Do we find liberal undertones within the “W.W.J.D.” ethical system?

#### A FLAWED ETHICAL SYSTEM

For those who adhere to the Scriptures as their ultimate and final authority, it must be acknowledged that there is a fundamental difference between Jesus of Nazareth and the rest of humanity. Jesus of Nazareth is God-incarnate. Every other human being that ever existed (and will ever exist) does not fall into this ontological<sup>3</sup> category. Therefore, Jesus Christ is *the* unique One. Since there is a fundamental distinction between His nature and ours, the “W.W.J.D.” ethical system will often fail. Allow me to give two concrete examples.

1) There are several instances throughout the Scriptures where we find Jesus receiving and accepting worship (Matthew 2:11, 14:33, 28:9, 28:17, John 9:38, and Revelation 5:14.). Yet, we are told in the book of Acts, when Peter visited the household of Cornelius, “it came about that Peter

entered, Cornelius met him, and fell at his feet and worshiped him. But Peter raised him up, saying, ‘Stand up; I too am just a man’” (Acts 10:25-26). Obviously, Peter did not do “what Jesus would do” in this situation.

2) In Matthew chapter 23 Jesus pronounces His woes upon the scribes and Pharisees of His day. Jesus, the righteous Judge (John 5:22), peers into the

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hearts of the Pharisees and proclaims: "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you clean the outside of the cup and of the dish, but inside they are full of robbery and self-indulgence . . . Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs which on the outside appear beautiful, but inside they are full of dead men's bones and all uncleanness . . . You serpents, you brood of vipers, how shall you escape the sentence of hell?" (Matthew 23:25,27,33). Since we are finite and sinful, we cannot judge as Jesus did. Nor do we know what lies in man as Jesus does (John 2:25). Therefore, again, if presented with this ethical situation we should *not* do "what Jesus would do."

While the above examples may come off as somewhat "knit-picky," they well demonstrate the liberal undertones of this ethical system. The liberal roots of this system deny the deity of Christ. A denial of the deity of Christ is a denial of an essential belief of the Christian faith.<sup>4</sup> Because of the ontological difference between Jesus and the rest of humanity, we must acknowledge that, when confronted with certain ethical situations, our prescribed actions will often not coincide with the actions of our Lord.

#### WHAT IS TRUE EVANGELISM?

A couple of years ago I was listening to a Christian radio "Talk Show." The topic that was on the "docket" for the day was "Christian Retailing." The round table panel consisted of a manager of a Christian retailing company, the vice-president of the same company, and a moderator. Eventually, they took phone calls, and one caller posed the question, which I paraphrase: "What about all of the 'Jesus junk?' I see all of these little nick-knacks that say 'God loves you' or 'W.W.J.D.?' that are sold at a 60 – 80% mark-up. How does one argue that this is a good 'Christian' thing to do?" The eventual answer came from the Vice President of this particular retailer. He answered, and again I paraphrase, "Whatever means we can use to get the Gospel out, we will use it."

This answer is indicative of the misguided notion of evangelism that largely permeates the contemporary church. Plastering a "God Loves You" sticker on the bumper of a car is *not* true evangelism. Giving an acquaintance a pencil with the acronym "P.U.S.H." (i.e. Pray Until Something Happens – another faddish acronym) etched on it is *not* true evangelism. And passing out "W.W.J.D.?" bracelets is *not* true evangelism.

While the true and living God is omnipotent and can use any thing He wishes to draw people closer to Him, the only message that He has proclaimed through which He will save humanity is the message of the *cross*. Over the last year I have addressed such movements as "The Seeker Sensitive Movement,"

"The Signs and Wonders Movement" and now the "'W. W. J. D. ?' Movement."

While all of these movements are distinct with diverse roots, a common thread is evident through them all – There is neglect of the cross of Christ. Where there is no cross, there is no true Gospel. I feel as if I am on the fringes of redundancy (in reference to my previous articles), yet I am led to quote 1 Corinthians chapters 1 and 2 again:

For the word of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God . . . For I determined to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and Him crucified. I was with you in weakness and in fear and in much trembling, and my message and my preaching were not with persuasive words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, so that your faith may not rest on the wisdom of man but on the power of God. (1 Corinthians 1:18, 2:1-5)

What has become evident to me through my interaction with several

contemporary movements within the church is there is a disturbing neglect of the heart of the Gospel – The glorious work of our God and Savior on the cross. We are not saved through our own attempted obedience to an ethical system. We are saved through faith in the finished work of Jesus Christ. Whatever common good that may come from it, passing out "W.W.J.D.?" bracelets is not true evangelism. Preaching the cross is.

#### HOW THEN SHALL WE LIVE

The above suggests the question: "How then should we live in obedience to God? In what way should I, as a Christian, emulate Christ?" What must first be established is our condition apart from God's work of regeneration.

Humanity is dead in trespasses and sin. In Romans Paul pronounces this point twice: "All have turned aside, together they have become useless; there is none who does good, there is not even one" (Romans 3:12). And, "the mind set on the flesh is hostile toward God; for it does not subject itself to the law of God, for it is not even able to do, and those who are in the flesh cannot please God" (Romans 8:7-8).

We *can't* do "what Jesus would do" (in a moral sense) without the power of God changing our hearts and freeing us from the power of sin that holds our will captive. It is only when God's heavenly gift is bestowed upon one's soul that one is given "everything pertaining to life and godliness" (2 Peter 2:3).

However, it must be affirmed that we do find commonality between our Lord and humanity. Hebrews 2:17 proclaims, "Therefore, He [Jesus] had to be made like His brethren in all things, so that He might become a merciful and faithful high priest in things pertaining to God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people." We are to strive to follow Jesus' example in His unwavering *obedience* to the Father, for "the one who says he abides in Him

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ought himself to walk in the same manner He walked" (1 John 2:6). Therefore, we *must* emulate Jesus in His obedience to the revealed will and sovereign plan of God.

Even though there are distinct areas of commonality, there is still a problem with *simply* asking ourselves, "What Would Jesus Do?" in these situations. We need to *know* God's righteous commands, and they are *not* found in our own intuition. For "the heart is more deceitful than all else and is desperately sick; who can understand it?" (Jeremiah 17:9). Rather, His righteous commands are discovered in His inspired, inerrant word. Again, simply asking ourselves: "What Would Jesus Do?," and then only relying on our own intuition as to what this would be, is another subtle indicator of the liberal undertones of the "W.W.J.D.?" ethical system. Liberalism, by and large, minimizes the sufficiency of the Scriptures for "training in righteousness" (2 Timothy 3:16).

### CONCLUSION

While much else could be said, space does not permit a further exploration regarding this contemporary fad and the related question of Christian retailing. Yet, this may well be fodder for a future article.

We can ask ourselves "W.W.J.D.?" all we want. However, in regards to obedience to the righteous commands of God, without the regeneration and grace that proceeds from our sacrificial Lamb and great High Priest, and without abiding in Him and His word, there will indeed be no "doing what Jesus would do." Our focus must remain upon Jesus Christ, the risen Lord of all. For we are dependent upon His divine grace to conform us into His glorious image.

END NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Timothy Miller, *Following In His Steps: A Biography of Charles M. Sheldon*, (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1987) xiii.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.* See CIC #56, Robert Schuller and *The Seeker Sensitive Church* by Bob DeWaay, for a further treatment on Fosdick and his influence on 20<sup>th</sup> Century Christianity.

<sup>3</sup> *Ontological* is a term that refers to "nature" or "being."

<sup>4</sup> In John 8:24, Jesus declares, literally translated, "unless you believe that I AM, you will die in your sins." This is powerful attestation for the necessity of a belief in the deity of Christ in reference to a genuine faith.

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