

MISAIMINGS

“Who concerning the Truth Have Misaimed” — 2 Timothy 2:18

Misaiming concerning Spiritual Experience and Spiritual Knowledge

Misaiming: “The Scriptures nowhere teach that God gives us any knowledge through ‘spiritual experience.’ Knowledge of spiritual matters is always linked to God’s propositional revelation, the written Word” (Arthur L. Johnson, “Mysticism and Evangelical Thought,” *Bulletin of the Evangelical Philosophical Society* 8 (1985), p. 25, as cited in *Mysticism: An Evangelical Option?* Winfried Corduan, Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1991).

Truth: An underlying flaw in this passage is the assumption that spiritual knowledge gained through spiritual experience is equivalent to doctrinal knowledge. Spiritual experience does lead to spiritual knowledge, but not in the way Johnson’s article interprets it. Spiritual knowledge, acquired from spiritual experience, is not the same as mere mental knowledge of doctrinal, scriptural truth. True spiritual experience is the personal apprehension of, appropriation of, and participation in the person of Christ; it is a Christian’s direct involvement with God in Christ as the Spirit. The knowledge gained by such divinely-ordered subjective experience is an experiential knowledge of the person of Christ, not the accretion of objective, academic Bible knowledge. Paul, who contributed fourteen Epistles to the Bible and knew “all the counsel of God” (Acts 20:27), still desired, in the latter years of his life, to “pursue toward the goal” (Phil. 3:14). Though he possessed an unparalleled knowledge of the Scriptures, he did “not account of [himself] to have laid hold” but was constantly stretching forward to know Him (vv. 13, 10). Such a knowing of Christ is experiential, subjective, and in the proper sense of the word, mystical. Tragically, it is possible to know Bible doctrines, even to memorize the Bible, yet not know the Author in a personal, subjective way. Christ admonished the Pharisees regarding this very matter: “You search the Scriptures, because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is these that testify concerning Me. Yet you are not willing to come to Me that you may have life” (John 5:39-40). The Bible, when used properly, will always direct us and even bring us to Christ Himself.

Genuine subjective experiences of God in Christ as the

Spirit will always harmonize with the Bible. The Bible and its Author will never contradict each other. Therefore, all spiritual experience and subsequent knowledge must be authenticated by the Word of God or else be discarded. This quotation misaims by disregarding a crucial aspect of many believers’ spiritual journey—namely, that at times spiritual experience comes first and is subsequently interpreted and clarified by the Word. Spiritual knowledge gained by spiritual experience can also provide strong affirmation of a spiritual truth already mentally apprehended from the Scriptures. Most central to the heart of the Christian faith, the real purpose of knowing the Bible must be, ultimately, to know its Author. In fact, the more personal knowledge of and genuine insight into the truths of the Bible one has, the more one longs “to know *Him*”—not just know *about* Him.

Misaiming concerning Denominations

Misaiming: “Many people see the existence of denominations as a blot against the church’s witness to unity. So they are surprised to learn that denominations were created with quite the opposite intent—to make unity in the church possible....Since no church has a final and full grasp of divine truth, the true church of Christ can never be fully represented by any single ecclesiastical structure. Finally, the mere fact of separation does not of itself constitute schism. It is possible to be divided at many points and still be united in Christ (Bruce Shelley, “Denominations—Divided We Stand,” *Christianity Today*, September 7, 1998, p. 90).

Truth: To denominate means to distinguish or divide oneself from others by taking different names. Declaring that denominations were created “to make unity in the church possible” is as illogical as saying that a surgeon can unite a patient’s body by dismembering it. Denominations are divisions, and no attempts at historical revision can change this fact that even unbelievers readily recognize. Denominationalism is a shameful blight on the church’s testimony and a death-blow to the church’s unity. In John 17:21 the Lord prayed to the Father, “That they all may be one...that the world may believe that You have sent Me.” The world believes only what it sees, and most believers would agree that the unbiblical system of denominationalism has severely

blunted the church's impact on the world. Claiming that the "fact of separation does not of itself constitute schism" is nothing but wishful thinking. There may be unity *within* a denomination as well as some general agreement among denominations, but the obvious fact remains that the fellowship of the one Body of Christ has been damaged by the existence of denominations.

Rather than making excuses, it would be more profitable for believers to confess any sin of division to the Lord and look to His Word for the God-ordained way of preserving the expression of the vital unity of the church. This misaiming errs in maintaining that there can be no single ecclesiastical structure for the church. Did God neglect to leave us such a pattern in His Word? No. The Bible establishes a clear pattern: one practical expression of the church in each city (Acts 8:1; 13:1; Rev. 1:11), no matter how large the church (Acts 21:17-18, 20) nor how small (Rom. 16:1), under one leadership and administration (Acts 14:23; Titus 1:5), possessing the liberty to hold different persuasions on minor issues (Rom. 14:5), yet one in the Spirit (Eph. 4:3) and one in the common Christian faith (v. 13), and above all, utterly rejecting any notion of dividing from one another according to name, i.e., denominating (1 Cor. 1:10-13). The Body of Christ is better served by our maintaining the scriptural way of unity rather than making excuses for the existing divisions in the church.

D. Martin Lloyd-Jones, a respected evangelical scholar, argues this point convincingly in a recent article in *Modern Reformation*, September/October 1998:

I feel that our position is a pathetic one. Indeed to me it is a tragic one. Why do I say this? My first answer is this. Can we deny the charge that we, as evangelical Christians, have been less interested in the question of church unity than anyone else? I say we cannot deny that charge. Everybody seems to be talking about church unity except evangelicals. Surely, with our view of Scripture and with our knowledge and understanding of it, we, of all people, ought to be the first to preach the vital necessity of church unity; but we are the last to do so. (15)

Misaiming concerning Formality and Ritualism

Misaiming: "The early Christians were 'fervently devoted to the apostles' doctrine, and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers' (Acts 2:42). Historic Christianity has known true fellowship only and exclusively in the objective reality of the fellowship *God* creates and sustains through his Word and his Sacraments....Thus, the first Christians gathered around the Word (the Apostles' doctrine) and around the Eucharist (the breaking of bread), in the context of an orderly

pattern of liturgical worship (the prayers)....Thus, for the New Testament and Early Church, altar fellowship was church fellowship and church fellowship is most visibly and tangibly expressed in altar fellowship" (*Modern Reformation*, September/October 1998, p. 21).

Truth: The corporate church life in Acts is portrayed as simple and spontaneous, having been produced as the result of the believers receiving "the gift of the Holy Spirit" (2:38). However, this quotation transmutes "the breaking of bread" into formal practices along with an altar, and also manages to read "an orderly pattern of liturgical worship" into what the Bible simply calls "prayers."

This misaiming errs in characterizing formal, ritualistic, and Eucharistic ceremonies with the early church's fellowship. *Eucharist*, innocuously, means "giving of thanks," which is certainly done at the Lord's table. Over time, however, this term came to be associated with a ritualistic, formalized altar service, even though the New Testament worshippers never used an altar. The altar was an item of furniture in the Old Testament tabernacle and temple; centuries later it was reintroduced and incorporated into the Roman Catholic Mass. The altar came to occupy a central site and role in medieval cathedrals. Sadly, the reformers continued this unscriptural practice and built "altars" into their edifices as well. Even today, this error is perpetuated by referring to the Lord's table as "altar fellowship."

What the Bible does record in its description of early church practice is the breaking of bread "from house to house." This could hardly have been a formalized service; for one thing, it often involved a full meal rather than just the bread and wine of the Lord's table. The believers "partook of their food with exultation and simplicity of heart" (Acts 2:46), which Jude referred to as "love feasts" (Jude 12). These feasts of love were often held in conjunction with the Lord's supper. Having the Lord's supper "from house to house" in a church of tens of thousands of believers (Acts 21:20) obviously made it impossible for the elders and apostles to formally preside over each meeting. The meetings were evidently simple, full of "praising God" (2:47), and not dependent on formal "church furniture."

When the Bible speaks of the breaking of bread and prayers, it means precisely what it says—a simple, spontaneous life of rejoicing in the "fellowship of spirit" (Phil. 2:1) and "the fellowship of the Holy Spirit" (2 Cor. 13:14). This in no way indicates formal rituals, elaborate church structures, Old Testament furniture, or "an orderly pattern of liturgical worship."

by the Editors