

CONVERSATIONS ABOUT THE CHURCH

"WHERE ON EARTH ARE GOD'S FRIENDS?"

by A. Graham Maxwell

Welcome to the first of our Conversations about the Church. The subject this time we have entitled, "Where on Earth are God's Friends?" another look at the meaning and purpose of the church, in of course the larger setting of the great controversy over the character and government of God. And for these two evenings we especially invite and welcome your questions.

Well, we've had twenty conversations about God and the measures He has taken to win us back, and to confirm the trust of the onlooking universe. Before Jesus went back to heaven, He made it plain to His disciples that He didn't want them just to regard themselves as trusted servants, even as trusting children, but as trusting friends. And in the book of Revelation we have the picture of the whole loyal universe celebrating the fact that God has indeed won His case, that He's proved that He's not the kind of person that His enemies have made Him out to be. All these loyal beings throughout the universe are rejoicing in the fact, reverently to be sure, that there is no need to be afraid of God. But where on earth are God's friends? That is, where *on earth* are God's friends? Where are God's friends on this planet? Jesus also said before He went back to heaven, that we, if we would be willing, would please go to all the world and take the good news, that others might be won back to trust. That great commission is the last of the verses on the Bible reference sheet. I put it on the end, because that's still our commission, and we should end with it as well. Matthew 28:19, 20. "Go then, Jesus said, to all peoples everywhere, and make them my disciples. Baptize them in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, and teach them to obey everything that I have commanded you."

Well, now it's 1984. How successful have we been in fulfilling his commission? If success is to be measured by the number of Christian organizations around the world, we've been very successful, except no two of them hold the same picture even of God. Why is there so much diversity of opinion and conviction about the truth and about what one must do to be saved, and even about God Himself? Is it possible among all of these organizations, that there is one true church? Each group likes to think it is the one. If there is, what are its marks of identification? I've been asked that question many times. I think the most interesting time was on the invitation of the Jesuit School of Theology up at the University of San Francisco, to come and explain the beliefs and practices of Seventh-day Adventists to a Seminar - a two-year course, it was - for lay-Catholic evangelists. This remarkable program carried on for a year there, but it was even described in *Time* magazine, not my visit, but the training of the lay-Catholic evangelists.

Well, I based my explanation on the meaning of our name, Seventh-day Adventist. You can imagine what I said. That was 25 years ago. The emphasis on faith in Jesus Christ led the monseigneur who was in charge, being a member of the Society of Jesus, you see, as a Jesuit, and liking the emphasis on faith in Christ, he said, "It seems to me that the main difference between you Adventists and us Jesuits is that we smoke," which he was doing throughout the meeting. But then having made that generous comment, he then said, "Presumably you Seventh-day Adventists believe you are the one true church. You know, we Roman Catholics rather think we are," he said quite gently. "How do you support your view that you are the one true church?"

Well in reply I decided to use the #1 key text that our Roman Catholics friends employ, because of its mention of Peter. That's Matthew 16:18, the first text on the reference sheet. "You are

Peter (This is very similar to the *King James*, 'Thou art Peter'--Footnote Greek `petros') and on this rock (Footnote Greek `petra') I will build my church." Now before we go on to discuss some of the other details and the other translations, we need to define the word church in there. What do we mean when we are speaking of church? Then we'll come back to "rock" and "Peter" and so on. Sometimes we use church to describe the organization. Does your church permit such and such? That doesn't mean the local congregation, does it? That's the whole organization. Sometimes it refers to the building. As you drive through town, you will see many churches, the buildings. For many of us, church is the worship hour, as compared with the Bible study hour. Both Sabbath and Sunday-keepers will say, "Are you staying for church after Sunday School?" or "after Sabbath School?" Church is the service. The Greek word from which our translation "church" comes, is pronounced "ec-clas-i-a," and you can hear "ecclesiastic" in there. It's made up of two parts: the preposition for "out" and the verb "to call." To call out. That tempts one to think indeed a call has gone out and we respond to it. Actually, the safest meaning is "the assembly," or "the people who respond to the summons, to the call." Hence you will find the translation often "assembly."

Look, for example, at the next reference, and we'll come back to this one. In Acts 7:28 reference is made to the church in the wilderness. Now what church? Did the tabernacle look like a church with a spire on it? Well, in *Revised Standard* it's translated the "congregation in the wilderness." Con means together, and gregate is together. It's the gathering together. Hence, *Moffatt's* translation, "the assembly in the desert," and that's right. I would like to have added another one, but I couldn't find the version that did it. "The synagogue in the wilderness. You see, "syn" together, "agogue" to bring. Synagogue is the Greek for the Latin "congregation." it means exactly the same. A synagogue is a gathering, an assembly, you see. In fact, in the highly esteemed *Greek New Testament Lexicon* by Arndt and Gingrich, one of the meanings of "synagogue" is "gang." In Psalm 22:16, where it talks about the company of evildoers, it is sometimes translated, "they were an evil gang," you see.

That made me remember Chaplain Burke's wonderful translation, *God is For Real, Man*, and Jesus and His disciples were known as "the Jesus gang." That's what the kids called it, and that was not a derogatory term at all. "The Jesus gang." But you see, the beauty of this is, it emphasizes that the church is primarily people. It's the company of God's friends. Let's not push God's gang too far. But it's people. That's the all-important thing, who may need a building and an organization, but by and large, it's a company of people. Now how large is the membership in this company of God's friends? Look at the next text, Ephesians 1:10, 22. Let's not make our church too small. I always hesitate to start in the middle of a verse, or a paragraph, or even a chapter, but having this reference sheet, you can look up the context. "He will bring everything together under Christ as Head, everything in the heavens, and everything on earth. He has put all things under His feet, and made Him as the ruler of everything, the head of the church, which is His body." Remember that, because that symbol of the body occurs later on. So Christ is the head of the church, and the church, it would appear, includes God's friends in heaven and on earth.

Now a very comforting thought. God's friends on this planet often feel uncomfortably in the minority. But when you consider the membership of the whole church, it is the majority that has chosen to be loyal. Only one-third of the angels chose to be disloyal and to move out. Two thirds chose to stay loyal. On a universe-wide scale, God's people are in the majority, when you feel a little lonely on this planet.

Now, do we belong to this group up there, which is pictured in Revelation as celebrating the fact that God has indeed proved Himself to be worthy of our trust? Well, look at Philippians 3:20, to

see if we belong. The next text on the sheet. "We are citizens of heaven." Trouble is, you may have not used the verse to say that, because in the *King James* it says, "Our conversation is in heaven." That's not the regular word that's translated "conversation" which would rather be better, "behavior." The Greek is "politeuma." In this political year of 1984, can you sense the meaning of that term? It means, citizenship, even fatherland, homeland. We are citizens of heaven, already--if we wish--members of this heavenly, universe-wide church.

Now in addition though, to the church, meaning the company of God's friends, it did come to mean unit or group within the larger company. So look at Romans 16:5, where Paul says, "Greet also the church in their house." Incidentally, there were no buildings, but folk who had come to their homes would convert part of them, and make them available as a meeting place for the church. So "greet also the church that's meeting in their house." This is not the large group. It's the smaller group.

Then also in Acts 16:5, notice the church in the plural. "So the churches (plural) were made stronger in the faith (Now buildings aren't made strong in faith, are they? Don't think there is much you can do to a building like that. It's a company of believers) and grew in numbers every day."

So these are the meanings of church. Most of all, people, the company of God's true friends throughout the universe. Let's look back now at the marks of identification of this loyal group. We come back to Matthew 16:18 at the beginning. "You are Peter, and on this rock I will build My church." Now you know how our Catholic friends use that. And so sometimes we Protestants say, "But you should notice that the word 'Peter' comes from 'petros' which means a little stone, a rolling stone, and petra, the other word, upon which the church is founded, means bed rock. Like the city Petra, you know, built on bed rock.

Well, you notice how the other translations handle this. The *New English Bible*. "You are Peter, the Rock, and on this rock I will build My church." And you might say, "That doesn't help us very much, does it?" Except that the first rock is capitalized and the second isn't. Well, let's try the next one. From *Williams*, Moody Bible Institute. "Your name from now on is to be Peter, Rock, and on a massive (lower case) rock like this I will build my church. And then from Mrs. Montgomery. I love to use her when I can, a lady translator, and isn't hers ingenious? "You are petros, (She says, 'Why not leave it in the Greek?') meaning in English a rock, and on this petra meaning in English a rock, I will build my church." You see, Peter means rock, so let's not be offended by that. What was his name before it was Peter? It was Cephas, wasn't it? Cephas. But you know, that means rock. You see, Rock Hudson is Cephas Hudson, Peter Hudson. It means rock, you see, so there is nothing wrong with saying, "You are Peter the rock." That's what his name meant. And then Jesus said, "and on this rock I will build my church." Do you build churches on people? How? Well, I decided a long, long time ago, that it never pays to argue about linguistic technicalities. Besides, a scholarly person could say, "There's no use making that distinction in the Greek, because Jesus was speaking Aramaic anyway. I think there's a much more winsome way to do it.

Why not concede, all right, the church was founded upon Peter. But there is a little difference there. And by the way, in *Desire of Ages* Ellen White very correctly interprets it, as you know. But it's not being winsome, especially with our good Catholic friends, especially if they're as scholarly as Jesuits are. They get Ph.D.'s on their way to their theological training. I would rather say, Yes, the church was founded upon Peter, because Paul said so. Look at the next verse, Ephesians 2:20. "So then, you Gentiles are not foreigners or strangers anymore. You are now fellow citizens with God's people." Notice the words here, "God's people." There's a designation

for a company of His friends. "And you are members of the family of God." There's that other name. The family of God. "You too are built upon the foundation laid by the apostles and the prophets, the cornerstone being Christ Jesus Himself." Not Peter, by the way, but Christ Jesus is the cornerstone.

Now I used the *Good News Bible*, which is easier to understand, but the *King James Version*, so familiar to so many of us, reads as below: "That the household of God is built on the foundation of the apostles and the prophets." Do you build a church on the bodies of apostles and prophets? Obviously not. Doesn't that mean that the church, the household, the family of God, the company of God's friends, their beliefs, their convictions, their practices will be built upon the teachings and the testimony of the apostles and the prophets? But Paul says that's building it on apostles and prophets. Then isn't that the same meaning when the church is built on Peter? Don't build poor Peter under the wall, but his testimony, for what had he just said? "We believe that you are Jesus, the Christ, the Son of the Living God." He'd accepted this as the truth, you see, but the One who stood before him was God Himself, and that when he said, "If you've seen Me, you've seen the Father," He was to be believed, because He was God Himself. That's what the church, that is, the company of God's good friends, is built upon.

Then we can have less difficulty with Matthew 16:18. Peter is not buried in the foundation, but what he taught, what he accepted, what he said, and he said it even beyond his understanding at the moment, didn't he? Jesus said, "You haven't said this of yourself. You don't fully understand it yet. God has revealed this to you, what you have just acknowledged. You are prepared to accept My testimony as true, because I am the Son of God. I'll build My church on this."

Now do you know of a church that builds its beliefs and its practices and its witness on the teachings of the apostles and the prophets, as a result of which, accepting the teachings of these prophets and apostles as found in the Old Testament, and in the New Testament, accepting that, and accepting their witness to the truth, they have come to accept Jesus Christ as the chief cornerstone?

Well, look at Revelation 21:13,14 for further corroboration of this. When the New Jerusalem is seen descending, whose names are on the foundation? "And the wall of the city had twelve foundations, and on them the twelve names of the twelve apostles of the lamb." And that means Peter's name is on the foundation of the New Jerusalem. So don't say it isn't built on Peter. Only in this special sense, you see. If you accept what the apostles and the prophets and Peter had said, Peter won't wind up the chief cornerstone, will he? Jesus Christ will be in that key role.

Now, I'm looking for a church that accepts all sixty-six books, the teachings of the prophets and the apostles, as a result of which Jesus Christ is recognized and worshiped as the chief Cornerstone. I'm also looking for this mark in Revelation 14:12, the next one on the list. Here's a description of the saints. The setting is in the last days. I'm looking for a church now in these last days that meet this description. The saints, "those who keep the commandments of God (I would look for that, all of them) and the faith of Jesus." Now what does it mean to have the faith of Jesus? And I've learned from reading other places that "faith of" can mean "faith in." Indeed, look at the one below from the *New English Bible*, which translates "Remaining loyal to Jesus." This is a technicality that is not debated at all among scholars. It can go either way. Supposing though, you have a faith such as Jesus had in His Father, all would be well. Supposing you have faith in Jesus and you're loyal to Him, therefore you would accept His testimony as true, would you wind up having faith in God as Jesus did? It comes out exactly the same. So enjoy it both ways.

I'm looking for a church then that keeps the commandments of God and is loyal to Jesus, desires to have a faith such as He had. Then I go on to Revelation 12:17, a description of the remnant, or "the rest of her seed." You remember the setting. Which again always keep the commandments of God - that's always mentioned - and they have something. The testimony of Jesus Christ. Now, does that mean the testimony that Jesus bore? It can be. Look at *Good News Bible* right below. "Are faithful to the truth revealed by Jesus." That's one of the two possible meanings. However, it can also mean "testimony to Jesus, about Jesus." Note in the *New English Bible* below, "They maintain their testimony to Jesus," which means, as Phillips has it below, "who bear their witness to Jesus."

Now, these people bear witness to Jesus, because they have faith in Him. Why do they bear witness to Him? Because they recognize who He is, as Peter did, and so they accept His testimony as true. They accept and hold fast the truth revealed by Jesus. You come out the same both ways. Never be caught in a needless argument over the various translations of that verse. Taken either way, you'll come out the same. He meant for a church that accepts Jesus' testimony about His Father as true. Think what that includes after our conversations. Also, because of their faith in Him, they bear witness to Him.

Then Revelation 19:10. I see there's a 1 missing. How did that get through? Revelation 19:10, that famous verse. What is this testimony of Jesus or about Jesus? It is "the Spirit of prophecy." That has a special meaning to some of us. But what did it mean to the Christians in the first century? "The testimony of Jesus?" They had never seen certain important books bound in red leather. It didn't mean that to them. What was the Spirit of prophecy, the prophetic Spirit? Look how versions have wrestled with this most significantly. "The truth that Jesus revealed (that is the testimony of Jesus, His testimony) is what inspires the prophets." That's what inspires the prophets.

Or, how about the *New English Bible*? "Those who bear testimony to Jesus (taking it the other way, who bear witness to Jesus) are inspired like the prophets." Or, I like it translated, "Those who bear witness to Jesus are moved by the same Spirit that inspired the prophets." That's the prophetic spirit. The Spirit of Prophecy is the Spirit that inspires all prophets, the same One.

You see, how is it that these people in the last days, days of the devil's last effort to deceive, they are not deceived. Instead of being deceived or confused, they are holding fast to the truth. They perceive that the testimony of Jesus is the truth, and they bear true, reliable biblical witness to the truth. They couldn't do it on their own. They have to be moved by the same Spirit that inspired the apostles and the prophets to give us the biblical record of the truth. You see, as John 5:39 says, "The scriptures bear witness to Me." The whole Bible bears this testimony to Jesus. And all the writers in the Bible accepted Jesus' testimony as true, for is not the Holy Spirit called sometimes the Spirit of Jesus? It's the same, Father, Son or Holy Spirit. Now there's something else we can add.

Supposing you find a group of people in the last days, bearing witness to the truth, bearing witness to Jesus, accepting the whole testimony of apostles and prophets, and they're able to do this because they're moved by the same Spirit, that being the Holy Spirit, would you not expect the fruits of the Spirit, the first of which is love and the last of which is self-control? There are many bearing a very excitable witness to the truth these days, and one thing that seems so often missing, is the dignity of self-control. "Let everything be done decently and in order," Paul said, inviting the presence of the Holy Spirit.

Now if one is filled with the Holy Spirit so he may see the truth and therefore have the fruit of the Spirit which is love, is not love the keeping of the commandments? That completes the circle, for it says that's one of their marks. They keep the commandments of God. For what does it mean to keep the commandments? Romans 13:8, 10, the next on the list. "To love then, is to obey the whole law." You remember Jesus said, to love God and love each other is to fulfil the law. Moses said it in Leviticus and Deuteronomy.

Now what kind of a church is this? Looking for a church which bases its beliefs and its practices and sense of mission on the teachings of prophets and the apostles, in all sixty-six books of scripture, and as a result they have been led to worship Jesus Christ as the chief cornerstone. They have faith in Him, and therefore they know the truth about the Father. The Father is just as gracious as the Son, and in pride and joy they bear witness to Jesus, and to His Father. They take His testimony to the world, and as they do it, they always speak the truth in love, which happens to be the way the Holy Spirit works. When you do that, you are keeping all the commandments, for love is the fulfilling of the law.

Now go one step further. 1 Corinthians 13 says people like that would always be patient, always be kind, never be arrogant, never be rude, never insist on having their own way. Where are such people? Well, when Paul saw the truth, he set out to build up the church. In his own words, "Do the things that build up the church." He understood God's purposes in doing so, for look at Ephesians 4. We viewed this during the conversations. Ephesians 4:11-15. "When Christ went back to heaven He gave gifts to mend (now he lists them). He appointed some to be apostles, others to be prophets, others to be evangelists, others to be pastors and teachers. (Sound familiar as we look over the church?) He did this to prepare all God's people for the work of Christian service in order to build up the body of Christ (the symbol of the church) and so shall we all come together to that oneness in our faith and in our knowledge of the Son of God. We shall become mature people. We shall no longer be children. We must grow up in every way to Christ (and you know all the words that come between.)

There is no closer unity than this oneness that is inherent in the fact that we love and trust and worship and admire the same Jesus and the same God. Growing up together at all levels of maturity we are bound together by the very truth that sets us all free. It seems a paradox. At its very heart, the church consists of individuals who in the highest sense of freedom have chosen to band together for mutual encouragement and for greater efficiency in taking the same good news that has won them, to the rest of the world. Now that's the church in its very essence.

Now you notice that when a church performs its proper function, the members grow up. That's another thing I'd want to look for in a church. Are its member encouraged to grow up? Or are they rather told that the faith of a little child is the ideal, to depend on those higher in authority to know the truth? Or does this church turn its members free as fast as possible, by encouraging them to question, to inquire, to demand evidence, to be respectful, to be sure, but undaunted by anyone's position as they seek to know the truth? Do you know a church that does that? A church that is not dogmatic and thus depriving people of their freedom to inquire. But it is dogmatic about one thing, and that's freedom. It will not budge any more than God will, on freedom in the family. In fact, that's the one great truth that moves us so much.

We believe that God values nothing higher than the freedom and the dignity and the individuality of His intelligent creatures, that their worship, their cooperation, their willingness to listen and obey may be freely given. And He's the infinite One leading out like that. If He's willing to do it, we of lesser stature should surely be willing to do the same. A church that does not govern in this way is not representing God. And the good news, risky as it is like to lead like this, God

presided over His family in this way and lost one third, and wept as they left. Are we so eager to hold the family together, we will not let them grow up? For we will not let them be free. A church like this may be alright as a beginning place, a nursery for little ones at the foot of Sinai, but it will never produce a group of stalwart individuals grown up who could survive the time of trouble. If we think we are that finishing church, then we must have a finishing message, and help finish our members. I mean, to be grown up, mature individuals. A risky business. Might that to some of us Adventists suggest some ideas of things that have been said, by one who used to be among us?

Well, surely God's friends like this will share Paul's pride in God, not like Jonah and be ashamed, and they will fulfil the commission, the last verse on the sheet, not as obligation or as something you'd better if you wish to be honored in the Kingdom. "Go then to peoples everywhere and make them My (students, My pupils. That's the meaning of "disciples." "Whom the Lord loves He discipl'ines. We pronounce it dis'ci plines. It's the same word. He teaches.) disciples, and baptize them (Think of the meaning of that; no mere ceremony or ritual) in the name of the Father, and the Son and the Holy Spirit (How often we've heard those words in our church) and teach them (It is a teaching ministry, the ministry of the church) to obey everything I have commanded you." We would also expect the church to fulfil the commission, using the methods of the One who gave the commission. You think of our conversations of God's exercise of authority. The way He always sought to persuade on the basis of evidence. On the road to Emmaus, He did not demand their agreement on the authority of His personal testimony. The Infinite One humbly in human form did not reveal who He was, until He had led them through the scriptures and they had come to an intelligent confidence, based upon unquestionable evidence, because He did not want them to agree with Him on the authority of who He was. I would look to a church that would use that method, a teaching, explaining, persuading method, based on the weight of evidence, and the evidence is to be found in the 66 books. More than that, Jesus spent more of His time healing the sick. Why did He spend so much of His time healing?

Would you not expect the church that is seeking to follow His methods, to be doing the same, even in the same proportion, that much of this church's program would be devoted to healing, for very important reasons? Now, is there such a church? Where on earth are God's friends? That is, where are God's friends on this planet? Now the pastor will join me again so we feel we are going right on with our conversations, and raise questions about these matters.

By the way, you asked me once about bumper stickers. Well, I brought two pens that were sent to me from friends in Orlando. Here's a pen that says right on it: "God said it; God gave evidence for it, suggested I examine it, and then settle it." How's that?

COMMENT: That's the bumper sticker you were talking about.

Yes, it's beautifully modified. Here's another one. They passed these out in Florida. "My God will not burn people. May I introduce Him to you? For free information, write: Box 7171, Orlando, FL." So there are a couple of suggested bumper stickers, and you might come up with another one too.

MODERATOR: Now, in what you said this evening, I'm really intrigued, "where on earth are God's friends," and this has such a beautiful feel to it, and I'm going along quite comfortably saying to myself, "Yes, I'm one of the friends of God, and I think God has a lot of friends in the world, but I have a kind of comfortable feeling that this is the church I've heard the word 'invisible'.

CONVERSATIONS ABOUT THE CHURCH - NUMBER TWO

"Growing Up Together As We Witness to the Truth"

by A. Graham Maxwell

The subject for this time is entitled "Growing Up Together As We Witness to the Truth," another look at the privileges and the problems too, of belonging to the church. As always, of course, in the larger setting of the great controversy, the universe-wide great controversy over the character and government of God. You may recall that in our first conversation about the church, we raised the question, **"Where on Earth Are God's Friends?"** As we have considered throughout these conversations, God desires the friendship, the love and the trust of His children throughout the universe, without which there cannot be the peace and freedom that He values higher than anything else, and hopes we do too.

But as the sixty-sixth book describes, when the war broke out in heaven, God watched in sorrow as one-third of His brilliant angels turned away in distrust and became His enemies rather than His friends. And then He watched still further as the rebellion spread to this planet, and so on down to us in 1984. But during the series we've considered the measures, the lengths to which God has been willing to go, first to confirm the trust of the loyal two-thirds throughout the universe, and then to win us rebels--He'd like to win us all, but at least some of us rebels--on this planet back to trust and faith and a willingness to listen. In every generation God has had His friends on this planet, and the Bible records the lives of some of them. Abraham, and Moses, and Job, and Jeremiah, and Paul. You think of how many more there are whose lives as God's proud friends they were, proud that they knew God, the kind of Person that He was, jealous for His reputation, eager to speak in His defense. It's great to read those stories, and realize that this is what God wants of His children.

But most of God's friends have not made the headlines through the years. Elijah at one time thought he was the only friend God had left on this planet. He may have been quite surprised when God said, "No, I have 7,000 others who have not bowed the knee to Baal." (1 Kings 19:10,14,18) So we don't know how many there are. But Paul does say in Ephesians 4, and we looked at it last time, it speaks of a special unity among those who love, trust, admire and worship the same God and the same Jesus Christ, this "unity that is inherent in our faith and our knowledge of the Son of God." This united company of God's friends is sometimes called the church, but it's first a company of God's friends, and "church" is the name we use for that.

The Bible indicates that before Christ comes back the second time, there will be a group, a company of such loyal friends on this earth, drawn to Him and to each other, and those who are most closely drawn to Him and to each other make up the very nucleus of the church. The closer they come to the last days of confusion and deception, the more they will need each other. They will need the encouragement and help that they can give each other. Hence that first verse on the Bible reference sheet, in Hebrews 10:25. Paul advises--and I am very conservative in saying Paul. The language of Hebrews may be more like Luke, but the theology is Paul. They were together, weren't they? A minister and a physician started this whole movement, you know, and I think when they get together in the end they'll finish it. He writes,

"Let us not give up the habit of meeting together, as some are doing (Even in the first century). Instead, let us encourage one another all the more, since you see that the day of the Lord is coming nearer."

Think how much nearer we are. For practical reasons, not a requirement you see, not something else you have to do to be saved, but we will realize the good sense and the

necessity of our getting together, because we need the encouragement and help that we can give.

Now just as these friends of God find pleasure in each other's company, the Bible indicates that they also bring special pleasure and joy to God. Look at Malachi 3:16.

"Then those who feared (now we considered that word during our *Conversations About God*; that is, they revered, they revered) and loved the Lord often spoke of him to each other (here are people having conversations about God with each other, you see). And he had a Book of Remembrance in which he recorded the names of those who honored and revered him and loved to think about him."

So conversations about God were nothing new. They were doing it 400 years before Christ in Malachi's day. And God says about those friends who love to think about Him and talk about Him. Verse 17.

"'They shall be mine,' says the Lord of hosts, 'in that day when I make up my jewels.'"

With all these passages, it's good to look up the context. Do you notice *L*? That's Taylor, the *Living Bible*. I haven't used his paraphrase before in this whole series, but as I went through all my versions, he's the one who said it just the way I wanted it done. Very nicely done, as in one other place coming up.

Now, in Zechariah 2:8 God has another way of representing His feelings about these friends who love to think about Him and talk about Him.

"He who touches you, touches the apple of his eye."

Now, there is much debate as to what the apple of the eye might be. So Taylor in the *Living Bible* tries this, and he has a perfect right to do so.

"He who harms you (My friends) sticks his finger in Jehovah's eye."

You know, it hurts God when somebody hurts His friends. I just love his interpretive phrase there, and that may well have been the intent of the prophet Zechariah.

God loves everyone, of course. Surely that's been clear throughout our series. John 3:16. "God so loved the world," all of it, even His enemies. He loved all twelve of the disciples, even Judas, the betrayer, and He washed his feet just as tenderly as He washed the dirty feet of the others. But there was one disciple who was particularly drawn to Christ in love and admiration, and because of that, not as a requirement, because he wanted to, he stayed close to Christ at every opportunity. Thus he became known as John the Beloved, or John the disciple whom Jesus loved. This has often troubled people. Didn't He love the others? We know He did. He even loved Judas. God does not play favorites, but when we respond to His love, then we're more likely to make ourselves available so that He can express and show more of His love to us.

There are many other examples we could cite in scripture, but looking at John a little more, look at John 13:23, next on the Bible reference sheet, how John always stayed close to Christ. *King James Version*, in the familiar words,

"Now there was leaning on Jesus' bosom one of his disciples whom Jesus loved."

As a boy I can remember not liking that exactly, and I think some artists have even pictured John as, you know, kind of a milk-toast sort with his head on Jesus' bosom. It is very sweet, and a bit too sentimental for a small boy. Remember, he was a son of thunder. I was relieved when I finally read that too. But the reason why John's head was in Christ's bosom, was they didn't sit at table. Leonardo da Vinci's great picture is several centuries out of date. They were not sitting there bolt upright on chairs, or even as in that magnificent communion service we had. That's just a representation. The disciples were not sitting there around the table. They were reclining, maybe on their left elbows, eating with the right. Now the person who is to your right, where would his head naturally be? It would be in your chest, in your bosom, and so on, all around the table. And that's why all the feet were out there, so conveniently placed to be washed. In Leonardo Da Vinci's picture, it would be a problem to wash feet. Or when Mary anointed Jesus feet, she was not crawling around under the table, looking for His pair of feet under there. No, they reclined at table, you see.

Now would you look at the next version, the *New International Version*, the *NIV*?

"One of them, the disciple whom Jesus loved, was reclining next to Him."

That's precisely right. So John was no sissy there. Ah, he was beloved indeed. He had a lot of bad habits to overcome. He had been a son of thunder, but gradually as he admires Jesus, he becomes more and more like the One he worships and admires. That's the way it works.

Daniel was another who always placed himself where God could show His love. Think of the way he lived. So the angel Gabriel comes to Daniel and addresses him as "a man beloved of heaven." Look at Daniel 10:11,19.

"Then he (the angel) said to me, 'Oh Daniel, greatly beloved, fear not oh greatly beloved.'"

Some versions have "man greatly beloved." How would you like to know heaven thought of you that way? Greatly beloved. God loves everybody, including His enemies, but some respond to that love and He can show it more. I wish there were time and space to show more of this in scripture.

But recalling the conversation of last week, Revelation describes a group of such friends of God who indeed would be beloved of Him in the last days. They love Him, and they love each other, Revelation says in 14:12. That is, they keep His commandments. That's what it means. Moreover, they are loyal to Him and to His Son (Revelation 14:12), and they gladly bear witness to the truth about God and His government (Revelations 12:17 and 19:10). They are able to see the truth about these matters in very confused times, and they are able to bear true and effective witness to this truth, because they are moved by the same Spirit that inspired the prophets to bear their witness (Revelation 19:10). These are our favorite texts. They're even better texts than we've sometimes used them to be through the years.

These are the marks of God's true people in the last days. There are other things about them that could be regarded as marks, unless we think of them as just badges of membership in the club, and that would be most regrettable, requirements to show you are on this team, and yet without real significance? On the contrary, people like this who want to bear witness and see the truth, they know that unless the Holy Spirit leads them, they cannot see it, they cannot bear a persuasive witness. So eager to keep themselves in condition of mind and body so that the Holy Spirit can work through them and give them clarity of thought and persuasiveness of speech, then it just makes good sense to them to look after physical and mental health. That's the background for Romans 12.

Romans 12:1,2. I think I went through every version on this paragraph, and wish I could have compiled them all. It's a magnificent section of Paul's epistle, but I chose the Jerusalem finally.

"Think of God's mercy, my brothers, and worship Him, I beg you, in a way that is worthy of thinking beings, (That's "reasonable service." That really means intelligent, rational, spiritual worship. Well, what is intelligent worship, the worship that God might expect of thinking beings? What one version calls, 'the worship of mind and heart' is as follows) by offering your living bodies as a holy sacrifice, truly pleasing to God. Do not model yourselves on the behavior of the world around you, but let your behavior change, modeled by your new mind (and you know who gives us that--the new heart and the right spirit). This is the only way to discover (or discern) the will of God (to see it, to perceive it) and to know what is good, what it is that God wants, what is the perfect thing to do."

If we do not keep our bodies holy, we are unfitted for this. Oh, I inadvertently there quoted the words of Ellen White. Without knowing the Greek, that's the wording she uses.

"If we do not keep our bodies holy we are unfitted to be spiritual worshipers."

Remarkable on the insight she showed on that verse.

Now can you see that to look after health is not just another of God's requirements, expected of every saint who wishes to be saved? With many, I think concern for health looms up as yet another thing one must do to be saved. Instead, it's simply good advice for our best good, as are all of God's commandments. Paul goes on to explain this in a picturesque way in 1 Corinthians 3:16. We are used to him using such picturesque representation.

"Don't you know that you yourselves are God's temple and that God's Spirit lives in you? (Now "in" is "in union with," so Christ is also in us, and the Father is in us, and we are in the Father and in the Son. We are all in each other. You remember, in John we discussed that one time.) If anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy him."

We've looked so much at the meaning of destruction. When Saul fell on his sword and committed suicide, the Bible says, 'thus God destroyed or slew him.' (1 Chronicles 10:14) It's just that God left him, since he wanted no help, and Saul committed suicide under those circumstances. If we don't want the Holy Spirit to work with us, to be in close union with us, if we choose not to look after ourselves so He can guide us and help us see the truth and tell it correctly, then God, what else can He do but leave us to our own devices. We will not see the truth. We will not be won back to trust. Therefore, God cannot heal us, and we will die. Thus,

"...God will destroy him, for God's temple is sacred, and you are that temple."

How more dramatically could God represent how close He wishes the union to be between Himself and us, that He might help and heal us? It's suicidal not to heed to this council. Now this is not arbitrary, you see. The Holy Spirit brings truth, which is apprehended by the brain. And so, it's just wise and smart to look after ourselves and be as healthy as we can be this far from the tree of life. Then when we're open like this to the Holy Spirit, He can help us in so many ways. Remember Galatians 5:22.

"But the Spirit produces" (remember the list?) the love, and the joy, and the peace, and the last of all the things He produces is self-control."

The *King James Version* translated it "temperance," which through the years has come to mean abstinence from certain things. Unfortunately, that's all that is sometimes attributed to the meaning here, that one of the requirements of the saints is abstinence, or "temperance," which has led sometimes to a rather gloomy image of saints and sainthood, at least in the minds of young people. No! The idea here is the Holy Spirit brings the dignity of "self-mastery" and "self-control." That's the meaning of the term, and that's the way grownups behave.

Maturity and being grown up is one of the marks of God's true people. In fact, that's the meaning of perfection, which has also come to have a very brittle, unattainable meaning, and a great burden to bear. In the Bible, to be perfect is to be grown up, not to be retarded, you see. So it's only good advice. God offers us the option, "Cooperate with Me, trust Me, listen, and I'll help you grow up and recover the dignity and the individuality of self-mastery and self-control." That's what God desires for us, and those who survive the last times of deception, need to be more than mere babes in the truth, though a babe is safe to save. But to pass through the time of trouble during Satan's final efforts to deceive, these friends of God will need to be grown up and mature, individuals who can stand on their own feet as Job did in his day.

God's friends will have such eagerness to see the truth as it is, and to tell the truth correctly and effectively, that this will affect their lifestyle, to use a modern phrase, in many ways, but their lifestyle is not a requirement, but simply a sensible way to accomplish what needs to be done, and God's friends live the way they do in the highest sense of freedom, feeling it's all so reasonable, and foolish not to live this way.

Also, to take the good news to all the world does cost a considerable amount of money. There is a verse in Ecclesiastes that says that "money answers everything." There are thousands of verses I wish we had time to look at in our series. If we ever do book-by-book together, we'll come to the verse. There is a need for money to do some things. The Bible says that God loves the people who gladly support the work. Remember the key text in 2 Corinthians 9:7.

"Every man should give what he has decided in his heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver."

In other words, the kind of giving that God desires, cannot be commanded. You cannot command people to be cheerful. You could say, "Smile, you're on heaven's camera," or something. It just won't work. It would be a plastic smile. So I not only must give, but I've got to enjoy giving. Then it's a double burden.

It's like Sabbath-keeping. Thou shalt not only keep the Sabbath, but thou shalt enjoy it. Remember in Isaiah 58:13,14? In other words, all the things that God wishes for us cannot be commanded or enforced. Oh, He's often used such language to get us started on the way, but as we grow up, we eventually do what's right because it is right, because we want to, and even our financial support, if it isn't voluntary, if it's under compulsion, is not in harmony with God's way of running things the way He'll run it in the future. God's friends will be especially called upon to exercise their greatest talents and the greatest gifts they can contribute to the church and their fellow believers as the gospel begins to go to all the world and the church becomes larger.

If our present campaign is successful, another million souls by the next General Conference. These people will be drawn from every kind of people, and language, and culture and custom, and levels of maturity. What a mixed group we will be. But God's friends, the nucleus of the church, people who have taken time to know Him well from all 66 books, they'll know what to do with such a variety of people. Like God, they will respectfully meet them where they are, and

lead them no faster than they are able to follow. When it comes to disagreements in the church, and those who have been longer in the way feeling they should exercise some freedom which might be confusing to these new believers, they will agree with Jesus, it would be better that such people be thrown in to the depths of the sea, than that they should cause a babe in the truth--a new believer--to stumble or be confused. Remember Jesus' words in Luke 17:2, next on the sheet.

"Such a man might better have a millstone hung around his neck, and he be thrown, than he should lead astray one of these little ones (who might be 65 but still a babe in the truth.)"

Goodspeed translates little ones as "these humble people" who tend to be very conscientious as they come in, and wonder about some of the things the rest of us are doing. If we really care about them, if we're really God's friends, we'll even be willing to limit our freedom, rather than confuse them, as Christ limited His. Because naturally when such a variety of people come together, there will be many differences of opinion that could divide the church, and usually these divisions don't come over major issues. They come over little things, don't they, like even dress, and recreation, and diet and all those matters? But rather than watch the church split up over these matters, God's friends who have a much higher purpose in mind, will be working steadily to hold the group together.

Paul, himself, offers one of the best illustrations of this anywhere in the Bible. He is dealing with the churches in Rome, and especially in Corinth. Many chapters in Corinthians, in fact, most of the Corinthian letters are devoted to this problem. I just wish there were time to go through those two whole books tonight. But instead, just a few excerpts in that next paragraph, from Romans 14:1,13; 15:1,2; I Corinthians 8:13 and 10:31-11:1. But everything in between in Corinthians is related to this, and much more besides. They were arguing even over whose baptism was the more authentic. "I was baptized by this elder. I was baptized by that one."

Paul says, "I thank God I didn't baptize any of you (except two that he names). Beyond that I don't remember any. Oh yes," he said, "I do remember another but beyond that I don't."

See how the Spirit leaves an inspired writer free to maybe even forget a name or two, because it's not that important. I wish we could be more tolerant of others inspired in perhaps more recent times. Look at the way Paul handles this problem, he, a friend of God, proud of the good news. He ends these remarks by saying, "Imitate me as I imitate Christ." Now back to the beginning.

"Welcome a man of weak faith (that is a beginner, a new believer), but not to pass judgment on his scruples, ("not for disputes over opinions," other versions have.) So let us stop criticizing one another. Rather, make up your mind never to put any stumbling block or hindrance in your brother's way. We who are strong (and he means strong in the faith, we know God; we've been His friends for some time) ought to bear the burdens that the weak make for themselves and us (you know, "bear ye one another's burdens"). Therefore, if food (and one of the major problems then--this is not a matter of the menu for your health--this has to do with whether it's right to eat food offered to idols or not, and whether or not idols affected the food. That's the whole setting, so he mentions food) is any hindrance to my brother's welfare, sooner than injure him, I will never eat flesh as long as I live. Never!"

I went over many versions to find one that strong, and that was Dr. Moffatt. Some of you older members remember his marvelous translation, my father's favorite for years.

"So whatever you eat or drink, or whatever you do (whatever's the problem), let it all be done for

the glory of God."

That's the first angel's message, "Give glory to God; honor Him." Whatever it costs, we want Him to be seen as worthy of our trust and reverence.

"So whatever you eat or drink, or whatever you do, let it all be done for the glory of God. Put no stumbling-block in the way of Jews, or Greeks, or the Church of God (that's everybody). Such is my own rule, to satisfy (or please) all men in all points, aiming not at my own advantage, but at the advantage of the greater number, at their salvation (that's what counts). Copy me as I copy Christ."

Some went along with Him. But as with Israel of old, so in Paul's day, and so in our own time, there has always been a mixed multitude. Some of them are born to the church, though not yet born of the Holy Spirit, or just going along for various and sundry reasons, not really clear as to the mission of the church, nor really committed to it and its fundamental convictions. You remember the trouble the mixed multitude caused Israel in ancient times. Look at the next verse, Numbers 11:1,4.

"There came a time when the people (that's the children of Israel) complained to the Lord of their hardships. (So a problem had arisen there, in the church in the wilderness). Now there was a mixed company of strangers who had joined the Israelites

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