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THE CHURCH'S TASK: EDIFICATION OR ENTERTAINMENT?

SELECTED TEXTS

ONE DEEPLY CONCERNED PASTOR HAS WRITTEN: Different days demand their own special testimony. The watchman who would be faithful to his Lord and the city of his God has need to carefully note the signs of the times and emphasize his witness accordingly. Concerning the testimony needed now, there can be little, if any, doubt. An evil is in the professed camp of the Lord, so gross, so brazen in its impudence, that the most shortsighted of spiritual men can hardly fail to notice it. During the past few years it has developed at an abnormal rate; ever for evil, it has worked like leaven until now the whole lump ferments. Look which way you may, its presence makes itself manifest. There is little if anything to choose between Church, Chapel, or Mission Hall. However they may differ in some respects, they bear a striking likeness in the posters that figure upon and disfigure their notice boards. Amusement for the people is the leading article advertised by each. If any of my readers doubt my statement, or think my utterance too sweeping, let them take a tour of inspection and study "the announcements for the week" at the doors of the sanctuaries of the neighborhood; or let them read the religious advertisements in their local papers. I have done this again and again, until the hideous fact has been proved up to the hilt, that "amusement" is ousting "the preaching of the Gospel" as the great attraction. "Concerts," "Entertainments," "Dramatic Performances" are the words honored with biggest type and most startling colors. The "Concert" is fast becoming as much a recognized part of church life as the Prayer Meeting, and is already, in most places, far better attended.

Now, in case we are tempted to dismiss all that as spoken today by some ranting curmudgeon who just stubbornly refuses to change with the times and be "culturally relevant," *they were actually penned in 1889* by Archibald G. Brown (1844–1922), a student, friend, and associate of Charles Spurgeon and pastor of the Metropolitan Tabernacle from 1908–11. He was also one of the very few who

stood with Spurgeon in withdrawing from the Baptist Union during the well-known "Downgrade Controversy" in 1887.¹ The above quotation comprised the opening words of Brown's tract, *The Devil's Mission of Amusement: The Church's Task—Entertainment or Evangelization?* It courageously and categorically condemned the growing belief that churches should provide secular activities and amusements to attract non-church goers. Sound familiar? Today we call this "appealing to the unchurched." Brown's very next words, in fact, were frighteningly prophetic and have been fulfilled to the letter:

"Providing recreation for the people" will soon be looked upon as a necessary part of Christian work and as binding upon the Church of God, as though it were a Divine command, unless some strong voice be raised which will make themselves heard. . . .

The devil has seldom done a cleverer thing than hinting to the Church of Christ that part of her mission is to provide entertainment for the people with a view to winning them into her ranks. The human nature that lies in every heart has risen to the bait. Here, now, is an opportunity of gratifying the flesh and yet retaining a comfortable conscience.

Eerie is it not? What Brown exposed is the very methodology we read of today in most any "church-growth manual" we randomly pick up. From concerts to coffee bars, from stage plays to styles of music, from programs for every age to personal fulfillment for every attendee, we appeal to people's flesh to "get them in the door."

Did Brown's burdens fall on listening ears? As his contemporary biographer recounts, while there were some "warm-hearted thanks for a needed protest," most "condemned [him] for publishing a book antagonistic to the progress of the pure religion of Jesus Christ." He was called "a morbid pietist, a sour bigot, a victim of religious melancholia, [and] a kill-joy." One writer vilified him in a popular magazine: "The sooner this gloomy wearer of a white choker goes in for a good spell of rollicking fun the better for his liver, which is clearly in a wretchedly bad way at

present.” But that was wrong on two counts: Brown had not worn a clerical collar for 22 years, and he was *not* against “amusement in itself,” just bringing it into the church.²

Also like Spurgeon, while Brown was in a small minority, there were others who sounded the alarm, such as Scottish pastor T. W. Medhurst, the first student at Spurgeon’s Pastor’s College. He wrote this uncanny parallel to our day in another publication:

The sooner the church is aroused to the deadly mischief this kind of thing is doing to our young people the better. The mission of the church is not to amuse, but to convert; not to keep people out of the public-house, but to bring sinners to Jesus; not to attract by singing, but to draw souls to the Saviour by the preaching of the glorious gospel of the blessed God. If sinners are not converted to God, to gather them off the streets for an hour’s amusement on the Lord’s day is a miserable substitute.³

In still another eerie parallel to our era, another pastor offered “a few specimens of what [was] being done on behalf of ‘The Devil’s Mission’ in [his] neighborhood”:

The notice board of a Congregational chapel recently informed the pleasure-loving public that the “Woolly Warblers” would give one of their “amusing comic entertainments” in an adjoining hall. A new church is supposed to be needed not far from here, so a regular “Opera Company has been engaged to give a performance in aid of the building fund,” while “Cinderella dances” are being held in aid of the same object.⁴

Brown’s biographer himself added:

I could go on giving quotations from letters and articles sufficient to fill a volume in themselves, but no good purpose would be answered. The gospel needs no “amusement” to recommend it, or even to supplement its divine mission. Those who think otherwise, and as they suppose, in the interests of religion, begin to provide amusement for the people, hardly know at the outset where they will ultimately stop.⁵

Do we need to be reminded again that this was 1889? Look where we are 130 years later! The seeker-sensitive movement has inevitably led to entertainment as the unchallenged driving force of Church ministry. Frankly, whether we want to accept it or not, this actually started decades ago with child and youth ministries that kept the kids entertained, but now it defines the whole Church. There is, for example, a church in the area where I pastor that is called “Enjoy Church.” That pretty well sums it up. Further, how many “programs” in our own churches came only as the direct result of giving people what they want? This was recently illustrated to me again when a fellow pastor’s prayer letter reported that some people had left that church because of *their* “desires for more programs.” If I may be blunt, that is not *Christianity*; it is *consumerism*. Many believe that the Church exists to serve them instead of God.

About 60 years later, another godly preacher sounded the same alarm to his generation. A. W. Tozer wrote much on this very issue, in fact. Here is just a brief sample:

I declare without equivocation that the church of Jesus Christ was never intended to become a religious theater. When we build a sanctuary and dedicate it to the worship of God, are we then obligated to provide a place in the church for entertainers to display their amateur talents? I cannot believe that the holy, loving, sovereign God who has given us a plan of eternal salvation based on the sufferings and the death of our Lord Jesus Christ can be pleased when His church becomes any of these things.⁶

You know, the church started out with a Bible, then it got a hymnbook, and for years that was it—a Bible and a hymnbook. The average church now certainly wouldn’t be able to operate on just a hymnbook and the Bible. Now we have to have all kinds of truck. A lot of people couldn’t serve God at all without at least a vanload of equipment to keep them happy.⁷

Within the last quarter of a century we have actually seen a major shift in the beliefs and practices of the evangelical wing of the church so radical as to amount to a complete sellout; and all this behind the cloak of fervent orthodoxy. . . . Religious persons carry on “services” so carnal, so pagan, that they can hardly be distinguished from the old vaudeville shows of earlier days. And for a preacher or a writer to challenge this heresy is to invite ridicule and abuse from every quarter.⁸

Please note that like Brown, Tozer and the few others who challenged this practice were ridiculed. At the risk of similar criticism, I would also dare to share my deep burden. Having pastored a small town church for 33 years, I would like to speak for many other pastors “in the trenches” who have resisted the pressures from their peers to “change with the times” and perhaps even the temptation to adopt this modern philosophy out of self-doubt. I also want to encourage those who have tripped into this trap to extricate themselves from it by opening the Scriptures. Let us consider three principles.

This Practice is Patently Unbiblical

I cannot imagine for a moment that any honest person today would even attempt to defend this practice from Scripture. Why? Because it is so patently *unbiblical* that to adopt it is to be either *completely ignorant* of biblical church ministry at best or to *consciously ignore* it at worst.

I call our attention to our primary text. Upon His ascension into heaven Jesus **gave some, apostles; and some, prophets; and some, evangelists; and some, pastors and teachers; For the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ** (Eph. 4:11–12). I would not be surprised if one of these days a new paraphrase titled *The Church Ministry Bible* was published that rendered this verse: “He gave us apostles, prophets, pastors, teachers, orators, entertainers, and innovators for the pleasing of the saints, for the ease of the ministry, for the entertaining of the body of the Christ.” Why not? That’s what is going on in practice, so why not superimpose it on the text to reflect it? Many love the “dynamic equivalence” method of Bible translation (e.g., the NIV, etc.),

so why not use it to the fullest to make our churches what we want them to be?

Oh, how critical these verses are! Verses 7–16 provide us with God’s four-fold method for building and growing a Church: the foundation of building—leadership (7–11); the approach to building—discipleship (12); the purpose of building—maturity (13–14); and the material for building—Truth (15–16). Verse 12, therefore, lists three principles of discipleship. If these are not present in a church, it simply is not a biblical church.

First, there is *equipping (the perfecting of the saints)*. The Greek behind **perfecting** (*katartismos*, which appears only here in the NT) means “to put in order, restore, furnish, prepare, equip.” In ancient Greek the verb form (*katartizō*) was used in a medical sense to refer to setting a broken limb or putting a joint back into place. It was also used in politics for bringing together opposing factions so that government could continue. A NT example of the verb, which appears 13 times, is in reference to repairing fishing nets (Matt. 4:21; Mk. 1:19).

So, the responsibility of church leadership is not to entertain *anyone*, but rather to put in order, restore, furnish, prepare, and equip the **saints**. First, they are “to put in order,” to organize God’s work according to biblical guidelines. Second, they “restore,” set things right when they are out of sorts and take care of problems. Third, they “furnish, prepare, and equip” by giving believers the tools to do the job that lies ahead. How does a pastor go about all this? By teaching the Word, not entertaining.

Second, there is *servicing (for the work of the ministry)*. What exactly is the work of the ministry? The answer lies in both instances of our Lord’s commissioning of His people to be witnesses (Matt. 28:19–20; Acts 1:8). The true essence of Christian service is being a witness for Christ, and the local church is the training ground for that outreach. The local church is where Christians are to be trained so they are equipped to serve, to be effective witnesses. This immediately and fundamentally addresses the fact that the local church was designed by our Lord for *believers* to gather for worship and training, not to appeal to *unbelievers*. Modern church-building methods, however, have turned this completely upside down, and it’s wrong, plain and simple.

Third, there is *building*, which completes the progression. Proper equipping by the leadership provides believers with the tools to serve God, which in turn results in the **edifying** (building up) **of the body of Christ**—the Greek behind **edifying** (*oikodomē*) refers literally to the building of a house. Such building comes first *internally*. That was the very point Paul made in his farewell message to the Ephesian elders in Miletus: **And now, brethren, I commend you to God, and to the Word of His grace, which is able to build you up** (Acts 20:32). It is only the Word of God that can make the body strong internally. Then, and only then, comes the building of the church *externally*. As Christians are given the tools for service, others are going to be brought to Christ as a result of that witness and God’s sovereign working (1 Cor. 3:5–7). The most common gauge today of the “success” of a church is the “results” of some campaign or program. How is that not humanistic? God never said he would bless us according to *results*; He said

He would bless us according to *faithfulness*.

Please consider a practical question: if entertainment, appealing to felt needs, and other staples of modern church growth are so critical, why did not our Lord and the apostles emphasize it repeatedly? As Archibald Brown so well put it:

Jesus pitied sinners, pleaded with them, sighed over them, warned them, and wept over them; but never sought to amuse them. When the evening shadows of His consecrated life were deepening into the night of death, He reviewed His holy ministry, and found comfort and sweet solace in the thought, “I have given them Thy Word” [Jn. 17:14]. . . . [Likewise] in vain will the epistles be searched to discover any trace of a gospel of amusement, . . . The charge brought against the apostles by the members of the Council was, “Ye have filled Jerusalem with your doctrine” [Acts 5:28]. Not much chance of this charge being brought against modern methods.

Consider also that Paul “continued [in Corinth] a year and six months, teaching the word of God among them” (Acts 18:11). A year and a half and no other method was used! “Not much chance of this” occurring nowadays either.

To put the above practical question more specifically within today’s context, where in Scripture is there even the slightest implication that the Church is to appeal to the *unchurched*? Or still another way to ask it: why didn’t Paul outline this in detail to Pastors Timothy and Titus instead of strongly emphasizing the preaching of doctrine (e.g. 2 Tim. 4:1–4)? This is, in fact, the crux of the issue. It unambiguously underscores the fact that much of modern Christianity is not based on the authority and sufficiency of Scripture. If I may be lovingly blunt, we care more about what focus groups and surveys say than what God says. We actually give more credence to man’s *reasoning* than God’s *revelation*, more to man’s *methods* than God’s *mandates*.

This Practice is Poisonously Ungodly

Yes, that heading is strong, but I believe it is warranted. Please consider this: this issue is about bringing the world into the Church, so how is that not ungodly? As Tozer put it, “We secularize God, we secularize the gospel of Christ, and we secularize worship.”⁹ Some pastors actually admit and defend that very idea without apology. The pastor of another church close to where I serve stated in a local newspaper interview 23 years ago: “We take what the secular world offers and put it in a Christian atmosphere. The days of the hard sell are over. Church to me was so boring [when I was young]. It was more like history lessons about people I didn’t know and had never heard of.”¹⁰ Appalling? Yes. Surprising? Not at all. I once visited still another church like that one and learned that “the hard sell” means authoritative doctrinal preaching. Further, the above pastor evidently never read the passages that speak of these “history lessons” being our examples (Rom. 15:4; 1 Cor. 10:1–13). And as for bringing the secular world into a Christian atmosphere, such a statement borders on blasphemy. In glaring contrast, Paul declares, “Be not conformed to this world: but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind” (Rom.

12:2), and only God's Word can renew the mind (Acts 17:11).

Dear Reader, is there any doubt that much of the Church today is being poisoned by the world? While the Greek *kosmos* is used in no less than nine ways, depending upon the context,¹¹ in most of its 188 occurrences it refers to the world system, that is, the attitudes, values, inclinations, philosophies, goals, drives, purposes, and even methodologies of society and culture. This system is in turn headed by Satan, the "prince of this world" (Jn. 12:31; 14:30; 16:11). Whatever happened to James' warning that "friendship of the world is enmity with God; whosoever, therefore, will be a friend of the world is the enemy of God" (Jas. 4:4)?

Now, defending against the accusation that he was against *all* entertainment, Brown later said:

My contention is that amusement pressed into the service of the churches, and adopted as a religious agency, or a means of raising church finance, is a delusion of the devil. To this I stand. That which is tolerable and allowable under some circumstances is an abomination under others. Christ did not go up and down the streets scourging money changers, overturning their tables, and rebuking the sellers of doves. He did, however, when they invaded the temple.¹²

Also in his defense, another penman wrote in a periodical of the day that Brown's tract was "just the shot that was needed. The devil is never so dangerous as when he is amusing. There is a colour of tragedy in his face when he masks his grinning features with the church of Christ."¹³

This Practice is Practically Unfruitful

Two words that have tragically made their way into Christian service without a shred of biblical support are: *success* and *results*. The ultimate problem with both words is that they imply that if we do such and such a thing, we will get the desired outcome, but the problem is that we define that outcome. In other words, we determine what success is and what results we want, an attitude that has created the wholesale Pragmatism that has captured and enslaved church ministry. For example, church growth "gurus" start with the premise, "If you want to get more people into your church, here's what you do." But where is the verse of Scripture that says that? Does not the incident of Ananias and Sapphira in Acts 5 demonstrate just the opposite? After God struck them dead for lying to the Holy Spirit, who would want to go to *that* Church?

I was also troubled by an article titled, "How Does the Bible Define Success?" It began by quoting David's words to his son Solomon: "Do what the LORD your God commands and follow his teachings. Obey everything written in the Law of Moses. Then you will be a success, no matter what you do or where you go" (1 Kings 2:3, *Contemporary English Version*). Here is another good example of being culturally relevant by using the culture's language. Rendering the Hebrew *sākhāl* as "success" (which other modern speech translations do as well¹⁴) is completely off base. This verb (*not a noun*) means "to act with insight, to be prudent, to give insight, to teach, to prosper, to consider, to ponder, to understand, to act prudently, to act with devotion. The primary

meaning of the word is to be prudent."¹⁵ *Young's Literal Translation*, in fact, reflects that: "so that thou dost wisely all that thou dost," as does commentator John Gill, "that thou mayest act wisely," while several others render the word weakly as "proper." So, this word has nothing whatsoever to do with the human idea of "success."

Success and *results*, however, are cheap substitutes for *fruit*. Why? Because fruit is alive since it is attached to the Vine, that is, Christ. But neither *success* nor *results* are alive. Invariably, in fact, modern ministry couches its "effectiveness" using those terms. We repeatedly hear such claims as, "Use this method to get results," or, "Our program is proven to succeed." But how is that any different than the claims of secular companies for their products or services? In contrast, fruit is not *manufactured* or *machined*; fruit is the *measured effect* of God's sovereign work through His Word.

Now, it is argued that verses that promise if we obey God and serve Him, the result will be God's blessing and success (e.g., the Beatitudes). But that is the language of the world. Consider this contrast: results and success are man-made and come by effort; fruit, blessing, and reward are God-made and come by grace. As Paul wrote the Romans, he wanted to come to them so he "might have some fruit among [them]" and then tells us what would produce that fruit in verse 16, which we will see below.

Consider Charles Finney (1792–1875), who has become virtually the "patron saint" of modern evangelism, founder of Pragmatism, and whose Theology was heretical and his methods horrific. We will, in fact, examine Finney's tragic legacy in our next TOTT, but briefly, his Theology was full-blown Pelagianism,¹⁶ he rejected the Doctrines of Grace in their entirety, and denied original sin, the substitutionary atonement, justification, and the need for regeneration by the Holy Spirit. As for his methods, it was Finney who *invented* the modern staple of evangelism we call the "altar call," in which he would pressure people to "make a decision for Jesus," "a commitment to Christ," and other clichés we have adopted as though they were based on Scripture. As he also wrote in his autobiography, "A revival is not a miracle, nor dependent on a miracle in any sense. It is a purely philosophical result of the right use of the constituted means, as much so as any other effect produced by the application of means."¹⁷ In the end, Finney's methods were an abject failure and reflected little real fruit. Out of thousands of "conversions" (*results* and *success*), by his own admission, true conversions were very few, and he tragically paved the way for the so-called "mass-evangelism" of many who would follow. And again, the sad fact is that Evangelicalism is *still* suffering from Finneyism, which is anything but fruitful.

Conclusion

As I continue researching and writing on Church History, seldom does a day go by that I don't think of George Santayana's (1863–1952) famous statement: "Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it."¹⁸ But forgetting is precisely what we are doing! We are repeating the exact same errors of the Downgrade that Spurgeon fought, the entertainment in the Church that Brown fought, and other errors that space prohibits our

addressing. So why do we persist in this? I believe there is a single reason: we simply do not believe in the authority and sufficiency of Scripture (even though our doctrinal statements say we do); we just do not believe that the precepts, principles, and precedents of Scripture are just as valid now as when they were penned. Whether we want to admit it or not, we think we are wiser than all that and replace it with performances, programs, and personalities.

Oh, but how often we hear the mantra, “Times change so we must change with them to meet people where they are.” Should not that distress us? Yes, times change, technology advances, and tides ebb and flow, *but man does not change*. He has exactly the same need now that he has had for millennia since the Fall. His need is salvation from sin and that need is addressed by proclaiming the Truth of Christ. A verse (and context) that seems all but forgotten nowadays is 2 Timothy 3:1—4:4. After Paul gives Timothy a list of the horrendous characteristics of the last days, he gives him *only one method*: the diligent, patient preaching of doctrine that reproves, rebukes, and exhorts. We read not a single word of cultural relevance or “giving people what they want.” I recently came across this statement by R. C. Sproul: “It is the task of the pastor and of the church to feed the sheep. If someone who is not a sheep comes in, that’s fine, but we’re not going to change the menu and give the sheep goats’ food. Worship is for the sheep.”¹⁹

That brings us finally to Romans 1:16, another verse that is plainly ignored these days: **For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ: for it is the power of God unto salvation to every one that believeth; to the Jew first, and also to the Greek.** Does it not appear that we are ashamed of the Gospel, that just proclaiming it is not enough, that we need something else? But Paul is clear. It’s not apologetic arguments, appealing to the culture, addressing felt needs, or even church programs that have any power whatsoever. In fact, more often than not they actually obscure the message. *The Gospel alone is the power*. Just proclaim that, and God will do the rest (cf. 1 Cor. 3:5–7). That will bring real fruit (1:13).

Paul wrote the same truth to the Corinthians: “we preach Christ crucified, unto the Jews a stumblingblock, and unto the Greeks foolishness; But unto them which are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God, and the wisdom of God” (1 Cor. 1:23–24). He then added that he “determined not to know any thing among [them except] Jesus Christ, and him crucified” (2:1–5) and refused to mix man’s ideas, philosophies, methods, and traditions with God’s Word, for such things undermine Scripture.

Near the end of his tract, Archibald Brown challenges the Church with a pointed statement, and I close with it: “The Lord clear the Church of all the rubbish that the devil has imposed upon her, and bring us back again to apostolic methods!”²⁰

Oh, may the Church *edify*, not *entertain*!

NOTES

- ¹ The Downgrade can be summarized in Spurgeon’s own words: “Believers in Christ’s atonement are now in declared union with those who make light of it; believers in Holy Scripture are in confederacy with those who deny plenary inspiration; those who hold evangelical doctrine are in open alliance with those who call the fall a fable, who deny the personality of the Holy Ghost, who call justification by faith immoral, and hold that there is another probation after death. . . . It is our solemn conviction that there should be no pretence of fellowship. Fellowship with known and vital error is participation in sin” (*The Sword and the Trowel*, Aug. 1887).
- ² Godfrey Holden Pike, *The Life and Work of Archibald G Brown* (London: Passmore and Alabaster, 1882), 100.
- ³ *Ibid*, 102–103.
- ⁴ J. W. Harrald, cited in *ibid*, 103.
- ⁵ *Ibid*, 107.
- ⁶ A. W. Tozer, *Whatever Happened to Worship?* (Camp Hill, PA: Christian Publications, 1985), 97.
- ⁷ A. W. Tozer, *The Tozer Pulpit* (Camp Hill, PA: Christian Publications, 1994), Vol. 1, Book 2, p. 40.
- ⁸ A. W. Tozer, *Of God and Men* (Camp Hill, PA: Christian Publications, 1995), 17–18.
- ⁹ Tozer, *Whatever Happened to Worship?*, 117. The reader might also be interested in Pastor’s Watson’s book, *The Forgotten Tozer: A. W. Tozer’s Challenge to Today’s Church* (Sola Scriptura Publications, 2013).
- ¹⁰ *The Daily Sentinel* (Grand Junction, CO; March 24, 1996), 3C.
- ¹¹ John, for example, uses *kosmos* in his Gospel in nine ways: the whole universe (1:10; 17:5); the physical earth (13:1; 16:33; 21:25); the world system or order (12:31; 14:30); unbelieving humanity (7:7; 15:18); an undefined group. (12:19); the general public (7:4; 14:22); general humanity (1:10); the non-elect (17:9); and finally the elect (3:16).
- ¹² Cited by Pike, *Life and Work of Archibald G Brown*, 101.
- ¹³ *Ibid*, 103.
- ¹⁴ E.g.: “Success” in *Christian Standard Bible*, *Common English Bible*, and *Holman Christian Standard Bible*; “succeed” in *Amplified Bible*, *God’s Word*, and *New English Translation*.
- ¹⁵ Spiros Zodhiates (Gen. Ed.), *The Complete Word Study Dictionary* (AMG International, 1992), entry # H7919.
- ¹⁶ Pelagianism, named after Pelagius (c. 360–420), a British monk and theologian, views every person as having the same “free will” Adam had and, therefore, is able to choose good or evil for himself.
- ¹⁷ *Charles G. Finney: An Autobiography* (Revell, n.d.), 5.
- ¹⁸ George Santayana, *The Life of Reason*, Vol. 1., 1905.
- ¹⁹ R. C. Sproul, *St. Andrews Expository Commentary: John*.
- ²⁰ By innocent error, this statement and other parts of Brown’s tract have often been attributed to Spurgeon.

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Grace Bible Church
P.O. Box 235
Meeker, CO 81641
www.TheScriptureAlone.com
dwatson@thescripturealone.com
A F.I.R.E. Church
www.FireFellowship.org

This monthly publication is intended to address Scriptures that have historically been debated, are particularly difficult to understand, or have generated questions among Believers. We hope it will be an encouragement and challenge to God's people to carefully examine and discern Truth. While the positions presented here are based on years of careful biblical research, we recognize that other respected men of God differ.

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