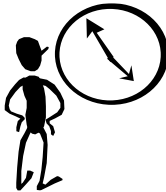


Inside this issue:

<i>Automatic Forgiveness</i>	1
<i>A Salvation Issue</i>	2
<i>A.M. Sermon Outline:</i> Valentine	6
Duty Rosters	7
Announcements & For the Record	8



Time of Assembly



Every other Sunday:

Bible Study	9:00 a.m.
Worship	10:00 a.m.

OR

Bible Study	4:00 p.m.
Worship	5:00 p.m.

Wednesday:

Bible Study	7:00 p. m.
-------------	------------

Automatic Forgiveness

By Robert M Hartian

Schoolmates hung a sign on a high school in West Paducah, Kentucky that read "we forgive you Mike!" Mike Carmeal, 14, the day before, had killed three of his classmates. Dennis Prager, a Jew, covered this story in the *Wall Street Journal* (December 15, 1997). This immediate and automatic forgiveness prompted an article he entitled, "When forgiveness is a sin." He noted how that Christians have adopted the idea that anyone who commits a horrible act should be forgiven, whether the evildoer repents or not. He lamented how a preacher (Reverend John Miller) at a Martha's Vineyard Church service attended by then-President Clinton called on all Christians to forgive Timothy McVeigh as he had done.

Sadly, this automatic forgiveness doctrine is now taught in churches of Christ. I find it exceptional too since Jesus' words in Luke 17:3-4 are simply said, "*If your brother sins, rebuke him; and if he repents, forgive him.*" The **IF** shows the contingency of forgiveness on repentance and reconciliation for someone to regain their brother (Matt. 18:15).

This automatic forgiveness doctrine has become very popular. The mental health community says it's "psychologically healthy," it brings "closure." In other words, "I forgive you so I can feel better." The religious world quotes Jesus on the cross asking the Father to forgive those who crucified him but overlooking two facts.

1. Jesus did not ask his Father to forgive those who did something wrong to someone other than himself and
2. The Father's forgiveness, as Peter made very clear, was not automatic, but required repentance. In fact, the Holy Spirit convicted and rebuked the sinning party who killed Jesus through Peter on Pentecost (Acts 2:36).

In Luke 17:3-4, the action-response flow is like this: Sin-rebuke-and if repentance-forgiveness. We are shown in Matthew 18:16 that one who refuses to repent must be treated as an outsider. Paul wrote that the unrepentant fornicator in Corinth should be handed over to Satan for the destruction of the flesh. This is not to be vindictive, but "*so that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord.*" (I Corinthians 5:5).

People who sin and are immediately forgiven are not convicted or rebuked and therefore not motivated to repent of their sin. These people then are left feeling complacent in their sins. To the worldly mind, God is mean, they say "what kind of God would send someone to hell forever?" And this automatic forgiveness is just another way to "out-good" God. That is, we modern folks can be nicer than the God of the Bible. But the spiritual person sees God's way as the only way. A way that cannot be improved.

Read for yourself what the church in Corinth did and what Peter said on Pentecost and to Simon in Acts 8:22-23, and what the Savior himself taught. This is, in fact, real love that produces reconciliation between men and most importantly between God and sinners.

A Salvation Issue

By Bobby Graham

In more recent years some have responded in this way with increasing frequency to our insistence upon adherence to the Scriptural pattern: "Well, it's not a salvation issue." It might be a matter of the organization of the local church, the use of women in roles of leadership, or the use of instrumental music which they relegate to the area of the unimportant, the non-essential, or matters about which we can differ and still please God. The blinding pace of change noted among some in regard to such issues convinces us that some are truly headed to a stance where nothing will be viewed as a salvation issue except some general belief in God or Christ. In recent weeks this writer learned from a mutual friend about a former brother in the Lord who had gone so far in his departure that he was meeting with the Episcopalians; when confronted by a faithful disciple about his vacillation, he insisted that the Episcopalians would be saved because "they believe in God." He obviously had gone this far because he now thinks that all of the issues formerly separating him from his eventual Episcopal brothers are not matters of salvation. Though they might not agree on all of these issues, they are matters of indifference to all of them. I wonder whether he thinks the appointment of a practicing sodomite as one of their bishops is such an issue. It would be interesting to know, would it not? It so happens that the particular Episcopal congregation which he attends has a female rector/priest. I also wonder how he views this issue, in view of his once steadfast insistence upon such matters. In his years of weakening and departing, he once said concerning Scriptural teaching on the issue of instrumental music, "It's truth

for you but it's not truth not for them," as if truth is individually and existentially determined by each one's own experiences. Imagine this kind of language being spoken by one of the Lord's apostles or first-century preachers, in view of their insistence on hearing Christ, obeying Him, and not even thinking beyond what is written (Matthew 17:5; I John 4:6; Hebrews 5:9; I Corinthians 4:6).

It is certainly relevant for us to consider this matter from a Biblical perspective. The relevance is made even more pertinent by our learning that prominent ones among our more liberal brethren have spoken to this effect and by the statement of an elder in a conservative church that the use of the church treasury is a minor matter. I wonder whether many whom we know might also have such feelings which they have thus far silenced. There is probably a greater need for this study than we have thought. My friends, if God is God, if the Bible is His Word, if truth and error are distinct from each other, if right is right and wrong is wrong, and if each shall face Christ in judgment, then we dare not permit ourselves to drift into such unbelief without the clarion warnings of God's Word.

Who or What Determines This?

To whom has the Lord delegated such a role? Who among men has the wisdom of Deity to speak for God on such matters? Is revelation still operating in certain ones so they can speak for God? The Lord has taught us that man's thoughts and ways are not His and man cannot guide his own steps (Isaiah 55:8-9; Jeremiah 10:23). It is human arrogance to speak thus for the Lord — an arrogance that manifests major disdain for what God has spoken.

"O the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and the knowledge of God! how unsearchable are his judgments, and his ways past tracing out! For who hath known the mind of the Lord? or who hath been his counsellor? or who hath first given to him, and it shall be recompensed unto him again? For of him, and through him, and unto him, are all things. To him (be) the glory for ever. Amen" (Romans 11:33-36, ASV).

When human beings become as wise as God, they will then be qualified to serve as His advisors in the expectation that He will have to hear them. Until they have advanced that far up the ladder, they will have to be content to listen to Him or, in the words of Habakkuk to a similarly arrogant people of his time, "*keep silence before Him*" (Habakkuk 2:20). We need to learn to be quiet and hear Him! That lesson is often impressed on children in a family at an early age, but it seems that some of the more mature ones in God's family have forgotten their raisin,' in that they thought themselves capable of charting their own course. The major problem now affecting the Episcopal Church in America is the result of the same attitudes that we here examine among our own; it did not develop overnight.

Is there really anybody to whom the Lord has passed this grave responsibility of

declaring for Him what is a salvation issue? Of course not, not even a group of distinguished scholars who know the language or have thought much about such matters or been selected by their brethren to serve in this capacity. Whoever presumes to speak in this fashion must remember that he, too, will answer to Christ for his lack of faith in Christ and confidence in His Word (John 12:48). Furthermore, there is no revealed basis for making such a determination, no question that must be asked, or no qualities that men can identify as marking an issue as one necessary or unnecessary to salvation. It is a task that nobody knows anything about, for God has not instructed us on this matter. It is in his jurisdiction, not ours. If He makes a difference in the Day of Judgment, at least He will know what He is doing and will have the divine right to do it. We don't know and need to be quiet before Him (I Peter 4:11)!

Any Non-essential Commands?

A question often asked by gospel preachers in debating denominationalists, who protested the need to be baptized to be saved, was “Did God give any non-essential commands?” God clearly commanded baptism in passages like Acts 2:38 and 10:48. Did He command something not necessary? The same question applies to the Lord's commands not to add to His words or to subtract from them. Is it necessary for us to observe them? If it is, then we have no right to venture into the arena of innovation where modern religion delights to operate.

Paul's Spirit-directed commands that restrict women from leading roles in the church were not matters culturally driven and thus unneeded in later cultures. We observe in their contexts that other factors prompted the Lord to legislate as He did (I Corinthians 14:34; I Timothy 2:12-14). In every matter that has come before the current “divine counselors” for their official declaration of wisdom, not one convincing point has been made that would remove any of the Lord's commands. They stand as He gave them — essential to our right standing before Him and to our eternal salvation. God made no provision for a new group of apostles or latter-day prophets to bless the world with up-to-date changes.

Old Gospel-Doctrine Distinction

Once upon a time in the distant past, the wise ones of that age also thought there is a difference between things essential and things non-essential. Men like Leroy Garrett and Carl Ketcherside borrowed from the writing of denominationalists (who expounded more about the Greek than the English but still failed to prove their point) to be among the first to speak about such matters among brethren. They distinguished matters necessary to becoming a Christian (styled “gospel” by them) from matters related to growth in Christ (styled “doctrine” by them). Actually, they were making a distinction without a difference, for the Bible fails to bear out their use of the terms in such fashion as they alleged. In the New Testament, there is really no difference between the gospel

of Christ and the doctrine of Christ.

As this writer thought about the present situation, he saw a parallel between the old distinction and the new one. In both cases, some matters or issues are seen as necessary to salvation, while others are seen as unrelated. In the area of unrelated or unnecessary issues, they said there can be unity-in-diversity. One of the major problems attaching itself to this human distinction was identifying who decides which issues belong where. It sounds familiar, doesn't it? In case the reader has so soon forgotten, he needs to re-read the second section of this article.

Willing to Take the Risk?

Are you willing to risk your soul to the meanderings of human wisdom? "Meanderings" is the proper term to describe the uncertain wandering course of one refusing to follow Christ as his guiding star and the Bible as his divinely given chart. All religious history bears witness to the tendency of man thus to wander. The sole solution to this tendency is to heed the Master's instruction in Matthew 7:13-15:

"Enter ye in by the narrow gate: for wide is the gate, and broad is the way, that leadeth to destruction, and many are they that enter in thereby. For narrow is the gate, and straitened the way, that leadeth unto life, and few are they that find it.

Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly are ravening wolves."

The gate by which one enters into Christ is narrow, and the way by which he persists in service to God is straitened (difficult). It becomes more difficult when one loses sight of the truth taught by the Lord and hearkens to the error of false prophets, people falsely claiming to speak for the Lord. The principle of respecting (not relaxing) God's commands, stated under the Mosaic arrangement by Jesus in Matthew 5:19, also prefaces the new dispensation under Christ with a similar warning, which is abundantly stated there as well.

You do not need to meander! You do not need to shift about on the quicksand of human opinion and speculation! There is solid ground where you can stand on the revealed truth of God's Word! Plant your feet there and refuse to be moved. You can be that tree planted by the water — fruitful, successful, and unfading in God's service (Psalms 1:3).

Church of the Covered Dish by Thom Tapp



"Our family is trying one of those old-fashioned churches, with preaching, the Bible, and all that stuff."