

## SUMMING UP

By

Curtis Dickinson

When I began writing *The Witness* in November of 1960, my readership consisted of the members of the small Christian Church in Fowler, Kansas, plus a few friends scattered here and there. I had no idea that it would eventually reach out across the nation and even overseas to people of all denominations, nor did I imagine that I would still be producing it forty-three years later!

Articles on controversial subjects tend to generate a lot of correspondence. Yes, there are still a few people out there who actually think! By 1987 the interest in *The Witness* and the research required to answer the correspondence were such that instead of *The Witness* being a tool to use in my ministry, it became the tail that wags the dog! I was ministering to thousands through *The Witness*, and could not properly minister to my congregation, so I resigned from the pulpit ministry to devote full time to *The Witness* and a literature ministry. This was an act of faith, as it meant that I had to give up a regular salary from the church. However, I have always preached that if we seek first the Kingdom of God and His righteousness, He will provide for us, and He has.

One of my purposes in producing *The Witness* was to expose some of the traditions, which hold people to false concepts and stand in the way of the simplicity of faith in Christ. Foremost among such traditions is the doctrine of unending punishment of the lost. Preachers often conclude their sermons with a statement that if you do not receive Christ as your Savior you will "spend eternity" in hell. The idea can be traced back to ancient Egyptian belief, adopted to a degree by Plato and brought over into the church by leaders who were avid students of Plato's philosophy.

Commentators and scholars have tried in vain to reconcile the biblical description of a God of love and justice with a God with such sadistic character that He would find pleasure in keeping billions of people in a perpetual state of sorrow and unending suffering. The issue is settled when one accepts the scriptural teaching, from Genesis to Revelation, that the wages of sin is death, death that become final and eternal at judgment.

This false doctrine seems essential to those who believe another traditional idea, that man posses an "immortal soul" that cannot die. We have heard it often from Billy Graham, that "inside of you is an immortal soul that must spend eternity..." When I began to research the subject, I was amazed that I couldn't find it in the Bible. The term "soul" (in the original scriptures) refers to the whole person, and it is never connected to the word "immortal," a word applied to God and to God alone. Man *seeks* immortality, but it is promised only to the Christians in the resurrection, never to the lost. (Rom. 2:7)

The very first command God gave was enforced by the warning that to disobey would result in death. It was Satan who invented the lie, "Thou shall not surely die." Throughout scripture man is portrayed as a mortal creature, but the general traditional belief is that God created something that He cannot destroy. One who is familiar with

scripture knows that Jesus and the apostles repeatedly warned that those who refused to believe would be destroyed. This will be death that is final and eternal.

Another tradition that can be traced to pagan ideas in both Egypt and Greece is the popular idea that at death the "real" person goes to heaven, while his body goes to the grave. At funerals we are often told that the person lying in the casket is actually in heaven with Jesus and Paul and Peter, looking down upon the congregation! Many people have told me that they have been greatly disturbed by the thought that their deceased father or mother or some other relative watches from heaven, and sees everything they do. When they err or commit a sin, they feel they must ask forgiveness from this person. It is an unnecessary burden of guilt, due to a false tradition.

Does scripture teach that one goes to heaven at death? I once decided to write an article on heaven, using Revelation 21:1-8; 22:1-5. Then I noticed that these are conditions in the "new earth," not heaven. Paul wrote of the "hope that the creation itself also shall be delivered from the bondage of corruption into the liberty of the glory of the children of God" (Rom. 8:21), and Peter wrote of a "new earth in which dwells righteousness," as the permanent place of our future home. (II Pet. 3:13) David sang: "For evildoers shall be destroyed: but they that wait on the Lord, they shall inherit the earth." (Psalms 37:9) In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus repeated the promise. "Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth." (Matt 5:5)

When a person dies, the spirit (Gk. *pneuma* = breath) returns to God who gave it, but the person remains in the state of death until the resurrection. Jesus compared death to sleep. In sleep there is neither consciousness nor awareness of the passage of time. So it is in death. On Resurrection Day all will be awakened, some to eternal life and some to judgment.

Now after all these years, I ask myself, "Did I succeed in exposing some of the false traditions in the church?" The readers have answered this in the affirmative through hundreds of letters - many from preachers - in which they have expressed the joy they have found simply in knowing the truth, and getting out from under the guilt and confusion of manmade traditions.

There are many other traditions that have crept into the churches, traditions that actually confuse the gospel, and cripple the church. Once such a concept has been incorporated into a creed, it becomes almost impossible to correct, as anyone who questions the creed is considered a heretic and is unwelcome in that fellowship. However, I will have to leave it to someone else to expose these traditions in order to help the church return to the simplicity of Christ.

Above all else is the truth that God is sovereign. He will prevail through His only begotten son, Jesus, upon whom he has bestowed all authority in heaven and on earth. All who are in Christ are His people, His chosen. He has called us to learn of Him and make His message known. Nothing is more important than our faithfulness to Him.

Regina joins me in praying for you the peace and joy that only the God of comfort and hope can give.

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