

THE MATRIX



WHAT IS THE MATRIX?

One of the most popular sci-fi/action movies of the past couple of years is the *Matrix*. The story line features a world where humans have been reduced to producers of electrical energy to feed computers. Humans are grown basically as an energy source and are then stored in small incubators. The Matrix, a computer-generated fantasy world, blinds them to the truth of their real life. The Matrix is a lie. In the movie, people do not rebel or try to escape because they accept the Matrix as reality.

Although far fetched, the story has many parallels with Christian theology. There is a Messiah figure in Neo and even a Judas character in Cypher. Just like the devil, the computers use lies and trickery to thwart humans. Going one step further I could not help but ask, 'Do we live in a Matrix?' Are we surrounded by a dream world based on deception?

In the movie, Morpheus, a prophet-like figure and leader of the rebellion, tells Neo the following: What you know you cannot explain, but you feel it. You have felt it your entire life. You know that there is something wrong with the world. You don't know what it is. But it's there like a splinter in your mind...The matrix is everywhere...It is the world that has been pulled over your eyes to blind you to the truth.

These words accurately reflect the war being waged over the human soul. Many people go through life blinded to the truth. Like those in the movie, they accept lies as truth and fail to live in the ‘real world.’ While the Lord builds His kingdom on truth, the devil uses bricks of deception. Through the years, lie is built upon lie creating a false reality – the matrix of our world. It is passed down from generation to generation. People will die to defend it because it is all they have ever known. A complex maze of little lies, the purpose of the matrix is to separate man from God.

Why do people fall prey to the matrix? The answer is quite simple. Most never know it exists. And even if they are shown its existence, they have a hard time accepting reality because the matrix tends to weave itself into the very fabric of ones soul.

**Only revelation from the Holy Spirit
can free the human mind
to accept reality as God sees it.**

People tend to see only the physical world not the spiritual realm behind it. Present pain or trouble clouds eternal vision. The Biblical story of Elisha facing off against the soldiers of Aram illustrates this point (II Kings 6:8-23). The king of Aram dispatched soldiers to kidnap Elisha, a prophet of God, because his prophecies assisted the Israelites in battle. When the soldiers surrounded the city where Elisha lived, he did not worry. Elisha’s servant feared for his life. He asked, “Oh my lord, what shall we do?” Elisha responded, “Don’t be afraid. Those who are with us are more than those who are against us.” The servant must have thought that Elisha had gone mad. He saw only the flesh and bones soldiers around the city. He did not consider the unseen spiritual realm or the army of God sent to protect his master. Elisha prayed to God,

and He opened the servant's eyes. All around the city were angels with chariots of fire. Many Christians tend to respond to challenges the same way Elisha's servant did. At the first sign of trouble, instead of trusting God and praying for His deliverance, panic and fear takes control.

The devil attempts to tear down the Biblical foundations necessary for a victorious Christian life by attacking key doctrinal truths. He will use fine sounding arguments to confuse people. One of the devil's biggest targets is grace. The enemy will try to pervert grace into a license for people to do whatever they want because God will forgive them. Or he will try to detract from the power of the cross by leading people to accept a works-based plan of salvation. The enemy even uses this ploy against Christians.

Taking advantage of the performance-driven American culture, the matrix deceives people into thinking they can earn God's acceptance. The typical American Christian jumps from one activity to another with very little time to simply enjoy being with God. They spend most of their time trying to serve God through ushering, teaching Sunday school, singing in the choir, or assisting the poor. Rush! Rush! Rush! This usually results in burnout. Although there is nothing wrong with ushering or teaching Sunday school, these activities have no eternal value apart from God. If a Christians is too busy to have time to commune with God, something has to go.

The matrix extends beyond grace. It affects every aspect of life from a person's goals and priorities to self esteem. It taints how people look at God, each other and themselves. This chapter explores some of the various angles of the matrix. Hopefully by the end of this chapter, you can answer the question — "What is the matrix?"

THE PRAYER OF JABEZ VS. THE TRIALS OF JOB

Why does God bless us? This question has been discussed since the time of Job and is at the heart of the health and wealth teachings that have become popular today. The prosperity message appeals to many because it promises earthly blessing if we only ask God. It has made a resurgence over the last couple of years due in part to the *Prayer of Jabez* book series. Don't misunderstand me. Based on other writings by Bruce Wilkinson, the author appears to have good intentions. But some have corrupted the true message of the prayer of Jabez into a get-rich-quick scheme. Simply ask God (of course, say the magic words) and then you will be blessed. Expect your bank accounts to overflow and your garages to be filled with new luxury cars.

But what about sacrifice? Are we not fat enough? Should we treat God like a short-order cook? While contemplating the prosperity doctrine, the Spirit led me to I Corinthians 4: 8-17. Paul corrected the church in Corinth for boasting about material wealth.

Paul did not forbid having wealth.

**But he rebuked the rich
for putting their faith
in the blessing
instead of the One who provides it.**

He encouraged them to follow his example and to be willing to suffer on earth for the name of Christ, which leads to greater rewards in heaven. Frequently, those who follow after Christ will suffer and sacrifice. Wealth and prosperity on earth are not necessarily signs of God's blessing. For God's greatest gifts are not of this world — they are His love, His favor, His Spirit and His power. These are priceless.

Jabez received blessings from God because he was righteous and followed after Him, not just because he asked in faith. According to the Bible, God hears the prayers of the righteous. If we live in sin and seek to satisfy the desires of the flesh, we lose standing with the Lord, which makes our prayers ineffective. Yes, God does desire to bless His children. But what does it really mean to be blessed? Blessing can come in many forms ranging from financial prosperity to developing godly character through pain and trial. The same God who lavishes his people with earthly riches also allowed the trials of Job. In the process of receiving some of God's greatest blessings, we may have to be refined by the fire. The account of Jabez does not tell us if he suffered the way that Job did. Yes, we should come before the Lord and ask for Him to bless us. We should expect for Him to do great things in us and through us for His glory. But we should not be distracted by the temporal. Instead, we should focus on the eternal. We should recognize that each new day is a blessing from God regardless of our stock portfolio, fame or worldly success.

**Ultimately, God blesses His people
to bring glory to Himself
by expanding His kingdom
and exalting His name
throughout the world.**

LIES, LIES, IT'S ALL BUILT ON LIES

What is truth? Pilate asked this question during Jesus' trial.

Jesus claimed to be ruler of a kingdom not of this world and that He had come to testify to the truth. Pilate wanted to know what truth had caused such a great uproar among the Jews.

Christ challenged Pilate to look beyond the matrix. But

during his moment of decision, Pilate succumbed to the pressures of this world. Jesus knew what Pilate chose to ignore — most of this world is based on lies. Mankind has become so blind that we don't know the truth even when it is right in front of us.

Pilate asked the wrong question. Instead, he should have asked 'Who is truth?' Truth alone can be found in Jesus Christ. Truth can only be interpreted through the Holy Spirit — God's great truth detector. Even many of the traditions of the modern church are lies. Below is a short story that I wrote to highlight a simple lesson about truth and reality.

As Professor Charles Gibbons scanned the pages of the latest issue of *The Economist*, he looked up and saw a former student walking outside of the coffee shop. The man, Fred Johnston, entered the shop, stomped his feet and approached the counter. Fred ordered a cup of dark coffee and looked out the window. He had not yet noticed the professor on the other side of the shop. Fred appeared upset and deep in thought. He kept on saying quietly to himself, "Lies, Lies, It's All Based on Lies." The attendant handed Fred the coffee and gave him an odd look while Fred continued to mumble.

As he turned around, Fred spotted the professor waving to him from across the shop. The professor invited his friend to sit down and share what seemed to be bothering him. Hesitantly, Fred agreed to share. Back 15 years ago, Fred was one of Professor Gibbons' most promising students. Then Fred abruptly stopped working on his degree in English and headed off to seminary. Fred came from a long line of preachers, and he joined the ministry to fulfill his family's expectations.

Although Professor Gibbons believed in God, he disliked organized religion and tended to have a skeptical view of any

theology that required him to change his life in any way. He believed God created the world and then stood far off to let it function on its own.

Fred slumped into the chair and looked across the table to the professor. Having reached the peak of frustration and hopelessness, he did not even try to hide his torment. He said, “My entire life is based on a series of lies, and I can’t take it any more.” Extremely curious about his friend’s confession, the professor asked, “Who has been lying to you?”

Fred responded, “Everybody. The entire world is based on a series of lies; even those who I love and have trusted the most have been implicated in the conspiracy. Unfortunately, they still believe the lies are truth.”

It was not every day that the professor found such a blend of madness and honesty in a world full of masks and polite conversation. He probed for more details by asking, “Aren’t you being a bit paranoid?”

Then Fred unleashed a flood of truth. He said, “I’m tired of trying to live up to expectations of the people in my congregation. And I’m tired of perpetuating a fraud.”

Are you saying that you no longer believe in Christianity and are ready to join the ranks of those who despise dead religion?” asked Professor Gibbons.

Fred sighed and said, “I am not denouncing Jesus Christ, but the charade most people participate in on Sunday. You are right. For many, Christianity is a dead religion because they do not know Christ. All they know are the religious trappings handed down from generation to generation. Many churchgoers come, punch their time card and put on their Church face. They believe they can obtain enough of the Lord in one two-hour meeting to make it through the week. Then they try to go out the sanctuary doors and be holy on their own. Oh sure, they believe that grace saved them from their sins at the point of their conversion. But now they can please God by their own works and plans. Then when man falls, he

doubts God. The backslider looks around the service full of happy, perfect people and begins to doubt his salvation. The backslider is separated from God because of his sin. He starts to reject God's love and think that God does not love him. Yet, the pastor struggles with the same temptations and sin as the backslider. The Christian caught in a web of sin turns from God instead of running into His arms. Ashamed, afraid to admit his sin, the backslider runs away from God."

"Well, Fred, you have sure pointed out the hypocrisy in most religions including Christianity. And you have stated my case for some of my criticisms," said Professor Gibbons.

Fred continued, "Many so-called Christians tend to live dual lives. Around other believers or in some public settings, they put on religious language like someone does a coat. Then around the guys at the bar or around the card table, they slip back into old ways. Or even more common, Christians get in a fight at a store at Christmas time over a gift for someone they have not talked to or even thought about in almost twelve months. This attitude results from religious people compartmentalizing their lives. Everything has its place from family to work to God to fun and relaxation."

Wanting to comfort his friend, Professor Gibbons said, "Wait a minute, Fred. Although I do not believe in God the same way as you do, I do not see how you are responsible for any of your parishioners' misunderstandings or their sin. You exist to help people discover God; I think you are being too hard on yourself."

"Am I?" asked Fred. "In the Old Testament, God told the prophet Ezekiel that the blood of the people would be on his head if he failed to preach the message of repentance and reconciliation that God gave him. By furthering the lies, I am guilty of aiding the enemy."

"How exactly have you aided the enemy?" asked the professor.

Fred responded, "I have pushed people to build up my

local church versus grow in their walk with Christ. We have spent money on our own grandiose plans instead of feeding and clothing those in need. By what I emphasize, I have taught that the buildings and programs are more important than knowing God and developing relationships with others. Too many of my parishioners languish in sin alone because they do not have anyone that they can trust to build them up and encourage them in Christ. We are so busy trying to be perfect that we are far from God. I have preached about how to receive God's blessing, and other popular topics. I have sugar-coated the truth and given the people what they want. I have tried to give people practical steps on how they can better their lives, without emphasizing their depravity and need for an intimate love affair with Christ."

The professor interrupted and asked, "If you really believe all of this, which I don't, by the way, why did you participate in the conspiracy?"

Stung by the question, Fred stopped to consider a response. He said, "Until recently, I was blind to the truth and accepted the patchwork of lies that had become my reality. Most of this world is based on lies. Lies have been built on each other like bricks. It has reached the point that we have become surrounded by lies, and we don't know the truth even when it is right in front of us. We are blinded to the fact that much of what we accept as reality is a lie. For truth alone can be found in Jesus Christ. Truth alone can be interpreted through the Holy Spirit. Even many of the pillars of the modern church or society are lies from the devil.

"For years, I have preached based on denomination guidelines and frequently used the prepared materials sent out by the denomination headquarters. Then, one day I became unsettled after overhearing a woman in the grocery store describe how God had spoken to her in a dream. I pondered why I never heard anything from God. Most of what I knew about God came from others or studying. I never thought of

God as a friend who I could just hang out with. Wanting to know God deeper, I spent a day in the wilderness alone with Jesus. Ever since then, I have not been the same. My Bible studies have come alive; I enjoy talking with Jesus at all moments of the day. It's great."

Alarmed by the mention of dreams and visions, Professor Gibbons asked, "Fred, you're not seeing things or hearing voices are you?"

Sensing his friend's deep concern, Fred laughed and said, "Although God can speak audibly to people, God usually speaks through His Spirit and the Bible. Other people can be the mouthpiece of God. And yes, God does use visions and dreams to communicate His truths. And if you are worried about my sanity, I have never thought with such clarity in my life. Recently, I have learned just how much I do not know."

"It does seem that you have gone mad," said the professor. "If I did not know any better, I would think you had been brainwashed by some religious cult. You are really going to scare people in your congregation talking about Jesus as if you see, hear and know Him personally. I would not tell your parishioners about visions or dreams either."

With confidence, Fred responded, "I do know Jesus personally. He came and died so that fallen man could be reconciled to God. Emmanuel means 'God with us.' The entire life, death and resurrection of Jesus occurred so that all men can have an intimate relationship with the Creator. He wants to love you too. But you have to let Him."

Denying his own spiritual need, Professor Gibbons changed the focus. He said, "I have no intention of converting today, reverend. Let's get back to your dilemma. If you can do nothing to be holy and live up to your congregation's expectations, then what are you going to do? And if some of the very institutions you foster drive people farther away from God, what will you do with your congregation? After all of these great revelations, it seems unfair for you to be tormented

by the reality of always falling short and never being able to do anything about it.”

As they exited the coffee shop, Fred smiled and said, “I will run to the cross and enjoy the sweet presence of Christ my savior. He will fix all the problems. Through the blood of Christ, God has created a new reality for me. Regarding my congregation, I will try to spur them to receive God’s love, walk with the Lord and develop relationships with other believers. I must trust their fate to the Lord. By the way, thank you for being there to listen to me. Without you even knowing it, God used you to declare His truths and confirm His love for me. I am free from guilt and despair. I can sing a new song today.”

Professor Gibbons chuckled and said, “You sure are a funny man. And I am always more than happy to listen even to your crazy beliefs about God.”

The two mens parted company. Fred walked away whistling, having once again realized the fullness of God’s love.

THE SPIRIT OF THE ANTICHRIST

The apostles Paul, John and Peter spent a considerable amount of time warning about false teachers and the spirit of the antichrist. John explained the spirit of the antichrist as anything that denies that Jesus is the Son of God who came in the flesh and died for the sins of man. The Bible plainly states that the spirit of the antichrist is active on the earth today.

False teachers take the focus off of Christ and place it elsewhere. There are numerous false religious and cultural ideologies in play today. Consider the ever-popular spirit of relativism, which denies absolute truth on religious matters.

Many believe that all religions are equally valid or there are many paths to God. Those who do not subscribe to this theory are characterized as intolerant. Yet we have forgotten what being tolerant means.

Being tolerant

means allowing something to go on that you don't agree with,

not denying the legitimacy or superiority of your beliefs over those of others.

Materialism has a strong grip on America. We see our wealth and prominence as God's seal of approval. Instead, we should be thankful and repent of our sins. For the Lord will soon pour out his wrath if we don't wise up as a country. Money and possessions have become America's god of choice. Many honestly believe that they are due peace and prosperity. However, we have no such guarantee.

Others want to look for the 'good' in people. They believe in the goodness of men instead of realizing mankind's depravity and sinful nature. Their salvation is based on good works, but they come up short when weighed on God's scale of justice. These are deluded into thinking they can stand before a holy God on their own merits.

Yes, the spirit of the antichrist is alive and well in the world. The Lord will come soon even while many in the 'Church' are being misled. Beware of false teachers. Dismiss any fine sounding arguments in conflict with the truth as revealed by the Holy Spirit through the Bible. Hold fast to Jesus, the author and finisher of your faith.

WHAT MAKES A HOUSE A HOME

While riding around my hometown of Richmond, Virginia, the Lord showed me what truly makes a house a home. My journey took me through Church Hill, a poor area of the inner city. Some of the houses are run down and in poor condition. Others have been renovated as yuppies move back to the city and try to live out an urban dream. Among the many well-kept or remodeled homes, one stood out from the others. It radiated not because of its exterior or immaculate interior. Actually, the building looked like a wreck. Plastic draped around the porch covering an area under construction. Once you walk inside, the house quickly shows its age and poor condition. In places, you can see through the ceiling to the rooms on the second floor. Paint and tile were stained from years of abuse. The frame of the house showed through certain areas where there was no wallboard. Most people would shake their heads and criticize this house. But it stands as a light in a dark city.

If the house seems old and run down, maybe it is the possessions inside that make it valuable? Are there expensive vases, artwork or jewelry hidden inside the four walls? No, the people living in the house own very little of worldly value. Yet people see the house as a beacon of hope and joy. The house springs to life because of the people inside it. They have been entrusted with a treasure and share it with others. A Christian couple owns this house. They are not the kind of people who play church on Sunday. They live the church 24/7. When I visited, their home was filled with neighborhood kids playing games and singing songs. In the main hall, visitors greeted one another with hugs and smiles. Adults and older teenagers were actively loving and encouraging young children. Wealthy friends came by and gave gifts to the children. Both whites and blacks intermingled without the hassle of a color barrier. Where most homes are filled with

shallow talk and fear, this house offered life because the love of Christ emanated from every room.

This couple did what many dreamers would consider unthinkable. They left the safety of the suburbs for the unknown of the city. They moved to the city out of a call from the Lord. Their obedience to God's plan has made it possible for others from the suburban church where they fellowship to make connections with needy people in the city. Listening to the voice of the Spirit, this couple lives out what it means to go dwell among those they are called to love.

In contrast across the street stood an old building with a church name painted on the side. A cross hung over the front entryway. It looked more like a large house than a church. Obviously, the church seated very few people. The small congregation probably included 50 people at the most.

Although it was a 'house of God', it looked dead. The building stands vacant most of the time except for a few services on Sunday and Wednesday. Maybe the No Trespassing sign placed prominently on the front keeps out more than just the vagrants. But come to think of it, why should a church try to keep anybody out at all?

The stark differences between the two buildings illustrate the deceptive mindset affecting the Church today.

**Many Christians believe in their hearts,
even if they will not
admit it with their lips,
that a Christian fellowship
must have a building
to be a 'legitimate' church.**

The existence of a permanent building gives the pastor and his flock spiritual status. But in this case, there appears to be more authentic ministry taking place at the home than

the church building. Of course, the building has nothing to do with it. The building only exposes the underlying heart problem.

What would happen if the people in the corner church turned the building into a home for a few single mothers and started to mentor them? What would happen if the building became a neighborhood recreation center for the children? In the effort to save what a small congregation has (its building) it loses the real prize. Some in the congregation raise objections. “Well, where would we meet for church services?” “Why do we have to give up our church building? There are government-run places where these kids can go play.”

Does a building used for services only a few times throughout the week really bring glory to God or does it build up our egos? The money would be better spent helping the neighbors across the street do the real work of the Church. The contrast between the two buildings caused me to stop and ask, ‘Are we building our kingdom or the Lord’s kingdom?’

The house on the corner stands as a real home because it has the love of Christ radiating from it every day.

Father, forgive my complicity in the crime. I have accepted the lies of the enemy as truth. Thank you for opening my eyes to the reality of what a real home is. A home is a place where Your love makes all things new. A real home is where people share their lives and the love of Christ with each other. Joy flows from room to room. God, make my house a home of love. May I be filled with your love and a desire to serve others in my community.

TWO TYPES OF PRIESTS

Church discipline and authority remain one of the most contentious issues in the Church. The battle traces its roots to

Christ. When Jesus establish His earthly ministry, He shook the very foundations of the establishment. Christ forever changed the rules of the game by tearing down the wall separating God and man. Jesus' sacrifices on the cross ushered in the new and living way.

The Bible described two basic paradigms — the Levitical priesthood and the Melchizedek priesthood. The Levitical priesthood was based on natural birth. The Melchizedek priesthood is based on a spiritual birth through Christ's blood. The Levitical priesthood stresses the priests' role to be the intermediate between God and the people. The Melchizedek priesthood changes the focus so man can directly commune with God. Under the new covenant and the new priesthood, God offers a direct relationship without the use of an intermediary. All believers become priests in the order of Melchizedek. We individually receive direction from God not an earthly priest.

**Many modern day churches
are still working under the principles
of authority established
under the Levitical priesthood.
Pastors and teachers are elevated
into a position where
God alone should be.**

Many times the people do this without any encouragement from those in leadership. People, including many Christians, so strongly desire earthly kings that they will elevate any man who seems worthy. We are not content with a God that we cannot see. Christians expect their leaders to be super humans without sin or defect. But even the best man falls short of God's glory.

Many church leaders foster the Levitical priesthood matrix because they want to be in control of the people. Wielding

words like ‘covering’, ‘submission’, and ‘accountability’, they try to keep the masses in line and the money pouring into the treasury. Yet, the Levitical priesthood matrix leaves people locked in chains. Most people in these types of churches never grow because their faith has no roots of its own. They only receive a minimal amount of food each week.

The enemy wins when people are constrained in the Levitical priesthood. The law cannot save. Salvation exists through Christ alone. Many have stayed weak in their faith because they have not understood the basic truths of the new priesthood.

The Lord will hold the leaders accountable. Those who encourage dependence on men and devotion to rules without a relationship are bringing wrath upon themselves. The Lord will hold the shepherds accountable for the sheep. Pride and fear can take away the love that only Christ can give.

DID CHRIST CALL US TO BE FLESH EATERS?

Jesus had a knack for saying what people did not want to hear. Consider Jesus’ discussion on the bread of life in John 6:25-66. Crowds followed Jesus after they literally tasted a miracle — the feeding of the 5,000. Jesus attempted to turn their focus from physical to spiritual bread. He claimed to be the bread of life that came down from heaven to give eternal life. The people scoffed and asked, “Is this not Jesus, the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know?” They doubted and questioned Jesus’ claim. He explained even further His role in providing the sustenance of eternal life. Jesus said, “I tell you the truth, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you.”

Notice how the crowds reacted. They asked, “This is a hard teaching. Who can accept it?” Some questioned, “How can this man give us his flesh to eat?” It is unclear if the references to physically eating Jesus’ flesh were made in jest

or if they truly did not understand the point Jesus tried to make. Regardless, Jesus' teaching did not fit into their preconceived ideas. Thus, many disciples turned back and no longer followed Jesus.

This teaching even caused Jesus' closest disciples to grumble among themselves. Jesus asked, "Does this offend you?" He recognized that this teaching contradicted everything they had been taught by the religious leaders. Indeed, they believed Jesus would rise up, seize control and become an earthly king. They did not understand the extreme suffering awaiting Jesus. He referred to His death on the cross, which brought atonement for the sins of the world.

**It appears that the natural impulse of man
is to reject the very nature
and purpose of God.**

**We love the Lord when He fills our bellies
or heals our sickness. But we run away
when He calls us
to die and drink His cup.**

Can you really share in Christ's life if you don't experience His death? Indeed, the very thoughts of God are foreign to man. Jesus tried to explain His atonement in a way the people would understand, but they could not get beyond their matrix. This story illustrates how the ways of God cannot be mentally reasoned. But they must be spiritually discerned as revealed by the Holy Spirit. Are you walking around in disbelief? What has the Lord been trying to show you that you have rejected? Believe in the Word of the Lord for He has called you to live a whole new life by experiencing His life and death.

THE COMPLACENCY TRAP

One of the greatest challenges facing the Church today has been a snare for mankind throughout the generations. It snagged the Israelites during Amos' day and attempts to snare many Christians today. The snare is the complacency trap where prosperity and blessing leads to laziness and unfaithfulness.

The children of Israel during the time of the prophet Amos thought they could do whatever they wanted because they were God's chosen people. They did not think that God would destroy them. They did not understand God's justice. They gave sacrifices yet did not repent. They sang songs of praise and lived unto themselves.

As a result, God sent disaster upon the Israelites, and they did not turn back to Him. God struck their economic and military might. God desires repentance. He said, "Seek Me and live." Yet, many reveled in their sin. Only a remnant held faithful to God. Most became complacent. They hoarded wealth and oppressed the poor. They actually longed for the judgment day because they thought that they would be spared. But God said that He would pass judgment on them. He denounced their 'religious feasts' and called their singing 'noise.'

The story of Amaziah, the priest of Bethel, shows how even the religious leaders turned away from the truth. They rejected the words of the prophet Amos. They preached a false message of security. Many churches today suffer from the same problem.

**Leaders trying to court favor
with men instead
of serve God
have lulled people into complacency.**

Many preach what the congregation wants to hear, not what they need to hear.

God, please forgive me for being selfish, complacent, lazy and foolish. Create in me a heart that desires to be with You and serve You. May false teachers no longer lead me astray. May I listen to the voice of Your true servants - those crying out in the wilderness. Forgive me for following the ways of the godless. May I be more like Christ and less like the world.

INVASION OF THE TIME SNATCHERS

One day, I woke up, wiped the sleep out of my eyes and gazed at the calendar in shock. The year 2002 jumped out like a bright neon sign. Where had the time gone? I remembered Y2K like it was yesterday. Suddenly, my mortality slapped me in the face. Unlike a car, we cannot slide under the hood and turn back the odometer. Time keeps marching on regardless of what we want.

If you are not careful, you could wake up some day and realize that you have wasted years of your life. No matter how wealthy, powerful, beautiful or smart you are, you can never add more time to the day or days to the year. Stop and consider your schedule. What do you spend most of your time doing? Are you a slave to your work? Do you feel like a chauffeur service for your kids? When was the last time you hung out with Jesus one-on-one? You can't remember? Stop right now and ask the Lord to reveal the time snatchers in your life. Confess your faults to the Lord and ask for His forgiveness. Lay your day planner at the Lord's feet and surrender all of your time to the King.

Are you weary and tired? The psalmsist wrote, "This is the day the Lord has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it" (Psalm 118:24). The Lord gives us breath each day. He numbers our days and calls us to seek first His kingdom. Time

snatchers can be things that appear innocent such as ministry, work, relationships, entertainment, home improvement projects, etc.

**Like a friend once asked me,
“Chaille, are you busy
doing nothing?”**

I am reminded of Luke 10:38-42 where Jesus visited Martha and Mary. Martha spent her time in the kitchen preparing meals and cleaning. According to the Bible, Martha was “distracted by all the preparations that had to be made.” Meanwhile, her sister Mary sat near Jesus listening to His every word. Martha asked Jesus to force her sister to help her. He responded by saying, “You are worried and upset about many things, but only one thing is needed. Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken from her.”

Wow! Jesus just slammed the door on busyness. Mary pursued a deeper relationship with Jesus while Martha tried to shoulder the burden herself. Notice that the cares of the world distracted Martha from what should have been her top priority. Martha just felt like she had to do these certain things first. Then, she would come and commune with Jesus. Have you ever felt the same way? I know I sure have.

This story should not be taken out of context to justify inaction when the Lord calls you to serve. Instead, Jesus identified Himself as the starting point and source for ministry. Communion with the Lord must never be ignored in order to serve or minister. The first requirement is to love Jesus, and He promised to never forsake us.

Jesus said, “Apart from me you can do nothing” (John 15:5).

**We can labor all day long
and do nothing
of eternal value
apart from God's blessing and power.**

Can we really change the heart of a man? No! Meaningful ministry must flow out of Jesus. Paul further explained the centrality of Christ to our every breath. According to Colossians 3:3-4, "For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God. When Christ, who is your life, appears, then you also will appear with him in glory." Paul basically claimed that we are invisible. When people look at us, all they should see is Jesus. How can this be if we spend our time doing instead of being with Him. In order to resemble Jesus, we must abide in His presence.

It can be easy to fall into the same trap that caught Martha. It happens everyday to well-meaning Christians. Churches are full of the walking wounded. Take for example Bill and Tammy Distracted. Both work full-time jobs to pay a huge mortgage. Between sports and homework, three kids take up the rest of the time. Oh, did I forget to mention that both Bill and Tammy spend four hours per week serving in various ministries at their church fellowship? They have no time to talk except for one hour per night when the kids are in bed. Their devotional/prayer life is virtually non-existent. Most of their weekly Word comes from the Sunday morning message. Bill and Tammy feel burdened and burnt out most of the time. They keep hearing about the joy of the Lord. But they do not experience it on a daily basis. Once or twice per month, they lose themselves in God's presence at a praise and worship service. Bill and Tammy accept their reality as the typical Christian life even though they are rotting on the vine.

Does this sound familiar? If so, you need to take a lesson from Mary. Start at the proper power source — Jesus. Then the Lord will take care of everything else. Consider temporarily stepping down from ministry activities. Try to figure out a way to live on less and reduce the amount of overtime at work. Reduce the amount of activities on the calendar. Your children may be way too busy just like you. Consider establishing a specific weekly times for prayer and Bible study as a family. As you rearrange your schedule to fit God’s plan, you will begin to discover the joy Mary experienced at the feet of Jesus.

COLORS

What would be your first reaction if you saw a picture depicting Jesus as a black man? Would you feel uncomfortable? Would you challenge the historical veracity of the image?

Stop and think for a moment, ‘What color is God?’

Racial barriers have become much more evident to me as I have started to hang out with more African Americans. While eating dinner with my good friend Pastor Don Coleman, I inquired about the attraction Islam has for black males. Giving me a peek into the African American psyche, Don responded, “Black males do not want to serve a white God. Islam is more attractive to them than Christianity because they think Allah is the god of dark skinned people.” He asked me, “When you see a painting of Jesus, usually what color skin does he have?” The answer — white.

I inquired even further, “Don’t they realize that God does not have a body as we know it?” Don pointed out that most people do not go beyond the surface. Regardless of your race or background, most people accept the prevailing bias established in the culture and use it as a basis for making their decisions. The devil does all that he can to fuel these lies. Don said that black Muslims accuse black Christians of selling out to the white man. The mere existence of the race

issue when it comes to God shows how far Christians are from the mind of God.

“For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways,” declares the Lord. “As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts” (Isaiah 55:8&9).

**God looks at
the world differently
than men do. Men see color,
nationality, position, and wealth.
God weighs the
worth of a person
by the heart.**

Even in the Church, division has sprung up, especially color barriers. But this is nothing new. The early Church dealt with the same issue. At first, the Jews did not want to let Gentiles join their exclusive club. The scene at Cornelius’ house in Acts chapter 10 demonstrates how God works. Much to the surprise of the Jews, the Holy Spirit came on the Gentiles, and they spoke in tongues and praised God. Hearing about Cornelius’ receiving a message from God, Peter said, “I now realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism but accepts men from every nation who fear him and do what is right” (Acts 10:34-35).

Even the original apostles had to overcome prejudices and deep-seated biases, so are we immune today? Religion then, as today, created artificial barriers. According to the Jewish law, Jews were not allowed to associate or visit with Gentiles. Peter and the other apostles clung to the old way of doing things (the law) while trying to spread the good news

about the new and living way. Had God not spoken to Peter in a vision and then sent him to Cornelius' house, he may have continued to treat Gentiles as second class citizens. The Spirit broke through and showed the early church leaders that simply being a Jew and following the law meant nothing. As Jesus pointed out during His earthly ministry, God can raise up a descendant of Abraham from rocks if He wants. God does not desire ritual or even sacrifice. God wants to know people from every tribe, nation and tongue.

Just like the early Church, Christians today must push past their prejudices and love those who are different from them. Even when the world reacts along lines of racial and ethnic prejudice, we must reply with the love of Christ. The world will not break free from the bondage of prejudice until Christians model the new and living way.

COUNTERFEIT CULTURE

Lies are the devil's primary weapon against the world and the Church. Satan tries to take the things of God and counterfeit them. The things of God satisfy our needs while the devil's counterfeits feed the lusts of the flesh. The Lord's provision leads us to enter eternal life, holiness and true joy. The devil's fare ends in death and corruption. Take being filled with the Holy Spirit — the devil offers alcohol as a substitute to drown sorrows away. After the buzz wears off, a drinker must endure a hangover and a deeper sense of depression. Each drink leads further down the road to destruction. Contrast this with the blessing of being overcome by the Holy Spirit. There's no contest. The devil loses out every time.

Yet many Christians settle for the devil's counterfeits when the Lord wants us to receive His choice blessings. From drugs and entertainment to wealth, material possessions and relationships, we drink the sand when the Lord holds out His living water. Counterfeits are designed to resemble

the original, yet they lack the essential qualities of the genuine article.

**People today are so apt to feed
their momentary impulses
that they never stop to inspect
the genuineness
of what they consume.**

This dangerous mindset has even tainted Christians. Many local churches are caught up in counterfeit religion focusing on everything but the Lord. From debating fine points of doctrine to constructing massive monuments to performing the latest flashy musical, Jesus gets relegated to a minority focus. Paul warned the early church in II Timothy 3:1,2a,5, “There will be terrible times in these last days. People will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money...having a form of godliness but denying its power.” Does this sound like many churches today? The décor appeals to the senses. The music entertains the masses. The sermon empowers us to live another week relying on cheap grace. Programs keep everyone in the family happy and entertained. Where is the focus on God? Where is the fire from on high? We have wasted our efforts on counterfeits while the enemy sits back and smiles.

The Lord wants to give you the real thing. It all starts with surrendering everything to God and asking the Spirit to reveal God’s heart to you.

If you want to experience the real thing in your life, pray this model prayer based on Ephesians 1: 17-23.

Lord, give me the Spirit of wisdom and revelation to know You better. Help me see with Your eyes that I may know Your heart. Enlighten me by Your Spirit so that I may know the

hope to which you called me. I reject the counterfeits offered by the devil. Reveal to me the riches of the glorious inheritance awaiting me as Your child.

Thank You for Your mighty power. It enables me to believe Your promises and receive the choice fare offered through Your sacrifice. Your mighty strength works in me completing the good work You started on the cross. Jesus, You are seated at the right hand of God ruling over all both in this age and the age to come. In You is the fullness of life, and You fill everything in every way. Crush me, fill me, mold me!

TEARING DOWN THE WALLS

I always love it when people ask me where I go to church. The question itself exposes a faulty premise. The church is not a place or building. Actually, the church is primarily spiritual not physical. It is both singular and plural at the same time. The Church transcends borders, denominations and culture.

Instead of asking where someone goes to church, get to the heart of the matter. Ask, ‘With whom do you fellowship?’ At its base, the Church is founded on relationships with other Christians and, most importantly, deep communion with Jesus Christ.

Many people mistake the Church for a building or particular fellowship of believers. In truth, it is the body of Christ consisting of all true believers everywhere from the resurrection of Christ to the rapture. I am the Church. If you are a Christian, you are the Church. Paul described the Church in 1 Corinthians 12 as ‘one body.’ Universally connected with each other through Christ’s blood, each part belongs to the others.

**The Church, based on Christ,
exists with no division.
All true Christians are one in spirit.**

An outsider might ask, “If this is true, why are there so many denominations?” Good question. Paul goes on to write, “Now the body is not made up of one part but of many...If the whole body were an eye, where would the sense of hearing be?...But in fact God has arranged the parts of the body, every one of them, just as he wanted them to be” (I Corinthians 12:14,17,18) The existence of many different types of people in the Church should not surprise anybody. God created each person to be different, and people tend to naturally flock to those of like mind and personality. Denominations sprung up as like-minded people joined together to study the Bible, worship and serve. There is nothing necessarily wrong with being involved in a denominational church.

The problem comes when groups or individuals try to detach from the Church. Paul wrote, “There should be no division in the body, but that its parts should have equal concern for each other” (I Corinthians 12:25). Artificial barriers of judgment and spiritual pride cause a crack in the wall. This gives room for the devil to work. When Christians begin to look down on others, they violate God’s design. There should be no spirit of competition between local church fellowships. Instead, the Lord calls churches to work together to build the kingdom of God.

I am involved in both a big denominational church and a home church. And I have seen a tension between them at times. In the past, I have heard leaders in denominational churches warn about the dangers of home churches. They say that home churches lack spiritual accountability and are sometimes led by crackpots and heretics. On the other hand,

I have also seen a judgmental attitude toward the institutional church and denominations among avid boosters of home churches. It's time for a spiritually reality check. They are both the Church as long as they hold to Christ. There are people going to hell and heaven in both the institutional church and home churches. There are dangers in both. Why can't we root for each other? The question is not why are there differences but why have we allowed superficial differences to create division? When we start name-calling, we act like a bunch of spoiled children. God desires unity, not grand-standing.

One of the best showings of solidarity I have ever experienced in the body of Christ happened in college. A group of students at the University of Missouri — Columbia met to pray for awakening and revival on campus. Christians from a wide variety of campus ministries joined forces to fellowship together as the body of Christ. Catholics, Baptists, Methodists, Pentecostals, Presbyterians, and independents set aside their differences to unite in prayer. Completely student led, the committee behind the weekend events decided on the name SPARC — Students Praying for Awakening and Rival on Campus. SPARC started with a prayer walk around the campus. In shifts students marched around the campus seven times praying for various needs. The entire weekend culminated in an incredible praise and worship service. SPARC captured the essence of what the Church is all about. In reality, there are no Catholics, Baptists, Pentecostals, Methodists or Presbyterians. There are only Christians.

Father, forgive Your children for acting like a bunch of brats. Forgive me for judging others just because they worship or 'do church' a bit differently. Fill me with Your love for others, especially my brothers and sisters in Christ. Help me to see beyond the matrix of the physical world to the reality of the

spirit world. I am the Church. Jesus, You are the head. Show me how to encourage others in the body. I want to do the things that You do. Unite Your people from every tribe, nation and tongue. Be glorified in Your Church. Amen!

