

# Engagement

Establishing Relationship  
in Christ

by

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Pilgrim Platform  
Marietta, Ohio



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5/25/2011 Edition

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ISBN: 978-0-9820385-2-9

Published by

Pilgrim Platform  
149 E. Spring St., Marietta  
Ohio, 45750  
[www.pilgrim-platform.org](http://www.pilgrim-platform.org)

Biblical quotations are from the *English Standard Version*, Standard Bible Society, unless otherwise cited.

Printed in the United States of America

*To my wife  
Stephanie*

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## INTRODUCTION

**I**t is to my embarrassment that this manuscript has sat unpublished for more than ten years. I have edited the material twice but each time I have gotten distracted by other concerns and simply forgotten it. Yet, the most recent edit has been helpful, both to me as I have reviewed this material and to the material because I have been able to see it with more mature eyes this time around. This is only to say that it has been waiting in God's providence for these final touches.

The material here is not my usual fare, but was an attempt to put my best understanding of Scripture and salvation in Christ into a succinct format for a church that did not know me. The first chapter was presented as my candidating sermon, which then became this series following my call and installation, which explains the gap in time between the first chapter (sermon) and the next. It is not an expositional book study, but is more of a topical study intended to speak to the needs of contemporary people by uncovering various biblical truths and at the same time revealing various contemporary misunderstandings about the Bible and salvation.

After fifteen years of ministry in the United Church of Christ (UCC), I changed denominations and entered the Conservative Congregational Christian Conference (CCCC), the only confessional branch of Congregationalism extant at the time. That change brought me to Marietta, Ohio, to serve Putnam Congregational Church, my first

CCCC church. This series was preached during my first months there as a way of self-introduction and was aimed at providing grist for church renewal and growth, as the pulpit committee that called me said they wanted.

As you will come to understand, it created quite a stir among those who heard it. But it did not generate church renewal or revival, at least not in the way that anyone would notice, not in what are considered to be the contemporary measures of renewal and revival.

I did not give them what they wanted nor what they expected, but I did my best to give them what God has given me by way of understanding Scripture. What else could I do? This is not to suggest that my understanding is unique, unusual or special in any sense. I don't think it is any of these things, and I pray that it isn't.

Rather, what you will see here is a synopsis of the historic, Protestant, Reformed position. If it seems unusual it is because this theological position has been all but abandoned by the vast majority of contemporary Christians and their churches over the past 20, 50 or 100 years, depending on where you live and what circles you fellowship in. To my surprise, Putnam Congregational Church did not want to be Congregational, at least not in the original, historic meaning of Congregationalism.

I have endeavored to remove references to Congregationalism from the content of these pages and to craft my best understanding of basic Christianity at that time, and have made a few editorial changes in this last editing process. The purpose is to explain Christianity from a biblical and historic perspective, not to convert anyone to the idiosyncrasies of Congregationalism. And yet I cannot be other than who I am, and my Christian upbringing and training have been mostly Congregational.

My prayer is that God's Holy Spirit will provide a generic understanding of God's Word and God's Way as you engage these pages. You will find them challenging, not because of anything I have added, but because God's Word challenges our humanistic understandings at every turn. I pray for your conviction as you engage these pages, that God will break the hard nut of resistance to His Word if He has not yet done so in your life.

Special thanks to my wife, Stephanie, for her love, without which my work would not happen, for proofreading and helping to make this book better, and for her patience and understanding of my need to write.

Phillip A. Ross  
September 2008  
Marietta, Ohio

## IN THE LIGHT

*Nevertheless, many even of the authorities believed in him, but for fear of the Pharisees they did not confess it, so that they would not be put out of the synagogue; for they loved the glory that comes from man more than the glory that comes from God. And Jesus cried out and said, "Whoever believes in me, believes not in me but in him who sent me. And whoever sees me sees him who sent me. I have come into the world as light, so that whoever believes in me may not remain in darkness. If anyone hears my words and does not keep them, I do not judge him; for I did not come to judge the world but to save the world. The one who rejects me and does not receive my words has a judge; the word that I have spoken will judge him on the last day. For I have not spoken on my own authority, but the Father who sent me has himself given me a commandment—what to say and what to speak. And I know that his commandment is eternal life. What I say, therefore, I say as the Father has told me."*

—John 12:42-50

**T**hese verses provide a summary of Jesus' teaching, much like Moses' farewell discourse (Deuteronomy 30:15-20). It is the very heart of Jesus' teaching. As with all Scripture it is set in a particular context, and the context is instructive.

Jesus had just entered Jerusalem on what we call Palm Sunday. He was teaching sojourners who had come to Jerusalem for Passover. He had predicted His death on the cross, and began talking about who would believe, and who wouldn't. Jesus then began talking about the

difference between believers and nonbelievers.

Some from every walk of life believed. Some from every walk didn't. Verse 42 tells us that there were many rulers or upper class people who believed—certainly not a majority, but many. More than a few. However, these upwardly mobile Christians were afraid to confess Jesus, afraid to publicly acknowledge that they believed Him to be the Messiah because such acknowledgment would threaten their social position, “lest they should be put out of the synagogue” (v. 42).

They knew that confession of their belief would not be popular, and that to maintain their ruling positions and their social status they had to appeal to what was popular. Unwilling to cast their salvation upon the Rock of Christ without regard for the prevailing winds of popular religion, they elevated popularity and social position above their commitment to Jesus Christ. Scripture says they loved the praise of men more than the praise of God (v. 43).

## SELF REFLECTION

Before we think too critically of them, we must carefully consider our own passion for popularity and position. We must take a close look at ourselves. It is easy to criticize these rulers. Scripture gives us all the ammunition we need. But before we bring them into our sights, we need to point the guns of grace and faith in Christ at ourselves. Before we accuse anyone else of overvaluing the winds of popular opinion, we need to take a critical look at ourselves.

In order to do that we need to know the difference between popular religion and classical (or biblical) Christianity. We must know the earmarks of historic faith, so we can take our cues from Christ. To fail here is to open ourselves to the errors of popular religion.

Everybody likes to think that they know the truth. These rulers that John criticizes thought that they knew the truth. They thought that they could be both popular and faithful. But real Christian faithfulness has never been popular. One of Satan's best ruses is to convince people that Christianity is a popular religion.

These rulers were people who believed in Jesus, but their belief failed to bring them to a confession of faith that was acceptable to God. Faithfulness is God's weapon against the excesses of popularity. It's easy to read that they loved the praise of men more than the praise of God and think that we are not like them. It is another thing to stand for Christ against popular opinion. This is the concern of these verses.

The first thing that Jesus said in response was that His popularity didn't matter because belief in Him constituted belief in God. To believe in Jesus is to believe in God, in Him who sent Jesus. And God is



not subject to the whims of popularity.

Of course, the issue of His divinity was the very issue that got Jesus crucified. The Jews accused Him of blasphemy, of claiming to be God incarnate. Indeed, they were right. He did claim that because it was true. Verse 45 is the clearest example of Jesus identifying Himself as God, “he who sees Me sees Him who sent Me.” To see Jesus is to see God. Jesus is not the issue here, “seeing” is.

Christians have come to accept Jesus’ statement as an ordinary fact of the Bible. But unbelievers today still find this ordinary fact of Christianity to be a major stumbling block. People say, “Sure, Jesus was a great guy, but God! No way.” In the face of such unbelief evangelism can easily open the doors of the church to the falsehoods of popular religion by allowing this kind of belief into the church in the name of evangelism.

Church growth gurus today tell us that the hard teachings of Jesus should be avoided because the unchurched won’t like them. They counsel preachers to preach only spiritual milk. The church has been fed on spiritual milk for fifty years—the milk of liberalism and socialism. During this period there has been a decided failure of Christian maturity because it is not the gospel, not the Bible that is being taught. This approach, begun in earnest after World War II, brought great popularity to Christian liberalism. The same strategy, dressed up in a new form, now threatens the contemporary Evangelical churches. By contrast Jesus offered this meaty discourse to unbelievers and the barely believing in Jerusalem.

## THE LIGHT

“I have come as a light into the world, that whoever believes in Me should not abide in darkness” (v. 46). When the light comes darkness is dispelled. But if the coming light is not too near you, and some darkness still abides—even though you see the light in the distance—you are not to continue to abide in the darkness, but move toward the light. In other words, the light of Christ will effect your situation by revealing what abides in darkness. When you see what abides with you in the darkness, you must then move away from it, and come to the light, to Jesus.

The Greek word for church is *ekklesia*, which means a called out people. The church is composed of people who have been called by the Lord out of their sins and out of the sins of society. Paul says that Christians are to be “separated to the gospel of God” (Romans 1:1).

I’m not going to argue for Christian separatism as it is popularly understood. We find too many otherwise faithful Christians thinking

that they should create alternative Christian communities or societies that have nothing to do with popular culture. I think that is wrong (and impossible).

But we must also realize that Christians are indeed called to separate themselves from some things and from some people, but not from society as a whole. We are called to be *in* the world, but not *of* the world. We are called to be leaven in the loaf of humanity. We are called to be lamps for the light of Christ. To accomplish these things we must participate in society.

But not in all that society offers. We are to avoid “adultery, fornication, uncleanness, lewdness, idolatry, sorcery, hatred, contentions, jealousies, outbursts of wrath, selfish ambitions, dissensions, heresies, envy, murders, drunkenness, revelries, and the like; of which I tell you beforehand, just as I also told you in time past, that those who practice such things will not inherit the kingdom of God” (Galatians 5:19-21). Whoever believes in Christ should not abide in darkness.

The application here is to discern how to both participate in and be separate from contemporary society. A good place to begin is to evaluate your television watching. If your television exposes you to the list of things to avoid in Galatians 5:19-21, watch something else. Better yet, turn it off. Television is one of the more successful means by which Satan infects most Christians with the evil that God commands us to avoid.

## THEOLOGY

Verse 47 takes us deeper into the recesses of theology. You know, theology is not really a difficult subject, not for believers. It is Satan who makes theology difficult by muddying the waters. Jesus makes it simple. However, there is one requirement for an effective understanding of theology. One must be a born again believer who relies upon the power and presence of the Holy Spirit. There can be no real understanding of Christ or His gospel without regeneration because God’s Word is foolishness to the world (1 Corinthians 1:20). Jesus said, “unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God” (John 3:3).

The deeper issue in verse 47 has to do with judgment. We know that Jesus is the judge of the world, “For the Father judges no one, but has committed all judgment to the Son” (John 5:22). God has made Jesus the judge of this world. But if that is true, then why does Jesus say here that He will not judge those who don’t believe? We know that Jesus will judge both the “good, to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil, to the resurrection of condemnation” (John 5:29).

The latter surely includes unbelievers.

Here we have the gospel of Christ in its purest form. Yes, Jesus is the judge of the world. But for now he has come to establish His throne of grace, not His throne of judgment. The coming of Christ has provided grace for believers. That window of opportunity is now open to all the world. Believe and be saved. But when Jesus comes again, He will come as judge, and the window of grace will be shut. This is the urgency of the gospel. The window of God's grace will not always be open. People must come to Christ while that window is open because when it is shut there will be no recourse to salvation.

We must also be careful to understand what Jesus meant when He said that He "did not come to judge the world but to save the world." Does He mean to save the whole world? I would like to think that he does because I have a strong emotional attachment to this world and to many of the people in it who are not born again Christians. I would like to believe that Jesus will save the whole world because that would be the humanitarian thing to do.

But that is not what God's Word says. Jesus does not offer universal salvation, He offers particular redemption. Clearly, not everyone has been, nor will be saved. Clearly, not everyone in the world today confesses Christ. And just as clearly, the day of Christ's return is approaching. His return will bring His throne of judgment.

## HELL

There is a hell and its jaws yawn wide to devour this perishing world. The jaws of hell are stretching wide today to satisfy Satan's voracious appetite for flesh. In contrast, Jesus commands His followers to "Enter by the narrow gate; for wide is the gate and broad is the way that leads to destruction, and there are many who go in by it" (Matthew 7:13).

Jesus calls His people to offer hope to this world of woe. But the hope we offer must be His hope, not ours. The words of instruction we give must be His words, not ours. The understanding of Scripture that we share must be His understanding, not ours.

Here we find Jesus' own summation of the gospel of grace. The same message that provides hope to the saved frightens everyone else. That is not my particular take on the message. That is Jesus' own summation. It is His Way and His Word. Faithful Christians are simply to study and report it. Let Scripture interpret Scripture, and not mess it up with our futile attempts to make it relevant.

The application of this particular verse is self-analysis. We must examine our own response to the Scripture. If we are assured of our

salvation in the face of Jesus' summation of the gospel, then we are to enter into the joy worship, prayer, study, and service. But if we are full of doubts and conflicts, we must enter into worship and make our service the discipline of further study and prayer.

That's basically what the church is: an institution of worship, prayer, study and service. Worship and prayer must inform both our study and our service. And the truth is that no one in this life ever outlives their need for worship, prayer, study, and service.

We didn't complete our examination of these verses this morning. But no matter when we started or when we stopped we would not have finished in a morning. I'm not concerned with finishing this morning. This morning I'm concerned with beginning. I pray we will have another opportunity to worship together.

January 14, 1996