

**PETER'S VISION
OF
THE END
IN SECOND PETER**

by

Phillip A. Ross



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Marietta, Ohio

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Dedicated to

Marietta College
Faculty
in the hope of Christ's
wholeness & healing

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INTRODUCTION

A couple of years ago a friend asked me about my interpretation of 2 Peter 3:12: “waiting for and hastening the coming of the day of God, because of which the heavens will be set on fire and dissolved, and the heavenly bodies will melt as they burn!” Are we to take it literally? And if not, why not? Isn’t the plain reading the right reading most of the time? I’ve thought a lot about the questions, issues and concerns regarding this and address them here, sometimes somewhat indirectly.

I knew that I couldn’t just jump into Second Peter without dealing with First Peter first. So, I worked my way through First Peter and published that book as *Peter’s Vision of Christ’s Purpose in First Peter* (Pilgrim Platform, Marietta, Ohio, 2011). There Peter wrote to the fledgling saints who fled Jerusalem prior to its destruction in A.D. 70 in order to help them understand that God had not and would not abandon them. On the contrary, God inhabited them as they fled in order to take the gospel of Jesus Christ to the world through them.

Peter wrote a lot about the end, as my friend noticed and was concerned about. And because contemporary Christians have been inundated with end times scenarios and Dispensational concerns for a couple of generations now, there is a lot of concern that the world is nearing the end of history. Peter was also concerned that “the end of all things is at hand” (1 Peter 4:7). It was at hand when Peter wrote, and it is still at hand today.

However, the *end* that Peter mentioned is the translation of the Greek word τέλος—*telos*, which does mean *end*, but it means it as in *end purpose* or *final purpose*. The *end* that Peter was talking about was the *purpose* of God for Jesus Christ. God was using Jesus Christ to bring the gospel of salvation to the Gentiles, to humanity, to the world. Consequently, Peter was not suggesting that God’s

purpose was the destruction of the world. Rather, God was working to save the world. God's message was and is a message of hope not hate, of love not loathe, of construction not destruction, of peace not war, and of suffering not fulfillment. That message continues in Peter's second letter.

Consequently, just as First and Second Peter stand together, so my books on these letters also stand together. They also stand together with a third book, *The True Mystery of the Mystical Presence*, by Phillip A. Ross & John Williamson Nevin (Pilgrim Platform, Marietta, Ohio, 2011). These three books were written during the same period of time and all three are intended to be a kind of trilogy regarding the renewal and reformation of Christianity in the 21st Century, Lord willing. Two are dedicated to local churches and their pastors in the hope to encourage reading and discussion of Christian unity among groups of Christians that don't speak to one another much, and this one is dedicated to Marietta College faculty. Why drag the college into such an effort? What do academics and Christianity have in common? And why Marietta College?

The connection pertains to the founding purpose of the earliest American colleges and universities generally, and to Marietta College because I live in Marietta. When the city of Marietta was founded, in 1789 by an act of Congress, the vision for the city (settlement) was for it to become a beacon of light and a launching pad for the growth of the nation. Marietta was founded on the "western" frontier, before the Louisiana Purchase (1803).

In 1830, the Reverend Luther Bingham established the Institute for Education, the precursor of Marietta College. Bingham was a Congregational minister and sought to use the Institute to educate the young in the fundamentals of Christianity, a common pursuit of Congregationalists from the time foot was set on Plymouth Rock.

The early years of the American Experiment were wild and heady as a host of theological controversies swept the fledgling nation. One of the most significant was the Unitarian Controversy. Conrad Wright reports that "Within the span of one generation, from 1805 to 1835, approximately 125 churches of the Massachusetts Standing Order, most of them in the eastern part of the state, became Unitarian." The Standing Order was the name of the Congregational church society that provided oversight regarding ecclesiastical polity. Wright continues, "There was controversy and

schism in a number of well-publicized cases, but in many more instances the churches became liberal through a gradual drift of opinion.”¹

In February 1835, as the Marietta Collegiate Institute and Western Teachers’ Seminary was granted a new charter to confer degrees, thus changing the name of the institute to Marietta College, its founders and instructors began the search for the College’s first president.

By that spring, the first trustees of the College identified a Congregationalist minister from Park Street Church² in Boston and former attorney as their choice for Marietta College’s pioneering president.

The Rev. Dr. Joel Harvey Linsley was one of eight children born to New York judge, the Hon. Joel Linsley and Levina Gilbert. A graduate of Middlebury College, he studied and practiced law during the first seven years of his professional life, though his passion for ministry became too great to resist. By 1822, Linsley, having resumed his religious studies, was ordained and began his first role as church leader at the South Congregational Church³ in Hartford, Conn., in 1824. When the trustees at Marietta College sought him out, he was the leading the Boston church.

When Linsley began his work at Marietta College, he was part of the five-member faculty and was in charge of the Department of Moral and Intellectual Philosophy, in addition to his fund-raising duties. For several months, he served as the minister of Marietta’s First Congregational Church.⁴

Like almost all early American colleges, Marietta College had been founded by Christians for the purpose of advancing Christian

- 1 Wright, Conrad. *The Unitarian controversy: essays on American Unitarian history*, Skinner House Books (1994). See also: Field, Peter S. *The Crisis of the Standing Order: Clerical Intellectuals and Cultural Authority in Massachusetts, 1780-1833*, University of Massachusetts (1998).
- 2 Park Street Church did not become Unitarian, and continues today as a trinitarian church in the Conservative Congregational Christian Conference (CCCC).
- 3 Also not a Unitarian church, South Church is a member of the National Association of Congregational Christian Churches (NACCC).
- 4 From Marietta College website: http://www.marietta.edu/About/marietta_history/presidents/Joel_Harvey_Linsley.html

education generally, and to provide for a local supply of educated Christian clergy. And like almost all of the early American colleges it has abandoned its first mission as the development of Modern science and technology seemed to suggest that religion issued from superstition and ignorance. This idea was a product of the Enlightenment and the new fascination at the time with Darwinism.⁵

Because the movers and shakers of Marietta were cut from the cloth of New England social visions and values, it's a sure bet that they did all they could to be on the cutting edge of social "progress," but at this point had not succumbed to Unitarianism, the root of religious and social liberalism. The Unitarian Society in Marietta was founded in February 1855 by Nahum Ward (1785-1860), a prominent land speculator, philanthropist and Marietta mayor.

The point of this historical tangent is to suggest that the abandonment of historic Christianity⁶ by early American intellectuals. This abandonment was not unique to Marietta, but at this time it was mostly a New England phenomenon. It's presence on the "western" frontier of Ohio provided a source of religious conflict, and was an error of serious proportion that today lies at the root of the current American crises that has grown worldwide in its scope.

What crises? At this writing the world is entangled with serious financial, ecological and social crises that are of American origin and export.⁷ And I am here suggesting that the root of these crises is the abandonment of historic, trinitarian Christianity by the American intellectual elite that found its voice in Unitarianism. It is at the heart of the religious and social conflicts that have been part of Marietta's long and fractious history.⁸ It has taken a long time for that abandonment to trickle down to the masses in Marietta and in American society generally, but its embrace by American society at large has succeeded in overturning many Christian values and virtues.

What will be a curiosity to many people at this point is my accompanying tenet that, contrary to much popular opinion, Christianity is not fundamentally an academic endeavor. Academics can

5 Darwin's book, *On the Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection, or the Preservation of Favoured Races in the Struggle for Life*, was published in 1859.

6 Finke, Roger and Stark, Rodney. *The Churching of America, 1776-2005: Winners and Losers in Our Religious Economy*, Rutgers University Press, 2005.

7 See Appendix, *The Demise and Hope for American Capital*, p. 166.

8 *The Spirit of Historic Marietta*, by David Snyder, former pastor of Beverly Baptist Church, www.lulu.com/11535657, unpublished.

and have served to both help and hinder the cause of Christ in the world. The Apostle Paul dealt with this issue in his letters to the Corinthians, particularly in his discussions of the foolishness and folly of the Corinthian church leadership. The foolishness he referred to was Greek philosophy, or the mindset of the pagan Greek academy.⁹ Western Christianity has mostly missed this point and most academicians continue to ignore religion generally and historic, trinitarian, biblical Christianity in particular.

My purpose in dedicating this volume to Marietta College is to call both Marietta and academia to reevaluate the reality and divinity of Jesus Christ in the light of real Christianity, science, history and philosophy. Obviously, the difficulty will be to reveal and define “real Christianity.” In part, that is the mission of this trilogy of books. A further difficulty will be to help academicians understand that real Christianity is not found in books or ideas, though books can point to it. Real Christianity is not an abstract idea but a living Person who is able to live through others.¹⁰

Part of the purpose of these books is to question the reigning paradigms of liberal arts education and liberal Western society, and to challenge academia to reexamine Christianity without its prejudices. It is my hope to suggest the ultimate religious questions in a fresh way so that they can be understood to reside at the very heart of what it means to be a human being. Who are you? Who am I? Who are we? What is humanity? What is the purpose of existence? Why bother? Academia needs to refocus its passion for the narrowness of intellectual minutia in order to engage the breadth of the greater concerns of purpose and wholeness of humanity and the world. Peter’s concern regarding the end or purpose of the world, the end or purpose of Jesus Christ, is particularly suited to address such issues and concerns.

My prayer is not that my work will be adequate to this task—it won’t be. No one knows that better than I do. Rather, my prayer is that Christ will use this work to accomplish *His* purpose for it. The world is far more complex, odd, interesting, dangerous and valuable than any intellectual endeavor can possibly reveal. Science, math, physics, history, psychology, sociology, etc., are simply inad-

9 Ross, Phillip A. *Arsy Varsy—Reclaiming the Gospel in First Corinthians*, Pilgrim Platform, 2008; and *Arsy Varsy—Proclaiming the Gospel in Second Corinthians*, Pilgrim Platform, 2009.

10 This is a central theme of *The True Mystery of the Mystical Presence*, Ross, Phillip A. & Nevin, John Williamson, Pilgrim Platform, Marietta, Ohio. 2011.

equate to the task of understanding the world apart from Christ—and yet that is exactly what the world and the current academy are trying to do!

No serious academic in any secular institution can earnestly consider the claims of Jesus Christ as a component of academic study or research, much less attempt to support or justify them, because the institutions themselves have adopted a widespread and vicious prejudice against such views. Thus, secular educational and academic institutions have taken on the task of ideological indoctrination and abandoned the idea of genuine liberal intellectual freedom—and they have done so in the name of progress! The discipline of liberal arts in such institutions has become every bit as culturally narrowminded and authoritarian as any of the religious, fundamentalist extremists that they so virulently abhor.

It is far past time to realize that in Christ all of these various academic endeavors will be far more robust than they are apart from Christ. The academy simply must discover its own presuppositions and prejudices against Christ and Christianity, just as Christians must drop theirs about the academy. The problem is not academics or liberalism, but Godlessness. Indeed, the Bible is much more liberal than most liberals believe, and much more conservative than most conservatives believe. The liberal/conservative paradigm is simply inadequate to biblical truth.

God's role in academia, as in all of life, is analogous to the relationship of the whole to the part. The whole is not simply like another part of a different sort, but is of an entirely different order. Yet, the value of the whole to the sum of the parts is incalculable—there would be no *whole* apart from the different order.

Indeed, forgiveness and freedom in Christ, part of the function and wholeness of God, means that we are free from our own history, free from our bondage of every kind to the past, free from our errors and sins, and free from our self-definitions and delusions. This is so because the root of Christianity is not in the past, but in the future. The reality of Christ beckons from the future as the only sure hope for the broken wholeness of the world.

Part of the problem that academia has with Christianity is that Christians don't actually represent Jesus Christ very well, which is unfortunately true. This also means that churches don't represent Christ very well, either. Sadly, this is also true. But it is understandable once you have come to realize who Jesus Christ actually is and

who (and what) we as human beings actually are. The gulf between perfection and sin is so wide that is it unbridgeable apart from Christ. How could the finite ever truly represent the infinite?

The gulf between our status as broken sinners and Jesus' status as the only begotten Son of God cannot be bridged from the human side, but only from Christ's side. Unfortunately, this means that those who deny, denigrate and disregard Jesus simply do not receive access to the bridge. No one keeps them from it but themselves and their own narrowminded fear of the actual depths of reality. Consequently, people will always fail to comprehend the Lord apart from a willingness to seriously engage with Him.

Thus, it is to the engagement of such a consideration to which this trilogy of books is dedicated, and particularly this volume on Second Peter. However, it must also be mentioned that there is an order to the trilogy, and that order is to begin anywhere except with this volume. Please read *The True Mystery...* or *Peter's Vision of Christ's Purpose...* first, and please reserve judgment until you have read and understood all three.

It will be best to read these books socially—in a group—as a book study or in a reader's club rather than privately because they try to reveal a glimpse of the multiplicity of perspectives in the trinitarian Godhead. To “grock” this means that listening to other people's perspectives is important to the process. These books also attempt to make our own presuppositions and assumptions more clear to us. Oddly, it is often easier to see those of others than one's own, but little is more important than seeing our own. Again, listening to other people will help in the process. The books are also full of language that is intended to elicit questions and discussion. The questions and issues raised are not all answered. To miss the discussion will be to miss the amazing diversity and surprising presence of the unity of the body of Christ.

What the careful reader will discover in this trilogy of books is a view of Christianity that is quite different from what they have been taught or what they have absorbed from their childhood, upbringing, Sunday School teachers, public school teachers, seminary teachers and/or American culture generally. However, it must be emphasized that this view is not novel or new. Rather, it is actually quite old and has been mostly forgotten by Christians and their churches. What is new about it is what we have learned about our

world and our history. What is new is our Twenty-First Century perspective.

Then again, I am not simply regurgitating old Christian doctrine for Twenty-First Century consumption. Peter's central insight is that the revelation of Christ in the lives of Christians is intertwined with history in such a way that history itself impacts how we see and understand Jesus Christ. Historical reflection increases the scope and/or depth of the perspective from which we are able to understand Christ and His mission to the world. Christ doesn't change, nor does His mission. But over time faithful Christians are able to incorporate what history teaches us about humanity and our world into what we know and understand about Christ and His mission. Consequently, our appreciation for Christ and His mission grows as we apply the lessons of our own history to biblical Christianity, and as we apply the lessons of historic Christianity to our world. There is a kind of reciprocal or symbiotic relationship between Christianity and history (or the development and maturity of humanity). It's not perfect, but it is there.

First Peter provides Christians with hope for the future of humanity as Christianity left its Jerusalem "nest" with Christ's mission for the world. It provides a message of hope in the face of struggle and suffering as Christianity first undermines the paganism of Roman culture in order to provide the foundation for Christian culture. The transition, said Peter, will be difficult—but rewarding.

Second Peter continues this same theme, but acknowledges that the transition process may be more difficult than first expected because there were false teachers who had successfully entered the ranks of the earliest churches, and were actively working to destroy God's plan of salvation in Christ. Indeed, the unfolding of God's plan for the salvation of humanity has taken much longer than any of the biblical writers first thought, though it has not surprised God in the least. *Nonetheless*, said Peter, *stay true to Christ because the process of His progressive revelation in history will continue to provide true guidance.*

John Nevin believed Peter and did his best to provide an historically progressive, though also ancient, understanding of Jesus Christ and His ongoing mission to the Modern world. Nevin found Jesus Christ to provide the highest, most inclusive and superior religious realization and teaching known to Man. Nevin's study of

world religions showed him that all religions seek union with God in one way or another. But Christianity provides the only way or means for such union. And though Nevin wrote a century and a half ago, his research, findings and presentation of Christ's role in the process of union with God stands undiminished and untarnished for the Twenty-First Century.

This ancient/contemporary view of Christianity not only requires participation from the various Christian denominations, but it provides the means for such cooperative participation through the correction of various denominational errors. Nevin left no denomination or other world religion unscathed as he unleashed Christ's mission to the world. Nevin's work provided the same services for the science and academics of his time (late 1800s). Though Nevin was not aware of the sweeping changes that have come to science and academics from the fields of quantum mechanics and higher mathematics, I believe that his essential insights and understandings can and will not only survive such interaction with them, but will thrive on it.¹¹

It is in the light of these things that I dedicate these books to the churches and academies of the Twenty-First Century. No doubt, my optimism appears overly bold, and especially to those who have long ago stopped thinking in such broad categories. The Modern academic experiment with Godlessness, which has strangled such thinking, continues to reveal its own paucity as it crashes on the fractured foundations of its own Godless and immoral assumptions and its misguided hope for the freedom to sin without consequence.

I am convinced that both the churches and the academy will benefit from the discovery that science and religion are not only not opposed to one another, but that their actual harmony in Christ is exactly what the Twenty-First Century will need to succeed. This harmony is part of the inheritance gained by Christ for the world. Godspeed!

Phillip A. Ross
Marietta, Ohio
January 5, 2012

¹¹ The work of Arthur M. Young is promising (<http://www.arthuryoung.com>). Young's math and science are quite exciting, but his theology is atrocious in that he augurs for the same pagan, universal amalgam of religions as the Unitarians. Nonetheless, I believe that his math and science can be more productively applied to Christianity from a presuppositional trinitarian perspective.

I. COMMON SERVANT

Simeon Peter, a servant and apostle of Jesus Christ, To those who have obtained a faith of equal standing with ours by the righteousness of our God and Savior Jesus Christ: May grace and peace be multiplied to you in the knowledge of God and of Jesus our Lord. —2 Peter 1:1-2

As usual Peter opened this letter by identifying himself as the author. Simon was his birth name and Peter was his Christian name, given to him by Jesus when they met (John 1:42). We must not make too much of the fact that Peter referred to himself as Peter in his first letter and as Simon Peter in his second. Peter would have been most widely known as Peter, and fewer people may have known him as Simon. Why? For the same reason that Christians are better known as the persons they have become in Christ than the persons they were prior to their conversion. The fact that Peter mentioned is birth name in this letter may suggest a fuller sense of realization or integration of Christ in his life as a testimony of his own regeneration over time and as he matured in Christ. It was as if he was saying, *I am the Simon who has become Peter in Christ.*

He went on to identify himself as both a servant and an apostle of Jesus Christ. The Greek word *doulos* literally means slave. *Servant* is not a wrong translation, but in our contemporary world *servant* has no real, visceral meaning because we Americans tend to think that we as a people abandoned servitude following our Civil War. So, we have no recognizable experience of actual servitude as it was known in the First Century. It is such a term of disgust that no right-minded American would ever submit to that kind of servitude for any reason. We tend to think of a servant as a waiter or

waitress in a restaurant who works in the service industry. Our idea of it does not in any way identify or classify such people as inferior persons locked in perpetual servitude to another. However, this is exactly what Peter intended to communicate.

There is a sense in which every Christian is to be a servant of Jesus Christ, as Peter here described himself. By using the word *doulos* rather than *diakonos* Peter suggested an ordinary Christian servant rather than an elected office holder in the church, like a deacon.

And yet he also paired the term with *apostle* (*apostolos*), the most authoritative Christian designation. The apostles held the highest and most unique office in the church. Oddly and instructively, Peter described himself as a Christian who was both the lowest of the lowly and the highest of the authoritative. Thus, the purpose for this dual description of himself was to indicate the broadness and diversity of the kinds of people who are to be united in Christian unity. Because Peter represented both the lowest of the lowly and the highest of the high, the singularity of his own personhood represented the breadth and depth of Christian unity because that unity includes all Christians, from the lowliest to the highest in rank or distinction.

The greater lesson of this simple teaching is that just as God does not respect human categories like slave or free, Jew or Gentile, male or female, etc. He does not respect any such ranks or categories in the church either. However, the fact that God does not recognize human distinctions with regard to salvation does not mean that such human distinctions lose all meaning. Slaves do not become free just because they become Christian. Neither do Jews become Gentiles, nor Gentiles Jews. Nor do men become women or *visa versa*. The categories remain, but with regard to salvation they have no meaning or effect.

SLAVE

Slaves who become Christian remain slaves, as Paul taught through the story of Onesimus in Paul's subsequent letter to Philemon. Onesimus had been a runaway slave who was converted under Paul's ministry. Following his conversion, Onesimus returned to Philemon in obedience to Paul's teaching. Paul wrote to Philemon, Onesimus' master, asking Philemon, who was also a Christian, to treat Onesimus as a brother in Christ. Paul also directed Ones-

imus to return to his former obligations as Philemon's slave as an act of testimony of his faithfulness to Christ.¹² So, Onesimus was free in Christ from the bondage and consequences of the law, but not free from his earthly responsibilities and obligations. Onesimus was eventually freed from his slavery, not by Christ or Paul, but by Philemon.

This is not an argument in favor of slavery, not at all! Rather, it is an argument that God's law is not in conflict with man's law, which means that Christians are not free to ignore or break the laws of civil government by acts of revolution. Onesimus remained a slave until Philemon released him. Thus, Christians, while free from the ultimate consequences of human sin dictated by God's law, are to use their freedom to work to Christianize society within the bounds of existing laws, from the inside out, one person at a time. This is to happen in such a way that only when a society becomes sufficiently Christian can its civil laws can be lawfully changed to better conform to the purposes of Christ.

Having identified himself as the author of this letter, Peter went on to identify its recipients: "to them that have obtained like precious faith" (v. 1). Again the translation of the Greek word (*lagchanō*) as "have obtained" is not wrong, though it is inadequate because it can suggest a kind of works-righteousness. The Greek word suggests the casting of lots and might better be translated as *have received*, rather than *obtained*. It is more akin to receiving than to taking.

Yet, there are problems with this translation as well. It may suggest a kind of overly passive reception rather than an active reception. A passive reception falsely suggests that people are made into Christians by some objective force outside of them, as if they are automatons who are manipulated by God against their will. But this is nonsense. Rather, people are made into Christians by the Holy Spirit who resides in their own hearts and minds through regeneration. The process is mysteriously both objective and subjective.¹³ Thus, everything about becoming a Christian involves a willing and voluntary response to the Spirit's bidding. Becoming a Christian is a matter of making an active response of willing compliance to God's Word in Christ—joyfully.

12 For a discussion of this see: Ross, Phillip A. *Colossians—Christos Singularis*, Pilgrim Platform, Marietta, Ohio, 2010, pgs. 234-236.

13 See footnote 10, p. v.

UNITY

Peter then suggested the unity of Christian faith by calling his readers to “a faith of equal standing with ours” (v. 1). The *Authorized Version* translated the phrase as “like precious faith,” which fails to convey the idea of unity or equality. The Greek word (*isotimos*) literally means of equal value or honor. Again, the idea is the unity of Christian faith regardless of church status or rank, a kind of similarity among Christians. This does not mean that all Christians are equally able to understand or describe their faith, nor that all Christians have equal functions or are interchangeable. Nor does it eliminate authority in the church by suggesting a kind of Christian anarchy.

Rather, Peter was establishing the unity of Christian faith despite various understandings or descriptions that may be produced by faithful Christians. Different Christians will understand and describe their faith somewhat differently, but as long as that faith is genuine their understandings and/or descriptions should not disturb the underlying unity of the faith. This is a difficult lesson to learn, as is evidenced by the acerbic and fractious history of the church over two millennia. In fact, the history of this difficulty suggests that it may be more fruitful not to pursue Christian unity as a function of doctrinal conformity beyond conformity to the Ecumenical Creeds.¹⁴ There must be sufficient doctrinal agreement to establish the doctrine of the Trinity among the churches because this doctrine is absolutely unique to Christianity and is essential for a unity that is reflective of the diversity of the Godhead. All true Christians and their churches must confess the veracity of the Trinitarian Godhead.

Genuine Christian unity is a matter of the already existing unity of the root of the Vine and generous acceptance of all of the fruit of the branches that is produced in different soils and climates. Consider the fact that not all grapes are red, and the amazing diversity of wines that can be produced from various grapes. Once the common root or vine of Christ is established, as it has been through the Ecumenical Creeds, the unity of the branches is a given—accepted.

14 An umbrella term used in the western churches to refer to the *Nicene Creed*, the *Apostles' Creed*, and the *Athanasian Creed*, which are accepted by almost all Christian denominations in the western church. The Eastern Orthodox Church accepts the *Nicene Creed*, but does not use the *Apostles' Creed* or the *Athanasian Creed*. The United Methodist Church accepts the *Apostle's Creed* and *Nicene Creed*, but does not use the *Athanasian Creed*.

This means that the branches and fruit are to assume unity with the other branches and fruit on the basis of the unity of the root. The differing branches and fruit are not to assume that all other branches and fruit must conform to their particular color, size or taste, that others are to understand and/or do things only the way that *they* understand and do things.¹⁵ Rather, they are to assume that the various ways of understanding and doing things by other branches and fruits in unity are simply a different expression of their common root, their common unity. And then they are to work toward a common understanding of that unity, of the different expressions of it. Rather than assuming that other branches are *not* in faithful unity and then working to prove their faithlessness, we must assume that other branches are in faithful unity and help one another demonstrate and understand our mutual faithfulness in Christ.

DISCIPLINE

The way to do this is for church elders to actually do the job of church elders biblically and faithfully, and for other church members to *not* do the job of the elders on their own. Church elders are to express and teach the theology of the common root or vine—Christ. As elders lift up Christ to those in their care in every circumstance and situation, by focusing on the center, on Christ, the branches will then come into proper alignment. Doing this biblically and faithfully will help to insure that Christians can trust that other Christians are genuine Christians. Unity is manifested by concentrating on the center, not the circumference. Only God clearly knows the circumference of infinity (Christ). The issue for ordinary Christians is not who is in and who is out (circumference issues), but the character of the center. We are to define and incarnate that character in Christ.

Circumference issues (faithfulness and membership) are important, but such concerns are for church elders regarding their own churches. Membership and orthodoxy issues are not the prerogative of ordinary Christians, and much will be gained as ordinary Christians stop usurping the jurisdiction of elders in order to anathematize people they disagree with. Much will be gained as elders concern themselves with understanding and teaching the orthodoxy of the Ecumenical Creeds and stop making and promoting

¹⁵ Fruits are so diverse that it is difficult to devise a classification scheme that includes all known fruits, <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fruit>.

judgments about others who are not in their jurisdiction. Rather than focusing on the differences of doctrine between various churches, we need to focus on the similarities of doctrine among those churches who are our closest geographic neighbors.

If a church member has an issue with another church member, Matthew 18:15-17 should be followed. The initial steps here involve simple conversation, discussion and argument, but not in the sense of fighting and bickering. Rather, conversation, discussion and theological argument are to be engaged in a spirit of benevolence and helpfulness, not pettiness and anathematization. No challenges or doubts regarding the authenticity of faith of another member of the same congregation should be made apart from actually engaging the help of church elders in the Matthew 18:15-17 procedure as needed.

No church member should challenge or deny the authenticity of the faith of someone from another church at all, ever! If one church member has a concern about some member of another church, he should take that concern to his own elders. If necessary, his elders will contact the elders of the other Christian and raise the issue so that church can sort out its own doctrinal and membership issues. We are all far too quick to brand others with the hot iron of heresy and apostasy, when only official church councils should make such generic determinations and local elders should make such particular determinations. Reining in private judgments against others will go a long way toward the institution of peace and unity among the churches.

The reason for this approach is that Christian unity is not established by the beliefs or practices of individual Christians or their churches. Christian unity is not established by the church at all, it is established and given by Jesus Christ. And it is not established on church doctrine but on the righteousness of Jesus Christ. The Christian church is not unified by belief, doctrine or practice. It is, rather, unified by the righteousness of Jesus Christ. Our job is not to dis other Christians or churches, but to cling to Christ's righteousness in our own lives. Christ is our unity.

We all fall short of Christ's righteousness in various and sundry ways. This is why grace and mercy must be extended to one another by one another, but always on the basis of the righteousness of Christ. We must not be so quick to judge where Christ has extended mercy. Christians are not unified by their beliefs, doctrines or prac-

tices, but by the fact of their striving toward and living in Christ's righteousness. Our unity is the common goal toward which we work, it is not based on the degree to which we meet that goal. We must help one another by assuming and sharing our common reliance on Christ's righteousness, and stop shredding one another on the basis of perceived faults and shortcomings. We all have too many faults and shortcomings, but Christ has loved and saved us anyway in order to bring us into His righteousness. By grace through faith He has brought us into His righteousness through mercy *in spite of our faults and shortcomings*. And we must not try to undo what He has done.

DIVINITY & TRINITY

The final thing that Peter did in this verse is to assert Christ's divinity when he described Jesus Christ as "our God and Savior" (v. 1). There is no divinity apart from the Trinity because God is trinitarian. It is, therefore, the fact of the Trinity that accounts for Christ's divinity. And we can see the Trinity in Peter's formula, "our God and Savior Jesus Christ" (v. 1). God is the Father, the Savior is the Son and the fact that He is *our* God points to the manifestation of the Holy Spirit who establishes their unity in the church through adoption.

All of these things issue out of Peter's statement of Christian unity in verse one. The unity of the faith is seen in the fact that the lowest and highest Christians enjoy equal standing regarding their salvation through the righteousness of Christ. Christian unity is not achieved by accomplishing the righteousness of Christ, but by our common orientation to it, our common desire to serve it. Unity is a matter of being in the same river of Christ's righteousness, not a matter of being on either shore or at some particular point in the course of the river.

Our standing of faith is equal because it is not a function of the performance of Christians, but of the righteousness of Christ toward which Christians all endeavor to live. Standing is not a measure of maturity, but of the trajectory of maturity in Christ. The unity of Christ is the unity of common membership in Christ's church, the body of Christ that results from baptism into Christ. Just as all those who are born of a human mother are human, so all those who are born of Mother Kirk, the Bride of Christ, by the regeneration of baptism (1 Peter 3:21) are Christian. Not all human

beings have the same level of maturity, nor the same gifts or abilities, nor the same experience or potential, etc. Nonetheless, all Christians are still of the same kind. Christians are a unity of kind (species) by regeneration—by grace through faith.

Contemporary Christians often turn the spigots of grace and peace toward themselves as they read verse 2: “May grace and peace be multiplied to you in the knowledge of God and of Jesus our Lord.” We are tempted to think that this verse is saying that we as individual Christians must increase our grace and peace through knowledge. It is so easy to slip into works-righteous Gnosticism in this regard. And, while it is true that knowledge of God increases our perception and appreciation of grace and peace, that is not what the verse conveys.

We are tempted to think of grace and peace as commodities, as if they are things that we can hold and collect, that they get attributed to our grace and peace accounts, like dollars to a ledger. But again, that is not what Peter was trying to say. Grace and peace would be better translated as *graciousness* and *peacefulness* in order to show that they are character qualities not abstract commodities.

In addition, the Greek word that is translated as *multiplied* is *plēthunō*. And the root of the word comes into English as the word *plethora*, which means extreme excess. And when we note that the word *you* is plural, we see that Peter was proclaiming the fact that there is to be an extreme excess of graciousness and peacefulness among the people of God—of the whole of them. The two characteristics that God's people should be known the world over for is graciousness and peacefulness. Of course, it cannot be a corporate reality apart from individual manifestation, but the point is that is it not dependent upon any particular individual manifestation.

KNOWLEDGE OF

What kind of knowledge was Peter talking about here? The Greek word is not *gnosis*, but *epignosis*, a more specific type of knowledge. *Epi* is a Greek preposition which means of or around, i. e., *epidermis* is the skin which is of the body, it goes around the body. Here Peter was talking about the knowledge *of* God that can be gained through a familiarity with the skin (or body—the reality) of Jesus. He was not speaking of a kind of abstract knowledge about

God, but about the intimate knowledge of the Person of God, Jesus Christ. Again, the phrase points to the reality of the Trinity.

Peter repeated the combination of God and Jesus Christ in a slightly different form in verse 2 by reiterating the divinity of Jesus Christ and the Trinity of God. The fact that we must translate the Bible into our vernacular languages from a foreign tongue and a foreign culture provides additional depth and meaning to God's Word because it forces us to acknowledge the difficulties involved in communication. Even the most simple communication is actually a complex and multi-layered process. It is very easy to make wrong assumptions in the translation process that insert our own biases into the intentions of others.

All communication requires commonly understood context and subtext. The art of good communication involves the bringing of context and subtext from assumption to conscious awareness for all parties involved. Having no original biblical source manuscripts forces us to bring to our awareness various complexities we usually and easily just assume. By having to translate, the Lord forces us to bring our own assumptions to the light of consciousness to keep ourselves and others from hijacking the text on the basis of some unacknowledged assumption. It also forces us to examine the context and subtext of the authors in the light of Christ. And it is actually a difficult and arduous process—but extremely valuable.

The sense of verse 2 is that graciousness and peacefulness are increased among the people of God through knowing God in Christ Jesus personally. The corollary would also apply: where graciousness and peacefulness are in short supply among the people of God, we can also expect little knowledge of God in Christ Jesus, and little effort toward bringing one's own assumptions to the light of consciousness and to the light of Christ. Thus, this verse provides direction to do just these things: to assume the unity of all who are in Christ Jesus without regard to status or standing, to increase our own graciousness and peacefulness by knowing God in Christ Jesus in a trinitarian way both personally and by encouraging others to do the same by one's own example.

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