**Round Top Church Christian Fellowship**

Thirteen Weeks till the Resurrection - April 4, 2021

***Will the Real Christianity Stand Up!***

 ***Acts 15:19-41***

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(Unless otherwise noted, NAS is quoted.)

**Prologue**

As a prologue to this sermon, I want to be clear that I see Christianity is rejected by many because it has been altered many times. In America and Europe, the Church in shrinking. There is an increase in other parts of the world. In America and Europe, there is insufficient trust in the message. More importantly, there is insufficient trust in the institutions and individuals presenting the message. The world has repeatedly witnessed one scandal after another and criminal acts by these same institutions of religion. Most of these atrocities surround misappropriation of money, pedophilia and dishonest acts.

Another factor contributing to the decline of Christianity in America is what we all witness daily in the Western Media. The Western Media is the voice of the H.A.S. community. (Humanism, Atheism, Secularism). Their message is streaming 24/7 into the ears, eyes and minds of people. In lock-step with the H.A.S. media is the education system. All levels of public education and the majority of colleges and universities downplay the Church and Christians. I am not saying these educators should establish a religion. I am saying they should not use their positions to discard or talk against Christianity. Parents are ill-equipped to deprogram their children from what many educators teach regarding the acceptance of secular society. The Church leadership, at the pastor level, is focused upon following and teaching particular structures handed down to them by regional and national heads at the expense of preparing parents and children to withstand the assault waiting for them in the education system and heard daily on Western media channels. Here is a good online article addressing Christianity in the West.

<https://www.pewforum.org/2019/10/17/in-u-s-decline-of-christianity-continues-at-rapid-pace/>

Here is an online article looking of the global growth of Christianity. https://www.holyart.com/blog/mind-blowing-statistics-christianity-need-know/

 The solution is for individual Christians to take it upon themselves to evangelize their neighbor, family and friends. Reliance upon failed religious systems has been and is an exercise in futility.

Through history, the Church of God has rarely been witnessed. The theocratic “mediator” State-Church with manipulating guilt-ridden traditions is designed to keep people in the **“trifecta of darkness and despair” – being unforgiveness, fear and pride-centered works.** These works are presented as part of a ‘person’ process of gaining salvation. The simplicity of the Gospel and access to the Good News has been over-shadowed by fallen humanities traditions incorporated in the “trifecta of darkness”.

My goal is to strip away the fallen humanistic coverings in order for people to see the Light of Truth that is the most attractive Message in the world. I see that presenting God and His Word in the most basic form is the most attractive. *Jesus, what must I do to inherit eternal life*, the lawyer asks in Luke 10:25. Jesus responds – *Love God and your neighbor;* or the lawyer in Mathew 22:35, *Jesus which are the greatest commandments?*

 **35 One of them, a lawyer, asked Him a question, testing Him,**

 **36 "Teacher, which is the great commandment in the Law?"**

 **37 And He said to him, "'YOU SHALL LOVE THE LORD YOUR GOD WITH ALL YOUR HEART, AND WITH ALL YOUR SOUL, AND WITH ALL YOUR MIND.'**

 **38 "This is the great and foremost commandment.**

 **39 "The second is like it, 'YOU SHALL LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR AS YOURSELF.'**

 **40 "On these two commandments depend the whole Law and the Prophets."**

Jesus is simple with His response, and so should we be. The reason sermons like this one are detailed is to provide an explanation as to what has happened. Jesus gave a simple witness and, at times, gave detailed teaching like in the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5. Jesus also was very exacting in His assessment of the religious leaders in Matthew 23 (“Woe to you” . . . white washed tombs).

**Why do I bring all this up in a sermon about Acts 15?**

**Remember when I said that the “messengers” are not trusted. That local pastors are about teaching the message of their national leaders at the expense of the Truth in God’s Word.**

**What happens when a person reads the Bible and learns what they have been told by a religious leader is in conflict with what they read in the Bible? Many times, they wash their hands of faith and religion.**

**Introduction Statement to Acts 15**

This sermon series takes us to the 15th chapter of the book of Acts and the Jerusalem Council. There is a great deal of theological issues addressing the Truth of God, as Jesus taught, contrasting to the misapplied Law of Moses. The leaders in Jerusalem are tasked with making cutting decisions based upon their understanding of what Jesus taught them. From reading the Old and New Testament, we see that the Law of Moses was never intended to remove the penalty for sin or make a person to be in right-standing with God. Instead, we see a covenant through “faith” that God establishes with Abraham in Genesis 12 and referenced in the book of Hebrews.

 **Hebrews 10:1** For the Law, since it has only a shadow of the good things to come and not the very form of things, can never, by the same sacrifices which they offer continually year by year, make perfect those who draw near.

 2 Otherwise, would they not have ceased to be offered, because the worshipers, having once been cleansed, would no longer have had consciousness of sins?

 3 But in those sacrifices, there is a reminder of sins year by year.

 4 For it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins.

 5 Therefore, when He comes into the world, He says, "SACRIFICE AND OFFERING YOU HAVE NOT DESIRED, BUT A BODY YOU HAVE PREPARED FOR ME;

 6 IN WHOLE BURNT OFFERINGS AND sacrifices FOR SIN YOU HAVE TAKEN NO PLEASURE.

 7 "THEN I SAID, 'BEHOLD, I HAVE COME (IN THE SCROLL OF THE BOOK IT IS WRITTEN OF ME) TO DO YOUR WILL, O GOD.'" Reference - Psalm 40:6;

**Psalm 51:16** For You do not delight in sacrifice, otherwise I would give it; You are not pleased with burnt offering. 17 The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; A broken and a contrite heart, O God, You will not despise.

**Galatians 3:19-25**

19 Why the Law then? It was added because of transgressions, having been ordained through angels by the agency of a mediator, until the seed would come to whom the promise had been made.

 20 Now a mediator is not for one party only; whereas God is only one.

 21 Is the Law then contrary to the promises of God? May it never be! For if a law had been given which was able to impart life, then righteousness would indeed have been based on law.

 22 But the Scripture has shut up everyone under sin, so that the promise by faith in Jesus Christ might be given to those who believe.

 23 But before faith came, we were kept in custody under the law, being shut up to the faith which was later to be revealed. [Christ]

 24 Therefore the Law has become our tutor to lead us to Christ, so that we may be justified by faith. [The Law could not justify a person to God]

 25 But now that faith has come, we are no longer under a tutor.

 All of these Scriptures detail the difference between the “Law” and “Faith.” Romans chapters 3 and 4 are excellent in Paul’s presentation pointing to Abraham, the “Father” of the Hebrew people, as “THE” example of a person becoming righteous in God’s eyes through faith and not the Law. Ephesians 2:8, John 3:16, Romans 10:13 and more, all proclaim right-standing with God based upon “Faith” and not adhering to works-of-the-Law.

Do not be confused when Jesus said that He came to fulfill/accomplish the Law (Mathew 5:17,18). Jesus fulfilled the Law when He became the perfect sacrifice to take away the sins of the world which no animal or human blood could accomplish.

It is true that Jesus directed us to follow His commands (John 14:15) which are not burdensome (1 John 5:3). Jesus’ commands address our relationship with God and each other. They were not functionary Laws directing what to eat, when to go to worship or when not to harvest, as examples. Jesus pointed to being a servant to others, asking by faith of the Lord, render to Caesar, honor marriage, forgive others, judge by how you want to be judged, follow Him, repent, be reconciled to God and with your neighbor and keep your word are examples of Jesus’ commands. James learned from Jesus, and we see this in his judgement at the Jerusalem Council.

Why is this biblical truth in conflict with some religious leader’s taught traditions? Because the Bible does not support merit-based salvation.

**What Acts 15 Teaches Us About James**

Is there a conflict in what the Bible clearly states about James and the start of the Church with the revisionist history of the State-Church? Yes, there is. Real factual Biblical history can sting. When we read the Bible and discover truth for the first time that is contrary to our previous understanding, we have an opportunity to learn and grow at the same time. There is nothing wrong in experiencing learning and growth in God’s Word. Sometimes learning and growth are not comfortable. I see that Saint Paul had an about-face when he met the Lord on the road to Damascus (Acts 9). Fortunately, we do not all have to go through what Paul experienced.

**Where Did the Church Start?**

Luke 24:47 states that starting from Jerusalem repentance for forgiveness of sins would be proclaimed in His [Jesus’] name to all the nations. Obviously, Jerusalem is not Rome and the head Elder of the Church is James, the half-brother of Jesus. James is the one who presided over all the speakers including Paul and Peter. James is the one to whom they all turned to make the most important decisions of the early Church. It is James, not Paul or Peter, who made a judgement on how to proceed. Notice, James states, “*Therefore it is my judgment*”, in making his pronouncement. James does not say it is *our* judgment. The Church in Jerusalem defers to James and accepts his judgement. Peter and Paul were apostles and served as leading missionaries. This biblical text directly contradicts the Roman State-Church’s claim that the Church started in Rome with a double apostolic tradition containing Peter and Paul with Peter being the first Pontiff.

 We need to focus on James to ascertain a correct understanding of the 1st century Church’s origin. Unfortunately, due to the political manipulation of the historical and biblical facts by the State-Church in the 4th century, many never see James in his correct role as the leading Elder in Jerusalem.

**Key Biblical Facts About James**

Here are key facts about James, who is not James the Apostle, son of Zebedee, brother of John who Jesus called to follow him in Matthew 4:21. Matthew 13:55 provides clear biblical proof that the James, making judgements at the Jerusalem Council, is Jesus’ half-brother.

**Matthew 13:55** "Is not this the carpenter's son? Is not His mother called Mary, and His brothers, James and Joseph and Simon and Judas?

 James did not believe Jesus was the Messiah prior to the Resurrection.

**John 7:5** For not even His brothers were believing in Him.

 After the Resurrection, James saw Jesus and then believed He was the Messiah. We read in Paul’s letter that James did see Jesus during the Resurrection ministry time. Luke also acknowledges the brothers of Jesus being with the Apostles praying in Acts 1:14.

**1 Corinthians 5:7** then He appeared to James, then to all the apostles;

**Acts 1:14** These all with one mind were continually devoting themselves to prayer, along with the women, and Mary the mother of Jesus, and with His brothers.

 When Paul gives his biography to the Believers in Galatia, he includes James, the Lord’s brother, to be a person he saw early in his ministry.

**Galatians 1:19** But I did not see any other of the apostles except James, the Lord's brother.

**Galatians 2:9** and recognizing the grace that had been given to me, James and Cephas and John, who were reputed to be pillars, gave to me and Barnabas the right hand of fellowship, so that we might go to the Gentiles and they to the circumcised.

Peter reports to James in recognition that James is the leader of the Church that started in Jerusalem.

 **Acts 12:17** But motioning to them with his hand to be silent, he described to them how the Lord had led him out of the prison. And he said, "Report these things to James and the brethren." Then he left and went to another place.

It is fitting that James is the author of the “book of James” that addresses the truth of “faith” and “works” since he is the one who made the judgment at the Jerusalem council about not fulfilling the Law of Moses including circumcision.

**James 1:1** James, a bond-servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ, To the twelve tribes who are dispersed abroad: Greetings.

 As we can see, James is a key figure in the early Church. His role must be properly seen and understood. Why is this important in comparison to the State-Church’s revised history?

The biblical text is clear, James is the biological son of Mary and Joseph. However, in the 4th and 5th centuries, the State-Church developed a theocratic system which included a dogma about original sin that encompasses Mary.

**What is the Issue with Mary and the State-Church?**

**Mary-Worship is another reason people checkout of Christianity after they read the Bible and find out there is not any Biblical basis for the teaching. In addition, other religions in the world, like Islam, accuses Christianity of being polytheism with Mary being exalted.**

Beginning with the State-Church (4th century) who taught that sin was transferred through the generations biologically through parents. They also positioned Mary to be sinless (being the mother of God/Jesus) and, therefore, sin never could have passed through her being. This teaching called for Mary not to be the biological mother of James. Eventually, the State-Church taught that Mary did not die a temporal death but ascended to heaven. Temporal death is a sign of sin. Remember, the result of sin is death (Genesis 2:17). This was not defined by a Roman Bishop (Pope Pius XII) until 1950. That is about one-thousand and nine-hundred years after the Cross. If this was a core foundation understanding of the early Church, then why does not the New Testament or the Church Fathers write about Mary’s status? Did Jesus mention Mary to the Lawyer who asked Him how to gain eternal life? NO!

 In addition, they taught Mary’s Immaculate Conception. Thus, freeing her from original sin. See online article: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Assumption\_of\_Mary

This article identifies that there is not any evidence that an identification with Mary’ assumption existed before Epiphanius of Salamis (c. 315–403) wrote about Gnostics sects regarding her assumption. A student of history needs to be aware of the thousands of writings produced during and after the 1st century. Numerous pagan sects incorporated Jesus, Mary, Moses and others into their philosophies. This is why the canon of the New Testament contains only 27 books. These survived the test of time being constantly compared to what the Apostles and eyewitnesses of Jesus said and wrote. Unfortunately, some of these pagan views crept into the traditions of some of the groups in the early Church. All around the world there are pagan traditions of a “mother” goddess giving birth to little gods. Again, the early Church Fathers did a good job in keeping all of these heretical writings from being adopted in the canon of the New Testament. However, traditions of culture were hard to keep from all Christian communities.

Here are excerpts from an online article about Mary. As you read the points adopted about Mary, note that they are not found in the biblical text.

In 1950 Pope Pius XII invoked papal infallibility to define the dogma of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin in his Apostolic Constitution Munificentissimus Deus.

The dogma of the Assumption followed from the 1854 definition of Mary's Immaculate Conception (her freedom from original sin), and both developed from the recognition of her status as the Mother of God, meaning that she, like Jesus, was without sin, preserved from corruption, resurrected, received into heaven, and a recipient of corporeal glory.

Teaching of the Assumption of Mary became widespread across the Christian world, having been celebrated as early as the 5th century and having been established in the East by Emperor Maurice around AD 600 St. John Damascene records the following:

St. Juvenal, Bishop of Jerusalem, at the Council of Chalcedon (451), made known to the Emperor Marcian and Pulcheria, who wished to possess the body of the Mother of God, that Mary died in the presence of all the Apostles, but that her tomb, when opened upon the request of St. Thomas, was found empty; wherefrom the Apostles concluded that the body was taken up to heaven.

**Know the Bible . . . Read the Bible**

By reading the Bible, we can see the truth. However, people have not always possessed the Bible to read. The truth was kept from the common person. Therefore, the State-Church from the 4th century and forward did not pursue producing the Bible in the native tongues of people groups like we do today. Even if the State-Church produced the Bible in Latin, most people could not read the language. At the time the Vulgate was produced, statemen and scholars in the Western Roman Empire did speak and read Latin. This still left-out the common person. There was not any public education system. True, the Bible was expensive to produce by hand-copy. Thus, only the upper-class and State-Church scholars and government officials had a copy. The common illiterate person was dependent upon State-Church officers to tell them what the Bible said.

The printing press was not invented until the 1450’s, and the first book printed was the Bible in Latin. However, with the invention of the printing press and the more affordability of printing the Bible, the State-Church saw the handwriting on the wall. The State-Church quickly made it illegal to produce the Bible. When men like William Tyndale (1534) did print the Bible in his native language, he was burned at the stake (1536).

So, for more than 1400 years, most commoners, due to a variety of social and State-Church policies, did not have access to the Bible. This was a political advantage to the State-Church, who did not have any interest in public education. Developing a mind with a biblical education is a threat to a totalitarian regime that uses the Bible to govern. This is called the Dark Ages (Middle Ages). Today, the state does not use the Bible to govern, and there is not any threat by commoners to read the Bible and derive their own views.

**James’ Judgement Pronounced - Acts 15**

**19 "Therefore it is my judgment** that we do not trouble those who are turning to God from among the Gentiles,

 20 but that we write to them that they abstain from things contaminated by idols

and from fornication and from what is strangled and from blood.

 21 "For Moses from ancient generations has in every city those who preach him, since he is read in the synagogues every Sabbath."

 22 Then it seemed good to the apostles and the elders, with the whole church,

to choose men from among them to send to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas-- Judas called Barsabbas, and Silas, leading men among the brethren,

 23 and they sent **this letter** by them,

"The apostles and the brethren who are elders,

 to the brethren in Antioch and Syria and Cilicia who are from the Gentiles, greetings.

**Letter Content**

 24 "Since we have heard that some of our number to whom we gave no instruction have disturbed you with their words, unsettling your souls,

 25 it seemed good to us, having become of one mind, to select men to send to you with our beloved Barnabas and Paul,

 26 men who have risked their lives for the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.

 27 "Therefore we have sent Judas and Silas, who themselves will also report the same things by word of mouth.

 28 "For it seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to lay upon you no greater burden than these essentials:

**Direct Instruction from James and Church Elders in Jerusalem**

Note here that this is a very limited list. The concern is not to give the appearance that a Believer is practicing a pagan lifestyle.

29 that you abstain from things sacrificed to idols and from blood and from things strangled and from fornication; if you keep yourselves free from such things, you will do well. Farewell."

 30 So when they were sent away, they went down to **Antioch**; and having gathered the congregation together, they delivered the letter.

 31 When they had read it, they rejoiced because of its encouragement.

 32 Judas and Silas, also being prophets themselves, encouraged and strengthened the brethren with a lengthy message.

 33 After they had spent time there, they were sent away from the brethren in peace to those who had sent them out.

 34 But it seemed good to Silas to remain there.

 35 But Paul and Barnabas stayed in Antioch, teaching and preaching with many others also, the word of the Lord.

**Paul and Barnabas disagree on Mark’s Service**

 36 After some days Paul said to Barnabas,

"Let us return and visit the brethren in every city in which we proclaimed the word of the Lord, and see how they are."

 37 Barnabas wanted to take John, called Mark, along with them also.

 38 But Paul kept insisting that they should not take him along who had deserted them in Pamphylia and had not gone with them to the work.

 39 And there occurred such a sharp disagreement that they separated from one another, and Barnabas took Mark with him and sailed away to Cyprus.

**Paul leaves with Silas**

 40 But Paul chose Silas and left, being committed by the brethren to the grace of the Lord.

 41 And he was traveling through Syria and Cilicia, strengthening the churches.

 I see that people who reject Christianity are really rejecting a church that does not accurately represent God and His Word. Many of us, as children, have gone through and been educated in strong traditions of a particular church culture. For some, these traditions have become a mediator for the rest of their lives. As well-intended as the instruction may have been, if it was not as simple as the answer Jesus gave the lawyer then there is a misunderstanding. We need the truth, without a mediator. Remember that there is only one mediator between God and people. That is Jesus Christ (1 Timothy 2:5). Traditions and cultures have been set-up over time becoming mediators, piling-up spiritual baggage being carried by souls weighed down with unnecessary rituals and ecclesiastical structures. I witness people carrying this “trifecta of darkness and despair” – unforgiveness, fear, and prideful works. No wonder people get to be adults, think for themselves and see the mediating structures failed to deliver forgiveness, love, peace, grace, hope and joy. Only God and His Spirit can deliver the fruits of the Spirit.

Multitudes have stopped their trek through these structures and are sitting on the sidelines. Demographers in the West identify that a group they call “Religious nones” (people with no faith) is the fasting growing group.

<https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2019/09/atheism-fastest-growing-religion-us/598843/>

<https://www.pewforum.org/2019/10/17/in-u-s-decline-of-christianity-continues-at-rapid-pace/>

 With the growing awareness of one church scandal after another victimizing children and other atrocities like the support of same-sex marriage and abortion-on-demand, piled on top of the mediator structures in place to prevent such crimes, people are checking-out of religion. The very Church that was to be a sanctity for family and community has been adulterated by these acts, and secular humanism is paving the way by theocratic ecclesiastical systems void of God’s character.

What do we do? We do our part. We use every tool available to accurately teach God/Jesus’ Message without creating mediating bearers.

Isaiah 49:6 He says, "It is too small a thing that You should be My Servant To raise up the tribes of Jacob and to restore the preserved ones of Israel; I will also make You a light of the nations So that My salvation may reach to the end of the earth."

Isaiah 45:22 "Turn to Me and be saved, all the ends of the earth; For I am God, and there is no other.

**AMEN**