

MANY ARE CALLED, FEW ARE CHOSEN

By James Summerville

I'm a regular guy. I like sports, particularly football. I enjoy action movies and silly sitcoms. Occasionally I watch cartoons, giggling like a kid at the antics of Bugs Bunny, Daffy Duck, and Yosemite Sam. I'd like to posthumously punish whoever invented suits and ties. When I visit McDonald's and Wendy's, I don't order the salads. If you give the remote to me, I won't return it until I flip through 100 or so channels at breakneck speed, twice.

Yes, I'm a channel surfer. Every so often, I stumble upon broadcasts of religious services in cavernous auditoriums, led by charismatic preachers, such as Joel Osteen, TD Jakes, Fredrick Price, and Robert Schuller. They're preaching to thousands of people, in all likelihood about Christian living; nothing wrong about that. However, as I pause to watch their shows, I can't help but recall the following statement by Jesus: "For many are called, but few are chosen" (Matthew 22:14). Are the thousands of people in those auditoriums the "many" or the "few"?

There are over 2 billion Christians in the world. Christianity is the world's largest and fastest growing religion, due mainly to charismatic movements in Africa and South America. Are the 2 billion Christians among the "many" or the "few"?

Well, that's a self-righteous question. For years we've been encouraged (conditioned, perhaps) to think of ourselves as special. While true—for some unknowable reason, God has opened our eyes to glimpses of His eternal truths—this feeling has bred a touch of arrogance in some of us. After all, the implication is that while we're special, others are not.

I've been around long enough to learn a few truisms: intelligence is sometimes overrated; wisdom doesn't automatically increase with age; and religious arrogance is the worst type of arrogance. With respect to the latter truism, it's sad but true: I've met more haughty people inside the Church than outside it. No, I'm not bashing the Church. Most brethren are indeed humble. But I've met self-important, not-so-nice brethren who believe that God is on their side, no matter what. Therefore, it becomes impossible for them to work and fellowship with others who don't share every iota of their beliefs.

On the other hand, I've met so many humble, nice people outside the Church. Moreover, many of the historical figures we admire, such as George Washington, Benjamin Franklin, Winston Churchill, and Thomas Jefferson, were not Christians per se. They were deists (Washington, Franklin), agnostics (Churchill), or undeclared atheists (Jefferson).

Therefore, who am I to question someone's calling? And why should I care? As Paul advised the Philippians, "Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, not as in my presence only, but now much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling" (Philippians 2:12).

While we shouldn't self-righteously question the calling of others, the Bible does encourage us to question our own calling: "Examine yourselves as to whether you are in the faith" (II Corinthians 13:5). Here, the Apostle Paul used the poetic term "in the faith" to mean a system of beliefs shared by an assembly of believers. A modern-day, albeit dull, translation would be "in the church."

Thus we should ask ourselves a simple but profound question: are we among the "many" or the "few"?

The Church

Jesus said to Peter, "I also say to you that you are Peter, and upon this rock I will build My church; and the gates of Hades [Greek for "grave"] will not overpower it" (Matthew 16:18). Though Jesus was speaking to Peter, the rock to which He referred was Himself: "Moreover, brethren, I do not want you to be unaware that all our fathers were under the cloud, all passed through the sea, all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea, all ate the same spiritual food, and all drank the same spiritual drink. For they drank of that spiritual Rock that followed them, and that Rock was Christ" (I Corinthians 10:1-4).

The Church was born on the Day of Pentecost, in 31 AD. In response to the miraculous events of that day, and as a result of Peter's stirring sermon, many people were converted: "So continuing daily with one accord in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, they ate their food with gladness and simplicity of heart, praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to the church daily those who were being saved" (Acts 2:46-47).

The word "Church" derives from the Greek word *ekklesia*, which means assembly. In other words, Jesus built an assembly of like-minded brethren. The author of Hebrews equates this assembly of early Christians with the Church of God: "to the general assembly and church of the firstborn who are registered in heaven" (Hebrews 12:23).

Because this assembly was the "church of the firstborn registered in heaven," they must've been doing something right. Obviously, they were among the "few," not the "many." What did they believe? When and how did they worship?

In short, we need a portrait of the first-century Church. First, a brief history of early Christianity.

Early Christianity

Originally, all Christians were Jews. "The divine authority of Moses and the prophets was admitted, and even established, as the firmest basis of Christianity."^[1] In his magisterial history of the decline of the Roman Empire until the fall of Constantinople in 1452, Edward Gibbon included a succinct and insightful history of the early centuries of Christianity. He affirms what most scholars believe, and indeed, what the Bible states: early Christians were considered a sect of Judaism.

“The origins of modern Christian diversity, biblical scholars contend, can be found in the early Christians’ ties to Judaism. Despite the drama of Pentecost and the missionary fervor that followed, it was actually some time before the first Christians thought of themselves as having started something altogether new.”^[2]

Gibbon records that the first fifteen bishops of Jerusalem were Jewish. They presided over congregants identified as Nazarenes, who “united the law of Moses with the doctrine of Christ.”^[3] However, unlike Judaism, Christianity was an inclusive religion. With relish, the early Christians, especially the apostle Paul, proselytized among the Gentiles (or non-Jews). The gentile converts, however, brought their pagan beliefs into the early Church. During the next few decades there was a struggle between two sets of Christians: those who kept “the commandments of God and [held] to the testimony of Jesus” (Revelation 12:17) and those who discarded any trace of Judaism, especially its adherence to Old Testament law and theology. “The Jewish converts, or as they were afterward called, the Nazarenes, who had laid the foundations of the church soon found themselves overwhelmed by the increasing multitudes, that from all the various religions of polytheism inlisted (sic) under the banner of Christ.”^[4]

In the ensuing centuries, Christians engaged in a long process of self-definition in relation to Judaism. The breach between early Christianity and Judaism (as expressed in the Old Testament) was hastened by the disastrous consequences of the 1st and 2nd Jewish revolts in Palestine, from 66-70 AD and in 135 AD. The Romans quashed these revolts and subsequently persecuted the Jewish religion. Most Christians, therefore, dared not to associate themselves with Jews, and consequently discarded laws, customs, and ideology inspired by Old Testament theology. In short, after these revolts, many Christians decided not to be tainted by association with the persecuted Jews. Shorn of Judaic or Old Testament influences, this emerging Christianity had to invent or adopt new customs, laws, and theologies.

The men who succeeded the Church leaders of the apostolic era (31 AD to the 90s AD) grew up in a world infused with paganism and Hellenism (Greek ideas): “The innumerable deities and rites of polytheism were closely interwoven with every circumstance of business and pleasure, of public or private life; and it seemed impossible to escape the observance of them, without, at the same time, renouncing the commerce of mankind.”^[5]

Because they did not want to be associated with the persecuted Jews, and because they wanted to accommodate the pagan converts, these men sought to replace God’s laws, Holy Days and Festivals with pagan substitutes. For example, “The Roman Catholic Church chose December 25 as the day for the Feast of the Nativity in order to give Christian meaning to existing pagan rituals. For example, the Church replaced festivities honoring the birth of Mithra, the god of light, with festivities to commemorate the birth of Jesus, whom the Bible calls the light of the world. The Catholic Church hoped to draw pagans into its religion by allowing them to continue their revelry while simultaneously honoring the birthday of Jesus.”^[6] The early Roman Catholic Church might have had good intentions in trying to convert the gentiles by Christianizing pagan rituals. But in doing so, they undermined the truth of God.

Moreover, many of the so-called Church fathers were infatuated with Hellenistic ideas and philosophies. Hellenism refers to Greek culture and its diffusion. Greek ideas were first propagated throughout the Mediterranean world by the conquering armies of Alexander the Great, in the fourth century BC: “The conquests of Alexander the Great spread Hellenism immediately over the Middle East and far into Asia. After his death in 323 B.C., the influence of Greek civilization continued to expand over the Mediterranean world and western Asia.”^[7]

The Romans adopted Greek ideas, and Plato was an icon. The Church fathers were by and large citizens of the Empire and thus shared this great respect for Plato and Platonism. For example, “The theologians Clement of Alexandria, Origen, and St. Augustine were early Christian exponents of a Platonic perspective. Platonic ideas have had a crucial role in the development of Christian theology and also in medieval Islamic thought.”^[8]

Even the Catholic Encyclopedia admits Plato’s influence on early Christian theology: “Nevertheless, the great majority of the Christian philosophers down to St. Augustine were Platonists. They appreciated the uplifting influence of Plato’s psychology and metaphysics, and recognized in that influence a powerful ally of Christianity in the warfare against materialism and naturalism.”^[9]

Why were many so-called church fathers (e.g. Clement, Origen, and St. Augustine, arguably the most famous and influential Christian theologian) devoted to Platonic ideas? These men were products of their time. They were pagan converts who had previously embraced Hellenic ideas. And because they discarded most Old Testament theology, they needed replacements. They found several replacements in the teachings of Plato.

The “Greek apologists recognized also elements of truth in Hellenic literature, especially in the Platonic and Stoic philosophy, and saw in them, as in the law and prophecies of Judaism, a preparation of the way for Christianity. Justin (Martyr) attributes all the good in heathenism to the divine Logos (Jesus), who, even before his incarnation, scattered the seeds of truth...and incited susceptible spirits to a holy walk. Thus there were Christians before Christianity; and among these he expressly reckons Socrates and Heraclitus. Besides, he supposed that Pythagoras, Plato, and other educated Greeks, in their journeys to the East, became acquainted with the Old Testament writings, and drew from the doctrine of the unity of God, and other like truths....This view of a certain affinity between the Grecian philosophy and Christianity, as an argument in favor of the new religion, was afterwards further developed by the Alexandrian fathers, Clement and Origen.”^[10] Furthermore, “even Augustine acknowledges the Platonists approach so nearly to Christian truth that with a change of some expressions and sentences, they would be true Christians.”^[11]

Are you still awake?

I hope so, because history can seem boring at times; its relevance to modern-day life isn’t readily apparent. For example, who cares if the early Church had “united the law of Moses with the doctrine of Christ”? Answer: not many people do care, but you should. After all, these same first-century Christians comprised the “general assembly and church of the firstborn who are registered in heaven” (Hebrews 12:23). They were among the “few” chosen by God to perform

His Work. Therefore, our goal is to emulate them. As stated earlier, we need to draw their portrait. Afterward, we should compare our 21st century church (of whatever denomination) to the portrait of the 1st century church. If your church resembles that portrait, great! If not, well, you might have something to think about.

Appearances are deceiving

“Peter replied, ‘Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off—for all whom the Lord our God will call.’ With many other words he warned them; and he pleaded with them, ‘Save yourselves from this corrupt generation.’ Those who accepted his message were baptized, and about three thousand were added to their number that day” (Acts 2:38-41).

The Church got off to a smashing start: on that first Pentecost, thousands of Jews converted to what was later called Christianity. In fact, the day’s euphoria moved some brethren to create what might’ve been world’s first commune: “All the believers were together and had everything in common. Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he had need. Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved” (Acts 2:38-47).

However, despite the best efforts of the apostles, especially Paul, the euphoria eventually subsided. Indeed, the Christian growth rate increased slowly throughout the first century:

“Progress must have seemed terribly slow during the first century—the projected total is only 7,530 [Christians] by 100 [AD]. There was a greater increase in numbers by the middle of the second century, but still the projection amounts to slightly more than 40,000 Christians. This projection is in extremely close agreement with Robert L. Walker’s estimate of ‘less than fifty thousand Christians’ at this time—‘an infinitesimal number in a society comprising sixty million’...the survival of Christian archeological evidence would have been roughly proportionate to how much there could have been to start with. The lack of anything surviving from prior to 180 [AD] must be assessed on the basis of the tiny number of Christians who could have left such traces. Surely it is not surprising that the 7,535 Christians at the end of the first century left no trace.”^[12]

Before we dismiss this quote as scholarly nonsense designed to debunk our intuition of a dynamic first century church, we should consider the opening chapters of the book of Revelation. These chapters include divinely-inspired letters to the churches located in Asia Minor, today modern-day Turkey. They provide a glimpse of the state of Christianity in the closing decade of the first century. These Christians were unenthusiastic, to say the least: the Ephesians had “lost” their “first love”; although the Sardinians had a “reputation of being alive,” they were “dead”; the Laodiceans were “lukewarm, neither hot nor cold.” The churches at Pergamum and Thyatira were no better: they had regressed into paganism and hedonism.

By the close of the first century, the true Church was small, lackluster, meandering, and riven by controversy. In this context, we understand Jude's admonition: "Beloved, while I was very diligent to write to you concerning our common salvation, I found it necessary to write to you exhorting you to contend earnestly for the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints" (verse 3).

Some scholars have estimated that, by the end of the 4th century, Christians had comprised about half of the Roman Empire. Nonetheless, appearances are deceiving. According to Jesus' prediction, many are called, but few are chosen. Despite their burgeoning numbers, there were relatively few Christians (in the most complete sense of the word; more on that later) by the end of first century, and probably even less by the end of the fourth century.

Back to the future

[Dr. Emmett Brown](#): Then tell me, "Future Boy", who's President in the United States in 1985?

[Marty McFly](#): Ronald Reagan.

[Dr. Emmett Brown](#): Ronald Reagan? The actor?

[Dr. Brown chuckles in disbelief]

[Dr. Emmett Brown](#): Then who's VICE-President? Jerry Lewis?

I love the first Back to the Future movie, released in 1985. A teenager (Marty McFly) of the 1980s "travels back in time to the 1950s, where he must arrange for his mismatched parents to meet—or else he won't exist."^[13]

Though it's a zesty comedy that doesn't take itself seriously, Back to the Future's subtext is provocative. In short, can we understand the present and predict the future by delving into the past? For the purposes of this article, what can we learn of the current and future Church of God by analyzing its past?

Jesus commanded His disciples (later apostles) to "make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age" (Matthew 28:19-20). Jesus gave them a worldwide commission. However, earlier He predicted that His disciples will not have achieved that worldwide mission before He returns: "go to the lost sheep of the house of Israel...for truly I say to you, you shall not finish going through the cities of Israel, until the Son of Man comes" (Matthew 10:6, 23, emphasis mine). Although Jesus commanded His disciples to preach to all nations, here He predicted that their success will be limited to the "cities of Israel."

Although the goal is worldwide conversion, the disciples and their spiritual descendants, including you and me, won't succeed. According to Jesus' prediction, by the time He returns, the Church will be limited to sections of the cities of the Israel ("you shall not finish going through the cities of Israel..."). Therefore, should we book the next flight to Israel to find the Church of God? No. Why not? Well, the answer resides in the history of biblical Israel.

A necessary, brief history of biblical Israel

For the sake of brevity, a short, selective history of biblical Israel: after the exodus from Egypt, the Israelites (comprising 12 tribes, one of which was Judah, whose members were called Jews) eventually formed a confederacy under King Saul, around 1000 BC. Sometime after Saul's death, the 12 tribes of Israel formed a kingdom under King David. The kingdom remained intact for about 100 years, until it split in two. The northern 10 tribes rebelled and seceded from the southern tribes, which were led and represented by the tribe of Judah. After the split, the northern tribes became known as the "house of Israel" and the southern tribes as the "house of Judah." The northern tribes were eventually conquered by Assyria, its inhabitants deported into regions of the Assyrian Empire. Thereafter, they became lost to history. ^[14]

"For their mother has played the harlot; she who conceived them has acted shamefully. For she said, 'I will go after my lovers, who give me my bread and my water, my wool and my flax, my oil and my drink.' 'Therefore, behold, I will hedge up her way with thorns, and I will build a wall against her so that she cannot find her paths'" (Hosea 2:5-6). Here God used poetic and symbolic language to describe the sins of the house of Israel. (Hosea was a prophet to the house of Israel.) God said He will "build a wall against her [the house of Israel] so that she cannot find her paths." In other words, the house of Israel (comprising the northern ten tribes or nations) would become so oblivious of their identity that, even if they tried, they will be unable discover their origin.

Jesus referred to the house of Israel as lost and sent His disciples to them. And they (the Church) will remain there until Jesus returns: "you shall not finish going through the cities of Israel, until the Son of Man comes." In which direction did His disciples travel after receiving this command? It's obvious that Christianity spread westward from Palestine. And Christianity today is found largely in the Americas and Europe, and in Australia (originally, a British colony). A majority of Asia is Buddhist and Islamic, northern Africa is largely Islamic, and sub-Saharan African religion is largely a combination of Christian and pre-Christian animism.

What's my point?

Simple: as predicted by Jesus, the Church never expanded to the four corners of the globe. According to the 6th chapter of Matthew, by the time of Jesus' return, the Church will be planted only in the cities of Israel. No, not the Israel in the Mideast; rather, in the cities and towns founded by descendants of the ancient Israelites who had migrated into Europe and eventually North America. ^[15]

Furthermore, as Jesus said, "many are called, but few are chosen." In other words, the Church, then and now, is small. Its extent is limited to the "cities of Israel"; again, then and now. Thus the portrait of the first century Church is small. And despite modern Christianity's size (over 2 billion Christians; the largest, fastest-growing religion in the world), as predicted by Jesus, the Church remains small.

Well, that's disappointing. Almost two thousand years have elapsed since Jesus' resurrection, and the Church—in the most complete sense of the word—remains small.

A paradox

Thus far we've determined the size and location of the first century Church: small and located throughout Europe. The paradox is this: Christianity grew, slowly but inexorably, to reach today's status as the world's largest and fastest-growing religion. Nonetheless, Jesus predicted that the Church would continue to be small, even to the time of His return. Therefore, the conclusion is inescapable: "Not everyone who says to Me, 'Lord, Lord,' shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father in heaven. Many will say to Me in that day, 'Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in Your name, cast out demons in Your name, and done many wonders in Your name?' And then I will declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness'" (Matthew 7:21-23).^[16]

It's not our job to (judgmentally) determine who is saved and who is not. Rather, as Paul admonished the Corinthians, we should examine only ourselves. One method of examination is to compare ourselves to our spiritual ancestors, that is, to the earliest Christians, who were called the "church of the firstborn who are registered in heaven." What were their attributes? Why were they special?

A woman, a dragon, and you

"Then the dragon was enraged at the woman and went off to make war against the rest of her offspring—those who obey God's commandments and hold to the testimony of Jesus" (Revelation 12:17).

The book of Revelation symbolically portrays Satan as a "dragon." In the cited scripture, the "woman" symbolizes both Mary (in the past tense) and the Church (in the future tense). For some reason, Satan is murderously enraged at her offspring—in other words, the brethren of the Church. Why is he so angry? Because they're the saints of God: "Here is the patience of the saints: here are they that keep the commandments of God, and the faith of Jesus" (Rev 14:12). They will "inherit the earth" (Matthew 5:5). They will be "kings and priests to our God;" they "shall reign on the earth" (Revelation 5:10). Therefore Satan, who would like to remain the "ruler of this world" (John 12:31), wants to destroy these saints.

What are the defining characteristics of these saints? What makes them special? Easy; the answer is found within the scripture itself: "here are they that keep the commandments of God, and the faith of Jesus."

Earlier I referred to "Christians" in the "most complete sense of the word." I also referred to the "Church" in the "most complete sense of the word." It's obvious that "saint" and "Christian" are synonymous. Moreover, these saints/Christians are members of God's Church, spiritual heirs to the first-century "church of the firstborn who are registered in heaven" (Hebrews 12:23). The 12th and 14th chapters of Revelation describe them as those who keep God's commandments and hold to the faith of Jesus. Just one attribute is not enough. Christians—again, in the most complete sense of the word—should hold to the testimony of Jesus and obey God's laws, as defined in the Old Testament. Furthermore, the Church, in the

most complete sense of the word, should teach both the necessity of holding to the testimony of Jesus and obeying God's commandments.

The two crucial Christian attributes

“Holding to the testimony of Jesus” is the sine qua non of Christianity. In other words, believing that Jesus is your Savior is the bedrock of Christianity, the definitive Christian attribute. However, according to the Bible, just believing isn't enough: “You believe that there is one God. Good! Even the demons believe that—and shudder” (James 2:19). Just faith in Jesus isn't enough: “But do you want to know, O foolish man, that faith without works is dead?” (James 2:20).

Early in His ministry, Jesus dispelled the notion that He advocated the irrelevance of God's law, as defined in the Old Testament: “Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. I tell you the truth, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished. Anyone who breaks one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever practices and teaches these commands will be called great in the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 5:17-19).

Despite the clarity of Jesus' statement, because He didn't leave behind any written statements, there was a struggle to define Christianity in the decades after His death and resurrection. The Gospels, composed decades after His death and resurrection, were written to portray the definitive Jesus.

Roughly speaking, two viewpoints prevailed in the earliest centuries of Christianity. On one side were the Jewish converts, many of whom believed that strict adherence to God's laws was necessary for salvation. On the other side were the pagan converts, many of whom believed that salvation depended only on the belief in Jesus as our Savior; they taught that Jesus had nailed God's commandments and laws to the cross.

Paul's letters demonstrate that both sides were right and wrong.

A synopsis of Paul's teachings

The apostle Paul was once a Pharisee who persecuted Christians (Acts 26:2-5; Acts 9:1). However, after his famous Road-to-Damascus conversion, Paul began to preach as a Christian to the Gentiles and

Israelites. He continuously emphasized justification and salvation through the death and resurrection of Jesus, the prophesied Messiah. Nowhere in his epistles did he teach that Jesus nailed the Law of God to the stake. On the contrary, Paul called the Law of God holy and good, and he obeyed it: “I do serve the God of our fathers, believing everything that is in accordance with the Law and that is written in the Prophets” (Acts 24:14).

Paul obeyed the Law of God. He observed the Sabbath and Holy Days and Festivals, which are described in the Old Testament, and urged others to do the same: “Therefore let us celebrate the feast, not with old leaven, nor with the leaven of malice and wickedness, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth” (I Corinthians 5:8). Here, Paul was urging the gentile Corinthians to observe the Feast of Unleavened Bread. Paul did not claim that this Feast belonged only to the Jewish people. Moreover, this Feast is one of God’s Festivals and Holy Days, as is the Sabbath.

Paul took exception to the claim that strict observance of the Law can save people. First, everyone has sinned (Romans 3:23), so it’s foolish to claim salvation by obeying the Law of God. Secondly, if you can obtain salvation by strictly observing the Law, then you don’t need Jesus. That’s heresy.

The Law of God leads us to Jesus: “Therefore the Law has become our tutor to lead us to Christ, so that we may be justified by faith” (Galatians 3:24). By realizing that we’re sinners in need of God’s mercy, we thus acknowledge the necessity of accepting Jesus as our “sin offering” (Romans 8:3)

We’re sinners when (not if, but when) we break God’s Law, including the seventh-day Sabbath (4th commandment). Therefore the Law cannot save us; only Jesus can. Our faith in the saving grace of Jesus leads us to salvation: “Therefore, having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom also we have obtained our introduction by faith into this grace in which we stand; and we exult in hope of the glory of God” (Romans 5:1-2). And “knowing that a man is not justified by the works of the Law but through faith in Christ Jesus, even we have believed in Christ Jesus, so that we may be justified by faith in Christ and not by the works of the Law; since by the works of the Law no flesh will be justified” (Galatians 2:16).

Paul did not criticize the Law itself but rather the self-righteous belief that people can obtain salvation solely by obeying it. Salvation cannot be obtained, said Paul. Strict observance of the Law, Sabbath, and Holy Days and Festivals (if it were possible) will not save you. Rather, we’re justified by faith in the saving grace of Jesus. It’s a gift from God.

Jesus did not redeem us from the Law, but from the penalty (death and eternal separation from God) incurred by breaking it (Galatians 3:13). Furthermore, Jesus, Paul and the other apostles obeyed the Law of God. They observed the Sabbath and God’s Holy days and Festivals, as identified in the Old Testament. By the way, there was no “New Testament” in the days of Jesus, Peter, and Paul. As stated earlier, the Gospels were written many decades after the death and resurrection of Jesus. And the New Testament, as a whole, wasn’t put together until centuries after the earliest Christians had died. Therefore, the Holy Scriptures to which Paul referred is the Old Testament: “But you must continue in the things which you have learned and been assured of, knowing from whom you have learned them, and that from childhood you have known the Holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus. All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness” (II Timothy 3:14-16). Here, Paul portrayed the Old Testament, with its laws, holy days, and feasts, as relevant for Christians.

Therefore, Jesus did not nail God's laws to the cross. Instead, He emphasized their permanence (Matthew 5:17-19). As Paul said, "the law is holy, and the commandment holy and just and good" (Romans 7:12).

An incomplete portrait of the first-century Church

The first-century Church—the "church of the firstborn who are registered in heaven"—believed in Jesus as their Savior and observed God's laws, as defined in the Old Testament. Thus we've defined four crucial attributes of the first-century Church:

1. Its small size;
2. Its extent or location;
3. Its faith in Jesus;
4. Its adherence to God's laws, as defined in the Old Testament.

Furthermore, we've learned that, according to Jesus' prediction, the Church would remain small, even to the time of His return. And at the time of His return, the Church will be planted only in the modern-day "cities of Israel."

Belief in Jesus as our Savior requires no explanation. One scripture will suffice: "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life" (John 3:16). However, the 4th above-listed attribute—adherence to God's laws, as defined in the Old Testament—requires further explanation:

God's laws and commandments

The law is a mirror to a society's soul. The law and its fair application speak volumes about what a society values and doesn't value. For example, capitalist societies, such as ours, value private property. Therefore we have a copious amount of law that defines property and regulates property transactions (e.g. buying and selling, title searches, deeds, etc.).

Moreover, the "legal system of any society is a mirror that reflects, necessarily, the structure of power in that society. If we understood exactly and completely how the legal system of some society worked, we would also have insight into who counts in that society, who has the power and the influence and the authority; and who does not."^[1]

Applying these purposes to biblical law: God designed His law to teach us how to act toward Him and each other. Therefore, the law teaches us about what's important and what's not. And the law serves as a reminder that God is in charge.

Law in the Bible

The definition of sin is the transgression of God's law: "Whosoever committeth sin transgresseth also the law: for sin is the transgression of the law" (I John 3:4). With the exception of Jesus, everyone has sinned. Solomon said, "for there is no one who does not sin" (I Kings 8:46). Because "sin" is the transgression of God's law, and because everyone has sinned (Romans 3:23), God's laws have thus been around since the Garden of Eden.

After the exodus from Egypt, the Israelites gathered at Mt. Sinai to hear God's laws. God began by delivering His guiding principles, codified as the Ten Commandments: (1) No other gods; (2) No idols; (3) Don't take God's name in vain; (4) Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy; (5) Honor your father and your mother; (6) No murder; (7) No adultery; (8) No stealing; (9) No lying; (10) No coveting.

With respect to how mankind should govern itself, the Ten Commandments should be our guiding light. In ancient Israel, they were the Commandments around which all other laws, judgments and statutes revolved. These Commandments are timeless. Each one is reconfirmed in the New Testament: (1) No polytheism: Acts 14:15; (2) No idolatry: I John 5:21; (3) No taking God's name in vain: Matthew 7:21-23; (4) Observe the seventh-day Sabbath: Mark 2:28; (5) Honor your parents: Ephesians 6:1; (6) No murder: I John 3:15; (7) No adultery: I Corinthians 6:9-10; (8) No stealing: Ephesians 4:28; (9) No lying: Colossians 3:9-10; (10) No coveting (no lust): Ephesians 5:3.

Moreover, the Ten Commandments highlight behavior that, if not stopped, would tear a society apart. The first four Commandments proscribe behavior that would necessarily lead Israel (and by extension, us) away from the true God. The next six Commandments proscribe behavior that would destroy civil society. Murder cheapens the value of human life; adultery tears apart marriages, the bedrock of society; stealing destroys the sanctity of private property; lying destroys trust between neighbors; and coveting implies that nothing is safe (your property, your spouse, your job, etc.) from the lustful eyes of others.

The Ten Commandments were the bedrock of Israel's legal system, which also included other laws, judgments and statutes. According to Merriam-Webster's Dictionary, law is "a binding custom or practice of a community: a rule of conduct or action prescribed or formally recognized as binding or enforced by a controlling authority; and the whole body of such customs, practices, or rules." Judgments are formal utterances "of an authoritative opinion, or an opinion so pronounced, or a formal decision given by a court." And statutes are laws "enacted by the legislative branch of a government." The sources of biblical law are found primarily in the books of Exodus (chapters 20 through 34), Leviticus, and Deuteronomy:

§ Exodus 20-34 and the book of Deuteronomy: mostly criminal and civil laws.

§ Leviticus: addresses the role of the Levites in Israelite society. They performed duties (e.g. taking care of the Temple, administering sin, burnt and other offerings, etc.) that demonstrated how the Israelites should worship God. This book also

includes the most complete description of God's holy days and festivals (chapter 23, more on that below), and His dietary laws.

God's holy days and festivals

God's law books (the first 5 books of the Bible) contain commandments about His prescribed feasts and holy days. "The LORD said to Moses, 'Speak to the Israelites and say to them: 'These are my appointed feasts, the appointed feasts of the LORD, which you are to proclaim as sacred assemblies'' (Leviticus 23:1-2). What follows in the 23rd chapter of Leviticus are descriptions of God's holy days and festivals, including the seventh-day Sabbath.

The purpose of the seven holy days and festivals (Passover, Feast of Unleavened Bread, Feast of Weeks or Firstfruits, Feast of the Memorial of Blowing of Trumpets, Day of Atonement, and Feast of Tabernacles and the Day immediately following the last day of such Feast—enumerated in Leviticus 23, Deuteronomy 16 and elsewhere) were educational. They reminded the Israelites that:

- § God had rescued them from slavery in Egypt (Passover & the Feast of Unleavened Bread);
- § God had blessed them (the Feast of Firstfruits, or Weeks);
- § God will protect them when they're in battle, and has provided them with special events throughout the year, announced by the blowing of shofars or trumpets (hence the Feast of the Memorial of the Blowing of Trumpets);
- § God will forgive them when they repent of their sins (Day of Atonement); and
- § God provided for them during their forty-year trek in the wilderness, and will continue to do so (Feast of Tabernacles and the Day immediately following this Feast, commonly referred to as the "Last Great Day").

By forcing the Israelites to do the same things (e.g. provide offerings, refrain from working, etc.) on the same days, and worship in the same manner with the same people, the holy days and festivals also reminded them that they shared a common heritage, destiny, and God. Thus the holy days and festivals (and the egalitarian laws) created a sense of collegiality, and of nationalism and patriotism, three necessary ingredients for building a nation-state. In essence, the holy days and festivals (and the laws of God) were the social glue that God used to bind the Israelites into a nation.

The holy days and festivals also provide a prophetic glimpse of the future.

The Holy Days and Festivals: their prophetic significance^[17]

People could not have understood the prophetic significance of the Holy Days and Festivals before Jesus' sacrifice in 31 AD. Only then did the apostles realize that, for example, the ancient

Passover foreshadowed Jesus' death: hence Paul's designation, "Christ our Passover." They also realized the prophetic significance of the other Holy Days and Festivals. In fact, they reveal God's sequential seven-step plan for man:

1. Passover: Acceptance of Jesus as our atoning sacrificial Lamb that was foreshadowed by the ancient Passover sacrifice. "For indeed Christ, our Passover, was sacrificed for us" (I Corinthians 5:7);
2. Feast of Unleavened Bread: In accepting the sacrifice of the unleavened "bread from heaven," that is, Jesus (John 6:41), and understanding that, biblically, leaven represents sin (I Corinthians 5:7), Paul thus urges us to "keep the feast (of Unleavened Bread), not with old leaven, nor with the leaven of malice and wickedness, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth" (I Corinthians 5:7-8).
3. Pentecost, anciently the Feast of Firstfruits: Those who have God's Spirit are called firstfruits (I Corinthians 15:23, James 1:18, Revelation 14:4), and Jesus was the First of the firstfruits. Pentecost is also the birthday of Christianity and God's Church, which is the collection of God's saints or firstfruits.
4. Feast of the Memorial of the Blowing of Trumpets: The plan of God unfolds in these Festivals. Passover and the Feast of Unleavened Bread point back to Christ, as does Pentecost in pointing us back to the birthday of the Church. Sequentially, the Feast of the Memorial of Blowing of Trumpets looks forward to the return of Jesus and the first resurrection: "For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first" (I Thessalonians 4:16).
5. Day of Atonement: What happens after Jesus returns? The banishment of Satan, itself symbolized in an ancient Israelite ceremony conducted on the Day of Atonement (Leviticus 16). The ceremony foreshadowed Jesus' sacrifice in the first century and foretells Satan's banishment during the Millennium. Only at that time will man be "at one" with God.
6. Feast of Tabernacles: After Satan has been banished, Jesus will establish His Kingdom. We shall be kings and priests in that Kingdom (Revelation 5:10). Since this Feast follows the Day of Atonement, the Feast of Tabernacles foreshadows the establishment of God's Kingdom on earth.
7. The Last Great Day immediately follows the last day of the Feast of Tabernacles. This Day represents the second resurrection for everyone not resurrected one thousand years earlier, and the ensuing 100-year judgment period in which everyone will have an opportunity for salvation.

The Sabbath^[18]

The seventh-day Sabbath, from Friday sunset to Saturday sunset, enjoys a special distinction, as it is mentioned prominently throughout the entire Bible. For instance, the Sabbath is the only commandment with a promise (Ex. 20:8-11); Jesus specifically healed on the Sabbath to teach a lesson (Mark 3:1-6; Luke 10:13-17; Luke 14:1-6); God calls the Sabbath a delight (Isaiah 58:13-14); the Sabbath is a sign between God and His people (Exodus 31:12-17); and the Sabbath symbolizes the future Kingdom of God (Hebrews 4:1-9).

A portrait of the first-century Church

As demonstrated above, the first-century Church believed in Jesus as their Savior. Moreover, they obeyed God's law, as defined in the Old Testament. They also observed God's Sabbath, Holy Days and Feasts, both in the educational and prophetic sense. Because they kept God's laws and observed His Feasts, they likely observed other Old Testament commandments, such as God's dietary laws (the 11th chapter of Leviticus).

There are other attributes. Nowadays, religion is a big business. Consider the many multi-million dollar best-sellers with religious themes. However, the first-century Church did not sell God's truth (Matthew 10:8). And they focused on the entire Bible, including prophecy, which is a large part of the Bible.

In short, the portrait of the first-century church includes the following attributes:

1. Its small size;
2. Its extent or location;
3. Its faith in Jesus;
4. Its adherence to God's laws, as defined in the Old Testament.
5. Its special, and nowadays unorthodox, adherence to the seventh-day Sabbath;
6. Its special, and nowadays unorthodox, adherence to God's Holy Days and Feasts;
7. Its proscription against selling God's truth;
8. Its insistence on keeping God's dietary laws;
9. Its focus on the entire Bible, not just the New Testament;
10. Its emphasis on prophecy, as it looked forward to the glorious return of Christ.

Imitation is the sincerest form of flattery

As amply demonstrated in this article, the first-century Church wasn't perfect. Even Paul admitted to sin (the 7th chapter of Romans). Nonetheless, this same flawed first-century assemblage of believers was called "church of the firstborn who are registered in heaven" (Hebrews 12:23). Therefore, despite their flaws, they must've done something right to enjoy that distinction. Obviously, they were among the "few," not the "many."

This article described at length the attributes of the first-century Christians. The list of first-century Christian attributes described herein is not exhaustive. These were fully-formed men and women who can't be reduced to a few descriptions here and there. Nonetheless, the attributes described above represent, in total, a good portrait of the first-century "church of the firstborn who are registered in heaven." It's our job to emulate these first-century Christians, to find a Church that embodies their attributes, and thus to become one of the "few," not the "many."

[1] Friedman, Lawrence. Law in America: A Short History, pg 17

[1] Gibbon, Edward. Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire, vol. 1, pg 451

[2] U.S. News & World Report, "Mysteries of Faith: Exploring the Bible with New Insights and Discoveries", pg 20

[3] Gibbon, vol. 1, pg 453

[4] Ibid, vol. 1, pg. 453

[5] Ibid, vol. 1, pg 460

[6] MSN Encarta Encyclopedia, article on "Christmas", web edition

[7] Columbia Encyclopedia, article on "Hellenism"

[8] MSN Encarta Encyclopedia, article on Plato

[9] Catholic Encyclopedia, article on Plato

[10] Shaff, Philip. History of the Christian Church, vol. 2, pg 114

[11] Ibid, pg 114

[12] Stark, Rodney. The Rise of Christianity, pgs 7, 9

[13] Leonard Maltin's Movie and Video Guide 1993, pg 66

[14] Lost but found—at least some of them; see our publication, The Divine Destiny of America, by this same author

[15] Refer to the Divine Destiny of America.

[16] Ironically, the kingdom of heaven will be on earth after Jesus returns. See our publication, Destination Heaven or Destination Earth?

[17] For more on the significance of these holy days and feasts, see our publications: Passover or Easter—Which is Biblical?; Pentecost & the Meaning of Life; The Feast of Trumpets and the Return of Jesus; The Day of Atonement & Satan's Fate; The Feast of Tabernacles, Christmas and the Kingdom of God.

[18] For a greater discussion of the Sabbath, see our publication, Why Have Christians Abandoned the Sabbath?

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