

**THE BIBLICAL CONCEPT OF *REVIVAL IN THE DESERT*
AND SOME IMPLICATIONS FOR TODAY'S CHURCH REGARDING
THE RESTORATION OF MAN'S COVENANTAL RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD**

by

BRADLEY ARON COOPER

submitted in accordance with the requirements
for the degree

MASTER OF THEOLOGY

In the subject

PRACTICAL THEOLOGY

at the

SOUTH AFRICA THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

SUPERVISOR: DOCTOR NOEL BEAUMONT WOODBRIDGE

June 2005

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to express my sincere appreciation to the following persons:

In the first place, I would like to thank my promoter, Dr. Noel Woodbridge, under whose capable direction this study was undertaken and completed. His valuable advice and sympathetic guidance were a constant source of encouragement and inspiration, and led to many pounds of flesh being added to some of the initially dry bones of this topic.

Many thanks also to my wife, Ruth, whose sacrifices made this entire project possible, and whose love and support made the task so much easier.

I would also like to thank the many friends who have provided personal feedback on some of the ideas and concepts that are contained in this study. Most notably among them are Bryan Slagle, Greg Morris, Larry Nichols, Charles Slagle, and Dr. William Atkinson, who all reviewed earlier, unpolished writings on this subject matter.

Above all, I thank my Heavenly Father for His inspiration and direction throughout this undertaking, for the revelation of Him as the God of *Hesed*, and for the love He has given me for His Word, and for His people.

BRADLEY ARON COOPER

Fort Worth, Texas

2005

SUMMARY

This study is an attempt to introduce the Biblical concept of *Revival in the Desert* and through it to provide guidelines for today's Church with regard to recognising and participating in the next move of God.

A historical survey demonstrated the development of religious traditions within the Church. Special attention was given to how these religious ideas came to supplant the priority of the individual's relationship with Christ, ultimately replacing it. This historical perspective revealed the foundation for the religious nature of today's Christian culture, and led to the conclusion that the modern Church is not walking in covenantal fellowship with God.

A Biblical survey was then undertaken to show that God has repeatedly rescued His people from religious bondage, as it is antithetical to a covenantal relationship. This study analysed the lives of selected Biblical figures, and the history of Israel regarding God's covenantal relationship with His people, to demonstrate that there exists a pattern, in terms of which God responds to the religious activity in His people. That pattern is introduced in this study as the *Revival in the Desert* concept, as God repeatedly draws His people into the wilderness, and away from religious culture and institutions, so that He can restore them to a proper sense of covenantal fellowship. This revival is also accomplished through God's self-revelation of Himself as the God of *Hesed*, or covenantal faithfulness. By revealing that He alone is responsible for covenant maintenance, God removes the necessity of any religious activity on the part of His people.

The study then combined its analysis of the present religious nature of today's Church with the *Revival in the Desert* concept to conclude that God will soon be acting again to liberate His people from religion. Further historical and Biblical research was undertaken in order to provide insight into how this next move of God will appear. Suggestions were then made to both the today's Church as a whole, and to individuals, so that they might be better prepared to participate in this coming revival.

The study concluded with a summary of the research findings and its contribution towards the field of Practical Theology.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER 1 – INTRODUCTION

1.1	Statement of the Problem: Religion vs. Relationship	1
1.1.1	Background to the problem	1
1.1.2	The problem observed	2
1.1.3	Summary of the problem	2
1.2	Aims of the Study	3
1.3	Definition of relevant concepts	4
1.3.1	Covenantal faithfulness	4
1.3.2	The Church	4
1.3.3	Religion	5
1.3.4	Revival	5
1.3.5	Desert	6
1.3.6	Revival in the desert	6
1.3.7	Socialisation and Re-socialisation	7
1.3.8	De-churched	7
1.3.9	Secularisation	8
1.4	Methodology	8
1.5	Literature review	9

CHAPTER 2 – THE PRESENT RELIGIOUS NATURE OF TODAY'S CHURCH AND ITS HISTORICAL ORIGINS

2.1	Introduction – The Eclipse	10
2.2	Historical Survey of the Religious Development of the Church	11
2.2.1	Israel and the Early Church	11
2.2.2	Boundary markers in the Early Church	12
2.2.2.1	The role of boundary markers	12
2.2.2.2	Baptism	12
2.2.2.3	Confession	14
2.2.2.4	Behaviour	17

2.2.3	Re-socialisation	19
2.2.4	Boundary shifting in the New Testament	22
2.3	The Present Religious Nature of Today's Church	24
2.3.1	<i>Episunagoge</i>	24
2.3.2	<i>Ekklesia</i>	28
2.3.3	Tradition	29
2.3.4	Replacing Christ with Church	31
2.3.5	Fear and tradition	34
2.4	Conclusion	37

CHAPTER 3 – A BIBLICAL SURVEY OF THE WAY GOD RESTORES THE COVENANTAL RELATIONSHIP WITH HIS PEOPLE: AN INTRODUCTION TO THE CONCEPT OF *REVIVAL IN THE DESERT*

3.1	Introduction	38
3.2	The Biblical Survey of God's Restorative Responses to Religion: The Revelation of Covenantal Faithfulness in the Desert	38
3.2.1	Eden – the foundation of the Covenant	38
3.2.1.1	The Creation covenant	41
3.2.1.2	Law and covenant	42
3.2.2	Abraham and the God of <i>Hesed</i>	45
3.2.2.1	A God of covenant	46
3.2.2.2	Abraham's test	49
3.2.3	Sinai – Theophany in the desert	52
3.2.3.1	Moses and the God of <i>Hesed</i>	53
3.2.3.2	Israel and the God of Covenant	55
3.2.3.3	Israel and Baal	57
3.2.3.4	Israel in the wilderness	61
3.2.4	Elijah – a prophet in the desert	63
3.2.4.1	Baal – the god of religion	66
3.2.4.2	The God of <i>Hesed</i>	67
3.2.5	John the Baptist – a voice calling " <i>in the wilderness prepare the way for the LORD</i> "	69

3.2.5.1	<i>Hesed</i> in the New Testament	70
3.2.5.2	Prepare in the desert	71
3.2.6	Jesus in the wilderness	75
3.2.6.1	The first temptation	76
3.2.6.2	The second temptation	77
3.2.6.3	The third temptation	78
3.2.6.4	Destiny	79
3.3	Summary	81

CHAPTER 4 – GUIDELINES FOR TODAY’S CHURCH IN THE RESTORATION OF MAN’S COVENANTAL RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD: RECOGNIZING AND PARTICIPATING IN GOD’S PLAN THROUGH *REVIVAL IN THE DESERT*- AN AMERICAN PERSPECTIVE

4.1	Introduction	82
4.2	A Prelude to Revival: Removing the Roadblocks to Revival	83
4.2.1	The <i>churched</i> and the <i>un-churched</i>	83
4.2.2	The <i>de-churched</i> : the process of <i>de-churching</i> in the wilderness	87
4.2.3	Secularisation and revival: an American perspective	88
4.2.4	God’s judgment of religion	92
4.2.5	The call to the wilderness	95
4.3	<i>Revival in the Desert</i> : Recognizing the Faithfulness of God	97
4.3.1	The imagery of <i>Revival in the Desert</i> : the Prophetic books	98
4.3.2	God’s work in revival: what to expect	100
4.3.3	The effects of a revival on the <i>un-churched</i> and the <i>de-churched</i>	104
4.3.4	The scope of revival: <i>the river of God</i>	106

4.4	Guidelines to Prepare for Revival: Recognizing and Participating in God' Plan	108
4.4.1	Expect opposition to the call to the desert	108
4.4.2	The call to rely on the faithfulness of God in the Covenantal relationship	111
4.4.3	The call of individuals to the desert	113
4.5	Conclusion	115
CHAPTER 5 – CONCLUSION		
5.1	Summary of Research Findings	117
5.2	The Contribution of the Findings to Practical Theology	120
BIBLIOGRAPHY		122

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Statement of the Problem: Religion vs. Relationship

1.1.1 Background to the problem

One of the important concepts in the Old Testament is that of God's covenant with mankind (Milton 1965: xi). The fact that the Almighty would choose to initiate a covenant with His creation is both astounding and difficult to fully comprehend. And yet the pages of the Old Testament repeatedly make it clear that it is His desire to be in a relationship with man.

“He has showed you, O man, what is good.
And what does the LORD require of you?
To act justly and to love mercy
And to walk humbly with your God” (Mic 6:8, NIV).

However, it was always intended that this relationship should be initiated *and* sustained by God Himself. Unfortunately, the Old Testament also details man's repeated failures at understanding those aspects of the covenant.

The Biblical history of the Hebrew people is littered with such accounts of covenantal failure. The lure of religion was most often the culprit, as God's Chosen People turned to false idols and religious ritual in attempts to garner favour with either Yahweh or one of the Canaanite gods. At a very basic level they failed to understand that He had always been their God, and that He had chosen them rather than the other way around. They did not see that His covenantal nature was committed to them regardless of their actions. As a result they developed a religion of performance whereby they hoped that they could ensure His favour, and their success.

1.1.2 The problem observed

This attitude of self-reliance is, however, the antithesis of what God desired from mankind. At the core of the Creator/created relationship is the need for the created to recognize his dependence upon the Creator. Without that in place the created supplants the supremacy of the Creator, and establishes a *quid pro quo* relationship by which he earns that which he requires from the Creator. In other words, the covenant of God's faithfulness to man becomes interpreted as a contract between two more equal parties, whereby man obligates God to certain actions by his own proper performance.

As a result of this interpretation, we also find in the Old Testament a detailed record of God dealing with and disciplining His children in an effort to restore them to a foundational understanding of the covenant. The most common scenario by which He challenged their ideas of religion in an effort to restore the primacy of relationship was to take His people through a type of desert experience.

Repeatedly one sees the wilderness as the place where God reveals Himself to both individuals and Israel as a whole in an attempt to dispel their religious notions, and re-establish the proper understanding of covenant.

That was in fact one of the primary messages of the prophets. Speaking first to their people and then to future generations yet to come. Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Hosea each spoke of God's commitment to restore the covenantal relationship with His people, whatever it took. Unfortunately, their cries were misunderstood by the religious institutions of their day, and quite possibly continue to be misunderstood by the institutional church today.

1.1.3 Summary of the problem

Like the Hebrew nation, the Christian church has evolved from a simple community of faith into a religious community that places an incredible amount of importance upon works. Though its official doctrine may stress that an individual is saved by faith, the Christian culture has over its history developed into a system of religious and ethical observances that would rival that of ancient Israel. With its development of this culture the church has subsequently established a religion of

traditions that has for all practical purposes replaced the covenantal relationship that God had originally intended.

This failure on the part of the Institutional Church to lead Christians into a proper understanding of the covenant has clearly advanced man's growing reliance upon religion rather than relationship. And so the need arises, as it did so often in the Old Testament, for God's people to be liberated from their religious notions so that they might return to a proper relationship with Him. And if the Old Testament is a reliable guide as to how that restoration might be accomplished then it must be presupposed that God would again take His children through a desert experience in order to bring about that much needed restoration.

Unfortunately, as was demonstrated in the Old Testament, and in the more recent evidence of 18th and 19th century revivals in America, that process of restoration, has not always been recognized by the religious institutions themselves. And so even today as God works to restore the covenantal relationship with Him, it is quite possible that the Institutional Church is again in danger of misinterpreting the signs of this great work, and missing the move of God that may already be in motion.

There is, therefore, an urgent need for today's Church to learn to recognize the true nature of revival and its role in removing the false compromise of religion. Without such recognition the Church can neither walk in a covenantal relationship with God nor lead others into its fullness.

1.2 Aims of the Study

The first aim is an attempt to examine the lack of covenantal relationship in today's Church from a historical perspective. In so doing, this study will trace the historical roots of the religious development of the church, and set this developed sense of religion against the Biblical call to a covenantal relationship (Chapter 2).

The second aim is an attempt to present a Biblical perspective of how God has previously brought about a restoration of the covenantal relationship with His people. This examination will include a review of the prophetic texts to see how

God has declared that He would restore the covenantal relationship with His people in the future (Chapter 3).

The third aim is an attempt to provide practical guidelines for today's Church in the restoration of man's covenantal relationship with God. These guidelines will include a critique of certain institutional mindsets that might otherwise inhibit the Church's participation in this restoration process (Chapter 4).

1.3 Definition of relevant concepts

1.3.1 Covenantal faithfulness

One of the foundational concepts of this study is that of God's covenantal faithfulness, an idea, which is encapsulated by the Hebrew word *hesed*.

Unfortunately, *hesed* has been translated variously as love, kindness, unfailing love, great love, mercy, loving, kindnesses, unfailing kindness, acts of devotion, devotion, favour approval, devout, faithful, faithfully, glory, good favour, grace, kind, kindly loving-kindness, loyal, merciful and well (Kohlenberger and Swanson 1998: 2876). While each of these renders an aspect of the word, the original meaning denoted *covenantal faithfulness* (Milton 1965: 17). Likewise, *eleos* was chosen to represent *hesed* in the Greek translation of the Old Testament, the Septuagint. Thus when we see this word in the New Testament we must look beyond the common translation of *mercy*, and see that *eleos* possesses covenantal implications as well.

1.3.2 The Church

Baker's Evangelical Dictionary of Biblical Theology defines the Church as, "*The People of God*. Essentially, the concept of the people of God can be summed up in the covenantal phrase: 'I will be their God and they will be my people'... Thus, the people of God are those in both the Old and New Testament eras who responded to God by faith" (2005:¶5). This continuity between the testaments is displayed by the early church's use of *ekklesia* as a term of self-identification. "In

the Septuagint *ekklesia* was used of the ‘assembly’ or ‘congregation’ of the Israelites...and especially of those ‘within the covenant’ (Cross and Livingstone 1974: 287). It was a way for the early church as a community of faith to identify itself with the early Hebrew assembly of the Old Testament that had also been a delivered community of faith. “The claim of the primitive Church to be an organic society rests on the belief that it was the inheritor of the promises made to Israel” (Cross and Livingstone 1974:287). The early Church was also identified by Jesus as “the gathered” (*episunagoge*), a name which points to the identity of the church as those whom *He* is gathering together, not simply those who gather together.

1.3.3 Religion

The Concise Dictionary of Theology initially defines religion as, “the basic attitude human beings should take toward God, their creator and redeemer.” However, the same entry goes on to describe Karl Barth’s position of opposing “faith (as founded in the word of God and utterly dependent on divine grace) to religion, which he dismissed as the worthless product of merely human aspirations” (O’Collins and Farrugia 2000:224).

Following Capon’s line that “the essence of any religion is its promise that, if it is followed diligently, God will smile on its practitioners” (1996: 4), this paper will assert that religion is a major obstacle that must be removed for a successful understanding of the covenantal nature of the relationship between God and man.

1.3.4 Revival

Though the term *revivalism* refers to “systematic attempts to rouse new life among lax or nominal believers by enthusiastic preaching and spontaneous praying aimed at evoking a mass religious response” (O’Collins and Farrugia 2000:228), true revival “is a Divine thing. It is a putting forth of Divine strength. It is God visiting the people...the renewing of spiritual life is God’s work” (Baker 1988:11).

Finney (1984:11) defines revival as a “renewed conviction of sin and repentance, followed by an intense desire to live in obedience to God”.

While Baker (1988:11) focuses on the initial renewing or restoration of an individual or group, and Finney (1984:11) highlights the resulting change of relationship between the revived subject and God, both are merely showing different aspects of the same revival process. First, God renews the subject spiritually; then the subject enters into a restored relationship with the Creator. While the subject of this revival process may be an individual or a group, the term revival usually points to a large group undergoing this process.

1.3.5 Desert

Vine's Expository Dictionary defines desert as "primarily a solitude, an uninhabited place, in contrast to a town or village...wilderness (Vine, Unger and White 1985:161). Yet the theological importance of the Biblical setting of the desert is not fully expressed in this physical description. Though the Concise Dictionary of Theology adds that the desert is "waterless, barren land" it goes on to say that "by depriving human beings of their normal supports for living, deserts confront them more immediately with the forces of good and evil (O'Collins and Farrugia 2000:62)

Commenting more on the spiritual significance of the desert, Leech claims that "The God of the Old Testament is the God of the wilderness...it was in these (semi-desert) regions that the early Jewish experience of God occurred" and "their desert experience is of the most fundamental importance in understanding their knowledge of God" (1985:27).

1.3.6 Revival in the desert

The key concept of this study is Revival in the Desert. This term is used to describe the process by which God has in the past led His people into the wilderness in order to remove their religious ideas and restore them to Himself. This study will also apply the Revival in the Desert concept to the present day in an effort to demonstrate that even now God continues to lead His people through seasons in the wilderness as part of a process whereby He draws them back into covenantal relationship. It is this study's assertion that today's Church is again in need of revival, and that as such it should expect to see individuals and groups led

away from religious ideas and institutions as they are led back into a restored relationship with God.

1.3.7 Socialisation and Re-socialisation

The Merriam-Webster Medical Dictionary defines socialisation as “the process by which a human being beginning at infancy acquires the habits, beliefs, and accumulated knowledge of society through education and training for adult status” (2002:¶4). The online Hyperdictionary defines it as “the process by which a person acquires the technical skills of his or her society, the knowledge of the kinds of behaviour that are understood and acceptable in that society, and the attitudes and values that make conformity with social rules personally meaningful, even gratifying” (2005:¶5).

Re-socialisation refers to a person going through this process of enculturation a second time as they enter into and adapt themselves to a new community or society. In this study socialisation and re-socialisation describe the processes by which one becomes a member of the Christian community through exposure and adherence to moral, ethical, and religious standards, either as a child raised in this culture or as a convert who enters into it later in life.

1.3.8 De-churched

Hovestol (1997:43) refers to the de-churched as:

“once active church members...they have now, however, become burned out, bummed out, and, in some cases, missing from the church...(some) have thus abandoned the church. Others are disgusted with religion. Some still long for a more meaningful religious experience; others simply do not care anymore”.

De-churched then refers to those who are undergoing a reversal of the Christian socialization process. In other words they no longer adhere to all of the Christian community’s religious standards.

1.3.9 Secularisation

Ravi Zacharias quotes from Os Guinness in describing another key term: secularisation. “Secularization can be summed up as ‘the process by which religious ideas, institutions, and interpretations have lost their social significance’” (1997: 24). Zacharias also quotes Peter Berger’s definition of secularisation as “the process by which sectors of society and culture are removed from the domination of religious institutions and symbols” (1997:23).

1.4 Methodology

This thesis will follow the Loyola Institute of Ministry theological research model which calls for three main areas of interpretation and presentation: the world as it is, the world as it should be, and action planning.

Chapter two will describe the present position of the church relating to Institutional Religion (“the world as it is”) and present a historical survey of the development of religion in the early church. This will serve to reveal the roots of religious thinking in the church and to demonstrate the current Christian culture that has sprung from those early seeds.

Chapter three of this study will move on to present “the world as it should be”. This will include a Biblical review of God’s design for the covenantal relationship with His people, as well as His past efforts at covenantal restoration. This will include the presentation of evidence of how God has dealt with the religious mindset of both individuals and the entire nation of Israel during Bible times.

Chapter four will attempt to extrapolate how God may be working in this day to restore covenantal relationships, based on His previous actions, and our present religious situation. It will also suggest a plan of action as to how the church might respond to *His* present covenantal actions.

1.5 Literature review

The initial research for this project focused on three main concepts: covenant, revival, and religious culture. The following books formed the centre of that research, and will consequently be used extensively in this study, thereby setting the tone of this dissertation:

God at Sinai: Covenant & Theophany in the Bible and Ancient Near East by J. Niehaus – This work deals with the scriptural revelation of God's covenant with man. Its main contribution to this work is its conclusions as to the unconditional nature of that covenant.

God's Covenant of Blessing by J. Milton – This work highlighted the theological significance of the word *hesed*, and how it was foundational to our understanding of God and His relationship with us.

The Nature of Revival by C. G. Weakley, Jr. (ed) – This work demonstrated some of the difficulty in reconciling religion and revival, as John Wesley points out the failures of religion to bring men closer to God.

Jonathan Edwards on Revival by J. Edwards – Edwards gives a first hand account of what revival actually looks like. This insight serves as a guide as to how future or current revivals may appear.

The Astonished Heart: Reclaiming the Good News from the Lost-and-Found of Church History by R.F. Capon – In this work Capon details the spread of religious thought throughout church history. He also, as the title suggests, attempts to reclaim the truth of the gospel message from the compromised message of religion.

Extreme Righteousness: Seeing Ourselves in the Pharisees by T. Hovestol – This work demonstrates the religious tendencies within the church today by comparing current religious thought and actions with those of the Pharisees of Jesus day.

CHAPTER 2

THE PRESENT RELIGIOUS NATURE OF TODAY'S CHURCH AND ITS HISTORICAL ORIGINS

2.1 Introduction – The Eclipse

In the opening chapter of *True God: an exploration in spiritual theology*, author Kenneth Leech (1985:5), quotes Ronald Smith's unflattering appraisal of modern Christian experience:

“The vast body of Christian people are suffering from an eclipse: they do not see the sun, they walk in shadows, and have almost forgotten what it is like to live in the full splendour of light. To say that they are suffering from an eclipse means that between God and them something has been interposed. It is really God who is in eclipse.”

Though Leech does not actually articulate what it is that has eclipsed man's experience of God, as his *Exploration* develops he does make clear that conventional Christianity “did not apparently offer any real experience” to those seeking a knowledge of God (1985:20).

It is the assertion of this study that these two observations actually point to the same unavoidable conclusion: that instead of leading individuals into a dynamic relationship with God, the practices of today's Church have served as a poor substitute for such. In so doing, the Church has itself become that which obscures the Christian's view of Him, evolving over time into an instrument of eclipse rather than the instrument of illumination that it was called to be.

This chapter will seek to explore the origins and continued development of the modern Christian culture, and how it is at odds with the covenantal relationship that God's people are called to. The following main aspects will be discussed:

- Religious development in the Early Church
- The religious nature of Today's Church

2.2 Historical Survey of the Religious Development of the Church

2.2.1 Israel and the Early Church

When God delivered the nation of Israel from the Egyptians, they instantly had a sense of community. But “they were not a ‘religious group’ ... rather they were a community knit together by the retelling of the story of their deliverance by God” (Capon 1996:18). Their national existence and religious identity had been formed by their common experience of God and His covenantal act of deliverance, and not by any shared set of beliefs or practices. And yet while their initial common bond was one of deliverance, their community would later grow into a nation where the institution of religion was the prevailing influence on individual, community, and national life.

Though their identity as “God’s Chosen” would continue to be based upon that initial act of deliverance from Egypt, their religious focus shifted from celebrating His covenant acts, to maintaining their place within the Covenant. While their beliefs still held on to the idea of divine election, “inherent in them is the requirement of ‘orthopraxy’ (‘correct practice’)” (Sanders 1993:35). In other words, though God had brought them into a covenantal relationship, the Israelites felt that it was their responsibility to remain in it.

In much the same way, the early church had originally found its identity in the delivering acts of Jesus’ crucifixion and resurrection. “They were a community of proclamation, not an organizational entity” (Capon 1996:35). This was not a new movement to reform a religion; it was a group of individuals that were bound together by their salvation experience. Their numbers grew not as converts conformed to some new style of worship or ritual, but rather as other individuals heard and received the proclamation of Jesus as Saviour, and became bound to the larger group by their own experience of His grace in their lives.

Unfortunately, as Israel had done centuries earlier, the Early Church allowed the spiritual focus to quickly shift away from simply celebrating the common salvation experience, as their corporate identity began to take shape.

“by the end of the first century, the church...had come to see itself quite frankly as both a religion and an institution. To distinguish itself

from what it considered the false religions of the Greco-Roman Empire, it was naturally enough tempted to see itself as the true religion...That it was the “right” religion could never make up for the loss of catholicity incurred when it forgot it wasn’t a religion at all to begin with”(Capon 1996:4).

Perhaps the clearest evidence of this shift can be observed in the use and development of boundary markers in the Early Church.

2.2.2 Boundary markers in the Early Church

2.2.2.1 The role of boundary markers

From the earliest days of the Church, faith and baptism served as clear boundary markers that identified who was and who was not a member of the community. Of these two, faith was the more foundational boundary marker as “only those who believe in Christ belong to the community, and...all those who believe in Christ...belong” (Wright 1993:3). Though the spiritual nature of faith makes it an internal and therefore unseen virtue, the external expression of this faith through the confession “Jesus is Lord” became a clear distinction between Christian and non-Christian (Ritter 1991:92). In similar fashion, baptism served as an outward expression of this community membership. Yet the act of baptism remained secondary to faith, for “only believers—people who confessed Jesus as Messiah—came to baptism” (Patzia 2001:236). However, once Christianity viewed itself as a religion, purity became the new focus of the Church. With this shift in place, the question of *who is or is not a member of the Church* began to be mingled with *who should or should not be a member*.

2.2.2.2 Baptism

To demonstrate this change one needs only to examine the change in baptismal practices that the Early Church experienced. In Acts 2:41 we read about those in Peter’s audience on the day of Pentecost who after receiving his proclamation word “were baptized; and that day about three thousand souls were added to them” (NKJV). *This is the initial Christian pattern*. Peter proclaims the

truth that has made him a member of the Christian community, and he knows that those who receive his proclamation are, like him, immediately part of that Christian community. He, therefore, baptizes them into that community on the very same day.

“Baptism was the boundary marker. Baptism in the name of Christ marked them out as the people of God, God’s holy people, a united and interdependent community of the Spirit, and the object of his love” (McDonald 1998:159).

Likewise in Acts 10 we again find Peter preaching; only this time it is to a Gentile audience. He speaks of the ministry of Jesus, and of how His death and resurrection provide a remission of sins. And then, “while Peter was still speaking these words, the Holy Spirit fell upon all those who heard the word” (Acts 10:44, NKJV). Though this event is at first a surprise to a Jewish delegation that is not expecting God to pour Himself out upon these Gentiles in the same way that He had on Pentecost (Acts 10:45-46), Peter soon recognizes that they too are now part of the new community of faith and so he instructs that they be baptized as well (Acts 10:47-48).

“During the early stage of initiation, the only separation in time between faith and baptism was for logistical reasons. The concept of prebaptismal instruction was a later development in the church. For the early church at least, baptism belonged to the beginning of the Christian life, when one initially expressed faith in Christ, and not to the maturity of the believer” (Patzia 2001:237).

But as was already mentioned, it took less than a hundred years for this community of new believers to see itself as a new religion. And with that its process for baptism is also radically changed.

“From the beginning of the third century we have a document, the *Apostolic Tradition* attributed to Hippolytus, that depicts...the elaborate procedures that had evolved in Rome in the second century for the reception of converts” (Meeks 1993:32).

While the New Testament clearly relates the common practice of baptizing new believers immediately, this third century document reveals not only a screening process for new candidates, that excludes some from even beginning instruction,

but additionally details further screenings that are to be administered *over the next three years of instruction prior to one being baptized* (Meeks 1993:32,33).

Once the identity of the Early Church had changed from community of believers to religious organization, it is clear that the motives of the church changed as well. Previously baptism was a confirmation of a person's belonging to the community by faith. But now this community is one of religion, and as noted before, not just any religion, but the "right" one. Accordingly, now the baptismal process takes three years, for "in Christian initiation, what is to be kept pure is the *community*" (Meeks 1993:33).

2.2.2.3 Confession

The Christian's simple confession of faith ("Jesus is Lord"), also quickly evolved into an ever more complicated statement of delineation. Though it had originally been a personal statement of faith in God, "towards the end of the New Testament period...the confession came to serve a different purpose" (Ritter 1991:93).

On the one hand, it is easy to understand the development from confession to creed. As spiritual questions arose, answers had to be provided. Often these answers led to more complex questions, and consequently to more complicated answers. The problem arose when these complicated answers took the place of the simple confession as the boundary marker for the Christian community. This passage from Wiles (1991:206) provides an example of how this process could have evolved:

"The earliest Christians had been taught to say 'Jesus is Lord'...but who was this Jesus? Some saw him as a purely spiritual being, unencumbered by a real human body. That was judged unacceptable; anyone failing to acknowledge that 'Jesus Christ has come in the flesh' was not of God (1 John 4.2-3). But who is the one who 'has come in the flesh'? The early baptismal creeds...defined him as God's only Son. But again the question was asked: What is it to be God's only Son? The answer came back: It is one distinct from the Father, yet sharing in his full divinity without undermining the unity of God....But further questions were pressed: How was this fully divine Son united with the fleshly existence into which he came? And once again any suggested answer which called in question the reality

of the integration of the two or qualified the fullness of either or implied a mixing of their distinctive characteristics was judged to put a person outside the true Church.”

Over time, however, the emphasis shifted completely from stating one’s faith in God, to stating what one believed about God. Ritter demonstrates this change through the replacement of *homologeïn* with *pisteueïn* within the creedal context itself. Originally, *homologeïn* (*to confess*) along with its noun form *homologia* (confession), referred to a belief in Jesus that separated Christians from non-believers (Ritter 1991:93). But as the confession’s role as a boundary marker evolved beyond that simple line of demarcation between Christian and non-Christian, the actual grammar of the creeds adapted to reflect their new function, as what one *believed* came to be stressed more than Who one believed in.

“Thus in the end it was no longer *homologeïn* (*to confess*), together with its derivatives, which functioned as the key term in creedal contexts (as well as for introducing creeds!), but *pisteueïn* (*to believe*)” (Ritter 1991:93).

Another crucial factor in the development of creeds was the prevailing influence of the Greek philosophical schools. These schools impacted creedal development on two different levels. First, they provided a model of membership and fellowship for the early Christian communities to emulate. Each school was led by a philosopher, who would assert his own beliefs, and those who followed him would then take on those beliefs to be their own (Hatch 1957:119,120). Thus the school’s membership was marked by the beliefs of its leadership. This pattern of employing more detailed beliefs as boundary markers, helped to legitimize the same practice in the early Church.

“Agreement in opinion, which had been the basis of union in the Greek philosophical schools, and later in the Gnostic societies, now came to form a new element in the bond of union within and between the Churches” (Hatch 1957:340).

Yet while the early Church adopted the more complex creeds as boundary markers, they failed to follow the Greek’s lead entirely. In the Greek world, to be outside of a certain school of thought meant that one was simply in a different sect or *heresy*. Despite the current usage of this word in the Church, there was originally

no negative stigma attached to this concept (Bruce 1966:249,250). In other words, while beliefs formed the boundary marker for membership in the schools, each school considered membership of the other schools of thought to be legitimate.

Currently, a similar situation exists in the Church to the extent that a Baptist and a Lutheran may have different doctrinal beliefs, but each still views the other as a Christian.

However, in the early Church “differences in the articulation of belief were too readily treated as denials of the faith itself” (Wiles 1991: 206). The boundary being drawn by the ever more complicated creeds was not “*Which church do you belong to*” but rather “*Are you a Christian?*” As Ritter (1991:99) points out, the opening lines of the Athanasian Creed make it clear that if one does not believe the entire creed then one is definitely not saved:

“Whoever desires to be saved must above all hold the Catholic faith. Unless a man keeps it in its entirety inviolate, he will assuredly perish eternally.”

The creed then goes on to list the numerous beliefs that must be adhered to for salvation to occur and then, in case the reader has any doubts as to the necessity of believing the entire statement of faith, the creed ends with the following: “This is the catholic faith, which except a man believe faithfully he cannot be saved.” Clearly the boundary between Christian and non-Christian is no longer a saving faith in Christ, for even the “Christian” creed is stating that faith in Christ alone is not sufficient for salvation.

“The profession of belief in Christ which had been in the first instance subordinated to love and hope, and which had consisted in a simple recognition of him as the Son of God, became enucleated and elaborated into an explicit creed; and assent to that creed became the condition, or so to speak, the contract of membership” (Hatch 1957:341).

The second way in which the Greek philosophical schools prompted the development of creeds was through the direct challenge that their own ideas posed to the newly forming Christian beliefs. As the church responded to infiltrating ideas such as Gnosticism, they felt compelled to produce ever more detailed theological responses. This, however, “led to the excessive intellectualizing of Christian faith”

(Bruce 1966:250). This reactionary type of theological development was not entirely void of merit, for “the resultant legacy of a well thought out but over-defined concept of orthodoxy has given to the church an intellectual vitality and toughness” (Wiles 1991:207). However, coupled with the tendency to replace the simple confession of faith as the community boundary marker with the increasingly complex creeds, this led to a further undermining of the necessity of an ongoing relationship with Christ.

“Faith henceforth comes to denote intellectual orthodoxy rather than personal commitment to Christ. Intellectual orthodoxy is good, of course, if it be not blindly accepted from tradition but reached intelligently from first principles; but it is no substitute for love to Christ and life in Christ” (Bruce 1966:250,251).

What had originally been a simple confession of faith, a declaration of one’s personal acknowledgment of God, was now an elaborate enumeration of beliefs. As it evolved, this boundary marker continued to shift more in the direction of man’s responsibility than God’s. In the first instance of confession, man had only to confess that *he had been saved* by what God had done through the cross, while in the more developed creedal forms, man had to mentally assent to the established orthodoxy (correct beliefs) *in order to be saved*.

2.2.2.4 Behaviour

Though *baptism* and *confession* were the first boundary markers of the early Christian communities, *behaviour* was soon added as a criterion for both initial and continued membership in the Church. Because of what God had done for them on the cross, they were now to live a life worthy of that gift. This push for moral behaviour, however, cannot be seen as simply a natural consequence of New Testament admonitions, for “the first Christians, the Christians who began to invent Christian morality, did not have a New Testament” (Meeks 1993:3).

While it is recognized that Jewish Christians already had a pre-existing moral imperative dating back to Sinai, for the ever-expanding number of Gentile converts, it appears that Greek philosophy was a primary influence on ethical

conduct. In Hellenistic society, the life of the philosopher was marked not only by their beliefs, but also by their ethical behaviour.

“In Roman times, the principal schools of philosophy were more and more concerned about ethics, or perhaps we should say the moral formation of the soul” (Meeks 1986:41).

Their standard of conduct was so admirable that Augustine, when speaking of philosophers who become Christians insisted that:

“(they) are required to abandon not their customary way of life but only their false doctrines...It is the point of Augustine’s argument that the ethics prescribed by pagan philosophers coincide with those required for the practice of Christianity. In the same vein John Chrysostom admonishes his flock not to fall short of the moral standards of pagan philosophers...The exhortation to live up to the ethics of pagan philosophers had evidently become a commonplace of Christian homiletics” (Whitaker 1993:24).

In other words, the boundary marker that was being established for the early Church was not even distinctively Christian in nature. Rather, it was a reflection of a social climate that was already moving toward moral improvement.

“The age in which Christianity grew was in reality an age of moral reformation. There was the growth of a higher religious morality, which believed that God was pleased by moral action rather than sacrifice...This is especially seen in the large multiplication of religious guilds, in which purity of life was a condition of membership...it affected the development of Christianity in that the members of the religious guilds who did so accept Christian teaching brought over with them into the Christian communities many of the practices of their guilds and of the conceptions which lay beneath them” (Hatch 1957:141).

And so almost immediately the leaders of the Church began to communicate moral standards to those who were part of the community of faith so that they too might have this “purity of life”. These paraenetic sermons and letters were used to communicate ethical or moral exhortations to the early Church.

“Whereas creeds, confessions and hymns largely served to clarify certain doctrines (What do we believe?), the paraenetic material was directed primarily toward the ethical life (How do we live?)” (Patzia 2001:202).

Unfortunately, this purity standard soon evolved from “the way members should live” to “a condition of membership” in the Church. It was a natural progression, not only in the sense that it followed the example set by the religious guilds, but also in that as the Church came to see itself as more of an organization, its decisions became more influenced by a sense of self-preservation.

“The basis of the community was not only a common belief, but also a common practice. It was the task of the community as an organization to keep itself pure” (Hatch 1957:162).

The inevitable problem that this approach leads to is quite similar to that posed by setting up elaborate creeds as boundary markers. Once the relationship with Christ is replaced as the boundary marker for the community, it then becomes easy to mistake that boundary marker as a legitimate substitute for Christ. Just as complex beliefs came to be understood as a condition for salvation, proper behaviour soon followed as a requirement for salvation.

“Side by side with the definition of Christian ethics there is also the development of the underlying theology that supported the need for a moral life that explains the rewards and benefits such a life offers...Such actions not only were a sign of loyalty but also *would bring eternal salvation...They came to be seen as the way one could eradicate the stain of minor sins*” (Womer 1987:2, emphasis mine).

In the end, the same conclusion that Sanders made regarding the necessity of orthopraxy (correct practice) in the Jewish faith could be just as readily applied to the early Church. Though the idea of Divine Election was still of primary importance, the reality of Church practice and doctrine dictated that only those exhibiting correct ethical behaviour were to be admitted to, or able to maintain their place in the community.

2.2.3 Re-socialisation

As the importance of orthodoxy (correct belief) and orthopraxy (correct behaviour) grew, so did their effect on the original boundary marker of *baptism*. As shown earlier, the practice of baptizing new Christians on the day of conversion was gradually replaced with a process of education (of orthodoxy) and examination

(for orthopraxy) to make sure that each prospective new member meets the standards of the community:

“In Christian initiation, what is to be kept pure is the community. Moreover, that purity is defined in moral as well as theological...terms. Moral scrutiny of candidates is for the Christians not merely a temporary measure to assure purity at the moment of entering the sanctuary...Rather, the initiation is understood by Christian writers as the anchor and beginning point for a process of moral re-education that is conducted by and within the community of converts” (Meeks 1993:33).

As the boundary markers of initial faith (in confession) and immediate baptism eventually came to be replaced by elaborate creeds and moral exhortations, the Church found itself compelled to protect the purity of the young community by subjecting all converts to a course of initiation that clarified what beliefs and actions were acceptable. Through this practice, the new convert is denied the reality of their membership in the body of Christ, until they go through a process of re-socialization, whereby their beliefs become redefined by the communally held beliefs of the Church.

“Socialization, or enculturation...is the process by which individuals are taught to function as members of a given society...resocialization (is) the socialization of adults who in the course of their lifetime must enter new systems—either subsystems of their own society or new systems altogether” (Loewen 1968:146,149).

Only after one has adopted the beliefs, practices, and lifestyle of the community is one admitted into the community through baptism. The focus has shifted from the ongoing work of Christ as He conforms the new believer into His own image, to the individual being conformed to the community standards.

Unfortunately, as Loewen (1968:148) points out:

“Uncontested (where the person has no options) standards, even when internalized, usually represent mere outward conformity. In such cases the value learned is not the behaviour pattern itself, but conformity”.

In other words, these new converts are not learning new standards as a proper response to God’s salvation acts; rather they are merely learning to meet the expectations of the community. Again, the shift has been made from the Christian

life being demanded *because of* what God has done, to adhering to the community's orthodoxy and orthopraxy *in order to* enter the community. As seen before, this shift ultimately serves to supplant the work of Christ with the work of the individual, as the convert learns through re-socialization what they must do *in order to* be rewarded by God. "What ultimately counts is that *the socializee does not obtain reward apart from the successful performance* of his new status expectations" (Loewen 1968:150, emphasis mine).

In other words, by means of the very process of re-socialization into the Christian community, the new convert is subjected to a mechanism that replaces the original internal boundary marker of faith, with the external expectations of the community standards. Membership in the community is, therefore, permitted only when the community standards are met, and is only allowed for as long as those standards continue to be met. As a logical consequence, the role of faith in eternal salvation is also replaced by the standards of the Christian community. For if one is taught that they cannot be rewarded except through successful performance, then the convert's initial assurance of faith becomes diluted by the necessity of adhering to the orthodoxy and orthopraxy of the Christian community.

"Legal precepts and institutions take the place that should be occupied only by Christ. In this way, Christ is replaced. What need is there for a personal relationship with Christ if the acceptance of doctrinal statements, the adherence to a moral code, or the subjection to ecclesiastical authority is sufficient?" (Schwarz 1999:26).

Once these community standards came to replace the salvation standards, the nature of the Church as a "community of the delivered" became utterly compromised, and its transition into an organized religion was complete. The Christian community, which had originally been a community of proclamation, had now come to be a society of enculturation. The goal of the community was no longer to proclaim what Jesus had done to save men; rather it was to inform men what they needed to do *in order to* be saved, and how to maintain that salvation.

"We took a liberated community of believers living in the freedom of unqualified grace and converted it into a navel-watching institution dedicated, inevitably, to the preservation of its own structure."(Capon 1996:4).

The boundary markers that had originally marked the simplicity of the salvation experience had now evolved into concepts that denied that grace oriented reality. Through the evolution of creeds and behaviour as boundary markers, the emphasis on correctness proved to be irresistible. Orthodoxy and orthopraxy had become the key components of the Christian life, replacing grace and faith altogether. No longer was grace seen as the foundation of the Christian life, as moral perfection and correct beliefs came to be seen as the keys to salvation.

2.2.4 Boundary shifting in the New Testament

Though the over-development of boundary markers came about through an understandable process of evolution, it is still difficult to imagine the progress of such ideas when one takes note of the many New Testament passages that deal with the refutation of the existing religious boundary markers of its day. Whether through the direct exhortation of the Pauline letters, or through the narratives of the Gospels and Acts, the religious nature of the Jewish faith is constantly challenged, as are other cultural ideas that might limit participation in the Early Church.

One key example of this challenge is seen in Matthew 15 when the Scribes and Pharisees approached Jesus, and asked Him why His disciples did not follow the established practice of ceremonially washing their hands prior to eating. Jesus' response was to point out that it was not what goes into a man that defiles him, but what proceeds out of him. In other words, Jesus was rejecting the idea that outward conformity is what kept a man pure, and replacing it with the concept that "the heart is the source of a man's true character, and therefore of his purity or impurity" (France 1985:244,245). Through this teaching, Jesus effectively shifted the boundary marker from external actions to the unseen nature of the inner man.

Other examples of boundary shifting come from salvation episodes that were recorded in Acts. One instance is seen in Acts 8, as an angel leads Phillip into an encounter with an Ethiopian eunuch, which results in the eunuch's conversion and subsequent baptism by Phillip. The amazing boundary shift that takes place here can only be understood in light of Deuteronomy 23:1 which states

that “No one who had been emasculated by crushing or cutting may enter the assembly of the LORD” (NIV). Yet when the eunuch asks Phillip if he can be baptized, Phillip answers: “If you believe with all your heart, you may” (Acts 8:37, NKJV). While the original purpose for this boundary may not be clearly understood, what is clear is that the Lord Himself has set in motion the abolition of it. Faith is now the sole criteria for admittance into the Kingdom.

Likewise, Peter’s baptism of Cornelius and his family (Acts 10:9-11:18) demonstrated another boundary shift, as Gentiles were also brought into the community without a period of re-socialisation into Judaism as was considered necessary at that time. Later, as Peter defends this boundary shift to the Church in Jerusalem, he points out how the baptism of the Holy Spirit necessitated immediate water baptism without the customary initiation into Judaism.

“Peter’s argument implicitly claimed that Gentiles were full members of the church, and therefore that circumcision and keeping of the law were unnecessary for salvation; it also contained the wider implication that the Jewish distinction between clean and unclean foods and people was obsolete” (Marshall 1994:198).

Again, however, it must be noted that God Himself had set in motion this boundary shift by pouring out His Spirit upon those who had not yet been conformed to a set of community beliefs or ethics.

In addition to these narratives, we find that Paul was quite explicit in his letters that legalism was not the key to salvation. As we noted earlier with Sanders quote regarding the Jewish faith, initial membership in the community was seen as a result of God’s divine election, but continued membership was understood to be the result of maintaining one’s place through religious observances. In the third chapter of Galatians, Paul directly challenges this thought as it began to corrupt the grace oriented gospel message that he had originally delivered to the Church.

“This only I want to learn from you: Did you receive the Spirit by the works of the law, or by the hearing of faith? Are you so foolish? Having begun in the Spirit, are you now being made perfect by the flesh?” (Gal 3:2, 3, NKJV).

While Paul may have succeeded in holding the Jewish influence at bay, history shows that ultimately legalism crept into the Church via orthodoxy and

orthopraxy. And while Peter argued against the need for any elaborate initiation into Judaism, the Church soon created its own demanding process of re-socialization. Phillip's powerful message that anyone can be saved if they only believe, was soon replaced by the Church's demand that only those with the right beliefs and right actions can be saved, though this focus on externals was clearly at odds with the teachings of Jesus. In the end, all of the boundary-shifting ideas presented in the New Testament were simply re-shifted to accommodate the developing religious nature of the Early Church.

2.3 The Present Religious Nature of Today's Church

2.3.1 Episcopate

One prime example of how a New Testament attempt to boundary shift was ultimately re-shifted by the religious nature of the church can be found in the modern interpretation of a portion of the tenth chapter of Hebrews.

"And let us consider one another in order to stir up love and good works, not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as is the manner of some, but exhorting one another, and so much more as you see the Day approaching" (Heb 10:24,25, NKJV).

Upon examining this verse, many come to the conclusion that it is dealing with the topic of church attendance. Barclay (1976:119) translates with the phrase "let us not abandon our meeting together", while Murray (1996:397) goes so far as to say that this passage creates a demand upon the believer:

"The inward unity must be proved in active exercise, it must be seen in the assembling together. The assembling of His saints has its ground in a divine appointment ...all who have entered into the Holiest to meet their God must turn to the meeting of His people."

Yet this understanding of the passage is problematic when the context of the letter is more closely examined.

Like the earlier example from Galatians, the Letter to the Hebrews was written to encourage Jewish-Christians, who might have been tempted to revert back to a more religious mindset, to remain true to the revelation that their

salvation had already been fully accomplished by Christ's work on the cross. To that end the author builds a two-fold case against maintaining the ceremonial demands of the Mosaic Law. One aspect of this argument is detailed in chapter four, where the author maintains that God's will for His people is for them to enter His rest: something that can only happen when an individual ceases from their own works (Heb 4:10). The author then goes on to describe Christ's pre-eminence over the Mosaic system by demonstrating His supremacy over Abraham (as father of their nation), Moses (the receiver of the Law), and the Levitical priesthood (which presided over the ceremonial sacrifices).

The tenth chapter of Hebrews then begins by specifically demonstrating the supremacy of Christ's sacrifice over those prescribed in the Old Testament. Verses 9 and 10 of that chapter conclude that the sacrificial work of Jesus has once and for all quenched the need for endless sacrifices. The author then exhorts the reader to trust in that completed work and "hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for He who promised is faithful" (Heb 10:23, NKJV). So by the time one arrives at verses 24 and 25, *it is clear that the author's purpose was to abolish the demand for mandatory forms of worship, not establish certain new ones.*

Keep in mind that these early believers, "didn't think of themselves as a 'church' in the sense that the word later acquired ... They were a community of proclamation, not an organization entity" (Capon 1996:35). As such, the very foundation of community affiliation, or "membership", was in fact the individual proclamation of faith made by each member. It was this shared expression of hope that bound them together. So by encouraging them to stay true to their simple proclamation of faith, the author is not merely protecting them from a more complicated religious system, but is at the same time exhorting them to not abandon their connection with the rest of the community.

In fact, this theme continues to be reinforced, as these verses are followed by a warning as to the seriousness of rejecting the blood of Jesus, and insulting the Spirit of grace. Again, it seems clear that the author's focus in this chapter is to encourage his audience to stay true to their faith in His accomplished work, rather

than turning back to their own works. As such, he teaches about the power of Jesus' sacrifice, and the consequences of embracing it or rejecting it. The author concludes this chapter by explaining that these consequences are to be received when Christ returns. That return is promised on a "Day" that is mentioned specifically in verse 25, and more generally again in verses 37 and 38.

The author, in addressing a community that is bound by its common testimony, knows that one who forsakes this proclamation of faith is, by their own new confession, no longer a part of the community. At the same time, the author also seeks to convey the importance of relying upon faith versus the complicated demands of religious works. In other words, the author of Hebrews is attempting to shift not only the boundary of salvation to a "faith only" position, but also the boundary of community membership to mean only those who hold on to that simple proclamation of faith.

However, as seen in Murray's earlier quote, this attempt to shift the boundaries of membership away from performance, has been re-shifted by the church into a new behavioural demand for Christians. Instead of recognizing the author's intent to forsake religious demands, the Church teaches that this passage creates a new one. Yet this interpretation is not only out of place in the context of Hebrews, but it also fails to correctly translate the Greek grammar of the passage.

Episunagoge is the word that has been translated "assembling together" in the passage in question. Although English translations bestow it with verb-like activity, *episunagoge* is actually a noun. As such, the author is telling his readers to not forsake "something", which is far different than telling them to not forsake "doing something". *Therefore, this verse can in no way be dealing with the activity of church attendance, for it is not talking about activity.*

Had the author wanted to focus on actions here, he could easily have used *episunago*, which is the verb form of *episunagoge*. And yet its previous usage in the New Testament reveals why the author did not use it. This word is used by Jesus in Matthew 23:37, when He says, "How often I wanted to gather (*episunago*) your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not

willing!" (NKJV). This verse clearly shows that it is God's wish to "gather together" His people.

Later in Matthew 24:31, Jesus shows the fulfilment of this desire: "And He will send His angels with a great sound of a trumpet, and they will gather together (*episunago*) His elect from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other." This verse, like the one before it, places the activity of "gathering together" firmly in the hands of God, not man.

Interestingly, the only other usage of the noun *episunagoge* comes in 2 Thessalonians, which reads:

"Now, brethren, concerning the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our gathering together to Him, we ask you not to be soon shaken in mind or troubled, either by spirit or by word or by letter, as if from us, as though the day of Christ had come" (2Thess 2:1,2, NKJV).

As we have already seen in Matthew 24 and Hebrews 10, the work of "gathering together" is mentioned within the context of a passage that deals with the Day of the LORD.

Yet unlike Hebrews 10, few would argue that these verses are dealing with Sunday attendance. Rather, this passage bolsters the idea that the work of "gathering together" is a work that He is doing, and that will be fulfilled upon His return. In fact, Paul's reason for assuring his audience that the Day of Christ had not yet come was that some of the believers in Thessalonica feared that they had missed this "gathering together".

In fact, after looking at these other passages we can look back on Hebrews 10:24-25 and its context, and realize that the author is exhorting readers to not forsake God's work of "gathering together" a people for Himself, by returning to a system of religious works. In other words, Christians are not to trust in religious works and in so doing step out of the community of faith that He is assembling. To do so would insult the spirit of Grace that is gathering them for that Day, as would any interpretation that removes that gathering activity from the Lord's hands, and turns it into a religious duty.

2.3.2 *Ekklesia*

Another reason for rejecting Murray's interpretation is the use of the term *ekklesia* in the Early Church. As noted earlier, the earliest Church recognized that they were a people of proclamation. Their message was that He had delivered them and would soon deliver the entire creation from bondage (Rom 8). This common experience and corporate hope for the future was what held together this community of faith. If one were to fail to "hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering" (Heb 10:23, NKJV) they would by default, cease to be a participating member of the community. If they ceased to trust in Him, and began to trust in themselves, their proclamation would no longer be about what He had done, or would do, but would return again to what they themselves were doing.

Perhaps in an effort to reinforce that they were in fact a community of faith, built by His delivering hands, they took on the name *ekklesia*. Israel, the community of deliverance in the Old Testament, was referred to in its scriptures by the Hebrew words *qahal* or *edah*, which translate as "assembly" or "congregation", as they were the assembly that He had formed by delivering them from Egypt (Meeks 1993:45). About 250 years prior to the birth of Jesus, these Hebrew Scriptures were translated into Greek to form the Septuagint. This Greek translation of the Old Testament chose the word *ekklesia* to replace *qahal*, and *synagoge* to replace *edah*.

But by the time the Christian community was being formed the word *synagoge* had already become an established part of the Jewish religious system, and so they were left with *ekklesia* as a name that could tie them to that first community of delivered peoples (Capon 1996:37). So the early Christian community, seeing itself as a delivered community of faith, chose to call itself *ekklesia*, or *the assembly*.

Unfortunately, nearly 2000 years later, the word *assembly* is now seen as a religious demand, rather than the unique identity of a people gathered by Him. In so doing, Hebrews 10:25, which again is telling us to not forsake the *episunagoge* (or *the assembly*, or *the ekklesia*), is used to rebuke those who don't attend a Sunday morning worship service. Not only is this text used to rebuke those who

are perceived to be abandoning *the Church*, because they no longer attend a *church*, it is also used as a mandate to cut off fellowship with those people. In other words, a passage, which was designed to help prevent boundary markers from restricting church membership, has been re-shifted into just such a boundary.

Unfortunately, as with other boundary markers, there is the inevitable tendency to replace the salvation standard with the community standard. Once attendance is viewed as *a legitimate boundary*, it is a short journey to being viewed as *the boundary*. Attendance is no longer seen as a celebratory gathering *because of what He has done*, but is instead viewed as an obligation *in order to maintain one's standing in the body of Christ*. Consequently, those not attending are simply regarded as not part of the true Church, and so their condemnation is likewise legitimised. Once that is established, then cutting off fellowship with non-attendees becomes justified as well.

2.3.3 Tradition

Despite the strict emphasis that some have placed upon church attendance, it should be recognized that today's church services are nothing more than a collection of traditions.

“In the Christian church, almost everything we do is based on humanly devised traditions. The days, times, and places we meet for worship are all traditions. The meetings we hold and ministries we offer are largely based on tradition, not Scripture. The way we dress, the structure of our service, our style of music, and the instruments used are dictated largely by tradition” (Hovestol 1997:101).

Tradition, however, is not merely restricted to the forms in which the Church gathers and worships. Though the boundary markers of the Early Church have gone through various stages of refinement and reform, they still exist to this day in the form of creeds, doctrinal statements, and behavioural standards. “Yet often we fail to recognize our traditions as comfortable patterns, not God-ordained instructions. We elevate them to unshakable truths” (Hovestol 1997:101). As these “traditions” become cemented in the Christian culture, they perpetuate the

tendency to mistake the standards of the community for the salvation standard set by God.

“Specific characteristics or behaviors are defined which are deemed to be constitutive. Whether a person is a Christian depends on whether he or she fulfills these criteria. Anyone who does not fulfill them is outside the circle” (Schwarz 1999:40).

These community boundary markers are now reinforced through membership classes that have taken on the role of the re-socialising agent in the modern Church. Through these classes the new convert is taught the traditional beliefs and ethical boundaries of the local church that they are attending, as they are taught to conform to their new community’s standards. Christian socialization is also accomplished through one’s adherence to the established patterns of worship.

“Christian practices also communicate the meaning of Christian faith. Children learn for example, that being Christian means going to church for worship and knowing how to behave there—when to stand, sit, or kneel, and when to listen, pray, or sing” (Stone and Duke 1996:14).

Unfortunately, as these traditions are passed on, so is the misconception that they are representative of salvation standards.

“Traditions may give us a false sense of righteousness. They may deceive us into finding the wrong source of and solution for our sin and provide rationalizations for our depravity and alternatives to dependency” (Hovestol 1997:112).

As seen before with the development of creeds, once a “right” or “orthodox” belief has been established, a convert’s salvation is often seen as conditional upon their holding that right belief. If they do not accept the orthodox position, they are regarded as a heretic, and thus find themselves outside of the Church’s boundary line.

“It is characteristic for this way of thinking that the boundary line is drawn *first*, and *then* it is decided who is inside the circle and who is outside: ‘If you think and act in a certain way then you are a Christian...According to this model, being a Christian can be defined as a system of different qualities that every believer must display at all times (e.g., right doctrine plus right behaviour...)’ (Schwarz 1999:41).

And yet, the word heresy “does not necessarily convey the thought of error, but rather of division on the ground of doctrine” (Nee 1962:67). As seen earlier in the world of Greek philosophy, a heresy was merely a distinguishing belief that separated one sect of believers from another (Hatch 1957:340). In fact, when Paul lists “heresies” as one of the works of the flesh in Galatians 5:20, he is not speaking of a doctrine being either wrong or right, rather he is speaking as to how a person not being led by the spirit can allow his or her beliefs to separate and segregate the community of believers. In other words, it is not the belief that makes one a heretic, but rather the attitude that allows one to divide the community based on beliefs.

Once again, however, the exact opposite of Paul’s teaching has become a standard in the Church. Those who believe in certain theological positions will often exclude someone from fellowship if they do not hold to the same denominational or orthodox positions. They will claim that the non-conformant believes in a heresy, and, therefore, is not a part of the body. Yet in reality, it is the majority, who believe in the consensus doctrines that are allowing their doctrines to become the heresy, as they become the dividing line for fellowship.

The resulting problems are similar to those of the Early Church. Not only do the community standards come to replace the salvation standards, but also over time, the emphasis on conforming to those standards, replaces the call to conform to Christ. Through this process, one’s relational position within the community becomes a substitute for one’s standing before God. As a result, the convert’s re-socialisation ultimately de-emphasises the individual relationship with God, as greater prominence is given to the need for community acceptance. However, “living God’s truth requires a relationship with Him. When traditions become automatic, it is easy for the intimacy to be lost” (Hovestol 1997:107).

2.3.4 Replacing Christ with Church

This de-emphasising of one’s personal relationship with Christ has progressed so far, that now: “Membership in the Church is widely regarded primarily as a matter of participation in institutional forms and actions” (Niebuhr

1956:21). With an incorrect translation of *episunagoge* as its support, the boundary marker for “who is or is not a Christian” been redrawn with regards to “who does or does not attend church”. That boundary then finds further revision when linked to one’s proper understanding of traditional beliefs (orthodoxy), and their successful adherence to traditional practices (orthopraxy). The Christian then comes to be viewed as one who has a “successful” relationship with the Church, rather than one who has a personal relationship with the Lord. Ultimately, the Church becomes seen as a substitute for Christ.

“The church is so relied upon as source of truth that what the church teaches is believed and to be believed because it is the church’s teaching; it is trusted as the judge of right and wrong and as the guarantor of salvation from meaninglessness and death. *To have faith in God and to believe the church becomes one and the same thing.* To be turned toward God and to be converted to the church become almost identical; the way to God is through the church” (Niebuhr 1960:58, emphasis mine).

Once salvation is seen to come through the Church, it becomes even easier to accept rules and traditions as a means of maintaining that salvation, and the replacement of Christ is complete.

“Legal precepts and institutions take the place that should be occupied only by Christ. *In this way, Christ is replaced.* What need is there for a personal relationship with Christ if the acceptance of doctrinal statements, the adherence to a moral code, or the subjection to ecclesiastical authority is sufficient?” (Schwarz 1999:26, emphasis mine).

This replacement of Christ is not limited to denominational boundaries either. As different traditions have developed in varying faith communities, each one has found its own substitute for the Lord.

“The older traditions communicate their idealism via the sacraments and/or the liturgy. The evangelicals emphasise ‘truth’ or ‘creed’ as the key to the transcendent. The holiness movement go for purity as the way through to the perfect realm” (Thwaites 2002:94).

Unfortunately, these substitutions lead to a further de-emphasizing of one’s relationship with God, and consequently to further substitutions. Once the

relationship with Christ is replaced by the need to have a proper theology, the need to *know Christ* is overtaken by the need to *know about Him*. As a result, the role of the pastor is another aspect of the Church that has been elevated to an improper status.

“Access to the Spirit, Word and Law is now predominately via the preacher...this causes the preaching event to take on the role of primary mediator between the natural and spiritual realms. Thus, the preacher and his words of grace, comfort and wisdom in effect become sacramental” (Thwaites 2002:88).

Not only are his sermons deemed to bridge the gap between heaven and earth, but his prayers are also seen as more effective than that of the common Christian.

“There is a common assumption among God’s people that as a result of their calling, pastors have conferred on them the sacramental presence of Christ. The ordained are donned with a holy aura not attainable by ordinary, common believers...Unwittingly the pastor assumes a mediatorial role, representing God’s people before the Lord in a way that they could never do so for themselves” (Ogden 1990:76).

Whether sought after for healing, wisdom, or guidance, eventually the pastor becomes seen, as the key to receiving Christ, ultimately replacing the need for a personal connection with Him. “If your job is to perpetually appear to identify with the transcendent realm removed from life, then people will begin to use you as a sacrament to get through to that realm” (Thwaites 2002:89).

The repercussions of this elevation are not restricted to the spiritual development of the individual. As the role of the pastor has grown in importance, the practical training of the Body has also suffered greatly.

“How disabled the body of Christ has become because our primary purpose for church attendance has been to hear one man exercise his gifts, rather than to prepare all the people to develop their gifts for ministry, not only within the church but also to society” (Snyder 1977:125).

While the preaching of the Word must be recognized as a valuable tool in the education of the Christian, its role has been so elevated in the Church that little or no time is reserved for the practical development of the individual’s ministry gifts.

This lack of training has in turn served to reinforce the faulty perception of a spiritually exalted leadership, by creating a new boundary line between the trained, spiritual, Christian ministers (clergy) and the untrained, less spiritual, Christians (laity). Ogden (1990:73), points out that this division places a negative light upon the majority of the Church:

“‘Laity’ has become associated exclusively with the negative. It has a pejorative ring. It has come to mean either what you are not or what you cannot. It means you are not clergy...the clergy are the experts; the laymen are the ‘are not’.”

This traditional understanding of leadership has left the modern Church with only a small percentage of recognizable “ministers” rather than a membership that constitutes “a royal priesthood”, thus further cementing the dependence upon authority figures.

2.3.5 Fear and tradition

While it is clear that the development of community boundary markers has led the Christian community from being a charismatic organism to becoming a religious institution, it should also be made apparent that another underlying cause for religious development is fear.

“Whatever version of the institutionalistic misconception is involved—fundamentalism, sacramentalism, dogmatism, traditionalism, clericalism, and so forth—the basic urge for security can always be clearly seen” (Schwarz 1999:25).

Man has consistently failed to trust in God for his salvation, choosing instead to develop ways of maintaining and ensuring his eternal destiny. Orthodoxy was established so that men could be saved through “right doctrine”. Orthopraxy allowed adherents to stay on the right path to salvation. Man’s need for security demanded that a line be drawn, so that he could know where he stood in relation to God. Unfortunately, the line the Church chose to look to for guidance was drawn by man and not by God.

In the end, tradition and conformity to tradition have become the basis for the religious nature of the Church. Whether the traditions in question are of a theological or moral nature is of little consequence. In either instance, the belief or

behavioural standard comes to represent the boundary line of the Church, and by extension, the boundary line of salvation. The resulting importance of conforming to such traditional standards is easily understood, for if one's beliefs and actions determine one's place either inside or outside of the community, then it is only natural that personal performance would be stressed as a key to success.

However, as Schwarz (1999:42) points out: "the most important thing about being a Christian is not conformity to certain doctrinal and ethical standards, but the relationship to Christ." Once "right belief" becomes the salvation standard, then the ultimate truth that can be presented to the Church is only doctrinal in nature. Schwarz (1999:60) continues:

"The absolute truth is not a *doctrine* about Jesus—that would bring us back to ideology—but the *person* of Jesus. Therefore, assent to even the most orthodox Jesus dogma is not what leads us into truth, but only a personal relationship with the one who said of himself that he is the truth."

Regardless of how "correct" the doctrine may be, it is only an understanding of the truth, and not The Truth, and as Thwaites (2002:109) points out: "We cannot love an ideal; neither can an ideal love us. Love is a creation exchange between those things that are real and living...Idealism is the counterfeit of intimacy."

In a similar fashion, moral behaviour, while indicative of a salvation experience is not the basis for it. "Though goodness and holiness are outward expressions of the Christian life, they are not its essence. Genuine faith means knowing God in Christ..." (Ogden 1990:18). In other words, while faith may demand ethical behaviour, such behaviour does not replace the need for a relationship with Christ. The only foundation for the Christian life is faith in God, for there is no behavioural standard that once met would ensure salvation.

"There is no law that can impart life, because law is always tied to self-effort. And self-effort can't produce life, because only Jesus is the life. He has come to live His life in and through us" (Stone and Smith 2000:146).

It was never intended that the Christian community should be based on common belief, or common practice. Neither theology nor morality, are foundational aspects to the formation of community, though they have since been

made such. Rather, it is the common experience of salvation that forms the community and the continued fellowship with Christ that maintains it.

Though the institutional church has, and will continue to limit membership in its ranks to those who conform and perform, the true church has no such limitations. Regardless of their morality, and regardless of their theology, any person who experiences salvation is immediately and irrevocably part of the *ekklesia*, or assembly, that God is gathering together.

And yet, the legacy of religion has remained a constant in the life of the Church. Orthodoxy and orthopraxy are still the measuring stick for one's Christianity. Accordingly, if we follow Capon's (1996:4), definition that, "the essence of any religion is its promise that, if it is followed diligently, God will smile on its practitioners", then it is clear that the Church has evolved into a religious organization. Instead of being a community that rejoices in the reality of His saving acts, Christianity simply becomes a religion with a foundation like all of the others: *Perform for God and He will perform for you.*

And so the *ekklesia* finds itself gathered in local churches that hand down the same traditional standards that have been handed down to them. Might the Lord have been speaking of today's Church when He said:

"These people come near to me with their mouth and honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. *Their worship of me is made up only of rules taught by men*" (Is 29:13, NIV, emphasis mine).¹

And yet, while it is clear that the Church has emphasised traditions (both doctrinal and behavioural) over authentic relationship with Christ, this does not by default imply that the individual church members are not Christ focused.

"For themselves, these Christians reject an impersonal view of God. Their problem is that they have taken over paradigms which demonstrably originated from an impersonal view of God, and which, in fact, are in conflict with the actual intentions of these Christians. The impersonal view of God is not necessarily to be found in their *person*, but rather in the *tradition* that surrounds them, which they have taken over far too uncritically" (Schwarz 1999:63).

¹ Hovestol (1997:107) uses the same passage in describing the Pharisees.

In other words, the modern Church finds itself in a precarious position, as individuals seek a personal relationship with Christ in a setting that by its own religious nature seeks to subvert that goal. “We have inherited traditions which justify and reinforce darkness of the soul within us” (Frangipane 1991:20). Consequently, while the heart of the individual may be inclined towards a grace oriented relationship, it is constantly subjected to religious influences that would imply that true security is to be found elsewhere; namely, in man-made traditions.

2.4 Conclusion

In the Early Church, fear and practicality drove the evolution of the Christian community’s boundary markers into salvation standards; and in so doing turned a charismatic community of proclamation into a religious institution of indoctrination. This religious foundation has been preserved in the modern Church through doctrinal and behavioural traditions that continue to subject the individual’s grace oriented fellowship with God to a barrage of legalistic demands.

Revisiting Smith’s imagery of God in eclipse, it is clear that the boundary markers of the Early Church have evolved into religious walls that now obscure the modern Church’s view of the Son. Rather like the pacifier that is given to comfort and distract a child crying out for their next meal, the Church has given its followers doctrine, practices, traditions, and moral exhortations even as they cried out for God Himself. And like the young child, many Christians have now learned to be satisfied by the pacifier of religion, and so they go on through their walk without the spiritual nourishment of the relationship that they were designed to depend on. However, it is the further assertion of this study that God has repeatedly demonstrated both a capacity for, and willingness to, remove man’s religious tendencies and restore a proper grace oriented, covenantal relationship.

CHAPTER 3

A BIBLICAL SURVEY OF THE WAY GOD RESTORES THE COVENANTAL RELATIONSHIP WITH HIS PEOPLE: AN INTRODUCTION TO THE CONCEPT OF *REVIVAL IN THE DESERT*

3.1 Introduction

In Chapter one it was asserted that today's Church needs to be liberated from religion in order that it might return to a proper understanding of the covenantal relationship. In Chapter two the development of this religious culture was then traced back to the Early Church in an attempt to understand how religion crept into a grace oriented community. Finally, the Church's current religious practices and traditions were highlighted in an effort to show how religion effectively replaces relationship with Christ in modern Christianity.

Liberation from religion is, therefore, a necessity as it is antithetical to an authentic relationship with God. This chapter will seek to explore the Biblical record for evidence of how God has previously responded to religion in His People, and will also serve as an introduction to the concept of Revival in the desert. This discussion will include:

- The nature of God's covenant with man
- God's method of restoration via revelation of His covenantal nature
- The desert as the key location for these revelations

3.2 The Biblical Survey of God's Restorative Responses to Religion: The Revelation of Covenantal Faithfulness in the Desert.

3.2.1 Eden – the foundation of the Covenant

In Genesis 1:26, God reveals His plan for the creation of humanity: "Let Us make man in Our image." It can be argued that this one line of scripture is the single statement of purpose that demands every other promise and action found in scripture. For though man has since fallen, *God's decision to create man in His*

image is still in effect. Therefore, the fall necessitated the Cross, sin created the need for forgiveness, fears demanded words of comfort, and doubts required the promises of God. Throughout scripture God has gone to great lengths to let man know that he is still on the way to being like Christ, who as God is the very image and nature of God (Hebrews 1:3, Philippians 2:5,6).

And yet it was man's belief that he could finish this task on his own that led to his downfall in the Garden. When the serpent offered the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil to Eve, he explained to her that after she had eaten it she would "be like God" (Gen 3:5, NKJV). Right then, she should have known that she could not, through any effort of her own, become like God. And yet she and Adam both failed to see through the illusion of their own ability, and in so doing, they failed to recognize the difference between creature and Creator, and stepped into the religious trap that had been set for them.

Interestingly, when Isaiah (14:14) described the fall of Lucifer he included Lucifer's declaration that he too would "be like the Most High" (NKJV). This shows that he also failed to realize the distinction between himself and the One who had fashioned him. As this religious failure occurs in both the fall of Lucifer from heaven along with a third of the angelic host, as well as the fall of man, it should be viewed as a key to understanding a right relationship with God.

First, one must ask, how could rational beings at the height of their respective created orders allow themselves to be deceived into thinking that they could be like God? Part of the answer lays in revelation, or more specifically, the lack thereof. It is impossible for any intelligent, rational creature to believe that he could do anything to become like God, unless he did not fully comprehend how limited he was, and how limitless He is. Therefore, one may assume that God did not fully reveal Himself to either Adam and Eve, or Lucifer, for if He had, surely they would not have acted on the premise of becoming like Him.

In fact, God's first order of business, once they had bitten the fruit, was to clear up this little misunderstanding regarding the differences between the Creator and those he had created. While Genesis 3:8 has traditionally been interpreted in a fashion that shows Adam and his wife hiding from God as He walks through the

garden in the cool of the day, a more recent translation of this verse captures the true revelation of God in that moment.

“Then the man and his wife heard the thunder of Yahweh God going back and forth in the garden in the wind of the storm, and they hid from Yahweh God among the trees of the garden” (Niehaus 1995:159).²

In that moment, He returned to His original task: that of forming man in His image. To do that He had to restore to them the proper idea of Who He is, and who they were to be. To that end, He had them remove the fig leaves and stand naked before Him, so that they could no longer hide themselves, or hide from His glory. *He was clothed in storm clouds and majesty; they were naked.* Only in that moment, when nothing remained between themselves and the Almighty, could they come to realize the great gulf that lay between creature and Creator.

In that moment God saw His creatures: remorseful of their sin, awed by their Creator, and fearful of their Judge. And He loved them. Having already discarded their attempt to cover themselves, He now replaces that with a covering of animal skins made by His hands, not theirs (Gen 3:21).

It is important to note here that God’s immediate response to sin was not punishment. *In Genesis 3 God’s first response to sin is revelation.* He comes rushing into the garden like a storm, and instantly clears up the notion that man could, by any effort of his own, become like God. And yet He is not quite finished. *He continues this process of revelation by showing that it is His work to restore His creatures, just as surely as it had been His work to create them.*

While the tendency is to focus on His graciousness to provide animal skins to cover both their nakedness and their sin, one should keep in mind that the fig leaves, which they had sown together by their own hands, revealed that they had thought it possible to cover their own sin. Therefore, this man-made covering had to come off before the new God-given coverings could be put on. God could not allow man to continue to cover his own iniquity for it is not his responsibility. The responsibility of restoring man to his original state of creation lies solely in the hands of God.

² Discussion explaining this final translation of this verse covers pp. 155-159.

3.2.1.1 The Creation covenant

Recent scholarship has revealed that the Genesis 1 account of creation is composed in the form of a second millennium covenant.³ This type of document was used historically to record a *suzerain*, or king, giving a grant of land to one of his vassals. As part of the covenant, the king would acknowledge his own responsibility to defend and restore the land to the individual, should it come under attack.

By employing this covenantal structure and language, God has related to mankind that, from the very beginning, He has been a God of covenant, and that Creation itself was placed within this covenantal structure. “Covenant suzerainty and covenant faithfulness are, therefore, essential attributes of God and are manifest in God’s dealing with all Creation”(Niehaus 1995:147). Consequently, this covenant with Creation obligates God to defend and restore creation just as any suzerain would be responsible for defending and restoring one of his vassals (Niehaus 1995:148-149).

With this covenantal understanding in place, it becomes clear that God’s responsibility to make man in His image is no longer limited to the one-time act at creation. God has “implicitly committed himself by covenant to intervene and restore” (Niehaus 1995:149). The promise to *form* man must accordingly be understood now as a commitment to *re-form* man. *The Creator is, therefore, bound by His own covenant to restore fallen man.*

Accordingly, out of faithfulness to His own covenant, He removed the fig leaves that remained from their invalid attempt to cover their own sin, and proceeded to cover them with animal skins. First, He had appeared as a storm in order to deal with the illusion that they could do anything to be like Him. Now, He deals with the similar illusion that they could do anything to make up for their original sin. Though His actions are gentler, the revelation of the message is equally clear: restoration is His work; it is His responsibility.

³ While Mendanhall and Weinfeld are the acknowledged groundbreakers in this field, this study will be following Niehaus’ more recent work. Though his structural analysis only extends from pp.143-146, he has convincing support for this argument extending throughout the 400-page work.

3.2.1.2 Law and covenant

Yet, while God's covenant establishes and ensures His relationship with man, He has still given man laws to govern that relationship. McComiskey (1985) distinguishes these two concepts by referring to covenants by which God commits Himself to man as "promise covenants", while reserving the term "administrative covenants" for the laws that God then reveals to those in relationship with Him. Thus, there exists an overlap of law and covenant in man's relationship with God; an overlap in which covenant initializes and guarantees man's walk with God, while law reveals some of the boundaries and responsibilities in that walk.

However, in today's church, that overlap of law and covenant has led many into religious deception. Instead of relying upon God's covenantal promise to deal with sin, many have turned toward the law of the administrative covenants for security, as the boundaries guiding fellowship with God, have been confused for the salvation boundary. For example, today's church again stresses behavioural standards as it tells its followers that if they do certain things (drink alcohol, smoke, dance, have premarital sex, etc.) they will go to hell. Of course, not all churches go to these extremes. Many simply claim that if you are doing these things "God can't bless you."

Now, looking back to Capon's (1996:4) definition of religion as the "promise that, if it is followed diligently, God will smile on its practitioners", it becomes clear that this message from the pulpit is religion, and not the Gospel. The belief that, God can only bless when someone with the proper performance, is a religious lie. *Whatever it is that one believes "must be done to be accepted and blessed by God," is just another "fig leaf."*

If attendance is set up as a religious standard, then the belief will be that God cannot bless someone that does not go to church on Sunday. If tithing is taught to be the key to financial blessing, then that religious standard will argue that one must first give in order to receive. In other words, the financial blessings sought after are "earned" by first giving ten percent to God.

And yet, the belief system that states that "God can't bless someone in sin", is not only religious, it is itself sinful. The idea that God cannot bless those in sin,

denies the reality of the “Cross”, when Jesus became a blessing to an entire world corrupted by sin. In addition, this belief system has reinforced the fallacy that man needs to do something “in order to” receive something from God. God’s desire for His people is that they live righteously “because of” what He has already done for them, not “in order to” earn His favour. Consequently, this belief system may itself be one of the greatest sins of all, as the Bible clearly teaches that moral and ethical evil are secondary to religious evil (Ladd 1977:30).

In the Garden, the overriding sin in the life of Adam and Eve was a religious one. They thought that they could by their own actions do something to become like God; they ate the fruit “in order to” be like God. Because they violated the only law that God had given to them, “of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat” (Gen 2:17, NKJV), the church teaches that they sinned when they broke that law. “In reality, Adam and Eve were sinners before they ate the fruit. *They were sinners when they accepted the thought that eating the fruit could make them like God.* But, they did not realize that they had religious sin, that their concept of “themselves and God” was distorted, until they violated a law that had nothing to do with internal religious sin. Their external violation of eating the fruit was in fact the key to the revelation of their internal religious sin. And so, God gave that law, knowing that the process of restoring their fallen minds would begin only after they had violated it. *In other words, the healing of their internal sin was not to begin until after they had failed externally.*

God knew that their inward religious sin had to be confronted, and so He set in place an external boundary that would reveal their inner failings. In other words, moral failure was not part of the problem; rather it was part of the cure. God’s chief concern was to deal with their internal religious sin, for that is the primary obstacle to covenantal fellowship. If man is allowed to rely upon himself, then he will substitute religion for relationship, and turn away from a dependence upon God.

Even the theology of the institutional church has stressed that a good man will still face the wrath of God if he does not recognize his need of God, while a repentant sinner will go on to heaven regardless of the immorality he has

committed. So as a point of fact religious sin, or the failure to recognize one's dependence upon God, is far more detrimental to one's soul than moral failure.

Unfortunately, the church has focused primarily on dealing with moral sin rather than dealing with the exceedingly more important topic of religious sin. In fact, in its zeal to quench moral sin, it has often promoted religious sin. Again, this pattern is not new for God's people. In Jesus' day there were those who, like many today, felt that their good behaviour was all they needed. So one day He told the following parable, "to some *who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and despised others*" (Luke 18:9, NKJV, emphasis mine):

"Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee stood and prayed thus with himself, 'God, I thank You that I am not like other men: extortioners unjust, adulterers, or even as this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I possess.'

And the tax collector, standing afar off, would not so much as raise his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, 'God, be merciful to me a sinner!'

I tell you, this man went down to his house justified rather than the other; for everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted" (Luke 18:10-14, NKJV).

Much like the Pharisee in this parable, many in today's church not only rely on good works to earn the blessing of God, but think of themselves as so much better than the world that surrounds them. Yet while church members constantly look at the "un-churched" world and point out its nakedness, Christians remain unaware that though "they are covered by the blood of Christ," the "un-churched" world cannot see it because of all of their "fig leaves" (invalid attempts to cover sin). And not only the world, but as the parable points out, God too sees their "fig leaves." And much like He did in the garden, He is willing to remove those "fig leaves" and confront His children with the revelation of who He is, in order to strip away their religious strongholds.

3.2.2 Abraham and the God of *Hesed*

“Get out of your country, from your family and from your father’s house, to a land that I will show you” (Gen 12:1, NKJV). These words, at the beginning of the twelfth chapter of Genesis, are the introduction of God’s call upon Abraham’s life. It is a call to leave all that has been familiar, in exchange for an uncertain destination. It is a call to leave family and friends, only to replace them with foreigners and strangers. It is a call to leave the commerce and luxury of life in the city and, in its place, take on the harsh environment of the desert. Most importantly, however, *it is a call to forsake the religion that he has previously known, and instead immerse himself in a relationship with the one true God.*

Mesopotamia was, during the life of Abraham, a region where polytheism, the worship of many gods, was commonplace.⁴ And yet, though the call to obey God would ultimately change his understanding of religion, it might not have seemed such a stretch for Abraham initially. With his polytheistic background, God might have appeared to be simply another god. It probably would have taken a lifetime of revelation from God, for Abraham to realize that He was the one true God.

But regardless of his exact ideas as to the identity of this God, Abraham listened, Abraham obeyed, and “Abraham departed” (Gen 12:4).

“Two of the boldest words in all literature. They signal a complete departure from everything that has gone before in the long evolution of culture and sensibility. Out of Sumer, civilized repository of the predictable, comes a man who does not know where he is going *but goes forth into the unknown wilderness under the prompting of his god*” (Cahill 1998:63, emphasis mine).

In choosing to obey this Voice, he heads out into the desert, and “out of a world of polytheism he emerges as one of the lone figures with faith in a God who is radically different” (Milton 1965:41).

One of the differences that Abraham would see in God was His covenantal faithfulness.

⁴ See Cahill’s *The gifts of the Jews, how a tribe of desert nomads changed the way everyone thinks and feels*, pp. 39-63 for a description of religious thought and practices in that region at that time.

The faithfulness of God is a major Biblical teaching, with its roots in the concept of the covenant. He is a God who keeps covenant (Deut 7:9)...it is, as it were, His very character of His nature to keep covenant or to be faithful in what He has promised. Therefore He is called a God of *hesed*" (Milton 1965:17).

Hesed is a Hebrew word that has been translated alternately as *loving-kindness, steadfast love, grace, mercy, faithfulness, goodness, and devotion* (Vine et al. 1985:142). It "is one of the most significant theological terms in the Old Testament" (Milton 1965:17), and is found over 240 times in that portion of scripture (Vine et al. 1985:142). *Hesed* describes the basis for all of God's dealings with His creation, and His people. In other words, the love, grace, and mercy that God has shown His people has from the very beginning found its basis in His covenants.

Just like Adam and Eve before him, Abraham is soon brought face to face with the fact that, not only is God a God of covenant, but the God of *hesed*, or covenantal faithfulness. As he does, he eventually comes to realize that the faithfulness required from His covenant, would be required of God, not himself.

3.2.2.1 A God of Covenant

In Genesis 15, God is in the middle of promising Abraham that he will have innumerable descendants, and granting him an inheritance of land, when Abraham asks: "Lord God, how shall I know that I will inherit it?" (15:8, NKJV). God then instructs Abraham to gather various animals, cut them in two, and lay them out opposite each other.

While these actions may appear odd to modern readers, for Abraham, the covenantal implications of such a ceremony would be impossible to miss. When a covenant was made in that day, animals were often cut into pieces so that the parties making the covenant could walk between the pieces as if to say "let this be my fate if I break the covenant." In fact, this practice was so common that it became customary to call the process of forming a covenant "cutting a covenant" even if no animals were utilized in the ceremony.⁵

⁵ Much of this information in this section is discussed in Milton's *God's Covenant of Blessing*, pp.3-4; Niehaus' *God at Sinai*, pp. 176-178; Morris L 1983. *The Atonement Its Meaning & Significance*. Downers.

In this instance, however, God does instruct Abraham to cut the animals in preparation for the ceremony. And yet shortly afterwards, Abraham falls into a “deep sleep” that is reminiscent of the “deep sleep” which God had caused to fall upon Adam back in Genesis 2.

“And it came to pass, when the sun went down and it was dark, that behold, there appeared a smoking oven and a burning torch that passed between those pieces” (Gen 15:17, NKJV).

While Abraham slept, God Himself passed between the animal pieces, and in so doing, *took on all of the responsibility for maintaining the covenant.*

The reality of what failure in this type of covenant meant is captured in an Assyrian writing in which one such covenant breaker is thrown “on a skinning-table and slaughtered...like a lamb” (Niehaus 1995:176).⁶ This historical reference is particularly relevant, as it points out that God, by walking through the pieces alone is saying that He will submit Himself to being “slaughtered like a lamb” in order to maintain the covenant. The significance of this can hardly be escaped once we look forward 2000 years from Abraham’s time to the cross, where the Lamb of God is indeed pierced and torn to uphold His covenantal oath.

And yet God’s willingness to faithfully suffer in that manner is not the only significance to be found in that covenant event. Not only did God walk through the pieces committing Himself to man, but He also put Abraham to sleep so that he would not have to walk through the pieces, thereby keeping him from committing himself to God. *In other words, when God passed alone between the pieces Abraham, and humanity along with him, did not have any covenantal obligations placed upon him.*

If Abraham were to fail to maintain the covenant, he would have no horrible punishment to face. God and God alone had taken on the responsibility of the consequences of covenant unfaithfulness. Just as with Adam and Eve, Abraham cannot be expected to make up for his failure. No amount of suffering could atone

Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press. pp.16-17; and Morris L 1992. *The Apostolic Preaching of the Cross*, Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans pp. 67-69.

⁶. Niehaus is himself quoting from: Piepkorn A C 1933. *Historical Prism Inscriptions of Ashurbanipal*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

for his failure and restore his relationship with God. And yet God is, by His covenant with creation, unwavering in His goal to restore man from his failure.

So God made a covenant with Abraham and, through him, with all of mankind, saying that He would continue to be responsible for the restoration process. His future suffering would bring about the promised restoration that Abraham's suffering could not. *Once again, God had removed human activity from the process of restoration, for just as He had replaced fig leaves with animal skins, God's walking through the animal pieces by Himself was a declaration that restoration is His business, not ours.*

Unfortunately, centuries later, God's people made a new covenant with God in which *they* walked between animal pieces, thereby making themselves accountable for their inevitable failure.

“And I will give the men who have transgressed My covenant, who have not performed the words of the covenant which they made before Me, *when they cut the calf in two and passed between the parts of it* – the princes of Judah, the princes of Jerusalem, the eunuchs, the priests, and all the people of the land *who passed between the parts of the calf* – I will give them into the hand of their enemies and into the hand of those who seek their life. Their dead bodies shall be for meat for the birds of the heaven and the beasts of the earth” (Jer 34:18-20, NKJV, emphasis mine).

Despite the sincerity and passion of those who made this new covenant with God, when they walked between the animal pieces, they walked a path that was not intended for them. God alone was meant to pass between those pieces, and He alone was meant to suffer for any failure. In their own way they too were trying to be like God, and so God had to bring them into a storm of defeat and captivity, to point out that they cannot be like the God of *hesed*; the God of covenantal faithfulness.

And that is the end of all religious activity, no matter how sincere an individual or group may be. Whenever one bases one's relationship with God on performance, one becomes like those who “passed between the parts of the calf”. Whenever God is asked to base His dealings with mankind upon its merits, works,

or goodness, it leaves Him little choice other than to reveal man's failures, and judge him accordingly.

Today's church is then left with a choice: either believe in a covenant with God that is based solely on His faithfulness, or make a new covenant with Him in which we demand that He gives us the same fate as the torn animals that we symbolically walk through. Ultimately, we are all unable to stay completely faithful in our relationship with Him; so suffering is, in the end, inevitable. So the question remains: will we trust in the sufficiency of Christ's sufferings, or trust in ourselves?

3.2.2.2 Abraham's test

Following the establishment of a covenant with Abraham, God gave the further revelation that Abraham's son Isaac was to be the promised heir: the first in an endless line of descendants. This child would carry the inheritance of a promised land to the next generation. In essence, he was to be both the first sign, and the ongoing guarantee that every promise made by God to Abraham would one day be fulfilled.

Years later, God decides to test Abraham's understanding of the promise covenant. "Now it came to pass after these things that God tested Abraham..." (Gen 22:1, NKJV).

He does so by asking Abraham to sacrifice his son Isaac, who was the very essence of the promise.

"At the outset of this harrowing episode, the narrator, knowing that poor human readers could never bear the suspense, tells us that this will be a 'test,' so we know that Yitzhak (Isaac) will not actually be sacrificed, however, difficult it is to keep that in mind during the ensuing action" (Cahill 1998:86).

Abraham, however, has no idea that this is only a test. All he knows is that God is asking him to kill Isaac. And yet God had said that Isaac was *the promised heir* through whom all of the rest of His promises would flow. One cannot have an endless line of descendants without that first one. And what good is a future inheritance of land, if one has no heirs to inherit it? In other words, to comply with

what God was asking meant not only the death of his son, but also the death of all that God had promised Abraham.

Many have claimed that God was simply testing Abraham's level of obedience. They suggest that any faith demonstrated by Abraham was merely a general faith in God that would prompt his obedience to whatever was requested of him. But elsewhere, scripture is clear that the motivating force behind Abraham's obedience in this instance was a specific trust in the promises of God.

“By faith Abraham, when he was tested, offered up Isaac, and he who had received the promises offered up his only begotten son, of whom it was said, ‘In Isaac your seed shall be called,’ concluding that God was able to raise him up, even from the dead...” (Hebrews 11: 17-19, NKJV).

Abraham's obedience was no longer blindly given to one of the many gods of his past. He was now trusting specifically in the God of revelation. He was trusting in the God who made promises, and kept them. He had faith in the God who had revealed that Isaac was the promised heir, *and his faith in God was so firmly established that he knew that even death could not destroy the promise of Isaac's life.*

Abraham's obedience was motivated by understanding that God's demand for the death of Isaac did not negate the promises made about Isaac. Therefore, Abraham rightly concluded that even were he to kill his own son, the promises of God ensured Isaac's future resurrection. “Faith saw beyond the sacrifice and was willing to obey” (Pfeiffer 1969:27).

However, if we look only at Abraham's response in this passage, we would miss yet another self-disclosing revelation from God. God is not merely testing Abraham's faith; rather He is again demonstrating how He is different from the gods of Abraham's past. The gods of other nations were often thought to require sacrifices from those wishing favourable treatment. These beliefs even led to the common practice of sacrificing one's own children to appease one's god.

God's demand for the sacrifice of Isaac would, therefore, not have been considered out of the ordinary at that time. However, His final actions of stopping Abraham from performing the sacrifice, and providing a ram for a substitutionary

sacrifice, were unheard of. These actions, therefore, served to reinforce the revelation that God had made Himself responsible for maintaining a covenant relationship with man.

Unlike the prevalent religious ideas of Abraham's day, the actual sacrifice of Isaac would have in no way appeased God, or improved Abraham's status in the eyes of God. Abraham's willingness to sacrifice his son, however, not out of blind obedience, but rather out of an understanding that God would make a way to fulfil His promises, did please God. *This is because Abraham had learned to let God be God.* Abraham had stopped trying to figure out how to fulfil the promises of God. He had learned how to rest, and let God do what He had promised. He had come to know God as not only a promise maker, but a promise keeper as well.

In addition, he now realized that while other religions taught that the gods would only bless in response to sacrifice, his God preferred to demand sacrifices only of Himself. Abraham's revelation and faith helped him to see that his God was more interested in giving to him than He was in taking things away from him. *In other words, he had been called out of a religious system that taught that heavenly blessings were based on works and merit, and called into a relationship with a God who had committed Himself to restoring and blessing him unconditionally.*

So ultimately, Abraham's call into the desert demanded not only that he leave his country, but also that he leave his culture in the past. His destiny was to be filled by faith and revelation, not reliance on tradition. In the wilderness he met the God of *hesed*, who revealed that He would be the one to maintain covenantal faithfulness, and consequently bear all repercussions, for any failures in their relationship. That relationship would, therefore, not be based on what he could do for God, but rather upon the fulfilment of God's promises towards man. And in this place he came to realize that it was never intended that God's commitment to him would be based on his faithfulness, but rather upon God's own loyalty to His covenantal task of restoration.

3.2.3 Sinai – Theophany in the desert

Centuries had passed since God had originally promised Abraham that he would have innumerable descendants, and that they would inherit the land of Canaan. And yet while “the children of Israel were fruitful and increased...and the land was filled with them” (Ex 1:7, NKJV), the land in question was Egypt not Canaan. In fact the Israelites’ population had become so large that the Egyptians decided to enslave them before they could become a national threat (Ex 1:8-14). It was into this climate that Moses, a Hebrew child, was born.

At the time of his birth, an Egyptian law had been enacted that forced all Hebrew mothers to cast their newborn sons into a river, in an attempt to curb the threat of any future Hebrew uprising (Ex 1:15-22). Moses’ mother, however, placed him into a small ark so that he floated on the river until the daughter of the Egyptian Pharaoh providentially found him (Ex 2:1-10). Her decision to raise him results in his life being spared, and consequently this child of a Hebrew slave is raised as the grandson of the king of Egypt.

Moses, however, was not one to forget his fellow Hebrews. As a grown man, he goes “out to his brethren and looked at their burdens” (Ex 2:11, NKJV). It is during this visit that he witnesses an Egyptian beating a fellow Hebrew. Perhaps out of anger over this one incident, or perhaps as retaliation for years of oppression, Moses kills the Egyptian. As a result he is forced to flee into the wilderness of Midian where he will live for the next forty years of his life (Ex 2:11-15, Acts 7:23-29).

Like Abraham before him, Moses’ journey into the wilderness is not only about where he is headed, but also includes an element of what is being left behind. As the grandson of Pharaoh, “Moses was learned in all the wisdom of the Egyptians” (Acts 7:22, NKJV). Living in Pharaoh’s house for forty years, Moses would have had access to the best educators from every field of study. At the same time, however, he would have been indoctrinated into all of the Egyptian religious beliefs and practices. Although one day he would be described as a man “whom the LORD knew face to face” (Deut 34:10, NIV), at the time that he fled into the desert, he only knew the faces of a variety of Egyptian gods.

“Now Moses was tending the flock of Jethro his father-in-law, the priest of Midian. And he led the flock *to the back of the desert*, and came to Horeb, the mountain of God. And the Angel of the LORD appeared to him in a flame of fire from the midst of a bush” (Ex 3:1-2, NKJV, emphasis mine).

Nearly forty years after Moses’ departure, the Israelites who were still enslaved in Egypt cried out to God because of their oppression. “So God heard their groaning, and God remembered His covenant with Abraham” (Ex 2:24, NKJV). The God of *hesed*, the God of covenantal faithfulness, decides that the time to fulfil His promise to these descendants of Abraham is drawing near.

“And when forty years had passed, an Angel of the Lord appeared to him in a flame of fire in a bush, *in the wilderness of Mount Sinai*. When Moses saw it, he marvelled at the sight; And as he drew near to observe, the voice of the Lord came to him.” (Acts 7:30-31, NKJV, emphasis mine).

So God appears to Moses here, in the wilderness of Sinai, and speaks to him about his role in the upcoming deliverance of His people.

3.2.3.1 Moses and the God of *Hesed*

More important than his future tasks, however, are the present revelations that come pouring forth from God. The first revelations deal with the very presence of God. Initially we see that though He appears as a flame of fire, He is a fire that burns without consuming or damaging the bush that He has enveloped. Next we see God call out to Moses and tell him to take off his sandals, as the simple desert earth has now become “holy ground” (Ex 3:5). With these words God reveals that His presence imparts holiness to whatever He comes into contact with.

The next great revelation is that of God’s identity as He declares: “I am the God of your father -- the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob” (Ex 3:6). This is crucial to Moses’ understanding of the identity of the One that he is about to serve. This God is not one of the many Egyptian gods from his past, nor is it simply one of the Canaanite gods that were commonly worshipped in this region. No, this was the God of his ancestors. This was the covenant-making God of Abraham.

And this revelation of God's identity is expanded even further just a few moments later as God reveals: "I AM WHO I AM" (Ex 3:14). This name by itself conveys:

"the constancy and certainty of his nature, and will, and word. The sense is, I am the same that ever I was; the same who made the promises to Abraham...and am now come to perform them" (Poole 1979:122).

It is within this understanding of God, as the covenant maker and keeper that the rest of the Exodus narrative unfolds. With that in mind, "the saving acts of God in the exodus are seen as proceeding from out of His saving purpose in the calling of Abraham and in the making of a covenant with him, a covenant of blessing" (Milton 1965:126).

And so it is in this first experience with God in the desert, that Moses comes to receive the theological framework through which he is to interpret all future encounters with God. He realizes that his life, along with the lives of the other Hebrews still in Egypt, has been incorporated into the covenant relationship that God established with Abraham. And it is in the context of this covenantal relationship with God, that Moses comes to hear the statement which contains the very essence of this covenantal commitment of God:

"I will take you as My people, and I will be your God" (Ex 6:7, NKJV).

However, before the Hebrews can come to an understanding of their covenantal relationship with God, they too, like Moses before them, must leave Egypt and head for the desert. In fact, the first instructions to Moses regarding this exodus are that he is to speak to Pharaoh and request that the children of Israel be allowed to "journey into the wilderness" so that they might sacrifice to God (Ex 3:18). The desert was where God had revealed Himself to Moses, and it was the place that He would ultimately reveal His covenantal nature to the rest of the Hebrews.

Pharaoh's refusal to grant this journey deters neither God nor Moses, and after God brings a series of plagues upon Egypt, the Hebrew slaves are finally released from their Egyptian bondage. However, as mentioned before with Abraham,

a deliverance from a cultural setting does not immediately relieve one from the cultural ideas and practices that have been learned in that setting.

And so, even as their physical deliverance from Egypt was being accomplished, God was also directly attacking the spiritual concepts of Egyptian religion.

“The first plague of bloody waters was directed against Osiris, the god of the Nile. The second plague of frogs was against the frog goddess Hekt. The third plague of lice was against Seb, the earth god. The fourth plague of beetles (or flies) was against Hatkok, the wife of Osiris. The fifth plague of cattle disease was against Apis, the sacred bull god. The sixth plague, boils, was against Typhon. The seventh plague, hail and fire, was against Shu, the god of the atmosphere. The eighth plague, locusts, was against Serapia, the god who protected Egypt against locusts. The ninth plague, darkness, was against Ra, the sun god. The tenth plague, the death of the first born, was an attack on all gods” (Wilmington 1981:67).

This process helped to ensure that by the time the Hebrews left Egypt, they knew that their God was more powerful than anything that the Egyptians worshipped.

Unfortunately, they did not yet really know who their God was.

3.2.3.2 Israel and the God of Covenant

“In the third month after the children of Israel had gone out of the land of Egypt, on the same day, *they came to the Wilderness of Sinai*” (Ex 19:1, NKJV, emphasis mine).

As soon as the Hebrews reached the place where God first revealed Himself in the burning bush, Moses began to receive fresh instructions from God. This time he is told to prepare the people to meet with God, as He will descend on the mountain in three days to reveal Himself to the entire gathering of people.

“Then it came to pass on the third day, in the morning, that there were thunderings and lightnings, and a thick cloud on the mountain; and the sound of the trumpet was very loud, so that all the people who were in the camp trembled” (Ex 19:16, NKJV).

Just as in the Garden of Eden, God’s self revelation as a storm invokes fear, as He descends upon Mount Sinai. And yet this event is far more important than simply another awe-inspiring encounter with God. This is the place where God begins the

further revelation of His covenantal nature, and gives the Hebrew people their special revelation of His law.

“And God spoke all these words, saying: ‘I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage. You shall have no other gods before Me” (Ex 20:1-3, NKJV).

When God introduced the Mosaic Law with these words, He was revealing that the covenant would continue to be based on His actions, not theirs. God was not as some have suggested, abrogating the covenant of grace that He had established with Abraham, for “the structure of the covenant form, with the historical prologue preceding the stipulations section, makes it clear that the laws are based on grace” (Motyer 1992:52).

When the God of *hesed*, or covenantal faithfulness, reminds the Hebrews that He has already delivered them from Egypt, He is demonstrating that He has already been faithful to the covenant that He had established with Abraham. These, “saving acts of God are related before the stipulations are imposed on Israel” (Wenham 1978:10), because He was setting a context for the terms which were to follow (Craigie 1976:51). Or, to reuse McComiskey’s terms, the *covenant of promise* was already in place, as God’s saving acts demonstrated. The new *covenant of administration* was merely set in place to help govern the relationship established in the promise covenant.

In other words, *man was to realize that the question of his acceptance before God was already settled*. These laws were never intended to be the conditions for entering into a covenant relationship; rather they were merely the guidelines for an ongoing relationship. God did not meet the Israelites at Sinai in order to hand out a new method for salvation. Rather, He was declaring to a people who had already been saved that He was already bound to them in a covenant relationship, and that His delivering them from Egypt, was the proof of this existing covenantal relationship. The laws that followed were simply intended to cover the nature and extent of the boundaries and duties inherent to that relationship.

In this context then, the covenantal faithfulness of God is intended to be the springboard for the Hebrews' own faithfulness. "Israel is expected to obey *because God has brought the people out of Egypt and preserved them in the desert*" (Wenham 1978:10, emphasis mine). In other words, Israel was not to obey God *in order to* earn favour, or deliverance, but was to obey *because of* the favour already shown in their deliverance.

God was declaring, here in the wilderness, that He was *already* their God, and they were *already* His people. He was revealing that this relationship, and consequently His covenantal commitment to them, had existed while they were still in bondage in Egypt. He was proclaiming that, before they even knew Him, He had been their faithful Lord. So in effect He was demonstrating, just as He had with Adam and Abraham, that the basis of their relationship would be His faithfulness, not theirs. And that would prove to be a most fortunate thing for this recently liberated Hebrew nation.

3.2.3.3 Israel and Baal

"Soon after God relates His law to the Israelites, Moses returns to Mount Sinai in order to receive additional instruction, as well as the Ten Commandments, written on stone by the finger of God. During his extended absence, the people asked for his brother Aaron to fashion an idol. Aaron did as they wished, fashioned a golden calf, and announced: "This is your god, O Israel, that brought you out of the land of Egypt!" (Ex 32:4, NKJV).

This golden calf was most likely intended to be a representation of the Canaanite god Baal. Baal was considered a fertility god, as well as the god of the storm (Gronbaek 1985:39). In this respect he was considered more than simply a god of agriculture "who was closely connected with fertility, field and cattle" (Kapelrud 1952:43). Rather he was seen as "a mighty warrior-king who controls the elements of the storm" (Chisolm 1984:270).

In Canaanite mythology, Baal's chief opponent was Yam, god of the sea (Kapelrud 1963:41). Their conflict begins as Baal is surrendered to Yam by the other Canaanite gods (Gronbaek 1985:31). Baal himself, however, refuses to surrender to Yam, thus beginning their epic battle. In this battle, Yam represents

not only the sea, but also the primordial chaos out of which the universe was born, so that with his victory, Baal is said to have brought order to the universe by destroying the monster of chaos (Albright 1968:109).

The Hebrews had probably been exposed to Baal worship while still in Egypt. In the eighteenth century BC the Hyksos, a Semitic people gained control of Egypt. These people “worshipped the Canaanite gods, their chief god Baal being identified with the Egyptian Seth” (Bright 1981:60).

So the Hebrews, having been exposed to the worship of a Canaanite storm god who has conquered the sea, are now delivered from Egypt by a God who controls the sea and parts it for them, and appears to them on Sinai as a storm. It is easy to understand how Aaron and the rest of the people could confuse the two deities. In fact, as we shall see later, this confusion would continue throughout Israel’s history.

And yet, though this may appear at first to be mere confusion, God clearly regards the whole episode as apostasy, claiming that, “they have turned aside quickly out of the way which I commanded them” (Ex 32:8). Within days of God telling them to “not make for yourself a carved image – any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath” (Ex 20:4), the Israelites fashion a calf to be their god. And just days after telling them not to make “gods of silver or gods of gold,” God watches as they mould their golden jewellery into an object of worship.

In order to commit these sins, it is clear that Israel has chosen to follow tradition instead of revelation. They had heard the audible voice of God speaking to them, and telling them that they were meant to worship at a simple earthen altar, rather than before carved or moulded images. In fact, if stones were used in the building of this altar, they were not even to use tools upon the stones, presumably to prevent the temptation to carve an image onto the stones (Ex 20:24-25).

And yet they chose to disregard this direct revelation, and instead worship in a manner that they were more comfortable with. Instead of entering into fellowship with this God, and gaining an understanding of His nature and character, they chose to rely on what they already knew. Their knowledge convinced them that

they had been delivered by a Canaanite god who, like other gods, would be faithful only as long as they were. So they made an idol to represent him, and began to worship him.

Though God tells Moses of His desire to consume the people for this wickedness, He quickly relents from this position as soon as Moses reminds Him of His covenantal commitment to these people (Ex 32:11-14). And though there is a punishment for this transgression, The God of faithfulness remains faithful to His promise to Abraham. Fortunately for the Israelites, His covenantal promises are not to be thwarted by the sins of man, but rather are guaranteed by His own nature. So He remains faithful to these unfaithful people, and continues to lead them towards the Promised Land, and declares:

“Depart and go up from here, you and the people whom you have brought out of the land of Egypt, to the land of which I swore to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, saying, ‘To you descendants I will give it.’ And I will send My Angel before you, and I will drive out the Canaanite and the Amorite and the Hittite and the Perizzite and the Hivite and the Jebusite” (Ex 33:1-2, NKJV).

As the Israelites approach this land, God instructs them to send twelve spies out into the land. When they return, only two of the spies recommend taking the land. The other ten convince the people that they are too weak to conquer the inhabiting nations, and that the land may not be worth taking.

“The land through which we have gone as spies is a land that devours its inhabitants, and all the people whom we saw in it are men of great stature...and we were like grasshoppers in our own sight, and so we were in their sight” (Num 13:32-33, NKJV).

While some would argue that the principle problem here was the attitude in which the spies saw themselves as a small people, I would disagree. To appear small in your own sight is not a bad thing. God not only wants us to realize our limitations, but, more importantly, He wants our limitations to create a dependence upon Him.

The problem was not that they appeared as grasshoppers in their own sight, rather it was that they had failed to believe God’s promise to drive out the land’s current inhabitants. Their size, strength, and numbers were all irrelevant. The God of covenantal faithfulness, who had brought plagues against Egypt and parted a sea,

had promised to guide them into this land. But they had not yet come to a place of trusting or relying upon Him. *With their own eyes, they had witnessed the miraculous, but their hearts and minds and not yet come to grips with the covenantal nature of God.*

Consequently, the LORD questions Moses: “How long will these people reject Me? And how long will they not believe Me, with all the signs which I have performed among them?” (Num 14:11, NKJV). Again, the Israelites had rejected revelation, and God makes it clear that to reject His revelation is the same as rejecting Him.

Moses, however, was again able to appeal to God as the Covenant Keeper. While he was previously on Mount Sinai, Moses had asked God to reveal His glory. God had agreed, and said that He would proclaim His name, and reveal a greater portion of His glory. In other words, the revelation of His glory was not restricted to just the visible revelation of how He appeared, or the tangible experience of what He imparted. Rather, the very name of God, the revelation of His identity, was itself a greater revelation of His glory.

“Now the LORD descended in the cloud and stood with him there and proclaimed the name of the LORD. And the LORD passed before him and proclaimed, ‘The LORD, the LORD God, merciful and gracious, long-suffering, and *abounding in goodness (hesed)* and truth” (Ex 34:6, NKJV, emphasis mine).

And so we see that for God, *hesed*, or *covenantal faithfulness*, is at the very core of His identity. In fact, not only is it part of His identity, but here we see Him make it known that it is quality that He abounds in.

Moses receives this revelation, and so now, when the Israelites reject His revelation, refuse to enter into the Promised Land, and in so doing reject God, he again appeals to God on the basis of His identity as Covenant Keeper.

“And now, I pray, let the power of my Lord be great; just as You have spoken, saying, ‘The LORD is long-suffering and *abundant in mercy (hesed)*... ” (Num 14:17-18, NKJV, emphasis mine).

Moses appeals to God using His own words of self-description and self-revelation. Though *hesed* has been translated as *mercy* in this passage, we must keep in mind its original covenantal implications. Moses is not merely asking God to show mercy

as we understand it, rather He is appealing to God's abundance of covenantal faithfulness, and again God agrees to be faithful to the people who keep rejecting Him.

3.2.3.4 Israel in the wilderness

This faithfulness is demonstrated over the next forty years, even as God leads the Israelites through the desert as a punishment for not immediately entering into the Promised Land. The record of this journey is summed up in the opening chapters of Deuteronomy, as is a second declaration of the Law, made to a new generation of Hebrews as they prepare to enter the Promised Land that their parents had missed out on.

And yet, though forty years had passed, the covenantal basis behind the Law remained the same. Thus, the retelling of God's acts of faithfulness is not merely history; rather it is again to be understood as the proof of an ongoing covenantal relationship. Just as on Mt. Sinai forty years earlier, these acts of faithfulness are again told as a prelude to the restating of the Law, so that this generation of Israelites will understand that their relationship with God is still based upon His faithfulness, not theirs.

And just in case they missed this point, Moses summarizes the entire concept for them.

"And you shall remember that the LORD your God *led you all the way these forty years in the wilderness...*and fed you with manna which you did not know nor did your fathers know, that He might make you know that man shall not live by bread alone; but man lives by every word that proceeds from the mouth of the LORD. Your garments did not wear out on you, nor did your foot swell these forty years...Therefore you shall keep the commandments of the LORD your God" (Deut 8:2-4,6, NKJV, emphasis mine).

This passage presents, in a condensed form, the idea that God's covenantal commitment to them, should continue to be the inspiration behind the obedience of the Hebrews. Again the main point is that their obedience is required *because of* God's faithfulness, not *in order to* earn it. And at the same time it also cuts to the core of what the Hebrews are to be obedient to: the revelation of God.

God clearly states that the miracle of the manna was not done simply to be a motivation in the lives of His people, but also to make them know that “man lives by every word that proceeds from the mouth of the LORD.” In other words, this manna, which was something that neither the Hebrews nor the generation before them knew, was a daily lesson in trusting fresh revelation over established tradition.

Traditionally, a person would have to plant a grain crop, harvest it, and then use it to make bread. During the planting of these crops, prayers and sacrifices would be offered up to the agrarian gods of the field, such as Baal, as the food supply depended on their favour. In other words, the traditional way to success meant labouring in the field, and religious service to the local gods.

That tradition is now turned on its head, as God requires virtually no labour from the people other than the gathering up of the manna from the ground. Additionally, this provision of food had no religious prerequisites tied to it. All that was required of the Hebrews was that they obey His directives on when to gather the manna, and when to store it.

As they did this for forty years they became more dependent on the revelation of God. Specifically, in this instance, they learned to believe God’s instruction for gathering and storing the manna. But on a larger scale, they also learned to trust in the revelation of God’s character. As He fed them in this manner for forty years, and as He protected them from their enemies for forty years, and as their clothes did not wear out during those forty years, they learned that His commitment to them was true.

Their parents had learned that Baal was not their true god, and that to worship according to their traditional methods was to reject revelation, and in so doing, reject God. Now this next generation was in the desert; and for them to rely on traditional methods of sustenance was not an option. There were no crops to be gathered out here in the wilderness. To rely on tradition would not only indicate a rejection of God, but it would also have meant certain death.

And so they learned to rely on God. They learned to trust in His miraculous ways as they followed His thunderous voice. And this reliance on revelation not

only sustained them for forty years, but also prepared their hearts for entry into the Promised Land, when their time came.

God had brought them out of Egypt and into the desert to reveal the existence of their covenantal relationship. He ratified that covenant with them at Sinai, and continued to be faithful to it even when their actions contradicted His spoken instructions to them. Not only did their deliverance from Egypt testify as to His commitment to His people, but His continued provision in the face of outright rejection also demonstrated that this covenant was still based on His faithfulness, not theirs.

In the end, the desert was the place where God revealed His glory: manifesting on Mt. Sinai as a storm, with His voice thundering from the heavens. That glory was also demonstrated by the self-revelation of His identity as the God of *hesed*. When Moses had already seen the burning bush, and had already visited the storm on Sinai, he asked God to reveal more of His glory. God agreed and, as part of that greater revelation, told Moses that He was the LORD, and that He abounded in *hesed*. This *covenantal faithfulness* was not only revealed to Moses through those words, but was demonstrated repeatedly to the rest of the nation, as God remained faithful to His people throughout their time in the desert.

In the wilderness, they finally learned to trust in that revealed identity. They learned to follow the revelation that He was giving them, rather than the traditions that they had brought with them. They followed God, and His revelation, for forty years through the desert, until they were ready to follow Him into the Promised Land.

3.2.4 Elijah – a prophet in the desert

At Sinai, the Israelites had mistakenly recognized Baal, a Canaanite god, as the one who had delivered them from Egypt. Yet while this deity was apparently similar to God in the minds of the Israelites, the worship of Yahweh and Baal were fundamentally different. *Baal was looked to for what he would do in the future, while Yahweh was to be exalted for what He had already accomplished* (Deut 5:6).

In fact, this covenantal act of deliverance from Egypt was to be the foundation for God's command that He alone be worshipped (Deut 5:7-9).

Yet, while His covenantal faithfulness to them was supposed to inspire their fidelity, this idea was not clearly understood, or embraced, by the Israelites. Even before they entered the Promised Land, their faithfulness had been corrupted. In Moab, the Israelite people joined the Moabites as they worshipped their gods, including Baal (Num 25:2-3). As a result of this sin, the Israelites are punished with a plague that kills 24,000 people, and yet it was not the last time that this worship of Baal occurred.

Centuries later, when Jeroboam was king over Israel, he "made two calves of gold, and said to the people, 'Here are your gods, O Israel, which brought you up from the land of Egypt!'" (1Kg 12:28, NKJV). Reminiscent of Sinai, we again see the worship of Baal, in the form of a golden calf, being substituted or confused with the worship of God.

It, therefore, became necessary for a spokesman to announce to "the people that Yahwism and Baalism could not co-exist – that the worship of Yahweh was an either/or and not a both/and proposition" (Eakin 1965:413). The prophet Elijah was called to be this spokesman, and his "whole struggle is seen in a false perspective if we do not recognize this fact" (Kapelrud 1952:34).

"In the thirty-eighth year of Asa king of Judah, Ahab the son of Omri became king over Israel...he took as wife Jezebel...and he went and served Baal and worshiped him. Then he set up an altar for Baal in the temple of Baal, which he had built in Samaria" (1Kg 16:29-32, NKJV).

When Ahab became king of Israel, he made an alliance with the king of Tyre, an alliance, which was sealed by a marriage to the king's daughter, Jezebel (Peake 1927:3). Concessions were then made to Jezebel, as well as those that accompanied her from Phoenicia, the chief of which was the provision of a sanctuary in which they could worship Baal (Peake 1927:3). This Tyrian entourage would have included at least 450 prophets of Baal (1Kg 18:19), who would have been so connected to the royal house that they would have eaten at the table of the king and queen" (Ostborn 1956:19).

It is during this setting of religious compromise that the prophet Elijah bursts onto the scene.

“And Elijah the Tishbite, of the inhabitants of Gilead, said to Ahab, ‘As the LORD God of Israel lives, before whom I stand, there shall not be dew nor rain these years except at my word’” (1Kg 17:1, NKJV).

Immediately after giving this word to Ahab, Elijah is commanded by God to “Get away from here and turn eastward, and hide by the Brook Cherith, which flows into the Jordan” (1Kg 17:3). *Interestingly, this area that God directs him to is likely the same wilderness where Jesus would spend forty days shortly after His baptism.*⁷ Once there, Elijah is fed by the ravens. God has commanded them to bring bread and meat to him in both the morning and the evening (1Kg 17:4-6).

Though Elijah gives no reason for God to withhold the rain, it is clearly a direct challenge to the authority and ability of Baal. As the god of agriculture who controlled the storms, Baal was “expected to be able to bring rainfall and fertility when he was asked to do so” (Kapelrud 1952:45). The only limitation to this power would come during the summer when, in Canaanite mythology, Baal would battle with Mot, “the god of death and summer drought” (Gronbaek 1985:30). During the dry seasons in which Baal descended into the underworld to fight with Mot, his worshippers would mourn his “death”. These “mourning rites mainly consisted of limping dances round the altar with laments and invocations of Baal...gradually increasing to orgiastic fury, in which the priests lacerated themselves with knives and lancets” (Hvidberg 1962:108).

Yet this drought was not to last for only one summer. God withheld the rain for three years in order to demonstrate that Baal’s death was not merely a seasonal occurrence, but was in fact a verifiable reality. Much as He had done previously with the plagues of Egypt, God was directly challenging the power of an opposing god, and in so doing He demonstrated that He was the real power.

In addition to the corporate revelation that God’s actions were intending to bring to Israel, God’s provision for Elijah delivered a more personal revelation. While Baal was failing to provide rain or produce for Israel, God was miraculously

⁷ See maps 134 and 229 in *The Macmillan Bible Atlas, Third Edition* (New York, Macmillan: 1993).

supplying food for Elijah. While all of Israel suffered the effects of the drought, Elijah lived as the Israelites of old, surviving in the wilderness as he trusted in, and relied upon, the sustaining hand of God.

3.2.4.1 Baal - the god of religion

“And it came to pass after many days that the word of the LORD came to Elijah, in the third year, saying, ‘Go, present yourself to Ahab, and I will send rain on the earth’” (1Kg 18:1, NKJV).

Elijah, again obeying the word of the LORD, leaves for Samaria, and meets with Ahab. He tells Ahab to gather all of Israel and bring them to Mount Carmel, along with the prophets of Baal. Once everyone is assembled, Elijah tells the people of Israel: “If the LORD is God follow Him; but if Baal, follow him” (1Kg 18:21). He then challenges the prophets of Baal to a contest, in order to demonstrate that he is serving the true God.

Both sides are to prepare a sacrifice by cutting up a bull and laying it upon wood, but neither side is to light the fire. Elijah further dictates: “Then you call on the name of your gods, and I will call on the name of the LORD; and the God who answers by fire, He is God” (1Kg 18:24). The prophets of Baal agree to the contest, and soon we see them going through their mourning rituals to raise Baal from the “dead” so that he might come and consume the sacrifice. They

“leaped about the altar...cried aloud, and cut themselves, *as was their custom*, with knives and lances, until the blood gushed out on them...but there was no voice; no one answered, no one paid attention” (1Kg 18:26-29, NKJV, emphasis mine).

Here again we see the danger of religious tradition. For centuries, the worshippers of Baal had gone through these “mourning rites” near the end of each summer drought in order to “resurrect” their god. The changing seasons always insured his return, but in their minds it was their actions that brought him back to life. And that is what religion always does: it looks at results, and then tries to trace those results back to some action by man, so that a process can be put into place to guarantee those results again in the future.

In other words, *religion first tries to determine what actions will please God, and then teaches that one must perform these actions in order to be rewarded by God.* The problem with that is that God is already unconditionally committed to mankind, so when religion comes in preaching “conditionality,” it always ends up presenting the opposite of God’s truth.

For instance, the truth was that God had already revealed to Abraham that He would allow Himself to be torn apart in order to maintain His covenant, *thus foreshadowing how He would be pierced on the cross in order to resurrect and restore humanity.* Religion, however, put the worshippers of Baal into a position of believing that they had to pierce themselves in order to resurrect their god. This was a complete corruption of God’s revelation. Despite their religious fervour, Baal was not revived; he had not brought rain for three years, and now he had failed to rise to another more direct challenge.

3.2.4.2 The God of *Hesed*

Next it was Elijah’s turn. After he had prepared the sacrifice, he had it doused several times with water, so that even the trench that encircled the altar was filled with water (1Kg 18:33-35). Then he prayed to the God of Abraham, the God of *hesed*, and asked that He confirm that He is God.

“Then the fire of the LORD fell and consumed the burnt sacrifice, and the wood and the stones and the dust, and it licked up the water that was in the trench. Now when all the people saw it, they fell on their faces; and they said, ‘The LORD, He is God! The LORD, He is God!’” (1Kg 18:38-39, NKJV).

Elijah did not attempt to revive a dead god; rather He chose to appeal to the Living One who had called him into the desert. He did not place his trust in a god who was thought to be responsible for the agricultural success of a nation; rather he trusted in the God who had miraculously and personally provided for him in the wilderness. He did not appeal to a golden calf that could not speak, but instead chose to place his faith in the God of relationship and covenantal faithfulness, whose voice had led him into the desert. And through his example, the rest of his

nation came to see that his God was not only the God of Abraham, but their God as well.

Following this thorough defeat of Baal, the Israelites rise up and kill all of the prophets of Baal that had gathered for the contest. Hearing this, Jezebel, the wife of King Ahab, sends a messenger to tell Elijah that she plans to kill him in retaliation for his victorious actions at Mount Carmel. So Elijah flees, returning to the wilderness, and once again God meets him there. He provides food and drink for Elijah that miraculously gives him enough strength for a journey that would take him forty days deeper into the wilderness (1Kg 19:1-8).

At the end of that journey, Elijah finds himself at Mount Sinai, the same place where God had previously revealed His glory to Moses and the Israelites.⁸ And on that same mountain in the desert, God reveals Himself: not through a strong wind, or an earthquake, or a fire, but rather in “a still small voice” (1Kg 19:11-13). In the same place where His words had once crashed like thunder, He now speaks with a tender voice, as He brings Elijah comfort and reassurance that he is not alone in his battle against Jezebel.

In fact, the entire story of Elijah presents a wonderful picture of the unrelenting faithfulness of God. In His faithfulness, He challenged the false beliefs of the Israelites, first with a drought, and then with His dramatic actions on Mount Carmel. He did not abandon them because their theology was wrong; He simply used revelation to correct it.

In addition, as we examine the life of Elijah, we also see God’s desire to be personally involved with mankind. The way in which God provided for, and comforted Elijah, demonstrates His love for individual persons, not just for all people. Most importantly, however, in the story of Elijah:

“we discover what the children of Israel discovered, what Elijah discovered, that *the living God is hiding in the wilderness*, waiting to be discovered afresh, waiting to meet us in a new way, a way marked to be sure with the sign of the cross, but a way of new intimacy, new depths that *only the silence and dust of the wilderness could make space for*” (Wright 1999:43, emphasis mine).

⁸ Although the text in 1 Kings 19:8 reads “Horeb”, it is the same location as Mt. Sinai. See Halley’s Bible Handbook p. 126.

While previous examples (Abraham, Moses, and Sinai) had shown the desert to be a place of revelation, Elijah's story goes beyond that to show that God would actively call His children into the desert to revive them as well. Though Elijah's personal experiences with the Lord served to deepen the revelation of a covenantal God, Israel's corporate encounter with God was a divine act of national restoration. On Mount Carmel He called out to all of Israel in order to demonstrate the difference between serving the God of *Hesed*, and serving the god of religion. *The wilderness was no longer simply the place of revelation; now it was the place of restoration and revival as well.* This concept would become even clearer during the ministry of the second Elijah, namely, John the Baptist.

3.2.5 John the Baptist – a voice calling “in the wilderness, prepare the way for the LORD”

Four centuries after the ministry of Elijah concluded, another prophet named Malachi spoke to the nation of Israel about the idea of covenant. In his message to a people who had recently returned to their land after a seventy-year exile in Babylon, he declared that God had always loved them, but that because they kept violating His covenant, they had to be disciplined. Yet even in this message of rebuke, God speaks to His people through Malachi and informs them that He will return to His people and restore His covenant with them.

“See, I will send my messenger, who will prepare the way before me. Then suddenly the Lord you are seeking will come to his temple; *the messenger of the covenant, whom you desire, will come*” (Mal 3:1, NIV, emphasis mine).

And as the book of Malachi closes, this messenger who is to prepare the way for the Lord is named:

“See, I will send you the prophet Elijah...He will turn the hearts of the fathers to their children, and the hearts of the children to their fathers...” (Mal 4:5-6, NIV).

3.2.5.1 *Hesed* in the New Testament

After another four centuries pass, a Jewish priest named Zacharias is busy serving in the Jerusalem temple, when he is met by an angel with the remarkable message that he will soon be a father, and that his new son,

“will also go before Him in the spirit and power of Elijah...‘to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children,’ and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just, to make ready a people prepared for the Lord” (Lk 1:17, NKJV).

By directly quoting from Malachi, the angel makes it clear that this son, John, is the promised one who is to prepare the way for the “messenger of the covenant”.

Zacharias, however, like Abraham so many years earlier, had along with his wife, grown very advanced in years without any children. This caused him to question the angel’s words, and consequently he was made mute until the day John was born. But on that day, when his tongue was loosed again, he prophesied of the One whose way was to be prepared by his son, the One through whom the Lord would “perform the *mercy promised to our fathers*,” and “*remember His holy covenant*” (Lk 1:72, NKJV).

While English Bibles translate the Greek word *eleos* in the above passage as *mercy*, there is in fact a much richer definition behind the word. By the time the New Testament was written, Greek was the predominant language of the day, and consequently, the most common form of the Old Testament at that time was the Septuagint, which was a Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures. When the translators who compiled the Septuagint came across the word *hesed* in the Hebrew, they nearly always rendered it as *eleos* (Vine et al. 1985:142).

So to properly understand the use of the word *eleos* in this prophecy, one would have to understand the word, as Zacharias would have. As a Jewish priest he would undoubtedly see *eleos* as referring to God’s covenantal faithfulness just as clearly as *hesed* did in the Hebrew. With this in mind, it becomes clear that covenantal fulfilment lay at the heart of the ministry of the One who would follow his son John. Accordingly, the ministry of John the Baptist is to be understood as

one that would prepare the people to be ready for this “messenger of the covenant”.

3.2.5.2 Prepare in the desert

“And the child grew and became strong in spirit; *and he lived in the desert* until he appeared publicly to Israel” (Lk 1:80, NIV, emphasis mine).

Interestingly, though this newborn child is recognized as the one who is to prepare God’s people for covenant renewal, he is not to be raised in Jerusalem, the heart of the Jewish religious establishment. He is the one who will “give knowledge of salvation to His people”, and “give light to those who sit in darkness and the shadow of death”, and yet he is not to be educated by the High Priest, or by the famous rabbinical teachers of his day (Lk 1:77,79). He is the promised messenger of Malachi, who is to make a people ready for the arrival of their Lord, *and yet he finds himself in a wilderness, separated from his people, and everything that his people’s culture values.*

One is not hard pressed to guess as to why John was not brought up by the religious institution of his day. For modern believers, it is easy to stand back and criticize the state of the Jewish religion of John’s day. It is easy to mentally admonish a religious system that John, Jesus, and Paul openly attacked. What is not often as evident, however, is that today’s religious systems are just as vulnerable to the same criticisms faced by Judaism.

“To begin with, Christianity is not a religion; it’s the proclamation of the end of religion. Religion is a human activity dedicated to the job of reconciling God to humanity and humanity to itself. The Gospel, however - the Good News of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ – is the astonishing announcement that God has done the whole work of reconciliation without a scrap of human assistance” (Capon 1996:2).

Despite the way it is commonly interpreted, the New Testament was not declaring that Judaism was the wrong religion. Likewise, the idea that the Jewish system as practised simply needed reform, was not the point that John, Paul, or Jesus were trying to make. *The heart of the New Testament message is that all religious activity is pointless.*

John's time in the wilderness was not to isolate him from the "wrong" religion; it was to keep him completely separate from *religion*. Unlike Abraham and Moses who had to go into the desert to unlearn their religions traditions, John the Baptist was protected from having to ever learn religion in the first place. He was not raised in an environment where he would learn about God from teachers, who had only heard about God from their teachers; rather he would learn to experience the presence of God himself. He did not learn to restrict his time with God to this building or that one; rather he learned to walk with God throughout his day. He was not restricted to hearing God's words through the select teachers of his day; instead he learned to recognize the voice of God on his own.

"Now in the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar, Pontius Pilate being governor of Judea, Herod being tetrarch of Galilee...while Annas and Caiaphas were high priests, *the word of God came to John the son of Zacharias in the wilderness*" (Lk 3:1-2, NKJV, emphasis mine).

This passage names the Roman emperor, the Roman governor of Judea, the Jewish ruler, and the leaders of the Jewish religious system, and yet none of them heard the word of God. Rather, it was received by a man: John the Baptist: someone who had been raised to hear and grasp God's words. The still small voice of God came to, and was heard by, a man who had been set apart in the desert. And this man went forth with the message that God had placed within him during this time in the wilderness.

To begin with, it was a message of repentance and baptism. They were to repent of the exclusive nature of their religion, which taught that they alone were precious to God.

"Do not begin to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father.' For I say to you that God is able to raise up children to Abraham from these stones" (Lk 3:8, NKJV).

As mentioned earlier, God called Abraham out of a land filled with the worship of many gods, so that he could enter into a covenantal relationship with the one true God. Part of that covenant promise that God made, not only stated that Abraham and his offspring would be blessed, but also stated that "through your offspring all

nations on earth will be blessed” (Gen 22:18). However, the Jewish people as a whole had merely focused on themselves as the blessed children of Abraham, in much the same way that popular Christian theology tells us that God will only bless “His children” who are in church, and tithing regularly.

John the Baptist challenged this idea, and called them to repent of their understanding of covenant, which limited God’s blessing to them alone as the “children of Abraham”. For while the God of covenantal faithfulness was uniquely bound to Israel, His pre-existing covenant with creation, and Adam, were and are still in affect. *God’s promise to make man in His image was not limited to the Jewish people, and is not limited to those engaged in the present church establishment.*

And so as the Gospel writers sought to sum up the ministry of John the Baptist, they quoted from Isaiah, and slightly modified it so that it said: “the voice of one crying in the desert: ‘prepare the way of the LORD’” (Mt 3:3, NIV). Perhaps this was done in order to make the quote seem to refer more exactly to John who was crying out in the wilderness. In the Hebrew of Isaiah 40, however, the quote is clearly an example of synonymous parallelism, a technique in Hebrew poetry where “the second or subsequent line repeats or reinforces the sense of the first line” (Fee and Stuart 1982:162).

“A voice of one calling:
‘*In the desert* prepare the way for the LORD;
make straight *in the wilderness* a highway for our God’”
(Is 40:3, NIV, emphasis mine).

Therefore, regardless of the location of the messenger, the message that Isaiah was clearly trying to convey here was “prepare the way for God in the desert.” *The idea of preparing for God in the wilderness is, therefore, not merely coincidental to John’s life, but is in fact the heart of his message to all of Israel.*

The Gospel authors, however, were not the only ones to connect John’s ministry with Old Testament prophecy. When Moses was leading the Hebrews into the wilderness, God spoke to him and said: “See, I am sending an angel ahead of you to guard you along the way and to bring you to the place I have prepared” (Ex 23:20). Then, centuries later when God spoke to Malachi about the future one who

would prepare the way for the LORD, He said: “See, I will send my messenger, who will prepare the way before me: (Mal 3:1). Not only do these two passages appear similar in English, but also in Hebrew, as the word translated as both *messenger* and *angel* is *malak*.⁹ And so, when Jesus confirms the ministry of John the Baptist, He declares: “This is he of whom it is written: ‘Behold, I send My messenger before Your face, who will prepare Your way before You’” (Lk 7:27). By drawing from the language of both texts, Jesus reinforces the idea that, like Moses, John was to lead his people into the desert in order to prepare them for their covenantal destiny.¹⁰

In the same way that Moses had led the Israelites into the wilderness to meet with God centuries earlier, John the Baptist now called out to Israel to join him in the desert. Moses had led his people out to meet with a God of covenantal faithfulness, or *hesed*, who had delivered them from Egypt according to His faithfulness. John was calling the nation out to prepare them to meet with the One that Malachi called “the messenger of the covenant”, the One who would “perform the mercy (*eleos/hesed*) promised to our fathers”, and the One that the world would call Deliverer.

The people of Israel were being called out. They were to leave behind the religious institution, and the self-righteous ideas that it fostered. They were to forsake a culture, which taught them to obey the law, but allowed them to neglect their brother.¹¹ They were to abandon whatever misconceptions they held about God so that they might be prepared to actually meet Him. *They were to forsake all, and run into the wilderness, so that in the midst of nothing, they might receive everything.*

Many responded to this call, travelling out to the wilderness to meet with this prophet who was to prepare them for the One to come. As they did, they encountered a man, and a message, which “produced the first revival recorded in the New Testament” (Baker 1988:127). This *revival in the desert* was not limited in

⁹ In fact, the name Malachi literally means “my messenger”.

¹⁰ I first encountered this comparison of Ex 23:20, Malachi 3:1, Matt. 11:14, and Luke 7:27 in *The Gospel according to Matthew: an introduction and commentary* by France, p.194.

¹¹ John’s testimony about this neglect is found in his advice to the people in Luke 3:11-14.

scope, but rather as in Elijah's day, it was a national restoration. "Then all the land of Judea, and those from Jerusalem, went out to him and were baptized by him in the Jordan River, confessing their sins" (Mk 1:5).

As they responded to John's message, and confessed their sins in the desert, they were baptized in the same wilderness where they had heard His Spirit's call upon their life. They were immersed in the waters of the Jordan, as they washed off the moral decay, and the religious entrapments that had so stifled His voice in their lives

Yet, John himself had spent a lifetime in the desert preparing for "the messenger of the covenant". He did not have the religious baggage that his followers were still trying to unload. He had spent his life listening to and walking with God, and so it comes as little surprise that when an unheralded Galilean carpenter approached him and his followers, only John recognized the One whom he was seeing. John alone realized that Malachi's prophecy was being fulfilled before him. And in keeping with Isaiah's prophecy about his message, John also realized that not only his Jewish brethren, but indeed "all flesh shall see the salvation of God" (Lk 3:6).

"John saw Jesus coming toward him, and said, 'Behold! The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!'" (Jn 1:29, NKJV).

3.2.6 Jesus in the wilderness

As seen earlier, the prophets Isaiah and Malachi had both spoken of one who would prepare the way for God to return to His people. When John the Baptist was born, his father Zacharias prophesied that his newborn son was this forerunner who would: "be called the prophet of the Highest; for you will go before the face of the Lord to prepare His ways" (Lk 1:76, NKJV). Malachi adds that after this Elijah type prophet comes, the Lord Himself will soon follow.

"Then suddenly the Lord you are seeking will come to his temple;
The messenger of the covenant, whom you desire, will come"
(Mal 3:1, NIV).

Again, through the poetic use of Hebrew parallelism, Malachi reinforces not only that the Lord will come, but also that He will come in the role of covenantal

messenger. Zacharias also prophesied about this “messenger of the covenant” who would demonstrate the promised covenantal faithfulness of God to the Israelites (Lk 1:72). So when his son John, who had spent his life in the wilderness, saw Jesus approaching the Jordan River where he was baptizing, he recognized that this was the Lord that he and Israel, and indeed the entire world, was waiting for.

Yet before Jesus would begin his ministry of covenantal restoration, He submitted Himself to the process of baptism. As this baptism was obviously not to deal with some sin on His part, it was most likely done “to identify himself with John’s message and the revival movement it had created” (France 1985:94). Regardless of the reason behind the baptism, once completed, the Spirit of God fell upon Him. “Then Jesus, being filled with the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan *and was led by the Spirit into the wilderness*” (Lk 4:1, NKJV, emphasis mine).

The promised Lord that Malachi had spoken of had arrived, but instead of going directly to His temple, He found Himself being led by the Spirit into the wilderness. Rather than revealing Himself to a nation that waited for His appearance, or even showing Himself to the leaders of their religious system, He chose to be obedient to the heavenly prompting that called Him into the desert.

3.2.6.1 The first temptation

Once in the wilderness, Jesus is confronted by the Lucifer; the same Lucifer that had tempted Adam and Eve in the Garden. “Now when the tempter came to Him, he said, ‘If You are the Son of God, command that these stones become bread’ (Mt 4:3). This first temptation comes in a form that challenges the very identity of Jesus. “If You are the Son of God” is a phrase the questions the revelation that Jesus had just received at His baptism, when the heavens opened and God said “This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased” (Mt 3:17, NKJV). Yet it is not only a question about identity. Jesus has just fasted for forty days, and is hungry, when the devil tells Him to change the stones into bread. So

in addition to this temptation challenging Jesus' identity, it is also posed in such a way as to call into question the idea of God's provision for Him.

Jesus replied by quoting from Deuteronomy: "Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God" (Mt 4:4, NKJV). Earlier we saw the significance of this quote within its historical setting. God was bringing a generation of Hebrews, who had just spent forty years in the desert, into the Promised Land. During that time He fed them with manna so that they would know that their provision was secured by His covenant with them. In other words, it is far more important to live by a complete trust in God's word, than it is to focus solely on one's next meal.

As the "messenger of the covenant" Jesus was confirming this implicit need to trust the Covenant Maker. He was not to be more concerned with providing His own food than He was with obeying the will of God. And He most certainly was not to worry about going outside of the will of God simply to prove His identity to anyone.

3.2.6.2 The second temptation

In His next temptation, Jesus was taken to the very top of the Jerusalem temple, where again Lucifer challenged His identity as the Son of God. This time he quoted Old Testament passages that showed that God had sent angels to protect His Son, and for that reason, Jesus could jump off the temple and remain uninjured if He truly was God's Son. Again Jesus quoted Deuteronomy saying, "You shall not tempt the LORD your God" (Mt 4:5-7, NKJV).

This verse is taken from Deuteronomy 6:17, where it was part of an admonishment to not behave as they did at Massah, an event that is recorded back in Exodus. After the first week of miraculous manna, the Hebrews in the desert began to quarrel with Moses because they had no water to drink. They had only begun to receive the provision of the LORD, and had not yet fully perceived His commitment to Him. By grumbling about their lack of water, instead of trusting that the LORD would provide, they were said to be testing the LORD. It was then that the LORD told Moses to strike the rock, so that water might flow out of it. However, the place that might have been named "Provision" as the LORD

ultimately provided water for His children there, was instead called *Massah* which in English means *Testing*.

So again, Jesus' response was based on a passage that reveals that man must trust in God's covenantal faithfulness. To demand proof of His commitment is to miss the joy and peace that come through faith in His word. Had Jesus jumped, we would of course have a record of angels miraculously lowering Him safely to the ground, just as we have a record of God miraculously providing water to the Israelites. But, we would also have a record of God's Son stepping out of His authority to test the faithfulness of His Father's word. Instead, the Biblical record reveals that in covenantal relationship one's actions are to be made in response to His covenantal love, rather than in some attempt to test His faithfulness, and have Him prove His love.

3.2.6.3 The third temptation

Finally, the devil took Jesus to a mountaintop, and showing Him all of the kingdoms of the world, said that he would give it all to Jesus if He would only bow down to worship him. This temptation cut to the very core of Jesus' destiny. He was called to take back all authority that the devil had. He was called to be the King of Kings and the Lord of Lords. It was not only His mission, but it was also His identity. Yet, He was called to accomplish all of this within the will of His Father.

“Then Jesus said to him, ‘Away with you, Satan! For it is written, ‘You shall worship the LORD your God and Him only you shall serve’” (Mt 4:10, NKJV).

One can only speculate as to whether the offer from Satan was an honest one. Did he really possess those kingdoms, and would he have actually given them away as proposed, are questions better left for others to wrestle with. What is clear, however, is that Jesus' response demonstrated that individual destiny is to be accomplished through one's relationship with God, and not outside of it. Man is to worship the Father, and regardless of whether Satan's offer was true, the Father would not have His Son worship another regardless of the prize at stake. *Like Jesus, all Christians are called to accomplish their destiny within the boundaries of a covenantal relationship with the Father.*

To demonstrate this, Jesus deflected each of the temptations with quotations taken from the book of Deuteronomy. In addition to the specific relevance for each text cited, it must be kept in mind that the book of Deuteronomy itself has been written in the form of an ancient treaty (Craigie 1976:20-24, 36-45). Not only is the text of Deuteronomy composed in this form, but as seen earlier, the story itself is of Moses re-establishing the terms of the covenant with God to the Israelites before they crossed the Jordan to occupy their Promised Land. *By repeatedly drawing from this covenantal document, Jesus, as the “messenger of the Covenant”, has demonstrated that the answer to religious temptation is found within a covenantal relationship.*

The last of these responses is directed at Satan’s invitation to worship. This command to love and worship God only, which is foundational to the covenant relationship, is a love that is merely a reciprocation of God’s pre-existing, and ongoing, covenantal faithfulness. And it is within the confines of this relationship that man is to discover his destiny.

3.2.6.4 Destiny

God has created man for a purpose, and that purpose is to be grasped and fulfilled by walking with Him. Of course, the destiny of our Lord was clearly laid out before Him as He walked between the torn animal pieces. In that action He committed Himself to a vicious fate that was the cross. In that death, Jesus did finally perform the ultimate act of *eleos* or *hesed*, *mercy* or *covenantal faithfulness*, just as Zacharias had prophesied. In that act He was fully aware of the covenantal oath He had sworn to Abraham. And even beyond that, He recalled the creation promise to “make man in Our image” (Gen 1:26).

Additionally, Jesus was the “messenger of the covenant”. As such, His words and actions always pointed to the reality of God’s unconditional love. For Jesus, the promise to make man in His image was not only the foundation for God’s faithfulness, but in regards to religion, this one promise superseded all other laws. Accordingly, He healed people on the Sabbath, despite the objections of the

religious establishment, who were more concerned with their understanding of the law, than they were about their fellow man.

The prime example of this covenantal attitude, however, is found in Mark's Gospel, when Jesus was asked for healing by a leper.

"Then Jesus, moved with compassion, stretched out His hand and touched him, and said to him, 'I am willing; be cleansed.' As soon as He had spoken, immediately the leprosy left him, and he was cleansed" (Mk 1:40-42, NKJV).

Now according to Leviticus 5:1-5, it is a sin to touch a person with leprosy, for they are "unclean", and according to 2 Corinthians 5:21, Jesus never sinned. And yet the above passage states that Jesus did touch the leper *before* he was healed. So how was this not a sin?

The answer of course rests in the type of covenantal understanding that Jesus, as the messenger of the covenant, possessed. God's primary promise to man was to make him in His image. After the "Fall," that promise continued on as a promise of restoration. As we began to see in the Garden of Eden, when God appeared as a majestic storm, that work of restoration has many different faces. In Sinai, that work continued over forty years as God both disciplined His children through a desert lifestyle, and provided for them miraculously so that their clothes never wore out.

The end result of all of this was to remind man of both the love and the power of God. Man is to recognize his dependence upon God, not only when it comes to provision, but more importantly when it comes to salvation. Man was given the law so that in the hopelessness of failed attempts to meet its high standards, he might realize the impossibility of "becoming like God" through his own efforts. In that manner, the law too was simply part of God's restorative plan.

So when that law would apparently limit Jesus from healing the leper, it was superseded. It would be foolish for God to allow the law, which is only one part of His vast plan of restoration, to exclude Him from performing other aspects of it, such as a restorative, healing touch extended to a leper. In other words, *the covenant of promise will always have supremacy over the covenant of administration, which is but one of its tools.*

Modern Christianity must learn to peer back into this 1st century healing, and come to understand that all humans are “lepers” (spiritually speaking). According to the law, no one has any right to expect a salvation touch from the Saviour...and nothing can be done to earn such a touch. And yet, because of His covenantal faithfulness, God reaches out and begins the restoration process anyway.

3.3 Summary

The God of *Hesed* has established an unconditional covenant with humanity. Understanding His nature, and the nature of the covenant, is foundational to authentic relationship with God. Consequently, when His people have strayed from that revelation and begun to rely upon religion instead of His faithfulness, He has stepped in to remove their religion as a prelude to restoring their understanding of *hesed*. As the Biblical record demonstrates, the Lord has typically led His People into the wilderness, where this restoration through revelation can occur, away from the camps of tradition. If this study is correct in its assertion that today’s Church is in need of just such a restoration, then it is plausible that a similar call to a *revival in the desert* is to be expected, and a similar revelation of God anticipated.

CHAPTER 4
**GUIDELINES FOR TODAY'S CHURCH IN THE RESTORATION OF MAN'S
COVENANTAL RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD: RECOGNIZING AND
PARTICIPATING IN GOD'S PLAN THROUGH *REVIVAL IN THE DESERT*- AN
AMERICAN PERSPECTIVE**

4.1 Introduction

In Chapter three it was asserted that through His covenantal relationship with man, God has obligated Himself to remove all obstacles to authentic relationship. The fulfilment of this promise has been demonstrated throughout the Biblical text as He has repeatedly liberated His people from religion, by drawing them out into the wilderness in order to bring them a fresh revelation. This study has labelled this concept *Revival in the Desert*, as it signifies both the restoration process and the location in which it so often occurred.

Therefore, if God is committed to liberating His people from religion through *Revival in the Desert*, and if Chapter two's assertion, that today's Church is mired in religious traditions, is correct, then one should conclude that another such revival must be on the way. This chapter will seek to explore the Biblical record, and the historical record of previous revivals, in order to provide practical guidelines for today's church in the restoration of the covenantal relationship with God. Answers to the following questions will be included in the discussion:

- Is God already preparing the Church for another revival?
- Who is likely to embrace the next Revival in the Desert?
- Do signs of this revival already exist?
- What will this revival look like?
- Will there be opposition to this revival?
- How should the Church respond to this move of God?

4.2 A Prelude to Revival: Removing the Roadblocks to Revival

4.2.1 The *churched* and the *un-churched*

In Chapter two it was asserted that though the Early church began as a community of proclamation that was held together by the common bond of their salvation experience, as the church grew into more of an organization, the common denominators of faith and proclamation were replaced by doctrinal adherence, as the church sought to protect itself from the influence of false doctrine.

“The definition of a Christian increasingly became more a matter of who intellectually conformed to the creeds and councils and less a matter of who trusted in God and Jesus...” (DeArteaga 1996:65).

In an effort to maintain its continued existence, the institutional church defined itself and its membership by a strict moral code, and an equally strict statement of faith. It created these organizational safeguards not as a result of obedience to the voice of God, but rather as an act of self-preservation. *In other words, it stepped out of covenantal reliance upon God in order to ensure its own destiny, and in so doing demanded that its members do the same.*

As the church exchanged its obedience to God for continued viability, its focus shifted away from the very foundation of its existence. The “message of the Cross” was that God has been, is, and always will be faithful to His covenant with man. Obedience to His voice in a covenantal relationship is supposed to stem from this recognition that in His faithfulness, He had orchestrated salvation, even before mankind was faithful to Him. This primary concept of His covenantal faithfulness, however, became lost in a sea of debates over “right” doctrine, and the “Messenger of the Covenant” (identified as Jesus in the previous chapter) had His covenantal message lost by those to whom it had been entrusted.

Without the foundation of covenant, religion replaced relationship and began to thrive. God’s will was no longer to be discerned by the individual believer through a living relationship with their Maker, but rather was to be determined and revealed solely by the institutional church. As time progressed, the proclamation of

grace became subverted by a reliance on performance, and one's standing before God was determined by one's relationship to the church.

Unfortunately, many of the same religious ideas dominate the institutional church today. In fact, the concept of linking one's standing before God to one's relationship to church has become so reinforced, that today people are often referred to as either being *churched* or *un-churched*. And yet, while these categories may be informative as to how one spends one's Sundays, these labels in no way accurately reflect whether a person in either camp is actually in a covenantal relationship with God.

In the 1730's, a revival known as the Great Awakening occurred in North America. One of its most prominent evangelists was John Wesley, and in a letter defending the revival he wrote the following regarding church attendance:

“Does this attendance at church produce the love of God and man? I answer, ‘Sometimes it does, and sometimes it does not.’ I myself thus attended them for many years, and yet am conscious myself that during that whole time, I had no more of the love of God than a stone! And I know many hundreds, perhaps thousands, of serious persons who are ready to testify the same thing” (Weakley 1987: 211).

By his own admission, Wesley was declaring that being “churched” had not in any way ensured or promoted a relationship with God. And yet, even as many in his day, and many nowadays, would be ready to testify to the same thing, a strong tendency remains to label people as either churched or un-churched. As a result, many today continue to mistakenly identify the institutional church, and those within it, as the Body of Christ.

When the early church named itself the *ekklesia*, or *assembly*, it was a way of linking or identifying their delivered community with the one that had been liberated from Egypt so many centuries earlier.¹² Israel had been delivered by the covenantal faithfulness of God, and now this new Christian community had seen the manifestation of that same faithfulness on the Cross. Unfortunately, over time this community of faith and proclamation became replaced by an organization of self-preservation.

¹² See discussion on *ekklesia* in Chapter Two.

However, it should be understood that regardless of the historical changes in the mindset of the church, only those who have actually responded to the good news of God's faithfulness, and their deliverance, are truly part of the *ekklesia*. While it is easy for most to realize that God's view of the Church does not include buildings, one should go beyond that to realize that He also looks beyond church membership and congregational participation when discerning His own body.

Only those who have recognized what God has done for them, and consequently have entered into fellowship with Him, are currently a part of the true Church. Whether a person is in a fellowship that meets on Sunday or not, or whether a person has been labelled as either *churched* or *un-churched*, are issues of secondary importance. *The one true defining aspect of their life is whether or not they have already begun the wonderful journey of a covenantal relationship that promises to bring them into a place where they are fully restored to the image of God.*

Unfortunately, many believers today are submitting to a process of re-socialization rather than to a covenantal relationship, in order to become more "Christ-like". The problem with this process of re-socialization is that through it, *individuals are conformed by religious ideas and practice into simply an image of religious conformity.* As the new convert submits to community standards, his or her behaviour and beliefs are eventually conformed into matching those of the community.

"God is almost defined as the one who is encountered in the church or the one in whom the church believes" (Niebuhr 1960:58).

God, however, has made it abundantly clear that the only image that Christians are to be conformed to is His. To that end, He seeks a Church that is made up of people, who rejoice that His faithfulness is eternal, rejoice in His finished work on the cross, and trust in the promise that He is conforming them to His own image.

With this in mind, let us re-examine the two labels: *churched* and *un-churched*. While these are generally reserved to mean Christians and non-Christians respectively, church attendance is in no way an accurate means of

determining the status of one's relationship with God. It could also be added that one who is *churched*, is almost certainly to have undergone some form of re-socialization that has stressed conformity to religious ideals held by the group he or she has joined.

Whether through the counsel of friends or through some form of formal membership classes, those who are *churched* have been influenced to believe that certain understandings of Scripture are to be preferred over others, and that some moral actions are to be preferred over others. Regardless of whether these beliefs are accurate or not, the problem exists in the fact that the individual ends up conforming his or her thoughts and actions to those of the group until each one becomes conformed to the group, instead of being conformed to Christ. And so, if God is looking for people who are ready to walk with Him in Covenant relationship, who would He look towards first: the *churched* or the *un-churched*?

Looking back over the Old Testament, it seems that the two most significant figures, Abraham and Moses, were both raised in polytheistic cultures where the true God was not recognized. For this reason, they could be considered as *un-churched*, because they had not been taught about God. On the other hand, they had been raised in religious environments that taught them all about the works of religious performance, so they could also be considered as *churched*.

In the end, however, both of them were called into the desert and away from the social conformity, in which they had been brought up. They should, therefore, be referred to in a way that reflects both their exposure to religious conformity, as well as their eventual separation from it. Perhaps, along with the *churched* and the *unchurched*, there should exist a new label for those who have been called out of religious conformity and into a covenantal relationship with God.

4.2.2 The *de-churched*: the process of *de-churching* in the wilderness

Hovestol (1997:43) uses the term *de-churched* to refer to those who:

“were once active church members...they have now, however, become burned out, bummed out, and in some cases, missing from the church...Some of them have chosen a lifestyle that is hostile to Christianity and have thus abandoned the church. Others are disgusted with religion. Some still long for a more meaningful religious experience; others simply do not care anymore.”

This study, however, will focus more specifically on those *de-churched* who are attempting to remove religion from their lives and replace it with authentic relationship. Consequently, one does not necessarily have to, in fact, leave church to be considered *de-churched*. Rather, it is the position of this study that a person who is *de-churched* is merely engaged in separating himself or herself from the process of being conformed to the religious standards of their church community, as each one seeks to walk with and be conformed to God alone. Therefore, this study presupposes that it is possible for one to be delivered from religion, while simultaneously called to live and serve in a religious environment.

One example of this would be Saul of Tarsus, who was “a Hebrew of the Hebrews; concerning the law, a Pharisee...concerning the righteousness which is in the law, blameless” (Phil 3:5-6, NKJV). Here was a man who was completely conformed to his religious community. And yet, once he encounters Jesus on the road to Damascus, he enters a relationship in which he responds directly to the Lord’s individual word to him, and not simply to the community’s understanding of God’s word. And it is within this new relationship that Paul feels led to the desert of Arabia (Gal 1:16).

“Why did Paul go away to Arabia? A common answer is that he went into the desert to reflect on his new situation, perhaps to commune with God in the vicinity of ‘Horeb, the mount of God’, where Moses and Elijah had communed with Him in days gone by” (Bruce 1978:81).

Regardless of his reasons for entering the desert, it is clear that when Paul emerges from it, the religious conformity, which had once consumed him, has been abandoned by a heart that now counts “all things loss for the excellence of the

knowledge of Christ” (Phil 3:8, NKJV). Yet despite this liberation from his religious past, Paul continued to minister in the Jewish synagogues throughout his missionary endeavours.¹³

Yet for many of today’s *de-churched*, it is not so simple. Christian communities claim that one should abandon all for God, and that’s just what they would expect from someone who has recently given himself or herself over to God. Family, culture, and previous religious ideas should all be abandoned in favour of a covenantal relationship with God. We expect it of Muslims and Hindus, and we celebrate when we hear their stories of people forsaking everything from their past life, in order to pursue Christ. And yet at the same time, while the Church teaches that all forms of religious culture are to be abandoned for a union with Christ, the one glaring exception to this teaching is Christianity’s own religious culture.

The modern church gladly embraces those who have a testimony about how they have forsaken their past religious ideas; except for those whose past ideas have been “Christian” in nature. Imagine the reaction to someone standing up and declaring that they were leaving the church in order to pursue a real relationship with God. Unlike the converted Hindu or Muslim, there would be no celebration over their decision to abandon all in their pursuit of Christ. A more likely reaction would be that they would be judged for stepping away from the fellowship and “protective covering” of the church. Perhaps, because people know what the response would be, the congregations never get to hear that declaration. But people are leaving their churches nevertheless.

4.2.3 Secularisation and revival: an American perspective

In addition to the exodus of individuals from congregations in America, the nation as a whole has found itself straying from institutional religion. In fact, the entire society in America has been trending this way for some time, as it has become thoroughly engrossed in the process of *secularisation*. Zacharias (1997:23) quotes Os Guinness’ definition of secularisation as “the process by

¹³ Acts 13:5, 13:14, 14:1, 17:1-2, 17:10, 17:17, 18:4, 18:19, 18:26, 19:8.

which religious ideas, institutions, and interpretations have lost their social significance.”

While the United States is still said to be a “Christian nation”, the religious ideas that helped to form this nation are gradually losing their hold. Schools that were once founded in order to promote religion, now vigorously attack it (Zacharias 1997:26). Accordingly, as religion has declined, so have the moral values of our nation. Yet, is there something positive that can be taken from this situation?

When surveying the history of revivals, the following pattern emerges: “The majority of the revivals of the Bible, and the majority of those in the Christian era, have followed periods of religious decline...” (Baker 1988:39). In fact, those who write about revival often cite that a decline in religion is one of the primary indicators for a coming revival. For many, this fact might seem quite obvious, for without the decline, a revival would not be necessary. But what if, rather than viewing revival as a necessary successor to religious decline, religious decline was instead seen as the necessary precursor for revival? What if, instead of saying “a revival is sadly needed in this land...the religious life is low” (Baker 1988:29), the church came to realize that “a revival can happen now *because* the religious life is low”.

In a lecture entitled “When to Expect a Revival,” Charles Finney makes the following statement:

“What is growing in grace? Is it hearing sermons and getting some new ideas about religion? No, not at all. The Christian, who does this, and nothing else, will grow worse and worse, more and more hardened. Finally, it will be nearly impossible to rouse him” (Finney 1984:17).

Finney understood that religion actually hampered one’s response to a move of the Holy Spirit. And time and time again this has proved true, as the most vigorous opponent to revival is usually the religious establishment.

“Early Methodism was a great charismatic revival that occurred outside the established churches *and was opposed by most of them*” (Weakley 1987:13, emphasis mine).

“After an initial period of goodwill and support, *most of the clergy turned against the Awakening* as a dangerous deviation from sound doctrine” (DeArteaga 1996:29, emphasis mine).

Historically, religious institutions have served as a roadblock to revivals, just as surely as religion has been at odds with covenantal relationship in the lives of individuals. Before God could cover Adam and Eve with His sacrificial animal skins, He had to appear as a storm and strip off their fig leaves! Before He walked through the animal pieces to form a covenant with Abraham, God caused him to sleep, so that Abraham would not walk that same path and take on the burden of legal performance. *And today He is stripping our society of its religious notions so that it might be better prepared to receive Him.*

Therefore, it is this study’s assertion that *religious decline not only precedes a revival, but is a divinely ordained part of the necessary preparation for one.* The manner by which Biblical figures were *de-churched* in the wilderness is very similar to the process of *secularization* that is going on in our society today. That “religious ideas, institutions, and interpretations” are all losing ground in America today is an inevitable conclusion. But the church’s reaction to this news reflects its lack of recognition of God’s desire for a covenantal relationship, for as long as believers continue to depend on these religious “ideas,” they will never truly depend on the God of the covenant.

If today’s Church continues to accept that one has to believe a certain doctrine, or behave a certain way, or abstain from certain things, or produce certain fruit in order to be a Christian, then they are placing their hope in a person’s will, and not in the expressed will of our Father. God has called on man to abandon his faith in all of these things, regardless of what good value they might seem to carry. We are to “count it all as loss” and replace it solely with a living and active relationship with Him.

Similarly, as long as ideas of moral or religious performance continue to dominate a society, it too will tend to base its standing before God on its own merits, and not His. For instance, soon after the United States faced the horror of the September 11th attacks, the religious voices within the nation were crying out

that: the attack was permitted by God as a judgment against the nation. They declared that though America had been founded as a “Christian nation”, its modern day sins of abortion and homosexuality had made it just like the other “god-less” nation, and that consequently God was now taking away His divine protection. *The inherent flaw in that line of thinking is the pride that allows them to believe that this nation was ever really good enough to earn God’s favour or His protection.*

The God of the Covenant demands that this attitude be done away with. Going back to the book of Deuteronomy, when He established His covenant with a new generation of Israelites who were about to occupy the Promised Land, God said the following:

“Understand, then, that it is not because of your righteousness that the LORD your God is giving you this good land to possess, for you are a stiff-necked people” (Deut 9:6, NIV).

“But it was because the LORD loved you and kept the oath he swore to your forefathers that he brought you out with a mighty hand and redeemed you from the land of slavery” (Deut 7:8, NIV).

The above passages clearly show that the religious foundation for a society should be God’s covenantal faithfulness, rather than the righteousness of the people. “We must inspire our society toward Christ rather than attempt merely to control the people with law” (Frangipane 1991:89). Yet as the Church tries to re-establish this society as a Christian one, they try to instil Christian values as the cornerstone for the nation. However, when the unbelieving population of a nation is asked to abide by Christian values, they are in essence being asked to live up to the responsibilities of a covenantal relationship, without becoming involved in the intimacy of that relationship. *In other words, they are being asked to fulfil God’s demands with their flesh, without ever joining with Him in the Spirit.*

In addition, if the Church believes that the United States has been punished for its sinful ways, then one should conclude that if the nation would simply perform this outward compliance of Christian values, then God would be more pleased with its moral society. And that is once again merely religion. It is religion that tells a man that God is pleased with outward compliance, and it is that same religious spirit that also teaches that a nation can find the favour of God through the works

of the flesh. Of course, religious people will point out that God was constantly judging Israel for its unfaithfulness, and that He is merely prepared to do the same to America. But looking back at the Old Testament, what was the reason that God gave for the judgments that He pronounced over Israel? This topic will be dealt with in the next section.

4.2.4 God's judgement of religion

The book of Jeremiah gives wonderful insights into this process of judgement, as over and over God laments that His people have forsaken the covenant, and that they, therefore, must face the judgments of covenant. Yet near the end of the book, God reveals the ultimate purpose behind all of the punishments that He is to inflict upon Israel:

“So you will be my people, and I will be your God” (Jer 30:22 NIV).

And in the following verses Jeremiah further explains this idea:

“See, *the storm of the LORD* will burst out in wrath, a driving wind swirling down on the heads of the wicked. The fierce anger of the LORD will not turn back until he fully accomplishes the purposes of his heart. In days to come you will understand this. ‘At that time,’ declares the LORD, ‘I will be the God of all the clans of Israel and they will be my people’ (Jer 30:23, NIV, emphasis mine).

God was not judging Israel for moral failure, but was instead judging them for falling out of relationship with Himself. *As such, the primary function of His punishments was to bring about a complete restoration of relationship.* To that end, God can again be seen coming in as a storm, as in Eden, to strip away any barriers between Himself and covenantal relationship with His people. The goal of that covenantal discipline is realized “at that time” when the relationship between God and His people is fully restored.

Interestingly, that fulfilment is not realized in the holy temple, or even in the city of Jerusalem. Rather, Jeremiah makes it clear in the very next verse that those who make it through the punishment phase “*will find favor in the desert*” (Jer 31:2, NIV, emphasis mine).

Jeremiah's description of "the storm of the LORD" is not only reminiscent of God's act of covenantal restoration in Eden, but it is also similar to God's dealings with Job. In the book of that same name, we read of how the LORD allows Satan to bring all types of troubles and travails into Job's life. In short order He loses his family and his fortune, and is even afflicted with painful sores all over his body. The majority of the book then consists of a theological discourse between Job and his religious friends: religious, for they adhere to the belief that all trouble comes from sin, and consequently they keep telling Job to repent of the sin that has brought these calamitous events down upon him.

Yet Scripture tells us that Job was "blameless and upright," (Job 1:1, NIV). Job, knowing that his punishments were not due to any moral failures, even challenges his friends about this saying "How many wrongs and sins have I committed? Show me my offense and my sin" (Job 13:23, NIV). Finally, near the end of the book, a younger man named Elihu jumps into the conversation and points out that Job is guilty, simply because God is greater than man (Job 33:12). *In other words, even man's own goodness comes from His covenantal faithfulness; so to argue that one does not deserve punishment because one is morally upright, is to fall into pride.* Elihu's argument continues that it is God's right and duty to a man, to use whatever means necessary to "keep him from pride, to preserve his soul from the pit" (Job 33:17-18, NIV).

As Elihu concludes his message, a storm picks up, and he spontaneously begins to praise God for His faithfulness to strip us of our false notions regarding our own goodness.

"At this my heart pounds and leaps from its place. Listen! Listen to the roar of his voice, to the rumbling that comes from his mouth. He unleashes his lightning beneath the whole heaven and sends it to the ends of the earth. After that comes the sound of his roar; he thunders with his majestic voice. When his voice resounds he holds nothing back. God's voice thunders in marvellous ways; he does things beyond our understanding...*So that all men he has made may know his work, he stops every man from his labour*" (Job 37:1-7, NIV, emphasis mine).

Elihu's speech not only reveals God as a storm, but the purpose behind that divine self-revelation as well. *His intent is to stop the religious works of men, so that they will be able to comprehend His own covenantal work on their behalf.* Just as in Eden, He declares His glory, so that man will stop attempting to achieve it on his own.

Later in the same chapter, Elihu again sums up this message about God's actions by saying that "in his justice and great righteousness, he does not oppress" (Job 37:23, NIV). In the Hebrew faith, the phrase "God's righteousness" referred to His covenantal faithfulness (Wright 1997:96). Therefore, Elihu is basically saying that whatever God has to do to save man from himself, is still part of God's faithfulness to that man, and, therefore, is still just, and is not merely to be viewed as oppressive punishment.

Finally, Elihu finishes, and then, as if on cue, God makes an appearance on the scene. "Then the LORD answered Job *out of the storm*" (Job 38:1, NIV, emphasis mine). As He speaks, God begins to strip away Job's sense of self-righteousness:

"Where were you when I laid the earth's foundation?" (Job 38:4, NIV).

"Have you ever given orders to the morning, or shown the dawn its place?" (Job 38:12, NIV).

"Have you journeyed to the springs of the sea or walked in the recess of the deep?" (Job 38:16, NIV).

God did not ask Job why he wasn't behaving more morally. He did not question him about his tithes and offerings. He simply revealed Himself more fully, so that in so doing, Job would see himself more clearly as well. Each question that He posed to Job, stripped away more of the "fig leaves," which had been knitted together into a garment of self-righteousness. And in the end this process brings about the desired result, as Job, like Adam and Eve before him, comes to understand the gulf that lies between him and his Creator.

"My ears had heard of you but now my eyes have seen you. Therefore I despise myself and repent in dust and ashes" (Job 42:5-6, NIV).

The self-revelation of God had, as intended, also served to bring man a greater revelation of himself. Job no longer viewed himself as righteous, even though he was morally blameless and upright. He had had an encounter with the Living God, and was consequently changed, like the Apostle Paul would be centuries later, from a man who trusted in his own goodness into a man who counted all of his own goodness as loss, for the greatness of God.

4.2.5 The call to the wilderness

And yet turning back to the United States, there are many who, like the religious friends of Job, keep telling society that its problems are due to worldly sin, and that if we would simply perform better, the circumstances of the nation would improve. *However, God has made it abundantly clear that He is not moved by religious performance or outward conformity.* Even in the Old Testament it was God's desire that His people would: "Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength" (Deut 6:5, NIV), and that they should "act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God" (Mic 6:8, NIV).

From the very beginning, God's desire has been for a relationship, not performance. And yet for whatever reason, mankind repeatedly turns to religion, and in so doing abandons its covenantal relationship with its Maker. Fortunately, however, God is determined to maintain His promise of covenantal restoration, regardless of what religious roadblocks are placed in His way. He promises to come in as a storm and stop man from his works so that he will be able to receive Him, and His covenantal work on the Cross. *And these seasons, when God comes into the life of a person and saves him from his own religious works, is in the truest sense, merely a prelude to revival.*

Abraham's call to the desert led him out of a polytheistic society where the gods demanded sacrifices of men. And during his season in the wilderness, he was prepared to enter into a relationship with a God who offered Himself as a sacrifice for men. Likewise, Moses and Paul were led into the desert where they would be stripped of the religious ideas of Egypt and Judaism. All three of these

men became *de-churched* in a sense, as the LORD removed their religious tendencies in order to prepare them for revival.

In the same manner, there are currently many who, like these three, are being called out of religion and into the wilderness. To be honest there are many who have left, and as yet have not even begun to pursue a relationship with God. As Hovestol noted, many are merely *running from* the hypocrisy or the condemnation of their congregation, and are not yet “*running to*” anything better. Yet Moses himself was at first only running away from Egypt, without any real sense of what was waiting for him in the wilderness. And like Moses, who did not hear God’s voice for forty years, many may not truly hear God for some time. Yet for these who have already begun to run from religion, there is only one other destiny: relationship. And the fact that they have had enough of the first option means that their own hearts are already being prepared to receive the second.

And at the same time, the people of America need to recognize that their nation itself is becoming *de-churched* through the process of *secularization*. While religious leaders are wrong to suggest outward observance of religion and morality will save a nation, they are absolutely correct in observing that compliance with and adherence to Christian values and ideas is in strong decline in America. Yet as suggested earlier, this process of America falling away from its Christian heritage may actually be viewed as a divine preparation for revival.

The United States is now in a season where the roadblocks to revival are being removed. Religion is being abandoned as, not only individuals, but indeed an entire society is being drawn into the wilderness. This society is becoming less and less concerned with religious performance, and in so doing it is becoming more and more ready for a covenantal relationship with God. *As such, this time is America’s prelude to revival.*

4.3 *Revival in the Desert: Recognizing the Faithfulness of God*

The religious mindset that is fostered in the institutional church is clearly an obstacle to the work of God, for a man cannot simultaneously depend upon his own works and those of God. He cannot learn to lean upon the “righteousness of God”, which is expressed in His covenantal faithfulness, while he continues to assert his own self-righteousness. Because of this, God must do away with one’s sense of righteousness, through the process of revelation, so that one might be better able to enter into a relationship of dependency upon Him. And as was seen with Job, He is willing to go to any length to save people from themselves, and bring them back into a place of restoration.

In addition, it was suggested that: if a nation is also to walk in a relationship with God, then it too needs to be rescued from religion. Unfortunately, however, the institutional church continues to promote religious values to a nation that is not in a relationship with God, thereby erecting even more barricades to true belief. *If one truly believes that “a man cannot be saved by his own works” then one should not continue to tell one’s nation otherwise.*

Fortunately, it appears that God has already begun to dismantle many such religious strongholds. The process of *secularization* seems to have taken hold of America and in so doing has decreased the status of religion in its society. Consequently, it is the assertion of this study that American society is currently experiencing a prelude to revival: a divinely ordered season in which God is preparing the nation to receive Him. During this time its entire society is entering the wilderness, as it leaves behind the religious culture of its past. Yet, as it journeys into the desert, how can one be sure that God is there, and that the covenant relationship is His goal?

The history of the Bible is full of men that have been led into the desert so that they might enter into relationship with the LORD. Yet as has already been seen, this process has not been restricted to individuals. After Moses had lived in the desert, he led Israel out from Egypt and into the wilderness in order for God to express His covenantal faithfulness to His children. Centuries later Elijah would again call this nation out to the wilderness so that the LORD could reveal Himself

on Mt. Carmel and deliver them from the religion of Baalism. *In both cases God used self-revelation in an effort to defeat religion and promote relationship, and in both cases He chose to accomplish this feat in the desert.*

4.3.1 The imagery of *Revival in the Desert*: the Prophetic books

Yet going beyond the historical books of the Bible to the prophetic books, one finds that the prophets have also spoken on the subjects of revival, covenant relationship, and the wilderness. As seen in the last chapter, Jeremiah spoke of the “storm of the LORD” coming in to accomplish the desires of His heart. Now while he was specifically addressing the Babylonian captivity that Israel would have to endure as a result of abandoning its covenantal reliance upon God, it is clear that the purpose of God’s storm was not merely punishment, but restoration. Consequently, the LORD makes it clear, using covenantal language, that once the season was over, He would again be their God and they would be His people (Jer 30:22-31:1). And again, the LORD makes clear the location for the re-establishment of this relationship, as He declares that these people “will find favor in the desert” (Jer 31:2, NIV).

The book of Isaiah is also full of the imagery of revival in the wilderness:

“The desert and the parched land will be glad; the wilderness will rejoice and blossom. Like the crocus, it will burst into bloom; It will rejoice greatly and shout for joy” (Is 35:1-2, NIV).

“Then will the eyes of the blind be opened and the ears of the deaf unstopped. Then will the lame leap like a deer, and the mute tongue shout for joy. Water will gush forth in the wilderness and streams in the desert. The burning sand will become a pool, the thirsty ground bubbling springs” (Is 35:5-7, NIV).

Yet while Isaiah is clear that healing and restoration, which are aspects of the covenant, will occur during this desert renewal, there is no specific mention of a covenant in these passages.

Ezekiel, however, helps us to tie it all together in a passage that demonstrates that the blessings of God are an integral aspect of His covenant relationship with man.

“I will make a covenant of peace with them and rid the land of wild beasts so that they may live in the desert and sleep in the forests in safety. I will bless them and the places surrounding my hill. I will send down showers in season; there will be showers of blessing...then they will know that I, the LORD their God, am with them and that they, the house of Israel, are my people...” (Ez 34:25-31, NIV, emphasis mine).

Although in this passage God uses blessings instead of Jeremiah’s storm of revelation, the end result - God’s restoration of the covenantal relationship with man - remains the same.

Yet perhaps the most compelling evidence placing covenantal restoration in the desert comes from the book of Hosea. In the second chapter of this prophetic book, God reveals that His people have been unfaithful, and that they have left Him in order to worship Baal. Yet while He initially speaks of punishing the nation, midway through the chapter He abruptly changes tone and says:

“Therefore I am now going to allure her; I will lead her into the desert and speak tenderly to her...I will remove the names of Baals from her lips...In that day I will make a covenant for them with the beasts of the field and the birds of the air and the creatures that move along the ground...so that all may lie down in safety” (Hos 2:14-18, NIV, emphasis mine).

Notice that God’s plan is to lead His people into the desert to speak to them, so that He might remove their religious confessions from them. This is again the same process that is seen with Israel at other points in her history, as well as in the lives of other individuals that He has dealt with. Notice too that the same imagery from Ezekiel is repeated here as a covenant is made so that there will be safety to lie down and rest. But again, this passage goes beyond Ezekiel’s vision, as God presents Israel as His bride.

*“I will betroth you to me forever; I will betroth you in righteousness and justice, in love (*hesed*) and compassion. I will betroth you in faithfulness...I will say to those called ‘Not my people’, ‘You are my people’; and they will say, ‘You are my God’”* (Hos 2:19-20, 23, NIV).

The word *love* used here is again the Hebrew word *hesed*, which is more accurately translated *covenantal love or faithfulness*. And as was shown in the previous

section, God's *righteousness* also refers to His *covenantal faithfulness*. And to prevent any confusion, God plainly states: "I will betroth you in faithfulness". So God is making it abundantly clear that He is entering into a marital union with His people that is based upon His faithfulness, not theirs. In order to secure this point beyond debate, God makes it clear that He is not limiting His marriage vows to those who are already holy, or self-righteous. Instead, He declares that He is pledging His love to those who are "Not my people", a concept that is also raised in Isaiah.

"I revealed myself to those who did not ask for me; I was found by those who did not seek me. To a nation that did not call on my name, I said, 'Here am I, here am I'" (Is 65:1, NIV).

So in Hosea, God presents his plan to bring a nation into revival, by drawing a people into the desert: a people who are not yet in a full relationship with Him. They will be called there so that He might speak to them and in so doing liberate them from the religion that consumes them. This must be done so that they will be able to receive His love and faithfulness, as He enters into a marital covenant with them.

With this plan in mind, it would appear that America is presently in the middle of such a call. As secularisation leads this nation further into the wilderness, religion is being removed from the lips of both individuals, and society as a whole. Yet if a revival is next: What will it look like, and how will the Church in America respond to it?

4.3.2 God's work in revival: what to expect

"See, I am doing a new thing! Now it springs up; do you not perceive it? *I am making a way in the desert and streams in the wasteland*" (Is 43:19, NIV, emphasis mine).

Unfortunately, if past revivals are any indication, many will see what God is doing, but they will not *perceive* that God is doing it. As shown earlier in this chapter, the most vigorous opponent of revival has consistently been the established religious system of the day. This is due in no small part to the fact that "too often Christians have tried to equate the church with the Kingdom of God"

(Layman 1994:34). As a result, spiritual activities occurring outside of the institutional church setting are often condemned, as are those who seek spiritual nourishment from sources that lay outside of the church's orthodox boundaries.

This confusion has occurred as a result of the institutional church's continuing efforts to maintain its own existence. Earlier it was seen how the church established a specific set of beliefs and morals, in order to ensure its own survival. Yet the church has also gone beyond the concepts of morality and theology, and in its efforts of self-preservation, has established an acceptable method for worship. Consequently, loyalty to "the way we have always done it" demands that any movement occurring outside of the traditional setting be judged as unbiblical, and not of God.

"Satan's deception during a move of God is both subtle and powerful because the devil's disguise is a religious spirit. He cloaks his activity by honoring what God has done, while fighting what God is doing."¹⁴

And so just as the reliance on a specific set of morals and beliefs led to a decreased emphasis on one's having a personal relationship with the Father, the reliance on a specific method of worship further eliminates and restricts the church from experiencing God's presence.

Yet, "structure should never have the effect of replacing Christ or in hierarchical fashion become the voice of Christ" (Ogden 1990:53), for as history has shown, the effects of revival have rarely been restricted within the confines of the institutional church. Consequently, it is often the religious voices that cry out the loudest in opposition to any ongoing move of God. Looking back again to the revival of the 1700's known as the Great Awakening we see that:

"The movement was abhorred and widely criticized by the established state Church of England. Here, as in first-century Israel, God placed His Spirit and the gifts and fruit of that Spirit into the hands of common people with a religious heritage, then set them free from denominational hierarchy, polity, and dogmatics. This new band of English Christians sought only to find God's will and to please Him by following His will" (Weakley 1987:14).

¹⁴ Quote is by Francis Frangipane, and is located in the opening recommendations of Quenching the Spirit, by William DeArteaga.

During that revival, God set people free from the bondage of religion, and brought them back into a relationship with Him. No wonder the established church hated it. They were losing members, losing authority, and losing credibility. Yet God was not concerned with the survival of their church system; He was only concerned about His relationship with His children, and so He took a “people with a religious heritage” and He *de-churched* them.

One of the most important aspects of this process was the mental dismantling of the hierarchal system of the church. As the religious system sought to replace the voice of Christ, its leaders also took on His role as mediator for His people. Consequently, the church body became divided into two groups: those who ministered, and those who received ministry. Yet,

“As long as leadership is conceived in mediatorial and representative terms – one group doing for another – then the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers is undermined” (Ogden 1990:52).

And so during the Great Awakening, as these people became freed from this system of hierarchy there “came a new boldness in lay ministry and prayer” (DeArteaga 1996: 29). As they learned to hear and obey God’s will for themselves, they were led into areas of ministry that the voice of the church had excluded them from.

“The Kingdom of God is not a collective in which the individual is sacrificed for the group. Rather, the individual is fulfilled by participating in the kingdom...for the Kingdom is frustrated whenever (and to whatever extent) individuals are hindered from realizing their potential as creatures of God” (Layman 1994:33).

Consequently, one effect of the coming revival will be the resurgence in lay ministry, as the barrier between clergy and laity is weakened. As the people again begin to hear God for themselves, the idea of the pastor as a sacramental key to the realm of the transcendent will soon fall. Likewise, they will realise that:

“Being made right with God is not mediated through the church institution, but directly through Jesus Christ. Neither pastors, bishops, archbishops, cardinals, nor the pope can represent an individual before God; Jesus Christ alone has that function. A hierarchical conception of ministry is therefore, undermined by the gospel” (Ogden 1990:49).

Some of this is already being realised in cell groups and house churches, where once removed from the clergy led service, individuals are beginning to minister to one another. This is not to imply that all cell groups are functioning in this manner. Many that are simply used for church growth are not fundamentally any different from a meeting of several hundred, if the same dynamics are at work. A cell group that has one leader, who teaches from the senior pastor's new book, may still be a hierarchy, just a smaller one.

Another aspect of the coming revival might well be the re-interpretation of various key Biblical passages.

“All exegetes who open the biblical texts have done so under the influence of some community of faith; their identities have been formed by that community; they have depended upon the authoritative interpretations of that community as a hermeneutical guide; they have listened to pastors, friends...and they have even sung hymns and gospel songs. In these and countless other ways the preunderstanding of everyone who opens a biblical text has been formed within the matrix of some community or communities of faith” (Putt 1996:211).

Consequently, as believers are led out of those community settings, it is likely that some of those “preunderstandings” will be reshaped by the fresh revelation of God. Community interpretations may then come to be replaced by those considered less “orthodox”. These interpretations, fashioned in light of a new found understanding of God's *hesed* (Covenantal faithfulness) may tend to be viewed by those remaining in the institutional church setting as “too grace oriented”, as man's performance comes to be de-emphasised. In the same manner, the Judaizers of Paul's day also viewed his message as “inadequate”, as Paul sought to eliminate man's reliance upon religion (Barrett 1994:26).

Likewise, many orthodox beliefs may find themselves subjected to a new level of scrutiny.

“No dogma or article of the creed can be simply taken over untested by theology from ecclesiastical antiquity; each must be measured, from the very beginning, by the Holy Scripture and the Word of God. And under no circumstance may theology set out to appropriate creedal propositions merely because they are old and widespread and famous” (Barth 1964: 39).

Though Barth accurately describes how things should be, this is by no means the current situation in the Church. As has been seen, one is often considered outside of the community if one is not firmly aligned with the community's beliefs; so there is usually little "testing" of the traditionally held beliefs. However, just as with Biblical interpretation, the removal of the believer from the religious sphere of influence opens up the opportunity to question and test those beliefs that were previously considered unquestionable.

4.3.3 The effects of a revival on the *un-churched* and *de-churched*

As this study has asserted, God is deliberately drawing people away from the established church to prepare them for revival; this leads to a secondary conclusion, that many of these people who are either *un-churched* or *de-churched* will enter into the next move of God more easily than many who are currently in church praying for it. Evidence of these types of phenomena, was recorded by Jonathon Edwards during the 18th century revival in America.

To begin with, Edwards points out the state of many of the youth in his area prior to the arrival of revival: "Licentiousness for some years prevailed among the youth of the town...wherein some, by their example, exceedingly corrupted others" (Edwards 1994:9). Notice that Edwards has described them in no uncertain terms. He is not talking about innocent pranksters, but is instead referring to a corrupt generation that even influenced others towards its sinfulness.

However, when revival does come, Edwards notices not only a difference in the group, but also among the "worst" members of that group. "Those who were wont to be the vainest and loosest...were now generally subject to great awakenings" (Edwards 1994:13). Even those who had in the past demonstrated the most immoral behaviour were now being swept up in revival. They had not done anything to be included in this move of God. Their faithful attendance did not help them to receive God's Spirit. Rather they were simply included in the revival as God once again fulfilled His words to Isaiah the prophet:

"I revealed myself to those who did not ask for me; I was found by those who did not seek me. To a nation that did not call on my name, I said, 'Here am I, here am I'" (Is 65:1, NIV).

The youth of Edwards' town had not cried out to God. He had cried out to them. And while many of Edwards' own congregation had difficulty "hearing" that cry, the immoral generation of youth did not. Within a short time, those youth had been completely overwhelmed by the call of God.

"Our young people, when they met, were wont to spend the time talking of the excellency and the dying love of Jesus Christ, the glory of the way of salvation, the wonderful, free, and sovereign grace of God..." (Edwards 1994:14).

Notice that they did not meet to hear a sermon, but rather they met "to spend the time talking." When they met it was for edifying conversations, not for a one-sided moral or theological lecture. Each of these youth was now a functioning part of the kingdom, and they were not about to sacrifice their relationship with God simply to enter into a religious system.

Edwards' account of the revival shows us a progression whereby the youth of his city that seemed the least suited for the kingdom of God, were soon on the cutting edge of it. It is this study's assertion that during the next revival the same phenomena will be seen. The *un-churched* and the *de-churched* are already more open to whatever God will be doing, for they have fewer religious standards of what it should look like. They will not care if God is calling His people to meet in a home or an auditorium, for regardless of the setting, there will no longer be a differentiation between minister and audience, for all will be participants.

They will not care if immoral people become part of the community, for they will realize that the kingdom is not about morality. An act will no longer be judged by its moral value, but will instead be seen as "right if and only if it promotes the Kingdom of God" (Layman 1994:32). And they will see that the kingdom itself is not limited to a building, or a theology, or a denomination, or a fellowship. They will walk in kingdom relationships that go beyond agreed-upon doctrine, as they become defined solely by the covenantal foundation of God's faithfulness to us.

And, to some extent, all of this too is already happening. Whatever criteria one wants to establish for revival, somewhere, someone is walking with God in a covenantal relationship, and revival is already being manifested. Small groups are already being formed in which unity is being stressed against conformity. In these

groups, just as in the youth groups of Edwards' time, discussions revolve around the common experience of God's love and mercy, as demonstrated on the "Cross." In these groups, ministers are stepping off of the platform and learning how to *receive* ministry, while at the same time, those who once sat on the fence, now discover the gifts that God has given to them, so that they might join Him in His restoration of mankind.

Worship too has taken on a greater significance over the past several years. *Soul Survivor* in the United Kingdom and *Passion* in the United States are just two of the many ministries that are bringing together young worshippers from a variety of different theological backgrounds.¹⁵ Again, their services are about unity, not conformity, and each worshipper is encouraged to learn to pursue their passion for the Lord wherever it might take them. In time, revival will bring about the development of more citywide worship events in which people from all types of backgrounds will come together in unity to sing to the Lord and experience His presence.

4.3.4 The scope of revival: *the river of God*

An acquaintance of the author, who is still serving in the institutional church setting, once communicated his preparation for revival. He indicated that though "the river of God" no longer seemed to be flowing through the congregation, at which he was on the staff, it was his job to firmly entrench himself into the "dry riverbed" that was left behind. The picture that he had was that one day the rains of revival would come again, and that when they did, he and others like him that had a secure foundation in the "dry riverbed" would be able to grab hold of those being swept into the river by the "flash flood" (revival) of the Spirit. He expressed that otherwise these people would simply be swept downstream without any direction.

While the author admired him for his commitment to his vision, it was felt that his loyalty might have been somewhat misguided. As has been seen, many people confuse the institutional church system for the Kingdom of God, and it is the author's opinion that perhaps his acquaintance has done the same. It seemed as if

¹⁵ View their information at www.soulsurvivor.com/uk/homepage.asp and www.passionnow.org/enter.shtml/

his idea of revival was limited to a scenario in which “the river of God” will ultimately flow back through the doors of his church. But is that where the Bible says it will flow?

This study has already discussed the prophets testifying of the springs that will bubble up in the desert, and yet Ezekiel, and John in the book of Revelation also go further in speaking of “the river of God.”¹⁶ In these two passages one sees *the river of God flowing out from His throne and through the desert*. Ultimately this water flows into the Dead Sea - a body of water that is too salty to support fish life.

“When it empties into the Sea, the water there becomes fresh. Swarms of living creatures will live wherever the river flows. There will be large numbers of fish, because...where the river flows everything will live” (Ez 47:8-9, NIV).

In other words, “the river of God” is not restricted to a well-established riverbed. It is not limited within the banks and channels of the institutional church. It is not contained within a narrow strip of Christian territory where the Church believes true life to exist. Rather, it is to flow into the areas where there is no life, where there is no growth, and in so doing bring life into those areas. *Instead of being limited to the areas where we believe the Kingdom of God has already been established, the river of life actually establishes His kingdom wherever it flows*. In true revival, life will flow in areas where it hasn’t flowed before, into settings that have held no hope, and touch people that have had no life. One should remember God’s promise to Hosea: “I will say to those called ‘Not my people,’ ‘You are my people’; and they will say, ‘You are my God’” (Hos 2:23, NIV).

Consequently, God’s promise of covenantal faithfulness is not limited to those who are currently called “His people”. And this is crucial to the overall view of the Father. God’s promise of relationship is not limited to those who are *currently* in a relationship with Him. He has declared that at some point in the future, those who are named as “not His” will be called “His people”, and by this promise one can look beyond the now to realize that His promise are reliable and sure.

¹⁶ Ezekiel 47 & Revelation 22

And that is the greatest hope, for all people have areas in their lives - that are not yet His, and have no life - which, therefore, need to be restored back to Him. And yet in His covenantal faithfulness to mankind, God has assured that He will not fail to restore mankind completely. And by that promise one can again look beyond the now to realize that one-day one's entire being will be devoted to Him. God's "river of life" is not restricted to only the redeemed areas of people's lives, hearts, and minds; it will ultimately flow completely through each of His people so that no death remains in any of them at all.

In the same way, that "river of life" will again soon flow in revival, touching the wilderness, and bringing life to areas that have no right to experience life: no right except for the Father's enduring promise of *revival in the desert*.

4.4 Guidelines to Prepare for Revival: Recognizing and Participating in God's Plan

4.4.1 Expect opposition to the call to the desert

As Christians begin to respond to this call to the desert, they should be aware that many of their relationships will be challenged by this pursuit of God. Those who are still immersed in the institutional church setting will have difficulty accepting any non-religious revelations that are received by those outside of it. In fact, they may even view any challenge of the institutional status quo as a personal attack upon themselves.

In addition, those that have remained behind tend to cut off fellowship with those who have moved on, in an effort perhaps to remain only equally yoked with those who believe exactly as they themselves do. In their eyes, according to their understanding of Hebrews 10:25 (as shown in Chapter 2), to leave the Sunday fellowship means that one has left the Kingdom. Consequently, those who remain in the institutional setting have little reason to maintain relationships with those who have, in their minds, abandoned the faith.

Likewise, the institutional Church is also very clear about its views on those who step outside of its walls of conformity. In recent years, the Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary adopted a "Declaration on Academic and Theological

Integrity.” It contained various affirmations and denials that were used to clarify its stance on theological and spiritual growth. One of these comments read as follows:

“We affirm the necessity of aligning ourselves with the enduring beliefs of Christian orthodoxy, the faith once and for all delivered to the church. We deny that distinctly Christian theological education and spiritual formation take place outside of such an alliance.”¹⁷

Briefly summarized, their point is that one cannot grow spiritually without being aligned with the orthodox beliefs. *And yet, to argue that one should conform to any specific set of beliefs in order to grow spiritually is simply more religion.* All one truly needs to grow spiritually is a relationship with God; without that one’s growth is merely intellectual, and not spiritual.

But going beyond this initial rejection of their declaration, whose orthodox beliefs do they believe we should adhere to? They specify “the faith once and for all delivered to the church,” but does that clarify anything? The faith of the early church has gone through many changes and adaptations, so which set of doctrinal ideas is truly orthodox? Before Martin Luther challenged the Catholic faith, justification was *not* by grace alone. Before the charismatic pioneers of the past century, the orthodox position held that the gifts of the Spirit were no longer in effect; and come to think of it, that is still the orthodox position of many seminaries.

Some believe that Jesus will have a literal 1000-year reign on earth; some do not. Some believe that Jesus literally descended into hell; some do not. At which point does an incorrect doctrine prevent any further spiritual growth? If we are to believe that only those who adhere to the truth (as contained within a particular Declaration) can grow spiritually, then we must accept that the majority of “Christians” aren’t growing spiritually, for we all have slightly different beliefs. In fact, if Paul’s assertion that Christians currently “know in part” and “see in a mirror, dimly” is accurate (1 Cor 13:9,12), then no believer is fully aligned with the truth, for it cannot yet be fully seen, and consequently, no Christian is able to grow spiritually.

¹⁷ This Declaration can be viewed in its entirety at www.swbts.edu

The truth of the matter is that the orthodox position is not a static one, or at least, it should not be. As Christians we are not commanded to accept the orthodox position for, as mentioned earlier, our biblical mandate is to “test all things”.

“This sort of reflection is sometimes called second-order theology, in that it follows upon and looks back over the implicit understandings embedded in the life of faith. By its very nature, second-order reflection is marked by a certain critical distance...Deliberations are undertaken at a far vista, removed from the more intensely personal viewpoint of embedded theology” (Stone and Duke 1996:16).

This “critical distance” gives one the new perspective that is necessary for believers to honestly evaluate their beliefs. In other words, as long as one is strictly aligned with orthodoxy, one can never truly test it.

Yet the institutional church has little regard for those who seek to find this critical distance, as seen again in the Declaration on Academic and Theological Integrity: “We deny that individualism is conducive to sound theological education or Christian living.”¹⁸ In other words, *according to one of the largest Protestant seminaries in America, Christian life is only nurtured within the secure boundaries of conformity.* Individualism, and the individuals that it produces, are to be shunned.

And yet, while the modern Church might encourage believers to reject individualism, it is quite clearly an unbiblical suggestion. The sole responsibility laid upon the people of God is to hear and obey the voice of God. “Obey My voice, and I will be your God, and you shall be My people” (Jer 7:23, NKJV). This one demand is the heart of the covenantal relationship between God and man, for if we do not hear and respond to His voice, there can be no relationship.

The institutional church, however, does not exist to hear and obey the voice of God. It has made a clear choice to preserve its own life at all costs, and as a result of this choice, it has continually sacrificed its passion for the voice of God for the safety of the status quo.

“The only reason the church cannot rise from its (declining) condition is that it will not die – that for as long as it tries to hang on to the life it

¹⁸ www.swbts.edu

thinks it has, it will never enjoy the gift of resurrection from the dead that God gives it in Jesus” (Capon 1995:7).¹⁹

And so, while the church organization declares that Christian life and spiritual growth are not supported outside of its institutional system, it remains abundantly clear that true life and growth are not always occurring within the conformist environments of Christian congregations.

In his classic work *Why Revival Tarries*, Leonard Ravenhill points out this conspicuous lack of life in our fellowships that extends from the pulpits to the pews. “The tragedy of this late hour is that we have too many *dead* men in the pulpits giving out too many *dead* sermons to too many *dead* people” (Ravenhill 1992:18). Unfortunately, while his book was written over forty years ago, the reality of the situation remains the same. In 2001, the *Houston Chronicle* reported the following remarks from pastor Jack Graham, as he spoke at the annual meeting of the Southern Baptist: “Most Christians in our churches are nominal, carnal, and living in disobedience to God...Churches have become stumbling blocks into hell rather than stepping stones to heaven” (Vara 2001).²⁰

And so Christians are left with a choice. They can either continue to listen to the voice of religious conformity, or they can choose to pursue religious abandonment. They can continue to follow the declarations of men, or they can instead learn to hear and obey the voice of God themselves. Biblically, only one of these paths leads to a covenantal relationship; only one of these paths leads to life.

4.4.2 The call to rely on the faithfulness of God in the Covenantal relationship

If the modern Church is going to participate in the coming revival, it too should make the choice to once again follow the voice of God. As was seen in Chapter two, the current religious culture of the church has substituted itself, and conformity to its standards, in place of an authentic relationship with Christ.

¹⁹ The author has here substituted the word “declining” for its synonym “moribund” which was the author’s original choice.

²⁰ I first encountered this quote in: Oliver C R 2002. *En Punto: arriving at there: a study in spiritual exactness*. Montgomery, TX: Zadok Publications.

“It is hard to escape the conclusion that today one of the greatest roadblocks to the gospel of Jesus Christ is the institutional church” (Snyder 1977:15).

To escape from its present condition the Church should come to recognize the covenantal faithfulness of God, and in so doing realise that salvation is in His hands. It should learn to re-establish faith in Him, over correct doctrine about Him. It should come to realise the difference between unity and conformity. For while God has committed Himself to rescuing His people from such deception, He is in no way obligated to save the existing Christian culture.

At the same time, the Church should understand that the dismantling of its religious ideas is not limited to God’s restorative activity during revival. At any time the Church is free to deconstruct the sacramental role of the pastor, thereby restoring Christ as the sole mediator between God and man. “The transcendence made possible by this God is available not just for spiritually talented individuals, but to all people and for an entire society” (Lerner 1994:65).

Likewise, the Church is free to tear down the boundary markers that attempt to keep non-conformants outside of the Body of Christ. It may at any time grant its members that “critical distance” to explore beliefs and interpretations that may fall outside of the denominational norm. In the same manner, church traditions should be put in their proper perspective.

“How do we avoid fostering false religion by our traditions? We should raise traditions to a conscious level. We must name and claim them as traditions, not truth, and refuse to award traditions doctrinal status” (Hovestol 1997:108).

In short, the Church is free to liberate its members from the same religious bondage that God Himself has promised to do, and thereby promote a true understanding of *hesed*.

If, however, the Church does not choose that route, then it should at the very least decide not to oppose the coming revival. “Let us all be hence warned, by no means to oppose, or do any thing in the least to clog or hinder the work; but, on the contrary, do our utmost to promote it” (Edwards 1994:130). It should realise that the likelihood of the revival being restricted to the established Church system

is highly unlikely (as demonstrated in both historical and biblical texts), and consequently it should learn to look outside of its own walls for signs of God's next move. It should come to accept those believers who are led outside of the traditional church setting as "brothers and sisters in Christ", rather than "apostates and heretics". "We need new eyes to see and new ears to hear the truth of our unity, a unity which cannot be perceived by our broken, sinful, anxious hearts" (Nouwen 1986:26).

However, this is not to imply that unity is the goal of a revival. "It would be an error to assume the goal of this move of God is unity. No, our objective is obedience" (Frangipane 1991:52, 53). Obedience to the voice of God is the essence of covenantal relationship, and thus it should remain the Christian's one true goal. All of the other suggestions or exhortations of this study are simply offered in an attempt to remove any obstacles to this chief objective.

4.4.3 The call of individuals to the desert

Turning back to individuals who have heard the call to the desert, one finds a group of people facing the same daunting decision that the Hebrews faced when they were called out of Egypt. "This was what faced every Israelite as each asked him/herself, 'Should I join this group of people who are going to the wilderness as the means to escape slavery?'" (Lerner 1994: 73). While bondage versus freedom may seem an easy choice, leaving all that is comfortable and familiar for that which is unknown can make for difficult decision. However, there is comfort in knowing that this path that leads away from religion has been well trodden by those biblical figures of the past. Abraham, Moses, Elijah, and Paul have all followed that same call to the wilderness, and all were rewarded with the revelation of God's covenantal faithfulness.

Those who are now being called to do the same should realise that:

"There is no law that can impart life, because law is always tied to self-effort. And self-effort can't produce life, because only Jesus is the life. He has come to live His life in and through us" (Stone and Smith 2000:146).

Consequently, the promises of religious obedience should be seen as empty “whitewashed tombs”. The only voice we are to follow belongs to our Creator.

“We must abandon all hope of finding true spiritual success apart from dependent, steadfast faith in the Person and power of Christ” (Frangipane 1991:28).

God’s ultimate goal is for man to be in intimate, covenantal fellowship with Him. Salvation is part of that plan, just as birth is a necessary foundation for a parent/child relationship. However, birth is not the fullness of the relationship. Yet the Church has created an environment that stresses the one-time decision for salvation over an ongoing relationship with the Saviour. And as has been demonstrated throughout the history of the institutional church, once relationship has been set aside, religion is quickly substituted.

He is a God of relationship, and as such, His Kingdom is established through a relationship. And yet His relationship with us, and our relationships with one another, could not exist without the foundation of His covenantal faithfulness. The true Church, the body of Christ, is united solely by its experience of His covenantal death on the cross. As such, the Kingdom of God does not have fixed borders of theological or ethical agreement.

Likewise, one’s relationship to Him is to be anchored in the knowledge that despite any weaknesses and failures, He will not abandon His people. *Any message that weakens this truth of His unconditional commitment to us is not the Gospel.* The performance of good works can never guarantee a place in the kingdom, but instead should only flow out of an understanding that one’s place in the kingdom is already secured.

To this end, it is the author’s belief that the Bible is clear that the desert is the place to go to begin this process. Of course, this desert need not be a physical or geographical place; rather it is simply a representation of a place where one comes to be separated from their religious traditions in order to receive fresh revelation from God. And yet, this claim is not intended to create a new demand that one should leave one’s congregation in order to hear God. To establish any specific process that says “Do this and you will hear from God” is in itself simply more religion. And yet, time apart from any environment gives one a better

perspective. Even in traditional church settings, individuals often go on “retreats” as they are encouraged to get away from the usual settings so that it might be easier to hear God’s voice.

“Oh, how peaceful is the life in the desert! How conducive and easy to raise one’s soul to union with God!” (Bacovcin 1992:164).

Therefore, each individual should endeavour to find a wilderness where communion with God is nurtured and made more real. Each should seek a place where he or she can hear God’s voice and know His will and direction for his or her life. Each person should come to a place within himself where he surrenders to God’s process of restoration, instead of pursuing holiness by conforming to a specific set of standards or beliefs.

4.5 Conclusion

Today’s Church is at a crossroads. It can either choose to remain faithful to its religious heritage, or embrace a fresh revelation of God’s covenantal faithfulness.

“The bottom line is this: law and grace won’t flow together. They are not compatible. One is sensible in appearance, but it is death. The other is absurd in appearance, but it is life” (Stone and Smith 2000:148).

Those individuals and institutions that choose to embrace the wilderness call are destined to encounter the God of *hesed*, and a relationship with Him, in which religion has no place. In their lives, the laws of conformity are to be replaced by the grace of covenantal faithfulness.

This same covenantal offer was made to the Israelites as they prepared to enter the Promised Land:

“this day I call heaven and earth as witnesses against you that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Now choose life, so that you and your children may live and that you may love the LORD your God, *listen to his voice*, and hold fast to him. For the LORD is your life...” (Deut 30:19-20, NIV, emphasis mine).

History tells us that they soon failed to listen to and obey His voice, in the same manner that the Early Church did centuries later. Today, the Church is being called back into a relationship with God that is based on listening to His voice. It is to be a covenant relationship based on obedience - not to a formulated set of beliefs or practices, but to the voice of the Creator.

So far, the church has to a large part ignored that call. It has misunderstood the secularisation of the society around it, as well as the exodus of individual members from their congregations. Today's church should re-examine these phenomena in the light of the evidence that supports the concept of *Revival in the Desert*, or else it risks missing, or even condemning, the next move of God.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

In this concluding chapter, the findings of this thesis are summarized. The contributions of this study to the field of Practical Theology will be reviewed and suggestions for further research will be given.

5.1 Summary of Research Findings

The study shows in chapter two that God's plan – to have a covenantal relationship with man – is being compromised by the modern church. The origins of this compromise are traced back to the development of boundary markers in the Early Church, which evolved from legitimate community identifiers, to illegitimate standards for salvation. The original markers of faith and baptism ultimately developed into a complex set of beliefs (orthodoxy) and code for moral behaviour (orthopraxy), which were to be followed to ensure salvation. The evolution of these boundaries into a replacement for an authentic relationship with God is shown to have continued despite the New Testament record of the challenges made by Jesus, Paul, and Phillip to the existing religious boundaries of their day.

Chapter two then proceeds to show how the religious traditions of the Early Church continue to exist in the modern Church. It demonstrates that the practice of re-socialisation is still observed, as new converts are taught to conform to traditional beliefs and acceptable standards of behaviour. In this manner, the Church has maintained a system whereby its members are taught to conform to the image that it has formulated, rather than to the image of Christ. Similarly, one's standing in the Kingdom of God is often understood in terms of one's relationship to the Church, rather than one's relationship to God.

The summary of chapter two states that the development of this religious culture has for all practical purposes replaced the covenantal relationship that God had originally intended, as a wall of legalistic demands now separate the Creator from His created.

The study then proceeds in chapter three to demonstrate that regardless of man's understanding of his relationship with God, YHWH remains committed to restoring a proper understanding of His covenantal faithfulness. This is then demonstrated through an examination of the lives of several Biblical figures. In these examples we find several consistencies –

- God is unwilling to allow His people to remain in religious bondage
- God draws His people out of their religious environment and into the wilderness or desert in order to bring about their liberation
- God presents His people with a greater revelation of Himself as the God of *Hesed*, or covenantal faithfulness, in order to complete their deliverance from religion

With this evidence in place, the study goes on to introduce the concept of *Revival in the Desert*, by which it is asserted that the above tendencies are not mere random actions, but rather reveal a Divine plan by which God revives His people by liberating them from religion, and restoring them into a covenantal relationship.

Chapter three then concludes that if the previous assessment of the religious nature of the today's Church is correct, then it follows that a similar, modern-day desert revival experience should again be expected.

In chapter four the study presents suggestions as to what this modern-day revival in the desert might look like, and guidelines as to how the Church should respond to it. It begins with an examination of the terms "churched" and "un-churched", and concludes that those identified as "churched" may be in the greatest need of liberation from religious bondage. Then, after finding both terms to be inadequate for describing the Biblical figures of chapter three, it presents the term "de-churched" as a more accurate description of those who are undergoing a process whereby religion loses its influence over their lives.

Next, the concept of secularisation is introduced. Similar to the idea of an individual becoming "de-churched", secularisation refers to a process in which religion begins to lose its influence over an entire nation or culture. While the current evidence of secularisation in America has elicited warnings and negative comments from the Church, this study asserts that as a nation becomes "de-

churched” it too, like the individual, becomes more open to revival. Accordingly, this study asserts that the current process of secularisation corresponds with the Biblical call away from religion and into the desert, and that this, therefore, is a prelude to revival.

An examination of the prophetic books is then undertaken in order to provide more insight into the concept of *Revival in the Desert*. From these texts it is clear that:

- God is faithful to the covenant regardless of man’s unfaithfulness
- Those, whom He will call into the desert, and into covenantal faithfulness, may not yet be in relationship with Him.
- The ultimate goal of revival is the restoration of man’s covenantal relationship with God

This study then presents an expectation of what a modern revival would look like, as the current religious bondage is removed from the people of God. These expectations find their support in both the Biblical text, and in the records of previous historical revivals, and include:

- A resurgence in lay ministry, and a corresponding decline of the role of the pastor or church leader as a key to the transcendent realm
- A re-interpretation of the Bible as individuals find the freedom to look beyond the interpretive traditions of their respective faith community
- A greater scrutiny of doctrinal statements that have been regarded as unquestionable by community leaders
- A greater response to the revival by those who are un-churched or de-churched, as they have fewer internal, religious obstacles to the move of God
- Opposition to the revival by the established Church

This opposition to revival is not only shown to be a historical pattern, but is also demonstrated in current theological statements, which claim that an individual cannot grow spiritually if he or she is not aligned with orthodox beliefs.

In response, this study proceeds to offer encouragement to the individual and suggestions to the Church as a whole. The Church is offered the suggestion

that it is free at any time to dismantle those religious traditions that keep God's people in bondage, and that it need not wait for a revival in order to do so. It is also suggested that the Church learn to re-interpret the current climate of secularisation, and declining church membership, in the light of the *Revival in the Desert* concept, and realise that the revival it is praying for may already be here.

The study also encourages the individual to find the "critical distance" necessary to re-examine his or her own beliefs, as each person seeks to be more open to the revelation of God's covenantal faithfulness. It also re-affirms the idea that the goal of this "daunting trek" into the unknown is a covenantal relationship with the God of *Hesed*, and that this path has been followed by many of the greatest Biblical figures.

5.2 The Contribution of the Findings to Practical Theology

As noted in Chapter one, God's covenant with mankind is based upon His faithfulness, and is consequently antithetical in nature to self-reliance via religious observance. Therefore, all such religious activity must be viewed as an obstacle to a true covenantal relationship with God. However, as God's faithfulness to the covenant is unconditional, He remains faithful to save man, even from his own attempts at self-justification. Accordingly, God has repeatedly acted throughout history to liberate His people from religious bondage. In this study an attempt has been made to introduce the Biblical concept of *Revival in the Desert*, by which God delivers His people from such bondage, and restores them to an authentic relationship with Himself.

Because of the current religious nature of the Church, the *Revival in the Desert* concept becomes particularly important to the field of Practical Theology, as it presents a likely Divine response to the current situation, that the Church may soon be required to face. Because of this importance, the following contributions, and starting points for further research can be claimed for this study:

- The *Revival in the Desert* concept provides a direct challenge to the religious nature of the Church, including a challenge to the tradition of a strict allegiance to orthodox beliefs and practices.

- The *Revival in the Desert* concept provides the Church with a new reference point for interpreting current social trends such as secularisation, and declining church membership.
- The *Revival in the Desert* concept presents a new understanding of the covenantal faithfulness of God, which could promote a healthier relationship between God and man.
- The *Revival in the Desert* concept provides a fresh picture of revival that enables the Church to more easily recognise and participate in the next move of God.
- Further research could be conducted on the current decline in church membership in order to establish what percentage of the people are still engaged in a relationship with God outside of the religious setting.
- Further research could be conducted on cell churches and house churches to determine both their growth (in popularity) and whether or not they maintain the religious traditions found in larger churches.
- Further research could be conducted on self-proclaimed “non-creedal” churches, in order to examine community fellowship in a scenario, in which doctrinal agreement is not a community boundary marker.

The author of this study believes that the *Revival in the Desert* concept can be used to equip today’s Church, and prepare the individual believer, so that each is better prepared to recognize and respond to the next move of God.

Bibliography

- Aharoni Y and Avi-Yonah M (eds) 1993. *The Macmillan Bible atlas* (3rd ed). Revised and edited by Rainey A and Safrai Z. New York: Macmillan.
- Albright W 1968. *Yahweh and the gods of Canaan*. London: Athlone Press.
- Bacovcin H 1992. *The way of a pilgrim* (Translation). New York: Doubleday.
- Baker E 1988. *The revivals of the Bible*. Belfast: Ambassador Productions.
- Baker's Evangelical Theological Dictionary*. Online book: <http://www/biblestudytools.net/Dictionaries/BakersEvangelicalDictionary/>, 2005-03-28.
- Barclay W 1976. *The letter to the Hebrews* (rev ed). The daily study Bible series. Philadelphia: The Westminster Press.
- Barrett C K 1994. *Paul: an introduction to his thought*. Louisville KY: Westminster / John Knox Press.
- Barth K 1964. *Evangelical theology: an introduction*. Garden City, NY: Anchor Books.
- Bright J 1981. *A history of Israel* (3rd ed). Philadelphia: Westminster Press.
- Bruce F F 1978. *Paul: Apostle of the heart set free*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans.
- Bruce F F 1966. *The spreading flame: the rise and progress of Christianity from its first beginnings to the conversion of the English*. Exeter, England: The Paternoster Press.
- Cahill T 1998. *The gifts of the Jews: how a tribe of desert nomads changed the way everyone thinks and feels*. New York: Doubleday.
- Capon R F 1996. *The astonished heart: reclaiming the good news from the lost-and-found of church history*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans.
- Capon R F 1995. *The romance of the Word: one man's love affair with theology*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans.
- Chisolm R 1984. The polemic against Baalism in Israel's early history and literature. *Bibliotheca Sacra* 150:267-283.
- Craigie P 1976. *The book of Deuteronomy*. The New International Commentary on the Old Testament. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans.

- Cross F L and Livingstone E A (eds) 1974. *The Oxford dictionary of the Christian church* (2nd ed). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- DeArteaga W 1996. *Quenching the Spirit: discover the real spirit behind the charismatic controversy*. Orlando, FL: Creation House.
- Eakin F 1965. Yahwism and Baalism before the Exile. *Journal of Biblical literature* 84:407-414.
- Edwards J 1994. *Jonathan Edwards on revival*. Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust.
- Fee G and Stuart D 1982. *How to read the Bible for all its worth: a guide to understanding the Bible*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.
- Finney C 1984. *Experiencing revival*. New Kensington, PA: Whitaker House.
- France R T 1985. *The Gospel according to Matthew: an introduction and commentary*. Tyndale New Testament Commentaries. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans.
- Frangipane F 1991. *The house of the Lord: God's plan to liberate your city from darkness*. Lake Mary, FL: Creation House.
- Gronbaek R 1985. Baal's battle with Yam. *Journal for the study of the Old Testament* 33:27-44.
- Halley H 1965. *Halley's Bible handbook: an abbreviated Bible commentary* (24th ed). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.
- Hatch E 1957. *The influence of Greek ideas on Christianity*. New York: Harper & Brothers.
- Hovestol T 1997. *Extreme righteousness: seeing ourselves in the Pharisees*. Chicago, IL: Moody Press.
- Hvidberg F 1962. *Weeping and laughter in the Old Testament*. Leiden, Holland: E. J. Brill.
- Hyperdictionary*. Online book. <http://www.hyperdictionary.com/dictionary/socialization>, 2005-03-28.
- Kapelrud A 1963. *The Ras Shamra discoveries and the Old Testament*. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press.
- Kapelrud A 1952. *Baal in the Ras Shamra Texts*. Copenhagen: G. E. C. Gad.

- Kohlenberger III J R and Swanson J 1998. *The Hebrew English concordance to the Old Testament with the new international version*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.
- Ladd G E 1977. *The Gospel of the Kingdom: Scriptural studies in the Kingdom of God*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans.
- Layman S 1994. The Kingdom of God. In Clark D and Rakestraw W (eds), *Readings in Christian ethics: volume one: theory and method*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books.
- Leech K 1985. *True God: an exploration in spiritual theology*. London: Sheldon Press.
- Lerner M 1994. *Jewish renewal: a path to healing and transformation*. New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons.
- Loewen J 1968. Socialization and social control: a resume of processes. *Practical Anthropology* 15:145-156.
- Marshall I H 1994. *The acts of the apostles: an introduction and commentary*. Tyndale New Testament Commentaries. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans.
- McDonald J 1998. *The crucible of Christian morality*. New York: Routledge.
- McComiskey T 1985. *The covenants of promise: a theology of the Old Testament covenants*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House.
- Meeks W 1993. *The origins of Christian morality: the first two centuries*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Meeks W 1986. *The moral world of the first Christians*. Philadelphia: The Westminster Press.
- Merriam-Webster Medical Dictionary*, 2002. Online entry: <http://dictionary.reference.com/search?q=socialization>, 2005-03-28.
- Milton J 1965. *God's covenant of blessing*. Madison, WI: Straus Publishing.
- Motyer S 1992. *Unlock the Bible*. London: Scripture Union.
- Murray A 1996. *The holiest of all*. Springdale, PA: Whitaker House.
- Nee W 1962. *The normal Christian church life*. Washington, DC: International Students Press.

- New International Version: The International Inductive Study Bible*. 1995. Eugene, OR: Harvest House Publishers.
- New King James Version*. 1994. Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers.
- Niebuhr R 1960. *Radical monotheism and Western culture*. New York: Harper & Row.
- Niebuhr R 1956. *The purpose of the Church and its ministry: reflections on the aims of theological education*. New York: Harper & Brothers.
- Niehaus J 1995. *God at Sinai: covenant & Theophany in the Bible and ancient Near East*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.
- Nouwen H 1986. *In the house of the Lord*. London: Darton, Longman and Todd.
- O'Collins G and Farrugia E 2000. *A concise dictionary of theology: revised and expanded edition*. New York: Paulist Press.
- Ogden G 1990. *The new Reformation: returning the ministry to the People of God*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing.
- Ostborn G 1956. *Yahweh and Baal*. Lund: C. E. K. Gleerup.
- Patzia A 2001. *The emergence of the Church: context, growth, leadership & worship*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press.
- Peake A S 1927. *Elijah and Jezebel: the conflict with the Tyrian Baal*. Manchester: The University Press.
- Pfeiffer C (ed) 1969. *The Wycliffe Bible Commentary*. London: Oliphants.
- Poole M 1979. *A commentary on the Holy Bible*. Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust.
- Putt K 1996. Pre-understanding and the hermeneutical spiral. In Corley B, Lemke S, and Lovejoy G (eds), *Biblical hermeneutics: a comprehensive introduction to interpreting Scripture*. Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers.
- Ravenhill L 1992. *Why revival tarries*. Kent: Sovereign World.
- Ritter A 1991. Credal elements in the New Testament. In Hazlett I (ed), *Early Christianity: Origins and evolution to AD 600*. Nashville: Abingdon Press.
- Sanders E P 1993. *The historical figure of Jesus*. New York: Penguin Books.

- Schwarz C 1999. *Paradigm shift in the Church: how natural church development can transform theological thinking*. Carol Stream, IL: ChurchSmart Resources.
- Snyder H 1977. *New wineskins: changing the man-made structures of the church*. London: Marshall, Morgan and Scott.
- Stone H and Duke J 1996. *How to think theologically*. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press.
- Stone D and Smith G 2000. *The rest of the Gospel: when the partial Gospel has worn you out*. Dallas, TX: One Press.
- Thwaites J 2002. *Renegotiating the church contract: the death and life of the 21st century church*. Waynesboro, GA: Paternoster Press.
- Vara R 2001 (16 June). Little fire, brimstone at Baptist convention. *The Houston Chronicle*, 3E.
- Vine W E, Unger M F, and White W 1985. *Vine's complete expository dictionary of Old and New Testament words*. Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson.
- Weakley, Jr C G (ed) 1987. *The nature of revival*. Minneapolis, MN: Bethany House.
- Wenham G 1978. Grace and law in the Old Testament. In Kaye B and Wenham G (eds), *Law, Morality, and the Bible*. Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press.
- Whitaker J 1993. Christianity and morality in the Roman Empire. In Ferguson E (ed), *Christian life: ethics, morality, and discipline in the Early Church*. New York: Garland Publishing.
- Wiles M 1991. Orthodoxy and heresy. In Hazlett I (ed), *Early Christianity: Origins and evolution to AD 600*. Nashville: Abingdon Press.
- Wilmington H L 1981. *Wilmington's guide to the Bible*. Wheaton: Tyndale House.
- Womer J (ed) 1987. *Morality and ethics in early Christianity*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press.
- Wright N T 1999. *The way of the Lord: Christian pilgrimage today*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans.
- Wright N T 1997. *What Saint Paul really said: was Paul of Tarsus the real founder of Christianity?* Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans.

Wright N T 1993. *The climax of the Covenant: Christ and the law in Pauline theology*. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press.

Zacharias R 1997. *Deliver us from evil: restoring the soul in a disintegrating culture*. Nashville, TN: Word.