

Paul's Favorite Question - Part 2

Barry O'Dell

In three of his letters Paul asked the same question a total of fifteen times. **Do you not know?** In the previous edition we looked at Romans 6:3, 16, and 7:1. In Romans 11:2 he wrote, “*God has not cast away His people whom He foreknew. Or do you not know what the Scripture says of Elijah, how he pleads with God against Israel, saying...?*” Contextually, Paul was addressing a prominent problem that existed in the first century church - the Jew/Gentile arrangement within the body of Christ. The issue started in Romans 9:1 and continues through the end of chapter 11. Without going into too much detail, the Jewish people were God’s elected and adopted people to bring about salvation through the Messiah. That all started with God’s choosing of Abraham (Gen. 12:1-3), Isaac (Gen. 18:10), and Jacob (Gen. 25:22-26). John the Baptizer had to address this subject during his ministry (Matt. 3:7-12). The “mystery” of the gospel is defined as the Gentiles being “*fellow heirs, of the same body*” (Eph. 3:1-7). The problem with the Jewish audience of Romans 11 was that they did not know the Scriptures on this matter. Romans 9-11 is filled with references from Genesis to Malachi, showing that all the prophets spoke of the acceptance of Gentiles by God because the Jewish people were “*disobedient and contrary*” (Rom. 10:21). They had forsaken God; He had not forsaken them. “*I say then, has God cast away His people? Certainly not*” (Rom. 11:1)! Their problem? They were ungrateful, had rejected the Christ, and blamed God for their situation. Things like that can still happen today when people do not know the Scriptures!

The next time we find Paul’s favorite question is in 1 Corinthians 3:16, “**Do you not know that you are the temple of God and that the Spirit of God dwells in you?**” Corinth had forgotten something. Nearly every chapter of this first letter to them addressed some specific problem they were having. Division based on who baptized who, trusting in human wisdom, immaturity, failure to address fornication among the membership, Christians taking Christians to court, etc., etc. In chapter three, Paul addressed their immaturity that was manifesting itself through their loyalty to men rather than to Christ (1 Cor. 3:1-8). The temple of First Corinthians 3 is the church as a whole, not the individuals. Paul’s warning to the congregation was to not defile the church by their immaturity and divisiveness. That warning still stands today! It doesn’t matter who baptized you. It doesn’t matter who your favorite preacher is. Don’t defile the church with a sinful attachment to some human!

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First Corinthians 5:6 reads, “*Your glorying is not good. Do you not know that a little leaven leavens the whole lump?*” Fornication was a prominent and unaddressed sin within the church. The sin was of such a nature that Paul exclaimed that the Gentiles would not even participate in such (1 Cor. 5:1)! While the church was actively avoiding the sin, Paul had already determined what needed to be done. “*In the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, when you are gathered together, along with my spirit, with the power of our Lord Jesus Christ, deliver such a one to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, that the spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus*” (1 Cor. 5:4-5). Church discipline. Withdraw fellowship. The New Testament specifies the “steps” to be taken when a believer has wandered off into sin. Typically, it begins as a one-on-one matter. Jesus confronted that subject (Matt. 5:21-26; 18:15-20; Lk. 17:3-4). In an ideal situation, a rift between brethren will go no further than the two individuals. However, the issue in the church at Corinth was different. Their was sin being committed that everyone knew about and that everyone was ignoring. Public sin demands public encounter. The congregation failing to address the sin was failing to realize that to tolerate sin is to encourage sinful behavior in others. They were told not even to eat with “*anyone named a brother*” who would not repent of sin. Why? That the sinner’s soul might be saved in judgment. When God’s people **do not know** the seriousness of sin and the eternal consequences of sin, an entire congregation is in danger! The seven churches of Asia teach us that same concept (Rev. 2-3). A church can lose its status as Christ’s body if it does not repent (Rev. 2:5). A little leaven leavens the whole lump.

To Be Continued...

Malachi and the Religion That Argues. There is a kind of religion that does not make a man tender before God. It does not make him soft, pliable, and easy to correct. It makes him harder to correct. He has enough Bible, enough worship, enough history, enough public identity, and enough inherited language to believe he must be standing where he ought to stand. Then the Word of God comes and names his sin, and instead of trembling, he argues. That is the book of Malachi. God speaks, Israel answers back, and God proves the charge. Malachi moves through six major accusations: God's love questioned, God's name despised, covenant treachery, wearied words, robbery in tithes and offerings, and stout speech against the Lord. The book shows what happens when God's people keep enough religion to defend themselves, while losing enough reverence that they can no longer hear reproof.

Wherein Hast Thou Loved Us? God begins with love. Before the altar is corrected, before the priests are charged, before the offerings are exposed, the Lord reminds Israel that His dealings with them began in covenant mercy. *"I have loved you, saith the LORD. Yet ye say, Wherein hast thou loved us? Was not Esau Jacob's brother? saith the LORD: yet I loved Jacob"* (Mal. 1:2). Their answer shows how far the disease had gone. The Lord says, *"I have loved you,"* and they answer as though His love is not evident. They had the history of Jacob, the covenant, the return from captivity, the rebuilt temple, and the continued Word of God through the prophet, yet they still spoke as though God owed them proof. The same attitude can live under modern religious language. A man can sit under preaching for years, receive mercy after mercy, be carried through providence he could never have arranged, and still talk as though God has dealt hard with him the moment correction comes. The issue shows itself when the Word presses his sin, and his first answer is a complaint about how little God has done for him. A congregation can do the same thing. It can point to hard years, small numbers, money trouble, family grief, and cultural pressure, then act as though those burdens excuse coldness, bitterness, neglect, or harsh dealing. God's past mercy should make a people easier to correct, because a people who remember grace should not treat every rebuke as an injury.

Wherein Have We Despised Thy Name? The next accusation falls on the priests. They were still handling holy things, still standing near the altar, and still performing the outward work of worship. God names the condition of the worship by naming the condition of their hearts toward His name. *"A son honoureth his father, and a servant his master: if then I be a father, where is mine honour? and if I be a master, where is my fear? saith the LORD of hosts unto you, O priests, that despise my name. And ye say, Wherein have we despised thy name"* (Mal. 1:6)? Their answer is almost unbelievable. God says they have despised His name, and they ask how. The altar was still active, the priests were still serving, and the visible structure of religion was still in place, so they treated the accusation as if it made no sense. God clears the matter by pointing to their actual offerings. Their religion could not hide the fact that they were bringing God what they would have been ashamed to bring to a human governor. *"And if ye offer the blind for sacrifice, is it not evil? and if ye offer the lame and sick, is it not evil? Offer it now unto thy governor; will he be pleased with thee, or accept thy person? saith the LORD of hosts"* (Mal. 1:8). Modern worship can carry the same contradiction. A congregation can insist on the right acts of worship and still treat the worship of God as though He receives whatever attention, preparation, reverence, and leftovers men decide to bring. A man can know the correct order of worship, defend it in public, and then sing without thought, pray without attention, give without purpose, and listen to the Word as though the living God has not spoken. The outward form matters because God has spoken about worship. Malachi presses a deeper question inside the form itself: where is His honor, and where is His fear? Correct form becomes an accusation against us when the form remains and reverence disappears.

Wherefore? Malachi then moves from the altar into the dealings of the people with one another. God charges them with treachery, and their answer is still the same posture of offended confusion. They speak as though the accusation has no place to land. *"Have we not all one father? hath not one God created us? why do we deal treacherously every man against his brother by profaning the covenant of our fathers"* (Mal. 2:10)? The sin was not confined to defective sacrifices. Their covenant language did not match their conduct toward brethren. They could claim one Father while dealing treacherously with one another, and God would not separate their worship from their treatment of people made accountable under His covenant. Malachi presses the matter into marriage. The men had dealt treacherously with the wives of their youth, and God says He had been witness between the man and the wife of his covenant. *"Yet ye say, Wherefore? Because the LORD hath been witness between thee and the wife of thy youth, against whom thou hast dealt treacherously: yet is she thy companion, and the wife of thy covenant"* (Mal. 2:14). A man can have public doctrine right and still treat his wife with contempt, evade responsibility with his children, speak sharply to brethren, manipulate a church decision, or protect a friend because the friend is useful to him. God does not receive public religion as a substitute for honest covenant conduct. A congregation can also become skilled at public correctness while ordinary righteousness goes neglected. The sign can be right, the bulletin can be right, the building can be kept in order, and the public positions can be defended, while members deal harshly, leaders avoid hard judgment, families are left wounded, and brethren learn that personal influence matters more than truth. Jesus named the weightier matters plainly. *"Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye pay tithe of mint and anise and cummin, and have omitted the weightier matters of the law, judgment, mercy, and faith: these ought ye to have done, and not to leave the other undone"* (Matt. 23:23). Judgment, mercy, and faith do not loosen what God has bound. They keep men from using smaller visible details as cover while the heavier matters are left lying on the ground.

Wherein Have We Wearied Him? The fourth accusation concerns their words. They had learned to talk in a way that reversed moral categories and then acted surprised when God charged them for it. *"Ye have wearied the LORD with your words. Yet ye say, Wherein have we wearied him? When ye say, Every one that doeth evil is*

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good in the sight of the LORD, and he delighteth in them; or, Where is the God of judgment" (Mal. 2:17)? Their words were not harmless discouragement. They had spoken about evil as though God approved it, and they had spoken about judgment as though God had failed to appear. Their mouths revealed a religion that still used God's name while losing confidence in God's moral government. The modern form appears when religious people excuse what God condemns because the offender is useful, likable, related, popular, or on the right side of a public controversy. Evil is softened by circumstances, loyalty, usefulness, or personality, then the person who names the evil is treated as the problem. That speech wearies God because the words protect sin while still borrowing the sound of faithfulness. The other side of the same speech asks, "Where is the God of judgment?" A man can look at wickedness that appears to prosper and begin to speak as though obedience has no visible meaning. Malachi does not treat that speech as careful discernment; God names it as weariness brought before Him by words.

Wherein Shall We Return? God then speaks to the long history of Israel's departure. Their sin was not a sudden accident. The people had inherited a pattern of going away from God's ordinances, and the Lord called them back with a promise. *"Even from the days of your fathers ye are gone away from mine ordinances, and have not kept them. Return unto me, and I will return unto you, saith the LORD of hosts. But ye said, Wherein shall we return"* (Mal. 3:7)? Their answer again exposes the disease. God says, "Return unto me," and they ask where returning is needed. A people can drift so long that distance from God begins to feel like normal life. God then puts His finger on a measurable act. Their departure from His ordinances could be seen in tithes and offerings. *"Will a man rob God? Yet ye have robbed me. But ye say, Wherein have we robbed thee? In tithes and offerings"* (Mal. 3:8). The tithe belonged to Israel under the law. God used their withholding of tithes and offerings to expose their larger departure from His ordinances. They had enough religion to find the charge strange, yet the storehouse itself bore witness against them. God's answer is direct. They must bring what He commanded, and God would bless the obedience He required. *"Bring ye all the tithes into the storehouse, that there may be meat in mine house, and prove me now herewith, saith the LORD of hosts, if I will not open you the windows of heaven, and pour you out a blessing, that there shall not be room enough to receive it"* (Mal. 3:10). The Christian is not under Israel's tithe law. The Christian still has no right to treat God's commands as optional while asking God for blessing. Under Christ, giving, worship, service, repentance, honesty, forgiveness, and holiness all become places where a man either yields to the Word or answers back with religious excuses. A modern *"Wherein shall we return?"* can sound very respectable. A congregation asks where repentance is needed while neglected members remain neglected, partiality remains untouched, worship has become mechanical, giving is treated as spare money, and correction is received as personal attack. God's Word names the place where return must begin, and the religious heart tries to make the charge sound unreasonable.

What Have We Spoken So Much Against Thee? The final accusation brings the matter to full strength. Their words had grown hard against God. They had begun to speak as though service to God had no profit, obedience brought no gain, and the proud were the truly blessed. *"Your words have been stout against me, saith the LORD. Yet ye say, What have we spoken so much against thee? Ye have said, It is vain to serve God: and what profit is it that we have kept his ordinance, and that we have walked mournfully before the LORD of hosts? And now we call the proud happy; yea, they that work wickedness are set up; yea, they that tempt God are even delivered"* (Mal. 3:13-15). That speech is the final sound of religion arguing against God. The people had moved from questioning His love, to despising His name, to treachery, to wearying words, to robbery, and finally to the claim that serving God is vain. A man has reached a dangerous place when obedience begins to look useless to him. The same speech appears whenever a religious person compares obedience with visible advantage and concludes that faithfulness has cost too much. A man sees the proud rewarded, the wicked promoted, the compromiser praised, and the faithful overlooked, then begins to speak as though God has mismanaged the world. That complaint may use the vocabulary of sorrow, but Malachi names the words as stout against the Lord. God also shows the other speech present among His people. While some spoke stout words against Him, others feared the Lord and spoke often one to another. *"Then they that feared the LORD spake often one to another: and the LORD hearkened, and heard it, and a book of remembrance was written before him for them that feared the LORD, and that thought upon his name"* (Mal. 3:16). The contrast is sobering. Some used words to defend themselves against God, while others used words in the fear of God. The Lord heard both.

Conclusion: Malachi is preserved because the same disease can live among God's people now. A people can keep public religion, inherited language, familiar worship, correct positions, and visible order, while slowly losing the ability to tremble when the Word of God names their sin. The book opens the same way again and again. God states the truth, Israel answers back, and God clears the matter. Their answers sound religious because the people asking the questions still had priests, sacrifices, altar, temple, covenant memory, and public identity. That is why the book searches us. The danger shows up when a man hears correction and reaches first for his religious résumé, when a congregation hears reproof and points first to its outward correctness, when brethren defend conduct by reminding everyone how sound they are on public issues. Religion has become dangerous when it gives a man confidence to argue with God. Malachi calls that man back to the fear of the Lord. God's love must be believed, His name must be honored, His covenant must shape our dealings, His judgment must govern our words, His ordinances must be kept, and His service must never be counted vain. When the Word of God names our sin, the faithful answer is repentance. There is a kind of religion that leaves a man harder to correct. Malachi shows where that road goes, and the Word of God gives us the better answer. God speaks, man hears, and the fear of the Lord makes him return.

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The Churches of Christ

- Bible only (2 Pet. 1:3)
- Name of Christ (Rom. 16:16)
- Began in Jerusalem (Isa. 2:2-3; Acts 2:1-4)
- Established by Jesus (Matt. 16:18)
- Purchased with Jesus' blood (Acts 20:28)
- Married to Christ (Rom. 7:4)
- Established in the 1st century (Acts 2:47)
- Jesus the Head of the One Body (Eph. 1:22-23; 4:4; 5:23)
- Added to the church by God (Acts 2:41, 47)

Salvation

- Saved by grace, through faith (Eph. 2:8-9)
- Not by faith alone (Jas. 2:14-26)
- Not by grace alone (Matt. 7:21)
- Belief and baptism (Mk. 16:16)
- Repentance and baptism (Acts 2:37-38)
- Belief, confession, and baptism (Acts 8:37-38)
- Heard, believed, baptized (Acts 18:8)
- Baptized into Christ's death - raised to a new life (Rom. 6:3-4)
- Baptism - faith in God's working/operation (Col. 2:12)
- Faith and baptism (Gal. 3:26-27)
- Baptism does save us (1 Pet. 3:21)

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Mail address corrections to: Fulton County Gospel News, PO Box 251, Mammoth Spring, AR 72554

Editor - Barry O'Dell - Office Phone - (870) 625-3217