

# Straight Bible Talk

Manchester Church of Christ, Share Christ's Love and Share His Message

## Hammer or a Hug?

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"Is not My word like a fire?" declares the Lord, "and like a hammer which shatters a rock?" These words of God from the mouth of Jeremiah crashed upon the ears of Israel like a clap of thunder from the heavens.

The people were not happy that Jeremiah had spoken. Much less did they want to hear the message that he delivered to them from Jehovah God of Israel. The king took what Jeremiah had written and threw it in the fire. Jeremiah just wrote it again!

As Babylon threatened to invade and destroy Israel, many false prophets arose to assure the people of their safety. In two years, they promised, all will be well. Only Jeremiah stood firm against these prophets of prosperity and peace. Only Jeremiah spoke for God.

Ezekiel spoke of the duties of the watchman on the wall. "If I bring a sword upon a land, and the people of the land take one man from among them and make him their watchman, and he sees the sword coming upon the land and blows on the trumpet and warns the people, then he who hears the sound of the trumpet and does not take warning, and a sword comes and takes him away, his blood will be on his own head. . . But if the watchman sees the sword coming and does not blow the trumpet and the people are not warned, and a sword comes and takes a person from them, he is taken away in his iniquity; but his blood I will require from the watchman's hand."

To be silent when danger lurks is wrong.

To speak out and warn is to be a true servant of God.

Paul advised a young preacher: "Preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, exhort, with great patience and instruction. For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine; but wanting to have their ears tickled, they will accumulate for themselves teachers in accordance to their own desires, and will turn away their ears from the truth and will turn aside to myths."

### The Bible is not Popular

While the Bible remains a best seller in America, it is not a popular book in many places. It is not a popular book in bars, brothels and casinos. It is not a popular book in sports stadiums, colleges and the courts.

Sometimes it is not popular because of what it says. Sometimes it is not popular because we are simply having too much fun to be distracted by "religious" concerns.

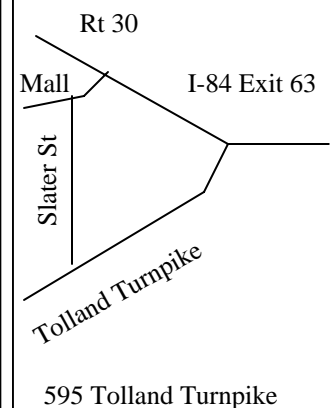
It is not even a popular book in many churches. Oh yes, lip service is given to the Book, but the messages are from pop psychology and the "feel good" philosophers. Some words from the Bible are often read, but many important passages are never mentioned. They contradict what is being done. They cry out against what is being practiced. There are no Jeremiah's to warn the people of the danger that lies ahead. But God's Word is still a hammer.

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Meeting at  
595 Tolland Turnpike  
Sun Bible Classes—9 AM  
Sun Worship—10 AM  
Sun Eve Worship—6:00 PM  
Wed Bible Class—7:00 PM

All scripture quotations are from the  
New American Standard Bible unless  
otherwise indicated.



## Tolerance

Tolerance is the catchword of the day. Sinners must not be confronted with God's idea of righteousness. Everyone must be assured that their conduct is "normal." After all, are we not simply creatures of our environment and a result of our genetic endowment? The popular cry is, "Can't we all just get along?" It is just an "alternative lifestyle." People must have a "choice." Jails are reformatories and "laws are made to be broken."

But getting along requires compromise. You give a little here and I will give a little there. God does not compromise. It is His way or no way. God is "funny" that way.

Tolerance is like the proverbial camel with his nose under the tent. Before you know it, the whole camel has come into your home. Concede a little here. Concede a little there. Soon there are no limits. Everything is relative. "Everyone did what was right in his own eyes." (That is a quote from the Old Testament book of Judges. We have been there, done that.)

We have moved from "the devil made me do it," to, "I can't help it because God made me this way." So now God is the source of misconduct instead of the devil. What a relief! Nothing to worry about when my behavior is from God and not from the devil!

When such a conclusion has been reached, the Bible no longer matters. Modern science has "proved" that my conduct is acceptable! That is the same kind of science that proved the earth was the center of the universe until Copernicus and Galileo came along and upset everybody's theories. That is the same kind of science the alchemists used to prove that one could produce gold from lead!

It seems not to matter what God has written in the Bible. If it does not fit one's preconceived notions, it must be that someone is "misinterpreting" the Bible. The hammer is about to fall. The Bible is not to be "interpreted," but understood. There may be many "interpretations," but there is only one proper understanding.

Certainly there are many pleasant, encouraging words to be found in the Bible. Many have found comfort in, "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want," or, "Come to Me, all who are weary and heavy-laden, and I will give you rest," or, again, "And the peace of God, which surpasses all comprehension, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus."

Many have found assurance in the words commonly heard at funerals, "Do not let your heart be troubled; believe in God, believe also in Me. In My Father's house are many dwelling places; if it were not so, I would have told you; for I go to prepare a place for you. If I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and receive you to My-

self, that where I am, there you may be also."

These are among the many "Hug" passages found throughout the Bible. They are true statements, but there is another side as well. There are other passages that hammer at our misdeeds and urge us to do better. Those "Hug" statements do not apply if one has not taken seriously the demands of a Holy God. "Be holy, for I am holy."

Consider, "Not everyone who says to Me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father who is in heaven," or, "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint and dill and cummin, and have neglected the weightier provisions of the law; justice and mercy and faithfulness; but these are the things you should have done without neglecting the others." Or, think about this passage: "Those who practice such things will not inherit the kingdom of God," (and there is a long list of the things that are not to be practiced) or "The wages of sin is death." Or, "These will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life" (and there is a standard by which this judgment is determined).

I am not sure that we need a Cotton Mather (an early New England preacher) to spell out in exquisite detail the torture of a sinner suspended over a hell of fire. But neither do we need a preacher who decides that he will only preach positive sermons because there are those who will not listen if he brings a hammer.

When imminent danger threatens, the doctor must give his warning. When a troubled soul comes burdened with care, that person needs the encouragement of hope. He needs a hug. Sometimes the doctor must cut. At other times he needs to bind up the wounds. The Bible does both and so must we.

## Does it Matter Which Church?

When society says, "Attend the church of your choice," the preacher must cry out, "But what about God's choice." Does God prefer one church over another? The Bible would certainly indicate that He does.

Paul spoke of the church "He purchased with His own blood." Jesus said, "I will build my church." Paul wrote of the time when Jesus would "present to Himself the church in all her glory, having no spot or wrinkle or any such thing." In each case the Bible speaks of a church, not churches.

Differences over a variety of matters led to a division between the church in the East (the Greek Orthodox Church) and the church in the West (the Roman

Catholic Church). When Martin Luther protested the sale of indulgences (payment made to avoid the penalty for sin), that led to his ouster from the Catholic Church. Thus was born the Lutheran Church in Germany. When the Catholic Church refused to give King Henry VIII a divorce, that led to a division creating the Church of England.

If God rejected Israel when they went astray from Him (and He did) then what must His reaction be to churches that go astray from His Word? With which of the above churches was God pleased? When doctrines not found in the Bible were adopted and forced on the people, what must God's reaction have been?

When Paul wrote his first letter to the church in Corinth, he confronted their division, within the congregation, into factions. In part, he wrote, "For there must also be factions among you, so that those who are approved may become evident among you." When there are factions, someone is wrong!

He did not say that all the factions were approved. Factions existed showing that some were right and others were wrong. It would seem that the same must be true in the religious world today. Where there are differences, someone is right and someone is wrong. Or, perhaps it is simpler than that. Both are wrong.

The Bible is given to men in order that we might be right with God. When we are wrong it is a hammer that shatters our pretensions and our personal ideas of what ought to be. It is a fire that will consume every false view. It shows us what God approves and leads us to decisions that please Him.

The New Testament describes the church as it ought to be. It describes the worship of the church established by Jesus' apostles. It describes the organization of that church. It outlines the moral demands that meet God's standard of right and wrong. If we want to be true to God we will pattern the church in this century after the plan laid out by God in His Book. We will follow God's pattern for worship. We will follow God's plan for organization. And we will follow God's plan for godly living.

While sometimes worship has more in common with a pep rally or a rock concert, God is not fooled. He knows what He wants in worship and He has told us plainly in His book.

If God wants a Pope as the head of His church, we ought to be able to find that in the Bible. If God wants a single Pastor running His church, then we ought to be able to find an example of that in the Bible. In fact, when one reads the New Testament neither a Pope nor a Pastor is found at the head of God's church. And there was certainly no "Reverend" Peter.

Pope comes from an Italian word meaning father. Jesus said, speaking of religious leaders, "Do not call anyone on earth your father; for One is your Father, He who is in heaven."

In the same way, the word pastor translates a Greek word, more commonly translated as shepherd. In the New Testament, those called shepherds are also called elders or overseers and there were always more than one in a congregation. They were also men who met rigorous standards concerning their morals and their family conduct, being married, having children, older in the faith and many other important characteristics. And they were not rulers, but shepherds making sure that the sheep were properly nourished from God's Word.

For churches in the New Testament, they had but one head, Jesus. They had no earthly head. They had no board of directors, synod, presbytery, conference or other arrangement for making rules and regulations. There was no group of men that controlled preaching through ordination, nor any limitations on who could serve communion and baptize. Each congregation passed on the qualifications of those who would lead, preach, teach, pray and otherwise serve the Lord.

The Bible is a hammer that shatters all modern assumptions that we can do things better than the apostles of Jesus. It calls men back to the simple teachings of Jesus and encourages people to bond together in fellowship to promote the cause of Jesus, not the cause of some group of fallible men.

## **God Sets Moral Standards**

When one turns to the matter of morals, who has not felt the hammer of God on their conduct? From the time that Moses held in his hands the two tablets of stone, men have come face to face with the awesome moral demands of a righteous God.

God's directions to Israel did not end with the Ten Commandments. In page after page of the books of Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy, God made His moral demands known to the people He had delivered from Egyptian slavery. Their personal conduct was a matter of intense Divine concern.

They were free, but they were not free to live in any manner they chose. When they committed fornication with the women of Moab and worshipped their gods, God destroyed 23,000 people in just one day.

When they were hungry, God fed them with manna from heaven. When they were thirsty, God brought water from the rock to quench their thirst. But when

they were wrong, God brought fire from heaven, He opened the ground and swallowed up the offenders, He sent serpents whose bite was death.

God did good to His people and encouraged them to press on to the promised land. But God also had a hammer to form them into the people He wanted them to be.

Some would summarize God's demands by pointing to the words of Jesus. When asked, "Which is the great commandment in the Law?" He replied, "'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.' This is the great and foremost commandment. The second is like it, 'you shall love your neighbor as yourself.'"

Jesus also added, "On these two commandments depend the whole Law and the Prophets." In other words, the two commands cited do not give all the details. There are other things written that give substance to the two commands and those additional commands are important as well. Stating what is great does not make it acceptable to ignore the rest!

John said simply, "This is the love of God, that we keep His commandments; and His commandments are

not burdensome." Which commandments? All of them. Is that a great burden? No. Not if you love God. The responsibility of conforming is a hammer for those who do not want to obey. It is simply what ought to be done by those who love the Lord.

Some of what the Lord commands is very general, as in the two commands to love. Other requirements are very specific. For example: "He who steals must steal no longer; but rather he must labor, performing with his own hands what is good, so that he will have something to share with one who has need." In other words, instead of taking other people's things, one should give, from what one has earned, to help those who cannot provide for themselves.

Or again, the Bible teaches: "Laying aside falsehood, speak truth each one of you with his neighbor, for we are members of one another." Quit lying and tell the truth!

### People Need to Change

Jesus came to change the world. But people do not like to be changed. If anything, they often change to be worse. They seldom change for the better unless forced to do so. That is why teachers give tests. That is why businesses use time clocks and give

workers reviews. That is why the police use radar and stores employ cameras to spy on the customers. People often cannot be trusted to do the right thing just because it is the right thing.

We resist change because it makes us uncomfortable. We resist change because we enjoy what we are doing (even when we know that it is against God).

Why should we be surprised that God uses a hammer? God tells us what is right and He sent forth His prophets to tell the people the truth. He still sends His preachers to open the eyes of the blind, to open the ears of the deaf, to help people see the way they should go.

He wants us to believe the things that are true. He wants us to do the things that He defines as holy. He wants us to worship according to His directions. He wants us to be in fellowship with those people whom He has called to be His people.

When we resist, God uses a hammer. When we conform to His pattern He gives us a hug. God works with us as a potter works with his clay, molding and making us into a beautiful vessel, fit for His kingdom.

- Please send me a free Bible
- I am interested in a Bible study program
- I am looking for a church
- Please send me a free copy of the book, "A Christian Survival Manual"
- Please add my name to receive "Straight Bible Talk" free each month
- I have a question

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