

Opening Notes *p.2* • First Chair *p.10* • Where Did the Songbirds Go? *p.18*

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Christian Dissenter



The Unfinished Symphony

Who Will Finish What the First Church Didn't?

FREE

Nightfall *p.12*

*Church History's Most
Difficult Dilemma*

The Insurgent *p.14*

*The First Radical Pamphlet in Christian
History and Why Martin Luther Reviled It*

Opening Notes



Quietly we all file into the grand 19th century hall and find our seats. A low murmur fills the magnificent, dimly-lit chamber. The anticipation is high. Tonight's performance promises to be one of the greatest of the 21st century: Boris Yeldenoff and the Siberian Chamber Orchestra performing Beethoven's 9th Symphony. "Ahhh, if the walls could only speak out and testify to the wonders that have taken place here," I say to myself. An older woman nestles down into her seat behind me. Draped in silk and pearls, she has an eerie bluish tint to her skin. Quietly she

If the early church sang a sweet melody of love,
then selfishness must sound like...



snaps her powder case shut after applying the last bit of blush to her already iridescent cheeks. She takes a puff from her oxygen mask and sits back to enjoy the performance. No doubt she numbers among the fine connoisseurs of musical genius.

Suddenly, a hush falls over the anxious crowd. One by one, the orchestra begins to file in and take their positions. Haunting sounds ensue and begin to fill

the air as the musicians begin to tune their instruments. Enter the maestro. As if moved by some supernatural force, the audience erupts with applause, rising to their feet to greet this famed man and welcome him to the Big Apple. There they are, like angels waiting to perform — scores of musicians under the direction of this master mind. The conductor motions for quiet. We sit.

With the grace of a stallion he steps up to the podium, whisking aside the tails of his tuxedo, lifting both arms high into the air, the baton in his right hand, he pauses. Suspense holds us all hostage as we wait for the opening notes. With the precision and speed of a bolt of lightning, his hand falls, ushering in what we have all been waiting for.

But what is this? Something is terribly wrong. Instead of the ethereal melody, written down generations before to be performed on this perfect night, the first-chair violin opens with a sour note. Oh, no, what's happening? Surely the orchestra will come forth and cover for this unfortunate soul. Why, even the best have an occasional mishap. Hopefully, for the sake of his career, he can recover.

In come the tympani and the brass to save the day. Like a hurt seal screaming for mercy, the orchestra begins to put forth horrible noise. "What in Sam Blazes is going on?" I exclaim, turning to the man next to me. As if in a trance, he twirled his handlebar mustache, savoring the tuneless sounds. I am shocked. Perhaps he is deaf.

Turning around, I look at the bluish woman behind me to see what her response might be. "Madam!" I exclaim, looking to her for consolation, "Do you hear what is going on?"

"Exquisite, isn't it? Just scrumptiously delightful," she replies, with a satisfying smile as if she were in pure euphoria listening to this out-of-tune nightmare. I cover my ears in agony. What is going on? Am I going insane? Can no one hear this musical disaster? But alas, as I look around, nothing but satisfaction seems to be caressing the faces of the audience.

Sound strange? Well, it should! Can you imagine a symphony orchestra so out of tune with itself, but plowing headlong into

a performance, as if they were in complete harmony? Even more shocking would be an audience so strangely unaware of the obvious facts, oblivious of the disharmony. Strange as it may sound, this kind of clamor goes on every single day all over the world, and few are shocked by it.

To understand this parable we have to take a step back in time, almost two thousand years, to be precise...

The Original Composition

Way back in the first century, something miraculous happened. No, it wasn't an orchestral performance. What happened was a social phenomenon. It is recorded right in the Book of Acts in the Bible.¹ The scenario described there was the foundation of a whole new way of life that was exactly what the Great Composer and Conductor had intended from the very beginning of time.

You see, just as in a symphony orchestra, people actually have a composition that they are supposed to follow. That composition first came in the form of the Law, and then later the commandments of the Messiah.² Most people know that whole composition today as the Bible. If that composition were actually followed, then a harmonious life of caring and sharing would result. That is exactly what happened in the first century.

Those who heard the message of the gospel that the apostle Peter was preaching on the Day of Pentecost were cut to the heart.

Like a deafening clap of thunder, the shocking revelation that they had crucified their long-awaited Messiah broke through the silence of their dull consciences. Three thousand received the apostle's message, repented, and were baptized.

The foundation of his message was what he had learned from Yahshua Himself: "Deny yourself, take up your cross, and follow Me." This message of self denial and obedience to the gospel resulted in a social harmony that could not be found anywhere else on earth. People who had formerly been paralyzed by insurmountable barriers of race, class, national, or economic background were suddenly sharing all that they had for the common good — time, possessions, energy, and gifting. It was like a well-practiced symphony that produced unmatched consonance.³

Although the social programs of today's modern society try to replicate this, they all fall miserably short. In fact, the true Holy Spirit is the only one who is able to cause people to be able to play the symphony of life in perfect unity. If He is not present in the hearts of those who pick up the score, then chaos is the ultimate result.

Constantine Steps Up to the Conductor's Podium

So what happened to the harmony that was found in the first-century communities?



¹Acts 2:42-44; 4:32-35 ²Yahshua is the Hebrew name for Jesus. See page 18 ³Consonance — agreement or compatibility between opinions or actions; the combination of notes that are in harmony with each other due to the relationship between their frequencies. ⁴Dissonance — a lack of harmony among musical notes; a tension or clash resulting in the combination of two disharmonious or unsuitable elements.

Sadly, they went off course; their love grew cold and they began to tolerate dissonance.⁴ By the beginning of the 4th century, the Church had mutated into something unrecognizable in comparison to its original form. It became Christianity. In an attempt to save the Roman Empire, Constantine made Christianity its official religion. A new conductor had taken the podium. With Constantine at the lead, the Church would begin to play the tragic scores of intolerance, persecution, and even murder that would last hundreds of years. Though many throughout the years protested the clamor that this new orchestra produced, there was nothing they could do. The masses were forced to listen and perform at the risk of life and limb.

So what about today? True enough, people aren't being burned

at the stake for having a different opinion than the Pope about infant baptism, but how does the orchestra sound? Do we see and hear the unity and harmony that resonated from the Church in the first century? Or are we like the dull characters in the opening story, sitting back, narcotized by the magnificent auditoriums and showy costumes of today's Christian performers, oblivious to the contradictions? To a child it is obvious that the unity and harmony described in the Book of Acts is nowhere to be found in Christianity, regardless of its pomp and fanfare.

Sanity Returns

But like the symphony that began 2,000 years ago on the Day of Pentecost in Jerusalem, a new sound is

beginning to be heard once again on planet earth. The Conductor is Yahshua Himself, and each member is in complete submission to Him and in harmony with one another — no first chairs, no superstars, just brothers and sisters obeying the commandments of the Son of God, loving one another the way He loved them. Listen closely and you might hear a new sound you cannot deny. You can even join in and sing with us, but it will cost you everything, for we have returned to the original Composition: “Deny yourself, take up your cross, and follow Me...”⁵





*Have you ever wondered
what the finale to God's
symphony will be like?
Or how He'll bring it about?*



The Unfinished Symphony

In 1822, the German composer Franz Schubert began his *Symphony No. 8 in B minor*, completing two movements and an apparent study of a third before he died. It is perhaps his best-known and cherished work, often called *The Unfinished Symphony*, and has stirred many composers to try their hand at completing it — so far without success. “Impossible!” some would say, “How could anyone capture what was in the spirit and soul of the original composer?”



Some music historians and scholars have labored to prove that the composition was actually complete in its two movements, and nothing more was intended by the author. But to the trained ear of a classical musician, it is inescapably lacking a satisfying conclusion, failing even to return to the key in which it was begun. Such people wish that the spirit that inspired the first two movements, and gave a mere glimpse of the third, could be brought back to complete the unfinished symphony.

This true story is strikingly similar to that of another unfinished symphony — the greatest symphony that could ever be imagined. It expresses the heart of the Creator Himself, and His ultimate purpose for mankind. Like Schubert’s unfinished symphony, the first two movements have been completed, and the third is but a prophetic sketch that must await a renaissance of the Spirit of its Composer. And just as with Schubert’s symphony, there are many who scoff at the suggestion that there was a third movement

in the Composer’s heart. But there are others who long for His grand symphony to be completed, and His perfect will to be accomplished on the earth.

The First Movement

The first movement began with the awakening of new life on the desolate landscape of this ancient planet. From the barren earth a lush garden sprang up at the very word of the Composer and Conductor, soon to be filled with a myriad of living creatures, each playing its own special part. Yet all creation held its breath as God brought forth from the dust of the earth His most magnificent creation: Man (male and female), created in the very image and likeness of his Creator. His purpose? To fill the earth and be its loving caretakers, gardeners, and shepherds, ruling under the direction of their Creator.¹ A noble calling!

Alas, the majesty of the music was short-lived, as the Serpent

cleverly beguiled the woman into rebelling against God’s clear command, and the man following after her plunged the human race into darkness. No longer would their Creator walk with them and shine His bright light on their steps, but they would have to walk by the light of their own consciences — their inherent knowledge of good and evil. In their suffering to bear children and to bring forth a living from the reluctant earth, they would have to grope for their Creator, and He would have to wait for someone with a heart to rule.²

The following two thousand years of tumult were finally interrupted by the hopeful melody of a heart being stirred, desperately longing for the light of his Creator. Abram stood gazing up at the sparkling stars on the velvety blackness of space, feeling very small, but willing to do the will of the One who had put those stars in their places. It was exactly the kind of heart God was waiting for. Over 85 years old and childless, Abram

¹Genesis 1:27-28 ²Genesis 3:16-19 ³Genesis 15:5-6



Abram stood gazing up at the sparkling stars on the velvety blackness of space, feeling very small, but willing to do the will of the One who had put those stars in their places.

heard in his heart the impossible promise of his Creator: “Count the stars if you are able to number them. So shall your offspring be.”³

Abram believed God, and God cast His mantle of righteousness over Abram, calling him His friend, and began to reveal Himself to him. It was the first time since the Fall that a man enjoyed intimate communion with his Creator, and when that communion deepened, God changed Abram’s name to Abraham (“father of a multitude”), knowing that he would command his children and his household after him to keep His way by doing righteousness and justice.⁴

On that basis, God made a self-cursing oath to give to Abraham’s offspring the land from the Euphrates to the River of Egypt as an everlasting possession.⁵ His intention was that twelve tribes would come forth from Abraham’s offspring, and they would dwell in that land in peace and unity, demonstrating through the bonds of their holy brotherhood the love, justice, and righteousness of their God. They were to be His royal priesthood, His holy nation, a people for His own possession who would be a great light to the nations around them,⁶ like a symphony

itself in its intricate, well-balanced harmonies.

Tragically, except for brief periods under Joshua and King David, this orchestra often ignored and even reviled its Conductor, bringing forth a cacophony⁷ rather than a symphony. Tribal wars, idolatry, injustice, and sexual immorality weakened the nation to the point that they were overcome by their enemies. Two thousand years after God had chosen Abraham to be the father of His holy nation, only a bitter and discordant fragment of Abraham’s descendants remained in the land, living resentfully under the dominion of Rome, in desperate need of a Savior. Yet among them were a few truly humble souls, praying earnestly for the Consolation of Israel.

The Second Movement

The second movement begins with the pure and plaintive strain of an aged priest named Zechariah, sincerely performing his allotted service in the midst of a corrupt priesthood. As he approaches the altar of incense in the Holy Place, an angel appears and tells him that his prayers have been heard and that his wife Elizabeth will bear him a very

special son who will turn many of the children of Israel back to their God. He would be the one spoken of by the prophet Malachi, who was to come 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 righteous, to make ready a people prepared for the Messiah.⁸

In perfect harmony, Elizabeth’s cousin Mary adds her song as she humbly receives the angel’s word that she, yet a virgin, will conceive and give birth to the Messiah, who will be called *Yahshua*,* for He will save His people from their sins.⁹ At His birth, the angels themselves break forth into shouts of exultant joy, introducing the dramatic movement of His short life. From His unexpected baptism by John in the muddy Jordan, to His shocking crucifixion on Calvary, to the unimaginable agony of His suffering for three days and three nights in *Sheol*,¹⁰ to His triumphant resurrection, His life expressed the very heart and soul of the Creator for Israel and for all of mankind. It was the song of love.

He taught that song to all who would listen, and especially to the twelve men who walked with Him, day and night, for the last three years of His life on earth. He told them to forsake everything to follow Him, and He would give them eternal life. That was the only gospel they knew. He wrote His commandments on their hearts, teaching them by His example to put them into practice. He labored to keep them in perfect harmony. His last prayer for them before His death was that they would be perfectly one, just as He was one with His Father.¹¹ His last command to them after His resurrection was to teach that same song to all who

⁴Genesis 18:19 ⁵Genesis 15:18 ⁶Exodus 19:5-6 ⁷*cacophony* — a harsh, discordant mixture of sounds. ⁸Luke 1:5-17 *Hebrew name for *Jesus*. See explanation on p. 18 ⁹Luke 1:26-38; Matthew 1:21 ¹⁰*Sheol* — the unseen realm to which the disembodied souls of the dead descend and experience the torment which their sins deserve. ¹¹John 17:21-23 ¹²Matthew 28:19-20 ¹³Apostle — one sent with a message and the authority to command obedience to it; Romans 1:5. ¹⁴Matthew 5:14-16; Acts 1:8; 4:32-33

would receive them — teaching them to obey everything He had commanded them.¹² His intention was that His twelve apostles¹³ would establish a new *spiritual* nation of twelve tribes that would fully express His Father’s heart in every place where they dwell together in communities, as a light to the nations around them.¹⁴

Although there is no trace of that spiritual nation left today, the book called “The Acts of the Apostles” records the fact that the apostles did as they were commanded.¹⁵ They preached the gospel they had received, and all who believed forsook everything just as they had. They all lived together and had all things in common. They were of one heart and soul, like a well-tuned symphony orchestra. Their communal life multiplied and grew into a spiritual nation of twelve tribes who earnestly served God night and day, hoping to fulfill their prophetic destiny.¹⁶ But over time, self-sacrifice gave way to self-concern and they forgot the melody.¹⁷ No longer able to live together in peace, they drifted back into living their own independent



lives. Their lively circles of spontaneous daily sharing¹⁸ ultimately gave way to a weekly ritual of filing into their pews to be led through a fixed liturgy by a professional clergy pretending to be God’s ministers.¹⁹

At some point along the way, the Conductor withdrew to His chamber, unwilling to endure the cacophony that had overtaken what had once been His orchestra. The second movement had ended, but most didn’t even notice,²⁰ continuing to screech out their own discordant improvisations, each claiming to be led by Him. Christianity had begun.

The Third Movement

It has been at least 1800 years since the last note of the second movement was played, yet most Christians still claim that God is directing their countless conflicting denominations,²¹ and that He never really expected His people to bear the fruit of His kingdom in this age.²² Supposedly God is going to welcome them all into heaven where they will play beautiful music together in eternal bliss while those who have shut their ears to the noisy gongs and clanging cymbals of Christianity will burn forever in hell. But many good and honest people over the past eighteen centuries have sensed the absurdity of this claim, and have earnestly longed for a third and final movement of God that will actually usher in His kingdom on earth.

Without a doubt, the symphony is unfinished, for the grand finale has not yet happened. Yahshua, the Messiah, has not returned, and He cannot and will not return until the end of the third movement, for as it says in Acts 3:21, “must remain in heaven until the time comes for God to restore all things, as He



promised long ago through His holy prophets.” This is speaking of the restoration of Israel in the next age as a twelve tribe nation dwelling in the land God promised to give to Abraham’s descendants,²³ just as Yahshua promised to His disciples, “I tell you the truth, at the renewal of all things, when the Son of Man sits on His glorious throne, you who have followed Me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel.”²⁴

So what is He waiting for? He is waiting for His Bride to be made ready,²⁵ and His Bride is the *spiritual* twelve tribes of Israel.²⁶ He is waiting for His enemies to be made a footstool for His feet,²⁷ which are the feet of His Bride, which is His Body, the Church.²⁸ She must be restored in this age as she was in the first century,²⁹ and she must complete the course, bearing the fruit of the Kingdom as a witness to the whole earth, and then the end will come.³⁰ That is the third movement of the symphony, and it is just beginning...



¹⁵Acts 2:40-45; 4:32-35 ¹⁶Acts 26:6-7 ¹⁷Revelation 2:4-5 ¹⁸Acts 2:46; 1 Corinthians 14:26; Hebrews 3:6,13 ¹⁹2 Corinthians 11:13-15 ²⁰Revelation 3:3; 2:5 ²¹Revelation 3:3; 2:5 ²²Christianity Today claims there are at least 39,000, and increasing. ²³Matthew 21:43 ²⁴Genesis 15:18 ²⁵Matthew 19:28 ²⁶Revelation 19:7-8 ²⁷Revelation 21:9-12 ²⁸Hebrews 10:13 ²⁹Ephesians 5:23; Colossians 1:18,24 ³⁰Matthew 17:11-12; Mark 9:11-12 ³⁰Matthew 21:43; 24:14

First Chair

*What could
be better than
playing in
one of the best
orchestras in
the country and
being looked up
to by thousands
of people?*

My new violin teacher was the leader of the second violins in the city's philharmonic orchestra. I liked her. She was encouraging and friendly, and obviously had the necessary skills to pass on to me. Her husband was the first chair in the same philharmonic. What a great team, I thought. How ideal — four teenage children, a nice big house in a quaint suburb. What could be better than playing in one of the best orchestras in the country and being able to work alongside your husband, being looked up to by thousands of people?

Well, as I visited her weekly over the next two years, I saw the dream crumble into reality. My teacher's husband left her after an affair with the leader of the cello section in the same orchestra. She was left feeling worthless and rejected, solo mother of four angry, confused, and insecure teenagers. Each day in her job as leader of the second violins she had to face her former husband and his new woman. How sad, I thought. That didn't seem right. Oh well, life goes on, I guess...

I was a young and naïve country girl, going to the university in the big city to study music and the arts, literature, and languages. Sometimes, I would go to hear the philharmonic play, maybe with a famous guest soloist, a virtuoso violinist, or an amazing pianist. Or perhaps it was a grand choral work with row upon row of brightly colored choristers filling the town hall with the most spectacular sound. Whatever it was, I would be moved by the power of that awesome medium of sound — the orchestra. One hundred or so musicians perfectly synchronized, filling the hall with harmony and rich colorful tones, every mood and emotion expressed from the melancholic solo strains of the oboe to the warm fuzz of strings to the full intensity of every instrument playing at full fury.

How I enjoyed riding that roller-coaster of emotion. The audience would stand and applaud, on and on, as first the soloist took a bow, then the conductor, and then the leading violinist stood and took a bow, and another, and maybe another.

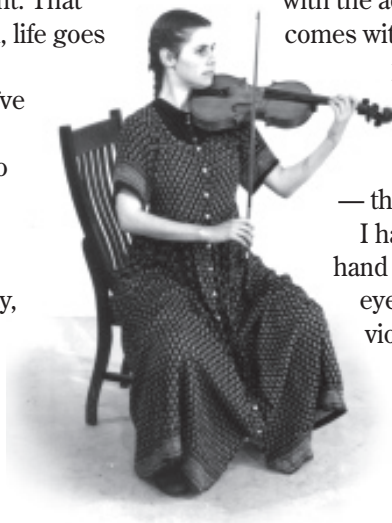
There he was, my teacher's ex-husband. It's funny, I thought... he was quite nice, certainly a likable character. Some said he was full of himself. I thought it would be no wonder, given all that attention. Anyway, I found it all very difficult to understand. In my own personal life, however, I was beginning to experience the inner working of an orchestra, in more ways than one.

I had been in the youth symphony orchestra since I was about 14 or 15. Quite a good orchestra, we were able to play most of the big symphonic works of the professional orchestra, though perhaps not with quite the perfection. At least, playing in the orchestra, I experienced that same moving of my soul. My emotions soared with the added rush of adrenalin that comes with being the one who has to produce the right sound at the right time in order to add every detail to that expression of total unity — the orchestra.

I had to watch the conductor's hand from the corner of my eye, one eye also on the lead violinists bow, and the other on the page covered with the dots and dashes of a complex written language. Stopping and starting at the right time was crucial, and if I managed

to play every note right in between, that was even better.

Quickly, I progressed from the back row of the second violins to sitting behind the first chair of the first violins. I took it all pretty seriously. The lead violinist was a young man of about 26 years who had led the orchestra for a number of years. He had technical skill, but above all, maturity and presence. I enjoyed the playing immensely, and even the hours and hours



we would have to practice was a challenge and a pleasure to me.

But what about my relationships with the other musicians? In our playing we expressed such unity, but what in reality was going on in our own personal lives with one another? I don't know if you've ever encountered the social hierarchy, the "pecking order" of an orchestra. It might be joked about, but actually it's quite a real thing. It's all about how good a player you need to be to get in to the different sections of an orchestra.

Generally, in the strings you have a lot of violins, and the spread of ability arranges them from the back row of the second violins, to the front row, to the front row of the first violins (though to lead the second you need to be quite good). So the first violinists look down upon the seconds, who look up to the first violinists with a mixture of envy and jealousy. If you play the viola at all you have a good chance of getting in, since viola players are rare, so viola players are looked down upon and generally ridiculed. The cellists are generally respected, but are a quiet bunch.

To be a flute, oboe, bassoon, or clarinet in an orchestra you must be good because there are generally only two of you. The flute players look down on everybody else, and in turn are generally despised by the rest of the orchestra. The brass players are the clowns of the orchestra, I guess because of the funny noises they can make at all the wrong moments, very loudly. They are used to being the laughing stock and the brunt of jokes. Of course, everybody wants to play timpani and percussion. All idolize such players. Generally musicians are a highly-strung bunch with a great variety of social skills and quirks.

It's all about competition. How good you are determines the friends you have. Socially I was insecure, but proud too. I looked down on those who weren't as trained or skilled as I

was (though I wouldn't admit it), and yet I despised those haughty ones who were just the same as I was. Backbiting, jealousy, unfaithfulness, and competition. It seemed like true friends were hard to come by, and we all stayed in our little cliques. At break time I felt awkward and looked forward to practice time starting again. Then we would sit in our places and under the conductor's ultimate authority play with unity, such beautiful music again, and forget our troubles.

I went to watch the Philharmonic at their rehearsal space a few times to gain vision and inspiration. Somehow it wasn't quite the same in that dingy, dark symphonic theater, all dusty and musty smelling. The musicians were drably clothed and didn't look very happy. Not one of them greeted me or even looked in my direction, except for my teacher. Somehow the glory was not there. The hours of tiresome and tedious practice seemed to take its toll on these miserable people. Could it be that this job was just as dreary as any other? Despite the thrill of concert night, I really wasn't sure if this was what I wanted to spend the rest of my life doing.

I decided I should be an opera singer instead, though I still continued to play in the orchestra. One season I was chosen to play first chair. My best friend was playing the cello concerto for this season, and we were doing a three-week tour in the spring. It was going to be great. Then suddenly everything became very strange. On top of the responsibility of leading the orchestra, which of course I took very seriously, the other players began to behave very strangely towards me. Those who had never taken much notice of me before were suddenly my friends, and those who had been my "friends" became cold and suspicious towards me. People talked about me behind my back, and I felt so alone and under great pressure to perform well, so as not to give anyone anything

to gossip about, and so the conductor would not disapprove of me.

On top of all this, at 21 years old I found the same things that had shocked and puzzled me about my teacher, and the relationships of the philharmonic, were now repeating themselves in my own life and the lives of those around me. Selfishness equals hurt and unfaithfulness. We didn't trust one another, so how could we trust one another? I had a miserable tour. The beauty and coordination of our music was less than skin deep. Our lives were out of control and our hearts were in no way connected. I was thankful to go back to second chair.

Soon after this, I encountered a people who reached into my heart and helped me to reveal the deep insecurities and hurtful ways in me that had caused all the strife that I found in my personal life. I was drawn to their music and dancing. It was simple, uncomplicated, and they danced together in unity. They were happy, really happy. It wasn't just a show. Their music was to praise their God, not for selfish gain, or their own glory and attention. They found life in giving, not seeking praise or approval. Theirs was an expression of unity that wasn't just "skin deep," but went deep into their own lives, and their relationships with one another. They had what I couldn't find — true love for one another. They trusted one another because they were trustworthy.

I joined in their symphony. Now I can live in harmony and play a simple melody, happy to be free.

Emunah



Nightfall

We must work the works of Him who sent Me as long as it is day; NIGHT IS COMING WHEN NO ONE CAN WORK. As long as I am in the world, I am the Light of the world. (John 9:4-5)

The Son of God spoke these words to His disciples, prophesying of a time that was still in the future. After the light of the world was no longer in the world, a time called “night” would come when no one would be able to do the work of God. What was He talking about? What was the light of the world? According to the Master’s own words, He was the light of the world. But He also said in Matthew 5:14 that His disciples were the light of the world. So, according to His prophecy, “night” would come when neither He nor His disciples were in the world. At that time, no one would be able to do the work of God. But when would this happen? Has there ever been a time when Yahshua was not on the earth and also had no disciples on the earth? Will there be in the future?

When Yahshua finished His mission on earth and ascended to His Father, the work of God was left in the hands of His disciples. They were His Body on earth, the dwelling place of His Spirit, carrying out the deeds prepared for them.¹ Their primary task was to serve each other and build each other up until they all became like their Teacher in every way.² They were a witness of the coming Kingdom. Their life together showed what it will be like when Messiah returns and the whole earth obeys His commands.³

Once every nation has seen this demonstration, the end will come. At that time, according to Revelation 19:7-8, the Church, the Bride of Messiah, will be ready for Him. She will be clothed in righteous deeds, the works that He prepared for her.

So, if the Church did the works of God in the beginning, and will be doing them at the end, what did the Master mean by “night, when no man can work”? Could there have been a time in between that the light went out? Surely this prophecy must have a fulfillment. The Son of God Himself spoke it. Did the works of God ever stop being done? Could this be what Revelation 2:4-5 was talking about?

I have this against you, that you have abandoned the love you had at first. Remember then from what you have fallen, repent and do the works you

did at first. If not, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place, unless you repent.

What was going on at the end of the first century when this was written? If the churches had “abandoned love,” and God is love, did this mean that they had abandoned God? If they weren’t doing the works of love they did at first, does that mean they weren’t doing the works of God? If God “removes your lampstand,” does that mean you are no longer the light of the world, as far as He is concerned? Is it possible that the people this was written to disregarded it?⁴ Did they not have ears to hear this warning that the Spirit spoke to the churches?

What if the light of all the churches actually went out at some point in history, between the bright beginning recorded in Acts and the glorious end prophesied in Revelation? Could such a thing be possible? In John 8:31, Yahshua said, “You are truly My disciples if you keep obeying My teachings.” Did He mean that if the churches stopped obeying His teachings, then they wouldn’t be His true disciples anymore? It was His true disciples who were the light of the world. If there were no more true disciples, would the light of the world cease? What does it take to be His disciple? We know that He said, “None of you can become my disciple if you do not give up all your

possessions.”⁵ We also know that the twelve apostles left everything to follow Him⁶ and that they taught others to do the same.⁷ The first church in Jerusalem lived this way in obedience to His commands:

All the believers were one in heart and mind. No one claimed that any of his possessions was his own, but they shared everything they had. With great power the apostles continued to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and much grace was upon them all. There were no needy persons among them. For all who owned lands or houses sold them, brought the money from the sales and put it at the apostles’ feet, and it was distributed to anyone as he had need. (Acts 4:32-35)

This sharing did not come from mere external obedience, out of a sense of obligation. Obviously, they had a deep concern about each other’s pressing needs. It was greater than their consideration for their own future security. This was the result of God’s love being poured out in their hearts by the Holy Spirit.⁸ These deeds of care were the “works of God” that had been prepared for the “light of the world” to do in the sight of the watching world.⁹

So if the light of the world ceased, as the Master predicted, how would we know? Would there be no more true disciples on the earth? How could we tell? Would it be that they didn’t obey His commands? Would they no longer give up their own possessions? Would they stop sharing everything they had and start becoming rich? Would they start to have poor and needy people in the churches? How disobedient would they have to get before God no longer considered them the light of the world?

If the churches stopped being the light of the world, what would they be like?¹⁰ If they no longer had God’s love in them, would they start loving the things of the world?¹¹ Would they get involved in the world’s politics?¹² Would they fight in the world’s wars?¹³ Would they persecute people who disagreed with them? Would they claim to have God’s light in them, when really it was darkness?¹⁴

If all the lampstands of the first century churches went out, as Revelation 2:4-5 warned,¹⁵ it would explain a lot of things in history. It would explain Christianity becoming the state religion under



Constantine. It would explain the atrocities of the Crusades, the horrible tortures of the Inquisition, the flagrant corruption of the Popes, the religious wars of the Reformation, and the splintering of Christianity¹⁶ into over 39,000 current denominations. It would explain why the Christian Church, supposed to be the dwelling place of God in the Spirit,¹⁷ has for nearly 2000 years been filled with what Galatians 5:19-21 calls the obvious deeds of the flesh.

Is it possible that humanity has been dwelling for centuries in the “night” that the Son of God prophesied? And if so, would the loving God who sent His Son to die for us be so gracious as to give the world another chance? Would He consent to light new lampstands,¹⁸ after such a long time? Could the same life that the first disciples had be restored to the earth again?¹⁹ And if the light of the world were once again on the earth, what would it look like? Would they do the works that the disciples did at first, like Revelation 3:4-5 talks about? Would they obey the Master’s teachings to love each other,²⁰ like the first Church in Acts 4:32-35? Would they leave everything to follow Him?

And if the light were once again on the earth, how would people respond to it?

How would you respond? 🗨️

¹Ephesians 2:10 ²Ephesians 4:11-16; Luke 6:40 ³Matthew 24:14; Daniel 7:27 (RSV, NRSV, ESV, NJB) ⁴It seems that the church in Ephesus had not taken to heart Paul’s encouragement in Ephesians 6:24 many years earlier. ⁵Luke 14:33 ⁶Matthew 19:27; Mark 10:28 ⁷Matthew 28:19-20 ⁸Romans 5:5 ⁹Ephesians 2:10; 1 Peter 2:12 ¹⁰Philippians 2:14-15 ¹¹1 John 2:15; 1 Corinthians 16:22 ¹²2 Timothy 2:3-4 ¹³John 18:36; Matthew 26:52; Luke 22:50-51 ¹⁴Matthew 6:22-24; Luke 11:35 (Make sure that the light you think you have is not really darkness.) ¹⁵See also Romans 11:21-22 ¹⁶Possibly the most divided of all religions, in utter disregard of 1 Corinthians 1:10-13 ¹⁷Ephesians 2:22 ¹⁸Establish new churches full of disciples who obeyed their Master’s commands. ¹⁹John 1:4; 8:12; 1 John 5:12-13 ²⁰John 13:34-35; 15:12-15

the Insurgent

They call it the Epistle of James. It is found near the end of the New Testament. Tradition says the author was “the brother of the Lord” and that he wrote it to the Jews living outside Judea. Most scholars date it within 30 years of the founding of the Church. Many say it was written as early as 45 AD. Tradition is a powerful force, isn’t it? It often carries more influence than common sense. If you are one who places more weight on tradition than on common sense, please don’t bother reading this article. But if you consider yourself a free thinker, then please consider this, as well: Most assumptions about the Book of James are wrong. They are neither based on the letter itself nor on hard historical evidence. And worst of all, these fallacies aren’t just the result of ignorance — they are attempts to deny and conceal a dirty little secret. But we’ll discuss that later. First, let’s consider the objective evidence.

Who Wrote It and When

The author only refers to himself as “James, a bondservant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ.” Beyond this, he makes

The Book of James: The first Radical Pamphlet in Christian History

no reference to his own identity, or authority, or place of residence, as Paul, Peter, and John do in their letters.

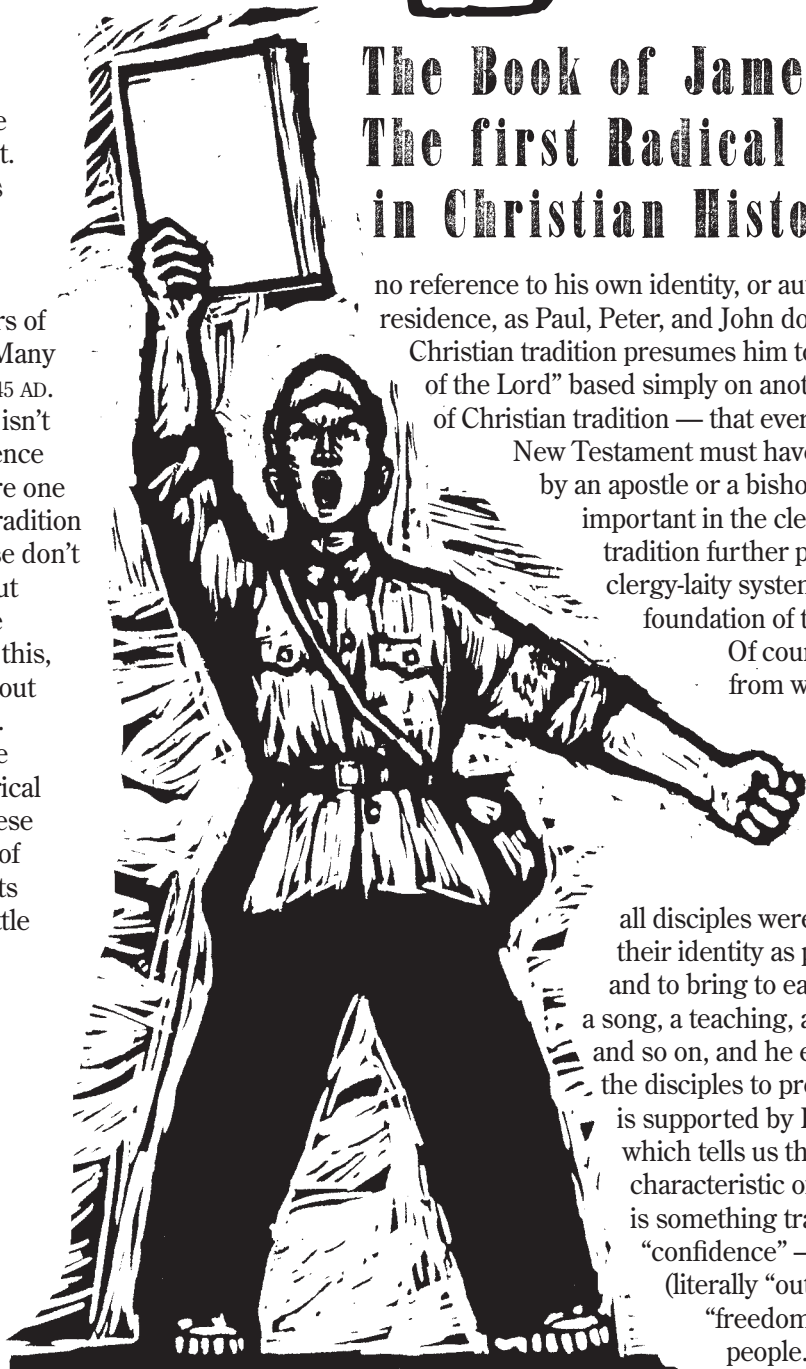
Christian tradition presumes him to be “the brother of the Lord” based simply on another presumption of Christian tradition — that everything in the

New Testament must have been written by an apostle or a bishop or somebody important in the clergy. And Christian tradition further presumes that the clergy-laity system was part of the foundation of the early Church.

Of course, we can tell from what Paul wrote that a distinction between clergy and laity was foreign to the early Church.¹

According to Paul,

all disciples were expected to take their identity as priests seriously and to bring to each gathering a song, a teaching, a revelation, and so on, and he encouraged all the disciples to prophesy. This is supported by Hebrews 3:6, which tells us that the defining characteristic of God’s house is something translated as “confidence” — the *parrhesia* (literally “outspokenness” or “freedom of speech”) of the people.



So there is no reason, other than the traditions of the clergy-laity system, to think of the writer James as being an apostle or even a leader in the early Church. There is every reason to believe that, like many of the Old Testament prophets, he rose from obscurity, moved by the Holy Spirit to express his concerns.

The usual date assigned to the writing (45-63 AD) is also a presumption, based on the presumption that James, “the Lord’s brother” (who is supposed to have been killed around 63 AD), is the author. Some scholars have objected to an early date, arguing that the spiritual condition James addresses is such a stark contrast with the fervor of the disciples at the time of Pentecost. Others reason that the sins he mentions “could have been found in the Church at any decade of its history” — a remarkable rationalization which we will address shortly. First, though, let’s consider who received this “epistle.”

Who It Was Written To

The opening sentence says, “to the twelve tribes scattered abroad.” The traditional take on this phrase is that “the Lord’s brother” wrote a general letter to all the Jews who lived outside of Judea — as if they would have read a letter from someone in a despised sect that was spoken against everywhere.² But there is a problem with presuming that these “twelve tribes” are the physical tribes of Israel. You see, only the two tribes of the Babylonian captivity, Judah and Benjamin, along with a few Levites, retained any identity as Israelites. The other ten tribes, taken captive by Assyria, had been swallowed up by the surrounding cultures, and it would have been impossible to address a letter to them. Besides, the term “twelve tribes” would hardly refer to the Jews (technically, only one tribe), and could scarcely be applied to Jewish believers (comprising only a small percentage of that tribe).

Actually, other references in the New Testament make it clear that the term “twelve tribes” referred to the whole Church — a spiritual nation made up of both physical Jews and physical Gentiles. For example, the “Bride of Christ” in Revelation is pictured as a city with twelve gates, each gate being one of the twelve tribes of Israel.³ Also, in Paul’s trial before King Agrippa⁴ he said that, in order to attain the promise made to Abraham, the

“twelve tribes” that Paul was part of were earnestly serving God night and day — and this was why the Jews (obviously not part of the tribes he referred to) were accusing him.

Given the objective evidence, it is clear that the “twelve tribes” James was writing to was identical with the “Commonwealth of Israel” of Ephesians 2:12, made up of both Jews and Gentiles, who had been made into one nation by the blood of Messiah. But there were some problems in the commonwealth, and that is what moved James to write.

Why He Wrote It

James saw that the new nation — the one Messiah had purchased with the sacrifice of His own life⁵ — was on the verge of being destroyed. Those who had been united through the cleansing power of His blood were now becoming alienated from one another, because His blood was no longer covering their sins. And the reason their sins were not being covered was that they were no longer confessing and forsaking their sins.⁶ The Church was in deep trouble — and it wasn’t just one or two communities, such as Corinth or Laodicea, it was the whole nation (the twelve tribes). There was a shocking contrast between the condition of the Church that James was writing to and the quality of the life the disciples lived at the time of Pentecost.

Unlike the congregation described in Acts 4:32, who were all of “one heart and soul,” James portrayed a Church that was splintered by quarrels and conflicts, largely as a result of the poor members envying the rich.⁷ That envy was based in part on the failure of the prosperous to meet the needs of the less prosperous,⁸ but both the envy of the poor and the self-centeredness of the rich could be traced to friendship with and love for the world,⁹ which James flatly condemned as spiritual adultery. Not only were the prosperous neglecting the needs of others, but the poor were being slighted socially, while the rich were lavished with attention. James rebuked this practice as inconsistent with having faith in Messiah.¹⁰

Despite the sins of the affluent, James did not justify those who were envious of them. He condemned both bitter jealousy and selfish ambition as demonic,¹¹ especially when those attitudes resulted in defaming their fellow disciples.¹² To those who would not bridle their



¹1 Corinthians 14:26-32 ²Acts 28:22 ³Revelation 21:9-12 ⁴Acts 26:6-7 ⁵Revelation 5:9-10 ⁶1 John 1:9; Proverbs 28:13 ⁷James 4:1-3 ⁸James 2:14-17 ⁹James 4:4 ¹⁰James 2:1-13 ¹¹James 3:14-16 ¹²James 4:11; 5:9 ¹³James 1:26; 3:8-12

tongue, but hypocritically blessed God while cursing men made in His image, James declared their religion to be worthless.¹³ Still, he reserved his harshest words for those who stored up riches, especially by unjust means:

Now listen, you rich people, weep and wail because of the misery that is coming upon you. Your wealth has rotted, and moths have eaten your clothes. Your gold and silver are corroded. Their corrosion will testify against you and eat your flesh like fire. You have hoarded wealth in the last days... (James 5:1-5)

The topic that James is best remembered for, however, is that of faith versus works. But it wasn't just a general doctrinal subject that he addressed with theological detachment. He was specifically attacking the lack of love in the Church that spawned their favoritism toward the rich and neglect of the needy.¹⁴ He was alarmed to find so rare those *works of love* which had been so common in the Church's infancy. He was appalled at the complacency of those who failed to meet their brother's needs while still professing to have faith.¹⁵ He even boldly challenged their claim of being saved.¹⁶ So-called faith, without *works of love*, was to James not only useless,¹⁷ but also dead.¹⁸

The scenario painted by James is so vastly different from the portrait of the Church in the book of Acts that it leads the reader to wonder whether the two writings were actually talking about the same group. In Acts, the brethren were devoted to the teachings of the apostles, were together, associated with each other, were of one mind, one heart, and one soul, gladly ate their meals together, shared everything they had, and even sold their possessions to meet the needs of their brothers, to the point that none among them were needy.¹⁹ In James, however, the brethren heard the apostles' teaching but did not do it,²⁰ were continually traveling from town to town in search of financial gain,²¹ were divided along economic lines,²² and even defamed and quarreled with each other because of the economic injustice in their midst.²³

The Church that James was writing to had degenerated far beyond the condition of the individual churches addressed elsewhere in the New Testament. Paul's letters to the Corinthians (written around 55 AD) spoke of the foolishness and carnality of an immature community, but gave clear direction what they must do in order to grow up. John's letters to the churches in the book of Revelation (written around 90 AD) pointed out the things each one was faithful in, as well as the things they had fallen away from, and once again, called each church to heed the



specific warnings and mend its ways or else face the consequences. James, however, was writing unilaterally to all the churches, addressing a spiritual condition virtually identical to that of the Pharisaical Judaism the Son of God had called His followers out from. For the Church to have reached that state, James could not have been writing before the beginning of the second century AD.

Epistle or Underground Tract?

Unlike the writings of Paul and John, which gave authoritative direction to specific churches, James only stated the general problems and made an appeal to *individual* disciples to obey the commandments of their Master if they found themselves in those situations. It is as if James had no hope of calling the Church back to the *deeds of love* that characterized the Church at Pentecost. John, on the other hand, specifically commanded the Ephesians²⁴ to repent and do the *deeds of love* they had done in the beginning, for if they did not, their lampstand (their validity before God as a church) would be taken away. But James did not try to keep any lampstands lit. Things had degenerated beyond that point, and all he could do was simply warn the *rich men*²⁵ in the congregations (he did not refer to them as *brothers*) about the judgment coming upon them and appeal to each of the *brothers*²⁶ who were oppressed by them to bear their sufferings patiently and be true to the commands of the Master.

It is obvious from the context that the sins James was confronting had become *accepted practices* within the Church. It made him so distraught that he wrote down the burden of his heart and began distributing the document to the entire Church. And so, rather than being a "general epistle" by someone in authority, the "Epistle of James" is clearly more of an "underground manuscript" exposing the problems that the shepherds and elders and overseers had

¹⁴James 2:8-10 ¹⁵James 2:19-20 ¹⁶James 2:14-17 ¹⁷James 2:20 ¹⁸James 2:17,26 ¹⁹Acts 2:42-46; 4:32-35 ²⁰James 1:22; 4:17 ²¹James 4:13

²²James 2:2-4 ²³James 4:1 - 5:9 ²⁴Revelation 2:4-5 ²⁵James 1:10

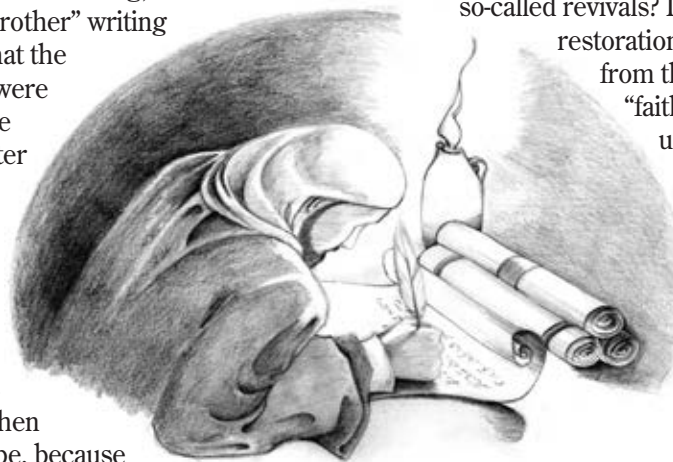
turned a blind eye to. James himself, rather than holding the prestigious position of “the Lord’s brother,” was more of an insurgent — not outwardly belligerent against the hierarchy of the compromising Church, but inwardly revolting against their accepted policies. It’s not hard to imagine the outrage among the rich and prosperous which this little essay generated originally — back when it wasn’t tucked away in the back of the Bible and watered down by commentaries. Just think what would happen if you stood up in the midst of a worship service and read aloud his condemnation of the rich.²⁷

Why They Got It Wrong

Someone may ask, “So if James was really an obscure outsider in the second century, grieved by sins the Church was tolerating, why don’t most people see it that way, and how did his writings become part of the Bible?” The second question is the simplest to answer: James is part of the Bible because it is almost entirely a restatement of Messiah’s teachings. It had to become part of the canon because it is so utterly orthodox. The first question takes a little more explanation.

Recall that some commentators claimed that the sins James spoke of “could have been found in the Church at any decade of its history.” There was a reason for that rationalization: To admit that backbiting, defamation, favoritism, quarrels, and (most of all) divisions between rich and poor were not part of the status quo in the first century Church would raise a very uncomfortable question: “Why have they been the status quo throughout the rest of Christian history?”

It is very convenient, even comforting, to claim that James was “the Lord’s brother” writing in 45 AD. That would mean that the obvious deeds of the flesh²⁸ were running rampant through the Church scarcely a decade after it was founded. And if the Lord’s brother could do no more about it than moan weakly, “these things ought not to be this way,” then that lets the rest of us off the hook, doesn’t it? If this is the way it has always been, then this is the way it will always be, because



the flesh is just too strong and human nature is too warped to do anything about it. The obvious conclusion: “All we can do is just have faith in the Lord and wait ’til we get to heaven.”

Most people are content to accept such rationalizations and cover up the “dirty little secret” that the whole Church fell away from the faith around the end of the first century.

What James said about bridling the tongue irked Martin Luther, because he was never one to control his tongue. What James said about works being the proof of faith especially irked Luther, because it messed up his pet theory.

Most people miss the fact that James tells us twice²⁹ that “faith” without works is dead, once that such “faith” is useless,³⁰ and once that such “faith” cannot save a person.³¹ They eagerly agree with him that “no man can tame the tongue,”³² but overlook his comment that if a man does not bridle his tongue,³³ then his religion is completely worthless.

But not all people are quite that dull. Martin Luther wasn’t. What James said about bridling the tongue irked him, because Luther was never one to control his tongue. What James said about works being the proof of faith especially irked Luther, because it messed up his pet theory that “faith alone” was all God required. That is why Luther called James an “epistle of straw.”

Hopefully, you who read this will be as perceptive as Luther, but rather than rejecting what James had to say about works, you will understand the implications of it. Consider what happened to the false “faith” that had taken over the Church in James’ day and failed to produce the works of love that were normal for all disciples when the Church began. Did it go away? Was it replaced by a resurgence of the self-denying love that motivated the believers at Pentecost? Hasn’t the bad fruit of that “faith” only gotten worse over the last nineteen centuries, in spite of reformations and counterreformations and countless so-called revivals? Instead, isn’t it time for the

restoration of the life of love that resulted from the message of the apostles? The “faith” that has been passed down to us by organized religion is none other than the false “faith” James was exposing — a “faith” that cannot save. Only if we can realize this do we have any hope of being delivered from a worthless religion where such “faith” is the norm and brought back to the true faith that turned the world upside down.³⁴ ■

²⁶James 1:9 ²⁷James 5:1-3 ²⁸Galatians 5:19-21 ²⁹James 2:17,26 ³⁰James 2:20 ³¹James 2:14 ³²James 3:8 ³³James 1:26 ³⁴Acts 17:6

Where Did the Songbirds Go?

When I woke up this morning from the deep, swirling darkness of my dream world, I heard the most marvelous symphony just outside my window. The beautiful melody of a thousand little songbirds welcomed me into the hopeful reality of a brand new day. I watched out my window for a short time, observing these wonderful little creatures that were kind enough to sing for me. As I looked around the many trees in my yard, I was amazed to see many different kinds of birds singing happily as they hopped from branch to branch, beginning their day's business. I have often wondered how all these birds could sing so many different little parts, yet they all blend together in the most amazing way. Then I wonder why mankind can't live together in harmony.

There was a brief moment in history when thousands of men, women, and children did actually live together in peace and harmony with one another and their Creator.¹ It was actually quite striking in contrast to the alienation, strife, and insecurity in the society all around them. These disciples of Yahshua,* the Messiah, were living a life that was like a beautiful symphony, written on the pages of human history before a watching world. Their life of love and unity was a new song, which unveiled the true heart and purpose of God.

Like all the different birds singing together, these people from every different walk of life were able to combine their hearts and lives into a beautiful symphony. Each one

did his part as they all walked in the works that were prepared for them,² continually doing the deeds of love³ that built up the Body of Messiah.⁴

Can we apply the metaphor of the symphony to Christianity today? Let's consider the three essential aspects of a symphony orchestra: each instrument must be in tune, all must be playing the same composition, and all must follow the lead of the conductor.

Corresponding to this, the Church must have these essential characteristics: all must be walking in unbroken fellowship, in tune with God and one another,⁵ all must live in accordance with the Scriptures, understanding them in the same way,⁶ and all must keep their eyes on the same Lord and Master.⁷

In our day, Christianity boasts a shocking 39,000 denominations. According to the *International Bulletin of Missionary Research*, there will be 55,000 denominations by the year 2025.⁸ Obviously, Christianity does not fulfill the criteria above, but stands in stark contradiction to the prophetic prayer that their supposed Lord and Master prayed the night before He was crucified: that His followers would be one as He and the Father were one.⁹ Nor does the life they live compare by any stretch of the imagination to the life of the Spirit in the first-century church, when all who believed as John 3:16 were together and shared all things in common, as Acts 2:44 asserts.¹⁰

Where, then, did all the songbirds go? 🐦

¹Acts 2:42-47; 4:32-37 ²Ephesians 2:10 ³Acts 9:36 ⁴Ephesians 4:16 ⁵1 John 1:5-7; Romans 8:10-16; 1 John 2:5-6; 5:11-12 ⁶Acts 2:42; 1 John 2:20,27-28; 1 Corinthians 1:10 ⁷Hebrews 12:2; 2 Corinthians 11:4; Galatians 1:6 ⁸http://gcts.edu/sites/default/files/IFMA_World_Trends.pdf ⁹John 17:20-23 ¹⁰Acts 2:42-47; 4:32-37

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“No comment”

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**“Where is the scholar? Has not God made foolish
the wisdom of this world?”**

APOSTLE PAUL, QUOTED BY MANY
BUT IMITATED BY FEW