1 A Loving Church by Jim Gilbert June 8, 2005

1.1 Thesis Statement

I intend to propose here that Jesus practiced and preached a life wholly driven by love and compassion over particulars of law and doctrine and not vice-versa. Jesus perceived that the Jews of His time had become so obsessed with interpreting and observing the minutiae of Judaic Law for fear of incurring God's wrath, that they had forgotten about the central motivation for the creation of those Laws in the first place: the love of God for all of His Creation. Jesus sought from His followers a simplification of their view of the Law down to its most fundamental root: love from the heart, not lip service or hollow rituals. He wanted them to form a more personal and loving relationship with God and all of Creation, not with the Law. Jesus consistently portrayed this relationship where an earthly teacher is not and should not presume to be much better than a well-trained disciple. Jesus purposely exemplified a love for all of Creation that couldn't help but be expressed through His acts of humility, humbleness, forgiveness and grace. Indeed, He intended that this loving grace would be the centerpiece at His table of worship and not a law book or pledged allegiance to a code of conduct.

This is not to say that a disciplined approach to the rebuking of sin within the believing Community was not equally emphasized; quite the contrary, it was deemed imperative, albeit on well considered and mutually agreed to bounds. Nor, likewise, is this to be taken as some complete absolution of His followers from observing the Commandments or respect for scriptural teachers or prophets. However, His message did represent a significant paradigm shift from the Old Testament to the New Testament understanding of our human relationship with God. It opened the door to Gentiles and Jews alike as realized by Peter in The Acts of the Apostles. There were no "specially chosen people by God" and He certainly did not wish to visit them (at least any further in Jesus' portrayal) with "group" punishment for the impious activities of individuals. Jesus wanted His followers to not just be competent in observing the Law, this was necessary perhaps, but it was certainly not sufficient. Jesus clearly wanted His followers to aspire to be perfect in love, even if they should fail miserably at life compared to a competent Law abiding person. He wanted His adherents to appreciate that competency had little or nothing to do with the Lord's judgment of them; rather, it was their hearts He was after.

I shall attempt in this document to rely primarily on the Scriptures (as translated within the New Revised Standard Version – the NRSV), as opposed to calling upon a vast number of extra-scriptural resources. It seems to be a reasonable necessity for Believers to start from a scriptural basis of this sort, before diving into any deeper or subtler extra-scriptural revelations of the Lord's message to us. However, by calling upon them to live more from the heart, Jesus asked His followers to trust more than their Scriptures and Laws. I believe that the modern means of supplementing these scriptural revelations with new revelations, through the application of the scientific method (that is to include linguistic, archaeological, and historical or anthropological evidence, as well as modern means of rhetoric and logic) are the pillars of a much stronger faith and deeper appreciation of God's will and Word. I hope, therefore, that the reader will be encouraged to use such resources as shall I in future work to refine my case.

1.1.1 New Testament Preface

As depicted in the Gospels, the Israel of Jesus' time was subject to the rule of the Gentiles: the Romans. The Lord of the Covenant, the God of Moses, had promised His people never to desert them, and to give to them deliverance from such enemies, if they but followed His Commandments. Infractions of the Law by Jews were punished vigorously by God in the Scriptures and Jewish lore of the past. For instance, in Exodus and Deuteronomy there are numerous examples of the entire Jewish nation or its cities being visited with punishment for such infractions.[1] However, the prolonged occupation of the Holy Land by the pagan worshiping Roman foreigners was apparently not only unwelcome, but also widely interpreted as portending that Israel must have somehow gravely sinned against the Lord; and, that the Lord was waiting for their submission and repentance before freeing them. The problem most likely facing the average Jew and their traditional authorities at that time was that nothing they did according to the old tradition seemed to be working in loosening that Roman yoke. Their tradition from Exodus through Deuteronomy was that adherence to the Judaic Law would continue their Nation in the Holy Lands in the Lord's good graces. And, that the ultimate earthly authority in this Jewish Law and tradition should be strictly wielded only by the Divinely legitimated Levitican priests, prophetic successors to Moses, and the Lord's Divinely anointed Kings. Any pretenders to such authority would be culled by the Lord (the Law called for the capital punishment of such offenders, when the Lord pointed them out of course) as evidenced by the lack of the fruition of their prophecies. Just who was legitimately in charge of the Lord's flock at the time of Jesus (both for the centuries preceding and following His death) was in constant question and the finger of blame for the sufferings was leveled often in every-which direction. The very fabric of Jewish society, and most importantly its faith, must have been stretched to the limits. The long-suffering Jews of Jesus' time had every right to be skeptical of any new self-proclaimed prophet.

Out of this chaos emerged Jesus the Nazarene, who proposed a radically different architecture for salvation and interpretation of the Law and tradition than most were teaching at that time. He began His ministry with the biggest endorsement that a self-styled prophet of His time apparently could have received, John the Baptizer, who himself seemed to be looking for someone in more of the traditional vein. Following this famous scene, Jesus began setting the table for His ministerial message in His first sermon recalled in the Synoptic Gospels – The Beatitudes.

1.2 Defense from the New Testament Words of Jesus

In defense of this thesis, I now offer the words of Jesus given to us through the Holy Scriptures of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John.

[1] In the most famous example, God punished them, shortly after their initial flight from slavery in Egypt, for breaking numerous commandments. Commandments that the reader is reminded, were yet to actually be delivered. They were subsequently "punished" by God to wander in the desert for forty years after this exodus from slavery, without seeing the promised Holy Land.

1.2.1 The *Sermon on the Mount* of Matthew and/or *Sermon on the Plain* of Luke: The quintessential Jesus and the beginning of the New Testament Era

The *Sermon on the Mount* of Matthew and its parallel *Sermon on the Plain* of Luke are perhaps the quintessence of Jesus' thought and teachings. These are covered wholly in Matthew chapters 5, 6 and 7, and Luke's *Sermon on the Plain* of chapter 6; while there are parallels covered in Mark 3.7-13 and 4.21,24-25.

We are given an introduction (especially in Matthew) with the poetic themes of *the Beatitudes*, *the salt of the earth* and *the light of the world*, whereby He contrasts the human standards of judging those of the lowest "class" or "caste" among us with how the Lord sees them, naked as they are, with their true hearts exposed. This background is then followed-up by pronouncements calling for the "radicalizing" (in the words of the NRSV notes) and reformation of the existing Mosaic Law and tradition system. Finally, Jesus finishes with visions of how the disciples of this new order should conduct themselves. Elements of how the disciples should judge one another and who should (or really should not) consider themselves worthy of being called teacher are covered specifically in Matthew 7.1-5, Mark 4.24-25, and Luke 6.37-42.

1.2.1.1 The radicalizing and reformation oriented pronouncements

The radicalizing and reformation of the law begins in Matthew 5.17-48 and Luke 6.27-49 with Jesus' first sermon of His ministry. By prefacing His words with "…I have come not to abolish the law, but to fulfill it," Jesus is saying that the new era of our human relationship with the Lord has begun and here is how it shall be conducted. Each new pronouncement in the passages from Matthew begins with a quote of the existing laws and traditions: "You have heard it said… ;" followed by the more radical and deeper message to the heart: "But I say to you…" Each of these is apparently intended to supplant the dogmatic and ritualistic adherence to the Law with a deeper individual accountability and proactive heartfelt labor in seeking God and submitting to and praising His love.

Many of the Laws recited here were capital offenses that Jesus expanded and made more complicated by adding intents of the heart to be enough cause for a sin. By Jesus' amendments, the judges and prosecutors of this new "law" would have to know the very heart and soul of the offender. Indeed, the offender is encouraged to "tear out and throw away" an eye that could cause sin. This is obviously an impossibility for any human judge other than the offender to fathom sufficiently to pass judgment in all but the most obvious of cases. Again, Jesus didn't desire His disciples to be merely competent at upholding the Law, He wanted them to truly desire to be more than competent themselves: to aspire to "be perfect." Equally emphasized in these passages is the fact that they must be extremely careful not to mistakenly or rashly punish the innocent or potentially repentant, lest they fall under the Lord's wrath. Indeed, in the *Parable of the Lost Sheep*, we are specifically enjoined to seek sinners out, not avoid them; a theme He repeats often throughout the Gospels. Overall, judgment and prosecution of justice on earth were, apparently anyway, to be taken with much more compassionate seriousness and heartfelt diligence than performed up to that point.

1.2.1.2 *The Golden Rule*: the new litmus test for the soundness of any doctrine

"In everything, do to others as you would have them do to you; *for this is the law and the prophets*." (Matthew 7.12, italics are my emphasis added). Again, "…for this is the law and the prophets." This was a radical statement for an Israelite of Jesus' time. Some scholars may say that others preached the Golden Rule as well, but I think that there is little evidence that any of these teachers succeeded in making it as forceful and broad in its coverage than Jesus. It is repeated in various forms as a mantra-like phrase throughout John's Gospel: "Love one another as I have loved you." Jesus proposed here that the legitimacy of any law or doctrinal authority must be tested against love for ones neighbor and "do to others as you would have them do to you." If the law or the judgment or pronouncement of any earthly authority cannot meet this test, true disciples are not bound in the eyes of the Lord to follow. Indeed it covers even laws not dreamed of yet by men. This is *the* litmus test for justice. This is the basis for the Church's new equivalent of the Bill of Rights. It trumps all other pretenses at justice.

1.2.1.3 Jesus on the decentralization of Church authority

Throughout Jesus' public life as presented in the Gospels, He questioned the authority of the Pharisees and invited the same of His apostles. See for example the *Parable of the Wicked Tenants* in Matthew 21.33-46, Mark 12.1-12, and Luke 20.9-19. However, only rarely did He clarify who specifically (or what institution) should replace them or more specifically Himself upon His death. It must have been obvious to His disciples, through His calls to personal account with the Father, that administration of the new order would be difficult and that forgiveness and harmony among fellow disciples could not be easily achieved without leadership.

Indeed to muddy the waters further here, it is not always clear to some early followers that Jesus foresaw a long future for the world. Paul evidently took such an eschatological approach as well in his preaching. Many modern scholars count Jesus to be among the eschatological prophets of His time, preaching a basic message of reform before The End comes. If the End Time is near, why bother with details, just prioritize and get to the most urgent. This may have some validity, but I don't think it means that you ignore any form of redress to authority entirely as though it is just ranting and raving. The direction of the reform He wished to see His followers take is at least a *vector* that we can reasonably assume to be relevant today, two thousand years later.

Jesus opens the door to the decentralization of authority within His new Church in Luke's account of the *Sermon on the Plain* by beginning with the *Parable of the Blind Man*: "Can a blind person guide a blind person? Will not both fall into a pit? A disciple is not above the teacher, but everyone who is finally qualified will be like the teacher." Luke 6.39-40. Similarly, when squarely confronted with this issue by His apostles later in Matthew's Gospel Jesus answers, "Again, truly I tell you, if two of you agree on earth about anything you ask, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them." Matthew 18.19-20. The words were carefully chosen here to be more than one, or at least some form of quorum: completely individualized interpretations were out, but you did not need complete agreement either, nor was a dictatorship condoned. Obviously, therefore, this decentralization of the authority in interpretation of matters of faith leaves the door open to no small amount of chaos and even anarchy among the Believers. It is a problem that

many Roman Catholics see with the Protestant denominations for instance, but such may be the consequence of our free will I suppose; and apparently, anyway, Jesus was satisfied that His disciples could handle this, if they abided by the *Golden Rule*.

Jesus declares that through His disciples "whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven." What He is offering to His people, I believe, is that since portions and interpretations of the Law simply didn't make sense any longer, especially given their present circumstance, the people of the Church have the right to adjust it as they best agree from their hearts to be fit. Moreover, God will support them on this, He trusts His people, which should give us cause for no end of hope (as opposed to despair about human frailty and unworthiness). Renewal of the covenant had precedents throughout the Pentateuch, but a cutting off of these continual reformations was now in effect in Judea. The Jews had prematurely closed the Bible to further revelation. Jesus wanted it re-opened.

"Simon Peter answered, 'You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.' And Jesus answered him, {…} you are Peter, and on this rock I shall build my church…'" Matthew 16.13-20. All four Gospels similarly recall Peter's answer in this *Peter's Confession/Declaration*, but it is interesting to note that only Matthew recounts any special favor given to Peter by Jesus afterwards. It is this phrase and those that proceed it, that the Roman Catholic Church used to grant complete infallibility (at least until Vatican II) and supreme Divinely anointed authority to its elected Pope's. I think that this is an unfortunate misinterpretation, since it is an over-stepping of what was truly said here and ultimately intended by the remaining context of all the Gospels, including Matthew's. While the Pope may be viewed to be a special member of God's servants, and treated with such reverence, I think it is clear that Jesus by no means left the door open to a single supreme and infallible authority for matters of faith.

The word "rock" was used often by Jesus elsewhere in the Gospels to connote the strong foundation of faith and love necessary for the survival and harmony of the Church. It was His own nickname for Simon, as Peter is derived from the Greek word for rock *petros*. When Jesus used the word rock in other places in the Gospels, He did not normally use it to refer to any particular individuals, laws or creation of laws. Furthermore, when He uses the word "you" elsewhere, as He does in this instance, He uses it to connote the disciples of His Church, and not any particular individual such as Peter. One need only look at the context of this statement in the other Gospel accounts including later in Matthew chapter 18, where the same phrase is repeated nearly word for word, but with respect to all of the apostles. There is no doubt that Jesus loved Peter, maybe even especially so, that is in the way we humans are occasionally partial to some others, but it is most likely that He never intended Peter or any other disciples that may follow to be considered His earthly successor upon His death. It is simply inconceivable within the context of His teachings.

1.2.1.4 Jesus on stoning or maiming and the practice of using violence on fellow disciples

Stoning or the practice of maiming fellow disciples (even though they may be fallen disciples) for various infractions of Mosaic Law are implied to be misguided in Matthew 5.38-48 and Luke 6.27-36. Stoning was common practice at the time. Jesus prefers to invoke an image of disciples who must exhibit a saintly amount of love and

patience with their enemies and those who sin against them, as opposed to this practice and its sometimes more earthly motives for stoning particular individuals. However, some scholars have pointed out that turning the other cheek in Jesus' day amounted to a modern day equivalent of giving "the middle finger."[2] Regardless, it is obviously not a call to allow ones self to simply react to violence with violence, as the tribal codes for "blood feuds" would have called for: "do not even the Gentiles do this." Even more specific on this subject is the passage recalled by John 7.53-8.11 where Jesus interrupts the attempted (and clearly legitimate by Mosaic standards, see for instance Deuteronomy 22.22-30, for Jesus even admits she has sinned) stoning of an adulteress with: "He who is without sin cast the first stone."

Prevalent too, are Jesus' parables regarding forgiveness especially the *Parable of the Prodigal Son* as retold by Luke 15.11-32. Jesus paints for us the picture of a rebellious son engaged in licentious behavior and drunkenness, which by the very language connotes what would normally have been punishable by death under the Law of the ancient authorities (again see Deuteronomy 21.18-21). However, the father of the parable (clearly a metaphor for our Lord the Father) offers up a huge party for his son's repentant return. He goes so far as to say that his other ever-faithful son is out of hand for even suggesting that the father should at least consider having nothing to do with the now formerly sinning son.

Finally, I believe, strongly, that it is not an insignificant fact that there is no Gospel account of Jesus' participation in a stoning or even tacit approval given to the execution of such radical forms of justice on other members of the faith. In virtually every case where Jesus even mentions capital punishment (and they are very rare), it is done within the confines of a parable. Here it is amply obvious in the metaphors that the prosecuting authority is the Lord God and not a particular human, and Jesus is referring to the "Judgment Day," and not of any other particular moment in time on earth. This is not to say that we *know* that He didn't approve of capital punishment for murderers or some other heinous crimes. This is debatable among any reasonable interpretations (especially so in ones that must be thoroughly practical). I point this out only because building a case from the New Testament Gospels (as opposed to relying strictly on the Old Testament) to support such a practice is a very difficult road to pave and not to be tread upon blithely.

1.2.2 Jesus on discipline and forgiveness of fellow disciples

In Matthew 18.21-22 and Luke 17.3-4, Jesus states that there is no limit to how often you must be prepared to forgive another member of the Church who asks for forgiveness: "seventy times seven." However, Jesus implores His disciples that they must rebuke those whom they believe (presumably upon careful reflection) to have sinned against them or to otherwise misrepresent or disrespect the Church. Furthermore, if one can corroborate the continued sins of this individual through another member(s) of the Church, then that offending individual is to be treated "as a Gentile and a tax collector." This amounts to what was later to become the justification and method for excommunication within the early Church. The process of excommunication was only much later to become within the Catholic Church, for example, considerably more

[2] See for instance John Crossan's *The Historical Jesus*.

complicated than Jesus' rather simple formula presented here. The Church authorities' abuses of such power were rife and many complicated rules were implemented to ensure (perhaps more like restore) the general integrity of the Church. This is also similar to the sort of disciplined Christian community approach employed by John Wesley within his Methodist society. Members who persisted in violating the society's rules were often rebuked or occasionally expelled from the society, but were always welcomed back, *if they repented*.

In interpreting this passage, the reader must also be aware as well that there is no specific call for finality in punishment (such as banishment until death) under any circumstances. Indeed, Jesus emphatically conditions that if this member were to come back "seven times, then you must forgive seven times;" and the process requires some considerable input and agreement by the laity of disciples and does not necessarily rest with a central authoritative figurehead. This must be noted as being in contrast with what both the Catholic Church (through the past exercise of lifetime excommunications by its Papal and Episcopal authorities) and Wesley (as he created rules of membership to a sub-community within the Church and exercised a vast majority of the sub-community's authority) put into practice.

1.2.3 Jesus on defilement and the practices of cleanliness and diet

In more than one instance, Jesus and the disciples are caught violating various precepts of Mosaic Law by either plucking grain to eat, or eating with unwashed hands, or healing the sick on Sabbath. In Mark 7.1-23, Matthew 15.1-20 and Luke 11.37-41 Jesus makes it clear that it is the intent of the heart that defiles a man and not necessarily the particulars of the actions especially with regards traditional interpretations of the Law.

It could be argued that Jesus and the disciples did not in fact violate the Law and that He still in substance agreed with the particular precepts, just not with the Pharisees particular interpretations on these occasions. These alleged violations, therefore, could be just chalked up as overstated cases that the Pharisees were calling the Apostles to task for in their effort to pin a punishable offense on Jesus' group. However, I don't think this is an interpretation consistent with the full context of Jesus' ministry, nor of the Church that followed Him after death (see especially Peter's visions in Acts and Paul's defense of the Gentile Christians in Acts and throughout his Letters). It must be appreciated that the Pharisees' positions were probably the best interpretations of the Law to date. For example, it doesn't take much imagination for one to arrive at the same conclusion that the Pharisees did upon reading Leviticus Chapters 11-15 that just day-to-day activity would cause one to unwittingly become unclean or defiled. Therefore, it could reasonably follow that the prudent Believers should cleanse themselves before eating or retiring, even if they were not aware that they came directly in contact with the defiled or unclean. Given our 21st century understanding of the spread of "germs" this just seems all the more prescient! I therefore do not accept this line of argument as being obvious at all.

1.2.4 Jesus on the role of the disciple in the greater secular community

Jesus would often contrast the actions of a true disciple with a "Gentile:" "For it is the Gentiles who strive for these things." Matthew 6.32. Or witness His continuous

disparagement of tax collectors. However, He rarely addressed whether it was ever appropriate for one to be involved in the greater secular or non-believing community. Other than, perhaps, to pay the required taxes – in order to avoid giving "offense" to them, He seemed to be ambivalent about the secular world. We also know that He absolutely forbad the taking of oaths for any purpose: "But I say to you, Do not swear at all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God, or by the earth, for it is His footstool, or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King. {…} Let your word be 'Yes, Yes' or 'No, No;' anything more than this comes from the evil one." This of course presents a problem for any modern day Christian who must engage in jury duty, or even something as seemingly benign as taking the "Pledge of Allegiance" at school. It was wrestled with a great deal by the Church Fathers during the Christian persecutions by the Romans recounted in such places as Acts and Paul's letters among other early Christian writings. It is not obvious at all that such modern oaths would be considered legitimate by Jesus. Indeed, it is not obvious that Jesus foresaw that there would ever be any earthly nation to be owed allegiance to.

Presumably, the larger "community" of which Jesus was a part was not a community that could be governed by or participated in any fruitful way by He and His Believers, so talk of participation was probably not only pointless, but gave little room for one to do anything, without, perhaps, participating in a greater sin. I think, therefore, that it is at least clear from what is said, that if the secular community is neither worthy nor seeking of one's participation as a disciple, then one does not owe anything in particular to that community. The Lord God and one's believing neighbors were the only ones due anything of your "allegiance," least of all hollow oaths to secular edifices. However, Jesus' message is not simple at all in regards to a democratic republic of the likes of today and some practical application of the *Golden Rule* and liberal exercise of personal conscience as agreed to by the Christian community within such a nation are undoubtedly reasonable approaches to these.

1.3 Defense from the words of the early Church fathers

Following Jesus' death there were lingering questions among the disciples as to just how the Church should be administered and how they should conduct themselves as its representatives. I do not wish to significantly lengthen this document by detailing what is fundamentally the subsequent human endeavor to interpret (or even misinterpret) and understand the core Gospels of Jesus as already presented above, so I shall be as brief as possible and rely mostly upon Paul. However, James (see Chapter 3 especially) and others later weighed in on this subject as well. It must also be remembered as stated earlier here, that Paul was given to some degree of eschatology, it didn't make much sense to spend a lot of time creating complicated and well thought out doctrines on how to, for instance, raise a Christian family, if you were all going to be dead in a few years anyway! Again, we can't just throw out the entirety of the message, because of this, but it is helpful to keep this in mind, before one assumes that Paul's message is to be interpreted as a sacred and final word on such subjects.

1.3.1 Paul on passing judgment on fellow disciples

In Romans 14.10-12 Paul states: "Why do you pass judgment on your brother or sister? Or you, why do you despise your brother or sister? For we will all stand before

the judgment seat of God {…} So then, each of us will be accountable to God." I don't think that we can get any clearer that Paul too interprets Jesus' message as being one more of personal accountability to God than concerned with the administering of detailed judgments with regards to trivial transgressions of the Law among disciples who are equally all sinners as well. Even more to the point, Paul calls such notions to this type of adjudication to task in Romans 15.1-6. He states here that insulting the *weak* (that is adherents to Judaic custom in this case) amounts to self-aggrandizing and it is clearly not our duty to please ourselves in such a way, rather it is our duty to please our neighbor, despite our opinions (be they well founded or not!).

1.3.2 Paul on adherence to Jewish Law and tradition

Paul is famous in the Acts (see especially the Council at Jerusalem in Acts 15) and Letters for his battles with "the circumcised Believers" (and the other apostles) about the observation of Jewish custom by the Gentiles and their acceptance into the Church. While Paul does at one point acquiesce and come down on the side of at least tolerating this adherence[3] to some extent, he nevertheless makes the point that such adherence was never a requirement for membership in the Lord's Church under Jesus' reign on earth nor should it be so going forward. As the quote above from Romans 15.1-6 reveals, he takes pity on them, but calls them *weak*, as opposed to the *strong* who are capable of living and abiding by the implementation of the law of love alone. In Romans 13.8-10 Paul sums it up beautifully: "Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. The commandments: 'You shall not commit adultery; You shall not murder; You shall not steal; You shall not covet;' and any other commandment are summed up in this word, 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law."

1.3.3 Paul on the practice of absolute authority within the new Church

At first blush Paul appears to have lain a foundation for the practice of absolute authority within the modern Christian Church by going so far as to say that we must submit ourselves to our leaders since the "governing authorities are instituted by God." Romans 13.1-7. This very statement has even been called upon in the past to justify the early, papally anointed, monarchies. It has most recently been used by supporters of the President of the U.S. in addressing the Roman Catholic Pope's (John Paul II) concern over the moral justifications for Catholics to participate in the U.S. led war with Iraq.[4] However, it is not clear from the context and tone of the preceding portions of the letter,

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[3] The reader is first reminded that what Paul refers to as "works" in Romans 3.19-5.1 and Galatians 2.15-3.24 is obviously "adherence to Jewish Law and tradition." James on the other hand confusingly calls acts of charity "works" (James 2.14-26) in regards what appears to some modern interpreters as the opposite of Paul's message in declaring "Faith without works is dead." The two are actually consistent views when the context is defined. What is also significant here is that while Paul argued against requiring circumcision, he allowed the other local customs to be required. It is reasonable to think that he acquiesced on this particular issue more as a matter of expedient political compromise than in support of the general principal given the context of his Letters. See the Council's Letter to the Gentiles in Acts 15.22-35 for details and his Letters for support of this interpretation.

[4] I think that it is significant to note that the Vatican authorities were not at all persuaded by Ambassador Nichols or Michael Novak's line of reasoning, since modern Just War Theory interpretations of "proper authority" within the Church has evolved considerably since the days of Nero and Constantine.

nor in the bulk of Paul's ministry, that he believed that to be true of all secular or Church authorities. More likely, Paul was referring to Jesus' remaining apostles. Certainly, Paul was following the "anointed" (like Nero) authorities while persecuting the Christians, for instance; so, it seems reasonable to think that some authorities may be ignored, at least when it becomes obvious that they are not acting in the best interest of the Believers. And, of course, forgiveness is in order, if one commits a mistake of following those in the wrong, or conversely not following those in the right, especially if one's heart is in the right place and forgiveness is appropriately sought and agreed upon.

1.4 Summary Statements

There is little or no substantial evidence that Jesus intended His Church to be doctrinally or lawfully concentrated, with some small group of authoritative individuals determining the interpretation of faith and the prosecution of its transgressions. Rather, Jesus' message was a simple one of love and forgiveness spiritually guided by one's personal accounting to the Lord and mutual agreement among the wise Believers. The complicated administrative details of a system of laws are instead often best left between the Believer and the Lord. I think it reasonable to assume that if He intended it to be the more detailed authoritative approach, He would not have likely questioned the Pharisees' authority to the extent and manner in which He did. Nor would He likewise have sought to lay out His agenda of love over law in the way that He did in the *Sermon on the Mount/Plain*, and throughout His ministry. That His immediate disciples continued to trumpet this same message, as most eloquently presented by Paul, only adds more substance to this claim.

While Jesus certainly intended the Old Testament Scriptures to be held as sacred and that we should obey the Commandments; we must be ever mindful that these are the ends or the fruits of the act of loving God by which we are ultimately judged; we must, therefore, never confuse them as being the means themselves. Additionally, there is no quarter given by Jesus and His immediate disciples to those who are not prepared to forgive endlessly their brother and sister disciples who say that they still believe in salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ and repent of their sins. They are, on the contrary, to be continually welcomed back like the prodigal son into the Church, even if perhaps they must be occasionally rebuked – if it can be mutually agreed that is necessary!

The road to salvation and the role of our Church in it are not an easy path, but Jesus never said it was. He repeatedly said that it was narrow and fraught with danger and suffering, even by the innocent and strong of faith. The hope He offered is that it is the submissive, forgiving and loving heart that will endure and that the Lord will reward these believing souls endlessly with His love and grace: Hope, Faith and Charity – that's religion.