



# THINK ON THESE THINGS

*Philippians 4:8*

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## GOATS AMONG SHEEP

By AL DIESTELKAMP

The judgment scene depicted by Jesus has Him separating sheep from goats and inviting the sheep into the eternal kingdom prepared for them from the foundation of the world (Matt. 25:31-34). Then He explains why the sheep in His flock were invited and the goats were not.

From this we should not be surprised when there are those who portray themselves as part of the flock of God while not fully submitting to the Good Shepherd.

In exhorting elders, Peter described local churches as “the flock of God which is among you” (1 Pet. 5:2). If there are “goats” among the Chief Shepherd’s flock, there no doubt will be “goats” in local churches.

I’m not an expert on farm animals, but some research has taught me that while there are some similarities between sheep and goats there are also some significant differences. To the casual observer, some goats look like sheep and are often in the same pasture, but they behave quite differently.

A shepherd will guide the sheep to “green pastures” and the goats will tag along, but they are willing to eat just about any trash they find along the way. Sheep have a reputation for being submissive and willing to be led, while goats are more independent and sometimes have to be driven. Goats tend to be more stubborn and occasionally combative. Goats may even appear more playful, making the sheep seem somewhat boring.

Of course, when it comes to “sheep” and “goats” in the church, the Lord has no problem distinguishing between them; but the task is a bit more difficult for shepherds in a local flock. Unlike the animal version, the distinction cannot be determined by appearance.

Jesus warns about other intruders whom he describes as “ravenous wolves” dressed “in sheep’s clothing” (Matt. 7:15). (That’s

another animal!) It’s by their fruits we can identify *them* (v.16). It’s not that easy to identify the “goats” among us, especially if we see them doing many “works” (cp. Matt. 7:22).

The goat-like church member often has that independent attitude which is resistant to correction or conformity. If things aren’t to his liking, he is likely to find another local flock where his independence is tolerated. Because of his independent nature, he is liable just to slip away quietly and resist any effort to bring him back into the fold. In some cases, he may even find a whole flock of goats who pride themselves in their non-conformity, even to the point of extending fellowship to some wolves.

The “goats” among the sheep will swallow the doctrines of “wolves” who give lip-service to the authority of the scriptures but find ways of interpreting them to fit their own views of “fairness.” They discount an increasing number of scriptures as not being applicable today by claiming that they were written based on the cultural norms of the first century.

In case you think that I am just being paranoid, let me give you an example of teaching that is being endorsed by some among us. There is a movement among some of our brethren which is being promoted by popular authors and internet bloggers. One such blogger who claims to be an elder in a local church in Alabama has written a 205-page book dedicated to refuting what he calls “legalism” which denies women the right to serve as preachers and elders. Imagine that! A

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book of that length attempting to explain away what the Holy Spirit clearly said is “shameful” (1 Cor. 14:34-35) and one of the inspired qualifications of an elder (1 Tim. 3:2; Tit. 1:6).

Of course, it doesn’t stop with a single issue. The so-called “progressive movement” is anxious to open the floodgates to many more digressions from God’s word. Hopefully “sheep” will not be moved by such attempts, but I fear for “goats” who may be attracted to such trash.

In the physical world, no matter how much it tries, a goat cannot be transformed into a sheep; but in the spiritual realm, it is possible. It requires being “transformed by the renewing of the mind” (Rom. 12:2) and being “clothed with humility” (1 Pet. 5:5). For proud Americans this does not come without effort, for we love our “rights”—almost to a fault. The founding fathers of our nation issued a “Declaration of Independence” that must not be applied to our spiritual lives. When it comes to following the Good Shepherd, we need to issue a “Declaration of *Dependence*.”

The Chief Shepherd sent the Holy Spirit to guide us into all truth, including how we ought to conduct ourselves in the church (1 Tim. 3:15). This includes obeying and submitting to those who lead us in our local congregations (Heb. 13:17). To do this, we must act like sheep—not like goats.

I have to wonder if one of the reasons more good men don’t “desire the office of a bishop” (1 Tim. 3:1) is that they see the flock among them acting more like goats than sheep and can’t imagine being able to shepherd those who have not demonstrated a willingness to submit to their leadership. However, even if my suspicion is correct, it’s not an excuse for failing to “set in order the things that are lacking” (Tit. 1:5).

Perhaps we would all do well to heed the message in the lyrics of a children’s song: “I don’t want to be a goat...nope! ‘Cause a goat ain’t got no hope!”

# Honoring Jesus His Way

By **ANDY DIESTELKAMP**

Over two thousand years ago an event of such great importance occurred that one is left with only awe and wonder when attempting to comprehend it. For centuries before, the prophets of old had foretold the arrival of One Who would come from the seed of Abraham; be greater than Moses, David, or Solomon; through Whom *all* nations would be blessed; and by whom Satan would be dealt a crushing blow.

That this Anointed One would be born to a woman only became amazing when considering that the Child could legitimately be called "Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace" (Isa. 9:6). The gospel of John was "written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in His name" (Jn. 20:31). That gospel account begins with these remarkable words, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God" (Jn. 1:1). Just a few verses later we are simply told, "And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us" (vs. 14).

The event of God becoming flesh should not be treated lightly, carelessly, or untruthfully. Any consideration and recollection of the incarnation of God is worthy of our utmost respect and honor. Yet, two millennia of legend, pagan mythology, and religious human tradition have been mixed with holy Scripture to create a *holiday* that has become more important to its celebrants than is the truth about the One whose name it wears.

The human tendency to worship God as we want rather than as God reveals is nothing new. It is idolatry. The unholy alliance of pagan practices and carnal cravings under the guise of holy terms is as ancient as the golden calf worshiped by God's

chosen people after their gracious release from slavery. "Then they said, 'This is your god, O Israel, that brought you out of the land of Egypt!' So, when Aaron saw it, he built an altar before it. And Aaron made a proclamation and said, 'Tomorrow is a feast to Jehovah.' Then they rose early on the next day, offered burnt offerings, and brought peace offerings; and the people sat down to eat and drink, and rose up to play" (Ex. 32:4-6). God is not mocked! He was not fooled by their pretense then, and He is not fooled by ours now. An article of this length can do little more than possibly arrest the attention of the festive as Moses did by throwing down the tablets of stone.

Yet, just as Paul used an altar "To the Unknown God" as an opportunity to teach pagan philosophers about the true nature of God, so we may be able to use our culture's seasonal holiday as an opportunity to teach the truth about the birth of Jesus Christ. Any sincere and honorable remembrance of the Messiah's birth should desire to separate the wheat from the chaff (cf. Matt. 3:12). To do this, one must return to the source (Scripture) rather than to the accumulated elaborations and popular traditions.

The gospels of Matthew (1:18-2:12) and Luke (1:26-2:40) provide the factual details of Jesus' conception, birth, and infancy. While there are differences in their accounts, there is no difficulty in ascertaining a reasonable harmony of the two. Read them and take notes. It won't take more than fifteen minutes of your time. What you read in Scripture is worth knowing. Be awed by it. Everything else is chaff.

Luke wrote about what was believed among the earliest Christians (Lk. 1:1-4). As a true historian, he even supplied references to historical persons and events for the purpose of validating his account to his first readers (cf. Lk. 1:5; 2:1,2; 3:1,2, etc.). Yet there is no scriptural information about the day or month of Jesus' birth. Indeed, the details of Jesus' birth are not the primary focus of Scripture. Many people may assume that the earliest Christians celebrated the birth of Jesus as a holy day, but there is no evidence at all for that in Scripture. That should sober us into a reconsideration of what it is that Jesus really wants from us.

Sometimes in our eagerness to honor Christ, we assume things that ought not be assumed and behave like Peter did when he witnessed Jesus' transfiguration (Matt. 17:1-9). Peter was ready to build three tabernacles right then and there to honor the event. However, he ended up building none and was told to be quiet about it all until after the resurrection. This was reminiscent of King David's desire to build a permanent temple to honor the Lord (2 Sam. 7:1-

7). He also was told "no." No one questions David's or Peter's good intentions; but we do not honor God by acting on our "good" ideas without God's authority.

It is important that we remember that the message first announced by shepherds was an incomplete gospel. We are not admonished to remember and preach the image of a "holy infant so tender and mild." Quite the opposite, we preach Christ crucified (1 Cor. 1:18-25; 15:1-4). While Jesus' incarnation was certainly essential to making His sacrifice possible (Heb. 2:9), the scriptural emphasis is clearly upon His death, burial, and resurrection. It is Jesus' death on the cross that He specifically asked us to memorialize (Lk. 22:14-20), and it is His death that we are to proclaim until He comes (1 Cor. 11:23-26). Interestingly, there were likely more people recently celebrating Christ's birth according to the traditions of men than there will be people remembering Christ's death according to His word. Let us repent and honor Christ by proclaiming Him in the way in which He asked to be proclaimed.

323 E. Indiana Ave., Pontiac, Illinois 61764  
e-mail: [adiestel@frontier.com](mailto:adiestel@frontier.com)

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Editor AL DIESTELKAMP  
260 N. Aspen Drive  
Cortland, IL 60112  
(815) 756-9840

E-mail [aldiestel@gmail.com](mailto:aldiestel@gmail.com)

Web Page [www.thinkonthesethings.com](http://www.thinkonthesethings.com)

# New Work to Begin in Springfield



By **KEN McDANIEL**

In the great commission, Jesus clearly indicated His desire for all people everywhere to have an opportunity for salvation. This has inspired Christians to travel the world preaching and teaching the gospel message of forgiveness and reconciliation. As a result, churches of Christ dot the globe—some in likely places, others in places unforeseeable.

Sometimes there are places which we would expect to see a faithful congregation of the Lord's people; but, to our surprise, there is none. One such place is Springfield, Illinois. For years there has been a strong desire among the brethren to remedy this. We have discussed it in our casual conversations. We have prayed about it and hoped that someone would take on the challenge. Some of us have even gone as far as researching and canvassing the area in search of Christians who might be interested in helping start a new work. For years little to nothing has shown up. This, however, has not quenched the desire to see a faithful group of God's people in the capital city.

After years of interest, visits, interaction in the community, and prayer, my wife Penny and I have committed to starting a work in Springfield. Our plan is to begin sometime in March, 2015. Though we have no commitments from anyone at the moment to move to the area and help, we are hoping that our son Colton—along with his soon-to-be-wife Keri Parker—will be able to raise the support to come in June and work as a fellow evangelist.

Having made our plans known for the last several months, we have received overwhelming support from brethren to come for short periods of time to work in the community. This is a tremendous encouragement to us as the focus of our efforts will be on converting the lost. Though we hope that some Christians will transfer to town when the church is established and that others will come to us from churches which have veered from God's pattern, we know that the bulk of our growth will stem from conversions. With that in mind, the help of brethren will be a blessing greatly appreciated.

However, our greatest dependence will be upon the Lord. "Unless the Lord builds the house, They labor in vain who build it" (Psa. 127:1 NKJV). There is nothing more crucial to the success of our endeavor than having His favor and blessing. We petition your earnest prayers—that God will be with and among us in this work—that He will give us wisdom and strength—that He will give us boldness tempered by an attitude of love and gentleness—and that by

His powerful word, He will open the hearts of those who seek Him.

We do not know what lies ahead. The work may flourish, or it may struggle. What we do know is that it is within the will of God for someone to preach the gospel in Springfield. "Go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature. He who believes and is baptized will be saved; but he who does not believe will be condemned" (Mk. 16:15-16).

So if the opportunity arises for you to come to Springfield to help in this work,

we would love to hear from you. Or, if you know of someone you would like for us to contact in order to set up a visit or study, we would appreciate the opportunity to follow it up. We will transition to Springfield in March. Until then, we will be out of the country doing evangelistic work. Therefore, the best way to reach us with contacts, questions, or to schedule a time to help with our initial efforts will be via email.

e-mail: [ken.mcdaniel@yahoo.com](mailto:ken.mcdaniel@yahoo.com)

## PUTTING UP WITH IT

By **DAVID DIESTELKAMP**

Israel mourned the day they were told they had to return to wander in the wilderness for forty years as the consequence of their sin (Num. 14:39). They stood on the border of a land "flowing with milk and honey" (Num. 14:8) but were forced back into a desert that would "consume" (Num. 14:33) and kill them (Num. 16:13). Whole families were swallowed by the earth (Num. 16:31-33), fire consumed hundreds (Num. 16:35), and thousands died of plague (Num. 16:49). The wilderness was an "evil place" where the thirsty found no water (Num. 20:5), the hungry tired of manna (Num. 21:5), and serpents bit them (Num. 21:6). They were tempted by prostitutes and idols. Other nations refused them passage and attacked them. They eventually had to fight their way back to the land "flowing with milk and honey." And there was what seemed like an ever-growing list of commandments to keep and judgments to avoid. They had to put up with a lot out there in the wilderness, but someone else put up with even more than they did.

Paul gives us God's perspective on the desert wanderings: "Now for a time of about forty years He put up with their ways in the wilderness" (Ac. 13:18). Had you been an Israelite in the desert, I doubt you would have thought God was the One putting up with things. After all, you were the one in an "evil place" suffering from thirst, serpents, enemies, and temptations! You were the one learning and keeping a myriad of commandments while trying to avoid a capital offense. Yet Paul affirms that it was actually God Who was the One being patient, tolerant, and longsuffering.

We don't truly think of God as being longsuffering. We don't think of God as suffering at all, let alone for a long time. Maybe this is because we don't like to be longsuffering and, if we were like God, we

wouldn't be. After all, when you are God, you don't have to do anything you don't want to do, right? Wrong!

Jesus taught the concept of praying, "Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven" (Matt. 6:10) because God's will is not being done on earth as it is in heaven. There have been times of ignorance when God "overlooked" things (Ac. 17:30). God's will from the beginning has not always been honored, even by His own people (Matt. 19:8). We think that enduring the consequences of sin is our burden. We think that the purification process through chastening is all on us. But our struggles with sin are painful to God and hard to endure for Him. We aren't just breaking random commandments. We have "...trampled the Son of God underfoot, counted the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified a common thing, and insulted the Spirit of grace" (Heb. 10:29). All are painful to our loving God!

What is God doing? Why endure and be patient with us as we come to Him? "What if God, wanting to show His wrath and to make His power known, endured with much longsuffering the vessels of wrath prepared for destruction, and that He might make known the riches of His glory on the vessels of mercy, which He had prepared beforehand for glory?" (Rom. 9:22-23). God is patient with His wrath so we will be drawn to His glory through His mercy and grace.

We need to stop thinking that we are the ones putting up with God, His will, and what He allows to happen to us in this life. We are "vessels of mercy"—incredibly, amazingly, undeservedly filled with God's grace so we could know the "riches of His glory." God has put up with a lot from others but from me, too. Time to stop complaining and start praising!

940 N. Elmwood Dr., Aurora, Illinois 60506  
e-mail: [davdiestel@yahoo.com](mailto:davdiestel@yahoo.com)



# I Don't Want to Be a "Church of Christ" Christian

By JEREMY DIESTELKAMP

Which of the following statements are true about the congregation of which you are a part?

- We are a church of God
- We are a church of Christ
- We are a church of God in Christ

If you said that all three of these statements are true, then you'd be correct. In 1 Corinthians 1:2, Paul wrote to the Corinthian brethren and—when he did so—he addressed “the church of God” which was at Corinth. Likewise, Paul closed the letter to the Roman Christians by saying that other “churches of Christ,” saluted them (Rom. 16:16). There were “churches of Christ,” implying that each individual congregation could be called a “church of Christ.” Finally, in 1 Thessalonians 2:14, Paul observes that the brethren in Thessalonica were “imitators of the churches of God...in Christ Jesus.” These are all correct descriptions for churches of the New Testament.

In the same regard, which of the following statements are true?

- I am church of Christ
- Church of Christ doctrine teaches a cappella singing
- This is a church of Christ church

If you said that none of these statements is true, then you'd be correct again. The reason for this is because the Bible never uses “church of Christ” in these ways. A single person cannot be a church. We are disciples (Ac. 9:10), saints (Eph. 1:1), and Christians (1 Pet. 4:16). The term “church of Christ” is not the name of an organization. There is not a “church of Christ” church. Rather the phrase is a description of the church itself and names the person to whom we belong and—as such—there is no such thing as a “church of Christ” doctrine. There is only Christ's doctrine (Matt. 15:9, Heb. 6:1).

Some might ask, “Why is it important that we talk about these things?” It is important because from time to time we need to remind ourselves of who we are and who we are not. Perhaps there are some new Christians who have been converted from the world. How are they to know the truth if we refuse to teach it? Perhaps there are some people we would like to teach. How are we to know the verses to use if we refuse to study them? And perhaps we are facing the temptation to be more accepting of sin. How are we going to be able to thwart the devil's attempts if we refuse to remind ourselves about the truth of the gospel?

So what is the “church of Christ”? The word *church* is translated from the Greek word *ekklesia* meaning a group of people

called out for a special purpose. The word is a collective noun, as are the words club, herd and flock. In Acts 8:1, Luke states that the church was scattered abroad. Who was scattered according to this verse? “They” were scattered, meaning more than one person. When we add “of Christ” after the word church, we modify the noun stating to whom the church belongs. Not all churches which exist today belong to Christ. The Lutheran church belongs to Luther, the Mormon church belongs to Joseph Smith, and the church of England belongs to the country of England. By stating that we are a “church of Christ” (as Paul stated in Romans 16:16), we are saying that we are Christ's church. However, the only way for this to be true is if we are following the word of God completely (Matt. 7:21).

What lessons can we learn from all this? First, since being a Christian means belonging to Christ, one ought to be part of a local group of people who belong to Christ—a “church of Christ.” Again, this is not being a member of a sectarian religious organization but being a member of a collection of Christians who belong to Christ (Ac. 9:26). We need to be active members in a church, assembling regularly (Heb. 10:25), growing in our knowledge of the scriptures (Ac. 17:11), and attempting to bring others to Christ (Heb. 5:12).

Second, we find that the descriptive phrase “church of Christ” is not the official name of the Lord's church (Eph. 1:22-23). We find many descriptive phrases in scripture that could be used to identify a local church. If as a local church we were to use any of those descriptions, we would still be as much a “church of Christ” as if we had used the term “church of Christ.” Many congregations claiming to be New Testament churches identify themselves as “churches of Christ” to distinguish them-

selves from denominations that have used these other scriptural terms but which fail to follow the scriptures as revealed by the Holy Spirit. Yet, we must be careful not to use the term “church of Christ” in a sectarian way; for when we do, we violate Paul's commands that there be no divisions among us (1 Cor. 1:10).

Finally, we learn that we must use scriptural terminology. The churches of Christ do not constitute a denomination. They are churches that strive to serve Christ apart from denominationalism. When we use the term “church of Christ” incorrectly, we become no better than the denominations that we preach against. I don't want to be a “church of Christ” Christian, and neither should you. I want to be a Christian, a follower of Christ, and part of the church He established (Matt. 16:18). For I know that if I am this, that I am promised a home in glory when Christ comes again (2 Tim. 1:12).

120 Torrensedale Ave., #1215, Toronto, CAN M2R3N7  
e-mail: jeremy.diestelkamp@gmail.com

## In Memory of Joe Novak

Joseph T. Novak died Dec. 9, 2014, at the age of 74. Joe helped to start the church that now meets in Glen Ellyn, Illinois. After a 40-year career with IBM, Joe served for many years as preacher for this suburban Chicago congregation.

Joe, who with joy and enthusiasm served God and others in many ways, will be greatly missed by his good wife Monetta, his children, grandchildren, and many brethren, especially in the greater Chicago area.



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