

IS THE LORD'S CHURCH IN AN IDENTITY CRISIS?

In the very liberal, left wing religious magazine called **Wineskins** appeared an article entitled, *"Is It An Identity Crisis?"* (March/April, 1996 edition) by brother **Mike Cope**. The editors of this paper are Mike Cope and **Rubel Shelly**. Both of these men have been recipients of challenge and exposure for their false doctrines in times past. Their doctrinal departures for a number of years are well known among sound brethren in the church in America (and other places in the world) who keep informed. Jesus warned us concerning false prophets in Matthew 7:15 and we see the need for Jesus' warning in our day and time. It is my purpose to briefly review the above mentioned article in the light of plain scriptural teaching of the New Testament of Jesus Christ. As you read remember to "prove all things, hold fast that which is good" (I Thessalonians 5:21).

COPE stated: *"I sense that we're talking much more about God — the one who has called us by his grace (rather than by our doctrinal fine-tuning) and who has called us to holy living."* **My Comments:** We should love God. We should appreciate God's grace. Paul states that we are saved by grace through faith (Eph. 2:8-9). However, the doctrine of God is that which reveals the grace of God to men. Someone had to do some "doctrinal fine-tuning" in order to teach the gospel to you, dear reader, if you are a Christian. After all, Paul stated that the grace of God "teaches us." The expression, "the grace of God" is equivalent to the expression, "the doctrine of Christ" (Titus 2:11; 2 John. 9). Why slight the concept of *doctrine*? The doctrine is the New Testament of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Granted, the sincere, truly converted Christian has a deep appreciation for the unmerited favor of God in saving him from his sins by the giving of His own Son (Jn. 3:16). Jesus died to give us his doctrine (teaching) *so we could know* of this grace of God. Let us never slam the need to study diligently and get some of that "doctrinal fine-tuning" so we can properly explain the grace of God to the lost, doomed, hell-bound sinner.

COPE: *"I sense that we're discussing more freely the Holy Spirit. We're learning about and experiencing his guidance, his renewal, his conviction. (Our doctrine never got father off course than when some claimed the Holy Spirit's work is limited to the work of Scripture)."*

My comments: Observe how a false teacher works through deception. Note how his wording leaves important things unsaid. He states that the Holy Spirit guides the Christian but he did not explain *how* the Spirit guides. You and I know the Spirit guides, instructs, and convicts of sin **through His Sword, the Word of God** (Eph. 6:17). Did Cope say this? NO! What *did* he say? He advocates brethren in the past were "off course" by teaching the Spirit's work is "limited" to the work of the Word of God. Now, such sophistry is identifiable. He leaves us with an open-ended statement. When God works in non-miraculous providential ways this is *external* to the Christian (Rom. 8:28). The Christian is not acted upon by a direct operation of the Holy Spirit today (I Cor. 13:8-10). Cope's ambiguity in writing (that is, he can be understood in different ways) makes Cope a *Question Mark* instead of an *Exclamation Point*. Where's the simplicity of the gospel here? (2 Cor. 11:3). Preachers ought to be exclamation points, not question marks. Cope is an educated man and a talented speaker, are we to believe he cannot express himself clearly? Is there any reason his readers (if they seriously accept what he wrote) after reading Cope, may not go to worship this Sunday believing the Holy Spirit may give them a psalm, an inspired message from the Holy Spirit, or a tongue, to minister to the assembly? Brethren, beware of such writers! Don't miss it, false teachers teach and influence by what they do *not* say (as well as what they say), by letting a question dangle, by not qualifying a statement and by leaving room for doubt. Innocent, Biblically uninformed babes in Christ will be deceived by such sophistry and subtly. Those of us who are aware of the devices of the Devil (2 Cor. 2:11) must expose their tricks and make people aware: "That we henceforth be no more children, tossed to and fro, by the sleight of men, and cunning craftiness, whereby they lie in wait to deceive; But speaking the truth in love..." (Eph. 4:14-15).

Cope: *"I sense that we're admitting that God has many other faithful children than those in our small 'brotherhood.' We're returning to our wonderful roots: 'Christians only, not the only Christians.'"*

My Comments: If you have been in the church for many years, take another look at Cope's statement above. Does such a statement sound like the gospel preaching you heard growing up? Cope not only misrepresents the facts of the restoration movement but misses the vital truth that our roots are in the apostles' doctrine (Acts 2:42). Our roots are in first century doctrine, first century Christians, the first century church (the Lord's church established in Jerusalem in A.D. 33, Acts 2:47). We follow after the traditions (2 Thess. 2:15). When the Lord prophesied he would build His church, how many churches did he build? Just one (Matt. 16:18). When His church came into existence in Jerusalem, how many did He build? **Just one** (Acts 2:47). How many doctrines did our first-century-roots-church teach? **Just one** (Acts 2:42 - the apostles' doctrine). When Peter preached to people in Acts chapter two, did they become Christians only? Yes (for example, they did not become Peterites). Did they become the only Christians on earth? **Yes**. There is no man living who can disprove the fact that—***The Bible only, makes Christians only, and the only Christians***. When Peter preached the gospel only, it made Christians only, and the only Christians. This is cause and effect. Consider the law of cause and effect applied to false religion: *The Koran only, makes Muslims only, and the only Muslims*. Men will agree to this. Why then will those same men deny this principle when it comes to the influence of the Bible? There's no reason to deny such a truth unless, you guessed it, it contradicts one's prejudices and cherished beliefs. I was born in the morning, but I wasn't born last morn. Cope and his kind today are preaching the **popular** doctrine of *unity in diversity* (we-must-agree-to-disagree, **but read I Cor. 1:10**). Any self-centered hireling who cares not for the flock of the Great Shepherd and is interested in his pocketbook and/or being popular can preach such a man-pleasing doctrine. Contrary to the claims of Cope, he **is** very interested in doctrine, *his* doctrine!

As with most false teachers this writer has encountered, and I've encountered quite a few, Cope is critical of smallness. What would Noah have thought of Cope's criticism if he could have heard of it in his day? **Noah was a small circle man** (I Pet. 3:20). While we are not enamored with numerical smallness, the last step of growth of the Lord's church is left up to the Lord. An editor of a religious journal should know this. Remember, after we have done all we can do in teaching the lost, the