

Have you ever taken a geological survey map and tried to locate a foot trail? The path is easy to see on the map, because it is usually marked by a dashed or dotted line. In the real world it can be very hard to find if it isn't used very much. Even when you find it, you can get lost very quickly if you try to follow it for long.

I've had a lot of experience with this type of confusion in my various camping and hiking excursions. But one trip was really special. I remember that a group of us went to hike a portion of the Appalachian Trail. We spent the night before the hike planning in great detail where we would leave caches of food and water along our route. We chose places where a road crossed the trail at a time that would be appropriate for a break or for lunch. We prepared our food packets and went to bed ready for a great adventure the next morning.

As we drove up through the top of the mountains on our way to the starting point, we were successful in leaving the first cache of supplies. But we encountered a problem as we tried to find the side road that led to the next drop-off: we couldn't locate it. I remember very clearly going back and forth along the road, slowing down at every possibility, but never finding what we were looking for. We would stop and studiously pore over the map, and then try again, but it was as if the road had been erased from the terrain.

Time began to get very critical. Finally someone in the group realized that what we had thought to be a secondary road was actually the state line boundary between Tennessee and North Carolina! We were embarrassed, but we had a good laugh and found some other place to leave our food. But I'll never forget the consternation we all felt, though, trying to find that "road".

This experience makes me realize how easy it is to get into a wild goose chase even though we have prepared very thoroughly to reach our goal. As we try to follow Christ, we can similarly end up trying to walk a trail that isn't there. We emphasize a structure that though it makes sense to us, was never meant as something to be used to guide our progress. It only gives us the illusion of real form. When we focus too much on the tiny details we are in danger of missing the point, of failing to realize that we are trying to follow a boundary line that only exists in our minds.

I remember that we were so confident as we pursued that elusive trail on our hiking trip. We had studied so hard, we knew what we were doing. And yet we became very frustrated when our 'knowledge' did not prove valuable. It was only when we had trouble finding what we wanted that we paused to examine the big picture and saw what we were doing wrong.

We can be so confident in our understanding of religious 'rules' until we actually have to walk some of the more difficult portions of the trail. I see people who have great confidence in legalism until their life goes into the dumper (divorce, financial problems, etc). As long as life is going well, they can afford to be very firm in their beliefs about the problems that other people have to deal with. But when disaster hits their own home, they either have to rethink their position or crash.

We should realize that the church chooses its leadership from those who have not hit bottom in their lives (blameless, husband of one wife, etc.). Thus, they may not be able to fully understand the struggles of many of the flock that they are to shepherd. But this is God's plan and it is up to all of us to communicate the true path of God's will. We all must help in the shepherding process.

God's grace covers our inability to walk perfectly. We must realize that it enables us to turn to Him in faith in every situation that we encounter. We cannot avoid the need for grace by achieving perfection, but we can appreciate its tremendous value by realizing that our hope rests entirely in Him. And we must be gentle with others, trying to understand their problems even though we perhaps have not had that experience ourselves.