



STATEMENT DS570

Gwen Shamblin: Weighed & Found Wanting

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The *Weigh Down Workshop* (WDW) has been an extremely popular program among Christians — as of early September there were 30–35,000 workshops, mostly in churches, in over 60 denominations in 70 countries around the world. According to the cover of WDW founder Gwen Shamblin’s autobiography, she “is a registered dietitian with a master’s degree in food and nutrition, and was a full-time faculty member at the University of Memphis for five years. She worked as a nutritionist for the state health department and has focused her consulting practice in the area of weight control since 1980. In 1986 she founded *Weigh Down Workshop, Inc.*”¹

WEIGHT LOSS ACCORDING TO JESUS

In 1992, Shamblin began distributing audio and videocassettes and workbooks of her program. Twenty churches signed up almost immediately. The program quickly crossed denominational lines and throughout 1992 it added about 20 churches per month. By January of 1993, this number grew to 60 per month and the secular media started to pay attention. Over the next several years, Shamblin was featured in a number of major periodicals and newspapers, such as *Woman’s Day*, the *New York Times*, *U.S. News and World Report*, *Self*, *USA Today*, and *National Enquirer*. In 1997 her first book, *The Weigh Down Diet*, was published by Doubleday and sold more than a million copies. Soon thereafter she appeared on *Hard Copy*, *A Current Affair*, *James Robison*, *The 700 Club*, ABC’s *The View*, *20/20*, and *Larry King Live*. She gained international renown by being interviewed on foreign media outlets. In 1998 she launched a second program called *Out of Egypt* to deal with other addictions.

The year 2000 saw the publication of her second book, *Rise Above*, through Thomas Nelson Publishers. It was launched with a 25-city publishing tour and with expected sales of two million. Currently, this book has sold over 185,000 copies.²

The cost of the workshop is \$103 for a first time participant, with a \$50 additional fee for a second family member. Over one million people have taken or are currently taking her workshop.

Why is the program so popular? In a day of confusing and complicated diet regimens, Shamblin’s program seems refreshingly simple. What we all need, Shamblin maintains, is “God-control” rather than self-control. Obesity is a sure sign that “you are your own god.” If you “put yourself under” the Lordship of God in every area of life, every moment of your life, your extra weight will drop off, and you will also effortlessly conquer other addictions and relationship problems.

On the surface, that sounds good. What Christian would not like to obtain perfection and eradicate all sin from his or her life? The problem is not with the wishing but with the doing, as long as we are in these mortal bodies. “For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out,” is the way Paul puts it in Romans 7:18b. No one will

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achieve sinless perfection in this life, no matter how hard they work at it. This is not an excuse to sin, but merely a recognition of reality.

SHAMBLIN AND THE TRINITY

At Midwest Christian Outreach, Inc.³ we have learned that since at least 1998, WDW's *Statement of Faith* affirmed that the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are three separate "entities." This apparently raised questions, so on 10 August 2000 WDW changed the *Statement of Faith* on its Web site and concerned calls and e-mails started pouring in to our office asking for information. The new statement of faith drops the ambiguous language and straightforwardly denies the doctrine of the Trinity, one of the fundamentals of the historic Christian faith.

WDW states:

*As a ministry, we believe in God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit. However, the Bible does not use the word "trinity," and our feeling is that the word "trinity" implies equality in leadership, or shared Lordship....If God had wanted us to refer to Himself, Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit as the "trinity," He would not have left this word completely out of the Bible.*⁴

These statements, both their content and wording, set off alarm bells since they are strikingly similar to Jehovah's Witness argumentation rather than orthodox Christian doctrine. After reviewing her Web site, we called Gwen Shamblin on Wednesday, 23 August 2000. We had hoped that Shamblin's statements reflected mere ignorance on the subject — that she might have been employing imprecise or incorrect language without understanding the seriousness of the issue. Certainly, we reasoned, she could not have intended to deny a fundamental teaching that the church universal and the churches that sponsor her workshops hold as a cardinal doctrine. Sadly, our conversation rather confirmed that Shamblin is deeply entrenched in these false teachings and not at all open to reexamining her position.

In our telephone discussion, Shamblin categorically denied the doctrine of the Trinity, asserting that it is "unbiblical." She again employed the specious argument that "the word 'Trinity' is not found in the Bible," which is a common straw man argument used by anti-Trinitarians. The argument implies, of course, that if the *word* is not found in the Bible, the *concept* must be "man-made." We responded by pointing out that there are many valid theological terms that are not found in the Bible, for the very good reason that the Bible is not a theology text. For example, words such as "inerrant" and "infallible" are not in the Bible, but that does not make the terms or the concepts unbiblical.

Shamblin acknowledged that our argument on this point was valid,⁵ but she insisted that the doctrine of the Trinity is a pagan doctrine, brought into the church in the fourth century. This, of course, is yet another familiar but fallacious argument employed by Jehovah's Witnesses (JWs) and other pseudo-Christian groups to deny the Trinity.

Indeed, in many ways Shamblin's theology eerily mirrors that of the Jehovah's Witnesses. She rejects the comparison, asserting that likening her views to those of the Jehovah's Witnesses is faulty, and maintaining that agreeing with one "small portion" of a false religion does not warrant receiving the same label.⁶ The resemblance of Shamblin's system of belief to the Watchtower, however, is not based upon some *small portion* of her teachings, as she asserts. She agrees with or mirrors JW dogma at *many* points, from her denial of some of the most basic Christian doctrines to her vilification of the churches as "Babylon the Great" and her identification of her fledgling religious organization as God's "faithful remnant." Furthermore, the *argumentation* she employs to defend her doctrinal positions could easily have come straight out of the Watchtower Society's playbook. Even if Shamblin's rejection of the Trinity were her *only* resemblance to JWs, that alone would provide sufficient grounds to reject her theology and warn Christians away from her influence. When anyone adopts a view of *God's nature* that is akin to the Jehovah's Witnesses, they are entering the kingdom of the cults, even if their beliefs are biblically acceptable in most other areas.

THE EARLY CHURCH AND THE TRINITY

It is important to realize that Shamblin *knows very well* that her doctrines differ greatly from the churches that have welcomed her and sponsored her workshops: “The Trinity tradition is based on human teachings which were formed between 325 and 415 AD. These man-made teachings have been debated since its inception. I should not be looked down upon because I continue the debate.”⁷ What Shamblin is alluding to is the fourth century (AD 325) Council of Nicea. First of all, while it is true that the doctrine of the Trinity has been debated since its inception, it has been affirmed consistently at every ecumenical council and in every ecumenical creed. Shamblin could produce liberal scholars who deny the Trinity, but she would be hard pressed to find even *one* example of a conservative scholar who rejects the doctrine. Even liberals generally agree that the doctrine is taught in Scripture, although they may personally reject it.

Second, anti-Trinitarians such as Shamblin often argue that since the doctrine was *codified* in the fourth century A.D., the early church fathers just grabbed the concept out of either pagan tradition or thin air. This is simply not true. The Council was called to combat Arius, an Alexandrian presbyter who promoted the heretical idea that Christ was a created being, brought into existence by the Father at some point in time. At Nicea the church merely formulated the creed that formally pronounced what the church had been teaching up to that time in order to expose Arius’s false view. For the first three centuries, there was no argument about Jesus’ deity — *all Christians believed He was God* — so there was no need to formally declare it to be so. It was only when the doctrine was challenged by Arius and those with him that it became necessary to codify the teaching and work out the exact language that would best explain precisely what the Bible taught, and the church believed, about the relationship between the Father and the Son. They didn’t make up the concept but painstakingly developed the language used to identify the concept.⁸

Aside from the biblical passages that identify Jesus as God, the early church fathers, long before the Council of Nicea, believed that the Jesus Christ of the Gospels was YHWH or Jehovah of the Old Testament. Far from the idea that the Trinity doctrine was made-up at the Nicean Council in A.D. 325, we find that Tertullian, as early as the late second century, in a refutation of Praxeas, wrote: “If the number of the Trinity also offends you, as if it were not connected to simple unity, I ask you how it is possible for a Being who is merely and absolutely One and Singular, to speak in plural phrase, saying, ‘Let us make man in our own image, and after our own likeness’; whereas He ought to have said, ‘Let me make man in my own image and after my own likeness...’”⁹

The Christian doctrine of the Trinity, defined in response to the errors of heretical teachers and drawn from the inspired Scriptures, can be concisely stated as follows: Within the nature of the one true God there exist three equal and eternal persons, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Trinitarians do not believe in three gods, nor do we believe that the three persons of the godhead are merely different modes or manifestations of the same person. The Father is not the Son, the Son is not the Holy Spirit, and the Holy Spirit is neither the Father nor the Son.

JESUS THE FIRSTBORN

In our phone conversation with Shamblin, we asked her if, in her view, the Father and Son are two separate beings. Her immediate reply was “Absolutely!” She then turned to Colossians 1:15 and asserted that since Jesus there is called the “firstborn of all creation,” He came into existence at a point in time. This would have to mean that Jesus is a mere creature, and not the God that created everything. Colossians 1:15 is another favorite verse employed (and twisted) by JW’s and other anti-Trinitarians to make Jesus appear to be less than God.

Having said that, let’s examine Colossians 1:15. Why *is* Jesus called the “firstborn”? It does not mean “first-created.” Jesus *never* had a beginning and He created all things that ever came into being, as the passage clearly goes on to state: “For by Him all things were created, both in the heavens and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities — all things have been created by Him and for Him” (Col. 1:16–17).¹⁰

John 1:3 also affirms the fact that Jesus, far from being created, is the Creator of all things. John could not have made it clearer: “All things came into existence by Him, and apart from Him, nothing came into being that has come into being.”

These two passages alone make it very clear that *if* Jesus is a creature who came into existence at some point in time, He would have had to have created Himself, a logical and actual impossibility.

What, then, does the phrase, “firstborn of all creation” mean, if it has no reference to Jesus coming into existence at some point in time? As we explained to Shamblin, the term “firstborn” is a title denoting that Jesus Christ is the One who has the right to rule over creation.

Biblical usage of the Greek term translated “firstborn” in Colossians has to do with preeminence. It is a title, station, or position. For example, in the Greek translation of the Hebrew Old Testament in Exodus 4:22, even though Israel was not the first nation to come into existence, God calls His chosen people the “firstborn.” David was likewise called the “firstborn” in Psalm 89:27, even though he was the youngest, the last born son of Jesse. Esau sold his birthright as “the firstborn” to his younger brother Jacob for a pot of stew. By comparing Genesis 41:51–52 to Jeremiah 31:9, we see that Manasseh was the first born of Joseph’s sons, but later God calls Ephraim the “firstborn.”

The entire teaching of Colossians is communicating the preeminence of Christ over all of creation. He existed before anything was created, and when everything was created, He created it!

ANOTHER JESUS AND ANOTHER GOSPEL

In Shamblin’s view, the church as a whole has become so corrupted over the centuries that it is teaching, in her words, “a different good news, a different Jesus, a different spirit”¹¹ from the one the apostle Paul preached and the one the early church embraced. She claims that agents of Satan have come into the church “secretly disguised as an angel of light because Satan himself masquerades around as an angel of light...what they’ve done is change the good news of Jesus Christ...What we’ve grown up in I feel like is the counterfeit church.”¹² Strong language — language evangelicals have traditionally reserved for the kingdom of the cults.

According to Shamblin, it has been her goal all along to evangelize the apostate churches and bring in her version of the gospel. Since the churches were unlikely to allow her to come right in and openly expose them as “counterfeits,” she was forced to use stealth. She says: “For the last twenty years I’ve had concerns about the state of the church and my first response was Weigh Down which was a message that sent lordship, total lordship, into the back door really of churches.”¹³

What kind of teacher sneaks into the “back door” of churches in order to introduce “another gospel” to the flock? False brethren do such things! It is interesting to listen to Shamblin in light of the Book of Galatians, which Paul wrote to pull the believers back from the brink of heresy after they had been bewitched by false teachers who had led them into the bondage of legalism. He almost could have written Galatians with Shamblin in mind, so much does that first century situation mirror her attempted coup. The false teachers came in and convinced the Galatians that their faith in Christ was not good enough — they must keep the law to be *truly* acceptable to God. Paul’s response is instructive: “This is the only thing I want to find out from you: did you receive the Spirit by the works of the Law or by hearing with faith? Are you so foolish? Having begun in the Spirit, are you now being perfected by the flesh?...It was for freedom that Christ set us free; therefore keep standing firm and do not be subject again to a yoke of slavery” (Gal. 3:2–3; 5:1).

REPEALING THE REFORMATION

Shamblin is incensed that people have been taught in their churches that there is nothing one can do to earn salvation. She is very open in her opposition to salvation by grace through faith without works, and she claims that when Paul spoke against performing “works” for salvation, he was referring merely to “Jewish customs.” Works are absolutely essential in Shamblin’s salvation scheme. She despises the churches for giving people the hope of

salvation without having to work for it. Identifying the great whore of Revelation 17 as the church of the past 500 years, Shamblin states, “The wine of the great prostitute of Rev. 17 is this grace message that is incorrect — it’s a false grace — it’s a cheap grace message. It intoxicates you. [They] say there is nothing you can do to be saved.”¹⁴

The Bible teaches that people are saved by God’s grace alone, through faith in Christ alone, completely apart from works or human effort. Salvation is a *gift*. Sadly, like all cultists and pseudo-Christian leaders, Gwen Shamblin ridicules this teaching as “cheap grace” that supposedly gives people a license to sin. She says that the church has been preaching a false gospel for the past five hundred years.¹⁵ What happened five hundred years ago that has resulted in a “false gospel” being preached? Could she be referring to the Protestant Reformation? Former WDW participants who had been to the national headquarters to participate in the new church Shamblin founded have recently informed us that Shamblin taught that reformer Martin Luther had invented “grace” in order to justify his sinful lifestyle.

Shamblin’s salvation scheme, as laid out in her writings, is a works-centered salvation available only to those who have “laid down” their sins. Shamblin rolls justification and sanctification into one big process by which people purify themselves through their own efforts to eradicate their own will and completely “put themselves under” the Lordship of God. Salvation is not based on “belief in Jesus” but in “following” Him and purifying oneself:

*God is looking for people who have purified themselves by obeying the Word...when you start obeying God’s will, yours is out of the way and it’s dead...it purifies you from your will...you purify yourself, you’re sanctified, you’re justified and cleaned up by following Christ and not your own ways...I’m not talking about just a good thing to do — I’m talking about life or death, heaven or hell...I’m talking about something that is essential for salvation.*¹⁶

While submitting to God’s Lordship is a Christian’s joyful and loving response to the gospel, no one has *ever* been saved by their efforts in this regard. Shamblin’s “Lordship” teaching puts the cart before the horse — one subjects his or her will wholly (and without the slightest reservation) to God *in order to earn salvation*. She claims that anyone who disputes her interpretation is suffering from an alleged “works phobia” that has reached its zenith in our time.¹⁷

DOES THE BIBLE TEACH JUSTIFICATION BY WORKS?

In her archived e-mail #22 and audio tape #4 from the *Out of Egypt* series, Shamblin expounds on the second chapter of the book of James to prove that Christians are not saved by faith, but must add works to faith to effect salvation. This is a time-worn argument, used by the Watchtower Bible and Tract Society along with numerous other heretical groups to prove that works are necessary to obtain salvation. As they all point out, James 2:21 asks, “Was not Abraham our father justified by works, when he offered up Isaac his son on the altar?”

Does this passage mean that salvation can be earned, either in whole or in part, by the good works one performs? Not at all! The Bible is *very clear* that salvation is a gift that cannot be earned (Eph. 2:8–9); nor is eternal life obtained by some combination of God’s grace *plus* our human efforts. “But if it is by grace, it is no longer on the basis of works, otherwise grace is no longer grace” (Romans 11:6).

Why then does James say that Abraham and others were justified by works? Does the Bible contradict itself? No. It helps to understand that most perfectly good words have more than one meaning. The meaning of the word “justification” is determined by the context in which it is used. To be “justified” does mean “to be declared righteous” in some biblical places where it is used, but it certainly does not in others.

For example, Romans 3:4 speaks of God Himself being “justified” when He was “judged.” Yet God has never had to be “declared righteous” by some higher authority in order to gain salvation, as we must. This verse is speaking of God being judged *by humans* and being “justified,” proved right and righteous, in *their* eyes or opinion. In James chapter 2, the word has that same application of being *proved* righteous, and being shown by one’s actions to *be* righteous. It carries also the idea of having our human righteousness proved to be of benefit or “useful” to others in a practical way. If our faith has no works, it is indeed “dead” or useless to a brother or sister who is hungry or in need

of shelter. Without going into greater detail here, the context of James is justification before *humans*, not before God.

This fits well with Paul's statement in Romans 4, in which he says that if works did indeed justify anyone, even Abraham, such "justification" would not mean justification *before God*. "For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about, *but not before God*. For what does the scripture say? '*And Abraham believed God and it was reckoned to him as righteousness.*' Now to the one who works, his wage is not reckoned as a favor, but as what is due. But to the one who does not work, but believes in Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is reckoned as righteousness" (Romans 4:1–5, emphasis added).

Believing in Him who justifies the *ungodly*...*Faith* reckoned as righteousness. This flies in the face of Shamblin's view — that people are purified and justified by their own efforts.

Even though Shamblin says that a person purifies and justifies him or herself through obeying the Word, she presumptuously adds her *own words* to the mix: "After conceiving this truth, stay in God's Word, and stay in your workbook, the tapes, the videos, and the class, all the while continuing to ignore the lies and letting this truth grow. Repeat it every day, all the time. Believe it, and after five weeks you will have been born again of Holy Seed."¹⁸ Born again of Holy Seed — somehow we doubt that the Apostle Peter had the *Weigh Down Workshop* in mind when he penned those words in 1 Peter 1:23. Shamblin seemingly promotes the Bible while twisting and destroying its life-giving message. She also uses Christian terminology while obviously changing its meaning.

In order to facilitate her mission of evangelizing the apostate church, Shamblin, along with a handful of other people, started a new church called *Remnant Fellowship* a year and a half ago, to which she is calling her faithful followers. Remnant Fellowship has the *true* understanding of the Scriptures (God reveals the proper interpretations to Shamblin) and the true explanation of the New Covenant, which the churches have never understood.

*Remnant Fellowships are based on Lordship, total Lordship....It's a New Covenant....Understanding the gospel in full....All we've gotten is a portion and a half-truth that's scarier than anything, because then you think you're safe when you're not. We have believed that all we had to do was a believer's prayer or come to a baptism...that happened on this one day, way back when you were a child or something...and it was all over with. No, we're talking about a walk of Lordship — if you endure — if you don't give up — then you will receive a crown of life.*¹⁹

Shamblin sets up a neat little straw man argument that she proceeds to knock down. It is true that no one has ever been saved by saying a prayer or being baptized. Faith in Jesus Christ is what is necessary for salvation, faith that He is both able and ready to save all those who call on Him. This trust in Christ is exactly what Shamblin rejects. She rejects the righteousness of Christ that is given as a gift to those who believe (Rom. 3:21–24) and seeks rather to establish her *own* righteousness (Rom. 10:2–4). Even worse, she leads others into this folly.

SHEER TERROR

Shamblin sees herself as a prophet and expects that deluded church-goers will be alarmed, even terrified, once they hear and accept her "Lordship" message: "The understanding of this message will bring sheer terror. It's going to when they finally understand [they are] supposed to be under a Lordship."²⁰

One can well imagine the fearful dismay that people would feel if they were deceived into accepting Shamblin's "Lordship gospel," after having believed that they were secure in God's love. Christians must understand that when Shamblin touts "Lordship," she is saying nothing less than that we must keep the Law in order to obtain salvation. To Gwen, "Lordship" is a test of endurance. What a burden! It is the same burden that Peter called a "yoke which neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear" (Acts 15:10–11). Life becomes a lifelong proving ground — and *if* you prove worthy and *if* you love being under this Lordship, you will eventually be "saved." Shamblin's message will become even more terrifying once one has worked at being perfect for a while. Every person who tries it will fail.

The true gospel message brings not terror but great joy and comfort. People who cannot save themselves by their own goodness or their perfect devotion have been given a great gift, the gift of a Savior, the gift of righteousness, the gift of sonship.

Romans 8:15–16 says, “For you have not received a spirit of slavery leading to fear again, but you have received a spirit of adoption, by which we cry out, ‘Abba! Father!’”

Shamblin sees God as the Great CEO in the sky and all of us as His employees; but anyone who has placed his or her faith in Jesus Christ is not merely an employee — he or she is a child of God. Even the best employees don’t enjoy absolute security, but sons and daughters are forever.

THE TRUE COUNTERFEIT

Christians often fail to recognize the wolves among us because the wolves use Christian terminology — most pseudo-Christian groups talk about Jesus, claim to “follow” Him, and integrate Him somehow into their salvation plan. A person is “saved” *with the help of Jesus* in these schemes, but faith in Jesus is *never enough* for salvation. It’s the Jesus-plus plan — Jesus *plus* law keeping, good works, and whatever else the specific group demands of its adherents. These are good counterfeits because of all the “Jesus talk.” They are *subtly* heretical, and hard for the inexperienced to identify as the false gospels that they are.

Gwen Shamblin’s Remnant Fellowship is a counterfeit Christian faith. She doesn’t appear to see the irony of accusing the “theologians” of being the ones who have apostatized the church when she is, by her own admission, the one who had to enter through the “back door” to get her message to the flock.

Jesus warned us about situations like this: “Beware of false prophets who come to you in sheep’s clothing, but inwardly are ravenous wolves” (Matt. 7:15). One does not have to go looking for the false prophets — they will come looking for you! They may come to your door, or they might sneak right into your church. They will fool many because they are wearing sheep’s clothing — they will look just like genuine Christians. But they will ultimately prove harmful — spiritually, emotionally, and relationally — to those who unwittingly follow them. We cannot judge anyone’s motives, but we can and should judge the message they bring. Gwen Shamblin is a wolf — charming perhaps, but a wolf nonetheless. Don’t let her bombast scare you. She cannot blow your house down, if it is sitting on the right foundation.

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- 1 Gwen Shamblin, *The Weigh Down Diet* (New York: Doubleday, 1997), back inside flap.
- 2 Thomas Nelson Publishers canceled the publication of her next book, *Out of Egypt*, which was also expected to sell two million copies, due to new doctrinal information, at great expense to themselves. We take our hats off to Thomas Nelson for their stand for orthodoxy in this case.
- 3 Midwest Christian Outreach, Inc. is headquartered in Lombard, IL with offices in Charlotte, NC; Spring Hill, FL; Lohrville, IA; and Scranton, KS.
- 4 *The Weigh Down Workshop* Web site, FAQ, question 18, “Does Weigh Down Workshop Have a Statement of Faith?”
- 5 Interestingly, after acknowledging that her argument does not prove her case, Shamblin continues to use the argument to prove her case.
- 6 In her 15 September Web site response she states, “Others are calling me a cult because Jehovah’s Witnesses teach that Jesus is the Son of God and that He is not the Father. In other words, one small portion of their teachings must parallel one small portion of my teaching...but I assure you that there are no other comparisons. This is a dangerous and faulty logic.”
- 7 Ibid.
- 8 The earliest battle about the nature of Christ was for Christians to prove that Jesus was *also* human, as well as God. The Gnostics denied His humanity, because they believed that all matter was evil, and therefore God could not touch matter. They taught that God sent out emanations from himself and one of those emanations was “Christ,” who settled on the man Jesus at his baptism and departed from him (Jesus) at his crucifixion.
- 9 Tertullian, *Against Praxeas*, vol. 3 in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), 606.
- 10 Bible quotations are taken from the New American Standard Bible.

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- 11 Gwen Shamblin, *Remnant Fellowship Introductory Video, 2000* (Franklin, TN: Remnant Fellowship, 2000).
- 12 Ibid.
- 13 Ibid.
- 14 *Remnant Basics*, audio tape 2 (Franklin, TN: Remnant Fellowship, 2000).
- 15 Ibid., audio tape 1 (Franklin, TN: Remnant Fellowship, 2000).
- 16 Shamblin, *Remnant Fellowship Introductory Video, 2000*.
- 17 *Remnant Basics*, audio tape 1.
- 18 *Weigh Down Workshop* archived message no. 34.
- 19 Ibid.
- 20 Ibid.