

MELITO and TERTULLIAN

By Boyce Mouton

This is an article about Christian unity. The two men at the center of our study lived 1,800 years ago. Many have never heard of them before, yet their influence is still very much alive in our modern world. When reflecting on the division we see everywhere, we need to remember that originally everything God created was good and there was no division or confusion. The devil, as you know, is the author of confusion. In fact, the word translated as “evil” in the original temptation is the Hebrew word “ra”. Strong in his Exhaustive Concordance states that it comes from the primary root “ra a” which literally means to “break to pieces”. Wholeness comes from God. Fragmentation comes from the devil. As you know, Jesus came to destroy the works of the devil (1 Jn. 3:8), and to bring unity to all things in both heaven and earth (Eph. 1:10). Please note that Jesus prayed for unity, and associated this unity with the evangelization of the world. Here are the words of Jesus:

“My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me.” (John 17:20-21)

Almost 2,000 years after Jesus prayed this prayer we must face the painful fact that:

#1 - Believers in Jesus are still not united as Jesus and the Father are united.

2 - And the world does not believe that Jesus was sent by God.

If this is not a concern to you, it ought to be!

THESE DISTURBING TRUTHS LEAD THINKING PEOPLE TO ASK, “WHY”?

Discovering the cause and cure of religious division is analogous to discovering the cause and cure of cancer. Finding the answer will therefore not be easy. The **human body** is designed to grow and the **Body of Christ** is also designed to grow. Cell division out of control in the human body is cancer, and church division out of control is quite similar. God designed His Spiritual Body to be held together by ligaments and sinews, and to grow as He intends it to grow (Col 2:19). Please consider these many references to church growth in the Scriptures.

- 3000 baptized (Acts 2:41).
- The Lord added to their number daily (Acts 2:47).
- The number of men grew to about 5,000 (Acts 4:4).
- More and more men and women believed (Acts 5:14).
- The number of disciples was increasing (Acts 6:1).
- The number of disciples in Jerusalem increased rapidly, and a large number of priests became obedient to the faith (Acts 6:7).
- Those who had been scattered preached the word wherever they went (Acts 8:4).
- All those who lived in Lydda and Sharon turned to the Lord (Acts 9:35).
- All the Jews and Greek in Asia heard the word of the Lord (Acts 19:10).
- The Gospel was proclaimed to every creature under heaven (Col. 1:23).
- Etc.

The early church grew both normally and rapidly. Yet, in spite of this rapid growth, there was only One Body (Eph. 4:1 – 4). Regardless of whether the converts were Jews, or Gentiles, slaves or free, men or women, everyone was baptized into only One Body (1 Cor 12:13).

Soon, however, unhealthy divisions appeared like cancer in the Body of Christ. There is no doubt about it, division in the church is of the devil and is designed to destroy the unity for which Christ prayed. It is in this context that you are urged to ponder Melito and Tertullian. As we have already said, even though they lived centuries ago, their influence is still very much alive.

Here is what these men did. First, Melito compiled a list of inspired books from the Hebrew Bible and called them the “Old Testament”. Then, Tertullian compiled a list of inspired books in the Greek language and called them the “New Testament”. Apparently, they were the first two men in the history of the world to call the Scriptures “testaments”. It needs to be emphasized that the Old Testament is not the first 39 books of the Bible. It never has been and it never will be. It also needs to be understood that the last 27 books of the Bible are not the New Testament. They never have been and they never will be. It is incredible that these two uninspired men could boldly misname what God has written and no one seems willing to challenge what they have done. The words in the text, of course, are inspired. The words of Melito and Tertullian above the text, are not. How and why their uninspired words have become so universally accepted ought to be a cause for concern.

Many will think that these misnomers are remote and disconnected from the painful division experienced by the Body of Christ. If these designations, however, are in error, these errors needs to be corrected. Christian scholars make every effort to determine what words should be included in the text of Scripture. Shouldn't we also be concerned about what words are written above the text? Uninformed people may think that these words are also inspired. It is unthinkable that any error should be accepted and perpetuated in association with the Holy Bible.

The Jewish people never referred to their Scriptures as the “Old Testament”. They called them the “Tanakh”. (Also spelled as Tenakh or Tenak) This word referred to the three major divisions of their Scriptures: (1) The Torah (“Teaching,” also known as the Five Books of Moses), (2) Nevi'im (“Prophets”) and (3) Ketuvim (“Writings”) - hence TaNaKh. Nobody, Jew or Gentile, ever called these books of the Bible the “Old Testament” until Melito .

Having said this, let go to the Scriptures and seek to identify the Old Testament.

THE OLD TESTAMENT (COVENANT)

“The time is coming,” declares the LORD, “when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah. It will not be like the covenant I made with their forefathers when I took them by the hand to lead them out of Egypt, because they broke my covenant, though I was a husband to them,” declares the LORD. “This is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after that time,” declares the LORD. “I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people. No longer will a man teach his neighbor, or a man his brother, saying, ‘Know the LORD,’ because they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest,” declares the LORD. “For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more.” (Jer 31:31-34)

Before proceeding, it needs to be noted that the word “testament” and “covenant” are used interchangeably in the Scriptures. The Hebrew word for “covenant” is “berith” and the Greek word used to translate it is “diatheke”. The word “testament” does not occur in English versions of the Old Testament Scriptures. In the KJV the word “diatheke” is translated as both “testament” and “covenant”. (Testament in 2 Cor. 3:6, 14, Heb. 7:22; 9:15 - 20, etc. and “covenant” in Heb. 8:6 - 13; 9:1 - 4; 10:16; etc.)

There are seven covenants mentioned in the book of Genesis (see Gen. 6:18; 9:9 - 17; 15:18; 17:1 - 21; 21:17 - 32; 26:28; and 31:44 - 45) When Jeremiah spoke of the Old Covenant, however, he was not referring to any covenant made in the book of Genesis. He specifically refers to the covenant that God made with His people when He took them by the hand to lead them out of the land of Egypt.

Please consider that the Scriptures refer to the Ten Commandments as the Old Covenant, and not the first 39 books of the Bible.

- Not one verse of Scripture ever refers to the first 39 books of the Bible as a Testament, or Covenant.
- The Old Covenant (Testament) was made when God took His people by the hand to lead them out of the land of Egypt (Heb. 8:9) The Hebrew Scriptures, however, were written later.
- God made the Old Covenant with His people in Horeb (Deut. 5:2) or in the language of Galatians 4:25, “Mt. Sinai in Arabia”. The first 39 books of the Bible, however, were written in Palestine, Babylon, and Persia.
- The Old Testament, or Covenant, was broken by the time of Jeremiah (Jer. 31:32). Some books of the Hebrew Bible, however, were not yet written at this time.
- The Scriptures state explicitly that Moses received a covenant while he was 40 days upon Mt. Sinai. This covenant (also called the Ten Commandments) was written on two tablets of stone and placed in a receptacle called the “Ark of the Covenant” (Nu. 10:33). Once this covenant was completed God “added nothing more” - Deut. 5:22. (See also Exodus 34:27 - 28; Deuteronomy 4:11 - 13; 5:1 - 3; 9:11, etc.)
- While there are many covenants mentioned in the Bible, the Old Covenant, (or Testament) as mentioned by Jeremiah, and quoted in Hebrews, was in fact the Ten Commandments and not the first 39 books of the Bible.

THE NEW TESTAMENT (COVENANT)

The Scriptures teach that God found fault with the Old Covenant and decided to write a new one (Heb. 8:7, 8). The New Covenant, however, would be totally different and distinct from the old. Like new wine and old skins the two cannot be combined. The revolutionary New Covenant is not cold, rigid, and inflexible for it is written in the hearts and minds of believers (See Heb. 8:6 - 13).

Please consider:

- Not once do the Scriptures refer to the last 27 books of the Bible as the New Testament or Covenant.
- The Christian Scriptures were written with paper and ink (2 John 12, 3 John 13). The New Testament, however, is not written with ink but with the Spirit of the Living God (2 Cor. 3:3).

- The New Testament became an immediate reality on the first Pentecost after our Lord's resurrection. Thousands were saved and became covenant people on that day, yet the New Testament Scriptures were not written for many years.
- The New Testament Scriptures came gradually as God guided inspired men into all truth. The canon of New Testament Scripture was not completed until near the end of the first century, and was not generally accepted until the fourth century. Many Christians died as martyrs before one word of the New Testament Scriptures was written.
- The Old Testament was written on tablets of stone. It was cold, rigid, inflexible, and without mercy. 3,000 died when the Old Testament was given (Ex. 32:28). The New Testament is written upon the fleshly tables of the heart and mind (2 Cor. 3:3, Heb. 8:8 - 10). It was given by a merciful and faithful High Priest (Heb. 2:17). 3,000 were saved when the New Testament was given (Acts 2:41).
- The Old Testament was in the Holy of Holies in the Temple. The New Testament transforms our bodies into temples of the Living God (1 Cor. 6:19). Just as the glory of God was associated with the Ten Commandments, so also we are to glorify God in our bodies.

NOTE THESE DIFFERENCES

- Under the Old Covenant, little children and aliens had no knowledge of God and had to be taught (Deut. 6:7). New Covenant people do not have to be taught the covenant in order to know God. From the least to the greatest they already know Him (Jer. 31:34; Heb. 8:11).
- The Old Covenant was in a box (Deut. 10:5; Nu. 10:33), but the New Covenant is in our bodies (1 Cor. 6:19).
- Old Testament worship was confined to a "place" (Deut. 12:5). New Testament worship is in spirit and in truth. It can happen anywhere (Jn. 4:23).
- The Old Covenant was administered by priests "without pity" (Deut. 13:8). The New Covenant is administered by a priest that is both faithful and merciful (Heb. 2:17).
- As we gave said before, when the Old Testament became a reality 3,000 died (Ex. 32:28), and when the New Testament became a reality 3,000 were saved (Acts 2:41).
- The Old Testament priesthood came from the tribe of Levi. The New Testament priesthood is after the order of Melchizedek. Melchizedek, as you know, has a superior priesthood (Heb. 8:6).
- The Old Testament high priest ministered on earth in a tabernacle made by man. The New Testament high priest ministers in heaven in the true tabernacle made by God (Heb. 8:2).
- Old Testament priests were prevented by death from continuing their service, but Jesus, our Great High Priest, ever lives to make intercession for us (Heb. 7:25).
- It was God who found something wrong with the Old Covenant and decided to write a New Covenant (Heb. 8:7).

As you already know, before entering into an earthly covenant it is wise to understand the nature of that covenant. Understanding the nature of our covenant with God is obviously more important for it is of eternal significance. Please do not allow the wicked one to convince you that your covenant with God is irrelevant and unimportant.

MELITO

Having said this, let us narrow our focus, and concentrate our spiritual and mental energies, on the man named Melito. Melito was the bishop of Sardis. We do not know when he was born, but he is thought to have died about A.D. 180. In Rev. 3:1- 6 a letter was written to the "Angel of the church in Sardis". Here is that letter: **"To the angel of the church in Sardis write: These are the words of him who holds the seven spirits of God and the seven stars. I know your deeds; you have a reputation of being alive, but you are dead. Wake up! Strengthen what remains and is about to die, for I have not found your deeds complete in the sight of my God. Remember, therefore, what you have received and heard; obey it, and repent. But if you do not wake up, I will come like a thief, and you will not know at what time I will come to you. Yet you have a few people in Sardis who have not soiled their clothes. They will walk with me, dressed in white, for they are worthy. He who overcomes will, like them, be dressed in white. I will never blot out his name from the book of life, but will acknowledge his name before my Father and his angels. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches."** (Rev 3:1-6 NIV) Some think that Melito was the next leader of the church in Sardis who succeeded the "Angel" or "Messenger" mentioned in Rev. 3:1. The fact that God considered the church in Sardis to be dead (Rev. 3:1) ought to raise a red flag when receiving spiritual advice from the bishop of that church.

Even though few details of his life are known, it seems that Melito was a prolific author, considered a prophet, called a eunuch, and defended the Christian faith to the Emperor Marcus Aurelius. An annual feast is celebrated in his honor on April 1st.

Of Melito's numerous works almost all have perished. Fortunately, Eusebius has preserved the names of the majority of his works, and even given a few extracts (Hist. Eccl., IV, xiii, xxvi). Melito's reputation as a writer remained strong into the Middle Ages: and consequently it is alleged that numerous works were erroneously ascribed to him. His Homily on the Passover is considered the oldest Gospel Sermon not taken directly from the Scriptures. A letter of Polycrates of Ephesus to Pope Victor about 194, mentioned by Eusebius, (H.E. 5.24) states that "Melito the eunuch" was interred at Sardis.

TERTULLIAN

Tertullian was believed to be born at Carthage about the year A.D. 160. He grew up amid the pagan surroundings of that provincial metropolis. His father, whose name is not known, was a centurion in attendance upon the proconsul of Africa. Before his conversion it is believed that Tertullian practiced law and the constant recurrence of legal phraseology in his writings supports this idea.

Tertullian's conversion is dated around A.D. 196. He was later ordained a "priest" in the Carthaginian Church. He was said to be married, but childless. He was also said to be fervid, impatient, impetuous, and known to have a vein of latent Puritanism.

In about A.D. 197 he wrote an Apology of the Christian faith. The work is said to be one of the best examples of Western apologetic writings. It not only presents a cogent and brilliant defense of Christianity, but also exposes in graphic detail, the moral darkness of paganism. He helped to establish Latin, rather than Greek, as an ecclesiastical language and vehicle for Christian thought in the Western world. He coined many new theological words and phrases and gave currency to those already in use, thus becoming a pioneer in forging and fixing the

vocabulary and thought structure of Western Christianity for the next 1000 years. Tertullian's practical and legal bent of mind expressed what would later be taken as the unique genius of Latin Christianity.

Unfortunately, almost all that we know of Tertullian is based on information written by men living over a century after his death, and from obscure references in his own works. Because of this, much of what is written about him has been continually disputed. According to Jerome, Tertullian lived to an extreme old age (*de vir. illustr.* 53). His death occurred around A.D. 240. A small sect, called after him "Tertullianists," lingered in Carthage to the time of Augustine (*Haer.* 86).

"TESTAMENT" LABELS GIVEN IN AN AGE OF CONFLICT

Biographers debate the details of men well known in our own generation. Certainly, they do not speak with a united voice concerning men who died 1,800 years ago. While the details of their lives may be debated, perhaps we can at least agree that Melito and Tertullian lived and labored in an age of great conflict. Here are some of the issues which they faced.

- Gentile converts had to decide whether, or not, to accept the Jewish Scriptures. Melito struggled with this and ultimately accepted the Jewish Canon, with the exception of the book of Esther.
- They also struggled with the Apocrypha. These are 14 books, as you know, not included in the final Hebrew canon but recognized by the Roman Catholic Church.
- Also at this time scholars were also seeking to determine the canon of Greek Scriptures. The oldest extant list of the 27 books that correspond to our modern Bible date back only to the Fourth Century. Tertullian, was one of the scholars seeking answers to the question of what Christian books were inspired by God.
- This was also a time of persecution. Emperor Marcus Aurelius (A. D. 161 - 180) persecuted Christians. Melito wrote an apology, or defense of the Christian faith, to this emperor.
- Lucius Aurelius Commodus (A.D. 180 - 192) was the son of Marcus Aurelius and became emperor upon the death of his father. His reign was characterized by cruelty, irrationality, and instability. There were several plots against his life by members of his own family. He was also contemporary with Tertullian.
- Another emperor of his day was Lucius Septimius Severus who reigned from A.D. 193 - 211. He considered it a capital crime to covert to either Christianity or Judaism.
- In addition to the problems of persecution, there were also doctrinal disputes. Marcion (c. 85 - c. 160 A.D.), for example, taught that Jesus Christ was a spirit and did not come in the flesh (See 1 John 4:2 - 3; 2 John 1:7).
- Montanus was also a divisive teacher of that era. He traveled and taught with two women, Priscilla and Maximilla. These three claimed the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. They spoke in ecstatic visions and urged their followers to seek for personal revelations. Even though Montanus was considered a heretic, both Melito and Tertullian were said to be associated with him.
- Melito also became embroiled in controversy regarding the nature of Christ. He accepted the two fold nature of Christ, that is, that He was both man and God. Theologians called this "Abinitarianism". Apparently Melito never referred to the Holy Spirit as God. Believing in the three fold nature of God is called "Trinitarianism".
- Another divisive issue that faced the church was when to observe Easter. (We need to note parenthetically that the Scriptures never command us to observe Easter). Nevertheless, a great division occurred in the church over this very issue. The Eastern Church (of which Melito was a part) observed Easter on the 14th of Nissan regardless of

what day of the week it fell upon. The Western Church always observed Easter on Sunday. Those who argued for a fixed day on the 14th of Nissan are called "Aquatadecimarians".

- We can add to this list a great many other controversies ranging from the millennium to the work of the Holy Spirit, and from Neo Platonism to the rise of the clergy.
- Suffice it to say, that when Melito and Tertullian compiled their list of inspired books at a time when the church was engulfed in great controversy.

THE LURE OF LEGALISM

I do not know why these Christian leaders chose to label the Scriptures as "testaments". Perhaps they felt driven to do so by the many problems they were facing. Many respond to frustrating circumstances by "laying down the law", and the word "testament" clearly has legal ramifications. It comes from the Latin "testari" which means "to testify". It is often associated with making a will. A will, as you know, is a legal document. In a legal document, every word and every punctuation mark are extremely important. Lawyers go to court and debate the meaning of testaments, just like preachers and teachers today debate the meaning of Scriptures. Touche! That's the point! Yes! The Scriptures are inspired by God and are essential to the growth and well being of all believers. Yes! Man does not live by bread alone but by every word that proceeds out of the mouth of God (Matt. 4:4). Yet there is something wrong when brothers in Christ debate and divide over the Christian Scriptures. Debates are not godly, they are a work of the flesh. The word translated as "debate" in the Scriptures is the Greek word "eris". In the KJV it is translated as "variance" in Gal. 5:20. It is also translated as "contention", and "strife". This word certainly does not describe activity that promotes unity. Perhaps this is why God wrote the real New Testament in our minds and hearts so that people wouldn't argue about it.

The KJV of the Bible contains 66 books and 773,746 words. If these inspired Scriptures are considered as "testaments" or legal documents, the legal debates would be without number. THIS, AS YOU KNOW, IS PRECISELY THE SITUATION IN THE CHRISTIAN WORLD TODAY.

The division of the Bible into chapters did not occur until the 13th century, and the first English Bible to have verses was the Geneva Version of 1560. Perhaps chapters and verses have not made it easier to understand the Scriptures, but they have certainly made it easier to argue and debate about them.

ISHMAEL AND ISAAC

"Tell me, you who want to be under the law, are you not aware of what the law says? For it is written that Abraham had two sons, one by the slave woman and the other by the free woman. His son by the slave woman was born in the ordinary way; but his son by the free woman was born as the result of a promise. These things may be taken figuratively, for the women represent two covenants." (Gal 4:21-24)

Hagar and Ishmael represent the Old Covenant and slavery. Remember that before Ishmael was born the Angel of God predicted that he would "live in hostility toward all his brothers" (Gen. 16:12). Obviously commandments written in stone never change. It is equally obvious, however, that people do change. This is why the Ten Commandments are controversial. For example, after 3,500 years of debates, scholars still do not agree on what can legally be done on the Sabbath Day.

Sarah and Isaac represent the New Covenant and freedom. Because this covenant is written in the minds and hearts of believers it is not easily debated. Further, though the truth of God does not change, our minds and hearts do. Like members of a family, little children and adults are at different levels of growth and maturity. It shouldn't divide the church, for example, when believers do not agree on holy days and kosher foods (See Rom. 14). Our faith is personal, nor propositional. We are not united in Christ by "what" we believe, but by "Who" we believe. Like sheep converging on a Shepherd, the closer we get to Christ, the closer we will also be to one another.

The word "Ishmael" means "God hears". There are two reasons why this name is appropriate. First, it is appropriate because God heard the cries of misery from Hagar, his mother. Second, because he was constantly crying out to God because Isaac received the inheritance which "by law" he felt belonged to him (Gen. 25:5).

The word "Isaac" means "laughter". While Ishmael was constantly crying out, Isaac was constantly laughing. Isaac did not deserve the inheritance, but he received it anyhow. Isn't this a beautiful allegory of what Christianity is all about?

Remember! These two women, Hagar and Sarah, represent two covenants! The Old Covenant, and the New Covenant.

THE NEW COVENANT AND UNITY

In a human family, fraternity is based upon paternity. Brotherhood is the result of fatherhood. Brethren at the family table will often differ in size, appearance, and knowledge, but they are brothers if they have a common father. The same is true in the Family of God!

This is precisely the reason that Jesus is not ashamed to call us brethren. We are inferior to Jesus in every way but we are His brethren because we have a common Father (Heb. 2:11).

Since Jesus is the Mediator of the New Covenant, He not only reconciles us to God, but also to one another. When we are "born again", His seed abides within us and leads to the transformation of our lives (1 John 3:9). Remember, the fruit of the Spirit is love (Gal. 5:22). Please also remember, the way that all men will know that we are His disciples, is because we love one another (Jn. 13:35). In some miraculous way, the Holy Spirit enables everyone who is born of God to love everyone else who is born of God (1 John 5:1).

As we have already stated, the New Covenant was a complete reality before one word of the Christian Scriptures was written. The unity created by this Covenant brought devout people together out of every nation under heaven (Acts 2:5). Obviously, these people from many different countries would have many differences. The Holy Spirit, however, broke down every barrier and brought all these people together in Christ. The Scriptures state categorically that "All the believers were one in heart and mind" (Acts 4:32).

The same New Covenant, can also bring the same kind of unity today! In a family, we love little children and allow them to grow and mature at their own pace. The same should also be done in the Family of God. Both Peter and Paul help to illustrate this point. Peter was specifically commanded to preach the Gospel to "all nations" (Matt. 18:18 - 20). Approximately ten years went by before he actually did this (See Acts 11:19). Paul was specifically

commanded by Christ to preach to the Gentiles (Acts 26:16 - 18). It was also about ten years before the Scriptures record that Paul actually obeyed his commission from Christ. In both instances, with both Peter and Paul, the Holy Spirit had to intervene directly to get them to obey Christ (See Acts 10:1 - 48; 13:1 - 3). If God was patient with Peter and Paul, perhaps he will also be patient with us. If God is patient with us, shouldn't we also be patient with one another? (Rom. 15:7)

WHAT CAN WE DO TO PROMOTE THE UNITY FOR WHICH CHRIST PRAYED?

1 - Every believer needs to focus on Christ, and to do everything possible to please Him. Jesus is the Head of His Body, the Church, and ideally ought to be in control of every member of His Body (Col. 1:18). He is only true foundation for Christian unity (1 Cor. 3:11). If we focus on pleasing men we are not serving Christ correctly (Gal. 1:10). The Body of Christ functions as one when every member of the Body does as the Head of the Body directs us to do (1 Cor. 12:12 - 31).

2 - We should remember that while the Scriptures are inspired of God, and essential for our Christian growth and maturity, they are not the covenant that binds us to God. Recognizing this fact will help us to be patient with others who are not at our own level of growth and maturity. There are, as you know, thousands of believers around the world who have been born again and are in a covenant relationship with Christ, who do not even have a written language. Even if they never become literate, and never have the Scriptures in their own language, they are still our brethren in Christ.

3 - Those who publish Bibles, should immediately correct the labels "Old Testament, and New Testament" which have traditionally been used. The impact this will have on Christian unity should not be our major concern. Our major concern should be to honor Christ and pursue truth. The consequences to our actions, of course, are in the hands of God. The books of the Bible from Genesis through Malachi are certainly inspired Scriptures written to a covenant people, but they are not the Old Covenant. If we know this, our words and actions need to be consistent with our knowledge. Perhaps we could refer to the books of the Bible as "The Old Testament Scriptures" and "The New Testament Scriptures". At any rate, we should not perpetuate titles that are inaccurate. Such changes could be easily implemented when producing Bibles for new people groups who are just beginning their walk with Christ.

4 - We must emphasize LOVE as the most important teaching in all the Bible. Jesus said that the entire teaching of the Law and the Prophets could be suspended on only two commandments, and both of them involved love (Matt. 22:37 - 40). Jesus said: **"By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another"** (John 13:35).

THANK YOU IN ADVANCE FOR YOUR OBEDIENCE TO CHRIST!

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Boyce Mouton
19559 Ibis Lane
Carthage, Mo. 64836
bmouton@joplin.com