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Understanding the Times

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P r e s e n t i n g
Harding University's

76th Annual Bible Lectureship
Understanding
the Times

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September
26-29, 1999

Books have played a major role in my life. The Bible, of course, has been the Book of books and has influenced me more than any other volume—from childhood until now. It is, indeed, the one book I would want in my possession if I could have but one. Some of my most joyful early memories are of sitting with my mother and sister and reading the Bible together while my father was at work.

Upon graduation from college, my wife's parents gave me a cash gift that I promptly used to purchase a few sets of core books that accompanied us to the mission field and came back to the United States with us when we returned. These books are still on my shelves after more than four decades. I have always been grateful for that wonderful gift and for those books that have blessed my ministry.

For a long time, my parents attended an annual college lectureship. Their custom was to purchase the yearly lectureship book and give it to me as a souvenir of their experience. Mother and Daddy are no longer with us, but the books they gave and their love for books continue to remind us of the importance of book-buying and book-giving.

We believe that Harding University's 1999 Lectureship book contains messages that will bless individuals, families, and congregations now and for as long as the ink remains on the pages. We have attempted to select topics and speakers that will help people understand their times and know what they should do to serve God more effectively as we move through the transition into a new millennium. — Howard W. Norton

Harding University's 76th Annual
Bible Lectureship

UNDERSTANDING THE TIMES

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Harding University's 76th Annual
Bible Lectureship

UNDERSTANDING THE TIMES

HARDING UNIVERSITY
Howard W. Norton, Editor

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Searcy, Arkansas

PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE

David B. Burks
President, Harding University

We are thankful for the lectures, classes, forums, and other events that fill the agenda of Harding University's Annual Lectureship. As in the past, the 76th Annual Lectureship program includes some of the finest preachers and teachers in the churches of Christ today. We are confident that those who attend the 1999 Lectureship will find their message informative, inspiring, and thought-provoking.

To teach a good class or deliver a powerful lecture is no small accomplishment. Normally, people who participate on the Harding Lectureship spend long hours preparing for the small amount of time they have available to make their presentations. In a matter of minutes, speakers deliver hours of research and preparation to people whom they hope will take what they have learned and teach it to others who did not have the opportunity to hear.

For many years, Harding University has tried to record at least a few of the annual Harding lectures in writing and preserve them in a book. This involves a great deal of effort on the part of everyone involved in the publishing process. Writers, editors, secretaries, layout artists, proofreaders, printers, sales personnel—all do their part in order to preserve and publish the thoughts of people who have worked at the task of preparing material to further the cause of Christ.

I am particularly pleased to introduce the 76th Annual Lectureship book about "Understanding the Times." The biblical writer in 1 Chronicles 12:32 describes the men of Issachar as people "who understood the times and knew what Israel should do." Every nation, every institution, and every family needs this wisdom in order

to survive and thrive in a world that is usually more confusing than it is enlightening.

We believe that the speakers and teachers chosen for Harding's 1999 Lectureship will provide valuable insights that will help us understand our times and know what the church and its people should do as we approach the dawn of a new century and a new millennium.

As this book goes forth to readers, many of whom we will never meet, it is our prayer that each chapter will provide insight, information, and inspiration that will further the work of our Lord in this troubled world.

David B. Burks
President

FOREWORD

Men from the tribe of Issachar "understood the times and knew what Israel should do" (1 Chron. 12:32). How desperately we need people with that same kind of insight today.

As we prepare to enter the 21st century, some of the most respected church leaders shake their heads in bewilderment when trying to understand the age in which we live. More complicated still is their struggle to know what the church should do in order to influence the current generation and, at the same time, be found "blameless and holy in the presence of our God and Father when our Lord Jesus comes" (1 Thess. 3:13).

Harding University's 76th annual Lectureship is dealing with a few of the most difficult real-life questions facing God's people today. Spiritual thinkers have attempted to help us understand the times in which we live and to provide guidance for the road ahead.

Jay Simpson, Financial Aid Counselor at Harding University, served as editor of the book. We are all in his debt for the sacrifices he made in order to see that these lectures were preserved for us and the future generations.

We are especially grateful to those speakers and teachers who have written their thoughts and included them in this book. By their extra effort, these messages will live on; and a still larger audience will partake of their insights.

Our prayer is that we may all understand the times and know what God's people should do.

Howard W. Norton
Executive Director, Institute for Church and Family
Lectureship Director

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THEME LECTURES



UNDERSTANDING THE CRISIS OF AUTHORITY

Harold Redd
Midtown church of Christ
Memphis, TN

Authority is at the center of a growing American crisis. Some social scientists trace the current crisis as far back as the 1950's and rock and roll music. Most observe the nonconformist revolts of the 1960's. America experienced the frustrations of the Vietnam war, the Watergate scandal, and other highly publicized revelations of national corruption. The hippies were driven to disregard ethics, laws, and leadership. In rebellion they used drugs and free love as a call to peace. In subsequent years, Americans saw boomers, bondage clothing, shaved heads, and multi-colored spiked hair. In the summer of 1978, President Jimmy Carter summoned the nation's leading intellectuals to Camp David to address the alienation of Americans from their government. John P. Diggins writes of that summit meeting: "...it is the intellectual who mediates between the state and its subjects...We were not surprised when President Carter called to his Camp David 'summit' some of the leading academic intellectuals to help the country resolve the 'national malaise' that came to be called 'the crisis of authority.'"¹ Today, the mention of authority will at least reap controversy, but may even result in a week-long media campaign to denounce authority. John H. Schaar in *Legitimacy in the Modern State*, writes:

Authority is a word on everyone's lips today. The young attack it and the old demand respect for it. Parents have lost it and policemen enforce it. Experts claim it and artists spurn

it, while scholars seek it and lawyers cite it. Philosophers reconcile it with liberty and theologians demonstrate its compatibility with conscience. Bureaucrats pretend they have it and politicians wish they did. Everybody agrees that there is less of it than there used to be. It seems that the matter stands now as a certain Mr. Wildman thought it stood in 1648: 'Authority hath been broken to pieces.'²

John P. Diggins comments about Schaar's passage: "The longer the situation continues, the more one wonders whether the 'pieces' can ever be put back together again. Is there anything in our history and culture that will help us understand the full implications of this lingering predicament?"³ This lecture will affirm that the pieces can be put together again. It will show that all authority emanates from God and will illustrate how rebellion against God-ordained authority is synonymous with rebellion against God. The only Christian answer for such a sin is penitent submission.

THE CRISIS

It is precisely the necessity of authority that makes the American situation so critical. The crisis is caused by the blatant rejection of an absolute necessity. Americans on the one hand abhor submission, but on the other hand enjoy and demand it even while despising those who submit. Diggins writes of the predicament: "While almost all Americans claim the need for a coherent sense of authority, and while many would agree that there is less of it than there used to be, few Americans are willing to submit to authority."⁴

The crisis can be observed from several perspectives. From a historical perspective, it is noteworthy that America was born in an act of rebellion against constituted authority. However, from the be-

ginning her leaders were pro-authority as indicated by the Preamble to the United States Constitution which says:

We the people of the United States, in order to form a more perfect Union, establish justice, insure domestic tranquility, provide for the common defense, promote the general welfare, and secure the blessings of liberty to ourselves and our posterity, do ordain and establish this Constitution of the United States of America.⁵

Ironically, the founding fathers of this country were guilty of rebellion but knew that in order for all Americans to be free, all would have to submit. It is apposite to mention at this point that today a much greater emphasis is placed on *individual* freedom and tolerance, which is indicative of the kind of selfishness that perpetuates resentment for authority.

The crisis spans politics. American conservatives believe the government has too much authority. Liberals plead for balance between individual rights and government control. Radicals wish the government could both control the powerful and be powerless too. The nonrealistic wishes of the radicals illustrate the crisis.

Undeniably, the crisis is affecting American life. Leland Stewart understood the crisis in 1971 and wrote, *Obedience, Discipline, Authority: Their Repulsiveness and Their Necessity*. The title itself indicates the crisis. The problem is that Americans are repulsed by what they desperately need.

A BIBLICAL PERSPECTIVE AND ILLUSTRATION

The purpose of this paper is to address the crisis from a biblical perspective. To accomplish this purpose, I will remind the readers of several historical periods that are relevant to ours and then

focus on one particular period for closer analysis. What are some of the periods in biblical history that are relevant to ours in terms of rebellion against God/authority? It happened in Noah's day when "God saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth and that every imagination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually" (Gen. 6:5). During the period of Judges, there was no king in Israel and every man did what was right in his own eyes (Judges 17:6; 18:1; 19:1; 21:25). During the days of the kings, Israel and Judah rebelled, and God sent His servants the prophets to remind/warn them of the covenant that centered around the Law. One such prophet was Jeremiah, who preached to Judah just prior to the Babylonian captivity. God pled with Judah to repent and avoid the impending destruction. Judah's response was, "there is no hope: but we will walk after our own devices and we will every one do the imagination of his evil heart" (Jer. 18:11-12). The attitudes of people in each of the above mentioned periods indicate that they chose to do what they wanted to do, despite the covenant and/or what God had said. In the days of Jesus, He illustrated the rebellion of the Jews with a relevant parable in Luke 19:11-28. According to the parable, the certain nobleman (Jesus) was told by citizens who hated him (Jews), "we will not have this man to reign over us" (Lk. 19:14). The dominant attitude in each age is this: people do not want to be told what to do by anybody regardless of position or authority.

The people of Judah during Jeremiah's day illustrate the problem. We have noted above their evil heart pictured in Jeremiah 18:12. The Contemporary English Version clarifies the meaning of verse 12 by translating Jeremiah's statement, "But I know you won't listen. You might as well answer, 'We don't care what you say. We have made plans to sin, and we are going to be stubborn and do what we want.'" God's response to Judah's stubbornness was a constant plea through Jeremiah, the weeping prophet, for them to return to Him.

They simply refused His love for them and according to Jeremiah in Jeremiah 27:1-11:

Not long after Zedekiah became king of Judah, the Lord told me: Jeremiah make a wooden yoke with leather straps, and place it on your neck. Then send a message to the kings of Edom, Moab, Ammon, Tyre, and Sidon. Some officials from these countries are in Jerusalem, meeting with Zedekiah. So have them tell their kings that I have said: I am the All-Powerful Lord God of Israel, and with my power I created the earth, its people, and all animals. I decide who will rule the earth, and I have chosen my servant King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylonia to rule all nations, including yours. I will even let him rule the wild animals. All nations will be slaves of Nebuchadnezzar, his son, and his grandson. Then many nations will join together, and their kings will be powerful enough to make slaves of the Babylonians. This yoke stands for the power of King Nebuchadnezzar, and I will destroy any nation that refuses to obey him. Nebuchadnezzar will attack, and many will die in battle or from hunger and disease. You might have people in your kingdom who claim they can tell the future by magic or by talking with the dead or by dreams or messages from a god. But don't pay attention if any of them tell you not to obey Nebuchadnezzar. If you listen to such lies, I will have you dragged far from your country and killed. But if you and your nation are willing to obey Nebuchadnezzar, I will let you stay in your country, and your people will continue to live and work on their farms.

Typically, the prophet of God would have encouraged God's people *not* to submit to foreign enemies but instead would have bolstered their faith to fight against the nations, trusting the mighty God

of heaven to deliver them. At this particular time, however, when Babylon was on the verge of capturing Jerusalem, the prophet of God was encouraging submission because God had given authority into the hands of Nebuchadnezzar. Some reasoned that Jeremiah should not have talked like he did, while others accused him of being a traitor. After all, Jerusalem was the Jews' homeland and the temple was the focal point of their worship to the almighty God. Still, Jeremiah predicted that nonsubmission would result in the destruction of both the city and the worship center. He kept on repeating that prediction until it came true in the days of King Zedekiah, who refused to submit because of his own selfish pride. Zedekiah told Jeremiah, "I can't surrender to the Babylonians. I'm too afraid of the Jews that have already joined them. The Babylonians might hand me over to those Jews, and they would torture me" (Jer. 38:19). Jeremiah tried to encourage him toward his only real alternative—submission. He told Zedekiah, "If you will just obey the Lord...you will be allowed to live and all will go well for you" (Jer. 38:20). Ironically, Zedekiah's best answer to his threat of being captured was what he feared the most and that is submission to Babylon and to the God who empowered Nebuchadnezzar. In the end, Zedekiah refused to submit, and in the 11th year of his reign the Babylonians captured Jerusalem and Zedekiah. They killed his sons while he watched, put out his eyes, and took him bound in chains to Babylon.

The above story contains godly messages about submission to authority. God identified Himself as the creator and sovereign God of everything (Jer. 27:5-6). He revealed how He had given land and beasts to Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon (Jer. 27:6-7). The instructions for the nations and Judah, including Zedekiah, the priest, and the people, were to submit to Nebuchadnezzar and Babylon and live *or* resist that authority and perish. Jeremiah warned Judah not to listen to the prophets, diviners, and dreamers who were saying Judah would not go into exile. Instead Judah was to submit to the king of

Babylon, go into exile, and build houses and vineyards, because according to the prophecy of Jeremiah they would be in exile for 70 years (Jer. 25:11-12). There are three lessons learned from the people of Judah in Jeremiah's day and applied to the people of America and this current crisis of authority.

THE ILLUSTRATION MADE PRACTICAL

One valuable lesson applicable to Judah and America is that ultimately all authority belongs to the sovereign God. Despite secular sinfulness in any era, authority remains a very necessary ordination of God. God wanted Jeremiah to remind Judah that He made this world and its contents and He alone has the authority to empower whomever He wills. Men from Pharaoh to Zedekiah have been forced to face their powerless condition at the hands of the Almighty. Who would have believed that even Nebuchadnezzar, the one given the authority in Jeremiah's day would have to learn again that the authority was really given to him by God. One day Nebuchadnezzar walked in the palace of the kingdom of Babylon and said, "Is not this great Babylon, that I have built for the house of my kingdom by the might of my power and for the honor of my majesty?" (Dan. 4:29-30). Immediately his heart was changed from a man's heart to a beast's heart, and he ended up acting like a wild man until he learned "that the most High rules in the kingdom of men, and gives it to whomsoever he will" (Dan. 4:32).

In Romans 13, Paul, inspired like Jeremiah, writes, "Let every soul be subject unto the higher powers. For there is no power but of God: the powers that be are ordained of God. Whosoever therefore resisteth the power, resisteth the ordinance of God" (Rom. 13:1-2). In this passage, Paul states clearly what all of scripture illustrates—God rules and ultimately all authority emanates from Him.

Americans need to remember that God has invested authority in specific people and He places and positions them where they are changeable only by God Himself. By His sovereign choice, Jesus, "though he were a son learned obedience by the things which he suffered; and being made perfect, he became the author of eternal salvation unto all them that obey him" (Heb. 5:8-9). Up from the grave, the Lord proclaimed, "All power is given unto me in heaven and in earth" (Matt. 28:18). Christians desire to be what Jesus modeled and taught. Consequently, whether the possessor of authority is government, an employer, a parent, a husband, males, or spiritual authorities, the Christian's responsibility is the same—submission; even unto suffering, as long as such submission does not require violation of God's will.

Christians make up the kingdom of God, which is the light to the world. Could Americans learn answers to the authority crisis from the church? Not only could they learn, but they also must learn. In a symposium on "Religion and the Intellectuals" that appeared in the *Partisan Review* in 1950, the question was asked, "Assuming that in the past, religions nourished certain vital human values, can these values now be maintained without widespread belief in the supernatural?"⁶ The resounding answer, with one exception, was NO! Any effort to maintain values without authority *must* be vain, since eliminating authority would ultimately mean eliminating God. Perhaps Jeremiah needs to preach in America and remind us that if we submit to the ultimate authority all will be well; but if Americans persist in resisting authority, they will ultimately defy the God of heaven, which is terminal.

A second lesson learned from Judah and which is good for America is that there will always be other voices. On one side stood Jeremiah encouraging Judah to submit to Babylon, but on the other side stood the magicians, diviners, dreamers, and even prophets saying they did not have to. One such false prophet was Hannaniah who

claimed at the temple, in the presence of the priests and Jeremiah, that God had showed him that He would deliver Israel from Babylon in two full years (Jer. 28:1-4). Jeremiah begged Zedekiah and Judah not to listen to the false prophets and their lies. Despite his prophecy and its fulfillment relative to Hannaniah's death within a year, Judah refused submission to Jeremiah and God, but they heard the voices of fools.

Other voices in America speak too. Through modern music and television, they sing and teach rebellion to the foolish. Advocates of "rights" cry when faced with the consequences of rebellion and insubordination. Others deceitfully whisper, "rules are made to be broken." Whether one sings or cries rivers of tears, whether one preaches loudly or whispers, the Christian's task is to listen prayerfully, carefully, for the voice of Jesus who said, "I am the good shepherd, and know my sheep and am known of mine" (Jn. 10:14). The sheep follow Him, for they know His voice. "And a stranger will they not follow, but will flee from him: for they know not the voice of strangers" (Jn. 10:4-5).

There are times when God's people have to listen with special care to hear His voice. When God's answer and/or message is not the most popular and one really wants an answer more aligned with his or her own desire, then the servant has to listen to God more than he listens to self. When suffering is involved and the worldly voices say, "don't take anything off anybody," the Christian listens for God and hears, "arm yourselves with the mind to suffer" (1 Pet. 4:1). When marriage is difficult and worldly counselors say, "separate and make yourself happy," God-fearing people listen for Jesus to repeat, "what therefore God hath joined together, let not man put asunder" (Matt. 19:6).

The illustrations are innumerable, but the point is the same. Other voices will forever be saying other things. The Christian's task is to hear the voice of God and submit. Christians make up the

church, and the church is the model for the world, not the world for the church.

The third lesson from Judah for America is almost a warning. *Ultimately, what is right and where God has vested authority will be revealed.* Historically, people have struggled with the ultimate authority until it is too late, before regretfully learning who He is. Pharaoh's tragic end continues to be a source of glory for God. In Jeremiah's day, Hannaniah died and Judah went into Babylonian exile, affirming the authority of God. Once while assuring Jeremiah that He would keep His promise to David and would bring Judah out of exile, God said, "If you can break my covenant of the day, and my covenant of the night, and that there should not be day and night in their season; then may also my covenant be broken with David my servant" (Jer. 33:20-21). That is just how sure God is to reveal His power. In Jeremiah's day, God gave the power to Nebuchadnezzar while he remembered his covenant with Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and David. The covenant with David was honored, and that seed of David was honored with the authority of His father. Ultimately every person must learn what that means. Older preachers proclaimed, "There will be no infidels in hell!" They did not mean an infidel would escape hell. They were affirming that earthly infidels would be eternal believers. Every soul lost or saved will eventually acknowledge that Jesus is Lord. Paul wrote the result of Christ's submission to death: "wherefore God also hath highly exalted him, and given him a name which is above every name: that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of things in heaven, and things in earth, and things under the earth; and that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father" (Phil. 2:8-11). Yes, Jesus is the all-powerful Lord! This chaotic world will become ordered again and America will find the only answer to its crisis of authority, only when men and women submit their wills to Him.

PERSONAL PRACTICE

Below are some suggestions and bits of encouragement for personal practice. *One, Americans, especially Christians, should keep their hearts open to God's will.* His will may be different from what men desire. Still men need to keep cultivating faith and working on the selfish attitudes that plant and fertilize the seeds that produce stubbornness and rebellion and resistance to God's authority. God was on His throne when we got here and He'll be there when we are gone.

Two, pray for God's guidance. When so many voices are uttering strange sounds, some of which are appealing, people can become torn between two or more pieces of advice. At other times life looks so big and problems with authority so obtuse that the whole thing looks overwhelming and hopeless. It was Solomon who exemplified what one must do in such cases. When faced with the tremendous task of leading Israel and filling the shoes of his father David, Solomon asked God for wisdom. America needs God's advice, too!

Three, learn to trust God. Men must not lean on their own understanding but acknowledge God who can and will direct steps. Spiritual maturity will lead a man to distrust himself. Trust is important because there is a subtle risk involved in submission. Often, when one makes the decision to do God's will, Satan makes it appear that the person made a mistake. God's people have to remain committed and trust Him to make everything come out all right.

Finally, keep working on submission. Every Christian will be faced with this issue until Jesus comes. The carnal mind does not want to submit. Consequently, as long as people are carnal, the authority crisis will go on, and God's people must keep growing and struggling and submitting. The only Christian answer is submission, and Christians are the lights in this world.

END NOTES

1. John P. Diggins, and Mark E. Kann, eds., *The Problem of Authority in America* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1981), 18.
2. John H. Schaar, "Legitimacy in the Modern State," in *Power and Community: Dissenting Essays in Political Science*, ed. Philip Green and Sanford Levinson (New York, 1970), p. 276.
3. John P. Diggins, and Mark E. Kann, eds., *The Problem of Authority in America* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1981), 3.
4. Ibid. 5.
5. U. S. Constitution, Preamble.
6. "Religion and the Intellectuals: A symposium," *Partisan Review* 17 (1950): 113-116.

UNDERSTANDING THE SPIRIT OF OUR AGE

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In his book *Reality Isn't What It Used to Be*, Walter Truett Anderson suggests that the Wizard of Oz is a myth for our time.¹ Toward the end of the movie, when Dorothy returns to the Emerald City, the broomstick of the wicked witch of the west in hand, she and her companions are granted an audience with the "Great and Powerful" Oz. Then, Toto makes a startling discovery which, according to Anderson's interpretation, is the moral of the whole story. And Anderson believes it is significant that it is the dog, Toto, who makes the discovery. As he pulls the control booth curtain back with his puppy dog teeth, Toto unmasks the "Wizard" who is, in fact, a fraud, the product of the imagination of a clever man who gets a lot of mileage out of the wishful thinking of Dorothy and her naive friends. Anyone with even half a brain—my apologies to the Scarecrow—should have known the truth all along.

TRUTH IN A POSTMODERN AGE

Anderson claims that many people in our modern, now postmodern, society are making a similar discovery, that the "truths" around which they have built their lives in the past are nothing more than the philosophical inventions of clever people from days gone by. That includes "truths" purported to have been "revealed" by deities like God in the Bible and Allah in the Qu'ran. These and other so-called "truths" were created by other wishful thinkers who fabri-

cated fables and sold them to others, motivated either by hidden vested interests or merely by the meaninglessness of life as they perceived it.

Anderson believes that people who make the discovery don't necessarily stop going to church or temple or mosque, at least not right away. Instead, leaving their doubts in the foyer they continue to attend, even participate, NOT because they are convinced that the myths they repeat there are true, but only that they are helpful. Plato labeled such a belief system a "noble lie"—noble because it is useful in bringing order to society, but a lie nonetheless. Clinging to similar thoughts, the irreligious don't necessarily abandon all morals despite the fact that they no longer believe the truths upon which those morals are based. Anderson is right when he observes that "In the evolution of ideas, the dinosaurs do not always disappear when they become extinct."² That helps explain why national polls routinely show that while 90 percent of all Americans say they believe in God, more than two-thirds of them say there is no absolute truth. Os Guinness warns about the dire consequence of the situation in which many people still behave somewhat morally, but not for the right reason. "Unless reversed," he fears, "this hollowing out of beliefs will finally be America's undoing."³

WORLDVIEW

Anderson's take on truth (sometimes called "constructivism" because of the belief that such "truth" is only a social construction) is at the core of the postmodern worldview that is receiving so much press today. The word "worldview" does not refer to global awareness. Worldview is a philosophical term for the basic set of assumptions people make about the way things are.⁴ Though people do what they do for complex reasons, worldview affects values and behavior (in that order) more than any other influence, because one's percep-

tions about reality—examined or not, articulated or not—determine one's values which in turn produce certain patterned behaviors. If, for example, I am convinced that there is no life after death (a major, worldview-level belief), then I will most likely prize personal pleasure in the here and now more than some possible reward in the sweet by and by. The high value I place on my own short-term happiness will be apparent in my behavior—my career choice, how I treat my spouse and children, how I spend my money and time, and so on. In Anderson's opinion—one shared by many who are less philosophically sophisticated than he is—there is no "true" worldview. Rather, each person accepts a worldview that has been imagined by others. Yet, this realization, Anderson assures us, should not bring despair but freedom from oppressive belief systems.

A STORM OF ISMS

Anderson's book is just one more salvo in the general attack on truth in Western culture which is at the eye of a storm of -isms that threatens the foundations of our society from the inside out (where the inside is worldview). The leading edge of the storm is not Anderson's relativistic view of truth, but a shared skepticism to which we owe the "seeing-is-believing" equation that undermines faith in invisible realities of any kind and secularizes the culture. Such skepticism inspires materialism, an underrated -ism since most people think of materialism only as a value or behavior reflected in an obsession with possessions. But materialism, the worldview, informs us that only matter matters; that is, the only things we can be sure of in life are physical things, including our own physical health and appearance, as well as what we own. Genuine conviction on this point can make an entire culture remarkably shallow, even to the point of accepting as true such slogans as "Image is everything" and "Why ask why?" Such shallowness is the logical result of the skep-

ticism that eliminates the unseen from the realm of public conversation and leaves us with nothing else to talk about besides the physical.

Mixed in with the skepticism and the materialism is a strong dose of individualism that first entered our nation's bloodstream some time before the pioneers first set out across the prairie and settled in places where self-reliance was prerequisite to survival. Individualism that is tempered by the truth about God's awesome power, our human limitations, and our need for others isn't all bad (though the church cannot be the church where people are too individualistic). But individualism combined with skepticism and materialism is a formula for hedonism where I, as a rugged individual, pursue material goals, looking for personal pleasure in a world where unseen "reality" is an oxymoron.

Add to that already-toxic concoction the philosophical pluralism that characterizes the American thought-world of today plus the relativism inherent in Anderson's view of things, and you have the basic ingredients of the worldview that shapes our culture at the close of the millennium. The pluralism inspires the relativism. Faced with so many choices about what is true and real, it makes sense to many thoughtful people to recognize all options as valid and to proclaim truth to be relative.

You have probably heard the poem, "Six Men of Indostan," in one form or another.⁵ It is the fictitious account of the king who invites six blind Indians to touch an elephant and try to describe what they "see." One grabs the tail and decides that the elephant is like a rope; another holds the trunk and concludes that the elephant resembles a snake; still another surmises that the elephant is more like a tree because he is holding onto the animal's leg, and so on. Each of the six blind men draws a different conclusion about the elephant's appearance because each one knows only part of the story and has less than accurate information about even that one part!

The story is often cited in these pluralistic times to support the idea that, at best, all who seek truth only find a piece of it, and their interpretations of that one piece are not very reliable either. Once upon a time, there was widespread agreement about the general contours of the truth. Especially in the Bible-belt South, citizens had few philosophical choices; the only acceptable ones were one version or another of the Christian worldview. But now seekers all over can choose from a menu of worldview options that is long and varied. Who, say the relativists, is arrogant enough to argue that any of the choices is "wrong"? No, the only proper response to these legitimate choices is "tolerance."

The word "tolerance" no longer means what it once meant—that we grant one another the right to disagree and treat one another with dignity and respect even as we dialogue in search of truth. Today, tolerance means that I **MUST** accept the proposition that all possible explanations of life are equally "true." By accepting them as true, I don't have to believe that these explanations actually correspond to the way things are. I can mean that they are "true" in a "religious" sense, separating religious "truth" from other kinds of "truth" (such as mathematical truth, as in $2 + 2 = 4$). Or I can say all worldviews are true in that any belief system that helps people in some practical way is "true." OR I can mean that all possible explanations are all "true" in that none of them is really true.⁶ Any of these attitudes toward truth are "tolerant" according to the current definition of the term, despite the fact that each one forces the culture into absurd and irrational positions about "truth." Again, it is the pluralism of our time that produces the relativism of our time.

Pluralism today offers not only a wide array of religious choices, but it encourages the beliefs-consumer to mix and match and customize religious truth to his or her satisfaction. Consequently, Phil Jackson's well-known "Zen Christianity"—an impossibility from a truly Christian point of view—is respectable, even admirable. Large

Jewish bookstores in the Northeast and Midwest offer books on Buddhist forms of meditation for practicing Jews in sections of the store labeled "JewBu." George Lucas' blend of the themes of the major religions of the world in his "Star Wars" movies is completely intentional. He is, in his own words, "taking all the issues that religion represents and trying to distill them down into a more modern and easily accessible construct."⁷ And don't be surprised if the Baha'i faith, the youngest of the major world religions, grows faster than your local church in the coming decade. Borrowing the "best" ideas from all major religions and blending them together is making Baha'i one of the fastest growing religions in North America at the end of the 20th century. G. K. Chesterton was right when he said, "The trouble when people stop believing in God is not that they thereafter believe in nothing: it is that they thereafter believe in everything."⁸

To be sure, there is a ring of truth in the "Six Men of Indostan." We cannot know everything; neither do we have infallible interpretations of what can be known. In fact, it *must* be known, and it must be shared with those who don't know it. A major flaw in the way the "Six Men of Indostan" is applied lies in the fact that it makes Creator God analogous to the unnamed Indian king who is amused by the gropings of a bunch of blind men!⁹ From a biblical point of view, we were blind, but now we see because God wanted us to see. We don't see it all, and we don't understand all there is to understand about what we *do* see. But God has revealed Himself in the written word, the Bible, and, most clearly, most definitively, and most recently in the Word who was made flesh and dwelled among us.

Neither pluralism nor relativism is new to the world, though they may be new to us. When Jesus, as a Jewish resident in a land occupied by a very pluralistic empire, said to Pilate, "I came into the world to testify to the truth. Everyone on the side of truth listens to me," Pilate's response reflects his low opinion of such truth claims.

"What is truth?" Pilate asked, and walked away tragically unaware that Truth was staring him in the face.

The winds that drive this storm of -isms—skepticism, materialism, individualism, hedonism, pluralism and relativism—bring it all the way to rural America. Foremost among them is the media whose pervasive influence is often condemned in our circles. Still, the media that takes the stigma out of sin, desensitizes society to ungodliness of all kinds, negatively portrays fundamentalists, and foists its secular worldview on us in the privacy of our own homes, often for several hours a day, has not inspired enough personal indignation in most of us to make us more vigilant about limiting and filtering our TV intake. Thus, we are willing accomplices in the whole process that introduces us and our families to this insidious worldview I am describing. The media has two more unwitting accomplices in this process. Urbanization, which exposes people to more belief systems, and academia, where new ways of perceiving reality are usually first explored and promoted, are both carriers of pluralism and relativism, though their reach is less extensive than that of the media.

FIVE BASIC WORLDVIEW QUESTIONS

For one reason or another, most of us don't pay much attention to -isms. -Isms are intimidating to some people. They remind others of pointless philosophical debates from which most of us want to run and hide. But the truth is, everyone has a philosophy of life, a worldview at the core of their values and behavior. Even if one's worldview is an unexamined, somewhat incoherent collection of assumptions, it still exerts incredible influence on one's life. So, as I like to tell my students, you can run from philosophy, but you can't hide. But there are other ways to describe the spirit of the age that are more user-friendly.

Several authors have attempted to compare and contrast worldviews with a series of questions.¹⁰ I offer these five basic questions which summarize the major elements of any worldview:

1. *Where are we and what is this place like?* Are we riding aimlessly through a closed universe (in which there are no influences at work on the universe from the outside), on a chunk of spinning space matter which is itself the product of a natural cosmic event (perhaps the Big Bang), a chunk which is moving away from its point of origin perhaps indefinitely (ask Stephen Hawking)? That is the secular, scientific answer to question one. Or are Hindus right when they say that we live in an illusory world where nothing physical is real at all, and that we are participating in a cycle of events that are repeated without end? What is the true answer to this fundamental question?

2. *Who are we and where are we going?* The postmodernist answers that no one can really know the answer; we can only tell stories that reflect our perceptions and nothing more. But to Muslims, we are subjects of Allah, created to submit to his will as laid out in the Qu'ran, destined for Paradise if we obey.

3. *What is the problem and what is right and wrong?* Curiously, every worldview senses that something is not right with the world. But each worldview offers a different explanation for the ultimate cause of the problem. In tribal cultures, the perception is that when people violate cultural norms, they anger the ancestors who punish the community with sickness and misfortune of other kinds. Right and wrong is whatever prompts the negative intervention of the ancestors. In the hard-to-pin-down New Age worldview, the problem is that people are simply ignorant of their true human potential to escape the limits of time and space and experience a vague cosmic

Oneness. New Age ethics are tied to whatever enhances the "consciousness."

4. *What is the solution?* Just as each worldview has its own version of the problem, so each one offers a unique solution. New Agers, for example, encourage us to seek a transformed consciousness by passing through "doors of perception" which might include meditation, trance, channeling, biofeedback, acupuncture, ritual dance, crystals, or a dozen other methods. To the naturalist/secularist, the problem is the ignorance that prevents some people from evolving as much as others; the solution, therefore, is more science and technology which, in the naturalistic worldview, both promotes and reflects a higher form of life.

5. *How do we know?* This may be the most important worldview question since it is foundational to all the others. Buddhists claim to know what they know on the basis of the insight first granted to the Buddha (Gautama) when he discovered the "Four Noble Truths" and the "Eight-fold Path" to enlightenment. Existentialists ask for clarification on the word "know:" They then proceed to separate objective from subjective knowledge. Objectively, they say, we "know" only what science tells us. Those are the only true "facts." But, since objective facts alone don't make life satisfying, one must emphasize subjective "knowledge," accessed through experiences of all kinds, over the objective variety.

A CHRISTIAN WORLDVIEW

In my classes at Harding, when I ask students to answer the five basic worldview questions from a Christian point of view, they usually do well with questions one through four. (1) Where are we and what is this place like? Answer: We are in an open universe—God

can and often does influence it—a universe created and sustained by God. But since the Fall, it is not the way it's supposed to be. (2) Who are we and where are we going? We are God's creations, made in His image—an image distorted by sin, clarified by Jesus Christ, and restored by His redemptive work—created to enjoy fellowship with Him forever. (So far so good.) (3) What is the problem and what is right and wrong? The answer, in a word, is sin—sin as defined by God Himself as anything inconsistent with His nature and will. (4) What is the solution? Individual and collective reconciliation through Jesus and recreation through our cooperation with the indwelling Holy Spirit.

But most of my students stumble over the last question: (5) How do you know? The most devout among them usually answer with something akin to the song, "You ask me how I know He lives, He lives within my heart" (an argument based on experience). In response, I assure these students that He lives in my heart as well and that I am certain and thankful He lives in theirs. Other students *reveal* their pragmatic view of truth when they explain that they know Christianity is true because "it works" (a pragmatic argument). To these students, Christianity is little more than a code of ethics which makes its adherents better spouses, better parents, better citizens, better people. "It" also gives them meaning and purpose in life and hope for an afterlife. To this group, I affirm the fact that Christianity is practical for daily living. But, I add, neither the experiential nor the pragmatic answer to the question "How do we know?" will carry much weight with a thoughtful skeptic raised in a postmodern world. In their way of thinking, all of one's answers to life's basic questions are merely the outgrowth of one's own story which is no more true or false than any other story. So, the Christian who defends his or her faith on the basis of experience has little to say to those who have different yet satisfying non-Christian experiences. The Christian who defends his or her faith by pointing to its practical value needs to

know that Buddhism "works," in that truly committed Buddhists are very calm, serene people. Hinduism "works," in that it focuses people's lives on unseen realities (about which they have tragically false impressions). The animism of tribal cultures "works" to keep people in line and in harmony with one another. But none of that makes any of those worldviews true.

I fear that we have raised a generation or two that accepts Christianity as a satisfying emotional experience or as code of ethics that "works" to meet their felt needs rather than as a worldview embodied in Jesus Christ, a worldview that tells us the truth about God, our world, ourselves and our destiny, our problem, God's solution, and our role in spreading the Word about it. We know all of this truth only because God has revealed it in the Bible. We know it is God speaking there primarily because He appeared in the flesh as Jesus Christ, was seen by eyewitnesses who verified that He did things only the Creator can do, and in the end, after his resurrection, they watched Him ascend into the heavens. If those men and women lied about what they saw, we have no truth to offer the world other than the kinds of truths Paul says we can learn about God from observing creation itself (Romans 1).

MEETING THE CHALLENGE

To meet the challenges of our time, we need to agree on two basic responses. First, we must do a better job of grounding our faith and our children's faith in the truth. Perhaps we have assumed too much about what our members believe. Or maybe we were focusing on other issues, stressing truths around the edges as the identifying marks of our movement while the world was attacking the truth at the center, eating away at basic convictions about whether or not God speaks exclusively and definitively in Christ. Whatever the rea-

son, we find ourselves in churches where many of our own members don't know what they believe and why.

Shoring up the foundation demands renewed interest in traditional apologetics, despite the trend away from reason and toward experiential arguments for Christian faith. That doesn't mean that we return to a strictly rational approach in which we set out to "prove" the truth of the gospel. Nor does every member need to be schooled in complex philosophical arguments about logic. It does mean, however, that we must teach our children and our churches how to present the evidence upon which faith rests. After all, the gospel writers do not appeal to some mystical feeling they had when they were around Jesus, nor do they point first to the practical value of becoming a follower of Jesus. Instead, they present the eyewitness testimonies—their own included—that led them to conclude that this man from Nazareth was in fact the Son of God (Luke 1:1-4, for example). The prologue to John's first epistle answers the "How do we know" question with these words:

That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at and our hands have touched—this we proclaim concerning the Word of life. The life appeared; we have seen it and testify to it, and we proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and has appeared to us. We proclaim to you what we have seen and heard, so that you may have fellowship with us. And our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ. We write this to make our joy complete. (1 John 1:1-4)

Again, John's approach to Christian evidences is apparent in the theme statement at the end of the Gospel of John.

Jesus did many other miraculous signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book. But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name. (John 20:30-31)

Notice that the offer of "life in his name" only comes to those who first accept the evidence—the "these things that are written"—which inspires them to believe in Jesus in the first place. Likewise, in the sermons in Acts, early Christian evangelists do not ask people to risk life and limb and believe in Jesus on the basis of some esoteric experience or some practical benefit they'll receive, including the salvation of their souls. The offer of salvation is worthless if Jesus wasn't who he claimed to be. Reread Acts 2:22-36 and ask yourself what the gist of Peter's message is. Peter's appeal to his audience is based on the facts about Jesus' life and death as attested by many eyewitnesses.

My family spent two year in Chicago while I was in graduate school. There in a predominantly Jewish community where we lived, we were challenged to defend our faith like we rarely are back home in Arkansas. So, during our family devotions, we spent a year going through Josh McDowell's book, *Don't Check Your Brains at the Door*.¹¹ Though we had to update McDowell's illustrations, we found that the conversations the book provoked helped us and our children represent our faith better to our friends and neighbors. For adults, I like the book by C. Stephen Evans entitled *Why Believe? Reason and Mystery as Pointers to God*.¹² Evans responds to the questions many people outside of Christian circles are asking with thoughtfulness and honesty, but without getting stuck in more complicated issues raised by the most diehard skeptics which would require a more thorough treatment than Evans provides.

What our members need most, however, is to re-read the Gospels so that we can begin to teach others the gospel according to the Gospels. I fear that if a stranger approached most of us requesting Bible study, we would be inclined to begin the study with passages on becoming a Christian. But that is where the Gospels *end*, not where they begin. It saddens me that my students must be *taught* how to guide a truth seeker through a Gospel, but they simply don't know how to do that! They are more equipped to argue with their Baptist friends about when to take the Lord's Supper than they are equipped to explain to an unbeliever why they believe that Jesus is the Son of God. We need to change that in a hurry.

The second response to the spirit of our age must be a recommitment to fulfilling the mission to which God has called us—to be ministers of reconciliation in the world. That will require us to be more connected to the world, more aware of current philosophical trends, more "prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks (us) to give the reason for the hope that we have" (1 Pet. 3:15) in a way that addresses new obstacles to faith in this postmodern climate. In recent decades, I believe we underestimate the extent to which the world was changing around us. Consequently, many of our children were not prepared for the challenges they faced in the secular culture. We must not be caught off guard again. We are not in Kansas anymore! We must stop acting as if we were.

There are those who live as if the proper response to the spirit of the age is to retreat from the world by withdrawing to large churches in mostly Christian enclaves (in the South) where our children can be protected from all of these evil influences. At the other end of the spectrum are those who would encourage us to become involved politically and, by the power of sheer numbers, force onto the table of public discussion the issues we hold dear. I am convinced that Jesus' own metaphors of salt, light, and leaven do not support either option. Instead, His followers must respond to opposition "with gentleness

and respect" (1 Pet. 3:15b-16), not with either retreat or coercion. We must slowly but surely impact every level of society through a commitment to Jesus which is the product of our conviction about Him, conviction that we can readily explain to those who do not share it.

In a section of His prayer for His followers recorded in John 17:13-19, Jesus summarizes the task He leaves us with two s-words: "sanctified" and "sent." We are to be sanctified, set apart, holy like He is holy, in the world but not of the world. It is the truth we have embraced that sanctifies, that makes us different. At the same time, He sends us to the world to interact with people as His own agents of transformation. To withdraw from the world in the name of sanctification is to neglect half of His commission to us. But to "mix it up" in the world at the expense of sanctity is equally wrong. So He prays not that we could be taken out of the world, but that God would protect us from the evil one while we are in it. This is the prayer we must repeat again and again as we recommit to faith grounded in the truth and to the task of speaking that truth in love in a climate that is increasingly hostile to it.

ENDNOTES

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3. Os Guinness, *Dining with the Devil* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1993): 18.
4. Paul G. Hiebert, *Anthropological Insights for Missionaries* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1985): 45.
5. Hazel Felleman, *The Best Loved Poems of the American People* (New York: Doubleday, 1936): 521-522.
6. See James W. Sire, *Chris Chrisman Goes to College* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1993): 48-67.
7. George Lucas, interview by Bill Moyers, "Of Myth and Men," in *Time* (April 26, 1999): 90-94.
8. G. K. Chesterton, as quoted by Anderson, 187.
9. See D. A. Carson, *The Gagging of God* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996): 123-125, for a more complete critique of the poem from a Christian perspective.
10. Including J. Richard Middleton and Brian J. Walsh, *Truth Is Stranger Than It Used to Be: Biblical Faith in a Postmodern Age* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1995): 11; James W. Sire, *The Universe Next Door* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1997): 17-18.

11. Josh McDowell and Bob Hostetler, *Don't Check Your Brain at the Door* (Dallas: Word, 1992).
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UNDERSTANDING THE CRISIS IN THE FAMILY— “I'M SO SCARED”

Prentice Meador
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Not long ago, I received the following letter and was asked to read it to our church family at Prestoncrest:

Dear elders and church family:

I am writing to you because I believe in the power of prayer, but I am too ashamed to come forward and make a public confession. Please take a moment to hear my story, because I need the prayers of the church much more than at any other time in my life.

I grew up in the church, with devoted Christian parents, attended and received two degrees from a Christian university, and have been married to a Christian wife for almost ten years. I have a daughter who is also a believer and I have always attended church with my family, served on the Lord's table, and led prayers in the different congregations we have attended. I have talents in ministry but have not taught a Bible class since college because of the personal battle I am going to tell you about.

I have never really struggled with smoking, drinking, gossiping, or overeating. I am not materialistic, rarely lose my temper, and watch very little television. Those who know me would probably say that I am a devoted husband and father.

I say all of this not to boast, but simply because I would far rather battle with all of those temptations than the one vice that has

gripped me like an unrelenting demon. I have struggled with it since I was about 14. When I was in college, I pleaded with God to free me from this evil. But as the years went by, I gave up. I couldn't beat it, and my feelings about this part of my life became numb, allowing temptation to take an even greater hold of me.

The vice is sexual addiction and I am a sex addict. I didn't really come to grips with my addiction until about a year ago. Though I had been involved in a few extramarital affairs, I secretly blamed everyone else for my infidelity. And then I met another addict. She too had grown up in the church, married a good Christian man, and has a son.

Once we gave in to lust, our sexual encounters were frequent and uncontrollable. Within a few months after our intimacy began, she became pregnant, and there is a possibility that the child could be mine. She confessed the affair to her husband several months ago, and after the baby was born he decided he would like a test to be done to determine if he is the father. They are waiting on the results, which will be revealed in about two weeks. My family has no idea of the possible pending tragedy.

He will leave her if the child is not his. It will destroy their family. I will need to take responsibility for the child if it is mine. It will destroy my family. Many people will be deeply hurt and deeply discouraged by this travesty. All that I have done with my life, any glory that I have brought to the Father, will be destroyed. I don't care about my future. I would gladly accept any consequences to my life, and even give my life, if I could protect these families and friends from the consequences of my sin.

Ironically, or perhaps not so ironically, I have gained a great deal of control over my addiction within the past six months, though I still need help. What I don't know is if God will extend His grace to me one more time. You see, He has blessed me my whole life. De-

spite my struggles, I have always given Him credit for everything that is good in my life. And He has always blessed me.

I will not lose faith if I must finally face the consequences of my sin. But others may. There will be mothers and fathers, sisters and brothers, sons and daughters, other family and friends, that will be devastated if this is a child of adultery.

There is nothing left to do but to pray. I have not been a righteous man. But many of you are very righteous, and I believe in the prayers of the righteous. I wish I had asked for help before now, but I was too ashamed.

Pleading for mercy,
An unworthy brother in Christ

"I'm so scared," said 15-year old T.J. Solomon as he took the gun out of his mouth and fell into the arms of his assistant principal in Conyers, Georgia after wounding six students on May 20, 1999. Following that shooting, *TIME* devoted its front cover to a picture of Eric Harris who, along with Dylan Klebold, killed a teacher and 12 students and wounded 23 others. *TIME* entitled its special article "Escaping from the Darkness." The special report focuses on nine boys and their families in places like Moses Lake, Washington; Pearl, Mississippi; West Paducah, Kentucky; Jonesboro, Arkansas; Springfield, Oregon; and Littleton, Colorado. As I read about the families of each of these boys, what really grabs my attention is the title of the article: "Escaping from the Darkness."

DARKNESS!

"I am the light of the world" (John 9:1-12).

- Jesus has been in Jerusalem attending the feast of the tabernacles.

- Each day, Jews carrying branches repeat certain psalms as the priests offer burnt offerings and praises to God.
- Apparently, the great candelabra is important to this celebration.
- As Jesus passes the gate of the temple, he sees a man blind from birth.
- Jesus comments that "This happened so that the work of God might be displayed in his life."
- Before he heals him, he claims, "I am the light of the world" (verse 5).
- Jesus makes some mud, puts it on the blind man's eyes, and sends him to the pool of Siloam to wash.
- For the first time in his life, he sees a sunset, a child's smile, his own hands that have held his food, the people from whom he has begged, and Jesus who gave him sight.

**WHAT DOES THIS STORY MEAN TO US
AND OUR FAMILIES?
LIKE THE BLIND MAN,
OUR FAMILIES SIT IN DARKNESS**

We have a hard time talking about what's truly bad. Whether it's a sex addict requesting a prayer or Harris and Klebold who have massacred students in Colorado. University of Chicago Professor Jan Bethke Elshtain quips, "When we need Reinhold Niebuhr, we get 50 Dr. Joyce Brothers." We simply don't have a vocabulary adequate enough to describe the enormity of the evil—the darkness that has descended upon so many of our families.

Darkness is cold, fearful, pervasive, undesirable, universal; the biblical word is "sin." It destroys our self-esteem, our family relationships, our hope, and our future.

How has darkness descended upon our families? We have shifted from moral absolutes to moral relativism. The writings of

Darwin, Marx, and Freud have framed life as though there is no God. Individualism and atheism have replaced fixed values. Frederick Moore Vinson, former Chief Justice of the United States Supreme Court, sensed the darkness by saying, "Nothing is more certain in modern society than the principle that there are no absolutes." Only experience, only personal perception, nothing is real. This shift results in gay bath houses, abortion clinics, condom distribution, casual sex, lack of respect for authority, removal of the Ten Commandments, and worshipping the god of tolerance. No wonder Robert Coles of Harvard University says, "I think what children in the U.S. desperately need is a moral purpose."

DARKNESS REDEFINES "LOVE"

With one out of two marriages ending in divorce, darkness has clearly settled over our homes. We're no longer certain as to the meaning of "love," the pivot around which everything in a family turns. It's the center, not the periphery. It's the bull's eye, not the edge. It's the mainspring, not the case.

But darkness has redefined "love" to mean short-term feelings. We have swapped "till death do us part" for "till something better comes along." In my newest book entitled *Promises to Keep*, I tell the story of my aunt and uncle, Bill and Betty Staggs. Bill came from a humble and modest home in Portland, Tennessee. When World War II broke out, he went into the Air Force and trained to become a P-51 fighter pilot. Almost daily he was in combat in Europe and became the captain of a P-51 squadron with more than 30 planes under his supervision. He was shot down three times, highly decorated, and became one of my earliest heroes. Uncle Bill returned to Tennessee where he took courses at Vanderbilt and the University of Tennessee. That's where he met Betty. They married, graduated from pharmacy school, and began their own life near Dunlap, Tennessee.

They reared five children. Eventually Betty suffered from Alzheimer's disease and required full-time care. Uncle Bill faithfully visited her several times each week. They were married almost 50 years by the time of her death.

Bill and Betty Staggs were among the 2.3 million couples who headed down the aisle at the end of the War. In the February 12, 1996, issue of *USA Today*, an intriguing story entitled "W.W. II Unbreakable Bonds" caught my attention. An amazing 16.4 out of every thousand people in this country got married in one year—1946. It's a record that stands today. These couples, who listened to Glenn Miller's music and bought a loaf of bread for 10 cents, are now celebrating 50 years of marriage. They watched the world change, but they stayed together. They must have figured out that love never happens at first sight. Love is something you decide in your own will power. You make a life-long commitment of trust to another person. Ask Bill and Betty Staggs.

DARKNESS REDEFINES "FAMILY"

I now want to mention something, and I want to do it with sensitivity, love and kindness. We live in a time of the gay liberation agenda. This agenda has convinced our culture that homosexuality is a civil rights issue, not a moral issue. Gay and lesbian couples are not only out of the closet, but they are also now featured in our school books, TV programs, music, films, and our laws. Our culture now bows before the god of tolerance, and intolerance becomes the worst of all possible sins.

While I do not want to be intolerant, I want to say several things about our current moment of darkness. First, God loves all people, including gays and lesbians. He will forgive all sins, including homosexuality. The church must become a hospital for a growing number of homosexuals who have lived in darkness. Second,

homosexuality is not a civil rights issue, but a moral issue. Our gay sub-culture is about one main focus—sex with someone of your own gender. It is about multiple partners, syphilis, AIDS, and eroticism. Nowhere does God propose, authorize, or hint that we redefine "family" to mean same sex unions.

In the last few months, I found myself talking with others on the American Religious Town Hall Meeting about the gay liberation agenda. Seated on my left was the minister of the largest gay and lesbian church in America. She painted God's instructions in the Bible as "culture bound" and outdated. As carefully and sensitively as I knew how, I pointed out that God's commands are not "suggestions" and neither are His teachings on murder, lying, greed, deceit, and malice. In point of fact, God treats homosexuality as a moral issue and condemns its practice because it both offends Him and destroys us.

CHRIST IS OUR ONLY LIGHT

"I am the light of the world" (John 8:12).

"I am the light of the world" (John 9:5).

"I have come into the world as a light" (John 12:46).

John uses "light" 23 times, much more than any other book in the Bible. Of course, light reveals everything, gives us guidance, diminishes darkness, and clarifies our perspective. Only Jesus brings salvation, hope, peace, and joy to our families. He does this by giving members of our family spiritual "life." "And the life was the light of men" (John 1:4). How does the life of Jesus bring light into our families? That's the question!

His light reveals that we need to be loved to live. This is our most basic need even at birth; we need to be held, hugged, nurtured. As children and teenagers, we are so blessed when our Christian parents affirm us, hug us, and listen to us. It's a real danger sign in a

marriage! I'm talking about when a couple stops expressing love for each other and their children. No wonder Paul connects the nature of married love to the nature of Christ's love for His church in Ephesians 5:22f. What does Christ do to show His love for the church? He praises, responds, sacrifices, appreciates, pleases, protects, and dies for His people. His actions suggest the way in which we husbands ought to love our wives. They need to be loved to live.

His light reveals that we need people who will relay truth to us so He gives us a family. When you have little children, you determine when to teach your faith and values to them. Often, it is at night just before bedtime. But as your children develop into teenagers, they will often determine when you will share your faith and values with them. It may be in the middle of the night, on a backpacking trip, in a fishing boat, in a kitchen, or while driving to a school event. Lots of families find that if they set aside a "family night" the family can together experience the relay of truth. Barbara and I set aside Monday nights as a time for sharing, teaching, talking, laughing, forgiving, confessing, eating, and praying. Our children still talk about it. No wonder *Power for Today* is so popular! Thousands of families subscribe to it in order to have some planned activities for family night. It is not a mistake.

His light reveals that we need people who will model committed living. Stickler and Salter in *Clinical Pediatrics* deplore the breakdown of discipline among American adolescents, among whom "drug or alcohol addiction, suicidal behavior, sexual promiscuity, and school failure" are frighteningly common. They argue, "many parents are uncertain about how to discipline their children and try to give this responsibility to the schools." So many families today don't succeed because they are confused, unsure, not really committed to each other. So Anderson and Guernsey quip, "we enter into and exit from relationships as if they were a McDonald's restaurant" (*On Being Family*).

A Christian family is really a community for learning order, respect, discipline, and an explanation of what this world is really about. Even though families need babysitters, they can't really be daddy and mother to their own children.

Now a word to the men. I really believe that Satan's strategy is to alienate you from your wife and your children. He does the former by offering you affairs with other women. He does the latter by offering you hard work and the prospect of making more money. But the light says that God wants you to be the leader of your home. Honor your commitment to your wife. Be a "one woman man" with your eyes, time, mind, and sex. Honor your commitment to your children. Hug them. Love them. Lead them in family worship. Provide discipline and boundaries. Build their self-esteem. You may have heard of the Sunday worship service in which the parents did their best to bring some sense of order to one of their sons during worship. They were losing the battle. Finally the father picked the little fellow up and walked sternly up the aisle on his way out. Just before reaching the safety of the foyer, the little boy called loudly to the congregation, "Pray for me! Pray for me!"

THE WAY YOUR FAMILY RESPONDS TO THE LIGHT DETERMINES YOUR ETERNITY

Jesus knows that not all families will welcome Him as the light of the world as they should. They "love darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil" (John 3:19). But those who reject Him as light for their families are in grave danger. "It is when he walks by night that he stumbles, for he has no light" (John 11:10). So Jesus calls on families to believe in the light, in order that they may become sons of light" (John 12:36).

He calls for faith in Himself through Him; we see clearly ourselves, the members of our family, our needs, and our God. Praise God that so many have seen the light! It is called conversion.

Some may not notice that there has been a real change. "Isn't that the person who used to sit and beg? Some will even say 'no, it only looks like him.' But it will be a chance for you then to affirm 'Yes, I am he!'" For the rest of your life you and your family can "walk in the light" (1 John 1:6-7).

In closing, I want to tell you the story of a man I knew extremely well. I knew him for 60 years. I watched him, listened to him, tested him, disagreed with him, knew him, and loved him. He was my Dad.

His life is now complete. He lived 86 years, was married to my mother more than 60 years, and served as an elder of the Hillsboro congregation for more than 30 years. On August 5, 1926, G.C. Brewer baptized Dad in Portland, Tennessee. I never heard Dad joke about or mention "divorce." We spent hours playing together, fly fishing, playing golf, hunting together, and working together. We built a patio, put in a septic tank, cleaned fish, and talked about sports. He had a brilliant sense of humor and learned to laugh at life. We once drove in a pickup truck to an old farmhouse where dozens of little children ran out from underneath the porch. "They're related to you, but not to me," he laughed. He told my Uncle Bill in his last conversation, "Many fish are alive and well today because we are old and weak." He was careful with his words, a tremendous listener, and possessed unusual humility. On a Sunday morning, as Mom was holding him, he slipped away into eternity. "Mrs. Meador," said the nurse, "you can let go of him now. He's gone away." On that same day, on the other side of the earth, in Russia, I was telling his story of eternal security to those outside of Jesus as an example of a Christian father. When I think of him now, I recall a monument erected in the South

Pacific to a missionary: "When he came, there was no light; when he left, there was no darkness."

UNDERSTANDING CHALLENGES FACING THE CHURCH

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THE DISTANT PAST

The documents of the New Testament reflect that the church of the first century faced severe challenges from the day of its birth. At Corinth they were distressed about divorce and the resurrection. The churches of Galatia were disturbed by Judaizers who dogged the apostle Paul's footsteps hoping to make the Lord's church nothing more than a branch of Judaism. At Thessalonica the church was confused and upset about the question of the Lord's second coming. The epistle of 1 John shows that some were doubting if Jesus Christ had really come in the flesh. As the first century closed, controversies like these were still raging.

New controversies arose after the New Testament closed. One of the biggest controversies was about the nature of Christ. Was Jesus the same essence as the Father, an entirely different essence, or merely a similar essence? This unsettling question occupied the church's attention for a long time. Church history, from the first century until now, is littered with the remains of many tenacious conflicts over doctrine.

THE RECENT PAST

Our recent past has also been occupied with controversies. The history of the last 150 years shows that we have been challenged by a series of controversies over such issues as musical instruments in worship, the missionary society, the millennium, the cooperation question of the 1950's, and the Holy Spirit question of the 60's.

Challenges to the church continue today, but some new dimensions have been added. Many controversies over the years have been about small branches far up on the doctrinal tree. The issues today are not about small branch issues but are about taproot questions which threaten the very existence of the church itself.

Also in the past, those who challenged the church usually differed with the mainstream, debated with them, and finally grew weary and left. This time those contesting the "mainstream" church's understandings of scripture have decided to stay the course. This new strategy has created more uneasiness in the church than anything I have seen in 43 years of preaching. Literally, we face life and death issues for the church. This time the problems will not go away. We must "get a grip" on these challenges or die.

THE ENEMY OUTSIDE THE GATES?

Non-believers have always taken issue with the church. This is just another way of saying secular culture is rarely friendly to the core values of God's people.

In our pursuit of truth we have tended to be rational, logical, and fact-driven. We read the Bible to find out what God wanted us to believe and to do. Current secular research calls that "left-brained." Suddenly, we seem to be living in a world which has become "right-brained" in a rapid paradigm shift. This means that the facts do not matter as much as they used to. The emotional part of man's nature

now seems to reign supreme from the White House to the county court house and every place in between. If things are illogical, that does not seem to matter. The motto is "Just go with your feelings." It seems like only yesterday that scriptures could be quoted to prove something. Now so many in our culture do not care one way or another what the scripture says. When they do care, they invariably abandon logic and adopt feelings as the standard.

We are told that even Jesus wanted the spirit, not the letter of the law. The truth is, Matthew 23:23 shows that Jesus did not reject God's demand for giving a tithe of the smallest vegetable seeds. He did say, however, that the Pharisees had neglected the more important matters of the law such as justice, mercy, and faith. Our Lord struck a balance. He did not say to quit tithing and keep the weightier matters of the law; rather, he said you should practice one "without neglecting the other." We must not make a choice between left brain analysis and right brain emotion when our example, Jesus, chose both.

Making decisions with our feelings allows the world to discard God's commandments and in their place substitute only one commandment. This commandment is simple and replaces all others. "Be tolerant" is the world's "politically correct" commandment. This means there is no objective truth. It also means the Bible does not state absolute truth on its pages. Suddenly, the Bible and the church are not just wrong in the world's eyes, but meaningless as well. What the Bible says has become in our culture a "non-issue."

The enemy pounds on our gates hoping to gain entrance and destroy all that we hold dear. As always, the world does not understand our values, beliefs, and behavior because our values come from God. We can never relax because the enemy will always be at the gates.

THE ENEMY INSIDE THE GATES

Unfortunately, not all of the church's trouble comes from outside the gates. Some of the challenges are inside the gates of the church itself. One of the puzzling questions is, "How did the enemy get inside our gates?" The church has endured attacks from within and without for years. Why did our sentries posted at the gates fail to discover the enemy before he was inside?

The answer to that question is not easy, and many will disagree about the reason for our failure to detect the enemy before he was among us. Since the church has endured attacks before, we have to ask, "What was different about this time?" Looking back, it would seem that only one significantly new idea captured the imagination of church leaders in our time, and that is the church growth movement. What is essentially a sound strategic idea was able to get by those standing on guard duty around the walls of the church. Historically, the church has tended to be alert for doctrinal heresy. We have been Bible centered and very careful to test everything by the scriptures. Although that strategy tends to keep us safe from doctrinal departures, it also carries within its bosom the tendency to be more concerned about "holding our own" than growing. Suddenly, in the latter half of the 20th century, leaders among us began to emphasize the goal of church growth. Since we could read about such growth in Acts, leaders tended to feel guilty because they had allowed the church to become isolated and withdrawn. We were encouraged to abandon our "fortress mentality," lower the drawbridge, quit being satisfied with biological growth, and go back into the world to win souls. Little did we know that when we corrected our unbalanced emphasis that we would fall into the ditch on the other side of the road!

There's a famous story told of the Trojan War. It lasted for ten years without either side gaining the advantage. The Greeks tried to assault the walls of Troy but failed. When the last assault failed, the

Greeks adopted more clever tactics. They built a large wooden horse to be used as a siege machine. Then one day they loaded their army on ships and seemed to depart, leaving behind the magnificent wooden horse. The city of Troy opened their gates and dragged the Trojan Horse inside their walls. Hours later a door opened on that horse, and Greek soldiers slipped quietly out and opened the gates of the city from within. What the Greek army could not accomplish by direct frontal assault on the city, they were able to do with their secretive Trojan Horse. When the church dragged the Trojan Horse of church growth inside its walls, we got the stimulus to grow, but we got more than we bargained for. We also found ourselves subtly accepting the philosophy which accompanied church growth; namely, the idea of "marketing" the church. Although Jesus did market the truth to a lost world, he never suggested that any truth which did not market well should be either delayed, downgraded, or omitted altogether. Products are sold this way in the marketplace, but whether we grow or not, the truth must be told. This marketing philosophy helps explain why so many inconvenient biblical doctrines have been reinterpreted. Once people are captive to that philosophy, it gives a powerful motivation to twist and turn doctrinal issues such as baptism, women's role in the church, and the limits of Christian fellowship into conformity with our culture. Lest we get carried away with marketing the truth at all costs, we must remember that Jesus did not soften the demands of discipleship. Instead he told would-be disciples the upfront cost of being a disciple (Luke 9:57ff). Likewise, Jesus refused to lower the cost when the rich young ruler objected to the Lord's "sell all" teaching as the price of the kingdom of heaven (Matt. 19:16ff).

Once we had the Trojan Horse of church growth inside, the soldiers began to be unloaded. These mythical soldiers can be used to dramatize the issues which have come under fire in the church. The first soldier out of the Trojan Horse attacked our "restoration"

ideal. We have been committed through the years to restoring first century New Testament Christianity to the modern world. Many think that restoration is nothing but another man-made idea. We need to look more closely at what the scriptures themselves have to say about the idea of restoration. As Peter wrote in 2 Peter 3:1, we need to "stir up your pure minds by way of remembrance." Although the word "restoration" is not used in the Bible, the concept definitely is. For example, according to 2 Chronicles 34, King Josiah was informed that in cleaning out the temple, the Book of the Law had been discovered. When the text was read to the king he tore his clothes as a sign of grief and decreed that they return to doing things the way God had commanded in former days. Likewise, Ezra the scribe read the law to the Jewish exiles who had returned from captivity in Babylon. When they heard the words of scripture, the people wept openly because they realized they needed to return to doing the things God had originally commanded them (Neh. 8). In fact, even Jesus had a restorationist attitude. When asked about divorce in Matthew 19, he pointed his hearers back to what God had originally said about marriage. His counsel was to return to the thought of God and restore it to their day. Restoration may not be a biblical word, but it is definitely a biblical thought. The loss of this vision has confused the church. Some challenge this restoration ideal by quibbling about which church of the first century do we want to restore? Would it be Corinth with all its troubles? Obviously, God never intended for us to imitate some flawed church, but He did expect us to be corrected by the writings of inspired men so that we could reach toward His ideal for the church.

The second soldier to emerge from the Trojan Horse attacks our "hermeneutics." This has become a pivotal issue for the church in recent years. That scholarly sounding word simply addresses the issue of how one interprets the Bible. In former days we thought we knew how to extract the Bible's meaning from the text. This contro-

versy, however, has taught us that we may have been expressing our system of thought inadequately. Our verbal shorthand has been to cite the guidelines of command, example, and inference. This is little more than a motto which points toward how we have actually interpreted the scripture. When we look beneath the slogan of "Speak where the Bible speaks and be silent where the Bible is silent," we find much which needs to be clarified. We have added words, such as "divine" commands, "approved, apostolic" examples, and "necessary" inference. Even that refinement does not clearly explain how we have extracted God's will from the raw biblical text. Obviously, we don't slavishly keep all the commandments found in the Bible, such as "Salute one another with a holy kiss" (Rom. 16:16) or "Sell all that you have and give to the poor" (Matt. 19:21). We also don't feel bound to follow every example mentioned in the New Testament. It would appear that "necessary inference" suggests conclusions to which one is driven by common sense. Obviously we have been using a more complicated hermeneutic than we thought.

It has been charged that the old hermeneutic is man-made. With this in mind, we have been challenged by an alternate method entitled by some to be "the *new* hermeneutic." Upon examination, we discover that the new hermeneutic is also man-made. Thus far, the exact dimensions of this new system have remained vague and ill-defined. Things such as "culture" and "the spirit of Jesus" have been enlisted as supposedly new guidelines for biblical interpretation. Out of this mix of culture and other suggestions, some very key doctrines have come under fire, such as baptism.

The third soldier crawls out of our church growth Trojan Horse to issue a challenge about "worship." Our logical approach to worship in the church has caused us to seek justification in scripture for what we do in corporate worship assemblies. Critics of this approach have suggested that the marketing strategy would indicate we ought to get in tune with our times. Suggestions are that we make our

worship periods more exciting. Since it was difficult to do this within our traditional worship, the idea of a "seeker service" was born to supplement our more traditional worship experience. It seemed like the ideal solution to a tension. Those who shared our heritage could continue to worship in the way to which they had become accustomed. Then, a less traditional service could be created for unchurched people and for members who preferred something other than our historic worship style. In a seeker service, the Lord's Supper might not be served. The music could be more modern in style. One component of such a worship includes the introduction of a "praise team" of trained singers who assist the congregation by using microphones and singing all the harmony parts of a song. At first, some praise teams did this from their seats, but in time most have chosen to stand before the group. The next step has been for the congregation to listen as the praise team performs. This means the praise team is actively "singing and making melody in *their* hearts" (Eph. 5:19). The rest of the worshipers, however, are not actively involved in singing, as the scripture describes, but are only listening. More recent developments feature special services on Saturday night in which the praise team has added instrumental music. All this has been in the noble pursuit of making our worship more attractive to the outsider. These developments have made many church members uncomfortable with the direction of the church.

The fourth soldier who emerges from the Trojan Horse goes forth to do battle with the "fellowship" question. When core doctrines such as baptism come into question, the issue naturally arises about who is or is not in our fellowship. At one time we accepted the biblical teaching that only baptized believers were a part of the Lord's church. With so much up in the air, the line of fellowship has been blurred considerably. Brethren know what the Bible says, but they also want to be as tolerant as the times. There is considerable temptation to make fellowship broader than the teachings of the New Tes-

tament. Nobody wants to be unduly restrictive about God's free gift of salvation in Jesus Christ.

All in all, we are experiencing what some call an "identity crisis." What is unique about our plea for returning to the Bible? Do we have any right or reason to exist? Why not just relax and sink smoothly into the oblivion of the ecumenical tidal wave now sweeping over the religious world? We must do something, but what shall we do?

RETURN TO THE BIBLE

Having sketched the tenor of the times, we sooner or later must turn from defining the problem to solving it. As all physicians know, diagnosis is not the same as cure. We read with some envy the statement of 1 Chronicles 12:32 which says, "The men of Issachar understood the times and knew what to do." So let us turn from the diagnosis to the treatment of the problem.

Two areas for remedy exist. The first of these is the exploration of the biblical text. The time was when our fellowship was known for being "a people of the Book." Sadly, that is no longer true. We may look for fancy prescriptions to cure our church ills, but the real cure is more commonplace.

There are three things we need to do in order to find a long-range biblical solution to our predicament. First, we simply need to return to reading the Bible. We have a reputation for doing that, but our practice has fallen woefully short in recent years. We need to learn again the significance of Luke's description of the noble Bereans who "searched the scripture daily" to see if the things taught by the Apostle Paul were so (Acts 17:11). The less one reads the Bible, the more likely one is to think like the secular culture. To open the Bible and read it afresh is like taking a trip to a foreign land. Only in reading the Bible do we discover the truth of Isaiah 55:8 in which the

prophet said, "For my thoughts are not your thoughts saith the Lord." Many of our Bible class lessons are composed of a few verses strung together into a topical format without intensive study of the context from which those verses came. Too many topical sermons smell of Cruden's Concordance and the midnight oil. Our intentions are good, but the results do not strengthen our people in the knowledge of the Word. We need to get back to the simple practice of reading the Bible. Reading the sermons of skilled preachers from other fellowships will not substitute for reading the Bible itself. We will find the old preacher's advice to be true when he said, "Read the Bible. It will shed a lot of light on the commentaries."

The second suggestion for using the Bible to solve our problem is similar to the first. We not only need to read the Bible, but we need to read it more carefully. A superficial knowledge of the Bible is not enough. We can fill our sermons with an abundance of biblical citations and still not crack the code of the scripture's meaning. Look at the ministry of Jesus to see the importance of this point. Jesus often clashed with the scribes and Pharisees who knew a lot about the scripture, but he chided them because they did not understand the meaning of scripture. Words often on his lips were, "Have you not read?" or "Have you never read?" (Matt. 12, 19, and 21). He told the Sadducees they erred because they "did not know scripture. . ." (Matt. 22). The religious leaders of Judaism knew scripture well enough to quote it, but the Lord's accusation was that they did not understand it. Like the Jewish leaders, we need to return to a more careful study of the text of the scripture. We must beware lest we filter God's Word through other teachers without checking the text for ourselves. A subtle and unintended bias often creeps in and buffers would-be seekers from discovering God's truth. Drinking from wells other than the fountain of God exposes us to the danger of being poisoned.

The third suggestion for a biblical redemption is that we need to read and study the Bible in the company of others. We must all

recognize that no matter how often and how closely we study the text of God's thoughts, we all stand in danger of mixing our own misconceptions into it. A brief description of our physical eyesight will help us to understand how this happens. Although we use the eye like a camera to gather light, seeing actually takes place in the brain. It's all a matter of interpretation. When you look at a brick wall, there are two blind spots in your vision. It is the spot where the optic nerve joins the retina. There are no receptors in that area. This means there are holes in your vision. Now the question is, "Why don't we see those blank spots?" The answer is that God designed the brain in such a way that the brain borrows the brick designs and "paints it over" your blind spot so that you see bricks even in the blind spot. This also applies to Bible study. Since we all have blind spots, it is best for us to enlist the aid of others in our study. It is true that others also have blind spots, but fortunately our blind spots and theirs don't match. This means we can help each other with our blind spots. It is good to read and discuss what others say, even if they aren't part of our fellowship. On the other hand, swallowing whole what someone says is not a good idea. While we are ingesting the author's valuable insights, we may also be swallowing his blind spots. Listening to lectures is a blessing, but mixing discussion of the Bible text into our study will enrich us, preserve us from blind-spot mistakes, and prove to be a greater blessing.

SOME PRACTICAL STRATEGIES

After Bible reading, we sometimes are left wondering, "But how do I apply this truth to my current problem?" For this reason, we want to turn to some practical strategies for surviving the church's present distress. Simple procedures won't meet every situation, but perhaps they will give us some guidelines.

The first thing we need to work on is our attitude. We must learn not to get so angry that we lose sight of our goal of discovering truth. We can be right in our stand for truth but lose the battle because we don't keep ourselves under control. The minute we get angry, we allow the issue to be lost in a sea of emotion. Also, our anger introduces personal feelings which sidetrack us from the issue at hand into a heated emotional battle. We must remember and take seriously the words of James who says, "The wrath of man does not work the righteousness of God" (Jas. 1:19, 20). Likewise, Paul says in 2 Timothy 2:24, "The Lord's servant must not strive but be gentle toward all." Reasonableness will accomplish more than screaming.

The corollary to that point is that we must not give up too soon. Angry people often get disgusted and quit prematurely. Some situations are redeemable if we hang in for the long haul. Too many church members leave a congregation before the battle is lost. To be sure, there finally comes a time when the situation has been lost. At that moment, perhaps the best thing to do is to leave. Before that moment, however, remember that the persistent widow of Luke 18 received justice from an unrighteous judge simply because she kept coming back until she wore him down. If we remain cool in spirit and persistent in pursuing God's will, we have the best chance of prevailing.

The second practical thing is that we need a strategy for convincing others. Once a steamroller is on the move, it is difficult to stop. It is not wise to get directly in its path. David Lipscomb in his day was pictured as a man with a broom trying to sweep back an ocean tide of digression from God's Word. Instead of "pushing back," we might do well to trying "pulling" instead. Those who teach martial arts train their students to use the opponent's strength, size, and speed against him. In discussing the truth of the Bible, this principle would suggest that we follow the teaching style of Jesus. Questions that "pull" an adversary toward the truth are better than statements

that "push." Jesus' critics said he cast out demons by the power of Beelzebub. Jesus asked, "And if I by Beelzebub cast out demons, by whom do your sons cast them out?" (Lk. 11:19). Searching for an answer to that question forced them to think.

The lawyer of Luke 10 wanted to know who his neighbor was. Instead of telling the lawyer the answer, Jesus told a story about a good Samaritan who helped a man lying wounded in a ditch. He finished the story with the question, "Which one do you think proved to be the neighbor?" A "pulling" question like this forced the lawyer to face an undesirable, but truthful conclusion. No amount of argument or screaming at the lawyer would have penetrated his defenses, but a simple story and an incisive question did just that. Asking questions will serve us better than making statements in front of a steamroller. We must ask questions which force others to face the implications of what they are saying and where the path they are on will lead them. Here are some sample questions one might use: "If we can postpone teaching someone the truth about baptism for a few weeks, months, or even years, then how long dare we deliberately leave men in ignorance of God's will?" "If the Bible's clear teaching that baptism is for forgiveness of sins is not true, then what do those verses mean?" We may not succeed in persuading others to return to the Bible's teaching by this strategy, but if this fails, what will succeed?

LESSONS?

As we look back, some lessons are obvious. One of those lessons is that any unbalanced emphasis will eventually be corrected. Our distortions as a fellowship will eventually be rebalanced on the scale of history. When our output of preachers began to dwindle in recent years, preacher schools were established to redress that balance. When our churches quit feeling any urgency to win souls, the discipling movement sprang up. Today we are facing the conse-

quences of neglect of emotion in spiritual worship. We are paying for our willingness to merely “keep house for the Lord” and our complacency with the lack of church growth. Let us pray that we profit from the turmoil and come out stronger on the other side.

On the other hand, there are lessons we have not yet learned. One of these is that God sits in the heavens and laughs at men who would oppose His will (Ps. 2:4; 37:13; 59:8). Furthermore, in the midst of this confusion in the church, we must remember the lesson of the prophet Elijah. God found the prophet hiding from the vengeance of Queen Jezebel. When questioned why he was hiding, Elijah explained to God how bad things really were. God’s answer in 1 Kings 19:18 was, “I have 7,000 who have not yet bowed the knee to Baal.” Whether we know it or not, God still has things in control.

Years ago a famous author lived in a rooming house. Below his room lived an old music professor now confined to a wheelchair. The two of them had become friends, and it was a daily ritual for the author to stick his head in the professor’s room each morning, and ask, “What’s the good news for today, professor?” In response to the question, the professor would take out his tuning fork and strike it on his wheelchair. Then he would hold up the tuning fork and say, “The good news is that although the tenor upstairs sings flat, and the piano downstairs is out of tune, this note, my friend, is middle C. It always has been, and it always will be.”

Today the good news is that God will ultimately vanquish the challenges of men to His church. In the meantime, no matter how isolated you may feel, God has thousands on His side who have not and will not bow their knees to any message but His own. And finally, amidst the noise of battle, we pause to listen for the ringing tone of God’s eternal message which floats over the battlefield like the sound of an ageless middle C.

UNDERSTANDING THE HOPE OF OUR FUTURE

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History and society prove that when a nation of people place themselves above God, become self-sufficient, lose all moral restraint, they plunge themselves into spiritual and moral confusion and social breakdown.

A SICK NATION

This is exactly what is going on in our nation today. We have come to the conclusion—if you don’t want it—kill it! If it feels good—do it! If you’re tired of it—divorce it! And if you can’t face it—drug it! What has that brought us to? A nation characterized by awful sin. Abortion, the abuse of our children, alcoholism, drug addiction, homosexuality, broken homes, pornography, crime and violence, making it almost impossible to be safe on any street in America.

We are a nation that is emotionally sick, and a nation that is sick on greed. What is the reason for all of this? We have decided we don’t need God. We have decided we are above Him. What is happening? We have thrown off all moral restraints, and now we are spiritually and morally confused. We are suffering from a social breakdown. The very thing that God prophesies in His Word, He made clear by looking at the nation of Israel. It is a pattern of what happens to a nation when people turn away from God.

You would think that there would be enough wise leaders in this nation who have grown up in churches, who know a good portion of truth, who know that a nation cannot violate the principles of scripture and escape the judgment of God. It is absolutely impossible. What are we to do? Where are we to go?

There are many answers to those questions, but there is one thing Christians cannot do. We cannot give up!

DON'T GIVE UP

We want to look at 1 John 3:1-3, but first I want to call your attention to a story I read on the front page of the sports section of the *Daily Oklahoman*. It was the tragic story of a 21-year-old female athlete from North Carolina State University. Her name is Kathy Ornsby. She was in Indianapolis, Indiana, participating in the NCAA Track and Field championships, and she was running in the 10K event—the 10,000 meter, approximately a six-mile race.

About two-thirds of the way into that race, she was running in fourth place. She was one of the favorites and was only a step behind the third place runner. Without any prior warning, she veered off the course, ran away from the pack, climbed the chain-link fence that surrounded the track, ran across a softball field, down about two blocks across the campus of a university hospital to a bridge that crossed the White River and jumped off. She fell 40 feet, and instead of landing in the water, she landed in a field next to the river. Although she wasn't killed by the fall, she was severely injured, and the doctors say she'll never walk again. The headline of that article was three big bold letters and a question mark that simply asked WHY?

What would cause a young lady with so many things going for her to make that kind of tragic choice? The article speculated that maybe it was pressure or her mind short-circuited. Maybe it was

a chemical imbalance as a result of fatigue. Nobody really knows for sure.

Is it possible that such events occur a lot more often than we think? Let me be more specific.

Isn't it possible that a lot of us have known people personally, not just in athletics, but in other walks of life, who get onto the field, so to speak, or of any number of endeavors and start out in a great way but before they get to the finish line, they lose sight of the goal and lose interest in that for which they strive. They're tempted and then are convinced to get off the track, check out of the game, give up on the pursuit, and maybe go in a completely different direction.

I think God knows we are going to be tempted to do just that.

Now let me shift gears and bring this closer to home. Let's go from something that is very serious to something that is not nearly as serious. How many of us have started on a program of losing weight? You start out great guns, but somewhere along the way, you check out, you run off the track, you climb the fence, and you go off the bridge. Do you know anybody like that? I have done it. I have known people who have done it. Now do you see what I am talking about?

THE CHRISTIAN RACE

Now more seriously, how many of us have known Christians who started out on that race track committed to the Lord Jesus Christ? We know people who were serious about following Him, sold out to being His child and to being His disciple, and learning and growing and being as effective as they possibly could be, and then for one reason or another they started getting bombarded. At first they were able to resist, but then the temptation to compromise—to give in—became too great! Satan whispered in our ear and said, "Hey, why

are you making so much out of this? Is it really worth all of the effort?" Your friends said the same thing.

God knows there are times in our lives when, in the race called life, we are going to be tempted to want to check out of the game, run off the track, and do something crazy with our own lives. There is a continual challenge to stay motivated and to maintain commitment—especially during those times when it seems like we are going through a valley and things aren't as exciting as we would like for them to be. But how do you deal with that? How do you deal with those times of low motivation in your own life? Where do you go when you're rounding that curve in the race and all of a sudden you're thinking, "Is it really worth it? Maybe I ought to be the one to check out and give in." God knows that we need motivation. I want us to look at a passage that I believe we could call one of God's many "pep talks."

He gives a motivating, very sensible, very logical, powerful message. God shares with us some facts. His message can penetrate our hearts and revolutionize our lives. I don't know where you are spiritually, but I am confident that many people are tottering and wondering, "How long can we carry on?"

I think about our potential and the future that God has planned for all of us who claim Him as Lord. In the years to come Satan is going to look for every way he can to get you off the track—to throw in the towel—to sell out! Whether it's drugs, booze, greed, materialism, or sex. Satan will use anything to cause you to settle for less than what God has in mind. Satan will lie to you. He will pull the wool over your eyes. He will discourage you! How can you maintain that commitment?

God shares with us some information in the first three verses of 1 John. These verses serve as a great challenge of encouragement to us to stay in the race, to keep on striving for what God has called us to be!

We are going to see (1) what we are, (2) what we will be, and (3) what we should be.

WHAT WE ARE

Look in verse 1: "How great is the love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are! The reason the world does not know us is that it did not know him." The first thing John says is, "Here is what we are right now." What does he tell us we are right now? He says, "You are the children of God!" He says how great is this love that God has lavished upon us. Those who know the Greek language tell us that the Greek tense John uses here means that he's talking about a gift that God has given us that is permanent. God's love is not conditional. He doesn't love us if we are good. He doesn't love us because we are lovable. He doesn't love us when we have a good day and stop loving us when we have a bad day. God's love is permanent! It is something you can have confidence in! It is something you can rest on! It is something you can believe in! He says, "See how great God's love is!" The word *see* comes with the idea of being *astonished*! You know what John is really telling us? He says, "If you understood how much God loves you, you wouldn't even be able to believe it! It is astonishing!" Sometimes we take it for granted. He says, "God loves you so much you're never going to be able to do anything that will ever make him love you any more." It doesn't matter how much money you give, how many times you go to church, or how much commitment you show; there is no way that God can love you any more than He already does!

There is nothing you can ever do to make Him love you any less. Isn't that beautiful? God loves us, and His love is unconditional. How is that demonstrated? "You are God's child!"

Now, please help me answer this question. Can you think of any relationship on earth that a human being is involved in that is more permanent than a parent/child relationship? God talks about the shepherd and the sheep. The vine and the branches. The Bride and His church. The husband and wife. The master and the servant. But out of all those relationships, which one does he refer to the most? God as the Father. That's how we are to approach Him. And of all those relationships, which one is the hardest to break?

What encourages me is that God not only provides for me because a father provides for His children, but God loves me, He cares for me, He offers me an inheritance, which is true, because I am His child. We are heirs of God, joint heirs with Christ (Romans 8). But we are in a permanent relationship with Him. That is so beautiful and so encouraging. It's not like I'm in one minute and out the next depending on my own standard. My salvation is based on what Jesus Christ has done for me! That's how great the love is that God has showered upon my life. Now, that's what we are. But He goes on to tell us what we will be.

WHAT WE WILL BE

Look at verse 2: "Dear friends, now we are children of God, and what we will be has not yet been made known. But we know that when He appears, we shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is." Isn't it neat that John says, "Hey, I don't have all the answers. I don't know yet what we're going to be like, but I know one thing, 'When He appears I shall be like Him.'" Not *if* He appears. Jesus says, He will come again (Lk. 17:30; Jn. 14:3)! In Acts 1:11 the angel says, "Jesus will return!" In Colossians 3:4, Paul says, "Christ will appear!" 1 Thessalonians 4 says, "The Lord will descend!" Over and over again the Bible talks about the second coming of Jesus Christ, not as a possibility, but as a certainty. The only thing we don't know

is exactly when it's going to happen! Some people say, "Hey, there are only two things in life you have to do: pay taxes and die." I disagree with both. You don't have to pay taxes. You may go to the state prison, but you don't have to pay taxes if you are willing to pay the consequences. And you know what else? Maybe not one of us will die! That's a really good possibility. The Lord may come before any of us die, but there is one thing that we are absolutely all going to have to do and that is meet Jesus face to face because He is coming again!

I heard a radio preacher one Sunday morning talking about earthquakes, and he said, "You know earthquakes are mentioned in the Bible as one of the signs of the last days." Now folks, we've been in the last days for 2,000 years. And if the New Testament writers were excited about the last days, we should be too! But after talking about the last days and earthquakes, they said, "Do you know what it's going to be like when Jesus comes again?" "The eye has not seen and the ear has not heard and the mind of man has not conceived what God has prepared for those who love Him" (1 Cor. 2:9). This man on the radio said, "I got excited, I got goose bumps just thinking about it and it motivated me and it got me really excited!" I want to ask you a question. When was the last time any of us really spent some quality time thinking about the fact that Jesus Christ is going to come again? And that we are going to be changed and have a brand new body, and we don't know what it's going to be like, and there is no way the human mind can conceive it!

He says, you are God's child, but let me tell you what you will be—you will be like Jesus!

WHAT WE SHOULD BE

The third verse tells us what we should be. "Everyone who has this hope in Him purifies himself, just as He is pure." What we

are reading here is just a divinely inspired pattern that God often uses. God doesn't just say "keep pure." He gives us the reason for keeping pure. You see, a good coach, a motivator, knows that in order to win those games he has to get those athletes out on the field and get them to work, work, work, work! But he can't do that without constantly reminding them about those Friday nights when they're playing the game. The successful coach knows how to balance the anticipation for the reward, the gold medal, the national anthem, seeing the American flag unfurled at the Olympics, winning that national championship—seeing the results. But if you just sit back all of the time and bask in the anticipation of that, you won't get out there and work! He knows how to balance that. He reminds them to get out there and run those wind sprints in order to strive for that championship. You have got to work an extra hour this afternoon. But once you have your eyes on the goal, then you are more motivated. Do you see what God has done? He says I love you so much and you have no idea what it's going to be like. That is why I want you to keep yourself pure.

Another passage on this is 2 Corinthians 6. The last few verses and the first two verses of chapter 7 say, "since we have these promises, let's make every effort to keep our lives free and unspotted."

The first two paragraphs of Colossians 3 say, "Put to death what is earthly in you; you've got something to look forward to." 2 Peter 3:8-14 says the very same thing.

God wants us to look forward to the future and realize that what he has in store for us is great! Go back to the Old Testament and ask Joseph, who was thrown into prison. He had an opportunity to compromise. He could have had an affair with Potipher's wife. He was a young man. We have young men and women who are going to be surrounded by all kinds of temptations to compromise, and Satan will ask, "Ah, is purity all that important?" "Is it really important that I save myself for the person whom I'm going to marry

until after I am married?" The Devil will say, "Check out of the game. Climb the fence!" He could have whispered the same thing into Joseph's ear. "How has God taken care of you? You're a slave. You're a prisoner! Come on, have some fun!" But Joseph did what God wanted him to do and things got worse. Sometimes when you do what God wants you to do, things get worse. He was in prison for a couple of years, but his commitment to God led him to become the second most powerful man in Egypt.

Joseph, was it worth it? Are you glad you told Potipher's wife "no?" Joseph's answer is "Yes!" He had the strength to do God's will and to say "no" to Satan's temptations.

God says, "Look how much I love you. You're my child. I have a plan for your life! You can't imagine what I've got in store for your future!" Don't be a child who says, "I want what I want and I want it right now!" Be mature in your thinking! Wait! Let God take control of your life.

Just as Satan tried to destroy Joseph in Egypt, he is seeking to destroy this nation also. He would love it! And we are well on our way with absolute immorality and confusion across the land. We have leaders who we put in office because it's good for the economy, it's good for the pocket book, instead of putting in leaders who follow God.

Do we have a heart for this nation or are we going to give up? We put ourselves above God and think we're self-sufficient. We are not self-sufficient. It is time that somebody stands up and says enough is enough. Send us godly men and women who believe the Word of God and will stand for what is right!

Every social ill, every economic ill in this nation can and will be solved if we will just follow the principles of scripture. You would think somebody in this nation would be intelligent enough to realize that what we have been doing for the past 30 or so years isn't working! It's getting worse and worse and worse.

Where are those men and women of courage who will have enough guts to stand up and say we're in a mess and let's go back to the basic principles that made this nation great!

Didn't God give us the Great Commission? Matthew 28:19-20: "Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age." You go and make disciples of the nations, but here's what you do. You start at home.

How can Christians fulfill the Great Commission if they don't have a heart for people? We need to be committed to spreading the gospel everywhere. The gospel we preach is a gospel of love. We live in a country where sin is so rampant. Hatred is so rampant, and love is the answer. God sends his message of love to a world that is so desperate.

I need to repent and get selfishness, hatred, greed, and immorality out of my heart so that I can begin to see others with the eyes of Jesus.

The next time you go vote, ask yourself which candidates are responsible and which candidates are godly. Don't ask who will help you get ahead financially. If you ask that, you are part of America's problem. If you ask the first question, you are helping with the solution.

If this nation does not turn around, we are going to be a fourth world power one of these days. If we have a heart for America, we're not thinking about today; we're thinking about the future. We need to be making decisions that have eternal values.

We need more Josephs! My prayer is that there will be other Josephs in this great country of ours who will rise up and turn this place around. There are too many Pharaohs today who are presidents and vice presidents and governors and mayors who do not know Joseph or God. It's ruining us!

HAVE A HEART FOR AMERICA

Have a heart for America! We can turn this country back to God! What can we do?

1. We can pray for this country. We can pray for the leaders to depend upon the Lord.
2. We need to carry out the Great Commission.
3. We need to express our godly, scripturally based values and convictions when we vote and quit putting in immoral degenerates. It's got to change! It's just got to change.
4. We need to get involved with those godly leaders and help them uphold the standard of what is right.
5. We can build strong homes and teach our children the ways of the Lord. They're not hearing it in school. They're not hearing it in churches. Mom and dad, it is your responsibility to teach them the ways of the Lord.
6. We need to build strong churches that will take a stand on that uncompromising truth of the will and Word of God. Speak the truth; herald the truth around the world. Be unwilling to compromise on those issues that are so clearly stated in the Word of God.

Those are six things we can do. It won't work without God. It won't work without morality. It won't work without virtues.

John Adams, second president of the United States, said, "Any avowed enemy of God is an avowed enemy of the country." He is right! Do you have a heart for God? Are you willing to do what you can do to help this nation turn to God? Listen to Proverbs 29:2: "When the righteous thrive, the people rejoice; when the wicked rule, the people groan." We are groaning today. But there is hope and the hope is if we will pray, if we will take action, if we will be holy as

God is holy, this nation will gradually turn around. We need a Holy Ghost spiritual awakening. We need the Spirit of God convicting us to change. The church is going to have to get convicted to change and take the message of Jesus to the world. We need a whole generation of young people who have courage and who have a passion for God and who have a heart for the world. We must stay in there.

CONCLUSION

The story is told of a woman who lived in a rural area and was so unfamiliar with the modern conveniences of life. She had never been into the city. She had never seen a high rise building. She had only heard about it. People had told her about the luxuries in the big city. She didn't live too terribly far from a big city that was supposed to have one of the most luxurious hotels in the world. She had heard so much about it that she decided, before she died, to take a trip and stay in that luxurious hotel. She took all of her savings and did just that. She made a tremendous investment of her money. She took her life savings, mailed it to the hotel and said, "I want the best room you've got, and I'm going to stay there for several days." She took a bus to the hotel. They pulled her up to the luxurious entrance of the hotel and took her inside. She checked in; the man took her bag and led her over to a room. She went in this room with this man. She looked around and was totally shocked! She thought to herself, "This isn't at all what I expected. This room is too small! There's no view! In fact, there are no windows!" She said, "I've given my life savings for this room. This is ridiculous! How disappointing!" Finally she was boiling on the inside, and she told the man, "Sir, is there any way I can check out of this hotel? Do I have to stay? This room is so small; I've got claustrophobia already, and there's not even a window." The man said, "Ma'am, we're in the elevator. We

are on our way up to the top floor where you have a reservation in the penthouse suite."

There are a lot of times that God's people are tempted to check out when it seems so hopeless, and God may want to lovingly put his arms around us and say, "Hey, friend, you're in the elevator. Relax. You're on your way! You're my child. I'll provide and I've got an inheritance waiting for you. But what you will be, oh, you can't even imagine that right now! It's beyond your ability to conceive. But for the time being, don't check out. Don't sell out. Don't give in. Purify yourself. Stay in the game." Look to Him for strength. Because God is God, we have a great future because He's our Father and we are His children. It takes courage to think alone, stand alone, to resist alone, especially when the crowd seems so safe, so right. But remember God! With God it doesn't just seem safe and right. It is safe and right!



AMOS IN HIS WORLD

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Most of us have heard the maxim "A passage taken out of context becomes a pretext." To understand a statement in the Bible requires us to consider the discussion in which it is found. We usually extend our understanding by asking other basic contextual questions, such as who wrote the passage, to whom was it written, why was it written, and when. But other contexts exist by which to understand any passage of scripture; among them are contexts of geography, culture, morality, politics, society, economics, and religion. This paper will present a brief discussion of Amos within his political, social/economic, and religious contexts. These are vital to appreciate the depth of Amos' remarks and to facilitate the transition from the world of antiquity to modern times.

Amos has often been called the prophet of social justice. His message has fired social movements which have sought to bring enlightenment and aid to the oppressed. An appreciation of his message will be enhanced by looking at Amos' world.

THE POLITICAL CONTEXT OF AMOS

The world of Amos had long been influenced by the looming threat of Assyria. The Assyrian king, Ashurnasirpal II (ca. 884-858 BC), zealously applied what became the almost stereotypical policy of cruelty and brutality for which the Assyrians are remembered. He

boasted of his cruelty, which served as a kind of foreign policy of intimidation. Of one of his campaigns, he narrated:

With the mass of my troops (and) my fierce battle I besieged (and) conquered the city. I felled with the sword 800 of their combat troops, I burnt 3000 captives from them. I did not leave one of them alive as a hostage. I captured alive Hulaya their city ruler. I made a pile of their corpses. I burnt their adolescent boys (and) girls. I flayed Hulaya their city ruler (and) draped his skin over the wall of the city Damdammusa. ...[moving to the city of Tela]... I captured many troops alive: I cut off of some their arms (and) hands; I cut off of others their noses, ears (and) extremities. I gouged out the eyes of many troops. I made one pile of the living (and) one of heads. I hung their heads on trees around the city. I burnt their adolescent boys (and) girls.¹

With only minor exceptions, this same brutal policy dominated the reigns of successive Assyrian monarchs. Sennacherib (ca. 704-681 BC) even paneled his throneroom at Nineveh with a graphic pictorial depiction of his siege and capture of the Judahite city of Lachish (cf. 2 Kgs. 18:13, 17; 19:8). Among the representations on the reliefs are depictions of citizens of Judah being killed, flayed, and impaled for public display.²

Assyrian records reveal that several Israelite kings came under the orbit of Assyrian rule and either encountered Assyria on the battlefield or were required to pay tribute to the reigning monarch. Ahab participated in a coalition of Levantine kings who engaged Shalmaneser III at Qarqar in 853 BC.³ A few years later, Jehu paid tribute to Shalmaneser III and is depicted on an obelisk bowing before Shalmaneser (ca. 841 BC).⁴ Around the turn of the 9th-8th century, Joash (ca. 804-789 BC) paid tribute to Adad-nirari III (ca. 810-

782 BC).⁵ Toward the end of Adad-nirari's reign, Jeroboam, son of Joash (sometimes referred to as Jeroboam II), acceded the throne in Israel (ca. 786-746 BC).⁶ Jeroboam's reign was relatively free of Assyrian presence and was one of the longest in Israelite history. Under Jeroboam, Israel experienced a resurgence of economic and political strength, but she also became the object of Amos' censure (Am. 1:1).

One reason for Israel's renaissance was Assyria's distraction with its own domestic concerns and a need to attend to international affairs closer to home. Hence, Israel was apparently free from the exaction of tribute, which in turn allowed Israel to develop relatively unencumbered from Assyrian dominance. During Jeroboam's reign, Jonah prophesied of Israel's territorial expansion (2 Kgs. 14:25). The Bible records Israel's recapture of Damascus and Hamath (2 Kgs. 14:28)⁷ and hints at a retrieval of territory in Bashan and Gad (cf. 1 Chr. 5:11-17). These developments would have been impossible with an imminent threat of Assyrian reprisals.

Assyria did not remain distant from Israel for long. After Jeroboam's death, Tiglath-pileser III (ca. 745-727) resumed the dreaded Assyrian campaigns. The Bible notes that Menahem paid tribute to Tiglath-pileser (i.e., Pul) in the form of 1000 talents of silver⁸ which he collected from the wealthy of the land rather than taking it from his own resources (2 Kgs. 15:19-20). Tiglath-pileser eventually returned to Israel during the reign of Pekah (ca. 732 BC) destroying numerous cities of northern Israel and deporting much of its population (2 Kgs. 15:29).⁹ Additionally, Tiglath-pileser reports receipt of tribute from Uzziah of Judah.¹⁰

These activities significantly affected Israel. The oppression by Assyria would have strained their sense of security as well as their finances. As reflected in Menahem's tactics, the Israelite kings probably did not drain their own financial reserves to pay tribute, but likely exacted it from the people (e.g., 2 Kgs. 15:19-20). But with

Assyria's distraction by other matters during Jeroboam's reign, Israel was able to recapture some territorial losses as well as recoup some of its financial security.

THE SOCIAL/ECONOMIC CONTEXT OF AMOS

Israel could have developed wonderfully while free from Assyrian scrutiny; however, their freedom from tribute benefited the rich, not the poor. Most ancient societies had a two-tier economic organization—rich and poor—and Israel apparently was no different. While the Bible implies a number of different classes according to modern sociological terms,¹¹ these classes still basically broke down into rich or poor.

God had instructed Israel to care for the poor and oppressed (cf. e.g., Lev. 19:9-18, 33-37). A major issue in Amos is the breach between the rich and the poor. Rather than taking advantage of Assyria's departure to rebuild the social infrastructure and religious climate of the country, the rich exploited the circumstance to further their own social and economic agendas.

Amos identified a slave trade in Israel which involved trafficking in their own countrymen (cf. Am. 2:6) for the paltry exchange of a pair of sandals! The poor of whom Amos spoke were not victims of Assyrian pressures, but of Israelite greed! Amos described the elites' efforts to seek economic security and advancement by "trampling the heads of the poor into the dust of the earth" (2:7)¹² to the point of confiscating garments the poor had left for a pledge (Am. 2:8). The cold, calculated nature of this behavior was compounded when the rich turned around and used those garments as bedding at their hypocritical worship services. Reflecting such abuse of the poor, an inscription from Israel (ca. 630 BC) preserves the plea of a fieldhand to the local magistrate to intervene on his behalf to another

person (presumably an employer) who had appropriated his cloak (cf. Ex. 22:26).¹³

Amos notes the decadence of the rich in several ways. Memorable to most are references to "houses of ivory" (3:15) and "beds of ivory" (6:4). The Bible notes that Ahab (and Jezebel, his Phoenician wife) was responsible for the major introduction of "an ivory house" (1 Kgs. 22:39). The tradition apparently caught on and remained a status indicator for the elite. Excavations at Samaria have yielded over 500 ivory fragments, the largest hoard of ivories discovered in Israel and Judah, many of which are carved in Phoenician style.¹⁴ Many of these exquisitely carved pieces were panel inserts in furniture.¹⁵ Barnett has concluded:

Our general impression.... is that the 9th-8th centuries B.C. should be called the Ivory Age in the Levant, and that in these two centuries, ivory working was a major industry, distinguished by a vast luxury trade in cabinet making and furniture, with workshops possibly in all the richest cities of Syria, Phoenicia [sic] and Palestine.¹⁶

Amos additionally recounted that some enjoyed winter and summer houses, great houses (3:15), and houses built of hewn stone with pleasant vineyards (5:11). The typical architecture of ancient Israel was to build houses on foundations of two to three layers of field stones surmounted by mudbrick walls and superstructure. Hewn stones imply a wealth of significantly greater proportions than the poor could afford. Excavations at Samaria have revealed extensive hewn-stone construction.¹⁷ While not all towns preserve impressive stone construction, some towns of ancient Israel show clear delineation between houses of the wealthy and the poor. The remains of Tell el-Far'ah North (i.e., biblical Tirzah) reflect this architectural differentiation with more durable and spacious houses near the gate

area and noticeably smaller houses of poor construction behind them further from the gate.¹⁸

Many towns of Israel reveal extensive public works, such as fortifications (at Hazor, Megiddo, Jezreel, Dan, Beth-shean, Shechem, Yoqneam, Tell en-Nasbeh, etc.), and storehouses (in Israel at Hazor and Megiddo),¹⁹ as well as some sophisticated water systems designed to protect the water sources against enemy sabotage (e.g., Megiddo and Hazor). Someone had to pay for and build them!²⁰ The construction and preservation of such public works are typically products of a hierarchical, state-sponsored government which taxes the populace for their construction and maintenance.

Taxes are necessary to fund such public works. Amos condemns Israel: "...you trample on the poor and take from them levies of grain" (Am. 5:11). The excavations at Samaria have uncovered a cache of inscriptions, which apparently were receipts for goods collected by the government. Some of these specifically cite wine, oil, and grain.²¹ The Bible notes that Menahem paid tribute to Tiglath-pileser by exacting it from the populace (2 Kgs. 15:19-20). It is probable that taxation characterized the funding for most major projects, whether they were for the "public good" or for tribute.

While the specific perpetrators of his tirades are unidentified, Isaiah noted the practice of land speculation which robbed cities of their open areas. It is unclear if these practices were state-sponsored declarations of imminent domain (for storehouses, etc.), or more simply the greed of the wealthy who bought land for development. The practices Isaiah condemns were likely present in Amos' time as well: "Ah, you who join house to house, who add field to field, until there is room for no one but you, and you are left to live alone in the midst of the land" (Isa. 5:8). Few cities from ancient Israel and Judah have been excavated extensively enough to determine city-plan shifts from one period to another, but W. F. Albright's excavations at Tell Beit Mirsim in Judah demonstrate a much more densely occupied city as

one moves from an earlier stratum to the later.²² Modern ethnoarchaeological research has identified tendencies for people to consume the open areas inside cities as populations increase and as families seek to remain together, hence subdividing the area into smaller units.²³ Such development typically cramps the lifestyles of the poor living in the areas, especially if the land-grabbing is done dishonestly. This will occasionally force the poor to sell themselves into slavery (cf. Am. 2:6; 8:4).

The extravagant lifestyles of the rich did not escape Amos' tirades. Not only did their ivory beds and houses of ivory indicate such decadence, but their meals and parties did as well. Amos condemned those "who drink wine from bowls, and anoint themselves with the finest oils..." (6:6). Contrary to many of our stereotypes, the ancient world had extensive trade routes, bringing incense from South Arabia and the horn of Africa; spices and gems from East Asia; and gold, ivory, blackwood, animals, skins, and feathers from Africa. Obviously such consumables would be difficult, if not impossible, to identify in the archaeological record. Bethel, however, has preserved a seal which derives from South Arabia and had likely been used to seal bags of spice, frankincense, or myrrh.²⁴

Israel and Judah's geographic proximity placed them in strategic locations, not only to have access to such luxury goods, but also to tax caravans and entrepreneurs and perhaps demand protection money from those that might pass through the countries.²⁵ The recently excavated site of Kuntillet 'Ajrud in the far southern Negeb almost certainly served as a caravansary on a trade route from the Gulf of Elat to the Mediterranean. Its international air is implied in the preservation of Phoenician art styles, specific references to Samaria and Teman,²⁶ and ceramics for which the raw materials came from clay sources in Judah, including some around Jerusalem.²⁷

While Amos does not mention them, burial practices often reflect social stratification. Tombs of the Divided Monarchy exhibit

extremely wide ranges of elaboration—from simple single-interment graves in the soil to elaborate, multi-chambered subterranean tombs with an array of luxury goods interred with the deceased.²⁸ Soon after Amos' career, Isaiah indicted Shebna, who was the steward of the palace of Judah, for carving an elaborate tomb for himself (22:15-19). The tone of the discussion implies a degree of wealth (cf. esp. v. 18). A tomb, which some have suggested may have been Shebna's, has been discovered along with numerous other tombs from the same period, and is carved in the hillside east of Jerusalem.²⁹ The tomb's inscription reads: "This is [the sepulchre of ...] Yahu who is over the house. There is no silver and no gold here but [his bones] and the bones of his amah with him. Cursed be the man who will open this!"³⁰ The inscription implies people's assumption that valuable grave goods would be interred with the deceased and hence the plea and warning of the deceased. A similar concern is reflected in an elaborate multi-chambered tomb in Judah, near Hebron, in which there is an attempt to protect the deceased from his enemies. However, it is unclear if this inscription is to protect his bones in the tomb or to protect him in the afterlife. The inscription reads, "Uryahu, the prosperous, his inscription: I blessed Uryahu to YHWH and from his enemies, O Asherata, save him. by Abiyahu ... and to Asherata... ..A[she]rata."³¹ The complexity of these tombs contrasts with the spartan simplicity of others and implies a pronounced social stratification.

These artifacts reflect the decadence of some of the ancient Israelites who were so consumed with their luxurious lifestyles that they failed or refused to recognize the plight of the oppressed—"they were not grieved over the ruin of Joseph" (Am. 6:6).

Archaeologists occasionally discover stone weights in the process of excavating. These were used in commerce with counterbalance scales similar to those that are depicted on the blindfolded lady-of-justice representation of our legal profession.³² Scholars have long tried to determine the weight of a shekel, but the best conclu-

sion from the data is that it ranged from 11-13 grams.³³ While such a variation may be the result of a lack of standards, one must consider the possibility that dishonesty was occasionally a factor.³⁴ The Bible repeatedly condemns dishonest scales and measures (cf. Lev. 19:35-36; Deut. 25:13-16; Pro. 11:1; 16:11; 20:10, 23; Hos. 12:7; Mic. 6:11) and Amos specifically cites the greed of the Israelites as they sought to trade using deceitful standards (Am. 8:5). Such dishonesty extended to selling the dregs and crumbs by "selling the sweepings of the wheat" (Am. 8:6).

The poor of Amos' time were not simply victims of the wealthy; they were also victims of political corruption. The areas of ancient city gates were where various civic and governmental activities were often conducted. The Bible notes that judicial proceedings occurred there (cf. 2 Sam. 15:2-6; Am. 5:10; Isa. 29:21; Deut. 25:7; Ruth 4:1), executions (Deut. 22:24), business transactions (Ruth 4:4; 2 Kgs. 7:1) as well as occasions of pomp and ceremony (cf. 2 Sam. 19:8; 1 Kgs. 22:10). The gate area was a kind of "courthouse square" of antiquity—it was where the poor should have been heard by the magistrates. Amos, however, notes that the people would "push aside the needy in the gate" (5:12). The phrase might refer to one simply ignoring pleas for handouts (cf. Acts 3:1-2), but the context notes Israel's affliction of the righteous and taking bribes (Am. 5:12) and implies a more active response of beating down the needs of the oppressed when they have a cause. The gates of ancient Israel were huge, often with two sets of gates between which was an open area where various social and government activities convened. Among other cities, gates of this nature have been located at Dan,³⁵ Megiddo,³⁶ and Gezer.³⁷

Overall, the portrait Amos offers of the social climate of Israel is one of extreme tension between the wealthy and poor. The wealthy willfully neglected the poor and even overtly oppressed them

for their own self-indulgent pursuits, considering them at best only grist for their agendas.

THE RELIGIOUS CONTEXT OF AMOS

While we often note Amos as a prophet of social justice, he also addressed religious corruption. Israel had wandered from the Lord to activities characteristic of the earlier Canaanites and of their neighbors. Contrary to God's expectation that Israel only bring offerings to the Lord at Jerusalem (cf. Deut. 12), Amos noted the existence of altars at Bethel which God declared would be decommissioned by having its horns lopped off (cf. Am. 3:14). Numerous examples of such four-horned altars have come to light from Israel and Judah. Most notable are examples from Dan,³⁸ Megiddo,³⁹ Ekron,⁴⁰ and Beer-sheba.⁴¹ To such centers Amos sarcastically invited Israel to worship (Am 4:4-5). Amos complained that it was not God's will that governed Israel's worship, but their own whims: "...for so you love to do, O people of Israel!" (Am. 4:5). God urged Israel to seek him—not at Bethel, where Jeroboam had built a shrine with a golden calf and altar (1 Kgs. 12), or at Beer-sheba (Am. 5:5), where evidence exists of a large four-horned altar which had been an object of worship.⁴² These unauthorized altars were an affront to the Lord, and God decreed he would break off their horns.

Another worship practice came under Amos' indictment (6:4-7):

Alas for those who lie on beds of ivory, and lounge on their couches, and eat lambs from the flock, and calves from the stall; who sing idle songs to the sound of the harp, and like David improvise on instruments of music; who drink wine from bowls, and anoint themselves with the finest oils, but are not grieved over the ruin of Joseph! Therefore they shall

now be the first to go into exile, and the revelry of the loungers shall pass away.

We have noted several of these features individually above, but the clustering of the activities in this passage describes the ancient Canaanite practice of a *marzeah* feast,⁴³ which involved worshipping the dead.⁴⁴ God frowned on Israel's worshipping the dead (cf. Lev. 19:28; Deut. 14:1; 18:11; 26:13-14).

Amos also condemned those who "swear by Ashimah of Samaria" (8:14). It is difficult to identify exactly to whom this phrase refers. Amos parallels the statement with references to their god; hence, we may infer it refers to a deity. The word "Ashimah" is a feminine form of the word "guilt"⁴⁵ or "wrong-doing,"⁴⁶ but it is unlikely that the name of the goddess was "guilt" or "wrong-doing"—it probably is a judgmental metaphor for a goddess. About a hundred years before Amos, Jezebel had officially sponsored prophets of Asherah (1 Kgs. 18:19), the goddess of fertility. An inscription from Kuntillet 'Ajrud in the far southern Negeb reads "may you be blessed by YHWH of Shomron (Samaria) and his ASHERAH,"⁴⁷ clearly exhibiting a syncretistic religious atmosphere. Most of the ancient world thought of their deities as divine pairs and consorts⁴⁸—YHWH of the Bible is the notable exception. The Ashimah of Samaria was probably Asherah whom some had concluded was a consort of the Lord.

It should not be surprising that such theology should have a practical impact as people attempt to duplicate the activities of their gods in their own religious expression. Likely a reflection in religious prostitution is what Amos refers to when he states that "father and son go in to the same girl, so that my holy name is profaned; they lay themselves down beside every altar on garments taken in pledge" (Am. 2:7b-8a).

The identity of the male counterpart to Asherah is difficult to determine from the Amos passage. The Bible elsewhere notes the

official sponsorship of the worship of Baal (1 Kgs. 12; 1 Kgs. 18:19), but inscriptional references occur to YHWH of Samaria as well as to Baal. People may have coalesced the two into one, or they may have recognized their distinct identities. Regardless, an inscription from Samaria offers the surprising reading "Y[H]W[H] is a young bull."⁴⁹ Hosea, Amos' contemporary to Israel, declared, "Your calf is rejected, O Samaria...The calf of Samaria shall be broken to pieces" (Hos. 8:5a, 6b). Hosea also noted that the devotees in Samaria paid homage to the calf by kissing it and that the images were of silver (Hos. 13:2). The Israelites had a traditional weakness for using calves as objects of worship—consider Sinai (Ex. 32) and Jeroboam's institution of calf worship at Dan and Bethel (1 Kgs. 12). Many of the people may have simply shifted the calf imagery from Baal to the Lord and then concluded that the Lord, too, must have a consort.

No metal images of bulls or calves have been discovered from Amos' time from Israel or Judah.⁵⁰ Such a lack of metal images may result from the tendency to plunder precious items and sometimes melt down precious metals. The preservation and retrieval of an object tends generally to be directly proportional to its perceived size and value;⁵¹ hence, we should not expect to find many metal images. There is sufficient evidence to determine that even if the Israelites might have been worshiping YHWH as their god, they generally worshiped him erroneously as a graven image and in conjunction with a consort—both of which were detestable to the Lord.

The religious climate of Amos time reflects sharp deviation from the Lord's will, which inevitably led to corruption in other areas of life.

CONCLUSION

While Assyria was distracted with other concerns, Israel had an excellent opportunity not only to recapture geographic territory

that she had lost, but also to recapture her zeal and dedication to the Lord. But as is often true with humanity, she took advantage of the respite from Assyrian oppression to pursue her own goals of economic growth and religious individuality. God had expected his people to worship and serve him, to listen to his directions of how to worship and how to behave, but Israel refused to listen to his pleadings, and instead commanded the prophets "You shall not prophesy" (Am. 2:12).

Because of Israel's recalcitrant, defiant behavior in her pursuit of economic security and luxury at the expense of people who needed help, God was incensed at her mocking worship. Israel occasionally exhibited "technical" compliance with God's law (i.e., they waited until the Sabbath was over to engage in business; Am. 8:5-6), but her worship was ritualistic and had no bearing on her everyday life. Hence, God decreed (Am. 5:21-24):

I hate, I despise your festivals, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies. Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them; and the offerings of well-being of your fatted animals I will not look upon. Take away from me the noise of your songs; I will not listen to the melody of your harps. But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.

Indeed, religion without devotion is worthless.

ENDNOTES

1. A. K. Grayson. *Assyrian Royal Inscriptions, Part 2: From Tiglath-pileser I to Ashur-nasir-apli II*. Wiesbaden: Otto Harrosowitz, 1979:549.
2. See David Ussishkin, *The Conquest of Lachish by Sennacherib*. Tel Aviv: Tel Aviv University Institute of Archaeology, 1982: 82-83, 86-86, 104.
3. This episode is not narrated in the Bible, but Shalmaneser preserves the account. See James B. Pritchard, *Ancient Near Eastern Texts*. 3d ed. Princeton: Princeton University, 1969: 278-79.

4. See Pritchard, *Ancient Near Eastern Texts*, 1969: 280; a picture of Jehu bowing before Shalmaneser is in James B. Pritchard, *Ancient Near East in Pictures*. 2d ed. Princeton: Princeton University, 1969: 122.
5. Pritchard, *Ancient Near Eastern Texts*, 1969: 281-82, records campaigns by Adad-nirari III into Israel, Edom, and Palestine. Another text records tribute to Adad-nirari by a "Ia'asu" (probably Joash) who is identified as Samaritan; see Stephanie Page, "A Stela of Adad-Nirari III and Nergal-Eres from Tell al Rimah," *Iraq* 30 (1968): 139-53.
6. For a discussion of the problems of chronology in the Divided Monarchy, see Mordechai Cogan, "Chronology, Hebrew Bible," *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, Ed. D. N. Freedman. New York: Doubleday, 1992: 1:1002-011.
7. There are significant difficulties with the Hebrew text in this passage. For a discussion, see T. R. Hobbs, *2 Kings*. Word Biblical Commentary 13. Waco: Word, 1985: 176, 183-84.
8. I.e., ca. 66,000 pounds of silver.
9. Evidence of Tiglath-pileser's campaigns have been identified at several sites in Israel, among them are Stratum V at Hazor (Yigael Yadin, "Hazor," *New Encyclopedia of Archaeological Excavations in the Holy Land*. Ed. E. Stern. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1993: 2:594-603), stratum IVA at Megiddo (Yigael Shiloh, "Megiddo," *New Encyclopedia...*, 1993: 3:1012-24), Upper Stratum V at Beth-shean (Amihai Mazar, "Beth-Shean," *New Encyclopedia...*, 1993: 1:214-23), Stratum II at Dan (Avraham Biran, Biblical Dan. Jerusalem: Israel Exploration Society, 1994: 260), and at Tel Rehov (Robert A. Mullins, "The Excavations at Tel Rehov: The Chronology of Iron Age II," *American Schools of Oriental Research Newsletter* 49/1 (1999): 7-9).
10. Pritchard, *Ancient Near Eastern Texts*, 1969: 282; see also W. W. Hallo, "From Qarqar to Carchemish: Assyria and Israel in the Light of New Discoveries," *Biblical Archaeologist* 23/2 (1960): 34-61.
11. Dever notes several classes in the Bible (some inferred), but the numeric percentage of each of these is important to determine; see William G. Dever, "Social Structure in Palestine in the Iron II Period on the Eve of Destruction," *The Archaeology of Society in the Holy Land*. Ed. T. E. Levy. New York: Facts on File, 1995: 427-28.
12. Unless otherwise noted, translations are taken from the New Revised Standard Version (1989).
13. Joseph Naveh, "A Hebrew Letter from the Seventh Century B.C." *Israel Exploration Journal* 10 (1960): 129-39; see also Pritchard, *Ancient Near Eastern Texts*, 1969: 568.
14. Richard D. Barnett, *Ancient Ivories in the Middle East*. Qedem 14. Jerusalem: Hebrew University Institute of Archaeology, 1982:49.
15. Many of these fragments preserve markings of the backs and on tabs which were inserted into wood frames to indicate how to assemble them, implying that they were transported from the ivory workshop to another location for assembly. See Henri Frankfort, *The Art and Architecture of the Ancient Orient*. 4th rev. ed. Harmondsworth Middlesex, England: Penguin Books 1970: 311-12.
16. Barnett, 1982: 24.
17. Nahman Avigad, "Samaria" *New Encyclopedia...*, 1993: 4:1300-10.
18. Alain Chabon, "Far'ah, Tell el-(North): Late Bronze Age to the Roman Period," *New Encyclopedia...*, 1993: 2:439-40; see primarily Alain Chabon, *Tell el-Far'ah I: L'age du Fer*. Paris: Editions Recherche sur les Civilisations, 1984:39-47.
19. There is an on-going debate as to the function of these tri-partite buildings. Many scholars identify them as stables and others as storehouses and one has suggested that they were ancient bazaars. Cf. e.g., James B. Pritchard, "The Megiddo Stables: A Reassessment," *Near Eastern Archaeology in the Twentieth Century*. Ed. J.A. Sanders. Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1970: 268-76; Zeev Herzog, "The Storehouses," *Beersheba I*. Ed. Y. Aharoni. Tel Aviv: Tel Aviv University, 1973: 23-30; Yigael Yadin, "The Megiddo Stables," *Magnalia Dei: The Mighty Acts of God*. Eds. F.M. Cross, W.E. Lemke, and P. D. Miller, Jr. Garden City, NY: Doubleday 1976:249-52; John S. Holladay, Jr., "The Stables of Ancient Israel," *The Archaeology of Jordan and Other Studies*. Eds. L. T. Geraty and L. G. Herr. Berrien Springs,

- MI: Andrews University, 1986: 103-65; Graham I. Davies, "King Solomon's Stables: Still at Megiddo?" *Biblical Archaeology Review* 20/1 (1994): 44-49; and Moshe Kochavi, "Divided Structures; Divided Scholars," *Biblical Archaeology Review* 25/3 (1999): 44-50.
20. I am not questioning the need for such defensive works, especially with the ongoing Assyrian threat, but their construction implies the implementation of heavy taxation which in Amos has continued unabated. Politically speaking, it is almost impossible to reduce a taxation level once it is in place.
21. For several of the texts, see John C. L. Gibson, *Textbook of syrian Semitic inscriptions*, vol. 1: *Hebrew and Moabite Inscriptions*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971: 5-15. For a broader discussion, see Ivan T. Kaufmann, "Samaria Ostraca," *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, 1992: 5:921-26.
22. The transitions under consideration are from Stratum B (Iron Age IIA) to Stratum A (Iron age IIB); see William F. Albright, *The Excavation of Tell Beit Mirsim*, vol. 3: *The Iron Age*. AASOR 21-22. New Haven, CT: American Schools of Oriental Research, 1943: 52; John S. Holladay, Jr., "The Kingdoms of Israel and Judah: Political and Economic Centralization in the Iron IIA-B (ca. 1000-750 BCE)," *The Archaeology of Society...*, 1995: 392-93.
23. Carol Kramer, "Spatial Organization and Residential Architecture," *Village Ethnoarchaeology*. New York: Academic Press, 1982: 138-46.
24. G. W. Van Beek and A. Jamme, "An Inscribed South Arabian Clay Stamp from Bethel," *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research* 151 (1958): 9-16; A. Jamme and G. W. Van Beek, "The South-Arabian Clay stamp from Bethel Again," *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research* 163 (1961): 15-18; G. W. Van Beek and A. Jamme, "The Authenticity of the Bethel Stamp Seal," *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research* 199 (1970): 59-65.
25. Holladay, 1995: 383.
26. Zeev Meshel, "Teman, Horvat," *New Encyclopedia of Archaeological Excavations...*, 1993: 4:1458-64.
27. Jan Gunneweg, Isadore Perlman, and Zeev Meshel, "The Origin of the Pottery of Kuntilet 'Ajrud," *Israel Exploration Journal* 35 (1985): 270-83.
28. For a convenient collection of much of this data which, in spite of the title, includes information about the northern kingdom of Israel, see Elizabeth Bloch-Smith, *Judahite Burial Practices and Beliefs about the Dead*. JSOT/ASOR Monograph Series 7. Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series 123. Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1992: 179-245.
29. David Ussishkin, *The Village of Silwan: The Necropolis from the Period of the Judean Kingdom*. Jerusalem: Israel Exploration Society, 1993: 188-202, 247-54, 329-30.
30. Nahman Avigad, "The Epitaph of a Royal Steward from Siloam Village," *Israel Exploration Journal*, 3 (1953): 137-52.
31. Because of the poor state of preservation, the full meaning of the inscription is cryptic. For details on the tomb and its inscription, see William G. Dever, "Iron Age Epigraphic Material from the Area of Khirbet El-Kom," *Hebrew Union College Annual* 40-41 (1969-1970): 139-204; for more recent discussion of the major inscription, from which this rendering is taken, see Ziony Zevit, "The Khirbet el-Qom Inscription Mentioning a Goddess," *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research* 225 (1984): 39-47.
32. Two examples of these balance beams have been discovered from Israel. Both are discussed (with additional discussions of the weight pans which have been found at several sites in Israel) in Gabriel Barkay, "A Balance Beam from Tel Lachish," *Tel Aviv* 23/1 (1996): 75-82.
33. Marvin Powell, "Weights and Measures," *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, 1992: 6:897-908.
34. Another theory proposes a shift in the weight standard about 700 BC; see Yigael Ronen, "The Enigma of the Shekel Weights of the Judean Kingdom," *Biblical Archaeologist* 59/2 (1996): 122-25.
35. Avraham Biran, *Biblical Dan*. Jerusalem: Israel Exploration Society, 1994:235-54; Avraham Biran,

"Sacred Spaces: Of Standing Stones, High Places and Cult Objects at Tel Dan," *Biblical Archaeology Review* 24/5 (1998): 38-45, 70.

36. Gordon Loud, *Megiddo II: Text*. OIP 62. Chicago: University of Chicago, 1948: 46-57.

37. William G. Dever et al., "Further Excavations at Gezer, 1967-71," *Biblical Archaeologist* 34/4 (1971): 94-132.

38. Avraham Biran, "An Israelite Horned Altar at Dan," *Biblical Archaeologist* 37/4 (1974): 106-07.

39. Loud, 1948: 45-46, Gordon Loud, *Megiddo II: Plates*. OIP 62. Chicago: University of Chicago, 1948: pl.254.

40. Seymour Gitin, "Incense Altars from Ekron, Israel and Judah," *Eretz Israel* 20 (1989): 52*-67*.

41. Yohanan Aharoni, "The Horned Altar of Beer-sheba," *Biblical Archaeologist* 37/1 (1974): 2-6.

42. The altar at Beer-sheba was eventually dismantled and its stones used in the construction of a storehouse at the site. One of the stones, however, preserved the image of a serpent deeply inscribed into its surface which poses interesting questions, especially since the serpent was often an iconographic representation of asherah. See Aharoni, 1974: 2-6.

43. The Hebrew text actually uses the word *marzeah* in the passage which in this version is rendered "revelry."

44. Eleanor Ferris Beach, "The Samaria Ivories, Marzeah, and Biblical Text," *Biblical Archaeologist* 56/2 (1993): 94-104; Francos O. Amerspm and Davod Mpe; Freed.am. Amos: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary. AB 24A. New York: Doubleday, 1989: 566-69.

45. Ludwig Koehler and Walter Baumgartner, *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*, vol. 1. Rev. W. Baumgartner and J.J. Stamm. Trans. M.E. J. Richardson. Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1994:96.

46. Francis Brown, S.R. Driver, and Charles A. Briggs, *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972:80.

47. Meshel, 1993:4:1462.

48. Anderson and Freedman, 1989: 828-29.

49. Gibson, 1971: 10,12.

50. An exquisite example of a bronze bull from the time of the Judges, however, has come to light from a site a little north of Samaria. See Amihai Mazar, "The 'Bull Site' -- An Iron Age I Open Cult Place," *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research* 247 (1982): 27-42. An example from Late Bronze Age Ashkelon has recently been discovered; see Lawrence E. Stager, "When Canaanites and Philistines Ruled Ashkelon," *Biblical Archaeology Review* 17/2 (1991): 24-31, 35-37, 40-43.

51. See discussions of curation of artifacts in William L. Rathje and Michael B. Schiffer, *Archaeology*. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1982: 105-25 and Dale W. Manors, *An Archaeological Commentary on the Josianic Reforms*. Ph.D. dissertation, University of Arizona. Ann Arbor: UMI, 1995: 375-76.

PREACHING FROM THE ACTS OF THE APOSTLES

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The Acts of the Apostles, featuring the work of the Holy Spirit through Peter and Paul, gives the only narrative of how the church developed following the resurrection of Jesus to the end of the first century. Without it, apart from the New Testament epistles, we would be almost completely in the dark about this important period of church history. The book shows how the gospel was presented to various groups and individuals (Jew and Gentile) and what they did in order to be saved. The Gospels are faith producing; the Acts of the Apostles shows what people did about faith. If one wants people to understand how to become Christians, this is the material to teach them.

The 28 speeches included in the book give a challenging picture of how preaching was done at the beginning of its theme "Christ and Him crucified."

The first book written by Luke is the account of what "Jesus began to do and to teach" (Acts 1:1) and it ends with the prospect of repentance and forgiveness of sins being preached to all nations (Luke 24:46-47). Then teaching (*didaskoin*) and preaching (*ouangelizein*) describe the activity the apostles engage in (Acts 5:42; 15:35). The verb "preach" is found 34 times in the King James Version of Acts. While the noun "herald" (*kerux*) does not occur in Acts, the verb *koryssoin* suggests the work of the herald, and *ouangelizoin* suggests the announcing of good news. Only Phillip is given the designation "the evangelist" (Acts 21:8). With Paul we have *dialogosthai* (Acts 20:7) from which our word "dialogue" comes and *homilin* (Acts

20:11; 24:26) from which "homily" derives. Paul and Barnabas proclaim (*katangellein*) the word of the Lord (Acts 13:5; 15:36). There is also the non-technical term "speaking the word" (*lalein ton logon*; Acts 8:25; 11:19; cf. 14:1; 16:13, 14), and of frequent occurrence for all speakers is the verb "exhort" (*parakalein*; Acts 2:40; 16:40).

It was God's pleasure through the folly of what we preach to save those who believe (1 Cor. 1:21). Faith comes by hearing, but "how are they to hear without a preacher?" (Rom. 10:14). Though the message preached was not in keeping with the wisdom of the age, the appeal was to the understanding and not chiefly to the emotions. The mind had to be convinced and persuaded. The preaching was direct and demanded a decision. Neither Peter nor Paul hesitated to put a guilt trip on the hearer. They did not hesitate to be personal with the sinners: "You crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men" (Acts 2:23). Peter was very direct with Simon in Samaria (Acts 8:20) as Paul was with Bar-Jesus on Cyprus (Acts 13:10) and Felix (Acts 24:25). The hearers were pricked in heart and responded.

As the church of the late 20th century has gotten away from preaching from the Acts of the Apostles, it has developed an identity crisis. A generation has arisen which does not know the Acts of the Apostles. It is a generation confused about the essentials of the gospel, about how to be saved, about continuing steadfastly, and about community life. The only way out of the identity crisis is to put a proper emphasis on the Acts of the Apostles while not neglecting the rest of God's revelation. The Acts of the Apostles is the corrective for the trust in feelings and experiences that looms so large today. Paul described his teaching and preaching as declaring the whole counsel of God (Acts 20:27). The Acts of the Apostles is a part of that revelation.

To preach effectively from the Acts of the Apostles, one has to read and study the book until he has become excited about its

message. When the heart is full, he can bring out of his treasure what is new and what is old (Matt. 13:52). J.W. McGarvey served the Lord well in his day, but we need to move up in our tools to include what has become available since McGarvey's day. The work of F.F. Bruce can help one do that. There are other up-to-date tools for in-depth study for those not satisfied with a quick sermon outline.

Phillips Brooks described preaching as imparting truth through personality. The preacher is not a stand-up comedian, a television performer, a book reviewer, or a huckster. He is a dying man with a message of life for dying people. He is the watchman on the wall who has seen the danger and must sound the alarm (Ezek. 38:1ff.). He must know the problems of his audience in his generation, and he must see how the Acts of the Apostles offers a solution to them. He must know the life of his times until he can make the message of the Acts of the Apostles to be seen as relevant.

If the Acts of the Apostles is humdrum to the preacher, he cannot make it exciting to an audience. If one has accepted a philosophy that the first century church forms no pattern for the 21st century church, he will not become excited about what is said in the Acts of the Apostles, nor can he excite others about it. The task takes more motivation than just that one has to present another lesson this week.

The preacher has to create in the hearer a consciousness of sin. American people have no built in sense of sin: "I'm okay and you're okay." If we have all become so respectable that no dangers can be pointed out, no actions denounced, no behavior corrected, no hope held out, then preaching becomes futile.

If I went to the doctor and he told me that a new technique for arm removal has been developed which he would like to try on me, I would flatly refuse. But should he inform me that my arm is infected with gangrene which if left alone will take my life, my response would be, "When do we start?" So it is with preaching. If I am answering

questions my people are not asking or are not conscious of needing to ask, the effort is futile. Questions people were asking a generation ago are not necessarily those they are asking now.

As the medical doctor may need to alert people to health dangers they have not been conscious of before, so the preacher may need to alert them to spiritual dangers they have not seen (Ezek. 33). He may hold out a hope they have not previously had. For each sermon, a preacher must ask himself, "What is my specific purpose in preaching this sermon now?" "Why bring this topic up?" He ought to make himself state in one clear sentence his purpose. If the preacher aims at nothing, he will likely hit it.

Borrowed sermon outlines are usually not very preachable, and that includes any that may be suggested in this series of lessons. Borrowed sermons do not come out of a preacher's knowledge of scripture or a knowledge of his audience. A lesson suitable for one audience and one occasion does not fit another. The suburbanite may think differently from the inner city modern pagan, and the educated from the uneducated.

There are many approaches to the task of preaching. One may give an exposition of a selected passage. The Acts of Apostles has many passages excellent for expository preaching. It has an unlimited number of texts for topical preaching. It depicts many characters who are walking examples of the varied truths the Bible sets forth. It is a book of beginnings. It is also replete with lessons which if presented properly should challenge the experienced Christian. It can supply one with a basis for being able to give a reason for the hope that is within. In general, we will benefit people more if we seek for the message of the book rather than for cleverly turned phrases and topics.

In this series I have divided the material into three arbitrary categories. First is "Persons You Need to Meet." Second is "Lessons

About the Church"; and third is "Lessons from Acts of the Apostles for Mature Christians."

I. PERSONS YOU NEED TO MEET

Jesus taught us the value of stories for the teaching of significant lessons. Missionaries from Africa keep telling us that they have to teach with stories. People learn from stories. The Acts of the Apostles is a rich mine of character studies depicting people in a multitude of problems of life. With those stories people can see how to solve their own problems.

The task of the preacher is to depict the character so that the person in the pew can see himself. The hearer needs to respond, "I am the one who is being described." My deceased brother-in-law was a life insurance salesman. He described his technique used with the reluctant customer. He said, "We back the hearse up to the front door, let him smell the flowers, and say to him, 'This is you we are talking about.'" That is precisely what the preacher must do when preaching about Bible characters. Anything short of that is failure. He must make the listener see himself reflected in the mirror of God's Word.

PETER THE FORGIVEN SINNER

Peter was so sure he would not do what Jesus was telling him he would do; but Satan sifted him; the ball did not bounce as Peter expected it; the rooster crowed; and he found he had already done what he knew he would never do. Jesus had said to him, "When you turn, strengthen your brothers." Out of his distress Peter turned. The Lord appeared to him after the resurrection.

Peter is always first in the list of apostles. He led in the selection of a replacement for Judas and was first in preaching the gospel

on Pentecost. He dealt with Ananias and Sapphira; with John he imparted the Spirit to the Samaritans; he raised the dead; and he was first to preach to Gentiles.

One's past does not have to determine one's future. Most of us need another chance. Peter, the man who is first, used the keys of the kingdom; he dispensed a treasure greater than silver and gold; he put his life on the line. Despite it all, he still was not perfect; he needed rebuking by Paul (Gal. 2:11).

BARNABAS A GOOD MAN

Barnabas, who participated in the community of goods of the early church, was apparently unmarried but is remembered best for his powers of encouragement. One of the few who are said to be "good" in the New Testament, Barnabas was full of the Holy Spirit and faith. The good man out of his good treasure brings forth good (Matt. 12:35); the sound tree bears good fruit (Matt. 7:17).

Barnabas was of a generous heart which did not hold a man's past against him. He introduced Saul to the church when no one trusted him. Barnabas was just the man Jerusalem needed to evaluate what was going on in Antioch; he saw Saul as the man needed to help him there. Barnabas and Saul were entrusted to carry the contribution of Antioch for Judea.

The Spirit chose Barnabas and Saul for the mission tour, but shortly the order shifted to Paul and Barnabas. Barnabas was ready to take second place, but what is an encourager for?

Barnabas had feet of clay and was carried away by the Judaizers (Gal. 2:13). But he saw possibilities in John Mark which Paul at the time did not see. Paul later also found value in Mark (Col. 4:10; 2 Tim. 4:11). No person needs to stay where he is; he can redeem himself; Barnabas should teach us that.

STEPHEN

Stephen was not a drop-out which the early church was trying to interest by giving him an assignment. He was full of faith and of the Holy Spirit as well as being full of grace and power. He is the first person, other than the apostles, able to do miracles. Those of the synagogue could not withstand the wisdom and Spirit with which he spoke. Before the opposing mob, his face was as the face of an angel.

Stephen's speech is the longest one in Acts. He declined to give a simple "yes" or "no" answer to the high priest's question about the accusations being made: "Are these things so?" Stephen knew the scriptures well. He defended himself in prophet-like fashion by surveying Israel's rebellions in the past. It was a story of privilege followed by disobedience which at its end points out that the same rebellious pattern resulted in Jesus' death.

At the point of being lynched, Stephen saw heaven open and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God. Following the pattern set by his Master (cf. Matt. 5:44; Luke 23:34), Stephen prayed, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them."

The church will always classify Stephen as the first of those following the Lord who gave his life for the Lord. Saul was there (Acts 7:58; 22:20), and years later the example of Stephen is repeated in Paul's prayer: "May it not be charged against them!" (2 Tim. 4:16).

THE ETHIOPIAN

The law excluded the castrated man from the community (Deut. 23:1); but the Lord had promises even for the outcast (Isa. 56:4-5). Despite his high governmental position, the Ethiopian had time to be concerned with his eternal welfare. Whether he was a Jew or a proselyte cannot be determined. He had traveled 2,000 miles to

worship. It was probably a once-in-a-lifetime experience. He was reading the scriptures as he returned; but he still was unsaved; and the Lord provided him a teacher.

Philip started where the Ethiopian was (Acts 8:35). Because Philip preached Jesus, a man who had never heard of Jesus learned of his need to be baptized. He did not need to seek the approval of any human group. His story is the clearest picture we have of how baptism was done. They went down into the water, Philip baptized him, and they came up out of the water.

One should not conclude from this story a doctrine of "lone wolf" Christians with no connections with the Lord's people. Though scripture follows the Ethiopian no farther as he goes on his way rejoicing, the tradition of the later church attested by Irenaeus and Eusebius is that he became an evangelist in Ethiopia.

DORCAS

The Acts of the Apostles is also interested in ordinary people. Dorcas is the only person in the New Testament designated by the feminine form of "disciple" (*matheria*). Her physical disorder is not identified, but like all people (Heb. 9:27), she died. Loving hands washed her body and placed it in an upper room to await the coming of Peter to Joppa from Lydda.

When Peter arrived, the widows were standing about crying and showing the coats and garments Dorcas had made. These things were their memorial to her. What a contrast with Queen Athaliah at whose death there was rejoicing and peace (2 Kings 11:20). The widows told a story, not of theology but of actions; insignificant as she was, Dorcas had made herself indispensable. Her work required no appointment to office; it required no prior approval of those in responsible positions. She had done what she could.

Peter, exercising the same life-giving power that had worked through Jesus, gave Dorcas back alive to the widows and saints. If Dorcas exploited her experience, the book of Acts reports nothing of it.

SAUL THE PERSECUTOR

The story of the conversion of Saul is the world's most famous conversion story, told three times in Acts. Among titles of lessons might be "Fighting Against God," "A Religious Man's Conversion," "Misguided Conscience," and "There is Hope for All." It is a most graphic demonstration that sincerity does not safeguard one from sin.

By Paul's own admission he was the chief of sinners (1 Tim. 1:12-16); but he was no moral reprobate. In fact, the Acts of the Apostles does not tell the story of the conversion of moral reprobates. It is Paul in Corinthians who gives hope for them.

The Lord's appearance to Saul on the road to Damascus qualified him to be an apostle (1 Cor. 9:1; 15:8); it did not save him. The Lord chose a zealous, trained man, not an uninformed, indifferent person for his service even though the man was in the wrong.

The Lord sent Ananias to tell Saul what to do: "And now why do you wait? Rise and be baptized, and wash away your sins, calling on His name" (Acts 22:16). Ananias's statement, along with that of others, is most important in considering the purpose of baptism. After his conversion, Saul preached Jesus as the Son of God in the synagogue of Damascus.

CORNELIUS

No story is more challenging than that of Cornelius which is told twice in the Acts of the Apostles. Cornelius was a Gentile who had been attracted to the God of Israel and who lived by the ethical code of Judaism. He was a God-fearer but was still on the outside. His qualities are impressive. He was devout, feared God with all his household, gave liberally to the people, and prayed constantly to God. He had a good influence on those about him. His messengers described him as "an upright and God-fearing man who is well spoken of by the whole Jewish nation" (Acts 10:22). If goodness or religiosity could save a man, Cornelius should already have been saved.

But the Lord did not see it that way. He instructed Cornelius to send for Peter at Joppa, 28 miles away. "He will declare to you a message by which you will be saved and all your household" (Acts 11:14).

But since Cornelius was a Gentile, the Lord had to convince Peter to go preach to him, and that took a vision and a specific command to go. Then it took the outpouring of the Holy Spirit to convince the Jewish Christians Peter took with him plus those back in Jerusalem that the Gentiles were acceptable to God. The Lord made Cornelius an example to get Christians out of the pattern they were in of working only with Jews (cf. Acts 15:7).

Cornelius said to Peter, "We are all here present in the sight of God, to hear all that you have been commanded by the Lord" (Acts 10:33). In this story repentance is not stressed; the righteous needs no repentance (cf. Luke 15:7). The outpouring of the Spirit did not remove the need of obeying by being baptized in water. Cornelius prior to baptism was out of Christ (Rom. 6:3; Gal. 3:27; 1 Cor. 12:13). The moral person must obey the Gospel (John 3:5; Matt. 7:21-23; Heb. 5:8-9).

LYDIA

In Philippi, Paul found Lydia out by the riverside where he assumed there was a place of prayer. Though a business woman of Thyatira, a seller of purple goods, she had not forgotten about spiritual matters. She was a worshiper of God, and she gave heed to the message of Paul. She and her household were baptized. As a person given to hospitality (cf. Rom. 12:13; 1 Pet. 4:9), she opened her house to Paul and his associates. After Paul's experience in prison, he visited Lydia before he left Philippi. Paul had a special relationship with the church in Philippi, and Lydia was a member of that congregation. What further influence she had cannot be known. Here is the basis for a lesson on "You and God When You Are Away from Home."

FELIX

The stories of Acts not only depict admirable characters, but they also present some others. Felix, the governor before whom Paul appeared in Caesarea, born a slave, had risen to his position through intrigue. "He exercised the power of a king with the mind of a slave." But he was fair enough to refuse the indictment Tertullus made and to give Paul a hearing.

Paul spoke before him about faith in Jesus Christ. He spoke of justice, self-control, and future judgment. Felix was alarmed, but he delayed: "Go away for the present; when I have an opportunity, I will summon you" (Acts 24:25). Felix hoped for a bribe. Paul had mentioned that he had brought alms to his nation. Felix often conversed with Paul, but his convenient time for obedience never came. Desiring to please the Jews, he left Paul in prison.

There would never be a convenient season to repent of the crimes by which a governor had risen to power; he could not pay the price of giving up his power; there would never be a convenient time

to give up a beautiful woman; there would never be a convenient time to abandon economic interests. "Now is the day of salvation" (2 Cor. 6:2).

II. LESSONS ABOUT THE CHURCH

THE GOD WHO MADE THE WORLD

When speaking to non-Jewish audiences, Paul stressed the idea of the God who made the world and everything in it (Acts 17:24; 14:15-18). The Greek gods had not made the world; they had come to power by a takeover from the Titans. The God who made the world has given instructions for the behavior of His creation. He has appointed a day for His world to be judged. In spreading the gospel to the non-Christian nations, people need conviction of His existence and ways. An evolutionary world has no less need. The God who made the world is at the heart of the whole religious question.

THE WAY

One of the significant and earliest names of the church was the Way. The concept goes back to Jesus' claim of being the way, the truth, and the life (John 14:6). But back of that is Enoch's walk with God (Gen. 5:21-24). "Walk is a metaphor for manner of life. The concept of two ways is prominent in Scripture (Deut. 30:19; Ps. 1:6; Jer. 21:8; Matt. 7:13-14). The Christian life is a pilgrimage in which one turns from dead ends, from the world of sin, to the only way that ends at the heavenly city. It is walking in the light where the blood of Christ cleanses from sin (1 John 1:7). There is salvation in none other (Acts 4:12).

AN OLD QUESTION, AN OLD ANSWER: WHAT MUST I DO TO BE SAVED? (ACTS 16:30)

The jailer's simple question states the longing of the human heart. A person convinced of sin, of judgment to come, and of salvation does not have to be begged to act. It is in Acts that the answer to this question is found. To the jailer, a Gentile, the God of Israel was a stranger. Such a person needs faith, which is an absolute essential: "Without faith it is impossible to please God" (Heb. 11:6). "How are men to call upon Him in whom they have not believed?" (Rom. 10:14).

There was more for the jailer to learn, and Paul spoke the word of the Lord unto him. In addition to the Jews, God granted repentance to the Gentiles (Acts 11:18). Godly grief produces repentance (2 Cor. 7:10). Repentance shows itself in actions. But Paul was not through; the jailer learned of the need to be baptized. Baptism puts one in the one body (1 Cor. 12:13). It is the point of cleansing, the break with the past, the entering into Christ (Gal. 3:27).

AFTER BAPTISM, WHAT? (ACTS 2:42)

The obligations of the believers at Pentecost by no means ended at their baptism. That "they devoted themselves" does not suggest haphazard activity. First is the apostles' teaching. With no written New Testament, the apostles were the authority for the early church. Later when it was written, every book was traced back to a connection with an apostle. After baptism, Christians were to be taught to observe what Jesus had commanded (Matt. 28:20). Moses was read in the synagogue every Sabbath; study became a part of the worship of the church. Paul instructed that his letter to Colossae be read in Laodicea and the one to Laodicea in Colossae (Col. 4:16). Paul urges Timothy to give heed to the public reading of scripture (1 Tim. 4:13).

The second item in the list is "fellowship," a term which means sharing, association, and participation. The community of goods was fellowship. The money the Antioch church sent to Judea was fellowship as was that raised by Paul in the various congregations. There was a sharing in the body and blood of Christ. The authorities in Jerusalem gave Paul and Barnabas the right hand of fellowship (Gal. 2:9). Fellowship is much more than the socials the congregation has. Walking in the light is a requirement of it (1 John 1:3, 7). A consideration of the full import of this term ought to be enough to expose the fallacy one often hears at the Lord's table which implies that the worship is now over and a collection will be taken.

The third item is the breaking of bread. There was no sliced bread in the ancient world. All bread eaten was broken. At times this term means only an ordinary meal; but the setting of Acts 2:42 and 20:7 suggests the Lord's Supper though the same term as for a meal is used. We have to go to 1 Corinthians 11 for a description of the observance of the Lord's Supper in detail. We go to Acts 20:7 for when they did it. Then descriptions in the Didache and in Justin Martyr's Apology give us second century descriptions.

The fourth item in the list is the prayers. There are 25 significant instances of prayer in Acts, each of which should be studied and considered. The early church was a praying church, and the 21st century church should follow its pattern.

PRAYING SINNERS

The world of Saul collapsed with the vision on the road to Damascus. Blinded by the sight, he waited in Damascus for instructions and was praying while he waited. All human help was vain. But the prayer uttered did not stop at the ceiling. God had not wrapped himself with a cloud so that no prayer could pass through (Lam. 3:44).

Though it was the chief of sinners praying, God was listening and sent Ananias to Saul (Acts 9:11).

Cornelius was quite different. He belonged to that group of Gentiles who were attracted to the synagogue but who had never come in. He prayed to God constantly; an angel informed him that his prayers and his alms had ascended as a memorial before God (Acts 10:4, 31).

Some people take the statement of the man born blind, that God does not hear sinners, is that they stop at the part of the statement that fits their case. The man also said, "But if anyone is a worshiper of God and does His will, God listens to him" (John 9:31). Old Testament warnings are about those who refuse to hear the Lord and who treasure iniquity in their hearts (Prov. 28:9; Ps. 66:18). Both Saul and Cornelius readily obeyed when they were instructed.

The problem is not solely who prays, but what they pray for. Prayer must be in keeping with God's will (1 John 5:14). Forgiveness of sins apart from baptism is not one of those things God has promised. Neither Saul nor Cornelius was saved by prayer apart from obedience.

One who has been baptized and then falls back into sin is specifically instructed by Peter to repent and pray that he may be forgiven (Acts 8:22; cf. James 5:16). But such instruction was never given an unbaptized person.

WHAT IS IN A NAME?

The proverb may be true that a rose by any other name would smell just as sweet, but names bring out important aspects of truth. The followers of Jesus are called "disciples" which has its modern equivalent in the term "students." Discipleship is a lifelong study of how to live and serve. Followers are also called "saints" which means those who have dedicated themselves to the Lord's service. The de-

gree of spiritual achievement attained is not implied in the term. Our bodies belong to the Lord to be given to Him as living sacrifices. "Brother" is used in at least three senses in the book of Acts. It designates members of a family; it is used when one speaks of fellow Jews; and it is used for fellow members of the Lord's body. Those who do the will of God are Jesus' brothers and sisters (Matt. 12:50). Because of this variety, one cannot tell whether or not a person is a Christian merely because he is addressed as "brother." Ananias addresses Saul as a fellow Jew (Acts 9:17); the Jews in Rome have not received letters from brothers in Judea (Acts 28:21). But there is a tie that binds together those of the household of faith. They are a family. The church is a worldwide brotherhood.

Faith in the Acts of the Apostles is obedient faith, not faith only. Believing comes through hearing the word of God (Acts 15:7). Hence, the followers are "believers." "The faith" is the teaching to be accepted (Acts 13:8; 14:22). People are obedient to the faith (Acts 6:7). There is one faith (Eph. 4:5). In the tolerance of the modern world, the faith needs to be contrasted with the idolization of feelings. Followers of Jesus are his "slaves" (*douloi*; usually translated "servants"). The slave was the person bought in the market to do the will of his master, not his own will. Paul and Silas are servants of the Most High God (Acts 16:17). The disciples were called "Christians" first in Antioch (Acts 11:26). The name was accepted as a mark of honor (Acts 26:28; 1 Peter 4:16).

LEADERSHIP IN THE EARLY CHURCH

At first the church was led by the apostles. The term apostle is used for the twelve Jesus chose, for Paul, and for men who were sent out by the churches (2 Cor. 8:23). The apostles at Jerusalem were the authority (Acts 8:14) and play a dominant role in the Acts of the Apostles. James, though he is never given any title, becomes

an important figure in the Jerusalem church (Acts 12:17; 15:13; 21:18; Gal. 1:19; 2:9, 12). There were also prophets (Acts 11:27; 13:1; 21:10). Prophesying could be done in a private setting, not solely in a worship gathering.

The seven were chosen to serve tables; no title is given for them. The Jewish community as well as the Hellenistic cities had a leadership of elders. The Jerusalem church had elders quite early (Acts 11:30; 15:2, 4, 6, 25; 21:18). Paul and Barnabas appointed elders in every congregation on the return segment of the first missionary journey. The role of elders is best presented in Acts in Paul's address to the elders of Ephesus (Acts 20:17ff.). The concept of elder, shepherd, and overseer all come out. Paul commends the elders to God and to the word of His grace. They knelt down and prayed together.

III. LESSONS FROM THE BOOK OF ACTS FOR THE MATURE CHRISTIAN

People tend to think that the Acts of the Apostles is primarily relevant to the process of becoming a Christian. It tells stories about faith, repentance, and baptism. It is now our purpose to think about the challenge of preaching to mature Christians from Acts.

MONEY

The Christians of the first century had similar problems about money that 21st century Christians have. Paul and Silas ran afoul of the owners of the girl in Philippi, and Paul had trouble with the silversmiths in Ephesus. Claudius Lysias had bought his Roman citizenship (Acts 22:28). Felix wanted a bribe (Acts 24:26). Let the church today take a strong stand on liquor, tobacco, gambling, magic, obscenity, and extravagance and see what opposition it encounters.

Peter and John had to face the question of their integrity when Simon Magus offered to buy the power to impart the Holy Spirit. His action left to the world the term "simony." The seven sons of Sceva tried to cash in on a good thing (Acts 19:13). It was a point of honor with Paul that he had not made merchandise of the gospel (Acts 20:33-35).

The church had what money cannot buy (Acts 3:6). The people of Ephesus had found the pearl of great price and gladly parted with their expensive books of magic (Acts 19:19).

The church never turned its back on private property. Ananias and Sapphira were compelled neither to sell their property nor to give the money they received for it. But they lied to God (Acts 5:4). The Jerusalem church was characterized by genuine generosity when people sold their possessions and distribution was made to those in need (Acts 2:45; 4:34-37). A famine over the world brought international generosity when Christians of Antioch, each according to his ability, sent aid to Judea (Acts 11:29; cf. 2 Cor. 8:3). Paul gathered charity money on his third mission tour (Acts 24:17; Rom. 15:26-27).

THE GOD OF OUR FATHERS

When speaking to Jews, the apostles always made it clear that they were talking about the God who had always been worshiped by the Jewish people. They were not offering a new God. They knew nothing of a distinction between a God of the Old Testament and a God of the New Testament. We need to relieve people's mind of such a concept. The God of the Fathers had written a new chapter in his dealing with Israel. He was carrying out the promise he had made. He had not cast off the Jews (cf. Rom. 11:1).

"IT IS MORE BLESSED TO GIVE THAN TO RECEIVE" (ACTS 20:35)

This one saying of Jesus outside the Gospels makes us ask what the word "blessed" means. It is hardly the equivalent of "happy." God, who gave His only Son, is Himself the example of the giver (John 3:16). Jesus gave His life as a ransom for many (Matt. 20:28). A baby is concerned only with his own needs and demands service longer than any other creature, but when growing up, the person must become less self-centered and should learn to serve others. The work ethic demands that one take care of himself and also to give to those in need (Eph. 4:28). Paul calls on us to give ourselves to the gift we have (Rom. 12:7).

THE CHURCH AT PRAYER

One can only be impressed with the emphasis on prayer in the Acts of Apostles. People prayed before the choice of Matthias; they prayed when persecuted, not for vengeance but that God would give them courage. Ananias found Saul praying in Damascus; Cornelius was praying; Barnabas and Saul set out from Antioch with prayer. Paul prayed with the elders at Ephesus; and he and his friends prayed on the seashore at Tyre.

WHO CAN FIGHT CITY HALL?

With James dead and Peter's execution imminent, the church prayed earnestly (Acts 12:5). Peter had escaped once (Acts 5:17-19), but likely not again with the precautions against escape taken by Herod. A small group met at the home of Mary and prayed (Acts 12:12). Their praying was interrupted by a knock on the door. The maid Rhoda was so excited that she forgot to open the door. When

their prayer was answered, they could not believe it. They insisted that Rhoda was insane. Peter kept knocking. We pray but are shocked at the answer. Who can fight City Hall? Praying people can!

YOU AND THE HOLY SPIRIT

People want to know what the Holy Spirit does for them. He was promised to the apostles with power (Acts 1:8). He was poured out on the Day of Pentecost and then again at the house of Cornelius. Nothing else is identified with baptism in the Holy Spirit. In neither case did it result in salvation for the recipients or take the place of baptism in water.

The Spirit was imparted by the laying on of the apostles' hands in Samaria and in Ephesus. It is logical to believe that when the apostles died the Spirit could no longer be imparted in this way.

The gift of the Holy Spirit was promised by Peter to the obedient just as forgiveness of sins was promised (Acts 2:38). There is no good reason why one would accept one promise and reject the other. God has given the Holy Spirit to those who obey Him (Acts 5:32). Nothing is said in either of these passages about laying on of hands.

Nothing is said about certain feelings being evidence of the possession of the Spirit. The Spirit makes intercession for the saints (Rom. 8:27); by the Spirit the Christian puts to death the deeds of the body (Rom. 8:13); and the Christian bears the fruit of the Spirit (Gal. 5:22-23). It is a promise to be accepted by faith.

FAREWELL

A text especially suitable for a farewell sermon is Acts 20:32 where Paul commends the elders to God and to the word of His grace. Paul's faith was that the God who had given His Son would with

Him give all things (Rom. 8:32). Paul and Barnabas had earlier committed the churches to the Lord whom they had believed (Acts 14:23). Guidance is alone to be found in God's Word.

THE LORD'S TRAVELING TENT MAKERS

Those scattered from Jerusalem went everywhere preaching the word. Paul was largely an unsupported worker who worked day and night to provide for his needs (Acts 20:34). At Corinth he met the refugees Aquila and Priscilla who also were tent makers (Acts 18:1ff.). They went with him to Ephesus where they taught Apollos the way of the Lord more perfectly. Later they were back in Rome, Paul greeted them and the church in their house (Rom. 16:3-5). They were apparently back in Ephesus when Paul wrote 2 Timothy (4:19).

People are on the move. Congregations should be started by people when away from home. Aquila and Priscilla are admirable examples of being a center of Christian fellowship wherever they were. If the Lord's church ever covers the world, it will largely have to be done by his traveling tent makers.

THE MACEDONIAN CALL (ACTS 16:9)

In coming to Troas, Paul was following the reverse course of Alexander the Great's conquest of the East. It was the greatest event of the period when Paul carried the gospel into Europe. It must have been disappointing after such a call to find in Philippi only a handful of women out by the river. But it was the opening of a continent, and that opened the western world. The church is called to the areas where the gospel has not yet gone.

GOD IS NO RESPECTER OF PERSONS (ACTS 10:34; 11:12)

The Lord had a hard time teaching the apostles that he meant the gospel to be preached to every creature. All evangelism of the first nine chapters of Acts is with Jewish people and the Samaritans. The visions of Cornelius and of Peter were required to open the door to the Gentiles. Only after Cornelius told his story did the light dawn in Peter's mind that everyone who believes in Jesus receives forgiveness of sins (Acts 10:43). Peter had to defend his actions when back in Jerusalem. Peter, himself, still had to be rebuked by Paul (Gal. 2:11-13). The middle wall of partition was gone (Eph. 2:14-17).

Though we may be proud of how far we have come on race questions in the past generation, the church still has far to go. It is still far from being free from economic stratification (cf. James 2:1ff.) and far from being free from social prejudice.

THE GRACE OF GOD

The word "grace" has multiple meanings in the Acts of the Apostles. It may be surprising to find it occurring 16 times in a book that talks about faith, repentance, and baptism. As a theological term grace means the unmerited favor of God. People sent out on a mission are commended to the grace of God (Acts 14:26; 15:40). Barnabas and Saul saw the grace of God at work in Antioch (Acts 11:23). God testified to His grace by doing signs (Acts 18:27). Paul's task was to testify to the good news of God's grace (Acts 20:24). He commended the elders of Ephesus to the word of God's grace (Acts 20:30).

In the book of Acts there is no conflict between salvation by grace and the obligations of the gospel. Obedience was not considered salvation by works. "Grace" was not turning everything over to

God. One is free to do what he pleases as long as he pleases to do God's will.

BREAKING BREAD (ACTS 20:7)

All eating was breaking bread. At the beginning people attended the temple but ate at home (Acts 2:46). Paul ate a meal on the ship in the storm; it was not unusual to give thanks before food (Acts 27: 35).

On the other hand, the list of items in which the people continued (Acts 2:42) suggests more than ordinary eating. It would be rather mundane to make much of people's eating every day. At Troas, Paul and his party stayed seven days and then met on the first day of the week to break bread. It is the only mention of the first day of the week in Acts of the Apostles; the sabbath is mentioned about ten times. The first day of the week is also mentioned in 1 Corinthians 16:2 and the Lord's day in Revelation 1:10. The seven day wait, the formal setting in Troas in the upper room with many lights, and Paul's prolonging his speech until midnight suggest a worship meeting.

Troas was a Roman provincial town, not a Jewish town. Romans began the day at midnight. The meeting was in the evening, but Paul intended to depart on the morrow. Had the day started at sunset, the morning would still be the same day. The day must have changed at midnight.

Acts 20:7 is the basis for observing the Lord's Supper on Sunday rather than some other day; we have no biblical example of a different practice. Logic adds that every week has its first day. In second century literature, Governor Pliny tells of Christians meeting on a fixed day. The Didache describes a Eucharist and has as the day for it "The Lord's Day of the Lord." Justin Martyr at the middle of the second century gives a description of a gathering on the "Day of the Sun" (*Apology* 67).

Those various topics are only a fraction of the riches for preaching in the Acts of the Apostles. A challenging study could be developed on the meaning of the titles of Jesus in the book: Christ, Lord, Author of Life, Prophet, Servant, Leader and Savior, Son of Man, the Judge of the living and the dead, and others. A searching series could be had on the questions asked in the book: What shall I do, Lord? How can I except someone guide me? Why do you tarry? Can any man forbid water? We have not even touched on the many challenging expressions of the book from which topical sermons could be developed.

Like Paul, I commend you to the word of God's grace which is able to build you up.

BIBLE STUDY



FREEDOM IN CHRIST
(ROMANS 14:1 – 15:13 & 1 CORINTHIANS 8:1 – 11:1)

Jack McKeown
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The spirit of the age is marked by the demands of virtually everyone for his or her rights. A cartoonist speaks to the selfishness of the human heart when he uses four words in ascending order (myself, mine, me, and I) to form an enormous monument. At the base of it, a large group of people have gathered with their arms raised as if worshipping at an altar. The caption on the cartoon reads, "Speaking of American Cults...." The borders of this same cartoon are also lined with some haunting lines that have been used to promote familiar products—"Have it your way," "Do yourself a favor," "You owe it to yourself," and "You deserve a break today."

Like spoiled children, we want our own way, and it doesn't seem to matter how our demands affect others. Even Christians have fallen foul of this philosophy. We need look no further than the "worship wars" that rage among us. Having rediscovered grace, and therefore freedom in Christ, the spirit of the age has crept into our lives and into our churches where we make demands because "we have rights you know!" Paul deals with this problem head-on in Romans 14:1 – 15:13 and 1 Corinthians 8 – 10. With their new-found faith and freedom in Christ, some were exerting their liberty at the expense of the body and its subsequent witness to the world. The apostle finds himself on the cutting edge of a problem where he establishes principles that remain ever relevant in the resolution of disputes over matters of opinion.

ROMANS 14:1 - 15:13

There was a time when most scholars regarded Romans as written for the purpose of showing that salvation is by grace through faith apart from works, especially the works of the Mosaic Law. In recent years, however, while not denying the above, many have taken the position that Romans was specifically written in response to the controversy between the "weak" and the "strong" and that Paul is attempting to unify these divergent communities in Rome.¹

While the overall purpose of the book will continue to be debated, there is no doubting Paul's intentions in 14:1 - 15:13. A marked change in literary style can be noted between chapters 13 and 14. "The apostle moves from general injunctions, embodied in traditional oral forms of paraenesis, to the consideration of a specific set of problems."² Not unlike the text of 1 Corinthians 8 - 10, Paul is wrestling with the subject of freedom or liberty in Christ. The Romans passage then becomes an expanded adaptation of the position and arguments he used in 1 Corinthians, when dealing with matters of opinion relative to meals sacrificed to idols that had become so disruptive and divisive in the Corinthian church.

What exactly are the specific problems that Paul is dealing with in Romans 14:1 - 15:13? He is certainly not referring to the fundamentals of the gospel. Paul "was absolutely clear in defining the fundamental facts of our salvation; they are definite and not up for debate. Paul was quite intolerant of any distortion of the gospel and made no allowance for compromise. His words to the Christians in Galatia are unequivocal and without ambiguity...(Gal. 1:7 - 9)."³ Nor is Paul discussing clear commands concerning Christian behavior. In the previous chapter (Rom. 13:8 - 14), he has challenged the believers to "put aside the deeds of darkness and to behave decently." Christians must not look to gratify the desires of their sinful nature. Things such as adultery, murder, stealing, coveting, orgies, drunken-

ness, sexual immorality, debauchery, dissension, and jealousy are wrong in the sight of God, grieve the Holy Spirit, and should have no place in the transformed life (Rom. 12:1, 2).

What Paul is dealing with are "disputable matters" or individual personal convictions about "secondary issues" that should never be allowed to develop into "tests of fellowship." In Romans 14:1, 3, 13, 14, and 22, he warns both sides in this particular debate not to "elevate non-essentials, especially issues of custom and ceremony to the level of the essential and make them tests of orthodoxy and conditions of fellowship."⁴ Paul advises these Roman Christians that where scripture is neither dogmatic or clear about certain issues they should avoid falling into the trap of creating major points of controversy.

Throughout, Paul refers to the parties involved in these disagreements as the "weak" and the "strong." The "weak" are said to be those who have solid convictions about certain foods, drink, and holy days (14:2, 3, 5, 6, 14, 21). The "strong," on the other hand, are those who can conscientiously eat and drink anything (14:2, 6, 22), and when it comes to holy days, those brethren viewed all days alike (14:5). Neither the "weak" nor the "strong" are specifically identified in chapter 14. It is not until we get to Romans 15:8ff that the Jews and Gentiles are mentioned, which has given rise to the assumption that the "weak" are the Jews and the "strong" are the Gentiles. The fact that Paul identifies with the "strong" group (Rom. 15:1) and that questions have been raised as to whether the Jews ever abstained from meat or wine has led to the suggestion that a definite line of demarcation between these two groups may not be possible.

Four considerations, however, make it most likely that the "weak" and the "strong" represent Jews and Gentiles respectively. First, the overall tone of the Roman epistle speaks to the spiritual place and standing of both Jews and Gentiles in relation to God. Second, the Jewish abstinence problem can be explained in light of

the Romans having shut down their slaughter houses in A.D. 49 to secure the expulsion of the Jews from Rome. Ten years later it was probably difficult to acquire ritually slaughtered (kosher) meat. Consequently, they felt it best to forego meat all together.⁵ Third, the "weak" are said to be Jews in light of "Paul's use of the term *koinos*, common, unclean, to describe (implicitly) the 'weak' Christian's attitude toward food (14:14)." Apparently this term had become a semi-technical way of describing food prohibited under the Mosaic Law (see Mark 7:2, 5; Acts 10:14).⁶ Fourth, the New Testament indicates that some Old Testament food laws continued to be a major issue among the early Jewish and Gentile Christians (Acts 15: 19 – 21).⁷

Although speculation abounds as to the identity of the "weak" and the "strong," there is no mistaking the attitudes adopted by the one group towards the other. According to 14:3, 10, the "weak" were both judging and condemning the "strong." The depth of feeling on the part of the "weak" towards the "strong" is missed in our translation of 14:3.⁸ The impression left is that the "weak" were actually practicing some form of Judaism. Paul's remarks in 14:1, "Accept him whose faith is weak" have helped contribute to such a view. His use of "faith" or "believe" throughout the Roman correspondence has led to the conclusion that the "weak" were upset with the "strong" over issues that were of the essence to one's relationship and salvation with God.

Two crucial considerations help to deflect such a conclusion. First, Paul's tone is too conciliatory on the matter. It is hard to believe, if the "weak" were arguing over issues that were viewed as the very grounds for a person's salvation, that the apostle would have permitted such without a severe reprimand. When Paul refers to these believers as those who were weak in faith, he is simply speaking of the brother who finds it difficult to break away from some of the old avenues through which he had become used to expressing his

faith. Second, Paul's use of the verb *pisteuim* in verse 2 helps to define his use of *pistis* in verse 1. "Explicitly, 'believe' has the notion 'believe that something is legitimate'.... The 'faith' in which these people are 'weak,' therefore... involves their individual working out of Christian faith, their convictions about what that faith allows and prohibits."⁹ Evidently there were some Jewish Christians in Rome who felt it best to live out their faith in Christ by a continued adherence to certain Old Testament rituals. These practices separated them from the pagan culture in which they lived and designated them as belonging to God. The "strong" did not hold their views. This gave rise to a tense disagreement between the two.

Like the "weak," the "strong" had an attitude problem of their own. According to 14:1, 3, 10, they were looking down on the "weak." The words "look down on" in verse 3 indicate "a strong term that carries the idea of looking down on someone as totally worthless, as being nothing or less than nothing. It does not connote simple dislike or disrespect, but utter disdain and abhorrence."¹⁰ The liberal "strong" regard the scruples of the traditionalist "weak" as worthy of contempt. The conservative "weak" on the other hand, viewed the liberal "strong" as totally unacceptable. Paul will state in 14:3, 4, that both parties have a sorry and disruptive attitude towards each other. In 15:7 he will subsequently make it clear that both the "weak" and the "strong" are obligated to work with each other to bring about a cessation to the enmity that exists between them. Throughout the text, however, Paul will place the onus on the "strong" to take the lead in resolving any such conflict between brethren (14:1; 15:1; Gal. 6:1). Having said that, it should be noted that while Paul would encourage concessions towards weaker brethren, he commands the Roman church never to allow a false teacher to lead others into sin (Rom. 16:17).

In an effort to deal with disputes about non-essentials, Paul establishes a series of apostolic instructions which the Romans are

expected to follow. This is borne out by the fact that he uses no less than 13 imperatives in the pericope (14:1, 3 (two), 5, 13 (two), 15, 16, 19, 20, 22, 15:2, 7).¹¹ Notice that the first and last of these (14:1; 15:7) use the same compound verb, *proslambanesthai*, "accept." The addition of the preposition to the basic verb intensifies it, making it a command.¹² In other words, Paul is not simply making a suggestion or presenting an option on how to resolve disputes over matters of opinion; he is issuing a series of apostolic directives (14:15, 16, 20, 21). With each of these, the apostle establishes concrete principles for conflict resolution that span the centuries.

The first principle that commands our attention is the need for accepting each others views about "disputable matters" (14:1; 15:7). The word "accept" in 14:1 of this principle and the restatement of it in 15:7 form an inclusio in the text to indicate that all that is said in 14:1 – 15:13 is spoken to address the same problem throughout the pericope and to show that 15:7–13 also functions as an integral part of the overall text. The kind of acceptance that Paul has in mind is worthy of note. The basic verb "accept," "receive," or "welcome" conveys more than simply according a person official recognition as a church member. This is the kind of acceptance that is to be heartfelt and that genuinely welcomes someone into our home or circle of acquaintances.¹³

Moreover, it is to be an unconditional acceptance. It is to have no strings attached and show no prejudice. Furthermore, Paul states that it is to be the same kind of acceptance afforded a brother by Christ (14:3). In essence he is saying "if God will not erect a barrier to communion relative to non-essentials, then neither ought we." Since God has accepted the weaker brother (14:3), and since Christ has accepted us (15:7), we must complete the triangle and accept one another. We must insist on the inescapable obligation of personal responsibility.

Paul takes this principle a step further when in 14:4 he warns the "weak" that as the Lord has accepted the "strong" they are not to usurp God's position as judge. "The beginning of verse 4 sounds a great deal like Paul's rebuke of the self-satisfied in 2:1 and makes it likely that it was the "weak" who had taken their disagreement with their fellow Christians to these lengths.¹⁴ Using an illustration of a household slave in relationship to his master (14:4), Paul informs them that when one belongs to another no one has the right to determine his standing or falling, his approval or disapproval. He concludes verse 4 with a bold declaration that a brother's standing is not based on a fellow brother's assessment of him, but rather, it is grounded in the finished work of Christ.

Paul sets forth another principle in the resolution of problems resulting from matters of preference and taste in not putting a "stumbling block" or "obstacle" in a brother's way (14:3). It is at this particular point in the text that Paul seems to be placing the greater burden for peace on the "strong." As with the knowledgeable in Corinth (1 Cor. 8:8), he concedes (14:14) that food in and of itself has no spiritual significance. When a "weak" brother, however, chooses to sanctify himself from pagan culture by the way he eats, drinks, and worships, the stronger brother ought to be commending him for his scruples instead of making his spiritual journey harder by criticism. Paul's greatest fear from such conduct is expressed in his use of the words *prosbomima* (obstacle) and *skandalon* (stumbling block). Both of these are more serious than their translation might suggest. It is not simply that the "weak" might be discouraged by the "strong" looking down on them (14:3, 10), but rather that such treatment could lead to an occasion of spiritual ruin. Taken together "these terms reveal that the danger spoken of here is nothing less than eschatological judgment."¹⁵

The "strong" then are being asked to forfeit their liberty relative to this issue for the sake of another's eternal destiny. For Paul,

there is a higher principle involved that goes beyond a brother's demanding his rights! To insist on having things your own way at the expense of a brother is wrong (14:20). Rather than scandalizing their brother, the "strong" were to make sacrifices which would promote harmony and produce edification (14:19). No doubt Paul felt that there were limits on the "strong" brother's obligation to the "weak." He probably expected the "weak" to grow in these disputed areas of faith, thus easing the tension between brethren. Nevertheless, it is noticeable in the text that Paul places no qualifiers on the "strong's" responsibility to the "weak." For the sake of the body, they "are not to please themselves" (14:9; 15:1). It is important for us as the contemporary church to refrain from erecting boundaries to our patience or liberality of spirit relative to hypothetical questions. The evidence, however, speaks for itself. This is not something that we do well.

We don't easily forfeit our rights....Before we can be persuaded to forfeit a liberty we must be given all the factors, before, during, and after the fact. We often abstain from forfeiting liberties until the person we are to bless "admits he is the 'weak' brother." We approach such situations with suspicion on our faces and measuring line in our hands. We want to know "how far" we are going to have to go and we want to be sure the other fellow is willing to meet us "half way".¹⁶

In 14:22, Paul draws the Romans' attention to another principle that is designed to help keep order between brothers over secondary issues of faith. He suggests to the "strong" that there are times when it is best to keep one's convictions on controversial issues private. The "you" in this verse is emphatic about Paul's instruction on this principle.¹⁷ The "strong" Roman Christians are to refrain from flaunting their liberty at the expense of the "weak." This does not mean that they can never speak of these issues. It does

mean that they must carefully exercise their freedom by choosing when it is best and in what format to do so. The contemporary "in your face" attitude that prevails among some, Paul states, has no place in the arena of Christian liberty. The truth is that "there are times when we don't need to air our views or brandish our liberty. Often a dignified silence is more helpful than unnecessarily upsetting others who have a different viewpoint from us. Don't deliberately provoke others over controversial issues; it isn't worth it. Some seem to take a distorted delight in needling others. Have your own convictions, yes, but at times it will be best to keep them private."¹⁸

Yet another principle designed to keep the peace among warring factions can be found in 14:8, 16, 14. It states in essence, when you go to arguing over "disputable matters," be careful of your influence and witness for Christ before the world. In 14:8 Paul teaches that the Christian lives for *Kyrios*. Failure to do this will leave the believer open to the indictment leveled at the pagan in 1:21.¹⁹ When our liberty in Christ creates conflicts in the church, it gives the world cause to criticize and condemn those who claim to hold brotherly love in such high esteem. When we turn on and rend each other, God is dishonored. Such fragmentation among believers creates division in the church and "atheism in the world."²⁰

In 15:1 - 13, Paul argues for two more principles that, if implemented, would ease the tensions between brethren over issues that are not essential to "the faith." The first is found in 15:1 - 4. Paul simply asserts that we are to follow the example of Christ. If anyone had "the right" to do as he pleased, it was the Lord. Yet, for him God came first, others next, and his own personal interests last. He is our example and inspiration for unity among believers. The word that Paul uses to convey this challenge is *bastazein*, translated "bear" in 15:1. It sets forth the idea that we, like Christ, are to surrender to the path of sacrifice for the sake of our brethren.

Paul concludes the pericope, and this series of principles, by challenging the church to aim for unity to the glory of God (15:6 - 11). This should be the primary objective of every congregation of God's people, and it is what one author calls "noblesse oblige."²¹ By implication, Christians are a people of high birth and should see their station as carrying a noble obligation. "Believers are the sons and daughters of the sovereign of the universe. As such, these highly privileged people... are under obligation to deport themselves in a manner that is in keeping with their high privilege."²² Paul realized that only when God's people come together with one heart and mouth will they glorify God and lift up Jesus Christ.

Fundamental to the Romans' success at achieving harmony over matters of opinion was their implementation of the "final arbitrator"—love (14:15). According to Batey, this entire context revolves around "how love acts in the midst of differing ethical discussions."²³ He writes, "It is the nature of the fellowship of love which constitutes the body of Christ that each subordinates himself to the good of all... if then one Christian in full realization and expression of his freedom in Christ injures a brother who does not fully grasp the nature of Christian liberty, the former is not walking in love."²⁴ John Stott agrees. His remarks are a fitting conclusion to our treatment of this passage. "In fundamentals, then, faith is primary, and we must not appeal to love as an excuse to deny essential faith. In non-fundamentals, however, love is primary, and we may not appeal to zeal for the faith as an excuse for failures in love. Faith instructs our own conscience; love respects the conscience of others. Faith gives liberty; love limits its exercise."²⁵

1 CORINTHIANS 8:1 - 11:1

The early narrative of 1 Corinthians addresses the problems reported to Paul by "the household of Chloe" (1:11) that were divid-

ing the Corinthian church. The latter half of the epistle sees the apostle offering answers to a series of questions that were directed to him in a letter from the Corinthians themselves. Each of these is designated by the words "now concerning" (7:1, 25; 8:1; 12:1; 16:1).

In 8:1 - 11:1, Paul answers the questions raised about "things sacrificed to idols." This pericope can be outlined as follows:

- 8:1 - 13; 10:1 - 22 An example of freedom in Christ sorely abused.
- 10:23 - 11:1 An illustration of Christian liberty that might be exercised.
- 9:1 - 27 A challenge to give up one's rights for Christ and the gospel.

It is evident from the context that freedom in Christ and the exercise of a believer's liberty was a hot-button issue in Corinth. This is "because it dramatized three much larger concerns: the problem of boundaries between the church and pagan culture, the strained relationship between different social classes in the community, and the relation between knowledge and love as the foundation of the church's life."²⁶

The New Testament speaks to the problem the Corinthians were wrestling with (Acts 15:28, 29; Rev. 2:14, 20), and Paul had written to them in an earlier epistle about their need to avoid idolatry (5:9 - 11). Moreover, in 6:12ff he introduces the subject of meats in connection with fornication. As meats and fornication might be associated with idols at pagan temples, Paul seems to be warning the Corinthians to abstain from involvement with idolatry because of the division it generates and the immorality it encourages. Such exhortations had gone begging. Some in Corinth had subsequently written to him challenging his reasoning on the subject, as well as taking on some in the congregation who held Paul's view on the matter. At the

same time, they demanded their freedom in Christ to go where they wanted and eat what they liked.

One would think that Paul might have issued a direct and seething prohibition against such behavior. Instead, he engages the brethren in reasoned dialogue to get them to see the error of their ways and repent. When he is finished, there is no doubting the apostle's position on the matter of "idol meals," nor is there any misunderstanding about a brother's eternal destiny when he insists on his rights at the expense of the body of Christ.

Using a "diatribe-like form,"²⁷ Paul will quote the Corinthian's own remarks, "We know that we all have knowledge" (8:1) and "We know that no idol is anything...there is no God but one" (8:4). He will then qualify them with his usual "yes...but" procedure. With this approach, Paul hopes that the "we know" group will realign their conduct, so that the "weak" in the area of "idol meals" will neither "stumble" (8:9) or be "destroyed" (8:11) over their involvement with idols.

In 8:10, we see the root cause of the problem discussed in 8:1 – 13 and 10:1 – 22. The "we know" group in Corinth had either been attending the feasts at pagan temples or frequenting the dining rooms associated with them which "were the restaurants of antiquity."²⁸ The "weak" in the congregation were offended by their conduct (8:12). These knowledgeable brothers felt that their enlightenment about the Old Testament concept of the *Shema* (8:4, 6; Deut. 6:4 "there is one God") and their prized understanding that spiritually food was insignificant (8:8), were enough to justify their participation in pagan temple events.

Paul's retort to them must have come as a shock. The informed Corinthians had stated "we all have knowledge," but Paul replies to their dismay: "Knowledge puffeth up, but love edifieth" (8:1). With his use of the term "puffeth up" to characterize these Bible-quoting Christians, Paul has just lumped the knowledgeable

with the divisive of 4:6, those who challenged apostolic authority in 4:18, 19, and the immoral of 5:2. By this, he has just informed them that their knowledge has caused them to commit the sin of arrogance. Furthermore, their spiritual self-aggrandizement demonstrates a spirit of lovelessness towards their brethren and has been detrimental to the building up of the body of Christ (8:11, 12).

The "we know" group had failed to grasp the most important fundamental principle of the Christian faith — love. There are close parallels between chapters 8 and 13: "though I have all knowledge, if I do not have love I am nothing" (13:2). "Love as a basis for Christian living and behavior deflates elitism, since it entails self-sacrificial service even to the weak...just because one knows something does not give one license to act.... Salvation is fleshed out not in self-helping actions, but in self-sacrificial actions."²⁹ Before the Corinthians acted, they should have asked at least two questions: "Is this loving?" and "Will this build up the church of the Lord or take it down?" They had to learn that the claim to freedom in Christ did not allow for idolatry nor negate a Christian's obligation to exercise restraint in interpersonal relationships.

The truth was that they were not as informed as they thought (8:2; 10:12). They had failed to appreciate the biblical insights and lessons from the past (10:1 – 11). Nor had they contemplated the seriousness with which God viewed their conduct (10:5). Paul informs the informed that this is not a matter of Christian liberty at all. Rather, it is a matter of Christians entrapped again by idolatry (10:14), and to make matters worse, they seem to be suggesting to the "weak" that they should join in the same practices if they are to be accepted (8:10).

Paul condemns the "we know" group with the serious charge that idolatry at a pagan temple is "sacrifice to demons, and not to God" (10:19). He had conceded earlier (8:5) that the "gods" are only "so called." His "use of the dismissive adjective 'so called' shows

that he does not believe these figures to be real gods.”³⁰ This affirmation, however, is not meant to teach that these “gods” (the traditional Greek deities) or “lords” (the deities of the mystery cults) exist objectively. “Rather, as verse 7 indicates, they exist subjectively in the sense that they are believed in.”³¹ What these informed believers had forgotten was that “there are demonic forces behind idols, using the idols to enslave human beings...Monotheism does not rule out the reality of lesser spiritual beings, some of them malevolent. The *gnosis* group had not reckoned with that.”³²

Like Israel before them, the Corinthian Christians had experienced the same kind of benefits from Christ as the Hebrews had enjoyed at the hand of Yahweh (10:1-4). This, however, had not prevented Israel’s destruction in the desert and their missing out on the Promised Land (10:5). It may well be that these knowledgeable believers “had a magical view of the Christian sacraments and thought that since they had partaken of the Christian initiation rite (baptism) and the Christian communion rite (the Lord’s Supper) that they were immune to spiritual danger at pagan feasts”³³ (10:2, 16, 17). Again, Paul is direct in his condemnation of such thinking (10:20, 21).

To add weight to his condemnation, Paul directs their attention to a series of incidents in the Old Testament designed to arrest their thinking, bring them back to their senses, and avoid the judgement of God (10:6 – 11). In 10:7, he refers specifically to Exodus 32:6 and issues the exhortation “Neither be ye idolaters as were some of them.” The last verb in verse 7 “and rose up to play” is significant, as it leads to the further chastisement of 10:8. While it might be translated “shouting,” “singing,” and “dancing,” it was understood by the rabbis and the early church to have reference to “sexual play.”³⁴ “It is true that there is no clear evidence of sacred prostitution in Roman Corinth, but there certainly were numerous stories of sexual immorality in pagan temples.”³⁵ Paul therefore warns the “we know” brothers in Corinth that they should not try to rationalize nor justify

their attendance (8:10) at these temples. To do so is to encourage both idolatry and immorality.

In 10:9, 10, Paul continues to draw the knowledgeable back to Scripture. This time he alludes to Numbers 21:5ff and Numbers 14:2, 36; 16:41 – 49. Like the Israelites before them, these brethren were guilty of provoking and grumbling at God. The grumbling mentioned here might have reference to the Corinthian’s rejection of Paul’s admonition on this subject in an earlier letter (5:9ff). Paul consequently feels they need reminding about the “destroyer” (10:10; Exod. 12:23) who does God’s bidding against those who refuse to heed counsel. Twice in this pericope, 10:6 and 10:11, Paul hopes that the “we know” brothers will learn from the mistakes made by those in the past, so that they might not “fall” (10:12). The warning is clear. In light of the “examples from the Pentateuchal narratives...God is not to be trifled with.”³⁶ Just as those under the Old Testament had lost their salvation due to their rejection of revealed truth, the Corinthians too were poised to be judged by God for their failure to do what was right in ministering to those who still had a conscience. God had provided a way out of their temptation, but they had to accept it (10:13).

The following observations from the text make it quite clear that this is an abuse of Christian liberty and therefore a sin.

- Paul lumps the knowledgeable with the sinners of 4:6; 4:18, 19; 5:2.
- Paul informs them that they are loveless and cannot therefore know God (8:1,3).
- Paul reminds them twice (8:2; 10:12) that they lack insight into God’s word.
- Paul directly accuses them of idolatry (10:14).
- Paul states that they are caught up in promoting the work of demons (10:20 – 21).

- Paul quotes from Old Testament examples that are designed to speak to the seriousness of their misbehavior (10:6 – 11).
- Paul uses Scripture to warn them that they could lose their souls if they insist on rejecting apostolic direction (10:11).

In 10:23 – 11:1, while still discussing meat sacrificed to idols, Paul gives the knowledgeable Corinthian Christians an illustration of freedom in Christ that might be exercised. I say “might be exercised” because a situation could arise that once again calls for the foregoing of one’s rights for the sake of the body and the witness of the church to the world (10: 27 – 19). Notice the change in subject matter here. Paul is no longer discussing idol meats in connection with pagan temples. Rather, he refers to meat sold in the “shambles” or market places (10:25). In these verses he indicates that if there are no circumstances to say otherwise, consumption of such meat is “lawful” if received with thanks (10:23, 30).

This is not, however, Paul’s primary purpose in this section of the pericope. The main principle asserted is designed to again challenge those who viewed themselves wise to stop demanding their rights and start thinking of the interests of others, both inside and outside the fellowship of believers (10:24–28). The bottom line for Paul throughout this section, as it was in Romans 14:1 – 15:13, is that the “strong” should demonstrate a deeper sense of love towards others for the sake of Christ.

He warns that if a host informs a Christian about the origin of the meat offered as part of a meal, even though the Christian has the liberty to eat it, it would be better for the sake of the host to decline eating politely. “In such a circumstance, if one would go ahead and eat, then the host would see that as a violation of one’s own religion. It would be a bad witness to that person.”³⁷

In 10:29, 30, Paul imagines the informed brother’s response. The knowledgeable ask, “Why should my freedom be determined by

another’s conscience?... Why should someone curse me if I partake of food having given thanks to God and partake with gratitude?”³⁸ Like the Romans, and ourselves, the “we know” Corinthians needed to realize that the Christian faith is not simply a matter of a vertical relationship, but it also has horizontal dimensions.

In the middle of all this theology lies chapter nine. To some it seems to be out of place in Paul’s argument. Some have suggested that it is a fragment from the lost Corinthian correspondence or it is a misplaced part of the second epistle, where Paul is so caught up defending his apostolic authority. Neither of these are true, if one keeps the overall thrust of Paul’s intent in mind. Moreover, in light of 8:1, 10:33, and 11:1 an *inclusio* is formed. This shows that Paul is offering himself as an example of the kind of thing he is asking the knowledgeable Corinthian Christians to do. Using his noted rhetorical style, Paul asks the Corinthians about his rights as an apostle. We can only imagine a resounding affirmative to his questions (9:1–12) by the informed brethren. Then Paul plays his hand: “nevertheless we did not use this right; but we bear all things, that we may cause no hindrance to the gospel of Christ” (9:12). Paul will follow in 9:13, 14 with two more illustrations of his rights. He will then follow with a series of contrasts in 9:15ff to explain why it is best for him, as it would be for the Corinthians, to stop demanding one’s rights. He does everything, not for self, but for the cause of the Christ (9:19 – 23). The Corinthians must do the same if they are to receive their reward (9:24 – 27).

PRIVILEGES AND RESPONSIBILITIES

We know what Romans 14:1 – 15:3 and 1 Corinthians 8 – 10 had to say to their original addresses, but what do they mean for us today?

First, each of us is privileged to have been accepted in Christ through God's grace (Rom. 14:3, 4, 8, 9; 15:7; 1 Cor. 8:3). The biblical concept of grace is something that we in churches of Christ have discovered or rediscovered over the past two decades. There is a need, however, to be careful that the new-found liberty that has come with this discovery is not turned into license or "cheap grace."

Like the knowledgeable Corinthians, we may be able to do the theology on the subject of grace, but we fail miserably at the practical working out of it in the fellowship. Paul makes it very clear that enlightenment is no justification for a continued association with pagan culture or an involvement with religious beliefs and practices through which the devil is working to dupe people (1 Cor. 10:14 – 22) into a false sense of spiritual security. By all means let us exegete the text to reflect what it really teaches. At the same time, let us work it out in our churches, demonstrating that we know where the line ought to be drawn between acceptable accommodation and unacceptable compromise that can lead to sin.

Second, we have the privilege of knowing the incarnate Christ. We consequently have the responsibility to continue living out the incarnation in the church and before the world. Paul calls on both the Romans and the Corinthians to make a marked adjustment in their thinking and conduct. They are to grow through *gnosis* (knowledge) to *agape* (love). As we have seen, this is to be worked out in a myriad of ways.

- Don't flaunt your liberty (Rom. 14:22).
- Don't cause your brother to stumble (Rom. 14:13; 1 Cor. 8:9, 13; 10:32).
- Don't grieve your brother (Rom 14:15; 1 Cor 8:7).
- Don't devastate a brother (Rom. 14:16; 1 Cor. 8:11).
- Don't use your liberty as a license to sin (1 Cor. 10:6 – 22).
- Don't forget your witness before the world (Rom. 14:16).

- Don't pull down the work of God and provoke him to jealousy (Rom. 14:20, 21; 1 Cor. 10:5, 10, 22).
- Don't forget the lessons from Scripture (Rom 15:4; 1 Cor. 10:1 – 10).
- Don't lose sight of the example of Christ who sacrificed for the sake of the body (Rom. 15:3ff).
- Don't miss Paul's illustration of the greatest liberty the Christian has — to give up that liberty out of love for others (Rom. 14:15; 1 Cor. 9:12 – 27).

There are four basic principles that will help in achieving the above. First, make sure that what you are upset over, and are about to upset the church over, is really a salvation issue that calls for a "test of fellowship." Second, take time to be a listener and not just a debater. Third, decide that you will be a resolver of problems and not just a creator of them. One question will help in this regard: "Am I a stumbling block or a stepping stone?" Fourth, remember that you are obligated to follow the example of Christ as an ambassador of the cross both in and out of the church.

ENDNOTES

1. Robert J. Karries, "Romans 14:1 – 15:13 and the Occasion of Romans," in *The Romans Debate*, ed. By Karl P. Donfried (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1977), 76-78. See the authors' extended footnotes on this subject.
2. Ibid, 86.
3. Victor Jack, "Don't Divide Over Debatable Issues," *Christian Brethren Review* 38 (June 1987), 36.
4. John Stott, *Romans: God's Good News for the World* (Downers Grove: Inter Varsity Press, 1994), 358.
5. Thomas R. Schreiner, "Romans" in the *Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1998), 709-710.
6. Douglas Moo, "The Epistle to the Romans" in the *New International Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1996), 829-830.
7. See Roger L. Omanson, "The 'Weak' and the 'Strong' and Paul's Letter to the Roman Christians" *Bible Translator* 33 (January 1982): 1:106-114. The author surveys the entire book of Romans identifying from one section to another the "weak" and the "strong" as Jews and Gentiles, while at the same time building a case to show that the epistle was written to deal with the problems highlighted in 14:1 – 15:13.

8. James D. A. Dunn, "Romans" in the *Word Biblical Commentary* Vol. 38b. ed. David A. Hubbard and Glen W. Barber (Dallas: Word Publishing, 1988), 802.
9. Joseph Fitzmyer, "Romans" in the *Anchor Bible Commentary* (New York: Doubleday Publishing, 1993), 688, 699. See Moo, Romans 836.
10. Dunn, Romans, 803.
11. Karris, *The Weak*, 84.
12. John Mac Arthur, "Romans 9-16" in the *Mac Arthur New Testament Commentary* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1994), 274.
13. Moo, Romans, 835.
14. *Ibid*, 839.
15. Schreiner, Romans, 733.
16. Jim McGuiggan, *Romans* (Lubbock, Tx.: Montel Publishing, 1982), 382.
17. Moo, Romans, 861. Lee William Hendrickson, *Exposition of Paul's Epistle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1980), 467.
18. Omanson, *The Weak*, 44.
19. Fitzmyer, Romans, 691.
20. Omanson, *The Weak*, 44.
21. Hendrickson, Romans, 469.
22. *Ibid*.
23. Richard A. Batey, "The Letter of Paul to the Romans" in *The Living Word Commentary*, Vol. 7 (Abilene, Tx.: A.C.U. Press, 1984), 165, 166.
24. *Ibid*.
25. Stott, Romans, 375.
26. Richard B. Hays, "First Corinthians", in *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Louisville, Kentucky: John Knox Press, 1997), 135.
27. Ben Witherington III, *Conflict and Community in Corinth: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary on 1 and 2 Corinthians* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eedmans, 1995), 187.
28. *Ibid*, 188.
29. *Ibid*, 190.
30. Hays, *Interpretation*, 139.
31. Gordon D. Fee, "The First Epistle to the Corinthians", *The New International Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Wm. B. Erdmans Publishing Co., 1987), 373.
32. Witherington, *Conflict*, 197-198.
33. *Ibid*, 220.
34. *Ibid*, 221-222.
35. *Ibid*, 221.
36. Hays, *Interpretation*, 165.
37. Witherington, *Conflict*, 227.
38. *Ibid*, 228.

COUNSELING



MARITAL COUNSELING

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"The Lord God said, 'It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him'" (Gen. 2:18). When Adam saw Eve, he said, "This is now bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called 'woman' because she was taken out of man" (Gen. 2:23). Since these words denote the closest possible relationship between a man and his wife, it is no wonder that Moses added these words: "For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and they will become one flesh" (Gen. 2:24).

Many writers list eight different steps in the family life cycle of a typical family: leaving father and mother, beginning to build a marriage, giving birth, children going to school, children in adolescence, children leaving home, parents rediscovering each other, retiring and letting go. During all of these steps, the marital relationship should be cultivated. It is somewhat like the illustration of a young man who had a small live bird in his hand. Going to a wise old man to try his wisdom the young man asked, "Is the bird alive or dead?" If the old man said, "dead," he planned to open his hand and let the bird fly away. If he said, "alive," he planned to crush the bird in his hand. Thus, the old man's reply was, "It's in your hand." With God's help, your marriage is in your hands.

In a recent article, Roth (1988) found that there is a positive relationship between spiritual well-being (defined as a well-integrated

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internal religious orientation) and marital adjustment. Subjects were 147 married individuals from churches in southern California. Responses indicated that spiritual well-being correlated significantly to marital adjustment. This research provides some support for what many have always believed: that lived-out spirituality is an important factor in marital happiness. All of this makes us want to turn to the Bible and to a loving relationship with God to stabilize marriages.

An important list of principles and scriptures for marital counseling would include the following:

1. God as creator and sustainer is the architect of marriage and the home (Gen. 1:26-27; 2:18-24; 3).
2. God instructs the husband and wife to love one another, to submit to one another, and to respect one another. There is a special sense in which the wife is to be subject to her husband (Mk. 10:9; Eph. 5:21-33; 1 Cor. 7:1-40; 1 Pet. 3:1-7).
3. Family members must learn how to handle anger (Eph. 4:26; Jas. 1:19-20; Prov. 14:17, 19; 15:13, 18; 18:24). Anger can ruin marriages as well as individuals. We should be slow to anger and quick to rid ourselves of anger before it either hurts us or others.
4. We must learn to forgive one another. If we do not forgive, our marriages will fail (Prov. 24:17; Mt. 5:7; 6:14-15; 18:21; Eph. 4:32; Lk. 23:34).
5. Parents are to guide their children in the way they should go; children are to obey their parents in the Lord (Ruth 4:13; Prov. 22:6; Eph. 6:1-4).
6. Marriage is for life (Prov. 18:22; Mal. 2:14-16; Mt. 5:31-32; 19:3-9; Rom. 7:1-4; 1 Cor. 7:10-17).
7. All have sinned and are in need of salvation through Jesus Christ (Is. 1:18; Rom. 3:23; 5:12; Jn. 3:16; Acts 2:38; 1 Jn. 1:6-9; Jas. 1:13-15).

8. Effective communication is extremely important in the family. This means listening, talking, and being responsive to the wishes of others (Prov. 15:1, 30; 16:18; 20:5; 12:21; 9:22).

9. Christian character and Christian living are essential for godly families (Prov. 16:3; Mt. 5:3-12; Acts 2:42; 1 Cor. 15:58; 1 Thess. 5:17; Rev. 2:10).

10. Spiritual priorities are extremely important in the home (Mal. 6:6-8; Mt. 22:34-40; 6:33; Amos 4:12). Learn to put first things first.

11. Self-discipline and growth are extremely vital to a healthy family (Prov. 23:20-21; 29-35; Gal. 5:19-23; 2 Pet. 1:5-7; 3:18).

12. Worshiping God together will help keep the family going in the right direction and will be pleasing to God (Jn. 4:24; Acts 2:42; 20:7; Eph. 5:19; 1 Thess. 5:17; 1 Cor. 10:14-22; 11:17-24; Heb. 10:24-31; 1 Jn. 4:7-8). It is extremely important early in marriage to get used to reading the Bible and applying its principles to one's individual and family life. If couples do this together, their marriage will be strengthened and their family guided in the right direction.

I would estimate that at least half of the counseling I do as a psychologist is marital counseling. Other psychologists give similar reports. Couples have many difficulties, get stuck at certain points, get into dysfunctional patterns of behavior that are self-perpetuating, and cannot seem to get out of it themselves. Oftentimes, a trained Christian counselor can help them get unstuck and point them in a new direction that is more healthy and more Christian.

There are several different approaches to marriage counseling, such as the following:

THE INTERGENERATIONAL APPROACH

The rationale for this type of marital therapy is that attitudes and behavior patterns — healthy or unhealthy — are passed on sub-

consciously from one generation to another. In counseling, the idea is to discuss the extended family — their parents and grandparents. Often one will see several themes that have been passed on from one generation to another, such as these from Jack and June's family: the importance of the church and Christian education, the frailty of life, people helping, strong women, and keeping one's distance. The idea is to bring subconscious patterns or themes to the surface, keep the good, and change what needs to be changed. If there are a lot of hurts and a lack of forgiveness in the family of origin, these need to be addressed: If you hate your parents, you will likely never forgive yourself. And you will likely pass the pattern on to your children. Some family themes or rules need to be challenged. Sometimes adult children can see in such counseling sessions that they want things from their parents that they don't have to give. In other words, their parents are limited also in what they can do. It also is sometimes pointed out that what the parents intended and what the child perceived are quite different. At any rate, there are subtle patterns that are passed on from one's family of origin that often need attention. Such patterns tend to be long lasting and difficult to change. The first step, however, in changing such patterns is to become aware of them. The Bible reflects this generation to generation principle both for good and evil, for blessing and cursing (Deut. 6:1-9; Prov. 22:6; Deut. 23:1-6).

THE STRUCTURAL APPROACH

The rationale for this approach is that a sick family structure produces sick individuals and a healthy family structure produces healthy individuals. The idea in such counseling is to intervene and change sick structures: When you change structures, you change individuals within that structure. The Bible, of course, is very ex-

plicit in pointing out the importance of family structure (Eph. 5:21-6:4).

THE STRATEGIC APPROACH

The rationale of this approach is that dysfunctions come from faulty communication patterns in the family system. The approach in counseling is to make strategic interventions that change the faulty communication patterns and thus change the system and individuals within the system. Proverbs 15-26 has numerous instructions on communication patterns.

THE EXISTENTIAL APPROACH

The idea here is that individuals are corrupted by society. Of course, there is some truth in this claim (1 Cor. 15:33; 2 Cor. 6:14-18). Yet individuals are responsible for their own actions (Josh. 24:15; Gal. 6:5; 2 Cor. 5:10). In counseling, one is to listen, focus on what is happening in the session at the moment, intervene, and change dysfunctional patterns during the session.

THE BEHAVIORAL APPROACH

The rationale of this approach is that people learn the behaviors, both functional and dysfunctional, and thus can unlearn behaviors that need to be unlearned and learn new behaviors that need to be learned. In counseling, the counselor uses behavioral techniques, such as reinforcement, and teaches the couple functional, healthy behavior.

One illustration of a behavioral approach in marriage counseling is the problem-centered approach of Jacobson (1979) and others which includes several steps:

1. Define the problem. Have each mate tell you what he or she thinks the problem is. Then work together to define the problem adequately so as to include the concerns of each partner.

2. Have them discuss possible solutions to the problem. You might think in terms of brainstorming for a while. For example, a couple might suggest that they could continue to go on as they are, get divorced, or work to improve their marriage.

3. Eliminate most of the solutions you have suggested. In the above illustration, I would hope that they would eliminate staying like they are, since they are troubled in their marriage, and the possibility of getting a divorce, and choose to work on their problems toward a better marriage.

4. Choose a solution to the problem that is functional, scriptural, and that each can live with. Both spouses have to be involved in this process. Ideally, the solution ought to be one that the Christian counselor feels good about as well as the couple. For example, if a man is abusing his wife and they both agree that they can live with it, this is not a good solution. Try to work with them until they find a solution that is healthy and scriptural. When this is accomplished, I often write out the agreed upon solution to the problem and provide each of us a copy for future reference.

5. Reinforce behaviors that you wish to recur: do this in counseling and encourage them to do it in their marriage. For example, in counseling praise them for changes they make that are healthy and going in the right direction. Then encourage them to do this with each other. For example, if a husband buys his wife a present for a special occasion, compliment him for doing that. If a wife quits cutting her husband down with sarcastic remarks, compliment her for that progress. This helps reinforce behavior that you wish to recur.

6. After you have gone through these steps toward a solution, select another problem and repeat the procedure.

Some of the main problems I have encountered during some 25 years of marriage counseling are as follows: communications, sexual-adjustment difficulties (especially frigidity, impotence, and differences in sexual desires), marital unfaithfulness, in-laws, money, religious differences, "incompatibility," disputes about roles and leadership, questions concerning children, personality differences, alcohol and drugs, falling out of love, lying, lack of time together, and others. All these and other problems can be taken up one at a time and handled with the problem-solving approach mentioned above. One may take points from other approaches and merge them into this approach. Whatever approach is used in marriage counseling, the Christian counselor will keep God's will in mind and try to help the couple apply it to their lives. As Christians, we believe that God can help make things better. He can strengthen the couple, he can strengthen the family, and he can strengthen the church and the community. What would happen if God's will were applied to marital difficulties, including husband and wife beatings; verbal abuse; child abuse, both physical and sexual; and so many other serious problems that are often seen by ministers, elders, and marital therapists? We need to take God seriously, to explore our thoughts, to understand what changes need to be made, to plan new actions, and to carry out these plans. May God bless us toward these ends.

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RELIGIOUS EDUCATION



BIBLE CLASS ENRICHMENT THROUGH SECULAR HISTORY

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Now these things happened to them as an example, and they were written for our instruction, upon whom the ends of the ages have come.

1 Corinthians 10:11

Truth forever on the scaffold, Wrong forever on the
throne, —

Yet that scaffold sways the future, and, behind the dim
unknown,

Standeth God within the shadow, keeping watch above
His own.

The Present Crisis: Stanza 8
James Russell Lowell

Many believe when God completed the Bible He bowed out of the history business. This is a terrible misunderstanding of God's involvement in people's ultimate destiny. The age of inspiration may have ended and the scriptures may be closed, but in the words of the stirring old hymn, "His truth is marching on!" The truths found within holy scripture are writ large in history, holy and secular, and through the lessons derived from observing human obedience or disobedience biblical principles are seen in action. Sadly, it is most often the negative examples of our ancestors which provide the most powerful

lessons, and this is the case with much of the activity in the Old Testament. As it was written of old, "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge."

This series of lessons will examine historical examples of famous men and women—their lives, their actions, their beliefs—which provide insights, either positive or negative, into the truths found in holy scripture. Secular history can help us better appreciate the personalities of biblical characters—heroes or villains—sympathize with their families or victims, and comprehend the challenges they faced and overcame. Life is the proving ground of spiritual truth, as was discovered in the Bible of a good sister who had taken the scriptures and beside each of God's promises and instructions for righteous living had written, "Tried and proven true."

The first examples deal with the lives of historical figures who were contemporary with biblical figures and events. Some had interaction with biblical men and women. An excellent example is Pharaoh Rameses II the Great of Egypt (reigned c. 1290—1224 B.C.), whom many consider the best candidate for the pharaoh of the Exodus, and who would have confronted Moses and Aaron. Rameses II is a wonderful character, one whose personality fits the biblical description of arrogance and pride. Rameses had the longest reign in Egyptian history, over 60 years, lived to near 90, and sired over 300 sons. He saw himself as a great general, and even though the Hittites bested him at Qadesh (1285 B.C.) one would never know it from reading the account on the walls at Karnak. Rameses was a great builder of temples and cities, and the ones he did not build he took credit for by erasing the builder's name and putting his own name on them. Such an egomaniac was the perfect foil for Jehovah and a king God could use to demonstrate His supreme power over even the greatest of human potentates.

Another king who discovered the power of Jehovah God was Assyrian king Sennacherib (705-681 B.C.). Sennacherib, son of

Sargon II, soon after becoming king in 703, faced rebellion in Babylon; while he was crushing this rebellion, Phoenicia and Hezekiah of Judah also refused to pay their tribute. As Sennacherib moved on Phoenicia, resistance collapsed, and even though Egypt tried to intervene, they also were beaten. The Assyrians then moved on Hezekiah and laid siege to Jerusalem, events recorded in 2 Kings 18-19 and in the annals of Sennacherib. The Assyrian scribes mention 46 cities Sennacherib captured. The most difficult one was Lachish, whose eventual destruction is celebrated on a vivid bas relief from the Assyrian palace banqueting room which Austin Henry Layard found at Nineveh in 1849 and which is now in the British Museum. Sennacherib wrote of Hezekiah, "Himself, like a bird in a cage in the midst of Jerusalem, his royal city, I shut up." Even though Sennacherib forced Hezekiah to renew the tribute, he was unable to capture and destroy the city. The biblical account of the Lord sending the destroying angel to smite the Assyrians inspired the poet Byron to write "The Destruction of Sennacherib."

The Assyrian came down like the wolf on the fold,
And his cohorts were gleaming in purple and gold;
And the sheen of their spears was like the stars on the sea,
When the blue wave rolls nightly on deep Galilee.

Like the leaves of the forest when Summer is green,
That host with their banners at sunset were seen:
Like the leaves of the forest when Autumn hath blown,
That host on the morrow lay withered and strown.

For the Angel of Death spread his wings on the blast,
And breathed in the face of the foe as he passed;
And the eyes of the sleepers waxed deadly and chill,
And their hearts but once heaved, and forever grew still!

And there lay the rider distorted and pale,
 With the dew on his brow, and the rust on his mail;
 And the tents were all silent, the banners alone,
 The lances unlifted, the trumpet unblown.

And the widows of Ashur are loud in their wail,
 And the idols are broken in the temple of Baal;
 And the might of the Gentile, unsmeared by the sword,
 Hath melted like snow in the glance of the Lord!

God's destruction of Sennacherib was a lesson to him, salvation to Hezekiah, an inspiration to Lord Byron, and an example to us.

Thorough examination of ancient records has given us insights into the personality of Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon and friend of Daniel. He built the Hanging Gardens, which the Greeks numbered one of the Seven Wonders of the World, for his homesick wife. It seems she was the daughter of the king of the Medes, the strong ally from the eastern mountains who had helped destroy the power of the hated Assyrians. Media was a mountainous country while Babylon stood amidst the vast flat plains of muddy irrigated land between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers. It seems the mountain flower did not do well when she was transplanted and transformed into a mud bud. The young queen was the joy of the king; so when the queen became unhappy, the king became unhappy, and when the king became unhappy, the whole kingdom was unhappy. To alleviate the problem, the king ordered the Hanging Gardens to be constructed. Tons of dirt were carried and piled upon the tops of the tiered palace; special new tiers were constructed to hold more dirt and the myriad trees, plants, and blooming shrubs planted therein. Special pumps, driven continuously by slaves, carried water to the highest tier and from there cascaded down in falls and channels watering the gardens. The citizens of Babylon soon followed suit and

began growing trees and bushes on the tops of their flat-roofed houses. Eventually, from the tree-shaded balconies of the king's gardens the queen could look out over the city and see rolling, tree-covered hills and was content—as was the king, as was the kingdom. Nebuchadnezzar comes through the annals of history not only as a very human husband concerned for his homesick wife, but also as a man who got things done. Likewise, we see him portrayed in the Bible as a powerful mover and shaker who, nevertheless, respected Daniel and his God, the ultimate mover and shaker.

Another area of fruitful study in secular history is in the area of unwitting servants to God's purpose. Alexander the Great (born 356 B.C.) had an interesting encounter with the scriptures and then, unknowingly, set the stage for the coming of Christ. Alexander's father, Philip of Macedonia, had the dream of uniting all of Greece and with the help of his son did so in 338 with his conquest of Athens and Thebes and the formation of the Panhellenic League. Two years later, Philip was assassinated, and Alexander became king of Macedonia and Greece. Alexander immediately began to plan an invasion of Persia in order to free Greek cities and pay the Persians back for their invasion of Greece a hundred years earlier. In the spring of 334 B.C., Alexander led his men across the Hellespont and into Asia Minor, a province of Persia. Thereafter, Alexander and his men marched from victory to victory, defeating the dissipated Darius III at every contact. Tyre, Jerusalem, Egypt—all fell to him. Tyre resisted, while Jerusalem and Egypt readily surrendered. At Jerusalem an interesting meeting was held between Alexander and the High Priest of Jehovah. The High Priest, who ruled the city, met Alexander as he approached the holy precinct. He offered to surrender the city without resistance and pay homage and tribute if Alexander would only respect their religious beliefs. Alexander agreed and then surprised the High Priest when he asked if he had anything to tell him. Fascinated, the High Priest listened as Alexander explained how be-

fore he left Greece he had dreamed of meeting a man dressed like the High Priest, and in his dream this man had said, "When we meet, I will tell you of your future." With Alexander waiting, the High Priest ordered the scriptures to be brought and then read to him the prophecies in chapters 2, 8, and 11 of Daniel. Alexander was very pleased and treated the Jews very humanely. Later, he would invite the Jews to help populate his new city of Alexandria, Egypt, offering them a quarter of the city.

Leaving Egypt, Alexander went on to defeat the Persians, and then marched his Greek soldiers across what is today Iran to the Indus River, the border of India. We now know Alexander planned to march east until he could find the place the sun rose. But, there on the banks of the Indus River he met the first army he could not defeat. The battle between the king of the Greeks and the Raj of India was the first time Alexander's men had seen elephants in combat, and the conflict was a draw. The Raj and Alexander met and came to friendly terms. Alexander and his men could pass through India and keep marching east. However, when Alexander reported this news to his men, they refused to go. No amount of persuasion could convince them, and Alexander was forced to give up his dream and lead his men back to Babylon. Upon their return to Babylon, Alexander married Roxanne, a Persian princess, and ordered 80 of his officers and 10,000 of his men to marry Persian women.

The result of Alexander's marches across Persia to India was to establish throughout the near and middle east a legacy of Greek culture and a taste for Greek civilization. The most significant of these legacies was the Greek language which very quickly became universally spoken everywhere in Alexander's kingdom and beyond. Greek became the spoken and written language of commerce and diplomacy in all of the nations of the western Mediterranean and in Greek colonies throughout the Mediterranean. Thereby, Greek provided for the New Testament the commonality needed among the

polyglot of peoples and dialects which made up the ancient world. The gospel, written in Greek, could be read most anywhere among the ancient nations and cultures because Alexander and his men had taken it there.

One of history's greatest examples of excess and unscrupulousness, Herod the Great of Judah failed to kill the infant Jesus but did kill his own wife and three of his sons among hundreds of others. Here again, the study of secular history helps the Bible student come to know better this critically important player in the life of Christ. Herod came to the throne of Judah via the influence of his father and through marrying Mariamne, the daughter of the last Hasmonean king. Eventually his jealousy and paranoia would bring him to kill her and her two sons, Alexander and Aristobulus. Some have questioned why there is no record in Herod's annals of the massacre of the innocents found in Matthew 2:16. However, the existing accounts of Herod are so resplendent with atrocities and horrors that the deaths of some infants in an obscure village in remote Judea would easily go unnoticed. Regardless, Herod refused to die unnoticed. Having already executed Mariamne and her two sons, he imprisoned Antipater, a son by another wife, and then laid plans for his own death. This ruthless king, who had known and supported at various times Julius Caesar, Mark Antony and Cleopatra, and Caesar Augustus, had kept his throne through deception and judicious murder, now himself faced a disgusting and horrible end. His dissipated life had left him stricken with dropsy, cancer of the intestines, and probably soft canker gonorrhea. Josephus tells us Herod's afflicted body began to rot and to breed worms; this produced such a stench no one could stay in the same room with him or bear the foulness of his breath. In 4 B.C., Herod tried suicide but was prevented from success by a servant. With his life still in doubt, the court began to mourn, and Antipater, still in prison, heard the commotion and tried to bribe his guard to release him. Instead, the guard reported the

effort to Herod who had Antipater executed. The emperor Caesar Augustus, upon hearing that Herod had killed another son, quipped, "I had rather be Herod's hog, than his son." Herod, who would die only five days after killing Antipater, now worried no one would mourn his death, so he ordered several thousand prominent Jews rounded-up and held in the Jerusalem amphitheater with orders to kill them all upon the news of his death. This, Herod felt, would guarantee great mourning in the land upon his death. Fortunately, the guards were more responsible and released the men upon the death of their demented ruler. Herod died in screaming agony, a rotting corpse before death, and as he had anticipated, there were few in Judea who mourned his passing; instead many openly sneered, "Herod stole to the throne like a fox, ruled like a tiger, and died like a dog."

Augustus, first emperor of Rome, is also another excellent candidate for one of God's unwitting tools, as were several of his successors. It was Augustus who issued the decree "that all the world should be taxed" (Luke 2:1). Augustus's desire for an empire-wide census, in order to "fairly" tax all the provinces under Roman rule, brought Joseph back to his tribal homeland and with him, Mary, his betrothed. As a result, Christ was born in Bethlehem as scripture had predicted, while his family was being numbered among the emperor's taxpayers.

The fourth ruler of Rome was the crippled emperor Claudius, who, the Roman historian Suetonius records, had the Jews expelled from Rome because of the constant disturbances among them over the issue of Christ. Among the Jews chased out of Rome were Aquila and Priscilla who went to Corinth where in due time they came into communion with Paul the apostle. While it may be easy for us to understand how God used both Augustus and Claudius to effect His ends, it is far more difficult to accept that God could use even Nero, the first persecutor of Christians, for His divine purpose. Yet, Jesus

had warned His followers that after He left there would come a great persecution, and Nero was just the man to do it.

The emperor Claudius married Agrippina, his niece, and adopted her son Nero as his heir. Agrippina then poisoned Claudius with a toadstool casserole. The reign of Nero (A.D. 54-68) was at first hailed as the beginning of a new enlightened era. During those first years, Nero's strong-willed mother and his wise tutor Seneca directed his reign, but soon Nero chaffed under their control and decided to rid himself of them. He ordered Seneca to commit suicide and then set out to kill his mother using various poisons, but in this he failed. Agrippina was an expert poisoner herself and knew all the antidotes. He tried having a house fall on her and a specially made boat collapse with her on it, but she escaped all his efforts. Frustrated, Nero had it proclaimed that his mother had tried to have him killed and so, finally, had her executed. As a result of this matricide, he became an insomniac and mentally ill, all of which drove him to more and more excesses. Then in 64, Rome burned. Nero had never made a secret of the fact that he wanted to destroy Rome and rebuild it to his glory. Naturally, soon after the fires were out, whispers and rumors began blaming Nero for deliberately setting the fire. In order to escape the rising ill feeling against him, Nero sought scapegoats among the new religious movement called Christianity.

Christianity and Christians were very common in Rome in the A.D. 60s, but their practices were misunderstood and misinterpreted. Various accused of incest, cannibalism, atheism, being incendiaries, and haters of the human race, the Roman historian Tacitus continues,

And their death was aggravated with mockeries, insomuch that, wrapped in the hides of wild beasts, they were torn to pieces by dogs, or fastened to crosses to be set on fire, that when the darkness fell they might be burned to illuminate the

night. Nero had offered his own gardens for the spectacle, and exhibited a circus show, mingling with the crowd, himself dressed as a charioteer or riding in a chariot. Whence it came about that, though the victims were guilty and deserved the most exemplary punishment, a sense of pity was aroused by the telling that they were sacrificed not on the altar of public interest, but to satisfy the cruelty of one man.

As dire as these scenes appear in our mind's eye, the persecution was not long or very widespread, not yet anyway. It was indeed a time of testing and trial for the young church. Nevertheless, from the fires of persecution arose a stronger more dedicated church body. Tertullian (A.D. 155-225), early Christian apologist, wrote, "The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church." Even as Christians were being tortured and executed in the Circus Maximus before 50,000 blood-thirsty pagans, their example of courageous faith in the face of death made converts.

The late Dr. W.B. West, Jr., former dean of Harding Graduate School of Religion in Memphis, Tennessee, in his New Testament Times class, very eloquently pondered the meaning of Nero's reign and life: "Time was when the apostle Paul sat chained to a wall in the damp and dark Maritime Prison on the banks of Rome's Tiber River, while the Emperor Nero sat enrobed in purple silk upon an ivory and gold throne in his Golden Palace; but the day would come when men would name their sons—Paul, and their dogs—Nero."

The story of the little Church of Quo Vadis?, an early church favorite, takes place during the horrible days of Nero's persecution. The rapacious Roman soldiers, under Nero's orders, searched Rome relentlessly for Christians, and hundreds were discovered and imprisoned. The church community did what it could to protect its own, but there was one among their number whom they strove to protect above all, and this was the apostle Peter. Peter had come to

Rome some years earlier to help guide the church Paul and others had helped establish. Now, every effort was being made to conceal the precious apostle. Eventually, church leaders told Peter they could no longer keep him safe and begged him to leave Rome and save himself. Those brothers and sisters who were left did not want to be responsible for Peter falling into Nero's bloody hands. Reluctantly acceding to their pleas, early one morning Peter left Rome by way of the famous Appian Way. As he left the walls of Rome behind him and entered the quiet countryside, Peter looked down the road and felt he knew the approaching figure. Soon he was certain; the oncoming man was Jesus, the Lord, and as Jesus drew near Peter called out, "Quo Vadis, Domini?"—"Where are you going, Lord?" Where-with, Jesus answered, "Quo Vadis, Peter? I am going to Rome to be with my people; they need a shepherd, even if I must again be crucified." Peter, holding up his hands, replied, "Stop, Lord, I will go back to Rome and be their shepherd, even if I must face crucifixion," and turning there, he strode back to Rome, where eventually he was captured and crucified, according to tradition, upside-down. Today, on the outskirts of Rome, on the side of the ancient Appian Way, stands the small Church of Quo Vadis? whose title ever asks all passersby, "Where are you going?"

A few emperors later, Domitian, son of Vespasian, came to the throne. The reign of Domitian very effectively illustrates Lord Acton's observation, "Absolute power corrupts absolutely." Soon after ascending the throne, Domitian's advisors recommended, for the sake of a more united empire, that Domitian be universally worshiped as a god, one which would represent the power and majesty of Rome itself. At first, Domitian allowed this emperor worship to be put into place only as a state policy, but eventually he came to believe it of himself and ordered all to address him as "Lord, God, and Savior." Taking to himself these "names of blasphemy" this emperor who thought he was God set the stage for the Revelation.

Even as Domitian began an empire-wide persecution of Christians because they steadfastly refused to worship him, his sister Domitilla and her husband joined their ranks. Eventually, Domitian discovered his sister's secret, and after executing her husband, had her exiled. Domitilla, before being exiled, left most of her estate to fellow Christians, including much land on the outskirts of Rome where the Christians built a large catacomb in her honor. The catacomb of Domitilla has a full-sized church underground where Christians worshiped for many years in secret and in safety.

If Domitian's memory is one of infamy, then the memory of Polycarp is of a true early-Christian hero. The venerable Polycarp, elderly bishop of Smyrna in western Asia Minor, was one of the last links with those who had seen Christ, for he studied at the feet of the beloved apostle John. In 156, when persecution arose in Smyrna, Polycarp's life was threatened. The anti-Christians struck at Christian leaders trying to cripple the movement. The Christians of Smyrna hid Polycarp outside of town for some time until an informant revealed his location. A squad of government officials arrested him and carried him back to Smyrna's arena. As Polycarp was being returned, the captain of the officials, who respected Polycarp, pleaded with him, "What harm is there in saying 'Caesar is Lord' and sprinkling a little incense on the altar." But Polycarp ignored him. Upon Polycarp's arrival at the arena where dozens of other Christians awaited execution, the proconsul of Asia suggested a way out: "Have respect for your age, and swearing by the divinity of Caesar, say to these others, 'Away with these atheists.'" With great solemnity, Polycarp waved his hand towards the screaming pagan crowd and said, "Away with these atheists!" In spite of this, as Polycarp was being tied to the stake, the proconsul made one last effort to save the gray-haired patriarch: "Take the oath of loyalty to the emperor and revile Christ and I will let you go." Polycarp then made his noble confession: "Eighty and six years have I served Him, and He has

done me no wrong; how can I blaspheme my Savior and King?" The church record further notes how the local Jews who were very jealous of Polycarp's reputation for righteousness and good works broke the Sabbath and carried the wood he would be burned upon. Polycarp's martyrdom still remains one of Christianity's shining moments of faith and courage.

All the previous illustrate biblical connections. The rest will be decidedly secular examples which nevertheless illustrate or exemplify Christian principles, beliefs and/or their negatives. Constantine is famous among all Christians as the first "Christian" emperor, yet few know he had Fausta, his second wife, Crispus, his eldest son by his first wife, and a nephew Licinianus all executed for unexplained reasons. It is supposed there was some plot to take his throne, but Constantine's actions remain unclear to this day. Actually, much about Constantine and Christianity remains mysterious. Constantine, the father of Constantine, had divorced Constantine's mother, Helena; consequently, she turned to Christianity for solace. Helena had a very strong influence both upon her son and the early church; on the latter because, as one of the first Christian pilgrims, she went on an extended tour of Palestine. During this tour, she searched out the location of every biblical event she could think of and her guides were able to find every one; she built a shrine, church, or chapel at each site. Helena also returned to Rome laden with sacred treasures which she distributed to the many churches. Subsequently, the worship of holy relics received great enhancement.

As for Constantine, he eventually had to fight his rival Maxentius for control of the western Roman empire. The decisive battle came on October 27, 312, at the Milvian Bridge over the Tiber into Rome. The afternoon before the battle, Constantine reported seeing a flaming cross in the sky with the words "in this sign conquer." Constantine ordered the monogram of Christ "X † R" placed on all his men's shields and on their regiment banners. During the

battle, the people of Rome closed the gate on their side of the Milvian Bridge, allowing Constantine to crush Maxentius and his forces between his troops and the Tiber. Constantine then entered Rome as the undisputed emperor of the western Roman Empire.

In 313, Constantine met Licinius, his counterpart from the eastern empire, and the two issued the Edict of Milan which gave Christianity official recognition and tolerance throughout the empire. Licinius later revoked the edict in the east and persecuted Christians whom he felt favored Constantine. For his part, upon becoming emperor, Constantine had great hopes for using Christianity to help unify his empire, but he was soon disillusioned. He found the Christians divided over several different heresies. As a result, to bring some unity to Christianity and through them the empire, Constantine called the important Council of Nicaea in 325. The result of the council was the Nicene Creed which defined the godhead as three equal persons—God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—and gave us the term “trinity.”

Constantine was also indirectly involved in giving the Christian world one of its most lasting holidays. When he became emperor, Constantine was still a pagan and a worshiper of the “Invincible Sun” which was an amalgamation of several ancient civilizations’ sun gods: Egypt’s Re, Greece’s Helios, Mesopotamia’s Mithra, and Rome’s Apollo. Constantine, from his limited exposure to Christianity through his mother, saw Christianity as just another eastern sun cult. Jesus was after all referred to as “the light of the world.” With plans of grafting Christianity to the Invincible Sun cult, Constantine was surprised when he found Christians very much opposed to such an association. He was forced to come to a clearer understanding of just what these Christians believed and practiced. As he did so, Constantine himself slowly moved away from pagan worship and became interested in the teachings of Christ and the gospel. Yet, it would not be until he was on his deathbed that

Constantine would accept baptism. (This was not unusual for his day, for most believed very strongly in the power of baptism to remove one’s sins, but only the sins of the past and only once. Therefore, most delayed baptism until as close to death as possible so it would have the best possible results in removing all their past sins, and they would have little opportunity to sin further.)

Returning to the issue of the Invincible Sun, we see that as Christianity prospered under Constantine’s rule, those pagan celebrations associated with the worship of the Invincible Sun became competing events with Christian worship. The two most important events in the Invincible Sun’s calendar were the Summer and Winter Solstice, the longest and shortest days of the year respectively. On each of these dates, worshipers of the sun offered magnificent sacrifices to their god in order to keep him from going any farther north (in the summer) or south (in the winter). As soon as it became evident the sun was returning, there would be further celebrations. The winter solstice celebrations had even greater significance because they honored the “rebirth” of the sun from its weakest point. The winter solstice occurs on December 22 and the resulting celebration in honor of the sun’s rebirth was on the 25th. Early Christians, whose number was increasingly made up of former pagans, found it difficult to compete with such traditional pagan holy days and responded with competing Christian holy days. If the celebration of the rebirth of the Invincible Sun tempted their former pagan brothers and sisters to return to their former pagan practices, then they would simply offer a Christian alternative and would celebrate the birth of the Son of God. Consequently, Christmas (Christ’s mass) came into being and has remained the premier Christian holy day until the present, even though Christ was not actually born on December 25. In point of fact, we have no idea on what day Jesus was born, but can only conjecture it was either in the early spring or fall when there would be “shepherds abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night.”

The age of Constantine saw many important changes in the church from whose examples we can still learn today. Patronage of the emperor quickly made Christianity fashionable, and this was not a good thing. Many pagans wanted to become Christian, but only for show. They had only the most rudimentary understanding of Christian doctrine and practice and so kept much of their former pagan thoughts and ways. Accordingly, many pagan practices were eventually incorporated into church practice. Further, as a reaction to this development, there was a severe backlash to the worldliness which the influx of pagans brought to the church. An ascetic movement began among many to demonstrate visibly their holiness in contrast to the growing materialism and immorality they saw around them. These ascetics moved in at least two directions. The first, and most radical, was to become hermits and live isolated lives of extreme poverty and self-denial. Those who did not feel the call personally to abandon the worldly church still often sought out these hermits and to ask for their advice and prayers. The larger group were those who decided to live together in small groups behind walls or in secluded areas. This was the beginning of the monastic movement which, having started in the east, eventually spread to the west and became a significant part of medieval Catholic practice. Monks, nuns, abbots, and others were soon wielding considerable influence and power in the developing Catholic church. An important lesson we learn here is that success can be far more detrimental than adversity.

On August 22, 1485, the English King Richard III gave his answer to Jesus's question, "...what shall a man give in exchange for his soul?" When Edward IV (reigned 1461-1483) died, his son Edward V was 12 and his brother Richard only ten years of age. Edward IV's brother Richard was made regent and guardian of his two young nephews. But Richard wanted to be king, so he struck at Edward V's mother's family, imprisoning two of her brothers and later executing them; the queen mother herself fled to Westminster

Abbey for sanctuary. Other supporters of the queen mother and of Edward V were arrested, imprisoned, and executed. Richard pressured Parliament to declare Edward V and his brother illegitimate and himself then the true heir and King Richard III. Edward V and his brother Richard were incarcerated in the Tower of London and there, in 1483, secretly murdered. When Richard III moved to marry his niece, the daughter of Edward IV, even his own followers were shocked. In 1485, Henry, Earl of Richmond, landed a force to oppose Richard. The two forces met on Bosworth Field in August. The battle was a hard fought one with the fortunes of both sides waxing and waning during the conflict. At the critical point of the battle, one of Richard's nobles changed sides, and Richard found himself surrounded and hard pressed. He was unhorsed; running across the battlefield, he was reported to have yelled, "A horse! A horse! My kingdom for a horse!" He was struck down, the blow throwing his royal crown into a nearby bush where it was later found and placed upon the head of Henry, who became Henry VII, of the house of Tudor. Too late did Richard discover that all his treachery had brought him neither kingdom nor happiness.

Henry VIII's chancellor, Thomas Cardinal Woolsey, learned too late he had served the wrong prince. Woolsey was born (1475?) the son of a butcher and entered the church where he quickly demonstrated his ability to take care of dirty little problems, at first for the bishop and then for King Henry VIII. A man of easy morality and no scruples, Woolsey rose fast in the corrupt church of the day and in the eyes of King Henry. Soon Woolsey was Lord Chancellor of England, Archbishop of York, and holder of the Privy Seal, which gave him the power to act in the king's name. Then, events in the king's life began to take an ominous turn. His wife, Catherine of Aragon, who had produced only one child, a daughter Mary, entered her post child-bearing years, and Henry became increasingly concerned about the survival of his young dynasty. The Tudors were

only in their second reign. Henry VII had founded the dynasty and Henry VIII wanted to continue it. To do so, he felt he needed a son because England, up to that time, had had no ruling queen. Therefore, Henry decided to divorce his wife Catherine and marry a sweet young maid who had captured his eye, Anne Boleyn. Henry asked his chancellor and *factor factotum* to get him a divorce—quick. Woolsey moved pope and parliament to get the demanded divorce and came up empty, a victim of political alliances beyond his control. Henry grew impatient, then indignant, then vindictive. Furious at Woolsey's failure, forgetting all Woolsey had accomplished for him in the past, he stripped him of his honors, titles, and powers, and exiled him to a remote ascetic monastery in Yorkshire in 1529. Even this was not enough to stay the king's wrath, and after a year, Henry ordered Woolsey to return to London and stand trial for treason, a virtual death sentence. As the crushed Woolsey made his forlorn way to London, he became ill, and his guards stopped him at a wayside monastery where the monks took the condemned man in and gave him succor. His condition worsened, and with only a few monks beside him, Woolsey spoke his last words, "If I had but served my God with half the zeal I have served my king, He would not have abandoned me cold and naked before my enemies." Truly, if Thomas Cardinal Woolsey had spent more time studying his scriptures instead of politics, he might have remembered Psalm 118:9, "It is better to trust in the Lord than to put confidence in princes."

Henry VIII provides another excellent illustration of scripture with his reaction to the birth of his daughter Elizabeth. In order to marry Anne Boleyn, Henry had finally forced the issue of his divorce, and when the pope rejected his final plea, Henry split from the Catholic Church and established his own separate and independent church, the Church of England, with himself as the head. He then granted his own divorce and married Anne. After all this effort, Henry was highly expectant of a son and terribly disappointed when the

child was a girl. The great irony of this event is that as Henry VIII stared into Elizabeth's cradle and was so disheartened, he did not realize he was staring at the future queen Elizabeth I, who would reign longer than he, and whose reign would see the defeat of the Spanish Armada, the plays of Shakespeare performed, and the English Renaissance at its peak. This brings to mind 1 Samuel 16:7, "...for the Lord seeth not as man seeth; for man looketh on the outward appearance, but the Lord looketh on the heart."

Elizabeth I, for her own part, did not have an easy time becoming monarch. Henry VIII's third wife, Jane Seymour, gave him the son he so much wanted and died doing it. The sickly heir, Edward VI, reigned only six years, and then his sister Mary became the first queen to rule England. All of Henry's fears proved unfounded and the nation accepted, if somewhat reluctantly, the sovereignty of a woman. The major problem was Mary herself, for she was a Catholic, determined to bring the Church of England to an end, and she did not care who or how many she had to burn to do so. Her Catholic advisors tried repeatedly to persuade Mary to execute her half-sister Elizabeth, and Elizabeth often found herself confined in the fearsome Tower of London under suspicion and even a sentence of death. Still, Mary could not bring herself to order the death of Elizabeth who, by means of shrewd vacillations—keeping her sister guessing, survived. Released to return to her home at Hatfield House, north of London, Elizabeth was at her estate sitting beneath a tree reading when she looked up to see horsemen coming fast towards her across a large grassy field. She immediately wondered, "Am I to be arrested and returned to the Tower once again?" Standing as the horsemen drew close, Elizabeth awaited her fate. The first rider leapt from his steed, rushed to her, fell on his knee, handed her a ring, Mary's royal signet ring, and proclaimed her Queen of England. The other riders followed suit. Elizabeth, taking the ring, looked up at the sky saying, "This is the Lord's doing; it is marvelous in our eyes" (Ps.

118:23). Elizabeth went on to reign for 45 years, seeing Britain become a world power. She never married, for she came to say, "I am married to England." This is very near reality. Elizabeth was a woman who was first and foremost a queen. She had many loves over those 45 years, but when she began to form any serious relationship, the men she had the misfortune to love all wanted to be king and to make her subordinate. It was accepted then that the man was to be the head of the home, even if the home was a royal palace. But Elizabeth could not accept this arrangement, even if it was biblical. She was queen, and she could not allow any man to come between her and her majesty. Elizabeth would not give up her throne for love and so died with no heir; the Tudor line became extinct.

Well, if Elizabeth could never stop being queen in order to be a wife, there was one who came to value being wife more than being queen, and this was Victoria. Upon becoming queen in 1837 at age 18, both Victoria's family and her government began searching for her a husband. He was soon found in the person of Albert of Saxe-Coburg-Gotha, a minor German princeling. For Victoria it was love-at-first-sight, and she speedily proposed to the dashing Albert who humbly accepted. They were married on February 10, 1840, and soon settled into married life at Windsor Castle. Albert was a well-educated and brilliant young man with great potential, a potential even Victoria did not immediately recognize. While she saw Albert through the eyes of love as her sweet prince, she was queen. It was not long before tension developed in their relationship because Victoria became dismissive of Albert when it came to affairs of state. She made no move to invite Albert to assist her in her official duties involving matters of state. Whenever a privy council meeting was called, Albert would be summarily dismissed and told to busy himself while Victoria went off to do queen business. Albert soon became frustrated at being cut out of this large area of his wife's life, for he felt he had much to offer her in being a helpmeet to help bear

the burden of the crown. Writing to his uncle Leopold, King of the Belgians, for advice, Albert received this answer: "Remember, Albert, Victoria is first your wife, and she loves you. You must find a way to remind her of this." Accordingly, when the opportunity soon afforded itself, Albert acted. The couple had just finished luncheon when Victoria, preparing to meet with her ministers, dismissed Albert, who rose stiffly from the table and left the room without speaking, slamming the door behind him. Victoria was incensed to have her majesty so insulted. She followed Albert to their bedroom and found the door locked. This further upset her; she pounded upon the door, and when Albert asked through the door, "Who is it?" she forcefully answered, "It is your queen, Albert, open this door!" Nothing happened, so she pounded away again. And again Albert responded, "Who is it?" Victoria shouted, "It is your sovereign, Albert, open this door!" After nothing happened, Victoria stood for some time seething and then for a while longer in thought. Finally, after a considerable period, she knocked very gently upon the door. "Who is it?" asked the firm voice of Albert. "Your wife, Albert," was the answer, and the door opened. From that moment, Albert may have opened the door, but Victoria opened her heart and let Albert into all of her life, and he became her dearest partner and truest advisor. Anyone visiting Osborne House, their home on the Isle of Wight, upon entering their study will be impressed to see their two desks, touching, face to face, where queen and consort shared the mail and the many duties impendent upon the queen of a great nation. Victoria might be the monarch of a great people, but she was wife to Albert, coming to depend upon him; while he lived, she did not have to be queen alone.

How great personalities come to face death can often be inspirational. The following two examples will serve to conclude this article. General Thomas "Stonewall" Jackson, as fierce a warrior as our Civil War would see, was yet a man of faith, stern morality and

self-discipline who would not abide cursing among his officers or men. Even while campaigning, Jackson made it his practice to attend worship services where he could. In Frederick, Maryland, a city of Union sympathies that his army was occupying, he attended the Reformed Church on September 7, 1862, and when the minister offered his prayer for Abraham Lincoln many in the audience were afraid Jackson would be offended. He was not, mainly because he was so exhausted from the previous days of marching and riding that he slept through the sermon! Later, at the battle of Chancellorsville, General Jackson's own men accidentally shot him while he was reconnoitering the line of battle. Shot in the right hand and left arm, Jackson was carried to a surgeon who amputated his arm. Fearing a counterattack, the decision was made to transport the general to safety some 20 miles over rough roads to Guinea's Station. The trip and loss of blood so weakened Jackson that he soon contracted pneumonia. Growing weaker daily, he told his wife and attendants he wished to die on the Lord's day. On May 10, 1863, Jackson asked the day and was told it was Sunday; he softly replied, "Let us cross over the river and rest in the shade of the trees." A little later, he died as he had wished. Secondly, General Robert E. Lee was the greatest general the Civil War produced, but once he had surrendered, he promoted peace and reconciliation between North and South. Refusing lucrative offers to use his name and reputation for commercial ventures, Lee accepted the presidency of a small Virginia college, Washington College (now Washington and Lee University), and worked for the last five years of his life to be an example of a Christian citizen and leader. In October, 1870, returning from his church's business meeting in a freezing rain, he contracted a fever which became pneumonia. He lingered for some days in this fevered delirium during which he would occasionally shout out orders, "Tell A. P. Hill to bring up his brigade quickly," and so forth. Then on the 22nd his illness reached its crisis. Lee rested quietly that morning, then peace-

fully gave his last order, one he would have given often during his long campaign whenever they were to break camp and move on to new challenges, "Strike the tent." With this command, Lee passed on to join thousands of his former troops in the bivouac of the dead. His closing order reminds us of Paul's observation in 2 Corinthians 5:1, "For we know that if our earthly house of this tent were dissolved, we have a building of God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens."

These men and women of secular history furnish us with as bountiful precedents for following our God as do those recorded in the list of faith in Hebrews 11. The pages of recorded history are rife with the stories of men and women, saints and sinners, whose lives serve as vivid instruction manuals of triumph and disaster, heroism and cowardice, love and hate, joy and sorrow, the spiritual or the fiendish. It is dependent upon us to search the record, report our discoveries, and make the appropriate application, for as long as the pages of history remain closed, those who have walked life's pathways before us cannot speak, cannot warn, cannot encourage us on our way. As Longfellow penned in his *Psalm of Life*:

Lives of great men all remind us
We can make our lives sublime,
And, departing leave behind us
Footprints on the sands of time.

CHURCH GROWTH



PLANNING IN THE LOCAL CONGREGATION

Carroll Sites
Higden church of Christ
Higden, AR

INTRODUCTION

Working for today, planning for tomorrow, building for eternity.

The above caption was taken from a statement on the front of a bulletin published by the Dixie church of Christ in North Little Rock, Arkansas. It really caught my attention. If we are going to accomplish what is in the statement, we must have vision and good planning. Today is yesterday's tomorrow. If we are going to build for eternity, it must be done on purpose. God is a God of order. In God's scheme of things, there was and is a definite plan. His will did not, and does not come about accidentally. God has a plan. He is the Master Planner! God planned the universe—the earth—and all things that inhabit the earth, including you and me. And everything "brings forth after its own kind" (Gen. 1:11,12, 21, 25). God planned it—and He did it. He also turned over some responsibility to His created beings—humans.

God planned for the salvation of man from the very beginning. From the foundation of the world, salvation was planned to be "in Christ" (Eph. 1:3-6). When the "fullness of time" came (Gal. 4:4-5), it happened just as God had planned. Jesus was and is "the way, the truth, and the life" (John 14:6). In Him we have "all spiritual blessings" (Eph. 1:3). We are a "new creature" (2 Cor. 5:17). We obtain "salvation, which is in Christ Jesus" (2 Tim. 2:10). Christ gave us the

way of faith in Him (John 8:24; Mark 16:15); He calls us to repentance of sin (Luke 13:3,5; Acts 2:38; Acts 17:30); confession of faith in Him (Mat. 10:32-33; Acts 8:37; Rom. 10:9-10); and baptism into Him for remission of sins (Mark 16:14-16; Acts 2:37-38,41; Rom. 6:1-7; Gal. 3:25-27). He planned for us to be servants administering love, grace, and forgiveness in the same way that He administers these to us.

Even the worship in the Lord's church was planned. In John chapter 4, Jesus was having a discussion with a Samaritan woman at Jacob's well in Sychar. They got into a discussion about worship, and Jesus explained to her God's plan for worship. It was to be "in spirit and in truth" (John 4:23-24). In other words, any worship that is not offered from the heart and centered around Jesus, in harmony with His word, is unacceptable to God, according to His plan.

THE CHURCH AND PLANNING

Good planning makes good sense. God planned—the world plans—but what about the church? How is the planning process in the congregation where you attend? Do you have a plan for the services next Sunday morning? How about Sunday night? How about Wednesday night? What are your plans to evangelize your community? Do you plan for growth? How about plans for the edification of every member? What are your plans for next year? How about the next three to five years? Do you have a ten-year plan? What are you planning for the next generation?

Frequently, when I ask how things are going where others worship, I often hear "Well, we're holding our own." Now, just what does that mean? Do you suppose those in the world are satisfied to "hold their own"? Do you think Fortune 500 companies are satisfied just to "hold their own"? Are we allowing the people of this world to be wiser than the people of God in their visionary planning? Can we

afford to? I'm afraid that many times we "plan to fail" by "failing to plan"! This "we're holding our own" usually means that we have no plans for anything! If that is our thinking, then we are our own worst enemy. In the church we have ability—facilities, funds, education, technology, time. What are we doing with it? Do we have effective plans to use the resources that we have?

In days gone by, we went to services on the Lord's Day in a wagon and stayed all day with dinner on the ground. We didn't have automobiles, radios, televisions, computers, or fancy buildings with hundreds of creature comforts. There was no "running water" and subsequently no rest rooms. There wasn't even any electricity. Times have changed! In America, we live in a fast-paced, highly-educated, modern world. In our particular culture, at this particular time if we are going to be effective in our service to the Lord and His people, we are going to have to plan it. Based on several years of experience gained as director of plans and programs for the Air National Guard and as a preacher for the local congregation for 37 years, I would like to point out a few things that I believe will help us do better in our planning.

DEVELOP A WEEKLY PLAN

Do you have a printed plan for the weekly services conducted at your congregation? Why not publish a monthly schedule of all who are to participate in the services week to week. Some congregations do this, but many do not. I have worshiped in a number of congregations where little or no advance planning was done concerning who would lead prayer, serve at the communion table, or even teach the classes. When I was very young in the faith and young as a preacher, both in age and maturity, I visited a congregation where I was spontaneously asked to teach class concerning Melchizedek in Hebrews 6. It was very obvious that no previous planning had been done.

After some very embarrassing moments, I finally stood before the class, and, needless for me to say, the lesson showed no planning, no preparation, and little knowledge on my part. This is *not* the way to plan a Lord's Day service. It is little wonder that some congregations go backward rather than forward.

Chart number 1 (at the end of this article) is a sample of the worksheet used at the Higden congregation where I worship. Two of our deacons work with the secretary to compile the monthly schedule. It is mailed to each family in the congregation via the weekly church bulletin. The schedule is also posted on all bulletin boards in the church building. Adapt this worksheet as you wish and use it to develop your own written plan for the worship services this next Sunday. It is also helpful to publish sermon topics and scripture readings in advance. At Higden this is done each week in the bulletin. This helps all involved to know what is expected of them and allows those who are assigned scripture readings to prepare the selection in advance. Written schedules also serve as a record of what has been done in the past and who has already served, thus preventing boring duplication while at the same time providing continuity both in serving and in lessons presented. This should help enhance the worship experience for the members.

DEVELOP A YEARLY PLAN

Do you have a printed yearly plan of work at your congregation? At Higden we call it our "Program of Work and Service." It covers a 12-month period. In it, we detail plans for congregational organization, benevolence work, evangelism (both local and distant), congregational activities (for young, old, and mixed), special efforts during the year (gospel meetings, VBS, lectures, fellowship activities, etc.), plans for edification of the body, leadership areas of responsibility, the yearly financial/budget plan, and anything else that

should be incorporated in the yearly planning for the congregation. This plan is published for our young people, showing all the various activities for the youth planned during the year. Not only does this yearly plan of work serve as a good planning tool, but it also serves as an excellent tool for communication between the elders and the members. It pays to keep people informed. Informed people—equals greater participation—equals a stronger membership. Isn't that what we desire?

DEVELOP A LONG-TERM PLAN

Do you have a written long-term plan at your congregation? You need to think about "visionary" planning. In his book, *How to Build a Great Church*, Mac Layton states, "Great vision builds great churches—great plans accomplish great things." This is so very true. I think of visionary planning as looking into the future, planning for the next three or five or ten years or even further. What plans do you have for your congregation three years from now? We presently have a three-year plan in place at the Higden congregation. After communication meetings with the elders and the ladies of the congregation and two brain-storming sessions with the elders and the men of the congregation, we have more than 100 suggestions to evaluate, consider, and prioritize. Chart number 2, Areas for Long-Range Planning, contains a list of the major categories considered in this planning. Admittedly, some of the things in this list will never happen, but many will. But we have to PLAN to make anything happen. Layton tells the story of the little snail that was climbing a cherry tree. It was mid-winter. There were no leaves on the tree, much less cherries. His buddy asked him, "Why are you climbing up this cherry tree when there are no cherries on it and won't be until summertime?" The little snail replied, "There will be by the time I get there." Vision! Planning! Preparation! Doing! It all works to-

gether. Many times we never do anything because we never PLAN to do anything.

WRITE IT DOWN

Write it down. Weekly plans. Monthly plans. Yearly plans. Decade plans. Write them down and give them to every member. "Then the Lord answered me and said: write the vision and make it plain on tablets, that he may run who reads it" (Hab. 2:2). Where are we? Are we where we want to be? Where do we go from here? Where do we want to go? What do we want to accomplish for the Lord—His church—His people? How do we do it? How do we get there? Be visionary. Plan it. Write it down. Talk about it. Talk it up. Pray about it always. Stick to it. When the mission of the church is made plain, then those who read it will run with it and much good will be accomplished for the Lord and His people. Souls will be saved because we *plan* to teach and convert them. The congregation will grow in number and in faith because we *make plans* for it. We will go to heaven and enjoy it because we have *planned for it* and ultimately because *God Himself planned for it*. Can we afford to do less? Dare we fail to express our deep gratitude to Jehovah for the great love and mercy He has manifested to each of us? What does God owe us? NOTHING! What do we owe God? EVERYTHING! What has God done for us? EVERYTHING! What do we do for God? Let's plan the work and work the plan. Be "...steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that your labor is not in vain in the Lord" (1 Cor. 15:58). May God bless you and the congregation where you attend in your planning and service to Him.

CHART #1:

Hidden Church of Christ			Worship Service Leaders				July		Year: 1999		
Day	Date	Wednesday Speaker	Song Leader	Opening Prayer	Month	Scripture Reading (BEFORE COMMUNION)	Closing Prayer	Closing Comments	Nursery	Greeters	
SUN AM	July 04										
SUN PM											
WED	July 07										
SUN AM	July 11										
SUN PM											
WED	July 14										
SUN AM	July 18										
SUN PM											
WED	July 21										
SUN AM	July 25										
SUN PM											
WED	July 28										
SUN AM											
SUN PM											
Serving at the Lord's Table:											
Alternate on Table:											
Serve in Foyer:											
Taping:											
		July Lesson Scripture Reading —				— AM & PM Sunday					

**CHART #2:
AREAS FOR LONG-RANGE PLANNING**

Local evangelism
Mission evangelism
Facilities
Education
Youth
Body life
Budget/Finances
Staff
Congregational communication
Leadership development
Spiritual enrichment
Equipment
Other

SCHOOL OF BIBLICAL STUDIES



THE WORK OF AN EVANGELIST

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The work of an evangelist is a great undertaking for which a man should well prepare himself. The gospel message is always relevant, whether it is popular among the masses or not. Paul admonished the evangelist Timothy in 2 Timothy 4:2-4:

Preach the Word; be prepared in season and out of season; correct, rebuke and encourage—with great patience and careful instruction. For the time will come when men will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear. They will turn their ears away from the truth and turn aside to myths.¹

Although generations have come and gone since the resurrection of the Lord, His message has remained constant. Peter, quoting the Old Testament, wrote these words: “For, ‘All men are like grass, and all their glory is like the flowers of the field; the grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of the Lord stands forever.’ And this is the word that was preached to you” (1 Peter 1:24-25). Although the events of the gospel occurred some 2,000 years ago, their impact will carry on until the second coming of Christ.

History has gone in cycles, from times of severe wickedness to times of great spiritual revival. Some think that Paul was speaking of our era when he wrote in 2 Timothy 3:1-5:

But mark this: There will be terrible times in the last days. People will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boastful, proud, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy, without love, unforgiving, slanderous, without self-control, brutal, not lovers of the good, treacherous, rash, conceited, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God—having a form of godliness but denying its power.

Really, the period of the “last days” has been present ever since the first century (Acts 2:17; Hebrews 1:2; James 5:3; 2 Peter 3:3). Moral depravity is common to man from generation to generation, and we still need the saving message of Christ today!

It is extremely important for preachers to have a firm grasp on 1 & 2 Timothy and Titus. These three letters have been somewhat mislabeled as the “Pastoral Epistles.” Spain summarizes the background of this title:

“As early as the 13th century Thomas Aquinas made a reference to 1 Timothy as a letter that provides something of a ‘pastoral rule.’ But it was probably Paul Anton’s series of lectures on the three letters, delivered in 1726, which he entitled ‘The Pastoral Epistles,’ that established this terminology.”²

Although the letters contain the qualifications for pastors (shepherds),³ they are written to evangelists. It would be better to label these letters the “Evangelical Epistles.”

An evangelist is one who preaches the good news.⁴ Paul commanded Timothy to “do the work of an evangelist, discharge all the duties of your ministry” (2 Timothy 4:5).⁵ Within the letters written to Timothy, he is also referred to as a “minister” (1 Timothy 4:6), a “man of God” (1 Timothy 6:11), a “good soldier” (2 Timothy 2:3),

and “the Lord’s servant” (2 Timothy 2:24). Although an evangelist may travel from congregation to congregation (as Titus did on the island of Crete, Titus 1:5), he may also be settled down in a location for several years (as Timothy was in Ephesus, 1 Timothy 1:3).

The sound commands that Paul gave to both Timothy and Titus should shape our ministries today. Our definition of an evangelist’s work and character should be rooted in Scripture. We will look at eight principles from 1 & 2 Timothy and Titus which should aid in one’s work as a preacher of the gospel. A few passages from other biblical books will also be consulted.

AVOID UNNECESSARY CONTROVERSY

Paul repeatedly warns Timothy and Titus to steer clear of controversies that would stunt the growth of the church. He writes to Timothy: “Don’t have anything to do with foolish and stupid arguments, because you know they produce quarrels. And the Lord’s servant must not quarrel; instead, he must be kind to everyone, able to teach, not resentful” (2 Timothy 2:23-24; cf. 1 Timothy 4:7). To Titus he writes: “But avoid foolish controversies and genealogies and arguments and quarrels about the law, because these are unprofitable and useless” (Titus 3:9).

The controversies in the church today are somewhat different from those Timothy faced in Ephesus and Titus faced on Crete. They struggled with gnostic and Judaizing elements that brought on all kinds of mystical ideas which had nothing to do with the Christian faith. Our problems seem to have more of a hermeneutical and personality flavor.

Controversy may arise where God has not spoken in depth on a particular subject or problem. A sister in Christ told me recently, “We want to put a question mark where God put a period.” We may

not always be able to answer every question that is raised in our studies. It is helpful to re-emphasize the things we firmly believe.

Not all controversy in the church is bad. It can be a "growth opportunity." "No doubt there have to be differences among you to show which of you have God's approval" (1 Corinthians 11:19). In matters of doctrine, the preacher should teach those who are misinformed and misguided. "Those who oppose him he must gently instruct, in the hope that God will grant them repentance leading them to a knowledge of the truth" (2 Timothy 2:25). An evangelist should himself have a searching heart, always looking for the truth.

A preacher must deal carefully with disputes. Charles Hodge aptly writes: "A preacher must have the heart of a child and the hide of a rhinoceros!"⁶ Many disputes arise over personal preferences. When a body of diverse people unite as one, it is natural for there to be conflicts in likes and dislikes. It is important always to hold before the congregation the truths that unite us in the Lord. The preacher can become a bridge-builder and a peace-maker (Matthew 5:9; Philippians 4:2).

As a minister becomes involved in the lives of people, he will learn things about them that no one else knows. He must know how to keep a secret (Proverbs 11:13). One of the greatest evils that plagues the church today is gossip. Although it is socially acceptable, the Bible condemns gossip as sin (Proverbs 10:18; 11:9; 16:28; 26:20; 2 Corinthians 12:20). One should ask the following questions when sharing information about a brother or sister: 1) Is it true? 2) Is it necessary? 3) Is it edifying?

EMPHASIZE THE BOOK

A knowledge of Christ, the gospel, and the Christian life only stem from a knowledge of the Bible. "Consequently, faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word

of Christ" (Romans 10:17). What other way can we learn and know the truth? An evangelist is always a student. It has been said that "the apostles got it by inspiration, we get it by perspiration." One must have a growing knowledge of the Book!

Paul laments that those who knew the least were shouting the loudest: "They want to be teachers of the law, but they do not know what they are talking about or what they so confidently affirm" (1 Timothy 1:7). It is popular today to replace class lectures with discussions to make each person feel more like a participant. This can be a positive experience if everyone has prepared for the class beforehand. Too often this is not the case. A discussion class can degenerate into a "pool of ignorance."

While there is great emphasis on "diversity" today, Paul emphasizes sameness. There is a pattern for each congregation to follow that originated with the Lord (Matthew 28:19). Paul writes: "What you heard from me, keep as the pattern of sound teaching, with faith and love in Christ Jesus" (2 Timothy 1:13). "Sound teaching" (1 Timothy 1:3, 10; 4:3, 6; 6:1, 3; Titus 1:9; 2:1) is that which helps a person grow into what the Lord would have him be, in contrast to instruction that functions like gangrene eating away at one's spiritual vitality (2 Timothy 2:17).

We should be cautious against "reading into the text" (eisegesis) and are called to "read out of the text" (exegesis). Paul writes to Timothy, "Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a workman who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the word of truth" (2 Timothy 2:15). We must respect the original meaning of the author ("authorial intent"). Exploring such background issues as authorship, dating, audience, and situation will keep us from misinterpreting and misapplying the text.

A preacher should always be devoted to sharing the Scriptures with the church he serves. "Until I come, devote yourself to the public reading of Scripture, to preaching and to teaching" (1 Timo-

thy 4:13). We must interact with Scripture in our lessons to give our hearers an anchor for their faith. Good stories help to illustrate Scripture but are no substitute for it.

Certainly each one has his own style of ministry and will be better at some aspects than others. Excel in the area in which you are gifted but also grow in the areas where you are weak. Timothy had received a gift that Paul encouraged him to use: "Do not neglect your gift" (1 Timothy 4:14) and "fan into flame the gift of God, which is in you" (2 Timothy 1:6).

The preacher is an anthropologist—he attempts to understand how people think and what they believe. He will search for ways to motivate people to serve the Lord better. He will learn what others believe by watching religious programming on television, reading religious articles in newspapers or magazines, reading books about other groups, and talking with these religious people.

An evangelist should point people to Jesus. Naturally, he will use illustrations from everyday life (including his own personal experiences) to help his hearers connect the ancient text to modern life. But he should never do this to the extent that people are distracted from the underlying message. Paul writes: "For we do not preach ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, and ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake" (2 Corinthians 4:5). We must periodically evaluate our motives for preaching. "Faithfulness, not fame, must be our goal."⁷

WORK WITH HUMILITY

The Greek proverb "know yourself" is applicable here. Although some will try to place you on a pedestal, you need not accept the invitation. While it is nice to receive encouragement (we all need a "Barnabas," cf. Acts 4:36), one should also listen to his critics. It is

only by hearing their words that we will correct our mistakes and improve our preaching.

"All have sinned" (Romans 3:23)—and this number includes each one of us. We all need God's grace to reach heaven. Paul, as bold as he was, realized that it was God's grace that made him a saint. Due to his past, this was an amazing thing! Paul "was once a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent man" but was changed because of grace. The all-powerful sacrifice of Christ could save even him, the worst (chief) of sinners (1 Timothy 1:12-16). God "saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy. He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit" (Titus 3:5). The preacher is a "wounded healer." He has been touched by God's grace and wants to share its healing power with others who have also been wounded by sin.

A preacher should have a right estimation of himself. Paul warns the Roman Christians, "Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought" (Romans 12:3). We should have humility before God and before our brothers and sisters in Christ. Yet the evangelist should also possess a sense of security as a child of God (cf. 1 Timothy 4:12).

There should not be anything that is "below" our dignity when it comes to serving the church. Some of the work that a preacher is expected to perform is neither easy nor enjoyable. One might not always enjoy visiting the sick in the hospital or nursing home or going to a funeral visitation. But these services are necessary and will make a big impact in others' lives. Paul was willing to do whatever it took to impact the world for Christ. In some cases he even engaged in "vocational ministry" (2 Thessalonians 3:7-9). He writes to the Corinthians, "So I will very gladly spend for you everything I have and expend myself as well" (2 Corinthians 12:15).

There will be some difficult situations that one will encounter as a preacher. He must remember that he is not God. The evange-

list must do his best to present God's truth as he understands it in a very kind manner. Yet, in the final analysis, it is the Lord who will judge. There is great comfort found in realizing that "the Lord knows those who are his" (2 Timothy 2:19).

A preacher must be himself. He must not try to imitate the style of someone he is not. Not everyone can be a Campbell or a Stone. A minister often begins with the idealism that he will set the world on fire. After preaching a few years, it is easy to become discouraged because he has not accomplished all that he has set out to do. Set high goals, and you will achieve much more than without them. Aim low, and you'll hit it every time. In ministry idealism fades to realism, but never give up.

SET AN EXAMPLE

The congregation looks to her preacher (and elders) to be a role model worth imitating. Although Timothy was considered young by the aging apostle, Paul believed that he could still make a huge impact for Christ. "Don't let anyone look down on you because you are young, but set an example for the believers in speech, in life, in love, in faith and in purity" (1 Timothy 4:12). Coupled together, Timothy's "life and doctrine" had the potential of saving both himself and those who listened to him (1 Timothy 4:16).

Our society has witnessed a rapid change in women's roles to the point that there is little distinction between the role of a man and a woman (or husband and wife). These changes have disturbed the church. If a preacher is married, he and his wife should model the differences between husbands and wives (cf. 1 Timothy 2:8-15; Ephesians 5:22-33). Leadership and submission should be evident in their relationship.

An evangelist should spend adequate time with his own family so as to build the relationships with his wife and children. The

greatest ministry he can perform is that of a husband and a father. He has the utmost responsibility to train his children in the ways of the Lord. What good would it be to win the whole world and lose one's wife and kids?

A preacher must also use discretion when it comes to financial planning. The same rule that Paul laid down for members of the church also applies to the preacher: "If anyone does not provide for his relatives, and especially for his immediate family, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever" (1 Timothy 5:8). Decisions on which church to serve should not be decided solely on money (cf. warnings against greed, 1 Timothy 6:9-11), but one should also not place his family in jeopardy. There is a need for budgeting, planning for your children's education, insurance, and retirement.

EMPOWER THE CHURCH

The preacher is not the pastor. God has not called him to run the church—nor should he want to. Paul emphasized to both Timothy and Titus the need for qualified leadership (1 Timothy 3:1-7; Titus 1:5-9). A minister should encourage the present leaders or patiently help establish a godly leadership if one does not already exist. He should emphasize and model respect for leaders (cf. 1 Timothy 5:17; Hebrews 13:17; 1 Peter 5:5). He should encourage the work of elders, deacons, and teachers from the pulpit.

An evangelist can use classes and personal help to train others to teach. "And the things you have heard me say in the presence of many witnesses entrust to reliable men who will also be qualified to teach others" (2 Timothy 2:2). Personal help may include: 1) pointing a brother to the particular passage, 2) helping with a lesson topic, 3) showing him how to develop an outline, and 4) encouraging him to get up and speak before a group of Christians.

Jesus ordained both evangelists and pastor-teachers to be placed in the structure of the church for the building up of the body. Paul writes in Ephesians 4:11-13:

It was he who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers, to prepare God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.

A preacher should constantly be searching for ways to involve each member of the family of God. Stone aptly writes,

"Every minister must learn that it is better to get ten men to work than to do the work of ten men. Perhaps you can do something quicker yourself, but you'll still be doing it yourself 20 years from now unless you train someone else to do it. Besides, you are robbing the person of a chance to do his part."⁸

Much more work could be done in evangelism, benevolence, and service if each member played an active role in church work. And this work must be done! "The church of Christ must reach out or it will pass out; it must evangelize or fossilize."⁹

AVOID FAVORITISM

All people should be treated with kindness regardless of their age, education, position in the community, wealth, or race. Church life involves the very young to the aged. There are those who are illiterate and those who have earned a Ph.D. Congregations will of-

ten be composed of people who are struggling to get by financially (maybe even unemployed) to those who are well-off community leaders. In some contexts, there may be a mixture of races who belong to the same local church. This poses a difficulty because the audience is composed of people from different spiritual backgrounds and learning styles. An evangelist should try to shape his sermons and classes to communicate to all who are present.

Jesus modeled compassion for all people. He had the time for the young, those on the fringe, and those struggling with enslaving sin in their lives. As a part of fragmented society, it is easy to oscillate toward those you have the most in common with and in whose presence you feel most comfortable. However, they might not be the ones who need you most. Don't show favoritism; treat all people with dignity. Be involved and show interest in every age group within the church (1 Timothy 5:1-2; Titus 2:1-10). Paul calls Timothy to be consistent in his work: "I charge you, in the sight of God and Christ Jesus and the elect angels, to keep these instructions without partiality, and to do nothing out of favoritism" (1 Timothy 5:21).

KEEP YOURSELF PURE

The preacher will do great damage to the church if he becomes entangled in sin. His reputation will become scarred and the gospel mocked. Paul warns Timothy, "[D]o not share in the sins of others. Keep yourself pure" (1 Timothy 5:22; cf 2 Timothy 2:22). To Titus he writes: "In everything set them an example by doing what is good. In your teaching show integrity, seriousness, and soundness of speech that cannot be condemned, so that those who oppose you may be ashamed because they have nothing bad to say about us" (Titus 2:7-8).

Hodge notes, "Preaching is not the art of making a sermon and delivering it. Preaching is the art of making a man and delivering him."¹⁰ A person teaches by his lifestyle. There is a pitiful picture of the fallen televangelist Jim Bakker on his book cover which is entitled *I Was Wrong*. Paul writes: "I beat my body and make it my slave so that after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified for the prize" (1 Corinthians 9:27).

The minister needs to be involved in spiritual exercises for his own growth—he must train himself to be godly (1 Timothy 4:7). He must "continue in" what he has already learned and become convinced of (2 Timothy 3:14). Not only is his ministry plowed and seeded by fervent Bible study, but it should also be fertilized by ardent prayer. The work cannot be accomplished through one's own abilities. We need strength from God to carry out this important task. A minister should pray with his family before meals (1 Timothy 4:4-5) and throughout the day; for the government (1 Timothy 2:1-2) and the physically and spiritually sick; during Bible study and certainly before he stands up to speak to God's people.

The preacher is also a counselor. His heart, at times, will be burdened down with the problems and sins of church members. His mind will need refreshing by positive, spiritual ideas. One helpful way to accomplish this is by listening to gospel songs and other music with a positive Christian message. Paul emphasizes the need for spiritual reprogramming: "Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things" (Philippians 4:8).

KEEP YOURSELF HEALTHY

It is unprofitable for a preacher to work himself into the ground and cut his years of service short. He must get enough sleep. There

is always enough work to keep busy all day and all night. He must also be careful what he eats. Dinner invitations and potlucks will keep him well fed. Watch what you eat, and don't be the first in line. Proverbs warns against gluttony (23:2, 20-21; 28:7). A minister should model discipline to others.

Hours of study will keep the evangelist hunched over a desk or behind a computer screen. He needs to find some form of exercise to keep fit. It is helpful to stand while reading, to use the stairs when visiting the hospital, and to avoid parking in the convenient spaces marked "clergy." Even Paul notes the importance of one's health when he says, "For physical training is of some value" (1 Timothy 4:8). He is concerned about Timothy's health and tells him, "Stop drinking only water, and use a little wine because of your stomach and your frequent illnesses" (1 Timothy 5:23).

The work of an evangelist is a noble task. It requires love for God, the Word of God, and the people of God. It is difficult work because the results are not immediately tangible. While it is encouraging to see the penitent come to the Lord in baptism, it is difficult to evaluate your influence on the saved to whom you preach week after week. Seed planters and waterers may not always witness the harvest of their labors, but they will be greatly rewarded by the Lord when he returns (1 Corinthians 3:6-8).

ENDNOTES

1. All quotations are from the *New International Version*.
2. Carl Spain, *The Letters of Paul to Timothy and Titus*, The Living Word Commentary, vol. 14 (Austin, TX: Sweet, 1970): 7.
3. The qualifications for pastors (shepherds) are found in 1 Timothy 3:1-7 and Titus 1:5-9. Pastors are equivalent to elders (presbyters) and overseers (bishops). Cf. Acts 20:17, 28; 1 Peter 5:1-3. A plurality of these men led each local congregation (Acts 14:23).
4. G. Friedrich, "evangelists," in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, abridged (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985): 272.

5. The term "evangelist" is also used to describe Philip (Acts 21:8). Evangelists are among those placed in the church's leadership for her growth and edification (Ephesians 4:11). Cf. Romans 10:15.

6. Charles Hodge, *Your Preacher* (Fort Worth, TX: Star Bible, 1972): 21-22.

7. Sam E. Stone, *The Christian Minister: A Practical Approach to the Preaching Ministry*, rev. (Cincinnati: Standard, 1991): 12

8. Ibid., 23.

9. Ibid., 30.

10. Hodge, 16.

A CALL TO WORSHIP: FELLOWSHIP AT THE LORD'S TABLE

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UNDERSTANDING THE TIMES

A call for "Understanding the times" is nothing new. Each generation wrestles with issues that impact how it understands its particular slice of time. One issue that has garnered a significant amount of attention in our time is worship. At least two camps have emerged from the discussion: (1) the traditional worship advocates and (2) the proponents of a contemporary worship model. Likely there are hybrids or modifications of these two as well.

I am not interested in an extensive comparison of the two models, although I intend to comment briefly on each one. My main interest lies in sharing what I believe is the most important aspect of worship, that is, a proper understanding of what is experienced when one gathers with others to offer praise to God.

The nuts and bolts of worship (traditional model versus contemporary model) are of interest, but not nearly as important as having a proper understanding of what God expects His people to experience when they assemble as the body of Christ. As my title indicates, the Lord's Supper will play a pivotal role in fulfilling what I believe is the vital experiential aspect of the assembly—fellowship.

Having established worship as the issue to be examined, from the perspective of "understanding the times," and noting that the context is the fellowship of the Lord's table, let's get to the task at hand.

UNDERSTANDING WORSHIP

Worship is the gathering of people who participate together in praising God. It is an assembly with tremendous potential for one's being enriched, excited, and revitalized; unfortunately, it often ends up being nothing more than the fulfillment of a religious requirement.¹

Participation in worship is not optional, and failing to do so is to fail to worship. God created man in order to share fellowship and love with Him; "understanding the times" requires that we realize there is no greater opportunity for fellowship with our Creator than when we answer His call to assemble.

Robert Webber is correct in his assessment that worship is a verb—something one does.² Our fellowship has spent considerable time, and continues to do so, discussing forms (nuts and bolts) or how a church should "do" worship. Jack Reese neatly sums up what many are interested in doing in terms of a worship experience:

Many are interested not in decreasing the demands of worship for the sake of the outsider, but increasing the demands of worship for the sake of believers, not eliminating discomforts for the worshipers but creating opportunities for the transformation of the community, not in merely doing worship rightly but being made right by a God who they feel is vitally present in the assembly.³

Reese's comment call for an evaluation of the important factor, in my judgment one that is often overlooked, of feeling the presence of God in the assembly.

Any discussion of worship and feeling is red-flagged by many in our brotherhood (especially strict adherents to the traditional worship model). The mere mention of feelings in the same sentence with

the word *worship* brings fear and trembling to those who major in proper worship forms and procedures to the exclusion of searching for experience (feeling).

Mike Root warns that emphasizing a special presence of God in our assemblies is harmful:

To say there is a special presence of God in assembly is to ignore his continual presence in our daily lives. The doctrine of God's special presence in assembly is great at producing guilt and loyalty to the assembly, but its origin is found in temple worship.⁴

While I believe Root's caution is worthy of consideration, it must also be pointed out that God has always appointed times and places where He appeared to His people in a special way.⁵ This was true even though He was always with them.

Everett Ferguson points out that worship occurs outside of the church meeting places:

The common meaning applied to worship, the assembly of believers gathered for corporate acts of devotion, represents a narrowing down of the New Testament meaning of worship: worship properly understood, covers the Christian life with all of its acts of service and devotion. Worship to God occurs in the church meetings, but not exclusively there.⁶

On the one hand, Ferguson's comments show that we should not compartmentalize worship to the confines of our meetinghouse. On the other hand, he points out that we need to understand that in our overall service to God, the assembly, which is only part of the total service to God, still holds a central place in that service.⁷

In spite of the inherent controversy, one cannot fully understand worship without addressing the role emotions/feelings play as the participant engages with others assembled in God's presence. In what sense can we experience the presence of God in our corporate worship assembly?

EXPERIENCING THE PRESENCE OF GOD IN ASSEMBLY

It is not my intention to maximize the importance of the Lord's Supper at the expense of preaching or any of the other components of worship. However, I am convinced that congregations need to rethink the central role the Lord's Supper should play and how all other elements of worship flow from it—especially the pulpit.

In many churches of Christ the Lord's Supper has lost its sense of being a worship event where God communes with His people. According to Edwin White, the church is at its present low state because it is unaware of God.⁸ The rugged individualism that is characteristic of American culture has influenced Christians to overlook the supper/fellowship motif and focus more on an individual communion with God.

The church assembles on the first day of the week to remember God's faithfulness to His people as well as to proclaim it to the world. God calls the family together to remember, celebrate, and proclaim the work His son accomplished at the cross. It was on the first day of the week that God broke the bonds of sin that held men and women captive, through the resurrection of His son. John Mark Hicks expresses well what the first day of the week should mean to Christians:

It is the day of remembrance, the day of our deliverance, because it is the day on which God raised Jesus from the dead

and created his new community, the church. The same reason the church gathers every first day of week is the same reason it should eat the Lord's Supper every first day of the week. It is the day of worship and a day of celebration because of what God has done in the gospel, and the gospel is proclaimed in the Lord's Supper.⁹

One can enjoy personal worship to God. However, only in the corporate worship on the first day of the week can one experience the presence of God within the community.

The Lord's Supper functioned both theologically and sociologically as the central act of the weekly assemblies of the early church.¹⁰ The theological sense of the Supper is recognized in God's presence at the table. The gathered community of worshipers, which comes together at the table, expresses the sociological dimension.

God is with us when we pray, sing, read scripture, and proclaim the Word. However, it should be noted that the Lord's Day of the first Christians was a celebration of Christ's resurrection, and in no other element of worship does one experience the essential remembrance of Christ's life, death, and resurrection in such depth and symbolism as at the table.¹¹ One must be careful, while emphasizing the centrality of the Lord's Supper, not to ignore the importance of other worship components.

The New Testament clearly points to the Lord's Supper as the worship component where God's presence is confirmed and hope is rekindled—a confident hope for a place at the messianic banquet. Ferguson speaks succinctly to this aspect of understanding presence now and then:

There is a future eschatological reference in the sharing of the bread and wine. The Lord's Supper not only brings the past into the present and creates a present fellowship, but it

also proclaims a future event. In a sense, it brings the future into the present. Indeed, the predominant note in the early Christian observance was not sorrowful remembrance as a funeral but joyful expectation. The crucified Christ is also a living Lord, and the present fellowship is a guarantee and anticipation of a fuller fellowship yet to be enjoyed.¹²

The Lord's Supper is a time of present reality, which prompts an anticipation of a future feast.

We began this discussion of God's presence in the assembly by talking about what we experience. Perhaps we need to stop and heed another warning concerning proper worship. Thomas Howard reminds us of the practical nature of the assembly of early believers:

Worship, in the ancient tradition, was not thought of as an experience at all—it was an act. Early Christians came together to worship, not to attend a meeting; they came together to do something, not to get something.¹³

Howard's work warns us not to place undue emphasis on experience and miss the fact that ritual (form) is being performed. Worship that does not acknowledge a sense of ritual lacks the depth fully to experience being in the presence of God.

On the one hand, the traditional worship group advocates a strict adherence to form to the near exclusion of worship experience. On the other hand, the contemporary group tends to jettison form for the pursuit of experience. I would opt for a middle ground which recognizes that form contributes to the worship experience and is therefore a vital consideration although subject to change. There are no instructions in the New Testament concerning the proper order of worship services.¹⁴

EXPERIENCING COMMUNITY IN THE ASSEMBLY

In 1 Corinthians 11:17-34, Paul's description of the church and the Lord's Supper offers significant insight into the central importance of the Supper in regard to fellowship with God and with one another. It is clear from His teaching that the Supper belongs to the Lord—it is the Lord's Supper (1 Cor. 11:20). His ownership is contrasted with the way in which the church at Corinth is making the Supper their own (1 Cor. 11:21). It is the Lord who presides at the table calling His people to gather to eat and drink in His honor.

The language "the Lord's Supper" is the only designation given this meal in the New Testament and demonstrates the meal is uniquely His own to be eaten by the gathered people in His presence (by His Spirit) and in His honor.¹⁵

Paul, recognizing the serious nature of the offense committed by the Corinthian brethren, restates the exact words of the tradition just as Jesus gave them concerning the institution of the Supper (1 Cor. 11:23-26). He calls on them to correct their aberrant behavior in the worship assembly, especially in regard to the Lord's Supper, by remembering the original intent of the Supper established by Jesus. Their actions, abusing one another, during the communal meal did not demonstrate any appreciation for this being God's meal with Him as the head of His table. Further, their individualism (small group behavior) did nothing to present the church to the world as a fellowship of believers called to a common table of fellowship with God.

Paul's corrective instructions remind the church that the Lord's Supper is more than a meal, and thus, the religious context must be established again. Eating within the religious context, they will restore the proper attitude of discernment of the body (both Christ's body and the church); and will, through this fellowship once again enjoy spiritual nourishment as opposed to mere physical food consumption.

The corrective set forth in Paul's interpretation of the tradition is a call not only to remembrance, but also to proclamation. By abusing one another (the wealthy brethren eating better than the poorer members) the wrong message is proclaimed to the world. Christ died to establish His church, the body of Christ, and a fellowship of equality, especially in the worship setting.

During the Lord's Supper recognizing (discerning) the body of Christ is to be taken seriously. At the table members are to discern not only their relationship with God (a vertical relationship established at baptism), but also the present reality of being in Christ's body, the church (a horizontal relationship also entered into at baptism).

It was not that the Corinthians had forgotten the tradition or that they had abandoned the Lord's Supper; it was that the Corinthian version of the Supper betrayed its original intent. Not only was fellowship with God being thwarted, but also fellowship as the body of Christ, the church, was negated.

According to Gordon Fee, the answer to the problem is given in 1 Corinthians 11:27-34—discern the body.¹⁶ However, there is not unanimous agreement as to exactly what is meant by body.¹⁷ The crucial term (body) is ambiguous enough in the pivotal sentence (verse 29) so that the point of the whole argument is frequently missed altogether, or at least its main emphasis is lost.¹⁸

The viewpoint that the body in verse 29 represents the congregation (body of Christ) seems to have the most evidence in its favor.¹⁹ Paul's focus has been on the way in which the brethren at Corinth have been treating one another as they come to the worship assembly and especially their behavior at the table. It seems logical to infer that Paul's criticism of their behavior toward one another lends itself toward understanding *body* to mean the assembled church rather than the body of Christ symbolized by the loaf.

IMPLICATIONS FOR OUR TIMES

Recognizing or discerning the body, the assembled brethren, has significant ramifications for our Lord's Supper participation today. At the table members are to discern not only their relationship with God through Christ, but also the present reality of being in Christ's body, the church. If one withdraws to his/her own world as the emblems are being served and does not want to be interrupted by the fellowship of singing together, scripture reading, or shared witnessing, what does this say about our being the community of believers eating together at the Lord's table?

I agree with Richard Oster's assessment that Paul is not addressing a problem of a lack of devotional focus.²⁰ The problem is much more serious. It is a matter of treating fellow Christians in such a way as to bring shame upon the church as well as to sin against the Lord. Is it possible for this to occur in our 20th century setting as well? I believe it is.

When we overemphasize the death of Christ and the memorial aspect of His sacrifice and fail to celebrate His resurrection, we need to be admonished. When the Supper becomes so individualistic and solemn that fellowship is understood as only between individual participants and God, we need to rethink our understanding of the church's being called to the table.

The principles set forth in 1 Corinthians 11:17-34 call for the church, in any age, to recognize or reestablish the Lord's Supper as the central element of the assembly. The Supper energizes and gives meaning to all of worship both corporate and individual. It reminds us that we become the church when we answer the call of God to assemble at the table to eat His Supper.

Nowhere in the worship assembly is the gospel proclaimed more powerfully and remembered in symbolism better than in the Lord's Supper. God meets Christians at the table in symbols that

recall the covenant community. By taking the Supper, Christians are sharing in Christ's sacrifice and its benefits. They are participating in Christ's body and blood; that is, they are identifying with His life and His death.²¹

It is my hope and prayer that churches will take a fresh look at the biblical material that emphasizes the important role the Supper played in the early church. A fellowship of believers, keen on restoring the church, needs to take seriously the lack of time and emphasis we have placed on our observance of the Lord's Supper. We need to learn from the emphasis and central focus we find that the early Christians placed on meeting God around His table, enjoying the fellowship one with another.

ENDNOTES

1. Mick Root, *Split Grape Juice* (Joplin, Mo: College Press Publishing company, 1992): 8.
2. Robert W. Webber, *Worship Is a Verb* (Waco, TX: Word Books Publisher, 1995): 11.
3. Jack Reese, "Worship in Transition, Part Two," *Image* 9.6 (November/December, 1993): 8.
4. Mike Root, "Diagonal Worship," *Image* 9.2 (March/April 1993): 12, 13.
5. John Mark Hicks, "The Lord's Table: A Covenant Meal," *Image* 3.3 (1995): 4. Through the history of God's redemptive work, God has established fellowship and covenant through sacrifice and has confirmed that fellowship and covenant through eating the sacrifice, a meal.
6. Everett Ferguson, *The Church of Christ: A Biblical Ecclesiology for Today* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1996): 226.
7. Ibid.
8. Edwin White, *A Sense of Presence* (Gospel Advocate Co., 1989): 2. Although White's comments are now a decade old, I believe his assessment is still accurate.
9. John Mark Hicks, class lecture notes, Christian Worship, Harding University Graduate School of Religion, Spring, 1997.
10. Ferguson, 253.
11. Oscar Cullman, *Early Christian Worship*, trans. A. Steward Todd and James B. Torrance (Naperville, IL: Alec T. Allenson, 1953): 12.
12. Ferguson, 253.
13. Thomas Howard, *Evangelical Is Not Enough* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1984): 45.
14. Robert G. Rayburn, *O Come Let Us Worship* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1980): 117. Ferguson, *The Church of Christ*, 248. The New Testament does not provide evidence for an "order of worship".
15. Gordon Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1987): 537. Fee points out that the verb "gather together", The concern is with what goes on when they "come together as the church" v. 18.

16. Ibid., 558.

17. Ibid., 563-564. Three major interpretations of what Paul means by body are offered: (1) Paul is concerned that the Corinthians are not properly discerning the difference between the sacred elements of the Lord's Supper and the common food; (2) the Corinthians are guilty of not appropriately meditating on the death of Jesus, particularly His body on the cross, when they take the elements of the meal; (3) the body refers to the congregation (body of Christ), and thus Paul is continuing to critique the Corinthian neglect of one another during the Lord's dinner.

18. Ibid., 559.

19. Richard E. Oster, Jr. *I Corinthians* (Joplin, MO: College Press Publishing Company, 1995): 276.

20. Ibid., 284.

21. Ferguson, 249.

ENCOURAGEMENT FOR MINISTERS



**KEEPING THE FLAME BURNING:
A MESSAGE FOR PREACHERS AND CHURCH LEADERS**

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Preaching is difficult. It may well be that there has never been a time in the history of our nation when the challenges confronting the preacher have been so great. Many preachers have lost their enthusiasm. Burnout has taken the energy, desire, and commitment away from many gifted individuals. We are losing preachers from our pulpits at an alarming rate. Hardly a week goes by that I don't hear of someone who has left preaching ministry in order to pursue secular work. Recently I heard of three in one week.

Being a man of God has never been easy. Noah, a God-fearing man and a preacher of righteousness, faced the scorn and ridicule of his contemporaries. Moses faced strong opposition from his own people and on more than one occasion felt his burden too heavy to bear (Num. 11:11-14). Elijah became discouraged and thought he was the only one left in Israel who really cared about God (1 Kings 19:10). In the midst of derision and discouragement Jeremiah resolved that he would "not make mention of Him, nor speak anymore His name" (Jer. 20:9). John the Baptist preached righteousness and lost his head (Mt. 14:1-12). Stephen preached Christ and was stoned (Acts 6:9-7:60). Paul was whipped, beaten, stoned, shipwrecked, and threatened because he proclaimed Jesus (2 Cor. 11:24-28).

Similarly, those of us who preach the Gospel in America at the threshold of the 21st century face the formidable task of preaching to a largely pagan society. Sociologists are saying that we have moved

from the modern to the post-modern age and also from the Christian to the post-Christian age in which the worldview is drastically different from that of the 19th and 20th centuries. In his book *The Gospel in a Pagan Society*, Kenneth F.W. Prior notes the parallels between today's society and that of ancient Athens with the observation that "Western society is becoming increasingly pagan with more and more people who do not share Christian presuppositions."¹ LaGard Smith notes, "Never in our lifetime has the challenge of preaching been so great. In this relativistic, non-judgmental age the message of sin and salvation couldn't be more foreign to our thinking."² Is it any wonder that preaching and preachers have become the objects of such intense scorn and scrutiny. One will scarcely find a preacher portrayed in a favorable light in today's media and entertainment venues. The vast majority of those in the business and professional world have little idea as to the nature and extent of a preacher's work. The old stereotype of the minister who works only two hours on Sunday is still with us. Harold Warlick in *How to be a Minister and a Human Being*, tells of taking a banker friend along with him to make a hospital visit. "Act like you're a preacher," Warlick said in jest. "Don't worry," said the banker, "I'm lazy and I like fried chicken."³ Such portrayals do little to aid the preacher's self-esteem.

Preaching is difficult today because of the wide array of expectations placed upon the preacher by members of the church. Everyone has his or her own ideas of what a preacher should be like and what he should be doing. In *The Seven Worlds of a Minister*, Gerald Kennedy suggests seven areas in which he feels ministers must be proficient: (1) preacher, (2) administrator, (3) pastor, (4) prophet, (5) theologian, (6) evangelist, and (7) teacher. Interestingly, Kennedy does not include the other hats a preacher must wear such as husband, father, and family member.

Within the local church there are many divergent views regarding the man who is known as "my preacher." Some view him as

the pastor who is to devote the majority of his time visiting and counseling members of the congregation. Others see the preacher as a public relations man who is to represent the church at every civic function and social event. Some want their preacher to be their buddy, always ready to drop what he's doing for a cup of coffee, a chat, or a game of golf. The preacher must be a jack of all trades, able to minister effectively to the young, the middle aged, and the senior citizens. Unfortunately, few expectations of the minister are centered upon the spiritual disciplines of study, prayer, and proclamation of the Word of God. Most preachers can easily relate to the plate spinners from the days of TV variety shows. No sooner has he started one plate spinning than another and another is added while trying to keep the first ones moving. Inevitably one of the plates will fall. Tragically, it is often the minister's family, health, or personal effectiveness that suffers.

Is there a key to longevity in effective ministry? I recently asked a friend who preaches for one of the largest congregations in our fellowship this question. His answer was both humorous and insightful. "Why am I still preaching?" he said. "Well, it is a mysterious mix of reasons which range from 'nobody offered me a good job outside of ministry at my most discouraged times' (the worst reason) to 'a deep sense of gratitude and mission' (the best)." Charles L. Rassieur in his timely work, *Stress Management for Ministers*, says that the question before the church is how to help its ministers cope more effectively with stress so that they not only serve with greater joy but also find genuine personal renewal in their ministry.⁴ What can be done to combat the drop-out rate among our preachers? What steps can we take to keep the spiritual flame burning?

I believe we must begin with an examination of our motives for preaching. Karl Barth reflected upon the audacity that all preachers occasionally feel. "What can it mean? It means above all that we should feel a fundamental alarm. What are you doing, you man with

the word of God upon your lips? Upon what grounds do you assume the role of mediator between heaven and earth? Who dares to preach knowing what preaching is?"⁵

As a student at Harding University I remember Will Ed Warren making the statement on the first day of class, "If there is anything else you can do other than preach, do it." I confess that those words didn't mean much to me at the time, but 20 years later they mean everything. For one to endure in preaching, he must realize that spiritual fulfillment can be found in no other way. Albert Schweitzer was a brilliant author, composer, physician, theologian, and Nobel Prize recipient. When he left Europe in 1913 to serve as a missionary in Africa, his friends and contemporaries did not understand. "What are you doing here?" they would ask while visiting him in such unfavorable circumstances. "I was sent here by Jesus Christ," came the reply. In a similar fashion Jay Kesler observes, "If a person can be happy doing anything other than the ministry, he ought to do it."⁶ You simply must settle this matter in your own heart and make sure your motives for ministry are right.

Many men enter full-time ministry with motives that are less than pure. Some view ministry as a means of obtaining status. The thought of being in the limelight or being in a public position can be an enticement for one who seeks power, prestige, and the favor of people. There are others who perceive that ministry is an easy way to make a living since the minister doesn't have a time clock to punch and is largely responsible for his own schedule. Such notions, however, quickly vanish with the realization that no other occupation requires the self-discipline and time organization required of an effective minister. Like Simon who sought the gift of the Holy Spirit for personal profit (Acts 8:18-20), there are still those who pursue ministry for personal gain. We must continually be reminded that "there is a world of difference between the preacher who preaches and *is* paid and the preacher who preaches *for* pay."⁷

What are the correct motives for ministry? First, there must be an all-consuming, overwhelming desire to fulfill the call of God and to bring glory unto Him. Though Jeremiah sought to keep the Word of the Lord to himself, he could not: "His Word is in my heart like a fire, a fire shut up in my bones. I am weary of holding it in; indeed, I cannot" (Jer. 20:9). When Isaiah experienced the sight of the Lord "high and lifted up" in the temple (Isa. 6:1-8) and experienced the cleansing that came from the throne of God, he couldn't help but respond when the call was given, "Here am I. Send me!" The glory of God fueled his ministry for the remainder of his life. As John Newton lay on his deathbed, his last words were "I am a great sinner but Christ is a great savior." It must be that continuing, compelling awareness of God's amazing grace "that saved a wretch like me" that fuels and fans the flame of ministry. Paul said, "We also believe and therefore we speak" (2 Cor. 4:13). His ministry was the result of "...the love of Christ which constrains us" (2 Cor. 13:14). As one who saw himself "crucified with Christ" (Gal. 2:20), there was nothing else he could do other than preach. "For if I preach the gospel, I have nothing to boast of, for necessity is laid upon me; yes, woe is me if I do not preach the gospel" (1 Cor. 9:16). G. Campbell Morgan once noted, "In the true sermon there must always be passion. But the passion must be something created by no conscious effort. It must come out of what we are declaring and out of our consciousness of it."⁸ In moments of quietness and reflection we must determine whom we serve. Jesus said, "No man can serve two masters" (Mt. 6:24). The man who preaches to please people will quickly find himself disillusioned. As the old saying goes, "You can please some of the people all of the time and all of the people some of the time, but you'll never please all the people all of the time." We must resolve that we are first and foremost servants of God regardless of the expectations others seek to impose upon us. As we place our service to God first in our lives, we'll find ourselves doing a better job of serv-

ing everyone. As Anderson notes, "We serve people best when our hearts long most deeply for the glory of God. When our activities flow out of the will of Jesus rather than from our own need to maintain favor with the whole church, we will also find our own work less stressful and more productive."⁹

Preaching is foremost a matter of character. Preaching is not merely the act of making a sermon and delivering it. Rather, it is the act of making a man. Paul instructed Timothy to be an example in word, conduct, love, spirit, faith, and purity (1 Tim. 4:12). We must be vessels of honor (2 Tim. 2:20ff). Henry Ward Beecher defined preaching as "truth through personality."¹⁰ David Pharr correctly observes regarding preaching, "There is no single style, no uniform temperament, and no exclusive approach. This assures us that God can use a great variety of men. There is, however, singularity of character, purpose, faithfulness, courage, and steadfastness."¹¹ I believe it is significant that all Christians are referred to as "priests and ministers" (1 Pet. 2:9-10), but the preacher is specifically called a "man of God" (2 Tim. 6:11). This implies a quality of life that is consistent with the message preached. In fact, nothing disturbed Jesus more than those who did not practice what they preached. He condemned the hypocritical lives of the Pharisees who appeared beautiful outwardly but inside were full of dead men's bones (Mt. 23:27). You cannot be a bad man and a good preacher at the same time. If we are not willing to be transformed by God, we will never be the spokesman He longs for.

In this regard I would recommend the book *Liberating Ministry from the Success Syndrome* by Kent and Barbara Hughes.¹² Discouraged by the lack of attendance at church and filled with doubt as to the effectiveness of their work, they set out to discover the true Biblical definition of success in ministry. Their conclusion was that godly success is not found in the size of one's congregation or one's personal popularity or prestige. Rather, a preacher is successful when

he possesses the qualities of faithfulness, servanthood, love, belief, prayer, holiness, and a proper attitude in his life. God can use a man like this to do great things in behalf of His kingdom.

Secondly, ministry must be motivated by a love for people and the desire to see everyone saved eternally. We know that God "is not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance" (2 Pet. 3:9). As preachers of the Gospel we must clearly understand that souls apart from Christ are lost and that we are primarily proclaimers of God's redemptive work. This realization must be the great standard used to gauge the effectiveness of our ministry. Jesus said, "the Son of Man has come to seek and save the lost" (Lk. 19:10). It was the desire for man's salvation that motivated the Lord to serve others (Mt. 20:28) and to sacrifice his own life (Phil. 2:5-8). Paul's desire to bring salvation to others led him to become all things to all people (1 Cor. 9:22). From the cathedral to the convalescent home to counseling with a troubled individual, we must remember that in every area of life we are "ambassadors of reconciliation" (2 Cor. 5:20). As John R.W. Stott says, "Only a constantly fresh vision of Christ and his commission can rescue us from idleness and keep our priorities correctly adjusted."¹³

Closely connected with the idea of motive is the need for a preacher to remain current and fresh in his spiritual life and his study of the Word. There is no substitute for genuine enthusiasm on the part of the preacher. In one survey the question was asked "What qualities do you like in a speaker?" Ninety percent responded with the word enthusiasm! The man who has lost his enthusiasm has experienced the worst bankruptcy imaginable. He is like an engine without a spark-plug. A blacksmith can do nothing if his fire has gone out. You and I must continually fan the flame of love for God and others within our hearts. This necessitates that we grow in our personal spiritual walk with God. Too many preachers limit their study to that involved with the presentation of sermons and classes without

taking time for their personal spiritual development. You cannot draw water from a dry well. Furman Kearly states, "to grow spiritually there must be an intermingling of several factors simultaneously."¹⁴ The factors are: (1) the desire to be spiritual, (2) a strong, deep, obedient faith, (3) devoted study, (4) thinking of spiritual things, (5) spending time with spiritual people, (6) communing with God through prayer, and (6) focusing on the fruits of the Spirit.

The Gospels record that Jesus took time for personal reflection and spiritual renewal. After a day full of teaching, healing, and casting out demons, He arose early the following morning and "departed to a solitary place to pray" (Mk. 1:35). Spiritual growth does not come without the spiritual disciplines of prayer, meditation, and study. Throughout the years of my ministry I have found the discipline of journaling to be valuable. I strive to begin each day early enough to spend several uninterrupted hours in my study where I spend time in personal reading of the Word and recording my thoughts and prayers in written form. Over the years I have completed over 17 volumes of journals that record the ups, downs, and all-arounds of my life. On occasion I review them and can see how growth has occurred in some areas of my life while other areas continue to encounter struggles. I have found that by writing several pages each day I am better able to focus on the spiritual dimension of life and start the day off on the right track.

To be a preacher is to commit oneself to a lifetime of study, learning, and growing. There is a joke about preachers not buying any new books after they turn 50. Sadly, there's probably more truth in that statement than we care to recognize. Just 20 miles from my home in Hohenwald, Tennessee, is the small town of Centerville where Paul Rogers has been a preacher for over 42 years. To my knowledge that gives him the longest tenure with one congregation of any man in our brotherhood. Paul makes the pertinent observation that the man who continually enters the pulpit with an old sermon and a tired

frame will not be tolerated long. In practicing what he preaches, he plans his sermons years in advance and keeps an abundance of reading material on hand in his study, at his home, and in his car. He is continually up to date and fresh, brimming with new ideas.

We must not only know the Bible but we must also know people, places, and events. Be an avid reader. A person who will not read is no better off than a person who cannot read. In addition to reading the scriptures, you must stay current with the world around you by reading newspapers, news magazines, and Christian periodicals. Talk with college professors and other preachers about "what's new" in reading materials. Seek contemporary illustrations. Bill Hybles says that unchurched people think most Christians, especially preachers, are woefully out of touch with reality. He notes that when you use a contemporary illustration you build credibility with the audience. An illustration from current events includes the non-Christian listener and puts him on equal footing with everyone else in the audience. The use of such illustrations requires us constantly to learn, grow, reach, and stretch ourselves.

Lynn Anderson tells of visiting with the late E.W. McMillan who was then nearly 90 years old. Anderson describes his visit:

He looked up from his papers, smiled warmly, and waved me to a seat. 'Hold on just a moment,' he said without dropping his pen, 'I don't want to lose this thought.' In a few moments he closed his book, rose and shook my hand vigorously, booming, 'I never noticed that before. I am going to be a better man and a better preacher because of what I learned this morning.' Then he added, 'for all these years, I have tried to learn at least one new thing about my Lord every day.'¹⁵

Study must be the focus of the preacher's daily ministry. As young preachers quickly find out, Sundays come around with relent-

less regularity. Without adequate time spent in preparation, his lessons will quickly grow stale and unfocused. Someone once asked Winston Churchill how long it would take to prepare a 20 minute speech. "At least two weeks," came the reply. "How long would it take you to prepare to speak an hour?" the inquirer asked. "Oh, I could do that right now!" said Churchill. Before going into the pulpit, every preacher has the obligation to approach the text with careful exegesis, hone his message down to a fine point, and bathe it relentlessly in prayer. Paul wrote his second letter to Timothy and requested the young evangelist to bring him two things: his cloak and the parchments. What were the parchments? Some think they were probably the Old Testament scriptures. Even under such difficult circumstances as imprisonment with the probability that he would never preach publicly again, Paul saw the need to study. Cecil May says he is sympathetic to the view that modern day church problems began when preachers stopped having studies and started having offices.¹⁶ Preachers must make study a priority. The preacher who thinks he can squeeze in a little reading here and there will find his reading squeezed out by other demands regardless of his good intentions. Some of the most effective preachers I've known have been those who sought solitude away from their formal offices and studied in the quietness of a back room without a telephone.

One of the most popular books of recent years has been Stephen R. Covey's *Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*.¹⁷ Based upon his years of studying individuals who have been successful in their endeavors Covey lists the shared traits he observed in their lives: (1) being proactive (2) beginning with the end in mind, (3) putting first things first, (4) thinking win-win, (5) seeking to understand and be understood, (6) synergizing, and (7) "sharpening the saw." It is this final habit, he notes, that makes all of the others possible and applies to the mental, spiritual, physical, and social dimensions of life.

The story is told of a logger who was hired on a Monday to cut trees. The first day of work he took his ax and cut more trees than anyone else on the crew. Each day he was the first to arrive on the job and the last to leave. By Thursday, however, his productivity had drastically decreased. What was his problem? Although he was working harder than all the others, he failed to take the time to sharpen his ax. He was working with a dull blade! The preacher who desires to keep the saw sharp will not hesitate to further his education. With distance-learning classes, audio/video resources, and internet availability, there have never been as many opportunities to take classes and extend one's education. An eldership must recognize that their preacher's continued education will be a blessing to the whole congregation. The eldership of the Hohenwald, Tennessee, church where I serve paid for my master's degree with the agreement that I stay with them and share the benefits of my study. In addition, they provided continued encouragement throughout the two years of classes and insisted that I take a break from teaching Bible class during my final semester with its comprehensive exams. Each year they encourage me to schedule several conferences, lectureships, and seminars as a part of my schedule, and they recognize that the time and effort put forth to attend will be well-rewarded by the information gained.

As we strive to keep the saw sharp, we must also recognize the importance of maintaining balance in our physical lives. In the interest of serving others, many of us have neglected ourselves. A healthy soul and a healthy body go together. J.J. Turner states that "One hour of preaching is equivalent to eight hours of physical labor in terms of the expenditure of nervous energy."¹⁸ Our bodies are the temple of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor. 6:18). As "earthen vessels" we are entrusted with the "treasure" of God's Word (2 Cor. 5:7). What type of impression do we make on others if we carelessly abuse our bodies through improper eating, lack of exercise, or over-working? Over the years I have learned that my talents are sharper, my mind quicker, and my

creativity greater when I take the time to exercise regularly. Just an hour a day of self-maintenance will pay huge dividends in the quality of your life and ministry.

Most preachers live with feelings of guilt that we're not doing enough. There's always someone else to see, another lesson to study for, a soul to be won for Christ, or need to be met. You can do as much as there is to do and still not get it all done. On top of this there is nearly always a good brother or sister around to remind us of someone else who needs a visit or a pet project that needs our urgent attention. Gordon McDonald in his book *Ordering Your Private World* speaks of the need for "Sabbath rest." He points out that God rested on the seventh day not because He was tired but in order to set an example for His creation. He makes the keen observation that, "A rest-less work style produces a restless person. Work that goes on month after month without a genuine pause to inquire its meaning and purpose may swell the bank account and enhance the professional reputation. But it will drain the private world of vitality and joy. How it close the loops on our activity."¹⁹ McDonald urges his readers to pursue "Sabbath rest without guilt." Make sure you take a day off each week. Plan time for recreation and hobbies. I find that my best work is usually done when I'm thoroughly rested and refreshed.

Endurance in ministry is enhanced as we "strengthen the ties that bind." No lecture on preaching would be complete without a word on the minister's family. Since the preacher's work is so closely entwined with the stability of his family, it is incumbent upon him to spend time cultivating family relationships. Not only are people looking to the preacher to give them a word from God, they are also looking for him to model those qualities in his own life. A man whose family life is in shambles will find it difficult to possess credibility in the pulpit. It is true that preachers and their families live in glass houses and are the objects of greater scrutiny by those in the church

and community. Again we must be reminded that we are here first to serve and please God. If you, your wife, and children are striving to please the Lord by being good mates to one another, good parents, and good children, then go about your lives with the assurance that God recognizes this, and do not be intimidated by the demands of brethren. I believe that most congregations today are doing a better job of recognizing the needs of the minister's family. One of the great changes we've seen in many congregations over the past 25 years has been that of allowing the preacher a housing allowance for the purpose of purchasing his own house. Not only does this allow the minister and his family to build equity in their property, it also gives them a feeling of greater stability and privacy while freeing the church from being in the landlord business. Such an arrangement is not possible in every instance, but I would heartily recommend it whenever possible.

Preacher, remember that to your wife you are foremost her husband, followed by being the father of her children. Somewhere way down the line you are her preacher. She wants your affection. She longs to spend time with you alone. As preachers we must not sacrifice our families on the altar of church work. There will assuredly be times when situations arise that will take us away from our families, but the wise minister will seek to organize his schedule so that his family needs are not neglected. I've heard it said of the late and beloved Ira North that the hours of 3:00 - 6:00 each afternoon were strictly reserved as family time to be spent with his wife and children. In those three hours each day they romped and played and talked to each other. They kept the lines of communication open. How different this is from the case of Eli, God's priest, who was unaware of the sinful activities of his sons and whose counsel to them was too little and too late to avoid their destruction (1 Sam. 2:22-25).

Preachers also need friends. Jesus had the 12 apostles. From among the 12 he had his inner circle of Peter, James, and John, who accompanied him at the transfiguration (Mt. 17:1) and in the garden of Gethsemane (Mt. 26:37). The writer of Proverbs spoke of the "friend who is closer than a brother" (Prov. 18:24). A healthy preacher/congregation relationship will be one of mutual friendship. The person in the pew needs to know that the preacher is a friend who is concerned about their well being. While avoiding the trap of cliquishness, that excludes all others, it is nonetheless healthy for the preacher and his family to develop close relationships within the congregation. I believe that the preacher also needs his "Jonathan" friends. Jonathan could relate to David like no one else. Both of them had fought hand to hand with the Philistines, both of them had been military commanders, and both had experienced the wrath of King Saul. No wonder the Bible refers to their souls being "knit together" (1 Sam. 18:1).

George Burns once paid tribute to Jack Benny by saying, "Jack and I were best friends for over 55 years. I suppose that most of those years we talked every single day. Jack never walked out on me when I sang and I never made fun of him when he played the violin." Theirs was indeed a special relationship. Preachers need such relationships with other preachers. No one can understand the trials and triumphs of being a preacher like another preacher. I have three preacher friends who live in neighboring towns with whom I meet once a month for a period of intense Bible study, sharing of ideas, and prayer. Of those three, one of them is my best friend who I meet weekly for lunch and conversation. We talk nearly every day on the telephone or by e-mail. Not only are we friends, but our wives and children are friends also. We've taken trips together and shared wonderful moments of friendship and fellowship with each other. They bring joy into our hearts and give us the freedom to share our thoughts and lives in

ways that are sometimes not possible with members of the local church.

Preachers need older friends. My life and ministry has been richly blessed by association with preachers who have been 20 to 30 years older than me. Where they are in terms of age and experience I will soon be. They have allowed me to tag along behind them, to watch and learn. In quiet moments together they shared with me the joys and heartaches they had experienced in their lives. Throughout the years they have provided shoulders upon which to cry and comforting words that came from hearts that have "been there." One of the most penetrating and insightful questions an eldership can ask of a prospective preacher is "who have been your mentors?"

Preachers need young friends too. Paul called Timothy his "son in the faith" (1 Tim. 1:2; 2 Tim. 2:1). We are the mentors for those who are to come. They are looking for us to show them how it's done in ministry. They need someone who is willing to take them under wing and guide them through those awkward, initial stages of ministry. We as preachers also need the fresh insights that young men can bring to our lives. Their enthusiasm, optimism, and excitement can reinvigorate us and help us to connect better with the younger generation.

It gives me great pleasure to announce at this year's lecture-ship the beginning of a new ministry that is designed to help preachers strengthen the ties that bind.

"Encouragement" is a ministry dedicated to helping preachers and their families in four ways. The first of these ways is through the publication of a quarterly newsletter filled with information and practical suggestions from preachers to preachers. Secondly, we hope to build a network for prayer requests and needs that preachers and their families might have. You may contact us by phone, fax, e-mail, or letter and share these requests. We will then send them out through e-mail and publish them (unless otherwise requested) in the newsletter

so that others may remember the need in prayer as well. Third, we are developing a nationwide network of Christian counselors along with marriage and family therapists who will be willing to assist ministers and their families. There are times when the struggles we face individually or as families need to be shared with someone who can provide us with positive, professional, spiritual counseling. While we are not asking these professionals to waive their fees, most of them are very sympathetic to the minister's work and are willing to provide discounts and/or special arrangements if needed. Fourth, it is our goal to host an annual Spiritual Renewal Retreat for ministers and their wives. We hope to provide a few days away from the routines of ministry where we can rest body and mind while enjoying fellowship with one another and learning from some of the best resource speakers available to us.

As a brash young college student 20 years ago, I thought I had all the answers and was ready to take the world by storm. Now I'm not even sure about the questions. I have learned however the following things:

That knowledge without zeal is never enough.

That zeal without knowledge is never enough.

That a man earns the right to speak.

That people don't care how much you know until they know how much you care.

That it is impossible to please all the people all the time.

That it is impossible to please some of the people any of the time.

That love covers a multitude of inadequacies.

That zeal can easily be lost in discouragement.

That the tempter is never far from the door.

That dreams do come true!

With all of its challenges I still share the opinion of John Wycliff: "The highest service men may attain to on earth is to preach the Word of God." It's great to be a preacher!

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GENERAL MINISTRY



HOW TO BUILD A LEADERSHIP TEAM IN THE LOCAL CHURCH

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THE ADVANTAGES OF A TEAM

One of the great joys of being a member of the body of Christ is the fellowship—the comradeship—the *koinonia* we enjoy. A Christian does not have to be the Lone Ranger. We can be termed a family, a body or, to use a term which today has wide circulation—a team. Just as the modern world of athletics enjoys team sports, so today's work-force has teams of people working together. Even in academic circles it is viewed as imperative that students learn to work together in joint projects and assignments. The value of acquiring the skills of teamwork will prove invaluable later in a career.

In the congregational setting we have historically used committee, group, or class to designate the concept of several people working closely together. With the introduction and rapid adaptation in the 1980's of the ministry system, those cooperating in a ministry are naturally called a "ministry team." This term serves, perhaps, better than either group or committee to describe the unity of purpose and the camaraderie indicative of such a close-knit collection of Christians.

I am a part of a leadership team at the Edmond church of Christ consisting of seven paid ministers, 17 elders, and 40 deacons. This responsibility obviously submerges one daily and hourly into working together closely with others. This involves coordination,

harmonious integration of effort, sharing of failures and successes, and, above all, close and constant communication. Some of what will be said here grows out of these current experiences.

Another strong influence has been the 12 wonderful years, 1961-1973, our family spent as part of the original Sao Paulo mission team. This mission team produced a missions textbook entitled *Steps Into the Mission Field: (Group Evangelism: From First Concepts to First Converts)*. The book was published in 1978, after ample time had elapsed to share only tested and proven principles. This material will borrow from and rely heavily upon the textbook, particularly chapters 1, 2, and 13. While some of the book's terminology reflects a foreign missions context, the theory and the principles cited have easy transferability to stateside church work.

Team work or group work in the church involves several individuals in a project and facilitates much more manpower (better called people power), better judgment and wisdom (through checks and balances and multiple ideas). It focuses greater attention toward a project and, ideally, gives greater opportunity for an effort to have continuity. Teamwork also provides a setting for increased fellowship.

Some of the advantages of the group or team approach to evangelism are developed in the book, *Steps*. The corporate, or "people," concept is present from Abraham on throughout the Old Testament. Solomon wrote about the value of a group: "And if one prevail against him, two shall withstand him; and a threefold cord is not quickly broken" (Eccl. 4:12).

In the New Testament, Jesus sent out the 70 two-by-two, and he traveled in company with the 12 (Luke 10:1; 18:31). Paul traveled at least once with a group of seven (Acts 20:4).

In church history one learns that from Ireland groups were sent out to evangelize and that Brazil was won for Roman Catholicism by a team effort of Jesuits.

Among churches of Christ in modern times some teams had already gone out. There was a group effort for a time in postwar Germany and Italy. Also, a group of American missionaries went to Japan and worked with Ibaraki Christian College in its early stages. Then, in 1961, 13 families—the largest group to that time—sailed together from the Port of Houston to Brazil.

ADVANTAGES OF GROUP WORK

While there admittedly are problems and potential disadvantages to group work, it must be said that there are many advantages. Group evangelism on the mission field offers a number of vital advantages.

The first advantage is that a greater impact is made all around. The impact among sending churches is greater as one looks for support, travel, and working funds. The impact is greater also on the mission field. By the very presence of the group members in a community, they constitute natural advertising for the church and for their work of evangelism.

The second advantage of group work is that it helps maintain high morale. Psychologists declare that everyone has "ups and downs." In a group, while some are down emotionally because of culture shock, poor physical health, etc., others are up and are positive and optimistic. Thus, the group is protected because one can encourage the other. The next month the encourager and the encouraged may reverse their roles, but there is someone there to pick up those who would fall. "Two are better than one, for they have a good reward for their toil" (Eccl. 4:9). Since higher morale is maintained, group members are thereby encouraged to remain longer on the field.

A third advantage is the opportunity to pool abilities. Not everyone is a good writer, a good song leader, a personal worker, financial manager, etc., rolled into one. In a group the members can

fit into the work which they enjoy, knowing that others will do their part in seeing that other areas are taken care of. More time and opportunity are available for personal development in the group context of pooling abilities.

In addition to these advantages others could be cited, but since the 1990's are already favorable to the concept of group work and teamwork, these should suffice.

A good leadership team is a kind of laboratory, a microcosm, and a model of what an entire congregation ought to be. If you have never attempted putting together a leadership team, you have a wonderful experience ahead of you if you will enter this endeavor with courage, faith, and a burning desire to see many people involved in a great work for God. At one time Paul had a traveling group of seven, and from Romans 16 we get a glimpse into the 30 or so people just in Rome (where he had never yet been) involved in his work. In F. F. Bruce's *The Pauline Circle*, he finds about a hundred people, by name, who worked with Paul or hosted him and/or a local congregation in their house.

In our next section, we will talk about recruiting a leadership team.

PUTTING A TEAM TOGETHER

Making a generic announcement ("Anyone who wants to be on the leadership team—put your name on the sign-up sheet going up and down the rows") may be the worst way to put together a team.

The best way is to approach the entire process with prayer, seeking prudent counsel about how to proceed, and devoting thorough and objective thought to the entire matter of who should be added to a leadership team in the church. We know that congregations have developed good procedures for adding elders and deacons. Forming a leadership team—while not requiring a formal pro-

cess—nevertheless deserves sober, spiritual alertness as well as common sense. It is much wiser to shoulder-tap the person(s) we believe would be compatible and effective to work alongside us. Some people have a temperament that suits them best for other work than on a leadership team.

In the previously mentioned mission textbook *Steps*, Howard Norton in chapter two has a number of suggestions which, although designed for missions, have much that is applicable for any close-knit leadership team. The 11 guidelines below are slightly edited but are almost verbatim from his chapter.

Personnel problems have been important in missions discussions ever since Paul and Barnabas had the "sharp contention" and separated over the question of John Mark. Soon after the idea of group mission work is conceived in the heart of a Christian, like Paul and Barnabas, he must begin to recruit fellow-workers. He will feel at a loss to know how to do it, but his strong conviction that the idea is sound, along with faith that he is doing what God wants him to do, will go a long way toward overcoming barriers.

Conviction and faith alone are not sufficient, however, to guarantee an effective work team. Although these elements are indispensable to the program, wisdom in recruiting and organizing is a must. The purpose of this section is to provide some guidelines for recruiting and organizing the group. Hopefully, these guidelines include the important features of conviction, faith, and wisdom.

SELECTING THE GROUP

What characteristics should a group member possess? The answer to this question will always be open for dispute. Even among authorities, opinions are divided as to who should be a missionary. The answer is made more difficult because, besides wanting to get men who will be good missionaries, there is a need for men who can

work in a group. While I do not propose to mention every desirable trait needed in a group member, 12 are suggested.

First, each group member must be spiritually strong. Spirituality is an elusive term which does not always mean the same thing to the different people who use it. For some, people are spiritual if they have a soft voice, a distant look in their eyes, and a trembling voice when they pray. Such traits do not necessarily indicate spirituality. There is a passage which seems to say what true spirituality is.

To set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace. For the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God; it does not submit to God's law, indeed it cannot; and those who are in the flesh cannot please God. (Rom. 8:6-8)

This passage indicates that true spirituality occurs when a person sets the mind on what is good and submits to God's law. Although tears or a trembling voice may not be produced, his life will show the fruit of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self control (Gal. 5:22, 23).

Second, group members must be doctrinally sound and well-versed in the scriptures. The mission field is not a place for people who need to strengthen their faith. Even the strongest people will have their faith shaken at times. It is for this reason that those sent to do group evangelism must be doctrinally sound.

Third, group members must be in good health physically and mentally. Sickness is an occupational hazard in mission work; the hazard increases and decreases in keeping with the country, or even the city, where the worker goes. Although there are exceptions to the rule, it is generally true that a sick person in the United States will be a sicker person in a foreign country. Mental health is as important, if not more so, than physical health. A tendency toward mental sick-

ness in one's own country is likely to become a fact in a new culture and a new language. Mental illness in a group situation is serious because the negative consequences affect other missionaries.

Fourth, group members need to have training and experience for the job. Most missionaries in Sao Paulo were recruited during college days. They felt, however, that prior to moving to Brazil they should further their education and gain experience in church work. In my opinion mission work is such a demanding job that potential missionaries should take adequate time to prepare themselves through training and experience.

Fifth, group members should have a history of successful work with other people. Unless they are congenial, considerate, and easy to get along with in their daily contacts, they are not likely to develop these characteristics on the mission field. Successful experiences with units as diverse as church groups, student government associations, or athletic teams give an idea of a person's effectiveness in group relationships.

Sixth, every missionary must have the ability to bear tedium. It is unfortunate that there is such a difference between what actually happens on the mission field and what prospective missionaries *think* happens. Possibly their life is no more tedious than others (although some missionaries would argue this point). The need, however, is to recruit people who are realistic about missions and who do not anticipate a life of 24-hour-a-day rapture.

Seventh, group members must be willing to try new ideas and not become despondent when some cherished plan does not materialize. Although group work is not a new concept, it does present some unique dilemmas to those attempting to apply it in the 20th century. Change is characteristic of life; it is also characteristic of mission work. Because of this, the validity of a solution is of limited duration. Flexibility, the ability to adapt to changing conditions without undue upset, is an important character trait of group members.

Eighth, group members must practice perseverance. It is no accident that the New Testament is replete with exhortations to “be steadfast, unmovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord” (1 Cor. 15:58). Neither is it by chance that perseverance is nearly always a characteristic of the ones held in highest esteem in any generation.

Ninth, the person doing the recruiting should look for group members among people he already knows. Experienced missionaries have said for years that there is danger in trying to get acquainted on the mission field. It is so much easier to get acquainted in the homeland away from the frustrations which are inherent in a move to a new country.

Tenth, group members should all be approximately the same age. This point is open to serious question and must therefore be carefully explained. First, it is to be taken as a principle rather than a rigid rule. Second, its validity depends on the attitude of both the younger and the older people involved. The Sao Paulo group had two men who were several years older than the next nearest age group. The men steadfastly refused to appeal to their age in assembly discussion. This won for them the respect of the younger men and naturally caused the younger members to be open to their suggestions.

Eleventh, the group members must be willing to listen to others preach and teach. It is probably, but not necessarily, true that men on an evangelistic team will preach *fewer* times each year than will a man who is working by himself. Like a football team, not everybody in the backfield carries the ball on each play.

Finally, each group member should be a person who wants to do mission work. Sometimes people go to the mission field out of a sense of duty or maybe even to please a mate whose heart is set on foreign evangelism. Unless desire is present, every phase of preparation becomes a burden; and once the person arrives on the field, the nationals are quick to perceive that one’s heart is not in the work.

These 12 steps are straight from *Steps Into the Mission Field*, which chronicles what was done—and, upon reflection, what would be the ideal process—in getting people onto an efficient and productive missionary team.

This is, perhaps, the best model to which we have recourse in churches of Christ for team-recruitment and development in recent times.

Admittedly, there are other good examples from secular sources. One would be the D-Day team of 1944 headed by Generals George C. Marshall and Dwight D. Eisenhower. Another would be the choosing of the NASA space-ground teams in the decades of the 1950’s and 60’s. Another would be by the successful transitional teams immediately prior to FDR’s first term, Eisenhower’s first term, JFK’s term, and Nixon’s first term. Still another would be the golden days of the Dallas Cowboy’s football team with Clint Menchison, Tex Shraun, Gil Brendt, and Coach Tom Landry as they always drafted the best available talent and crafted great teams year after year.

The task is formidable. It demands the best we have: to take Christians in a local church and explain to them, challenge them, enlist them, and train them in strategies, tactics, and techniques; then, to model and show them how teams can become both creative and harmonious!

When great leadership teams can be built in churches of Christ like the Sao Paulo mission team—like the teams built in the 1950’s by Ira North at Madison, Tennessee, and M. Norvel Young at Broadway in Lubbock—then we can have good reason to believe God will bless these efforts with great numerical and spiritual growth and influence.

In the last section we will look at some spiritual, emotional, and practical considerations for keeping a team together.

DYNAMICS OF KEEPING A TEAM TOGETHER: EMOTIONALLY, SPIRITUALLY, AND PRACTICALLY

First of all let it be said that there is no perfect guarantee that a leadership team can be kept intact for a long period of time. Even Paul and Barnabas had such a sharp disagreement that they formed two separate mission teams (Acts 15:37ff). Health, changing circumstances of employment, economics, persecution, different opinions and convictions, etc., can limit the golden years of a leadership team's optimum functioning. Nevertheless, there are emotional, spiritual, and practical considerations that can help or hinder.

First we look at the emotional and spiritual dynamics. This material comes from David Mickey's chapter 13 in *Steps*. It is important that members of an evangelistic team or missionary group examine their own personalities. Close group relations offer ample opportunity for self-discovery, discovery of both personal weaknesses and strong points. In a discussion on "Why a Man May Avoid Uniting with a Group," Paul M. Miller says, "Some people probably avoid joining a group because of fear of having their true selves discovered."

In a close group relationship, when each member of the group knows the others so well, individuals are led to see their own weaknesses and inabilities. It does not take long to find out that someone else can do a job better or can speak the language better or deal with problems among the native people in a better way.

In group work, we find out our ability to lead, to discuss, and to present ideas in comparison to others. We may find that others in the group are better leaders with better ideas and judgment. We may see that others have more influence within the group. These differences must be recognized and accepted.

Being a part of a closely-knit team can help one to discover weaknesses in personality, habits, and abilities, which likely would

never be discovered outside of group work. And, as well, group members can help one another to overcome their difficulties.

Just as the individuals discover personal faults through close group activity, they also see the faults, weaknesses, and bad habits in the lives of other group members. When we work closely with people day after day, visit with them in their homes, play with them, travel with them, discuss problems with them, and share their sorrows and joys, we come to know both their strong points and their weak points.

Members of the group must first remember that they are not *looking* for faults in the lives of their companions. They are looking for the good and not the bad. They remember that the other group members know them very well also. Weaknesses seen in others must not be allowed to cause one to feel better or more important than the fellow workers.

Members within the team should be anxious to help the other. They must be lenient and forgiving toward faults found in others, always recognizing the differences in individuals. Differences in temperament, in ability to meet strangers and make friends, in linguistic talent, may cause jealousy if the differences are not understood.

How can you say to your brother, 'Let me take the speck out of your eye, when there is the log in your own eye? . . . first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your brother's eye.' (Matt. 7:4, 5)

HANDLING THE PROBLEMS

Conflicts can be used creatively rather than as stumbling blocks. We should first of all examine our own attitudes before God to be sure there is no pride or self-interest on our part that has caused the conflict.

When conflicts arise, the group should take time to get facts straight and give time to let ideas “incubate.” The integrity and sincerity of all members should be reaffirmed. Group members should attempt to relax, let feelings cool, and evaluate what lies under the surface. If the conflict is just between two individuals, the group can suggest that it be settled outside the group meeting.

Group workers must learn to accept and give criticism in a positive way. This is always much easier to say than do; advice is easier to give than to receive.

Regular group discussions concerning special problems and how they should be met always help the team’s work. Members should frequently express their gratitude for the help and work of others and show a willingness to listen to the ideas of fellow workers.

It is good to be a part of a group, but one should not forfeit the right to think and act and feel independently. The majority may not always be right nor do what is best, but it exerts a tremendous pressure on the others to conform. So within the missionary group, as in any other tightly knit group of people, there is the danger of being “swallowed up” by the group, so that one’s thoughts and actions are always determined by others. Individual rights must be maintained. The weaker personality in the group should not allow the stronger personalities to suppress initiative nor to provoke withdrawal from discussion.

The biblical instructions given to help brothers correct their differences must be followed by the missionary team. As Jesus taught, one is to go to a Christian and try to resolve the difficulty (Matt. 5:23, 24). Love is to be without hypocrisy. The apostle Paul gave these instructions which express very well the attitude each group member should have toward others: “Love one another with brotherly affection, outdo one another in showing honor” (Rom. 2:10).

Complete my joy by being of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. Do nothing from selfishness or conceit, but in humility count others better than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others. (Phil. 2:2-4)

As this subject of handling personality problems is discussed, prayer can certainly not be left out. The power of prayer should always be remembered when problems come. Pray for God’s help in solving the differences. It is important that those involved in the difficulty pray for one another, and ask God to give them necessary wisdom, love, and courage to settle the clash or problem. Humbling oneself before God in prayer will help to humble oneself before a fellow worker. God can give the needed guidance to solutions and help the team to be more forgiving toward one another. It is helpful to begin all periods of discussion, even committee meetings, with a prayer, asking God for divine direction.

Team members must remember that no one person or group is bigger or more important than the cause for which they are working. Therefore, no person nor group should be allowed to cause problems and conflicts that would destroy the name, influence, and work of the kingdom of God.

PRACTICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Someone(s) must look out for the welfare of the leadership team. Appreciation must be shown. One of the great touches of the Kennedy years was a special tie-clasp that JFK gave to those who had agonized through the 1962 Cuban missile crisis. If no one is “on top of things” in showing gratitude and anticipating emotional let-downs, difficulties, and crises, then the leadership team may break apart or drift away from each other. Any relationship—such as joint

participation in a team—can wither and die from lack of attention. Even heated disagreements and periods of conflict and confrontation may not be as deadly to a team as withdrawal of rapport and indifference. I was once told of a minister who was unaware that a secretary outside his office door had a child who had been suffering from leukemia for a year. How can we be so indifferent to each other's concerns?

Sometimes a leadership team needs brand new ideas—needs a period of “disequilibrium” so that it can restructure and think things out anew. On the Sao Paulo mission team we would re-organize each year. This is not to say that everybody began doing some area of work utterly different from before, but, at least, we knew at the end of a year there was hope for newness and some change and variety.

In a local church, one danger is that those not on the primary leadership team will become increasingly less involved with the vibrant life of the church. One thing done at the Edmond church of Christ is that we develop task forces which meet from time to time (sometimes on a frequent and intense basis) to treat important matters which seem to be “falling between the cracks” in our local ongoing leadership teams of elders, deacons, and paid staff. These task forces can be productive in generating good ideas, involvement, and even greater financial resources for the local congregation. A real-life consideration is that elders must be well-informed and some of them should be on the task forces. Also, the task forces must not infringe unduly on the work of the deacons so as to appear discouraging or threatening. The local church does not need “turf wars.” Also, the paid staff should be invited to be a part of special task force meetings. There ought to be, obviously, a special task and a terminal point for the task force to complete its work.

It is imperative that a leadership team have a burning vision, some goals, and a clear mission. These things often have to be em-

bodied in someone who is not easily deterred nor detoured from the main line.

I hope that you can experience the joy of forming and/or belonging to a great leadership team for God in your lifetime. It makes a Mission Impossible seem like a Mission Possible.

Life on a leadership team is one of the headiest thrills imaginable. To wake up each morning feeling good about your relationship with the Lord and with your family, knowing just what you need to be and do for the Lord's church to go forward—that may be the closest thing to Heaven on earth. Being a part of an eternal purpose—winning others to Christ and strengthening and helping to bring to maturity those won—that is a heavenly quest.

... Christ in you, the hope of glory. We proclaim him, admonishing and teaching everyone with all wisdom, so that we may present everyone perfect in Christ. To this end I labor, struggling with all his energy, which so powerfully works in me. (Col. 1:27b-29)

PRINCIPLES OF TEAM BUILDING

In conclusion, I have found useful a list of ten team building principles from my son, Dr. Gene Vinzant, of the Harding University Bible faculty:

1. There is a clear game plan (mission, vision, and strategy).
2. There is a clear understanding of roles.
3. Every member of the team is valued. Team players appreciate the differences in style within a team.
4. Team members cultivate trust in one another.
5. Team members care about each other.
6. Team members hold each other accountable.
7. Leaders are like coaches, not bosses.

UNDERSTANDING THE TIMES

8. Communication is open and honest.
9. Once a decision is reached, team members put aside differences and work toward the play that is called.
10. Team players accept responsibility for problems and work toward solutions. The focus is on the future, not the past.

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HOW TO DEVELOP A HOSPITAL MINISTRY

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After retiring in September 1986, my wife Jewel and I moved from Memphis, Tennessee to Jonesboro, Arkansas. We had only been in Jonesboro about a month when other Pete had a very serious heart attack. In his room at the hospital, the various doctors gave him his medical reports. His lung doctor told him that since his lungs were so weak, he did not know if Pete could withstand an operation (he had smoked for over 40 years), so he referred him to a cardiologist, Dr. Anthony White. Dr. White told Pete that his heart was such that if he did not have heart bypass surgery, he probably would not make it.

During this dilemma, Pete asked me what I thought he should do. I told him that only he could make that kind of decision — one doctor saying that his lungs would not withstand surgery and another saying that he would die if he did not have it. Pete said that he could not continue to live in such pain, so surgery was chosen. He said that if he died on the operating table, so be it; he was ready. Then the third doctor asked me to pray — all of us along with another doctor, joined hands and I prayed.

Pete's lung doctor told him what to expect: to stay on a respirator at least four weeks in ICU. Pete's heart surgeon performed six bypasses. My brother healed remarkably well. He was out of ICU in less than two days, but his lungs kept him in the hospital for over two months. Since I was retired, I could stay with him and relieve his

family. When he would rest or some attendant take care of him, I began to visit other hospital rooms nearby.

An old man from Charleston, Missouri, was in a room across the hall from Pete. He was very lonely; therefore, he was offensive to the staff, which in turn, made them not do anything for him except what they had to do. As it turned out, I was the only visitor he had. After several visits, he finally began to warm-up to me. One day he asked me what made me tick. I told him of my good wife, our two sons, and our six grandchildren. Then I asked about his family. He really told me a very sad story. Years ago he had a business in Charleston, and after several years, he lost it. He drank and, as he said, was hateful to his family and even to his customers. His son forsook him and quit helping in the business. Then his wife left him, and from there on, he really went downhill. He said he would like to have had a life like mine. I asked him if he could admit this to his family. He said that when he first got married they attended the church of Christ. What could he do now? I suggested that we pray — which we did. I did not pray that he be forgiven but asked the good Lord to help bring him back to his Christianity.

The next few days his health improved, and he was able to go home. I suggested that when he returned home he go to his church and ask the people to pray for him. At first he hesitated, then said since it had been so long that nobody there would know him anyway. I told him that the Christians there would help him if he would do his part. Just go forward at the service and tell them that he had sinned and wanted their prayers. I asked him if he would do that and he said yes. Then I asked if it would be okay if I called some of the Christians there and told them to expect him, and he said yes. I did just that and got in touch with one of the elders. I followed through on him, and he did go to church and asked for their prayers. The last account I had of him was that he was trying to reunite with his family.

During this time, I was visiting with other patients also. One patient, Cecil Garner, was weak with cancer. After several visits, one beautiful day I asked him if he would like to get out of his room for a while. He said if he could get help he would. I was able to find a wheelchair, and since his frail body was so weak, I easily picked him up, set him in the wheelchair, and rolled him downstairs to the windows. The trees and flowers were just beautiful. I asked him if he believed that there was some power that created all of that beauty, or did he think it just happened that way by chance. He thought it was a super-power. We talked about heaven and hell — the beauty verses the sorrow. I could tell he was getting tired, so I took him back to his room and put him to bed. I gave his wife my home phone number. I later started home and met my wife. She was flashing the lights on her car. She told me that Mrs. Garner had called to tell me that her husband wanted to be baptized. Arrangements were made in the hospital, and I was able to baptize him myself.

Still another person I began to visit was a 340 pound diabetic. I found out he was to have a leg amputated. I visited him off and on through this operation. He was finally able to go home. It wasn't too long before it became obvious that he would have to have his other leg removed also. I visited him regularly, and in the process, found out his wife was Catholic and that he had grown up as a youngster in the Baptist belief. At least he said that if he had any religion at all, it was Baptist.

One morning as I was sitting by his bedside, his wife came in. Just inside the doorway she said to me, "I wish you would baptize him so he would shut-up." So then I began to ask him some questions. He told me that he wanted to become a Christian. Then I was faced with a new problem. Here is a 340 pound man, without any legs, and he wanted to be baptized. One of the staff's nicer nurses said she would help me. We got him on a stretcher, took him down to

the hospital whirlpool tank and baptized him—stretcher and all. More about his life later.

Another person I visited was a man in his 40's that was a cancer patient. We would study some each day. One morning when I went to his room, his wife, Chris said, "Bill, Johnny and I have talked all night, and we want you to baptize both of us. We want to become Christians." I had noticed before that every time I saw him he was lying in the same position. So I thought I had better call his doctor before proceeding any further. I called his doctor and told him Mr. Craft wanted to be baptized. The doctor thought I was crazy. He asked me if I knew how serious Mr. Craft was, and I told him no; that's the reason I was calling him. The doctor said that his spinal cord, brain stem, and disc vertebrae were just about "eaten-up" with cancer. I said that Mr. Craft wanted to become a Christian. He told me he wanted to talk to him first. Mr. Craft told the doctor that yes, he did want to be baptized. Then the doctor told me to get the nurse to fit him with a good neck brace because a sudden jar or shift in his body could kill him immediately.

This scared me, and I debated about it and we prayed. I decided that I did not want to undertake this task by myself. So I called the Southwest church of Christ and asked our minister, Jimmy Adcox, to come and assist me. When he got there, we had to use a stretcher for Mr. Craft. I told Jimmy that I was going to get in the whirlpool with Mr. Craft and for him to operate the stretcher lift. I held Mr. Craft's head to steady it. When we brought him up out of the water, I almost passed out. I've never had such a load lifted off my shoulders as with this experience.

Matthew 25:36 — I was sick and you visited me.

Matthew 25:39 — When did we see you sick?

Matthew 25:40 — Since you did to one of the least of these, you did it to me.

So the Church of Christ Hospital Ministry was born, not just a visitation program, but a ministry.

The hospital ministry got off the ground February 1, 1988. In these 11 plus years 135 have been baptized and 358 have rededicated their lives. These figures are as of May 15, 1999. We have baptized from ages 14 to 91.

Many of those baptized were family members and/or friends. For example, a very faithful brother was in the hospital with cancer. He knew he was going to die. We talked about where he was going and what a wonderful place it would be. We planned his funeral. And most of this conversation was in the presence of his family. Shortly after his death, we baptized two of his brothers, his son and wife, and their teenage daughter. They loved his life and dedication.

"Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the Kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. I was sick and you looked after me."

A spiritual body devoid of spiritual food will not last long before it dies. The spiritual nourishment being provided through the hospital ministry has led many to make a commitment to serve in His Kingdom.

How are we running the race? How are we ministering to others? The answer to the second question is contingent upon the first. We have been blessed in many ways in the hospital ministry.

God has blessed me with good health, more work than I could achieve, many opportunities to serve and good friends, families, and congregations that care about the hospital ministry.

We recently baptized an 81-year-old man. When he came up out of the water, he said, "Glory to God, what a relief." This man could care less who was running for president.

James (5:19-20) challenges Christians with a sobering responsibility towards their fallen brothers: "If any of you do err from the truth, and one convert him, let him know that he which converteth

the sinner from the error of his way shall save a soul from death, and still hide a multitude of sins."

There was a misconception in the medical community that we would be resented and perhaps mistrusted if we said anything about a patient's spiritual condition. Though this does occasionally happen, it is much less common than most think. I've found out in visiting patients, you don't anger people by telling and showing them that you can love them. Galatians 6:1: Paul's reminder that we show a "spirit of meekness" when we attempt to restore a brother is a good safeguard against hurt feelings.

Sin is like cancer: it did not happen in one day, but gradually over a period of time.

Many people in hospitals are lonely; many doubt their faith; many have a change of personality, especially after heart bypass surgery; many doubt God. Some just need someone to talk to: **I LISTEN! DID YOU EVER NOTICE HOW MUCH BETTER YOUR EARS WORK WITH YOUR MOUTH SHUT?** — Yes, I listen.

I was visiting an elderly man who was in the ICU. He had been through a traumatic experience. He was telling me he was satisfied with his sprinkling "baptism". I explained that my understanding of baptism was that through faith we were immersed in water and when coming up out of the water we were in contact with Jesus' blood. Our conversation shortly ended. In a few days, his wife visited the dentist where my wife and I go, and she told him that her husband now understood baptism as a burial. The dentist contacted me, and I went to the man's home and talked to him. After some conversation, we took him to the Southwest church of Christ building and baptized him.

Some two years later he died, and I want to quote from the card that his wife mailed to me: "Dear Brother Hutchison: Our family and friends have expressed to me their great joy that my husband George was baptized. We owe you so great a debt of gratitude—

more than words can express. Our sorrow would have been sorrow without hope if you had not been there for him. How wonderful it was to see you baptize him after the many years of waiting and hoping. We will always remember what you did for him and the hope and comfort it brought to all his family."

I do not go into hospital rooms every day with the idea of teaching and converting people. The first objective is to make friends, show genuine concern, and to build confidence. I do stress the value of Christian belief and try to get patients to maintain a good attitude. If they are depressed, their medicine does them very little, if any, good at all.

One really interesting experience follows: I was leaving the ICU waiting area when a local gospel preacher came in with a man. The preacher introduced him to me and told the man what I did. This man's wife was in the ICU and wanted to die. He asked me if I would go visit her. After asking him some questions about her, I left him. Typically, when I get to the hospital, I pray for wisdom for that day. This particular time I prayed and asked the good Lord to guide me on this one visit especially. I went into the ICU and walked up to the patient's bed. The doctor was attending to her and asked me if I were part of the family. I told him no that I was a minister. When he got through checking her, he stepped back. I asked the doctor if I could talk with her. She had not, at that time, lapsed into a coma. She looked up to me as if to say, "Who are you?" I introduced myself, then asked her this question: When your children were small, did you show them the little book about the little train where the engine said, "I think I can, I think I can?" She acknowledged that she had. Then I went over about eight positive points: wasn't it good to bring children into the world, take care of them, watch them grow, etc.? She beamed a smile. Then I stepped back so the doctor could examine her again. Then he turned to me and asked what I did to her. He said that all her vitals were normal. Then his expression seemed to

ask about laying hands on her. She responded and two days later she was back in a private room, and two days after that she was able to go home.

Some months later, my wife and I were at the mall. We met this couple walking toward us. When this lady got about 20 feet from us, she broke and ran and gave me a real bear hug. I mean she squeezed me. Then she said, "You saved my life." After all was said and done, I just helped her out of her depression and gave her a reason for living.

About two years later, June 1992, *Guideposts Magazine* ran an article almost identical to my experience with the lady that wanted to die. The results were the same. Healing was brought about. I've learned to watch for depression. I try to get patients into a positive frame of mind. I know when they're depressed that their medicine does them very little good.

I quite often will ask an older person to tell me about some experience that happened in their childhood. The sillier the better. I want to get them laughing. Then I laugh with them.

In my visitation, I rarely wear a tie and suit. I feel that I get a lot closer to the person if I appear as someone not in a hurry. I learned a lot of that when I was an elder in the Wooddale church of Christ in Memphis, Tennessee for 24 years. I want to gain their confidence and want them to like and trust me. I want to be a servant.

Really, it's true; people don't care what you know until they know how much you care. Not only in hospitals, but in everyday life, doors of service will open when we become sensitive to the needs of others. I'm not talking about just the sick, but any need.

One of the incredible benefits of a hospital ministry is getting to know people at every stage of illness. Some people are just being diagnosed. Some are getting second opinions. Some are weighing medical options. Some are in the midst of medical treatment. Some

are in total remission. Some, being unable to overcome the disease, die.

Sometimes we visit a Christian who blames God for misfortune and loses faith. Others have various problems, but by just being there, we have been able to help in many ways.

Over the past year, I have visited hundreds of patients. The spectrum has included the terminally ill, some from accidents, bypass surgery, strokes, heart attacks, knee or hip replacements, and many others with varying illnesses including, regretfully, AIDS.

What have I learned from these experiences?

First, every patient is a unique individual and wants to be treated as such, to be treated as a human being, a person of worth.

Second, every patient wants someone who will listen attentively and compassionately to his or her concerns.

Third, many times the patient's primary concern is not his or her illness, but the effect the illness is having on loved ones.

Fourth, a patient's illness or injury is only a part of the many issues that he or she must address or have addressed by others.

Fifth, some needs surface quickly and can be addressed simply by providing information. Other needs may be more difficult to identify because many patients and/or their families do not want to admit to having a need.

In these 11 years of the hospital ministry, I have learned a lot about how to deal with various needs. The result is nearly 500 responses to Christ's call.

There are many good reasons to visit the ill and their families. Patients and families need us to be there and listen, to ask what we can do, and to help in whatever ways possible. Medical research is confirming what has been proclaimed for years: Loving visits nourish hope and help the patient recover.

February 1 we started our 12th year. Books could be written on hospital ministry experiences. It's gratifying to know that almost

daily I have requests to visit certain patients. These requests come from doctors, hospitals, staff, friends, preachers, etc.

Some suggestions: Some people won't visit the hospital from fear of their lack of Bible knowledge. That's a myth. It's not always what you say, but what you do and the care you give people that really counts.

I'm not an expert. When I started, I did not have any idea how to proceed. No track to run on. By trial and error we have survived nearly 12 years.

When I first started, I could tell that doctors were not too concerned about the spiritual situation of the patients. I began a slow plan to change this. Every opportunity I got, I would talk to a doctor about faith in healing. Over the years, I could tell I was winning.

Irene Kraus, chairman of the American Hospital Association, has written a book entitled *The Importance of Caring*. In it she says, "Compassionate, personalized care has long remained the ultimate goal of hospitals. In fact, in the early days of hospitals and medicines, caring was often a sole aid that physicians and nurses could give to their patients. Many diseases had no cure; medical capabilities to relieve suffering were limited. Because some cures were not possible, caring was the only alternative."

"Within the last several years there has been a growing realization of what many had known all along, that emotional caring can be as important to the patient's overall health and well-being as physical curing."

She goes on to say, "The principles of compassion and helpful care are based in part on the spiritual values of religions and in part on the moral values important in the philosophy of a democratic nation."

Those of us who have ever been in a hospital can cheer for Irene Kraus and her worthy goal. Too many of us have been victims of impersonal, inadequate, and incompetent care in medical institu-

tions. Irene Kraus not only sees the need for compassionate, personalized care, but she also understands that only people with deep spiritual values are motivated to provide that kind of care. More than that, she sees the community itself and the hospital staff as partners in this kind of care. Again this is where we come in.

Fortunately, more and more people in the helping professions are taking seriously the spiritual nature of people and the interrelatedness of health and emotional well-being. At an international symposium on holistic medicine recently, one of the doctors said, "In the past, we doctors treated diseases that happened to be in people. In the future, we need to learn how to treat people who happen to have diseases."

After I received an invitation to speak at the Pepperdine University 1992 lectures, I did a lot of research. I found some interesting questions. What can be done to help those who are breaking down physically for emotional and spiritual reasons?

In a recent survey, the American Medical Association asked several general practitioners across the country, "What percentage of people that you see in a week have needs that are qualified to meet with your medical skills?" Some replied 25 percent and some one percent but the average was 10 percent. In other words, by their estimate, 90 percent of the people who see a general practitioner in an average week have no medically treatable problem. Certainly they are ill and suffering real pain, but their problems are not chemical or physical and defy normal medical procedure. The survey went on to ask what they did for these people. Most of the respondents said they prescribed tranquilizers such as valium. When asked what they would like to do for these people, most of the doctors said they would like to have had time to spend an hour a week talking to these patients about their lives, their families, and their jobs. Here again is where we come in.

One of my doctor friends and I were discussing one of his patients. I asked how she was doing. He laughed and said she had been sick over 30 years and has enjoyed every bit of it.

"Religious faith can make a big difference in life," is a quote from Dr. David Larson, research psychiatrist at the National Institute for Mental Health. Larson, who examined the impact of religion in past studies while at NIH, says he expected to find that what he was told in medical school was true: that religion is irrelevant to health. But when he looked at years of studies, he discovered something quite different. "When you look at findings concerning religious practice or attitudes, it's very beneficial (to health)."

"Proverbs works. If you want to live longer, feel better, enjoy life more, and not have mental problems, you should go to church not on an annual basis. That does nothing, but on a regular, weekly basis," says Dr. David Larson. "Men who went to church and liked it had much lower blood pressure than men who didn't go to church and didn't care about religion." Religious people seem to be healthier, mentally and physically, than nonreligious people. They appear to be less susceptible to such illnesses as cancer, heart disease, hypertension and stroke. They may do better in some kinds of surgery and recover faster.

We studied the elderly who had hip fractures. Believers got out of the hospital twice as fast, because faith prevents depression. Why? How does he explain it? "God is good. God is gracious. He loves the people who are trying. He responds to us more if we give a little."

It's not unusual for religious individuals to claim that their faith has carried them through a bout of illness. What's new is that a growing number of scientists are agreeing with them.

I stress that a proper attitude and a good spiritual relationship with God is over half of their healing process.

I sometimes refer them to Philippians 4:6. "Have no anxiety about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your request be made known to God."

You do not have to be a Bible scholar to do ministry. Just be there. Show interest.

We have designed a hand-out entitled "While You Are in the Hospital." We have printed and handed out thousands. It really gets attention. We now have some 50 people involved in our hospital ministry.

Teams go to the hospital, usually on Friday. They find out who will be there Sunday and if they want communion brought to them. They make a list of the people's names. From this list we find out a lot. Communion is served on Sunday to those who desire it.

Then on Monday I follow through.

We have worked up some Do's and Don'ts and some general suggestions for visiting a hospital. I surveyed priests, chaplains, several doctors, other ministers, and some patients before writing the Do's and Don'ts list.

For the patient's family, we give them a schedule of our church services.

SUMMARY: WHEN ALL IS SAID

Someone has observed wisely that "When all is said and done, there is usually more said than done. And from experience we know it to be a fact!

Our wishes and good intentions often far exceed our actual accomplishments.

Service, not selfishness, is the path to greatness. Both the world and the kingdom have been greatly blessed by men and women who have laid aside their selfish aims and spent themselves on behalf of others.

PLEASE LISTEN! It is never too late, nor is anyone too old, to become a volunteer. Those who volunteer, discover the depth, breadth, and richness of life.

God wants you to have a positive impact on the world for Him. Jesus told us to be salt and light (Matt. 15:13-14). We must not let preoccupation with organizations, committees, and "ministry systems" keep us from serving. Remember, when you serve God, you are His partner. He gave you the gifts and the strength to share His grace in its many forms (1 Peter 4:10-11).

If a commitment to service is new to you, here's how you can be a "point of light" for Jesus.

(1) Identify what you can do well. Read Romans 12 for ideas. Ask a friend what he or she thinks your strengths and talents are. Think of something you would like to do as a tangible expression of your gratitude to God.

(2) Serve within the parameters of your gifts. A need is not necessarily a call. Be honest with yourself regarding your skills, maturity, schedule, and personality. You should serve somewhere, but not everywhere.

(3) Plug yourself in! There is so much good to do. Don't wait for a "program" to come along and coax you into service! Help a disadvantaged youngster learn to read. Befriend a lonely elderly person. Teach a Bible class. Distribute food to hungry people. Ask a leader in your congregation for ideas. Talk with the principal or counselor at the school nearest your home. Look, listen, pray and be creative, but be yourself. Personal responsibility is the key.

(4) Don't try to do all things, but at least do one thing well.

The church's programs exist because of volunteers—Christians witnessing to the power of the gospel in their lives. When encouraged to use their talents creatively, the church becomes a magnetic community of light in the world: "a city set on a hill that cannot be hidden" (Matt. 5:14).

Volunteerism must be expressed in our own individual ways, based on the resources we have to give. According to God's plan, each of us has different gifts. Some have spare time, others have extra mental or physical energy; some have a special talent or skill, others have ideas, imagination, the ability to organize; others show hospitality, motivate, teach, or lead. Everyone can do something.

The fundamental principle of Christian service is based on the life of one who said, "For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but serve" (Mark 10:45).

Here is our opportunity: One of the best ways to open hearts to the gospel is through service.

People don't care what you know until they know how much you care. Doors of service will open when we become sensitive to the needs of others. I'm not talking about the sick alone, but any need!

I quote from Bruce Larson's book, *There's a Lot More to Health Than Not Being Sick*. "During a week at the famous Menninger Foundation I asked some of the staff the single most important ingredient in the treatment of the emotionally disturbed. I was told that the entire staff was unanimous in singling out HOPE as the most important factor in treatment. They went on to confess that they really don't know how to give hope to a patient. It is a spiritual and elusive gift. Nevertheless, they could discern immediately when a patient turns that crucial corner in treatment and realizes that he does *not* have to be what he has been before."

A simple definition of hope is this: To believe that good things are about to happen. Our hope for the future determines our course of action in the present, just as our present plays a powerful role in determining our future.

Through the hospital ministry we have brought joy, peace of mind, and in some cases a real desire to heal not only physically, but emotionally and spiritually as well.

My job isn't without its challenges. One of the most difficult parts is working with the bereaved. So you just cry along with them. You just try to let them know there is someone who loves them, that the Lord loves them, and that there really is HOPE.

Earlier I mentioned the 340 pound diabetic. He lived about three years after becoming a Christian. The family asked me to preach his funeral. Some two years later, his wife, still Catholic, died. To my amazement, the family asked me to preach her funeral also. They did not impose any stipulations on me or the service. Since that time, I have stayed in touch with this family.

I really believe that the Lord does work in mysterious ways.

I cannot change yesterday:

I can only make the most of today;

and look with hope toward tomorrow.

In conclusion, I will share one of my favorite poems with you.

On Wings of Prayer

Just close your eyes and open your heart
And feel your worries and cares depart.
Just yield yourself to the Father above,
And let Him hold you secure in His love.

For life on earth grows more involved
With endless problems that can't be solved
But God only asks us to do our best,
Then He will "take over" and finish the rest.

So when you are tired, discouraged, and blue,
There's always one door that is open to you
And that is the door to "the house of prayer."
You'll find God waiting to meet you there.

And "the house of prayer" is no farther away
Than the quiet spot where you kneel to pray,
For the heart is a temple when God is there
As we place ourselves in His loving care.

And He hears every prayer and answers each one
When we pray in His name, "Your will be done."
And the burdens that seemed too heavy to bear
Are lifted away on "the wings of prayer."

HOW GOD MAKES COVENANT

**David Lusk
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To illustrate our study of "covenant," let me tell you three true stories.

STORY NUMBER ONE:

On November 11, 1918, the Germans and the allied forces signed what was known as an "armistice agreement" to end World War I. The two warring factions were weary. They sat down and negotiated a treaty that said, "I will stop if you will." By mutual agreement, the opposing forces laid down their arms and went home. All was quiet on the Western front.

STORY NUMBER TWO:

Twenty years later, war broke out again. Most of the same countries were allied on each side (though this time, the Axis forces included the unlikely partnership with Japan). Germany and the European forces finally were defeated, and then all of the Allied might was trained on Japan.

On August 6, 1945, a bomber called the Enola Gay was dispatched to drop the first atomic bomb on Hiroshima, Japan. That nation was brought to its knees. The Japanese asked for peace.

On September 9, 1945, in Tokyo Bay, the warring sides met to sign a peace treaty. But this was no "armistice agreement." This

was a pact of unconditional surrender dictated by the Allies and signed by the humbled nation of Japan.

STORY NUMBER THREE:

When I lived in Texas, I received a phone call one night from a friend of mine who lives in Arizona. We chatted for a while, and then he asked if my wife and I had ever gone to the Grand Canyon before. I answered "no." He said, "Come go with my wife and me." I explained I didn't have the money. He replied, "I know that. My wife and I are going to pay your way on this vacation." He was true to his word, and we enjoyed a wonderful time at no expense to me.

The two treaties that ended those two wars plus the story of the phone call perfectly illustrate the concept of *covenant* that we find in the Bible.

The first treaty—the *armistice*—was an "agreement between equals." Both sides had a say, and both sides got part of their way. The Bible speaks of covenants like that—agreements made between equal partners who "hammer out" a consensus. It is called a *parity agreement*—an agreement between equals. But you will never find God entering into an agreement like that. We cannot find anyone equal with God.

That second treaty—the one signed in Tokyo—was different. It was what the ancients called a *suzerainty treaty*—one imposed by a superior party (a *suzerain*) over an inferior (a *vassal*). This type of covenant we see God making many times in the Bible. He (the superior) makes covenant with us (the inferior), and thus He forms suzerainty covenants with everyone, unless it is the third kind of covenant.

The third story is actually a story of "covenant" too. When you learn about it, (and it is the most beautiful kind of covenant) you will enjoy it. It is called a *patron covenant* or a *charter covenant*.¹

This is an agreement made by only one person—not two. It takes the form of a sovereign promise, voluntarily taken by God (usually) to bless mankind. He offers His favors unconditionally to a chosen one, to bless that person or his descendants after him. In such a covenant, man doesn't have to do anything—all he can do is trust God to carry out His promise. God binds himself with a promise much like my friend did, to pay for my vacation. For an example of such a covenant, see Genesis 15. It was God alone who passed through the pieces, meaning He was binding Himself to do something for Abraham. Abraham did not pass through because he took on no responsibility in the matter.

Our God has always been a *covenant* God. He deals with people only by way of covenant. In creating the heavens and the earth, He made a covenant with creation (Jer. 31: 35; 33:20). In dealing with humans, He first makes covenant with them. Thus the Bible is replete with covenants of all kinds, written in covenant language.

To understand the Bible, then, we need to understand covenants. And to understand covenants, let's look at the different kinds we will find in the Bible.

KINDS OF COVENANTS

Generally speaking, the term *covenant* is translated as "a contract or agreement between two, in that each agrees to do something of benefit to the other"² or, "an agreement between two or more persons to do or to refrain from doing some act. A compact or arrangement between two parties."³ Yet that is only the "bare bones" definition. We can't stop here, for there is much more.

THE MEANING OF THE TERM IN HEBREW

The word in the Hebrew language is picturesque. It is the word *b'rith* meaning *to cut, bind*. It probably meant *to bind together in an alliance*. I say "probably" because, though it is used 280 times in the Old Testament, we are not sure of the word's origin.⁴ Some trace it to *barah* which means *to eat*. Others see it coming from *birit* meaning *between*. (In the early days they used *to cut a donkey* between covenant participants). Others find in the word an Akkadian root: *baru—to bind, to fetter*.

In the Old Testament, the phrase *to make a covenant* literally reads *to cut a covenant*. The term is used throughout the entire Old Testament: in the Law,⁵ in the Prophets,⁶ and in the Writings.⁷

It is important to notice, however, that in Bible times, the word *covenant* was a commonly used word. The average man on the street used it and understood the language in which the covenant was written. "There can be no doubt that *berith* belongs primarily to the secular vocabulary, and means 'cutting in pieces,' namely, of one or more sacrificial victims."⁸

The Hebrew language was so simple that one word had to mean many things. Thus in the Hebrew, the various kinds of covenants (parity treaties, suzerainty treaties, etc) are not determined by the words, but by the context. So *covenant* might mean *to cut, to agree, to bind, to make covenant*—but the text doesn't always say what kind of covenant was meant. The meaning had to be determined by the context of the passage.

THE MEANING OF THE TERM IN GREEK

The Greek language, on the other hand, is profuse. It has totally different words for the different kinds of treaties mentioned.

The first word, for example, is *suntithake* (or as it is used in the Bible, as a verb in the "middle tense" *suntithami—to put together; to agree, assent*⁹). *Sunatheke* is describing a *negotiated contract*, in which both parties determine the terms (bartering, dealing, etc). That is the word for our *armistice* that we saw earlier.

The second word is *diathake*: a non-negotiated treaty where the terms are laid out by the superior party. "*Diatheke* is properly translated as *disposition*, an "arrangement made by one party with plenary power, which the other party may accept or reject, but cannot alter."¹⁰

W. E. Vine says that the *charter covenant* idea is also found in *diathake* saying, "In contradistinction to the English word 'covenant' (lit. a coming together), which signifies a mutual undertaking between two parties or more, each binding himself to fulfil obligations, it does not in itself contain the ideal of joint obligation [:] it mostly signifies an obligation undertaken by a single person."¹¹

Since God is God—since He is all powerful and sovereign, He could just force men into covenant with Himself if He chose. He could just announce to us, "You are under covenant with Me—like it or not!" But thank God, He doesn't. When God enters into *diatheke* with men, in His grace he chooses a special form of covenant-making called a *patron covenant*. In such covenants, the terms are extended by the superior, but the vassal has at least a choice of entering or not.¹² We can say "yes" or "no."

The very best definition for the kind of covenant we see God making comes from A.T. Robertson. He said that *covenant* means, "A bond in blood sovereignly administered."¹³ It is indeed a bond; it is always formed by "touching blood," and it is dictated by a sovereign,¹⁴ magnificent God who loves us and wants only the best for us.

A STRANGE TWIST ON THE WORD

In the New Testament, however, the word takes on a strange second meaning. It is used to describe not only a covenant, but also a "last will and testament." Some scholars have a real problem with the word *diatheke* being translated as *will*. They have rejected that concept and declare that the word never means *will* or *testament*.¹⁵

But that view cannot be true because Hebrews 9:16,17 is so obviously talking about a *will*: "In the case of a will [diathake], it is necessary to prove the death of the one who made it, because a will [diathake] is in force only when somebody has died; it never takes effect while the one who made it is living."

If you were to insert the word *covenant* for *will* there, the verse would lose its entire meaning. After all, what sense would there be in the words, "a *covenant* is in force only when somebody has died"? That is just not true, is it? The writer is obviously speaking of a "will," but he uses the word for "covenant."

Then in other verses, either word—*covenant* or *testament*—could be used with equal clarity interchangeably. For example:

Galatians 3:15—"Brothers, let me take an example from everyday life. Just as no one can set aside or add to a human *covenant* that has been duly established, so it is in this case."

How can we use both *covenant* and *testament* so freely when they mean such different things? Brinsmead may have the answer:

There has been some uncertainty (evidenced by the New Testament translators, for instance) as to whether the New Testament *diatheke* should be translated as *covenant* or *testament* (*will*). Undoubtedly, in view of the fact that the concept comes from the Old Testament, *covenant* is better translation, with the possible exception of Hebrews 9:16,17.

Some scholars, wishing to bend everything into the mold of *berith*, even contend that Hebrews 9:16,17 does not mean *will* and *testament*. This, however, is not supported by the face-value context. The Bible does not always fit into the precise systematic mold of scholars.

Granting that the New Testament word *diatheke* primarily means *disposition* and *arrangement* corresponding to the Old Testament *berith*, is it not conceivable that, since *diatheke* also had the popularly understood meaning of *will* and *testament*, the apostles could at times make a play upon this double meaning? Perhaps in Galatians 3:15 Paul is also making a play upon the double meaning of *diatheke*.¹⁶

THE IMPORTANCE OF COVENANT
IN OUR UNDERSTANDING

When I began my study on *covenant*, I was shocked to hear some of the statements scholars made. They raved and carried on about the importance of the *covenant* concept. It wouldn't have surprised me to hear them say an understanding of *covenant* was important; but instead I heard them say *covenant* was *vital*. They said such things as the following:

Edward J. Young: "Never believe you have understood anything about the Bible until you have reduced it to a corollary of 'covenant.'" ¹⁷

David Alexander: "It can be said that the entire religion of Israel presupposes for its basis a covenant between God and the nation he has chosen."¹⁸

Mont Smith: "One must be very careful to read the Bible as he would a treaty document, not as a tool for divination, or as a document that

carries some magical power to reveal privately some message from God. It is a treaty paper and is straightforward in language...."¹⁹

Robert Brinsmead:

This idea of a covenantal relationship between God and man is so basic and overwhelmingly predominant in the scriptures that the two great sections of the Bible have appropriately been called the Old Testament (covenant) and the New Testament (covenant). . . . The covenant theme is not just one of many interesting Bible doctrines; it is part of the very framework of biblical theology. Whereas the study of some things in the Bible may be regarded as optional as far as understanding its essential message is concerned, some understanding and appreciation of the covenants is indispensable to a sound knowledge of the scriptures.²⁰

Hearing such things, it almost became a challenge to prove them untrue. Yet the more study that was done, the more I was proven wrong. The more evidence that was uncovered, the more those statements were certified to be totally correct. By understanding the concept of *covenant*, the entire Bible takes on new meaning.

LOOKING AT THE BIBLE AS A LEGAL PAPER

When you approach the Bible wearing "covenant glasses," suddenly it all begins to make sense. From first to last, this is a treaty—or a series of treaties—God made with His people. Understand, the Bible is not a covenant, but it is a record of many covenants. Thus even the vocabulary found in the Bible is *covenant* vocabulary. Words take on a new and special meaning when seen through *covenant*.

Scan through the following words. You don't have to read this section closely, but close enough to get the point. Note that the Bible was written using covenant words and takes on new meaning when we learn these words.

WORDS TAKE ON NEW MEANING

RIGHTEOUSNESS: *keeping covenant*. It was used with Adam, in the law of Moses (Deut. 6:25), and in the New Testament (1 John 3:7). "He that does what is right is righteous." What is "right" is always stipulated in a covenant.

JUSTICE: the word *mishpath* in Hebrew meant "making judgments or decisions that are in harmony with the covenant." Another way of saying it is "deciding rightly" (Deut. 33:21).

SIN: breach of the covenant, or disobedience (Deut. 28:58-61). John said that sin was disobedience. Offerings for sins were for breach of the law of God, whether one realized he was doing it or not (Lev. 4:2, 13, 22, 27).

SACRIFICES: covenant renewal. The entire sacrificial system provided for "atonement" for sins committed. The system was a vital part of the old covenant, and when the old covenant was done away, the entire sacrificial system was done away with (Heb. 10:1-10).

THE LAW: the statement of stipulations for Israel. It was a word having a broader and milder connotation than European or American concepts of law. Law was a tool to help maintain good relationships. It helped one covenant partner know what the other could not abide. It allowed great areas of freedom. That which was not forbidden was presumed to be permitted. The Law in Israel later came to mean the covenant itself, and later yet the entire body of scripture of the Old Testament.²¹

BLESSINGS: were covenant blessings. Some common blessings were given to all descendants of Adam, but others were special and limited to the people of the covenant. They were extensive, specific, and related to each individual covenant (Deut. 28:1-14).

CURSES: almost always related to covenant. There is a long list in the Old Testament in various places, all part of the old covenant (Deut. 28:15ff). When neighboring tribes about Israel were cursed by God, it was to insure the survival of Israel as a covenant people and to make good the promises made to their fathers (Deut. 9:1-6).

PROPHETS: not ecstatic visionaries, but sober lawyers of the covenant, pressing Yahweh's lawsuit against a sinful and covenant-breaking nation. They were to aid Israel in keeping their relationship with Yahweh sound and secure. All the thunderings about sin by the prophets were related to the law of Moses. This fact was confessed by them (Dan. 9:7-19).

LOVING THE LORD: used in parallel with keeping His statutes, walking in His ways, and cleaving to Him. All these phrases were diplomatic terms for keeping a treaty.

CALLED, ELECT, ELECTED, CHOSEN: all words used frequently in the scripture "and all trace back to the covenant with Abraham" (p. 43).²²

DETERMINATE, PREDETERMINED, PREDESTINATED: all trace back to the determination of God to bless all mankind in Christ who was the seed of woman and of Abraham. This determination began with "the choice of Abraham" (p. 64).

GRACE: "The grace of God in the Old Testament is closely connected with the idea of covenant." It represented the forbearance with which God dealt with man and His offer of a way out. "Paul's approach (to grace) was through the idea of covenant-love, *hesed*, which has broken down all barriers" (p. 100).

INHERITANCE: a concept of receiving the blessings from God as within His family and "traces back to God's promise to Abraham in Genesis 12:7" (p. 112).

KINDNESS: "used once in the sense of a good deed (2 Sam. 2:6) and elsewhere (36 times) for the Hebrew *hesed*, the covenant-word which Cloverdale translated by 'loving-kindness'" (p. 119).

LOVING-KINDNESS: "Sir Adam Smith suggested the rendering of 'real-love.' The merit of this translation is that it combines both the two ideas of love and loyalty, both of which are essential. The theological importance of the word *hesed* is that it stands more than any other word for the attitude that both parties to a covenant ought to maintain toward each other" (p. 136).

OBEY: from the Hebrew *shema* meaning to hear and to conform in humility to the terms of the covenant. It is directly opposite of the conduct of "revolt and rebellion of those who broke the old covenant" (p. 160).

PEACE: a very complex concept that involved a covenant peace with God. "Peace is a normal and proper condition of men in relationship with one another in family first and extended to others by a covenant which determines relationships and is also a 'covenant of peace'" (p. 165).

PROMISE: most frequently related to a covenanted agreement, "e.g., strangers to the covenants of promise" (p. 172).

PEOPLE IN COVENANT TAKE ON A NEW MEANING

And not only words, but people take on a special meaning when the Bible is seen as *covenant*. For example:

ELECT: those selected to be incorporated into covenant. "God chose Israel from among all the nations of the earth to be His people in the possession of covenant privileges and blessings."²³

CHILDREN OF GOD: a very significant idea in both testaments, came into being by having a covenanted relationship with God. God chose Abraham and Israel as His own special people and made a covenant with them. Their status was a result of their relationship to God, identified and defined by the covenant (Deut. 26:16-19).

GENTILES: those outside covenant were seen as merely "the nations"—not included in covenant with God. (Called by someone "Just a heap of people.")

RELATIONSHIPS IN COVENANT BECOME CLEAR

God's covenant people are seen as very precious. For example, in Exodus 19:5, 6 we see how Israel becomes God's own *special possession*, simply because she gladly accepted *covenant*. In Ezekiel 16:8 we see that, in that same covenant, Israel became God's *bride*.

"In responding [to God's call to a covenant], Israel becomes a covenantal partner. She takes upon herself the responsibility of faithfulness, and in so doing becomes a 'Person'. . . Without these demands, without this structure for her life, Israel could have no real identity or destiny."²⁴

Israel had something special. In all of history, only the Jews are said to have had a covenant with their God. Leon Morris says,

Every religion has to do with some form of union, fellowship, friendship, or relationship with the deity. This is not peculiar to the Hebrew religion. What is peculiar to the Hebrew religion is that this union, fellowship and partnership with the deity is based on a legal arrangement called a covenant. . . . Covenant is a legal conception. . . . A legal basis is inherent in the very nature of the covenant.²⁵

If a person is *precious* and *special* in covenant, what of God's relationship with those outside? What relationship do non-covenant people have with Yahweh? Absolutely none (Eph. 2:1-10). If that is true, it is vital that we are in covenant. And it is vital that we understand the covenant we are in. We need to learn all we can about this wonderful concept.

HOW A COVENANT WAS FORMED

It would make it easy if we could say all covenants followed exactly the same steps when they were made, but that is not true. Different kinds of covenants were made in all kinds of ways. People entered into covenants with people; God entered into covenants with men, and few were ever formed in exactly the same way. But if you study the ancient covenants made by the Hittites and other nations, you will find a basic pattern of covenant-making coming into focus. Many of these very forms are found in the Bible.

Consider carefully these steps of old covenant-making because you will see later that they have a New Testament parallel:

#1: THE PREAMBLE

This first step in covenant-making identifies the author of the treaty and gives his titles and attributes. For example, some king might say to the pauper, "I am king Belsheban, ruler of all the lower lands." Now the poor man probably already knows the king, but it had to be done. It was the first step in covenant-making.

We see even God do this before entering into a covenant with mortals. He "introduces Himself" to the vassal (as though any introduction is needed), so there will be no doubt about who is making the covenant. This is why God introduces Himself to Abram

(Gen. 15:1, 17:1), to Isaac (Gen. 26:24), and to Jacob (Gen. 28:10ff). He is merely following covenant custom.

#2: THE HISTORIC PROLOGUE

In this next step, all the kind deeds of the great king on behalf of his vassal are recounted. "I have allowed you to run your cattle on my lands for many years." These past deeds are the ground of the suzerain's appeal to the vassal to render future obedience in gratitude for past benefits. After all, since the king has been so good in the past, it would be to my profit to enter into covenant with him now.

God does this, too, when he enters into covenant with Israel in Exodus 19:4: "You yourselves have seen what I did to Egypt, and how I carried you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself."

#3: THE INVITATION

Now the king wants to know the willingness of the vassal to enter the covenant. Thus he graciously invites the vassal to enter.

God does this at Sinai with the children of Israel, saying, "Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession. Although the whole earth is mine, you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation" (Ex. 19:5-6).

#4: THE TERMS OF THE COVENANT

Next comes the stipulations—the working rules of the covenant. "You must pay a dollar per head per year to run your cattle on my land." Here are the things the weaker member of the covenant must do to keep this covenant.

"These refer to the obligations of the weaker party, or the party of the second part, if equals. These were often stated in detail, with frequent use of moral terms, such as 'to love' and 'to walk before with the whole heart.' Total loyalty was demanded. Usually the vassal was forbidden to make alliances with anyone else...."²⁶

Such is the case, too, with God giving the terms for Israel's covenant. His "terms" are what we call the "Ten Commandments" (Ex. 20).

#5: THE BLESSINGS AND THE CURSES

Next all the good things are spelled out if the vassal keeps covenant. And on the other hand, here are listed the threats of horrible things that will happen if the vassal is unfaithful. The results of the vassal's keeping or not keeping the covenant are made very clear. The vassal who proved to be treasonous agrees that he is deserving of the listed discipline.²⁷ Keep the covenant, and here are the blessings; break it and here is what will happen to you.

#6: THE OATH-SWEARING CEREMONY

Also called "covenant ratification." This was the actual pledge made by the vassal to the lord. It involved the killing of an animal or animals and each party touching blood. This affirmed the idea they were one blood and had a shared life. It also indicated the type of punishment fitting for one who broke his oath and betrayed his covenant lord.

Usually, the animals that were killed were split from top to bottom. Sometimes the blood was allowed to fall to the ground; other times it was caught in a basin to be used in the ceremony.²⁸ The

animal pieces were then put on each side of a field or plot of land—one side on the right and the other side of the animal on the left forming an isle to walk through.

The Suzerain would read again the terms of the covenant, and the vassal would again voice his willingness to enter.²⁹ At that point, the two would "touch blood" by walking between the pieces together, sometimes standing in the blood to cut themselves,³⁰ to hold up their hand and swear loyalty or to eat salt.³¹ In the case of Moses and Israel, the covenant was ratified when the blood was sprinkled on the people marching by.

There were exceptions to the covenant-making forms—many exceptions,³² but the form of "cutting the animal" was nearly always present.

#7: CEREMONIES AFTER RATIFICATION

People did many things to celebrate the ratified covenant. For example:

There was feasting (Gen. 26:30; Ex. 24:9-11). Examples of such feasts are obvious in scripture. When Isaac made a covenant with Abimelech, he made a great feast (Gen. 26:30). Jacob did the same when he made covenant with Laban (Gen. 31:54). When David made a covenant with Abner, they feasted (2 Sam. 3:20).³³

There was the giving of gifts. These tokens were given by the superior (Suzerain) to the inferior (1 Sam. 18:3-4).

There was the changing of the name. In certain covenants, the inferior took on all or part of the name of the Suzerain. This identified the vassal with the exalted superior. Abram, Sarai, Jacob and others had their names changed. And these changes had a deep meaning behind them. It did much more than just make "exalted father" into "father of a multitude" as in the case of Abraham.

There were monuments and memorials. In some instances, a stone or other monument was erected as a reminder of when and where a covenant was made (Gen. 31:44).

#8: STORAGE OF THE COVENANT

The text of the treaty was most sacred. Even in the case of the pagan covenants, the oath of the covenant was sworn before the many gods. To breach the pact was an offense to the gods. Because it was so sacred, the actual treaty text was kept in a temple—in the "presence of the gods." Sometimes the text of the treaty was taken to that local temple and stored in a box called the "ark (box) of the covenant" and placed in an alcove they called the "holy place."³⁴ This terminology was used among the pagans as well as God's people when they made covenant through Moses.

#9: WITNESSES TO THE COVENANT

In pagan agreements, a list of witnesses, often a long list of respected gods of both parties, was inscribed as part of the treaty. In the early treaties, the vassal's gods were listed in full, but this practice gave way in later centuries.

Honored men, rivers, holy mountains, the sky, or other objects of nature were also called upon to be witnesses.

You will notice this is what God does. The covenant was witnessed by heaven and earth (Deut. 4:36; 30:19) so when Judah broke it, Micah goes to court with them and calls heaven and earth to witness His covenant (Micah 6:1-5).

#10: COVENANT RENEWAL

Many covenants (including the one that God made with Israel) had a ceremony of "renewal" built into them. Perhaps one broke covenant because of ignorance, because of infidelity or inability. Or perhaps the two parties simply wanted to perpetuate the agreement for another year. In that case, they went through what they called *covenant renewal*.

In pagan covenants, such a renewal could be made merely by reading the covenant at a stated time each year and vocally agreeing to continue. Or, in the case of Israel, when the worshipper offered a lamb, he was expressing good faith, saying that he wanted to continue with God. This was his *covenant renewal* ceremony.

#11: THE SIGN OF THE COVENANT

When a *suzerainty treaty* was made, the superior sometimes gave the inferior a gift—a sign that one was tied to the other. Then, as long as both were living in good faith in the covenant, they both were bound together,³⁵ and the sign was a reminder.

In a *parity agreement* (two equals making covenant) memorials took the place of gifts. "A sign may have been a pile of rocks, some stone placed upright—anything agreeable to both parties or imposed upon the other by the stronger party."³⁶

THE MAKING OF THE SUPERIOR COVENANT

Now that we have learned the principles above, notice how the new covenant that Christ made with us follows recognized covenant-making procedures.

- For us there is a *preamble/historic prologue* section. They are found in the Gospel accounts. Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John tell us of this Savior and what He has done for us from the beginning.

- We too have an *invitation* section in our New Testament. You will find the Master's invitation throughout the Gospels.³⁷

- When you look for the *terms* in our covenant, see the book of Acts. There the Gospel is preached, and the terms of the covenant are shared with the people.³⁸

- The section of *blessings and curses* will be found in the rest of the New Testament letters. There you learn the joy of walking in the light³⁹ and the horror of turning away.⁴⁰

- The Christian's *oath-swearing ceremony*—the *ratification ceremony* is obvious. It is found in baptism.⁴¹ It is there we "touch the blood" and join with our Master in covenant.

- And God, too, gives each of us a *sign of the covenant*. He has given us the precious gift of the Holy Spirit.⁴²

THE CONCLUSIONS WE DRAW

So if I am in covenant with God through Christ, what difference does it make? What relationship do I have with God in this covenant? Many wonderful changes take place as a result. I am made new (2 Cor. 5:17). I am special (1 Pet. 2:9). I am free from condemnation (Col. 1:21, 22).

And what relationship do I have with God if I am not in covenant with Christ? I have no relationship with Him whatsoever.⁴³

No one would want to stay on the outside. The wise one will choose to enter *covenant* without delay.

ENDNOTES

1. Everett Ferguson, *The Church of Christ* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996): 3.
2. Montgomery F Essig, *The Comprehensive analysis of the Bible* (Nashville: Southwestern, 1951):

151. This definition would not fit in the case of a Unilateral covenant-only one party assumes responsibility in such cases.
3. Norman L. Geisler & William E. Nix, *A General Introduction to the Bible* (Chicago: Moody, 1980): 18.
4. O. Palmer Robertson, studied the etymology of the word in depth: *The Christ of the Covenants* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1980): 18.
5. Gen. 15:18; 21:27,32;26:28; 31:44; Exod. 23:32,34; 24:8; 34:10,12,15,17; Deut. 4:23; 52,3; 7:2; 9:9; 29:1, 12,14,25,29; 31:16.
6. Josh. 9:6 ff.; 24:25; Judg. 2:2; 1Sam. 11:1,2; 2 Sam. 3:12 ff.; 1 Kings 5:12 ff.
7. Job 31:1; Ps. 50:5; 1 Chron. 11:3; 2 Chron. 6:11; Ezra 10:3; Neh. 9:8.
8. Leon Morris, *Apostolic Preaching of the Cross* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1957): 67.
9. W.E. Vine, *Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words* (Old Tappan, NJ : Fleming Revell, 1966): 251, See the word in John 9:22; Acts 23:20; Luke 22:5.
10. James Moulton & George Milligan, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1968): 2:128.
11. Vine, 250.
12. God has never forced covenant upon people. He did say, "I will make my covenant with you..." (Gen. 6:18), but in each instance it is obvious that the man wanted such a covenant.
13. O. Palmer Robertson, 4.
14. Sovereign means "independent of all others." God doesn't need us or anyone to function.
15. "...the concept of a 'last will and testament' must be rejected. It is simply impossible to do justice to the biblical concept of 'covenant' and at the same time to introduce an idea of 'last will and testament.'" Robertson, 11.
16. Robert Brinsmead, "The Importance of Covenant" *Present Truth* 7 (November 1976): 36.
17. Edward J. Young, *An Introduction to the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1965): 47.
18. David Alexander, *Eerdmans' Handbook to the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972): 196.
19. Mont W. Smith, 9.
20. Robert Brinsmead, 37.
21. Ibid., 38.
22. In the word studies from this word down, I have taken several definitions from Alan Richardson and John Bowden, *The Westminster Theological Dictionary* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1983).
23. John Murray, "Elect" in *Baker's Dictionary of Theology*, edited by Everett F. Harrison, (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1960), 179.
24. Elmer Prout, "Covenant Code," *Firm Foundation* 96 (June 5, 1979) 96:3.
25. Mont Smith, 12.
26. Ibid.
27. The most startling example of this is in Deut. 27 where the entire list of "blessings and cursings" are read to the people in the great "covenant renewal ceremony."
28. This is what Moses does with the blood in Ex. 24: 5,6.
29. Ex. 24:7.
30. Malcomb Smith, "The Abrahamic Covenant," in audiotape series, *Living In Covenant* (Washingtonville, NY:MSM Inc): MS608.
31. Num. 18:19, 2 Chron. 13:5 Why the use of salt? Herman Witsius suggested it was because it "resists putrefaction and corruption, and therefore prolongs the duration of things, and in a manner renders them everlasting." Witsius, *The Economy of the Covenants*, 45.
32. Some ratified the covenant by giving the hand (Ezra 10:19, Lam. 5:6, Ezek. 17:18); loosing the shoe and giving it (Ruth 4:7); writing and sealing (Neh. 9:38. Jer. 32:10-12); cutting an animal and

- sacrifice (Gen. 15:9-17, Jr. 34:18); and Oaths (Gen. 21:21-24; Gen. 22:16,17; Gen.26:26-31; 1 Sam. 20:42).
33. Witsius, 44.
34. Smith, 111.
35. The signs of God's covenant were obvious: with Noah, the rainbow; with Abraham, circumcision; with Israel, Sabbath keeping.
36. Smith, 122.
37. Matt. 11:28; Matt. 28:18,19; Mrk. 16:15,16; etc.
38. Acts 2:38; Acts 3:18; Acts 22:16.
39. 1 John 1:6-8.
40. Heb. 10:25-28.
41. Mark 16:15,16; Acts 2:38; Acts 22:16; Rom. 6:3-5; etc.
42. Eph. 1:13; 2 Cor. 1:22; 2 Cor.5:5.
43. Matt. 7:22; John 17:9; Lk. 13:27; Matt. 7:22, 23; Rom. 8:9; 1 Cor. 2:14; 1 Cor 5:9; Eph. 4:17.

MISSIONS



DEVISING A STRATEGY TO BUILD CHURCHES THAT LAST

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Picture a congregation where every member matters, where each can make a difference to society and the world as an active participant, a congregation where every member has opportunities to succeed in ministry, with success defined by God.

This congregation will be a spiritual home for its people, not a hotel. Strong families will serve as anchors; evangelism and concern for the lost of the world will be its heartbeat. This is a church that will last!

RIGHT ATTITUDE VITAL

Churches that last are made up of members who have the attitude of Christ. "You were taught, with regard to your former way of life, to put off your old self, which is being corrupted by its deceitful desires; to be made new in the attitude of your minds; and to put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness" (Eph. 4:22-23). In everything we do, a right attitude — dictated by a clear, submissive understanding of the will of God — is absolutely essential. This will result in a complete, uncompromising trust in God. We will not trust in our own understanding. There will be no place for intellectual pride, selfishness and egoism. Jesus and His way will be kept at the center. A further result will be that we will not insist that our human opinions must be elevated to the status

of divine decree. This will free the church from hurtful human issues that Satan so often uses to create division. "Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things" (Col. 3:2) is instruction from God through the Apostle Paul that, when given heed to, will result in the right attitude.

EXPECTATION

Expectation is a relative of desire. The church that lasts will be the one that expects and desires to last. We must really want to! Paul says, "my heart's desire...is that Israel might be saved" (Rom. 10:1). We must expect to win souls to Christ. We must expect to grow in number. We must expect to mature in faith.

Expectation and desire then give birth to reality when followed by planning, training, and determination. It has been rightly said, we finally get about what we really want.

AN EXAMPLE OF STRATEGY

Luke writes of Paul's visit to Thessalonica as follows: "As his custom was, Paul went into the synagogue, and on three Sabbath days he reasoned with them from the Scriptures, explaining and proving that the Christ had to suffer and rise from the dead. "This Jesus I am proclaiming to you is the Christ," he said. "Some of the Jews were persuaded and joined Paul and Silas, as did a large number of God-fearing Greeks and not a few prominent women" (Acts 17:2-4). This was the beginning of a church that achieved true greatness.

One year later Paul writes a description of the church at Thessalonica. "Paul, Silas, and Timothy. To the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ: Grace and peace to you. We always thank God for all of you, mentioning you in our prayers. We continually remember before our God and

Father your work produced by faith, your labor prompted by love, and your endurance inspired by hope in our Lord Jesus Christ. For we know, brothers loved by God, that he has chosen you, because our gospel came to you not simply with words, but also with power, with the Holy Spirit, and with deep conviction. You know how we lived among you for your sake. You became imitators of us and of the Lord; in spite of severe suffering, you welcomed the message with the joy given by the Holy Spirit. And so you became a model to all believers in Macedonia and Achaia. The Lord's message rang out from you not only in Macedonia and Achaia—your faith in God has become known everywhere. Therefore, we do not need to say anything about it . . ." (1 Thess. 1:1-8).

What worked for this great first century church will work in any century and for us here and now. Take note, they had "work" produced by faith, "labor" prompted by love, and "endurance" inspired by hope in the Lord Jesus Christ. They became "imitators" of Paul and of the Lord; they "welcomed" the message with the "joy" given by the Holy Spirit and became a "model" to all believers then and now. The Lord's message "rang out" from them.

LEADERSHIP

The church must have capable, godly leaders. These leaders will recognize that it is essential to nurture, feed, shepherd, and make it possible that every member understands that he or she is a vital part of the one body (1 Cor. 12:27), and that each has a gift or gifts that must be used to the edification of the church and to the glory of God.

HARDING'S HISTORY

Harding University began as a senior college in 1924, when two junior colleges, Arkansas Christian College and Harper College, merged their facilities and assets, adopted the new name of Harding College, and located on the campus of Arkansas Christian in Morrilton, Ark. The college was named in memory of James A. Harding, co-founder and first president of Nashville Bible School (now David Lipscomb University) in Nashville, Tenn. A preacher, teacher and Christian educator, James A. Harding inspired those around him with his enthusiasm for Christian education.

The first president was J.N. Armstrong, who had previously served as president of Harper College. In 1934 Harding was moved to its present site in Searcy, Ark., on the campus of a former women's institution, Galloway College.

One of Harding's first graduates, George S. Benson, returned from mission work in China in 1936 to assume the presidency of his alma mater. Quickly directing the institution out of deep debt, he began Harding's journey to financial stability, national recognition and academic accreditation. When Dr. Benson retired in 1965, his 29 years of tireless service were more than evident in a multimillion-dollar campus, regional accreditation, a strong faculty, and a continually growing student body.

Dr. Clifton L. Ganus Jr., a 1943 graduate, served as president from 1965 to 1987. A former history department chair and vice-president of the College, Dr. Ganus led a plan of campus improvement and expansion. During his administration, enrollment increased and several major campus buildings were constructed. Many academic programs were added to the curriculum, and an overseas study program in Florence, Italy, began during Dr. Ganus' administration. Harding achieved university status in May 1978, and the school officially became Harding University.

Dr. David B. Burks became Harding's fourth president in May 1987. A 1965 graduate, he has been a member of the faculty since 1967 and previously served as dean of the School of Business. Under his leadership, the University has experienced record growth in enrollment, and has constructed and renovated several campus buildings. New academic majors have continued to be added to the curriculum, and the graduate studies area has grown to include several master's degree programs. The international studies program has added three satellite campuses — in Athens, Greece; London, England; and Brisbane, Australia. Most importantly, the University has stayed true to its mission of integrating faith, learning and living.

