


7-1-1986

Mission: Vol. 20, Nos. 1 and 2

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Recommended Citation

(1986) "Mission: Vol. 20, Nos. 1 and 2," *Mission: Vol. 20 : Iss. 1*, Article 1.
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.acu.edu/missionjournal/vol20/iss1/1>

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JULY-AUGUST, 1986



MISSION JOURNAL

All the "ins and outs" of the suffering, needs, longings, and questions of the person's life must give shape to the church's life and ministry. In the presence of the Good Shepherd of the soul these human realities, in all their depth and complexity, are not to be lost in religious propositions and ecclesiastical programs.

In our Christian experience some of us are more adept at listening to the ancient stories of Abraham and Sarah, Moses and Miriam, Mary and Peter, than we are in attending to the "stories" of the brothers and sisters we live with every day.

Victor Hunter and Phillip Johnson,
The Human Church in the Presence of Christ

Coping With Change In Religious Belief
Herbert A. Marlowe, Jr.
Guest Editor

Tensions and Traumas of Active Faith
By Kathy J. Pulley

Coping When Different
By Dwayne D. Simmons

A Book Whose Time Had Come
By David Elkins

**VOLUME 20, NUMBERS 1 & 2
JULY-AUGUST, 1986**

A Thread Of Faith
From The Editor

Probably most of us, as the writers in this issue of *Mission*, have found ourselves many times hanging by a thin thread of faith, being very unsure of doctrine, or changing and maturing in faith patterns because of new insights or because what we have been taught does not ring true to our own experiences, intuition, or study. However, most of the time we find it dangerous to voice our doubts, our true beliefs, our questions, or our desires to change, for "we have seen the sensitive and thoughtful souls silenced, ignored, even driven away with tragic regularity."¹ "Wives cannot share their changing beliefs with their husbands; ministers are fired because they speak with an 'uncertain sound'; young people become fervent in order to hide their doubts."² Hungry, praying, seeking persons are driven away literally (by formal action); or they leave in rejection and sorrow with faith and hope further diminished by bigots and unloving people who are sure that theirs is the absolute truth and that they must set right or condemn anyone whose formula is different or uncertain. Some leave because they find other congregations where people are loving, gracious, caring, and nurturing, where the faith one seeks to commend is not trivialized nor God made contemptuous, where leaders have not forgotten "that the most important 'product' to come out of the church is the person in his or her healing, wholeness, and redemption."³

Surely the church should be a place where persons can work out their beliefs in an environment of support, encouragement and flexibility; where they are allowed to think through the complexities of doctrine and theology for themselves without ridicule, condemnation, or "withdrawal"; where personhood is valued above dogma; and where the beauty and promises of faith flow from life together with God rather than from pronouncements from the pulpit or edicts from the Board/Elder meetings.

Harry Emerson Fosdick in his book *The Meaning of Faith* points to those whose faith has laid hold upon and and who profoundly trust a Person—Jesus Christ—but who are unsure of their beliefs.

They have no . . . stereotyped,
(continued on p. 20)

"TO EXPLORE THOROUGHLY THE SCRIPTURES AND THEIR MEANING . . . TO UNDERSTAND AS FULLY AS POSSIBLE THE WORLD IN WHICH THE CHURCH LIVES AND HAS HER MISSION . . . TO PROVIDE A VEHICLE FOR COMMUNICATING THE MEANING OF GOD'S WORD TO OUR CONTEMPORARY WORLD."
— EDITORIAL POLICY STATEMENT, JULY, 1967

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20th Year Logo:
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Mission Journal is published monthly by Mission Journal, Inc., 12102 Tanglebriar Cove, Austin, Texas 78750. Annual \$16: annual student and senior citizens, \$7.50 Bundle and bound volume rates on request. Single copies \$1.

Unsolicited manuscripts are welcome. Those submitted for publication should be submitted in duplicate, double spaced, and typed. Maximum length ten pages.

Editorial Office: 1508 Ephesus Church Road, Chapel Hill, NC 27514. Phone: 919/929-4936.

POSTMASTER: Send address changes to Mission Journal, 12102 Tanglebriar Cove, Austin, TX 78750, which is also the address to be used for circulation and bookkeeping correspondence.

Coping With Change In Religious Belief: Genesis and Overview



Herbert A. Marlowe, Jr.
Guest Editor

This special issue has its genesis in one of those "let George do it" remarks. In response to a *Mission* article, I had written to Bobbie Lee Holley to encourage her to address the issue of how people cope with personal changes in religious belief. Bobbie Lee, demonstrating that she has become streetwise as an editor, was not about to let a live fish off the hook and promptly suggested that I take on such a project. Having been rapidly maneuvered into a put-up or shut-up position, I was ego-bound to say yes. Let this be fair warning to those who are indiscriminate letter-to-the-editor writers.

So, with Bobbie Lee's patient persistence behind me, I ventured alone into the strange and perilous world of the special edition. Immediately, in an attempt to alleviate my anxiety about this responsibility, I began to learn the humbling art of asking for contributions. After much cajoling, threats of excommunication, and down and out begging I was rewarded by those gracious souls who agreed to contribute. So it is with much pleasure, pride, and hope that this special edition was born.

In this issue we have attempted to address a problem that has been of concern to me over the years: how does one cope with the difficulties that arise when one's religious beliefs change? As with many concerns this one arose out of my own experiences in handling my changing religious beliefs and my

observations of friends and acquaintances in the same situation. I have been fascinated by the variety of ways in which various persons cope with this challenge.

Both through personal experience and professional training I have learned that one of the most powerful coping mechanisms is shared experience. Just knowing that others share similar thoughts and feelings is often an enormous relief to a person under stress. Learning how others have handled similar situations can be highly useful knowledge. Since I believe that a large number of persons experience stress as their religious beliefs change and since I further believe that shared experience is an important way to cope with such stresses, I have been pleased to be involved in this special issue.

The following articles represent a variety of viewpoints and are presented in a variety of formats. Some are formal articles, others are personal letters to me—all in response to my original letters or request. The authors represent the demographic diversity of the Churches of Christ—young and old, single and married, white and black, etc. Regardless of format they all answer my original question: "how do [did] you handle changing religious beliefs?"

The articles, except for the last, are presented in no special order. In the initial article Kathy J. Pulley writes on the difficulties of active faith. Drawing on a broad range of experiences she identifies three guidelines for coping with the demands of an "active (i.e. changing—Editor) faith": accepting the

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imperfections of human nature, developing an alternative belief system before abandoning the old one, and learning to live with pain. In the next article Dwayne Simmons discusses coping when different. He presents a theological argument for human differences and their validity in congregational life. He then turns to a discussion of how a focus on core commonalities can overcome differences. Acknowledging the imperfection of the church of Christ as well as his own, he none the less confesses deep faith in the God who perfects.

The rest of the articles are especially personal in their revelations of the faith experiences of the authors. Mary Lou Walden in the following article details her odyssey of changing faith. She identifies "the counting of blessings" as one major way in which she copes with the stress of change. Diana Caillouet uses a diary format to illustrate her changing and coping process. A close reading of her diary indicates the healing power of time, self-examination, and continued faith. Larry and Jacqueline Floyd discuss their decision to stay in the Churches of Christ and the mechanisms they use to assist them in that decision. In particular they list three strategies: reaching out to others, praising good things, and asking informational questions. Everett and Helen Champney, via a letter format, stress the importance of a Christ-focus in overcoming the difficulties of religious differences. They have found these issues to be mainly ones of perspective. David Henderson describes his journey from a childlike "I believe *because*" through the sloughs of apologetics and Christian evidences, the "golden calf" of knowledge, and personal failure to the Cross and the experience of God's love and thus full circle to a "very childlike understanding of God's reality."

The final article is particularly special to the editor. As I struggled with my changing beliefs, the one most helpful source was Robert Myers's *Voices of Concern*. Reading of the faith pilgrimages of others

helped end my feelings of isolation and encouraged me to go on with my personal quest. I have heard others say the same. Therefore I was very pleased when David Elkins agreed to do a retrospective review article on *Voices*, including an interview with the editor. For those familiar with the work the review offers a fascinating history. For those unfamiliar with *Voices* Dr. Elkins' review article offers an excellent introduction.

Based on personal reflection and a reading of these articles, what have I learned about coping with changing religious belief? First, to accept *the reality of change*. While we all may wish for an Edenic garden, life brings change just as surely as it brings death and taxes. Second, to accept *that the stresses that accompany shifts in religious belief are just as real and potentially debilitating as the stresses that accompany other major life changes* (marriage, retirement, "empty nest," divorce, death, etc). Third, to *communicate with others about our thoughts, beliefs and fears*. To "keep it all in" is one of the most serious errors one can make. Fourth, to *listen carefully to others*. Through both direct personal encounter and reading we can learn that others share our same concerns. Fifth, to *try to keep both perspective and humor about this process*. In the midst of change this is very difficult since it seems our entire world is crumbling. Of course, in some ways it is. However, if we can remember that the sun will probably still rise and that life more than likely will go on, we can perhaps recognize that these changes are simply changes and that we will survive them.

The Christian community at its best can be characterized as a sharing community. Those persons who have agreed to share their personal coping experiences via this special edition demonstrate that sharing. To each of them, and to Bobbie Lee, I express deepest gratitude.

MISSION

Editor's Note: The publisher and editor of *Voices of Concern* (which is now out of print) have agreed to allow David Elkins to make available photocopies of the book. The photocopy will be of the entire original book except for one article by a writer who asked that her article be withdrawn. If you would like a copy of *Voices of Concern*, send a total of \$8.00 to David Elkins, 27793 Rota, Mission Viejo, CA 92691.

On Not Jumping Without A Parachute

Transitions, Tensions and Traumas of Active Faith



Often the Gospels comment that Jesus taught "as one who had authority," but his was not an authority of forced mandates; rather, it was an influential authority arising from his personal power and his ability to speak truths which rang true to the experience of living.

By KATHY J. PULLEY

Faith is dynamic and active, not simply a set of doctrines or beliefs; and our potential for acting and doing faith changes with our life experiences all the way through adulthood, just as it did prior to adulthood. Richard Niebuhr describes the journey of faith as going from shipwreck (a total collapse of our world and of everything we thought we knew about ourselves and our significant others) to gladness to amazement.¹

Many who are seriously committed to religious truths often experience a "shipwreck" of disillusionment with life. Sharon Parks, a professor of theology at Harvard, has come to believe that reality gets closer each time we go through a cycle of shipwreck—to gladness—to amusement.² The greater our grasp of reality, the greater our potential to be whole and free. Most of us go through several such cycles as mentioned above. We experience many winters wandering through the wildernesses of Egypt. But the joy and gladness in such a thought is that each Egypt can potentially bring us into the Promised Land. And "Promised Lands" are to be celebrated, because with each new entry into the Promised Land there is a victory—a reality has been made clearer and human freedom has been expanded into another dimension. Each cycle of "shipwreckedness" has the potential to make us freer from something which was binding us.

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Challenging Authority

Coping in the midst of changing religious beliefs, however, is an extremely wearisome and difficult task. Constructing a genuine faith of our own means a reconstruction of at least some of our initially learned absolutes, turning our backs on some ideas and embracing others. This is especially difficult because such change means that our authority base must shift.

Most of us grew up trusting church authorities to interpret the Scriptures accurately for us; however, as adults we have often been confronted with the reality that our doctrinal and moral upbringing is inadequate and in conflict with our experiences in living. The Protestant reformers struggled with the same issue: how can the authority of the Church be reconciled with the ever-changing internal psyche of humanity? The individual struggle is more private and quiet, but nonetheless tension-filled. Such tension is heightened because biblical statements such as Romans 13:2 have been indelibly impressed upon our minds: ". . . he who resists the authorities resists what God has appointed and those who resist will incur judgment" (RSV).

For thinking, spiritually growing believers, doubts are real and inevitable. Yet if we entertain the possibility of going against the authoritative teachings of the Church, we leave ourselves open and vulnerable to mist-covered ambiguities and uncertainties. How do we "cope" with the unending questions and ambiguous answers that seem so far

removed from the security of the doctrinal and moral boundaries we knew in earlier days?

Doctrinal Traumas

If through careful study and conscientious reflection, we conclude that a doctrine once believed to be absolutely true is less than absolutely true, the reactions may vary from extreme feelings of having been lied to or taught utter foolishness to a kinder conclusion that our teachers did not have all the information, sincere as they might have been. Either of these reactions may diminish our trust in church authorities and easily lead to skepticism and perhaps cynicism about religious authority in general.

A minor example of this in my own experience concerns the doctrine of the Holy Spirit. Until 1967 I had studied the doctrine of the Holy Spirit very little in the church, and I do not recall the Holy Spirit ever being referred to with any other pronoun than "it."

The primary role of church authority may be to call upon the individual to allow her/his internal goodness to prevail; to support the conscience when it is weak; to offer God's forgiveness and love when the conscience is steeped in guilt; to sensitize against insidious actions; and to arouse the core of one's being to its inner desire for the Holy.

But that year, when I was a freshman in high school, a guest speaker spoke at the congregation I attended; and the concept of Holy Spirit as "divine being" emerged. What are the implications of the Holy Spirit as "being-ness" instead of "it-ness"? Does such a belief have any impact on faith and spiritual living?

In our (Stone-Campbell) tradition we still have not fully resolved our doctrine of the Holy Spirit. Aside from the theological issues, my struggle as a young adolescent included the issue of religious authority. Had the church leaders, whom I had trusted, misinformed me? Could I trust this new interpretation and its implications, even though it was counter to the religious values of many teachers in my congregation? Should I begin to study and develop my own biblical interpretation of the doctrine of the Holy Spirit or should I unquestioningly rely upon the interpretation of my tradition? Without my conscious awareness the struggle between doctrinal absoluteness and doctrinal ambiguity had begun; religious authority had to be reevaluated. How does one deal with the knowledge that the authority of

the Church, or any institution, is not infallible and has fluctuated throughout church history?

Perhaps our authoritative pronouncements have been tied to propositional mandates for too long. Often the Gospels comment that Jesus taught "as one who had authority,"³ but his was not an authority of forced mandates; rather, it was an influential authority arising from his personal power and his ability to speak truths which rang true to the experience of living. Perhaps church authority should be viewed as more metamorphic. Richard Sennet's book *Authority* discusses how the Ibo culture of Africa has mitigated the conflict between the individual's changing beliefs and her/his encounter with static, institutional authority.

In the Ibo culture one's understanding of authority changes as the person matures from childhood through adulthood. In childhood, the individual is expected to accept and to follow strictly the commands of the authorities. In adolescence, one is expected to hear out the advice of the authorities; and in adulthood, one is expected to rely upon the memories of the tribe's past as the main source of authority. As the Ibo child grows, he/she experiences greater personal freedom because the form of authority is transformed; however, the power and respect for that authority does not recede. From Sennet's perspective, the only illegitimate authority in the Ibo culture is that which attempts to "freeze the conditions of authority into a single mold."⁴

Would it be possible for institutional church authority to perceive itself in the same way as the Ibo's authority—mutable and alterative? How would such a church structure look? Generally, its members have different questions regarding spiritual matters. Regardless of the question, however, each person must be encouraged to voice her/his doubts. Each must be listened to seriously, and each must be listened to with openness and respect. Such sensitized listening is easier if we recognize that on any given day the doubter's question may once again be our own.

"Does God exist?" is perhaps the most fundamental concern in the believer's life. In adolescence it was legitimate to raise such a question in our Bible classes. As adults, however, we do not voice the doubt because we "assume" that an active believer has resolved that question. To ask such a question would raise eyebrows and incur possible rebuke. Yet, it is a question which seems to keep on recurring and needing to be answered at various times in our life.

Elie Wiesel, in his book *Night*, describes how this question was raised one evening at a Nazi concentration camp as a small, wrongly-accused boy was about to be hanged in the gallows with two adults:

*...The two adults were no longer alive. . . the child was still alive. . . For more than half an hour he stayed there, struggling between life and death, dying in slow agony under our eyes. . . his eyes were not yet glazed. Behind me I heard. . . "Where is God now?"*⁵

Regardless of whether we happen to be the authority or the questioner, regardless of how we interpret faith, we also, in the personal crises of our lives, look at our haunting gallows and ask that tormenting question anew, "Where is God now?" Our answers cannot be platitudinous or cliché. They must ring with truth if they are to be viable and faith-intensifying.

If there is no one to feel the pain and the trauma, to answer in helpful ways, to understand the depth of the crisis, many begin to move away from the Church. Though we often find ourselves steeped in guilt and/or rebellion, the most obvious means of coping in such a situation is simply to drop out.

Changing Moral Values and Lifestyles

Conservative churches have always emphasized the importance of the individual's response to God and along with that emphasis has been an emphasis on moral behavior. In my experience it is much more likely to see individuals drop out from a change in lifestyle, perceived to be unacceptable to the Church, than to see them drop out because of a theological disagreement. This too presents another challenge to religious authority.

Phil Donahue's autobiography contains a statement which is an example of the pain involved when we encounter moral disagreement with our religious leaders:

*Never again would I give the Church or any institution the power to make decisions about my moral well-being. Never again would I go to confession for 'absolution,' and never again would I go to a body of disinterested men to seek a marriage 'annulment.' . . . Not would I allow a group of old men (sitting on hard benches in Rome or Trent) to presume to tell me what is a mortal sin or venial sin and what is the prescribed punishment for each.*⁶

As individuals and as the Church, we must be very cautious about recognizing the differences between cultural norms and universal norms: we are a part of our culture and at any given moment it may be difficult to discern between what is finite and what is transcendent. There is much ethical ambiguity today. One of Tom Stoppard's characters in

Professional Foul says, "There would be no moral dilemmas if moral principles worked in straight lines and never crossed each other."⁷ Unfortunately, moral principles do cross each other.

Huckleberry Finn experienced entrapment between two moral principles when he helped Miss Watson's slave Jim run away. Should he hurt Miss Watson by stealing from her and endangering his own soul in the process?

*. . . everybody naturally despises an ungrateful nigger. . . The more I studied about this the more my conscience went to grinding me. . . I was stealing a poor old woman's nigger that hadn't ever done me no harm. . . 'people that acts as I'd been acting about the nigger goes to everlasting fire.' . . . It made me shiver.*⁸

Should he hurt Jim and turn him in, not knowing how severely he would be punished?

*. . . I couldn't seem to strike no places to harden me against him, but only the other kind. I'd seen him standing my watch on top of his'n, 'stead of calling me, so I could go on sleeping, . . . and how good he always was; and said I was the best friend old Jim ever had in the world, and the only one he's got now. . . I was a-trembling, because I'd got to decide, forever, betwixt two things and I knowed it.*⁹

Like Huck, we also shiver and tremble when confronted with our own moral dilemmas.

This is not to say that there may not be ethical absolutes, but rather that church authorities may need to reevaluate their approach to ethical dilemmas. Is the function of church authority primarily to judge individuals and their behavior after the fact or to be more helpful as a resource for individual "conscience-raising"? The primary role of church authority may be to call upon the individual to allow her/his internal goodness to prevail; to support the conscience when it is weak; to offer God's forgiveness and love when the conscience is steeped in guilt; to sensitize against insidious actions; and to arouse the core of one's being to its inner desire for the Holy.

Enlightened Coping

What then can be done or said constructively about transitions and changing religious beliefs?

1. Give Up The Wunschbild! In Dietrich Bonhoeffer's book *Life Together* he says that Christians must give up their *Wunschbild* or "wish dream" about the Christian community. "Only that fellowship which

faces such disillusionment with all its unhappy and ugly aspects, begins to be what it should be in God's sight, begins to grasp in faith the promise that is given to it."¹⁰

Often we are disillusioned not only by the authority figures who fail to measure up to our ideals, but also by lay members who are unintentionally thoughtless, nonresponsive, and seemingly indifferent to human needs. The good news in Bonhoeffer is "thank God" when the *Wunschbild* finally passes, when we stop expecting the human community of Christians to be near-perfect and start accepting all the imperfections of human nature. It is then that the coping can begin anew—an enlightened coping, however, when we are aware of human frailty but can look beyond such frailties, seeking after the promises of God.

Constructing a genuine faith of our own means a reconstruction of at least some of our initially learned absolutes, turning our backs on some ideas and embracing others. This is especially difficult because such change means that our authority base must shift.

2. Don't Jump Without A Parachute! When I was enrolled in a freshman religion class in college, one of my professors humorously coined this phrase and talked about the importance of not jumping from an airplane without a parachute, i.e., one should not abandon one set of beliefs, values, and traditions without being sure that he/she has another meaningful and dependable system with which to replace the first.¹¹ In a pluralistic society like ours such moves appear to be made easily. However, we are not blank slates; we cannot totally erase our roots.

Since that day in college there have been many occasions when I have stood on the edge of the airplane's open hatch, wanting desperately to jump, leaving my particular parachute with all its traditions and trappings behind. I didn't. Why? Cowardice or Commitment? No dependable parachute in place? I don't know.

Whatever our reasons, some of us are compelled to jump either with a different parachute or with the patched-up old original, but hopefully not without any parachute at all. The parachute we choose determines our landings; our parachute needs to be one which smoothly grounds us, not one which serves as an entangling albatross to cripple us.

3. Understand That Some Pain Must Be Endured! This is certainly not a new awareness for most of us.

In Madeleine L'Engle's book *A Severed Wasp* she writes, "Part of living is learning to live with the things that will always hurt."

Reality is that some wounds heal, others leave scars, and still others leave internal bleeding. Coping involves acceptance—acceptance of all the realities involved. One must accept that changing religious beliefs is inevitable if there is to be spiritual growth occurring throughout adulthood.

New belief may make our lives more congruent, but the pain from the past cannot necessarily be healed; nor can future pain necessarily be avoided. Many of us may discover that we are like Henry David Thoreau: our beliefs take us down solitary, lonely roads. And the solitariness is a kind of suffering in itself. There are others who may be experiencing similar thoughts and feelings, but they are often difficult to find because they are walking their own solitary roads. It is easy to blame others and to fault the institutions in which we have been involved, and perhaps rightly so; however, it may be that at least some of our solitariness has to do with our own nature.

As we journey through Niebuhr's cycles from shipwreck to gladness to amazement, perhaps the best hope for coping with changing religious values comes with an intense focus upon the gladness and amazement. Another shipwreck survived!

NOTES

¹Richard R. Niebuhr, *Experienced Religion* (New York: Harper and Row, 1972), pp. 91-106.

²Sharon Parks, "Faith Development," Lecture at Weston School of Theology, November 29, 1984.

³See Matthew 7:29; Mark 1:22; 11:28-33, as examples of this.

⁴Richard Sennett, *Authority* (New York: Adolf A. Knopf, 1980). pp. 161-162.

⁵Elie Wiesel, *Night* (New York: Bantam Books, 1982), p. 61.

⁶Phil Donahue, *Donahue* (New York: Phil Donahue and Co., 1980). p. 243.

⁷Tom Stoppard, *Professional Foul*, as cited by James F. Childress, "A Right to Health Care?" *The Journal of Medicine and Philosophy*, 4 (Spring, 1979): 135.

⁸Clemens, Samuel L., *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (New York: The Heritage Press, 1940), pp. 252-253.

⁹Ibid.

¹⁰Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together* (New York: Harper and Row, 1954), p. 27.

¹¹John F. Wilson incorporated this illustration into his book: *Religion: A Preface* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 1982) p.11. _____MISSION

Coping When Different

The Uniqueness of Each Person's Expression of Christianity



Since we are in a fallen state in relationship both to God and to each other, being a part of the body of Christ restores our sense of community. It is in this community that God's will reigns and should have concrete manifestation in our love for one another.

By DWAYNE D. SIMMONS

A beautiful attribute of humankind is that we are all different. Human beings come packaged in many different shapes and forms, and with an almost infinite set of individual experiences. We each have different biological and personal histories that lend to, if not create, our uniqueness. In addition we have an almost limitless capacity for data storage; we are constantly receiving information about our environment and then interpreting that information in the context of past experiences. I also believe that our spiritual attributes are just as colorful as any other part of us. Our experiences help to inform our view of God, and these very experiences also tend to modify the response(s) that we make to God. As Christians, we do not have homogeneous backgrounds; and because our experiences diverge, each person's expression of Christianity is unique.

It seems that the biblical record goes to great lengths to demonstrate God's concern for the individual and to provide us with numerous examples that affirm the essential worth of each person no matter how different she/he may appear. If we believe in the importance of the person, then we have to develop an understanding of how we are different from one another and especially how we can have Christian communion in spite of the differences. However, the tendency throughout church history has been to view the expression of differences with suspicion. Many Christians view fellowship

as sharing with those who are least different from themselves. The goal of such a fellowship is to have uniformity of opinion and expression. This has the advantage of making everyone feel comfortable with one another. In such a case, fellowship is dependent upon how similar your experiences are. If fellowship is a precursor to love, then this view of fellowship creates a distorted view of love. It is easy to love someone that shares a common background and way of thinking. It is much more difficult to love someone who is different from us. Differences between people may create tensions in relationships. Coping with such tensions can be viewed positively as a way of maturing and expanding both intellect and spirit. However, it is possible for such tension to lead to stress if we allow barriers to result from our differences.

Jesus does not create barriers but rather encourages us to recognize the essential worth of each person regardless of differences. A loving attitude tends to minimize potential stress and allows us to appreciate better the beauty of each person. When it comes to Christian expressions, I believe we have to recognize what is fundamentally most important: *Christian love overrides Christian opinion.*

Yes, I have differences in opinion (some call it doctrine) with many in the Churches of Christ. These differences of opinion have caused tensions in my relationships with many Christians in the Churches of Christ, and I am quite sure that barriers may have arisen because of my commitment to my views. It is my hope and prayer that love may yet win!

Dwayne D. Simmons is a candidate for the Ph.D. Degree at Harvard University and a member of the faculty at Pepperdine University.

Early Church of Christ Experiences

My Christian background is plural. I attended a Catholic elementary school and that involved going to mass every morning. Both parents were nominal Baptists; they sent their children to church and paid their dues. Also in my family were Jehovah's Witnesses, members of the Holiness Church of God and the Church of Christ, and Agnostics. They all seemed intent on getting my soul (including the Catholics). I do not know how typical this was of a Black middle-class experience.

The only people I saw as a child whose lifestyle was most consistent with their profession were the Jehovah's Witnesses and the ministry of all the varying groups. However, the church that appealed to me most was the Church of Christ. This particular congregation was predominantly Black. The older members tended to be blue-collar and a few of the younger members were aspiring to white-collar em-

If we believe in the importance of the person, then we have to develop an understanding of how we are different from one another and especially how we can have Christian communion in spite of the differences.

ployment (i.e., were in college). These people seemed to have a vision of what the church should be. They had a simple faith that took Jesus Christ very seriously. They believed their name (Church of Christ) gave them a special identity. It was these three factors: vision, Christ-centeredness, and identity that probably swayed me to become a baptized member. Almost all of my friends continued to be White and Catholic; as a result I shared little common social dimension with this church.

A source of early tension was my perception that these people tended to emphasize many legalistic strictures, especially social behaviors. Among the most notable were not smoking cigarettes, drinking alcoholic beverages, or dancing. I accepted these without much question since they were not part of my daily or weekly routine. I did, however, question their insistence on strict (one-way) interpretation of Scripture. And it was not uncommon for me to feel that they thought they were not just Christians but "the only Christians." This I interpreted as a form of self-righteousness that just did not fit with my intuition. The worship services were very formulaic. They seemed ritualized to such a degree that one did not have to think about anything, but only to accept and perform what was expected. Though

various versions were often preached against, I felt great satisfaction in reading aloud Scripture from a translation other than the King James version.

This early Church of Christ experience was often very frustrating. The undue stresses placed on church structures, uniform behaviors, and the rationalization of the Scriptures were frequently at odds with my own more intuitive approaches. Many times, I rationalized that it was my lack of commitment and of faith that caused my deviation in thought. Therefore the burden was placed on me to harmonize my way of thinking with those in the church. But the more I studied and reflected on the Scriptures, the more comfortable I felt with my interpretations. I realized early that the basic difference between me and most of the members was that they were content to accept what someone else told them as long as it played reasonably well with their cultural-social experience. Since this was something foreign to me, I felt many times like an outsider. I wanted my religious experience to have the same intellectual rigor that I found in the sciences. I found such rigor in a Catholic high school where I began to study Christianity seriously. As a result of such study, I had even less in common with the church members.

The Church And Commitment

When my experiences in the Churches of Christ broadened to include congregations across the nation, what I found was no more impressive than what I had seen on the local level. First of all, there was a common belief of local church autonomy, which I have rarely observed practiced. As soon as a local Church of Christ deviates from the practices of the mainline membership, they are viewed with suspicion and are likely to be ostracized. Having similar worship formulas, common social taboos, a tendency toward racial and gender bias, and self-

I realized early that the basic difference between me and most of the members was that they were content to accept what someone else told them as long as it played reasonably well with their cultural-social experience.

righteous attitudes seems to be the unifying milieu of the Churches of Christ throughout the nation.

I think it is interesting that I never considered seriously leaving the Church of Christ. I may have little in common with many of its members on a practical level, but we do share in some important basic

beliefs. We share a belief in Jesus and God and in a common tradition of restoration and unity. However, because I tend to adopt a non-absolute worldview, I believe my ideas about reality at best shadow what is God's Truth. My knowledge and intuition of God will be limited by my set of experiences, and I cannot, therefore, ever claim final authority. As a result, I find myself in constant struggle with God's Will. Since I can only hope to gain insights into his Will, the struggle is to keep pushing those insights further. Many people in the Churches of Christ have almost the opposite religious worldview. They view their knowledge of God as complete. For most of them the Scriptures can be approached in such a way as to provide only one correct interpretation. If views are absolute, there is little room for the intuitive spirit.

I may not be alone in my worldview, but I am very much in the minority in the Churches of Christ. Obviously, then, what I share with the Churches of Christ has more meaning and importance to me than our differences. My experiences in the Churches of Christ have led me to three fundamental insights about what the church can and should be.

1. What originally attracted me to fellowship with the Church of Christ was *its vision of what it should be as a congregation totally dedicated to God*. The little church I attended truly saw itself as the bride of Christ and the direct heir of the first century church. This was a significant part of its identity. This has meant that its standard is not what may be current pop theology but an everlasting external standard that is found in the New Testament. From the beginning this had a significant impact on me and has continued to influence my perspective on what the church can be. For me, as a child and as an adult, the church has had very concrete meaning. The imagery of the church as the body of Christ means that it is a physical representation of Christ. This has inescapable implications, one of which is that the church then becomes a microcosm of God's kingdom until it comes. Our Christianity should then be a working out of expression of God's kingdom in concrete terms.

2. Not only did I perceive the Church of Christ as having a vision of what it should be, but I also perceived that *its vision was rooted in the idea of Christian community*, i.e., Christians being in relationship with one another. Though this idea of community has not been realized and from many perspectives is very far from actuality, this does not negate the germination of its presence. I would like to see this ideal of community become more of a sharing community in Jesus Christ. Throughout most of Jesus' teaching on the kingdom, the imagery of the restoration of community is unmistakable. Since

we are in a fallen state in relationship both to God and to each other, being a part of the body of Christ restores our sense of community. It is in this community that God's will reigns and should have concrete manifestation in our love for one another. Such a community becomes a place where self is not necessarily lost but is given less priority. We should begin to value our neighbor more highly and to love him/her more dearly. We will be a people in community when we begin to be like Jesus to one another.

In the Churches of Christ my sense of community is especially heightened when I travel, for it has been my experience that in almost any congregation I at-

The imagery of the Church as the body of Christ means that it is a physical representation of Christ. This has inescapable implications, one of which is that the church then becomes a microcosm of God's kingdom until it comes.

tend, I find Christian friends or someone with whom I share a common friendship. This becomes very important; it is what I call Church of Christ networking, a way of keeping us constantly in touch, joined to one another. Christian networking is an essential ingredient for the further development of the church as a sharing community of Jesus.

Having a vision of the church and sharing in community create in me a sense of commitment. This commitment is translated into faith in God and by implication his church—no matter how imperfect I perceive it to be. The Churches of Christ are too often grounded in the limitations of their cultural context. Historically this has been evidenced by the lagging acceptance of social change, e.g., there has been much resistance to the breakdown of cultural/ethnic barriers. Of course this retards the development of Christian community. Race is still an issue in many churches and there are many hindrances to women in the church. I believe it is also true that Churches of Christ have had a tendency to appropriate or adapt traditional socio-cultural models in the guise of scriptural mandate. For example, the leadership in many churches is nothing but a mere copy of successful business practice and a far cry from the biblical notion of pastoring/shepherding. These and other perceived imperfections lead me to the inescapable conclusion that God is in control. We as individuals and as his church are perfected through and by Him, not by anything we do. This has always been hard to understand; and as in most of the Churches of Christ, it is easier

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Changing Without Leaving

Transcending Institutional Ties and Personal Differences



Coping with the trauma of religious change is really no different from coping with the stress of other situations, except perhaps when guilt becomes overwhelming.

By MARY LOU WALDEN

The facts are simple. I grew up in the Church of Christ in Nashville in mainline churches—Belmont during very early years, then Otter Creek until I left home at age twenty-one or so. I went four years to David Lipscomb High School, another four to David Lipscomb College. I was a loyal member of the Church of Christ during subsequent years of high school teaching in New Jersey and California, and in Texas, where I taught at Abilene Christian University (then College) for five years. When I married and moved to Massachusetts, I continued this relationship for several years until we moved to Duxbury, the town south of Boston where we have lived for thirteen years.

In Duxbury no one had ever heard of the Church of Christ. The nearest was in Easton, twenty-five backroads miles away. We made the long commute on Sunday mornings for several months, then discovered the local Baptist church five expressway miles away. For more than a year we'd alternate: one Sunday to the Church of Christ in Easton, the next to the Baptist church in Duxbury.

The overall effect of this juggling was that we belonged nowhere, and people in both churches looked askance at our commitment. One day it occurred to me that we were neither giving nor receiving and that if our family were faced with crisis, we'd have nowhere to turn. People in Easton were too far away, and people in Duxbury regarded us as little more than occasional drop-ins.

Aware of my frustration, my husband, less

Mary Lou Walden is a high school English teacher and a free lance writer living in Duxbury, Massachusetts.

bothered by our nomadic affiliations than I, agreed that we should perhaps put down some spiritual roots in Duxbury. For reasons irrelevant to this article, we felt led to identify not with the Baptist church but with Pilgrim Congregational, a United Church of Christ.

There we have been for the past eight years or more. The change for me was more geographical than theological. I never felt that I had "left" the Church of Christ or that I had joined the UCC denomination. In both groups there were points of doctrine as well as cultural practices which I thought were questionable, and in both churches I had feelings of compatibility within these same areas.

Deeply committed to Jesus Christ, the UCC minister always preached biblical sermons. And within the fellowship I found friends whose faith humbled mine. The transition was anything but traumatic, and stress virtually non-existent. The change, in fact, was pure relief, for at last we were close enough to be involved, yet far enough away from the Church of Christ to escape criticism.

We had the unusual advantage of having parents on both sides who, if they were upset, never let us know it. In no visible way did our church change result in family barriers. For that I continue to be grateful. I have friends who have not been so fortunate, and I feel that our situation is somewhat unique in that respect.

But, yes, I guess there have been some stresses along the way. One of them involved a separation of intellect and emotion. For example, at

some point in high school I began to think that the question of instrumental music was a non-issue. I could, I reasoned then, read the Bible through a dozen times a year and never conclude *on my own* that it would be sinful to sing with an organ. But not until four or five years later did a test case arise.

While working in Colorado one summer vacation, I was invited to go to a Methodist church with a friend I'd met there. As the hymns were played and sung that Sunday morning, I stood with the congregation and opened my hymnal but not my mouth. My head was convinced that it was okay to sing with the organ; but my emotions were not persuaded, and I just could not sing. My friend had been to the Church of Christ with me and had participated enthusiastically; but I held back at her church, even feeling a bit self-righteous in restraint.

During the following week I learned that my unwillingness to sing had embarrassed her. And I believe that the experience ultimately had the effect of helping merge the thinking part of me with the feeling part. Certainly it caused me to realize how far apart mind and heart can sometimes be—and to try to be sensitive to this gap in others.

Other stresses have resulted from the fact that my husband, a very fine Bible scholar, and I do not always agree on religious matters. Oh, we had no problem changing churches together; but over the years we have had differing views, some of which we will never resolve. In some areas he is far more liberal than I; in others, far more conservative.

But when we married each other, we did not promise to agree, a fact I try to keep in mind when I want him to see or do it my way. Of course, we would prefer perfect harmony; but I think we both

realize that such hopes are unrealistic. The glue that holds us together is God's love and our individual commitment to Jesus, both binding when personal differences might otherwise cause us to crumble.

Coping with the trauma of religious change is really no different from coping with the stress of other situations, except perhaps when guilt becomes overwhelming. But I am not by nature a worrier; my conscience has never been overly sensitive. This is merely a fact of heredity, not a virtue!

For me it has been relatively easy to cope because in addition to reasons I have already mentioned, I have not been put on the defensive. When you're geographically isolated from the mainstream and don't depend on the Church of Christ for income, not too many arrows get shot in your direction. No one has attacked me, written about me, or ceased being my friend.

So I guess in some basic ways I have never really "left" anything. I treasure the Bible teaching I received and the resultant faith it gave me, the great hymns I memorized, and the influence and friendship of people in the Church of Christ whose devotion to Jesus transcended institutional ties. You don't leave things that have become your lifeblood. I've learned that one way to cope is to count—blessings, that is. Mine are legion!

Church change for me is tentative. I probably won't spend the rest of my life in my present church, and under different circumstances I might welcome a chance to reunite with a Church of Christ. I believe there are some that would have me without demanding public confession of sin.

MISSION

(Coping, continued from p. 11)

not to deal with this and just adopt "phariseeism."

We share in the faith that God is fundamentally in control. Faith in the Churches of Christ is always bipedal. It is a body of knowledge and body of action. *Faith is seen as being simple, emanating from a belief and trust in Jesus Christ.* However, we tend to confuse the testimonies and experiences of his disciples as part of what is crucial to Faith. This may be because we are not aware of the limitations on the expression of truth imposed by our cultural settings. Nonetheless, the simplicity of the Faith encountered in the Churches of Christ has helped me immeasurably to struggle and survive in many religiously hostile environments.

How do I cope, being a member of a church body where I do not agree with many of its practices? The answer to me is easy. The Churches of Christ have a

vision, a community, a simple faith. What more could I want? Because I am deeply committed to these things, I become personally and intensely committed to this body. I consider myself wed to it for better or for worse. My belief is that God in his providence saw fit to join me to this body. We as human beings have fallen in our relationship not only with God but with each other, and we must learn to love God and one another. It is not easy to love those who are different from you, but neither race, gender, nor opinion should interfere with love. However, we all know that these are barriers to our relationships; hence, our deep need for God. The Churches of Christ are, in my opinion, not perfect but neither are other church groups; nor am I necessarily any closer to perfection. It is God who perfects and I believe God is at work.

MISSION

Dear Diary snapshots of transition



By DIANA CAILLOUET

October 3, 1982

I don't know what to write. This is a dark day in our congregation's history and a worse day in mine. I'm so sad, so hurt, and so confused. What is wrong with the elders? Why would they do this without talking to us first? Am I a villainess to be feared? Has my ministry been against God's will and dangerous to the church? Why are they so afraid of the women?

November 25, 1982

I struggle with crushed enthusiasm and battered hopes and a sense of being unwanted that spills over into virtually all areas of my life. The emotional ups and downs of the last several weeks have settled more and more into downs only. Optimism is increasingly replaced with resentment and bitterness. My relationship with the congregation is marred by my fear of a nameless, faceless "they" who seem to oppose me because my desire for more commitment and meaning in my spiritual life somehow makes them uncomfortable, as if I'm trying to mess up "their" church.

February 6, 1983

Meetings, meetings with the elders, more meetings. An endless stream of words. I guess Larry thinks he is the Henry Kissinger for the congregation. He thinks he can read a statement and the elders can read theirs and the wounds will heal. I hope so.

March 28, 1983

I'm not growing. I come to church barely okay and leave feeling sick. I pray that love can somehow make things better, but I wonder if I'm merely a silly Pollyanna. Does it make sense to stay any longer?

Diana Caillouet holds an M.A. in Marriage and Family Counseling from Western Kentucky University and is employed by a private counseling agency in Bowling Green.

They accuse us of wanting to split the church. They don't want us to stay, but if we leave they'll say we're trying to start a new congregation. Talk about a double-bind. Other Churches of Christ in town are more legalistic than ours. Where can we go?

May 1, 1983

What has brought me to this point? After all, I'm thirty-one years old and I counsel others as a profession. Yet here I am, totally disintegrated, unable to stop crying, unable to be consoled, unable to bring to pass that which I really desire. I am helpless. I've seen the public humiliation of many faithful Christian ladies, the destruction of our Thursday night Bible study, and the banning of me and my husband from teaching classes. My friends are threatened with public rebuke because they are faithful to their beliefs as well. Where will this stop?

May 6, 1983

I've tried prayer, fasting, patience, loving, talking, reasoning, pleading, compromising, more compromising, giving in, and nothing seems to help. Sometimes I hate them. Most times I hate me. I'm drowning in frustration and could easily be consumed by a spirit of bitterness. Am I a Christian if the elders think I'm evil? Has Satan cleverly snatched me from my Father's hand?

May 10, 1983

Another meeting last night with the elders! This was the last one for me. Larry sat there for four hours, still trying to use words, still explaining, still defending, still trying to get them to understand, still trying to convince. He didn't even notice me drawing into a shell. After they left, I ran outside screaming, unaware of the neighboring houses, unaware of anything except the excruciating pain and the utter darkness.

May 12, 1983

We have decided to leave the Church of Christ. For a long time we have disagreed with many official beliefs; but we hoped that if we could live with the dissonance, things could work out. I never expected it to come to this. I wonder if I'll ever belong anywhere again. I wonder if our families will ever understand. I know they'll believe we're going to hell. I never realized until now how much a sense of belonging and approval have meant to me. And yet I think of Galatians 5:1; "For freedom we have been set free!" I pledge myself to a relentless search for truth. I pledge myself to seeking God's will for me—whatever the cost.

July 26, 1983

The summer has been long and agonizing here in Frankfort. Most of the days can be described as a blur of loneliness and depression. I'm taking valium to dull the pain of my meaningless existence. I feel so alone, so irrevocably cut off from the people I love, my religious heritage, my husband, and God. Larry is burying his pain in endless hours of work while I just bury myself in emptiness.

August 20, 1983

God's healing hand is touching our hearts. Memories of things that were done and said are beginning to feel like historical facts instead of emotional triggers that send us into tirades of depression. I see the sin of my own anger and rage as well as the sin of the elders. I've come to the end of my own meager ability to love. I now know that I am empty and I need God more than ever before. He is everything. If every friend, if every loved one departs from me and God alone remains, He is enough. The Lord is my shepherd. What more could a wounded sheep need?

September 30, 1983

I woke up today wondering if God will ever use me. Would it matter to anyone if I just disappeared from the face of the earth? I quit my job almost a year ago because I believed God wanted me to serve more in the kingdom. I'm a willing servant with no place to go.

January 14, 1984

Thank you, Lord! First I had no church and now I have two churches that want me and will let me serve. They aren't Churches of Christ, but they are surely Christ's churches. I will learn from either one of them, and I will grow. They will fill in some gaps

in my spiritual development; and my religious heritage, even with its problems, has something to offer them.

March 1, 1984

"Praise to the Lord,
who o'er all things
so wondrously reigneth,
Shieldeth thee under his wings,
yea so gently sustaineth!
Hast thou not seen
how thy desires e'er have been
Granted in what he ordaineth?"

Praise to the Lord,
who doth prosper thy work and
defend thee;
Surely his goodness and mercy
here daily attend thee.
Ponder anew what the Almighty can do
If with His love he befriend thee."

My heart is overwhelmed with deep praise and adoration for the great mercy of God in our lives. In the past two years He has

- renewed and deepened the love, affection and friendship in our marriage;
- given us a new church home where we are accepted, allowed to teach, and experience a freedom that was previously only longed for;
- opened up a job for me at a Christian counseling agency;
- deepened my faith and trust in his great power and sovereignty;
- bonded me to Himself, wrapping cords of love and faithfulness around my soul;
- fulfilled my heart's desires far better than I could have myself;
- blessed us with steadfast, merciful brothers and sisters in Christ who have shown us God's love and forgiveness many times over;
- raised up a new Bible study and fellowship that is better and stronger than ever;
- scattered several of our closest friends to new works in other areas where they can be happier and better able to spread the kingdom;
- carved in my soul a deeper understanding of love and forgiveness.

I thank the Lord for his great mercy in redeeming the shattered portions of my life! "A bruised reed He will not break and smoking flax He will not quench" (Isa. 42:3).

MISSION

Personal Responses To Editor's Request

We Have Chosen To Stay

We have chosen to stay in the Church of Christ. This was a difficult decision, for we find ourselves in conflict with many of the doctrines held to be fundamental by the Church of Christ. This conflict has placed us in a stressful situation because we feel helpless. How do we reveal our views without starting World War III?

After having kept our beliefs bottled up inside for a long time, we have determined that some plan of action must be taken that allows us to vent our feelings in a peaceful way. Keeping it all inside was affecting our self-esteem, making us feel dishonest, and causing us to avoid the Church of Christ and anyone associated with it, even family and close friends. We had to formulate some plan allowing self-exposure and at the same time keeping peace. It was either that or reverse our decision to stay in the Church of Christ.

Our plan of action is made up of three parts:

1. *Reaching out to people* in a warm, accepting and friendly way. Everyone wants to be accepted and loved. When we sincerely love and listen, doors open, allowing for conversation that will lead to an understanding of each other's viewpoint.

2. *Encouraging and praising* every good thing about the Church of Christ. Everything is not negative; there are lots of positives that are praiseworthy. Perhaps this will endear us to people, and it will surely help our own attitude. We also need to assume the sincerity of those with whom we differ.

3. *Asking informational questions* will enable us to control the direction of a conversation. Sure, we could blurt out our disagreements and pose a challenge, but to what avail? It would result in closed minds and doors. A question asked in a warm information-gathering way automatically causes people to think. If we have not already alienated ourselves, the results can be amazing.

Moreover, by asking questions we are able to express our own beliefs. This helps boost our self-esteem and relieves us of the pent-up feelings of dishonesty, thus removing some of the stress involved.

(continued on p. 17)

God Is Bigger Than The Problem

We are writing in response to your letter and article which we read with interest.

We long ago ceased having stress or major dissatisfaction in the Church of Christ framework. In our younger years we felt that the main line denominations had fewer conflicts in doctrine, more love, more life-changing experiences to offer, less restrictions and more incentives for growth. But, as we listened to their members, studied their doctrines, and occasionally visited their gatherings, we came to see that they too had problems, conflicts and tensions. They were just a bit different from ours. We realized that our differences with their theology would cause us even more stress than we were experiencing.

So we settled down to work with our brothers and sisters in the church where we were, accepting them as they were, thankfully being accepted. Most of our latter years have been blessed by being in fellowships where we can speak freely and share our growth in Christ.

Here in Albuquerque, at the Pennsylvania Street Church of Christ, we are nourished, strengthened and loved by a dedicated, committed group of Christians—not all agreeing with us, nor we with them, but cherished because Jesus Christ is enthroned in hearts.

In teaching people "how to cope" perhaps the most vital information to pass along is to enthrone Jesus as Lord in one's own heart and let Him work out from there.

Jesus Himself in his home congregation in Nazareth had to "cope" with narrow-minded provincialism, bigotry, bad theology, all with more stress than we'll ever know. So, He will know how to help us deal with it. We realize that there may be congregations so restrictive that one's freedom in Christ would be completely taken away. Then one would have to find a more loving, open-to-the-Spirit community of believers. But we believe that in most congregations we can with *much love* and *prayer* allow the Spirit to begin his work through us, changing us and those around us.

We believe it is not simplistic to suggest that with
(continued on p. 17)

(We Have Chosen, continued from p. 16)

The plan outlined above is the goal we strive toward. As with any long-range goal, there are many mountain peaks and valleys to cross as we travel toward it. Our plan does not relieve all of the stresses involved with our decision to stay in the Church of Christ. It helps us cope and gives us a feeling of purpose.

It is our firm belief that however a person chooses to deal with those who disagree religiously, whether within or without the Church of Christ, the example of God's demonstrated love for human beings must be our guide.

Sincerely Yours,
Larry and Jacquelyn Floyd

Larry and Jacquelyn Floyd live in Jerome, Idaho.

(God Is Bigger, continued from p. 16)

families falling apart all around us and lives being devastated by all kinds of stress our main concern should be to get folks' eyes off themselves and their little or big problems and on the Lord Himself, who has the power to change their thinking, their lives *and the church*. He has the power to raise the dead; He just might send renewal and revival! Maybe we should be naive enough to ask: "Do we pray enough, truly trusting?" "Do we allow his Spirit to take charge of our lives?" It is not that we do not see the problem. We have found that our God is bigger than the problem. Our main efforts now go towards pointing people to Him.

Love in Christ,
Everett and Helen Champney



For many years Helen and Everett Champney lived in the Chicago area, where Everett was employed by the Wrigley Company. Now in Albuquerque, New Mexico, they continue "in retirement" their ministries of loving service, blessing all those whose lives they touch.

EVERLASTING LIFE

*The raspy voice assaulted my ears and drove
My consciousness off the padded pew and up
Through the vaulted ceiling.
I heard again the whining and shouting of
countless preachers
Who held me rapt through childhood
And mesmerized me so that I cannot
Root out their injunctions.
My heart is still a field—
Above it is barren and lurid, but
Time bombs lie germinating beneath the surface,
Ready to explode me into a fundamentalist
eternity.
The words coming from the speaker's lips
Lock together like links in a chain and hang
Heavy around my neck.
They pull me under and I cannot breathe
Because of the crushing weight.
I feel trapped under miles of dark water,
Flailing helplessly against the constriction,
Trying desperately to reach the surface.*

*A little girl wrote:
"Everlasting life is a gift of God. He gives it to
You and you can't get rid of it,
Even if you want to."
Suddenly I am that child again—
Hiding in the corner of a darkened room,
Waiting for the end—
Knowing it will never come.*

—Karen Lashley

Karen Lashley is a graduate of Oklahoma Christian College and is currently a doctoral student in Counseling Psychology at Oklahoma State University at Stillwater.

Failing But Believing

A Backdoor Approach To The Mystery of Love



God is real, but not when I pseudosyllogistically structure his existence. He is real in the eyes of those believers who can still look at me with love—with my Father's eyes—and in those who can look beyond my failure to see a man who still wants to believe the wonderful story of God-come-down.

By DAVID HENDERSON

When asked the question "Why are you a believer?" my response approaches an almost childlike "Because." But invariably the persistent unbeliever will retort, "Cause why?" And once more I find myself on that precarious and very personal soapbox labeled "BELIEVER."

During most of my religious rearing this question was little more than a carelessly constructed strawman arrogantly disassembled in order to grid up an all too false faith. But at the time and in my tenderness, this faith worked. However, as I came to confront not just strawmen but intellectually honest unbelief in the form of my own doubt and learning, this faith began to have its fraudulent foundation dissipated with each new wave of my own personal "enlightenment." I was confronted with self-indictment: I believed simply because I'd been taught to. With considerable doubt raised by this acknowledgment I embarked on a rather Ulyssean voyage on an ever-shifting sea of apologetics and Christian evidences.

My search took me to some faith-protecting harbors: everything from Josh McDowell's *Evidence That Demands A Verdict* to Thomas B. Warren's *Warren-Flew Debate* to C. S. Lewis's *Mere Christianity* to Don England's *A Christian's View of Origins* to Francis Schaeffer's *The God Who Is There*. They all offered safety and security; and they all contributed to that structure, that concreteness for which I so desperately yearned: faith. Yet too often I asked to

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replace what was too ethereal. I was of the twentieth century and too much a child of the Aristotle-Thomas Aquinas-Enlightenment-Darwin-Biogenetic-High Tech Revolution. I simply didn't like faith.

Faith was too mystical—too Eastern—too much of an insult to my innate pride in knowing. Whether or not the Tree of Knowledge really existed matters not to me; the *idea* profoundly indicts man, especially "modern" Western man. We insist on and indeed lust after knowing. When the serpent told Adam and Eve "your eyes will be opened" and you will know "good and evil," he hooked us all forever.

So, I set out to know; and any number of elixir salesmen were ready to "remedy" me. But while each one promised amazing assurance, what seemed too often to result was a lingering and painful hangover of disappointment and sometimes disillusionment. However, being zealous to know, I built "faith" structure after "faith" structure like so many apartment complexes in a sunbelt metroplex. I raised up one faithplex after another, full of cubicles for housing my fears and doubts. My heritage, the Churches of Christ, encouraged striving after knowledge, particularly a knowledge of God's reality and his will for us. This in turn created for me a "what-to-whom" gap. In other words, I knew a great deal of WHAT I was supposed to believe and knew but very little about Him, "in WHOM I have believed." Bridging the canyon separating the "what" from the "whom" has been a struggle for faith, and I found myself very often lost in the winding labyrinth of my "faith" structures.

Once I realized what I was missing—that is, the relationship with the Father—I set out on the first leg of my present pilgrimage. When I was an undergraduate student in the natural sciences at Harding College, biochemistry and genetics provided provocative systems for knowing and demythologizing man's yearning for faith. However, the faculty there helped me to an understanding of man's inability to explain materialistically or chemically the total creature we call "man." The parts never quite equaled the whole. Suffice it to say, current media notwithstanding, I learned enough about the sciences to know they didn't satisfy questions they were not designed to answer.

About this time a truly great communicator entered my life as the pulpit minister at the college student church in Searcy, Arkansas. Not only could he transform a formal, high church, corporate worship sermon into a chat with friends around a November fire, but he'd captured a vivid glimpse of the Father. He showed his listeners the God of the universe through the humanity of Jesus of Nazareth. The Gospels were his four seed bins from which he dispersed the Good News of a Father who was as mysterious and divine as the cross and the empty tomb, but who was also as mannish as the tears wept over Lazarus, the temper in the temple, and the prayers of Gethsemane. As a result, I and a whole band of other starving searchers immersed ourselves in the Gospels. We wanted to KNOW Jesus.

When the serpent told Adam and Eve "your eyes will be opened" and you will know "good and evil," he hooked us all forever.

But then came the trauma of questioning the source of my knowing. I'd always claimed a faith in an infallibly inspired Bible without ever realizing that this was more the cornerstone of my faith than was the man-God Jesus. I became obsessed with knowing. I engaged myself in the study of not only this book but also biblical languages, never aware of its role as the golden calf in my wanderings. Instead of using it as the windshield through which I might better see the Father, I began to focus on the specks and easily have ended up in a ditch. I asked—indeed demanded—the Bible to be something more than either it or God claimed it to be. I wanted it to be infallible and miraculously handed down. It never occurred to me that just possibly God didn't see it the same way.

But as I have told inquisitors since then, after they have assured me that I have leapt over into darkness,

Jesus walks with his light just as bright over here too. As an aside, I often wondered why we would accept a Roman Catholic council's fiat concerning the canonicity of a dubious book but reject its pontification regarding anything else. It always seemed inconsistent. They were inspired in one area but not in another. Needless to say, after such an antagonistic view of traditional theology came to be mine, ministry within our movement was anything but convenient. Except for clinging with white knuckles to the back pew, it was easy to feel as if the brotherhood authoritarians would have appreciated my quiet exit from their peaceful gatherings.

However, I have chosen to remain a part of the movement in which I grew up and which has had such a great impact on me and my thinking. The book *Voices of Concern* proved influential in this decision by pointing out the value of continuity in remaining with the church of one's youth. In addition, it poignantly illustrated how any group has its struggles. But at least within the Churches of Christ I have the benefit of understanding the source of much of the thinking and theology. I am one of them.

Through all these phases of developing some sort of relationship with the Father and a theology to communicate that relationship, I seemed almost frantically to continue to construct one faith structure after another. C.S. Lewis was my Frank Lloyd Wright, and particularly was his book *Mere Christianity* my blueprint. All of Lewis's writings seemed to appeal to both the classicist and romantic within me. But eventually I began to view Lewis as another—an outstanding one, but nonetheless another—proponent of another apologetic: the moral argument. And once again I felt my dependence on something I considered intellectually susceptible to collapse.

About this time I became close friends with an agnostic who provided me with as challenging a mind and as good a heart as any I'd ever known. The result? Two things actually: (1) I could rationally argue for belief as capably as unbelief; and (2) there was only one way this person would ever become a believer—by being loved into the Kingdom, the love issuing from both believers and the Father. As he put it to me one day, "You know, I really feel comfortable with and capable of explaining everything around us except for one thing—human love. It's mind boggling—it's inexplicable."

That love remains even more inexplicable today. Recently I have endured a painful divorce and the recognition of my failure to be the husband I had always hoped to be. Several insights have resulted; two of them in particular have further simplified my

theology and apologetic. Never before have I felt so keenly the incredible mystery of the cross, specifically that its duality is wrought with "Godness." Jesus' death on the cross is certainly consistent with his life. It is, in fact, the appropriate culmination of his life. His life was one of daily dying to self and the cross ultimately proclaims this. So, on the one hand, the cross is the most indicting symbol of my failure to succeed selflessly as a husband; but, on the other hand, it looms as the glorious gift of grace to all failures. It both breaks me and forgives me. Indeed, love, as seen in the cross, seems to always be that way. It is mysterious in its Godly duality.

The second part of my apologetic arising out of failure is an almost backdoor approach to the mystery of love. In William Styron's *Sophie's Choice* a young Nazi army physician has been ordered to decide who shall live and die at the death camp to which Sophie has been sent with her two children. Since Sophie can speak German, on arriving she appeals to the now calloused, yet guilt-ridden, doctor that she is a Christian—a believer. The young doctor is stunned by her unintentional indictment of his role as "God" in making the life/death selections at the camp. Styron then suggests that what may have prompted this young "healer" to force Sophie to make the horrible choice of which of her two children should live was his desperate attempt to reestablish some order in his life. If he could establish evil, some great sin, then just possibly he could believe again in great good, even love.

No doubt this is a twisted and horrible way to find faith once again, but possibly there is some validity in this. Certainly it goes beyond a syllogistic presentation of the moral argument. Similarly the horror and anguish of divorce has affirmed for me the reality of abused and violated love. The anguish is real in a very personal and undeniable way. But in the midst of its reality I know that the love involved is real, more real in a way than matter itself. Even more substantial than the flesh and blood beings who have muddled their way through the horror and anguish.

So, I seem to have returned in many ways to a very child-like understanding of God's reality. When I was a child, God was never more real than when my mother and father taught me that God loves deeply. I saw it when my mother's eyes filled with tears at another's anguish. I felt it in my father's tired, worn hands that could lift me with such strength and security. God was real. He *is* real even *now*, but not when I pseudosyllogistically structure his existence. No. Now He is real in the eyes of those believers who can still look at me with love—with my Father's eyes and in those who can look beyond my failure to see a man who still wants to believe the wonderful story of God-come-down.

Why am I a believer, you ask. I am a believer because I have to be or else the most intense realities of my life—the failing, the suffering, and the loving—become unreal. And even the most cynical agnosticism I can muster within knows the falseness of this.

MISSION

(Thread, continued from p. 2)

clear-cut beliefs. They are very puzzled about life. It seems to them abysmally mysterious. And when they speak they talk with a modesty the formal creedalist has never felt: My beliefs are most uncertain. Confused by many voices shouting conflicting opinions about truths which I once accepted without thinking, I cannot easily define my thoughts. But I do trust God. That assent of mind which I cannot give to propositions, I can give to him.⁴

Even Paul confessed "his limited and uncertain knowledge. 'Now we know in fragments,' he wrote, 'Now we see through a glass darkly' (1 Cor. 13:12). 'How unsearchable are his judgments and his ways past tracing out'" (Rom. 11:33). Yet of one thing he is very sure: "'I know *him* whom I have believed' (1 Tim. 1:12) The certainty of his life was his relationship with a person, and his beliefs were the best he yet had thought in the explication of establishment of

that trust."⁵

Even when faith is gone, there is yet—yes, even more so—the need for understanding and support, for how else is faith to be renewed? George Matheson, minister and author of the beautiful confessional hymn "O Love, That Wilt Not Let Me Go," confessed also that "at one time with a great thrill of horror, I found myself an absolute atheist. After being ordained, . . . I believed nothing; neither God nor immortality. I tendered my resignation . . ., but to their honor they would not accept it. . . . They said I was a young man and would change."⁶

How much we need the kind of openness in our Christian communities that enfolds people not only in their weaknesses and sin but also in their questing, questioning, and doubting—indeed that encourages rethinking and questioning—a place where those of mature faith can, if need be, have faith for those hanging by the slender thread, a place where hearts can be opened, where we are drawn

(continued on p. 32)

Voices of Concern: A Book Whose Time Had Come



By DAVID N. ELKINS

*Prefatory Note: **Voices of Concern: Critical Studies in Church of Christism** was edited by Robert Meyers and published by **Mission Messenger** in 1966.¹ The book was a critique of the Church of Christ. Each of its seventeen chapters was written by a member or former member of the Church of Christ. This was perhaps the first time a group of "insiders" had been brought together for the express purpose of doing a critique of that church. The book sold only 4,000 copies, but it made its way into every state of the union and into several foreign countries. It was read primarily by Church of Christ people but also made its presence known among other churches, including Christian Churches, Disciples of Christ, Baptists, and Brethren churches.²*

Mission Journal asked me to review this book, since it is considered by many to be something of a "classic" in the more recent history of the Church of Christ. Since the book is almost twenty years old and no longer in print, I asked permission to do an article on the book instead of the typical review. I thought it would be interesting to research and write an article describing how the book came about, its positive value, and its contributions. To gain background information on the book, I contacted Robert Meyers, the editor, and Carl Ketcherside, whose **Mission Messenger** published the book. Through ads in **Integrity** and **Mission** I also invited anyone who had been influenced significantly by the book to write and tell me his or her story. The following article is the result.

A YOUNG MINISTER IN CRISIS

The year was 1968. In a cabin in the woods of central Michigan, the young Church of Christ minister sat quietly holding a book. For several months he had been deeply troubled, struggling with inner doubts about his church. He had grown up in the Church of Christ, had majored in Bible at one of its colleges, and was now considered one of its faithful ministers. From childhood he had been taught

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that the Church of Christ was the "one and only true church." He had memorized its scriptural "proof texts" and believed its doctrines. He loved the Church of Christ and remembered with joy its Sunday Schools, gospel meetings, Vacation Bible Schools, baptisms in rivers and creeks, and the deep spiritual awakenings that it had stirred in his soul as a boy.

Gradually, however, over the past three or four years he had come to see his church in clearer perspective. It was a church whose brief history was rife with debate, dissension, and division. From studies in church history he had discovered that the Church of Christ was one branch of a restorationist movement which itself was quite similar to other such restorationist groups. Somehow, these studies had broken the powerful mystique of the Church of Christ and had given the young minister permission to question, doubt and challenge. He had also learned that the original restoration leaders were tolerant of diversity, had never intended for their movement to crystalize, and had never sought to impose a creed, written or unwritten, that excluded those Christians who disagreed. The original goal, instead of excluding Christians with differing doctrines, was to *foster unity among all Christians*. In contrast to these original goals, however, the young minister had become convinced that a sectarian spirit often characterized Churches of Christ and that this spirit was most evident in the insistence that everyone agree with certain tenets of an "unwritten creed."

Such thinking had gradually brought the young minister to a real crisis. His elders had already learned of his doubts and were concerned about his "doctrinal soundness." They had, in fact, arranged for his retreat at the cabin where he was now staying. Their hope was that by giving him a brief vacation and time to reflect, he would "come around" and plug the leaks in his theological dam.

His job and possibly even his future in the Church of Christ were on the line. He could tell them he had no doubts (a lie) and continue as their minister, or he could tell them he did have doubts (the truth) and probably be branded as "dangerous" and be fired. He felt terribly alone and wondered if anyone really understood the struggle he was going through. The silent loneliness of the woods outside the cabin only echoed the loneliness deep inside his soul. His attention turned to the book he was holding. An older minister, knowing of his struggles, had given it to him the day before. The young minister opened the book and began to read.

As he turned its pages and read the stories of the various authors, he was deeply touched. He would never be the same again, for he found in these writers, none of whom he knew personally, a community of the spirit. They gave him the comfort he was needing. They put into words many of his deepest feelings and unformed thoughts. Many of the writers seemed to be loving, caring, and deeply spiritual persons. Above all, they seemed to be tolerant and to embody the same spirit that characterized the original restoration leaders. The courage of those authors who, like himself, also doubted and struggled gave him courage to be honest with himself and to trust his own thoughts. The young minister made his decision: He would try to be loving and non-divisive, but he would not be dishonest about his beliefs and doubts in order to keep his position as minister. However, only a few weeks later this young man, only twenty-three years of age, was fired and rejected by his church. This was the most painful and devastating experience he had ever endured. It was several years before his life was really together again. But during those years it helped to know that there were others who had chosen the same path and traveled its length.

FREEDOM AND COMMUNITY: IMPACT AND CONTRIBUTIONS OF VOICES

The above story is true. The book the young minister was reading was *Voices of Concern: Critical Studies in Church of Christism*. The experience of that young minister epitomizes, I believe, the major contribution of *Voices of Concern*. The book gave a sense of community to those in the Church of Christ who were wrestling with doubts and questions. Reading the book made one say, "Thank God. Maybe I'm not crazy after all. Others too are struggling just as I!" In the 1960s honest examination, doubt, and criticism were not highly valued activities in many Churches of Christ, and those who engaged in such often found themselves in trouble. In many ways that time period was almost a "McCarthy Era"

in the history of the Church of Christ. Many good Christian people were the objects of unmerciful witch hunts; and just as McCarthy had found "communists" almost everywhere, so some church leaders seemed to find ungodly "liberals" and "modernists" in every Church of Christ. On the other hand the 1960s was a time of great cultural agitation and change in America. People were asserting their individuality; and there was a distrust of, and rebellion against, "the establishment." The Church of Christ was a microcosm of these larger societal forces. There were "the old guard" trying to maintain the status quo and many "young rebels" insisting on total honesty and change. Thus, given the milieu of those days, it was predictable that such a book as *Voices of Concern* would appear. I suspect *Voices* was a manifestation of the *Zeitgeist*, and in many ways it was simply a book whose time had come.

The book had an immediate impact. For many it became almost a symbol of freedom. Probably it was not simply the content of the essays—in fact, many who read the book doubtless disagreed with many of the positions of the various essayists. But it was the recognition that human beings, even in conservative churches, have a right to express their sincere opinions and that this right cannot be denied. Upon first reading, many had an experience similar to Dusky Henry who wrote the following in a recent letter:

When *Voices of Concern* was published, I read all the essays in it in one evening. To me it was like a breath of fresh air. It sort of blew all the "cobwebs" of legalism out of my brain. I felt I was at last free to refuse to "parrot" the party line and free to disagree with some positions taken by the Church of Christ. Naturally, I was in disagreement with some of the statements made by several of the writers in the book, but still it was an "eye opener" and a genuine help in my spiritual life.³

Anne Cato Sowell was raised in the Church of Christ, attended one of its colleges, and at one time was "dogmatic in believing that We Had The Truth." Anne, in a recent letter, stated:

Voices of Concern was a great influence on my life! It was wonderful (and surprising!) to find that there were other people in the world who were thinking along the same lines as I was. It helped give me courage to search, question, and even make a change. Several times I have loaned my copy of *Voices of Concern* to other seekers, and even now it is borrowed by a friend who tells me she really is enjoying it and wants her children to read it! She is a member of the Church of Christ.⁴

Ben Boothe was an aspiring young minister and a

Bible major at a Church of Christ college when he first read *Voices of Concern*. His story is typical.

When I read *Voices of Concern*, the first response I had was that of joy that I was not the only one who had doubts, questions and criticisms concerning some of the philosophies promoted by many leaders of the Church of Christ. It was important and significant . . . to know there were well-educated, balanced individuals who had come to some of the same conclusions which I had and had done so many years before. In my case the book created in me an idealistic and enthusiastic desire to challenge the Church of Christ, which in my opinion had polarized after the death of Alexander Campbell, Raccoon John Smith and Barton W. Stone into a secular organization, and to try to improve and broaden the church as I knew it. Of course, at the time, I had no idea of how frustrating and painful such an effort could be. When I ventured to make some of my views public, I felt the sting of the repressive persecution which powerful church leaders could apply. I found that suddenly the largest churches, which had invited me to hold meetings and some of which had offered me excellent positions, now withdrew those invitations. And again and again during my young preaching career I found that conservative mainline individuals and churches opposed whatever projects, ministries, or mission efforts I attempted.

This I can report: of twelve good friends who were Bible majors during my senior year I know of only one who is still a member of the Church of Christ in good standing. The rest either dropped out through frustration or were driven out through persecution or simply thought that their lives would be happier and more meaningful in some other religious group. . . . Some are now atheists. To this day I believe that an attitude of tolerance, understanding, and personal support on the part of mainline church leaders would have had a significant impact on the lives of many people during that period of time. *Voices of Concern* simply served as one of the few encouragements we had that we were not alone, that we were not crazy, we were not mentally ill, and that perhaps the problem did not lie so much with us as it did with an institution which allowed unrighteous and power-hungry men to alter the original idealism from which it was born.

. . . I still think the movement started by Alexander Campbell was a beautiful movement with a wonderful heritage. . . . and also think the movement has been all too often subservient to, and compromised by, the influence of calculating and unwise church politicians.⁵

While *Voices of Concern* engendered a sense of freedom and community in some, it certainly was not so received by many in the mainstream Church of Christ. For example, James D. Bales, a well-known writer in the Church of Christ, gave a review which was published in several installments in *Restoration Review*.⁶ Bales, who is viewed by those who know him as a caring and intellectually astute

Christian man, focused his arguments primarily against the *content* of the essays. While Bales made some good points in analyzing and pointing out problems with the logic and theology of some of the writers, he did not seem to appreciate the positive value nor grasp the symbolic significance of the book. It is this writer's opinion that the real power and impact of *Voices* was not its logical and theological correctness, but its personal, emotional, and symbolic power. Thus, those who approached the book with a need either to "agree" or "disagree" with it probably missed its real contribution.

Another indication of the book's poor reception in mainline circles is that it was not usually found on the shelves of Church of Christ bookstores. Several young men and women told Carl Ketcherside just how difficult it was to purchase copies of the book. Carl recently reminisced about this: "I would get a kick out them telling me they would go into "brotherhood" bookstores and ask for a copy and the manager would reach down under the counter as they used to do with moonshine in prohibition days and dare to drag out a copy."⁷

BACKGROUND OF VOICES

The story behind *Voices of Concern* is an interesting one. In a recent letter Robert Meyers, who conceived the idea for the book and who served as its editor, described the book's beginning:

I came to Wichita in the fall of 1960 to teach at Friends University and preach at the Riverside Church of Christ. Riverside was perhaps the one church in the city with people who would be willing to consider being more open toward those in other churches. Within a couple of years a movement was organized to excommunicate Riverside unless it renounced my teaching and sent me packing. Since Riverside had founded the Maude Carpenter Children's Home, it was particularly vulnerable to withholding of contributions to that charity; and in the first month after an ultimatum was unofficially made to get rid of Robert Meyers, the Home lost \$4,000 in revenue. Since in those days it was almost absurdly easy to find another teaching job, I urged the Riverside elders to yield to the demand, but they refused. In part, I hope, for principle's sake; in part, surely because they disliked the pressure tactics. From that time until I left Riverside in 1971, the church was for all practical purposes totally isolated from other Churches of Christ (17 of them) in Wichita.

Sometime during 1963, as I took almost daily walks around Riverside Park along the banks of the Little Arkansas River, the idea for the book was born. A young man by the name of Fred Corner, now a professor of accounting at Kansas Newman College in Wichita and a

CPA but then a college student, had drifted over to Riverside from one of the most conservative churches in the city, in search of he knew not what exactly. We explored every nook and cranny of Church of Christism, past, present, and what we could guess of the future, on those walks. And I can remember the exact spot on the riverbank walkway when I stopped and turned to him to say, "You know, we've talked many times over the past year or so of people who have left the Church of Christ. Why wouldn't it be a great idea to get in touch with some of the most sensitive and intelligent of those people and ask them to give their reason?" I knew the moment I had said it that it would have to be done, and I think I had written my first letters about it before twenty-four hours had passed. And although Fred Corner is now a member of the Pine Valley Christian Church in Wichita, and I am minister of a new University Congregational Church, we still walk almost every Saturday, either in the same park, or on the golf course near my home!⁸

INTERVIEW WITH ROBERT MEYERS

Having been intrigued for many years by *Voices of Concern* and by Robert Meyers, I asked Robert for a telephone interview.⁹ He graciously consented. The interview was not taped; I made hurried notes as we talked. The following edited version captures the essence of our conversation.

Elkins: Robert, I've never met you, but I'm curious about the background and development of a man who would edit a book like *Voices*. Who is Robert Meyers?

Meyers: As a young man, ten, eleven, twelve years of age, I idolized the old legalistic preachers in the Church of Christ. I knew many of them; we had had them in our home, and I thought they were next to God Himself. Men such as Will Oliphant, Foy E. Wallace, Jr., and Rue Porter—very great and imposing men in the Church of Christ. They had tremendous effect on me. I wanted to grow up to be like them.

Elkins: So you grew up in the Church of Christ and were very committed to it. But somewhere along the way this changed. Can you describe what brought about the change?

Meyers: I'm sure many things were involved, but I remember my experience in the military as having a special effect on me. In our worship services I was in contact with men from other churches. I saw my own intolerance and narrow attitudes because I had always been told we were the only true Christians. This had a powerful effect on me; it made me reexamine a lot of my views and values. I've often thought about this whole process of change that many of us raised in the Church of Christ have gone through. Why did certain experiences make such a differ-

ence for me? Others, raised as I was, went through the same military and other experiences; but they remained the same. I don't know. . . maybe some of us are just sensitized in a different way and things therefore affect us and change us.

Elkins: Yes, I've often wondered about that process also. Robert, in your letter to me you described how the idea for *Voices* was born; but one question I have always had is this: How did you know where to find the people who contributed articles to the book? Where, particularly in the 1960s, did you find so many Church of Christ "liberals"?

Meyers: Actually, it was rather easy. For some time, as minister of the Riverside Church, I had been mailing out a bulletin in which many of these issues were discussed. A lot of people, here and there across the country, read the articles and made contact with me. Also, Leroy Garrett helped; and Carl Ketcherside, who had held lectureships at Riverside, had rather wide contact with such people. And in addition to these contacts, I also knew some people personally—friends of mine who had gone through experiences similar to my own.

Elkins: So you had no real difficulty at all in finding contributors?

Meyers: No, not at all. In fact once things got going I had many others to contact me—people willing to tell their stories. We could easily have published a sequel to *Voices* and had twice as many additional contributors.

Elkins: Obviously, as editor, you put a great deal of time and energy into the book. What was it like for you to go through this experience?

Meyers: I can truthfully say *Voices* was the most exhilarating and satisfying thing I have ever done. I have published academic articles—and I'm sure my colleagues would not understand—but I never had so much sheer happiness as when I did *Voices*. The work was a purgation and catharsis for me. Intellectually, I was already untied from the shibboleths, but my history said I could not break the bond. The book released me *emotionally*. It cleansed my soul. Now I can love people in the Church of Christ.

Elkins: What, in your own opinion, was the major contribution of the book? What did it do for those who read it?

Meyers: I think at the time it was published there were hundreds in the Church of Christ who felt very much alone. They felt, "Am I the only one who doubts? Everyone else seems so sure." When such people read *Voices*, it brought to them a sense of community. The book was primarily personal narrative, the odysseys of the writers. When people read the book, they identified with these writers and knew they were not alone.

Elkins: In a recent letter Carl Ketcherside, who published your book, indicated the Church of Christ has changed since the 1960s and that he suspected *Voices* would hardly "cause a ripple" if it were published today. Do you agree with that?

Meyers: Yes, I think I would agree with that generally. There are more liberal Churches of Christ now than ever before. The old-fashioned narrowness is not there as much as in the past. However, I'm not as optimistic as some that the Church of Christ *in general* will come to the level of freedom and openness depicted in *Voices*. But I do see Churches of Christ today that no one would have dreamed of twenty years ago.

Elkins: At the time *Voices* was published, you spoke from *within* the Church of Christ, but now you are with the Congregational Church. What brought about this change?

Meyers: If I had found an open Church of Christ, I'm sure I would have stayed. I lived in Wichita and wanted to stay there; I was a teacher at the university. When things fell apart because of the uproar directed at the Riverside Church, I went through a rather difficult time. I stayed in town but went through almost a "pagan" period in my life. Then some friends at the Congregational Church called me and said, "We need an interim minister for the summer. Why don't you come and try out." So I went and was offered the job. I was only to fill in from May to September—that was 1971—but the regular minister died that August, and the church asked me to stay. At first they wanted me to leave my position at the university; but when I told them I would not do that, they graciously allowed me to be their "preaching minister."

Elkins: Finally, Robert, *Voices* is no longer being published. Do you envision it ever going into another printing? Or, another question, do you envision a sequel to it, perhaps something such as *Voices of Concern in the 1980s*?

Meyers: Well, I would certainly love to see the book go into print again. We have consistently had requests for it year after year. The book went through three printings. Then one of the contributors, Margaret O'Dowd, complained that her article had been edited by me in such a way as to make it sound more critical than she intended it to be. As editor, I felt I had leaned over backward to preserve the words and essence of each contributor. But, anyway, we just decided to stop printing the book.

As to your question about a sequel: That might be an interesting idea, but somebody else should do it—not me.

Elkins: Robert, thank you for your time and for granting this interview. *Voices* influenced many people; I was one of those, and I'm grateful to you.

WOUNDERS AND HEALERS

Voices of Concern was published almost twenty years ago. Many believe the Church of Christ has come a long way since that time. Ironically, some of those who felt the blade of the inquisitor's sword in those days are now leaders in the church. The "old guard," who seemed so powerful and threatening back then, seem now to be more impotent. Young ministers in the 1980s speak more freely the same ideas that would have cost them their jobs in the 1960s. Generally, as Robert Meyers noted above, the Church of Christ has made significant progress toward more tolerance and openness—at least in many congregations. But I believe it is important to remember those things which have contributed to the progress. It is all too easy to forget the pain, disillusionment, and disrupted lives that marked the era of the 1960s in the Church of Christ. Many good Christian men and women were maligned, persecuted, and in some cases driven out simply because they had honest doubts and spoke their sincere opinions. It did not have to be so. It does not have to be so again, if the Church will but remember, and love the doubter as it loves the convinced.

But it would be unfair to imply all was dark in those days. Even at the height of the "McCarthyism" there were individuals, elderships, churches, and colleges which did not join the inquisition. These people and organizations transcended their time and refused to participate in the branding, labeling, and general paranoia that seemed so rampant. They offered healing when others seemed only to wound. They opened their hearts and doors to outcasts and invited them in. They loved the doubter when no one else seemed to. They were the only haven some had. To all these a great debt of gratitude is owed. *Voices of Concern* and the people associated with it are among those who should be remembered. They provided one small harbor in those days which beamed forth the message: "Come this way, my brother and sister, and rest for awhile. . . ."

¹*Voices of Concern: Critical Studies in Church of Christism*, ed. Robert Meyers. St. Louis, Mo.: *Mission Messenger*, 1966.

²Carl Ketcherside in personal correspondence to the author dated December 12, 1983.

³Dusky Henry in personal correspondence to the author dated May 12, 1984.

⁴Anne Cato Sowell in personal correspondence to the author dated May 16, 1984.

⁵Ben B. Boothe in personal correspondence to the author dated March 8, 1984.

⁶Bales, James D. in *Restoration Revies*, ed. Leroy Garrett, 1967, Vol. 9, Nos. 1-10.

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⁹Telephone interview with Robert Meyers in January, 1984.

A Word For Our Times

**a column for
opinion and
personal
reflection**

Experiencing The Stages of Love

By Harold Straughn

Are you ready for a word of good news—and challenge—about your love life?

The word that I bring comes from a consensus of current research opinion about the quality of relationships. The consensus goes something like this:

1. There are more good relationships now than ever before.
2. The ones that are thriving are better than ever.
3. The percentage of healthy relationships to ailing ones is on the increase.

What we are seeing in America, I believe, is a sea change in what love and marriage is about. Its purpose, design, and experience are shifting so rapidly and comprehensively that, even though most of us are caught up in it all, we are scarcely aware of what is happening.

It's as if the historical shift from ancient patriarchal, parentally arranged marriages to the romantic ideal of each individual selecting a mate had taken place all over the world in one generation instead of over centuries.

Statistics can explain some aspects of the change if we are skilled enough in interpreting them. On the surface, however, the facts about the trends appear contradictory.

We hear, for example, that the divorce rate in the 1980s is on the decline—for the first time in over a generation. On the other hand, some very troubling, even horrifying, reports are being made public by Sen. Daniel P. Moynihan's new book *Family and Nation* and a recent CBS Reports documentary by Bill Moyers, both of which raise serious alarms over the disintegrating forces at work on poor families in the cities, particularly in the black population. When we read that over half of black children are growing up without a father in the home and that 70 percent of the males among these children will grow up without the skills to enter the work force, it is time to set aside whatever dogmas we

may have allowed ourselves to assume about either conservative or liberal agendas for American life and make a serious effort to look for a new perspective.

These two trends, the good news and the bad, both seem to be true. The good marriages are getting better, and the unstable ones are getting worse. To live in a world where the rich get richer and the poor get poorer, economically, culturally, or spiritually, is alienating and threatening to all, of course. So any attempt to understand and come to terms with one of these trends requires us to view it in light of the other. They are not simply two separate movements, but are part of a larger whole. And both trends affect all of us.

In my studies of the stages of marriage I have taken as my point of departure the cultural environments that encourage certain styles of being married and put pressures on others.

It's easy for us to see that arranged marriages have virtually no cultural supports in America. If persons move here from a culture that still expects parents to choose mates, they will have to maintain their own closely-knit support group, preferably cut off from the mainstream pressures by their own language, religion, and schools.

What's not so easy for us to see is the way that marriage as understood fifty years ago in this country is also losing its cultural supports. Only a generation or two ago almost every marriage involved two persons who shared common backgrounds, usually small town or rural, and who married either just before or just out of high school. They

tended to settle down within a few hours' travel from their extended family. This was the style of family life that settled the frontier, built the communities, established the schools, planted the churches, democratized government, and provided the sons and daughters who fought in world wars and made the United States a world power.

This traditional marriage is also the type that is experiencing the highest divorce rate today and is suffering the most severe instability as our cultural values and needs are changing.

Divorce has not struck our society's marriages with equal force everywhere. Marriages between people who have received several years of college, who have gotten a head start in their careers, and who delay the start of a family for a few years are showing a lower divorce rate than that of the country as a whole.

In my search for the elements that characterize the healthiest marriages today, I'm finding that these sociological facts are only part of the story and that the more important factors are certain dynamics that emerge one after the other in a series of stages. Naturally, the more attuned two people are to each other, to cultural values, and to their own potential for emotional, intellectual, and spiritual growth, the better their chances for experiencing all the stages. Otherwise, couples tend to hit a certain plateau and stay there.

Very briefly, some of the stages I have been able to identify and classify are as follows:

1. *Eros*. The feelings of attraction and

SPEAKERS OF A WORD FOR JULY/AUGUST: Harold Straughn is a New York City-based writer, editor, and lecturer for business, religious, and educational organizations. Neil DeCarlo is a Mental Health Counselor at Jackson Memorial Hospital in Miami, Florida. Paul Fromberg is a candidate for the Master of Arts Degree in Marriage and Family Ministry at Fuller Theological Seminary. Larry James is minister for the Richardson East Church of Christ, Richardson, Texas.

desire that ignite a relationship and rekindle intimacy throughout the relationship.

2. *Storge*. The sense of affection and enjoyment of being together, which enables a couple to develop and renegotiate the roles and rules for sustaining the daily routines of life.

3. *Philia*. The capacity for friendship, for sharing common values that transcend roles and rules, and for serving their family and community out of the overflow of love they share.

4. *Dikaiosune*. The passion for justice, fairness, and equality, which propels each partner to develop his or her own unique gifts to the fullest, not in competition with each other but out of a sense of mutual encouragement.

5. *Agape*. The living out of an experience with redemptive love which learns to live with paradox and pluralism. Failure is experienced as a necessary step toward achievement; grief as a part of healing; suffering as the price of wholeness; death as a dimension of life; divorce as a stage within marriage.

6. *Ktisis*. Creative, open-ended love,

that can live with radical change, that can pioneer still newer stages of loving the way the pioneers of past stages have had to do it: by being willing to be the first, to be alone, to be challenged by the cultural majority, to be convinced they are right, and to have that judgment vindicated by history.

These reflections form a kind of prologue to my longer study, *THE FIVE DIVORCES OF A HEALTHY MARRIAGE: Experiencing the Stages of Love* (CBP Press, 1986). The key insight that healthy marriage offers to our culture is that love learns to embrace and redeem all that has gone before—that in effect divorce is not the opposite of marriage any more than death is the opposite of life. The healthiest marriages are less threatened by divorce than the most unstable ones, not because they experience less pain or failure but because they internalize the whole of life and not just the good parts.

As a result, for the first time in cultural history, it becomes possible to understand that married, single, divorced, and widowed persons are all

on the same side of the struggle. Instead of viewing divorce, separation, or even death with fearing, fighting, or fleeing, we are able to accept these events with a view to their potential as experiences for growth.

The greatest source of hope that I see for dealing with the dissolution of traditional marriage, especially among the poor, is to encourage the move of more people into a more redemptive lifestyle. If I see in my own life and relationships the very same dynamics that I see in the suffering of the poor, if I accept my own sense of hopelessness, loneliness, or rage at the world's unconcern, only then can I embrace those who are the greatest victims.

For if cultural forces are decisive in determining the quality of our relationships, it is equally true that the values we experience in our most intimate relationships are the ones we inevitably contribute to society. The images that empower our culture can never go higher than the images that express our most personal experiences.

History Bears Out More Than Fiction

By Neil DeCarlo

I am reading the book of Acts, the account of rising Christianity in the first century, roughly 2,000 years ago. It is a story about a movement that was based on the witness of a handful of people to the Resurrection and Ascension of Jesus. We know these things because they were recorded in the literature of that time. The movement was actuated by the Holy Spirit, an agent of spiritual power that endowed men with extraordinary capabilities.

Actually, this is good fictional material. But history bears out more than fiction. History is revealed through literature; and in ancient literature, biblical and nonbiblical (Josephus), we find a character named Paul who stormed through the world speaking the truth about God: that He came to us in human form and was raised from the dead. If Paul's letters were merely fiction, why would he so passionately live out his tale, so passionately enter into his fiction as if it were as real as his own beating heart? Yes, history bears out more than fiction, for the Christian story seems to have deep connections with the lives

of confirmed historical figures. It is embodied in the fabric of Graeco-Roman culture, its people, and its politics.

History discloses a handful of enflamed hearts, the walking lame and the risen dead, and a fiery power that ripped through thousands, igniting internal change that was manifested in martyrdom, sacrifice, and unexplainable joy. History confirms the Gospels and the Letters as the written expressions of pierced, believing hearts—hearts touched by *something*, if not the Only God.

I would like to do an investigation into the literature of the first century and see how the Gospels and Letters compare with other literature of the day. Would this investigation make the biblical works more believable or less? I have a feeling more. The movement spread, by means of the Holy Spirit, in opposition to the more traditional Mosaic beliefs, in opposition to the monolith of Jewish ritual and religiosity. *The movement spread!*

It spread to the Greeks. The Spirit was with them, too! Believers were taken as prisoners, and some were tor-

tured and killed. Herod tried to obstruct the movement; he was struck dead by an angel of God. The fear of God was spreading like a plague. Men were jealous. Men were venomous.

Christians were hunted like wild animals, of course. For who can reshape the allegiance and lifestyles of so many people without danger to life? This is usually not the type of activity that is safe. The believers were toying with men's egos, with the Possessive State, with the passion and security of those who had their whole lives invested in the prevailing order of things; take away the order of things and sting those who are a part of it, sting them bad! The Jews rested their lives on the Law; and Paul said, "Your Law is dead!" The Greeks rested their lives, literally, on their gods; and Paul said, "your gods are no gods at all!" *Sting them bad!*

This fellow Paul—not some phantom of the mind but a real, live historical figure, a taxpayer, a tent-maker—brought Greeks right into the Jewish temple. This was outright defiance of the Law! There were religious

men who vowed not to eat until they killed him, this defiant man. He was arrested and tried before the Governor, before the King, and even before Caesar, who, in all his stately pomp, came to hear this radical man. Paul defended himself brilliantly and tactfully. He had risen to the attention of the highest Roman official. He made *World News Tonight*. He made *Night-Line* with Ted Koppel.

The Nazarene sect was known throughout the entire world: this handful of people, possessed from above with fire and tongues; the living dead and the walking lame; the few leading the many in revolution, sharing everything they had, looking to heaven with angelic eyes as stones pelted their cheeks and heads, and as rocks splintered their spines. The main human character, Saul of Tarsus, who

was entrenched in Jewish tradition and scholarship and who was a violent accuser of the new sect, was converted on a lonely road by a blinding light and was never the same. He became the major proponent of the new movement and carried his God-inspired message to both Jews and Gentiles, through synagogues and Greek households, against physical and spiritual opposition, into the high courts of religion and the bastion of the Roman government.

What a story! It would make a great novel. The plot is moving. There is adventure, suspense, risk. Try reading it as a piece of literature once, and see how absorbing it can be. Read it from cover to cover; it's more like a short story. As literature, it rivals the best ancient works of history, philosophy, or drama. It is a story of a man who

undergoes a major change of faith and fights triumphantly for a new cause, who is caught up in something larger than himself, who rides the winds of destiny, emblazoned, without compromise, never looking back.

But it is more: It is a story about the Holy God and his communication with his creatures: first He prophesies through men of old; then He sends his Promised One in creature form with Creator powers; and then He leaves his Spirit inside his creatures. The Only God, apart from all other gods in history, the origin of all things both living and nonliving, merges together with man in his spirit and pushes him to his most noble calling: a symbiotic, dynamic, spiritual relationship with his Creator.

A fantastic tale: *it's just that history bears out more than a tale.*

A Fast Day

The Day of Fasting begins in this way:

I have a feeling of hunger. Not a desperate feeling, but a peace: a giving up of what is my own. I am tired, calmed; my throat asks for food but is clamped tightly closed. I long to be faithful to the Fast. But there is no way for me to know if I can keep my pledge. Will I be faithful?

I think of the pain of the Fast. The physical pain—the rhythmic ache in my belly. The psychological pain—there will be no happy times at the table today. The spiritual pain—I

may fail. I think of the others, the millions who cry up to the throne of God, "How long Lord, Holy and True!" Others cannot fail. They have no choice but hunger.

Why? The question presses on me—Why? Why? Why?

I think of starving bodies, starving psyches, starving spirits; and I am crushed by the pain of humanity. There is no way to see the pain—to feel the pain—and remain uncrushed. My fast crushes me as surely as the swollen-bellied child is crushed.

Yet there is a difference. I will break

my fast. I will eat my supper. There will be a joy, a marvelous serenity when I taste the bread and the wine. But the starving child—the empty cup—the lonely heart—the pulverized spirit: all of this—all of them—will go on in the empty hunger of life.

Holy God—Hungry God of the Fast—grant them peace. Feed them of your flesh! Clutch them to your bosom! Nurse them with the water of life.

Requiem aeternam—Dona eis, Domine.

By Paul Fromberg

An Outrageous God

A recent editorial statement offered by Mark Olson in *The Other Side* stirred me deeply:

"Easter is pretty outrageous. But then so is a good bit of what we read in the Bible—more outrageous than even we Christians are able to take." (The Other Side April, 1986, p. 2)

It is true, you know. Our God is absolutely outrageous. Our great sin involves us in the attempt to domesticate the Creator. We are guilty of making Him over in our own image. We have it backward, don't we?

Two absolutely dissimilar issues come to mind: Nicaragua and Mary Tussey. Practically everyone knows something about Nicaragua. Only a few of us know Mary. Let me explain.

Our risen, outrageous Savior whispers weird, foolish unworkable words in our ears about the Sandanistas and the *contras*. The promptings of an outrageous God is to love enemies no matter what—makes no difference which side you are on today. Choose and develop a course of action based on the seemingly insane, outlandish love of enemies. What would be the implication for foreign diplomacy? Who knows? Such a

strategy is so ludicrous no one would be fool enough to try it. Such a policy would demand conversation, possibly even a party or a banquet. Ridiculous! Naturally.

Then there is sixty-year-old, street-wise Mary. A recent letter haunts me. She writes, "I must tell you this then I will say no more. I do not believe there is a God. I think church is a waste of time. I have always believed this . . . Nothing good in life has ever come my way, only bad things. I have never cared much for anyone and if I did I never say so. Last night I cried most of the night. I feel as if something is

(continued on page 30)

By Larry James

MISSION

and the Church

The Quest for Unity Crumbling of the Old Walls



By ROBERT M. RANDOLPH

The forum on "The Church and Change" sponsored by the Central congregation in Irving, Texas, this past February was well attended by a cross-section of Restoration Churches. The whole effort has been constructive in intent and positive in its conclusions. It became clear to me in this meeting that the greatest loss of membership in Churches of Christ/Christian Churches has not been through defection to "liberal" churches, but rather to independent evangelical churches. There were many such persons in attendance at Irving, people who had moved to find greater freedom; and I was struck by how quietly this revolution has occurred. I would guess that in every city where Churches of Christ are strong there are growing numbers who simply have switched rather than fight. One can hardly blame them.

Being something of a cynic, I wonder if this phenomenon has not contributed to the new concern for unity among Christian Churches and Churches of Christ. These defections indicate, after all, that some of the old walls of distinction are crumbling. Leaders are more likely to take risks when they realize that they are in danger of losing their troops.

The unity movement we are now witnessing has led to some additional developments that deserve comment. For example, the movement owes much to the work of Leroy Garrett and Carl Ketcherside. For all of their eccentricities, although they diminish daily, these two men have forced our churches to look again at common roots and to recapture a glimpse of the unity Christ prayed for. In their personal lives they have reminded us all that we are never too important or secure to repent and change. These two giants have been seldom mentioned and largely uninvolved in the current round of conversations. At the recent ACU Lectureship some of Ketcherside's phraseology was utilized, but never

acknowledged.

I think the reasons for failing to acknowledge Ketcherside and Garrett are clear. To do so is to invite criticism from the fringes of the church. For the sake of unity we deny the prophets of unity. John LeCarre, the novelist who draws on East/West tension for his work, has written, "It is not distance but proximity that makes wars. It is not victory but failure that makes us keep on fighting." It was proximity that kept us jousting with our brethren in the Christian Churches. Now that we have begun to remember that we are in the same family, I hope we can recognize these two men who have given so much to our drawing together. Possibly, for example, one day Abilene Christian University will give each an honorary degree. There would be supreme irony here, given their anti-college origins; but more importantly it would be a sign of maturity in our fellowship. They could be cited for having been gadflies on the rump of the church, and we could acknowledge our victory by ceasing to fight. In the evolution of the church there are always moments when generations are reconciled. This is such a moment. We all drink from wells we did not dig, and we should be mature enough to admit it.

Even as we talk of unity, our concern with criticism points to another reality. The non-instrumental Churches of Christ are possibly more diverse and divided than ever before in their history. I suspect the same is true among conservative Christian Churches. There is a loose confederation around certain institutions such as Abilene Christian University and Milligan College, but more and more congregations are marching to their own beat.

For non-instrumental churches *The Firm Foundation* has ceased to speak to/for the mainstream, and other publications have not yet taken its place. Often congregations are far more diverse than could have been imagined a decade ago. In most large

cities the slogan "Attend the Church of Christ of your choice" is not humor, but truth. Within the next decade I expect two new branches of the Restoration Movement to emerge. On the right there will be the more sectarian churches in the non-instrumental fellowship, and on the left those churches owing their origin to the Crossroads Church in Gainesville, Florida. Already they (Crossroads) have influenced the beginning of congregations in many major cities. While they are often extremely sectarian themselves, they are beholden to no organization or hierarchy in the mainstream of the movement. Given their clientele, their lack of historical sense, and their uninformed biblicism, they will eventually fall into a theological vacuum. Their focus will depend on the personalities that dominate their pulpits, and the emerging group will begin to differ from its church of origin. On the right this evolution has already occurred, and the negative spirit that marked Churches of Christ forty years ago remains alive and well.

Finally, for mainstream Churches of Christ the reaction against the negativism so prevalent in our

past has begun to express itself in two tangible ways. There is first of all a generation of preachers, both old and young, who castigate the church they used to know as sharply as they once preached against the "denominations." A friend commented on one lecture at ACU by saying that he could not believe he was a part of the church described there. Where he had served, the church had never been so narrow or negative.

The other side of the controversy is to be found in those churches that will have no controversy no matter what it is about. Theological questions that divide will not be discussed; neither will social issues on which there is not agreement. The result may well be a church that is successful in terms of numbers, wealth, and the ability to minister. What we risk is the theological vigor without which we cannot survive. What we believe and teach about Christ and his Church is important. There will always be differences of opinion, and conflict will result. The important difference in the future should be in how we regard conflict and not in avoiding it at all cost.

(God continued from page 28)

always trying to hurt me and it is. But this I don't understand at all. I feel like I like you but why should I like you. I don't like most people . . ." I can't throw that letter away. I find it speaks volumes about modern despair. As I read it over and over, I'm sure of only

one thing—I can't help Mary. Then comes this outrageous God of mine. He won't let me rest! How about you? He keeps talking about forgiveness, compassion, fresh starts, and meals shared together with unlovable people (Luke 14:12-14). What folly! Absolutely.

The tomb of our outrageous Lord is

empty. The longer you run with him the more you realize that is the only way it could have ended, er . . . *begun*. Most outrageous of all, this crazy God wants into my world. And of all things, He wants to enter through me. Newspapers and handwritten letters program my life! Outrageous!

FORUM



The March issue was one of the most stimulating ever. The church is precious to me, as I think it must be for most readers of *Mission*. I know it is filled with problems, but I also know that it belongs to Jesus. Thus, it is where I meet Jesus. As far as it is from being ideal, it is where I'm renewed and where I have identity and belonging.

I'm constantly confronted with the nitty-gritty issues of how to serve in a

leadership capacity within the church. I don't question that some authority must be exercised. Nor do I question the absolute necessity for maintaining the truth in all we do (without it, what else makes sense). It's how we exercise authority and maintain the truth in the very specific and generally very complicated and debated situations of the church's life that causes me questions. So, I found Ron Highfield's article provocative. Even in his "fictional" examples, he spoke of situations that I find familiar.

Truth should never be subservient to church politics. I read no recommendation for such subservience in his article. What I did read was how fundamentally untrue it is to make a quan-

tum leap over those very difficult, mundane issues that truth must face. How often do we hear people in the church call for a retreat from truth? But how often do we see an unwillingness to bring the truth to bear on some aspect of our life together in such a way as to promote the unity of believers and the good of all.

Thus, the truth of our fallen condition needs the stress Mr. Highfield put on it. We are sinners, and this includes those who accept the task of leadership. I fear that much of our Restoration heritage (as wonderful as it is) has made the implicit assumption that elders are not fallen. We place no restraints, controls, or time limits on their exercise of authority. We assume

they will always be good-spirited. What we have too frequently found is that an unchecked power has converted good-spirited men who know they are sinners into men who are authoritarian, inflexible and prideful. I would much prefer to recognize the ambiguity of church life and leadership that focuses on eternal values yet lives in a fallen world than to pretend that all is simple matter of deciding between simple truth and simple evil. This is not to say that some matters are not clear-cut; just that when I see something as clear-cut, others frequently—and, inexplicably to me—disagree. So I'm left wondering if two can walk together when they are not agreed. Good leadership helps us to focus on the truth of our unity in Jesus rather than on some myth of a commonality of opinion.

Lynn Mitchell's articles on the Holy Spirit have also been excellent.

Mike Sanders
Boise, Idaho

I am writing to tell you what a great article Edwin S. Gleaves has in the May issue—"Nobody Ought To Know What Starving Is Like." I do not think I've ever read a better article along this line. I plan to keep it handy and read it fairly often. We need to act upon all of this information we can, for it will help us to be more sacrificial and generous.

I think it meant more to me also because I had just read, a day or two earlier, about the 3,500 thatched-roof huts of the Lao refugees being destroyed by fire, leaving 8,000 homeless and in need of food, clothing, and everything. Many of these are Christians.

Carolyn Allen
Abilene, Texas

It was good to have Highfield's challenge to our tendency to oversimplify thinking on ethical issues ("The Ethics of Church Politics," March, 1986). Yet I agree generally with Hicks's assessment; I do not see all

ethical decision as being so relative as Highfield suggests. He says that "because of the Fall, it is impossible for us to do the absolutely right thing." Like many of Highfield's statements, this is a rather too absolute espousal of the relative condition. Granted that *all* is not black and white; must we therefore conclude that *everything* is relative? There are situations, I believe, where the loving course of action is not only possible, but absolutely right. In a situation where I have been wronged, it seems to me that the choice to love my enemy rather than kill him is absolutely right, at least in terms of Christian morality (and I assume Highfield is writing in that context).

Of course Magee carries Highfield's argument one step further by saying that "all issues of truth and nontruth are decided by consensus," and suggesting that Highfield is "underestimating relativity" as a factor in arriving at consensus. Obviously, I think otherwise. I have no trouble with Highfield's use of the term "politics" and its application to church affairs. It seems to me that Ball, in objecting to the term, fails to interpret the word in Highfield's context.

In the same issue, A.J. Hoover's point is well made. I would like to see a more extended study of the problem he raises. How do liberal and relativistic ethicists reconcile their horror over certain nearly universally condemned behavior and the position that one must not try to "legislate morality"? I find my relativist friends as censorious as fundamentalists in areas that they feel strongly about. Yet they continually inveigh against "value judgments."

Robert Seymour's lead article in the April issue is excellent ("If You Are the Son of God. . ."). He does a fine job of taking scriptural situation and applying it to circumstances we know and can relate to. I don't believe I've read a better treatment of the temptations, unless it's Milton's. His style is clear and forceful, not pretentious. A fine piece.

Mary Lou Walden's story of one

woman's efforts to get Bibles into Russia is consumingly interesting. I had read *God's Smuggler* with excitement and skepticism long ago. I still have some skepticism, but I admire those who persist in doing what they can.

Tom Langford
Lubbock, Texas

Even though I am no longer a member of the Sixth and Izard Church of Christ, I am still vitally interested in what happens to the remaining members of that congregation. Because of what I could see was taking place there, I decided to leave and go, instead, to the First Christian Church. Until now, I have remained silent about the reasons for my leaving, but the enclosed article (May, 1986) by Brother Leroy Garrett, Editor of *Restoration Review*, best describes why I finally decided to leave.

Many of the members of Sixth and Izard have known me for a long time (I am the oldest member, in terms of service, with the possible exception of one sister and I have known, and loved, the elders there for more years than any of us care to admit. I am convinced that every single elder probably thinks that what he is doing is the right thing to do, and probably is acting in accord with what he believes to be the will of God. But even so, though they are not violating their own conscience, what they are doing and continue to do is simply wrong.

How many more of us are going to have to leave before the members themselves force a change of direction? How many more of us must be sacrificed, in order that the elders can continue their unyielding control and dictatorial authority? I beg those who remain to move toward becoming free in Christ, free to think and speak out, and finally, feeling free to say, "I'm sorry, elders, but what you are doing is wrong."

Clint McDonald
Little Rock, Arkansas

Paul certainly wasn't qualified to talk about love, Paul who had persecuted as many Christians as ruthlessly as possible; and yet his poem of love in 1 Corinthians has shattering power.

Madeleine L'Engle, *Walking on Water*

Thread

(continued from p. 20)

to trust through the faith of each other. People do change; if not, the cross means nothing.

I would plead with church leaders, with those who take pride in their orthodox beliefs, with those who are prone to condemnation and rejection to consider once again the story of the Publican and sinner who went to pray and to see how the Pharisee missed the "beauty of the publican's life because he thought the publican's formula was wrong," to see that life with God is so "incomparably important than when anyone has that, his opinions about God [can] be tolerantly regarded, however mistaken they may appear to be."⁷ I would plead that the stories of faith and doubt, triumph and defeat, struggle and assurance, pain and excitement in this issue be read with deep compassion and empathy. I would ask those who have been unforgiving and unloving, impatient and intolerant toward their struggling brothers and sisters to seek forgiveness and to let Christ's love and forbearance fill them so that henceforth they may exemplify the same respect and understanding as Paul when he said, "Not that we have lordship over your faith, but are helpers of your joy (2 Cor. 1:24).

NOTES

¹Victor L. Hunter and Phillip Johnson, *The Hunter Church in the Presence of Christ* (Macon, Georgia: Mercer University Press, 1985). p. 12.

²Herbert A. Marlowe, Jr., in unpublished manuscript.

³Hunter and Johnson, p. 6

⁴Harry Emerson Fosdick, *The Meaning of Faith* (Nashville: Abingdon, c. 1950 by International Committee of YMCA), pp. 111-112.

⁵Ibid., pp. 116-117.

⁶Ibid., p. 113.

⁷Ibid., p. 99.

MISSION

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Murphy, Norman — Waco, Texas
Myers, Nancy B. — Bridgeport, Texas
Nowell, Ken — Arlington, Texas
Parks, Norman — Murfreesboro, Tennessee
Pulley, Kathy J. — Springfield, Missouri
Reynolds, Jim — Fort Worth, Texas
Sampson, David A. — Arlington, Texas
Scott, Bob — Little Rock, Arkansas
Scott, Jack — Costa Mesa, California
Shaw, Robert — Coral Gables, Florida
Simmons, Dwayne — Malibu, California
Stem, Carl H. — Lubbock, Texas
Straughn, Harold — Brightwaters, New York
Taliaferro, Gary — Friendswood, Texas
Tyler, Ron — Fort Worth, Texas
Ward, Roy Bowen — Oxford, Ohio
Watson, William E., Jr. — Houston, Texas
Willbern, Roy — San Marcos, Texas