

1985

## 1985: Abilene Christian College Bible Lectures - Full Text

ACU Press

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**WHAT  
THE CHURCH  
NEEDS  
TO HEAR**



# WHAT THE CHURCH NEEDS TO HEAR

*being the*

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Abilene Christian University  
Annual Bible Lectures

**1985**

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## **PREFACE**

The lectures and special classes contained in this volume are those which were given at the 67th annual Bible Lectureship at Abilene Christian University on the theme "What the Church Needs to Hear."

This title brings to mind so many things that are needed by the Lord's people in these days. The church needs to hear the Good News about God's love, and the Good News about Jesus and salvation. The church needs to hear about forgiveness and mercy, about love and kindness, about fellowship and unity, about faithfulness and commitment. So many things are needed. Where does one begin?

The primary purpose of the annual Bible Lectureship is to further the cause of Christ in the world. The Lectureship Committee seeks each year to bring outstanding men and women of God to the campus to speak on the most relevant and helpful subjects facing the people of God. It is hoped that these lectures will be helpful not only to those who were able to attend in person but also to thousands of others through this volume for years to come.

**CARL BRECHEEN**  
Lectureship Director



# MAIN SPEECHES

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# WHAT THE CHURCH NEEDS TO HEAR ABOUT THE GOSPEL

Charles Hodge

**Texts:** *Romans 1:14-18; 1 Corinthians 1:17, 9:16, 15:1-4; Galatians 1:6-9; 2 Thessalonians 1:7-9; 1 Peter 4:15-18.*

## I. THE GOSPEL

- A. The Gospel is God's power to save. It was, is and always will be God's power to save. This is what the church needs to hear; it is what the world must hear. Our mission is simply to present the Gospel. The Gospel will do now what it did then. People have not changed, and the Gospel has not lost its power.
1. The word *Gospel* is *euaggelion* in the Greek. This simply means *evangel*. In Anglo-Saxon it is *godspel* or *God's story*, the glad tidings from God.
  2. The Great Commission is to preach the Gospel (Mark 1:15,16). Paul said, "...woe is unto me, if I preach not the gospel" (1 Corinthians 9:16).
- B. What is the Gospel? It is not dogma, creed, philosophy, ethics, morals. The Gospel is what God did in Christ on the cross: "...to testify the gospel of the grace of God" (Acts 20:24). Tell men what God did before you tell men what to do! The Gospel is Christ, not conditions.

1. Mark 16:15,16. Christians preach the Gospel to sinners; then the responsibility to respond is theirs.
2. Christianity is historical. God in Christ acted upon the stage of history. This removes Christianity from mere philosophy or moral ethics. You can take Buddha out of Buddhism and nothing is missing. You can take Socrates out of philosophy and nothing is missing. You can take Christ out of Christianity and nothing is left (John 15).
3. Preach amazing grace! Read 2 Corinthians 5:14; 1 Corinthians 15:10; 1 John 4:7-11; John 3:16; 1 John 3:16. It is not our love for God but His love for us. Everyone loved Sis. Lanter. She told me the reason: "I loved them first." It is easy to love those who love you. The only permanent motivation in New Testament Christianity is grace. The only truth that can motivate men in life is Christ.
4. A great landscape artist was asked what painters paint first; he answered, "The blue sky." PAINT THE BLUE SKY FIRST!
5. Notice also the distinction between truth and Gospel. A doctor examines a patient, only to find terminal cancer. This is truth. It must be preached. But this is not Gospel. Then the doctor says that there is a cure. This is Gospel! The hope of healing! The Gospel brings life from death, hope from failure, and heaven from hell. Jesus died for failures only! This is Gospel! Do not fear grace!

One observer said of us, “Grace is a wonderful thing among you until you need it.” Believe in grace, accept grace, preach grace! PAINT THE BLUE SKY FIRST!

## II. APPLICATION TIME

### A. PREACHING

1. Don't turn the “Good News” into “Bad News.” Sin cannot be fixed, but sin can be forgiven. Do not try to earn grace. It may have been Friday (the cross), but Sunday's coming! No one can be worth grace! A certain preacher was loved. A member observed, “He was the first preacher that told me God loves me.”
2. Read 1 Corinthians 1:23, “But we preach Christ crucified.” This was made into a sign on a meeting house. In time a vine covered “Christ crucified.” Perhaps this exposes us! Never have we had so much preaching! But we have neglected “Christ crucified.” One elder was highly critical of a series of sermons preached on the cross. He dismissed it by saying, “It was a waste of time.” Since some “pets” are not preached regularly, some gripe, “I haven't heard a Gospel sermon in years.” How tragic.
3. Pulpits are not “whipping posts.” Beware of “Joy Robbers.” Stay away from any pulpit that only makes you feel bad. Some preach guilt but not grace. Some don't feel good

unless they are made to feel bad. “Thanks be unto God for his unspeakable gift” (2 Corinthians 9:15).

4. Preach Christ, Christ, Christ! The difference in the first century was Christ; the difference in the 20th century is Christ. Sing it! Preach it! Live it! The early church concentrated upon the MESSAGE, not the Method! The sermons of the early church (Acts) focused upon the death, burial, and resurrection of Christ. Christ was preached, and as a result churches were established. You cannot preach the church and get Jesus! Plant Matthew, Mark, Luke and John to produce Acts! You cannot plant Acts to produce Acts! The power to live the epistles is found in the Gospel accounts. Karl Barth said the most profound truth on earth was, “Jesus loves me; this I know.” “And I, if I be lifted up from the earth, will draw all men unto me” (John 12:32).
  
5. Therefore, a sermon can have two hundred verses yet not be Gospel! The Gospel is not “right answers to selected questions.” One could eliminate all error on earth yet still not save one soul. Salvation is not the conclusion to a three-line syllogism. It is not enough to know *about* the Bible; we must know the Bible. It is not enough to know *about* Christ; we must know Christ.

## B. EVANGELISM

1. Evangelism does not start with conditions. Evangelism begins with Christ. Bring sinners to the cross and keep them there. We must start with sinners where they are, not where we are or want them to be. Reread the Great Commission. We are to preach the Gospel, not “straighten sinners out.” We are evangelists, not judges, policemen, or fixers! Proselytism is not evangelism.
2. The Jewish schools at Jesus’ time were Hillel and Shammai. There is no record of their conversion. So far as we know, Gamaliel never “obeyed the Gospel.” You will observe that sinners “obey the Gospel.” They respond to grace, not earn salvation by obeying law. To obey the Gospel is to trust/commit to that which God did in Christ. The “Good News” is so good that all other news, good or bad, is irrelevant! To obey the Gospel is to accept what God supplied. Do not reduce the Gospel to “church law.” A party spirit empties church houses!
3. Sinners “artificially got” must be “artificially kept.” Some only teach sinners what they want them to know. Give sinners Jesus! Plant the cross square-dab in the middle of their hearts. Do not convert sinners to you. It was the Gospel, not Christian ethics, that captured the first century. The Gospel is not too good to be true; it is too good not to be true. The Gospel is not for you only but for

me also. Preach the Gospel, not religious law. This turns Bible teachers into “church house lawyers.”

### C. RELATIONSHIPS

1. Treat people right. Jesus does not make men mean (John 10:10, 14:6). Christians are “experts in life.” Christianity is relationship! Don’t yell “Christ” at the world; live Christ before the world.
2. Read Revelation 2. The Ephesian Church had lost its first love. They were so busy doing church work and fighting the Nicolaitanes that they had lost the Gospel. Jesus did not come to point us to the Bible; the Bible points us to Jesus.
3. A Bible teacher once began each Bible class with this statement: “There is good news today: Jesus Christ died for our sins.” It is much easier to have a commitment to abstract principles than to a person. Christianity is more than simply the matter of believing the right stuff. James tells us that even demons believe the right stuff (James 2:19). If orthodoxy alone makes Christians, then demons are Christians. But being a Christian is much more than external creeds. Being a Christian means giving yourself, totally, without reservation, to the one in whom you say you believe. Therefore, the church does not exist to be served and to be the receiver of gifts. Rather, the church exists



in order to serve others and to give itself away to others. Jesus became poor for our sakes (2 Corinthians 8); we must become poor for the world. Only the church that is willing to lose itself will find itself. Only the church that is willing to die can live. Jesus saved us so that we might meet the needs of others.

### **III. CONCLUSION**

The Gospel! What God did in Christ on earth at the cross! The "Amazing Grace" of the Gospel of God. Your preacher is privileged to preach every sermon at Duncanville in 1985 simply on "Jesus." It is not known what this will do for the congregation, but it will radically change the preacher. The church is but an extension of Jesus. When God sits in judgment, He will be looking for a church that looks like Jesus.

## JON E. JONES

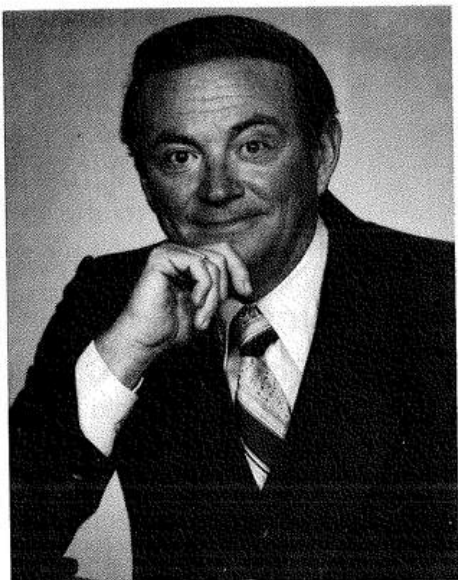
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**Other Fields of Special Interest:** Was chaplain of the Miami Civitan Club, past president of the Sunset Elementary School PTA, and served on the Dade County Steering Committee for better schools. Since 1973, he has served on the Advisory Board of Abilene Christian University.



# WHAT THE CHURCH NEEDS TO HEAR ABOUT MONEY AND CHRISTIAN STEWARDSHIP

Jon E. Jones

“ ‘Hilarious’ was a New Testament adjective used to describe the saints... (2 Corinthians 9:7), and this concerned the giving of offerings to the Lord. Taking the collection is one of the low ebbs of a worship service. If ‘hilarious’ describes a low ebb, they must have torn the house down when something exciting happened.”<sup>1</sup>

Why don't we enjoy giving? Why is the time of offering such a somber moment? Is it because we have tried to raise money by making people feel guilty? If we can just get old John Q. Churchmember to feel guilty and uncomfortable, he may throw a few extra bucks in the plate. As a result of this procedure, many church members groan and moan when they anticipate a sermon on giving. Most preachers dislike the idea of having to talk about it because when they make the members uncomfortable, somehow the members have a way of making the preachers feel uncomfortable. It ends in a vicious cycle of guilt-giving, bad feelings and meager results.

May I share with you some astonishing biblical principles concerning money and Christian stewardship? Let us begin by making a statement upon which all of us can readily agree. We need money! However, it is not enough to need financial success, we must *desire* it. We will quickly run out of energy if all we reach for is what we need.

Did you ever stop to think about it? God goes where He is desired, not where He is needed. Success goes where it is desired, not where it is needed. The Bible says, "The desire of the righteous shall be granted" (Proverbs 10:24). Mark 11:21 states, "Whatsoever things you desire when you pray, believe that you will receive them and you shall have them." Lots of people need better incomes, but don't really desire them. Do you think everybody desires a better income? Not necessarily. The proof of desire is pursuit. We reach for what we want, not necessarily what we need. The Wright brothers didn't need an airplane: they wanted an airplane. Thomas Edison didn't need the light, since he had candles: he wanted the light. I hate to contradict Benjamin Franklin, who said, "Necessity is the mother of invention." The truth is, desire is the mother of invention. Desire will run on when need runs out.

Desire gives birth to *imagination*. Every great success is the result of imagination. Imagination is a God-created machine inside one, designing tomorrow's events.

The mind has several functions: one is the memory; another is the imagination. The purpose of the memory is to replay yesterday's events. The purpose of the imagination is to preplay tomorrow's events.

The Bible says regarding Christ's crucifixion and resurrection, "For the joy that was set before Him, He endured the cross." The Saviour knew the resurrection was there. He knew the crucifixion was coming and literally moved toward what He was thinking. Tell me

your dominant thought, and I will tell you in which direction your life is moving.

The third key word is *respect*. You must respect money before it comes to you. If you respect people, you will attract friends. What you don't respect, you will lose. If you don't respect people, you will lose friends. If you don't respect money, you will lose money. If you respect ideas, they will come to you.

Now go with me to 1 Kings 17:1-16. In this exciting narrative, Elijah the Tishbite puts his finger in the face of King Ahab and then carries the keys to heaven around in his pocket for the next three years while it does not rain in Israel. At the beginning of the drought, God will send His prophet to a brook east of Jordan. The ravens provide meat and bread for him, both in the morning and evening, and he drinks from the refreshing stream. After a while, the brook dries up and God then sends His man to Zarephath. As he comes to the gate of the city, a widow is gathering sticks. He says to her (verse 10), "Please get me a little water in a jar that I may drink." And as she is going to get it, he calls to her and says, "Please bring me a piece of bread in your hand." But she answers, "As the Lord, your God, lives, I have no bread and only a handful of flour in the bowl and a little oil in the jar. Behold, I am gathering a few sticks that I may go in and prepare for myself and my son that we may eat it and die." Then Elijah says to her, "Do not fear. Go do as you have said, but make me a little bread cake from it first and bring it out to me. Afterward, you may make one for yourself and for your son. For thus says the Lord God of Israel, 'the bowl of flour shall not be exhausted, nor shall the jar of oil be

emptied until the day that the Lord sends rain on the face of the earth.' ” So she goes and does according to the word of Elijah, and she and he and her household eat for many days. The bowl of flour is not exhausted, nor does the jar of oil become empty, according to the word of the Lord which He spoke through Elijah.

Now let's glean the principles from this God-directed incident in the life of Elijah.

**1. A NEED IS AN INDICATION TO CHANGE.**

If I do tomorrow the same thing I am doing today, then tomorrow I shall be exactly where I am today. When a need surfaces, it is an indication that I must change my information flow. I must change what I am doing. I must reposition myself. The brook dried up. Suddenly, Elijah was in need. That was God's way of letting him know, "I am changing my method of blessing."

**2. IT IS NOT A SIN TO HAVE A NEED.** There is no climate of condemnation in I Kings 17. God doesn't blast Elijah for not treating the ravens right. God doesn't say the reason that the brook dried up is because Elijah drank too much water too fast. God doesn't tell him that the reason the ravens are not coming is because he wasn't thankful enough. The man of God is not criticized by God for having a need. Neither is the widow.

**3. THERE IS ALWAYS A REASON FOR LACK.** You say, "I know why! My husband/wife spent too much money last month." No, believe it or not, that is not one of the Bible reasons.

*The first reason for lack is an unteachable spirit.*  
 "Poverty and shame will come to him who neglects

discipline, but he who regards reproof will be honored” (Proverbs 13:18).

*The second reason for lack is ignorance* (see Proverbs 24:4). Proverbs 11 says, “By knowledge shall the just be delivered.” Hosea 4:6 states, “My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge.” You say, “I thought if I got right with God, I would get smart.” No, being right doesn’t make you bright. Having a clean heart doesn’t mean you have an informed mind. There are a lot of good people who are not so smart. God doesn’t do a knowledge transplant at your conversion. It is one thing for knowledge to be accessible; it is another thing for knowledge to be implemented. Salvation is an act; knowledge is a process. Some of us will spend more money on our cars than we will on our minds. That’s why our cars run better than our minds.

*The third reason for lack is laziness.* “Poor is he who works with a negligent hand, but the hand of the diligent makes rich” (Proverbs 10:4).

*The fourth reason is oppressing the poor* (Proverbs 22:16). The Bible says that if you mistreat the poor and help the rich, poverty will come to you.

*The fifth reason is misfortune.* Misfortune is temporary, not permanent. Don’t put people down because they may be in a chapter of need in their life because of a misfortune. It can happen to you. One lawsuit can wipe you out. One surgery could set you back for six years. That’s the reason God gives the rest of us surplus.

*The sixth reason is withholding* (Proverbs 11:24). The Bible says that if we withhold, lack will come. We will literally lose what we have if we hold back something that belongs to God.

4. GOD WILL USE VARIED METHODS OF SUPPLY. For a while, God used the raven; then He switched over to the widow. God has more than one method. God doesn't always use clay and spittle as He did with the blind man. He used dipping in the Jordan for Naaman.

5. THERE IS A SPECIFIC PLACE OF BLESSING. There is a place for blessing. Just as Christ told His disciples to go into the upper room and power would be given to them there, God told Elijah to go by the brook. "I have commanded the ravens to feed you there." Elijah could have gone to the palace of the king and his needs would not have been met. He had to be where God wanted him to be.

The Bible says blessings will come upon you (Deuteronomy 28). Blessings are not waiting to be created. They are waiting to be commanded. God doesn't have to create your blessings. All He has to do is command the blessing to be where He tells you to be. If God wants you here, He commands the blessing to meet you here. That is why the Bible says they overtake you. They are here waiting. The ravens were waiting for Elijah, and so was the widow. Your supply is where God wants you positioned.

6. GOD WILL REMOVE VISIBLE SUPPLY TO RESTORE DEPENDENCY UPON HIM. You might cry out, "God, my raven died! Where do I go now?" God will not allow a substitute of supply in your life. God wants to be the ultimate source. God will remove every visible means of support to create dependency upon Him.



7. GOD USES THE ILLOGICAL AND UNLIKELY TO SUPPORT MY NEEDS. You will never be able to anticipate God. Let me give you an example: Rebecca. Abraham's servant was looking for a wife for Isaac, and he said, "Let the woman that you have chosen for my master's son offer to water my camels." Now these are filthy, dirty camels. If you have ever been around camels, you know that they are filthy. If you went to Israel and rode on a camel's back for a picture, that was beautiful. But stick around camels for a while—their breath is horrible, they would just as soon bite you as to look at you, they are cantankerous. Yet, Rebecca was willing to involve herself in something repulsive. She watered the camels, never realizing that on the back of those camels were the treasures and wealth of Abraham. The wealth of God sometimes is in the most repulsive packages. God does not always wrap gold in silk.

8. WE RARELY USE OUR FAITH UNLESS A DEMAND IS MADE UPON US. Faith is like a muscle. Some years ago, the *Guinness Book of Records* reported an incident that occurred in Tampa, Florida. A grown son was working under his car in his garage. The jack holding up the car slipped, and the axle pinned the young man under the car. His mother heard the noise from inside the house, came into the garage, saw the scene, and lifted the corner of the automobile off the young man. She weighed only 100 pounds. She did not have the strength to lift the car, but she did it anyway. The crisis generated a strength—an incredible, supernatural strength. No one can understand it. So it is in the faith walk.

**9. IT IS THE RESPONSIBILITY OF THE CHURCH TO MAKE A DEMAND UPON THE FAITH.** Last year, the church of which I am a member made a large demand upon my faith. Joan, my wife, and I were uncomfortable about it. We squirmed over it. We prayed concerning it, and we ended up giving more than we would ever have given had we not been challenged by our spiritual leaders. In fact, most of the good works to which I have ever contributed have made a demand upon my faith, or I simply would not have done it. Elders who protect the pocketbooks of the members, rather than challenging them to give sacrificially, are not doing God's work.

The widow of Zarephath would not have given Elijah the cake voluntarily. He had to ask for it. He challenged her faith. Some people don't like preachers who ask them straightforwardly to give. What do you think those preachers ought to do? Hint? The Bible does not say, "Hint and you shall receive."

**10. YOUR FAITH WILL RELEASE WHEN YOUR MIND CAN FOCUS ON A CLEARLY DEFINED TARGET.** Notice how Elijah gave the woman a mind picture of supply and that released her faith. He first said, "Give me what you have." And she then told him the circumstances. She said, "I'm in bad shape. I have just enough for me and my boy and then we are going to die." He comes back and brings a mind photograph upon which she can target. He says, "Listen, your meal barrel will not run empty for the rest of the famine. God is going to feed you." He gave her the same thing God gave to Abraham when He said, "See the stars. That's what your children are going to be like."

Your faith will not be released until you have a clear picture. You will never have the faith to leave Egypt until you get a clear picture of Canaan. You will never leave where you are until you know where you want to be.

What if I went to the D/FW airport? An agent says, "Where would you like to go?" I say, "Oh, just anywhere. Just get me out of Fort Worth." They don't sell tickets based on departure. "How much does it cost just to get in the air? I just don't want to be in Texas!" That will not work. They sell tickets based on destination.

Notice that God did not stop using the raven until He had established the widow. Don't leave your job just because you are mad at your boss and you can't put up with it another day. God may be teaching you tolerance—pain tolerance. But there comes a time in your life when you realize that you don't just jump up and leave where you are. Wait until God gives you a mind picture, a target, something to reach for.

**11. GOD WILL NEVER ASK YOU FOR SOMETHING YOU DON'T HAVE.** I can't find one Scripture in the Bible where God told someone to give something he didn't have. When the little boy had five loaves and two fishes, Jesus didn't say, "What I am really needing is twelve catfish." He will never ask you for something you don't have.

**12. GOD WILL ALWAYS ASK YOU FOR SOMETHING YOU WANT TO KEEP.** God is not going to ask you for something you were going to give to Goodwill anyhow. God will never ask you for something you were going to throw away. He is going to ask you for something you respect, something you hold

important. God doesn't want your throwaways. That's why in the Bible He mentions first fruits.

13. YOU HOLD THE SEED FOR TOMORROW'S SUPPLY. Now you say, "I don't have enough to get my supply tomorrow." No, whatever you have is enough to get tomorrow started. It doesn't matter how little you have. If you have a talent, it is a gift (I'm not speaking just of money) and it is enough. You see, a seed is anything of value. You have enough today for tomorrow's supply. If you plant it, get it going in the direction God wants it and wherever God wants it, it will be enough for tomorrow's supply.

14. EVERYBODY HAS SOMETHING TO GIVE. Notice the widow again. She was down to the last of her oil and meal. God did not wait until she had nothing because there is no such thing. I don't want God to multiply nothing in my life.

In the Old Testament, even the poor people were required to give something. It is the only thing that God can bless. God can't bless nothing. He blesses something. At the marriage in Cana, the stewards said, "We have run out of wine." Jesus didn't say, "Let there be wine," and gurgle, gurgle, there was the wine. He said, "Go, fill the water pots with water." Get something going. He didn't look out there and see a hungry multitude of 5,000 people and say, "Let there be 7,000 sandwiches." No! He said, "Find somebody with something."

15. GOD HONORS THE WORK OF OUR HANDS. God didn't say, "I will bless the thought of your mind." He said, "I will bless the work of your hands." "But what if I don't have work?" you ask.

You *do* have work. “Well, nobody has hired me!” you respond. There are plenty of folks for whom you could work. “You mean FREE?” you ask. Plant your seed.

16. THE WORLD’S CIRCUMSTANCES DO NOT CONTROL THE CHRISTIAN’S SUPPLY. “Do you know the reason that things are bad today? It is because of the economy.” No, my friend, President Reagan has nothing to do with my supply. If that’s the case, God needs to consult Mr. Reagan. God is the source of supply—not the Democrats, nor the Republicans. The Christian is unaffected by the world’s circumstances.

17. GOD WANTS ME TO GIVE WITH THE EXPECTATION OF RECEIVING. “Wait a minute! I thought love was the highest motive for giving,” you say. It is, and that would be fine if we had a perfect love. There is another great biblical motive for giving. It applies powerfully to all of us and is attractive to the minds of men where they are, not where they should be. That motive is investment and therefore of the highest self-interest. Self-interest is not a sin. To be told to love my neighbor as myself will be meaningless if we were not to love ourselves. The Bible makes it clear that every step in the way of salvation is one of self-interest.

Sacrifice in the Bible is not throwing something into a hole that has no bottom. It is not the pagan idea that moves the mothers of India to throw their babies into the holy river. It is enjoined only as a valuable exchange. “He that cometh to God must believe that He is and that He is a rewarder” (Hebrews 11:6). Abraham was to go out from his home, but it was to obtain something better. Moses “had respect to the

recompense of reward.” Our Lord, Himself, “for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame.”

18. CONSECUTIVE GIVING GUARANTEES PERPETUAL HARVEST. There is something special about consecutive giving. Notice in 1 Kings 17 the woman fed the man of God and her household continuously. You see, the giving nature is something that you grow. It is not something you just suddenly have. It is something you nurture.

19. MY REACTION TO ANOTHER’S NEED DETERMINES GOD’S REACTION TO MINE. How I respond to somebody in need is how God responds when I have a need. The widow looked at Elijah and said, “You have a need.” And that is exactly what controlled God’s reaction to her.

20. MY GIVING INITIATES A GOD PARTNERSHIP THAT CREATES A WALL OF PROTECTION (Malachi 3). A gift initiates a relationship. That is why possessions were made—to link people together. We are not made for possessions. We are made for relationships. The purpose of possessions is to create relationships.

My offering does not buy protection. That’s the Mafia. My offering creates a partnership, and the benefits of partnership include protection of what I have in my possession.

21. MY SUPPLY DEPENDS ON WHAT I DO. Proverbs 28:20 says, “A faithful man shall abound with blessing.” Proverbs 24:4 says, “And by knowledge shall the chamber be filled with all precious and pleasant riches.” Proverbs 22:9 says, “He that hath a bountiful

eye shall be blessed, for he giveth of his bread to the poor.” My supply depends on what I do. It does not depend on God’s love for me. God’s love is not optional. If I murdered someone today, love is still generated, but His *blessings* are optional. I don’t have to do anything to be loved, but I do have to do something to be blessed. “Well, God loves me so He blessed me,” you think. No! He loves you even while you are yet an ungodly sinner. For the prodigal to reap the blessing, he must go home.

22. GOD ENCOURAGES OPEN, EXEMPLARY GIVING. One year ago, I never would have included this principle in a lesson on Christian stewardship. I did not understand nor appreciate this principle. Less than a year ago, I was a part of an incredible experience in giving at the Richland Hills Church of Christ in Fort Worth. That congregation committed \$8.5 million to be given over a three-year period above and beyond the regular contribution. That incredible amount would never have been committed without the employing of this principle.

In the past, as a very private person, I have rather conveniently fallen back on the statement Jesus made in the opening verses of the sixth chapter of Matthew: “Be careful not to do your acts of righteousness before men to be seen of men. If you do, you will have no reward from your Father in heaven.” He goes on to talk about giving to the needy and not letting your right hand know what your left hand is doing. In verse 5, He speaks about prayer. Following that, He discusses fasting. He is talking about acts of righteousness *to be seen of men*. It is wrong to pray *to be seen of men*. It is

wrong to give *to be seen of men*, or to fast *to be seen of men*. That is the wrong motivation. He does not condemn open giving, open praying, open fasting, nor any other acts of righteousness. We know that He did not because He often prayed with His disciples in large groups. He told them that it is good to go into your closet to pray, but that did not preclude praying with groups. So in spite of the fact that they were never to pray just to be seen or heard by men, there wasn't anything wrong with open, public praying. Nor is there anything wrong with open, public giving.

In fact, our Lord commended a widow for giving two pennies in the temple. She was giving openly. Jesus was in the public area, standing against the treasury, observing what she gave into the treasury. It was done openly before all. He commended her for it. It was not a gift in which the right hand didn't know what the left hand was doing. Jesus observed it just as anyone could have on that occasion.

There is a beautiful example of this principle in the fourth chapter of Acts regarding the giving of Barnabas. "Barnabas sold the field he owned and brought the money and put it at the apostles' feet." Barnabas gave it openly and publicly. They knew what he was doing. He served as a source of wonderment and amazement to the congregation.

The Christians in Macedonia, of whom Paul speaks so beautifully in 2 Corinthians 8:1-5, gave openly and generously beyond their ability.

There is a place for private giving. There is a place for private, personal acts of righteousness. There also is a place for open, generous acts of righteousness that are



in fact seen of men. The motive is not to be seen of men, but to honor and serve God.

May God help us as we continue to learn and grow in the grace of giving.

<sup>1</sup> Jess Moody, *A Drink at Joel's Place* (Waco, Texas: Word Books, 1967), p. 19.

## THOMAS FOSTER

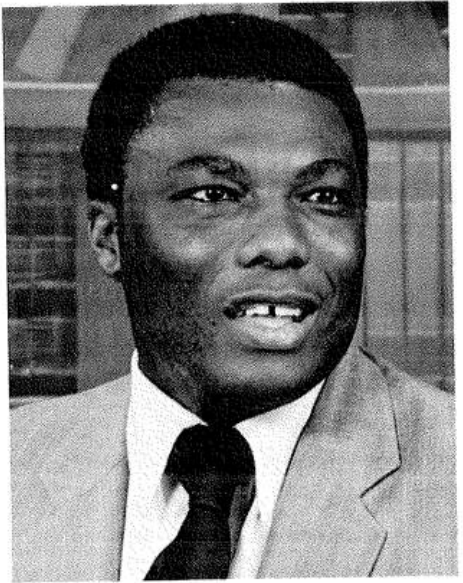
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# WHAT THE CHURCH NEEDS TO HEAR ABOUT HEAVEN

Thomas Foster

## NEWSPAPER CAPTIONS

- (1) A 16-year-old is given a life term for slaying...
- (2) Area services offer Suicide Counseling...
- (3) How to handle infidelity in your marriage...
- (4) Brown University students vote on suicide pills...
- (5) Gallup Poll finds more teens drink...

Heaven is going to be so beautiful. Heaven will be the resting place from sorrow, sin, and death.

*I'm just a weary pilgrim,  
Plodding through this world of sin;  
Getting ready for that city  
When the saints go marching in.  
When the saints go marching in,  
O Lord, I want to be in that number,  
When the saints go marching in.*

Heaven (*ὁὐρανός*) means to lift, to heave, as used in the New Testament. What a marvelous experience it will be to be lifted from this existence into the Celestial City of God!

## THE THOUGHT OF HEAVEN HAS BEEN SET WITHIN

In my hands I hold no doctoral dissertation to prove the existence of Heaven, but deep in my heart, I believe that the great God of Heaven has placed within each of us a longing, a sighting, a thirsting for heaven. Ancient Greece, notwithstanding its scholars like Diogenes, Epicurus, Socrates, and Pythagoras, found a place in its thinking for the Elysium (the abode of the good after death). The American Indians with their great chiefs like Cochise, Geronimo, and Crazy Horse still needed their Happy Hunting Grounds. The American Black Slaves from the cotton fields of Mississippi, the Cane fields of Georgia, sang:

*Still away, still away home,  
I ain't got long to stay here.  
My Lord calls me by the thunder,  
The trumpet sound within my soul,  
I ain't got long to stay here.*

Today as I stand here, my desire is to cause each of us to consider, if but for a moment, how beautiful heaven must be.

*O Beulah land, sweet Beulah land,  
As on the highest mount I stand  
I look away across the sea,  
Where mansions are prepared for me  
And view the shining glory-shore,  
My heaven, my home, for evermore!*

## APOSTLE PETER PREACHED HEAVEN SERMONS IN THE FIRST CENTURY

The epistle of First Peter was written near the end of the reign of Nero. After the fire of July, 64 A.D., Nero initiated a savage campaign of hatred and persecution against the church. When Christians burned in the midst of the atrocious flames of Nero's garden, our brother Peter dipped his pen in the ink of inspiration and wrote an epistle whose key words are patience and hope. At the time that Peter wrote, he was no longer the rash young man who rebuked the Lord for speaking of suffering and death as a part of His divine mission, no longer the impetuous one that severed the ear of Malchus. Time bowed his back while directing his eyes upward. Therefore, he wrote for me that day he wrote of how beautiful heaven must be.

*...Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ, to the strangers scattered throughout Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia,*

*Elect according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, through the sanctification of the Spirit, unto obedience and sprinkling of the blood of Jesus Christ: Grace unto you and peace be multiplied.*

*Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, which according to His abundant mercy hath begotten us again unto a lively hope by the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.*

*To an inheritance incorruptible, and undefiled, and that fadeth not away, reserved in heaven for you.*

—1 Peter 1:1-4

My brothers and my sisters, the good news is that there is an inheritance that can never decay, that is sinless and eternal on reserve for us in the Father's house.

*When with the Saviour  
We enter the glory land—  
Won't it be wonderful there?  
Having no burdens to bear.*

*Dearly beloved, I beseech you as strangers and pilgrims, abstain from fleshly lusts, which war against the soul.*

—1 Peter 2:11

We are sojourners on the earth, seeking for a better country. Hope (the happy anticipation of good) drives us on. It is this hope, deeply anchored by our faith in Christ, that motivates us to abstain from lusts, which war against our soul...

*And besides all this, giving all diligence, add to your faith virtue; and to your virtue knowledge;*

*And to knowledge temperance; and to temperance patience; and to patience godliness;*

*And to godliness brotherly kindness, and to brotherly kindness charity.*

*For if these things be in you, and abound, they make you that ye shall neither be barren nor unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ.*

*But he that lacketh these things is blind and cannot see afar off, and hath forgotten that he was purged from his old sins.*

*Wherefore the rather, brethren, give diligence to make your calling and election sure: for if ye do these things, ye shall never fall.*

*For so an entrance shall be ministered unto you abundantly into the everlasting Kingdom of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.*

—2 Peter 1:5-11

*But the heavens and the earth, which are now, by the same word are kept in store, reserved unto fire against the day of judgment and perdition of ungodly men.*

*But beloved, be not ignorant of this one thing, that one day is with the Lord as a thousand years and a thousand years as one day.*

*The Lord is not slack concerning his promise, as some men count slackness; but is long-suffering to us-ward, not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance. But the day of the Lord will come as a thief in the night; in the which the heavens shall pass away with a great noise, and the elements shall melt with fervent heat. Nevertheless we, according to his promise,*

*look for new heavens and a new earth, wherein dwelleth righteousness.*

*Wherefore, beloved, seeing that ye look for such things, be diligent that ye may be found of him in peace, without spot, and blameless. And account that the longsuffering of our Lord is salvation; even as our beloved brother Paul also according to the wisdom given unto him hath he written unto you.*

—2 Peter 3:7-15

Thanks be to God that when the rising tide of evil came against the family of God, there was Peter stepping in the breach with a powerful exhortation of hope. His message was clear and helped God's people to persevere. Over and over they must have read and hid these words in their hearts:

- (1) Give diligence to make your calling and election sure.
- (2) The Lord is not slack concerning His promises.
- (3) An inheritance incorruptible, and undefiled, and that fadeth not away, is reserved in heaven for you.

### **APOSTLE JOHN PREACHED HEAVEN SERMONS AT THE CLOSE OF THE FIRST CENTURY**

As the first century came to a close, Domitian's reign was filled with incessant crimes and cruelties. Domitian



was one of the greatest tyrants of any age. He instituted the second persecution of the Christians. Apostle John, the apostle of love, stepped into the breach and wrote a book setting forth the ultimate overthrow of evil. Even today, John's message makes it easier to sing:

*Tempted and tried we're oft made to wonder  
Why it should be thus all the day long,  
While there are others living about us,  
Never molested though in the wrong.  
Farther along we'll know all about it,  
Farther along we'll understand why;  
Cheer up, my brother, live in the sunshine,  
We'll understand it all by and by.*

Apostle John's bold call for courage, fidelity, perseverance, and confidence was successful. The Christians became overcomers. They had found something worth living and dying for.

*Fear none of those things which thou shalt suffer: behold, the devil shall cast some of you into prison, that ye may be tried; and Ye shall have tribulation ten days: be thou faithful unto death, and I will give thee a crown of life.*

—Revelation 2:10

*Behold, I come quickly: hold that fast which thou hast, that no man take thy crown.*

—Revelation 3:11

*And when he had opened the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of them that were slain for the word of God, and for the testimony which they held.*

*And they cried with a loud voice, saying How long, O Lord, holy and true, dost thou not judge and avenge our blood on them that dwell on the earth?*

*And white robes were given to every one of them: and it was said unto them that they should rest yet for a little season, until their fellowservants also and their brethren, that should be killed as they were, should be fulfilled.*

—Revelation 6:9-11

*And one of the elders answered, saying unto me, What are these which are arrayed in white robes? And whence came they? And I said unto him, Sir, thou knowest. And he said to me, These are they which came out of great tribulation, and have washed their robes, and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.*

—Revelation 7:13-14

*And I heard a voice from heaven saying unto me, Write, Blessed are the dead which die in the Lord from henceforth: Yea, saith the Spirit, that may rest from their labours; and their works do follow them.*

—Revelation 14:13

*But the fearful, and unbelieving, and the abominable, and the murderers, and whoremongers, and sorcerers, and idolaters, and all liars, shall have their part in the lake which burneth with fire and brimstone: which is the second death.*

—Revelation 21:8

*And he shewed me a pure river of water of life, clear as crystal, proceeding out of the throne of God and of the Lamb. In the midst of the street of it, and on either side of the river, was there the tree of life, which bore twelve manner of fruits, and yielded fruit every month: And the leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations.*

*And there shall be no more curses: but the throne of God and of the Lamb shall be in it; and his servants shall serve him:*

*And there shall be no night there; and they shall be in their foreheads.*

*And there shall be no night there; and thy need no candle, neither light of the sun; for the Lord God giveth them light: and they shall reign for ever and ever.*

—Revelation 22:1-5

Heaven preaching of the first and second centuries made Christians willing to die as witnesses. These were the days when Christians proved the strength and genuineness of their faith in Christ by undergoing violent deaths. Polycarp is a great example.

**THE MARTYRDOM OF POLYCARP,  
22 FEBRUARY 156**

*But as there was so great an uproar in the place that not many could hear, a voice came from heaven to Polycarp as he entered the stadium: "Be strong, Polycarp, and contend manfully." No one saw who it was that spoke; but the voice itself was heard by many of our brethren. When he was led forward, however, a great tumult arose among those that heard Polycarp was taken. At length, as he advanced, the proconsul asked him whether he was Polycarp, and he answering that he was, he persuaded him to renounce Christ, saying, "Have a regard for your age," and adding similar expressions, such as is usual for them to say, he said, "Swear by the genius of Cesar. Repent; say, Away with those that deny the gods." But Polycarp, with a countenance grave and serious, and contemplating the whole multitude that were collected in the stadium, beckoned with his hand to them, and with a sigh he looked up to heaven, and said, "Away with the impious." As the governor, however, continued to urge him, and said, "Swear, and I will dismiss you. Revile Christ." Polycarp replied, "Eighty and six years have I served him, and he never did me wrong; and how can I now blaspheme my King that has saved me?" The governor still continuing to urge him, and again saying,*

*“Swear by the genius of Caesar,”* said Polycarp, *“If you are so vain as to think that I should swear by the genius of Caesar, as you say, pretending not to know who I am, hear my free confession. I am a Christian. But if you wish to learn what the doctrine of Christianity is, grant me a day and listen to me.”* The proconsul said, *“Persuade the people.”* Polycarp replied, *“I have thought proper to give you a reason; for we have been taught to give magistrates and powers appointed by God the honour that is due to them, as far as it does not injure us; but I do not consider those the proper ones before whom I should deliver my defense.”* The proconsul said, *“I have wild beasts at hand, I will cast you to these unless you change your mind.”* He answered, *“Call them. For we have no reason to repent from the better to the worse, but it is good to change from wickedness to virtue.”* He again urged him. *“I will cause you to be consumed by fire, should you despise the beasts, and not change your mind.”* Polycarp answered, *“You threaten fire that burns for a moment and is soon extinguished, for you know nothing of the judgment to come, and the fire of eternal punishment reserved for the wicked. But why do you delay? Bring what you wish.”* Saying these, and many other similar declarations, he was filled with confidence and joy, and his countenance was brightened with

*grace. So that he not only continued undismayed at what was said to him, but on the contrary, the governor, astonished, sent the herald to proclaim in the middle of the stadium, "Polycarp confesses that he is a Christian." When this was declared by the herald, all the multitude, Gentiles and Jews dwelling at Smyrna, cried out, "This is that teacher of Asia, the father of the Christians, the destroyer of our gods; he that teaches multitudes not to sacrifice, not to worship." Saying this, they cried out, and asked Philip the Asiarch,\* to let loose a lion upon Polycarp. But he replied, that he was not permitted, as he had already completed the exhibition of the chase in the amphitheatre. Then all cried out together, that Polycarp should be burnt alive!*<sup>1</sup>

### **THE TWENTIETH CENTURY CHURCH NEEDS TO HEAR MORE HEAVEN SERMONS**

The captions from our brotherhood publications indicate that the Church is facing much trouble today.

- (1) Bickering over small issues;
- (2) Preoccupation with special interests;
- (3) A world of hungry, hurting people who long for relief;
- (4) Christians only or only Christians;
- (5) Church discipline;

- (6) Digression;
- (7) Lack of commitment to mission;
- (8) Marriage, divorce, and remarriage.

Times like these call for a thousand Peters and Johns thundering forth strong lessons on the beauty of heaven. Let every baptized believer be assured that his inheritance, incorruptible and undefiled, is reserved in heaven. May our eternal inheritance be forever more important than CD's, public registrars, the applause of sinners, or the approbation of devilish men.

May our song and our story be heaven. May that city whose streets are paved with gold, whose walls are of Jasper, whose gates are of pearls, and where the tree of life and the pure river of water of life are, dominate our dreams. May churches from California to Maine be brought to their knees, sighing and mourning for the courts of heaven.

Thank God for the great preachers-teachers who are teaching us to rejoice that we are in Jesus, that we are in the Church that Jesus bought with His blood—spirit-filled, hell-proof, and heaven bound. Thank God for those who have caused us to want to join that chorus when the angels, the redeemed, the heavenly beings, and every creature of heaven and earth join together in praise of God and the Lamb.

<sup>1</sup> Eusebius Pamphilus, *Ecclesiastical History* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, 1977), pp. 145-147.

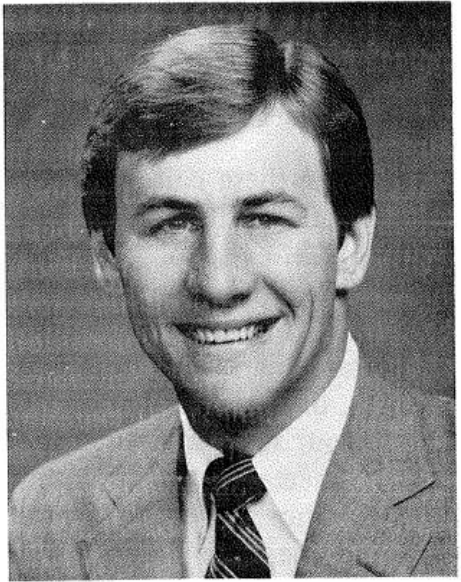
## RICK ATCHLEY

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# **WHAT THE CHURCH NEEDS TO HEAR ABOUT PERSONAL SPIRITUAL GROWTH**

**Rick Atchley**

I am most honored to have been invited by my alma mater to participate in this lectureship program. However, I must also confess that this opportunity afforded me is a bit intimidating as well. Actually, my anxiety with regard to this address stems not so much from the setting as from the subject. To be asked to speak on the subject of personal spiritual growth implies that the speaker has been doing some spiritual growing. Let it be understood that I do not consider myself as one who has arrived spiritually. I am still in the process of becoming. So please receive my thoughts as from one struggling pilgrim to another.

First, let me say the obvious: everybody is for growth! Growth means health, while lack of growth means sickness or even death. That is just as true in the spiritual realm as it is in the physical. The issue I want to address is not "Should we want it to happen?" but "How should we determine if it is happening?" To measure physical growth, physical standards are naturally employed. It is easy to determine whether someone is taller than he was last year, if a church plant has been expanded or if, during a certain period of time, more names have been added to the membership roll. But physical standards are inadequate when judging a phenomenon like personal spiritual growth. How does one determine whether or not he is maturing in the Lord

as he should? This lesson does not propose to be the end of the matter, but it does dare to suggest the only proper beginning.

### **GROWTH PRINCIPLE INVESTIGATED**

Before considering what indicates personal spiritual growth, perhaps it would be helpful to consider what does not. We in the church often create invisible status ladders for climbing and demonstrating our "growth" as compared to other Christians. However, I am of the opinion that they are all illegitimate because they seek to measure the intangible by the tangible. Let's consider a few of these "ladders":

- (1) *Time.* Spiritual growth cannot be answered by a calendar. We all know relatively new Christians who are maturing rapidly in their new life, and we also know brothers and sisters who have been in Christ many years and still need milk. Now that is not how it should be, but that is how it is.
- (2) *Lack of bad activity.* Growing up in the church, I thought that the key to being a Christian was knowing what not to do. While I certainly do not endorse bad activity, it should be noted that the absence of badness could also be a sign of death. What this ladder attempts to do is create a negative system of justification by works.
- (3) *Presence of good activity.* Another ladder found in many congregations consists of rated

functions and roles in the church. The higher the rung, the more spiritual the one who reaches it is deemed. The problem with this perspective is that it reverses the proper order. While mature Christians will engage in good works, good activity does not necessarily confer Christian maturity on anyone. Indeed, when the goal of any ministry is to earn status, it may be zealous, but it is certainly not spiritual.

- (4) *Knowledge*. Of course, knowledge of God's Word is indispensable to genuine personal spiritual growth. But when people speak of "Bible knowledge," they don't always speak of the same thing. For some, it means the ability to memorize and quote scripture. For others, it means having an answer for every question that challenges a tradition. Still others delight in the latest trinket in the theological marketplace. Now, I am certainly not deprecating Bible study, but it should be remembered that one does not even have to be a Christian to have what some call "Bible knowledge."
- (5) *Abilities or gifts*. Some allow themselves to be overly impressed with the gifts God has granted to some of his children. They should recall the situation in Corinth. "You are not lacking in any spiritual gift..." Paul observed (1 Corinthians 1:7). But a little later he writes, "But I, brethren, could not address you as spiritual men..." (1 Corinthians 3:1). The presence of the gifts of the Spirit does not always ensure the presence of the fruit of the Spirit.

- (6) *Financial standing.* Some interpret prosperity as an indication of a life pleasing to God. Still others regard poverty as a ladder of virtue. Again, the attempt to measure the internal by the external fails completely. The fact is, prosperity is often the result of manipulation, deception, and a materialistic mindset. And poverty could be a sign of social oppression, incompetence, or even laziness.
- (7) *Praise of men.* Spiritual men do recognize spiritual growth. However, it needs to be remembered that much of the praise in the Christian community is based on the physical standards and status ladders already mentioned. Perhaps that is why Jesus said, “Woe to you, when all men speak well of you, for so their fathers did to the false prophets” (Luke 6:26).

By now, my point should be made: you cannot legitimately measure spiritual growth using physical criteria. But we have not accomplished much if we only consider what does not represent genuine spiritual growth. We turn now to a consideration of what does. Our quest now becomes more helpful—and more humbling.

Have you ever noticed that the Christian perspective often seems quite paradoxical? For example, I am strongest when I am weak. I am most alive when I die to myself. I am the most liberated when I am in bondage to Jesus Christ. Could it be that we have been looking at this backwards? In other words, could it be that spiritual growth is more of a plummet than a climb?

That gaining comes by releasing? That advancing comes by surrendering? That growing in spiritual maturity means becoming more like a child?

Spiritual progress does not involve straining for some pinnacle whereby moral or doctrinal superiority over others can be claimed. Rather, I am of the opinion that genuine growth takes place through an endless series of releasing our more controllable securities as ultimate. Of course, most of us believe that we have placed our security in Christ. Still, we usually manage to hold on to a few of our "tangibles," and growth is impeded. A man cannot develop spiritually with something in his hands, and that includes church ladders. To grow, you must let go.

### GROWTH PRINCIPLE ILLUSTRATED

*Now a young man came up to Jesus and asked, "Teacher, what good thing must I do to get eternal life?" "Why do you ask me about what is good?" Jesus replied. "There is only One who is good. If you want to enter life, obey the commandments." "Which ones?" the young man inquired. Jesus replied, "Do not murder, do not commit adultery, do not steal, do not give false testimony, honor your father and mother, and love your neighbor as yourself." "All these I have kept," the young man said. "What do I still lack?"*

—Matthew 19:16-20

Three gospel authors were moved enough by this incident to record it in their biographies of Jesus of Nazareth. It seems that one day, one of the “Outstanding Young Men of Palestine” came to visit Jesus. In his own eyes, he was one good man wishing to talk to another good man about the subject of goodness. He wanted to know what he could add to his “growth chart” so that he might secure his salvation. Now, the problem is not with his goal, but with the way he wishes to measure if he has attained it. Indeed, Jesus’ reply indicates that the young man has a very superficial view of the whole picture. Still, the young man persists. “What do I still lack?” is another way of saying “What’s the next rung up the ladder, Jesus?” He was treating religion as a system for piling up credits with God. Jesus knew if this young man was to be helped, he would have to be crushed.

*Jesus answered, “If you want to be perfect, go, sell your possessions and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me.”*

—*Matthew 19:21*

The word “perfect” suggests the idea of maturation or completeness (1 Corinthians 2:6, 14:20; Ephesians 4:13; Philippians 3:15; Colossians 1:28, 4:12; Hebrews 5:14). In other words, Jesus told the rich young ruler that to grow, he must let go. Jesus is really just issuing one command, for the terms define what the following signifies. By definition, following one thing means turning one’s back on everything else.

Why didn't Jesus make this demand of forsaking riches of every disciple? In this particular instance, I believe Jesus was considering not the needs of the poor, but the needs of the man. Riches were his tangible security, and thus his obstacle to growth. However, let me add that Jesus will demand of every prospective follower that he release something. To grow, you must let go.

*When the young man heard this, he went away sad, because he had great wealth.*

—*Matthew 19:22*

Have you ever met anyone who was sorrowful because he was rich? Give him credit for perceiving that one cannot serve two masters. Now, by physical standards, he was an excellent recruit. He was rich, he was moral, he was even religious. Some bystander probably thought that Jesus could use a personal evangelism lesson on "closing the sale." But Jesus knew that there was a great impediment to development in the young man's life. No one can follow unless first he lets go. Could it be that the church today needs to learn to let some leave in sorrow?

*Then Jesus said to his disciples, "I tell you the truth, it is hard for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven. Again I tell you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God."*

—*Matthew 19:23,24*

The problem with riches is that they promote a false sense of security (Revelation 3:17). Of course, the rich can still get baptized, go to church, and be “good.” It’s not religion that gets rejected, but kingdom.

*When the disciples heard this, they were greatly astonished and asked, “Who then can be saved?”*

—*Matthew 19:25*

The disciples were genuinely frightened by the implication. All their lives, they had been taught that wealth was positive proof of the favor of God. Now, here was a man who was moral, religious, full of “Bible knowledge,” and even rich, yet Jesus sent him away. Now, if he wasn’t good enough, who was? Jesus was tearing down all their ladders, and that was scary.

*Jesus looked at them and said, “With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible.”*

—*Matthew 19:26*

Grace! That is the only way a man can be saved. In human terms, it is impossible, because no ladder reaches all the way to heaven. The sooner we accept that, the sooner we will stop placing our security in our ladders. Then the growth can begin.

I think it no coincidence that in all three gospel accounts, this incident follows Jesus’ teaching on the relationship between children and the kingdom.



*Then little children were brought to Jesus for him to place his hands on them and pray for them. But the disciples rebuked those who brought them. Jesus said, "Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these." When he had placed his hands on them, he went on from there.*

—Matthew 19:13,14

Mark even adds that when Jesus saw what his disciples were doing, He was indignant (Mark 10:14). Jesus' anger was stirred not because they were rude, but because they were still failing to understand the nature of the kingdom. The problem with securities is that they tend to erode those childlike qualities indispensable for kingdom relationship. And if you think about it, adults don't grow; children do. What are those qualities?

- (1) *A willingness to receive.* Children cannot earn; they can only receive. On the other hand, adults don't want anything given to them. We must realize that God cannot be obligated. No ladder we can climb can get us out of His debt. We must see ourselves in relation to God as receiver.
- (2) *A willingness to trust.* Children place no confidence in any security besides their parents. They have no "Plan B" in case their father does not come through. But even as we declare our complete confidence in our Father, we cling to a few more tangible securities. We must learn to let go of whatever it is that makes us rich.

Actually, this kind of relinquishment is the perfect preparation for death. At the end of life, the Christian who has surrendered all material and status securities as ultimate has only to turn loose of the body to be unencumbered in joining God. It is the man who has never let go that is afraid to die.

To grow, we must learn to let go. It's not easy, but it's worth it. For when you bring God empty hands, He places His securities in them.

*Peter answered him, "We have left everything to follow you! What then will there be for us?" Jesus said to them, "I tell you the truth, at the renewal of all things, when the Son of Man sits on his throne in heavenly glory, you who have followed me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel. And everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or fields for my sake will receive a hundred times as much and will inherit eternal life. But many who are first will be last, and many who are last will be first."*

—Matthew 19:27-30

## **GROWTH PRINCIPLE IMPLEMENTED**

First, *false securities must be identified*. Jesus could find them just by looking into the heart, but it is hard for us to make ourselves probe that deeply. Perhaps it would be helpful to ask, "What, next to God, is the one

asset or possession or relationship that means the most to me?" More than likely, it will be a very good thing, but then nobody said that securities had to be intrinsically bad. The point is that whatever it is can become for all practical purposes your god and, consequently, the ultimate consideration for all your decisions. The result will be lack of growth.

Second, *false securities must be confessed*. It is hard to do, but you must admit to God that you struggle with loving something else more than Him. That demands overcoming the pride that often comes with adulthood. Confession doesn't seem like a very grown-up thing to do, but maybe that's why it pleases God.

Finally, *false securities must be released*. It's not easy to let go of a ladder. Sometimes we can only turn loose by intention and grant God the permission to enter our hearts and weed out any idolatry he might find there. It hurts for a time, but maybe that's why they're called "growing pains." If you've forgotten about those, just ask the nearest child.

## CONCLUSION

At times, it might have appeared that this lesson was more about becoming a Christian than growing as one. Remember that I mentioned at the start that it was about the beginning of spiritual growth. It should happen at the same time, but some of us were in Christ quite a while before we emptied our hands. To grow, you must let go. Consequently, personal spiritual growth is a lifetime process.

Isn't that the message of Gethsemane? Three times God answered the prayer of Jesus with the call to turn loose of his ministry, his friends, even his life. He did let go, and evil men delighted in his fall, but God raised him up. Men will still scoff; God will still provide.

He is no fool to give up what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose.



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# **WHAT THE CHURCH NEEDS TO HEAR ABOUT CHURCH GROWTH**

**Jim Mankin**

“When a tree stops growing, it dies.” I believe these words of Sydney Clark. Just like the tree, the growing church must have a program of outreach and also maintain its inner strength. We want to be “rooted and builded up in Him [Christ]” (Colossians 2:7). In the church of our Lord, we want to grow in both bulk and strength.

In churches of Christ today, we are not growing as we once did. In fact, I think people are very much concerned about the fact that we have plateaued in many places, and have even declined in others. According to the research that Flavil Yeakley did, the average congregation among our brethren has a membership of 160, baptizes eight people per year, six of which are their children, and then loses half of this number. According to the research that Mac Lynn did in 1980, we have 1,273,000 members of the churches of Christ in America and 13,000 congregations.

All of us are concerned about church growth. The real question is, “What can we do about it?”

## **CHURCH GROWTH IS BIBLICAL**

Church growth is certainly biblical. Christ emphasized this in His life. Christ made a direct statement as

an imperative: "Go ye therefore into all the world and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit; teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world" (Matthew 28:19-20). On another occasion, Jesus said to His apostles, "As my father has sent me into the world, even so send I you into the world" (John 20:21).

The New Testament church emerges as a growing body. One of the most exciting things is to see the growth of the early church, by reading the inspired scripture. The book of Acts shows the church alive!

Inspiration records, "And day by day continuing steadfastly with one accord in the temple, and breaking bread at home, they took their food with gladness and singleness of heart, praising God, and having favor with all the people. *And the Lord added to the church day by day those that were being saved*" (Acts 2:46-47). Later on, it is recorded, "So the churches were strengthened in the faith, *and increased in number daily*" (Acts 16:5).

From reading the New Testament, it seems that the Gospel reached into every possible kind of situation. Village communities, small towns, large cities, mixed urban groups, inter-racial segments of society, social and economic structures were bridged. People became Christians in record numbers.

Yet, this should not be surprising to us who understand the teachings of Christ. In His parables, He had emphasized the nature of the kingdom. He told of the Kingdom of Heaven being like a great net that was cast



into the sea to gather every kind. The impressive thing is that the net was filled when it was drawn upon the beach. The Kingdom of Heaven was also described as being like a grain of mustard seed that grew to such proportions that it became a tree, and the birds lodged in its branches. Further, the Kingdom of Heaven was likened unto leavening yeast which continually increased in the measures of the meal.

Jesus called some fishermen of His day to become "fishers of men" (Mark 1:17). Later, He showed these earthy men that He knew about their desire to leave Him and go fishing again. He told them to cast down their nets to the sea, and their catch was 153 fish. If the Lord could do this, surely He could help them in finding people subject to the Gospel.

He referred to the fields that were white unto harvest, meaning that there would be a great in-gathering. This indicates that there would be a great in-gathering of souls into the Kingdom of God. Christ is the Lord of the harvest. The seed is still the word of God, according to the famous parable of the soil.

The Lord would even have us to go unto the highways and byways to bring people to the great banquet table, which represents salvation in the church. Jesus came to be the light of the world, and we know that light penetrates the darkness. One of the purposes of Jesus' coming was to bring the light to a dark world of sin. Everywhere, there is emphasis on reaching people, changing their lives, and saving them eternally.

Keeping up with the flock is of vast importance for those of us in the church, and this would indicate the importance of numbering. In Jesus' famous parables of

Luke 15, one man had 100 sheep that he had counted, but one was lost and he went to find that. The woman was interested in finding the one coin out of ten that was lost. The father of the two boys was interested in the one who was a prodigal in the strange land. Here, the ratio changes from one out of a hundred and one out of ten to one out of two but, in each case, the important thing was to find what was lost.

I firmly believe that there are open doors of opportunity for us to reach the lost and for the church to grow. Sometimes our opportunities may change, and we may see things in a different light, but we should never be guilty of "people blindness," not realizing there are those near us that can be reached for Christ. Paul was even willing to turn from the Jews to the Gentiles, because this field was more productive. But he never stopped preaching. I believe it is only an excuse for non-growth for a person to say, "Our congregation stresses quality instead of quantity. We have to sacrifice the one in order to have the other."

## **SEVEN VITAL SIGNS OF A HEALTHY CHURCH**

As we turn from these examples from the New Testament to today's situation, we must inquire what makes a church grow in our day and age. Much research has been done on this particular theme by others, and we must learn from these experiences. We are interested in making the Gospel relevant to our time and to see the church of our Lord grow and prosper.

C. Peter Wagner, in his book *Your Church Can Grow*, gives seven vital signs of a healthy church. These are worth noting:

- (1) The minister;
- (2) The people of the church;
- (3) Church size;
- (4) Structure and function;
- (5) Homogeneous unit;
- (6) Methods; and
- (7) Priorities.

Now, let's go back and look at these more closely to determine what he means. Vital sign number one of a healthy, growing church is a minister who is a possibility thinker, and whose dynamic leadership has been used as a catalyst for the entire church to *spring into growth*.<sup>1</sup>

Let's face it, preachers of the Gospel. If the church is to grow where we are, we have to set the tone. We have to be willing to motivate the Christians where we are to believe that the church can grow. We have sat idly by and placed the blame on others for too long, and largely we have been at fault. Though we realize the biblical organization of the church with elders and deacons, the preacher is in the public eye more than anyone else and has a primary responsibility for teaching and preaching.

In this connection, a preacher needs to be positive, challenging, biblical, and dynamic if the church is to grow. Nothing can grow or exist on a negative spirit. Yet, to be fair, our preaching must be balanced. Not only should we be willing to reach people with the

Gospel of Christ in a positive and enthusiastic way and have lessons that would help in Christian living, but we must also teach lessons to motivate the members of the church to do more in reaching others. We still do best at reaching people on a one-to-one basis.

To explain what I mean by the minister who is a church-growth minister, I would say he:

- (1) Is obedient to the Great Commission.
- (2) Is willing to pay the price to see more disciples made.
- (3) Is willing to measure results.
- (4) Is goal-focused.
- (5) Is aware of the people dimension in evangelism.
- (6) Views the potential of a given congregation realistically.
- (7) Implements strategies to win more disciples through the growth of the church.
- (8) Searches for a leadership style that matches a person's individual gifts, talents, and temperament.
- (9) Is aware of the motivational power of using these particular talents.
- (10) Accepts who he is and is determined to make the most of himself in his situation.

The second vital sign of a growing church is a *well-mobilized membership*.<sup>2</sup>

It is time for us to learn that the members of the church have a definite part in helping to carry out the Great Commission. The Bible teaches that we need to use the people based on their abilities (see Romans 12:6-8). With different gifts and abilities, we need to connect people with jobs they can do. Not everyone can lead singing, teach a class, or do personal work in the generally-accepted sense, but every member has been given some talent that he can use. One of our problems has been not finding people to meet the varied jobs that we have, so that a few do the work of all. Paul said, "But now hath God set the members of each one of them in the body, even as it pleased Him, and if they were all one member, where were the body?" (1 Corinthians 12:18-19).

This is where our elders need to be very wise. They should plan a dream, organize a great program of work, and then delegate responsibility to the members to help carry it out. Many people ought to be involved in many capacities. There becomes more a feeling of "our" congregation and what "we" are doing for the cause of Christ. When elders merely do the work the deacons should do, deacons have nothing left to do. In the average congregation, there should be more work than the elders, deacons and preacher can possibly do, and the members need to have the feeling that they are helping to advance the Kingdom of God.

It should be the aim of every congregation to have 100% involvement in the church of the Lord. This may not be completely realistic, considering the number of members who would be shut-in, away at college, or have commitments that cause them to be out of town most of

the time. Yet, it should be that 75-80% of the people should have specific tasks to perform, and all of these should relate either directly or indirectly to the growth and development of the church.

The third vital sign or characteristic of growing churches in America is that they are *big enough*.<sup>3</sup> There is no particular magic number for the size which a congregation should be. At Centerville, Tennessee, a town of 3,000 people, the church of our Lord has almost 1,000 members, and Paul Rogers has effectively served this congregation for over 25 years.

The tragedy is that some members actually do not want the local church to grow. This is evident by such statements as "We are as big as we want to be" and "If we grew, we couldn't know everybody." This can sometimes be interpreted that we could not run everything. Again, some people will say, "We have to be careful whom we let into the church; we don't want the wrong kind of people here." It almost sounds as if they do not want sinners to be saved.

When we talk about the church being big enough, we are really saying that the size of the church should depend upon what is trying to be accomplished. It is very hard for a church that is extremely small to offer any services in benevolence, support many missionaries, or even be big enough to offer many classes. Some churches seem to want to stay at 250 or smaller in membership.

Churches grow by biological growth (that is, when we baptize our own children), by transfer growth (when a member comes to us from another congregation), and by conversion or evangelism. The problem is that many

of us are not reaching out to bring in other people. Yet, when the needs of people are being met in a congregation, the congregation often experiences a great growth. This is certainly true of the Highland Oaks Church in Dallas, which has focused upon its ministry to singles.

The fourth vital sign of a healthy, growing church can best be expressed by this simple formula: *celebration plus congregation plus cell equals church.*<sup>4</sup> What this means is that there ought to be a time when the entire church comes together and can worship. When people come to worship, there ought to be a celebration of praise. Sometimes our services have more of a funeral atmosphere than one of celebrating the risen, resurrected Lord. We need to understand that the whole church comes together to worship and praise God. Members need to be built up, lifted up, inspired, and challenged. We need to give them an hour of uplift so they can go back into the world and live more closely to the Lord. This is what is meant by the term "celebration."

The idea of the congregation is that in every local church there will be some smaller groups. A congregation of people can meet together for a class, when the group is broken down into a smaller group. One hundred to two hundred people—even up to five hundred—could be in an adult Bible class. There have to be different classes and emphases in a church.

In contrast to that smaller group that we list as congregation, there is the third group which has been identified as the "cell." This means a small group with a very special relationship. This refers to a friendship

circle that bands together for a certain activity or program. It may be a group of ladies who go to the nursing home week by week and feel very close to one another. It may be a group of men who take the Lord's Supper to the hospitals or shut-ins. The participants feel close to their groups because they work with one another. There may be a variety of other circles of concern. But this is just a way of saying that as the church grows bigger, it must still have a small group emphasis so people can get to know one another.

The fifth vital sign of a healthy, growing church is that its *membership is composed of basically one kind of people.*<sup>5</sup> This is the homogeneous unit principle. Research has found that even in church "birds of a feather flock together."

Although it is possible for people of different economic levels and different racial backgrounds to be together and work together, it is often found that people gravitate to those that are like them. It is wrong to be prejudiced or hold something against another person. But somehow, in the church, things go better when people can work together among people that they feel comfortable with and to whom they can relate. Congregations, like people, have personalities of their own.

The sixth vital sign of a healthy, growing church is that of *using an evangelistic method that works.*<sup>6</sup> There is no one method that works all the time. We need to analyze the situation in which we find ourselves, and then do everything that is within our power to reach people with the Gospel of Christ.



I am impressed with this definition of “evangelism” from George G. Hunter:

*So, evangelism is the church intentionally offering what it supremely has to offer—the opportunity to follow Jesus Christ within the life, fellowship ministries of a congregation. Whatever else one may legitimately believe evangelism to include, this is its indispensable focus. I believe that disciple-making is at the very heart of . . . evangelism and will be the dominant understanding in the 1980’s.*<sup>7</sup>

In order for us to accomplish what we need to do in the church, we need to think basically of three areas in reaching and keeping people. These are as follows:

- (1) *Kerygma*—the message preached;
- (2) *Koinoia*—fellowship; and
- (3) *Diakonia*—service.

A great many people view Christianity as some kind of other worldly soul-saving enterprise whose preoccupations in this world are limited to ecclesiastical affairs, doctrinal squabbles, potluck suppers, and praising those who are already in the church. The man in the street may believe that Christianity is okay for the little old ladies who like churchy things, but Christianity is irrelevant to his life and to the real issues and struggles that he faces daily. The church is not perceived in the way it should be, unfortunately. Our message must be relevant, clear, and biblical.

In his excellent book *Why Conservative Churches Are Growing*, Dean Kelly offers two reasons why certain churches are growing. First, conservative churches are growing because they presume to interpret “the meaning of life in ultimate terms.” Second, those churches grow which make demands upon people, when their advocates seem to be making great sacrifices for the cause that they advocate.<sup>8</sup> This could very well apply to us in churches of Christ.

The seventh and last vital sign of a healthy, growing church in America is that *they have their priorities right*.<sup>9</sup> This simply means that we understand the biblical priorities. Priority number one is “...seek ye first the Kingdom of God, and His righteousness and all these things will be added unto you” (Matthew 6:33). Nothing can be substituted for our relating to God and His Son, Jesus Christ, as our Lord as the first and great priority in our lives.

The second priority is that we are committed to each other in Christ; we are called to be the body of Christ. This means that we are connected and made to be dependent on one another in His body. This means we must love and care for one another.

Priority number three is the work of Christ in the world. Not only do we relate to one another, but we have a command to go forth and relate to people who are not yet Christians.

### **WHAT IT TAKES FOR US TO GROW**

These vital signs should have convinced us that it is possible for us to have a healthy church. We can grow as

the body of Christ. Jesus has given us this challenge. We are the Lord's people and can grow as He wants us to grow.

For all of us to be church-growth leaders, it is going to take some work and effort on our part. First, we must have a single-minded obedience to what our Lord has told us to do.

Secondly, we must have clearly-defined objectives. It would be good for us to know how much we want the church to grow and how it is possible for us to reach the people of our community. We may have to make a survey or have a self-study to see what we are really talking about.

Third, we need to rely on discerning results. It would be good if every congregation would learn what its composite membership is and has been over a ten-year period. This would mean taking the actual membership, the Sunday morning worship attendance and the Sunday School attendance, and averaging these three figures. If this is done for a ten-year period, the growth or decline of the church will be seen. Further analysis will show if people are coming in the front door and going out the back door. Or, the decline in membership may merely be due to deaths or transfers.

Fourth, we need to be ruthless in evaluating the results, and decide if there is something that can be done to change the tide. Most of us have not done anything in the last few years to make it possible for us to grow.

And fifth, there must be an attitude of optimism and faith. I believe it is possible for us, with great faith and enthusiasm, to move the church forward. We need to look for receptive people. Pray that God will help you in

this way. The people who visit your congregation are receptive. People who have recently lost faith in anything are very receptive. America is in a changing mood, and many people are looking for something that will be permanent. People who are like those members that you already have will tend to be more receptive. Those who have conscious needs, such as a great loss, a change in their status, or special problems or needs, are also receptive people. We just need to be on the lookout for people like this.

I have worked with Ira North, who is one of the greatest builders of a local church. He has left Madison a rich heritage, and we are trying to build on his foundation. I like the way he closed his book, *Balance*:

*God does not require that we be big, or wealthy, or powerful, or super-smart. What our Heavenly Father requires is faithfulness. The important thing that is absolutely essential is for us to be faithful. The apostle Paul teaches us that faithfulness is ours to plant and water and cultivate, but it is God's to give the increase. Let us not be too interested in numbers or bigness, but let us be vitally interested in faithfulness.*

*... We must never lose sight of the value and preciousness of the individual. It has been my experience that congregations that have begun to reach anywhere near the peak of their potential, have been congregations where the emphasis is on the individual.*

*It is good to be goal-oriented and it is good to strive to do better every day in every program. I am often asked how many do you want in Bible School? The answer is simply "one more."*

*Jesus said to leave the 90 and 9 and go after the one. When we are willing to knock every door in the community, swim the mighty river and climb the mountain in order to reach one more little boy or girl for Christ, then we have the spirit that is going to lead us into acceptable growth. Part of the balance for which we plead in this book and part of the balance of the model church in Jerusalem was the interest in the individual, the value of the soul, the worth of each soul, and the importance of each one being faithful.<sup>10</sup>*

The time has come when we must get serious about church growth. We can do it with the help of the Lord.

<sup>1</sup> C. Peter Wagner, *Your Church Can Grow: Seven Vital Signs of a Healthy Church* (Glendale: Regal Books, 1976), p. 57.

<sup>2</sup> Wagner, p. 69.

<sup>3</sup> Wagner, p. 84.

<sup>4</sup> Wagner, p. 97.

<sup>5</sup> Wagner, p. 110.

<sup>6</sup> Wagner, p. 135.

<sup>7</sup> George Hunter, *The Contagious Congregation* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1979), p. 25.

<sup>8</sup> Dean Kelly, *Why Conservative Churches Are Growing* (New York: Harper & Row, 1972).

<sup>9</sup> Wagner, p. 147.

<sup>10</sup> Ira L. North, *Balance—A Tried and Tested Formula for Church Growth* (Nashville: Gospel Advocate, 1983), pp. 153-154.

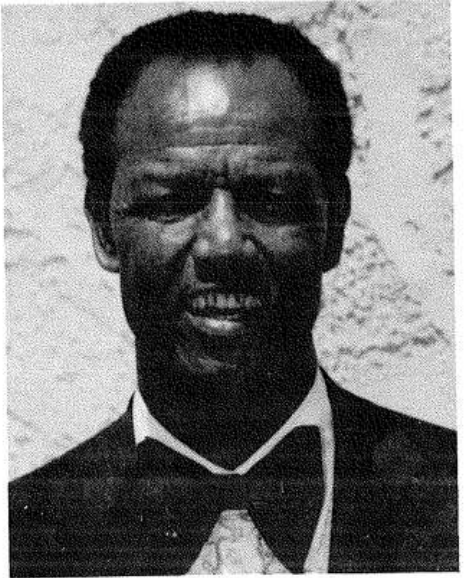


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## WHAT THE CHURCH NEEDS TO HEAR ABOUT UNITY

Carroll Pitts, Jr.

The theme for this great 67th Annual Bible Lectureship here at Abilene Christian University is "What the Church Needs to Hear." Several major topics are being presented so that church leaders and members can learn from them and be inspired to practice the principles at their local congregations. So the main purposes of this lectureship are to have Christian fellowship, preach God's Word and, especially, to help churches of Christ to grow more in the late 1980's. I keep hearing and reading statements that if the Lord's church does not really increase in growth, we will be in serious trouble within the next decade. God wants us to grow and increase by saving souls and by keeping souls saved. Now, both of these challenges are a real problem in today's materialistic and evil society. The topic for my lecture is "What the Church Needs to Hear About Unity." I will base this lesson on teachings from the inspired Word of God.

According to "Bro. Webster" (*Webster's Dictionary*), this word *unity* means such things as: (1) the state of being one; (2) being united; (3) oneness and harmony; (4) agreement, concord, unification; and (5) a group or body united together. Now, this word *unity* is a key word for relationships between husbands and wives; parents and children; employers and employees; a coach and team members; and teachers and students. I want to emphasize strongly the concepts of

unity, love, and cooperation because, unfortunately, in our present society, many people have been brainwashed into a philosophy that says, "I will do *my own thing*, in *my own way*." Those who live by this concept have little or no respect for what God says through the Bible, or what our local and national regulations are. That is why today more couples are "shacking up," more "gays" or homosexuals are "coming out of the closet," and why, even in the religious field, many believe that they can be saved by practicing their own religion, no matter what the Bible teaches.

I was shocked to hear on a television news report that prostitutes from all over the world were having a convention in San Francisco, California, one week before the Democratic National Convention in July of 1984. I saw one of those "hookers" being interviewed on television. She said that they wanted America and other countries to change their laws against prostitution and stop arresting them. She also said, "It is my decision to use my body any way I want to. If I want to have sex with men and earn \$25,000 a year, that is my decision, and no one has the right to tell me I can't do it." If I had been interviewing that woman, I might have asked her these questions. "If the Bible says, 'Thou shalt not commit fornication,' and it does; and if it says, 'Thou shalt not steal,' and it does—suppose a thief decided to *do his own thing* by stealing your \$15,000 car while you were having sex with a man at a hotel. Would you want him arrested, your car returned and that man put in jail, or would you just let him remain in society and keep on stealing cars?" I would also ask her if her income tax consultant lied by saying on her income tax forms that

her income was \$50,000 instead of \$25,000 so that he could get more fees and she would have to pay more taxes if she would accept that. I hope that she would understand that fornication, lying, stealing, and murder all violate God's law, and that none of these sins are good for our society—that those who continue in them will lose their souls.

God's Word teaches us that we must have unity in our homes, in the Lord's church, in our religious world, and even in our society. Even if the Bible did not teach unity, in my mind, just plain human wisdom and judgment would see the need for unity and cooperation to keep our society alive. So every individual, congregation, or some denomination cannot "do its own thing" if it violates the Bible or human wisdom. When I was a teenager in Tulsa, Oklahoma, "a few years" ago, I still remember seeing signs that said, "Attend the church of *your choice*." Friends, that statement is not in my Bible, nor yours either.

## UNITY IN THE CHURCH

I want to narrow my lecture down to what Christians need to hear about "unity" in the churches of Christ and in the religious world. As most of you know, the church of Christ got started in Jerusalem in A.D. 33. This was the first Pentecost after His resurrection. Peter had preached the first gospel sermon; and when we read Acts 2:37-47, we see in verse 41 that 3,000 people were baptized into Christ that same day. Then, in verses 42 to 46, we see how these new converts continued steadfastly in the apostles' teaching; they had

daily fellowship, they prayed together, they ate from house to house. Also, some sold their property and gave their money to help the needy; they went to the temple to worship God, had unity and togetherness; they had gladness and singleness of heart. Finally, they praised God daily and made a very good impression upon many non-Christians in that city. As a result of these unified Christian activities, verse 47 says that folks were added to the church *every day*. According to Acts 4:4, the membership had grown to 5,000 men. That church continued to grow; in Acts 5:14, the number of members was called *multitudes*.

The point is this—as a result of that first century Christian unity, cooperation, love, prayer, faith in God, evangelism, missionary spirits, and the use of those nine spiritual gifts, the disciples were able to preach the gospel to every *creature* on this earth at that time. Paul wrote in Colossians 1:23:

*If ye continue in the faith grounded and settled, and be not moved away from the hope of the gospel, which ye have heard, and which was preached to every creature which is under heaven; whereof I Paul am made a minister.*

So, if we 20th Century Christians can practice the same kind of unity, love, and cooperation as they did in the first century, we too can save thousands of souls each month, and keep them saved as we grow.

## CHURCH PROBLEMS

Even though the Lord's church in the first century grew tremendously, it certainly had problems from time to time, especially the congregation at Corinth. Corinth was an old and wicked city. It was destroyed by the Romans in 146 B.C., and it was not rebuilt until 46 B.C. Paul established the church of Christ in Corinth and then, about three years later, he wrote them 1 Corinthians while in Ephesus on his third missionary trip. They had written him a letter and asked several questions. Some of the problems they had included:

- (1) Divisions in the congregation;
- (2) Marriage problems;
- (3) Taking brothers to heathen courts;
- (4) Meat offered to idols;
- (5) Head covering for women;
- (6) Proper observance of the Lord's supper; and
- (7) Conflict over spiritual gifts.

When Paul wrote his first letter to them, the lack of "unity" was the first issue that he dealt with. In chapter one and verse 10, Paul said, "Now I plead with you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you all *speak the same thing*, and that there be *no divisions among you*; but that you be perfectly *joined together* in the same mind and in the same judgment." Paul said to them later in 2 Corinthians 13:11, "Become complete. Be of good comfort, be of one mind; and the God of love and peace will be with you." Now, let's

examine a few areas in local congregations and throughout our brotherhood where God wants us today to be united and work together in love.

## LEADERSHIP UNITY

It is very important for the preacher and elders to work in unity, along with deacons and Bible class teachers. All of these leaders are mentioned in Ephesians 4:11 and in Philippians 1:1. We especially need more unity, love, and teamwork among elders and preachers. There should be less argument and disagreement over who is over whom. According to Matthew 28:18, all power is given to Christ. Then, Ephesians 5:23 tells us that Christ is the head of the church. In his book *Bigger Men for Better Churches*, Cleon Lyles wrote:

*There is nothing in the Bible that indicates that any one group of people in the church should be dominated by any other group. Jesus taught that true Christianity was not a seeking for power or greatness, but becoming a servant. Hence, in their relationship, preachers and elders should be neither preacher-dominated nor elder-dominated. However, as is true in all relationships where there is close human contact, there will be differences in opinions at times.*<sup>1</sup>

While God has given both elders and ministers special responsibilities in the church, they should definitely

work together in unity. While attending a National Lectureship many years ago in Los Angeles, California, I heard an elder say that the main job of the preacher is to go out into the community and catch chickens and throw them over the fence; then, he said, it is the elders' job to keep them fenced. According to Titus 1:5, it is the minister's job to train and ordain elders in every congregation. Of course, he needs help, suggestions, and cooperation from present leaders and members. In their process of working together, there are times when a minister may have to correct or discipline elders (1 Timothy 5:19,20), and there may be situations when the elders must correct their minister, especially if he is teaching false doctrines or living an immoral life. Lyles also wrote:

*There is but one exception to the wisdom—as well as common sense thinking—for the minister of a church being included as a permanent member of all the business meetings of the elders. This exception is when such a meeting is for the express purpose of discussing the preacher personally...A preacher must be fully informed regarding all phases of the operational affairs and future plans of the church he serves if he is to do his best work.*<sup>2</sup>

The minister is a full-time servant of the Lord, and though his work is under the supervision of the elders in a local church, he is not subservient to them. The preacher is under no more obligation to his elders than they are obligated to him as colleagues in the busi-

ness of saving souls as they work together. So when an eldership and preacher are as one, they can keep “the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.”

## SOLVING PROBLEMS

In the New Testament, there are several examples of leaders and members working together in unity to select and appoint leaders and solve local and brotherhood problems. In Acts chapter 6, we have an example of how leaders, or deacons, were selected to be in charge of solving a race-related problem of caring for widows in the congregation in Jerusalem. In this situation, some members had a legitimate complaint. The apostles then indicated the solution, the qualifications of those needed to solve the problem were set forth, and members chose the men to serve. This “united” process “pleased the whole multitude” (verse 5). In Acts 15, we learn that the church of Christ in Antioch had division and confusion over the issue of requiring Gentile Christians to be circumcised as the Jews had been doing for hundreds of years. Since they could not settle the issue by themselves, they decided to get help from the apostles and elders in Jerusalem. They sent Paul, Barnabas, and others there for advice. Verse 4 says, “And when they had come to Jerusalem, they were received by the church, the apostles, and elders.” Later, the apostles and elders came together to consider this matter. I believe that James was the chairman. There was much dispute and discussion. James also quoted scriptures. They finally settled it and decided to write a letter to the brethren in Antioch. They also decided to send some of



their brothers to help in a personal way. Then, we read in verse 22, "It pleased the apostles, elders, with the whole church." Thus, we see that problems can be solved when the minister, elders, and members work together in unity and love, seeking God's help through prayer.

While the church in Jerusalem was strong spiritually, on one occasion it needed some help financially to feed poor saints. Paul was able to get several congregations all over the brotherhood to send them money. Therefore, when congregations work together in unity to help one another spiritually and/or financially, three blessings will occur:

- (1) Those in need will be blessed and happy;
- (2) God will bless those that help others spiritually and financially; and
- (3) Some people will be led to Christ when they see religion being practiced in love and unity.

The old expression "Actions speak louder than words" is still true in the 1980's. I sincerely believe that if we Christians today were to follow these biblical principles of "love," "unity" and "cooperation," as they did back then, we could do a better job of solving spiritual and financial problems all over our brotherhood. Yes, I sincerely agree with Ira North, who wrote, "The number one problem in the local congregation today is keeping the unity of the spirit in the bond of peace."<sup>3</sup>

## UNITY IN RACE RELATIONS

Another important area for unity among New Testament Christians in the 20th Century is race relations, both in America and around the world. Jesus said to his disciples in Matthew 28:19, "Go ye therefore and teach *all nations*." Then, Mark's record of this same great commission is a little different. He said, "Go ye into all the world, and preach the gospel to *every creature*. He that believes and is baptized shall be saved" (Mark 16:15,16). After the church was established, the apostles and early Jewish Christians preached the gospel to Jews only. For about seven years, they did not teach or try to convert Gentiles. The word "Gentile" means a non-Israelite person (Judges 4:2; Isaiah 11:10, 42:1). In Acts chapter 10, we read that Cornelius, his family, and friends were the first Gentiles to become members of the Lord's church. This happened because God used a miracle to convince Peter that he should preach the gospel to Gentiles. In Cornelius' house, Peter began his lesson by saying, "You know how that it is an unlawful thing for a man that is a Jew to keep company with or go to one of another nation. But God has shown me that I should not call any man common or unclean" (Acts 10:28). Then Peter said in verse 34, "In truth I perceive that God shows no partiality." Therefore, when Christ died on the cross, he broke down that middle wall of partition between Jews and Gentiles and made all of us one, according to Ephesians 2:14.

Consequently, Christians need to have more unity, love, and cooperation among all races and nationalities in the church. This includes blacks, whites, Spanish, In-

dians, Orientals, Jews, etc. We are to be concerned about the soul of every man, woman, boy, and girl that walks upon this earth, regardless of racial background. Paul tells us in Galatians 3:27,28, "For as many of you as have been baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek; there is neither male nor female; there is neither slave nor free; for you are all one in Christ Jesus." In commenting on these verses, Bro. Richard Pectol said:

*There's more than just race involved in this thing. A lot of times we get bogged down because our nation is involved in racial difficulty. A lot of times we get bogged down just in the race; but you know, you can integrate and have problems among people that don't have anything to do with the color of your skin. A lot of times our problems involve rich and poor, young and old, and educated and uneducated. Paul is saying here that when a man comes to Christ, he comes by faith in Christ, and that then he is baptized into Christ Jesus. When he is baptized into Jesus then all differences that separate men and the world disappear. <sup>4</sup>*

I am sure that all of us know that racial prejudice is sinful. If a white Christian hates a black Christian because he is black, or a black Christian hates a white Christian because he is white, both are guilty of sin and need to repent. There are some serious cultural and historical differences between blacks and whites in

America, and there is nothing wrong with that. But in my opinion, God wants more unity, love, and cooperation among the predominantly black and predominantly white churches of Christ. By having more unity and fellowship, we can help get rid of racial prejudice on both sides. Also, we can prove to the world that we are "one body in Christ," and thus save more souls. Now, it is not a sin for one to desire to worship in a totally white or black congregation, or one that is predominantly white or black. However, because of our cultural backgrounds, there are certain areas of the Lord's work where both racial groups can help each other. All we need is more unity, love, and fellowship. Our ultimate goal on this earth is to be like Christ and lead souls to Him from all races. Bro. James S. Woodruff wrote some articles on the subject "How to Differ Without Dividing." They appeared in four issues of the *Firm Foundation*. His concluding article was in the July 20, 1982, issue. He wrote:

*Love is the glue that holds us together (whether Jew or Greek, bond or free, male or female, black or white)...Love keeps us together while our rough edges are being smoothed and our extremes and idiosyncrasies are being mellowed. Love is the bridge to unity that spans diversity and prizes oneness above sameness, and regards unity above union.*

Then finally he said:

*Love is not just the best way to achieve unity—it is the only way.*

If we believe that, and accept it, then let's practice it!

## UNITY IN RELIGION

Basically, America is divided into these five religions: Catholics, Protestants, Jews, New Testament Christians, and a few cults. Friends, God is very unhappy with that situation. I make this statement based upon the religious unity Jesus prayed for in John chapter 17. In verses 9 and 11, Jesus first prayed for the unity of the twelve apostles, since He was ready to leave this earth and leave the mission of saving souls in their hands. He said, "I pray for them. I do not pray for the world but for those whom you have given me...Holy Father, keep through Your name those whom you have given Me, that *they may be one* as We are." Thank God, that part of His prayer was answered. As long as the apostles were alive, they were united, preaching the same doctrines and all belonging to the church of Christ, the one and only church in the first century. They also taught against false doctrines, and never established any denomination.

Then, in verses 20 and 21, Jesus prayed for the oneness of all people in this world who believe in Him and the Bible. He prayed, "I do not pray for these [apostles] alone, but also for those who will believe in Me through their word; *that they all may be one*, as You, Father, are in Me, and I in you; that they also may be one in Us." Unfortunately, that part of His prayer has not been answered. We have about 300 different denominations. They all believe in Christ, but they are divided. Therefore, each Sunday or each Saturday, when Christ

looks down from heaven and sees millions of people "going to the church of their choice," He is very unhappy. You see, Christ wants His prayers answered, just as we do. Some may ask the question, "Is it *really possible* for all of us who believe in Christ to be united in just one church?" Yes, unless Jesus made a mistake when He prayed for unity. Now, Christ was tempted, but he never sinned (Hebrews 4:15). That kind of religious unity may never happen, but it is possible! All we have to do is turn to Jesus and use only the inspired Bible for all religious teachings. Some preachers try to defend denominationalism by quoting scriptures that they misunderstand, or use them to justify their position. To prove this point, R. N. Hogan wrote:

*Another scripture that they often refer to in order to justify denominations and their claim to be scriptural is John 10:16. Here again, they misapply the teaching of the Lord. Jesus said, "Other sheep I have, which are not of this fold: them also I must bring, and they shall hear my voice; and there shall be one fold, and one shepherd." Many claim that the other sheep has reference to other denominations. I cannot understand how one can read this verse and come to such a conclusion...he said, "Other sheep I have." This certainly could not refer to denominations, for the first denomination was not in existence until over five hundred years after Christ made that statement... It is clearly seen that the other sheep that Christ referred to in John 10:16 were the Gentiles who were aliens from the Jewish fold.*<sup>5</sup>

To help answer Christ's prayer on unity, there are several biblical truths and historical facts that New Testament Christians should present to our denominational friends. I believe that most people who join any man-made church really want to be saved. I also believe that they would obey all Bible teachings regarding baptisms, worship, and the one Bible church if they were taught them by their preacher, relatives, or friends. All religious people need to be taught how the church got started, how it drifted away, how the Reformation Movement started many denominations, and how the New Testament church has now been restored. Once these facts are known, people should be encouraged in love *to do God's will*. Perhaps the best way for our religious friends to learn these truths is to be taught them by those of us who believe in the Bible, the one New Testament church, and the Restoration Movement. This can be done in love on radio and television, through films, gospel meetings, tracts, and through personal evangelism. Thank God that we are using these methods, but we can improve with more unity among us.

Here are some simple Bible truths and historical facts that the world should know. Jesus promised to build His church (Matthew 16:18); that promise was fulfilled on the first Day of Pentecost after His resurrection (Acts 2:1-47); Christ purchased that church with His blood (Acts 20:28); He is the head and Saviour of the church (Ephesians 5:27); there is only one body (the church), one Lord, one faith, one baptism, and one God (Ephesians 4:4,5). The world should be taught that as long as the apostles were alive, all belonged to the one

Bible church, they taught the same doctrines, and they never established any denominational churches. John, the last apostle to be alive, wrote Revelation about A.D. 97. The Holy Spirit commanded us through him not to add or take away from the Bible (Revelation 22:18,19; see also Deuteronomy 4:2, 12:32 and Proverbs 30:5,6).

About 235 years after John died, a group gradually pulled off from the church and its doctrines and began to call themselves the Holy Roman Catholic Church. In this connection, L. G. Tomlinson wrote:

*The Catholic Church had an embryonic beginning. The early church departed from the simplicity of a congregational form of government, guided by the New Testament as the only Rule of Faith and Practice, and permitted more and more authority to be vested in the bishops of the various churches. By the middle of the second century, the church was well united under the authority of the bishops who gradually came to be regarded as successors to the apostles. In opposition to the heresies creeping in, the church came to be the "catholic" or "universal" church... The Catholic Church suffered a severe split in 1054, when it divided into the Greek and Roman Catholic Churches.*<sup>6</sup>

Then in 1519, Martin Luther, a Catholic priest in Germany found some unscriptural teachings and practices in the Catholic church. He wrote his Ninety-Five



Theses, debated these issues, and was eventually excommunicated from the Catholic church. He started the Lutheran Church and the Protestant Reformation Movement. Since that time, hundreds of churches have been started by men and women all over the world, and for different reasons. In the first decade of the Nineteenth Century, many honest people from all denominations began to ask such questions as: Why are we so divided? What is the Bible name of the church? Why do we sprinkle, pour, and immerse for baptism? Why do some of us commune weekly, others monthly, others semiannually or annually? Why do we have creeds, manuals, prayer books, and catechisms for our religious doctrines?

Each denomination defended its own doctrines, basing its arguments upon tradition and its interpretation of the Bible. Then, such men as Thomas and Alexander Campbell and Barton W. Stone helped get the Restoration Movement started. Their aim was not to start another denomination, but to go back to the New Testament only and restore the one New Testament church. This movement's appeal is to "speak where the Bible speaks, and be silent where it is silent." Its mottoes are:

- (1) No book but the Bible;
- (2) No creed but Christ;
- (3) No name but the Divine;
- (4) No plea but the Gospel;
- (5) No basis for unity but the scriptural;
- (6) In essentials, unity;

(7) In opinions, liberty; and

(8) In all things, love.

I sincerely challenge us to have more prayer, love, unity, and cooperation in our brotherhood. Then we can do a better job of teaching and practicing the kind of unity God wants us to have. Yes, let us always endeavor to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.

<sup>1</sup> Cleon Lyles, *Bigger Men for Better Churches* (Little Rock: Cleon Lyles, 1962), p. 54.

<sup>2</sup> Lyles, p. 50.

<sup>3</sup> Ira North, *Balance* (Nashville: Gospel Advocate Company, 1983), p. 58.

<sup>4</sup> Richard Pectol, *Sermons for the Seventies* (Wichita Falls, Texas: Western Christian Foundation, 1975), p. 44.

<sup>5</sup> R. N. Hogan, *The Bible and the Doctrines of Men* (Los Angeles: The Christian Echo, 1983), pp. 19, 20.

<sup>6</sup> L. G. Tomlinson, *Churches of Today in the Light of Scripture* (Nashville: Gospel Advocate Company, 1927), p. 17.



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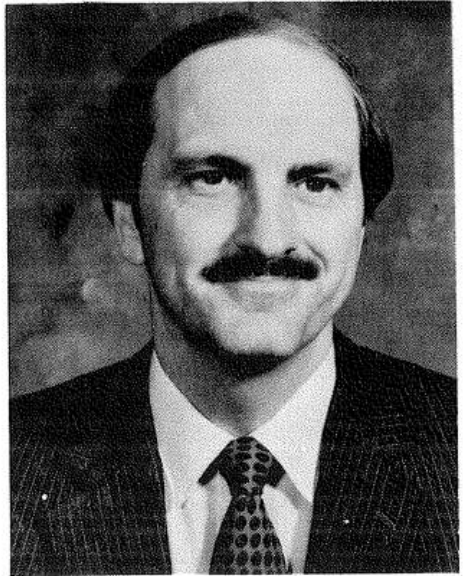
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Served on the faculty of U.C.L.A. from 1963-71, and taught at the University of Washington, Seattle in 1971. Has appeared on numerous radio and television news and talk shows throughout the country, including the popular "Religion on the Line" broadcast in Los Angeles. Currently he is seen twice daily on Springfield's Channel 10 News as a member of their news team. He is also heard five times daily on KTTS AM & FM. He has authored several publications, including the books *Who Rules Your Life* and *Sermons for Today*.

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## WHAT THE CHURCH NEEDS TO HEAR ABOUT RIGHTEOUS LIVING

Prentice A. Meador, Jr.

*Abraham believed God, and it was credited  
to him as righteousness.*

—*Genesis 15:6*

Early morning in the desert is a strange but beautiful sight. As the veil of night is lifted, morning ushers in a quiet and unforgettable scene before the sun rises. The dark greys of the desert give way to the light greys, which in turn give way to the bright pastels. The morning unfolds like a tapestry. The wind is calm except that, occasionally in the distance, it spends and churns the sand. Looking to the horizon, one sees scanty vegetation except for the tamarisk and acacia groves of trees. Occasional grassy pasture lands with wells and springs feed the flocks. There is a barren, desolate grandeur about the desert.

It was on just such a morning that Abraham stood at the doorway of his tent. Now, he had not slept through the night, and peered out at the early morning through old and sleepy eyes. During the night, he had turned and twisted in his sleep as he struggled within himself and wondered when the morning would come. His loving wife, Sarah, had watched him as he pondered the heavy burden that now fell upon his shoulders. She had gone with him from Ur of the Chaldees, had been taken by Pharaoh into his harem, had posed as Abraham's sister, and had continually tried to give Abraham a son. At the age of 90, Sarah was blessed by God and had given birth to Isaac. But never in her long life of danger and adven-

ture had she faced a morning like this one! She sat still and raised no questions. After many years of marriage to Abraham, she had learned that there were times when he listened to another voice. As Abraham watched two of his servants load the wood, Sarah tried unsuccessfully to hold back the tears. When all of the provisions were made for the journey, Abraham sent Isaac to tell his mother goodbye. The child of Great Promise rushed into his mother's arms. For him, there was great excitement and anticipation of a journey with his father; but for Sarah, there was a tragic and empty feeling down within her. Finally, Abraham turned and looked at Sarah. How often they had looked into each other's eyes! Like any close married couple, they had learned to communicate without speaking. This time, it was heart to heart. Without saying a word, he took her wrinkled, beautiful face in his ancient gnarled hands and pressed her face against his beard. With tears, he journeyed into the young desert morning. Sarah watched the journey as long as she could see it. She returned to her tent and wept.

As Abraham journeyed for three days, he wondered about the words of the God he worshipped: "Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the region of Moriah. Sacrifice him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains that I will tell you about" (Genesis 22:2). And so he wondered, and so he went. On the third day of the journey, Abraham saw the mountain in the distance. Abraham and Isaac left the servants behind and made their way up the mountain. As they approached the top, the questions continued to come to Abraham's mind: "Was there nothing in his

tents which God would rather have than Isaac? Perhaps camels, linens, or gold? Why take the child of promise when I have waited for him so long? Why offer Isaac in a slow, roasting death, hour by hour until he is gone?" Abraham had claimed since the days of Ur of Chaldees that God had called him in a special way—that God's hand was uniquely upon him and his family. At age 75, Abraham claimed that God had called him to leave Harran through Shechem and Bethel into Canaan. When he was 97, Abraham claimed that Yahweh again appeared to him and reaffirmed his promises. When he was 100, Abraham claimed that God was especially with him when Isaac was born. In a pagan world where men worshipped fire, water, air and dirt, Abraham and his family got hold of the idea of God in this world. Never had he asked, "Where does God come from?" The pagans asked that question. Abraham simply worshipped God. As never before, God was now testing his faith. After so many trials, Abraham deserved to watch this boy grow up, marry, and have children. But now, he was on the top of Moriah. For Abraham, it was always a test. As he raised his sacrificial dagger out of his robes and above his startled son, he heard the words of this God: "Abraham! Abraham!" "Here I am," he replied. "Do not lay a hand on the boy," he said. "Do not do anything to him. Now I know that you fear God, because you have not withheld from me your son, your only son." Tears of joy flowed from the old man's eyes as he hugged his son. Having sacrificed a ram, they hurried down Mt. Moriah and returned home to Sarah. What a great celebration! How great is the God Yahweh!

As shadows do so for a picture, another story will now highlight Abraham's powerful faith.

### **RICH YOUNG RULER (MATTHEW 19:16-24)**

A wealthy young magistrate had approached Jesus Christ. His wealth was obvious, and he was wearing long, flowing, expensive robes and exquisite jewelry. He was followed by a long entourage of servants. Morally fine and legally correct, the young man asked a crucial question: "Good teacher, what good thing must I do to get eternal life?" Jesus told him that if he wanted to be completely happy, he needed to obey the commandments. The young man replied, "I have kept the commandments, the laws, and the rules for a moral life. I do not murder. I do not commit adultery. I do not steal. I do not give false testimony. I honor my father and mother, and I love my neighbor."

Jesus, loving the young man and not wanting to put him down, noticed his wealth. The robes, jewelry, and servants clearly indicated that the young man had a great deal of wealth. Calling for the very best in the young man, Jesus in essence said, "I would say that the only thing standing in your way of happiness is your *wealth*." The young ruler's face probably dropped in amazement, but Jesus continued: "If you want to be righteous, sell your wealth, give the money to the poor, and come follow me."

The young ruler walked away slowly, shaking his downcast head as he contemplated the cost of following Jesus Christ. As Jesus watched the young man make his



choice, and as he watched him walk away sad, Jesus in essence commented to the apostles, “Isn’t it tragic how some people hold on to the very thing that keeps them from being right with God? Isn’t it sad to see a man hold on to earthly treasure when he could have treasure in heaven? Isn’t it tragic to see someone lose his life in order to hold on to his treasure?”

### **THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN THE TWO MEN—RIGHTEOUS LIVING**

These two biblical stories tell of two men who wrestle with the ultimate question: “What must I do to find favor in God’s sight?”

Notice the similarities. Each man was morally good. Each man was given the same answer to the ultimate question. Each was told to take that which was his treasure and sacrifice it for God’s sake. Each was told that the essence of righteous living is in taking one’s treasure and being willing to give it up for a strong, personal relationship with God. Each man stood at the foot of his own Mt. Moriah trying to decide how he would answer the ultimate question. Each had the opportunity of pleading or bargaining or manipulating with God, but each man made his decision, and each man retained exactly what he thought was the most important thing in his life.

But there is a Grand Canyon difference between Abraham and the rich young ruler. What is that difference? The difference between the two men can best be seen in the way in which they left their Mt. Moriah.

In the case of Abraham, though he was an elderly man, there was a youthful spring in his step, an unspeakable joy in his heart, a celebration in his spirit, and a story which he must tell. He rushed home to Sarah to tell her of a faithful God in a pagan world. He is a God of love and grace, a God who is real and faithful, a God who can be trusted. By offering up his Isaac, Abraham received Isaac, gained a nation, and experienced the essence of righteous living. Abraham did not ask God for a lighter load. He prayed only for a stronger back. That's faith!

In the case of the rich young ruler, we will always wonder what would have happened if he had said to Jesus, "I will sell all my wealth, give it to the poor, and follow you." Wonder what Jesus would have said to him? He probably would have said the same thing that he said to Abraham on top of his Mt. Moriah: "You don't need to sell your wealth. What I want from you is your *willingness* to part with your wealth. Bring it and follow me." But we will never know, because the rich young ruler made his decision to keep his treasure. He went away with his heart broken, in sadness and in tragedy.

## THE IMPLICATIONS OF RIGHTEOUS LIVING

The first implication of these two stories has to do with the meaning of *faith*. For God, genuine faith is never simply intellectual—it is to be expressed in obedience. To be genuine, faith has to be expressed in daily living. While God's religion includes not doing certain

things, righteous living is found in doing the will of God. It is this very feature of faith that James drives home into our minds:

*Show me your faith without deeds, and I will show you my faith by what I do. You believe that there is one God. Good! Even the demons believe that—and shudder. You foolish man, do you want evidence that faith without deeds is useless? Was not our ancestor Abraham considered righteous for what he did when he offered his son Isaac on the altar? You see that his faith and his actions were working together and his faith was made complete by what he did. And the Scripture was fulfilled that says, “Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness,” and he was called God’s friend. You see that a person is justified by what he does and not by faith alone.*

—James 2:18-24

Mt. Moriah was a region of pagan child sacrifices. Various cults took their children and slowly roasted them to death so that ancient deities might be appeased. For the living God, Yahweh, to ask Abraham to sacrifice his own son Isaac placed Abraham in a situation in which life made no sense anymore. God had given a firm promise to Abraham that it would be through Isaac that all the nations of the earth would be blessed. Isaac was the Child of Promise. The fulfillment of the

promises of God all hinged on Isaac. As Dan Ivins in his fine book *God's People in Transition* says:

*We have no trouble identifying with Abraham here. Into every life come those occasions when life makes no sense. Things happen, and we are left to grope for reasons to make sense out of it all, and we come up empty...but the point is, when life no longer made any sense, Abraham obeyed anyway.*<sup>1</sup>

There are those times in our lives when we do not understand much more than Abraham did, but we are called upon to trust in the faithfulness of God. Those times include rearing children, deciding on where we will live, having certain diseases, living in foreign cultures, and continuing our daily life of discipleship. God gives us strange instructions which we do not understand, but we do them anyway. And when we do them, we walk again in the footprints of Abraham, who showed that faithful obedience wins over understanding and logic. Abraham depended upon the faithfulness of God. And God was faithful.

A second great implication of these two stories has to do with the meaning of treasure. For Abraham, Isaac was his treasure. For years, Abraham had hoped and longed for a son. He was the Child of Promise. The future made sense because of Isaac. For the rich young ruler, wealth was his treasure. He was able to command respect and exercise great power as a city magistrate because of his wealth. His wealth enhanced his life style and allowed him to make a great impression upon others.

To find favor in the sight of God, both Abraham and the rich young ruler were given the same answer: “sacrifice your treasure (whatever it is that may be between you and Me).” Of course, God is not interested in taking a life of an Isaac any more than he is interested in having a lot of money. The point has to do with where a person who claims relationship with God places God in his life. To find favor with God, a person must put God first in his life. Jesus stresses to us, “No one can serve two masters” (Matthew 6:24).

What is your Isaac? What is it that you have most longed for? Hoped for? Dreamed about? Planned on? What is your greatest ambition? What is your wealth? What is it that you look to for respect? Power? To make impressions upon people? The paradox of righteous living is this:

*Gain comes from loss.*

*Self-possession comes from self-denial.*

*Life comes from death.*

What we lose to gain Jesus Christ, we can afford to lose. What we gain by following Christ, we cannot afford to lose. So when Paul gives us his “Gain-Loss Record” in Philippians 3, he says:

*I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatest of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them rubbish, that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteous-*

*ness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ—the righteousness that comes from God and is by faith (Philippians 3:8-9).*

A third great implication from these two stories has to do with our *spirit*. What is the difference between the boring, guilt-ridden, non-evangelistic, non-celebrative life and the exciting, forgiven, evangelistic, and celebrative life? These two stories tell us the difference. In the case of Abraham, there was great joy over a personal relationship with God—a God he trusted and a God who was faithful. In the case of the rich young ruler, there was the tragedy of living his life on rules, laws, and propositions. We will never know the joy of Abraham if we live on propositions instead of a relationship with God. Propositions have no “life” in them. If Jesus had wanted us to accept a group of rules, why didn’t he tell us? He didn’t say, “Accept my rules.” He said, “Follow me.” He didn’t say, “I have a way, I have the truth, and I have the life,” but he said “I *am* the way, *the* truth, and *the* life.”

Growing, evangelistic, celebrative, and thrilling churches are made up of individual Christians who experience the deep, unspeakable joy that comes from running down the side of their Mt. Moriah to tell their family and friends of a faithful and loving God. That kind of joy brought a youthful step to an ancient man Abraham. That same kind of joy inspired a great apostle Paul to preach, write, teach, and die. No wonder he could say, “I have fought the good fight, I have

finished the course, I have kept the faith” (2 Timothy 4:7).

Another implication of these two great stories has to do with *evangelism*. At times, we have the mistaken notion that the secular world will hear the Gospel simply because it is the Gospel. And so we spend a great deal of time discussing the methods and means of how to present the Gospel to a secular people. Enormous amounts of money and time are offered in the belief that the people in our great cities and on our farms will hear the Gospel simply because it is the Gospel. That may be true for some people, but so many people have been “burned” by the electronic church or the “Elmer Gantrys” that the Gospel’s credibility has been damaged. Simply saying that one is presenting the “Gospel” does not necessarily mean that it is the Gospel.

So how does the Gospel get its best hearing? What is God’s strategy for bringing the Gospel to people who do not know righteous living? The account of Abraham most convincingly proves that the Gospel gets its best hearing from Christian people who have been willing to sacrifice their Isaac. It is in their obedient faith and their living out what they say they believe that the Gospel gets its best hearing. This is exactly how the early Christians gave the Gospel its best hearing. They relieved human needs and possessed a strong sense of concern and love. This is especially clear in statements made by the early Christians.

*TERTULLIAN: These contributions are the trust funds of piety. For they are not spent on banquets, drinking parties, or dining clubs;*

*but for feeding and bearing the poor, for boys and girls destitute of property and parents; and further for old people confined to the house, and victims of shipwreck; and any who are in the mines, who are exiled to an island, or who are in prison merely on account of God's church....*

*SEXTUS: Kindness to men on behalf of God is the only suitable sacrifice to God. God does not hear the prayer of the one who does not hear men in need.*

*ARISTIDES: They (Christians) love one another. They do not overlook the widow and they save the orphan. He who has ministers ungrudgingly to him who does not have...and whenever they see one of their poor has died, each one of them according to his ability contributes ungrudgingly and they bury him.<sup>2</sup>*

No wonder the Roman government could not stop the early Christian movement. Their life style of obedient faith gave credibility to their testimony.

So it is with us today. It is in lives of people who go the second mile, who turn the other cheek, who wash feet, who care for orphans, who visit prisons, who clothe the naked and feed the hungry that the Gospel gets its best hearing. It is in the faithful lives of Christian families where there is strong devotion, respect, and obedience that the Gospel gets its best hearing. When the people of the world see that you and I have an integrity in the relationship between our words and our deeds, then the Gospel gets its best hearing. When they



see that we have something more to us than living by a set of rules and laws, the Gospel gets its best hearing.

I am sure you must have heard the story of the performer who walked the tightwire across the deep chasm. He performed skillfully a number of tricks on the tightwire, and amazed the crowd that stood below. All admired his great athletic ability, his balancing skills, and his daring courage. But when the skilled performer returned to the side of the chasm, one man in particular congratulated him and admired him. The tightwire performer, seeing the great admiration and appreciation of the man, told him of his next performance. "For my next act, I plan to push a wheelbarrow across the tightwire to the other side of the chasm. I need a man to ride in the wheelbarrow. Would you ride in the wheelbarrow?" Feeling the heat of the moment, the man who had admired the performer sank back into the crowd, taking with him his admiration but not his trust. In a similar way, the rich young ruler admired Jesus Christ and the religion of God. But the reason Abraham is called "the father of the faithful" and "the friend of God" is that he got into the wheelbarrow.

The religion of Jesus offers you "righteous living." It does not mean ease, having your own way, convenience, or discipleship without commitment. Righteous living begins at the top of Mt. Moriah. Why does it begin there? Because God wants to reign in your life without a rival.

<sup>1</sup> Dan Ivins, *God's People in Transition* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1981), p. 34.

<sup>2</sup> Everett Ferguson, *Early Christians Speak* (Austin: Sweet Publishing Company, 1971), pp. 207, 210.

## DON KLEPPE

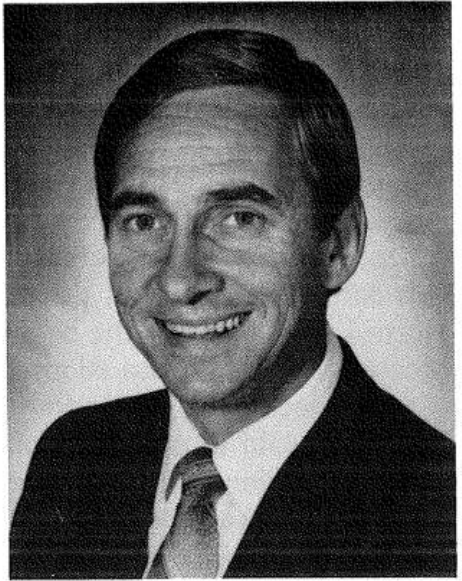
**Address:** 3827 Marshall,  
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**Family:** Married to the former Nancy Russell. They have two sons: Jonathan and Stephen.

**Education:** High School, Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada; Abilene Christian University (B.A., Bible, 1970; S.T.B., 1973).

**Work and Ministry:** Currently serves as pulpit minister for the Wilbarger Street church of Christ in Vernon, Texas. Previously worked with congregations in Rusk and Northwest in Tyler, Texas. Also has a five-minute, five-day-a-week radio program.

**Other Fields of Special Interest:** Served two years as president of the Vernon Optimist Club. Has helped in planning the annual ACU Ministers Renewal Workshop.



# WHAT THE CHURCH NEEDS TO HEAR ABOUT SPIRITUAL SECURITY

Don Kleppe

We see a man walk by. There is a spring in his step, his jaw is set, his eyes are focused. He seems to exude confidence. We pay him a high compliment when we say, "There's a man who obviously knows where he's going." When the world looks at the church today, do they get the same impression? Are we a people who by our very lifestyles say to the world that we know where we are going? You can almost hear the determination in Paul's voice when he says, "But one thing I do: forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus" (Philippians 3:13,14 NIV). Near the end of his life, that confidence had not subsided, as he wrote to his son in the faith:

*I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Now there is in store for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day—and not only to me, but also to all who have longed for his appearing.*

—2 Timothy 4:7,8 NIV

Our fellowship is not characterized by that kind of assurance, and we are paying dearly for it.

## THE PROBLEM LIES CLOSE TO HOME

What's the problem? Why do so many of our people have so little assurance? The problem is basically with our preachers. Our people believe what the preachers are telling them. I know that our heritage is of a church which studies the Bible and comes to its own conclusions. But, as wonderful an idea as that is, it is simply not true. I'm grateful for those who have accepted the challenge of full-time ministry, but I believe there are at least two significant mistakes which are being made in our pulpits.

Our first error begins when we hold out hope, salvation, and eternal life for those who would repent and be baptized. We urge them to trust God to do something for them that they cannot do for themselves. Afterward, we leave the impression that Christians must now rely on themselves—their ability to believe the right things and do the right things. Unfortunately, we are only too aware of our frailties. We know that if it depends on us, we're in real trouble!

In many churches, the people are regularly browbeaten and terrorized from the pulpit. They leave their church buildings as though they are walking a tightrope. Worst of all, they have a concept of God as being One who is trying to knock them off. Sometimes we wonder why we cannot get our people to be more interested in evangelism. What are we telling them that is good enough news to share with others?

Our second error is to paint a false picture of biblical characters and the early church. We hold up the lofty ideals of God's heroes who were called into service.

Sometimes we are left with the impression that these people didn't even need the grace of God. We have convinced our members that if they will have the faith of Abraham, the concern of Barnabas, the leadership of Moses, the courage of Amos, and the missionary zeal of Paul, they will be all right. Unfortunately, there are not too many people like that around. In my experience, that kind of preaching tends to discourage people—not motivate them. Many have concluded that if we were only like the first century church, we could really do something. However, because we are not, there is little or nothing that can be accomplished.

The Bible is a lot more realistic than we give it credit for being. Oliver Cromwell was once having his portrait painted, and the artist was being kind enough not to include the warts on his face. When Cromwell realized what was going on, he insisted, "Paint me as I am—warts and all." That's what the Bible does. From the beginning, Moses was reluctant to be God's messenger. Abraham tried to pass his wife off as his sister to protect his own interests. Peter, James and John, often called the "inner circle," had plenty of faults. How many times was Jesus frustrated by the disciples' inability to understand or accept what he was talking about?

I continue to be amazed by the honesty used in presenting the situations at Rome, Corinth, Galatia, etc. These churches had some very serious problems. They were weak in doctrine and vulnerable to immorality; they had great difficulty creating fellowship. Yet, for all of their problems, they belonged to a kingdom which was eternal because it belonged to the King. Before Jesus was born, the angel Gabriel prom-

ised Mary, “His kingdom will never end” (Luke 1:33 NIV). Regardless of what happened to their world, they were citizens of a kingdom that could not be shaken (Hebrews 12:28). I believe that the church in Vernon compares quite favorably to those New Testament congregations. But it is not for that reason that we are sufficient. We are dependent on God’s grace for our salvation and our ongoing ministry. One of these days, we shall hear for ourselves the loud voices in heaven which shout, “The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he will reign for ever and ever” (Revelation 11:15 NIV).

This is the message which we can share with our own people. We have tried telling them that they are no good and not worthy. The results have been predictable. Some are of the opinion that people who are given real assurance will take advantage of it. They will no longer care about the sins which dot their lives. As the apostle Paul went from city to city, he preached grace over law and received criticism for it. Some even dared to say that he was promoting sin and encouraging people to “do evil that good may result.” His response to them in Romans 3:8 is quick and to the point—“Their condemnation is deserved.”

When I heard that the general theme of this lecture-ship would be “What the Church Needs to Hear,” I chose the topic of spiritual security. I feel that this is important for my own life and ministry, and I am convinced that the Bible speaks openly about it. In truth, in preparation for this lesson, I have discovered that the Bible talks about it much more than I thought. Why aren’t we talking about it more? Robert Shank has

written an excellent book entitled *Life in the Son*. In that book, the author does a masterful job of demonstrating the possibility of apostasy. However, he also demonstrates clearly that Christians who continue to worship and serve their Lord have reason for assurance. The gospel is still good news—both to those who hear the invitation of Christ and to those who have heard and responded, “We will serve the Lord!”

### **FORGIVENESS IS WHERE GOD BEGINS TO MAKE A DIFFERENCE**

The good news begins with the forgiveness which only God can offer. The prophet Isaiah declares that our sins and our iniquities cause us to be separated from our God. But we didn't need to be told that, did we? We realize what the problem is. We know how the cords of sin can entangle us and pull us from the Father. We have felt that sense of alienation and isolation. All of our covering up and rationalizing do not remove the sense of guilt. On the other hand, honest and penitent confession open up the fountains of God's forgiveness. It is not as though we have to hunt to find this message. God's revelation overflows with it. It might surprise some of us to know that many of the most glorious words of forgiveness are found in the Old Testament. The psalmist says, “As far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our transgressions from us” (Psalm 103:12 NIV). The prophet Micah was awed by his Creator. “Who is a God like you, who pardons sin and forgives the transgression of the remnant of his inheritance? You do not stay angry forever, but delight to

show mercy' (Micah 7:18 NIV). Our God loves to be merciful and forgiving. We don't relate well to that because we are so stingy with our forgiveness. Have you noticed the context of Isaiah 55:8? "'For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways,' declares the Lord." God is talking about the way he freely forgives.

The New Testament reveals the basis for that forgiveness. It tells of one who left his equality with God, emptied himself, and became obedient to death on the cross. The blood that was shed at Calvary has become the spiritual detergent that can act upon our sinful selves and make us "white as snow" (Isaiah 1:18 NIV).

When we preach the message of forgiveness to the sinner, let us not forget how important it is to the saint. There must be an assurance that forgiveness is readily available in our lives on a day-to-day basis. The first letter of John seems to have been written especially to fill that need. Notice what the apostle says:

*But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from every sin. If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.*

—1 John 1:7-9 NIV

You see, the work of Jesus Christ goes on. Having made atonement for our sins, he ascended to the



right hand of the Father. That's why John continues, "But if anybody does sin, we have one who speaks to the Father in our defense—Jesus Christ, the Righteous One" (1 John 2:1 NIV). There are times when we really seem to understand and appreciate this tremendous promise. There are other days when we feel convinced that forgiveness is simply not possible. John has more good news. God's forgiveness is not based upon our feelings! He writes:

*This then is how we know that we belong to the truth, and how we set our hearts at rest in his presence whenever our hearts condemn us. For God is greater than our hearts and he knows everything.*

—1 John 3:19,20 NIV

There are certain things that we can know simply because God says they are true, regardless of how we feel. The word "know" appears some 40 times in 1 John. Perhaps the most well-known and significant verse is 1 John 5:13: "I write these things to you who believe on the name of the Son of God so that you may know that you have eternal life."

## **SECURITY IS A PARTNER TO FORGIVENESS**

With forgiveness comes genuine security for our future. And a sense of security is absolutely necessary for abundant living. In John 10, Jesus said that the abundant life was what he came to bring. At other

times, it is called “eternal life.” Sometimes our understanding of that term is confined to “never-ending days.” But the Bible uses that phrase more often to describe a quality of life which comes from being related to God. In fact, the closest thing to a definition is given by Jesus Himself in John 17:3: “Now this is eternal life: that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent.”

Our security, like our eternal life, is tied to our relationship to Jesus. That’s why Paul could confidently write, “Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus” (Romans 8:1 NIV). Are we uncomfortable with that? We shouldn’t be. Listen to the assuring words of Jesus during the latter part of his ministry:

*My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one can snatch them out of my hand. My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all; no one can snatch them out of my Father’s hand.*

—John 10:27-29 NIV

We have spent so much time assuring our religious neighbors what that Scripture does not mean that we have not had time to really appreciate what it does mean. God takes on all comers in order to protect his own sheep. All the enemies and accusers in the world, including Satan himself, cannot wrestle us from the strong hand of God. The doxology of Jude offers praise and glory “to him who is able to keep you from falling

and to present you before his glorious presence without fault and with great joy” (Jude 24 NIV).

There can be no doubt that sin is a terrible and costly thing. Paul makes it plain: “The wages of sin is death” (Romans 6:23 NIV). But we have found the cure for that. We were once on our way to perishing, but we heard God saying, “You don’t have to go!” We have responded, “Well, we don’t want to!” We have decided to trust the one who said, “I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies; and whoever lives and believes in me will never die” (John 11:25,26 NIV). We are eternal because of whom we’re related to. “The world and its desires pass away, but the man who does the will of God lives forever” (1 John 2:17 NIV). Isn’t that a message worth sharing? You know, if we believe in our security so strongly that it affects the way we act and speak, we may find that we have more opportunities to share that message.

## **GOD’S CHILDREN AND HEIRS WITH CHRIST**

But there’s even more to the good news. We know that our Lord came “to seek and save the lost.” The New Testament uses other terminology to describe his mission as well. The prologue to John’s gospel is a capsule of his entire book. He foreshadows the rejection which our Lord would experience. Then he offers this alternative.

*Yet to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God—children born not of*

*natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God.*

—John 1:12,13 NIV

Do you know that our Father has had that on his mind for a long time? Paul writes in Ephesians 1:5, “In love he predestined us to be adopted as his sons through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will.” That ought to make our hearts jump within us! “How great is the love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are!” (1 John 3:1a NIV).

For several years, my wife worked for the state of Texas as an adoption worker. She would interview couples who desperately wanted children in their home. She would then try to find a child who was being neglected, abused, or had been given up by an unwed mother. That process would usually take months, or even years. The prospective parents knew that, but they would often call “just to check” if any progress had been made. People do that when they desperately want children. Can you believe that God feels the same way? It's true! Paul explains the situation more thoroughly in his letter to the church at Galatia.

*But when the time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under law, to redeem those under law, that we might receive the full rights of sons. Because you are sons, God sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, the Spirit who calls out, “Abba, Father.” So you are no longer a slave, but a son; and*

*since you are a son, God has made you also an heir.*

—*Galatians 4:4-7 NIV*

Paul elaborates on what it means to be a child of God by suggesting that we are now heirs. Once again, our eligibility for that inheritance is tied to Christ. In Romans 8:17, we read, “Now if we are children, then we are heirs—heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ.” It is time for us as the children of God to get excited about our inheritance. There was a time in theological circles when it was taboo to talk about reward. It seemed too mundane a reason to serve God. However, Jesus assures those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, “Great is your reward in heaven.” Those heroes of the faith we read about in Hebrews 11 considered themselves “aliens and strangers on earth.” They had no real home here, and thus were looking “for a better country—a heavenly one.” We read in Hebrews 11:16, “Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared a city for them.”

The book of Revelation holds back the curtain briefly for us so that we can see things which are beyond this life. There are a lot of mysteries in this final book which are difficult to understand, but that ought not to dim our appreciation for the wonderful city of God which is described there. Let’s notice one little part of that description.

*The city does not need the sun or the moon to shine on it, for the glory of God gives it light, and the Lamb is its lamp. The nations will walk by its light, and the kings of the earth*

*will bring their splendor into it. On no day will its gates ever be shut, for there will be no night there. The glory and honor of the nations will be brought into it. Nothing impure will ever enter it, nor anyone who does what is shameful or deceitful, but only those whose names are written in the Lamb's book of life.*

—*Revelation 21:23-27 NIV*

No wonder Jesus encouraged his disciples to have a little better perspective in life. After they had returned from a mission, he told them, “Do not rejoice that the spirits submit to you, but rejoice that your names are written in heaven” (Luke 10:20 NIV).

Doesn't that sound like a great neighborhood to live in for all eternity? As Peter opens his first letter, he wants to assure us that God has given us a new birth “into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade—kept in heaven for you” (1 Peter 1:4 NIV). Peter even goes on to assure us that while we live here, we are shielded by God's power until that day. It really shouldn't surprise us that God has such a marvelous inheritance prepared for his children, and that he will go to any length to preserve them for it. Paul asks the question, “He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all—how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?” (Romans 8:32 NIV).

## CONCLUSION

Our Father wants us to enjoy the abundant life which is available only in his Son. He offers his forgiveness to

us—indeed, he delights in showing mercy. The ongoing forgiveness which is provided by his blood assures us and gives us a genuine security. “If God is for us, who can be against us?” He has adopted us as his children so that we might be co-heirs with Christ. About a year ago, there was a popular commercial for an investment firm. Various people were shown opening their mail and smiling with assurance because of what they read. The message was, “You look like you just heard from Dean Witter.” I believe that we can be reading our Bibles and living with such assurance and peace that people will say to us, “You look like you just heard from God.”

In 1941, Ann Frank and her family were hiding from the Gestapo in a small house in Europe. For two years, they had been relatively safe and sound, but always knowing that at any time a knock at the door could mean imprisonment, and possibly death. It became increasingly obvious that they would soon be found. Just before that dreaded knock came at their door, Otto Frank turned to his family and said, “For two years we have lived in fear—now we can live in hope!” For too long, the church has lived in fear—let us determine that we will live in hope!

The Bible often uses the word “hope” to describe that kind of assurance. It is not a hope that is unlikely, or even tentative. It is a living hope, as sure as the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. Peter says that all Christians have been given new birth into that living hope.

## DAVID TARBET

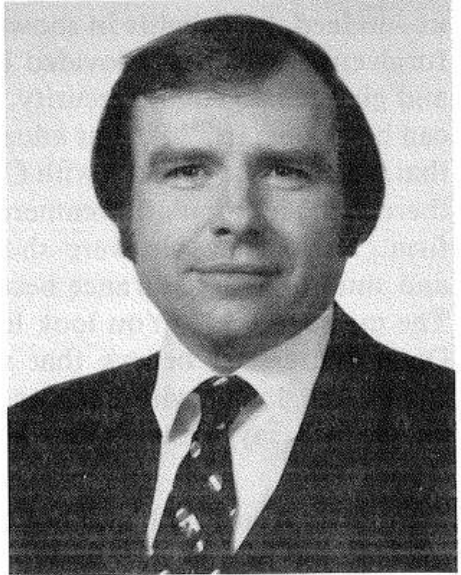
**Address:** 37 Ironworks Hill Road, Brookfield, Connecticut, 06804.

**Family:** Married to the former Paula Beth Dosier. They have four children: David Paul, Timothy Brian, Joanna Elizabeth, and Judith Katrine.

**Education:** Abilene Christian University (B.A., 1964); Fairfield University, Connecticut (M.A., 1972).

**Work and Ministry:** Currently serves as minister for the church of Christ in Danbury, Connecticut (since 1965). The congregation has grown from ten to almost three hundred members, and has helped establish four other congregations. He was appointed an elder in 1980. Previously was minister of the Anderson Street church in Big Spring, Texas (1962-65) and Sand Spring, Texas (1961). Past editor-in-chief of *Search* magazine and *Christ for Today*. Writes newspaper articles used by churches in the northeast. In 1979, he conducted the Northeast Awakening Soul Winning Workshop in Danbury, which was the largest gathering of members of the church in New England in history.

**Other Fields of Special Interest:** He is currently writing a book on the miracles of Jesus. Publishes an annual survey of churches of Christ baptizing one hundred or more. Has contributed articles to *Firm Foundation*, *Gospel Advocate*, *Personal Evangelism*, and the *Christian Chronicle*. He and his wife, Paula, are members of the American Cut Glass Association. They collect and sell Brilliant Period cut crystal and maintain a colonial house, c. 1795.





# WHAT THE CHURCH NEEDS TO HEAR ABOUT THE KING OF KINGS

David Tarbet

## Colossians 1:13-23

In 2 Samuel 7:16, God promised to David: “Your house and your kingdom shall be made sure forever before Me; your throne shall be established forever.” In Psalm 89:36-37, God said, “Like the moon, it shall be established forever; it shall stand firm while the skies endure.” It was Micah who spoke of the coming of the King to be born in Bethlehem. “But you, O Bethlehem Ephrathah, who are little to be among the clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for Me one who is to be Ruler in Israel, whose origin is from of old, from ancient days” (Micah 5:2). Isaiah announced, “For to us a Child is born, to us a Son is given; and the government will be upon His shoulder, and His name will be called ‘Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.’ ” Isaiah prophesied, “Of the increase of His government and of peace there will be no end” (Isaiah 9:6-7).

The archangel promised Mary that her Son would “be great and be called the Son of the Most High; and the Lord God will give to Him the throne of His father David, and He will reign forever” (Luke 1:32-33).

Paul gave the Christian fulfillment: “God has delivered us from the dominion of darkness and has transferred us to the kingdom of His beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins” (Colossians 1:13).

## I WHO IS OUR KING?

*The image of the invisible God.* Recently, a Gallup poll surveyed the American people to ask what they thought about Jesus. Eighty-seven percent of the American people said Jesus Christ had made an impact on their lives, but only forty-two percent believed Jesus Christ was in any way God become flesh. Victor Paul Wierwille has written a book entitled *Jesus Christ Is Not God*.<sup>1</sup> He has convinced many young people of college age that Jesus Christ is not “the image of the invisible God.” It is true that the Bible uses the phrase “image of God” in the sense that we reflect the characteristics of God—“God made man in His own image” (Genesis 1:26). However, in the context of Colossians 1:15, to speak of Jesus as “the image of the invisible God” is to speak of Him as uniquely manifesting the very nature of God. John began his gospel: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God...and the Word became flesh and dwelt among us” (John 1:1,14). In Colossians, chapter one, the writer affirmed, “In Him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell” (Colossians 1:19). In chapter two, he said, “In Him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily” (Colossians 2:9). Jesus is God become flesh! When He speaks, it is with the very authority of God Himself. He is God’s Word in human form. When men heard Him, they marvelled because they had not heard anyone speak like that before (John 7:46). He taught them with authority, and not like their scribes (Matthew 7:29).

He is the only one who could stand in the midst of His enemies, those who were the most critical of Him, and

say, "Which of you convicts Me of sin?" (John 8:46). Not one of us would dare to stand before our finest friend with such a challenge, much less our enemy! When Philip said, "Show us the Father and we will be satisfied," He replied, "Have I been with you so long, and yet you do not know Me? He who has seen Me, has seen the Father... Believe Me that I am in the Father and the Father in Me" (John 14:8-11).

The writer of the Hebrew letter tells us that Jesus Christ reflects "the glory (the brightness, KJV) of God and bears the very stamp of His nature" (Hebrews 1:3). We've all had a rubber stamp and know it leaves an impression of its image on the paper. Whatever the type-face on the piece of rubber is exactly what is left on the paper. That is the concept of the Hebrew writer. Jesus bears the very stamp of the nature of God Himself. He is the brightness of God's glory. We can no more separate Him from the nature of God, the essence of God, the authority of God, the power of God, and the prerogatives of God than we can separate the rays of the sun from the brightness of sun. Moses endured as seeing Him who is invisible, but those who were fortunate enough to live in the days when God became flesh endured as seeing God visible.

*The firstborn of all creation.* Our Jehovah's Witness friends tell us this means Jesus was the first thing created by God.<sup>2</sup> But the word "firstborn" is used sometimes in a special sense, and in the context of Colossians, chapter one, it is so used. God said He made David His "firstborn son, the highest of kings on earth" (Psalm 89:27). "Firstborn" was a title of position, a title of power, and a title of privilege. God said

of Israel, "Israel is my firstborn son" (Exodus 4:22). In Jeremiah 31:9, He called Ephraim His "firstborn son," the choicest of all of the nations of the earth. When we read that Jesus is "the firstborn of all creation," we should understand that He is above all things that have been made; He is over all things that have been made. He has a unique position, a unique authority, and a unique prestige which elevate Him above all created things. The text goes on: "For in Him all things were created, things in heaven and things on earth visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or principalities or authorities—all things were created through Him and for Him." It reminds us of John 1:3: "Without Him was nothing made that has been made"; and of Hebrews 1:3: "Through Him He created the world." But in Colossians, we have the fullest description of the things God brought into being through His Son, Jesus, our King: "Things visible and invisible," all the power on the light side and the dark side of the force, "dominions, thrones and principalities." All things were created "through" our King of Kings and "for" Him. Every president exists with a mandate to fulfill the purposes of Jesus for the world. Every Parliament exists to bring the plans of Jesus to fruition. Every monarch and every military leader has a divine responsibility to realize the glory of Jesus. Every Congress is to glorify Jesus. All powers and all dominions exist for His glory. The theme of the Bible is that any dominion, power, or authority that will not bend its knee to our Jesus will be totally destroyed!

The apostle tells us that all things "hold together" in Him. It's the phrase of adhesion, the phrase of glue.

What is it that gives predictability to our universe? It is Jesus! What has set in motion the laws of planets and stars? What has determined the paths of the sea and the currents of oceans? What enables the meteorologist to track the storm and predict the weather? What enables the botanist to know the hybridity of plants, or the biologist to predict what will happen in cross-breeding animal life? It is Jesus! He is the Power behind the ocean currents. He is the Orderliness behind the Table of Elements. He is the Balance of the genetic code. He holds all the universe in His hand. "He upholds the world by His word of power" (Hebrews 1:3).

Our King of Kings is *the head of the church*. Upon His resurrection, He received "all authority in heaven and on earth" (Matthew 28:18). The apostle writing to the Philippians affirmed that God exalted the One who had humbled Himself to become obedient unto death, and gave Him the name that is above every name, "That at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father" (Philippians 2:9-11). Jesus does not share His headship or His authority as governor of our religious lives with any other person or movement. He does not share it with Buddha. He does not share it with Mohammed. He does not share it with John Paul. He does not share it with Joseph Smith. He shares His headship with no one. He is the Head of His church. It is His by right of His resurrection (Ephesians 1:20-23).

*He is the beginning*. He was the beginning of the creation (Revelation 3:14). He is the beginning of the new

creation (2 Corinthians 5:17). He is the beginning of the new birth (John 3:3-5). He is the beginning of the church, founded upon the rock (Matthew 16:18). He is the beginning of life after death—"through Him life and immortality have been brought to light through His gospel" (2 Timothy 1:10).

He is *the firstborn from the dead*. He went to His friend when her heart was broken to speak with her about the life to come. He assured her, "I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live" (John 11:25). We have never known a person like this Man! We have never known one who could say, "I have the power to lay down My life and I have the power to take it again" (John 10:18), and prove it by many infallible proofs! We have never known another to claim, "I am the first and I am the last. I died; behold I live and I have the keys of death and Hades" (Revelation 1:18). We sometimes sing "Low in the Grave He Lay." The first verse of this song should be sung with a sadness, a heartache, a slowness, and an emptiness because the Word who became flesh, Jesus Christ, gave His life and lay in the tomb. But the third verse of that song cannot—it must not—be sung with a broken heart. The third verse is the verse of hope, the verse of confidence, the verse of joy! It is the verse that helps us begin again.

*Death cannot keep its prey—  
 Jesus, my Saviour!  
 He tore the bars away—  
 Jesus, my Lord!*

## II WHAT HAS OUR KING DONE FOR US?

*He has reconciled us.* "When we were estranged and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds," He reconciled us in "the body of His flesh" by His death, in order to present us "holy and blameless and irreproachable before Him" (Colossians 1:21f). We were His enemies. He came to earth to bury the hatchet—not to dig up the hatchet again and again, but to bury the hatchet forever. He came to reconcile us to God, to make us friends again. He extended His hand. Through Him, God moved to reconcile the world to Himself (2 Corinthians 5:19).

The heritage He left is that we can become the friends of God. He reconciled us to God when we were hostile in mind, when our will was not to do the will of God, when we wanted to live for self. In the cross, the King of Kings won the sinner over to God's side. One who stood at the foot of the cross and saw the King die said, "Truly this was the Son of God!" (Matthew 27:54). Another pleaded, "Lord, remember me when you come into your Kingdom" (Luke 23:42).

*He has redeemed us.* "In Him we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins" (Colossians 1:14). We were slaves. We were in bondage to passion, to evil desires, to self—in bondage to old habits which we felt incapable of breaking. But He redeemed us! Not with silver, gold, or perishable things, but with "the *precious blood* of Christ like that of a lamb without blemish or spot" (1 Peter 1:18-19). Parents consider their children and say, "These are our *precious* children." No other

children are so precious! A husband looks at his wife and says, "You are my *precious* wife." Nothing means more to him than his wife. A jeweler examines a gem and exclaims, "This is a *precious* gem. Its value is beyond any human estimate." In the same way, when Jesus gave His life and shed His blood, we were redeemed with something that means more to us than anything else in the world, far beyond any monetary value that could be placed upon it—*the precious blood of Christ!*

*He has relocated us.* Paul records, "He delivered us out of the dominion of darkness and He transferred us to the kingdom of His beloved Son" (Colossians 1:13). It was an ancient custom that when a nation had been defeated, its people were moved—transported—to another nation. We are told by historians that long before Paul wrote these words, many Jewish people (approximately 2,000) had been taken out of one nation and brought into the city of Colossae. They had been physically "transferred" to another kingdom. We, too, have been relocated. We have been transferred. Transferred from where? Transferred from the "dominion of darkness." We cannot help but think of the night when Jesus was arrested. When the chief priests, officers, elders, and soldiers came out against Him with swords and clubs, Jesus said, "This is your hour and the power of darkness" (Luke 22:53). *The hour of darkness is the hour of man's madness.* We have been transferred from there. We have been taken out of a life of self-centeredness, out of a life of ignorance, out of a life of fear, out of a life of emptiness and aimlessness. We have been transferred into the kingdom of light, into the



kingdom of knowledge, into the kingdom of confidence, into the kingdom of freedom, into the kingdom of hope. That's what our King has done for us!

### III

#### WHAT DOES OUR KING EXPECT OF US?

The answer is given in Luke, chapter nineteen, in the parable of the ten pounds. The parable describes a nobleman who called his servants to him and gave each one of them a pound. He said, "Go trade with these pounds. I am going into a far country to receive kingly power." Almost immediately, his citizens sent an embassy after him, saying, "We don't want him to reign over us." After a long time, the king returned and called his servants to account. The one who brought back ten pounds was given authority over ten cities. The one who brought back five was given authority over five cities. The one who brought back one was deprived of that one pound which he had. Then the king said, "As for these enemies of mine, who did not want me to reign over them, bring them here and slay them before me." Obedience to the King of Kings and Lord of Lords is not an option—it is a demand. It is not a nicety—it is a necessity.

Obedience was demonstrated in Jesus' own life. Although He was a Son, he learned obedience by the things which He suffered, "and being made perfect, He became the source of eternal salvation to all them that obey Him" (Hebrews 5:9).

He gave a parable about two builders. One built a house upon the rock. He was like a man who heard Christ's Word and obeyed it. When the rains came and the floods rose, and the winds beat against that house, it stood because it was founded upon the rock. The other man was the man who heard the word and did not obey it. He built his house upon sand. When the rains came and the floods rose, and the winds beat against that house, it fell; and great was the fall of it! (Matthew 7:24-27).

We're living in a time when obedience is not a popular subject. This is the age of tolerance for every form of sin and rationalization for every kind of disobedience. People think everybody has a right to his own personal convictions about religion, about God, and about truth. Everything is relative. There are no "blacks," there are no "whites," and no absolutes. There are no inherent errors—only what is right or wrong to one's own personal conscience. In the church of the Lord Jesus Christ, those who love the King and want to honor Him as King must arise to state, "Things the King has not approved are wrong!" We need courage today to stand against an immoral world and say that it makes a difference how one lives—that "alternate life styles" are not alternate life styles, but immorality. We need a renewed respect for our King which will compel us to stand in our pulpits and in our Bible classes and proclaim that things not authorized by the Scripture are unacceptable in Christian worship and doctrine. (How long has it been in the congregation where you worship since there was a sermon on the unacceptability of instrumental music in worship or sprinkling for bap-

tism?) We need the courage to show by our lives that we are committed to obeying the Great Commission to “Go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature” (Matthew 28:19). We need to know that means it begins with you and me, here in this community, among our friends, among our family. Furthermore, we ought to affirm that turmoil and stress in the church of the Lord Jesus Christ must end—that we will love peace and seek peace with our brethren because peacemakers are the sons of God (Matthew 5:9). We need to reach out to our brethren to reconcile with them. We need to study with them again. We need to pray together. We need to come together. We need to love each other. It is not something we might do if we chose—it is something we must do if we would obey our King.

### **WHAT DOES OUR KING PROMISE US?**

Our King promises that if we will be faithful to Him, there is a throne for all of us. He said, “He that conquers, I will allow him to sit down with Me on My throne as I conquered and sat down with My Father, on His throne” (Revelation 3:21). In Revelation, chapter two, He wrote to the church in Thyatira: “He who conquers will be given a throne and he will rule the nations with a rod of iron. And I will give him the morning star” (Revelation 2:26-28). He pictured for us in the beautiful parable of the judgment all the world gathering before the King of Kings to hear Him say to those on His right, “Come, you blessed of My Father, inherit the

kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world” (Matthew 25:31-46).

*There with all the loved ones who have gone before;  
We shall see the King some day!  
Sorrow passed forever on that peaceful shore  
We shall see the King some day!*

So let the Pharaohs, ancient or modern, ask, “Who is the Lord that I should obey His voice?” (Exodus 5:2). Let them reject our King. But every Pharaoh, past or present, who rejects our King will lose more than his firstborn son! Let the Jezebels, past or present, who mock, persecute, or ridicule the prophets of God, understand that God searches mind and heart. Our King will try the Jezebels and cast their children on the sick-bed; for He gives to everyone as he deserves (Revelation 2:23). Let the Goliaths cry against the armies of the living God. Let them mock God’s Israel (1 Samuel 17:26). God will slay them with the first smooth stone that flies from His sling. Let the Beast arise from the sea, with the power of its ten horns and ten diadems and all the smartness of its seven heads (Revelation 13:1). Let it try to stamp out the church of the Lord in any century, past or present. It will not succeed. Come on, False Prophet who looks like a lamb, and speaks like a lamb! (Revelation 13:11). Deceive the uninformed with signs and wonders, leading them astray from true allegiance to the King. You, too, will fail! Let the Mother of Harlots rise to seduce God’s children to commit immorality, to drink the cup of her impure passion (Revelation 17:5). She, too, will fail!

Our King rides through heaven on the finest of steeds. He is dressed in a robe dipped in blood. He is known by the name "The Word of God." He is faithful and true. On His head are many diadems. His eyes are like a burning fire. A sword issues from His mouth, with which He smites the nations. He treads the wine press of the fury of the wrath of God, the Almighty. He is undefeatable and unconquerable, for He is King of Kings and Lord of Lords! (Revelation 19:11-16).

Thank God, Jesus Christ is King!

<sup>1</sup> Victor P. Wierwille, *Jesus Christ Is Not God* (New Knoxville: American Christian Press, The Way International), 1971.

<sup>2</sup> *New Heavens and A New Earth* (Brooklyn: Watchtower Bible & Tract Society, Inc., 1953), p. 24.



# AFTERNOON SESSIONS

## IAN A. FAIR

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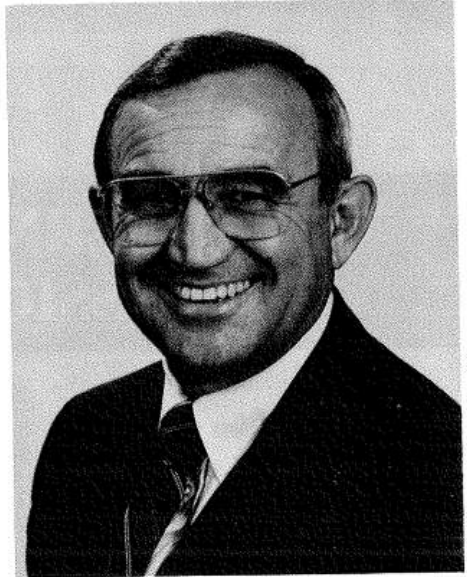
**Family:** Wife: June. They have three sons: Deon, Nigel, and Douglas, as well as two grandchildren.

**Education:** Abilene Christian University (B.A., Bible); University of Natal, South Africa (B.A.-Hon.; M.A., Ph.D. in New Testament and Systematic Theology).

**Work and Ministry:** Currently Associate Professor and Chairman of the Bible Department of Abilene Christian University. Has been at ACU since 1978. Serves as pulpit minister for the South 11th and Willis church of Christ in Abilene.

Began preaching and mission work in South Africa in 1960. Served as a missionary in South Africa from 1960-74. Established numerous congregations among both the white and the black peoples in South Africa. Was responsible, with Tex Williams and Delbert McLoud, for founding the Natal School of Preaching in South Africa for training black ministers. Served as Director of that school from 1968-74. Was Chairman of the Board of Trustees of the Southern Africa Bible School in Benoni, South Africa. Served as Dean and Instructor in the Sunset School of Preaching, Lubbock, Texas, from 1974-78.

**Other Fields of Special Interest:** Was member of the South African Society for Missiological Studies from 1970-76. Is current member of the Society for Biblical literature, the American Academy of Religion, the Southwest Biblical Seminar, the Seminar on the Development of Early Catholic Christianity, and the Evangelical Theological Society. Fields of research and teaching include the Synoptic Gospels, Romans, Revelation, Advanced Introduction to the New Testament, and Contemporary Religious Thought.





# JESUS—THE SAME YESTERDAY AND TODAY AND FOREVER

Ian A. Fair

## INTRODUCTION

The message of this lectureship that we are enjoying this year is built around the statement “What the Church Needs to Hear... .” Without assuming in any way a posture of arrogance, there *are* some things that we as a brotherhood desperately need to hear. There are voices from the past that must be heard, and cries of the present that demand our urgent attention. There are also whispers from the future that are yet undefined thoughts and concerns, even anxieties, that are seeking expression. Our concern is that we as a brotherhood should even now be straining to catch every voice, every cry, and every whisper that calls out to us from the past, the present, and the future.

I have been given the challenging task of identifying and articulating these concerns. The theme that I will develop in these three lectures, as I seek to address this statement “What the Church Needs to Hear,” will be “*Jesus—The Same Yesterday and Today and Forever.*” You have, no doubt, already identified this theme as one deriving from *Hebrews 13:7-9*. Working with this text, I will attempt to explain, in these three lessons, how I believe that Jesus, His message, and His church

are always relevant. I will maintain and seek to clarify, however, that the church's message and preaching of Jesus is not always in touch with contemporary concerns and needs. I will attempt to focus attention on the critical need of addressing the message of Jesus to the felt needs and hurts of people living in a society that is grasping for meaning. I will also develop the concept that as a movement interested in "restoring the ancient order of things," we must be sensitive to our past, to our Christian and restoration heritage. I will seek to explain how a sensitivity to our heritage has a dynamic role to play in the development and maturing of faith.

As we look at this theme of "Jesus—The Same Yesterday and Today and Forever" and its concomitant warning against compromising one's faith, three lessons arise naturally from this text. These will form the three lessons of this series:

- (1) "*Jesus—The Same Yesterday...*" addresses the church's *responsibility* to the *past*. We need to be reminded that our roots are in the past, that faith is concretely rooted in history, that our Christian and restoration heritage is a solid heritage, and that our present role must be played out in response to that past. We will develop this lesson more fully today.
- (2) "*Jesus—The Same Today...*" addresses the church's *responsibility* for the *present*. We will emphasize the church's urgent need to speak to the present, to wrestle with new problems, to move from the past to the present without disparaging the past, to seek anew the message of

Scripture as it speaks to the present, to remain faithful to the Biblical message yet address an ever-changing social and cultural scene. These concerns will form tomorrow's lesson.

- (3) "*Jesus—The Same Forever...*" addresses the church's *responsibility* for the *future*. We will stress that we have a responsibility for the church in the 21st century, that we must leave a clear legacy for our children, that we must have a clear statement of Biblical faith, that we must emphasize evangelism, missions, edification, and leadership in order for the future of our movement to be secure. These concerns will occupy our attention on Wednesday as we bring these thoughts to a conclusion.

### **OUR TEXT: HEBREWS 13:7-9**

In the first century, as always, there lurked as a constant threat to the life of the church the danger of the church compromising its faith. The apostles in a variety of contexts wrestled almost on a daily basis with this tendency to compromise.

Early in his ministry, Paul had to contend with Judaizers who, with either good intentions or otherwise, wished to bind the keeping of the Jewish law on Christians. Although the law was good, spiritual and holy, Paul knew that this would destroy the gospel vitality, message, and power. As we learn from Paul's confrontation with Peter (*Galatians 2:11ff*), such a compromise would certainly have made relations with the Jews a lot

easier. It could even later save one from Jewish persecution. But regardless of persecution or good relations, Paul knew that this compromise would both void his ministry to the Gentiles and, in fact, destroy the dynamic message of grace. Because of this inclination to compromise, the future of the Gentile mission and, in fact, the eternal purpose of God, hung in the balance.

John, some 40 years later, stressed that compromise with the gnostic super-intellectual, or super-spiritual, who took pride in his own knowledge and spirituality, and compromise with the Roman emperor-cult would likewise negate the power of the gospel. With Paul, John readily identified the extreme danger in a compromised faith. He warned his followers to welcome no one whose faith in Jesus was questionable (*2 John 9,10*).

Some time after Paul's early battles with the Judaizers and before John's struggles with the gnostics, our writer of the letter to the Hebrews had argued that Christians could avert compromise by *holding fast to their Christian heritage*. Like Paul and John, he was aware of the real danger of compromise. His apology, however, was different in some ways from that of Paul and John. It was similar to that developed later in the second century. The surest defense against apostasy was to remember one's Christian heritage, to return to that upon which one could have firm confidence, to accept only that which was apostolic. He thus wrote, "*Remember your leaders, those who spoke to you the word of God; consider the outcome of their life, and imitate their faith*" (*Hebrews 13:7*).

In *Hebrews 3:1-6*, the writer developed the point that as Jesus was faithful to His divine appointment, and as Moses was faithful to his divine calling, so Christians too should *hold fast to their confidence* in Jesus as their high priest. Like Paul, this early Christian believed that Jesus should indeed be the foundation of Christian faith. Paul had frequently and adamantly maintained that he would hold to no other foundation to his faith, that he could preach nothing but Jesus. In *1 Corinthians 2:12*, Paul had stated that he had not preached “the testimony of God in lofty words or wisdom.” He had committed himself to “know nothing among them except Jesus Christ and him crucified.” Furthermore, a few years later in *Colossians 1:28*, Paul wrote, “Him we proclaim, warning every man and teaching every man in all wisdom, that we present every man mature in Christ.” To emphasize the urgency of laying this foundation to Christian life and faith, Paul continued in *Colossians 1:29*, “For this I toil, striving with all the energy which he mightily inspired within me.” He developed this point even further in *Colossians 2:6,7* by stressing that Christian faith must be rooted in Jesus. “As therefore you received Christ Jesus the Lord, so live in him, *rooted and built up in him and established in the faith*, just as you were taught, abounding in thanksgiving.”

Thus, for Paul, we note that faith must be rooted in Jesus. But we note, too, that faith must also have a *historical perspective*. In *Colossians*, Paul stressed that Christians should remember their past teaching and faith—that is, their historical heritage and Christian commitment to Jesus. They must *continue* in that com-

mitment. There is a significant dynamic for faith in the Christian recollection of a heritage of commitment to Jesus. Faith grows and matures in that recollection, and faith in this manner returns, to be sustained by its roots.

The writer to the Hebrews, likewise, stresses in the clearest manner this Pauline concept. Faith is always to be focused in and built on Jesus, and the message of Jesus. But faithfulness to that commitment to Jesus is dynamically strengthened through a remembrance of one's past heritage. Christians are constantly encouraged to *remember* and, in remembering, to hold fast to that heritage of faith that comes to them from yesterday.

At this point, we need to stress a thought of considerable significance. It is not simply that faith is to be rooted in Jesus or some nebulous concept about Jesus. The Scriptures do not simply reveal to us the mighty acts of God in Jesus and then leave us to formulate for ourselves *how* we will *react* to Jesus. The New Testament does not *simply* record for us the good news that God's grace has been poured into human experience through Jesus, or that Jesus is simply the *core* of Christian theology. Indeed, this *is* one conclusion that we derive from Biblical theology, that God is truly a loving God who works mightily in behalf of His people, and that this love is focused in the person of Jesus. Jesus truly is the *core* of Christian theology. Biblical theology, however, *expands* on this core by explaining *how* we, as Christians, *must relate* to this core—that is, how our lives are brought into unity with Jesus, the foundation and core of our faith. This expansion and explanation is the role of Christian doctrine—

that is, to explicate the meaning of this core of faith in propositional terms, hence a “pattern” that is to be obeyed from the heart. The *gospel*, therefore, is not merely some good news focused on the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus. This surely is the *core* of the gospel, but there is an element of the gospel that is to be *obeyed*. For there to be any sense of obedience, there has to be a *pattern* for obedience, something that has to be obeyed for one to have an “obedient faith” (*Romans 1:5; 6:17; 16:26*). Christian doctrine, therefore, explains and presents this *pattern* of faith and gospel that focuses on and derives its power from Jesus, its core.

Returning to our text and lesson, it was this very point of faithfulness to Jesus and an understanding of the dynamic of a Christian heritage that Paul and the writer to the Hebrews labored to develop for their Jewish Christian followers. Both were at pains to explain that faith in Jesus could not be compromised by overlaying it with Judaism and adherence to the Jewish law. The writer to the Hebrews states flatly that “we share in Christ, *if only we hold our first confidence [in Jesus] firm to the end*” (*Hebrews 3:14*). He follows this with the admonition that “since then we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, *let us hold fast our confession*” (*Hebrews 4:14*).

To bring this section to a conclusion, we notice the admonition of *Hebrews 10:32-36*:

*But recall the former days* (i.e., your heritage of commitment to Jesus—IAF) when,

after you were enlightened, you endured a hard struggle with sufferings, sometimes being publicly exposed to abuse and affliction, and sometimes being partners with those so treated...*Therefore do not throw away your confidence*, which has great reward. For you have need of endurance, so that you may do the will of God and receive what is promised.

Christians should never lose contact with their past. They should recall the former days. They should not lightly “throw away” their Christian heritage. Faith certainly is rooted in the past actions of God. *Christian endurance*, another way of defining faith, however, is *rooted in past experiences*. The past helps by serving as a reminder of these concerns wherein lie the core of our faith and of how that faith is to be transplanted into responsive reaction to God’s love. Reflection on our Christian heritage emphasizes how God has worked in human experience, and indeed our own experience, to bring us to where we are.

With these thoughts in mind, our writer to the Hebrews penned our text for this series of lessons, and focused attention on the dynamic role of Christian heritage in the maturing of faith:

*Remember your teachers, those who spoke to you the word of God: consider the outcome of their life, and imitate their faith. Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever. Do not be led away by diverse and strange teachings... (Hebrews 13:7-9).*



## REMEMBER THE PAST

The remainder of the lesson today will be devoted to developing the message of the Hebrews text and explaining *how* this text is relevant to contemporary needs. As the tendency to compromise faith was a real threat to faith almost two thousand years ago, so too is compromise a threat today. What are the lessons we can learn from our text that are relevant to our faith today?

*First*, we are reminded that God's people have always been a people with *deep roots in the past*. Israel's *credo* (*Leviticus 11:65*) reminded them of how God had brought them by the hand out of Egypt. God's people were constantly reminded to recall that past. In calling this to memory, they were reminded that their life was to be rooted in God's mighty acts of grace. Recollection of such a heritage is a powerful dynamic in the maturing of faith. By being reminded of our past we, too, are reminded that we are who we are only by the grace of God. Being constantly reminded of our past Christian heritage also serves to *correct our pride*. It reminds us that we did not create the present—that the real power of the present lies beyond ourselves. To disparage our past by being intoxicated with our present is the height of arrogance. *Humility is always a prerequisite of Biblical faith.*

In addition, being tied to the past reminds us that the present is not isolated, floating directionless in a sea of meaninglessness. Suicide among young people today is epidemic. Recently, a university in the northeast voted on a resolution requiring the university to stockpile suicide pills in the event of a nuclear war. To many

young people, suicide is a reasonable alternative to the nihilism of a meaningless present with little prospect for any meaningful future. Christians, however, have a heritage that reminds them that the God who has dynamically acted for them in the past will also be with them in the precarious present. He will also carry them through an uncertain future. *What the church needs to hear today is that Jesus is the same yesterday and today and forever...* . It is to our loss that we are not a people impressed greatly by history. Although representing an impressive history, and religiously the descendants of an impressive restoration heritage, we give little thought to the dynamic of that heritage for faith.

But the past speaks to us in other ways as well. The past not only reinforces our faith by reminding us of the roots of our faith and by giving us encouragement for the present. It also serves as a corrective to the present and gives direction for the future. We can learn from our heritage where we have gone astray and where we have been successful. "*Jesus the same yesterday*" reminds us that we are not the first disciples to come this way. The Hebrews writer admonishes his readers to "remember your leaders...consider the outcome of their life, and imitate their faith."

History has the value of illustrating how men of the past have struggled with their faith, with sin, with weakness, and with their problems. History reminds us that Jesus was relevant to their needs. History also reminds us of how men failed to remain faithful to the cause of Christ, how they strayed from the ancient paths. History demonstrates how and where men have succeeded or failed in the restoration of the primitive faith.

The ongoing dynamic of a restoration movement is severely impaired by those who disparage past efforts at restoration. The strengthening of our faith and our constant effort to “return to the ancient paths” is not served by a short memory or by a deprecation of our past restoration heritage. We are who we are today by the grace of God and by the struggles of faithful men who strove to point us back to the “ancient paths.” The pages of history and the men in our restoration heritage are a constant challenge to us “to hold fast to our Christian heritage” and to “return to those ancient paths.” *Jesus truly is the same yesterday, and today... .*”

## CONCLUSION

May we never suffer from the arrogance of Israel, of whom Jeremiah speaks in *Jeremiah 6:16*: “Thus says the Lord: ‘Stand by the roads, and look, and ask for the ancient paths, where the good way is: and walk in it, and find rest for your souls.’ *But they said, ‘We will not walk in it.’*”

May we never suffer the arrogance of ignoring our past, both ancient and immediate. May we never ignore the lessons of the past. This is not to be interpreted in the sense that we should always be satisfied with the answers of the past, that we should not seek for new answers for the present. But in the words of a famous theologian, Karl Barth, “Let us not forget upon whose shoulders it is that we stand so that we can see so well into the future.” In the words of an even more famous

theologian, *“Remember your leaders, those who spoke to you the word of God; consider the outcome of their life, and imitate their faith” (Hebrews 13:7).*



## KENNETH G. DYE

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# REDISCOVERING THE FAMILY

**Kenneth G. Dye**

## INTRODUCTION

In the past several years, churches around the world have begun looking to their families with great concern and even a bit of dismay. The upheavals which have come from the shifts in the direction of our society have brought churches face to face with these changes, and must cause those in leadership positions to re-think the role assigned to the family by God. Society has been having more and more influence upon Christian people, and the church does not seem to be addressing itself to these changes.

In comparing ourselves to previous societies, we find the unique characteristic of our era setting us apart from the past is the bewildering rapidity and profound extent of ongoing social change. As far as we might wish to look ahead, nothing appears to be permanent. These observations having been made, the natural reaction of the human personality is stress, for stress is an organism's reaction to change. This stress is deep-seated. One of the pitfalls of stress is that we have so long been completely immersed in it that it is easy to forget just how much stress daily pervades our lives.

As David Elkin writes in his book *The Hurried Child*, there are three particular sources of stress that result from this age:

- (1) *We are more afraid.* The threat of violence, theft, and intimidation is now a permanent possibility in life in urban America.
- (2) *We are more alone.* Separation and divorce statistics have reached new highs.
- (3) *We are more professionally insecure.* The threats of technology, unemployment, inflation, recession, rising prices, and so on are also prevalent.

Another result of stress is that people become absorbed with themselves simply because they are attempting to survive. As a result of the various demands made upon them and their dealing with these reactions and feelings, people under stress become self-centered and are depleted of the energy needed to deal with various problems which come along that are apart from themselves. As far as history is concerned, people are probably under more stress now than any other time since the Great Depression. With both parents working, even very young children under great pressure to succeed, and society in the throes of change and demanding its pound of flesh, it is no wonder there are so many problems in our families.

The changes through which our society has gone over the past several generations have caused us to face the present and future with the attitudes we have. Toffler writes:



*To free workers for factory labor, key functions of the family were parcelled out to new specialized institutions. Education of the child was turned over to the schools. Care of the aged was turned over to the poorhouses or old-age homes or nursing homes. Above all, the new society required mobility. It needed workers who would follow jobs from place to place. Torn apart by migration to the cities, battered by economic storms, families stripped themselves from unwanted relatives, grew smaller, more mobile, more suited to the needs of the work place.*

As a result of all this, David Elkin continues to write in his book, *The Hurried Children*, our children are the ones upon whom much of this stress is focused. These children are hurried, as evidenced by the following changes:

- (1) *The pressure for early academic achievement*, but one of the many contemporary pressures on children to grow up too fast.
- (2) *The change in children's dress*. No longer do prepubescent boys wear short pants and knickers until they begin to shave. The first pair of long pants has lost its significance as a true rite of passage. Today it is becoming increasingly more difficult to tell children from mature adults, as children's fashions differ from adults' only in scale.

- (3) *The change in the programs of summer camps for children.* Whereas there are many camps similar to the way camps were in the past, an increasing number of summer camps offer specialized training in many different areas, including foreign language, tennis, baseball, dance, music, and even computers. Among such camps, the most popular seem to be those that specialize in competitive sports.
- (4) *Children today travel across the country, and indeed across the world, alone and unprotected.*
- (5) *Lawyers are encouraging children to sue their parents for a variety of grievances.*
- (6) *The media, including music, books, films and television, increasingly portray young people as precocious and present them in more or less explicit sexual or manipulative situations.*

For children growing up, it appears that their emotional maturation is complicated and difficult under any circumstance, but when their behavior and appearance speak "adult" while their feelings cry out "child," the problems will be immense.

Other factors influencing our families today include the rapid changes in social values, women's liberation, the exploding divorce rate, the decline of parental and institutional authority, and the fatalistic sense, not often verbalized, that we are all going to die in a nuclear holocaust anyway, so why not have a good time? With all of these ideas in mind, it is even more ironic that practices once considered the province of lower-

class citizens now have the allure of middle-class "chic." Divorce, single-parenting, dual-career couples, and unmarried couples living together are not new, but were common among the lower-class decades ago. Divorce is today's middle-class status symbol.

At times of greatest dilemma, the only direction in which to turn is God's word. The church, more so today than ever before, has a viable message for those facing these stresses; however, these answers are quite often overlooked. Biblical direction is often ignored when attractive psychological approaches are so readily available.

### **MARRIAGE NOT FOR EVERYONE**

One of Paul's strongest messages from 1 Corinthians 7 is that marriage is not necessarily for everyone. Regardless of the pressures from parents, church people, and society in general, a choice which can be made is that a person possesses the freedom to choose to remain single.

*Now for the matters you wrote about: It is good for a man not to marry.*

*—1 Corinthians 7:1*

*Now to the unmarried and the widows I say: It is good for them to stay unmarried, as I am.*

*—1 Corinthians 7:8*

That choice is not necessarily honored today, for all kinds of imaginations often take place when the choice is made to remain single. However, God's people can see that some have this gift, and it should be honored (1 Corinthians 7:7).

### **SOME CONDITIONS ENCOURAGE MARRIAGE**

Paul very quickly recognizes that for some to remain single is simply not their gift, and therefore his advice to them is that they enter into marriage. One of the strongest pronouncements Paul makes at this point is that if one cannot control his or her body in the state of being single, then he certainly should marry.

*I wish that all men were as I am. But each man has his own gift from God; one has this gift, another has that. Now to the unmarried and the widows I say: It is good for them to stay unmarried, as I am. But if they cannot control themselves, they should marry, for it is better to marry than to burn with passion.*

With these teachings in mind, each person is able to evaluate his or her gifts and personal feelings about this matter. God's teachings encourage us to understand our freedoms; but within these freedoms, he expects us to exercise control.

## **FAMILIES IN ALL SHAPES AND SIZES**

With these changes in society forcing themselves upon the church, we therefore must realize just how eclectic our attitudes must become toward families. Whereas some years ago most families consisted of a husband, a wife and two or three children, families are somewhat more diverse in description today. Churches must begin looking at the single individual as a type of family. However, these singles come in various configurations. There are:

- (1) The single who never married and is still fairly young;
- (2) The single who is older, with little or no desire for marriage;
- (3) The single divorced person; and
- (4) The single whose mate has died.

As a church, we must be cognizant of including, as well as ministering to, these single segments. With this recognition made, the entire scope of family within the church is broadened.

## **STRONG FAMILIES ARE CHURCH WORK**

Over the past several decades, as our churches have become larger, more prosperous and, therefore, more active, a rather interesting development has taken place. From the leadership has come not only the expectation

but the example to be involved in the “activities of the Lord.” The emphasis has been on church programs and church-related activities.

In time, the influence of society upon modern Christians trying desperately to juggle ever-busier work and church schedules could be seen in the slow disintegration of the family. For whatever reasons, preachers, elders, deacons, and other members began grappling with a multiplicity of problems, from divorce and drug addiction to suicide.

When Paul wrote Ephesians and chose to describe the relationship of Jesus to the church, he chose the husband-wife relationship as the ultimate analogy.

*Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word, and to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless. In this same way, husbands ought to love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. After all, no one ever hated his own body, but he feeds and cares for it, just as Christ does the church—for we are members of his body. For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh. This is a profound mystery—but I am talking about Christ and*

*the church. However, each one of you also must love his wife as he loves himself, and the wife must respect her husband.*

—*Ephesians 5:25-33*

A conclusion which a close look at Scripture forces us to accept is that “church work” is also loving and taking care of one’s family. Church work is not always related to activities organized by the local church; family relationships deserve, and must be accorded, a high priority as well.

This conclusion is easily reached when one understands how diluted our message becomes when the message of faith we profess is not being carried through to our own families.

## **A FAMILY MINISTRY IN EVERY CHURCH**

Changes over the past several years have caused us to be more concerned than ever about our families. The question “What can we do?” is continually being asked by those who care about people. The answer, quite simply, is to become aggressive in providing a family program in every congregation.

This does not necessarily mean hiring a family specialist, which of course would be excellent if possible; but it does mean going back to Biblical teachings as our example for setting personal priorities. Paul, to Titus, encouraged this:

*Likewise, teach the older women to be reverent in the way they live, not to be slanderers or addicted to much wine, but to teach what is good. Then they can train the younger women to love their husbands and children, to be self-controlled and pure, to be busy at home, to be kind, and to be subject to their husbands, so that no one will malign the word of God.*

—*Titus 2:3-5*

In our memberships, there are those who have experienced the various changes and crises of life. At any given point, we are working with those who have experienced the grief process, divorce, the first child, problems of adolescents, aging, mid-life crisis, remarriage, singleness, etc. It is time we begin incorporating these members into our ministry of family help. These family specialists are experienced and well-trained—they need only to be asked. When asked, our family ministry has begun.





## RON ROSE

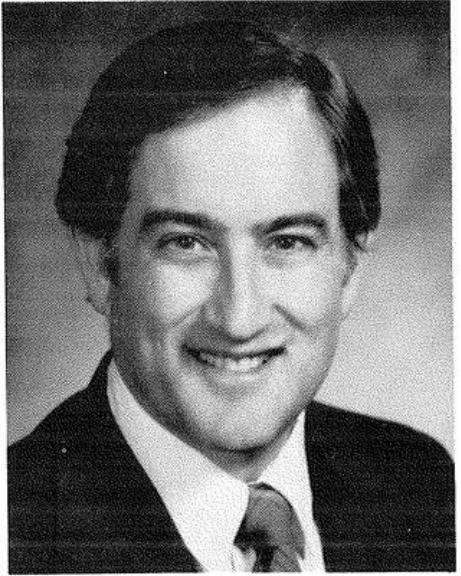
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**Other Fields of Special Interest:** Is a popular speaker and resource person throughout the southwest. Has authored publications emphasizing adult education, family issues, and relationship development. He has developed a catalogue of seminars designed to give practical help to adults at critical times in their lives. He has spoken at workshops and lectureships at many of the Christian colleges, and speaks on special occasions at a dozen churches a year.



# **WHAT EVERY CHRISTIAN SHOULD KNOW ABOUT RAISING FAITHFUL KIDS**

**Ron Rose**

When you focus your attention on what you can see, you can get pretty pessimistic. Pick up the front page of any newspaper and you will see stories that point out the cruelest realities of life. Push a button and television dramatizes life's deepest emotions; radio endlessly broadcasts the story of personal heartbreak. If your life is not conspicuously different from the media menu, then you have the right to be pessimistic and faithless. You also have the right to doubt your knack for raising children with any other view of life than yours.

For the Christian, life—real life—is not depicted in the daily media fare. God's will is that people learn to look beyond the realities of the obvious, to see through the seen to the unseen, to develop a new perspective on life. It is God's will that people live by faith. With God's help, you will be successful in passing your faith along to your children.

## **THE SEARCH FOR DEFINITION**

Not long ago, there was a study on the power of hope done at Duke University. The researchers set up two vats nearly full of water. Several rats were prepared for this study. The first vat had a plug at the top. One at a time, the appropriate number of rats took their turn

swimming in the vat with the plugged top. One rat actually stayed alive for six minutes. He had the record. Finally, it was time to test the rats in the vat without the plug. The first rat placed in the water swam for 36 hours before the researchers stopped the experiment. It seems that even a rat's life is changed when there is a glimmer of hope.

The foundation concept of faith is that regardless of how hopeless a life situation may be, one's vat is not plugged. At times, there seems to be no rational alternative; it seems a person may be finally trapped. The common concern that people bring to professional counseling is the trapped, hopeless, powerless feeling. Interestingly, the major cause of church dropout is a prevailing sense of hopelessness. For these troubled people, faith seems lifetimes away. Yet it is through these difficult times that one develops a trust in the unseen—faith.

According to Hebrews 11, "faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen." One of the best ways to test your own level of faith is to evaluate your attitude about life. Do you look beyond the traps? Do you look for positive traits in people that you don't see? When life seems hopeless, do you expect the impossible?

### **A CREED TO BELIEVE**

As we define faith, first let's look at what we believe. Even though the Church of Christ does not profess statements of creed other than the Bible itself, some basic beliefs would be generally accepted:

- I believe in a God who has revealed Himself to be the living and true God, perfect in love and righteousness.
- I believe in a God who discloses Himself to mankind through His creation and has redemptively spoken in the words and events of history.
- I believe Scripture is an essential part of and a trustworthy account of this Divine disclosure and all the books of the Old and New Testament are given by Divine inspiration.
- I believe the only Mediator between God and mankind is Christ Jesus, our Lord, God's eternal Son, who fully shared and fulfilled our humanity in a life of perfect obedience.
- I believe the Holy Spirit renews our hearts, persuades us to repent, and blesses us with unity.
- I believe there is a God who by His Word and Spirit creates His church, that members of this church are summoned by Christ to offer acceptable service and encouragement to each other, and that God's redemptive purpose will be consummated by the return of Christ, to raise the dead and judge all people according to His grace.

These belief statements affirm the relationship between the Creator and His creation, but they do not define faith. When I was a youth, the term "keeping the faith" referred to "holding to the old paths." The emphasis was on believing what was "right"; and if I would affirm my position on the "old paths," believing the accepted statements, then I truly possessed faith.

As I grew, I began to realize how unfair it was to define faith in terms of what you believe—faith is more. James puts it this way: “You believe there is one God, good, even the demons believe that and shudder” (James 2:19).

**IMPLICATION**—Shaping and molding the faith of your children is more challenging than simply training your children to adhere to some set of belief statements.

### **A CONCEPT TO ACCEPT**

For many Christians, faith is directly connected to how much one knows. Study is the key word. A premium is placed on knowledge. The Bible, then, is transformed into a textbook to be read and studied and quoted from. Therefore, the most faith-producing activity one can participate in is studying the Bible. (Remember, the Scribes and Pharisees were famous for their knowledge—not their faith.)

The fact is that faith is built on knowledge, but it's not knowledge of the Book—it's knowledge of a Person. For example, when you make a new friend, you learn about him—his past, his dreams, his fears, his values. As the friendship grows, trust develops and more information is shared. The friendship then moves closer. It is God's plan for us to read and study the Bible in order to get to know God in the same way we get to know a new friend.

Peter understood this relationship between faith and knowledge when he described the growth process as starting with faith—“add to your faith, goodness;

and to goodness, knowledge; and to knowledge, self-control..." (2 Peter 1:5). Granted, knowledge is part of the process, but it is only a part.

**IMPLICATION**—In order to guide your children along the pathway to faith, you tell them of your growing relationship with God. Becoming a master of the Bible is not nearly so important as growing closer to God.

### **A COVENANT TO KEEP**

Faith is more than believing the right things; it is more than knowing the right things. The key to understanding faith is the idea of promise (covenant). In 2 Peter 1:3,4, we discover that God has given us everything we need for life and Godliness; our task is to act as if God will keep His promise. Simply put, God promises to open the vat; so faith is living as though we are sure there is hope.

Paul illustrates this promise idea in Romans 4:19-21:

*Without weakening in his faith, he faced the fact that his body was as good as dead—since he was about a hundred years old—and that Sarah's womb was also dead. Yet he did not waver through unbelief regarding the promise of God, but was strengthened in his faith and gave glory to God, being fully persuaded that God had the power to do what He had promised.*

Abraham acted as if God would keep His promise even when it looked as if the vat had been plugged.

God made a promise/covenant with Abraham, and Abraham's attitude about life was changed. God has made a promise/covenant with you:

*I will put my laws in their minds and write them on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people. No longer will a man teach his neighbor, or a man his brother, saying, "Know the Lord," because they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest. I will forgive their wickedness, and will remember their sins no more.*

Faith is living as if God will keep his covenant with you; it is looking through the seen to the unseen. It is walking by faith in the covenant maker, not by the limited sight of our own perspective on life. If this is what faith is, then you don't know what kind of faith you have until it is tested, and it will be tested.

**IMPLICATION**—You can help your children to understand the concept of promise by developing your own family covenant. You might promise: to listen first, to forgive and forget, to be affirming, to be honest, etc. A covenant is mutual promising!

**IMPLICATION**—By asking your children to help you see beyond the life situation, beyond the feeling of being trapped, beyond the hopelessness, and beyond what everyone else is doing, you will help them to come to you when their faith is being tested.



## HOW DOES FAITH DEVELOP?

Faith does not develop in one or two super-spiritual experiences. In his book *Faith Shaping*, Stephen Jones suggests seven steps in the process of development. These steps describe the process in an extremely practical way.

- (1) *Experiencing*. There is a time in life when spiritual experiences are new and exciting. These strange emotions are difficult to describe. How do you talk about feelings of awe and adoration the first time you feel them?

IMPLICATION—It is important for parents to provide a large number of spiritual experiences for their children. Devotionals, retreats, youth gatherings, special assemblies, and private times provide great potential for spiritual feelings; therefore, they ought to be the best.

- (2) *Categorizing*. After these spiritual feelings have been noticed, the child tries to sort through feelings, experiences, and memories. This sorting procedure is new and sometimes upsetting. Inevitably, all the feelings don't fit.

IMPLICATION—Help your children to sort through the feelings; don't do the sorting for them. Never ridicule an idea expressed, no matter how crazy it seems. Make sure the basic concepts of Christianity are explored; these concepts should give structure to the sorting process.

- (3) *Choosing*. This step requires a personal decision. The youth must choose what seems to be true. Your parents did not make these choices for you, and you cannot make these choices for your kids.

IMPLICATION—Modeling of your spiritual choices will have a powerful impact on these struggling young people. During this growth time, it is normal for some kind of doubt to be experienced. Doubt is part of the choosing process. Encourage your children to think by asking their opinions and listening beyond their words. Challenge them to question; questioning is good at this point.

- (4) *Claiming*. “I have decided to be baptized. I want to be a Christian.” These words are claiming words. They are the dearest words to the Christian parent’s heart. This is a lifetime milestone. It is a marker event that gives the youth identity and purpose.

IMPLICATION—To encourage your young people to claim Jesus as their Savior and Lord, a parent should talk openly about the decision. Plan special ways to celebrate this milestone. Write a personal letter describing your feelings. Keep the letter and give it to your youngster one year from the day.

- (5) *Deepening*. Remember, it takes time to grow faith. However, time can also destroy faith. It is helpful to know that no one has ever gone

through life feeling close to God all the time. So when times of doubt come, look for ways to grow.

**IMPLICATION**—Try to remember your struggles in the first years of your faith, and share those struggles with your youngster. Support this deepening process by encouraging the new Christian to spend lots of time with faithful people, young and old, in the church.

- (6) *Separating*. There comes a time when all teenagers must leave home in an emotional and a physical way. This move away from parents allows the teen to leave as a child and return as a friend. There will be time of apparent separation from God, too. This is a natural but painful step.

**IMPLICATION**—You can help the youth through this time of separation by sharing your personal wilderness times (struggle times). Peeling off the success mask will give you the opportunity to relieve feelings of guilt, despair, and failure. Never let this sever the relationship.

- (7) *Responding*. Now, the young adult is ready to give personal gifts, talents, and abilities to the Lord. People at this step now own their own faith. Although family and friends have had a major part in the development process, the faith truly belongs to the young adult.

**IMPLICATION**—You must provide opportunity for youth to be involved in the total life of the church. A renewed commitment is pos-

sible because of a "second touch." Like the blind man in Mark 8, we see things more clearly after the second touch. Help people discover their God-given gifts through study and affirmation.

### WHAT CAN WE DO?

In Mark 9, Jesus encouraged his followers to welcome the children in His name. Actually, the followers were to open doors for the children—doors of faith. Your task as a parent is simply to spend a lifetime opening the doors of faith. There is a door at each of the seven faith development steps. Each door is ready to open.

### LEARNING FROM THE PAST

With the best of intentions, the church has used six different techniques designed to keep our children faithful. None of them has worked, but by looking at these unsuccessful techniques, a careful observer can learn a great deal about what will work.

- (1) *Attendance.* Just keep the kids attending church services and eventually they will develop faith. Although attending church can help develop faith, a resentful youth may never benefit from forced church attendance. The bitterness keeps the doors closed.

**IMPLICATION**—The kids will come to services that are designed to meet their needs. Our emphasis should be on providing quality learning opportunities which open all the faith development doors. Parents can help by encouraging the church to plan activities which focus on the expressed needs of the kids. This is most important in the junior high years.

- (2) *Aisles*. This line of reasoning suggests that we should preach sermons that motivate kids to walk down the aisle. This faith-by-the-aisle technique is dangerous. It can actually build more walls than bridges. The invitation is important, but not as a method of keeping your children faithful.

**IMPLICATION**—The invitation time could be used as a reporting time. The emphasis could be one sharing what God is doing in our lives. This kind of time builds sensitivity to people of all ages and situations in life. Open sharing of life experiences helps open several faith doors.

- (3) *Keep 'em busy*. Keep the kids involved in all kinds of activities and they will become busy adults. Perhaps, but does activity alone ever cause us to look beyond the seen to the unseen? In fact, over-scheduling activities can tear down relationships quickly and effectively.

**IMPLICATION**—Activity is important to faith development. Doing things as an expression of faith—devotionals, mission trips, service projects, etc.—can open many doors. It is important to remember that the focus is

on faith expression, not just doing things. Activities with a purpose build memories that will help us look for the unseen when our faith is threatened.

- (4) *Groups*. Everyone needs a place to belong. Belonging to the youth group at church is important, but being a group member doesn't guarantee faith development. In fact, group membership can destroy faith.

IMPLICATION—Groups can be built by focusing inside the group or by focusing outside the group. In order to develop faith, it is necessary to focus outside the group. That is why team building projects should focus outside the group.

- (5) *Osmosis*. This let-it-happen technique is never effective. The concept is that if we give God the room to operate, He will develop our children's faith without our biases getting in the way. That's a cop-out!

IMPLICATION—It is true that our children will develop faith at their own rate. It is not true that the osmosis technique will let their faith (not our super-imposed faith) develop. Our children deserve to hear firsthand about our faith, our struggles, and our victories.

- (6) *Rob-the-cradle*. When all else seems to fail, let's just start earlier. The answer to the faith drop-out problem must be to baptize our children earlier in their life, maybe age seven or eight.

**IMPLICATION**—Generally, children younger than eleven haven't developed adult reasoning abilities; thus, if we baptize too early, the kids will want to be baptized again when they begin thinking like adults. We should encourage young children to obey God and want to please Him, and leave baptism to age 11 or 12 at the earliest.

## **HOW TO GET STARTED**

In order to pass our faith along to our children, we have got to believe God will keep His promises; we have to be aware of our own growing faith; we have to look for opportunities to see beyond the obvious. Remember, faith development is a process. It's more than belief, more than knowledge; it's a promise that God's ready to open doors for greater faith.

Plan to take advantage of life's moments and watch your own faith grow (2 Thessalonians 1:3). Use the threatening times as opportunities to demonstrate your faith. Listen for comments from your children that remind you of Ephesians 1:15: "...because I have heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love toward all the saints... ."

## CARL BRECHEEN

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# KEYS TO GREATER INTIMACY IN MARRIAGE

Carl Brecheen

The American family is in trouble. Marriages are hurting, even Christian marriages. Strangely, the happily-married couple seems an oddity in our times. This is true even among those we once admired.

The divorce rate continues to climb, with more than one million divorces every year in our country. But the divorce rate is only the tip of the iceberg. Many couples maintain the appearance of a healthy marriage, but the substance of the marriage is gone.

In the past, little help has been available, and our culture has taught young couples that they should be able to work out their own problems without external help. Even the church has not been able to hold many of these couples in their marriages.

Today, increasing help is available. Skills that have been needed for young couples are now understood much better and can be communicated to these couples not only in counseling, but in other types of settings.

David Mace, one of the best-known and most highly-respected specialists in the field of marriage and the family, says that there are three essentials to a happy marriage. First, there must be a commitment to growth. This commitment will show itself in a willingness to participate in whatever activities are needed to improve the

quality of the marriage relationship. There must be this willingness on the part of both partners, or the marriage is doomed to mediocrity or failure.

The second essential is effective communication skills. One marriage specialist makes the statement that "the ability to communicate in mutually-affirming ways is the essential ingredient for marital happiness." It will be impossible for a marriage to grow without effective communication skills that serve as a vehicle for growth.

The third essential ingredient is the ability to use conflict as raw material for growth. Many of our young people enter the marriage relationship believing that conflict is an enemy. Some seek to avoid it at all costs. Others simply ignore it, hoping that it will go away. Still others panic and see it as a certain sign that the marriage is doomed. Such is not the case in reality. Conflict is actually a "friend." Not that we should seek conflict but, when it comes, we should accept it as a natural consequence of an intimate relationship.

Conflict is an arrow pointing to an area in the relationship which needs attention and work. However, a couple that can effectively face and reconcile each conflict as it arises in the marriage will find that their marriage grows stronger and stronger with the passing years.

Robert and Patricia Travis had both been through painful divorces before they found each other and decided to marry. Each had made a personal decision without the knowledge of the other, that this present marriage would not fail. Each was determined to read, study, attend seminars and workshops—in short, do whatever it took to make this marriage work.

After months of such activity, each learned that the other was working diligently toward the same goals, and they decided to merge their efforts. They began to write down on newsprint all the things that seemed important to making any marriage the best it could be. They brought their newsprint together in their living room and affixed them to the wall. They sat on the floor together, viewing their work and wondering how they could condense it enough to make sense to others. In their book *Vitalizing Intimacy in Marriage*, they tell the story of their search. They came up with five areas which deserve special focus and attention in order that a marriage may be really good.

First, “*Who are you?*” In a good marriage, there must be the realization that each person changes a little every day. These changes may be almost imperceptible, but if they are not observed, they make a significant difference over a period of time. We all know of those who have said, “This is not the same person that I married,” and that statement is true. No one of us is the same person even the next day, much less five, ten, or fifteen years later. With this realization, every couple needs constantly to ask the questions, “Who are you?” “Who are you *today?*” “What are you thinking?” “What are you feeling?” “What is going on inside you?” They need to say, “I really need to know how you are changing if I am to maintain an intimate relationship with you.”

Second, “*There are three of us.*” Each of us is still an individual, and we must not lose that individuality. At the same time, we have created a third entity that is “us.” I will continue to have some individual needs.

My spouse will continue to have some individual needs. But our marriage will also have some unique needs. To ignore any one of these three dimensions of the relationship is to overlook something that is extremely important.

Third, “*Where are we going?*” Our marriage will be what we make it—nothing more, nothing less. We must accept responsibility for making it, with God’s help, what we want it to be. We need to spend some time dreaming dreams about the future and planning to make those dreams come true. We cannot expect good things to happen unless we plan and make them happen.

Fourth, “*Let’s touch each other.*” The importance of touching in an intimate relationship cannot be over-emphasized. Couples who share life together must constantly reach out to each other with love and affection. Virginia Satir has said,

*Hugging can be vital to your emotional well-being. Everybody feels skin hunger throughout their lives, and unless that hunger is satisfied by touching, there is a vital void in the emotional makeup that is going to cause deep unhappiness. We all know that babies thrive on frequent stroking. Well, adults are not different. When they are not patted on the hand, or embraced around the shoulder, or hugged, they withdraw into themselves. I prescribe four hugs a day for survival, eight for maintenance, and twelve for growth.*

My wife and I have established four contact points that we make every day without fail. We call these “the

four most important minutes of the day.” The first of these minutes is our first greeting to each other when we awake in the morning. This greeting includes a hug, a kiss, and some words of affection. This brief exchange sets the tone for the way we feel about each other and the way we feel about our marriage throughout the rest of the day. The second important minute is the last minute before we separate for the day’s activities. We always have a hug and a kiss and exchange words of affection and encouragement. This moment sets the tone for the way we feel about each other and about our marriage during the time that we are apart. The third most important minute of the day is the first minute that we are together at the end of the day’s activities. This greeting always includes a hug and a kiss and words of endearment. This sets the tone for the way we feel about each other and our marriage during the evening hours. The fourth most important minute of the day is the last minute before we drop off to sleep at night. This minute, like the minutes described above, includes a hug and a kiss and words of affection and appreciation. This sets the tone for the way we feel about each other and our marriage as we drop off to sleep.

We believe that these points of contact insure that we do not get through any day without regularly reaching out to touch each other. There is no way to tell you how important we feel these contact points are to a growing marriage. They are surely not the only points of touching, but they insure that no day will pass without a touch.

Fifth, *“Let’s talk with each other about ourselves.”* We need to be willing to let our partner know every day

what's going on inside us. We should not hesitate to share both the good and the bad. We should not say things that hurt our partner, but our partner needs to know how we're feeling, what we're thinking, what we are concerned about, what is putting pressure on us, and how life in general is looking.

We recommend a period of "checking in" every morning. This is a ten-minute period during which each of us looks inwardly for a few minutes and then describes to the partner eight or ten things that we find inside us. We find this practice very helpful in minimizing problems, nipping difficulties in the bud, and keeping lines of communication open between us.

## **DEALING WITH CONFLICT AND ANGER**

Every married couple must learn to handle effectively the conflict which inevitably arises in their relationship. Without these coping skills, anger, resentment, and bitterness threaten the quality of the relationship.

One of the discoveries made in recent years has been the realization that conflict cannot be resolved until anger is processed. If two people try to handle their conflicts while they are still angry with each other, they tend to attack each other rather than the problem.

Dr. David Mace has made some important discoveries with regard to anger. He suggests that anger is a physiological response. We thus become angry before we have time to think. Because this is true, it is impossible to live in an intimate relationship without at some point becoming angry with one's partner. If couples allow the

anger to persist, it tends to become permanently imbedded in the relationship and contaminates every aspect of it. Dr. Mace believes that this failure to process anger effectively is the chief cause for divorce.

If, on the other hand, a couple learns to handle their anger in appropriate ways which minimize its destructive power, they are able to discuss their conflicts calmly in ways that can make the marriage stronger.

Dr. Mace recommends a three-step approach to processing anger in a marriage. Step One: Each partner gives the other permission to be angry. This step recognizes that anger is inevitable. There is no way to maintain an intimate relationship without occasional anger. Thus, permission is granted for the partner to become angry. Also included in this permission is a mutual promise by each of the partners to the other that "I will not hurt you when I am angry. I promise not to hurt you physically, ever, and I promise not to hurt you with words." This is an extremely important part of the process, because it develops trust. It also recognizes that we cannot deeply love a person that we fear.

Step Two in the process is an agreement that we will quickly report an anger that we feel toward our partner. Anger should be reported immediately when that is appropriate. There are times, however, when it is inappropriate to report anger immediately. In these cases, the anger must be reported within 24 hours. In such cases, the Scripture "Let not the sun go down upon your wrath" is a good approach. The couple probably should not retire for the evening while still angry. Anger that has been allowed to go unattended for more than a few hours tends to become bitterness. It is likely to fester in

such cases, and may eventually lead to an explosion over some seemingly unimportant matter.

The third step in the process is a request which says, "Help me with my anger." This request recognizes that the anger does not simply belong to the person who possesses it, but it is shared by the partner.

Once the anger has been resolved, there may or may not be a conflict remaining which needs attention. Sometimes the anger evaporates when one finds that the cause was unintentional or because of a misunderstanding. On other occasions, there is a conflict which needs attention. Many individuals have grown up in our society convinced that a marriage which is working properly will develop no conflicts. Thus, when conflicts arise, the couple is convinced that the marriage is not working properly. This is a terrible misconception. Conflict is inevitable in an intimate relationship. It is impossible for two people to live closely together without finding that they come at certain issues in their life together in different ways. Each has been programmed by his background to function in a certain way. When it is discovered that the partner is programmed to function in a different way, conflict is inevitable. Conflict, however, should not be viewed as an enemy of the relationship. Conflict is, instead, much like a strange sound that develops in an automobile engine. It indicates that something is wrong and needs attention. When appropriate attention is given to the strange sound, it can be eliminated, and the automobile can run smoothly again. In the marriage relationship, conflict indicates an area that needs attention, and perhaps adjustment. If handled properly, conflict resolution can make the



marriage much better than it ever could have been had the matter gone unattended.

There are several approaches to conflict resolution. Much work has been done by experts in this area. One approach suggests that there are only three basic ways to resolve marital conflict: capitulation, compromise, and coexistence.

Capitulation is a natural way to resolve many conflicts. This approach says, "It doesn't matter all that much to me. I will be glad to join you in doing it your way." This may be done as a gift of love from one partner to another.

Compromise is probably the most frequent way to resolve marital conflicts. Each of us knew when we married that we could not always have our way. We realized, if we were realistic, that two people cannot always agree, and that neither can consistently have his own way without being unfair to the partner. Thus, some kind of compromise would seem to be the best way to approach most conflicts. I do not get my way. My partner does not get her way. But somewhere between, there is a compromise approach that the two of us can agree upon.

The third approach is coexistence. This means that there will be some areas in which neither partner changes his mind. It is possible for two people to disagree in many areas and still be happily married. It is also possible, however, that coexistence means that they are pulled apart and that their energies are expended in isolated activities. Too many of these areas left unresolved tend to damage the marriage relationship.

## TIME TO GROW

Marriage is a search for intimacy. It is a search for someone who will know us completely and love us adoringly. In order for this intimate relationship to become the delight that we want it to be, we must be willing to spend time together interacting. Couples who cannot or will not spend time together—not just time in the same house or the same room, but time together talking and sharing—will never develop the intimacy they both want.

It takes time to grow a great relationship. I am convinced that most relationships are too tenuous to ever become really strong. One of the functions of marriage is to bind two people together permanently in order that they may develop a really great love.

But love does not grow automatically just because two people are married. Growth depends on communication. It depends on words and actions—the way two people treat each other and speak to each other, and the attitudes which govern these words and actions.

Love is nurtured by words which say, “I love you,” “I need you,” and “I enjoy being with you.” Love is also nurtured by compliments—compliments to the spouse and complimentary statements about the spouse.

Uncomplimentary statements or words, on the other hand, tear down and destroy. A good rule to follow in all human relationships is “Never say anything that is uncomplimentary to or about another unless some really important principle is at stake.” That rule is especially important in the close quarters of a marriage.

As important as verbal communication is—and it is extremely important—non-verbal communication is even more important. As a matter of fact, the words may sound like or even be a deception if the actions do not match. Words that contradict actions send mixed messages and confuse. To say “I love you” while ignoring or neglecting or mistreating a spouse is patently dishonest and produces deep anger.

On the other hand, words that match actions reinforce messages. A husband who treats his wife with great courtesy and respect can be believed when he says, “I love you.” A wife who berates or demeans a husband will not be believed when she says adoring things.

It is important for husbands and wives to study each other’s needs. Everyone needs respect. Everyone needs to feel needed, appreciated, and treasured by others. Everyone needs compliments and approval. Everyone needs to be accepted and valued as a person of worth. Beyond these common needs shared by everyone, every person has specific, personal needs which may be unique. Unless these needs are recognized and met, there will be an erosion of happiness and one’s sense of well-being.

It is important to the marriage that each person communicate to the other specific needs which are not being met. It would be nice to think that the partner would be sensitive enough to know without being told just what to do and say, but such is not usually the case. It is usually necessary to communicate in very specific terms just what one’s needs are. To communicate in non-demeaning, non-accusing ways is not always easy. But it is impossible for the spouse to automatically know what

we are thinking. And it is easy to get busy and get so involved in one's own problems and challenges that we go for days without making special efforts to meet our partner's needs.

A communication rhythm which helps husband and wife to affirm each other's self-esteem will increase the depth of intimacy in a marriage. Learning to communicate verbally and non-verbally their warm, loving "I care" messages can have a lasting, positive effect. Effective use of the sense of touch—a hand on the arm or around the shoulder or waist—is often worth more than words. No partner should ever assume "my partner knows I love him/her."

A growing sense of intimacy should not require minute-to-minute reinforcement, but even the healthiest husbands and wives have enough doubts about themselves as persons worth loving to need regular affirmation from each other.

A magazine cartoon showed a husband and wife leaving the office of the marriage counselor. The wife was saying to the husband, "Now that we have learned to communicate, shut up!" It is obvious that learning to be aware of and communicate real feelings in words is not the whole answer to the problem of communication. Need-satisfying communication becomes interpersonal communion as richer, more multi-leveled interaction becomes a channel for caring. Couples who have been intimately married for a long time often communicate on deep, subconscious levels. Such communion is something far beyond the mere sending and receiving of messages, as important as these are. It is the result of depth

intimacy, the strong marital identity which is the strand of gold thread in a marriage contract.

No marriage can become what both partners want it to become without conscious planning and effort. But no task on earth pays greater dividends than this shared effort. The beauty of a healthy marriage is a marvel to behold. It blesses not only the two who are directly involved, but the rippling effect also brings blessing to the immediate environment and ultimately makes the world a better place in which to live.



**FEATURED  
CLASS**

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approximately 35 seminars, retreats, workshops, etc., per year. Speaks for civic groups, parenting groups, library groups, PTA groups, etc. Has worked as a newspaper reporter, secretary, engineering rate specialist, printing and office supply company manager, and seminar leader for Professional Training Associates.

**Other Fields of Special Interest:** Interested in ancient history and archaeology, particularly as it relates to Biblical history.





# REACH FOR YOUR SPIRITUAL POTENTIAL

**Doris Black**

INTRODUCTION: The following lessons are from the book *Reach For Your Spiritual Potential*, and have been arranged for presentation at the 1985 Abilene Christian University Lectureship.\*

## LESSON ONE: **When The Problem With Prayer Is Me**

### **I. Know How To Pray**

Have you ever struggled with a problem and were counseled by other Christians, "Pray about it," and your answer was, "I have," but you were still struggling? Have you ever taken your problems to the Lord and come away feeling guilty because you still felt burdened? Does it seem God never grants your prayer requests? Have you come to the conclusion that you must be asking "amiss" as spoken of in James 4:3?

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\* Doris Black, *Reach For Your Spiritual Potential* (Round Rock, TX: New Day Press, 1983).

But you don't understand how, for you are conscientiously trying to pray as God would have you to.

If you have experienced this dilemma in a major or a minor way, then the dimension for spiritual growth in prayer is especially for you. I particularly identify with you because I struggled with a weak prayer ministry for years until I did an in-depth study on prayer and discovered *How To Overcome The Four Major Barriers To A Powerful Prayer Ministry*.

In this study I found that the main barrier for me had been my inability to see how God granted my prayer petitions. The next chapter will deal with that dimension of prayer exclusively, but the first three barriers (which we will be looking at in this chapter) have the potential to be just as great a handicap. They are:

- (1) Lack of planning;
- (2) Not knowing how to pray; and
- (3) Not being specific.

Surprisingly, as you improve any one of these areas, the others improve proportionately.

### **BARRIER #1—LACK OF PLANNING**

Planning your prayer life sounds so structured and routine that it almost smacks of insincerity. But I believe that reaction is more the result of our own mental image of prayer than the result of information gleaned from the Word of God.

In the gospels we see that Jesus took time to pray regularly—much too regularly for it to be a hit-and-miss-when-ever-he-could-find-the-time arrangement. He must have planned for time in prayer and then took that time in prayer for the scriptures to be able to mention so frequently, “...*Jesus went aside to pray... .*”

But unfortunately, we often treat prayer as though it must be spontaneous to be sincere. And we will have many spontaneous occasions to pray—but if that is the only time we pray, our prayer life will be just about as consistent and successful as:

- (1) Our public worship would be if we worshipped only spontaneously; or
- (2) As successful as our house or yard work would be if it were only taken care of when the mood struck us.

Yet with our lives constantly bombarded by jobs, car pools, meetings, homework sessions, cleaning, cooking, yard work, getting the car lubed, trips to the doctor, dentist and orthodontist, band practice, soccer games, Bible classes, etc., etc., there never seems an appropriate time to pray. And to add to the dilemma, things we are usually doing are important tasks that we can't and shouldn't neglect. But oftentimes “doing good things” is one of Satan's most effective weapons against a devoted Christian. A person dedicated to the Lord is not going to fall for Satan's “Let's do something wicked instead of talk to God” routine. But dedicated people often get so involved doing the good things that there is very little time left for communing with God.

“But isn’t doing good things what Christianity is all about?” Yes, and Jesus did the biggest and the best thing of all. But, Christ returned to heaven while there were still people on the earth that needed to be healed, needed to be taught, needed to be ministered to. Even He did not finish off every “good deed,” nor can we. But one thing Jesus did NOT leave undone was time in prayer, evidently. He needed it to do His Father’s will—and if He did, we certainly do. On the other hand, if His time in prayer is mentioned so often just to leave the example for us, the conclusion is the same. We NEED time in prayer.

Note, many of the times “...*Jesus went aside to pray...*” he was in the midst of teaching, healing, etc. I do not believe this example teaches that we should stop in the middle of teaching, etc. and make a big ordeal of “going aside to pray,” but it certainly does teach Jesus placed a high priority on talking to His Father.

“But how do you go about finding time?” Unfortunately, you can never “find” time for prayer, you must “make” time for prayer, and that takes PLAN-NING. The first step in any plan is decision. The next step is to make that decision a commitment, and the third step is to follow it through. This is a universal principle and a scriptural principle. In James 1:6-8 we are told, “...*A person who doubts is like a wave blown and tossed—a person like that will not receive anything from God for he is unstable in all of his ways... .*” In that passage James is speaking of asking God for wisdom—but this is a “truth” that is applicable in all situations. An unstable person does not receive anything because he does not stick to a course. So if you want

your prayer life to change into a faith-building ministry, make a decision that you are going to change your prayer life—make that decision a commitment—and follow it through.

### **MAKE A SPECIFIC PLAN**

If you decide to improve your prayer life by praying more often, it will be just about as successful as deciding to diet more often. Neither will come to much. A plan for spending time in prayer must be just as specific as a plan for dieting. And with the type and variety of our responsibilities this is not easy—but it is possible.

### **MAKE A PRAYER CYCLE**

We often dread starting prayer, because we have so many things to pray about. We know it is going to take us 30 to 40 minutes...and we don't have that much time right now...and we'll be exhausted by the time we finish...and we are expecting a phone call; so we put it off until bedtime. But the next morning we do not awake feeling refreshed from our time in prayer, we awake feeling guilty because we fall asleep after praying for only the very top portion of our list. And we wonder what is wrong with our faith that we can't even stay awake long enough to place our needs and the needs of others in God's hands.

Let's use our heads. It doesn't take long to realize that to do everything in the whole house every day is impossible. So we develop a schedule to keep everything

done without killing ourselves. Be just as smart in dealing with your prayer responsibilities. I use a prayer cycle: Monday I pray for our married children and their families; Tuesday I pray for our parents, brothers and sisters, and other close relatives; Wednesday I pray for brothers and sisters in Christ that I know have particular needs; Thursday I pray for our church leaders, church programs, and our government leaders; Friday I pray for my husband and myself. That does not mean that I do not pray for these at other times—but my “thought-out” concerns are taken care of regularly.

Do you know what a “thought-out” concern is? A thought-out concern is a request that you have taken time to consider seriously in someone’s behalf. We frequently spend more time selecting the “right” birthday gift for someone we love than choosing a blessing for them from God’s great wealth. Paul’s writings give us some examples of specific “thought-out” blessings he requested. For example, in Colossians 4:2-6, he asked the Colossians to pray to God to open a door for his message and the ability to proclaim it clearly. An example of a thought-out concern for one of my prayer benefactors might be, “Help her to learn to speak gently and firmly to her children...Help him to grow in perseverance...Help him to be more aware of the multitude of tasks his wife copes with...Help her to grow in her understanding of your power... .”

### **MAKE A PRAYER BOOK**

When I made the decision to work at making my prayer life more fulfilling, I knew I needed a prayer

book. Not because I found a scripture that said, "For a fulfilling prayer ministry thou shalt make a book and therein write down what thou prayest for." No, I needed it because I often forgot prayer commitments. On several occasions I had sisters ask for my prayers and I would shoot off a short mini-prayer at the time and then promptly forget their burden, only to be painfully reminded when I met them face to face that I had not been praying for them. The memory of those times was the motivation for my prayer book, but I soon discovered many other dimensions it added to my prayer ministry.

My prayer book was also the perfect place to list my thought-out concerns for the people in my prayer cycle. I put each of their names at the top of a page. On that page I listed my thought-out concerns and the date. Then I left room for regular status reports. Lo and behold, as I went through these concerns week after week, I discovered God was granting every prayer petition, but I had never seen before because I had never known how to "watch." As I looked again at the teachings on prayer I realized that we are not only told to pray, but we are also told to WATCH and THANK Him for the answer (Colossians 4:2).

My prayer book kept my focus on "past" prayer requests. One of my problems had been that I would be praying fervently about one concern and then a more serious or urgent one would come up. I would start focusing my prayers on it and then another one would come up that would claim my attention. In the meantime, God might have granted my request on the first, but I did not see because my attention was on the latest

one. Consequently, I never realized or thanked Him for His answer. I was truly a very negligent and ungrateful child.

This book has been one of my greatest faith builders. Any time I am tempted to become discouraged, I can glance through it and recall all the times God has rescued and blessed me and those I love. These memories quickly lift me out of any snares Satan prepares for me and fill me with confidence that my God is alive and well and taking care of me.

### **BE SPECIFIC**

Often when we become discouraged because we don't see God answering our prayers, we begin to pray more and more in generalities. In fact, our prayer life often deteriorates into little more than the adult version of "Now I lay me down to sleep, I pray the Lord... ." And unfortunately that only adds to our problems, because when we start resorting to generalized prayers we can't receive anything but generalized answers—that we never see.

For example, if you pray, "God please help me be a better Christian," when does the day come that you wake up ready to thank God because you are a "better" Christian? It doesn't happen. But if you pray, "Help me to discipline myself to spend time in your Word daily...help me to pray consistently this week...help me to speak softly and gently to my children...help me to pay the electric bill... ," then you can clearly see the result and clearly thank God for His answer. Thanking



God for His answers is much more than just exercising good manners. It plays a powerful role in your overall spiritual growth. And we will discuss this aspect in more depth later.

### **OVERCOMING BARRIER #3 KNOWING HOW TO PRAY**

Having grown up in the Word of God, it did not occur to me that I needed to learn how to pray. After all, how much do you need to know? You just bow your head and talk to God in the name of Jesus Christ. But as I studied, I realized there were many things I did not know and even more that I did not understand.

I learned there are five aspects of prayer mentioned in the New Testament. And for a well-balanced prayer life you need to include all five. Jesus did. He mentioned the first three (Praise, Needs, Confession) in what is known as “The Lord’s Prayer”; he referred to the fourth (Thanksgiving) in John 11:41; and the fifth (Intercession) consumes the major portion of John 17. Let’s look at the dimensions of each.

### **PRAISE**

Praising God is a valuable tool for OUR individual spiritual growth—a rather surprising fact. Because usually praise is for the benefit of the “praisee,” not the “praiser.” But in God’s case our

knowledge of His greatness and power is so limited that we are like amateurs pointing out to a concert pianist that he does “Chopsticks” very well. And for years this awareness made me uncomfortable in my attempts at praise.

However, the example of praise is very clearly recorded in scripture; therefore, I very determinedly started to include praise in my prayer ministry. It felt unnatural at the beginning, but I found reading aloud from the Psalms of praise was a comfortable alternative. Shortly, I realized the praise was not for the purpose of reminding God of His greatness; rather, it was for the purpose of reminding ME of His greatness. We all need to recall on a regular basis that it is God’s strength and protection that we must rely on and that his love, mercy, and faithfulness constantly surround us. The consistent use of praise in our prayer life fills this need and adds dimension to our spiritual growth.

## THANKSGIVING

Much of the time when our Christian walk is dull and mediocre, it is the result of not understanding or practicing the dimensions of thanksgiving (gratitude, insight, and appreciation). But thanks be to God, for submitting to His commands of thanksgiving can add these dimensions to our spiritual growth.

- (1) *Gratitude*. The acknowledgment of “Thanks” not only has power and purpose in our spiritual life, it also has power and purpose in our

secular life. Consider—as children, we are taught to say “thank you” long before we know the meaning of the words. But the repeated use of these words not only teaches us their meaning but makes us realize that when someone serves us (whether it be with a drink of water or the opening of a door), he deserves our gratitude. Could the 12 times in the New Testament we are told to practice thankfulness be for the same purpose—to teach us gratitude?

- (2) *Insight.* But one of those times (1 Thessalonians 5:18, “...give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus...”) is often difficult to implement. For there are a multitude of life experiences that are not easy to be thankful in. But it is possible when we realize that being “thankful in” and being “happy about” are not one and the same. Being “happy about” is an emotional response to our circumstance, while being “thankful in” is an attitude and a behavior. The attitude is our mental approach to that event, while the behavior is the literal practice of saying, “Thank you God.” But how can we say “Thank you” for the loss of a loved one, the loss of a job, a flood that destroyed our uninsured furniture, carpeting, etc., etc? We often respond to such dilemmas by rationalizing, “I don’t think God means be thankful for this; He just means to live my life in an overall attitude of thankfulness.” And God does intend that we live our lives in an attitude of thankfulness, but no mat-

ter how many translations we read of this scripture, no matter how we twist or turn it, 1 Thessalonians 5:18 still commands, “...*In every circumstance give thanks, for this is God’s plan for you... .*” This means not only to live in the attitude of thankfulness, but also to practice the behavior of thankfulness.

And that behavior (simply saying, “Thank you for...”) can not only draw our attention to His care in every situation, but it can also teach us to see His will. A scriptural example of this concept can be found in Paul’s remarks in Philippians 1:12-19. He said in effect that he now realizes his imprisonment is for the best because:

- (a) The guards and everyone have become aware that he is imprisoned for Christ’s sake;
- (b) Other Christians are now boldly preaching Christ; and
- (c) Many Christians no longer fear being imprisoned.

Yet Paul did not want to go to prison or want to stay in prison. While there, he persistently prayed to be released, and asked others to pray for his release. He prayed without doubting, for he wrote he was confident he would soon be free and be able to join them (Philippians 2:24). But he was wrong.

However, his letter to the Philippians was filled with thanksgiving, rejoicing, and praise, and it was also filled with insight as to how

God's will was being served BY THE RESULT of Paul's imprisonment. Could it be that thanking God IN every circumstance not only focuses our attention on the blessings in each event but also REVEALS God's use of each event in our lives? But many of those events are painful—because God has given man the power of choice, and the consequences of those choices are often tragedy. For example, the man who decides to drink decides to drive, and accidentally kills a child. But if following such a tragedy, the parents can bow their heads and say, "Thank you for the gift of this child and the joy she was in our lives, thank you she is safely in your arms, thank you she will never feel the pain we are experiencing, thank you for all the people who comforted us during this time, thank you for the grace to forgive this man and the strength to leave his punishment or pardon in your hands, thank you for the empathy and understanding we now have of other parents who suffer such loss and the ability we will have in the future to comfort them." In this example they are not thanking God their child is dead. They are thanking God IN the circumstance, and THE RESULT is they are growing in forgiveness, strength to resist vengeance, love and empathy for others, and appreciation of people's kindness, all of which are the will of God.

- (3) *Positive Thinking.* Practicing thankfulness IN every circumstance also trains us to develop a

positive attitude and become a channel for God's encouragement in the lives of others. For example, when my husband and I married, he was a new baby Christian. He was not ready to serve in many ways I wanted to. So I had the option of seizing the spiritual leadership of our family or waiting for him. I decided to wait—but what I did in fact was evaluate his spiritual shortcomings and get busy “praying them away.” At the same time, I sincerely (but arrogantly) chose spiritual goals for him and got busy “praying him into those.” But, before he could reach one spiritual plateau, I was already praying for the next one. The result was, no matter how fast he grew, he did not measure up to my spiritual vision for him. Consequently, he was always in the shadow of failure. Eventually God's teachings and insight convicted me of what I was doing. Consequently, I changed my thinking and my prayer life. I started thanking God for the man my husband was and all the qualities and virtues I appreciated in him. Though I said nothing to him about the change in my prayers for him, he could sense that the vibrations of criticism had changed to vibrations of appreciation. Not only did his spiritual growth go straight up, but so did his confidence and achievements in many other areas.

A second example of the practical application of thanksgiving concerns one of our daughters. She married and moved to a rural area that had

a small, struggling church. There were very few people her age, and I was afraid she would become discouraged. I started praying fervently every day that God would not allow the situation to weaken her faith and commitment. I agonized for two years before I realized that she was not discouraged, not weakened in her commitment, but in fact was thriving. I had been agonizing daily over what might happen tomorrow instead of “thanking God for what he was doing today.” In both of these situations, I had been focusing on the negative. Only thanking God IN each circumstance turned my negative focus into a positive one. We must never neglect thanksgiving in our prayer ministry, for it is the key to a happy, confident, and exciting Christian walk.

## CONFESSION

Prayerful confession of our individual sins is a valuable tool for our overall spiritual growth. But Satan will try to con you out of its benefit. He whispers, “Just lump them all together; after all, God knows what you’ve done. He even knows sins you’ve committed that you are unaware of.” And it sounds reasonable—until you realize you are being cheated of the “overcoming power” of confession. Think about it. What is the first step an alcoholic must take to overcome his alcoholism? He must admit he is an alcoholic. He must face his problem. Confession in prayer is an even more powerful

dynamic. It is to your benefit to confess to God, “Please forgive me for gossiping today, forgive me for the rumor I repeated, forgive me for the lie I told, forgive me for the resentment in my heart against my husband, etc., etc.” By enumerating your sins to God, you are confronted with behaviors and attitudes in your life that need to change, problems you need to work on. And the repeated confession of some sin draws your attention to how strongly it has you bound. By way of contrast, Jesus simply says in Matthew 6:11, “...*forgive us of our sins as we forgive those that sin against us...*” but remember Jesus had NO individual sins; so the real focus of His statement was forgiveness—God’s forgiveness of us and our forgiveness of others. The most specific scripture in the New Testament concerning confession of sin in prayer is found in 1 John 1:9, “...*If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness...*” It is comforting to know that confession not only opens the door to overcoming, but even more importantly, it opens the door to forgiveness.

## NEEDS

For most people, the number one cause of anxiety is concern over their needs being met. But as Christians, we can live above that level of anxiety. Paul said in Philippians 4:6, “...*Have no anxiety about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God... .*” And the next verse says, “...*And the peace of*



*God, which passes all understanding, will keep your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus... .”* The key to peace of mind (or freedom from anxiety) is to ask God for whatever you need, and then:

- (1) ACCEPT WHAT COMES AS HIS ANSWER;  
and
- (2) BE CONTENT WITH IT.

God’s response to our requests is similar to ours when our children ask for something—ice cream, for instance. We give it to them, IF they have not already had too many sweets, IF it will not make them sick, IF they have eaten the foods their bodies need for proper nutrition, etc., etc. When we ask God to meet our needs (food, clothing, shelter, etc.), He responds as any trustworthy parent and gives us what is best for us at that time. How do I know? Because in Matthew 7:9-11 Jesus says, “...*Or what man of you, if his son asks him for bread, will give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a serpent? If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask him!... .”* But just like children, we often are not satisfied with what God provides. We want it bigger and better like the child who cries for a three-dip cone (he can’t handle) instead of the one-dip cone (he can handle). Paul said in Philippians 4:11, “...*Not that I complain of want; for I have learned, in whatever state I am, to be content... .”* Paul says contentment is something he learned. And that is encouraging, because if he learned it, so can we if we take the

same mental approach. And his mental approach was “I can live in whatever state God provides for me because Jesus Christ is going to empower me to do so.”

## INTERCESSION

The prayer of intercession is the most frequently mentioned prayer in the New Testament. I do not believe this was accidental—because of all aspects of prayer, it is the one that focuses on the needs of others. And that is the focus of the New Testament—others. Praise in prayer focuses your attention on the greatness and adequacy of God—Confession, Thanksgiving, and Needs focus your attention on you, while Intercession forces your attention to the needs of others. It is easy to become self-absorbed in prayer. Constantly engrossed in: “What I need to change in my life...How weak I am...How short I fall...What I need here...What I need there...Being thankful for helping ME with this...For helping ME with that...etc. But intercessory prayer turns our attention to the needs of others. It makes us aware that:

- (1) I am not the only person that has difficulties;  
and
- (2) I am not the only person with needs that have not been met.

The dynamic power of intercessory prayer is three-faceted. When my heart is right in intercessory prayer, two facets benefit me, and one facet benefits the person

I am praying for. The first facet that benefits me is the obvious one mentioned above—focusing on the needs of others. This protects me from self-absorption and challenges me to grow spiritually through actively trying to lift the burdens of others. The second facet that benefits me goes into operation when I obey the command to “...*pray for your enemies...* .” This exciting aspect of prayer benefits me in several ways:

- (1) It gives me insight. If my heart is right in this prayer, it should convict me of any guilt I have in the conflict. For it is difficult to be petty, overly sensitive, or vindictive while kneeling at God’s feet in prayer.
- (2) It helps me overcome my own evil. The 12th chapter of Romans discusses conflict with others, and one of the points it makes is in verse 21, “...*do not be overcome by evil, but instead overcome evil with good...* .” Through praying for someone that has actually wronged you, you can overcome the strong human desire for revenge. And through obeying Proverbs 25:21,22 concerning behavior toward an enemy, “...*if your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him a drink...*” (returning kind behavior for unkind behavior), you can overcome any feelings of anger and resentment.

It focuses my attention on the “problems” my enemy has and helps me develop a merciful attitude toward him. (Consider Jesus’ example on the cross.) When we pray for an enemy, it does not mean he will not receive

recompense for his sin. His pardon is between himself and God, but praying for him helps us to forgive him and overcome any bitterness or evil that would otherwise make us useless in God's service. There is a dynamic power in intercessory prayer that is far beyond my understanding. Obviously, an affirmative answer to prayer does not depend on the number of people praying. But the Word of God is filled with examples of Christians praying for one another and requesting the prayers of one another. Paul, a man who had been blessed with many spiritual gifts and was being used by God in a mighty way, still wrote to simple, everyday Christians and asked them to pray for him (Romans 15:30-32; 2 Corinthians 1:11; Ephesians 6:19; 20; 2 Thessalonians 3:1). Why? The implication is clear: the power of prayer is magnified as more Christians request the same thing. So, praying for others and requesting the prayers of others is not just a "nice" or "sweet" thing to do—it is a powerful thing to do—a powerful thing that can actually change life for someone else and at the same time change life for you. But you can do all of this and still have a dismal prayer ministry UNLESS you have learned to recognize God's answers to your prayers. The next chapter deals with that dimension for spiritual growth in prayer.

### QUESTIONS FOR THOUGHT

- (1) What point in this section had the most impact on you? Why?
- (2) What interferes with your time in prayer?

- (3) How can you overcome it?
- (4) Discuss Luke 18:1; Philippians 4:6; James 1:5-7; James 5:16.

## **II. Watch for God's Answers**

In "I. Know How to Pray," we discussed how to overcome the first three barriers to a Powerful Prayer Ministry. In this lesson, we will look at the fourth and most difficult obstacle: LEARNING TO SEE GOD'S ANSWERS TO PRAYER. We can practice and benefit from everything we learned in "Know How To Pray," but if we have not learned to recognize God's answers to our prayer petitions, we will (on many occasions) experience a mediocre and discouraging Christian walk and, consequently, a mediocre and discouraging spiritual growth.

### **KNOW THE SCRIPTURES ON PRAYER**

The foundation for "recognizing" God's answers to prayer is to know the scriptures on prayer. There are 27 examples of God answering prayer in the New Testament. There are five passages that enumerate behaviors that will hinder prayer (1 Peter 3:7; 1 John 3:22; Mark 11:25; James 1:7-8, 4:3). But all the examples and passages in the New Testament could be summed up by 1 John 3:22, "*...And whatsoever we ask, we receive of him, because we keep his commandments, and do those things that are pleasing in His sight... .*"

This does not mean we must be sinless to receive from God, but it does mean we must be serious about our commitment. Assuming we understand these passages and what a “serious commitment to God” is, let’s look at how God answers prayer.

### **WATCH FOR ORDINARY ANSWERS**

God answers prayer—he answers it “yes” or he answers it “no.” The “no” answers aren’t difficult to recognize. It is the “yes” answers that often confuse us, often because we limit God to “out-of-the-ordinary” answers, like parting the sea and walking on water. But from looking at Matthew 7:7, 1 John 3:22, and Philippians 4:6, we can conclude that for God to grant our prayer petitions is ordinary—not extraordinary—so we should watch for “ordinary answers.” How? Learn to recognize His providential care.

### **ANSWERS OFTEN COME THROUGH PROVIDENTIAL CARE**

We are often like the young woman who saw a work for the Lord on the other side of a stream. She did not know how to swim; so she bowed her head and prayed for a bridge. When she raised her head a few minutes later, there was no bridge, but the water level had lowered and some stones crossing the stream had appeared—but she didn’t see them because she was looking for a bridge. She bowed her head and prayed again.

She raised her head—no bridge. But in the meantime, lightning had struck a tree and it had fallen across the stream. But she didn't see it—she was looking for a bridge. She bowed her head and prayed again. Some beavers completed a dam that crossed the stream, but when she raised her head she didn't see it because it wasn't a bridge.

She sat down, feeling frustrated and discouraged. She didn't understand—she knew it would be God's will for her to do this work, yet He wasn't providing a bridge. It just seemed that her plans to serve God never worked out.

Then she heard the rattle, rattle, bang, bang of a truck and construction crew driving up. The men jumped out of the truck with picks and shovels and started building a bridge, right at her feet. She smiled in relief and then happily prayed, "Dear heavenly father, you don't need to worry any more about the bridge—the State of Texas is going to build it."

Does God really provide in such ordinary/providential ways? The 11th chapter of Numbers says he does. It tells how God, through ordinary/providential means, answered a request (actually a complaint). This chapter tells how the children of Israel were complaining in the wilderness because they were tired of eating manna—they wanted meat. Verse 31 tells us God caused a wind to blow that brought quail from the seashore and dropped them in the camp until they were several feet deep. God did not zap quail that had previously been nonexistent into the camp. Instead, He brought them from their natural habitat by the sea on a strong wind (another natural part of life) to answer this request.

## **BUT WE MUST HAVE EYES OF FAITH**

But we must have eyes of faith to see His answers. Someone who disbelieves or whose faith is weak would look at this same story and explain it this way: "What happened is no great mystery. There was simply an abundance of quail in the area by the sea that year. And when a high-pressure system up near Macedonia came rushing south and collided with a strong low-pressure system moving up from Egypt, naturally winds of hurricane force developed. They literally picked up the quail, who had no protection on the shores, and blew them several hundred miles into the wilderness. When the winds subsided, the birds were exhausted. They fell to the earth, right in the middle of a nomad camp. You should have seen those nomads—they thought their God did it. But in our enlightened age we know better. It was just a combination of abnormal conditions."

But God says HE DID IT. We often have the desire of faith and can ask without doubting. But we don't have the eyes of faith because when it comes to receiving, we doubt God was responsible. We tend to credit a "combination of circumstances."

## **DOORBELLS, PHONE CALLS, AND PLAIN BROWN ENVELOPES**

We must always be watchful for God's answers because they often arrive through a simple, routine phone call, doorbell, or plain brown envelope.



For example, did you ever pray, “Lead me to some soul today, Oh teach me Lord just what to say,” and then became irritated when your neighbor, whose life is a constant mess, came over and spent the morning talking to you? You got so frustrated because the day was slipping away, and you had planned to call the church secretary and get the name of someone to visit. Or, your mother-in-law (who is not a Christian) called and wanted you to go shopping. You knew she was going to gripe about this, complain about that, and go on and on about her loneliness since her husband died. You just didn’t feel up to it. Besides, you wanted to practice “pure, undefiled religion” today by visiting some widows and orphans. In fact, you had even talked to your class teacher about ministering in this area. But you couldn’t seem to get started because of all these interruptions.

Someone (I don’t know who) christened these obstructions as “Divine Interruptions.” As we grow in spiritual maturity, we recognize them as such and thank God. And we learn to adjust OUR plans to serve Him—to accommodate HIS plans for our service.

Jesus recognized this type of opportunity. Remember the woman at the well in John 4. Meeting her interfered with his plan to go to Jerusalem. He could have irritably noted that she wasn’t even a good candidate to share God’s message with. Her life was a mess, her initial response to him was one of ridicule, and she tried to change the subject when He attempted to talk about her needs. And if taking time with her wasn’t enough, he ended up stuck there for three more days teaching the rest of her village.

But this story is not told with irritation in the New Testament. It is told with victory and joy because it is treated as a “Divine Delay” instead of one more interruption in Jesus’ plans.

Ordinary answers to prayer not only come in the ring of a telephone or doorbell—they often come in plain brown envelopes. For example, our phone billing got put into the wrong computer billing cycle one time and we kept getting cutoff notices almost before we got the bill. Yet, it was not showing on their computer that way. Consequently, we were asked to put up a large deposit. And though we were very indignant, our choices were to remove the phone, pay the deposit, or sue. The most practical choice was to pay the deposit. Shortly after, the phone company discovered the billing cycle error and corrected it—but our deposit was already in the computer and could not be returned for six months.

Six months later, due to the most unlikely set of circumstances, we had some enormous bills hit all at once. Remarkably, though, at the same time, we had sums of money arriving in plain brown envelopes from the most unexpected sources: the return of the phone bill deposit, refunds on electric pumping bills paid 15 years before, funds from the sale of cotton placed in a co-op 17 years before, refunds on ginning fees from 16 years before, an unexpected raise, etc., etc.

We were humbled to realize that God had been preparing for this need long before we knew we had it, just as the abundance of quail by the seashore was prepared before the Israelites complained about the manna. Thank God for His care.

## **WE MUST NOT BE BLINDED BY FEAR**

But sometimes fear and worry blind us to God's power. There is an example of this type of blindness in 2 Kings 6:8-22. It tells of the king of Aram who sent an army down to Dothan to capture Elisha. They surrounded the city one night. The next morning, when Elisha's servant awoke and went out on the balcony, he saw the enemy army and was terrified. But when Elisha came onto the balcony and saw the surrounding army, he was not afraid because he had eyes of faith. He prayed for God to open his servant's eyes. The Lord did. Then the servant saw on the surrounding mountains (behind the enemy army) the Lord's army with horses and chariots of fire. Needless to say, the Lord fought Elisha's battles for him. And the story has a happy ending for even the enemy army—read it. But the servant might have died of fright if God had not opened his eyes.

We are often like Elisha's servant. We see a problem looming so large that our fear of it completely blinds us to God's ability to deliver us—in any situation.

A practical example I recall concerns a young mother whose husband had deserted her and her two children. She had no job skills, no money, and no family to help her. We got her into a job training program and provided money to meet her basic necessities. But just when we thought everything was arranged, she received a disconnect notice from the utility company. They were going to disconnect her electricity because, unknown to her, her husband had left a \$700 electric bill. This was the final blow. She was seized first with fear and then with despair. It seemed hopeless; there was no escape.

But, lo and behold, her husband's uncle (whom she barely knew) heard of her plight. He came and paid the electric bill and made arrangements to give her future help until she could get on her feet. This had to be God's army—come in answer to our very fervent prayers.

### PRAYER ALWAYS CHANGES THINGS

The first rule we must master to see God's answers to prayer is: **PRAYER ALWAYS CHANGES THINGS**. We are assured of this in Matthew 7:7, where Jesus said, "Ask, it will be given; seek—ye shall find; knock—it will be opened unto you." Then He explains why. He asks if man, being evil, knows how to give good gifts to his children when they ask, how much more will God give us good things when we ask? This passage is teaching that we can rely on God's responding to our requests.

And the most important clue to seeing those responses is to know that prayer always changes things. But we can easily miss them unless we realize that many of those changes may not be what WE had in mind. (Remember the young woman at the stream.)

A dramatic example of such an answer could have easily been overlooked if my friend and I had not learned the value of comparing the changes in our lives to the petitions we were taking to God. Her life had been difficult. It had been a downhill rollercoaster ride through two marriages and two divorces, discouragement, depression, despair, analyses, and suicide attempts. And her children had been with her all the way.

Then she came for counseling and met Jesus Christ. She became a Christian, and life took on a whole new meaning for her. But she had taught her teenagers “established” religion was shallow and empty, with nothing to offer. Now when she tried to teach them differently, they were suspicious and skeptical.

She agonized in prayer over them. The agony was even greater because she knew she was responsible for their attitude. One day she called, especially down because her younger son, whom life had been the hardest for, had been dropped from the basketball team. Her heart was breaking for him because she felt the basketball team was the one joy he had in life, and now even it was gone.

I felt for both of them, but had no answer when she asked how God could let this happen when he had already been through so much. I asked her to review her “thought-out” prayers for him. The most urgent of these was her request for him to know Jesus. In an effort to bring this about, she had been taking him to church with her. We both suspected he rather enjoyed it but did not want to admit it, because his friends on the team did not attend church.

About a week later she called, absolutely elated. She had come in from work to find him and two new friends working on Algebra II. At the same time, they were talking to a girl on the phone and having a great time. Later, she discovered the new friends all went to church and were excited about their faith.

The point for this lesson is: she was praying for him to know Jesus, but the best circumstances for that happening resulted in the temporary pain of not making the

team. This was not the method she anticipated God's using to answer her prayer. And if she had not checked this "change" against her petitions, she would have probably "gone away sorrowful," convinced that life had dealt this son one more low blow.

### **GOD SOMETIMES HAS A DILEMMA GRANTING OUR PETITIONS**

We are sometimes like a teenager who asks her mother to help her lose 10 pounds. In order to do that, the mother must withhold certain foods or get her daughter to exercise more. But the daughter really doesn't want to do either. She doesn't want to walk two miles to school because she will be all sweaty. She doesn't want to take P.E. because her hair will look "gross" afterwards. And she doesn't like any foods other than hamburgers, french fries, chips and dip, cokes and ice cream. The mother has a dilemma. If she gives her daughter the cookies and ice cream she pleads for after school and the hamburgers and fries she wants for supper, then she can't grant the long-range request—the weight loss. We often do the same thing to God.

We ask to be more patient, but we don't want to deal with any trials that produce patience. We ask to be more loving, but we don't want to make any sacrifices that help us develop a more loving attitude. We want to be stronger, but we don't want to carry any burdens. We want to know the Bible, but we don't want to spend the time to study. We want to lead others to Christ, but we are too embarrassed to talk about Jesus, etc., etc.

## **DOES PRAYER CHANGE THINGS WHEN GOD SAYS “NO”?**

There are two examples in the Bible where God said “no” to people He loved. God heard their prayers and things changed, but not in the way they desired. Look at Paul in 2 Corinthians 12:7-10. Paul asked God to remove his thorn in the flesh. He asked three times. What happened? He was left with the thorn. But his prayer changed things:

- (1) God gave him grace and strength to deal with it;
- (2) Paul learned to appreciate weakness, because he learned God is made perfect in weakness; and
- (3) He realized the thorn was serving a purpose in his overall spiritual growth.

Any time God says “no” to you in a prayer request, you can be certain that:

- (1) He will give you the grace and strength to cope with your problem;
- (2) God’s image will be perfected in your struggle; and
- (3) The thorn is serving an overall purpose in your life or the life of someone else.

A second example of God saying “no” is to Christ in the garden. Jesus begged God to let the cup of crucifixion pass from Him. And God had the power to do it; He could have brought about man’s redemption in some

other way. Or he could have zapped Christ with a body that would not feel the pain of the ordeal, but he didn't, because Christ put God in a dilemma. He was praying, "...let this cup pass...if it be Your will... ." God's will was that man's redemption come about through the death of Jesus and that He bear the pain. So by answering that part of Christ's prayer, God could not grant the first (even though Jesus knew He would if He but asked.)

But God did answer the prayer with more than a "no" answer. As Christ agonized in the garden, God sent angels to minister to His needs. And when the soldiers came (God's answer to Christ's plea), Christ did not have to be dragged away. He went to the trial and the cross with dignity. God's grace was sufficient, and He was given the strength to bear what He must bear.

### QUESTIONS FOR THOUGHT

- (1) What point in this section had the most impact on you?
- (2) Discuss Jonah 2:1-7. How did Jonah get in this situation? How did he get out?
- (3) Are we ardent in prayer during times of trouble and negligent when things are going "okay"?
- (4) Discuss Luke 23:42. What attitude did the thief display in his petition?
- (5) If Jesus and the Father were one, why do you think Jesus spent so much time in prayer?



**LESSON TWO:**  
**Discover Your Talents  
And Your Ministry**

One of the requirements for reaching our full spiritual potential is discovering and multiplying our talents. But few of us are totally confident we are doing that. In fact, we often live for years uncertain about our service to God, plagued with such thoughts as:

- (1) “Am I really serving God in the way He wants? Should I be serving as a missionary, or working as a houseparent in some children’s home, or doing the work of a foster parent, etc., etc., etc.?” Or, we wonder...
- (2) “Am I burying a talent God has given me? Is it possible I could teach like...or bring people to Christ like...or have a music ministry...if I just put in more effort?” Or, we lament...
- (3) “I wish I knew what my talent is. I want to serve more effectively, but I can’t because I haven’t found my talent.” Or, perhaps we think...
- (4) “I don’t have any special talent. There isn’t a thing I can do that a hundred others can’t do if they just try.”

Such thinking indicates that we are falling short of our spiritual potential and into one of Satan’s best traps, for such thinking can become totally SELF-absorbing.

We can get so hung-up searching for some elusive talent and worrying about what God wants us to do that we are useless in His service. But how can we avoid it? After all, we do need to use our talents for God, don't we? Yes, because as we use them in His service, not only do they bring glory to God, but they activate a three-fold blessing in our lives. They grow and multiply, making our lives more fruitful and rewarding; they direct our steps in the ministry God has designed for each of us; and they lead us toward our full spiritual potential.

But we don't have to get all hung-up "finding" our talents, for God has provided a way to spotlight them for us. Consider the parable Jesus told in Matthew 25:14-30. In this passage, Jesus begins by saying a man was going on a journey. He called his servants and entrusted his property to them. (He does not say he called "some" of them. It says he called his servants, implying "all.") The man gave one of the servants 5 talents of money, one 2 talents of money, and the last 1 talent, each according to his ability. (Notice: he GAVE the talents. He did not hide them somewhere on the property or on their person for them to find. Their talents seemed to be out in the open for them and everyone else to see.)

The first two servants went immediately (no procrastinating) and put their money to work and doubled it. The third servant buried his in the ground where it would be safe. Later, the master returned for an accounting. The first two servants had doubled their money, and even though the 5-talent servant had gained more than the 2-talent servant, they were both praised

and rewarded equally, for they had done the best they could with what they had. Next, the master called the 1-talent servant. He began by explaining, "I knew you were a hard man, harvesting where you have not sown and gathering where you have not scattered seed. So I was afraid...and hid your money." Then he returned the 1 talent safe and undamaged. But the master was not pleased. He admitted he expected results and pointed out that since the servant knew this, he should have made even greater effort to multiply the master's money.

So the Lord commanded the talent be taken from the fearful servant and given to the 10-talent servant. Then the master made a statement that seemed unfair: "For everyone who has will be given more, and he will have an abundance. Whoever does not have, even what he had will be taken from him." But actually, this statement is not unfair, it is just practical. The world recognizes this same concept and states it this way: "If you want a job done, give it to a busy man." In this parable, the talent given to each servant was money (or something of value). But we can quickly see that we could substitute "a special ability" for a "talent of money," and this parable would be just as true in every way.

### **BUT HOW DOES THIS HELP US KNOW WHAT OUR TALENTS ARE?**

One more application of this parable will spotlight our individual talents and our ministry. All we need to

do is replace the phrase “talent of money” with the word “opportunity,” in which case a paraphrase of the parable would go something like this: “When the master prepared to go on a long journey, he called his servants to him and gave them various opportunities, EACH ACCORDING TO HIS ABILITIES. They already had the talent to meet the opportunities (Matthew 25:15). To one, he gave five opportunities. To another, he gave two opportunities. And to the last, he gave one opportunity... .” We can easily see how the parable would develop: as each servant used an opportunity, he would receive more opportunities and, consequently, develop more abilities. When he refused an opportunity, he would be closing the door to a whole area of service. Therefore, our God-given opportunities are like spotlights focusing on potential or talents that others see in us. And as we accept these opportunities, they will double and double and double again; the first thing we know, we have a ministry.

### IS THERE SCRIPTURAL SUPPORT FOR THIS THEORY?

Yes, there is scriptural support for this theory. In Ephesians 2:10 we are told, “For we are God’s workmanship in Christ Jesus, created to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.” And John 12:7 is a good example of such a “...*work prepared in advance...*” In that passage, Mary anointed Jesus’ feet with an expensive perfume. When she was criticized, Jesus said, “...*It was meant*

*that she should save this perfume for the day of my burial... .*” The phrase “it was meant” clearly shows this was a work prepared in advance, and Mary was given the opportunity and the capability (she owned the perfume) to accomplish it.

The gospels speak often of Martha and Mary. And we can easily see the talents they possessed in John 11 and 12. Martha appears to have had organizational and leadership qualities which she used particularly in hospitality, while Mary seemed to be more sensitive to Jesus’ teachings and his needs. But the “spotlight” that draws these talents to our attention is the opportunities they received to use them.

Consider Stephen, whom we meet first in Acts. We are told he was full of the Spirit, but hundreds of others were, too. However, the apostles must have seen organizational and administrative skills in him along with the heart and spirit of a Godly man. So he was given this opportunity to serve, which he accepted. Later we see he developed into an evangelist boldly preaching the gospel. Could this have been the multiplication of a talent?

The Apostles themselves are all excellent examples of opportunity “spotlighting” potential and talent. From everything we read, there was nothing in these men’s backgrounds to qualify them for the work of Apostles (except for Paul). But Jesus saw the potential and, after hours of prayer, He selected them from among His followers. There were probably other disciples with more social and political prestige. But Jesus saw in these 12 men the talents and qualities needed to fulfill the work of Apostles.

If we go back to Matthew 25:14 again and read the parable, remembering that the opportunities were given **ACCORDING TO EACH MAN'S ABILITIES**, we can see that God does not give an opportunity that one does not already have the talent to perform. So when you are approached, provided, or confronted with an opportunity, take it. If you do not already have the ability, you have the potential to develop it. In fact, the scriptures do not say, "Go find your talent (special ability) and come put it to work for the Lord." Instead, we are told time and time again to take every God-given opportunity (Galatians 6:10; Colossians 4:5; Ephesians 5:16).

Now, note that the parable beginning in Matthew 35:31, just below the parable of the talents, leaves no doubts whatsoever about the use of opportunity. Remember, the parable is describing the day of judgment. And the Son is dividing the saved from the lost. He says, to be saved, "...for I was...and you did... ." To the lost he says, "...for I was...and you did not... ." He did not say, "Enter in because you built the biggest church in New York City...were the best teacher in Texas...were the best speaker in the brotherhood... ." No, he said the saved responded to their opportunities ("you saw") to meet people's needs—the lost did not. If this is a criteria for judgment, we can be sure we are all receiving opportunities to serve, but we often miss them for a multitude of reasons.

### **WE ARE OFTEN BLIND TO OUR OPPORTUNITIES**

*We are often blind to our own opportunities or abilities because we are busy looking at someone else's.*

We see them do this or that. We hear them praised and admired. We long to have their abilities and opportunities. And as we watch through various shades of envy, our own opportunities slip by unnoticed. We have such an example in Acts 8. Simon the Sorcerer was converted to Jesus. He was already a man of great influence and evidently gifted with qualities of leadership, for we are told many people followed him. But he saw that “...*through the laying on of the Apostles’ hands the Holy Ghost was given... ,*” and he wanted that ability. He even offered to buy it. After he was told to repent, we hear no more about him. It is sad that he did not see his own opportunity. He was already a gifted man of influence and leadership. What a man of God he could have been if he had not been overtaken with envy and greed as he looked at the gifts and opportunities of others!

*Sometimes we may see and even recognize an opportunity, but we don’t like it—it is not what we had in mind.* We have an example of this reaction in Matthew 19:16-22. Jesus gave a young man an opportunity. He told him to sell what he had and come follow him. And the scripture says he went away sorrowful, “...*for he had much goods... .*” This young man was a dedicated servant. He had kept the commandments from his youth up, and he even went to Jesus to find out how to be more diligent in his service. But when Jesus told him how, he turned away, and we hear no more about him in scripture. I wonder what kind of ministry he missed.

*Another reason we often miss our opportunities is that we are too impatient.* We want to do this mighty work for Jesus or that mighty work for Jesus—right

now. We don't want to wait or prepare or let God take the lead. Jesus Himself almost fell into this trap in Luke 2:40-52, when He stayed behind at the Temple talking with the teachers. Evidently, He was doing a remarkable job, because the teachers were impressed. The promise and potential were already evident in His life. But Jesus was running ahead of God's plan for Him, because His parents (whom God had selected and entrusted His care to) came and took Him home with them. It was not until 18 years later that His ministry actually began. And then it was His mother who insisted He perform His first miracle. (Could that have been God's direction, just as taking Him home at age 12 must have been?)

*On many other occasions, we miss opportunities and even exciting ministries because we just don't recognize them.* Our negative attitudes disguise them and we see only problems, never realizing they are God-given opportunities. In fact, any problem we see is just the backside of an opportunity. For example, we may see the church we attend is negligent about greeting and talking to visitors. The members rejoice so much in one another's company that they visit together and never get around to greeting and talking with visitors. If you've seen this problem in your congregation, then you have the talent to do something about it. Not only do you have the talent, God is also giving you the opportunity. You can become the friendliest, quickest-to-talk-to-a-visitor member of your congregation.

### **SATAN WILL TRY TO STOP YOU**

But such opportunities often come to naught because they are so effective, Satan has surrounded them with



snare. And one of his most deceiving is the NO-ONE-WILL-HELP-ME snare. For instance, we decide to be friendly; so we rush to the back on Sunday morning after dismissal. We catch two or three visitors and speak to them—a little awkwardly, but we have made an effort. We see others heading toward their cars. We are sure no one has spoken to them. So we mount a soapbox and start a campaign to get everyone to do what we are. What happens—nothing! Our brethren just keep talking among themselves and ignore the visitors. Before long, we get frustrated and discouraged, and decide that if no one is going to help us, forget it. See how Satan has trapped us? He has taken our mind off the opportunity: our chance to encourage visitors to return to our service and seek Jesus. Instead, we are focusing on how our brethren are letting us, God, and the world down, never realizing that we have started letting all of them down. Instead of our example influencing all of them, their example has influenced us.

Another one of Satan's most successful snares is the BUT-I-DON'T-HAVE-THE-AUTHORITY trap. We are hesitant to do anything that we have not been given someone's verbal permission or authority to do. But we don't need permission or authority to do the Lord's work. We just need that to start programs. For example, God tells us to encourage, so we have His authority and permission to be the friendliest, most encouraging person in the lobby after every service. But we don't have the authority to stand up and tell the congregation that everyone whose name starts with the letters A-G must go to the lobby the first Sunday of the month and greet visitors; then on the second Sunday,

the H-M's are the official greeters; etc. That is a program. And programs need the leadership's permission and authority. Another problem we might see is that the elderly in our congregation tend to be forgotten. This problem has a beautiful opportunity on the other side. We can invite the elderly over to our homes for ice cream and cookies, or for an outing of some sort. We can have a fellowship for them, etc., etc.

We could go on and on endlessly listing problems that we "might" see in our congregations. But God does not hold us responsible for "might be" problems. We are just responsible for the ones we actually see and the way we react to them. For they are the opportunities and ministries God is "spotlighting" for us.

Right about here, it is easy to object with, "Oh, sure, I see problems. In fact, I see so very many problems that I can't possibly work on all of them. I don't have that much time." After I realized that every problem was an opportunity and started working on it, I soon discovered the busier I was, the fewer problems I saw. Yes, my ministry multiplied, but it multiplied in a definite direction. As a result, I did not see as many "other" problems. That is when I found that work is the best antidote for complaints. But Satan does his best to hide this knowledge from us with all sorts of rationales, because he does not want us to become aware that God is spotlighting an exciting ministry that can lead us on to our spiritual potential.

### I AM A LIVING EXAMPLE

I am a living example of someone resisting a ministry God was planning. To put it honestly, God had to drag

me toward my ministry for years, because I had planned a different ministry. I wanted to be a missionary or a social worker, or a children's home houseparent, or a foster parent, or an author of Agatha Christie-type mysteries, etc., etc., and I really put an effort into pursuing those areas of service. And God attempted to gently close the doors but, knowing me, he eventually had to slam them and drag me toward the doors (opportunities) he had been holding open for me—doors that I didn't see because I was so busy deciding how God and I were going to get His program on the road.

Now I praise God for the love that moved Him to stay with me, patiently picking me up after each and every disappointment when I was trying so hard and accomplishing so little, and for the love that heard me finally say in frustration, "Okay, I don't understand. I have tried to do this...and it didn't work. I tried to do that...and it didn't work. I tried to do something else...and it didn't work either. Now you show me! I am going to let you bring me opportunities. And I am going to take every one that comes along. So please, don't bring me one you don't want me to take." And praise God, He heard my prayer, and my ministry took off. God took all the knowledge I had been accumulating and used it—but in a different area than I had planned. He took every skill I had been developing (typing, writing, research, teaching) and gave me glorious opportunities to use them. He took every experience (good and bad) and gave me fresh insight into His plans for me.

And He took my life and my ministry and multiplied them a thousand times over. He built them into more than I even had the courage to pray for.

## IN CONCLUSION

He is a glorious God. And if He can lead me to an exciting ministry through the opportunities He provides, He can lead you. But get ready! Your life may take off in the most unbelievable directions. Or, He may keep you simmering for a while longer because you are not ready for what He has in mind. But you can be sure of this—He has you in His mind, for Paul said in Ephesians 2:10, “...*For we are God’s workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works; which God prepared in advance for us to do.*”

## QUESTIONS FOR THOUGHT

- (1) What point in this lesson had the most impact on you? Why?
- (2) What opportunities have you had in God’s service in the last year? What talents or potential did they spotlight?
- (3) What were talent or special abilities given for in the church? (Ephesians 4:11-16).
- (4) Discuss Romans 12:6-10. How is serving, showing mercy, encouraging, etc., a talent or special ability?

**LESSON THREE:**  
**Living With Me  
In Spite Of Myself**

**I. Dealing With Self—MIND**

As we reach for our spiritual potential, one person that will constantly be in our way is SELF. Self will be easily recognized, for he will either be belligerent and stubborn or discouraged and defeated. And until we deal with SELF, following Jesus will be a pathway of constant conflict.

Since SELF lurks deep within us, it is often difficult to know where to begin to confront him. He obscures his presence and identity with long, philosophical discussions and unproductive hours of self-centeredness. But when we really get serious and take him in hand, we will discover Self is simply “Me” or:

- (1) My Mind;
- (2) My Behavior; and
- (3) My Emotions.

**RENEWING OUR MIND**

Paul gives us the first clue to dealing with self by teaching in Romans 12:2, “...*Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the RENEWING OF YOUR MIND... .*” He is saying we can be changed, we can be different, and the key is in the renewed mind. But how do we “renew” our minds?

The first step is understanding what a “renewed” mind is. The second is learning how to develop it, and the third is prayerfully asking for God’s help, strength, wisdom, and power.

### **THE RENEWED MIND**

It does not take a sincere Christian very long to realize that having a “renewed” mind is having the mind of Christ. In fact, Paul tells us in Philippians 2:5, “...*let this mind be in you that was also in Christ... .*” To do so would require training our thoughts to imitate his thinking, putting on the attitudes he put on, and living by the priorities he lived by.

The tools that shape our minds are:

- (1) Our thoughts;
- (2) Our attitudes; and
- (3) Our priorities.

These were the tools that conformed our minds to the patterns of the world originally. And they are the tools that can conform our minds to the mind of Christ now.

### **TRAINING OUR THOUGHTS**

To make any successful change requires being honest and realistic about our present condition. And a little serious listening will quickly tell us the condition of our thought life. Do our thoughts focus on gossip, rumors, criticism, slander, envy, jealousy, unresolved anger, or bitterness? Or do they dwell on dreams and schemes for power, wealth, fame? Or are they filled with thoughts of sex, lust, sinful fantasy? Or, perhaps, our thoughts are a

giant void of nothing but apathy, complacency, or indifference.

But how can we think like Jesus? How can we even know his thoughts? Obviously, one way is by knowing His Words. For the words that we speak reflect our thinking. But Jesus said He spoke what he heard from God. However, John recorded some words spoken by Jesus in the 17th chapter that do reflect his thinking. They are words spoken from his heart to his Father in prayer.

### **JESUS THOUGHT ABOUT HIMSELF**

In the first five verses of this chapter, Jesus' thoughts focused on:

- (1) The reality of his circumstance;
- (2) His purpose;
- (3) His power, authority;
- (4) The real meaning of eternal life;
- (5) The completion of his work for God; and
- (6) Where he came from and where he was going.

When we compare the emphasis of these thoughts to Philippians 4:8 (where Paul enumerates what our thoughts should dwell on), we can quickly see it coincides.

In these five verses, Jesus thought about Himself, yet He did not become self-centered. It is easy to become wrapped up in OUR needs, OUR wants, OUR weaknesses, OUR problems, etc., etc. And even though everything we are thinking about may be true and

needed, if it becomes the total focus of our thinking, we tend to lose our purpose and direction for the Lord. What's more, we lose our perspective in life—because we see the rest of the world only through ME-colored glasses.

### **JESUS THOUGHT ABOUT HIS DISCIPLES AND FUTURE BELIEVERS**

John 17:5-26 reflects how others-oriented Jesus' thoughts were. Notice, of the 26 verses in this chapter, Jesus devoted only five to Himself. The rest of the prayer concerned others. For example, regarding His disciples, He thought about:

- (1) His responsibility to them;
- (2) Their responsibility for their decisions;
- (3) Where His opportunity to teach them came from;
- (4) Whom He must return them to;
- (5) The glory they had already brought Him;
- (6) The glory they would bring Him in the future;
- (7) The future dangers they would face;
- (8) Who could protect them in His absence;
- (9) Their likeness to Him; and
- (10) His commitment to them.

His thoughts are remarkable when we consider that Jesus knew Judas would betray Him, Peter would deny Him, and all would desert Him. Even though His dis-



ciples had seen His miracles and heard His teachings for the past three years, they were still weak, worldly-minded, and frustrating.

In Jesus' place, we would probably have thought, "Father, how can Judas do this to me, after all he has seen me do, and after all I have done for him? Even Peter, who has boasted he would follow me to the death, is going to deny me and then desert me with the rest. These men are so weak, what is going to happen to this world if this is the best it has to offer? I just don't see how this gospel business can possibly work out. We should probably be thinking about another plan."

But His thoughts concerning His disciples did not follow these lines. Instead, He focused on what He could do for them, the glory they had brought Him and God, and their acceptance of Him. In other words, He thought of them in a positive frame of mind, with vision and appreciation.

This does not mean He did not face reality. He admitted His disciples would face divisive conflict, He admitted they would be hated because He was hated, and He admitted they would be in danger. He was also realistic about His ability to protect them, since He was returning to the Father.

But this confrontation with reality did not drive Him to worry, panic, or despair. It did drive Him to His father—to ask God to protect His disciples. The result was His thoughts were free to continue His prayer for future believers and free to complete the mission He had been given.

## GREAT THOUGHTS

One of the books of Wisdom in the Old Testament emphasizes the importance of our thoughts in Proverbs 23:7, “...*As a man thinketh in his heart, so is he... .*” This scripture is often used to support the world’s definition of positive thinking (“If I think I can do it, I can”). But this interpretation is shallow; the scripture has much more depth. It is saying the person we are began in our thoughts; in other words, we are becoming what we are thinking. Though no one can read our minds, anyone can know our thoughts if he waits and observes long enough—because our thoughts today will be our behavior on a future day.

Therefore, one of the quickest and surest ways to become great is to think great. And the quickest way to become Christ-like is to think Christ-like.

## RENEWING YOUR ATTITUDE

There is probably not a kid in the United States that has not been told over and over, “You better straighten up your attitude.” And there are probably very few who actually knew what it meant—other than, “Quit what you are doing and be nice about it.”

Probably all of us have heard or even said, “They are just fantastic, they have the best attitude” or “I can’t stand them, they have the worst attitude.” And most of the time, all we really mean is we “do” or “do not” like them. The point is, the word “attitude” is used and misused continually in our culture without giving its meaning any serious thought.

Attitude is defined as a mental approach or mental position to a fact. Does that help? Maybe this will: our thoughts are what we think, our attitude is the way we think.

For example, a positive attitude tends to see the best in every situation before it sees the worst. On the other hand, a negative attitude always sees what's wrong before it sees what's right. (And it rarely gets around to seeing anything "right" because there is so much "wrong" holding its attention.)

A person with a negative attitude usually experiences a lot of conflict. He fights with the car dealer, the postman, the man down the street, the appliance repairman, the woman whose garbage can is spilling into the road, etc., etc. His life is usually filled with long sessions of either complaining, criticizing, telling someone off, or straightening someone out. He rarely has a time he is free of worry, because something is always bothering him.

Can any of us picture Jesus living like that? We know He worked as a carpenter. And we know He lived in a village with other Jews. But somehow, we just don't see Him getting involved in situations where He would bicker with this person, complain about that person, tell this person off, and straighten that person out. It just doesn't coincide with our image of Jesus.

Could it be that His attitude lifted Him above that way of life? Because the negative attitude is an attitude based on the patterns of the world (i.e., no one is going to take advantage of me). Patterns which Paul admonished us NOT to conform to. And the only way we can submit to that admonition is to conform to the at-

titudes of Christ. Or as Paul put it in Ephesians 4:22, “...put off your old self, which is being corrupted by its deceitful desires; to be made new in the attitude of your minds... .” And then in Philippians 2:5-11, he tells us how our attitudes should be the same as that of Christ Jesus:

*Who, being in the very nature of God,  
did not consider equality with God  
something to be grasped,  
but made himself nothing,  
taking the very nature of a servant,  
being made in human likeness.  
And being found in appearance as a man,  
he humbled himself  
and became obedient to death—  
even the death on a cross!  
Therefore, God exalted him to the highest place  
and gave him the name that is above every name,  
that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow,  
in heaven and on earth and under the earth  
and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is  
Lord, to the glory of God the Father.*

Now, what attitudes does this passage display? Remember the definition of an attitude—a mental approach or position to a fact. And what were the facts:

**FACT**—Jesus was in the nature of God (with all the power and privileges involved (verses 6 and 7)).

**JESUS’ MENTAL APPROACH**—He was “willing” to give that up mentally (then later He gave it up physically).

FACT—Jesus became a man. (This statement is made so often it has lost much of its meaning for us. But one way to keep it in perspective is to realize that Jesus' becoming a man is like a man agreeing to become a dog, or a bird, or a rabbit and live that life.)

JESUS' MENTAL APPROACH—He submitted to everything being a man involved. He endured ridicule, shame, humiliation, untrue accusations, beatings, even death, all administered by men that had no power to hurt Him unless He allowed it. And they didn't even realize He was allowing it.

FACT—He was given meager physical resources to work with: a birth clouded with disgrace, a lowly background, the humble trade of a craftsman, minimal education, and no property. It might be compared to the owner of a Rolls Royce having to travel on a stick horse.

JESUS' MENTAL APPROACH—He thanked God for His daily bread. He did what He could with what He had and relied on God to make up the difference.

Three characteristics stand out as we consider the attitudes displayed in this passage:

- (1) Selflessness;
- (2) Spiritual meekness\*; and
- (3) Gratitude/appreciation.

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\* "Spiritual meekness" means whatever God does with my life is all right with me.

Now, what are the facts in our lives? What is our mental approach to them? For example:

**FACT**—I have the power of choice in a multitude of life situations.

**MY MENTAL APPROACH**—Do I deal with my choices based on what I want, like, deserve, have the right to OR do I base my choices on what is best for all concerned?

**FACT**—I am a woman/man.

**MY MENTAL APPROACH**—Do I resent what that involves? Do I rebel against all that state requires (jobs, child-rearing, yard work, laundry, cooking, supporting a family, etc., etc.)?

**FACT**—I have a certain amount of wealth and health, etc., at my disposal.

**MY MENTAL APPROACH**—Am I grateful for what I have been given, or am I envious and resentful because others have more (forgetting that others also have less)?

As we compare our attitudes to those of Jesus, we can probably see areas that need to change. But how do you change an attitude? We begin by changing our priorities.

## **RENEWING OUR PRIORITIES**

At first glance, it may not seem appropriate to consider priorities a part of our mind. But for the purposes of this study, they must be included, because our prior-

ities influence our attitudes and our thoughts, and all three influence our decisions.

We should carry on a lengthy discussion about which has the greater impact on our decisions, but it would be about as beneficial as “Which came first—the chicken or the egg?” What is beneficial, though, is to realize that to develop a renewed mind requires developing renewed priorities—the priorities of Jesus.

There are a multitude of statements in the New Testament that reflect Jesus’ priorities, but no more conclusive or dramatic than the statement spoken by Jesus in the Garden: “...*Not my will but thy will be done... .*” This is more than a lovely thought and noble statement—it displays Jesus’ submissiveness to God’s will, His obedience to God, His trust in God, and His willingness to let God make the choice (even when He might not like it).

Each of these attitudes was the result of his priorities. And his priority was to do God’s will. That was the basis of his “sinless” life.

This coincides perfectly with our mental image of Jesus, because we visualize Him always WANTING to do things God’s way. But Hebrews 5:7 says, “...*He learned obedience by what He suffered... .*” So, He didn’t always WANT to do things God’s way. Sometimes He WANTED to do something different—just like us.

But we see Him taking a stand at the beginning of His ministry that made it possible for Him to do God’s will even when He didn’t want to. He established clearly-defined priorities.

The first time we are introduced to His priorities is in the wilderness, in open confrontation with Satan. And in that battle, Jesus verbalized His priorities:

- (1) Serving God is more important than physical food.
- (2) Serving God is more important than the riches, power, glories, and pleasures of this world.
- (3) Serving God is more important than proving oneself.

Notice every temptation known falls into one of these categories—but the biggest temptation isn't stated. It is very vividly portrayed: to let Satan upset or distort our priorities. And Satan is very effectively using the same strategy with us today. Any time Satan can upset your priorities, he has the biggest half of the battle won. But Jesus did not succumb to the temptations, nor was He deceived—He had clearly defined his priorities and was committed to them.

Clearly-defined priorities also protect us from a great deal of uncertainty and conflict when it's time to make decisions. In fact, established priorities actually eliminate many decisions, for example:

*Early in our marriage, my husband and I decided that serving Jesus would be our first priority.*

*So, we never really had to decide about church attendance. Our priority decided it for us. As our children were growing up, they knew that we all went to church Sunday morn-*



*ing, Sunday night, and to midweek Bible study. The only time anyone did not go to church was when he was sick. Then the rest of the family went. They never had to ask (or argue), "Are we going to church today?...Do we have to go to church?" The priority was set and the decision was made, and complaining did as much good as complaining about going to school.*

*I know families in which every church service is an issue. Are we or aren't we, can we or can't we, will we or won't we? And the evidence of such unclear priorities is very evident.*

*We never had to decide on divorce because we were BOTH committed to God's word and His teachings on marriage. If we had a problem, we settled it God's way. Since we were not going to get a divorce, we had no other choice.*

When I work with someone coming out of the world into the life of Jesus, the first thing I have him do is define his priorities. Then I have him sit down and go over his old lifestyle and see how it fits his new priorities. He eliminates the things that will not conform, and alters the patterns of things that are questionable.

Consequently, he avoids so much temptation, conflict and, often times, sin. For example, if he quits buying liquor and going to bars, he doesn't have to decide whether or not to get drunk.

## CONCLUSION

From Jesus' answers to Satan, we can tell that He had studied the Scriptures (as had every Jewish boy) and had already made His decisions before He confronted Satan. Then when temptation came, He really did not have to struggle with a decision—it had already been made.

See the possibility for victory. As we study God's Word, we can make our decisions, establish our priorities, and then when Satan tempts us, we can say confidently with Jesus, "Get thee behind me, Satan."

## QUESTIONS FOR THOUGHT

- (1) What point in the section on our "thoughts" had the most impact on you? Why?
- (2) What point in the section on "attitudes" had the most impact on you? Why?
- (3) What point in the section on "priorities" had the most impact on you? Why?
- (4) How does Matthew 22:37 compare to this overall chapter?
- (5) How does Romans 1:28 relate to this chapter?

## II. Dealing With Self—BEHAVIOR

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## **II. Dealing With Self—BEHAVIOR**

In our current culture, there is so much emphasis on attitudes and motives we have almost lost sight of the importance of behavior. Although attitudes and motives count, so does behavior.

We can be assured of this by the multitude of commands in the Word. Some Christians are fond of saying the Old Law was a law of rules and commands, but the New Covenant is a Covenant of grace without rules or commands. That concept is a fantasy. The New Covenant is a Covenant of Grace, but there are over 500 direct commands listed in the New Testament. And a multitude of those commands focus on our behaviors.

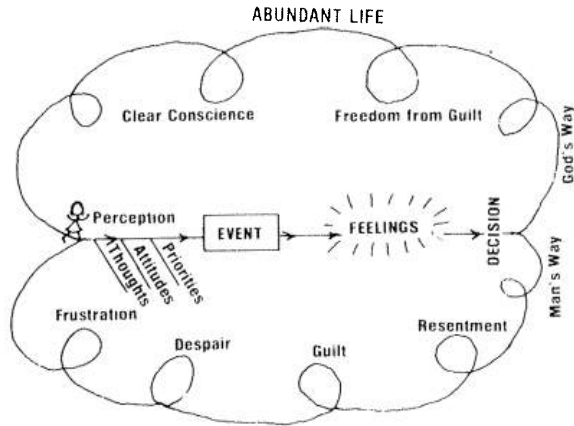
From looking at them, we can see they break down into two separate categories:

- (1) Commands that train us in righteous behavior;  
and
- (2) Commands that protect us from Satan's snares.

### **COMMANDED BEHAVIORS THAT TRAIN**

A very good example of commands designed to train us in righteous behavior is found in Ephesians 4:22-32. We won't go over them individually, but let's look at the principle involved. And that principle is to replace wrong behaviors with right behaviors (behavior modification).

The drawing on the following page illustrates the steps that lead up to making the behavior decision and the consequences that follow that decision.



As we travel life's path, we constantly approach life's EVENTS (ball games, shopping trips, dental appointments, job situations, etc.). And as we approach those events, we view them from OUR perspective. (Our perspective consists of our thoughts, attitudes, and priorities.)

Next, we enter the actual event and, as a result, we experience EMOTIONS, following which we decide on some kind of behavior response. Depending on that decision, we either circle up into God's abundant life or we drop down into the way of the natural man.

Now, let's impose a life situation to this model. You are taking a leisurely stroll around the neighborhood. All of a sudden, two kids come tearing out of an alley on their bicycles. They almost run over you, scaring you to death, forcing you to leap out of the way. After you have survived the initial shock, your angry feelings start exploding. Now you are at the junction, and it is decision time. What are you going to do about your angry feelings? (Or, what is your behavioral response going to be?) And as you stand at this cross-

roads, you can turn the way of your sinful man or you can travel in the way of God's teachings.

The sinful man's way:

- (1) You can chase those kids down the street, yelling curses;
- (2) You can bang on their mother's door and threaten to have her kids arrested or sued, or both; or
- (3) You can try to sick your dog on them the next time they ride by your house.

God's way:

- (1) You can overlook the incident, just making a note to watch for them in the future; or
- (2) You can speak the truth in love, telling them about the dangers involved.

In the first response, you circled down into sinful behavior patterns that were filled with guilt, conflict, anger, resentment, etc. And with this response, you reinforced that pattern in your life. In other words, exploding makes it just that much easier to explode the next time. Behavioral responses are habit-forming.

In the second response, you circled up into the peace, freedom from conflict, freedom from guilt, the comfort of a clear conscience, etc., all of which are features of the abundant life. And with this response, you have reinforced this pattern in your life. "Good" behavioral responses are just as habit-forming as "bad" ones.

### **COMMANDED BEHAVIORS THAT PROTECT**

We all have our children's best interest at heart when we tell them not to touch a stove, play with a knife, run

with a pencil. We love them and don't want them to suffer the consequences we know are possible.

God has the same motives when he forbids us to be involved in certain behaviors. He knows the consequences. He knows that not only will the behavior endanger us with an earthly consequence, but the disobedience to him will also have a future consequence. For example:

- (1) "*Do not steal.*" There is a danger we will get caught and go to prison. Stealing reinforces selfishness on our part because we are taking for ourselves what belongs to someone else. Both of these will cause us conflict on earth and, if unrepented of, they will have a consequence in eternity.
- (2) "*Do not be sexually immoral.*" There is danger to our physical bodies through disease. An unwanted child could possibly be conceived. Hearts can be broken because of the intimacy of the relationship without protection of the serious commitment of marriage. All of these sins can be forgiven, but many of the consequences have to be lived out.
- (3) "*Do not lie, rage, slander.*" All of these sinful behaviors involve conflict, deceit, and pain. They can all be forgiven. But in many cases, people are hurt and will bear the scars of those wounds for years.

### **THE THREE-FOLD PURPOSE OF OBEDIENCE**

Obeying God's commands does train us in righteous

behavior. His commands protect us, reason enough for us to obey. But there is an additional reason to obey God's commands that brings glory to God, His Son, and His Word. That purpose is disclosed in the following verses.

### **Glory to God**

Listen to Jesus in John 14:31: *"...but the world must learn that I love the Father and that I do exactly what my Father has commanded me... ."* This is Jesus Christ, the Son of God. He had lived a perfect life and glorified God in many ways, yet He said that the world must learn He LOVED God. And the way He displayed this love was by doing exactly what God said.

### **Glory to Jesus**

And Jesus also said, *"...All men will know that you are my disciples if you love one another..."* (John 14:35). Jesus had told them to "love one another." Now He tells them their obedience to this command will bring glory to Him. He prays for this same thing in John 17.

### **Glory to the Word**

And Paul added, *"...to be self-controlled and pure, to be busy at home, to be kind, and to be subject to their husbands, so that no one will malign the Word of God... ."* Again, we see how much impact our obedience has on the way the world views God, His Son, and His Word.

## QUESTIONS FOR THOUGHT

- (1) What point in “II. Dealing With Self—BEHAVIOR” had the most impact on you? Why?
- (2) Discuss John 14:31 in relation to this section.
- (3) Discuss 1 Peter 2:13-16 in relation to this section.
- (4) How does James 4:7 compare to the behavior diagram in this section? (Remember that fear is a feeling.)

### III. Dealing With Self—EMOTIONS

Emotions are simply our feelings. Our present culture is FEELING-oriented. Feelings are good; they are a gift to man that serves and enhances his life in a variety of ways.

But our present culture has almost made our feelings our God. And as a result, “feelings” have become the basis of many of our values and decisions; i.e., “If it feels good, do it.”

This is NOT what the Bible teaches. Listen to 1 Peter 3:6: “...*do what is right and do not give way to fear... .*” Fear is a feeling. But Peter said to base your behavior on what is RIGHT, not on fear.

Then, in 2 Timothy 4:5: “...*But you keep your head in all situations... .*” In this passage, Paul is telling Timothy that no matter what anyone else does, he must keep his head. In other words, react in logic based on knowledge and wisdom.

Christ left an example in John 12:27: “...*Now my heart is troubled, and what shall I say? Father, save me from this hour? No, it was for this very reason I came to this hour. Father, glorify your name.*”



In this passage, we see Jesus dealing with his emotions:

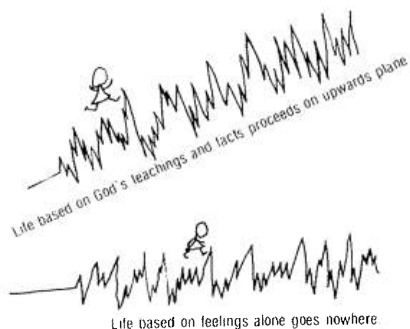
- (1) He acknowledged them (“*my heart is troubled*”);
- (2) He verbalized this option (“*shall I say...save me*”);
- (3) He made a decision (“*No, it was for this very reason*”); and
- (4) He was strengthened.

A similar model to the one on behavior can be used. We approach an event seeing it from our perspective (our thoughts, attitudes, priorities). We experience the event, we experience the feelings, and then we face our options (deal with it God’s way or sin’s way). Then we decide on our behavioral response.

But many people never go through the decision-making process. The patterns of past behaviors are so strong their responses are automatic. Take, for instance, the high-tempered person that has a pattern of responding to angry feelings through explosions. He probably isn’t aware he has a choice. The other is so automatic—besides, it feels good.

But we do have a choice; otherwise, how could the scriptures in Ephesians 4:22—5:21, 1 Peter 3:6, and 2 Timothy 4:5 be valid? But to overcome sinful responses to feelings (angry, sexual, fearful, etc.), we must learn and live discipline until God’s patterns are established in our lives. A life based on God’s teachings and facts may have some ups and downs, but it is on a

plane that is gradually sloping upward to new spiritual heights.



On the other hand, a life based only on feelings has its ups and downs and never goes anywhere.

Then, if we would reach to fulfill God's vision for us, we must take Paul's admonition to heart and keep our heads in all situations so we can develop God's patterns in our lives as we reach for our spiritual potential.

### QUESTIONS FOR THOUGHT

- (1) What point in "III. Dealing With Self—EMOTIONS" had the most impact on you? Why?
- (2) Discuss Philippians 4:12 in relation to this section. Focus on the phrase "learned to be content."
- (3) Discuss Colossians 3:2 in relation to this section. Is "affection" a feeling? How can you set it on things above?
- (4) Can you implement Ephesians 5:15 based on feelings alone? Why?