



THE

# Preacher's

## MAGAZINE

DECEMBER / JANUARY / FEBRUARY 1996-97

"...SPEAKING THE TRUTH IN LOVE..." Eph. 4:15

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JUDGMENT,  
SHE WROTE

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CAESAR  
OR CHRIST?

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PUBLIC MINISTRY,  
PRIVATE PAIN

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### Preacher's Exchange

#### NEEDED:

Here at Nazarene Theological College we have a great need for commentaries, books on holiness, and any other books. Books are very expensive to buy here and are not readily available for our ministerial students. If any retiring pastor would like to contribute his library, or if any active pastor wants to weed out some books from his library, it would be of great help for our students. Also, if there is any church who has purchased the new hymnal and has copies of the *Worship in Song* hymnal that they would send to us for use in our chapel services, it would be of great help.

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# Thanks to an Old Friend and Welcome to a New Feature



by Randal E. Denny

Editor, Spokane, Washington

As editor, I wish to express appreciation and thanks to Crandall Vail. He worked on the *Preacher's Magazine* for many years as he served Nazarene Publishing House. I first met Crandall during my seminary days on a visit to his church. When I began as editor, I was delighted to renew an old friendship.

Crandall Vail was born and raised in the Boston area. As early as the sixth grade, Crandall wanted to go to art school. Following his military service during World War II, Crandall, in his own words, "got confused about what I was going to do and started studying for the ministry." Well-intentioned people in his life assumed that if God had called Crandall, it was specifically a call to preach. He recalls: "The Lord never wanted me to preach. He wanted me to do artwork." In that process of discovery, Crandall studied for the ministry for one year but went back to art school. He was graduated from Vesper George School of Art in Boston.

Contributing to the Lord's mission, Crandall did some freelance work for *Youth Comrade*, a magazine for teens. Responding to an advertisement in the *Herald of Holiness*, Crandall contacted Nazarene Publishing House. After an interview with Bud Lunn, the NPH assistant manager (eventually manager), Crandall and his family moved from Massachusetts to Kansas City in 1955. He has served as the art director for 24 years.

Crandall has been a long-standing, faithful church member. He and his wife, Ruth, have three daughters. He also enjoys being a grandfather. His interests include teaching Sunday School, golfing, hunting, photography, and painting.

This hardworking commercial artist added his touch to the *Preacher's Mag-*

*azine*. He was always eager to help, quick to grasp what I needed, cooperative with my journalistic requests, and ready with valuable advice. Crandall Vail has moved into retirement, but I know he'll keep busy. He was born creative! We'll miss you and your contribution to our work, Crandall.


These men and women behind the scenes at Nazarene Publishing House often are unknown and unseen by the public, but they, like Crandall Vail, make an important contribution to holiness literature. Thanks, good and faithful servant of the printed word! "Crandall, this is Randal! God's best to you!"

Having said thanks to an old friend, I welcome now a new feature to the *Preacher's Magazine*. We refer to this newly added section as *Highpoint*. With some pastors struggling over what to do with Sunday evening services, our Church Growth Division designed and sent out a survey to understand what is happening on Sunday nights. To everyone's delight, the survey indicated that many churches enjoy successful, creative, and inspiring Sunday evening meetings. Often the style and content follow more unusual approaches to make the services meaningful. Rather than throw in the towel and quit Sunday evening

services, we are offering sermons, suggestions, and creative ideas so that many more pastors can find help for joyful enrichment on Sunday nights.

*Highpoint* material in a brochure format was designed and sent to pastors in the U.S. Church of the Nazarene. Such a good response came from them that the Church Growth Division personnel were inundated with requested tapes, diskettes, and manuscripts. Moving this concept into the *Preacher's Magazine* opens the doors to all five participating holiness denominations and our worldwide audience. Therefore, following "Worship and Preaching Helps," we have added 16 pages to the magazine to provide an additional section designated *Highpoint*. Each quarterly issue features a different preacher's outlines with creative ideas for making Sunday evening a time of valuable inspiration for our congregations. Beyond the outline format, full manuscripts of the sermons will appear on the Internet. Read page 82 for those specific instructions.

David J. Felter, who works at International Headquarters, Church of the Nazarene, will do the editing of this new, creative segment. With my duties as full-time pastor of a growing congregation as well as editor of the *Preacher's Magazine*, I welcome David Felter's editorial touch. I give my full support to this innovative supplemental help to pastors and missionaries around the world. We extend a helping hand to thousands of faithful pastoral shepherds working among the people for whom Jesus died. Our efforts to provide *Highpoint* are not intended to mandate but to assist as needed in your God-inspired, time-pressured, widely varied ministries.

So, thanks again, Crandall Vail, and welcome, *Highpoint*. 

# Judgment, She Wrote

## Author's Note:

*The following sermon has been used recently in a variety of settings with positive results. It is a "blended narrative" sermon in which contemporary and ancient narratives are melded.*

*Why such a form? This particular sermon came about as a result of my pondering how one gains a hearing for the judgment passages in today's world. U.S. culture is in the throes of a populist rebellion in which authority figures such as preachers are resisted, ignored, or run out of town. When Mr. and Mrs. Don't-Tell-Me-What-to-Do plop down in the third pew, how do you preach from judgment texts such as the Ananias and Sapphira story?*

*One answer is to let someone that everybody knows and likes do the investigation of the text. Someone like Jessica Fletcher of "Murder, She Wrote."*

*The idea is not entirely original with me. Two years ago I read a sermon (by a person whose name I forget) in which the author used Jessica Fletcher looking at the Ananias and Sapphira story as an extended illustration followed by a return to didactic and traditional sermonics. He did not develop the possibilities of narrative form. In this sermon I treat the passage entirely in a narrative structure to the best of my imagination.*

*Being a blended narrative, the encounters cannot be historical. Yet they are true to human experience, and even more important, they are true to the biblical text. The characters explore what this passage teaches about God and judgment and the nature of the Church.*

*Using narrative and inductive structure calls for the preacher to strategically delay certain elements in the story. The text is to be read at the end of the sermon. To read the text as preamble to the sermon in this case would likely result in de-*



**by Wesley D. Tracy**  
Editor, "Herald of Holiness,"  
Kansas City

*fenses springing up in the minds of the sermon-proof people who populate the pews. Also, I have given nicknames to the biblical characters so that their identity will not be prematurely revealed. I even recommend that the title not be spoken or printed in advance.*

*There is something for both seekers and settlers in the sermon. The seeker will learn something new about God and the Church; the settler who has been treating the church as his property will also get a solemn message. The sermon starts with someone that everyone "knows"—Jessica Fletcher, thus gaining what Fred Craddock called the "nod of recognition." The object then is to carefully craft the story, building to the "shock of recognition" in the end.*

*The task for every preacher is to gain a hearing for the text in our confused and confusing times. Here's my attempt to get people to hear the Ananias and Sapphira story again—for the first time.*

## JUDGMENT, SHE WROTE

Mystery writer Jessica Fletcher of Cabot Cove, Maine, had writer's block. Her novel based on the O. J. Simpson case just would not gel. So when her friend Phira had invited her to spend three weeks at their suburban Jerusalem ranch, she thought she would give it a try. It was a beautiful and quiet place. And Phira's husband,

Nye, was such an understanding man that he would not interfere with the muse if it awoke.

## SCENE 1: AT THE AIRPORT

The plane was on the ground now. The flight attendant in first class handed Jessica her purse and notebook and escorted her (after getting an autograph) to the reception area.

While she was still too far away to speak without yelling, Jessica saw her old friend, Phira, approaching.

"Jessica, Jessica Fletcher," Phira called out a little too soon. Attractive, intelligent, and more slender than any 45-year-old woman had any right to be, she greeted Jessica wearing a brown sundress of the finest silk. Suddenly Jessica felt old, and chunky, and rumped—she could never remember being that slim. But she recovered her Yankee boldness, waved, and smiled, and then hugged.

"Is Nye with you, Phira?"

"He wanted to be here, but he is closing a big real estate deal right now. He sends his love."

"He always had a knack for making money."

"That's right, Jessica. I'm so proud of him. He's making a carload of cash on this deal. We sold our ranch—"

"Oh no, not the ranch! It is one of my favorite places in all the earth. The hills, the view—and that lovely rose garden."

*If Jessica had been as curious about the Scriptures as she was about murder, she would probably have inserted a line about the desert blossoming as a rose.*

"Don't worry, Jessica, we don't have to give possession until weeks after you are gone."

"But where are you going to live?"

"Jessica, I've got my eye on a palatial condo in Haifa—ocean view, cool sea breeze. And let me tell you, Jessica, we made more than enough on the ranch to pull it off. I can't believe it. Nye sold the ranch for twice what



we thought it would bring. We are going to pay for the condo in cash, make a donation to charity—and it's way too complicated for me to explain, but I think we are going to work a deal whereby our basic living expenses are going to be paid out of a group thing—a sort of mutual fund through our church.

"That's another thing, Jessica. We have a new religion. It means a lot to us. I don't understand it very well yet, but we think it is going to be the answer to—you know—what your heart cries out for. Know what I mean, Jessica?"

"I think so. I pray; I think of myself as a person of faith. I don't know how I would—well, a new religion? That sounds risky to me, Phira. Who's your leader? Not Bhagwan Rajneesh, or David Koresh, I hope?"

"C'mon, Jessica, we're not wackos from Waco. But we do have a very important meeting at church tonight. Nye is going to go straight from work. I'll join him later, after I get you settled. I'll be late, but that's all right. The Big Fisherman keeps the service going for hours. Last week the neighbors across the street from the House of the Carpenter (that's the name of our meeting place) complained to the police about how late we carried on."

"The Big Fisherman? The House of the Carpenter? Phira, I—"

"Jessica, how would you like to come along? It's going to be a big night for Nye and me. I really want to share it with you. How 'bout it?"

"Well, I really was looking forward to a soaking in your Jacuzzi and a walk in the rose garden and a good night's sleep."

"Oh Jessica, come with me. Like I said, it's going to be a wonderful night for me and especially for Nye. He would be so proud to have you there."

"Are they honoring him or something?"

"Well, you could say that. I don't know for sure, but after tonight they may just name their new school for missionaries up at Antioch after my dear, sweet husband—and maybe me too. Who knows?"

"He is such a good man. I learned the last time I talked to him that his full name means 'grace of God.' Phira, I think I'll go with you."

"Wonderful! You'll get to meet

Knosha—my friend from the *Jerusalem Post*. I asked her to cover this event. She adores you, Jessica. She wants to become a mystery writer just like you."

## SCENE 2: THE SERVICE

The Porsche carrying Phira and Jessica wound its way into the bowels of the city. *Not a very fashionable part of town*, Jessica thought, but she said nothing. Finally they parked on a side street. Phira gave an urchin in a dirty headdress two dollars to watch her car. Phira led her guest down an alley and across a vacant lot, reaching the gate of a simple house. "This is the House of the Carpenter?" Jessica asked.

"The House of the Carpenter and the group is led by the Big Fisherman."



"He always had  
a knack for  
making money."



"Takes all kinds," Jessica murmured, as they slipped quietly through a door and up the stairs.

*If Jessica had been as curious about the Scriptures as she was about murder, she would have known that these early Christians had a thing for "upper rooms."*

The service had actually been going for several hours when the women arrived, but the night was young—even if Jessica wasn't. Someone was praying. Phira whispered, "James, the brother of our Lord." They waited reverently. Jessica noted that the prayer was offered in Jesus' name and that at the close the one praying thanked God for the Paschal Lamb who redeemed "us all" from sin.

A tall, bearded man in a simple robe stood, his eyes searching the congregation. Jessica nudged her friend. "Big Fisherman?"

"Yes, that's Pastor Peter in the flesh."

"I don't see Nye," Jessica said.

"Oh, he's bound to be here somewhere, Jessica. Oh, here comes Knosha, from the *Post*. She's dying to meet you, Jessica."

But as Knosha approached, she did not seem happy. Her eyes spoke shock and alarm. "Phira—oh, Phira!" But Phira raised her hand to shush her, for just at that moment the Big Fisherman called her name. Even the *Post* had to wait when Pastor Peter spoke.

His voice rang with a solemn timbre: "Sapphira," he called, using her full name, "Beautiful Sapphira" (the name means "beauty" in Aramaic).

A barely audible gasp arose from the congregation.

"He wants me up front, Jessica," Sapphira said, fluttering her lashes and arching an eyebrow. She squared her shoulders, adjusted her pearls, flicked at her hair, and strode forward. A knowing smile flirting with the corners of her mouth, she gave Jessica the circle and three finger sign.

A hush came over everyone. Even the guy who shuffled the overhead transparencies with the choruses on them was quiet.

Pastor Peter stood at the front, a black Bible in his hand. On it was what looked like a yellow Post-it. Everybody probably thought it was the order of service, the words to a new chorus, or a sermon outline.

Pastor Peter held up the Bible and said, "Sapphira, beautiful Sapphira, I have written a figure here on this Post-it. Would you look at it closely and tell me whether or not that figure is the amount for which you and Ananias sold the Bar-Nothin' Ranch?"

*Wait a minute! This is not the way this was supposed to go. Something is very wrong here. Sapphira is being treated as if she is on trial. She glances at Jessica, whose face is a puzzle. Knosha is crying. She looks at the figure: "Yes, Pastor Peter. That is the amount."*

"And is that the amount you are putting in the church common fund?"

"Why, yes it is. I'm sure that Ananias has already given you a check for that amount."

"Sapphira, oh, Sapphira," the Big Fisherman said. "Why did the two of you agree to lie to the Holy Spirit? Before you sold the ranch, it was yours. After you sold it, the money was

yours to do with as you wished. You did not have to give it all, the way Barnabas did. In fact, you did not have to give any of it to the church. Were you jealous of the honor that came to Barnabas?

"Just three hours ago your husband stood right here and told the same lie to God. When he put on the hypocrite's mask, he dropped dead. I see that the men who buried him have just returned. They are just in time to bury you."

With that Sapphira, beautiful, beautiful Sapphira, fell down dead. Jessica was stunned. (*I'm not sure why; every week, wherever she goes, somebody gets killed.*) She was stunned; but her Yankee aggressiveness rescued her, and in a flash she hustled to the front and checked for a pulse. No pulse.

"She's dead," she gasped. With that well-known accusatory stare, she glared at Pastor Peter. "What happened here?" she demanded.

Pastor Peter answered not a word but beckoned to the young men. They wrapped the body in a blanket and started for the door, to bury the mortal remains of Sapphira.

"Not so fast, there, Pastor Fisherman—or . . . or whoever you really are. This is a police matter! You can't go burying people without the proper procedures. The medical examiner, the coroner, or whatever you call him here, has to examine both of these bodies! How dare you? Who do you think you are, Jim Jones? David Koresh? Tammy Faye Bakker? Mark Fuhrman? You can count on having both those bodies exhumed and examined. And if I were you, I wouldn't leave town."

*Of course, if Jessica had been as curious about the Scriptures as she was about murder, she would have known that both Leviticus and Deuteronomy say that bodies are to be buried the same day the death occurs.*

Pastor Peter ignored Jessica as she rattled on. In a calm, clear voice, he pronounced the benediction. And quietly, as the fear of God hovered over everyone except the delegate from Cabot Cove, the congregation filed out into the night. Jessica was left alone at the House of the Carpenter.

### SCENE 3: WITH INSPECTOR BENJAMIN

An hour later, Jessica had the homicide detective, one Inspector Benjamin, on the scene. Of course, he turned out to be a lackey, an incompetent political appointee who didn't know how to investigate killings or anything else. He did know, however, that he did not like to be hassled out of bed in the middle of the night.

"Mrs. Felcher—"

"Fletcher."

"Whatever! There is no blood, no sign of a struggle."

"I'm telling you, Inspector, I saw it with my own eyes."

"Mrs. Fletcher—"

"Fletcher."

"Whatever! What did you say you do in America?"

"I write murder mysteries."

"Mrs. Fletcher—"



"After tonight they may just name their new school for missionaries after my dear, sweet husband."



"Fletcher."

"Whatever—I have a nephew in America. He lives in Denver. Maybe you know him."

"Inspector, my two friends are dead! If you don't do something, this religious cult is going to get away with murder!"

But the inspector's response was a condescending, "Mrs. Fletcher, I know a little diner that's open 24 hours, down Eschol Avenue. What do you say we go have a cup of hot carob tea and a cold mutton pie, and see how this looks on a full stomach."

### SCENE 4: A MEETING IN THE PARK

The next day, though the police could find no trace of Pastor Peter, Jessica did. He was meditating in a parklike garden filled with olive trees. But Jessica flounced right into his meditations. "I was told you might be hiding out here."

Peter, still mostly absorbed in his prayers, glanced up, barely noticing her. Half to her, half to himself, he said, "This is where it happened, you know. Right here in Gethsemane Park."

"I do not know what you're talking about, Pastor Fisherman, but what I'm interested in didn't happen here. It happened at the House of the Carpenter."

Unperturbed, Peter continued, "Right here is where He prayed, 'Not my will, but Thine, be done.' John and James and I mostly snoozed, but I heard that prayer, all right. I'll never live long enough to forget that. He meant what He prayed too. He was crucified for our sins, yours and mine, Mrs. Fletcher."

Jessica stamped an impatient foot in the dust. "I don't know about that, but I do know that your sins right now include presiding over the deaths of two of my dear friends."

"And right across that valley is where I denied Him." If Jessica had looked at her Tourist Bureau map, she would have noticed that Peter was pointing across the Kidron Valley. "I denied Him, Jessica, and they crucified Him."

"Speaking of crucifixion, *Mr. Don't-Bother-Me-About-a-Couple-of-Deaths*, there just may be a crucifixion or an electric chair in your future!"

Pastor Peter jerked his head sharply, looking her full in the face. After a long pause, he said, "You just might be able to bank on that one."

"And speaking of banks, I'll bet you still have the check that Ananias forked over."

"No, Jessica."

"You just sit here in the park as if nothing happened. How do you think you can get away with it?"

"There's a deeper question, Mrs. Fletcher. Why would Ananias and Sapphira—grace and beauty, that's what their names mean in Aramaic, you know—how could they think that they could get away with it? That's the question!"

"Get away with what, exactly?"

"Lying to God. Hypocrisy."

"Are you saying, Rev. Big Fishperson, that because they did not give you all their money, God struck them dead? Some God. I never heard of such a thing. Besides, they deserve that condo in Haifa if anyone did. Ananias worked hard to make his money."

"Right up to the very end."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Tell me, Mrs. Fletcher, do you suppose that Nye and Phira thought that by contributing to the common fund and then living out of it, in the long run they'd get more out of it than they put in? Or did they forfeit their lives because they wanted praise like Barnabas received?"

"Really, I can't buy either of those nasty suppositions. From what I hear, this God of yours (whom you yourself denied) is supposedly to be all love, mercy, and grace."

"Pardon me, Jessica—remember Achan?"

*If Jessica had been as curious about the Scriptures as she was about murder, she would have recalled the case of Achan, who hid what belonged to God, thus polluting the whole congregation and forfeiting his life.*



"This is the House of the Carpenter?"



But again, Jessica did not know, but she plowed on. "You're not the first charlatan to try to blame his crimes on God, you know. You will never—"

"Mrs. Fletcher. There's a Gideon Bible in your hotel room, right? Read up on Uzzah. You see, he touched the ark and died. For pity's sake, Jessica, **Ananias and Sapphira grabbed the new ark with both hands!**"

"Pastor Fisherman, you are positively the most frustrating man I have ever had the misfortune to meet. Il-

logical too. Suppose that Nye and Phira were trying to make a profit from the church mutual fund? Suppose they were wearing a bit of a mask, and trying to make something of a false impression? I mean, we all have done that sort of thing, more than once. Everybody has been less than honest, pretentious—you even denied your Lord. Yet here we are hale and hearty—a little sweaty, but hale and hearty. How, then, can you claim that God struck them dead? Why would He?"

"Mrs. Fletcher, you need to learn the word *ecclesia*. It means "the church, the called-out ones." We have just begun to call our faith community, church, *ecclesia*. Mrs. Fletcher, let me say that our fellowship is so precious that no one dare look with favor on anyone who would hinder its Great Commission with self-serving praise seeking.

"I see I'm confusing you. Let me start over. Jessica, I'm sure you know about the ark of the covenant—surely you've seen Harrison Ford in *Raiders*."

"Oh yes, yes," Jessica chimed, like a schoolkid who finally got one answer right.

"Mrs. Fletcher, if Indiana Jones (or anyone else) had really recovered the ark, it would have been empty."

"What? I thought you believed in—"

"What I'm saying, Jessica, is that God no longer lives in the ark of the covenant; He lives in the **covenant community**. He makes His very **home** within the covenant community."

Jessica was quiet for what seemed like a long time. Maybe Nye and Phira *had* grabbed the new ark with both hands. "So you are saying that God smites those who mess with the church?"

"You said that, Jessica, not me."

"Well, I'm not buying it. I demand that you report to Inspector Benjamin. He's going to exhume the bodies, you know. And he put out an APB on you too. I gave him your description myself."

"I'm right here every day at this time. Inspector Benjamin can interrupt my prayers anytime—just as you did. Tell him to exhume the bodies. He will find nothing incriminating."

The inspector came.

Pastor Peter was arrested.

The bodies were exhumed. The medical examiner called his superior. Together they could not come up with any cause of death—none! Not one thing wrong with these people—no poison, no heart attack, no nothing.



*If Jessica had been as curious about the Scriptures as she was about murder, she would have known that these early Christians had a thing for "upper rooms."*



Before she left, Jessica met again with the inspector. He reported that Peter escaped. "The stupid guard claimed an angel came and dazzled him and opened the door. Fired him. I think he's on drugs. Anyway, we think Pastor Peter is in Galilee—anonymous tip. We'll check it out." Jessica bustled out in a huff.

#### SCENE 5: JESSICA ALONE IN HER ROOM

That night Jessica goes to her room in the King David Hotel, Jerusalem. Back to Cabot Cove tomorrow. She begins to think about it all. Being a very logical person, she can't help but think about how Phira thirsted for praise and public applause. How she had hoped that the new school of



missions in Antioch would be named after them. And calling the *Post* to cover their donation? And Nye had been a little too close to the line on business ethics more than once. Sapphira had been evasive about the church "mutual fund." With her own ears, Jessica had heard her lie in public about the amount of the sale and the amount they planned to give to the church! Maybe . . . ? No; how could it be?

Jessica is not used to being stumped, but she just can't figure it out. Jessica pulls out the Gideon Bible and thumbs to the story of Achan. She reads twice the account of Uzzah, who put unauthorized hands on the ark and dropped dead just like Sapphira.



"My two friends are dead! If you don't do something, this religious cult is going to get away with murder!"



She begins to think of her own life. She has failed to keep a few vows in her day. She remembers how as a child she encountered God, but somehow the vision faded in the whirlwind of adolescence. She recalls as a teenager at church camp those who went forward after the missionary from Africa preached. She had pledged her life to missionary service! But then came college and marriage. She recalled how she prayed and promised when her husband got so sick. But then came best-sellers and fame and wealth. **She had promised**

**God so much and yet had given Him so little.**

That's why Jessica is so popular, they say—we can all identify with her.

**A hundred times** she had promised and forgotten.

**A hundred times** she had pretended to be what she *really* wasn't.

**A hundred times** she had reported on her local, state, and federal income taxes more than she had actually given to the church.

**A hundred times.**

The Gideon Bible falls open, and Jessica's eyes notice Eccles. 8: "Though sinners do evil **a hundred times** and prolong their lives, . . . it will not be well with the wicked, neither will they prolong their days like a shadow, because they do not stand in fear before God. . . . Because sentence against an evil deed is not executed speedily, the human heart is fully set to do evil. . . . I saw the wicked buried; they used to go in and out of the holy place [where they] were praised. . . . This also is vanity" (vv. 10-13, NRSV, emphasis added).

Though the air-conditioning in the King David was working perfectly, perspiration broke out on Jessica's Este Lauder-covered brow. I think I see a tear, don't you?

A little pretentious hypocrisy here, a little going back on your vows there—and God didn't do anything—and Jessica had hardly given it a thought until now, until this encounter with the Word.

Oh, Jessica, while grace still beckons . . .

Oh, Jessica, it is still not too late. But, Jessica, this time be true to your vows. How many times can you promise?

Can we identify with her? Have we been writing with the pen that is our lives the sequel to Ananias and Sapphira in

our posturing?  
our pride of face or grace?  
our thirst for praise?  
our ambition?  
our changing faces according to the crowd we are with?

Surely we would not pollute the pure fellowship of the church? Surely we would not defile the purity of the whole with hypocritical posturing?

For pity's sake, is that my hand, or yours, leaning on the ark? Should we identify with Jessica, right down to the cold sweat and trembling lip?

#### CONCLUSION

Well, there's Jessica, still stumped. Unusual for her. Every week she solves a murder in 60 minutes with 16 minutes out for commercials.



She had promised God so much and yet had given Him so little.



But there in her hotel room alone with her Bible, a strange look captures her face. It's a little like the wide-eyed *Aha moment* when you expect Jessica to say, "Aha—I know who our killer is, and I know why he did it."

It's *something* like that look, but more solemn.

Almost trembling, Jessica puts the Bible down and walks slowly across the room. She sits down at her word processor and in

ALL CAPS

BOLDFACE

36-POINT TYPE

she types three words:

JUDGMENT, SHE WROTE!

SCRIPTURE READING: Acts 5:1-11

Closing Prayer:

*Almighty God, to whom all hearts be open, all desires known, and from whom no secrets are hid: Cleanse the thoughts of our hearts, by the inspiration of Thy Holy Spirit, that we may perfectly love Thee and worthily magnify Thy holy name. Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.*

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# How Pastors Can Bring Unity

**T**he good news is that pastors can be a force for reconciliation and cooperation. They can model for their people how to obey Christ and speak the truth in love. They can teach their people how to handle conflict in mature and constructive ways.

For most of us, the process of learning to handle conflict is just that—a learning process. Bill Hybels, pastor of Willow Creek Community Church in South Barrington, Illinois, describes the changes that took place in his own life that significantly increased his effectiveness as a pastor:

In my early years of ministry, I rebutted people who wrote to me and said I had offended them or hurt their feelings. For years, I'd write back and say essentially, "I'm sorry you took it wrong, but there really wasn't anything wrong with what I said." But then they'd write back, doubly hurt. They knew what I really meant was, "I'm sorry you're so sensitive that you get upset about petty things."

After several years of this, I thought, *What if I just said, "Thank you for writing me and expressing your hurt. I'm sorry. I didn't intend to hurt you. Please forgive me."*

Soon after implementing this approach, I began receiving letters saying, "Thank you for your letter. You don't know how much that meant to me."

Many people, I discovered, just want to know if their pastor is a safe person. Can he respond to hurt with compassion? Does he care as much about relationships as he does his sermon material? . . . Our people already know we make mistakes. What they want to know is whether or not we have enough integrity to admit them.<sup>1</sup>



by Robert Moeller

Contributing Editor to "Leadership Journal,"  
Libertyville, Illinois

Because the majority of conflict in local churches takes place between a pastor and the congregation, it's important we look at the steps pastors can take to encourage unity and harmony. As Hybels says so well, "The mark of community—true biblical unity—is not the absence of conflict. It's the presence of a reconciling spirit."<sup>2</sup>

## A Pastor with an Attitude—of Reconciliation

H. B. London defines reconciliation as "the restoration of friendship and fellowship after estrangement."<sup>3</sup> There are few times when a pastor's commitment to living out a spirit of reconciliation is as tested as when someone calls his character or motives into question. Consider this incident that Ben Patterson speaks about:

I remember several years ago hearing a friend tell of a painful confrontation with a member of the church. The man had a list a mile long of criticisms aimed right at him as pastor. My friend had tried to use meals together as a means of reconciliation. All he had to show for his efforts, however, was heartburn.

The pastor felt bombarded by the number of smart-bomb questions and laser-guided accusations

raining down on him. He interrupted the attack by saying to the gentleman, "Clearly, you think I'm doing everything wrong. But do you trust my heart?"

There was a long pause. The man looked at the pastor and said matter-of-factly, "No, I think you're trying to ruin the church."

The pastor was stunned. When he recovered, he said, "No, wait. You really think that I am trying to destroy the church?"

"Yes," he replied, "I think you are."<sup>4</sup>

## A Heart Exam for Pastors

While all believers have a responsibility to work toward true biblical unity, the Bible singles out the heart attitudes and characteristics of pastors for special attention. That's the case in Paul's instructions in his second letter to young pastor Timothy:

Pursue righteousness, faith, love and peace, along with those who call on the Lord out of a pure heart. Don't have anything to do with foolish and stupid arguments, because you know they produce quarrels. And the Lord's servant must not quarrel; instead, he must be kind to everyone, able to teach, not resentful. Those who oppose him he must gently instruct, in the hope that God will grant them repentance leading them to a knowledge of the truth, and that they will come to their senses and escape from the trap of the devil, who has taken them captive to do his will (2:22-26).

Now, not everyone who opposes a pastor has been taken captive by the devil to do his will. The context of this passage suggests the captives were those who opposed sound doctrine and the truth of the gospel. But this paragraph does contain the basic

truths a pastor must incorporate into his or her life to keep personal attacks and conflict from destroying his effectiveness.

### Pursue Character, Not Control

What happens in us is more important to God than what happens to us. The development of a Christlike character is God's first and foremost agenda for our lives. For that to happen, we sometimes go through difficult situations. It often means facing difficult critics and their scrutinizing assessments of our lives. Ben Patterson tells of his struggle between growing in character or reacting defensively:

## Handling conflict is a learning process.

There was a woman in a church I served that could see little, if any, redeeming value in my ministry. As we were trying to work out the problem, she told me that I had to be more receptive to what others wanted me to do (translated, it meant doing exactly what she wanted me to do).

Instinctively, I reacted in exactly the opposite direction. I became determined to never give this woman control over my life or ministry. There was an element of truth to what she was saying, but my own ego strength sometimes wouldn't allow me to admit it. It's tempting to react by shutting some people out completely, writing them off as incorrigible cranks.

I find it difficult in those situations to readily forgive people. I know they need a model of Christ's love and forgiveness, but their actions eat away at my soul. Yet, if I don't follow Jesus' advice to bless those who persecute me, it will end up coming between God and me. That's too high a price to pay.<sup>5</sup>

Patterson is describing the battle between character and control. Pastors have to choose between the two.

Either I'm going to trust God that He is working out the maturing of my character by allowing me to face sometimes hostile critics, or I'm going to have to maneuver, plan, and manipulate to remove my critics from my life and ministry.

I remember hearing the story of a pastor who would tolerate no objection or opposition from his board. Whenever a board member or deacon would challenge him, he would call that one into his office and say, "Jim, I've heard you're in opposition to what I'm doing."

"Yes, Pastor, that's true. I am concerned about this area of the church's ministry."

The minister would then supposedly reply, "Well, sir, why don't we let the Lord decide who's right in this matter? Let's both pray that God will take home the one who's wrong in this situation." The pastor claimed that he had buried almost half a dozen deacons who were foolish enough to oppose the Lord's work (or him) and pray that prayer.

Whether the story is true or not, such an approach obviously isn't in keeping with the spirit of Paul's advice to Timothy: "Pursue righteousness, faith, love and peace, along with those who call on the Lord out of a pure heart." To ask God to strike dead the person who opposes you seems to suggest an insatiable need to control others.

There are, of course, more subtle methods of domination. We can quit talking to the grumbling parishioners, have them quietly removed from committees, criticize them to the other leaders, or openly humiliate them in a confrontation.

But only at a great cost to our character. To feed our appetite for control turns us ultimately into petty, vengeful, and ruthless individuals. It also destroys the inner character of the church. Instead of being a place of joy, vibrancy, and winsomeness, the church becomes a dwelling for suspicion, alliances, fear, and most of all, deep hurt.

But when we pursue righteousness, faith, love, peace, and a pure heart, even if we lose, we win.

Michelle Prentice-Leslie, pastor of a church in the suburban Chicago area, reminds us that we have to be sensitive to the loss and grief issues that

are often behind the troublesome behavior of some individuals:

People who have experienced a great loss in their lives may have difficulty letting go of the familiar, such as their role as choir director or trustee chair. The prospect of losing something else in their life that's been meaningful to them is too overwhelming. The result is they fight tooth and nail to hang on. [In those cases] I would share with the [person] some of the losses that have occurred in my own life. I'd admit these setbacks have made it difficult for me to entertain the idea of trying new things. I would explain how [their] own grief work may be adversely impacting their area of service and hindering the work of the Holy Spirit.<sup>6</sup>

When one of my harshest critics was hospitalized, my commitment to being a person of reconciliation was put to the test. Would I go and visit? Should I send someone else? It took all the mercy God could pour into my life for me to make the trip to the hospital and step in the elevator. I struggled as I walked down the corridor and entered the room. I was greeted with cold and unwelcome stares from the person's relatives as I walked in.

## The Bible singles out the heart attitudes and characteristics of pastors for special attention.

But after I had read Scripture and prayed with the individual, something changed inside me. I knew as I stepped back on the elevator that I was free—free from the need to punish or control that person. Free to love him.

Let me add a word of caution. The quest for character doesn't imply we roll over and become passive in the face of unjust and unfair criticism. It means that we respond by pursuing reconciliation with a loving and open heart. Hybels tells of one of the most painful accusations he ever had to deal with:

Many years ago, I heard from reliable sources that a local pastor had commented repeatedly that Lynne and I were unhappily married, headed for divorce. Included in his charges were accusations of unfaithfulness. Needless to say, Lynne and I were deeply saddened by these false reports.

After much discussion and prayer, Lynne and I drove to this pastor's church and walked into his office, unannounced, and introduced ourselves.

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## The development of a Christlike character often means facing difficult critics and their scrutinizing assessments of our lives.

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"The things you have been saying have been ripping our hearts out," we said. "They're not true. We're wondering why you're saying what you're saying."

"I thought my information was accurate," he sputtered. By the end of the conversation, he was apologetic. He appreciated that we had come to him and spoken the truth in a loving way. I think we all gained some valuable life lessons that day.

By refusing the impulse to either run from the problem or run over his critic, Hybels was able to deal with a painful issue in a positive way. The payoff of pursuing righteousness, faith, love, peace, and a pure heart is that you eventually find them. They take up residence in your soul.

### Avoid the Irrelevant

There is a distinct difference between moral absolutes, deeply held convictions, and personal preferences. Pastors who are able to make those important differentiations are far more likely to promote unity in their congregation.

My friend Linda once casually referred to the main auditorium of a church as "the sanctuary." The person she was with immediately stiffened and said, "You mean the *auditorium*. We don't believe in sanctuaries around here."

Linda could have picked up the challenge and engaged the other person in a spirited theological argument over the correct terminology for the room in which a congregation worships God. The nature of the debate would not have been altogether irrelevant.

But there was an emotional hard edge to the person's voice, almost an anger about the issue. As Linda read the situation, it seemed the person was dealing with other issues in his life. So she practiced some advice that the writer of Proverbs offers: "Starting a quarrel is like breaching a dam; so drop the matter before a dispute breaks out" (17:14). She smiled at the person and changed the conversation to another topic. It wasn't worth dividing fellowship over.

My mother was part of a group that once got into a heated discussion over whether to serve dill or sweet pickles for lunch. Paul Cedar, until recently the president of the Evangelical Free Church, remembers a congregational meeting he attended as a boy getting ugly over whether to use brown or red shingles on the church's roof. I've seen church boards melt down over who left mud on the carpet.

What do all these incidents have in common? The issue that led to division was irrelevant. Paul advises Timothy, "Don't have anything to do with foolish and stupid arguments, be-

cause you know they produce quarrels. And the Lord's servant must not quarrel" (2 Tim. 2:23-24).

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## "If I don't follow Jesus' advice to bless those who persecute me, it will end up coming between God and me."

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As a general rule, it is best to major on the majors and minor on the minors. People who go through life seeing every issue in capital letters are going to frequently find themselves in conflict. When they consider every aspect of their faith as equivalent in value, the important is devalued and the trivial is exalted, and division results.


The Pharisees made that exact mistake. They would give to God a tenth of the smallest herbs in their garden but rob the houses of widows. They would count the number of steps they walked on the Sabbath, but they would find ingenious ways to get out of supporting aging parents.

Wouldn't it have been better for them to forget their endless rules and regulations and instead show mercy and kindness to others?


In the same fashion, it is far more important that we evidence the character of Christ than to enforce cultural and man-made rules and regulations in the local church. In recent years some churches have taken strong positions on issues such as the style of music used in worship, where children should be educated, and the proper size of a family. I honor the strong convictions these individuals hold. These are neither foolish nor insignificant matters. But it would be wrong to make any one of them a test of orthodoxy.

We are all one family, not because

we all agree on matters such as these, but because "there is one body and one Spirit—just as you were called to one hope when you were called—one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all" (Eph. 4:4-6).



We have to be sensitive to the issues that are often behind the troublesome behavior of some individuals.



To promote unity and harmony, pastors need to avoid being consumed in controversies and arguments that, in the light of eternity, will prove irrelevant in comparison to the important tasks of preaching the gospel and leading people to faith in Christ.

Several years ago I read a fascinating book titled *Protestants in Russia*. It told the story of Czar Alexander I, one of the infamous rulers of Russia in the early 1800s. He possessed absolute power (*Czar* is the Russian translation of *Caesar*) as well as unlimited wealth and a massive army to do his bidding.

Alexander I appeared to have it all. Wealth. Power. Absolute control. Then one day a distant cousin from Austria paid him a visit. Surveying his ostentatious palace, his numerous servants who catered to his every whim, and the opulent lifestyle he took for granted, she said, "You lack only one thing."

"What's that?" he replied, miffed that anyone could point out an inadequacy in his magisterial possessions.

"Jesus Christ," the baroness calmly replied. She went on to explain his need for a personal Savior.

If he was convicted by her com-

ment, he didn't let on. He continued to amass wealth and expand his influence over the millions of subjects who owed him their complete subservience.

Then came an event that Alexander could have never foreseen. A short, determined general by the name of Napoleon decided that Russia should belong to him. His swarming French armies invaded Russia and drove the czar's forces back as far as Moscow. Alexander I watched in horror as the city of Moscow burned before his very eyes. All that he had lived for, all the power and wealth and status that had consumed his every waking hour, was engulfed in a swirling column of smoke and flames. Observers say the incident left him deeply shaken. It was a spiritual turning point in his life.

With the cruel Russian winter as his ally, the czar was able to rally his forces and launch a counteroffensive that drove Napoleon back in a bloody retreat across the frozen steppes of his empire. When Alexander returned victorious from his campaign, he went for a retreat in the Crimea. You can imagine the shock and disbelief of the Russian people when they learned their conquering hero had suddenly died in the Crimean peninsula. His coffin was returned to St. Petersburg for a state burial, but it was never opened.

At the same time a man by the name of Feodor appeared in the far eastern region of Siberia. A person of glowing faith, he spent the remainder of his life performing acts of mercy and kindness to the elderly and children. When he died, the people considered him a saint.

In 1933 the Communist government in Moscow ordered that all the coffins of the former czars be opened to search for state jewelry and treasures. When they opened Czar Alexander I's casket, they were dumbfounded—it was empty. Some speculate that Alexander I, recognizing the futility and transitory nature of power and wealth, quietly gave up his throne to become Feodor, the man of compassion and faith in Siberia.


If that is indeed what happened, it is a lesson to us all. The kingdoms of this world, and the power, prestige, and possessions we so hotly pursue

and contest, are insignificant when compared to the eternal value of the kingdom of our God and of His Christ.


Our focus in the local church must remain on doing the work of Christ while we still have an opportunity. Jesus gave us a short and succinct job description: "Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit" (Matt. 28:19). I agree with the bumper sticker that reads, "The main thing is to keep the main thing the main thing." Or as the apostle Paul said, to build unity and maintain right priorities, avoid the irrelevant.

#### Commit Random and Senseless Acts of Reconciliation

There are few things that dissolve anger and hardened attitudes in another person as effectively as kindness. Performing an act of grace and unselfishness toward a person we don't like can transform an enemy into a friend.



After I had read Scripture and prayed with the individual, something changed inside me.



There was no more bitter or divisive conflict in American history than the Civil War. Yet on the day Abraham Lincoln heard that Gen. Robert E. Lee had surrendered his army at Appomattox Courthouse, he walked outside the White House and instructed the U.S. Marine Corps band to play "Dixie."

It is often a single gesture or act of kindness that can begin the healing of wounds and disunity with a congregation. Pastors can, by a single sincere act of love and concern for an opponent, change the atmosphere of a



church from one of acrimony to acceptance.

I recall a time when I moved too quickly on an idea, and it led to considerable disruption. I was serving an inner-city church that was looking to increase its outreach to the community. We wanted to begin a Sunday service and lunch for the unchurched, but our building seemed inadequate. Our clothes and food distribution ministry had expanded to the point where, some Sundays, groceries and clothing were stacked on the front pews.

There was a rather large and modern church facility across the street from us that had recently built an addition. It was newer, more attractive, and had considerable space. I suggested we rent their facility on Sunday afternoons to hold our outreach service and meal. In my enthusiasm, I approached their pastor about the idea, and he was open to it. A sister church of ours even offered to underwrite the rent. I was ecstatic.

But not everyone in the congregation shared my enthusiasm. A number of people, particularly a sizable group of older members, objected to the plan. The other church was of a different denomination than we were. There was also the fear we would lose our identity as a church if we held our services in another building. Where I saw the move as the dawn of a new day for our ministry, others saw it as a one-way trip down Sunset Boulevard.

The dissension in the church came out into the open. The atmosphere on the Sunday morning before we were to take the vote was heavier than a crate of hymnals on Saturn. By the evening meeting, it was clear the opposition not only were digging in their heels but also were wearing cement shoes. They produced a petition signed by a number of individuals who opposed the move to the other building. In fairness, they did propose a compromise. If we would hold our regular Sunday morning worship service in our building, then we could hold the outreach service and meal at the other.

As the moment of the vote arrived, I remember looking at the group opposed to the plan and thinking, "These people are not my opponents. They are members of the flock I'm supposed to shepherd."

Though I suspected there were enough votes on my side to pass my proposal, I changed my mind. I rose and said, "I am your pastor, and we are one congregation. I do not feel comfortable adopting this measure by a 55 percent to 45 percent margin. I suggest we table it until we can reach a true consensus. I don't want to go ahead with this unless we can go ahead as a united church."

—▶

**The payoff of  
pursuing  
righteousness,  
faith, love,  
peace, and a  
pure heart is  
that you  
eventually find  
them.**

—▶

I wish you could have seen the expressions on the faces of the opposition. They were stunned. None of them had expected me to back down. But in my heart, I knew it was the right thing to do. Though I had great dreams for what we could do as a church, they could not be accomplished with a severed body. The unity of the church had to take priority.

—▶

**Our focus in the  
local church  
must remain on  
doing the work  
of Christ.**

—▶

A few months later, when we proposed an afternoon service for com-

munity residents that would include a free lunch in our basement, it passed unanimously. People who had been dead set against the original plan got behind this proposal in a big way. Most showed up for the first service.

Within just a few weeks we had a hundred people and more sharing a meal together each Sunday. It launched a new day in the church's ministry and sense of unity. Nearly a decade later, that program continues.

Someone has said, "When in doubt, choose kindness." In this case, kindness meant setting aside my agenda and listening to the needs and concerns of an opposing group. It was a random and senseless act of reconciliation that opened the door to genuine unity and purpose.

Paul tells pastors they "must be kind to everyone" (2 Tim. 2:24). In a world that values power, dominance, and winning at all costs, there is little room left for an act of tenderness, particularly toward one's opponents. But that is the way of unity.

Abraham Lincoln was once sent a letter requesting a pardon. There were no accompanying letters of recommendation.

"What? Has this man no friends?" asked the president.

"Apparently not, sir," replied the aide.

"Then I shall be his friend," said the president, and he signed the pardon.

Unity and harmony occur when we treat our enemies just as we treat our friends, and commit an occasional random and senseless act of reconciliation toward them.

#### **Breaking Bones with Gentleness**

The writer of Proverbs tells us, "Through patience a ruler can be persuaded, and a gentle tongue can break a bone" (25:15). Gentleness can accomplish far more than brute strength or relentless aggression can ever achieve.

My daughter has always wanted a cat. It is not her nature to argue or beg. But she is persistent. She began by bringing home posters of kittens.

"See these, Dad?" she would say.

"You can't have one, darling," I would reply.

"OK." And she would drop the matter.

Then when it was time to order books from school, she would show

me her selection. They were all stories of cats.

"Your mother and I have decided: no cats," I would say.

"All right, Dad," she would say with a smile. Nothing more was said.

Then came Christmas. We asked each child to make a short list of gifts they wanted. When we picked up her list, every item was the same thing: "I want a cat."

"We've already talked about this; no cat," I would say.

"Whatever you say, Father," she would reply.

I don't need to tell you her campaign of patience and gentleness was beginning to wear us down. I came to my desk one day to find Post-it notes all over the room. They all had cat paw prints drawn on them.

Not long after, we as a family crowded into a small room in a local animal shelter to select a cat. As I walked down the aisle of the supermarket and dropped a box of Tender Vittles in the shopping cart, I knew I had been beaten. By an eight-year-old. Who happened to have patience.

Anyone can get angry. It takes no special talent to lose your temper and get mean. I know; I've done it. Ugly and threatening exchanges are not hard to come by in our world. But a gentle answer is hard to find and is the sure mark of a mature and growing believer.

People rarely escalate their anger and criticism toward a pastor who responds in gentleness and patience. It does happen, but more often gentleness has a way of disarming our critics and opponents. The writer of Proverbs observes, "A gentle answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger" (15:1).

Remember, the person who is in control of his responses is ultimately in control of the situation. Gentleness and patience are not signs of weakness, but of maturity and strength. They are vital components of unity.

People who tend to rise in corporate and business structures (and stay up there) are not the bullies and the intimidators. These people eventually self-destruct. Most leaders who endure are men and women who know how to control their tempers and give gracious answers despite the provocations they receive. Pastors who can restrain their anger and deal

with criticism honestly but graciously will likely outlast and outlive their opponents. They will also help create a climate of unity and harmony.

—

**"The main thing  
is to keep the  
main thing the  
main thing."**

—

### **Liberate, Don't Eliminate**

A final and vital step a pastor can take to promote unity in the local church is to pray for, not punish, critics and opponents. We ought to sincerely pray for our critics to see God's truth in a clear and liberating fashion. Paul puts it this way: "Those who oppose [the Lord's servant] he must gently instruct, in the hope that God will grant them repentance leading them to a knowledge of the truth, and that they will come to their senses and escape from the trap of the devil, who has taken them captive to do his will" (2 Tim. 2:25-26).

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**An act of  
grace and  
unselfishness  
can transform  
an enemy into  
a friend.**

—

Few antagonists in the church are aware that their ungodly behavior or divisive actions may be serving an evil purpose. They often sincerely believe they're doing what they're doing for the good of everyone.

But that's the way deception works. If we knew we were being deceived, we would probably change course. But deception is subtle, se-

ductive, and usually has the appearance of good. As Paul reminds us, "For Satan himself masquerades as an angel of light" (2 Cor. 11:14).

But when deception enters our lives, we end up caught in a trap. Because we are believing a lie, we end up living a lie. Ultimately, we end up doing the will of the devil rather than the will of God.

How should we respond to those who are deceived in this way?

Our natural instinct is to try to get rid of our enemies. The Pharisees certainly thought they were doing God a favor when they had Jesus arrested and eventually put to death. The Crusaders thought they were doing God a favor when they slew the occupants of Jerusalem during the Middle Ages. And the officials who had the Anabaptists drowned during the Reformation era probably thought they too were doing God a favor.

Often when we do pray for our critics in the local church, we pray that they will simply leave. That may be prudent in some cases, but God's first priority is to ask that they might come to a knowledge of the truth.

One of the most stinging phone calls I ever received came from a woman whose wedding I would not perform. Some weeks earlier she and her fiance had called the church, asking to be married there. I met with them and said, "Bill and Brenda, I'll agree to meet with you for several sessions. But I won't promise to marry you two. I'll make that decision after I've gotten to know you better."

They both agreed. After several weeks of counseling with them, I became uneasy. Something was wrong in their relationship. I couldn't quite pinpoint it, but something wasn't right. I wrestled with my decision, then finally admitted to myself I couldn't go through with it.

One afternoon Brenda called to finalize the arrangements for the wedding. "Pastor," she began, "I think it's important we nail down a date now. How about—"

"Brenda, excuse me for breaking in," I replied. "But I have had to make a very difficult decision."

"What?" she said in a concerned voice.

"I'm afraid I can't marry you and Bill. I don't believe he loves you. I don't think he wants to get married."

"You won't what?" she yelled into the phone. She then let me have it. If memory serves me correctly, she went on to describe my character in less than glowing terms. "Well then, I'll just find a pastor who's a real pastor. Not someone like you." She slammed down the phone.

I didn't hear again from Brenda for several weeks, not until the Sunday I spotted her in the front pew. She smiled at me and seemed so much more peaceful.

She walked through the greeting line at the end of the service and extended her hand. "Pastor, do you remember me?"

"Why, of course, Brenda," I said. (How could I forget?) "What's happened since we last talked?"

"You remember how you told me that Bill didn't love me?" she said. "Well, I called him that same day and told him what you had said."

"And?"

"And he said you were right," she replied. "He said he didn't love me, and he didn't want to get married. So we called off the wedding."

Later I learned that Brenda had suffered a miscarriage before she and her fiancé had come for counseling. She had deceived herself into believing she and Bill were in love and were right for each other. And they had tried to deceive me about the nature of their relationship.

A single gesture  
or act of  
kindness can  
begin the  
healing of  
wounds and  
disunity with a  
congregation.

I'm glad I chose the road of gentle instruction and that God granted her a knowledge of the truth. She was not my enemy because she yelled at

me; she was a victim of a deception she eventually recognized.

—  
"These people  
are not my  
opponents.  
They are  
members of the  
flock I'm  
supposed to  
shepherd."  
—

We live in a culture in which deceptions of all sorts abound. Perhaps the most common deception in the church is the idea that the church belongs to us. It doesn't.

Virtually every church consultant I interviewed or studied in preparation for this book agreed on one frequent source of conflict: people who feel they own the church. Often it is those who have been there the longest who feel that way. Conflict erupts when they perceive they are losing control of "their church." It doesn't matter what the issue might be, whether it's a style of music or dropping the Sunday evening service—when one group senses its losing control to another, conflict begins.

But that's where good theology can save us from disunity and disharmony. Biblical theology teaches us that the church belongs to Jesus Christ, the Head, the Lord of His people. Neither the pastor, nor the board, nor the original stakeholders can claim the church belongs to them. Remember Paul's words: "And God placed all things under his feet and appointed him to be head over everything for the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills everything in every way" (Eph. 1:22-23).

Those who insist on trying to maintain ownership of a local church as if it's a hamburger franchise are guilty of rebellion. It's not their church, it's not the pastor's church, it's Christ's

church. If they continue to insist it belongs to them, and are successful in seizing and maintaining control, they will probably live to see their church's demise.

Churches that live in the glow of yesterday's accomplishments and yesterday's pastors but refuse to allow new leaders and new visions to enter in will ultimately see their church decline. People grow old and die. When one generation passes on without handing the mantle of leadership to another, you end up like the Shakers in Kentucky. They didn't believe in sexual relationships in marriage, so by the 20th century, they were down to two people. No reproduction, no one to carry on, eventually no church.

The same is true of pastors who are reluctant to leave or turn over the mantle of leadership to another. It's particularly a temptation when a pastor has enjoyed a long and prosperous tenure. They just can't let go.

Pastor John had been at the same church for 25 years. When he retired from that church, he left reluctantly. He sent subtle signals that if the people really loved him, they would reject his successor and all those who tried to follow him.

—  
Unity and har-  
mony occur  
when we treat  
our enemies  
just as we treat  
our friends.  
—

The leadership picked up on his subconscious cues, and sure enough, they ran off everyone who tried to fill his shoes. The church steadily declined. All the good that Pastor John did during his tenure was eventually undone by his unwillingness to let go of the church. Both pastors and laypeople must yield control of the church to its rightful Lord and Master if unity is to prevail.

We can only pray for those who are deceived, whether they be pastors or laypeople, that God will grant them repentance and a knowledge of the truth. But it is prayer, not pressure to leave, that God uses to change hearts. Our prayer purpose should be to liberate, not eliminate.

### Put Love into Action

It's important that a church not maintain simply a reactive mode to conflict. Churches need to take positive steps to prevent conflict from occurring. John Sheaffer, a pastor in the Midwest, recommends four practical steps any church can take to help promote a spirit of harmony and unity in the congregation:

Gentleness can accomplish far more than brute strength or relentless aggression can ever achieve.

1. *Once a year take a written survey of your congregation.*

This type of survey allows people to express their concerns about various programs or aspects of church life. They don't have to sign their names if they don't wish to. The staff and official board then study the results to determine what's working well and where the trouble spots might lie that need their attention.

2. *Once a year do a phone survey of your congregation.*

The staff and board members di-

vide up the list and call each member and active participant in the congregation. The survey is intended to help the leadership listen to the needs and concerns of people. It also offers the advantage of follow-up questions to determine just what the person is saying. These results are also presented to the board for discussion and action as needed.

3. *Pray for unity on a consistent basis.*

The staff, board, and leadership of the church make it a matter of high priority to continually pray for the oneness of mind and heart of the congregation. While problems still arise, the spirit of prayer changes the atmosphere in which they are discussed and dealt with. They feel maintaining unity requires divine protection and the assistance of God's presence in all the various aspects of the church's life.

Deception is subtle, seductive, and usually has the appearance of good.

4. *Finally, stress a common vision.*

"Kingdom people building Kingdom families" is the unique vision of Pastor Sheaffer's church. Vision statements will always be as unique as the church itself, but it provides a common goal for the congregation to strive after. That, in and of itself, helps promote unity.

As most physicians will tell you, the best way to treat disease is to prevent it. In the same manner, the best way to deal with church conflict is to

take active steps to stop it from ever getting started.

### Conclusion

Pastors who respond with gentleness to difficult people and who pray for their opponents are a key to church unity. They send the message that this church is a safe place to be. It's mature enough to handle disagreements, and its leadership is committed to building true community.

Perhaps the most common deception in the church is the idea that the church belongs to us.

Peace and unity in a church don't just happen. They must be pursued, and the person to lead that pursuit is the pastor. Pastors must both model and train their congregations in the ways of building harmony.

As one pastor said to me, "When you treat people with grace and acceptance, you're training them how to treat you."

Taken from Robert Moeller, *Love in Action: Healing Conflict in Your Church* (Portland, Ore.: Multnomah, 1994).

1. "Standing in the Crossfire: An Interview with Bill Hybels," *Leadership Journal* 14 (winter 1993): 20-21.

2. *Ibid.*, 14.

3. H. B. London, "Resolving Conflict: Tearing Down the Walls That Separate," *Pastor to Pastor Newsletter*, February 1994, 1.

4. Personal interview with Ben Patterson.

5. *Ibid.*

6. Michelle Prentice-Leslie, "Good Grief and Holy Cow," *Leadership Journal* 14 (summer 1993): 72.

7. "Standing in the Crossfire," 18-19.

“By the foolishness of preaching we keep our own hearts pure and bring cleansing to the Church and to society.” So . . .

## Preach, Pastor!

by Harold R. Crosser

**W**hen Clyde R. Hoey was governor of North Carolina, he visited the western part of his state and met a country pastor. The usual question about how many members there were in the church brought the response “Fifty.”

When the governor asked, “How many of them are active?” he got the same answer. “My,” he remarked, “you must be an unusual preacher to have a 100 percent active membership.”

“Well,” the parson admitted, “Twenty-five are active for me, and twenty-five are active against me.”

This wry story illustrates the precarious role played by the preacher-pastor. Keeping the flock intact is never an easy task. A true shepherd must have a heart that is compassionate, concerned, and even broken over the needs of his people; but he must be willing to suffer their scorn when he attempts to lead them out of the comfortable rut into which they have settled.

A pastor must first be willing to expend any amount of love and time to rescue the lost. The story is told of how the Italian General Garibaldi one evening met a Sardinian shepherd grieving over the loss of a lamb. The big-souled Garibaldi at once turned to his staff and organized a great search party. Lanterns were lit, and the elite of the army went off through the mountain ravines. But no lamb was found, and finally the order was given for the men to retire.

The next morning after the sun had risen, Garibaldi’s servant found him fast asleep. Upon being awakened, the old general took from under the covers the lost lamb. He had searched through the night until he had found the little creature.

The heart of a true pastor will drive him to do the same thing. He will preach Jesus, who came to seek and

to save the lost. And he will seek the lost with love.

But there is another side to the ministry. Besides trying to rescue and comfort the lost, the pastor must also protest and disturb.

The word “preach” comes from a Latin word that means “to make publicly known.” Something needs to be said in defense of righteousness; it burns into the heart of a godly man, and he proclaims the divine message to men around him.

Christian preaching is the proclamation of God’s Word. The Word will not always be preached in the same way. Men differ greatly, and each minister will have his own preaching characteristics. But all who love God

will preach the same Bible and the same truth.

Spirit-filled preachers are one of God’s channels for conveying divine truth. Sometimes this truth makes people uncomfortable. This is good. The revealed truth of God’s Word should disturb men’s hearts.

That the preached Word is often disturbing caused Billy Sunday to say to someone, “Cheer up, you are not in church.” And J. Edgar Park says that a congregation might be relieved if the man in the pulpit said, “Cheer up, I am not going to preach.” But when all is said and done, God uses “the foolishness of preaching to save them that believe” (1 Cor. 1:21, KJV).

By shying away from the rugged preached Word, the finest ministers have faltered in their greatest responsibility. So much needs to be done, and so many have no concern. Some good laymen seem amused when the preacher becomes disturbed about spiritual conditions, for they have decided to stop being concerned and have given way to pessimism.

The story is told about Nathan Bangs, who, as a young minister, became discouraged by difficulties and lack of success. He was about to give up when he dreamed he was working on a rock with a pickax. Blow after blow had no effect. He threw down his pick and cried, “Useless!”

A stranger came to him and said, “You will work no more?”

“No more.”

“Were you not determined to finish the task?”

“Yes.”

“Why stop it?”

“I make no impression on the rock.”

“What is that to you? Your duty is to use the pick. Your work is in your own hands; the result is not!”

In the dream Nathan Bangs re-





sumed his task. At the first blow the rock fell to pieces.

In this careless day in which we live, the inclination is to stop crying out against sin, to open the gate and let the marauders—the world, the flesh, and the devil—ride wildly into the fields of spiritual grain. It cannot be this way. Let us be on the alert for the trampling, devastating forces of sin.

Walter E. Isenhour tells of an English farmer at work in his fields.


He saw a party of horsemen riding about his farm. He had one field that he was especially anxious they should not ride over. So he sent one of his boys to the field, telling him to shut the gate, and then watch it, and on no account to let it be opened.

The boy went as he was told, but was scarcely at his post before the huntsmen came up and ordered the gate to be opened. This the boy refused to do, stating the orders he had received and his determination not to disobey them. Threats and bribes were offered, alike in vain.

After a while one of the huntsmen said in commanding tones, "My boy, you do not know me. I am the Duke of Wellington, and I command you to open that gate that I and my friends may pass through."

The boy lifted his cap and stood uncovered before the man whom all England delighted to honor, and then answered firmly, "I am sure the Duke of Wellington would not wish me to disobey orders. I must keep that gate shut and not allow anyone to pass but by my master's permission."

Greatly pleased, the old warrior lifted his own hat and said: "I honor the boy or the man who can be neither bribed nor frightened into doing wrong." Handing the boy a sovereign, the old duke put spurs to his horse and galloped away.

All of us are gatekeepers. Let us do our work firmly, kindly, nobly, but well. Don't be afraid to preach, Pastor. The soul that needs to be warned may be your own. By the foolishness of preaching we keep our own hearts pure and bring cleansing to the Church and to society. 

# Stump Preaching

by Frank Eifert

With power-filled preaching  
Old-timers are teaching  
Young students aspiring,  
With vigor untiring,  
To platforms of greatness  
With pomp and sedateness,  
But scornfully spurning,  
As part of their learning,  
The practice of preaching from stumps.

The old generation,  
With no wish for station,  
Found spots in the wood  
And in solitude stood.  
There they preached to the trees  
And the birds and the bees,  
In out-of-way places  
Where there were no faces,  
And conquered the humps from the stumps.

Then, with hearts full of love,  
A command from above,  
With flinty-set faces  
And blessed with God's graces,  
With purpose commendable,  
Resolute, unbendable,  
Sermons yet full of holes,  
They went out after souls  
With the know-how they learned on the stumps.

The devil tried roadblocks  
And bounced them on hard rocks;  
The mountains grew steeper,  
But thinking probed deeper.  
Their spirits rose higher,  
Rhetoric caught fire  
And ended in thunder;  
They tore sin asunder  
With anger they felt on the stumps.


Folk wept with conviction;  
Satan, served with eviction,  
Was stripped of his power  
As God sent His shower  
Of love so unending

While angels, descending,  
Sang in jubilation  
O'er the sinners' salvation  
The songs they rehearsed at the stumps.

Through the years since they started,  
They never departed  
From singleness of vision  
That formed their decision  
To join with God's forces,  
The "called" whose discourses,  
Some light, some gigantic,  
In depth and semantic,  
Began with a will on the stumps.

Today eager young men  
With a genuine yen  
Say, "I wish I could preach  
In the heights that they reach."  
To reach such perfection  
Demands the subjection  
To strictest of ruling  
And searching past schooling  
To pursue what began on the stumps.

The grand masters of old  
Are like lodes of fine gold;  
They hold in their store  
Of homiletic lore  
Vast wealth for young miners  
Who, respecting old-timers,  
Must dig with perseverance  
And constant adherence  
To basics once learned on the stumps.

Then through swift years ahead,  
By the sweet Spirit led,  
They, too, move from pastures  
To plateaus of the masters  
Where their voices ring out,  
With authoritative shout,  
Profound truths of the Word  
At command of the Lord,  
Who commanded back there on the stumps. 

## Caesar or Christ?

*And he will be called  
Wonderful Counselor,  
Mighty God,  
Everlasting Father,  
Prince of Peace.*

*Of the increase of his government  
and peace there will be no end  
(Isa. 9:6-7, emphases added).*

**Text:** "In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world" (Luke 2:1).

Luke mentions, almost in passing, that Jesus was born during the reign of the Roman emperor Caesar Augustus (2:1-7). History is full of ironies, but none greater than when Luke puts Caesar Augustus and Jesus Christ in juxtaposition: the one, the epitome of beneficent violence in the service of law, order, and empire building; the other, the incarnation of nonviolence in the service of compassionate service and self-giving love.

This lone reference to Caesar Augustus, buried so deeply in the Christmas story as to be totally overlooked, opens a tiny but significant window through which we can look out on a vast universe of a larger-than-life military-political genius. Caesar Augustus personified those militant qualities of superior strength and dominant power that the Jews of Jesus' day looked for in their Messiah.

Though the story of Caesar Augustus has been largely lost to our historical memory, he was, by every standard of measurement, the most powerful, beloved, influential, and successful ruler in the history of the Roman Empire, or any nation of antiquity for that matter. His story fills multiple pages in encyclopedias. Scores of scholarly books have been written about him. The long shadow of his influence extended across the Western world for a thousand years. In that he ruled Rome with a rod of iron for half a century, it is appropriate to use him as a standard against which to evaluate the significance of Jesus' life and



by C. S. Cowles

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ministry from the perspective of secular history.

There are many striking parallels between the two. Caesar and Christ were both proclaimed to be the Son of God. Both gained, exercised, and wielded unprecedented power over men and nations, albeit in radically different ways. Both came to establish vast kingdoms and exercise sovereign roles, though in entirely different realms. Both live on in the value systems, ideals, and options before us today.

### I. CAESAR AUGUSTUS IS THE BEST THAT THE WORLD HAS TO OFFER

Gaius Octavius was born on September 23, 63 B.C., into a rich and powerful family. His father was a Roman senator, his mother the niece of Julius Caesar, Roman ruler. He caught Caesar's eye at 12 years of age when he delivered an eloquent eulogy at his grandmother's funeral. So impressed was the dictator with his brilliant nephew that he took him under wing. Not having a son of his own, he adopted Octavius and began to groom him as heir to the throne. And the boy did not disappoint. His talent was apparent in everything he did.

When Octavius was 18, Julius Caesar was murdered, unleashing a power struggle for control of the Roman Empire that would embroil it in bloody civil wars for 13 years. Young Octavius threw himself into the struggle. By the exercise of deft political

savvy, military genius, flattery, deceit, and enormous personal charisma, he was able to overcome all competitors except Mark Antony, with whom he made an uneasy truce. Yet he continued to undermine Antony's strength while Antony was preoccupied with his lover, Cleopatra. He met and defeated Antony's forces in a pitched battle, after which Antony and Cleopatra committed suicide, thus delivering the empire into his sole control.

The story of Gaius Octavius's rise to power is the stuff of legends. It contains enough passion, intrigue, and adventure to provide numerous plots for novels, plays, and movies. In that he emerged the victor in every conflict, he was praised, adored, and even worshiped by the populace who, then as now, love a winner. They were quick to forgive him of such indiscretions as murdering over 300 senators and 2,000 noblemen whom he perceived to be less than absolutely loyal to him. The people gave him the royal title of Caesar. Later he added Augustus, which meant "superior to the rest of humanity."

Once enthroned as "maximum leader," it did not take him long to bring law and order to the entire empire. The Pax Romana (Peace of Rome) was enforced by a great army and navy and administered by a republican form of government. He extended the borders of the empire as never before and gained the compliance of the subjugated populations through his fair and just governance according to the rule of law.

Caesar Augustus set in motion one of the greatest construction splurges of antiquity, erecting great coliseums for games and religious festivals, lacing the empire with a network of highways, building temples and shrines. He was a poet, philosopher, musician, patron of the arts, and author of more than a dozen books. Hundreds of statues showing off his handsome Greco-Roman face were sculpted and exhibited in public

places throughout the empire, some surviving to this day. He unscrambled the hopelessly complicated monetary systems and instituted a universal coinage, which boosted trade, encouraged commerce, and lifted the standard of living empirewide. He made sweeping social reforms, encouraged marriage and family life, increased penalties for adultery, and breathed new moral and intellectual life into a decaying republic. He himself was a homespun family man, devoted to his wife. Yet, like most Roman patricians of his time, he had a string of mistresses.

At about the time of Christ's birth, Caesar Augustus had himself appointed chief priest of Roman religion. Since Julius Caesar, following his assassination, had been proclaimed a god by the Senate, that automatically made Augustus the "Son of God"—an appellation he ordered engraved upon every Roman coin underneath his own image. When the Pharisees tried to trap Jesus with a loaded question of whether it was lawful to pay taxes, Jesus responded, "Bring me a denarius." The image on that coin was that of Caesar Augustus. Jesus' respect for Caesar can be seen in the saying that follows: "Give to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's" (Mark 12:13-17).

Since Caesar was not only the supreme political leader but supreme religious leader as well, it was only natural that the adoring populace would begin to worship him as a god. He did nothing to dampen their enthusiasm. One inscription dating around 7 B.C. says, "Caesar's birth was . . . the beginning of all things. . . . He set the world right and gave it another appearance. . . . The birthday of the god was the beginning of the good news to the world on his account."

Caesar Augustus was the embodiment of all that is celebrated and highly praised in our world today. He was a man of driving ambition, innate skills, inbred genius, and macho leadership. He exhibited a fine mixture of shrewd ruthlessness and kindly generosity. His wrath was terrifying, but his love was boundless. He put the stamp of his personality upon his world as no other. He powerfully shaped the political and cultural history of the West for another thousand

years. All democratic forms of constitutional government, supported by the rule of law, owe everything to Caesar Augustus. The values he per-



**Caesar  
Augustus  
personified  
those militant  
qualities of  
superior  
strength and  
dominant power  
that the Jews of  
Jesus' day  
looked for in  
their Messiah.**



sonified are those that drive the mighty engines that have made our country the military, commercial, and cultural superpower that it is today. His use of violence on behalf of de-



**Caesar and  
Christ were  
both  
proclaimed to  
be the Son of  
God.**



fending the peace and maintaining social order is admired by all. His ability to manipulate the populace and governmental process to bring about re-

form is highly coveted by contemporary Christian activists on all sides of the political spectrum. He was more than the Man of the Year, more than the Man of the Decade, more than the Man of the Century; he was the Man of the Millennium.

Now, let's set that in contrast to . . .

## **II. JESUS CHRIST, WHO IS THE BEST THAT GOD HAS TO OFFER**

Who is this Jesus of whom Luke speaks? Even though He was born in the reign of Caesar Augustus, it is certain that neither Caesar nor any of the lords or ladies of his empire ever heard of Him. Most of the important people of the empire had no idea where Judea was, much less Bethlehem. The Roman Senate did not pause in their proceedings to applaud Christ's birth.

When was He born? Nobody knows. Not even Luke, who only approximates the time of His birth. The best scholarly guess is that Jesus was born sometime during the year 4 B.C., ironic since our calendar's threshold is marked from the time of His birth.

While Caesar Augustus's birth was front-page news across the Roman Empire, Jesus' birth was marked by only a few smelly shepherds, nondescript peasants, astrologers from the East, and the paranoid Galilean puppet King Herod. His birth was so unremarkable that an account wasn't committed to writing until decades after His death.

Caesar's father was a senator. Jesus' earthly father was a carpenter. Caesar's mother was of royalty. Jesus' mother was a commoner, a humble Jewish maiden. Caesar's birth was honorable and celebrated. The circumstances surrounding Jesus' birth were questionable, placing Him under a cloud of illegitimacy that followed Him into adulthood. Caesar's boyhood and teen years were chronicled in great detail and became the stuff of legends. Jesus' early years are shrouded in mystery except for the Temple incident when He was 12. Caesar was powerful of build and handsome of face. His solid features were sculpted in stone, painted on canvas and walls, woven into frescoes, and etched upon hundreds of thousands of coins. There are no sculpted images of Jesus and not one extant description of what He looked

like, except that of Isaiah, penned prophetically hundreds of years before Jesus' birth:

He had no beauty or majesty to attract us to him,  
nothing in his appearance that we should desire him.  
He was despised and rejected by men,  
a man of sorrows, and familiar with suffering.  
Like one from whom men hide their faces  
he was despised, and we esteemed him not (53:2-3).



The story of  
Gaius  
Octavius's rise  
to power is the  
stuff of legends.



Caesar knew the value of well-placed friends and surrounded himself with gifted, wealthy, influential, and powerful people. Jesus companied with fishermen, peasants, farmers, women, misfits, prostitutes, outcasts, losers, lepers—the weak, vulnerable, and powerless of His society.



The adoring  
populace  
worshiped  
Caesar as a  
god.



Caesar traveled the length and breadth of his empire. Jesus never journeyed more than a hundred miles from the place of His birth.

Caesar became the wealthiest man

of his century, one of the richest in world history, and had royal palaces strung out all over the empire. Jesus had no money, no real estate, no change of clothes, no job, no source of income, and wandered about homeless. "Foxes have holes and birds . . . have nests," Jesus confessed, "but the Son of Man has no place to lay his head" (Matt. 8:20).

Caesar wrote over a dozen books of poetry and philosophy. Jesus wrote nothing.

Caesar became a priest and was elevated to the position of the high priest of the Roman Empire. Jesus was neither a priest nor the son of a priest but was rejected, harassed, and abused by a religious establishment that finally engineered His untimely death.

Caesar sought, gained, and maintained power through the use of persuasion, intrigue, and violence. Jesus emptied himself of His divine power, took upon himself the role of a servant, and renounced all forms of coercion.

Caesar conquered the world and ruled it with a rod of iron. Jesus ministered to a few with gentleness and mercy.

Caesar competed against, vanquished, and destroyed rivals. Jesus was harassed, betrayed, and crucified by rivals.

Caesar gained a loyal following of millions across the empire. Jesus could attract only a dozen or so close followers, one who turned out to be a betrayer, another a denier, and the rest abandoning Him in the darkest hour of His life to walk the last mile of His life all alone.

Caesar raised and led the most powerful, feared, and successful armies of his time. Jesus' followers could count in their possession only two swords, and they didn't know how to use either of them. When Peter took things in his own hands in the Garden of Gethsemane and tried to cut off the head of a guard who had come to arrest Jesus, he managed only to slice off an ear. For his small act of courage, Peter earned Jesus' rebuke: "Put your sword back into its place; for all those who take up the sword shall perish by the sword" (Matt. 26:52, NASB).

Caesar counseled, "Subdue, crush, and kill your enemies." Jesus admonished, "Love your enemies and pray

for those who persecute you" (Matt. 5:44).

Caesar lived by the rule of "Get all you can." Jesus lived by the rule of "Give all you can."



Caesar  
Augustus was  
the  
embodiment of  
all that is  
celebrated and  
highly praised  
in our world  
today.



Caesar exemplified the principle that "He who would be great among you must be first and best of all." Jesus taught that "He who would be great among you must be least and last of all."



Neither Caesar  
nor any of the  
lords or ladies  
of his empire  
ever heard of  
Jesus.



Caesar's career exhibited the rule of the jungle: "The mighty shall inherit the earth." Jesus said, "The meek . . . shall inherit the earth" (Matt. 5:5, KJV).

Caesar modeled, "Blessed are the war makers, for theirs are the kingdoms of the world." Jesus taught, "Blessed are the peacemakers."

Caesar exemplified, "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst after power, possessions, and pleasure, for they shall be filled." Jesus responded, "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be filled" (Matt. 5:6, NKJV).

Caesar personified, "Blessed are the ruthless, for they shall demolish the competition and rule the world." Jesus incarnated, "Blessed are the merciful: for they shall obtain mercy" (Matt. 5:7, KJV).

Caesar boasted, "Blessed are the strong of heart, for they shall win." Jesus promised, "Blessed are the pure in heart: for they shall see God" (Matt. 5:8, KJV).



Jesus  
accompanied with  
the weak,  
vulnerable, and  
powerless of  
His society.



Caesar reacted, "When someone strikes you on the cheek, cut off his head." Jesus commanded, "If someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also" (Matt. 5:39).

Caesar's economic policy dictated, "If someone wants to borrow your coat, charge him as much interest as the market will bear." Jesus' radical counsel was, "If someone takes your coat, let him have your shirt as well" (Luke 6:29, TEV).

Caesar said, "If someone borrows from you but does not return it, sue him!" Jesus said, "Forget it!"

Caesar was the darling of the adoring masses. Jesus "came unto his own, and his own received him not" (John 1:11, KJV). Caesar lived a long and illustrious life. Jesus lived a short and traumatic life.

Caesar died an honorable death, his passing mourned by millions. Jesus died a dishonorable death, convicted

as a religious heretic and a political subversive. He was executed as a common criminal. His final agonies were noted by mockers and a few devoted women.

Caesar pursued power with a single-minded passion, rising to the top over the broken, bleeding, and bashed bodies of his sacrificial armies and vanquished foes. Jesus would not step on "a bruised reed or quench a smoldering wick" (Matt. 12:20, RSV).

Caesar would rather wound, cripple, and kill than be killed, and he did. Jesus would rather die than damage, destroy, or damn, and He did.

Caesar died and stayed dead. Jesus died but did not stay dead.

Two thousand years have come and gone. The Roman Empire, which Caesar seized and ruled with such passion, has long since perished; but the kingdom of God, which Jesus served, is alive and well. Only a few crumbling remnants of Caesar's great buildings, coliseums, and construction projects still stand. Buildings erected in honor of Jesus of Nazareth grace every city, town, village, and hamlet in the Western world, and in much of the rest as well.

None of Caesar Augustus's books or poems survive. The New Testament, which chronicles the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, has been the runaway best-seller for two thousand years and continues to outsell all books sacred and secular. Whole libraries can scarcely contain the works, treatises, studies, poems, dramas, art, hymns, and anthems that have been composed in the honor of that lowly Galilean peasant named Jesus of Nazareth.

Scarcely anybody notices the name

of Caesar Augustus, and fewer speak it. Yet every day—especially every Lord's day—millions of knees bow and tongues "confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father" (Phil. 2:11).



Caesar lived by  
the rule of "Get  
all you can."  
Jesus lived by  
the rule of  
"Give all you  
can."



Caesar's birth was hailed as the beginning of all things. Yet every time a person writes a check or dates a letter today, the referent point is not the birth of Caesar Augustus but Jesus of Nazareth.

The birth of Jesus was a tiny, obscure, insignificant footnote in the reign of Caesar Augustus. Now the reign of Caesar Augustus is a tiny, obscure, insignificant footnote in the story of Jesus, whose birthday is celebrated by billions of people in the greatest, longest, and most joyous holiday season of the year, known not as "Caesarmas" but "Christmas."

*Oh, what a difference a few years makes!* 

### Pontius' Puddle





# The Word Became Flesh: A Christmas Reading

by Peter A. Samuelson  
Freelance writer, Brooklyn

*In the beginning was the Word—*

The beginning of the gospel about Jesus Christ, the Son of God (*Mark 1:1*).

*and the Word was with God—*

I came from the Father and entered the world (*John 16:28*).

*and the Word was God.*

The radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being (*Heb. 1:3*).

*He was with God in the beginning.*

I am the Alpha and the Omega, the First and the Last, the Beginning and the End (*Rev. 22:13*).

*Through him all things were made—*

The heavens declare the glory of God; and the firmament sheweth his handywork (*Ps. 19:1, KJV*).

*without him nothing was made that has been made.*

For in him we live and move and have our being (*Acts 17:28*).

*In him was life, and that life was the light of men.*

The people living in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of the shadow of death a light has dawned (*Matt. 4:16*).

*The light shines in the darkness—*

A light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel (*Luke 2:32*).

*but the darkness has not understood it.*

Then said Jesus, Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do (*Luke 23:34, KJV*).

*There came a man who was sent from God; his name was John.*

This is he who was spoken of through the prophet Isaiah: "A voice of one calling in the desert, 'Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him'" (*Matt. 3:3*).

*He came as a witness to testify concerning that light—*

People went out to him from Jerusalem and all Judea and the whole region of the Jordan (*Matt. 3:5*), so that through him all men might believe.

Confessing their sins, they were baptized by him in the Jordan River (*Matt. 3:6*).

*He himself was not the light; he came only as a witness to the light.*

To make ready a people prepared for the Lord (*Luke 1:17*).

*The true light that gives light to every man was coming into the world.*

Magi from the east came to Jerusalem and asked, "Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews?" (*Matt. 2:1-2*).

*He was in the world—*

"In Bethlehem in Judea," they replied, "for this is what the prophet has written" (*Matt. 2:5*).

*and though the world was made through him—*

We saw his star in the east and have come to worship him (*Matt. 2:2*).

*the world did not recognize him.*

When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him (*Matt. 2:3*).

*He came to that which was his own—*

The throne of his father David (*Luke 1:32*).

*but his own did not receive him.*

They . . . mocked him. "Hail, king of the Jews!" they said (*Matt. 27:29*).

*Yet to all who received him—*

At once they left their nets and followed him (*Mark 1:18*).

*to those who believed in his name—*

One of the criminals . . . said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom" (*Luke 23:39, 42*).

*he gave the right to become children of God—*

I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in paradise (*Luke 23:43*).

*children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision . . . —*

And do not think you can say to yourselves, "We have Abraham as our father" (*Matt. 3:9*).

*but born of God.*

For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast (*Eph. 2:8-9*).

*The Word became flesh—*

This is how the birth of Jesus Christ came about: His mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph (*Matt. 1:18*).

*and made his dwelling among us.*

Joseph . . . went . . . to Bethlehem . . . with Mary. . . . While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born, and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son . . . and placed him in a manger (*Luke 2:4-7*).

*We have seen his glory—*

Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart (*Luke 2:19*).

*the glory of the One and Only—*

He was the son . . . of Joseph . . . the son of Abraham . . . the son of Adam, the son of God (*Luke 3:23, 34, 38*).

*who came from the Father—*

"And they will call him Immanuel"—which means, "God with us" (*Matt. 1:23*).

*full of grace and truth* (*John 1:1-14*).

Suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God, and saying, Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men (*Luke 2:13-14, KJV*).

# Christmas Reminds Us Babies Are Important

If Dan Rather had been living in 1809, his evening news broadcasts would have concentrated on Austria, not Britain or America. The attention of the entire world was on Napoleon as he swept across helpless hamlets like fire across a Kansas wheat field. Nothing else was half as significant on the international scene. The brushstrokes on the historian's canvas give emphasis to the bloody scenes of tyranny created by the diminutive dictator of France. From Trafalgar to Waterloo, his name was a synonym for superiority.

At that time of invasions and battles, babies were being born in Britain and America. But who was interested in babies and bottles, cradles and cribs while history was being made? What could be considered more important in 1809 than the fall of Austria? Who cared about English-speaking infants that year Europe was in the limelight?

Somebody should have. A veritable host of thinkers and statesmen drew their first breath in 1809. William Gladstone was born in Liverpool. Alfred Lord Tennyson began his life in Lincolnshire. Oliver Wendell Holmes cried out in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Edgar Allan Poe, a few miles away in Boston, started his brief and tragic life. A physician named Darwin and his wife called their infant son Charles Robert. Robert Charles Winthrop wore his first diapers. A log cabin in Hardin County, Kentucky, owned by an illiterate, wandering laborer, was filled with the screams of a newborn boy named Abraham Lincoln.

People's minds were occupied with battles, not babies. Yet 187 years later, is there the slightest doubt about the greater contribution to history—those battles or those babies?

So it was with the birth of Jesus.



by Morris Chalfant

*Evangelist,  
Bourbonnais, Illinois*

The Bethlehem crowds had no inkling that the infinite Son of God was asleep in their little town. Only a few shepherds came to see Him, and they left glorifying God.

How wise God was when He started the whole thing with a baby. Babies are life in all its goodness. And so God laid a baby on the doorstep of the world. And when the little Baby cried, humanity opened up its arms and took Him in.

Christmas reminds us that babies are important. The world's greatest festival celebrates the birth of a baby, not the exploits of a king, or a warrior, or a moneymaker. When Jesus was born, somewhere in the world armies were marching into battle, senates were debating important legislation, and fortunes were being made and lost. Somewhere a "king was in his countinghouse, / Counting all his money," and a "queen was in the parlor, / Eating bread and honey," as the old nursery rhyme puts it. But the most important event of the day, both for that generation and all subsequent history, was the birth of Jesus Christ.

We need to be reminded of this today. If Mary had possessed the mentality of many modern "liberated" women, Jesus would never have been

born. Instead, Mary would have opted for an abortion.

A few years ago, on a Christmas Eve, a reporter sat in the pressroom of a city police station. Suddenly overwhelmed by an impulse, he rushed to a certain location and arrived just in time to knock a loaded gun from the hand of a man about to shoot himself. "Let's go someplace where we can talk," he said to the now sobbing man.

Entering a restaurant, the reporter checked in with his city editor and was told to ride out with an ambulance to pick up a woman who had just met a violent death. "Come along," he said to his new friend, then stuck two \$10 bills into the man's pocket.

In a tenement flat, they found a distraught husband and five crying children. The reporter saw the first man, whose family was starving, slip one of the bills given him into the hand of the grief-stricken husband. Back in the ambulance, he said, "Please take me home; my wife will be worrying. I must have been crazy. I don't know what misery is."

Only then did the reporter realize the Source of the impulse that had propelled him into action. We never know when or in what way the Lord will come to lift us up. It may be that He will come to others through us—you and me—if we are listening to hear the urging of His Spirit. But we do know that if we look for Him in faith, believing, like Simeon and Anna, we will see His salvation for us.

"Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away," Jesus said (Matt. 24:35).

No matter what happens in our world, we can confidently trust His unchanging Word. He has promised our deliverance.

He will come—on time.





# Senior Ornaments on Our Tree

**I**m going into the hospital. Then they'll let me out to come back home to die!"

Everett was 94 years old. He had to go to that dreaded hospital. Doctor's orders. After that—back to his senior apartment to die. At least so he concluded with a gesture of his huge arm.

Yet this was Christmas. And we at the church could not permit this Christian gentleman such a mood at Christmas.

Younger participants in the church's senior adult ministry (SAM) concluded that we would cheer up those older ones by surprising them on a December Saturday morning.

"Let's package up our favorite cookie recipes for those folk. We'll deliver them to their homes, sing some carols, then wish them God's best," one of the women suggested.

No sooner said than done.

One of those Maine winter snows had settled upon the ground as SAM enthusiasts gathered in front of the country church. In hand were decorated gift boxes filled with delicious morsels. And inside our hearts were ready carols to be sung to our friends.

So it was that Everett greeted us, at first not able to make out who we were. His eyesight was not that precise. Yet in short order each of us grasped his hands, leaned into his vision, and extended warm Christmas greetings.

"Come again," he cheerfully waved toward us as we left him with a prayer. "It is more blessed to give than to receive," we concluded when leaving his residence (Acts 20:35, emphasis added).



by **J. Grant Swank Jr.**  
Pastor, Windham, Maine

Then on to see Alice. She met us at the front door as she was about to put more birdseed in the feeder outside her kitchen window.

"I wasn't expecting you!" she exclaimed. "That's right," we answered. "Just the way we wanted it." And so we filled her house with Christmas cheer.

Winding up Douglas Mountain to see Loann and Gertrude took more time than we had expected. They lived nearly an hour from the church. With winter ice, this was sometimes extra-adventurous traveling. Yet *they* were faithful to worship on the Lord's day.

Knocking on their front door brought no response. Yet I could hear them inside that cozy country house. They were simply tucked away at the far end of the place.

Wading through the snow to a side window, I rapped on the pane. There was Loann, jolted around to stare at me. She had been on the phone, standing alongside their newly decorated tree.

"Just a moment," she motioned to me.

In a minute or two we were all shaking hands, exchanging best wishes, and sharing their usual humor inside their welcoming abode. A huge fire roared in the fireplace.

"How nice of you to stop in this morning," Loann's mother said as we prepared to leave. Here were two churchwomen—a mother and daughter—who made *our* Saturday for Christmas. They always did that. One always left them with more joy in the heart than when entering. It was their gift to their friends.


On to Ruth's senior apartment. We just had to see the community room, she insisted. There in the corner was the gorgeous Christmas tree that once stood in *her* living room back at her house in a neighboring village.

"I am so glad that I could donate that to the others—this being my first Christmas away from that house I lived in for over 30 years. I feel so good to know that my tree has gone with me. And now others enjoy it too."

She took us on a welcomed tour of the place—up and down the halls to see the door decorations. "Some of my friends have outdone themselves," she exclaimed with pride.

And on and on we went. How that morning flew.

"This has been the real start of my Christmas," one of the travelers remarked as we drove back into the churchyard. "I would not have missed this for anything."

The reason? Because we had visited the wonder-filled senior ornaments on our church's friendship tree. 

## The Barren Times

If we are honest, there are times when the very work of ministry seems dry and barren. In such days the soul goes through torturing moments, asking the “whys” and uttering doubts. There has never been a pastor exempt from such occasions. The biographies of great pastors include their dark moments of the soul.

Such moments are real. To deny them is to be dishonest. To ignore them is foolish. To admit them and to address them is the mark of maturity.

**For some, admitting to the dryness is the admission of failure.**

The very thought of it weighs so heavy that it almost short-circuits any possibility for recovery. Pastors see failure as a career-nullifying stigma. But, Pastor, be encouraged—every successful minister has a chapter or two of failure. He who denies any is either unrealistic or in the depths of denial. The cure for failure is not denial but courage—courage to face the facts, to put them in context, and then to move on with faith that God will help you write a new chapter of ministry. He will—with your help! The words of Jeremy Taylor help: “It is impossible for that man to despair who remembers that his Helper is omnipotent.”

**For others, admitting to dryness gives occasion to the victim syndrome.** One begins playing the “if only” game. The blame game creates a no-win situation. Rather than face the facts, it focuses on others. It invites self-pity. It only paralyzes the person who needs to seek help and to sketch a new day. David A. Seamands, in his book *If Only*, writes about “the obsession with victimism or victimology. This is the Great Blame Game in which people try to escape personal responsibility for their choices and excuse almost any kind of behavior by finding somebody else to blame.”<sup>1</sup>

**Others see admitting the dryness as ego damaging.** Their arro-



by C. Neil Strait

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gance is blinded to such a problem. “It could never happen to me,” they say. While they are quick to see it in others, they never see it in themselves. Calvin Miller has written of a time in his ministry when such was his problem. He writes:

I cried out to God to slay me or make me an honest man with an authentic word. My intellectual pride dissolved in utter need. I broke! My brokenness—like all brokenness—had for its sweet fruit, simple fluent tears. Those tears were sheer acetylene. A torch that cut away, at first, my pride, and then my doubt.

With arrogance and doubt both gone, the scales fell from my eyes. I saw God! High and lifted up!<sup>2</sup>


**For some, dryness and the barren times come because, to some degree, they invited it.** Sometimes one loses focus and passion for ministry by digressing to other things. In his book *Margin*, Richard A. Swenson quotes Christopher Lasch, who talks about our “baffled sense of drift.”<sup>3</sup> If a pastor does not keep his heart and mind focused on God, it is easy to be drawn away by other things. Too much attention to other things can create dryness in the soul and barrenness in ministry. The cure for such dryness is to give priority to the spiritual. It is to give attention to one’s call and to be steward of the responsi-

bilities God has placed in your care. This may well be one of the biggest problems with contemporary ministry—loss of focus by too many interests outside the ministry.

**Some see dryness as an end to ministry, God’s withdrawal of blessing, His signal to bring closure to ministry.** But is it really? Could it not be a time to do some spiritual evaluation and inventory? Could it not be a time to renew passion for ministry and people? To recapture the joy of service and preaching?

Pastor, be encouraged—in the dry times there is opportunity to meet God and have the heart touched again with the fire and purging of His love. The God who called you to preach is the God waiting to touch your dryness with life, with fire, and with passion. Gordon MacDonald, in his book *The Life God Blesses*, talks about “developing the muscles of the soul.” He writes, “The life God blesses is a life lived out of the soul—that place where God meets a person.”<sup>4</sup>

**Pastor, be encouraged! The dry times can be times of growth, learning, and submission.** Our response and reactions will determine how we survive, how we rebound. It will determine the future of our ministries. Someone has written, “In the presence of trouble some people grow wings; others buy crutches.”

Stay close to God in the dry times. Seek His face. Study His Word. Let the spiritual resources bathe your soul until the dryness gives way to tears and recovery. Your faith in God’s faithfulness is crucial. He will touch the waiting heart with newness, with vision, and with hope. 

1. David A. Seamands, *If Only* (Wheaton, Ill.: Victor Books, 1995), 14.

2. Calvin Miller, quoted by Alan E. Nelson, *Broken in the Right Place* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1994), 11.

3. Richard A. Swenson, *Margin* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 1992), 25.

4. Gordon MacDonald, *The Life God Blesses* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1994), xiii-xiv.

## Public Ministry, Private Pain

**M**inistry can be the most joyous, fulfilling, soul-satisfying experience of life; it can also be one of life's most frustrating, soul-paralyzing, painful experiences. Both the joy and the pain come with the territory. Both come from the same sources—the daily expectations and demands of ministry and the people to whom we minister, the pressures of our own humanity, and the vicissitudes of this earthly existence.

Every pastor is familiar with public expectation. We all understand that people have us on a pedestal, whether we wish to be there or not. We all know that we're not the super-



by **Bill O'Connor**

*Evangelist, Church of the Nazarene,  
Newberg, Oregon*

heroes that some people think we ought to be. Much as we might wish to walk on water, few of us have the courage of Peter; and if we have

climbed out of the boat, we've probably found ourselves sinking beneath the waves.

A life of ministry holds many painful moments. Any servant of God could enumerate an entire catalog of hurtful words, misguided judgments, unfair expectations, damaging actions, critical accusations, and injurious comments inflicted on them by the people of God. Some of these do minor damage and are worth a good laugh when we look back on them. Like the young woman who, attempting to offer a compliment after the morning service, said, "That was a much better sermon than most of your sermons, Pastor."

Other words and deeds strike deep into the fiber of our soul and spirit, bringing emotional distress, spiritual suffering, and personal anguish that we may never forget. My most distressing ministry experience happened more than 25 years ago, but I can remember every moment of that morning as if it were yesterday.

A woman in my congregation, an overly protective mother, guarded the feelings of her two teenage girls as a lioness guards her smallest cubs. Her eldest daughter, only 16 years of age, had been friends with a teenage boy in the congregation for several years. The friendship blossomed into a dating relationship, but not one that could be classed as true love—not in the minds of the two young people, at least. To the zealous mother, this couple was destined for marriage and a future of bliss.

When the young man decided that he needed some breathing space, he broke off the relationship during a week at summer camp. He did it as gracefully as a 16-year-old boy ever does those things. Of course, the young lady's feelings were hurt. I did my best to minister to the girl during





the final days of camp and on the long drive home. She sat in the front of the van with me and even drove part of the way. By the time we completed the 600-mile journey across mid-America, she was adjusting to her loss and seemed on the road to recovery.

I believed everything was all right. Several weeks later I learned that almost everything was wrong. Though the girl's pain had been alleviated, the mother's pain had festered, causing a sickness in her soul that spilled over on me. She thought I hadn't handled things properly. I had not, after all, kept the young people together. Suddenly the mother lioness was roaring all across the congregation. If I were a caring and compassionate pastor, she said, I would never have allowed the separation.

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## How could I overcome the shame and humiliation I felt?

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Things came to a head on a Sunday morning, in the middle of the worship service. I noted the woman rise from her pew and descend into the basement by the stairway at the rear of the sanctuary. I thought nothing of it, for traffic up and down those stairs was frequent. A few moments later, I heard the door behind me at the right of the platform squeak open. Then, from behind me, the voice of the lioness began to roar. I have never before or since been called so many names. I was damned to eternal punishment. I was condemned to everlasting torment. I was threatened with bodily harm. She went on for several minutes, telling me what God was going to do to me for my failure to properly care for her daughter's needs.

Finally the door banged to a close. I made an effort to continue the morning message. Five minutes passed,

and the door flew open once more. The verbal barrage began all over again. This time, when the door again slammed shut, I brought the service to a rapid close and pronounced a hasty benediction.

I didn't sleep that night, nor the night after that. In fact, I barely rested for the next five days. This woman was someone I had counted as a friend. Her husband was a member of the church board. Both served as respected leaders in the congregation. What could I do to make things right? More important, how could I overcome the shame and humiliation I felt?

I was emotionally drained by the experience. My body ached with physical pain. For the next week, I could hardly eat. My mind spun around like a whirlpool of conflicting emotion. Mixed with the shame and humiliation were anger and outrage. Most of all, there was indescribable hurt.

How does one minister in the midst of a situation like that? What can you do when you hurt so much that you cannot pray? Where do you turn when the only thing you want to do is hide? How does public ministry go on when your private pain is almost all-consuming?

***I learned that Jesus is there in the midst of the pain.***

That's something we should never forget. I would have forgotten it then, I think, had the Lord not made himself real to me. As the days passed, His presence became increasingly genuine. The awareness of His love and concern, which was at first hidden by my suffering, became more and more substantial. With the benefit of time and perspective, I found myself able to focus again. When I did, everywhere I looked, I saw Jesus. He was present in the faces and in the words of people who reached out to me. He was active in the situation, though I could not see how at first. Most importantly, He was present and active in my life. He was there all the time, and He hadn't for a moment forsaken me. As soon as I was able to get my eyes off myself and my pain, I could see Jesus. Once my eyes focused back on the Author of my faith, I could trust Him to go on doing His work in me.

***I also learned that Jesus was in***

***control even when my world was crumbling into little pieces.***

←

## What can you do when you hurt so much that you cannot pray?

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Emotionally devastated, wanting only to hide or to run away from it all, Jesus kept opening doors of ministry. In spite of the pain, I knew that I was a pastor, after all; these people needed me. The Lord knew that I would rise to the occasion, so He saw to it that I had more than enough to keep me busy. As I ministered to others, I also ministered to myself, and I began to heal. There is, in addition to the parts of ministry that wear you down, a good deal about it that builds you up. The very act of doing ministry, even when you don't feel like it, can restore the desire. That's how it has often worked for me. It's a case of "Physician, heal thyself" (Luke 4:23, KJV). With the help of the Holy Spirit, it works.

Several months later the woman and her family returned to the church. No apology was ever requested; none was ever offered. God gave me the grace to love that woman and to go on.

Eleven years afterward I found myself facing pain of another sort. It was a pain so intense that, for a while, I despaired of living. Two years into my ministry in another congregation, my wife of 16 years ran away with another man. She took our adopted toddler son with her. For four and a half months, I did not know where they were. She disappeared on a Monday. On the following Sunday, I stood in the pulpit and wept my way through the second sermon in a series on the Beatitudes. My subject that morning: "Blessed Are Those Who Mourn."

Never in the history of that church has a sermon been preached with so many tears. Never before or since

have those good people seen a pastor whose emotions were so out of control. My pain that day was not private. It was on display for everyone to see. It wasn't that I wanted it that way; I just couldn't hold in the tears. God in His sovereignty had known where I would be and what I would be facing on that morning. Months before, He had motivated me to plan a series of messages that would speak directly to my own need. His grace had arrived to help at exactly my moment of need. He's in the habit of arriving like that—just in the nick of time.

It was four and a half months before I found my wife and son, six months before I had my son home again, more than a year before the separation finally ended in divorce. Through all that time, the pain lingered. However, along with the pain, there were more of God's tender lessons.

*I learned that my pain didn't have to be bottled up and kept from my people.*

As I ministered  
to others, I also  
ministered to  
myself.

They cared about me as a person. Though my pain rocked the pedestal that some had placed me on, they really didn't expect me to be superhuman. Though I never again wept my way through an entire sermon, there were many mornings during the first weeks of that experience when my emotions got away from me. People forgave me for that. In fact, during those next few months, they became more open to my ministry than ever before. We began to relate on a level that had not been open to us previously; now we were all human, and we knew it.

*I learned that God's people could minister to me every bit as effectively as I could minister to them.*

In fact, had it not been for five per-

sons—a staff member and four laymen—who reached out to me during those months, I would probably have given up and walked away. The embarrassment was overwhelming. I had myself up on a pedestal, too, you see. The loneliness was incapacitating. The emotional and spiritual numbness that gripped me for months was beyond my comprehension. Some days I feared for my sanity. On other days, my anger ran rampant. At times I became lethargic and sat in front of the television for hours at a time as if it were my only link to life. The only good thing I could find in those first months was an involuntary loss of weight that was much needed.

The people who  
stood by me  
in my pain  
rejoiced with  
me.

People took me under their wings. I was seldom home alone for dinner during the next three months. The phone rang several times each day as various members of the congregation called the church office to say they loved me and were praying for me. Members of the church took me to concerts, invited me to their homes to play games, kept me out late enough that I was able to go home and fall asleep. They walked with me through the grieving process, encouraged me to talk when I wanted to talk and to be silent when I needed silence, and praised my ministry even when it was feeble.

*I learned that God's grace really is sufficient, even for our deepest needs.*

As I walked through those deep sands of life, there were times when the Lord picked me up and carried me. He took the mediocre sermons I prepared and added His special touch of anointing. He again multiplied the opportunities to minister. He helped me to keep a smile on my face for

public consumption, but He also put an increasingly infectious joy in my heart so that I began to laugh again. He gave me brother pastors who became my counselors and guides as I struggled to put my life together again.

Remember the  
promise of God  
himself, who  
says He will be  
with you  
wherever you  
go.

Two and a half years after that agonizing Sunday morning, God reminded me that those who mourn will be comforted. The people who stood by me in my pain rejoiced with me as I married again. Ten months later, they rejoiced with my wife and me in the birth of a baby girl. In three years, they had experienced three firsts: never before had a pastor gone through a divorce, never before had a pastor married while serving the congregation, and never before had a pastor's wife given birth to a child during his pastoral tenure. I stayed with that wonderful church family for a total of 15 years.

During my 28 years as a pastor and evangelist, there have been many other painful experiences in ministry and in my personal life as a minister. Most of the pain has been personal and private, yet public ministry has gone on, either in the midst of the pain or in spite of it. God has given me opportunity to learn many lessons through it all. Here then, from my well of experience—which is probably no deeper than your own—are some suggestions for dealing with public ministry in the midst of private pain.

*Always remember that God is present and in control.*

Though it may feel as if you've been forsaken, don't allow yourself to

be governed by your feelings. Remember the promise of God himself, who says He will be with you wherever you go. Remind yourself of the words of Christ, who promised that He would never leave you, nor would He ever forsake you (Heb. 13:5). Should you have a hard time reminding yourself of the facts, find some faithful friends who will tell you the truth of your situation again and again. You are not alone. You never will be. The sovereign God, the Creator and Sustainer of the universe, is beside you, and He cares.

**Do not hide the fact that you are in pain.**

Though some people might still have you up on that pedestal, most people know that you're human too. You've probably demonstrated your humanity many times, both intentionally and by accident. If your people don't yet know that you're human, it's time that they learned. Be willing to appear vulnerable. Though you shouldn't wallow in your misery, you should be free to let people know that you're miserable. They'll love you for it—most of them, anyway. You'll find that they have something to give if only you will let them. Your people can pray for you as powerfully as you pray for them; give them the privilege of doing so. It will be good for both your congregation and you.

**Don't miss the lessons that exist in your painful experience.**

The wonderful thing about cliches is that they are true. Behind many of life's clouds, there really is a silver lining. Behind the darkest storm clouds, there usually lurks a lesson to be learned. One of the discoveries I made

during the painful months of my unplanned and unwanted separation and divorce came in the words of an anonymous quotation. Someone said, "The worst thing that ever happened to you can be the best thing that ever happened to you if you don't let it get the best of you." I've found those words to be true again and again. You will, too, if you allow God to teach you whatever He has in mind.



**Your people can pray for you as powerfully as you pray for them.**



**Don't blame God for your situation, but be sure to expect Him to work through it.**

During my months of loneliness, there were times when I ranted and railed at God. On several occasions I paced the floor of my home, shouting at the Lord. I asked Him repeatedly why He had allowed such a tragedy to happen. I questioned His love.

I shouldn't have to remind God's children, especially those who serve Him in public ministry, of Rom. 8:28. But I remember how hard it was for me to believe that God really was working for my good. How could the things I've related have any positive


outcome? I couldn't see it at the time, but I see it now. I've become a stronger person through every painful situation. My ministry has been deepened and broadened by the things that I've suffered. My life is richer now than ever before in all the things that matter most. God has brought some very good things out of my pain.

**Remember that the sun will shine again, and keep pressing toward the dawn.**

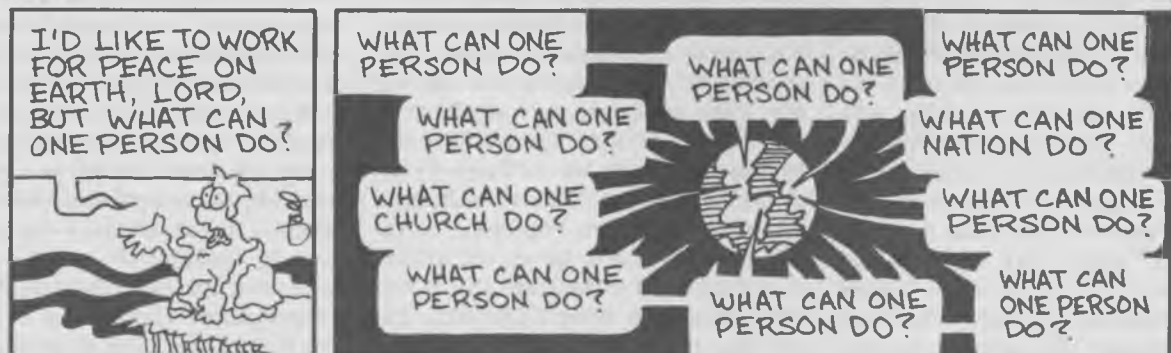
Sometimes it seems that the night goes on and on, but God set the sun in the heavens and determined its course. He knows when and how the daylight will return to your soul. I will never forget hearing Father John Powell tell an audience to tie a knot in the end of their rope and hang on. You may reach the point where you're hanging on with broken fingernails and bleeding fingernails, he said, but the Lord will come. His arrival won't come even a moment too late.

**Continue to minister to the best of your ability, no matter how great your pain.**

Do what you can, and do it faithfully; your Heavenly Father will do the rest. How could we ever stand in the pulpit to declare God's truth without the aid of His Spirit? How could we offer comfort to the bereaved without the Spirit's guidance? How could we do any of the things that ministry demands unless the Lord were with us?

Our private pain might be great, but God's grace is greater. Our agony might be extreme, but God's grace is still amazing, His love abounding, and His life abundant. Long before we reach our limit, God will step in with whatever we need to see us through. 

## Pontius' Puddle



## Preaching the Trinity

by Roderick T. Leupp

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**T**he Church's greatest treasure and mystery maybe the Church's greatest silence and neglect. That is the Christian understanding of God, God as Three in One. The Church's central proclamation—that Jesus is the Christ—is incomprehensible apart from God's trinity. Unless coequal with the Father, a bond cemented by the Holy Spirit, the Son's salvation is totally unavailing, an empty promise incapable of uniting the human with the divine. The oneness of the Father and the Son (John 10:30) stands central to the triune premise of perfectly shared divine life, fully and freely shared among Father, Son, and Spirit. We have a communion of grace freely offered to all.

For many preachers and theologians, the Trinity is obscured by a haze of abstruse theology and needlessly intricate reasoning. The respect and reverence intended by such attitudes inevitably translates itself into benign neglect. On high and holy days, the Trinity may be mentioned or highlighted in worship. However, the doctrine's practicality is imagined to be spent.

The doctrine of the Trinity is the central support of the Church, the fullness of God's revelation to humankind. As a doctrine, the Trinity remains relatively the province of trained theologians.

So far from being mere doctrine, the Trinity is the lifeblood of the Church. Doctrine divorced from the totality of human life—thinking, willing, feeling—can degenerate into intellectual curiosity. The Trinity stands infinitely bigger and more majestic than any possible doctrinal formulation of it. Some may legitimately doubt that the doctrine of the Trinity added thousands of souls to the Early Church's ranks. The apostolic preach-

ing proclaimed, "Jesus is Lord!" and not "God is Triune." A certain wisdom exists in the claim that the Trinity is not the Church's primal proclamation but reflects on that proclamation. To declare Jesus as Lord is impossible unless by the Holy Spirit (1 Cor. 12:3). "Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father" (Phil. 2:11). This does not mean that the Father miserly withholds all benediction from Son and Spirit.

Because the Triune God is the Creator of all, God's triunity does not suddenly disappear on account of the Church's neglect. The doctrine of justification by grace through faith was no less true because it was obscured under the penitential system of medieval Roman Catholicism. Every pulpit that is lax in exalting the Trinity may consider itself shattered, not by God, but by all that would oppose God—secularism, materialism, greed, apathy.

Theologically, the past quarter century has seen a revival of interest in the doctrine of the Trinity. Much of it follows in the train of Karl Barth's work earlier in the century. Barth's central insight had been simply that as triune, God perfectly corresponds to himself. In God there is no gap between essence and existence, potency and actuality, being and becoming. Although not Barthian in outlook, one of the best recent treatments of the Trinity is by Catherine Mowry LaCugna, a Roman Catholic who teaches at Notre Dame. The title of her 1991 book, recently available in paperback, locates the burden and promise of today's Trinitarian thought: *God for Us: The Trinity and Christian Life* (San Francisco: Harper). Because God is *for* us, the Trinity is not an arcane doctrine but is the only ground in which Christian life can take root. The ancient church fa-

ther Tertullian, who coined the Latin *trinitas*, likened the Trinity to root, branch, and shoot. What may be true of God analogically is spiritually incumbent upon every Christian: to be "rooted and grounded in love" (Eph. 3:17, NRSV), "rooted and built up in [Christ Jesus the Lord] and established in the faith" (Col. 2:6-7, NRSV).

Preaching the Triune God overcomes the foolish impasse some imagine to exist between "intellectual" preaching that aims toward a discernible theological sophistication and the simple presentation of the claims of the gospel. The Triune God *is* the gospel. It is simply not possible to preach about God's love for erring humankind and not preach about the Trinity, even if one has not intended any explicit reference to God as Three in One. The Triune God is present whenever His self-emptying love is offered to those for whom He intended it. The word "Trinity" has no magical qualities. Its presence will not cover any multitude of devotional or homiletical sins. The Holy Spirit is not only faithful but also more subtle than we commonly acknowledge. The Spirit not only bears faithful witness to our own spirits but also points beyond himself to the perfect fellowship between Father and Son, accomplished through that very Spirit.

Surely every preacher fully intends to announce God's sacrificial love on every occasion of standing behind the sacred desk. More focused suggestions are needed beyond the rudimentary "preach the Trinity." Being many yet one, the triune premise even implies several variations upon a singular theme, or unity expressed diversely, multiplicity not for its own sake, but for the edification of the congregation. Though one in number, the fruit of the Spirit is yet nine in ex-

pression (Gal. 5:22-23). There must be more ways of preaching the Trinity than one. The love of God awaits application to every human situation.

Paul preached Christ crucified (1 Cor. 1:23) and desired to know nothing except the crucified Christ (2:2). Preaching the Trinity means preaching the cross of Jesus Christ. Many theologians have commented that the Cross is the most compelling—the shortest and most direct—speech possible about the Trinity. Not an event isolating the Son from Father and Spirit, the Cross happens in the *midst* of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The Father delivers up and hands over the Son for us (Rom. 4:25), for our sakes even making Him to be sin “who knew no sin” (2 Cor. 5:21, NRSV), so that Jesus became a curse for fallen humanity (Gal. 3:13). For His part, the sacrifice Jesus Christ made was not that of a cowering, reluctant victim, but of a grateful Son who from beginning to end trusted in His Heavenly Father. Jesus died, not cursing His Father, but “crying with a loud voice, said, ‘Father, into your hands I commend my spirit’” (Luke 23:46, NRSV). The triune Cross shines through with utmost clarity in Heb. 9:14, where “through the eternal Spirit” the Son “offered himself without blemish to God” (NRSV).

Preaching the triune Cross is appropriate, not only during Lent and Holy Week, but throughout the entire Christian year. Every season of the Christian year will be enriched by careful attention to the presence of the Triune God. Aside from the Trinity, no Church seasons could ever be. The Cross is anticipated by Advent, Christmas, and Epiphany, and completed by Easter and Pentecost. Even preliminary reflection will bring to mind fruitful avenues for preaching and encouraging congregational depth. Epiphany is a traditional time for remembering Jesus’ baptism, with its obvious Trinitarian symbols and meaning. Peter’s sermon at Pentecost demonstrates the Easter truth of God’s raising of Jesus, the Son’s exaltation at the Father’s right hand, and the Father’s subsequent bestowal of

the Holy Spirit through the Son (Acts 2:32-33).

Augustine said that the Trinity is found on every page of the New Testament. Catherine Mowry LaCugna, in her book, finds Eph. 1:3-14 richly Trinitarian for its faithful recounting of God’s overflowing grace. She wisely asserts that not every Trinitarian passage need explicitly mention all three divine Persons. Augustine expanded his vision from Scripture to the created world, where he found “vestiges” of the Trinity present in nature. For Augustine, God has providentially sprinkled triune grandeur effusively throughout the cosmos. For those preachers with an analogical or metaphorical bent, the Trinity offers uncounted opportunities to practice that art. The sun (the whole pouring forth both heat and light), an egg (shell, yolk, and white), water as liquid, solid, vapor—all of these and others have been pressed into service to illustrate the Trinity. One inventive student of mine likened the Trinity to a pie, the whole being made of crust and filling. The best metaphors are not necessarily drawn from nature, as in Augustine’s description of the Trinity as three identical statues dipped in the same gold.

Clearly, though, homiletical cleverness could soon eclipse theological responsibility. The Trinity does not need to be tricked up with gimmicks, regardless how winsome. Handling the Trinity, every preacher should feel the same awe Martin Luther felt on the occasion of celebrating his first Communion as a Roman Catholic priest: shuddering to think the Holy had been mishandled. Perhaps this is the reason why Karl Barth opposed Augustine on the issue of *Vestigium Trinitatis*, the vestiges of the Trinity in nature. Barth’s Trinity began and ended with revelation, which by definition could have no human or natural analogues. Barth’s uncompromising stance regarding revelation will surely encourage every preacher to ponder yet again what he calls “The Strange New World Within the Bible,”\* a world that convinces us that Christians are not mere monotheists

but are rather *Trinitarians*. Christians must rethink whether they worship the same God as Jews and Muslims who do not confess Jesus Christ as Lord. A well-crafted sermon on the Trinity would necessarily confront the listeners with difficult theological choices to be made, choices with implications for the entire devotional and spiritual life.

At a minimum, then, preaching the Trinity could involve both proclaimer and listeners in many sermonic adventures: metaphorical theology, interreligious dialogue, theology of the Cross, seasons of the church year—just for starters! One is only limited by the diligence with which one faithfully pursues God’s Word, both incarnate and in Scripture.

A final suggestion is the area of Christian ethics. A godless ethic can never be a Christian ethic, and the only Christian God is triune. The Trinity must say something to those preaching—and trying to live—a Christian ethic. The medieval theologian Richard of St. Victor provides one possible departure. He differentiated between *mutual* love, which any two of the three of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit could experience between themselves, and *shared* love, the next step, where those two took their love and gave it to the third. Shared love was perfect love, a spontaneous combustion of the divine. Every pastor prays to preside over a flock where such love is practiced, love acknowledged to come only from the Triune God, and carried forth within the congregation as within God himself: selflessly, other-regarding, multiplied through bestowal upon the needy. The world may take notice and be drawn to the Christ who said: “And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself” (John 12:32, NRSV). The world may even say of Christians, as it did in Tertullian’s time, “See, how they love one another!”

\*An address Barth gave during the autumn 1916, found in *The Word of God and the Word of Man*, trans. Douglas Horton (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1928).



# A Strategy for Counseling Couples Cohabiting Before Marriage

One of the most difficult areas of ministry at the present time is that of counseling and marrying people on the fringes and from outside the church, especially when the issue of cohabitation is involved.

Cohabitation has soared sixfold since 1960.<sup>1</sup> The U.S. Census Bureau says 6,085,284 unmarried, opposite-sex partners live together.<sup>2</sup> **Cohabitation is the invisible cancer of marriage!** Recent studies have shown that marriages that are preceded by living together have *50 percent higher* disruption (divorce or separation) rates than marriages without premarital cohabitation.<sup>3</sup>

Today our nation has the highest divorce rate in the entire world.<sup>4</sup> Charles Colson properly sums it up: "It is quite obvious to everyone that **the major crisis facing America today is the breaking up of the family. Divorce.** Fifty to sixty percent of marriages will end up in divorce. Who is doing anything about it? The government can't. The schools aren't. The media won't. You and I have to as the church. The church ought to be equipping people for strong marriages. . . . **It is one of the most urgent tasks and highest priorities of the Church**" (emphasis added).<sup>5</sup>

The issue of cohabitation presents a major dilemma for pastors to overcome. Two or three out of every five couples coming to our churches for marriage today are already living together, in spite of our strong teaching and preaching to the contrary. How do we graciously tell a cohabiting couple they (1) are living in sin according to biblical standards, (2) are endangering their current and long-



by Don Weston  
*Outreach Minister,  
South Church of the Nazarene,  
Lansing, Michigan*

term relationship, and (3) need to separate before marrying in the church—all without offending them and having them angrily walk away from the church forever? Either we lower the standards and marry every-

one who asks (hoping that something spiritual rubs off in the process), or we raise the standards so high that we marry an even smaller percentage of couples each year (missing excellent and rare opportunities to evangelize many others).<sup>6</sup> Neither choice seems very appealing or appropriate.

Every new couple coming to be married seems to bring a whole new set of circumstances. We find ourselves making yet another exception and bending the rules one more time to get them into our church and believing that they will come to Christ soon in the process.

But the fact is that most new outside couples fade away from the



church soon after the marriage ceremony. The net result leaves us feeling compromised and wondering if we have helped any of the couples make any spiritual gains.

An even greater dilemma is posed for pastors when either or both of the couple's families are active in the church. The family's expectations are that pastoral premarital counseling will draw the couple farther into the church, not turn them away even colder. It is our responsibility to confront sin and to preach holy living while keeping redemptive doors open. Our first goal in counseling is always to help people into a right relationship with God; **our ultimate goal in premarital counseling is to help launch lasting Christian marriages.**

One very useful resource is the "Community Marriage Policy" concept as described in the book *Marriage Savers*, by Mike McManus.<sup>7</sup> Our own local clergy circle, the Capital Area Holiness Association, recently adopted a similar set of standards for premarital counseling and marriage. We are one of about two dozen communities in 16 states that have voluntarily adopted marriage standards.<sup>8</sup>

This is the strategy I currently use. If I learn during the first marriage interview that the couple are living together, we discuss the subject of cohabitation. We go over the "Twenty Good Reasons Not to Cohabit Before Marriage" (see below), which are taken from a chapter in our local marriage standards.<sup>9</sup> They are taken from good secular research, and therefore the couples more readily accept the results of the studies and don't feel preached at. They also provide a basis for dialogue between us to help them understand why it is not in their best interest to cohabit and why I choose not to marry them in their present circumstance.

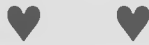
We then discuss the biblical standards for relationship and marriage, emphasizing that **any form of sexual intimacy occurring outside the covenant of heterosexual marriage is a sinful distortion of the holiness and beauty that God intended for it.** If they understand and are willing to separate physically (in place of residence) and sexually until the wedding, we then set appointments for further premarital counseling sessions. In one of those sessions, I will present the gospel and invite

them to begin attending church.

Here are the **"TWENTY GOOD REASONS NOT TO COHABIT BEFORE MARRIAGE"** that we discuss (many address the popular myths of the day):



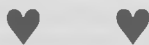
A total of  
**6,085,284**  
unmarried,  
opposite-sex  
partners live  
together.



**1. Those who live together before marriage are the least likely to marry each other.**



Marriages  
preceded by  
living together  
have **50 percent**  
higher divorce  
or separation  
rates.



A Columbia University study cited in *New Woman* magazine found that "only 26% of women surveyed and a scant 19% of the men married the person with whom they were cohabiting."<sup>10</sup> A more comprehensive *National Survey of Families and Households*, based on interviews with 13,000 people, concluded, "About 40% of cohabiting unions in the U.S. break up without the couple getting married."<sup>11</sup>

**2. Those who live together before marriage have higher separation and divorce rates.**

*Psychology Today* reported the findings of Yale University sociologist Neil Bennett that cohabiting women were 80 percent more likely to separate or divorce than were women who had not lived with their spouses before marriage.<sup>12</sup> The *National Survey of Families and Households* indicates that "unions begun by cohabitation are almost twice as likely to dissolve within 10 years compared to all first marriages: 57% to 30%."<sup>13</sup> Another 5-year study by William Axinn of the University of Chicago of 800 couples reported in *The Journal of Demography* that those who cohabit are the most accepting of divorce.<sup>14</sup>

**3. Those who live together before marriage have unhappier marriages.**

A study by the National Council on Family Relations of 309 newlyweds found that those who cohabited first were less happy in marriage. Women complained about the quality of communication after the wedding.<sup>15</sup> A physical relationship is an inadequate foundation upon which to build a lasting, lifelong relationship.

**4. Those who are sexually active before marriage are much more likely to divorce.**

A study of 2,746 women in the National Survey of Family Growth performed by Dr. Kahn of the University of Maryland and Dr. London of the National Center for Health Statistics found that nonvirgin brides increase their odds of divorce by about 60 percent.<sup>16</sup>

**5. Those who live together are at high risk for contracting HIV and other sexually transmitted diseases.**

There are about five dozen STDs, including chlamydia, gonorrhea, herpes, syphilis, and genital warts, whose incidence is skyrocketing. If left untreated, STDs can lead to arthritis, brain damage, heart disease, infertility, and even death. *Nearly two dozen STDs are incurable.* Annually about 10,000 teenagers contract HIV, and when it develops into AIDS, it is *always fatal.* According to gynecology researcher Dr. Thomas Elkins of the University of Michigan, when a person has three or more sexual partners in a lifetime, the odds of getting cervical cancer jump 15 times!<sup>17</sup>

**6. Those who live together are at high risk for having an unwanted pregnancy.**

According to the National Center for Health Statistics, births to unmarried

teenagers have continued to increase astronomically: 56 percent in the 1950s, 119 percent in the '60s, 38 percent in the '70s, and another 19 percent in the '80s. More than 1 million teenage girls will get pregnant this year, and nearly half of these pregnancies will be aborted. Half of the children born out of wedlock never complete school, and most end up on welfare.

**7. Those who are sexually active before marriage have greater behavioral problems.**

According to a study reported in *Pediatrics*, early sexual activity leads to serious behavioral problems. Of 1,500 girls studied, nonvirgin girls were 2.5 times more likely to have used alcohol than virgins, 6.2 times more likely to have smoked marijuana, and 4.3 times more likely to have attempted suicide. Boys were 7 times more likely to have been arrested or picked up by police.<sup>18</sup> The *Medical Tribune* reports that "sexual matters often predominate among the risk factors for adolescent depression and suicide."<sup>19</sup>

♥ ♥  
The church  
must equip  
people for  
strong  
marriages.  
♥ ♥

**8. Those who have had premarital sex are more likely to have extramarital affairs as well.**

Premarital sexual attitudes and behavior do not change after one marries. Research indicates that if one is willing to experience sex before marriage, a higher level of probability exists that one will do the same afterward.<sup>20</sup> This is especially true for women; those who engaged in sex before marriage are more than twice as likely to have extramarital affairs as those who did not have premarital sex.<sup>21</sup>

**9. Those who live together are likely to have a fleeting romance rather than a lasting relationship.**

A romance is not the same as hav-

ing an ongoing relationship. Relationships take time and work to develop and maintain; romance is a positive feeling toward another person. Romance without relationship is a brief encounter at best. Romance, in today's disposable society, is hastily devised and easily discarded at the first sign of conflict or disillusionment.<sup>22</sup> There is no lasting commitment when times get tough. Good relationships are built upon knowing and enjoying each other on social, recreational, spiritual, intellectual, and communicative levels, not only the sexual level.

**10. Those who have trial marriages do not have better marriages.**

Trials or half steps that test whether the relationship works are not successful—in fact, quite the opposite. Research indicates that couples who live together before marriage have significantly *lower* marital satisfaction than those who do not cohabit.<sup>23</sup> Conventional wisdom says it is acceptable to have a trial period to "try the shoe on first to see if it fits." For marriage, however, just the opposite is true! "All a man's ways seem right to him" (Prov. 21:2).

**11. Those who live together have no lasting commitments or responsibilities.**

Cohabitation involves no *public* commitment, no *pledge* for the future, no *official* pronouncement of love and responsibility. Theirs is essentially a private arrangement based on an emotional bond. Marriage, on the other hand, is much more than a love partnership. It is a public event that involves legal and societal responsibilities. It brings together not just two people but also two families and two communities. It is not just for the here and now; it is, most newlyweds hope, "till death do us part." Getting married changes what you expect from your mate and yourself.<sup>24</sup>

**12. Those who live together often have a "marriage of convenience" or a "marriage of compatibility" rather than a marriage of commitment.**

"Marriages of convenience" are disposable; marriages of commitment are lifelong and not to be dissolved.

**13. Those who live together do not experience the best sex.**

The best sex is found in the marriage relationship. It is reported that if

a couple abstains from sex before marriage, they are 29 to 47 percent more likely to enjoy sex afterward.<sup>25</sup> In a study by Dr. Evelyn Duvall and Dr. Judson Landis, evidence was found that premarital sex was not as satisfying. They found that the frequency of satisfaction rose considerably after couples adapted during marriage.<sup>26</sup> Another recent study by the Family Research Council titled "What's Marriage Got to Do with It?" found "72 percent of all married 'traditionalists' (those who strongly believe out-of-wedlock sex is wrong) report high sexual satisfaction. This is roughly 31 percentage points higher than the level registered by unmarried 'nontraditionalists.'" Psychiatrist and medical researcher David Larson, after researching the subject with Mary Ann Mayo, says that "the **most** religious women are **most** satisfied with the frequency of intercourse . . . and were **more** orgasmic than are the nonreligious."<sup>27</sup>

♥ ♥  
Those who  
cohabit are the  
most accepting  
of divorce.  
♥ ♥

**14. Those living together often do so to "prove" their love to their partner.**

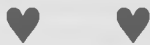
The partner who demands sex as proof of love is flatly exploitative. He or she is looking out for number one at the other person's expense. How the other party feels about it is not his or her primary concern. There is an ego and physical desire to satisfy, and the other party will be used to fulfill it. Such a person can become a dominating tyrant who demands compliance and may even become abusive. These early patterns of behavior carry over into the marriage.

**15. Those having premarital sex may be fooled into marrying a person who is not right for them.**

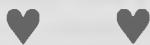
Sex can be emotionally blind.<sup>28</sup> Real love can stand the test of time without the support of physical intimacy.

If you establish a mutually satisfying sexual relationship, you lose objectivity and actually cheat on the test of time. The only way to rationally decide whether your love is for keeps is to remove any preoccupation with eros, sexual love. Otherwise you may marry a mirage, not a person you really know.<sup>29</sup>

**16. Those living together often have only superficial relationships.**



Marriage is much more than a love partnership.



Anyone can make love, but not everyone can carry on a meaningful conversation. A good relationship is much more than physical intimacy. Beauty is more than skin deep; there is a deeper intimacy of the mind and spirit that takes the time and commitment of a marriage to develop to the fullest. Physical attraction is insufficient glue with which to build or maintain a lasting relationship.<sup>30</sup>

**17. Those who live together have more difficulty resolving conflicts.**

Attempts are made to resolve conflicts with a hug, kiss, or more—rather than developing the ability to talk through them.

The qualities that hold a relationship together—trust, honesty, openness, deep friendship, spiritual intimacy—take time and effort to develop. When you focus on the physical aspect, you short-circuit that process. Physical intimacy is a mistaken attempt to quickly build emotional bridges, but relationships built on such an inadequate foundation eventually collapse.<sup>31</sup>

**18. Those who live together before marriage often suffer from guilt and fear.**

Such a relationship often produces feelings of guilt, remorse, and fear because of the danger of HIV, STDs, an

unwanted pregnancy which says, "Marriage should be honored by all, and the marriage bed be kept pure, for God will judge the adulterer and all the sexually immoral" (Heb. 13:4). This cycle of unhealthy feelings, taken into the context of marriage, is a major contributor to frigidity, impotence, and sexual maladjustment. Dr. Joe Aldrich says, "There is no prophylactic for the conscience."<sup>32</sup>

**19. Those who live together before marriage often lay a foundation of distrust and lack of respect.**

Mature love is built on the security of knowing that your love is exclusive. There is no one else. Premarital intimacy causes you to wonder: "If he or she has this little control with me now, have there been others before me, and will there be others in the future too?" As suspicion and distrust increase, you slowly lose respect for the other person.<sup>33</sup>

**20. Those who live together before marriage abuse each other more often and more severely than dating couples or married couples.<sup>34</sup>**

#### CONCLUSION

These 20 reasons currently provide some good supporting information for pastoral premarital counseling. Additional research showing the detrimental effects of cohabitation and the ever-changing standards of society will no doubt necessitate changes in future counseling strategies. The ways in which we communicate will always require new applications and new appeals. It is our desire, as Paul says, "to win as many as possible . . . by all possible means" (1 Cor. 9:19, 22). However, regardless of what is currently popular, societal trends, or whether or not current secular research supports God's standards, we will continue to try to help couples establish lasting Christian marriages. ❧

1. H. B. London Jr., "Churches: Wedding Factories or Marriage Savers?" *Pastor to Pastor* 10 (April 1994): 2.

2. K. C. Scott, "Mom, I Want to Live with My Boyfriend," *Reader's Digest*, February 1994, 77-78.

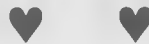
3. Larry Bumpass, Center for Demography and Ecology, University of Wisconsin, *National Survey of Families and Households*, Working Papers Nos. 2 and 5, 1989.

4. George Gallup Jr., foreword to *Marriage Savers*, by Michael J. McManus (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1993), 9.

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# Counseling the Suffering: Seven Ways to Help Hurting People

by Victor M. Parachin

*Ordained minister and counselor,  
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One fall morning, Sandra and her husband walked out of a neurologist's office, shaken and saddened. After six months of perplexing symptoms and four diagnostic tests, an MRI scan of her brain revealed a tumor.

On the way home Sandra and her husband picked up their three-year-old daughter at a neighbor's house. Sandra shared the diagnosis with her neighbor, Laurie. Other family and friends anxiously awaited the test results, so Sandra and her husband spent the afternoon making phone calls.

Meanwhile, her neighbor, Laurie, was busy organizing a "compassion task force" of six women from the neighborhood. Quietly and consistently the needs of Sandra's family were met. Meals were brought in; laundry was done; child care was provided; housekeeping was accomplished; family Christmas gifts were wrapped; hospitality was extended to out-of-town family flying in for the surgery. Most importantly, a prayer vigil was held the night before Sandra's operation.

Looking back, Sandra says, "I will treasure forever my friends' gifts of prayer, support, caring, and love during my traumatic time of surgery and recovery."

Every year in every community someone becomes ill, suffers a loss to death, undergoes a separation or divorce, has an accident, or becomes the victim of a crime. Whenever people experience physical or emotional pain, they need the support of others. "Friendship lightens adversity by

dividing and sharing it," observed Cicero.

In the Old Testament, the philosopher-writer declared: "Two are better than one, because they have a good return for their work: If one falls down, his friend can help him up" (Eccles. 4:9-10).

Furthermore, the Bible makes it clear that Christians must respond with kindness and compassion toward hurting people. "Do not cast me away when I am old; do not forsake me when my strength is gone," implores the psalmist (71:9). And Paul reminds: "Who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves have received from God" (2 Cor. 1:4). Here are seven ways for clergy, Christian educators, and other spiritual leaders to help those who hurt.



## 1. Respond Immediately and Boldly

As soon as you hear of someone's troubles, make a visit, pick up the phone, send a letter, write the check. Many good intentions are never acted upon because people hesitate. Remember that when people are hurting, they feel isolated, vulnerable, lonely, and frightened. Receiving quick support eases those feelings considerably.

## 2. Be There to Listen

Lois and Don Duncan were devastated when they learned that their 18-year-old daughter, Kaitlyn, was the victim of what police term a "random shooting." Kaitlyn never regained consciousness and died the next night. Advising others on the most effective ways to help during a crisis, Mrs. Duncan says the willingness to listen is most important. "The people we found most comforting made no attempt to distract us from our grief," she recalls. "Instead, they encouraged Don and me to describe each excruciating detail of our nightmare experience over and over. That repetition diffused the intensity of our agony and made it possible for us to start the healing."

## 3. Offer to Help in Specific Ways

The generic response, "Please let me know how I can help," is not useful. People in crisis may be suffering too much to know what kind of help they need. Or they may hesitate to request specific aid. It is always better to offer assistance in specific ways. Consider this advice from a woman whose seven-year-old daughter was hit by a car and



spent 10 months in a coma: "Many people offered to help, but I was too grieved to respond. One couple volunteered to have the film from my camera developed. I appreciated this kindness, especially when they returned with beautiful photographs of my daughter taken just before the accident."

#### 4. Comfort with Tears or Touch

Sometimes the most eloquent expression of empathy is an embrace or a tear. "When my wife's mother was widowed, she had already been incapacitated by a stroke, confined to a wheelchair, and limited in her speech," recalls evangelist Billy Graham. "Friends and neighbors dropped by to comfort her. Those who comforted the most were widows themselves. All they did was put their arms around her and weep together, briefly. But Mother was comforted."

#### 5. Be Very Sensitive

One man, whose wife was hospitalized and subsequently died of cancer, expressed disappointment with well-meaning friends whose assistance was inappropriate. "Based on my experience, I'd advise friends not to visit a patient unannounced. They should always call ahead. Also, people should not send a patient candy or rich foods that the patient is unable to eat. It would be better to ask what the patient can have, and offer to prepare something light and nourishing."

#### 6. Help Tap Spiritual Resources

People facing crisis and loss may need gentle reminders to seek out God's healing, rescuing power. This can be done by sharing a simple prayer, reciting a scripture that you have found meaningful, or recalling together the words of an inspiring hymn. Doing this helps a suffering person realize that beyond searing pain there will be renewal.

#### 7. Pray for Guidance

When learning of a crisis, take a moment to ask for God's guidance. Remember King Solomon's brief prayer: "Give me wisdom and knowledge, that I may lead" (2 Chron. 1:10). Pray for the right words; pray for the right response; pray for the most effective way to comfort. By seeking God's wisdom, you will respond with greater sensitivity and compassion. ¶

# A Handful of Lock Washers

by Stephen W. Nease

*Former Education Commissioner, Church of the Nazarene*

**T**hanksgiving dinner was over. The family gathered in the living room with our special guests, Rev. and Mrs. Ernest Bradley, veteran New England pastors. Conversation turned to church planting—a new concept close to the hearts of our hosts, for even now a new Nazarene church was being born in the very room where we were seated. As we shared, Rev. Bradley told with joy of the many new churches spawned by congregations he had pastored in Maine and Massachusetts back in the days when church planting went by another name—home missions!

Warmed by thoughts of God's work among new converts, and anxious to share His watch care over his workers, Rev. Bradley, now in his 80s, recalled an incident in his very early ministry. Every Sunday afternoon he drove his Model T Ford 40 miles to a neighboring community, preached the gospel to a new congregation, then returned to his own church for the evening evangelistic service.

It was understood that the entire afternoon offering was to be given to the visiting preacher toward his expenses. One Sunday afternoon the offering totaled 48 cents—hardly enough to pay for gasoline! Apparently as a joke someone had added to the plates a handful of lock washers—enough, the reverend said, to fill his hand, heaped up and overflowing. As always, he gratefully accepted all that was given—including the lock washers!

As he rushed back for his evening service, something snapped in the front of the Model T—the steering wheel turned freely in his hand with

no effect on the car's direction. Miraculously he stopped without an accident! But what to do—near zero weather, a country road, no mechanical help—and a worship service near at hand. Absently he reached into his pocket and felt the forgotten lock washers. Instantly inspiration hit him, and he remembered a roll of baling wire in the trunk. No mechanic he; but he strung the lock washers—scores of them—onto a double strand of wire, got under the old car, and secured the broken tie-rod end to the steering column. Miraculously again, the repair job held as he steered carefully to his church just in time to lead the evening service.

But God's watch care over His servant wasn't yet complete! As Rev. Bradley shared his miracle story with his congregation that night, it caused his people to think about the safety of their pastor's flivver. Someone noted that the tires were nearly bare (indeed one had been patched by hand at least 12 times!)—and that week, four brand-new tires were put on the pastor's car.

An interesting—and true story! But had you been with us Thanksgiving Day, you would have sensed the awe and gratitude still apparent in our guest's voice as he told the story. God's providential watch care over His servant so many years ago made Thanksgiving more real to us this year! With grateful hearts we remembered Paul's words to the Philippian church: "My God will meet all your needs according to his glorious riches in Christ Jesus. To our God and Father be glory for ever and ever. Amen" (4:19-20).

## Leading People

**A**n old Chinese proverb says, "If you want to reap a harvest in 1 year, plant rice. If you want to reap a harvest in 10 years, plant trees. But if you want to reap a harvest in 100 years, plant people." Leadership is planting men and women for a future harvest, but much of today's leadership in the church is mis-directed.

John Naisbitt spoke about the failed railway system. He said they understood their task through the years to be that of running railroads. Nowadays, the only nonrecreational passenger system in most areas is underwritten by the government. He said, "Had they recognized their task as being in the transportation business, they would have diversified and adapted to provide transportation rather than of trying to keep an outmoded system resuscitated." I thought of the church when I heard that. It seems many church leaders understand their task as keeping the church going, rather than serving the Lord through serving people. Some are like the man of whom it is said, "He didn't care which direction the car was going, as long as he was in the driver's seat." But what makes a good leader?

One mistake we make is in stereotyping leaders. When our new pastor fails to do things the way the former pastor did, is he a poorer pastor? Not if you understand the complexity of leadership and how God uses our individual characteristics to His advantage. The end result is many styles of leadership. In the Bible, leaders came in many shapes, sizes, and colors. The king was nearly omnipotent. The priest was a compassionate father-type. The prophet roared thundering admonitions through the valleys and plains. The disciple said, "Follow me, as I follow Him." The wise man inspired through his teachings. The apostle led as a proxy. Even the servant led in following.

A young pastor seemed open for guidance as he faced the serious chal-



**by Clyde M. Hughes**  
*General Overseer of the  
International Church of Christ,  
Atlanta*

lenge of pastoring for the first time. With little time to provide him a seminary study, I simply said, "Before you make a move, *think it through* and *pray it through*." Much trouble can be avoided if only we do those two things. The following expansion of that thought is a homespun recipe that seems to work for me.

### ***First of all, be called of God!***

After years of fellowshipping with liberal ministers who do not understand the meaning of the Blood, the Spirit, unction, and anointing, I wonder why they are in the business of preaching. They have forfeited the only meaningful and effective resource to meet the needs of the world. A preacher is like a steam locomotive; he must have a fire in his belly before he can go. So we presume a relationship with the Lord that will meet every need. Upon that we can build.

### ***Outwork them***

The trouble with opportunity is that it usually comes disguised as hard work. The person that goes the second mile is already ahead of 60 percent of the pack. It has been said facetiously, "Success in any field depends more on energy and drive than it does on intelligence. This explains why we have so



many stupid leaders." The natural tendency is to get by with the least amount of effort. Good leaders are hard workers. It is impossible, unless you have a very high percentage of participation from your people, to pastor a church or ministry on 40 hours a week! The needs of the community are too urgent to treat the ministry as one would stocking groceries, repairing transmissions, or managing an office!

I often run into people who are more talented than myself. I often meet persons who are more wise and intelligent than I. I have little control over the difference between them and myself. But I do control whether or not they outwork me! There have been many instances where everything was seemingly going against me. I had no answers. There were no gems or wisdom to draw upon. All I had was God's grace and the ability He gave me to work.

Preachers are notorious for leaving it all to God and prayer. Then the prayer we imply that we send up is not as quantitatively present as we suppose. Most prayer is worthless if we do not back it up with work! If we have the ability to do a task, how dare we ask God for more than the ability and power to perform it! By outworking your people, you inspire them by demonstrating your true commitment to the task.

### **Outthink them**

Leaders are thinkers. People will not follow people who don't know which way to go, why they should go, or how they got there if they did. Much damage has been done in churches by slipping unwise comments from the pulpit or to a loose-tongued member. The failure to think through projects has diverted much-needed resources and has deflated the enthusiasm of many individual and church bodies. We are admonished to "let this mind be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus" (Phil. 2:5, KJV). What a powerful reason to abstain from intoxicating chemicals! What a powerful incentive to think and pray before we speak, plan, or act!

Know of what you will speak. Imperfect knowing must be reflected in imperfect preaching! One sermon was described as "thin as the homeopathic soup that was made by boiling the shadow of a pigeon that had been

starved to death." But it requires more than formal education. Don't be like one man who was described as so learned he could name a horse in nine languages, yet so ignorant that he bought a cow to ride on.

### **Outlast them**

One church growth instructor sent some pastors home to write about the potential for their individual churches to grow. One returned and said, "I feel my church is about three funerals away from growth," a cruel but real characterization.

Many pastors do not succeed because they fail to give God time to change people. The average tenure of pastors is two and one-half years. It takes four to six years to get acclimated to the community. So before he has a chance to make a difference, the pastor, due to frustration and the indifference of the people, trucks on down the road. His successor comes in with another frame of reference, rips out all the progress previously made, and begins anew. This pattern exists in far too many churches.

"God is through with me here," a statement made daily across America, is a testimony of the failure of churches to seize the opportunity to unify and make a difference in their community. If you are called to a church, stay there until God really tells you to leave. Please understand; He doesn't change His mind as often as pastors and boards do! A hero is usually no braver than an ordinary man, but he is brave five minutes longer!

### **Outlove them**

The hard part of leadership is loving in the face of hostility. We want to be respected and appreciated. But this must be earned. *People follow leaders, not for who or what the leader is, but for how the leader makes them feel!* Remember, our task is people, not buildings, budgets, or vocations. To paraphrase John Ruskin, "The entire objective of true leadership is to make people, not merely do the right thing, but to enjoy doing right things; not merely to be industrious, but to love industry; not merely learned, but to love knowledge; not merely pure, but to love purity; not merely just, but to hunger and thirst after justice." If you preach hard, do it because you love, not because you

have some burr in your saddle. Never pour out your disappointments from the pulpit, but let it be done with a spirit of, "Oh, my people. How I have poured myself into you and have pled for you to come back into the fold of safety, but my heart is pained and broken. Come back to Jesus." About those who despitefully use you, the true test of leadership is your respect for those who can be of no possible service to you!

### **Outfocus them**

Be focused. In the Gulf War we learned much about modern weaponry. One missile locks on to incoming radar signals. Once the computer in the missile identifies the beam, it locks onto it and follows the beam to its source. Nothing can distract its focus!

Leaders are focused on the incoming beam of the Holy Spirit. Follow the beam. Be a visionary. Be committed to that vision.

Adlai Stevenson said, "I view this cultivation with grave misgiving. One looks back with dismay at the possibility of a Shakespeare perfectly adjusted to bourgeois life in Stratford, a Wesley contentedly administering a country parish, George Washington going to London to receive a barony from George III, or Abraham Lincoln prospering in Springfield with nary a concern for the preservation of the Union."

I have stopped off at many historical sites, yet in all the places I have visited, I have never seen a monument to a critic. Critics accomplish nothing! I have never seen a monument to a committee. Many times they stifle vision. I have never seen a monument to an organization. But I have seen hundreds of monuments to men and women who have stood up to be counted, who have been called to make a difference! Start building your monuments now! Let those monuments be not carved of granite and marble, but in the lives and eternities of the men, women, and children that God has placed in your charge! Be the leader God saw the moment He chose you to be conceived of your parents! Success is simply fulfilling the potential created by whatever abilities, small or great, that came with that conception, for it doesn't take much of a person for God to use, just all of him or her! ✚

# Prayer-Life Crises in the Church

by K. P. Yohannan

*We spend thousands of hours with consultants in study and planning. Yet there seems to be no time to pray.*

I'll never forget one of my first prayer meetings in America. I had been in the United States for only a few weeks, and I was eager to meet the spiritual giants and leaders. Even before leaving India, I had heard of one man in particular. He was famous for his uncompromising defense of the Scriptures and sound doctrine.

So on that first Sunday, I hurried to visit his church—one of the most famous in the city. More than 3,000 attended the morning services to hear the talented choirs and outstanding preaching of the Word.

My ears perked right up when the pastor of the church announced a special emphasis at the upcoming midweek prayer meeting. There were some things "heavy on his heart," he said. He announced the name of a certain chapel, and I determined to attend.

In other parts of the world, where Christians are often persecuted and attacked for their faith, **prayer meetings are the very centerpiece of the church calendar.** Everyone attends. Prayer and worship often last long into the night. **It is the powerhouse of their faith,** and many believers rise before dawn for daily prayer meetings.

Prayer is probably the best thermometer you will ever have to measure your growth in Christ. It drives all that is truly spiritual, both in our church and personal lives.

On the appointed night I arrived early, fearful that I would not get a good seat—or even a seat at all! Right away I noticed that there was room for only about 500 worshipers, but

there was no singing or clapping. The hall was completely empty. I walked all the way to the front and took a seat to wait.

By 7:15 I was getting really worried. "I must have gotten the wrong hall," I reasoned. I went outside to check the name above the door, but it was the chapel where I had been waiting.

Finally, at 7:30 several others came into the huge hall. There was no leader, songs, or worship. People sat and talked about sports and weather.

After about 45 minutes an elderly man came in to lead the prayer meet-

ing. The pastor was not even there. I counted seven people. The elderly man read a scripture, made some devotional observations, and led a brief prayer.

As the others got up to leave, I sat stunned. Was this it? Weren't they going to stay and wait upon God? Where was the worship? The tears? The cries for guidance and direction? Where was the list of the sick, and the poor, and those in need? What about that burden that pastor said was heavy on his heart? Weren't they going to intercede for a miracle?

And what about the missions? I asked myself silently. This church supported missions on every continent. Weren't they going to pass around the missionary prayer letters and pray together for those facing attacks from Satan on the front lines?

Many set up their churches and lives much like their secular businesses and careers. With or without the blessing and presence of God, religion goes on like a well-oiled machine.

These churches by the tens of thousands have what are called "midweek prayer meetings." But it's a shame even to call them prayer meetings. What really happens seldom has anything to do with prayer at all! The people gather. Someone stands to lead some singing. Then *one* person prays—briefly. Another person reads a list of announcements. Of course, the preacher usually delivers a short homily. In some cases, there may then be a few prayers, but most close having had no real time of prayer at all. How can we call that a prayer meeting?

**Nothing reveals the bankruptcy of modern Christianity more clearly and quickly than the current crisis in prayer.** It has reached emergency proportions.



## I CAN HANDLE IT MYSELF, THANK YOU!

Many times I have asked, "Why is it that we as believers in the West do not pray more?" and "Why is it churches do not give more attention to prayer?"

After all, since prayer is the ultimate act of spiritual intimacy with God, shouldn't it be the central activity of our whole lives? It cannot be that we lack teaching on prayer. Few Christians have more books and seminars on prayer than do the believers of North America.

The awful truth, whether we admit it or not, is that **we don't pray because in our hearts we don't think we really need God.** We don't know how to pray because true prayer can originate only from a life emptied of self-sufficiency.



Prayer is  
the best  
thermometer to  
measure your  
growth in  
Christ.



The church we see today is truly the church of Laodicea described in Rev. 3:14-22. There is no more accurate description of our spiritual condition anywhere in the Bible. Jesus said of the church:

I know thy works, that thou art neither cold nor hot: I would thou wert cold or hot. So then because thou art lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will spue thee out of my mouth. Because thou sayest, I am rich, and increased with goods, and have need of nothing; and knowest not that thou art wretched, and miserable, and poor, and blind, and naked (*vv. 15-17, KJV*).

Our prayerlessness highlights our

self-sufficiency. This "I can handle it myself" mind-set is the spiritual cancer of our times. It is the root cause of the present powerlessness in both our personal lives and our churches. Because we have not yet comprehended the essence of prayer, we fail to see the arrogance and terrible rebellion of our present state.

We have so much else to depend on today—buildings, machines, money, programs, and technology. We spend thousands of hours with consultants in study and planning. Yet there seems to be no time to pray.

**Clearly, we have lost touch with the eternal, living God.** Instead, we are serving the machines, programs, and systems that we have established. But they are an idol, a god that we have created and now control with our own ingenuity. And the message of the Bible on idolatry is clear. Either we will turn from these idols and trust in God, or the Lord himself will intervene to destroy the work of our flesh. It is dangerous to travel on in this pathway of pride—in our personal lives as well as our church lives.

### WAITING FOR POWER FROM ABOVE

How different our current lifestyle is from the instructions of Christ to the first disciples. After three and a half years of constant example and teaching, what was the only lesson He wanted them to remember? *"Without Me you can do nothing!"* (John 15:5, NKJV, emphases added). No wonder He told them to "tarry in . . . Jerusalem" and wait until they were "end[ow]ed with power" from above (Luke 24:49, NKJV), before they went out to fulfill the Great Commission. He wanted them to realize that in and of themselves, they were headed for disaster.

Unless we come to this place of total helplessness, we can never understand prayer. This is why Paul says, "When I am weak, then I am strong" (2 Cor. 12:10). Prayer is nothing more than voicing our dependence upon God. And the answer to every prayer is nothing more than this: God is with us, in all His power and authority, to make up for our human limitations. Each of us, in our own personal daily walk and work, is led through trials and tribulations. These test our faith and should spur us on to a life of

more prayer and deeper dependence upon God.



True prayer can  
originate only  
from a life  
emptied of  
self-sufficiency.




We have countless opportunities to trust God in the world of missions work. However, even in this realm where it would seem we would want to depend on God the most, it is rare to find leaders moving out in reliance upon the Lord.

We have time to study anthropology, sociology, theology, marketing, and media, but we have no time to pray. It is nothing for our leaders to spend two or three days in continual planning and scheming. Yet you will seldom find these same men and women on their knees for one night of prayer. Why aren't we waiting for a revelation of His plan? Crying out for the invisible God to go before us in battle?

Is this not a clear indication these leaders and organizations are trying to reach the lost world without coming to grips with spiritual reality? **How can we overcome unseen spiritual forces, cast down evil strongholds, and open closed doors unless we are a people of prayer?** God's army always moves forward on its knees.

Thousands of hidden people groups are still without the gospel in Asia. Yet we go blindly—holding planning conference after planning conference on how to reach them without at least giving equal time to prayer.

If our own careers, churches, families, and ministries are not built on prayer, we are in danger of fathering an Ishmael. 

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# Confession of a Sinking Preacher

by Alan Redpath

**I** find that Christians of every age-group today are involved in a rat race. They're on a conveyor belt from dawn until night seven days a week—too tired to pray, too weary to read the Bible. Studies, business, the family, social life—all these responsibilities produce a feeling that one is beginning to sink.

Beginning to sink—what did Peter do in the same circumstances? He cried out, "Lord, save me!" (Matt. 14:30).

That's a very short prayer, but under the circumstances I don't think it could have been much longer. The water was probably up to his chin. He was desperate. "Lord, save me!" It is a confession of need. Faith works most convincingly when there is no other way out!

Afterward Jesus exposed the cause of his sinking—a breakdown in Peter's basic relationship with God. "Wherefore didst thou doubt?" (v. 31, *KJV*). In other words, why has your confidence in God ceased?

When Peter first left the ship to come to Christ, he had no problem with the winds and waves. But when he began concentrating on them, he began to sink. This isn't only Peter's trouble; it's yours and mine. We can give our time and our concentration to battling with life's problems until our spiritual horizons grow dim. We can lose the sense of the presence of the One who has power to control the storm. Then we begin to sink.

But Jesus reversed the defeat when Peter called. Immediately Jesus takes him by the hand and lifts him up. A new power takes over. That's exactly what you need when you're sinking—a Master who can take hold and lift you above the storm and enable

you to triumph. Jesus Christ must be Lord. He must take control.

One winter evening a few years ago I was aboard a plane at New York's Kennedy Airport, waiting on the runway for the takeoff to Chicago. It was a very foggy night, and the snow was falling. I looked out the window and saw four men with their ladders on the wings sweeping away the snow. The whole situation was most uncomfortable. But shortly there was a tremendous roar, and that plane gradually took speed. In a flurry of snow it sped along that runway, and at the speed of about 150 knots the nose went up in the air, and the plane began to soar—eventually to reach 35,000 feet, in a clear, brilliant moonlit night. In less than two hours I was at Chicago's O'Hare Field. What lifted us off the ground and eventually above the very storm itself? At a speed of 150 knots another law came into operation. Until that moment the law of gravity had held that plane on the runway; but the law of aerodynamics began to take over, and the thrust of four jet engines overcame the law of gravity and kept it in subjection. The plane soared through the storm.

So it is in the Christian life. "The law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set me free from the law of sin and death" (Rom. 8:2, *RSV*). Hallelujah! When I say, "Lord, save me!" at that very moment He stretches out His hand and lifts me up, and I experience the upward pull of a living Christ.

In 1964 I was preparing my message for a Sunday—it was Saturday afternoon—in my study in Edinburgh. As I was writing it out, I suddenly lost control of my hand, and it wandered

all over the paper. I called out to my wife. I found I couldn't stand up. In five minutes I couldn't speak, and I couldn't walk. I knew that I had had a cerebral hemorrhage, a stroke. It might well have been fatal. I was helpless, and in a few minutes reduced to a childhood condition.

Spiritually, I couldn't pray or read my Bible for months. Mentally, I couldn't think, couldn't concentrate. Physically, I was weak as a child. This lasted for seven or eight months. One time, I suddenly found that the devil was hurling everything at me. I thought it just like him to take advantage of a situation like this. He began to put into my mind sinful thoughts. Temptations that I thought I'd gotten rid of for 20 years came back at me with overwhelming force, and I had no power to resist—temptations of impurity, temptations to bad language, temptations to blow my top with my wife and children. They had a father and husband who had reverted to childhood.

In the midst of all this, when I was absolutely desperate, I cried out to God and said, "O God, get me out of this mess. Lord, take me on to heaven. I can't stand any more of this attack of the devil. I can't lie here like this. I don't want the last memories that my family have of me to be of a man who lived like a cabbage, helpless for all of his life. Lord, save me. Let me die right now!"

Though I had no dramatic sense of God's presence, the conviction came to my heart borne of the Spirit, who said to me, "You've got all this wrong. Satan hasn't got the slightest thing to do with it. This isn't from the devil. It's from Me. I had to bring you to this point in order that you might un-

derstand that this is the kind of man you always will be, but for the grace of God."

I knew it in theory, but now I knew it in experience that God is not in the self-improvement business. He's in the Christ-placement business. He's always been wanting me to make room for Him. Then He said to me, "Just take a look and a long think into the past 30 years."


Then I went back to the time when I started to minister in London—14 years over there, 10 years at Moody Church in Chicago, 2 or 3 years in Edinburgh. And I saw the building up of pressures, problems, work. Oh, I thought it was so spiritual, for I was working like any slave for the sake of God's dear Son seven days a week, 14 hours a day, sometimes more. There was no time for home, no time for the family, no time for anything but work. I had substituted work for the Lord Jesus, service for heart surrender, orthodoxy for obedience. I was so proud of my neat sermon outlines—three points, introduction and conclusion, all points beginning with the same letter. I had substituted my knowledge of truth for my knowledge of God.

Remember Paul's great desire—"That I may know him" (Phil. 3:10, KJV). Not that I might know truth. The one is important, of course, but it is only the gateway to the other—"That I may know *him*." I saw it all, and I could do nothing but weep. I was at the end of my rope, and when I knew that,

*From sinking sand He lifted me;*

*.....*  
*From shades of night to planes of light—*

*Oh, praise His name, He lifted me!*  
—Charles H. Gabriel

And today I am restored. I'm not suggesting that God is going to do that sort of thing with everyone, but I am suggesting that He insists on restored relationships. If you feel yourself sinking under burdens and pressures, don't simply preoccupy yourself with the circumstances. Turn instead to the Sovereign of the universe and cry out, as did Peter, "Lord, save me!" He will. 

This article originally appeared in *Moody Monthly* in December 1968. Reprinted with permission.

# As Salty Today as Then—1914



by Leland May

*Professor, Maryville, Missouri*

**B**illy Sunday, the colorful evangelist, from more than 80 years past left the world quite a legacy. People loved his preaching because he seasoned his sermons with salt.

The following pungent quotes, gleaned from his 1914 sermons, are some of my favorites. They are as salty today as when he first preached them. Some of the "Sundayisms" would be appropriate for fillers for the church bulletin or newsletter.

1. Live so that when the final summons comes, you will leave something more behind you than an epitaph on a tombstone or an obituary in a newspaper.
2. Your reputation is what people say about you. Your character is what God and your wife know about you.
3. When your heart is breaking, you don't want the saloonkeeper. No, you want the preacher.
4. Pilate washed his hands. If he had washed his old black heart, he would have been all right.
5. It takes a big man to see other

people succeed without raising a howl.

6. The carpet in front of the mirrors of some of you people is worn threadbare, while at the side of your bed where you should kneel in prayer, it is as good as the day you put it down.

7. "You are weighed in the balances"—but not by Bradstreet's or Dun's—"you are weighed in God's balances."

8. Churches don't need new members half so much as they need the old bunch made over.

9. Whiskey is all right in its place—but its place is in hell.

10. Bob Ingersoll wasn't the first to find out that Moses made mistakes. God knew about it long before Ingersoll was born.


11. To see some people, you would think that the essential of orthodox Christianity is to have a face so long they could eat oatmeal out of the end of a gas pipe.

12. There is more power in a mother's hand than in a king's scepter.

13. I have no doubt that there are men looking into my face tonight who will have "1914" carved on their tombstones.

14. Jesus Christ came among the common people. Abraham Lincoln said that God must love the common people; He made so many of them.

15. If you want milk and honey on your bread, you'll have to go into the land where there are giants.

16. What have you given the world that it never possessed before you came? 

## A Personal Letter

### Editorial note:

A recent article written by C. S. Cowles titled "Canaanite Genocide and the God of Love" stirred some healthy debate on a tough issue. Among the "con" responses, Richard S. Taylor gave the clearest rebuttal. It was a personal letter that dealt with the issues raised, not an attack on the person. With permission of C. S. Cowles and Richard S. Taylor, we print this thoughtful response.

Dear Dr. Cowles:

You may not believe it, but no one dreads controversy more than I do, especially with my friends. My dread makes me procrastinate, in hopes that the issue will go away. But your article in the current *Preacher's Magazine* is printed and will not just "go away." I feel compelled to respond, as reluctant as I am to do so.

You are a good writer, often very eloquent, certainly persuasive. Furthermore, you are a sincere thinker, one who loves God and the church. The problem you pose is a real one, which I also have struggled with. Some things in the Psalms are far from Christian, as for instance Ps. 137:8-9. However, this psalm voices the vengeful spirit of the displaced Hebrews in Babylon; it is not a psalm that ascribes this sentiment to the command of God.

However, while their vengeful spirit was not God-endorsed, vengeance itself in the sense of repayment or justice is not ruled out in the Bible. What is ruled out is persons as individuals seeking vengeance themselves out of hatred and anger. The New Testament declares the propriety of repayment, but God claims that right. Quoting from the Old Testament, Paul writes: "Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord" (Rom. 12:19, RSV). What I gather from this is that re-



by Richard S. Taylor

Former editor of  
the "Preacher's Magazine,"  
Edmonds, Washington

vengefulness is not a legitimate attitude, either Old Testament or New; but this does not rule out God's right to use men in accomplishing His judgments. What the Israelites in Babylon wished for with a wrong spirit, God in His general providences actually brought about in the downfall of Babylon—a destruction that all major prophets ascribe to the action of God. And those infants—in all probability—were dashed against the rocks, even if the Israelites were wrong in wishing for it.

Nor does the New Testament rule out God's use of man's sword as His instrument of judgment. From Paul's warning to Christians in their personal private lives in Rom. 12, he immediately moves to the public obligations of governmental agencies, and at once we find ourselves in a new order of propriety. Speaking of kings and governors, Paul says, "For he is God's servant . . . he does not bear the sword for nothing. He is God's servant, an agent of wrath to bring punishment on the wrongdoer" (13:4). Paul sees the cruel, pagan Roman government as God's minister, and he ascribes authority for the use of the sword to God, who chooses in civil life to work through human agencies. Yet you seem to deny to

God the equal right in Old Testament settings to use Israel or other nations as His deputies in accomplishing His judgments.

The apostle Paul has no problem with God's punitive judgments. In his second letter to the Thessalonians he says:

God is just: He will pay back trouble to those who trouble you and give relief to you who are troubled, and to us as well. This will happen when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven in blazing fire with his powerful angels. He will punish those who do not know God and do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. They will be punished with everlasting destruction and shut out from the presence of the Lord and from the majesty of his power (1:6-9).

Such violent destruction of the wicked, without hope of repentance, is not seen as incompatible with a God of love and forgiveness.

The same truth is in Heb. 10:26 ff. In this passage the Spirit-inspired Word does not say, "In view of Christ, it is a wonderful thing to fall into the hands of the living God," but rather, "It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God" (v. 31, KJV). God's self-revelation in Christ was not the revelation of a new kind of God, one whose capacity to act in judgment was deactivated.

Then there is Revelation. It is not John, but a "voice from heaven" who declares concerning the judgment on "Babylon":

Come out of her, my people, so that you will not share in her sins, so that you will not receive any of her plagues; for her sins are piled up to heaven, and God has remembered her crimes. Give back to her as she has given; pay her back double for what she has done. Mix her

a double portion from her own cup (18:4-6).

Please observe, this is the New Testament God who is being presented here! And in the destruction of this segment of population, were there no infants, no cripples, no old people? (By the way, why be so indignant over the death of infants? They are probably the only class whose eternal salvation is made secure by their untimely death!)

As for Ananias and Sapphira, only a desperate need to somehow get God "off the hook" would read the account as you do. The commonsense meaning to a commonsense reader is that Luke intends us to understand that here are two instances of direct and immediate divine judgment. Obviously this is the way the Church understood it, for Luke says that great fear fell on the Church. To suppose that the identical instant death of a husband and wife three hours apart when confronted with their sin was totally natural and completely coincidental is to strain one's credulity a bit too hard. According to your view, for God to do such a thing as a punishment would be quite ungodlike. I say it would be no more ungodlike than for this same God (unless we are Marcionites) to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah.

Your problem is, you have determined in your mind what God will or will not do, and you reject whatever there is in Scripture that does not fit your conception of God.

This leads me to what I consider as grave a problem in your thesis as is the doctrine of God: the doctrine of Scripture. In effect, you have dismembered the Old Testament as the authentic Word of God—as Jesus, Paul, and the others obviously considered it to be. Actions ascribed either to God or to His commandment that do not fit your concept of God are *interpreted as misinterpretations*. In other words, in many cases when Moses, Samuel, or other prophets said, "Thus saith the Lord," you are free to repudiate the authenticity of their claim to be speaking for the Lord.

The solution to your problem, it seems to me, is achieved at too great a cost. We are left with a porous Old Testament that we can evaluate subjectively, compelling it to conform to the plumb line of our a priori standards.

Furthermore, where would be the end? Are we to say that the Bible record is wrong that ascribed to God the slaying of the firstborn in Egypt? What about the Flood—was that merely myth? If God sent the Flood (and the New Testament confirms that He did), were there no infants and children and helpless old people who drowned? And what could have been more complete "genocide"? Was it any more ungodlike to order the elimination of the Canaanites than to order the elimination of the human race, minus Noah and his family?

If you answer that in the cases cited the action was done miraculously by God, then we admit that He did those things. And if God chooses to appoint human beings as His agents in carrying out such judgments, is it not still God? Actually, in the case of the firstborn in Egypt, God sent His angel. If God had used a human police force to do it, would it have been any less His action?

Now to move directly to certain statements in your article: I fear that some positions taken seem to me to be logically disjointed. In the overall, however, you make a valiant attempt to state the different ways theologians have sought to explain the mass killings in the Old Testament. You did not really answer them; you just turned them aside because you had "problems" with them. I have problems, too, but I prefer to leave the accounts as problems and realize that I am really not qualified to second-guess God or pass dogmatic judgment on what a holy, loving God can or cannot do.

On page 45 you state: "Furthermore, this justification of the avenging sword is in conflict with Jesus' parable in which He cautions His disciples not to take judgment into their own hands, lest they root up the wheat along with the tares." Of course, taking the law into one's own hands is forbidden equally in the Old Testament. But to compare this to official divine action within a theocratic framework is to compare apples to oranges.

Also on page 45, third column, you say you have "trouble accepting the idea that God would treat in such a cavalier manner the life He has created and professes to love." That is caricature—sorry! God's actions in judg-

ment, whether in this life or at the Judgment when He pronounces eternal doom on sinners, can never be described by the word "cavalier."



## Violent destruction of the wicked is not seen as incompatible with a God of love.



And you make the analogy that God's right over life would not be less stringent than that of a mother's right to murder her child. That is erasing the difference between our rights as created beings and God's rights as the Creator of being. God has not given the mother the right to kill her child. But He has reserved for himself the rights of life and death in His moral order. Unless we can climb up to God's throne and ascertain what belongs to Deity, we are not in a position to pronounce judgment on the rightness or wrongness of His actions. Let us please try to recover a perception of God's transcendence, in wisdom, authority, majesty, and power. He never has taken a life or lives, directly or through the mediation of others, but that He had a reason that was completely harmonious with His holy and loving sovereignty. God knows fully all the issues at stake, and all the minute, often hidden factors that determine what is just. Who are we to suppose we can get into all the tangled threads of justice and decide which actions are right for Him?

You say you "shrink from questioning any divine command, especially when it is in the Bible." Really? All of the commands to kill that trouble you are in the Bible. They are not in the Sunday morning *Times*. Your problem is, you wish to have the final word in determining whether the command is

really from God or just from the mistaken person who says it is from God. But when we start down this path of pure subjectivism, there is no stopping place.

You are quite consistent in assuming that Moses got it totally mixed up when he interpreted Abraham's action in offering up Isaac as being a true act of obedience. Your basic position could not agree that the Holy God would ever make such a demand of Abraham. But you forget that quite obviously God had no intention of allowing the deed to be carried out, for He providentially provided a substitute animal. Furthermore, you presume to be not only wiser than Moses but also wiser than the New Testament, which assumes the historicity of the account (Heb. 11:17).

Again, you have trouble harmonizing the divine command to kill with three of the Ten Commandments. Strange, there is no indication that this conflict was a problem in Moses' mind or in the minds of any of the children of Israel. Of course, these are basic moral standards, but they govern the human race in their relations with each other. They cannot be used as weapons against God that tie His hands in the exercise of His sovereign authority over men and nations. This is why many modern versions say, "Do not commit murder"—recognizing that not all killing is murder. To take the position you seem to be implying is to require total pacifism.

As far as stealing and coveting are concerned, God gave to Abraham the land of Canaan hundreds of years before the final (partial) displacement of the Canaanites. It was not a matter of coveting but of believing God. And since He is the Sovereign over the earth, His right to promise the land to Abraham seems incontrovertible. Or is that promise also only myth, a misrepresentation of God's will? If so, a lot of Bible must be thrown out, including Hebrews.

God was certainly more than fair with the Amorites (Canaanites, etc.), for early in His covenant with Abraham He forewarned him that the land would not be given to his descendants at once; instead, they would pay the price of being subjected to

slavery in Egypt 400 years, for, He explained, "The sin of the Amorites has not yet reached its full measure" (Gen. 15:12-16). When the time finally came, they were a rotten apple about to fall from its own rot; God simply said, "It is enough! and it is time to fulfill My promise to Abraham and turn this land over to his descendants." In the light of this clear biblical history, to indict their military action as killing, stealing, and coveting is too far-fetched to be taken seriously. Moreover, it is to reflect on the integrity of God. And it is to abandon the Old Testament in any meaningful sense, for its entire literature is woven around these events and the presupposition that they were both historical and of divine ordering.

It is most unfortunate, in my view, that you should bring Elie Wiesel into your argument. What about Christian Jews whose hold on God was not destroyed by the Holocaust? Your analogy implies that the wanton destruction of the Jews by the Nazis was somehow like the destruction of the Amalekites and the Canaanites. That this similarity might so impress some people I can understand. But what they would be forgetting is that the butchery in Germany was done in defiance of God; He certainly didn't order it. What Joshua and the Israelites did in the Holy Land was a necessary displacement—with the Amalekites an annihilation—ordered by God, and therefore was invested with the quality of judicial cleansing. I realize it is hard for us to be horrified by the ethnic cleansing in Bosnia and still defend the ethnic cleansing in Palestine by the Israelites. But one is motivated by ethnic hatreds and revenge; the other by the worship of and obedience to God, and the necessary action of a sovereign God in cleansing the land.

Unless we allow God to operate as God differently than men, we really have no biblical God. In other words, it is not logical to say that what is wrong for you and me to do is also wrong for God. That is not the case, for we are not God, and God is not man. "Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable his judgments, and his paths beyond tracing out! *Who*

*has known the mind of the Lord? Or who has been his counselor?"* (Rom. 11:33-34, italics mine).

You come straight out with your position on page 48: "In regard to Canaanite and Amalekite genocide, [I suggest] *there was a difference between what God said and what Moses, Joshua, and Samuel understood Him to say.*" You are conceding that God said something, only Moses, Joshua, and Samuel understood Him to say kill, when He didn't. Then if He said something but was misquoted, what did He say?

There is not the slightest clue in the Scriptures that God was misunderstood by Moses, Joshua, and Samuel. These were the giants of their time. They knew God better than their contemporaries. God spoke to them face-to-face. They were as knowledgeable of God's mercy and love and forgiveness as you are. But knowing God, they could still say: "This is what God commands." If they got the command wrong, then there is no reliable communication between God and man anywhere in the Bible. There is only one problem: What God said to these men is a word you don't like because you don't think it fits God. But, rather than surrender any meaningful biblical authority, it might be wiser to revise your doctrine of God.

Have you read *The Beauty of God's Holiness*, by Thomas L. Trevethan? This is a 278-page book put out in 1995 by InterVarsity Press. Trevethan honestly faces the same problems you do, and he grapples with them courageously. But to my thinking his solutions are more satisfactory, for they are not arrived at by virtually scuttling the reliability of the Old Testament as the authentic Word of God.

I cannot be sure you will have the grace or patience to get this far; but if you do, thanks for reading, and God bless you. We are friends, even though our disagreements at this point are, to me, very serious. Also, since your article was printed in the *Preacher's Magazine*, I feel it only fair to send a copy of my reaction to the editor.

Yours sincerely in Christ,  
Richard S. Taylor





## 12 Best Books of Recent Date

**B**ooks have long had a central place in telling us of God's ways and work in the life of the church. It is still true today. Even in an era of sound bites, megabytes, videotapes, CD-ROMs, and floppy disks, few would deny the exalted role that books have in the life of the church and of Christian believers. For this reason faculty members and guests at Nazarene Theological Seminary were asked to choose a single important or favorite book of recent date (ca. 1995) from their respective disciplines.

What criteria did our "experts" use in choosing their titles? Beyond the usual qualities of clarity, organization, balance, and thematic importance, some pointed to the author's spiritual insight, thoughtful reflection, and maturity. "Writers of great books," said one, "encourage a vision of faith and an uncompromising honesty in search of truth." "Their work possesses a quality of illumination that engages the reader, and a persuasion that compels response," offered another. "Great books do not simply read well, they read us," said a third.

Here then for your consideration are a dozen or so of the most important religious book titles of recent date, with summaries by the person recommending the book. In a case or two we indulged those reviewers who felt compelled to list more than one title.

J. Harold Greenlee, *What the New Testament Says About Holiness* (Salem, Ohio: Schmuel Publishing Co., 1994), 52 pp. PA088-019-3263. \$3.99.

For all its brevity, this is a significant piece of writing about the doctrine and life of holiness. No small part of its value derives from Dr. Greenlee's acknowledged prowess as



**Compiled by David Grosse**  
Director, Excellence in Ministry Project,  
Kansas City

a Greek scholar, which is recognized in the wider realm of New Testament scholarship. The book is a careful examination of the New Testament teaching (as important for what it does not say as for what it says), but it combines this with a concern for holiness living. As the fruit of a lifetime of thought and experience, it deserves careful reading and pondering.

—Alex R. G. Deasley  
Professor of New Testament

David S. Dockery, *The Challenge of Postmodernism: An Evangelical Engagement* (Wheaton, Ill.: Victor Books, 1995), 428 pp. PA156-476-4109. \$18.99.

Twenty-three chapters written by various Evangelical writers assessing the movement that is now fully upon us, called "postmodernism." Helpful in understanding this phenomenon that influences the religious as well as the secular world in which we will be ministering in the 21st century.

—Rob L. Staples  
Retired Professor of Theology

Stanley J. Grenz, *A Primer on Postmodernism* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1996), 199 pp. PA080-280-8646. \$13.00.

A simpler, less technical book deal-

ing with the same subject as Dockery's book, except that it is written by a single author.

—Rob L. Staples

Wesley Duewel, *Revival Fire* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995). PA031-049-6616. \$14.95.

Dr. Duewel is a well-respected author in the area of prayer. This recent release is a dynamic indictment of our day regarding prayer.

*Revival Fire* documents numerous periods of revival throughout the world and highlights the religious and secular environment of the day. It also briefly discusses the involvement of God, the people of God, and the people not readily acquainted with the movement of God throughout His creation. Throughout the 350 pages of text Dr. Duewel repeatedly brings out the importance of concentrated, convicted, committed prayer by the people of God of all ages. In a day when we believe revival will come through the effort of prayer on Sunday morning and evening services and maybe Wednesday evening prayer service, it is refreshing to read of the hours and days of prayer that preceded the "falling of the fire."

*Revival Fire* presents a strong statement regarding "seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well" (Matt. 6:33). I personally appreciated the fact that secular businesses and schools closed down for periods of one hour up to two or three days, in order for the people to be engaged in prayer for the Holy Spirit to visit, and endue with the glory from on high.

—Terry Pinkerton

Carl Bangs, *Phineas F. Bresee: His Life in Methodism, the Holiness*

*Movement, and the Church of the Nazarene* (Kansas City: Beacon Hill Press of Kansas City, 1995), 319 pp. PA083-411-6219. \$34.99.

An impressive and well-illustrated biography that makes a vital contribution to the history of the Wesleyan-Holiness tradition and its churches.

—Stan Ingersol  
Archivist for the  
Church of the Nazarene

Charles R. Foster, *Educating Congregations* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994). PA068-700-2451. \$12.95.

Foster changes the paradigm of local Christian education away from educating individual Christians to educating Christian congregations. This is important for the pastor-educator who is interested in nurturing a community that, in turn, nurtures persons in faith. The integrated approach takes into account the formative experiences of worship, fellowship, and service, as well as the traditional structures and programs normally associated with Christian education.

—Edwin H. Robinson  
Dean and Professor of  
Religious Education

David C. Peterson, *Possessed by God: A New Testament Theology of Sanctification and Holiness*, in *New Studies in Biblical Theology*, edited by D. A. Carson (Leicester, England: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1995). PA080-284-1732. \$18.00.

Peterson reminds us that the doctrine of sanctification cannot be reduced to teaching on entire sanctification. Holiness must be rooted in the redemptive work of Christ and is the gift of God through the Spirit. Peterson might have given more emphasis to the notion of perfect love as a reality to be experienced now and lived in communion with God and neighbor. A valuable, readable book even if we might not always agree with it.

—K. E. Brower  
Professor, Nazarene Theological  
College, Manchester, England

Rick Warren, *The Purpose Driven Church: Growth Without Compromising Your Message and Mission* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1995). PA031-020-1063. \$19.99.

This is not your typical modern-day church growth book. Building on a biblical understanding of the church, Warren invites church leaders to reflect on major themes that produce authentic growth: developing a purpose statement, worship styles, reaching out to the community, and making disciples, not simply attenders. This book will probably become a textbook in church growth courses. It is attractive in layout and very readable. Warren's burden to see everyone come to know Jesus is engraved on every page.

—Terry Page  
Associate Professor of Missiology

Richard S. Hess and David Toshio Tsumura, eds., *I Studied Inscriptions from Before the Flood: Ancient Near Eastern, Literary, and Linguistic Approaches to Genesis 1—11* (Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns Publishers, 1994). PA093-146-4889. \$34.50.

This collection of articles on one of the most fascinating sections in all the Bible will stretch you in places. You will not agree with everything; you may not read every article. But you will treasure this book for its insight into the message and importance of this part of the Bible, promising greater depth in your preaching and contributing to your development as an expositor of the whole counsel of God.

—Joseph E. Coleson  
Professor of Old Testament

Darius Salter, *American Evangelism* (Wheaton, Ill.: Victor Books, Bridge Point, 1996). PA156-476-4702. \$21.99. New publication release date: 10/20/96.

In this comprehensive survey of American evangelism Darius Salter, professor of Christian preaching and pastoral theology at Nazarene Theological Seminary, provides a rich resource of information, ideas, and resources for strategically planning evangelism in the local American church. Writing from the Wesleyan perspective, Salter comprehends cultural and sociological issues. He has a feel for what is happening in the lives of people. More than simply techniques, and from his own burning heart, Salter points the reader to the powerful Christ and moving Spirit, who are the real forces in evangelism. This is an impressive

and significant book.

—Charles "Chic" Shaver  
Professor of Evangelism

Gordon D. Fee, *Paul's Letter to the Philippians*, in *New International Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1995), 495 pp. PA080-282-5117. \$36.00.

In this replacement commentary for Jac J. Muller's 1955 commentary on Philippians and Philemon, Fee writes with detailed awareness of the positions of contemporary scholarship while staking his own interpretive "turf" with grace and energy. Fee writes with the local pastor and Bible teacher in mind. Greek and technical discussions appear in footnotes, enabling a person to read the commentary text without many of the distractions of academic debate. There is no better commentary on Philippians in English that puts together the best in New Testament scholarship and evangelical pastoral concerns. This book will nourish and teach a pastor for many years.

—Roger L. Hahn  
Professor of New Testament

H. Ray Dunning, ed., *The Second Coming: A Wesleyan Approach to the Doctrine of Last Things* (Kansas City: Beacon Hill Press of Kansas City, 1995), 275 pp. PA083-411-5255. \$19.99.

Chapters are written by 10 different Nazarene scholars on the theme of eschatology. Divided into three parts—Biblical Studies, Historical Studies, and Theological Studies—the book deals with important issues that heretofore have been neglected in Wesleyan/Holiness publications.

—Rob L. Staples

Are there some titles missing from this list that you think should be included? We invite your suggestions. Simply list your favorite title, its author, publishing company, and publishing date with your name, address, and telephone number, and tell us why you think the book deserves a place on our "top books" list. We will include these in a future edition of the Minister's Resource Library. We reserve the right to edit.

Send your suggestion to: Minister's Resource Library, 1700 E. Meyer Blvd., Kansas City, MO 64131. Attn.: David Grosse.

# A Moving Experience

**W**e were celebrating 10 years of ministry in a church and were given a card shower as part of the festivities. Some wrote on their card that they hoped we would be there another 10 years. They couldn't possibly know how glad I was to know we were welcome to stay on.

I vividly remembered 10 years prior to this. How could I forget! "Two more boxes to pack! Or maybe it will be four. Will I ever get it all packed?" I thought as I was getting ready to move. It was like the pot of oil in 2 Kings 4. The more I packed, the more there was to pack. In the 7 years we had lived there, we had accumulated a lot of things, confirming my husband's suspicion that I was a pack rat.

We have moved many times in our 41 years of marriage. A new congregation to minister to was exciting for my husband, but a move for me meant long days of work. When our children were young, it not only meant packing but also involved consoling them in their dread of leaving old friends and making new ones.

In some ways this move was different. One daughter was now married, and another daughter and son were away in college. Emotionally it was a good move for me, but physically it was the most difficult. We had just returned from a Holy Land tour. I was the director of our daycare center and had that responsibility to transfer to another person. Coming home each day and packing more boxes was taking its toll. That's when I decided the Rapture would be even more wonderful than I had thought. I hoped it would be my next move—I wouldn't be packing for it.

We had lived in our present location longer than any other, and I had had time to rest up. But I had also had time to reflect on our past moves. In assessing them, I have discovered the



**by Betty Thompson**

*Pastor's wife,  
Mahomet, Illinois*

benefits far outweigh the inconveniences. Some of the houses we have lived in were lovely, while some left something to be desired; but each was home, and we were happy.

Our children often wished moving days would not come, but they have gained much by them. They learned early in life how to adjust to new situations and make new friends. We have met many wonderful people and formed close friendships. Many people have touched our lives.

Doors of opportunity opened to me in each place. Many things that I am able to do now are the result of some prodding by a member of the congregation or what I learned out of necessity.

Our first church provided the opportunity to learn to quilt. The ladies gave me no choice. "Every minister's wife needs to know how to quilt" was their belief. Though I had two small children, I managed to meet with them and let them teach me. I have made many beautiful quilts for myself and other members of my family since then. I am grateful for their prodding me to learn the craft.

The next church was in a small resort and retirement area. Hats were fashionable, and I had two little girls who loved to dress up. I enrolled in a class taught by the home economics teacher of the school and learned the

art of hat making. Our budget was tight, and I did a lot of sewing. With scraps left after making our dresses, I made hats to match them. A missionary, an evangelist's wife, and others were also the recipients of my newest craft.

My first taste of antique collecting came about in the third church. We were given an old, oval-shaped library table. After stripping it of the old varnish and adding a coat of new, we became the owners of a beautiful and valuable piece of oak furniture. It still graces our home and is a constant reminder of the church and people who gave it to us.

Another move provided opportunity to add to my antique collection. I purchased several chairs for a minimal price at a "junk store" and refinished them. They needed new seats. The high school offered a course in chair caning, and I enrolled. The value and appearance of my two-dollar chairs increased tremendously. They are very functional. At holidays when our children are home, while sitting around the table in those chairs, we share together of happy days gone by.

One must choose to make room in life's schedule for things that bring enjoyment and fulfillment. Boredom and loneliness do not have to be a part of our lives.

I don't enjoy moving and will never get used to leaving people I love, but I am not resentful. Instead, I am thankful for each new experience. "A wise man will hear, and will increase learning" (Prov. 1:5, KJV). I feel I am more effective in being a helper to my husband in his ministry as I stretch myself in learning.

If I am faced with the task of packing for another move, I wonder what new craft I will learn or what new acquaintance will enrich my life. I rather anticipate each "moving experience"!

# Making Church Crises Stepping-stones to Blessing

**T**he written character for crisis in the Chinese language conveys a profound truth. It is composed of two radicals: one meaning "danger" and the other meaning "opportunity."

Indeed, that is the way crisis should be understood in the church. If not resolved, crisis portends disaster; but when worked through in submission to the Spirit of God, crisis becomes a stepping-stone to blessing.

This can be seen again and again in the experience of the Church recorded in the Book of Acts. In telling the story, Luke carefully points out that the growth did not occur without resistance. Sometimes hostility arises from the state authorities (12:1-23), especially when pressured by unscrupulous Gentiles whose vested interests depend upon maintaining the status quo (16:19-40; 19:23-41). Far more often, though, opposition to the Church comes from the Jewish religious establishment that rejects the gospel (2:13; 4:1-22; 5:17-42; 6:9-7:60; 8:1-3; 9:1-2, 29-31; 13:49-50; 14:2-19; 17:5, 13; 18:5-17; 19:8-20; 20:3; 21:27-36; 22:22-30; 23:1-15; 24:1-9; 25:1-22; 26:1-32). Harassment becomes most intense from persons with basic theological differences within their own culture.

Still, this external oppression, whether civil or religious, does not impede the growth of the Church. Quite the contrary. Opposition outside the fellowship of faith actually serves to draw believers closer to God and to each other, intensifying their zeal to spread the gospel.

The real crisis comes from *within* the Christian community. There the danger of spiritual defection exists, not out in the world. To meet these perils, the



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saints are forced to draw more deeply from the resources of God's grace. That this condition surfaces repeatedly in the apostolic Church should dispel any notion that growing congregations today will have no problems.

Making this point clear, the first chapter of Acts shows the Church having to deal with the betrayal of Christ by one of their own leaders. Surely that must have been a traumatic experience. Not defeated, however, the Christians meet the crisis with united prayer, and another believer is selected to take the place of Judas (vv. 15-26).

After the explosive growth of the Church following Pentecost,

we read about the hypocrisy of two members of the congregation. What a tragic revelation! If the sin of Ananias and Sapphira spreads, soon the Church would lose its integrity. When the deceit is forthrightly confronted and judged, people see the high standard of holiness expected in the Body of Christ. The number of believers continues to grow (Acts 5:1-16).

Rapid growth does create tension. The sheer increase of numbers made difficult the assimilation of new converts, even as it strained the leadership resources of the Church. Before



long, Greek-speaking members stood at odds with the Aramaic Christians because their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution of food. Recognizing the murmuring of the discontented and the potential for a church split, a committee of Spirit-filled deacons was formed to deal with the situation. Not only was the immediate problem resolved, but also, by enlarging the leadership base of the Church, the apostles now had more time for prayer and the ministry of the Word. The result provided renewed growth of the Church. Even a large contingent of priests became open followers of Christ (Acts 6:1-7).

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Little wonder that the wrath of the Jerusalem hierarchy came down heavily upon the Christians, forcing many to flee from the city. Among them, Philip went to Samaria. Crowds were attracted by the miraculous healings accompanying his preaching. Then comes a problem. Caught up in the mass movement, Simon the sorcerer professes faith in Christ. He is baptized, though his heart is not right before God. If such superficiality is not corrected, the whole gospel mission could be thwarted. Sensing the danger, the apostles quickly dispatch Peter and John to the breaking revival. Not only is the confused, bitter-spirited impostor condemned, but also the Church receives some much-needed instruction in true spirituality (Acts 8:1-25).

Meanwhile, the chief human adversary of the Christians was converted on his way to Damascus. But apprehen-

sive disciples in Jerusalem were "all afraid" to welcome Saul of Tarsus into fellowship (Acts 9:26). What a momentous tragedy in the making! Thankfully, God had a Barnabas to take Paul's side. In doing so, he showed how we must give encouragement and love to new converts (vv. 1-30; cf. 11:25-30).

Before long the gospel has penetrated the Gentile world, as Cornelius and his household are converted at Caesarea (10:1-48). When the news reaches Jerusalem that Peter had preached to uncircumcised men and even eaten with them, some Jewish Christians became indignant. They believed that every follower of Christ had to conform to Mosaic law, of which circumcision was their most cherished rite. Christ's command to make disciples of all peoples seemed not to have crossed their mind (11:1-3; cf. Matt. 28:19-20; Mark 16:15). If these legalists have their way, the Church would become nothing more than a sect of Judaism. Even more devastating, the whole concept of justification by faith in Christ alone would be undermined.

Though Peter answers their criticisms (Acts 11:4-18), the problem still simmers in the Church. It reaches a boiling point after the first missionary journey of Paul and Barnabas (13:1-14:28), particularly in the congregation at Antioch, where some itinerant Judaizers were teaching strict adherence to the Law. In their minds, no one could be saved without becoming a Jew (15:1, 5). So great is the resulting discord that finally a council of church leaders convene in Jerusalem to deal with the question (vv. 1-29). More attention is given to the resolution of this crisis than any other in the Acts of the Apostles. It sets before us a beautiful example of how a church can deal with bewildering conflicts today.

*1. Believe that God works through every crisis to accomplish His purpose.* What happens to us, great or small, is not unrelated to God's comprehensive plan to make a people for His praise from every tongue and tribe and nation to display His glory. In this light, all things providentially move toward the end ordained by Him.

Peter, addressing the issue at the council, repeatedly referred to divine initiative in the unfolding drama. What

happened was not of his doing, the apostle said. "God made a choice among you that the Gentiles might hear" (Acts 15:7). "God, who knows the heart, showed that he accepted them" (v. 8). "Now then, why do you try to test God . . . ?" (v. 10; cf. vv. 12-14).

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The inference is clear. This situation was no accident. Behind the scenes God orchestrated events that brought the gospel to the Gentile world. We see a display of sovereign grace (v. 11).

So we, too, should regard the disconcerting, often unforeseen, developments that confront us. God has not been caught by surprise. In His infinite foreknowledge, He already contemplated the mess. Somehow He will effect His redemptive plan for creation through the mess. Whether the crisis was caused by our own failure or the consequence of factors completely beyond our control, it falls within the parameters of God's permissive will. We know He is always seeking the good of those that trust Him (Rom. 8:28).

What a difference it makes when we approach conflicts with this confidence. It stimulates a positive attitude that looks to the Lord for help. Moreover, by forcing hard decisions, we get to the underlying reasons for the difficulties, which underscores another principle.

*2. Confront the issue head-on.* A vibrant, growing church, as we learn from the Book of Acts, does not sidestep problems nor sweep them under the rug. Rather, seeing a dangerous situation, it resolves to do something about it. That churches have recurring problems is no reflection on their spirituality, but the way they deal with problems does reflect spirituality.

The disturbed church in Antioch challenges the teaching of the Judaiz-




ers that Christians must be circumcised (15:1-2). Not only that, but the congregation decides to take the matter to the highest church authority. Paul and Barnabas are selected to go to Jerusalem and meet with the apostles and elders (vv. 2-3).


When the church leaders hear the report of the missionaries, they decide to convene a general church council to consider the problem (vv. 5-6). The meeting is called immediately. Observe how the leaders show initiative. Knowing the gravity of the situation and the danger of waiting to take action, they want to quickly find a resolution to the crisis.

The dispatch and openness with which the apostles came to grips with this conflict should encourage church leadership in any age. Let us not miss this lesson. Leaders must recognize a problem and deal with it before it becomes a calamity. How this can be done realistically leads to another principle.

3. *Bring the concerned parties together.* Opportunity was provided in the church for persons with grievances to face each other in an assembly of mutual respect. Total attendance at the Jerusalem Council is not recorded, but it appears that the leading contenders on both sides of the controversy were present, along with "the apostles and elders, with the whole church" (15:22; cf. 14:4-5; 6:2).



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The issue was thrown open for debate. Everyone was free to express his opinion. Only after "much discussion" did the apostle address the meeting (15:7). Had they spoken ear-

lier, perhaps it would have intimidated others into silence.

In any event, the orderly manner of the proceedings show us a wise course to follow. Disagreement need not disrupt fellowship. Indeed, when we can frankly share differences, not only do we show respect for each other, but also our own convictions may be seen with greater clarity.

The church should encourage free discussion of contrary views by the people involved, particularly on potentially divisive issues. Personal communication between adversaries may not always be pleasant, but it is nonetheless essential in maintaining Christian unity. Though we may not all come to the same conclusion, we can agree to disagree and to unite to serve. In sensitizing such understanding, another principle becomes evident.

4. *View the issue from the perspective of past experience.* History has much to teach us, especially when it records God's actions in the affairs of men and women.

Peter draws upon this resource in telling what happened when he preached to the Gentiles at Caesarea. By their receiving his message, God gave them the Holy Spirit, just as He did with other believers. As Peter explained: "He made no distinction between us and them, for he purified their hearts by faith" (15:9). As far as he was concerned, that made obvious God's approval.

Similarly, Paul and Barnabas shared their previous experiences, "telling about the miraculous signs and wonders God had done among the Gentiles through them" (v. 12).

In seeking direction, we, too, should look back to see what can be learned from past predicaments. Solomon reminded us long ago that "there is nothing new under the sun" (Eccles. 1:9). That is a rather broad generalization, but it teaches us that situations that appear to us as novel very likely in some way other people have already confronted. Is there an emerging pattern, some sequence of events indicating direction? A discerning eye may see the hand of God in those happenings pointing to the future. While pondering this means of guidance, another principle comes into play.

5. *Hear what the Bible says on the subject.* Human experiences help us comprehend many things, but it is

the inerrant Scripture that charts God's course. Experience, however convincing, is not our final authority for faith and practice in the church.



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Notice how this surety comes out in the counsel of James. Having listened approvingly to the testimonies of the persons directly involved in the crisis (15:14), he says: "The words of the prophets are in agreement with this, as it is written" (v. 15). Then he quotes from Amos 9:11-12, with allusions also to Jer. 12:15 and Isa. 45:21. This passage refers to the promised reestablishment of the Davidic Kingdom, when "the remnant of men may seek the Lord, and all the Gentiles who bear my name" (v. 17).

In a larger context, his words recall God's plan to make a people from all nations—a theme running through the Scripture, beginning in creation, reaffirmed to Abraham, amplified by the prophets, and accomplished in the redeeming work of Christ (Gen. 1:28; 12:2-3; Dan. 7:13-14). Welcoming Gentiles into the Church, in this light, is just the continuation of the divine plan, which will consummate in the fulfillment of the Great Commission at the throne of heaven (Rev. 7:9-10).

Having established this mission from Scripture, James concludes: "It is my judgment, therefore, that we should not make it difficult for the Gentiles who are turning to God" (15:19). The Church could not discount this witness.

Nor should we try to find our way through the maze of conflicting opinions without recourse to the Bible. The Bible is the Rule Book in every crisis. When correctly understood, what is written unfailingly lifts up the Living Word in our midst. Now we must recognize another principle.

6. *Apply the love of Christ to the situation.* Here reality meets the

road. What we understood from Scripture relates to living everyday. Nowhere is this more evident than in our relationships with people, especially in the fellowship of believers.

Though James did not side with the Judaizers, he believed that everyone should be considerate of persons who kept strictly the law of Moses. Accordingly, he proposed that the Jerusalem leaders draw up a letter asking that Christians refrain from some practices that would be offensive to Jews. Specifically, he mentioned that they "abstain from food polluted by idols, from sexual immorality, from the meat of strangled animals" and eating anything that had "blood" in it (15:20-21). The prohibitions were deeply embedded in the Jewish culture. Since they were reasonable convictions, they should be respected.

Taking this advice, the council wrote a letter conveying their agreement to excuse Gentile Christians from the requirements of Jewish law, except the above-mentioned prohibitions. Some leaders, including Paul and Barnabas, were sent to read the letter to the churches at Antioch, Syria, and Cilicia (15:22-29).

At issue here is not salvation, but courtesy. In many ways, it boils down to common sense. Where no principle of truth is violated, we should adapt our lifestyle to the persons we want to reach. The point has already been made that we are saved only by grace through faith in Christ, plus nothing. But freedom from condemnation of the law is not a license to live as we please. For in receiving Christ as Lord and Savior, we become His bond-slaves. His Word is our command; obedience, the proof of our love (John 14:21, 23). In loving Him, we are to love others as we love ourselves.

To us, then, when we confront a crisis, simple as it may seem, the question is: What would Jesus do in this situation? Where human relationships are involved, we might also ask

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ourselves: knowing the mind of Christ, how would I want to be treated if I were in the other person's place? Coming to a decision through this process brings into focus one last confirming principle.

7. *Rest in the Holy Spirit.* This is the peace that comes when we have earnestly sought to follow Christ. Whatever the consequences of our action, we can leave everything in the hands of God.

What a blessed assurance came to the Jerusalem Council when they reached agreement on what to do! "It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us," they said (15:28). God witnessed with their spirits that all was well. With this divine approval, their message was dispatched and read to the churches with joy (vv. 30-31).

The Holy Spirit mediates the grace of God. As the unseen Presence of Christ, He affects God's redemptive will in the world. All through the Old Testament, He works preparing the

way for the coming of the Lord. As the Spirit-inspired prophets foretold, in the fullness of time, He clothed the Eternal Word with flesh in the person of the only begotten Son of God.

The Spirit led and empowered Jesus during the days of His incarnate ministry. Before leaving the disciples, Jesus promised them the same Spirit. "He will bring glory to me," Jesus said, "by taking from what is mine and making it known to you" (John 16:14). The Spirit does not speak of himself. Rather He reveals the Son; and, seeing Him, we know the Way, the Truth, and the Life (John 14:6, 26; 16:13-15).

An indispensable part of this impartation of Christ is the promise of His continuing guidance. "Those who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God" (Rom. 8:14). We can see how wonderfully this was experienced by the Christians in Jerusalem. As they were led by the Spirit, so we, too, can find God's way through the crises in our lives.

Are you facing some conflict, some overwhelming problem that threatens the stability of your Christian witness? Are you wondering which way to turn?

Then learn from the Spirit-filled Church of the New Testament. Believe that God is working for your good. Face honestly the issue. Discuss it with others in the church, pro and con. Consider the lessons of past experiences. Listen to the counsel of Scripture. Relate Christ's love to the situation. Then let the indwelling Counselor, the Spirit of Truth, have His way.

Following this course, you can expect God to work through the problem for your good and His glory. In fact, the crisis becomes a stepping-stone to blessing.

## BEYOND BELIEF



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# Secrets of Small-Church Leadership

by Ron Klassen

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**I** (Ron) was taught a lot about church leadership in seminary. I was taught how to preach and how to guard my study hours so I could preach my best. I was taught how to conduct services. I was taught how to lead meetings. I was taught how to administer. In short, I was taught how to be a CEO.

So when I started my first pastorate, I felt well prepared to do all these things. I spent long hours in my study every week preparing sermons, and as a result I probably preached some of the best sermons the congregation had ever heard. I used the skills I had developed for conducting services to make our worship services run more smoothly than ever before. I worked at administration, ensuring that every church event was well organized.

Yet my ministry was going nowhere. People were sitting through my sermons and taking part in the events I organized, but I couldn't see that they were making much difference in people's lives. I was doing what I had been taught. Why wasn't it working?

### Leadership Models: Business vs. Family

What I learned was that my effectiveness as the pastor of a small-town church had little to do with how well I preached or led worship or administered, though those things all had their place. My effectiveness as pastor was determined primarily by my personal relationships with the people.

Effectiveness came only when I started spending less time in my study and more time in the local cafe

drinking coffee. It came when I spent less time organizing church events and more time touring members' businesses or having lunch with them. It came when I got out of the office and went to ball games or went hunting. I learned that an hour of personal time with someone in my congregation could have more impact than a dozen sermons.

Because I am a behind-the-desk person, I had to block off on my calendar several hours a week for relationships so I wouldn't just drift toward desk work, which came easier for me. And because I am shy, I had to work at developing people skills. But the more I worked at it, the easier it got, and the more I enjoyed it. Once I started regularly investing time in building relationships, it wasn't long until church members started viewing me as a member of the family instead of as an outsider.

The CEO model of church leadership I had learned in seminary, I came to realize, really didn't fit the small-town church. While a large church may operate much like a business and so need a pastor with strong business skills, the small church sees itself more as a family. The pastor's role, therefore, is less that of a CEO and more that of a nurturing parent. More than anything else, what the small church wants in a pastor is someone who will love them.

### Management by Relationship

Churches need strong pastoral leadership to cast vision and provide the kind of direction that will help them steer clear of the innate tendencies that can stifle their growth and devel-

opment. They need leaders who can function effectively as change agents.

But when many small-church pastors propose needed changes, they see their ideas rejected. Some pastors respond by accusing their members of being set in their ways, unenlightened, uneducated, or uncommitted. But blaming doesn't get the job done.

When change is needed, how do you go about building support for it?

*Step 1: Build relationships.* The authority to lead does not come with the position of pastor; you have to earn it through winning your people's trust. The first step in earning that trust is to build strong, warm, family relationships. If you don't yet have such relationships, you may as well put your idea on hold and work on relationships first.

Relationship is the precondition for change. Effective small-church leadership depends on pastor and people learning to deeply trust one another and work closely as partners. If your people like you, if they trust you, they will like your ideas. Just as in every other area of small-church life, in leadership, too, intimacy and involvement are the keys.

*Step 2: Find the right way to initiate change.* Most small-church people don't like top-down management. They are grassroots people, preferring that ideas come from the bottom up. So does this mean the pastor's ideas are those least able to get a fair hearing? No, it just means the pastor must find a bottom-up way to introduce those ideas.

If your church responds better to a bottom-up process, avoid presenting your idea first at a board meeting or in

front of the congregation—both top-down approaches. Instead, why not plant your idea informally with several key people? Throw it out between innings at a ball game, or mention it over coffee at the café. Then sit back and listen. If the idea doesn't pop up anywhere, it probably means people didn't like it. You've just been spared trying something that wouldn't have flown anyway.

But if people like the idea, it will come up at a board meeting or congregational meeting, usually with the person presenting it claiming ownership. When the idea is proposed in this bottom-up way, you can be pretty sure it will fly—which is far more important than your getting credit for it.

*Step 3: Be patient.* Don't get in a hurry. Your ideas don't have to be implemented today. Your church has gotten along for many years without your ideas. And remember, there are few causes worth dying for—dying professionally, that is. Far better to let your idea die and for you to live to see another day of pastoral ministry in your church.

### Vision in the Small Church

Vision has become something of a buzzword among church leaders. We've recently seen the ministry vision of a few entrepreneurial pastors lead to phenomenal numerical growth in their congregations. In the small church, though, all this talk of vision can seem as out of place as *Robert's Rules of Order* would be at the family dinner table. I (John) discovered some of the reasons for this when our church, Valley Chapel, went through the process of formulating a ministry vision statement.

One reason is limited resources. A week before we finished work on our vision statement, our Sunday School superintendent and financial secretary both resigned. The Sunday School superintendent was relocating to another community, and the financial secretary had started a new job that made it impossible for her to continue.

Suddenly our grand design for the next century didn't seem all that important. I was more concerned about getting through the next quarter.

Another reason the small church feels less need to define a vision is its family orientation. At the beginning of Valley Chapel's vision formulation

process, I outlined the project to one of our members. Her face fell as she listened.

"If you expected me to say I liked the idea," she said, "I'm afraid I can't." I was surprised and disappointed. I had considered her one of our more progressive members.

She went on to explain. "As a teacher, I see this sort of thing all the time. It always turns out to be some administrator's idea of what we teachers should be doing." At the core of her lack of enthusiasm was a fear that by focusing on the vision, we would lose sight of the needs of our own people, and our church would lose its family quality.

The pastor may have more of an outward focus, while the congregation's focus is primarily inward. The pastor often anticipates a field of ministry much broader than the congregation does, partially because most members view the church as a place to be served rather than as a place to serve or as a base for outreach.

The pastor in most cases has moved to town specifically to minister to the community and naturally sees the community as a mission field. But most of the church's members have a different perspective. To them the community isn't a mission field; it's home.

The small church may be ambivalent about growth. Pastors usually focus on the positive consequences of numerical growth—a greater potential for ministry, an increased financial base, and a larger presence in the community. They sometimes forget that numerical growth is also painful for the congregation.

As the church moves from one stage to another in its growth, it experiences a kind of death and rebirth. Its structure changes. The atmosphere changes. People experience more distance from both the pastor and the rest of the members. Even in the most successful transition, the church experiences real losses and must go through a period of disorientation and grief.

The small congregation does not need to feel obligated to become a megachurch, but it does have a responsibility to evangelize. This is not because bigger is better, but because the church is heir to Christ's calling to "seek and to save what was lost" (Luke 19:10). Evangelism is essential

to every church's mission regardless of size.

I've seen signs that a vision to reach outside ourselves has begun to take root at Valley Chapel. Not long after we finished crafting our vision statement and its goals, a member called me. A friend had told him of a used school bus our church could buy for \$1,000.


"John, it's in really good shape," he said excitedly. "My friend was going to buy it himself, but now he is planning to move."

I could hardly believe my ears. We hadn't expected to meet the goal of buying a vehicle for our Sunday School for another six years. The comment his wife made, however, excited me even more. "I thought the Lord would do something through these goals," she said, "but I never expected Him to give the burden I now have for this ministry."

Another couple in our church is hoping to rent a house in Albania to use as a base for ministry during the winter months when they are not occupied with the demands of their farm. "If you had told me 10 years ago I would be doing this," the wife says, "I never would have believed you." This is the same church where, 9 years earlier when I mentioned to one of our key members that evangelism was going to be a high priority in my ministry, I was told, "We're not that kind of church."

Early in the 20th century, the English explorer Sir Ernest Henry Shackleton placed an ad in a London newspaper that read: "Men wanted for hazardous journey: small wages, bitter cold, long months of complete darkness, constant danger. Safe return doubtful." Thousands responded to the challenge.

Does the challenge of leadership in the small-town church seem daunting? Good! We are starting off on the right foot when we realize that the task is bigger than we are.

But God has called and is calling thousands of people to accept this challenge, and He promised that we will not have to do it in our own strength. When we say yes to that challenge, we are embarking on the adventure of a lifetime. 

Taken from *No Little Places: The Untapped Potential of the Small-Town Church*, by Ron Klassen and John Koessler (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1996).

## The Preretirement Years: A Time for Planning

by Don Walter

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**M**y father, upon retirement, hung a plaque on his wall that read, "Too soon old, too late smart." That saying would be funnier if it weren't so often true. It suggests that we learn many of life's lessons the hard way. And it hints that learning those lessons would have been easier had we been more alert, sooner. Consider particularly the task of planning for retirement.

"Too soon old,  
too late smart."

For many individuals, retirement is the tomorrow that will never come. They prepare for it either minimally or not at all. Then, one day, the main entry in their Day-timer is a retirement celebration—their own!

Suddenly their incomes shrink, but their living expenses may not. They begin to worry about where they will live and how they will stretch their newly limited income. They make important decisions on the spur of the moment. As a result, problems develop and well-intentioned men and women struggle with unfavorable circumstances caused by a retirement that was poorly planned. These folks find they are "too soon old, too late smart."

The lesson we should learn is that we should anticipate retirement and plan for it during our preretirement years. Some psychologists identify the preretirement stage of life as the years

from age 56 to age 65. Others believe this stage begins as early as age 50. (One should begin planning for the financing of retirement with the first paycheck.) During the years before retirement, many people tend to look forward to retirement and, at the same time, worry about it because of the uncertainties it may hold. But, if we plan carefully and adequately during these years, we can relieve some anxiety and facilitate the transition into an enjoyable retirement.

Effective preretirement planning should involve four main areas:

1. Personal Finance
2. Health and Health Care
3. Retirement Activities
4. Emotional Changes and Adjustments

The following brief discussion of these topics may give you, the minister, some initial guidance in preretirement planning.

### Personal Finance

During your preretirement years, you should determine (1) what you can expect realistically in terms of retirement income and expenses, and (2) how best to structure your financial resources to guard against outliving your wealth.

Be sure to in-

clude housing as you assess expenses. Most likely, you will have to provide your own retirement housing and utilities. This will be quite a change from living in a parsonage or even receiving a housing allowance. Housing can represent a large part of your retirement living expense, and you should explore all your options now. Depending on your geographic area, you might consider single-family or multi-family dwellings, apartments, condominiums, retirement village housing, and prefabricated or mobile homes.

To provide for retirement needs, you should start a retirement savings program as early in your career as





possible. Even if you haven't done this already, you still can benefit from starting now to contribute to a Tax-Sheltered Annuity (TSA) or an Individual Retirement Annuity (IRA). Your denomination's pensions office can provide detailed information on such plans.

When projecting retirement income, be sure to contact the Social Security Administration for free material regarding general benefit calculation. Also, you should request a report of personal income. In fact, you should check this every two or three years to make certain your records are being updated accurately. Local social security offices will be able to provide appropriate forms for each of these requests.

You should contact your denominational pensions office for a summary explanation of the retirement plan it offers. From this summary, you should be able to estimate the amount of pension you can expect. This information, together with the information from the Social Security Administration, and the projected retirement income from your TSA and IRA plans, should provide a close estimate of the fixed income amounts you may expect from these sources after you retire. The key is to gather the information now while there is still time to plan ahead and make adjustments in plans you may have made already.

### Health and Health Care

As we get older, health and health care become increasingly important. With age come increased health risks and the increased possibility of needing extended health care. Your preretirement planning should include: (1) how best to maintain your good health, and (2) how to pay for health care services if you become ill.

Adequate health insurance is a must. While you cannot predict ill health, you can protect yourself financially if it comes. The Social Security Administration can provide to you free information on Medicare coverage. Also, pay particular attention to what Medicare **does not** cover. This understanding will allow you to shop intelligently for insurance to supplement Medicare coverage. Many insurance companies offer approved plans with a variety of options and premi-

ums. You might want to contact a qualified professional to help you analyze your insurance needs and evaluate your coverage options.

### Retirement Activities

Probably, throughout your ministerial career, your schedule has been full to overflowing. Both you and your spouse need to be aware of all the changes that retirement will bring. You may be less busy, and you may be involved in different types of activities.

JAAAAA—  
**Start a  
retirement  
savings  
program as  
early in your  
career as  
possible.**  
—AAAAJ

No one (not even you yourself) can prescribe beforehand **all** the appropriate activities that you can or should pursue after retirement. You may continue many of your ministerial activities, even though you're retired. Others may pursue interests in different areas. Whatever your choice, you should ask some basic questions during the preretirement years regarding retirement activities. Consider the following:

"What have I always wanted to do that I never had time for?"

"What service opportunities are there that I would find fulfilling?"

"If I do volunteer for service in an organization, how much of my time do I want controlled by others?"

"Will my hobbies or recreational activities keep me busy and happy?"

"What will be my role in the activities of my local church?"

Answers to these questions will be unique to each individual. Successful preretirement planning means being prepared for these changes. Part of that preparation includes **being will-**

**ing to reevaluate and adjust** any of your activities when necessary. Each of us has skills, abilities, and needs that should be challenged, used, and fulfilled by wisely planned retirement activities.


### Emotional Changes and Adjustments

Any major change in a person's life, such as retirement, brings with it a time of emotional adjustment. Although the areas of adjustment may vary from individual to individual, you should bear in mind that adjustment takes time.

For one minister, retirement brought the need to adjust his feelings regarding self-identity. He had been so busy that unscheduled time was nearly nonexistent. When retirement came, people didn't call for him as they used to, and free time was abundant. His family had to spend time getting to know this newly retired minister.

Some of you will find that you need to adjust your relationship with your spouse. You probably have found that the demands of ministry often have left precious little time for the two of you to spend together. However, after you retire, you may be constant companions on a daily basis. One semiretired friend commented that he really enjoyed having more time to spend at home. The only problem, he said, was that his idea of when to tackle a project around the house was not the same as his wife's. Like him, you may need to fine-tune some of your interpersonal relationships.

Even with the best planning, getting used to retirement is hard. Knowing that these changes and adjustments are normal is an important step in coping. Sharing your personal feelings with your spouse, a fellow minister, or a trusted friend who has recently made a successful transition to retirement often helps as you work through your own adjustments.

Preretirement planning is an essential task each minister should undertake. Certainly the transition from a "full-time-plus" work routine to a retirement routine will be a major change in your life. Identifying the issues that accompany this change and preparing to resolve them are central to any type of preretirement planning. 

## Today's Books for Today's Preachers

# Awakening the Giant

by Jim Russell

Zondervan Publishing, PA031-020-1764, \$15.99

**A** *Awakening the Giant* is a radically different analysis of the condition of our society and the mission of the Christian Church in relation to it. Author Jim Russell contends that it's time to give discipling first priority in our churches. I can't recall ever hearing such a message from an Evangelical author, especially from one whose book is a major offering of a major Evangelical publishing company.

Russell's argument stands on three legs. The first is the Great Commission. Jesus' last words to His disciples were to "make disciples of all nations . . . teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you" (Matt. 28:19-20). Russell regards these words as the summation of Jesus' three-year teaching ministry, as well as His marching orders to His followers, both then and now.

The Evangelical church in America, he continues, has placed much more of an emphasis on making decisions than on making disciples. We are strong on evangelism but weak on Christian growth. Many people in our churches have made a decision for Christ, but their weekday lives are hardly distinguishable from those of the "good," cultured unbelievers around them.

The second leg is the moral state of our nation. The author sees us as a society in moral confusion and deterioration. Abortion, the breakdown of marriage and family life, militant homosexuality, increasing crime, drugs, and sex and violence in movies and television are some of the symptoms of our sickness.

Most Evangelicals believe the answer is a renewed emphasis on evangelism. Russell believes the answer is the discipling of the host of baby

Christians who have made decisions but have not yet become disciples, a radically different approach.

The evidence on which Russell bases this solution is the third leg on which his book stands. Data gathered by pollsters George Barna and George Gallup indicates that 85 percent of Americans believe in the death and resurrection of Jesus and that He is spiritually alive today. Nearly three-quarters say they have made a commitment to Jesus Christ.

Russell regards that evidence as a cause for celebration. For 300 years we have prayed for and worked for the evangelization of our nation, he says, and God has blessed our faithfulness with "the gift of a marvelous proclamation victory." Our response, however, has been "a monumental discipling failure." We have been successful in creating "believers," but we have failed miserably in "mak[ing] disciples . . . teaching them to obey everything I have commanded." The result is believers whose lives are little different from the lives of unbelievers.

It's time, Russell says, to rejoice in the success of our evangelistic efforts in this country and to change our primary focus to discipling. That is where we need to be concentrating our energies and our resources. The main ministry of churches and pastors needs to be nurturing all the people around us who at one time or another have made decisions for Christ but who have never learned to be obedient disciples.

If the author is right, the Evangelical church is likely to be facing an identity crisis. For generations evangelism has been a key identifying mark of the Evangelical church. Programs, ministries, mission statements, and goals have been built around it.

Russell's book proposes a radical restructuring of how we see ourselves and how we do things.

*Awakening the Giant* is an analysis of the condition of the Christian Church today, including its strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats. It offers some new paradigms in thinking about the church to replace the old ones that Russell says are now outdated. The book gives suggestions for discipling our families, our churches, our communities, and our nation. While the author doesn't go into elaborate details in most of these areas, he does give enough examples to get his readers thinking.

It needs to be said that Russell is a successful small businessman, not a theologian. He approaches his task from that viewpoint. Theologians like to think about things. Businessmen tend to say, "Let's do it!" Russell emphasizes "doing" rather than discussing or arguing.

And his life is consistent with his thesis. In addition to being a man with a strong witness for Christ, he has been a model discipler as well, both in one-on-one relations and on the broader societal scene. His Amy Foundation has had a noticeable impact on the secular press in our nation, which today is much more open to articles from a Christian perspective than it has been in years. That, in Russell's thinking, is one way he can be involved in "teaching them to obey everything I have commanded."

This is not a dispassionate book. Russell believes deeply in what he has written; it is a reflection of his life. Even if one might want to argue certain points with the author, there is plenty here to trigger the pastor's thinking.

—Donald E. Lindman

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WORSHIP

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PREACHING

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*James W. Tharp*

## December/January/February 1996-97

Prepared by James W. Tharp

### INTRODUCTION

Every revival in history can be traced to prayer. The history of every great church has been written in prayer. No wonder the apostle Paul commanded, "Continue earnestly in prayer, being vigilant in it with thanksgiving" (Col. 4:2, NKJV). And, "Pray without ceasing" (1 Thess. 5:17, NKJV). Perhaps this is why John Wesley believed that "God does nothing except by prayer."

This being true, the most urgent business of the Church is prayer. Why, then, is the Church so weak in this all-important grace? Because effective prayer is not merely the work of the human intellect; it is an all-consuming expression that requires the anointing of the Holy Spirit. From the beginning, Satan sought to distract the Church from prayer (Acts 6:1-4). Throughout the centuries the evil one has sought to keep the Church from its source of power. In the place of prayer power, Satan has been pleased to see leaders substitute theological power, traditional practices, good organization, and even Bible knowledge. As important as these things are, they do not in themselves bring about the release of the power of the Holy Spirit. The outpouring of the Holy Spirit is for praying men and women. God does not entrust the fullness of the Holy Spirit to prayerless souls, no matter how sincere, how disciplined, how enlightened. Nor does He pour out His Spirit on a prayerless church.

Perhaps we are seeing something of a "prayer revival" among God's people around the world at this hour. Even here in North America, the Church is caught up in one of the greatest prayer movements in the history of American Christianity. It is estimated that more than 5 million believers are committed to a minimum of one hour of daily intercession for revival in America and the salvation of souls. High school kids who used to pray together at the flagpole every fall have now organized into weekly prayer meetings. They are praying for their teachers, their peers, their pastors and churches, their communities, and for revival in the land. Little children are developing a phenomenal interest in prayer, and they are seeing amazing answers!

Could it be that we are seeing the prophecy fulfilled in our time that spoke of a day when God would pour out on His people the "Spirit of grace and supplication" (Zech. 12:10, NKJV)? If so, may the Lord give us an ear to hear what the Spirit is saying to His people. It is prayer time around the world for God's people; it is prayer time in America; it is prayer time in your church and mine. The greatest tragedy at this hour of the moving of God's Spirit would be the condition referred to in Isa. 64:7: "No one calls on your name or strives to lay hold of you; for you have hidden your face from us and made us waste away because of our sins."

For the next few weeks, I suggest that we look at the prayer life of Jesus, at what He taught, and how He modeled this all-important ministry. Then we'll hope to see how the Early Church followed Jesus' example and obeyed His teachings concerning prayer. Let us make no mistake—the Holy Spirit follows a prayer trail and nothing more or less.

Let us lead our people back to the Upper Room in preparation for the great revival that God wants to give in all of our churches and communities.

# JESUS, THE MAN OF PRAYER

by James W. Tharp

Luke 11:1

December 1, 1996

## INTRO:

As God, Jesus answered prayer; as Man, Jesus himself needed to pray. The Father always heard Jesus' prayers. As we study the life of Jesus, we certainly should study His faithful prayer life. Following His example would revolutionize our spiritual lives and our ministries and our churches.

## I. Jesus Was Anointed for Prayer (Luke 3:21-22)

A. Jesus was "the Anointed One." The Holy Spirit anointed Jesus. He anointed Him for all that He would do. Jesus declared: "The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor" (Luke 4:18-19). Since Jesus' primary devotion was to the Father, we can believe that the Spirit's anointing had primarily to do with Jesus' prayer life. All His other ministries would stem from His prayer life. The Holy Spirit's anointing attended Jesus in His life of prayer.

B. The Father responded to Jesus' prayers. "During the days of Jesus' life on earth, he offered up prayers and petitions with loud cries and tears to the one who could save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission" (Heb. 5:7). It cannot be established that the Father ever denied the Son any request. During His prayer for the return of Lazarus from the dead, Jesus rejoiced that the Father always heard Him (John 11:42).

C. Jesus' prayer life impacted His disciples. On one occasion, when He had finished praying, the disciples requested, "Lord, teach us to pray" (Luke 11:1). They noticed the connection between Jesus' powerful public ministry and His secret life of prayer. They realized that whatever the Son asked for, sooner or later He would receive it from the Father.

Our prayer life also should become a great witness for God. Our loved ones and close friends should see that our Heavenly Father listens to us when we pray and that we get answers to prayer.

## II. Jesus Was Devoted to Prayer

A. Jesus began His ministry in prayer. From the Jordan River, Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness for a period of prayer and fasting and testing (Matt. 4:1; Luke 4:1). Jesus began His ministry in a six-week prayer retreat. He did not leave the Jordan, where He was anointed by the Spirit, to begin His ministry with a healing campaign, an exorcism, or a mighty miracle. He began in prayer.

B. Jesus continued to pray throughout His ministry. In the early part of His ministry, Jesus experienced great power in Galilee for preaching, teaching, healing, and casting out evil spirits. In the midst of mighty miracles, "Jesus went out to a solitary place" (Luke 4:42). "One of those days Jesus went out to a mountainside to pray, and spent the night praying to God" (6:12). On occasion He would take some disciples and go to the mountain for prayer (9:28).

## III. Jesus Summoned Us to Prayer

A. Jesus issued a call to prayer. In preparing the disciples for His departure, Jesus spent a great deal of time speaking about the Holy Spirit and prayer. In giving the Great Commission, Jesus gave both a promise and a command: "Behold, I send the Promise of My Father upon you; but tarry in the city of Jerusalem until you are endued with power from on high" (Luke 24:49, NKJV). The disciples would understand His command to "tarry" as a command to wait on the Lord, to pray.

B. The disciples returned to pray. After the ascension of Jesus, the disciples needed the reminder of the angels in order not to be distracted from Jesus' orders. "Then they returned to Jerusalem from the Mount called Olivet. . . . And when they had entered, they went up into the upper room where they were staying. . . . These all continued with one accord in prayer and supplication, with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus, and with His brothers" (Acts 1:11-14, NKJV).

C. Prayer prepared the way for the Pentecostal outpouring.

Now when the Day of Pentecost had fully come, they were all with one accord in one place. And suddenly there came a sound from heaven, as of a rushing mighty wind, and it filled the whole house where they were sitting. Then there appeared to them divided tongues, as of fire, and one sat upon each of them. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak with other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance (*Acts 2:1-4, NKJV*).

Jesus had told His followers that they should pray for the Holy Spirit (Luke 11:13). It is still in order for those of us who have the Spirit indwelling us to pray for His fullness (Matt. 5:6; Eph. 5:18). In fact, God does not entrust the fullness of the Holy Spirit to His prayerless children. A prayerless church will not be visited with the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. Jesus himself was praying when He was filled with the Spirit (Luke 3:21-22).

Let the Church get back to prayer in order that it might return to Pentecost.



**SUGGESTED WORSHIP ORDER**

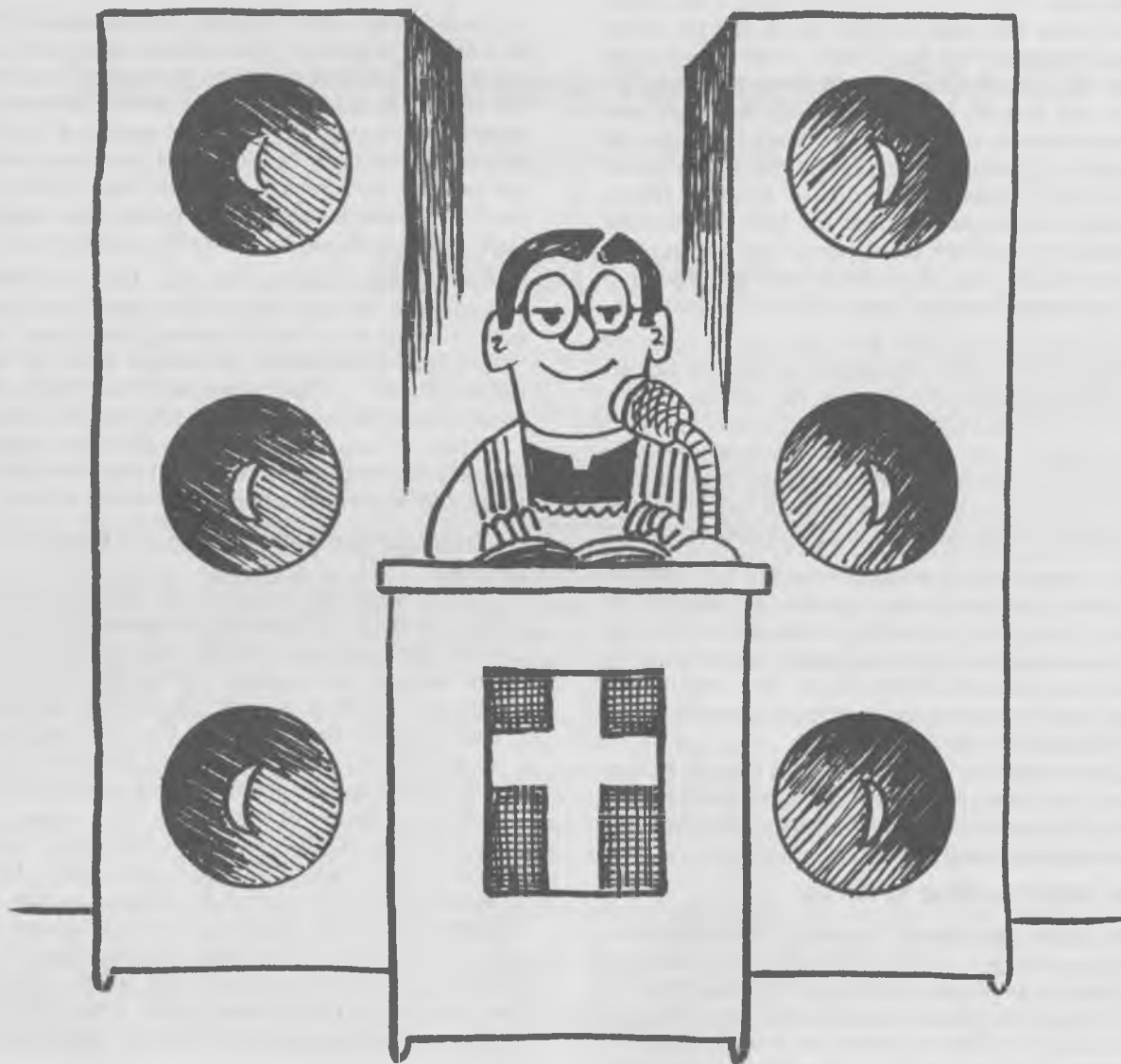
Call to Worship  
Scripture Reading Luke 11:1-13  
Hymns "Take Time to Be Holy"  
"A Charge to Keep I Have"  
Prayer  
Choir or Special Song  
Announcements and Offering  
Special Song  
Message "JESUS, THE MAN OF PRAYER"  
Closing

**Creative Worship Ideas**

**Closing**

"May we during this series of messages trust the Lord to lead us into a more meaningful prayer life. Even now as we close this service, I should like to pray for those who are concerned about making a deeper commitment to prayer and would welcome your indication by raising your hand."

A READING FROM THE BOOK OF QUOTATIONS



"Speak softly but carry a big amp."

# JESUS, THE TEACHER OF PRAYER

by James W. Tharp  
Luke 11:1-13; Matt. 6:5-15  
December 8, 1996

## INTRO:

As an authority on prayer, Jesus instructed His followers on both how to pray and how not to pray. In Matt. 6:5-7, we hear Jesus warning against two ways of praying and then emphasizing the need to pray a certain way.

### I. There Is Hypocritical Praying

"And when you pray, do not be like the hypocrites, for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the street corners to be seen by men. I tell you the truth, they have received their reward in full" (Matt. 6:5). Jesus refers here to the Pharisees who sought to impress people with their piety. Jesus is not teaching that it is wrong to pray in churches and in public. What is wrong is forgetting that prayer is addressed to God and not to people.

Public prayer is important. It is not forbidden by our Lord. But the temptation that we must overcome in public praying is to fashion our words and expressions so as to impress people instead of the Lord.

### II. There Is Mechanical Praying

"And when you pray, do not keep on babbling like pagans, for they think they will be heard because of their many words. Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him" (Matt. 6:7-8). The pagans, who prayed to many gods, were quite taken with certain "power words" or mantras. They believed these to be the secret of getting answers to their prayers. In their superstition, the pagans would trade ideas on certain chants and expressions that might get the attention of their gods. Jesus wanted His followers to know that such "babbling" was nonsense and got nowhere with the Heavenly Father.

Christians today must guard against placing value on mere spiritual-sounding expressions when it comes to prayer. Prayer is more than words and expressions, even though words are a part of prayer. But in praying, our Father wants us to put our mind and heart and soul into communion with Him. Prayer is more than words and sounds.

### III. There Is Christian Praying

"But when you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father, who is unseen. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you" (Matt.

6:6). Jesus Christ addresses neither the Pharisees nor the pagans here. "But when you pray [My followers—believers] . . ." The Christian needs a secret prayer life. Without it, he or she can never develop into the kind of prayer warrior that God intends. Each one needs a place to pray, a place where the believer can shut out the world—the sounds and sights, even the loved ones. While it is good to pray with families, a Christian needs a place to pour out one's heart each day while alone with God. Jesus got alone with the Father. He moved away from the multitudes, from His disciples, and from the duties of ministry in order that He might commune with the Father.

It is not easy in these times to find the time and the place to get alone with God. But it must happen! Whether it is a bedroom, a den, a porch, or somewhere else, we must find a place. Jesus had "a certain place" where He prayed. Of course, He prayed in many places. We can too. But we must find a place where we can meet secretly with our Heavenly Father.

#### SUGGESTED WORSHIP ORDER

Call to Worship	
Hymns	"The Garden of Prayer" "Blessed Assurance"
Prayer	
Announcements and Offering	
Special Music	
Message	"JESUS, THE TEACHER OF PRAYER"
Chorus	"Follow, Follow, I Will Follow Jesus"
Closing	

#### Creative Worship Ideas

##### *Call to Worship*

"Let us dedicate this service to the Lord and expect that He will help every one of us know how to more successfully draw near Him for a meaningful prayer relationship. Let us believe that He wants this even more than we do."

##### *Closing*

"Let us go out and follow Jesus in His example of prayer. May the Holy Spirit help us to remember what He taught and to pray even as He prayed."

# Picture Windows for Preaching

### Assurance

Many years ago an older lady left her home in Buffalo, New York, and sailed by boat to Cleveland to visit a daughter. A terrific storm arose, and the passengers feared they were doomed. They gathered to pray, but the older lady seemed quite unconcerned. She sat praising the Lord.

After the storm calmed, several of the passengers approached the woman to find out how she could be so serene in such terrible conditions. "Well, children," she replied, "it is like this. I had two daughters. One of them died and went home to be with Jesus in heaven; the other moved to Cleveland. When the storm hit, I wondered which one of my daughters I would visit first, the one in Cleveland or the one in heaven, and I was willing to see either one first."

Walter Knight, *Knight's Master Book of Illustrations* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1956), 14.



Compiled by Derl G. Keefer

Pastor,

Three Rivers, Michigan

### Giving

A government income tax inspector once visited a minister and asked to see his church. The pastor beamed with pride and pleasure at the request. The minister showed him the sanctuary, fellowship hall, the office complex, and anything else the tax man asked to see. The clergyman anxiously asked what he thought of the church.

"Well, to tell you the truth, I'm a bit disappointed," the tax man replied.

"After looking at the income tax returns of your parishioners and the amounts they claimed to have given, I had come to the conclusion that the aisles must be paved with gold."

Eleanor Doan, *The Speaker's Sourcebook* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1975), 110.

### Stewardship

Lawrence L. Durgin wrote: "Christian stewardship is the matching of gift for matchless gift: our life and its whole substance for the gift of perfect love. And though God's Son and His precious death are matchless—in the strange economy of God, our gift returned is made sufficient. My all for His all. Stewardship is your commitment: the asking of God to take you back unto himself—all that you have and all that you are."

Frank S. Mead, ed., *12,000 Religious Quotations* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1989), 427.

### Excuses

One young man told a friend that he did not wish to become a Christian. "Why not?" asked his friend.

He replied: "Several years ago I was selling from door to door and was invited into a house to show my product to the wife and children. While I was demonstrating, the husband came home, swore at me, and kicked me out. He was a professing Christian. From that time I decided never to have anything to do with religion."

His friend asked him, "Would you write down your reason in full and sign it?" With hesitation the young man did as asked. Then the paper was handed back to him with these words: "Keep this, and when you are asked for your excuse on the Day of Judgment, hand this to God."

Leslie Flynn, *Come Alive with Illustrations* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1990), 137.



# NEW COVENANT PRAYING

by James W. Tharp

John 16:22-28

December 15, 1996

## INTRO:

Our Scripture lesson today represents the last discourse of Jesus on the subject of prayer. Here He underscores the importance of prayer as it will take place in His followers after the Holy Spirit has come upon them. He shows that there will be a difference in the prayer life of a Christian who is filled with the Spirit. We might call this kind of praying "new covenant praying." Notice the four parts to this kind of prayer:

### I. We Come Approaching the Father

Jesus promised, "My Father will give you whatever you ask in my name" (v. 23). And again, "The Father himself loves you because you have loved me and have believed that I came from God" (v. 27). Jesus wanted His followers to understand that the Father is approachable so long as they come through the name of the Lord Jesus Christ. They need not fear that they are intruding or that they are out of place in coming before the Father. The author of the Hebrew Epistle wrote, "Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need" (4:16).

We are invited to the throne of grace. God expects us. Actually, we are commanded to come before the Father. "In him [Christ] and through faith in him we may approach God with freedom and confidence" (Eph. 3:12). Without apology we are free to approach our Heavenly Father at any time and on all occasions. No wonder the apostle Paul commanded Christians, "Devote yourselves to prayer" (Col. 4:2). And again, "Pray continually" (1 Thess. 5:17).

### II. We Come in the Name of Jesus

Even though believers would be able to approach the Father directly with their petitions, they would need to come in Jesus' name. Our standing with the Father depends on the merits of the Lord Jesus. Our relation with the Son becomes the ground for our relationship with the Father. When we are in Christ, we can come to the Father "in Jesus' name," meaning "in His stead," "by His authority," and "over His signature."

Jesus did not leave us powerless or helpless; He gave us His name. Giving us His name is like someone granting a designated person power of attorney, or the authorization to act in that person's absence but with the same authority that the one granting the authority would act if he or she were present.

### III. We Come in the Power of the Holy Spirit

Twice in this passage Jesus uses the phrase "in that day"—meaning the time when the Holy Spirit comes upon the disciples. What Jesus has been telling them about prayer will only be possible when they are filled with the Holy Spirit. Twice in the New Testament, believers are commanded to "pray in the (Holy) Spirit" (Eph. 6:18; Jude 20). What does it mean to "pray in the Spirit"?

A. Praying in the Spirit means that the Holy Spirit enlightens our understanding so that we can pray according to the will of God. We read in the Bible that "the Spirit intercedes for the saints in accordance with God's will" (Rom. 8:27). If we are out of tune with the indwelling Spirit, we might begin to pray amiss—"ask with wrong motives" (James 4:3). But if we listen to the Spirit, we can know how to pray and what to ask for. And we will receive it, just as Jesus promised.

B. Praying in the Spirit means that the Holy Spirit energizes our human spirit so that we do "not faint" (Luke 18:1, KJV). Fainting—"losing heart" (MOFFATT), giving up (NIV), quitting (TM)—has always been one of the great problems of believers when it comes to prayer. We need to tap the energy available from God's Spirit for this special task. Intercessory prayer is taxing, draining, and demanding. We need to ask for the anointing of the Holy Spirit so that we do not give up at this holy task. "Watch and pray," Jesus told the disciples on the night of His arrest, "so that you will not fall into temptation. The spirit is willing, but the body is weak" (Mark 14:38). But we can know the strength-giving Spirit for this vital ministry. Through Him, we can prevail in prayer.

C. Praying in the Spirit means that the Spirit will embolden our faith so that we will not be denied. Jesus gave two parables on bold praying (Luke 11:5-8; 18:1-8).

The first parable features a midnight mediator who shamelessly knocked at the door of one who had bread in order that he might feed his hungry guest before he lay down to sleep. The man who had the bread was not happy to hear the knock on his door. Jesus said that the man got up and gave him bread, not because he was his friend, but because of the man's *boldness!*

The second parable features a widow, the one person in the society of that day who had no clout. Her welfare depended on an ungodly judge who decided that he need not worry about hearing a woman's case. She was only a woman, a widow who had no husband or son to speak for her. But the woman shamelessly, boldly knocked at the door of his chambers every day. Finally, because of her boldness, the judge heard her case and ruled in her favor.

The kingdom of God depends on men and women who will give themselves to the Holy Spirit, who will in turn give them the boldness of Jesus to prevail with God for the salvation of souls, for revival in the Church, for whatever God is laying on their hearts.

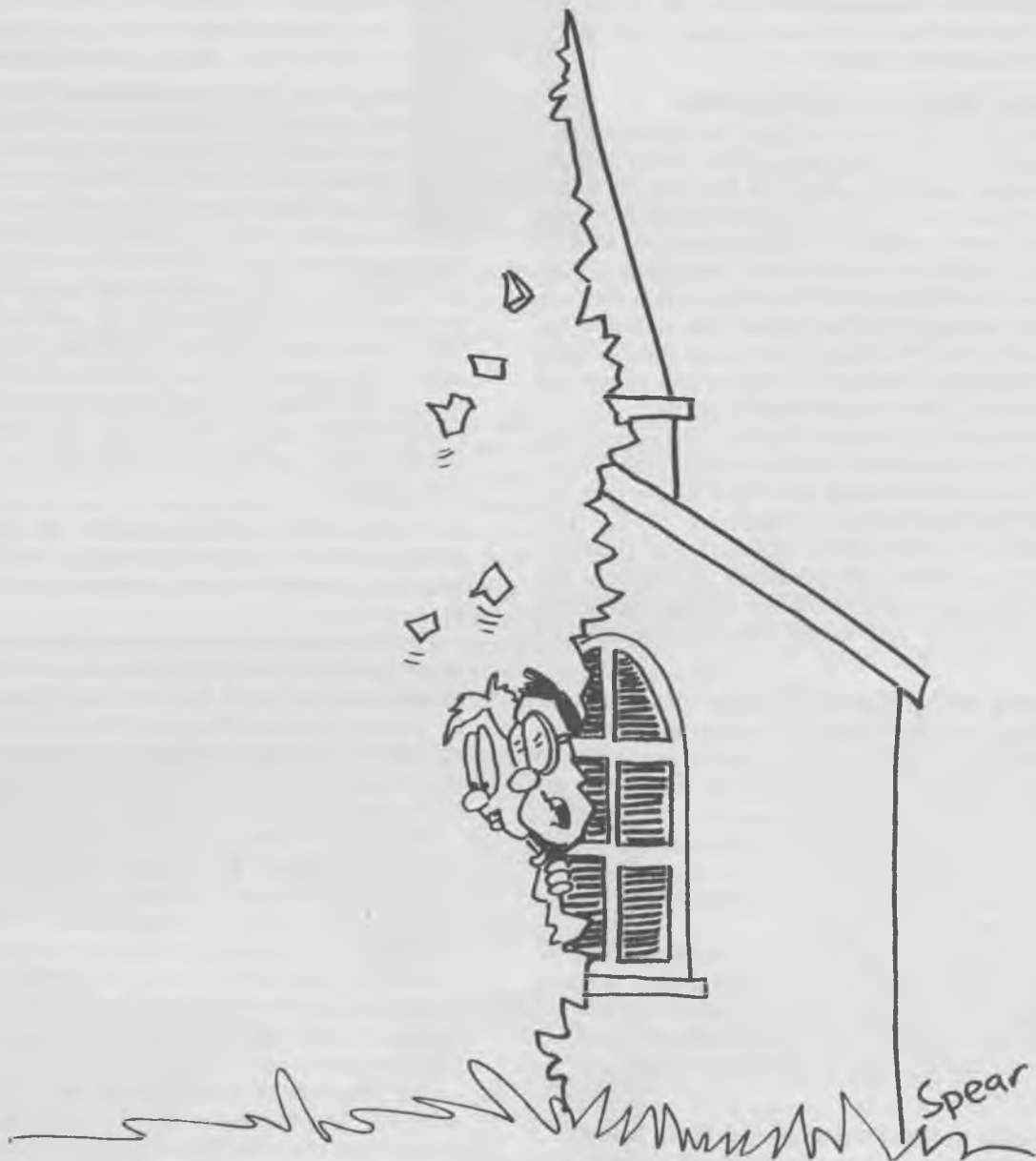
### IV. We Come in the Name of the Kingdom

Don't forget that Jesus' teachings on prayer in this lesson comes within the context of the Great Commission. When He gave this amazing prayer promise, "I tell you

the truth, my Father will give you whatever you ask in my name" (v. 23), He was not issuing a blank check by which we might indulge the flesh or satisfy our personal whims. He is speaking of building the kingdom of God. When He said, "I came from the Father and entered the world; now I am leaving the world and going back to the Father" (v. 28), He was telling the disciples that they were now in charge. They were to go into the world and to do as He had done, to pray as He had prayed, and to obey the Father as He had obeyed.

#### **SUGGESTED WORSHIP ORDER**

Call to Worship	Psalm 46
Hymns	"It Is Well with My Soul"
	"I Know Whom I Have Believed"
Prayer	
Announcements and Offering	
Special Music	
Message	"NEW COVENANT PRAYING"
Chorus	"Come, Holy Spirit"
Closing and Benediction	



"This is, by far, the worst church split I've ever seen!"



# AN URGENT PROMISE

by James W. Tharp  
Luke 11:13; Eph. 5:18  
December 29, 1996

## INTRO:

Jesus spent more time teaching His disciples concerning the coming of the Holy Spirit than on any other subject. Prayer was His second most prominent topic in training His disciples. Yet the two subjects are interrelated. The experiences of prayer and the renewing of the Holy Spirit in our hearts and lives are so interrelated that it is understandable if we grow a bit confused as to the cause and the effect. The truth remains that only praying hearts are filled with the Holy Spirit. It is equally true that only Spirit-filled hearts can prevail in prayer.

It is the baptizing fullness of the Holy Spirit that sets our hearts on fire to pray. Jesus knew this. Not only was He filled with the Spirit, but also He gave an urgent promise again and again concerning the fullness of the Spirit for His disciples. In Luke 11:13, Jesus makes it clear that the Father is delighted to give us the Holy Spirit if we will ask. In Eph. 5:18, the apostle Paul orders that Christians be filled with the Spirit. Pay particular attention to the text: "Be filled with the Spirit." Greek scholars insist that we note at least three important things about the structure of this command:

## I. The Instruction to Be Filled with the Spirit Is in the Imperative Mood

This means that being filled with the Spirit is not a mere human suggestion but a divine command. The Spirit-filled life is a must if we are to experience the Christian life; to stand against the temptations of the world, the flesh, and Satan; to worship in spirit and in truth; to know a meaningful prayer life; to witness for the Lord Jesus Christ to a lost world; and to live in readiness for the coming of the Lord.

Being filled with the Spirit is not simply an experience for pastors, evangelists, and Christian workers. God intends for every believer to be filled with the Holy Spirit. We must take this experience as seriously as the Lord himself takes it.

## II. The Instruction to Be Filled with the Holy Spirit Is in the Passive Voice

This means that it is an experience we allow (give consent to), and not a thing that we do for ourselves. Being filled with the Spirit is a divine operation within a believing human heart. It is not something we can hype up or create with our emotions. The Spirit's filling is a work of divine grace in our needy human hearts. As we go and place ourselves in the hands of a competent surgeon for the physical operation we need and make no attempt to perform it ourselves, so we go before the Lord and ask Him to fill us with His Holy Spirit. As we believe He does, it is done. Then we can go out to live in the fullness and power of His infilling. Our yielding to Him without reservation is the condition for His filling us beyond measure.

## III. The Instruction to Be Filled with the Spirit Is in the Present Perfect Tense

This means that the action will need to be repeated, that it is continual. A proper translation of the text might well be, "Keep on being filled with the Spirit."

In Acts 2:4 we read concerning the Upper Room believers that "they were all filled with the Holy Spirit" (NKJV). Then in 4:31, we read that the apostles were again "filled with the Holy Spirit." Just as the human body needs continual intakes of liquids, so our inner beings need refreshing renewal by the Holy Spirit.

The Bible gives several warnings against violating the Holy Spirit. "And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God" (Eph. 4:30). "Do not put out the Spirit's fire" (1 Thess. 5:19). The Holy Spirit purposes to be a burning fire in our hearts, not a smoldering influence. Grieving and quenching (KJV) the Spirit are not unpardonable sins, for most of us have committed these sins, either by suppressing His urgings, ignoring His leadings, or by allowing unkind words to fall from our unguarded lips. To grieve, quench, or ignore the Holy Spirit will mean that we must repent and seek Him to fill us anew. Even to simply ignore the Holy Spirit through spiritual laziness will require repentance and prayer for a new anointing.

I am convinced that the greatest need represented in the Church today is for Christians to be filled with the Spirit. If even a minority of believers get filled with the Spirit in the average congregation, that church will see revival. Revival might be described as the children of God experiencing a renewal of the fullness of the Holy Spirit.

May the Lord help us to give attention at this hour to this urgent promise to the Church! May the Lord give us an ear to hear what the Spirit is saying to this congregation about our need for the fullness of the Holy Spirit.

### SUGGESTED WORSHIP ORDER

Call to Worship	
Chorus	"Spirit of the Living God"
Hymn	"Breathe on Me, Breath of God"
Prayer	
Choir or Special Music	
Announcements and Offering	
Special Song	
Message	"AN URGENT PROMISE"
Closing	

### Creative Worship Ideas

#### Call to Worship

"On this last Sunday of 1996, I trust we will open our hearts to what the Lord wants to say to us about our relationship with His Holy Spirit. Wouldn't it be great if all members of our church body purposed in

their hearts to allow the Holy Spirit to melt, cleanse, fill, and use them. Can you freely sing with us . . ."

**Closing**

"We don't make judgments on one another as to who is and who is not filled with the Holy Spirit. That

is a distinction that we prayerfully make concerning our own hearts. If you are not filled with the Spirit, you can come and ask the Lord to fill you right now. It is an important move some of you need to make as we face the new year." (Sing again "Spirit of the Living God.")



DOMINIC  
PROCUPIO

# THE LAWS OF SPIRITUAL POWER

by James W. Tharp

Acts 1:8; Luke 11:13; Acts 5:32

January 5, 1997

## INTRO:

On this first Sunday of the New Year, we would do well to consider that God wants us to draw on His promised power throughout the next 12 months and, of course, for the rest of our earthly journey. We read in 1 Cor. 4:20: "For the kingdom of God is not a matter of talk but of power." Most Christians have gone through a power crisis when, at some point in their life, they failed because they were not in touch with the Holy Spirit as they should have been. Such experiences are costly, but they should teach us to depend ever and completely on the power of the Holy Spirit to assist us in every decision, every temptation, every assignment.

Today, I hope we can focus on some of the unvarying principles of Christian power. Spiritual power is unlike political power, social power, financial power, or personal power. Let us look at what we might call the laws of spiritual power by which Christians are to live. There are at least three.

## I. The Holy Spirit Is Our Source of Power

Jesus said, "I am going to send you what my Father has promised; but stay in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high" (Luke 24:49). One of the last things He told His disciples was, "But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you" (Acts 1:8). All that we are called to do must be done in the power of the Holy Spirit. The Christian life was never intended to be lived merely in our own strength and wisdom but in the power and wisdom of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit empowered Jesus to pray, to preach, to teach, to heal, to cast out devils, to perform miracles, and to finish His mission on earth by dying on the Cross for the sins of the world. The Holy Spirit enabled the apostles to proclaim boldly the gospel of Jesus Christ, to suffer gladly for His name's sake, to plant churches across the world, and to advance the kingdom of God. The continued spiritual awakenings across church history have come through men and women and young people who responded to the stirrings and cleansing power of the Holy Spirit.

Oh, how we need at this hour a fresh new realization of our need of the powerful movings of the Holy Spirit upon the people of God, especially here in North America! What we need is more than theology and education and organization can give us. As important as these things are, we need to understand what God meant when He said through the prophet, "Not by might nor by power, but by my Spirit" (Zech. 4:6).

## II. Our Access to the Holy Spirit Is Through Prayer

Jesus declared, "If you then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!" (Luke 11:13). Jesus himself was praying

when the Holy Spirit came upon Him (3:21-22). The apostles and believers had committed themselves to prayer before the Holy Spirit came upon them on the Day of Pentecost (Acts 1:14; 2:1-4). The apostles were in a great prayer meeting when they were again filled with the Spirit (4:31). When will we understand that God entrusts His Holy Spirit to praying hearts? He does not pour His Spirit out upon prayerless hearts and prayerless churches. If you are looking for Spirit-filled men and women, you will have to look among those who are given to prayer. If you yourself would like to be filled with the Spirit, you will have to come to terms with a life of prayer.

The discipline of prayer is essential to life in the Spirit. Prayer should be both a discipline and a delight. But in order to keep at meaningful prayer, we need to plan time for it, schedule around it, and prayerfully protect that special time when we secretly meet with the Father as Jesus described in Matt. 6:6.

If we follow Jesus, the apostles, and the men and women who have moved things for God, we will add fasting to our praying. This form of self-denial must become a part of our praying if we go into the dimension of power against evil of which Jesus spoke (Mark 9:29, NKJV).

## III. Obedience Releases the Power of the Holy Spirit into and Through Our Lives

When the religious rulers in Jerusalem arrested the apostles for having "filled Jerusalem with [their] teaching" about Jesus, they ordered them to speak no longer in the name of Jesus. Peter responded by saying, "We must obey God rather than men!" (Acts 5:28, 29). Then he added: "The God of our fathers raised Jesus from the dead—whom you had killed by hanging him on a tree. God exalted him to his own right hand as Prince and Savior that he might give repentance and forgiveness of sins to Israel. We are witnesses of these things, and so is the Holy Spirit, whom God has given to those who obey him" (vv. 30-32). Disobedient professors of the faith need not expect to receive the fullness of the Holy Spirit. The Lord gives the Holy Spirit to the obedient. The apostles went about doing the Master's business. They obeyed His Great Commission, and they were entrusted with the power of the Holy Spirit. The indolent, the indifferent, the disobedient cannot know such power.

Has the Lord spoken to us about something we are to do? Are we obedient? We would do well to take our Bibles and a good concordance and do a word study on "obedience." We would learn how important obedience is in the eyes of God. One reason we need to be obedient is so that we might walk in the fullness and power of the Holy Spirit. Obedience is one of those laws of spiritual power that we cannot afford to violate. If we have disobeyed at any point, we need to come to the Lord and seek His forgiveness, asking Him to fill us anew with His Spirit.

### SUGGESTED WORSHIP ORDER

Call to Worship  
Chorus "Come, Holy Spirit"  
Hymn "Holy Spirit, Be My Guide"  
Prayer  
Announcements and Offering  
Special Music  
Message "THE LAWS OF SPIRITUAL POWER"  
Closing

### Creative Worship Ideas

#### Call to Worship

"Let us in this New Year's service pray that the

Holy Spirit will touch our hearts in preparation for meeting the Lord's conditions for a life of power and victory across the coming months."

#### Closing

"Could there be some here today who are in violation of these important laws of spiritual power? You've been operating on your own and in defeat. You can come today and confess your need to the Lord. This could be the moment when God would fill you with the power of the Holy Spirit and prove His grace in your life. Let's sing again, 'Come, Holy Spirit, I need You . . .' Come and let Him fill you this morning."



"What do you mean you need a vacation?  
We thought hanging around with us **was** your vacation."

# HINDRANCES TO PRAYER

by James W. Tharp

Ps. 66:18

January 12, 1997

## INTRO:

God delights in hearing the prayers of His children when they are right with Him. But the Scriptures faithfully describe for us some conditions that hinder prayers. Today we look at some of those conditions. I can think of nothing compared to the joy of answered prayer. But it is not an encouraging situation when our prayers go on unanswered from month to month.

The Lord has left the Church His marvelous legacy of prayer. Prayer is the one weapon God has given the Church against which Satan has no defense, except to seek to prevent it or to disqualify the one who prays. Through the prayers of the saints, God will shape the Church; and, through a praying Church, He will touch the world. E. M. Bounds said, "The prayers of the saints are the capital stock of heaven by which God carries on His great work on earth." Charles Spurgeon defined prayer as "that slender nerve that moves the muscle of Omnipotence." And John Wesley said, "God will do nothing but in answer to prayer." So may the Lord help us to deal with hindrances to successful prayer.

## I. Unconfessed Sin Hinders Prayer

The psalmist rejoiced that God had heard his prayer, but he reminds us all what would have caused the Lord to not listen to him. He said, "I cried out to [the Lord] with my mouth; his praise was on my tongue. If I had cherished sin in my heart, the Lord would not have listened; but God has surely listened and heard my voice in prayer. Praise be to God, who has not rejected my prayer or withheld his love from me!" (66:17-20).

The apostle James wrote, "The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective" (5:16). Moffatt translates this, "The prayers of the righteous have a powerful effect." So, for a prayer to be effective, the one offering it must be righteous—not self-righteous, but right with God. The person who gets answers to prayer must know a righteousness that comes by faith in Jesus Christ. He must be able to approach the throne of grace on the merits of the Savior.

As children of God we must remain in fellowship with Him in order for our prayers to be heard. "If you remain in me and my words remain in you," said Jesus, "ask whatever you wish, and it will be given you" (John 15:7). Whatever comes between us and the Father must be confessed in order for us to be forgiven and cleansed (1 John 1:7-9). As we walk in fellowship with Him, we gain the confidence that whatever we ask, we know that He will hear us and grant us our request.

## II. Broken Relationships Hinder Prayer

In order for God to hear our prayers, we not only must be right with Him but also must be right with our brothers and sisters, our husbands and wives, and all others. The apostle Peter warns husbands that they must live

with their wives in respect and consideration "so that nothing will hinder your prayers" (1 Pet. 3:7). Husbands and wives must live together in mutual understanding and sensitivity, in honoring, cherishing, loving, and caring for one another. We cannot let anger build up and harsh words fly, then go on as though nothing has happened. When we come before the Lord, He simply will not hear us. So our differences must be settled; forgiveness must be sought and granted.

We learn from Jesus (Matt. 5:23-24) that if we go to worship and remember that someone has something against us, we need to go right away and seek to be reconciled. Are we careful to clear up offenses and tensions? Are we humble enough to assume some of the responsibility for allowing things to go on unsettled? We must not wait around in smugness and self-righteousness, expecting the offended person to come to us. Let us seek out those who feel we have hurt them. Let us prayerfully seek to be reconciled. If our going alone does not succeed, let us ask the Lord for a witness to go along and help make peace. We need to clear things up in order for the Lord to hear our prayers. Or, at least, we must do everything possible.

## III. Selfishness in Giving Hinders Prayer

"If a man shuts his ears to the cry of the poor, he too will cry out and not be answered" (Prov. 21:13). If we live for material things and fail to share our prosperity with the needy and with Kingdom interests, the Lord will close His ears to our prayers. We must not let our pocket-book get in the way of our prayer life.

Are we robbing God of the tithes that belong to Him? Let us not expect to get our prayers answered when we are withholding the sacred portion of our prosperity that belongs to the Lord.

## IV. Unbelief Hinders Prayer

James, the brother of Jesus, said that when we ask, we "must believe and not doubt, because he who doubts is like a wave of the sea, blown and tossed by the wind. That man should not think he will receive anything from the Lord" (James 1:6-7). Unbelief is always a spiritual problem. Behind it is almost always neglect of the Word and the dragging of our feet in disobedience. Obedience, searching the Scriptures, and devotion to prayer will purify our faith and get us in readiness to expect great things from God.

## V. Ignorance of God's Will Hinders Prayer

The Bible places the responsibility for knowing the will of God on the believer. The apostle Paul wrote, "Therefore do not be foolish, but understand what the Lord's will is" (Eph. 5:17). Ignorance is as much a handicap to the Christian as it is to the scientist. We need to go in search of the will of God with the same passion that the scientist tackles the mysteries of the universe. God will



reveal himself and His will to those whom He can trust. He hides himself from the carnal but reveals himself to the spiritually desperate.

"No eye has seen, no ear has heard, no mind has conceived what God has prepared for those who love him"—but God has revealed it to us by his Spirit. The Spirit searches all things, even the deep things of God. For who among men knows the thoughts of a man except the man's spirit within him? In the same way no one knows the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God. We have not received the spirit of the world but the Spirit who is from God, that we may understand what God has freely given us (1 Cor. 2:9-12).

We are not left to ourselves to figure out the will of God. If we prayerfully seek to know it, the Spirit of God will reveal to us God's will for us.

## VI. A Life Dominated by the Flesh Hinders Prayer

The Holy Spirit is faithful to convict the Christian of the fleshly life. As repentance takes place, cleansing comes, and a pure heart is realized. The apostle Paul wrote: "Therefore, brothers, we have an obligation—but it is not to the sinful nature, to live according to it. For if you live according to the sinful nature, you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the misdeeds of the body, you will live, because those who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God" (Rom. 8:12-14). In the following

verses, the apostle teaches that the Spirit in us will be free to cry, "Abba, Father." Such worship can be experienced by those who are cleansed from unrighteousness and made holy before the Lord.

Perhaps some things need to be cleared from our hearts this morning. As we close this service, meet the Lord here at the altar, and allow Him to help you deal with the hindrances to your fellowship with Him.

### SUGGESTED WORSHIP ORDER

Call to Worship	
Hymns	"Whiter than Snow" "O to Be like Thee"
Prayer	
Choir or Special Song	
Announcements and Offering	
Special Music	
Message	"HINDRANCES TO PRAYER"
Closing	"Cleanse Me"

### Creative Worship Ideas

#### Closing

Invite those who want to pray about hindrances in their lives to come to the altar.

## BEYOND BELIEF



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# A STRATEGY FOR PRAYER

by James W. Tharp

Matt. 6:9-13

January 19, 1997

## INTRO:

Jesus introduces the model prayer by saying, "This, then, is how you should pray" (Matt. 6:9). He is responding to the disciples' request to show them how to pray (Luke 11:1). Most scholars believe that Jesus emphasizes the paradigm and not liturgical form. This prayer is a marvelous thing to grasp, since it touches on every aspect of prayer for the believer. Our Lord never missed a significant thing in outlining how we should pray.

We see four aspects of prayer in this model laid out by the Lord Jesus: adoration; confession; petition; and intercession.

## I. Jesus Suggests Adoration

"Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name" (v. 9). The Lord would have us begin our praying by addressing our Heavenly Father in a personal way. Before Jesus came, Jewish circles tended to multiply titles (attributes) for God and to ignore the idea of the Fatherhood of God. Jesus' practice of addressing Almighty God as His Father and then teaching His followers to do so appeared presumptuous to the Jewish community. But His followers soon adopted the Lord's practice. The very first lesson taught in this paradigm adores God as personal and caring. However, the opening language of this prayer shows less concern with proper protocol in approaching the Almighty One than with establishing the truth of who He is. The burden of the first line of the prayer insists that God's name be "hallowed" (that it be understood that He is holy).

Every believer should daily exalt the name of the Lord with joy. We can do so in the secret place by rejoicing in one or more of the names by which God has revealed himself: Elohim ("The Eternally Powerful One"); El-Shad-dai ("The All-sufficient One"); El-elyon ("The Most High God"); El-olam ("The Everlasting God"); El-roi ("The God who sees me"); Jehovah ("The Great I AM"); Jehovah-tsid-kenu ("The Lord our Righteousness"); Jehovah-jireh ("The Lord will provide"); Jehovah-rapha ("The Lord our Healer"); Jehovah-nissi ("The Lord our Banner"); Jehovah-rohi ("The Lord our Shepherd"); Jehovah-shalom ("The Lord our Peace"); Jehovah-shammah ("The Lord is present"); Adonai ("Master and Lord"); Father ('*Abba*, Father!'); Jesus (Phil. 2:9-11).

## II. Jesus Suggests Confession

"Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one" (vv. 12-13). After the upward look of adoration and worship, we turn to the inward look of heart-searching and confession. John Wesley taught that the Christian should have a time of daily confession during which he prayed with the psalmist: "Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts. See if there is any offensive way in me, and lead

me in the way everlasting" (139:23-24). Wesley testified personally that, if he had to choose between Holy Communion and daily confession, he would choose daily confession.

It is important to understand that the daily heart-searching does not mean that we go on a "witch-hunt." As children of God, our sins are under the blood of Jesus Christ. We must not dredge up some sin that has already been confessed and put into God's "sea of forgetfulness." When we ask God to search us, we mean just that. It is really not our search. We only need to focus on whatever He shows us. But if the Spirit reveals some dispositional sin, we will not ignore it but will confess it and believe that we are forgiven and cleansed, as promised in 1 John 1:9. The inward look has the purpose of maintaining heart purity and allowing the Lord to prevent sin in our life by sharing with us something that is brewing in the subconscious, which can be dealt with radically before it produces disobedience.

This portion of the prayer also deals with temptation. It may appear that we are to pray for exemption from temptation. That is not likely, since our Lord and His apostles told us to expect trials and temptations throughout this life. But with the leadership of the Lord, we can be led in such a way that temptation shall not result in moral failure.

This portion of the prayer also appeals to the authority of God over Satan. We should pray to be kept from "the evil one." We are no match for his wiles and wit. Yet God is greater than Satan. In the third stanza of Martin Luther's "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God," we have this assurance:

*And tho' this world, with devils filled,  
Should threaten to undo us,  
We will not fear, for God hath willed  
His truth to triumph through us.  
The prince of darkness grim—  
We tremble not for him.  
His rage we can endure,  
For lo, his doom is sure;  
One little word shall fell him.*

## III. Jesus Suggests Petition

"Give us today our daily bread" (v. 11). "Daily bread" no doubt represents not just the food on our table but every area of human need. The apostle Peter urged believers to "cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you" (1 Pet. 5:7). It matters to Him about each and all of our needs. We need a time each day when we pour out to Him all that bothers us, frightens us, angers us, and concerns us in any way. Whether a financial, spiritual, physical, or personal need, our situation matters to the Lord. He delights in having us trust Him with every detail of our lives. Watch how He works it out for our good and His glory. Then we must not forget to thank Him for what He does.

#### IV. Jesus Suggests Intercession

"Your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven" (v. 10). Jesus suggests that we should engage in the priestly ministry of interceding for the advancement of the kingdom of God. God called us Christians "to be a holy priesthood" and "a royal priesthood" (1 Pet. 2:5, 9). We are called to be "kings and priests" (Rev. 5:8, 10, KJV) in our intercessory ministry. The Lord himself, our great High Priest and King of Kings, at the present time rules not with a scepter but through prayer. He is seated at the Father's right hand interceding (Rom. 8:34). He also calls us into His ministry of intercession. As He intercedes in heaven, so we should intercede on earth until His will is done "on earth as it is in heaven."

May the Holy Spirit align our praying with the Savior's intercession in heaven so that the kingdom of God is advanced wherever we live and pray. What a privilege we have to be enlightened and inspired by the Holy Spirit to pray as Jesus prays (see Rom. 8:26-27).

Let us take seriously this model for prayer that Jesus has given us. Ask the Lord to help you practice this approach in your prayer life even this week.

#### SUGGESTED WORSHIP ORDER

Call to Worship  
Hymns "Sweet Hour of Prayer"  
"Holy, Holy, Holy, Lord God Almighty"  
Choir or Special Song  
Prayer  
Announcements and Offering  
Special Song  
Message "A STRATEGY FOR PRAYER"  
Closing

#### Creative Worship Ideas

##### Closing

"This, then, is how you should pray," said Jesus. My prayer for you as you leave this service is that, before this Lord's day passes, you will have put into practice the manner of praying as outlined in the Lord's Prayer."



"Honey, I'll turn out the light as soon as I find that family illustration I'm looking for."

# SPIRITUAL WARFARE

by James W. Tharp

Eph. 6:10-18

January 26, 1997

## INTRO:

Spiritual warfare is of course a controversial subject. Extremists see a demon behind every bush. Skeptics have a difficult time accepting Jesus' view of evil and evil forces. Jesus Christ and His apostles often spoke in military terms and symbols when describing the conflict between the kingdom of God and the kingdom of darkness. They knew how easy it is for Christians to forget that behind the symptoms of the times rages an invisible war. The apostle Paul set forth the nature of the conflict in no uncertain terms: "For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms" (Eph. 6:12). This passage is a ringing call to arms. The victory that Jesus has already won in His death and resurrection must be defended in spiritual battle by believers who have on "the whole armour of God" (v. 11, KJV).

Most of the equipment outlined by the apostle are pieces for defense against the attacks of the wicked one through his minions. However, of the seven pieces of armor, the last two serve both defensive and offensive action.

## I. Soldier, Use the Belt of Truth (v. 14)

The first provision God has made to protect His children against the forces of evil is like the wide leather belt that the Roman soldier put on in preparation for battle. To tighten this belt indicated that the soldier was ready to go into battle. To loosen the belt meant that he was ready to go off duty. The belt of truth may be interpreted as the truth of the gospel—Jesus said, "I am the way and the truth and the life" (John 14:6)—or as "truth in the inner parts" (Ps. 51:6). The true believer not only has accepted Jesus Christ as the Truth of revelation but also seeks to display the consistency of character that springs from it: he or she is "speaking the truth in love" (Eph. 4:15). To ward off the lies and deceptions of the evil one, we must live with truth in our inner being. We must speak the truth with our loved ones and tell the truth on our income tax forms, on our job résumés, on our insurance claims, and on everything else. To win against evil means that we are kept from the dark spirit that captured Ananias and Sapphira as well as Judas. Wearing the belt of truth means that we have no place for pretense, hypocrisy, or deception in our lives.

## II. Soldier, Use the Breastplate of Righteousness (v. 14)

The breastplate that Paul had in mind covered the Roman soldier from the neck to the thighs, intended primarily for protecting the heart and other vital organs. Most Bible scholars believe this piece stands for uprightness and integrity of character. Yet it must be remembered that such moral rectitude stems from appropriating the

righteousness of Christ by faith. We do not seek or find our protection in our own works of righteousness but only in what Jesus has done for us and in us. The evil one is repelled when we rest in the righteousness of Christ alone.

## III. Soldier, Use the Gospel Boots (v. 15)

"... with your feet fitted with the readiness that comes from the gospel of peace." Once the belt was on and the breastplate in place, the Roman soldier was ready to put on his big army boots. His boots were studded with deep cleats to assure firm footing and traction. Boots were of primary importance whether in climbing, marching, or standing in hand-to-hand combat. One slip of the foot could mean death to the soldier. The meaning here shows that we are secure against satanic assaults regarding our salvation when we rely on the simple gospel of peace. No believer, despite his or her knowledge of the Bible, great reasoning powers, or persuasive abilities, can stand against the evil one if there is doubt about one's standing with God.

## IV. Soldier, Use the Shield of Faith (v. 16)

This protective shield consisted of two layers of wood glued together and covered with hide. The defender would maneuver this piece so as to ward off coming darts and arrows. Paul tells us here that by faith we "extinguish all the flaming arrows of the evil one" (v. 16). The enemy dipped arrows in poison and then ignited them before their release, intending to poison and infect on penetration. But the shield of faith instantly receives the horrible missile and immediately quenches its power to penetrate and spread. May God equip His people today with overcoming faith to quench all the evil that Satan hurls at the Body of Christ!

## V. Soldier, Use the Helmet of Salvation (v. 17)

This head covering served two purposes:

1. The helmet covered the most vital part of the human body, the head—the control center for the human organism. It protected the brain, the eyes, and the ears. In a sense, this covering protects the believer against the "arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God, and . . . take[s] captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ" (2 Cor. 10:5).

2. The helmet displayed the symbol of the emperor in whose name the soldier went out to war against the enemy. So Christians need to invoke the name of our mighty Commander in Chief by whom we wage war. We must withstand the evil one in Jesus' strong name!

## VI. Soldier, Use the Sword of the Spirit (v. 17)

Paul leaves no room to wonder what he means here—it is "the word of God." The Holy Spirit always works through the Word. No one ever won a battle against the

evil one apart from the power of the Holy Spirit working through the Word.

Read the account of the temptation of Jesus (Matt. 4:1-11), and note the withering effect of God's Word on Satan as it came out of the mouth of our Spirit-inspired Lord. It was like a sword thrust and put the devil to flight. It works the same way today in us and through us. As our minds and hearts are filled with the Word and as the Holy Spirit cleanses and fills us, our word of rebuke to Satan will have a ripping effect on him and his kingdom of darkness. Christians need to learn how to "pray the Scriptures against evil and the evil one," but this must be done in the power of the Holy Spirit in order to be effective.

### VII. Soldier, Pray in the Spirit (v. 18)

"And pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests." Twice our New Testament commands us to "pray in the Spirit:" here and in Jude 20. Clearly Paul believes the Holy Spirit desires to have a role in the believer's prayer life so that he isn't praying merely on his own—in his own wisdom, by his own strength, for his own purposes. Already January 26, 1997, we have learned what it means to "pray in the Spirit." But we repeat here a threefold definition:

1. The Spirit enlightens us so that we are enabled to pray according to the will of God.
2. The Spirit energizes us so that we do not faint.
3. The Spirit emboldens us so that we will not be denied.

Yes, the Church and the individual Christian are called to take a stand against "the wiles of the devil" (v. 11, KJV). Not only are we to defend ourselves against evil's attacks on us, our loved ones, our communities, and the Body of Christ, but also God has empowered us to wage war against darkness and "demolish strongholds" (2 Cor. 10:4).

<b>SUGGESTED WORSHIP ORDER</b>	
Call to Worship	
Hymns	"A Mighty Fortress Is Our God" "Fill Me Now"
Choir or Special Prayer	
Announcements and Offering	
Message	"SPIRITUAL WARFARE"
Closing	"His Name Is Wonderful"



"Pastor Coley makes a third unsuccessful attempt to swallow the 12 ounce gristle discovered in the Petenbrink sisters' famed Sunday pot roast."



# THE PRAYER OF ADORATION

by James W. Tharp

Matt. 6:9

February 2, 1997

## INTRO:

It seems best to begin our main prayer period of the day with our attention on God instead of on ourselves, our family, our church, or the world. Jesus said, "When you pray, say: Our Father in heaven, hallowed be Your name" (Luke 11:2, NKJV). We should consider how beginning our prayer time with these words is meaningful.

## I. Take the Godward Look

Just a few verses before our text, Jesus had taught the disciples to "go into [their] room [and] close the door" when they prayed (v. 6). He assured them, "Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you." In order to know God, who is unseen, we must get alone with Him and close out the world. If we fail to clear time with God in secret, He simply will not reveal himself to us as He would like. Perhaps He watches to see who will seek Him out and come apart from the world in order that He might reward them with a sense of His presence.

Read the testimonies of our spiritual heroes of church history. You will discover that God truly reveals himself to those who plan a secret time with Him.

## II. Pray That God's Name Be Kept Holy

Hallowing God's name produces powerful results in our own hearts and lives:

1. God's character is revealed by His names.
2. Our needs are revealed in His names.
3. Our salvation is revealed in His names.
4. We come to know God better as we praise Him with the use of His names.

When we celebrate God's glorious being with the use of His names, it is not so urgent that we use the Jewish pronunciation ("El-Shaddai") as it is that we declare Him to be "The All-sufficient One."

## III. Offer Praise and Thanksgiving

Although often used interchangeably, praise and thanksgiving describe different aspects of our worship of God.

Praise celebrates *who God is* ("Maker of heaven and

earth, the sea, and everything in them—the LORD, who remains faithful forever" [Ps. 146:6]).

Thanksgiving expresses our gratitude for what He has done ("You turned my wailing into dancing; you removed my sackcloth and clothed me with joy, that my heart may sing to you and not be silent. O LORD my God, I will give you thanks forever" [Ps. 30:11-12]).

As we celebrate the glorious being of God in words and song, something transforming and exciting takes place within us by the work of the Holy Spirit. It is good to be alone with God and experience this transformation—just the Lord and me!

### SUGGESTED WORSHIP ORDER

Call to Worship	
Hymns	"More Love to Thee" "His Name Is Wonderful"
Choir or Special Song	
Prayer	
Announcements and Offering	
Message	"THE PRAYER OF ADORATION"
Closing	"I Exalt Thee"

### Creative Worship Ideas

#### Closing

"What do you think might happen in our personal lives if most of us here today would purpose to lay aside a few minutes each day to simply worship God in praise and thanksgiving? This is the burden of my heart as your pastor. I'd like to assure you that this coming week I'm making this a priority in my life. I'd like to pray a special prayer now in closing for all who would slip up a hand, indicating that you'll join me in this commitment for this coming week. Of course, I trust it will be so meaningful that you'll keep on doing it every day for the rest of your life."

Lead in a prayer of blessing on all who indicated that they want to have a meaningful time with the Lord in adoration every day.

# THE PRAYER OF CONFESSION

by James W. Tharp

Matt. 6:12-13

February 9, 1997

## INTRO:

After a good season of praise and thanksgiving to Almighty God, quiet your heart and take an inward look with the Lord. We should pray with the psalmist: "Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts. See if there is any offensive way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting" (139:23-24). This should not be a routine examination; it should be done in sincerity before the Lord. Let us consider the manner in which we should approach this experience of heart-searching.

## I. Look Inward with God

This inward look is not something we do on our own. Since we are inviting the Lord to search our hearts, we should be willing to look at only what He shows us. Nor should we expect to find the "offensive way[s]" on our own. The Lord searches the heart and knows it: "The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure. Who can understand it? 'I the LORD search the heart and examine the mind, to reward a man according to his conduct, according to what his deeds deserve'" (Jer. 17:9-10).

The inward look is not a witch-hunt. We know the Lord is not going to dredge up our sins that are already under the blood of Jesus. Nor should we. The inward look is an exposure of our hearts and lives to the Lord, allowing Him to show us anything He wants to reveal.

Whatever He reveals we will confess. The instant we confess it, we know that we are forgiven and cleansed (1 John 1:9).

## II. Maintaining Fellowship with God

The condition for maintaining fellowship with God is walking in the light (1 John 1:5-7). The inward look allows us an opportunity to see anything that might be hindering our fellowship. Whatever the Lord shows us—an unguarded word spoken in haste, neglect of a sacred duty, or an unhealthy attitude toward someone—it all needs to be owned and confessed immediately. The wisdom of the Lord determines what and how much to reveal to His

children. He never puts on us more about our condition than we can handle. Certainly what He shows us, He is ready and willing to forgive when we ask Him to do so.

## III. Keep Your Heart Pure

"Blessed are the pure in heart" (Matt. 5:8). We must not see the need of daily confession as a practice that is in conflict with our teachings on holiness of heart and life. We are saved and sanctified, but that does not mean that we have been fixed up like a machine to never need fine tuning or additional repairs. We are not machines; we are free agents. We can veer off course, turn to the right or the left, and "fall short of the glory of God" (Rom. 3:23). In keeping with God's grace, we undergo times of heart-searching to understand our need to make corrective measures, to return wholeheartedly to His will and His way.

In fact, the inward look can be a means of preventing sin in our lives. God can and does deal with us before sin becomes a part of our behavior. He prefers preventing sin to forgiving and cleansing it. But the good news is that if we do sin, "We have one who speaks to the Father in our defense—Jesus Christ, the Righteous One. He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins" (1 John 2:1-2).

Anything that falls short of God's will and God's Word should be confessed and forsaken in order to know His purifying grace.

### SUGGESTED WORSHIP ORDER

Call to Worship

Hymns

"Higher Ground"

"O to Be like Thee"

Choir or Special Song

Prayer

Announcements and Offering

Special Song

Message

"THE PRAYER OF CONFESSION"

Closing

# THE PRAYER OF PETITION

by James W. Tharp

Matt. 6:11

February 16, 1997

## INTRO:

I don't know how the misunderstanding got into our thinking that good Christians do not bother the Lord with their problems and needs. Even though He knows our needs before we tell Him, He still wants us to bring our cares to Him. Jesus taught us to pray for our needs: "Give us today our daily bread." "Daily bread" represents more than simply the food on our tables; it covers every human need. The Bible says, "Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you" (1 Pet. 5:7).

## I. Tell God Your Needs

To be human is to be needy. Having need of something is simply a part of our limitations as members of the human family. No matter how financially secure, regardless of how healthy in body, we run into a need every now and then. It is good to have a daily time with the Lord when we can unburden our hearts about what concerns us—something of a financial, health, family, or relational nature. It does not matter. Whatever concerns us concerns Him. He has a way to meet that need. We ought to learn how to unburden our hearts to the Lord before worry sets in. When we tell Him about a need, we need to have the relief of that care, knowing that He will take care of it.

Christians can live life free of worry—and they should! Worry over health, finance, or family problems militates against faith. When a matter goes into worry, we should know that we are not trusting the One who wants to supply all of our needs.

Practice telling God your concerns daily. It is humbling. It brings relief. It will result in faith. Don't leave anything out. Tell Him all.

## II. Claim His Promises

In telling God our needs, we should also prayerfully search the Scriptures until we find a promise that we believe the Holy Spirit is highlighting just for us in our situation. How often this has been exactly what I have needed! I hang on to promises such as "And my God will meet all your needs according to his glorious riches in Christ Jesus" (Phil. 4:19). Or, "The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not be in want" (Ps. 23:1). Or, "Fear the LORD, you his

saints, for those who fear him lack nothing. The lions may grow weak and hungry, but those who seek the LORD lack no good thing" (34:9-10).

One of the titles for our glorious God is "Jehovah-jireh": "The Lord will provide."

## III. Delight in His Will

Take everything to the Lord. Cast all your cares on Him. Claim His promises, but allow Him to be the Sovereign One. Praise Him that He will supply your need according to His will and in His time: "Trust in the LORD and do good; dwell in the land and enjoy safe pasture. Delight yourself in the LORD and he will give you the desires of your heart. Commit your way to the LORD; trust in him and he will do this: He will make your righteousness shine like the dawn, the justice of your cause like the noonday sun. Be still before the LORD and wait patiently for him" (Ps. 37:3-7).

### SUGGESTED WORSHIP ORDER

Call to Worship	Luke 12:22-34
Hymns	"Great Is Thy Faithfulness"
	"Savior, like a Shepherd Lead Us"
Choir or Special Song	
Prayer	
Announcements and Offering	
Special Song	
Message	"THE PRAYER OF PETITION"
Closing	

### Creative Worship Ideas

#### Closing

"The Lord does not want a single one of us leaving this service today feeling worried about anything. Before we go, we ought to lay our burden on Him. Trust Him to bring to pass the answers we need, and go in peace. Some of you may wish to come and linger a moment for prayer. But let us go from this service trusting the Lord to free us from worry and the cares of life. May we live in clear faith in our Heavenly Father the whole week long."

# THE PRAYER OF INTERCESSION

by James W. Tharp

Matt. 6:10

February 23, 1997

## INTRO:

Appropriately in our last message of the series on prayer we shall focus on intercession. Jesus taught us to pray, "Your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven." Such praying includes "The Kingdom Look." It is priestly business here on earth that is of such interest in heaven.

## I. Take Note of Jesus' Unfinished Work of Intercession

The work of Christ as our great High Priest might be divided into two parts: atonement and intercession.

Jesus' work of atonement is complete: "But when this priest had offered for all time one sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God" (Heb. 10:12).

Atonement was complete, but not intercession: "But because Jesus lives forever, he has a permanent priesthood. Therefore he is able to save completely those who come to God through him, because he always lives to intercede for them" (Heb. 7:24-25). Also, we learn that Christ "is at the right hand of God . . . interceding for us" (Rom. 8:34). He is the faithful Intercessor on our behalf.

## II. Take Note of Our Call to Priestly Intercession

While we had no part in Jesus' ministry of atonement, except to believe in His shed blood for our sins, we are called to participate with Christ in His unfinished work of intercession: "As you come to him, the living Stone—rejected by men but chosen by God and precious to him—you also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ" (1 Pet. 2:4-5). "To Him who loved us and washed us from our sins in His own blood, and has made us kings and priests to His God and Father" (Rev. 1:5-6, NKJV).

The One who is the great High Priest and King of Kings has called us to a priestly ministry and made us "kings and priests." Such a dual title given earthly intercessors underscores that we are to take authority and rule in prayer with the Lord Jesus so that God's will shall "be done on earth as it is in heaven." Jesus is ruling in heaven, not with a scepter but with prayer. We are to rule with Him here on earth. The Holy Spirit reveals to us His will for prayer so that we pray, not according to our will, but according to His.

## III. Take Note of Prevailing Prayer

Jesus gave two parables on boldness for prevailing prayer: Luke 11:5-8; 18:1-8. The Holy Spirit would embolden our hearts today for praying for the salvation of the lost, for seeing revival in the church, and for all other matters requiring intercessory prayer.

Perhaps in these days, the Lord is returning His Church to the reality of the priesthood of all believers—a tenet of the Reformation that has been lost in too many areas of the Church. We all are priests, called to join the great High Priest in His ongoing ministry of intercession. All around us are people and causes worthy of prayers and tears and loud cries, such as our Lord engaged in while on earth (see Heb. 5:7).

Each of us, as we engage in intercessory prayer, must look to the Holy Spirit for enlightenment, energy, and boldness for this priestly ministry. Let us not forget: "The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective" (James 5:16).

### SUGGESTED WORSHIP ORDER

Call to Worship	Luke 18:1-8
Hymns	"I Am Thine, O Lord" "Sweet Hour of Prayer"
Choir or Special Song	
Prayer	
Announcements and Offering	
Special Song	
Message	"THE PRAYER OF INTERCESSION"
Closing	"A Charge to Keep I Have"

### Creative Worship Ideas

#### Closing

"God forbid that, in that day when all believers stand before the judgment seat of Christ, some of us would be found as falling short in our priestly responsibilities of intercessory prayer. May this very hour we ask God to strengthen our hearts, our minds, and our wills for a new commitment to this sacred duty. Let us repeat the second stanza of 'A Charge to Keep.' Let us make a definite surrender of our hearts to the Lord for our priestly duties this very week toward loved ones and the unsaved. 'To serve the present age . . .'"

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# *Highpoint*



# REMEMBER WHEN INFORMATION CAME THE OLD-FASHIONED WAY?

Preparing sermons meant clearing a space on the desk of the study, lining up your Bible, favorite commentaries, book of illustrations, and maybe, the Greek New Testament and Thayers' Lexicon. While many preachers still use this means of sermon preparation, times have changed. Now, through the Internet, tools to help you preach effectively week in and week out, are available for immediate downloading to your personal computer. Bible software, illustrations, and now through Highpoint Preaching Resources, your computer can become a virtual library for sermon preparation.

Only recently, we thought we were approaching state of the art transmission of information when we made Highpoint Preaching Resources available to pastors in diskette form. The changes in technology make accessing this information as easy as a telephone call. By accessing the Nazarene Home Page on the World Wide Web (WWW), you can pull down Highpoint Preaching Resources for easy manipulation on your personal computer. When combined with access through your favorite Bible software such as LOGOS, you can do the

word studies, customize the illustrations, and configure the application to your local needs. Follow these four simple steps:

Step One: Using any online service, connect with <http://www.nazarene.org>

Step Two: Page down to Church Growth Resources, looking for Pastoral Ministries.

Step Three: After clicking on Pastoral Ministries, select Highpoint Preaching Resources.

Step Four: Download to your personal computer. When you have completed your download, log off, and begin manipulation of the data to suit your needs.

Where is technology leading us? That's a good question. While we know there are any number of possible answers to this question, we believe it's the wrong question. The right question is "Where is God leading us . . . and how can we use technology responsibly as His servants to accomplish His mission and task?" We hope you will discover the potential technology offers clergy for effective use of limited scarce resources, viz., their time for study of the Word in preparation for its proclamation.

## HOW TO USE THIS MATERIAL

The material that follows will provide you with an array of helps designed to assist you as you deal with the theme How to Live a Holy Life. Here is a sermon outline to get you started in thinking about the way you're going to organize the sermon around the central theme. Included here are textual references, a sermon strategy, some illustrations, along with some presentation options you may want to explore.

Preaching is still an exciting part of the Christian ministry. With today's changing scenarios, even more options are open to creative preachers willing to accept the challenge of relevance. The change occurring in preaching is very similar to those occurring in the field of education. Educators no longer see themselves strictly from a pedagogical perspective. Rather, they see themselves as partners, coaches, facilitators, catalysts, and so on. Does this sound too trendy? Not if one recognizes the implications behind the notion of the believer's priesthood. Evangelicals have always understood the role of the Holy Spirit in leading believers to truth. Preaching is one genre among others that God uses in this process. The KJV translated 1 Cor. 1:21, "For after that in the wisdom of God the world by wisdom knew not God, it pleased God by the foolishness of preaching to save them that believe." The NIV, however, translates the same verse to read: "For since in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not know him, God was pleased through the foolishness of what was preached to save those who believe."

The Sunday evening event, according to the research conducted by Church Growth Division, has become a rich, diverse, and exciting hour in many churches. While not all pastors have discovered that mix of variety that sustains interest and provides much-needed vitality, others have shared their successes in the form of ideas. *The Highpoint concept emphasizes communication that*

*connects with the needs of the congregation.* In this array of resources, you will find much to help you combine effective preaching, focused content, and interest-sustaining variety. Of course, you are the one who will determine the final configuration. This is why you will find a list of potential tools useful in developing the text of the sermons on this series.

One thing for sure, the expectations surrounding Sunday evening services are in a state of change. Whatever is happening at your church on Sunday evening needs to be examined in light of your mission, purpose, vision, and objective. Strategic planning can help you mine the profits of ministry geared to the living realities of your situation. Just as David could not fight in King Saul's armor, no one expects you to use Sunday night just exactly as someone else down the road. Sunday nights at your place—what a possibility for creative pastors to open up both the Word and new methodologies in ways truly meeting the needs of your people.

### STRATEGIC POSSIBILITIES FOR WORKING WITH THE TEXT

Below are listed areas of opportunity to explore in terms of developing variety in your approach to the text. These represent wide areas, or genres, of opportunity. Within the category, you may find stimulus for further development, refinement, or expression. The goal is to create a living variety that energizes Sunday evenings at your place!

#### Leadership Training

1. Prepare a course syllabus for the content to be covered in the summer series sermons.
2. List all scriptures to be covered, the Highpoint of each title, and a key descriptor from the Strategy for each title.

3. Make up special notebooks or participant handbooks. Follow adult education techniques for offering this material. If you need help or assistance in this area, check out Jerry Stubblefield's book *Church Ministering to Adults* ([Nashville: Broadman Press, 1986], 318 pp.). (PA083-411-5166, \$11.99)

### Spiritual Formation

1. After meeting together for a time of informal worship and community building, break up into your previously designated formation groups.
2. Look at the suggestions in the book *The Upward Call* (PA083-411-5166, \$11.99, available through Nazarene Publishing House) for ideas on developing formation groups. These, in many instances, will be similar to Wesley's small groups.
3. Use the material developed in the outline as meat for discussion in the groups.
4. If you do not use small formation groups, design your service around the intentionality of spiritual formation. Here are some suggestions:
  - a. Select appropriate music using the Nazarene hymnal *Sing to the Lord*.
  - b. Highlight the reading of Scripture sections by individuals during the service.
  - c. Take time for spiritual progress reports from audience members.
  - d. Use an overhead projector or newsprint as you teach biblical concepts.
  - e. Assign "homework," assign daily Bible readings, and, if feasible, assign "partners in formation," individuals with whom members make contact during the week to discuss God's leadership in their endeavor to walk more closely with Him.

### VARIETY IDEAS—HIGHPOINT SERMON SERIES HEBREWS SERMON SERIES, David J. Felter, Editor

#### Introduction

There are essentially 10 areas of potential variation in thinking about pastoral preaching components. These are

not new, but rather include all the fundamental concerns or domains critical to congregational life and spiritual formation. The preacher must hold these areas up to the proclamation event as a prism to the sun. Through the separate, yet indisputably related planes, the light is given opportunity to reflect in ways that possess unique power to illuminate our common life together.

In thinking, therefore, about the creation of variety ideas for the Highpoint Sermon Series, these 10 areas form the backdrop for development. The 10 areas include:

- Fellowship
- Music
- Participation of the People
- Preaching/Teaching as Event
- Prayer
- Koinonia
- Sacrament
- Training/Teaching/Coaching
- Body Life (Performance Versus Participation)
- Alternative Worship Styles (Experimentation)

In this series of sermon-related variety ideas, attempt will be made to link the idea with an example or derivative of one or more of these 10 areas. Not every sermon will carry ideas from all 10 domains, nor will all domains be represented equally in the suggestions. Indeed, the suggestions are offered in the context provided in order to spark your thinking regarding the identification of additional domains unrepresented by the ones described here.

Here is your chance to be creative. The craft of preaching deserves our very best efforts. Apart from the anointing of the Holy Spirit, our preaching is superficial and shallow. It is the unmistakable presence of the Spirit upon the preacher that makes the sermon a message. The variety ideas represent consideration of the related domains inherent in the context in which we preach. Rather than their being limits to your expression, may they become catalysts by which your creative thinking is sparked to develop that particular vehicle that provides transportation of ideas and concepts in recognizable formats for your people.

## WELCOME TO HIGHPOINT

The challenge of the Book of Hebrews presents an interesting dilemma to the preacher interested in mining its mother lode. Looming large on the landscape are the hills, valleys, canyons, and crevices of historic Judaism with its rituals, metaphors, and traditions.

To increase the degree of technical difficulty, we aren't exactly sure of the author's identity. Indeed, some of the fascinating details inherent in this book stretch the paradigms of Western thought. Without doubt, however, its trustworthiness as a part of the canon is not disputed, nor its message disbelieved. Even this witness, however, does not dismiss the challenge of articulating its truths to 21st-century listeners.

B. W. Hambrick, pastor, Ephrata Church of the Nazarene, Ephrata, Pennsylvania, has written a sermon series taken from Hebrews. Not only has he developed usable outlines for preaching, but also he ventured forth into the heart of this book, mining and extracting its lode in preachable nuggets. Pastor Hambrick is first of all a preacher of the Word. His doctoral dissertation focused on his interest in combating clergy burnout. He has com-

bined an interest in counseling with his love for the Word in the pastoral setting.

With this edition of *Highpoint*, we introduce a new format for its delivery. The *Preacher's Magazine* is a valuable partner in an array of delivery systems providing clergy practical tools for conducting ministry. It is also a forum by which the salient issues of culture, ecclesiology, and Christian thinking are examined and discussed. We are happy to present *Highpoint* in this creative environment.



B. W. Hambrick

# THE SUPERIOR CHRIST

## Introduction to the Series

- A. Hebrews is a presentation of Christ's superiority.
- B. He is presented as superior to prophets, to angels, to Moses, to Joshua, and so on, since His sacrifice and promises are superior.
- C. Much of the book is expositional and sermonic in form.
- D. Its central theme is "Jesus Christ the same yesterday, and to day, and for ever" (13:8, KJV).

# SUPERIOR TO ANGELS

Heb. 1—2:4

## I. GOD SPEAKS (1:1-2a)

- A. The opening thoughts of Heb. 1 are like a double-barreled shotgun. They are a salvo that blasts into the conscience with amazing force and lasting impact (vv. 1-2). His having spoken is a glorious truth and reality. (Read Ps. 8:3-4.)
- B. God has spoken in the OT through the prophets, and now through His Son.
  - 1. As expressed by the Samaritan woman, "I know that Messiah is coming. When he comes, he will explain everything to us." Jesus declared, "I who speak to you am he" (John 4:25-26).
  - 2. Because He has spoken, we have answers to our questions, solutions to our problems, and hope for the end.
- C. His is a completed and perfect revelation—the revelation of the New Testament.
  - 1. "In these last days he has spoken . . . through his Son" (v. 2, TEV).
  - 2. "He humbled himself and became obedient to death—even death on a cross!" (Phil. 2:8).

## II. GOD SPEAKS THROUGH THE INCARNATE SON (vv. 2b-3a)

- A. There are six facts presented here about the incarnate Son:
  - 1. He is the "appointed heir of all things." (See Ps. 2:8.)

- 2. "Through whom he made" all things. (See John 1:1-3.)
- 3. "The Son is the radiance of God's glory." God's love, grace, mercy, long-suffering, and goodness are seen in Him.
- 4. "The Son is . . . the exact representation of his being," or as the KJV says, "The express image of his person."
- 5. He is the Sustainer of "all things by his powerful word." The atoms that comprise the physical universe are held in place through His infinite power.
- 6. Jesus stooped to redeem that lost creation and "provided purification for sins."

## B. Purification for sin was His most significant act in the redemptive process.

- 1. The thought is this: Jesus was the One who offered a sacrifice to the Father for sin and was the Sacrifice that was offered.
- 2. All other sacrifices had only been stopgap, imperfect sacrifices placed against one's account until the perfect Sacrifice was offered.

## C. The emphasis in the Word of God is not so much on what wicked men did to Jesus, as on what Jesus did for man (Matt. 20:28; John 10:18).

## III. JESUS OUR VICTORIOUS LORD (1:3e—2:4)

- A. His work was finished—"he sat down" (v. 3e).
- B. His position is fixed—"at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven" (v. 3f).
- C. His rank is unexcelled—"He became as much superior to the angels as the name he has inherited is superior to theirs" (1:4).
- D. The results are in: (1) His place is established as the Son of God (v. 5). (2) Before Him alone must the angels fall down and worship (v. 6). (3) His place is established forever. "But about the Son he says, 'Your throne, O God, will last for ever and ever'" (v. 8). (4) His character is fixed. "But you remain the same, and your years will never end" (v. 12). (5) His victory is already won. His enemies will be His footstool (v. 13).
- E. The important question is "How shall we escape if we ignore such a great salvation?" (2:3).

**CONCLUSION.** There was a faithful Christian father who was recently called to the jail to come and bail out his son who was caught in possession of drugs. When he had gone to a number of jails, he realized that it was a prank call. It was now three in the morning. He knew

where his son would be. He went to the building that was vacant except for the addicts. Stepping over bodies who had freaked out on drugs and were scattered in sleep all over the floor, he looked until he finally found his son. He, too, was asleep. He bent down and kissed him.

Several months later the son called to tell his dad he was straight and wanted to talk to him. Sure enough, the boy was OK and had a great testimony. Finally, the son could stand it no longer. He asked his father, "Aren't you going to ask me how come, or what happened?"

"No, I figured you'd tell me if you wanted me to know."

"I do," replied the boy. "You remember the night you bent down and kissed me? I wasn't asleep. I got to thinking if you through your faith in God could love me that much, how much must He love me?"

Jesus has bent down and kissed us! Some are asleep, but others have felt the tenderness of His kiss of love and are ready now to turn to Him who loves them so.

## Variety Ideas for Sermon 1

### Music:

- 1. Select songs that focus on Jesus. Let the audience know that the music will focus on Christ alone.

### Participation:

- 1. Have your children's group participate in the service.
- 2. Make angels' wings for costumes for the kids to wear.
- 3. Let them do some music in tonight's service.

### Training/Teaching/Coaching:

- 1. Give every person in attendance a pocket New Testament.
- 2. Contact the American Bible Society for reasonable prices for these items.

# SUPERIOR TO MAN

Heb. 2:5-18

## INTRODUCTION

- A. What a paradox! In last week's message we looked at Jesus as "Superior to the Angels"; this week we look at Him as "Superior to Man." How clearly it is stated in Scripture: "You made him a little lower than the angels" (v. 7). Why this turnaround?
- B. The writer of Hebrews deals with the temporary humiliation of Christ as the voluntary humiliation of Jesus as a necessary step in the exaltation of humanity.
- C. The kingdom of God was given to Christ (1:13; 2:8).
1. We should remember that God had already given dominion of this world to man in Gen. 1:28.
  2. That gift was cursed (Gen. 3:17-19). Man was banished from the Garden of Eden to work the ground from which he had been taken. Pain and death entered the human scene because of man's sin.
  3. Cursed and in sin, "What is man that you are mindful of him, the son of man that you care for him?" (v. 6).

## I. A LOOK AT MAN GIVES US SOME IDEA OF WHY GOD INVESTED SO MUCH IN MAN

- A. What is man?
1. Man is totally symbiotic at birth. He can do nothing for himself and is totally dependent on others for his survival.
  2. Man has the greatest potential for growth, development, and productivity of all the species.
  3. Man has the highest level of communication skills. He is able to express himself to the point of revealing his deepest thought, to teach his language and skills to others, to record his ideas for future generations, and much more.

4. Man exhibits a wider range of differences than any other species.
5. Man can manipulate, and be manipulated by, his environment.
6. Man has the ability to reason and gain insight.
7. Man has the highest ability of all creation to make decisions that determine his life and destiny.

- B. Are these reasons enough? No. The only reason that makes any sense is found in John 3:16—it is His love.

## II. CHRIST ACCEPTED A TEMPORARY POSITION OF IMPOTENCE (vv. 8c-9)

- A. Christ became the true Savior of men, or as *The Message* calls Him, "Salvation Pioneer."
1. The Son of Man became our Savior. It is He through whom and for whom all things exist (v. 10).
  2. He brought many sons to experience glory (v. 10a). He was made perfect, that is, completed the process through His suffering, so that "both the one who makes men holy and those who are made holy are of the same family" (v. 11a).
  3. Our righteousness and holiness are through Him. "Jesus is not ashamed to call them [us] brothers" (v. 11b).
- B. Christ's condescension frees us from shame. Being ashamed is a terrible feeling. A few years ago a friend of mine was arrested. The shame of that arrest alienated him from his family, his job, his church, and virtually every other relationship he had. When he went to court, the judge threw it out with the words, "How did something as ridiculous as this ever get into a courtroom?" It didn't matter, the damage was done; his shame was too entrenched. Although it has been years now, there are many relationships that have not been renewed. He won't let them be renewed; he is too ashamed.
- C. It is through His suffering that we are set free from our sin. We are allowed to be holy even as He is holy (v. 11a, NKJV).

## III. WE PROCLAIM HIM IN THE PRESENCE OF THE CONGREGATION AS THE LIVING, LIFE-CHANGING SAVIOR

- A. It is because of *who He is* and because of *what*

*He did*—His suffering—that draws you and me to put our trust in Him (v. 13a).

- B. He completely shares in our humanity, that "he might destroy him who holds the power of death—that is, the devil" (v. 14).
- C. I am reminded of the great benediction of Eph. 3:20-21:

Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen.

CONCLUSION: Think of it: "Both the one who makes men holy and those who are made holy are of the same family. So Jesus is not ashamed to call them brothers." Since the converse of this would be true, that is, *He would be* ashamed of *those who are not holy*, the question of necessity would be, "Is He ashamed of me or of you?"

## Variety Ideas for Sermon 2

### Music:

1. Invite a special group to sing for this service.
2. Have a mini-music concert.

### Participation/Fellowship:

1. Emphasize Family Night.
2. Have family-oriented fellowship following the service.
3. Make the evening "Adopt a Family" Night.
4. Have table fellowship following church, making sure that everyone is included in a "family."

### Body Life:

1. Ask volunteers to share a story of encouragement based on how someone stood by them, gave them assistance, met a special need, and so on.

## SUPERIOR TO MOSES

Heb. 3

**INTRODUCTION.** The readership of this anonymously penned letter was comprised of converted Jews who were in a no-man's-land, unwanted by their families, hated by the Romans, and judged as misfits by the Gentile believers around them.

A. The author's purpose in writing to them (and us) was twofold: one, to convince them that their superior Savior was worthy of their trust; and two, to warn them that they must guard against drifting and neglecting the salvation God had purchased for them through Christ.

B. If faith is in Jesus Christ, we not only have a Savior sitting at the right hand of the Father in heaven but also have a Savior who stands by our side here on earth, even in the loneliest and darkest hours.

### I. FLOW OF TRUTH (vv. 1-6)

A. Realizing what Christ has done (read 2:17-18)—“Fix your thoughts on Jesus” (3:1).

B. Jesus the Priest is our Bridge Builder, giving us immediate access to God.

### II. CHRIST THE APOSTLE AND PRIEST IS SUPERIOR TO MOSES

A. The marks of His superiority:

1. His message was of himself, not of another.
2. Spiritual things, not only ceremonial things.

B. The differences between the two remain:

1. Christ was the “faithful as a son over God’s house” as well as its Builder (vv. 6, 3), while Moses was only a servant.
2. While both remain faithful in God’s sight, the responsibility is Christ’s. For with ownership comes responsibility.

3. Finally, Moses was faithful in preparation, while Christ was faithful in fulfilling.

### III. WARNINGS AGAINST THE FAILURES OF MOSES’ DAY (vv. 7-19)

A. “Do not harden your hearts . . .”

1. “As you did in the rebellion, during the time of testing in the desert” (v. 8).
2. When they refused to enter Canaan because “we became like grasshoppers in our own sight, and so we were in their sight” (Num. 13:33, NASB).
3. When you wanted to “go back” to Egypt (Num. 14:1-10). (Their death in the wilderness was an answer to their own prayer!)

B. Remember His word, “See to it . . . that none of you . . . turns away from the living God” (v. 12).

1. This is a personal responsibility.
2. “Keep thy heart with all diligence; for out of it are the issues of life” (Prov. 4:23, KJV).

C. “Encourage one another daily . . . so that none of you may be hardened by sin’s deceitfulness” (v. 13).

1. We have a very real responsibility to one another.
2. Sin is deceitful.

**Illustration:** The shrublike vine that grew at the corner of Ted’s house bloomed beautifully for two years. This year the blooms were smaller, and it produced thistles that were very sharp and painful. He tried to pull it up but couldn’t. He tried to pull it up with the tractor, and it broke a nylon rope.

3. The Word is our only effective weapon against the work of Satan.

**CONCLUSION:** Has the deceitfulness of sin taken its toll in your life? His promise is ever the same: “According to your faith be it unto you” (Matt. 9:29, KJV). Let it never be said of us, as it was said of the towns near the Lake of Galilee (near where Jesus was reared), “He did not many mighty works there because of their unbelief” (13:58, KJV).

## Variety Ideas for Sermon 3

**Music:**

1. Feature music by your orchestra/band or groups.

**Alternative Worship Styles:**

1. Ask participants (in advance, of course) to bring their favorite Christian tape or CD.
2. Play the music over your sound system.
3. If possible, display the words, asking the audience to sing along.

**Koinonia:**

1. Give volunteers opportunity to share ministry updates.
2. Feature lay ministry testimonies of how God is using His people through the Sunday School, church, and workaday world.

**Training/Teaching/Coaching:**

1. Show the video clips from Sunday School Ministries’ video, *Sunday School, A Place Where Somebody Cares*.



## SUPERIORITY OF SABBATH REST

Heb. 4:1-13

INTRODUCTION. Our generation has more free time than any generation before us. Yet we stay so busy, none of us ever seem to get everything done. And few ever feel they have time to rest. We think of rest as a trip to the beach, half-dozing in front of the TV, or sleeping late on a Saturday morning.

Clearly, something is not working. North Americans take more Valium and other sedatives than ever. Sleeping pills and stomach medicines give away the fact that we are not a people who are able to relax, much less rest.

The rest described in Heb. 4 is potent, powerful, and proven. Interestingly enough, we do not even have to take a day off work to obtain it. We don't have to spend a dime or go anyplace. Hebrews presents this rest; it is superior to all other rests.

### I. PAST FAILURE, PRESENT POSSIBILITY

- A. We are reminded of the failure of the Israelites to enter this rest.
- B. We are reminded that "since the promise of entering his rest still stands . . ." (v. 1)
  1. The Israelites, at Kadesh Barnea, refused to enter, and died in the wilderness.
  2. But when they died, the promise of God for His rest did not die with them; it stands.
- C. What is this rest?
  1. In the Greek it means "to cease, to stop something."
  2. It is a reference to the rest of God, which took place after His creation of man on the sixth day.
  3. Therefore, it is a blessed rest, which reflects completion. Someone else is in charge. God is at the helm; we need not struggle, wrestle, or worry.

4. It refers to something to be entered. It is "God's specially provided resting space."

### II. HOW DO WE ENTER THIS REST? (Look again at verses 2-3.)

A. There is a formula for this rest hidden in these verses:

Hearing + Faith = Resting

B. Entering this rest requires a right attitude. The prayer of the hymn writer Philip Doddridge says:

*Now rest, my long-divided heart;*

*Fixed on this blissful center, rest—*

*Nor ever from my Lord depart,*

*With Him of every good possessed.*

C. Entering this rest requires the right timing (see v. 7); the urgency is "today" (Christ—Matt. 11:28-29).

### III. THE AVAILABILITY OF THIS REST (vv. 9-10)

A. The rest God entered "remains" for us.

1. Our place is assured, like a reserved seat at the stadium.
2. Failure may cost us and the next generation of Christians (v. 11).

B. Rest begins when the absolute truth of the Word is applied (v. 12). The Word is living.

1. The Word of God is the Bible.
  - a. Living
  - b. Active
  - c. Sharp
  - d. Penetrates
  - e. Divides or judges

C. The Word is omnipotent, all-knowing (v. 13). Nothing is hidden from Him, and we must *face it now or face it later!*

CONCLUSION. Out of all this we may surely say, (1) God wants us to have His rest. (2) His rest is still possible. (3) To have His rest, we must submit to spiritual surgery, because His greatest desire is for us to be whole, holy, and healthy in spirit.

## Variety Ideas for Sermon 4

Music:

1. Make this "New Music Night."
2. No song more than 15 years old may be sung tonight.

Koinonia:

1. Meet with your NWMS Council to make this a World Mission Update hour.

Participation:

1. Bring the children to the front for a Kids' Story Time. You tell them a story.
2. If you have puppets, use them.

## SUPERIOR HIGH PRIEST

Heb. 4:1—5:10

INTRODUCTION. November 10, 1989, will be recorded for all time in the history of humanity as the date when the wall separating the East and the West fell. What a sight! East and West Germans climbing to the top of the wall that had divided their city, their countries, and their lives since 1961. A young man and woman walked from the wall to extend a rose to the Communist guards, who only hours before would have either killed or arrested them. There is no greater picture of humankind than the picture of free people!

It was true in the church when after the tyranny of the Dark Ages, people of faith stood their ground and demanded religious freedom.

The principles upon which these individuals stood were three: (1) no sacrifice but Calvary, (2) no priest but Christ, and (3) no confessional but the throne of God.

By demanding and gaining these, they not only brought on the Protestant Reformation but also made religion personal, dynamic, and individual. Christ alone is the superior High Priest who can provide our spiritual freedom.

### I. ENTERING SPIRITUAL REST (4:1-2)

- A. Our goal: Rest in the Lord. "The promise of entering his rest still stands" (v. 1). To rest is to turn over to Him our worries and anxieties, to know that salvation comes only from Him and through Him.
- B. Our need: To call on the Lord (4:16).
- C. Our High Priest offers (4:14-16)
  - 1. Ability
  - 2. Sympathy (Ps. 103:13-14)
  - 3. Understanding
  - 4. Grace

Idea: Quote Charles Wesley's "Arise, My Soul, Arise"
- D. Our hope: Responding to the Lord, "So that we

*Highpoint*

may receive mercy . . . in our time of need" (v. 16).

### II. JESUS' MINISTRY AS PRIEST (5:1-3)

- A. The qualifications for priests
  - 1. He must represent God (vv. 1-2).
  - 2. He offered sacrifices for sin (v. 3).
  - 3. He must be called by God (v. 4).
- B. The example of the OT priest was Aaron. His ordination to the priesthood is recorded in Exod. 28:1-3, 43.

### III. CHRIST, OUR HIGH PRIEST (5:4-10)

- A. God never intended it to be a permanent institution.
- B. Jesus replaced the human priesthood.
- C. The comparison of Aaron to Jesus shows Jesus as the superior High Priest (5:5-9).
  - 1. From Levi—from God
  - 2. Many sacrifices—one Sacrifice
  - 3. Temporary assistance—eternal salvation
- D. Jesus is the final Priest! He is the final Sacrifice. He was God-appointed.
- E. He is Priest after the order of Melchizedek.
  - 1. Both a king and a priest
  - 2. He appears alone.
  - 3. He did not pass His Priesthood on to a successor.

CONCLUSION: What does this mean for us? What do we receive in Christ?

- 1. We need a priest who is fair, unbiased, not discriminating between male or female, slave or free, Greek or Jew (see Gal. 3:28).
- 2. We need One who is Priest forever in the presence of God. We don't need a priest who changes with the times, takes days off, or keeps regular hours.
- 3. We need to be accepted or presented before God himself.

*Between the exhilaration of Beginning . . .  
and the satisfaction of Concluding  
Is the Middle time  
of Enduring . . . Changing . . . Trying . . .  
Despairing . . . Continuing . . . Becoming  
Jesus Christ was the Priest of God's Middle Time  
Between Creation . . . and Accomplishment.  
Through Him God said of Creation,  
"Without mistake."*

*And of Accomplishment  
"Without Doubt."*

*And we in our Middle Time  
of Wondering and Waiting*

*Hurrying and Hesitating  
Regretting and Revising  
We who have begun many things  
and seen but few completed . . .  
We who are becoming more . . . and  
less . . .  
through the evidence of God's  
Middle Time*

*Have a stabilizing hint  
That we are not mistakes,  
That we are irreplaceable,  
That our being is of interest,  
And our doing is of purpose,  
That our being and our doing  
Are surrounded by our Priest, Amen.*

—Tim Hansel, *Eating Problems for Breakfast* (Dallas: Word Publishing, 1988), 177

## Variety Ideas for Sermon 5

Music:

- 1. Use Promise Keepers-style music.
- 2. If you have a tape, let the audience sing along.

Body Life:

- 1. Feature men during a testimony time, sharing how God is helping them break down the walls in their lives.

Fellowship:

- 1. If you have a men's fellowship group, have them host the church in a time of all-church fellowship following tonight's service.

## SUPERIOR DEVELOPMENT

Heb. 5:11—6:9

**INTRODUCTION.** Having already presented the superiority of Christ in so many different ways—superior to angels, superior to man, superior to Moses, providing a rest superior to all other rests, and the superior High Priest—the writer turns almost parenthetically to the question of why some lives did not seem to be moving forward as they should.

### I. PROBLEMS OF GROWTH IN SOME (5:11-14)

The scene here is a tragic one. It looks more like an elementary school than a church.

#### A. “You are slow to learn” (5:11).

1. The NKJV says, “You have become dull of hearing.”
2. We become slow because we fail to grow up as we grow older—a 10-year-old acting like a 2-year-old.

#### B. “Though . . . you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you the elementary truths of God’s word all over again” (5:12a).

1. Like the third grader who was ready to quit school. Mom asked what kind of work he would do. “Teach second grade” was his reply. You are immature (v. 12b) and “still an infant” (v. 13).
2. You need the preventative prescription, “solid food” and training (v. 14).

### II. THE NUDGE (or kick) TO GET ON WITH THEIR SPIRITUAL GROWTH (6:1-3)

#### A. “Leave the elementary teachings about Christ” (6:1a).

1. There is no need to remain there; this is but the foundation of the building.
2. “Go on to maturity” (v. 1b).
3. Don’t get hung up on church policy and preferences or prophecy, but go on to *maturity* (“perfection,” KJV). This is the joy of living out our lives in the fullness of the Holy Spirit, and the joy of serving daily in the power of the Holy Spirit.

### III. THE INHERENT DANGERS IN THIS ARRESTED DEVELOPMENT (6:4-9)

#### A. It is a most serious problem. (Read 6:4-9.)

B. The enlightened are the susceptible. The weight of this danger: “It is impossible . . . if they fall away, to be brought back to repentance.” The reason they cannot come back to God: “Because to their loss they are crucifying the Son of God all over again and subjecting him to public disgrace.”

#### C. The Son of God is crucified all over again.

#### D. There is only limited hope.

#### E. “We are confident of better things in your case—things that accompany salvation” (v. 9).

**CONCLUSION.** This is a serious passage! God clearly is holding us accountable for our own growth, for how we react to what we have seen and heard, for how we produce the fruit of righteousness for Him, and for how we are viewed in His sight!

## Variety Ideas for Sermon 6

### Music:

1. Choose worship music, that is, music that focuses on God, His Word, His power, His saving acts, and so on.

### Body Life:

1. Encourage personal as well as corporate worship in tonight’s service.
2. Emphasize prayer by including multiple times for brief prayers in the service, including a corporate recitation of the Lord’s Prayer.

### Sacraments:

1. Observe and celebrate Holy Communion at some point during tonight’s service.

## CHRIST—SUPERIOR TO MELCHIZEDEK

Heb. 6:13—7:28

**INTRODUCTION.** As we think of Christ in light of His superiority to the greatest priest of them all, I am reminded of an article carried by the AP wire service that talked about the standards of production required for a progressive economy. It pointed out the need for quality, but not for perfection. Why? Because a perfect product would not wear out. It cited the Model T Ford, which was among the first of the assembly line automobiles. The Model T Ford was easily operated, relatively inexpensive to own, and easy to keep repaired. Its greatest weakness, according to the article, was its strength. In fact, it worked so well that at the time of the writing of the article, of the 1 million of the Model T Fords built, there are 800,000 of them still in operation, although they have been antiques for many years!

The Model T Ford is an example of the first product becoming one of the best products ever built. Melchizedek was superior to all the priests who were to come, and now Christ is superior to Melchizedek.

- I. WHO IS MELCHIZEDEK? Mentioned in only four places in the Bible, yet worthy for the writer to make a comparison with Christ. To understand Heb. 7, we must have some understanding of who this person with the strange name really is.
  - A. His account is found here, in Gen. 14:18, in Ps. 110:4, and in Heb. 5:6, 10.
  - B. We know Melchizedek as:
    1. King
    2. "Ruler of Righteousness"
    3. Establishing a high standard of goodness
    4. A priest
  - C. He was of God.
    1. Totally unique
    2. Human, yet distinct from humanity
    3. Given power by *what* he was rather than by who he was

4. Eternally the same
- II. THE GREATNESS OF MELCHIZEDEK IS AS REPRESENTATIVE OF GOD'S HOLY PRIESTHOOD (vv. 4-10)
    - A. Abraham saw Melchizedek as greater than himself:
      1. Paid tithes to him
      2. Received blessings from him
      3. Accepted himself as less than Melchizedek
    - B. Melchizedek became greater than all the Aaronic priests.
      1. No descendant can be greater than the ancestor.
      2. Abraham's acknowledgment made him the greatest ever.
  - III. THE INSTITUTION OF THE PRIESTHOOD OF JESUS (vv. 11-21)
    - A. While the order of Melchizedek had all the permanent essentials of priesthood:
      1. The power of intercession
        - a. Receiving the tithes
        - b. Offering the blessing
      2. The power of character
      3. The power of continuity
    - B. The perfect Priesthood of Christ represents the same permanent idea of priesthood as Melchizedek.
      1. Bringing people into the very presence of God
      2. Personal character
      3. Continuous relationship
      4. Spiritual restoration and personal victory
  - IV. MELCHIZEDEK WAS ABOVE AARON; CHRIST IS ABOVE MELCHIZEDEK
    - A. The Aaronic priesthood was human judgment vs. Christ's Priesthood, which offers the inward renewal.
    - B. Aaron condemned; Christ offers a better way (John 3:17).
    - C. The Aaronic priesthood was of Levi. Melchizedek was priest of the Most High God, and Jesus himself was the Sacrifice.

**CONCLUSION.** Welcome Him as your Priest. The Melchizedek of this new era on whom the fullness of the Godhead rests. For truly He is a "priest for ever after the order of Melchisedec" (6:20; 7:17). He knows not

only where we're coming from but also where we're going. He alone is able to ensure that we get there, but in terms of our spiritual maturity and our eternal security.

If you're separated from God by what seems to be an unbridgeable chasm of sin, I have good news for you. You can reach God and know Him through Jesus. He is the permanent Pontifex. He is the perfect High Priest. He is the Bridge over troubled waters of sin that separates us from God.

### Variety Ideas for Sermon 7

Music:

1. Focus on praise to God in tonight's music.

Alternative Worship Styles

1. If you normally do not use a praise team, prepare volunteers for leadership in the music of tonight's service.

Sacraments:

1. Plan a baptismal service for tonight.

## THE SUPERIOR COVENANT

Heb. 8:1-13

INTRODUCTION. This is a high-tech age—isn't it amazing! Pocket calculators, TVs; compact discs; personal computers that can record, sort, and store as much material as would be in a good-sized library in a space less than 3" square. It's unbelievable!

There's one problem. Six months after the hardware is developed for a new product, it becomes obsolete, either replaced by a better model or by the next generation of upgrades.

Today we're going to consider Christ's covenant from Heb. 8. And the most exciting thing about this new covenant is that, unlike today's technology, it will never become obsolete. Never!

### I. CHRIST'S PRIESTHOOD: BETTER THAN THE FORMER

#### A. During the old covenant . . .

1. Priests represented sinners before God.
2. Sin was forgiven and those who had sinned became cleansed through the blood of innocent animals.

#### B. The effect was never final.

1. The blood the priest poured on the altar could atone for only the sins of the moment.
2. Jesus' blood atoned once for all for the sins of the world. (10:11-12)

#### C. Christ's priesthood is better:

1. Because He is sinless,
2. Sacrifice offered once,
3. He is the perfect Son of God forever (7:26-28).

### II. CHRIST'S COVENANT: BETTER THAN THE OLD (See 8:1-2)

"The point of what we are saying is this: We do have such a high priest, who sat down at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in heaven, and who serves in the sanctuary, the true tabernacle set up by the Lord, not by man" (vv. 1-2).

#### A. The word "true" means "genuine" or "real," but

1. Not real as opposed to false, but real as opposed to a copy or representation.
2. Example, a true dollar bill as opposed to a photocopied one, not a true dollar bill as opposed to a counterfeit.
3. Christ's ministry is the true tabernacle (8:2; 9:24).

#### B. There is a new arrangement between God and man: before, an earthly priest; now, a heavenly priest represents us in heaven.

### III. WHY IS THE NEW COVENANT BETTER?

- A. First, the new covenant is a reality, not a representation. (Read vv. 3-5.)
- B. Second, this new covenant is faultless, not faulty.
- C. Third, it offers internal motivation and power instead of external lists (v. 10a).
- D. Fourth, it is based on a close relationship instead of one that is fearful and distant (v. 10b).
- E. Fifth, it provided confidence and assurance instead of insecurity and uncertainty (v. 11).
- F. Sixth, it emphasizes forgiveness and mercy instead of failure and wrong (v. 12).

CONCLUSION: If you are imprisoned by guilt and failure, step forward! He is ready to forgive your sins and remember them against you no more.

The bad news is that we've all made a mess of our lives and fallen short of the glory of God. The good news is that Jesus can take our brokenness and turn it into wholeness (1 John 1:9).

That's grace. That's amazing grace. And that's a sweet sound to ears that have heard only hard accusations from the stone tablets of the Law.

## Variety Ideas for Sermon 8

### Music:

1. Emphasize participation in music. Be creative in terms of getting people involved in music through special groups, soloists, and so on.

### Participation:

1. Ask volunteers from all age-groups to share a brief story of God's love and grace in their lives.
2. Interview new believers. (Goal: speed up the assimilation process.)

### Training/Teaching/Coaching:

1. Show slides of the Holy Land. These can be your slides, rental from libraries, or purchased for the occasion. (For more information, contact Rev. Larry Morris, editor, *Illustrated Bible Life*, Sunday School Ministries, Kansas City.)

## SUPERIOR SALVATION

Heb. 9

INTRODUCTION. Have you ever had to deal with your conscience? It can be a brutal battle. Our consciences, while not always perfect, when properly trained with values of right and wrong, become the strongest defenders of truth. They take us to task, hold us accountable, take the fun out of our pleasure, and keep us awake at night. They can be a powerful force.

The Hebrew people were busy trying to find external means to deal with the internal problems of unrest and disobedience. The writer points to the problem and assesses it, to show the total completeness of Christ's superior salvation.

### I. THE EXTERNAL SYMBOLS OF THE FIRST COVENANT

- A. The Tabernacle, its layout and its worship (vv. 1-5)
  - 1. Temporary, portable structure
  - 2. Rigid regulations (vv. 6-10)
- B. These were a poor substitute for the real presence and power of Jesus Christ. (Read vv. 11-14.)
  - 1. His sacrifice is ever new.
  - 2. His blood is ever cleansing.
  - 3. His resurrection is ever declaring His permanent victory over sin.

### II. THE VALIDITY OF HIS BLOOD (vv. 14-28)

- A. There is power in the Blood (v. 14).
- B. The Blood satisfied three objectives:
  - 1. Covenant (vv. 15-21)
  - 2. Forgiveness (v. 22)
  - 3. Salvation (vv. 23-28) *full and free*
- C. Quote "Nothing but the Blood."

### III. THE SEAL OF THE RESURRECTION (v. 28)

- A. Christ's resurrection is a declaration over sin and death.
- B. Why is His salvation a superior salvation? Because it deals not only with the acts of sin but the *cause* of sin—the inner rebellion, the root of all sin.

CONCLUSION. The concluding words of this chapter are words of warning: "Man is destined to die once, and after that to face judgment" (v. 27). But Christ waits "to bring salvation to those who are waiting for him" (v. 28). Let's read Heb. 9 again.

## Variety Ideas for Sermon 9

### Music:

1. Select music that focuses on the great symbols of Christian faith.
2. Music that emphasizes Christ's blood; baptism; the Family of God; Christ, the Light of the World; and so on.
3. Talk about the significance of these symbols.

### Participation:

1. If your church building offers an illustration of such symbols, architecturally or in the furnishings, ask a teen to share a report on the meaning and significance of such symbolism.
2. Coach the teen presenter by helping him or her develop the report.

### Koinonia:

1. At the conclusion of tonight's service, offer opportunity for the breaking of bread as a closing ritual of Christian community.



## SUPERIOR SUFFICIENCY

Heb. 10:1-25

INTRODUCTION. Self-righteousness is the antithesis of trust in God, even in a child of grace. It always produces moral blindness. It is easy for anyone, whether converted or not, to be impressed with personal virtue and respectability. One fortifies this sense of personal decency by contrasting oneself with others. In this contrast the self subtly selects the ground of comparison so as to be favorable to its own position. If one is short on charity, one can at least talk of one's rugged honesty. If one is weak on honesty, one can point to one's courage. If courage is not a strong point, one can refer to one's faithfulness to spiritual exercises. If one has been a notorious sinner, one can point to one's penitence and the complete break with old vices. But all this leads to a vicious kind of moral blindness, the most serious flaw in the respectable citizen who sees no need of saving or sanctifying grace.

Self-righteousness is so unnecessary in light of all that has transpired. For:

### I. THE WRITER REMINDS US THAT ALL THAT HAS GONE BEFORE IS THE SHADOW OF WHAT HAS COME

- A. What shadow? The law: a system of rules, rites, and sacrifices that were only a reminder of sin (v. 3).

### II. THE POWER OF JESUS' SPIRITUAL SACRIFICE (vv. 11-18)

- A. The reality of all that is ours in Christ Jesus
1. Power to change lives
  2. Free them from the law
  3. Free us from the cause of sin
- B. His work was so complete "he sat down at the right hand of God" (v. 12).

### C. His superior Sufficiency

1. Jesus offered one sacrifice for all sins (v. 12).
2. By His power "he has [past tense—already done] made perfect forever those who are being made holy" (v. 14).
3. He makes our hearts perfectly clean. The result? Phil. 2:13, TLB.

### III. THE OLD TABERNACLE HAD A "KEEP OUT" MESSAGE. THE NEW COVENANT INVITES US TO ENTER WITH CONFIDENCE (vv. 19-25).

#### A. Our Privilege (vv. 19-21)

#### B. Our Duty (vv. 22-25)

1. To ourselves—"Let us draw near to God . . ." (v. 22a)
  - a. Prayer
  - b. Purity—"having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience and having our bodies washed with pure water" (v. 22cd).
  - c. Profession—"Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful" (v. 23).
2. Our duty to one another—"Let us consider how we may spur one another on" (v. 24). Spiritual blessings are never for personal use; they are for mutual edification. We lose the value of blessings we keep to ourselves, and we keep those we give away.
3. Our duty to the church. "Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching" (v. 25).
  - a. The church is a spiritual body. We are responsible to the body for godliness, loyalty, and faithfulness.

CONCLUSION. We have all this going for us. The path has been well established. There can be no enjoyment of spiritual privilege without meeting these minimal spiritual requirements.

## Variety Ideas for Sermon 10

### Music:

1. One popular Christian song features words that communicate the message of hopefulness regarding the mission of the present in terms of those who are yet to come.
2. Let tonight's music reflect the same hope by asking volunteers to suggest songs that encourage faithfulness. Ask, "What song would you sing if you wanted the church to know that you value and practice faithfulness?"

### Prayer:

1. Have an "open altar" time for participants who want to spend time sharing their needs with our great High Priest, the Lord Jesus Christ.

### Body Life:

1. Have a healing service for needs of the body, soul, and spirit.

## SUPERIOR FAITH

Heb. 11 (Read early in service: Heb. 11:1-40)

Text: Heb. 11:1-6, 39-40

INTRODUCTION. Quite by accident (I was trying to get to Arlington National Cemetery) I drove past the Vietnam Memorial. There before me was the black marble with the names of men and women who died in Vietnam etched in the stone. What a foreboding sight! To me it was as if I had inadvertently invaded a very private moment, as I momentarily watched as people stood reading down the list of names, finding their loved one.

I get much the same feeling as I read the 11th chapter of Hebrews. While I share in the heritage of this great list of those of faith, I almost feel I am violating their private, intimate, and holy relationship with God to dissect, examine, scrutinize, and familiarize myself with the truth that exudes from every word, phrase, and account.

Yet, in the same way that the Vietnam Memorial is placed in the park as a reminder to the nation of those who fought and died, the names of the faithful are placed here for us to examine, to scrutinize, and to learn.

### I. THE MEANING OF FAITH (vv. 1-6)

A. E. Stanley Jones said, "Faith is not a blind leap in the dark; it is more like the sure step of a trusting child toward the loving arms of its mother. Faith is confidence in God, that He is there, that He cares, that He is faithful, and He intervenes . . . and that He embraces us when we throw ourselves into His arms."

Do we really believe faith is name it and claim it.

B. The work done as servants of Christ is spiritual.

1. Faith makes God real, righteousness real, heaven real, and the improbable/ impossible real.
2. Faith brings the unseen and eternal things of God into evidence.

### II. THE MEMORIAL ROLL OF FAITH (vv. 4-38)

A. Faith was tested in common service and accomplished uncommon rewards: Abel, Enoch, Noah.

B. Faith that pleased God (Abraham)

1. "By faith Abraham, when called . . . , obeyed and went. . . . By faith . . . he lived in tents . . . looking forward to the city . . . whose architect and builder is God."

2. What principles can we learn and apply from Abraham's faith?

- a. Abraham had vision, determination, surrendering the comfortable for something better.
- b. Jim Elliot: "He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose."

3. Read 2 Cor. 4:8-9 and note the indication of the four levels of oppression for testing our faith.

- a. Most moderate—hard pressed
- b. Second level—perplexed
- c. Third level—persecuted
- d. Fourth level—struck down (shoved aside, rejected)

4. Abraham was put to the *ultimate* test: "Your son, your *only* son, . . . whom you *love*" (Gen. 22:2, italics added).

5. Abraham's faith was (1) immediate, (2) confident, (3) based on God's character, and (4) thorough.

C. Faith that risks comfort and ease—Moses. In our comfort zone we do nothing new; or by faith in God we venture forth. Moses refused sin and left Egypt for the wilderness to learn of God.

D. Through others we see a faith that is miraculous:

1. Passing through the Red Sea
2. Wall of Jericho falling
3. Prostitute Rahab being spared

### III. THE REWARD OF FAITH (vv. 39-40)

A. Those soared who faced apparent defeat.

B. God didn't grade them little faith or great faith. He simply commended their *faith*.

C. What they longed to see and never saw, we see in Christ.

D. Their faith looked into the future; our faith looks back two thousand years with crystal clarity.

CONCLUSION. Though we are privileged to see faith in action 20/20 in the past, it is always difficult for us to see God's plan in the present; but if we did, it would not be faith. He invites us to put our faith in Him.

Chuck Swindoll says, "Whatever role you have been scripted to play, play it well, play it with all your heart . . . because you only have a brief moment on stage."

Jesus calls you to a superior faith—a faith based on himself, the Lord Jesus Christ.

## Variety Ideas for Sermon 11

### Music:

1. Have a "Christian Country Music" emphasis.
2. Have a group do Christian music with a country flare.

### Participation:

1. Honor all service personnel in your church, especially those who served in Vietnam. Tonight's sermon begins with an illustration that mentions the Vietnam veterans' memorial.

### Fellowship:

1. Have a chili-fest in the fellowship hall following the service. Ask members and friends to bring their favorite home chili.
2. Ask everyone to wear a Western hat, boots, or bandanna.

## JESUS, A SUPERIOR ENDURANCE

Heb. 12

INTRODUCTION. What a chapter! It begins with assurance of our staying power and ends with the ultimate power of God. Staying power is not easy. Last week we cited 2 Cor. 4:8-9:

We are hard pressed on every side,  
but not crushed;  
Perplexed, but not in despair;  
Persecuted, but not abandoned;  
Struck down, but not destroyed.

It is still true. Becoming a Christian means we enter an arena where there is pain, heartache, sickness, sorrow, pressure, hardship, and even death. What are we to do as recipients of faith? God's call in chapter 12 is for *endurance*.

### I. PERSEVERE

- A. We have "such a great cloud of witnesses" (v. 1a).
- B. We can all take steps to assure we make it (vv. 1b-4).
  - 1. "Throw off everything that hinders" (v. 1b).
  - 2. "Throw off . . . the sin that so easily entangles" (v. 1c).
  - 3. "Fix our eyes on Jesus" (v. 2).
- C. Remember the difference is Jesus.

### II. ENDURE

- A. Endure discipline as an indication of your membership in the family (v. 7).
  - C. S. Lewis put it, "God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks in our conscience, but shouts in our pains; it is His megaphone to rouse a deaf world."
- B. No discipline is easy—but painful (v. 11).
  - It was only when I lay there on rotting prison straw that I sensed within myself the first stirrings of good. Gradually, it was disclosed to me that the line separating good and evil passes, not through

states, nor between classes, nor between political parties either, but right through every human heart, and through all human hearts. So, bless you, prison, for having been in my life.

—Alexksandr Solzhenitsyn quoted in Philip Yancey's book, *Where Is God When It Hurts?*

C. The goal is inner healing (vv. 12-13).

### III. TAKE ACTION (vv. 14-17)

- A. Spiritually positive action (v. 14)
  - 1. "To live in peace" (Those who are strong "feeling" people are often frustrated when, after they have done all they can do to live in peace and it doesn't come, what they are to do next.)
  - 2. "Be holy."
- B. Personally cautious action (know yourself) (vv. 15-17)
  - 1. "See to it that no one misses the grace of God."
  - 2. "See to it . . . that no bitter root grows up to cause trouble and defile many" (carnality).
  - 3. "See that no one is sexually immoral" (sensuality).
  - 4. "See that no one . . . is godless" (materialism).

### IV. CONQUER YOUR MOUNTAIN! (vv. 18-24)

- A. The outward, the physical, the material—all represent the power to strike terror in the heart.
- B. "You have come to Mount Zion." (Read vv. 22b-24.)

### V. OBEY

- A. With Christ leading the way, there is no excuse.
- B. "Let us be thankful" (v. 28).

CONCLUSION: "*Let us . . . worship God acceptably with reverence and awe*, for our 'God is a consuming fire'" (vv. 28-29, italics added).

Song "Awesome God" by Rich Mullins

## Variety Ideas for Sermon 12

### Music:

1. Feature children's music.
2. Use the children of your church. If you have a children's choir, use them tonight.

### Training/Teaching/Coaching:

1. Interview a Christian athlete about the role and importance of endurance.
2. Interview a Christian coach about the characteristics of winners, especially endurance.

### Alternative Worship Styles:

1. Invert tonight's service order.
2. Begin with the interview, proceed to the sermon, finish with the music.

## SUPERIOR RELATIONSHIPS

Heb. 13:1 ff.

INTRODUCTION. Heb. 13 is a catch-all conclusion into which all of the writer's closing comments are placed. The writer has focused on our relationship with God, but in chapter 13 he shifts to our relationship with others. The letter has been very theological; now, however, he provides warnings and instructions that are personal and practical. He directs us in achieving responsible relationships.

### I. RESPONSIBLE RELATIONSHIPS WITH OTHERS (vv. 1-3)

- A. Our relationship with our brothers and sisters is based on *philadelphia*, simply brotherly love.
- B. Our relationship to strangers is based on common hospitality (v. 2).
- C. Our relationship with prisoners, the mistreated—the battered and broken believers, who have been incarcerated (not the hardened, impenitent criminal) (v. 3).
  1. Like the story of the good Samaritan, those who walked on the other side of the street were the religious people.
  2. We have to get involved—roll up our sleeves—get our hands dirty.

### II. RESPONSIBLE RELATIONSHIP WITH OUR SPOUSE (v. 4)

- A. The problem of infidelity.
  1. In our world, the sin of adultery is very visible, but the shame is gone.
  2. Sexual sin has become the basis of much of the entertainment and therefore helps for the "value base" for many of us.
  3. The law of the harvest is: "Whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap" (Gal. 6:7, KJV).
  4. Therefore, "Let marriage be held in honor" (RSV).
- B. Keep "the marriage bed . . . pure" ("free from contamination." Greek).
  1. We protect our own marriages by being

meticulously faithful to our own mates (1 Cor. 6:16-20).

2. Sexual immorality of any kind does permanent damage to our marriage, our spouse, and our relationship with God.
3. The memory becomes permanently etched with the experience.

Illustration: Counselor—"I cannot rid myself of the awful guilt and memory of being with someone else! Will my marriage bed ever be pure again?"

### C. "God will judge the adulterer and all the sexually immoral."

1. Two things that destroy the sanctity of marriage: *adultery* and *fornication*.
  - a. *Adultery* is a specific term that refers to extramarital relations.
  - b. *Fornication* is a more general term that includes all forms of sexual impurity and immorality.
  - c. Both incur God's judgment. The drying up of life is the judgment of God. He saps our vitality. He withers our leaves. He makes brittle our branches. Hardly the picture of a fruitful life.

D. The antidote or the spiritual solution to marital problems is *commitment*—to honoring our spouse, our marriage, our children, and purity.

### III. OUR RELATIONSHIP TO MONEY (v. 5)

- A. Just as commitment is the key to a marriage relationship, so *contentment* is the key to our relationship with *finances*.
- B. Contentment is a recurring theme of the NT (Phil. 4:11-12; 1 Tim. 6:6-8).
- C. The opposite is the message the media sends us about money.
- D. Why is contentment so important? If there is a lack of contentment in our life, a vacuum is formed, and anxiety comes rushing in to fill it (Matt. 6:24-34).
- E. The Bible is clear it is not money or the lack of it that is the problem—it's the *love* of it (1 Tim. 6:10).
- F. The solution is not a vow of poverty. It is to "be content with what you have." Contentment keeps us thankful, no matter how much or how little we have.

Chuck Swindoll said, "Contentment comes

from knowing that what we have is ultimately a gracious provision from the hand of God—not merely from the sweat of our own brow or the skill of our brain."

- G. "I WILL NEVER DESERT YOU, NOR WILL I EVER FORSAKE YOU" (NASB). We can be content, not because of the money we have, but because we have the continual presence of God.

CONCLUSION. Listen to the Word of the Lord:

The name of the LORD is a strong tower;

The righteous runs into it and is safe.  
A rich man's wealth is his strong city,  
And like a high wall in his own imagination.

Before destruction the heart of man is haughty,

But humility goes before honor  
(Prov. 18:10-12, NASB).

Security can never be found in a safe-deposit box. It can be found only in the Lord.

## Variety Ideas for Sermon 13

Music:

1. Let the music of this service focus on love.
2. Emphasize the love of God, God's love for us, His love for His Church, and so on.

Participation:

1. Recognize those married the longest, and those just married.
2. Have a "Happy Anniversary Party" fellowship time following the service.
3. Group couples at tables by months. For example, those married in January at one, February at another.
4. Consider grouping months together to insure plenty of folks sharing table fellowship.
5. Have wedding cake for refreshments.

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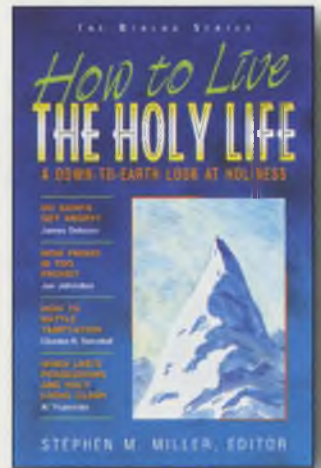
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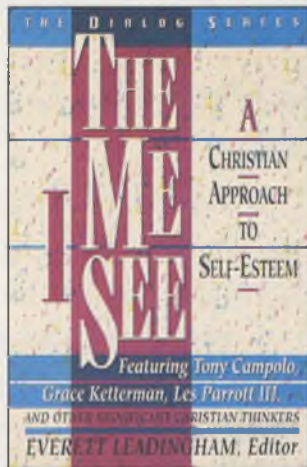
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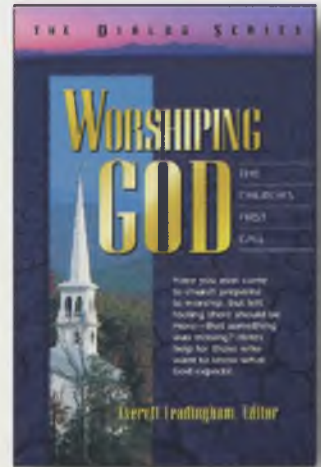
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