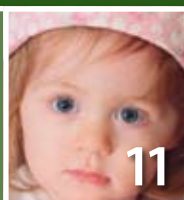


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CHRISTIAN Odyssey

October/November 2008

Exploring Life and Faith



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Letters to the Editor

Readers in the United States may not realize that *Christian Odyssey* is widely circulated in Australia. Here is a selection of letters from readers “down under.”

With this donation, I am sending also my grateful thanks for the magazine *Christian Odyssey* and also the newsletters of the church. I always pray for the church in my prayers that it will continue to grow in grace and knowledge of our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ.

God bless you all.

JG, South Australia

I thank you for your publication of the *Od-*

yssey. I have just received the June/July issue and once again have been steered to look to Jesus and God.

Many years back I was introduced to WCG publications and other life abundant issues of publication that corrected my course of living. I can say that I may not have been here had the lifeline of your love and concern for your neighbour through your magazine and booklets shone through to me. God corrects those he loves.

The whole change of law within the church to the law of love to God and neighbour is shining through.

Thank you again.

DN, Tasmania

There is no subscription cost for Christian Odyssey, and we are pleased to send it to you as long as our resources allow. Of course, any help you can give us with the production costs is gratefully received.

Letters for this section should be addressed to “Letters to the Editor.” Send your letters to Worldwide Church of God, PO Box 5005, Glendora, CA 91740-0730, or by e-mail to john.halford@wcg.org.

The editor reserves the right to use letters so addressed in whole or in part, and to include your name and edit the letter for clarity and space. We welcome your comments.

I’ve Been Reading...

Who Stole My Church?

What to Do When the Church You Love Enters the 21st Century

by Gordon MacDonald

Reviewed by Barbara Dahlgren

Do you love your church, but can’t stand the new hymns? Do you appreciate your fellow Christians but wish they would dress a bit more formally for services? Do you look forward to the future but find yourself sometimes missing the “old days”? Then this is the book for you.

Gordon MacDonald tackles the difficult topic of churches struggling with change. He wisely uses a fiction genre to make a sensitive subject more readable. Yet, this does not diminish the interesting facts you learn about how churches have made changes through the centuries to remain relevant.

MacDonald presents himself as the pastor of a fictional church in New England. Some of the older members are having difficulty adjusting to newer ways of doing things, such as using contemporary music instead of traditional hymns, using band or CD accompaniment instead of piano or organ, relaxed dress codes, and so on. In frustration, one member asks, “Who stole my church?”

In a bit of desperation, Pastor MacDonald decides to have a weekly meeting of 20 older-generational church members so they can discuss their irritants and concerns. At the meetings these members examine what is happening in their church, compare it to church history, and try not to throw their hands up and say, “What’s the use?”

Who Stole My Church is not plot driven, and seems more like a parable than a novel. It doesn’t really offer solutions for the problems derived from change, but much can be gleaned from the dialogue form used in these weekly meetings. Having been a pastor



for over 40 years, MacDonald offers great insight into local church dynamics. At times I felt as though he had been eavesdropping at some of our leadership meetings.

Toward the end of the book, some of the younger-generational congregants get involved. The result is that both generations end up understanding the other just a little better—not by justifying their feelings but by exploring why they lean toward differ-

ent styles of worship, don’t like each other’s music, or see evangelism and discipleship from different perspectives. At the end, not everyone in MacDonald’s core group embraces change. Some walk away. Some continue to struggle. Some learn to cope. Most have a deeper understanding of what church is all about.

I highly recommend *Who Stole My Church*. It is an easy, insightful, and informative read. Personally, I found a certain comfort from realizing I am not the only one trying to adapt, and that churches through the ages have had to continually reinvent the way they “do church” to keep up with changing times. *Who Stole My Church* can also be used as a small-group tool for open dialogue, since there are points to ponder about each chapter at the back the book.

Gordon MacDonald, *Who Stole My Church?: What to Do When the Church You Love Enters the 21st Century*, Thomas Nelson, 272 pages, \$21.99.

Circulation 19,000

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Doing what comes “naturally”

By John Halford

They call the process of becoming an American citizen “naturalization.” It’s a good name, because when you live in a country, pay its taxes, enjoy its benefits, identify with its values and do what you can to contribute to its success, it is only “natural” to want to fully belong.

America grants her citizenship generously, but not casually. Naturalization is a long process, which includes fingerprinting, an interview, and if you pass, a background check.

At the interview, you are tested on your ability to speak and understand English, and your knowledge of American history and government. So we are a nervous group of potential Americans as we sit in the waiting area of the Immigration Department. An African man is praying. An Asian couple test each other with the sample test questions. A Hispanic family is chatting nervously. And me, a Brit? I am doing what I usually do when I am trying to relax and fill in time. I am writing this article.

Every now and then a door opens and a young man calls out a name, and with a “wish me luck” look at the rest of us, someone heads off for his or her date with destiny. We who are left settle back down to our anxious wait.



Jesus announced our citizenship and broke down every barrier that could prevent us from accepting it.

The process by the U.S. Immigration Service is courteous, fair and impartial. No one is trying to intimidate us. But those responsible must be thorough.

But, I think to myself, suppose, just suppose, that door could open and the Immigration officer would say: “Relax, everyone. I have some good news for you—a message from the President. He asked me to welcome you to the United States, and he has asked us to give you citizenship. We want you, we love you, we know who you are, and we are ready to accept you. Now, who wants to be first?”

Dream on. That is not going to happen. You certainly can’t blame post 9/11 America for being cautious, because not everyone who wants to live here wishes America well.

But there is a “nation” that *can* do that: it offers,

indeed eagerly desires, to freely bestow its citizenship and all its benefits, privileges and opportunities to all who ask for it. I’m not speaking of any political entity of this world, of course. I mean God’s “nation”—the kingdom of heaven.

As Paul wrote in his epistle to the Philippians, “We’re citizens of high heaven! We’re waiting the arrival of the Savior, the Master, Jesus Christ, who will transform our earthy bodies into glorious bodies like his own. He’ll make us beautiful and whole with the same powerful skill by which he is putting everything as it should be, under and around him” (Philippians 3:20-21, *The Message*).

Jesus came to open the door to that citizenship. He brought the good news that we are wanted and accepted. There is no need for fingerprinting—the hairs on our heads are already numbered. We all fail the background check miserably, for “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Romans 3:23). But Jesus has taken care of that through his death, resurrection and ascension. You are loved, wanted and accepted.

Jesus announced our citizenship and broke down every barrier that could prevent us from accepting it. In a cautious and suspicious world, it is hard to believe that anything can be so free and so generous. It seems too good to be true. We wonder about the fine print, and wait for the “other shoe to drop.” And sadly, sometimes those of us who are called to proclaim that good news erect our own barriers, and, like the Pharisees of Jesus’ day, put unnecessary hurdles and stumbling blocks in the path of citizenship in God’s kingdom.

Going through the process of becoming an American citizen has made me think deeply about the meaning of citizenship. My family, my home and so many of my friends are here. It is only natural that I would want to fully belong. However, others, on the other side of that door, must make that decision.

Likewise, my—and your—eternal citizenship is not for us to decide; it’s already an accomplished fact. Jesus already signed all the paperwork with his own blood and opened the door wide, inviting us all to come through.

“Do not be afraid, little flock, for your Father has been pleased to give you the kingdom” (Luke 12:32).

For a God who *is* love that is only natural. **co**

REVELATION

It's No Mystery

Mike Feazell

The book of Revelation holds special interest for many Christians. With its strange, many-headed monsters and mystifying symbols, Revelation has provided through the centuries the raw material for a myriad of equally strange and mystifying interpretations and predictions.

From the second century on, every succeeding generation of Christians has had its prophecy pundits who claimed to understand and rightly “interpret” Revelation’s symbols as referring to nations and events in their particular day and “proving” that Christ would return in their generation. And all of them were wrong.

Our generation is no different. With a Bible in one hand, newspaper clippings in the other and a wall full of maps behind, our modern pushers of prediction addiction use the power of electronic media to give the 1900-year-old message of the book of Revelation a new scramble and generate big dollars in donations to get out their “urgent” message before it’s “too late.”

But how *should* Revelation be interpreted? To whom was it written and why? What is its real message for Christians today?

“What must soon take place”

Most biblical scholars agree that Revelation was written sometime in the late first century after the sacking of Jerusalem and the destruction of the Jewish Temple (A.D. 70). The intense persecution against Christians in Rome launched by the Roman emperor Nero would have been at least a recent vivid memory for believers, and renewed abuse by Roman authorities was an ever-present fear. Christian hope was understandably challenged by the stories of Roman Christians being rounded up and imprisoned, butchered, fed to lions in the arena, enslaved, or smeared with tar and burned as human torches on crosses along Roman roadsides.

The author of Revelation describes himself as John,

writing as an exile on an island in the Aegean Sea called Patmos, located off the coast of what is today southwestern Turkey. His purpose is simple: “...to show his [Jesus] servants what must soon take place” (Revelation 1:1). In other words, the author was writing about events of *his* day, not about the flow of history through the centuries and millennia to come after him.

Apparently, however, it’s no fun to believe that Revelation was *actually* about things that were to take place “soon” after the book was written. Here we are, 19 centuries later, still trying to find ways to interpret it as having been written for *our* day.

How *should* Revelation be interpreted? To whom was it written and why? What is its real message for Christians today?

Apocalyptic style

The name of the book of Revelation is taken from its first verse: “The revelation of Jesus Christ.” The word *revelation* is translated from the Greek word *apokalypsos*, which means “unveiling” or “revealing.”

Another term for the book of Revelation, “The Apocalypse,” comes from this Greek word. In modern English, *apocalypse* has come to imply “disaster” or “appalling destruction.” Yet the original word simply referred to an unfolding, or opening, of events that, in the case of John’s book, were to come to pass in the near future.

John chose to write in a special literary style well known to Jews and early Christians called “apocalyptic.” Apocalyptic uses fantastic images and symbols to describe God’s judgment and victory over the oppressors of his people and all evil. It was popular during the last two centuries B.C. and the first century A.D. The symbols and figures in apocalyptic writing were not to be taken

literally, but were to be understood in the context of the apocalyptic style, similar to the way we might understand the symbolism of a political cartoon today.

The symbols found in Revelation might appear strange to Christians of later centuries, and they have certainly been the subject of great debate and mystery. But John used them because they were understood by the Christians of his day. Revelation was not a riddle book to enable Christians of future generations to decipher when Jesus would return. It was a book of hope and encouragement to Christians of the first century, written to assure them that in spite of all evidence to the contrary, Jesus Christ had already won the final victory over all tyrants and tyranny.

Even if the faithful saints must face martyrdom at the hands of the enemies of God, Revelation assures its readers, in time they will be vindicated, raised from the dead in glory and reign with Christ. Therefore, Revela-

Revelation was not a riddle book to enable future Christians to decipher when Jesus would return. It was a book of hope and encouragement to Christians of the first century

tion urges, the faithful should trust Christ, the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world, and resist any temptation to give their allegiance to those who stand against him.

Message for today

That message has the same striking force for Christians today. Whatever despots arise, wherever tyranny takes hold, Christians are assured by the message of Revelation that the day of their deliverance and vindication is coming. “He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away” (21:4).

Jesus has already won the victory over the devil and all forms of devilish oppression. Though the faithful might die at the hands of the wicked, their place with the risen and victorious Lamb of God is assured. Whenever throughout history Christians have faced persecution and oppression, even as many do today in various parts of the world, they have found John’s apocalyptic book a source of great faith-building joy.

Revelation is a message of hope to all Christians through every century who find themselves walking

Thomas Torrance: Apocalypse or Revelation is the unveiling of history already invaded and conquered by the Lamb of God. Apocalypse means the unveiling of new creation. At its very heart Revelation means the unveiling of Jesus Christ.
—*The Apocalypse Today*

Ben Witherington III: Indeed if one is a student of the history of the interpretation of Revelation, one recognizes a near 100 percent failure rate when matching up images and events in Revelation with particular historical figures.
—*New Cambridge Bible Commentary* (Revelation)

Gordon Fee: Revelation is a Christian prophecy cast in apocalyptic style and imagery and finally put in letter form, dealing primarily with *tribulation* (suffering) and *salvation* for God’s people and God’s *wrath* (judgment) on the Roman Empire.
—*How to Read the Bible Book by Book*

Craig S. Keener: John’s symbolic language is meant as evocative imagery, to elicit particular responses, rather than as a detailed literal picture of events.
—*The IVP Bible Background Commentary* (New Testament)

G. B. Caird: John uses his allusions not as a code in which each symbol requires separate and exact translation, but rather for their evocative and emotive power. This is not photographic art. His aim is to set the echoes of memory and association ringing.... The first readers were almost certainly well versed in the sort of symbolic language and imagery in which the book is written. Whether they had formerly been Jews or pagans, they would read the language of myth as fluently as any modern reader of the daily papers reads the conventional symbols of a political cartoon.
—*A Commentary on the Revelation of St. John the Divine* (Black’s New Testament Commentaries)

M. Eugene Boring: Revelation has continued to speak directly to the church in times and places where Christians with no political or economic power have experienced inhuman cruelty, such as the Nazi era in Europe or the church today in countries governed by oppressive dictatorships. Response to the message of Revelation is an expression of faith in the faithfulness of God in a situation which gives no indication of it in this world.
—*Revelation* (Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching)

Not so mysterious

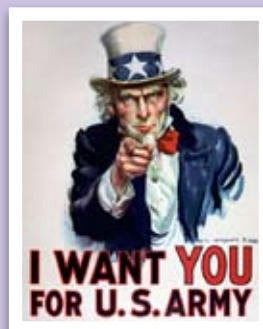
And I saw a beast coming out of the sea. He had ten horns and seven heads, with ten crowns on his horns, and on each head a blasphemous name. The beast I saw resembled a leopard, but had feet like those of a bear and a mouth like that of a lion. The dragon gave the beast his power and his throne and great authority. One of the heads of the beast seemed to have had a fatal wound, but the fatal wound had been healed. The whole world was astonished and followed the beast. (Rev. 13:13)

What on earth does that mean?

Many scholars, preachers and religious hobbyists, of course, have been painting the symbolism of Revelation with all sorts of creative interpretations for nearly two thousand years. But it's helpful for us to take note that all these seemingly baffling symbols would have made perfect sense to the people for whom Revelation was originally written. A modern counterpart might be political cartoons, whose exaggerated or even wildly distorted symbols and caricatures make perfect sense to us today.

Political cartoons use stereotyped images. G. R. Beasley-Murray calls the political cartoon "the closest modern parallel" to Revelation's symbols (Revelation, The New Century Bible Commentary, p. 17). For example, there is John Bull, who represents the temper of Britain, and Uncle Sam, the spirit of the United States. The lion also represents Britain and the eagle the United States. Two other symbols are the Russian bear and the Chinese dragon.

Often these and other political figures are drawn as caricatures. Says Beasley-Murray, "Frequently the situations depicted are deliberately exaggerated, and even made grotesque, in order that the message may be made plain." The operative word here is plain. That's what the symbols of Revelation were to John's congregations. They were plain, simple and quickly understood. Beasley-Murray explains the point further:



"The symbols by which the contemporary political forces and the spiritual powers of heaven and hell are portrayed [in Revelation] were as traditional as Britannia and the British lion, the Russian bear, and the Chinese dragon.... What to the uninitiated modern reader appears grotesque imagery, spoke with power to John's fellow Christians."

Most people are familiar with George Orwell's *Animal Farm*, in which animals speak.

The book itself is a political-social statement about the excesses of political leadership and the subjugation of the weak. We do not think the book bizarre because animals talk in it. We know it is symbolic. We also readily understand the

meaning of Orwell's symbols—and enjoy them. In fact, it was precisely because of the form in which *Animal Farm* was written that has made it a timeless piece of literature.

There are several lessons in this. First, we should not consider Revelation strange or bizarre. To its original readers, the book was easy to understand, extremely interesting and thoroughly meaningful. If we look for the overarching message to all Christians instead of the specific details intended for first-century believers, Revelation can be all those things to us as well.

Five keys to unlocking the strange book of Revelation

1. Revelation was written to encourage late first-century Christians in the wake of severe persecution.
2. It was written in a special literary style understood by first-century Christians and characterized by fantastic beasts and mystical symbols set in a titanic battle between good and evil.
3. Its message is consistent with the rest of Scripture, a declaration of the good news of Jesus Christ and a call for patience in faith as believers await their vindication and glory.
4. Its central figure is the slain, risen, victorious Jesus Christ.
5. Its central theme is the ultimate salvation of the saints.

through the valley of the shadow of death. Because Jesus reigns, every believer's story, no matter how dismal it might be in the present, will end triumphantly.

"I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, 'Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death, or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away'" (Revelation 21:3-4). ☪

Theater of the Imagination

By Kenda Tuner

Little did I know in my senior year of college that we were having fun participating in a centuries-old form of theater. My friends and I simply thought we had created a unique style of entertainment.

It began when the six of us crowded around on a couch and read from A.A. Milne's *The House at Pooh Corner*, each of us taking on a different character or part. Jeannie read in our best Winnie-the-Pooh voice. Linda, Debbie and Sybil chimed in at appropriate places as Christopher Robin, Kanga and Roo. I was the narrator. The one who stole the show, though, was Seth. No one could read the part of grumpy old Eeyore like him.

The performances were mostly for our benefit, but sometimes we played before small audiences, such as

Readers Theater opens up a world of possibilities for sharing messages about God's awesome love and grace.



my parents and brothers. But no matter where or when we read, we did so with great expression and drama—and had fun. Imaginations took flight. We almost felt like we were right there with Pooh in his little corner of the world.

The long-forgotten memory resurfaced this past spring when I was invited to participate in a dramatic reading for our church's Easter celebration. Here, for the first time, I was introduced to the term "Readers Theater." Although the tone of the Easter script was far removed from a children's story, the experience reminded me of the value of expressive oral reading. Performing in this way draws both reader and listener

into the time, place, and emotion of a story—and leaves a lasting impression. It's a good way to bring to life Bible stories and their meaning for special worship occasions in church.

Our team performed "He Is Risen," a Readers Theater script written by Pastor Rick Shallenberger of Christ Fellowship Church, Cincinnati. Characters included Mary the mother of Jesus, the apostle John, Mary Magdalene, Peter and Saul. We readers entered the sanctuary and, on cue, stood at music stands with our scripts before us. Having practiced together, we were familiar with such fundamental elements as the tone of the piece, need for inflection and feeling, and difficult word pronunciations. We learned how to express the emotions of our characters and how to trail off our part as the next reader picked up theirs. In this manner the story could flow smoothly.

While familiar to the audience, the story line of "He Is Risen" soon touched listeners in a personal—and powerful—way. Scene One explored the overwhelming emotions felt by key individuals present at Jesus' crucifixion. Scene Two built to a climactic expression of exhilaration experienced by the same people when they learned of Jesus' resurrection. In turn, a degree of this exhilaration was transferred to all in the room at the glorious reminder that "he indeed is risen"!

In this way, a familiar story was retold in a meaningful and moving way. The experience reinforced how effective a Readers Theater format can be in teaching and inspiring the audience.

In its simplest terms, Readers Theater is merely the reading of a story in parts, with each character represented by a different person. The story is communicated through reading aloud with expression and feeling. A narrator "sets the stage" with necessary explanations and transitions. Script memorization is not necessary, and neither are costumes, sets or stage props.

Why is this format effective? One Readers Theater enthusiast explained it this way: Readers Theater is "the theater of the imagination... [This is because] the audience shares the job with the performers of making

The Advantages of Readers Theater

Can be staged almost anywhere—churches, classrooms, nursing homes, even outdoors.

CASTING can be drawn from varied age groups and backgrounds.

Rehearsal time less than other forms of theater.

No memorization.

No costumes, props or staging necessary.

More people can be involved.

the story come alive in the theater of the mind.”¹

And we know what a powerful tool the imagination can be!

Readers Theater comes from a long tradition of using stories to illustrate a lesson. Some say the tradition can be traced back to ancient Greece. The first known female playwright, Hrosvitha of Gandersheim (c. 935-1001), produced her plays as staged readings for the nuns of her abbey.² In more modern times Readers Theater follows the old-time tradition of radio drama. Today Readers Theater is a highly effective medium for any size church congregation.

Without the need for visual clues, Readers Theater simplifies the stage setup and focuses on the message. And because the format is so simple, there is less preparation time required than what would be needed for memorizing a script in a major production. These are significant pluses for incorporating Readers Theater. Also by adopting Readers Theater scripts, opportunities open up for a variety of people to participate. The program could involve men and women, a mix of older and younger, and also those with physical disabilities that would normally preclude them from a more active drama. At the same

time Readers Theater is of value to those in the audience who are visually impaired, since the story is in the reading and not in stage action.

Another plus for Readers Theater is location. All that is needed is space for the readers and the stands that hold their scripts. And Readers Theater productions can expand beyond church settings to other places, such as nursing homes and classrooms. Today Readers Theater is popular in schools, where it not only involves students in presenting stories but also helps develop and foster better reading skills.

Readers Theater scripts can be adapted from a variety of sources, including Bible stories, parables, poems and other books and forms of stories. Many people creatively write their own scripts. A number of resources can be found at Christianbook.com and Amazon.com especially for Advent, Christmas, and children’s scripts.

By using imagination to stir imaginations, Readers Theater is a wonderfully valuable method of communicating lessons and stories. Churches can incorporate Readers Theater in their worship services, classrooms and potentially in outreach opportunities. Simple and easy to present, Readers Theater opens up a world of possibilities for sharing messages about God’s awesome love and all-encompassing grace. And Readers Theater certainly provides creative ways to take readers and listeners far beyond Pooh Corner! ☺

¹ www.mrjeffrey.com/Reading%20Responses/Readers%20Theater.doc.

² Fr. Matthew Powell, “Of Parables, Church and RT,” *Readers Theatre Digest*, Issue 13, Summer 2006. <http://www.readerstheatredigest.com/archives/x13powell.htm>.

Resources

General

Readers Theater—Its Methods and Techniques, by Marion Fairman, PhD. Contemporary Drama Service, Box 7710, Colorado Springs, CO 80933.

Readers Theatre Handbook: A Dramatic Approach to Literature, by Leslie Irene Coger and Melvin R. White. Glenview, IL: Scott Foresman and Company, 1967, 1973, 1982.

RT: A Readers Theater Ministry, by Todd V. Lewis. Kansas City, MO: Lillenas Publishing Company, 1988.

Readers Theater Fundamentals, by Fran Averett Tanner. Topeka, KS.: Clark Publishing, 1987, 1993.

Experimental Theater: Creating and Staging Texts, by Judy E. Yordon. Prospect

Heights, IL: Waveland Press, Inc. 1997.

List compiled from:
www.readerstheatredigest.com

Adult Scripts

Sunday Morning Readers’ Theater, by Pamela Urfer.

Performing Parables: Religious Folk Tales, Legends, and Fables for Readers Theater, by Matthew Powell.

Children’s Scripts

Christian Reader’s Theater (2-5): 12 Bible Story Plays, by Thomas Ewald.

The Old Testament: Ten Plays for Readers Theater, by Josephine Davidson.

Readers Theater Bible Based Dramas New Testament, by Instructional Fair.

Christmas Scripts

Voices of Christmas: Readers’ Theater for

Advent, by Jerry Nordstrom.

Speaking of Christmas: Christmas Plays for Readers’ Theater, by Matthew Powell.

At the Manger: Drama and Worship for Christmas Eve, by Dennis M. Mauer.

Gabriel’s Horn: Readers’ Theater for Advent, by Frank Ramirez.

Internet Information

Readers Theater Digest—<http://readerstheatredigest.com>

Institute for Readers Theatre—<http://www.readerstheatreinstitute.com>

Aaron Shepherd’s Stories, Scripts and More—<http://www.aaronshp.com>

“Readers Theater”—www.webenglishteacher.com/rt.html

“Readers Theater”—www.mrjeffrey.com/Reading%20Responses/Readers%20Theater.doc

Parenting “Do Over” for Grandparents

By Jeb Egbert

Life doesn't give us the opportunity for “do-overs.” I certainly wish it did. There are things I have regretted about how I've handled particular time periods or relationships in my life. Perhaps you feel the same way. Ever pine for missed opportunities? I've sometimes whispered to myself, “If I only had known then what I know now, I might have handled that situation better.”

But I didn't know then what I know now, and neither did you.

I have the privilege of leading workshops on parenting, and inevitably quite a few grandparents attend. One of the recurring questions I ask during these workshops is “if you had a ‘do-over,’ how would you change your approach to parenting?” My purpose for the question is not to open up feelings of regret, but rather to listen to the voice of experience.

Perhaps the most consistent answer I hear is, “I would focus more on the love I have for my children and less on rules and discipline.” Variations of this response include “I would tell my children I love them more frequently than I did.” Another is, “I would work harder to understand how my son or daughter interpreted my behaviors as loving and seek to make adjustments.”

That's an interesting response, because it implies that our children truly are unique, and while some may know they are loved by hearing the words “I love you,” to others those words might seem hollow and lifeless. They might prefer spending a day at the beach with their mom or dad, or perhaps receiving a gift. It's no secret that different children interpret love from their parents differently.

You may have heard grown adults share with great sadness their pain over the fact that their father or mother “never told me they loved me.” On the other hand, some who didn't hear those words never doubted their parents' love in spite of the lack of verbal affirmation.

Some “do-over” questions

I always follow up the discussions about increased demonstrative love by asking a rhetorical question: “Does this mean that you wouldn't have any rules or discipline?” The response is typically, “Oh no. There

would certainly be rules and discipline. It's just that my recollection of my parenting style was an over-emphasis on rules and discipline. I thought rearing my child was more important than showing them love in demonstrable ways.”

Many grandparents say they wished they had spent more time with their kids when they were growing up. Some turn melancholy when they reflect on years gone by and the relationships with their offspring that they feel were never really cemented by an investment of time.

Some say they would have been more intentional about showing spiritual leadership within the family. When I probe about this, the responses range from a desire to have modeled a more overt spiritual focus in their own lives, to wishing they had led more family Bible discussions or more often modeled sharing the gospel with others. Others muse about their perception of the gaps that existed between their professed Christian allegiance and the reality of the lives they led. They wonder whether their areas of personal hypocrisy might have set up a stumbling block for their children.

I thoroughly enjoy listening to the hearts of these “grand” parents. They have much to share. It is inspiring to know that in spite of the many pitfalls of parenting and our lack of parental perfection, God so deeply loves our children that he never ceases to look after them.

Most parents do not make willful mistakes in how they raise their children. The vast majority with whom I speak love their children and wanted to be “the perfect parent” for them.

We don't have a chance for a do-over. But we can share the lessons of experience with one another and our loved ones. We can also pray for young parents and their children and find ways to provide a word of encouragement and support. And we can rest in our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, knowing that his perfect work in the lives of our children is complete, although not fully apparent at this time. Regardless of all we did or did not do as parents, the best for them is yet to come! ☪

Jeb Egbert has focused on youth ministry and education for 30 years. He has spent considerable time working in camp ministry and has taught at the secondary and post-secondary levels. He earned his Doctorate in Education from Texas A & M. He is currently the Vice President of Academic Affairs for Argosy University in Southern California.



“I would focus more on the love I have for my children and less on rules and discipline.”

“When I am *Bigger...*”

By Pat Halford

I t was the day after my mother’s funeral. I felt so tired and empty, greatly missing my mother’s loving presence...wanting to pray and yet not knowing what to pray for or even where to begin.

I sat down at my computer and pulled up an email from my pastor. He had typed out the first chapter of Paul’s letter to the Ephesians and sent it to me, inserting my mother’s name in all the appropriate places in the text. It was so moving, so full of hope and encouragement. The tears began to flow once again as they had in the previous weeks of my mother’s illness leading up to her death.

My little 4-year-old granddaughter, Nikki, was playing on the floor not far away. She had been watching me, and with a sorrowful look of concern on her little face, she came over and laid her hand gently on my arm. “Do you want me to pray for you, Meemaw?” she said.

“Oh, that would be wonderful, Honey,” I replied.

“Okay,” she said, and taking a deep breath, she bowed her head, closed her eyes and folded her little hands. What seemed like ages passed, and still there was silence. Finally, she looked up at me and said, “I think I am going to have to wait until I’m bigger to do this!”



I smiled, trying so hard not to laugh, and gave her a big hug. She would have been devastated to think that I might not be taking her efforts to help seriously. She knew what to do; she just didn’t know quite what to say. Her mother had always helped her pray by supplying the words and then Nikki would repeat them. She had never had to go solo before.

But in fact, her efforts to pray for me did have the desired effect. It was as if she had prayed the most eloquent and beautiful prayer ever spoken.

There are many occasions in life when the problems seem overwhelming, and I seem so inadequate. Those are the times when I too am tempted to cry out to God, “I think I am going to have to wait until I am (spiritually) bigger to do this.”

God reminded me, through this little child, that he understands and he has provided for me when I don’t know how to pray. “In the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groans that words cannot express. And he who searches our hearts knows the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints in accordance with God’s will” (Romans 8:26-27). ☪



Pat Halford is the wife of this magazine’s editor, and the proud grandmother of 6 wonderful children. She lives in Indiana.

In Other Words

“U sooh nkon, u sooh yag matibla”

By Kalengule Kaoma

The forest-dwelling Bassa people of Cameroon have a saying that goes, “U sooh nkon, u sooh yag matibla.” Translated into English, it means, “If you hide the sickness, you hide the treatment.” The point is that you can’t help someone who won’t reveal what their problem is.

God didn’t make us to be loners. We are all connected as children of our Father in heaven, brothers and sisters of our Lord Jesus Christ. The apostle Paul wrote that we all “live and move and have our being” in God (Acts 17:28).

Our need for others is never more pressing than when we face crises and challenges in our lives. The kind reassurance of another



person can calm our fears, soothe our nerves and hold us up in times of trial. Finding professional support to help us through marriage problems or financial difficulties can make the difference between success or failure. And telling a qualified physician about our physical symptoms can save our lives.

We can all take a word of wisdom from the Bassa: Are we hiding our needs from the people who want to help us?

Our shoulders might be broad, but no shoulders are broad enough to carry the whole world. ☪

Karl Barth: The Most Important Election Ever

By Eric Wilding

No, we are not talking about the 2008 U.S. election between Senators McCain and Obama. We're talking about the election that affects all nations and all people who have ever lived: the election of Jesus Christ.

Many theologians have attempted to grasp the mystery of election attested to in Scripture. One of the most influential commentators on the doctrine of election is the Swiss theologian Karl Barth. For Barth, the doctrine of election is the sum of the gospel and the foundation for understanding God.

God's free choice

"Election" simply means "a choice." The Christian doctrine of election involves a choice made by God. For Karl Barth, this doctrine—the decision of God before all time to be who he is for humanity—is the basic truth on which all other Christian truths are built.

The doctrine of election involves two aspects, the electing God and the elected man. As the electing God, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit together make a choice. The choice God makes is that the Son of God will become the elected man, Jesus of Nazareth.

The Triune God eternally elects, or chooses, in divine freedom, to be for humanity the God of grace and love. Therefore, in Jesus Christ, who is fully God and fully man, God is both the elector and the elected. Barth wrote, "In the midst of time it happened that

God became man for our good. While underlining the uniqueness of this event, we have to reflect that this was not an accident, not one historical event among others. But it is the event which God willed from eternity."¹

Theologian and Barth scholar John Webster describes it this way, "God elects to be this God, God in this man, God known in and as Jesus Christ."² As the act of grace and love, the Son of God is elected to give of himself to become united with the Son of Man for the specific purpose to save sinful humans. This is the act of free grace where God gives "love in the deepest condescension," that is, he reaches down to pull humans to himself (p. 10). The Son of God empties and humbles himself so that humans may be united in fellowship with God (see Philippians 2:6-8; John 17:22-24).

This is the work of the Triune God: Father, Son and Spirit, in perfect love and perfect unity for the sake of humanity. Barth wrote, "This work of the Son of God includes the work of the Father as its presupposition and the work of the Holy Spirit as its consequence."³ We know the Father loves us because we know Jesus loves us, and we live in this assurance by the Spirit.

Scripture tells us that God is love (1 John 4:8, 16). As the Triune God, the Father, Son and Holy Spirit have freely shared their perfect love and fellowship within the Godhead eternally, and by God's own free choice, he elects to share that same love with humanity through Jesus Christ, who is the elect man on behalf of all humanity.

The Greater Truth

"To pronounce the name of Jesus Christ means to acknowledge that we are cared for, that we are not lost. Jesus Christ is man's salvation in all circumstances and in face of all that darkens his life, including the evil that proceeds from himself. There is nothing which is not already made good in this happening, that God became man for our good. Anything that is left can be no more than the discovery of this fact. We do not exist in any kind of gloomy uncertainty; we exist through the God who was gracious to us before we existed at all. It may be true that we exist in contradiction to this God, that we live in remoteness from Him, indeed in hostility to Him. It is still truer that God has prepared reconciliation for us, before we entered the struggle against Him. And true though it may be that in connection with our alienation from God man can only be regarded as a lost being, it is still much truer that God has so acted for our good, does it and will also act, that there exists a salvation for every lost condition. It is this faith that we are called to belief through the Christian Church and in the Holy Spirit."

—Karl Barth, *Dogmatics in Outline*, page 71.

How do we know about this choice? Barth explains, “It is grounded in the knowledge of Jesus Christ because He is both the electing God and elected man in One.”⁴ We only need to look to Jesus Christ to know about this election. Theologian Robert Jenson explains, “Jesus Christ is therefore the basis of the doctrine of election. All its statements must be statements about Him.”⁵

Predestination

For Barth, predestination is identical with the election of Jesus Christ. God freely chooses or predestines himself and all humans to be in loving relationship with and through Jesus Christ. God will have it no other way; he loves humanity and will not be without humanity.

The problem is that humans are fallen, sinful beings who reject God and need redemption in order to stand in that fellowship from their side. Scripture testifies to God’s foreknowledge—before creation—that human beings would be sinful and would be in need of redemption and reconciliation (see 1 Peter 1:18-21; Revelation 13:8; Romans 5:6-11; 8:28-30; Ephesians 1:3-14; Colossians 1:15-20). Barth explains, “Yet these transgressors are the ones on whose behalf the eternal love of God for Jesus Christ is willed and extended” (p. 123).

You may say, “Predestination? Doesn’t that mean that God accepted some (the elect) and rejected others (the reprobate) before he even created humanity?”

Barth challenged this hyper-Calvinist version of “double predestination” because of its lack of scriptural support. For Barth, God is not a capricious tyrant who elects some to salvation and elects others to perdition by some abstract absolute decree. On the contrary, all knowledge we have about God and his election is in and through Jesus Christ—there is nothing hidden beyond or behind that knowledge.

Double predestination in Jesus Christ

For Barth, “double predestination” has to do with the election of Jesus Christ for crucifixion and resurrection. Before time began, God accepted us by electing Jesus Christ in our place and on our behalf through the Incarnation, the cross and the empty tomb.

At the crucifixion, God rejects and says NO to disordered human sin that caused alienation from him. However, God’s NO is not directed at us—even though we deserve it because of our rejection of God. Instead, Jesus takes the rejection and the NO of God totally upon himself as the human representative of and substitute for all humanity.

The NO is absolutely necessary so that we can hear God’s YES. Jesus Christ does not come to the world as “an accuser, as a prosecutor, as a judge, as an executioner.” Instead he is “the herald of this Yes which God has spoken to it [the world].... God has loved it from all eternity,

and...He has put His love into action in the death of Jesus Christ.”⁶

The resurrection of Jesus Christ is God’s YES to Jesus Christ. It is the acceptance of Jesus Christ’s obedient submission to God’s will. In and through Jesus Christ, the YES of God is freely given to all human beings. Therefore, we may say that Jesus Christ is our elected representative.

You may ask, “What does the NO and YES mean for me?”

Theologian Joseph Mangina writes, God’s No is “a death-dealing rejection of sin and evil” and Yes is “a life-giving affirmation of covenant love.”⁷ The NO passed away at the cross; Jesus Christ bore the NO and totally removed it. There remains only the covenant or relationship of YES with the resurrection of Jesus Christ (see 2 Corinthians 1:19-20).

Ultimately, double predestination involves Jesus dying for the sins of every human being who ever lived—not just a closed number of elect—so that all might have eternal life (see John 3:16-17; 1 Timothy 2:3-6; 2 Peter 3:9; 1 John 2:2). At the resurrection, the Father gave acceptance to Jesus Christ and everyone with him. Barth states, “We have to see our own election in that of the man Jesus because His election includes ours within itself and because ours is grounded in His. We are elected together with Him in so far as we are elected ‘in Him’” (p. 120).

The good news

Barth calls the doctrine of election the sum of the gospel, for it reveals the heart of God: “God’s eternal will is the election of Jesus Christ” (p. 146). He is the loving God who has freely chosen and created human beings to be in his image and in fellowship with him.

This is the absolute good news. There is no bad news mixed with the good news, no fear mixed with terror, no certainty mixed with uncertainty. We are not left to blind fate or some unknown will of God. Our election and predestination by God is certain in Jesus Christ, and in him alone and in him fully we have and know the will of God for the meaning and direction of our lives. **co**

¹ Karl Barth, *Dogmatics in Outline* (Harper & Row: 1959), 69.

² John Webster, *Barth: Outstanding Christian Thinkers* (Continuum, 2000), 91.

³ Karl Barth, *Dogmatics in Outline*, 71.

⁴ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics II/2* (T&T Clark, 2004), 3. All quotes, unless otherwise cited, come from this source.

⁵ Robert W. Jenson, *Alpha and Omega: A Study in the Theology of Karl Barth* (Wipf & Stock, 2002), 144.

⁶ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics IV/1* (T&T Clark, 1956), 347.

⁷ Joseph L. Mangina, *Karl Barth: Theologian of Christian Witness* (Westminster John Knox, 2004), 75.

So How Did it Go?

A Report From the Philippines

In our last issue we interviewed four young people who were about to embark on a short-term mission trip to the Philippines. Now they are back, and we invited them to tell us...

...How did it go?

Well, you went and you are back safe. Did the trip live up to your expectations?



Steven: Yes, I was able to experience God in a way that many people here never will. I watched him work through our group and right into the people we were trying to reach. He made it possible for a group of people who don't speak English very well to have an understanding of the gospel through people who speak only English.



Kyle: To be honest, I really didn't have many expectations because I didn't know how or what the Philippines were like or anything. So I guess you could say that it rose above my expectations and was awesome!



Deanna: We met so many wonderful people and had so many amazing experiences that we never could have expected.



Alex: Yes, it did. It surpassed even what I imagined it would be. It extended my horizons and gave me many chances to grow as a person and in God.

What was the highlight of the trip for you?

Steven: When we were in Bulacan doing a Vacation Bible School for the 12-year-olds, a group of kids gathered outside the windows and doorway. Janet saw that the students inside were being distracted, so she sent Kyle, Cassandra and myself outside to get them away from the building so that it wouldn't be as noisy. There were only about 30 at first, but before we knew it there were over 200 kids out in the street. We played with them for over 2 and a half hours. Even though the kids could hardly speak English, they understood our actions. We played games and just spent time with them.

Deanna: There are too many to choose from! One was having Praise and Worship at the youth retreat (with 100 enthusiastic young people) in the pouring rain! God was clapping his hands!

Alex: The whole trip was too amazing to pick one moment. It was all great, even the frustrating times were fun in the end. One moment that was really great was worshipping on the last day of the youth camp with all the kids. They jumped and sang and really loved to worship God.

What was the low point, or the hardest part?

Steven: The language barrier between us was the only constant test we had in working with the people. It was difficult throughout the entire trip, especially for younger children.

Kyle: The low point of the trip was the driving

2.



4.





part. Even though we had fun, it was still over 10 hours in a van driving down to Bicol then again back up to Bulacan.

Deanna: I would say the hardest part was communicating to the kids the first day of VBS at the village in Bulacan. They did not understand much English, and the room we were in was so noisy because we had over 100 kids in a single room. We had to make changes in our plans and totally rely on God—but I think it worked out for the best.

Did you have any trouble adjusting to the different culture?

Steven: Well, taking a shower there is very different, for one, and having rice at almost every meal is definitely something to get used to, but overall I think the whole group adjusted quickly without any trouble.

Kyle: The driving experience was the major cultural change in my eyes, but other than that, I really didn't have to adjust myself for the culture change.

Deanna: So many things I loved about the culture. The driving is so exciting—there seem to be no rules—just suggestions! I also love how friendly people are! I do admit that it was very difficult to find that there was no toilet

paper in the restrooms—and most toilets do not flush on their own!

Alex: I didn't have too much trouble. I even noticed myself adopting some of their culture, like eating with a spoon and a fork.

Some say that a short-term mission is a "life changing experience." Do you feel it has changed you? In what way?

Alex: Yes, the experience has inspired me to go on more mission trips as well as opened my eyes to the poverty that exists in this world.

Steven: Yes, before we went on the trip some people I talked to said that it would be life changing, and they were right.

Kyle: This has definitely changed me. During the two weeks, I found myself praying a lot more asking God to work through me and in turn, it brought me much closer to God.

Deanna: This trip is definitely life-changing and eye-opening. We saw that there is so much need for people to hear about Jesus and to be taken care of for just the basic needs. I still can't get over all the children we saw begging in the streets with such hungry eyes. But at the same time we saw so many youths who were so joyful—even with the



little that they had—and they were especially joyful to worship God and share with others. I hope people in America will share that same enthusiasm! It felt so awesome to be able to go, and share God’s love with people who were ready for it!

Now you have had the experience, what advice would you give to someone else about to embark on a short-term mission?

Kyle: Go for it! It’s a blast, and you and the people you’re going to see won’t be let down.

Deanna: Don’t be afraid—God takes care of us and blesses us no matter what country we are in. Also, just listen to the Holy Spirit and he will guide you—even if that means making changes along the way.

Alex: My advice is to prepare mentally and physically before the trip. Our group did a lot of preparation and although it was hard sometimes, the trip went so well because of it.

Would you do this again?

Steven: Absolutely!

Kyle: Yes, I believe I would. I had a lot of fun and I



know that we touched many people, bringing them closer to God, which is a great feeling that I would love to experience again.

Deanna: No doubt! I’m just getting started!

Alex: Yes, this type of work and experience is something I definitely want to do in the future, because the trip was so amazing and it so passed my expectations. ☺

Benefits of a short-term mission trip

A short-term mission trip cannot do the work of full-time, long-term missionaries. But the participants nevertheless have a mission: to tell others about Jesus through words and actions. With proper planning and execution, a short trip can bring benefits to everyone concerned: the participants, their supporters, the churches in the host area, and those who learn about Jesus through the work that is done.

A mission trip should always be done in conjunction with local churches, so that people will be connected with an ongoing source of help after the short-termers have gone home. The host churches benefit from an influx of energetic people who have set aside their normal schedules to focus on a particular task. Visitors from another nation spark interest, motivating the churches to advertise their event and providing incentive for people to come. Simply by being visitors, the short-termers can do something that the locals cannot.

Financial assistance is often involved—people who can afford to travel also have money to help pay for event expenses, building repairs, supplies, etc. Some assistance may continue after the trip is over, too, as participants learn of additional needs. But any assistance, whether in personnel or finances, should not dwarf the local abilities so much that dependency or passivity is created.

People in the host community benefit by hearing

the good news of Jesus Christ, or receiving physical benefits such as clean water, medical help, building supplies, etc. People also benefit by being directed to a local church, a community of people who will continue to offer spiritual and in some cases physical help.

Participants receive many benefits, too, usually starting even before they go. Some trips require extensive training, in which participants learn how to share the gospel in different ways and settings. And even if they don’t travel at all, a group of believers is likely to experience spiritual growth simply from setting aside their normal routines to live, work, and talk about the gospel with each other.

As they travel, participants learn about the culture they are visiting and broaden their awareness of the world, noting economic disparities, different types of civil government, spiritual needs, and the diversity that exists not just in the world but also within the family of God. When things do not go exactly as planned, they pray, and then watch God work. In many cases they will learn from the zeal of local Christians, and bring some of that enthusiasm home with them.

Those who support the travelers in prayer and finances also benefit, in part from the stories and zeal that the participants bring back with them. ☺

— Michael Morrison

Speaking of Life...



with Joseph Tkach

Most Americans are eagerly anticipating the November elections, hoping that a new president will mean a new beginning for our country. Voters might disagree over which party and candidate is more likely to bring that new beginning, but there is wide agreement on what they'd like to see happen.

Most voters hope that the new administration will bring economic stability, enough decent paying jobs, affordable gas prices, accessible healthcare, effective schools, security from terrorists and criminals, quick victory in war, an effective immigration policy, a stable housing market, and a sense of hope for the future.

That's a tall order.

Many Americans are fearful, not only about our nation's future, but their own as well. Between unstable families, unsafe streets, financial struggles, job problems, and health problems, life has become depressing for many of us. Elections can pro-

vide a temporary shot-in-the-arm of hope, but where does a person turn when the momentary rush of hope and excitement fades into long-term reality?

The only hope that has enduring substance is the gospel. The gospel does not promise a charmed life filled with constant blessings, but it gives solid assurance that life is worth living, that problems are worth enduring, and that the risks of life are worth taking.

It provides hope that there is more to life than what we can see right now.

But the gospel is not just about the future; it also offers priceless benefits right now—freedom from guilt, assurance of being loved, guidance on right living, even a heads up that we can't rely on the things of this world.

Our real hope, the confidence we can have for the future, looks far beyond next week or even next year—it looks to Jesus Christ, who promises us life everlasting in

the joy of the household of God.

The gospel offers forgiveness for sin, confidence in salvation, and peace in our relationships. We don't always take full advantage of these, but the gospel offers them—free—because Jesus already paid for everything, in full.

Whomever we vote for in this election, we do so knowing that our Father in heaven, with his Son and the Holy Spirit, already voted for us long before we were born. And that's an election that will stand forever in Jesus Christ, who is both our representative and our substitute. We belong to the God who loves us, and there are no term limits on our place in his family. ☪

This article is derived from Speaking of Life, a weekly video program presented by Joseph Tkach on the Worldwide Church of God website. You can watch it online, listen online, or download the video, audio, or text. For all these options, go to www.wcg.org/av/spol.htm

Bystander

Let the Little Children Come

By Joyce Catherwood

Matthew 19:13-15; Mark 10:13-15; Luke 18:15-17

My daughter proudly clasped a red poppy in her chubby little hand, so anxious to give it to Jesus. As I got closer, I could see other parents already gathering. Then I overheard the disciples harshly rebuking the moms and dads who had brought their children to be blessed. Everyone looked duly chastised as they were told that Jesus had many more important matters to attend to. Their loud, unfriendly tone actually startled and frightened some of the little ones, who began to cry.

Had I misunderstood what Jesus was like? I had previously observed his respectful and loving interaction with both young and old, especially the powerless and others regarded as insignificant.

This was a huge letdown for me. Our society doesn't validate children, especially fatherless little girls, but I had expected Jesus to be different.

I turned to go back home. But I stopped in my tracks when I heard Jesus rebuke the rebukers! He told them to let the little children come to him, and not to hinder them because the kingdom of God belongs to them! He said, "Whoever does not receive the

kingdom like a little child will never enter it."

As the disciples backed off, parents hesitantly stepped forward with their children. Jesus knelt down and reached out to a wobbly toddler with a runny nose and tattered clothes. The playful little boy pulled away from his father's hand, ran to Jesus and jumped into his arms. With an enormous grin on his face, Jesus stood up. Within minutes, he was surrounded by giggling children, touching his hair, tugging on his sleeve, crawling on his lap. Then Jesus took each child, one by one, cradling the infants and lifting the others high in the air before blessing them.

And as for my own little bundle of joy, well, we waited our turn and Jesus accepted the bright red poppy she offered him, even though it was a little crumpled by then. He picked her up and for a few treasured moments they marveled at the beauty of her little gift, both deciding it was their favorite flower. Then he blessed her.

The littleness of these children contrasted sharply with the well-meaning, but overbearing disciples. These precious ones, so used to being ignored, pushed aside, even mistreated, not only received a blessing and validation from the humble Messiah, but were lifted up as tender examples of the very essence of the kingdom of God. ☪

What, Why, When, How, Where, Who

By Barbara Dahlgren

Journalism students memorize the following poem from Rudyard Kipling's *The Elephant's Child* to help them remember the best way to gather information:

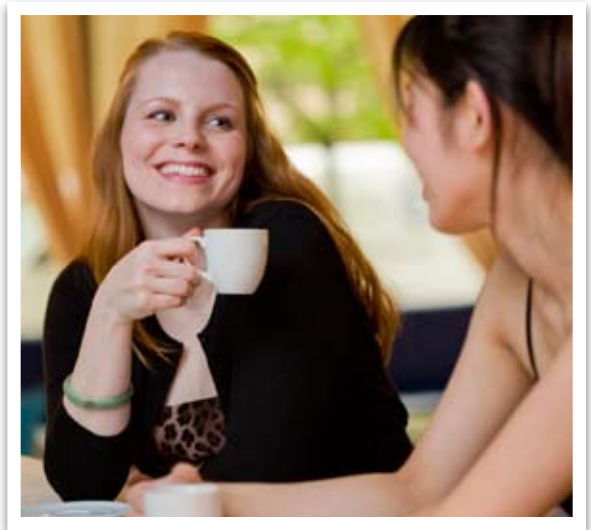
I keep six honest serving-men.

(They taught me all I knew); Their names are
What and Why and When and How and Where
and Who.

Since I'm writing a column for *Christian Odyssey*, you may want to ask me the same questions. My answers in reverse order would be:

"Who are you?" For almost 40 years I have been a pastor's wife. I'm also a mother, grandmother, friend, former teacher, former newspaper columnist, humorist, speaker, thinker, writer and Christian.

"Where do you come from?" Born in the foothills of the Ozarks, I was raised in St. Louis, Missouri, met my husband at college in Texas, have lived in Florida, Kentucky, Washington, and Michigan, and am presently living in San Jose, California.



Everyone we meet has a story to share, and the right questions—not nosy ones, but caring ones—can help us connect with others.

"How do you come up with topics to write about?" Occasionally I'll read or hear something that triggers a thought, but most of my ideas come from everyday life situations. Readers supply great information, too, by e-mailing me at bdahlgren@wcgsouthbay.org.

"When did you start writing?" It seems like I've been writing forever, but the first article I sold was in 1975.

"Why do you write?" My goal is to show God's hand and humor in everyday life.

"What do you hope to accomplish?" My hope is for people to think, share thoughts, and take their Christian calling, but not themselves, too seriously.

Journalists have long known that the secret of getting a good story hinges on asking questions. In a way, we are all journalists. Everyone we meet has a story to share, and the right questions—not nosy ones, but caring ones—can help us connect with

others.

Some nosy questions you might want to avoid would be: How much do you weigh? How old are you? What did you pay for that car? What is your original hair color? Is that a bird's nest or toupee on your head?

Some caring questions might be: What brings you to our fair city? Would you like to be part of our Bible study group? How did that make you feel? What are your thoughts? Why don't you list your options with the pros and cons?

Jesus used questions to expand others' understanding. He often asked his disciples, "What do you think?" Being Jesus, he knew what they thought, but he wanted them to use their minds. Why did he ask, "Who do people say I am?" in Matthew 16? Was it so they would think about misguided ideas some might have about him? And when he followed with, "Who do you think I am?" was it so they would solidify their faith?

Those last two questions are still being debated today. I'm just thinking out loud here...but as Christians, I hope we know the difference between who people say Jesus is and who he really is.

So here I am—a journalist full of questions, seeking a deeper relationship with Jesus, hoping to connect with others, claiming God has a sense of humor, writing about everyday life, and praying God blesses our journey as we think out loud together! ☪

From Both Sides Now

Sheila Graham

I don't read *The Wall Street Journal* every day, but this particular article on the "Opinion" page caught my eye.¹ Well, what actually caught my eye was the photo of Batman in the middle of the article, plus this callout: "This summer's blockbuster shows that Americans still understand the difference between good and evil."

The articulate author of this op-ed piece, Andrew Klavan, was bemoaning the fact that Hollywood can only seem to produce films with definitive lines between right and wrong in fantasy or comic-inspired films such as *The Dark Knight*, *Spiderman 3* or *Narnia*.

Klavan argues that when filmmakers handle realistic films about terrorism or some other social evil, "The good guys become indistinguishable from the bad guys, and we end up denigrating the very heroes who defend us."

As one who grew up reading stacks of comic books as a child, I enjoy these action films with easily identifiable heroes and villains. But, I'm not so sure he's right to conclude from the huge success of *The Dark Knight* at the box office that Americans are so keen on being reminded of the difference between right and wrong.

Klavan asks why conservative filmmakers don't make realistic films with clearly defined values. His answer: "Doing what's right is hard, and speaking the truth is dangerous. Many have been abhorred for it, some killed, one crucified."

Is he right? Has it come to that? Are all our displays of tolerance and our attempts to understand both sides of a question to be strangled by fear? As one of those who identifies with the values set forth by the "one crucified"—Jesus—I certainly hope not.

When I lived in California, my values were considered conservative. When I moved to Texas, my values—the very same values—are considered by some as liberal. I'm not unhappy about this. I don't kid myself that I've got all the answers, but I hope that means I'm closer to following in the footsteps of Jesus. People couldn't figure him out either.

We should not try to limit our Savior—because we can't. He is not limited by our narrow viewpoints. Does that mean he is tolerant of sin? Of course not. He paid for human sin with his life.

Yet Jesus allowed prostitutes to minister to him. He set adulteresses free, telling them to sin no more. He healed both Jews and Romans, wealthy and poor, male

and female. He not only talked to a Samaritan woman, unheard of for a Jewish rabbi, but also revealed to her he was the Messiah.

A pastor friend of mine gave the example of Jesus' story of the Good Samaritan. To the Jews of that age there was no such thing as a "good" Samaritan, of course. He said if Jesus were telling the story of the Good Samaritan to us today, he might very well call it the story of the Good Muslim.

It is unfortunate that we Christians tend to create Jesus in our own image. For when we do, we lose sight of how amazing our Savior really is. What would Jesus do? Would he fit any of today's labels? Don't be too sure. The biblical account shows him doing just the opposite of what was expected, not only by his enemies, but by those closest to him.

Yes, Jesus was crucified for telling the truth, but the truth for which he was killed could not be categorized as far right conservative truth or far left liberal. It was the wonderful truth that our Father loves humanity and sent his Son to be one of us, to live and die and be raised again to remove our sins and heal our hearts.

Our Savior sacrificed his life to redeem the world—the entire world. That redemption includes everyone who has ever lived or will live in the future. God wants all humanity to be with him as his beloved children forever.

Jesus loves both saints and sinners. He loves both conservatives and liberals. He loves both Republicans and Democrats. He loves both Batman and the Joker. He loves Christians, Muslims, Jews, Buddhists, Hindus, atheists—he loves every one.

So, fellow Christians, in the heightened atmosphere of partisan finger pointing and mudslinging accusations we've had to experience for the last year or two, let's not forget who we are—for the love of Christ. ☪



Sheila Graham is a freelance writer and speaker on religious topics. She holds degrees in religion from Azusa Pacific University's Haggard School of Theology and from Claremont Graduate University.

¹ The Wall Street Journal, Friday, July 25, 2008, "Opinion," page A15.

Jesus was crucified for telling the truth, but his truth cannot be categorized as conservative or liberal.

The Untold “Un-Story” of Trophimus

By Kerry Gubb

We who live by faith in Jesus Christ have no need of patron saints, secondary role models or supplementary heroes.

Jesus is our all. The value of lesser Bible characters is in the lessons and insights their stories offer to support our growing up into the Master in all things (Ephesians 4:15).

Trophimus, who worked in the gospel ministry with the apostle Paul, is a more unlikely candidate for fame than most, rating, as he does, less than a column inch in a large-print Bible. We know that he was:

- from the province of Asia (Acts 20:4),
- specifically from Ephesus (Acts 21:29), which led Jewish religious zealots to wrongly assume that Paul had brought him into the Temple precinct, which made him the unwitting cause of a nasty riot.
- left behind in Miletus sick by Paul, unable to help him, topping off his unimpressive list of accomplishments (2 Timothy 4:20).

That, friends, is all of it. Not very impressive! A story untold ... because there's just not much of a story to tell. In fact, it might be better called an “Un-Story.” Which is the point.

Any genuine Christian might dream of doing something magnificent for the Master, but our lives in reality are pretty ordinary.

presenting the gospel of the kingdom. Most of us won't be appointed to lofty positions and roles. Most of our evangelism will be quiet and personal. Most of our service to the Master will be unsung and unrecorded in Scripture—even more obscure, in fact, than the service to the gospel and ministry Trophimus gave. At least he got his name in print!

A good number of us personally share Trophimus' keenly-honed talent for obscurity.

Most of us won't have stories told about our leading the charge into glorious exploits in the name of Jesus like, say, a Billy Graham.

Most of us won't become well-known media personalities,

Actually, we who live the resurrection life of faith, along with Trophimus, *are* mentioned in the Bible.

We're all familiar with the faith chapter “Hall of Fame” (Hebrews 11), comprised of well-known servants of God who conquered kingdoms, administered justice, stopped the mouths of lions, quenched the fury of flames, and so on. Acknowledged in the same chapter alongside these spotlighted, specified luminaries, there is also a “Hall of Obscurity”—an unstipulated mass of faithful servants of God (verse 36—collectively called “others”) for whom the cavalry did not come over the hill in the nick of time.

These are people whose names will remain unknown in this life, whose faith in the Master carried them all the way through privation, torture and martyrdom.

Historically, the obscure hugely outnumber the famous. Let's be honest. Although any genuine Christian disciple worth the title might sometimes dream of doing something magnificent—or at least significant—for the Master, our lives in reality are pretty ordinary, aren't they?

In his book, *Community and Growth*, Jean Vanier, founder of the worldwide L'Arche Movement, describes accepting this honest reality as “the second call.” He writes:

“The first call is frequently to follow Jesus or to prepare ourselves to do wonderful and noble things for the Kingdom. We are appreciated and admired by family, by friends or by the community. The second call comes later, when we accept that we cannot do big or heroic things for Jesus; it is a time of renunciation, humiliation and humility.”

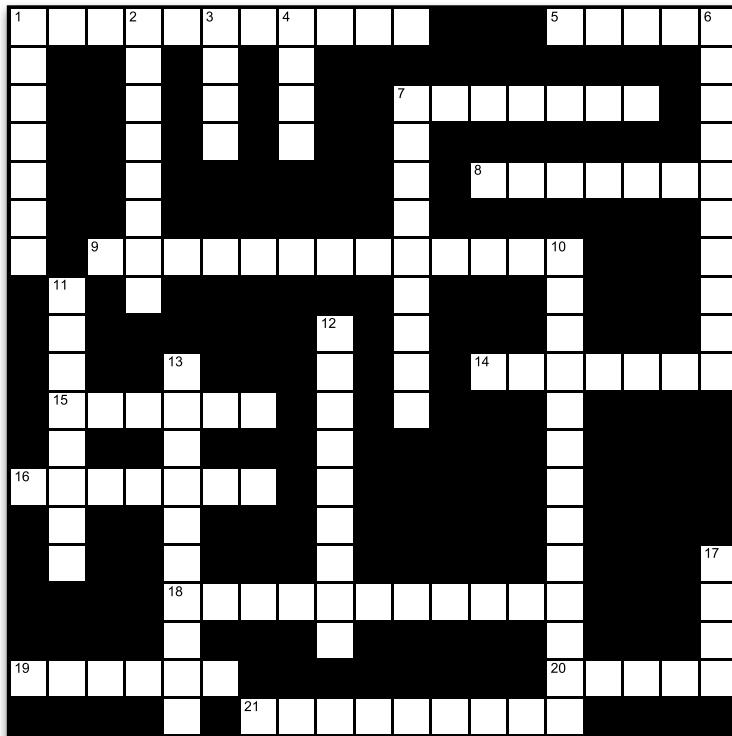
He's right.

Some Christians waste much valuable time waiting for the big moment—the cosmic call—the opportunity to do something extraordinary, when in reality, most of us are just ordinary people. We are called by an extraordinary God who has chosen to draw other ordinary people to himself in a hundred thousand different places—one at a time—most often through their association with ordinary Christians.

Although he was God in the flesh, the Master himself, in his own culture, was so much one of us, so unremarkable (Isaiah 53:2), so “normal” (at least, on the surface), that *“The ordinariness of Jesus was a huge roadblock to belief in his identity and work in the days of his flesh. It is still a roadblock.”* So writes Eugene Peterson, who translated *The Message Bible*.¹

Christian Word Crossword Puzzle

How to play: Solve the crossword puzzle by first looking at the clues. The answers are in the articles in this edition of *Christian Odyssey*.



Designed by Christopher Sealey

I have no idea if Trophimus was content with his unimpressive, back-seat, supporting role in the life of the first-century church. My philosophical affinity with this man rests on the charitable assumption that he was. Regardless of how Trophimus felt about it, the fact is that most of us will live out the resurrection life of faith in relative obscurity—unsung, unrecorded, unacknowledged this side of the fullness of the kingdom.

We should know that God remembers our labor of love—that he values our faithful, obscure, unsung, unrecorded, unacknowledged service to him every bit as much as the stuff that gets published. We can take confidence that we are included in this encouraging statement in Hebrews 6:10: “God is not unjust; he will not forget your work and the love you have shown him as you have helped his people and continue to help them.”

The world may not know your name. That’s okay; God knows your name.

The world may not know your faithful, quiet service. That’s okay; God knows your faithful service.

This reassurance is what I take, both from Hebrews 11 and the unremarkable “Un-Story” of Trophimus. ☪

¹ Eugene Peterson, *Christ Plays in Ten Thousand Places* (Eerdmans, 2005), p. 35.

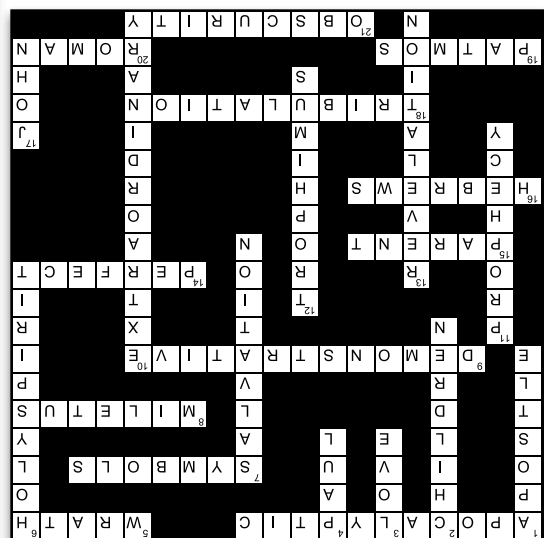
Across Clues:

1. literary style (use of imagery and symbols) used by John in writing Revelation
5. Revelation prophesies God’s ____ (judgment) on the wicked.
7. Used by John in Revelation, which were well understood by early Christians.
8. Paul left Trophimus behind sick in this ancient Greek city (2 Tim. 4:20)
9. ____ love is not only based on rules and discipline.
14. ____ love casts away all fear (1 John 4:18)
15. a partner with God in raising a child
16. “Hall of Fame”—Chapter 11 of this New Testament book
18. a period of immense suffering and sacrifice
19. John was in exile on this island in the Aegean Sea when he wrote the book of Revelation
20. Emperor Nero was of this nationality
21. Trophimus’ keenly-honed talent

Down Clues:

1. Paul’s title (2 Tim. 1:1)
2. raised by parents in partnership with God
3. the bond between a parent and a child
4. An apostle of Jesus Christ (2 Tim. 1:1)
6. a member of the Triune Godhead, The Comforter (John 14:16)
7. Central theme of the book of Revelation: the ____ of the saints.
10. God uses ordinary people to do ____ things.
11. A divinely inspired revelation to John on Patmos, which used symbols and figures
12. from the province of Asia, he worked in ministry with Paul (Acts 20:4)
13. last book of the Bible
17. author of the book of Revelation

Solution:



Living a Holy Life

A study of 1 Thessalonians 4:1-12

By Mike Morrison

Paul has reminded the believers in Thessalonica of their faithfulness in midst of some trials. Now he reminds them of what he taught them about Christian life. Although the Thessalonians had been idolaters (1:9), Paul does not say anything about the need to avoid idolatry. He focuses on sexual purity, love, and work.

He begins with a general principle: **Finally, brothers, we instructed you how to live in order to please God, as in fact you are living. Now we ask you and urge you in the Lord Jesus to do this more and more (4:1).** Paul's message in Thessalonica was not just about how to get eternal life on the day of judgment—it included instruction about behavior, as well. Some ways of life are more pleasing to God than others—not because God has arbitrary pet peeves, but because our behavior can help or hurt the people he loves (including ourselves).



We are already children of God, but Paul exhorts us to act like it, to make our behavior consistent with what God says that we are.

Paul praises the Thessalonians for already doing what he had told them, and he encourages them to continue, because the instructions are not just Paul's personal preferences—he was acting as God's messenger: **For you know what instructions we gave you by the authority of the Lord Jesus.**

Sex and sanctification (verses 3-8)

It is God's will that you should be sanctified, Paul begins. "Sanctified" means to be holy, or to be "set apart." In one sense, all Christians have already been set apart or sanctified or made holy by Jesus Christ. But Paul also encourages believers to set themselves apart for God's use.

We are already children of God, but Paul exhorts us to act like it, to make our behavior consistent with what God says that we are. God wants us to set our lives in a certain way.

What does sanctification include? The first thing Paul mentions, and the topic he gives the most space to, is sexual conduct: **that you should avoid sexual immorality.** Greco-Roman religions had few

restrictions on male sexuality, and as a result, sexual conduct was always high on the list of moral exhortations given to Gentiles. Paul does not specify here exactly what was included in "immorality" (he and Timothy may have already covered those details)—he just reminds them to avoid what they had already been taught is wrong.

Paul explains this instruction not on the basis of Old Testament laws, but on a more general principle: **that each of you should learn to control his own body in a way that is holy and honorable.** Self-control was one of the primary virtues of Greco-Roman civilization, and Paul appeals to that cultural value to argue against a common cultural vice.

He contrasts self-restraint with people who are driven by carnal urges: **not in passionate lust like the heathen, who do not know God.** Paul uses the word *ethnē*, which means "nations" or "Gentiles." His readers were Gentiles, but they are not to live in the same way as everyone else around them. If they indulge in sexual immorality, they are acting as if they are ignorant of who God is and what he wants. They are letting themselves be controlled by the flesh, not the Spirit.

Paul further says **that in this matter no one should wrong his brother or take advantage of him.** Sexual immorality hurts other people, and it should not be done to fellow believers—nor to anyone else, for that matter. People are not to be used for one's own self-gratification.

Paul adds yet another reason for sexual purity: **The Lord will punish...for all such sins, as we have already told you and warned you.** Part of Paul's message in Thessalonica was that God would eventually punish selfish behavior that hurts other people. (The NIV has the word "men," but in a passage about sexual sin, this could easily be read as referring only to males, when the Greek text is not gender specific. A more literal translation is "the Lord is an avenger concerning all these things.")

Paul brings the discussion back to God's will: **For God did not call us to be impure, but to live a holy life.** God wants sexual purity. Anything else is impure, unholy, unspiritual, and unchristian.

Most of Paul's exhortations are given without supporting argumentation, but when it comes to sex, it seems that Paul felt that more support was needed.

Perhaps the Thessalonians had asked for some reasons for what was, in their culture, an odd restriction. So Paul gives several reasons: 1) immorality comes from a lack of self-control, 2) it hurts other people, 3) God wants us to avoid it, and 4) he will punish it.

Paul concludes by reminding the readers that this is God's idea, not just his own: **Therefore, he who rejects this instruction does not reject man but God, who gives you his Holy Spirit.** Since God is sharing his life and nature with us, and this is the life we want for all eternity, then, as best as we can with his Spirit transforming us, our lives should be holy and conformed to the pattern that Jesus Christ gives us.

Respectable behavior (verses 9-12)

Paul then moves to two other areas of life—love and work. He does not say much about either one, apparently because the Thessalonians are already doing well, and a brief reminder will be sufficient. **Now about brotherly love we do not need to write to you, for you yourselves have been taught by God to love each other.** Paul is using two Greek words for love: He did not need to write to them about *philia* love (mutual love) because they already had *agapē* love (unilateral love) for one another.

And in fact, you do love all the brothers throughout Macedonia. (Apparently they had some contact with the church in Philippi, and perhaps Berea.) **Yet we urge you, brothers, to do so more and more.** In other words, good job! Keep up the good work!

Paul turns from their behavior with other believers, to their role in the larger society around them: **Make it your ambition to lead a quiet life, to mind your own business and to work with your hands, just as we told you.** If you want to be ambitious, count yourself a success when you stay out of trouble—that's a pretty ambitious goal in itself. If you are going to be persecuted, make sure it is for the gospel and not for bad behavior. And don't be lazy (some Greeks thought that manual labor was beneath their dignity).

He gives two reasons for this: **so that your daily**

life may win the respect of outsiders and so that you will not be dependent on anybody. Let your behavior make the gospel more attractive to unbelievers (similar to Titus 2:5, 8, 10), and don't become financially beholden to someone else. Mooching doesn't do the gospel any favors. Be an asset to society, and people might be a little more willing to listen to what you have to say.

The coming of the Lord

Paul's next topic is the return of Christ—the only place in his letters where he gives details about what will happen. The Thessalonian believers wanted to know more about this topic. We'd like to know more, today, too, because some of the things Paul says are puzzling.

He begins by discussing the resurrection of believers who die before Jesus returns. It sounds like someone in the Thessalonian church had died—although it's possible that the people were asking a hypothetical question.

Paul assures them that people who die will not miss out on the great event. They will have places of honor as the saints rise to meet the returning King. Is Paul teaching a "rapture" of the saints before the Great Tribulation? We'll discuss the details in the next issue of *Christian Odyssey*. ☪

Taking it personally

- How would I respond if someone starting giving me commands I already knew about, and I was already doing a good job in that area? (vv. 1, 10)
- How "set apart" is my life for God's use? Are there areas of my life that are not given to him? (v. 3)
- Why does Paul specify that we should not harm a brother (or sister) in sexual immorality? (v. 5)
- Are all people taught by God to love each other? (v. 9)

The Greeks Had a Word for It

"Πορνεία"

Paul told the Thessalonians to avoid it. He told the Corinthians to flee from it. He told the Galatians it was a work of the flesh. "It" was sexual immorality—referred to by the Greek word *porneia*. This word comes from *pornē*, prostitute, which comes from the word *pernaō*, meaning "to sell." *Porneia* is what prostitutes sold. The English word pornography comes from this same root word.

Although *porneia* originally meant to consort with prostitutes, it was also used for a variety of other sexual practices outside of marriage, including incest (1 Corinthians 5:1), adultery (Matthew 5:32), the orgy at Sinai (1 Corinthians 10:8; Numbers 25:1), and the immorality in Sodom (Jude 7). "Among you," Paul writes in Ephesians 5:3, "there must not even be a hint of *porneia*."

Hmm...

Setting aside the scandal caused by His Messianic claims and His reputation as a political firebrand, only two accusations of personal depravity seem to have been brought against Jesus of Nazareth. First, that He was a Sabbath-breaker. Secondly, that He was "a gluttonous man and a winebibber, a friend of publicans and sinners"—or (to draw aside the veil of Elizabethan English that makes it sound so much more respectable) that He ate too heartily, drank too freely, and kept very disreputable company, including grafters of the lowest type and ladies who were no better than they should be.

Dorothy Leigh Sayers,
Unpopular Opinions

A century ago, your window to the world was in fact the front window of your house. You paid attention to threats that were local. You could read the paper and note the threats that were far away, but they had little impact on your daily assessments. Fifty years ago, your window to the world was the television. With visuals and the humanizing effect of in-person interviews, distant threats became more real and pertinent to Gut. Today, what you see on television has become your local community, with all of the rapes, murders and abductions from around the world neatly organized and queued up for your consumption. When a sweet little girl 1400 km away goes missing, Gut tells you that all little children in your immediate community are at risk. The truth, of course, is quite different.

Dan Gardner
Risk: The Science and Politics of Fear

God is not merely mending, not simply restoring a status quo. Redeemed humanity is to be something more glorious than unfallen humanity.

C. S. Lewis, *Miracles*

Perfect love may cast out fear, but fear is remarkably potent in casting out love.

P. D. James, *Time to Be in Earnest*

I want to be an evangelical around the Commission for Equality and Human Rights...but I don't want to be a nutty evangelical who believes that only a moral agenda is important. I do not want to be a placard-waving evangelical who believes that you are only being prophetic if you are getting up everybody's nose, or the sort that writes to me to ask why I haven't condemned somebody. I want to be an evangelical who brings light and life, and who pursues a passion to be good news. I want to be an evangelical who upholds the uniqueness of Christ. And if I have to say something negative, I say it on my knees and I say it with sorrow and compassion, and I don't glory in the idea that prophetic evangelicalism is measured by the extent to which we are seen to be obnoxious in the public square.

Joel Edwards,
*Leader of the United Kingdom
Evangelical Alliance*

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