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She came to me abused and neglected. She taught me a lot about God.



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An unusual ministry partnership from the other side of the world.

CHRISTIAN Odyssey

June-August 2010

Exploring Life and Faith



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Is your child's faith (or lack of it) up to you?

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Letters to the Editor

I was born in Port-au-Prince almost 50 years ago. My family's ancestral home is Jacmel. I was very encouraged and blessed by your article in *Odyssey* magazine. Thanks so very much. I lost several cousins in the earthquake. I too hope and pray that this tragic event will work to bring the country to where God wants it to be and will be a vehicle to bring Jesus more tangibly to the people.

EL, email

I read your most recent article about forgiving the man who killed your sisters. Seven years ago I was studying about praying for our enemies, and God laid on my heart to contact the man who killed my father. So, I dutifully prayed for him. I prayed the prayer I thought a good Christian would. (Lord, bring someone to his life that will lead him to you.) Before I could get the words finished, I felt a voice in my head (Holy Spirit)

say "Why not you?" I argued for half an hour, but eventually I was obedient.

I wrote a letter to the man who killed my father. I was completely honest with him. I told him that I didn't hate him. I told him that Christ died for all of us. I told him that God doesn't have a scale for sin, one sin is just as bad as another in his eyes. I told him I was able to forgive him through my faith in Christ's sacrifice.

A week later I received a letter from him that gave many people in my family closure on this horrible event. He was truly sorry, not sorry because he got caught, but sorry because he took another man's life. We began writing back and forth. In each letter I shared with him the love of Christ. It was only through his divine strength that I could write these letters and see this man as a man, not the man who took my father's life.

I also sent him a Bible. About four years ago I received a letter from him that said he had received Christ as his Savior and was working with the prison chaplain to witness to other prisoners. He was beginning a prison ministry. I wanted to share this with you. God is so good. And unless you've experienced great loss at the hands of someone else, you can't fully appreciate just how amazing his grace is.

BC, email

Letters for this section should be addressed to "Letters to the Editor." Send your letters to Grace Communion International, PO Box 5005, Glendora, CA 91740-0730, or by e-mail to john.halford@gci.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

Three Cups of Tea:

One Man's Mission to Promote Peace . . . One School at a Time

by Greg Mortenson and David Oliver Relin | Reviewed by Cheryl Shallenberger

After a failed attempt to scale the world's second highest peak, K2, Greg Mortenson was saved and cared for by the Balti people of an impoverished Pakistani village. When he recovered, he resolved to repay the generosity of the village leader and his people by building them a school.

It took years of struggle to complete the school, but along the way his commitment evolved into building many more schools for both boys and girls in this Muslim country. As his goals grew, so did Mr. Mortenson as he learned from his new friends that building relationships was just as important as building schools.

This book helped me understand that education is a key to peace. Fighting terrorism was not Mr. Mortenson's goal when he built the first school, but he came to see how education does help reduce terrorism. *Three Cups of Tea* is now required reading for senior U.S. military commanders, Pentagon officers in counter-insurgency training, and Special Forces deploying to Afghanistan. Mortenson explained, "Illiterate young boys often wind up in [terrorist] camps.



When we increase literacy, we substantially reduce tensions."

Eventually, despite the many obstacles, setbacks, threats and even being kidnapped, Mortenson received the blessing of the Pakistan government, giving him permission to build schools and other projects. Now, as co-founder and executive director of Central Asia Institute (CAI), Mortenson has built more than 130 schools and projects.

As the CAI expresses it, "The tribal communities of northern Pakistan taught Mortenson a critical lesson in our first five years of existence: sustainable and successful development can only occur when projects are entirely initiated, implemented and managed by local communities. It is also important to listen and learn from the local communities served, rather than impose external evaluations or judgment of what is best from an outsider's perspective."

The book's title comes from a Balti proverb: "The first time you share tea with a Balti, you are a stranger. The second time, you are an honored guest. The third time you become family." *Three Cups of Tea*, a New York Times bestseller, is a testimony to the power of one man's devotion and determination, as well as his readiness to listen and learn from those he is committed to serve.

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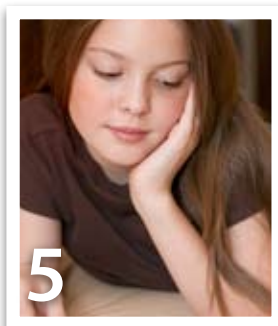
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If You're Happy and You Know it—Binky!

By John Halford

Next to my house in rural Indiana there is a row of blue spruce trees. A family of rabbits has made their home underneath them.

We don't see much of them during the winter. Rabbits don't actually hibernate, but they are a lot less active in the colder months. But when the warmer weather returns, they are out and about again. I was watching two of them recently on a beautiful late spring evening.

They scampered around our property, checking to see if any of my lettuce plants were edible yet, and generally just looking things over.

Suddenly, one of them jumped about 18 inches in the air, twisted its body and spun around, before landing on all fours. Then the other rabbit did the same thing. They continued with this odd behavior for about two minutes before resuming more normal activity.

What on earth was happening? Were they frightened? Were they having convulsions? Had they gone mad? Not at all—they were happy and they knew it,



our standing with God. We know we are not doing enough. We realize we need to make some changes and we hope it is not too late. Unlike the birds of the air, the lilies of the field, and the rabbits under the spruce trees, we do not feel secure in

our environment, either physical or spiritual. We feel our relationship with God needs to be repaired, and we promise him and ourselves to “do better.” But of course, we never do. So we spend a lot of time worrying, and waiting for the divine axe to fall.

It is sad that so many of us see our relationship with God as a kind of obstacle course. Like the Pharisees of Jesus' day, many Christians still see obedience to God as a grim struggle against almost overwhelming odds. But as Paul wrote to the new Christians in Rome, “God's kingdom isn't a matter of what you put in your stomach, for goodness' sake. It's what God does with your life as he sets it right, puts it together, and completes it with joy” (Romans 14:17, *The Message*).

Jesus went to great lengths to show us that his love for us is not capricious or conditional. He said he would never leave us or forsake us (Hebrews 13:5) and promised that nothing and no one can ever snatch us out of his hands (John 10:28). We can be utterly confident that the really important aspects of our lives are secure. So even when other things get rough, we still have good reason to binky (Luke 6:23).

Just watching those rabbits binkyng left me feeling good. Their joy at being alive was contagious. Real joy is like that, and this so often gloomy, anxiety-filled and stressed-out world needs to catch it.

I am not suggesting you actually try to binky. That falls firmly in the category of “don't try this at home” for most of us. But the idea of showing by your behavior the joy you feel within is certainly something to consider. Or as Paul put it, “May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit” (Romans 15:13). ❧

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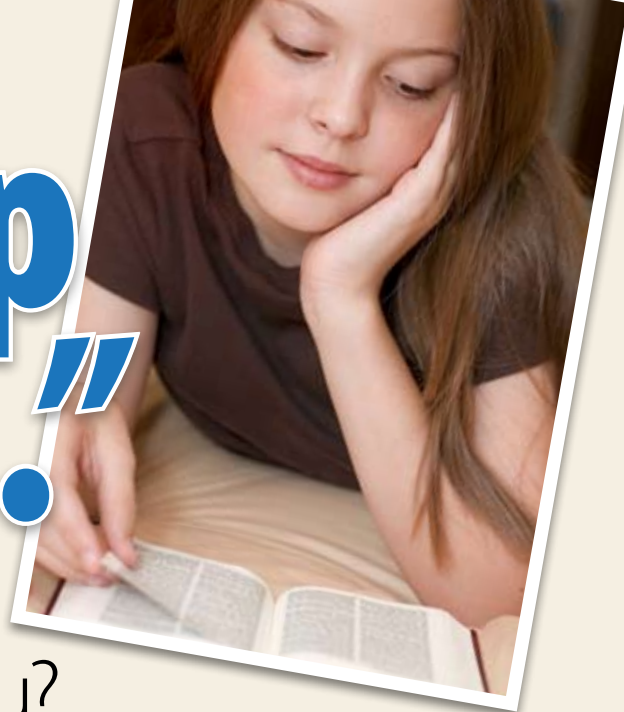
and they were showing it. People who study these things call this odd behavior a “binky.” Binkyng is the rabbit's way of expressing pure joy, and my rabbit neighbors had reasons to be joyful.

And why not? They had survived the winter. A new litter of kittens—that's the correct name for baby rabbits—was coming along very nicely. Those kind people had planted a new supply of lettuce, which would soon be ready. They had food and shelter, so why not be content? Life was good. So they binkied.

As with the lilies of the field and the birds of the air (see Matthew 6), I think we can learn a lesson from binkyng rabbits.

Maybe you've noticed that we Christians can sometimes be a rather doleful lot. We tend to take ourselves a little too seriously, and although we might be reluctant to admit it, we worry constantly about

“Train Up A Child...”



Is Your Child's Faith (or Lack of It) Up to You?

By Jeb Egbert

Most Christian parents want nothing more than for their children to know Jesus Christ. For years I read several scriptural passages that informed my approach to parenting. For example, Deuteronomy 6:7, in the context of the commandments that God gave to the Israelites after their exodus from Egypt, says “Impress them [the commandments] on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, and when you lie down and when you get up.”

Proverbs 22:6, in my understanding at the time, put a great deal of pressure on parents, for it said, “Train a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not turn from it.”

Such passages convinced me that my children's commitment to Jesus was squarely a function of how I trained them. Only if I did my job well would my children “not turn from” the way they should go. What pressure! I had better get this Christian parenting thing right!

Is it really all on you?

But is a child's eternal relationship with God truly a function of parental or caregiver teaching? Some parents work with their children from a young age, reading from the Bible, praying with and for their children, exposing them to multiple church activities and functions, ensuring they attend camps and mission trips, exposing them to passionate and charismatic youth ministers, only to see their children dismiss

Christianity as adults.

In my ministry of some 30 years, much of it exclusively focused on working with children and adolescents, I have been approached by numerous “model” Christian parents who harbor guilt and shame because despite their having faithfully followed all the “right” childrearing principles, their children reach adulthood with no interest in developing a relationship with Jesus.

Early in my ministry I would have concluded that such parents had not done a good job of bringing up their children in the nurture and admonition of the Lord (Ephesians 6:4). No matter how devoted they had been, I would have thought, if they had *truly* done

God wants our children have a relationship with him. He is at work in them, and he is patient in that work.

their jobs, their children would automatically grow into committed Christian adults.

Parental role

Research shows that many who enter a committed relationship with Jesus did so before the age of 13. George Barna's research in 2004 (www.barna.org) indicates “that nearly half of all Americans who accept Jesus Christ as their savior do so before reaching the age of 13 (43%), and that two out of three born again Christians made that commitment to Christ before their 18th birthday.” Furthermore, Barna's research shows that “among Christians who embraced Christ before their teen years, half were led to Christ by their

parents, with another one in five led by some other friend or relative.”

The words of Paul in 2 Timothy 3:14-15 are of interest in this context: “But as for you, continue in what you have learned and have become convinced of, because you know those from whom you learned it, and how *from infancy* you have known the holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Jesus Christ.” Parents clearly have an important role, but that does not change the fact that faith is a personal matter, one that all individuals must decide on for themselves.

At what age can children begin trusting in Christ?

Many Christians believe that children must be a certain age before they can truly understand the fullness

Parents clearly have an important role, but that does not change the fact that faith is a personal matter, one that all individuals must decide on for themselves.



of the gospel message of Jesus. In my early ministry I was convinced that pre-adolescent (and even adolescent) children were not mature enough to make a commitment to Jesus. I expected young people to be of a certain age, and even then, I emphasized their “producing fruit in keeping with repentance” (Matthew 3:8). I couldn’t imagine a child even knowing the full ramification of what “repentance” means.

So what is repentance? Several years ago, my wife shared an experience with me regarding a time when she was working with relatively young children in a children’s ministry. She said that when a small boy, around the age of 6, was asked about his commitment, he simply said, “I choose God.” Wow! What more needs to be said with respect to repentance?

One of the great moments of my life was watching one of my sons, early in his teen years, kneeling with a friend and taking communion. It was a moment I will never forget. Could it be real? Could it be lasting? He *seemed* too young.

The will and work of Jesus

Peter says in 2 Peter 3:9, “The Lord is not slow in keep-

ing his promise, as some understand slowness. He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance.” This is the same Peter who said in Acts 15:11, “We believe it is through the grace of our Lord Jesus that we are saved.”

Grace is the work of Jesus, not the work of parents. Parents are flawed. We make mistakes. But grace covers those mistakes. Grace says, “In spite of mistakes, I love you and will redeem you.” Timothy adds, “This is good, and pleases God our Savior, who wants all people to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth” (1 Timothy 2:3-4, TNIV).

Jesus’ work is a work of grace, and it is a work that is alive in all people, including our children. Jesus is patient. His timing is different than ours.

We want to know that our children have a committed

relationship with Jesus, and we are perplexed or even disturbed when we do not see evidence of such a relationship. But we can rest in the fact that not only is God patient with all, he *wants all to be saved*.

Parents have an important role to play in teaching their children about an enduring relationship with Jesus. But a child’s choices are not completely

dependent on how well parents teach them.

God wants our children have a relationship with him. He is at work in them, and he is patient in that work. That doesn’t diminish the importance of our instruction of our children. But it should give us pause to trust our children to God instead of fretting over them ourselves. Our role as parents is only one small part of the picture. Jesus’ role as Redeemer is what really matters.

So what should we do?

Given this, it is the responsibility of adults to follow the biblical admonition to teach our children and to bring them up in the nurture and admonition of the Lord. And if we do, can we know with certainty that our children will have the deep, abiding, intimate relationship with God that we pray for? No, we can’t. But thank God it doesn’t depend on us.

What we *can* know is that God loves our children unconditionally, that Christ has included them in his atoning and redemptive work, that he will never cease to work with them and will never let them go.

As a parent, I can think of no better assurance than that! ∞

Ted and Me, and Anthony Too: **THE JOY OF** **Mentoring**



By yourself you're unprotected. With a friend you can face the worst. Can you round up a third? A three-stranded rope isn't easily snapped.

Ecclesiastes 4:12, *The Message*

By Greg Williams

Several years ago I was at a conference in the pleasant little town of Elburn, Illinois, with a group of camp leaders. There was an engaging session on the topic of mentoring. We were encouraged to find a trusted, more experienced person to take us under wing and spend focused time helping us as we gained experience in ministry.



The next morning my good friend Ted and I went for a walk. I had known Ted for more than a decade and admired his wide variety of skills and experiences. He is 10 years my senior, so this seemed like the right fit. After circling the block for

the second time I got up the courage to ask him if he would mentor me. His reply was, "Why don't we just keep doing this ministry together and learn from each other?" My reaction was, "Yeah, that sounds good," but I was thinking "Am I not worthy to be a mentee?"

Nevertheless, Ted did become my mentor, and he and I have worked together in ministry for more than 10 years. I recently reminded him about our morning walk and he confessed to me that he had gracefully

declined a formal mentoring relationship because he felt inadequate to be my mentor. The upside to this story is that we forged ahead sharing ministry and life, and I was mentored in the process.

I have learned that mentoring is not so much a formal agreement with signed contracts that feels forced and stiff. Mentoring is, instead, a relationship based on mutual respect, honesty and shared experiences.

I've learned that mentoring is not so much a formal agreement, but a relationship based on mutual respect and shared experiences.

A younger protégé cannot and will not learn from a mentor he or she doesn't respect. Respect involves the skills, knowledge and track record of the mentor, but even more importantly, how the counsel and wisdom is delivered. Does the mentor talk down to the mentee or talk with the mentee? Does the mentor

pretend to know it all or does he or she exemplify the depth of a life-long learner? You get the idea.

Mentoring at the highest level is more than the transfer of knowledge and skills; these alone fit more into the realm of training or coaching. Mentoring requires something more: heart-level honesty. This means even having the tough conversations that are risky. (Proverbs 27:6 says that “wounds from a friend can be trusted.”) Being able to speak openly and offer corrective advice moves the relationship from coaching to mentoring. If truth-telling is not a high priority, there can be little mentoring value in the relationship. Both parties need to be able to talk honestly to

the invitation to the 12 disciples “come and follow me,” it was an open-ended opportunity to share the highlights of ministry, the difficulties of confrontation and persecution, and even the mundane activities of hiking about the country. It was an invitation to share life and friendship together.

The disciples had the great benefit of observing Jesus, serving beside Jesus, and then being sent out by Jesus (the best seminary experience ever). This pattern speaks to the rhythm of mentoring; there is movement from novice to co-worker, and then co-worker to skilled professional. These original mentees went from being weak, almost faithless students to believers who became the strong, faith-filled founders of the church.

Ted and I had been traveling together in the shared purposes of Generations Ministries even before we titled this ministry. Ted has always made himself available, being just a phone call or e-mail away, and he has patiently been the big brother whom I look up to (figuratively and literally—Ted is 6’ 7”). He and I both realize and deeply appreciate the constant presence of Jesus over our individual lives, our shared ministry, and the unique bonds of friendship that have formed as life and ministry have merged together. Thanks Ted, for allowing me into the journey of your life, and most of all thanks to Jesus, who binds us all in journey together.

When Jesus gave the invitation to the 12 disciples “come and follow me,” it was an invitation to share life and friendship together.

each other when things become fuzzy and less than genuine.

At the core, mentoring is about sharing life together (both personal and professional). When Jesus gave

Greg and Me

By Ted Johnston

I have known Greg for 20 years. We first met when he was 28 and I was 38. We both were employed in vocational ministry in Colorado; Greg in Denver and I in Grand Junction. We both coordinated regional youth ministry programs and we often met at such events.



When our denomination decided to make a change from one central summer camp to multiple regional camps, Greg and I were involved in the planning. This led to the formation of Generations Ministries, which has been

the focus of our journey together for the last 10 years.

This shared passion for youth ministry has been the thread binding us together as ministers and friends.

In his article, Greg mentions the conference we attended together in Elburn, Illinois. Such shared learning experiences have played a major role in knitting us together. They have helped us share a set of values and commitments that form the foundation of our ministry and friendship.

Greg mentions that I declined his first request to become his formal mentor. At the time, it did not seem right to me that I should take a “senior” role in our partnership. Yes, I am 10 years older. However, we were on the same path of learning and growing.

It seemed more appropriate that we should journey as equals.

Only later did I learn that a shared journey is what mentoring is all about. Yes, one typically serves as mentor, and the other as protégé (mentee), but I have found that effective mentoring is about mutual trust, respect and friendship. It is about life-on-life sharing, not about rigid hierarchy. And each learns from the other. In fact, I think I've learned far more from Greg than he has from me. But I know he feels the same about me. I think that's how mentoring is supposed to work.

I remember how profoundly I was impacted when at age 23 a pastor took me under his wing and treated me like a friend. I did not forget that he was pastor, but he made me feel like an equal partner on the journey of life. He gave me significant opportunities to share in his ministry. In fact, he is the one I credit with instilling in me a passion for youth ministry. I credit to him the foundation that has sustained me in ministry for 35 years.

Shortly after that early mentoring experience, I spent 15 years in business. There I had several "bosses" with the power to promote or fire me. However, what I experienced from most of them (and for this I am very grateful), was mentoring from a more experienced and able person who was willing to teach me, share life with me, and open doors of opportunity.

I will never forget my boss in Colorado who invited my wife Donna and me into his family life—we even lived in their home for a time. He then spent hours after work with me teaching me some of the "tricks of the trade." That greatly encouraged and challenged me—I worked hard to live into his example.

When I left that company in 1987 to enter ministry full time, I left behind four men and two women whom I had mentored. Any one of them was fully able to take my place. For that I give credit to the one who mentored me. And so there was a chain of mentoring that spanned three generations.

Through that experience and now in the mentoring relationship I have with Greg and with others, God has shown me that mentoring is not about power, not about obligation, not about a rigid program, but about life-on-life sharing focused on helping another person achieve their personal best. And it's about *passing the baton*.

I had the privilege this last March to pass the baton of leadership of Generations Ministries on to

Greg. I had not grown tired of my role in Generations Ministries. Not at all. But I knew it was time to step aside so Greg could step up. That is what mentors do.

Others had done it for me before. I had done it several times before and seen the wonderful fruit borne. And though it's not an easy thing to do (at least not for me), God has always given me new opportunities, including new possibilities for mentoring others, new opportunities to share life, passion and skill, to spend time (even years) equipping another, and then to turn leadership over to them. I hope to do it a few more times before I check out.

It seems to me that my generation (the "boomers") faces a significant opportunity (and challenge). Our generation has been dominant in numbers alone, but also in many other ways. Now we are challenged to pass the baton we have been given to the next generation. I pray that we will do so artfully—that we will

Mentoring is not about power, obligation, or a rigid program, but about life-on-life sharing focused on helping another person achieve their personal best. And it's about *passing the baton*.

do so in ways that serve those younger than us by not merely throwing the baton to them on our way out the door, but by spending time in transition, serving as their mentors. We do so by giving them a place "at the table," and not just any table, but the "head table." Then we need to give them the head position at the head table, even if that means that we move to a lower position.

Passing the baton, however, does not mean to abandon. Greg has asked me to continue serving as one of his advisors. One of the greatest joys of my life is seeing the Body of Christ operate as what it truly is: a family where multiple generations serve side-by-side. This is the way of Jesus, and I love it.

As Greg moved into my position, he needed someone to take his place. Because Greg had also been mentoring, there was someone ready to take the baton.

Greg and Me

By Anthony Mullins

Why would you do that?" It was a sincere question that deserved a thoughtful response. It was puzzling to me that he would let go of something so meaningful. When I posed the question five years ago to Greg Williams, a mentor of mine, he was the director of a Christian youth camp in North Carolina called Higher Ground.



of leadership to me.

Greg was in his 40s, vibrant and in good health and it made no sense for him to walk away from a good thing. He methodically walked me through his decision-making process and shared his strategy for making disciples. That conversation marked the beginning of our journey into a mentoring relationship.

He introduced me to what I will call a ministry of "share and release." He shared his deep desire to multiply disciples of Jesus and to help groom and release emerging leaders. We continued to tour the campground that afternoon and talked about life, family and ministry. Since that day, we have shared similar conversations over meals, at conferences, at camps, in coffee houses, over the phone, in his home and mine, at church, at airports, on long road trips, on the basketball court and in restaurants, celebrating personal and shared milestones. He has always had time for me.

Greg saw something in me and wanted to help me reach my goals and fulfill my deepest, most heartfelt ambitions. What has been really special about the relationship is that he's never treated it like a teacher-pupil encounter. It has never been a boss-to-employee relationship. It has been more like an older brother putting his arm around a younger brother and saying, "Let's go learn and have some fun together while we are doing it." It's been life-on-life, an authentic and transparent relationship. Offering one's life and spending that kind of time with someone speaks volumes. Whether or not

it's actually articulated verbally, it says that you value the other person. Who doesn't want to be in that kind of friendship? What a rich gift from God!

It is through our shared ministry that I came to know Greg's mentor—Ted. Ted is one cool dude, and I have a deep level of affection for who he is and admiration for his service to the Lord. Three generations of mentoring relationships; how neat is that?

I have entered a season in my life where I love to mentor and coach younger people and help them experience the joy that is truly theirs in Jesus. It's interesting how things have come full circle. I have had the great privilege of directing a Christian youth camp in the Atlanta, Georgia, area for the past few years. In spring 2009, I handed the baton of leadership to a friend and gifted leader—"share and release" in action once again. Funny, just a few short years ago, I would

Mentoring relationships require immersing oneself into someone else's life. Entering the highs and the lows, the joys and the sorrows.

have thought it crazy to have given up a great ministry like that. Now, thinking back on the powerful lesson Greg taught me about multiplying leaders, it makes perfect sense.

There's an old African proverb that states if you want to go fast, go alone; if you want to go far, go together. For me, that sums up the beauty of mentoring relationships. It's about "we" instead of "me." Mentoring relationships aren't overly complicated, but it does require a willingness to immerse oneself into someone else's life. It means entering the highs and the lows, the peaks and the valleys, the joys and the sorrows. My friend Greg has skillfully done that for me, as his friend Ted did for him.

I will always be grateful. **co**

Greg Williams and Ted Johnston co-teach Trinitarian Youth Ministry for Grace Communion Seminary.

Death Ain't What It Used to Be

By J. Michael Feazell

While sipping coffee and browsing Yahoo news one morning, I came across a lead sentence so amusing I had to write it down. Take a look.

Fri Dec 2, 11:22 AM ET

NEW YORK (Reuters Health)—Women who go through menopause in their early 40s may have a slightly higher risk of death later in life compared with their peers, a large U.S. study suggests.

Imagine it, a slightly higher risk of death later in life. Apparently, some women have a slightly *lower* risk of death later in life. Death must not be as inevitable as we all thought. Hmmm. Who pays for these studies, anyway?

Actually, of course, the study itself made sense—it showed that women who go through menopause in their early 40s might not live quite as long after the age of 75 as women who go through menopause later than their early 40s.

The *presentation* was misleading—not the study. Sometimes it's like that with the gospel, too. Presented poorly, even the gospel can be misunderstood. And sad to say, there's a lot of that going around these days.

The gospel is actually *good* news. It exposes the chink that Jesus put in death's armor. It promises a new life that extends beyond death, a life rich in joy, peace, friendship and love. A life in harmony with a God who loves you and wants you with him no matter who you are, where you've been or what you've done.

But the gospel is not always presented that way. Sometimes it's presented as a way to get big cars, big houses and fancy clothes right now. Just "name it and claim it," people are told.

Sometimes it's presented as an austere framework of rules and regulations overseen by an angry God who'll roast you forever if you don't toe the line.

Sometimes it's presented as a grand pyramid scheme in which the greater number of pious salespeople you fast-talk into joining, the greater your eternal income will be.

Jesus said, "Let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven" (Matthew 5:16, NRSV). But

some believers let their pushy, memorized spiels so grate before people that, given a choice, I suspect that most people would rather live next door to a used-car salesman than to a Bible-thumping evangelical Christian.

If we could all do it the way Jesus said to, if we could all let our light shine in such a way that people are won over instead of put off, imagine what a positive reputation the good news could have.

If only we could present the gospel the way it really is, as a new life in Christ, a life of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control (Galatians 5:22-23) instead of as some wacky caricature that misrepresents both the gospel and Jesus.

I wonder if there might be some merit in placing our emphasis on being the kind of people that Jesus said his disciples would be rather than just telling people what to believe. Wouldn't that win more people over to the real power of the gospel?

Presented poorly, even the gospel can be misunderstood. And sad to say, there's a lot of that going around these days.

The chink in death's armor is love, after all, not memorized testimonies. Testimonies have their place, but it's love, God's love, that overthrows death and hell. And people can digest genuine, godly love a whole lot easier than fast talk, pushy questions and judgmental frowns.

The proof is in the pudding, not in reciting the recipe.

Large U.S. studies show that we all have a slightly higher risk of death today than we did yesterday. But because God loves us, because his Son died for us and now lives for us, death has had its teeth pulled. Like the old gray mare, death ain't what it used to be. That good news is worth living for. Why not show someone today? **co**

Dog is Love



By Greg Williams

“Dog is Love” is a popular bumper sticker in western North Carolina where I live. It seems to be a takeoff of “God is love” from 1 John 4:8.

I am not certain whether the people who sport this bumper sticker are anti-God people, or people who are simply committed dog-lovers, or maybe both. But whatever their feelings might be, I like the bumper sticker for my own reasons.

“White Creek’s Haley’s Comet” (registered dogs have long names) was a small, energetic black Labrador retriever. She was just over a year old when she was adopted into the Williams family. Because



God created animals for humanity’s benefit and pleasure, and Haley brought my family and me great joy and great love.

her original owner had been verbally and physically abusive, Haley was tentative and cowered quite easily. Our son Glenn, being the tenderhearted young man he is, was patient with Haley and she slowly regained

her confidence and became the healthy, spirited dog God had created her to be.

Labs will play all day if they can, and their favorite activity seems to be the simple game of fetch. Haley played fetch with any object she could get in her mouth—a tennis ball, a tin can, a stick, and her favorite—an apple. When the apples would ripen on the trees in early fall, nobody was happier than Haley. She would actually grab apples off the tree in her mouth, then after an extended game of fetch she would curl up on the ground and eat them.

Just by being the creature God created her to be, Haley taught me a lot about how God relates to us. Her love was ever-present and unconditional. She was always excited, always happy and always ready to interact with any member of the family. She was thrilled to see us when we’d been gone and loved to be near us and listen to our conversations.



The Storms of Life

By Barbara Dahlgren

Years ago traveling preachers would come to town, pitch a large tent, preach the gospel nightly for about a week, then move on. People would come from miles around to hear God's word expounded. In larger cities, such as St. Louis where I grew up in the early '60s, they would set up on a vacant lot near a hub of activity. Whenever I hear Neil Diamond's song *Brother Love's Traveling Salvation Show*, childhood memories of mom hauling us to these revival meetings come to mind.

My dad believed in God, but wasn't what you would call a church-going man in those days, so he only came with us once. Unfortunately, there had been a bad storm the night before, resulting in some tent damage. As we nestled into the back row, the enthusiastic preacher was blaming this mishap on Satan and soon had everyone standing, pointing to the holes in the top of the tent and shouting, "I hate the devil. I hate the devil." Everyone except my father, that is, who slipped our family out quietly and informed us that a preacher who didn't have the sense to know God is the one who allowed the rain to fall isn't one he wanted to listen to.

Dad taught me that while it may be convenient to blame our storms of life on the devil, God is the one ultimately in control. He said, "God is good, but it rains on everyone. Sometimes God stops the rain and sometimes he doesn't."

Jesus illustrated this with a parable about a foolish man and a wise man who each built a house (Luke 6:46-49). The foolish man built his house on a shaky foundation and the wise man built on a solid foundation. Then the rains came.

Many Christians feel that if they are nice to others and follow biblical principles, they will escape the rain. Oh no, my friend. The thunder will roar and the lightning will strike. It will rain on everyone: the good, the bad, the ugly, the beautiful, the just, the unjust, the atheist and the Christian. No one escapes the rain.

In the parable, it rained on both the foolish man's house and the wise man's house. But the foolish man's house was wiped out, and the wise man's was not, because he built his house on a solid foundation.

Spiritually speaking, the house represents our lives, and that rock-solid foundation is Jesus Christ. An unshakable foundation can be laid daily by believing Christ, walking with him, talking with him, and trusting him. Those with a shaky foundation cut corners, play the angles, and are self-sufficient. When the storms of life come—and they do come—we rely on whom we have grown accustomed to relying on. May that be Christ. As the saying goes, sometimes he calms the storm; sometimes he lets the storm rage and he calms us. **co**

The day she died was more difficult than I could've imagined. I have often considered adamant pet-lovers to be silly. After all, shouldn't our love be directed toward people? But Haley's death was a painful loss—loss of the partner who ran ahead on walks through the orchard and around the pond, loss of the entertainer who fetched floating objects out of the pond and sounded like a motor boat when she swam back to shore, loss of the youthful exuberance as she would sprint across the yard and snatch a thrown ball from the air, and most of all loss of a dear friend who always loved and always accepted. I wept over her.

Haley's life taught me the truth behind the bumper sticker, "Dog is Love." But behind that truth is a far greater truth: "God is Love." God is not just the creator of love; he himself is love—the fullness of giving, sacrificing, waiting, longing, passion, excitement and joy in the eternal relationship of Father, Son and Holy Spirit. And Jesus Christ, in making us one with him, has drawn us into his own relationship with the Father as the Father's beloved Son.

God created animals for humanity's benefit and pleasure, and Haley brought my family and me great joy and great love in her short five years. On the day of her death, I took a walk alone around the pond. I remembered Haley and I talked to the God of love.

I pondered how God's extravagant love is magnetic, compelling and irresistible. He loves us so much that he sent Jesus, who will pursue us relentlessly even when we are walking away from him or caught up in the storms and cares of life.

Francis Thompson's poem *Hound of Heaven* is a fitting close to this tribute to White Creek's Haley's Comet. Thompson was a man who did not fight for any flag or any particular religion, but simply tells the mysterious story of his own soul, and vicariously the story becomes our own.

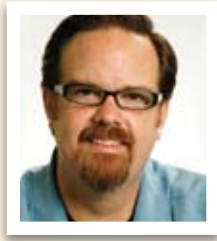
Through the struggles and pursuits there enters a wonderful and exciting new element. The poem describes successive people following after the ideal, "which, like some receding star, travelled before its pilgrims through the night." Here the ideal is no longer passive, a thing to be pursued. It halts for its pilgrims—"the star which chose to stoop and stay for us." It now turns upon them and pursues them. The ideal is alive and aware—a real and living force among the great forces of the universe. It is out after people, and in this great poem we are to watch it hunting a soul down as a hound would pursue a fleeing convict. This religious idealism is none other than Jesus, the Hound of Heaven who in love pursues all of humanity.

Haley was a remarkable pet who helped this pilgrim better know Jesus, both in her life and in her death.

Haley, you will be missed. **co**

Should You Plant a

An Interview with Ed Stetzer



“Read the books and listen to the people who are already doing it.” But don’t just listen to their success stories. Listen to what they did wrong and learn from their mistakes.

Randy Bloom, Director of Church Multiplication Ministries for Grace Communion International, interviewed Ed Stetzer, President of LifeWay Research of Nashville, Tennessee. An experienced church planter, Ed trains church planters and pastors around the world.

RB: Tell us about your experience as a church planter.

ES: I have a great love for church planting. I planted my first church in the inner city of Buffalo, New York. I was 21 years old, and God was calling my wife and me to move into the city among the urban poor. We started knocking on doors, and we started our first church there. That was 22 years ago.

Depending on how you count, I’ve had the privilege of planting five churches. The last church I planted was about three or four years ago. I’ve written some books on the subject. The newest is *Viral Churches: How Church Planters Can Become Movement Makers*. It is focused on how we can move from church planting by addition to exponential multiplication. I love your title as “director of church multiplication.”

I think that’s better than just “church planting director.” We need churches planting churches. Every church, I think, needs to be involved in church planting in some way. It’s just a natural extension of what God is doing in the world through the work of Christ and his church.

RB: What is church planting?

ES: Really, it’s not planting a church; it’s planting the gospel and making disciples. Then a church flows

from that. Any movement that’s going to be serious about reaching the lost world is going to be involved in church planting. As a matter of fact, just to maintain status quo in terms of membership, a movement needs to plant new churches every year at the rate of three percent, that is, about three new churches for every 100 existing churches. Church planting is just so essential to the growth of the kingdom, the work of Christ through his church.

RB: What is the first step for a church planter?

ES: To pursue it with wisdom and discernment. Experiencing the prompting of the Holy Spirit and being obedient to the leadership of the Holy Spirit is key. I know in Grace Communion you have an assessment process. I think it would be essential for people to go through that assessment process. Not everyone can plant a church. You could be a very effective pastor but not have the wiring to be a church planter. That’s why you go through an assessment process. You begin to look into church planting. You go to the website, you read some information there about church planting, you read books on church planting. If you’re going to throw your life into the establishment of a new congregation, you really want to have thought through and prayed through this. You’d consult with some people who know and love you and would speak into your life and say, what do you think about me being a church planter?

So, again, assessment, preparation, getting more knowledge and getting more advice are good steps in the process.

RB: What are some of the major pitfalls?

ES: I think a lot of times people start churches for the wrong reasons. If you’re starting a church because

Church?



Tammy's Turn

God Is in Our Moments

By Tammy Tkach

My dad used to say time goes so fast it seems as if every other day is Thursday. When time goes that quickly, the seconds, minutes and hours of life can run together and get lost. James was right—life is like a mist that appears for a little while then vanishes (James 4:14).

“Teach us to number our days aright,” Moses asked God, “that we may gain a heart of wisdom” (Psalm 90:12,). How do we do this? Author Mark Buchanan suggests we “work out where time and eternity meet. Pay attention to how God is afoot in the mystery of each moment, in its mad rush or maddening plod. He is present in both. But too often, we are so time-obsessed that we take no time to really notice” (*The Rest of God*, Thomas Nelson, 2006).

Do you pay attention to how God is afoot in the mystery of each moment? Or do you let them blur together in a mad rush to get everything done?

I may have mentioned a time or two I'm a big *Star Trek* fan. I enjoyed all the movies (even the odd-numbered ones). In *Insurrection*, a Ba'ku woman named Anij teaches Captain Jean-Luc Picard how to capture a single moment. She slows time, allowing him to see the beating wings of a hummingbird as it hovers over a flower. When her life is in danger, he practices this technique and is able to keep her alive until help arrives.

While we can't slow time (I wish), we can pause to notice the mystery of God in our moments. Pick a moment and focus on where you are, what you're doing, who you're with and how God is present. Take a mental snapshot and praise God for what you see. In a way, time will slow down and you'll be fully in the moment.

I remember doing this one day when my kids and I were at a park. It was a beautiful day—perfect weather, everyone was happy and healthy. We were with a good friend and my kids were playing and laughing. As I watched them, I realized this was one of those perfect moments in time that would never come again. I took a mental snapshot, noting every detail of the moment. I can still picture it in my mind, many years later.

Why is this important, you may be wondering? We are told in 1 Peter 1:24, “People are like grass; their beauty is like a flower in the field. The grass withers and the flower fades” (NLT). We aren't here long, and we look forward to a better future with the Lord. But while we're here, we might as well enjoy it. The Westminster Shorter Catechism states: “Man's chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy him forever.”

Let yourself slow down a little and enjoy God, giving him glory and thanks as you go through your day. He is present in the meeting of time and eternity as we live, move and have our being in him. **co**



you're mad at the leadership of your old church or they wouldn't let you preach, or you've got something to prove, I think those are wrong reasons to plant a church. So I'd be really cautious with those.

The other thing is, church planters tend to be self-starters and mavericks, go-getters and entrepreneurs. I would say that a Spirit-filled church planter who is walking in humility before God and before others is a lot more powerful than just the entrepreneurial “I know what I'm doing” church planter. So I think one of the common mistakes is not listening to advice and counsel. That's one of the reasons I said, “Read the books and listen to the people who are already doing it.” But don't just listen to their success stories. Listen to what they did wrong and learn from their mistakes along the way.

RB: Any parting words of advice?

ES: I would encourage the churches and the leaders not to grow weary, but to be faithful with what God has called them to do and to trust him for the results. It isn't our work; it's his work and he's called us to join him in it. **co**

GCI Church Multiplication Ministries (CMM) trains and supports individuals and congregations as they start new faith communities in every possible geographic location, cultural context and social network. CMM helps pastoral leaders develop and implement plans for church multiplication. For information on CMM training events and resources, visit the CMM website at cmm.gci.org.

Who Ever Thought ... ?

A Ministry Partnership in Nepal

By Rod Matthews

Meet Deben Sam. Deben is a young man—quiet, resolute, and unobtrusive, but with a heart that agonises for those who are poor and suffering. He was born in the shadows of Mt. Everest among a people who are for the most part uneducated people living in harsh conditions. Many idealistically think of Nepal as the land of yaks and yetis and majestic mountains. It is spectacularly beautiful, but it is also grindingly poor.

In Kathmandu, a vast spread of red brick buildings filling a valley with traffic, pollution, noise, and nearly shoulder-to-shoulder humanity, Deben supervises two small congregations and a fellowship group. Beyond Kathmandu, he serves a network of 15 congregations and at last count five new fellowship groups.

Deben and his wife, Manju, are from Limbu province in eastern Nepal. He moves easily in this environment, and he has been instrumental as a tool of God in introducing many village people to their Savior.

One of his newer groups is on the far eastern border of Nepal, where roads don't exist and electronics are useless. Once or twice a year, Deben makes one of



Deben Sam

his extended visiting trips to the village of Chyanthapu in the mountains along the eastern border with India, where there are few believers.

It's a 4:30 a.m. start from his Kathmandu home in a three-wheeler motor taxi (called a tuk-tuk in some parts of the world) heading for the bus station. The "day bus" leaves for Birtamod at 5 a.m. It has no air conditioning. In winter it is mild, but in summer the weather is swel-

tering. Thirteen hours and 400 miles later, it arrives in Birtamod, a small city in the southeastern corner of Nepal. But he's not there yet. It's just time to change buses. Now he will travel north to Phidim, another 7-8 hours on a rough, deeply rutted road. The distance travelled is close to 75 miles, but the speed is slow and the road tortuous.

Phidim is a small town—the nearest bus stop to the village Deben needs to reach. But "near" is a relative term. Ahead of him lies two days of walking to Chyanthapu. The local people can do it in one day, but for a 30-year-old, healthy young man from the city, it takes twice as long. Surely, you say, he could use a motorcycle. But no, the narrow track clings to the side of steep hills. In fact, the local people joke that it is so steep and narrow that even the monkeys slip off. Deben said that, at times, he has to walk on all fours like a monkey to retain his footing up the hills. And I haven't mentioned yet that he is carrying a backpack containing weighty Bibles, supplies and equipment.

After two days of walking and a night on the way, he arrives in Chyanthapu to be welcomed into the Christian home where he is staying. It's small, one room downstairs and one upstairs, of stone and mud walls with a roof of thatch. The family cooks in the



The city of Kathmandu



Deben Sam and family

downstairs room over an open fire. They are thrilled to see him. He is tired but relieved to have arrived, four days of arduous travelling behind him at last, and at least two long days of service ahead.

This is a new fellowship group of eight people from three families, eager to hear the word of God, so there's no time to waste. It's into a morning Bible study for the believers, or an evening one under the flickering light of a kerosene lantern. In the afternoon, Deben's presence generates curiosity amongst the villagers, and some will want to talk to him. There aren't many visitors in such a remote village. It's an opportunity for explanations of why he is here, why he cares, and what he brings with him. For them it is good news.

Most want to hear more, so the evening meeting could become an extended assembly. Did I mention that in his backpack, in addition to Bibles to distribute, Deben has brought into the hills a megaphone so he can speak more easily to larger groups? The days are long. No part of the day is wasted. It's a special event for such a remote village—although not every local resident appreciates the truth that counters their Hindu traditions passed down through the generations.

The meals are times of discussion and fellowship. Simple rice dishes with vegetables are served, tastier than in the city, Deben says. On special festival occasions, buffalo meat will be added, but only rarely. It's a real luxury.

When it comes time to leave, the fellowship group gathers for worship with singing and prayer. The rhythm comes from a chyabrung, a two-sided drum common in the Limbu province. The little group is so new that they don't yet have an established leader. Deben is farewelled with sadness and the big question, "When will you be back?" Then he moves on to another village, or the four-day return trip to Kathmandu. The entire expedition usually takes 10-14 days.

Limbu is the home province of Deben and his wife, Manju. The Limbu dialect is one of three languages Deben speaks. He was the first Christian converted in his village, and in spite of his parent's efforts to protect him, he was driven out of the village



Deben Sam and the author



Deben's sister Dipa and six orphan girls

by the persecution of the Hindu villagers towards his family. He fled to Kathmandu and for a while lived with a Christian uncle who was involved in ministry there. Eventually he branched out into his own ministry because of his heart for the poor and the neglected people who populate the villages and towns of Nepal.

In Kathmandu, Deben's brother-in-law, Raju, and his wife, Sarika, assist full time in his ministry. Raju supervises the day-to-day operations of the medical clinic serving the disadvantaged brickyard workers on the outskirts of Kathmandu. It's a joint venture between Gospel for Himalayas Ministry and GCI, and one we support financially. Deben's younger sister has taken responsibility for six little orphan girls whom they love, support and educate in a rented facility in Kathmandu used by the local congregation for worship services.

Far to the west of the capital, there is also a growing network of new groups—the farthest being in a small village of Kunjagali, about 20 hours by bus from Kathmandu, serving the Kamaiya people. To the north in the last village before the great mountain of Ganesh Himal, there is another new group of Tamang people.

On a trip with Deben to a village west of Kathmandu where a new group was being established, I asked him, "Why here?" I meant to ask how this village had been chosen, but he interpreted my question more broadly. He looked slightly puzzled, and told me it was because he had a heart for the poor and they were the poor! Deben's love and compassion and sacrificial commitment to his people is reflected in his work, his family and the local congregation. I am so grateful that God has brought us together in shared ministry. **co**

The Himalayas

Stay Tuned

By Kerry Gubb

Every now and then my car needs a tune-up. Not necessarily because it stops working. It can still take me places. But when it needs tuning, the engine runs sluggishly, the cylinders might start to miss or fire out of sequence, and the exhaust might start blowing out smoke. A mechanic fixes all that with a tune-up. The car runs more efficiently and burns cleaner. And the ride is far more pleasant.

A piano tuner does essentially the same thing when he adjusts a piano's strings and hammers; discord turns to harmony. Tuning a radio screens out

We are saved by grace. But that does not mean that God causes everything that happens in our lives and that we are responsible for nothing.

static noise and focuses on the specific wavelength of the broadcast so that it can be heard clearly and crisply.

Keeping your Christian life properly tuned is a bit more complex, but it's quite do-able. There are various helpful checks and diagnostics available in Scripture to assist us in running cleanly, harmonizing with and hearing God.

Just as well! Because there's much in our culture that can throw a Christian life out of tune. Take, for instance, that popular old chestnut: "Pray as if it all depends on God and work as if it all depends on you."

The idea is made credible by its originator: the celebrated St. Augustine of Hippo. It sounds reasonable. There is just one problem.

It doesn't work.

It confuses the reality of our dependence on God. It throws the Christian life "out of tune."

Consider this: If everything depends on God, what would be the purpose or value of our thoughts and efforts? Did God make us robots, or did he give us creativity and unique personalities and talents to use in his service? On the other hand, if everything depends on us, how can we succeed in the face of our inherent weakness, inadequacy, shortcoming and faithlessness? As serious disciples, we certainly set out to do our best, but we know that our best isn't good enough.

The result: frustration, uncertainty, fear, wasted effort, discord, static and blowing a lot of smoke. Because we're out of tune.

I'm familiar with this problem from experience. I have always believed in salvation by grace; never believed in salvation by works. But I did accept Augustine's advice uncritically at an early age based on the words he said—without actually understanding what he meant.

Big mistake.

You see, "It all depends on God" is true of salvation: we are saved by grace. But that does not mean that God causes everything that happens in our lives and that we are responsible for nothing.

Likewise, the statement "It all depends on us" can leave us wide open to the vagaries of salvation by works. I'm sure it is not what St. Augustine intended, but 1,600 years later, such a statement can be a clear and present danger to a well-tuned Christian life. We have many things for which to thank Augustine. But this particular quote might not be one of them.

Ignatius of Loyola, another historic notable, offered an alternative: "Pray as if everything depends on you; act as if everything depends on God."¹ This reversal of the admonitions still leaves the original problem. Awareness of our shortcomings should inspire fervent prayer. Confidence in God should bring assured strength and life to our own efforts. But the admonitions as written still imply that in daily life

Continued on page 21

Attacked by an Answered Prayer

By Rick Shallenberger

A while back I felt the need to ask God to help me know he was in me and working through me. And as I often do, once I take a request to God, I didn't give it much further thought.

I had been home for a couple hours working on my computer when an email arrived from someone I hadn't talked to in a long time. I was pleased to hear from him and excitedly opened the message. I was floored as I read the most vindictive and mean-spirited email I've ever seen. It accused me of being selfish, unloving, stingy, and so totally caught up my religion that I was not balanced in how I approached other areas in my life. I was told I placed my religion above my family and that my beliefs had tainted my judgment. Many of the words were in all caps. Others were underlined and/or in bold print.

I stared at the words in a state of shock, wondering how in the world I was going to respond. His attack was based on misinformation and miscommunication that had evidently been brewing for some time. A lot of the misinformation came from a third party, who had informed him of a decision I had made. In the email the writer not only told me he was angry at my decision, but also at the reasons behind my decisions, and then he proceeded to tell me what those reasons were. None of his information was correct.

My morning prayer suddenly came to mind and I told God, "Thanks a lot. This is not what I need." I really had no idea how to start answering the email or what to say. As I read it through one more time, the words *hurt* and *offended* jumped out at me. So I said another prayer, took a deep breath and started typing.

I began by telling the individual how sorry I was that he was so hurt. I shared that I had no intent to cause him any offense and that I had no idea these things had been building up to the point where he finally felt the need to send his email. Then I responded to each paragraph trying not to accuse, but to explain any misinformation and to clarify things so he could understand my intent, my thoughts and, well, me, better. I looked at each paragraph and accusation from his perspective and tried to understand why he was so hurt and offended. I prayed as I went through the email and asked God to help me respond

as Jesus might respond.

At one point he said he realized he was burning any remaining bridge he had with me, but he felt the need to say the things he was saying. I responded that I could see that he was reaching out in his hurt and I wanted to help him through it so we could build bridges and improve our relationship, not destroy it.

I found it amazing that I was writing words of comfort and forgiveness when inside I felt ripped apart. I wanted so much to lash out in retaliatory accusations, but I knew it wasn't the thing to do. And I knew it would not serve to heal, but only to further deepen the wounds. I knew I had to respond in love—Christ's love.

When I finished my response, prayed over it again and then hit send, I wasn't at all sure it was going to do any good. And I was admittedly still a bit frustrated with God. I was asking for confirmation, and

I wanted so much to lash out in retaliatory accusations, but I knew it wasn't the thing to do. And I knew it would not serve to heal, but only to further deepen the wounds.

he allowed me to be hit with accusations. I got up from my desk and decided to not do any more work for a while.

It wasn't until the next morning in prayer that I realized God had granted my request. He didn't answer it nearly in the way I wanted him to answer it, or hoped he would answer it, but he answered it. He answered it by enabling me to be Christ-like to someone who was attacking my family and me. He enabled me to respond to false accusations with humility and tenderness—actually focusing more on the writer than on myself. His answer did not take away the pain in my gut from the accusations, but his answer did exactly what I asked. God showed me that he was with me and was working through me.

In the midst of pain, God enabled me to be a light. Not by anything in me—I was too hurt—but by his grace, in spite of me. **co**



Our Strange Dead God

By John Halford

From the various medals, statues and drawings adorning his car, it was obvious that my taxi driver was Hindu. He was driving me to Kuala Lumpur's airport, through the vast oil palm plantations of Southern Malaysia.

Malaysia is a multicultural nation, and although the principal religion is Islam, it is common to see Hindu and Buddhist temples alongside the mosques in the towns and villages. There is even the occasional Christian church—although Christianity is very much a minority religion in Southeast Asia.

The older I get, the more tolerant I become of other people's religious beliefs. I don't mean that I accept them or even understand them, but I have learned that what to me might seem foolish or confusing can have deep meaning to someone from a different culture. For example, my Hindu taxi driver is an intelligent man, but I have to wonder what he sees in what to me are rather

to choose a tortured, bleeding corpse hanging on Roman cross as the symbol of your faith.

Not always the cross

Today the cross is the universally recognized emblem of Christianity. It wasn't always. In the early years of the Church, the cross was not widely used. Perhaps it was considered too horrific at a time when crucifixion was still a dreaded punishment in the Roman Empire. The first Christians identified themselves with the symbol of the fish, like the one you see on bumper stickers. The first letters of the Greek words that meant "Jesus Christ, God's Son, Savior" (Iesous Christos Theou Yios Soter) happened to form the Greek word for "fish" (ichthys).

It was an apt symbol, because Jesus told his followers they would be "fishers of men." But in those early days, they had to "fish" in secret. It was dangerous to be a Christian, and the followers of Jesus resorted to secret signs and symbols to keep from exposing themselves unnecessarily. For example, a man sometimes drew half the picture of a fish in the sand while talking with someone. If the figure was recognized to signify more than an unconscious movement during the course of a conversation, the other person would complete the drawing, and the two believers would know they were safe with one another.

The Christians had to worship in secret, and visiting Christians could find their way to the worship center in the long underground passageways by simply looking at the fish on the wall pointing in the direction they were to go.

However, when Christianity became the religion of the Roman Empire in the days of Constantine and crucifixion was abandoned as a punishment, the cross became more prevalent as a symbol of Christian faith. But during the first millennium, the Christ figure was usually portrayed fully clothed and very much alive, focusing on his triumphant resurrection rather than his ignominious death.

My Hindu taxi driver was not the only one who did not understand "our strange dead God." In many parts of the world, where the representatives of Christ have not always behaved well, the cross is seen as a symbol of oppression and exploitation. And of course, there are now millions of people in the Western world who wear a cross as jewelry, but have no clear idea of what it symbolizes. Perhaps you have heard the story of the girl who asked a jeweler, "Do you have one of those cross things people are wearing?"

"Do you want a plain one, or one with the little man on it?" the jeweler asked.

To those who don't know the story, it must seem odd to choose a tortured, bleeding corpse on a cross as the symbol of your faith.

odd symbols of his faith. Like, for instance, the brightly colored statues of monkeys and elephants that adorn the temples. Or the small statue of a multi-armed goddess on the taxi's dashboard.

I was thinking of asking the driver about this, when he neatly turned the tables on me. We passed a Christian church building decorated with a large cross on the wall. The cross had a gaudy plaster statue of the crucified Christ nailed to it, with bright red painted blood flowing from its hands, feet and side. Turning to me, the driver asked, "Excuse me, sir, but are you a Christian?"

"Yes," I said.

"Then could you tell me what you Christians see in that strange dead god?"

I had never thought of the symbol of the cross like that. To me, Jesus is very much alive. When you know the story, the cross becomes a powerful reminder of how Jesus suffered when he became the sacrifice for sin. But to someone who does not know the story, it must seem odd

Core of our faith

Even if a growing number of people see a cross as nothing more than another kind of trendy jewelry, the cross continues to hold its rightful place as a centerpiece in our places of worship. It adorns our Bibles, prayer books and hymnals. It represents forgiveness of sin and reminds us of what Jesus suffered to become our Savior.

But here's something to think about. Does a cross actually convey the core meaning of our Christian faith? It might to us, since we know the whole story. Jesus didn't remain on the cross or in the tomb. He rose from the dead and ascended to the Father, having conquered death and reconciled humanity to God as both the representative and substitute for all. But to many, like my taxi driver, the cross conveys the idea that we worship a "strange dead God."

Many a church notice board reminds passersby that "the wages of sin is death." Such constant emphasis on avoiding punishment for sin can give the impression that this is what our faith is all about.

But Christianity is not primarily about avoiding death. It is not even primarily about forgiveness of sin. It is about love and life. John 3:16 reminds us that God so loved the world that he gave his only beloved Son so that humanity could have—not just their sins forgiven—but true life, life with God. Forgiveness is part of the process, but even forgiveness springs eternal only from God's heart of love, and it is God's undying love that transforms people into brothers and sisters of Jesus, more than that, into friends of Jesus, and into the beloved children of the Father.

The world has never been so filled with fear, suffering and death. We need to remind ourselves that Jesus said "I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full" (John 10:10).

Christianity stands for love and life. The cross will always be a symbol of the death of our Lord. But is there an equally recognizable way to represent the new life created for humanity in his resurrection and ascension to the Father? Artists' attempts to show the risen Lord in all his glory inevitably fall far short of reality. But maybe there is a way.

Jesus said he would live in and through people who accept him as their Savior. They would follow him, their lives transformed, reflecting his love and life like a glowing candle in a dark room. "By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another," said Jesus (John 13:35).

A life characterized by love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, trustworthiness, gentleness and self-control (Galatians 5:22-23) will undoubtedly be thought of as a bit strange. It is to be expected; people thought Jesus was strange, too. But Christian faith is best represented not when someone looks at a handmade symbol that might have different meanings to different people, but when those who believe it become living symbols of our "strange living God." ☪

Stay Tuned

From page 18

God is "way up in heaven" somewhere needing to be desperately begged for help, and that since everything depends on him, we actually have no responsibility for the outcomes we see in our lives.

As people who know and acknowledge our weaknesses, who know and acknowledge our complete dependence on God, who live and walk by faith, let's have a shot at tuning the terminology to something relevant and practical for today, while preserving the original intent of these two great churchmen.

How about: "Do everything knowing God loves you, stands beside you and will never forsake you."

The evolution of language is a funny thing. By tuning their respective Christian life statements like this, although using different words, we're actually agreeing with what both Augustine and Ignatius *meant*. We're drawing on the rich heritage left by such men—and we're clarifying it for practical use in our present-day context.

It's astounding how much clearer—and freer—and hopeful—and positive—the Christian journey ahead became, once my thinking on this matter had been tuned. And it wasn't a huge adjustment. Tuning is often just a tweak. But it makes all the difference. It's more than worth it. I'm no longer constantly frustrated and fearful. I'm more in harmony with God, there's less static and I don't blow as much smoke!

The unexpected bonus was a quantum leap in my functional grasp of the "joy of salvation"², its accompanying peace of mind and calm confidence that every step of the journey is safely in the care of the Master. The ride is indeed *far* more pleasant.

My car, unfortunately, despite the best efforts of General Motors, is not a Christian. It's only a dumb machine. It is therefore incapable of thoughts and emotions. But if it were thus capable, and if it were able to read what you've just read, I'm confident it would agree wholeheartedly, from its own equivalent experience.

So, friends...

Stay tuned! ☪

¹ Francis R. Smith, S.J., "The Religious Experience of Ignatius of Loyola and the Mission of Jesuit Higher Education Today" (paper presented at the Fourth Institute of Jesuit Higher Education, University of San Francisco, San Francisco, CA, June 6-9, 1990), 2-3.

² Psalm 51:12; Galatians 5:22, etc.

Diversity and Unity in Spiritual Gifts

A study of 1 Corinthians 12

By Michael Morrison

The church members in Corinth asked Paul a number of questions, and Paul responded in the letter we know as 1 Corinthians. One of the topics he addresses is “spiritual gifts.” Paul’s explanation begins in chapter 12; we’ll begin in verse 3.

Same source, but different results (verses 3-7)

Paul comments on how God works in different ways in different people: **There are different kinds of gifts, but the same Spirit distributes them. There are different kinds of service, but the same Lord. There are different kinds of working, but in all of them and in everyone it is the same God at work.**

Paul uses “gifts,” “service,” and “working” as roughly equivalent (just as Spirit, Lord and God are equivalent). The three terms are not distinct categories, but they highlight different aspects of the



“If a person who did not speak in tongues should say, “Because I do not speak in tongues, I do not belong here,” Paul would respond: “That does not disqualify you—you are still part of the body.”

same phenomena: 1) that the abilities are given, not something we can take credit for ourselves, 2) they are given for service, to help other people, and 3) they work; they produce results in our lives. The main point is that God works in different ways in different people.

Paul summarizes the purpose: **Now to each one the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good.** Spiritual gifts are not for a person’s private benefit—they are to help the church as a whole.

Various gifts (verses 8-11)

Paul lists some of the gifts: **To one there is given through the Spirit a message of wisdom, to another a message of knowledge by means of the same Spirit.** Generally speaking, knowledge refers to awareness

of facts; wisdom refers to the ability to apply facts to the right situation. The Corinthian believers seem to be interested in knowledge and wisdom, and that may be why Paul begins with these two gifts.

He lists more: **to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healing by that one Spirit, to another miraculous powers, to another prophecy, to another distinguishing between spirits.** All believers have faith, but some have stronger faith than others. Presumably someone who has a gift of miraculous healing also has stronger faith than most people. These gifts overlap; Paul is giving examples, not creating totally distinct categories. He will have more to say about prophecy in chapter 14.

Paul ends with the gift that was causing the most problems in Corinth, and its solution; **to another speaking in different kinds of tongues, and to still another the interpretation of tongues.** No matter what the “tongues” were, no one in Corinth understood them, except people who had the special gift of interpretation.

The main point for Paul here is that **all these are the work of one and the same Spirit, and he distributes them to each one, just as he determines.** Not everyone is given the same abilities; the Spirit purposely distributes different skills to different people.

Why?

As verse 7 says, it is for the common good. When we have different gifts, when no one has all the abilities, then we need to work together, and that in itself is good for us.

One body with many parts (verses 12-16)

Paul compares the church to a human body: **Just as a body, though one, has many parts, but all its many parts form one body, so it is with Christ—** that is, with the body of Christ, the church. Paul is still stressing diversity within one body. The Corinthians needed to know about that diversity, because some of them said that everyone should have one gift in particular—tongues—and they looked down on people who did not have that gift.

Paul explains the body analogy: **For we were all baptized by one Spirit so as to form one body—**

whether Jews or Gentiles, slave or free—and we were all given the one Spirit to drink. The Spirit places people of all ethnic and social groups together. We have a common origin and a common purpose, but (Paul reminds us again) we are not identical: **Even so the body is not made up of one part but of many.**

Paul insists that all the parts are needed: **Now if the foot should say, “Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body,” it would not for that reason cease to be part of the body.** Similarly, if a person who did not speak in tongues should say, “Because I do not speak in tongues, I do not belong here,” Paul would respond: “That does not disqualify you—you are still part of the body.”

Similarly, **And if the ear should say, “Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body,” it would not for that reason cease to be part of the body.** If someone thinks that they don’t belong because they lack the gift of miracles, then Paul says: “You are part of the body anyway; that is no reason to drop out.”

Variety is necessary (verses 17-20)

Paul develops the analogy further: **If the whole body were an eye, where would the sense of hearing be? If the whole body were an ear, where would the sense of smell be?** He is saying, in effect, “If everyone in the church had the gift of tongues, who would be doing the prophecy? If everyone had the gift of miracles, who would have the wisdom?”

Paul stresses diversity: **But in fact God has placed the parts in the body, every one of them, just as he wanted them to be. If they were all one part, where would the body be? As it is, there are many parts, but one body.** We cannot turn a gift into a requirement for acceptance, because God has distributed different roles to different people. There are many parts to play within the body of Christ.

All parts are needed (verses 21-27)

Earlier, Paul encouraged the people who felt left out. Now he addresses those who look down on others: **The eye cannot say to the hand, “I don’t need you!” And**

the head cannot say to the feet, “I don’t need you!”

People who speak in tongues should not think that they have everything they need.

One person might say, “I don’t need prophecy, because I have tongues. I don’t need discernment, because the only gift that counts is the one that I have.” But Paul says, “We need every part, and every person.” God puts his people into a body, into a community of people in which we need to work together to help each other.

On the contrary, those parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, and the parts that we think are less honorable we treat with special honor.

Is this true in the church today? Do we give special honor to people who are weak, who are not in the limelight?

And the parts that are unpresentable are treated with special modesty, while our presentable parts need no special treatment. Do we take special efforts for church members who are less glamorous in the eyes of the world? Paul wants us to make sure we include everyone, and to make everyone feel an important part of the body—because everyone *is* important.

But God has put the body together, giving greater honor to the parts that lacked it, so that there should be no division in the body, but that its parts should have equal concern for each other. God wants his children to love one another, no matter which gifts they have or lack. We should not separate into the haves and the have-nots; we are all in this together, and we are to help one another and learn from one another.

What does “equal concern” look like? Paul will say more about that in the next chapter. Here he gives one example: **If one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honored, every part rejoices with it.** Our sorrows and our successes are shared; we support those who suffer, and congratulate those who have blessings. Someday the tide will turn, so everything will work best if we stick together, each doing the part God has given us to do.

Paul summarizes it: **Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it.** Everyone belongs, and all the parts need to work together! ☪

The Greeks Had a Word for It

χάρισμα

In English, a person who has “charisma” has a personality that seems to attract followers. But for Paul, everyone has been given a *charisma*, because for him the word meant a gift, something given by the grace (*charis*) of God. When God delivered Paul from danger, it was a *charisma* (2 Cor. 1:11). His ability to be celibate was another *charisma* from God (1 Cor. 7:7).

But *charismata* (the plural form of *charisma*) are best known

as the special abilities God’s Spirit distributes to his people (Rom. 12:6; 1 Cor. 12:4; 1 Pet. 4:10). Churches that emphasize these gifts are often called *charismatic* churches.

But actually, all Christians can be called charismatic, because we all believe that “the gift [*charisma*] of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Rom. 6:23). Salvation is the greatest gift, given to all. ☪

Hmm...

The cross is directed not at moral evil but at Sin. Moral evil, we can often do something about—and when we have the power and the opportunity, we should do it with all the energy at our disposal. But *Sin*, which is the radical inability of human nature to be true to itself—our failure to bring off, individually or socially, a version of the world that actually squares with the Word's version of it—*that* hard fact of our existence we cannot undo just by willing to be better in the future. There is simply too much in the past we cannot change.

Robert F. Capon

The only way to permanently defeat your enemy is by making him your friend.

Abraham Lincoln

A lie gets halfway around the world before the truth has a chance to get its pants on.

Winston Churchill

I am only one, but still I am one. I cannot do everything, but still I can do something; and because I cannot do everything, I will not refuse to do something that I can do.

Helen Keller

Our days are numbered. One of the primary goals in our lives should be to prepare for our last day. The legacy we leave is not just in our possessions, but in the quality of our lives. What preparations should we be making now? The greatest waste in all of our earth, which cannot be recycled or reclaimed, is our waste of the time that God has given us each day.

Billy Graham

One of the major discoveries of the post-Newtonian sciences is that objectivity is, in fact, impossible. To look at something is to change it and be changed by it. Nevertheless there is still the common misperception, the illusion, that fact and truth are the same

thing. No! We do not need faith for facts; we do need faith for truth. In his letter to Titus Paul speaks of the mystery of faith, and in Hebrews 11:1 he writes, *Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen (KJV).*

Madeleine L'Engle
The Rock That Is Higher

For people of the kingdom, participants in the triune fellowship, love and love alone is the bottom line. This is the only thing that gives value to anything we believe, say, or do. This is the reason the world exists, and this is the reason the church exists. Whatever music we play, sermons we preach, churches we build, people we impress, powers we display, stances we take, doctrines we teach, things we achieve—if believers are not growing in their motivation and ability to ascribe unsurpassable worth to people who have no apparent worth, we are just wasting time. We are not making true disciples.

Gregory Boyd
*Repenting of Religion:
Turning from Judgment to the Love of God*

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