

GRACE COMMUNION INTERNATIONAL

# CHRISTIAN Odyssey

December 2011–January 2012

Growing Together in Life & Faith



Truce on Earth,  
Good Will  
Toward Men

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Vol. 8 No. 6

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# Happy Christmas, Billi7. Whoever you are.

As I write this, the world's population will have topped seven billion.

October 31<sup>st</sup> was the estimated date, although that is only a guesstimate. Population analysis is, at best, an inexact science. Some countries, especially very large and very poor ones, have no idea how many people they have. It is highly likely that our seven billionth inhabitant will be born into one of these countries. There is a just better than even chance that he will be male, as the statistics indicate slightly more males born than females.

What does life hold for him? Well, unless he was born into a very poor country, his chances of surviving infancy are quite good. So also, believe it or not, are his chances of not being killed in a war or a terrorist attack. A recent report showed that more of the world is living in peace than ever before.<sup>1</sup>

Peace maybe, but not prosperity. Life for most people in our world is still a grim struggle for survival. Average income worldwide is \$7,000 a year. However, the distribution is uneven. The median annual income is only \$1,700. About half the world's population has never made a phone call, and about 40% have never ridden in a car. With the rapid spread of cheap digital technology this will almost certainly change during his lifetime. He can expect that life to last about 64 years (unless the seven billionth person is a girl—women live on average four years longer). Statistics like this can only be general. And in this precarious world, it all could change—for the better or the worse. He will have to

take his chances. It is hard to predict anything certain about his future.

However, there is one thing we can say for certain. We may not know who the seven billionth person is, or where he is, but God does. The Creator, who is "sustaining all things by his powerful word" (Hebrews 1:3) is very much aware of the details of his creation. Jesus told us that whereas "five sparrows are sold for two pennies... not one of them is forgotten by God." (Luke 12:6)

How many sparrows are there? There are at least 35 *kinds* of sparrows in the world. Some flocks have been estimated as numbering 20 million. So how many individual birds are there? God knows.

Jesus also said that we humans are of much greater value to him. "Even the very hairs of your head are all numbered," he explained. Our seven billionth baby probably doesn't have too many hairs on his little head yet, but God knows about him, loves him, and has plans for him. Those plans were established "before the foundation of the world." Jesus, the Son of God, was born as one of us. At that time there were probably only about half a billion people alive. He lived, died and was resurrected for them. And for all who had gone before and would come after—a number estimated at just over 100 billion altogether.

So welcome to the human race, whoever you are and wherever you are. And Happy Christmas—it is good news for you too. **co**

<sup>1</sup> Associated Press, Oct. 22, 2011

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British and German troops celebrate together during the Christmas Truce of 1914-15

Below: Frank Sumpter



# Truce on Earth, Good Will Toward Men

By John Halford

**A**bout 15 years ago, I met an old soldier. A very old soldier. Frank Sumpter was more than 100 years old when we met. He was one of the dwindling ranks of veterans who had fought in the trenches of the First World War that raged from 1914 to 1918. Frank is dead now, as are all those who fought with him and against him. The last known WWI combat veteran died in Australia in May this year.

I wanted to meet Frank because he was one of the few people who had personal memories of a remarkable event that happened at Christmas in the first year of that devastating war nearly a century ago. The old soldier's body may have been fragile but his mind was still sharp and focused. He told me a fascinating story.

## Let me set the scene for you.

The dreadful conflict that history remembers as The Great War had been building in Europe for years. Germany in the late 19th century had become a formidable, united nation, and felt threatened by its neighbors. The rest of Europe, in turn,

was alarmed by Germany's growing power.

Great Britain had been the unchallenged superpower of the day, but Germany was becoming a serious rival. The German leader, Kaiser Wilhelm II, was the grandson of Queen Victoria of England, and the two nations were not natural enemies. But storm clouds were gathering as political and economic tensions steadily increased across the continent.

By August 1914, Europe was ready for war, and a madman's murderous assault on the Archduke of Austria provided the catalyst. Germany invaded Belgium, and Britain and France had pledged to come to the little nation's defense. So hundreds of thousands of young Britons, Germans and Frenchmen cheerfully went off to fight for King, Kaiser or Country. Both sides expected a quick victory. "Home by Christmas" was the patriotic slogan.

But it was not to be. A fierce winter set in over the battlefield, and neither side could gain a quick victory. By December 1914, the two huge armies were stalemated, bogged down in a line of trenches that stretched from the Belgian coast to the Alps. Losses to both sides were appalling as they fought to gain

or regain a few feet of land.

It soon became obvious that this war would be different from anything the world had seen before. It would not be decided by one or two pitched battles. The front-line soldiers lived for weeks on end, knee deep in mud, literally in each other's gun sights. They had once shared the same youthful enthusiasm, the same belief that they were fighting for a worthy cause. But as winter clamped down, friend and foe realized that, far from being home for Christmas, they were trapped in the grim trenches, cannon fodder for the first modern industrialized war.

Then on the evening before Christmas of 1914, a remarkable thing began to happen. Frank Sumpter remembered: "The Germans started it. They were in the trenches about 80 yards away, with rolls of barbed wire separating us. As Christmas Eve fell, the German troops called across 'Happy Christmas, Tommy.' 'We called back 'Happy Christmas, Happy Noel.' Then the Germans signaled to us to come out and we began to move.

"The Officers became extremely annoyed and called out 'Get back in the trenches.' But we ignored them. We had no particular feelings of animosity towards the individuals



## Soldiers left their muddy trenches and met each other in No Man's Land. They shared drink, food and cigarettes. Some even played football.

on the other side. We were soldiers, and soldiers don't hate each other. We put our hands through the rolls of barbed wire and shook hands with the German troops.

"One man asked me where I was from, and I told him. 'Do you know the Jolly Farmer Pub?' he said, and I said, 'Yes.' He said, 'I used to be the barber next door!' As far as we were concerned there was no hatred between us."<sup>1</sup>

Similar exchanges began to happen all along the front line. German soldiers adorned their lines with candles and makeshift Christmas trees. On Christmas Eve and Christmas Day, men who only a few hours before had been trying to kill each other sang carols and songs across the trenches. Soldiers left their muddy trenches and met each other in No Man's Land. They shared drink, food and cigarettes. Some even played football.

Soldiers on both sides wrote home about this extraordinary event. One German soldier wrote: "Is it possible? Are the French really going to leave us in peace today, Christmas Eve? Then; listen; from across the way came the sound of a festive song. A Frenchman singing a Christmas carol with a marvelous tenor voice.

"Everyone lay still, listening in the quiet of the night. Is it our imagination or is it maybe meant to lull us into a false

sense of security? Or is it in fact the victory of God's love over human conflict?"

And from a letter written by Sergeant A. Lovell of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Rifle Brigade:

"Climbing the parapet, I saw a sight which I shall remember to my dying day. Right along the whole line were hung paper lanterns and illuminations of every description...as I stood in wonder a rousing song came over to us... Our boys answered with a cheer. Eventually a party of our men got out from the trenches and invited the Germans to meet them halfway and talk. And there in the searchlight they stood, Englishmen and Germans, chatting, and smoking cigarettes together midway between the lines. A rousing cheer went up from friends and foe alike."

The diary of Lieutenant Geoffrey Heinekey of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Queen's Royal West Surrey regiment recounted an astonishing development, as Christmas dawned over the front line:

"The next morning a most extraordinary thing happened—I should think one of the most curious things in the war. Some Germans came out and held up their hands and began taking in some of our wounded, and so we ourselves immediately got out of the trenches and began to bring in our wounded also. The Germans then beckoned to us and a lot of us went over and talked to them and they helped us bury our dead. This lasted the whole morning, and I talked with several of them and I must say they seemed extraordinarily fine men. It seemed too ironical for words. There, the night before we had been having a terrific battle and the morning after, there we were, smoking their cigarettes and they smoking ours."

No one gave the order to fraternize like this. It happened spontaneously, in many different places, all along the front. It was just that the ordinary Tommy, Fritz and Jacques had had enough, and for “one brief shining moment,”<sup>2</sup> sanity prevailed over the madness. The generals didn’t like it. They realized that if opposing soldiers became friendly, it would weaken their resolve to continue the struggle. Nevertheless, in some places the unofficial armistice continued into the New Year. (Certain areas of the line actually remained quiet for even longer by an unspoken, mutual consent.) But eventually the fighting started again.

It lasted for nearly four more years, until the 11th minute of the 11th hour of the 11th month of 1918. So terrible had been the carnage that politicians confidently said it had been the war to end all wars. It wasn’t. Twenty-one years later, the sons of those who fought in those trenches were at it again in the trenches of World War II. It never ends.

Of course, there is another way—a way humanity longs to go but cannot. But that path, the path of love, the path of peace, is a path humanity is incapable of walking. Even when we are weary of the fighting, hating and killing; even when we weep the tears of deepest pain and anguish for our sons, and now our daughters, who are sent away to war to return broken and traumatized, if not in body bags; even then, even then, we always do it again. In the words of the musical, *Shenandoah*, set in the U.S. Civil War, “They always got a holy cause to send you off to war.”

### Jesus changed all that.

Christmas is our way of celebrating the Incarnation, the “becoming human” of the Son of God for the sake of humanity. He became one of us. He took up our cause into his own being. He lived our life for us (Colossians 3:4). He died our death for us (2 Corinthians 5:14). He is our righteousness (1 Corinthians 1:30). And he draws all people, even you and me, to him (John 12:32). He has made us one with him, one with each other, and in him, one with the Father (John 14:20). In Jesus Christ, at what the Bible calls “the day of his appearing,” the day will at last have arrived when “Nation will not take up sword against nation, nor will they train for war anymore” (Isaiah 2:4).

Ninety-seven years ago, at Christmastime, for one shining moment in the midst of a ghastly war, the spirit and hope of peace transformed the hearts of soldiers at the front. The day is coming when such a moment will last forever. **co**

<sup>1</sup> Louis Orgeldinger, *History of Württembergische Reserve Infantry Regiment No. 246*, Stuttgart, 1931.

<sup>2</sup> Lerner and Lowe, *Camelot*.

## The Light of Lights



My teenage son is a Hoosier fan and one of his Christmas gifts was to take him to a game. The drive to Bloomington from Ohio was over country roads, making it a pleasant afternoon drive. After the game, however, the nighttime drive home had quite a different feel. The dark country roads with no streetlights made me feel as if I were entering a mystery novel, “It was a dark and stormy night . . .”

It was the sheer blackness that made the first home we saw decorated with Christmas lights really stand out. The rich, bright colors replaced the ominous darkness with something beautiful, something inviting. It occurred to me that if I were lost and needed directions, I’d look for a home with Christmas lights to ask for help.

Christmas lights, especially on black, starless nights, always make me think of Jesus, who called himself the Light of the world (John 8:12). I like to ponder what he meant. What is he illuminating? What is he revealing?

Did he come to reveal the depravity of mankind? Did he come to show us how far removed we are from the Father, how our sins have deceived us, destroyed us and separated us from God? We already know all that, so that can’t be it.

Did he come to reveal a new and better set of laws, new rules we must adhere to if



we are to have any hope of obtaining God’s love? No, that doesn’t make sense either. No one has ever lived without sin, not even believing Christians. If there is anything we have to do to qualify for God’s love, none of us will ever qualify for it.

Or did he come to reveal not something for us to qualify for or measure up to, but something about God—about the Father’s unconditional love, mercy, forgiveness and grace toward humanity manifest in Jesus himself?

As I continued driving home, I started thinking about my relationship with my children. If I want to have a relationship with them that endures into their adulthood and for the rest of our lives together, my priority will not be to continually point out their flaws and weaknesses. My priority will be to continually remind them how precious they are to me. Yes, I teach them and do what I can to equip them to cope with life and to thrive in this world. But the most important thing I can teach them is that I love them unconditionally.

Jesus is the Light who came to reveal the Father for who the Father really is. He came to show us that God loves us, and that he is not some angry god of judgment and condemnation. He came to show that God is a Papa/Father who loves us as his precious children. It’s amazingly simple, yet incredibly beautiful. And he’s asked us to share that good news!

I think it’s a good time of year to start. **co**

# God Told Me...

By J. Michael Feazell

*How can we know whether God is leading us toward a particular decision, or whether it is just something we want to do for our own reasons?*

**“God told me to move my family to Saudi Arabia.” Alex stared at his friend, wondering if he was just joking or had gone mad. Alex had known Tom for more than 10 years. He’d been best man at Tom’s wedding, not to mention godfather to Tom’s and Alicia’s twin girls. And Alex knew that Tom and Alicia were as cut out for missionary life in Saudi Arabia as toads are for an omelet.**

“That’s, well, a pretty big decision, Tom. How do you know it’s really God’s will for you?”

“Well, just a lot of things.” Tom stared deep into his coffee cup. “Pastor Mel’s sermon a few weeks ago really got me thinking.” He glanced up at Alex. “We’re pretty selfish enjoying the good life here in America while people all around the world need help. I gave it a lot of prayer, and God seemed to answer that we should go.”

Alex nodded thoughtfully, weighing how to respond. “How did God give you that answer?”

“Well, for one thing, I was talking to the Hogarths, you know, the missionaries in Saudi Arabia. They said they could use some help.”

“What kind of help?”

“Well, you know, I’m pretty good at carpentry, and they said that’s just what they’d been praying for—somebody good at carpentry. It was like God was just saying to me, ‘This is what I want you to do, Tom.’”

“What does Alicia think about it?”

“Oh, she’s not as excited as I am, but I’m praying she’ll come around.”

“Not as excited?” Alex said.

“Well, actually she’s dead set against it. She can get pretty hardheaded sometimes. But I think the Lord will show her it’s the right thing for us to do.”

“Hmm, I see,” Alex dumped a pack of powdered sweetener into his coffee. “What if he doesn’t?”

“He will, Alex. I trust the Lord. And I have a really good feeling about this decision.”

Tom is not unique. Every day, Christians somewhere are convincing themselves that God is telling them to marry a certain person, take a certain job, go to a certain college, or “get out there” and do something really big and meaningful for him.

But is he—really?

How can we know whether God is really leading us into some major life decision, or whether, just maybe, we are simply bored and frustrated with our current situation and looking for a change or a way out? A way out with God’s name stamped on it?

Here are a few thoughts God told me to pass along about decision-making. Or maybe he didn’t. In any case, here are my two cents worth. I believe they are a biblically rooted two cents worth.

When God spoke to people in the Bible, there was no question that it was a message from God. It usually was delivered in person by an angel, and it usually scared the recipient of the message.

When God had to tell people what he wanted them to do, it was usually something they did not want to do.

Sometimes, our prayers for God’s blessing are really our prayers to get our own way despite what God thinks. Take King Ahab, when he wanted to attack the King of Aram, who

## How can we know whether God is really leading us into some major life decision, or whether we are simply frustrated with our current situation and looking for a way out with God’s name stamped on it?

had captured some of Ahab’s cities. Ahab asked Micaiah the prophet if he’d be victorious. Micaiah told Ahab the truth, even though all the other “prophets” had said Ahab would surely win the battle. Ahab wasn’t looking for God’s will; he was looking for affirmation of his own will. He was doing a bullheaded thing, but he also wanted God’s blessing to cover his backside. Well, God is apparently not into covering the backsides of bull-headed people. Ahab attacked the king of Aram and was killed. God doesn’t stop us from making stupid decisions when we are determined to make them.

God is pretty clear about what he “tells” us to do: “The entire law is summed up in a single command: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’” And for what it’s worth, we don’t have to go half way around the world to find our neighbors.

One of the reasons we crave to do something “great” for God is that we are unsure of how we stand with him, and we hope that if we do something “great” like move to a faraway corner of the earth and be a missionary, God will like us more

and we can feel better about our relationship with him. That’s not gospel thinking—that’s religious thinking. God loves us where we are, and there is a “great” Christian work in our being ourselves in Christ and showing his love to the people we run into every day.

Changing our location does not change us. We can’t run away from our problems. If I’m a lazy curmudgeon in Peoria, I’ll be a lazy curmudgeon in Bangladesh. If I’m a short-tempered mule with my first spouse, I’ll likely be a short-tempered mule with my second, or third, too. If we need to change, we just might need to change our *selves* first, not merely our circumstances. We might need to pray for a clean and godly heart of love, and then take that clean heart wherever life leads us, not where we think there might be more spiritual glory.

Spiritual glory is invisible, don’t forget, and it’s present in every act of kindness and self-sacrificial love. Geography or possessions have nothing to do with it. If I want to do “more” for God, I might do well to start by being a better husband and father, or wife and mother.

Some ordained people give poor advice. Don’t think that when a pastor or missionary says, “Hey, I think God is calling you to such-and-such,” they necessarily know what they are talking about. “In a multitude of counselors, there is safety,” says the proverb. We shouldn’t take one hyped-up person’s opinion as though it were God’s sacred word just because it’s what we wanted to hear.

### Concluding thoughts

“God told me to...” is often a euphemism for “I want to and have decided to...”

It isn’t wrong to want to do something and decide to do it. But why not be honest? Why not say: “I have decided to go to Africa and work in a health clinic. Please pray for me.” That would be honest.

God can and does bless us in our decisions without making them for us. God gives us the ability to weigh the factors in our lives, get advice, do some research, study the issues involved and make informed, well-considered decisions. And we should ask him to lead us.

Wouldn’t it be nice to enjoy the godly freedom to say: “Lord, I’ve got several paths before me, and based on all the facts as I understand them, here’s what I think I should probably do. If there’s something I’m missing here, would you show me before it’s too late? And if I miss the cue, then please have mercy on me, a sinner and a frequent dumbbell. And one more thing, if this is a trap door instead of an open door, would you mind not letting go of my hand until I get back to where I ought to be? Thanks. Amen.” **co**

# Journey to the Middle of the World

By Carla Pearson-Sethna

**I** have wanted to go to Ecuador ever since I heard Danny Oertli perform his song “God Will Repay” at a children’s ministry conference about five years ago. The song was written to a child he had sponsored and finally got to meet.

*“Well for years we’ve had your picture on our refrigerator door.*

*It’s good to see your brown eyes face to face.*

*Even if it’s in this musty bus in Quito, Ecuador,*

*There is something very holy in this place.”*

Last fall, I was invited to visit this “holy place.” A colleague of mine who directs DoMissions for Dominion Christian High School asked me if I’d be interested in helping chaperone teenagers on a mission trip to Ecuador in June 2011. On the spot I told him to count me in.

Our trip details were organized by Extreme Response (ER), a Christian organization dedicated to “Changing Lives” around the globe. Its website, [extremeresponse.org](http://extremeresponse.org), indicates its goals: “serving and caring for the needs of the poor; responding in compassion and love; partnering with organizations serving children and families at risk; and empowering people to help others around the world.”

On June 1, dressed in our brown “Changing Lives” T-shirts, we met at the Atlanta airport and flew down to Quito. Paul Fernane, an ER coordinator, met us at the airport, from where we drove to the ER building in Quito, which would be our home for the next ten days.

Early each morning, we traveled by bus in the shadow of *Cotapaxi*, a snow-capped volcano, for about 30 minutes to the town of Pifo. Half our group worked at Peniel Christian Elementary School, scraping and painting the buildings and building benches for the on-site church. Beautiful little smiling children, dressed in school uniforms, took turns popping out of their classrooms to give us hugs and to practice their English.

The other half of our crew traveled a bit further to Bethel High School, where the teens dove into the hard work of pouring cement and building an outdoor basketball court and bleachers. (The most challenging point in the trip for me came on the last day when we were expected to

play basketball against the Ecuadoran students on the new court. I thought I might need to see the inner workings of an Ecuadoran medical clinic.)

## Learning the culture

Each afternoon we met back at the elementary school for lunch and to conduct *escuela biblica*, or Vacation Bible School (VBS), which was the part of the program I had been asked to organize. I gave our teens opportunities to lead worship, play instruments, organize crafts and games, making fruit costumes for our *El Fruto del Espiritu* theme, read Bible verses in Spanish, put on puppet shows, and act out Bible stories. I soon learned a lesson about working in other cultures. Although Nick had suggested abandoning my intention to implement the American-style plan of dividing the children into age groups and rotating through activities, I didn’t listen; thinking my way was the right way. During the first afternoon, it became evident that the children were not going to separate into age groups, that older children were taking care of young siblings and cousins, but that boys and girls liked being in separate groups.

Our second night in Quito was a spiritual highlight for me. We participated in another ER ministry to the people who work and live in the city’s Zambiza Dump, digging in the garbage for anything that could be recycled. ER works with local Pastor Jose Jimenez to provide an on-site medical clinic, daycare center and preschool. It was there that we met the night workers, prayed with them, served them a meal and sang with them.

On Sunday we worshipped in Spanish with the Buen Pastor congregation and then journeyed to *mitad del mundo*, the “middle of the world,” where we lined up for a photo with a foot on either side of the equator.

## Life-changing experience

This was my first short-term mission trip, and before I went I was skeptical about such trips, wondering how much good can possibly be accomplished in a week, especially with a language barrier. Were these trips really just a new kind of vacation designed to help people feel better about themselves? I wanted to find out.

Continues on page 14





▲ DoMissions students with children at Peniel Christian School.

▼ Carla Pearson-Sethna



▲ It makes for harder work when the truck gets stuck.



Ryan Schrock with a new friend



First day of Vacation Bible School (VBS). ▼



Serving dinner to the night workers at the Zambiza Dump



# Holidaygreetings.com

By Brenda Steffen



**I don't do much for the holidays. I string up a few lights, more for a coziness factor in the cold than anything else. And I have a single star I put in my window every year.**

I also bake a few batches of gingerbread cookies and give some to the neighbors and to my high-school girlfriends at our annual holiday breakfast. My husband, who is a sailor, is gone every other Christmas. Last year, I spent the day talking with him on Skype, along with friends in Germany and Egypt, and eating the rest of those gingerbread cookies. I probably took a nap in between. All in all, I'm pretty low key as far as any holiday goes. Except for one thing.

Most of my friends tell me that mailing Christmas cards is a chore, and expensive, and something they put off until the last minute. But I love it.

I remember, as a child, getting pen pal letters from far away. Some pen pals I had met, through church or summer camp, but others I wrote to for school projects or in response to their ads in magazines asking for pen pals. I had my own little desk where I wrote about my life as a 10-year-old. Once I mailed the letters, I eagerly awaited replies.

How thrilling to know that somewhere on the planet, someone else eagerly waited to hear news from me. Me!

Checking the mail was (and admittedly, it still is) one of

my favorite parts of the day. Sometimes there was a photo of a pen pal in one of the letters, or even some kind of trinket. In the days before the Internet made it so easy to share our every obscure thought and fuzzy photo, we kids measured our "friend lists" by the stack of wallet-sized pics we had traded with one another.

From our house to the mailbox was a good walk, and some days it proved fruitless except for the exercise. Sometimes my mom would get the mail and come back and joke that nobody loved us because there were only bills in the mail.

Even now, my husband says the same thing with a laugh when there is nothing good in the mail. With a mailbox full of bills, rejection letters from various publishers, and flyers with special offers that aren't so special after they've sent the fifth one, good news is hard to come by.

There is something so refreshing about opening an envelope with a foreign postmark and my name handwritten on it, and reading holiday cheer—or indeed anytime-of-year-cheer—from friends far away.

Proverbs 25:25 says, "Like cold water to a weary soul is good news from a distant land."

*The Message* says it like this: "Like a cool drink of water when you're worn out and weary is a letter from a long-lost friend."

I don't know about you, but I know a lot of worn out and thirsty people out there. Sure, the cost of stamps has gone up. And most greeting card companies charge a small fortune to say something that you can just as easily email or post to 400 plus friends at the same time on Facebook. But really, how special does it make you feel when you get a mass message from someone that essentially says, "you're a dear friend... but you are not worth 44 cents to me, or even 29 cents for a postcard"?

I have been guilty, more than once, of crossing someone's name off of my Christmas card list because they haven't reciprocated for a few years. I might have to rethink that policy, though. Maybe they're the very people who need to hear some good news—even if it's simply news that someone somewhere is actually thinking of them.

Perhaps it's time to add a few people to the list instead of crossing some off. Won't you join me? And while we're at it, let's not stop at just at the holidays. We can send a note to our friend's child at summer camp. We can mail a letter to a school friend we haven't seen in 20 years. We can put a family photo in a real card for the widow at church who always gives us a hug and says we remind her of her granddaughter on the other side of the country. It might be exactly what they've been waiting for in their own mailbox.

May we all receive a little good news from both far and near this holiday season! **co**

# Big Sandy Revisited

By John Halford



Sonny Parsons and New Beginnings

the last of our church. Only a small congregation continued to meet in the area, pastored from neighboring Longview.

Then in 2002, Sonny Parsons and his wife Jane asked to be transferred back to Big Sandy. They had worked on the campus, and as they were getting older, they wanted to make Big Sandy their home. But not their retirement home. Sonny Parsons is a born mover and shaker and his goal was to make the church once again a significant presence in this rural Texas community. Not this time as a beautiful but mysterious college on the outskirts of town, but as a lively church that would be a light and a blessing to the local community. So the local congregation bought some property in the middle of town, renamed the congregation “New Beginnings” and true to their new name, began again.

They had invited me to their annual “Fun n’ Fall” festival day, to which they invite everyone who lives in and around Big Sandy to enjoy a day of free fun and entertainment. Saturday, October 29, was a beautiful day, unseasonably warm, with clear blue skies. The church members had been preparing for several weeks, and some were on site preparing at 3:00 a.m.

The day began with an all-you-can-eat breakfast of waffles

**Rather than dwell on the past, the Big Sandy congregation decided to become a bright, active part of the local community.**

It is always a bittersweet experience to go back after several years to revisit a home you have lived in or a place where you have worked. Although I was never actually assigned to the Ambassador University campus in Big Sandy, Texas, I knew it well. I visited often, as a guest lecturer from church headquarters to teach a few classes or as a video writer and director for the church’s television department. Both my daughters were students there, and many of the staff and faculty became close friends.

So it was with some hesitation that I approached the familiar entrance on Highway 80. This was no longer “our” property, no longer connected to our church as it had been for more than four decades. It is now known as Alert College. Would they even let me in?

There was no problem. The security checkpoint was unmanned. I drove in and spent 20 minutes or so cruising the campus. Everything looked much the same. The buildings we had built 20 years ago had settled into the landscape, and there were a few new structures, the most obvious being a large climbing tower on the athletic field. The current owners have different priorities.

As I drove around, memories came flooding back. They were all memories of people, not places. The buildings, without the people who once worked, studied and played there, were just buildings. Nice buildings, but buildings all the same. They belonged to someone else; I had no business there. And so, curiosity satisfied, I continued down Highway 80 toward the little town of Big Sandy. That is where our story is now. And it is a good one.

When Ambassador University in Big Sandy closed its doors in 1997, the local people might have thought they had seen



Melven Allen still manages the ‘fleet program’.

One time SEP chef Glenn Roberson and veteran pastor Kelly Barfield supervise the catering.



Ivirne Allen gives the old SEP Frogurt machines a new lease on life.



and sausage. Then followed several hours of activities. There were games and face painting for the children, competitions for everyone, and free hot dogs and drinks for all. Several tables were set up, laden with surplus clothing, free for the taking for anyone in need. A highlight was the BSKCAR (Big Sandy Kids) car races, in which children (and some adults) tried their skills in some gravity fueled go-karts. White Chocolate, a praise band from neighboring Longview, donated their talent to provide several hours of live music.

More than 500 people, about half of the town and surrounding community, showed up to enjoy the day with us. Especially noticeable was the number of teens and young people. These were not just day visitors, taking advantage of some free food and entertainment. Sonny explained that in addition to the regular Sunday service, which usually had an attendance of around 55 people, mainly older adults, a Wednesday night teen Bible study had up to 60 young people showing up regularly.

The Big Sandy congregation has determined to make its church a benefit to the community. They allow responsible groups to use their facilities free of charge, and something seems to be happening there every day of the week. One member is President of the local Rotary, and the club holds its meetings in our building.

From the moment he arrived, Sonny Parsons became involved in the community. He served for two years as mayor and has twice been selected as Big Sandy's Man of the Year. He has also been President of the Ministerial Alliance. As a qualified paramedic, he continues to play a leading role in the local emergency response team.

When the University closed, many of the employees remained in the local area. I was able to get together with longtime friends and colleagues, some of whom I had not seen for years. They are older now, and some are retired, but they still play an active part in church life. Melven Allen once managed Ambassador College's transportation department. Now he supervised the fleet of unpowered go-karts that have become a regular attraction at Fun n' Fall.

Mel's wife Ivirne was dispensing frozen yogurt from the venerable machine that had once been a popular feature of the old summer camp at Orr, Minnesota. Glenn Roberson, renowned at the University and the Orr summer camp for his culinary and baking skills, was still at work grilling hot dogs, assisted by veteran pastor Kelly Barfield. Another retired pastor, 84-year-old Ken Swisher, who had been instrumental in starting the original college, long before it became a university, was visiting for the day. Dr. Bill Stenger, former registrar of the University, lives nearby and

## Jesus is the Redeemer, and that redemption—the forgiving of sin and his making us one in himself—is for a purpose, a reason—that we might make and keep friends.

is a regular preacher in the surrounding congregations. Rick Petersen (a regular in the Young Ambassadors video series produced by the church many years ago) and his wife Lois (Weber) and their family are active in promoting teen activities. Lee Pettijohn, who was chief engineer for the television department in Pasadena, and his wife Vivian have built their dream retirement home right by the railroad—not everyone’s dream location, perhaps, but the Pettijohns are railroad buffs and enjoy sitting on their front porch watching several dozen freight trains rumble by every day.

For me, visiting Big Sandy was inevitably a nostalgia trip. But a very positive one. Rather than dwell on the past, the Big Sandy congregation decided to become a bright, active part of the local community. One theme emerged as I talked with old friends and colleagues. The past is the past; what has gone is gone. It was fun and rewarding while it lasted, and we built many good memories and relationships that will last a lifetime—and beyond. However, we agreed, if only we had known then what we know now.

Maybe you never knew Big Sandy. But you have your own memories of places and people. Especially people. Never underestimate the value of these relationships. The heart of all Jesus’ saving work and teaching is about good relationships, and the gospel declares that wherever our sinfulness has damaged or broken our relationships with one another and with God, Jesus has healed and restored them in his own life and death and resurrection and ascension in our place and on our behalf.

Making and keeping friends (which is the bottom line of “love one another” and “love your neighbor as yourself”) are, and always have been, the truest “kingdom work.” How true is the old saying, “Make new friends but keep the old; one is silver and the other is gold.”

Think of it this way: Jesus is the Redeemer, and that redemption—the forgiving of sin and his making us one in himself—is for a purpose, a reason—that we might make and keep friends.

Jesus knew what we often forget: buildings inevitably crumble, and the physical things we put so much value on eventually come to nothing. But humanity is created to last forever, and not just to last forever, but to last forever together in love. The older I get, the clearer it becomes that it is the relationships we have forged and will yet forge, and that inevitably find their fullness in Christ, that matter more than anything else in this world. **co**

## Aging to Perfection



It’s hard to believe that 2012 is upon us! When I was young the years seemed to go at a snail’s pace. It seemed to take me forever to stop putting the previous year’s date on my school assignments. When I became an adult, it took a while to stop doing the same thing with my checkbook. This year, though, I started writing 2012 on a check while we were still in October 2011. That’s scary! I must really be old. Now years are whizzing by like I’m caught in H.G. Wells’ *Time Machine*.

I don’t mind getting older. Really I don’t! Many expensive delicacies are described as “aged to perfection.” Certain cheeses, cuts of beef, old paintings, antique furniture, classic cars, retro jewelry, distilled spirits and fine wines improve with age. Although I prefer being compared to fine wine as opposed to cheese, the point is that if we are “aging to perfection” through maturity—gaining wisdom and knowledge and valuable experience—then each year represents more than just being, as Tennessee Ernie Ford used to sing, “another day older and deeper in debt.”

Paul speaks of this maturing process from a Christian perspective. He says in 1 Corinthians 13:11, “When I was a child, I spoke as a child.” What do some children do to get what they want? Some cry, “Waw-waw-waw!” Some pout. Some throw tantrums. Some hit. Some say, “If you don’t want to play my way, I’ll take my marbles and go home.” Some sing, “Everybody hates me. Nobody loves me. Think I’ll eat some worms.”

Ideally, a loving, parental hand leads a child out of such behavior. Unfortunately, sometimes we adults continue to deal with difficulties the same way we did when we were children, just not as blatantly. We harbor feelings of resentment, bitterness, and anger. And yes, sometimes we might still pout, throw a tantrum, take our marbles home and want to eat worms.

However, when one becomes a Christian, something new happens. Our Father’s loving, parental hand, through his Holy Spirit, guides us into his truth (John 16:13). We start developing the fruit of his Holy Spirit, such as love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control (Galatians 5:22-23). We feel a need to pray for those who hurt us, rather than wishing them hurt or dead. Even though we tell God our desires, we rely on his wisdom to do the right thing. We pray, “Your will be done” and more importantly, we mean it!

When we become adults, we can put away childish things (1 Corinthians 13:11). We can be secure in our belief in Jesus Christ and no longer live like children tossed to and fro (Ephesians 4:14-15).

When a Christian is “aging to perfection” the way God intends, facing another year need not be cause for regret about days gone by. It can be a time of rejoicing for what the future holds, and for praising our great God who holds our future. **co**

# Middle of the World

From page 9

We certainly worked hard to make improvements in the daily lives of some children in Ecuador, and to share the joy of God's truth through fun activities in VBS. We were just one group of many who are participating in the ongoing great work of our loving God in Ecuador. ER attracts not only Christians, but also individuals, many of whom are college-aged, from around the world simply looking for service opportunities. Although they may not be professing Christians, they learn about Jesus from ministering alongside the Christian volunteers, such as the teens in our group. Working alongside us most days was a student from Scotland and another from Austria, who were spending their summer in Ecuador.

I was most amazed, however, to witness what happened to our teenagers in such a short time. They were transformed by the spiritual law that it is more blessed to give than to receive. During nightly debriefings and devotions, the teens, often in tears, tried to find words to express what it felt like to make a difference, and to receive acceptance and joy from the people we were trying to serve. Having the little ones smile, hug them and play with them helped the teens feel God's unconditional love, which crossed the language barrier. They also learned the value of hard work and surprised themselves in what they could accomplish without complaining.

Certainly, mission work in our own communities and country is important and can achieve similar transformation. But going to a developing country, away from TV, computers, the mall and cell-phone coverage gave us an appreciation for what matters. Conversations among our teens became more meaningful. They cared less about acting cool and looking good. They felt loved, beautiful, important, and worthwhile from participating in God's work. All they wanted to do in the mornings was get to work and see the kids. And they were in daily awe of the Creator who made the spectacular Andes Mountains.

As Danny Oertli puts it in his song, "God Will Repay," participating in missions enables us to "realize the joy that Jesus feels in bringing hope." **co**

**PS.**

After returning to the United States from Ecuador and recounting my experience in Quito's Zambiza dump, a film-buff friend recommended I see the documentary, *Wasteland*, about how artist Vik Muniz changes the lives of *catadores*, garbage pickers, in Rio de Janeiro's dump,

the world's largest landfill. This inspiring film illustrates the transformational power to change lives that comes from sharing the good news that all people are loved, are beautiful, and are God's artwork. For more information, go to:

[wastelandmovie.com/vik-muniz.html](http://wastelandmovie.com/vik-muniz.html).

## Emmanuel, Our Redeemer



As we prepare to celebrate the birth of our Redeemer, the opening words from a beautiful hymn keep running through my mind: "There is a redeemer, Jesus God's own Son."

Redemption isn't a word we use often in everyday life, unless we're talking about turning in a coupon to save money, or exchanging points for merchandise. Some of us remember saving green stamps in books and redeeming them for just about anything. We sometimes talk about redeeming time, particularly making up for a misspent youth or wasted opportunities.

However, even when we think of *redemption* as a churchy word, we might not be so clear on the meaning. One well-known story of redemption is found in the book of Ruth (a biblical love story, if you will), of a young widow's tragedy and triumph, and her hero-kinsman-redeemer, Boaz. Perhaps you know the story. Ruth's experience helps us understand what it means to be redeemed.

Under the laws of ancient Israel, the closest relative of a widow (enter Ruth) could, upon her request, marry her and thus restore the land belonging to the family, as well as continue the family line of the deceased husband. When Ruth lay at Boaz's feet on the threshing floor, she wasn't being inappropriate; she was claiming her right to make him her kinsman-redeemer. A closer relative who had the first prerogative declined to marry Ruth and the rest is history; Ruth took her place in the genealogy of Jesus.

By marrying Ruth, who was a gentile daughter-in-law of the wife of one of his relatives, a "nobody" to him, Boaz restored her honor, dignity, land and inheritance. By extension, Naomi, Ruth's mother-in-law, also got back her life and was given a future and hope.

Boaz was a type of Christ, pointing to Jesus as the kinsman-redeemer of all humanity who would buy us back from sin and death. Jesus gave himself for us, restoring our hope and future. His sacrifice saves us from bondage to the wrong master and frees us to be in him, with blessings now and hope for eternal life with him.

The most beautiful thing about our redemption is that it wasn't a transaction. Just as Ruth had nothing to offer Boaz but herself, we have nothing to offer Jesus but ourselves, sins and all, no coupon or green stamps required. It was a plan God formulated before the foundation of the universe, and it was motivated and shaped by one thing: his amazing love.

By becoming human just as we are human, yet remaining God; from zygote to embryo to fetus, then infant to child to preteen and on to teenage and adulthood, Jesus redeemed us entirely, healing our sin and alienation and taking us into himself. Just as Boaz changed Ruth's life, making her part of his family and no longer an outsider, so Jesus has brought us into the life of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit and, in him, we are outsiders no more. Our Kinsman-Redeemer became one of us to make us one with him. **co**

# Forty-Two Men and Five Women

A Study of Matthew 1:1–16



Many modern readers feel that the New Testament begins in the most boring way possible: a list of unusual and hard-to-pronounce names.

However, ancient readers would have found a number of interesting things in this list.

## Women in the list

Matthew wanted to present evidence that Jesus is the Messiah. Everyone expected the Messiah to be descended from David, so Matthew began by showing that Jesus meets that requirement.

Biblical genealogies usually list only men. Matthew's list is unusual because it includes five women.

Even more surprising, Matthew did not mention women who were highly esteemed—Sarah, Rebekah, and Leah. Instead, he mentioned women who were somewhat embarrassing:

- 1) **Tamar**, who committed incest. Genesis 38 tells the seedy story. Judah and a Canaanite woman had three sons. The first one married Tamar, but he died before they had any children. Following ancient Middle Eastern custom, his brother was supposed to marry the widow and engender an heir for the dead brother. The second son did not want to do this, and he died. Time passed, and Tamar saw that Judah's third son was not going to marry her, so she pretended to be a prostitute and had sex with Judah, her father-in-law. Her twin sons became the ancestors of most of the Jewish people.
- 2) **Rahab** the prostitute. When the Israelites were about to conquer the land of Canaan, they sent spies into Jericho, who stayed at "the house of a prostitute named Rahab" (Joshua 2:1). The king of Jericho wanted to kill the spies, but Rahab helped them escape. When Jericho was destroyed, Rahab and her family were spared (Joshua 6:25). The Old Testament does not tell us what happened to Rahab, but Matthew tells us that she was an ancestor of King David.
- 3) **Ruth** the Moabitess. The biblical book of Ruth says that a Jewish family moved to Moab, and the sons married Moabite women. The men died, and two of the widows moved to Beth-

lehem. Following ancient custom, a relative was supposed to marry the young widow so the dead man would have an heir. So Boaz married Ruth. Deuteronomy 23:3 says that Moabites could not "enter the assembly of the Lord, even down to the tenth generation." Nevertheless, in fewer than 10 generations, God anointed one of those descendants as Israel's king.

4) The wife of Uriah the Hittite. Curiously, Matthew does not mention her name. But his readers would know the story of **Bathsheba** from 2 Samuel 11. While Uriah was fighting battles for David, David was stealing his wife. Bathsheba became pregnant, and David arranged for Uriah's death. The child died, but David's second child with Bathsheba was Solomon, the next king.

5) **Mary**, mother of Jesus. Mary was accused of a scandal, but Matthew explains that there was no scandal: Mary became pregnant before marriage by a special act of God (Matthew 1:18).

## Why these women?

Why did Matthew mention these women? One theory is that the women were immoral. Indeed, some were, but Ruth was not, and the way in which Rahab become an ancestor of David is not known; she may have been completely moral after coming to know God. Nor would Matthew want to imply that Mary was immoral.

Another theory is that the women were Gentiles. Some were, but we do not know about Tamar and Bathsheba. Matthew says that the gospel should be preached to all nations (28:19), and it would indirectly support his point to mention Gentiles in the ancestry of the Savior. Although genealogies were often designed to support ethnic authenticity, Matthew uses his genealogy to point out ethnic impurity.

Perhaps Matthew's purpose was simply that all of the women are irregularities in the royal lineage of Judah, and that people should therefore not be surprised that the birth of the Messiah involves some irregularity as well. Jesus was not born as a "pure" person, but as an ordinary person, with moral and ethnic impurity in his ancestry, just as we all have. **co**

## THE GREEKS HAD A WORD FOR IT

### γεννάω

Matthew's genealogy uses the Greek word *gennaō* 39 times to indicate the father-son relationship; in the King James Version, one man begat another. But in a few cases, generations are missing. Verse 8 says that Jehoram was the father of Uzziah. But from 2 Chronicles 22-24 we learn that the list should

be: Jehoram, Ahaziah, Joash, Amaziah, and then Uzziah.

These omissions show that *gennaō* does not mean "to cause conception." Nor can it refer specifically to birth. It is a more general word indicating ancestry. In verse 20 *gennaō* refers to the fetus in Mary's womb; in Mat-

thew 2:1 it refers to Jesus' birth in Bethlehem. Like the English words "generate" and "produce," it is flexible in meaning. **co**

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H m m ...

It is one of the blessings of old friends that you can afford to be stupid with them.

**Ralph Waldo Emerson**

Whatever your situation, seek God's will for your future. Pray about it, seek wisdom from others, search God's Word for direction, and trust him to guide you. His will for you during retirement may not differ greatly from what you have envisioned—or it may take you in new and unexpected directions. But whatever the outcome, make God's will your priority for your retirement years. Then you will be able to look back over your life and say with King David, "My share in life has been pleasant; my part has been beautiful" (Psalm 16:6 NCV).

**Billy Graham,  
Nearing Home, p. 45**

It is one thing to show a man he is in error and another to put him in possession of the truth.

**John Locke**

**The true character of a man is measured by what he does while no one is watching.**

**John Wooden**

There is nothing so annoying as to have two people talking when you're busy interrupting.

**Mark Twain**

It takes a great deal of courage to stand up to your enemies, but even more to stand up to your friends.

**J. K. Rowling**

My grandfather once told me that there were two kinds of people: those who do the work and those who take the credit. He told me to try to be in the first group; there was much less competition.

**Indira Gandhi**



**Discipline is the bridge between goals and accomplishment.**

**Jim Rohn**

The budget should be balanced, the Treasury should be refilled, public debt should be reduced, the arrogance of officialdom should be tempered and controlled and the assistance to foreign lands should be curtailed, lest Rome become bankrupt. People must again learn to work instead of living on public assistance.


**Cicero, 55 BC**

**Renewal begins with recognizing the sparks of life already present in the church and then fanning those sparks into flame. The principle is basic and self-evident: Life begets life.**

**Howard Snyder,  
Signs of the Spirit**

All their life in this world and all their adventures in Narnia had only been the cover and the title page: now at last they were beginning Chapter One of the Great Story, which no one on earth has read: which goes on for ever: in which every chapter is better than the one before.

**C.S. Lewis,  
The Last Battle**

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**The illiterate of the 21st century will not be those who cannot read and write, but those who cannot learn, unlearn, and re-learn.**

**David Stark**