

The Gospel: From the Bible to the World Today

By Grace Communion International

Second edition

May 2018

Copyright © Grace Communion International
All rights reserved.

ISBN-13: 978-1502598738

ISBN-10: 1502598736

All scripture quotations, unless otherwise indicated, are taken from the Holy Bible, New International Version®, NIV®. Copyright ©1973, 1978, 1984 by Biblica, Inc.™ Used by permission of Zondervan. All rights reserved worldwide. www.zondervan.com The “NIV” and “New International Version” are trademarks registered in the United States Patent and Trademark Office by Biblica, Inc.™

CONTENTS

Introduction	vii
Part 1: The Gospel as Defined in the Bible	
1. Good News for Ordinary People	1
2. The Message of Jesus	9
3. What Jesus Said About Himself	13
4. Preaching in the Early Church	18
5. What Did the Apostles Preach?	22
6. The Gospel According to Paul	30
7. Paul Preaches the Good News	35
8. The Good News of Salvation	39
9. Relationship With Christ	44
10. Humans in the Image of God	49
11. What Are Human Beings?	55
12. Will Humans Become Gods?	62
Part 2: Accepting the Gospel	
13. Why Would Anyone Want to Be a Christian?	66
14. Heart Trouble	70
15. An Anchor for Life	73
16. Make This the Worst Day of Your Life	76
17. The Gospel—It's Not Fair!	78
18. Grace	81
19. Grace and Truth	85
20. Grace to the Gluttons	88

21. Grace: An E-Ticket Ride	90
22. God's Grace	92
23. Grace From First to Last	95
24. The Best Story of All: The Gospel	97
25. East From West	100
26. Do Grace and Law Conflict?	103
27. Grace and Obedience	106
28. Is Grace Too Good to Be True?	113
29. Too Much Grace?	115
30. Grace: A License to Sin?	128
31. Lopsided Grace	131
32. Grace to Be Who You Are	133
33. Afraid of God?	135
34. Is Jesus the Only Way of Salvation?	137
35. A New Look at the Good Samaritan	141
36. Peter's Story: Coming to Christ	145
37. The Gospel and Superman	151
38. The Gospel According to Sam	153
39. A Covenant of Forgiveness	156
40. The Chink in Death's Armor	157
41. Going on a Guilt Trip?	159
42. The Gospel Really Is Good News	161
43. Only One Name	169
44. How to Become a Christian	188
45. Your Invitation to the Kingdom	192
46. The Gospel Jesus Preached	198
47. This Is Living Faith	204
48. Responding to God With Faith	211
49. Jesus' Acceptance	218
50. Justification and Righteousness by Faith	225
51. A Simple Matter of Trust	230
52. In God We Trust	240
53. In Christ We Trust	244
54. Another Look at Faith	248
55. Believing the Gospel	255
56. Take the Leap	260
57. I Want to Accept Jesus, But...	267

58.	Do You Believe?	272
59.	Should Believers Be Baptized?	277
60.	A Good Way to Go	280
61.	Baptism: Commemorating a Commitment	282
62.	How Baptism Pictures the Gospel	286
Part 3: Growing in the Gospel		
63.	New Life in Christ	291
64.	Coming to Know God	298
65.	He Lives Within Us	304
66.	Tell Peter	308
67.	Good News in an Alabaster Jar	311
68.	On Being a Child of God	319
69.	Discovering Adoption	323
70.	Our Relationship With Jesus Christ	326
71.	The Joy of Salvation	331
72.	Standing in Christ Alone	334
73.	Obedying God	342
74.	Looking for Love...	350
75.	Getting a Grip on Repentance	352
76.	Trusting God With the Problem of Sin	362
77.	Getting Real	372
78.	Fulfilling the Law	376
79.	By Faith, Not by Sight	385
80.	Is Anything Too Hard for God?	391
Part 4: Sharing the Gospel in the Bible		
81.	Preaching in the Book of Acts: Part 1: Peter	395
82.	Preaching in the Book of Acts: Part 2: Paul	405
A. Jesus' Good News Encounters With Everyday People		
83.	Jesus' Encounter With a Despised Sinner	411
84.	Jesus' Encounter With a Foreign Woman	417
85.	Jesus' Encounter With a Rich Man	421
86.	Jesus' Encounter With a Sinful Woman	425
87.	Jesus' Encounter With a Religious Leader	430
88.	Jesus' Encounter With a Samaritan Woman	435
89.	Jesus' Encounter With a Disabled Man	440
B. The Disciples' Encounters With Everyday People		
90.	The Disciples' Encounter With Mass Evangelism	445
91.	The Disciples' Encounter With Street Ministries	450

92. The Disciples' Encounter With Spirit-Led	455
93. The Disciples' Encounter With Prison Ministry	459
94. The Disciples' Encounter With Worldview Evangelism	464
95. The Disciples' Encounter With Messianic Ministries	469
Part 5: Sharing the Gospel in the World Today	
96. Introduction	474
97. A Theological Look at Evangelism	477
98. A Trinitarian Perspective on Evangelism	485
99. God's Gift: Outline for an Evangelistic Tract	497
100. Living the Gospel	499
101. It's About Relationships	502
102. Sharing the Good News	504
103. Sharing a Secret	510
104. Reaching Out With the Gospel	513
105. Sharing Your Faith	515
106. Sharing Your Faith With the Unchurched	520
107. Sharing Your Faith Through Friendship	525
108. Sharing Your Faith With a New Ager	530
109. Sharing Your Faith With Another Christian	539
110. Sharing Your Faith in a Postmodern World	544
111. The Jonah Syndrome	549
112. Ev-Angela's Sermon	555
113. Fostering an Evangelistic Culture	557
114. Why Should We Tell People About Jesus?	559
115. Losing Our Gospel "Buts"	562
116. Truth in Advertising	564
117. Gossiping the Gospel	566
118. The Power of Intent	571
119. Ordinary People Change the World	575
120. Invisible Missionaries in China	580
121. Show Up – Declare – or Win?	582
122. How I Found My Way to Follow Jesus	586
123. Evangelism Focused on Relationships	589
124. An Evangelistic Outline	604
125. Summary of the Outline	614
About the Authors	616
About the Publisher	618
Grace Communion Seminary	620

INTRODUCTION

This book is a compilation of numerous articles, most of them written independently of the others over the span of twenty years. There is inevitably some overlap, and perhaps even some contradictions, although all articles have been edited in 2014 for this compilation. Some of the articles will be more relevant to your needs and interests than others, so feel free to skip around according to which titles interest you. We hope that you find the collection useful.

GOOD NEWS FOR ORDINARY PEOPLE

The message of Jesus

Almost 2,000 years ago, a Jewish carpenter began to preach. He was popular with some people, but he made others angry. Officials said he was a threat to national security, and they arranged for his death. His only weapon was his message.

The crowds seemed to like it, but “good” people didn’t. He said it was about love—so why did anyone hate it? What was the message that got Jesus killed?

Here’s another puzzle: If this message got Jesus killed, why did other people take up the message and preach it, too? Were they trying to get themselves killed? Why were they so bold with the message?

Let’s examine what the Bible says about the message of Jesus. Let’s see the words he used to describe it, and the words his followers used.

Chapter 1: The gospel of the kingdom

Matthew describes the beginning of Jesus’ preaching career in this way: “From that time Jesus began to proclaim, ‘Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near’” (Matthew 4:17, New Revised Standard Version).

Verse 23 adds a little more: “Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and curing every disease and every sickness among the people.”

From these verses, we see that Jesus taught:

- good news (older translations say “gospel,” which means the same thing)
- about “the kingdom”—the kingdom of heaven, or the reign of God
- the kingdom had come “near” and

- people should therefore repent, or turn toward God.

What is this “kingdom” of God? How was it near—in time or in location? How are people supposed to turn toward God? And if all this is good news, why did it create such a controversy among first-century Jews? Why would anyone kill the messenger of good news?

We need to keep reading.

“Good news”

In the Roman empire, the word for “good news” was used for official announcements. Jesus was announcing something about God’s empire. Perhaps you can guess why some government officials might think that his message was dangerous: he was preaching about a kingdom. But they didn’t understand what Jesus really meant.

How did Jesus use the word for “good news”? In the Gospels, the word is usually on its own—Jesus preached “the good news.” The readers knew what it was—it was a shorthand way of saying “the message of Jesus.”

But sometimes we are given a brief description of the good news. Once it is called “the good news of God” (Mark 1:14). But it is more often called “the gospel of the kingdom.” The first three Gospels tell us that Jesus often preached about “the kingdom of God.”

Gospel Statistics

What is the most common way to describe the good news? Here’s how the word is most often used in the Bible:

- good news of Jesus Christ – 15 times
- good news of God – 9 times
- good news of the kingdom – 7 times
- my gospel, our gospel – 6 times
- the gospel of peace – 2 times
- good news of God’s grace – 1 time
- good news of the glory of Christ – 1 time
- gospel of your salvation – 1 time

The Bible does not require any particular label for the message of Jesus and the message of the church. We can convey the meaning without insisting on any particular word.

But this is not the only way to describe the message. The Gospel of John,

for example, doesn't even use the word for "good news." John describes the message in other ways. And as we go forward in the Bible, the word "kingdom" becomes less common. The message is much more commonly called "the good news of Jesus Christ" (see box). It can also be called the good news of salvation, the good news of God's grace, and the good news of peace.

This creates another puzzle: The words "grace" and "kingdom," for example, are not normally interchangeable. Is the message about a kingdom, or is it about grace, or is it about Jesus Christ?

What did Jesus preach?

The Gospels use the word "preach" or "proclaim" more than 40 times. If we survey these, we will see that Jesus not only preached the good news about the kingdom, he also preached about repentance, forgiveness, justice, and rescue for the poor (Luke 4:18; 24:47).

Was Jesus leading some sort of poor-people's revolt? No, Jesus was not a political leader—he was a religious leader, a rabbi. His message was about God, repentance and forgiveness. But his message was especially good news for the poor—not to lift their economic burdens, but to lift their religious burdens. They were carrying a heavy load, and it wasn't fair.

Jesus preached justice for the poor, freedom for the oppressed. But the people who were doing the oppression didn't like the message. The religious leaders didn't like the message of Jesus. It disturbed the peace, and threatened the status quo (Matthew 10:34).

Religion (even certain forms of Christianity) can be used to oppress people, to keep them in line, to burden them with guilt that they don't need to carry. But the message of Jesus can lift those burdens. It can help people see clearly, can help them be freed from religious bondage. Even today, people who oppress others do not like the message. Religious leaders who use religion as a tool of power do not like the message of Jesus.

The time is at hand

"The time is fulfilled," Jesus said, "and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news" (Mark 1:15). What did Jesus mean by saying that the time was fulfilled? He meant that the time had arrived for the kingdom of God. The kingdom of God is near, and in this passage Jesus is talking about nearness in terms of time. Jesus told his disciples to preach the same thing (Matthew 10:7).

The kingdom of God had been predicted hundreds of years earlier; it had been hoped for and prayed for. The Jewish people wanted the kingdom to

come, and Jesus came and said, “I have good news! It’s time for the kingdom of God!”

Today, we might have all sorts of ideas as to what a kingdom is, and what the kingdom of God might be. But if we have the wrong idea, then we will conclude that Jesus was a false prophet, because he did not bring the kind of kingdom that we expected. But if we do that, we are judging Jesus even before we give him a chance to explain what he means.

First-century Jews had their ideas about the kingdom, too, but Jesus did not bring what they expected. Many were disappointed—even his own disciples were disappointed. That’s because they were hoping for a political kingdom, but Jesus did not bring a political kingdom. He brought a spiritual kingdom.

Jesus not only announced that the kingdom was near—he also had to explain what the kingdom was. The people had their ideas about it, but Jesus had to correct them. “The kingdom of God is like this...,” Jesus often said, and he would give an illustration. The reason he had to teach so much about the kingdom is because the people had so many wrong ideas about it.

First-century Jews thought the kingdom would be a time of agricultural abundance, economic prosperity, military superiority and glory for the Jewish people. But Jesus never described the kingdom of God in these ways. He had something much better in mind.

Responding to the message

Jesus expected people to *respond* to his message. He urged them to believe it and to repent. Of course! Any speaker wants people to believe the message. But Jesus wants more than a simple acceptance that what he said was true—he wants them to believe that it is good! He wants them to receive it with joy.

The kingdom of God is bad news for people who oppress others. But if you are a victim of religious oppression, then the kingdom of God is good news. If you have been turned off to religion, then the message of Jesus is good news.

Jesus wanted people to repent. What does it mean to repent? In simple terms, it means a change of mind, a change of attitude. It means a change from not trusting God to trusting God. It means a change from not believing God to believing God. Since the kingdom is at hand, Jesus was saying, people need to have their hearts right with God.

Repentance is the flip side of believing the gospel. To have an attitude of *faith* is to believe that the news is good. We *want* the King to reign and rule. We trust that he will rule us well. We want to please him, rather than simply

trying to avoid his anger. We rejoice that God's kingdom is near. And with joy, we give our allegiance and loyalty to him. That is what it means to repent and believe the good news of the kingdom of God.

When Jesus announced the gospel, there was an urgency about the message. Jesus didn't tell anyone to repent later. He told them to repent right away. The kingdom of God was at hand!

The message is just as urgent today. Jesus wants *us* to believe the gospel.

A Jewish kingdom?

What did first-century Jews think when they heard the phrase "kingdom of God"? They probably thought in terms of a normal human kingdom—a king, giving laws and ruling over people in a certain territory.

The Jews were ruled by Romans, but they wanted to be independent. They wanted God to restore the kingdom to Israel. They searched the Old Testament prophecies that promised Israel national greatness. They speculated about how and when God would rescue his people. They looked for a golden age in which Israel would be the richest and most powerful nation on earth.

The Dead Sea scrolls and other writings of the time show that the Jews wanted a Messiah, a person sent by God who would lead the nation to greatness again. The overall hope was that God would intervene and restore the Jewish nation to greatness.

Not what Jesus meant

When Jesus used the phrase "kingdom of God," many people would have thought of a nation like the kingdoms of this world. But this is not what Jesus meant. He did not lead or predict a revolt against Rome. The people wanted Jesus to be a military leader, but Jesus went out of his way to avoid their wishes (John 6:15). He told people to obey the Roman rulers and pay their taxes.

Jesus did not resist the government even when soldiers came to arrest him and crucify him. Jesus conquered spiritual enemies, not military ones. That is because spiritual enemies are far more oppressive than military ones. Spiritual freedom is far more important than political freedom.

Jesus' kingdom was not like the popular expectation. He used the phrase "kingdom of God" with a different meaning. His kingdom was not of this world (John 18:36). It was not like the kingdoms of this world. It was the kingdom of God, a supernatural kingdom. It was invisible to most people (John 3:3)—it could not be understood or experienced without the Holy Spirit (verse 6). God is Spirit, and the kingdom of God is a spiritual kingdom.

The disciples often misunderstood

But Jesus' disciples were ordinary Jews of first-century Jewish culture. The disciples had wrong ideas about the kingdom, too, and they often misunderstood what Jesus was teaching. Near the middle of his ministry, Jesus asked them, "Do you still not perceive or understand? Are your hearts hardened? Do you have eyes, and fail to see? Do you have ears, and fail to hear? And do you not remember?... Do you not yet understand?" (Mark 8:17-21).

Some people even stopped following Jesus because they couldn't understand what he was talking about (John 6:66). Others stayed even though they didn't understand (Mark 6:52). He asked Peter, "Are you also still without understanding?" (Matthew 15:16).

Christians today might find it encouraging that the disciples weren't particularly bright, and yet Jesus was patient with their mistakes. We make mistakes, too, and we don't always understand Jesus correctly, but we are in good company. We don't have to be super-smart to follow Jesus. He will lead us and teach us at the speed we need.

The wrong kind of Messiah

Matthew 16 tells us the interesting story of how Peter had a moment of wisdom, and then almost immediately stumbled into a horrible heresy. It begins with Jesus asking his disciples what the people thought of him (verse 13). Then he asked, "But who do you say that I am?" Peter answered, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God" (verses 15-16).

Great answer!, said Jesus. You aren't smart enough to figure that out for yourself—no one is—God must have helped you (verse 17). So Jesus admitted to being the Messiah, the leader the Jewish people were eagerly waiting for. But wait, Jesus said. Don't tell anybody who I am (verse 20).

Surely this puzzled the disciples! Jesus was telling everyone that the kingdom of God was near. He just admitted to being the Messiah, the person everyone believed would bring the kingdom in. Why announce one truth but not the other?

We will see why if we keep reading: "From that time on, Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering...and be killed, and on the third day be raised" (verse 21).

This did not match the disciples' ideas about a Messiah. Messiahs aren't supposed to suffer and be killed. So Peter took Jesus aside "and began to rebuke him, saying, 'God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you'" (verse 22).

Peter had just called Jesus the Messiah, the God-appointed national leader. Now he began to rebuke his own leader, as if he could teach him a thing or two. Perhaps he said, “Jesus, the Messiah isn’t supposed to suffer and die—he is supposed to be a popular leader.” Peter’s idea of a Messiah was not the same as Jesus’ idea.

Jesus had the right idea, and Peter and everybody else in Judea had the wrong idea. That’s why Jesus didn’t want the disciples to tell anybody he was the Messiah. They had the right word (it means someone anointed by God to do a certain task), but the wrong idea. Their understanding of “kingdom” probably wasn’t much better than their understanding of Messiah.

That’s why Jesus had to teach so much about the kingdom. It wasn’t enough just to announce it—he had to explain what it was. The kingdom, like the Messiah, wasn’t the way that people expected it would be. It was not the sort of kingdom that Greeks and Romans and Jews were familiar with.

Disciples would understand later

Jesus told the disciples to keep some things secret until after he had been raised back to life. But they did not understand (Mark 9:9-10). He predicted his own death and resurrection, but they still didn’t understand (verses 31-32). These ideas didn’t fit into their concept of what Jesus was all about.

The disciples were perplexed at the teaching of Jesus (Mark 10:24), and after more explanation, they were still perplexed (verse 26). They did not know what he meant (John 16:18). But Jesus said that the time would come when they would understand (verse 13).

Although Jesus had told them several times that he would be raised to life after being killed, they were devastated by his death and perplexed by the empty tomb. They did not understand, because it was all so different from what they had assumed.

Didn’t Jesus preach that the kingdom of God was near? Didn’t he say he was the Messiah? But when your Messiah is dead in the tomb, the kingdom of God seems a long way off. It just didn’t make any sense. The disciples were afraid. They fled and locked the doors.

Shortly after Jesus was resurrected, he chided the disciples for how slow they were to believe (Luke 24:25). But they would soon understand it all. Near the end of his ministry, Jesus predicted that his gospel would to continue to be preached (Matthew 24:14). It would not be a different gospel, but the same good news, now going to all nations.

Now we need to turn to the book of Acts to see what the disciples preached. There we will learn more about what the gospel is.

THE MESSAGE OF JESUS

In this Bible study, we refer you to verses that answer the questions. Although you may get the gist of the answer by looking at the comments we make, the study will be more meaningful if you look up the Scriptures and take time to think about it, rather than reading through in a hurry.

1. When Jesus began his ministry, what did he preach? Mark 1:14-15. When he sent his disciples out, what did he tell them to preach? Matthew 10:7; Luke 10:9.

Comment: Some ancient Greek manuscripts of Mark 1:14-15 say that Jesus preached the kingdom of God; others say that he preached the gospel of God. It is not necessary here to discuss which manuscripts are better, but we will discuss the version that is familiar to most of us—Jesus preached, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand” (NIV 1984)

Jesus was clearly announcing the kingdom—not just the king—as being near. He was talking about nearness in terms of *time*, not geography. “The time is fulfilled....” The time had come for God’s kingdom to be established.

Likewise, when the disciples preached that the kingdom was near, they were not talking about the king, and they were not talking about a nearby territory. They were announcing that God’s kingdom would soon be there. This was good news!

2. Was Jesus a king? John 18:37. But was he like the kings of this world? Were his disciples supposed to act the way rulers of this world act? Matthew 20:25-28. May we assume that God’s kingdom is like the kingdoms of this world?

Comment: When we are studying something as important as the central message of Jesus Christ, it is not safe to make assumptions. God’s thoughts are not like our thoughts, and his ways are not like ours. We need to look to Scripture to see what Jesus revealed about the kingdom.

The Jews had various assumptions about what the Messiah would do, but Jesus did not act the way they wanted him to. Their assumptions about the king were wrong, and their assumptions about the kingdom were wrong, too.

Just as their ancestors had wanted a king like the nations around them (1 Samuel 8:5), the first-century Jews also wanted a kingdom much like the kingdoms of this world—with a military leader who enforced laws in a particular territory. The Jews wanted the Messiah to bring a kingdom like that, but Jesus brought something different. Let’s study a few more verses to

learn about the kingdom Jesus preached.

3. Did Jesus say that the kingdom had already come upon the first-century Jews? Matthew 12:28. Were people already entering the kingdom of God? Luke 16:16; Matthew 21:31. How were they entering? Matthew 21:31-32. Is it possible to enter something that does not exist?

Comment: When Jesus preached the kingdom of God, he told people to believe the message and repent (Mark 1:15). He criticized those who did not believe and repent, but praised the people who did believe and repent, and said that they were entering the kingdom.

Jesus was talking about a spiritual move, not a geographic move. People enter God's kingdom by accepting his rule, not by moving to a new territory. They enter God's kingdom by repentance and faith—they accept his rule in their lives. They accept Jesus as their King, and he reigns over them. They become his subjects, doing his will. Paul said that Christians have already entered the kingdom (Colossians 1:13).

Jesus, the King, has already been crowned with power and authority over all things (Matthew 28:18). He is already King. However, he does not force others to do his will, the way the kings of this world do. Rather, he reigns over those who willingly accept him as their King.

4. Did Jesus also speak of the kingdom of God as a future reality? Matthew 8:11; 13:43; Luke 13:28. Can something that exists right now expand and also exist in the future?

Comment: Jesus spoke of the kingdom as both a present-tense reality and a future glory. It exists now as a spiritual realm—in the world, but not part of the world—and it will later expand with power and glory when Jesus returns. The kingdom will then come in great power. God's power is already here, but it is veiled—present but usually not visible.

The kingdom is both present and future, already in existence but not yet visible in its fullness. The “already/not yet” nature of God's kingdom is similar to other spiritual realities:

- We are already saved, but the fullness of our salvation is yet future (Ephesians 2:5; 1 Peter 1:5).
- We have already been given eternal life, but its fullness will be given after we die (John 3:35; Mark 10:30).
- We will be like Christ, yet Christ is already being formed in us (Philippians 3:21; 2 Corinthians 3:18).
- We will live with God forever, but he already lives within us (1

Thessalonians 4:17; 1 John 4:13).

The Bible speaks of these spiritual truths not only as future gifts, but also as blessings we already enjoy in part.

In a similar way, Jesus spoke of the kingdom both as something that exists right now and something that will exist in a greater way when he returns. When he and his disciples announced that the kingdom was near, they meant the spiritual, invisible phase of the kingdom. For those who thought the kingdom would soon appear with power and glory, he told a parable to explain that there would be a delay (Luke 19:11-27)—but the parable also explains that some of the work of the kingdom must be done even before the kingdom appears in its fullness. Now is the time we are to believe, repent, be saved and enter the kingdom.

5. What did Jesus say would be preached throughout the world? Matthew 24:14. What did he commission his disciples to preach? Matthew 28:19-20; Mark 16:15-16; Luke 24:47. Should we conclude that preaching the kingdom is practically synonymous with preaching faith, repentance, forgiveness and making disciples?

Comment: According to Jesus, our goal when preaching is to make disciples, and we do that by preaching repentance and faith, baptizing those who believe and teaching them to obey what Jesus taught. For those who *reject* Jesus as King, the kingdom is a message of judgment. But for those who accept him, it is wonderfully good news—the good news is that we can enter the kingdom now!

Since the good news of the kingdom is experienced only through faith, repentance and forgiveness, these aspects of salvation must be a prominent part of the gospel message. If people have faith in Jesus Christ and accept him as Lord, they enter his kingdom—even if they have never heard the word “kingdom.” It is their *relationship* to Jesus Christ that is crucial; the precise terminology is not nearly as important.

When we preach the gospel of the kingdom, what should we say about it? In future studies we will see the way Jesus described the kingdom, what the original apostles preached, and what Paul emphasized as the most important part of the gospel message.

Michael Morrison

WHAT JESUS SAID ABOUT HIMSELF

Jesus preached the kingdom of God. However, the early church preached mostly about Jesus. Is there a contradiction in this? Did the early church get things turned around, preaching about the messenger but neglecting his message? Let's go back to the four Gospels to see whether the early church's focus on Jesus is compatible with Jesus' own teaching. Did Jesus actually preach about himself?

1. Near the end of the Sermon on the Mount, how does Jesus describe the people who enter the kingdom of God? Matthew 7:21-23. Is it appropriate to call Jesus Lord? Is it appropriate to do good works in his name? What else is needed? Verse 21. In verse 23, who is acting as Judge? Whose words are we to put into practice? Verse 24.

Comment: Throughout the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus spoke with personal authority. People are blessed or not blessed in relation to him. He indicated that his own words were on the same level as Scripture. He said that people should put Jesus' words into practice just as seriously as they obey God.

2. Did Jesus claim to be able to forgive sins? Matthew 9:2-6. Did he heal for the purpose of showing this authority?

Comment: I can forgive sins that are committed against me, but I do not have authority to forgive someone of the sins they commit against someone else. But Jesus claims to forgive all sins, even in terms of a person's relationship to God.

In this passage, Jesus is teaching something about himself. This is one aspect of the message God the Father wanted Jesus to preach: that forgiveness comes through Jesus Christ. This means that entry into the kingdom is through Jesus Christ. The kingdom of God is good news for those who accept Jesus.

3. If a person does not accept Jesus, how will that affect the person's relationship with God? Matthew 10:32-33. Is Jesus claiming to be Judge of our eternity? Does Jesus promise eternal rewards? Verse 42. Does he pronounce judgments about the future? Matthew 11:22. Which is worse—the sin of Sodom, or the sin of rejecting Jesus? Verse 24.

4. What did Jesus claim about his own knowledge and authority? Matthew

11:27. Did he claim to be more important than Solomon, more important than Jonah, more important than the temple, more important than the Sabbath? Matthew 12:5-8, 41-42.

Comment: As part of his mission, Jesus claimed an authority and knowledge that was much greater than any other person had. He claimed to be the key to eternal life in the kingdom of God. He was teaching about himself.

5. Did Jesus want his disciples to know who he was? Matthew 16:13-15. Did God the Father want them to know? Verses 16-17. Did Jesus have authority to give the keys to the kingdom of God? Verse 19. Is obedience to Jesus more important than life itself? Verse 25.

Comment: If ordinary people said this, we would consider them either crazy or dangerous cult leaders. But Jesus said it about himself. He was extraordinary.

Jesus preached the kingdom of God, but he also preached about himself as the decisive factor as to whether a person is in the kingdom. For the gospel to be communicated accurately, it is essential that people know about who Jesus is and what he taught.

6. Jesus called himself the Son of Man. Did he also claim that he would have the Father's glory? Matthew 16:27. Would he also be the Judge, the one who gives eternal rewards? Did he claim to give authority to his disciples? Matthew 18:18; 19:28. If Jesus can give that kind of authority, does it imply that he has even more authority than that—more than heaven and earth?

7. Did Jesus claim that his life was worth more than all other people? Matthew 20:28. Did he take a psalm about God and apply it to himself? Matthew 21:16; Psalm 8:2. Does he claim to have angels, whom he can send throughout the universe? Matthew 24:30-31. Does he claim that his words are infallible, greater than the universe? Verse 35.

Comment: These are astonishing claims. Jesus is teaching that he is as great as God.

8. In a parable, Jesus again claimed to be the Judge, sitting on a throne in heavenly glory. Will he control the eternity of all human beings? Matthew 25:31-32. Will he have authority to give eternal life in the kingdom of God? Verse 34. Will he have the authority to condemn people? Verse 41.

9. Did Jesus claim to institute a new covenant between God and his people? Matthew 26:28. Does this covenant bring forgiveness? Whose blood made it possible?

Comment: Jesus taught that he was the sacrifice that enabled people to live in the kingdom of God, the ransom that could set them free. He claimed to do this by his death, and yet he also claimed that he would live forever. In all these things, Jesus was teaching something about himself.

10. Does Jesus again claim universal authority? Matthew 28:18. Does he put himself on the same level as the Father? Verse 19. Does he put his own commands on the same level as the Father's? Verse 20. Does he claim to be present with believers throughout the world and throughout the ages?

11. Did Jesus give his disciples power over all things? Luke 10:19. Did he claim authority to give the kingdom of God and to give the highest positions? Luke 22:29. Even on the cross, did he claim authority to judge whether a person would be saved? Luke 23:43. Did he have the authority to send the power of God? Luke 24:49.

12. When Jesus approached Jerusalem, did he equate his own coming with “the time of God’s coming”? Luke 19:41-44. Did he acknowledge being the Son of God? Luke 22:70. Did he claim to be the fulfillment of the Old Testament Scriptures? Luke 24:44. Was this what he taught before his crucifixion, too? Same verse, first part.

Comment: The first-century Jews were looking forward to an earthly kingdom, with land, laws, king and subjects. If Jesus preached this kind of kingdom, most people would have found it normal, and not objectionable. But Jesus caused controversy by the things he taught about himself. This was what caused the Jewish leaders to accuse him of blasphemy and to crucify him. This was an important part of his message.

13. Jesus’ identity is much more explicit in the Gospel of John. What does he claim about himself? John 3:13-16, 35. Did his audience understand that he was claiming to be equal to God? John 5:17-19. Can the Son give eternal life? Verse 21. Is he the Judge of the world? Verse 22. Should Jesus be honored in the same way as the Father—with worship? Verse 23.

14. Did Jesus teach that he had life within himself? John 5:25. Is he the one who gives eternal life? John 6:27. Is he the one who raises the dead?

Verse 40. Is eternal life uniquely dependent on Jesus? Verse 51. Is he the key to eternal life? John 11:25-26.

15. Did Jesus teach that he existed before Abraham? John 8:58. That he had glory with God before the world began? John 17:5. That he is able to resurrect himself? John 10:18. That he is equal with God? Verse 30. That he is the perfect representation of what God is? John 14:9-10.

Comment: Jesus did not begin his sermons with, “Let me tell you about how great I am.” Nevertheless, in his preaching and teaching, Jesus often taught about himself. He taught that he had an extraordinary greatness, and our eternal future hinges on whether we accept him for who he is. He is the key to the kingdom. We must believe in him before we can experience his forgiveness and life in his kingdom.

Jesus’ disciples didn’t always understand what Jesus taught. He often chided them for being slow of heart and of little faith. They did not understand Jesus’ role as Savior until after the resurrection. They seem to have misunderstood who he was, despite all the things that he taught. There were some things that he specifically told them to be quiet about until after his resurrection (Mark 9:9).

After Jesus ascended into heaven and the Holy Spirit empowered the apostles, they understood much more about Jesus and his kingdom. They were inspired to see even more clearly that Jesus’ teachings about himself were of supreme importance.

People can have many misunderstandings about the kingdom and still be saved, but in order for them to experience salvation, it is crucial that they accept Jesus as Lord and Savior. *He is the most important part of the message.* People need to know about Jesus.

Jesus taught about his own death and resurrection, and he taught that forgiveness comes through him. That also formed the focus of the preaching of the early church in the book of Acts. The apostles did not contradict their Master. What we see is continuity and greater clarity, not contradiction. The gospel focuses on who Jesus is and what he did so that we might be saved in God’s kingdom.

When we compare the different sermons in the book of Acts, we see different ways to preach the gospel. When we see the different parables and sayings of Jesus, we also see a variety of ways to preach the gospel of salvation. When we examine the letters of Paul, which we will do in our next study, we will again see some differences, as well as continuity in the most important points.

Michael Morrison

PREACHING IN THE EARLY CHURCH

What is the true gospel, the gospel revealed in the Bible? There are several ways to approach Scripture to learn what the gospel is.

One would be to focus on the teachings of Jesus, who often called his own message “the gospel of the kingdom of God.” We have done this in previous studies. We saw how he described the kingdom of God and how salvation is based on a person’s response to Jesus.

But this is only part of the biblical picture. Jesus told his disciples some things privately, and he told them not to tell the public until after his crucifixion and resurrection. So perhaps the gospel was more clearly revealed after the Holy Spirit empowered the apostles for their mission. Because of this possibility, we should also find out what Jesus’ *disciples* taught. In this study, we will focus on the book of Acts. We will compare the apostolic gospel with the message of Jesus to see if they are the same.

1. When Matthew wrote his book about the life and ministry of Jesus, he was inspired to end the book with some final instructions—the last words of Jesus that the readers needed. What did Jesus tell his disciples to do? Matthew 28:19-20. Luke also tells us what Jesus expected his apostles to preach. How did he describe it? Luke 24:46-47.

Comment: Jesus’ commission to his church can be phrased in several ways. It can be called the gospel of the kingdom of God, but none of the commission verses happens to use that phrase. The content of the message is much more important than the label we use for it.

The content of the message is repentance and forgiveness of sins, which will be preached in Jesus’ name, that is, by his authority, continuing the ministry he began. People who believe are to be baptized and taught, and they will be saved. It’s a message of repentance, salvation and teaching.

It is a self-replicating message and mission, since one of the commands that Jesus’ disciples are to teach is the command to go and make more disciples. It is to be taught and retaught to every generation.

2. The book of Acts reports Jesus’ last-minute instructions to his followers. What did he say? Acts 1:8.

Comment: Jesus gave his apostles the task of being his witnesses. In Acts, Luke shows that the apostles were witnesses of Jesus in Jerusalem, Samaria and all the way to Rome.

The word “witness” is important in the book of Acts. “Witness” is a

courtroom term. In a trial, witnesses are called to tell what they have seen and heard. Similarly, the apostles preached what they had seen and heard of Jesus. They were his witnesses, testifying to the truth about him.

The Greek word for “testify” is *martyreo*, and the word for “witness” is similar: *martyr*. We get the English word “martyr” from the fact that many people who were witnesses for Jesus were killed because of their faith. Their willingness to die for Jesus was a powerful testimony that they firmly believed that salvation was given only through him. They were his witnesses to the very end.

3. Luke includes numerous sermons in Acts, the “history of the early church.” What was Peter inspired to preach about on the Day of Pentecost? Acts 2:14-36.

Comment: Peter began by explaining the miracle of tongues. What was his focus after that? Verse 22. What was his main point? Verse 36. What were the people supposed to do with this information—what difference was it to make in their lives? Verse 38.

4. Peter gave another sermon in chapter 3. Again, he began by explaining a miracle (verse 12). What then did he preach about? Verses 13-18. What were the people encouraged to do? Verse 19.

Comment: The focus of these sermons is Jesus. Peter said that Jesus would return and restore everything, but the focus of his message was not on the future. Rather, he focused on what Jesus had already done, and how people were to respond to that right now.

Peter talked about Jesus’ life, death and resurrection, his fulfillment of Scripture, and his identity as Lord and Christ. Peter called for repentance and baptism, and he offered the Holy Spirit and forgiveness. That was his concluding exhortation, the main point he wanted people to get.

5. The next sermon in Acts is a long message by Stephen, who preached to the Jewish leaders. He began with an overview of history (Acts 7:1-50). What accusation did Stephen then make against the Jewish leaders? Verses 51-52. This made them angry. What then did Stephen testify before the court? Verse 56.

Comment: Stephen’s witness made the Sanhedrin so angry that they cut his sermon short and stoned him to death. His witness to Jesus made him a martyr. We do not know for sure how he would have concluded his speech/sermon, but as it turns out, his dying words were a message about

forgiveness through Jesus (verse 60).

6. The next sermon that Luke reports is the sermon Peter gave in the house of Cornelius. This is a short sermon, perhaps because Cornelius already knew much of the message (Acts 10:37). But Peter repeated the most important parts. What was the focus? Verses 38-41.

Comment: How did Peter summarize the commission Jesus had given the apostles—how did he conclude? Verses 42-43.

7. Luke then describes some sermons by the apostle Paul, who spoke to four different audiences: Jews in Pisidia, Gentiles in Athens, Jews in Jerusalem, and civil rulers. Although Paul used different approaches for these audiences, some aspects of the message remained the same. In the synagogue in Pisidia, Paul began with Israel's history (Acts 13:16-22). What did he concentrate on for most of the sermon? Verses 23-37. What was the conclusion, the main point? Verses 38-39.

8. In Athens, Paul faced a different crowd. He could not begin with Scripture or Jewish history. But he could start with a contemporary situation (Acts 17:22-23) and introduce them to the Creator God (verses 24-28). What did Paul exhort the people to do, and how did Paul end his message? Verses 30-31.

9. In front of a Jerusalem crowd, Paul gave a more personal history—his own history before conversion, then his conversion and his commission. How did Ananias describe Paul's mission? Acts 22:15.

10. In front of King Agrippa, Paul again gave his personal testimony. As Paul describes it, what did Jesus tell him to preach? Acts 26:16-18. How did he describe his own preaching? Verse 20. How did he summarize his own message? Verse 23.

Comment: Keeping in mind that some of the sermons were not finished, let us see what they have in common:

- All of them mention God.
- All of them mention Jesus.
- Seven of them mention Jesus' death.
- Seven mention his resurrection.
- Four say that he is now exalted.

- Seven mention forgiveness of sins.
- Five mention repentance.
- Three mention the need for faith.
- Five mention Scripture.
- None of them use the word “kingdom.”

Luke tells us that the early church preached the gospel of the kingdom of God, but from the examples he gives us, we see that it is not necessary to use the word kingdom when we preach the gospel. Nor do we need to describe a future age.

The gospel is good news right now, but it is good only if we are able to participate in it— and we do that through Jesus Christ. He is the one we need to hear about, since he is the one who makes it possible.

The book of Acts shows us that gospel preaching should focus on Jesus Christ, especially his death and resurrection, and on repentance, forgiveness and salvation through him.

Michael Morrison

WHAT DID THE APOSTLES PREACH?

The book of Acts shows a dramatic change in the disciples. No more questions, no more doubts, no more arguing among themselves. They boldly preached with confidence to thousands of people in the temple, defying the religious leaders, risking their lives because they were so zealous for the message.

What turned the fishermen into faith-filled preachers? Two things: they were convinced that Jesus was alive, and that they were given the same power that Jesus had—the Holy Spirit helped them understand and gave them courage.

The Messiah was alive, and his message was true: The time had come. The kingdom of God had come! Turn to God, and believe the wonderful news! Jesus told them to preach, and so they preached!

But what did they preach?

Peter's sermon

On the day of Pentecost, strange sounds came from heaven. Strange things appeared near the disciples. Strange words came from their mouths. Jews from all across the empire asked, What is going on? Peter stood up to explain what was happening: A prophecy of Joel was being fulfilled (Acts 2:1-20).

A prophecy of *Jesus* was being fulfilled, too. He had predicted that the Holy Spirit would come upon his disciples, and it was happening. The Holy Spirit had filled Peter, and he preached with power.

What did he say? He preached about Jesus:

Listen to what I have to say. Jesus of Nazareth, a man attested to you by God with deeds of power, wonders, and signs that God did through him among you, as you yourselves know—this man, handed over to you according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of those outside the law. But God raised him up, having freed him from death. (verses 22-24, NRSV)

Peter continued to preach about Jesus, and concluded his sermon by saying, “Therefore let the entire house of Israel know with certainty that God has made him both Lord and Messiah, this Jesus whom you crucified” (verse 36). He told the people to repent, and they would know that their sins were forgiven (verse 38).

In chapter 3, Peter and John speak to another crowd, beginning their sermon by talking about Jesus (verse 13). They explain that the Scriptures predicted the suffering and death of the Messiah (verse 18), and they called for repentance (verse 19). They ended the sermon by talking about Jesus. This pattern happens throughout the book of Acts (see box).

Preaching in the Book of Acts

What did the disciples preach about? Here are the verses in Acts that use the words for “preach,” showing what they preached about:

- 4:2 — proclaiming that in Jesus there is the resurrection of the dead
- 5:42 — proclaiming Jesus as the Messiah
- 8:4 — proclaiming the word
- 8:5 — proclaimed the Messiah
- 8:12 — proclaiming the good news about the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ
- 8:25, 40 — proclaiming the good news
- 8:35 — proclaimed the good news about Jesus
- 10:36 — preaching peace by Jesus Christ
- 11:20 — proclaiming the Lord Jesus
- 13:5 — proclaimed the word of God
- 13:32-33 — bringing the good news that God fulfilled the promise by raising Jesus
- 13:38 — proclaiming forgiveness of sins through Jesus
- 14:7, 21; 16:10 — proclaiming the good news
- 14:15 — bringing good news, that you should turn to God
- 15:7 — the message of the good news
- 15:35 — proclaimed the word of the Lord
- 17:3 — proclaiming the Messiah, Jesus
- 17:18 — telling the good news about Jesus and the resurrection
- 17:23 — proclaim what you worship as unknown
- 20:24 — testify to the good news of God’s grace
- 20:27 — declaring the whole purpose of God
- 26:23 — proclaiming light to Jews and gentiles

The disciples did not forget about the kingdom of God. It is mentioned a few times, but the overwhelming focus of their messages was Jesus. The most important thing people needed to know about the kingdom is Jesus, specifically that he is the Messiah (or in Greek, the Christ), that he has come, and he has been resurrected to life.

The kingdom in Acts

Evangelism is a major theme of the book of Acts, but the word *kingdom* is not used in any of the sermons. It is used only eight times in Acts. We’ll see what the disciples said about the kingdom.

Although Jews believed in the kingdom of God and had the Old Testament prophecies about it, Paul argued about the kingdom for three months in the Ephesian synagogue (Acts 19:8). His concept of the kingdom must have been considerably different from what the Ephesian Jews had believed.

No wonder! Paul's message about the kingdom was coupled with a message about Jesus and grace and faith. The overwhelming focus of the apostolic messages was Jesus. The most important thing people needed to know is about Jesus.

That was Jesus' message, too. For 40 days after his resurrection, he taught the disciples about the kingdom (Acts 1:3). What did this include? Luke tells us what he talked about during that time. On the road to Emmaus, "he interpreted to them the things *about himself* in all the scriptures" (Luke 24:27). Later, he summarized his own message: "These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you—that everything written *about me* in the law of Moses, the prophets and the psalms must be fulfilled" (verse 44).

What was written? Here it is in a nutshell: "*The Messiah* is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day, and that *repentance* and *forgiveness* of sins is to be proclaimed *in his name* to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem" (verses 46-47). This is the kingdom message: a message about the Messiah who suffers, dies, is resurrected, calls for repentance and brings forgiveness.

Throughout the book of Acts, we see the disciples preaching about Jesus, about his resurrection, about repentance, faith and salvation. Many people accepted the message. Others scoffed, and some became angry. People react in different ways to Jesus.

But wait! How did a message about the kingdom of God get turned into a message about the messenger? Did the disciples get it wrong? Absolutely not! They were inspired to understand what Jesus was teaching. Jesus had spoken in figurative language; he inspired them to take the next step. They were also inspired to write the books of the New Testament—and the first four are all about Jesus. Jesus is the focus of the Gospels, of Acts, of the Epistles, and of Revelation. He is the focus of the message of the church.

Jesus speaks about himself

Jesus made some astonishing claims about himself—so bold that the Jewish leaders hated him for it. They could tolerate talk about the kingdom, perhaps, but they were really upset when Jesus talked about himself.

He talked as if he were the Judge of the entire world (Matthew 10:32; 7:21-23), as if everyone had to obey him just as they obeyed God (verses 24-

29). He claimed the authority to forgive sins. Anyone can forgive sins that are against themselves, but Jesus claimed to forgive sins that were against God (9:2-6). He claimed to know what the Holy Spirit would do (10:20). He guaranteed eternal rewards (verse 42; 19:29).

Jesus claimed to know how cities would fare in the judgment (Matthew 12:41-42; 11:20-24), and said it was worse to reject him than to commit the sins of Sodom (verse 24). He claimed to know more about God than anyone else (verse 27), to be more important than the temple of God (12:6) and to have authority over the Sabbath (verse 8).

Jesus preached about himself, and it made people angry. He made sure that his disciples knew who he was (Matthew 16:13-17), and he promised them heavenly rewards (verse 19). He said that devotion to himself was more important than life itself (verses 25-27). He claimed that he would return with the glory of God (verse 27). He gave enormous authority to his disciples, which means that he himself had even greater authority (18:18). He claims to have *all* authority, and to have power everywhere (verse 20; 28:18).

He claimed to be the judge of all humanity, and to have the power to appoint his disciples to be judges over all Israel (Matthew 19:28; 25:31-34). He is the one who can let them enter the kingdom of God (verse 34) or to exclude them (verse 41).

Jesus claimed that his life would ransom everyone else (Matthew 20:28), as if he were worth more than everyone else put together. He claimed that his blood would institute a new covenant between God and humans (26:28). He quoted a psalm about God as if it applied to himself (21:16). He claimed to have the power to send angels throughout the world (24:31). He said his words were infallible and eternal (verse 35).

Good news—or blasphemy?

The Jewish leaders thought that these claims were blasphemous. They understood how astonishingly great Jesus claimed to be. The validity of the message that he preached depended on who he was. If what he said was true, he was God. They could not accept it.

We find similar teachings in the Gospels of Mark and Luke: Jesus said he was someone incredibly important, the focal point of prophecy, the key to everyone's eternity. We cannot enter the kingdom of God unless we accept Jesus as the King. We cannot have one without the other. The good news about the kingdom is that Jesus himself has arrived.

In his actions and in his words, Jesus showed that God accepted people into his kingdom. He forgave them, he welcomed them, he invited them. It

was good news for sinners. Jesus did not come to invite the “good” people—he came to invite the sinners. They are the ones who know they need help.

But people who thought that they could work their way into the kingdom did not like the message. Their concept of religion was totally opposed to the way that Jesus taught. Wasn’t religion a way to keep people in line? Wasn’t the threat of punishment necessary for a law-abiding society? Jesus was upsetting the way the world worked.

Jesus was a blasphemer, they thought. He was treating the law of Moses far too casually. He must be one of the false prophets that Moses said should be killed (Deuteronomy 13:1-5). They felt justified, no doubt, in arranging for his death. It was better for one man to be killed than to plunge the whole nation into a war with Rome (John 11:49). That was the choice they thought they had: kill a blasphemer, or risk Roman retaliation. The choice was obvious.

Although they didn’t know it, this was part of God’s plan for the kingdom. The Messiah had to die, to give his life as a ransom, to atone for their sins, to bring forgiveness, to make the kingdom good news of salvation instead of bad news of punishment. For the people to be saved, one man did have to die.

What a man this was! The man sent by God to be the Lamb of salvation (John 1:29), so that all who believe in him are children of God, born of God (verses 12-13). We are children of the King—through believing in Jesus Christ.

Jesus is the Savior, the Messiah, the bread of life, the entry-point of salvation, the light of the world, the shepherd of God’s people, the resurrection and life, the way and the truth (John 6:35; 8:12; 10:7, 11; 11:25; 14:6). If we believe in him, if we trust our future to him, we have eternal life—another way of saying that we belong to God’s kingdom (John 3:35).

Jesus has the authority to give eternal life, to judge the world, to be honored in the way that God is (John 5:21-24). Jesus had eternal life (verse 26), and will raise others back to life (6:40), and raise himself (10:17). He was just like God (5:17-20; 14:8-10). He claimed eternal existence (8:58; 17:5) and accepted worship (9:38; 20:28).

To enter the kingdom of God, we must trust in Jesus. To understand the kingdom of God, we must understand about Jesus. To preach about the kingdom of God, we have to preach about Jesus, for without him, it would not be good news.

The kingdom is good news only if we have hope of getting in, and Jesus gives us more than hope—he gives us confidence, assurance. We know the

supreme price has been paid. We know that we are God's children through faith in him—and when we are in the royal family, we can be sure that we are in the kingdom of God.

We will perceive the kingdom as good only if we are in it—and as part of his good news, Jesus talked about how people get in. That's the most important thing we need to know about it. God will take care of where it is and when it is and what it will be like. We might like to know those things, but we don't have to know them. What we need to know is how we can be part of it.

We can be sure that the kingdom will be incredibly good—but we also want to be sure that we are in it, and the only way we can be sure is through Jesus. The good news about the kingdom is that Jesus is the way for us to be in it. When Jesus came preaching about the kingdom, the time had arrived. The kingdom was near. Jesus wanted people to believe it, and to enter it.

So he told them how.

Entering the kingdom

"The tax collectors and the prostitutes are going into the kingdom of God ahead of you," Jesus told the priests and elders (Matthew 21:31). How were they going in? By believing Jesus' words about righteousness and repentance (verse 32) and by doing what God wants (verses 28-31). People enter the kingdom by repenting and believing the gospel.

We must "receive the kingdom," Jesus said (Luke 18:17). He talked about how hard it was for rich people to "enter the kingdom" (verse 24). The disciples then asked, "Then who can be saved?" (verse 26). Here, we see several phrases used to indicate the same thing: receive the kingdom, enter the kingdom, be saved. These are different ways of talking about the same thing.

Jesus did not preach much about the details of the future kingdom. Rather, he preached about the way citizens of his kingdom can live and think in *this* age. He told us how our sins are forgiven. He told us to repent and believe the gospel. His disciples preached the same (Luke 9:6; Mark 6:12).

The kingdom of God is here, Jesus said. It begins right now. In the future the kingdom will have great glory—God will see to that. There will be fabulous future rewards, but the question that Jesus brings is, Are we willing to be in the kingdom right now?

A Kingdom Yet to Come

Jesus announced that the kingdom of God was near, but he also talked about it as something that was in the distant future. He told his disciples to pray that the kingdom would come (Luke 11:2). He gave a parable because some people thought the kingdom would appear right away (Luke 19:11). Jesus looked forward to the kingdom in the future (Matthew 26:29). People “will enter the kingdom” on a future “day” of judgment (Matthew 7:21-23; Luke 13:22-30).

Jesus could speak about the kingdom of God as already existing, or he could speak about it as a future event, depending on which aspect of the kingdom he wished to speak about. The time was at hand, the kingdom had arrived, even though it was not yet the glorious kind of kingdom that the Jews were hoping for. Nevertheless, for those who had faith, for those who repented and believed the good news, the kingdom had arrived.

Right now, the kingdom is small (Matthew 13:31-33). Currently, the kingdom has both good and bad in it (verses 24-30). The kingdom is waiting for growth (Mark 4:26-29). Eventually, the kingdom will come in power, but now, it is small. The good news is that we can enter it.

Some Pharisees asked Jesus when the kingdom would come (Luke 17:20). He replied that the kingdom already existed in their midst (verse 21). But they could not yet see it. The kingdom will eventually be seen by everyone, but the King had to suffer and die first (verses 22-25).

Jesus also told the Pharisees, “If it is by the Spirit of God that I cast out demons, then the kingdom of God has come to you” (Matthew 12:28, Luke 11:20). The kingdom is here, he said, and the proof is in the power. The kingdom of God is demonstrating its authority over Satan’s rule—and this proof continues in the church today. Just as the kingdom could be seen in the ministry of Jesus, it is seen in the ministry of his church, too. Jesus predicted that his followers would do even greater works than he did (John 14:12). The kingdom is growing.

The kingdom of God is *here*, Jesus said. People did not need to wait for a conquering Messiah—God is already ruling, and we turn our hearts toward him now. The kingdom announcement demands a decision. It is a call to action. We do not need to wait—there are things to be done right now.

The good news about the kingdom is not just that it is near—it is that we

can be part of it. Nearness is not good news if we miss out! Our sins would disqualify us, but in Jesus our sins are forgiven. We can believe in Jesus and turn toward God. We can be in the kingdom of God forever, and that is wonderfully good news!

Michael Morrison

THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO PAUL

Let us see how Paul describes the gospel. We'll proceed book by book, skimming the surface, looking primarily at verses that use the Greek words for *gospel* or for *preaching*.

1. Paul begins his letter to the Romans by saying that he was commissioned to preach the gospel (Romans 1:1). Was this gospel predicted in the Old Testament? Verse 2. What does Paul say the gospel is about? Verse 3. What other points are part of the message? Verse 4.

2. What does the gospel message accomplish for people who believe? Verse 16. What does the gospel reveal? Verse 17. What else does the gospel include? Romans 2:16.

3. We saw above that the gospel brings salvation to everyone who believes. How else does Paul describe those who will be saved? Romans 10:13. Is it necessary to believe in a person? Verse 14. Would the message therefore have to include information about this person? Verses 15-17.

4. Near the end of his letter, Paul again mentions that he has a commission to preach the gospel (Romans 15:15-16). What was the focus of his message? Verse 18. As a pioneer, he wanted to preach where the gospel was not previously known. How did he describe this in verses 20-21? How did Paul describe his proclamation? Romans 16:25.

5. When Paul wrote to the Corinthian church, he also described the gospel. Who gave him his commission? 1 Corinthians 1:17. How did he describe the message he preached? Verse 18. The message of the cross is the power of God for salvation. What did Paul preach about? Verse 23. Did he preach anything else? 1 Corinthians 2:2.

6. Paul defines his gospel in chapter 15. Is this the message he preached and the Corinthians had believed? Verse 1. Was it effective for their salvation? Verse 2. What was the message that he had given them? Verses 3-5. Was this a minor part of the message, or was it the most important part? Same verses. Was it predicted in the Old Testament? Verses 3-4. What or who is the central theme? Was the resurrection part of the message? Verse 12. Whose resurrection is he talking about?

7. Paul talks about the gospel message again in the next letter. What did he preach about? 2 Corinthians 1:19. How does he describe the gospel? 2 Corinthians 4:4. Again, what did he say that he preached about? Verse 5. In chapter 11, he again uses the word *gospel* and in the same verse tells us the center of his preaching. What did he preach? 2 Corinthians 11:4.

8. In the first chapter of his letter to the Galatians, Paul points out that he has a commission to preach. What is it that he should preach? Galatians 1:16. How does he describe his message in his letter to the church at Ephesus? Ephesians 3:8.

9. In his letter to the Philippians, Paul has a more personal note. He is in prison, but he looks at the bright side. Even though other preachers seem to be taking advantage of Paul's imprisonment, he is not troubled. His stay in prison has helped advance the gospel, he says (Philippians 1:12). What is the message communicated to the palace guard and others? Verse 13. What were the "competitor" preachers preaching about? Verses 15, 17. Were all of these competitors bad, or were some good? Verses 15-16. But what was the most important thing for Paul? Verse 18. Did Paul like what his competitors were preaching? Verse 18.

10. Paul gives another brief definition of the gospel in his letter to the Colossians. He says that believers are reconciled to God if they continue in their faith. He then says, "This is the gospel that you heard" (Colossians 1:23). But what is "this"? Where in the context does Paul define the gospel? Are verses 24-25 a description of Paul's message, or are verses 21-22 the gospel he is describing?

11. Paul told Timothy about the gospel, too. How did he describe what was being preached? 1 Timothy 3:16. "Join with me in suffering for the gospel," he wrote (2 Timothy 1:8). What had he just encouraged Timothy to preach about? Verse 8, first part. Do verses 9-11 further describe what Paul's gospel is about? What concise definition of the gospel does he give in 2 Timothy 2:8?

Comment: A more thorough study would lead to the same conclusion: The gospel that Paul preached was about Jesus Christ, specifically his death and resurrection, and the good news that we can be saved through what he has done. Whether we look at the sermons of Paul, or in his letters, we see a

consistent focus on Jesus Christ.

The disciples originally did not understand everything Jesus taught, especially about his death and resurrection. Although he told them, they did not accept or understand this part of the message. His crucifixion was a tremendous shock to them. His resurrection was also a tremendous surprise.

Since Jesus was not able to teach his disciples about the fact of his death and resurrection, he could not teach them about the significance of these events, either. But after Jesus rose, and after the Holy Spirit came, the disciples understood. They saw that Jesus' death and resurrection were necessary for people to have the salvation that Jesus had taught about. His death and resurrection were the key to the kingdom of God.

Jesus preached about salvation, repentance and faith. He taught that he was the key to eternal life, and he taught about his own death and resurrection. In all these things Paul preached the same thing as Jesus did.

After his resurrection, Jesus reminded his disciples what he had taught them about himself: "This is what I told you while I was still with you: 'Everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms.'... This is what is written: The Christ will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day" (Luke 24:44, 46).

Jesus commissioned the apostles to preach this message about salvation through him: "Repentance and forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things" (verses 47-48).

George Ladd summarizes by saying that the message of Paul

is essentially the same as that of Jesus: that in the person and mission of Jesus, God has visited human beings to bring them the messianic salvation. But there is one great difference. Paul stands on the other side of the cross and resurrection and is able to see...that what was being accomplished in Jesus' life was incomplete apart from the cross and empty tomb. While the blessings of the Kingdom of God were present in Jesus' words and deeds, the greatest blessing of God's Kingdom was the conquest of death and the gift of life; and this was accomplished only by Jesus' death and resurrection. (G.E. Ladd, *Theology of the New Testament*, 1993, page 453)

The apostles also saw that, to bring this good news to the world, they did not have to use the word *kingdom*. That word was only one of several legitimate pictures of the good news of what God is doing. The apostles were free to use other descriptions of the salvation that Jesus makes possible

through his death and resurrection.

Paul occasionally used the term “kingdom of God,” but it was not his most common term for describing the gospel. He was not preaching about a future geographic territory. He was talking about an eternal kingdom that we may enter in this age (Colossians 1:13). He was talking about a King who is already ruling—a Lord who is alive and may be accepted as Lord even in this age. We do not have to wait for Jesus to return before we experience blessings in the gospel.

If we assume that God’s kingdom is like human kingdoms, with a geographical base, as many first century Jews did, then we will find it difficult to understand some of Jesus’ parables about the kingdom. The kingdom Jesus described doesn’t fit well into a message about a territory-based kingdom, and neither does the preaching of the early church and of the apostle Paul.

If we assume that the kingdom is exclusively future, we will also find it hard to understand some of the things Jesus and Paul said. But when we understand the kingdom of God to be God’s rule, not dependent on territory, then we can see how the kingdom can exist in this age as well as in the future. People who accept Jesus as Lord accept his rule over their lives, and they thereby enter his kingdom. They come willingly under his rule now, and they await the gift of immortality at the resurrection. This is what Jesus talked about—and Paul is talking about the same thing, but with more details.

In terms of God’s kingdom and salvation, the most significant event of all time happened between Jesus and Paul. That event was the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. That event brought the old covenant to an end. It marked a dramatic change in the way God deals with his people.

That event marked a dramatic shift in the understanding of the apostles and of the message God inspired them to preach. That event was the key to the kingdom, the key to salvation, and it has become key to the message we preach: salvation has been made possible through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

For further reading

Green, Michael. *Evangelism in the Early Church*. Eerdmans, 1970; Harold Shaw, 1995.

Guthrie, Donald. *New Testament Theology*. InterVarsity, 1981. “The Mission of Christ,” pages 408-509.

Ladd, George Eldon. “Kingdom of Christ, God, Heaven,” in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, edited by Walter Elwell (Baker, 1984). Ladd

also wrote *Gospel of the Kingdom* (Eerdmans, 1959), and there are several relevant chapters in his *Theology of the New Testament* (Eerdmans, 1993).

Poe, Harry. *The Gospel and Its Meaning: A Theology for Evangelism and Church Growth*. Zondervan, 1996.

Stein, Robert H. "Kingdom of God," in *Evangelical Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, edited by Walter Elwell (Baker, 1996). Stein also wrote *The Method and Message of Jesus' Teaching* (Westminster/John Knox, 1995).

Michael Morrison

PAUL PREACHES THE GOOD NEWS

We have looked at the four Gospels and the book of Acts to see what the Christian message is. In this chapter, we look at the letters of Paul. Jesus appeared to this rabbi and made him a powerful agent for the kingdom of God. He can tell us what the gospel is.

Paul began his letter to the Romans by saying who he was and the message he had: “Paul, a servant of Jesus Christ, called to be an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God, which he promised beforehand through his prophets in the holy scriptures, the gospel concerning his Son” (Romans 1:1-3, NRSV).

What is the gospel about? It is about Jesus, the Son of God. In verse 9, Paul calls it “the gospel of his Son.” What does this gospel do? “It is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith” (verse 16). The gospel tells us about a righteousness that we are given by faith (1:17). The gospel tells us how our sins are forgiven and how we are counted as righteous through Jesus Christ.

In his letter to the Corinthian church, Paul told us more about the gospel: “Christ did not send me to baptize but to proclaim the gospel, and not with eloquent wisdom, so that the cross of Christ might not be emptied of its power” (1 Corinthians 1:17). Here Paul associates the gospel with the cross, because it is through the cross that we are forgiven.

In the next verse, Paul calls the gospel “the message of the cross.” It is all about Jesus. “I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and him crucified” (2:2). “The message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God” (1:17).

In Jewish culture the cross was a scandal, a shameful death. God could not possibly let the Messiah die a cursed death. Greeks thought it was stupid to follow a crucified criminal (1:23). It was foolish to believe in a resurrection.

But Paul boldly proclaimed the cross, for this was the heart of his message. We are made right with God because Jesus died on the cross. The good news about the cross is that we are forgiven and we can live forever with God!

Paul defines the gospel

Perhaps the clearest definition of the gospel comes in chapter 15, where Paul reminds the Corinthians of the tradition he had received, and the tradition he gave them. This is what he wanted them to focus on:

Now I would remind you, brothers and sisters, of the good news

that I proclaimed to you, which you in turn received, in which also you stand, through which also you are being saved, if you hold firmly to the message that I proclaimed to you—unless you have come to believe in vain.

For I handed on to you as of first importance what I in turn had received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, and that he was buried, and that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures. (1 Corinthians 15:1-4)

The gospel is a message of salvation, Paul says, and we can believe it. The most important thing, Paul says, is that the Messiah died for our sins, just as the Scriptures had predicted. It was not an accident—rather, it was the key to our salvation. The gospel proclaims the resurrection of Jesus, because that gives us confidence that we will be raised, too, because we belong to Jesus.

This is not the only way to describe the gospel, as Paul shows in the next letter. In 2 Corinthians 5:19, he calls it “the message of reconciliation.” The message is about reconciliation between us and God. Once we were enemies, separated by our sins. Through Jesus and his death on the cross, we are forgiven, and we are friends and family of God. It is good news—to be received by faith in Jesus, not by working for it.

Some people did not like the message. Paul encountered opposition from both Jews and Gentiles. In Galatia, false preachers said, No, it’s not that simple. If you want to be saved you have to keep the law. Paul responded: No, you will never keep the law well enough for that. If you want to be saved, it will have to be by grace through faith in Jesus Christ.

Jesus became a curse for us, so that we don’t have to be accursed (Galatians 3:13). He paid the ransom to redeem us, to purchase us for God’s kingdom. “In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace” (Ephesians 1:7).

It is in Christ that we received the Holy Spirit when we believed “the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation” (verse 13). It is through Christ that God gave us new life, by grace, and raised us up with Christ “and seated us with him in the heavenly places”—in the kingdom of God. Jesus has done the work. We are to believe the good news, to accept him, to love him, to give ourselves to him.

When Paul was jailed for the gospel, he rejoiced that the gospel continued to spread: “It has become known throughout the whole imperial guard and to everyone else that my imprisonment is for Christ” (Philippians 1:12). Everyone knew about his allegiance to Christ, because that was the center of his message.

Paul even rejoiced when some other people tried to take advantage of his imprisonment. They were trying to exalt themselves against Paul, but he saw good even in that, because they were preaching about Christ. “What does it matter? Just this, that Christ is proclaimed in every way, whether out of false motives or true; and in that I rejoice” (verse 15-18). The important thing, Paul said, is that people preach about Christ. That is what the gospel is about.

Paul described the gospel to the Colossian church, too. The message starts with the sins that alienated us from God, and climaxes in the cross of Christ that removes those sins:

You who were once estranged and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds, he has now reconciled in his fleshly body through death, so as to present you holy and blameless and irreproachable before him—provided that you continue securely established and steadfast in the faith, without shifting from the hope promised by the gospel that you heard. (Colossians 1:21-23)

Paul mentions the kingdom of God in this chapter, too: “He has rescued us from the power of darkness and transferred us into the kingdom of his beloved Son” (verse 13). We have already entered the kingdom of God through the work of Jesus Christ. Through his death on the cross, Jesus brings us into the presence of God.

The emphasis is clear: the gospel is about Jesus Christ and salvation by grace through faith in him. The news is wonderful! God has chosen us for salvation and tells us about it through the gospel (2 Thessalonians 2:13-14). Salvation is his gift to us, given through Jesus Christ.

“Remember Jesus Christ, raised from the dead, a descendant of David—that is my gospel, for which I suffer hardship, even to the point of being chained like a criminal. But the word of God is not chained” (2 Timothy 2:8-9).

“This grace was given to us in Christ Jesus before the ages began, but it has now been revealed through the appearing of our Savior Christ Jesus, who abolished death and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel” (2 Timothy 1:9-10). The gospel tells us about eternal life through grace. Turn to God—accept his gift—turn toward Jesus Christ!

This is the wonderful news. It’s about Jesus and what he has done for us. Life with Christ is far better than life without. The better we realize it, the more we will be willing to accept it.

The time is at hand. Believe the good news—trust Jesus.

Michael Morrison

THE GOOD NEWS OF SALVATION

In the first century, many Jews looked for a Messiah who would lead the Jewish nation to international power, wealth and glory. They were proud of the fact that they worshiped the true God, but ashamed that their God allowed pagan nations like Rome to rule over them. They wanted the Messiah to be a powerful hero who would defeat the Roman armies.

But Jesus was not the sort of Messiah they expected, not the type of leader they wanted. He did not attack the Romans—instead, he criticized the Jewish religious leaders! Instead of respecting wealth and power, he seemed to prefer poor, weak people. He seemed to think that sin was a bigger problem than the Romans.

Jesus announced a kingdom of God, but it was not the sort of kingdom that most Jews were looking for. It was a kingdom that started in a small and insignificant way, a kingdom that involved judgment, not just glory. This kingdom required humility, not pride—meekness, not power. It involved repentance and forgiveness, not weapons and wealth.

But Jesus also offered something that a military leader could not: eternal life. He spoke of salvation, of freedom from death. When people entered his kingdom, they entered into life eternal.

Jesus' disciples did not understand Jesus' kingdom at first. But after Jesus' death and resurrection, after they had seen Jesus demonstrate victory over sin and death, then they understood. Jesus' kingdom was not like the kingdoms of this world. It was a spiritual kingdom that dealt with their greatest spiritual needs: relationship with God and the opportunity to live with him forever.

How can it be done? Through Jesus Christ our Lord and Savior—and only through him. That is why the early church preached about Jesus Christ: He is the proof that salvation is a real possibility for all who trust in him. He is not just proof—he is the One who makes it happen. He is the key to the good news, the key to salvation, the door to eternal life.

The book of Acts shows how the apostles presented this gospel in various settings. The letters of Paul give us greater understanding of what the gospel does for us and how it works. Paul uses several key words to teach us how salvation is made a reality for us through Jesus Christ. In this study, we'll look at several of those key words.

1. In the synagogue in Antioch, what did Paul proclaim? Acts 13:38. Through Jesus, what could people receive that was not possible through the

law of Moses? Verse 39.

Comment: Here we can see that “justified” is similar in meaning to the forgiveness of sins. It is God’s declaration that a person is not guilty, that the person is “just” or “righteous.” Paul develops this meaning further in his epistles.

2. Is it possible for a person to be declared righteous through the law? Romans 3:20. But now, through the gospel, a different way of righteousness has been made known (verse 21). How does it come? Verses 22, 24, 26, 28, 30.

Comment: The gospel makes known a “righteousness from God” (Romans 1:17). We cannot earn this righteousness by obeying the law, but it comes to us by grace. It is given to all who believe in Jesus Christ. God declared us righteous not on the basis of law, but on the basis of faith.

But faith is not something we “do” to earn this gift of being counted righteous in God’s sight. All of salvation is a gift from God (Ephesians 2:8-9). Faith is belief that accepts the gift, not a work that earns it. That is why Paul calls his message “the gospel of grace” (Acts 20:24) and the “gospel of your salvation” (Ephesians 1:13).

3. This principle of being declared righteous on the basis of faith is made clear in the New Testament gospel. Did the Old Testament also give evidence of this principle? Romans 3:21. What illustration does Paul give? Romans 4:3. Did God count Abraham righteous because he obeyed, or simply because he believed? Verses 2-4. Who is it that God justifies—the obedient, or the disobedient? Verse 5.

Comment: People who are already righteous do not need a special declaration of God to say that they are righteous. As Jesus said, he did not come for the righteous, but for sinners. The good news is a message for sinners who need to be rescued. Since all have sinned and no one has earned the right to be called righteous before God, everyone is in the category of wicked or ungodly. The good news is that these are the people God is willing to declare righteous, if they believe.

4. Will God count us righteous if we have faith? Verses 23-24. What do we now have with God? Romans 5:1. Where do we now stand? Verse 2.

5. When Paul confronted Peter about “the truth of the gospel,” what did he say about justification? Galatians 2:14-16. Can righteousness be obtained

through the law? Galatians 2:16, 21; 3:11, 21. Does this mean that sin is acceptable? Galatians 2:17.

Comment: Many people did not understand Jesus. Similarly, many people did not understand Paul correctly. That is because the message is so surprising, so unlike the way we normally think.

Paul repeatedly answered questions about the law of God. Are you doing away with the law? Does your gospel mean that it's OK for people to sin? Modern readers might ask, But what about the law? Isn't it important to obey? Paul answers: Certainly, we should obey. We are not doing away with the law. We are not giving permission to sin.

Paul would not have to answer such questions if he had emphasized the law. Instead, the fact that such questions had to be answered shows us that Paul emphasized grace so much that questions arose as to whether there was still any role for the law.

These questions reveal how surprising the gospel of grace is—God justifies the ungodly. We are justified, counted righteous, by faith, not because of obedience. Our standing before God is not dependent on the law, not dependent on whether we obey!

If that seems shocking to us, then perhaps we are hearing the gospel the way that Paul wanted it to be heard—with so much surprise that we ask, Can it be true? Isn't obedience important? Doesn't it count for something? If we hear Paul correctly, we might ask such questions.

Paul tells us, Obedience is part of the picture. God wants his people to be servants of righteousness. But this is a subsequent matter—it is not the reason that God declares us righteous (Titus 3:5). Paul had a righteousness based not on the good things he had done, but a righteousness that had been given to him by God through faith in Jesus Christ (Philippians 3:9).

The sequence is this: First, God declares ungodly people righteous on the basis of faith. Second, he tells them to live a righteous life. The declaration comes first, and obedience comes later.

The verdict of “not guilty” comes first—even though God knows that we cannot live perfectly even after he justifies us. Despite that, he declares us, in advance, to be righteous. He declares, in advance, that there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus (Romans 8:1). We are not falling in and out of Christ; we are not falling in and out of condemnation. We stand in grace, a state of being forgiven, a state of being counted righteous.

“Justification” is a term that deals with law and judgment. It refers to a verdict at a trial. This is part of the good news of the gospel: that our Judge

is declaring us “not guilty” because we believe in Jesus Christ.

Actually, we are better than “not guilty”—better than neutral. We are counted as positively righteous, because of what Christ has done. Through his obedience, we can “be made righteous” (Romans 5:19). Justification means that God is declaring us righteous.

6. God tells us that the penalty of sin is death. How is it possible for us to escape the penalty? Romans 5:6, 8; 1 Corinthians 15:3; 1 Thessalonians 5:10; Titus 2:14; 1 John 3:16. What else did he become for us? 2 Corinthians 5:21; Galatians 3:13; Hebrews 9:26. What did he carry for us? Hebrews 9:28; 1 Peter 2:24.

Comment: We can escape the death penalty because it has been paid “for us”—on our behalf. Jesus Christ died for us, in our place, as a representative and our substitute. He was a sin offering, a sacrifice, carrying our sins, paying for our sins, suffering the curse or penalty required by the law. Because Jesus had no sin of his own, and because Jesus was our Creator, his death could pay the penalty for us.

7. What else was achieved when Christ died for us? Galatians 2:20; Romans 6:4, 6, 8; Colossians 2:20. What was achieved in his resurrection? Ephesians 2:5-6; Colossians 2:12-13. In him, what do we become? 2 Corinthians 5:21. He became sin for us; did he also become righteousness for us? 1 Corinthians 1:30. Is it through him that we are made righteous? Romans 5:19.

Comment: These scriptures have concepts that are foreign to modern thought, but if we want to understand the biblical message, we need to explore the way that Paul explains our means of salvation. We died with Christ, were buried with him, and raised to life with him. Through faith, we are united with him. He shared in us and we share in him. He represents all humanity, because he is the Creator of all humanity.

Let’s use accounting terms: Just as our sins were transferred to his account so that he could pay the penalty of those sins, so also his righteousness is transferred to our account so that we may be counted righteous. His righteousness is imputed to us. Not only are our debts forgiven, our bank account is also filled. An unlimited number of debts can be forgiven. We are clothed with his righteousness (Galatians 3:27; Colossians 3:3), not our filthy rags.

8. What other financial terms are used to describe what Jesus did for us?

Acts 20:28; Mark 10:45; 1 Timothy 2:6; Hebrews 9:15; Galatians 3:13-14; Titus 2:14; 1 Peter 1:18-19.

Comment: Both “ransom” and “redeem” suggest that Jesus paid a price to buy our salvation, so he could give it to us. Scripture does not use these metaphors to imply that payment was made to anyone in particular—the biblical emphasis is on the concept that God now owns us. We are his slaves, obligated to obey him.

Greco-Roman society was familiar with slavery and redemption. When Paul said that Christ is our Redeemer, and that we have redemption in his blood, his readers would understand that God is the Lord, who has ownership rights over the people he purchased. Paul urges his readers not to sin, but to yield themselves as slaves of righteousness, as slaves of God (Romans 6:15-22).

In our next study, we will look at more salvation terminology, especially the terms that bring out the concept that salvation involves a relationship with Jesus Christ.

Michael Morrison

RELATIONSHIP WITH CHRIST

Various words are used to illustrate different truths of the gospel. In our previous study, we looked at the word *justification*, which comes from a law-court setting, and *redemption*, which comes from a financial setting.

But salvation involves much more than those words can convey. Scripture also uses several other terms. In this study we will examine some of the words that describe our relationship with God and Christ.

1. Before we had faith in Jesus Christ, we were alienated from God, cut off from him. Whether we thought of ourselves in this way or not, we were his enemies (Colossians 1:21). But now, as a result of Jesus Christ, what are we? Verse 22. How has this peace been achieved? Verse 20.

Comment: Reconciliation is a relationship term. It is another word-picture for the gospel, since reconciliation means to make peace between those who used to be enemies. The gospel tells us that we, who were once enemies of God, are now on good terms with him. We are more than friends—we are loved as children and heirs. The word reconciliation helps make the point that we used to be God’s enemies, and have now been set right through Jesus Christ.

2. How was our reconciliation achieved? Romans 5:8, 10-11. Does this reconciliation mean that our sins are not counted against us? 2 Corinthians 5:18-19. Does the gospel message, the good news that we preach, include this concept? Verses 19-20. How is reconciliation possible? Verse 21; Ephesians 2:16.

Comment: God made Jesus, who was sinless, to be sin on our behalf. As Paul explains elsewhere, Jesus died for us. He was the perfect sin offering, and the result is that in him, “we might become the righteousness of God.”

This is astonishing news: Sinners can become God’s righteousness through Jesus Christ. Jesus’ death on the cross makes it possible for our sins to be forgiven, for us to have peace with God, for us to be counted righteous with him, and in right relationship with him.

3. What family metaphor does Paul use to describe our new relationship with God? Romans 8:15; Galatians 4:5-6. What are the implications of this status? Romans 8:17; Galatians 3:19; 4:7.

Comment: In Romans 8:15, the Greek word for “sonship,” as seen in some translations, means *adoption*. The picture is that God has chosen us to

be in his family, even though we had no right to be there. There are two thoughts here: 1) God has chosen us and 2) we will be given an inheritance from him.

In the ancient world, wealthy people who had no children of their own would adopt people (sometimes adults) to be their heirs. Paul is saying that God has chosen us as his children for the purpose of being his heirs, so that we will share with him in all the goodness of the universe. When we are in Christ, when we identify ourselves with him, when our life is hidden in him, then we share in his rights as Son. We have all the legal rights of children, and we are heirs with Christ of all things (Hebrews 2:6-11).

Normally, children do not inherit property until the parent dies. But this is not possible with God, so the analogy falls short at this point. In salvation, the truth is the other way around: it is the children who must die before they can inherit the property! The old self must die, and the new person must be created in Christ. Through faith, we become united to Christ. We share in his death (Romans 6:3-4) and will also share in his resurrection to eternal life (Romans 6:5; Ephesians 2:5-6; 2 Timothy 2:11).

The word *adoption* points us to the fact that we have a great inheritance. It also reminds us that God has chosen us, selected us, elected us for his purpose. We are “set apart for holy use”—the meaning of the word *sanctified*. We are “holy ones”—the meaning of the word *saints*.

Because of what Jesus Christ has done for us and is doing in us, our lives are completely different, described in new ways. As Paul says, “If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!” (2 Corinthians 5:17).

Now let’s look at one more word-picture of how new our lives are in Christ.

4. Another biblical image of our relationship to God is not as adopted children, but as *direct* descendants, children born in the household of God. Did Jesus describe our need for a new birth? John 3:3-8. Has God now given us that new birth? 1 Peter 1:3. How does God give us this new start in life? 1 Peter 1:23; Jas. 1:18; Titus 3:5.

5. Do those who accept Christ become born of God? John 1:12-13; 1 John 5:1. Are we his children? 1 John 3:1-2. Does John stress that someone who is born of God should forsake sin, and live a new way of life? 1 John 2:29; 3:9-10; 4:7; 5:4, 18.

Comment: These verses use the Greek word *gennao*, which usually refers

to the birth of a child. In a few verses, it has the more general meaning of “produce.” Here are verses where the word clearly means the birth of a baby: Matthew 2:1, 4; Luke 1:57; John 16:21; Romans 9:11; Hebrews 11:23.

James 1:18 uses a different Greek word: *apokueo*, which comes from *apo*, meaning “from,” and *kueo*, meaning “to be swollen” or “to be pregnant.” *Apokueo* means to get something from a pregnancy. The meaning is to give birth, to bring forth. James 1:18 says that God “chose to give us birth through the word of truth.” Through the gospel, God has given us a second birth, a spiritual birth.

Jesus, John, Peter and James are all using the same analogy: that Christians are born again, with a new start in life, with a family-like relationship with God, in which we call God the affectionate term *Abba*.

Scripture describes Christians as already-born babies and children (1 Corinthians 3:1-2; Hebrews 5:12-14). Shortly after Peter tells us that we have been born again (1 Peter 1:23), he tells us to desire milk as eagerly as a newborn baby does (1 Peter 2:2).

We are to have a new source of life and a new way of life. The stress is on newness—our new nature as children of God. Our new life is energized and guided by the Holy Spirit.

We have examined several biblical words that describe our relationship with God. But physical things can only partially describe spiritual truths. The spiritual meaning of salvation is more profound than can be captured in legal terminology, financial ideas, or friendship or family terms.

All the terms describe something true about the good news we have in Jesus Christ, but the complete truth is better than any of these terms can convey. Eternal life with a perfectly good God will be better than we can currently describe.

It is sometimes said that Christianity is not a religion—it is a relationship. In sociology, Christianity is correctly classified as a religion. When people say that Christianity is not a religion, they are making the point that our faith is not just a list of things we do for God, not just a series of rituals, not just a set of behaviors—it is an interactive, personal relationship with God.

God wants us to do certain things and have certain behaviors, but the greatest commandment of all is to love God with all our being (Matthew 22:37-38). Our relationship with him is to be characterized by love. He has already shown us his love for us; we are to respond with love for him.

Our obedience and our behavior should be motivated by love. We are to seek God and desire him; we are to be eager to do his will. God does not want a reluctant obedience (motivated perhaps by fear), but a willing desire

to be more and more like his Son. An eternity with God, in his kingdom and family, will be a blessing *only if we enjoy being with God*.

Scripture describes an interactive relationship with a personal God. He has a personal concern for each of his children, tells them of his love, and leads them in what he wants them to do. In response to God, we love and speak to him in prayer, and want to please him. He responds to us, and we respond to him. It is a personal and interactive relationship for each of us.

The intimacy of this relationship is shown further by the fact that God lives within us (sometimes expressed as the Father living in us, sometimes as the Son living in us and sometimes as the Holy Spirit living in us). When we accept Christ as our Savior, God gives us his Spirit to live within us. Whether we put it in these words or not, we are inviting God into our lives, to establish a relationship that will last forever.

Eternal life involves knowing God and knowing Jesus Christ (John 17:3). To “know” a person means more than knowing about them—it is a relationship term. Faith is also a relationship term, since it involves not only belief but also trust. Our relationship with Christ is not just a servant-master relationship, but a friendship (John 15:15).

God is our Father, and Jesus Christ is our Brother. Christ’s love for his people is compared to a husband’s love for his wife (2 Corinthians 11:2; Ephesians 5:21-33). These analogies help us realize that God wants a close relationship with us—a companionship closer than the best marriage, closer than the best friendship, closer than the best parent-child relationship.

Everyone, Christian or not, has some sort of relationship with God. Some people are like slaves who have run away from the master, some are like children who have run away from home. Some try to act as if God did not exist; others openly resent him. For them, the relationship is characterized by the word *enemies*.

The good news is that God does not want us to remain as enemies—he wants us to be his children, his friends, who love him dearly. He wants this so much that he sent his Son to die for us, so that we might be reconciled and given a new start in life, in which we have invited God into our lives to lead us and reshape what we are, so that we become more and more like him, better prepared to live with him in his kingdom with joy forever and ever. This is the good news of the kingdom of God, the gospel of Jesus Christ, the message of salvation.

Summary: The gospel is good news about the kingdom of God — the news that God has qualified us to be there! This is by grace, not by anything

that we do or deserve. We are qualified by what Christ did in his life, death and resurrection. Our sins would disqualify us, but we are forgiven because our Creator and Savior, Jesus, took our sins upon himself and has given us his righteousness.

But the gospel is more than forgiveness: Christ does not just wipe away our sins and leave us at that point. The gospel is also the good news of spiritual transformation, of rebirth, of being conformed to Christ in who we are and how we live. Forgiveness is not an end in itself — it is for a purpose, and the purpose is that we will be in the kingdom of God, living with him and with each other forever, in an environment of love. God wants to share his life with us.

Salvation is not just a change in location, or a change in length of life — it is an eternity *with God*, in a realm and society filled with love. This has implications for the way we live today, because our life now reflects whether we *want* what God has given.

The metaphor of “kingdom” (or family terms such as “children”) reminds us that salvation is for relationships, for social interactions. Paul’s stress on grace reminds us that although we cannot qualify for this on our own, it is given to us, purchased for us by our Savior. The gospel is good news about how we “get in,” good news about how God works with us now, and good news about an eternity of good life.

Michael Morrison

HUMANS IN THE IMAGE OF GOD

God created the first humans in the image of God, in the likeness of God (Genesis 1:26-30). What does the “image of God” mean? In what way are we humans different than animals, and in what way are we like God? How has sin affected the image? Is this image relevant to Christian growth, sanctification and the ministry of the church?

The image of God refers primarily to humanity’s moral capacities, which includes our conduct with others. Other theories about the image focus on a limited aspect of morality. Although sin has reduced our moral abilities, we continue to have moral abilities, and Christians are conformed closer to God’s image as the Holy Spirit restores their moral abilities.

We will address three topics: 1) What is the image of God that sinful humanity now has? 2) What is the image that Christians are to become? and 3) How does the church assist in this transformation?

Part 1: The Image of God

Thesis: The image of God refers to intellectual and relational abilities not found in animals — the ability to think and reason, specifically to make moral decisions. Our ability has been corrupted by sin, but humans still have the potential for morality.

Humans were made in the “image” and “likeness” of God (Genesis 1:26). These two terms have similar meaning and will be used interchangeably in this paper.¹ But animals were not made in God’s image.² Philip Hughes summarizes our uniqueness by saying that humanity, although having “affinities with the animal realm, is radically distinguished from all other earthly creatures by the fact that [humanity] alone has been created in the divine image and is intended by constitution to be a godly creature.”³

Although humans were created to be God-like, we are now sinful and unlike God in our morality (Romans 3:10, 23). Nevertheless, we are still considered to be in God’s image (Genesis 9:6; James 3:9). Four concepts have been proposed as this image:

- 1) Thomas Aquinas located the image in the human ability to think and reason, to use language and art, far surpassing the abilities of any animals.⁴
- 2) Leonard Verduin says that the image consists in our dominion over animals and plants, which continues despite our sinfulness.⁵
- 3) A “widely accepted interpretation” is that the “image” is our ability

to make moral decisions, which involve self-awareness and social awareness.⁶

- 4) Emil Brunner says that it is our ability to have a relationship with God, reflected in the tendency of all societies to have forms of worship.⁷

These four are inter-related, but concept 3 is dominant. Our rational abilities are not ends in themselves — they enable us to make moral decisions, and our intellectual abilities are judged by morality. Morality also determines whether we are using dominion rightly and whether our relationships with God and humans are right.

Rationality and dominion help distinguish humans from animals, so they may be considered aspects of the image of God, but they do not constitute all that the image is. Rather, it is the purpose for which we use rationality and dominion that is of greater importance. People who have low intelligence and limited dominion are, if they love God and neighbor, closer to the desired image of God than a wicked genius dictator is. Mental skills and rulership are God-like only if they are used in a moral way. Morality is the standard by which thoughts and actions are judged, so I conclude that, although cognition and dominion are aspects of the divine image, morality is a more significant aspect.⁸

Aquinas' emphasis on mental abilities is too broad, and the focus on dominion is too narrow. Humans are not unique in ruling, and we conform to the image of Christ primarily by submitting to rule, not by ruling. The manner of our rule is far more important than the fact of our rule — it is essential that we rule morally, in right relationship with God and other beings. Morality involves our relationships with other people, and also with the divine Being, but relationship in itself is not sufficient. The relative importance of morality and relationships will be further analyzed in the next section.

Part 2: Restoring the Image

Thesis: Jesus Christ is the perfect image of God. As we are re-created in his image, by his presence in us, we are being changed primarily in our morality — in our relationships with other humans and with God.

Ever since the Fall, humans have been corrupted morally. They are not like God in their morality, but yet they are still considered to be in God's image (Genesis 9:6; James 3:9). Our defect must be corrected, as shown in

the next paragraph. Humans still have vestiges of moral potential. Even the natural human has a potential for morality — all societies have some concept of right and wrong (Romans 2:15).

Jesus Christ is the perfect image of God (2 Corinthians 4:4; Colossians 1:15; Hebrews 1:3), and Christians must be conformed to his likeness (2 Corinthians 3:18; Galatians 4:19; Ephesians 4:13; Colossians 3:10). Geoffrey Bromiley observes, “In Himself Christ already sums up all that humanity is to be.... He is a perfect representation of God.”⁹ He is our perfect example.¹⁰ He is being formed in us and we are being conformed to his image. If we share in his humble estate in this life, we will share in his glory in the next age (Romans 8:29-30; 1 Corinthians 15:49; 1 John 3:2) — living more fully in his image.

In what way should we be conformed to the image of Jesus Christ? Jesus spoke about the morality of our thoughts, but he did not address rationality per se or the logic we use in forming conclusions. Although he took care of people’s bodily needs, he did not indicate that health and wholeness were necessary for image completion. And he said more about subordination than about exercising dominion over animals and matter.

Knowledge is important (Romans 10:2; Ephesians 4:13), but not all facts are of equal importance. Jesus said that we ought to understand the Scriptures, to discern which portions are most important, and to make behavioral decisions on that basis (e.g., Matthew 23:23). We need to discern right from wrong behavior (Hebrews 5:14). Jesus’ focus was on morality, which involves our relationships.

Karl Barth, noting that God is triune and that humans are male and female, argued that relationship is the divine image.¹¹ Bromiley and Hughes point out that his conclusion is not explicitly provable from Genesis 1.¹² Nevertheless, interpersonal relationships are important, for they are the sphere in which morality is manifested. They are a prominent part of Jesus’ teaching and one of the ways in which we must become more Christ-like. Jesus advocated emotions such as love (an interpersonal attitude) and faith (an interaction with God).

Emil Brunner focused on our relationship with God.¹³ This potential is a reflection of what God is, but it is misleading to isolate this as the only way in which humans are like God. Atheists are made in the image of God, so we can conclude that the image is not dependent on a good relationship. All creation has a relationship with God, but not all creatures are made in God’s image. What kind of relationship is needed?

A right relationship with God leads to changes in our understanding of

right and wrong behavior and to changes in our relationships with others. As we are being transformed more completely into the image of Christ, it is essential that we have a relationship with God. But the image of God has important practical implications, such as the necessity to avoid murder and hatred (Genesis 9:6; James 3:9; 1 John 4:20). We must not neglect the practical way in which the image of God expresses itself, and that is in terms of our morality — our relationships with others. These relationships give us experiences that help us understand our relationship with God. The quality of all our relationships is judged by morality, which again shows the priority of morality. Relationships are very important, since they are the sphere in which morality is exercised.

Part 3: Ministering to the Image of God

Thesis: The church should assist with the needs of every aspect of humanity: physical needs, knowledge and emotional needs involved in making moral decisions, and relational needs in society and with God.

Ephesians 4:12-13 summarizes some basic functions of the church: preparing God's people for works of service, and working toward unity in faith and the knowledge of Christ and maturity in him. Physical service, education, social needs and worship are all within the responsibility of the church.

Physical needs are important. Just as all humans have the duty to avoid bodily harm and cursing because of the image of God (Genesis 9:6; James 3:9), Christians have the duty to take positive actions for others.¹⁴ The church not only teaches Christians to perform physical works of service that help the needy (James 2:15-17; Matthew 25:31-46; Galatians 6:10), it also sets an example of ministering to physical needs, as Jesus did. The church teaches social responsibility and morality to all who are being transformed closer to the image of Christ. It is often our failures in social areas that help us realize that our relationship with God is in need of repair.

The church preaches a message of reconciliation with God, which is a result of faith in Christ as Savior. Cognition and emotion work together to produce the faith-decision of the will — whether to believe (cognitive) and trust (emotive). The church teaches about God and Christ and exhorts people to accept the relationship with God that is offered through Christ and the Spirit. A love-based relationship with God, in turn, carries with it obligations regarding our relationship with other humans. Theology leads to ethics.

Christianity interrelates all aspects of humanity — worship, social obligations, rational decisions, and physical assistance. The church teaches

relationship with God, faith in him, love for him, holy living (James 1:27; Hebrews 5:14; 1 John 3:1-3; 5:2), and love for other humans, a love that leads to practical service (James 1:27; Hebrews 10:25). The church teaches the proper use of dominion, rationality, creativity, and personality.

Conclusion

We are made in God's image, but the potential value of this image will not be realized unless we become conformed to the image of Christ in our morality. To be living in God's image, we must be in a right (i.e., moral) relationship with God and with other humans, using our minds and our authority to serve God and our fellow humans. This is what it means to be in the image of God and conformed to the perfect image, his Son.

Endnotes

¹ These terms are used interchangeably in Genesis 1:27; 5:1; 5:3; 9:6; they are used in Genesis 1:26 as synonyms in a typical Hebrew poetic parallel (Philip Edgcumbe Hughes, *The True Image: The Origin and Destiny of Man in Christ*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989, p. 7).

² Animals could be killed, but humans were not to be killed because they were made in the image of God (Genesis 9:3, 6). Adam could not find any animal suitable as a companion (Genesis 2:20), and humans were given rulership over animals (Genesis 1:26-30).

³ Hughes, p. 7. Humanity's similarities with animals include the fact that both are living *nepheshes* made of the earth, dependent on the breath of life (Genesis 2:7, 19; 7:15). These material similarities with animals suggest that the image of God is not to be found in our matter, including shape or posture. Humans are in the image of God even if they are deformed.

⁴ Thomas Aquinas, "Man to the Image of God," in Millard Erickson, editor, *Readings in Christian Theology, Volume 2: Man's Need and God's Gift*, Grand Rapids: Baker, 1976, 37-43.

⁵ Leonard Verduin, "A Dominion-Haver," in Erickson, pages 55-74.

⁶ G.W. Bromiley, "Image of God," in G.W. Bromiley, editor, *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, vol. 2. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988, p. 804.

⁷ Emil, Brunner, "Man and Creation," in Erickson, pages 45-54.

⁸ Genesis 1:26 implies that the image of God is a qualitative rather than quantitative distinction. We are distinctly different than animals — not just more intelligent than apes and not just able to rule more of creation than elephants can. Some aspects of cognition and dominion are merely quantitative, which again suggests that they are not definitive of the image of God.

⁹ Bromiley, p. 805. The metaphor of image is again paralleled by the metaphor of sonship, in that Christ is the Son in its fullest sense.

¹⁰ Christ is more than an example, since he is the One who empowers the transformation we need and rectifies our failures along the way.

¹¹ Bromiley, p. 804.

¹² Bromiley (p. 804) and Hughes (pp. 18-20) point out that animals are created male and female, so “the image of God” should not be sought in sexuality itself. Sexual activity is not necessary for image-bearing. Moreover, humans are not the only social animals, so this is a quantitative rather than a qualitative difference.

¹³ Brunner, pp. 45-54.

¹⁴ The practical implications of the image of God were seen by Tyndale and Latimer, who argued that it was more important to serve the needs of the living images of God than to give money to the church for lifeless images (Hughes, p. 21).

Michael Morrison

WHAT ARE HUMAN BEINGS?

When we look at the heavens, when we consider the moon and stars, when we consider the enormity of the universe and the stupendous powers involved in each star, we might well wonder why God bothers with us at all. We are so small, so limited—like ants scurrying to and fro inside a terrarium. Why should we think that he even looks at this anthill called Earth, and why would he even care about each individual ant?

Modern science is expanding our awareness of how large the universe is, and how powerful each star is. In comparison to the universe, humans are no more significant than a few randomly moving molecules—but yet it is humans who are asking the questions of significance. It is humans who develop the science of astronomy, who explore the universe without ever leaving home. It is humans who turn the universe into a springboard for spiritual questions. It reminds me of Psalm 8:

When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars that you have established; what are human beings that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for them? Yet you have made them a little lower than God, and crowned them with glory and honor. You have given them dominion over the works of your hands; you have put all things under their feet. (Psalm 8:3-6, quotes in in this chapter are from the NRSV)

Like animals

So, what are human beings? Why does God care about them? They are in some ways like God himself, yet inferior, yet crowned by God with honor and glory. Humans are a paradox, a mystery—tainted with evil, and yet believing that they should behave morally. So corrupt in power, but yet having power over other living things. So far below God, and yet called honorable by God himself.

What are human beings? Scientists call us *Homo sapiens*, a member of the animal kingdom. Scripture calls us *nephesh*, a word that is also used for animals. We have spirit in us, just as animals have spirit in them. We are dust, and when we die, we return to the dust, just as animals do. Our anatomy and our physiology is like that of an animal.

But Scripture says that we are much more than animals. There is a *spiritual* aspect to human beings—and science cannot tell us about this spiritual part of life. Nor can philosophy; we cannot come up with reliable answers just by

thinking about it. No, this part of our existence must be explained by revelation. Our Creator needs to tell us who we are, what we are supposed to do, and why he cares. We find answers in Scripture.

Genesis 1 tells us that God created all things: light and darkness, land and sea, sun and moon and stars. Pagans worshipped these things as gods, but the true God is so powerful that he can call them into existence just by speaking a word. They are totally under his control. Whether he did it in one day, six days, or six billion years is not nearly as important as the fact *that* he did it. He said it, it was done, and it was good.

As part of all creation, God also created humans, and Genesis tells us that we were created on the same day as the animals. The symbolism of this seems to say that we are in some respects like the animals. That much we can see for ourselves.

The image of God

But the creation of humans is not described in the same way as everything else. There is no, “And God said...and it was so.” Instead, we read, “Then God said, ‘Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion’” (Genesis 1:26). Who is this “us”? The text does not explain, but it is clear that humans are a special creation, made in the “image of God.”

What is this “image”? Again, the text does not explain, but it is clear that humans are special.

Many theories have been suggested for what “the image of God” is. Some say it is intelligence, the power of rational thought or speech. Some say it is our social nature, our ability to have a relationship with God, and male and female reflecting relationships within the Godhead. Others suggest it is morality, the ability to make decisions that are good or evil. Some say the image is our dominion over the earth and its creatures, that we are like God’s agents to them. But dominion itself is godly only if done in a moral way.

Exactly what the first readers understood from this phrase is open to question, but it seems to say that humans are in some way like God himself. There is a supernatural significance to who we are, and our importance lies not in being like animals, but in being like God. Genesis does not tell us much more. We learn in Genesis 9:6 that each human is in God’s image even after humanity sinned, and for that reason murder must not be tolerated.

The Old Testament does not mention “the image of God” again, but the New Testament gives more meaning to the phrase. There we learn that Jesus Christ, the perfect image of God, reveals God to us in terms of his self-

sacrificial love. We are to conform to the image of Christ, and by doing so we achieve the full potential that God intended for us when he made us in his image. The more we let Jesus Christ live in us, the closer we are to God's purpose for our lives.

Let's go back to Genesis, for it tells us more about *why* God cares so much about people. After saying, "Let's do it," he did it: "So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them" (Genesis 1:27).

Women and men are both made in the image of God; they have equal spiritual potential. Similarly, social roles do not change a person's spiritual value—a person of high intelligence does not have more value than one with a low intelligence, nor does a ruler have more value than a servant. We are *all* made in the image and likeness of God, and all humans deserve love, honor and respect.

Genesis then tells us that God blessed the humans, telling them, "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth" (verse 28). God's command is a blessing, which is what we would expect from a gracious God. In love, he gave humans the responsibility to rule the earth and its living things. The humans were his stewards, taking care of his property.

Modern environmentalists sometimes accuse Christianity of being anti-environmental. Does this mandate to "subdue" the earth and to "rule" the animals give humans permission to destroy the ecosystem? Of course not. Humans are to use their God-given power to serve, not to destroy. They are to exercise dominion in the way that God does.

The fact that some humans misuse this power, and misuse this scripture, does not change the fact that God wants us to use it well. If we skip ahead in the story, we will learn that God told Adam to till and *keep* the garden. He could eat the plants, but he was not to use up or destroy the garden.

Life in the garden

Genesis 1 concludes by noting that everything was "very good." Humanity was the crown, the capstone of creation. This was just the way God wanted it to be—but anyone who lives in the real world realizes that something is now terribly wrong with humanity. What went wrong? Genesis 2 and 3 explain how an originally perfect creation became messed up. Some Christians take the account at face value; others view it more as a parable. Either way, the theological message is the same.

Genesis tells us that the first humans were named *Adam* (Genesis 5:2), the common Hebrew word for “human.” The name *Eve* is similar to the Hebrew word for *living*—“The man named his wife Eve, because she was the mother of all living” (3:20). The names Adam and Eve, to use modern terms, mean Human and Everyone’s Mother. What they did in Genesis 3—sin—is what humanity as a whole has done; the story illustrates why humanity is in a less-than-perfect situation. Humanity is typified by Adam and Eve—humanity lives in rebellion against its Creator, and that is why sin and death characterize all human societies.

Note the way that Genesis 2 sets the scene: an ideal garden, somewhere that no longer exists, watered by a stream. The picture of God shifts from a cosmic commander, to a nearly physical being who walks in a garden, who plants trees, who shapes a person out of the ground, who breathes into his nostrils to give him life. Adam was given something more than animals had, and he became a living soul, a *nephesh*.

Yahweh, the personal God, “took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it” (verse 15). He gave Adam instructions about the garden, asked him to name all the animals, and then created a woman to be a companion for Adam. Again, God became personally involved, physically active in creating the woman.

Eve was a “helper” for Adam, but that word does not imply inferiority. The Hebrew word is most often used for God himself, who is a helper to humans in our needs. Eve was not invented to do the work Adam didn’t want to do—Eve was created to do something that Adam was unable to do on his own. When Adam saw her, he recognized that she was basically the same as he was, a God-given companion (verse 23).

The narrator concludes chapter 2 on a note of equality: “A man leaves his father and his mother and clings to his wife, and they become one flesh. And the man and his wife were both naked, and were not ashamed” (verses 24–25). This is the way that God meant it to be, the way it was before sin entered the picture. Sex was a divine gift, nothing to be ashamed of.

Something went wrong

But now the serpent enters the story. Eve was tempted to do something that God had forbidden. She was invited to follow her emotions, to please herself, instead of trusting the instruction of God. “When the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate; and she also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate” (3:6).

What went through the mind of Adam? Genesis does not say. The point of the story in Genesis is that *all* humans do what Adam and Eve did—we ignore the word of God and do what we please, making up excuses as we go. We can blame it on the devil if we want to, but the sin is still within us. We want to be wise, but we are foolish. We want to be like God, but we are not willing to be the way he *tells* us to be.

What did the tree stand for? The text does not tell us anything more than “the knowledge of good and evil.” Is it experience? Is it wisdom? It is moral authority? Whatever it represents, the main point seems to be that it was forbidden, and that it was nevertheless eaten. The people had sinned, had rebelled against their Creator, had chosen to go their own way. They were no longer fit for the garden, no longer fit for “the tree of life.”

The first result of their sin was a changed way of viewing themselves—they saw something wrong with their nakedness (verse 7). Even after making loincloths, they were afraid of being seen by God (verse 10). They made lame excuses.

God explained the consequences: Eve would bear children, which was part of the original plan, but now it would be with great pain. Adam would till the ground, which was part of the original plan, but now it would be with great toil. And they would die. In fact, they were already dead. “In the day that you eat of it you shall die” (2:17). Their true life in union with God was over. All that was left was mere physical existence, far less than the true life God intended. But there was potential, for God still had his plans.

There would be struggle between the woman and the man: “Your desire shall be for your husband, and he shall rule over you” (3:16). People who take matters into their own hands (like Adam and Eve did) instead of following instructions are likely to have conflict, and brute strength usually prevails. This is the way society is, once sin has entered the picture.

So the scene has been set: The problem that humans find themselves in is their own fault, not God’s. He gave them a perfect start, but they blew it, and everyone ever since has been infected with sin. But despite human sinfulness, humanity continues to be in God’s image—tarnished and dented, we might say, but still the same basic image.

This divine potentiality still defines who human beings are, and this brings us to the words of Psalm 8. The cosmic commander still cares about human beings because he made them a little bit like himself, and he gave them authority over his creation—an authority they still have. There is still honor there, there is still glory, even though we are temporarily lower than we were designed to be. If our vision is good enough to see this picture, it should lead

us to praise: “O Lord, our Sovereign, how majestic is your name in all the earth!” (Psalm 8:1, 9). God is to be praised because he has a plan for us.

Christ, the perfect image

Jesus Christ, God made flesh, is the perfect image of God (Colossians 1:15). He was fully human, showing us exactly what a human being ought to be: perfectly obedient, and perfectly trusting. Adam was a type of Jesus Christ (Romans 5:14), and Jesus is called “the last Adam” (1 Corinthians 15:45). “In him was life, and the life was the light of all people” (John 1:4). Jesus restored the life that was lost through sin. He is the resurrection and the life (John 11:25).

What Adam did for physical humanity, Jesus Christ does for the spiritual revision. He is the starting point of the new humanity, the new creation (2 Corinthians 5:17). In him, everyone will be made alive again (1 Corinthians 15:22). We are born again. We are starting over, this time on the right foot. Through Jesus Christ, God is creating the new humanity, and sin and death have no power over this re-creation (Romans 8:2; 1 Corinthians 15:24-26). The victory has been won; the temptation has been rejected.

Jesus is the one we are to trust, and the model we are to follow (Romans 8:29-35); we are being transformed into his image (2 Corinthians 3:18), the image of God. Through faith in Christ, through his work in our lives, our imperfections are being stripped away, and we are being brought closer to what God wants us to be (Ephesians 4:13, 24). We are going from one degree of glory to another—to a much higher glory!

We do not yet see the image in all its glory, but we are assured that we will. “Just as we have borne the image of the man of dust [Adam], we will also bear the image of the man of heaven [Christ]” (1 Corinthians 15:49). Our resurrected bodies will be like Jesus Christ’s: glorious, powerful, spiritual, heavenly, imperishable, immortal (verses 42-44).

John put it this way: “Beloved, we are God’s children now; what we will be has not yet been revealed. What we do know is this: when he is revealed, we will be like him, for we will see him as he is” (1 John 3:2-3). We don’t yet see it, but we know it will happen, for we are God’s children, and he will *make* it happen. We will see Christ in his glory, and that means that we will also have a similar glory, able to see spiritual glory.

Then John adds this pastoral comment: “All who have this hope in him purify themselves, just as he is pure” (verse 3). Since we will be like him then, we try to be like him now.

Humanity is a multilevel being: physical and spiritual. Even the natural

human is made in God's image. No matter how much a person sins, the image is still there and the person is of tremendous value. God has a purpose and plan that includes every sinner.

Through faith in Christ, a sinner becomes a new creation, modeled after the second Adam, Jesus Christ. In this age, we are just as physical as Jesus was during his earthly ministry, but we are being refashioned into the spiritual image of God. This spiritual change means a change of attitude and behavior, brought about because Christ lives in us and we live by faith in him (Galatians 2:20).

If we are in Christ, we will bear the image of God perfectly in the resurrection. We cannot fully grasp what that will be like, and we do not know exactly what the "spiritual body" will be, but we know that it will be extremely good. Our gracious and loving God will bless us with as much as we can enjoy, and we will praise him forever!

When you look at others, what do you see? Do you see the image of God, the potential for greatness, the image of Christ being formed? Do you see the beauty of God's plan at work in giving grace to sinners? Do you rejoice that he redeems a humanity who went astray? Do you rejoice at the majesty of the wonderful plan of God? Do you have the eyes to see?

This is far more wonderful than the stars. It is a far more glorious creation. He has given his word, and it is so, and it is *very* good.

Joseph Tkach

WILL HUMANS BECOME GODS?

Christians are called the children of God, and children normally grow up to be like their parent(s). Does this mean that we will become God? What will our resurrected state be like? These questions are of great interest. John had something to say about these issues in 1 John 2:28-3:2:

And now, dear children, continue in him, so that when he appears we may be confident and unashamed before him at his coming. If you know that he is righteous, you know that everyone who does what is right has been born of him. How great is the love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are.... Dear friends, now we are children of God, and what we will be has not yet been made known. But we know that when he appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is.

There are some interesting thoughts in this passage. First, John admits that what we will be like has not been revealed. We can speculate about these matters, but we should admit that we really don't know what we will be like nor what life will be like in eternity. We do know this much: we will be free of the trials and sorrows of this life (Revelation 21:3-5). That is certainly a wonderful insight.

John also stated that we are “born again” in this life and that we are also called the “children of God.” But we are still limited human beings. Thus, we can be children of God and be “born again” without being “Gods.” We have to be careful how we interpret such expressions in terms of what our nature and life might be like after the resurrection.

Flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, but this does not mean that we will be spirits without bodies. In the resurrection we will be “clothed” with an imperishable and immortal nature (1 Corinthians 15:52-53). We will be raised with a “spiritual body” (verse 44), which will be a state of existence given to us by God. This tells us that we will be qualitatively different, but this difference is not something we can explain or understand in this life.

This makes it doubly important that we clarify our assumptions about the next life—and that we use terms as carefully as possible. For example, there is a big difference between “become God” and “become like God.”

We may become “like” God in certain ways. God is spiritual, and we shall have spiritual bodies, so we will be “like” God in one sense. Indeed, we are already made in the “image and likeness” of God. We are to exhibit the fruit

of the Holy Spirit, which reflects the mind and nature of God's love. We are to become "like God" in this way as well, even in this life.

But to believe that we shall "become God" contradicts the Bible's teaching about the nature of God. God is one being, not many separate beings. God is eternal and uncreated. But we do not have a past eternity, and we were created by God. Therefore, we are less than God, and can never be all that God is, and we can never be God, for that word implies being eternal, being uncreated, and being all-powerful. We do not have life within ourselves, as does God. We must be given life by God. He will give us eternal life, but that life is not inherent in us, and we cannot give it to others, as God can.

Some people use John 10:34—"you are gods"—in support of the idea that we shall become God. But Jesus was not commenting on the question of what we will be in the resurrection. In this passage, Jesus is quoting from Psalm 82:6, in which the Hebrew word translated "gods" is *elohim*. In context, it refers to unjust human judges (Psalm 82:1-2, 7). Jesus says the following in John 10:34-36:

Is it not written in your Law, "I have said you are gods." If he called them "gods" to whom the word of God came—and the Scripture cannot be broken—what about the one whom the Father set apart as his very own and sent into the world? Why then do you accuse me of blasphemy because I said, "I am God's Son"?

In John 10, the Jewish leaders were accusing Jesus of blasphemy because he had claimed "to be God" (verse 33). Jesus was saying, in effect, the following: "If Scripture can call unjust human judges "gods," how much more can the name 'Son of God' refer to me?"

Jesus was not telling the Jews that these unjust judges were gods. As the psalm says, they were mortal. Rather, Jesus was cautioning his hearers about their own unjust condemnation of his use of the term "Son of God." Both the psalm and Jesus were talking about mortal human beings. The question of what we will be like after the resurrection has nothing to do with John 10:34.

In the resurrection, we will be like Jesus Christ, and that will be wonderful. We will be God's children forever, living in perfect joy and happiness, and we thank God that we can become his children even in this life, through faith in Jesus Christ our Lord and Savior.

Paul Kroll

PART 2: ACCEPTING THE GOSPEL

WHY WOULD ANYONE WANT TO BE A CHRISTIAN?

In several nations, it is illegal to become a Christian. But people become Christians anyway — despite penalties and even threats of death. Thousands of believers are killed each year, yet more people become Christians.

Christianity can spread even when it is persecuted. That is the way Christianity started — Jesus was killed as a political criminal. In the first 200 years after his death, thousands of Christians were killed as the Roman Empire tried to exterminate this new faith.

Millions of people become Christians each year. Scientists, farmers, historians, and clerks — people from all walks of life — become Christians. **Why?** This article gives several reasons. You can see whether any of them make sense to you.

1. The teachings of Jesus

Christianity wouldn't make any sense without Jesus at its center. Jesus began his ministry as a teacher. He emphasized love, mercy, faith, forgiveness and honesty. He taught gentleness rather than violence, generosity rather than selfishness, doing good rather than evil. Jesus had respect for all people, even people others looked down on. Jesus touched lepers, welcomed children, and treated women and foreigners with respect.

But Jesus said some harsh things about religious leaders. He hated hypocrisy and the attitude of looking down on others. Jesus spent time with the “sinners” that the leaders despised. He was tolerant. He spent time with the tax collectors that many people hated. Prostitutes found forgiveness, not condemnation.

Jesus kept on teaching even when he knew the religious leaders were trying to kill him. He was sincere, and it cost him his life. People worldwide respect Jesus for his teachings. Many have tried to apply these teachings in their own lives. They have become disciples — followers of Jesus.

But sometimes the people who like Jesus' teachings are surprised to learn what he really taught. He said that he had a unique relationship with God and that no one could get to God except through him. “No one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and those to whom the Son chooses to reveal him” (Matthew 11:27). Some people accept this; others do not.

2. The resurrection of Jesus

Roman soldiers crucified thousands of people. But only one of them has a following today. Why is that? Perhaps because only Jesus was resurrected. The resurrection of Jesus was the main message of the early church, according to the book of Acts. This is what the early disciples testified about and preached about. “God has raised this Jesus to life, and we are all witnesses of the fact” (Acts 2:32).

With this simple message, Christianity grew rapidly. Paul said there were hundreds of people who had seen Jesus alive (1 Corinthians 15:6). Thousands were convinced as the early apostles risked their lives to tell what they believed.

No other explanation makes sense. If Jesus’ body had remained in the tomb, the religious leaders would have used it to stop the message. Nor would it make any sense for the disciples to steal the body, then risk their lives for the next 30 years preaching that he was alive, without any of them ever betraying the secret. Ordinary fishermen do not risk their lives to preach something they know to be false.

Nor does it make sense that the disciples had hallucinations. Dozens of people do not have identical dreams, all substantiated by an empty tomb. The disciples were not deceived, nor were they deceivers. They preached that Jesus had been raised from the dead and had now gone into heaven to be at the right hand of God.

On this testimony, preached by ordinary people with an extraordinary boldness, thousands more believed. Even by first-century standards, it was a strange story, but they accepted it. If God raised this man from the dead, then God must have approved of what he taught — even his claims to be our route to salvation.

3. The death of Jesus

If Jesus was such a good man, if God really approved his teachings, why did God allow him to die? What was the purpose of his hideous death? Early Christians were not long in trying to explain the purpose of his death, and more people found reason to believe the story.

It started with Jesus himself, who taught that he “did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Matthew 20:28). Jesus said he was giving his life for a reason. His death had a purpose — it was to serve other people, to pay a price to rescue them.

The disciples said that Jesus “died for our sins” — he died so that our sins, the things we have done wrong, would be forgiven. First-century Jews and Greeks were used to thinking about religion in terms of sacrifices. Jesus was a sacrifice, a payment of some kind, dying on behalf of other people to

rescue them.

Scholars debate the reasons *why* Jesus had to die so others could be forgiven. But the bottom line is that he did it. He willingly gave his life to save us. It shows his great love for us — “God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us” (Romans 5:8).

For some people, this makes tremendous sense. Evil is serious, and it cannot be waived aside as if it did not matter. It matters a great deal, and the death of Jesus shows that it does. A huge cost was involved in paying for the consequences of sin. Jesus’ death shows not only the seriousness of sin, but also the depth of God’s love for us. Because of Jesus’ death, people believe that God loves them.

4. The disciples of Jesus

One reason that Christianity spread so quickly in the first century is the believers. They set an example of sincerity, faith, love and mercy. They were letting Christ live in them. They, like their Master, were willing to give their lives to serve others. They changed their ways from selfishness to helpfulness, from violence to peace, from greed to generosity. It was an astonishing transformation, and their friends wondered why they no longer lived in debauchery, lust and drunkenness (1 Peter 4:3-4).

These Christians had a change of life that spoke well of Jesus Christ. Some people were convinced of the truth of Christianity simply by seeing the results in their lives (1 Peter 3:1).

And yet, the example set by Christians today is a reason some people do not believe! The church is supposedly full of hypocrites. There is some truth in this objection. The church does indeed have people who are less than Christ-like in their attitudes and behavior. But the church is exactly where such people *need* to be!

The church is not a showcase for perfect people — it is a hospital for sinners. People with flaws are invited in, so it should be no surprise that problems are inside it. Sinners need to be in church to hear the message of forgiveness, to hear the teachings of Jesus, and to be exhorted to be more like Jesus.

True, there are hypocrites in the church. Some people like the social advantages of the church, but have not really submitted their lives to Jesus Christ. But there are also people remarkably *changed* by Christ. Former prostitutes, former alcoholics, former white-collar criminals, and even former hypocrites give their testimony that Jesus has changed them. Because of this, some people believe that Christianity is true. This evidence convinces them.

5. The return of Jesus

This life, with all its pains and problems, is not all there is. There will come

a time when injustices will be set right, and goodness will be rewarded. The apostle Paul, preaching to philosophers in Athens, ended his speech with this claim: “God commands all people everywhere to repent. For he has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed. He has given proof of this to everyone by raising him from the dead” (Acts 17:30-31).

There will come a day of judgment, a day on which everyone will be called into account in front of the Judge who died for us. How can we stand before him? Not through our own wisdom, strength or goodness. We can stand only through the mercy of Jesus Christ, the only way of salvation. The Judge loved us so much that he gave his life to save us.

Christianity teaches the good news that eternal life is possible through faith in Christ. We can live forever with God in great joy and peace! There is tremendous purpose in our lives, purpose in our experiences, even in our pains and sorrows. Just as Jesus was raised from the dead, we will be, too, if we believe in him.

If this life is all there is, it has no lasting value. But if eternity is possible, it is worth everything in the world. In Christianity, there is everything to gain, and nothing to lose. Some people choose to believe.

Conclusion

Christians believe for many different reasons. Do any of these reasons make sense to you? We'd love to talk about it. Jesus means a lot to us.

Michael Morrison

HEART TROUBLE

“Yes, I know that God doesn’t require people to keep old covenant laws,” the man said. “He looks on the heart.”

That’s true—God does not require anyone to keep old covenant laws—but when he looks on the heart, what does he see? Does he see a perfect attitude, a heart that has never sinned? No. When the Bible says that God looks on the heart, it is not giving an easier standard for salvation—it is saying that salvation is a lot harder than the law ever made it out to be.

Jesus illustrated this in the Sermon on the Mount. “You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, ‘Do not murder.’... But I tell you that anyone who is angry with his brother will be subject to judgment.... Anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery” (Matthew 5:21-22, 28).

In other words, if you even think wrong thoughts, you have sinned—you are headed for judgment. If your heart is not totally clean, you’ve got heart trouble, because God looks on the heart.

Do you deserve eternal joy?

Suppose you are brought to the judge on judgment day, and he asks, Where should I send you—the place for saints, or the place for sinners?

What will you say—I have a saintly heart? I don’t think so. As Paul says, Everyone has sinned and fallen short. It doesn’t matter whether you look on the outside, or look in the thoughts, or look on the heart—everyone has sinned and has a problem.

We can never plead for salvation on the basis of what we did, or what we are, or what our heart is like. No one ever deserves to go to a perfect place, a place where there is no more crying or tears, because none of us is the sort of person who never does anything wrong. We have all let God down; we have all failed to treat others rightly—in the heart if not also in words and deeds. Our hearts fall short every day.

The good news is that Jesus cleanses our hearts—changes our hearts—gives us new hearts (metaphors for the same thing). Now, the sad truth is that even with our new hearts, we still have wrong thoughts, wrong attitudes. But our new heart is the heart of Jesus, and Jesus’ heart cannot be stained with sin. “There is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus” (Romans 8:1).

Satan may accuse us of sin, but the charge doesn’t stick, because we have been forgiven, and our old self the sinner has died with Christ. Now we are

a new creation in Christ. “The old has gone, the new has come” (2 Corinthians 5:17)!

The gospel, the good news we have in Jesus, is not health and wealth in this age. It is not a charmed life where nothing ever goes wrong. The time is not yet here when there will be “no more crying and no more tears” and “no more death.” These sorrows still happen to us, just as they happened to Jesus.

Faith in Christ sometimes is accompanied by blessings—miraculous healings, financial blessings, better relationships. These blessings, although substantial, are not the good news that Jesus brought, because not every believer gets them. In some cases, faithful Christians experience poverty, sickness and early death because of their faith in Jesus.

Further, the good news is not that Jesus will return and set up a worldwide government that forces everyone to keep certain laws. The Jews already envisioned an age like that, but Jesus brought good news of a different sort.

Bad news, good news

Jesus brought both good news and bad news. The good news is that God will set the world right. There will be an eternity of joy and fellowship with God. The bad news is that no amount of doing good will ever qualify us to be part of that world. We’ve got heart trouble.

The good news is that eternal life is a gift. It cannot be earned—it must be given to us, based on what Christ has done for us in his life, death, resurrection and ascension to heaven. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus said, “Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy” (Matthew 5:7). They don’t earn their salvation by showing mercy—they still need mercy. The good news is that it will be given to them.

That is why sinners can enter the kingdom of God ahead of law-abiding religious leaders. Eternal joy is not based on self-made men and women who rely on themselves for moral strength. Rather, it is the ones who know their need for mercy who understand and embrace the mercy of God.

If law-abiding, clean-living people recognize their need for Christ, that’s great. But sometimes such people don’t admit their need, because they believe they are doing fairly well on their own. But fairly well is not good enough. When we come to the day of judgment, “I did fairly well” is not a good excuse.

We have no excuse—but we do have a Savior. When we come to judgment, our only valid response will be to trust in the mercy and grace of Jesus Christ. Our answer, our hope of salvation, can never rest in ourselves, can never rest in our own hearts. It must always rest in Jesus Christ. Our lives

are hidden in him (Colossians 3:3) so that when God looks at us, he sees the righteousness of Christ (1 Corinthians 1:30).

It is good that wrongs will be righted, that evil will be eliminated, that an eternity of perfection will come. But that news will do me no good unless I listen to the gospel, the good news that tells me how I can be part of that wonderful world. Jesus has good news for people with heart trouble. He brings us grace, and he gives us everything we need for salvation, so we can live forever with him.

Joseph Tkach

AN ANCHOR FOR LIFE

Have you ever felt that you needed an anchor for your life? That the storms of life were trying to smash you on the rocks? For some people, it might be family problems. For others, it might be the loss of a job, the death of a loved one, or a serious illness.

Such trials can overwhelm us like a wave that crashes upon a ship. Gone are the memories of peaceful sailing on smooth seas—all we can think of for the moment is the trial we are in right now. Will we survive, or will we sink? Sometimes the turmoil is so great that sinking doesn't seem that bad of an option!

To weather the storms of life, we need an anchor to keep us in place, to keep us from being swept toward the rocky shore, to keep us from capsizing and sinking. What is our anchor?

The book of Hebrews tells us that we have an anchor—the sure hope of salvation through Jesus Christ. This is the hope set before us, the hope that greatly encourages us. “We have this hope as an anchor for the soul, firm and secure” (Hebrews 6:18-19).

Verse 20 tells us that this hope enters the presence of God in heaven, where Jesus is already helping us. Our hope of eternal life is anchored in heaven, where the storms of this life can never sink our ship! Our salvation is safe and secure.

The storms still come, though, and rage around us. The waves beat on us, but we need not fear—our anchor is in the unsinkable heavens. Our lives are safeguarded by Jesus himself. Our anchor will keep our lives safe—as long as life itself will last. That means forever! We have an anchor for life, a point of stability when life gets rough. Don't wait for the storms to begin—anchor your life in Jesus now!

Parable of stability

Jesus taught something similar in the Sermon on the Mount:

Everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house; yet it did not fall, because it had its foundation on the rock. But everyone who hears these words of mine and does not put them into practice is like a foolish man who built his house on sand. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell with a great crash. (Matthew 7:24-27)

Jesus describes two groups of people: those who follow him, and those who don't. Both types of people build good-looking houses. Both types of people can appear to have their lives in order. But the storms of life strike them both, and the houses are tested not so much for how they look on the outside, but how well they are built underneath.

Listening to Jesus does not prevent the rain, water and wind—the problems of life—but it does prevent collapse. When the storms of life beat upon us, we need some solid foundations to keep us steady.

Jesus advises us to build our lives not just on hearing his words, but on putting them into practice. We need more than the name of Jesus—we need a willingness to do what he says, to trust him not just with the future, but to trust him in life right now.

If we hear the words but do not obey what Jesus says, our lives might look good on the surface. But eventually the trials come, and our lives can fall apart, or become unraveled or capsize—choose whichever metaphor you want. The point is that life works best when we do what Jesus says.

Jesus does not force us to obey, but he gives us a choice. He tells us what will happen if we don't. Our behavior shows whether we believe him, and whether we trust him.

Seeking a foundation

If we want a basis of stability in times of trouble, then we need to consult the teachings of Jesus. We should not wait for the storms to begin—we should get right habits right now.

But how do we do that? Wait for Jesus to pop down in our home to tell us what we ought to do? No. In most cases the words of Jesus are already in our homes. What we need to do is to take the initiative to learn what they are, and to do what he says. Don't assume you know, just because you read it a few years ago. If you really want a stable foundation, you need to read it again. You can't build on the right foundation unless you know what it is.

What you learned a few years ago may have been good enough for then, but you have probably forgotten a few things, and you might learn even more, now that you have more life experience. I encourage you: Keep learning—keep growing—keep strengthening your connection with the true foundation of life. No one else can do it for you.

Joseph Tkach

MAKE THIS THE WORST DAY OF YOUR LIFE

Have you ever had a really bad day? Maybe you've been fired, totaled your car, and, just when you thought it couldn't get any worse, you were served divorce papers in the emergency room! Whatever your worst day was, no doubt someone had it even worse.

But wouldn't it be good if today was the worst day of your life—if, from now on, things will only get better?

A good choice

You may not have the choice, but millions of people do. I think for example of a drug addict on Skid Row, eating out of dumpsters and getting high on gasoline fumes. This person once had a job, once had friends, once had health, but because of the drug habit, all those good things were lost. Life has been a steady deterioration.

But one day the addict says (this is one of the fortunate ones): "My life stinks, and all these drugs that I thought were helping me, are actually messing me up. I need to quit, and I need help, or else I'm gonna die."

When drug addicts admit to being addicted, the worst day of their life turns into the best decision they have made in 10 years. Although they will still have severe withdrawal pains and emotional struggles, their life will get better from this point forward.

Life doesn't have to bottom out on Skid Row. Some people hit bottom at other levels—some while they still have jobs and families. But for each, they come to a point where they say, "My life stinks, and I am the one who messed it up, and I need help." Life on alcohol or drugs gets so bad that they are motivated enough to admit it and get help.

They say, This is the worst day of my life—tomorrow is going to be better because I am going to get help today. If I don't quit drugs, tomorrow will be worse than today, but I don't want that—I choose this day to be the worst day of my life.

Have you ever thought that it could be *good* to have the worst day of your life? For millions, it is. I wish even now that millions of people would make the decision now that this is the worst day of their life. Of course, just saying the words doesn't make the future better—it won't work unless they admit their need for help, and get that help.

What about you?

If you have an addiction—to alcohol or pornography, for example—you can make the decision today. If you have a habit that enslaves you, life could get better for you—if you get help.

Admit that you can't do it on your own. Seek the help of Jesus and the help of a mature Christian, who will show you grace and mercy. I can't promise that life will always be smooth sailing and better every day, but your life will definitely be better in the hands of Jesus than in your own hands. Only he can take your guilt away—only he can make you clean. How bad will it get before you make the right choice?

But you have to make the decision: Is this the worst day of your life, or will you wait for it to get worse? It could be the best decision you've ever made.

Joseph Tkach

THE GOSPEL: IT'S NOT FAIR!

Jesus didn't carry any swords or spears. He didn't have an army behind him. His only weapon was his mouth, and it was his message that got him into trouble. He made people so angry that they wanted to kill him.

A dangerous message

His message was seen not merely as wrong—it was dangerous. It was subversive. It threatened to upset the social world of Judaism. But what kind of message could make the religious leaders so angry that they would kill the messenger?

One idea that could anger the religious leaders is found in Matthew 9:13: "I have not come to call the righteous, but the sinners." Jesus had a message of good news for sinners, but people who considered themselves good often thought that Jesus preached bad news.

Jesus invited prostitutes and tax collectors into the kingdom of God, and the good people didn't like that. "That's not fair," they may have said. "We have been working hard to be good, and why can they get into the kingdom without working hard? If you don't keep sinners out, it isn't fair!"

They thought that Jesus was saying that God is not fair. Even today, people don't like to hear that idea. Good Christian people want God to be fair—but he isn't. Most people think that fairness requires equal treatment for everyone, but when it comes to salvation, God simply isn't fair.

More than fair

God is more than fair. His grace is far beyond anything we could deserve. God is generous, full of grace, full of mercy, loving us even though we don't deserve it.

That kind of message bothers religious leaders and all who say that the harder you work, the more you will get; if you behave better, you will get a better reward. Religious leaders like to have that kind of message, because it makes it easy to motivate people to work hard, to do right, to live right.

But Jesus says, It isn't so.

If you have dug a really deep pit for yourself, if you have messed up time and time again, if you have been the worst sort of sinner, you don't have to work your way out of the pit to be given salvation. God simply forgives you for the sake of Jesus. You don't have to deserve it—God simply does it. You just need to believe it. You need to trust God, to take him at his word: Your million-dollar debt is removed from the record.

That is good news for ordinary people.

But it seems that some people are distressed at this kind of news. "Look,

I've been working hard to get out of the pit," they might say, "and I am almost out. You mean to tell me that 'those' people are pulled out of the pit instantly, without having to do any work at all? That's not fair!"

No, grace is not "fair"—it is grace—it is a gift we did not deserve. God can be generous to whomever he wants to be generous to, and the good news is that he offers his generosity to everyone. It is fair in the sense that it extends to everyone, even though this means that he forgives some people a big debt, and some people a smaller debt—the same arrangement for all even though there are different circumstances.

A parable of unfairness

Matthew 20 includes the parable of the workers in the vineyard. Some people worked all day long in the heat of the day. Some worked only half a day, and some worked only one hour, but they all got paid the same amount, a day's wage. Some got exactly what they agreed to, but others got more. However, the people who worked all day long said, "That's not fair. We worked all day long, and it's not fair to pay us the same as those who worked less" (see verse 12).

But the people who worked all day got exactly what they had agreed to before they began work (verse 4). The only reason they got upset was because other people got more than they deserved.

What did the boss say? It was this: "Don't I have the right to do what I want with my own money? Or are you envious because I am generous?" (verse 15).

The boss said they would be given a fair day's wage for a fair day's work, and they were—and yet they complained. Why? Because they compared themselves with others and they got the shorter end of the stick. They got their hopes up, and then they were disappointed.

But the landowner said: "I am doing you no wrong. If you think it's not fair, the problem is in what you expected, not in what you actually got. If it hadn't been for the amount I paid the newcomers, you would be quite happy with what I gave you. The problem is in your expectations, not in what I did. You accuse me of being bad, simply because I was good *to someone else* (see verse 15).

How would you react to this? What would you think if your boss gave a bonus to the newest employees, but not to the old faithful workers? It would not be very good for morale, would it? But Jesus was not giving us payroll advice here—he was telling a parable about the kingdom of God (verse 1).

The parable reflected something that was happening in Jesus' ministry. God was giving salvation to people who hadn't worked very hard, and the religious leaders said: "That's not fair. You can't be generous to them. We've

been working hard, and they have hardly been working.” Jesus replied, “I am bringing good news to sinners, not to the righteous.” His teaching threatened to undermine the normal motive for doing good.

Where do we fit in?

We might like to think that we have worked all day long, bearing the burdens and the heat of the day, deserving a good reward. But we have not.

It doesn’t matter how long you’ve been in the church or how many sacrifices you have made—those are nothing in comparison to what God is giving us. Paul worked harder than any of us; he made more sacrifices for the gospel than we realize, but he counted it all as a loss for Christ. It was nothing.

The time we’ve spent in the church is nothing to God. The work we’ve done is nothing compared to what he can do. Even at our best, as another parable says, we are unprofitable servants (Luke 17:10). Jesus has bought our entire lives; he has a fair claim on every thought and every action. We cannot possibly give him anything on top of that—even if we do everything he commands.

We are like the workers who worked only one hour and got a whole day’s wage. We just barely got started, and we were paid like we actually did something useful. Is that fair? Maybe we shouldn’t even ask the question. If the judgment is in our favor, we shouldn’t ask for another opinion!

Do we think of ourselves as people who have worked long and hard? Do we think we deserve more than we are getting? Or do we see ourselves as people who are getting an undeserved gift, regardless of how long we’ve worked?

Joseph Tkach

GRACE

“If righteousness could be gained through the law,” Paul wrote, “Christ died for nothing!” (Galatians 2:21). The only alternative, he says in this same verse, is “the grace of God.” We are saved by grace, not by keeping the law.

These are alternatives that cannot be combined. We are not saved by grace plus works, but by grace alone. Paul makes it clear that we must choose either one or another. “Both” is not an option (Romans 11:6). “If the inheritance depends on the law, then it no longer depends on a promise; but God in his grace gave it to Abraham through a promise” (Galatians 3:18). Salvation does not depend on the law, but on God’s grace.

“If a law had been given that could impart life, then righteousness would certainly have come by the law” (verse 21). If there could be any way that rule-keeping could lead to eternal life, then God would have saved us with the law. But it wasn’t possible. The law cannot save anyone.

God wants us to have good behavior. He wants us to love others and by doing that, to fulfill the law. But he does not want us to ever think that our works are a reason for our salvation. His provision of grace implies that he has always known that we would never be “good enough” despite our best efforts. If our works contributed to our salvation, then we would have something to boast about. But God designed his plan of salvation in such a way that we cannot take any credit for saving ourselves (Ephesians 2:8-9). We can never claim to deserve anything; we can never claim that God owes us anything.

This goes to the heart of the Christian faith, and it makes Christianity unique. Other religions say that people can be good enough if they try hard enough. Christianity says that we cannot be good enough; we need grace.

On our own, we will never be good enough, and because of that, other religions are not good enough. The only way we can be saved is through the grace of God. We can never deserve to live forever, so the only way we can be given eternal life is for God to give us something that we don’t deserve. This is what Paul is driving at when he uses the word *grace*. Salvation is a gift of God, something that we could never earn with even a thousand years of the law.

Jesus and mercy

“The law was given through Moses,” John writes. “Grace and truth came through Jesus Christ” (John 1:17). John saw a contrast between the law and grace, between what we do and what we are given.

Nevertheless, Jesus didn't use the word *grace*. But his entire life was an example of grace, and his parables illustrated grace. He sometimes used the word *mercy* to describe what God gives us. "Blessed are the merciful," he said, "for they will be shown mercy" (Matthew 5:7). In this, he implied that we all need mercy. He noted here that we should be like God in this respect. If we value God's grace to us, we will give grace to others.

Later, when Jesus was asked why he associated with notorious sinners, he told people, "Go and learn what this means: 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice'" (Matthew 9:13, quoting Hosea 6:6). In other words, God wants us to show mercy more than he wants us to be perfectionists in law-keeping.

We do not want people to sin. But since we inevitably make mistakes, we need mercy. That is true of our relationships with one another, and true of our relationships with God, too. God wants us to know our need for mercy, and for us to have mercy toward others. Jesus gave us an example of this by the way he lived, when he ate with tax collectors and talked with sinners—he was showing by his behavior that God wants fellowship with us all, and he has taken all our sins upon himself and forgiven us so we can have fellowship with him.

Jesus told a parable of two debtors, one who owed an enormous amount, and the other who owed a lot less. The master forgave the servant who owed much, but that servant failed to forgive the servant who owed less. The master was angry and said, "Shouldn't you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you?" (Matthew 18:33).

Each of us should see ourselves as the first servant, who was forgiven an enormous debt. We have all fallen far short of what God wants us to be, so God shows us mercy—and he wants us to show mercy as well. We fall short in showing mercy, too, so we must continue to rely on God's mercy.

The parable of the good Samaritan concludes with a command for mercy (Luke 10:37). The tax collector who pleaded for mercy was the one who was set right with God (Luke 18:13-14). The wasteful son who came home was accepted without having to do anything to "deserve" it (Luke 15:20). Neither the widow of Nain nor her son did anything to deserve a resurrection; Jesus did it simply out of compassion (Luke 7:11-15).

The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ

The miracles of Jesus served temporary needs. The people who ate loaves and fishes became hungry again. The son who was raised eventually died again. But the grace of Jesus Christ continues to be extended to all of us through the supreme act of grace: his sacrificial death on the cross. This is

how Jesus gave himself up for us, with eternal consequences rather than temporary ones.

Peter said, “It is through the grace of our Lord Jesus that we are saved” (Acts 15:11). The gospel was a message about God’s grace (Acts 14:3; 20:24, 32). We are justified by grace “through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus” (Romans 3:24). God’s grace is linked with the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross (verse 25). Jesus died for us, for our sins, and we are saved because of what he did on the cross. We have redemption through his blood (Ephesians 1:7).

But God’s grace goes further than forgiveness. Luke tells us that God’s grace was on the disciples as they preached the gospel (Acts 4:33). God showed them favor, giving them help they did not deserve. Don’t human fathers do the same? We not only give our children life when they had done nothing to earn it, we also give them food and clothing that they could not earn. That’s part of love, and that is the way that God is. Grace is generosity.

When church members in Antioch sent Paul and Barnabas out on missionary trips, they commended them to the grace of God (Acts 14:26; 15:40). In other words, they put the missionaries into God’s care, trusting God to take care of the travelers, trusting him to give them what they might need. That is included in his grace.

Spiritual gifts are a work of grace, too. “We have different gifts,” Paul says, “according to the grace given us” (Romans 12:6). “To each one of us grace has been given as Christ apportioned it” (Ephesians 4:7). “Each one should use whatever gift he has received to serve others, faithfully administering God’s grace in its various forms” (1 Peter 4:10).

God graced the believers with spiritual gifts (1 Corinthians 1:4-5). Paul was confident that God’s grace would abound toward them as he enabled them to do even more work (2 Corinthians 9:8).

Every good thing is a gift of God, a result of grace rather than something we have earned. That is why we are to be thankful even for the simplest of blessings, for the singing of birds and the smells of flowers and the laughter of little children. Life itself is a luxury, not a necessity.

Paul’s own ministry was given to him through grace (Romans 1:5; 15:15; 1 Corinthians 3:10; Galatians 2:9; Ephesians 3:7). Everything he did, he wanted to be according to God’s grace (2 Corinthians 1:12). His strength and skills were a gift of grace (2 Corinthians 12:9). If God can save and use the biggest sinner of all (that’s how Paul described himself), he can certainly forgive and use any of us. Nothing can separate us from his love, from his desire to give to us.

Response of grace

How should we respond to the grace of God? With grace, of course. We should be merciful, even as God is full of mercy (Luke 6:36). We are to forgive others, just as we have been forgiven. We are to serve others, just as we have been served. We are to be gracious toward others, giving them favor and kindness.

Our words are to be full of grace (Colossians 4:6). We are to be gracious (forgiving and giving) in marriage, in business, in church, with friends and family and strangers. It's supposed to make a difference in our lives and in our priorities.

Paul spoke of financial generosity as a work of grace, too: "We want you to know about the grace that God has given the Macedonian churches. Out of the most severe trial, their overflowing joy and their extreme poverty welled up in rich generosity. For I testify that they gave as much as they were able, and even beyond their ability" (2 Corinthians 8:1-3). They had been given much, and they in turn were willing to give much.

Giving is an act of grace (verse 6), and generosity—whether in finances, in time, in respect, or in other ways—is an appropriate way for us to respond to the grace of Jesus Christ, who gave himself for us so that we might be richly blessed (verse 9).

Joseph Tkach

GRACE AND TRUTH

“The law was given through Moses,” John tells us, but “grace and truth came through Jesus Christ” (John 1:17).

God has always been gracious and true. The law was an expression of his grace and truth. But in Jesus Christ, God’s graciousness and his truth are given their full and complete expression. The law, by which every human is condemned, is not the final word. But in Jesus Christ we have been given God’s final word—the greatest and most complete revelation of God’s grace and truth for humanity.

Salvation

Grace triumphs over justice (James 2:13). Justice is real, and justice demands our condemnation, because all humans have broken the law of God, sinned and fallen short of God’s glory (Romans 3:23). But there is a word that follows justice, and that word is Jesus Christ, who not only was the author of the law, but is also the author of grace and truth, which brings redemption and salvation. The law brought condemnation, so we may see our sinfulness and our need for mercy (Romans 3:20). But grace and truth brought salvation, moving us by the kindness of God to turn to him for the mercy we need so badly (Romans 2:4; Titus 3:4-5).

Mercy triumphs over judgment, James says. Grace overpowers legal requirements. Through Jesus Christ, we are given something much better than we deserve. The last word, given at the last judgment, will be the triumph of grace and mercy.

Truth brings freedom

Jesus said, “The truth will set you free” (John 8:32). When we trust Jesus, when we believe the truth of his word of salvation for us, we are set free from the sin and death that imprisons us. We are no longer slaves of sin.

Those who sin become “slaves of sin” (verse 34). They become enmeshed in its power. But grace and truth came by Jesus Christ. When we trust him to be our salvation, we are freed from the condemnation of the law. We become one with him, at perfect peace with our Father in heaven. Even though we still wrestle with sin in this life and often fail, for the sake of Jesus we are not condemned (Romans 8:1).

Jesus teaches us that true righteousness involves much more than the law. It involves not just our behavior, but also our minds—our thoughts, our attitudes, our whole being. In Jesus, we can see that we fall short all the time.

But in Jesus, we trust in God's love and mercy for us.

Knowing that God will never forsake us nor leave us, we continue to fight against our sinful nature, trusting Christ to stand with us and strengthen us. In the confidence of his grace, we forgive one another, just as for Christ's sake God has forgiven us (Ephesians 4:32).

No way out

The law also offers freedom. The law forbids socially destructive behavior, and when people keep it, they are freed from all sorts of bad consequences. It is in every person's own best interest that they seek to live by good and right behavioral guidelines.

But there is a problem: even though the law promised life, it became death, because it stirred up sin, and then it condemned the sinner (Romans 7:8-11). So we learn about our sinfulness from the law, which is holy, just and good, but the law offers no way to be delivered from its condemnation. Because we are sinners, the law rightly condemns and kills us and leaves us dead (verses 10-13).

New creation

Even though our condemnation under the law is just and right, God is not a prisoner of his own law or his own justice. God operates in perfect divine freedom according to his own will, and his own will is first and foremost a will of grace and redemption.

The law serves his purpose, not its own purpose, and God's purpose, as Creator and Redeemer, is redemption. Redemption results in nothing less than a new creation. That is why James says that mercy triumphs over justice. God's justice serves his redemptive purpose, and that is the only kind of divine justice there is.

In Jesus Christ, God does for us what we could never do for ourselves. Just as we could never create ourselves, so we could never redeem ourselves. There is no escape from the condemnation under which we all fall, unless God himself, the Creator and Redeemer, provides that escape. That is exactly what he has done.

Jesus declared, "God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him" (John 3:17). The law condemns. But by grace and truth, which came by Jesus Christ, the world is redeemed. Mercy triumphs over judgment.

Everything (even the law, justice and condemnation) serves God's unchanging redemptive purpose. God's covenant faithfulness, his word of redemption, is the word of grace and truth, which was revealed fully and

finally in Jesus Christ.

Paul wrote, “God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in [Jesus], and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross” (Colossians 1:19-20).

No matter how bad we are, there is good news: God loves us and forgives us for the sake of Jesus who redeems us. In Christ we are set free from sin, both from its condemnation of us, and from its power over us. The Holy Spirit reminds us and reassures us of God’s love for us and strengthens us to stay in the battle to turn away from sin.

Jesus, who is the perfect revelation of God’s grace and truth, set people free. He forgave them, taught them and gave them the sure hope of God’s love and salvation!

Joseph Tkach

GRACE TO THE GLUTTONS

“Cretans are always liars, evil brutes, lazy gluttons,” Paul wrote to a young pastor on the island of Crete. “Therefore, rebuke them sharply” (Titus 1:12-13). Paul went on to advise Titus to teach the Cretans to be self-controlled and to set a good example (Titus 2:1-7).

Why should they learn self-control? “So that no one will malign the word of God” (verse 5). They were to change their behavior to make the gospel more attractive. Slaves, too, were to be good representatives for Christianity — “so that in every way they will make the teaching about God our Savior attractive” (verse 10).

Paul did not want enemies of the faith to have anything bad to say about the people who were associated with the gospel message. He wanted the Christians to live holy lives and serve God, which would help put the gospel in a good light.

Then Paul gave some more reasons: “For the grace of God that brings salvation has appeared” (verse 11). Grace, he says, teaches us to reject ungodly desires “and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age” (verse 12). Grace teaches us to be obedient. The message of grace leads to holy living. Gluttons need grace, and they should stop being gluttons.

Christians ought to be among the best-behaved people on earth. Often we are not, and for that we ought to be ashamed. Our sins invite people to say bad things about what we teach, the church we attend, and worst of all, the Savior we worship. We have every reason to live holy lives — not only in obedience to our Savior, but also for the sake of his gospel and for the salvation of those who see the example we set in his name.

Dedicating our lives to Christ leads us to reject every ungodly desire — sexual temptation, pride, greed for money and power, and even gluttony. It leads us to pursue peace and harmony in our families, learning how to constructively work through conflict. It leads us to a job performance that is marked by diligence and humility, not by office politics and stubbornness.

Our way of life is the result of God working in us, motivating us to conform to the image of Christ. His grace transforms us, and his Spirit changes us from lazy gluttons into self-controlled good examples. But it takes time. And it takes earnest commitment to our calling.

Jesus “gave himself for us,” Paul wrote (verse 14). Christ is not only our future King but also our Savior, the One who died for us. Why did he do it? “To redeem us from all wickedness and to purify for himself a people that

are his very own.” He died for us so that we might be rescued from the power of sin.

Our Savior redeemed us and is purifying us, leading us to holy lives rather than sinful lives. Instead of catering to our natural selfish desires, we are to respond to his lead — we are to be “eager to do what is good.” This is the product of our salvation!

“These, then, are the things you should teach,” Paul concluded (verse 15). This is the job of a pastor, to teach about grace and living a good life.

We were once foolish and sinful, Paul noted (Titus 3:3). But when Christ came, he revealed God’s kindness and love for us. “He saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy” (verse 5). Salvation was given by grace.

“He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit.” We became cleansed of all sin and heirs of eternal life. The message of God’s grace and the gift of eternal life is “a trustworthy saying,” Paul says (verse 8). We can count on it and have faith in it.

“I want you to stress these things,” Paul instructed Titus. On Crete, an island full of “lazy gluttons,” Paul wanted Titus to emphasize grace. Every culture needs the message of grace. And the message includes the obligations that come with grace, too: a new way of life — holy living, self-control, the path of eternal life in Jesus Christ our Savior.

Joseph W. Tkach

GRACE: AN E-TICKET RIDE

You'd think that the transition from a legalistic religion to an understanding of the gospel of grace would make life easier. It does in some ways. But it is also an "E ticket ride."

E ticket ride? Today when you go to Disneyland, you pay a onetime entry fee, giving you access to everything. But before 1981, you needed individual tickets for each ride. They ranged from "A" tickets for the less spectacular rides, through B, C, and D for the more exciting ones. But the best attractions, like the Matterhorn Bobsleds, needed an E ticket.

E ticket rides were more expensive and the lines were longer, but they were worth it. You'd be strapped into your seat and warned "Keep your arms and legs inside the bobsled at all times" and "Don't get out until it stops." Then with a lurch you'd be off.

First was a long slow haul up an incline, and a brief moment to admire the view and catch a glimpse of less adventurous friends far below. Then you hurtled down towards what looked like a sheer drop. At the last second you were yanked at right angles to face another abyss and an even more impossible-looking hairpin bend.

"No way," you'd think. "We're going to come off." But as the bobsled careened around the track you realized that the ride only looked impossible. If you stayed with it you'd be okay.

In some ways a journey from legalism to grace is like that. You see, a legalistic approach to your relationship with God is "safe," like an A ticket ride. The pace is slow and the rules seem clear-cut. Don't eat "unclean" food, don't watch TV or fix the car on the Sabbath, pray and study an hour a day, and you might have at least the illusion of progress. With legalism, you can at least feel as though you know where you stand.

Oh, you won't be perfect. But like the Pharisee in Jesus' parable (Luke 18:11-13), who boasted "I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get," you can say "God, I thank you that I am not like other men — robbers, evildoers, adulterers — or even like this tax collector."

"But," Jesus explained, "the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, 'God, have mercy on me, a sinner.'" He was on an E ticket ride. Once you begin to understand the depths of God's mercy and grace, you want to please him. And the more you know him, the more fully aware you become of your own sinfulness. So, naturally, you want to make amends—to do something to make up for your sins—and legalism tells you that you can do that. But the Bible tells you

something entirely different.

Should I bring an armload of offerings topped off with yearling calves? Would God be impressed with thousands of rams, with buckets and barrels of olive oil? Would he be moved if I sacrificed my firstborn child, my precious baby, to cancel my sin? (Micah 6:6-7, *The Message Bible*).

No. That is not the answer.

He's already made it plain how to live, what to do, what God is looking for in men and women. It's quite simple: Do what is fair and just to your neighbor, be compassionate and loyal in your love. (v. 8)

Is that it? Yes. When we believe God loves us, we are free to love others. In other words, just hang on tight to life's bobsled, trusting in God's love and mercy. There is nothing you can do, or need to do, to get back into God's favor.

There are times on the journey when that is hard to believe. Moments when, looking at what the track looks like ahead, you think "There's no way..." But there always is. Jesus didn't promise an A, B, C or even D ticket ride. To trust in God's grace needs an all or nothing E ticket. But you can take rest in Jesus' promise to be with you, both on the long uphill climbs and the lurching, heart-stopping, nail-biting descents.

I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one can snatch them out of my hand. My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all; no one can snatch them out of my Father's hand. (John 10:28-29)

Just stay in the bobsled, and don't get out until it stops.

John Halford

GOD'S GRACE

Ask 20 ministers from multiple denominations to define grace and you'll likely get many different definitions, along with some lively discussion! Ask several GCI ministers and you'll likely get some variety, but there will be a common core of understanding. One thing is for sure, in GCI we've stopped trying to force-fit grace into a framework of legalism!

Grace defies simplistic, one-size-fits-all definitions. It's too profound for that, which is why the Bible reminds us that God's grace is an inexhaustible topic—one worthy of a lifetime of study. That's why Peter admonished Christians to "Grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ" (2 Peter 3:18). The more I read, study, think and write about grace, the more I find my understanding expanding.

Google grace on your computer and you'll uncover multiple definitions. Probably the best-known is this one: "Grace is God's unmerited favor or pardon." A. W. Tozer defined it this way: "Grace is the good pleasure of God that inclines him to bestow benefits on the undeserving." Dutch-Reformed theologian Louis Berkhof defined grace as, "The unmerited operation of God in the heart of man, effected through the agency of the Holy Spirit." I find the following definition from Karl Barth to be particularly profound (though as often is the case with Barth, it must be carefully read to get the full impact):

Who really knows what grace is until he has seen it at work here: as the grace which is for man when, because man is wholly and utterly a sinner before God, it can only be against him, and when in fact, even while it is for him, it is also a plaintiff and judge against him, showing him to be incapable of satisfying either God or himself?What takes place in this work of inconceivable mercy is, therefore, the free overruling of God. It is not an arbitrary overlooking and ignoring, not an artificial bridging, covering-over or hiding. It is a real closing of the breach, gulf, and abyss between God and us, for which we are responsible. At the very point where we refuse and fail, offending and provoking God, making ourselves impossible before him and in that way missing our destiny, treading under foot our dignity, forfeiting our right, losing our salvation and hopelessly compromising our creaturely being—at that very point God himself intervenes as man (*Church Dogmatics*, Vol. 4.1: The Doctrine of Reconciliation).

I like Barth's expression, "inconceivable mercy." It refers to what God,

in Christ, through the Spirit, has done and is doing to write within us a new law that emancipates us from sin as well as death. Paul put it this way: “The law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and of death” (Romans 8:2).

The Greek word *charis*, usually translated “grace” in the New Testament, has multiple shades of meaning, referring to something that affords joy, pleasure, delight, sweetness, charm, loveliness, goodwill, loving-kindness, favor or gratitude. Scripture tells us that grace is ours by God’s initiative alone. In Christ, through the Spirit, the Father’s will for us is perfectly fulfilled. God’s grace takes us by surprise because nothing that we can do and nothing that we are earns grace. We are predestined and elected in Christ, the Lord and Savior of the whole world. The story of our lives begins and ends with God’s unfathomable, amazing grace.

When I hear or read world news, I wonder why God bothers with us at all. Our brutality, cruelty, bigotry, hypocrisy and greed boggles the mind. But God knows there is another way to live, and his purpose is to share that life with us. He loves us far too much to allow the final result of life—any life—to be determined by our own behavior. In the sovereignty of God’s grace, evil has no future. Christ is making all things new. The new heavens and earth will be established!

God’s plan is to remake us into the image of his Son as we receive his grace by our repentance and faith in him. God even enables that response—one that, by the Spirit, grows deeper throughout our lives, as Paul noted:

For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers and sisters. And those he predestined, he also called; those he called, he also justified; those he justified, he also glorified. (Romans 8:29-30)

After observing what God is doing in our lives by grace, Paul proclaimed confidently that, “He who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus” (Philippians 1:6). God is not finished with any of us—he alone is the author and finisher of our salvation and he knows how to complete the story that he has begun writing in our lives.

In Ephesians 2:10, Paul proclaimed that, “We are God’s handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.” The Greek word here for “handiwork” is *poiema*, from which we get the word “poem.” By his grace, God is writing the story of our lives—

we're a divinely written ballad, sonnet (or in some cases, a haiku!), full of ups and downs and twisting plot turns. Because of God's grace, we look forward with hope and confidence to how the story will end.

Joseph Tkach

GRACE FROM FIRST TO LAST

Grace is the first word in the name of our denomination. We chose it, but not because it sounds “religious.” Each word in our name identifies our experience as a fellowship, and grace is an integral part of our identity — especially our identity in Christ.

As a denomination, we have always understood grace to be God’s unconditional and unmerited pardon. But we tended to think of it as a component of salvation that needed to be “stirred into the mix” because of our inability to keep the law. We now see God’s grace as much more than that.

Grace is not some sort of passive concept of forgiveness. It is not a principle, a proposition, or a product. Grace is the love and freedom-producing action of God to reconstitute humanity into what the apostles, Peter and Paul, refer to as being made into God’s own people (2 Corinthians 5:17–20; Galatians 6:15; 1 Peter 2:9–10). It is not just a spiritual supplement that God provides because we can’t keep his law, like a whiff of oxygen to help a sick person breathe a bit easier.

Grace is an entirely new atmosphere that transforms us and gives us a new kind of life — life that no amount of law keeping could sustain. Note Paul’s explanation: “For I through the law am dead to the law, that I might live unto God. I am crucified with Christ: nevertheless I live; yet not I, but Christ liveth in me: and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by the faith of the Son of God, who loved me, and gave himself for me” (Galatians 2:19–20 KJV). Grace is the environment that allows us, God’s new creation, to not just survive, but to grow and flourish.

At the risk of over-simplification (a danger inherent in all analogies) we might think of grace as God’s “operating system.” The Father, Son and Holy Spirit have been giving, receiving and sharing love for all eternity. When they extend that sharing of love to us, it is their gift of grace. This grace of God is not the exception to a rule—his rule is a gracious one, all the time, to give us life and to bless us, even if obstacles to our receiving it have to be removed at his own cost.

We see God’s grace most clearly in the person of Jesus, who as Paul said, loved us and gave himself for us. As the early church leader Irenaeus taught, the Son and the Spirit are the “two arms” of the Father lovingly embracing us back to himself. The Gospel of John gives us Jesus’ own encouraging words: “The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one. I in them and you in me, that they may become

completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me” (John 17:22-23 NRSV).

As recipients of the grace of God in Christ, we not only share in the love and life of the Father through his Son in the Spirit, but we also share in the mission of God to the world. That mission is the complete restoration and renewal of all creation in Christ Jesus, through the Spirit, into a state of perfect glory.

God’s grace in the person of Jesus Christ is for all humanity without distinction to race, status or gender. And that is why the vision of Grace Communion International is for “all kinds of churches for all kinds of people in all kinds of places.”

Joseph Tkach

THE BEST STORY OF ALL: THE GOSPEL

I enjoy reading a book or watching a movie in which a good story unfolds. I especially enjoy it when I know how the story ends, yet still I am compelled to read or watch to the end to see how it unfolds. The old American television series *Columbo*, starring the late Peter Falk, is a great example.

Each episode of *Columbo* revolved around the perpetrator of the crime, whose identity is already known to the audience. He would eventually be caught and exposed. The intrigue was generated by seeing how Lieutenant Columbo would go about solving the crime. The series was not so much a traditional “whodunit?” as a “how to catch them.” The gospel of God’s grace is rather like that. Jesus has completed the work of saving us, although not all understand that. There is great joy when the proverbial “light bulb” turns on and someone does get it!

Christians often say that the gospel is good news, but then add a great big “IF.” I’m sure they are sincere, but this addition turns the gospel into a proposition or a possibility of what *could* be true if certain works are first performed. For them, the gospel is good news, but only for those who qualify. For everyone else, it is not good news at all.

The wonderful truth is that the actual gospel is not a contract, which tells us what God will do “IF” we first do our part. Rather, it is the announcement concerning what God has *already* done—what he has *already* established in and through his Son, Jesus Christ. It is vital to understand the difference. It is an announcement of fact.

Just the facts

The actual gospel speaks of the *fact* of our forgiveness in Jesus and gives us something real to believe in. The gospel with an “IF” appended speaks of the *possibility* of our forgiveness, but then proclaims that we must also believe in something else, such as our faith, or our repentance or our performance, before that possibility becomes reality. One is the truth of God’s grace; the other is legalism.

This legalism projects a false reality that Jesus’ forgiveness does not exist unless you first measure up. However, no one can measure up to the perfection of God. Even when we become believers, we still have our times of failing to do what is right. And the blessing of the grace of God is that we are forgiven in Jesus Christ. He stands in for us as our great high priest and takes our weak and imperfect repentance and faith and then by the Holy

Spirit shares with us his perfect faith and repentance on our behalf. And God gets all the glory.

Sadly, some reject this, objecting that it means that you can just sit back and do nothing. But that is not where a correct understanding of grace leads you. Presuming upon God's grace is not receiving God's grace. It is not responding to grace as grace. Grace is not an impersonal abstract fact or principle, like gravity. Grace is not an exception to the rule of law. It is God's gift of a restored, reconciled relationship of fellowship and communion with him in faith, hope and love.

A call for response

Grace calls for a particular response. The apostle Paul tells us that God has reconciled the cosmos to himself. He then goes on to implore us to be reconciled, to live in line with the reality of that reconciliation (see 2 Corinthians 5:18, 20)—to wake up and smell the coffee! Such an ordered or disciplined response is not the enemy of grace but how we receive and benefit from it, or rather, benefit from our restored relationship to God through Jesus Christ!

In Colossians 1:29, Paul explained how he proclaimed Christ: "To this end I labor, struggling with all his energy, which so powerfully works in me" (NIV, 1984). The gospel of grace in Jesus Christ energizes and moves us just as it did Paul. It brings about "the obedience of faith," which was the aim and goal of his entire ministry (see Romans 1:5; 16:26 RSV).

Accepting God's grace is not a license for laziness. We should remind ourselves every day what Christ has done and is doing for us. Our motivation is the fact that he has accepted us, not the fear that he might reject us. Paul tells us: "For the grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men. It teaches us to say 'No' to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age" (Titus 2:11-12 NIV, 1984).

Before I began to really understand grace, I regarded the Bible largely as a rule-book that God gave to tell us what to do and not do. In doing so, I missed the point of many of the narratives in the Bible. I saw God as detaching and not attaching, disconnecting and not connecting with us. Do the right thing and you belonged to his "in" crowd. Disobey and you were "out." The more I focused on obeying the law, the more I also seemed to miss God's purpose to develop a loving relationship with each of his children. My view became one of seeing God as ruling people out, breaking them with "rods of iron." Thankfully, I did not totally lose sight of God's mercy, but I

really did see him as a cosmic sheriff and myself as his deputy!

Our experience was not as unusual as we may have thought. As I have gotten to know Christians in other denominations, I find that this is common, even among many who have been Christians for many years. That is why we need to understand and be reminded daily that it is his grace—not law—that disciplines us. God has caught us, like Columbo caught those criminals. He is the author and the finisher of our faith. It is the best “whodunit” and “how did he catch ‘em” story of all.

Joseph Tkach

EAST FROM WEST

Each spring, we celebrate the great sacrifice of Jesus Christ, by which our sins are forgiven and our eternal future is assured. It was the greatest act of love we can imagine—although we can't fully grasp the depth of that love. As Paul wrote to the Romans, "Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous person, though for a good man someone might possibly dare to die. But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us" (Romans 5:7-8).

What the Lord God did in Jesus goes far beyond any human standards of love and sacrifice. That is why we find it so hard to accept, without any reservations, the richness of God's grace. We read that our sins are forgiven, but we feel the need to add an "if." We understand that God's love for us is unconditional, and yet we still think there is a "but." Unconditional love and forgiveness seem too good to be true.

People in Old Testament times didn't have this problem. The Temple animal sacrifices left no doubt that the removal of sin was a bloody and messy business. But even then, some were able to glimpse that there was more to the forgiveness of sin than slaughtering an animal. David, when confronted with his multi-faceted sin with Bathsheba, pleaded,

Hide your face from my sins and blot out all my iniquity.
Create in me a pure heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me.
Do not cast me from your presence or take your Holy Spirit from me. (Psalm 51:9-11)

David realized that his outrageous behavior had damaged his relationship with God. He wanted desperately to make it right. However, a visit to the Temple with a sin offering was not enough.

You do not delight in sacrifice, or I would bring it;
you do not take pleasure in burnt offerings.
My sacrifice, O God, is a broken spirit;
a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.
(Psalm 51:16-17, NIV footnote reading)

David was ahead of his time in glimpsing God's grace, realizing there was nothing he could do except admit his guilt and ask for forgiveness. He was forgiven and later, in happier times, he could sing confidently:

For as high as the heavens are above the earth,
so great is his love for those who fear him;

as far as the east is from the west,
so far has he removed our transgressions from us.
(Psalm 103:11-12)

The world of David's day was not technologically advanced. Most people thought of the heavens as a vast inverted bowl in which the sun, moon and stars moved. In Psalm 103, David used that view of the cosmos as an analogy for the vastness of God's forgiveness and mercy, which separates our sins from us by an unimaginable distance.

That sense of vastness is sometimes blunted in our modern age. I often fly long distances "through the heavens" from east to west and back again. Thus, David's analogy might seem less impressive. But it shouldn't. In 1977, an unmanned spacecraft named Voyager 1 was launched from Florida. Its mission was to travel along a trajectory that would take it through our solar system, sending back photographs as it traveled.

Voyager 1 fulfilled its mission brilliantly. After traveling for 18 months, it sent back stunning pictures of Jupiter. Three years into its mission it gave us the first close-up pictures of the ringed planet Saturn. Now, over 35 years later, Voyager 1 has traveled farther "from east to west" than any other man-made object. It is now over 11 billion miles from earth. Its signals, traveling at the speed of light, take about 18 hours to reach us. It is heading out of our solar system at about 38,000 miles an hour. Its power plant may be able to send us signals for a few more years. But then Voyager will be on its own, hurtling through interstellar space until it comes under the influence of another star in about—wait for it—40,000 years!

The journey of Voyager 1 puts David's analogy of "east from west" and "above the heavens" into perspective, doesn't it? Although the spacecraft has traveled through only a tiny fraction of our cosmos, the distance, even with our modern scientific understanding, is beyond our ability to grasp. Perhaps if David was writing Psalm 103 today, he might put it this way:

For as far as interstellar space reaches away from earth,
so great is his love for those who fear him;
as far as Voyager has traveled from east to west,
so far has he removed from us our transgressions.

God's commitment to remove from his memory the guilt and stain of our sins is still greater than anything we humans can imagine. That's how great God's love for us is. And always will be. Let's be thankful for that.

Joseph Tkach

DO GRACE AND LAW CONFLICT?

God has provided a wonderful plan of salvation, based not on human merit but on his grace (Ephesians 2:8-9). This word “grace” has become shorthand for Christians. Some understand its meaning well, while others seem to view it as being in conflict with the idea of law. “Now that we are under grace, do we have to keep the law?” is a question Christians have asked for nearly 2,000 years. Paul addressed this question in his letter to the churches in Rome:

So what do we do? Keep on sinning so God can keep on forgiving? I should hope not! If we’ve left the country where sin is sovereign, how can we still live in our old house there? Or didn’t you realize we packed up and left there for good? That is what happened in baptism. When we went under the water, we left the old country of sin behind; when we came up out of the water, we entered into the new country of grace—a new life in a new land! (Romans 6:1-3, *The Message*).

According to Paul, this “new life” in a “new land” is not lawless. It is not “law” or “grace” as though the two are opposed. Instead, the word “grace” should be understood as representing the many parts or aspects of God’s whole plan of redemption. God’s grace has always included within it a call for the response of an obedience that trusts in (has faith in) God’s grace.

It is often stated that the old covenant is “law” while the new covenant is “grace.” Though this shorthand way of thinking is not totally inaccurate, it can lead to the unfortunate idea that law and grace are totally at odds. But what we see in Scripture is that the old covenant was not graceless and the new covenant is certainly not lawless. Instead, what we find are two forms of God’s one gracious covenant with the Old Testament presenting the promise and the New Testament presenting its fulfillment in Christ. Each of these has its particular form of obedience corresponding to its particular form of covenantal grace.

Under the new covenant form of grace, we live by the law of Christ that is written on our hearts. Paul refers to that law as “the law of the Spirit” (Romans 8:2) and “the law of Christ” (Galatians 6:2). These new covenant references equate the law with the will and heart of God, which is shared with us as his children by the Spirit of Christ. As we submit to God’s will and are moved by his heart, we experience the freedom that we have been given from the condemning effect of sin. Note this related comment from Trinitarian theologian Andrew Purves concerning the covenanted way of response to

God's grace found in both the old and new covenants:

God knew that Israel would not be able to be faithful as God required. Thus, God, within the [old] covenant established and maintained unilaterally by God, freely and graciously gave a covenanted way of responding so that the covenant might be fulfilled on their behalf.

Israel was given ordinances of worship designed to testify that God alone can expiate guilt, forgive sin and establish communion. This was not just a formal rite to guarantee propitiation between God and Israel, however. By its very nature, the covenanted way of response was to be worked into the flesh and blood of Israel's existence in such a way that Israel was called to pattern her whole life after it.

Later, in the prophecies of the Isaiah tradition especially, the notions of guilt-bearer and sacrifice for sin were conflated to give the interpretative clue for the vicarious role of the servant of the Lord. It would take the incarnation actually to bring that to pass, however, for Jesus Christ was recognized and presented in the New Testament both as the Servant of the Lord and as the divine Redeemer, not now only of Israel, but of all people. Jesus Christ has fulfilled the covenant from both sides, from God's side, and from our side (from the paper "I yet not I but Christ: Galatians 2:20 and the Christian Life in the Theology of T. F. Torrance").

Purves' insights help us appreciate the age-old Christian axiom: "Jesus did it all," while also answering Francis Schaeffer's famous question: "How should we then live?" Unfortunately, some think grace means living any way we want. Some, objecting to that conclusion, insist that we obey all 613 laws of the Torah. But neither of these responses to grace is God's will for us as followers of Jesus. As Paul explained, we are called to die daily, letting Christ live in us through the Holy Spirit. As we yield to Christ, we experience his kingdom reign and share in his obedience to the Father's will including what he is doing to fulfill the Father's mission to the world. As noted by Thomas F. Torrance, we live out the obedience of faith in Christ's fulfillment of the heart and good will of God for us:

It is only through union with Christ that we partake of the blessings of Christ, that is through union with him in his holy and obedient life... Through union with him we share in his faith, in his obedience, in his trust and his appropriation of the Father's blessing (*Theology in Reconstruction*, 158-9).

To help us understand the important relationship between law and grace, Dr. Gary Deddo has written an article in which he discusses this topic from an Incarnational, Trinitarian perspective. I think you will find his essay both challenging and informative; it follows this article.

Joseph Tkach

GRACE AND OBEDIENCE

Following centuries of debate, it seems that Christians still have not settled on how best to speak about the connection between grace (faith in God's grace in Jesus Christ) and obedience. Biblically grounded Christian teachers recognize that salvation is God's work and that it is received by faith. They also recognize that the resulting life with Christ involves obedience. The problem arises in how to affirm the one without denying (or severely qualifying) the other. The challenge is avoiding either lawlessness (antinomianism) or works-righteousness.

Both-and?

Most recognize the validity of both grace and obedience (faith and works). Rather than going the "either-or" route, most embrace some form of the "both-and" approach. However, this approach typically has little to say about the "and"—about how grace and obedience are actually connected. The result is that grace and obedience are artificially laminated together or stacked on top of one another. It is as if they are put into a room together and told to "get along."

Following this approach, efforts to correct perceived errors on one side typically involve emphasizing the other. If the perceived problem is too much works, then grace is emphasized. If it's too much grace, then obedience is emphasized. In similar fashion, various ministries emphasize one or the other, depending upon which they think is more dangerous or prevalent. I find that the result of this approach is a sort of "seesaw theology" where the connection between law (works) and grace (faith) remains vague if not altogether absent.

In contrast, I find that the Bible deeply relates and integrates grace and obedience as fundamental to Christian faith and life. For example, in Romans 1:5 and 16:26 the apostle Paul says that bringing about this integration was the goal of his ministry. In 14:23 he says that any obedience that does not spring from faith is sin! Hebrews 11 offers illustrations of people who obeyed God "by faith." Then in 1 John 5 we are told that God's commands are not burdensome because of the victory of faith in God's grace (verses 3-4). Jesus himself reminds us that his burden is easy and his yoke light (Matthew 11:29-30) and that we are God's "friends," not his slaves. In Galatians, Paul tells us that "faith is made effective through love" (5:6 NRSV, footnote).

The nature of “AND”

There are dozens of places in the New Testament that clearly establish this connection between grace (faith) and obedience (love for God and for others). But how does the connection work? What is the nature of the AND? It is found in the person of Jesus, who alone embodies fully the character, mind, attitude and purpose of God. The object of our faith is Jesus Christ, and the essence of that faith is trusting in Jesus as God in person according to who he is and what he has done. Faith is our response to who Jesus is in person, word and deed. We put our trust in God because of who Jesus Christ is. And he himself is the grace of God towards us.

Jesus is the gospel. He is our salvation. And we receive all the benefits of who he is as we trust in him and cast aside (repent of) all rival objects of trust. We then enjoy our union and communion with Jesus as our Lord and God. Our lives are united to him and we share in his life, participating with him in all he is doing and will do in our relationship of trust (faith).

We have our being by being in fellowship and communion with Jesus, receiving from him all that he has for us, and he taking from us all that we give him. In that union and communion we are transformed, bit by bit (2 Corinthians 3:18) to share more of Christ’s own glorified human nature, his character. We can count on this on-going gracious work of Christ by the Spirit even if much still remains hidden (Colossians 3:3) and we remain mere earthen vessels (2 Corinthians 4:7).

Our view of Jesus

The problem is that people have too small a view of Jesus and thus a restricted faith in him. Though they trust him for future salvation (getting into heaven), that’s pretty much it. However, when we look closely at scripture, we see that Jesus is both Savior and Commander. Jesus saves us by grace and also commands things of us.

We know that our obedience to his commands does not earn us salvation, so why is obedience important? Perhaps we think that we must obey simply because our Commander says so—because he is big and powerful and we had better obey or else! Approached in this way, obedience becomes an act of will in response to the might and seemingly arbitrary will of God. This is the obedience of a slave.

The problem with this approach to obedience is that it reflects a shrunken conception of Jesus and what he offers. We need to see all of who Jesus is and all of what he offers if we are to grasp all of what we can trust him for. We begin by understanding that Jesus is Lord of the whole cosmos, the entire

universe; Lord of all reality, and he has a good and loving purpose for it all. He is redeeming all things and will renew heaven and earth. He is Lord and Savior over every aspect of human life and has a purpose for every dimension of our existence. It is all to be a channel of his blessing to us and through us to others. All of it, every relationship, is meant to lead to life and life abundantly. Even our eating and drinking is to reflect the very glory of our life-giving God (1 Corinthians 10:31). Every relationship is to be a fruitful gift exchange that contributes to a fullness of life and so a fullness of love.

Jesus' authority extends into every aspect of created existence, into every dimension of life at every level: mathematical, physical, chemical, biological, animal, human, social, cultural, linguistic, artistic, judicial, economic, psychological, philosophical, religious and spiritual. All this has its origin in fellowship and communion with God through Christ. This relationship with God through Christ works its way into every avenue of life under his redeeming lordship. God's grace has to do with *everything*. That's the foundation of a Christian worldview.

Everything we receive from God we pass on to others to contribute to God's universe-wide purposes. This is especially true in our relationships. We receive forgiveness of sins—renewing grace to start again with hope. We receive God's generosity, providing us all the fruit of the Spirit. We receive comfort, love, transforming power and a purpose and direction in life to be a sign and witness to the grace and goodness of God. We become witnesses to the truth and holy loving character of God. All these things point to eternal life—life with God as his beloved children in holy, loving unity.

Trust and obey

Our faith is a trust in God through Christ for all these things, not just for “going to heaven” or “being in the kingdom” someday. Every command of God and our every act of obedience is keyed to some aspect of what we can trust God for:

- We forgive because we have been and will be forgiven.
- We love, because we are first loved by God.
- We love our enemies because God first loved us and also loves (wants his best) for his and our enemies.
- We can be generous because God is generous with us.
- We can be truthful and honest because God is truthful and honest and will bring out the truth in the end.
- We can be creative and helpful because God is creative and helpful to us.

- We comfort others in their grief because God comforts us in our grief.
- We can be patient because God is patient with us.
- We can be peacemakers because God is a peacemaker.
- We can pursue justice and right relationships at every level, because God is just and righteous.
- We can be reconcilers because God is a reconciler.

All our doing by faith is participating in what God is doing through Christ and in the Spirit. That means everything we do is fellowship and communion with Christ. We never act alone—because we are never alone but are united to Christ as his brothers and sisters and members of the family of God.

Imperatives flow from indicatives

We obey by faith when we see all of who Jesus is in any given situation, trust him to be faithful in that situation and then act as if he will be faithful. That is, we act on our faith in who he is. You will find that, connected to every command in Scripture is some kind of reference to who God is and what he can be trusted for. Seeing the connection between what God can be trusted for and what he then directs us to do generates the obedience of faith.

James Torrance spoke of this by saying that every *imperative* of grace is built on a foundation of an *indicative* of grace. The reason there is always a connection is because all of God's commands to us (the imperatives) arise out of his own character, heart, nature and purpose, including everything he has done for us in Jesus Christ (the indicatives). God is not arbitrary—his will for us always is informed and controlled by his nature and character as the Triune God who came to us in Jesus Christ so that we might have fellowship and communion with him in holy love.

Faith in God's grace arises out of a trust in God because of Jesus Christ, and *obedience* to the God of grace arises out of a trust in God because of Jesus Christ. Faith and obedience have one and the same source—the faithfulness of God in Christ. They both are a response to who Christ is. They both have the same Trinitarian, Incarnational theological source. They both are the fruit of a trusting relationship with God through Christ in the Spirit.

Guidelines for preaching/teaching

Here are guidelines that I've developed to help keep grace and obedience together in Jesus:

1. Never call for an act of obedience without first showing how that call to action corresponds to something we can trust God for. Always look for the indicatives of grace that are the foundation for

- the imperatives (commands) of grace in every biblical passage.
2. Always indicate the character of the gracious, saving, redeeming Commander. Never present God as a merely a commander with a strong will disconnected from his heart, mind, character and purpose, which we see in Jesus Christ. Always begin by answering the foundational question, Who are you, Lord? Doing so makes our preaching and teaching truly Trinitarian and Incarnational.
3. Never simply preach to a person's will or power of choice. Behind every act of will and choice is a desire, a hope, a love, a fear, a trust or distrust. That is, behind every act there is belief or unbelief, trust or distrust in God. Preach to persons' hearts, their affections, their yearnings concerning the character, purpose and heart of God and his desire for our fellowship and communion with him. Preach what God can be trusted for. He can be counted on to keep his promises. Feed people's faith, hope and love for God. Obedience will flow out of that.
4. Do not preach: "If you...then God." Doing so tempts people into legal obedience and works-righteousness. Instead, preach: "*Since* God in Christ by the Spirit...then you ____." Or, "*As* you do x, y or z out of trust, you will be receiving what God offers us in Christ." For example, say, "*As* we confess our sins, we experience the forgiveness that God has already given us in Christ."
5. Present obedience as "going to work with God"—as an act of fellowship with God that involves us in what the Spirit of God is doing.
6. Preach obedience as a "get to," not a "have to." Preach it as the privilege of a child of God, not the grit-your-teeth duty of the slave of a willful God.
7. Do not seek to motivate others on the basis of trying to close a supposed "credibility gap" between the "reality" of this fallen world and an ideal that we suppose God hopes for. It is not our calling to build the kingdom or to make God's ideal actual. Rather, preach the reality of who God is and what he does (and has done), and the calling we have to participate with God in making visible a bit of that reality. With this approach, our only choice is to affirm and participate in the reality that God has established in Christ by the Spirit or to deny and to refuse to participate. We have no power to change that reality, but only to choose whether we will participate.
8. Preach and teach the grace of God as a finished work—a reality that

we can count on even if it is hidden for now. Do not teach it as a *potential* that God has made possible *if* we do x, y or z—God is not dependent upon our actions. Rather, he invites our participation in what he has done, is doing and will do. Preach like Jesus did: “The kingdom of God has come near, so repent and believe in that good news.” Preach like Peter did: “Since God has made Jesus Lord and Savior, therefore repent and believe.” Notice that the desired action is presented as a response to who God is and what he has done.

9. Never preach as if God cannot be more faithful than we are—as if God is limited by what we do or don’t do. Paul says that, “If we are faithless, he [God] remains faithful” (2 Timothy 2:13). We may miss out on being involved, but God will still accomplish his good purposes. God does not need us, but he delights in having his children involved in what he is doing. We were created for fellowship (communion, partnership) with God.
10. Do not grant reality-making to human actions, as if what we do makes “all the difference.” Christ alone gets that credit. Our actions, whether they be great or small (as small as a cup of water, or a mustard seed of faith), amount only to a few loaves and fish to feed 5000. They are signs pointing to the coming kingdom of God. We are mere witnesses, and our sign-acts are partial, imperfect, temporary and only provisional. But by God’s grace, the Spirit uses even these meager things to point people to Christ so that they may put their entire trust in him according to who he really is.
11. Realize that you will have to trust mightily in the unconditioned grace of God to bring about the obedience of faith in order to preach and teach this way and not succumb to the temptation to revert back to making it sound like God’s grace is dependent upon our response (and thus conditional upon our action).
12. Know that you, like Paul, will not be able to prevent some people from trying to take advantage of this grace (even though taking advantage of it is not receiving it, but rejecting it!). You will also be accused by some, just like Paul was, of encouraging sin and disobedience (antinomianism)! But Paul did not change his message of grace under the pressure of such accusations. We must not attempt to prevent this rejection and abuse of grace by changing our message to a conditioned grace or an arbitrary obedience, as happened in Galatia. Making that switch would be a denial of the gospel of God in Jesus Christ.

I hope you can see how I think this biblical orientation brings together grace and obedience in an organic, personal and integrated way so that there is no “either-or” separation, nor a simplistic seesaw “both-and” juxtaposition of two different things. Those who love and trust God through Christ in the Spirit as Lord of the universe will desire to be faithful to him and with him in every dimension of life here and now, even in our current fallen condition.

Gary W. Deddo

IS GRACE TOO GOOD TO BE TRUE?

Non-believers and even some believers see God's grace as something too good to be true. How about you?

I think most of us understand grace intellectually. But has the astonishing truth of God's grace sunk in? It is one thing to accept grace as a doctrinal argument, but another for grace to be the truth that defines and thus transforms our lives.

For some, there remains a tension between grace and obedience. This is not new—we see it in the New Testament. “Shall we sin because we are not under law but under grace?” challenged Paul in Romans 6:15. “By no means,” he answered, though we can sympathize with these early Christians for having this question.

We too find grace a difficult idea to internalize. Our experience with “special offers” and TV bargains has taught us that if something sounds too good to be true, it probably is.

We all know that there is no such thing as a free lunch. So when we read that God has done all that is required to save even the worst sinner, we are suspicious. Our “Yes but...” program clicks in, and we ask “What’s the catch?” There must be more to it than just “accepting Jesus.” We know we can’t earn salvation, but surely we have to do something! Pastors have told me that by emphasizing grace over legalism they worry that they may be encouraging their people to disobey God.

I love the way Peter’s second epistle opens:

Grace and peace be yours in abundance through the knowledge of God and of Jesus our Lord. His divine power has given us everything we need for a godly life through our knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness. Through these he has given us his very great and precious promises, so that through them you may participate in the divine nature, having escaped the corruption in the world caused by evil desires. (2 Peter 1:2-4)

God has already offered to himself what we could not offer. The grace in which we participate is the life of faithfulness that Jesus lived towards the Father. As Thomas F. Torrance wrote: “In this God-Man we partake in grace, as members of his body, reconciled to God through him and in him, and even it is said, are incomprehensibly partakers of Divine nature!”

Torrance is right. There is something incomprehensible about it. God’s grace towards us shows a level of love that seems unnatural to us. Charles

Wesley expressed it beautifully in his hymn *Amazing Love*:

And can it be that I should gain
An interest in the Savior's blood?
Died He for me, who caused His pain?
For me, who Him to death pursued?
Amazing love! how can it be
That Thou, my God, shouldst die for me?

It does sound too good to be true. But it is true. We can delight to be alive in Jesus and united in his life. We should rightly be dumbfounded by his grace. When we recognize how and why Jesus takes away the sin of the world, we are immediately brought to a point of disconnection from our own false center and nourished by the true vine of life, which is the fullest purpose of God. Worrying about how we and others are falling short is to maintain a focus that stems from legalism.

We never need worry that we are over-emphasizing God's grace when we point people to Jesus and a living, loving relationship with him. Grace and obedience are not at odds—rather, they are integrated in the source of both—the person of Jesus Christ.

In the next article, Dr. Gary Deddo explores this topic in depth. I think you will find it helpful and encouraging. Though it's long, I believe that the time taken to read it, then share it with others, will be time well invested.

Joseph Tkach

TOO MUCH GRACE?

Sometimes I hear expressed a concern that we emphasize grace too much. The suggested corrective is that we should counter-balance teaching about grace with teaching about obedience, righteousness and other obligations mentioned in Scripture, especially those in the New Testament. I have been reflecting on this concern and think I might have something useful to offer concerning the nature of grace and our response.

A legitimate concern

Those who worry about extending “too much grace” sometimes have a legitimate concern. Sadly, some people teach that because we are saved by grace and not by works, it makes no difference how we live. For them, grace means no obligations, rules or expected patterns of relationship. For them, grace means that pretty much anything goes, since it’s all forgiven beforehand. This erroneous view sees grace as a free pass—carte blanche permission to do whatever one wants. In my experience, most people who hold this view, or something like it, don’t go quite this far—they seem to know that there are some limits. However, some people do hold an extreme, and I believe unbiblical, view of grace.

Living without or against any laws or rules is known as antinomianism. This problem has been written and preached about throughout church history. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who was a Christian martyr under the Nazis, called it “cheap grace” in his book *The Cost of Discipleship*. Antinomianism is addressed in the New Testament. Paul referred to it when addressing the accusation that his emphasis on grace was encouraging people to “continue in sin in order that grace may abound” (Romans 6:1, *NRSV*). Paul’s reply was short and emphatic: “By no means!” (verse 2). Then a few sentences later he repeats the charge against him and answers it: “What then? Should we sin because we are not under law but under grace? By no means!” (verse 15).

But what is the real problem and solution?

There was no ambiguity in Paul’s response to the charge of antinomianism. Those who argue that grace means “anything goes because it’s all covered” are mistaken. But why? What’s gone wrong? Is the problem really “too much grace”? And is the solution to counter-balance grace with something else? Is that how Paul and the rest of the New Testament writers understood the problem? Was that how they sought to remedy it? I think the answer to both questions is clearly, “by no means!”

The New Testament revelation, founded in Jesus Christ himself, identifies the nature of the problem and its solution quite differently. Paul did not change his message of grace and he warned against those who would, especially in his letter to the Galatians.

Rather than being “too much grace,” the real problem is a misunderstanding of both grace and obedience. Ironically, those who worry about “too much grace” hold the same misunderstanding about grace as those who have no worries at all and so go merrily on their way without giving further thought to living a life of faithfulness to Jesus Christ and the instructions given in the New Testament. Their misunderstanding of grace trips them up and undermines their ability to live a life of joyful obedience in the freedom of Christ—a freedom and joy that both Paul and Jesus talk about.

It took me many years to get to the bottom of this issue, and I didn’t get there without a lot of help from others who I learned from, some in person and others through their writings. So let me now try to lay out what I found.

The problem is not too much grace, nor is the solution to counter-balance grace with an equal insistence on obedience, works or service. *The real problem is thinking that grace means God makes an exception to a rule, a requirement or an obligation.* That is a common, everyday misunderstanding of grace. If grace involved merely allowing for exceptions to rules, then yes, a lot of grace would simply yield a lot of exceptions. And if God was said to be all-gracious, then, we could expect that for every obligation or responsibility God would make an exception. The more grace, then the more exceptions to obedience. The less grace, the fewer exceptions allowed. A nice clean proportion. If we have to allow some room for grace in this scheme, then the only question is where to put the balance between grace and requirements: 25/75? 50/50? 75/25?

Such a scheme perhaps describes the best that human grace can achieve. But note that this approach pits grace against obedience. It puts them at odds with one another—always pushing and pulling one another; back and forth, never really settling down, since they fight against one another. Each one undoes or negates the other. Being in perpetual contradiction, they have no hope of ever getting along. Folks who assume that “this is just the way things have to be” experience this tension within themselves. Externally their lives might look like a teeter-totter, tipping now on one side and then on the other. But such a scheme does not represent God’s kind of grace. The truth about grace sets us free from this false dichotomy.

God's grace in person

Question: How does the Bible actually define grace? Answer: Jesus Christ himself is God's grace to us. Paul's benediction that ends 2 Corinthians refers to "the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ." Grace is what God freely gives us in his incarnate Son, who in turn, graciously communicates to us God's love and restores us to fellowship with God. What Jesus does towards us reveals to us the nature and character of the Father and the Holy Spirit. Scripture tells us that Jesus bears the stamp of God's exact character (Hebrews 1:3). It says that "he is the image of the invisible God" and that "God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him" (Colossians 1:15, 19). He who has seen him has seen the Father, and if we know him we will know the Father (John 14:9, 7).

Jesus explains that he only does "what he sees his Father doing" (John 5:19). He tells us that only he knows the Father and he alone reveals him (Matthew 11:27). John tells us that this Word of God, who has existed from the beginning with God, took on a human existence and has shown us "the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth." While "the law indeed was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ." In fact, "from his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace." This Son who has existed in the heart of God from all eternity "has made him known" (John 1:14-18).

Jesus is God's grace to us—revealing in word and in action that God himself is full of grace. Grace isn't just one of the things God happens to do every now and then. Grace is who God is. God gives us his grace out of his own nature, the exact same character we meet in Jesus. He does not give out of a dependence upon us, nor does he give because we somehow obligate him to extend his good gifts to us. God gives grace because he has a giving nature. That means that God gives us his grace in Jesus Christ, freely. Paul calls grace a free gift from God in his letter to the Romans (5:15-17; 6:23, *NRSV*). And in his letter to the Ephesians, he memorably declared: "For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God — not the result of works, so that no one may boast" (Ephesians 2:8-9, *NRSV*).

All that God gives us he gives freely out of his own goodness, out of his desire to do good to all that is less than and other than himself. God's acts of grace have their source in God's good, freely giving nature. So God continues to give freely of his goodness even when it meets up with resistance, rebellion and disobedience from his creatures. In response to sin, he freely gives his forgiveness and reconciliation in and through his Son's atonement. God, who

is light and in whom is no darkness, gives himself to us freely—in the Son, by the Spirit, so that we might have abundant life (1 John 1:5; John 10:10).

Was God always gracious?

Unfortunately it has often been said that God originally (even before the Fall) agreed to give of his goodness (to Adam and Eve and then to Israel) only if his creatures fulfilled certain conditions (obligations) that he set out for them. If they didn't, he would not extend much of his goodness to them. He especially would not extend forgiveness and eternal life.

This erroneous viewpoint sees God as having a contractual, *if you-then I* relationship with his creatures. That contract has conditions or obligations (rules or laws) that humanity must meet in order to receive what God is offering. According to this view, God's primary concern is conformity to his rules. If we don't measure up, God will withhold his best from us. Worse than that, he will give us what is not good, what leads to death, not life; both now and in eternity.

This erroneous view sees law as the deepest thing about God's nature and thus the most fundamental aspect of God's relationship with his creatures. He wills what he wills, and he blesses us only when we fulfill certain obligations. This God is essentially a contract God who has a legal and conditional relationship with his creatures. He conducts that relationship like a master to a slave. In this view, God's freely giving of his goodness and blessings, including forgiveness, is far from the essence or nature of this God. From this perspective, Jesus is viewed as showing us only one particular and isolated aspect of who God is. Jesus actually represents an exception to God's rule and will, nature and character, rather than representing the fullness of God's divinity. In this way of thinking, Jesus only reveals and demonstrates something that is non-essential to God's nature and character. Regarding Jesus in this way ought to alert us to a serious problem.

If law actually was the most fundamental feature of God's relationship to us, then grace could only be an exception to law. But, especially given the new covenant, it is clear that law is not the most basic way that God relates to us now. It never has been. God is not fundamentally sheer will or law. This is most clearly seen looking at Jesus, who shows us the Father and sends us the Spirit. It is clear when we hear from Jesus about his eternal relationship with the Father and Spirit. Jesus tells us that his nature and character are identical to that of the Father's.

The Father-Son relationship is not one of rules, obligations or the fulfilling of conditions in order to earn or deserve benefits. The Father and

Son do not have a legal relationship with each other. They have not drawn up a contract with each other where if one fails to complete his part the other will not fulfill his part. The idea of a contractual, law-based relationship between the Father and the Son is an absurdity. The truth, revealed to us in Jesus, is that their relationship is one of holy love, faithfulness, self-giving and mutual glorification. Jesus' prayer in John 17 powerfully reveals that those triune relationships are the foundation and source for all God does in every relationship, since God always acts according to who he is—because he is faithful.

As we read Scripture carefully, it becomes clear that God's relationship with his creation, and with Israel, is not contractual—it is not one of conditionality. An important point to remember, one that Paul is clear about, is that God's relationship with Israel was not fundamentally one of law, of an *if-then* contract. God's relationship with Israel began with a covenant, a promise. The Law of Moses (the Torah) came in 430 years after the inauguration of the covenant. Given that timeline, law could hardly be regarded as the foundation for God's relationship with Israel.

In the covenant, God freely pledged himself and his goodness to Israel. It had absolutely nothing to do with what Israel could offer God (Deuteronomy 7:6-8). Abraham did not know God when God pledged to bless him and make him a blessing to all the nations (Genesis 12:2-3). A covenant is a promise—it is freely chosen and freely given. "I will take you as my people, and I will be your God" said God to Israel (Exodus 6:7). God's pledge of blessing was unilateral—established from his side alone. God gave the covenant as an expression of his own nature, character and being. Its establishment with Israel was an act of grace—yes, grace!

A careful review of the early chapters of Genesis makes it clear that God does not relate to his creation according to some sort of contractual agreement. First, creation itself was an act of free giving. There was nothing there that deserved or earned existence, much less a good existence. God declares: "And it was good," even "very good." God freely extends his goodness towards his creation, towards what is far less than himself, giving it life. Eve was God's gift of goodness to Adam so that he would no longer be alone. In like manner, God gave Adam and Eve the garden and the good purpose of keeping it so that they would experience fruitful and abundant life. Adam and Eve fulfilled no conditions before these good gifts were given freely by God.

But what about after the Fall, when sin entered? What we find is that God continues to give of his goodness freely and unconditionally. Was not God's

pursuit of Adam and Eve, giving them an opportunity to repent following their disobedience, an act of grace? Consider also how God provided animal skins for their clothing. Even their expulsion from the Garden was an act of grace, to prevent them from taking of the tree of life in their fallen state. God's protection and provision for Cain can only be regarded in the same light. We also see grace in God's protection of Noah and his family, and in his pledge of the rainbow. All these acts are of grace—freely given gifts of God's goodness. None of them are rewards for fulfilling some kind of even minimal legal contractual obligation.

Grace as unmerited favor?

It has often been said that grace is God's unmerited favor. Strictly speaking, this is true. But given what we think it implies, it is just barely true. What is false about it is the assumption (almost always lurking in the background) that God originally intended for us to merit his favor. That is utterly false. God did not originally plan on us meriting his favor, but then gave up as he saw us fail. God did not abandon Plan A: Merited Favor for Plan B: Unmerited Favor. No—God never, from the foundations of the earth, wanted a contractual, conditional relationship with us. He never wanted a master-slave relationship.¹ Rather, he wanted all along for his children to have a relationship with him that mirrored as much as possible the relationship God the Father has with his Son in the Spirit.

God always freely gives of his goodness, of himself to his creatures. And he does so because of who he is, eternally and internally as Father, Son and Holy Spirit. All they do towards creation is an overflow of their inward life together. The acts mirror externally who God is internally, and so give him glory. A legal and contractual relationship with God would not give the triune creator and covenant-making God glory, but would obscure it, even deny it. It would make God into an idol. Pagan gods always enter into contractual relationships with their appeasers because they need their worshippers just as much as the worshippers need them. They are mutually dependent. So they use one another for their own self-centered ends. The only question is which "side" will win. The outcome of that competition is largely dependent upon which side is strongest, more powerful, and slightly less dependent than the other. But such a relationship is exactly what the God of the Bible completely repudiates. God is not a pagan deity and does not want the kind of contractual, conditional relationship with his people that idols demand. Idols must be appeased, but not the God of Israel and of our Lord Jesus Christ.²

The smidgen of truth hidden down under the saying that grace is God's

unmerited favor is simply that we don't merit it. But the implication almost always accompanying that idea is false! God's favor or blessing (his freely given goodness) was never meant to be merited. You can "unmerit" God's blessing, but you can't merit it and you never could. For if God extended his goodness to us because we merited it, that action would not be motivated by God's own nature and character. Such goodness would not be freely given by a good God. Favor earned is not favor freely given. It is not grace!

The graciousness of grace demonstrated

Grace does not just come into play when there is sin, making an exception to some law or obligation. God is gracious whether there is sin or not. God does not need sin to be gracious. However, grace continues when even there is sin. So it is true that God continues to freely give of his own goodness to his creatures even when they do not merit it. He freely gives forgiveness at his own expense of reconciling atonement.

Even when we sin, God remains faithful, because he *is* faithful, just as Paul says: "If we are faithless, he remains faithful" (2 Timothy 2:13). Because God always is true to himself, he persists in extending his love and in pursuing his holy purposes for us even when we rebel and resist. This constancy of grace shows the depth of the freedom that God has to be good toward his creation. "For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly.... But God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us" (Romans 5:6, 8 *NRSV*). The special character of grace shines forth when it shines out in the darkness, so we often speak of grace in the context of sin. There is nothing wrong with that. But the problem comes when we think God's favor was originally meant to be earned in a legal arrangement with him.

Sin can't stop God's free giving of his goodness. He remains constant in character, nature and purpose. God is not dependent upon us to remain true to himself. We cannot make God freer than he is, nor by our rejection of his goodness can we take from him his freedom to be gracious.

So God is gracious without sin and God is gracious with sin. God is faithful in being good to his creation and maintaining his good purposes for creation. We see this most fully in Jesus, who cannot be stopped from completing his atoning work by all the forces of evil arrayed against him. Those forces cannot prevent him from giving up his life so that we could have life. No amount of pain, suffering and utter humiliation could deter him from carrying out his holy, loving purposes to reconcile humanity to God.

God's goodness does not require evil to be good. But when it comes upon

evil, goodness knows what to do: overcome it, conquer it, and vanquish it. There is no such thing as too much grace.

So why the law (or any other commands)?

Given what we saw about grace, how then do we regard the Old Testament law and Christian obedience under the new covenant? If we remember that God's covenant is a unilateral promise, the answer more easily falls into place. A promise calls for a response from the one to whom it is made. However, the fulfillment of the promise does not depend upon this response.³

There are only two options here: to trust (have faith or believe) in the promise or not. The Law of Moses (the Torah) described for Israel much of what trusting God's covenant should look like during its pre-fulfillment stage (prior to Jesus Christ). God graciously provided for Israel ways to live within his covenant (as it was expressed in the old covenant). The Law of Moses also described ways that were distrustful of God's covenant promises to Israel. But what the Torah did not do is to prescribe how Israel might earn God's favor and blessing—its purpose was not to define how to get God to make a promise and then how to keep him faithful to it.

The Torah was freely given by God to Israel. It was meant to help Israel. Paul calls it a “tutor” (Galatians 3:24-25, *NKJV*). It should be regarded as a good gift of God's grace to Israel. The Law of Moses is given inside and under the old covenant, which was the covenant of grace in its phase as promise (awaiting the fulfillment in Christ within the new covenant). It was meant to serve God's freely given covenant purpose to bless Israel and make Israel a channel of blessing to all nations.

God, remaining faithful to himself, desires the same kind of non-contractual relationship with people who live within the new covenant fulfilled in Jesus. He freely extends to us all the blessings of his atoning and reconciling life, death, resurrection and ascension. We're offered all the benefits of his coming kingdom. Even more, we are offered the blessedness of being indwelt by his Holy Spirit. But the offer of these gifts of grace of the new covenant calls for a response—the same kind of response that Israel was to give: faith (trust). But under the new covenant we trust in the fulfillment of God's covenant rather than in its promise.

What difference does the response to grace make? It is in answering this question that confusion often arises. If we are to benefit from the promise, we must live on the basis of trusting it. This is what is meant by “living by faith.” We see faithful living exemplified by the Old Testament “saints” in

Hebrews 11.

There are consequences for not living out of trust, both in the covenant promised or the covenant fulfilled. Distrust in the covenant and in the God of the covenant severely limits one's experience of the covenant benefits. Israel's distrust cut them off from the source of their life—their sustenance, health and fruitfulness. Distrust blocked their relationship with God to the point where they were unable to receive much of anything from God. God did not want that, because he is gracious and want to give! So in Scripture we find strict warnings describing the dire consequences of living in ways that deny God's faithfulness (faithfulness to his word of promise), thus preventing his people from receiving the freely given grace of God. Instead of blessings, what his faithless people receive is sometimes referred to as "curses." He had warned them about unpleasant results of faithlessness.

However, even these warnings can be regarded as gifts of God's grace. If God did not care about Israel and would just as soon cancel his covenant, there would be no reason for him to warn them. He'd just let them go, and be done with it. But Israel was in the covenant, and even if they lived as if they were not, the result was NOT that it would be nullified, or that God would change his mind and go back on his promise. God cannot be tempted to be unfaithful to his promise.

God's covenant, Paul tells us, is irrevocable. Why? Because God is faithful and will keep his covenant even when it costs him dearly! God will never go back on his word; he cannot be forced to act uncharacteristically towards his creation or his people. Even in our distrust of the promise, we cannot make God to be untrue to himself. This is what is meant by God doing things "for his own name's sake."

Israel's disobedience resulted in bad (even dire) consequences. All of these occurred within the covenant, under God's grace. Under the old covenant, God never abandoned Israel—never went back on his covenant promises. From time to time, God renewed his covenant with Israel, always leading up to the fulfillment of the covenant in Jesus Christ.

It is the same under the new covenant. All the instructions and commands we find there are meant to be obeyed by faith in God's freely given goodness and grace. That grace reached its high point in God's self-giving and self-revelation in Jesus. To be enjoyed, God's good gifts must be received, not rejected or ignored. The imperatives (commands) found in the New Testament describe what receiving or trusting in God's grace looks like for the people of God living after the establishment of the new covenant.

Where does obedience come from?

So where then does obedience come from? It arises out of a trust in God's faithfulness to his covenant purposes fulfilled in Jesus Christ. The only obedience that God is interested in is the obedience of faith—faith in God's constancy, in God's faithfulness to his Word, faithfulness to himself (Romans 1:5; 16:26). Obedience never was and never is an attempt to fulfill conditions to get God to be faithful, to make God more likely to be good, to get God to be (freely!) gracious.

Obedience is our response to grace. Paul is clear on this—especially where he tells us that Israel's failure was not that the people did not fulfill certain legal conditions of the Torah, but that they “did not strive for it on the basis of faith, but as if it were based on works” (Romans 9:32, *NRSV*). Paul, a law-keeping Pharisee, came to realize that God never wanted him to work up a righteousness of his own through keeping the law. What good would that be even if it were possible (which it is not)? Compared to the righteousness that God intended to give him by grace, compared to having a share in God's own righteousness given to him in Christ, it would be garbage (or worse!)—see Philippians 3:8.

All along, God intended to share his own righteousness with his people as a gift of grace. Why? Because God is gracious! (Philippians 3:8-9). So how do we receive this freely given gift? By trusting God for it, by having faith in his promise to provide it. Trying to work for or earn that gift—trying to meet certain legal conditions, trying to conform to specified obligations in order to earn God's blessings—actually indicates distrust. Such attempts indicate unbelief in God's freely given grace.

The obedience that God is looking for is motivated by faith, hope and love for God. The calls for obedience found throughout Scripture, the commands found in the old and new covenants, are those of grace. They are not conditions of grace. If we believe in God's promises and trust in their fulfillment in Christ and then in us, we will want to live in, under and by those promises, as if they are true and trustworthy. If we are not living in a way that expresses trust in God's grace—his being good to us even when we don't deserve it—then we're not really trusting in God's grace!

The obedient life is a trusting life. A disobedient life is one that is not trusting or perhaps does not (yet) want what is promised.⁴ Only obedience that arises out of faith, hope and love gives God glory, for only that kind of obedience bears witness to the truth of who God actually is, as revealed to us in Jesus Christ.

God will continue to be gracious to us whether we receive or resist his

grace. Part of his graciousness will be to resist our resistance to his grace! That's the nature of God's wrath as he says "No" to our "No" to him in order to reaffirm his "Yes" to us in Christ (2 Corinthians 1:19). God's "No" is just as strong as his "Yes," because it is an expression of his "Yes." Those who resist God's grace will not experience the benefits of living by faith. However, they will not, by that unbelief, stop God from being true to himself, from being the gracious God that he is.

Grace makes no exceptions!

It's important to realize that God makes no exceptions to his good purposes and holy aims for his people. Because he is faithful, God will not give up on us. Instead, he loves us to perfection—the perfection of his Son. God intends to glorify us so that we perfectly trust and love him with all that we are and have, and so live out our trust in his graciousness to the full. Doing so means that our distrusting hearts will be done away with so that our lives perfectly reflect our trust in God's freely given goodness. God's perfect love will love us to completion by justifying us, sanctifying us and glorifying us. "He who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion" (Philippians 1:6).

Would God be gracious to leave us, in the end, less than whole? What if heaven were filled with individuals for whom exceptions were made—allowing for a lack of faith here, a failure of love there, some unforgiveness here, some bitterness and resentment there, a bit of jealousy here and a mote of selfish pride there? What would that be like? It would be just like it is here and now, but forever!

Would God be gracious to leave us in such an "exceptional" condition for all eternity? No, he would not! In the end, God's grace allows for no exceptions to his ruling grace, to the rule of his love, to the sovereignty of his loving will—because otherwise he would not be gracious.

What can we say to those who abuse God's grace?

How might we answer those who say that they can do whatever they like since we're under grace and not law? Perhaps we can point out that living a lawless life actually resists or goes contrary to the grace of God. Perhaps we can help them understand that to *presume* upon grace is to not receive it, and thus to experience few of its benefits. Grace is not permission to indulge in behaviors that hurt us. Indifference is not love.

As we disciple people in the way of Jesus, we should help them understand and receive God's grace, rather than misunderstand and pridefully resist it. We should help them to live in the grace that God is extending to

them right now. We should help them know that no matter what they do, God will continue to be true to himself and true to his good purposes for them. We should help them trust in the fact that because God loves them and is gracious in his own nature, character and purpose, he will resist any resistance to his grace so that one day we all might fully receive and thus live by his grace and so gladly take on joyfully the “obligations” of living in grace, knowing the privilege it is to be a child of God with Jesus Christ as our elder brother.

¹ An even worse explanation is that God wanted us to believe the falsehood that he wanted a conditional relationship with us, where we merited his favor, so that when we failed (which he knew we would), we would come to see that we could not merit it. Thus it turns out that he never did really want a conditional relationship with us, although he had to deceive us into believing that he did.

² See for example Isaiah chapters 1 and 66 and Hosea 4–14 for God’s complaint about sacrifices given to appease God as if he were an idol.

³ The idea of an inheritance conveys the same sort of understanding. The giving of an inheritance does not depend upon its reception. It is given and therefore possessed in a certain way even before it is received. Found in the practices of Israel, the idea of an inheritance is also used to speak of God’s ultimate blessings at numerous key points in the New Testament. See Galatians 3:18; Ephesians 1:11; Colossians 3:24; Hebrews 9:15.

⁴ Editor’s note: What is promised is Jesus—life with Jesus living in us, living in the way that Jesus lives. This is what God is giving; this is his grace. Salvation is *not* living a selfish life for all eternity. People who want “grace” without any commands are seeking permission to be self-centered, and that is not the grace that God gives.

Gary W. Deddo

GRACE: A LICENSE TO SIN?

It is a constant wonder how we guardians of the true faith can become so skilled at gumming up the greatest news in the universe. We hold in trust the Good News of all good news — God gives free grace to sinners for Christ's sake — and then we break our necks to hide it behind a great wall of rules, regulations and laws.

“You must not take grace too far or you will turn it into license to sin!” we admonish one another, as though lack of license has ever stopped anybody from sinning.

Hasn't anyone noticed? We are all sinners, for crying out loud, even all we religious, God-fearing, church-going Christians. Always have been, always will be, in this life. It is only by God's pure and unfettered grace, as demonstrated once for all through Jesus Christ, that we are made something else — righteous — and not by avoiding sin, but by trusting him.

It seems that our vigilant efforts to prevent anyone from “turning grace into license to sin” has resulted, ironically, in our managing to turn sin into a barrier to accepting grace. The church promises grace, then delivers condemnation. The church headlines the gospel, then preaches hellfire. The church disguises its moralistic hook with gospel bait, reels in the unwary catch and plops him or her into the hot greasy frying pan of salvation by works.

Consider how the gospel is plowed under by the relentless glacier of denominational “rightness,” doctrinal “exactness” and behavioral “standards.” Christian church against Christian church, warring over phraseology, terminology, dress codes, political stands, seating arrangements, music styles, architecture...the list seems endless. We all seem to have at least a mild case of the “our-way-is-God's-way-die-you-heretic” virus.

Certainly, right doctrine is important. But surely we need look no farther than the Nicene Creed or the Apostles Creed for those doctrinal “issues” that really matter. Yet, many Christian churches still refuse Communion to fellow believers who don't belong to the “right” denominational brand name or haven't jumped through all the required theological hoops.

The underlying message of religious behaviorism, “Behave right (according to our particular standards), or go straight to hell,” buries the gospel under layer after layer of religious hair-splitting, nit-picking and measurement-taking. That isn't the gospel. It's religion. It holds out salvation like some phantom carrot-and-stick reached only through a lifetime of unquantifiable good deeds. It is a soul-sapping lie against the truth of God.

Jesus did not bring some “new and better” brand of religion. He brought

the gospel, which is good news for sinners, which we all are. For the sake of Christ, God has thrown away all the report cards, homework records and detention notes in the world and given everybody a 4.0 GPA and a gold-plated invitation to eternal life.

Only some of us, it seems, “don’t want no charity.” We’d rather feel like we have been — or through discipline and devotion have become — the right and proper sort of person upon whom God could appropriately bestow eternal life. We have been good Christians, and we don’t want to be lumped in with a bunch of immoral losers who do nothing more than put their trust in the Christ we have worked so hard for so long to imitate and obey. (We thank you, O God, that we are not like the rest of people — greedy, dishonest, adulterous or, for that matter, like this embezzler.)

Suppose we take up a challenge: give up the charade. Drop the legalism and the fear tactics. Quit pretending to be worthy and righteous, admit we are hopeless sinners without anything to our credit, and put our trust in Jesus Christ, for whose sake God justifies the ungodly (Romans 4:5).

Drop the nonsense about how that would mean people could “just go out and sin all we want, since we’re already forgiven.” Nobody who trusts God wants to sin. When you trust God to love you and forgive you, you want to be like Jesus; you don’t want to sin. But when we do sin, in spite of the fact that we don’t want to, we have an advocate with the Father, 1 John 2:1-2 tells us (and he tells us that so we won’t sin, not so that we will, verse 1 says).

It’s like Paul told Titus:

The grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men. It teaches us to say “No” to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age, while we wait for the blessed hope — the glorious appearing of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ, who gave himself for us to redeem us from all wickedness and to purify for himself a people that are his very own, eager to do what is good. (Titus 2:11-14)

It’s *grace* that teaches us to say no to ungodliness. It’s *grace* that makes us eager to do what is good. Knowing we’re already forgiven and accepted does not lead us into the devil’s workshop, but into deeper fellowship with our Lord and Savior. The gospel really is that simple. It really is good news.

J. Michael Feazell

LOPSIDED GRACE

It's been said there are only about seven stories in the whole world, and the storyline of every book or movie is simply a variation of one of them. The most common storyline is the battle between good and evil and usually features a savior figure.

One familiar story is that of King Arthur, Guinevere and Camelot. It's a utopian setting until a bit of evil enters the scene in the form of temptation. The queen is seduced by Lancelot, the king's best knight. When the king discovers their infidelity, he is faced with a painful choice: abandoning the law or the death of his beloved Guinevere. But he knows her death is the only action that will satisfy the law and serve justice.

The tale of Arthur and his queen comes in many versions, but parts of it remain constant: just as Adam and Eve did in the Garden of Eden, Guinevere gave in to temptation, messed up and needed to be saved.

But here's where Camelot diverges from the original story and the truth. While Arthur agonized over the decision to let the love of his life die and serve justice or let her go and negate the law, God's decision and plan were clear from the beginning. Unlike Arthur, God is not subject to the law—rather, he created it. He in no way agonized over balancing the scales of justice because he himself is justice. His plan to die in our place wasn't about fulfilling any requirements of the law.

Some look at grace and see a great balancing act, with mercy on one side and God's holiness on the other, as if he has set limits on how much he can forgive. What Jesus did is sometimes called the Great Exchange, which makes it sound like a business transaction instead of the greatest act of love ever performed.

Humanly speaking, we think everything has to work out evenly and be fair. Remember the parable of the workers in the vineyard who began at dawn? They received the same pay as those who showed up at the end of the workday. To us, this seems unfair and even extravagant. But God does not use scales of justice like humanity does. God's love and grace are outrageously unfair. When Jesus went to the cross, everyone was forgiven. Everyone was invited to the eternal banquet with the Father, Son and Spirit. No sin is too great to be wiped out. No one is beyond help. No one is out of his reach and no one must be punished as a way of balancing grace and justice.

If God were to use scales, one side would be up in the air and the other resting on the table. How can grace be so lopsided? His love and grace far

outweigh even his own laws to the point of seeming like the ultimate lack of balance. Lucky for us and unlike King Arthur, God is more powerful than the law. He uses a different scale, a scale of mercy balanced only with more love and grace.

Tammy Tkach

GRACE TO BE WHO YOU ARE

I enjoy riding a bicycle for exercise and try to ride almost every day. One day this past summer, believe it or not, it rained—in the summer, in California! It wasn't really rain, but there was enough moisture I decided not to ride. I don't have rain gear and didn't want to get wet. Not that I'm afraid I'll melt — I just don't like going out in the elements without the proper clothing. So, not wanting to miss a workout, I pulled out an old exercise DVD.

I started to laugh as Tony Little appeared on the screen, telling me to “Conceive, believe and achieve.” I used to work out regularly with Tony and realized I've missed his wit and wisdom. As we started into a nice stretch for the back, Tony reminded me to go only as far as I can go. “Well, of course,” I always say. What else does he expect?

Tony may not realize it, but he has hit upon an essential element of grace. As we each work our way through life, we can only go as far as we are able. We may see someone achieving something wonderful and think, “I should be doing that.” But if or when we can't, we may become discouraged and may even give up. We compare ourselves to others, then judge and condemn ourselves. Or others may judge and condemn us because they feel we should be more like them.

The grace we receive from God and in turn extend to others and ourselves allows us to go at our own pace, fall down and get up again, without fear of condemnation. God knows our weaknesses and faults. He knows our strengths and abilities. He doesn't expect everyone to look alike, act alike or be in the same place in their growth.

God values our unique personalities, and his grace gives us room to be who we are. We can be happy we have different gifts and talents and give glory to him as we use them to serve him and others. How can we do less for each other? Just as we have received forgiveness and are learning to extend it in return, so we are to honor and respect each other by showing grace in our everyday interactions.

Paul was careful to stay away from making comparisons: “We do not dare to classify or compare ourselves with some who commend themselves. When they measure themselves by themselves and compare themselves with themselves, they are not wise” (2 Corinthians 10:12).

Even nature teaches us each star, tree, flower, animal—everything—has its value, glory and purpose. Each of us has value and purpose, with our own unique place in the world. We have the freedom to do what we do best and

not worry about what we can't do.

God's grace is a marvelous gift and touches every part of our lives. Go as far as you can go and may his grace be with you on the way.

Tammy Tkach

AFRAID OF GOD?

Are you a little afraid of God? Do you worry that he has something against you? When I feel that way, it helps me to remember three stories in which God teaches us how he really feels about us.

The first is the strange story of the prophet Hosea. God told Hosea to marry a prostitute, so he did. Their marriage produced children, and Hosea loved his wife. She eventually went back to her immoral ways, but despite her unfaithfulness, Hosea didn't stop loving her. Hosea's experience was God's way of illustrating how he never stopped loving his chosen people, even though they repeatedly turned back to idolatry.

The second story is that of the Good Samaritan, who stopped to help a Jew in distress. Samaritans were despised; but in Jesus' parable, the Good Samaritan ignored the history of prejudice and mistreatment to help a man who in other circumstances might have spit in his face. That's just how Jesus feels about me. No matter what I've done, he still loves me, forgives me and takes care of me.

The third story is Jesus' parable of the Prodigal Son. The father of the prodigal son didn't wait for his son to drop to his knees, begging and pleading to be taken back, even as a servant. He ran to his son crying, elated to have him back, before his son had even spoken a word.

Sometimes we might think God is much like stern parents or teachers, peering over his reading glasses, looking down his nose at us, waiting for us to sheepishly or desperately admit our sins and ask for all to be forgiven before giving us the "Well, okay, but don't do it again" condescending nod. We might or might not get the ruler on the knuckles before he sends us on our way.

Growing in grace and knowledge means we can put aside our childish notions of a God who thinks and acts as we humans do. He is not like us; his thoughts and ways are not like ours. He is not a petty, malicious, self-centered being who gets offended when we sin and then peevishly waits for us to crawl to him on bloody knees. Just as in the examples of Hosea, the Prodigal Son and the Good Samaritan, our God loves and forgives us even while we are sinning! Christ died for the ungodly. His love is not conditional, and his forgiveness is ours before we even think to repent.

God wants us to repent. He wants us to be with him and to know we have his forgiveness. Repentance is going to God's throne of grace and being reassured that he never stops loving us. It does not mean drumming up artificial sorrow and begging for a forgiveness we fear we might not get.

God is not holding a grudge and he has not turned away from us. He lovingly awaits those who fall back into old habits, who still feed at the pig troughs, and who in their sins are helpless in a ditch, no matter how long it takes. His love is unfailing and his grace is never ending.

Tammy Tkach

IS JESUS THE ONLY WAY OF SALVATION?

People sometimes object to the Christian belief that salvation is available only through Jesus Christ. In our pluralistic society, tolerance is expected, even demanded, and the concept of freedom of religion (which permits all religions) is sometimes misinterpreted to mean that all religions are somehow equally true.

All paths lead to the same God, some say, as if they have traveled all of them and have come back from the destination. They are not tolerant of the narrow-minded folks who believe in only one way, and they object to evangelism, for example, as an insulting attempt to change the beliefs of other people. Yet they themselves want to change the beliefs of people—those who believe in only one way.

Does the Christian gospel teach that Jesus is the only way of salvation?

Other religions

Most religions are exclusive. Orthodox Jews claim to have the right path. Muslims claim to have the best revelation of God. Hindus believe that they are right, and Buddhists believe what they do, not surprisingly, because they think it is right. Even the modern pluralists believe that pluralism is more right than other ideas.

All paths do not lead to the same God. The different religions even describe different gods. The Hindu has many gods, and describes salvation as a return to nothingness—certainly a different destination than the Muslim emphasis on monotheism and heavenly rewards. Neither the Muslim nor the Hindu would agree that their paths eventually lead to the same destination. They would fight rather than switch; the Western pluralists would be dismissed as condescending and uninformed, an offense to the people that the pluralists do not want to offend.

We believe that the Christian gospel is correct, while at the same time allowing people to not believe it. As we understand it, faith requires that people have liberty not to believe. But while we affirm the right for people to believe as they decide, this does not mean that we believe all faiths are true. Allowing other people to believe as they wish does not mean that we have to quit believing what we do.

Biblical claims

Jesus' earliest disciples tell us that he claimed to be the one and only path to God. He said, If you don't follow me, you will not be in the kingdom of

God (Matthew 7:26-27). If you reject me, you will not be with me in eternity (Matthew 10:32-33). People who reject Jesus probably wouldn't want to be with him in eternity, anyway.

Jesus said that God "has entrusted all judgment to the Son, that all may honor the Son just as they honor the Father. He who does not honor the Son does not honor the Father, who sent him" (John 5:22-23). Jesus claimed to be the exclusive means of truth and salvation. People who reject him are also rejecting God, because God is just like Jesus.

"I am the light of the world," he said (John 8:12). "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. If you really knew me, you would know my Father as well" (John 14:6-7). People who claim that there are other ways to salvation are wrong, Jesus said.

Peter was equally blunt when he told the Jewish leaders, "Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven...by which we must be saved" (Acts 4:12).

Paul also made it clear when he said that people who did not know Christ were "dead in your transgressions and sins" (Ephesians 2:1). They had no hope, and despite their religious beliefs, they did not have God (verse 12). There is only one Mediator, he said—only one way to get to God (1 Timothy 2:5). Jesus was the ransom that everyone needed (1 Timothy 4:10). If there were any other set of instructions, or any other path that offered salvation, then God would have provided it (Galatians 3:21).

It is through Christ that the world is reconciled to God (Colossians 1:20-22). Paul was called to spread the gospel among the Gentiles. Their religion, he said, was worthless (Acts 14:15). The book of Hebrews says: Christ is not just better than other paths—he is effective whereas they are not (Hebrews 10:11). It is an all-or-nothing difference, not a difference of one being a little better than the others.

The Christian teaching of exclusive salvation is based on what Jesus said, and what the Scriptures teach. This is tightly linked to who Jesus is, and our need for grace.

Our need for grace

The Bible says that Jesus is the Son of God in a unique way. As God in the flesh, he gave his life for our salvation. Jesus asked if there might be some other way, but there was none (Matthew 26:39). Salvation comes to us only through God himself entering the human world to suffer the consequences of sin, to free us from sin, as his gift to us.

Most religions teach some form of works as the path of salvation—saying

the right prayers, doing the right things, hoping it will be enough. They each teach that theirs is the right way. They teach that people can be good enough if they try hard enough. But Christianity teaches that we all need grace because we cannot be good enough no matter what we do or how hard we try.

It is impossible for both ideas to be true at the same time. The doctrine of grace teaches, whether we like it or not, that no other paths lead to salvation. We either rely on what we do, or we rely on what God has done in Jesus Christ.

Future grace

What about people who die without hearing about Jesus? What about people who lived before Jesus was born, in a land thousands of miles away? Do they have any hope?

Yes—precisely because the Christian gospel is the gospel of grace. People are saved by God’s grace, not by pronouncing the name “Jesus” or having special knowledge or special formulas. Jesus died for the sins of the whole world, whether they know it or not (2 Corinthians 5:14; 1 John 2:2). His death was an atoning sacrifice for everyone—past, present, future, Palestinian or Peruvian.

We are confident that God “wants everyone to come to repentance” (2 Peter 3:9). Although his ways and times may often be invisible to us, we nonetheless trust him to love the humans he has made. Jesus said plainly: “God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him” (John 3:16-17).

We believe that the resurrected Christ has conquered death, and therefore not even death can pose any barrier to his ability to lead people to trust him for salvation. We don’t know the hows or whens, but we can trust him. Therefore we can believe that one way or another, he urges every person who ever lived, or who ever will live, to trust in him for salvation. That might be before they die, at the point of death, or perhaps even after they die. At the last judgment, if some people turn to Christ in faith when they at last learn what he has done for them, then he will certainly not turn them away.

But no matter when people are saved, or how well they understand it, it is only through Christ that they can be saved. Well-intentioned good works will never save anyone, no matter how sincerely people believe that they can be saved if they try hard enough. The whole point of grace, and of Jesus’

sacrifice, is that no amount of good works, no amount of religious deeds, can ever save anyone. If such a path could have been devised, then God would have done it (Galatians 3:21).

If people have sincerely tried to attain salvation by working, meditating, flagellating, self-immolating or any other humanly devised means, then they will learn that their works do not earn them anything with God. Salvation is by grace, and only by grace. The Christian gospel teaches that no one can earn it, and yet it is available to all.

No matter what religious path a person has been on, Christ can rescue them from it and set them on his own path. He is the only Son of God, who provided the only atoning sacrifice that everyone needs. He is the unique channel of God's grace and salvation. This is what Jesus himself taught as true. Jesus is exclusive and inclusive at the same time—the narrow way and the Savior of the entire world—the only way of salvation, yet available for all.

God's grace, shown most perfectly in Jesus Christ, is exactly what everyone needs, and the good news is that it is freely given to all. It's great news, and it's worth sharing.

Joseph Tkach

A NEW LOOK AT THE GOOD SAMARITAN

The Good Samaritan is one of Jesus' most popular parables. Preachers often use it to encourage people to be unselfish, to think ahead and help others. But there is more to the story than that. Jesus was doing far more than putting hypocritical religious leaders in their place. Let's take a closer look.

A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, when he fell into the hands of robbers. They stripped him of his clothes, beat him and went away, leaving him half dead.

A priest happened to be going down the same road, and when he saw the man, he passed by on the other side. So too, a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side.

But a Samaritan, as he traveled, came where the man was; and when he saw him, he took pity on him. He went to him and bandaged his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he put the man on his own donkey, took him to an inn and took care of him. The next day he took out two silver coins and gave them to the innkeeper. "Look after him," he said, "and when I return, I will reimburse you for any extra expense you may have."

Which of these three do you think was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers? (Luke 10:30-37)

The answer to Jesus' question was obvious. But I want to show you that Jesus was teaching much more than a simple lesson in social responsibility. Let's consider the context. Jesus was answering a lawyer who had asked, "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" (verse 25).

This man was a religious lawyer, priding himself in his understanding of all 613 points of the Torah. The religious leaders of Jesus' day had inherited a system that had turned obedience to God into an obstacle course, so strewn with picky dos and don'ts that it left the average person on a permanent guilt trip.

This approach contradicted what Jesus taught, and confrontation became inevitable. The lawyers, along with the Pharisees, Sadducees, scribes and others in religious leadership, were constantly trying to discredit Jesus. There was a motive behind the lawyer's apparently innocent question.

So Jesus let the expert speak first: "What is written in the law?" He asked. "How do you read it?" (verse 26).

The lawyer knew the answer: "Love the Lord your God with all your

heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind'; and, 'Love your neighbor as yourself'" (verse 27).

"You have answered correctly," Jesus replied. "Do this and you will live" (verse 28).

It was a good answer, as far as it went. But you know what lawyers are like. They are trained to look for some extenuating circumstance that might in some way limit the extent of the law. The lawyer knew that the command to "love your neighbor as yourself" was difficult, in fact, impossible to fulfill. So he thought he had found a loophole.

"And who is my neighbor?" he asked Jesus. That is when Jesus gave his famous parable.

Cast and location

Jesus set his story on the road from Jerusalem to Jericho, a distance of about 17 miles. Jerusalem was where the Temple was located, the center of the Levitical priesthood. The priests were the highest class of the Levites. They were supported by thousands of other Levites who served at lower levels, doing such tasks as keeping the altar fire going, lighting the incense, singing in the Temple chorus and playing musical instruments.

When they were not on duty, many of these priests and temple workers lived in Jericho, which had become a "bedroom community" of Jerusalem. They often traveled this road between Jerusalem and Jericho.

Travel in those days could be hazardous. One stretch of the Jericho road was known as the "Way of Blood," because so many people were robbed and killed there. This was where Jesus set the scene for his parable. People knew exactly where he was talking about.

In Jesus' story, the first person to see the victim is a priest, but rather than get involved, he passes by on the other side of the road. He is followed by a Levite, a temple-worker. The Levite does the same—he passes by. Then along comes a Samaritan.

A *what?* Jesus would have caused a stir with that. The Samaritans were a mix of Jew and Gentile, and the Jews did not like them. They had names for Samaritans like "half breeds" and "heathen dogs," and considered them to be spiritually defiled. The Jews of that time did not often hear the words "good" and "Samaritan" used in the same sentence.

But in Jesus' story, it is this outcast who stops to help. Not only does this Samaritan help, but he goes far beyond what most people do. He cleans the victim's wounds with oil and wine. Then he bandages them. People didn't carry first-aid kits back then. He likely would have had to tear up some of his own clothing to make a bandage. Next, he puts the injured man on his donkey

and takes him to an inn. He takes two silver coins, a considerable amount in those days, and promises to reimburse the innkeeper for any further expense.

This is an exceptional level of assistance, especially as the victim is a total stranger and someone who is supposed to be a social enemy. But the Samaritan did not let that stand in the way.

With this deceptively simple little story, Jesus impales the lawyer on his own hook. He asks him, “Which of these three do you think was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?” (verse 36). Jesus has turned the question around. He is not asking, “Which people should I help?” He is saying: To answer the question, you need to put yourself into the shoes (or lack thereof) of the man who was beaten and left to die. The better question is: “When I need help, who will help me?” Don’t you *hope* that the Samaritan will be a neighbor to you?

Who was a good neighbor? The answer is obvious, but the expert in the law didn’t want to say the word *Samaritan*, so he said, “The one who had mercy on him.”

Then Jesus delivers the knockout blow: “Go and do likewise” (verse 37).

Remember, this “teacher of the law” was from a class of people who prided themselves on how carefully they obeyed God. For example, they would not even pronounce God’s name, considering it too holy to utter. They would even take a ritual bath to ensure purity before writing God’s name. Along with the Pharisees, they were fastidious about observing the law in every detail.

The lawyer had asked what he needed to do in order to inherit eternal life. Jesus’ answer was, in effect, “You have to do the impossible.” Your love for others needs to extend far beyond what humans are capable of doing.

A story of salvation

How could anyone be expected to live up to the standard of the Samaritan in this story? If that is what God expects, even the meticulous lawyer was doomed. But Jesus had chosen his words carefully. He was showing that humans cannot meet the perfect requirements of the law. Even those who dedicate themselves to it fall short. Jesus is the only one to fulfill the law in its deepest intent. Jesus alone is the Good Samaritan.

Jesus knew that there is nothing we can “do” to earn an eternity with a holy God. So he crafted his answer-story at two levels of meaning. On the surface, it made the point that people ought to love and do good to their enemies. But on a deeper level, it addressed the question of eternal life.

To answer the question, we need to put ourselves in the place of the man who was beaten and left to die. He represents us—all humanity. The robbers

correspond to sin and the forces of evil, the devil and his dominion. We do not have enough strength to combat these forces, and if we are left to ourselves, we will die.

The priest and the Levite represent the laws and sacrifices of the old covenant. They can't help us. The Good Samaritan is the only one who can help. The wine and the oil correspond, roughly, to the blood Jesus shed for us and the Holy Spirit who dwells in us. That is what heals us.

The inn could then represent the church, where God puts his people to be spiritually nurtured until he returns for them. Jesus pays for this ongoing need in our life, too.

Jesus used the lawyer's question to show how inadequate for salvation even the best human effort is, and how wonderful and sure is his work of redemption for humanity. Jesus, and only Jesus, can rescue us from the "Way of Blood." And he did it by way of his own blood.

Joseph Tkach

PETER'S STORY: COMING TO CHRIST

Peter, the fisherman-disciple, embarked on a lifetime journey with Jesus Christ. We can do the same.

Their small fishing boat was being battered about in the stormy Sea of Galilee. Suddenly, out of the darkness emerged a shadowy figure. Incredibly, the phantom seemed to be — yes, it was — walking on the water toward them.

For a moment, the disciples were more frightened by this ghostly apparition than by the turbulent sea and their tossing boat (Matthew 14:22-33). But then the figure called out to them: “Take courage! It is I. Don’t be afraid.”

Still not convinced, Simon Peter shouted out, “Lord, if it’s you, tell me to come to you on the water.” Jesus invited Peter to come to him. Peter climbed out of the boat and — miraculously — began to walk on the water toward Jesus.

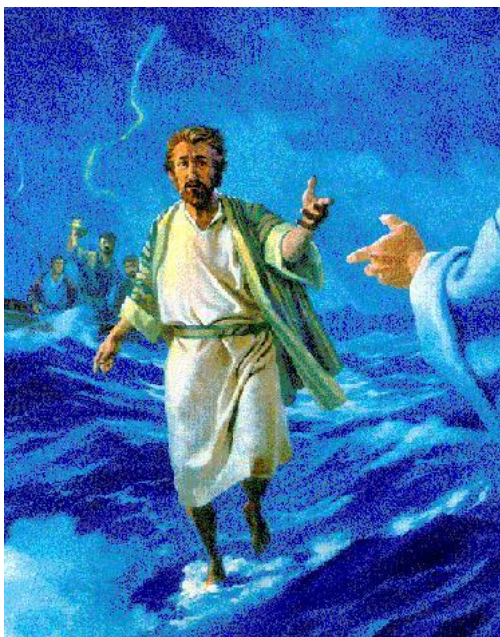
But Peter, feeling the wind beating against his body and the waves swirling about him, became afraid and started to sink into the cold, dark water. “Lord, save me!” Peter cried out, and Jesus reached out and caught his hand. Next thing he knew, they were both in the boat, and the wind had died down.

The disciples were stunned by the event, and by this man, Jesus. The Gospel of Matthew says, “Those who were in the boat worshiped him, saying, ‘Truly you are the Son of God’” (verse 33).

Peter and the other disciples had come face to face with Jesus as the One who saves. For a fleeting moment, they recognized something special about him — something they couldn’t explain.

Who am I?

Not long afterward, Jesus



and his disciples came to Caesarea Philippi, where most of the residents were pagans. The city was north of the Sea of Galilee, at the base of Mt. Hermon. The city was filled with reminders of a pagan religious world. In such an unlikely place, Jesus Christ popped the question about his own identity (Matthew 16:13-20).

“Who do people say the Son of Man is?” he asked his disciples. They gave him the answers they had heard others give: Some thought Jesus was in the style of John the Baptist. Others viewed him more like Elijah, Jeremiah or one of the other biblical prophets.

More than a man

But something was missing in the people’s identification of Jesus. If he was merely the greatest of the great, he was still only another man. Jesus was looking for another answer. He asked his disciples, “Who do *you* say I am?” Peter, as usual, answered immediately, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.”

Jesus’ question to his disciples is the same question he poses to each of us: “*You*, what do *you* think of me?” As Jesus told Peter, this is not knowledge we discover on our own. “Blessed are you,” Jesus said to Peter, “for this was not revealed to you by man, but by my Father in heaven.”

God had revealed to Peter who Jesus was — and God must do the same for us. We must have an internal experience of Jesus Christ, one that God makes possible by opening our understanding through the Holy Spirit. The biblical scholar and author William Barclay wrote, “Christianity never consists in knowing *about* Jesus; it always consists in *knowing Jesus*” (*The Gospel of Matthew*, Vol. 2, The Daily Study Bible Series, page 138).

To know Jesus Christ is to experience him, to believe in him and to follow him. By God’s grace, Christians are led to belief—belief that changes our lives.

Repentance

After Jesus’ death and resurrection, the disciples, including Peter, were given the Holy Spirit. By an act of God’s grace, they received the gift of repentance and were converted (John 20:22; Acts 2:1-4). On that memorable Day of Pentecost, about seven weeks after Jesus’ death, Peter gave his first public sermon. He urged devout Jews to repent, become converted and receive the gift of the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:38).

But Peter spoke about repentance and conversion — a turning to God — in a surprising way. First, he did not tell his audience that they had to change their lives in terms of obeying the law of Moses more diligently and

accurately.

The people listening to Peter were Jews who already worshiped God and obeyed the law (verse 5). Most of these devout Jews did not need to repent of what we commonly think of as corrupt, immoral behavior. They were what we might call good, church-going, religious folks. They weren't flagrantly and habitually defiling the Sabbath, burning incense to idols or killing people.

In the context of repentance and conversion as "turning one's life around," what could these Jews have done differently? Externally, not much. But Peter's directing them to repentance was an imperative, a command. It was a change of mind regarding Jesus, not a change in behavior. He asked them to enter into a *new relationship with* Jesus as their resurrected Savior. The context of Peter's first public sermon makes his purpose clear. He began by pointing his hearers to Jesus Christ, whom he said they had rejected and their leaders had killed (verses 22-23). This was the basis of their guilt and sin.

Throughout the sermon, Peter hammered away at one point: Jesus Christ is Lord and Savior, and people must put their faith in him. This turning to Jesus in faith was summarized as a simple charge to his hearers: "Repent and be baptized" (verse 38).

What they were to repent of was their rejection of Jesus as Messiah and Savior. Peter's sermon explained repentance as a change of mind about Jesus — as an experience of him — as an acceptance of him as Savior. Peter called on his listeners to believe in Jesus Christ and to place total faith in him as their Savior.

Called to a new life

In the New Testament, the idea of repentance is expressed by the Greek verb *metanoeō*, which includes the idea of changing one's mind, one's way of thinking. Repentance will often result in a change of behavior, but it begins in the mind, in the heart.

That change occurs in our relationship to the one, true God. It has to do with a turning away from a life in contradiction to God (that is, in sin), and a turning to him in faith. When we repent, God is accomplishing his will in our lives.

The church members in the Greek city of Thessalonica were commended by the apostle Paul because they had "turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God" (1 Thessalonians 1:9). Repentance has this "from" and "to" quality. When we repent, we go from an old way of life apart from God (sin) and take on a new life based on the Creator (in faith). To repent is to be turned around, so to speak, to be remolded and transformed. Believers in

Christ become converted — they become new men and women of God.

Repentance is closely linked to faith — believing what God says and trusting in Christ as Savior. It means having one's mind lifted from its concern with the “around” (the world) and the “within” (ourselves) to a faith based on the “above.”

Repentance-conversion-faith-belief are all aspects of the same spiritual quality of mind that God must give us. We cannot manufacture it of ourselves, apart from God's calling. Our part is to respond to the urging of the Holy Spirit to accept this gift of God's salvation. As Paul told the Ephesians, “it is by grace you have been saved, through faith — and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God” (Ephesians 2:8).

The need to believe

If you're like most people, you may think repentance and conversion have something to do with being good or being accepted by God. The problem is that most people soon discover they aren't very good at doing the “religious things” they think define conversion and repentance. They face the same question that's found on a card people sometimes put on their refrigerators. It asks, “Why is it that everything I like is illegal, immoral or fattening?”

Earnest Christians soon spot their spiritual failings. They don't pray enough — don't study their Bible regularly — aren't always kind and generous to everyone — gossip — think evil thoughts. The list of failings is endless. On top of that, most Christians (if they are honest with themselves) eventually face a brutal reality. Years after embarking on a new spiritual life of repentance and conversion, they discover to their chagrin they are the same old person they supposedly left behind in the watery grave of baptism.

Some Christians tire of living a Christian life, and they start to backslide. They may leave their church, put their Bible on the shelf and live their life the way they want to. No more guilty feelings, no more God. Peace and serenity — at last. The problem is that the nagging of the Spirit may continue. That's because there springs eternal within men and women an unspoken yearning for a loving relationship with God.

All human beings bear the image of God. Unfortunately, that image has been horribly disfigured and distorted. Because God made us in his image, we have both a need to worship and a desire to commune with our Creator. Each of us needs to connect with God. We desire a relationship with our Creator. Each of us eventually has to come to grips with this aspect of our nature.

Michelangelo's painting of the creation of Adam in the Sistine Chapel in

Rome makes the point well. In the painting, the figure of God reaches out to touch the figure of Adam, thus creating him. We all need to be spiritually touched by God so we may be converted into new men and women, and be created anew.

For this reason, repentance and conversion are the most important things for every human. We can receive God's gift of a new life only by coming to know Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior. That's why we need to prayerfully ask God to help us find him.

Follow me

The apostles and evangelists always pointed people to Jesus Christ and the resurrection. We can see this throughout the book of Acts, which is Luke's story of the spread of the gospel of salvation. Apostles such as Peter encouraged people to understand Jesus as the One who saves. In this, they were following their Master himself, who spoke often of the need to follow him, to become Christlike.

To Jesus, "following" and "becoming" were the essence of repentance and the converted life. "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me," Jesus taught his disciples (Matthew 16:24).

People were to follow and trust Jesus at all costs. The choice of allegiance has always been between Jesus and everything that makes up our world. To make the right choice — to accept Jesus and crucify the self — was to repent.

Jesus' summons to repentance and conversion is closely tied to his person. An individual's decision to repent or not to repent is a choice for or against Jesus personally. When we are called to repent, we are not primarily confronted with changing a doctrine, a belief or cultural practice (although our commitment to Christ often leads to that as well). More importantly, we are faced with the living Christ himself. We are called to come to Christ and to allow him to transform our lives.

Lifetime walk

Some speak of conversion, coming to Christ or being "born again" as a one-time event. But Jesus did not call for merely a singular dramatic event. He asked for much more.

We can see this if we again look at the devout Jews who repented and became Christians in the first century. They had to accept an important reality: They needed to recognize that God had acted in history in Jesus. They were called to believe that the promise of grace and salvation made to their ancestors (among them Abraham and David) had been fulfilled in Jesus' life,

death and resurrection. God's Messiah had come, and every knee was commanded to bow to him.

The person willing to acknowledge this as a life-changing fact is converted by God through the gift of the Holy Spirit. That person now has a new *ongoing* loyalty — an allegiance to the triune God, who in the person of Jesus Christ became our Savior.

How about you?

Have you experienced a repentance and conversion in Christ? Have you come to Christ in faith? Have you accepted him as Lord and Savior? If not, Jesus bids you come and follow him. As he did in Paul's day, God commands men and women everywhere to repent. His purpose is that all people come to a knowledge of the truth and repent.

If the enlightening power of the Holy Spirit has opened your eyes to see who Jesus Christ is — our Messiah and Savior — then you have already made a positive response to God's offer of salvation. Now it may be worked out in your life.

Paul Kroll

THE GOSPEL AND SUPERMAN

“I don’t think this world needs Superman. This world doesn’t need a savior,” Lois Lane tells the Man of Steel in the latest remake of one of America’s most popular fairy tales.

Later on, suspended high over Metropolis, Superman tells Lois quite feelingly, “You wrote, ‘The world doesn’t need a savior,’ but every day I hear people crying for one.”

This is not the “wow” moment pastor-journalists such as myself might seize upon as a chance to pontificate, either as a recommendation for or against the movie. I’m still partial to the 1978 Christopher Reeve version where the early details are so convincing, set as they are in breathtakingly beautiful rural Alberta, that you almost believe it.

No, as a longtime Superman fan from those boyhood DC Comics days of the 1950s, I am not surprised when I hear such dialogue. Fact is, a fellow student and I offended a group of our colleagues at a seminary one day when we jokingly pointed out some of the parallels between the gospel and the Man of Steel:

- A being with extra-earthly origins here to do good,
- a father (Jor-el) with “el” in his name, the Hebrew word for God, perhaps being traced to a term creators Seigel and Schuster heard in the synagogue,
- the double identity, “meek” Clark Kent possessing super powers he could use at will, paralleling perhaps the humble carpenter from Nazareth working amazing miracles with the power of God,
- the evil, relentless enemy, Lex Luthor, perhaps a type of Satan with Kryptonite as a stand-in for temptation and sin.

You don’t have to be a genius to be able to continue the set. This is why I was amused when a Christian book appeared in the late 1970s, *The Gospel According to Superman*. I couldn’t help but chuckle: “They beat me to it!”

Superman is a work of pop culture—one of pop culture’s classic imaginative recreations of a standard myth. Yet even pop culture, which typically deals in boringly predictable stereotypes, can on occasion touch on some universal and enduring themes. The fact is, we *are* all looking for a Savior, and that is why hero figures still sell. Something inside us will shell out money for a tale where genuine goodness exists and where good wins in the end.

During his 1980s television series, *The Power of Myth*, Bill Moyers asked the

cultural critic Joseph Campbell why the same stories keep repeating—tales of heroism and nobility, striving and self-sacrifice, trying to rescue the damsel, the city, the group. Campbell answered candidly, “Because these are the only themes worth writing about.”

C.S. Lewis once advanced a similar concept. With Christianity, Lewis argued, the Myth became Fact. What human beings have always longed for, have always hoped for, still yearn and even pray for—the possibility of meaning, of a person who is on our side, that the universe is not apathetic, but that love and caring and purpose exists at its core—that, said Lewis, is precisely what the gospel is all about. It is the central story of our existence, the one on which all the other child-like replicas are based.

Or, in the words of 2 Timothy 1:9-10, we need the caring God “who has saved us and called us to a holy life.... This grace was given to us in Christ Jesus before the beginning of time [yes, even before Krypton exploded!] but it has now been revealed through the appearing of our Savior, Jesus Christ, who has *destroyed death* and has brought life and immortality to light through the gospel.”

There it is. In the gospel, the Myth became Fact and Truth, and dwelt among us, and we beheld his glory. No wonder the human imagination keeps reinventing this Hero Story. It’s the only thing worth writing about.

Neil Earle

THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO SAM

Some people help you understand what the gospel is all about. They cut through all our theological bickering, personality conflicts and denominational rivalries and inhibitions. They do things that show us what Jesus really meant.

They are people like the widow in the Temple who donated “all her substance” to the offering. Or the thief on the cross who just wanted to be forgiven. Or the worried father who asked if Jesus could heal his child in spite of his own unbelief. And like Sam Howard.

Sam is a middle-aged African-American man who has spent nearly two decades on death row. My wife, Pat, and I have known Sam for about half of that time.

Grim surroundings

Sam is incarcerated in Ely Maximum Security Prison, a grim fortress of concrete and razor wire in the moonscape of central Nevada. As we wait for him in the windowless, no-nonsense visiting room, it occurs to me that in more than 10 years of knowing Sam, we have not once been able to sit in the open air. The rules are strict—this prison holds some dangerous people. But Sam is no longer one of them.

Several years ago, Sam became a Christian. For him, this was not just the acceptance of a religious argument, or a knee-jerk emotional reaction. It meant the repudiation of a whole way of life that had earned him the reputation for being one of the most dangerous inmates in Nevada’s prison system—his nickname was “Nitro.” Today he is a quiet teddy bear of a man, living a life of service and humility in circumstances that most of us could not tolerate for 24 hours.

Talking with Sam is refreshing. We who are the richest and best educated disciples in history tend to complicate Jesus’ teachings. We have vast resources, but we seem to spend so much time talking, arguing, planning for action, revving our engines on the starting grid, getting our ducks in a row and endlessly analyzing, quantifying, organizing and reorganizing ourselves in our efforts to be lights and preach the word. Sam just gets on with it.

His mission field is literally and spiritually stony ground. Ely Prison is a harsh and unforgiving place, but Sam has found a way to bring compassion, empathy and kindness to an environment where the usual emotions are anger and fear.

“You good”

The hours we spend together are not spent going round in circles over controversial doctrinal points and theological conundrums. Sam tells us about the people he has helped—like the deaf, mute young inmate who was the victim of bullying and racial abuse. Sam befriended him, and encouraged him, until eventually the traumatized man stumbled out the words “You good, man.”

“But I’m not good,” says Samuel “I know who to give the credit to.” The gospel for Sam is a 24/7 challenge of living in contrast to what he calls his “situation.” Every day sends opportunities to serve, to share the little that he has, to turn the other cheek and to do good to those who would abuse him.

His “room” on death row has become a place of hope. Mail—vast amounts of it—arrives from all over the world. Even staff members, used to hostility and abuse, know they will get respect and encouragement from Sam Howard. “I’ve been able to accomplish so much in here,” he tells us, without a trace of vanity.

Until his conversion, everything and everyone Sam trusted in life let him down—his family, his friends and his country. He is an ex-Marine who was sprayed with Agent Orange while on active service in Vietnam. But he bears no grudges. “I made mistakes—it is my fault I am in here,” he says. “And in Jesus I now have a friend who will never betray me.”

We’re his friends too, and we’d like to help. Can we do anything for him? No—he’s fine, thank you. Does he need anything? No—he has all he needs, but he promises he will let us know if there is anything. But there hardly ever is.

Sam receives a small disability pension from a veterans association. He tells us how grateful he is for small blessings—a chance to encourage a lonely inmate, a letter or card from one of his many friends, or just a new air mattress to make life a little more comfortable. He never has a bad word for anyone. He is not bitter, resentful or consumed with greed. He has that deep-down spiritual peace of mind which, as Paul wrote, “transcends all understanding.”

He also reminds me of what the imprisoned Paul said to King Agrippa: “I pray that you and all who are listening may become what I am, except for these chains” (Acts 26:29).

What next?

Sam’s case is under appeal and inching its way oh-so-slowly through the legal system. Most people who know the facts believe there is a strong

argument for a retrial. I don't have the legal expertise to comment on this, and anyway, Sam wouldn't want me to.

"John," he says, simply and with conviction, "it does not worry me. God knows what happened. I'd like to be free, but for me it is not the big question. The big questions of my life were answered when I repented of my sins and accepted Jesus as my Savior. Sin is a terrible prison to be in—I am free of that. Whether I live or die is not the critical thing. God has a plan for me, and no one can take that away."

All too soon it's 2:45—time to go. A phalanx of officers appears to escort the inmates back to their cells. "See you next time," says Sam cheerfully as we say our good-byes. "Thanks for coming." Thank *you*, Samuel. Once again you have reminded us what this way of life we call Christianity is really all about.

John Halford

A COVENANT OF FORGIVENESS

How do you forgive someone and go on with your life? It is not easy, is it?

Some cultures have customs of forgiveness. For example, the Masai in Tanzania perform an *osotua*, a word meaning “covenant.”

In his inspirational book, *Christianity Rediscovered*, Vincent Donovan relates how *osotua* works. If a sin has occurred between families within a community, it can be disastrous to the unity of the nomadic clan. It may threaten why they came together in the first place.

It is imperative that both the offending and offended parties be brought back together in an act of forgiveness. So the community prepares a meal, and both families must bring food. The offended must accept and eat the food prepared by the offender, and vice versa. The food is called “holy food.”

The idea is that when the food is eaten, forgiveness comes, and a new *osotua* begins.

Startling, isn't it? What a simple idea. Have you shared holy food with someone you don't like or whom you have offended? What about Communion? As you take Communion together, can a new covenant of forgiveness begin between you and someone whom you've offended or who has offended you? Or will you continue to carry the same resentment from holy meal to holy meal?

Donovan notes of the Masai custom, “A new testament of forgiveness is brought about by an exchange of holy food. What can one say?”

What a blessing when in our Lord and Savior we can say the same.

James Henderson

THE CHINK IN DEATH'S ARMOR

Get a load of this lead sentence from Reuters:

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

The study itself made sense — it showed that women who go through menopause in their early 40s may not, on average, 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 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 it's not always presented that way. Sometimes the gospel is 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 glorious pyramid scheme in which the more pious salespeople you talk into joining, the greater your eternal income will be.

Jesus said, "Let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven" (Matthew 5:16). 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 (see

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?

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. 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 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, the teeth have been pulled out of death. 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?

J. Michael Feazell

GOING ON A GUILT TRIP?

Guilt trips. They're all the rage, you know. Everybody's taking them. No date restrictions. Availability unlimited. People of all ages are welcome. But there are a few hidden costs.

Among other things, guilt trips cost you your stomach lining, your sleep, your sense of humor, your ability to have fun, your productivity and any realistic sense of who you really are and what your purpose really is.

But we stand in line for tickets anyway, as though it's our chief call and duty to leave the world of confidence and hope, and set sail for the land of dread and gloom. We stuff every mental container we own with depressing emotions, fear and blame, and then, with the whole load strapped on securely, we lug it across the gangplank and down the narrow hall to our inside stateroom deep in the bowels of the S.S. Guilty Conscience.

And yet we're *religious* people, people who know that God forgives sin and that we don't have to be crushed down with burdens of guilt.

Maybe that's the problem. Maybe religion is not the solution to guilt. Maybe, if the truth were known, we'd find that religion and guilt are sweethearts. After all, wherever you find one, the other will usually be buzzing nearby like some fat, annoying housefly.

That's because religion is designed to give people a list of things to do to stay on good terms with whatever deity they worship. The trouble is, no one has ever kept their particular list of rules well enough to be absolutely sure their deity isn't one day going to hurl a nasty curse their way.

Religion isn't enough. All it manages to do is make people feel worse for their failure. It pumps out guilt like some magic grinder gone mad. What people really need is some hope, some good news, not more religious talk about how bad they are.

Good news

Christians should know better. We have the gospel—the good news. Sad to say, however, a lot of us are experts at turning even the gospel into religion, which means we end up spending more time on guilt trips (or sending others on guilt trips) than we do resting at home with our Lord of grace.

Freedom from a guilty conscience is so foreign to most of us that, as soon as it happens, we start feeling guilty for not feeling guilty. It's as though we think we stand in better with God if we refuse to feel forgiven and clean.

Hebrews 10:19-22 says, "Therefore...since we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus...let us draw near to God with a

sincere heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience....”

This passage speaks of confidence—confidence to be at home in the presence of God, not hiding guilt-ridden behind a trashcan in the corner. That confidence is not confidence in ourselves or in how well we’ve behaved; it’s confidence in God himself who loves us so much that he sent his Son to remove our guilt and give us all the privileges of beloved children.

The gospel, thank God, is not religion. It is the end of religion. It’s good news, the good news that God loves you so much that he sent his Son to bear the curse of your sinfulness and be raised from the dead so you can be forever at peace with him.

You don’t need religion to be at peace with God; you just need to trust your Savior. You don’t have to pack your guilt trip suitcase with plenty of fear, doubt, worry and anxiety. You don’t have to wonder whether God really loves you, or really forgives you, or really has saved you.

Instead of a guilt trip, why not believe the good news—the good news that cleanses you from a guilty conscience?

J. Michael Feazell

THE GOSPEL REALLY IS GOOD NEWS

When Americans gathered in churches around the nation on September 14, 2001, a day of mourning, they came to hear words of comfort, encouragement and hope. Yet, try as they might to bring hope to a grieving nation, a number of conservative Christian leaders unwittingly proclaimed a message that amounted to despair, hopelessness and fear for people whose loved ones had died in the terrorist attack without having first professed faith in Jesus Christ.

Many Christians are convinced that everyone who did not profess Christ before death, even those who never so much as heard of Christ, are now in hell, being tortured in agony by God—the God the same Christians ironically proclaim as compassionate, merciful, loving and full of grace.

“God loves you,” some of us Christians seem to be saying, but then comes the fine print: “If you don’t say the sinner’s prayer before you die, then my merciful Lord and Savior will torture you forever.”

Good news

The gospel of Jesus Christ is good news. It remains forever, good news, the best news imaginable, for absolutely everybody and everything. It is not merely good news for the few who came to know Christ before they died; it is good news for the whole of creation—even for all those who died before they ever heard of Christ.

Jesus Christ is the atoning sacrifice not merely for the sins of Christians but for the sins of the whole world (1 John 2:2). The Creator is also the Redeemer of his creation (Colossians 1:15-20). Whether people know that truth before they die is not the thing that determines whether it is true. It depends entirely on Jesus Christ, not on human action or human response of any kind.

Jesus said, “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life” (John 3:16, New Revised Standard Version throughout). It is God who loved the world and God who gave his Son, and he gave him to save what he loved—the world. Whoever believes in the Son whom God sent will enter into eternal life (better translated “the life of the age to come”).

The verse says nothing about that belief having to come prior to physical death. In fact, it says that believers will not perish, and since even believers die, it should be obvious that “perish” and “die” are not the same thing. Belief keeps people from perishing, but it does not keep them from dying.

The kind of perishing that Jesus is talking about here, translated from the Greek word *apoletai*, is a spiritual death, not a physical one. It has to do with utter destruction, with being abolished, put an end to, or ruined. Those who believe in Jesus will not come to such a final end, but will, instead, enter into the life (*zoe*) of the age to come (*aiōnion*).

Some enter into the life of the age to come, or kingdom life, while they still live and walk on the earth, but in the grand scheme of things, this happens to only a few of those who make up the “world” or *kosmos* that God loves so much that he sent his Son to save it. What about the rest? This verse does not say that God cannot or won’t bring to faith any of those who die physically before believing.

The idea that physical death is a barrier to God’s ability to save, or to his ability to bring a person to faith in Christ, is a human interpretation; the Bible states no such thing. We are told that everyone dies, and then they are judged (Hebrews 9:27). But let us remember that their Judge, thank God, is none other than Jesus, the slaughtered Lamb of God who died for their sins—and that changes everything.

Creator and Redeemer

Where do we get this notion that God is only able to save live people and not dead ones? He conquered death, didn’t he? He rose from the dead, didn’t he? God doesn’t hate the world; he loves it. He didn’t create humanity for hell. Christ came to save the world, not to condemn it (John 3:17).

One Christian teacher told his Sunday School class on September 16, the first Sunday after the terrorist attacks, that God is perfect in hate as well as perfect in love, which accounts for why there is a hell as well as a heaven. He went on to explain how dualism (the idea that good and evil are equal and opposite forces in the universe) is a false doctrine. But doesn’t he realize he posited a dualistic God with his explanation of God holding in tension perfect hate and perfect love?

God is absolutely just, and all sinners are judged and condemned, but the gospel, the good news, lets us in on the mystery that in Christ, God took that very sin and its judgment on himself for our sakes! Hell is indeed real and horrible. But it is precisely that hell, the hideous hell reserved for the ungodly, that Jesus bore in humanity’s stead (2 Corinthians 5:21; Matthew 27:46; Galatians 3:13).

All humans are under condemnation because of sin (Romans 6:23), but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ (same verse). That’s why it is called grace.

In Romans 5:15, Paul puts it like this: “But the free gift is not like the trespass. For if the many died through the one man’s trespass [this “many” refers to everybody; there is no one who doesn’t bear Adam’s guilt], much more surely have the grace of God and the free gift in the grace of the one man, Jesus Christ, abounded for the many [the same “many”—absolutely everybody]” (Romans 5:15).

Paul is saying that as bad as our condemnation for sin is—and it is bad (it deserves hell)—it can’t even hold a candle to the grace and the free gift in Christ. In other words, God’s word of reconciliation in Christ is incredibly louder than his word of condemnation in Adam—the one completely eclipses the other (“much more surely”). That is why Paul can tell us in 2 Corinthians 5:19 that “in Christ God was reconciling the world [that’s everybody, the “many” of Romans 5:15] to himself, not counting their trespasses against them...”

So, then, what about the family and friends of those who die without having professed faith in Christ? Does the gospel offer them any hope and encouragement about the fate of their dead loved ones? Indeed, the Gospel of John records Jesus declaring, “And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself” (John 12:32). That’s good news, the gospel truth. Jesus didn’t lay out a timetable, but he did declare that he would draw everybody to himself, not just a few who find out who he is before they die, but absolutely everybody.

Then it is no wonder that Paul wrote to the Christians in the city of Colosse that in Jesus Christ, God was pleased, *pleased*, mind you, to “reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross.” (Colossians 1:20). That’s good news. And it is, like Jesus said, good news for the whole world, not just for the limited few.

Paul wanted his readers to know that this Jesus, this Son of God raised from the dead, is not just some exciting leader of a new and improved religious concept. Paul is telling them that Jesus is none other than the Creator and Sustainer of all things (verses 16-17), and more than that, he is God’s way of fixing absolutely everything that has gone wrong with the world from the beginning of history (verse 20)! In Christ, Paul was saying, God has moved once and for all to make good on all his promises that he made to Israel—promises that he would one day act in pure grace to forgive all sins everywhere and make everything new (see Acts 13:32-33; 3:20-21; Isaiah 43:19; Revelation 21:5; Romans 8:19-21).

Only for Christians

“But salvation is only for Christians,” the fundamentalists howl. Yes, of course it is. But just who are “the Christians”? Are they only those who repeat the sinner’s prayer? Are they only those who are baptized by immersion? Only those who belong to the “true” church? Only those who are absolved by a duly ordained priest? Only those who have ceased sinning. (Have you? I haven’t.) Only those who come to know Jesus before they die? Or does Jesus himself, the one into whose nail-pierced hands God has given all judgment, decide who is and is not ultimately to be included among those upon whom he will have mercy? And while he is at it, does he, the one who conquered death and grants eternal life to whomever he will, decide when he might bring a person to faith, or do we, the all-wise defenders of the true religion, make that determination for him?

Every Christian became a Christian at some point, that is, was brought to faith by the Holy Spirit. The fundamentalist assumption seems to suggest, however, that it is impossible for God to bring a person to faith after that person has died. But hold on, Jesus is the one who raises the dead. And he is the one who is the atoning sacrifice, not for our sins only, but for the sins of the whole world (1 John 2:2).

Great chasm

“But the parable of Lazarus,” someone will argue. “Abraham says that there is a chasm fixed between his side and the rich man’s side” (see Luke 16:19-31).

Jesus did not give this parable as a textbook on the afterlife. After all, how many Christians would want to describe heaven as “Abraham’s bosom” with Jesus himself nowhere in sight? The parable was a message to the members of the first-century Jewish privileged class who rejected their Messiah, not a portrait of the resurrection life. And before we take even that further than Christ intended, remember what Paul wrote in Romans 11:32.

In the parable, don’t forget, the rich man was still unrepentant. He still saw himself as Lazarus’ superior. He still saw Lazarus as existing only to serve his personal needs. Maybe it is not unreasonable to think that the rich man’s persistent unbelief is what kept the gulf fixed, not some arbitrary cosmic necessity. Remember, Jesus himself bridges the otherwise impassable chasm from our sinful condition to reconciliation with God. Jesus underscores this point, the point of the parable—that salvation comes only through faith in him—when he says, “If they do not listen to Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced even if someone rises from the dead” (Luke 16:31).

God is in the business of saving people, not torturing them. Jesus is Redeemer, and whether we believe it or not, he is awfully good at what he does. He is the Savior of the world (John 3:17), not the Savior of a fraction of the world. “God so loved the world” (verse 16)—not merely one out of 1,000.

God has ways, and his ways are higher than our ways.

Jesus tells us, “Love your enemies” (Matthew 5:43). Surely we believe he loves his own enemies. Or do we believe that Jesus hates his enemies while he calls on us to love ours, and that his hatred accounts for why there is a hell? Give me a break. Jesus asks us to love our enemies precisely because *he* loves them. “Father, forgive them, for they don’t know what they are doing,” Jesus prayed of those who murdered him (Luke 23:34).

Certainly, those who continue to refuse Jesus’ grace even after they understand it receive the fruit of their own stupidity. There is no place left for people who refuse to enter the Lamb’s banquet, except outer darkness (another of the metaphors Jesus used to describe the state of alienation from God; see Matthew 22:13; 25:30).

Mercy to all

Paul makes the amazing assertion in Romans 11:32 that God “has imprisoned all in disobedience so that he may be merciful to all.” And yes, the Greek words here do mean all, not some, but *all*. All are sinners, and in Christ all are shown mercy—whether they like it or not; whether they take it or not; whether they know it before they die or not.

And what can you say to such a thing, but what Paul says in the next verse: “O, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways! For who has known the mind of the Lord? Or who has been his counselor? Or who has given a gift to him, to receive a gift in return? For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be the glory forever. Amen” (verses 33-36).

In fact, it would seem that his ways are so unfathomable that many of us Christians simply cannot believe that the gospel can be that good. And some of us seem to know the mind of God so well that we just know that everybody goes straight to hell if they aren’t Christians yet when they die.

But Paul’s point is precisely that the unbelievable extent of God’s mercy is simply beyond our ken—a mystery revealed only in Christ: God has done something in Jesus Christ that nobody would ever have guessed in a million years.

In his letter to the Christians at Ephesus, Paul says that this is what God

had in mind all along (Ephesians 1:9-10). It was the whole point of God's calling of Abraham, of his choosing of Israel and David, and of the covenants (Ephesians 3:5-6). God is saving even the aliens and strangers (2:12). He is even saving the ungodly (Romans 5:6). He really does draw all people to himself (John 12:32). The Son of God has been at work underneath all of history from the very beginning, bringing about the redemption, the reconciliation of all things to God (Colossians 1:15-20). God's grace has a logic all its own, a logic that often seems illogical to religious-minded people.

Only path to salvation

In short, Jesus Christ is the only path to salvation, and he draws absolutely everybody to himself—in his way, in his time. It might help if we could get our minds around the fact that there isn't anywhere to be in the universe except in Christ, since as Paul said, nothing exists that isn't created by him and upheld by him (Colossians 1:15-17). Those who finally reject him do so in spite of his love; it's not that he refuses them (he doesn't—he loves them, died for them and forgave them), but that they refuse him.

C.S. Lewis put it this way: "There are only two kinds of people in the end: those who say to God, 'Thy will be done' and those to whom God says, in the end, 'THY will be done.' All that are in Hell choose it. Without that self-choice, there could be no Hell. No soul that seriously and constantly desires joy will ever miss it. Those who seek, find. To those who knock, it is opened" (*The Great Divorce*, chapter 9).

Heroes in hell?

As I listened to Christians preach about the meaning of September 11, I thought of the heroic firefighters and police officers who sacrificed their lives trying to rescue victims of the attack on the World Trade Center. How is it that we Christians can call these people heroes and applaud their self-sacrifice on one hand, but declare that unless they confessed Christ before they expired they are being tortured in hell on the other?

The gospel declares that there is hope for those who died in the World Trade Center without yet having professed Christ. It is the risen Lord they will encounter on the other side of death, and he is the Judge—the one with nail holes in his hands—eternally ready to embrace and receive all his creatures who will come to him. He forgave them before they were born (Ephesians 1:4; Romans 5:6, 10). That part is done, just as it was done for us who believe now. All that remains for them now is to throw down their crowns before him and receive his gift. Maybe some won't. Maybe some are so committed to loving themselves and hating others that they will see their

risen Lord as their archenemy. That's a shame, no, more than that; it's a disaster of cosmic proportions, because he's not their archenemy. Because he loves them anyway. Because he would gather them into his arms like a hen gathers her chicks, if they would only let him.

But it is safe to say, if you believe passages like Romans 14:11 and Philippians 2:10, that by far most of the people who died in that attack will jump into Jesus' forgiving and merciful arms like a puppy runs to its mother at mealtime.

Jesus saves

"Jesus saves," Christians put on their posters and bumper stickers. It's true. He does. And he is the author and finisher of salvation, the beginning and goal of all creation, including all dead people. God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, Jesus said. Rather, he sent his Son into the world to save it (John 3:16-17).

Regardless of what some people say, God is out to save everybody (1 Timothy 2:4; 2 Pet. 3:9), not just a few. And guess what? He never gives up. He never stops loving. He never stops being who he is, was, and will always be for humanity—their Creator and their Redeemer. Nobody falls through the cracks. Nobody was created for the purpose of sending to hell. If anybody winds up in hell—the tiny, meaningless, dark, nowhere corner of the eternal kingdom—then what causes them to stay there will be nothing but their own stubborn refusal to receive the grace God has for them. It will not be because God hates them, because he doesn't. It will not be because God is vindictive, because he isn't. It will be because 1) they hate the kingdom of God and refuse his grace, and 2) God won't let them spoil the fun for everybody else.

Positive message

The gospel is the message of hope for absolutely everybody. Christian preachers don't have to resort to threats of hell to coerce people to turn to Christ. They can proclaim the truth, the good news: "God loves you. He isn't mad at you. Jesus died for you because you're a sinner, and God loves you so much he has saved you from everything that is destroying you. So why should you keep on living as though this dangerous, cruel, unpredictable and unforgiving world is all you've got? Why don't you come and start experiencing God's love and enjoying the blessings of his kingdom? You already belong to him. He's already paid for your sins. What are you waiting for? He'll turn your sorrow into joy. He'll give you peace of heart like you've never known. He'll bring meaning and purpose to your life. He'll help you improve your relationships. He'll give you rest. Trust him. He's waiting for

you.”

This message is so good that it bubbles out of us. Paul wrote in Romans 5:10-11: “For if while we were enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of his Son, much more surely, having been reconciled, will we be saved by his life. But more than that, we even boast in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation.”

Talk about hope! Talk about grace! Through Christ’s death, God reconciles his enemies, and through Christ’s life, he saves them. No wonder we can boast in God through our Lord Jesus Christ—we are already experiencing in him what we are telling others about. They don’t have to keep on living like they have no place at God’s table; he’s already reconciled them, they can come on home.

Christ saves sinners. It really is good news. It’s the best news anybody can hear.

J. Michael Feazell

ONLY ONE NAME

Many Christians believe that all people who do not accept the gospel before they die are eternally lost and without hope.

On one hand, Christians believe that by the Son of God all things were created (Colossians 1:16), by the Son's word all things are held in existence (Hebrews 1:3), and that through the Son's human birth, death and resurrection all things are reconciled to God (Colossians 1:20). Yet, on the other hand, many have the idea that the blood of Christ cannot reconcile humans who die before coming to faith.

Before we start, let's be sure we understand that the Bible is very plain that only in Jesus Christ is there salvation at all (Acts 4:12). Human religions do not lead to salvation. Only in the Triune God—Father, Son and Holy Spirit, who creates, redeems, sustains and rules all things—is there forgiveness of sin, healing of minds, redemption and eternal life.

The question we are dealing with in this article is whether the Bible says that people must confess Christ before they die, or else be automatically damned.

Lazarus and the rich man

Two passages in the Bible are sometimes interpreted as proving that all who die without having come to faith are automatically damned. We'll look at both of them. The first is the story of Lazarus and the Rich Man, in which Abraham tells the rich man there is a great gulf fixed, a gulf that keeps those in Hades separate from those who are with Abraham.

It is found in Luke 16:19-31. Before the story begins, however, we can back up a few verses to get an idea of the context. Who were the people Jesus was talking to when he told this story? What was the subject that prompted him to tell it?

In verse 14, we read: "The Pharisees, who were lovers of money, heard all this, and they ridiculed him" (New Revised Standard Version throughout). Jesus was talking to a group of Pharisees, and what Luke wants his readers to know about the Pharisees in connection with this passage is this: the Pharisees were lovers of money. Now we are getting the context of the story. A group of Pharisees who were lovers of money were ridiculing Jesus because of what he was saying.

We have to go back to the previous chapter, to Luke 15, verse 1, to get the whole episode. Here we read: "All the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him. And the Pharisees and the scribes were

grumbling and saying, “This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.” So he told them this parable...”

Then Jesus proceeds to tell them three parables in a row: The Shepherd Who Rejoices Over Finding His Lost Sheep, The Woman Who Rejoices Over Finding Her Lost Coin, and The Father Who Rejoices Over Finding His Lost Son. Jesus tells these three parables specifically in response to the Pharisees and scribes who were disgruntled over the fact that he welcomes sinners and eats with them. These parables push God’s grace toward sinners right up the Pharisees’ and scribes’ disgruntled noses.

Jesus wants them to know that “there is more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance” (verse 7). The remark is not lost on the Pharisees and scribes—they consider themselves righteous and not in need of repentance. Jesus (knowing they are not really righteous) is telling them that heaven is not singing their song.

Money vs. God

If the first two parables irritate the Pharisees and scribes, the third one, The Father Who Rejoices Over Finding His Lost Son (commonly known as the Parable of the Prodigal Son) takes the cake. Here is a father who gives unbridled love and unconditional forgiveness to a son who dishonored him, wasted half his assets and dragged the family name through the mud. It was a scandalous story that trampled on any sense of common decency, dignity and honor. When Jesus finishes telling it, he turns to his disciples and addresses them with yet another story (Luke 16:1). But the Pharisees are still listening (verse 14).

The moral of this story, Jesus says, is that you cannot serve both money and God; you will find yourself devoted either to the one or to the other, not both (verse 13). If you love money, you will not love God.

The Pharisees heard everything, but learned nothing. Instead of repenting so that there might be joy in heaven, they ridiculed Jesus. His words were utter foolishness to them, because they were lovers of money (verse 14). Responding to their ridicule, Jesus says, “You are those who justify yourselves in the sight of others; but God knows your hearts; for what is prized by human beings is an abomination in the sight of God” (verse 15).

He goes on to point out that the law and the prophets stand as witnesses that the kingdom of God has arrived and that everyone is urgently piling into it (verses 16-17). His implied message: “Because you value the things that other people do, not the things of God, you are rejecting God’s urgent

summons to enter his kingdom, which can be done only through me.”

Now, as the coupe de grace, he tells the story of Lazarus and the Rich Man.

A tale of unbelief

There are three characters in the story, the rich man (representing the Pharisees who love money), the miserable beggar Lazarus (representing a class of people despised by the Pharisees), and Abraham (whose bosom or lap was a Jewish figure of comfort and peace in the afterlife).

Jesus uses the story to make a point—the same point he has been making all along: “You consider yourselves the high and mighty blessed of God, but the truth is that you love money and hate God. That is why you are so rankled that I spend my time in fellowship with unvarnished sinners; this is why you despise other people and will not humble yourselves and believe in me and find true riches.”

Back to the story. The beggar dies. Without missing a beat, Jesus again pokes the Pharisees in the eye by saying, “... and was carried away by the angels to be with Abraham” (verse 22).

As usual with Jesus’ stories, this is exactly the opposite of what the Pharisees expected would happen to a man like Lazarus. Such people were poor and diseased beggars because they were under God’s curse, they assumed, and therefore it is only natural that such people go to be tormented in Hades when they die. “Not so,” says Jesus. “Your worldview is upside down. You know nothing of my Father’s kingdom. Not only are you wrong about how my Father feels about the beggar, but you are wrong about how my Father feels about you.”

Jesus completes the turnabout by telling them that the rich man also died and was buried, but contrary to their expectations, he is the one who finds himself tormented in Hades. And Jesus draws it out. From his torments in Hades, the rich man looked up and saw Abraham far off, with none other than Lazarus by his side. He cries out, “Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue; for I am in agony in these flames” (verses 23-24). But Abraham tells him the way things stand. “All your life you loved riches and had no time for the likes of Lazarus. But I do have time for the likes of Lazarus, and now he is with me, and you have nothing.”

Now comes the out-of-context proof-text: “Besides all this, between you and us a great chasm has been fixed, so that those who might want to pass from here to you cannot do so, and no one can cross from there to us” (verse

26).

Have you ever wondered why anybody could possibly want to pass from “here to you”? It is obvious why someone might want to cross from “there to us,” but from “here to you” makes no sense. Or does it?

The Bridge across the chasm

There is someone who crosses chasms for the sake of sinners. “God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life” (John 3:16). God gave his Son for sinners, not just for sinners like Lazarus, but for sinners like the rich man, too. But the rich man doesn’t want the Son of God. The rich man wants what he always wanted — his own comfort at the expense of others, which is exactly the opposite of what the Son of God wants.

In this story, Jesus is condemning the unbelief of the Pharisees. Near the end of the story, the rich man says that if someone would warn his brothers, they would not go to the place of torment. But Abraham tells him, “They have Moses and the Prophets; they should listen to them.” (Remember Jesus’ statements in verses 16-17? The Law and Prophets are a testimony to him. See John 5:45-47 and Luke 24:44-47.)

The rich man protests that Moses and the Prophets are not enough: “No, Father Abraham, but if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent” (Luke 16:30).

Abraham replies, “If they do not listen to Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced even if someone rises from the dead” (verse 31).

And they didn’t. The Pharisees conspired with the scribes and the chief priests to have Jesus crucified. But even after he rose from the dead, they conspired to have soldiers lie about his resurrection (Matthew 27:62-66), and proceeded to persecute and kill those who became believers.

There is a bridge across the chasm, the bridge across all chasms. The bridge is Jesus. But the rich man (the Jewish religious leaders who constantly oppose Jesus) is not interested in putting his faith in Jesus. Permit me to paraphrase Abraham’s reply to the rich man.

Look, friend, you refuse to come to Christ, so there is no place left for you but right where you are. You won’t even admit that you need forgiveness. You still want exactly what you always wanted — everybody else zipping around waiting on you hand and foot. You can’t get over here because you won’t go anyplace where you’re no better than old Laz the bum. We can’t get where you are to help you because you are precisely nowhere. You made your own chasm to

separate yourself from who you are in Christ because you won't come to him to have life.

You still think like you always thought — that you are something special and Laz here is a nobody, the dirt under your sandals. And now you're still so convinced you've got it all together that you can't even see that you've been the nobody all along and Laz is the one who's in with me. Well, pal, you've still got just what you've always had — nothing, nothing that matters anyway.

What's that? Now you want Laz to run some errands to warn others like you? Are you kidding? They won't listen. They've got Moses and the Prophets who told them Messiah would come. If they won't listen to them, you think they're going to listen to Laz? Forget about it. What's that? If someone comes back from the dead they'll listen to him? Oh really? Well, guess what? That's just what Jesus did, came back from the dead, and yet there you are, over there in Nowhereland because you won't put your trust in him.

Even if you don't like my interpretation of this passage, you still have to admit one thing: it is bad business to base a doctrine on one verse alone, and especially on one in a story designed to make a different point altogether. This story is primarily about the refusal of the Jewish leaders to believe in Jesus and the willingness of others to do so, and secondarily about the reversal of common assumptions about riches being a sign of God's favor.

It is not there to paint us a portrait of heaven and hell, or about how easy it is to have conversations between the two places. It is a parable of judgment against the unbelieving Israelite leaders and the unkind rich, using common Jewish imagery of the afterlife (Hades and "being with Abraham") as a literary backdrop to make the point. Jesus was not commenting on the validity of Jewish imagery of the afterlife; he was simply using that imagery as scenery for his story.

Jesus was not in the business of satisfying our itching curiosities about what heaven and hell must be like. He was in the business of filling us in on God's secrets (Romans 16:25; Ephesians 1:9, etc.), the mystery of the ages (Ephesians 3:4-5)—that in Christ, God has always been reconciling the world to himself (2 Corinthians 5:19). Our preoccupation with otherworldly geographical trivia leads us away from the point missed by the rich man in the story: Believe in the One who came back from the dead.

Who is lost?

None are lost except people who will not trust in Christ. Since God made

the world and called it good (Genesis 1), and calls humanity “very good” (verse 31), and since God loves the world and sent his Son that whoever would believe in him would enter into life (John 3:16), it is not unreasonable to conclude that God will provide an opportunity for every person to respond to the gospel. Further, since most people die before they hear the gospel, it is not unreasonable to conclude that God will also provide such an opportunity for them even if it is after they die.

“Maybe it is not unreasonable, but that does not make it true.”

You are right about that. But the Word of God is true. The Word of God is good news for humanity, not bad news. And what is good for humanity is whatever is God’s will for humanity. God has demonstrated his will for humanity by sending Jesus Christ. His will is not that the world be condemned, but that it be saved (John 3:17).

“I admit it doesn’t seem fair that people who don’t hear the gospel before they die are damned, but just because something doesn’t seem fair to us doesn’t mean it isn’t fair in God’s sight. If God wants to save only a few, that is his prerogative. After all, the damned are only getting what they deserve!”

We don’t argue with that. Certainly, if God wanted to, he could do things that way. We simply argue that the Bible does not reveal God that way. It reveals God in Christ as 1) graciously and faithfully procuring the reconciliation of all people (1 John 2:2), and 2) graciously desiring the salvation of all people (1 Timothy 2:3-4).

Deep current of Scripture

The deep current of Scripture is nothing other than the gospel. Scripture exists, we could even say, as testimony to the gospel. The Bible, in other words, is the Spirit-inspired revelation of God’s Word of redemption and salvation by his grace through faith in his Son made flesh for our sakes, Jesus Christ.

The Bible, this testimony of God’s good news to humans, reveals God the way he really is: the God of creation, redemption and salvation. The Bible, inspired by the Holy Spirit, shows us that God loves his creation, a creation over which he is sovereign and almighty, and that he loves the people he has created. He made his creation, including humanity, very good (Genesis 1:31). Because humanity botched itself by going into its own God business, he also reconciled his creation to himself through Christ, even from the foundation of the world (1 Peter 1:20; Romans 5:10).

The Bible tells us that God longs for humans to repent and to turn to him (Acts 17:20; 2 Peter 3:9). He wants them to know him and experience him for who he really is as their Creator, Deliverer, Redeemer, Father and Friend. He wants them to dwell eternally in him and with him.

The apostle Peter wrote: “The Lord is not slow about his promise, as some think of slowness, but is patient with you, not wanting any to perish, but all to come to repentance” (2 Peter 3:9). This is how the Spirit consistently reveals God as feeling and thinking about the people he has made. He made them in his image; they became sinners, alienated from him, and he, loving them intensely even in their sins (Romans 5:6-8), has forgiven and redeemed them through the blood of his Son (John 12:32; 1 John 2:2).

The Judge is the Savior

“You said there is another passage that is often used to prove that those who die without knowing the gospel are automatically damned.”

Thanks for the reminder. The second passage is this: “Just as it is appointed for mortals to die once, and after that the judgment, so Christ, having been offered once to bear the sins of many, will appear a second time, not to deal with sin, but to save those who are eagerly waiting for him” (Hebrews 9:27-28).

The only way to read into this passage the idea of automatic damnation for all who die without the gospel is to begin with that very assumption.

In other words, the passage doesn’t say that. It doesn’t even address that question. It simply says that judgment follows death. It says nothing about what that judgment might include, nor anything about whether God will allow people to trust in him after they die. This passage proves nothing one way or the other about whether the dead are given the gospel.

Let’s move on. We are told in Acts 17:30-31: “While God has overlooked the times of human ignorance, now he commands all people everywhere to repent, because he has fixed a day on which he will have the world judged in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed, and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead.”

Not only will the whole world be judged in righteousness, but the Judge will be none other than the Savior of the world, Jesus Christ. God doesn’t only command all people everywhere (that’s everyone) to repent, he does so because he has appointed Jesus, who died for the sins of the whole world (1 John 2:2), to be Judge.

If anybody wants assurance that God is serious about all this forgiving and reconciling of all people, all they have to do is notice that he raised the

Judge from the dead after the very people who need redemption (that is, all of us) killed him. God will not be thwarted in his faithfulness to his covenant to be our God and we his people.

Revelation 20 depicts the Judgment this way:

Then I saw a great white throne and the one who sat on it; the earth and the heaven fled from his presence, and no place was found for them. And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened.

Also another book was opened, the book of life. And the dead were judged according to their works, as recorded in the books. And the sea gave up the dead that were in it, Death and Hades gave up the dead that were in them, and all were judged according to what they had done. Then Death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. This is the second death, the lake of fire; and anyone whose name was not found written in the book of life was thrown into the lake of fire. (Revelation 20:11-15)

When the judging is over, every person is either saved or condemned. But first, before any distinction is made, to everyone's surprise, death and hell themselves are thrown into the lake of fire. If I might be allowed to personify death and hell for just a moment, just imagine them sitting there in the heavenly courtroom, barely able to contain their grins, knowing that everybody on trial is guilty as sin. Waiting for the verdicts, their thoughts are delightfully occupied with the cruelty and torture they have in store for this innumerable multitude of sure-to-be-condemned wretches.

Then suddenly, their wicked daydreams are rudely interrupted as strong angels grip their arms and muscle them out of the courtroom to the Judge's own furnace and hurl them screaming into oblivion. A hush falls on the court. What can this mean? With death and hell destroyed, how can anybody remain their slaves?

All are judged

The Bible teaches that there is one and only one way to be saved — by God's grace through faith in Jesus Christ (Acts 4:12). As we see from Revelation 20 and other passages, such as Matthew 25:31-33, there are only two kinds of people in the final judgment, the saved and the condemned.

So what about the people who die before the gospel is presented to them? Some conclude that such people are automatically doomed eternally, simply because they died before anyone told them about the death and resurrection of Jesus.

Consider Paul's statements in Romans 10:14-21. Paul highlights the unbelief of Israel by citing the words of the Psalms and of Isaiah. First, he asks a question regarding the hearing of the word of Christ (Romans 10:17): "But I ask, have they not heard?"

His answer: "Indeed they have; for [quoting Psalm 10:18] 'Their voice has gone out to all the earth, and their words to the ends of the world'" (Romans 10:18).

Next, Paul quotes Isaiah to illustrate the irony of Israel's unbelief in light of the salvation of the Gentiles: "I have been found by those who did not seek me; I have shown myself to those who did not ask for me" (Romans 10:20, quoting Isaiah 65:1).

God's word is the decisive word for all time to all humanity; it is not merely the word to those who are contacted by Christian missionaries and evangelists. Jesus is the incarnate Son of God and Word of God—the supreme Good News for all time past, and all time future, and extending to every corner of the cosmos.

It is strange that we should be asked to believe that God is incapable of confronting humans with the gospel in ways we do not understand and by means in which we have little or no role. Through his superintendence of Scripture, the Holy Spirit presents the atonement of Jesus Christ as thoroughly sufficient for the redemption of the whole cosmos—the cosmos Christ holds in the palm of his hand for his Father and to which he gives life and existence every moment. Yet, we are asked to believe, as one preacher put it, that "millions are going to hell this week because nobody is getting to them with the gospel!"

God is consistent with his word—he does not want any person to perish. Jesus said he will draw all people to himself. Since salvation comes by no means other than trusting in the word of God's grace through Jesus Christ, this means God does, in ways and at times to which we are not privy, give every person the freedom to accept God's grace through faith in Jesus Christ.

Righteous Judge

Returning to Revelation 20:11-15, we find the two great truths of human destiny, attested continually in Scripture, jumping out at us: 1) Everyone gets judged, no exceptions, and 2) Jesus is the judge.

Now let's sit down and give a little serious thought to that.

What sort of judge is this Jesus? Well, for one thing, he is not like any human judge we're ever going to meet. No human judge takes on himself every criminal's punishment and then declares the criminal "not guilty!" But

this one does. In fact, he already did. He did it from the foundation of the world. Which means that the power of his redemption came before even the very first salivating of Eve's mouth for the forbidden fruit.

This is no ordinary judge. This judge holds all the universe every moment in the miraculous dance of existence, holding it all simply by the word of his mouth. This judge not only gives existence to every single human, he became one of us for the express purpose of forgiving all our crimes against him and giving us eternal life in himself. This judge draws all men, women and children to himself in his death and resurrection from the dead. This judge is no ordinary judge.

He is perfectly fair and just — but not just fair and just, because that would leave every one of us dead. His perfect fairness and justice are overpowered by his perfect mercy (Hosea 6:6; Matthew 9:13; 12:7; James 2:13). He has gone to extraordinary lengths, through his own incarnation, to see to it that people are saved. He took all our sinfulness upon himself and by doing that, he destroyed sin in the flesh (Romans 8:3). This is no ordinary judge.

This universe springs from the gracious freedom of the triune God to be who he will be. By his grace the worlds exist. By his grace every person exists. And by his grace the eternal Son of the Father became flesh for us, atoning for the sins of the whole world, that God's gracious purpose for us might be fulfilled in him, the eternal Son, Jesus Christ.

When all the people of the world, the great and the small (Revelation 20:12), including all the dead (verses 12-13), stand before the judgment seat, they are facing none other than Jesus Christ. Imagine the scene. Their judge, the one who holds their eternal fate in his hands, is none other than the Lamb of God, the atoning sacrifice not only for our sins but also for the sins of the whole world (1 John 2:1-2). They are in the hands, the spike-pierced hands, of the risen Son of God, the crucified and glorified Christ. They are at his mercy—at the mercy of the Author of mercy.

Judgment day

Imagine you are sitting in the Court of the Universe, waiting with pounding heart for the Judge of All Things to walk in and pass judgment on you. You had never really taken seriously the idea of a final judgment. You had heard people talk about God and such, but it never really meant anything to you.

Now you realize that there really is an accounting to be given. The piper is going to be paid, after all. You are heartsick. Your breathing is shallow,

rapid. Sweat is trickling down your spine. Your eyes focus on the signs above two doors behind the bench. One reads, Exit for Perfectly Sinless and Righteous Saints. The other reads, Exit for All Others. Flooding through your mind is a hideous collage of your lies, lust, meanness, betrayals, selfishness, greed. And now this is it, the day of reckoning. You feel numb. You know you've got no hope. You hear yourself groan.

Then the Judge walks in and takes his throne. His presence overwhelms you. He is like nothing you could have expected. The whole courtroom seems to come alive in response to him. He is the definition of power and of authority, yet he radiates peace, serenity and love. He is so compelling that your thoughts are no longer on yourself and your dread. Your body relaxes, an unexplainable joy bubbles up from the center of your being. As awesome as he appears, you suddenly feel you would rather be smothered in his embrace than live another moment without him. You know that whatever his verdict, it will be good, and you are no longer afraid of anything.

"How do you plead?" the Judge asks. His voice seems to draw the truth from your lips. "Guilty," you respond, and as you do, you realize two things at once, that you are deeply ashamed of your sinful life, and that the Judge has already dropped all charges against you. Your shame melts into grateful tears of joy and peace of heart as you receive his life-giving gaze into the depths of your soul.

"Guilty of what?" the Judge asks, with a playful smile. "There doesn't seem to be any record against you. Are you ready to join the celebration? Good. Let's go eat." He holds open the Exit for Perfectly Sinless and Righteous Saints and beckons you to go through it with him.

You could plead not guilty and try to argue your case, demanding to demonstrate that you really are a right decent sort of fellow most of the time, and you should be counted among the saints because of the quarters you put in that donation jar in the grocery store line. Or you could try to argue that you should be let off the hook because God has no right to impose his arbitrary rules on you in the first place.

Or you could tell God to leave you alone: he can keep his gospel, you don't need it, you want none of his lovey-dovey stuff, you'd rather keep what works for you, your survival of the fittest, dog-eat-dog, fend-for-yourself way of life—at least you're the master of your own domain. All these avenues allow you to exit with your nose in the air through the All Others door and find yourself where you like it best, in the dark, free to stew in your own self-satisfied juice.

No need to worry

Even if you don't like my little tale of the heavenly courtroom, the point is that there is no need to worry that our departed loved ones, nor any of the rest of the masses of humans who have died, are consigned to the eternal flames simply because no missionary reached them with the gospel message before they died. Jesus knows the gospel, too, and yes, ladies and gentlemen, he can present it even better than we can.

Sad to say, the Bible tells us that some will not accept the grace of the Creator and King (Matthew 25:46; Revelation 19:20; 20:15). They will not trust the Son of God and his Father. There could be no greater tragedy, indeed, no greater stupidity, than for guests invited to the Marriage Supper of the Lamb to reject God's free gift of grace in favor of their own pitiful and miserable attempts to make life worthwhile. But that is exactly what our broken human nature is bent toward doing.

We often think that people should get what they deserve. In this frame of mind, we find it distressing to put all our eggs in the one basket of the Father's outrageous grace. Such a deal would mean not only that our hard work at being good didn't really matter in the end, but worse yet, that some pretty unsavory types might be allowed to stroll into the kingdom alongside us as well—by nothing more than believing in God's grace through faith in Jesus Christ.

There must be some way to distinguish the deserving, like us, from the undeserving, like that weed-smoking pimp on the corner. There must be some way the good, decent people will get a better deal than the blatant sinners will get. Free, undeserved grace has too many question marks around it for us to be entirely comfortable with it. It is the Judgment of God's grace, and it works off its own logic, a logic as high above ours as heaven is above earth (see Isaiah 55:8-9 and Psalm 103:11-14).

Two sets of books

A remarkable thing takes place during this heavenly judgment sequence of Revelation 20. First, all the dead are gathered and some books are opened (verse 12). Then, another book is opened—not the “books” just mentioned, but “another book,” distinct from them. This book is called the Book of Life. The dead people are judged “according to their works, by the things which were written in the books.”

These “books” contain the record of their works, all the evidence needed to judge them, and on the basis of the evidence, where do you suppose it leaves them? It leaves them in the same spot you and I are in—red-handed

guilty. That is the hideous predicament of every one of these people, and the predicament of all people who have ever lived.

“There is none righteous, no not one,” God says. “All your righteousness is as filthy rags,” is his assessment of where we humans stand in terms of judgment. “All have sinned and come short of the glory of God,” just in case anyone is still wondering who “made it” and who didn’t.

Just to be sure we understand that no one is left out of this judgment, we are again told that everybody who has ever died is there: the sea gives up the dead in it and Death and Hades give up the dead in them (Revelation 20:13). Don’t get the idea that anybody has slipped through the cracks. Everybody stands before this judgment seat. All are judged “according to their works.”

At this point, things seem to have taken an ugly turn. There is not one righteous. Everybody who has ever lived and died is condemned by their own actions as recorded in the books. They have to stand there and wait their turn while Death and Hades get tossed into the ultimate incinerator (verse 14).

But wait! What is this? That “other” book turns up again. The judgment according to their works by what was written in the books is not the end of the story! There is another book, the Book of Life, and the only ones who wind up in the lake with Death and Hades are those whose names don’t appear in this Book (verse 15)! It was sitting there all along. Everybody whose name is in it gets a full pardon. How do names get in it? By the atoning blood of Christ. The great mystery is that through Christ’s atonement, everybody’s name is in it. Believers simply receive what was there for them all along.

“I tell you the truth, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be condemned; he has crossed over from death to life” (John 5:24). Those who will not believe, on the other hand, are unable to make the leap. This has been the message of Scripture all along, Old and New Testaments alike—a testament to Jesus Christ. “You diligently study the Scriptures because you think that by them you possess eternal life. These are the Scriptures that testify about me, yet you refuse to come to me to have life” (John 5:39-40).

There is only one way to be saved — faith in Jesus Christ. The Law brings condemnation by our failure to keep it. The very same Law also brings salvation through its proclamation that God would send his Messiah to rescue us from our sins. The curse of death does not have the last word! In Christ, all things are made new. The Word of Life is himself the final word for humanity!

Sinners welcome

In Matthew 25:31-46, all people come before the judgment seat of Christ. On what basis does Christ separate the sheep from the goats? The Bible gives only one basis for salvation—either accept God’s gift or reject it. One of the fascinating things in this parable is that the people who have been displaying the self-sacrificial love of Christ do not even realize they have been doing so. They have no personal sense of having been particularly good or holy or righteous. “When did we do all these things?” they ask, surprised.

Ironically, those who are rejected are also surprised, surprised that the judge would think they have done nothing worthwhile for God. “When did we fail to do all these things?” they ask, incredulous. They have no need, they believe, for this free and undeserved grace reserved for dirty sinners. They have a stack of good report cards and a pocket full of merit badges, and if that is not good enough for this so-called judge, then they want no part of his kingdom of losers.

It’s about grace

Who will love Jesus more—the one who is forgiven much or the one who is forgiven little? Jesus poses the question in Luke 7:41-50. The point? People who think they are decent moral folks don’t seem to be looking for grace. People who know they are big sinners tend to be hungry for grace. Big sinners will get into the kingdom ahead of some big righteous people, Jesus says (Matthew 21:31). A friend of sinners, he was called, and that is just what he is (Luke 7:34). He is your friend and mine, after all.

Religious people tend to think they have an inside track on who is going to be saved and who is not. The rule keepers, the good boys and girls and the holy people are “in,” and the troublemakers, the stinkers, the porn stars, the lowlifes, the unwed mothers and the like are “out.”

“Don’t count on it,” Jesus says. “You think you know about righteousness? Why won’t you trust me to be your righteousness, because you can’t even see you’re nothing more than a dolled up corpse, so rotten your nose can’t smell your own stink. I will have mercy on whom I want to, pal, so take what you’ve earned and get out of here” (forgive my loose paraphrase of Matthew 20:13-15).

How many sinners have died longing for justice, for righteousness, for peace, for hope, for truth, for freedom, but having no clue where to find it? In Christ, and in Christ alone, these ageless quests are finally ended. “This is eternal life, that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent” (John 17:3).

Remember what happened when Jesus touched the lepers? Everybody else stayed as far from lepers as possible. But not Jesus. Not only was he unafraid to touch lepers, but when he touched them, the lepers got healed. Our minds are like lepers' bodies, hopelessly deformed and rotting. But when Jesus took human nature upon himself, not only did his mind not catch corruption from our minds, he healed the human mind.

That healing is open to everyone. All it takes to receive that healing, to begin to experience the joy of that healed mind, to enter the kingdom of God, is accept his free gift—to trust that in Christ's death and resurrection the astonishing almighty God of lavish love has done everything that needed to be done to secure our place at his table.

The will of the Father

In the last book of his Narnia Chronicles series, *The Last Battle*, Christian author C.S. Lewis presents a symbolic picture of the final judgment. A man who was well acquainted with the intimate love of our Savior, Lewis was not afraid to depict the gracious salvation of a soldier who died having never believed in the only name under heaven whereby people must be saved. When Emeth, the Calormen soldier, came face to face in the final judgment with Aslan, the Christ figure in the story, he immediately loved Aslan, knowing Aslan was the true longing of his soul.

Is this concept so far-fetched? The Lord who died for us while we were still sinners (Romans 5:8) knows those who are his (2 Timothy 2:19). Jesus tells us that God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him (John 3:17). John tells us that Jesus died not only for our sins but also for the sins of the whole world (1 John 2:2). Is this same Jesus not the Lord of all space and all time?

Perhaps Lewis' depiction is not far off. In Matthew 25:31-46 we learn that Jesus lives in those who are his and that his works are accomplished in them even though they are not entirely aware of it. Is it too much to say that by God's grace such people might know and love the glorious risen Lord as the deepest longing of their souls?

And is it too much to say that those whose hearts have become fully committed to whatever opposes the kingdom of God—some to the egotistic pursuit of their own ends, some to cruelty and hatefulness, some to evil and rebellion against whatever is good and pure—those people will be filled with terror and hate for him?

Even so, there is still the element of surprise, of supreme reversal, in which even the blackest human heart can be melted and transformed by the

radical grace of our radically gracious God. “There are those who are last who will be first, and first who will be last,” Jesus declares (Luke 13:30).

Human expectations of justice and fairness are knocked on their ear when God’s Son starts shelling out the fabulous grace of his Father. Witness the parable of the workers in the field (Matthew 20:13-15). He is dangerous, this One, because he forgives where we can’t muster forgiveness, and he blesses where we can’t see any justification for blessing. He saves the undeserving, the “deserving” get mad about it, and he tells them to shove off.

What is God’s will? Jesus said, “This is indeed the will of my Father, that all who see the Son and believe in him may have eternal life; and I will raise them up on the last day” (John 6:40). Some argue that God’s will is also that a great many *not* see the Son and not believe in him and not have eternal life so that he will *not* raise them up at the last day. But let them take their rain cloud somewhere else. That is not what the Bible says.

Other objections

Jesus Christ is the atoning sacrifice for the sins of the whole world (1 John 2:2). Through Jesus Christ, God is pleased to reconcile all things to himself whether on earth or in heaven by making peace through Jesus’ blood on the cross (Colossians 1:20). The vast majority of humans died without ever hearing the gospel. Therefore, we must take into consideration the possibility that their decision of faith, or decision of non-faith, may be one that takes place in the realm of death.

Objections to this suggestion include the idea that the church is a little flock, so God intends to save only a few. The church may be a little flock in this age, but we are not talking about the church of this age. We are talking about those who have not known the gospel before they die. We are talking about the new creation in its full flower.

Another objection is that such trust in the grace of God for all humans would destroy motivation for spreading the gospel. To that, I can only say Nonsense. Jesus our Lord commanded us to spread the gospel, and that should be sufficient motivation for any of us. Besides, a person who possesses, by God’s grace and in the power of the Holy Spirit, such good news cannot help but spread it. How can forgiven sinners like us want the rest of the world to continue living in the misery of not knowing that God loves them and has reconciled them to himself through the blood of his Son? As the Spirit dwells in us, how can we not care whether others continue to live hopeless in their sins without the healing balm of the Savior?

But to say that God depends on our puny and often destructive efforts is

to limit God. God loves us so much that he grants us the grace to participate with him in his joy of bringing people to faith, but surely we can admit that our track record is such that he has to do more clean-up after us than we are of actual help to him.

Universalism? No. God gives humans freedom to trust him and also allows them not to trust him. Relationships are built on trust, and those who finally will not trust God will remain alienated from him. The Bible indicates that some people will not trust God to forgive them, but will instead by their own choice, in spite of their God-given freedom to believe, remain his enemies.

On that topic, though, let's never get the idea that hell is on any kind of par with heaven. Hell is only a tiny weed bed in a dark corner under a porch on a little street in the outskirts of the vast immeasurable expanse of all things made gloriously new in Jesus Christ. Those who choose to cower there in the dark do so not because that is where God wants them, but because God, in his free grace, allows them to trample on his love, and to huddle in the nowhere place they have "created" for themselves in their darkened minds.

I have received letters from some readers who strongly disagree with what I have written on this topic. Nearly every letter that disagrees also grants in essence that the Scriptures lead us to trust that God will indeed deal righteously with those who die without knowing the name of Jesus. I offer that he will deal with them in no other way than in accord with his eternal faithfulness and mercy as demonstrated supremely in Jesus Christ, the great Judge.

Not a 'religion'

An amazing thing about the kingdom of God is that it is nothing like a religion or an exclusive society or club or institution. The religions and institutions of this world erect barriers and rules to keep the riffraff out. But the kingdom of God is designed to encompass everybody—everybody whom God has created.

Everybody is born, because of Jesus Christ, with a golden invitation to his kingdom—they just don't know it yet. Some, upon finding out about this invitation, don't want it. They have better things to do, more important fish to fry. Others figure they have better ways of getting in, working for it instead of taking charity. Others don't want to be in a kingdom that lets in so many losers. When all is said and done, the only people who will be excluded from the kingdom of God are those who refuse to accept it on the terms it is offered—absolutely free to the completely undeserving by simply trusting in

the grace of the Giver.

It is not hard to be a Christian. There is no secret handshake, no riddle or maze to figure out. And thank God, it certainly doesn't depend on how competent the church is as spreaders of the gospel, even though our Father in his grace has blessed us with a role in that wonderful task. Jesus says simply, "Come to me, all you who are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest" (Matthew 11:28). He doesn't say when. He doesn't say, "Oh, by the way, beat the deadline or you're burnt toast."

This Savior has all the ends sewed up. The final judgment is rigged. Not only did the Father send his Son into the world that whoever believes on him would not perish but have eternal life (John 3:16), indeed, not only did he send his Son into the world precisely not to condemn the world but so that the world might be saved through him (verse 17), he also committed all judgment to him—he made his Son the supreme presiding Judge of the final judgment.

This is not the God of popular imagination! This is not the God people grow up on, the stern stone-face God who blows away the sinners and sends winning lottery tickets to the pious and obedient. This is the God of the Bible, the one who can't be stopped from lavishly dishing out his grace to anybody and everybody who will accept it.

God is not a "butterfingers." No one is going to slip through the cracks. Jesus Christ has a personal and intimate interest in every person who has ever lived, and he has gone to incredible lengths to see to it that they will take their place at his Father's table. He will not force anyone. But neither will he consign anyone to condemnation simply on the basis that one of us Christians did not get to the poor unfortunate wretch with the gospel message before he or she died. God's grace is not geared to our level of competence in evangelism.

When people die they get judged (Hebrews 9:27). It is a final judgment. But the one who sits on the judge's bench is none other than the One who bore the marks of slaughter for them, and boy, has he got good news! You will find no teaching in the Bible, regardless of what many Christians believe, that Jesus is powerless to confront and save people when their physical life has ended.

In the words of the finale from the musical *Les Miserables*: "For the wretched of the earth, there is a flame that never dies. Even the darkest night will end and the sun will rise."

Whatever the author of the verse intended, this is not just a lovely sentiment. It is God's own truth. Jesus is that eternal Flame, and even the

darkest night has found its end in the rising of the Sun of righteousness (Malachi 4:2), the only name under heaven by which we must be saved (Acts 4:12).

J. Michael Feazell

HOW TO BECOME A CHRISTIAN

If you want to become a Christian, the first and most important step has already been done: God has chosen you. He loves you. He wants to live with you, and he will make sure that you can live with him.

People generally want God to leave them alone. But sometimes God works in their lives to make them aware of a hunger for something more — something supernatural, something to fill an emptiness inside them. So he invites them to come closer.

If you *want* to become a Christian, then you have evidence that God is already working in your life. That's because no one wants to be a Christian unless God is *inviting* that person. Jesus said, "No one can come to me unless the Father has enabled him" (John 6:65). He also said, "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me" (John 14:6). We come to God by coming to Jesus Christ — becoming a Christian.

Where do we start?

All human beings started out in the same place: alienated from God. We pay no attention to him, do not respect him, do not thank him, do not obey him. "All have sinned," Paul wrote, "and fall short of the glory of God" (Romans 1:21; 3:23).

The result is simple: Without God, we die. Everybody dies, and unless something supernatural happens, we will stay dead. Our physical death pictures something that is even more important: We are spiritually dead because of our transgressions and sins (Ephesians 2:1). We are alienated from God, not having the life we could have with him.

Christianity brings the good news that something supernatural can happen — in Christ, we can be *with* God, and we can live with him forever. The good news is that God is inviting you to be in eternal joy with him.

But it's helpful to remember where we start: in sin and death. "The wages of sin is death," Paul wrote (Romans 6:23). This is what we need to be rescued from. Christianity is a rescue operation. We are being saved *from* something. God is inviting us to escape sin and death through Jesus Christ. Let's see how he does it.

The work of Christ

Humans are unable to save themselves. But God loves humanity so much that *he has done it for us*. "God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us" (Romans 5:8). God loves us. He

wants us to be restored to him and live forever with him, so he sent his Son to die for us.

Jesus did not deserve to die. He never did anything wrong. But he willingly accepted his crucifixion, because his life was a ransom for ours, a sacrifice made so that we can live (Matthew 20:28; 2 Corinthians 5:14-15).

Jesus' resurrection is evidence that we will also live forever. Although our physical bodies die and decompose, God will ensure that we live again (Romans 6:4-5). Even now, in Christ, we have new life (1 John 5:13). That's the rescue operation going on. That's what salvation means — it means something happens *now*, something that affects your life from now into eternity. All because of what *Christ* has done. He did it; our part is to accept it.

Accepting the invitation

Salvation — eternal life — is a gift of God. He makes it available to us through Jesus Christ. Our part is to accept this gift. God doesn't force it on people who don't want it. How do we accept it? Through faith.

Faith is, in simple terms, belief and trust. We believe that we need to be rescued, and we believe that Jesus Christ does it for us. We trust our lives and our future to him. We accept the fact that we have sinned, that we have become enemies of God. We are incapable of changing our sinful hearts, but through faith in Christ, we are changed by God from enemies to friends, from strangers to family members.

God saves us as a gift of mercy. Mercy, by definition, is something we haven't earned and don't deserve. The Bible calls it grace: "It is by *grace* you have been saved, through faith — and this not from yourselves, it is the *gift* of God — not by works, so that no one can boast" (Ephesians 2:8-9).

We can never earn salvation by our works, by doing good things. If we could earn it, we would have reason to be proud of our accomplishment. But Paul is saying that no one has any reason to boast, because salvation is given by God's grace, not earned by human effort.

We also accept that Jesus Christ has claimed us, through his death on the cross. "I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me" (Galatians 2:20). When we *accept* what Jesus did for us, his claim on us becomes *effective* for us. Our sins are covered; they are forgiven. Our alienation is removed. There is no gulf or chasm between us and God.

Trust Jesus

Faith also means *trust*. We trust Jesus to take care of us. We trust him to teach us, and we accept his teachings. Since he died for us, we want to live

for him (2 Corinthians 5:14-15). We are willing to do what he says, to obey him. That is what repentance means. We want to quit doing wrong, and in thankfulness for what Christ has done for us, we want to do what is right. We submit to Christ and obey him. We accept him as Lord and leader of our lives.

He's the one who made us, who saved us, who loves us, who wants us to live forever in happiness. He has the love and the wisdom to give us instructions that are for *our* good. We trust him to give us good commands, and we do what he says. We love him and trust him so much that we invite him to live in us. Jesus said, "If anyone loves me, he will obey my teaching. My Father will love him, and we will come to him and *make our home* with him" (John 14:23).

When we trust Christ, we ask him to live within us, to teach us and guide us from within. We are willing for him to change our hearts, to identify our problems and to give us better ways to live.

How do Jesus Christ and the Father live within Christians? By the Holy Spirit — and God *promises* to give us his Spirit whenever we ask. "How much more will your Father in heaven give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!" (Luke 11:13). That changes our life! "If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead is living in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through his Spirit, who lives in you" (Romans 8:11). If God's Spirit is in you, then you will live with God forever!

If you ask God for his Spirit to live within you, if you ask the Father and the Son to make their home within you, you can be *guaranteed* that it is done — and you belong to Christ. You have given yourself to him, even as he gave himself for you on the cross. You are a Christian!

Prayer

To ensure that you have done this, it is helpful to verbalize it. Talk to God — tell him your story. Tell him that you admit your sin, you admit your need for forgiveness, you admit your need for his mercy, to cleanse your guilt. Accept the gift of Jesus Christ, that his death ransoms you from your sins. Repent of going your own way, resolve to do what *he* wants and ask him to live within you. Accept the gift of his Son — accept the gift of forgiveness — accept the gift of the Holy Spirit — and accept the gift of eternal life! And be assured that it is done.

What then?

Becoming a Christian does not make all your problems go away. You will still struggle against sin, but you will do so with the assurance that Christ

continues to love you and forgive you. “There is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus” (Romans 8:1).

The New Testament also shows us that those who believe in Christ are to be *baptized* as a symbol of their salvation, the death of their old sins, and their new life (Romans 6:3-4). Baptism pictures what Jesus has done for us. Talk to a Christian leader about expressing your faith in this way.

The New Testament also shows that believers meet together frequently to learn from each other and to encourage each other. Find a group of Christians who will welcome and strengthen you in the faith.

Michael Morrison

YOUR INVITATION TO THE KINGDOM OF GOD

Everyone has some concept of right and wrong, and everyone has done something wrong even by his or her own definition. “To err is human,” says a common proverb. Everyone has betrayed a friend, broken a promise or hurt someone’s feelings. Everyone has experienced the feeling of guilt.

People therefore want God to stay away from them. They know they cannot stand before God with a clear conscience. They know they should obey him, and they also know that they have not. They are ashamed and guilty.

How can their guilt be erased? How can the conscience be cleared? “To forgive is divine,” the proverb concludes. God himself will forgive.

Many people know the proverb, but somehow do not believe that God is divine enough to forgive their sins. They still feel guilty. They still fear the appearance of God and the day of judgment.

However, God has already appeared — in the person of Jesus Christ. He did not come to condemn, but to save. He brought a message of forgiveness, and he died on a cross to guarantee that we may be forgiven. The message of Jesus, the message of the cross, is good news for all who feel their guilt. Jesus, the divine human, has died for us. Forgiveness is given freely to all.

We need this message of good news! Christ’s gospel brings peace of mind, happiness and personal victory.

The true gospel is really good news. It’s the gospel the apostles preached: Jesus Christ and him crucified (1 Corinthians 2:2). Jesus Christ is our hope of glory (Colossians 1:27), the resurrection from the dead, the message of hope and salvation for humanity — this is the gospel of the kingdom of God that Jesus preached!

A call to live the future here and now

After John was put in prison, Jesus went into Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God. “The time has come,” he said. “The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news!” (Mark 1:14-15)

This good news Jesus Christ brought is known as the gospel. It is a potent, life-changing and life-transforming message. The gospel not only convicts and converts, it will eventually confound all who stand against it. The messenger not only brought good *news* about salvation—by his death on the

cross, he brought salvation itself. Then, the announcement was not just about the future—it was about something that had already begun.

The gospel is “the power of God that brings salvation to everyone who believes” (Romans 1:16). The gospel is our invitation from God to live on an altogether different plane. It is good news of a future inheritance to be given in full when Christ returns. But it is also an invitation to an invigorating spiritual reality that can be ours here and now.

Paul describes the gospel as “the gospel of Christ” (1 Corinthians 9:12), “the gospel of God” (Romans 15:16), “the gospel of peace” (Ephesians 6:15). Paul took his cue from Jesus and began to redefine the Jewish view of the kingdom of God around the universal significance of Christ’s first appearing.

As the *New Dictionary of Theology* explains, in the writings of Paul, “the preacher [Christ] becomes the preached one” (page 278). The Jesus who walked the dusty roads of Judea and Galilee, Paul taught, is now the resurrected Christ who sits at the right hand of God, and who is “the head over every power and authority” (Colossians 2:10).

In the gospel according to Paul, the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ were “of first importance,” the key events in God’s plan (1 Corinthians 15:1-11). The gospel was good news for the poor and downtrodden. History was going somewhere. Right, not might, would ultimately triumph. The pierced hand had triumphed over the iron fist. The kingdom of evil was being replaced by the reign of Jesus Christ, an order of things that Christians already experienced in part.

Paul stressed this aspect of the gospel to the Colossians:

Giving joyful thanks to the Father, who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of his holy people in the kingdom of light. For he has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins. (Colossians 1:12-14)

For weary Christians in all ages, the gospel is both a present reality and a future hope. The resurrected Christ, who presides over time, space and everything that happens here below, is the Christian’s champion. The One who ascended into the heavenly realms is the ever-present source of power (Ephesians 3:20-21).

The good news is that Jesus Christ triumphed over every obstacle during his earthly life. The way of the cross is the rough but triumphant road into the kingdom of God. That is why Paul could summarize the gospel: “I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him

crucified” (1 Corinthians 2:2).

The great reversal

When Jesus appeared in Galilee earnestly preaching the gospel, he expected a response. He expects a response today.

But Jesus’ original invitation to enter the kingdom was not received in a vacuum. Jesus’ proclamation of the kingdom of God, accompanied by impressive signs and wonders, electrified a nation chafing under the Roman Empire. This is one reason Jesus had to clarify what he meant by the kingdom of God.

The Jews in Jesus’ day were looking for a strongman to restore their nation to the glory days of David and Solomon. But Jesus’ message was “doubly revolutionary,” in the words of British scholar N.T. Wright. For one thing, Jesus took the popular expectation of a Jewish superstate throwing off the Roman yoke, and transformed it. He turned the widespread hope of political salvation into a message of spiritual deliverance: the gospel!

“The kingdom of God is here, he seemed to be saying, *but it’s not like you thought it was going to be*” (Wright, *Who Was Jesus?*, page 98).

Jesus shocked people with what his good news implied. “Many who are first will be last, and many who are last will be first,” Jesus emphasized (Matthew 19:30). “There will be weeping there, and gnashing of teeth,” he told his own people, the Jews, “when you see Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and all the prophets in the kingdom of God, but you yourselves thrown out” (Luke 13:28). The great banquet was for everyone (Luke 14:16-24). The Gentiles were invited to the kingdom, too.

And one thing more, something just as revolutionary. This prophet from Nazareth seemed to have a lot of time for the disenfranchised — from lepers and physically disadvantaged folk to money-grabbing tax collectors — and sometimes even the hated Roman oppressors.

The good news Jesus brought upset everyone’s assumptions, even those of his own disciples (Luke 9:51-56). Jesus insisted that the kingdom they looked for as a future event was already dynamically present in his ministry. As he said after one dramatic episode: “If I drive out demons by the finger of God, then the kingdom of God has come upon you” (Luke 11:20). Those who saw Jesus in action, in other words, were experiencing the presence of the future.

Jesus turned popular expectation on its head in at least three ways:

- 1) Jesus taught the good news that the kingdom comes as a pure gift — the reign of God bringing healing in its wake. Jesus inaugurated “the

year of the Lord's favor" (Luke 4:19; Isaiah 61:1-2). But the people getting into the kingdom were the weary and the burdened, the poor and the beggars, repentant tax collectors and harlots, and children and social outcasts. To social outcasts and spiritually lost sheep, Jesus proclaimed himself their shepherd.

- 2) Jesus' good news was also for those willing to turn to God through repentance. They would find God to be like a generous father who scans the horizon for his wandering sons and daughters and spots them "while...still a long way off" (Luke 15:20). The good news of the gospel meant that anyone saying the words, "God, have mercy on me, a sinner" (Luke 18:13), and really meaning it, would find God a sympathetic listener. Always. "Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you" (Luke 11:9). To those who believed, this was the best news they could ever hear.
- 3) Jesus' gospel also meant that, despite all appearances to the contrary, nothing could stop the triumph of the kingdom Jesus Christ had inaugurated. Though that kingdom would meet fierce and unrelenting resistance, it would ultimately triumph in supernatural power and splendor.

Christ told his disciples: "When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit on his glorious throne. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate the people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats" (Matthew 25:31-32).

Jesus' gospel message had a tension between the "already" and the "not yet." The gospel of the kingdom referred to a rule of God that was already active — "the blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is proclaimed to the poor" (Matthew 11:5).

But the kingdom was "not yet" in the sense that its full consummation still lay ahead. To understand the gospel is to appreciate this twofold aspect — the interval between the promised presence of the King who lives inside his people now and his dramatic reappearance.

The gospel of your salvation

Paul the missionary helped initiate the second great movement of the gospel — its expansion from tiny Judea into the sophisticated Greco-Roman world of the middle first century. He focused the blazing light of the gospel through the prism of day-to-day living. He tapped into the practical

implications of the gospel as he exalted the glorified Christ.

Paul shared with his fellow Christians the breathtaking significance of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ:

Once you were alienated from God and were enemies in your minds because of your evil behavior. But now he has reconciled you by Christ's physical body through death to present you holy in his sight, without blemish and free from accusation — if you continue in your faith, established and firm, and do not move from the hope held out in the gospel. This is the gospel that you heard and that has been proclaimed to every creature under heaven, and of which I, Paul, have become a servant. (Colossians 1:21-23)

Reconciliation. Without blemish. Grace. Deliverance. Forgiveness. Not just in the future, but here and now. That was Paul's gospel. The resurrection, the climax to which the Four Gospels pointed their readers (John 20:31), released the power within the gospel for daily Christian living.

Jesus Christ's resurrection certified the gospel. Therefore, taught Paul, those events in far-off Judea give everyone hope: "I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God that brings salvation to everyone who believes: first to the Jew, then to the Gentile. For in the gospel the righteousness of God is revealed — a righteousness that is by faith from first to last" (Romans 1:16-17).

A call to live the future here and now

John brought another dimension to the gospel, presenting Jesus Christ as he was remembered by "the disciple whom he loved" (John 19:26), a man with the heart of a pastor, a church leader deeply concerned about people, their cares and fears. "Jesus performed many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book. But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name" (John 20:30-31).

John's presentation of the gospel revolves around the thrilling phrase, "that by believing you may have life." "John's central theme is eternal life as a present possession" (George Eldon Ladd, "Eschatology," *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, vol. 2, page 136).

John brilliantly enshrines another aspect of the gospel of Jesus Christ in some of his most personal, intimate and up-close moments. John's Gospel is a vivid account of the personal ministering presence of the Messiah.

In John's Gospel, we meet a Christ who was a powerful public preacher (John 7:37-46). We see Jesus as warm and hospitable. From his welcoming

invitation, “Come...and you will see” (John 1:39), to the challenge to doubting Thomas to put his finger in the nail marks in his hands (John 20:27), here is an unforgettable portrait of the One who “became flesh and made his dwelling among us” (John 1:14).

People felt so welcome and comfortable with Jesus that they engaged him in lively give-and-take (John 6:5-8). They reclined next to him at a meal while eating out of the same dish with him (John 13:23-26). They loved him so dearly as to impulsively swim to shore at the very sight of him to enjoy a breakfast he had prepared (John 21:7-14).

The Gospel according to John reminds us of how much the good news revolves around Jesus, the example he set and the eternal life available to us through him (John 10:10).

It reminds us that preaching the gospel isn’t enough—we have to live it as well. John offers encouragement: Others may be attracted by our example to share the good news. That is what happened to the Samaritan woman Jesus met at the well (John 4:27-30) and to Mary of Magdala (John 20:10-18).

The One who wept at Lazarus’ grave, the humble servant who washed his disciples’ feet, is alive today. He offers us his own presence through the indwelling of the Holy Spirit: “Anyone who loves me will obey my teaching. My Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them” (John 14:23).

Jesus actively leads his people today through the Holy Spirit. His invitation is as personal and as encouraging as ever: “Come...and you will see” (John 1:39).

THE GOSPEL JESUS PREACHED

Some people can get quite excited about Bible prophecy, it seems, but have a hard time getting excited about the central message of the Bible — salvation through Jesus Christ. God has given Christians the most precious gift possible and the role of telling others how they can also receive that gift.

Peter described the apostles' commission: "He commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one whom God appointed as judge of the living and the dead. All the prophets testify about him that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name" (Acts 10:42-43).

This is the supreme message, the good news, which the apostles came to see was the central message of all the prophets — that Jesus Christ is the One appointed by God as judge of the living and the dead, and that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name!

In 1 Corinthians 15:1-8, Paul described the gospel Jesus gave his church. Notice his words:

Brothers and sisters, I want to remind you of the gospel I preached to you, which you received and on which you have taken your stand. By this gospel you are saved, if you hold firmly to the word I preached to you. Otherwise, you have believed in vain.

For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas, and then to the Twelve. After that, he appeared to more than five hundred of the brothers and sisters at the same time, most of whom are still living, though some have fallen asleep. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles, and last of all he appeared to me also, as to one abnormally born.

What Paul calls "of first importance" is the fact that Jesus is the Messiah or Christ, that he died for our sins, was buried and was raised, all according to the Scriptures. Further, he highlights the fact that there were plenty of witnesses to Christ's resurrection, lest anyone should doubt that Jesus was really raised from the dead.

"By this gospel you are saved," Paul asserts. Our goal, like Paul's, should be to pass on the message we have received, which is "of first importance." We must pass on what Paul and the other apostles received — "that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was

raised on the third day according to the Scriptures.”

All other biblical teaching hinges on these primary facts. Only the Son of God could die for our sins, and it is only because he died and was raised again from the dead that we can live in steadfast assurance of his return and of our inheritance of eternal life.

Therefore John could write:

We accept human testimony, but God’s testimony is greater because it is the testimony of God, which he has given about his Son. Whoever believes in the Son of God accepts this testimony. Whoever does not believe God has made him out to be a liar, because they have not believed the testimony God has given about his Son. And this is the testimony: God has given us eternal life, and this life is in his Son. Whoever has the Son has life; whoever does not have the Son of God does not have life. (1 John 5:9-12)

Most central truth

Luke wrote that Jesus reminded his disciples of the central truth of his message just before he ascended:

Then he opened their minds so they could understand the Scriptures. He told them, “This is what is written: The Messiah will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, and repentance for the forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things. (Luke 24:45-48)

When Jesus opened the apostles’ minds so they could understand the Scriptures, what did they understand the Scriptures to contain? In other words, what is, according to Jesus, the central, most important truth to understand from the Old Testament Scriptures? It is that Christ would suffer and rise from the dead, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins would be preached in his name to all nations!

But what about the gospel of the kingdom of God? Didn’t Jesus preach the good news of the kingdom of God? Of course! Is the gospel of the kingdom of God different from the gospel Paul, Peter and John preached about salvation in Jesus Christ? Not at all!

Entrance into the kingdom of God is salvation. Being saved and entering the kingdom of God are the same thing! Receiving eternal life is the same thing as receiving salvation, because salvation is being saved from sin, which brings death.

In Jesus there is life — eternal life. Eternal life requires forgiveness of sin. Forgiveness of sin, or justification, comes only by faith in Jesus Christ.

Jesus is both Judge and Redeemer. And he is also King of that kingdom. The gospel of the kingdom of God is the gospel of salvation in Jesus Christ. Jesus and his apostles preached the same message — Jesus Christ is the Son of God and the only way to receive salvation, deliverance, eternal life and entrance into the kingdom of God.

When a person's mind is opened to understand the Old Testament prophecies, as Jesus opened the apostles' minds (Luke 24:45), it becomes plain that the central message of the prophets, too, was Jesus Christ (Acts 10:43).

Let's go further. John wrote, "Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life, but whoever rejects the Son will not see life, for God's wrath remains on them" (John 3:36). That's plain language!

Jesus said: "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me" (John 14:6). If there is anything we must understand from the Word of God, it is that a person cannot come to the Father, cannot know God, cannot inherit eternal life and cannot enter the kingdom of God, apart from Jesus Christ.

In his letter to the Colossians, Paul wrote:

Giving joyful thanks to the Father, who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of his holy people in the kingdom of light. For he has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins. (Colossians 1:12-14)

Notice how the inheritance of the saints, the kingdom of light, the kingdom of the Son, redemption and forgiveness of sins all come together as one seamless garment of the word of truth that is the gospel.

In verse 4, Paul speaks of the Colossians' "faith in Christ Jesus" and "the love you have for all God's people." He describes that faith and love as springing "from the hope stored up for you in heaven and about which you have already heard in the true message of the gospel that has come to you" (verses 5-6). Again, the gospel is centered in the magnificent hope of eternal salvation in the kingdom of God through faith in Jesus Christ, the Son of God, by whom we have received redemption.

In verses 21-23, Paul continues:

Once you were alienated from God and were enemies in your minds because of your evil behavior. But now he has reconciled you

by Christ's physical body through death to present you holy in his sight, without blemish and free from accusation — if you continue in your faith, established and firm, and do not move from the hope held out in the gospel. This is the gospel that you heard and that has been proclaimed to every creature under heaven, and of which I, Paul, have become a servant.

In verses 25-29, Paul continues to underscore the gospel to which he was commissioned and his goal in proclaiming it. He wrote:

I have become its servant by the commission God gave me to present to you the word of God in its fullness—the mystery that has been kept hidden for ages and generations, but is now disclosed to the Lord's people. To them God has chosen to make known among the Gentiles the glorious riches of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory.

He is the one we proclaim, admonishing and teaching everyone with all wisdom, so that we may present everyone fully mature in Christ. To this end I strenuously contend with all the energy Christ so powerfully works in me.

What the gospel is all about

Jesus Christ is what the gospel is all about. It is about his identity and activity as the Son of God (John 3:18), as judge of the living and the dead (2 Timothy 4:1), as the Christ (Acts 17:3), as Savior (2 Timothy 1:10), as High Priest (Hebrews 4:14), as advocate (1 John 2:1), as King of kings and Lord of lords (Revelation 17:14), as the firstborn among many siblings (Romans 8:29), as friend (John 15:14-15).

It is about him as Shepherd and Overseer of our souls (1 Peter 2:25), as the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world (John 1:29), as our Passover sacrificed for us (1 Corinthians 5:7), as the image of the invisible God and the firstborn over all creation (Colossians 1:15), as the head of the church and the beginning and the firstborn from among the dead (verse 18), as the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being (Hebrews 1:3), as the revealer of the Father (Matthew 11:27), as the way, the truth and the life (John 14:6), as the door (John 10:7).

The gospel is about Christ as the author and perfecter of our faith (Hebrews 12:2), as the ruler of the creation of God (Revelation 3:14), the First and the Last, the Beginning and the End (Revelation 22:13), as the Branch (Jeremiah 23:5), as the chief cornerstone (1 Peter 2:6), as the power of God and the wisdom of God (1 Corinthians 1:24), as the desired of all

nations (Haggai 2:7). It is about Christ the faithful and true witness (Revelation 3:14), the heir of all things (Hebrews 1:2), the light of the world (John 8:12), the living bread (John 6:51), the Root of Jesse (Isaiah 11:10), our salvation (Luke 2:30), the sun of righteousness (Malachi 4:2), the Word of life (1 John 1:1), declared with power to be the Son of God by his resurrection from the dead (Romans 1:4).

Paul wrote, “No one can lay any foundation other than the one already laid, which is Jesus Christ” (1 Corinthians 3:11). Jesus Christ is the heart and core, the central theme, the foundation of the gospel.

One cannot preach anything else and be consistent with the Bible. Jesus told the religious leaders: “You study the Scriptures diligently because you think that in them you have eternal life. These are the very Scriptures that testify about me, yet you refuse to come to me to have life” (John 5:39-40).

Message of salvation

The message Christians are called to proclaim is about salvation, which is eternal life in the kingdom of God. To receive that eternal salvation, to enter the kingdom of God, one must come through the only true Door, the only true Way — Jesus Christ. He is the King of the kingdom.

John wrote, “No one who denies the Son has the Father; whoever acknowledges the Son has the Father also” (1 John 2:23). Paul wrote to Timothy, “There is one God and one mediator between God and mankind, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom for all people. This has now been witnessed to at the proper time” (1 Timothy 2:5-6).

We are warned in Hebrews 2:3: “How shall we escape if we ignore so great a salvation? This salvation, which was first announced by the Lord, was confirmed to us by those who heard him.” The message of salvation was first announced by Jesus himself — it was Jesus’ own message from the Father.

John wrote of God’s own testimony about his Son: “This is the testimony: God has given us eternal life, and this life is in his Son. Whoever has the Son has life; whoever does not have the Son of God does not have life” (1 John 5:11-12).

John again showed the emphasis on the Son in John 5:22-23: “The Father judges no one, but has entrusted all judgment to the Son, that all may honor the Son just as they honor the Father. Whoever does not honor the Son does not honor the Father, who sent him.”

That is why the church is to preach about Jesus Christ! Isaiah prophesied,

This is what the Sovereign Lord says:

“See, I lay a stone in Zion, a tested stone,

a precious cornerstone for a sure foundation;
the one who relies on it
will never be stricken with panic. (Isaiah 28:16)

Walking in the new life to which we as Christians are called in Jesus Christ, trusting in him as our sure foundation and eagerly looking forward to his second coming, we can rejoice in the hope and assurance of our eternal inheritance.

THIS IS LIVING FAITH

Living faith — as described in the Bible — can transform your life, enabling you to enjoy a close, personal relationship with God. Faith can offer freedom from the shackles of worry, doubt and fear. It can bring strength, hope and wisdom in the face of problems and challenges.

Profiles in faith

Faith! It brings to mind images of fiery prophets, dynamic apostles, brave martyrs and exceptional followers of Christ across the ages. Great people of God, powerful and effective. You could never have faith like that, could you?

Perhaps you could.

Few aspects of the Christian experience are so often talked about, but so little understood, as the subject of faith. And yet, God says that without faith it is impossible to please him, “because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him” (Hebrews 11:6).

“Have faith in God,” Jesus Christ declared (Mark 11:22). He was speaking about heartfelt belief. Such belief involves trust, commitment and loyalty. Faith in God means belief in him even though we cannot physically see him. It means accepting God’s principles, his words, his instructions — believing in and doing what he wants.

The Bible records many examples of believers who in faith served God, received answers to prayer, triumphed over adversity and did remarkable deeds. These examples have been recorded and handed down to us for our learning (Romans 15:4). Let’s look at some experiences of believers of the past and see how faith worked in their lives.

God’s friend Abraham

Besides Jesus, no individual is referred to more often in the New Testament as an example of faith than Abraham, who lived nearly 2,000 years before Jesus Christ came as our Savior. Because of the sincerity of his belief, he is called God’s friend (James 2:23).

At age 75, Abraham (then called Abram) probably would have liked to comfortably live out his days in Mesopotamia, where his home and relatives were. But God had something else in mind. He instructed Abraham to pull up roots and migrate to the land of Canaan and live in unfamiliar territory. Although Abraham and his wife, Sarah, were childless, God promised to greatly multiply their descendants.

At Abraham's age, it was not easy to accept the idea of a move like that. He probably would never again see most of his relatives. But Abraham had faith. His reaction is summarized by the words "So Abram left, as the Lord had told him" (Genesis 12:4). "By faith Abraham, when called to go to a place he would later receive as his inheritance, obeyed and went, even though he did not know where he was going" (Hebrews 11:8). But he did know he could trust God.

Time passed. Though God had safely guided them to their new land, Abraham and Sarah remained childless. Abraham therefore reminded God of his promise (Genesis 15:2-3). God responded, not by granting a child, but by repeating his promise in additional detail. And, in spite of how hopeless having a child looked from a physical point of view, Abraham believed the Lord (verse 6).

More time passed. For nearly 25 years, Abraham and Sarah felt their bodily vigor diminish. "Abraham and Sarah were already old and well advanced in years, and Sarah was past the age of childbearing" (Genesis 18:11). But Abraham knew that nothing is too hard for the all-powerful Creator God he worshiped.

Without weakening in his faith, he faced the fact that his body was as good as dead — since he was about a hundred years old — and that Sarah's womb was also dead [she was about 90]. Yet he did not waver through unbelief regarding the promise of God, but was strengthened in his faith and gave glory to God, being fully persuaded that God had power to do what he had promised. (Romans 4:19-21)

After many years of waiting, the time that God had promised eventually came, and Isaac was born to Abraham and Sarah in accordance with God's word (Genesis 21:2). Their faith had grown over years of testing. Who would not have been anxious as the years went by? Who would not have wondered if God meant what he said, if the passage of time somehow nullified the promise?

It is never too late for God! He "calls things that are not as though they were" (Romans 4:17), and he will do whatever he wants at the time he appoints. Nothing can stand in the way.

But God had not yet finished testing Abraham. When his long-awaited-for and beloved son, Isaac, was still young, the big test came. God told Abraham to take Isaac to a designated place and there to offer him as a sacrifice (Genesis 22:1-12)! "A sacrifice?" Abraham must have been tempted to ask.

However, Abraham didn't argue. He trusted in faith that God knew what was best. Abraham did not understand how God would work it all out. But he did know without a doubt that the true God was speaking to him. He knew the God he served did not desire human sacrifices, as the gods of other nations supposedly did. He knew that God would somehow provide a substitute offering (verse 8). But how? When? Abraham did not know. Nor did he have to. He prepared to offer Isaac. It wasn't until the last second that God intervened and provided the substitute sacrifice.

A close call? Not for God. He had promised Abraham innumerable descendants through Isaac. Abraham believed the promise. He knew that God, if necessary to fulfill his word, could raise Isaac from the dead (Hebrews 11:19). Abraham fully trusted that God was in complete control.

As a memorial of the experience, Abraham named the place "The Lord will provide" (Genesis 22:14). In every trial, in every peril, in the face of every obstacle or need, the promise that God will provide is the assurance on which faith thrives and triumphs.

Of course, Abraham was not perfect. His faith wavered at times. Nevertheless, the Bible calls him "Abraham, the man of faith" (Galatians 3:9) and singles him out as an important example for Christians to follow. Faith without action is dead (James 2:17, 20). By his deeds or works, Abraham demonstrated the reality of his faith (verses 18, 21-24).

Mary the mother of Jesus Christ

God carefully chose the woman who was to be the mother of Jesus, the Son of God. He made certain that both Jesus' mother and stepfather would be capable parents, submitted to God's will. Joseph, the man appointed to be the stepfather of Jesus, was a righteous, God-fearing person (Matthew 1:19-25). Mary, the woman who was to give birth to and be the mother of the Son of God, was a person of quiet, patient faith.

Can you imagine Mary's astonishment when the angel Gabriel appeared and announced to her that she, even though she was a virgin, would bear a child, and that the child would be "the Son of the Most High" (Luke 1:32)? What a test of faith! How can a virgin give birth, let alone to God's child, who was destined to live and reign forever?

On a personal level, what about all the gossip and accusations that would result from Mary conceiving a child before her betrothed husband came to live with her? From a human point of view, there was ample reason for a woman to be hesitant and skeptical about getting involved in something like this. But the angel assured Mary this was God's doing, that the Holy Spirit

would accomplish it and that “nothing is impossible with God” (verse 37).

In spite of how unlikely all this seemed, humanly speaking, Mary believed God and faithfully obeyed. “I am the Lord’s servant,” she said. “May it be to me as you have said” (verse 38).

Mary’s reaction to Gabriel’s announcement stands in sharp contrast to the reaction of another person—the priest Zechariah. Some months previously, Gabriel had appeared to him and announced that his wife, Elizabeth, despite her age, would conceive and give birth. Luke records that Zechariah had difficulty believing Gabriel (verses 18-20).

But Mary, the inexperienced young woman, believed. She knew that God is trustworthy and can never fail. Mary’s faith is commended in these words: “Blessed is she who has believed that what the Lord has said to her will be accomplished!” (verse 45).

From the beginning it was obvious that Jesus was a special child. The hand of God was often manifested in events surrounding him. Mary didn’t understand everything that happened or everything her son Jesus said and did (Luke 2:33, 48-50). “But Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart” (verse 19, see also verse 51). In faith she knew God was in charge, and that is what really matters.

Mary’s humble faith is apparent in the account of the wedding at Cana. When the supply of wine ran out, Mary knew Jesus could do something about it. Why else would she have brought the problem to his attention (John 2:3)? Though it was not yet time for Jesus to perform public miracles (verse 4), the fact that he performed a miracle as a result of Mary’s request speaks loudly of his respect for her and her faith.

For a long time, Jesus’ own brothers didn’t believe in him (John 7:5; Mark 6:4). But his mother believed in him. Mary remained steadfast through all the years of Jesus’ life as she witnessed her son being ridiculed and persecuted and finally shamefully murdered.

Where were Jesus’ brothers and sisters when he was crucified? The Bible doesn’t say. But it does record that in the depth of his agony, close to the cross and the torn and bleeding body of her firstborn, stood his mother, Mary (John 19:25).

Mary’s faith endured. The next and last scripture where she is mentioned by name is Acts 1:14. Here we learn that she was with Jesus’ disciples, who were later filled with the Holy Spirit on that great Day of Pentecost (Acts 2:1-4).

The apostle Paul's faith

No one wrote more books of the New Testament than the apostle Paul. Through them we get a clear picture of the role faith plays in genuine Christianity.

Paul had his share of trials after becoming a Christian. More than once he was unjustly thrown into prison for his beliefs and preaching. He experienced execution attempts, serious accidents, attacks by criminals, betrayal and opposition from those he tried to help. He was familiar with pain and weariness, loss of sleep, lack of food, water, shelter and even clothing. You can find a list of various trials he endured in 2 Corinthians 11:23-27.

What did all these unpleasant events make of Paul? A depressed, discouraged, defeated individual? Not at all! As his writings show, Paul was a thoroughly positive person—one who traversed difficult times with a triumphant faith:

I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances. I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. (Philippians 4:11-12)

Paul could handle all these challenges and more because he had faith in Jesus Christ. “I can do everything through him who gives me strength,” he wrote (verse 13). Paul knew the God he served would make all things work out for good in his life (Romans 8:28).

Faith is a way of life

Aside from demonstrating the value of faith to meet the challenges in life, Paul showed how faith is related to salvation. He taught that commitment to faith in Christ involves obedience (Romans 1:5; 16:26), living by God's Word as revealed in the Bible (1 Thessalonians 2:13) and being willing to serve others, even to the point of self-sacrifice (Philippians 2:17). These are ways faith is expressed in daily Christian living.

Paul made it plain that salvation is free—a gift by the grace of God through faith (Ephesians 2:8-9). It is impossible to earn salvation by works (our actions and deeds). People are “justified by faith apart from observing the law,” Paul wrote. But, lest some misunderstand, he also said, “Do we...nullify the law by this faith? Not at all! Rather, we uphold the law” (Romans 3:28, 31). Faith is in harmony with God's will, not opposed to it.

We need God's Spirit (verses 9-14) to give us more faith. The problem

the ancient Israelites experienced under the old covenant was that although they had God's law, they didn't have faith (Hebrews 3:18-19).

God's church has both the commandments of God and faith (Revelation 14:12). Because of this combination, we "may live a life worthy of the Lord and may please him in every way: bearing fruit in every good work, growing in the knowledge of God" (Colossians 1:10).

Living the Christian life constantly requires the exercise of faith. It is by faith that Christians come to repentance and the knowledge that Jesus Christ died so their sins may be forgiven. By faith they know God has given them his Spirit and they are his children. And in faith they await the immortality and glory promised at the resurrection of the dead when Christ returns. Faith assures them that God watches over them, cares for them and hears them when they pray.

Christians continually face decisions requiring them to choose between doing God's will and doing their own will, between doing what is right and doing what appeals to their human nature — their lusts, their vanity, their pride.

Doing their own will appeals to their natural desires and may promise rewards such as sensual pleasure, immediate gratification, material gain and increased self-importance. Doing God's will may involve extra effort, short-term sacrifice and humility now, with a sure reward promised in the future.

By faith Christians reject their own will and choose to do God's will. By faith they offer their "bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God," as Paul pointed out in Romans 12:1. This is an expression of total dedication, where every ounce of bodily strength is expended to God's glory and all the members of the body are "as instruments of righteousness" (Romans 6:13).

Persons of faith trust God and give themselves in loving service to God and humankind — "faith expressing itself through love," in the words of Paul (Galatians 5:6). This is living faith. And it is living by faith!

Ruth's story

The story of Ruth is a lesson in commitment and loyalty. Ruth's demonstration of these qualities in her relationship with her mother-in-law, Naomi, resulted from Ruth's faith. Commitment and loyalty are expressions of faith.

Naomi, a Jewish woman, her husband and their two sons had moved from Bethlehem in Judah to the land of Moab. There the sons married Moabite women. Eventually Naomi's husband and two sons died, leaving three widows.

Naomi decided it would be best to return to Judah. Her daughters-in-law, Orpah and Ruth, set out on the journey with her, but Naomi recommended that they go back to their own people and their way of life. For one thing, the young Moabite women might receive an unfavorable reception from the Israelites. A tense, sometimes violent relationship had existed for many years between the two peoples.

Orpah followed her mother-in-law's recommendation. She tearfully kissed Naomi and returned to Moab. But Ruth clung to Naomi and uttered a remarkable statement of loyalty: "Where you go I will go, and where you stay I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God my God" (Ruth 1:16).

In this way Ruth expressed commitment to her mother-in-law and to her mother-in-law's God — the God of Israel. She had no guarantee of gaining anything by accompanying Naomi to her homeland. She stood to lose everything by leaving her own people. Naomi had nothing tangible to offer Ruth but widowhood in a strange land.

But Ruth believed in Naomi and her God. She demonstrated her belief not by words alone, but by deeds. God rewarded Ruth for her faithful attitude. She eventually met and married Boaz, a wealthy relative of Naomi. Through their son, Ruth had the honor of contributing to a most important family line. From Ruth and her husband descended not only King David, but also Jesus Christ!

RESPONDING TO GOD WITH FAITH

God always uses his enormous power to further his promise of love and grace toward his people. He is gentle, loving, slow to anger and full of mercy.

That's good, but what difference does it make in our lives? How do we respond to a God who is simultaneously powerful and gentle? We respond in at least two ways.

Trust

When we realize that God has all power to do anything he wants, and that he always uses it for the good of humanity, then we can have absolute confidence that we are in good hands. He has both the ability and the stated purpose of working all things (including even our rebellion, hatred and betrayal against him and one another) toward our salvation. He is completely trustworthy—worthy of our trust.

When we are in the midst of trials, sickness, suffering and even dying, we can be confident that God is still with us, that he cares for us, that he has everything under control. It may not look like it, and we certainly do not feel in control, but we can be confident that God isn't caught off guard. He can and does redeem any situation, any misfortune, for our good.

We need never doubt God's love for us. "God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us" (Romans 5:8). "This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us" (1 John 3:16). The God who did not spare his own Son can be counted on to give us everything we need for eternal happiness.

God did not send somebody else: The Son of God, essential to the Godhead, became human so that he could die for us and rise again for us (Hebrews 2:14). We were redeemed not by the blood of animals, not by the blood of a very good man, but by the blood of the God who became human. Every time we take communion, we are reminded of the extent of his love for us. We can be confident that he loves us. He has earned our trust.

"God is faithful," Paul tells us. "He will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear" (1 Corinthians 10:13). "The Lord is faithful, and he will strengthen and protect you from the evil one" (2 Thessalonians 3:3). Even "if we are faithless, he will remain faithful" (2 Timothy 2:13).

He is not going to change his mind about wanting us, about calling us, about being merciful to us. "Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful" (Hebrews 10:23).

He has made a commitment to us, a covenant with us, to redeem us, to

give us eternal life, to love us forever. He will not be without us. He is trustworthy, but how do we respond to him? Do we worry? Do we struggle to be worthy of his love? Or do we trust him?

We need never doubt God's power. This is shown in the resurrection of Jesus from death. This is the God who has power over death itself, power over all the beings he created, power over all other powers (Colossians 2:15). He triumphed over all things through the cross, and this is demonstrated through his resurrection. Death could not hold him, for he is the author of life (Acts 3:15).

The same power that raised Jesus from death will also give immortal life to us (Romans 8:11). We can trust that he has the power, and the desire, to fulfill all his promises toward us. We can trust him with everything—and that's a good thing, since it is foolish to trust in anything else.

Of ourselves, we will fail. Left to itself, even the sun will eventually fail. Our only hope is in a God who has power greater than the sun, greater than the universe, more faithful than time and space, full of love and faithfulness toward us. We have that sure hope in Jesus our Savior.

Belief and trust

All who believe in Jesus Christ will be saved (Acts 16:31). But what does it mean to *believe* in Jesus Christ? Even the devil believes that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God. He doesn't like it, but he knows it's true. Moreover, the devil knows that God exists and that he rewards those who seek him (Hebrews 11:6).

So what is the difference between our belief and the devil's belief? James gives us an answer: True faith is shown by action (James 2:18-19). What we *do* shows what we really believe. Behavior *can* be evidence of faith, even though some people obey for wrong reasons. Even the devil operates within constraints imposed by God.

So what is faith, and how does it differ from belief?

Saving faith is *trust*. We trust God to take care of us, to do good rather than evil, to give us eternal life. Trust means knowing that God exists, knowing that he is good, knowing that he has the power to do what he wants, and trusting that he will use it to do whatever is best for us. Trust means a willingness to put ourselves under him, to be willing to obey not out of fear but out of love. When we trust God, we love him.

Trust is shown by what we do. But the action is not the trust, and it does not create the trust—it is only the result of trust. True faith is, at its core, trust in Jesus Christ.

A gift of God

Where does this kind of trust come from? It is not something we can work up for ourselves. We cannot talk ourselves into it or use human logic to build an airtight case. We will never have the time to cover all the philosophical arguments about God. But we are forced to make a choice each day: Will we trust God, or not? Trying to delay the decision is a decision in itself: We do not yet trust him.

Each Christian has at some point or another made a decision to trust in Christ. For some, it was a well-thought-out decision. For others, it was an illogical decision, made for wrong reasons—but the right decision anyway. We could trust no one else, not even ourselves. On our own, we would mess our lives up. Nor could we trust other people. For some of us, faith was a choice of desperation—we had nowhere else to go but to Christ (John 6:68).

It is normal that our first faith is an immature faith—a good start, but not a good place to stay. We need to *grow* in our faith. As one man said to Jesus, “I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief!” (Mark 9:24). The disciples themselves, even after worshiping the resurrected Jesus, had some doubts (Matthew 28:17).

So where does faith come from? It is a gift of God. Ephesians 2:8 tells us that salvation is a gift of God, which means that the kind of faith that leads to salvation must also be his gift.

In Acts 15:9 we are told that God purified the believers’ hearts by faith. God was working in their hearts. He is the one who “opened the door of faith” (Acts 14:27). God did it, because he is the one who enables whatever faith we have.

We would not trust God unless God himself gave us the ability to trust him. Humans have been too corrupted by sin to believe or trust in God on our own strength or wisdom. That is why faith is not a “work” that qualifies us for salvation. We get no credit for meeting the qualification—faith is merely receiving the gift, being thankful for the gift. God gives us the ability to receive his gift, to enjoy his gift.

Trustworthy

God has good reason to give us faith, for there is someone completely trustworthy for us to believe in and be saved by. The faith he gives us is rooted in his Son, who became flesh for our salvation. We have good reason to have faith, for we have a Savior who has purchased our salvation for us. He has done all that it takes, once for all, signed, sealed and being delivered. Our faith has a firm foundation: Jesus Christ.

Jesus is the author and perfecter of our faith (Hebrews 12:2)—but he does not work alone. Jesus does only what the Father wants, and he works by the Holy Spirit in our hearts. The Holy Spirit teaches us, convicts us, and gives us faith (John 14:26; 15:26; 16:10).

Through the word

How does the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit give us faith? It is usually through the preached word. “Faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word of Christ” (Romans 10:17). The message is in the written word, the Bible, and it is in the spoken word, whether a sermon at church or a simple testimony of one person to another.

The word of the gospel tells us about Jesus, the Word of God. The Holy Spirit uses this word to enlighten us, and somehow allows us to trust ourselves to this word. This is sometimes called “the witness of the Holy Spirit,” but it is not like a courtroom witness we can ask questions of.

It is more like a switch inside us that is turned on, allowing us to accept the good news that is preached. It feels right. Though we may still have questions, we believe that we can live in this message. We can base our lives on it, we can make decisions based on it. It makes sense. It is the best possible choice.

God gives us the ability to trust him. He also gives us the ability to grow in faith. The down payment of faith is a seed that grows. It prepares and enables our minds and our emotions to understand more and more of the gospel. It helps us understand more about God as he reveals himself to us in Jesus Christ. To use biblical metaphor, we begin to walk with God. We live in him, think in him, and believe in him.

Doubts

But most Christians struggle with faith at some time or another. Our growth is not always smooth and steady—it comes through trials and questions. For some, doubts come because of a tragedy or severe suffering. For others, it is prosperity or good times that subtly tempt us to rely on material things instead of God. Many of us will face both sorts of challenges to our faith.

Poor people often have stronger faith than rich people do. People beset by constant trials often know they have no hope except God, no choice but to trust him. Statistics show that poor people give a higher percentage of their income to the church than rich people do. It appears that their faith (even though not perfect) is more consistent.

Often, the greatest enemy of faith is when all goes well. People are

tempted to think that it was by their strength or their intelligence that they achieved as much as they have. They lose their sense of child-like dependence on God. They rely on what they have, rather than on God.

Poor people are in a better position to learn that life on this planet is full of questions, and God is the least questionable thing they have. They trust in him because all else has proven itself to be untrustworthy. Money, health, and friends are all fickle. We cannot depend on them.

Only God is dependable, but even so, we don't always have the evidence we would like. So we have to trust him. As Job said, even though he kills me, I will trust him (Job 13:15). Only he offers the hope of eternal life. Only he offers a hope that life makes any sense or has any purpose.

Part of growth

But still, we sometimes wrestle with doubts. That is part of the process of growing in faith, of learning to trust God with yet more of life. We face the choices set before us and once again choose God as the best choice.

As Blaise Pascal said centuries ago, if we believe for no other reason, then at least we ought to believe because God is the best bet. If we follow him and he does not exist, then we have lost nothing. But if we do not follow him and he does exist, we have lost everything. So we have nothing to lose and everything to gain by believing in God, by living and thinking that he is the surest reality in the universe.

This does not mean that we will understand everything. No, we will never understand everything. Faith means trusting in God even though we do not always understand. We can worship him even when we have doubts (Matthew 28:17). Salvation is not an intelligence contest. The faith that saves does not come from philosophical arguments that answer every doubt. Faith comes from God. If we rely on having answers to every question, we are not relying on God.

The only reason we can be in God's kingdom is by grace, through faith in our Savior, Jesus Christ. If we rely on our obedience, or anything else that we do, then we are relying on the wrong thing, an unreliable thing. We need to re-form our faith (allowing God to re-form our faith) into Christ, and him alone. Works, even good works, cannot be the basis of our salvation. Obedience, even to the commands of Jesus, cannot be our source of assurance. Only Christ is trustworthy.

As we grow in spiritual maturity, we often become more aware of our own sins, and our own sinfulness. We realize how far we are from Christ, and this can lead us to doubts, too, that God would really send his Son to die for

people as perverse as we are.

No matter how real our doubts, they should lead us back to greater faith in Christ, for only in him do we have any chance at all. There is no other place to go. In his words and his actions, we see that he knew how perverse we were before he came to die for us. The better we see ourselves, the more we see the need to cast ourselves into the mercy of God. Only he is good enough to save us from ourselves, and only he will save us from our doubts.

Fellowship

It is by faith that we have a fruitful relationship with God. It is by faith that we pray, by faith that we worship, by faith that we hear his words in sermons and fellowship. Faith enables us to have fellowship with the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. It is by faith that we are enabled to give our allegiance to God, through our Savior Jesus Christ, by means of the Holy Spirit working in our hearts.

It is by faith that we can love other people. Faith frees us from the fear of ridicule and rejection. We can love others without worrying about what they will do to us, because we trust in Christ to reward us generously. Through faith in God, we can be generous with others.

Through faith in God, we can put him first in our lives. When we believe God is as good as he says he is, then we will treasure him above all else, and be willing to make the sacrifices that he asks of us. We will trust him, and it is by that trust that we will experience the joys of salvation. Christian life is, from first to last, a matter of trusting God.

Joseph Tkach

Five facts to know about faith

- God loved us even when we were his enemies; he will be faithful in all circumstances.
- The resurrection of Jesus shows that God has the power to save us even from death.
- When we trust God, we obey him, knowing that his commands are for our good.
- No one has perfect faith; we grow in faith through life experiences.
- Doubts and questions can lead us to trust Christ even with the unknown.

For further reading

Faith is discussed in numerous books about evangelism and apologetics, including:

William Lane Craig, *Reasonable Faith*. Crossway, 1994.

C. Stephen Evans, *Why Believe?* InterVarsity, 1996.

Peter Kreeft and Ronald Tacelli, *Handbook of Christian Apologetics*. InterVarsity, 1994.

Alistair McGrath, *Intellectuals Don't Need God and Other Modern Myths*. Zondervan, 1993.

Alistair McGrath, *Doubting: Growing Through the Uncertainties of Faith*. InterVarsity, 2007.

Questions for discussion

- Which is most reassuring to you: God's love or his power?
- Does God love us even when we rebel against him?
- How was your faith immature when you first believed? How have you grown?
- Do you find that Scripture strengthens your faith?
- Has prosperity weakened your faith?
- Do you tend to trust something else—money, government, or friends?

JESUS' ACCEPTANCE

Christians often joyfully proclaim that “Jesus accepts everyone” and “does not judge anyone.” Though there is gospel truth in these affirmations, people assign to them a wide range of different meanings. Unfortunately, some of those meanings seem to differ from the revelation of Jesus that is given to us in the New Testament.

In GCI circles, we sometimes use the words, “You’re included.” That simple statement conveys an important point. But it can also be (and has been) understood in a variety of ways. What are we included in? Answering this and related questions calls for care as we, in faith, seek to sort out the related issues so that we are accurate and thus faithful to the biblical revelation.

Jesus welcomed all into his presence and offered himself and his teaching to all who came toward him. He told his listeners that he would draw all persons to himself (John 12:32). We find no instances where Jesus rejected someone, turning away from or refusing someone who was seeking him. More than that, Jesus received and even shared meals with the sorts of people who were being rejected by many of the religious leaders of his day.

What stands out in the biblical record is that Jesus welcomed and interacted with lepers, the lame, blind, deaf and dumb. He interacted socially with women (some with questionable reputations) and did so in ways that ignored religious regulations of the day. Jesus also spent time with adulterers, Jewish tax collectors working under Roman direction, and even with fanatical anti-Roman political activists.

Furthermore, Jesus spent time with the Pharisees and Sadducees, religious leaders who were his most severe critics (including some who plotted his execution). The apostle John tells us that Jesus did not come to condemn, but to save and rescue people for God. Jesus said, “whoever comes to me I will never drive away” (John 6:37). He also instructed his disciples to love their enemies (Luke 6:27), forgive those who wronged them and bless those who cursed them (Luke 6:28). Jesus also extended forgiveness to his executioners (Luke 23:34).

What comes across in these examples is that Jesus came to benefit all—he was “on the side” of everyone, he was “for” everyone. He is God’s grace and God’s salvation for all. The rest of the New Testament outside of the Gospels summarizes what we see lived out in Jesus’ life. Paul indicates that Jesus came to atone for the sins of the ungodly, the sinners—those “dead in their sins” (Ephesians 2:1).

The attitude and acts of Jesus demonstrate God's love for all human beings and his desire to be reconciled to all and to bless all. Jesus came to give life and to give it abundantly (John 10:10). God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself (2 Corinthians 5:19). Jesus came as a ransom to free captives of sin—to free them from their own sins and from the evil done against them.

Jesus had a purpose

But there is more to the story—a “more” that should not be viewed as contradicting or in tension with what we just surveyed. Contrary to the view of some, there is no necessity to think that there are contrasting or conflicting aspects within Jesus' heart, mind and purposes. There is no need to see some sort of internal balancing act, now tipping one way then correcting and tipping the other. There is no need to think that Jesus is trying to accomplish two divergent things at the same time, such as love and righteousness, or mercy and holiness. Such imagined tensions might exist within us in our fallenness, but they do not exist within the heart of Jesus or his Father.

Jesus, like the Father, welcomes all people. However, he does so *with a particular purpose in mind*. His love has direction to it. He engages all who will listen to reveal something that is generally hidden. He came to give something in particular—to serve all in a way that points in a particular direction, that has a certain goal or end in mind.

Rather than an end point, his welcome to all is the starting point of an ongoing relationship. That relationship is one of his giving and serving and of our receiving what he offers. Jesus does not offer any old thing or serve us in any old way (including the way we might prefer). Rather, he offers us only the best that he has—and that is himself. In offering himself, he gives us the way, the truth and the life. Nothing more. Nothing else.

Jesus' attitude and acts of receiving and welcoming call for a certain response to his self-giving. In essence, it calls for receiving what he offers. In contrast to that receptive response, there is the response of rejecting what Jesus offers, which means rejecting Jesus himself. By Jesus drawing all people to himself, he is looking for the response of reception. That response requires a certain attitude, a certain approach toward him.

Jesus thus announced to his disciples that in his presence the kingdom of God had drawn near. All of the kingdom's blessings are available in him. However, that truth and reality calls for a response – as Jesus said, “Repent and believe in the good news” of the kingdom's arrival. A refusal to repent and put faith in Jesus and his kingdom amounts to a rejection of Jesus and the benefits of his kingdom.

The response

Jesus offers his gift before any response is made. It is the offer of the gift that calls forth the response. Repentance and belief are the responses of reception to what Jesus has already offered. Those responses are not behaviors or attitudes that pre-condition Jesus' offer, or determine to whom he makes the offer. Jesus' offer is for the sake of its reception—not for the sake of its rejection.

The receptive attitude Jesus is always looking for in response to his offer of himself is indicated in a variety of his sayings: "The Son of Man came to seek and save the lost" (Luke 19:10, NRSV). "It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick" (Luke 5:31). "Anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it" (Mark 10:15). We must be like the soil that "receives the word" of the sower "with joy" (Luke 8:13). "Seek first his kingdom and his righteousness" (Matthew 6:33).

Receiving what Jesus offers, and therefore benefitting from what he gives, requires acknowledging that we are lost and need to be found, that we are ill and need a physician to heal us, that we come to Jesus to receive with empty hands, rather than hoping to make an exchange with him. For like a child, we do not presume to have anything that he needs. This is why Jesus indicates that it is the "poor in spirit" who are receiving the blessings of God and his kingdom, not those who regard themselves as spiritually rich (Matthew 5:3).

Christian teaching has summarized this attitude of receptivity to what God in Christ freely offers to all his creatures as one of humility. This is an attitude that admits that we are not self-sufficient but must receive life from our Creator and Redeemer. A willingness to repent requires an attitude of humble receptivity. That is what Jesus is looking for in extending his welcome, his acceptance. It is only through humility that we are able to receive what Jesus offers.

The opposite of such a trusting and receptive heart has been called pride. In the context of church teaching, pride is an attitude that asserts autonomy from God, a trust in oneself, a confidence in one's own adequacy, even in the face of God. Such pride is offended by the suggestion that one needs to receive anything significant from God, most especially his forgiveness and mercy. One result of pride is a self-righteous refusal to receive anything essential from God, particularly those things you think you can provide for yourself.

Pride insists on paying its own way, getting what it thinks it deserves. It insists that it does not need grace or charity from God—that it can provide itself with life sufficient for its own purposes. Pride refuses to "be beholden"

to anyone or anything, including God. Pride says that nothing really needs to be changed in us. We are fine just as we are.

In contrast, humility recognizes that one cannot give oneself life. Instead, it admits its need not only for help, but for the transformation, renewal, restoration and reconciliation that only God has to give. Humility acknowledges our inexcusable fault and our utter helplessness to renew ourselves. We need total grace from God or we are lost. Our pride needs to be put to death that we might receive life from God himself. Receptivity to receiving what Jesus has to offer and humility are inseparable.

Discernment

In the end, Jesus welcomes all in order to give them himself. His welcome is purposeful. It leads somewhere. His purpose necessarily includes a positive response, that we receive what he gives.

Jesus tells us that he has come to enable the worship of his Father (John 4:23). This is his most comprehensive way of indicating the purpose of his welcome and acceptance of us. Worship is a way of indicating a total response to who God is as the only one who is worthy of our ultimate trust and loyalty. Jesus' self-giving leads to a true knowledge of the Father and a receptivity to his Holy Spirit. It results in worshipping God alone through the Son and in the Spirit, that is, to worshipping God in truth and in spirit.

In offering himself to us, Jesus gives himself to be our Lord, our prophet, priest and king. In doing so he reveals the Father and sends us his Spirit. He gives of himself according to who he is, not according to who he is not, nor according to our wishes or imaginations.

This means that Jesus' way involves discernment—it does sort through and notice the kinds of responses made to him (and to all that he is). Jesus discerns those who are rejecting him and his word, those who are rejecting a true knowledge of God and right worship. He discriminates between those who are receiving and those who are not receiving. However, this discrimination does not mean that Jesus has a different attitude or intention other than that which we described above. There is no reason to suppose that Jesus' love is diminished or contradicted by his acts of discernment.

Jesus does not condemn those who reject his welcome and invitation to follow him. But he does warn them concerning the consequences of such rejection. Jesus' acceptance and love calls for a particular kind of response, not giving no response or any sort of response.

Jesus' discernment of the various kinds of responses made to him is evident at many points in Scripture. His parable of the sower and the seeds

(the seeds being his word) makes this obvious. There are four distinct soils, and only one represents the receptive response that Jesus is looking for. On numerous occasions, Jesus talks about receiving or rejecting him, his words/teaching, his heavenly Father and his disciples.

Jesus' initial initiative towards people is expressed in his invitation to "come, follow me" (Mark 1:17). There is a difference between those who follow and those who do not. Jesus likens those who follow to those who act on an invitation to a wedding and contrasts them with those who refuse the invitation (Matthew 22:4-9). In like manner, a difference is noted in the refusal of the elder son to join in the feast celebrating his younger brother's return, despite his father imploring him to come in (Luke 15:28).

There are strict warnings to those who not only do not follow Jesus but who actively reject his invitation to the extent of preventing others from following him, some even plotting to have Jesus executed (Luke 11:46; Matthew 3:7; 23:27-29). These warnings are severe—indicating what Jesus does not want to happen, not what he hopes will happen. Warnings are given to those whom we care about, not to those for whom we have no concern. The same love and acceptance is exhibited towards those who accept Jesus and those who reject him. However, such love would not be loving if it then failed to note the difference of response and the corresponding consequences.

Jesus welcomes and invites all to respond in a receptive way both to him and to what he offers, which is the reign of the kingdom of God. Though the net is cast wide and the seed is sown everywhere, receiving, trusting and following him call for a particular response. Jesus likens it to the reception of a child. He calls such receptivity faith, belief or trust in him. It includes repenting of putting one's ultimate trust in anyone or anything else. It is summed up in worshiping the Father through the Son and in the Spirit. The gift is offered freely and extended to all. No pre-conditions are set out to limit or restrict who might benefit from it.

The cost

However, the reception of the freely given gift always involves a cost to the recipient. That cost is to give up one's entire life and hand it over to Jesus and the Father and the Spirit with him. The cost is not something paid to Jesus to enable or incline him to give himself to us. It is the cost of emptying our hands and hearts to receive him for who he is, our Lord and Savior. What is freely given is costly to us to receive because it involves dying to the old and corrupted self in order to receive new life from him.

The cost to us to receive God's free grace is referred to throughout Scripture. In the Old Testament, we are said to need both new hearts and new spirits that God himself will give! In the New Testament we are told that we need to be born again, from above, that we need new natures, that we must stop living for ourselves and begin living under the Lordship of Christ, that we must die to our old natures, that we are to become new creations, that we are to be regenerated, that we are being renewed according to the image of Christ, the new Adam. The day of Pentecost indicates not only God's sending of his Spirit to indwell his people in a new way, but our need to receive and be indwelt and filled by his Holy Spirit, the Spirit of Jesus, the Spirit of life.

Jesus' parables indicate that the response he is looking for, the response that indicates that the reception of what he offers us involves a cost to us. Consider the parables of the pearl of great price or the purchase of a field in which there is a treasure. Those who respond appropriately must give up all they have to receive what they have found (Matthew 13:44, 46). Those who place other things as a priority, whether they be lands or home or family, are not receiving Jesus and his benefits (Luke 9:59, Luke 14:18-20).

Jesus' interactions with people indicate that following him and receiving all his benefits calls for the abandonment of anything we might value above Jesus and his kingdom. That includes abandoning the pursuit of material wealth. The rich ruler did not follow Jesus because he could not part with his goods. Consequently he was unable to receive the good that Jesus offered him (Luke 18:18-23). Even the woman caught in adultery was called to set out in a different direction of life. Receiving forgiveness was to be followed by her sinning no more (John 8:11). Recall the man at the pool. He had to be willing to leave behind his place at the pool as well as his diseased self. "Get up! Pick up your mat and walk" (John 5:8).

Jesus welcomes and accepts all, but a receptive response to Jesus does not leave anyone where Jesus finds them. Jesus would not be loving if he simply left them in the condition in which he first encountered them. He loves us too much simply to leave us alone, as though he merely empathizes with us or feels sorry for us. No, his love is a healing, transforming, life-changing love.

The New Testament consistently declares that the response to the free offer that Jesus makes of himself, including all that he has for us, involves denying (dying to) ourselves. It involves giving up our pride, our confidence in ourselves, in our religiousness, in our gifts and abilities, including our ability to manage and give ourselves life. In that regard, Jesus shockingly

declares that compared to following him, we must “hate” our father and mother. But more than this, following him calls for hating our own life—the false idea that we can give life to ourselves (Luke 14:26-27).

When we accept Jesus, we cease living for ourselves (Romans 14:7-8) because we belong to another (1 Corinthians 6:18). In that sense, we are “slaves of Christ” (Ephesians 6:6). Our lives are completely in his hands, under his provision and direction. We are who we are in relationship to him. Because we are united to Christ, “it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me” (Galatians 2:20, ESV).

Jesus accepts and welcomes everyone. He died for all. He is reconciled to all. But he does this as our Lord and Savior. His welcome and acceptance are an offer, an invitation that calls for response, for receptivity. That acceptance and receptivity necessarily involves receiving exactly what he has to offer according to who he is. Nothing more and nothing less.

This means that responding to him will involve repentance, getting rid of anything that blocks receiving what he has to offer, that blocks communion with him and the enjoyment of life in his kingdom. Such a response is costly to us—but a cost well worth it. For in dying to our old selves, we receive a new self. We make room for Jesus, receiving with emptied hands his life-transforming, life-giving grace. Jesus accepts us wherever we are in order to take us to where he is going, which is to be with his Father in the Spirit now, and for all eternity as his healed, whole, regenerated children.

Who would want to be included in anything less than that?

Gary W. Deddo

JUSTIFICATION AND RIGHTEOUSNESS BY FAITH

God called Abraham out of Mesopotamia and promised to give his descendants the land of Canaan. After Abraham was in the land of Canaan,

The word of the Lord came to Abram in a vision: “Do not be afraid, Abram. I am your shield, your very great reward.” But Abram said, “O Sovereign Lord, what can you give me since I remain childless and the one who will inherit my estate is Eliezer of Damascus?... You have given me no children; so a servant in my household will be my heir.”

Then the word of the Lord came to him: “This man will not be your heir, but a son coming from your own body will be your heir.” He took him outside and said, “Look up at the heavens and count the stars—if indeed you can count them.... So shall your offspring be.” (Genesis 15:1-5)

This was a phenomenal promise. But even more remarkable is what we read in verse 6: “Abram believed the Lord, and he credited it to him as righteousness.” This is a landmark statement of justification by faith, of being accepted by God simply because we believe him. Abraham was counted righteous on the basis of faith.

The apostle Paul develops that thought further in Romans 4 and Galatians 3. Christians inherit the promises of Abraham *on the basis of faith*—and laws that were later given to Moses cannot take away those promises. This principle is taught in Galatians 3:17. This is an especially important passage.

Faith, not law

In Galatians, Paul was arguing against a legalistic heresy. In Galatians 3:2 he asks, “I would like to learn just one thing from you: Did you receive the Spirit by observing the law, or by believing what you heard?” They had received the Holy Spirit by faith, not by the law.

He asks something similar in verse 5: “Does God give you his Spirit and work miracles among you because you observe the law, or because you believe what you heard?” The answer is that the Holy Spirit—and salvation—comes by faith, not by law.

“Consider Abraham,” Paul says in verses 6-7. “He believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness. Understand, then, that those who believe are children of Abraham.” Paul is quoting Genesis 15. Through faith,

we are children of Abraham. We inherit the promises that God gave to him.

Notice verse 9: “So those who have faith are blessed along with Abraham, the man of faith.” Faith brings blessings. But if we rely on our obedience, we will be condemned. We will fall short. But Christ saved us from that. He died for us. Notice verse 14: “He redeemed us in order that the blessing given to Abraham might come to the Gentiles through Christ Jesus, so that *by faith* we might receive the promise of the Spirit.”

Then, in verses 15-16, Paul uses a practical example to tell the Christians in Galatia that the law of Moses cannot do away with the promises given to Abraham. “Brothers, let me take an example from everyday life. Just as no one can set aside or add to a human covenant that has been duly established, so it is in this case. The promises were spoken to Abraham and to his seed.”

That “seed” is Jesus Christ, but Jesus is not the only one who inherits the promises of Abraham. The point that Paul is making is that Christians also inherit these promises. Through Christ, we are Abraham’s children, and we inherit the promises through him.

A temporary law

Now we come to verse 17: “What I mean is this: The law, introduced 430 years later, does not set aside the covenant previously established by God and thus do away with the promise.”

The law given at Mt. Sinai cannot set aside the Abrahamic covenant, God’s promise to Abraham based on Abraham’s willingness to believe in and trust in God. That’s the point that Paul is making. Christians have a relationship with God based on faith, not on law.

Paul’s point here is that the law of Moses—the old covenant—was temporary. It was added only until Christ came. That’s what we see in verse 19: “What, then, was the purpose of the law? It was added because of transgressions until the Seed to whom the promise referred had come.” Christ is the Seed, and the Law was added only until Christ came. Our relationship with God is not based on the Law, but on the promise given to Abraham.

Let’s read verses 24-26: “The law was put in charge to lead us to Christ that we might be justified by faith. Now that faith has come, we are no longer under the supervision of the law. You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus.” We are not under the old covenant laws.

Let’s drop down to verse 29: “If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham’s seed, and heirs according to the promise.” The point is that Christians are given the Holy Spirit on the basis of faith. We are justified by faith, or declared right with God by faith. We are saved on the basis of faith,

not on law-keeping, and certainly not on the basis of old covenant laws. Through Jesus Christ, we have a right relationship with God.

In other words, our relationship with God is based on a promise, just as Abraham's was. Laws that were added at Sinai cannot change the promise given to Abraham, and those laws cannot change the promise given to all who are Abraham's children by faith. The laws of Moses became obsolete when Christ died, and we are in the new covenant.

Even circumcision, which was given to Abraham as a sign of his covenant, cannot change the original promise based on faith. In Romans 4, Paul points out that Abraham was declared righteous, and therefore acceptable to God, while he was **uncircumcised**. It was at least 14 years later that circumcision was commanded. Physical circumcision is not required for Christians today. Circumcision is now a matter of the heart (Romans 2:29).

The law cannot save

The law cannot give us salvation. All it can do is condemn us, since we all are lawbreakers. God knew in advance that no one could keep the law. The law points us to Christ. The law cannot give us salvation, but it can help us see our *need* for salvation, and it helps us see that righteousness must be a *gift*, not something we earn.

Suppose that Judgment Day comes and the Judge asks us why he should let us into his domain. How would we answer? Would we say that we have kept particular laws? I hope not, because the Judge could easily point out laws that we haven't kept, sins that we never knew we committed and never repented of. We can't say that we were good enough. No—all we can do is plead for mercy. Christ died to redeem us from *all* sins. He died and rose again to rescue us from the penalty of the law. That's our *only* basis for salvation.

When we accept this, our faith *leads* us to obedience. The new covenant has quite a few commands of its own. Jesus makes many demands on our time and our hearts and our money. Jesus did away with many laws, but he also *reaffirmed* certain standards of behavior and taught that God's way of life should transform us in our thoughts and not just superficially. We must look to the teachings of Jesus and the apostles to see the way that Christian faith is expected to *work* in our lives in the new covenant.

Christ died for us so that we might live for him. We are saved from the slavery of sin so that we might become slaves of righteousness (Romans 6). We are called to serve one another, not ourselves. Christ demands everything we have, and everything we *are*. We are told to obey—but we are *saved by grace*.

Justified by faith

We can see that in Romans 3. In one short section, Paul spells out the plan of salvation. Let's see how it confirms what we have seen in Galatians: "No one will be declared righteous in his sight by observing the law; rather, through the law we become conscious of sin. But now a righteousness from God, *apart from law*, has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify" (verses 20-21).

Old Testament scriptures predicted salvation by grace through Jesus Christ, and it does not come through the laws of Moses. The basis of our relationship with God is through our Savior Jesus Christ. Paul continues in verses 22-24: "This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. There is no difference, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified freely *by his grace* through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus."

Because Jesus died for us, we can be declared righteous. God justifies people on the basis of what Jesus did—and therefore no one can brag about how well they keep the law. Paul continues in verse 28: People are "justified by faith *apart from* observing the law."

Abraham's faith *led* him to obey God (Genesis 26:4-5), and our faith in God also goes hand-in-hand with a willingness to do what God says. Paul is talking about real faith, the kind that includes allegiance to Christ, a wholehearted willingness to follow him. However, no matter how well we obey, we are not saved by those works—we are saved by Jesus Christ, and we receive that by faith, not by works.

In Romans 5:1-2, Paul writes: "Since we have been *justified through faith*, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand. And we rejoice in the hope of the glory of God."

Through faith, we have a right relationship with God. We are his friends, not his enemies. That's how we will be able to stand before him on the day of judgment. The promise has been given to us through Jesus Christ. Paul explains this further in Romans 8:1-4:

Therefore, there is now *no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus*, because through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit of life set me free from the law of sin and death. For what the law was powerless to do in that it was weakened by the sinful nature, God did by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful man to be a sin offering. And so he condemned sin in sinful man, in order that the righteous requirements of the law might be fully met in us, who do not live according to the

sinful nature but according to the Spirit.

So we see that our relationship with God is based on Jesus Christ. This is the covenant promise that God has made with us. He counts us as righteous because of his Son. The law cannot change us, but Christ can. The law condemns us to death, but Christ promises us life. The law cannot rescue us from the slavery of sin, but Christ does. Christ gives us freedom, but it isn't freedom to please ourselves—it is freedom to serve him.

Faith causes us to be willing to follow our Lord and Savior in whatever he tells us to do. We see clear commands to love one another, to trust in Jesus Christ, to preach the gospel, to work for unity in the faith, to meet together as a church, to build one another up in the faith, to do good works of service, to lead pure and moral lives, to live peaceably and to forgive those who wrong us.

These new covenant commands are demanding. They absorb all our time. All our days are dedicated to serving Jesus Christ. We need to be busy doing his work, and it's not the broad and easy path. It's a difficult task, a challenging task, a task that not everyone is willing to do.

Our faith cannot save us—God accepts us based not on the quality of our faith, but on the faith and faithfulness *of his Son*, Jesus Christ. Our faith will never measure up to what it “should” be—but we are saved not by how much faith we have, but simply by trusting that Christ has enough faith for all of us.

Joseph Tkach

A SIMPLE MATTER OF TRUST

How can you be sure you are in the kingdom of God and not destined for the lake of fire? Many Christians worry that in the final analysis, they might not be counted among the children of God and will face their fate in the lake that burns with fire and brimstone (Revelation 20:8).

What is the basis for such a worry? Personal sins. Deep inside, we know how ugly and real our sins are and continue to be, and we fear that since God knows it too, there is no way he will “let us in” his kingdom. After all, we know that God is pure and holy, and that his kingdom is also pure and holy. Where does that leave us? Since we are not “pure and holy,” we figure it can only leave us on the outside looking in.

We want to overcome. We struggle to overcome. We pray against our sins. We set our wills against our sins. But when all is said and done, we never quite get rid of them. We are sinners, and as such, we keep on sinning.

“You can’t play games with God,” we are told. “Christ didn’t die for you so you could keep on sinning,” we are warned. We listen to the Ten Points for Overcoming Sin sermons, the Five Rules for Ruling Your Emotions sermons, the Nine Keys for Healthy Happy Families sermons, the Seven Laws of Success sermons. On and on and on they come, the never-ending stream of “Get Your Life Straightened Out or Burn” messages.

We take notes feverishly, we pin them up on the fridge, we pray over them, we try and we try, yet, when the chips are down, we blow it, confronted once again with the stark truth that we are what we are, and what we are stinks. “Don’t kid yourself,” the little voice in the back of your mind whispers. “You’re a loser. If you think God is going to give anything good to you, you must be in dreamland.” So where does our loser life leave us with God? Why should he keep putting up with us? Why should he let us into his pure and holy kingdom?

Bad information

Somewhere along the line, Christians have given other Christians bad information about how the kingdom of God works. The kind of thinking I mentioned earlier does not come from the Bible. It comes from ugly rumors and twisted tales about God, making him out to be more like one of us than the way the Bible says he really is.

The Bible says God is on your side, even though you are a sinner. That’s right. Even though you are a sinner. Don’t forget: Christ died for you while you were still a sinner (Romans 5:8).

Contrary to what you may have heard and may have thought, the Bible is not primarily a rule book, though it does contain plenty of good instruction about how humans ought to live. The Bible is not first and foremost “God’s instruction manual for humans,” which if you don’t heed and obey, God will hurl you into his supernatural furnace. Quite the contrary: the Bible is good news, and it is good news for you just as it is for everybody who has ever lived—not merely good news if you straighten up, but pure and simple good news no matter what you have done or do or will do.

In Christ, God has chosen to reconcile his whole creation to himself, and he didn’t even ask your permission to do it (1 John 2:2; John 12:32; Romans 8:21; Colossians 1:20). In personal terms, in Christ, God has reconciled *you* to himself, and he didn’t even bother to check your credit first. You have been reconciled, like it or not, and the only question left is whether you will trust him that it is so, and enjoy it, and start seeing yourself the way you really are—the way God has made you in Christ—or just keep on seeing yourself the way you always have, through your own dirty, cracked and crooked lenses.

The Bible is the record of God’s work of grace through which he has redeemed the world through his Son Jesus Christ (Luke 24:45-47). When you read the Bible, you are reading about a world of people who need redemption, and whom God has in fact redeemed through the birth, life, death and resurrection of his Son, God with us, God in the flesh, God in death and God in resurrection, Jesus Christ (John 3:17; 5:46; 1 Corinthians 15:3; 1 Timothy 2:4-6).

God holds you as you really are, the way you were always meant to be, in Christ, and what the Word and the Spirit say you are. That is what you actually are, for it is only in God that we exist at all (Acts 17:28). God says that you, as you are held in Christ (which is the only way you exist at all) are good (Romans 6:11, 23; 8:2; 1 Corinthians 1:30; 2 Corinthians 1:21; 5:17; 17-19). You, as you are in Christ, are God’s beloved child, in whom he is well pleased. That is true, whether you want to believe it or not. It is true because God says it is, and what God says is, is.

No strings attached

So what room is there for worry about our salvation? There is no room for worry. Remember, it is for Christ’s sake that we are accounted worthy before God. Without Christ, we are dead meat. With him, we are full members of God’s family. When he touched the rotting corpse of our loser life, he healed it completely and made us his own. He made us, in him, the beloved children of God (John 1:12; Galatians 3:26). Being “good” doesn’t

cut it—never did and never will. There is only one ticket into the kingdom of God—trusting in Jesus Christ.

The kingdom of God is free, absolutely free, with no strings attached. You enter it by trusting God to give it to you. You cannot get in with spiritual merit badges. You cannot buy a ticket. All you can do is walk right through the front door by trusting the Giver of the gift to do exactly what he promised—to give you his kingdom (Luke 12:32; Galatians 2:16).

You don't have to worry about the cost; it has already been paid (Romans 5:9; Revelation 1:5). You don't have to worry about how to dress; he will give you an outfit. You don't have to worry about what to say or do when you get inside; he will show you. You don't have to be anybody special, do anything special, pass any test, fit any profile or win any drawing.

It's free. God wants you there. The invitation is platinum-plated real, from God himself. And yes, he knows you are a rat. He took care of that. To him (and he is the One who decides), you are not a rat any more, even though he knows you still act like one. "In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins" (1 John 4:10, New Revised Standard Version in this article).

The initiative in all this is God's, not ours. It depends on him, not on us. He is the author and the finisher of our faith (Hebrews 12:2). Our part is to believe and accept, and that's it. This is not a "Thanks for everything, Jesus. I'll take it from here" arrangement. No, it is only Jesus, Son of the Father Almighty, with no help from us, from start to finish. You can take it or you can leave it, but there is not one thing you can add to it. If you try, you'll wind up like the fool who sneaked into the banquet wearing his own filthy rags instead of the free wedding garment provided by the King (Matthew 22:12).

"God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us" (Romans 5:8). "Trust me," God says. "You're in. You don't have to do anything except trust me. The wedding banquet of the Lamb is totally free to you. I have already paid the bill. Now it is time to celebrate. Come on in. Don't bring anything. Everything is provided."

It's still about grace

By now, some Christians are angry with me. "You are taking this grace thing too far," they are thinking. "God wants a changed life, not just some easy believism. God is not going to just let in anybody who believes. These sinners have to prove the genuineness of their belief by living right."

They mean prove it by living right to the satisfaction of the "godly" people in the church, namely them, because sinners certainly have nothing to prove

to God. Jesus died for sinners while they were still sinners. He knows what sinners we are, and he also knows what sinners the “you’re taking this grace thing too far” people are. That is why we all need grace. It is why the Son of God died for us, and it is why salvation comes by grace.

Regardless of our neurotic need to vindicate ourselves, we are sinners, and left to ourselves, we have no hope. Even if salvation were based on performance, which it isn’t, our little doodle-bug mound of righteousness could never begin to measure up to our Himalayan mountain range of sinfulness.

Still, we desperately look for ways to feel that we are not quite as bad as we really are. After all, we don’t blow up at our family every day. We don’t look at pornography all the time. We don’t gossip in every conversation. We aren’t really bad persons, we just slipped up under pressure. We aren’t really liars, we just shaded the truth a little. We only envy certain people. We are only greedy about some things. We are only inconsiderate, or selfish, or rude, or arrogant, or mean, or callous or pigheaded (et cetera ad infinitum on and on) only part of the time.

But when it comes to the sins of others, now that’s a different matter entirely. There are some sins that we holy righteous folk just cannot and will not abide. Today it is especially vogue not to put up with “those people” who get abortions, “those” homosexuals and “those” fornicators. Well, on second thought, it seems we can abide the fornicators a whole lot better than we can abide the homosexuals.

Our intolerance for certain kinds of sinners whom we find more disgusting than ourselves extends to most anybody who does most anything that we don’t like, whose sins are different than our own. We want rules for others, to keep them in line, and we even want rules for ourselves, to keep us in line (as long as we can keep secret our breaking of them). We feel we have to find a way not to be as bad as we suspect we might be, and keeping some rules and doing some good deeds are great ways to make ourselves feel that we are not as big a sinner as we really are.

We have a hard time accepting and admitting that we are hopeless sinners who could never climb out of the sin pit in a million years. We are sinners, pure and simple, but we keep telling ourselves, to placate our consciences, that we can somehow, someday, put all this sin out of our lives.

It ain’t gonna happen, neighbor. Work at it all you want, as hard as you want, and you will still be in the sin pit on the day you die. The only thing that will get you out of it is being raised with Christ, and that has already happened (John 5:25; Colossians 1:13-14; 3:1; Romans 6:11). But you can’t

live like it and enjoy the fruit of it if you refuse to believe it.

The only thing that matters is trusting God that his word is true—for Christ's sake he has erased all sin, including yours, and removed every record of your guilt forever. He has officially declared you not guilty, free to go, and he has closed the courthouse. You can believe that, you can trust him, you can lay down your burden and take your rest in him (Matthew 11:28-30).

Or, if you are hell-bent on it, you can continue trying to prove yourself worth saving by striving in all the typical ways to make yourself a better person. (That makes it easier for you to condemn others, too.) If you like that kind of life, you can have it. God will grieve for you, but he gives you the freedom to choose to be a fool, if you want it.

Faith is not a work

At this point there is something important that we need to say about faith, too. You are not saved by faith, but by God's grace. That means God is not even measuring the quality and quantity of your faith. You are not saved by trusting in your faith; you are saved by God for Jesus' sake. You are saved because God loves you and because he is good, not because you have faith. Faith comes in so that you can actually believe that what God says is true and actually enjoy the gift you have already been given.

There is no earning, no merit, in your trust. Don't think faith is the price tag of salvation. It is not. Faith is simply trusting God that his gift to you, which is still invisible, but is more real than anything you can physically touch or see, and is really yours just because he says so. You can receive it or refuse it; either way, it is no less real, and it is no less a free gift. Faith simply enables you to enjoy the gift he has given you.

You don't have to have some certain kind of faith. You don't have to have some emotional experience. You don't have to feel an overwhelmingly deep love, or intense remorse, a surge of power or a wave of peace. You don't need anything at all. Just trust God. Just believe him.

Faith means belief. It doesn't mean breathless, tearful, super-commitment. It just means believe God and quit worrying about whether you are going to "make it into the kingdom"—you already have (Romans 5:1). Christ has qualified us (Colossians 1:12).

Receiving the gift

No analogy is perfect, but let's pretend for a minute that someone you have heard is trustworthy walks up to you and hands you a check for a million dollars. He tells you that it is a gift, no strings attached, and that it is all yours. You can either believe the benefactor and take the check to the bank and

deposit it in your account, or you can figure he is a nut and throw the check in the trash. I suppose you could even decide that you'd rather make your own money and haughtily refuse to take his charity. You could even spit in his eye if you felt especially offended by his generosity, especially if his gift offended your sense of personal dignity by making it look like you were a loser who actually needed the money.

But to get to the point, when your benefactor hands you the check with your name on it, you don't have to dance a jig to make it actually become yours. You don't have to go to his house and wash his windows. You don't have to start pleading with him to forgive all the financial mistakes you have made in your life and shed tears. You don't have to do anything. A hearty thank you would be nice, but you already have the check. It is yours. All that is left to do is to believe that the benefactor wasn't lying and that the check is good, and in that belief, take it to the bank and deposit it in your account.

God has forgiven your sins and given you a ticket to his kingdom. If he waited to see if you believed before he gave you the gift, then it would no longer be a gift; it would be a reward for the act of believing. But that is not how God works it.

Our faith does not affect one way or the other whether God gives us the gift. He has already given it. The only thing faith affects is whether we can enjoy the gift we have already been given. We can let it sit unused and unenjoyed, or we can pick it up and embrace it and kiss it and laugh and enjoy it to the hilt, praising and thanking him forever. Either way, it is still ours, given to us by God absolutely free with no strings attached and no requirements at all.

To use a slightly different analogy, he has not just given us a check that we have to cash—he has already transferred the money into our bank account. It is already there, already legally ours; it is our choice to use it or abandon it.

Once and for all

We do not have to ride the never-ending merry-go-round of trying to strain up enough faith, or work up enough good deeds, or overcome enough sins, in order to convince the God of our nightmares to finally say "Yes" to us in the judgment. We couldn't pay for this gift if we lived a million lifetimes. It is a gift.

Imagine someone hoping to make the Pacific Ocean wetter by adding a thimbleful of water to it, and you have a small idea of how realistic it is to think we could actually bring anything to the table of salvation. (On second

thought, it might be more like adding a thimbleful of arsenic to the Pacific Ocean, but let's not quibble over the relative quality of our good deeds.)

The Father of Jesus is not the God of the rumor mill, the God of our nightmares, who makes his list and checks it twice to see if we've been naughty or nice. The Father of Jesus is the God of pure grace. He is the One who dealt with all human sin, once and for all, through the Messiah Jesus, who redeemed Israel and the whole world from sin through his own death and resurrection. "Believe in me and live," he says. "Get off the merry-go-round. It's not getting you anywhere but deeper in the hole."

New in Christ

"For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God—not the result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life" (Ephesians 2:8-10).

You can't get salvation by works. We all at least give lip service to that. So why do we keep acting like we can? Why do we keep worrying that we may have lost salvation every time we sin? Salvation does not come by works. It comes purely by grace, and we can pick it up and drink it down and enjoy it forever if we simply trust God, who justifies, guess who, the ungodly (Romans 4:5).

He has made us righteous his way, in Christ—not our way, not by our latest set of good deeds. Verse 10 says we were created for good works. What good works are they? They are good works in Jesus Christ. They are not *our* good works. We are what he has made us. He has made us something we were not before—he has made us new creatures in Christ.

We are strengthened in our inner being with power through his Spirit (Ephesians 3:16). Christ dwells in our hearts through faith (verse 17), not in ways that are open and obvious. He works within us to do anything and everything of worth and value (verse 20). He makes us what we really are in him, God's own children, and he does that in spite of ourselves. Remember, he justifies the ungodly, and ungodly is all we would ever be without him.

Confident about the judgment

John writes about having confidence in the judgment (1 John 4:17). What do we need to do to be confident about the judgment? Only to believe the promise of God (5:1, 5)! Only to trust the Lord both to save us and to give us his righteousness in Christ (Romans 3:21-26). Only to give him our fears and anxieties and rest in his sure word. Peter wrote: "Cast all your anxiety on

him because he cares for you” (1 Peter 5:7). And care for us he does. Paul described in Romans 8:32-39 the unshakable faithfulness God has for us:

He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all—how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things? Who will bring any charge against those whom God has chosen? It is God who justifies. Who is he that condemns? Christ Jesus, who died—more than that, who was raised to life—is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us. Who shall separate us from the love of Christ?... *Nothing* can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

“If we confess our sins, he who is faithful and just will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness” (1 John 1:9). When we confess our sins we are acknowledging that we are sinners in need of Christ’s righteousness. Why confess such a need unless we trust him to forgive and cleanse, unless we believe him, unless we joyfully accept his free grace?

Confession itself merits us nothing, of course. It is merely a means of expressing trust in God, who has already freely forgiven sinners for the sake of his Son. It is the means by which we actually pick up the free gift of forgiveness and take it home with us.

It is like the parable of the tax collector and the Pharisee who went into the temple to pray (Luke 18:10). The Pharisee prayed about all the good things he was doing, but the tax collector said, “Father be merciful to me, a sinner.” Jesus said the tax-collecting sinner went away clean.

Do you see what is happening? The law-abiding Pharisee was seeking purity in the things he could do. But there is only one who is pure—Jesus Christ. The only way to be pure is to be in Christ, and to be in Christ is God’s gift, freely given to all, to be experienced by anybody who trusts him for it.

The tax collector trusted God for mercy and got it. The Pharisee didn’t need to trust God for mercy, he figured, because his deeds were, he believed, already pure. He did not, he figured, need to stand in the beggars’ line for mercy with the likes of the tax collector. So, he wouldn’t receive from God what God has already done for him in Christ.

We cannot be pure by acting pure. We cannot be pure by acting impure. We can be pure only by trusting in God, who saves sinners. The only thing a person has to be to get into the kingdom of God is a sinner (and everybody is a sinner), and the only way to experience it is by believing God, trusting him to wipe the record clean.

God says he has already done that in Christ (1 John 2:2). God says

cleansed sinners have Christ's righteousness attributed to them. God says, "Trust me. It's taken care of. You don't need to justify yourself. You don't need to punish yourself. You don't need to qualify. You don't need to clean up your act. Just trust me. I have taken care of everything. Trust me."

Righteousness does not come by trying to be good (you are not and cannot be good by trying). Righteousness comes as a gift of God, who declares you righteous for the sake of Christ, who became sin for us all, so that sin could be defeated and our wickedness fixed.

Whatever Jesus takes upon himself gets sanctified, cleansed and saved. He took our sinful wicked minds on himself. That is how we get fixed—not by trying real hard to be good. We can believe it and begin living in the joy of the light, or we can scoff at it and keep right on being miserable sourpusses wallowing in the dark.

Either way, it has been done for us without our help. The heart that has some inkling of how desperate is its need, is the heart that is inclined to seize the truth. The gospel is not good news for folks who think they are already good; it is good news for wretched sinners.

People who consider themselves good, decent folks are not inclined to stand in the soup line for free salvation next to rag-tag spiritual underachievers. They prefer the special entrance for the spiritually well-to-do who have properly purchased tickets in the special VIP section. Only one problem: Their tickets are frauds, and at this banquet, everybody sits in the VIP section.

God at work

Believe it or not, we can trust God to transform us into the image of Christ. It is the Holy Spirit who does the sanctifying work of chiseling off the lifetime of sinful habits and attitudes and thinking, not us. It is the Spirit who transforms us from the inside out (Romans 8:11). Some of that is painful and hard, but it is also liberating and joyous and exciting, because through it we come to know and love Christ more intimately and look forward to his appearing with greater anticipation and hope. It is Christ who brings our lives into harmony with the reason we were created, to bring glory to God, to love him and, in him, to love the other humans he created.

In case you haven't noticed, even after we come to faith in Christ, we still struggle with sin. But what the gospel declares to us is that we do not ever have to fear that we "might not make it." There is no need to worry that we don't "measure up." We can rely on the Word of God. We can believe the promise.

We can accept God's love and rest in his Word with the assurance that

we are saved from our sins, that we belong to him and that he won't lose us (Romans 8:1). We can rest in his promise that in Christ we stand with God right now, and that we will continue to stand with him when Christ comes. We can rest securely in his love, knowing that we are forgiven, and that even though we still often lose our struggles with sin, our saved condition in Christ with God is never in jeopardy, because Christ and Christ alone is both the Author and the Finisher of our faith (Hebrews 12:2).

That is why Jesus, who knows all about such things, calls this stuff good news. Because it is. That is why this cannot be said enough: Don't let anyone deceive you into thinking that the gospel spells doom for you because you haven't cleaned up your act. They haven't cleaned up theirs either, but that's not the point. The point is this: Jesus Christ came to save sinners, and Sinners R Us. Believe it; it's the gospel truth.

One more thing

There is one more thing we need to mention. Perhaps you have heard someone say something like this: "Jesus died for your past sins, not for your future sins." Wrong! Jesus died for all sins—past, present and future. Remember, when you are in Christ, God does not count your sins against you (Romans 4:6-8; 8:1). Does that sound so antinomian, so doing-away-with-the-law, that you can't swallow it? Does such talk make you afraid that people might run out and sin all they can and not worry about their salvation? If it does, you are not alone.

God declares that he gives us powerful and absolute grace. But that idea scares some people silly. It runs so counter to all our notions about fairness and plain old common decency that we just can't bear to see it in all its glory. We feel we have to tone it down a little or it will get completely out of hand.

Two things must be said. First, this unvarnished, raw and universal grace is real; it is God's own grace; and it is already a *fait accompli*, a done deal. So whether it bothers the daylights out of you or not, you might as well get used to it, because there is no other ball game in town.

Second, you really don't need to worry that people who trust God for pure and complete pardon for sins past, sins present and sins future will run out and sin all they can, because it simply does not work like that.

Consider this: Does knowing that God has forgiven *your* sins through the blood of Jesus make you want to run out and sin all you can? I doubt it. When you are in Christ, you hate sin, and even though you still do it, you hate the fact that you still do it. The last thing on your mind is to "sin all you can." In fact, when you are feeling close to God, you cannot even fathom the idea of sinning, much less running out and sinning all you can.

Of course, we do not often feel such close intimacy with God, and sin still deceives us and slays us, as Paul put it, but even so, we do not view God's grace as permission to sin—that is not how it works. Sin is a disaster. It creates havoc and ruin. It hurts and destroys. When we sin, to one degree or another, we and those around us suffer the physical and emotional consequences of our sins. But, by the grace of God through Jesus Christ our Lord, we do not and will not lose the gift of salvation because of our sins.

Through Christ (the Son of God who became human for our sakes, slain from the foundation of the world), God has dealt completely with all human sin, taking it upon himself and destroying it forever through his birth, life, death and resurrection. God did not save us so that we can continue to sin, but he is not an old fool. He knows we still sin. He does not condone sin. Sin amounts to a betrayal of his love, and he is grieved by our sins.

Still, he loves us so much that he sent his Son to save us from sin and death, and indeed, he saves us absolutely and completely. So even though sin is still present, it does not have the upper hand. We will not die in our sins—we will live forever through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Faith not sight

Christ said everything has been taken care of. But it doesn't take much looking around to see that things don't look very taken care of just yet, not in our lives, not in the church, and not in the world. That is why we have to live by faith, and not by sight.

We trust God that he has taken care of our sins, even though we still grind through them, and that he has indeed taken care of every bad thing in the world, every injustice, every wrong, every hatred, every pain, fear, terror and trauma—even though these things still exert real influence in the world for the time being.

In Christ's death and resurrection, all things, all things, are made right, cleansed, purified and reconciled. We still suffer the consequences of sin, our own sins and those of others. Yet, in faith, taking God at his word, we know two things: 1) Because we are in Christ, our salvation is never in jeopardy; and 2) We are completely safe and secure in God's hands.

He is always with us, in good times and bad, in our successes and in our pain, in our failures and in our tragedies. Nothing, not even our sins, can ever separate us from God. So when we walk through our dark times, whether times of stress, pain, sorrow, tragedy, grief or just plain guilt of sin, remember that our crucified and risen Savior walks with us.

He feels our pain and grieves with us, and he will never leave us; he will

never forsake us. Everything is indeed all right, even though our night is awfully dark and cold right now. But the eternal dawn will come, and when it does, and we at last see all things as they really are in Christ, our joy and peace in the Truth of God, the consummation of all our hope, will overflow forever like a thousand Niagaras.

J. Michael Feazell

IN GOD WE TRUST

God wants us to trust him. We are to trust in him, not in ourselves. We are to trust that he is good, that he loves us, and that he is full of mercy. Our faith is to be in him. He is trustworthy, absolutely reliable and faithful.

Trust, or faith, is a key ingredient of our new life in Christ. We are justified by faith (Romans 3:28), sanctified by faith (Acts 26:18) and saved by faith in Jesus Christ. We live by faith (2 Corinthians 5:7), stand in faith (Romans 11:20), work in faith (1 Thessalonians 1:3) and pray in faith. We cannot please God without faith (Hebrews 11:6). It is absolutely essential!

When we put our trust in God, we are trusting him to be our very life (Colossians 3:4). That means that when we first put our trust in God, we are taking the first step toward learning to trust him for everything!

A step beyond belief

Trust is active. We do not merely accept that God took care of our salvation from sin and death and then go on our way with no further thought about it. Trust in God cannot be a passive thing—by its very nature it has to be active. Faith generates action. It is far more than just believing a set of facts about God (see James 2:19)—it is trusting God to be and to do everything he said he will be and do for us. When we trust God, we are committed to everything he is committed to.

That is why worship is important and meaningful. Worship is a means God has given us of rehearsing and remembering who he is and what he has done for us. Through worship, God helps us more deeply understand and value who he is and what he has given us. Worship helps us commemorate and celebrate his love for us and the good things he has done for us.

When we trust God, we don't want to hide any part of our lives from him. We want him to make us into the person he wants us to be, and we trust him both to know what to do and how to do it. The Holy Spirit leads and empowers us to love him with all our heart, mind, soul and strength (Mark 12:30), and to adore him, desire him and delight ourselves in him (Psalm 37:4).

In worship, we praise God for his power and love. We express and act out our faith that he will always be the most important reality in our lives. Our praise helps us put life into better perspective.

When we trust God, we realize he is our greatest priority. He is more important to us than anything else—more valuable than possessions, money, time, reputation and even this mortal life. He is our all in all.

The greatest commandment

The greatest commandment, Jesus said, is to love God with all that we are. That means we orient our lives around him, around his gracious will for us. When we trust him, we believe he knows best for us, and we want to please him. He is our point of reference, our definition of a meaningful life.

When we trust him, we do his will not out of fear, but out of love—not begrudgingly, but with joy. We trust his judgment, his word and his ways. We even trust him to give us a new heart, to make us more and more like him, to lead us to love what he loves and to value what he values.

We would never be able to do any of this on our own—we must trust God to fulfill his promise to do his work in us from the inside out, by the Holy Spirit transforming us. To trust God is to let him have his good way with us. It is to believe him, to desire and to take his advice, to seek to follow him wherever he leads.

When we trust God, we trust him with all that we are—our past, our present and our future combined. Like a toddler resting fearlessly and contentedly in its mother's arms, we rest securely in the love of our heavenly Father.

Joseph Tkach

IN CHRIST WE TRUST

Christianity is based largely on trust. We have been given exceedingly great and precious promises, but for the most part they remain as promises. We have eternal life, we are told, but we still die. We will be raised incorruptible, but in this life our bodies still degenerate. We have fellowship with the Father, we are assured, but sometimes he seems terribly distant.

How can we be sure it is all true? Although we have evidence in nature and in Scripture, we must still have a large component of trust. We have to take God's word for it, to trust him to be faithful. We have no other choice.

All beliefs require faith. Atheism requires that certain ideas be believed. Agnosticism involves beliefs that have no proof. Hinduism, Buddhism, animism and all other isms involve believing ideas that cannot be proven. Our decision, then, is not *whether* to have faith, but what to have faith in. Christians have faith in Jesus Christ.

Jesus died for our sins

Faith in Christ means much more than merely believing that he exists, as if we are saved by our knowledge. Faith means more than agreeing that he is our Savior, that he died for our sins. That is important, but faith involves more than that.

If we believe that Jesus died for our sins, then we also believe that we sinned, and that our sins deserved death. We believe that we could not pay for our own sins, and if Jesus did not die for us, then we would be condemned, excluded from the kingdom of heaven. If we accept Christ as our Savior, then we admit that we cannot save ourselves. We don't just trust in God—we trust in Christ as our only means of being in fellowship with God, our only means of being saved.

If we stand before the judgment seat of Christ and he asks us why we should go into eternal life rather than eternal punishment (Matthew 25:46), we cannot talk about ourselves. There's no point in mentioning all the good things we did, all the laws we kept, all the Bible study we did. The central issue is not what we did, but what has been done about our sins. Everyone has done a mixture of good and bad, righteousness and sin. The question is, What has been done about the bad that we did?

The answer is, Jesus died for our sins. That is the only way our sins can be removed from the record, the only way we can be counted as righteous. It does not matter how many sins we have—Jesus died for them. Even if we have only one little sin and millions of good deeds, the only way we can be

counted as perfectly righteous is to accept the death of Christ as covering our transgression. Even if we have millions of sins and very little good in our life, Jesus died for all our sins, no matter how many there are.

We don't have any physical evidence of that, do we? We can see historical evidence that Jesus died, but historians can never prove that his death covers our sins. For that, we have to trust him, to take his word for it. We can see evidence that he was resurrected, vindicated by God, and that the apostles proclaimed forgiveness in his name, and we have reason to trust him, but it still boils down to trust. We have his word, and we have to trust him. We have no other hope. If there is no God, we are doomed, and if there is no Jesus, we are doomed.

So when it comes to eternal life, where do we stand? Do we stand on our good deeds, or do we stand on the promises of Jesus Christ? When we accept Jesus as our Savior, it means that we stand on him. We trust that in his death, he did everything that is needed for our salvation. We do not trust in ourselves, but in him, for eternal life. Titus 3:5 makes it clear: "He saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy."

No one can boast in what they have done. No one can say, "I think I'll make it into the kingdom because I've done this or that." No one gets into the kingdom with a self-made ticket. All we can say is: "I will be saved only because Jesus died for all my sins, even though they were many. I can be here only because I was invited, and he paid for my ticket."

When we stop discussing the righteous deeds we have done and focus instead on Jesus' grace, then we have accepted Jesus as our Savior. If we try to claim some credit, even a little bit, then we are not fully trusting in Christ.

Is it fair?

"But that's not fair," some people say. "People who do good are locked out because they rejected the gospel, and criminals are welcomed because they accepted it on their deathbed? Where is the logic in that?" The logic is that everybody has done a mixture of good and evil. The question is not whether one has done more good than sin, but whether the sin has been taken care of.

People who insist on doing things their own way, even if they usually do good, cannot be trusted, because "their own way" will eventually fail. People who reject the grace of God are stuck in pride. Some people think they are good enough for God on their own righteousness, but they woefully underestimate the goodness of God.

On the other hand, people who admit their sins, even if they are many,

are on the road to recovery. People who admit that they don't have a chance, except for the grace of God, are willing to accept God's help—and that is the only way that eternal life will be enjoyable. People are saved not so much on where they are on the highway, but on the direction they are looking.

We have to admit that we aren't God, that we can't work our way into being perfect. Jesus told this parable about it:

Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee stood up and prayed about himself: "God, I thank you that I am not like other men—robbers, evildoers, adulterers—or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get." But the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, "God, have mercy on me, a sinner." (Luke 18:10-13)

Jesus' point is that we must recognize our need for mercy. If we think we are OK because of what we have done, we are not OK, no matter how much good we have done. We have misunderstood what "good" is. We have neglected the most important duty in the universe: to worship God. We have turned our backs on our Creator, trying to be independent of him, refusing to believe him when he says that there is no way we can be good on our own, and that we need his mercy and help.

For spiritual life, we must recognize that we are dependent on God, not just for physical life but also for spiritual life and well-being. When we understand grace, we become grateful to God for his mercy. We know that we fall way short of his glory, but he loves us anyway. This does not cause us to despise him, but to love him. We are moved to worship him even more as we see more clearly the endless depths of his love and patience. As Titus 2:12 says, God's grace teaches us to despise sin, and to seek righteousness while we wait for Christ to complete the process he has begun in our lives.

In Christ, we have confidence! He has demonstrated his commitment to us—he did this by setting aside his glory to become a human to give his life for us. We can be sure that he will complete the job.

His resurrection is evidence that God approves of his sacrifice for us, that it was accepted, that it was an effective atonement. His miracles, his resurrection and his ongoing help in our lives all testify that he can and will do what he has promised. He is the God-human mediator, uniquely qualified to give us fellowship with God.

An unfinished work

But we do not yet see what we shall be. We still see sin in ourselves, we

struggle, we see ourselves falling short time and time again. Yet we do not despair, for we are assured that Jesus' death covers all sins, even ours. Our failures do not depress us, but cause us to be more thankful for God's mercy. Our confidence is in Christ, not in our performance, not in our fallible efforts to please him. We cannot lean on ourselves, but must lean completely on Christ. Only he is trustworthy.

We are like the patriarchs, who believed in things they could not see (Hebrews 11:1). The patriarchs had plenty of sin, and they had moments of doubt, but they ended up trusting in God. They received some of the promises, but for the really big promises, they died without having received what was promised (verse 13).

Abraham was promised an eternal city, a heavenly home, but he died without it. Our only real evidence is faith. We have no tangible proof that Abraham will get what he believed; we have no tangible proof that we will get the salvation that we look for. What we have are promises. Jesus says: "Yes, you are forgiven. Yes, you have the Holy Spirit living in you. Yes, you have eternal life. Yes, you are qualified for the kingdom. Yes, I will see to it."

We do not have proof—we have promises, and we have to trust in him. Yes, he has paid for all our sins. Yes, salvation is by grace, a free gift even to the worst of sinners. Yes, he has done what we need. We can trust in him. We can trust him for eternal salvation; we can also trust him in day-to-day life.

Joseph Tkach

ANOTHER LOOK AT FAITH

One night recently I couldn't sleep, and after an hour or so of tossing and turning I got up and went to the kitchen. I stared into the fridge for a minute or so, then stared into the freezer for a while, and finally into the food cupboard, and then started over. During the third or fourth survey of the fridge, I pulled some leftover meatloaf from behind the milk and made myself a sandwich, and went to see if anything good might be on TV at 2 o'clock in the morning.

Flipping through the channels I ran past a Star Trek rerun, an old M.A.S.H. episode, and a Steam Buggy infomercial. Then I came upon a bespectacled, white-haired preacher who, with furled brow, was pointing threateningly and warning his listeners with an air of authority that they had better "wake up" and start "keeping God's law," including, he emphasized, "God's holy Sabbath day," or they would not be in God's kingdom.

He was scary. He had a string of verses lined up, right out of the Bible, that sounded like God was mad at just about everybody, and that the only way out of the horrible mess we've gotten ourselves into is to "repent" and "start keeping God's law."

"Oh, you've heard that it's just by faith, but that is not true," he said. "All those preachers are just preaching an empty faith, without meaning. God will not save you if you are not keeping his law."

I wondered what this preacher counts as "keeping God's law." Does he mean what he says? Does he mean that even one sin will doom you to hell, regardless of your faith? Just how well does one have to keep God's law in order to be saved? Is 95 percent good enough? Or does one have to be perfect?

He admitted that nobody can keep God's law perfectly, "at least not on our own"—but with Christ in us keeping the law, he said, we can. I felt sick. This finger-waving professing prophet was telling people that if Christ lives in them, then not only *can* they keep the law of God perfectly, but they *must*, or they will assuredly not be saved.

Wait a minute.

I would like to point out that no Christians, not even the sober-faced, stone-jawed preacher on the TV screen or the apostle Paul himself, have ever, EVER, finally got to the point, even with Christ living in them, that they no longer sin.

I am baffled as to why the Law Brigade has never seemed to notice that. Or maybe they have, but quickly put it out of their minds, since it doesn't fit

their tidy view of how salvation works. Or maybe it's never occurred to them, and they really do believe, that somewhere, somehow, somebody finally, at last, with the Spirit's help, actually overcame all sin and got perfect and died without ever sinning again.

Only in Christ

The gospel teaches us that “because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions—it is by grace you have been saved” (Ephesians 2:4-5). The righteous us—the sanctified us, the perfect us—is a *miracle of grace* performed by God in Christ. That perfect us is “hidden with God in Christ” and won't be seen by us or anyone else until Christ comes back (Colossians 3:2-3). We do not get perfect in this life by trying really hard, by setting goals for overcoming, by following Preacher Fearmonger's seven-point program, or any other form of Christian work, jargon or platitude.

We are accounted righteous by God for the sake of Jesus Christ—and Jesus Christ alone—and that is only because God is holy and good and full of grace and loves us and he *did it*, period (Colossians 1:19-20). That's why we trust our salvation to him alone and not to the latest overcoming model. With a sense of peace, I went back to bed and fell fast asleep.

What must we do?

Salvation is by God's grace, given freely in spite of our sins for the sake of Jesus Christ, and we experience and enjoy that gift by trusting him. If we don't trust him, we don't enjoy the gift he has given us; if we trust him, we do. It's that simple.

We don't have to know deep theology, or sign the right statement of faith, or recite the right phrases, or read the right books, or belong to the right club. He is already our Redeemer; he has already redeemed us. All we have to do is trust him to do what he has already done and to be who he already is.

“But you had better stop sinning!” warns Preacher Ironjaw, who forever seems to be lurking behind the lamppost. Well, when Preacher Ironjaw stops sinning, maybe we can too. But he won't, because he doesn't have it in him, and neither do we. The sooner we figure that out, the sooner we will cast our burdens on Christ and find our true rest in him.

A crowd beside the Sea of Galilee once asked Jesus, “What must we do to do the works God requires?” Jesus answered, “The work of God is this: to believe in the one he has sent” (John 6:28-29).

“But my sins!” your weary conscience protests. Listen. Jesus knows you are a sinner. That's why he died for you. Don't let your sins talk louder than

the Creator and Redeemer of the whole universe. Sin and death are done for. *Your* sins and *your* death are done for. They are done for because God condemned them and destroyed them and reconciled all things to himself through the blood of Jesus Christ (Colossians 1:19-20). That's the gospel; that's what the Holy Spirit empowers you to know and believe so you can start resting in Christ instead of worrying so much.

Not saved by faith

We are saved by *grace*, by God's own kindness toward us, which he expressed perfectly in Jesus Christ. No work of ours, not even our faith, can save us. Salvation is entirely God's work for us from beginning to end. Our faith is simply the act of accepting what God has already given us even though we didn't deserve it. Faith doesn't cause him to give it to us. It doesn't convince him to give it to us. He doesn't even withhold it from us until we have faith; he died for us while we were still sinners, before we ever had any faith (Romans 5:8).

But without faith, we will not, indeed cannot, see, experience and enjoy his gift. In other words, if we don't trust him, we won't believe him. That means we won't accept and make use of his gift. And when you don't believe you have something and therefore make no use of it, it amounts to the same thing as not having it. Faith doesn't save us, but without faith, the salvation we have in Christ by God's grace is meaningless to us.

So we lament, "But I'm not sure I have faith." By God's grace, the answer to that concern is not to worry about it. Jesus has enough faith for all of us. He provides not only the obedience and perfection, but also the faith (compare 2 Peter 1:3: "His divine power has given us everything we need for life and godliness through our knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness"). So instead of worrying that we don't have enough faith, we can simply trust Christ to save us in spite of our doubts and weakness. We can trust *him* to have *for us* the faith we need to believe in him.

We can trust Christ to save us in spite of our sins, in spite of our past, in spite of our ignorance, our fear, our doubt. We can trust him to be everything for us that God requires, because he is.

"Wait a minute," you say. "You just said we have to have faith, and then you said if we don't have faith, don't worry about it. What kind of shell game are you playing?"

It's no shell game. It's just that we need to learn *to trust in Jesus, not in faith*. When we start analyzing our behavior to see if it is good enough to make God happy, we are playing a losing game, because our behavior is never that

good, for starters. In the same way, when we start to analyze our faith to see if it is good enough, we have already aced ourselves right out of real faith, which is simply trusting Jesus. Instead, we have set up faith as the new work of salvation, and we are trying to see how well *we* are doing. We have ruined the whole thing.

That is why, when we start to worry that we don't have enough faith, we should just trust Jesus, whose faith is perfect, to be everything we need for salvation. We trust *him*, not our faith. We can set aside our worry about how much faith we have, and remember that we have decided (by God's grace—through the Holy Spirit freeing us and prodding us) to trust Jesus to save us no matter how things look.

Looks are deceiving

Looks are deceiving. Sometimes things look bad because we feel depressed. Sometimes things look bad because we are plagued by doubt. Sometimes all we can see is our mountain of sins and failures. But we don't trust in looks and feelings; we trust in Jesus Christ. Feeling good about our progress in holy living does not save us. Feeling bad about it does not condemn us. Christ saves us. We trust in him, not in how things appear to us.

The Bible says that there is *nothing* that can separate us from Christ's love (Romans 8:31-39). Our worries are no match for his love. Our doubts can't overpower his love. The shortcomings of our church, our pastor, our friends, or our families are no match for his saving power.

The noise, lack of space, and even chaos of our home, which might keep us from the kind of prayer and Bible study we might hear about others enjoying, cannot keep Christ from saving us. Not even our roller-coaster-style emotional instability can keep him from making us into his new creation.

When we trust Christ, when we rest in him, we can quit the futile game of counting our good deeds and our bad deeds. We can cast all our cares on him. We can confess, without fear or reservation, all our sins to him. We can rest in his forgiveness, in his acceptance, in his love.

God has not called us to worry, to fret, to fear (Romans 8:15). The Holy Spirit leads us to courage, to boldness, to confidence in the one who loves us and gave himself for us. He is on our side (verses 31-32); why should we worry that he, the very one who is indescribably *for* us, might somehow be *against* us? It makes no sense. Yet every time we fall short, it seems, we go through this traumatic worry session that God is going to pound us instead of forgive us.

Sin lies to us

Sin lies to us in countless ways. It tells us that it is fun. It tells us that we need it, that we deserve it. It tells us it won't hurt us or others. All lies! Once we fall for its lies, though, sin takes off its mask and laughs in our faces while it beats us senseless. Then it starts lying all over again.

Maybe the worst lie of all is when sin tells us that God doesn't like us anymore. Don't ever forget: Christ died for us while we were *still sinners* (Romans 5:6, 8). God does not hate sinners. He loves them. That's why he died for them.

Are you a sinner? What a surprise! Well then, sinner, God loves you. He loves you right in the midst of your sinfulness; it is right there in your sinfulness that his greatest display of love took place on the cross.

That means that when we confess our sins, we are not begging for God to do something that he might not otherwise do. We are, in a word, *celebrating* the forgiveness he has already given us. We admit our need and then celebrate the restoration of fellowship we have with God through Jesus Christ. We celebrate our friendship with God, who loved us and saved us, coming to us in our sinfulness and taking it away. (And in the joy of such celebration of God's love and grace toward us sinners, we likewise forgive those who have sinned against us.)

Trust his mercy

When we trust in Christ, we believe he knows what is best for us. That means we listen to what he tells us to do, and we do our best to do it. Still, even though we commit ourselves to live by every word of God, we fail in so many ways. But because we trust in Christ, we do not *ever* have to despair! We ask forgiveness, *in full assurance* that we have it, and we get up and try again.

This process is an exercise of faith, of trusting in the One who saves us and is at work in us. As C.S. Lewis wrote: "We learn, on the one hand, that we cannot trust ourselves even in our best moments, and on the other, that we need not despair even in our worst, for our failures are forgiven. The only fatal thing is to sit down content with anything less than perfection" (*Mere Christianity*, chapter five).

Keeping faith strong

Faith is not a feeling. It is not an emotion. It is a gift of God that prompts a decision, a decision to trust in Christ no matter how we feel. Sometimes we mistake our emotions for faith, and we think that because we have bright

feelings toward God we are full of faith, or that because we are in the dumps we lack faith. But that is a mistake. Faith is not based on moods. It is a gift, ministered to us by the Holy Spirit, and it must be held onto even when the winds of doubt and fear threaten to pull it away.

But it is not usually the wind that causes us to lose faith; winds usually motivate us to hold on tighter. No, it is usually neglect—just setting it down someplace and planning to get back to it sometime, but rarely getting around to it. That is why Christians make it a point to pray and read the Bible and confess their sins every day, as well as meet together every week. When we do that, we are reminded of what we believe, and therefore it is less likely that our confidence will slip away (see Ephesians 3:12; Hebrews 10:25).

Such constant reinforcement, such practice or exercise, helps our grip on faith remain strong, which is important, because it is only through faith that we can see things the way they really are—instead of the way they appear to be. The more we let God remind us of the truth, the less inclined we are to believe sin's lies.

Without faith, the lies that sin tells us start to sound logical again. Without faith, we start to think God is angry at us again. Without faith, we start to think salvation comes by good behavior again. Without faith, we start to forget the real gospel, and that makes us start down either the road of arrogance or the road of despair, depending on how we feel about the way our dimming eyes decide to size up our behavior.

One way we could describe faith is this: Faith is the Holy Spirit nudging us to believe what is really true in spite of the great pendulum swings in how we feel about things. Here's what is really true: God loves us and he saved us by the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Faithfulness

Some Christians think that God ordained before all time some to be saved and the rest to be lost. But the Scriptures tell us that what God has ordained before all time is his own steadfast love, that is, his unswerving covenant faithfulness (Acts 13:32-33). He will finish what he began in Christ before all things (Ephesians 1:9-10), and he will do it because he is faithful, and in spite of our human unfaithfulness (Romans 5:6). Our unfaithfulness becomes the tool through which God magnificently displays his utter faithfulness (Romans 5:10, 15; Titus 3:3-7).

Christ, the ever-living God whose word cannot be broken, became God in the flesh, the perfectly faithful human for all our sakes, thereby keeping his covenant with humanity from both ends. From God's side, as God, he

became and provided everything we needed for life and godliness (2 Pet. 1:3); from our side, as human, he became and offered up to God everything humans needed to be and needed to give to God (Romans 8:1-3). That is why we find our fullness, our true selves, only in our union with Christ, for it is only in our union with Christ that we are truly ourselves as God created us to be (Colossians 3:3-4).

J. Michael Feazell

BELIEVING THE GOSPEL

Many Christians are afraid of the gospel. We are afraid of the gospel because it is too good. Many of us are more comfortable with *religion* than we are with the *gospel*. We prefer to read the Bible as a divine rulebook that guards the entrance to the kingdom than to read it as God's witness to his redemption of the whole cosmos through his Son.

We prefer to think that when God breathed the life of his Word into the Bible, he was merely creating a religion—a divine formula to show humans what things to do and not to do in order to get on God's good side and stay there.

But the gospel is not a new and improved religion. The gospel is an affront to religion. It is the end of religion, the end of all systems of works designed to make us acceptable to God. The gospel, by contrast, tells us that God himself has already, through Jesus Christ, made us acceptable. The gospel is good news; religion is bad news; and the gospel wins. Christ is victorious. Sin is vanquished.

We are overcomers only in Christ, not in *our* overcoming anything. We are sinners, always have been and will continue to be to the day we die. Whatever we may have overcome is like removing a spoonful of sand from the beach. Unless and until we are found in Christ, we remain dead in our sins. And we are found in Christ only by trusting him to be for us who he says he is and to do for us what he says he does. Only when we trust him will we accept his gift of mercy and life, and only when we wake up to our sinfulness will we trust him.

As long as we think we are “doing OK,” or that we “aren’t all that bad” or that we are “making progress” or even that we will never be “good enough,” we will not trust him. All such thinking is trusting not him, but ourselves. It is thinking that his acceptance of us is based on how well we behave. It is thinking that if we do better, then he will accept us, or conversely, that he accepts us because we have been overcoming.

God accepts us because he wants to accept us, and not because we have measured up. God dealt with our sin by the blood of Christ, not by giving us a new and improved law code. We are justified because God justified us himself, personally, through his Son. God did for us in Christ what we could not do for ourselves, and he calls on us to trust *him* to be our righteousness (1 Corinthians 1:30).

That means we do not have righteousness. It is not just a matter that we “have got some problems.” It is not just a matter that we have “a few things to overcome.” It is not even a matter of “putting sin out of our lives.” It is a

matter of understanding that we are hopeless losers, sinners through and through, and that even our “good” deeds are thoroughly laced with selfish impurity. Until we see that, until we see ourselves for what we really are, we will not trust him who alone saves sinners.

Fear of the gospel

Many Christians are afraid of the gospel because it puts everybody on the same level—“All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Romans 3:23). That means that we, being sinners ourselves, have no ground to feel spiritually superior to people who do things that disgust and offend us.

Others are afraid of the gospel because the gospel requires them to believe that God will save them in spite of their sins. We have a hard time trusting God to do exactly what he promised to do—forgive us our sins. We want to prove to him we can “do it.” We want to show him we’ll be faithful, that we will be obedient, that we will be “good Christians.”

But the truth is, we won’t be. We will sin, and we will sin again, and again. And until we believe the gospel, instead of some fairy tale about having to please God before he will accept us, we will not enter God’s rest. God saves us; changes in our behavior do not.

We can live in misery, struggling to be found worthy by perfect obedience and constantly failing, and fearing that God is waiting to squash us like flies, or we can trust his Word. (Or even worse, we can live in appalling arrogance, actually believing that we are worthily obeying God and trusting him to accept us for our “holy deeds.”)

God is our salvation; our improved behavior is not. To repent is to turn to God and away from ourselves. It is to admit that we are sinners and that we need God’s mercy. It is to trust God to be faithful to his word of grace spoken in his Son before the world began. It is to remove our little homemade crown and hand it over to our Maker, the author of eternal salvation.

God is our righteousness; our illusion of good behavior is not. When we come to see our righteousness as filthy rags, as indeed it is, then we can begin to see our need for God’s grace and mercy. When we believe his word of salvation in his Son, then we can begin to trust him to forgive all our sins and save us.

Trusting God

Why is it so hard to trust God to forgive us and to make us his perfectly righteous children in Christ? Perhaps one reason is because we can’t stand to think of ourselves as, or to think that others might think of us as, bald-faced sinners. We prefer the façade of pretending to be good, decent folks. But we

are not good, decent folks. Nobody is good, decent folks. At best, we are less destructive and wicked than we could be if we let ourselves go entirely.

Have you ever noticed that if you behave decently for a day or two, you begin to feel like you are a pretty good person after all? And conversely, if your natural self gets loose for few minutes and you behave like the ratbag you are, then you feel depressed, disappointed and frustrated that you are not as grand as you had been imagining?

But what is there to be disappointed about? Why, given what you are, a sinner, were you expecting not to behave accordingly from time to time? Our disappointment ought to be in our failure to honor the God of our salvation, not in our failure to look impeccable to ourselves and others.

If our disappointment comes from failing to honor God, then we would be free to see more clearly that in spite of our sin, we can rest in the atonement of Christ, for our sins are forgiven in him. The reason we need a Savior is because we need saving. The gospel declares that God has indeed saved us through Christ. Christ died for us ungodly people while we were still sinners (Romans 5:8).

Please don't tell me that we "were" sinners, but now we are not to be sinners anymore. Please drop the rhetoric. We *are* sinners. We *do* still sin after conversion. Every Christian who ever lived continues to sin after conversion. That doesn't make sin OK. It doesn't condone sin. It is simply a fact, and one we would all do much better to just admit, and quit pretending that if we try hard enough we will become sinless.

There is one way in which we are not sinners. As believers we are in Christ, and as such, we are not sinners, in the sense that God does not count our sins against us (Romans 4:8). In other words, when we do not pretend that we are not sinners, but instead put our trust in Jesus Christ who saves sinners, God does not count our sins against us (compare 1 Timothy 1:15). We are *forgiven* sinners.

Overcomers

What must we do about sin? We must trust God to forgive our sins. We must *trust him!* He is our only hope. We are sinners, and unless God forgives our sins, we come under the condemnation all sinners deserve. We are not going to stop being sinners. I'm sure you have tried, like I have, and discovered that despite occasional bouts of improvement, sin is still alive and well in your life. But God says that if we trust him *he* will take care of our sins and *he* will count us righteous *in Christ* who, *for our sakes*, became the perfect human.

The Bible is not a rulebook for new and improved religion. It is the Word of God, God's chosen revelation of himself to us, declaring to us that in Jesus

Christ he has dealt with the sins of the world so that whoever trusts him will be saved. That is good news. It is the gospel. It is not religion. Don't be afraid of it.

I know. You're still waiting for me to say something about the importance of behaving right. But I'm not going to. At least not in the way you are probably used to. We are overcomers in Christ alone; when it comes to godly overcoming, there is no other way to be an overcomer.

When you trust Christ to be your righteousness, your behavior will be set by the Holy Spirit on the road to improvement, regardless of whether you constantly set "overcoming goals" for yourself. But if you try to improve your behavior without trusting Christ to be your only righteousness, you may or may not be successful, and whether or not you are won't make a hill of beans of difference in terms of your standing with God.

In other words, salvation is not based on what you do; it is based on what God has already done. When you trust God, you are in Christ, and when you are in Christ, God does not count your sins against you. If you do not trust God, you are still in your sins, because you are not in Christ.

Priorities

Here's a gospel tip: don't make behaving better your main goal in life. If you do, you'll always be frustrated, disappointed in yourself and miserable, not to mention a judgmental and obnoxious prig. You're welcome to it if you want it, but will-powering yourself into a better you is a no-win life goal. Will-power goodness is the root of religion; it has no place in the gospel.

Instead, make your main goal in life knowing and trusting in the Lord your God for absolutely everything, including your behavior. When you do that, your preoccupation with yourself and how good you are will fade, and your eyes will begin to open to the righteousness of God and the joy and peace of his kingdom. The Holy Spirit will reorder your priorities, and the pain your sins naturally cause in your life will more readily drive you to God for mercy and help to overcome.

Let me say it another way: Work on yourself and make every effort to change for the better—but *not because you think it will make you less a sinner and get you in good with God*. Take overcoming seriously. Do it because God wants you to, because Jesus Christ gave you a new life, because it is right, because everybody who loves you wants you to, and because it will make your life much more blessed, rewarding, peaceful and pleasant. But don't do it because you think that's how you will get into the kingdom of God. It isn't.

Regardless of how much you improve (and you need a *lot* of improvement—I know you; you're just like me), you are still a sinner, and the only hope of salvation you've got is the mercy of God, along with his word

that in Christ he extends it to you. Trust *him*, not your good life, when it comes to salvation. When it comes to salvation, trust the word of God that it is a *fait accompli* in Christ; when it comes to behavior, trust yourself to the supervision of the Holy Spirit and put your heart into overcoming.

Don't think that good behavior results in salvation; but know that salvation results in good behavior. But don't let that make you think that poor behavior equals unsaved, and good behavior equals saved. It does not work that way; don't forget that we all still sin. Sin involves not merely acts but attitudes, and God knows even the deepest secrets of our hearts.

Rest in this: God loves you; he's proven it in Christ, and he will make you into what he wants you to be. You can trust him to do it. Get to know him. Spend time with him. Put your confidence in him. Make him the priority in your life, and you will begin to find his love influencing the way you live in the world and the way you interact with others.

Whether we experience hardship or ease, prosperity or poverty, bad times or good times (and Christians experience them all), our ability to cope with what comes our way will depend on our trust in God. But all the while, because we are in Christ, our salvation is not in question. We are saved by God's grace through faith, and even our faith is God's gracious gift to us.

Remember, the gospel is good news. It is "the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes" (Romans 1:16). Therefore, as Hebrews 10:23 encourages us, "Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful."

J. Michael Feazell

TAKE THE LEAP

Jesus once told a story about two kinds of people who went to the temple to pray. One of them was a Pharisee, and the other was a tax collector (Luke 18:9-14). Now, these days, 2,000 years after Jesus told the story, we might be tempted to nod knowingly and say, “Yes, of course, the Pharisee was a self-righteous hypocrite, right?” Well, maybe, but let’s put that assessment aside for the moment and consider what Jesus’ listeners would have been thinking.

First, Pharisees were not thought of as hypocritical bad guys, as Christians today tend to think of them. Pharisees were the devoted, careful, faithful religious minority of the Jews who were standing heartily in the breach against the growing tide of liberalism, compromise and syncretism with the Roman world and its pagan Greek culture. Pharisees called the people back to the law and committed themselves to faithfulness in obedience.

When the Pharisee in the story prayed, “God, I thank you that I am not like other people,” he was not just whistling Dixie. It was true. His respect for the law was impeccable, and he and the Pharisee minority devoted themselves to keeping it in a world where its importance had become seriously eroded. He was not like other people, and he was not even taking the credit for that—he was thanking God that it was so.

Tax collectors, on the other hand, were notorious crooks—Jews who worked for the Roman occupation forces collecting tax revenues from their own people, and worse, men of few scruples who routinely inflated the bills for their own profit (compare Matthew 5:46). Those listening to Jesus’ story would have instantly pegged the Pharisee as a man of God—the white hat—and the tax collector as the archetypal wicked man—the black hat.

But Jesus, as usual, was making an unexpected point: God isn’t helped or hampered by who you are or what you’ve been up to; he forgives everybody, even the worst sinners. All we have to do is trust him. Equally as shocking, people who think they are more righteous than others (even with ample physical evidence of it) are still in their sins, not because God hasn’t forgiven them, but because they won’t receive what they don’t believe they need.

Good news for sinners

The gospel is for sinners, not for righteous people. Righteous people don’t get into the gospel as it really is, because they have the notion that they don’t need that kind of gospel. To righteous people, the gospel is the good news that God is on their side. They feel confident in God because they know they are behaving in a more godly manner than the blatant sinners in the

world around them. They give a good deal of attention to the terribleness of the sins of others, and they are glad that they are close to God and not living like the adulterers, murderers and thieves who they see on the streets and in the news. To righteous people, the gospel is a trumpet of condemnation toward the sinners of the world, a warning message that sinners should stop sinning and begin living like they, the righteous people, do.

But that is not the gospel. The gospel is good news for sinners. It declares that God has already forgiven their sins and given them a new life in Jesus Christ. It's a message that causes sinners who are sick of sin's cruel tyranny over them to sit up and take notice.

It means that God, the God of righteousness, who they thought was against them (since he has every reason to be), is really *for* them, and in fact loves them. It means that God is not holding their sins against them, but has already in Jesus Christ paid for their sins and broken sin's death-grip on them. It means they don't have to live another day in fear, doubt or guilt. It means they can trust God to be for them in Jesus Christ everything he says he is—forgiver, redeemer, savior, advocate, provider, friend.

No mere religion

Jesus Christ is not just another religious figure. He is not a cow-eyed weakling with a nice, but in the end unrealistic, idea about the power of human kindheartedness. Nor is he just another great moral teacher who stirred human hearts to rise to a higher level of social responsibility.

No, when we talk about Jesus Christ, we are talking about the eternal source of all things (Hebrews 1:2-3), and more than that, he is also the redeemer, the purifier, the fixer of all things, who by dying and rising reconciled the whole out-of-kilter universe to God (Colossians 1:20). Jesus Christ is the one who made everything that is, who keeps it all in existence every moment, and who takes all its sin on himself to completely redeem it—including you and me. He came to us as one of us, to make us into what he created us to be.

Jesus is not just another religious figure, and the gospel is not just another religion. The gospel is not a new and improved set of rules, formulas and guidelines to get us in good with an otherwise ill-tempered Supreme Being; it is the end of religion. Religion is bad news; it tells us that the gods (or God) are hopping mad and if we do this, that and the other thing just right, then they (or he) will change their minds and smile on us.

But the gospel is not religion: it is God's own good news to humanity. It declares all sin forgiven and every man, woman and child God's friend. It is

a golden invitation on a silver platter to anybody and everybody who has sense enough to believe it and accept it (1 John 2:2).

“But there’s no such thing as a free lunch,” you say. Well, actually, there is, and this is it. It’s not only a free lunch, it’s a free banquet, and it lasts forever. You don’t need anything to get in but to trust in the One who is throwing the party.

God hates sin—not us

God hates sin for one reason only—because it destroys us and everything around us. You see, God is not out to destroy us because we’re sinners; he’s out to save us from the sin that destroys us. The good news is—he’s done it. He did it in Jesus Christ.

Sin is evil because it cuts us off from God. It makes us afraid of him. It keeps us from seeing reality as it really is. It saps our joy, scrambles our priorities and turns what ought to be serenity, peace and satisfaction into chaos, anxiety and fear. It makes us despair of life, and never more thoroughly than when we actually achieve and possess everything we think we want and need.

God hates sin because it destroys us—but he doesn’t hate us. He loves us. That’s why he has done something about sin. And what God has done about sin is forgive it—he has taken away the sins of the world (John 1:29)—and he has done it through Jesus Christ (1 Timothy 2:6).

We are sinners—but that doesn’t mean that God wants to stay away from us, contrary to what you may have heard. Rather, it means that as sinners, *we* want to stay away from God. Yet without him, we are nothing—our very being, all that we are, depends on him. The treacherous blade of sin cuts both ways: On one side, it compels us out of fear or mistrust or both to turn our backs on God and his love for us, and on the other side it leaves us starving for that very love. (Parents of teens understand this very well.)

Sin removed in Christ

Maybe during your childhood you got the idea from the grownups around you that God is a sort of stern judge, holding your every action in the balances, ready to blast you with a curse if you blow it, or to let you into heaven if you measure up. But the gospel gives us the good news that God is not a stern judge at all; he is Jesus Christ.

Jesus Christ, the Bible tells us, is the perfect representation to us humans of exactly what God is like (Hebrews 1:3). In other words, when God stoops low to come to us as one of us to show us what he is like—how he thinks, how he acts, who he hangs out with and why—he is Jesus Christ.

Yes, God made Jesus judge of the whole world, but he is anything but a stern judge. He forgives sinners; he doesn't condemn them (John 3:17). Sinners get condemned only if they refuse to come to him for forgiveness (verse 18). This is a judge who pays everybody's penalties out of his own pocket (1 John 2:1-2), declares all charges dropped against everybody forever (Colossians 1:19-20) and then invites the whole world to the greatest celebration in history.

We can sit on our duffs and debate all we want about who will or who won't believe him and accept his mercy and come to his party, or we can leave all that to him (he can handle it), jump to our feet and scramble on down to the party ourselves, spreading the good word to and praying for whoever crosses our paths along the way.

Righteousness from God

The gospel, the good news, tells us: You already belong to Christ—receive it. Enjoy it. Trust him with your life. Enjoy his peace. Open your eyes to the beauty, the love, the peace, the joy in the world that can be seen only by those who are at rest in Christ's love. In Christ, we are free to face and admit our sinfulness. Because we trust him, we are not afraid to confess our sins and unload them on his shoulders. He is on our side.

"Come to me," Jesus said, "all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light" (Matthew 11:28-30).

When we rest in Christ, we get out of the business of measuring righteousness; now we can be completely honest and uninhibited in freely confessing to him our sins. In Jesus' story of the Pharisee and the tax collector (Luke 18:9-14), it was the sinning tax collector, who freely admitted his sinfulness and wanted God's mercy, who was made righteous. The Pharisee, who was devoted to righteous living and kept track of his holy successes, had no clear view of his sinfulness and his correspondingly acute need for forgiveness and mercy, so he would not reach out and receive the righteousness that comes only from God (Romans 1:17; 3:21; Philippians 3:9). His very success in "holy living" became the fog that prevented him from seeing how badly he needed God's mercy.

Honest assessment

Christ meets us with grace in the midst of our deepest sinfulness and ungodliness (Romans 5:6, 8). It is precisely there, in our blackest unrighteousness, that he, the Sun of righteousness, arises for us with healing

in his wings (Malachi 4:2). Only when we can see ourselves as we really are in our real need, as did that extortionist tax collector in the story, only when our daily prayer can be, “God, have mercy on me, the sinner,” are we able to allow ourselves to rest peacefully in the warmth of his healing embrace.

We don’t have anything to prove to God. He knows us better than we know ourselves. He knows our sinfulness and he knows our need for mercy. He has already done for us everything that needed to be done to secure our everlasting friendship with him. We can rest in his love. We can trust in his word of forgiveness. We don’t have to measure up; we only have to believe him and trust him. God wants us to be his friends, not his electronic toys or his tin soldiers. He is looking for love, not cowering or preprogrammed servitude.

Faith, not works

Good relationships are based on trust, faithful commitment, allegiance, and above all, love. They are not based on mere obedience (Romans 3:28; 4:1-8). Obedience has its place, but it is, we ought to understand, a side effect of the relationship, not the cause of it. If you allow obedience to be the ground of your relationship with God, you will sink either into sticky pride, like the Pharisee in the parable, or into fear and frustration, depending on how honest you are with yourself about your true reading on the perfection scale.

As C.S. Lewis wrote in *Mere Christianity*, “There would be no sense in saying you trusted a person if you would not take his advice.” When you trust Christ, you will listen to his advice and do your very best to live by it. But when you are in Christ, when you trust him, you will do your best without fear of rejection when you fail, as we all so often do. Fail, that is.

When we rest in Christ, our striving to overcome our sinful habits and thoughts becomes a commitment rooted in the faithfulness of God in forgiving us and saving us. He has not thrown us into the middle of some never-ending battle to measure up (Galatians 2:16). Quite the contrary, he is bringing us with him on a journey of faith in which we learn to stop dragging around the chains of slavery and pain from which he has already freed us (Romans 6:5-7).

We are not doomed to an impossible uphill struggle to prove ourselves worthy; instead, we are given the grace of a new life in which the Holy Spirit teaches us how to enjoy the new us created in righteousness and hidden with Christ in God (Ephesians 4:24; Colossians 3:2-3). Christ already did the hard part—dying for us. How much more will he do the easy part—bringing us

home (Romans 5:8-10)?

Leap of faith

Faith, we are told in Hebrews 11:1, is our assurance of the things that we, the beloved of Christ, hope for. Faith is the only reality we currently sense of those good things God has promised—things that remain, as yet, invisible to our five senses. In other words, we see with the eyes of faith, as though it were already here, that wonderful new world in which voices are kind, hands are gentle, there is plenty to eat, and no one is an outsider — things for which we have in this present evil world no tangible, physical evidence.

The faith generated by the Holy Spirit, who enflames in us this hope of salvation and the redemption of the whole creation (Romans 8:23-25), is the gift of God (Ephesians 2:8-9). In this faith we are swaddled in his peace, his rest and his joy by the incomprehensible assurance of his overflowing love.

Have you taken the leap of faith? In a culture of acid stomachs and high blood pressure, the Holy Spirit urges us toward the path of serenity and peace in the arms of Jesus Christ. More than that, in a world of shocking poverty, disease, starvation and brutal injustice and war, God invites us (and enables us) to open our eyes of faith to the light of his word, which promises the end of pain, tears, tyranny and death, and the creation of a new world in which righteousness will be at home (2 Peter 3:13).

“Trust me,” Jesus tells us. “Despite what you see, I am making everything new—even you. Quit worrying, and trust me to be for you, for your loved ones and for the whole world exactly who I told you I am. Quit worrying, and trust me to do for you, for your loved ones and for the whole world everything I have told you I will.”

We can trust him. We can give him our burdens—our burdens of sin, our burdens of fear, our burdens of pain, disappointment, confusion and even doubt. He will carry them, just as he carries us, even before we ever knew it.

J. Michael Feazell

I WANT TO ACCEPT JESUS, BUT...

Advice for people thinking about
committing their lives to Jesus Christ.

“I want to accept Jesus, but I’m afraid. I’m not even sure if I’m ready yet, but I want to be.” My wife and I were talking with a teenage girl. She said she wanted to accept Jesus but didn’t understand how. “Can you describe what happens when I decide to commit my life to Christ? What is expected of me as a Christian? How will I have to change?”

These are good questions. They’re also important questions. To answer them completely, we need to discuss topics like salvation and grace. But even before those things, one of the most important issues for anyone who wants to come to Christ is: How do we make Jesus our priority number one? That’s what it means to believe him, accept him and follow him.

Believe in Jesus Christ

The first thing expected of a Christian is to believe that Jesus was and is. The Bible tells us that Jesus is God. “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.... The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us” (John 1:1, 14).

When Jesus asked his disciples who people thought he was, their answers ranged from John the Baptist to Elijah, to Jeremiah, to one of the prophets. Finally, Jesus asked his disciples who they thought he was. Peter correctly said, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God” (Matthew 16:16).

As a Christian, you believe that Jesus was and is the Son of God. Of course, he was also a real human—born to Mary—descended from David. He breathed, he sweated, he ate, he drank, he bled and he died. Christians believe that Jesus lived as a human on this earth. He was God in the flesh. Jesus Christ was tortured, nailed to the cross, killed and buried. That same Jesus was resurrected and lives today. That’s who Jesus is. He is the Son of God and he is your Savior.

Requires faith

That may sound simple, and with the enlightenment and guidance of the Holy Spirit, it is understandable. But for some people, these things are almost impossible to believe. Why? Because a commitment to Christ requires faith. *Faith* is a word that describes our relationship with Jesus. It takes faith to believe that Jesus was God in the flesh (John 1:14). It takes faith to believe

that once a person dies, he or she can live again.

Jesus lived again. He was resurrected. How important is that resurrection? It means everything. “If Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless and so is your faith” (1 Corinthians 15:14). If Jesus had not been resurrected, then we would have no salvation, we would have no hope, we would have no future. But he is risen. So to believe takes faith, and faith is a gift from God.

Salvation through Christ

A Christian also believes that Jesus came to save the world (John 3:17). Through Jesus, our sins are forgiven. Through Jesus, we have access to God and the Holy Spirit. Only by Jesus are we given salvation (Acts 4:12).

Christians believe what Jesus said. A Christian takes the words of Jesus to heart, and makes those words a part of life. This is another step in putting Jesus in your heart, of making him priority number one. It’s more than talking about Jesus – it’s living the life Jesus lived, walking the walk Jesus walked.

Jesus was perfect. He never sinned. He loved everyone. He set a right example in everything he did. Does he expect the same thing of you? Yes and no. Jesus came and lived as a human being for many reasons. One was to let us know that he understands what we face. Jesus understands the battles we face against peer pressure. He understands depression, sadness and anger. He understands frustration and stress.

Jesus understands that no one is perfect, and that we will sin. He knows that Christians aren’t perfect, but we are forgiven. So you can safely say Jesus Christ doesn’t expect you to be exactly like him, because you can’t be. But with Christ’s help, you can deal with the problems and challenges life brings. As the Bible tells us, Christians are counted as righteous because of what Christ did for us, not because of what we do.

Christ’s message for you—how to live your life, how to treat others, how to look to God—is throughout the Bible. The four Gospels—Matthew, Mark, Luke and John—give different views on Jesus, the life he lived and the words he spoke. In Matthew 5 through 7, you find what is known as the Sermon on the Mount. It’s a great place to find out how Jesus wants you to live.

Salt and light

Jesus said a Christian is the salt of the earth (Matthew 5:13). Salt gives flavor. Salt is also a preserver. It is even used for medicinal purposes. A Christian is also the light of the world—someone who isn’t ashamed of being known as a Christian (verses 14-15). He or she is willing to talk about Jesus

Christ to those who want to know.

A Christian sets a right example and, if that example is commented on, gives the glory to Jesus Christ. In this way, other people can see the Christian's good works and praise God (verse 16). In Matthew 6, Jesus tells us our relationship with God is personal. Our acts of righteousness—acts of love and service such as giving to the needy—don't need to be seen by other people.

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus then talks about prayer. He emphasizes that prayer is personal, something between you and God. It's much easier to talk to God when you know others *aren't* listening. Praying in private allows you to be honest with God, to share your secrets, your fears, your goals and your thoughts—something you wouldn't likely do if you were praying in public. Jesus even gives us a sample—sort of an outline—for prayer (Matthew 6:9-13).

Live as he lived

Having Jesus in your heart simply means Jesus is living in you and is giving you strength. It means you have committed yourself to following Jesus. It also means you are committed to doing what he said. It means to live the life of a Christian, striving to live as Jesus lived. That's what Jesus will help you do.

It's not always easy. It takes commitment. Jesus' way isn't the most popular or the easiest. But it is the right way. To have Jesus in your heart—to know that you are in him and he is in you—is to study the words of Jesus and the apostles and, with his help, to put those words to practice.

The best news of all is that Jesus said he won't leave you on your own. He said he will send the Holy Spirit to give you strength to follow him (John 16:7, 13). Believing in Jesus Christ involves making Jesus a part of your life—studying his Word, becoming like him and making him priority number one.

Expect the unexpected

People would never have expected the Messiah—the promised King—to be born in humble circumstances! Or to grow up in a town like Nazareth—in *Galilee*, of all places. They wouldn't have expected him to choose fishermen and a tax collector as his assistants. Or to be at odds with the religious establishment. Neither would they have expected him to spend time with street people, prostitutes, beggars and greedy tax collectors.

No, Jesus Christ was not what everybody expected. His teaching style often included startling statements, ironic twists that hit people right between the eyes:

- Turn the other cheek (Matthew 5:39).
- Love your enemies (verse 44).
- To be a great leader, you must serve like a slave (Matthew 20:26-27).

Jesus never sinned, but to the people around, especially the religious leaders, he was a dangerous radical. Controversy surrounded him.

His death was the greatest irony. Here he was, the king the people thought would save them from Roman occupation, and he allowed himself to be killed by the Romans. Why? To save us all from a much greater oppression: our own sins. The true enemy wasn't the tough-skinned Roman warrior, but the hardened heart under our own skin.

But today, everyone has Jesus figured out, right? After 2,000 years, it would be hard for Jesus to surprise us, wouldn't it? I'm sure you're not surprised that I say, no. Today, just as before, Jesus does the unexpected. Read the accounts in Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. Look at them from the perspective of the listener in the first century A.D., and you'll find some surprises. Then translate Jesus' teachings into your 20th-century situation, and you may be in for even bigger surprises.

Where do you expect to find Jesus today? Unconsciously you may expect to see him with the pious church ladies and the super-righteous deacons, but you may be disappointed. If you expect to see Christ wherever his name is used a lot, you may be disappointed (see Matthew 7:21-23).

Jesus may not be visible in all the places we expect. But if we look closely, we may find him in unexpected places. We may have overlooked his transforming work in small children, in the homeless and inner-city poor, in murderers on death row. The surprise that affects you most is this: With all the billions of people on earth, Jesus is taking a special, personal, full-time interest in *you!*

We might expect Jesus to be too busy. Or we may feel that he's given up on us when we fail again and again. But that's not so. As the apostle Paul wrote, "Neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Romans 8:38-39).

That's powerful love. What else would you expect from a God who does the unexpected?

M. Bennett

DO YOU BELIEVE?

I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies; and whoever lives and believes in me will never die. (John 11:25-26)

They left Jerusalem and Judea because of continuing threats on the life of Jesus. Now the small group was in the region of Perea, close to Jericho. But even here they could not get away from death. The news came by a messenger: "Lazarus is sick, and near death." Lazarus and his sisters, Martha and Mary, lived in Bethany of Judea, just east of Jerusalem. For many of the disciples, it seemed foolish to even think of going into such a dangerous area.

Jesus waited two days before announcing that they would go back to Judea. He spoke, as he often did, in figurative language: "Our friend Lazarus is asleep, and I am going to wake him up." As often happened, the disciples tried to understand Jesus' words literally. Jesus then explained, "Lazarus is dead." Thomas, not known for his cheerful and positive outlook on life, responded, "Great, let's go back into Judea and we can all die with him."

They didn't talk much as they walked to Bethany. Their hearts were heavy. They reluctantly followed Jesus into Judea. Jesus did not reassure them that nothing would go wrong. In fact, he knew that he was in the last few days of his own life.

Martha believed

Hearing that Jesus was coming, Martha left her sister, Mary, to continue preparing food while she went out to meet Jesus as he neared Bethany. Grief-stricken, and still in shock at what had happened, Martha shared her burden with Jesus: "If you had been here, Lazarus would still be alive. But maybe you can still do something. I know God will give you whatever you ask."

Jesus looked into Martha's eyes and said, "Your brother will be resurrected." Martha believed that there would be a future resurrection to life. She had heard Jesus speak of it, and felt that he was comforting her now. "I know, Jesus. I know that he will be resurrected at the last day."

This was the setting for the words Jesus now spoke: Words of comfort that Christians hear at funerals, as corpses await burial. Words that have been preached from tens of thousands of pulpits. Words that millions have memorized. John records them. "I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies: and whoever lives and believes in me will never die" (John 11:25-26).

Jesus did not preach these words at a gravesite, or in an open-air stadium

at an evangelistic rally. It was a one-to-one conversation with Martha. He looked at her and explained: “I am life. Life is me. The resurrection—it’s me.”

Most of us usually end our recitation of John 11:25-26 without including the last sentence. The last sentence is a question that reminds us that Jesus originally spoke these words to Martha. But the last sentence is much more than just a question for Martha. These probing words are a call to all who will follow Jesus. These words are a challenge to you and me: “Do you believe this?”



Here is the gospel. God, in the person of Jesus, came to die that we might live. Jesus was and is God. The second Person of the triune Godhead came in the flesh, lived among us and went to the cross for our salvation.

We struggle with sin. We are helpless in the face of sickness and death. We are captives of time and space, knowing that death will have its way with each of us. We know that our own sin, our sinful condition, sentences us to death. It is inevitable. Each of us, on our own death row, awaits our date with death.

But there is good news. We can be pardoned. We can be rescued from our hopeless condition and the sentence of death. God came from outside of time and space, and entered into it. He came from immortality to mortality. He took a body of flesh and empowered that body with his divinity. To rescue us. To save us. Do you believe?

“Who am I?”

Martha affirmed a statement of faith remarkably similar to the one voiced

by Peter at an earlier time. Jesus had also pressed Peter to make a commitment (Matthew 16:13-16). He asked Peter, “Who am I, Peter?”

Peter responded, “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.” Martha had an equally faith-filled response: “You are the Christ, the Son of God.”

Neither Martha nor Peter said anything about what a good example Jesus was. They did not explain that Jesus was a respected teacher of values and ethics. They said nothing about Jesus’ prophecies, nor did they speak of his healings. They both affirmed that he was and is the Christ, the Son of God.

Both Peter and Martha knew about Jesus. They had spent time with him, and they had observed him. They watched him and came to know much about him. But Jesus eventually pressed them for a more intimate and lasting commitment. Jesus Christ wanted to know if they believed. He wants nothing less from us. Do you believe?

Perhaps the Jesus you know is a Jesus you know about. You may know about his life and his teachings. You may know his parables. You may have studied what he said about the future. You may be interested in the date of his second coming. Perhaps you have been taught that he came to set us an example, and if you can only do what he did, then you will be good enough to be given salvation.

But, do you believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God, the only source of life? Does that belief change your life?

Come to Christ

You know how the story of Jesus, Mary, Martha and Lazarus ends. After Jesus’ conversation with Martha, Mary also left the house to see Jesus. She also told him that if he had been there, surely he wouldn’t have let Lazarus die.

Death and grieving were everywhere. Mary and Martha were in tears, their friends were weeping. It was the custom to hire mourners, who wailed and shrieked in the background. The air was heavy with hopelessness. Life was in their midst in the person of Jesus, but death controlled and ruled their attitudes.

Jesus Christ knew that he, too, would soon meet death— and overcome it. He knew that through his own death and resurrection, he would solve the problem for everyone else. He would claim victory for all who would believe in him.

When he came to the tomb and asked them to take away the stone that sealed it, they thought he wanted to see the body. Martha protested: “But he

has been dead four days. The body is decomposing and it stinks horribly.”

The command of Jesus, “Lazarus, come forth!” is high drama. We can almost hear the wailing stop, we can almost see the faces as they peer intently into the face of death. Life was commanding the tomb of death to give up its hold on the dead.

A call to new life

Jesus calls us to the same new life, from our own spiritual bondage and decay. But before we can have the new life in Christ, the gravestone must be rolled away. We must be willing to look into the jaws of death. We must confront the chains, addictions and beliefs that bind us and come forth.

As he called Lazarus to new life, Jesus sealed his own death warrant. On another day, not many days later, Jesus again took on the forces of death and sin, and overcame them once and for all. He triumphed on the cross, that we may have life. Three days later, he came out of a tomb – but he was raised not just to physical life, as Lazarus was, but to eternal life and a supernatural body.

He showed that he was God in the flesh by rising from the dead. It was the sign he gave to prove that he is Messiah, Redeemer and Lord. He triumphed over death and the grave.

Do you believe?

Jesus Is God

1. Jesus came to live with us, adding humanity to his divinity, to save us from sin. He was God-man. He was not simply a teacher, a prophet, a reformer, a rabbi, a wise man, a miracle worker, or a moral teacher setting a good example. He was God in the flesh: Emmanuel—God with us.
2. Salvation is through him and by him. Jesus taught that we must come to him, we must follow him. He pointed us to himself. He told us that he is the bread of life, he is the light of the world, he is the resurrection and the life, he is the way, the truth and the life. We must come to the Father by and through him. Only God in the flesh would make those claims.
3. Jesus accepted worship. Thomas, who had been skeptical, upon seeing and believing, fell at Jesus’ feet and worshiped. “My Lord and my God,” he said.
4. Jesus claimed to be the Messiah promised in the Old Testament. He proclaimed that he would return again in glory.
5. Jesus claimed equality with God. To know him, to see him, to believe

in him and to honor him was to do the same to God.

6. Jesus forgave sin. He claimed authority over the old covenant law. He had power over natural law. He healed, and he gave life.
7. Jesus is God. He can transform you and me, and our lives. Only God can give us a new life, heal us and forgive us. Because Jesus was and is God, his death on the cross was enough to pay for your sins and for mine. The question is not, “Who was Jesus?” The question is, “Who *is* Jesus?”

And the next question is: Do you believe?

G. Albrecht

SHOULD BELIEVERS BE BAPTIZED?

Is baptism essential to the Christian life? Should people be rebaptized if they change churches or denominations? Is it essential to be baptized in a specific way, such as sprinkling, pouring or immersion?

We can begin to answer such questions by asking: What is the example of the New Testament for those who accepted Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior? The answer is that they were baptized.

On the first Pentecost after Jesus' resurrection, when the Holy Spirit was given, Peter exhorted his listeners: "Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off — for all whom the Lord our God will call" (Acts 2:38-39). We are among those who are "far off," and we can share in the grace of God along with those who heard Peter speak almost 2,000 years ago.

Note how the people responded to Peter's call after he finished his sermon: About 3,000 accepted Christ that day, and were baptized (Acts 2:41). Baptism became a public testimony that these people had accepted Jesus as the Christ.

Baptism is a public statement that Jesus is our Savior. It is a statement expressed in symbolic action as a message to ourselves, to others, and to God. By being baptized, we acknowledge that God is the source of our life and the reason we exist, and that Christ is our Lord and Savior.

In that sense, baptism is the most important landmark and turning point in our lives. It has much in common with another ceremony that marks a milestone in many people's lives — marriage. We know how important a marriage ceremony is to the couple in love, as well as to their families and their friends. It is a public statement of their life-long commitment to each other.

A wedding ceremony does not make people married in a real sense, though it may do this legally. Neither the ceremony nor its component parts — such as the vows, the pronouncement of the minister and the exchange of rings — creates the marriage. The commitment and *carrying out* of that vow to be faithful to each other is what really makes the marriage. Nonetheless, the marriage ceremony is the public statement of the couple's agreement to commit to each other. It is important, although people may also be married without a ceremony.

Baptism pictures the drama of our "I do" decision for Jesus Christ—but

it is possible only because Jesus has already said the “I do” for us. He has already made a commitment to us, and we are now acknowledging it. He has already given his life for us; we are now responding and giving our lives to him. Baptism is a symbolic act that says there is a life-long commitment between Christ and us, and he is our Savior. Baptism implies that we will follow him wherever he may lead us.

People who request baptism are saying they accept Jesus’ offer. He wants to be associated with us, to live with us forever and ever. In baptism, we say that we want to be associated with Jesus Christ in a personal and intimate way — to belong to Christ, to share in the benefits of his life and death. That’s what it means to be baptized “in the name of Jesus Christ.”

Believers share in the life of Christ. As Christ died, so do the believers. As they share in Jesus’ death, they also have a part in his resurrection and eternal life. In baptism, believers dramatize that we are united with Christ in his death and in his life. The apostle Paul explained this to the Romans:

All of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death. We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life. If we have been united with him like this in death, we will certainly also be united with him in his resurrection. (Romans 6:3-4)

Baptism symbolizes our death and resurrection with Christ, that our old self is a thing of the past, and that our real life is in Christ. Going down into the water pictures the death of the self, and the rising up out of the water pictures the resurrection of the self to a new life now, and eternal life in the future.

Baptism is not magic. It does not mechanically bring the Holy Spirit to us, nor does it *cause* our spiritual renewal and salvation. Rather, it is done *after* the Holy Spirit has led us to faith and we have responded. Baptism is a metaphor that symbolizes that on the cross, Christ has crucified our former life and has brought us into a new life in him.

We can see this in some examples in Scripture. First, an example where the Holy Spirit did not come immediately to individuals who had been baptized. We read about this in Acts 8:14-17. Many people in Samaria had believed the gospel and accepted Jesus as Savior. They had also been baptized, but they had not received the Spirit in any noticeable way. In this case, Peter and John had to place their hands on these individuals and pray for them to receive the Holy Spirit.

In the case of the centurion Cornelius and his family and friends, the Holy

Spirit came *before* baptism (Acts 10:44-48). They were baptized after receiving the Spirit, but there was no laying on of hands. These examples teach us that while baptism is an important public statement, it is symbolic. (The repentant “thief on the cross” could not be baptized at all, yet was saved.)

This brings up the matter of the method of baptism. Different churches baptize in different ways. If we understand that baptism is primarily a symbolic public statement of being united with Christ in his death and resurrection, then we can see that the mode is not critical. The *fact* of our baptism is the meaningful act.

For adults, we follow what appears to be the biblical example of baptism by full immersion. Our church also uses the formula of Matthew 28:19, baptizing candidates into the trinitarian fellowship of God. The minister will conclude the baptism prayer with words to the candidate such as the following: “Having repented of your sins, and having accepted Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior, I now baptize you — not into any denomination or church — but into the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.”

When individuals who were once baptized in another church enter our fellowship, they sometimes wonder if they should be rebaptized. If they only recently came to faith in Christ, then they may feel that their previous baptism was not valid, and they may wish to be baptized as an acknowledgement that Jesus is their Savior. On the other hand, if they have been a Christian for a long time, living in faith in Christ and being led by the Spirit, their life has already been a public testimony of their new life in Christ; there is no need to repeat a ceremony when the reality has long been evident in their lives.

A GOOD WAY TO GO

Chad and I cling to each other in the roaring rip tide of the Persian Gulf. We can feel the sand under us being scoured by the strong undercurrent as we are turned and twisted in the rough sea.

Chad is about to die. As we hold on to each other in the waves, my mind goes back some 37 years to my own death. Tonight we have both rejoiced, for these are no ordinary deaths. This is baptism.

Last September I had the privilege of conducting Chad's wedding. Now he and his wife and I rejoice at his burial. I plunge him briefly beneath the water, and then we wade ashore and let the warm air dry us. The Middle East sky is dark now and the humidity high. Pages of my Bible feel as clammy as damp blotting paper.

Oxymorons

How strange this must seem to those passing by. But then, much of Christianity seems strange—full of oxymorons. An oxymoron is an apparently self-contradictory statement. They usually point out a poignant truth with wry humor. For example, efficient government, military intelligence, friendly fire and bitter sweet. And “he who will save his life must lose it.”

The idea is oxymoronic. That is just what Jesus intended—a symbolic burial that symbolizes the beginning of new life.

The Bible firmly reminds us that all have sinned, and have fallen short of the glory of God. Sin is a word that has lost its currency. But it still pays wages—which the Bible says is death. There is no escaping what that means. But Jesus Christ loves us so much that he has already paid the cost for our sinfulness. That means we can accept his love for us and in him start the new, clean life he has already prepared for us.

In our quieter moments we all know that there are things not right with our lives and not right with our attitude to others. Many go to their graves with those feelings. But the best way to go to your grave is to do so voluntarily—like my friend Chad.

Wanted dead and alive

The Bible explains that in our human state we are dead to God and alive to sin, and that he wants to reverse this condition. He wants us alive to him and dead to sin. He wants us dead and alive.

So how is this changed life to be achieved? It can't—not by us. But Christ

has done it for us. He both represents us before God and substitutes for us before God. When we trust in Jesus, his death substitutes for ours, and he gives us new life in him. When we are “in Christ,” we are dead to sin in his death, and alive to God in his life. Being submerged in water is a way of picturing this transformation, this death to the old self and this resurrection to our new self in Christ.

In his letter to the Romans, St. Paul explains the idea behind baptism as a watery grave: “When we went under the water, we left the old country of sin behind; when we came up out of the water, we entered into the new country of grace—a new life in a new land!” (Romans 6:4, *The Message*).

That’s what baptism into the life of Jesus means. When we are lowered into the water, it is like the burial of Jesus, and our own burial; when we are raised up out of the water, it is like the resurrection of Jesus, and our own rise to new life as well.

Through his own Son who became one of us for this very purpose, our loving God provides our escape from the prison of sin and its death sentence, which has taken hold of us all. That’s why I buried my friend in the Persian Gulf. He was ready to go.

Tony Gondie

BAPTISM: COMMEMORATING A COMMITMENT



We gathered around a swimming pool anticipating the ceremony about to begin. The baptismal candidate, one of several, stepped into the shallow end of the pool. She walked through the water toward the minister who was about to baptize her.

It was a momentous and memorable day for this young woman, and we all felt some of her excitement. She now understood God's aim in salvation – to save us from our blighted human condition, to make us at peace with him, to give the Holy Spirit as the promised “down payment” on eternal life – and most importantly, she understood that Jesus had done everything necessary to make God's gift a reality for her.

New life in God

Jesus Christ has a profound role in God's purpose for us. He was sent by God to be the Savior of humanity. By his perfect obedience and his atoning work on the cross, we are saved. Now, the young woman was about to make a public statement that Jesus had saved her. Jesus had made a commitment to her, and she was making one to him. She had accepted Jesus as her Savior, and had accepted his new life. She was saying “I do” to God.

The baptismal ceremony had begun. “Have you repented of your sins and accepted Jesus Christ as your personal Savior?” the minister asked. “Yes, I have,” the young woman replied.

“Since you have repented of your sins, and have accepted Jesus Christ as your personal Savior, I now baptize you into the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit,” said the minister.

He concluded with an “Amen,” and we all whispered the word in agreement. We watched as the minister briefly immersed the young woman under the water. A second later, he lifted her back up to her feet. It was a dramatic moment. The young woman emerged from the watery grave as if she had been resurrected from the dead. The baptism symbolized something that had happened well before the ceremony: she had become a new person—a born-again child of God.

The minister welcomed the smiling woman into the family of Jesus Christ, and wrapped a towel around her shoulders to help keep her warm. It was a wonderful experience for the young woman and the other people baptized that day. They will remember their baptism as a special event for the rest of their lives. Some might even think of their baptism as a special birthday. It is a public testimony of our new birth, our new life that was brought into existence by the death and resurrection of our Savior.

In our minds, baptism reinforces our decision to accept God’s gracious offer of salvation. It is a statement made to ourselves, to the community and to our Creator that *we have accepted Christ’s commitment to us*, and we are responding to him. We acknowledge that he is the source of our life and the reason we exist. In that sense, baptism is the most important landmark and turning point in our lives. It has much in common with another ceremony that marks a milestone in many people’s lives—marriage.

We know how important a marriage ceremony is to the couple in love as well as to their families and their friends. The ceremony does not make a man and woman married. Neither the ceremony itself nor its component parts—such as the making of vows, the pronouncement of the minister and the exchanging of rings—creates the marriage.

The reason the couple is getting married is because they have *already agreed* to commit to each other. The bonding process began long before the couple actually walked down the aisle. However, that doesn’t make the marriage ceremony any less meaningful. The ceremony is an outward statement of a couple’s intention to make a life together. Marriage is their public commitment to say “I do” to each other.

Symbol of Christ’s commitment to us

Baptism pictures the drama of our “I do” decision for Jesus Christ and all that he represents in our salvation. It is a symbol that reminds us he is our

Savior, and we are his beloved. People who ask for baptism are saying they want to be associated with Jesus Christ in a personal and intimate way—to belong to Christ. That desire is effective only because Christ already wants to be associated with us! That’s what it means to be baptized “in the name of Jesus Christ.”

Believers share in the life of Christ. As Christ died, so do the believers. The old self is dead; we are acknowledging that our life is not defined by our past – it is defined by our association with Jesus. As we share in Jesus’ death, we also have a share in his resurrection and eternal life. We are stating that we, by God’s grace, have a part in the greatest events of salvation history. This includes the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. In being baptized, we publicly dramatize that our life is now with Christ.

Baptism is not magic. It is a ritual, a metaphor that symbolizes that we have died to our former life and have been given a new life in Christ. What better metaphor for the individual’s inner change than through the cleansing of water?

Author and pastor William Willimon described it well when he said: “To receive the Spirit through Christ is likened to a *birth bath* in John 3:3-5 and Titus 3:5-7; to a *funeral bath* and burial in Romans 6:1-11; and to a bride’s *nuptial bath* in Ephesians 5:26. These baths were consummated in anointing and arraying the body in clean, or new, clothing (Galatians 3:27)” (*Peculiar Speech: Preaching to the Baptized*, page 58).

Remembering baptism

I was baptized more than 30 years ago. Many things have happened in my life since then. There were times when I doubted my conversion, and there were times when I, like Jonah, sought to run from God’s presence. But one thing could never be changed: I had stated in public that I accepted Jesus Christ as my Savior.

I knew what that meant. I took on responsibilities as a Christian, as well as the promises. I would enjoy the benefits of having a personal relationship with God and would receive the promises of eternal salvation given to me by Jesus. When I was placed under the water, I understood this portrayed the death of my old life and sinning self. When the minister lifted me out of the water, I was being symbolically resurrected to a new life now, the new life in Christ.

I can never forget that I came to understand God’s purpose for my life. I can never say: “Well, that was so long ago. I didn’t really understand God’s message of salvation.” Of course I didn’t understand it then as well as I do

now, but I understood enough: that God was giving me salvation through Jesus Christ. The drama of my baptism ceremony reminds me that, yes, I did understand, and yes, I did declare that I belonged to Jesus.

If God is moving in our lives, a time comes when we see how much we need him. We learn that because of sin, we have cut ourselves off from him and the blessings of knowing him. But we also learn of God's grace given to us through Jesus Christ. We can demonstrate that the Holy Spirit has enlightened our minds about these important truths. We can show we have accepted God's promises and put our faith in Jesus Christ as Savior.

We can portray our commitment and desire by saying "I do" to God. We can be plunged into the watery grave of baptism, and then rise out of the water to picture the new life we have with Christ.

Paul Kroll

HOW BAPTISM PICTURES THE GOSPEL

Rituals were a prominent part of Old Testament worship—there were annual rituals, monthly rituals and daily rituals. There were rituals for birth and rituals for death, rituals of sacrifice, rituals of cleansing, rituals of ordination. Faith was involved, but rituals were prominent.

The New Testament, in contrast, has two basic rituals: baptism and the Lord's Supper—and there are no detailed regulations for either observance.

Why these two? In a religion in which faith is primary, why have any rituals at all?

The primary reason, I believe, is that both the Lord's Supper and baptism *picture the gospel of Jesus Christ*. They rehearse the fundamental elements of our faith. The Lord's Supper reminds us of the Lord's death, his life now, which we share in, and his promise to return. It is a reminder that our salvation is based on the life and death of Jesus Christ.

Pictures the gospel

How does baptism picture the central truths of the gospel? The apostle Paul wrote:

Don't you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life. If we have been united with him like this in his death, we will certainly also be united with him in his resurrection. (Romans 6:3-5)

Paul is saying that baptism *pictures our union with Christ* in his death, burial and resurrection. These are the primary points of the gospel (1 Corinthians 15:3-4). Our salvation depends on his life, death and resurrection. Our forgiveness—being cleansed of sin—depends on him; our Christian life and future depend on him.

Baptism symbolizes the death of the old self—the old person was crucified with Christ—died with Christ—buried with Christ in baptism (Romans 6:8; Galatians 2:20; 6:14; Colossians 2:12, 20). It pictures that we are identified with Jesus Christ—he cast his lot in with humanity. We accept that his death was “for us,” and “for our sins.” We acknowledge that we have sinned, that we have a tendency to sin, that we are sinners in need of a Savior. We acknowledge our need to be cleansed, and that this cleansing comes through the death of Jesus Christ. Baptism is one of the ways in which we confess Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior. We are saved by what he did,

not by the way we responded. The emphasis in baptism should be on what Jesus did, not on our faith or acceptance. The only reason that we can show our commitment to him is because he is already committed to us.

Raised with Christ

Baptism pictures wonderful news—we have been *raised* with Christ to live with him (Ephesians 2:5-6; Colossians 2:12-13; 3:1). In him, we have a new life, and are called to live a new way of life, with him as Lord leading and guiding us out of sinful ways and into righteous and loving ways. In this way baptism reminds us that faith involves a change in the way we live, and that we cannot make this change in ourselves—it is done by the power of the risen Christ living in us. Christ has united himself to us in his resurrection not just for the future, but for life right now. This is part of the symbolism.

Jesus did not invent the ritual of baptism. It developed within Judaism, and was used by John the Baptist as a ritual to show repentance, in which the water symbolized cleansing. Jesus continued this practice, and after his death and resurrection his disciples continued to use it, but with a more profound meaning. Baptism dramatizes the fact that Jesus has given us a new basis for life, and a new basis for our relationship with God.

Paul saw that since we are forgiven or cleansed through the death of Christ, baptism pictures his death and that we (even before we were alive) are participants in his death. Paul was also inspired to add the connection with Jesus' resurrection. As we rise from the baptismal waters, we picture Christ raising us to a new life — a life in Christ, with him in us.

Peter wrote that baptism saves us “by the resurrection of Jesus Christ” (1 Peter 3:21). However, baptism itself does not save us. We are saved by God's grace, through faith in Jesus Christ. Physical water removing physical dirt cannot save us, this verse reminds us. Baptism saves us only in the sense that it is “the pledge of a good conscience toward God.” It is a visible representation of trusting in Christ, trusting that he has cleansed our conscience and forgiven us. We are saved by what he has done, not by what we do.

Into one body

We are baptized not only into Christ Jesus, but we are also baptized into his body, the church. “We were all baptized by one Spirit into one body” (1 Corinthians 12:13). That means that people cannot baptize themselves—it should be done within the context of the Christian community. There are no secret Christians, people who believe in Christ but no one knows about it. The biblical pattern is to confess Christ before other people, to make a public

acknowledgment of Jesus as Lord, to become part of a community of believers.

Baptism is one of the ways in which Christ may be confessed, in which a person's friends may see that a commitment has been made: Christ's commitment to us in his death, and our commitment to him as a response. It may be a joyous occasion in which the congregation sings hymns and welcomes the person to the family. Or it may be a smaller ceremony in which an elder (or some other authorized representative of the congregation) welcomes the new believer, rehearses the significance of what is being done, and encourages them in their life in Christ.

Baptism recognizes that a person has *already* repented of sin, *already* accepted Christ as Savior, already begun to grow spiritually — is already a Christian. We are simply catching up to what Christ has already done for us. Baptism is usually done soon after a person has come to believe in Christ as Savior, but occasionally it may be done much later.

Teens and children

When a person has come to faith in Christ, he or she may be baptized. This may be when the person is old, or when young. A young person may explain faith differently than an older person does, but young people may have faith nonetheless. Teenagers and younger children may have genuine awareness of sin, genuine trust that Christ has paid for their sins, and genuine acknowledgement that their life is united with Christ, and they may be baptized.

Will some of them eventually change their minds and fall away? Perhaps, but that happens with adult professions of faith, too. Will some of those childhood conversions turn out to be mistaken? Perhaps, but that happens with adults, too. There are no guarantees about what humans will do — the guarantee comes in what Christ has already done for us. That is what we can celebrate with certainty.

If the person has faith in Christ, as best as the pastor can determine, then the person may be baptized. It is not our practice, however, to baptize minors without the consent of their parent or legal guardian. If the minor's parent objects to baptism, then the child who has faith in Jesus is still a Christian, even if waiting until he or she becomes a legal adult to be baptized.

In our denomination, we generally baptize by immersion. That was most likely the practice in first-century Judaism and in the early church. Immersion pictures death and burial better than sprinkling does.

Sprinkling pictures cleansing, and perhaps watering for new growth, but not death. Nevertheless, we might say that the old person died with Christ,

whether or not the body was properly buried. The old life is dead, and the new life is here, and that is what is important.

We do not make the method of baptism an issue to divide Christians. The important thing is that we remember that Christ has done the real work of salvation, and we are simply responding to what he has done. We give up on our own self-centered approach to life and begin to live a Christ-centered life.

Salvation does not depend on the exact method of baptism (the Bible doesn't give us many details on procedure, anyway) nor on the exact words. Salvation depends on Christ, not on the depth of the baptismal water. If a person has faith in Christ, that person is a Christian, no matter what kind of baptism was done. A Christian who was baptized by sprinkling or pouring is still a Christian. If such a person wishes to become a member of our denomination, we do not require a new baptism, unless the person believes it appropriate. Christianity is based on faith, not on performance of a ritual.

Occasionally a person baptized in infancy wishes to become a member of our fellowship. Is it necessary for us to re-baptize the person? This decision must be based on the person's preference and understanding of baptism. If the person has only recently come to a point of faith and commitment, it may be appropriate to baptize the person. In such cases, baptism would emphasize to the person that the old self has died with Christ.

If the person was baptized as an infant and has been living as an adult Christian for many years, with good fruit, then we do not need another baptism. If they request it, we may do it, but we do not need to quibble about ceremonies of decades ago when Christian fruit is already evident. We can simply praise the grace of God. The person is a Christian whether or not the ritual was done in the "right" way or "right" time.

Sharing the Lord's Supper

For similar reasons, it is permissible for us to share the Lord's Supper with people who have not been baptized in the manner we are accustomed to. If people have faith in Jesus Christ, they are united to him and have been baptized, one way or another, into his body, and they may share in the bread and wine, even if they do not agree with us on every point of doctrine.

We should not get sidetracked by arguments about detail. We have our beliefs and practices, and we love those who have other beliefs. We focus on the larger picture, provided by the apostle Paul: Baptism pictures our old self dying with Christ, our sins being washed away by what he did, and Christ raising us up to new life in him and in his church. Baptism is an expression of faith, a reminder that we are saved by the death and life of Jesus Christ. It

is the gospel in miniature drama — the central truths of the faith being portrayed in the actions.

Do we baptize infants?

We accept members who were baptized as infants in other churches. We see the fruit of the Holy Spirit in their lives. Because they are already Christians, they don't need another baptism. When infant baptism is practiced responsibly by the community of faith, it can be viewed as a sign of God's gracious initiative and a powerful expression of the fact that God loves us before we ever begin to respond to God.

Our pastors may baptize an infant when requested to do so by the infant's parents or guardians. They are also free to explain these principles to parents or guardians and offer infant baptism as an expression of God's unconditional grace and love. They are also free to explain the principles involved in infant blessing and believer's baptism.

Individuals can counsel with a pastor if they have any questions about baptism. Others who are interested in discussing baptism, or other spiritual matters, can write to the church office in their country or contact us at: Grace Communion International, P.O. Box 5005, Glendora, California 91740. Those in the United States can also call our toll-free number for church and minister information: 1-800-423-4444. Or see our website.

Joseph Tkach

PART 3: GROWING IN THE GOSPEL

NEW LIFE IN CHRIST

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a leader in the Confessional Church, had been arrested by the Gestapo in April 1943. A year later, he was jailed in Berlin's Tegel prison. He was hanged by the Nazis at Flossenbürg concentration camp only a few days before the camp was liberated by the Allied armies.

Christians in crisis

But on April 30, 1944, Bonhoeffer was still very much alive, though imprisoned. He was mulling over the significance of a religion—what it meant to be a Christian in such trying times. Nazi Germany was testing Christian discipleship in a direct and crushing way. We in today's Western society have not been tested in the same way.

Bonhoeffer had seen a tragic appeasement among Christians in Nazi Germany. Most church leaders and their flocks had gone along with the pagan and anti-Christian sentiments at the heart of Nazism. Only a few had spoken out, like those Germans who formed the Confessing Church. Bonhoeffer's own Christian faith as a member of this group was on the line. And so was his life.

It's not surprising that when Bonhoeffer sat down to write a letter to his close friend Eberhard Bethge on that April day in 1944, the meaning of the Christian faith was uppermost on his mind. "You would be surprised, and perhaps even worried, by my theological thoughts and the conclusions that they lead to," he wrote. "What is bothering me incessantly is the question: what Christianity really is, or indeed who Christ really is, for us today" (*Letters and Papers From Prison*, edited by Eberhard Bethge, page 279).

Christianity in Germany had become, in Bonhoeffer's view, nothing more than pious talk and a sterile repetition of creeds. Those who call themselves Christians "do not in the least act up to it," he wrote (page 279). Bonhoeffer was dismayed at the many German Christians who had sold out.

What about us?

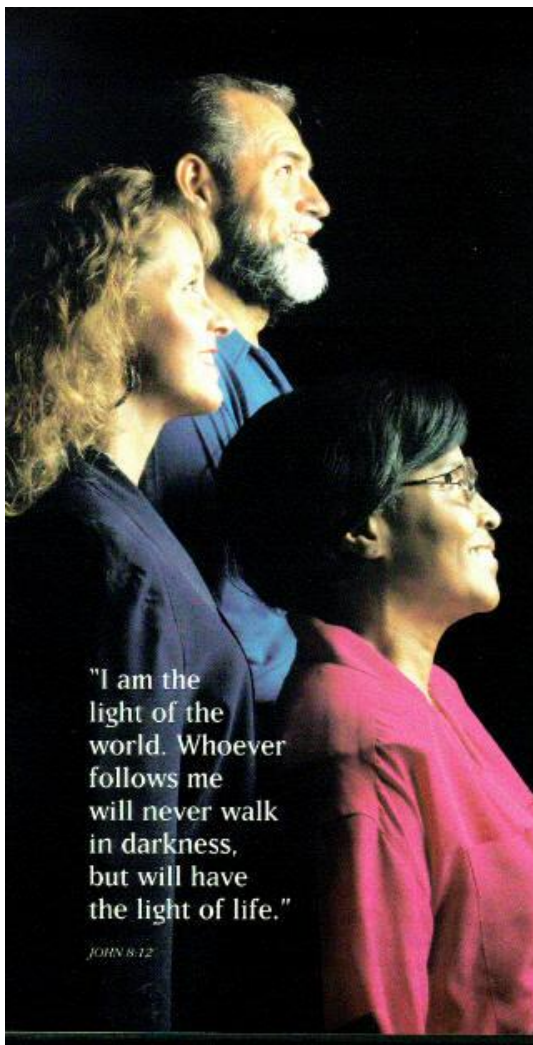
What happened to Christianity in Nazi Germany should send chills through us who call ourselves Christian. But does it?

It's easy for those of us who live in democratic and nominally Christian nations to take our Christianity for granted. Well more than half of Americans call themselves Christian. Some even consider the practice of Christianity be patriotic. It seems easy to be a Christian.

We may not be forced to face human tragedy and madness in the profound way Bonhoeffer and his community, the Confessing Church, did. But we can be overcome by the world in more subtle ways. For this reason, we all need to ask ourselves a basic question: What is Christianity? When we say, "I am a Christian," what do those words mean for us who were born into a Christian world?

The word *Christ* is the foundation and basis of the words *Christian* and *Christianity*. It is logical to assume that Christ would also be the foundation and basis of Christianity, and of each Christian's life. But as Bonhoeffer asked, who is Christ for us today? And where does he fit into our Christianity?

Today, Christianity is often defined by specific religious practices. It's about such things as going to church, ceremonies of various kinds, and giving some financial support. But you don't have to be a Christian to listen to preaching, to go through



"I am the
light of the
world. Whoever
follows me
will never walk
in darkness,
but will have
the light of life."

JOHN 8:12

rituals, or to give money to a church or charity.

Christianity emphasizes correct beliefs, creeds and doctrines. Biblical truth is important to faith. But is Christianity only about believing? Is it about doing good and being a certain way? Christianity for many is primarily about being moral and doing good. That's commendable. However, people of other religions—Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam and Judaism, to name a few—also try to live good, law-abiding lives. Christianity has no corner on morality.

For many, Christianity is a cause to get involved—to change the world through politics. But is cause-Christianity transforming the world, or is it selling out by putting its faith in the political world? Much of what passes for Christianity falls under the five Cs: causes, ceremonies, churchgoing, conduct and creeds. But is it enough to define the Christianity of the Bible?

Perhaps we can see by now that it's a bit harder to discover what the Christian faith should be about. So what *should* it be about?

Chipping to Christ

There's the old story about the sculptor who had just finished a magnificent elephant in marble. When asked how he was able to sculpt such an exquisite piece, he replied, "I just chip away everything that doesn't look like an elephant." In a similar way, we need to chip away everything that passes for Christianity but is not an essential part of it. If we use our hammer and chisel properly, we can discover what the Christian faith looks like at its fundamentals.

Let's begin by offering a basic proposition: Christ is Christianity, or Christ = Christianity.

That is the good news the Gospel of John proclaims. John records Jesus as telling his disciples: "I am the way and the truth and the life" (John 14:6). According to the apostle John, Jesus Christ kept insisting that *he* was whatever true religion might be. "I am the resurrection and the life," he told Martha (John 11:25).

Since Jesus is the way, that means Christianity ought to be *the way*. Since Jesus is the truth, that means Christianity ought to be *the truth*. Since Jesus is the life, that means Christianity ought to be the way to *life* eternal.

Misunderstood Messiah

The simple solution to finding true Christianity, then, would be to follow Jesus Christ. And to become Christ-like. But it's not as simple as it sounds. We can't just decide to do it.

The apostle Peter thought he knew what it meant to be a dedicated and zealous Christian—a follower of Christ, which the word implies. To him,

faith was having a religion of dedication and zeal.

When challenged on his ability to be a Christian, Peter said: “Lord, why can’t I follow you now? I will lay down my life for you” (John 13:37). Jesus said Peter didn’t know what he was talking about—and that he would fail. Peter soon did (Mark 14:66-72).

Philip, another disciple, said something about Jesus showing them the Father. “That will be enough for us,” he said (John 14:8). Perhaps Christianity was only a mystical experience for Philip.

Thomas, the doubting disciple, was befuddled about the center or way of Christianity. “Lord, we don’t know where you are going, so how can we know the way?” he asked (verse 5).

Jesus wasn’t that easy to understand. Not that he didn’t speak clearly. He did. The problem was that he announced a good news message that turned common beliefs on their heads— and gave them a surprising dimension. People lacked a spiritual ear with which to hear Jesus’ otherworldly message.

For one thing, Jesus didn’t seem to act like people thought a religious person should act. He was constantly accused of being irreligious. He was called a drunk and a glutton. He interacted with tax collectors and prostitutes—among the worst social outcasts of the time.

The local religious leaders, the Pharisees, complained that Jesus didn’t keep their religious ceremonies or hold to their beliefs. More than that, they felt he was slighting, even attacking, them.

The Pharisees thought: He keeps knocking our religion. He’s accusing us of giving up the true faith so we can keep our own traditions. Imagine that? The gall of this—this *upstart*. Does he think he personifies true religion? Yes, in fact, Jesus did think so. He claimed to be the originator, the embodiment, the perfect example and the High Priest of the way, the truth and the life. If you didn’t have him at your center, he insisted, then you had a useless religion.

Christ the center

Jesus gave us the answer to the question: What is Christianity? Christianity is Christ living his life in Christians through the Holy Spirit. Jesus is not merely living religion in us. He is not primarily living doctrine in us. He is not living ceremonies and rituals in us. Jesus is living *himself* in us. When he does, that means we have his new life in us. We are his.

What, then, is Christianity for us? It is Christ. Who is Christ for us today? He is the center of our lives; he *is our* life.

No scripture better summarizes what we are as Christians, and what Christianity is, than Paul’s statement to the Galatian church. Paul wrote: “I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me.

The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me” (Galatians 2:20).

If Christ as our center is embedded in our hearts by the Holy Spirit, we shall be Christians indeed. Christianity will not be an empty religion. It will bear witness to and be an example of Jesus Christ to the world.

How can Christ become the center of our lives? It can come about only through God’s revelation to us, and his rescue of us. We must first be drawn by God to understand that we must be rescued. Humanity without God leads only to death. This hearing—this understanding—comes by revelation of the Holy Spirit.

At one point, Peter recognized something about who Jesus was—the Son of God. Peter didn’t figure it out on his own. Jesus told him, “This was not revealed to you by man, but by my Father in heaven” (Matthew 16:17). The Holy Spirit from God must give us a hearing ear so we can recognize who Christ is—and our need for rescue. The rescue is our transformation through a renewed mind that frees us from conformity to the evil in the world. However, we must respond positively to God’s revelatory call and offer of rescue.

Jesus explained it by a farming example. God is a sower scattering the seeds of understanding in human minds. Some seeds never germinate because they fall on hardened minds enmeshed in the world. Such people don’t understand what they’re hearing.

Other seeds fall on shallow minds. The seeds of understanding germinate and grow to a point, then die. Such people catch a momentary glimmer of the truth, but the light is overpowered by the glitter of worldliness. The worries of life, the desire to make it in the world and to live a life of worldly pleasure—with no place for God—choke out the seeds that bring the revelation of God.

But in some people the seeds of truth grow into magnificent plants. They “hear the word, accept it, and produce a crop,” said Jesus (Mark 4:20). Such Christians understand the revelatory call of rescue from God and continue to respond to it. Today, God is calling each of us to a relationship with him that rescues us from the clutches of our society and its values—and saves us to eternal life. The question is: Are you answering God’s pleading revelation and rescuing call?

What’s in a name?

The word *Christian*, which describes those who follow Jesus Christ, was first used by pagan outsiders, probably as a term of ridicule and abuse. Luke tells us, “The disciples were called Christians first at Antioch” (Acts 11:26).

Pagans in Antioch probably coined the word as a term of derision to mock people who believed in Jesus as the Messiah. (Antioch, in the province of Syria, was the site of major Christian evangelizing work among Gentiles in the A.D. 40s.)

The word *Christian* appears only twice more in the New Testament (Acts 26:28; 1 Peter 4:16). Once, it's on the lips of a Jewish king who tells the apostle Paul it won't be as easy as he thinks to convince him to be a Christian. In the second instance, the apostle Peter used the word *Christian* in the context of accusations made by the enemies of the church. (The word *Christianity* does not appear in the New Testament.)

Only a few references to Christ and Christians occur in the secular literature of the time. The Latin historian Suetonius spoke of an action taken by the emperor Claudius (A.D. 41-54): "Since the Jews constantly made disturbances at the instigation of Chrestus, he expelled them from Rome" (*Claudius* 25.4). *Christ* would have been a generally meaningless name to the Latin-speaking Romans. It's easy to see why Suetonius confused it with the common name *Chrestos*, which meant "good" or "kind."

The Roman historian Tacitus wrote that the emperor Nero (A.D. 54-68) had "inflicted the most exquisite tortures on a class hated for their abominations, called Christians by the populace" (*Annals* xv.44). However, the church in those earliest decades called itself by terms other than Christian. Some of them are described below.

Names for disciples

The church referred to itself as the group that followed "the Way" (Acts 19:9). This showed that Christianity was more than an abstract philosophy. It was a description of the way to a personal relationship with Jesus Christ and to fellowship with God.

Christians also called themselves "the believers" (Acts 4:32) and "God's elect" (1 Peter 1:1). The first title explained that the disciples believed in Jesus Christ as Savior. The second pointed to the special place Christians had within God's plan as the heirs of his promises.

The church often referred to its members collectively as "the disciples" – a word that means "people who learn" (Acts 6:2). The early Christians were carrying on Jesus' teachings and following his example. They were a living community that embodied the teachings of their Master. The disciples also called themselves "brothers" (Acts 9:30; 17:14). The name stressed the intimate, familial relationship of the believers to one another.

Another designation for the followers of Jesus was "friends." Jesus had called his disciples his friends (John 15:14-15). It's not surprising, then, that the disciples would call themselves "friends" of Jesus. John used this

designation in one of his letters (3 John 14).

“Saints” was the apostle Paul’s favorite name for Christians (Romans 1:7; 8:27). The name is also used 13 times in the book of Revelation. The word did not emphasize any special holiness achieved by individual obedience, but rather the individual’s special calling to salvation. The perfect righteousness of Jesus Christ was credited to people who were called out by God and separated for his purpose. Such people were holy, or saints, in God’s sight.

Christians also called themselves “the congregation,” from the Greek *ekklesia*. We use the word *church* rather than *congregation*, but they mean the same thing (2 Corinthians 1:1). They define the presence of God’s people in the world at large or in a particular place.

The word *Christian* seems to have had no special significance for the earliest church. If used, the word was but one of a number of self-designations. (The apostolic church apparently did not have a single official name for itself.)

“Christian” wins out

Eventually, however, the word *Christian* became the common way to designate the collective church. By the beginning of the second century, the word was used by both outsiders and insiders to refer to the followers of Jesus.

Today, the term *Christian* has lost some of its meaning because it is so loosely used. It seems everything is Christian. We have Christian churches, schools, political parties, cultural associations, kings and even geographical areas such as the Christian West. That being so, it would be well for us to reflect on what we mean when we call ourselves Christians. A Christian is one who belongs to Jesus Christ, one who is transformed by him, and one in whom Jesus Christ dwells.

Paul Kroll

COMING TO KNOW GOD

Christ's gospel invites you to satisfy the restless longing all humans share.

I was about 6 months old when my cousin Rex, then in his early 20s, kissed me on the cheek. I was sitting in my high chair in my family's kitchen in St. Louis, Missouri, and Cousin Rex was about to leave home and head out west to California to find his fortune. According to family legend, he announced, "Well, that'll have to be enough sugar for my coffee until I see you again."

We didn't see each other again for more than 37 years. You know how it is. My dad and mom lost contact with Rex. I was too young to know or care who he was. His branch of the family did their thing, and we did ours. Through the decades, rumor had it that cousin Rex fell on hard times in California, or that he struck it rich. He became a preacher, or he became a bum. **Rex** was the greatest guy you would ever want to know, or he was wild and dangerous.

Finding Rex

Last year, I looked up Rex. In an emotional phone call, he said hearing from me had made him so happy that he wouldn't be able to sleep. He invited me to come see him at his home in northern Nevada. I did, and I took my wife and daughter with me.

I recognized him as soon as I rolled into his driveway, and he recognized me. Happy days and nights of catching up followed our first bear hugs and kisses. We met his wife, and their children and grandchildren, all of whom lived nearby. Suddenly my 6-year-old daughter had scads of newly discovered cousins to play with!

No family reunion could have been warmer. Rex was gentle, generous and lovable. As we sat in his home, he told us of his adventures as a younger man. His family had grown and flourished. He had built a successful business. He had become friends with a famous actor. Through the years, with a few rough spots here and there, he had maintained a deep faith in Jesus Christ and was an active leader in his church. To my delight and to both our wives' half-grimacing tolerance, we learned that he and I are afflicted with a similar slightly warped (and only slightly funny) sense of humor!

What we all long for

Family. Home. Close, tender relationships. People who really care. Embracing those we love, and never having to part. Aren't these the blessings that all of us desire most?

But, search as we might, many of us never find them — and no one enjoys them all the time. Relationships break up. People move away. Families lose contact—or never make it in the first place. There are no perfect homes, at least in this world.

Whoever we are, wherever we live, we find ourselves always searching, searching—but searching for what? *Loving relationships that last*. This is exactly what God invites us to—an eternal place in his loving family. That’s what the gospel of Jesus Christ is—an invitation to come into an intimate, lasting relationship with the perfect parent, brother, friend, provider, teacher and protector.

The Healer of hurts

“Come to me,” Jesus welcomes (Matthew 11:28). Yet many find it hard to accept this invitation. Their experiences with their own human families and other relationships have been upsetting and sad. Their natural longing for warmth and love has been denied, rebuffed and unfulfilled. They want relationships, yet also distrust them, even fear them.

Seeing the ugliness and injustice and abuse in this world, they cannot embrace the concept of an all-powerful God who knows our weaknesses and troubles and who cares—and who is able to make things different, and yet seemingly does not. The questions seem too tough, the chasms too wide, the hurts too painful for us. Yet this is exactly why God sent his Son, Jesus Christ, into the world.

The Bible records how Adam and Eve rejected a relationship based on trust, and humanity has followed that approach ever since. But God still loves the world. He has stepped in to rescue us from sin and death. “God so loved the world,” John 3:16 tells us, “that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.”

Jesus came into the world to undo Adam and Eve’s tragic failure. They chose death for the human race, but Jesus chose to give us life! The full, abundant, joy-filled, worthwhile life we all desire comes through knowing Jesus Christ our Savior. “Now this is eternal life,” Jesus said, “that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent” (John 17:3).

Through his death in our place, and through his miraculous resurrection from the dead, Jesus closed the breach. He healed the hurt. He corrected the abuse. Jesus Christ revealed God as a heavenly Father who wants to reunite all of us with him, to gather us around him in a loving, everlasting embrace.

It is no wonder that the apostle Paul declared: “I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, and so, somehow, to attain to the resurrection

from the dead” (Philippians 3:10-11)! This was not a goal for the distant future—he wanted to know Christ each day of his life, to be in constant relationship with him.

Coming to know God

“No one can come to me,” Jesus said, “unless the Father who sent me draws him” (John 6:44). He also revealed: “I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me” (John 14:6). God calls, and we must respond. We must be willing to humble ourselves before God, to realize that we can do nothing to save ourselves. Unless God gives us grace, through his Son, Jesus Christ, we are lost.

But God is more than willing to receive us. We must acknowledge and repent of our sinful state – that when we try to live without him, we are showing a lack of gratitude, and an arrogance about our own abilities. We need to realize that only through Jesus Christ can we be saved (Acts 4:12). Then we will accept and embrace the Son of God as our Savior and Lord. Paul wrote, “If you confess with your mouth, ‘Jesus is Lord,’ and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved” (Romans 10:9).

Growing in knowing

The hardest part of many worthwhile pursuits is taking the first step. It would have been easier, for instance, not to call my cousin Rex. After all, I didn’t really know him. How could I be sure that the bad things some family members told me about him weren’t true? We might not have gotten along at all. Finding the phone number and calling were needlessly fearsome hurdles for me.

But from the moment we heard each other’s voices, we realized we never should have been strangers in the first place. The 37-plus years of separation after the kiss in my family’s kitchen were the tragic result of unintentional neglect. We got along famously, joyously. *Together* was exponentially preferable to *apart*.

It’s the same with a person’s relationship with God. Before we answer Jesus’ invitation to come to him, we don’t even know him. We may have heard a lot of misinformation about God, from ignorant assumptions to outright lies. We may fear that we just won’t get along. It’s much easier to simply not think about that hole in every human heart, that spiritual aloneness that cries out for unity with our Maker.

Saying that first prayer, or making that first contact with Christians who enjoy close friendship with Jesus, may be needlessly fearsome hurdles. Jesus stands outside the door and knocks. From the moment you open the door, you realize you never should have been strangers in the first place. However

many years you've been apart—perhaps your whole life? – may have been the tragic result of unintentional neglect. Or confused emotions. Or scars inflicted not by God but by some imperfect human.

Christians who enjoy a personal relationship with Jesus Christ affirm, with the apostle John:

We live in him and he in us, because he has given us of his Spirit. And we have seen and testify that the Father has sent his Son to be the Savior of the world. If anyone acknowledges that Jesus is the Son of God, God lives in him and he in God. And so we know and rely on the love God has for us. (1 John 4:13-16)

Our Christian lives consist of *growing in knowing*—knowing and relying on the love God has for us. We return that love to God through worship and faithfulness. We follow where he leads. We patiently continue, throughout our lives, our walk with Jesus Christ.

“Come to me”

A church sign near my home reads, “No Jesus—No Peace; Know Jesus—Know Peace.” Christians are born into a loving, spiritual community, and they know peace, thanks to the work of Jesus Christ. The gospel of Jesus Christ invites you to satisfy the restless longing that all human beings share—the longing for *loving relationships that last*.

You can *know* that you know God by placing your faith and trust in Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior. In one of the most reassuring passages in the New Testament, Paul wrote to the Ephesian church:

I pray that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith. And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all the saints, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge—that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God. (Ephesians 3:16-19)

Growing in Christ

“Do not be ashamed to testify about our Lord,” wrote the apostle Paul to the young evangelist Timothy. Christ “has saved us and called us to a holy life—not because of anything we have done but because of his own purpose and grace.” Jesus “has destroyed death and has brought life and immortality to light through the gospel” (2 Timothy 1:8-10). Through the gospel, God invites us—calls us—to experience new life through his Son, Jesus Christ, both now and in the world to come, and he invites us to grow, to draw closer.

If you are growing closer to Christ, you will read the Bible as a trustworthy record of God's revelation to humanity. The Holy Spirit will guide you to understand and agree with that revelation. You will want to dig out this Book's every gem of truth (2 Timothy 3:16-17). And you will want to live by what the Scriptures say.

You will want a closer relationship with your Creator. You will want to get to know God's Son, Jesus Christ. He has erased your sins and made it possible for you to be born again, spiritually, with a new start in life. You will want to submit your life to Jesus.

If God's Spirit is leading you, you will feel a sense of purpose in your life, maybe for the first time. You will enjoy worshiping and serving your Savior, Jesus Christ. You will see the need to pray. You'll be excited about being part of the international, spiritual community of believers — God's church. Despite the challenges and troubles of life, the Holy Spirit will bless you with an inner calm. This is the "peace of God, which transcends all understanding" (Philippians 4:7).

If God is working in your life, you will grasp the meaning of sin, and you will regret your own sinful condition. You will realize that Jesus suffered the consequences of our sins, so that we might escape death, and you will feel gratitude and commitment and faith toward him for having done so. You will come to detest the faithless ways of the world, and you will want to leave those ways behind.

If God is calling you, you will be ready to do the hardest thing a person can do—admit you are wrong. That is, not only have you committed wrong and sinful acts. You *are* sinful, fallen, and in need of salvation. This is part of repentance. You will want to change your life—to start doing what God knows is best for you. You will appreciate the grace of God in forgiving you and giving you new life through his Son. You will want to praise and worship Jesus Christ in all you think, say and do.

You will want to serve and help others. A Christian does so, in part, by sharing the gospel of Jesus Christ—by helping to invite others to come to God, just as you were invited. If God is calling you, you will realize that nothing else matters more than answering that call. Perhaps it is time to do something about it!

Norman Shoaf

A Traveler's Guide: Book Review

By Neil Earle

"As it would be cruel to an Amazonian tribesman to fly him to London, put him down without explanation in Trafalgar Square and leave him...to

fend for himself, so we are cruel to ourselves if we try to live in this world without knowing about the God whose world it is and who runs it.”

Such vivid writing characterizes theologian James Packer’s million-seller, *Knowing God*, a book that has been printed in more than a dozen languages and become a source of nurture for many Christians.

The crisp, pungent, witty style I remember from his lectures at Regent College in Vancouver, British Columbia, is there in force. For example, the biblical claim that Jesus was fully divine as well as fully human is, claims Packer, “two mysteries for the price of one—the plurality of persons within the unity of God, and the union of Godhead and manhood in the person of Jesus.”

Packer knows that most of the questions Christians ask are what he calls “travelers’ questions”—which way do I go and how do I get there?

Such practicality keeps this book well read. *Knowing God* contains theology, but one reason this book is a classic is because Packer makes doctrinal matters accessible to everyday people. In chapter 14, titled “God is the Judge,” he probes a head-scratcher: how to reconcile God’s mercy with his justice. Later in the book, Packer reassures us that God “will not let us ruin our souls.”

“Disregard the study of God,” warns Packer, “and you will sentence yourself to stumble and blunder through life blindfolded, as it were, with no sense of direction and no understanding of what surrounds you.”

Knowing God has helped thousands of people. It can help you.

HE LIVES WITHIN US

Do you sometimes feel that God is absent from your life?
The Holy Spirit can change that for you.

The New Testament writers insisted that Christians living in their day were experiencing God's living presence. But is he present for us today? If so, *how* is he present?

How God is with us

The answer is that today, as in New Testament times, God can live in us through the Holy Spirit. Here's what we need to know: Are we experiencing the Spirit's indwelling? If not, how may we do so?

Gordon D. Fee, in his book *God's Empowering Presence*, repeats a student's telling remark about the Holy Spirit. It illustrates our often hazy view of the Holy Spirit's nature and activity: "God the Father makes perfectly good sense to me," the student said. "God the Son I can quite understand, but the Holy Spirit is a gray, oblong blur."

Gray—oblong—blur. Indeed! Certainly not the presence of a personal and powerful God. "The Spirit has become God's specter, if you will," says Fee, "an unseen, less than dynamic, vibrant influence, hardly God very God." Such incomplete perspectives are partially due to the fact that the Holy Spirit is just that—spirit. He is, as Jesus said, like the wind and isn't seen.

No footprints

As a Christian scholar once said, "The Holy Spirit leaves no footprints in the sand." Being invisible to our senses, he's easily missed and easily misunderstood. On the other hand, our knowledge of Jesus Christ is set on firmer soil. Because our Savior was a human being, God living among us in human flesh, Jesus Christ has a face for us. And God the Son put a "face" on God the Father as well. Jesus insisted that those who had seen him had "seen" the Father as well.

Both Father and Son are with Spirit-filled Christians today. They are present within Christians *through the Holy Spirit*. Because of that, we would surely want to know more about the Spirit, and experience him in a personal way. Through the Spirit, believers experience the closeness of God and are empowered to apply his love.

Our Comforter

For the apostles, John in particular, the Holy Spirit is the Counselor or

Comforter. He is someone called in to help in time of trouble or need. “The Spirit helps us in our weakness,” said Paul. “We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groans that words cannot express” (Romans 8:26).

Those who are led by the Holy Spirit are God’s people, said Paul. More than this, they are sons and daughters of God, who are able to call him their Father. By being filled with the Spirit, God’s people are able to live in spiritual freedom. No longer enslaved to the sinful nature, they live new lives of inspiration and oneness with God. This is the radical change the Holy Spirit creates in people at their conversion.

Their desires are therefore reoriented from this world to God. Paul spoke of this transformation as “the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit” (Titus 3:5). The presence of the Holy Spirit is the defining reality of conversion. No Spirit; no conversion; no spiritual rebirth. That’s why Paul could say, “If anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he does not belong to Christ” (Romans 8:9). (Since God is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, “Spirit of Christ” is simply another way of referring to the Holy Spirit.)

On the other hand, if a person is truly converted, Christ will live in him or her through the Holy Spirit. Such people belong to God because he has made them his with his Spirit.

Newfound faith

People often think being born into a Christian culture and performing a church’s rituals—or accepting its dogmas—are enough. In other words, if you are christened as a Christian and raised as a Christian, you are a Christian. This paradox is pointed up in a story R.C. Sproul tells in *The Mystery of the Holy Spirit*. In 1957, wrote Sproul, he was converted to Jesus Christ. Sproul rushed to share his newfound faith with his fiancée. When he did, however, she expressed confusion. “What do you mean that you’ve become a Christian?” his fiancée asked. “You have always been a Christian. You were baptized, confirmed, and all the rest.”

Sproul had been, until his conversion, a product of the same process as hundreds of millions of Christians. For centuries, people have become Christians by birth and culture, not necessarily by responding to the Holy Spirit. They were Christian in name but not in Christlike spiritual values, because they were not led by the Holy Spirit. True spiritual renewal, however, takes place in our innermost thoughts by the action of the Holy Spirit.

Spirit-filled life

How can we have the power and presence of the Holy Spirit in our lives,

and know that the Spirit of God lives in us? The New Testament writers, especially Paul, said empowerment comes as a result of a person's response to an appeal. The appeal is to accept God's grace in Jesus Christ, forsake old ways of thinking and to begin to live by the Spirit.

That's why we need to be encouraged to be *led* by the Spirit, to walk by the Spirit, to live by the Spirit. How to do this is spelled out in broad principle in the books of the New Testament. The apostle Paul insisted that Christians need to "stir up" the Spirit to help them live by virtues that include love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control (Galatians 5:22-23).

When understood in a New Testament context, these qualities are more than concepts or good thoughts. They reflect real spiritual power within believers, as given by the Holy Spirit. This strength is waiting to be put to use in every life circumstance.

When put into action, virtues become the "fruit" or evidence that the Holy Spirit is operating in us. The way to be empowered by the Spirit is to ask God for and then be led by the virtue-creating presence of the Spirit.

As the Spirit leads God's people, the Spirit also empowers the life of the church and its institutions. That's the only way the church as a corporate structure can be empowered—by individual believers living by the Spirit. That means we must be careful not to mistake aspects of corporate church life—such as its programs, ceremonies or beliefs—for the Holy Spirit's dynamic activity *within* the lives of human beings.

Christians in love

The most important evidence or quality of the Holy Spirit's work within believers is love. This quality defines the essence of who God is—and it identifies Spirit-led believers. This love is what the apostle Paul and the other New Testament teachers were always concerned about first and foremost. They wanted to know whether individual Christian lives were being empowered and transformed by the love of the Holy Spirit.

Spiritual gifts, church service and inspired teaching were (and are) important for the church. To Paul, however, of vastly more importance was the dynamic work of the Holy Spirit's love within believers in Christ.

- Paul could speak "in the tongues of men and of angels" (1 Corinthians 13:1). But if he lacked love, he said he was nothing but a noisemaker.
- Paul could also "have the gift of prophecy," be able to "fathom all mysteries and all knowledge" and even "have a faith that can move

mountains” (verse 2). But if he lacked love, he was nothing. Not even a storehouse of biblical knowledge, theological orthodoxy or strong beliefs could substitute for the empowerment of the Spirit’s love.

- Paul could even say, “If I give all I possess to the poor and surrender my body to the flames, but have not love, I gain nothing” (verse 3). Not even doing good works for their own sake should be confused with the working of the Holy Spirit in love.

Real Christians

What is crucial for believers is the active presence of the Holy Spirit, and that we respond to the Spirit. Paul insists that the true people of God—real Christians—are those who have been renewed, reborn and transformed to reflect God’s love in their lives. There is only one way this transformation can take place in us. It is through a life led and lived by the love of the indwelling Holy Spirit. God the Holy Spirit is the personal presence of God in our hearts and minds.

Paul Kroll

TELL PETER

The life of Peter, Jesus' friend and leading disciple, is a lesson for all who are discouraged. He struggled with despair but, through the faithfulness of our Lord, he found acceptance and forgiveness.

Peter was a man of contradictions—impulsive and bold, yet affectionate and loyal. He responded eagerly to Jesus' call (Matthew 4:18). He left his net, his boat, his job and his familiar surroundings. He was also the first of the disciples to recognize who Jesus was (Matthew 16:16).

However, his strong and positive leadership qualities had a down side. He could be too assertive, and would sometimes have to be brought back into line. Like when Jesus was foretelling his suffering and death, and Peter began to rebuke him, saying: "Never, Lord...this shall never happen to you!" Peter was firmly put in his place by the Lord's reply, "Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; you do not have in mind the things of God, but the things of men" (Matthew 16:21-23).

Only a few verses before, Peter had been praised by Jesus as blessed to have the revelation of the Father. He was now reprimanded for being used as a mouthpiece for Satan. Knowing that his dynamic friend was vulnerable, Jesus later told him, "Satan has asked to sift you as wheat. But I have prayed for you, Simon, that your faith may not fail. And when you have turned back, strengthen your brothers" (Luke 22:31-34).

The impulsive Peter answered Jesus with a bold pledge of loyalty: "Lord, I am ready to go with you to prison and to death!" Brave words, but he was setting himself up for his greatest fall.

'Not me, Lord'

The night before his death, Jesus said to his disciples, "This very night you will all fall away on account of me, for it is written: 'I will strike the shepherd, and the sheep of the flock will be scattered.' But after I have risen, I will go ahead of you into Galilee" (Matthew 26:31-32).

Peter found that hard to accept. He may have said to himself, "Maybe the others, but not me!" Soon, however, he denied the Lord three times, fulfilling Jesus' prediction. Just as the rooster crowed and Jesus was led out by the soldiers, he turned his eyes to Peter. That gaze was too much for Peter to bear. He had betrayed his friend and his Lord in his hour of greatest need. Overcome with guilt, he wept bitterly.

During the next few hours, Jesus was beaten, crowned with thorns and killed by the soldiers. All the disciples were filled with grief, but perhaps none

among them experienced the depths of Peter's discouragement and shame. How could he face the other disciples? Would they—would anybody—ever trust him again?

Mentioned by name

The resurrection of Jesus brought new hope—and fresh anxiety. The angel at the tomb that morning told the women who came to anoint Jesus' body: "Don't be alarmed. You are looking for Jesus the Nazarene, who was crucified. He has risen! He is not here. See the place where they laid him. But go, tell his disciples *and Peter*, 'He is going ahead of you into Galilee. There you will see him, just as he told you'" (Mark 16:6-7).

How do you think Peter felt about that? Not only had the Lord risen from the dead, but he had mentioned Peter's name in particular. Imagine how that must have made Peter feel. Why had he been singled out? Was it because of the denials?

After Jesus' resurrection, Peter must have known for sure that Jesus was indeed the Christ, the Son of the living God! All Jesus' claims about giving his life as a ransom for many were true. But would he have anything to do with Peter, after Peter had denied him—not once, but three times over?

Peter soon got his answer. Jesus still accepted him, trusted him and loved him, despite the way Peter had turned against him. Peter soon found out that the words, "tell Peter," were an expression of love, confidence and forgiveness from Jesus.

"Tell Peter." What loving words of assurance for one who had been unfaithful! The Lord was saying, "No matter what you have done, there is forgiveness, there is hope. I am alive. I am with you all the way. I offer you a new beginning."

The rest is history. Peter spent the rest of his days proclaiming boldly the good news of the Lord he once denied. He became a mighty witness to the gospel of Jesus, finally sealing his faith with his own blood in martyrdom. Peter left us a legacy of one who failed, but with the power of Jesus, one who had a new beginning and meaningful life for the glory of God.

Do you feel discouraged? Are you, like Peter, dismayed at the extent of your inadequacies, the pressure of living your faith, and those times when you may have also denied Jesus in your life?

Jesus knows what Christians will be facing in this life. Our faithfulness will be tested many times—through temptations, through rejection, opposition and discouragement. But in those words to Peter, we can see the will of our Lord that we will be able to bounce back and prevail. As those

times come to us, we too can be a source of strength and inspiration for others.

Take heart! Be encouraged by the words of the Lord through the angel in the garden. His message is as much for *you* as it was for the one who felt he had gone too far to ever be accepted again.

You can put your own name there: “Tell _____!” Jesus has risen from the dead – for you. He has been a ransom – for you!

Eugene Guzon

GOOD NEWS IN AN ALABASTER JAR

Matthew 26 records an interesting episode in the life of Jesus, just two days before he was killed. This was an action-packed week, filled with highly significant events — and this event is no exception. In Matthew 26, we find a description of Jesus being anointed with perfume. The story begins in verses 1-2:

When Jesus had finished saying all these things, he said to his disciples, “As you know, the Passover is two days away — and the Son of Man will be handed over to be crucified.”

Jesus knows that his time is short — he has only two days to live — but his disciples seem to be unaware of it. Jesus will soon be given another opportunity to tell his disciples about his impending death.

Then there is an abrupt change of scene, in which Matthew tells us what is happening in another place at about the same time:

The chief priests and the elders of the people assembled in the palace of the high priest, whose name was Caiaphas, and they plotted to arrest Jesus in some sly way and kill him. “But not during the Feast,” they said, “or there may be a riot among the people.” (verses 3-5)

Jesus anointed with perfume

Matthew then takes us back to Jesus:

While Jesus was in Bethany [two miles east of Jerusalem] in the home of a man known as Simon the Leper, a woman came to him with an alabaster jar of very expensive perfume, which she poured on his head as he was reclining at the table. (verses 6-7).

A whole jar of perfume! The smell would have filled the entire room.

When the disciples saw this, they were indignant. “Why this waste?” they asked. “This perfume could have been sold at a high price and the money given to the poor.”

Aware of this, Jesus said to them, “Why are you bothering this woman? She has done a beautiful thing to me. The poor you will always have with you, but you will not always have me. When she poured this perfume on my body, she did it to prepare me for burial.”

Then Jesus, with special emphasis, said,

I tell you the truth, wherever this gospel is preached throughout

the world, what she has done will also be told, in memory of her.
(verses 8-13)

Why is this so important?

I would like to ask a follow-up question: Why is this story so important that it will be told wherever the gospel message goes?

The woman had done a nice favor for Jesus, and it was appropriate for Jesus to thank her in a nice way. But surely this does not mean that the disciples, no matter where they went in the world, would have to tell this story everywhere they told the gospel? If the disciples were running short of time, couldn't they just preach the gospel and skip this particular story? No, said Jesus. Wherever the gospel is preached, this story must be told, too. It is practically as important as the gospel itself!

When the disciples were inspired to write the stories of what Jesus did, they also wrote the story of what this woman did. In the Gospel accounts, it is on an equal level with the teachings and miracles of Jesus. What this woman did is an essential part of the story of Jesus.

That is not just long ago and far away. It also applies right now, and right here. Wherever the gospel goes, this story must be told, too. Why is that?

The context: Jesus' death

This section of Matthew is about Jesus' death. It begins in verse 2 with Jesus mentioning his death. It moves in verse 3 to the conspiracy to kill Jesus. And in verse 12, Jesus connects the anointing with his burial.

Right after Jesus says that this story will be told around the world, Matthew tells us in verse 14 that Judas went out and conspired with the chief priests to betray Jesus. This anointing with perfume was the last straw for Judas. He was so upset about this waste of money that he went out to betray his master for 30 pieces of silver – ironically, money that he himself would waste. He eventually saw that there was something more important than money – but that is a different story. Our focus today is on the story of what the woman did. That is the story that must be told everywhere the gospel goes.

The story is set in the context of Jesus' death. It is part of the introduction to what is called “the passion” – Jesus' suffering and death. That helps make the story significant. There are several points of resemblance between what this woman did and what Jesus did on the cross. Her action was in some ways a parable, a drama that portrayed spiritual truth about Jesus.

Many of Jesus' own actions were object lessons for spiritual truths. He did many more miracles than could be recorded in the Bible, but some are

reported to us because they have special significance.

The miracle of feeding 5,000 people, for example, helps show that Jesus is the bread of life. Just as he gives food for physical life, so also he gives what we need for eternal life. The fact that he could do something we can see, gives us assurance that he can do something we cannot see. Just as he heals diseases, so also he forgives sins. The physical action pictures a spiritual truth.

This is also true of what this woman did for Jesus. What she did illustrates for us some lessons about the sacrifice of Jesus Christ. It also pictures the way that we should respond to Jesus. What this woman did is a miniature picture of the gospel itself. That is why this story is so important that it has become part of the gospel message. It can help us explain the nature of the gospel.

A powerful devotion

Let's look at three ways in which this anointing resembles the sacrifice of Jesus himself.

Let's give this woman a name. John 12 tells us that she was Mary, sister of Lazarus, and that this was shortly after Jesus had raised Lazarus from the dead. The story can be told without that particular fact — the action is more important than who did it — but it does help us understand a little more of what went on behind the scenes. (It is not exactly certain that the story in John 12 is the same incident as we read about in Matthew 26, but that question does not affect the point we wish to make here.)

First, we can see that Mary was motivated to do this out of love. Nobody told her to do it. It was not commanded. It was just something Mary took upon herself to do, and she did it out of love.

Jesus also made his sacrifice out of love. He had no obligation to die for us, but he chose to do it, willingly, motivated by love. Even while we were sinners, he loved us with incredible intensity.

Mary may have known that Jesus was soon to die, but perhaps not. The disciples didn't understand that Jesus was going to die, and Mary probably didn't, either. Otherwise, she would have saved the perfume for the actual burial. She seems to have poured the perfume on Jesus simply because she had an incredibly intense devotion to Jesus. She was overwhelmed with love. Maybe it was a response to the resurrection of Lazarus.

Mary may have bought that perfume to anoint the dead body of her brother. Now that Lazarus was alive, Mary did not need the perfume for him — thanks to what Jesus had done. How could Mary thank Jesus for his

wonderful gift of life? Why, she could use that same perfume to lavish it on Jesus, as a token of her thanks and love. Mary was praising Jesus, honoring Jesus—in effect, worshipping Jesus, sacrificing to Jesus.

Many people today are concerned with right beliefs. Right beliefs are good. We need them. Many people today are concerned with right behavior. Right behavior is good. We need it — but we need something else, too, and that is something that Mary demonstrates for us. Mary shows us right *emotion*, right feeling. The heart we need for God is an intensely personal devotion, a powerful dedication of ourselves to his service.

This intensity of emotion is unusual, and like most unusual things, this was criticized. This kind of devotion was not within the ordinary range of acceptable behavior. People would call Mary eccentric, maybe even out of her right mind. Society says, Don't get carried away with your emotions. Mary did. Her society criticized her, but Jesus praised her. Society says, Moderation in all things. Mary was not moderate. Her society criticized her, but Jesus praised her. The jury of 12 men said this is wrong, but Jesus said, she is better than you all.

Mary had an intense affection and devotion for Jesus. We can see it when she sat at Jesus' feet listening to him teach. She was a contemplative person who liked to think. Here, she is an expressive person — expressive not in words but in actions. Her quiet nature did not prevent her from making a powerful statement — more powerful than words could have possibly done.

An enormous sacrifice

The second way in which Mary's action was like the sacrifice of Jesus is that it was a sacrifice. This was some incredibly expensive perfume. Mary could have sold it for a large amount. Mark tells us it was worth about one year's wages — the amount of money that a working person would earn in an entire year. In today's economy, it might be worth several thousand dollars.

Can you imagine one jar of perfume that costs several thousand dollars? Now, can you imagine taking that and just pouring it out? Thousands of dollars evaporating into thin air — gone forever. A year's worth of work, gone, just like that.

This shows us something of the intensity of Mary's love for Jesus. She must have known what she was doing, and how much it had cost her. But she did not care. Her love for Jesus was so great that she was not concerned about the cost. She was probably happy about it — she was getting a chance to demonstrate her devotion to Jesus. If she had sorrow, it was not about

how much she was giving up, but that she had so little to give. Love often expresses itself in self-sacrifice, with little thought for self.

If an offering is to be meaningful, it should cost us something, and it should be done out of our own free will. We should give up something that is of value to us. Worship always involves sacrifice — sacrifice of money, time or pride, or all three. Maybe it requires everything we have, and everything we are.

The disciples were concerned with self. They wanted to be great in the kingdom of God. But Mary was achieving greatness already, through her devotion to Jesus. She was not concerned for self and what she would get out of it. She was concerned for nothing but Jesus, and in that, she was already great.

Concern about the money

The disciples suggested that the money could be given to the poor. It wasn't just Judas who objected to this "waste" of money. All the disciples were indignant.

It is good to give money to the poor. The traditional Jewish understanding of righteousness included giving money to the poor, and apparently the disciples sometimes did it. (When Judas went out from the last supper, the disciples thought that he might be going to give something to the poor. If Jesus had never given any money to the poor in the previous three years, the disciples probably would not guess that he would start right then. Charity seems to have been part of what they normally did.)

When someone has lots of money, it is appropriate to share some of it with those who need it. That is a good use of money. But in this case, Mary had picked an even better use of the money. She used it in an act of tremendous devotion, an act of worship. That is a legitimate use of money, too.

Some Christians make a religion out of social work, and they do it very well. Social work can be part of the Christian faith. But some unfortunately see that as the only form of religion, and they have forgotten about devotion to Jesus. Social work is good, but it is not supreme. Jesus is supreme — and our devotion to *him* will cause us to help the people who need help. It's a question of priorities, and Jesus must always be first. For Christian service to really count, it must be done for Christ. We are serving him. Even when we are helping other people, we are serving Christ.

What Mary did, from an observer's perspective, was a big sacrifice. But because she was willing, it was for her a small price to pay, a token of her

love. Jesus' crucifixion, from all perspectives, was a tremendous sacrifice, but he was willing to make it. For the joy set before him he endured the cross. He knew that glory was waiting not just for him, but for all who would be saved by what he did. He was willing to pay the price—and he was happy that he was able to pay the price, because he knew how valuable the result would be.

As *we* grasp the enormity of his sacrifice, we cannot help but respond in love and devotion — and there is no sacrifice too great. Nothing we do could ever compare to what he has done for us. Our love for him causes us to *live* for him, to give all that we are.

Extravagant sacrifice

The third way in which Mary's action was similar to Jesus' crucifixion is that it was extravagant. It was far more than what was necessary. It was outrageous! Mary was not a calculating person who thought, what is the least I can do? How much do I have to spend to be enough? What is my duty?

Nor was she tied down to tradition. Mary did not think, How do other women show respect for a rabbi? She was not afraid of public opinion. Her love freed her from that fear. She was not afraid to do something out of the ordinary. Mary did not ask the disciples if it was OK. No, Mary broke traditions. She broke the limits of what is public propriety. Mary didn't even ask Jesus if it was OK. She just seized the opportunity, and did it. She did what she could, because only that expressed her devotion to Jesus. Her love was so great that it called for an exceptional act of creative devotion.

The disciples didn't object to the anointing in itself. They didn't object to perfume. What they objected to was the extravagance. This was just *too much* of a good thing — way too much. This was ridiculous, wasteful, even sinful.

No so, said Jesus. What she has done is a beautiful thing, Jesus said. It had an aesthetic value, like a beautiful work of art, a beautiful piece of music. It was a beautiful *action* — a beauty that defies cost analysis. It is impossible to put a price on such personal devotion.

Sometimes we are too concerned about the usefulness of something. I often think that way. But that may mean that I do only the ordinary things, never the unusual, never the beautiful, never anything heroic, never anything requiring faith.

The disciples wanted the money to be put to good use, for something practical, like food for the hungry. That *is* a very good use for money. It was the ordinary thing to do, the normal thing to do, even a respectable thing to do. But *usefulness* is not the most important thing in the universe. Usefulness

is not our god. Efficiency is not our god. Public opinion is not our god. Traditional boundaries of politeness are not our god. *Jesus* is our God, and it is useful to use up our material resources to honor and glorify him.

Maybe there aren't any tangible results, but a sacrifice of love and devotion *has a usefulness of its own*. An act of great beauty has a usefulness of its own when it is done for Jesus Christ. Mary's act of extravagant waste was actually a picture of spiritual beauty — a heavenly fragrance. It pictured the sacrifice of Jesus Christ in a way that words could not. It was extravagant, and that is part of its beauty. God himself is extravagant.

Now, when something is done out of the ordinary, *someone* is going to complain about it. Someone is not going to understand the motive, or understand the beauty, or they are going to say, "That's not right. We don't do things that way." To them, it seems that mediocrity is better than intense emotion. But Jesus praises extravagance, not mediocrity.

God gave us an extravagant gift in the person of Jesus Christ. It was an outrageous gift, worth far more than what we deserve. Grace is extravagant. Jesus gave everything he had for us. He gave his very life. He gave more than necessary — he died for the whole world, and yet the whole world does not accept him. He died even for the people who reject him.

What a waste!, some people might think, but it was really an act of love, of sacrifice, of extravagance. Some people said, "That can't be right. That's not the way God normally acts with us." But God does things out of the ordinary. Jesus shows us total commitment, total sacrifice, so that we might respond to him with all that we have.

An extravagant response

We need to respond to Jesus the same way that Mary did — with a supreme focus on him, a single-minded love that counts everything else loss for Jesus Christ, a love that does not ask how *little* we can do to get by, a love that is not worried about public opinion, a love that is no longer concerned about what is within the boundaries of normal devotion — a love that is willing to be extravagant.

When Mary poured perfume on Jesus, she was not only picturing some aspects of what Jesus did on the cross, she also pictured the way that we should respond to Jesus, with such complete devotion, such willingness to sacrifice, such willingness to go beyond the boundaries of normal and to have an extraordinary love for Jesus.

Have you ever done anything extravagant for Jesus Christ? Have you ever done anything so outrageous for him that other people thought you were

foolish? Have you ever been so bold with love that other people have criticized what you did? Some of us have. Maybe it was a long time ago. Whenever it was, it was sweet-smelling aroma offered to God.

The example of Mary tells me that I am too reserved. I am too often concerned with what others think. I am not loving Jesus as much as I ought. I am too concerned with myself. I need to think more about actions of extraordinary beauty. God has been extravagant with me. He has lavished on me the riches of his grace. He has repeatedly given me things I did not deserve and things I did not appreciate the way I ought. His grace toward me abounds and abounds and abounds. How do I respond to him who gave his life for me?

Michael Morrison

ON BEING A CHILD OF GOD

Jesus' disciples sometimes had delusions of self-importance. They once asked Jesus, "Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?" (Matthew 18:1). Their motive may not be the same as ours, but we can ask a similar question: What personal characteristics are the best examples of what God wants in his people?

It is a good question, and Jesus used it to make an important point: "Unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven" (verse 3).

The disciples must have been surprised, even puzzled. Perhaps they had been thinking of people such as Elijah, who called down fire from heaven to consume some enemies, or a zealous person like Phinehas, who killed sinners (Numbers 25:7-8). Were they the greatest in the history of God's people?

Their idea of greatness was misguided. Jesus said that what God wants most in his people is not bravado, not spectacular works, but childlikeness. If we do not become like little children, we will not be in the kingdom at all!

In what way are we to be like children? Are we to be immature, childish, uninformed? No. We are to put childish ways behind us (1 Corinthians 13:11). We are to discard some characteristics of children, while keeping others.

One characteristic we need is humility, as Jesus says in verse 4: "Whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven." The humble person is, in God's way of thinking, the greatest—the best example of what God wants in his people.

This is because humility is characteristic of God himself. God is willing to give up his privileges for our salvation. What Jesus did in becoming flesh was not contrary to God's nature—it revealed what God is like all the time. God wants us to be like Christ, willing to give up privileges to serve others.

Some children are humble, but others are not. Jesus used one particular child to make a point: We are to see ourselves in certain respects as like children—particularly in our relationship to God.

Jesus also pointed out that as children, we ought to *welcome* children (verse 5), and he probably meant this both literally and figuratively. Adults should be attentive to and respectful of young people. We should also welcome and respect people who are young in the faith, immature in their relationship to God and in their understanding. Humility involves not only our relationship with God, but also with other people.

Abba, Father

Jesus knew that he had a unique relationship with God. Only he knew the Father well enough to reveal him to others (Matthew 11:27). Jesus called God by the Aramaic word *Abba*, an affectionate word that children and adults used for their fathers. Perhaps the best modern equivalent is “Dad.”

In prayer, Jesus talked to his Dad, asking him for help and giving him thanks for whatever he had. Jesus says that we do not have to flatter our way into an audience with the King. He’s our Dad, and we can talk to him because he is our Dad. He has given us that right, so we can be confident that he hears us.

Although we are not children of God in exactly the same way that Jesus is the Son, Jesus taught his disciples to pray to God as their *Abba*. Many years later, Paul could assume that the Roman church, more than a thousand miles from Aramaic-speaking lands, called God by the Aramaic word *Abba* (Romans 8:15).

Using the word *Abba* isn’t required in prayers today, but the widespread use of the word in the early church shows that it made an impression on the disciples. They had been given an especially close relationship with God, a relationship that gave them guaranteed access to God through Jesus Christ.

The word *Abba* was distinctive. Other Jews didn’t pray like that, but the disciples of Jesus did. They knew that God was their Dad. They were children of the King, not just members of a chosen nation.

Rebirth and adoption

The apostles used several metaphors to help communicate the new fellowship that believers have with God. A term like *redemption* conveyed the idea that we belong to God. We were redeemed from the slave-market of sin through an enormous price—the death of Jesus Christ. The “price” wasn’t paid to anyone in particular, but it did convey the idea that there was a cost involved in our salvation.

A term such as *reconciliation* emphasized the fact that we were once enemies of God, and are now restored to friendship through Jesus Christ. His death allowed our sins, which separated us from God, to be wiped off the record. God did this for us, because we were completely unable to do it ourselves.

The analogies that Scripture gives us are analogies, and the fact that several are used indicates that none of them gives us the complete picture. This is obvious when it comes to two analogies that, when taken literally, are contradictory: first, that we are born from above as children of God, and

then, that we are adopted.

Both these analogies tell us something important about our salvation. Being born again tells us that there is a radical change in who we are as human beings, a change that begins small and grows in our lives. We are new creations, new people, living in a new age.

Adoption tells us that we were once strangers to the kingdom, but now, by God's decision, attested by the Holy Spirit, we are declared God's children, with full rights of inheritance and identity. We who were once far off have been brought near through the saving work of Jesus Christ. In him we die, yet because of him we do not have to die. In him we live, yet it is not we who live, but we are new people, being created by the Spirit of God.

Each metaphor has its value, and each has its weakness. Nothing in the physical or social world can fully convey what God is doing in our lives. But these are the analogies he has given us, and one of the most consistent images that Scripture uses is that we are children of God.

Become as children

God is Creator, Sustainer and King, but far more importantly for us, he is Dad. It's an intimate bond, expressed in the most important relationship of first-century culture. In that society, you were known by your dad. Your name was, for example, Joseph son of Eli. Your place in society was determined by your dad. Your economic status, your occupation, your future spouse, were determined by your dad. If you inherited anything, it was from your dad.

In modern society, mothers play a more prominent role, and many people today have a better relationship with mom than with dad. If the Bible were being written today, maternal metaphors might be more common. But in Bible times, father metaphors were more important.

God sometimes reveals himself with maternal characteristics, but he always calls himself a Father. If our relationship with our dad is good, then the analogy works well. But if our relationship with our dad is bad, then we will have to think harder to see what God is trying to communicate to us. We are not to judge God as no better than the father we know, but to think more creatively, to the idealized parental relationship that no human being ever matches up to. God is better than the best.

As children of God, in what way do we look to God as our Dad?

- God loves us deeply, and he sacrifices to prepare us for success. He made us to be like himself, and he wants us to succeed. Often, it is only when we are parents ourselves that we can appreciate how

much our own parents did for us. In our relationship with God, we can only dimly perceive all that he goes through for our good.

- We look to God in faith, as totally dependent on him. We are not self-sufficient. We trust him to provide our needs and guide us in life.
- We have day-to-day security, knowing that an all-powerful God is looking out for us. He knows our needs, whether for daily bread or for emergency assistance. We do not need to worry, because Dad will take care of us.
- As children, we are guaranteed a future in God's kingdom. To use another analogy, we'll inherit a fabulous fortune—living in a city in which gold is as plentiful as dirt, where we will have spiritual wealth of far greater value than anything we know now.
- We have confidence and courage. We can preach with boldness, without fear of persecution. Even though we may be killed, we do not fear, for we have a Dad no one can take away from us.
- We can face trials with optimism. We know that our Dad allows difficulties to discipline us so we will be better in the long run (Hebrews 12:5-11). We are confident that he is working in our lives, and he will not disown us.

These are enormous benefits. Perhaps you can think of more. But I am sure that there is nothing better in all the universe than being a child of God. That is the greatest blessing of the kingdom of God. When we become like little children, we become heirs to all the joy and blessings of the eternal kingdom that cannot be shaken.

Joseph Tkach

DISCOVERING ADOPTION

One night in 1975, while waiting for his meal in a restaurant, Gary Klahr struck up a conversation with a man seated at the table next to him. His name was Steve Barbin. By the time they finished their meal, Gary and Steve had pushed their tables together and were well on the way to becoming best friends. Over time, they grew so close that they finished each other's sentences and laughed at jokes that no one else seemed to understand. Gary told Steve he thought of him as a true brother. He explained that his parents had tried for years to have a child before he came along, and they called him their gift from God. Steve, on the other hand, had been adopted.

Gary and Steve had been best friends for 23 years when, out of the blue, Gary got a phone call from a woman with the Connecticut Department of Children and Families.

"You should probably sit down before I tell you why I'm calling," she said. "Did you know that you were adopted?"

"Are you sure you have the right Gary Klahr?" Gary asked.

She persisted, "Believe me," she said, "I wouldn't do this if I weren't sure. One of your biological siblings needs urgent medical information from his family."

Gary was stunned. His parents had always treated him as if he was their own biological child. They never even hinted that he was adopted.

"In all my years in this work, I've never seen a case like this," the woman said. "Your biological parents lived in Bridgeport and they had 13 children. Nine of them were adopted by other families. Is there someone besides your parents that you can talk to about this? Perhaps, someone you are close to?"

"My buddy Steve is adopted and he is okay with it," Gary said slowly. "So I guess I will be too, once I have some time to get over it."

The woman from the Department of Children and Families asked, "What's Steve's last name?"

"Barbin" he replied.

"Gary," she continued, "Steve is your brother!"

Can you imagine it? How would you feel if you suddenly discovered that your best friend, the one you have been calling your brother, turns out to actually be your real brother? You don't have to imagine it, because this is the situation for every one of us.

In New Testament times, society had clear divisions. Jews would have nothing to do with Gentiles, whom they considered spiritually inferior. Many first-century Christians came from a Jewish background, so we can easily

understand how Gentiles who became Christians may have felt like second-class citizens. In his epistle to the Ephesians, Paul sets out to correct this.

Therefore, remember that formerly you who are Gentiles by birth and called “uncircumcised” by those who call themselves “the circumcision”... remember that at that time you were separate from Christ, excluded from citizenship in Israel and foreigners to the covenants of the promise, without hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far away have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he himself is our peace, who has made the two groups one and has destroyed the barrier.... His purpose was to create in himself one new humanity out of the two, thus making peace.... Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and strangers, but fellow citizens with God’s people and also members of his household. (Ephesians 2:11-19)

Paul had grasped what was, at the time, a revolutionary point of truth. The old divisions between Jew and Gentile had become irrelevant. Jesus as our elder brother included both Jew and Gentile in the relationship with the Father and Holy Spirit. Jesus knew that he had a unique relationship with God. Only he knew the Father well enough to reveal him to others (Matthew 11:27). Jesus called God by the Aramaic word *Abba*, an affectionate word that children and adults used for their fathers. Perhaps the best modern equivalent is “Dad.”

In prayer, Jesus talked to his “Dad,” asking him for help and giving him thanks for whatever he had. Although we are not children of God in exactly the same way that Jesus is the Son (we are adopted by grace), Jesus told us that God is also our Dad, and we can talk to him just as he did. Using the word *Abba* isn’t required in prayers today, but the widespread use of the word in the early church shows that it made an impression on the disciples. They had been given an especially close relationship with God, a relationship that gave them guaranteed access to Father, through the Son and in the Holy Spirit (Romans 5:2; Ephesians 2:18; 3:12).

Like Gary and Steve, we learn that we too are adopted – by God. This is not some fuzzy spiritual idea. Our adoption is a real and practical relationship that God has established with us through Jesus. Just as Gary and Steve discovered that they were brothers, we see that Jesus, whom we may have thought of as a friend, is in reality a brother. This idea is as revolutionary today as when Paul first wrote about it to the early church. How different our world could be if every person and every nation could grasp this wonderful truth!

Joseph Tkach

OUR RELATIONSHIP WITH JESUS CHRIST

Doctrine is only one portion of authentic Christianity. It is important, to be sure — it is essential that the church teach right doctrines — but it is only part of what we must include in our worship of our Creator, Savior and Sanctifier. No matter how much we know, Paul says, it doesn't do us any good if we don't have love (1 Corinthians 13:2).

Jesus said the most important command in the Scriptures was to “love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind” (Matthew 22:37). When we focus on the Word of God, we often focus on doctrines. That is because the Holy Spirit leads us to bring our minds and thoughts into conformity with God's will. But the Spirit does not stop there. Knowledge of God's purpose and will must be put to use, or it is worthless.

As the 16th-century reformers said, we are saved by faith alone, but not by a faith that is alone. The Holy Spirit leads us to combine right belief with right action. Faith in Jesus leads the believer to obedience to the will of God. We do not want to have a dead orthodoxy, being correct in beliefs, but ineffective in life. Right doctrine, if held in true faith, will necessarily affect our behavior.

Let's get emotional

Likewise, right doctrine affects our emotions. It is not possible for us to love God with all our heart without getting emotional about it! When we understand the doctrine that God showed his love for us by sending his only Son to die for us, then it will have an effect on our emotions toward God. We love him because he first loved us.

Our relationship with God is characterized by love. Love is more than emotion, but it includes emotion — a powerful affection and attraction. When we love him, we will adore him, seek him, yearn to spend time with him, desire to be like him and seek to please him in everything we do.

The Psalms are very expressive emotionally. Psalm 69, for example, shows how David poured out his emotions to God. Psalm 63 is an example of David's yearning for God: “O God, you are my God, earnestly I seek you; my soul thirsts for you, my body longs for you, in a dry and weary land where there is no water.” Psalm 42 gives a similar thought: “As the deer pants for streams of water, so my soul pants for you, O God.”

The Holy Spirit leads believers to feel this way when they love the Lord with all their heart. After all, we are the “fiancee” of Jesus Christ (2 Corinthians 11:2). We are going to live with him forever and ever. The Spirit provides believers with true love, a love that transforms everything we do throughout the day. We can be, in effect, walking on cloud nine. We can be

happy and hopeful. We can have the peace that surpasses understanding. We can have a song on our heart. These are poetic ways of describing the love that surpasses our ability to describe in literal terms. We do not have words to describe how good we feel. That's how it is between us and our Savior.

It is often said that Christianity is a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. "Relationship" has many meanings. We must ask what *kind* of relationship we have. Some people ignore Jesus. Some are afraid, and some are angry. These are defective relationships.

The Bible describes a good relationship with God in several ways. In a simple analogy, he is the Lord and Master, and we are his slaves. This analogy is correct — we should honor, reverence, and obey our perfect and good Lord — but it is not the complete picture. Jesus said we could have even more: "I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know his master's business. Instead, I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you" (John 15:15).

Is Jesus your friend? I hope so, but some people are not comfortable with that phrase. Some men are not comfortable expressing love for Jesus Christ. They may or may not be able to say that they love their dad and love their children, but they are not comfortable saying, "I love Jesus." They find themselves embarrassed to express love for their Savior.

Some people prefer more abstract titles, such as the Eternal, the Creator, the Almighty, the Messiah, the Christ. Those titles are good, and true, but alone they can make God seem aloof and far away. The name *Jesus* reminds us that the Word became flesh and lived among us as a human being.

Jesus Christ came to show us the Father. He showed us a personal being. He stressed that God is our Father, and the name *Father* shows a desire for love and companionship. Our Father in heaven wants to spend eternity with us, and he wants our relationship with him to be characterized by an emotion — love. He loves us, and he wants us to love him with intensity, with passion. He wants worship, but he also wants friendship. In this we follow in the footsteps of Abraham, our father in the faith, who walked with God and was called a friend of God (James 2:23).

Relationship terms

Faith is central to Christianity, and *faith* is a relationship term. We must have faith in Jesus Christ. This means that we believe that he is all he says he is, and he will do what he has promised. It means that we trust him.

When we have faith in Jesus, it means more than simply believing that he exists, more than believing that he is the Son of God, more than believing that he died for our sins. Those are true, and they are essential, but faith also means trusting him day by day, walking with him, knowing that the love he

has for us will never fail.

Jesus gave us this promise: “This is the will of him who sent me, that I shall lose none of all that he has given me, but raise them up at the last day. For my Father’s will is that everyone who looks to the Son and believes in him shall have eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day” (John 6:39-40). We can have confidence in him.

Paul described salvation as reconciliation between God and his people. *Reconciliation* is also a relationship word. Before we were called, we were hostile toward God, but we were reconciled through the death of Jesus Christ (Romans 5:10). This means that we are his friends rather than his enemies.

This personal reconciliation is important. It is part of the message we have been called to proclaim: “He has committed to us the message of reconciliation” (2 Corinthians 5:19). We implore people on Christ’s behalf that they be reconciled to God (verse 20). We urge them to accept the gift of friendship that has been made possible by the death of Jesus on the cross (Colossians 1:20).

By becoming friends of God, we also become friends of each other. Since we will each live with God eternally, we will also live with one another eternally, in a relationship characterized by love. We are reconciled not only with God, but also with each other. Paul described the reconciliation of Jews and Gentiles:

In Christ Jesus you who once were far away have been brought near through the blood of Christ.... His purpose was to create in himself one new man out of the two, thus making peace, and in this one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross.... You are no longer foreigners and aliens, but fellow citizens with God’s people and members of God’s household. (Ephesians 2:13-19)

We have citizenship rights in heaven — but not just citizenship — we are also part of the royal family. We are heirs of eternal life, heirs of a never-ending life with a Father who loves each of us individually and personally. He wants us to be with him, to enjoy him forever.

Invited in

To help convey some of this spiritual reality, let’s imagine for a minute a metaphorical throne room in heaven, larger than any we have ever seen, full of splendor and beauty. God the Father reigns supreme. Jesus is at his right hand. The Holy Spirit fills the room with tremendous brilliance. Do we come before his throne with fear and trembling only, or also with joy and affection?

By his grace, through faith in Jesus, we can come to God with tremendous respect and awe, with never-ending worship. But also through Jesus we can

come to God with joy, thanksgiving and confidence, with full assurance, knowing that the blood of Christ cleanses us from every sin (Hebrews 4:14-16). There is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus (Romans 8:1). We come before God spotless and pure, clothed in the perfect righteousness of Jesus Christ.

We have an eager longing to enter the throne room of heaven, knowing that we are welcome. God wants us to be there. He loves us so much that he sent his only Son to die for us. We are his children, and we can enter his gates with praise. He wants us to come in, to feel the splendor, to experience the love and kindness, to know that the power is always used to help us.

Did you know that we are *already* in the heavenly throne room? Paul says:

Because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions — it is by grace you have been saved. And God raised us up [past tense] with Christ *and seated us [past tense] with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus*, in order that in the coming ages he might show the incomparable riches of his grace, expressed in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus. (Ephesians 2:4-7)

Spiritually, we are already in heaven! God wants us to be in his presence. He wants us to be with him, to love him, to be friends of his Son — and even more than friends: to be brothers and sisters. We can come boldly before his throne, knowing that he wants us to be there.

We can ask ourselves, how is my friendship with the Lord? Am I comfortable in his presence? Do I welcome him in my life and heart? Is the gospel, grace and forgiveness making a difference in my life? The new covenant, sealed with the blood of our Savior, gives us forgiveness. It gives us reconciliation and confidence. It gives us personal friendship and brotherhood with Jesus Christ.

A good relationship with Jesus goes a long way in times of trial, in times of doctrinal uncertainty, and in times of blessing. It is a joy to know the Lord — not just know about him, but to know *him*, to have a person-to-person friendship. It is a tremendous comfort to know that he values us, that he is like a father who gets up and runs toward us whenever we come back to him (Luke 15:20). He welcomes us as a beloved child, not as a servant (verses 22-23). He wants us to live in his house forever.

Jesus Christ says you can have the joy of salvation. Faith and hope in him will transform your life. Do you need a better relationship with our Lord and Master? Yes, we all do. So how can we have it? Let me suggest three things: prayer, study and fellowship.

- *Pray.* Ask God to give you the joy of salvation. Ask him to help you know his love for you in the sacrifice and resurrection of his Son. Ask him to help you adore him, to know and feel his love for you. Ask him for faith in Jesus, and for his power to walk in his love.
- *Study.* In this case, I suggest studying the four Gospels. Sometimes we study for doctrine and for commands regarding what we should do. This time, I suggest that we study simply to see what Jesus is like as a person. Get a feel for his love and compassion, his desire for friendship, his zeal for his Father's glory. Walk with him in the mountains, across the lake, into the city of his death. Meditate on it. Feel with him. Our life is hidden with Jesus Christ (Colossians 3:3) — discover what his life is like.
- *Fellowship.* Our love for the Lord is expressed in part by our love for one another. Share with others the joy that you have in the Lord. Let it shine. In Christ, we will live forever with one another, with ever-growing love for one another. Let's express his love in us now! Encourage others, as often as we meet them (Hebrews 10:24-25). Treat others with the courtesy that Jesus would give them. Forgive them as he would forgive them, and as he has forgiven you.

Christianity is a way of life, changing our thoughts, our actions, and our emotions. It is Christ in us who makes it possible. May he live in us all.

Joseph Tkach

THE JOY OF SALVATION

Have you ever noticed that we tend to appreciate things more after they are gone? People take better care of their heart, for example, after it stops working for a minute. The job that causes complaints one week may be valued more after the job comes to an end.

An old car looks good to someone who has none, but less desirable to someone who has a new one. It's the same car, yet one person appreciates it more than the other one does, because the person who has less tends to value it more.

In Jesus' parable, a woman celebrated having 10 coins only after fearing she would have only nine (Luke 15:8-9). She had the same amount (10) before as after, but she did not celebrate until after she had lost and then found a coin. The shepherd did not celebrate 100 sheep, but celebrated finding one that was lost (verses 4-6).

People appreciate food more when they are hungry, they appreciate water more when they are thirsty, they appreciate help more when they are needy. Health and freedom—and perhaps all good things—become more important to us when they are threatened.

The joy of being found

The same seems to be true of spiritual realities, too. We value life with God more after we have experienced the problems of life on our own. In a strange sort of way, good can come out of evil.

Joe Aldrich mentions this statistic:

More than 90 percent of those who remain within the fellowship of the church following conversion were dissatisfied with their non-religious lifestyle before anyone proclaimed the gospel to them. More than 75 percent of those who “drop out” of the fellowship following conversion showed no significant level of dissatisfaction before conversion. (*Gentle Persuasion*, p. 99)

In other words, people make a more serious commitment when they have a greater need. The less happy they were with life before, the more serious they are now.

Perhaps that is why Jesus came to seek the lost (Luke 19:10). Everyone he spoke to was spiritually lost, but Jesus came to seek those who would admit to being lost, who would admit that they needed to turn toward God. They were the ones who knew they needed help and would appreciate his help. Beggars appreciate crumbs more than rich people do.

This does not mean that people should go out and sin like crazy so they can have a more dramatic repentance. All sin brings heartaches and grief.

Why make it worse? Everybody sins enough that they should be able to see that we are incompetent creatures and are in need of serious help. It would be foolish to pretend that we are among a (nonexistent) tiny minority who can manage life OK without any need for God.

Jesus did not call the comfortable. He called those who were burdened and tired (Matthew 11:28). He called the thirsty, those who knew they had a need (John 7:37). The first step of salvation, it seems, is to realize that we have a need. We need to see that life has more to it than what we can get on our own.

Some people struggle on the margins of faith. They know they fall short, but think that if they just had a little help, they could get back on their feet and make it on their own. They view Jesus as a temporary help, it seems—a little rescue every now and then, but they think they will manage after that. “Just tell me what to do, and I’ll do it. A couple of days in the hospital and I’ll feel better and go on my way.”

But we are far too sick for that. We need more than rescue—we need regeneration—a new life. We need a heart transplant, intensive care, constant monitoring and constant forgiveness. We need a pacemaker—Jesus giving us a new heartbeat—and frequent medication from the Holy Spirit. We are seriously sick, and the better we realize it, the more appreciative we will be of the help that Jesus gives us.

Help now and forever

The gospel of Jesus Christ helps us both in this life and in the future day of judgment. We have needs in both ages, and we should not neglect either one.

Some people treat the gospel merely as rescue from future condemnation. They accept Christ and, thinking that their future is now secure, go back to living pretty much the way they were before, all on their own steam, their own willpower, their own ideas of right and wrong. They may have seen a future need for Christ, but failed to see that they are desperately in need of him in this age as well.

They may trust in Christ when it comes to the future, but they do not trust in him for the here and now. They may strive for financial success, or for fame, power and importance. They may strive for pleasures in food and drink, sports and amusements. They may get them, but none of these will satisfy, because God has made us to need something more significant than self-amusement.

God has made us for fellowship with him, and nothing else can satisfy our souls. However, we often go hours or even days without giving much thought to God’s glory, love and holiness. I am sure that once we see Christ in his glory, we will thump our heads and say, “Oh, how could I have ever paid so much attention to other things?”

But we do not yet see Christ this clearly. We live in the slums, so to speak, and find it hard to imagine places we have never been. We are too busy trying to survive the slum to dwell on the glories of God.

But all the miseries of this life are learning opportunities for us, I think. We will appreciate the joys of eternity even more after we have struggled with the shackles of sin. We will appreciate spiritual bodies more after we have experienced the pains of our physical bodies.

We will appreciate paradise more after being lost, than if we had never been lost at all—or at least the contrast will help us appreciate it much faster.

The trials of this life make us look forward to, and will help us appreciate even more, the joys of eternity. In a strange way possible only with God, good will come out of and replace evil. This does not make our trials go away. Rather, it may help explain why trials are part of life. As it is written in Acts 14:22: “We must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God.”

God does not give us health and wealth whenever we ask, even if we are his children, because such things would too easily tempt us to focus on this physical life instead of spiritual reality. We are distracted too often as it is, but our attention (and our affections) would go astray even more if this life were more physically satisfying.

This physical life, in itself, is not supposed to be satisfying. It is supposed to make us hunger and thirst for the kingdom of Christ, so that we will come to him and be satisfied in him. The joys that he gives can never be taken away. In this life, we get only a down payment, to whet our appetite for more. It is through realizing what we lack, that we appreciate what Christ gives. The pain of being lost makes the joy of salvation that much more wonderful.

Joseph Tkach

STANDING IN CHRIST ALONE

“OK, I can see that we’re saved by grace and not by works, but I’m still not clear on a couple of things. For example, some passages in the New Testament indicate that we won’t be saved unless we are doing good works. How do those passages fit with the passages that tell us we are saved by grace and not by works?”

Good question. Just as these passages tell us, we cannot enter the kingdom of God unless we are righteous, unless we are meeting the righteous demands of the law of God (that is, the law of Christ, not the law of Moses). There is no way around it. Unless we are righteous, we are doomed.

The bad news is, the righteous demands of the law, which are indeed righteous, leave us doomed. Why? Because we don’t have what it takes to be sinless. “There is no one who is righteous, not even one,” Paul reminds us (Romans 3:10).

That is where the gospel comes in. The gospel, which is good news, tells us that God made Christ, who was sinless, to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God (2 Corinthians 5:21). It is good news.

That means we are saved by God’s gracious acts of love on our behalf—that’s the only way we can be saved. In spite of our rebellion, he loves us and wants us in his kingdom (John 6:40; 2 Peter 3:9). His eternal banquet of joy and celebration is so important to him that he has decided to have it overrun with guests even if the only guest-pool in the world is made up of nothing but ne’er-do-well, no-good losers.

God wants us at his eternal dinner party, and he has made sure we can have, free of charge (because we haven’t got the price of a ticket), the soapy scrub-down, fragrant oils and clean clothes not to stink it up. He has made it sure—with no help from us, because we bring nothing to the arrangement but our smelly, dirty selves.

So when we read a passage like Galatians 5:24, we need to keep firmly in mind that this kind of person is exactly who God has made us to be in Christ. We are not righteous of ourselves; we are righteous only in Christ, and only by God’s grace.

We can believe it or not, but that is what God says he has done. If we believe it, we will welcome the scrub-down and the clean outfit he provides for us.

If we don’t believe it (that is, if we don’t accept God for who he is, the Father of Jesus Christ through whom he has saved the world), then we will simply continue the futile masquerade we call life and cut ourselves off from

the joy of real life waiting for us in God's banquet hall.

Standing in the light

In the kingdom of God, righteous pretenders aren't welcome. Only sinners who know they are sinners, and who trust God to forgive them and make them righteous in Christ, are allowed in. Pretenders, who think they are in some way more deserving, or more acceptable, or less dirty than the others, can't stay. They remain in their sins because they won't give up their little righteousness charade and won't trust God to be their righteousness.

Knowing what God has done for us and in us, we are led to work on ourselves to overcome the sin that so easily entangles us (Hebrews 12:1-3). But keep this in mind: we are accepted as righteous by God only because of what Christ has already done for us, not by our Three-Stooges-Keystone-Cops overcoming performance, which is the best we can ever muster.

The Holy Spirit in us moves us to devotion, but the victory we participate in is the victory of Christ (Ephesians 2:4-7). We can enjoy the glorious fruit of his victory only by trusting him, not by improving our behavior (Romans 3:27-28).

When we rest in Christ, the peace of God removes our doubt, fear, anxiety and worry (Philippians 4:6-7). We are secure in him, like a helpless baby comforted in his mother's arms.

When God sent his Son to die for our sins and to be raised for our life, he made two things indelibly clear: 1) He loves us immeasurably and unconditionally, to the point of taking our burden as his own, even to the point of death, and 2) Our salvation was entirely his work; there is nothing we can do to save ourselves.

Sin

What is it about sin that makes it so bad? Sin amounts to a self-imposed gulf between us and God. Imagine what would happen to a tomato plant if it declared independence from soil, water and light. Without resting in the elements that produce its life and growth, the little plant is doomed.

It can never be what it is, a tomato plant, without soil, water and light. It can never do what tomato plants do—bear tomatoes—without soil, water and light. Yet our little rebel tomato plant, if we can still call it a tomato plant, has decided it has a better plan toward self-realization than the natural plan that makes tomato plants be tomato plants.

Sin amounts to a state of declared "independence" from God. It cuts us off from the source of our life and being. It is refusing to be who we really are, who we were created to be, in a crazy effort to be who we think we can

be. Sin is more than mere actions—it is the very condition of our lives. Individual sins are merely the natural fruit of a corrupt heart.

On our own, because we are sinners, we are like that tomato plant, trying to scratch out a life for ourselves in a hostile world, ignorant of the fact that we are not even in the ground. Lying as we are in the dark on the concrete sidewalk, the best we can hope for is to stay as green as we can for as long as we can and finally wither and die.

But the gospel tells us that we are not on our own. God has come to our rescue and planted us in the rich, moist soil in the sunlight. What can we do about it? Nothing. But we do have a choice about whether we will believe it and enjoy it, or deny it and shut off our roots and close our leaves and go on pretending we are lying on our side in the dark on the concrete. Such tragic pretense can end only in withered ruin.

Dead in sin, alive in Christ

To put it another way, if any one of us is fog-brained enough to think we are acceptable and righteous before God because of our devoted efforts to do what is right and avoid what is evil, then what can anyone say? Imagine a spoiled can of Spam shedding a layer of its reeking, bacteria-infested mass and then humbly telling you that it would now, free of that layer of putrefaction, make an acceptable lunch for you, and you have something of the idea.

In other words, no matter how much you overcome, no matter how many sins you shed, no matter how many bad habits you replace with good ones, no matter how much better you are today than you used to be, it is still fourth down and one million yards to go.

That is why we need to get our minds off ourselves and onto our Lord and Savior. We need to give up on ourselves and put our trust in Christ. He fixes us from the inside out.

Quit looking at the evidence you see in your life and start trusting him to be for you and do for you what he says he will be for you and do for you. Quit worrying that he will not be faithful on account of your being a sinner, and start trusting him to forgive you and clean you up like he said he would.

It works like this: your unfaithfulness does not keep God from being faithful. He will be faithful because that is the way he is—faithful. You can stick out your tongue at him all day long, and he will still be faithful. You will have a sore tongue and you will miss out on all the fun he wants you to have, but in spite of your woodenheadedness, he will still be faithful. He will not stop loving you and he will not stop knocking on your door, hoping you will

let him come in and eat with you. He is, and always will be, faithful, even when you are not.

We are free to deny him. We are free to give up on him. We are free not to believe him, even to hate him. We have that choice, the choice to love our own self-defined pseudo-lives and turn down his gift of real life. We don't have to enjoy his kingdom. He will let us stew in the misery of sin and death if we want to. Even so, he will always remain faithful, never forcing himself on us but always desiring our love.

As Paul wrote: "The saying is sure: If we have died with him, we will also live with him; if we endure, we will also reign with him; if we deny him, he will also deny us; if we are faithless, he remains faithful—for he cannot deny himself" (2 Timothy 2:11-13).

You can get yourself into all the trouble you want, and God will still be faithful. He will hurt for you and grieve for you, because he loves you, but he will not force you to trust him. He earnestly wants you to trust him and receive the glorious benefits of his grace, mercy and love, but the choice is yours.

You ask me if you can sin and still be saved, and all I can say is that you are a sinner and God saves sinners, so there can be no other answer but *yes*. You ask me if I am trying to encourage you to sin, and I answer, no, I am not; I am encouraging you to trust God to love you and forgive you and save you in spite of your sins, because that is what he promises to do.

You ask me how a person can have true faith in Christ and still keep sinning, and I answer, it would be nice if we believers would quit sinning, but nobody in all history has quit sinning this side of death. You try to think of some other way to ask it, and I still can answer no other way if I am to be faithful to the Word of God.

We are all sinners, and God saves us anyway, because saving sinners is what he does. That is not an invitation to sin; it is simply a fact. God remains faithful to us even when we are unfaithful to him, and thank God it is so. If we put our trust in him and admit we are sinners, he is faithful and just to forgive us.

Saved by grace

"But God will not save us unless we change, will he?"

Change how much? Change a little, change a medium amount, change a lot? Listen! God saves sinners. He heals the sick, not the healthy (Mark 2:17).

"Mike, you know what I mean. We have to change at least some,

or he will not save us.”

God does not save on the basis of human changes. He saves on the basis of his own righteousness (Romans 3:21).

“Come on. You know what I mean. If you believe, and Christ lives in you, then you have to put sin out of your life or you won’t be saved.”

OK, how much sin do you have to put out? All sin, most sin, some sin, a little sin? How much sin have you put out? How much sin is still left?

“I may not have all the answers to your cute little in-my-face questions, but I know this much: God is not going to save us if we just keep on sinning and not even caring about it.”

Ah, now we’re getting somewhere. Who said anything about not even caring about it? That is precisely what believers can’t do. Not that there is a rule against it. There doesn’t have to be. When you love somebody, you care, that’s just the way it is. The fact that we are believers means we do care about it.

The very thing that believers are trusting God to do is to forgive their sins and raise them from the dead. People who sin without caring about it, do not (by definition) care about whether God forgives them for sinning. They might figure that it’s nice if he does, but it’s all the same to them if he doesn’t. It doesn’t matter to them what God thinks, one way or the other. They only care about one thing: themselves, which is why they don’t mind sinning in the first place.

Believers, on the other hand, care about themselves, of course, but they also care about something else: God. They care that God says sin is wrong, they care that sin destroys, and they don’t want to be sinners, which is why they want to be forgiven. They trust God’s Word, including what it says about sin. They care about the fact that God loves them and has forgiven them, and they care about loving, thanking, praising and serving their gracious God.

Believers fight their sinful nature, desiring to live in harmony with their calling in Christ. But when they sin, as they all do, they trust God to forgive them for the sake of their Advocate, their Savior. That is, they *ought* to trust him to forgive them. But with all the legalistic you’d-better-measure-up-or-go-to-hellfire preaching and teaching, tragically, many Christians live in dread that God will in the final analysis reject them because of their sins, not save them.

Ask the average churchgoer, “How do you avoid hellfire?” He will say something like this: “By living a good life.”

That is not the gospel, but it is the common perception not only of John Q. Public, but also of John Q. Churchperson. Why is it the common perception? Because that is what has passed for preaching in untold numbers of Christian pulpits for centuries. Believers are lured in with promises of grace, then held hostage by a long and slippery list of required moral demands necessary in order to stay on God's good side. It is called religion.

The gospel, however, is not religion. The gospel is a loving God's good news to humans: "I love you so much that I sent my Son, so that by putting your trust in him you will not perish but live in joy and peace with me forever."

Let him who thinks he stands...

When we love God, we obey him. Right? Well, maybe that works for you—maybe the fact that you love God moves you into a life of faithful obedience and steady purity. It doesn't do that to me. I love God with all my heart, and in many ways I do better than I used to when it comes to sin, but I still grieve the Holy Spirit a lot more than I want to.

God's children *want* to obey him. The Spirit of God in us leads us to obey him. Our consciences, appropriately, plague us when we know we are disobeying him. Still, two things to remember: 1) We have been forgiven already, and 2) We keep sinning no matter how much we overcome.

The person who thinks he stands is the one who needs to take heed (1 Corinthians 10:12). Why? Because nobody stands except in Christ. Even with all the apostolic urging to do what is right, not one of us actually walks a pure and holy life—except as we are held in Jesus, and that life is invisible to us (Colossians 3:3).

Unless our righteousness exceeds that of the Pharisees, Jesus said, we have no part in the kingdom (Matthew 5:20). The Pharisees were the most careful and devoted law abiders around! They took the word of God seriously, and they devoted themselves scrupulously to observing it. But Jesus said that anyone who wants to be in his kingdom must have even greater righteousness.

Do you have such a level of righteousness? I don't. And that is the point. Salvation does not come by what we do, no matter how good we are—or think we are. Our righteousness is the righteousness of Jesus (1 Corinthians 1:30), and our faith is in his promise of deliverance, not in what we can do (Ephesians 2:8-9).

So how do we stand? By admitting that we are stone dead, flat on the ground, unable to lift a finger, and by trusting Christ who raises the dead

(John 11:25). How do we stand? By faith in the God who justifies the ungodly (Romans 4:5).

How do we know we can trust him? Because he has proved how much he loves us by sending his Son (Romans 5:8). How much proof do we need to be able to put our trust in him? What does he have to do? Die for us? He did just that. More than that, he was raised for us, too. It is in him that our true life is hidden with God until it is revealed with him when he comes (Colossians 3:3-4).

Then we shall see ourselves for what we really are, for what he has made us. We can accept our resurrected life, which includes and springs from our death, or we can reject it in favor of what we have always had—this pitiful excuse for life we see all too clearly right now.

We can keep the little coin we found in the dirt (which gave us the illusion of having a good handle on life), or we can trade it all for what's behind the curtain—trusting God's gracious promise that even though we can't see it yet, it is the mother of all jackpots. In other words, we can die to all the things we thought were worth fighting, clawing and bleeding for in this world, and trust God to give us the real life we don't yet see, the one that is hidden in Christ with God.

The two cannot exist together. We must give up the fake life we hold so tightly with both hands in order to grasp the real life God continually holds out to us (Matthew 6:24).

Serious about sin

Yes, we do need to “get serious” about avoiding sin. But we need to do so in the context of complete assurance that we are God's forgiven and beloved children for Christ's sake. We need to get serious about sin, knowing full well that God has not and will not reject us because of our sins, and that he will always stand with us in our struggle against sinning.

The only thing that can cause us to lose our salvation is for us to stop caring about it altogether and stop trusting God (Hebrews 2:3). Even then, God will continue to knock on our door, earnestly desiring that we answer it and let him in (Revelation 3:20).

The bottom line is, fight sin diligently but quit worrying that your failures, setbacks and dry periods will cut you off from God. They don't. God is not arbitrary in his love for you, nor does he keep score (1 Corinthians 13:7). He is absolutely true to his covenant promise; he will never leave you nor forsake you, and you can count on that no matter how deep in the miry pit of sin you have wallowed.

In his eyes, even while you still wage war with your sins, you are already new and righteous with him in Christ (Colossians 3:3). He sees you for what he has made you in Christ, not for what you have made yourself by a lifetime of wrong turns, bad decisions, weak moments, failures and sins.

Again, that is why this gospel is good news!

J. Michael Feazell

OBEYING GOD

“I still don’t get one thing. If we are forgiven already, what’s to stop us from continuing to sin? I realize we are saved by God’s mercy and not by being good, and I realize we could never be good enough anyway, and I realize that even our goodness is tainted with sin, but still, doesn’t God want us to stop sinning?”

You’re worried that if we put too much emphasis on grace, people won’t care how they behave?

“Yes, I guess I am.”

I have never met a Christian who did not care about how he or she behaves. It just comes with the territory—Christians care about how they behave. But I have met lots of Christians who have serious trouble believing that God could keep on loving them and forgiving them in spite of how rotten they behave.

Most of us Christians have an easy time seeing our sins and trying to do better. What we have trouble with is handing off our deep sense of guilt and failure to Christ. Most of us are always and ever struggling to overcome something, but our moments of deep peace and guiltless rest in God’s total and unconditional love for us are few and far between.

“Well, that supports my point. If we would quit sinning, then we wouldn’t have to suffer from guilt.”

You said you realized that even our goodness is tainted with sin, and you are right about that. It is. If we are honest with ourselves (and as Christians, we ought to feel free to be honest with ourselves), we know we are never guilt-free. But in Christ, we *are* guilt-free, not because of us, but because of him. God accounts us righteous in Christ. All we can do is believe it, because we can’t see actual evidence of it. We might see a little, or even a lot, of improvement in this or that aspect of our lives, but we never see anything close to perfection (unless we are delusional).

In other words, yes, we should fight sin in our lives, and because Christ lives in us, we do. But we should never measure God’s love for us by our success levels in achieving sinlessness. God wants us to trust *him* to be our righteousness.

When we trust him to be our righteousness three things happen:

1. We realize we are not righteous (that is, we are sinners in need of mercy; that's what we mean by repentance—admitting we are sinners in need of mercy).
2. We realize his Word, his promise to forgive us and save us, is good.
3. We rest in him.

God got hot with Israel over *unbelief* (Psalm 106:6-7, 21, 24; Hebrews 3:9, 12, 19). They would not trust him to do what he said he would do for them, which was to save them, to be their salvation, to take care of them. Instead of trusting him, they would make treaties with neighboring countries, or sacrifice to the gods of other nations, or trust in their own military strength.

(And hand in hand with their untrust, they would oppress the poor and weak among them. Not trusting God to take care of us always leads to walking all over the poor and weak. That is because when you try to make your own way in the world, you have to adopt the ways of the world, play by the world's rules—survival of the fittest.)

Trusting in God means that when we are hurt or taken advantage of, or when problems arise or tragedy strikes, all is not lost, because Christ was raised from the dead for us. It means that we know we have nothing to lose because everything we have was given to us by God in the first place.

It means we can cast all our cares on him because he cares for us. And that takes faith, because God's deliverance from the many things that fall on us in this life very seldom comes in ways that make sense to us.

Sometimes deliverance doesn't come in this life at all. In the same way, overcoming all our sins doesn't come in this life, which means we have to *trust* him when he says he doesn't count our sins against us (Romans 4:1-8) and that our new lives are hidden with Christ in God (Colossians 3:3).

Holy in Christ

Sin is our enemy as well as God's enemy. It destroys the creation, including us. But God has moved powerfully, decisively and once for all in Christ to redeem the creation, including us, from the corruption of sin. The outcome of the war with sin has already been determined through the death and resurrection of the incarnate Son of God. The devil, along with the sin and death he champions, has already been defeated, but he still exercises influence in the world until Christ returns.

By God's grace, we are *God's* children. Our hearts are turned to him, devoted to him and sanctified by him. We have tasted his goodness and experienced his love, and we have given our allegiance to him. We fight sin in our lives and strive to walk in righteousness because he lives in us.

Christ's victory is our victory. In other words, what Christ did, he did for us, and he stands for us with God. We are holy because, and only because, we are in Christ. That is something we can see only with the eyes of faith—we have to trust God that it is so.

Christian life a paradox

Here is another way of putting it: God has given us an active part in Christ's victory. We stand clean and forgiven in Christ's blood even while we seek to live in harmony with God's perfect love. A repentant heart and commitment to obedience characterize our lives of faith in Christ, yet we routinely fall far short of Christ's ideal.

When we fail, which is continually, we can trust in the forgiveness of our God who loves us so much that he gave his Son to redeem us. In Christ we stand, and we stand only because we are in Christ, who is *for us*, as opposed to *against us*.

In Christ, even though we are sinners, we are righteous. Even when our commitment flags, Christ's commitment to us does not—God is faithful even when we falter (2 Timothy 2:13). There is no condemnation for those who are in Christ (Romans 8:1).

If all this sounds like a paradox, it is. At least, it is from our perspective. But from God's perspective, it is the way the universe is put together. God loves and redeems, and he has made all things new in Christ. We are dead in sin, yet we are alive in Christ (Ephesians 2:5; Colossians 2:13). We still sin, yet God no longer considers us sinners (Romans 4:8). Our real lives, which are a new creation, are hidden in God with Christ (Colossians 3:3). Just as the old creation is judged, the new creation is saved.

Does that make sin OK? The question misses the point. Sin is not OK. It is never OK. But it is defeated. Its teeth have been pulled. It is on its last legs. It still slaps you around and might even kill you, but God has you covered forever.

Jesus confirms the ideals of the life of the kingdom in Matthew 5. The old categories of the law of Moses are transcended by Jesus' description of the transformed heart that reflects the new life in him. It is a heart that puts others ahead of self, that not only avoids hurting others but also actively loves others. It is a pattern of life that cannot be measured by mere outward appearances, but flows instead from a new creation, a new interior, a new birth.

It is the heart of Christ. And as such, it is a heart we are *given*, not one that we work up with moral energy and personal commitment.

“Why does Jesus say that anyone who does not keep the whole law and teach it will be called least in the kingdom of heaven?”

Because it is true. But remember, it is in Jesus that we keep the whole law, not in ourselves. It is Jesus who has kept it for us. The law condemns us because we cannot help but fail to keep it (Galatians 3:10-14). In Christ, there is no condemnation.

We become law keepers only by putting our faith in Jesus, who himself alone is our righteousness. Don't let anyone tell you otherwise. We don't begin to have what it takes to stand righteous in the presence of God. Jesus does, and the gospel is God's good news that God has *in Christ* made us everything he wants us to be. He has already done it.

Because we can't see any physical evidence of that, we can know it only by faith in the One who gives us the gift (Galatians 3:22). That's why God pleads, “Trust me!”

One other point, while we're on the topic: When Jesus refers to the law in Matthew 5, he is obviously not talking about the whole old covenant law. Otherwise we would all be wearing blue tassels and phylacteries and sacrificing lambs. Whatever way Jesus is defining “law” here, we are law keepers only through faith in him, not through our ever-bungling efforts to avoid sin.

Devotion born of trust

Jesus is our Savior, Lord and Teacher. We can start with the confidence that we are indeed forgiven and saved, purely as God's free gift to us through his Son. Jesus is our Savior. With that sure trust in God's true word of grace, and because his love is growing in us from the moment we believed him, we can (in his strength) devote ourselves to doing whatever he says. Jesus is our Lord, which also means he is our Master, our King, our Ruler.

We come to know God better and understand his will more fully by listening to what he has given us about himself in the Bible. Some of the ways we listen to him are: reading the Bible, listening to our teachers in the church (Ephesians 4:11-14), reading devotional writing by Christian teachers, as well as “listening” to God's prompting of our wills during prayer. Jesus is our Teacher.

“So, you're saying that obedience really is important?”

Yes. We are commanded to obey God. If we believe in God's mercy and love through Christ, then the Holy Spirit works in us to lead us to desire to obey God, and to actually obey him.

“So, that’s what we mean by ‘bearing fruit?’”

Exactly. We bear fruit, but it is not really that we are doing it ourselves. It is the Holy Spirit working in us to bear it. But the beauty is that the Spirit makes us able to cooperate with his work in such a way that we are indeed pleasing God and bring glory to him through Christ.

“But, back to the original problem. We fall short a lot.”

Yes, we do. But again, we can rest in the confidence that God has already forgiven us, already saved us and already made us his saints. In that confidence we don’t have to languish in discouragement; we can get up and continue our struggle against sin, resting in the sure and unlimited love of God. Our failures, lapses and sins are not the measure of who we are in Christ; his faithful word and his victory for us are.

“So, we really are in a battle against sin.”

Of course we are. But the victory does not depend on us; it depends on Christ, and he has already won. We are living out the implications of his victory in our personal struggles, and because the victory is already his, our God-given part in his victory is not at stake.

Our part has already been secured by the Son of God. By God’s gracious will for us, we are indeed safe in Christ, and we can take joy and rest in God’s presence if we believe his word about that. (If we won’t believe God’s word about that, then, of course, we won’t be able to rest in his joy. God doesn’t force people not to stew in hell, but hell is not his choice for them.)

Teaching right living

“But shouldn’t the church teach people right ways to live?”

Yes, it should. And as it does so, it needs to keep in mind that teaching right ways to live is not the same as teaching people how to be loved by God or how to be saved. The two must be kept separate. God already loves us and has already saved us, even though we are sinners. Right living can help us avoid loads of trouble, pain and heartache, but it can’t make God love us or save us any more than he already has.

“But doesn’t it please God when we live right?”

Yes, it does. It pleases God because he loves to see us living in tune with him and with the persons he has made us to be in Christ. Likewise, he hates to see us torturing ourselves and living in fear and despair, out of harmony

with the new creation he has made of us in Christ. Do we stop loving our children when they ignore our rules and warnings and get themselves hurt? God loves us even more than we are able to love our children.

With the new covenant in Christ, God has eclipsed the old system of reward for righteousness and punishment for sin (Hebrews 10:9-10). That system bound everybody under sin and death (Galatians 3:21-22). Because of our utter helplessness, weakness and bondage, he has taken on himself for us the consequences of sin, and he, as the righteous Human for all humans, shares with us the rewards of his righteousness. Those rewards for righteousness are reconciliation and unity with God. We receive everything Christ has done for us only one way: *in faith*, and without faith, or trust in God that his word of the gospel is true, we will not accept his love, reconciliation and eternal life.

What this means is that we must get rid of the notion that our behavior determines how God feels about us. God alone determines how God feels about us, not our good works or our bad works. God decided before all time that he loves us, and his Son is the perfect Human for us in our place so that God's love for us may be complete and eternal precisely because its essence is his love for his Son. He will be faithful even when we are not faithful, because in Christ we are reconciled with the Father, and it is in Christ that he loves us for the sake of Christ.

So, when we teach people to live rightly, we are teaching them, and ourselves, how to live free of the bondage and pain that accompanies sin. We are not teaching how to be better than others, more loved of God than others, more important to God than others, or even more righteous than others. That is because our righteousness is only in Christ, and we walk in that righteousness only by faith in him, not by avoiding illicit drugs, sex and violence.

To be sure, life is indescribably smoother if we do avoid illicit sex, drugs and violence. But we need to remember that the blood of Jesus is just as necessary for indifference, laziness, stubbornness, selfishness, gossip, judgmentalness, secret envy and the like as it is for blatant adultery, grand theft, heroin trafficking and murder. We are all sinners, regardless of how much success we achieve in right living, and we all stand in need of mercy at the foot of Jesus' cross.

Faith in the faithful One

Still, the church does have the role of teaching right living, and every one of us does have an obligation to God to commit ourselves to doing

everything God wants us to do. God gives us all this instruction about right living because it is good for us, and because it reflects the way he is toward us. The more we trust in God to save us from our sins, the more we desire to turn away from sin. Yet it is God himself, reigning in his divine freedom to save sinners in Christ, who actually delivers us from sin.

When we pore over pornography or engage in casual sex, we are reinforcing empty illusions about human intimacy that corrupt our ability to find real and fulfilling intimacy. In other words, we are robbing ourselves of the very thing that led us to the porn site or the one-night stand in the first place, the need for an honest, trusting, intimate relationship.

Besides that, we are defrauding and taking advantage of other children of God for our own gratification, whether by indulging in photographic images of their shame and ignorance, or by participating with them in their own painful journey of humiliation and indignity. We are ignoring God's warning to avoid the attractive but dangerous trap door in our quest for the real thing he made us to need and desire.

When we resort to fraud or larceny, we are turning our backs on God's promise to be our provider and see us through. We are finding our own solutions to our needs or wants, overlooking the consequences our actions will bring to others, and robbing ourselves of the peace of heart that God wants us to experience with him through the deepening trust that comes of patience.

Church of forgiven sinners

Whatever instruction the church gives in paths of right living needs to be framed in humility and love. The same Bible from which we draw God's pearls of wisdom about human conduct provides us his testimony about his Son who died to save us from our failure to heed perfectly such instruction.

Every teacher of the Bible is himself or herself a sinner. As fellow sinners with the world, then, we must guard against the tendency of the church to allow its proclamation to descend into a mere rattle of condemnation against people who don't walk in the precepts of the Bible. To become a voice of condemnation does violence to the gospel and reduces the Christian proclamation into merely another religion vainly trying to hold together a powerless façade of human morality.

The church (I'm talking about the people, not the buildings) is the place in the world where the gospel visibly intersects human history. It is the place where sinners have found out they are clean and forgiven, and where these forgiven sinners continually offer to God their worship, praises and

thanksgiving.

It is where this good news of the gospel is celebrated and affirmed for everyone who will listen. It is where the love of Christ can take root in the world. It is where men, women and children of faith have been made able, by their Savior and Lord in whom they trust, to be like him in the world—a friend of despised people and sinners.

Wherever the church comes into contact with the world, the world should be the better for it. The poor should be hearing good news. Prisoners should be hearing about the release that transcends physical freedom. People in bondage to personal and societal sin should be finding mercy, kindness and hope.

The cleansing, purifying light of Christ's truth and love and peace should be finding its way into dark fears, lost hopes and tortured souls. And this should be happening because the crucified Christ is risen and living in his people, not because the church found an ancient book of laws it can use to more effectively declare sinners condemned.

Jesus did not come to condemn the world, but to save it (John 3:17). That is why the gospel is *good news*! How sweet it is when the proclamation of the church is the same good news.

J. Michael Feazell

LOOKIN FOR LOVE...

Our English word “love” covers a wide variety of meanings, depending on context. But that was not a problem in the Greek-speaking world of the first century.

Eros speaks to romantic or sexual love and *filia* to brotherly love or friendship. *Agape* was a relatively unused word picked up by early Christians to speak of God’s kind of love shown especially in Jesus Christ. *Agape* is self-giving, perfecting love that is steadfast and faithful. Similar to the Hebrew word *hesed*, *agape* indicates God’s everlasting covenant love that is neither contractual nor conditional. Like a covenant promise, *agape* is freely given.

Had you walked into a first-century church looking for *filia* and *agape*, you might have been surprised to hear the preacher reading from a letter written by someone named Paul addressing the topic of law-keeping. Some in the congregation might be nodding in agreement while others are shaking their heads, shouting “No, no!”

The latter group holds a legalistic understanding of the Christian faith, grounded in a religious heritage that emphasized strict conformance to the ten commandments, with the Sabbath command being the ultimate test. To even hint that keeping the law of Moses was not God’s foremost demand for Christians would have sounded heretical to them. Their understanding of law-keeping was so ingrained that they would have dismissed any challenge to that view without giving it a fair hearing. Though they might not have put their hands over their ears or ripped their clothing (as Paul’s audiences sometimes did), many probably felt like doing so.

In his letter to the churches in Galatia, Paul explained that Christians are to fulfill the law of Christ, which is the law of love. That law is people-oriented rather than task-oriented—focused on relationships, not lists of rules (see Galatians 6:2). The law of Christ cannot be imposed according to an external written code because it is written on one’s heart by the Holy Spirit. A written code cannot encompass the law of Christ because that would mean doing the impossible: encompassing Christ himself—his whole heart, mind, purpose and wisdom.

Rather than a written code, the law of Christ is an internal principle that brings forth a life expressive of Jesus’ own “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.” Indeed, “against such things there is no law” (Galatians 5:22-23, *ESV*). The law of Christ arises out of a growing relationship of faith, hope and love with God through Christ Jesus and the working of his Holy Spirit within us.

While trying to explain this to Christians in Galatia, Paul became quite emotional. Some legalists with a Jewish background insisted that Gentiles must keep the law of Moses in order to be part of the new covenant people of God. Paul said “No!” and ended the third chapter of his letter by saying

that Gentiles can inherit the promises of salvation without any need to keep the law of Moses.

For Paul, a Christian's obligation is to love as God has loved us in Christ. Everything else is secondary—even the sacrosanct ritual of circumcision: "For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision has any value. The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love" (Galatians 5:6). Now Paul is really meddling! His press secretary (if Paul had one), would no doubt have groaned as he added, "I wish those who unsettle you would castrate themselves!" (verse 12, *NRSV*). Other translations try to make this sound a bit nicer, but that is what Paul said.

I can appreciate Paul's anger here. Legalism is "looking for love in all the wrong places"—it is a false holiness. Sadly, some don't recognize or understand that. Legalism is the equivalent of not being able to see the difference between death and freedom. When we have freedom in Christ, the person we used to be is uprooted and torn out. In Christ, we live in newness of life; we are a new creation. Our nourishment comes from being rooted in Christ, who accepts us where we are, to grow us up into his perfection of holy loving. In Romans 13:8-10 (*ESV*), Paul summarized his understanding of what it means for a Christian to abandon legalism in order to obey the law of love:

Owe no one anything, except to love each other, for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. For the commandments, "You shall not commit adultery, You shall not murder, You shall not steal, You shall not covet," and any other commandment, are summed up in this word: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore love is the fulfilling of the law.

Thankfully, God has allowed us to understand, so we can find and enjoy his love in "all the right places."

GETTING A GRIP ON REPENTANCE

“A horrible dread.” That was how the young man described his deep fear that God had rejected him because of his repeated sins. “I thought I had repented, but I did it again,” he explained. “I don’t even know if I really have faith, because I’m afraid God might not forgive me again. No matter how sincere I think my repentance is, it never seems to be enough.”

Let’s talk about what the gospel means by repentance toward God.

The first mistake in trying to understand what repentance means is to go to an English dictionary for a definition of the word *repent*. Contemporary dictionaries tell us how words have come to be understood at the time the dictionary was compiled. But a modern English dictionary does not tell us what was in the mind of a person who was writing 2,000 years ago in Greek about things that were first spoken in Aramaic, for example.

Webster’s Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary says this of the word repent: 1) to turn from sin and dedicate oneself to the amendment of one’s life; 2a) to feel regret or contrition; 2b) to change one’s mind.

The first definition is exactly what most religious people believe Jesus was talking about when he said, “Repent and believe.” They believe that Jesus means that only people who stop sinning and change their ways will be in the kingdom of God. But that is precisely what Jesus was *not* saying.

Common mistake

It is a common mistake for Christians to think of repentance as ceasing to sin. “If you had really repented, you wouldn’t have done it again” is a refrain many tormented souls have heard from well-meaning, law-upholding spiritual counselors. We are told that repentance is to “turn around and go the other way,” and it is explained in the context of turning away from sin and turning toward a life of obedience to God’s law.

With that idea firmly in mind, Christians set out with the best of intentions to change their ways. But along the way, some ways change, and some ways seem to stick like super-glue. Even the ways that change have a nasty way of cropping up again.

Is God satisfied with such mediocrity, such hit-and-miss obedience? “No, he is not!” the preacher exhorts, and the vicious, gospel-crippling cycle of commitment, failure and despair takes another spin around the going-nowhere rat-race-track of futility.

Just when we are feeling frustrated and depressed about our failure to measure up to the high standards of God, we hear another sermon or read

another article about “real repentance” and “deep repentance” and how such repentance results in a complete turning away from sin.

So, we crank up the commitment jalopy and go at it again, with the same, miserable, predictable results. Our frustration and despair deepens, because we realize that our turning away from sin is anything but “complete.” We can only assume we have not “really repented.” Our repentance was not “deep” enough, or “heartfelt” enough or “true” enough. And if we have not really repented, then we must not really have faith. Which means we must not really have the Holy Spirit. Which means we must not really be saved.

Finally, we either get used to living like that, or, as many have done, we finally throw in the towel and walk away from the whole medicine show people call Christianity.

We won’t even talk about the disaster of people who actually believe they have cleaned up their lives and made themselves acceptable to God. Their state is far worse.

Repentance toward God is simply not about a new and improved you.

Repent and believe

“Repent and believe the gospel,” Jesus declares in Mark 1:15. Repentance and faith mark the beginning of our new life in the kingdom of God. They don’t mark it because we did the right thing. They mark it because that is when the scales fall off our darkened eyes and we at last see in Jesus Christ the glorious light of the liberty of the sons of God.

Everything that ever needed to be done for human forgiveness and salvation has already been done through the death and resurrection of the Son of God. There was a time when we were in the dark about that. We couldn’t enjoy it or rest in it because we were blind to it.

We thought we had to make our own way in this world, and we spent all our effort and time plowing as straight a furrow in our little corner of life as we could manage.

We devoted all our attention to keeping our life and our future safe and secure. We worked hard to be respected and appreciated. We stood up for our rights and tried not to let anybody or anything take unfair advantage of us. We fought to protect and preserve our reputation, our family, our belongings. We did everything in our power to make something worthwhile of our lives, to be winners and not losers.

But like everybody who ever lived, it was a losing battle. Despite all our best efforts and plans and hard work, we simply cannot control our lives. We cannot keep disasters and tragedies and failures and pains from coming out

of nowhere and shattering what little scraps of hope and joy we have managed to piece together.

Then one day, for no other reason than that he wanted to, God let us in on the way things actually are. The world is his, and we are his.

We are dead in sin, and there is no way out. We are lost blind losers in a world of lost blind losers, because we don't have the sense to hold the hand of the only One who knows his way around. But that's OK, because he became a loser for us through crucifixion and death, and we can be winners with him by joining him in his death so that we can also join him in his resurrection.

In other words, God gave us good news! The good news is that he has personally paid the heavy price for all our selfish, rebellious, destructive, evil lunacy. He has freely saved us, washed us, purified us, dressed us in righteousness and set a place for us at his eternal banquet table. And through the gospel, he invites us to trust him that it is so.

When, by the grace of God, you come to see that and believe it, you have repented. To repent, you see, is to say: "Yes! Yes! Yes! I believe it! I trust your word! I'm leaving behind this rat-race life of mine, this pointless struggle to hold together with chewing gum and baling wire this death I thought was life. I'm ready for your rest. Help my unbelief!"

Repentance is a change *of how you think*. It is a change of perspective, from seeing yourself as the center of the universe to seeing God as the center of the universe, and trusting your life to his mercy. It is to surrender. It is to throw down your crown at the feet of the rightful ruler of the cosmos. It is the most important change you will ever make.

Not about morals

Repentance is not about morals. It is not about good behavior. It is not about "doing better."

Repentance is putting your trust in God instead of in yourself, your wits, your friends, your country, your government, your guns, your money, your authority, your prestige, your reputation, your car, your house, your job, your family heritage, your color, your sex, your success, your looks, your clothes, your titles, your degrees, your church, your spouse, your muscles, your leaders, your IQ, your accent, your accomplishments, your charity work, your donations, your kindness, your compassion, your self-control, your chastity, your honesty, your obedience, your devotion, your spiritual disciplines or anything else you can come up with of yours or associated with you that I left out of this long sentence.

Repentance is putting all your eggs in one basket—his basket. It's getting on his side, believing what he says, throwing in your lot with him, giving him your allegiance.

Repentance is not about promises to be good. It is not about teeth-clenched straining to “put sin out of your life.” It is trusting God to have mercy on you. It is trusting God to fix your evil heart. It is trusting God to be who he says he is—Creator, Savior, Redeemer, Teacher, Lord and Sanctifier. And it is dying, dying to your need to be thought of as right and good.

We are talking about a love relationship—not that you loved God, but that he loved you (1 John 4:10). This Person is the very fountainhead of all that is, including you, and it has dawned on you that this Person loves you for who you are—his beloved child in Christ—certainly not for what you have, or what you have done, or what your reputation is, or how you look, or any other characteristic you have, but purely and simply for you in Christ.

Suddenly nothing is the same. The whole world has suddenly become bright. All your failures no longer matter. They are all redeemed and made right in Christ's death and resurrection. Your eternal future is assured, and nothing in heaven or earth can take your joy away from you, because you belong to God for Christ's sake (Romans 8:1, 38). You believe him, you trust him, you put your life in his hands, come what may, whatever anyone says or does.

You can be lavish in forgiveness, in patience, in kindness, even in losses and defeats—you have nothing to lose, because you have gained absolutely everything in Christ (Ephesians 4:32–5:1). The only thing that matters to you is his new creation (Galatians 6:15).

Repentance is not just another worn out, hollow, moth-eaten commitment to be a good boy or girl. It is dying to all your big images of yourself and putting your weak, loser hand in the hand of the Man who calmed the sea (Galatians 6:3). It is coming to Christ for rest (Matthew 11:28–30). It is trusting his word of grace.

God's initiative, not ours

Repentance is about trusting God to be who he is and to do what he does, not about your good deeds versus your bad deeds. God, in his perfect freedom to be exactly who he wants to be in his love for us, decided to forgive our sins.

Let's be clear about this: God forgives our sins—all of them—past, present and future; he does not tally them (John 3:17). Jesus died for us while

we were still sinners (Romans 5:8). He is the slain Lamb, and he was slain for us, for every one of us (1 John 2:2).

Repentance is not a way of getting God to do what he has already done. Rather, it is believing he *has done it*—saved your life forever and given you a priceless eternal inheritance—and such believing blossoms into loving him for it.

“Forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us,” Jesus told us to pray. When it dawns on us that God has, for reasons entirely internal to himself, simply decided to write off our lifetime of selfish arrogance, all our lies, all our cruelty, all our pride, lust, betrayals and meanness—all of our evil thoughts, deeds and plans, we have a choice to make. We can praise him and thank him forever for his indescribable sacrifice of love, or we can go right on living the “I’m-a-good-person-you-shouldn’t-think-I’m-not” rat-race life we love so much.

We can believe God, we can ignore him, or we can run scared of him. If we believe him, we can walk in joyous friendship with him (and since he is a friend of sinners, all sinners, that makes everybody, even bad people, our friends too). If we don’t trust him, if we think he won’t or can’t forgive us, we can’t walk joyously with him (or with anybody else, for that matter, except for people who behave like we want them to). Instead we will be afraid of him and eventually despise him (and everybody else who doesn’t stay out of our way).

Two sides of the same coin

Faith and repentance go hand in hand. When you put your trust in God, two things happen at once. You realize you are a sinner who needs God’s mercy, and you decide to trust God to save you and redeem your life. In other words, when you put your trust in God, you have also repented.

In Acts 2:38, Peter told the crowd, “Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.” Belief, or faith, is part and parcel with repentance. By saying, “repent,” he was also implying “believe,” or “trust.”

Later in the story, Peter puts it this way: “Repent and turn to God....” This turning to God is a turning away from yourself. It does not mean you will now be morally perfect. It means you have turned away from your personal ambitions of making yourself worth something to Christ and instead put your trust and hopes in his word, his good news, his declaration in his own blood of your redemption, forgiveness, resurrection and eternal inheritance.

When you trust in God for forgiveness and salvation, you have repented.

Repentance toward God is a change in the way you think, and it affects everything in your life. The new way of thinking is the way of trusting God to do what you could never do in a million lifetimes. Repentance is not a change from moral imperfection to moral perfection—you are incapable of that.

Corpses don't improve

You are incapable of moral perfection because, the fact is, you are dead. Sin has made you dead, as Paul says in Ephesians 2:4-5. But even though you were dead in your sins (being dead is what *you* have contributed to this process of forgiveness and redemption), Christ made you alive (this is what *Christ* has contributed: the whole thing).

The only thing dead people can do is nothing. They cannot be alive to righteousness or to anything else, because they are dead, dead in sin. But it is precisely dead people, and only dead people, who get raised from the dead.

Raising the dead is what Christ does. He does not pour perfume on corpses. He does not prop them up and dress them in party clothes and wait for them to do something righteous. They are dead. They can't do anything. Jesus isn't the least bit interested in new and improved corpses. What Jesus does is resurrect them. And again, corpses are the only kind of people he resurrects.

In other words, the only way to enter into Jesus' resurrection, his life, is to be dead. It doesn't take much effort to be dead. In fact, it doesn't take any effort at all. And dead is precisely what we are.

The lost sheep did not find itself before the shepherd went looking for it and found it (Luke 15:1-7). The lost coin did not find itself before the woman went looking for it and found it (verses 8-10). The only thing they contributed to the whole process of their being sought, found and rejoiced over in a big party was being lost. Their utter, hopeless, lostness was the only thing they had that allowed them to be found.

Even the lost son in the next parable (verses 11-24) finds himself already having been forgiven, redeemed and fully accepted purely on the basis of his father's lavish grace, not on the basis of his "work-my-way-back-into-his-good-graces" plan. His father had compassion on him without ever hearing the first word of his "I'm so sorry" speech (verse 20).

When the son finally accepted in the stench of the pigpen his deadness and lostness, he was on his way to discovering something amazing that had been true all along: his father, the one he had rejected and disgraced, had never stopped loving him passionately and unconditionally.

His father flatly ignored his little scheme for redeeming himself (verses 19-24), and without even a probationary waiting period, restored him to full rights as son.

Likewise, our utter, hopeless, deadness is the only thing that allows us to be resurrected. The initiative, the work and the success of the whole operation is entirely the Shepherd's, the Woman's, the Father's, God's.

The only thing we contribute to the process of our resurrection is being dead. That is as true for us spiritually as it is for us physically. If we cannot accept the fact that we are dead, we cannot accept the fact that we have, by the grace of God in Christ, been raised from the dead. Repentance is accepting the fact that you are dead and receiving from God your resurrection in Christ.

Repentance is not bringing forth some good and noble work or mouthing some emotion-laden speech designed to motivate God to forgive you.

We are dead, which means there is absolutely nothing we are capable of doing that could possibly add anything at all to our being made alive. It is a simple matter of believing God's good news of forgiveness and redemption in Christ through which he resurrects the dead.

Paul articulates the mystery, or paradox if you prefer, of our death and resurrection in Christ in Colossians 3:3: "For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God."

The mystery, or paradox, is that we have died, yet we are, at the same time, alive, but that life, which is glorious, is not apparent: it is hidden with Christ in God, and it will not appear as it actually is until Christ appears, as verse 4 says: "When Christ, who is your life, appears, then you also will appear with him in glory." Our life is Christ. When he appears, we will appear with him, because he is our life.

So let's come at this again. Dead bodies can't do anything for themselves. They can't change. They can't "do better." They can't improve. The only thing they can do is be dead.

God, however, is the very Source of life, and he absolutely loves to raise the dead, and in Christ, he does just that (Romans 6:4). The corpses bring nothing to the process except their deadness. God does it all. It is his work, his alone, from beginning to end. Which means there are two kinds of raised corpses: those who receive their redemption with joy and those who, preferring their familiar deadness over life, despise it, close their eyes, clasp their hands over their ears and devote all their energies to pretending they are still dead.

So again, repentance is saying "Yes!" to the gift of forgiveness and

redemption that God says you have in Christ. It is not doing penance, making promises or drowning in guilt. Repentance is not about a never-ending string of “I’m deeply sorry” or “I promise I won’t do it again.” Let’s be brutally honest. Chances are you *will* do it again, if not in actual deed, at least in thought, desire and emotion. Yes, you are sorry, maybe even deeply sometimes, and you truly don’t want to be the kind of person who will do it again, but that’s definitely not the heart and core of repentance.

Remember, you are dead, and dead people act like dead people. But even though you are dead in sin, you are also, at the same time, alive in Christ (Romans 6:11). But your life in Christ is hidden with him in God, and it doesn’t show itself very consistently or very often—yet. It’s not going to be revealed for what it really is until Christ himself appears.

Meanwhile, even though you are now alive in Christ, you are also, for the time being, still dead in sin, and your deadness does show itself just about all the time. It is precisely that dead you, that you that can’t seem to stop from acting stinkingly dead, which Christ has resurrected and made alive with him in God—to be revealed when he is revealed.

That’s where faith comes in. Repent and believe the gospel. The two go hand in glove. You can’t have one without the other. To believe the good news, that God has washed you clean in the blood of Christ, that he has healed your deadness and made you alive forevermore in his Son, is to repent.

Likewise, to turn to God in your utter helplessness, lostness and deadness, receiving his freely given redemption and salvation, is to have faith, to believe the gospel. They are two sides of the same coin, and it is a coin God gives you for no other reason, no other reason at all, than that he is righteous and gracious toward us.

Behavior not a measure

Someone will say, repentance toward God will result in good morals and good behavior. I do not dispute that. The problem is, we love to measure repentance by the absence or presence of good behavior, and that is to tragically misunderstand repentance.

The truth is that we do not have perfect morals or perfect behavior, and anything short of perfection is not good enough for the kingdom of God. So let’s dispense with any nonsense about how “if your repentance is sincere then you will not commit the sin again.” That is precisely not the point of repentance.

The point of repentance is a change of heart, from being on the side of yourself, from being in your own corner, from being your own lobbyist, press

agent, union rep and defense attorney, to trusting God, to being on his side, to being in his corner, to dying to yourself and being God's completely forgiven, redeemed and beloved child in Christ.

To repent means two things we don't naturally like. First, it means facing the fact that the lyrics "Baby, you're no good" are a perfect description of us. Two, it means facing the fact that we are no better than anybody else. We are standing in the same soup line, with all the other losers, for mercy we don't deserve.

In other words, repentance emerges from a humbled spirit. This humbled spirit is one that has no confidence left in what it can do; it has no hope left, it has given up the ghost, so to speak, it has died to itself and put itself in a basket on God's doorstep.

Say 'Yes!' to God's 'Yes!'

We must get rid of the hideous notion that repentance is a promise to never sin again. Such a promise is pure hot air, and it is spiritually meaningless.

God has declared an almighty, thundering, eternal "Yes!" to you through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Repentance is your saying "Yes!" to God's "Yes!" It is turning to God to accept his blessed gift, his righteous declaration of your innocence and salvation in Christ.

To accept his gift is to acknowledge your deadness and your need of life in him. It is to trust him, to believe him and to put yourself, your being, your existence, all that you are, in his hands. It is to rest in him and to give him your burdens. So why not rejoice in the rich and burgeoning grace of our Lord and Savior and take our rest in him? He redeems the lost. He saves the sinner. He raises the dead.

He is on our side, and because he is, nothing can come between him and us—not even your wretched sins, or your neighbor's. Trust him. It's his good news for all of us. He is the Word, and he knows what he is talking about.

J. Michael Feazell

TRUSTING GOD WITH THE PROBLEM OF SIN

“OK, I understand that the blood of Christ covers all sin. And I understand that there is nothing I can add to the equation. But here’s my question: If God, for Christ’s sake, has completely forgiven me for all my sins, past, present and future, then what is to stop me from just going out and sinning all I want? I mean, is the law meaningless for Christians? Does God now condone sin? Doesn’t he want me to stop sinning?”

That’s already four questions. And they are important. Let’s go through them one at a time, and see if any more crop up along the way.

All sin forgiven

First, you said that you understand that the blood of Christ covers all sin. That’s a great beginning. A lot of Christians don’t understand that. They believe that the forgiveness of sins is a transaction, kind of a business deal, between a person and God. The idea is that you do the right thing for God, and God will give you forgiveness and salvation.

For example, you put your faith in Jesus, and God rewards you by applying Jesus’ blood to your sins. Tit for tat. That would be good deal, to be sure, but it’s still a deal, a transaction, and certainly not the pure grace proclaimed by the gospel. In this way of thinking, most people are damned because they didn’t ante up in time, and God divvies out the blood of Jesus to only a few; it never actually redeemed the whole world.

But many churches don’t even leave it there. Potential believers are lured in with the promise of being saved by grace alone, but once the believer enters the church, the list of rules comes out. If you don’t toe the line, you might get kicked out, and under certain circumstances, not only out of the church, but out of the kingdom of God as well. So much for “saved by grace.”

There is definitely, according to the Bible, a place for removing a person from the fellowship of the church (which does not remove a person from the kingdom, of course), but that’s another subject. For now, suffice it to say that organized religion tends to have a love affair with keeping sinners out of the church, whereas the gospel trumpets an invitation for them to enter.

According to the gospel, Jesus Christ is the atoning sacrifice not only for our sins, but also for the sins of the whole world (1 John 2:2). That, contrary

to what many Christians have been told by their preachers, means absolutely everybody.

Jesus said, “I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself” (John 12:32). Jesus is God the Son, by whom and through whom all things exist (Hebrews 1:2-3), and his blood redeems no less than everything he made (Colossians 1:20).

By grace alone

You also said that you understand that there is nothing you can bring to the table to sweeten the deal God has drawn up for you in Christ. There again, you are way ahead of the game. The world is full of sin-battling preachers who lay weekly guilt trips on their cowering flocks with a long list of specially selected commissions and omissions that reputedly ignite God’s ever-shortening fuse and threaten to land the whole pathetic lot of spiritual low-achievers in the fiery torments of hell.

The gospel, on the other hand, declares that God loves people. He is not out to get them. He is not against them. He is not waiting for them to trip up so he can squash them. Quite the contrary, he is on their side. He loves them so much that he has set free from sin and death all people everywhere by the atoning sacrifice of his Son (John 3:16).

In Christ, the door is open to the kingdom of God. People can believe God’s word (faith), turn to him (repent) and claim their freely given inheritance—or they can continue to deny God as their Father and reject their part in the family of God. God honors our choice. If we disown him, he lets our decision stand. That is not the choice he *wants* us to make, but he does allow us the freedom to make it.

Response

God has done all that needed to be done for us. In Christ, he has said “Yes” to us. It is up to us to say “Yes” to his “Yes.” But the Bible indicates that there are, amazingly, those who say “No.” They are the wicked, the haters, the ones who oppose God and themselves.

When all is said and done, they have committed themselves to the proposition that they have a better way; they have no need of God. They regard not God or man. To them, God’s offer of complete amnesty and eternal blessing is a meaningless and worthless insult. God, who gave his Son for them, ratifies their appalling decision to remain the children of the devil they have chosen over him.

God is the Redeemer, not the destroyer. And he has done all this, for no other reason than because he wants to, and he is free to do what he wants.

He is bound by no outside rules, but he has freely chosen to be utterly faithful to his covenant love and promise. He is who he is, which is exactly who he wants to be, and he is our God, full of grace and truth and faithfulness. He forgives our sins because he loves us. That is how he wants it, so that is how it is.

No law could save

There is no law that could bring eternal life (Galatians 3:21). We humans simply don't keep laws. We can argue all day over whether it is theoretically possible for humans to keep the law, but when all is said and done, the fact is, we don't keep it, never did and never will, and nobody ever has but Jesus.

There is only one way salvation comes, and that is through God's free gift apart from anything we do or don't do (Ephesians 2:8-10). Like any gift, we can take it or leave it. Either way, it is ours already by God's grace, but we can use it and enjoy it only if we actually take it. That is a simple matter of trust. We believe God and turn to him.

If, on the other hand, we are foolish enough to reject it, we will, tragically, continue to live in our self-imposed darkness and death as though we never had light and life handed to us in a golden goblet.

Hell a choice

Such a choice, such contempt for God's free gift—a gift paid for by the blood of his Son through whom all things exist and consist—is nothing less than hell. But it is a choice made by people whose invitation to pre-paid life is just as real and valid as the invitation of those who accept theirs. Jesus' blood covers all sin, remember, not just some sin (Colossians 1:20). His atonement is for all the creation, not just part of it.

Those who scorn such a gift are kicked out of the kingdom only because that is their own preference. They want no part of it, and God, though he never stops loving them, won't allow them to stick around and ruin the joy of the eternal celebration by stinking up the place with the pride and hate and unbelief they have made their gods.

So they go where they like it best—to hell, where there is nobody having fun to spoil their miserable self-absorption.

Free grace is good news! Even though we didn't earn it or deserve it, God decided to give us eternal life in his Son. Believe or scoff, it's our choice. Whatever we decide to do about it, this much is forever true: Through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, God has concretely demonstrated how much he loves us, and how far he has gone to forgive our sins and restore us to himself.

He has freely poured out his mercy everywhere in abounding love on absolutely everybody. It is pure grace—God’s free gift of salvation, and it is enjoyed by everybody who believes his word and accepts him on his terms.

What stops me?

That brings us to your questions. If God has already forgiven my sins even before I commit them, what is to stop me from just going out and sinning my brains out?

First, let’s clear some ground. Sin is primarily a condition of the heart, not merely individual acts of wrongdoing. The acts of wrongdoing don’t come from nowhere; they spring from our corrupt hearts. The solution to our sin problem, consequently, requires a fixed heart, getting at the source of sin, rather than merely treating its external, visible effects.

God is not interested in finely behaved robots. He wants a love relationship with us. He loves us. That is why Christ came to save us. And relationships are built on forgiveness and mercy, not on forced compliance.

If I want my wife to love me, for example, do I force her to act as though she does? If I did, I might get compliance, but I certainly wouldn’t get her to actually love me. You cannot force anybody to love. You can only force people to act.

Through self-sacrifice, God has shown us how much he loves us. Through forgiveness and mercy, he has proven his great love. By suffering for our sins in our place, he has demonstrated that there is nothing that can come between us and his love (Romans 8:38).

God wants children, not slaves. He wants a love relationship with us, not a world of cowering whipped dogs. He made us free beings, with real choices to make that matter to him very much. And the choice he wants us to make is him.

Real freedom

God gives us freedom to behave as we wish, and he forgives our failures. He does it because he wants to. He set things up that way, and he makes no apologies for it. If we have any sense, we will see his love for what it is and latch onto him like there’s no tomorrow.

So what is there to stop us from sinning all we want? Nothing. Absolutely nothing. And there never has been. The law certainly didn’t stop anybody from sinning all they wanted (Galatians 3:21-22). We have always sinned all we want, and God has always permitted it. He’s never stopped us. He doesn’t like it. He doesn’t condone it. He doesn’t endorse it. In fact, it grieves him. But he has always permitted it. That’s called freedom, and he gives us that

freedom.

In Christ

When the Bible says that we are righteous in Christ, that is what it means (1 Corinthians 1:30; Philippians 3:9). We are not righteous in ourselves; we are righteous in Christ. In ourselves, because of sin, we are dead, but we are also, at the same time, alive in Christ—our lives are hid in Christ (Colossians 3:3).

Without Christ, we are in hopeless shape, sold under sin, with no future. But Christ saved us. That is the gospel—good news! His salvation, if we receive it, puts us on a new footing with God.

Because of what God has done in Christ for us (including his prompting, even urging, us to trust him), Christ is now in us. And for Christ's sake (he intercedes for us), we are, in spite of our sin, acceptable—righteous—before God. The whole business, from start to finish, is done, not by us, but by God, who wins us not by force, but by the power of his self-sacrificial love.

The law meaningless?

Paul was plain about the purpose of the law. It shows us that we are sinners (Romans 7:7). It declares the fact of our slavery to sin so that we might be justified by faith when Christ came (Galatians 3:19-27).

Now, suppose for a moment that you enter the judgment actually believing you are righteous because you always tried really hard to obey God. And so, instead of taking the wedding garment provided at the door (the free, clean one that goes only to dirty people who know they need it), you go in by a side door wearing your striving-real-hard garment, reeking all the way, and sit down at your place at the table.

The lord of the house will say to you, “Hey buddy, where did you get the brass to come in here and insult me in front of all my guests with your sewage-soaked rags?” Then he will say to the staff, “Handcuff this filthy imposter and dump him in the swamp.”

We cannot clean our own dirty faces ourselves with our own dirty water, our own dirty soap and our own dirty washcloths, and go happily on our way thinking our hopelessly filthy faces are clean. There is only one way to remedy sin, and it does not lie with us. Remember, we are dead in sin (Romans 8:10), and dead people, by definition, can't remedy their deadness. Rather, the acute knowledge of our sinfulness should lead us to trust Jesus to clean us (1 Peter 5:10-11).

God wants you sin-free

God has given us indescribably great mercy and salvation—but this is not so that we feel a license to sin, but to free us from sin. That freedom not only removes our guilt from sin, but it also empowers us to see sin stripped naked for what it really is instead of dressed up in the pretty costume it wears to fool us, and to reject its fraudulent and pretentious power over us. Even so, when we still sin, which we certainly do, Jesus remains no less our atoning sacrifice (1 John 2:1-2).

God not only does not condone sin, he condemns sin. He does not like or endorse our glazed-eyed rationalizations, our comatose suspension of good sense or our hair-trigger, dive-in responses to temptations of every sort, from anger to lust to scorn to pride. And he rarely bails us out of the natural consequences of the things we choose to do.

However, because our faith and trust are in him (which means we are wearing the clean wedding clothes he provides), neither does he kick us out (as some preachers seem to think) of his wedding feast because of the poor choices we make.

Confession

Have you ever noticed that when you become aware of sinfulness in your life, your conscience plagues you until you confess your sins to God? (Chances are, there are some forms of sinfulness that you find yourself confessing rather frequently.)

Why do you do that? Is it because you have committed yourself to “go out and sin all you can”? Is it not, rather, because your heart rests in Christ, and you, in tune with the Spirit who dwells in you, are grieved until you re-establish a sense of right relationship with him?

The Spirit in us testifies with our spirit, we are told, to the truth that we are the children of God (Romans 8:15-17). There are two things to remain keenly aware of here: 1) You, by the testimony of the Spirit of God himself, are, in Christ and with all the saints, a child of God, and 2) The Spirit, as the inner witness to your real identity, does not neglect to rumble your landscape when you choose to live as though you are still nothing but the dead meat you used to be before Jesus redeemed you.

Make no mistake. Sin is God’s enemy and your enemy. We need to fight it tooth and nail. But we must never think that our salvation depends on the level of our success in overcoming sin. Salvation depends on Christ’s success in overcoming sin, and that’s already been done. Sin and the death that shadows it have already been defeated in Jesus’ death and resurrection, and

the power of that victory resounds through all the creation from the beginning of time and forever. The only overcomers in the world are those who trust in Christ to be their resurrection and life.

Good works

God takes joy in the good works of his children (Psalm 147:11; Revelation 8:4). He delights in our acts of kindness, our sacrifices of love, our devotion to justice, honesty and peace (Hebrews 6:10).

These and every good work are the natural outgrowth of the Spirit's work in us, leading us to trust, love and honor God. They are part and parcel with the love relationship that he has built with us through the sacrificial death and resurrection of the Lord of life, Jesus Christ. Such deeds and such work are God's own work in us, his beloved children, and as such, they are never useless (1 Corinthians 15:58).

God's work in us

Our faithful devotion to do what pleases God reflects our Savior's love, but again, our works of righteousness in his name are not what saves us. The righteousness that finds expression in our words and deeds of obedience to God's commands is righteousness that God himself is behind, joyfully working in us to his glory to bring forth good fruit.

It would be silly for us to try to take credit for what he does in us. It would also be silly to think that the blood of Jesus, which covers all sin, leaves any of our sinfulness uncovered. Because if we think that, then we still don't know who this eternal and omnipotent triune God is—this Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, who created all things, redeems us freely and magnificently with the Son's own blood, dwells in us through the Holy Spirit, and renews the whole creation, indeed, makes us into a new creation (2 Corinthians 5:17) along with the whole universe (Isaiah 65:17), because of his indescribable love.

True life

Though God commands us to do what is right and good, he does not determine salvation by record books. That is good for us, because if he did, we would all turn up in the reject pile.

God saves us by his grace, and we can walk in the joy of that salvation if we give up all our claims on life and turn to him and trust him and him alone to raise us from the dead (Ephesians 2:4-10; James 4:10).

Salvation is determined by the One who writes names in the book of life, and he has already written absolutely everyone's name in that book with the

Lamb's blood (1 John 2:2). It is a colossal tragedy that some refuse to believe it, because if they would trust the Lord of life they would find that the life they have been scratching to save is not really life at all, but death, and that their true life, waiting to be revealed, is hidden with Christ in God (Colossians 3:3). God loves even his enemies and wants them, along with all people, to turn to him and enter the joy of his kingdom (1 Timothy 2:4, 6).

Summing up

So let's summarize. You asked: "If God, for Christ's sake, has completely forgiven all my sins, past, present and future, then what is to stop me from just going out and sinning all I want? I mean, is the law meaningless for Christians? Does God now condone sin? Doesn't he want me to stop sinning?"

There is nothing to stop us from sinning all we want. There never has been. God has given us free will, and he values it. He loves us and desires a love relationship with us, and such a relationship comes only through free choice, rooted in trust and forgiveness, not through threats or forced compliance.

We are not robots or videotaped characters in a predetermined play. We are created as real, free beings, made so by God in his own creative freedom, and the personal relationship God has with us is real.

The law is far from meaningless; it serves to make it abundantly plain that we are sinners, falling far short of God's perfect will for us. God permits us to sin, but he definitely does not condone it. That is why he has gone to such astounding self-sacrificial lengths to save us from it.

Sin hurts and destroys us and everyone around us. It springs from a corrupt heart of unbelief and selfish rebellion against the very source of our life and being. It saps us of true life and true being, and imprisons us in the darkness of death and nothingness.

Sin hurts

In case you haven't noticed, sin hurts like hell—literally, since that is in essence what it is. It makes as much sense to "go out and sin all I want to" as it does to stick my hand into the running lawnmower. "Well, then," I heard one man say, "If we're already forgiven, we might as well just go out and commit adultery."

Sure, if you want to live in constant fear of being caught while you risk unwanted pregnancy and some nasty diseases, breaking your family's hearts, discrediting yourself, losing your friends and paying alimony out the nose, not to mention a plagued conscience and the likelihood of having to deal with

very angry husbands, boyfriends, brothers or fathers.

Sin has consequences, bad ones, which is precisely why God is at work in you to conform you to the image of Christ. You can work on listening and cooperating, or you can keep feeding appendages to the lawn mower.

We must not forget that the usual sins we think about when we say things like “go out and sin all I want” are only the tip of the iceberg. What about being greedy, or selfish or rude? What about being unthankful, or saying mean things, or not helping out when you ought? What about holding a grudge, envying someone’s job, clothes, car or house, or harboring angry thoughts about someone? What about taking supplies from your employer, sharing in gossip, or belittling your spouse and children? On and on we could go.

These are sins too—some big, some little—and guess what? We “go out” and do them all we want to. It’s a good thing God saves us by grace and not by works, isn’t it? Sin is not OK, but that does not stop us from sinning. God does not want us to sin, yet he knows better than we do that we are dead in sin, and that we will continue to be dogged by sin until our true life, redeemed and sinless, which is hidden in Christ, is revealed at his appearing (Colossians 3:4).

Sinners alive in Christ

Purely by the freely given grace and limitless power of our ever-living and ever-loving God, believers paradoxically have died to sin, yet are alive in Jesus Christ (Romans 5:12, 6:4-11). Despite our sins, we no longer walk in death, because we have believed and accepted our resurrection in Christ (Romans 8:10-11; Ephesians 2:3-6), a resurrection that will find its consummation at the appearing of Christ, when even our mortal bodies put on immortality (1 Corinthians 15:52-53).

Nonbelievers continue to walk in death, unable to enjoy their life that is hid in Christ (Colossians 3:3) until they come to faith, not because the blood of Christ does not cover their sin, but because they cannot trust Christ to raise them from the dead until they believe the good news that he is their Savior, and they turn to him.

Nonbelievers are as redeemed as believers—Christ died for everybody (1 John 2:2)—only they don’t know it yet, and because they don’t believe what they don’t know, they continue to live in the fear of death (Hebrews 2:14-15) and the futile pursuit of life in all the wrong places (Ephesians 2:3).

The Holy Spirit transforms believers into the image of Christ (Romans 8:29). In Christ, the power of sin is broken, and we are no longer its prisoners.

Even so, we are still weak and give place to sin (Romans 7:14-29; Hebrews 12:1).

Because he loves us, God cares very much about our sinful condition. He loves the world so much that he sent his eternal Son that whoever believes in him would not remain in the darkness of death that is the fruit of sin, but would have eternal life in him. There is nothing that can separate you from his love, not even your sins. Trust him. He helps you walk in obedience, and he forgives your every sin. He is your Savior because he wants to be, and he is very good at what he does.

J. Michael Feazell

GETTING REAL

Most of us go to great lengths to look good in the eyes of others, but according to Jesus, it is only when we honestly see ourselves as we really are that we can become who God has made us to be. Life has much more to offer than the frustrating rat race of “keeping up appearances.”

New life

The night Jesus was arrested, he spent some time telling the disciples about the Holy Spirit. He referred to the Holy Spirit with a word that was translated into Greek as *parakletos*, a word conveying the sense of “advocate,” “friend” or “supporter.” *Parakletos* was used to describe, for example, a person who would stand beside you in court—to support you and your cause, to speak up for you, to hearten you. *The Message* paraphrases it as “the Friend.”

Jesus knew that things were about to get difficult, not just for him, but also for those who would follow him. So he said to the 11 disciples (Judas had already left to betray him),

I’ve told you these things to prepare you for rough times ahead. They are going to throw you out of the meeting places. There will even come a time when anyone who kills you will think he’s doing God a favor. They will do these things because they never really understood the Father. I’ve told you these things so that when the time comes and they start in on you, you’ll be well-warned and ready for them. (John 16:1-4a, *The Message* paraphrase)

What is it that these persecutors did not understand about the Father? For starters, they did not understand that the Father loved the world so much that he would send his Son to save it from its sins. They did not understand the “mystery, which for ages past was kept hidden in God...which he accomplished in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Ephesians 3:9, 11). And they didn’t understand that “in him and through faith in him we may approach God with freedom and confidence” (verse 12). Jesus went on:

I didn’t tell you this earlier because I was with you every day. But now I am on my way to the One who sent me. Not one of you has asked, “Where are you going?” Instead, the longer I’ve talked, the sadder you’ve become. So let me say it again, this truth: It’s better for you that I leave. If I don’t leave, the Friend won’t come. But if I go, I’ll send him to you. (John 16:4b-7, *The Message*)

The disciples were sad because Jesus was leaving them. But what they didn't yet understand was that his going to the Father would result not in their loss of him, but rather in their union with him and with the Father. How? Because he would send the Holy Spirit, the Friend, who would draw them into the eternal relationship of love that exists between the Father and the Son.

Sin, righteousness and judgment

Jesus continued:

When he comes, he'll expose the error of the godless world's view of sin, righteousness, and judgment: He'll show them that their refusal to believe in me is their basic sin; that righteousness comes from above, where I am with the Father, out of their sight and control; that judgment takes place as the ruler of this godless world is brought to trial and convicted. (John 16:8-11, *The Message*)

How is the world wrong about sin? The world thinks sinners can make up for their sins by doing works of goodness. But here is the fascinating thing. Now that Jesus has come to forgive all sin and reconcile all things to God, the only kind of sin that can remain is the sin of not trusting in him who takes away all sin. The root of all sin is unbelief in God's own atonement for human sin through Jesus Christ.

How is the world wrong about righteousness? The world thinks of righteousness in terms of human virtue and goodness. But here is the fascinating thing. Now that the Son of God has lived a sinless human life and has been accepted by the Father as the perfect offering of humanity in sinful humanity's place, righteousness can be defined only in terms of the gift of God, a gift rooted in Jesus Christ, who, in our place and as one of us, did everything his Father commanded him to do for our sakes.

How is the world wrong about judgment? The world thinks people who endure great suffering in this world are great sinners under God's curse, and that people whose lives are abundant have been judged worthy and are under God's favor. But here is the fascinating thing. Now that the Son of God has destroyed the works of the devil (the pioneer of sin), judgment can be defined only in terms of the condemnation of the god of this world, not in terms of the condemnation of the people Jesus came to save.

But Jesus said the Holy Spirit would bring the truth about sin, righteousness and judgment (John 16:13-14). To be forgiven of sin, to be judged righteous, and to be freed from the grip of sin are all gifts of the Father to us through Jesus Christ. We experience them only by trust in God's word

of grace and salvation, which he gives us by the Holy Spirit. In Christ, we are reconciled to the Father, partakers of Christ's righteousness and of Christ's union and communion with the Father.

Getting real

In the parable of the tax collector and the Pharisee, Jesus illustrated the difference between the world's view of sin, righteousness and judgment and the true view that the Spirit would lead us to see. The two men went to the temple to pray, one a tax collector and the other a Pharisee. You can read the story in Luke 18:9-14. Take special notice of verse 9: Jesus told this story for the sake of those "who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everybody else."

Such people don't feel the need to pray for God's mercy, like the tax collector did. But the tax collector saw himself before God as he really was — a sinner in great need of mercy, and he is the one who "went home justified before God" (verse 14). And think about this: The tax collector had to trust God with his life, didn't he? He knew he deserved nothing, but he trusted God to be the way God says he is: "the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness" (Exodus 34:6).

When we go to the judgment seat of God, honestly confessing our sinfulness and asking for mercy, the Judge turns out to be the Defense Attorney who turns out to have taken our crimes on himself and then declared us innocent and set us free. That is why we live in the world as people who understand grace, mercy and compassion and who devote ourselves to extending these to others.

The Prodigal Son in the Luke 15 parable knew he needed mercy, and that is all he knew, so he went to ask for it. When he did, he found out that he had had it all along — but only after he had come home, trusting his father to be merciful, was he able to start enjoying it.

Forgiven and forgiving

The instruction in the story of the Prodigal Son goes hand in hand with what is called the Lord's Prayer, because the Holy Spirit leads us to forgive others as he has forgiven us. Jesus told the disciples to pray, "Forgive us our debts, as we have forgiven our debtors." This is not a new form of legalism. It is, rather, a description of what life is like among those who are in Christ. People who cannot see their own condition of sinfulness, and therefore do not feel their own need for mercy, do not extend mercy to others. People who understand the grace they have received from God, on the other hand, are not quick to hold a grudge or to withhold forgiveness. Because we are in

Christ, we are forgivers, and we trust God to forgive us.

When we pray, “Forgive us our debts,” we do not ask as though God might not do it. In Christ, God has already forgiven us. Our asking is both a reminder of and a participation in the forgiveness we already have in Christ. In the same way, the prayer “as we forgive our debtors” is also a reminder of and a participation in our new life in Christ, in which we forgive as we have been forgiven (compare Ephesians 4:32-5:1-2).

Turn and trust

We can trust God to give us everything we need for life, godliness and salvation. Because he is the Judge, we have nothing to fear in the judgment. And more than that, God does what he does for us because it is his good pleasure to do so (Luke 12:32). He is for us.

We don’t have to be prisoners of “keeping up appearances.” We don’t have to carry around anxiety about whether we will “make it into the kingdom.” We can live carefree before God, casting all our anxieties, all our cares, upon him, because we know he cares for us (see 1 Peter 5:7).

With God, we can “get real.” We can be perfectly honest with ourselves and with him. We don’t have to hide anything. We can unload all our sinfulness, all our failures, all our fears on the One who loves us and gave himself for us — and who makes all things new, including us!

J. Michael Feazell

FULFILLING THE LAW

The apostle Paul once wrote of love as a “continuing debt” to one another, saying, “he who loves his fellowman has fulfilled the law.” He cited four of the Ten Commandments and then included all others, explaining that they “are summed up in this one rule: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’” He said, “Love does no harm to its neighbor. Therefore love is the fulfillment of the law.” You can read it in Romans 13:8-10.

When we consider Paul’s teaching about the relationship between love and the law, it is interesting how we seem naturally inclined to reverse it. We seem to find ourselves more comfortable with the idea of the law fulfilling love than we are with the idea of love fulfilling the law.

Love and law

When it comes to relationships, most of us like to know where we stand. We don’t feel comfortable not knowing whether others like us or don’t like us. We feel better if we have some clear evidence, some way to measure, where we stand with others. Maybe that is why we find ourselves more comfortable with the law being the fulfillment of love, than love being the fulfillment of the law.

The statement, “love is the fulfillment of the law,” does not mean the same thing as the statement, “the law is the fulfillment of love.” The first statement makes love the principal thing and the law the secondary thing. The second statement makes the law the principal thing and love the secondary thing.

In the first statement, the law is subsumed within love. In other words, love is bigger, wider, broader, deeper and richer than the law. When one loves, one has fulfilled the law, but one has also done more than that—one has loved.

Let’s see how that works with the second statement, “the law is the fulfillment of love.” In this case, we would be saying that love is subsumed within the law. We would be saying that the law is wider, broader, deeper and richer than love. We would be saying that when one has kept the law, one has not only loved, but one has done more than love—one has kept the law.

But that is not what Paul is saying. He is saying that love fulfills the law. A person can keep the law without loving. But one cannot love without the law being fulfilled in them. The law gives instruction in the ways that one who loves will live. But the difference between the law and love is that love works from the inside and the law works from the outside.

Different motivation

A person motivated by love does not need to be told to behave in a loving way; a person motivated by law does. Maybe that is why we tend to get uncomfortable with the idea that faith in Christ has superseded the law. We fear that unless there is an outside agent, the law, compelling us to behave rightly, we probably won't. We know our love is weak, so we don't trust ourselves to behave with love without a threat of unpleasant consequences as motivation.

The problem with that is obvious: Love cannot be compelled, forced, coerced or threatened into being. Love is freely given and freely received, or it isn't anything at all. Love is unconditional; anything short of unconditional is something other than love. It might be acceptance, it might be approval, it might be pleasure, it might be happiness, but it is not love, because love has no conditions. That is why our "love" is so easily strained when the people we love fall short of our expectations and demands—as they invariably do.

We fall short of theirs, too. But we usually expect them to overlook and understand the ways we fall short of their expectations. In either case, what we call love is often stretched thin by the failure of either party to measure up to what the other feels is appropriate behavior.

Conditional love

When we allow the demands and expectations of the people we love, however unreasonable they may be, to dictate our lives, we are not free, but imprisoned. Likewise, if we withhold our love from others, making it conditional upon whether they are at any given moment pleasing us or doing what we want them to do, then we are being manipulative, not loving.

When we love others, we love them for who they are, not for what we want them to be. More precisely, as Christians, we love others for who God has made them to be in Christ, not for who we want them to be for us. It is only when we drop the selfish habit of withholding love from others until they adequately please us, that we can also free ourselves from the prison of striving to please others in order to win or retain their love.

If someone loves you, they do not have to remake you into their image. And you, just as surely, do not have to make someone into your image in order to love them, either.

Unconditional love

"Love is blind" is an old saying that illustrates how silly the common understanding of love is. It is usually taken to mean that love does not see

the flaws, problems and warts of the object of love, and is therefore naïve. That is a good description of infatuation, but it is a terrible description of love.

Love is honest. It sees things as they really are, and loves what is real, not some image. A good marriage, for example, is one in which each partner, in love, puts up with the various selfish, immature and obnoxious behaviors of the other. The partners do not waste their emotions and energies trying to manipulate and manage each other through the typical shame games, guilt-trips and favor withholdings that plague so many marriages. We ought to expect that people will not measure up to the silly, grand ideals we hold out for them, and wise people, people who love, know that.

When love is unconditional, then iron can truly sharpen iron (Proverbs 27:17) without the accusations, resentments and recriminations that usually go hand in hand with our typical selfish efforts to “correct” one another.

It would be comical, if it were not tragic, how we can say to each other, “If you loved me, you would not have... (fill in the blank: said that, embarrassed me, done that, forgot that, bought that, sold that, asked that, ruined that, etc.) or “If you loved me, you would have... (been nice to my mother, ironed my pants, stood up for me, known what I meant, etc.).

Maybe an actor in the movies, following a script, would do all the things we wish others would do, at least while the camera is on, but real people in real life don’t—and neither do you.

All of us, in every relationship we have ever had or will ever have, at some point along the way, in one way or another, experience disappointment, if not betrayal. That is a two-way street. We eventually, in one way or another, disappoint, if not betray, the people we care about, too. But to love is to know full well what you are dealing with—one flawed, imperfect and weak human being relating to another—and to love in spite of it all.

The point is: Love is not based on whether the one being loved measures up. Love travels in a different universe from that, and its chariot is forgiveness.

Forgiveness: root and fruit of love

Jesus was once invited to dinner by a Pharisee. During dinner, a woman who was well known as a sinner came in and started anointing Jesus’ feet with perfume. Standing behind him at his feet (in those days, people ate by reclining on a backless couch at the table, so their feet were directed away from the table), she wet his feet with her tears and dried them with her hair.

Naturally, the Pharisee thought this intrusion irregular, but said nothing. He simply thought to himself: “Good grief. If Jesus were really a prophet, he

would know what kind of big-league sinner this woman is.” The implication being, righteous men don’t truck with sinners, especially woman sinners.

Jesus knew his thoughts, though, and asked him this:

Two men owed money to a certain moneylender. One owed him five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. Neither of them had the money to pay him back, so he canceled the debts of both. Now which of them will love him more?

Simon replied, “I suppose the one who had the bigger debt canceled.”

“You have judged correctly,” Jesus said. (Luke 7:41-43)

Then Jesus turned to the woman and said to Simon: “Look, Simon. You didn’t show me any particular love when I got here, but this woman certainly did, and big time. Do you know why? Because she is a big-time sinner who needs her sins forgiven, and she trusts me to do it, so she loves me big time. But you? Well, Simon, you don’t think you need much in the way of forgiveness, at least not from me, so you don’t show me much love. It’s like that with people who think they are reasonably righteous—they don’t love much, but people who know they are sinners and want my forgiveness, well, my grace inspires them to great love.”

The more we understand how much we’ve been forgiven, the more we love God who forgives us. And the more we love God who forgives us, the more we forgive our neighbor who wrongs us. Forgiveness generates love, and love generates forgiveness.

Love comes from God. He loved us while we were still sinners (Romans 5:6-8), and in Christ he demonstrated his love for us by forgiving us.

Love defined

Paul describes love in 1 Corinthians 13. He begins like this:

If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. If I give all I possess to the poor and surrender my body to the flames, but have not love, I gain nothing. (verses 1-3)

The only real value, in anything at all, is love. Doing good things, following the rules, keeping the law: these are not the same thing as love, and they can be done without love. Paul continues:

Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it

is not proud. It is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. (verses 4-7)

Paul never says of love: “It keeps the law.” Meditating on these beautiful characteristics of love ought to make it plain that love is on a vastly higher and deeper level than merely keeping the law. He goes on:

Love never fails. But where there are prophecies, they will cease; where there are tongues, they will be stilled; where there is knowledge, it will pass away. For we know in part and we prophesy in part, but when perfection comes, the imperfect disappears. When I was a child, I talked like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I put childish ways behind me. Now we see but a poor reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known.

And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love. (verses 8-13)

Everything is temporary—from prophecies to knowledge to childhood to the spiritual manifestations we put so much stock in—except faith, hope and love, which never fail.

Law rooted in love, not vice versa

The law, contrary to what many well-intentioned Christians believe, does not define love. The law and love may intersect at many points, but they are definitely not the same thing. The law is rooted in love, but love is not rooted in the law.

Just as the law does not define love, so love does not define law. It transcends the law. The law exists only because God loves. I doubt anyone would want to say that God loves only because he first had a law.

Even though the law is a product of love, the law can be misused and turned into something that harms, rather than helps, when it is administered by cruel and pitiless people. But love, from which law springs, cannot be misused.

In his love, God tempers justice with mercy. Regarding the way God views the law and justice, James wrote: “Speak and act as those who are going to be judged by the law that gives freedom, because judgment without mercy will be shown to anyone who has not been merciful. Mercy triumphs over judgment!” (James 2:12-13).

Now here is a curious thing! Many religious people have the idea that

God's spiritual blood is constantly at a furious boil at the sinning masses, and that he is first and foremost the God of justice who is itching to blast the evildoers. So naturally, most people who believe this caricature of God go around either worried about or resigned to their obvious toboggan slide to hell.

But James, the biblical writer who is a hands-down favorite of works-oriented Christians, says two remarkable things in the just-cited passage: 1) people are judged by the law that gives freedom, not the law that condemns, and 2) the only kind of people who will get judgment without mercy are people who have not been merciful, because mercy triumphs over judgment!

This ought to be no surprise, because like Zechariah reported, "This is what the Lord Almighty says: 'Administer true justice; show mercy and compassion to one another'" (Zechariah 7:9). In other words, in God's view, there is no other kind of judgment but the kind that is tempered with mercy and compassion. When God talks about judgment, he is talking about something quite different from what a lot of religious people are talking about.

God loves. And because he loves, he gave the law. Because he loves, he judges. Because he loves, he judges us all guilty, since we are. Because he loves, in judging us guilty, he has mercy on us. It is because he loves that he sent Jesus. It is because he loves that he sent the Holy Spirit. It is because he loves that he moves us to turn to him (repent), to trust him (have faith), and that he saves us from sin and death (salvation).

When we love, we are behaving like God. Jesus said, "In everything, do to others what you would have them do to you, for this sums up the Law and the Prophets" (Matthew 7:12). Psychologists say that at the most fundamental level, what all human beings need and want is to be loved. If we want to be loved, then Jesus says we need to love, and that, he says, sums up the Law and Prophets.

Released from the law

The law, which justly brings all human beings under condemnation and death, has been replaced by the Spirit, which brings life through Jesus Christ (compare Romans 7:6 and 8:1-4).

Through faith in Christ we are no longer under the condemnation of the law. The law has no claim on us, because we stand in Christ, not under the law. In Romans 6 and 7, Paul uses the analogy that we die with Christ and are raised with Christ. The point of his analogy is that the law, which had a claim on us until death, has now lost that claim, because we have died. Our new life is in Christ, and is not under the law.

It is in this condition, the condition of belonging to Christ and being released from the law, that we bear fruit to God (7:4). Our sinful nature, which would use the law to destroy us if it could, can no longer do so, because we are no longer under the law. Instead, we serve God in a new way, the way of the Spirit, not in the old way, the way of the law.

What does this mean in practical terms? At least this: There is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ. To repeat, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ. Warning: Your natural defenses might not let you believe this at first. It might help to repeat it a couple of more times. If that doesn't help, you could try looking up Romans 8:1 and reading it slowly. It is hard for us to believe, but it is the gospel.

Those who are in Christ take their stand against their sinful nature on the basis of faith in Christ and life in the Spirit (which are the same thing), not on the basis of the law. On the basis of the law, we lose. On the basis of faith, however, we win. That is not because we ourselves win, but because Jesus is our victory.

We do not need to worry that God has rejected us, or that he will not listen to our prayers, or that he won't save us, or that he won't forgive us, or that he doesn't love us or even that he doesn't like us. God's relationship with us is not based on the law; it is based on his Son. If it were based on the law, we'd be sunk. But, thank God, it is not. It is based on his Son, whom he sent to save the world because he loved it, you included (John 3:16-17).

In the Son of God, who became human for us, all the barriers to love have been broken down, whether those were between Jew and Gentile, between enemies, within families, between nations, or between anybody else (Ephesians 2:14-18; Matthew 5:44; Ephesians 5:25; Isaiah 2:4; etc.). Because we trust in Christ, who loves us and makes us into a new creation in his own perfect humanity, we are free to love others in spite of all the reasons humans have to hate others.

Sin not our master

The reason sin shall not be our master is because we are under grace and not under the law (Romans 6:14). If we were under law, sin would be our master. But since we are not under the law, but under grace, sin cannot be our master.

You would think that if we were not under the law then sin would most surely be our master. But that is not how it works, according to Paul. Only grace frees us from sin; the law does not. The law only perpetuates the problem by keeping us enslaved to sin. Sin is overthrown only by grace.

"So you're saying we can just sin all we want!" someone wants to say.

But I didn't come up with this stuff—Paul did, and Christ made him do it.

And yes, we sin all we want. We always have, and always will. And that is just the point. The grace of God changes what we are inside so that we no longer want to sin. At least not in the same way we did before. We might still succumb to temptation, but we don't want to, we don't like it, and we fight against it. If we do succumb, we don't pretend it is OK, and we don't make excuses for it.

We see our sins as sins, we confess them to God, we trust him for the forgiveness he says we have in Christ, we thank him for his indescribable grace, and we get up and get back in the fight against our sinful nature and keep on striving to live godly in Christ.

We can do that because we trust God to never stop loving us. John tells us in 1 John 4:16, "We know and rely on the love God has for us." In verse 19, he continues, "We love because God first loved us."

Think about that. It is God at work in us—God who makes us into a new creation in the perfect humanity of his Son—who turns us into the kind of people who love. This is not something we bring into being by our will, by setting our mind to it. We do not bring it about through our own reason and effort.

We love because God did something for us through Christ that we could never do for ourselves. He became human for us, and he was perfect—he loved and kept the law for us—so that when we are attached to him through faith (which is the only way we can be attached to him), we become something new, a new creation in him.

His atoning reconciliation on our behalf is what makes us into something different from what we are, not our actions, attitudes, emotions or willpower. Through faith, through trusting him, we participate in his perfect love. Don't ever think that we actually love with perfect love ourselves, because we don't. Our salvation from sin and death and our new selves, our new lives in Christ, come only from him and by him and of him, and he gives all this simply because he loves us.

Christ, and Christ alone, is our righteousness (Romans 3:22; 1 Corinthians 1:30; Philippians 3:9; etc.). It is his humanity that God accepts as righteous on our behalf. All religious ideas of human "measuring up" are worthless, because such a thing is impossible. Humanity is saved only because Christ became the perfect human for us, and we partake of that salvation and become a new creation only in him and only through faith in him. There is no other way.

Paul wrote: "For it is God who works in you to will and to act according

to his good purpose” (Philippians 2:13). We cannot trust ourselves to do that, but we can trust him to do it.

Final thoughts

When Christians say the law is superseded by faith in Christ, they are not saying something has been lost. They are saying that something has been gained—something that so transcends the law as to make it obsolete.

Remember the telegraph? It was a wonderful boon to communication. But today, it makes much more sense to give your mom a phone call on Mother’s Day than to have someone tap her out a message at the telegraph office. The telegraph network as a delivery system, as great as it was at the time, is obsolete because communication technology has transcended it. (It’s only an analogy. If it helps, use it. If not, toss it.)

Christ’s command that we walk in love (2 John 4-6; John 13:34) transcends the Ten Commandments. It goes beyond them. Those who walk in love fulfill the law. The one transcends the other, and they are not the same thing. As John wrote in John 1:17, “The law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.”

J. Michael Feazell

BY FAITH, NOT BY SIGHT

It was electrifying news: Jesus Christ had risen from the dead! Just as he had said he would. “We have seen the Lord!” some of the disciples excitedly affirmed. The disciple named Thomas, however, could not bring himself to believe it. “Unless I see the nail marks in his hands and put my finger where the nails were, and put my hand into his side,” he exclaimed, “I will not believe it” (John 20:25).

Some days later, Thomas’ doubt evaporated when he had the opportunity to see in person the resurrected Christ and to examine his wounds. “Then Jesus told him, ‘Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed’” (verse 29).

“Those who have not seen and yet have believed”—that describes most of God’s people past and present. We have been called to worship the invisible God. When we pray, we don’t see or hear God. Our faith does not rest on physically detectable signs or manifestations. Our beliefs sometimes go contrary to what logic and the physical senses indicate. Faith is “being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see” (Hebrews 11:1).

“So we fix our eyes,” Paul wrote, “not on what is seen, but on what is unseen. For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal.... We live by faith, not by sight” (2 Corinthians 4:18; 5:7).

As we walk through this life, we trust in our great, caring Shepherd to lead us safely. Sometimes the path winds through green pastures and beside still waters. At other times it may traverse the valley of the shadow of death. At all times, though, God is with his people today as he was with the saints of old.

Those men and women of God “were still living by faith when they died. They did not receive the things promised; they only saw them and welcomed them from a distance. And they admitted that they were aliens and strangers on earth.... Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared a city for them” (Hebrews 11:13, 16).

No human knows exactly what the future has in store. But Christians have the advantage of knowing that the steps they take in faith lead to a definite and positive goal—God’s promise of immortality. Peter referred to this comforting truth when he wrote, “Though you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy, for you are receiving the goal of your faith, the salvation of your souls” (1 Peter 1:8-9).

Nevertheless...

The Christian life was illustrated long ago by what the ancient Israelites experienced. As they went through the rugged wilderness to reach their inheritance in the Promised Land, so Christians journey through this life, with all its obstacles, on the way to their eternal inheritance in the future fullness of the kingdom of God.

It's a journey of faith. The Israelites, for the most part, showed how *not* to make the journey. They lacked faith. Doubt and disobedience kept an entire generation of them from their inheritance — “they were not able to enter, because of their unbelief” (Hebrews 3:19). They perished in the wilderness. The warning to Christians is obvious: Faith is essential to inherit salvation (Hebrews 4:1-3). A converted person must “through faith and patience inherit what has been promised” (Hebrews 6:12).

One of the Israelites' biggest mistakes was their lack of spiritual vision. At one point they were poised on the border of the land they were to inherit, awaiting the return of 12 scouts who had been sent to get an idea of what the land was like. The scouts returned and in glowing terms certified that the land was indeed rich and fertile as God had promised (Numbers 13:23-27). “But...,” they added, and then began to list all the obstacles they had seen (verse 28).

They had seen strongly fortified cities, and strong warriors of great and fearsome stature. For 10 of the 12 scouts, there was only one logical answer: retreat! “They spread among the Israelites a bad report” (verse 32).

The people of Israel chose to believe the bad report. They trusted in what they could see, what they had heard from the spies. Faith disappeared. Morale collapsed. Disaster followed. The scouts who brought the bad report reasoned wrongly. They should have said, “Our eyes may see many terrifying obstacles to inheriting the land, *nevertheless* we believe God's promises. Our God is bigger than all of them put together.”

Many centuries later, Simon Peter also had to choose between what seemed obvious to him and what God said. Jesus, standing in Simon's fishing boat, directed that the nets be let down for a catch of fish. Simon balked. He and other professional fishermen had just spent hours toiling in a fruitless attempt to catch something.

“Simon answered, ‘Master, we’ve worked hard all night and haven’t caught anything’” (Luke 5:5). Simon stated the facts. But then he added, “‘But because you say so, I will let down the nets.’ When they had done so, they caught such a large number of fish that their nets began to break” (verses 5-6).

The physical evidence may proclaim impossibility. All our eyes can see may threaten defeat. Nevertheless, we can believe God when he says he will help us, encourage us, and make things work out for the good.

Being spiritually minded

A classic example of faith versus sight is Peter's attempt to walk on the water of the Sea of Galilee. One night Peter and some companions were in a boat being battered by a storm. They were in grave danger of sinking when, suddenly, they saw Jesus walking toward them amidst the surging waves, telling them not to be afraid.

"Lord, if it's you," Peter replied, "tell me to come to you on the water." "Come," he said. Then Peter got down out of the boat, walked on the water and came toward Jesus. [So far, so good!] But when he saw the wind [faith now gives way to sight], he was afraid and, beginning to sink, cried out, "Lord, save me!" Immediately Jesus reached out his hand and caught him. "You of little faith," he said, "why did you doubt?" (Matthew 14:28-31)

One of the greatest hindrances to faith is that the world around us, like the waters swirling about Peter, seems so real. We, made from the dust of the ground, are naturally in tune with the physical. We feel pain when we are sick. We hear harassment or threats from neighbors and relatives. When we lose a job, we see the cold reality of a termination notice and the accumulation of bills. Family problems are real. Medical reports are real. So are the temptations and weaknesses of the flesh.

Whatever the situation is, we can look around and see, hear, taste, smell and feel material reality. Knowledge of it comes to us through our senses. But there is another vital dimension: faith. Faith sometimes operates in conjunction with our physical senses, making spiritual truths real to us.

Once a large army was sent to capture the prophet Elisha and his young servant. The situation did not look good. Elisha's servant could see that the number of enemy soldiers was immense. He saw they were well-armed. He saw they surrounded the city. He saw there was no escape route. He was overcome with fear. "Oh, my lord, what shall we do?" he asked (2 Kings 6:15).

Elisha, to whom God was very real, answered, "Don't be afraid.... Those who are with us are more than those who are with them" (verse 16). The servant must have wondered, What does he mean by that? Can't Elisha count? There are two of us and multitudes of them!

"Elisha prayed, 'O Lord, open his eyes so he may see.' Then the Lord

opened the servant's eyes, and he looked and saw the hills full of horses and chariots of fire all around Elisha" (verse 17). The servant now saw with his eyes what he should have seen by faith: The power that sustains and protects the righteous by far exceeds all opposing forces.

If our minds are mostly on the world and material things, exercising the spiritual element of faith is extremely difficult. We easily begin to sink in the waters of doubt as Peter did. Or we worry and fret as Elisha's servant did.

On the other hand, getting one's mind off the physical and onto the spiritual is one of the greatest keys to strengthening faith. We can fill our minds with spiritual understanding by studying God's Word and allowing God's Spirit to work in us. Also, through God-centered prayer, our minds will be more focused on the reality of God's presence in our lives.

Daniel and his three friends

God was real to the prophet Daniel and his three friends, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego. Daniel was known to pray to God every day. One day, Daniel's enemies tricked King Darius into signing a decree that outlawed making petitions to anyone but to the king himself. Anyone found breaking this law was to be thrown into a den of hungry lions.

Here was a test for Daniel. The new decree made it unlawful for him to pray to God. Should he now forsake prayer? Daniel determined to do what was right, and in faith leave the outcome to God. "When Daniel learned that the decree had been published...he got down on his knees and prayed, giving thanks to his God, just as he had done before" (Daniel 6:10).

His enemies caught him praying, reported him and had him thrown into the lions' den. There he was, face to face with ravenous beasts closing in for the kill. Had he made a mistake by trusting in God? No, the Lord "sent his angel, and he shut the mouths of the lions.... And when Daniel was lifted from the den, no wound was found on him, because he had trusted in his God" (verses 22-23).

Daniel's three friends, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, had trusted God in a similar situation. King Nebuchadnezzar ordered that everyone worship a golden image he had made. Those who would not comply were to be thrown into a fiery furnace (Daniel 3:4-6).

Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego refused to worship the king's golden image. The king was furious. He decreed that the furnace be heated seven times hotter than usual. Even as Daniel's three friends fell into the blazing inferno, their faith remained steadfast. They would not compromise their loyalty to God even though they could see no escaping from the fire. They

knew God could deliver them at any time. And they knew that even if he chose not to do so, their ultimate fate was still in his hands.



Imagine the astonishment of those who braved blasts of heat to peer into the furnace. There, walking about in the flames, they saw Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, accompanied by a fourth individual, who appeared to be a divine being! When the king ordered the three to come out of the furnace, he and his attendants “saw that the fire had not harmed their bodies, nor was a hair of their heads singed; their robes were not scorched, and there was no smell of fire on them. Then Nebuchadnezzar said, ‘Praise be to the God of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, who has sent his angel and rescued his servants! They trusted in him’” (verses 27-28).

The Bible contains many accounts of individuals who believed God and his promises. They said, in effect: “I see what the circumstances are. I see the hardship. I see the trial, the danger, the suffering. Nevertheless, I believe God and his Word. I will walk by faith, not by sight.”

We should review those accounts often (see Romans 10:17) so we get used to thinking of God as the living God who is faithful to what he has promised. To those who have faith, God has promised that they will not be tested with more than they can handle (1 Corinthians 10:13). All things will eventually work out for good (Romans 8:28). Exactly how and when is up to God to decide. After all, the principal goal of faith is not that we be free of every problem and difficulty in this life. The main goal of faith is salvation (1 Peter 1:9) and receiving a crown of life (James 1:12).

When God allows our faith to be tried and tested, when our eyes can focus on no visible solution to our distress, we must not despair. That’s precisely the time to continue believing and patiently waiting in faith for God to lead. He knows what is best. We must learn to trust him in faith.

IS ANYTHING TOO HARD FOR GOD?

Even the greatest faith imaginable would be of little worth if the supreme God were not faithful. But God is faithful. “For the eyes of the Lord range throughout the earth to strengthen those whose hearts are fully committed to him” (2 Chronicles 16:9).

Living faith goes beyond believing that God exists. The faithful also believe God actively intervenes in their lives. That is why the Scriptures tell us “anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and [equally important!] that he rewards those who earnestly seek him” (Hebrews 11:6).

Moving mountains

To his disciples Jesus declared: “Have faith in God... I tell you the truth, if anyone says to this mountain, ‘Go, throw yourself into the sea,’ and does not doubt in his heart but believes that what he says will happen, it will be done for him” (Mark 11:22-23). Again he said, “If you have faith as small as a mustard seed, you can say to this mulberry tree, ‘Be uprooted and planted in the sea,’ and it will obey you” (Luke 17:6).

Jesus did not imply that moving mountains or trees would be a regular occurrence. Indeed, there is no record of Jesus or the apostles ever doing exactly that. But the point is, the God whose power regulates the universe would literally transport a mountain or a tree if there were ever a valid need to do so. Jesus pointed to those nearby physical objects to illustrate the limitless possibilities of faith.

Life is filled with obstacles that, on the spiritual level, can be more formidable than a tall mountain. Who does not from time to time come up against situations, circumstances and problems that are overwhelming — predicaments that defy resolution? These, too, God can move.

Several centuries before Jesus, Zerubbabel, governor of Judah, supervised the rebuilding of the ruined temple in Jerusalem. Many great obstacles stood in the way of completing the project. But God said he would provide the strength to overcome all those “mountains.” “What are you, O mighty mountain?” God challenged. “Before Zerubbabel you will become level ground” (Zechariah 4:7).

A person with faith can substitute his or her name for that of Zerubbabel. No obstacle is too great, no barrier too imposing—they can all be leveled before someone who seeks God’s help in believing prayer.

But faith is more than belief that something will happen. It is trust in God, in his overall wisdom and judgment as revealed in the Scriptures. Faith takes

into account whether a matter really is God's will. Jesus Christ, knowing that he would soon be arrested and crucified, prayed: "Father, everything is possible for you. Take this cup from me. Yet not what I will, but what you will" (Mark 14:36).

Here is a remarkable example of a prayer of faith. First is the expression of faith that God has all power, that with him nothing is impossible. Next comes the personal request. The matter is then left in God's hands, in faith, that he knows and will do what is best: "Not what I will, but what you will." What was best was already revealed in Scripture, and Jesus in faith and submission accepted that.

This is a prayer by which believers may receive "whatever" they desire (Mark 11:24), providing, of course, that what they ask for is based on God's will. If they are close to God, their desires will be molded around godly principles and concepts. They will be striving to reflect God's desires.

"If you remain in me," Christ stipulated, "and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be given you" (John 15:7). John later wrote, "This is the confidence we have in approaching God: that if we ask anything according to his will, he hears us" (1 John 5:14).

Faith is not wishful thinking. Nor is it "walking in the dark" or believing without evidence. Faith is based on knowledge and the surest evidence of all — the written Word of God! God cannot fail. His word cannot be broken. God "does not change like shifting shadows" (James 1:17). For God nothing is impossible, and nothing can keep him from fulfilling his promises.

God is the source

But how is it possible to have this kind of faith? If faith does not depend on tangible evidence, how can a person ever be sure of the invisible truths concerning salvation?

The answer: It is not possible — humanly. The human mind of itself is capable of evidencing a degree of faith, just as, for example, it can have a degree of joy or kindness. But that which is of the human spirit is limited. Whatever it produces is sporadic and undependable. Human faith easily wavers and falters. We see a graphic example of wavering in the desperate man who with tears cried out to Jesus: "I do believe," and then quickly added, "help me overcome my unbelief!" (Mark 9:24).

Human faith is inadequate. Saving faith comes only from God. It is a gift. "God has given" to each one a measure of faith (Romans 12:3). The Scriptures speak of faith as something God's people have "received" (2 Peter 1:1). "For it has been granted to you on behalf of Christ not only to believe on him, but also to suffer for him," Paul wrote (Philippians 1:29). Jesus Christ

is “the author and perfecter of our faith” (Hebrews 12:2) — “faith that comes through him” (Acts 3:16).

Living faith is active belief and trust in God and his Word. God is its source and sustainer. God’s gift of faith enables us to repent and accept the sacrifice of Jesus Christ in payment for our sins. This marks our conversion. Faith then grows. It is nurtured by the Christian experience. Trust in Christ increases with experience. The more we see that God is dependable and of great mercy, the stronger our faith in him becomes.

Faith thinks big!

“Is anything too hard for me?” God asked (Jeremiah 32:27). The answer, of course, is no. “With God all things are possible” (Matthew 19:26). Still, a lack of faith can limit what God is willing to do in our lives. Time and again the disbelief of the ancient Israelites caused God to withhold his blessing from them. Lack of faith “limited the Holy One of Israel” (Psalm 78:41, King James Version).

Jesus encountered similar disbelief. When he visited Nazareth, his hometown, the lack of faith he found was so great that he “could not do any miracles there, except lay his hands on a few sick people and heal them. And he was amazed at their lack of faith” (Mark 6:5-6).

On the other hand, the Bible clearly demonstrates what God can do for those who do believe. When his people placed their confidence in him, he repeatedly gave them victory against overwhelming odds. The lesson, written time after time, is that physical circumstances don’t limit God, for “nothing can hinder the Lord from saving, whether by many or by few” (1 Samuel 14:6).

Nor does he have to work things out in the way that seems most logical. The Israelites, leaving Egypt, became trapped at the edge of the Red Sea. They were about to be captured by Pharaoh’s army. There was no way they could see to get out of this predicament, and they were frightened. Though he did not know how God was going to do it, in faith Moses reassured the people: “Do not be afraid. Stand firm and you will see the deliverance the Lord will bring you today.... The Lord will fight for you” (Exodus 14:13-14).

Then God, who is not limited by human imagination, directed Moses to do what no one expected: Tell the people to start walking toward the water! Moses, following God’s instructions, stretched his hand out over the lapping waves and watched as a dry pathway to freedom formed through the midst of the sea (verses 15-22).

It’s a natural tendency, when praying to God for help, to try to figure out

what God's options are for resolving the problem at hand. But God is not limited to what we can think of, for with him nothing is impossible (Luke 1:37). In fact, the more hopeless a problem appears, the more uncrossable an obstacle seems, the more unwinnable a situation is by human standards, the greater God is glorified when his mighty hand brings victory.

"My power is made perfect in weakness," said Christ to Paul (2 Corinthians 12:9). But our weakness in no way determines his powers. Who would have thought, when there were thousands of hungry people to feed and enough food for only a dozen or less, that the way Jesus would solve the problem would be by multiplying the small amount of food on hand (Matthew 14:13-21)? Faith thinks big. It places no bounds, no restraints on God.

The hem of Jesus' garment (Matthew 14:35-36), the shadow of Peter as he passed by (Acts 5:14-15), or just a spoken word (Matthew 8:8) brought God's miraculous power into play. He who for Elisha made an insignificant, borrowed axhead float after it had fallen into a river (2 Kings 6:4-7) is the same one who for Joshua suspended laws of physics regulating the sun and moon (Joshua 10:1-15). He who designed the atom is he who filled the heavens with untold numbers of galaxies.

God does not change. "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever" (Hebrews 13:8). All power is his. He is the living God. There is no limit to what God can do for you if you trust him.

PART 4: SHARING THE GOSPEL IN THE BIBLE

PREACHING IN THE BOOK OF ACTS PART 1: PETER

The church today is a continuation of first-century Christianity. We do not imitate every cultural detail of the church, but we do want to continue the faith and the message of the early church. To help us do this, let's turn to a record of what they did: the book of Acts. Evangelism is a major theme of the book. Let's examine it to see what the apostles preached.

The kingdom of God

Our first clue comes in verse 3: The resurrected Jesus taught the apostles "about the kingdom of God." However, despite the many evangelistic sermons described in the book of Acts, the word *kingdom* is not used in any of them. It is used only eight times in Acts:

1. Jesus taught about the kingdom of God (1:3).
2. The disciples asked about the kingdom (1:8).
3. Philip taught the Samaritans about the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ (8:12).
4. Paul and Barnabas told the Christians in Antioch that we enter the kingdom of God through many hardships (14:22).
5. Paul argued in the synagogue for three months about the kingdom of God (19:8).
6. Paul told the Ephesian elders that he had preached the kingdom (20:25). But in verse 21 he characterized his message with the terms *repentance* and *faith*; in verse 24 he said he preached "the gospel of God's grace"; these seem to be equated with the gospel of the kingdom. (Luke never uses the phrase "gospel of the kingdom." The only place he uses "gospel of" is here: "the gospel of God's grace.")
7. To Roman Jews, Paul preached "the kingdom of God and tried to convince them about Jesus" (28:23).
8. In Rome, Paul "preached the kingdom of God and taught about the Lord Jesus Christ" (28:31). Here, a message about the kingdom is linked to a message about Jesus Christ.

Although Jews believed in the coming kingdom of God and had the Old Testament prophecies of it, Paul argued about the kingdom for three months in the Ephesian synagogue. His concept of the kingdom must have been considerably different than what the Ephesian Jews believed. And no wonder! Paul's message about the kingdom was coupled with a message about Jesus and grace and faith.

That was Jesus' message, too. For 40 days after his resurrection, he taught the disciples about the kingdom. What did this entail? We can go to the Gospel of Luke to see what he talked about during that time. On the road to Emmaus, "he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures *concerning himself*" (Luke 24:27). Later, he summarized his message: "Everything must be fulfilled that is written *about me* in the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms" (verse 44).

What was written? Here it is in a nutshell: "*The Christ* will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, and *repentance* and *forgiveness* of sins will be preached *in his name* to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem" (verses 46-47). This is the kingdom message. As George Ladd wrote,

In the days after Jesus' resurrection, he continued to teach them about the Kingdom of God (1:3). We are undoubtedly to understand this to mean that he was instructing them in the relationship between his proclamation of the Kingdom of God and his death and resurrection. (George Eldon Ladd, *Theology of the New Testament* [Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1963], page 332)

Jesus then reminded his disciples "You are *witnesses* of these things" (verse 48). That brings us back to the book of Acts. Let's see what the apostles preached.

Witnesses

What did the apostles preach about? Our next bit of evidence is in Acts 1:8. Jesus told his disciples that they would receive the Holy Spirit, and then he told them what that divine power would enable them to do: "You will be my *witnesses* in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."

Witness is an important word in the book of Acts. It comes in several forms, both verbs and nouns, all built on the root *martyr*-. It refers to a witness in a courtroom, or the testimony that a witness gives in court. We get the English word *martyr* from this Greek root. People who were faithful **witnesses** to Jesus Christ sometimes became **martyrs** for their faith.

Let's survey the occurrences of the *martyr*- words in Acts to see what the

disciples were witnessing to. They were giving evidence in support of a particular fact.

- 1:8 — witnesses of Jesus Christ
- 1:22 — witness of Jesus' resurrection
- 2:32 — witness of his resurrection
- 3:15 — witness of his resurrection
- 4:33 — they testified to the resurrection
- 5:32 — witnesses of his resurrection, exaltation and forgiveness
- 10:39 — witnesses of everything Jesus did
- 10:41 — the resurrected Jesus was seen by witnesses
- 10:43 — all the prophets testify about him and forgiveness
- 13:31 — those who saw the resurrected Jesus are his witnesses
- 14:3 — the Lord confirmed the message of his grace
- 22:15 — Paul will be Jesus' witness of what he saw and heard
- 22:18 — they will not accept Paul's testimony about the Lord
- 23:11 — Paul testified about Jesus in Jerusalem and Rome
- 26:16 — Paul was appointed a witness of what he saw of the Lord
- 26:22 — Paul testified, saying that the Scriptures predicted that the Christ would suffer, rise from the dead, and proclaim light to Jews and Gentiles.¹

The focus of the apostles' testimony is Jesus, his resurrection, and the fact that grace or forgiveness is available. Let's go back to the beginning of Acts and see how often that message is repeated.

Peter's Pentecost sermon

The first sermon that Luke includes in his apostolic history is Peter's comments to the crowd at Pentecost. This is not only a landmark event in the church, it is a foundational speech in the book of Acts. First, Peter tells the people that the Spirit-caused tongues are a fulfillment of Scripture and a sign that the "last days" had begun and people can be saved (2:16-21).

Ladd summarized it in this way:

The age of fulfilment was dawned. "This is what was spoken by the prophet Joel" (Acts 2:16). "But what God foretold by the mouth of all the prophets...he thus fulfilled" (Acts 3:18). "And all the prophets who have spoken, from Samuel and those who came afterwards, also proclaimed these days" (Acts 3:24). The apostles declared that the messianic age had dawned. (Ladd, page 329)

Peter then makes his point:

Men of Israel, listen to this: Jesus of Nazareth was a man accredited by God to you by miracles, wonders and signs.... This man was handed over to you by God's set purpose and foreknowledge; and you...put him to death by nailing him to the cross. But God raised him from the dead. (2:22-24)

Peter explains that David had predicted the Messiah's resurrection. The apostles are witnesses of Jesus' resurrection, and the exalted Jesus is now pouring out the Holy Spirit on his people. The conclusion: "Therefore let all Israel be assured of this: God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ" (2:36). Jesus is the Messiah and the One we should obey.

The people believed. They had crucified the Messiah they had been hoping for! So what were they supposed to do? Peter told them the appropriate response of faith: repentance and baptism, with the result of forgiveness and the Holy Spirit (2:38). And Peter pleaded with them to do it (2:40).

Three thousand did, and their zeal is shown in Luke's summary statement: "They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer" (2:42). Their willingness to share was legendary (2:44-45). They met at the temple, broke bread at home and ate together, praising God (2:46-47). They quickly became a community, a fellowship.

Healing in Jesus' name

Peter's second sermon in Acts is reported in chapter 3. It is also given to a crowd of Jews at the temple, and it has some basic similarities to Peter's first sermon. A miracle was done; the people were amazed. They were ready to listen to Peter. What did he tell them? He told them about Jesus.

What ironies! The Jews wanted him killed, even though Pilate did not. Instead of accepting the true Messiah, they asked for a false one. They killed the author of life! (3:13-15). But God raised him and glorified him, Peter testified to the crowd.

The healing had been done by faith in the name of Jesus (3:15-16). The temple was the place of God's name (1 Kings 8:29), but the healing was done in the name of Jesus. We are soon told that there is no name, other than Jesus, by which we can be saved (4:12). The name of Jesus far surpasses the value of the temple.

Lame people were not allowed in the temple, but by faith in Jesus, this man, for the first time in his life, was permitted to praise God in the temple. Jesus, the Holy and Righteous One, makes it possible for more people to

come to God. Readers would have already seen hints of that: “*Everyone* who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved” (2:21). “The promise is...for *all* who are far off — for *all* whom the Lord our God will call” (2:39). These are literary anticipations of the eventual opening of salvation to other previously restricted peoples, such as eunuchs, Samaritans and Gentiles.

Peter continues his sermon by noting the Messiah’s sufferings had been predicted (3:18). The desired response: repentance, resulting in forgiveness, and waiting for the predicted return of the Messiah Jesus. After all, Moses had predicted that God would “raise up” (same Greek word as “resurrect”) a prophet, and whoever rejects him will be expelled from the community of God’s people (3:22-23). If they don’t want to follow the leader God provides, then they won’t be part of his people.

In Abraham’s day, God promised to bless “*all* peoples on earth,” and he is now blessing the Jews “first” (a subtle hint of others to come later) through the servant he raised up or resurrected, and the blessing comes through repentance (3:25-26). Luke summarizes the Peter’s message in 4:2 — “The apostles were...proclaiming in Jesus the resurrection of the dead.” The underlying implication is that Jesus’ resurrection proves that we can also be resurrected if we are aligned with him.

Peter’s witness to the Sanhedrin

The Sadducees, who did not believe in a resurrection, did not like the apostles’ message. Peter and John were arrested and brought into court. The Jewish leaders asked Peter, “By what power or what name did you do this?” (4:7). They couldn’t have asked a better question. Peter soon got to his point: “It is by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified but whom God raised from the dead, that this man stands before you healed” (4:10). You rejected him, but God has made him the capstone and the only avenue of salvation.

The Sadducees still didn’t like the message, so they told Peter “not to speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus” (4:17-18). But Peter replied that he had to speak about what he had seen and heard. He was a true witness, not one who could be forced to be silent or false.

Peter and John went back to the community of faith, and they all rejoiced in prayer. Their prayer acknowledged that the Scriptures predicted the conspiracy against the Messiah (4:25-27). It repeats the fact that everything had happened according to God’s foreknowledge (4:28). They asked for boldness in speaking the word of God, and for miracles through the name of Jesus (4:29-30).

Luke gives another summary: The believers shared their possessions, and the apostles testified to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus (4:32-33). Grace and generosity are a result of Christian faith.

In answer to prayer, the apostles were bold, and many miracles were done (5:12-16). The Sadducees still didn't like it, and the apostles were jailed again (5:17-18). An angel released them, and told them to preach "the full message of this new life" (5:20). Here we see another phrase — new life — that characterizes the preaching of the apostolic church.

The apostles were again brought before the Sanhedrin and given opportunity to speak. Peter explained why he was disobeying the Jewish leaders' orders: "We must obey God rather than men!" (5:29). He was obeying God's orders to be a witness to the new life available through Jesus Christ. Peter then launched into his message:

The God of our fathers raised Jesus from the dead — whom you had killed by hanging him on a tree. God exalted him to his own right hand as Prince and Savior that he might give repentance and forgiveness of sins to Israel. We are witnesses of these things, and so is the Holy Spirit, whom God has given to those who obey him. (5:30-32)

What kind of obedience was Peter referring to? Not the Jewish customs observed by the Sanhedrin. Rather, the obedience Peter had in mind here was belief in Jesus as the Christ, and obeying his command to preach salvation.

The Sadducees were even more angry at the message, and wanted to kill the apostles. But Gamaliel, a Pharisee (Luke is more favorable to Pharisees than to Sadducees), advised them to let the apostles go (5:33-39). Gamaliel's short speech may have been quoted partly for the benefit of Jewish Christians who did not like Paul's gospel to the Gentiles. The advice applies quite well: "Leave these men alone! Let them go! For if their purpose or activity is of human origin, it will fail. But if it is from God, you will not be able to stop these men; you will only find yourselves fighting against God" (5:38-39).

Despite the threat of death, the apostles rejoiced and "never stopped teaching and proclaiming the good news that Jesus is the Christ" (5:42). There's the gospel: Jesus is the Christ. His resurrection proves that he is the Messiah, the God-ordained agent of salvation.

The kerygma

Peter had a consistent message. He had seen something so life-changing that he simply had to tell others about it. He was filled with the Spirit, filled with zeal, filled with boldness, to tell others the good news. This gospel

focuses on the resurrection of Jesus, but several other related facts are usually included.

This package of core facts is usually called the *kerygma* (a Greek noun meaning preaching). Here are the major components:

1. Jesus' resurrection: God raised Jesus from the dead.
2. Jesus' life and death: Jesus did many miracles, he suffered, he died by crucifixion.
3. Jesus' exaltation: God glorified Jesus, raised him to his right hand as Messiah, Prince, Savior and Lord.
4. Prediction: All this happened as predicted in Scripture. Jesus fulfills the promise of the Old Testament.
5. Salvation: Because of Jesus' resurrection, people are exhorted to repent and are promised forgiveness, grace, salvation, and new life in his name.
6. Restoration: Jesus Christ will return.²

This is the heart and core of the gospel — it is the message the apostles preached, despite threats of death. It's a life-transforming message, a message about new life, a message worth living for, and a message worth dying for. We see that in the next story Luke gives us.

Stephen, Philip and Saul

Stephen, a Greek-speaking Jew, was arrested, and he preached a long sermon before the Sanhedrin. He reminded them of a central lesson of Israelite history: They disobeyed, resisted the Holy Spirit and persecuted the prophets (7:51-52). Moses predicted that God would raise up a prophet (7:37), but they killed the prophets who predicted Christ, and now they had murdered him.

Stephen's last message was that the exalted Jesus, the Son of Man, was standing at the right hand of God (7:56). Stephen's stinging indictment of the Jewish leaders led to his martyrdom, and his last witness was to the forgiveness that can be obtained from the Lord Jesus (7:60).

Persecution intensified, and the Christians were scattered, but they did not stop preaching despite the threats of death. Philip went "to a city in Samaria and proclaimed the Christ there" (8:4-5). Miracles were done, and the crowds listened as Philip told them about the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus (8:6, 12). Many believed and were baptized. Philip eventually met the Ethiopian eunuch and accepted an invitation to speak. "Philip began with that very passage of Scripture [Isaiah 53:7-8] and told him the good news about Jesus" (8:35). The eunuch believed and was baptized.

Then we are introduced to the dramatic conversion and call of Saul of Tarsus. He was promised the Holy Spirit and was baptized (9:17-18). “At once he began to preach in the synagogues that Jesus is the Son of God...proving that Jesus is the Christ” (9:20, 22). That was the fundamental message. The Lord told Ananias that Saul had been chosen “to carry my name” (9:15). Paul was not preaching a new gospel, but a continuation of the same basic message taught by Christ and the apostles.

Peter’s gospel message to Gentiles

Peter enters the story again, and his speech to Cornelius is pivotal. The leading Jewish apostle gives the kerygma to Gentiles. They, like Jews, can be saved through belief in the Messiah. God accepts people “from every nation who fear him and do what is right” (10:35).

Peter acknowledges that Cornelius already knows “the message God sent to the people of Israel, telling the good news of peace through Jesus Christ, who is Lord of all” (10:36). He knew the story, starting with the ministry of Jesus: “God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and power, and...he went around doing good and healing.... We are witnesses of everything he did in the country of the Jews and in Jerusalem” (10:38-39).

The next item on the evangelistic summary: “They killed him by hanging him on a tree, but God raised him from the dead on the third day and caused him to be seen...by witnesses whom God had already chosen” (10:39-41).

Jesus commanded these witnesses to preach that Jesus is the Messiah — “the one whom God appointed as judge of the living and the dead” (10:42). As predicted in the Old Testament, “everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name” (10:43). This was a message Cornelius already knew. He believed, and the Holy Spirit gave evidence not only that God accepted Gentiles, but also that he accepted this message of salvation going to them as well as to Jews.

Peter continues to stress the now-familiar themes of the gospel. It is a message that brings salvation (11:14); it is a message about repentance and life (11:18).

Endnotes

¹ To be complete, here are all the other verses in Acts that use *martyr*-words. These do not indicate what the apostles were commissioned to testify about, but show how the word can be used in other situations:

6:3 — men known to be full of the Spirit

6:13 — false witnesses gave testimony

7:44 — ancient Israelites had “the tabernacle of Testimony”

- 7:58 — witnesses at Stephen's trial
- 10:22 — Cornelius was respected by the people
- 13:22 — God testified concerning David
- 15:8 — God showed that he accepted Gentiles
- 16:2 — the brothers spoke well of Timothy
- 20:26 — Paul declared that he was innocent
- 22:5 — he can testify that Paul persecuted the church
- 22:12 — Ananias was highly respected by the Jews
- 22:20 — the blood of your martyr Stephen was shed
- 26:5 — they can testify that Paul was a strict Pharisee

² Philippe Menoud gives us this summary of the kerygma:

The preaching of the apostles...may be briefly summarized as follows:

God has realized the promises of the OT and brought salvation to his people (Acts 2:16-21, 23; 3:18, 24; 10:43).

This has taken place through the ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus (2:22-24); 3:13-15; 10:37-39).

Jesus has been exalted as "Lord and Christ" (2:36).

The Holy Spirit in the church is the sign of Christ's present power and glory (2:33; 5:32).

Salvation will reach its consummation in the return of Christ to judge the living and the dead (3:21; 10:42).

The apostles have been chosen by God as witnesses of the ministry of Jesus and above all of his resurrection (2:32; 3:15; 10:40-41).

They address to their hearers an appeal for repentance and offer to the believers forgiveness of sins and the gift of the Holy Spirit (2:38-39; 3:25-26; 5:31; 10:43).

In short, the primitive preaching of the apostles is a proclamation of the work of salvation made by God in Christ and a call to believe and be saved. (P.H. Menoud, "Preaching," *Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible* [Nashville: Abingdon, 1962], volume 3, pages 868-869)

Michael Morrison

PREACHING IN THE BOOK OF ACTS

PART 2: PAUL

In Acts 11, Luke takes us back in time and fills us in on some developments in Antioch in Syria. Greek-speaking Jews had been telling Gentiles “the good news about the Lord Jesus.” Many Gentiles believed and repented (11:20-21). This was “evidence of the grace of God” (11:23). Through the work of Barnabas and Saul, many people “were brought to the Lord” (11:24). These phrases are descriptive of what the gospel of Jesus Christ does.

The believers in Antioch talked about the Messiah *Christos* so much that they became known as the *Christianoi* (11:26).

Paul's first major speech

Our previous major speech was the apostle to the Jews (Peter) speaking to Gentiles. We now move to the apostle to the Gentiles (Paul) speaking to Jews. This illustrates continuity. The message is the same throughout the apostolic history.

Barnabas and Saul were sent on a gospel-preaching journey, and Paul gave a sermon in a synagogue in Antioch in Pisidia. After a brief historical introduction, Paul gets to his point: “God has brought to Israel the Savior Jesus, as he promised” (13:23). Jesus is the fulfillment of Old Testament promise. (Luke never uses *promise* in the plural. Christ fulfills *the* promise of the Old Testament.)

John the Baptist preached repentance and baptism, but Christ is greater: He brought a message of salvation to both Jews and Gentiles (13:24-26). Paul gives the kerygma in his own words: In fulfillment of Scripture, Jesus was executed and buried, but God raised him from the dead, and he was seen by many witnesses (13:27-31). This fulfills God's promise (13:32-33).

Paul explains Christ's resurrection further (13:33-37). Because Jesus has been raised, forgiveness is available through him. This is what Paul is proclaiming. “Through him everyone who believes is justified from everything you could not be justified from by the law of Moses” (13:39). We cannot be justified by the law of Moses — justification comes only through faith in Christ. (The “law of Moses” will be dealt with again in Acts 15.) Those who believe are “appointed for eternal life” (13:48).

Paul warned the Jews that rejecting the word of God is equivalent to rejecting eternal life (13:46); the implication is that the message Paul preached is about eternal life. The Lord had commanded him to bring salvation to the

ends of the earth (13:47). Although different words are used, Paul's commission to preach salvation and eternal life is the same as being a witness of Jesus to the ends of the earth (1:8) and the same as preaching the gospel in all the world (Matthew and Mark).

Committed to the grace of God

Paul and Barnabas continued their journey. In Iconium, they preached the Lord's grace, and the Lord confirmed that message through miracles (14:3). In Lystra, Paul and Barnabas preached repentance from idolatry (14:15). On the return trip, they exhorted disciples to remain true to "the faith" (14:22; cf. 13:8). Christianity can be characterized by the one word *faith*. They had put their trust in the Lord and were to be faithful to him (14:23).

They returned "to Antioch, where they had been committed to the grace of God for the work they had now completed" (14:26). The entire journey or commission or work was described as a commitment to the grace of God. We see that in 15:40, too, which tells us that Paul and Silas were "commended...to the grace of the Lord." The ministry Paul received from the Lord Jesus was to testify "to the gospel of God's grace" (20:24). Paul committed the Ephesian elders "to God and to the word of his grace" (20:32). That is the message Christ's ministers preach: Faith, repentance, grace, forgiveness, salvation, eternal life through the resurrected Jesus Christ.

Paul's first evangelistic trip demonstrated that God "had opened the door of faith to the Gentiles" (14:27). But not everyone could believe this good news. Some Jews insisted that the Gentile believers ought to become proselytes by being circumcised and accepting the law of Moses (15:1, 5). At the Jerusalem conference, Peter explained that the Gentiles had been given the Holy Spirit upon faith (15:7-8). God accepts people on the basis of faith whether or not they have been circumcised. Gentiles do not need to keep the law of Moses. There is no need to make it difficult for anyone to turn to God (15:19).

God cleansed Gentile hearts (that is, he justified them) by faith (15:9). They are right with God on the basis of faith. Not only are Gentiles saved by "the grace of our Lord Jesus," Jews are, too (15:11). No one can be justified by the law of Moses. The gospel of grace is for everyone.

Paul's next journey

As Paul traveled, he reported the decision of the Jerusalem council, and the churches were strengthened in the faith (16:4-5). Paul eventually went to Europe and spoke to Lydia at Philippi. "The Lord opened her heart to respond to Paul's message" (16:14). She believed, and she responded

appropriately with baptism and hospitality (16:15).

Paul and his group told the people “the way to be saved” (16:17). They told the jailer, “Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved” (16:31). There is little question as to what gospel Paul was preaching: a message of salvation through faith in Jesus Christ. The jailer believed, and he responded appropriately with baptism and hospitality (16:33-34).

In a Thessalonian synagogue, Paul preached about the messianic promise of the Old Testament and proved that the Messiah “had to suffer and rise from the dead.” He was proclaiming that Jesus is the Messiah (17:2-3). Hostile Jews accused him of preaching Jesus as a king, and Paul went to Berea, where he was received more favorably. They examined the Old Testament prophecies, and many believed (17:11-12).

Luke is emphasizing that Christianity is thoroughly rooted in the Old Testament. This is something his Gentile readers would need to know. It is also something Roman officials would need to know when they were asked to judge whether it was legal to preach the gospel. Judaism was legal. Luke records the judgment of Gallio, a Roman proconsul, that Christianity was a branch within Judaism and therefore outside the jurisdiction of Roman courts (18:14-15).

In Athens, Paul preached “the good news about Jesus and the resurrection” (17:18). He preached that we are God’s children, that he is patient, that he commands everyone to repent (17:29-30). God “has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed. He has given proof of this to all men by raising him from the dead” (17:31). Every human being will be resurrected (thus our opportunity for eternal life). The proof of this is in the fact that Jesus has been raised from the dead. His eternal life is the key to our eternal lives. Some of the Athenians believed (17:34).

In Corinth, Paul testified to Jews that Jesus is the Messiah (18:5). Many responded with faith and baptism (18:8).

Apollos “had been instructed in the way of the Lord, and he...taught about Jesus accurately” (18:25). But he needed further instruction, presumably in association with Christian baptism. Priscilla and Aquila “explained to him the way of God more adequately” (18:26). What is the “way of God”? Is it a life-style, a behavior? Apollos, a disciple of John the Baptist, would already have had an impeccable life-style. What he needed more adequately was instruction about salvation through Christ. That is the way of God, the way of salvation.

Apollos moved to Corinth and helped “those who by grace had believed”

(18:27). He not only preached about Jesus accurately, he proved, from the Scriptures, that Jesus is the Christ (18:28).

Meanwhile, Paul was in Ephesus, where he informed more people about Jesus. They were rebaptized and given the Holy Spirit (19:4-6). In the synagogue, Paul argued persuasively about the kingdom of God and preached publicly for two years (19:8-10). Great miracles were done, “and the name of the Lord Jesus was held in high honor” (18:17). Many repented of their sorcery, and Paul persuaded many that idols were not gods (18:19, 26). A riot ensued, and Paul moved on.

On his way back to Jerusalem, Paul sailed to Miletus and called for the Ephesian elders (20:17). He gave them a heart-to-heart speech summarizing his work: “I have declared to both Jews and Greeks that they must turn to God in repentance and have faith in our Lord Jesus” (20:21). He had been given the job of preaching the good news about God’s grace, and that is what he called preaching the kingdom (20:24-25). The message about the kingdom is actually a message about grace, because it is only by grace that we can be in the kingdom.

We should not be misled by the way the word *kingdom* is used in modern cultures. Rather, we need to see it in its biblical context. The book of Acts shows that “preaching the kingdom” is done by preaching about the Messiah-King and about how humans can become part of the kingdom through faith in the King. It is *not* about the physical details of what Christ will do after he returns. The New Testament does not give such details, and Paul argued for three months with people who knew the Old Testament prophecies. He was not preaching the Old Testament, but something new.

Paul noted that God’s grace could build them up and give them “an inheritance among all those who are sanctified” (20:32). He reminded the elders that by “hard work we must help the weak” (20:35). After this farewell, Paul sailed toward Jerusalem knowing that he had many enemies there. He knew their zeal and their willingness to kill. But he told the members in Caesarea that he was ready to die “for the name of the Lord Jesus” (21:13).

Paul a witness to the resurrection

Paul was eventually given Roman protection from his persecutors, and he had several opportunities to explain his message. He had seen and heard the Righteous One, the Messiah, and he had been appointed a witness of what he had seen and heard (22:15). Earlier, Paul had said that others were witnesses of Jesus (13:31); here he says that he is also a witness. In the bright light on the road to Damascus, he had seen and heard the risen Jesus. He

believed and was baptized, calling on the name of the Lord (22:16). He gave testimony about him instead of persecuting those who believed in him (22:18-19).

Before the Sanhedrin, Paul summarized his conflict with the Jewish leaders: his “hope in the resurrection of the dead” (23:6). That is a crucial element of the gospel. There will be a resurrection, and the resurrected Jesus is the way in which people can be given eternal life in that resurrection.

The Lord appeared to Paul again, promising that he would not die in Jerusalem but would testify about Jesus in Rome, too (23:11).

Paul told Felix that he had a hope that there would be a resurrection of the dead (24:15). That was the central reason he was on trial (24:21). Felix heard Paul speak not only about faith in Christ Jesus, but also righteousness, self-control and a future judgment (24:24-25). Here we see that there is an ethical component to the gospel message. Felix, who lacked self-control, did not like the implications of what Paul was preaching about the resurrection of the wicked, and he sent Paul back to jail (24:25).

Two years later, Festus explained to Agrippa that Paul was held in custody because of a religious dispute “and about a dead man named Jesus who Paul claimed was alive” (25:19). The dispute centered on whether Jesus had been resurrected. As Paul told Agrippa, “It is because of my hope in what God has promised our fathers that I am on trial today” (26:6). That promise, that hope, is the resurrection of the dead (26:7-8).

Paul recounted his commission from the Lord, the gospel he had received. Jesus had appointed him to be “a witness of what you have seen of me and what I will show you” (26:16). Paul was sent to the Gentiles “to open their eyes and turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan to God [i.e., repentance], so that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me” (26:18).

Paul, always zealous, did exactly as he had been ordered. He preached repentance and good deeds (26:20). He stressed that his message was in complete conformity to the Old Testament, which predicted the suffering and resurrection of the Christ, and the preaching to Gentiles (26:22-23).

To the Jews in Rome, Paul proclaimed that he was chained “because of the hope of Israel” (28:20). The hope of Israel is the resurrection, and Jesus is the first to be resurrected. So Paul, using the Old Testament prophecies, preached for two years about the connection between Jesus and the kingdom of God (28:23, 31). It is a message of salvation given not only to Jews who accept it, but also to Gentiles who listen (28:29).

Resurrection and salvation through the Lord Jesus. That’s the gospel

according to the book of Acts.

Michael Morrison

JESUS' ENCOUNTER WITH A DESPISED SINNER — MATTHEW 9:9-17

Editor's note: This is the first of a 13-part series by Lorenzo Arroyo. On our website, the series is given the title: "Manual of Early Evangelism."

Introduction

When Jesus called his first disciples, he said to them, "Come follow me...and I will make you fishers of men" (Matthew 4:19). Jesus was going to show his disciples how to win people for his kingdom. Jesus not only taught his disciples by word but also by example. The four Gospels of the New Testament Scriptures are rich in personal encounters where Jesus ministers to the practical and eternal needs of ordinary people. Jesus is the Master par excellence of sharing the good news of his person and work with everyday people. Can anyone better instruct today's disciples in evangelism than the Master himself? Jesus and the first generation of disciples not only set great examples of early evangelism in the world, but they also convey proven and universal fundamental principles of effective evangelism that transcend their own time and cultures right down to ours today.

This series of articles is entitled *Manual of Early Evangelism* because that is exactly its content. A manual is a how-to-book, and this manual instructs us on how Jesus and his disciples reached out with their lifestyle and message of salvation.

This study material can be divided in two parts. The first part selects key passages of Jesus' ministry where he encounters everyday people in his community. These lessons are taken from the four Gospels and provide keys to the Master's work in living and sharing the good news of his messianic mission to save those who were lost. The stories are of real, hurting persons (not unlike those in our own communities) who have a variety of personal needs, but need most of all to find the love and grace of Jesus.

The second part is a continuation of Jesus' ministry through the early disciples of the church. The second part selects key passages from the book of Acts where the disciples use a variety of evangelistic paradigms or models taken from Jesus' own ministry but applied to new circumstances and new communities. You will come to see and appreciate the diversity and creativity of the early disciples as they launch out into new ministries and strategies: All for the sake of proclaiming the gospel message of Jesus' atoning death and resurrection.

Manual of Early Evangelism will help you come to know how the early church fulfilled the Great Commission and thus turned the first-century world upside down for Jesus. How this is to be done today, hopefully, you will discover for yourself as you advance through each lesson. The gospel work of the early church was recorded for a reason. We believe the reason is for the instruction of every new believing generation so that both the message of the gospel and the *agape* motivation for sharing it may never be lost. The fish are biting, and you are Jesus' chosen vessel for the labor of reeling them in. Happy fishing!

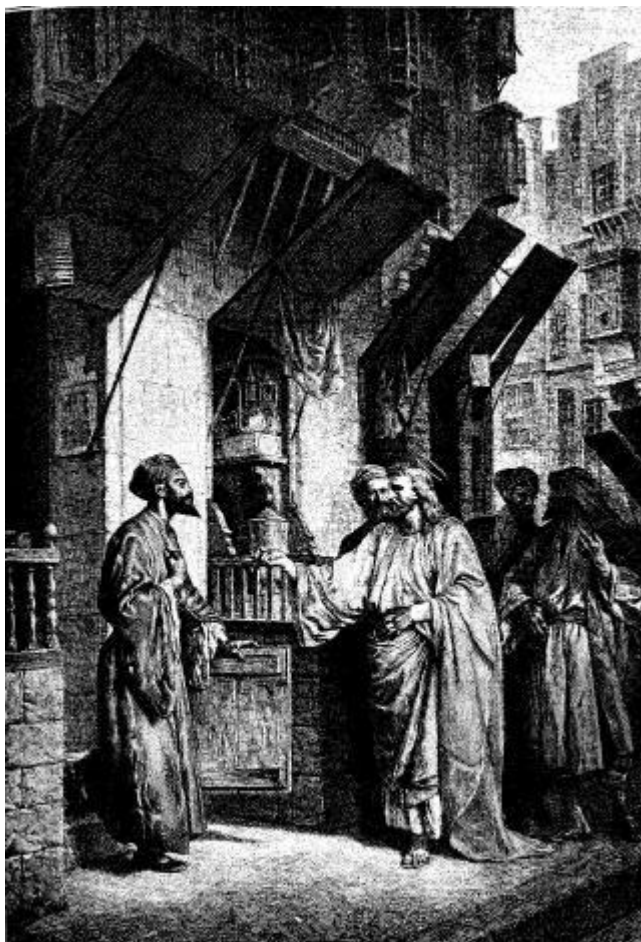
Key text: "On hearing this, Jesus said, 'It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. But go and learn what this means: 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice.' For I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners'" (Matthew 9:12-13).

Main point: Jesus' purpose and mission is centered on his redemptive work of bringing salvation to sinners. This upsets the status quo and often calls for a radical break from traditional religious norms.

Introduction

The passage before us (Matthew 9:9-13) describes Jesus' call to Matthew, a despised tax collector. Matthew worked in Capernaum, where Jesus lived (4:13; 9:1). He would have undoubtedly seen Jesus or at least heard of him before their encounter.

Matthew was probably a customs officer working on Capernaum's trade route. He was hated and despised by his own people for being a collaborator with imperial Rome. Jewish tax collectors were not allowed in the synagogues. They were an unscrupulous class that had bought or bribed to get their appointments to become very wealthy. They burdened their own people with excess tax, while bribing the wealthy and declaring less tax for them.



The call of Matthew
illustration by Alexandre Bida

It is easy to see why the Pharisees were furious with Jesus' apparent lax attitude in sharing a meal with Matthew and his kind (sinners). After all, Scripture says that righteous people should not sit with deceitful people or with the wicked (e.g. Psalm 26:4-5). Jesus responds in the opposite of traditional norms. What the self-righteous Pharisees did not understand, and what many church people today do not grasp, is that Jesus' redemptive activity must be thrust into center stage. The Pharisees have no reason to accuse. It is like telling a doctor not to get close to the patient because he might get contaminated with the same condition as the patient or get blood on his hands!

The next passage is linked to the previous controversy, but this time it deals with the disciples of John the Baptist (Matthew 9:14-17). It seems that not all of John's disciples were fully convinced that Jesus was the Christ. Yet they were sincere, and this is probably why Jesus takes time to explain to them new changes already on the horizon of his redemptive mission. The disciples of John and the disciples of Moses (Pharisees) fasted on a regular basis. The Pharisees fasted on Mondays and Thursdays, and the disciples of John apparently did, too. The Pharisees were religious fundamentalists who sought to separate themselves from everything they deemed "worldly." John's disciples were probably gloom and doom last-days prophets.

But Jesus' disciples were radically different, because they were filled with the presence of their Master's joy! Who can fast when sinners are being saved? Who can separate themselves from the world when salvation is laid at its front door? Who can preach gloom and doom when the message of salvation is *good news*? The old religious patterns of yesterday will not hold the new wine of today's new covenant gospel of Jesus.

In both the above passages, Jesus is not concerned with maintaining past shadows for ritual's sake alone as much as he is concerned with the reality of showing mercy by sharing the *good news* of God's saving grace (9:35-38).

Questions for Bible study

Read the following verses and respond to the questions:

1. Matthew 9:9-13

- a. What area was Jesus passing through when he came upon Matthew?
Verse 9a. See 4:13 and 9:1. Where was Matthew sitting? Verse 9b.
What profession was he in?
- b. What does Jesus say to Matthew? Verse 9c. Does Jesus want
Matthew to go somewhere with him, or is there a deeper meaning to
Jesus' words?
- c. What is Matthew's response? Verse 9d. What does his response
mean? Could he have responded differently? See 19:21-22.
- d. What was going on at Matthew's house? Verse 10. Who were at the
house? Why do you think that undesirables were there?
- e. Who else saw what was happening, and why was this group upset
with Jesus' disciples? Verse 11. Would you also be upset? Why?
- f. What is Jesus' response to them? Verse 12. What does a doctor have
to do with this situation? Is someone sick?

- g. Who is Jesus addressing here, and why? Verse 13. How healthy were the Pharisees? Are they among the righteous who do not need Jesus? Are you? Who is? See Romans 3:9-10, 19-20, 23.

2. Luke 19:1-10

- a. Where was Jesus passing through? Verse 1. Who else was there, and what was his profession? Verse 2.
- b. What does Zacchaeus want to do? Verse 3a. Why is he having trouble? Verse 3b. What solution does he find? Verse 4. Why?
- c. What happens next, and what does Jesus say to him? Verse 5. Why does Jesus insist on this?
- d. What is Zacchaeus' response? Verse 6. What was his attitude toward Jesus: fearful or joyful? Why?
- e. What was the attitude of the people who heard Jesus' invitation to Zacchaeus? Verse 7. Why?
- f. What attitude does Zacchaeus demonstrate at Jesus' invitation? Verse 8. Did Jesus tell him to make restitution, or does Zacchaeus follow Jewish custom? See Exodus 22:1; 2 Samuel 12:5-6. Does he do this with sorrow or with joy? Was he responding to a threat, or to something good?
- g. What had come to this house? Verse 9a. Explain. Why was Zacchaeus excluded by his own people but accepted by Jesus? Verse 9b.
- h. What does Jesus say is the purpose and mission of his first coming? Verse 10. How does he accomplish this task with Zacchaeus?

3. Matthew 9:14-17

- a. What question do John's disciples ask Jesus? Verse 14. What do you think is their motivation for asking such a question?
- b. What answer does Jesus give? Verse 15a. What does Jesus mean by the analogy of a wedding feast? What does he mean by the bridegroom being taken away? Verse 15b. Is he speaking of his death, or his Second Coming? Explain how the disciples would have understood this.
- c. What does Jesus mean by these two short parables? Verses 16-17. What great truths are they designed to teach?

Contemporary interaction

- 1. As committed followers of Christ, what can we learn from Jesus' availability and approach in sharing the good news to Matthew and Zacchaeus?

2. What kind of negative response can we expect from some within our own church community? Can you give a discrete example?
3. How did Jesus follow up his call in each of the above cases? What can we learn from this in integrating new believers into the community?
4. Is Jesus' message to sinners one of condemnation, or one of acceptance? Why can't old traditions hold the new wine of the gospel? Give examples.
5. What is Jesus' motive for seeking the lost, and what challenge does he lay at his disciples' front door and to every generation? See Matthew 9:35-38.

Conclusion

Jesus' purpose and mission is the salvation of the lost. His encounters with despised sinners and society's outcasts are centered on sharing the joy of his presence. He wants to live with us; he does not want to exclude us. We are disciples of this good news!

Lorenzo Arroyo

JESUS' ENCOUNTER WITH A FOREIGN WOMAN — MATTHEW 15:21-28

Key text: “A Canaanite woman from that vicinity came to him, crying out, ‘Lord, Son of David, have mercy on me! My daughter is suffering terribly from demon-possession’” (Matthew 15:22).

Main point: Jesus’ ministry to Israel was only the beginning of a worldwide endeavor to take the gospel to all nations, to all peoples and to every culture.

Introduction

Earlier in his ministry, when Jesus sent out his 12 disciples, he told them not to go to the Gentiles or the Samaritans but only to the “lost sheep of Israel” (Matthew 10:5-6). Jesus, as Israel’s Messiah, was sent on a specific mission, and that was to save them from their sins (1:21). The prophets long ago had predicted both his birth and mission (2:4-6). Israel as a nation had found themselves continually in bondage because they had not been faithful to God. Gentiles had ruled over them for centuries, including the Assyrians, Babylonians, Persians, Greeks, and finally the Romans. Israel was promised a deliverer, savior, messiah, one who ultimately came in the person and work of Jesus.

The passage before us (15:21-28) involves a foreigner and seems out of place in this phase of Jesus’ mission. The structure of the passage follows the pattern of an encounter and subsequent dialog. Jesus and his disciples travel to the pagan northern regions outside of Israel’s borders, perhaps to rest before returning to Israel and resuming their ministry afresh.

Behold! Jesus is met by a Canaanite woman boldly seeking mercy on account of her demon-possessed daughter. Unlike the Israelites, this foreigner recognizes Jesus as Israel’s Messiah and will not give up, even when she is rebuffed three times! Jesus acknowledges her faith and takes care of her need, all to the disciples’ surprise—they are left pondering, as if with their mouths wide open.



The Canaanite woman beseeches Jesus
Illustration by Geronimo Nadal

Jesus is always full of surprises – he often says and does the opposite of what we would say or do. As far as salvation is concerned, no one can put Jesus in a box or limit his mission. How many times have we thought it was impossible for a certain person or persons to ever be saved because they do not fit our standards? We are often struck dumbfounded when we see the Lord shatter our shortsighted ideals and convert those very people.

The Gospel of Matthew has several indications along the way of underlining the universal scope of Jesus’ redemptive mission beyond Israel’s cultural borders. The Magi from the east who came to visit Jesus as “king of the Jews” were Gentile worshippers (2:1-2). The centurion whose servant Jesus healed with only a word was a Gentile Roman officer. Jesus said that many such Gentiles would come from the east and west and take their place in the kingdom of heaven, while the subjects (Jews) of the kingdom would be cast out (8:5-13). The parable of the tenants expounds the same theme of Israel forfeiting the kingdom and it being given to the Gentiles (21:33-45). At the conclusion and climax of the Gospel of Matthew, we have Jesus’ Great Commission to make disciples of *all nations* (28:18-20).

Questions for Bible study

Read the following verses and respond to the questions:

1. Matthew 15:21-28

- a. What region do Jesus and his disciples travel to? Verse 21. What cities are mentioned, where is this region, and what kind of people lived there? Consult a Bible dictionary.
- b. What ancient pagan people is this woman associated with? Verse 22a. See Deuteronomy 7:1-6; 20:16-18.
- c. With what two titles does the Canaanite woman address Jesus? Verse 22b-d. What is the significance of these titles? What do you think is the minimum she knows about Jesus?
- d. What petition does this woman bring to Jesus? Verse 22e. Why? Verse 22f. In what manner is her plea: casual or desperate? How do you think her daughter became afflicted?
- e. What is Jesus' response to the first pleas of the woman? Verse 23a. What is the disciples' response to her continual pleas for mercy? Verse 23b. Do you think the disciples are more concerned with the woman's need or her continual nagging?
- f. What is Jesus' second response to the woman? Verse 24. See 10:5-6. Don't you think that the woman should have left and gone away at this point?
- g. What action does the woman take next? Verse 25a. Why? Verse 25b. Where else do you think that the woman can find help?
- h. What is Jesus' third response to her? Verse 26. It appears that Jesus has just added insult to injury! Most people would have given up at this point and gone away in frustration. What would *you* have done if someone implied that you were a dog? Note: The Jews of that time considered a Gentile no more than an unclean wild dog, not the domesticated pet that we think of today!
- i. How does the woman respond to Jesus' formulation of a witty Jewish put-down? Verse 27. Note: The woman responds with wit of her own, matching wit for wit in this exchange. She recognizes her station in life within this particular phase of the Jewish Messiah, but at the same time she understands the Messiah's ultimate concern is for all peoples, including her!
- j. What is Jesus' response to her? Verse 28. Why does Jesus attribute to the woman "great faith"? Why do you think Jesus finally granted her request after rebuffing her three times? What would the woman have shown if she had given up earlier?

2. Matthew 8:5-13

- a. Who meets Jesus and what does he want? Verse 5. What is a centurion and where is Capernaum? Consult a Bible dictionary and map.
- b. How does the centurion address Jesus? Verse 6a-b. What is his request to Jesus? Verse 6c. Where is the servant and in what condition?
- c. What is Jesus willing to do for him? Verse 7.
- d. What objection does this foreigner raise? Verse 8a-c. Why do you think that he does not want Jesus to come to his home? (see Acts 10:28). What is the centurion's amazing suggestion to this dilemma? Verse 8d-e. Why does the centurion believe this will work? Verse 9.
- e. What is Jesus' response to the Jews at the centurion's remarks? Verses 10-12.
- f. What is Jesus' reply and action toward this foreign believer? Verse 13.

Contemporary interaction

Read Matthew 28:18-20

1. After Jesus' death and resurrection, what does Jesus' redemptive mission accomplish? Verse 18 and see Matthew 27:51. Did Jesus die for only one particular race of people, or did Jesus die for the sins of the world?
2. As we go out in obedience to the Great Commission ("Therefore go..."), what are we commanded to do as disciples of Christ? Matthew 28:19a. To what peoples and cultures is our mission limited? What about races other than our own? Can you explain what racism is? Have you ever joked about the color of someone's skin? Or have you made fun of cultures different than your own?
3. Aside from going out, how else are disciples made? Verse 19b. In what Trinitarian formula? What does it mean to be baptized?
4. What third activity is involved in making disciples? Verse 20. Whose commands are we to teach? Explain in new covenant terms.

Conclusion

Jesus' encounter with a foreign woman reveals God's universal outreach to all peoples regardless of who they are or what needs they have. As disciples of Christ, we have been called to share the *good news* of salvation to all peoples everywhere!

Lorenzo Arroyo

JESUS' ENCOUNTER WITH A RICH MAN MARK 10:17-31

Key text: “As Jesus started on his way, a man ran up to him and fell on his knees before him. ‘Good teacher,’ he asked, what must I do to inherit eternal life?’” (Mark 10:17).

Main point: The offer of the gift of eternal life does not always yield positive results, no matter how lovingly it is presented. Even Jesus was rejected by a wealthy man whom he loved and wanted to save.



“Sell everything you have”

Illustration by Henry Hofmann

Introduction

It is easier to focus on success, of stories of persons being saved through evangelistic efforts in the proclamation of the gospel. Success stories are important because they help motivate and mobilize Christian workers for the task of the Great Commission. However, the reporting of “failures” is also important, and even necessary in preparation for the gospel work. When believers share their faith and are rejected, they often feel depressed, inadequate and even guilty for having “failed” in their mission. Believers sometimes misunderstand what their part is in the mission of sharing the gospel.

In Mark’s passage before us (10:17-31), there is an encounter between Jesus and a rich man who asks, “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” The parallel passages in Matthew and Luke add that he is not only wealthy but that he is a *young* man and a *ruler*. He appears to be a person of some distinction and importance within the Jewish aristocracy.

Jesus was born under the law to redeem those under the law (Galatians

4:4-5). The rich young ruler was a Jew and also under the requirements of the Mosaic Law. As a Jewish boy, he would have been confirmed at his *bar mitzva* on his 13th birthday, and held responsible for keeping the whole Mosaic Law, which includes the Ten Commandments. This was the heart of the old covenant that God made with Israel at Sinai (Deuteronomy 4:13). This is why Jesus quotes part of the Ten Commandments to him, and why the young man believes he has kept them “since I was a boy.” Under the old covenant law, this was what he was required to do!

However, Jesus quotes only a partial list of the second part of the Decalogue. It appears that Jesus deliberately leaves out the tenth commandment! Before his conversion, as a Pharisee, Paul (Saul) also thought he had kept the law and was blameless (Philippians 3:5-6). The legalistic Pharisees focused on external conformity to the law, even though in the inner heart they were full of greed and wickedness (Matthew 23:25-28). When Paul was still under the law, he found this out when he faced the implications of the tenth commandment, “Do not covet.” This commandment spoke to his inner sinful condition, exposed his spiritual bankruptcy, and condemned him as a sinner. The law that he thought would bring him life actually brought him death (Romans 7:7-10).

The rich young ruler did not fare any better than Saul the Pharisee—the law was also his undoing. The young man refused to part with his riches because he *coveted* them more than turning in faith to Jesus for salvation. In order to receive the salvation that Jesus has given us, we must look beyond our own abilities (works) and trust simply in the mercy of another. In Christ, we are no longer under the law, but under grace. Only by faith in Christ did Saul the Pharisee become Paul the apostle. The rich young ruler could have believed, because Jesus loved him, but he refused the gift.

Gospel work calls on believers to share their faith genuinely and lovingly with others. However, the *fruit* from the gospel is God’s part of the equation (1 Corinthians 3:6). Let us be faithful in the part that Christ has called us to do (Matthew 28:19-20); and leave the results to him!

Questions for Bible study

Read the following verses and respond to the questions:

1. Mark 10:17-22

- a. What does the man do as he encounters Jesus? Verse 17a, b. What does the man call Jesus? Verse 17c. What do his actions say about his regard for Jesus?
- b. What important question does the man ask? Verse 17d, e. From his Jewish framework, what do you think he means by *eternal life*?
- c. What question does Jesus pose in return to the man? Verse 18a. What is Jesus’ own answer? Verse 18b, c. Both the question and answer seem out of place. What is Jesus’ ultimate concern? Note:

Goodness can be measured only by the source from which it is derived. Who can compare himself to the Father, but the Son! The man uses *good* in a generic sense, but Jesus uses it in the absolute sense of his own deity.

- d. What revelation does Jesus cite as an old covenant answer to the man's question? Verse 19. From what part of the Decalogue are these commandments, and which one is missing? Note: One of the commands is not one of the Ten but only an application to them. Compare lists with Matthew 19:18-19; Luke 18:20.
- e. What is the man's response to Jesus' old covenant list? Verse 20. Is the man's focus on outer conformity to the law, or inner obedience of the heart? Matthew 23:25-28 tells us what was most important in the thinking of the times.
- f. What attitude does Jesus take toward this man? Verse 21a. What does Jesus say to him? Verse 21b-h. What is it that you think is missing, that is, what is it that Jesus *really* wants from him? See verses 13-15.
- g. What is the man's response to Jesus' offer of salvation? Verse 22. Why? See 1 Timothy 6:9-10. How does his inner condition remain? See Romans 7:7-10.

2. Mark 10:23-27

- a. To whom are Jesus' next comments directed? Verse 23a. What does Jesus say about the man's rejection of the offer of eternal life? Verse 23b. Note: *To inherit eternal life* and *to enter the kingdom of God* are equivalent terms, both depicting present and future realities.
- b. What is the disciples' reaction? Verse 24a. What does Jesus repeat? Verse 24b, c. Why? Verse 25. Note: The illustration is meant to contrast an impossibility, not a probability.
- c. How do the disciples react to Jesus' illustration? Verse 26a. If this is true with rich people (who seem to be blessed), what about everyone else? Verse 26b. Note: In Jewish culture, being rich was often regarded as a sign of God's favor. If it is impossible for the rich, how much less for the poor! Note also that being *saved* is now equated with *to inherit eternal life* and *to enter the kingdom of God*.
- d. What is Jesus' response and assurance to his disciples? Verse 27. Note: People cannot save themselves no matter what they do. Salvation is by grace and must be received as a gift.

3. Mark 10:28-31

- a. Peter's presumption is evident: What is he boasting about in contrast to the rich man's denial in verse 21? Verse 28.
- b. How does Jesus respond to Peter's boasting? Verses 29-30. What is the cost and reward of discipleship? The contrast is between the present evil age and the future age to come.

- c. What teaching has Peter forgotten? Verse 31. See Jesus' teaching in 9:35.

Contemporary interaction

1. How do you feel after you have shared the gospel with someone you care about, and are then rejected? Share your experiences with the class.
2. After you spend enough time with a person, are you able to assess what is hindering that individual from accepting the gospel? Share your experiences without identifying the person you are talking about.
3. Why did the young man go away sad? Perhaps because he was *thinking* about what Jesus had said. He wanted something from Jesus, but did not get what he wanted. The story is not done, and there may yet be hope for the young man. As Jesus said, "With God all things are possible." If people reject the gospel, remember that all is not lost — the story is not done — God is still able to do his work.
4. Have you ever felt that a certain person would never turn to Jesus and be saved, and then be amazed when that person is converted to Christ?

Conclusion

It is impossible for people to save themselves through their own efforts. Only through Jesus is salvation possible as a *gift*. It is not forced on anyone, yet it is freely given to all, and received by anyone who believes it.

Lorenzo Arroyo

JESUS' ENCOUNTER WITH A SINFUL WOMAN — LUKE 7:36-50

Key text: “When the Pharisee who had invited him saw this, he said to himself, ‘If this man were a prophet, he would know who is touching him and what kind of woman she is – that she is a sinner’” (Luke 7:39).

Main point: Repentance involves understanding that we fall short of what God wants, and a desire to align our thoughts and actions with him. Forgiveness of sins is received by faith and is followed by gratitude and love toward the forgiver – Jesus Christ.



Mary anoints Jesus
Illustration by Julius Schnorr

Introduction

The Gospel according to Luke emphasizes that Jesus came to save people who were lost (19:10). The passage before us (7:36-50) accentuates Jesus' plan of salvation and the human conditions that accompany that plan. The good news is that everyone Jesus encounters, he desires to save from their sins, and his mission was more than sufficient to save all humanity. Nevertheless, not everyone accepts the salvation he brought. The encounter and dialog between Simon the Pharisee and Jesus concerning the sinful woman will shed light on why this is so.

The story of Simon the Pharisee as found in Luke should not be confused with similar stories found in the other Gospels. Simon was a common name in the time of Jesus, and the New Testament records the name at least a

dozen times. Our story takes place in Simon's home at mealtime. Jesus is an invited guest, and we are not sure why a Pharisee would make such an invitation, since for the most part they were at odds with Jesus' teachings and ministry. Most likely, Simon was testing Jesus to find some fault or accusation against him. He did not have to wait long, for a woman of ill reputation, perhaps a prostitute, dared to enter the Pharisee's home and make a scene over Jesus' feet. And worst of all, Jesus did not push her away, but let her continue with her scandalous weeping and the drying with her own hair and kissing of Jesus' feet! What was Simon to think of Jesus?

The crux of this story has to do with the contrast between the actions of two people. The contrast is between Simon the Pharisee and the sinful woman. The parable that Jesus gives to Simon illustrates the point that Jesus is making between the two. The story has to do with repentance and faith. Salvation may be given, but it will not be experienced as salvation unless it is received with faith, and faith is always accompanied by a change of thinking that we call repentance.

Apparently the sinful woman had previously heard the good news message from Jesus. She was full of sorrow for her many sins, and in faith she accepted Jesus as her Savior. As a result of having her enormous sinful debt cancelled, she poured herself out in loving gratitude over the One who had forgiven her. Simon does not see with spiritual eyes what God has done in this woman's heart, so Jesus makes a public announcement that her many sins are forgiven. Her love for Jesus is so filled with gratitude that she cannot control her emotions.

In contrast, what does Simon the Pharisee show by his conduct? It is not that Simon has less need of Jesus, for we are all debtors who cannot pay. Jesus was his Savior, too, but Simon does *not believe* he needs Jesus, and confirms this by the absence of gratitude and love toward Jesus. Ironically, Simon was the more "religious" of the two!

Questions for Bible study

Read the following verses and respond to the questions:

1. Luke 7:36-39

- a. What kind of invitation is Jesus given? Verse 36a. Who makes the invitation? Who are the Pharisees? Consult a Bible dictionary.
- b. How does Jesus respond to the Pharisee's invitation? Verse 36b. What does it mean to recline at the table? Is it the same as with our modern tables and chairs? Note: Custom at that time was to lie down on bedded sofas and recline on one arm while eating with the free hand. The table was very low to the floor, with the guests'

heads towards the table and their legs stretched out behind them as if lying down.

- c. What kind of woman is described here? Verse 37a. Why does this woman dare to enter the Pharisee's home? Do you think she already knows something of Jesus?
- d. What does she bring with her? Verse 37b. Consult a Bible dictionary and describe the item in her possession.
- e. Where is the woman positioned, and what is she doing? Verse 38a. How do Jesus' feet get wet? Verse 38b. What does she do with her hair? Verse 38c. What two more things does she do to Jesus' feet? Verse 38d. Why would a sinner do such things?
- f. What does the Pharisee say to himself when he sees Jesus permitting this display to continue? Verse 39. According to the Pharisee, Jesus has failed the test of being a prophet. How does the Pharisee reason to that conclusion?

2. Luke 7:40-43

- a. What does Jesus say to Simon the Pharisee? Verse 40a. What does Simon call Jesus? Verse 40b. Do you think that Simon has any idea that Jesus can read his thoughts?
- b. Jesus presents a parable to Simon. What is it about? Verse 41. How do the two amounts compare to one another?
- c. Does either debtor have the money to pay the debt back? Verse 42a. What action does the moneylender take? Verse 42b. What is the key question that the parable poses? Verse 42c.
- d. What response does Simon give in answering the parable? Verse 43. How does Jesus judge Simon's theoretical answer? Note: The Pharisees prided themselves in being ardent students of Scripture and masters in answering rabbinic parables and wisdom riddles.

3. Luke 7:44-50

- a. Toward whom does Jesus turn, while at the same time he is addressing Simon? Verse 44a. What contrast does Jesus make between Simon's actions and the woman's? Verse 44b. Note: It was common courtesy in those days to offer water for cleaning the dust off the feet of a guest.
- b. What second contrast does Jesus make between Simon's actions and the woman's? Verse 45. Note: It was also common courtesy for the host to welcome his guest with a kiss of friendship and well-being, as is still the case in many cultures.
- c. What third contrast does Jesus make between Simon's actions and the woman's? Verse 46. Note: It was customary to anoint one's guest with perfumed olive oil as a sign of honor.

- d. What pronouncement does Jesus make concerning the sinful woman? Verse 47a. Does this mean that people are forgiven because of how much they are able to love (by works)? Or do people love much because they have come to realize the enormous debt already forgiven them (by faith)?
- e. What about Simon's condition? Verse 47b. Do you think that Simon has become aware that Jesus has read his thoughts?
- f. What public pronouncement does Jesus make to the woman? Verse 48. If the woman's sins were already forgiven in private, why does it have to be declared in public? How will this help the woman?
- g. What do the other guests grumble about? Verse 49. What assurance does Jesus give to the woman? Verse 50.



Mary anoints Jesus' feet
illustration by James Tissot

Contemporary interaction

- 1. What is the importance of repentance and faith as a response to the gospel? Define and explain both terms.
- 2. How easy is it for believers to fall into Simon's kind of thinking? Can you explain how destructive a "holier than thou" attitude can be to a church's evangelism program? What attitude should prevail among believers in regards to sinners?

Conclusion

Jesus' encounter with a sinful woman teaches us the great price paid for the enormous debt of sin that we once carried. There are too many ungrateful Simons in the church. Let loving gratitude toward Jesus be characteristic of our walk with him.

Lorenzo Arroyo

JESUS' ENCOUNTER WITH A RELIGIOUS LEADER — JOHN 3:1-18

Key text: “Jesus answered, ‘I tell you the truth, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit’” (John 3:5).

Main point: Jesus stands at the threshold of salvation and is the sole life-giving source of all who enter the kingdom of God.

Introduction

The Pharisees were a religious sect of great influence that developed during the intertestamental period. The first seeds of this group can be seen in the development of a scribal system during and after the Babylonian Exile. Israel's Exile was understood to have been their punishment for having violated the Mosaic covenant-law (Torah). Israel then turned more diligently toward that covenant-law and founded a scribal system to safeguard its violation.

At the time of Jesus, scribes were considered experts in the interpretation of the Torah and the Oral Tradition. In the time of Jesus there were perhaps 6,000 Pharisees in Israel, most of them being scribes, and thousands more people looked to them for religious leadership. The Pharisaic party had influential members in the Sanhedrin, Israel's ruling elite, although most of the Sanhedrin members were Sadducees (the priestly class).

Nicodemus was a Pharisee and privileged to belong to Israel's ruling class of elders, the Sanhedrin. Our passage (3:1-18) indicates that Jesus' encounter with Nicodemus took place at night. The reason is not given, but we can guess that Nicodemus does not want to be seen talking with Jesus in public, probably fearing rebuke from his own party members. Nicodemus does not come with deception, to test or trap Jesus in order to hold some accusation against him—he has come with a sincere desire to know.



Illustration by the Wandsbecker Art Institute,
before 1910

It is fitting that this meeting takes place at night, because Nicodemus cannot see (understand) what Jesus reveals to him, although the “true light” and the “light of the world” is right in front of him!

The messianic age has dawned in the person and work of Jesus, and with it, the kingdom of God has arrived! However, it is perceived only by people who have faith. The old Mosaic covenant-law has come to an end, and is now entirely fulfilled and no longer obligatory. The new covenant takes its place and opens salvation’s door, which is Jesus Christ. He is the life-giving source

of God's Spirit and, like water that gives life to organic matter, so Jesus gives new spiritual life to whoever believes in him!

In the new covenant, salvation comes with belief in Jesus. Nicodemus could not see because he was still focused on Moses, even though Moses is pointing to Jesus! To be born again is to experience new spiritual life in Jesus as Savior and Lord.

Many people today are like Nicodemus – they look for a future kingdom of God, which in its time will surely come. But Jesus invites anyone who believes to enter his kingdom in the here and now! Those who enter spiritually by faith today will also enter it the future, with glorious, transformed.

Questions for Bible study

Read the following verses and respond to the questions:

1. John 3:1-8

- a. Who is Nicodemus? Verse 1. Explain his prominence in Jewish society. Note: The ruling council is the Sanhedrin, Israel's highest governing body under Roman occupation.
- b. At what time did Nicodemus meet with Jesus? Verse 2a. Why do you think Nicodemus chose *not* to meet Jesus in the plain light of day and in public?
- c. With what title does Nicodemus address Jesus? Verse 2b. Explain what this title means. Consult a Bible dictionary.
- d. What does Nicodemus believe about Jesus? Verse 2c-d. On what evidence does Nicodemus base his belief about Jesus?
- e. What does Jesus say to Nicodemus? Verse 3. Jesus seems to anticipate Nicodemus' question before he even asks it. From Jesus' reply, what do you think Nicodemus wants to know?
- f. In verse 3, what does Jesus mean by the "kingdom of God"? Note: The kingdom of God is both present and future. It does not necessarily refer to a place, but to God's messianic rule in Christ over the believing hearts of persons who submit to his authority. These people are privileged to live with God, and that begins in this age.
- g. How does Nicodemus interpret Jesus' words, "born again"? Verse 4. Is Nicodemus having a hard time understanding Jesus?
- h. What is the difference here as opposed to verse 3 where Jesus uses the words, "no one can see..."? Verse 5. The two terms are two ways of conveying the same thing. In the Gospel of John, *entering the*

kingdom of God is synonymous with *entering eternal life*. Both are accessible here and now through Jesus.

- i. What other terms are used in verse 5 to describe “being born again” (verse 3)? What does it mean to be born in this way? Note: “Water” may not refer to baptism in this verse. It may be used figuratively to refer to spiritual renewal. For John’s use of water in the figurative sense, see also 4:10, 13-14; 7:38-39.
 - j. What contrast is being made between the two manners of birth described? Verse 6. Explain the difference.
 - k. What should Nicodemus not be surprised about? Verse 7. Is being born again an optional condition, or an absolute requirement for entering the kingdom of God? Why?
 - l. What analogy is presented here? Verse 8. What is it that Jesus is attempting to convey to Nicodemus by this analogy? Note: Spiritual regeneration (the new birth) is something that only God can give to persons. Humans cannot produce it, deserve it, or control it (decide for it to happen on their own terms). God gives spiritual rebirth on his terms alone, and it comes by God’s grace through faith (believing) in Jesus Christ alone. See John 1:12-13.
2. John 3:9-15
- a. What is Nicodemus’ reaction to what Jesus has told him so far? Verse 9.
 - b. What admonishment does Jesus give him? Verse 10. Explain.
 - c. What messianic evidence does Jesus present? Verse 11. What is the reaction of the Jews as a whole?
 - d. What is Jesus referring to in this verse? Verse 12. Compare with verses 6-8.
 - e. Who has gone into heaven to bring back and reveal God’s redemptive will? Verse 13a. Where does the Son of Man (Jesus) come from? Verse 13b.
 - f. What is God’s redemptive will, and who is to both reveal it and accomplish it? Verse 14. How does the old illustrate the new? Verse 15. See Numbers 21:8, 9.

Contemporary interaction

John 3:16-18

1. If you could use only this one verse, how could you use it to briefly present the gospel to someone else? Verse 16. The verse can be

broken down into three or four parts. Present the gospel one part at a time in your own words.

2. What attitude should the Christian worker have when presenting the message? Verse 17. Explain the difference between presenting the “good news” of the gospel versus condemning with “bad news.”
3. What is the present condition of those who do not believe? Verse 18. Why? What about those who have never heard the gospel? Note: This question gets at the root of humanity’s problem. Although the *medicine* is available to everyone who *hears*, it must be *received* to be effective. But what about those to whom the *medicine* never arrives?

Conclusion

Nicodemus, as hard-pressed as he was to understand Jesus, mercifully, finally saw the light (John 19:38-39). Many of us also stumbled in the night, until we encountered Jesus and were spiritually “born again” in him.

Lorenzo Arroyo

JESUS' ENCOUNTER WITH A SAMARITAN WOMAN — JOHN 4:1-42

Key text: “Jesus answered her, ‘If you knew the gift of God and who it is that asks you for a drink, you would have asked him and he would have given you living water’ (John 4:10).

Main point: Jesus offers the gift of salvation to all; his gift is universal and transcends racial, cultural and social barriers. Those who receive it confess their sins and acknowledge him as Lord and Savior.

Introduction

In the time of Jesus, Jews and Samaritans were divided. The division was deeply embedded by a history of conflict, hatred and prejudice. More than 500 years earlier, the Babylonians had conquered the Southern Kingdom of Judah and taken many of the people into captivity (605-586 BC). As was the custom of those nations, Babylon transported masses of Jews from Judea and the surrounding areas, and settled them in the kingdom of Babylon. However, Israel was not left completely desolate; the poor people were left to work the land (2 Kings 24:14; 25:12).

Even earlier, the same thing had happened with the Northern Kingdom of Israel by the Assyrians in 722 B.C., and the Assyrians brought other people in to repopulate the land (2 Kings 17:24-29; 2 Chronicles 30:1-10). While the Jews were exiled in Babylonia, the people left in the land—Israelites and Gentiles—intermarried, and that created the Samaritan people. They were partly Israelite but partly not.

After the Persians conquered Babylon, they allowed the Jews to return to their homeland. However, Nehemiah refused to allow the mixed people of the land to have any part in the rebuilding of Jerusalem (Nehemiah 2:20). The returning Jews denied them any part in the rebuilding of the temple. This deepened the animosity between them (Ezra 4:1-5).



Illustration by Henry Hofmann,
before 1910

As a result, the Samaritans built another place of worship. Their beliefs came to include monotheism, the Law of Moses (they accepted the Pentateuch but not the other books), and they built a temple at Mt. Gerizim as the one appointed place of sacrifice and worship.

The Jews destroyed the Mt. Gerizim temple in 128 B.C., adding more bitterness to the already strained rivalry. Many Jews would travel between Galilee and Judea by crossing the Jordan River and circling around Samaria rather than polluting themselves with Samaritan dust, even though this would

require more travel time than the more direct route through Samaria.

The Samaritans were no band of angels, either. Both sides had made reconciliation an impossibility, that is, until Jesus arrived at Jacob's well. The Samaritan woman, by any stretch of the imagination, is what most would call today a "hard case." Among the several strikes she has against her from the start are:

- 1) She is a woman. In the ancient world, women were an oppressed group. It was deemed inappropriate for a man to talk with a woman in public, even with his wife, let alone a stranger!
- 2) She was of a despised race. In racism no words need be exchanged— piercing eyes and body language can fill the air with hate, like heavy smoke from a burning fire.
- 3) She was a social outcast, even from among her own people. That is why she went to the well at midday, rather than morning like everyone else.
- 4) Her religious persuasion was false. Hypocrisy and distortion marked her religious upbringing.

Many would venture to say there is no hope for this woman. She was dealt a bad hand at birth and she had only managed to compound her problem. Thank God for Jesus Christ and the gift of salvation that he brings! This is a story of hope for every "hard case." The love of God beckons all who thirst to drink from the spiritual well of Jesus and never thirst again.

Questions for Bible study

Read the following verses and respond to the questions:

1. John 4:1-14

- a. What success were the disciples of Jesus having, and who took an interest in what they were doing? Verses 1-2. Do you think the Pharisees were happy with what Jesus was doing? Why not?
- b. What does Jesus learn about? Verse 3a. What does he decide to do in response? Verse 3b. Locate Judea and Galilee on a Bible map.
- c. How will Jesus get to Galilee? Verse 4. Locate the region of Samaria on a map. Is this the only route to Galilee? Consult the Introduction of this study.
- d. On his journey, where does Jesus stop? Verse 5a. What is so special about this place? Verse 5b. See Genesis 33:18-20. Sychar was a small village near ancient Shechem and Mt. Gerizim (Judges 9:7).

- e. What else was there? Verse 6. What time was it when Jesus sat down to rest? (Scholars debate whether John uses Hebrew or Roman time.)
 - f. Who comes by, and for what purpose? Verse 7a. What does Jesus ask her for? Verse 7b, c. Where are Jesus' disciples? Verse 8.
 - g. What is the Samaritan woman's reply? Verse 9. What is John's note at the end of the verse attempting to explain?
 - h. What is Jesus' response to her racial and cultural concerns? Verse 10.
 - i. What literal meaning does the woman give to Jesus' offer? Verse 11. Archaeologists have found that Jacob's well is more than 100 feet deep. One would need a container and a rope to draw water. The woman also knows that a Jew would not use a Samaritan's "unclean" vessel to draw the water.
 - j. What does the woman doubt concerning Jesus and his offer? Verse 12.
 - k. How does Jesus' reply counter her doubts of whether Jesus is greater than the patriarch Jacob? Verses 13-14.
2. John 4:15-26
- a. What conversational transition does Jesus make in response to the woman's desire for Jesus' offer? Verses 15-16.
 - b. What abrupt answer does she then give? Verse 17. What is Jesus' detailed response to her? Verse 18. Do you think the woman is amazed that Jesus knows this? He just arrived that very hour!
 - c. What does the woman think of Jesus up to this point? Verse 19. What religious question does she now ask of this holy man? Verse 20.
 - d. What response does Jesus give? Verses 21-24. Explain.
 - e. What stunning revelation does Jesus make to her? Verses 25-26. Why?
3. John 4:27-42
- a. What reaction do the disciples have when they return? Verse 27. Why? Where is the woman going, and what does she do? Verses 28-30. Why does she leave her jar behind, and what is motivating her to speak out?
 - b. What is Jesus' reply to his disciples, and what literal meaning do they give to Jesus' words? Verses 31-33. What did the disciples miss out on?
 - c. How does Jesus help them focus on their true mission? Verses 34-38.

- d. What were the harvest results of Jesus' encounter with one person? Verses 39-42. Can you identify the two evangelistic cycles of cultivating, planting and reaping as found in this chapter? Note: Jesus begins cycle one and the Samaritan woman begins cycle two.

Contemporary interaction

1. Do you believe that Jesus teaches each of us to stick to our own kind? Are we to share the gospel only with those who are most like ourselves? Is Jesus so radical that he wants us to leave our own comfort zones and reach out beyond racial, cultural and social barriers?
2. What motivated the Father to send his Son to die on the cross for sinners? What motivated Jesus to lay down his life for us? What motivates you to share the gospel with those who are lost?
3. Describe how your local church is involved in Jesus' Great Commission of cultivating, planting and reaping God's harvest. How are you helping?

Conclusion

Jesus' mission to the lost is a radical commission: for the church to share God's love with unbelievers. It means leaving our comfort zone and making ourselves vulnerable in order to love people who are different from us.

Lorenzo Arroyo

JESUS' ENCOUNTER WITH A DISABLED MAN — JOHN 9:1-41

Key text: “As long as it is day, we must do the work of him who sent me. Night is coming, when no one can work. While I am in the world, I am the light of the world” (John 9:4-5).

Main point: Jesus came into the world not only to open the eyes of those physically blind, but to open the eyes of the spiritually blind so they may believe in him and be saved.

Introduction

Since ancient times, people around the world have understood the concept of opposite poles of struggle between the forces of light and darkness. In the first chapter of Genesis, we understand that God created matter and gave it form out of chaos and darkness. God brought physical light into being and separated it from darkness, and created life. The apostle John understood the cosmic and spiritual significance of the creation story, as is evident in his redemption story (John 1:1-14). Ancient civilizations at times distorted these themes and added a dualism to them, that is, a constant cosmic struggle between equally opposing forces.

When light and darkness are seen in an ethical dimension, they stand for the forces of understanding vs. ignorance, and good vs. evil, as well as life vs. death. However, the Bible does not portray light and darkness as having qualities of equal force where the slightest wind can sway the ultimate outcome. No, that can never be. Jesus is the spiritual “light” of salvation and eternal life, and there are no close competitors, only beaten foes!

The passage before us may begin with a man born blind from birth, but the truth lies in the “light” that enables people to see and believe. Jesus’ healing takes place on the Sabbath day, and as a result a controversy is stirred up with the Pharisees. The Pharisees are more interested in preserving the particulars of Moses’ day (Nehemiah 9:14) than acknowledging Jesus’ miraculous messianic sign (Luke 4:18). After all, the Pharisees by their own admission are Moses’ disciples, and not Jesus’ (John 9:28).



Illustration by Henry Hofmann,
copyright 1898

In the final analysis, it is the man born blind who now sees and becomes Jesus' disciple, while the Pharisees who were born seeing are now made blind by their own legalism. How ironic that the tables have so easily turned! Jesus' method was to cultivate the man born blind through a process of understanding and transformation. Even after the new disciple is healed of blindness, he does not see Jesus face to face until after he has given his testimony to his neighbors and his community leaders. The man is not even sure who Jesus is, other than he must be from God, perhaps a prophet (verse 17). After the new disciple is expelled from the synagogue, Jesus encounters

him and reveals himself in a fuller way. The result is that the man born blind believes Jesus' claims as the messianic "Son of Man" and worships the true light of the world as "Lord" (verses 35-38).

Jesus' new disciple was persecuted for seeing and believing. The trials that he went through did not diminish the joy of recovering his sight. In fact, he grew bolder with every step. It is easy to take one's sight for granted when one is born with it. It is even easier for people to think they see spiritually, too, when they have never seen what they are lacking. The gospel message of salvation in Jesus Christ is the only "light" that can dispel the chaotic darkness of spiritual blindness and bring eternal joy no matter what the challenge.

Questions for Bible study

1. John 9:1-12

- a. Whom does Jesus see along the way? Verse 1. Describe the man's condition and the length of time he has been this way.
- b. What theologically loaded question do the disciples ask Jesus? Verse 2.
- c. The disciples assume that infirmity is somehow related to God's punishment of sin. The logic is that the man has an infirmity, infirmity is due to sin, God punishes sin; therefore, the man is being punished for sin that either he committed or his blindness is the result of the punishment his parents received for their sins. What do you think? Is infirmity or tragedy always the result of sin? What is Jesus' response concerning this man? Verse 3. Explain.
- d. When is it that Jesus and his disciples must work? Verse 4a, b. What does Jesus mean? When is it that no one can work? Verse 4c, d. Why?
- e. What is Jesus claiming for himself? Verse 5. Explain the metaphor.
- f. Explain in detail and step by step what is involved in this healing event – verses 6-7. On what day does this occur? See verse 14. If Jesus could heal with a spoken word, why go through this laborious process on the Sabbath day? What is Jesus showing?
- g. When the man goes home, what controversy is stirred up by his neighbors? Verses 8-9. What do you think is the confusion, since all his neighbors knew him from birth? See verse 32.
- h. What do his neighbors demand of him? Verses 10-12. Explain.

2. John 9:13-23

- a. What do the man's neighbors do with him? Verse 13. Why? Verse 14.

- b. What do the Pharisees also inquire of him? Verse 15a. What reply does the man give? Verse 15b.
- c. What conclusion do some of them jump to, and why are the Pharisees divided in their opinion? Verse 16.
- d. In an attempt to further investigate the matter, what did they next ask the man? Verse 17. At this point, why does the man believe Jesus to be a prophet?
- e. In the next step of their investigation, the Pharisees call for witnesses to confirm the man's identity. Describe step by step the interrogation of the witnesses and their response. Verses 18-21.
- f. Why do the man's parents not give credit to the One who healed their son? Verses 22-23.

3. John 9:24-34

- a. The frustrated Pharisees return to sum up their investigation of this case. What twofold conclusion have they reached? Verse 24. Explain how the man points out the contradiction in their conclusion. Verse 25.
- b. What do they ask again in frustration, and what is the man's bold reply? Verses 26-27. Why the violent reaction against him? Verse 28. What two types of disciples clash? Why? Verse 29.
- c. What refutation does the man give them? Verses 30-33. How do the disciples of Moses respond? Verse 34. Explain.

4. John 9:35-41

- a. In your own words, sum up the event of Jesus' second encounter with the man. Verses 35-38. Consult the lesson Introduction. What lasting result is reaped? Consult John 20:31 and explain.
- b. In your own words, explain the twofold judgment that is inherent to Jesus' mission. Verse 39. Explain the results seen in verses 40-41.

Contemporary interaction

1. Whenever you give your testimony (story of how you came to Christ) and a person responds with a blank stare of disbelief, what do you say? Briefly share your experience with the class.
2. Some people are spiritually blind. Are they blind because they have no choice in the matter, or because they refuse to see where the gospel will take them?
3. Have you ever encountered a violent reaction for what you believe? Should a disciple of Christ respond in like manner, that is, insult for insult? Why not?

4. Have you ever encountered a contemporary disciple of Moses (for example, a Sabbath keeper) and tried to share the light of the gospel of grace? With what results?

Conclusion

The man born blind from birth was chosen to give abundant witness and light to the most hardened unbelievers. Our task is to be witnesses of Jesus, the light of the world! Only the gospel of grace can open the eyes of the spiritually blind.

Lorenzo Arroyo

THE DISCIPLES' ENCOUNTER WITH MASS EVANGELISM — ACTS 2:1-47

Key text: “Those who accepted his message were baptized, and about three thousand were added to their number that day” (Acts 2:41).

Main point: The Holy Spirit empowered the disciples to continue Jesus’ ministry as they preached the gospel to large crowds.

Introduction

Many today are familiar with crusade evangelism through the ministry of Billy Graham. He began preaching in small revival tent meetings more than a half a century ago, eventually preaching in capacity-filled stadiums, reaching millions at a time via technological advances that were not available until recently. Giant-screen monitors and multi-translation channels in metropolitan areas across the globe can bring the gospel message from one evangelistic event to millions of viewers simultaneously.

However, crusade or mass evangelism, that is, the staging of a large evangelistic campaign usually in the thousands through the involvement and support of local leaders and churches, is no recent innovation. The American frontiers in the 18th and 19th centuries brought out thousands of people at a time to hear such great orators and preachers of the gospel as John Wesley, George Whitefield, Charles Finney and Dwight Moody. Vast crowds gathered for evangelistic revivals in large church buildings, in town squares, in open fields outside of cities and towns, and in camp meetings miles into the wilderness.

Over the time of their great preaching careers, each of these preachers reached millions of hearers! Technology is a servant of the gospel, but certainly not its power, for these preachers had no access to modern means of transportation and had no amplification systems, radio or other electronic media.



The Holy Spirit comes on Pentecost,
by Martin Schaffner, 16th century

According to the apostle Paul, it is the message of the gospel that is the power of God for salvation (Romans 1:16). According to the apostle Peter, it is the Holy Spirit who enables the preacher to speak the gospel with authority and power (Acts 2:33, 38), and it is only by the Spirit that anyone can understand and believe (1 Corinthians 2:10-15).

Jesus often ministered to multitudes of people numbering into the thousands (Matthew 14:21; 15:38). Jesus' best-known sermon was most likely given in the presence of crowds numbering several thousand (Matthew 4:25, 5:1). The disciples' first public ministry after Jesus' resurrection was mass evangelism. The crowds numbered in the thousands, out of which 3,000 accepted the gospel! This was orchestrated by the Holy Spirit, not by extensive planning on the part of the disciples for an evangelistic "campaign."

Mass evangelism is still an effective tool for the church today. As we will see, it is not so much of getting the event planned to the last detail, although that has its place, but getting the message right. You can gather thousands of people into a stadium, but if the message is not there, then you do not have an evangelistic crusade. The power is in the message, and the message is the good news that Jesus Christ died on a cross and paid for the sins of the whole world, qualifying everyone for the gift of eternal life in relationship with our Creator. Halleluiah!

Questions for Bible study

Read the following verses and respond to the questions:

1. Acts 2:1-13

- a. What was the day of Pentecost? Verse 1. See Leviticus 23:15-22.
Note: The old covenant festival fell on a Sunday, and its new covenant fulfillment is understood here as the birthday of the church, the new harvest of firstfruits.
- b. What phenomenon took place where the disciples were gathered?
Verse 2. What is the sound compared to? See John 3:8.
- c. What second phenomenon happened? Verse 3. What comparison is made? See Exodus 19:18. In later Jewish tradition Pentecost is also the anniversary of the giving of the Law at Sinai (Exodus 19:1), where the presence of God is depicted by fire.
- d. What third phenomenon occurs? Verse 4. What had John and Jesus foretold would happen? See Mark 1:6-8; Acts 1:4-5. The advent of the Holy Spirit in this manner was a unique event. Spirit-baptism is now given to everyone the moment they believe (1 Corinthians 12:13).
- e. Who were in Jerusalem at the time, and what reaction did they have at what they heard from the lips of the disciples? Verses 5-6. The scene has changed from the temple precincts to the streets and into the temple court. The disciples' prophetic words – associated with

the reception of the Spirit – are human languages (a reversal of the curse at the Tower of Babel).

- f. What miracle has occurred so that the crowd is completely amazed? Verses 7-11. What two reactions unfold? Verses 12-13. Why?
 - g. How do all these events help the disciples prepare for the evangelistic crusade about to take place? How is this similar to preparing for a crusade today? How is it different?
2. Acts 2:14-36
- a. What is Peter's immediate purpose in addressing the crowd? Verses 14-15. It was only nine in the morning, a rebuttal to verse 13.
 - b. What is the explanation for the strange phenomena of that Sunday morning? Verses 16-18. The first part of the early apostolic message stressed the arrival and fulfillment of the messianic age.
 - c. What is the meaning of the extended quote from the prophet Joel in verses 19 and 20? Scholars debate whether these verses were fulfilled: 1) at the crucifixion, 2) at the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70, or 3) still to be fulfilled in the future at the Second Coming.
 - d. What good news fulfillment does this last quote from Joel point toward? Verse 21; Acts 4:12. Here the sacred name *Yahweh* is applied to Jesus, emphasizing his full deity and equality with the Father.
 - e. How does Peter present the gospel to his audience? Verses 22-24. In your own words, give the details of Peter's Christ story. (The second part of the early apostolic proclamation is the retelling of the death and resurrection of Jesus.)
 - f. What Scripture texts does Peter offer to prove his point? Verses 25-35. Can you follow Peter's argument and explain? The third part of the early apostolic message was the scriptural proof of Jesus' messiahship.
 - g. At the end of his apostolic sermon, what conclusion does Peter give? Verse 36. Why?
3. Acts 2:37-47
- a. How did the people react after they heard the message? Verse 37. How did Peter conclude his message? Verses 38-39. The fourth and final part of the early apostolic message was the call to repentance.
 - b. What were the results of this evangelistic crusade? Verses 40-41. What were the results at Sinai? See Exodus 32:28. Why? How important is it to get the message right?

- c. What follow-up was available to those who accepted the gospel message? Verses 42-47. From these verses, can you discern the major purposes of the church? The church was just born, but it knew what to do: preach, disciple, fellowship, serve, and worship.

Contemporary interaction

1. Have you or your local church ever been involved in an evangelistic crusade where thousands attended? Were you trained to share the gospel?
2. Have you seen an evangelistic crusade on television? What points were emphasized in the message? How does this differ from a “counterfeit” show?

Conclusion

One way to reach the lost is through crusade evangelism. Multitudes are still being drawn to stadiums and arenas to hear the good news that Jesus saves sinners. Let’s endeavor to participate with the next crusade that is organized in our area.

Lorenzo Arroyo

THE DISCIPLES' ENCOUNTER WITH STREET MINISTRIES — ACTS 3:1-26

Key text: “When all the people saw him walking and praising God, they recognized him as the same man who used to sit begging, at the temple gate called Beautiful, and they were filled with wonder and amazement at what had happened to him” (Acts 3:9-10).

Main point: Christian ministries to the socially marginalized involve both the act of service and the miracle of a life-changing transformation through the word of the gospel.

Introduction

What is effective gospel-centered street ministry? With so many needs to be met in our communities and in the world, it becomes difficult at times to distinguish between human acts of compassion and gospel work. Although they overlap, they are not exactly the same.

Because we are all made in the image of God and are therefore stamped with the moral imprint of our Creator, all humans are able to display moral traits. It is true that humanity is fallen and the moral traits that remain are faint, but they are there! This is why believers and unbelievers alike can respond so courageously to catastrophes and human tragedies worldwide, especially when human life is at stake. Nevertheless, gospel-centered street ministries are more than the meeting of physical and emotional needs; they involve the regeneration of new spiritual life via the proclamation of the risen Lord.

Gospel-centered street ministries reach out to the disenfranchised, homeless, panhandlers, mentally ill, addicts, prostitutes, runaways, social outcasts, the battered, abandoned and the defenseless. These are the persons that respectable society shuns, and some of them have given up on society as well. They are found in all the major urban centers of the world. They live in abandoned buildings, cardboard boxes and rescue missions. They eat what they can find, and sometimes eat hot meals in church fellowship halls and soup kitchens. Some are predators that live a life of continual crime and violence, while others live in fear and with fading hope.



Peter and John with the lame man at the temple, as depicted by Raphael

While church relief work and government aid can help patch up their wounds, humanitarian help alone can never fully heal them. Only the gospel can do that! Gospel-centered street ministries tend to their wounds and offer them the gospel message of salvation: Jesus is the friend of sinners and will transform the hearts and lives of all who come to him by faith.

When Peter and John were passing by a panhandler near the place of worship, they were aware of a more lasting need than money (Acts 3). The beggar had been placed daily in that one spot for many years, for he was born crippled. Peter and John ministered to his physical needs through a miracle of physical healing. But the more important need was spiritual, and the man was converted by faith in Jesus. What we now see is a transformed new covenant believer leaping, singing and praising God to the extent that he appears not to be the same man he was before! This in turn led to the further proclamation of the gospel and a new call to repentance and acceptance of Jesus as Lord and Christ (Acts 4).

When a street person is transformed by the gospel, this is often followed by a radical change in demeanor and personality, so much so that the person is barely recognizable by those who knew the person before. That is the life-transforming power of the gospel!

Questions for Bible study

1. Acts 3:1-10

- a. Where are the two apostles going, and why? Verse 1. The temple was the center of community life in Jerusalem. It was often crowded with thousands of worshippers, merchants and even Gentiles, in the outer courts.
- b. Who is placed at the temple gate daily and for what purpose? Verse 2. Can you describe the man's physical and emotional condition? The Beautiful Gate was one of the passageways leading from the court of the Gentiles into the inner courts of the sanctuary.
- c. Seeing Peter and John, what does the man ask for? Verse 3. Why? How does Peter first respond to the man? Verse 4. What does the man then do, and with what attitude? Verse 5. Why do you think this was so important?
- d. What negative reply does Peter give the man first? Verse 6. Why? What positive declaration and command does Peter then give the man? In what name is this miracle proclaimed? Why? See Acts 4:8-12.
- e. What happens next? Verses 7-8. Do Peter and John just walk away after proclaiming the word? Explain their follow-up with the man. Describe the man's renewed physical, emotional and spiritual condition.
- f. What is the reaction of the people at seeing the once crippled beggar as a radically changed person? Verses 9-10. What was the renewed man continually doing? Why?

2. Acts 3:11-16

- a. Why are the people so astonished? Verse 11 (see 4:21-22). Where have they begun to gather? By this time the apostles had made their way back out to the Court of the Gentiles and Solomon's porch.
- b. In Peter's second recorded sermon, who or what is the starting point of contact between the messenger and the audience? Verse 12.
- c. Who or what is the centerpiece of Peter's sermon? Verse 13. Who in particular is Peter thinking about at this point? Verse 14. See Matthew 27:15-26.

- d. What is the cornerstone of Peter's sermon? Verse 15. What does the apostle Paul call this event in 1 Corinthians 15:1-5?
- e. To whom and by what means does Peter attribute this healing miracle? Verse 16. What is the purpose of the miracle? See 4:1-4, 13-16.

3. Acts 3:17-26

- a. How does Peter explain the evil intentions and actions of the people? Verses 17-18. Even so, what does Peter call on them to do? Verse 19. Why?
- b. What does Peter say about the dawning of the new messianic age and the exalted prophetic office of the Messiah Jesus? Verses 20-23. The messianic age includes the period between Christ's first and second coming.
- c. What blessings are available now for those who believe (Jew and Gentile alike)? Verses 24-26. On account of Peter and John's street ministry, the crippled beggar at the temple gate was miraculously changed, which caused the people to wholeheartedly listen to God's word through Peter's sermon.

Contemporary interaction

1. Do you believe that there are poor and needy people in the world today? Can you describe the living conditions of the poor in other parts of the world? How do you know?
2. Are there any poor and hungry in your nation? Isn't America so rich that virtually all poverty was stamped out decades ago? Are there any poor in the city or town where you live? Your own neighborhood? Are their handicaps visible or invisible?
3. Many evangelical churches do well in preaching the Word, but is preaching the gospel sufficient for those in dire need? See James 2:14-17. How would you classify your local church — as a "Dead-faith church" or as a "Living-faith church"? How would you classify yourself?
4. Have you ever been involved in faith-based street ministries such as a rescue mission shelter, food bank, clothing distribution center, feeding those in need during Thanksgiving Day or collecting toys during Christmas time? What about helping out migrant families?
5. Have you ever worked as a volunteer for "Hard-core street ministries" such as working with addicts, prostitutes, and gang members? Share your experience with the class.

6. Do you know someone who once was a “street person” and is now converted? How valuable is such a believer’s testimony?

Conclusion

The apostles learned street ministries from the Master, who always showed compassion for the poor and needy. It is not for us to judge the reasons for the poor, but only to count our blessings and share them with the less fortunate.

Lorenzo Arroyo

THE DISCIPLES' ENCOUNTER WITH SPIRIT-LED EVANGELISM — ACTS 8:26-40

Key text: “The Spirit told Philip, ‘Go to that chariot and stay near it’” (Acts 8:29).

Main point: The old saying “God works in mysterious ways” is true when it comes to the Holy Spirit’s means for evangelizing the lost.

Introduction

What about those who fail to hear the gospel message? This is a question of great importance. The Bible states that salvation is based on the person and work of Jesus Christ alone (John 14:6, Acts 4:12). The gospel or “good news” of Jesus’ death and resurrection is the cornerstone of Christianity. After Jesus’ death on the cross, all peoples everywhere, Jew and Gentile, are called to repentance and faith in Jesus as Lord and Savior (Acts 2:36-38; 17:30-31).

The gospel is a new and complete revelation given by Jesus Christ and his apostles as recorded in the New Testament. The Gentiles cannot find it by thinking hard, studying the stars or the works of creation, although God’s fingerprints can be seen. Even the Jews cannot see it in the Old Testament Scriptures alone, although there are an abundance of pointers found there. No, this is a story that must be *told!*

Like a shadow cast from an object in a room, one can make out the silhouette, but cannot see who or what the person or item is until the light shines in. The gospel message is a light shining on the Old Testament Scriptures and on the created world as well.

Spirit-led evangelism has to do with getting the light to shine in dark places. Even in a country where the air waves and Internet are filled with TV and radio evangelists as well as volumes of Christian books, magazines and gospel tracts, there are still multitudes lurking in the shadows of unbelief. The church is not only responsible for getting the word out, but through the Spirit’s leading, to get the message in! For the most part this means personal encounters. Internet evangelism is helpful, but it is a poor substitute for sharing the gospel through personal relationships. Jesus is the friend of sinners, and he uses believers to represent his friendship to the lost, and to get the light of the message through.



Philip and the Ethiopian with the scroll of Isaiah,
as depicted by Wilhelm Ebbinghaus

The story of the meeting of Philip the evangelist and an old covenant God-fearing Ethiopian on the road to Gaza is classic Spirit-led evangelism (Acts 8:26-40). Supernatural phenomena occurred beyond the norm that most of us experience, but this shows the lengths the Spirit will go to get the gospel message within reach of the lost. All Philip had to do was to make himself available to the Spirit's leading, and that he did!

The Ethiopian was a royal emissary, the queen's treasurer, on his return trip from Jerusalem back to his native homeland. It appears that the Ethiopian eunuch had come to Jerusalem for worship at one of the old covenant festivals. "Eunuch" may simply designate his status in the royal court, or it may indicate that he was castrated. If he was literally a eunuch, he was not a full proselyte (Deuteronomy 23:1) but a God-fearer, that is, a Gentile who devoted himself to the study of Old Testament Scriptures and to the Jewish way of life as much as possible, but short of circumcision.

This personal encounter and what was to happen is no accident, from the Spirit's leading Philip alongside the chariot to the very passage of Scripture

the eunuch was reading at the time. This story is Spirit-led evangelism at its best.

Questions for Bible study

1. Acts 8:26-29

- a. Where is Philip told to go, and by whom? Verse 26. Where had Philip been ministering previously? See verses 4-8 (Philip probably returned to Jerusalem with the apostles, verse 25). Locate Samaria, Jerusalem and Gaza on a Bible map.
- b. Who does Philip meet on the road to Gaza? Verse 27. Can you define key words like Ethiopian, eunuch and Candace? Consult a Bible dictionary. Why had this person visited Jerusalem?
- c. What is this person doing on his journey back home? Verse 28. What scroll is he reading from and why is this important? Can you think of someone else that read from this prophet? See Luke 4:17-21.
- d. Who reveals to Philip an evangelistic opportunity? Verse 29. What is it that Philip does in response? Verse 30. How does Philip calmly start up a conversation? Do you think Philip already knew this person, or is Philip just following the Spirit's lead?
- e. How difficult do you think it is for Philip to run up alongside a moving chariot and introduce himself? See Romans 1:16-17.

2. Acts 8:31-35

- a. What is the Ethiopian's response to Philip's question? Verse 31. What is it that the man needed most at that moment? With what purpose did he invite Philip into his chariot?
- b. What text from Isaiah is the eunuch stuck on? Verses 32-33. If you had not heard of what happened to Jesus, could you figure it out?
- c. What is the eunuch attempting to figure out? Verse 34. Several passages in Isaiah like this one deal with the puzzling identity of the Suffering Servant. Who the reference meant or pointed to was not known until its fulfillment.
- d. Where does Philip begin his explanation, and *who* is the "good news" he is able to share with him? Verse 35. Can you explain the gospel message using Isaiah 52:13-53:12? Read the text and be a Philip.

3. Acts 8:36-40

- a. What evidence is there that shows the eunuch understood Philip's explanation of the gospel? Verses 36-37. What is the significance of water baptism? See Romans 6:3-6.
- b. What orders does the Ethiopian immediately give? Verse 38. Where do they both go, and what does Philip do then? There were several brooks, springs or pools of water along the way where they could

have stopped. There is no long apparent lapse of time between the eunuch's hearing the gospel and his baptism.

- c. What happens to Philip once his task is done with the Ethiopian? Verse 39. What is the Ethiopian's attitude after this incident? Early traditions claim the eunuch as Ethiopia's first evangelist and a missionary of the gospel among his people.
- d. Where does Philip find himself? Verse 40. What does he do there, and where does he end up? Locate these places on a Bible map. Philip apparently stays in Caesarea for some time.
- e. How in tune to the Spirit's leading do you think Philip was, to have earned such a title as "the evangelist" and at the same time raise a godly family? See Acts 21:8-9.

Contemporary interaction

1. Who is ultimately responsible for the salvation of the lost? What is the usual means God has chosen to get his gospel message to the lost? Is that just for pastors and gifted evangelists? Is it OK for lay members to cheer the pastors on from a bench, like spectators at a football game? Why not?
2. Does your church have an evangelistic program? How many events per year? Can you name them? What is your role in one of those events?
3. What kind of training have you received from your pastor for doing evangelism? Do you know how to share the gospel message? What methods?
4. What is Spirit-led evangelism? Have you ever been in a situation where you believe the Spirit prompted you to share the gospel with someone? Share your experience with the class.

Conclusion

God works in mysterious ways, but he uses ordinary means to tell the awesome gospel story. All believers are to make themselves available to the Spirit's leading, for with God there is no limit to reaching out to the lost.

Lorenzo Arroyo

THE DISCIPLES' ENCOUNTER WITH PRISON MINISTRIES — ACTS 16:16-40

Key text: “About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the other prisoners were listening to them” (Acts 16:25).

Main point: The early disciples were ready to take the message of the gospel under any circumstances to anyone who might listen, from prison inmates to law enforcement officers, for the call of salvation is universal.

Introduction

There are many reasons why people might find themselves in prison. In the case of the apostle Paul and Silas, who were visiting the Roman colony of Philippi, it is for the gospel's sake that they find themselves fettered in stocks and held in a maximum security cell. But that is not the case for the other prisoners who were with them and to whom the apostles ministered.

Most Western judicial systems are founded in part on ancient Roman law. There were both petty and notorious criminals in those times, as there are now. Society deems lawbreakers as worthy of punishment for crimes committed against the state. Among them are thieves, muggers, drug dealers and drug users, as well as arsonists, embezzlers, murders, kidnappers, child abusers and so on. On the other side of the ledger, there are law enforcement officials in charge of protecting the citizens by upholding the letter of the law and administering appropriate punishment for violators.

No one is questioning that the state needs to protect its citizens and that crimes need to be dealt with in some manner. If you have ever been the victim of a burglary, robbery, hit-and-run accident, identity theft, or had shots ring out in your neighborhood, or worse, then you personally know the seriousness of the matter. Yet, it seems like our judicial system is too soft on crime and too often releases predators only to commit another crime. Many criminals get off on technicalities, such as for violations of their rights.



Earthquake in the prison,
as depicted by Sir James Thornhill

Our justice system sometimes seems to favor the rich, whose lawyers can often get a more reduced sentence for their clients. However, no one wants a police state with minimal personal rights, where profiling, rousting, beatings, planting false evidence and even torture are the norm of the day. If you have ever been stopped by mistake and taken for a criminal, then you know what police rousting is and how humiliating the experience can be.

The issues of crime and punishment in this imperfect world will be continually debated and scrutinized. However, one premise that is not debatable in a biblical worldview is that there exists a higher Authority than any human government, and that before God, we are all sinners! Paul and

Silas knew this well, and preached to the prisoners inside, and the prisoners were not the only ones listening. The Philippian jailer was also attentive to all that Paul and Silas were saying. This law enforcement officer had put them in the maximum security cell and placed their feet in stocks that were designed to inflict torturous pain, yet they both were singing hymns to God. What a testimony!

In Philippi, Paul and Silas shared the gospel as the only true means to make be reconciled to a good relationship with God. Only through Christ's shed blood is true forgiveness and reconciliation found. Christ died in our place, and rose from the dead and gives new life to all who come to him by faith alone. This is what salvation is all about. In Christ we are saved from the power of sin, the condemnation of the law, and the coming Day of Judgment. Through prison ministries, Paul and Silas reached the prison inmates, the jailer and even his whole family. Praise God!

Questions for Bible study

1. Acts 16:16-24

- a. Where are Paul and his followers going? Verse 16a. (See verses 10-13 and locate these places on a Bible map). Whom do they meet on the way? Verse 16. Describe four things about this person.
- b. What does the girl do? Verse 17. According to her divination, who are Paul and his followers (Silas, Timothy and Luke), and what is their purpose? The two theological terms used (God and salvation) were common to both Jews and Gentiles, but their meanings differed significantly. Paul's meaning was more radical than old covenant or pagan ideas.
- c. What is Paul's reaction to the free advertisement? Verse 18. To whom did Paul speak, and in what name is the exorcism done? With what results?
- d. What is the reaction of the slave owners, and why are they so upset? Verse 19. Note: In Roman times slaves were considered property. The owners were Roman citizens now denied of their financial rights by these traveling Jews.
- e. What do the owners do next, and with what charges? Verses 20-21. In the Roman Empire many religions were approved, and among them was Judaism. But Christianity was not a recognized religion as yet and therefore considered illegal.

- f. Who else joined in backing the slave owners? Verse 22. What happens to Paul and Silas next? Verse 21. Do you think this was according to Roman law or mob rule?
 - g. What happens to Paul and Silas, and who is introduced for the first time in this passage? Verse 23. What kind of a person do you think he is, and what special cell does he use? Verse 24. Note: Since Philippi was a Roman colony where old soldiers sought retirement, it is probable that the jailer was a retired Roman soldier and as such, he was accustomed to administering cruel punishment when ordered to do so.
2. Acts 16:25-34
- a. What two things are Paul and Silas doing, and at what hour? Verse 25. Who is listening to the apostles? Why?
 - b. What catastrophic event follows, and with what results? Verses 26-27. Describe each effect in sequence.
 - c. Under Roman law the jailer's life was forfeited in place of those who escaped. See 12:19. What does Paul shout out, and why? Verse 28. What is the jailer's reaction to Paul's clamor? Verse 29. Why?
 - d. What is the key question that the jailer asks, and why do you think he brings up the subject at this point? Verse 30.
 - e. What answer do Paul and Silas give him? Verse 31. How did the apostles follow up their unique message? Verse 32. How would you have explained it? State the central tenets of the gospel of salvation. See 1 Corinthians 15:1-4. Who else received instruction that night?
 - f. What does the jailer do for Paul and Silas physically? Verse 33. What do they do for the jailer and his family as symbolic of their new faith?
 - g. What evidence is there that confirms the jailer accepted both the messengers and message? Verse 34.
3. Acts 16:35-40
- a. What news do Paul and Silas receive in the morning? Verses 35-36.
 - b. What surprising response does Paul give the officers? Verse 37. Why do you think that Paul and Silas did not make an issue of this at the start?
 - c. What is the reaction of the magistrates to the officers' report? Verse 38. As Roman citizens, Paul and Silas had their rights violated by being denied an inquiry to the charges made, and then beaten and disgraced in public without a trial.

- d. How are the magistrates humbled by Paul's request? Verse 39. What was foremost on the apostles' minds before leaving? Verse 40. Why?

Contemporary interaction

1. Have you ever visited someone in jail? What does that person long for, and how can you best share the gospel with him or her?
2. Were you ever in prison in the past? Can you briefly share your experience with the class? How did you come to Christ?
3. Are you a police officer? Do you share the gospel with officers and prisoners?
4. What are the cautions in doing prison ministries? What are the benefits?

Conclusion

Paul and Silas were apostles of Christ (1 Thessalonians 1:1; 2:2, 6) and dedicated to take the gospel of salvation to prisoners, law enforcement officers and to all within their reach. Prison ministries can reach even the unreachable!

Lorenzo Arroyo

THE DISCIPLES' ENCOUNTER WITH WORLDVIEW EVANGELISM — ACTS 17:16-34

Key text: “A group of Epicurean and Stoic philosophers began to dispute with him. Some of them asked, ‘What is this babblers trying to say?’ Others remarked, ‘He seems to be advocating foreign gods.’ They said this because Paul was preaching the good news about Jesus and the resurrection” (Acts 17:18).

Main point: Worldview evangelism is a type of cross-cultural evangelism that transcends cultural customs and traditions to reach the building blocks of thought running contrary to the gospel.

Introduction

The apostle Paul wrote, “Jews demand miraculous signs and Greeks look for wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified; a stumbling block to the Jews and foolishness to the Gentiles, but to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God (1 Corinthians 1:22-24). Here Paul gives us insight to understand that the battle for salvation is waged in the world of ideas.

In the first century, Jews and Greeks were not only two peoples with separate identities, they also held to different structures of thought. The Jews’ worldview was monotheistic (only one God). The Greeks were polytheistic (many gods). The Jews were holistic (matter, spirit and human life were designed as good and to be joined). The Greeks were metaphysically and morally dualistic (matter is an evil that the good spirit seeks to escape from). The Jews held to a biblical worldview, the Greeks did not.



Paul preaches in Athens about the unknown God,
as depicted by Gebhard Fugel

In this worldview mix, if we add religious perspectives and aspirations, we get a fuller picture. The Jews were waiting for a triumphant messiah to liberate them from the hands of their political Roman oppressors. They were awaiting miraculous signs on the scale of the parting of the Red Sea and the bringing down of Jericho's walls. How could they believe that Jesus, a weak person who was accursed by the standards of their own law, to have been

vindicated by God and risen from the dead? For the Jews it was not so much the resurrection from the dead that was a stumbling block (for most Jews believed in a future general resurrection), but who Jesus claimed to be and the manner of his death. Both the Incarnation and the cross were stumbling blocks for many.

On the other hand, Greeks felt themselves to be superior to other peoples, and they treasured the wisdom of a prestigious group of philosophers (e.g., Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, Epicurus and Zeno) from the past golden days of Greece. How could a god who is spirit ever contaminate his being with evil matter to become flesh – let alone be resurrected in it? The gospel was foolishness to the Greeks whose worldview did not leave room for a bodily resurrection!

Today as much as in ancient times, gospel messengers need to take into account the worldviews that unconsciously affect millions in our own nation as well as worldviews imported from other lands. It seems that globalization is bringing about a smorgasbord and syncretism of many incompatible ideas. The current competing worldviews in America seem to be naturalism, new age, pantheistic monism and postmodernism. Unfortunately, biblical or Christian theism has taken a back seat as society has become more and more politically secular. This makes for a formidable challenge to get the gospel articulated in terms that others can understand. Just as it was difficult in Athens for Paul, so it is today for gospel workers in this era. May it be said of us that we turned the world upside down for the gospel!

Questions for Bible study

1. Acts 17:16-21

- a. Who is Paul waiting for in Athens? Verse 16a. See verses 13-15.
What does Paul see there, and how does it affect him? Verse 16b.
Why?
- b. What three groups of people does Paul encounter, and where? Verse 17. How resistant or open might they be to Paul's message? In your opinion, how receptive would each group be?
- c. What class of intellectuals begins to dispute with Paul? Verse 18a.
Who are the Epicureans and the Stoics? Consult a Bible dictionary.
Fatalism and fear were the norm of the day for the Greeks. They tried to appease the displeasure of their gods with a variety of superstitions.
- d. What first remark from this class is really a put down? Verse 18b, c.
A "babbler" (the Greek word means a seed-picker) was a want-to-

be who picked up bits and pieces of philosophy here and there but had no profound instruction.

- e. What do others remark? Verse 18d, e. What is Paul preaching? Verse 18f.
- f. What decision do the opponents come to? Verse 19. Where do they take Paul, and for what purpose? The Areopagus (hill of Ares) was the name of a place as well as a council that examined new teachings and philosophies.
- g. How curious are the Athenians in their quest for philosophical wisdom? Verses 20-21. How willing do you think they might be to give up their comfort zone for the gospel's sake?

2. Acts 17:22-31

- a. Who is Paul addressing as he gives his apology (defense of his beliefs)? Verse 22. What does Paul say about them? The Greek word for “religious” can also mean “superstitious,” depending on context. Some commentators prefer the latter reading here, as in “very superstitious.”
- b. What point of contact does Paul establish with his audience at the start of his speech? Verse 23. Paul's point is not in what they know, but in what they confess they do not know (their ignorance of the one true God).
- c. In the following verses Paul lays a foundation on terms that his audience could understand, and even quotes pagan poets. Can you find the themes of God's nature, creation, providence and purpose? Verses 24-28. Explain.
- d. What is Paul's conclusion concerning his distress in Athens? Verse 29. Although the Athenians should have reasoned this out on their own, and some did, their reason was “darkened” on account of sin, as Paul writes in Romans 1:18-23.
- e. What had God “overlooked” (that is, not judged) according to what it deserved? Verse 30a. What is different now for all people than in the past? Verse 30b. Repent of what in particular for the Athenians? Paul is seeking from the Athenians a radical change in worldviews!
- f. What revelation does Paul give concerning the identity of the Judge of all humanity? Verse 31a. What proof is there of what God has done? Verse 31b. Not only is this proof of the coming judgment, but more so of the good news that salvation is available through Jesus Christ alone.

3. Acts 17:32-34

- a. At what point does the audience encounter a problem, and why? Verse 32. What reactions does Paul receive for his exposition?
- b. How does Paul respond? Verse 33. Do you think he was disappointed?
- c. What results does Paul reap from sowing the gospel? Verse 34. There is no record that Paul planted a church in Athens. Most of the Athenians were resistant to the gospel, but a few believed.

Contemporary interaction

1. Our educational system for the most part is plagued with the worldview of naturalism – the view that all of reality is confined to nature. What strategy is best for sharing the gospel to those who exclude God from reality?
2. Pantheistic Eastern religions have had a great influence in the West in recent times. How does one share the gospel with those who see themselves (we are all gods) and everything else as an extension of divine reality?
3. Postmodernism is an assault on absolute truth, the canons of logic, and language as a medium for truth. These concepts are at the core of biblical revelation. How can you share the gospel with someone who views everything as relative, subjective and ultimately meaningless to anyone but them?

Conclusion

The Holy Spirit is more than sufficient in tearing down the strongholds of those who hide behind false worldviews. The gospel is still the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes. God's love is stained on the cross forever.

Lorenzo Arroyo

THE DISCIPLES' ENCOUNTER WITH MESSIANIC MINISTRIES — ACTS 18:24-19:10



Scene in a synagogue,
as depicted by James Tissot

Key text: “For he vigorously refuted the Jews in public debate, proving from the Scriptures that Jesus was the Christ... Paul entered the synagogue and spoke boldly there for three months, arguing persuasively about the kingdom of God” (Acts 18:28; 19:8).

Main point: Although disciples such as Priscilla, Aquila, Apollos and Paul were enormously successful co-laborers in their mission to the Gentiles, they never stopped reaching out to the Jewish community with the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Introduction

In our *politically correct* society, the word “tolerance” has undergone a radical redefinition in meaning. *Tolerance* is now defined in postmodern terms as embracing the right of every belief or idea as *true* even for those holding contradictory views. In other words, one is supposed to respect another’s view *as true* even while holding an opposite viewpoint. In this way, people are taught to respect the culture, religion and tradition of all people and sub-groups everywhere.

Today, it is taboo to argue differences, but we are instead urged to embrace our common humanity through mutual respect while abandoning any notion of absolute truth. Evangelical Christianity is repugnant and

“intolerant” to this way of thinking because it dares to proclaim only one truth and challenges the validity of other religions as to their truth claims.

The word *tolerance* should mean that one is to respect the rights of others as to their human dignity, value, and freedom, despite legitimate disagreements concerning political, social and moral issues. Also, *religious tolerance* does not place all religious beliefs on the same level of truth. It allows the freedom of every individual to worship according to their beliefs without the fear of persecution from the state. *Tolerance* was never meant to be the judge and jury of *truth*, only the protection from persecution of people who hold different ideas, not the ideas themselves.

Ideas or truth claims must be tested and verified by the real-world criteria of evidence, consistency and experience. All religious truth claims are not equally valid – and Christianity substantiates its unique message. The gospel that the early disciples preached is superior to all other religions’ truth claims in evidence, consistency and experience.

It was the truth of the gospel over against Judaism that moved the early disciples to evangelize as many Jews as would hear the message. The apostle Paul grieved for his people Israel because without the gospel they would perish (Romans 9:1-3; 10:1-4). Paul knew of only one new covenant gospel message that was the fulfillment of old covenant aspirations. There are not two covenants coexisting, but only one!

Paul made it clear that the Jews are now saved in the same manner as the Gentiles through the one and same gospel message (Galatians 2:14-16). Apollos was a messianic Jew from the Dispersion who believed in Jesus as the hope of Israel, but had only a fragmentary knowledge of the gospel. Priscilla and Aquila were co-laborers of Paul (Acts 18:18-19) who took the time to fine-tune the gospel message for Apollos. He became a powerful preacher and debater in proving from the Scriptures to his fellow Jews that Jesus was the Christ (verses 24-28).

In his missionary journeys, it was Paul’s custom to preach the gospel first in the synagogue before moving on to his primary target group, the Gentiles. He also met some Jews who needed to know about the gospel fulfillment of John the Baptist’s message (19:1-10). Today, Messianic Jews are those who recognize Jesus as Israel’s promised Messiah and have accepted the gospel message of Jesus as Lord and Savior of the world. Most Messianic ministries are new covenant Jews reaching out to other Jews with the gospel. Although such believers may be uniquely positioned to reach Jews, they are not the only ones who can effectively share the gospel with Jews. All believers are entrusted with that task and are members of the one and same body of Christ

(Romans 11:13-32; Ephesians 2:16).

Questions for Bible study

1. Acts 18:24-28

- a. Who arrives in Ephesus? Verse 24. Can you describe at least four things about him? These events take place at the start of Paul's third missionary journey (see verse 23). Alexandria, Egypt, was a famous scholarly city with a large Jewish population and famous for its allegorical style of interpretation, as taught by Philo.
- b. What four other facts are presented about this man? Verse 25. What do you think is meant by the *way of the Lord* and the *baptism of John*? "The way" is a Christian designation – short for salvation through Christ alone and the lifestyle associated with it (Matthew 7:14; John 14:6).
- c. What is Apollos doing? Verse 26. Who heard him, and how do they respond to Apollos? Why? The fact that the woman is mentioned first suggests that she was the principal teacher of the two.
- d. Where does Apollos want to go next, and what was provided for him? Verse 27. How effective was he on his arrival? One manuscript tradition specifies that it was Corinth in Achaia where he first arrived. One thing is certain: he did spend time in Corinth. See 19:1; 1 Corinthians 3:4-6.
- e. What is Apollos best known for? Verse 28. Apollos was an eloquent powerful preacher in the allegorical tradition of Alexandria. In their debates in the early centuries of the church, the church fathers used this method in interpreting the Old Testament as Christ centered. Although the method can easily be overextended, it was very successful in that early era.

2. Acts 19:1-10

- a. While Apollos is elsewhere, what is Paul doing, and whom does he find? Verse 1. The word "disciples" by itself usually means Christian disciples, but here it probably refers to John's disciples. However, Apollos was already a believer in Jesus.
- b. When Paul senses that something is lacking, what does he ask them? Verse 2. What response do they give? These Jews were still anticipating the coming of a nameless Messiah and did not know that Joel's prophecy had already been fulfilled. See Acts 2:1-18.
- c. What inquiry does Paul make next? Verse 3. What surprising reply is given? It is probable that these "disciples" got their information

second-hand – from other Jews who had heard some of John’s message, for even John the Baptist spoke of the Holy Spirit (Luke 3:15-18).

- d. What necessary and vital instruction does Paul give them? Verse 4. Although John preached the good news of the coming Messiah, Paul preached the fulfilled good news of salvation in *Jesus* through faith as the only way. Compare with Acts 4:12.
- e. What new covenant results are seen after the gospel is preached? Verses 5-7. This proves the necessity for old covenant Jews to move into new covenant fulfillment. Pentecost and Ephesus serve as signs to the Jewish community to believe in the name Jesus.
- f. How did Paul reach out to other Jews? Verse 8. The kingdom (rule) of God is present in Jesus in the here and now as well as in the future.
- g. What positive and negative results does Paul encounter? Verses 9-10.

Contemporary interaction

1. Have you ever attended services at a Jewish synagogue? How about a Messianic church? If you are going through these lessons with a discussion group, share your experience with the others.
2. Have you ever shared the gospel with a Jewish person? If not, why not? Do you think the Jews need to hear the gospel of Jesus? Why?
3. Is it acceptable for Messianic Jews to share the good news of Jesus with other Jews? What about for Gentiles to try to convert Jews? What is the best approach in reaching Jews today?
4. How should one view the relationship between the old and new covenants? Is it any different for the Jews? (Do not confuse culture with covenant.)
5. Do you think there are some Messianic Jews like Apollos who may need help in understanding the fuller implications of the gospel over against the old covenant Mosaic Law? Explain.

Conclusion

The early disciples were mostly Jewish Christians whom God used as instruments to evangelize both Jews and Gentiles. Today, Gentile Christians are at the forefront of evangelism along with a small but growing number of Messianic Jews!

Lorenzo Arroyo

PART 5: SHARING THE GOSPEL IN THE WORLD TODAY

INTRODUCTION

“God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, *not counting people’s sins against them*” (2 Corinthians 5:19). “Love...*keeps no record of wrongs*” (1 Corinthians 13:5). Jesus “canceled the charge of our legal indebtedness, which stood against us and condemned us; he has taken it away, nailing it to the cross” (Colossians 2:14).

Jesus paid for our sins, our debts, and he did it 2000 years ago. It was done, past tense, before we ever lived and long before we ever believed it. Forgiveness has been granted; God is not waiting on us to believe it before we are actually forgiven. There is no longer any debt to speak of.

Why then do many evangelistic presentations dredge our sins back up, to pronounce people guilty? Why do they threaten people with non-existent debts? They present God as a cranky judge who is upset merely at the fact that people don’t know that someone else has paid their debt. They present a Father who seems unaware of what his Son did, and one who has a different attitude toward us than the Son has.

Some evangelistic presentations present the gospel as a trial in a court – that we first have to be proven guilty before we can be forgiven. But the Bible says that the sins are already paid for, and already forgiven. God is not counting our sins against us. He does not keep a record of our mistakes. The book of our sins is already blank.

Other presentations say that our sins have created a huge chasm between us and God. But this chasm is a fiction; it has already been filled in by Christ. Our sins are not a barrier that keep us away from God, because God has already reconciled us to himself. It is a unilateral declaration of peace. He does not harbor any grudges against us.

A guilt-based gospel is a misrepresentation of who God is, what Christ has done, and how people are to respond. It often works, though, because many people are already enculturated into thinking that God is cranky, that he is angry at people, and that we have to *do* something to get back on his good side. They think that God is like Zeus or Thor, ready to send lightning strikes on anyone who annoys him. But the gospel should free people *from* these errors, rather than act like they are correct.

What would the gospel look like if we didn't harp about sins that are already paid for? If we didn't focus on guilt that God has already put aside? (We are of course guilty of all kinds of sins, but the Bible says that God is not counting our sins against us. He is not concerned about a legal category called "guilt.")

Guilt is so thoroughly engrained in religious culture that many people cannot imagine the gospel without a focus on guilt. They *say* the gospel is a gift, but they actually present it as a transaction: you will be forgiven IF you accept the gospel. But in truth, Jesus already paid for your sins and you are already forgiven. There is no IF.

However, many religious people think that God is still focused on our guilt, that our relationship with God is based entirely on whether he holds us guilty. They see humanity's problem through the lens of guilt, and if we remove guilt from the equation, then they think that the gospel will have nothing left to say. There is no reason for anyone to accept the gospel, they think, if everyone is already forgiven. Such people have a one-dimensional gospel.

But consider this: If humanity's only problem is guilt, and that guilt is removed when we accept Jesus as our Savior, then that would mean that we have no more problems. If the only thing wrong with sin is that it makes us guilty, and that guilt is forgiven when we accept the gospel, then there will then be nothing wrong with sin! That is of course wrong, but it illustrates the fact that there's a lot more to sin and salvation than just the removal of guilt. There's a lot more to the gospel than a transaction by which our sins can be forgiven.

To help us think more about this, consider this question: If our sins are paid for by the death of Jesus, what then *is* the problem of sin? The answer: it messes up our relationships. The reason that sin is wrong is because it hurts people, it hurts our relationships. Lying, cheating, and stealing hurt our relationships with other people; idolatry hurts our relationship with God. The reason that God tells us to avoid sin is not because it annoys him, but because it's not good for us, and because God loves us, he wants us to avoid the pain that sin causes.

The reason that sin is wrong is because it hurts our relationships, and we are relational beings; that is the way that God made us (Genesis 1:27-28), and that is the future that he has promised us (Revelation 21:1-4). So let us look at sin, salvation, and the gospel through the lens of relationships.

Michael Morrison

A THEOLOGICAL LOOK AT EVANGELISM

Let's start with the Trinity as a doctrine, which says that God is best described as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit existing as one God. The early church formulated this doctrine because the Bible reveals that the Father is God, that Jesus Christ is God, and the Holy Spirit—yet the Bible also insists that there is only one God. The doctrine of the Trinity puts this complex idea into a shorter phrase.

We do not want to teach a Trinity that is functionally unitarian, as if God is an undifferentiated singularity. Nor do we want to present a God that is functionally tri-theistic, as if the Persons of the Godhead are separate from one another and different in personality.

God is not a faceless, abstract principle existing in some distant place—God is *love* (1 John 4:8). Love is inherent to God—his essence and being—that's what makes him God. And this God who is love by nature existed before God created anything, before there was anything else to love.

Can love be expressed by a solitary person? It cannot. The doctrine of the Trinity explains that God not a solitary person, but three persons. The Father loves the Son and the Spirit, the Son loves the Father and the Spirit, the Holy Spirit loves the Father and the Son, in a criss-crossing interchange. This love relationship is part of the inner life of the Godhead. Not only do they love one another, they also *live* in one another—the Father in the Son, the Son in the Father, etc.

Next, we see that God intends to share this life with us. He created human beings “in the image of God,” and he wants *us* to love, because that is what he designed us for. The Father, Son, and Holy Spirit want us to enjoy the same love that exists in the Godhead. Salvation does not consist in a change of location (“going to heaven”), as if that would solve all our problems. Nor is it better enforcement of the rules in a kingdom. Rather, it involves entry into the life of God—or we should say, the entry of his life into us. God's plan is for us to join in his life of love for all eternity.

Humans have fallen short of what God wants, and we are incapable of attaining what God wants to give us. We do not live in love because we are sinful. Humanity's “fall” into sinfulness was no surprise to God, because he had already planned the solution to our problem. God the Father sent the Son to become a human and to redeem humanity, to re-connect humanity to the Creator in whom we all live and have our being.

There is no Father-Son separation here. This is not a case of the Father being angry at humanity and really wanting to punish us, and the Son doing

something to change the Father's mind. No, the New Testament consistently says that the Father sent the Son—the Father wants to save us just as much as the Son does. The Father is love just as much as the Son is. He wants to share his life and love with us.

The first step was our physical creation: humanity was made from elements of earth, and made to breathe oxygen. But love cannot be manufactured out of physical elements—it is a spiritual quality, and God continues his creative work in us spiritually. This takes time.

So Jesus became a human in order to save us, to rescue us from our physical and spiritual weakness. And in doing so, Jesus revealed to us what the Father is like. He told Philip, Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father (John 14:9). Jesus has the essential divine characteristic: love. Our concept of God is formed not by philosophical reasoning about what “the perfect” is—we form our concept of God based on what Jesus is and what he has done. That brings us back to love, which is serving others instead of ourselves.

Jesus became human and took our sins upon himself, and he experienced the results of our sins (including death) upon the cross. This was not because God became angry at Jesus or punished him; that would suggest some separation within the Trinity. God loves his Son, just as he loves humanity. But this death, even the shame and pain of the cross, was part of what it meant for him to take our fallen condition upon himself. And his resurrection demonstrated that death itself has been overcome. Jesus has done all that is needed for our salvation.

This brings us to an important part: Jesus died for our sins—past tense. He paid for them—past tense. The penalty has been paid—past tense. God does not count our sins against us. How could he? They've already been paid for. He has already forgiven us, and like the father of the prodigal son, he is eagerly waiting for us to return to him. He is not saying that we will be forgiven IF we repent or IF we believe in some particular doctrine. No, the gospel is that the penalty has already been paid in full, the sins are already forgiven, and God invites us to accept what he is offering in Christ.

In one popular evangelistic sketch, there is a great chasm between humanity and God—a gulf too wide for us to jump across, too deep for us to climb across. The gospel says that this chasm is an illusion—the truth is that in the incarnation, in his birth, life, death, and resurrection, Jesus has eliminated that chasm. He has come to us; it is not a matter of us having to go to him.

Our sins made us *feel* like we are separated from God, but because of Jesus

Christ, they do not separate us. God is not unreachable – he is with us in Jesus Christ. God does not *want* us to live in sin, but those sins do not constitute a barrier between him and us. However, our sinfulness is a barrier between us and the *life* that God wants us to have—the life of love.

Sin is by definition something that is contrary to love. God is offering us a life of love, not a life of sin and death. We cannot experience the joy of mutual acceptance, for example, at the same time as we harbor resentment against others. It is a contradiction in terms. So ethical behavior goes hand-in-hand with a Trinitarian, love-based theology. Since none of us is perfect, we enter God's life imperfectly, but the gospel promises that perfection will eventually be given to us. Even now, through the Holy Spirit, God's love and righteousness are available to people.

What role does faith play? God can forgive us all he wants, but if we don't *think* we are forgiven, we will see our sins as a chasm we cannot cross. We will not experience the benefits of his forgiveness, even though it's there. To use a financial metaphor, it would be like we continue to make payments on our debt even though Jesus has already paid it in full. If we don't believe he paid for us, and we continue to make payments anyway, we are enslaved by our own mistaken idea, our unbelief. Our faith does not change the external circumstances, but our faith is essential for our *experience* of salvation. That's why we want people to *believe* the good news!

It is good news, but not everyone believes it. Why? The Bible explains that people, on their own, *cannot* believe it. God must intervene in their minds to call them or invite them to faith. We trust that he works in each person's life in the best possible way—and he has a far better understanding of those circumstances than we do. From our limited perspective, we do not always understand why God works in the way that he does, but we know that he loves each person, and can be trusted to carry out his work in the best possible way.

How does Christ give us salvation? The Bible describes it as a union between us and Christ: we died with him, we are raised with him, we are seated with him in heavenly places (Ephesians 2:1-6). He took our sinfulness, and he gives us his righteousness; we become partakers of the divine nature (2 Peter 1:4). There are different ways of saying it, but we become part of who he is, and he becomes part of what we are. He lives in us and our lives are hidden in him (Colossians 3:3). The goal is that we join the Trinitarian life and love of Father, Son and Spirit.

In our experience, there may be a specific point in time that we come to believe that our old self died with Christ and that we are forgiven. The Holy Spirit opened our minds to understand and believe what God has done for

us. *But in fact*, the old self died when Christ died, which was before the foundation of the world. God's plan all along has been that the old self would be counted as dead and the new self be reconstructed in Christ. It is his idea, not ours, and we can't take any credit for catching on to what was his idea all along. We are time-bound creatures and cannot help but experience things as a succession of events, but from God's perspective it was a done deal all along.

The parable of the prodigal son (Luke 15:11-31) provides a useful outline. To put it concisely, Trinitarian theology says that the Father is eagerly awaiting for us to come to ourselves, to realize that we have been wasting our life, and to return to the Father—not as a servant or slave, but as the treasured child that he has always loved.

Key points

- 1) God created all humans in his image, and he wants everyone to share in the love that characterizes the Triune Godhead.
- 2) Christ became a human to redeem all humanity through his Incarnation, life, death and resurrection. He atoned for the sins of all humanity.
- 3) Christ has already paid for our sins, and there is no further debt to pay. God has already forgiven us, does not want to punish us, and eagerly desires that we return to him.
- 4) We will not experience the blessing of receiving his love unless we *believe* that he loves us; we will not experience his forgiveness unless we believe he has forgiven us.
- 5) We will not experience the blessings of giving love while we continue living in sin. We will experience the joy of salvation only as we share in the life of Christ through the Holy Spirit.

The motive for evangelism

Some fear that this theology reduces the motive for evangelism. For some people, that may be true. If they were motivated by a misunderstanding, then it *will* weaken their motive if we explain the error in their thinking. One person might evangelize because he's afraid that people will go to hell if he doesn't tell them. Another might evangelize because she thinks it's the only way she can earn her own salvation. A third person might think that God needs help. Hopefully each of these people will be given new and better motives for evangelism, but it may take a while before they are able to build on the new foundation.

We can confidently say that God wants all people to be saved, and that

his plan includes everyone. We don't know how he will do it, but we trust that he (since he is fair and loving) will give everyone a decent opportunity. Not everyone will take what he offers, but he offers it. However, if everyone will get a chance for salvation whether or not we tell them in this life, why should we risk our lives (or the risk of being embarrassed) to tell anyone?

Simply this: Jesus told his disciples to spread the gospel – our theology cannot change that – and doing so is an expression of love for God, of giving him glory for his astonishing generosity. The command of Jesus and the example of Paul show us that a willingness to share the gospel is part of the lifestyle of love that God wants us to participate in. These foundations for evangelism have not changed.

However, the way in which we *explain* the gospel may have to change—mainly that we don't want to imply that Jesus did something to change the Father's mind, and second, we don't want to imply that God holds people's sins against them when Jesus has already paid the debt for them. God knows that the debt has been paid, and from his perspective, there is no huge chasm that people have to try to cross. Jesus has already crossed that chasm for them, and God is already on their side.

Some people prefer lifestyle evangelism, in which people are won to Christ by seeing an example of the way that Christ changes people from selfish to caring about others. Some of the people we meet can see our lifestyle; but others see us for only a few hours, and we may never see them again. Is there any way to share the gospel with them? Yes. For those who want some sort of outline, I'll give one, but I note in advance that many variations are possible, based on the personality of the presenter and the circumstances of the audience.

- 1) God created us because he wants to live with us. He loves us. Life is a gift from him to us.
- 2) Humans fall short of what we are supposed to be (Romans 3:23). We have all experienced pain from being let down or betrayed by a friend, and all of us have broken promises that we've made, too.
- 3) But God is not going to let our mistakes thwart his plan. So he has acted to rescue us. Salvation is a free gift (Romans 6:23). If a friend gives us a gift, we do not pull out our wallet and offer to pay for it. It's a gift. In the same way, eternal life is a gift. We cannot earn it or deserve it, either before it is given or afterwards—God gives it to us as a gift. No one has earned their way into a perfect eternity. God knows we don't deserve it, but he wants to give it to us anyway.
- 4) It is made possible by Jesus Christ, who died for our sins, and was

raised to life so that we might live again. The Bible says that we died with him, and we live with him (Romans 6:4; Colossians 2:12). The old self, with all its weaknesses and shortcomings, died with Christ. Some of the effects still linger with us, but in the next life, the old self will be gone, and only the new self will live—the new self that is created like Christ by the Holy Spirit. In the resurrection of Jesus, God has shown us that death itself has been defeated. He promises to raise us back to life, too. The problem of death has been overcome.

- 5) God will let us live forever, but he also wants to fix our other major problem: the *quality* of life. We were made for love, truth, kindness, and joy, not a life of betrayal and disappointment. We can't do this on our own, so God promises to live within us, to change us from the inside out, to create us anew.
- 6) God doesn't force himself on us. For this to work in our lives, we have to *accept* God's plan. We have to believe that it's true, and we have to trust him to let him do the work in us. We need faith to know that God has planned something better for us than what we see in this life, and we need faith to know that our failures don't disqualify us from this better eternity. We need faith to know that God has power over death, and he has power over our life. He will live within us and we will be his children.
- 7) Our new life is experienced in this age by faith in Christ. He died for our sins whether or not we believe—our faith can't change that reality one way or the other. But faith makes it a reality in our lives, that we see ourselves as new people, made by God and enabled by the Holy Spirit to be like Christ. We see that we were made for love—and with the guarantee of eternal life, we are given the courage to love. If we look to ourselves, we will always have doubts. But if our life depends on Christ, it depends on something that is 100 percent reliable. Our confidence is in him, not in what we do. When we see an eternity with God as the good life we've always wanted, we will also try to live the good life.

Will everyone be saved?

Some people think that Trinitarian theology leads to universalism, the idea that absolutely everybody will be saved. I do not know why this idea is repugnant to some people. I think it would be good if God turned the Hitlers of this world into kind and considerate people. However, I do not see

anything in the Bible or in Trinitarian theology that requires this result.

Trinitarian theology teaches that God gives people freedom. He gives people a real choice—love isn't really love unless it is freely given—and the Bible indicates that some people will insist on making the wrong choice, to live in self-imposed misery, in a world of selfishness rather than love. Jesus died for their sins, and they don't *have* to be trapped in them, but they choose to continue in them anyway.

The Bible says that Christ achieved reconciliation for all things and all people (Colossians 1:20), so we can speak of universal reconciliation. However, this does not mean that everyone suddenly likes God—it means that God likes everyone. The reconciliation has been unilateral, but is not complete until it is bilateral.

“Salvation” is a word with several meanings. The Bible can say that we *have* been saved by the death of Christ, but it also says that we *will* be saved when Christ returns and our bodies are transformed from weakness into glory. One of the biggest problems humans have is that we are enslaved to sin—sin is like an alien power that causes us to make stupid choices in life. Salvation is not complete unless we are freed from the grip of sin, and so our salvation is not complete until we are liberated from our tendency to sin, which is at death, or our resurrection.

Salvation comes in steps. Christ died for everyone, and God accepts his sacrifice as being effective for everyone. He forgives everyone, so everyone has been given that initial step in salvation. But when we say that everyone *will* be saved, we are speaking of salvation in the future and full meaning. This requires the *acceptance* of God's gift, the human response to God's unilateral action, and the cessation of all sin. We do not have biblical evidence that everyone will accept what God gives, so we cannot teach universalism.

Trinitarian theology helped me answer two questions that I had for a long time. First, what is the role of ethics, when we are judged on the basis of what Christ has done? If salvation merely consists of cancelling our sins, our debt, and our punishment, then why should we bother trying to be good? If the only thing bad about sin is that it is a violation of God's law, and that violation is stricken from the record, then what's the problem with sin? The New Testament clearly shows that we should try to do right, but why? The answer is that we are preparing for the life of the age to come. If we really want this godly way of life, then we will try to live that way now. If we don't really want it, then God isn't going to force us to have it. We will get what we want, and that's a sobering thought.

The other puzzle I had was, How can God be so sure that nobody is ever

going to sin in the age to come? That just seems hard to believe, that I will sin until the day I die, and then suddenly at that point I will never sin, not even once, any more, ever. That's a pretty amazing miracle. But Trinitarian theology caused me to think more deeply about my union with Christ, what it means for my old self to die with him, and a new self to rise with him. My old self will stay dead; only what has been re-created in Christ will live, and that's why it's guaranteed to never sin again.

Michael Morrison

A TRINITARIAN PERSPECTIVE ON EVANGELISM

Some people have asked, If everybody is already forgiven, why should I bother with evangelism? From a Calvinist perspective, the question is: If God has already decided who's going to be saved, why should I bother with evangelism? And from an Arminian perspective, the question is: If God already knows who's going to be saved, and I can't change something that he already *knows*, why should I bother with evangelism?

The questions are not new. The basic question is, Since God is the one who saves, why should I bother with anything at all? The question does not stop with evangelism – it can include *all* aspects of Christian life. If I can be saved without going to church, why should I go to church? If I can be saved without giving an offering, why should I give an offering? If I tell a lie, commit adultery, or steal some money, I can be forgiven, so why should I restrain myself?

People can always use theology as an excuse for doing whatever it is they want to do. But all of the above excuses are short-sighted, and basically wrong. They all stem from a simple logical error, and it goes like this: If *I* can't see the purpose, then there is no purpose. If it's not for the purpose of salvation, then it must not have a purpose at all.

And, if I don't *want* to do it, then I *won't* do it.

The traditional answer to all the above questions about evangelism is simple: We don't do evangelism in order to save people from hell, or to send them to heaven, either one. That's not in our power. The reason for evangelism is simply because Jesus told us to do it.

Jesus told his disciples to preach the gospel, and to teach all future disciples to do everything that Jesus had commanded (Matthew 28:19-20). So Jesus commands us to preach the gospel whether we want to or not. We may not be able to save anybody, but we may be the means God has chosen to bring salvation to others. So we may not understand exactly *why* we have this role, but we have it anyway: We are supposed to spread the gospel because Jesus told us we should.

For some people, that's good enough. For other people, it just means finding a different theological excuse for avoiding something we want to avoid: "Well, we can be saved without perfect obedience, so I'll just skip that evangelism command." In other words, if it's not about *me*, and my salvation, then don't bother me.

Sure, I want to go to heaven, or wherever it is, and live forever, but I really don't want to do what God says. Obedience will be a lot easier once I get there. Since God loves me no matter what I do, I don't know why he bothers to tell me *anything* about what I'm supposed to do, or not do. It all seems pointless, if he is going to love me anyway.

Why obey?

Maybe it *does* seem pointless, if there is no particular purpose to Christian life. But God has not made a mistake in leaving us here, or in giving us instructions on how we ought to live, or in telling us to share the good news of what he has done for us in Jesus Christ.

Faith in God's wisdom

Let's think about why we should obey God, even if our salvation doesn't depend on it.

For one, God knows a whole lot more about it than we do, and we have faith that he has given us some good instructions. He's a lot smarter than we are about what works in the long run, and what doesn't. He is the one who made us, and he knows how life works, and especially how relationships work. And relationships are really important – they can make life enjoyable, or they can make life miserable. We can have all the money in the world, and good looks, and a healthy body, and still be frustrated at our inability to have even one good and permanent relationship.

God has made us relational beings, because *God* is a relational being, and he wants to have a relationship with us, and he wants *us* to have relationships with each other – relationships that last forever. And so he has shared with us some of what he knows about what makes relationships work well. Don't lie to each other, he says, because that hurts relationships. And don't take each other's stuff, and keep your promises, and don't be jealous – be content with what you have.

We can summarize it all under the heading of love. Don't be selfish – care about other people, and you'll have better relationships, and a better life.

I am not saying that this is easy. In fact, I admit that we cannot do it as well as we should, or even as well as we'd like to. We fall short. We need salvation not just for length of life, not just for a better *location* to spend eternity, but also an improved *quality of life*. We'd like to be rescued from the grip of sin and selfishness. We want perfection in eternity, but we know we aren't perfect right now. So there's this big *gap* between what we want and what we can actually do.

That doesn't mean that it's wrong to want perfection, or wrong to aim for

a target when we know we can't hit the bulls-eye every time. It's the right target, and no matter how badly we do, it's still the right target and we ought to be aiming for it. But since we all fall short, it is sure nice to know that God forgives our mistakes and shortcomings, even our bad attitudes.

Now, his forgiveness does not somehow make bad attitudes good for us, and his forgiveness does not mean that it's OK to break our promises, or that spreading gossip isn't going to hurt our relationships. It just means that we can keep on trying even if we don't do very well when we are just getting started. We don't need to give up just because we aren't very good. *Good* is still good, and we can still aim for the target even if it's a long way off.

So we should follow God's instructions because he tells us where the target is, and he knows a lot better than we do what the target looks like. We have faith that he knows what he's talking about – at least he knows a lot more about it than we do. Even when it comes to human life, he's seen a lot more of it than we have.

God is love, and he loves us. He has not given us a bunch of rules just to make life more difficult for us. No – he has given us these instructions to help us avoid some pitfalls in life, to help us form better and more stable relationships.

God is perfect, and he doesn't need any rules. But if we could see what he does, it would *seem* like he was following rules. He would not lie, he would not cheat, he would not steal, and he would not get pleasure out of torturing little children. These things are descriptive of how God lives. And these descriptions of God become prescriptions for us: Don't do this, or you are going to mess up your relationships.

If we are going to live together *forever*, we need to be able to trust each other and *like* each other. We need to do more than just tolerate one another – we need to actually like each other's company, because we are going to *be* with one another for an awfully long time. Even if we see each other for only 10 minutes every 10 billion years, it is going to add up to an *infinite* amount of time. So it's really important that we have relationships based on the highest possible standard, the standard of perfect love. This is the right target, even if we don't do very well at it right now.

Now, if this is the kind of eternity that we want, God assures us that we can be there if we want to be. And he'll do everything he can to make us want that. That is, after all, why he created us in the first place. We were created from love, and for love, so that we would be loved, and so that we would experience the joys of giving love.

God does everything he can to make sure that we can be there. He sent

Jesus to die for our sins, to assure us that they've been taken care of. We don't need to worry about debts, because they've all been paid. We can be assured that death itself has been overcome, because Jesus died and was resurrected. He's been there and done that. So he guarantees us a ticket into a perfect eternity, if we want it.

Now, that doesn't somehow make lying, cheating and stealing good for our relationships, no matter whether we are talking about eternity or just next week. God says, Don't do it, because it will mess your life up. Now, if you do it anyway, you are still invited into God's eternal home, but if you really *like* doing that sort of stuff, then you are not going to like living with God very much. I don't see any way around that one.

Hope in reward

The Bible tells us that the way we live in this life has something to do with the way we are going to enjoy the next one. I'm not sure that we know enough about God and spirit life and eternity in order to describe what it will really be like, but the Bible tries to convey the message to us in terms we can understand, and one of the ways it does that is to use the concept of rewards.

Jesus said, if we give a cup of cold water to a disciple who needs it, we will by no means lose our reward. If you give to someone in secret, then the Father in heaven will reward you. If you pray in secret, your Father will reward you. If you fast in secret, your Father will reward you. Jesus is not afraid of using the word "reward" to talk about life in the age to come.

Paul talks about it, too, in 1 Corinthians 3:12-14 – he says that people need to build with permanent materials rather than wood, hay or straw. On the Day of Judgment, our work will be tested by fire, and if our work survives the judgment, then will receive a reward. He's not talking about salvation – we get that even if all our work fails the test – but he says that we get a reward on top of salvation.

Paul doesn't say exactly what that reward will be. Jesus used several metaphors to talk about our rewards. I'm not sure if we really understand enough about eternal life with transformed bodies in a merger of heaven and earth, in order to say what those rewards are, but the long shot of it is that what we did in this life has *something* to do with how rewarding we will find the next one to be.

I suspect that the rewards are not external payments for work that we've done, but rather the rewards are inherent in the nature of life itself, and love, and kindness. That's vague and abstract, but even at the most abstract level, the point of the metaphor seems to be that we will find eternal life more

rewarding if we do what is right in this life. There's no calculus, there's no formula for specific repayment – there is just an assurance from Jesus and Paul that it's better to do right, than to do wrong, and that this carries over into eternity.

Love for others

We have faith that God has given us his instructions for our own good, and we have hope that whatever we do in this life will have eternal benefits. A third reason for doing good, with absolutely no suggestion that we could ever earn our salvation, is love. We love God, and we love other people.

We can throw in all the usual disclaimers, that we don't love as well as we ought. We don't love our children as well as we ought, or our spouse as well as we ought, or other believers, or our non-Christian neighbors, or anybody else. But that doesn't mean we should stop trying to improve.

But we've got a problem: We have a rather incomplete understanding of what love is. Does love mean letting everybody do whatever they want? Does love mean letting somebody kill themselves? "Well, if that's what you want, don't let me stop you..." Does love mean interfering in the way somebody else disciplines their children? Does love mean that we can't put restrictions on people who spread contagious diseases?

The Bible gives us a little practical advice on what love really is. Don't lie, cheat, steal, commit adultery, etc. All those are under the umbrella of "love."

Of course, the supreme example of love is Jesus Christ: "This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us" (1 John 3:16). Love means self-sacrifice – it's about doing things we ordinarily wouldn't want to do, so that we can help others. It's about accepting some limitations on our own behavior, in order to help other people. Love means giving up something in the short term, and getting a lot more in return, if we just wait long enough.

The Bible tells us that we should imitate Jesus Christ in this pattern of humility, self-denial, and service. And it gives us some guidelines as to what that looks like in practical details, about sharing instead of stealing, about encouraging people instead of belittling them, about being faithful to our promises rather than breaking them when they become inconvenient.

And what about love toward God? God's not very fussed about how we show love to him. He really doesn't need anything from us. The only reason that he wants us to love him is that it's good for *us* to do so. He doesn't need it, but he wants it so that *we* get the benefits of doing it. And he tells us that the way we show love to him is by showing love to all his children. How can

we say that we love God, if we don't love one another? (1 John 3:17; 4:20). And if we love God, we will love one another according to the instructions he has given us.

Even if obedience doesn't give us salvation, it still has a purpose, and we can describe that purpose in terms of faith, hope and love. Basically, God is inviting us to share in the Trinitarian life – that's love. God does not force this on us, but we participate in his life *by choice*, as we choose to love. We can imagine some of the joy of being in eternal fellowship with billions of people who choose only to love, and never to be selfish, and we bring that lifestyle of the kingdom into the present age as we live that way even now, letting God live in us, living like Jesus would.

Now about evangelism...

Let's talk about evangelism.

First, the Bible tells us that God wants everyone to be saved (1 Timothy 2:4). That should be no surprise, since we are all made in his image (Genesis 1:27). And the Bible tells us that Jesus is the Savior of everyone, not only those who believe in him, but also those who don't (1 Timothy 4:10). To use a financial metaphor, he has already paid for us all. Paid for every one of our sins, purchased every last person for God. Colossians tells us that Christ reconciled everything and everyone to the Father (Colossians 1:20).

The Bible sometimes uses the metaphor of a courtroom, so let's plug the data into the courtroom equation. Satan is the Accuser, and he says we've done all sorts of bad things. Jesus is the Defense Attorney, and he says every one of those bad things has been stricken from the record, paid in full. Satan doesn't have a leg to stand on, so he slithers away, the case is dismissed, and the party begins.

So, in the judicial sense, everybody has already been saved.

But as you have no doubt noticed, not everybody acts like they've been saved. Some of them don't know anything about it, and some of them don't want it even after they hear about it. And there is a lot more to salvation than the judicial sense.

Unfortunately, many Christians have been working with a truncated view of salvation, as if the judicial verdict is the only factor involved in what God is doing in our lives, as if the only problem with sin is the verdict on the day of judgment. Some methods of evangelism focus so much on the judicial verdict that they forget about other aspects of salvation.

The judicial verdict is important, and that's why the Bible tells us how Jesus has taken care of that verdict for us. There *is* something wrong with sin,

and we do incur guilt when we go contrary to what God wants. So the judicial explanation is an important one, and it's a valid approach to explaining the gospel, as long as we don't play the role of Satan and start accusing people of all sorts of things when Jesus has already paid the penalty for them. It's especially good for people who already have a sense of guilt and think that their sins will prevent them from getting into salvation. They need to hear a word of forgiveness.

But there is a lot more to salvation than just getting rid of the judicial verdict and the judicial penalty. We can take care of all that paperwork and still not be the kind of people God created us to be. We can still be in the grip of sin, and have a miserable and frustrated life. Salvation means more than just giving us a really long life in a beautiful heavenly mansion – it means restoring us to the way we were created to be. It means transforming us into the image of Christ in righteousness and holiness. It means changing who we are and the way we think. Although some aspects of salvation have already been accomplished, our salvation isn't complete until we have been totally transformed.

Let's consider what it means to be reconciled. Colossians says that everything in heaven and earth has been reconciled to God. And what does "reconcile" mean? It means that people who were formerly enemies are now friends. Where there was animosity, now there is peace.

So what does it mean that everything has been reconciled to God? Obviously, not everyone in heaven and earth likes God. So what is Paul saying? He is saying that *from God's perspective*, there is peace. God is not anxious to hurl lightning bolts to zap everybody who does anything wrong. From his side, he has nothing against us; that is simply another way of saying that our sins have been forgiven. To use a military metaphor, there has been a unilateral ceasefire. Now, some people might still be angry at God and wish he would go away, so from their perspective the reconciliation has not been achieved. God loves them, but he doesn't force them to return that love.

To use another metaphor, they are at the party, but they aren't celebrating. Some of them don't even know that there's a party going on. Others know about it, but they are having a positively rotten time, because they wanted to be at a different party.

All metaphors break down if you push the details too far, and this one breaks down pretty quickly, but the point is that salvation has been given, but not necessarily enjoyed. God forgives their sins, but some people haven't accepted his forgiveness. Some people insist that they can work off their debt, if God would just let them, and that way they'd keep their sense of dignity

and self-reliance. Some people insist that they don't need his forgiveness because they didn't really do anything bad enough to keep them out in the first place.

And some people latch onto that forgiveness as a great theological excuse to resume doing whatever it is that they want to do. It seems to me that in such a case they have not really understand what sin is in the first place – they think it is the breaking of some arbitrary rule put forth by a God who wants to trip them up, and that the only problem with sin is the judicial verdict, which has now been set aside, and so they think that it is now OK for them to sin all they want. These people are still in the grip of sin, *deceived* by sin into thinking it's good.

But really, the definition of good and evil is built into the fabric of life itself – so much so that Paul says that we used to be dead in our trespasses and sins (Ephesians 2:1). Forgiven, yes, but *dead*, as long as we lived in a way that is contrary to the life that God wants us to have. Simply forgiving our sins, setting aside the judicial verdict, does not somehow make it OK to live in the way of death. God wants much more for us than that. He wants us to have a life that is really life, really enjoyable, a life that will be good even if we live forever.

So how does all this relate to evangelism?

First, let's consider whether the gospel has done *us* any good, whether we are any better off for having heard the gospel, rather than waiting until the day of judgment to hear the good news. We can't really know how life would have been if we had never heard the gospel; we cannot change the past. We have to deal with life the way it comes to us, rather than wish it might have been some other way.

So what are the benefits of knowing?

The benefits are going to be different for different people. For some people, the gospel is good news of forgiveness. Some people are really troubled by the bad things they've done in life, and they think that they deserve to be punished pretty severely, and it is really good to learn that Jesus has already paid that penalty for them. They done bad stuff in their life and they feel dirty, and they rejoice that Christ cleanses them from all impurity.

For some people, the gospel is a rescue from the grip of legalism, of thinking that we have to earn our salvation, and realizing that we can never quite seem to make it. The good news of grace is a breath of fresh air, a word of assurance when they had a life of anxiety.

For some people, the gospel is the good news not just that they will live with God, but that God is living with them right now, that the Holy Spirit

lives in them to give them wisdom and the strength they want to do what is right.

For some, the gospel is an assurance that they are not alone in this overly busy and heartless world. They are loved not just for what they can do, but simply for who they are, whether or not they do well. God loves them, and they are always welcome at his house. God is a refuge in time of trouble, a comfort in time of pain, a bit of stability in times of turmoil. God knows our sorrow and pain – he has been here himself in Jesus.

For some people, the gospel tells them that there is a tremendous purpose in life. Life has great meaning, because God has designed us for a purpose, and he wants to be in relationship with us for eternity. Even the little things of life become significant, when we put them into the context of a relationship with an eternal God. God cares about each of us. He knows the sacrifices we make, even if nobody else knows. We know they are significant because God says they are.

Now, some people have heard the gospel but are still sitting on the sidelines. They realize that the gospel concerns the meaning of life, and the significance of existence, and they are not quite ready to make that level of commitment. I congratulate them for seeing how significant the decision is, and I encourage them to shake off the paralysis of indecision, and to take the leap. You really don't have much to lose – maybe a little status in the eyes of some of the people you know. You aren't going to keep that for long, anyway. It all goes down the drain when you die. You might as well live for something more significant than this life. Sure, you'll have another life in the age to come, but why wait till then?

Now let's think about evangelism again. Suppose we have a neighbor who is a happy Hindu, or a well-mannered Muslim, or even a kind and considerate atheist. Each of those people will appear before the judgment seat of Christ and find out that all their sins have been forgiven and that God wants them to live forever in peace and joy. He will take care of them, so the question arises, why should we? Won't God do a whole lot better job of it than we will? Why should we disrupt their life with a message that will turn their world upside down?

If the goal is good behavior, then they've already got it. There are lots of Muslims and Mormons and Buddhists who live pretty decent lives. Christianity isn't going to make them much better behaved than they already are.

And lots of people think they have the meaning of life figured out. They have something that makes sense to them, so why should we try to talk them

out of it? Why not just wait and let God take care of it?

God has already told us *how* he wants to take care of it... and *we* are part of the plan. Jesus gave his disciples the commission to share the good news, and to teach other people to do the same thing. The example of Jesus, and the example of Paul, shows us that when we are captured by God's love, then evangelism is one of the results.

Paul didn't go around organizing three-step evangelism programs, but he set an example of someone who was so convinced of God's love and grace that he risked his life time and time again to share this good news with other people. He had a message that was much more important than his own convenience. "We make it our goal to please him," Paul said, "whether we live or whether we die" (2 Corinthians 5:9, my paraphrase).

"For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may receive what is due him for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad" (v. 10). This is the apostle of grace here. Salvation is by grace, but there's more to eternal life than just getting in the door.

"Since, then, we know what it is to fear the Lord, *we try to persuade men*" (v. 11). Paul was not *afraid* of God, but he had such deep respect for God that he wanted to do his job well, to convince as many people as possible about the truth of the gospel.

"If we are out of our mind, it is for the sake of God," he says in verse 13. "If we are in our right mind, it is for you." Paul was not worried about looking crazy to the outside world. He was quite willing to be a fanatic for Christ. But in reality, he was in his right mind, working to help other people.

Why?

"For Christ's love compels us..." He was motivated by the love of Christ, by how much Christ had loved him. "because we are convinced that one died for all, and therefore all died." Yes, Christ died for everyone, to pay the sins for everyone, all at once. But this theological truth was not an excuse for Paul to sit back and wait for God to do the rest. No – he knew that God had given him a job.

"And Christ died for all..." Why? So that we could live however we wanted to? No – far from it. He died "that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised again" (v. 15). We are conscripted into service.

In verse 18, Paul writes that God has "reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation." Did Christ die for you? Yes! Did God reconcile himself to you? Yes! Then he says that you should live for him – specifically that you have been give a ministry of reconciliation,

that you should want to persuade people, as he says in verse 19, “that God was reconciling the *world* to himself in Christ, not counting men’s sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation.”

“We are therefore Christ’s ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us” – because he is. God is using *us* to make his appeal to the world, and we want to make the message as appealing as we can.

Notice what Paul says in verse 20: “We implore you on Christ’s behalf: Be reconciled to God.” He is writing this to people who are already Christians. The forgiveness has already been given, but the people had not made the kind of response God wanted. So Paul urges them to respond to God in the way he had initiated: He gives reconciliation from his side, and he wants them to give reconciliation from their side.

As he says two verses down, chapter 6, verse 1: “As God’s fellow workers we urge you not to receive God’s grace in vain.” Paul is not saying that they are going to lose their salvation. What he is saying is that they are in danger of not letting it work in their lives. They are building with wood, hay, and straw, and if they don’t change, they will still be saved, but all their life’s work is going to go up in smoke. Don’t waste your life, he says.

God has given us the ministry of reconciliation, the job of sharing the gospel. He does not say how or when or how often or any other such detail. He doesn’t threaten us with punishment if we fail to do it. He just says, This is what I want you to do.

Why is that? It goes back to our earlier discussion, of why God asks us to do anything at all – it’s because it is for *our own good*. Now, we may not see *how* it’s good for us, but if it were really obvious, then God wouldn’t need to tell us. God knows that it’s not always convenient, and it’s not always easy, and people don’t always thank us for what a wonderful message we have given them. No, the first guy who preached this message got killed for it, and so did the second guy, and the third guy, and a whole lot of other guys got killed for it. But they were willing to do it because they saw that the message was a lot more significant than life in this age is.

So we share the gospel in faith, knowing that God knew what he was doing when he included this as part of our job description. We share the gospel in hope, knowing that as we align ourselves with life the way that God intended it to be, we will be better off for it in eternity. It carries its own rewards, not only in this life but also in the life to come. It is self-rewarded, with an automatic blessing.

And third, we share the gospel in love, because the message is good for our Muslim or Mormon neighbor. We think it is good for us, and they might

think it's good for them, too. Who knows, unless we actually give them a chance?

If life is going really well for them and they are happy with their understanding of God, then they probably aren't likely to convert. But how do we know their level of contentment unless we actually talk about it with them? Maybe they are happy with their religion only because they don't know there's anything better out there.

I'm not saying we should barge into their living room and give them a 30-minute sermon. There are better ways to go about it. The Muslim is going to need a somewhat different explanation than the Buddhist needs. Methodists have different questions than Catholics do. We need to be aware of our audience.

But mostly, we need to be aware of the gospel. The gospel comes with a claim on our life: Christ died for all, so that we would live for him. Do we live for him and do the work he has assigned us to do?

Michael Morrison

GOD'S GIFT FOR YOU: OUTLINE FOR AN EVANGELISTIC TRACT

Bible quotations are from the Contemporary English Version

Copyright 1995, American Bible Society

God made the sun, moon, and stars, land and sea, plants and animals – *and you!* This was not an accident – he made you because he wanted you to be one of his children.

God has a good life, and he wants his children to have a good life. The Bible says, “God created humans to be like himself: he made men and women” (Genesis 1:27).

God wants us to live with him, where everything is perfect. But there is a problem: we aren’t perfect. No one deserves to be with God. The Bible says, “All of us have sinned and fallen short of God’s glory” (Romans 3:23).

God knows everything we have ever done, and he loves us even if we aren’t perfect. The Bible says, “God is love” (1 John 4:8).

We can never do enough good things to earn a place in God’s family, but God gives it to us as a *gift*. The Bible says, “God’s gift is eternal life given by Jesus Christ our Lord” (Romans 6:23).

How did God do this? He did it by sending his Son, Jesus Christ, to be our Savior. The Bible says, “God showed how much he loved us by having Christ die for us, even though we were sinful” (Romans 5:8).

One of the most famous verses in the Bible says, “God loved the people of this world so much that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who has faith in him will have eternal life and never really die” (John 3:16).

“God wants everyone to be saved and to know the whole truth, which is, There is only one God, and Christ Jesus is the only one who can bring us to God. Jesus was truly human, and he gave himself to rescue all of us” (1 Timothy 2:4-5).

Jesus Christ was God’s Son, and he became a human and lived a perfect life. Then he died for us, to rescue us from all the wrong things we have ever done.

And God brought Jesus back to life! “God gave Jesus to die for our sins, and he raised him to life, so that we would be made acceptable to God” (Romans 4:25).

The life and resurrection of Jesus shows that God has power over sin and death. Because of what he has done, we can be sure that he can rescue us

from sin and death, too. The apostle Paul asked, “Who will rescue me from this body that is doomed to die? Thank God! Jesus Christ will rescue me” (Romans 7:24-25).

Salvation is a gift – but God doesn’t force it on us. It will affect our lives only if we believe that it’s true. “You will be saved, if you honestly say, ‘Jesus is Lord,’ and if you believe with all your heart that God raised him from death” (Romans 10:9).

If we let him, God will help us live a new life. The apostle Paul said, “Christ lives in me. And I now live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave his life for me” (Galatians 2:20).

Our life will be changed! “God’s Spirit makes us loving, happy, peaceful, patient, kind, good, faithful, gentle, and self-controlled” (Galatians 5:22-23).

Michael Morrison

LIVING THE GOSPEL

As followers of Jesus Christ, we proclaim the gospel—we announce the good news of what Christ has done for all humanity. But the gospel is not just words to pronounce—it also involves practical application in our lives.

When we accept the gospel of grace, it affects the way we think and the way we live. When we realize that we are sinners saved only by God's mercy, we become more patient with other sinners. When we realize that we have been forgiven an enormous debt, we become more forgiving. The better we understand and appreciate the grace shown us, the more gracious we become toward others. We see the need for forgiveness in ourselves and in others.

However, the more we see the need to be like Christ, the more we see how inadequate we are to this calling. We do not forgive as well as we should, or as well as we want to. We continue to need forgiveness for our lack of forgiveness, as well as our many other shortcomings. We do not find it in ourselves to do what we know we should.

So we look to God for the strength to forgive, and the desire to forgive. This is a learning and growing process, not achieved all at once. We look to God to change not just what we do, but who we are and how we think and what we value.

A matter of trust

In this often-slow process of change, we need to trust Christ. We need to trust that he will, in his own time, make us like himself. We need to trust that he will change others, too. Although the church and its members are not perfect, and although they disappoint us and sometimes even hurt us, we need to trust Christ to do his work in them just as he does his work in us. We are all sinners on the journey together.

Trust in Christ affects the way we live—the gospel persistently reminds us to be forgiving, and to be aware that forgiveness will always be a necessity in this world. Just as we need continual forgiveness from God, the people around us need continual forgiveness from us. Even people with the best of intentions make mistakes. Even people who love us hurt us sometimes. In this world of pain and tears, forgiveness is necessary.

If this world is all we have to hope for, we have a rather meager hope. But in Christ, we have a sure hope of a far better world to come. The world needs a major overhaul, and we trust that Christ will do it. Our faith in the future, the heavenly world that Christ has promised, changes our values in the present. We put less importance on the things that this world values, and we put more emphasis on the things of Christ.

This change in values doesn't happen instantaneously. Like other changes in our lives, it is a slow process with breakthroughs and backslidings. Sometimes we get mired in the temporary things of the world, and sometimes

we are able to cast them away as irrelevant and unnecessary burdens. As we value people more than things, as we value truth more than money, as we value grace more than revenge, the gospel is changing our lives.

Examples

Friends, we are not just to know the gospel and preach the gospel—we are to be living examples of the gospel—examples of grace and faith and love. We want our lives to support the gospel, to commend the gospel, to make it attractive to others. We want the words we say about Jesus Christ to be accompanied by the sweet aroma of a Christlike life.

Few things can bring the gospel into disrepute more than a Christian with a corrupt life. People hear of sexual immorality within the church and devalue the gospel even before they hear it. Get your own house in order, they might say, and then we might listen to what you say.

Certain television evangelists have given the gospel a bad name. Church treasurers who steal give the gospel a bad name. Immoral priests have undermined the gospel. Church members who gossip and slander cause the gospel to be ridiculed. Hypocrisy undermines the good news. Self-righteous judgmentalism, on the other hand, hurts the gospel as much as adultery and crime. The point is that our behavior affects the reputation of the message. One bad example can mar thousands of good words.

A good example, however, helps the gospel to be favorably received. That is one of the dynamics at work in friendship evangelism. People can be won to Christ in only a few words after they have seen some good examples of the gospel in action. As Paul wrote, “Conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ” (Philippians 1:27). Some behaviors are worthy of the gospel, and some are not. Our example is important. Our lives should reflect the grace and faith we have in Jesus Christ.

When we trust Christ, we are willing to do what he says, confident that his instructions are what we need. Our behavior should include not only obedience to the commands of Christ, but also sensitivity to the expectations of our cultures. We do not have to obey cultural expectations, but we are sensitive to them because that is part of the way that we show love to others. We are considerate, gentle, patient and kind. Faith and love makes a difference in our lives.

Jesus said, Let your good deeds be seen so people will praise God (Matthew 5:16). Peter wrote, Let your good deeds be seen so people will glorify God when the right time comes (1 Peter 2:12). But we do not do good deeds simply for show—we do them because they are right. We were made for the purpose of doing good deeds (Ephesians 2:10). We were made for love, and love means more than good feelings—it means helpful words and helpful actions.

Cause and effect

However, the gospel is not a list of good deeds that we must perform. The gospel is a message of grace—but after this message has taken root in our lives, it produces the fruit of good works, because the more we value the grace and love we have been given, the more we want to dispense grace and love to others.

Even so, we must distinguish between root and fruit, between the gospel and its results. We should not preach the results as if they were the message, because if people try to imitate the results without being motivated by the grace of Jesus Christ, they have mere religion, a fake faith, a legalism, not the gospel.

We preach the gospel of grace. We can point people, as the New Testament does, to the results that God's love will have in our lives, but we must remember that these are the results and not the focus of the message. But on the other hand, if there are no results, we might wonder whether the gospel has really been understood. This calls for patience. Just as we have a continual need for grace, others do too, and we have to trust Christ to do the work that only he can do.

The gospel commends good works, and good works commend the gospel. It is important to distinguish them, but not separate them. They go together, and grace is the horse that pulls the cart of good works. Our job is to help the horse. Our behavior should be a reflection of the gospel, based on grace, pointing toward faith and love.

How can we better live the gospel? That is something worth thinking about, worth talking about and worth putting into practice.

Joseph Tkach

IT'S ABOUT RELATIONSHIPS

According to an article in *Christianity Today*, 19.8 percent of North American non-Christians do not know any Christians and 60 percent have no relationships with any.¹ According to LifeWay president Thom Rainer, in his book *The Unchurched Next Door*, though most people come to church because of a personal invitation, seven out of ten unchurched people have *never* been invited to attend church, despite the fact that 82 percent of unchurched people are at least somewhat likely to attend when invited.

LifeWay Research surveyed over 15,000 adults and found that about two-thirds are willing to receive information about a local church from a family member, and over half are willing if the information comes from a friend or neighbor. The survey also showed that 4 percent of formerly church members are actively looking for a church to attend (other than their previous church) and 6 percent would prefer to resume attending regularly in the same church they had attended.

The survey also indicated that over 60 percent are not actively looking for a church but are open to the idea of attending regularly again. It showed that many would respond to an invitation to attend church when given by a friend or acquaintance (41 percent), by their children (25 percent) or by an adult family member (25 percent). The issue of affinity surfaced here: 35 percent indicated that they would be inspired to attend “if I knew there were people like me there.” Unfortunately, the study also revealed that only 2 percent of church members have invited someone to church in the past year.

Statistics like these remind me of Jesus’ words in Matthew 9:37: “The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few.” I can only echo the words of Lee Strobel, author of *The Case for Christ*, “Seven out of 10 unchurched people would visit a church if a friend invited them. What are we waiting for?”

¹ The article is online at www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2013/august-web-only/non-christians-who-dont-know-christians.html

SHARING THE GOOD NEWS

After Jesus had been resurrected and had appeared to his disciples for several weeks, he took them to the Mount of Olives. The disciples asked him, “Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?” (Acts 1:6). In other words, where are we now in the prophetic timetable? Are we near the end?

And Jesus answered, “It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by his own authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth” (verses 7-8). In other words, you don’t need to know the prophetic timetable. What you need to do is to preach the gospel.

What Jesus said to the disciples is still true: Our place in prophecy is not to calculate dates, but to preach the gospel. We do not need to worry about the *next* phase of God’s plan—we need to be diligent about the phase of history we are *currently* in. This is the church age, the gospel-preaching age, and we need to be doing the work he has assigned us.

Evangelism is central to our mission, as described in Jesus’ “Great Commission”: “Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you” (Matthew 28:19-20).

For apostles only?

However, a few people have wondered: “The apostles were commanded to preach the gospel, but how do we know that it applies to us today? Isn’t our role just to set a good example, and then give the gospel to people when they ask about it? The Bible does not actually command us to preach to the public, does it?”

Let’s go back to Matthew 28:19-20. Jesus told his apostles to teach other people to obey everything he had commanded the disciples. And one of his commands to them was to preach, and as a result, the apostles taught believers to obey Jesus’ command to preach the gospel. In effect, Jesus gave a self-perpetuating command. Future disciples were to carry on the commission. Matthew ended his book with a command that his readers needed to obey.

Verse 20 tells us that Jesus promised, “I am with you always, to the very end of the age.” Jesus did not promise merely to be with the apostles, but with the church throughout the centuries. The commission is likewise

applicable to all the church, from the earliest apostles even to the end of the age. The New Testament records the results of Christ being with and motivating apostles and many other believers to preach the gospel.

A word about ‘preach’

Before we look at examples in the New Testament about the church carrying out the command to preach, let us take a moment to better understand the Greek words usually translated “preach” or “preaching.” Some Christians are put off by the idea that all believers are told to “preach.” They understand “preaching” as standing up in public and speaking convincingly and forcefully. Very few people are equipped to do that kind of “preaching.”

But “preach” is only one of the possible ways the Greek words can be translated. One of the words commonly translated “preach” is *euaggelizō*, and it means “to bring or announce good news.” Certainly, the common understanding of “preach” is an important way in which the good news is announced. But that common understanding is not the only way to bring the gospel.

In passages such as Luke 1:19 and 2:10, *euaggelizō* is translated “show” or “bring” the good news. Our concept of “preach” needs to expand to include the many other ways the gospel can be given to others. The concept intended with *euaggelizō* is that of a person or persons getting across the message of the good news of the gospel to other people. There are many ways in which that can be done in addition to preaching.

Another word usually translated “preach” is *kerysso*, and this means to to proclaim, to make known. This can be done by public preaching, but it can be done in other ways too. The word used in Mark 16:15 and translated “preach” is *kerysso*.

Different translations often use different words to translate *kerysso* or *euaggelizō*. For example, in Luke 9:2, the King James Version translates *kerysso* as “preach,” while the New American Standard translates it “proclaim.” In Luke 1:19, the KJV translates *euaggelizō* as “shew thee these glad tidings,” while the NAS translates it as “bring you this good news” and the New International Version has it “tell you this good news.”

Getting the gospel to others is not limited just to popular notions of preaching. On the contrary, informing others about the grace of God in Jesus Christ can take many forms, and all of us are gifted by the Spirit to bring the gospel to others in one way or another.

Evangelism in the early church

Throughout the book of Acts, we see the apostles carrying out Jesus' commission. They declared that Jesus is the Christ, that he was crucified and raised from the dead, and that salvation is available through him. It was a Christ-centered message, an "evangelistic" or "gospel-oriented" message.

But was the gospel proclaimed by the apostles alone? Not at all! Stephen did great works in the name of Christ, and argued that Jesus is the Christ (Acts 6:8-10). Before the Sanhedrin, he forcefully argued that Jesus is the Righteous One, the Messiah, predicted in the Scriptures (Acts 7:51-52). His dying words were a testimony to God's forgiveness of sins in Christ (verse 60).

God inspired Stephen, and he inspired many others. "On that day a great persecution broke out against the church at Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered.... Those who had been scattered preached the word (*euaggelizō*) wherever they went" (Acts 8:1, 4). Even at risk of their lives, these lay Christians saw to it that the gospel was given to others. They were simply doing what Christians do naturally. They felt compelled—led by the Holy Spirit—to tell others the good news that God had blessed them with. Luke presents the story as a good example for us to follow.

Next, Philip went "to a city in Samaria and proclaimed the Christ there" (verse 5). God blessed this evangelism by converting some of the Samaritans. The gospel continued to expand.

"Those who had been scattered by the persecution in connection with Stephen traveled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus and Antioch, telling the message only to Jews. Some of them, however, men from Cyprus and Cyrene, went to Antioch and began to speak to Greeks also, telling them the good news about the Lord Jesus. The Lord's hand was with them, and a great number of people believed and turned to the Lord" (Acts 11:19-21).

God inspired his people to tell the good news about Jesus, and he blessed the results.

Paul was given a special commission as an apostle to the Gentiles. But Luke tells us that Paul was not the only one who shared the good news with them. "Paul and Barnabas remained in Antioch, where they *and many others* taught and preached the word of the Lord" (Acts 15:34). Luke does not think that the commission applied only to the apostles. His book serves as an example of what future generations of the church should do.

Also in the book of Acts, we might note the example of Apollos, who

“vigorously refuted the Jews in public debate, proving from the Scriptures that Jesus was the Christ” (Acts 18:28). Later, Paul rejoiced that even more people were preaching Christ (Philippians 1:15-18; *kyrasso* is used in verse 15; *katagello*, meaning “proclaim,” is used in verses 16 and 18).

Paul told Timothy (2 Timothy 4:5) to do the work of an evangelist (*euaggelistes*—a bringer of good news). God gives some of his people a gift for evangelism (Ephesians 4:11). Training can make their gift even more effective. The church could not fulfill its mission if all it ever did was wait for people to come to it. It needs to be intentional about going out in the name of Christ and reaching people with the good news.

Personal evangelism

At one level or another, evangelism involves every member of the church, every disciple of Jesus Christ. As we mature in the faith, each member should become more competent with the Christian message. “By this time you ought to be teachers,” Hebrews 5:12 says, implying that anyone who has been a Christian for a while should be able to teach others the good news.

God has given the “message of reconciliation” to all who are reconciled by Jesus Christ (2 Corinthians 5:18-19). We are to encourage other people to be reconciled to God through the gospel of Jesus Christ.

As the church obeys the commands of Christ and we conduct ourselves “in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ” (Philippians 1:27), people will indeed come to us and ask for help. This is evangelism by example, and it adds to rather than replaces our responsibility to be intentional about reaching others. We are to do both. Part of our example should be our willingness to give credit to the One who works within us.

We are a holy people, called to “declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light” (1 Peter 2:9). How do we do this? In part, by living “such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us” (verse 12).

It is in the context of setting a good example that Peter writes, “Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have” (1 Peter 3:15). Example and evangelism go hand in hand. Sometimes one comes first, sometimes the other does.

In the world today, the Christian way of life stands out. When society is pessimistic and apathetic, the Christian hope and purpose are more noticeable. People need and want the peace of Christ, whether they understand it yet or not. When they ask for help, we can explain in our own

words why we have hope in Jesus Christ. A good example and a wise witness to our faith help preach the good news.

Paul encouraged Christians to live “without fault in a crooked and depraved generation, in which you shine like stars in the universe” (Philippians 2:15). But the Christian’s role in the community does not stop with avoiding sin. Paul’s very next words are “as you hold out the word of life” (verse 16). Their works were combined with their words. Good deeds go with the gospel, and the combination is an effective form of evangelism.

Prepared to give an answer

Each Christian should be able to explain the basics of the faith. Perhaps not in an eloquent way, and certainly not in an argumentative way, but in simple confidence. We know the peace of God in our lives. We know that we will be resurrected. We know that life is worthwhile. We know that our sins are forgiven. We know that God sent his Son to die for us, and that he now lives for us. We know he wants us to stop living for ourselves and start living for him (2 Corinthians 5:15).

Christians can’t explain every verse of the Bible, but they can give their own testimony as to why they believe. They can’t prove every point with an iron-clad argument, and they don’t need to. What makes their testimony believable is their “good behavior in Christ” (1 Peter 3:16). When we give an answer for the hope that lies within us, the evidence is in our works as well as in our words. The two reinforce each other to make each more effective than they would have been on their own.

Not every member is equally gifted at explaining the grace of God, and not every member will do it in the same way. “Evangelism,” in the sense of continually approaching others with the gospel, is a spiritual gift, and we cannot expect every Christian to have this particular gift. But all Christians are commanded to be ready to give an answer. All of us should want our neighbors to have the blessing of knowing Christ, rather than living in ignorance. All Christians should be ready to be used by God when appropriate situations arise.

Personal evangelism should not be ignored. The Holy Spirit leads each Christian in behavior and in word. That means that each of us should be a good example in the community and be a faithful witness of the faith that lies within us. If you are a more reserved person, if religion is not the first subject you want to bring up, that’s OK. Be zealous for Christ in the way God has gifted you—but always be ready to give an answer. Being ready includes being willing, not just having the right words.

Christ's commission to bring the gospel to others is a continuing part of our work. That is why we are committed to the work of evangelism—this is one of the ways in which we obey Jesus Christ. This is part of our commission, part of our responsibility.

Joseph Tkach

SHARING A SECRET

I've got a secret—and you probably have one, too. But it's no longer a secret. It's been revealed in the gospel of Jesus Christ. It was hidden for a long time, Paul said, but at just the right time it was opened to the world.

The gospel is “the revelation of the mystery hidden for long ages past, but now revealed and made known through the prophetic writings by the command of the eternal God, so that all nations might believe and obey him” (Romans 16:25).

God had a mystery—a secret plan—a plan for all nations to be given eternal life in Jesus Christ. The Old Testament prophets wrote about God's plan, but very few people back then understood it.

An Old Testament secret



God whispered the secret to Abraham when he called him out of Mesopotamia. “Go to the land I will show you,” God said, “and I will bless you ... and *all peoples on earth* will be blessed through you” (Genesis 12:1-3). The blessing of Abraham extends not just to the Jewish people, but to people everywhere around the globe. Genesis says very little about it. It doesn't even say that the blessing would involve

eternal life. It was still a secret.

Centuries later, when God brought Israel out of Egypt, he whispered again that his plan was bigger than the tribes of Israel. The plagues on Egypt were not just to punish Egypt or to impress Israel—they were also designed so that “the Egyptians will know that I am the Lord” (Exodus 7:5).

The plan went farther than Egypt, too. God told Pharaoh that he would show his power in Egypt so that “my name might be proclaimed in all the earth” (Exodus 9:16). Apparently some of the Egyptians learned about the secret—there were “many other people” who left with the Israelites (Exodus 12:38).

When Israel was at Mount Sinai, God offered that they could become “a kingdom of priests” (Exodus 19:6). They would help other nations come to God. Israel seems to have neglected the offer, though, and we do not hear of it again until the New Testament. But God's plan remained—he was still determined to bring all nations to learn about what he could do for them.

When Joshua led the people across the Jordan River, was it just for Israel? No—Joshua said that God's plan was that “all the people of the earth might

know that the hand of the Lord is powerful” (Joshua 4:24). The shepherd boy David had an inkling of what God was doing, too. He told Goliath that “the whole world will know that there is a God in Israel” (1 Samuel 17:46).

Singing about salvation

Many of the psalms are about God’s plan for all nations. Psalm 2 speaks to the Son of God: “Ask of me, and I will make the nations your inheritance, the ends of the earth your possession” (verse 8). “Kiss the Son,” the nations are advised. “Blessed are all who take refuge in him” (verse 12).

“Let all the earth fear the Lord,” Psalm 33:8 says. “Let all the people of the world revere him.” O, that everyone would know his goodness. “Shout with joy to God, all the earth!” (Psalm 66:1) “Come and see what God has done,” the psalmist says to everyone. “Praise our God, O peoples... Come and listen, all you who fear God; let me tell you what he has done for me” (verses 8, 16).

The mission of the church is not based on a single scripture at the end of Matthew—it is based on what God has promised from the beginning. Although the Old Testament is focused on Israel, various passages here and there remind us that God has a lot more than Israel in mind.

God sent his own Son into another culture in order to reach people. When we are involved in mission, when we are sharing the blessing he has given us, we are taking part in God’s plan to bless all nations through the Seed of Abraham.

“Sing to the Lord, all the earth.... Proclaim his salvation day after day. Declare his glory among the nations” (Psalm 96:1-2). “The Lord has made his salvation known and revealed his righteousness to the nations.... All the ends of the earth have seen the salvation of our God. Shout for joy to the Lord, all the earth” (Psalm 98:2-4).

Everyone is involved

God wants everyone to come to a knowledge of salvation—to hear the gospel (1 Timothy 2:4). When our hearts are like the heart of God, we too want to see the salvation of all peoples, and we’ll do our part spreading his good news to others. Some of us will go to our own city to share the gospel. Others will travel within one nation, and some will go to other nations. Others will support them in prayer and finances and hospitality.

I encourage you to share the gospel, and to pray for those who share the gospel. I encourage each congregation to train people in evangelism, encourage people in evangelism, and allocate part of their budget for evangelism. It can be done by supporting churches in other nations, or by

supporting new churches in the next neighborhood.

The Great Commission is our mission, and that is why our financial structure includes support for mission developers in other nations. Through this denominational initiative, every congregation has at least an indirect role in supporting overseas missions. Some choose to have more direct involvement, too, through “sister church” arrangements or other partnerships that can help churches share the good news of salvation.

We may help in different ways, but for each of us, the call is there: Go, preach the gospel, make disciples of all nations, and teach them to do the same thing (Matthew 29:19-20). The secret is simply too good to keep to ourselves.

Joseph Tkach

REACHING OUT WITH THE GOSPEL

What is the best, most effective way to share the gospel with others? This is a question our church has been discussing as long as I can remember. And I think I can say with some confidence that we have tried just about everything except the Goodyear blimp.

We have published millions of magazines and booklets, used radio and network television, launched evangelistic personal campaigns — and in recent years we have experimented with web casts and other types of social media.

Which of these has been the most effective? It's very hard to quantify the results. Some work for a time, and then the novelty wears off. Others seem to be effective, until we add up the cost. Then there are methods that generate a huge initial response, but very little actual returns. Like a magazine newsstand program. Or advertisements in *Reader's Digest*.

But is there one method that is the most effective? Yes, there is.

Ed Stetzer was a guest speaker at our International Conference in Orlando. He is a missiologist and the president of LifeWay Research, and he provided us with a helpful, humorous and colorful presentation on evangelism. He noted that while driving down the interstate, especially in the “Bible belt” in the USA, you will come across some interesting billboards and marquees, set up by well-meaning religious organizations that seem to have more enthusiasm than theological insight and marketing savvy.

Like me, you probably wonder what made the sponsors think that messages like these would turn people to the gospel. As Ed said, “You feel frustrated at how silly they seem. But more importantly, you wonder about the reaction of the countless unchurched who are reading them.”

Ed has done research on this topic, and has come up with some interesting information about how unchurched people respond to various evangelistic approaches. He conducted a survey with more than 15,000 Americans, asking them about different methods of church outreach. The survey covered 13 different evangelistic methods to discover ways that Americans are willing to receive information about local congregations. The top five, in increasing order of effectiveness, are:

- 5) Newspaper or magazine advertising — 46%
- 4) Outdoor sign or billboard — 46%
- 3) Informative ad in the newspaper — 48%
- 2) Personal conversation with a friend or neighbor from the church — 56%

1) Personal conversation with a family member — 63%

So the research showed that, whereas mass marketing methods have some effect, the biggest impact is gained by the least expensive techniques.

Additionally, the research discovered that some people are more or less receptive to considering issues of faith at different times in differing circumstances. The following are the top five times that people are most open to considering matters of faith:

5) After the birth of a baby — 28%

4) After a natural disaster — 34%

3) After a major national crisis — 38%

2) During the Easter season — 38%

1) During the Christmas season — 47%

What Ed Stetzer's research has shown is that unchurched people are more willing to talk about Jesus than we may realize. But it has to be the right person and the right time. So while the research shows that marketing and advertising do provide support for outreach, they are supplemental at best. Contact based on relationships is the most effective approach.

And so it has been since the early years, when Peter exhorted the first Christians: "Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have" (1 Peter 3:15).

The message of Jesus is best shared by example, one conversation at a time. Perhaps that helps explain why, rather than hovering over us for all eternity in a heavenly blimp, Jesus came to us in time and space, in flesh and blood, in person, face to face!

Joseph Tkach

SHARING YOUR FAITH

“Everyone knows the Bible is filled with contradictions,” I asserted, smugly assuming that I had scored a point in the debate my friend and I were having. The conversation had begun innocently enough. We were members of a high school debate team, and we were at a tournament miles from our hometown. The debates were finished, and we were just killing time, waiting for the results to be announced.

At first our conversation was casual, but it became more intense when one of his offhand remarks made me realize for the first time that he was a Christian. I had always assumed Christians were ignorant and uneducated. Until now. This friend was not ignorant. On the contrary, he was very intelligent.

I was intrigued by the idea that he had firm religious convictions, so I began to ask him questions. At first my questions were based on a desire to trip him up. But gradually, as my friend provided answers that made sense, my questions came out of a hunger I had never acknowledged. The real turning point in our debate was my assertion that the Bible contradicts itself. His answer stunned me.

“Where?” he asked.

That one word hit me with the force of a freight train. He had not argued with me. He simply asked a question I could not answer because I had not read the Bible for myself. I felt ignorant and exposed. For someone who had always looked at Christians as ignorant, I was forced to see that I was the one who was ignorant of what the Bible really contained. Even nonbelievers



admit that the Bible has been a vital force shaping Western civilization, but I had never examined this cornerstone of our culture.

More than two years passed before my friend ever knew the effect that conversation had on me. At the time, he thought I simply walked away from what I had heard. He did not know our discussion was never far from my thoughts until I finally acted on what I knew.

“Do I have to?”

The results of such experiences are often not seen right away. Many Christians therefore see evangelism as a rarely successful chore. It is difficult to be motivated, if you cannot see any results.

Evangelism is the duty of all Christians. The great commission at the end of Matthew’s Gospel is a commission for all who follow Jesus Christ: “Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit” (Matthew 28:19).

In the video *Go For It!*, a primer on evangelism, British evangelist Ian Knox lists four reasons for us as Christians to share our faith. The first three relate to our duty: 1) Christ commands us to, 2) the world urgently needs the gospel and 3) the fields are already “ripe for harvest” (John 4:35).

The fourth reason relates to our own spiritual health. We share our faith because we cannot contain ourselves. This was true of the early church. When the religious authorities ordered the disciples to stop preaching the gospel, Peter’s answer described their burning desire: “For we cannot help speaking about what we have seen and heard” (Acts 4:20).

Evangelism is not a matter of knowing all the answers, nor does it require that we have a sophisticated theological argument. Instead, it is a natural outgrowth of a deep faith. It is something good that we want others to enjoy.

The flip side of this fourth reason is that sharing our faith cultivates a still deeper faith in us. In their book, *Becoming a Contagious Christian*, Bill Hybels and Mark Mittelberg touch on this idea. An enthusiastic faith is a contagious faith, and new believers are often the most zealous. When mature Christians see the enthusiasm of a new believer, they cannot help but examine their own relationship with God. And mature Christians who share their faith will find themselves in this situation repeatedly. “So what started as dutifully helping someone else,” Hybels and Mittelberg say, “changes into a personal desire for intimacy with God.”

Is anyone really interested?

One of the greatest obstacles to Christians sharing their faith is the mistaken idea that no one is interested, Hybels and Mittelberg note. “Most of us routinely make the mistake of assuming people aren’t really that interested in spiritual truth. But many people today are getting tired of living without ultimate purpose.... Many of them are actively searching for answers.”

A Gallup Poll in the 1990s suggested that baby boomers, roughly one third of the population, look for deeper answers to life’s questions after they become parents. “Those expecting to spend more time with religious

activities in the future,” according to the book *Religion in America: 1992-1993*, a summary of Gallup Polls on the subject, “far outweigh the boomers who anticipate less time.”

Most of us are still uneasy, and perhaps even afraid, of sharing our faith. A cartoon captured this sentiment. A dispassionate pastor rhetorically asks his congregation: “The question is, How do we win the world to Christ...with a minimum of fuss and bother?” (*Leadership*, Spring 1993). Sharing one’s faith should not be burdensome—either to the Christian or to the unbeliever.

Relational evangelism

Perhaps the biggest factor in our fear of evangelism is the idea that sharing our faith means standing on street corners flagging down unsuspecting sinners. This approach is usually ineffective.

The people who need the good news we bring live in a cynical time, an age without trust, even in little things. We all know, as they say, that there’s no free lunch, so we’re always suspecting a gimmick. How, then, could anyone expect to be effective offering to strangers something so intensely personal as the gospel of Jesus Christ?

Our society needs a different approach—an approach based on trust. That is how the concept of “relational evangelism” was born. “It’s the people we do know,” say Hybels and Mittelberg, “who have already developed a measure of trust in us and our motives, and are therefore most in range of influence.” When we concentrate on sharing our faith with people who trust us, our words and actions are more natural. No longer are we faced with the need to manufacture some artificial system or argument.

“Far too many Christians,” assert Hybels and Mittelberg, “have been anesthetized into thinking that if they simply live out their faith in an open and consistent fashion, the people around them will see it, want it, and somehow figure out how to get it.”

The realization that sharing one’s faith is much more effective when a Christian has developed close friendships with non-Christians is the premise of relational, or friendship, evangelism. In *Sharing Our Faith With Friends Without Losing Either*, Monte Sahlin states that placing no conditions on friendship is a vital element of relational evangelism.

Most of us have grown accustomed to our own private worlds, comfort zones where everyone we are close to is a Christian. A few Christians even believe it is wrong to befriend unbelievers. Spending time with unbelievers may be denounced as friendship with the world. Yet, without the willingness to penetrate the world of unbelievers, we’ll never have the opportunity to

share our faith with them.

Jesus did not restrict his love to those who sought him. He actively pursued sinners, spending so much time with them that the Pharisees assumed that he was a sinner, too. His response put the matter in perspective: “It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick” (Matthew 9:12).

The apostle Paul may be the premier biblical example of a Christian eager to share his faith. He befriended people. “I have become all things to all men,” he wrote, “so that by all possible means I might save some” (1 Corinthians 9:22).

The key to success in relational evangelism is not how well that we as Christians can argue, or how much we know. The key, Sahlin insists, is listening—really listening.

One of the most important elements that leads to effective relational evangelism is the relationship between a Christian and Christ. We cannot expect success if we give an answer that we have not accepted for ourselves. But when our words about Jesus Christ are based on lives that include him, others will be far more receptive to the gospel.

Starting an epidemic

Hybels and Mittelberg, in *Becoming a Contagious Christian*, present the following formula for sharing one’s faith: $HP + CP + CC = MI$. HP stands for high potency, which refers to the kind of moral character that makes others take notice. It is a reflection of “Christ’s influence in our lives” that makes “His power and presence...undeniable to others.”

The second component, CP, is close proximity, which means that Christians cannot spend all their time only with other Christians. We must mix with unbelievers as well. CC, the third component, is clear communication, which requires us to have a good grasp of the essentials of the gospel. We do not need sophisticated theological language, but we must have a firm grasp of the essentials.

When believers have all three of these components in their lives, the inevitable result, according to Hybels and Mittelberg, is MI, or maximum impact.

Sharing our faith as Christians boils down to caring enough about unbelievers to lay down our lives in friendship, and, when the time is right, boldly discussing the good news of salvation through Christ. As Christians, we cannot succeed in sharing the gospel until we’re willing to sacrifice. That means learning to love unbelievers the way God does.

Once we share our faith with others, it’s important that we not abandon them. Like babies who are dependent on their parents for everything,

newborn Christians need the support and help of mature Christian friends. That will mean helping them begin lives of Bible study, prayer, and worship. It will mean sharing the joy of Christian fellowship.

A measure of success

More than two years passed since my former debate teammate and I had discussed Christianity. Both of us had completed our first year in college. For him, our conversation was a distant memory. But to me, it had been a turning point, a catalyst that initiated major changes in my life. That's why I had to tell him what had happened since that moment.

I rang his doorbell in anticipation. When he came to the door, I wasted no time telling him of my faith in Christ. I'll never forget how surprised he was. All he remembered was my hostile reaction to his words. Until I met him at his door, he did not know the effect he'd had on my life.

We cannot always see how God is working in our own lives, much less the lives of others. That's why we must be careful not to dismiss our conversations with unbelievers as ineffective. For most of those to whom we reach out, we'll only be one stop on their road to conversion. Many other people may be involved as well.

Our measure of success cannot be quantitative—how many people come to Christ through us. Instead, we must measure our success in *qualitative* terms—how much we reflect the love of Christ and how willingly we share his gospel.

B. Palmer

SHARING YOUR FAITH... WITH THE UNCHURCHED

By some estimates, 55 to 78 million adults in the United States seem content without attending church (Lee Strobel, *Inside the Mind of Unchurched Harry and Mary*, page 44).

Unchurched Harry and Mary are a lot like many Americans today — people trying to fight the traffic, pay the bills and eke out a living in today's uncertain economy. They are “nice” people. They don't throw wild parties, ruin the neighborhood, or threaten others with bodily harm — but they probably haven't been to a church for years, except to attend weddings and funerals. They are the unchurched.

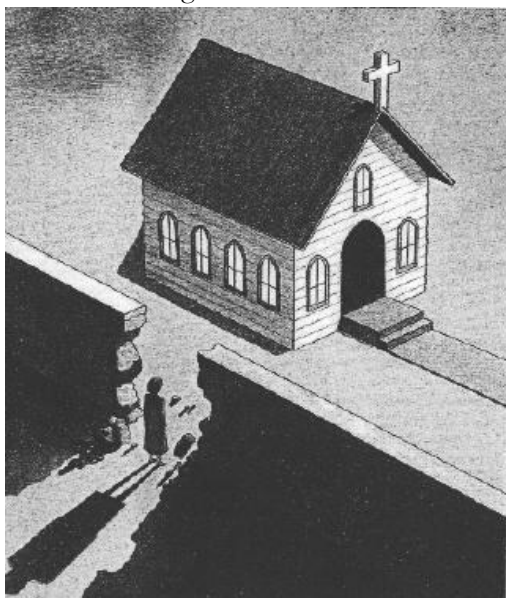
As Christians, we are expected—sometime, somehow—to share our faith with people like Harry and Mary. If Jesus lives in us, then we have little choice. The apostle Paul showed that all Christians participate—to one degree or another—in God's intentions to reconcile the world to himself:

Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting men's sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of

reconciliation. (2
Corinthians 5:17-19)

God has committed to us the message of reconciliation. It is hard to think of a bigger incentive to share our faith with the unchurched. “God has reconciled the world in Christ,” writes Ralph Martin. “But the task of proclaiming the reconciliation goes on” (2 *Corinthians*, Word Biblical Commentary, page 138).

Paul created a vivid analogy for this part of our Christian job description:



“We are therefore Christ’s ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us.... As God’s fellow workers we urge you not to receive God’s grace in vain” (2 Corinthians 5:20; 6:1). We are to yield to God, allowing him to make his appeal to this hurting world through us. It’s a humbling assignment, isn’t it? Thankfully, God’s Word and real-life Christian examples can help train us for the task.

Evangelism most personal

Charles Swindoll explained personal evangelism: “The skeptic may deny your doctrine or attack your church but he cannot honestly ignore the fact that your life has been changed. He may stop his ears to the presentations of a preacher and the pleadings of an evangelist, but he is somehow attracted to the human-interest story of how you—John Q. Public—found peace within” (*Come Before Winter*, page 43). The gospel according to *you*—it’s one of the best weapons in your Christian arsenal.

Thirty years ago, I had drifted away from regular church attendance. I remember a preacher forcefully challenging me on some ideas I had. I was stirred to search the Bible, to come to grips with the urgency of the gospel. That produced an upheaval in my life that has had a lasting effect. I remember wanting to share this new conviction with my best friend.

Guess what? Because he was my friend he listened. He heard me out. And because he had a friend, and she had other friends, eventually a group of seven people who had more or less drifted from active church involvement made a commitment to put God number one in their lives. We’ve had our ups and downs, but all were affected for the good.

Here’s the point: When we are first convicted by the gospel, we are almost bubbling over with enthusiasm for what we have learned. We want to share it with people close to us. We find out fairly soon that some will respond and some won’t. It seems that rule number one in sharing your faith with the unchurched is to not be easily discouraged. Even in Jesus’ parable of the sower, much seed fell by the wayside (Matthew 13:3-7). I learned as a pastor that this is normal.

We are best able to influence those closest to us, those with whom we have more credibility than the hit-and-run style of evangelism. But you won’t win them all. Remember, Jesus was crucified between two thieves. One responded. One did not. Even Paul, probably the greatest missionary in history, didn’t always convince the skeptics. “When they heard about the resurrection of the dead, some of them sneered.” Thankfully, there were some who said, “We want to hear you again on this subject” (Acts 17:32).

In Acts 28:1-6, we see Paul being regarded first as a murderer and then as a god. That is an insight into real-life evangelism. It is hard to predict how people will respond. But since we care about people and their hurts and fears, we try to stay open to the opportunities God provides for effective witness. “Seize the moment” might have been coined as a slogan for personal evangelism. My challenge has been to learn to build personal evangelism into my Christian walk as an ongoing experience. How about you?

Letters from Christ

Another great principle of sharing your faith is to know the kind of questions you could be asked. The good news is that most things people have on their minds are personal issues. Often it is a personal experience that has turned unchurched Harry and Mary off to Christianity. An abusive minister, a harsh doctrinal stance, above all, a conflict with someone in the church. These are the hurdles in many people’s minds.

Here is where your personal example comes into play. Most people you will share your faith with want the gospel according to you. You don’t even need to know how to read and write to be an effective ambassador for Christ. It is how we live our Christian lives as employees, neighbors and family members—these are our credentials. The apostle Paul was pleased that his converts were “a letter from Christ, the result of our ministry, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts” (2 Corinthians 3:3).

People open up to people they know. In this unpredictable and uncertain world, we can expect personal and social troubles keyed to the crises of life—a bout with cancer, or the office reaction to a recent disaster, for example. These real-life events can create the seedbed for Christian witness to flower. As Peter wrote, “Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have” (1 Peter 3:15). Having Christ in us makes us different. Over time, that difference stands out. This is core training in sharing our faith.

Words that help

The best evangelism is intimate, up-close and one-on-one. Perhaps Jane the receptionist will tearfully confide to you that her husband is leaving her for another woman. Or maybe Mark from the shipping department will close your door quietly and break the news he has prostate cancer. These are the real issues of life.

So what do you do? Verbalize your feelings. Make your communication heart-to-heart as well as head-to-head. Tell others you will pray for them. In some situations, it might be appropriate to pray together, asking God for wisdom and healing. Ask for strength and faith and peace, or share a favorite scripture. Perhaps 1 Corinthians 10:13: “No temptation has seized you except what is common to man. And God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can stand up under it.”

There is healing in God’s Word. Scripture can calm people. Sometimes that’s all that people caught in the panicky first frightening wave of crisis need. People who share their faith report how these dialogues often go:

● *Question:* “So Susan, how does your church explain the killing of those innocent children in the terrorist attack?”

● *Response:* “I can’t answer for everything that happens to us in this crazy world — the Bible says the rain falls on the righteous and the unrighteous (Matthew 5:45). God doesn’t promise us clear-cut answers; he offers faith for those who ask.”

● *Question:* “Well, Jack, how does your Christian faith help you figure out that big airline crash over the weekend? Still believe in a God of love, do you?”

● *Response:* “Plane crashes and other unexpected evils sure make us troubled — even to realize it might happen to us one day. We make our choices and take our chances. But a Christian always has Someone to turn to



when trouble hits.”

Be discerning. Go only as deep as the person wants you to go. Most unchurched people are not expecting us to be theologians. It’s our personal reaction—the gospel according to you and me—that people want to hear. “Be concise. Be spontaneous. Tell them in your own words what God has shown you,” advises one Christian single who has shared her faith with others.

God gives us faith to share. Let’s remember these basics:

- Be Christlike. Be the kind of person people can respect and confide in. Agree with people as much as possible. Be known for going the extra mile at work and elsewhere (Matthew 5:41). Christ living in you day by day will help you accomplish this. You don’t have to be perfect, but you do have to be consistently open, honest and concerned.
- Be bold. Don’t be afraid to tell people: “I’ll be praying for you” or “I have a booklet that’s helped me. I’ll bring it tomorrow if you want.” Offer to pray with them right then and there.
- Follow up. This shows you really are interested. A card or a gift is a concrete way of letting people know you care. Our world is starving for spiritual connection. With God’s help we can be ambassadors of healing. God wants us to share our faith with others.

Neil Earle

SHARING YOUR FAITH... THROUGH FRIENDSHIP

Some of us have a hard time expressing ourselves. We're not good with small talk. We're not witty. Get us away from familiar folks and surroundings, and we're not sure of what to say. Some people don't go to church because they can't stand the thought of talking to people they don't know. Others go to church, but arrive at the last minute, sit in the back row and hurry out the door at the last "Amen."

Yet, as Christians, our responsibility is to communicate with others, to share our faith. "Let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds. Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another" (Hebrews 10:24-25). But how can we share our faith and encourage one another in living Christian lives if we aren't getting together and communicating with others?

There's no magic formula for eloquence. But let me share with you a few lessons I've learned as a self-confessed nonverbal type.

You can learn to talk to others

I've learned that we can learn how to talk to other people. And what better place to learn than at worship services? Practice at church. Begin by getting to know people who find it easy to talk to others. All you have to do is ask them how they are, and then stand back and listen. If they reveal a problem

they've had that week, and you had something similar happen to you, share your experiences with them.

Letting people talk about their problems helps them to know that others care. Next week, talk to these people again. Since you talked to them before, you'll have something in common to discuss, and then talk to one or two more people.



Effective listening

One of the most important, and most neglected, aspects of communicating with others is effective listening. The apostle Paul encouraged Christians to “carry each other’s burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ” (Galatians 6:2). To share each other’s burdens, we need to know what those burdens are.

Often, friends or acquaintances are most receptive to seeking a closer relationship with God when they are suffering some kind of trial. But unless they feel comfortable discussing their problem with you, they won’t. When people are expressing their feelings, they appreciate being heard. If you are a good listener, they will talk to you.

One of the ways you can be a better listener is to listen with an open mind. If you act shocked and begin to judge and find fault, and then try to correct the individual, you’ve lost your opportunity to help. This world is not an easy place, and some people have a more difficult time coping with life than others. Haven’t we all made mistakes in judgment and then had to suffer the consequences? Listen compassionately. People need sympathy, not judgment.

Another way to be a good listener is to listen actively. If you’re not sure you understand, rephrase what your friend is telling you. For example, “If I understand you correctly, you are saying...” “In other words, you thought that...” “You felt that way because...” “I see, you mean that...” Repeating what your friend said in your own words helps you focus on what he or she is saying. It also limits misunderstandings.

Be supportive. If you are able to help, do so. Offer to pray about the problem. Let your friend know you have a relationship with God, and that God cares when we suffer.

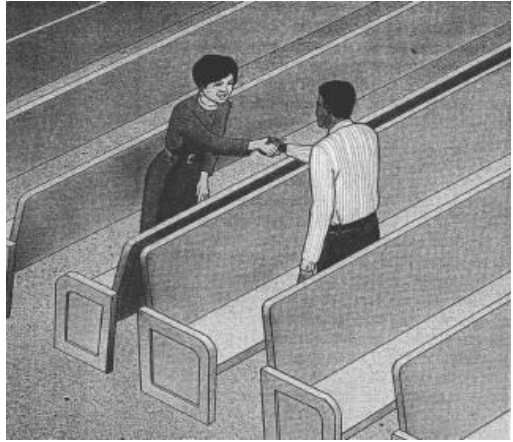
Who am I?

James gave us another clue for sharing our faith. “Confess your sins to each other” (James 5:16). To share our faith, we must be able to share ourselves. We must be able to admit that we have sinful human nature as well. We have our faults just like everyone else. Sharing yourself means you admit (confess) that Christian or not, you’ve made your mistakes. This will help people better relate to you.

It’s not easy for most of us to reveal who we are. We fear that if others really know what we’re like, then they will lack respect for us and reject us. But the opposite is often the case. Say, for example, that you haven’t let John, a friend at the office, know that you are a Christian. John is a nice guy, but once in a while he tells an off-color story. You nervously laugh at his jokes, but you’re cringing inside. You don’t want John to think you’re some kind of goody-goody. But you’re not doing John a favor by keeping from him how

you really feel. Some day John may need a friend he can talk to about God.

How do you let him know? Begin by offhandedly mentioning something funny your child said at church last weekend. Or talk about why your church softball team lost its last game. Letting John know you are involved in your church sends him the message that you are a Christian. He won't be as surprised as you might think. Long ago, he probably sensed something different about you. Knowing you are a Christian explains it for him.



He may kid you about it. That's OK. Or, he may not show any further interest, but if he does, you have the opportunity to share your personal convictions about Christ. Be ready for these opportunities when they come. You never know under what circumstances you may find yourself able to share your faith.

My son-in-law Alan is the vice president of an electrical company in Texas. One weekend an elderly African-American woman in his church asked for his help. A windstorm had snapped a tree limb, which had fallen and knocked out the power to her home. Alan, also a master electrician, set to work repairing the damage.

Alan knew Willie Mae well. He, and others, had helped her out before. She was taking care of some of her grandchildren and also had opened her home to others at times. She had built a small house for herself behind her home to free up her home to provide shelter for family members and others in need.

After repairing the damage, Alan had to call a city inspector to get the power turned back on. When the inspector came out, he was not happy with what he found. The wiring in Willie Mae's house was not up to city code. Alan began to explain her situation, citing her humanitarian efforts in the neighborhood. He told the inspector that she couldn't afford to have electrical work done by licensed electricians.

Alan said he was there because they attended the same church. The inspector, also African-American, listened with interest to this young white man, here in the middle of a black neighborhood on a Sunday afternoon, defending this elderly woman. "What church do you go to?" the inspector

asked. Alan told him. The inspector said he would like to attend next week.

Alan did not go out that weekend expecting to share his faith with someone he didn't know, but when the opportunity came, he responded. If he had been embarrassed to admit he was a Christian, this chance to share his faith would not have happened.

Of course, in sharing information about yourself, you don't want to talk nonstop about yourself and your walk with Christ. You need to discern when to tell what about yourself, and to whom you should tell it. But don't be secretive about being a Christian. Make yourself available to people. Sooner or later, they're going to find out you're not perfect, and they will feel closer to you because you're not.

How not to offend

The apostle Paul said not to offend each other. "Let us stop passing judgment on one another. Instead, make up your mind not to put any stumbling block or obstacle in your brother's way" (Romans 14:13). One of the quickest ways to turn people off is to be judgmental. Who wants to talk to someone who, when you express some belief you have, self-righteously condemns you for your weakness in the faith, plus a general lack of good sense?

Paul said it's OK to have some differences in beliefs. Some believe it's OK to eat meat. Others are strict vegetarians. Some Christians believe the moderate use of alcohol is fine. Others feel even taking one drink is a sin. Some keep certain days holy to God. Others keep other days, and some feel every day is sacred. Paul said we should not condemn people for living according to their consciences (Romans 14).

Once we know how people believe, we should try not to offend them. My grandmother was a teetotaler. She was so conscientious about avoiding alcohol that she wouldn't eat a bite of fruitcake if she suspected it had rum in it. My grandmother was a fine Christian woman, well-known for her service and kindness to others. Though she knew I believed having a glass of wine with dinner was not a sin, I never drank any alcohol in front of her. Nor would I have tried to force my belief on her in any way.

"For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking, but of righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit, because anyone who serves Christ in this way is pleasing to God and approved by men" (verses 17-18). Why judge people about such inconsequential things as food and drink, and days and times, and risk driving them away from Jesus Christ?

The importance of fellowshiping

Sharing our faith with others doesn't usually happen unless we get acquainted with other people. We have to get to know them and allow them

to get to know us before we can talk about the gospel of Jesus Christ. Before we can encourage our brothers and sisters in Christ, we must get to know them. We call that fellowshiping.

After looking around for and finally finding my teenage daughter after church one day, I asked her where she had been. She replied, with a big smile, "Fellowshipping." It may not be exactly the kind of communicating I'm talking about here, although teens certainly can and do share their faith among themselves and with adults.

Fellowshipping involves sharing our lives with others. It involves listening to others, so we know their problems and can pray for them. It means studying God's Word so we can give an answer to those who ask.

Fellowshipping also means maintaining a close relationship with God. Our relationship with others depends on the state of our relationship with God. When we fellowship in Christian love with others, he is the One with whom we truly fellowship.

Our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ... God is light; in him there is no darkness at all. If we claim to have fellowship with him yet walk in the darkness, we lie and do not live by the truth. But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin. (1 John 1:3, 5-7)

Sheila Graham

SHARING YOUR FAITH... WITH A NEW AGER



Does the cross give us a bridge across the chasm?
Or is the chasm only an illusion created by our fears?

“I used to go to church, but all they seemed to care about were rules and regulations, and everyone was always judging everyone else,” said one man. His friend responded: “Same here. Church was irrelevant to what was happening in my life. The minister’s favorite topic was hellfire. What a waste of time.”

I was perusing the shelves in a New Age bookstore and could not help overhearing the conversation between two men farther down the aisle. “Now I’m into this,” one of the men continued, holding up a book by a well-known New Age guru. “It hits the nail right on the head, as far as I’m concerned.” “I’ve been helped by so-and-so,” the other man replied (he named a local ‘trance channeler’). “The readings I get from her have really made a difference.”

I finally summoned the nerve to speak up. After all, New Agers pride themselves on being open to all points of view. So I decided to offer mine. “Excuse me,” I interrupted. “I overheard what you were saying, and I know where you’re coming from. I’ve had similar disappointing experiences with churches. But what you’re reacting against isn’t Christianity, it’s legalism. Christianity isn’t about judging and condemning, or threats of hellfire and damnation.”

Turned off

The two men were typical New Age devotees. Many New Agers once

attended traditional, mainstream Christian churches. But they were turned off by the dos and don'ts that are often attached to the gospel of Jesus Christ—legislation about clothing styles, hair length, musical preferences, financial contributions and the like.

They wanted to find ideas for leading a more spiritually fulfilling life. But instead, they found churches that took a heavy-handed, works-oriented approach to Christian living. These churches placed primary emphasis on knowing facts about God rather than knowing God, or downplayed personal hands-on experience of God's love and power in favor of formalized liturgy and culture-based expectations. So they began looking elsewhere for deeper answers to life's questions. The New Age was ready and waiting for them.

Phenomenal growth

The New Age movement offers its followers a dazzling array of alternatives to conventional religion. Since it began taking shape in the early 1970s, the New Age movement has experienced phenomenal growth. It has become a major force, with millions of devotees. Uninformed observers often dismiss the New Age as quackery and mystical mumbo jumbo—an essentially harmless passing fad, a marginal diversion among a gullible and misguided few on the lunatic fringe. This is a naive and dangerous attitude.

Yes, plenty of New Age hucksters, crooks and charlatans are making extravagant claims—and a great deal of money. New Agers themselves admit that many “psychic phone lines” are out-and-out scams, and the trite “revelations” of some alleged channelers give patrons only a superficial illusion of insight. But frauds can be found in any field of human endeavor. That does not mean the whole movement should be judged by it.

We need only recall the much-publicized scandals that beset many televangelists. Just because certain individuals have shown themselves unworthy of the ministry of Jesus Christ doesn't mean that all of Christianity is bad and should be avoided. The New Age is no mere fad. Ignoring it will not make it go away. It is a deeply entrenched cultural trend that will not quickly disappear. But it is possible to offer an alternative, through effective Christian evangelism.

A crash course on the New Age

New Age beliefs and practices differ from Christianity in several significant ways. Here are a few of the differences:

God: New Age view: God is an impersonal energy or force permeating the universe. Everything is of this one basic essence. (“All is one.”) As part of the universal oneness, humans are also divine. (“God is all, and all is

God.”) The New Ager seeks God within the self. (“I am my own God.”)

Christian view: God is one divine Being in three Persons—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. God is maker of heaven and earth. He is both immanent (present in his creation) and transcendent (existing apart from his creation).

Jesus Christ: New Age view: Jesus was a great “spiritual master” who attained “Christ consciousness.” The “Christ” that inspired him is a divine energy available to everyone. (“I am Christ, you are Christ, we all are Christ.”) The “higher self” is the “Christ within.”

Christian view: Jesus Christ is the second Person of the Godhead, who became human through the Incarnation. He was God manifest in the flesh for our salvation, offering himself as an atoning sacrifice for sin. He dwells within Christians today through the Holy Spirit.

The Bible: New Age view: The Bible cannot be trusted. The apostles got Jesus’ message wrong and/or deliberately added teachings and requirements not endorsed by God. The Bible has been tampered with over the centuries, the victim of innumerable additions and deletions.

Christian view: The Bible is the book that God uses to reveal himself to humanity. It is the foundation of truth and the ultimate authority in all matters of doctrine. Its purpose is to reconnect us to our Creator through Christ. Its accuracy as a document is attested by thousands of ancient manuscripts.

Sin: New Age view: There is no concept of sin in the New Age. There can be no sin because there is no transcendent God to rebel against. There are no rules or absolute moral imperatives. Sin is merely ignorance of one’s “inner divinity.” Because sin does not exist, there is no need for repentance or forgiveness. Jesus did not die for our sins.

Christian view: Sin is a state or condition of alienation or rebellion against God. We are all sinners, but we are forgiven through Jesus’ incarnation, life, death and resurrection.

Salvation: New Age view: Salvation is not an issue. The soul is part of the universe and never dies. It is reborn or reincarnated in different physical bodies in a succession of future lives. The good or bad “karma” earned in the present lifetime determines one’s subsequent incarnation. Humans should seek to progress to higher states of consciousness and higher planes of existence. There are many different paths to the goal of spiritual perfection. No one path is the only correct path.

Christian view: Salvation is deliverance from the bondage of sin and death. Salvation is a gift of God, by grace through faith in Jesus Christ, not earned by our own merit. Humans are alienated from God, “dead in

transgressions and sins.” Since all humans are sinners, they need the salvation God offers through his Son. Christ is “the way” to salvation and eternal life (John 14:6)—the only name by which one may be saved (Acts 4:12). Humans are destined to “die once, and after that to face judgment” (Hebrews 9:27). The assumed cycle of reincarnation and karma presupposes a salvation by works, contrary to the principle of salvation by God’s grace through faith in Jesus Christ (Ephesians 2:8-9).

Spiritual growth: New Age view: Humans can transform themselves spiritually—through meditation, hypnotism, yoga, creative visualization, past-life regression, channeling and other spiritual disciplines. Spirit guides and angels may help in this endeavor.

Christian view: Spiritual disciplines—“works”—cannot remake the inner person or wash the soul of sin. Jesus Christ lives in Christians through the Holy Spirit and transforms the hearts of his followers. Christians thereby “participate in the divine nature” (2 Peter 1:4). The Holy Spirit is the Christian’s guide into spiritual truth (John 16:13) and the agent of change in human beings. Christians do not allow lesser intermediaries such as angels to take the place of the Holy Spirit or to push a personal relationship with Jesus Christ into the background.

The future: New Age view: The salvation of the world depends on human beings. When enough people harmonize their positive energy and turn their thoughts to peace, the world will be cleansed of negative elements and New Age ideals will be realized in an era of spiritual enlightenment.

Christian view: Jesus Christ is essential to the survival of humanity. The “New Age” of the kingdom of God will be ushered in by the triumphant return of Jesus Christ, not by human effort. Christ ultimately will deliver the kingdom to God the Father, and both heaven and earth will be made new.

Ripe for harvest

On the whole, most New Agers are honest people searching for answers. Though some are merely dabblers looking for shortcuts to spiritual development, many have adopted New Age philosophies as a committed way of life.

Like most of us, New Agers are looking for love, healing and spiritual guidance. They are seeking to rid themselves of guilt, pain and emptiness. They want to change their hearts and their ways of thought. In an age of materialism, they want to more fully explore life’s spiritual dimension. The tragedy is they did not perceive that Christianity held any answers for them. People are more open to the spiritual today than at any time in living memory.

Millions are desperate to fill the gaping spiritual void in their lives.

New Agers are winnable for Christ! They may be more open to a life-changing encounter with Jesus Christ than any other segment of society. The fields are “ripe for harvest” (John 4:35)! Here are some suggestions for sharing your Christian faith with friends, co-workers and acquaintances who are involved in the New Age movement:

- **Educate yourself.** New Agers use some of the language of traditional Christianity—referring to God, Jesus Christ, spiritual growth and other familiar Christian concepts. But these words are often used with a non-Christian meaning. To intelligently and effectively share our faith with a New Ager, we must understand the differences.

It is also important not to argue with New Agers over elements of New Age thought that are not in conflict with Christianity. Not all New Age ideas and practices are intrinsically hostile to Christianity. Books like Russell Chandler’s *Understanding the New Age* and Douglas Groothuis’ *Confronting the New Age* can provide insights and fill in details.

- **Do not condemn.** Acidic language and confrontation do more harm than good, and they close off avenues for winning New Agers to Christ. Though we must not adopt a naive and uncritical approach toward the New Age, neither should we denounce it wholesale as demonism and satanism. Such blanket condemnation is irritating, alienating, unhelpful—and inaccurate. To evangelize effectively, we must first show respect for the views, experiences and motives of New Agers, not ridicule and demean them.
- **Identify shared values.** If there is one thing that unites New Agers and Christians, it is a recognition of the need for more spirituality and less materialism in today’s world. Use this as a basis for initiating conversations about their beliefs and experiences. Highlight areas of agreement before exploring differences.
- **Objectively discuss differences.** Many New Age concepts are radically different from Christian doctrine. Any of these divergences can provide a springboard for discussion and evangelism. Experience shows that many New Agers have not completely thought through what they believe. They fail to see the incompatibility of their New Age views with Christianity, which they may still claim to keep in a general way.

- **Point out the contradictions.** Explain your reasons for belief in a transcendent God, in Jesus Christ as personal Savior, in the Bible as the authoritative Word of God. Ask their reasons for rejecting these beliefs. Also remind them that there is a dark side to the spirit world and occultism. Encourage them not to give up their minds to spirits alienated from God, but to “test the spirits” as the Bible advises (1 John 4:1).
- **Emphasize Jesus Christ.** Jesus Christ is the center of true spirituality. He is superior to all angels and “spirit guides,” and is alone worthy of worship, honor and reverence. Only Christ can fulfill one’s unmet needs. Be open about what Jesus has done in your life. An enthusiastic faith is a contagious faith.
- **Be an example.** Many New Agers reject Christianity because they fail to see Christ’s influence in the lives of Christians. The most effective way to share your faith with New Agers is to show them by your life what Christianity is. The Holy Spirit offers us the power to be different people. Show others by your example that the Christian faith can lead people into a new dimension of personal development and maturity. Reflect the love of Christ.

As John Drane writes in his book *What Is the New Age Saying to the Church?*, “In the case of every New Ager I have ever met, I have felt that God could give that person to the Church as a gift, if only he or she could meet Christians in whose lives the reality of Christ was an everyday experience.”

- **Intervene through prayer.** Pray that the Holy Spirit will touch them and move them to worship and serve Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. In Jesus’ power we can intercede for them, through prayer, against the spiritual forces that are influencing them. Pray for their positive response to God’s call. Remember that your evangelizing efforts may not have an immediate effect. But what you say and how you say it may plant a seed that will one day bear fruit for God.

Spiritual Supermarket

To some, the name *New Age movement* implies a single, unified, cohesive group. New Age, however, is not represented by any one particular organization or institution. It has no headquarters, no authoritative sourcebook, and no religious hierarchy.

Rather, New Age is a loosely knit movement encompassing many diverse groups and belief systems. Under its umbrella lies a grab bag of techniques, practices and philosophies—a kind of supermarket of spiritual goods, from which one can select whatever meets one's particular wants and needs at the time.

New Age gurus spread their teaching through tapes, lectures, workshops and books. A survey of the subject labels on the shelves in a New Age bookstore provides a good overview of the diversity of ideas that make up the New Age movement: Reincarnation, channeling, spirit guides, hypnotism, yoga, meditation, crystals, dreams, witchcraft, shamanism, auras, natural healing, Eastern religions, I Ching, runes, tarot, voodoo, astrology, pyramids, UFOs, herbology, alchemy, angels, mythology, mysticism, numerology.

Much in the New Age is not new. Its critics label it “repackaged paganism” — a thinly disguised revival of ancient Gnosticism and pre-Christian religions, though some of the terminology has been updated (“oracles” and “mediums” are now called “channels,” for example).

Critics also charge that the New Age movement encourages an obsessive interest in one's *self* and shows little interest in doing anything for others. The focus is on meeting one's own needs, in contrast to Christianity's mission of taking the gospel message to all peoples and helping alleviate human misery in tangible ways.

Meeting the challenge

Millions are searching for a deeper spiritual dimension to life. For many, that search is taking place outside Christianity. That places a weighty responsibility on churches to become more relevant, to address the real needs of people, to reassess what Christian fulfillment involves and to foster spiritual growth.

One of my acquaintances in the New Age bookstore observed: “I think Christianity is much bigger than many Christians realize. Churches limit God. They limit the ways he can work. They've got him neatly packaged inside their own little denominational boxes. Who's to say God wouldn't endorse some of the spiritual techniques and disciplines that we find here on these bookshelves?” The point is well taken, even though cautions are in order.

For Christians, much is nonnegotiable. Pantheistic ideas and demonic practices must be rejected, and the centrality of Christ consistently affirmed. But are all New Age ideas and practices hopelessly off track? The apostle Paul did not rule out the possibility of encountering elements of value and truth in non-Christian cultures, such as Greek philosophy (see Acts 17). Churches must not throw away the wheat with the chaff.

“Test everything. Hold on to the good,” Paul advised (1 Thessalonians 5:21). The discerning minds of biblically grounded Christians should be able to perceive what is true and of value in New Age thought, and integrate such

truth into their discussion of biblical truth.

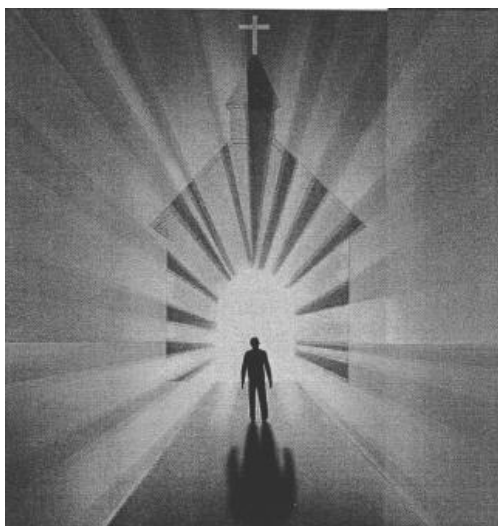
If Christianity is to meet the challenge of the New Age, churches will have to do a better job of answering questions about God's existence, the nature of the mind and consciousness, the concept of the spirit, the reality of space and time, the reconciliation of science and spirituality, the compatibility of psychology with Christianity. They will have to more effectively guide their members in cultivating and exercising the gifts of the Holy Spirit, in opening up to the reality of God's love, in prayer and in using meditation in a Christian's devotional life.

Churches must not rule out powerful spiritual experiences. An overly intellectual church—closed to the supernatural dimension of faith—will be stifling rather than liberating, and will fail its members in their search for spiritual maturity.

New Age techniques OK?

"Is there no place for techniques like creative visualization and guided imagery in Christian growth?" my bookstore acquaintance continued. "Couldn't visualizing Jesus Christ, for example, stimulate faith, worship and obedience? After all, didn't Jesus himself appeal to the imagination by using parables?"

"Some Christians would probably agree with you," I replied, "as long as the techniques remained Christ-centered. But why, then, do you seek the advice of channeled spirits instead of pursuing a deeper relationship with Jesus Christ?" He said it was because the channeled entities spoke to him directly.



"Yes, but who are these entities?" I asked. "And what are they telling you? You'd never trust a stranger with your money or your life, yet you faithfully act on advice from channeled entities of uncertain identity and motive. Does that make sense?" I also pointed out that God does communicate with Christians—through prayer, meditation and Bible study.

Positive note

In the end, my acquaintances said they appreciated the fact that I was open-minded enough to set foot inside a New Age bookstore, which some of their former Christian friends scrupulously avoided as a “den of satanism.” My presence there predisposed them to consider the merit of what I was saying.

I wrote the address of my church on the back of a couple of business cards and wished them well on their spiritual journey, as they did me. The encounter would have ended on a much different note had I denounced them as “dupes of Satan” or “agents of deception.”

Keith Stump

SHARING YOUR FAITH... WITH ANOTHER CHRISTIAN

Everyone needs an Aunt Helen. My Aunt Helen was a schoolteacher for many years along the stormy windblown coast of the place I call home. She was my teacher those first four years in the little one-room school that lives on in my memory. It was Helen who helped plant in me a love for learning that has endured. I remember her sharing with me newspapers and *Life* magazines in the 1950s. That was the beginning of a worldview that has stayed with me as a teacher, journalist and minister.

Helen is also a deeply committed Christian. Not long ago, she was presented a plaque for more than 60 years of devoted service to her local church. At age 80-something, she is still an active, visible member of the choir. Most of the resident ministers who have served in her area over the years have found her a loyal, sympathetic friend and ally.

When I was 7 years old, I did one of those silly, stupid things that children do. My parents were upset. We were a close family, so the rejection and anger I felt from my parents cut me deeply. I was crushed. Hurt. Troubled. But I didn't know what to do or where to turn. But Helen did. She could see exactly what I was feeling. She knew just what to do.

Quietly but deliberately, she took me upstairs to her room. We both knelt by the side of the bed. Then she told me, "All you have to do is close your eyes and tell God you are sorry, and he will forgive you." I did what I was told. And—guess what?—it worked. I felt forgiven, pardoned, restored, clean. No penance, no agonized harangue, no great spiritual pyrotechnics. I



didn't have to carry the guilt anymore.

That's probably when I came to Christ, when I began to realize that God is a God of love, that—as I explained later to other people as a pastor and youth leader—God is in the “forgiveness business.” I needed to

hear that at age 7. Some of you reading these words now need to hear them at age 17 and age 70, or any other age.

A friend in need

As Christians, no matter how converted, no matter how yielded to God, each of us will reach a point when we feel like giving up, when we need someone to give us a boost along the road to life. This may happen more than once. It has to me. At such times, we need the loving attention of a friend or acquaintance in the faith. We need a friend who can speak to the heart of the matter in a way that will inspire us to want to carry on.

And sometimes we need to *be* that kind of person, too. In some ways, as Helen might say, that's what we are here for. The apostle Paul knew this. The subject appears often in his writings: "Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen" (Ephesians 4:29).

To the Colossians he outlined the principles of mutual sharing and encouragement as vital to Christian growth: "Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since as members of one body you were called to peace. And be thankful. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom, and as you sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God" (Colossians 3:15-16).

Son of encouragement

But Paul was only human. He wasn't perfect. His deeds didn't always match his words. There was the incident with Mark, for example. On Paul's first missionary tour, a young man named John Mark had some kind of disappointing encounter with Paul. "From Paphos, Paul and his companions sailed to Perga in Pamphylia, where John left them to return to Jerusalem" (Acts 13:13).

We know there was friction here because later on Paul and Barnabas disagreed over Mark's future as a missionary (Acts 15:36-40). But Barnabas had a reputation in the first-century church for generosity, for sticking up for the underdog. His real name was Joseph —Barnabas was a nickname given to him by his Christian friends, meaning "Son of Encouragement" (Acts 4:36).

Barnabas saw that Mark had a lot of promise. As a young man, Mark may have been a witness to many of the events he writes about in the second Gospel. Now he needed the steady hand of an older brother in the faith, someone to listen to him, to speak words of encouragement, to help steady his footsteps in the faith.

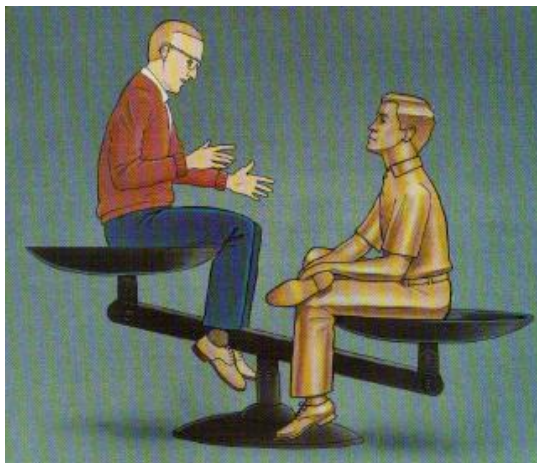
Barnabas took Mark, his nephew, with him to the Cyprus ministry. On the way to Cyprus, Barnabas and Mark no doubt talked about more than just the weather. Sharing with Barnabas was just the tonic for John Mark. Even Paul had to concede that the young man had changed: “Get Mark and bring him with you, because he is helpful to me in my ministry” (2 Timothy 4:11).

Barnabas knew how to encourage a fellow believer. He knew how to share his faith. How about you and me? Do we know how to share our faith with a fellow Christian?

Beyond clever arguments

Here are some principles that can help us learn to share our faith with a believer:

1. Be sensitive to people’s needs. Those who have the most success in encouraging their brothers and sisters are usually sensitive people. An untypical remark, a strange comment, a critical or disturbed attitude, a report from a third party—these are signals or emotional cues that a brother or sister may be struggling under a heavy load.



Charles R. Swindoll’s advice on how to share our faith in the painful situation of bereavement holds true for many situations we encounter:

Those who comfort must have a tender heart of understanding. They don’t come to quote verses or leave a stack of literature. They come simply to say they care. Nor do they attempt to erase today’s hurt by emphasizing tomorrow’s hope. They are committed to the support, the understanding of the grieving. Few things heal wounded spirits better than the balm of a supportive embrace. (*Growing Strong in the Seasons of Life*)

Figuratively speaking, that embrace can also be a warmth in the eyes, a softness of the countenance, a sympathetic expression that shows our concern for a hurting friend. Clever arguments rarely penetrate a grieving

spirit. But rest assured: God will often bring people into contact with us who need our help, our attention, our sympathy and concern. We must be open to such encounters. We must be discerning enough to see the need and concerned enough to want to help.

2. Identify with the person. This doesn't mean you always have to agree with other people's complaints, attitudes or accusations. But perhaps they have something on their minds they want to unload, some care pressing them down. In such cases, a brother or sister may not express thoughts or feelings in the best way. Maybe the language even gets a bit rough. The thing to do is to patiently and lovingly stand your ground. Listen, but listen with an open mind.

Experienced counselors know that first reactions from troubled people are often their worst reactions. Sometimes it is necessary to wait till the emotional fog clears, to sort through the barrage of words to pinpoint the real problem. Be respectful of the fact that a fellow Christian is using you as a sounding board, trusting you with his or her deep feelings. After all, with all the pressures on us in this hectic world, if we can't unload to a good friend in the faith, where can we go?

The task here is to identify with the other person as much as possible. We may want to gently mention that we once shared their viewpoint. We might want to say those two marvelous words, "I understand." Without compromising your own feelings and convictions, it is not wrong to diplomatically "hold your fire," to avoid criticism. In times of another person's great stress and strain, the ability to patiently and sympathetically listen is worth its weight in gold.

Even in his corrective letter to the church at Corinth, the apostle Paul had this approach. Though he had harsh words for them later on, he began by identifying himself with the congregation and its accomplishments:

I always thank God for you because of his grace given you in Christ Jesus. For in him you have been enriched in every way—in all your speaking and in all your knowledge—because our testimony about Christ was confirmed in you. Therefore you do not lack any spiritual gift as you eagerly wait for our Lord Jesus Christ to be revealed. (1 Corinthians 1:4-7)

Even though Paul is writing a corrective letter, even though he has to address fornication and heresy—he still takes time to identify and praise his audience. Above all, he lets the people know they are appreciated. We all need mutual sympathy and support. Often. We all need to be appreciated, to know that our Christian service and life's efforts are not in vain. And when we are "down," we need to hear it again and again and again.

3. Be realistic. Don't promise an injured person "pie in the sky." The Christian walk is tough. Trivial comments such as "You'll get over it!" won't work. The best thing to do in reaching out successfully is to admit our own feelings, confess—where appropriate and when necessary—to our friend our own lacks and needs. This will have a powerful effect in the sharing process.

Paul was not afraid to be autobiographical in his letters to the churches in his care. As he told the Galatians:

For you have heard of my previous way of life in Judaism, how intensely I persecuted the church of God and tried to destroy it. I was advancing in Judaism beyond many Jews of my own age and was extremely zealous for the traditions of my fathers. But when God, who set me apart from birth and called me by his grace, was pleased to reveal his Son in me so that I might preach him among the Gentiles...I went immediately into Arabia and later returned to Damascus. (Galatians 1:13-17)

Every Christian life story is full of fascination and delight. It breathes the spirit of authentic faith and commitment that wounded, troubled people need to hear. Often a believer who is losing perspective can be inspired by the ups and downs, the trials and triumphs of someone else. When we listen with the inner ear, we show we have discovered a great key in sharing our faith.

A little girl once went to comfort a sorrowing mother. "What did you say?" asked her father. "Nothing," the little girl replied. "I just climbed up on her lap and cried with her." Every church needs people like that!

Neil Earle

SHARING YOUR FAITH IN A POSTMODERN WORLD

Many people today have no desire to “get back to God.” They have no sense of sin, no sense of guilt, no sense of God. They do not trust authority, or the concept of “truth,” which has too often been used to oppress people.

How can the good news about Jesus be put into terms that are meaningful to them? This article explains the gospel by focusing on interpersonal relationships, which people still find meaningful.

Fixing broken relationships

One of the biggest problems in Western society is broken relationships—friendships that have turned sour, promises that have not been kept, hopes that have been disappointed. Many of us have experienced divorce, either as a child or as an adult. We have experienced pain and turmoil from an unstable world. We have learned that authorities cannot be trusted, that people are basically looking out for themselves.

Many of us feel like we are lost in an alien world—we don’t know where we have come from, where we are now, where we are going, how we will get there, or where we really belong. We try to navigate as best we can through the hazards of life, like walking through a minefield, trying not to show the pain we feel, and not knowing whether it’s worth our while.

We feel tremendously alone, having to fend for ourselves. We are reluctant to commit to anything. We enjoy casual friendships, but anything deeper runs the risk of rejection, of betrayal, of deep hurt. We keep our options open, because the rewards of commitment are not worth the risk of pain.

Religion doesn’t seem very helpful, either. Religious people are the ones who blow up innocent bystanders, who say that people are suffering because God is angry at them, who look down their noses on people who are different. Religious people are not the sort of folks we’d pick for a friend. The God they talk about doesn’t seem very friendly, either. Their idea of God makes no sense in the world today—right and wrong are just matters of opinion, sin is an old-fashioned idea, and guilt feelings are just fodder for psychiatrists.

Jesus seems irrelevant. People read about Jesus in the Bible and sometimes conclude that he led a charmed life, healing people just by touching them, making bread out of nothing, walking on water, surrounded by protective angels, magically avoiding bodily harm. That has no connection

with the world today. Even in his crucifixion Jesus seems strangely detached from the problems of life today. His resurrection is good news for him, of course, but why should I think it is good news for me?

Jesus experienced our world

But the pain we feel in an alienating world is precisely the sort of pain that Jesus knows. He was betrayed by friends, and abused by authorities. He was betrayed by a kiss from one of his closest associates. Jesus knew what it is like for people to cheer him one day and jeer the next. He suffered from the envy, jealousy, hatred and fear that other people felt toward him.

Jesus' cousin, John the Baptist, was murdered by the Roman-appointed ruler because John exposed the ruler's moral failings. Jesus knew he would also be killed, too, because he challenged the teachings and the status of the Jewish religious leaders. Jesus knew that people would hate him without reason, that friends would turn against him, that he would be betrayed and killed. He didn't have to put up with this, but he did, for our benefit. He did something good for us, even though he knew ahead of time that we human beings would beat and kill him. This sort of person, who will be loyal to us even when we are hateful, is a true friend, the opposite of a betrayer.

Jesus comes to rescue us even though we are snarling and trying our best to bite the hand that sets us free. To use another analogy, we are like people fallen into an icy river, unable to swim, and Jesus is the guy who jumps into the frigid water even though he knows we will do our best to grab him and pull him down in our desperate attempt to lift our heads above the water. Jesus came into our world, knowing full well that we would hate and kill him.

Jesus did this voluntarily, for us, to show us a better way. Maybe that's the sort of person we can trust—if he is willing to give his life for us even when we are enemies, how much more could we trust him if we are friends? He has nothing to gain from us, and we have nothing to offer him, except being thankful. And maybe, just maybe, here is someone we can trust.

Our path in life

Jesus can tell us something about life, about where we've come from and where we are going and how we are to get there. He can tell us about some of the hazards in the relationship minefield we call life. We don't have to trust him very much—we can just try a little bit to see if it works. And as we do this, I think we'll grow in our trust. In fact, I think that we will find that he is always right.

Normally, we don't want friends who are always right. It's annoying. But Jesus isn't the kind of person who is always saying "I told you so"—he just

jumps into the water, fights off our efforts to drown him, hauls us up onto the bank of the river and lets us catch our breath again. And off we go, until we do something stupid and fall into the river again, and the cycle happens again. Eventually, we start learning to ask him where the trip hazards are, and where the thin ice is, so that we don't have to be rescued quite so often.

Jesus is patient. He lets us make mistakes, and even lets us suffer from those mistakes. He lets us learn—but he never runs away. We might betray him, but he will never betray us. We might not even be sure that he exists, but we can be sure that patience and forgiveness work a lot better than anger and alienation when it comes to relationships. Jesus is not bothered by our doubts and distrust. He knows we've been burned before; he understands why we are so reluctant to trust. He's been burned himself, and he can let it pass. He can wait for us to come around.

His purpose in being patient is that he wants us to finally come to him and accept his free invitation to a hilariously joyful party. Jesus is talking about fun, about joy, about real and lasting personal fulfillment that doesn't fade away, about people who really love you even after they know what you're like. We were created for relationships (that's why we want them so much), and this is what Jesus offers.

Think about living for a long time—an eternity—with people who really like you, who are fun to be with, people who will share your journey in life without ever pulling the rug out from under you. They'll never ignore you, complain about you, or put you down. Isn't that the kind of friends you want?

Divine guidance

There is a life ahead of us that's worth living for. That's why Jesus willingly endured the pain of this world, in order to point us to a better one ahead. It's like we are trudging through a million-mile desert, not knowing which way to go, and Jesus leaves the comfort and safety of his tropical paradise to brave the sandstorms and tell us there is everything we ever wanted, if we just change direction and follow him. We can say, Thanks, but I'd rather take my chances in the desert—or we can, lacking anything better to do, take his advice, knowing quite well that he didn't have to come into the desert to tell us that.

Jesus tells us where we are right now, too. We are not in paradise, are we? Life hurts. We know that, and he knows that. He experienced it. That's why he wants to get us out of this mess into the kind of abundant life that he meant for us to have from the beginning.

Jesus tells us that there are some relationship hazards in the world today

(we knew that, didn't we?). Family ties and friendships are two of the happiest and most fulfilling relationships in life, if they work well—but they don't always work well, and that is one of the greatest pains in life. But we know that love is better than hate, patience is better than anger, and forgiveness is better than condemnation.

There are ways that cause pain, and there are ways that promote pleasure. Unfortunately, sometimes people seek pleasure in ways that end up causing pain for other people. Sometimes in our effort to avoid pain we end up avoiding joy as well. So we need some guidance as we struggle through the trackless desert. (Wait a minute—there *are* some tracks there—the tracks of Jesus, showing a different way of life. Maybe if we follow them we'll end up where he is.)

One of the big problems in relationships today is loyalty. People are used to having their feelings hurt, of having their friends turn away, of having no one to trust but themselves. We'll never know the joy of a loyal friendship if we always hold back—but is that joy worth the risk of pain, when we've given our heart before, only to have it crushed by someone who wants to move on?

The Creator wants a relationship with us, a friendship of love and joy, but we stand aloof, fearful. We have betrayed our Creator, hidden ourselves, refused to open the letters he sent. So God came in the flesh, in Jesus, into our world to tell us that we don't need to be afraid. He has forgiven us, he has provided something better for us than what we have, he wants us to come back home where it's safe and comfortable.

The Messenger was killed, but that doesn't make the message go away. Jesus still offers us friendship and forgiveness. He is alive again, offering not just to show us the way, but also to travel with us, and to fish us out of the icy waters whenever we fall into them. He'll stick with us through thick and thin. He's persistent, and patient. We can count on him, even when everyone else disappoints us.

Good news for us

With a friend like Jesus, we don't need to fear our enemies. It's good to have friends in high places, and Jesus is about as high as you can get. His resurrection is good news for us because he is in a position to give favors to his friends—and we can all become his friends, if we are willing. He has all the power in the universe, he says, and he has already promised to use it for us. Can we trust him in that? We should. Our other options aren't very promising, are they? This doesn't mean instant health and wealth, but it

means meaning and purpose in a life that does not end.

Jesus invites us to his party, at his expense, in paradise. He went to a lot of trouble to deliver the invitation. He was killed for his trouble, but that doesn't stop him from loving us. He still invites everyone to the party.

What about you? Maybe you aren't ready to believe that anyone can be so faithful, or that life can really be fun forever. That's OK—he knows that your experience makes you pretty skeptical of such claims.

I think you can trust Jesus, but don't take my word for it. Try it out for yourself—a little at a time. To use yet another metaphor, climb into his boat. You can jump out later if you want to, but I think you'll want to stay, and eventually start working the oars and inviting other drowning people in. You have nothing to lose but your lostness, and everything to gain.

Michael Morrison

THE JONAH SYNDROME

“How I learned to stop worrying and meet the Assyrians”

“Show proper respect to everyone; love the brotherhood of believers, fear God, honor the king” (1 Peter 2:17). This is a great code to live by, but it’s much easier said than done. Why is it difficult? Perhaps because our jaded society tends to make us suspicious and fearful of people different from ourselves, and that attitude can’t help but short-circuit human relationships.

Numerous studies show that the gospel is carried to new people most effectively by personal contact. Fuller Seminary’s mission expert Charles Van Engen has written: “The world is ever more a stew-pot of people of very diverse cultures, religions and world-views working and living side by side.” For this reason, Van Engen argues, “the local body of believers is the primary agent for crossing cultural barriers and experiencing reconciliation in Christ.”

Your Muslim or Buddhist neighbors may question your religion, but they cannot overlook the fact that you, John or Joanne Christian, are different from other people on the block. Or at least we should be.

This is why, when Christians are asked to consider the importance of personal evangelism to the basic mission of the church, we need to reacquaint ourselves with the book of Jonah. As we seek to reach out to the world on a more personal level, the experiences of this Old Testament prophet can at the very least help show us how *not* to do mission.

Called to mission

Romans 15:4 tells us that everything written in the past, that is, in the Old Testament, “was written to teach us, so that through endurance and the encouragement of the Scriptures, we might have hope.”

What is immediately hopeful about Jonah’s story is that it shows us in stark terms that the source of genuine mission and outreach springs from the kindness and mercy of the great heart of God. Near the end of the book of Jonah, God asks Jonah the core question: “Should I not be concerned about that great city?” (Jonah 4:11).

That gets to the heart of effective biblically based mission. God was concerned about the cities of Jonah’s day, as he is concerned about the people in our cities today.

The biblical witness is consistent. Abraham pleaded for the life of Sodom (Genesis 18:23-32). Jeremiah urged his compatriots in Babylon to “seek the peace of the city.” Jesus wept over Jerusalem (Luke 19:41-44), and Jonah ...

well, Jonah had some lessons to learn.

God had a challenging new assignment for Jonah, one that totally upset the prophet's comfortable worldview: "The word of the Lord came to Jonah son of Amittai: 'Go to the great city of Nineveh and preach against it, because its wickedness has come up before me'" (Jonah 1:1). Jonah's reaction was far from exemplary— "Not me, Lord — find someone else, please!"

'Calculated terror'

What is going on here? A little background helps. Up till now Jonah had been a successful prophet. His ministry had gone well.

Sometime in the long and prosperous reign of King Jeroboam II (c. 793-753 B.C.) God had given Jonah the opportunity to announce the good news that Israel would expand its borders (2 Kings 14:23-25). As a native of Gath-heper, a town in the area later known as the Galilee, Jonah was overjoyed to proclaim that his nation would expand northward. Perhaps this expansion would secure a buffer zone between Israel and the dreaded Assyrians to the north.

The Assyrians — that was a name to reckon with. These fearsome warriors had already made their reputation with raids into Israelite territory in the previous century. Assyria's King Shalmaneser III (858-824 B.C.) had received tribute from Israel around 841 B.C., and Adad-Nirari was banging at the gates of Damascus in 804 (Lasor, Hubbard and Bush, *Old Testament Survey*, page 207). Cunning and cruel, Assyria's swift-moving legions were the most dreaded military force in Jonah's day, and Nineveh was the capital of Assyria!

The Assyrians practiced a policy of calculated terror. The Assyrian king Ashur-Nasir-Pal II (883-859 B.C.) inscribed his tactics on a stone monument: "I stormed the mountain peaks and took them ... with their blood I dyed the mountains red like wool.... The heads of their warriors I cut off, and I formed them into a pillar over against their city, their young men and their maidens I burned in the fire" (Finegan, *Light from the Ancient Past*, pages 202-203).

How gruesome can it get! And God was asking Jonah to preach to these people? Impossible. Inconceivable! Jonah, like everyone else in the Ancient Near East, was all too familiar with the sins of Nineveh, its "evil ways and...violence" (Jonah 3:8). This was too much for Jonah to handle. "A mission to Nineveh, to the Assyrians? Lord, you must be kidding," we can almost hear Jonah saying. This is like a mission to Osama bin Laden.

Fight and flight

In times of stress, psychologists tell us, we react with either fight or flight. Perhaps Finegan's words give us a partial insight into Jonah's flight reaction to God's calling: "But Jonah ran away from the Lord and headed for Tarshish. He went down to Joppa, where he found a ship bound for that port. After paying the fare, he went aboard and sailed for Tarshish to flee from the Lord" (Jonah 1:3).

What a strange turn of events! A prophet trying to escape God's presence by leaving the territory of Israel! Ironically, he leaves from the exact same seaport where God will send the apostle Peter to start the Gentiles on the road to salvation (Acts 10:5-6).

So now the lessons from Jonah begin to accumulate. For openers, the prophet seems to have had a limited concept of God. Whether from a panicky fear of the Assyrians or from the shattering of his comfortable assumption that God was working only with Israel — he hightailed it to Tarshish, perhaps in the Western Mediterranean.

He was about to learn that God was a lot bigger than the Mediterranean. He would be faced with the uncomfortable fact that this God he served loved all people — even the dreaded Assyrians.

The action continues: "Then the Lord sent a great wind on the sea, and such a violent storm arose that the ship threatened to break up" (Jonah 1:4).

Where was Jonah during this storm? Incredibly, he was in the hold of the ship fast asleep (verses 5-6). What was going through his mind? Was he totally uninterested in the fate of the ship or — as seems more likely — was he still in shock over God's shaking up of his neat and tidy division of the world into good guys and bad guys?

Some expositors picture Jonah down in the hold in utter shock, perhaps curled up in a fetal position. Perhaps it was fear and loathing toward the Assyrians, or perhaps it was the trauma of a shattered worldview, but Jonah was in deep, emotional disturbance.

We can almost hear him pondering down in the darkness of the cargo hatch: "Isn't Israel God's nation? Aren't they a special treasure above all nations (Exodus 19:5)? Why is God sending me to the wicked Assyrians? No, no, it can't be ... can it? ... Does God love Israel's enemies as much as he loves Israel?"

Deep down, Jonah may have suspected that this was the case (Jonah 4:2-3). But he has to work out this shattering new formula in his mind. Jonah had misread his country's history. God had called Israel to be "a kingdom of priests" (Exodus 19:6). Their founding father had been commissioned for an

international mission of mercy — “all peoples on earth will be blessed through you” (Genesis 12:3).

Missing the boat!

Israel was to be a missionary nation (Isaiah 49:6). Jonah was being challenged to stretch his thinking; to be inclusive rather than exclusive; to be sharing the light, not narrowly looking down on others.

Jonah may have known all this, but he needed time to process the shock. He may have been on a vessel, but he was missing the boat. No wonder he is too distracted to notice that they’re all about to drown!

Here the narrative gets more ironic. The Gentile sailors are terrified of the storm. They have “done something religious” — they have been calling out to their gods, a common procedure when in trouble (Psalm 107:23-37). The captain shakes Jonah awake: “How can you sleep? Get up and call on your god! Maybe he will take notice of us, and we will not perish” (Jonah 1:6).

Nope. Jonah remains obdurate. When it becomes clear that all this is his fault, he says: “I am a Hebrew and I worship the Lord, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the land” (v. 9). This would sound comical if so much was not at stake. The pagan sailors could have asked: “If your God created the sea, why did you think you could get away from him on a boat?”

Ah — a logical question. But Jonah isn’t thinking logically. Neither do we in times of great mental and emotional turmoil. You can almost visualize Jonah thinking of his next move. He responds impulsively: “Throw me into the sea. All this is my fault!”

Incredibly, those pagan sailors refuse. They have more respect for human life than the so-called man of God. Ironic, isn’t it? Finally, events force them to do the deed, but with great reluctance. They do it respectfully, reverently, invoking God’s name (v. 14). The pagans are more religious than the prophet!

Further, when the storm subsides, they offer sacrifices to God (v. 16). What potential converts these seamen might have made. But Jonah is not thinking about such things. Into the sea he goes. Tragically, he chooses self-extinction rather than accept God’s mission.

Mercifully, God wasn’t through with his servant yet. A great fish swallowed up Jonah, the man of God. A man of God, all right, but a man who had head knowledge without corresponding heart knowledge.

But he was still Yahweh’s servant, and with his back to the wall, inside the great fish, Jonah prayed a beautiful prayer of repentance (Jonah 2:1-9). Notice the lessons here. His “death” in the sea reconciled the sailors to God (Jonah 1:16). His “resurrection” from the belly of the fish would result in the

salvation of Nineveh (Jonah 3:10). In all of this, the Hebrew prophet was an amazing foreshadowing of the Messiah, also from Galilee, Jesus the Christ (Matthew 12:40).

The still, small voice

But the repentance of Nineveh brought out the worst in this hot-headed prophet. Habits of a lifetime are not so easily overcome. He resented God's grace and mercy (Jonah 4:1-3) and erupted with one of the most ironic requests ever made by a biblical rarity: a successful prophet: "Now, O Lord, take away my life, for it is better for me to die than to live" (Jonah 4:3).

God does not do what Jonah wants (just as well for Jonah!). In this experience and in the incident with the worm and the vine (verses 5-8), God twice approached Jonah in the soothing tones of a skilled Counselor: "My friend Jonah, come on now, be reasonable. Do you have a right to be angry about all this? Don't you see what I'm doing here?" (Jonah 4:9-10).

What great lessons for us today! New Testament Christians are continually challenged to keep growing, to keep breaking new ground in our relationship with God. Perhaps we can all relate to Jonah — a sincere servant of God with a successful track record who still had so much to learn about the depths of God's goodness and grace.

Yes, we need to stay humble before God's overwhelmingly unfathomable love. God's mission of mercy is for everyone who will hear — including the Assyrians. It is so splendidly all-encompassing.

This supreme reminder from the book of Jonah was stated more powerfully by another prophet, Isaiah. He too passed on a message about the greatness of God, about his loving concern for all people, all nations. And he reflected: "As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts" (Isaiah 55:9).

God goes ahead of us

Perhaps Jonah was so busy being a prophet to Israel that he forgot the purpose of his nation's existence — to be a nation of priests to the whole world, regardless of color, creed or birth. Perhaps his involvement in his own country's liturgy and service — the true religion of God — had blinded him to the fact that God looks on the heart.

The sinning Assyrians found that God could be reached through attitudes of repentance and faith rather than religious ritual. Even heathen sailors could turn to God when given a chance. You never know where God might be working.

These are profound lessons to ponder as the 21st century unfolds. God

wants us to expand our horizons, to be always ready for new opportunities that lie around us. From Jonah we learn that God is always ahead of us — the Creator of all wants to be the Redeemer of all (Ephesians 1:9-10).

In that hope we can recommit ourselves to the mission of making disciples — “of all the nations” (Matthew 28:18-20). God is already there ahead of us, just as he was already working with ancient Nineveh before Jonah appeared, just as he later prepared the ground for Philip (Acts 8:26-40).

God wants us to succeed in our mission, for the mission is his. He wants to use us to help spread more of his light to a dark world and...avoid the Jonah Syndrome.

Neil Earle

EV-ANGELA'S SERMON

Angela showed us an amazing example of evangelism. She invited seven members of the same family to church last month, and they all seemed to enjoy themselves. While most Christians would rather take up bullfighting than evangelize, six-year-old Angela made it look easy.

“Living and sharing the gospel” is the motto of our denomination, and I have been encouraging my congregation to commit to this great commission. That’s what Christians are supposed to do, isn’t it?

Since this thing called “evangelism” scares the life out of most Christians, Angela’s example paints a beautifully simple portrait of what can be an overcomplicated concept.

Earlier in the year, I asked our local members to seek out one person per year with whom they could cultivate a relationship and learn his or her life story. I asked if they would also share their own life journey and maybe even invite one person to join us for worship. These simple steps seemed to be at the heart of living out the meaning of our church motto by sharing genuine love and hope through authentic relationships.

Many evangelicals concentrate on “bringing people to Christ,” but our focus has been more on “bringing Christ to the people” by extending to them his love as we get to know them. To that end, our little “Ev-Angela” blessed us with an example of pure and undefiled commission work.

During a discipleship class, we saw in high definition our Lord’s message of Matthew 18:1-4. Jesus said, “Unless we change and become like little children, we will never enter the kingdom of heaven.” Wow, what a way to see what the kingdom is like. As I led the discipleship class, I noticed Mr. and Mrs. Toy and their five children in the front pew. They had come for the third visit at Angela’s invitation. They sat impeccably dressed and seemed to be soaking in every word.

I noticed that during the hymn singing they stood up, during the prayer time and sermon they sat, and following the service the Toys enjoyed being surrounded in fellowship as Angela introduced us to each family member.

It seems little Angela had invited them to join her family on the front row and had dutifully shared with them what to do next as the service unfolded. The beauty of her actions mesmerized me. Questions flooded my mind. Has this six-year-old been listening all these weeks? Has she understood what I have been preaching about?

The answer is probably more revealing than I care to acknowledge. Frankly, I don’t think Angela ever considered evangelism to be a problem.

These were the people she played with and talked to on a regular basis. These are the people she spends her free time with. Sure, they were a “toy” family, but does it make a difference to her? Angela wanted to share her worship experience with friends.

It was so easy, so natural, for Angela to invite the Toys to church and patiently walk them through what to do. Could this thing that often breaks adults out into a cold sweat really feel easy and natural? If meeting the Toys is an indication, I have to say yes!

George Barna reports that 99 percent of all evangelical Christians have never shared the gospel with an unbeliever. Could it be that many believers have been evangelizing all along but just didn’t know that is what it was officially called? When we take the time to genuinely listen to another’s story, share our own life story or seek to leave behind a piece of spiritual fruit for a hungry acquaintance, aren’t we evangelizing? If your heart is to share what new life, true freedom and transformed thinking feels like, then Christ be praised, you have shared the gospel!

So, thank you Ev-Angela for the sermon you gave our congregation. You set a useful and inspiring example for everyone in speech, in life, in love, in faith and purity. May we all approach the good news with such simplicity and grace.

Jeffrey Broadnax

FOSTERING AN EVANGELISTIC CULTURE

Pastors and ministry leaders have many important responsibilities. One is to help shape within their congregation or ministry a culture (or “environment”) that is expressive of the love and life of Jesus Christ. A critical aspect of such a culture is having an *evangelistic orientation*—a passion for sharing actively in what Jesus is doing to reach out in love to share the gospel with non-Christians.

How do leaders do that? There is no one-size-fits-all formula, but there are helpful practices. Here are four, offered by LifeWay president Thom Rainer in a blog post:

1. **Model passion for evangelism.** As a leader in your church, be active in sharing the gospel with non-believers. Then share your experiences with your church family. Doing so is much more impactful than a dozen sermons or Bible studies about evangelism. Passion for evangelism is more caught than taught.
2. **Ask one of your small groups or classes to become an evangelistic group for one year.** This fosters accountability on a small scale as that group understands that it has been selected to be an example for the whole church. Watch how the group becomes more intentionally evangelistic—more prayerfully creative and excited to reach people with the gospel. Then share their stories with the whole church.
3. **Begin a small-scale evangelistic mentoring program.** Doing so is another way to foster accountability. The mentor should teach their protégés how to begin a conversation about Jesus with a non-believer and how to include in that conversation a clear presentation of the gospel.
4. **Regularly pray in church services for the lost.** Most members are not hesitant to pray for the physical needs of people. But it is rare for churches to pray together for the conversion of non-Christian family, friends and neighbors. As a church begins to pray consistently this way, God often begins to demonstrate clear answers to those prayers. As that happens, you will see your church becoming more evangelistic in its culture.

Ted Johnston

WHY SHOULD WE TELL PEOPLE ABOUT JESUS?

Reflections on Romans 10:1-15

In Romans 10:1 Paul says that it was his heart's desire to see his fellow Israelites saved. But there was a problem: the Israelites that he knew were relying on the law to be right with God (Romans 10:2-4). Christ is the end of all that, Paul says. You cannot be right with God by improving yourself. The only way to be right with God is if God makes you right with him.

We have all lived under laws at times. When I was a boy I lived under my mother's laws. One of her rules was that you didn't track mud and dirt all over her clean kitchen floor when you came in from playing in the yard. You had to get the dirt off before you came in the house, even if it meant being hosed down on the back porch.

God cleans us up

God is no different. He doesn't want the filth of our sins tracked all over his house. The problem is, we have no way of cleaning ourselves up. It's a catch-22 situation: we cannot come in until we are clean, but we have no way of getting clean. Only those who are holy, sinless and pure of heart can see God, yet no one can achieve that purity on his or her own.

That's why God had to come out of his house, in the person of Jesus, and clean us up. Only he could make us clean. If you are waiting to come into God's house until you get the dirt off, you will be waiting until judgment day. But if you believe what he says, that he has already made you clean, you can come in right now and sit down to dinner at his table.

Understanding the remainder of Romans 10 hinges on understanding this fact. It is impossible to know God until your sin has been removed. Knowing God does not make it possible to have your sin removed; having your sin removed is what makes it possible to know God.

To back up this point in Romans 10:5-8, Paul quotes from the words of Moses in Deuteronomy 30: "Do not say in your heart, 'Who will ascend into heaven?'" (that is, to bring Christ down)." As human beings we cannot seek out and find God; he comes to us.

God has found us

Moses had been to the mountaintop, seen God, received his word, and brought it down to Israel. They did not need to go find God and see what he says—God had already found them.

It is the same with Jesus, Paul is telling us. The eternal Word of God has come down to us, being made flesh as the man Jesus. We could not go up to

heaven and find him, or summon him to our aid. But he could, and did, choose in his divine freedom to come down to us. Jesus saved the creation by cleaning up the dirt of sin and thus opened the way for us to come into God's house.

That leaves us with the question: will we believe what God says? Will we believe that he has come down to us, found us, and already made us clean so that we may enter his presence? Will we believe that Jesus has already washed the dirt off us so that we can now come into his house? To fail to believe this is to remain outside God's house.

This is what Paul is talking about in Romans 10:9-13. This is reality: God has redeemed his creation through Jesus Christ. This is reality: he washed away our sins and made us clean by his own work and righteousness, without any input, help or even request from us. When we believe in Jesus, confessing that he is Lord, we are now living in reality.

Here is an example. On January 1, 1863, President Abraham Lincoln signed the Emancipation Proclamation. This executive order said that all slaves in all states in insurrection against the U.S. government were now free.

The news of this freedom did not reach the slaves of Galveston, Texas, until June 19, 1865. For two and half years those slaves had been legally free, but they did not know it and could not live in the reality of it until soldiers of the U.S. Army arrived to tell them.

Jesus saves us

It is important for us to realize that it is not our confession that saves us. Jesus saves us. Remember what Paul has already told us earlier in Romans 10: we cannot obligate God to do anything. Our good works do not make us right with God, and it does not matter what kind of work we are talking about. Whether it is the work of obeying a rule—like keeping a day sacred or avoiding alcohol—or whether it is the work of saying, “I believe.” As Paul says in Ephesians 2:8, even our faith is a gift from God!

Maybe it is helpful to think of the difference between a contract and a confession. A contract is a legal agreement in which an exchange takes place. Each party is obligated to trade something to the other. If we have a contract with God, then our confession of Jesus obligates him to save us. But we cannot obligate God to act on our behalf; that would be like ascending to heaven to bring Christ down. Grace is Christ choosing, in his divine freedom, to come down to us.

In a confession, however, a person stands in open court and admits to the reality that already exists. A criminal might say: “I admit it. I stole the merchandise.” He has confessed to the true state of his world. Likewise, followers of Jesus say: “I admit it. I needed to be saved and Jesus saved me.” They have confessed to the true state of the world.

Confess that we are free

What the slaves in Texas in 1865 needed was not a contract to buy their freedom. They needed to know and confess that they were already free. Their freedom had already been established. President Lincoln could set them free, and he did set them free by his executive order. God had the right to save us, and he did save us by the life of his Son.

What the slaves in Texas needed was to *hear* that their freedom had been established, to believe that it was so, and to begin to live accordingly. This world being what it is, their freedom was only the first step in a long road toward being treated as free. Slaves need someone to come and tell them they have been set free. This is Paul's point in Romans 10:14.

Can you imagine what it was like for those slaves, chopping cotton in the 100-degree heat of Texas on that June day to hear the good news of their freedom? When they looked up and saw the U.S. Army coming, don't you think that was the most beautiful sight they had ever seen?

I think Paul would say that it was. In Romans 10:15 he quotes from Isaiah: "How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!" What does that tell you about our role in God's plan of salvation? We are his army, carrying the good news of what he has accomplished to all those who have not yet heard. We cannot save a single person. Our job is to be the heralds, the messengers, the newscasters of the good news of what Jesus has already accomplished.

Why should we tell people about Jesus? Because they are living as slaves when they should be free. Jesus won their freedom 2,000 years ago, and they still haven't believed the good news.

The Israelites that Paul knew were relying on the law to be right with God (Romans 10:2-4). Christ is the end of all that, Paul writes. You cannot be right with God by improving yourself. The only way to be right with God is if God makes you right with him.

J. Stepp

LOSING OUR GOSPEL “BUTS”

Have you heard the big gospel BUT? It goes something like this: “Yes, yes ... of course we’re saved by grace, BUT ...”

The big BUT always manages to bring up the rear in any discussion about grace. We can give unlimited lip service to “saved by grace,” it seems, but when the chips are down, we’d have a whole lot more “faith” in our salvation if we had a decent-sized pile of good works to point to.

Most of us are ready to get a little agitated on that point any time we hear somebody pushing the grace envelope a little “too far.”

“Sure, we’re saved by grace, BUT keep that up and you’ll go straight to hell.”

Huh?

What are we afraid of?

It’s as though we’re scared to death that somewhere, somehow, somebody might “get away with” something — something we might even wish deep down we could get away with, too. So we have to find ways to put the brakes on the grace train before it rumbles out of control, before people actually start to believe it, before they actually start to shed some guilt and quit fretting over whether God is going to throw them into hell for their failure to measure up to perfect behavior.

The Bible is pretty clear on the point. “For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith — and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God — not by works, so that no one can boast. For we are God’s workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do” (Ephesians 2:8-10).

Even our faith is a gift of God, not something we add to the equation. Our good works, such as they are, are God’s workmanship, not ours.

Paul asked the Galatians rather pointedly: “I would like to learn just one thing from you: Did you receive the Spirit by observing the law, or by believing what you heard? Are you so foolish? After beginning with the Spirit, are you now trying to attain your goal by human effort?” (Galatians 3:2-3).

So how did the big BUT get into the picture?

We’re all addicted, it seems, to the idea that in the matter of judgment God is pretty much like us — that he doles out kudos and prizes for good actions and curses and plagues for bad actions, that he holds grudges, that he keeps score of all our mistakes, and that he will “get us” in the end. That makes sense to us, apparently, because we routinely do it to each other, to our spouses, to our kids, to our bosses, our employees, our neighbors, our friends.

God doesn’t.

Just like Jesus

When it comes to harboring grudges and keeping score and retaliating, he isn't like us at all. He's like Jesus Christ. Exactly like Jesus Christ. Jesus didn't count up mistakes and hold sins over people's heads. He forgave. He forgave even his enemies, even the people who killed him. "Father, forgive them," he prayed, "for they do not know what they are doing" (Luke 23:34).

Salvation isn't geared to how well you behave; it's geared to how much God loves you. He loved you so much that he gave his Son to save you; he sent his Son not to condemn the world, but to save it (John 3:16-17).

Here's the BUT we should be listening to: "But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions — it is by grace you have been saved" (Ephesians 2:4-5).

You won't find an extra BUT at the end of that one.

Yes, God will do something about your behavior too. He'll come and live in you through the Holy Spirit and begin a lifelong transformation of you from the inside out. That means your salvation is entirely his gift from start to finish. You can trust him; not even your weaknesses and problems and sins can stop him from seeing you through to the end he has for you.

If there's another "but" to reckon with, it's this: It's free, but you can't experience and enjoy what you won't accept. So why not accept God's love and trust Jesus for your salvation? You're safe in his hands.

Isn't it time you stopped worrying about what's going to become of you and hand over your life to him once and for all? He's on your side, you know — and he always has been!

J. Michael Feazell

TRUTH IN ADVERTISING

Have you ever watched a TV advertisement that makes an offer that seems so outstanding, and the price so ridiculously cheap, that it seems too good to be true? At first you might be skeptical. But testimonial after testimonial pile up to confirm that this is indeed a miracle product – one that promises to transform your life. The price is just a fraction of what you might have to spend on similar products that don't work as well.

But wait – there's more! If you call in the next five minutes you'll get not one – not two – but three bonus gifts that are alone worth the purchase price. Our operators are standing by, but supplies are limited, so you **MUST ACT NOW!!!!**

So you succumb, and place an order. But when the item arrives you are deeply disappointed. As you take it out of the box it looks very different from what you saw displayed under the bright lights of a TV studio. The smooth presenter may have made it look like a miracle product, but in your hands it barely works. With a sigh you realize you have been tricked by slick advertising that greatly oversold the item. It leaves you feeling foolish and betrayed, and you resolve never to fall for that kind of deception again.

It's bad enough if that happens with a vacuum cleaner, or a piece of jewelry. It is tragic if untruthful advertising misrepresents something as important as the gospel. But sadly, it does happen.

The gospel is good news, the best possible news anyone can hear. It promises a new life beyond death, a life rich in joy, peace, friendship and real love. It's the good news of a life in communion with 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 a set of rules and regulations overseen by a temperamental God who'll roast you forever if you don't measure up. You need to "act now," before it is too late to get back in his favor.

Sometimes it's presented as a pyramid scheme in which the more people you talk into joining up, the greater your eternal income will be. You might be promised some "valuable free gift" as an additional reward for your quick response and "generous free will offering."

Presented like this, the gospel message can be misrepresented as something it is not. Then, when it fails to deliver, people become suspicious and disillusioned. Some overly enthusiastic believers with their pushy, memorized spiels end up increasing their neighbors' resistance to accepting

the true gospel message. Some polls have shown that most people would rather live next door to a used-car salesman than to a Bible-thumping evangelical Christian.

But imagine if we could all share the gospel the way Jesus asked us to. Jesus said, “Let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven” (Matthew 5:16). If we 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. That would 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 – the way Galatians 5:22-23 describes it.

Jesus made it pretty simple. He said, “A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another” (John 13:34-35).

What if we believers just did that? Wouldn’t that win more people over to the real power of the gospel? Testimonies have their place, certainly, but it’s God’s love that overcomes sin and the fear of death. People can warm up to genuine, godly love a whole lot easier than religious talk, pushy questions, judgmental frowns and threats of damnation.

The gospel is the best and only hope for humanity. It is the best and only hope for you and me and everyone we care about. Human beings can never become righteous on their own. But God does in Jesus Christ, forgive us, heal our minds, and make us righteous.

That is why we preach the gospel, calling on all people everywhere, as far as the Spirit gives us opportunity, to turn to Christ in faith so they can know him for who he really is and know themselves for who they really are in him.

Joseph Tkach

GOSSIPING THE GOSPEL

I was asked by some congregations to consult with them about how they might be more effective instruments of Christ. I consider this a privilege and have learned as much from these members as they have learned from me.

One congregation had been devoting themselves, as a group, to asking God to transform them so that they might be able to fulfill his will. Together we discovered that we are bound to some faulty paradigms, which must change if we are going to be effective stewards of the gospel.

Toxic paradigms

Paradigms are values and assumptions we never question. They are difficult to change because they remain invisible. Everyone just “knows” that a particular way of doing or thinking is right—so paradigms are assigned a truth status that is rarely questioned. Some are incorrect from the outset. Others may have been correct initially, but as situations change, a helpful paradigm can cease to be valid and become toxic.

It might be helpful to share a couple of areas where we (Western Christianity, including our denomination) tend to be paradigm bound—that is, unquestioningly accepting a faulty paradigm. I’ll then try to contrast the faulty paradigm with one that is hopefully more reflective of Christ’s intent.

Static vs. dynamic

Christ intended that his disciples embark on a lifelong journey with him. The early church was dynamic—it spread like yeast, penetrating increasingly diverse places, crossing ethnic and cultural boundaries. The church could not be contained by any economic stratum and surmounted all class barriers. Only after several centuries did the church begin to position itself as the center of society, government and culture. It became the static church—everyone and everything in society was expected to revolve around the church.

In the United States we have no conscious awareness of this dynamic; nevertheless, this is where the prevailing Western Christian paradigm got its start. Over the last few centuries, government and society rejected the church being the center of all things. The church was forced to accept this new status, but did not shift back to its original dynamic, journeying role. Instead, the church began to compete for a place in the life of the individual, which brings us to a second flawed paradigm.

Attraction

As the increasingly disenfranchised church continued to cling to the security of its centuries-old static paradigm, it was forced to adopt an approach of trying to attract unbelievers to it. As a result, nearly every evangelistic program and effort is built around the concept of either directly attracting people to join the static church, or to raise the awareness and reputation of the church. This is part of an effort to grow by attraction. The attraction paradigm is essential if the church is going to be static and still grow. This approach was effective to a greater or lesser degree, depending on the receptivity of the target audience.

Marketing paradigm

Since World War II, the church in the West has been considered increasingly irrelevant. The target audience has grown more resistant to organized religion. The continued attempts to attract have often resulted in sheep shuffling, or transfer growth, rather than an increase in conversion of unbelievers.

Marketing the church

The static and attraction paradigms have caused us to adopt and cling to another toxic paradigm that I'll call the marketing paradigm. To attract effectively, the church has essentially cloned the business model and seeks to market the gospel. Hence we have a huge emphasis on "evangelism," a term that seems to defy precise definition.

We find a strong focus on learning how to witness, share our faith, advance the kingdom, lead someone to Christ, give our testimony, fulfill the Great Commission. We take out ads, we do radio and television shows, we have seeker services, we conduct crusades and revivals, we canvass neighborhoods, we build attractive buildings with maximum amenities, such as childcare and exciting audio-visual effects.

All this is part of trying to make our product (the static church) more attractive to unbelievers. The desired result is the same—that unbelievers are brought to Christ—hence to the (static) body of Christ. The problem is that more and more effort is being expended for less and less result. Modern unbelievers in the West tend to reject the institution of the church.

Increasingly, wise heads within Christianity are urging us to force ourselves back into a dynamic mode instead of our comfortable static/attraction/marketing mode. I urge our congregations to follow suit for two reasons. First, if we pursue a marketing paradigm, we are taking on as new

something that is actually old and increasingly proven to be ineffective. Second, we are too small, too poor and too far behind to compete in that market. The good news is that there is a better way.

Dynamic church

Let's take a fresh look at the principle on which Jesus founded the church and see if we might recapture some of Jesus' paradigm. One of the most overused slogans in the marketing paradigm is Matthew 4:19, "Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men." Reading this through marketing-paradigm eyes causes one to miss the true paradigm that Jesus was communicating. Under the marketing paradigm, we place the emphasis on learning how to be effective "fishers of men." That is backward thinking! The emphasis of Jesus is on "follow me."

Jesus is saying that we are invited to be on a journey (dynamic paradigm) with him. It is in following Jesus in a journey that he will cause us to be effective at catching other people. This is the opposite of the static paradigm—and takes us in the opposite direction from the marketing paradigm. As Wayne Meeks, church historian, puts it, the early Christians, who were a vibrant part of their communities, "gossiped" the gospel. The joy of the journey with Christ simply overflowed, impacting those in their intimate community. They didn't have to "evangelize."

The church Jesus founded was dynamic, not static. They had no status, no grand institutions or facilities other than their homes. They expected Jesus to return, and viewed themselves as sojourners. They lived normal lives and did not stand out from the culture around them—except that inwardly the Holy Spirit of God was radically transforming them.

The church was fully engaged with its community. Unlike our history, where we awaited Christ's return in as much exclusion as possible, Jesus plunged the first Christians into the world.

Except for avoiding idolatry, the culture of the church was virtually indistinguishable from the surrounding Jewish, Greek or Roman culture. By Christ's design, his people remained tightly connected to their friends and relatives. It was Christ living out of the daily lives of Christians that made them attractive. The focal point of the life of the church and the basis of its growth was the household—a fabric of family and business relationships.

Rodney Stark, sociologist of religion, relates research on the growth patterns of the early church in his book *The Rise of Christianity*. Stark shows that the growth of the church from its tiny 120 person beginning to a conservative estimate of from 5 to 7.5 million Christians by the early 300s

need not be the result of unending signs and wonders or any other abnormal process. Stark demonstrates that a growth rate of about 40 percent per decade would account for the growth of the early church. This translates to about 4 percent per year.

Even in our modern context, this is not unknown. The Mormon Church has grown about 40 percent per decade for the last century!

Importance of the household

Stark shows that the primary means of the growth of the early church was by attachments and networks of intimate relationships. Stark says that “conversions to new deviant religious groups (as early Christians were viewed by those around them) occurs when, other things being equal, people have or develop stronger attachments to members of the group than they have to nonmembers” (p. 15).

Stark then points out that

the basis for successful conversional movements is growth through social networks, through a structure of direct and intimate interpersonal attachments. Most new religious movements fail because they quickly become closed, or semi-closed networks. That is, they fail to keep forming and sustaining attachments to outsiders and thereby lose the capacity to grow. Successful movements discover techniques for remaining open networks, able to reach out and into new adjunct social networks. And herein lies the capacity of movements to sustain exponential rates of growth over a long period of time.

I urge any and all congregations to devote significant time and prayer to trying to discover how they can create and maintain open networks.

The early church grew because close friends and relatives of new Christians saw a transformation taking place in the lives of the believers. As a fellowship, we need to start living. We need to get in a frame of mind that embraces the fact that we are spiritual pilgrims while living a normal life, with relational attachments to our unconverted friends and loved ones.

By breaking out of the marketing paradigm, we will instead become servant-priests (1 Peter 2) who offer spiritual sacrifices of love, prayers, and quality time given to our households. This includes those friends, relatives, neighbors and associates with whom we have an open networking relationship. This may mean re-ordering our use of time.

Accepting Jesus’ paradigm would lead us to love and serve rather than look for the opportunity to give our gospel sales pitch. Jesus said in Acts 1:8:

“You will be my witnesses.”

We witness him by living in close connection with our household, or network of relationships. The growth of the church will take care of itself when we love the household that God has given each and every one of us. Growth takes care of itself because “as movements grow, their social surface expands proportionately. That is, each new member expands the size of the networks of attachments between the group and potential converts.”

To summarize, we need to transition out of the paradigm of marketing, which tries to attract people to the institution, and seek instead to do the following:

1. Every individual asks Jesus to transform him or her enough into his likeness to be an effective witness through ordinary living.
2. Every individual seeks to deepen the attachments with his or her existing network of relationships of unbelieving family, friends and associates. The individual purposely looks for ways to love and serve—with no strings attached.
3. When the Holy Spirit brings the unbeliever to a desire to know more, the Christian needs to have, through personal study and prayer, an effective answer for the hope that motivates them.

I will develop these concepts further in the following two chapters.

Randal Dick

THE POWER OF INTENT

Many people want to understand how to respond to Christ's command that we are part of his Great Commission. They ask: "What is the next step?"

The answer is simple: become intentional about walking with Christ. The key word here is *intentional*. This next step is essential for most of us. It can also make a tremendous difference in the life of the individual and the fellowship.

A longtime friend and elder put it well when he said that so much of the problem that people were facing in his congregation revolved around the fact that they were conditioned to be reactive, or even passive, to the gospel needs and opportunities in our immediate surroundings.

Now, he said, we understand the need to take responsibility for sharing the gospel personally, to be proactive. But he concluded that it is a real struggle for a lot of people to make the transformation from being reactive to being a proactive part of the gospel of Christ—living with the knowledge that we were called to live our lives for them (the lost), not just for ourselves.

Why are you saying that intent is so important?

It's simple when you think about it: God is an intentional being. You can see it in Genesis 1, where the God of creation moved across the face of the waters of a confused planet and with great intent restored it to a state of beauty. Or, you can look at John 1, where God intentionally came to earth and lived in the flesh in order to be the Savior of the human race.

God is not only a God of intent, he has the power to make whatever he intends become reality. The Great Commission is a statement of intent as well. Jesus is saying that the power to make *intent* become reality has been given to him. He therefore wants us, when we go into all the world, to make disciples.

We are also intentional beings. That is one of the great gifts God has given us when he made us in his image. But unlike God, we do not have the power to always make our intention become perfect reality. Sometimes we don't even manage to make our intention reality at all, and sometimes we get a reality that we didn't intend.

Why intent must be the next step

The Great Commission is of essential importance. But the Great Commission is not a mantra, nor is it a command that is independent of the other statements that surround it.

Edmund Gibbs, professor of church growth at Fuller Theological Seminary, observed that in order to understand Matthew 28:18-20, one must see it in the context of Matthew 4:19, where Jesus says to those who would be disciples, “Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men.”

A Christian’s primary intent should be to wholeheartedly participate with Jesus and allow him to lead us on that journey. That journey of following him is led, guided and guarded by Jesus personally. He knows the path and the destination. He chooses the pleasant meadows of the good times and the narrow confines of our trials and sorrows. This is a journey we will never finish in this life. When we draw our last breath, it will be on the road, so to speak. Most importantly for us, this is intended to be a journey of transformation.

It is essential to be clear on this point, because it forms the foundation of all that follows. Jesus causes a powerful transformation to happen within us as we intentionally participate and wholeheartedly submit to Christ’s authority in our lives. As we are transformed, we become attractive to the lost who are seeking to understand the purpose of life. I cannot emphasize enough that this is what makes the difference between being part of Christ carrying out his will on this earth vs. trying to “do evangelism” and asking God to bless the endeavor.

Where the power of intent enters the picture

Christ desires to shape our future, our reality and who we are. That is what the “follow me” is all about. I can’t make my intent reality, but I do have the God-given ability (and responsibility) to be intentional in my desire to follow him. This is an essential response to Jesus’ command to “follow me, and I will make you fishers of men.” In so doing, we open ourselves up to Christ and allow him to make us an effective part of his will on this earth.

What would some of the transforming effects be when we are intentional about being part of Christ’s journey, as opposed to asking him to be the guide of *our* journey? The semantics are small, the difference in life is huge. We would become much more aware of the existence of unsaved people around us. We tend to block out the clutter of other people’s lives, especially those for whom we feel that we have no responsibility. Being intentional about following Jesus on a daily journey automatically nudges us into a priestly mentality, because that is who Jesus is.

It is interesting to note that Christ inspired Peter to write that we, the members of the Body of Christ, are part of a royal priesthood that offers spiritual sacrifices in the name of Jesus the High Priest (1 Peter 2:9). What

are those spiritual sacrifices, in practical 21st-century terms, that Christ desires that we offer? The answers to that question should shape who we are and what we do, both personally and collectively.

We would be growing spiritually. Being intentional about journeying with Christ would probably cause a person to begin talking to God about helping him or her to overcome some of the long-standing failings, be they commission or omission, that cause us to miss the mark. This is quite different from the legalistic approach to overcoming, where one is motivated by fear of not being in the kingdom or a desire for a greater reward.

This desire to have our character formed in Christ is driven by the realization that it is Christ in us who makes us attractive to the lost, and every sin that remains resident in us causes people to see Satan's way in action instead of the transforming power of the love of God at work in us.

We would be more serious about knowing what we believe and being able to give a sensible explanation of those beliefs. Being intentional about journeying with Christ tends to stimulate a person to also be intentional about having an effective response to a lost person who needs and desires to know that there is a God, and to know how they might connect with him. Why would we leave such an important thing to accident?

Think about the words of Isaiah that Christ adopted as a primary theme of his ministry to humanity, "Comfort ye my people." "Tell them that their iniquities are pardoned." "That their warfare is ended." And "make straight a highway to our God."

Should we not invest some intentional effort at being able to assess the felt need of a person and being able to articulate that part of the gospel that speaks to their immediate need, thereby encouraging them to take a step toward redemption? Is not a highway a long series of steps that has been cleared of obstacles, and passage made as simple as possible? What is the practical application of making a highway to our God (for the lost)? What part do we play, and what constitutes, in real terms, making a highway for them?

Being intentional about being on Christ's journey would lead us to change the way we allocate our time. We might begin to focus more time and energy on people instead of things. We would also tend to focus more on the relationships that we either have, or can develop, with people who do not have a saving relationship with Jesus. The focus of that time would be outgoing—being there for them, serving them in some small or great way, one time or ongoing.

I hope it becomes clear that by being intentional about yielding to Jesus'

command to engage in a lifetime journey of following him, we put ourselves in the best position to be effective in his Great Commission. This is the power of intent.

Next segment—it gets even better!

So far we've talked about the powerful spiritual dynamic that is put into motion when we are intentional about making our walk with Christ part of our daily thought and action. We've seen what a transforming effect it has on our personal life. But that is only the beginning. The power of intent goes way beyond our own life. By being intentional in our walk with Christ, we become a part of what he is doing on a much larger scale. We are often not even aware of its scope until it has passed by and borne incredible fruit.

In the next installment I'll give a couple of exciting examples from the lives of believers in the early church, how a small, insignificant group of outcasts rocked an empire. They didn't know that was what they were doing. They were just being intentional about following Christ. But by being intentional about their walk with Christ, they put themselves in a position to be a part of something big.

Randal Dick

ORDINARY PEOPLE CHANGE THE WORLD

*This is part three of a trilogy that includes
“Gossiping the Gospel” and “The Power of Intent.”*

When we pray and ask God to let his will be done in our lives, how much do we mean it? We try to avoid putting our agenda before God’s will, but I suggest that the bigger problem is that we often don’t take God seriously enough in his statements about how he will use us to his glory and honor.

God desires to take our daily life and spend it in a way that yields results we could not produce or predict. The net result will be so much greater than anything we could “do for the Lord”—and the impact can be magnified even further when we allow God to work through us as a community of believers.

To illustrate this point, I cite two powerful examples. The people involved didn’t perceive any particular dramatic value to what they were doing. Yet Christ used them to help bring the Roman Empire face to face with Jesus Christ.

Women

When the first house church believers followed Christ’s example in their communities, something started small, but soon grew large. The early church became attractive to women. The rate of conversion of women from paganism to Christianity became such a problem to the pagans that Emperor Julian issued a written order to Pope Damasus I banning Christian missionaries from calling at the homes of pagan women.

In order to appreciate how the daily walk of the individual Christian was used by Christ to create this history-shaping dynamic, we need to contrast the Christian community with that of the pagan.

Gendercide

New converts who undertook to follow Jesus would have stopped practicing abortion and infanticide. Because of the need for a large male population for war and food production, female infanticide was widely practiced in the time of the early church. It would have been a part of most family’s circumstances.

A study of the Delphi inscription enabled historians to reconstruct about 600 families. Only six families had raised more than one daughter. We would call that gendercide today. Abortion was also widely practiced in Greco-Roman society. When Christians obeyed God, it became visibly evident to

the pagan community around them—it made a difference.

This simple act of obedience made the Christian way of life much more attractive to Greco-Roman women, and in a fairly short time the Christian church's dominant population was women, while the pagan religion was primarily populated by men.

Christ made them 'fishers of people'

These women journeyed with Christ; their lives began to take on the character of their Lord. They were transformed into something desirable, that men could not find anywhere else. It's not that there were no virtuous pagan women, it's just that proportionately there were so many virtuous Christian women that any man looking for a virtuous woman would tend to be drawn to the Christian community.

Paul's statements in 1 Corinthians 7 were primarily intended to guide a phenomenon that was happening with increasing frequency. Pagan men were coming to the church to find wives.

Quality of life

Over time, Christian women also came to enjoy a significantly better quality of life than did many pagan women of Greco-Roman society. This is where the Christian community, all journeying together in response to Christ, made a huge difference:

1. The Christian community rejected the double standard that expected women to be chaste but allowed men extensive sexual license. This changed the pattern of life for the community and everyone whom they touched. It extended to the subsequent generations. This exponentially increased the impact of that simple obedience.
2. Christians also reflected God's love for widows. Pagan widows were often forced to remarry against their will. They often became the property of the new husband and lost all inheritance and personal control of their assets. They could be put away and left with nothing. Not so with Christians. The Christian community would help sustain Christian widows without means.
3. Christian women were able to marry at an older age. That may not seem important until one realizes that in the Greco-Roman world, girls were often forced into pre-pubertal marriage. Some historians estimate that nearly 50 percent of pagan females were married before the age of 14. Christian women had it much better because of the intentional walk of the community on a journey with Jesus.

4. Leadership roles were available to Christian women—they were ordained deacons right along with the men. Origen and others commented on the women who were deservedly part of the diaconate. (The term *deaconess* is a modern invention and does not reflect the original, where a deacon was a deacon, male or female.)

Plagues

Two serious plagues swept the Roman Empire. The first ravaged the region between A.D. 165 and 180, the second about 100 years later. During its 15-year duration, the first plague took the lives of between one fourth and one third of the population of the empire. It even claimed the life of Emperor Marcus Aurelius. (His death was portrayed at the beginning of the movie *The Gladiator*.)

Christians were affected by the plagues along with their pagan neighbors. But unlike the pagans, most Christians were following Jesus and were emulating him in the way they lived—and in some cases the way they died. Jesus used the fact that his people followed him to rock the empire.

Imagine yourself caught in the plague. The stench of death surrounds you. Caravans of carts work their way through the streets and out of the city carrying diseased bodies to a communal dumping ground where they are either buried or burned. People all around you are dropping dead. Who will be next? In the midst of circumstances like these, people ask searching questions about life, death and God.

Pagans had no one to turn to. Their priests did not have answers. Their gods were of no help. Pagan gods were to be appeased so they would not cause harm. But the pagan gods did not offer to have a loving relationship with the pagan people. Only Jesus did. The pagan gods offered no eternal life—except in the dismal underworld.

So there was a hope and peace in Christians that was nurtured by the Holy Spirit. There was an attitude of outgoing love even in the sore trial they faced. Around A.D. 260 Dionysius wrote:

Most of our brother Christians showed unbounded love and loyalty; never sparing themselves and thinking only of one another. Heedless of danger, they took charge of the sick, attending to their every need and ministering to them in Christ, and with them departed this life serenely happy; for they were infected by others with the disease, drawing on themselves the sickness of their neighbors and cheerfully accepting their pains. Many, in nursing and caring for others, transferred their death to themselves and died in their stead....

The best of our brothers lost their lives in this manner, a number of presbyters, deacons, and laymen winning high commendation so that death in this form, the result of great piety and strong faith, seems in every way the equal of martyrdom.

Large numbers of pagans, including rulers, priests and physicians, having no hope or anchor for their souls, fled to get away from the plague. They left their sick behind, alone, without care or the basic necessities of life. The Christians, as a whole, tended to remain and care for their loved ones, and for each other. In many cases the love of God in them stretched far enough to also enter the houses of the pagans and care for their sick as well.

This act, resulting from asking themselves what Jesus would do in the same situation, had a profound impact. Here are some of the ways they made such a difference: The Christian example was in such stark contrast to the pagan example that large numbers of those who survived the plague were drawn to look at the Christians around them with open hearts. Their own belief system had let them down, but their Christian neighbors seemed to know a better way. Many were brought to Christ.

Pure religion ... undefiled

Epidemiologists estimate that basic health care, such as providing adequate water and warmth, can result in as much as a 30 percent higher survival rate. Hence there were many more Christian survivors than pagan survivors. This by itself was enough to change the ratio of pagans to Christians. Also, pagans who were cared for by Christians also enjoyed a higher survival rate. These survivors then would tend to have loving relationships with Christians in place of the suspicions of the past. Conversion rates soared.

This change of the status quo had such a dramatic impact that we find the Emperor Julian writing to his chief priest of Galatia, complaining that they needed to equal the virtues of Christians.

In a letter to another priest Julian wrote, "I think that when the poor happened to be neglected and overlooked by the priests, the impious Galileans observed this and devoted themselves to benevolence." And he also wrote, "The impious Galileans support not only their own poor, but ours as well, everyone can see that our people lack aid from us."

Poor Julian, like many today, could only see things in marketing terms. He had no idea that he and his system were being confronted by Jesus himself through the collective lives of those who heeded the call to "Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men" (Matthew 4:19).

Key lessons I have learned from researching and writing this series of three articles:

- Jesus wants *me*, not just my efforts on his behalf. His call to me is to be my ____ (he will fill in the blank, and the result will glorify the Father).
- My effectiveness starts and ends with submitting my ordinary daily life to him—each day is a new step on a lifelong journey with Christ.
- Being an ordinary person, living an ordinary life in Christ, allows him to spend me in such a way that his kingdom benefits in ways I could not even imagine, let alone engineer.

I did not cite every quote or source. The main source is Rodney Stark's book, *The Rise of Christianity* (HarperCollins, 1997). Dr. Stark cites the specific sources for the studies as well as the references from ancient manuscripts.

Randal Dick

INVISIBLE MISSIONARIES IN CHINA

An important part of preaching the gospel effectively is being sensitive to opportunities. An excellent example of this is the current global village economy, where rapidly growing economies import labor from other countries to fill their needs.

Every month, thousands of Filipinos leave the Manila airport on their way to be overseas guest workers. Christian leaders in the Philippines realize that these workers are being allowed into places where missionaries would not be permitted, and they provide mission training to as many overseas workers as possible.

Among those who are now spreading the gospel in China are a couple we will call Mary and Jesse. They had a deep desire to reach parts of China where the gospel has not penetrated.

They were given an opportunity to go to China on a one-month tourist visa. At the end of the month, in order to obtain an extension, Jesse had to become a student. Although he had very little money, he sought enrollment in one of the universities. God gave favor, and he and Mary were granted student visas. Jesse enrolled in classes in Chinese language studies. Extra funds had to be spent for the visa upgrade as well as for mandatory medical examinations.

Getting started in mission

Mary and Jesse spent those first months waiting on God, in prayer, to see how he would open doors for them to reach people around them with the gospel. The area where they were working was home to more than 20 ethnic minorities.

At first Mary and Jesse went to universities, parks and public places to build friendships with the Chinese people. They invited them to their apartment. When they had enough people, they began an “English Corner.” The group grew. After several meetings, they were able to determine that most of the group was open to reading the Bible, and they converted the English Corner into a small group Bible study.

Newcomers continued to show up. To keep numbers small and reduce the risk of being reported to the authorities for conducting private meetings, they started an additional group on a different day of the week.

Blessed in China

God continued to bless and encourage them. Mary had become pregnant, and their resources had dwindled down to about a two-week’s budget. They transferred to a new apartment with nothing inside except for a small dining table and a bed. However, Jesse wanted to continue to host people in their apartment.

On one occasion they were expecting more than 15 people, and they did not have a sofa. They reasoned that it would be more affordable to purchase an inexpensive carpet, and the guests could sit on the floor. Jesse measured the floor and calculated that they would need about \$36 to cover the living room.

A few days before the event they were walking on a roadside when they heard a sound like falling dry leaves. When they looked down they found local currency worth about \$36! Jesse purchased the carpet. The big day arrived and Mary excitedly prepared Filipino dishes for their guests. They had a simple but joyful party. As the guests were leaving the party, each of them, one by one, approached Jesse and gave him some money. The total amounted to more than \$60—more than one-month's food allowance.

Mary had to return to the Philippines, since it is illegal for foreigners to give birth in China. Jesse remained behind to complete the semester and to disciple the two groups, which had grown to 40 people. He then returned to the Philippines to be with Mary.

Please pray for them

The baby was born, and the family went back to China the following year. This time they focused their work on a people in an even more remote province with a large Tibetan population. The baby was an effective missionary, too. He is so full of smiles that many people cannot resist stopping to take another look at him, which results in many more conversations and some additional relationships.

Missionaries like this know that they cannot do the work of God without our support and prayers. They ask that you lift them up to God in prayer. They ask for prayers for their families—that they can adapt to the physical climate and the cultural climate. They ask that you continue to pray for those God calls through them, that they will encounter the living God in their Bible studies.

Randal Dick

SHOW UP — DECLARE — OR WIN?

How would Christ have us preach the gospel? Three broad approaches are in use today. Evangelism can be thought of as presence, proclamation or persuasion. Or in more colloquial terms, *show up, declare, or win*.

Persuasion evangelism (which of course involves being present and declaring the gospel) is by far the most effective and biblically supported model. We fall short of Christ's intent if we define presence or proclamation evangelism as the primary goal.

This is not to say that the activities involved in presence or proclamation evangelism are not good Christian endeavors, but we must realize that even unbelievers can alleviate suffering and do good works. But only those who are in Christ can lead others to Christ.

God's primary purpose for us, and for the people we meet, is that we will all share eternity with him. That's why Paul, though he cared very much for the needy (consider the offering for the saints in famine-stricken Judea), he sought by all means to persuade people of salvation through Jesus Christ.

However, sometimes we face a situation where persuasion is either not possible or too dangerous. Sometimes even proclamation is not viable. In those cases, we revert to presence evangelism, but we never resign ourselves to making presence or proclamation our only goal—we always strive to return to persuasion evangelism.

The church's efforts in Bangladesh are an ideal example. Bangladesh is one of the most difficult mission fields in the world, and therefore one of the areas that has the greatest need for the gospel. John Biswas began with proclamation evangelism. Before long, several gospel workers were nearly killed, and our training facility was nearly burned down by angry mobs. We backed away to reconsider how to proceed.

John set out to establish a presence and let Christ be known through sharing his love with people round about. Everything was done with the intent of being able to see changed lives and permanent spiritual communities being formed. There is now a beautiful and effective progression in Bangladesh, from presence to proclamation to persuasion. Spiritual communities have been and are being formed, and they are gaining in strength and spiritual health. They remain a blessing to all who are round about.

Definitions

Presence Evangelism: Letting your light shine, often through good



works. Example: World Vision, Mercy Ships, Kids Alive, local outreach projects.

Proclamation

Evangelism: Creation of situations where people are told about Jesus Christ and invited to accept him. Example: Crusades, door-to-door evangelism, musical touring evangelism, Jesus

Film project.

Persuasion Evangelism: Establishment of relationships that lead to conversion and discipling of converts to a basic level of spiritual maturity. Example: church plants, World Impact, cell churches.

Proclamation gone wrong

Ranjon Roy and his wife are part of the gospel work we support in Bangladesh. It's a risky occupation, but Ranjon patiently establishes a presence in a village. Based on the goodwill generated at the "presence" level, Ranjon introduces those who are open-minded to the Scriptures. As the Holy Spirit opens minds further, people are led to accept Christ as their Lord and Savior.

Ranjon's brother was also a gospel worker, involved in strictly "proclamation" evangelism—in this case, showing the *Jesus* film. He was stabbed to death in reprisal for attempting to indoctrinate villagers away from Islam. He was hailed in a U.S. Christian newsletter as a martyr. Perhaps he was, but perhaps there was a little lack of wisdom there as well.



Presence evangelism

The goat program has opened doors and hearts in the villages. Our people establish relationships with village leaders, who help identify the poorest of the poor, who are then given a goat. One goat can, over time, lift a widow from destitution. Pictured are some of the latest beneficiaries of the goat program.

Presence evangelism

The nurses training program is the latest of the “presence” evangelism efforts in Bangladesh. Professional training in home-care nursing is given. Pictured above is the second class to graduate from the training program. These young women will fan out across the countryside providing home-care for elderly and invalids. The nurses represent all faiths, but the Christian nurses have a special mission to share Christ’s love with as many as possible.

Proclamation evangelism

Our ultimate goal is always to see people who are dead in their sins become alive in Christ. Pictured is a Bible study being conducted at our training center. Many of these women were reached through one of various “presence evangelism” programs. But their desire has gone beyond the physical to a desire to understand the Scriptures and to come to know the Christian God. The vast majority of attendees are women. This is common in many mission fields. The women teach the children, and eventually many husbands follow.





Persuasion evangelism

Cell groups are formed where new converts can be part of a growing spiritual community. After conversion and a time of discipleship, these brothers and sisters in Christ become part of the presence and proclamation process. Each new household opens the door to relationships that are open to persuasion evangelism from the outset.

Randal Dick

HOW I FOUND MY WAY TO FOLLOW JESUS

John N. Biswas uses the following testimonial in a printed tract he uses in evangelistic efforts in Bangladesh.

On March 22, 1971, the front page of every newspaper in Bangladesh published a statement from its nationalist leader to the Bengali people stating, “This struggle of ours is for the complete freedom for the...people of Bangladesh.... We must be ready for any sacrifice in order to achieve our goal.”

The Pakistani army opposed the independence of Bangladesh. At midnight, March 25, 1971, the Pakistani army began killing and terrorizing Bengalis. Seeing hundreds of people killed and many mass graves, I escaped from my college in Dhaka (capital of Bangladesh) and joined MuktiBahini, the Bangladesh Liberation Force.

One awful night I joined 200 other young men on a two-week, 220-mile walk barefooted along the rough and muddy roads to India to train to fight for our homeland. This treacherous journey was filled with calamity and death. Several people died from lack of food, medical needs and severe exhaustion. It was a painful journey.

My first real inkling that God was calling me occurred during one of those perilous nights while trying to rest on the steps of a church. A missionary there invited me in, gave me a glass of water and showed interest in my troubled fate. He understood my apprehension to defend our country. He gently spoke about a great Defender, Jesus, who shed his blood for my sins. The missionary’s story sounded like a fairy tale, but the Lord planted a seed in my heart. Afterward I went to Spicer College in India to study the Bible. There I placed my faith fully in Christ and trained as a soldier for Jesus.

The Bengali people suffered nine months of looting, rape and slaughter by the Pakistani army. Ten million people fled to refugee camps in India and three million were slaughtered—young and old, men, women and children. However, by God’s grace the Pakistani army was defeated, surrendering to the valiant freedom fighters of the Land of Bengali— Bangladesh—Dec. 16, 1971.

Feeling fortunate to have survived the civil war, I believed God had spared me for a particular purpose. After completing my college studies at Dhaka University in Bangladesh, I decided to pursue higher knowledge at Far Eastern Theological Seminary in the Philippines and at Andrews University in Michigan in the United States.

At first, I wanted to be a rich lawyer, live in a big house and do great

things. However, I got my degree in religion. God had other plans. I eventually returned to my home village and organized the native gospel mission now known as the Bengali Evangelical Association (BEA).

Why would anyone choose to follow Jesus? Because of his love, Jesus had respect for all people, especially the ordinary ones, the ones oppressed, whom other people look down upon. The prostitutes found refuge and forgiveness, not condemnation in him. He touched lepers, cast out demons, cared for children, esteemed women and foreigners.

Jesus was compassionate, and it cost him his life. God has come to us in Christ, offering us friendship, joy, hope, courage, doing good rather than evil, forgiveness rather than violence, renewal and more. The resurrection of Jesus is the main message for Christians to share with others. Jesus gave his life for a reason to pay the price to rescue us.

Jesus' death shows the depth of God's love for us. People should know that God loves them truly, and "that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life" (John 3:16). Christianity teaches that eternal life is possible through faith in Christ. In Christ there is nothing to lose but rather everything to gain.

For some people, this makes tremendous sense, and they desire to follow Christ as their Savior. Jesus assures his followers that sacrificing for his sake will be repaid many times over in this life—Mark 10:29-30. People around the world have accepted his call and become his disciples. His word changed my life and it can change others.

I chose to invest my Christian education as a servant and an ambassador for Christ. Today I am not a lawyer but a fellow defender of the poor and follower of Jesus. He commands his followers to love one another. Jesus also told his disciples to preach the gospel.

Along with other native missionaries, we are now preaching God's love in the remote villages of Bangladesh, distributing gospel tracts and Bibles, extending emergency relief, running elementary schools, providing medical support to the rural destitute, baptizing new believers and establishing churches.

We desire to reach the entire rural population of the 68,000 villages of Bangladesh, sharing the salvation story of a great Savior who is calling us to follow him. Jesus said, "Come, follow me" (Matthew 4:19).

John Biswas

EVANGELISM FOCUSED ON RELATIONSHIPS

In many presentations of the gospel, the focus is on guilt – on the fact that people have broken various laws of God. Often, no rationale is given for these laws other than the fact that God has given them. The evangelistic presentation focuses on a person's relationship to those laws, and the good news is presented as a courtroom argument in which the person is determined to be guilty, and then we learn that the penalty has been graciously paid by Jesus.

Potential problems with the traditional gospel presentation

In a culture that has already absorbed some Christian ideas, this approach is often effective, and it is based on various verses in the Bible. It is simple, but it presents only *part* of the gospel, only part of the good news of salvation through Jesus Christ. There are some problems with this approach:

- God is presented in his role as law-giver and judge. The presentation may say that God loves us, but the presentation still implies that he relates to us primarily through law, and through the legal technicalities of whether a penalty has been paid. It's based on a contract, and legal technicalities, not a personal relationship.
- The laws are mentioned without explanation. We are given no reason to keep them except that God says so, and he will punish those who break them.
- This presentation works best with people who already accept the Bible as an authority, have some concept of God as a judge, and of heaven as a reward. But fewer people in our society start with these concepts. We need to explain what God is like, and what the reward is like.
- The presentation stumbles when we observe that Jesus has already paid for our sins, even our future sins. If guilt is our chief problem, and we have been forgiven, then our chief problem has been solved, and there is no *logical* reason for us to obey God. If the only problem with sin is that it offends the lawgiver, and Jesus has taken care of that problem, then the logical conclusion is that there is now nothing wrong with sin, because it's all been paid for on the cross.
- The common evangelistic outline has presented a God who is irrational. He gives no reasons for laws other than the fact that he has the power to punish us if we don't keep them. He is angry at

people for “debts” that have already been paid, and he is angry at people for not believing that they’ve been paid, even if no one has told them.

Suppose that someone listens to the evangelistic presentation and says, “OK, I believe that Jesus paid for my sins. Now, why should I bother changing my life? Why should I stop cheating my customers, cheating on my spouse, and cheating on my taxes? Hasn’t Jesus already paid for those sins?” That’s a reasonable question, and some people ask it.

We could say, “You should stop because those things hurt other people.”

And the person says, “Why should I care whether it hurts other people?”

We could respond, “Because God wants you to care.”

“Well, I *don’t*. Hasn’t that sin already been paid for?” – and we are back to square one in the argument.

We could go back even further if the person asked, “Is it a sin to lack faith?”

If we said “yes,” then the question might be, “Hasn’t Jesus paid for that sin, too?”

Again, we’d have to say, “Yes.”

“Well then, if the sin of unbelief has already been paid for, why does God hold it against me?”

The evangelistic presentation failed to pre-empt these questions. It started from a partial foundation, one that sees sin only as the violation of a rule, and sees the human problem merely as one of guilt.

Why is heaven good?

What we need instead is a better understanding of sin, and of salvation, and indeed, of what life is for and where it’s all headed. We could start with any of those topics, but let’s start with the last one. Where is all of this headed? What’s the goal in life, in salvation, in the gospel?

An evangelistic presentation often begins with a question about heaven. “Are you sure you will go to heaven?” (We assume they want to go.) “Heaven is a free gift.” (We assume they want it.) But we could ask, “Why should people even *want* to go to heaven?” Most evangelistic presentations start with the assumption that people want to go to heaven, but not every listener starts with that assumption. They could rightly ask, “Why should I want to go to heaven? What’s in it for me?”

Often, the Christian answers to that question are shallow. The cartoon stereotype is that we will live on clouds and play harps all day long, and that doesn’t sound appealing to most people. Most Christians see a little further than the stereotype, but sometimes it doesn’t go very far. Heaven is a

beautiful place, they might say, with streets of gold, gates of jewels, and bright light. Those are good, but not exactly compelling. Some Christians talk about the beatific vision, of the joy of seeing the face of Jesus, but that doesn't sound very compelling to many people, either. The main advantage of heaven for some people is simply that it's better than the other place.

The Bible says that there will be no more tears, no more pain, and no more death (Revelation 21:4) – and there we have a little better foundation to build on – especially because the passage also says that God will live with us (v. 3). This sounds good only if you think that God is good, that you would actually enjoy living with him. You have to get rid of the stereotype of an angry God who is watching you from a distance, to zap you when you do something wrong. That is not the sort of god you really look forward to living with.

To help us understand what heaven will be like, it is helpful to turn from the last book in the Bible, to the first. Let us go back to the beginning to see why God created us in the first place. What is the purpose of life? Genesis 1:26 says that God created humanity in his own image, “in the image of God he created...male and female” (v. 27). The next chapter says that it is not good for the male to be alone – so God made a female to be his companion. Life is meant to be lived together, and when we understand God as a Trinity, we can see how this is part of what it means to be made in the image of God, to live in relationship with others.

Genesis 3 describes another pivotal moment in the beginning of humanity, and the story is representative of what went wrong. The gist of the story is that the first humans didn't do what God told them to do, and when he went looking for them, they hid themselves from God. He wanted to live with them, but they were afraid of him. And that's been the story of humanity ever since.

When we add the story of Genesis together with the story of Revelation, when we see how it all started, and how it all ends up, we get better picture of what life is all about, and what salvation is, and from that, we can see a little better how we can present the gospel.

Let's go back to the question, “Why should we want to go to heaven?” And we can address the question of what heaven will be like:

- We will be living with a God who always wants the best for us, a God who is described in the Bible as love.
- We will be living with each other.
- There will be no more pain or sorrow – no one will hurt anyone else. Like God, we will love others, and they will love us. Love

characterizes the life of God, and the life of heaven.

- We will live forever – there will be no more death. There are eternal relationships, eternal friendships. Some of the greatest joys in this life are in the relationships we have with other people, and that will continue and expand forever. This is why we should all want eternal life with God.

Why is sin bad?

Some of the greatest pains and sorrows in life also come from relationships. There's the pain of betrayal, of broken promises, of pride and envy and hatred. There is the attitude of selfishness, which says that I am more important than you, that I want to do things my way even if you get hurt in the process.

That's basically what is wrong with sin. Sin is not the breaking of an arbitrary rule – it is anything that causes a disruption in our relationships. Lying, stealing, and adultery hurt our relationships with one another. Idolatry hurts our relationship with God.

When we do wrong things, when we do things to damage our relationships, we are guilty. We *feel* guilty, because God has given us a conscience to help us realize that something's gone wrong. But guilt is not the only problem we have – it is only the problem in the middle. The problem of sin goes into the past, and into the future.

It goes backwards, into *our tendency to sin*. We know what good and bad are, and we don't want to do bad things to our relationships, but we end up doing them anyway. We've got a problem there, and humanity seems unable to solve that problem on its own.

We've got problems on the other side of sin, too, because we have the consequences of sin, the *damaged relationships*. Even if we could get rid of the guilt, we'd still have the problems of distrust, of hurt feelings, and of fear of what others might do to us.

So we've got fundamental problems, and eternal life isn't going to be much of a reward unless *all* aspects of the problem are fixed. We need to do something about guilt, and our tendency to sin, and we need to do something about the consequences that sin has on our relationships. Salvation addresses all three aspects of the problem, and so the gospel also addresses all three aspects of the problem. Let's take a look at all three.

Three tenses of salvation

The Bible says that we have been saved, that we are being saved, and that we will be saved (Ephesians 2:8; 1 Corinthians 1:18; Philippians 1:28). In one

sense, it's already been done. In another sense, it's in the process of being done, and the job won't be finished until the future. That's because "salvation" covers the entire range of the human problem: our tendency to sin, our guilt, and the results of our sins in damaged relationships.

Let's start with a simple point. In heaven, no one is going to die. But all of us are mortal; we are all going to die. We are not yet everything that God wants us to be. Our salvation is not complete until we are transformed from being mortal to being immortal (1 Corinthians 15:53). We wait for "the redemption of our bodies" (Romans 8:23). One of our enemies is death, and we will not be rescued from this body of death until the future return of Christ. Our salvation has begun, but it is not yet complete.

In heaven, no one is going to sin. No one is going to hurt you, and you are not going to hurt anyone else. But even though we "have been saved" by Christ, we still struggle with sin, with our own tendency to hurt others, even when we didn't intend to. One of our enemies that we need to be rescued from is our own tendency to sin, to be selfish, and we will not be totally rescued from that until the return of Christ. Our current inability to stop sinning is evidence that our salvation is not yet complete. We still struggle with the cause and the consequences of sin.

What gives us reason to hope that we will indeed be saved in the future from our problems with mortality and morality? It is because of Jesus Christ. He lived without sin, but experienced the consequences of our sins. He willingly accepted those consequences, which included betrayal, excruciating pain, and death – he did this not for his own sins, but for ours.

The Bible says that he died for us, and that he died for our sins (Romans 5:8; 1 Corinthians 15:3). He had no guilt of his own, but he carried our guilt for us. "God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God" (2 Corinthians 5:21). He overcame all the fundamental problems humanity had: a tendency to sin, guilt, death, and broken relationships. He did not sin himself, he carried our guilt, he went into death and came out the other side.

How did he fix broken relationships? The Bible says that he has reconciled us to God (v. 18). In fact, he has reconciled the whole world to God by his death (Colossians 1:20). "Reconciliation" is just a big word for fixing broken relationships, for helping people who were enemies of each other, to become friends again. When a husband and wife are angry at each other, and then they turn around and begin to work toward restoring the love they once had, then they are being reconciled to one another. And Jesus has done that for us, to reconcile us to God. And the Bible says that he has done

it, past tense, for the whole world.

Wait a minute, you might say. Wake up and look around. The world is not on good terms with God. Many people are ignoring God, and some are even angry at God. How can the Bible say that the whole world has been reconciled to God?

That's because reconciliation has two sides to it. There are two parties involved – God and humanity. From God's perspective, from God's side, the reconciliation has taken place. He is not angry at us. He wants to restore the relationship. He does not count our sins against us (2 Corinthians 5:19).

If we took that last verse seriously, that would totally transform the way we present the gospel. God is not angry at us, holding a grudge against us, holding the threat of penalties over our head. Because of what Christ did on the cross, our sins are forgiven. There is no debt to pay; it was all paid 2000 years ago, long before we were alive – and long before we believed it. The gospel says that because of what Christ has done, we are forgiven, whether or not we believe it. From God's perspective, there is no animosity, no anger. He wants to restore the relationship.

The gospel also says: "Be reconciled to God" (v. 20). It is an exhortation that, since God has nothing against you, you should drop your fear and dislike of God, and be reconciled to him. He extends his love to you; the gospel urges you to extend your love to him. This is what you were made for, and the gospel is the good-news announcement that God has pulled out all the stops, as it were, and done everything from his side. There is no threat of revenge, no threat of getting even, no threat of punishment, because he does not count our sins against us. He says, "Let's be friends. Will you be my friend?"

So there is a past tense of salvation: from God's perspective, he says, "All is forgiven." Guilt is not a barrier; God has forgiven all our guilt.

There is a present tense of salvation: the gospel is saying: "Be reconciled to God." We have a response to make – a response that we continue to make throughout life. We do not overcome our shame and fear all at once; it takes a lifetime of walking with God in order for us to have a good relationship with him.

And there is a future tense of salvation: we will be saved when Christ returns, when our bodies are changed from mortal to immortal, when our minds are changed from corruptible to incorruptible.

The Son has done his work on the cross, but he still works as our high priest and mediator in heaven. The Holy Spirit is involved in the ongoing work of transforming us to be more like the "image of God" we were created

to be. And the Father, who began the plan, will also finish the plan in the new heavens and new earth as the reconciliation is finalized as he lives with us and we are his people.

Relationships with other people

So far, we have focused on our relationship with God – the declaration of reconciliation, and the ongoing process of responding to that reconciliation. But that is only part of the picture, for our purpose in life is not only to live with God forever, but to live with each other forever, and we need reconciliation with other human beings, too. Jesus said, “If you remember that your brother or sister has something against you...be reconciled to your brother or sister” (Matthew 5:23-24).

How is this done? Just as with our relationship with God, it begins with one person forgiving another – whether or not they accept it. No threats of retaliation, no guilt trip about how much you’ve done for them, no grudges. “Love...keeps no record of wrongs” (1 Corinthians 13:4-5). If you have ever done this, you know it’s not easy. It takes a long time for people to learn to trust one another after things have gone wrong. That is part of what life is about in this age before Christ returns – we are learning to get along with each other. We are learning to forgive, to be patient, to respond with love even when we are not treated with love.

The process will be finished when Christ returns and transforms us. The transformation of our physical bodies is just one aspect of the make-over that we all need. There will be a transformation of the mind and will, too. We will of course be freed from desires linked to our physical bodies – but there will also be a transformation in our pride, envy, and self-centeredness.

What evidence do we have for that? There is the promise of Revelation 21:3, that we will cause no pain or sorrow. Isaiah gave a similar vision: “They will neither harm nor destroy on all my holy mountain, for the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea” (Isaiah 11:9). And we have the evidence that Jesus himself lived without sin; he knows how to conquer that enemy, just as surely as he knows how to conquer death. As we are joined with him, as we live with him, and he lives in us, he will enable us to escape the sinful tendencies we want to be freed from.

We also have evidence that this is happening in this life, too. We are already in the process of being transformed by the renewing of our minds (Romans 12:2). It’s not happening as fast as we might like, but we are making some progress, as the Holy Spirit is working in us. We have already mentioned God the Father, Jesus the Son, and now we mention the Holy

Spirit. These are three ways in which the one God has made himself known to us.

But this calls for a quick clarification. By “ways,” we do not mean that God puts a “father” mask on for a while, and a “son” mask for a while, and sometimes a “spirit” mask. No, God is always these three, and yet unified as one God. The early church discussed the biblical data for centuries before finally coming up with the description “three persons in one being.” But they were quick to point out that divine persons are not like human persons, and that’s why the arithmetic doesn’t work the way we might expect it to. We humans just don’t know enough about divine existence in order to make pronouncements about what’s possible and not possible. All we can do is work with what God has revealed to us, and what we have been given in the Bible is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit – not separate beings, but persons who live within each other (e.g., John 17:21). They are so closely intertwined, so of one spirit, that they are one being.

But this concept of the Trinity also helps explain another interesting thing about God. The Bible says that God is love. However, before God created anything, how could God be love, if there was nothing to be loved? When we understand that God is Father, Son, and Spirit, then we understand that the three divine persons loved one another (e.g. John 17:24). There is enough “otherness” in the divine persons that “love” is the right word to express their attitude towards one another, and there is enough “sameness” in the persons that we can say that God is one.

Jesus promised his disciples that the Holy Spirit would live in them (John 14:17). God, in the person of the Holy Spirit, lives within his people. In one sense, God is omnipresent, living in all locations, so in that sense the Spirit lives in all people. But not all people are responding to the Spirit, being led by the Spirit, and this responsiveness is what Jesus means by saying the Spirit will live within his followers. This is the way that God is working in our minds, to change us from the inside out, to transform our attitudes to be more like his. The three persons of the Trinity are all involved in our salvation.

It comes back to God’s purpose for humanity, the reason that we are alive, and the future that we hope for: It is to live with God, and in the spiritual world, we will be in him and he will be in us. We are made in the image of God because God wants us to share in the kind of life that he has, a life that is characterized by love, and that means that we should love one another, and love our enemies, too. We are to extend reconciliation to all, because that’s the future that we are hoping for.

A three-dimensional gospel

A person who says “You will be forgiven IF you have faith” does not accurately portray the forgiveness that Jesus attained for us on the cross. Forgiveness was done 2000 years ago, and it was done before we were alive and before we could believe. It was a unilateral declaration from God that he is not counting our sins against us. There is no “if” to it. God does not accept us *if* we believe. Rather, we believe because God already accepts us.

On the other side of the coin, people who say, “You are forgiven,” and quit at that point, have not given all of the gospel. Such people are falling into the same mistake as the first group, acting as if humanity’s only problem is guilt. They may say, “Everyone is saved,” but they are only partly right. Most theological mistakes are “partly right.”

What sort of gospel do we see in the New Testament? We see one that announces forgiveness – but it does not stop there. The gospel also calls for a response. It calls for a response of faith, and of following Christ. It calls for personal, mental and moral transformation. It announces an ongoing work and a future work. The apostle Paul knew a thing or two about the gospel, and he always exhorted people to believe and respond in other concrete ways.

Forgiveness is certainly good news, but we need more than forgiveness. Guilt was one of our problems, and we are glad that it has been taken care of, with a sacrifice that enabled all sin to be forgiven in advance. But even after forgiveness, even apart from guilt, we still have some important problems, and salvation addresses those other problems, too, and so does the gospel. For one, we’ve got the problem of death. Although Christ has experienced victory over death, a victory that will be shared with us, we have not yet experienced that part of our salvation.

We’ve got the problem of sin and selfishness. We’ve got our tendencies to mess up our relationships, to hurt other people’s feelings, and to be hurt by them. Paul describes it as a slavery to sin, and we need to be rescued from it. Jesus has won the victory over that, too, but we have only begun to experience it in our own lives, through the Holy Spirit living in us. Our salvation is not complete in this area, too, and we definitely cannot say that everyone has been saved in this sense.

Since the term “salvation” includes various aspects of what God is doing in our lives, it is misleading (only “partly correct”) to say that everyone has been saved. [Note: Everyone is saved in one sense, that Christ paid for their sins on the cross. They are forgiven. But if they don’t believe it, they are still living in darkness and pain, and they need to be saved from that, too. In that sense they have not yet been saved. Because of the ambiguity of the word

“saved,” I believe it is best to avoid the expression “everyone is saved.”] There is no biblical precedent for that phrase. However, there is biblical reason to say that Jesus paid for the sins of everyone, and everyone has been forgiven, and all people, through Christ, have been reconciled. That does not mean that everyone will respond in a favorable way to God’s forgiveness. We might hope that everyone would, but the Bible suggests that some will not (Daniel 12:2; Matthew 18:8; 10:28; 2 Thessalonians 1:9; 2 Pet. 2:6).

We might also wonder how God will take care of people who die before hearing the gospel. Yes, we might wonder that, because the Bible doesn’t tell us. But we are convinced that God loves all people, that Jesus died for all people, and that God is fair. God did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for our salvation. We can be sure that this kind of God wants all people to have a full and fair opportunity to experience the benefits. Just how he does that is up to him; we’ll have to trust him on that. We might speculate various ways of how he might do it, but we cannot be dogmatic about any of those possibilities.

Visiting heaven again

Let’s look at the concept of going to heaven. Actually, the Bible talks more about heaven coming to earth. In Revelation 21, John saw a vision of new heavens and new earth, and God comes here to live with us. The vision is that we will be on earth, not floating on the clouds or lost in space. “Heaven” is not really about location – it’s a figure of speech for life with God.

We can also look at another term the Bible uses for salvation, and that’s eternal life. That sounds like we will live forever and ever, and never die. That’s true, but there is a lot more to salvation than just living forever. Living forever in North Korea would not be a very good thing, would it? Living forever isolated on Pluto wouldn’t be very good, either. Eternal life would be good only under the circumstances described in Revelation 21: no more crying, no more tears, no more sorrow, no more pain, with good relationships all around. They will neither hurt nor destroy in the new heavenly earth.

The good thing about salvation is not just that we live forever – it is that we live together, forever with love and joy. No one hurts anyone else, either physically or emotionally. So when we ask people, would you like to go to heaven, it means, would you like to live in a society where no one hurts anyone else? That is the kind of life that God is giving us – it’s the kind of life that Jesus died to give us. We were created in the image of God, and God wants us to be like he is, to share in the life he has, and that means a life of loving other people. It is the path of joy that has no negative consequences.

When we describe heaven or salvation in this way, it pre-empts the question about the way we live. Heaven is a place or time or realm in which people have positive relationships and don't hurt one another. If that's the way we describe it, then no one is going to ask us, Does that mean I can continue cheating, stealing, and fooling around? No – God is offering them a life where there is no cheating and stealing and fooling around. The behavioral questions don't come, because the answers are built into the description of salvation. Nobody is going to say, Why does the Bible talk so much about how people live? There is now an obvious connection between the gospel of salvation and the follow-up that we tell people is the normal biblical response to what God has done.

The apostle Paul described it as a logical consequence of salvation. In several of his letters, he writes, Since you are being saved by the mercies of God, this is what you ought to do (e.g., Romans 12:1-2). Since God is merciful, you should be merciful. Since God has forgiven you, you ought to forgive one another. Since God is trustworthy, you should be trustworthy. The life he is offering is the same as the life he is asking. We were made in his image, to be like he is, and he is to live in us, and so we should expect our life after the gospel to be a changed life, one that is more like his.

Why is faith important?

Some people ask, If God forgives us whether we believe it or not, why is it important that we believe? If God will take care of people whether or not they believe, why should we worry about whether they believe? Why should we bother preaching the gospel? Can't we keep this a little secret among ourselves, without taking the risk of rejection if we share it with someone else?

If we ask that question, it's because we have not understood the gospel in the way that Paul did. He travelled land and sea to make more converts for Christ. He saw an urgency to evangelism, and he was willing to endure a lot of inconveniences in order to tell people about Jesus and salvation. He urged people to believe it, and to have their lives transformed as a result of the gospel. What motivated him?

First, Jesus told him to, and he thought it was a good idea to do what Jesus said. After all, Jesus is a lot smarter about spiritual things than we are, and if that is what he says to do, it's probably good for us to do it. That's part of what it means to share in the life of Jesus; we are simply doing the kind of thing that Jesus did. His style of life is to love others enough that he is willing to make sacrifices to help them. If we are sharing in that style of life, that's

what we will do, too.

Another thing that motivated Paul was the love of Christ. “Christ’s love compels us,” he said, “because we are convinced that one died for all, and therefore all died” (2 Corinthians 5:14). It’s either that Jesus was living in Paul, and Paul was so responsive to him, that Christ was doing this through Paul. Or another possibility is that Paul was so impressed by how much Christ loved him, that he wanted to tell other people about it. It was the best news he could think of, and it would be selfish to keep it to himself.

Jesus told his disciples to share the gospel with other people, and to tell those who believe to do the same thing (Matthew 28:19-20). “Preaching the gospel” is one of the things he commanded, and it’s one of the things that new people should be taught to do, too. Now admittedly, we don’t all do it exactly the way that Paul did it, but as a church, we work together to do it. The way of life to which God calls us is not a self-centered life, in which we do only those things we are personally comfortable doing, but a life that reaches out to others, giving them the good things that God has given us.

So there are a couple of reasons to preach the gospel: obeying Christ, and loving other people. We want to encourage them to believe it. It is not going to bring blessings to their life unless they believe it. They are not going to experience the joy of giving to others unless they actually give to others. They are not going to be freed from feelings of guilt, unless they believe that God has forgiven them. They are not doing to be freed from the fear of death, unless they believe that Jesus has overcome death, and that he promises that they will also overcome death.

Some people say that salvation has an objective side, and a subjective side. The objective side is God’s perspective, about what Jesus has done. The subjective side is a human perspective, about the way we feel about it, the way we respond to it. Objectively, we were guilty of breaking the law. Subjectively, we had guilt feelings. Objectively, our guilt was taken away when Jesus paid for our sins; we were forgiven. But subjectively, we are freed from guilt *feelings* only when we believe in what Jesus has done.

Objectively, we are reconciled to God by the death of Jesus. From his point of view, it has been done. Subjectively, we can respond to that either by ignoring it or by accepting it as true and responding in a similar way. Subjectively, he is reconciled *to us* only if we accept the relationship that he offers, only if we accept the truth that he holds nothing against us.

The extent of our belief will be reflected in the way we live. The more we believe and understand that God has forgiven us, the more willing we will be to forgive other people. The more we comprehend the sacrifice that Jesus

made for us, the more we will be willing to make sacrifices to help others. All this depends on our subjective appropriation of what God is like, how he has revealed himself to us in Jesus Christ, and how the Holy Spirit is leading us toward the life that characterizes the loving relationships in the Trinity.

A changed life is the outworking of a changed mind. Or in religious terms, repentance is a result of faith. Salvation is given, and then accepted. It's there, even if we don't accept it; we are forgiven even if we don't believe it, but belief is the turning point in our lives. We begin to see new possibilities for what life is, and new promises for what it will be, through Christ.

Some people ask, If God has already forgiven us, then why does the Lord's prayer include the request that God forgive us as we forgive others? Doesn't that sound conditional, that God won't forgive us unless we first forgive others? Yes, it can sound like that. But we have to ask some follow-up questions: Who among us can forgive others perfectly? No one. Does it mean then that God will not forgive anyone perfectly, because they haven't met his conditions? Well, if that's the way we read the verse, we'd end up with nobody forgiven.

Or we can ask, Should we, like God, forgive other people only if they have forgiven all the people who sinned against them? Well, they don't do that, so if God's forgiveness is conditional, then we don't have to forgive anyone else. In this way of thinking, nobody can take the initiative to forgive – it comes only when somebody else does it, and that means it isn't going to happen very often.

Another question is, Does God forgive us only if we ask? Do we have to mention every sin in order to be forgiven that sin? Who of us can even remember all our sins? Conditional forgiveness leads us to condemnation and despair, and that is not the intent of what Jesus was saying.

Well, what *was* his intent? It was that we should respond to God's mercy by forgiving other people. He was not saying that God won't be merciful to us unless we somehow find it within ourselves to be more merciful than God is. This saying of Jesus, like several other sayings, is exaggerated. It was a figure of speech designed to make a point. And the point is that we should forgive others.

The apostle Paul has a similar saying, but he puts it the other way around: we are to forgive others as God has forgiven us (Ephesians 4:32). The meaning is the same, and it is only as we believe that God has forgiven us – without us doing anything to deserve it – will we be willing to forgive others. The process starts with an objective fact (God has forgiven us) and leads to a subjective receiving of that fact (we believe in his mercy) and a change in

the way we treat other people. Faith is important because it has practical consequences in the way we live, in the way we treat one another, and that's important. Faith is important.

Another request in the Lord's prayer is that things be done on earth the way they are in heaven. Again, location is not the important thing here – what is important is that things be done God's way. We pray that love, joy and peace prevail on earth, and if we really want that to happen on earth, then we will be doing it. If we want to enjoy the kind of life that "heaven" represents, then we will be doing it no matter where we are. In fact, our willingness to do it is an indication of how sincerely we want it to be done.

Return to the gospel

Let's go back to the way we present the gospel. We can begin by talking about heaven, and the fact that God wants us to experience the wonderful results of everyone living in the way that God does. Most people realize that they are not qualified to live in a perfect place, because they aren't perfect, but we can assure them that God has already forgiven them. They may find it astonishing, but it's true. They will not perceive it as permission to sin if we have properly described what the goal is like: eternal life is where no one does anything to hurt anyone else. Would they like to be part of that? Sure, they might think, but I'm really not qualified.

Yes, you are, we can say. God has already forgiven you; that is what the death of Jesus was all about. "Giving joyful thanks to the Father, who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of his holy people in the kingdom of light" (Colossians 1:12). There is no barrier here to keep people out; there is no great chasm to be crossed. Jesus has already done that for us, and eliminated the chasm. If we want to be part of the heavenly life, we can start right now.

This is after all why God created us – he created us in his image, to be like him, because he wants to live with us. God is love, and mercy. God is also just, which means that he lives in a right way. But he knows a lot more about what is "just" than we do, and if he says mercy and forgiveness is more important than keeping track of people's sins, then we ought to accept it as right, and we ought to be doing it, too.

God showed us the extent of his love in that, even while we were sinners, even while we were his enemies, he sent Jesus to die for us (Romans 5:8, 10). The Bible doesn't tell us exactly how Jesus could die for us, but somehow, by the death of Christ, all our sins are wiped off the record; they do not count against us. One way to explain it is that since Jesus was our Creator, and since

he became a human being, he was able to represent all humanity, and as our representative he experienced the consequences of sin on behalf of all humanity.

Whether we understand it or not, the Bible says that we all shared in his death, and we all share in his resurrection (2 Corinthians 5:14; Ephesians 2:5-6). One very clear fact is “God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us” (Romans 5:8). And because of this, we can trust him with everything else: “He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all—how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?” (v. 32).

Michael Morrison

AN EVANGELISTIC OUTLINE

Let's suppose that you would like to share the gospel with someone you do not know – someone in the mall, or on an airplane. Perhaps the person finds out that you go to church, and wants to know more about your religious beliefs. You can start the discussion with some diagnostic questions – these can help you see where the person is on their spiritual journey.

1. **If you were to die tonight, do you know for certain that you'd go to heaven?** Some people feel threatened by the “tonight” part of the question, and it may be enough to ask, “Some day, we are all going to die. Now for you, do you know for sure that you'll go to heaven?”

[Note: Some people are certain that they are not going to heaven even if they are saved. Asking about heaven would turn the discussion into an argument about location, when the real question is about how we get our eternal reward, not where it is. For such people, it may be better for us to ask the diagnostic question more generally: “Some day, you will die. Do you know for sure that you'll be given eternal life?” However, most people in America do think in terms of “going to heaven,” so the traditional starting question is usually effective. We can ask the question even if we do not think that people go to heaven right after they die. We are not concerned about location, but about the means of salvation, and we are using the terminology that is familiar to many people. If there is a problem with the word “heaven,” then adapt the outline below to talk about eternal life, or being saved, or whatever terminology is most appropriate for the person.]

Non-Christians may not know what heaven is, so they won't know how to answer the question. Most people answer “not sure,” although a few people are certain. Either way, we can go to question 2:

2. **That's interesting. Suppose that you got to the gates of heaven, and God asks you, Why should I let you into my heaven? – how would you answer?** (We are not implying that there will be an entrance exam at the gates of heaven. We are just using common terminology of the day without endorsing it – something that Jesus did, too.)

Some people answer the question by saying that they are sure

they will get in because they are generally good people, and they presume that God has a low enough standard to let them in. A guilt-based presentation would have to give them the bad news that no, that's not good enough. But it is best to ignore "false positives" and just go to the third question:

- 3. Would you like to hear how I became certain that I would be accepted in heaven?** [or be given eternal life, or be saved] This question then gives us permission to present the gospel.

Heaven is a free gift

There's a verse in the Bible that says, "God offers us eternal life as a free gift, through Christ Jesus our Lord" (Romans 6:23b). [Note: Scriptures are paraphrased, to be in more conversational English. This paraphrase comes from the Knox translation. The NIV says, "For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord." The presentation begins on a negative tone if we start by talking about sin. Our goal is to begin with good news, so we use only the last part of the verse. The NIV is OK, but a paraphrase sounds more like natural English, something we might say in a real conversation. We do not need to tell the person that this is in Romans 6:23 (though we should know it, in case they ask). Citing verse numbers would make it sound memorized. This is supposed to be a personal testimony, the way we'd tell the story.] Salvation is a free gift.

Now, to illustrate that, suppose that your friend comes over one day and hands you [for example] a brand new smartphone, and says, "Here. This is a gift from me to you." What kind of response do you think you're supposed to have? Are you supposed to get out your wallet and offer your friend 40 dollars for the computer? No – it's a gift, and we don't pay for gifts. That turns an offer based in friendship into one that is based on money. When God says that eternal life is a gift, it means that we don't have to pay for it. God really wants us to have it.

Jesus told some stories that help show us how much God wants us to have eternal life. He told a story about a shepherd who had 100 sheep, and one day only 99 came home. He was so worried about the lost sheep that he left the 99 at home and went looking for the lost sheep. And when he found it, he was so happy that he threw a party for his friends to celebrate. And Jesus said, that's the way God is whenever anybody takes up his offer to have eternal life.

Jesus told another story about a woman who had 10 heirloom coins, and she lost one of them. She was so worried about it that she searched her house

everywhere, and when she finally found the missing coin she threw a party for her neighbors to celebrate. It's a bit exaggerated, you might think, but Jesus is telling the story to illustrate the idea that God celebrates whenever anybody takes up his offer to have eternal life.

And he told a third story about a man who had two sons, and one of them ran away from home and made a big mess of his life. That son eventually fell on hard times, and he was homeless and out of a job, and he thought to himself, my father's servants have it better than I do. I think I'll go back to my dad and ask if I can be a servant. And as he was walking back home, his father saw him from a long way off and ran out to hug him and kiss him and welcome him home. And he threw a party for all his friends to celebrate. And that's the way God is whenever somebody accepts his gift of eternal life. Heaven is not only a free gift – it is a celebration.

[Feel free to adapt these stories from Luke 15, to tell them in your own words. They are here to convey a sense of celebration, joy, and relationship. We will refer to the story of the lost son later in our outline.]

[Optional, if there's time] There's another verse in the Bible that says, "We are saved by grace—and it was not because of anything you did, but it was a gift from God" (Ephesians 2:8-9). [Note: The Worldwide English translation of v. 9.] We can't do anything to earn our way into salvation. No one has anything to brag about when it comes to this – no matter whether you've been naughty or nice, it's a gift that we could not earn.

But what are we talking about here? Some verses in the Bible call it eternal life. Some verses call it salvation. Some people call it "going to heaven."

Probably the best description is in the very last book of the Bible, the book of Revelation, and it's almost the last chapter of the whole Bible. The apostle John was describing his vision of the future:

I saw a new heaven and a new earth.... And the new Jerusalem came down from heaven, and I heard a voice saying, "Look! God's home is now with the people! He will live with them, and they will be his people. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old way of doing things is gone." (Revelation 21:1-4) [Paraphrased from the Good News Translation.]

The Bible goes on to describe how beautiful this place will be, and I'm sure that we'll enjoy the beauty, but I think the *best* part about it is the kind of relationships we will have in eternal life. We will be with God, and we will be with each other, and there won't be any pain or suffering. There won't be any hurt feelings, or any broken promises, or any loneliness. Nobody will

hurt anyone else. There won't be any bullies or criminals. It's a beautiful community based on love, on people *liking* each other. And there won't be any more death, either – we will all live forever in peace and joy.

Does this sound like something you'd like to be part of? It sure sounds good to me, and I'm glad that I will be part of it.

The problem: sin

Why does this sound so good to us? It's because in the world right now, we've got pain and suffering and death. Our relationships go sour, and people get hurt. We get old and we suffer and we die. We would like to be freed from all that, wouldn't we?

This is what the Bible calls “the old way of doing things,” and the reason that the new world will be so much better is because the old way of doing things will be gone. It will be obsolete, and there will be a new way of doing things, a way that is more appropriate to an eternal life of peace and joy and good relationships.

Another word the Bible uses for this *old* way of doing things is “sin.” Anything that messes our relationships up is sin. The Bible says that everybody's sinned and fallen short of what God wants for us (Romans 3:23). But you probably knew that even without the Bible. As the saying goes, Nobody's perfect. “To err is human.” We all make mistakes in our relationships, and we hurt other people's feelings, and other people do things to us that *we* don't like, either.

So it is really good news that God promises that there's going to be a new way of doing things, a perfect way—and he *wants* us to be there, and he *gives* it to us as a gift.

Everyone has sinned, but of course we don't sin *all* the time. And most people are pretty good most of the time. We are mixtures of good and bad.

[Illustration] But what does that mean? Let's suppose that I owned a restaurant, and you came in for breakfast one day. And I began to make you an omelet. I began cracking open the eggs, and found out that one of them was rotten. Have you ever smelled a rotten egg? It's bad! But I said, “Oh, no matter. There's three good eggs and only one bad one, so I'll mix them all together and make the omelet that way.” It will be *mostly* good, won't it?

Well, not really. The mixture isn't good – it's bad. Our lives are a mixture of good and bad, and the overall mixture isn't as good as we'd like it to be. We make New Year's resolutions, but most of them get broken pretty soon. And when it comes to relationships, how many times have we let people down, or hurt someone's feelings, or felt prejudice or jealousy?

And that leads to a question: how can God bring us into a perfect place, and it still stay perfect? If we make mistakes, won't that end up hurting somebody, and bringing hurt feelings into a place that's not supposed to have any sorrow or regrets?

The solution: God

Well, this didn't catch God by surprise. He knows what he's doing, and he knows how imperfect we are, and he wants to live with us anyway. He knows how to take care of the problem, and one thing he knows is that we can't work our own way out of the problem. We can't do it on our own. No matter how much we stir that bad omelet, it is still a mixture of good and bad. We can't get out of loneliness on our own; we can't solve the problem of betrayal and broken relationships on our own; we can't solve the problem of rejection on our own.

The Bible tells us that God is love (1 John 4:8), and it also says that God has made humanity in his own image (Genesis 1:27). He wants us to be like he is – and that is characterized by a life of love, of caring about other people. We are made to have relationships with other people, and that's what we all long for, and that's why it hurts so much when things go wrong in our relationships.

You see, the problem we have is not just that people sin – it's that those sins affect our relationships. That's why they are wrong in the first place – they are damaging to the reason God made us.

Jesus gives us another description of eternal life – he says that eternal life is knowing God and Jesus Christ (John 17:3). It's not just hearing *about* God, or knowing that there *is* a God – it is knowing him in the sense of having a relationship with him. There's a big difference between knowing about [some well-known person], and knowing him [or her] personally, and it's the same with God. Eternal life is having a relationship with God and Christ, through the Holy Spirit – a relationship that will last forever and ever.

Then our relationship with God becomes the foundation for having better relationships with other people. When we experience his love and patience for us, it helps us to extend love and patience to other people.

You remember the story Jesus told about the son who ran away from home, and his father welcomed him back? When that son ran away, did he have a home? Yes, he did. He didn't have a house in the place he had run to, but he had a home to go back to, and he was welcomed back home. He didn't know it earlier, but that's where he belonged. And Jesus told the story because it tells us something about our relationship with God: he wants people to

come back home, and he will welcome them, as the story says, with a celebration. God is waiting, and he is eager to welcome us back into a relationship with him. God loved us even when we turn our backs on him; we can never do anything to make him love us less than he already does.

In some of Jesus' other stories, he says that God is like a rich man who is throwing a big wedding celebration for his son. And he sends invitations to the all the usual folks, and amazingly, some of the people don't want to come. And the character representing God says, "That will never do." He tells the servants, "Go out to the street corners, and look under the highway bridges, and invite everybody you can find. We want to have a big celebration, and absolutely everybody is invited." [Note: This is paraphrased and condensed from Matthew 22:1-14 and Luke 14:16-24.] That doesn't mean that everyone will come, but it means that everyone is welcome, and that's what God is like. There's a party, and you're invited!

The person: Jesus

Well, how do we have a relationship with God? He's way up there, he's glorious and perfect and all-powerful. How are we supposed to have a relationship with a being who is billions of light-years ahead of us?

Well, God knows the problem, and he has fixed it. He sent his Son to earth as a human being, so that we could know God. The Bible tells us in the book of John that Jesus is God. Jesus said, "If you have seen me, then you know what God is like" (John 14:7, 9). It's not that God is five and a half feet tall, with brown hair and dusty feet. No, in physical terms, Jesus was pretty much like everybody else. But in terms of relationship, Jesus is showing us what God is like. He is showing us love and kindness and patience.

Jesus created us. And because he loved us so much and wanted to bring us back into relationship with God, he became a human. He was a little baby – that's what we remember at Christmas each year. He was a refugee in Egypt; he was a boy in a carpentry shop in Israel. He was a real human being. He shared in our humanity, in our joys and our pains and sorrows. [Note: In the story of Jesus, we are not mentioning his miracles. We want to focus on the way that he is like us, particularly in experiencing relationships gone wrong.] He felt the sting of rejection, of betrayal, of hatred, and even death.

Now, since he was our creator, he understands humanity and our problems. He accepted all the bad things that humanity has ever done and ever will do. He took our guilt and our shame upon himself. He carried our sin, all the sins that plague human relationships. He carried them all to the cross, and he took them all to the grave, and that's where he left them. He

didn't have any sins of his own, and he didn't deserve to die, but he willingly accepted the consequences of our sins.

It's like he is saying, Give me all your pain and sorrow and sin – I know what to do with it. I know how to get rid of all your guilt. I will take all the bad stuff you've ever done, and I will bury it where it will never be seen again. That's all in the past, and God won't hold it against you.

Even when Jesus was on the cross, he prayed to God, "Forgive them, because they don't know what they are doing" (Luke 23:34). And even today, as people reject God and reject what he offers, the same word of forgiveness is still there. If they don't want to be part of the eternal celebration, it must be because they don't know what they are doing. It's sad that some people are choosing pain and sorrow when God is offering them peace and joy and love.

Another thing that Jesus said on the cross was a promise of salvation. One of the men who was crucified with him said, "Jesus, remember me when you come back," and Jesus said, "I promise you, you are going to be with me in paradise" (Luke 23:42-43). And he says the same to all who want it: Your sins are forgiven; you can be with me in paradise. We will be there together, in relationship with one other.

No one forced Jesus to come to earth and accept the consequences of our sins – he did it willingly, because he loves us and wants us to come back home, and to be restored to a good relationship with God. He is showing us what God himself is like – God is love, patience, and forgiveness, and eternal life is having a good relationship, a friendship, with God.

The book of Revelation describes Jesus as saying, "I am standing at the door and knocking. Open the door, and I'll come in, and we'll eat together" (Revelation 3:20). He wants to spend time with us, to have a relationship with us. And that was part the vision in Revelation, too, that God would live with his people, and we'd be together for all eternity. It's a vision of relationships set right – relationships based on people loving one another, of caring about one another.

Our response: faith

What do we do with an offer like that? When God invites us to the celebration, he wants us to come. When Jesus knocks on the door, he wants us to open it to let him come in so we can have a relationship.

Jesus told his disciples, You are my friends (John 15:15). He wants to have a friendship with us. Or the Bible also describes it as being children of God, brothers and sisters of Jesus, with God as our Father.

Did you have a good relationship with your Father?

[If appropriate: Your relationship with your father might not be very good, so don't assume that God is just like your dad, only bigger and stronger. No, if your dad wasn't very good (and none of them are perfect), then realize that your dad just didn't measure up to what a dad really ought to be. In this comparison, God is the standard, and humans are judged by how much they are like God; God is not to be judged by how poorly the humans do it.]

The point is, that all these are relationship terms.

Of course, God is not your average friend – he is perfect. He is perfect in his love, and in his understanding, and in how much he knows about life. He's the one who made humanity, and he knows everything there is to know about how we ought to live. And since he knows what's good for us, it is to our advantage to do what he says. He knows what's best, and he has the love to tell us what it is.

So our relationship to him is not just friend to friend, but also as an apprentice to a skilled craftsman, or a child to a parent, or servant to boss. This is what the Bible means when it calls Jesus our *Lord* – a Lord who loves us, who cares about us. He wants to help us, and when we ignore him, he is sad – not because we have hurt him, but because we are going down a path that will most likely hurt us. He cares about what we *do* because he cares about *us*.

His basic command is simple. Jesus said, “My command is this, that you love one another as I have loved you” (John 15:12).

As we see the love of Jesus, and as we catch the vision of what life *could* be, then we are eager to live this way now – with God's help, of course, as he promises to live with us and in us.

The apostle Paul described it this way: “Christ's love compels us,” he said. It *motivates* us, “because we are convinced that one person died for all of us [that's Jesus.] And he died for everyone, so that those who live [that's us] should no longer live selfishly, but we should live for the one who died for us and was raised again” (2 Corinthians 5:14-15). [Note: Romans 12:1-2 is another good passage describing the kind of response we should have to God's mercy. Paul said, “Now that you've seen God's love and mercy, I ask you to give yourself to him. Don't just copy the way that everybody else lives, but let God change the way you think. That's the kind of response that makes God happy.”] He died for us, so we should live for him. And what does he want us to do? He wants us to help other people.

The good news is that we can be certain of our salvation, certain that we'll be part of the new heaven and new earth, because we are certain that God loves us, that he sent Jesus to accept all the consequences of everything we've done wrong, that he forgives us. [Note: Or to put it in the terminology of the

story of the lost son: “He has done everything he can to make sure that we know that we have a home, that we are welcome there, that there is nothing in our way to prevent us from going back home, and that he wants us to be at the celebration that never ends.”]

Does this sound good to you? Do you want to share in love, joy, peace, and confidence of having a relationship with God?

Well then, let’s tell God about it, and ask him to help us learn more. If you want, I can pray and you can pray with me. OK? I’ll say a few words, and you can repeat it bit by bit:

God, thank you for loving me so much that you sent Jesus to be my Savior. He was willing to die, to show us how much you want to have a relationship with us, and he was raised back to life to continue helping us. Thank you for forgiving me for everything I’ve ever done wrong. Now I ask you to help me live in a way that is more like you. Thank you for reserving a place for me at the celebration that never ends. And we pray this with the permission given to us by Jesus. Amen.

Welcome to a relationship with God! There is already a party going on for you in heaven. We will live forever with God in love and joy and peace!

Follow-up

In some ways, coming to Christ is like getting married. But a marriage is only the beginning of the relationship – there’s a lot more to it than just getting started. And that is true of our relationship with God – it needs to grow, and it does that as we spend more time with God. Over the years, believers have found a number of things that can help us grow in our relationship with God.

We’ve already done the first one, and that’s prayer. We talk to God, we thank him for what he’s done, we ask him for help with whatever’s on our mind. That’s part of what a relationship is. But it takes practice, and it’s something we do every day for the rest of our lives.

The second thing we do is to read the Bible. That’s one way we can listen to what God is saying to us. In the Bible we can see what Jesus was like and what he did when he was here on earth. We can see stories of how God has worked with his people over the centuries. And we can see some guidance for how we can get along better with one another.

A third thing we do is participate in a church. Notice that I didn’t say “go to church.” Just going there and being part of the audience isn’t what church is all about. Church is supposed to be about relationships – we get together to worship God together, to pray together, to discuss the Bible with one

another, to encourage one another. Now, people in the church aren't perfect – we still make mistakes, and sometimes we will hurt one another's feelings – but this is also where we learn to be patient, to forgive, to become better people, and to help one another in *life*.

A fourth way that we become more like Jesus is to help other people. We can help people in church, and we can help people who aren't believers. We can be friends to the lonely, we can comfort those who are hurt, we can help the poor in our community. This is what the church calls "the ministry of all believers." "Ministry" is just an old-fashioned word for helping other people. We are doing what Jesus would do, and in fact we become *agents* of Jesus, the hands and feet that Jesus uses to do some of his work. And that feels really good, to be the means that God uses to help other people.

And last, another way to be like Jesus is to tell other people the good news of what he has done for us – just like I've been doing with you. Jesus came to earth not just to die for us, and not just to show us how much God loves us. He also came as a *teacher*, as one who brought the good news that God wants to live with us, to celebrate with us, to have love and joy and peace with us. That was part of what Jesus did, and that's one of the ways we can grow to be more like Jesus.

Welcome to the celebration!

Michael Morrison

SUMMARY OF THE OUTLINE

Often, we do not have time to give the full presentation. Feel free to omit scriptures and illustrations to fit the time available.

Preliminary diagnostic questions

If you were to die tonight, are you certain that you'd go to heaven?

If God asks, Why should I let you in?, how would you answer?

Would you like to hear how I became certain?

The goal: heaven is a free gift and a celebration

Romans 6:23: God offers us eternal life as a free gift.

Stories of lost sheep, lost coin, lost son (Luke 15). Celebration!

optional: Ephesians 2:8-9: we are saved by grace, not by works.

Revelation 21:1-4: God will live with his people; there will be no more death or sorrow or pain.

The problem: sin hurts relationships

Romans 3:23: Everyone has sinned and fallen short.

Illustration: omelet mixture of good and bad.

The solution: God loves us

1 John 4:8: God is love.

Genesis 1:27: God made humanity in his image.

John 17:3: eternal life is knowing God and Jesus Christ.

Did the "lost son" have a home? Yes!

Optional: Story of the wedding: Invite everyone!

The person: Jesus shows us the love of God

John 14:7, 9: Jesus shows us what God is like.

Story: Jesus experienced relationship joys and sorrows.

Luke 23:34: Forgive them, because they don't know...

Luke 23:43: I promise, you will be with me in paradise.

Rev. 3:20: Jesus knocks on the door, wanting to eat with us.

Our response: accepting Jesus as friend and Lord

John 15:15: You are my friends.

John 15:12: Love one another as I have loved you.

2 Corinthians 5:14-15: He died for us; we are to live for him.
(Lord)

[or] Romans 12:1-2: Give yourself to God, not to the world.

Prayer of thanksgiving and commitment.

Word of welcome

Follow-up – our relationship must grow

Prayer

Bible

Church

Ministry
Sharing

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

The authors worked for Grace Communion International. Some articles are corporate products; although one person may have been the primary author, they were published without any particular name. Here they are in alphabetical order.

G. Albrecht was the editor of *The Plain Truth* magazine.

Lorenzo Arroyo was a GCI district pastor in the U.S. and a mission developer for GCI Mexico.

M. Bennett was the editor of a youth magazine published by the Worldwide Church of God.

John Biswas is director of the Bengali Evangelical Association, bengalimission.org.

Jeffrey Broadnax is a GCI pastor in Ohio.

Randal Dick was the missions coordinator for the denomination. He has earned a PhD and now works with Design Group International.

Neil Earle was a pastor of a GCI church in Glendora, CA, and is an instructor in church history at Grace Communion Seminary.

J. Michael Feazell was vice-president of Grace Communion International and the author of numerous articles.

Tony Goudie is a GCI pastor in the British Isles.

Sheila Graham was a writer and editor for Grace Communion International. She is the author of one of our most popular articles, on the Proverbs 31 woman.

Eugene Guzon is the national director of the GCI in the Philippines.

John Halford was the editor of *Christian Odyssey* magazine and the author of numerous articles. He died in 2014.

James Henderson was the GCI mission developer in Africa; he is now the national director in the United Kingdom.

Ted Johnston works with GCI U.S. Church Administration and teaches at Grace Communion Seminary.

Paul Kroll is a now-retired journalist and researcher for Grace Communion International.

Michael Morrison, PhD, is the Dean of Faculty at Grace Communion Seminary. He is the author of several books and is the editor of this volume.

B. Palmer was a writer for the Worldwide Church of God.

Norman Shoaf was the editor of *The Good News* magazine, published by the Worldwide Church of God.

J. Stepp was a GCI pastor in Tennessee.

Keith Stump wrote for magazines and telecasts of the Worldwide Church of God.

Joseph Tkach, D.Min., is president of Grace Communion International, presenter of the *Speaking of Life* webcast, and author of numerous articles and e-books.

Joseph W. Tkach was president of the Worldwide Church of God from 1986 until his death in 1995.

ABOUT THE PUBLISHER...

Grace Communion International is a Christian denomination with about 50,000 members, worshiping in about 900 congregations in almost 100 nations and territories. We began in 1934 and our main office is in North Carolina. In the United States, we are members of the National Association of Evangelicals and similar organizations in other nations. We welcome you to visit our website at www.gci.org.

If you want to know more about the gospel of Jesus Christ, we offer help. First, we offer weekly worship services in hundreds of congregations worldwide. Perhaps you'd like to visit us. A typical worship service includes songs of praise, a message based on the Bible, and opportunity to meet people who have found Jesus Christ to be the answer to their spiritual quest. We try to be friendly, but without putting you on the spot. We do not expect visitors to give offerings – there's no obligation. You are a guest.

To find a congregation, write to one of our offices, phone us or visit our website. If we do not have a congregation near you, we encourage you to find another Christian church that teaches the gospel of grace.

We also offer personal counsel. If you have questions about the Bible, salvation or Christian living, we are happy to talk. If you want to discuss faith, baptism or other matters, a pastor near you can discuss these on the phone or set up an appointment for a longer discussion. We are convinced that Jesus offers what people need most, and we are happy to share the good news of what he has done for all humanity. We like to help people find new life in Christ, and to grow in that life. Come and see why we believe it's the best news there could be!

Our work is funded by members of the church who donate part of their income to support the gospel. Jesus told his disciples to share the good news, and that is what we strive to do in our literature, in our worship services, and in our day-to-day lives.

If this book has helped you and you want to pay some expenses, all donations are gratefully welcomed, and in several nations, are tax-deductible. If you can't afford to give anything, don't worry about it. It is our gift to you. To donate online, go to www.gci.org/participate/donate.

Thank you for letting us share what we value most – Jesus Christ. The good news is too good to keep it to ourselves.

See our website for hundreds of articles, locations of our churches, addresses in various nations, audio and video messages, and much more.

www.gci.org

Grace Communion International

3120 Whitehall Park Dr.
Charlotte, NC 28273
800-423-4444

You're Included...

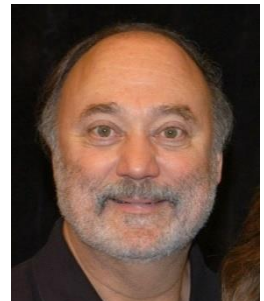
Dr. J. Michael Feazell talks to leading Trinitarian theologians about the good news that God loves you, wants you, and includes you in Jesus Christ. Most programs are about 28 minutes long. Our guests have included:

Gordon Fee, Regent College
George Hunsinger, Princeton Theological Seminary
C. Baxter Kruger, Perichoresis
Jeff McSwain, Reality Ministries
Cherith Fee Nordling, Antioch Leadership Network
Alan Torrance, University of St. Andrews
Robert T. Walker, Edinburgh University
N.T. Wright, University of St. Andrews
William P. Young, author of *The Shack*

Programs are available free for viewing and downloading at www.youreincluded.org.

Speaking of Life...

Dr. Joseph Tkach, president of Grace Communion International, comments each week, giving a biblical perspective on how we live in the light of God's love. Most programs are about three minutes long – available in video, audio, and text. Go to www.speakingoflife.org.





GRACE COMMUNION SEMINARY

Ministry based on the life and love of the Father, Son, and Spirit

Grace Communion Seminary serves the needs of people engaged in Christian service who want to grow deeper in relationship with our Triune God and to be able to more effectively serve in the church.

Why study at Grace Communion Seminary?

- Worship: to love God with all your mind.
- Service: to help others apply truth to life.
- Practical: a balanced range of useful topics for ministry.
- Trinitarian theology: a survey of theology with the merits of a Trinitarian perspective. We begin with the question, "Who is God?" Then, "Who are we in relationship to God?" In this context, "How then do we serve?"
- Part-time study: designed to help people who are already serving in local congregations. There is no need to leave your current ministry. Full-time students are also welcome.
- Flexibility: your choice of master's level continuing education courses or pursuit of a degree: Master of Pastoral Studies or Master of Theological Studies.
- Affordable, accredited study: Everything can be done online.

For more information, go to www.gcs.edu. Grace Communion Seminary is accredited by the Distance Education Accrediting Commission, www.deac.org. The Accrediting Commission is listed by the U.S. Department of Education as a nationally recognized accrediting agency.