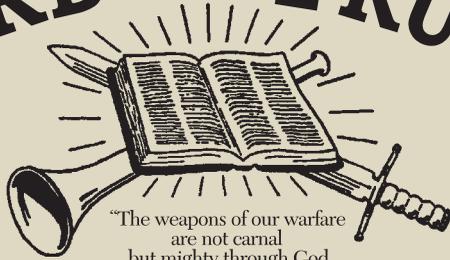


The SWORD and TRUMPET

“Blow ye
the Trumpet
and warn
the People.”



“The weapons of our warfare
are not carnal
but mighty through God
to the pulling down of strongholds.”

“Take the Sword
of the Spirit
which is
The Word of God.”

Guidelines



CLAUDE C. CULP

APRIL 2006

\$1.50

The Sword and Trumpet

Founded in 1929 by Geo. R. Brunk I

Vol. LXXIV

APRIL 2006

No. 4

SWORD AND TRUMPET GUIDELINES monthly magazine is a faith ministry directed by a Board representing various constituencies of the Mennonite Church. It is committed to defending, proclaiming, and promoting the whole Gospel of our Saviour and Lord, Jesus Christ, as revealed in the Holy Scriptures. It emphasizes neglected truth and contends for “the faith which was once delivered to the saints.” This publication exposes and opposes doctrinal error which compromises that faith and leads to apostasy.

BOARD OF DIRECTORS — Sword and Trumpet, Inc.

Raymond P. Brunk, Chairman

John J. Forry, Vice Chairman

Stanley Good, Secretary/Treasurer

David L. Burkholder

Paul M. Emerson

Christian Good

James Hess, Honorary

Luke L. Horst, Honorary

Lee H. Kanagy, Honorary

Marcus Yoder

EDITOR — Paul M. Emerson

NEWSLINES — Christian and Rebecca Good

SUNDAY SCHOOL LESSONS

David L. Burkholder

CIRCULATION — Ethel Rhodes

IN THIS ISSUE

1. **Claude C. Culp** **Cover**
 2. **Person of the Month** **1**
 3. **Two Ways and Two Destinies** **2**
 4. **From the Editor’s Desk:**
 - Guest Editorial: **The Audience of One** **7**
 5. **The Sunday School Lessons** **9**
 6. **Newslines** **15**
 7. **Living a Magnetic Faith in a Post-Christian World** **17**
 8. **Why Is the Simple Life So Complicated?** **21**
 9. **Eroding Marriages in Our Culture** **23**
 10. **UN-comfortable!** **27**
 11. **God’s Order Within the Church** **28**
 12. **The Disappearance of Church Discipline—**
 - How Can We Recover? Part Three** **33**
 13. **Dangers of Debt** **35**
 14. **Beware of Leaving Your Little Ones in Egypt!** **36**
 15. **Family Peacemaking Italian Style!** **39**
 16. **How Could Noah and His Family Care for the Many Animals**
 - on Board the Ark?** **41**
 17. **Truth in Advertising** **42**
-

THE SWORD AND TRUMPET (USPS 615-540) is published monthly by *The Sword and Trumpet*, Inc., P. O. Box 575, Harrisonburg, Va. 22803-0575. Periodicals postage paid at Harrisonburg, Va. SUBSCRIPTION RATES: 1 year US \$12.00, 2 years US \$20.00. Bulk rates on the basis of US \$9.00 per year. Add US \$3.00 per year for countries outside USA and Canada. Telephone (540) 867-9419 or 867-9444. FAX (540) 867-9419. E-mail address: swandtrumpet@verizon.net.

Person of the Month:

Claude C. Culp (1893-1953)

Claude Culp was born into the home of Simon and Marelda Culp of Wakarusa, Indiana, on May 22, 1893. Claude and his three sisters grew up on the family farm. His parents, people of faith, attended Yellow Creek Mennonite Church.

In 1907 Daniel Kauffman conducted revival meetings in Culp's home area. In one of these meetings Claude, then 14 years of age, sensed the conviction of the Holy Spirit and surrendered his life to Christ. Several months later he followed the Lord in baptism.

Culp began to take life seriously, spending much time in his favorite pastime of reading and studying. This was to be good preparation for what the Lord would have for him in the future. In 1913, at the age of 20, Claude was asked to work at the Fort Wayne Mission and later at the Youngstown Mission in Ohio. While there he was asked to serve in rural missions under the Indiana-Michigan District Mission Board and was subsequently ordained to the ministry in 1917.

Although life had been peaceful on this side of the Atlantic, the story in Europe was one of war and turmoil that brought a drastic change to Claude's life. In March of 1918 he was drafted to serve in the army and was sent to a training camp in Kentucky. This was a time of intense testing for conscientious objectors like Culp and others in the camp. He was subjected to ridicule and came into sharp conflict with his officers. Brother Culp was arrested and later tried for his refusal to serve in the military. In May of 1918, at the age of 25, he was sentenced to 10 years in the federal prison in Kansas. Eight months later, in January of 1919, he was released due to the end of the war. At the time of his sentencing he had no way of knowing whether he would have to serve his full term or not but Claude was faithful and God came to his rescue.

In March of the same year Culp married Emma W. Habig of Fort Wayne. Two months later they moved to Chief, Michigan, to pastor the Pleasantview Church. God blessed them with the births of two daughters. In spite of his busy life, Claude was conscientious about the spiritual life of his family.

Brother Culp began to be much in demand as an evangelist and records show that he conducted more than 107 series of meetings from one end of the country to the other. He was one of two men who held such meetings in the Upper Peninsula of Michigan before a church was established in that area. During these years of his life he was also involved in Bible conferences and weekend meetings as well as serving on the Executive Committee of the Indiana-Michigan Conference.

In order to better facilitate the work of the local church as well as to free Culp for various meetings, his church ordained another pastor in 1944. Although his first love was evangelistic work, Culp allowed his name to be placed in nomination as bishop over three mission churches in the Upper Peninsula area because he did not want to be disobedient to the Lord. He received a strong majority vote and accepted the ordination of bishop in 1947.

Brother Culp was also involved in many educational endeavors such as principal of summer Bible schools, winter Bible schools, teacher at Johnstown Bible School, and principal of Michigan Mennonite Bible School.

(continued on page 8)

Two Ways and Two Destinies

Lessons from Psalm 1

by Harold S. Martin

The Book of Psalms is probably the best-known and the best-loved book of the Bible. Psalms is the one book from the Old Testament that is often bound with the New Testament when only the New Testament is purchased.

The Psalms are hymns and anthems characterized by praise, instruction, worship, confession, and prayer. The Psalms were written over a span of perhaps 500 years. A large number of the hymns were written and collected by King David, but many of the psalms were added to the collection after David's time.

The New Testament quotes from the Psalms 116 times—more often than from any other Old Testament book. In the early church, the singing of the Psalms was an important part of worship (Colossians 3:15-17). In fact, many of the hymns which we sing today have their roots in the Psalms. These include: *A Mighty Fortress Is Our God* (Psalm 46); *The Rock That Is Higher Than I* (Psalm 62); *Glorious Things of Thee Are Spoken* (Psalm 87); *O God, Our Help in Ages Past* (Psalm 90); *Praise to the Lord, the Almighty* (Psalm 103); and *Bringing in the Sheaves* (Psalm 126).

The first Psalm is a wisdom psalm with an appeal to wise and godly living. Psalm 1 reminds us that for every human being there are two basic choices—life or death. There is a contrast between the righteous and the wicked. The righteous are prosperous and happy; the ungodly are troubled and in the end experience adversity.

(There are, of course, some glaring exceptions to this rule, yet the general principle is true and valid.)

Verses 1-3 paint the portrait of the upright person. Verses 4-6 predict the doom of the ungodly person.

1. THE WAY OF THE RIGHTEOUS *(Psalm 1:1-3)*

The first Psalm starts out, "Blessed is the man that walketh not in the counsel of the ungodly, nor standeth in the way of sinners, nor sitteth in the seat of the scornful" (verse 1). The word *blessed* (in the Hebrew) is plural, and literally means "Oh, how exceedingly happy are those who do not walk in the counsel of the ungodly," or "How deep is the joy of those who are careful about the company they keep."

—It's not just happiness, but exceedingly great happiness.

—It's not just joy, but deep joy.

Those who lead untarnished lives, and seek to live by the standards of God's holy Word—will be blessed in unusual ways. In the end, they will not perish with the wicked.

In verse 1, godly persons are described in terms of *what they do not do*. People concerned about doing right are marked by things they don't do, places they don't go, books they don't read, and company they don't keep. The wise person recognizes the significance of not doing certain things:

a. We do not walk in the counsel of the ungodly. That is, we do not follow the advice of ungodly persons. We do not spend considerable amounts of

time with those who are out of touch with God, except for careful attempts to witness to them. (Jesus associated with sinners as a means of witnessing to them, not just to “hang out” with them. And when He did spend time with sinners, He always called them to a higher life.)

The “ungodly” are not necessarily brazenly wicked persons. They may be nice people, but they have no serious regard for God and for His commandments. They may attend church services and lead a normal, civilized life. They may be intelligent and formally educated—but their focus is on empty, meaningless things. Their lives are filled with activities related to sports, and parties, and new clothes, and the affairs of this life. People who have no time for God in their lives are classified in the Bible as “ungodly.”

We do not walk in the counsel of the ungodly.

Verse 1 continues:

b. We do not stand in the way of sinners. That is, we do not share the lifestyle of rebels against God. The “ungodly” (in the first phrase of verse 1) are those who have no place for God in their lives. The “sinners” (in the second phrase of verse 1) are those who rebel against God and are determined to live in sin. Their entire lifestyle is opposed to the ways of God. Sinners are habitual transgressors of God’s laws.

Disciples of the Lord Jesus will not spend their time in fellowship with such sinners. We will seek to win such persons to faith in Christ, and thus we will mingle with them—but we will not spend long hours finding satisfaction and fellowship with those who defy God’s laws. We should make it a matter of principle not to linger and loiter with those who are following Satan’s path.

The genuine Christian does not live by the standards of people who have no respect for God’s laws. We do not share

the lifestyle of sinners.

The final portion of verse 1 says:

c. We do not sit in the seat of the scornful. That is, we do not settle down with ungodly intellectuals who have rejected God’s truth. To “sit with” the scornful implies “identification with” scoffers. It speaks of an acceptance of their points of view. Scoffers not only separate themselves from God; they put themselves above God! They are arrogant, quarrelsome, and full of mischief. They mock goodness, and ridicule and sneer at God.

A young man goes to a seminary where the teachers proclaim that the Bible is not divinely inspired, and that it’s a collection of myth, folklore, and fable. The young man is taught to deny the deity of Christ, and to repudiate the blessed hope of His coming again. His Bible and his boyhood faith have been torn to shreds. He’s been “sitting in the seat of the scornful.” We are not to sit in the seat of those who scoff at holy things.

Notice the downward steps in the words of verse 1. The person who is not alert to deception: first “**walks**”—a casual, passing association; then “**stands**”—a continued fellowship with persons who are sinful; and then “**sits**”—a feeling of being quite at home with those who mock God and laugh at holy things.

The psalmist says that one who is upright refuses to take even the first step on this downward path. Upright persons do not follow the advice of the ungodly; they do not share the way of life of sinners; they do not adopt the attitude of scoffers.

In verse 2, the character of righteous persons *is described positively*. Instead of going to people of the world for advice, godly persons rely on guidance from the Lord. They find their delight in “the law of the Lord”—a reference to the teachings and instructions found in God’s Word.

Psalm 1:2 says, “But his delight is in the law of the LORD; and in his law doth he meditate day and night.” The Christian seeks to be Bible-led and Bible-fed. We “meditate” upon the words of God. The word *meditate* means to soak ourselves in God’s Word; to saturate our minds with it. It’s not that we never think of anything else, but all of our thoughts and actions are to be governed by a deliberate desire to obey God’s Word in every way.

God’s laws are not a burden, but a delight. The follower of Christ “delights in the law of the Lord.” God’s laws are the believer’s chief desire. And the first Psalm says that meditation during the daylight hours is not enough. Godly persons meditate “day and night” (v. 2)—that is, they memorize key portions so that they can rejoice in God’s law at nighttime when the lights are out, and during the day when hands are too busy to hold the Book.

Christians cannot expect to resist the distorted values of an unbelieving world if they devote one hour a week to meditating on God’s truth, and the other 167 hours providing for the needs of the body and enjoying worldly entertainment. To shape our lives by God’s standards, we need more than the Sunday morning worship hour. We need study times with fellow Christians, regular family devotions in our homes, and a daily block of time for personal Bible reading.

Our delight is not merely in **knowing** and **studying** the Word—but also in **doing** what it says. Serious study of the Word brings forth fruit in our lives. It causes us to grow “like a tree planted by the rivers of water” (verse 3).

Look for a few minutes at Psalm 19.

(1) The effect of the law of the Lord

In verses 7, 8 of the 19th Psalm, David says that “the law of the LORD” does four things. The Psalmist says, first:

(a) The law of the LORD, being perfect, converts the soul.

“The law of the LORD is perfect, converting the soul” (Psalm 19:7a). God’s Word leads to conversion, and refreshes the soul. It provides a measure of strength to do what is right, and to turn away from what is wrong. The message of the Bible is able to turn us from our sins, and lead us through our problems, and enrich our lives so that we can bring glory to God.

(b) The law of the LORD, being trustworthy, makes wise the simple.

“The testimony of the LORD is sure, making wise the simple” (Psalm 19:7b). The Bible is a sure testimony (absolutely trustworthy). It makes “the simple” wise. The word *simple* refers not to those who have a low IQ, but to those who are open and teachable. God’s Word makes us wise by warning against sin and the dangers of sinful living.

(c) The law of the LORD, being right, makes the heart rejoice.

“The statutes of the LORD are right, rejoicing the heart” (Psalm 19:8a). The commands of the Lord are right; they are indeed an exact expression of God’s will. They bring “rejoicing” to the heart. They give courage in the midst of trial. Imagine having to face death and eternity without God’s Word!

(d) The law of the LORD, being pure, gives light to the eyes.

“The commandment of the LORD is pure, enlightening the eyes” (Psalm 19:8b). God’s Word gives insight for holy living. His law “enlightens the eyes”—that is, it gives guidance for today and the promise of glory for tomorrow. God’s Word illumines the path over which we are to walk, thus making it easier for us not to stumble. The 119th Psalm says, “Thy word is a

lamp unto my feet and a light unto my path” (Psalm 119:105).

(2) The value of the law of the Lord

Verses 9-11 (of the 19th Psalm) assure us that God’s law is of infinite value. His words are more to be desired than fine gold, and are sweeter than the best of honey (verse 10). David compared God’s Word to the most valuable metal known (gold), and to the sweetest substance available (honey). Then David says (in verse 11) that those who drink deeply from God’s Word will experience two benefits: “Moreover by them [that is, by God’s words] is thy servant warned; and in keeping of them there is great reward.”

(a) *One who knows the law will be warned by it.* That is, God’s law warns against sin and its harmful effects. God’s law warns against the lies and errors of the world. John Bunyan was right when he said of the Bible, “This Book will keep you from sin, or sin will keep you from this Book.”

(b) *One who keeps the law will be rewarded by doing it.* The Bible clearly says, “Blessed are they that do his commandments that they may have right to the tree of life, and may enter in through the gates into the city” (Rev. 22:14). Those who have accepted Christ and are living for Him have the promise of entering the heavenly City, the New Jerusalem—where there is health without sickness, day without night, and life without death!

Back in the first Psalm again, godly persons are likened to deep-rooted trees growing along rivers of water. The leaves never wither because of drought, and fruit is produced abundantly. The “rivers of water” may speak of the Holy Spirit (John 7:38, 39), and the “bringing forth of fruit” pictures the godly lives of those committed to following the teachings of Scripture.

The word *prosper* in verse 3 (“Whatever he doeth shall prosper”), does

not necessarily promise great wealth, but the righteous will experience God’s special blessing on their words and activities. The word *prosper* does not so much refer to material prosperity as it does to spiritual productivity.

The way to be truly blessed in life includes three negatives: 1) do not listen to the ungodly; 2) do not linger with sinners; 3) do not laugh with the scornful.

The way to be truly blessed includes one clear positive: let the Word of God capture your full attention. God’s Word is perfect; it is sure; it is right; it is pure. Meditate in it day after day. Let God’s instructions be the road map for your life. Doing so will bring spiritual productivity in your life.

2. THE WAY OF THE UNGODLY (Psalm 1:4-6)

This section is shorter than the description of the righteous, because nothing positive can be said about the way of ungodly persons. The entire description is negative. Psalm 1:4 says, “The ungodly are not so [that is, not like trees planted by rivers of water], but are like the chaff which the wind driveth away.”

The sinner is contrasted in this verse with those who are righteous. Unlike the deep-rooted tree, sinners are like the chaff “which the wind drives away.” This is a reference to a threshing floor located on a windy hilltop. The wheat was thrown onto the floor; the grain was trampled upon so that the chaff (the hull) was separated from the kernels of grain. The wheat and the chaff were then thrown into the breeze with shovels. The heavier wheat dropped to the ground. The light and worthless chaff was blown away by the wind.

Ungodly folks (like the chaff which blows away) are without root and fruit. There is nothing much more worthless than chaff. Whatever chaff was left on the threshing floor was piled up and

burned. Verse 5 says that “the ungodly shall not stand in the judgment.”

The description of the final Day of Judgment (in Revelation 20:11-15) is one of the most solemn passages in the Bible. The unsaved will be summoned to the Great White Throne and will find that heaven and earth have fled away. Everything familiar will be gone! Everything in which they invested their time and energies will be gone! They will have nowhere to stand. Their house was built upon the sand, and the judgment has swept it all away.

The conclusion to the first Psalm is clearly marked: “For the LORD knoweth the way of the righteous; but the way of the ungodly shall perish” (verse 6). The Psalmist gives words of promise for the righteous, and words of warning for the wicked.

The Lord “knows” the way of the righteous. The Hebrew word means more than that God is simply informed about our activities. The verb more literally means that the Lord “watches over” the way of the righteous. We are guarded by, and blessed by our heavenly Father. God takes an active interest in our needs, and cares for those who are following in the path of righteousness.

The Lord knows the way of the righteous, but the “way of the ungodly shall perish” (or more literally, “shall end in ruin”). To “perish” means “to go out into darkness; to be forever under judgment; and to exist eternally in torment.”

The ungodly will not survive the judgment. They will stand before God without excuse. There will be no mercy for those persons who choose to live without God. The ungodly, all along, wanted God to stay out of their lives. On the Judgment Day their desire will be granted. God will say, “I’m going to give you what you wanted.”

Godly persons are like a tree—

sturdy, strong, fruitful, and covered with foliage. The ungodly are like chaff—dead, dry, helpless, and in the end, hopeless.

The key verse in the first Psalm is verse 6, “The LORD knoweth the way of the righteous, but the way of the ungodly shall perish.”

There are only two ways: there is the way of the cross—the way that leads by Calvary where Jesus died, and on to glory. And there is the way of the curse—the broad and popular way that leads to a lost eternity. All of us have been given the power of choice. We have all sinned and violated the laws of God, but we can make a change. We can come to Jesus.

—He is *the way*; everything else is a dead-end street.

—He is *the truth*; everything else is a lie.

—He is *the life*; everything else is the way of death.

There are only two roads that people can travel; nothing is more important than being sure that you are on the right road!

If you are among those who have no personal relationship with Jesus Christ, why not come to Him today? Why face the issues of life alone? Why not choose companionship with Jesus? Why not acknowledge your need of salvation, and experience God’s transforming power in your life today? Jesus came to earth and died on the cross that you might not only have life, but that you might experience it abundantly (John 10:10). ■

—Used with permission. Copies of this article, Bible Helps Booklet No. 356, are available free upon request from Bible Helps. Ask for our sample packet.

BIBLE HELPS

Robert Lehigh, Editor

P. O. BOX 391

Hanover, PA 17331

From the Editor's Desk



Paul M. Emerson

GUEST EDITORIAL

The Audience of One

by Kevin L. Oessenich

Os Guinness recounts the events of July 27, 1881, when industrialist Andrew Carnegie returned to his city of birth in Scotland. Along with his mother, Margaret, and a select group of friends, Carnegie made the long trip across the Atlantic from New York to Brighton, England, and then slowly traveled north into Scotland to the awaiting city of Dunfermline. In a carriage that was royally built and impeccably furnished, Carnegie entered the city of his birth to a magnificent display of celebration and splendor. The climax of the day was Carnegie's gift of a new public library. But the significance of the event is fully understood only when seen through the eyes of his mother, who, as they rode through the city that day, wept freely.

As a boy, Andrew Carnegie and his family lived in extreme poverty in Pittsburgh. Returning home one day following his duties as a "bobbin boy," young Andrew found his mother weeping in a moment of

despair. Holding her hands and attempting to console her, he promised that someday he would be rich, making it possible for them to ride in a "fine coach driven by four horses." Through her tears, his mother replied, "That will do us no good here, if no one in Dunfermline can see us." At that moment, Carnegie resolved that someday he and his mother would make a grand entrance into the city of his birth. For his mother's sake, the beloved city in Scotland would witness his accomplishments. A Pittsburgh audience would not be enough; the Carnegie family's success from poverty to extreme wealth would be measured by one audience only—that of the city of Dunfermline, Scotland. It was the approval sought by that one audience that motivated Carnegie to be both ruthless and excessively generous. It was this audience alone from which he sought approval and value.

Most of us do things for the approval of some audience. The audience may be our

family, employer, community, and yes, even our ministry. Guinness states the concept this way: “Most of us, whether we are aware of it or not, do things with an eye to the approval of some audience or other. The question is not whether we have an audience, but which audience we have.” When the approval of others takes center stage, we begin to experience a life that fails to be complete or satisfying.

For Christians, however, life is meaningful as we live before the audience that far surpasses all others—The Audience of One. Recognizing God as our primary audience changes the focus of our lives. We no longer seek to gain approval and value from others but rather to “*live a life worthy of the Lord . . . pleas[ing] him in every way: bearing fruit in every good work, growing in the knowledge of God, being strengthened with all power according to his glorious might so that you may have great endurance and patience, and joyfully giving thanks to the Father who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of the saints in the Kingdom of light*” (Colossians 1:10-12 NIV). This living is possible, as the believer is filled with a deep and accurate understanding of God’s will (Colossians 1:9). Simply put, our audience is to be our Heavenly Father, and we should seek to please Him in every way.

Living before The Audience of One has immense value and for a variety of reasons. For instance, it no longer motivates us to seek the approval of others, but rather to seek a life that exhibits continual fruitfulness (Ephesians 2:10). Further, it results in a life strengthened, enabling the believer to stand firm. As the Apostle Paul states in Philippians 4:13, “I can do everything through Him who gives me strength.” Living before The Audience of One also results in personal spiritual growth, which takes place as we spend time knowing God. What rain and sunshine are to plants, the knowledge of God is to the growth of the spiritual life (Vaughan, 178). Finally, living before The Audience of One instills a heart of thank-

fulness that acknowledges God has “qualified” us to “share in the inheritance of the saints.” The believer has already been rescued from a life of darkness and is, even now, a citizen in God’s Kingdom. Life cannot help but take on new meaning, purpose, and motivation with such a focus.

To live before our Heavenly Father makes a practical—and transformational—difference in our lives. With so many audiences competing for our attention, believers will only find a life of purpose when our focus is on The Audience of One. Living under the watchful eye of God is all that truly matters. The question is not whether we have an audience, but which audience we have. ■

Guinness, Os (1998) *The Call: Finding and Fulfilling the Central Purpose in Your Life*. Word Publishing: Nashville, TN.

Vaughan, Curtis (1978). *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*. Frank Gaebelien. General Editor. Zondervan Publishing House: Grand Rapids, MI.

—From *PBU Today*, Winter 2006. Used with permission.

CLAUDE C. CULP . . . cont’d.

Claude was a capable speaker and his audiences were attentive to his preaching. He clearly presented the Word with vigor and was emphatic in his delivery. Some churches asked him to return again and again. Over the years he was faithful to his stand on nonconformity and nonresistance and encouraged others to be so as well. He knew what he believed and why. He was a student of God’s Word and a thinker. He was always concerned about the church at large and sought to keep up with its “pulse” to assess its spiritual health.

Culp had problems with a stomach ulcer for many years. In 1952 he suffered a severe hemorrhage but the Lord pulled him through. However, several months later he had to have an operation due to a relapse. This did not help and four days short of his 60th birthday he went home to be with the Lord, on May 18, 1953.

—Gail L. Emerson

THE SUNDAY SCHOOL LESSONS



A Devotional Commentary



by David L. Burkholder

Introduction:

As I begin to write these lessons (January 3) on Tragedy and Hope, all eyes are riveted on a small coal mining community in West Virginia, just 100 miles from my home, where thirteen miners are trapped 260 feet underground. By the time you study these lessons the truth will be out—were they rescued, or did they die in the mine? But for now the tragedy grips the nation and especially the small coal mining community of Tallmansville, West Virginia.

There is hope that tragedy can be averted and the miners will be rescued alive and returned to their homes and families. At the same time the reality strikes that thirteen men may perish in their underground tomb. While reality gnaws at the edges, hope holds forth, and rescue operations go forward.

In the midst of tragedy we ask, as Job did, Why? Why, God? Why me, why us? And often we get the same answer Job did—silence. In calmer moments we admit that God doesn't always explain His actions, nor does He need to. But when tragedy strikes we cry for answers. Now God's silence is not indicative of a lack of interest in His people, but a means of forcing us to look beyond our puny human resources and place trust firmly in Him, regardless of how the situation plays out.

Job's response to personal tragedy was to turn to God. And his example should guide us when hope seems distant and tragedy looms. And remember, God is sovereign, He is in control, He is aware of our feelings and our needs. He will comfort and guide us even though we may never understand just what all

is going on behind the scenes. Job put his trust firmly in God, saying with deep conviction, "Though he slay me, yet will I trust in Him." That speaks of deep faith.

Let us also exhibit that same trust in the midst of tragedy, and "hope to the end for the grace that is to be brought unto us at the revelation of Jesus Christ." The stark lesson from Job, and the coal miners, is that as we face the uncertainties of life, and certain tragedies that life brings, we need to be constantly and instantly prepared to meet "Him to whom we must give account."

APRIL 2, 2006

Responding to Tragedy

Job 1:8-22; 3:1-3, 11

Lessons for April are taken primarily from the Books of Job and Ecclesiastes, with New Testament passages added for April 16 (Easter), and April 23. The general theme for the quarter is *Living in God's World*. This month's lessons, which include Palm Sunday and Easter, focus on tragedy, hope, and discovering the meaning of life.

Today's lesson, *Responding to Tragedy*, traces the experience of Job and his reaction to loss. Job is an intriguing character. He was wealthy, generous, upright, and a friend of God. His response to tragedy provides a lesson for all times. As we follow his experience it is easy to see where his values lay. But Job was human and prone to despair, as we notice in the verses from

Chapter 3.

The first part of Chapter 1 provides the setting for today's lesson. It describes Job's possessions and the event that led to his testing. As we pick up our text, we notice the unqualified trust God placed in Job's integrity. "My servant Job . . . none like him in the earth . . . perfect . . . upright . . . fears God . . . shuns evil." God knew that with those qualities Job could be trusted to represent His character. And Job came through with flying colors.

To lose all one's possessions, whether meager or great, would be indeed a traumatic experience. We have a tendency to equate personal worth with the quantity or quality of our possessions. To lose them not only takes away value, but also reflects on self-worth. Job, this greatest of all the men of the east, lost everything—flocks, herds, servants, and finally, family. But he did not lose faith or integrity.

Note Job's gracious response to the loss of possessions and even his children. "The Lord gave, the Lord took away." These were words of a man of faith whose values were not rooted in fleeting, temporal things. Job worshiped. He blessed the Lord. He gave up freely. Without doubt Job's grief was intense, yet he did not allow grief or loss to destroy his relationship to God, whom he recognized as the giver of all things.

The severest loss perhaps, next to personal affliction, which Job faced in Chapter 2, is the loss of family in tragic situations. Job also experienced that, as well as the loss of support from his wife when his own life was touched by pain. And such experiences of loss do cause grief, justifiable anguish of soul. And the way we react defines our character and the placement of our values.

In the verses from Chapter 3 we see Job's despair over personal affliction. Read Chapter 2 for understanding. Note what Satan said in 2:4, 5. Job was

devastated. There was nothing to live for; he had lost all and now he was experiencing severe personal pain. He cursed the day of his birth. He wished to die. (Read also 3:20-26.) His was not an abnormal human response. We don't fault Job for his cry of despair. Rather, we take a lesson from the fact that God was in control and nothing was happening beyond His will or power.

Job's integrity, and the important lesson for us when undergoing tragic experiences, is exemplified in verse 22: "In all this Job sinned not, nor charged God with wrongdoing." Here is the testimony of a man of faith who dealt well with tragedy.

For thought and discussion

1. Explain the difference between tempting and testing.
2. Was God putting His integrity at risk by allowing Satan to test Job as he did? Why, or why not? Explain your answer.
3. Jesus said (Luke 12:15) that "man's life consisteth not in the abundance of his possessions." Job understood this. Do we? Think about it.
4. Does God lead us through difficult experiences at times to test our loyalties, our faith, and commitment? Discuss ways of coping with tragedy which can be faith-building.
5. The way we respond to tragedy defines both our personal character and commitment to God. How can we deepen our faith outside of tragedy and thus prepare ourselves for when it does strike?

APRIL 9, 2006

Searching for Hope

Job 14:1-17

Today's lesson comes after Job has faced the tragedy of total loss of possessions, family, health, and the support of wife and friends. In the intervening

chapters Job has dialogued with his “friends” in an effort to defend himself from their charges of sin in his life, and to come to an understanding of God’s purpose behind his suffering. While it is true that Job did not blame God for his circumstances, he nevertheless was at a loss to make sense out of it all.

To say that Job was in despair puts it mildly. (Read Chapter 3.) There was silence from God and false accusations from his so-called friends. So his cry was, “Is there any hope in the midst of my suffering, or at its end, if indeed there be an end?” To Job, his present situation looked bleak and hopeless. There was nothing left to live for and his physical torment overpowered all other considerations—except his strong desire to prove himself innocent of wrongdoing.

Job is speaking here in Chapter 14. He begins by recognizing the brevity of life and the abundance of trouble that man experiences during his brief time on earth. He is like a flower that blooms and then withers away, or like a fleeting shadow, briefly seen, then disappearing. And, he asks God, Do You really notice such an one and judge such a frail, unworthy creature? Man is vile, and God alone can cleanse him from his inherent sinfulness (v. 4).

God sets the boundaries of each man’s life, our times are in His hand. We live and die at His pleasure. (See Job 7:1; Psalm 90:9, 10.) Job then, (verse 6), seems to be pleading with God to allow him to live out his days free from suffering and turmoil. Since life is so brief, why should not man be able to enjoy his days?

Job asks, verse 14a, “If a man die, shall he live again?” He says, in verses 7-9, that a tree when cut down may sprout again and grow. Man, however, dies and that is the end as far as physical life is concerned. But Job seems to hint at the future resurrection of man in verse 12 and pleads with God to keep

him secure until that time. (See also 14b and 19:26.)

At that time, when God will longingly call man forth from the grave, Job will gladly answer. For now, Job says, God watches over him, numbering his steps, marking his sin. He recognizes that for now, God holds sealed evidence of his transgressions, but Job’s unspoken hope is that when the time of resurrection comes, his transgressions will have been dealt with by a merciful God.

So, for the present, Job struggles on, questioning, hoping, but never losing faith, and with an eye to the future. It is obvious that it was only his deep-seated faith in a just and merciful God that kept Job from giving up. And therein lies the lesson for us today. No matter how dark, desperate, or despairing our current situation, the person with a deep, unshakable faith in God looks beyond the present circumstance to a brighter future. So faith is the key to hope. Job recognized it. Do we?

For thought and discussion

1. If you have read the intervening chapters you have learned something about Job’s “comforters.” What lessons do we learn from them in terms of helping others work through grief? Discuss.
2. An issue for discussion would be the correlation between health, emotions, and spiritual well-being.
3. What is the secret to maintaining faith in the midst of adversity?
4. Does God care for His children? Why, then, does He at times seem far away and unhearing of our entreaties?
5. There is a motto, “Only one life, ’twill soon be past. Only what’s done for Christ will last.” Life is brief. Every Christian should take this motto to heart and work diligently while he has time. Are you, am I, making full use of the time available to do things of significance for the kingdom of God?
6. If a man dies, he will live again. That realization should motivate a life of commitment and carefulness.

APRIL 16, 2006 (Easter)

Raised to Life

Job 19:25-27; Mark 16:1-14

Today we celebrate Easter, the glorious resurrection of Christ our Saviour from the grave. This was without doubt the most intellectually incredible event that ever took place on planet earth. Many in Jesus' day refused to accept it. Many still do. However, we who have placed our trust in Jesus for salvation, and have experienced resurrection power in our own lives, have no trouble believing this stupendous event. And we, too, look forward with anticipation to the day when we shall share in Jesus' resurrection (Romans 6:5).

Interestingly, Job, that Old Testament saint, also believed in a living Redeemer and the eventual resurrection of the body. Here in the 19th chapter, Job was still under attack by his friends. Not being able to convince them of his innocence, or call forth a response from God, he looks into the future to find the hope denied him by the present (*New Bible Commentary*). What an encouragement for us who know the New Testament Scriptures to realize that one who lived so many years ago also understood the concepts of a living Redeemer and the bodily resurrection from the dead. Thanks, Job.

As we turn to the New Testament passage we enter familiar territory. We have heard and read the Easter story many times. However, we should never allow its familiarity to dull our sensitivities to the tremendous impact of that event. Not only was it groundshaking, it was earthshaking in its implications.

We applaud the dedication of the women who followed Jesus and often, no doubt, ministered to His needs. (See Luke 8:1-3.) And we should not be too harsh with our criticism over the unbelief expressed by those who should have understood the resurrection message. These people were human, driven by fears, doubts, anxieties, and skepticism similar to our own.

In examining this Scripture again, we should not overlook the many ways God planned and ordered events. When the women came, the stone was rolled away, giving access to the empty tomb. Angelic messengers were on hand to provide comfort and direction. Jesus Himself provided visual evidence of what they only dared to believe.

Jesus honored Mary's devotion by appearing first to her as she left the garden that morning in bewilderment (John 20:11-17). He also instigated a private meeting with Peter no doubt to forgive and restore and encourage. (See Luke 24:34; 1 Corinthians 15:5.)

Jesus seemed to be especially harsh with those who should have understood and accepted the message of His resurrection. He had told them many times that He would rise again and yet they believed not, even when trusted ones of their own company gave testimony of seeing Him alive. Herein is a lesson for our faith. God has given us revelation through His Word. We dare not doubt or refuse that message because of lack of tangible, visible evidence. Jesus is alive and He is coming back some day for Job and all of us who have faith in His promises. Will you be ready?

For thought and discussion

1. How would you respond to one who claimed that resurrection from the dead was an impossibility?
2. Explain how Job came to an understanding of a living, returning Redeemer.
3. Explore the reason the angel (Mark 16:7) gave specific instruction for the women to tell Peter that Jesus was risen.
4. There is a saying: "Seeing is believing." Jesus' disciples lived by that dictum. But how does that fly in the face of faith? Are there rewards in accepting *faith over sight*?
5. Be sure to notice the implications of the resurrection event as detailed in the remaining verses of Mark 16. There is still work to be done while we await the final resurrection.

APRIL 23, 2006

Finding Life's Meaning

Ecclesiastes 1:1-9; John 20:19-23

Why am I here? What is the purpose for my existence? What is the meaning of life? Many of us have no doubt asked such questions. In our past three lessons we have looked at Job's questionings regarding life and suffering. This Sunday and next we examine Solomon's philosophy of life and the meaning of human existence. Hopefully through this study we will discover God's answers and have our faith in Him and His purposes for man more firmly established. Today's passage from John adds a positive and motivating note to the discussion.

In the first verses of Ecclesiastes 1, the writer identifies himself as the Preacher, son of David, king in Jerusalem. There can be no doubt but that this is Solomon, as a reading of the following chapters so clearly points out. (Read all of Chapters 1 and 2 as background.) Solomon had everything—wisdom, wealth, prestige, servants to do his bidding. But he realized, as he reflected on the pursuit of material satisfaction, that these things did not give true meaning to life. All, he says, is vanity. Emptiness. Transitory. Unsatisfactory.

Solomon's reflections on life are from the purely human standpoint, things done "under the sun." He had observed, correctly, the cycle of life. Generations pass and new ones take their place on the world stage. And so life continues. The sun makes its daily round. The wind blows in an observable pattern. Rivers flow into the sea where the water evaporates into clouds which pour rain upon the land to refresh the rivers in a continual process.

Man is not satisfied with what he sees or hears. Everything is wearisome. It's the same old things over and over. There is nothing new under the sun. Nothing new to challenge the mind or give new impetus to life. "All is vanity and vexation of spirit." And so it is for the man who leaves God out of the equation and attempts to find meaning and purpose through purely human endeavor. But there is

more to life than the dark picture painted in Ecclesiastes. Thank God.

Our text from John ties in with last week's text from Mark and picks up where that left off. That resurrection evening, Jesus appeared suddenly, unexpectedly, to the eleven. They were in hiding for fear of the Jewish leadership. Their lives and hopes had been shattered with the crucifixion of Jesus. Would they now be hunted down and put to death as Jesus had been? They were fearful and confused. Then Jesus came. His first words were words of comfort: "Peace be unto you."

Then, to provide proof that it was He indeed, Jesus showed them His crucifixion wounds. The disciples' fear turned to joy as they realized that Jesus their Master was indeed alive and present with them once again. Jesus then immediately commissioned them with the task He had begun. Under the power of the Holy Spirit they were to go forth preaching the life-giving message of forgiveness of sin.

As we read through the rest of the New Testament we see how this commission was fleshed out in the lives of Jesus' followers. There was power. There was motivation. There was meaning to life and a purpose for existence.

Solomon's musings on the vanity of life were transcended by the motivational work of the Holy Spirit.

For thought and discussion

1. Perhaps this is a good time to ask yourself just why you are here. And then look to God for help in forming your answer.
2. What makes life a meaningless drudgery for so many? Explore. Discuss.
3. How does our understanding of the cycles of life as observed in the natural world enhance our view of God and His purposes?
4. Contrast the attitude of the disciples there in hiding, with their attitude on the day of Pentecost to show the difference God can work in man's life when He takes control by His Spirit.
5. Jesus gave His disciples work to do and promised them His presence and power in

carrying it out. Until He returns, the work passes from generation to generation, challenging, inspiring, and instilling meaning in men's lives. Are you experiencing the fulfillment of active service?

APRIL 30, 2006

God's Order of Life

Ecclesiastes 3:1-8, 14, 15

The most important lesson to take from this text is a reminder of the sovereignty of God. He has created the universe and set it in motion. And He has established the cycles of life. Nothing happens by chance. Everything that transpires is part of, and in fulfillment of, God's plan and purpose.

The *Jamison, Faussett, and Brown Commentary* comments on this text: "The season to everything is not one fixed by blind fate, but by the gracious God, who cares for His people. . . . Man's part, therefore, is to do and enjoy every earthly thing *in its proper season* (vv. 12, 13), not setting aside God's order; and not to undertake anything depending on his own anxious efforts for its accomplishment, but to commit all his ways to God, who has appointed the time and end."

The text does not cover every conceivable event in the life of man and nature, but rather outlines broad categories relating to the physical, emotional, business, and social events of life. It is instructive to note that the items mentioned in these couplets are mutually exclusive. They cannot happen together in the same time or setting. They are opposites. However, they do all happen within a set time frame, between the bookends of life—birth and death.

Now Solomon, that wisest of men, was an astute observer of life and nature. (See 1:12, 13a.) And although Solomon started his reign as a devoted worshiper of God, his later political alliances, allegiance with many strange (foreign) women, and extravagant living led him astray. The musings we find here in Ecclesiastes are purely from the perspective of natural revelation apart from divine revelation. And certainly from that perspective life is noth-

ing but vanity and vexation and somewhat meaningless. But if nothing else, this lesson should show us that there is a better, brighter side of life, life lived within God's framework and on His timetable.

In verses 14 and 15 Solomon acknowledges that God's design is perfect—nothing can be added to it to enhance it and nothing can be taken from it to diminish its intention. There is an established ongoing cycle of life, and in that sense there is "nothing new under the sun," except that each individual experiences differing events and emotions during his lifetime. The principles of life which God has established do not change. They are fixed.

That principle is brought out in verse 15. The things that man experiences in life today are simply a repetition of what has happened to man in the past. The things which will happen in the future are the things which are happening today. God's principles are constant. And that should add a measure of comfort and trust to our lives. We will never experience more than God is capable of controlling, however varied and burdensome the experiences of life may be. Everything happens in God's time, under His control and direction.

For thought and discussion

1. Do you ever wonder why certain things happen? How does this text help make sense of the sometimes unexplainable events we encounter in life?
2. We recognize that God controls life and death. But where does responsibility lie when we make unwise lifestyle choices that lead to premature death? Think through this issue carefully.
3. How does one find real fulfillment in life? Ponder this carefully in light of the thrust of today's lesson.
4. Is life a meaningless round of unconnected experiences and events, or does it have purpose and meaning? Discuss.
5. Sometimes we may think life is unequal. Why does God allow some people to go through much harder (or easier) experiences than others? What is to be learned, either from experience or observation? ■

Newslines . . .

by Christian Good

incidents events occurrences facts illustrations episodes committees vignettes proceedings problems
experiences crises adventures transactions meetings tragedies scoops reports conferences happenings
bulletins questions reports affairs dramas encounters personages actions tidings et cetera

Rare Book Found

An interesting and remarkable document was discovered recently in Rhode Island. At the Rhode Island Historical Society, librarian Phoebe Simpson uncovered a first edition copy of religious liberty pioneer Roger William's *The Bloudy Tenent of Persecution*. The book is 361 years old and in good shape because of the heavy cotton content of the paper. Prior to this there were only five first edition copies of the work. Most of the copies were destroyed because they were printed in England and subsequently condemned to the flames by Parliament for its dangerous content. Williams smuggled some into the colonies. In the book, Williams warned against opening up "the hedge, or wall of separation, between the garden of the church and the wilderness of the world."

—from *Church and State*

President Carter on Church and State

President Carter in his new book, *Our Endangered Values*, condemns the supposed erosion of the wall of separation between church and state. Carter holds that this "wall of separation" (Thomas Jefferson's phrase) has been under attack from the Bush administration. In an interview with National Public Radio concerning the book, he said: "This separation of church and state, which Jefferson ordained as a wall between the two has been severely breached in the last 15-20 years and particularly in the last five years." Carter went on: "When I was president, and I think all my predecessors and most of my successors have been meticulous in trying to separate church and state

and not inject religious aspects into policy and not let the churches or any religion dominate or heavily influence the political decisions made by this government."

Carter also opposes government funding of religion where taxpayer money is being sent directly to churches, and then the church is allowed to discriminate against those who receive services through them from taxpayers' money.

—from *Church and State*

Extremist Iranian President Poses Anti-Semitic Threat

Recently elected Iranian President, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, has made outrageous anti-Semitic comments in the last several months: Last year he said that "Israel must be wiped off the map." In December, he has also denied the holocaust which has legitimately outraged the world including German leaders. He charged that "they [the West] have created a myth today that they call the massacre of Jews and they consider it a principle above God, religions and the prophets."

This has stimulated some courage in the region to voice other anti-Semitic comments. Mohammed Mahdi Akef, Egyptian leader of The Muslim Brotherhood (Egypt's oldest and largest Muslim organization), also accused the West of "attacking anyone who questioned that the Nazis killed some six million Jews."

In January Ahmadinejad announced plans for a conference to examine evidence for the holocaust. His extremism obviously poses great difficulty for the world community's hope in restraining Iran's interest in enriching uranium. And

reportedly Iran continues to be involved with terror. A bomb attack in Israel in January was blamed on Iran, Syria, and Palestinians. Israeli Defense Minister Shaul Mofaz said that the attack “was financed by Tehran, planned in Syria and carried out by Palestinians.” Fearing Ahmadinejad’s extremist rhetoric, Israel has since drawn up plans for possible strikes against nuclear facilities in Iran.

—adapted from various articles (mostly from *www.news.bbc.co.uk*)

Israeli Prime Minister's Stroke Linked With Divine Punishment

Pat Robertson has linked Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon’s recent stroke with divine punishment. Robertson asserted that “God considers this land to be His. You read the Bible and He says, ‘This is my land’ and for any prime minister of Israel who decides he’s going to carve it up and give it away, God says, ‘No, this is mine.’ ” Robertson also said, “Sharon was dividing God’s land and I would say woe unto any prime minister of Israel who takes a similar course to appease the EU (European Union), the United Nations, or the United States of America.” Sharon ordered Israel to withdraw from Gaza in 2005.

Robertson underwent predictable criticism for his comments. Ralph Neas for People for the American Way Foundation (which often critiques Robertson) said, “[O]nce again, Pat Robertson leaves us speechless with his insensitivity and arrogance.” However, Robertson also said that he had personally prayed with Sharon a year ago and considers him to be “a very tenderhearted man and a good friend.”

—from *Daily News-Record*, Harrisonburg, VA

Robertson Apologizes

Pat Robertson, under pressure for his controversial suggestion that Ariel Sharon’s stroke was a divine judgment for dividing the Holy Land, apologized for his remarks. Many conservatives have distanced themselves from him, leading to

the cancellation of his planned speech at the National Religious Broadcaster’s banquet, February 21. His apology has partly appeased Israeli tourism officials who had banished him from a Christian theme park building project in Galilee. Now the project will continue, but Robertson’s involvement will be less obvious.

—from *WORLD*

Terrorist Party's Win in Palestinian Election Promises Greater Conflict

On January 25, the Hamas party, which is notorious for its flagrant expedition of violence in Israel, won 76 of 132 seats in Parliamentary elections. This coming just weeks after Ariel Sharon’s stroke, creates insurmountable difficulties in Middle East peace deals. The general feel of Israeli leadership is that there can be no deals with Hamas unless they renounce terrorism and their bold call for the extermination of Israel. Hamas indeed seems unwilling and ill-fitted for any irenic political moves. Their success, they believe, is likely because of their extremism. Barry Rabin from *Jerusalem Post* says: “Why should Hamas change its historic policy which, its leaders think, has brought them such popular acceptance and success? They genuinely believe—like bin Laden and Ahmadinejad—that the balance of forces is of no importance because God will certainly bring them victory.”

—adapted from *WORLD*

Muslims Die While Stoning the Devil

Three hundred forty-five people were killed in a deadly stampede outside of the holy city of Mecca earlier this year. The stampede took place at an annual Islamic ritual where participants “stone the devil.” In the stoning ritual, pilgrims must pass a series of three pillars “which represent the devil and which the faithful pelt with stones to purge themselves of sin.” The site of the disaster which is in the desert of Mina just outside of Mecca is

a dangerous bottleneck. Many disasters have occurred here during these rituals: a stampede in 1990 killed 1,426 people; in 2004, 244 lives were taken.

—adapted from *Daily Herald*, Chicago, IL

British Newspaper Reports Live Babies After Abortions

In a report from *The Times* of London, doctors have claimed that up to fifty babies a year are born after they have

been almost killed in the womb. A government agency is launching an investigation which was initiated because of concerns that ambiguity in the law could make clinicians guilty of infanticide should they leave these babies to die. In Britain, abortion on demand is allowed till 24 weeks gestation. In 2002, in the United States, President Bush signed the Born-Alive Protection Act. This requires doctors to care for abortion-survival babies.

—from *Touchstone*



Living a MAGNETIC FAITH in a Post-Christian World

by Denis Haack

***Many of our neighbors have seen something of our faith
and are unimpressed.***

One day as we worked in our yard, a neighbor drove up the alley and we noticed a bumper sticker on his truck with the name “Jesus” emblazoned boldly in large letters. This was especially interesting because we knew he was not a Christian. We walked up the alley to get a closer look. “Jesus,” the sticker said, “save me from Your followers.”

I often ask people—Christian and non-Christian—some form of this question: “If you converted to Christianity today, do you think your life would be larger, fuller, richer, more attractive and creative, more involved with the people, circumstances, art, and culture around you? Or do you think your life would be smaller, narrower, more withdrawn, judgmental, and negative, less winsome

and creative, less involved with the people, art, circumstances, and culture around you?

Not once have I received the answer we would hope to hear. Some Christians have even told me that, come to think of it, they are less creative, more negative, and more withdrawn since coming to know Christ. As a result, many of our neighbors and co-workers believe they have seen something of our faith and are unimpressed.

But consider Jesus. He never compromised the truth, never slighted the demands of God’s Word, never demonstrated anything but perfect holiness, and consistently called sinners to repentance. And they came to Him in droves. Multitudes followed Him around, interrupted Him, and crowded around to be

near Him and to listen. He was winsomely at ease with the people and culture around Him, eager to ask questions, listen, and tell great stories which remain intriguing today.

Although there is an offense to the cross, few non-Christians have truly heard enough of the gospel to be offended by it. So how have we succeeded in giving the watching world such a negative view of our faith? It might be helpful to take a look at two closely related things: First, where we live, and then, what faithfulness looks like there.

Where Are We?

Consider three famous Old Testament cities, each an apt metaphor for the different sorts of cultures that Christians—at any given point in history—find themselves in.

First, consider Jerusalem. Dominating the city was the Temple where priests offered sacrifices for the sins of the people. Jerusalem was home to the covenant people of God who defined its life and shaped its society. The calendar was marked by a series of feasts that celebrated God's grace in the history of His people. The legal system was rooted in God's revelation in the Scriptures, the law, and the prophets. Though non-believers lived there, every aspect of Jerusalem's life and culture was centered on God and His Word.

Next consider Samaria. It was a journey from Jerusalem, but not too far. Its people intermarried with pagans, and there was a great deal of idolatry and superstition in their history and traditions. Though they worshiped Jehovah, they didn't worship at the Temple but on a nearby mountain. They did not receive the entire Old Testament but only the Pentateuch, and the copies they used were incomplete. Samaria wasn't as bad as it could be—after all, they believed in the one true God—but it certainly wasn't Jerusalem either.

And finally, there was Babylon. It was a long way from Jerusalem. The greatest military and economic force of its day, it was a pluralistic society. Races and religions from every corner of the world could be found there. And, while God's people were in the mix, they were given no advantage. They could achieve positions of influence, as long as they were careful not to offend the ruling elite. The art and literature of the Babylonians were pagan, colored by their belief in sorcery and magic. It was very different from Jerusalem, especially in the ways that matter most.

So, which of the three most closely parallels where we are today? Though regional differences are significant, the answer seems clear: We live in Babylon.

Our postmodern world is profoundly pluralistic—far more so than ancient Babylon. The religions we used to hear about only when missionaries visited are now next door, and growing. The public square is a cacophony of competing truth claims. Increasingly our closest neighbors and co-workers do not share our deepest values and convictions.

So what does Christian faithfulness look like in such a setting? One thing is clear: reacting to things in Babylon as if we are living in Jerusalem will make us appear judgmental, unhappy, and self-righteous. And since Babylon won't change, we'll probably become more reactionary, negative, and withdrawn.

Scripture often addresses the people of God in cultural settings similar to our own. Daniel tells the story of God's people living in the actual city of Babylon. Jeremiah 29 is a letter the prophet wrote to the exiles living there, explaining how they were to be faithful. And in Acts 17 the Apostle Paul spends time in Athens among people who did not share his deepest beliefs. If we reflect on the nature of our pluralistic world in light of these texts and the substance of the gospel, we can begin to see the shape of faithfulness.

A Magnetic Faith is . . .

Motivated, not offended. Living in a pluralistic culture means that many of our neighbors adopt values that are contrary to true righteousness. Does this offend us—or motivate us? They are, after all, Babylonians.

When Paul visited Athens he found religious shrines everywhere, and some of the most public idols were openly erotic. Luke records that Paul's "spirit was provoked within him as he saw" it (Acts 17:16). But he didn't withdraw from the culture. Instead, he entered more deeply into it. He examined their shrines, and read their pagan philosophy. When we are offended it is difficult, if not impossible, to find points of agreement, but Paul did just that. He quoted their pagan poet and agreed with what he said about "God," even though the poet was actually talking about Zeus.

If we pull back when we're offended by our neighbors' ideas and values, they can easily see it as self-righteousness. We withdraw, and imply that they are not worth knowing. Just as Paul's switches were flipped by the lostness of his pagan world, so, too, we should be motivated to engage our post-Christian, pluralistic world creatively with the strength and joy of the gospel.

Agreeing before disagreeing. Notice how Paul engaged the Athenians. He knew they didn't accept the Scriptures as authoritative, and that they would have dismissed such a claim. So Paul did something deliciously subversive. He quoted their own poet, and he showed that if the poet were correct, then the Athenian idols made no sense—but Jesus did. He disagreed with the Athenians (his message was a refutation of idol worship), but he didn't start there. He began by agreeing with them. We need to disagree with plenty, but when we begin there we merely make ourselves look disagreeable.

Telling a mystery clearly. When Paul spoke in Athens he introduced an idea that was too strange for his hearers to grasp (Acts 17:18). He spoke of a physical resurrection—in which we believe—but about which there is a great deal of mystery. Paul was careful to present things clearly, but in a way that encouraged discussion. On the one hand, the gospel is simple, and so our explanation should be clear. When Paul was asked, "How can I be saved?" he didn't give a complicated answer (Acts 16:30, 31). On the other hand, when we share our faith we are sharing a story that is full of mystery. We need not complicate the message, but we must not demystify it either, and thereby diminish its richness. Question number four of the *Westminster Shorter Catechism*, for example, asks "What is God?" and answers, "God is a Spirit, infinite, eternal, and unchangeable in His being, wisdom, power, holiness, justice, goodness, and truth." All true, and yet, it hardly expresses the full reality of who our Father is.

Our postmodern world is rejecting the arid secularism of modernity, and yearns for spiritual reality. But a God who is easy to comprehend and comfortable to know does not appeal to the postmodern mind. Our God has revealed much about Himself, and those things can be expressed clearly. But He remains the Almighty, who is far greater than all we can possibly imagine or know. And we must convey our deep sense of awe.

A warm welcome. The most radical form of Christian discipleship today may be simple hospitality, says Dr. Donald Guthrie. Personal relationships have always been central to witness, and today, with more and more people being the products of fragmented families, opening our homes with warm acceptance is invariably welcomed. Even those from intact homes can feel the loneliness of our mobile, individualistic society. We were created for community,

so when we open our homes with warm hospitality we are expressing something central to the Good News.

Part of this includes giving the gift of unhurried time. Not unlimited time—no one has that to offer—but deliberate, focused attention. When I was a L'Abri student drinking tea with Francis Schaeffer in his living room, never once did I get the impression that he would rather be somewhere else, or with someone else. He had a knack for giving the gift of unhurried time.

An authentic spirituality. Paul was never hesitant to tell his story, and we shouldn't be either. The story of our spiritual pilgrimage is more credible than a victorious "testimony." The postmodern generation is not looking for simple answers but for spiritual reality, for a sense of transcendence that has ancient and noble roots. They seem to be equipped with authenticity meters and can quickly sniff out accounts that skip over the hard parts and so fail to mesh with the reality of living in a broken and sad world. They aren't looking for perfection, but for substance, and that is precisely what the gospel provides.

Listening imaginatively. Before Paul talked to the Athenians, he listened, gaining insight into what they believed and valued. Francis Schaeffer was fond of saying that if he had an hour to spend with a non-Christian, the first 55 minutes should be spent listening, asking questions, and then listening some more. Then, in the last five minutes, he hoped to say one thing that might cause them to consider some aspect of the biblical story.

How Do We Listen?

One way is to ask non-Christians about their spiritual pilgrimage. They're always eager to talk, and listening to their stories not only raises all sorts of interesting issues, but also provides a wonderful window of insight into their

world.

Another avenue is music—especially among those of the postmodern generation. Listen with them to the music that most resonates in their hearts and imaginations. Ask about the lyrics, and why a song speaks the language of their soul. A conversation about the things that matter most always ensues. Often, when we've done this in our home, we learn that we're the first Christians of our generation to take their music—and thus, them—seriously.

Art is another platform for meaningful conversation. And finding creative ways to encourage the arts in the Church causes those outside to see our faith differently. Artists are essential for evangelism, Timothy Keller argues, "because without art we cannot reach the world . . . reason tells me about the truth, but I really cannot grasp what it means; I can't understand truth without art." The God of all truth is also the God of awesome beauty. Therefore, demonstrating His glory and proclaiming His gospel requires us to proclaim the truth with a vibrant imagination.

Enjoying a covenant relationship with God should make our lives larger, fuller, richer, and more attractive—not smaller, narrower, and more withdrawn, even in Babylon. This doesn't mean that every non-Christian we meet will be drawn to faith; the offense of the cross remains. It means, rather, that we are being faithful to our conviction that our Father is both the God of absolute truth, and of infinite beauty.

We need not fear the changes in our post-Christian world or the challenges they raise. We can trust what the Bible says about the power of the gospel. We can develop skills in discernment, and creatively apply the truth of God's Word—even when the issue confronting us is not specifically addressed in Scripture. ■

—Reprinted from the September/October 2005 issue of *ByFaith*

Why Is the Simple Life So Complicated?

by Klaas Reimer

The very fact that you are reading this article tells me that you have life inside of you. Genesis 2:7 says, *“And the LORD God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and man became a living soul.”* Each one of us has been given only one life to live. The question is—How are we living our life? Are we living a simple life? *Webster’s Dictionary* describes simple life like this—“free from vanity and free from elaboration.” One step farther, what is vanity?

Again, quoting from *Webster*, vanity is “something that is vain, empty, and valueless.” Does this mean that we are not to have things that do not have any eternal value? I don’t believe that is what it necessarily means. A question to ask ourselves is—Are the things controlling us, or are we controlling them? Let us see what the Bible says on how we are to live our lives. *“For the grace of God that bringeth salvation hath appeared to all men, teaching us that, denying ungodliness and worldly lusts, we should live soberly, righteously, and godly, in this present world; looking for that blessed hope, and the glorious appearing of the great God, and Saviour Jesus Christ; who gave himself for us, that he might redeem us from all iniquity, and purify unto himself a peculiar people, zealous of good works”* (Titus 2:11-14). Verse 11 says that the grace of God has taught us to deny or reject worldly desires and to live temperate and self-controlled lives. This is so we don’t get distracted and become

so comfortable we forget to anticipate the glorious appearing of our great God and Saviour Jesus Christ. Verse 14 says that Jesus redeemed us and purified us that we might be peculiarly His own, and be eager and enthusiastic about living a life that is good and filled with beneficial deeds.

Back to the question—Are the things controlling us, or are we controlling them? Are we using things that we have only for God’s honor and glory? Is it possible to have so many things that even though they are good things, they hinder us from following God the way we should?

Let us take a look back into history not so many years ago. We see Father and Mother along with the children sitting on the front porch shelling peas by hand. As they work, they sing or engage in conversation, enjoying this time together. It’s mid-afternoon. The peas are finished, and now there is hay to unload, and chores to do which includes milking two cows by hand. They all know that there is prayer meeting this evening.

Now don’t you think if they would modernize a bit it shouldn’t be a problem getting the jobs done and get ready for prayer meeting? All right, let’s look at it that way. It’s 11:30, and they are done picking peas. Mom says she’ll quickly take the peas to the huller. Father says that he and the boys need to finish unloading the hay, and mix a batch of feed with their new big mixer. They also need to clean out the heifer pen, but of course they have the big

skid loader for that. Then they scramble to get the chores done to get to prayer meeting on time. With all the modern equipment, why all the scrambling? There's no time for family singing and general fellowship together.

Do we have more time for family and church activities after we have all our timesaving devices? Why is it that we can hardly find time to attend prayer meeting as well as other church activities? We have reached an era where we find ourselves working more hours to pay for our timesaving devices.

Here are a few questions to ponder: Is it truly God's plan for us to work longer days, making life stressed for our family and ourselves? And then at various times during the year we say we need to go to the cabin "to get away" and have some good quality family time. Would we need so many costly getaways if we would slow down and enjoy family times on the front porch or around the supper table? Are we perhaps complicating life when we wouldn't need to?

Can we truly say God is pleased if we make ourselves so busy that it's a struggle to make it for midweek services at church? Do we really need to work so late on Saturdays that we struggle to stay awake Sunday morning? Please don't misunderstand me; I'm not against modern equipment. But shouldn't we have just as much time now to have quality family time at home, or have time for mid-week services, etc.? We are reminded time and again in the Scriptures about our short time here on earth. And what are we doing with that slot of time God has allowed us?

In Mark 13:32-37 we read these words, "*But of that day and that hour knoweth no man, no, not the angels which are in heaven, neither the Son, but the Father. Take ye heed, watch and pray: for ye know not when the time is. For the Son of man is as a man taking a*

far journey, who left his house, and gave authority to his servants, and to every man his work, and commanded the porter to watch. Watch ye therefore: for ye know not when the master of the house cometh, at even, or at midnight, or at the cockcrowing, or in the morning: lest coming suddenly he find you sleeping. And what I say unto you I say unto all, Watch.

Are we truly watching? Are we ready at all times? We may be, but how about our families? Have we taken the time to instruct them in the important things of life? Jesus says in Matthew 6:33, "*But seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you.*" Or is our life so complicated that we hardly have the time to ". . . bring them up in the nurture and admonition of the Lord"? (Ephesians 6:4). To nurture someone takes quality time. Let us remember that we can only take people to heaven with us. My burden for God's people is that we do not make our life so complicated that we fail to accomplish God's purpose for our lives. "*I therefore . . . beseech you that ye walk worthy of the vocation wherewith ye are called, with all lowliness and meekness, with longsuffering, forbearing one another in love*" (Ephesians 4:1, 2). ■

—From *The Pilgrim Witness*, November 2004



Eroding Marriages in Our Culture

by Mervin C. Groff

The word *erode* means to eat into; to wear away; to disintegrate as acid erodes metal. It means to wear away gradually as a stream erodes a gully. To “erode” means to cause to deteriorate, decay, or to vanish.

Eroding marriages in our culture are more and more commonplace. Matthew 7:24-27 says, “Therefore whoever hears these sayings of mine, *and does them*, I will liken him unto a wise man, who built his house on a rock; and the rains descended, and the floods came, and the winds blew, and beat on that house; and it did not fall, for it was founded upon a rock. And everyone who hears these sayings of mine, *and does not do them*, shall be likened to a foolish man, who built his house upon the sand; and the rains descended, and the floods came, and the winds blew, and beat on that house; and it fell, and great was the fall of it.”

This parable may not appear to apply directly to marriage. But we want to note especially verse 25—the rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house—yet it did not fall.

Two homes are built—one is built on rock and one is built on sand. There are two builders—one is wise and one is foolish. They face the same circumstances—violent storms—but there are different results. One stands firm and one collapses. Why does that happen in marriages? Why is it that two marriages can go through the same circumstances and yet experience differing results? Why? What are some pitfalls couples need to avoid?

1. *Living Together Before Marriage*

The number of unmarried couples

living together has increased dramatically over the past few decades, and that number will likely continue to increase. The rationale is simple: They say, “By living together before marriage, we will know how compatible we are.” Presumably, if a couple can get along by living in the same apartment before marriage, they will be able to get along with each other after marriage.

It is a tempting argument. After all, a typical *date* during the courtship period tends to be artificial. Each person is “up” for the occasion, and both make an effort to have a good time together. In *marriage*, couples are also together when they’re “down.” Would it not make sense for a couple to live together for a while, just to see how they react to each other’s “down” times?

The problem with those arguments is that marriage changes everything. If couples who live together think that after marriage everything will be the same—they don’t understand what marriage does to a couple, both positively and negatively.

In my experience (and in reports that I have read), the chances of a divorce after having lived together are huge, much higher than for couples who have not lived together prior to marriage. If living together were a test of marital compatibility, the statistics should show opposite results. Couples that live together before marriage should have stronger marriages, but they don’t. They have weaker marriages.

To understand why this is the case, we must look at why couples who live together decide not to marry. Ask the question: “Why did you choose to live with your boyfriend instead of marrying

him?” The most common answer given is that you were not ready to make that commitment to him yet. First, you wanted to see if you still loved him after you cooked meals together, cleaned the apartment together, and slept together. In other words, you wanted to see what married life would be like without the commitment of marriage.

But you will never know what married life is like unless you are married. What, exactly, is the commitment of marriage? It is an agreement that you will take care of each other for a lifetime, regardless of life’s ups and downs. You will stick it out together through thick and thin. But the commitment of living together is not like that at all. Living together is simply a month-to-month rental agreement. The one says to the other, “As long as you behave yourself and keep me happy, I’ll stick around.”

Habits are hard to break, and couples that live together before marriage get into the habit of following their month-to-month rental agreement. Living together may prove compatibility for a moment in time, but it provides no evidence for your happiness together over a lifetime. The only way you can have that happiness and compatibility is if you agree to take each other’s feelings into account every time you make a decision. And that is what people who marry (without having lived together) are highly motivated to do. So, in order to build a strong marriage, one of the pitfalls to avoid, is living together before marriage.

2. Quick Courtships

Another pitfall to avoid is a quick period of courtship. Take time to have a courtship that honors and glorifies God by learning to know each other well.

Daily we face distorted concepts of love. The songs, literature, and advertisements of our day, even many so-called *Christian* songs and writings, describe love primarily on a mere sen-

sual level. There certainly is an emotional side to the man-woman relationship. But feeling is so emphasized that *love* has been turned into a feeling-seeking self-centeredness. What the most clingy young couples love, is not one another, but themselves. When all of their nerve endings are inflated to ninety pounds of this wonderful feeling, it is impossible to convince them that they may not be in love!

Christian young men and women will need to surrender their courting plans to the will of God. Couples need to honestly consider God’s will for their lives in relation to courtship and marriage. Consider this question: Can anyone make practical and specific decisions about courtship until he has sought God’s direction for life? Unfortunately, many courting young people have never seriously asked the following questions: “Is there some preparation that I need to make in light of a possible marriage in the future? What work do I sense God leading me to do? How will my life best contribute to advancing the kingdom of God?” The answers to these questions will affect not only whom I court, but when I should court, and (in some cases) even whether I should court at all.

As long as God’s will is not given a place of priority, marriage (and life itself) will not deliver the fulfillment we are expecting. This point can hardly be overstressed. It speaks to many of the hollow marriages of our day, even within the church. We are talking about courtships that are quick and frequently take place without much thought and prayer. Pleasing God must always be our highest motivation for courting a potential marriage partner.

It is quite obvious that many courting young people allow lesser things than God’s will to motivate their relationship. Some are after security. Some want companionship. Some are merely following biological urges. Some have

other reasons. God's Word speaks to the issue:

And the LORD God said, It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper comparable to him. Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and they shall become one flesh" (Genesis 2:18, 24).

He who finds a wife finds a good thing, and obtains favor from the LORD. A prudent wife is from the LORD (Proverbs 18:22; 19:14).

For this is the will of God, your sanctification: that you should abstain from sexual immorality; that each of you should know how to possess his own vessel in sanctification and honor; not in passion of lust, like the Gentiles who do not know God (1 Thess. 4:3-5).

Marriage is the only proper motivation for courtship. This is not to say that from the first date, a couple must be convinced that they are for each other. It is important to warn, however, against dating for motivations less than the purpose of eventual marriage.

It is only the part of wisdom to court someone whom you, through careful and prayerful discernment, would consider eligible for marriage. Begin courting only when you are ready to allow the discernment process of courtship to move in wisdom toward marriage—without either rush or undue delay.

3. Marriage Without the Thought of Children

Another pitfall to avoid is marriage without any plans for children. The Bible says, "Unless the LORD builds the house, they labor in vain who build it; unless the LORD guards the city, the watchman stays awake in vain. . . . Behold, children are a heritage from the Lord; the fruit of the womb is his reward. Like arrows in the hand of a warrior, so are the children of one's youth. Happy is the man who has his quiver full of them" (Psalm 127:1-5).

In the next Psalm (128), we read, "Blessed is everyone who hears the LORD; who walks in his ways. When you eat the labor of your hands, you shall be happy, and it shall be well with you. Your wife shall be like a fruitful vine in the very heart of your house; your children like olive plants all around your table. Behold, thus shall the man be blessed who fears the LORD" (Psalm 128:1-4).

The Scripture teaches that children are a great blessing, a heritage from the Lord—and families with children are especially blessed of God. The command to Adam and Eve was to "be fruitful and multiply; fill the earth and subdue it" (Genesis 1:28). That truth is handed down to us. The command to Noah and his sons and their wives after the flood was to "be fruitful and multiply" (Genesis 9:7). Marriage is expected to result in children. It is always sad when a couple marries and the marriage is not fruitful with children. Happy is the man and woman who want children.

The woman who wants all that marriage gives, wants the man's support and his name, yet does not want to bear him children is not fulfilling God's normal plan. Such persons are dodging the privilege God has given to women who have made the noble commitment of marriage.

Somebody said, "I don't think we ought to fill the world with children who are living for the devil." I agree, but surely it is not wise to leave the bearing of children and the populating of the earth to the illiterate and criminals and the ignorant. Why should not the people of God (people who care and people with Christian principles) raise the men and women who will rise up and serve and bless the God of heaven? Rejoice, then, in the children whom God gives. They are a blessing from God.

To be married and never desire to have children is not normal, not natural, not God's will for the human

family. God's plan is to replenish the earth through honorably married couples bearing children.

Married couples who do not have children are denied some of the greatest lessons in life. They do not have the opportunity to fully round out their character. They are shut out from some of life's most necessary experiences. And so there are many lessons in life which they never learn. Some couples are physically unable to have children; they should consider adopting children. Other couples willfully prevent children; this is a tragedy. Adults can never reach the maturity they should have without the presence of children in the home. May God bless each home with children.

4. Having a Wrong Focus on Material Goods

The Scripture's warning that "the love of money is a root of all evil" is really never more wisely observed than in family finances. It is the misuse of finances that leads to much dissension and unhappiness in many homes. This pitfall may easily be avoided by simply following the principles given in Scripture for our guidance as Christians.

First of all, do not try to totally separate money from spirituality. There is nothing wrong with money. It is the use of money that needs to be carefully watched. It is the love of money—inordinate, consuming love for money that is condemned in the Bible. It is when money becomes a god, and acquiring money becomes the passion of life—that it is terribly wrong.

There should always be a family policy in regard to money matters. This should be worked out prayerfully by both husband and wife. First, the Lord's work should be supported through proper giving; then there should be a budget for fixed expenses, and the balance will be available for savings and for careful use. At times

there will be special financial emergencies to meet, and these need to be agreed upon by both married partners.

Today's business world almost daily sends an overwhelming attack upon the family budget. By every means available the advertising barrage reaches each of us, endeavoring to force us to buy more and more goods and services. In order to meet and repulse this attack, the Christian family will need to watch its defenses closely, lest the budget become hopelessly buried under an avalanche of luxury items and installment buying. So be very careful.

Money may be a source of untold blessing for us. The money we have earned is part of us, part of our days—part of our lives. And, very graciously, God allows us to distribute the money we earn. We may purchase things for ourselves and for others. We may give to needy causes near at hand and we may support needs beyond the sea. We may find great satisfaction in knowing that God observes and records our gifts. So we must allow money to bless us, and others in need, and God will be honored.

All of us must be prepared to face the culture in which we live. Just as heavy rains soak everything in sight, so the culture tends to permeate our home, our society, our families, and our marriages. There are some forces in society that work against the family. There are groups committed to the destruction of marriage and the family, and so we must be alert to such destructive forces.

Just as continuous rain has an eroding effect on the stability of a house, so our culture has an eroding effect on the stability of our marriages. It is most likely harder to stay married today than at any other time in history. May God help us to keep our marriages free from dangerous erosion. ■

—Reprinted with permission from the January/February 2006 issue of *BRF Witness*.

UN-comfortable!

by P. Daniel Stetler

One little prefix of two tiny letters is all it takes to mess up a perfectly good word! Let me demonstrate my point. Take the word in my title for example. *Comfortable* is a sweet word which suggests a whole array of wonderful things like:

- To be relaxed.
- To feel comfort or ease.
- To be free from stress or anxiety.
- To have a sense of adequacy.

When you add that tiny little prefix—UN—it turns a beautiful word into an ugly word meaning:

- To feel dissatisfied.
- To feel certain levels of discomfort or be ill-at-ease.
- To feel a certain level of stress or anxiety.
- To have a sense of inadequacy.

When these two concepts are placed side by side, one need not be a genius to realize that the natural inclination of every normal human being would be to choose comfort over being UN-comfortable!

I like the word *comfort* and its associated words—*comforter*, *comfortable*, and *comforting*! In fact, I believe we can safely say the idea of comfort is rather central to the whole concept of Christianity! Think about these facts for a moment. The word *comfort* is used no less than 62 times in the King James Bible. God is described in 2 Corinthians 1:3 as “. . . the Father of mercies, and the God of all comfort,” and He promises to “. . . comfort us in all our tribulation” in 2 Corinthians 1:4. Jesus promised in John 14:16 that He would send us a Comforter who would abide with us forever, and He identified that Comforter as the Holy Spirit in John 14:26. We are admonished to comfort ourselves in 1 Thessalonians 5:11 and to “comfort one another . . .” in 1 Thessalonians 4:18. Besides all this, if you search for the words

uncomfortable or *discomfort* in the Bible, you will not find them because they are never used! So, we may safely conclude that God wants all His people to be comfortable all the time—right? WRONG!

In fact, there are times when attaching that pesky little prefix “UN” to the word *comfortable* can be the best thing that ever happened to us. What if pain never made us uncomfortable to warn us that some disease was at work in our body? What if our nervous system never sent our brain the uncomfortable pain sensation to warn us that hot surfaces were not to be touched with the bare hand? What would happen to the whole concept of diligent work and achievement if we were always perfectly comfortable with the status quo? What kind of crude, undeveloped world would we live in if discomfort had not driven someone to find an easier way or build a better machine?

On the spiritual side, where would our relationship with God be if we had never felt the sting of guilt and condemnation, or the discomfort of conviction? What if we had never experienced the discomfort of realizing that we would be hopelessly lost and headed for Hell without the merits of Christ’s blood? How much would we grow and mature spiritually if we were never made uncomfortable by adversity, failure, or loss?

No, a perpetual state of being comfortable is not something we need or should desire. In fact, God would like to make us uncomfortable with a “holy dissatisfaction” about some very important things that should concern us.

God never wants us to grow comfortable in our attitude toward the Devil, sin, and our salvation. We are told to be watchful and vigilant because we have an adversary in the Devil. We are told to “keep our souls with all diligence,” to “strive to enter in,”

to “give all diligence and add to our faith.” The warning of Scripture is strong when it says, “Woe unto them that are at ease in Zion,” and “be troubled ye careless ones.” The deadly comfort of the doctrine of unconditional eternal security is destroying multitudes of “Christians” today.

God does not want us to grow comfortable with the spirit of this world. He warns that the “god of this world” is none other than the Devil. He urges us not to be conformed to this world but to be transformed to think like He thinks. He reminds us that we are strangers and pilgrims in this world, and that our citizenship is in heaven. He told Pilate that His Kingdom was not of this world, and in His high-priestly prayer, He said His disciples were not of this world even as He was not of this world. God does not want us to grow comfortable with the spirit of this world!

God never wants us to grow comfortable about the multitudes of lost, hopeless people who are all around us. You can sense the passion in His words when He urges His disciples to “lift up their eyes” and see the waiting harvest fields. You can feel the urgency when He tells them to pray that the Lord of harvest will send forth laborers into the harvest! His last challenge to His disciples was that they should go into all the world and preach the Gospel.

So we obviously need a balance. Yes, God is the God of all comfort and He knows how to comfort us in all our tribulations. But that same God wants us to be eternally vigilant and does not want us to ever grow comfortable, careless, and indifferent about things of eternal significance. So in parting I will say, “May the God of all comfort keep you carefully UN-comfortable!” ■

—Reprinted from *The TORCH*, Fall 2005.
Used with permission.



God's Order Within the Church

by Omer P. Miller

The word *discipline* is found only once in the King James Bible. Elihu, the young friend of Job, said to him, “He [God] openeth also their ear to discipline, and commandeth that they return from iniquity” (Job 36:10). The meaning of the Hebrew original is chastisement, reproof, warning or instruction, restraint.

Webster in his dictionary also includes chastisement as a synonym for discipline. It is the kind of training that corrects, molds, and perfects orderly conduct. It can also be a system of rules to govern conduct and practice.

The German word *Zucht* is a term that includes various forms of discipline. The words *nurture*, *sound mind*, *sober*, or

sobriety are all Biblical terms for discipline. Even though the word *discipline* is not used in the New Testament, the principle is taught throughout.

We would like to consider three types of discipline, especially as they relate to the church:

1) Preventive discipline. We have all heard the old saying, “An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure.” Preventive discipline includes the giving of direction through rules, laws, and regulations. We may think of this as a negative approach, but it also teaches the positive side of how to live rightly. There should be just as much emphasis on “thou shalt” as on “thou shalt not.”

2) Corrective discipline. This becomes necessary when preventive measures are ignored, or rebelled against. The intent of corrective discipline is to get the erring one's attention and to correct the unacceptable behavior. Punishment should never be given in a spirit of vengeance or anger, or to flaunt one's authority. Rather, it should draw a person to respond in a positive way. True, the chastisement of the Lord is not pleasant, but grievous for the moment. But as we yield to it, the peaceable fruit of righteousness is the result. (See Hebrews 12:11.)

3) Inner discipline. This is the true object or goal of the two previous forms of discipline. In child training, the intent of early preventive and corrective measures is to teach the child inner control, or what we sometimes call self-discipline.

We have utterly failed our 12-to-16 year-olds if they still need to be told everything they may or may not do. By then they should know what behavior is acceptable, and what is not. If our discipline was given with love and understanding, there will usually be a willingness to follow and submit to discipline.

If our discipline is designed to control the child for selfish reasons, or if we use fear tactics or expressions of anger, we can expect some form of rebellion to appear. This is also true of discipline in the church, for the patterns are very similar.

THE ROLE OF CHURCH STANDARDS

Today in our churches, we see various degrees of reaction against discipline. Our preventive discipline (written standards, or the *Ordnung*) is being challenged as un-Scriptural, and corrective discipline is often being ignored or considered a form of oppression. The lack of inner discipline is actually being labeled as true liberty and freedom in Christ. How should our churches be responding to these reactions?

A reaction is a negative response to something. It becomes obvious that reacting to someone else's reaction is a vicious circle that accomplishes nothing. So the

first point for our churches to keep in mind is to not react toward these reactions against discipline in the church.

We need to look for and then apply the truth. No matter how well-worded or how Biblical our standards are, they have no life in themselves. True spiritual life comes only through Jesus Christ who said, "I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life. No man cometh to the Father but through me." When we seek spiritual life through other means such as baptism, church membership, ceremonies, rituals, or church standards, these become a form of idolatry. Article 6 of the Dordrecht Confession states this very clearly.

In Revelation 3 we read of the church at Sardis which had the name of being alive but in reality was dead. This same thing can still happen today if we place more emphasis on outward conformity than on inward change. Even though we believe an inner spiritual renewal often brings a very notable outward change, we must beware of judging one's right standing with God only on what can be observed outwardly. No set of standards can change a person's heart—only God can do that as man responds to Him.

Without a changed heart, rules become a burden to be endured, or an instrument to greater self-righteousness. Carnality cannot be controlled with regulations—it will always find ways to express itself. Rather, the carnal nature must be crucified and brought to its death. (See Galatians 5:24.) Only then will church discipline and church standards be effective.

THE MISUSE OF STANDARDS

However good and right something may be in its proper setting, there is always a danger of misusing it, getting out of balance, or going to some extreme. With regard to church standards, we would like to first list four pitfalls in our use of them, and then four dangers of reacting to church standards.

1) One subtle danger of church standards is the tendency to measure our spiritual status by them. Since a truly spiritual

person would surely not rebel against Biblical standards, we are inclined to equate obedience with spirituality. This mindset may lead to the reasoning that being more conservative than the rest of the church is being more spiritual. We measure ourselves with others and may end up putting people in categories as to their spiritual level.

2) Another risk has to do with church leadership. When the above thinking has settled in among the ministry, then church discipline becomes a means of control rather than an expression of faith. When a carnal nature hides behind outward piety, we may resort to making more rules as a means of constraining the worldliness that seeps through the shell of piety. Too often the ministry ends up filling the role of a policeman instead of a shepherd, thus getting so bogged down with fine details that the church's witness as a light to the world is obscured.

3) A related threat is the confusion between principle and application. When the central focus is on church standards, we tend to forget that the applications are not the principles. Biblical convictions are based on Biblical principles, and applying these principles to our lives may vary from congregation to congregation.

When our spirituality is measured by our obedience to the application, confusion may set in when someone else's application differs from ours. We may quickly label that person as not spiritual, a conclusion that is harmful and breaks down relationships. This kind of thinking also keeps churches from making positive changes in the standards.

4) Still another danger of overregulation is that uniformity often replaces unity. Spiritual unity is an important Biblical principle that is often neglected. True unity derives from a body of believers who have a common bond through faith in Christ, and this results in a certain degree of uniformity. Spiritual unity is willing to sacrifice the independent spirit and blend together in one body in which the fruit of the Spirit—love, joy, peace, etc.—is evident. (See Ephesians 4:1-6 and Galatians

5:22, 23.) Uniformity should be expected more than demanded—the natural result of brotherly love and submission to one another in a functioning body.

A LACK OF STANDARDS

On the opposite side of the spectrum come the reactions to the above misuse of standards, ending with not having any regulations at all in the church. Since there are various pietistic movements today that are making inroads into some of our churches, let us also look at the dangers of not having any standards.

1) Without a collective agreement within the brotherhood as to the application of principles, each individual is burdened with trying the spirits and making decisions on his own. Such independence downgrades the role of the brotherhood. Love is portrayed as tolerance to allow each one to do his/her own thing. This tolerance has very few restrictions. Compared with rules and regulations, it feels like liberty and freedom.

Such people often find a common ground based on their reactions toward where they came from rather than upon the response to the faith in where they are going. When decisions are made individually, diversity of the spirit (not the unity of the Spirit) becomes a lifestyle that is easily lured into the world.

2) Related to the above is the confusion with regard to Christian liberty. There is no liberty without law. Could we safely travel the highways if there were no restrictions, laws, or directions? Romans 3:27 mentions the law of faith. Titus 2:11-13 teaches us about the law of grace.

Christian liberty comes as a result of denying our selfishness, loving others, and submitting to a Scriptural brotherhood. Rules and standards become bondage only when they are abused or we resist them. The "live-and-let-live" philosophy allows for individual expression and interpreting of what is sin and what is not, of personal convictions and preferences without being accountable to one another. It ignores the

deceitfulness of man's own heart and the need to be our brother's keeper.

3) Another peril is the emphasis on personal impressions and revelations. The cry from the no-regulation camp is that the Word of God is all we need and that anything more, such as a confession of faith or written standards, becomes idolatry and is an addition to the written Word.

It is ironic, though, that their own verbal expressions of faith or private interpretations are considered valid and "from the Lord." This again promotes individualism and undermines the protection one experiences within a close-knit structured brotherhood.

As mentioned before, when written standards or confessions of faith are held equal to the Word of God, then indeed they become a form of idolatry. But this is equally true of unwritten independent confessions and private interpretations that are given the same validity as the Holy Writ. Not only are they a form of idolatry, but also delusive and deceptive.

4) By reacting to the abuse of overregulation, it is easy to convince ourselves that all restrictions are legalistic or formalism. Yet one Biblical example of written standards from the early church is recorded in Acts 15. There the Apostles and the church at Jerusalem welcomed the Gentiles into their fellowship, based on their faith in Jesus Christ. The willingness of the Gentiles to submit to certain restrictions proved their sincerity.

But that ye write unto them [Gentiles] that they abstain from pollutions of idols, and from fornication, and from things strangled and from blood (verse 20).

In verse 25 we are told that they had assembled "with one accord," which indicates a collective decision. Some of the requirements were so-called "manmade rules" and all of them were restrictions. Had the church resorted to legalism by not allowing the Spirit to reveal His will individually? I find it interesting and encouraging to discover God's approval plainly stated in verse 28:

For it seemed good to the Holy Ghost, and to us, to lay upon you no greater burden than these necessary things.

The example of Acts 15 confirms the belief that collective decisions (written or not) can be, should be, and often are an active function of the Holy Spirit. These guidelines often include restrictions as well as admonitions. Spirit-filled forms and traditions are useful tools to maintain spirituality, stability, and preservation. When we deny that truth, we often lose the ability to keep the very saving faith we claim to have, and so sorely need.

SEEKING A BALANCE IN THE CHURCH

Having reviewed the dangers on either side, let us now look for a balance between the two extremes. If Christ is not the life of the church, then to have rules or not to have rules will avail nothing in eternity.

The Word of God is clear that man must die to himself and become alive as a new creature in Christ before he can enter into the kingdom of God. This is more than an experience—it is a commitment. Keeping all the moral rules in the world cannot take the place of this life-saving commitment to follow Jesus in a spirit of brokenness and humility.

Even with this commitment, our subtle old nature, the world, and Satan still tempt us to depart from God. When the carnal nature comes to the surface, we do well to repent and revive the spiritual man rather than generate more rules. The carnal man can never become spiritual by creating and keeping rules. The carnal must be replaced by the spiritual.

When church disciplines or regulations are made, they need to be done collectively. The Book of Ephesians portrays the church as a building, a body, a marriage, and as an armored warrior. To properly function as any of the above, there must be order. Godly order for the church can only be attained when there is a willing submission to collective decisions. These decisions are designed to provide preventive discipline and to give direction to the believers. Even

though there is a suitable application of a principle, this alone is not enough unless it is also an expression of our faith.

Although there is beauty in uniformity, we still need to leave room in the church for some diversity. We believe the Holy Spirit dwells within the church as a collective body of many members, yet unless He dwells within each member personally, it will hardly be possible for Him to work through the church collectively. The body of Christ made up of members with various gifts, talents, and abilities, but working together in spiritual unity, has a unique beauty as a bright light shining in a dark world.

In Ephesians 4:3 we are reminded of the need of “endeavoring to keep the unity of the Spirit, in the bond of peace.” Here the emphasis is on the *unity* of the Spirit, not on the “diversity” of the Spirit. The Spirit of God always promotes unity in a Biblical church. When the Spirit speaks to us, He will also speak in unity to the brotherhood. Even the various Spirit-given gifts for the church will enhance peace, unity, and edification. It is when we fail to faithfully prove the spirits and give heed to “another” spirit, that confusion and discord abound.

Jesus prayed for a oneness among His disciples, and this is especially needful for each local body of believers. The unity of belief will translate into a unity of practice. The most powerful living witness to the fallen world is a brotherhood in which love and submission are consistently practiced, through the supernatural strength of the Holy Spirit in the common bond of Jesus.

In Romans 14 and 1 Corinthians 8, Paul instructs each believer to be considerate of each other’s consciences. One’s conscience is trained by the influences we are under and that is how we develop a sense of right and wrong. Not everyone’s conscience, however, is properly trained. Sometimes a conscience needs to be retrained, but never should it be violated or defiled.

Church decisions on certain cultural issues may not be so much a matter of

right and wrong as a concern which direction these issues are leading us. Eating meats offered to idols did not make a person better or worse, but to someone raised in such a setting, eating that meat would defile his conscience. When we do something deliberately that offends a brother’s conscience, we do not walk in love. Collective decisions provide a means to live in peace with one another. Where this love reigns, the weaker conscience can be retrained through faith without violating it. What is not of faith is sin.

Another important element for a church to successfully function is consistency. Once an agreement is reached, it will need to be put into practice. Any willful violation of the agreement needs to be considered as a sign of spiritual decay. It is not that changes can’t be made, if done so collectively. But when individuals ignore or rebel against the church standards, they become subject to corrective discipline. To know and to teach has very little value when it is not lived. Faith without works is dead.

Lastly, our accepted standard dare not hinder the vision and purpose of the church in reaching out to bring souls into the kingdom. Too often troubled churches spend so much of their time in corrective maintenance that they lose sight of this goal. Where preventive discipline is applied in a spiritual setting, it creates an atmosphere that draws seekers of truth. Where love flows without offense, a sense of security is provided and peace is preserved in spite of differences of opinion.

Such love and peace cannot be found in the world. May God grant us the grace to allow His love to flow through us in esteeming others more than ourselves. Where such love prevails in a church, then surely the preventive and corrective discipline will create an effective inner discipline in each member—a discipline that is approved of God and that enables the members to work together in the church in true unity of the Spirit. ■

—From *Family Life*, May 2003. Reprinted with the author’s permission.

The Disappearance of Church Discipline— How Can We Recover? Part Three

by R. Albert Mohler Jr.

In 1 Corinthians 5, the Apostle Paul confronted a case of gross moral failure in the Corinthian church. In the face of such sin, however, the church had done nothing. So how should the Corinthians have responded to this public sin? Paul speaks in this passage of delivering this sinner unto Satan and removing him from fellowship. How is this to be done? To the Galatians Paul wrote that “if anyone is caught in any trespass, you who are spiritual, restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness; each one looking to yourself, so that you too will not be tempted” (Galatians 6:1). This teaching is clear, indicating that spiritual leaders of the church are to confront a sinning member with a spirit of humility and gentleness, and with the goal of restoration. But what are the precise steps to be taken?

The Lord himself provided these instructions as He taught His disciples. “If your brother sins, go and show him his fault in private; if he listens to you, you have won your brother. But if he does not listen to you, take one or two more with you, so that by the mouth of two or three witnesses every fact may be confirmed. If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector” (Matthew 18:15-17).

The Lord instructed His disciples that they should first confront a sinning brother in private. “Show him his fault,” instructed the Lord. If the brother acknowledges the sin and repents, the brother has been won. The fact that the first step is a private confrontation is very important. This limits the injury caused by the sin, and avoids a public spectacle, which would tarnish the witness of the church to the Gospel.

In the event the private confrontation does not lead to repentance, restoration, and reconciliation, the next step is to take

witnesses. Jesus cited the Deuteronomic law which required multiple witnesses of a crime for conviction. Yet his purpose here seems larger than the mere establishment of the facts of the case. Jesus seems to intend for the witnesses to be an important presence in the event of the confrontation, thus adding corroborating testimony concerning the confrontation of a sinning brother. The brother cannot claim that he was not confronted with his sin in a brotherly context.

If the brother does not listen even in the presence of one or two witnesses, this becomes a matter for the congregation. “Tell it to the church” instructed Jesus, and the church is to judge the matter before the Lord, and render a judgment which is binding upon the sinner. This step is extremely serious, and the congregation now bears a corporate responsibility. The church must render its judgment based upon the principles of God’s Word and the facts of the case. Again, the goal is the restoration of a sinning brother or sister—not a public spectacle.

Sadly, this congregational confrontation may not avail. If it does not, the only recourse is separation from the sinning brother. “Let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector,” instructed the Lord, indicating that the separation is to be real and public. The congregation is not to consider the former brother as a part of the church. This drastic and extreme act is to follow when a brother or sister will not submit to the discipline of the church. We should note that the church should still bear witness to this man, but not as a brother to a brother, until and unless repentance and restoration are evident.

What is the church’s authority in church discipline? Jesus addressed this issue directly, even as He declared the

establishment of the church after Peter's great confession. "I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; and whatever you bind on earth shall have been bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall have been loosed in heaven" (Matthew 16:19). This "power of the keys" is one of the critical controversies between evangelicals and the Church of Rome. Roman Catholics believe that the Pope, as Peter's successor, holds the keys, and thus the power of binding and loosing. Protestants, however, believe that the Lord granted the keys to the church. This interpretation is supported by the Lord's repetition of the matter in Matthew 18:18, "Truly I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall have been bound in heaven; and whatever you loose on earth shall have been loosed in heaven." Here, the context reveals that the power of binding and loosing is held by the church.

The terms *binding* and *loosing* were familiar terms used by rabbis in the first century to refer to the power of judging matters on the basis of the Bible. The Jewish authorities would determine how (or whether) the Scriptures applied in a specific situation, and would render judgment by either "binding," which meant to restrict, or "loosing," which meant to liberate. The church still bears this responsibility and wields this power. John Calvin, the great Genevan Reformer, believed that the power of "binding" should be understood as excommunication, and "loosing" as reception into membership: "But the church binds him whom it excommunicates—not that it casts him into everlasting ruin and despair, but because it condemns his life and morals, and already warns him of his condemnation unless he should repent. It looses him when it receives into communion, for it makes him a sharer of the unity which is in Christ Jesus."

Calvin's interpretation is fully in agreement at this point with Martin Luther, whose essay on "The Keys" (1530) is a massive refutation of papal claims and Roman Catholic tradition. Luther saw the keys as one of Christ's great gifts to the church. "Both of these keys are extremely

necessary in Christendom, so that we can never thank God enough for them." As a pastor and theologian, Luther saw the great need for the church to bear the keys, and he understood this ministry to be gracious in the recovery of sinning saints. As Luther reflected, "For the dear Man, the faithful Bishop of our souls, Jesus Christ, is well aware that His beloved Christians are frail, that the devil, the flesh, and the world would tempt them unceasingly and in many ways, and that at times they would fall into sin. Therefore, He has given us this remedy, the key which binds, so that we might not remain too confident in our sins, arrogant, barbarous, and without God, and the key which looses, that we should not despair in our sins."

What about a church leader who sins? Paul instructed Timothy that a church leader—an elder—is "to be considered worthy of double honor," when he rules well (1 Timothy 5:17). When an elder sins, however, this is a matter of great consequence. First, no accusation is to be received on the basis of just one uncorroborated witness. If a charge is substantiated by two or three witnesses, however, the congregation is to "rebuke [him] in the presence of all, so that the rest also will be fearful of sinning" (1 Timothy 5:20). Clearly, leadership carries a higher burden, and the sins of an elder cause an even greater injury to the church. The public rebuke is necessary, for the elder sins against the entire congregation. As James warned, "Let not many of you become teachers, my brethren, knowing that as such we will incur a stricter judgment" (James 3:1).

The scandals of moral failure on the part of church leaders have caused tremendous injury to the cause of Christ. The "stricter judgment" should be a vivid warning to those who would violate the Word of God and lead others into sin by example. The failure of the contemporary church to apply consistent biblical church discipline has left most of these scandals unresolved on biblical grounds—and thus a continuing stain on the church. ■

—Reprinted with permission.
www.albertmohler.com

Dangers of Debt

by Joel Martin

Editorial Note: *It may be appropriate to borrow money for a large purchase, such as a house, if the debt is paid back in a timely manner according to the understanding with the lender.*

One of the reasons many people find themselves in financial difficulty is because of a consumptive lifestyle. The world tells us, “Enjoy it now, you owe it to yourself, live it up, and you only go around once.” So we borrow money we cannot afford, to impress people we do not know, to buy things we do not need. The discipline of saving until we can afford a certain item is considered old-fashioned. We need to realize that if we cannot afford to pay cash for an item we certainly cannot afford to pay an additional interest charge on top of the original cost.

Our grandparents’ philosophy was quite different. They said, “Use it up, wear it out, make it do, or do without.” They understood the importance of a penny saved.

The Bible teaches us to live a simple lifestyle, that we are stewards and not owners, to seek God’s kingdom first, to prefer others before ourselves, and to share and not hoard. We are strangers and pilgrims in this world. We are seeking a better country. Debt can make it difficult to follow many of these principles.

Some of the dangers of debt:

1. Debt can keep us from responding to God’s call to take a day off to help a brother in need, to take a week to help clean up after a flood or hurricane, or to take a year or two to go on the mission field. If our payments are keeping us from taking time off from our jobs we need to reevaluate our financial situation. In Luke 16:13, Jesus tells us, “We

cannot serve God and money.” God needs to be first in our lives but debt will sometimes make that very difficult. Second Timothy 2:4 says, “No man that warreth entangleth himself with the affairs of this life: that he may please him who hath chosen him to be a soldier.” Debt can entangle us to the point that we are not free to serve when God calls.

2. Debt can tempt us to violate our convictions. A certain young couple took out a large mortgage on a new home. They also financed their furniture and appliances. They had two new cars that were financed. After a period of struggling with the payments they decided they just could not start a family because that would mean the wife would have to quit working and then they would not be able to keep on making their payments. They both believed God wanted them to start a family and that the mother should be at home with the children. If we find ourselves in this type of situation we need to be willing to humble ourselves and downscale to a level where we can live on one income. Otherwise, if the mother continues to work after having children, they may be providing a beautiful house for their family but a very poor home.

3. Debt can cause us to rob God. Malachi 3:10 says, “Will a man rob God? Yet ye have robbed me. But ye say, Wherein have we robbed thee? In tithes and offerings.” Many times people ask, “Should I be tithing when I am behind on my debts?” God makes it very clear that we are responsible to pay our debts. Psalm 37:21 says, “The wicked borroweth and payeth not again. But the righteous sheweth mercy, and giveth.”

If God is first in our lives, we must

first give to Him. If we cannot make our payments after tithing we need to be willing to take the steps necessary to meet our obligations. Perhaps we need to sell the new car and get an older one. We may need to return items we cannot afford. We need to look at all the options available to bring our finances under God's control so we do not need to rob Him. I have found that when we are willing to give God our first fruits that He can make 90% go farther than we can stretch 100%.

4. Debt deprives God of the chance to say "no" to our plans or to provide through a better means. God can give us direction either by providing funds or withholding them. Psalm 37:7, "Rest in the LORD, and wait patiently for him: fret not thyself because of him who prospereth in his way, because of the man who bringeth wicked devices to pass." Waiting on the Lord can be a very difficult thing to do when we feel the only solution to our financial prob-

lem is to borrow money. But God is looking for an opportunity to demonstrate His power to both Christians and those who are observing our lives. Second Chronicles 16:9a says, "For the eyes of the LORD run to and fro throughout the whole earth, to shew himself strong in the behalf of them whose heart is perfect toward him." If we have the same principles concerning money as the world, something is wrong. The world has never been in step with God. Psalm 50:14, 15 says, "Offer unto God thanksgiving and pay thy vows unto the Most High: and call upon me in the day of trouble: I will deliver thee, and thou shalt glorify me."

What a great opportunity to glorify God and to testify of His great name by allowing Him to provide and give us direction through the funds that He provides or does not provide. We serve a great God! ■

—From *The Seed of Truth*, December 2005.



Beware of Leaving Your Little Ones in Egypt!

by C. H. Mackintosh

If there is one point above another in which Christians have failed, it is in this very point of commanding their children and household. A man who knows how to command his house is worthy of God's confidence. This is a stupendous truth. God looks upon a man's house as a part of himself, and he cannot, in the smallest degree, whether in principle or practice, disregard the connection without suffering serious damage, and also marring the testimony.

Now, I would affectionately, yet faithfully, suggest the question, whether much of the failure in practical testimony for Christ is not justly traceable to the neglect

of the principle involved in the expression, "thou and all thy house." I cannot but think it has much to do with it. One thing is certain, that a quantity of worldliness, confusion, and moral evil has crept in amongst us through our little ones having been left in Egypt. We see many who, it may be, ten, fifteen, or twenty years ago, took a prominent place in testimony and service, and seemed to have their hearts much in the work, are now gone back, lamentably, not having power to keep their own heads above water, much less to help anyone else. All this utters a warning voice for Christian parents having rising

families; and the utterance is, "Beware of leaving your little ones in Egypt." Many a heartbroken father, at the present moment, is left to weep and groan over his fatal mistake in reference to his household. He left them in Egypt, in an evil hour, and under a gross delusion, and now when he ventures, it may be in real faithfulness and earnest affection, to drop a word into the ear of those who have grown up around him, they meet it with a deaf ear and an indifferent heart, while they cling with vigor and decision to that Egypt in which he faithlessly and inconsistently left them. This is a stern fact, the statement of which may send a pang to many a heart; but truth must be told, in order that, though it wounds some, it may prove a salutary warning to others.

There is, I should say, a very serious error involved in a Christian parent's committing the training of his children to unconverted persons, or even to those whose hearts are not with him as to separation from the world.

In the Book of Numbers, "the little ones" are again introduced to our notice. We have just seen that the real purpose of a soul in communion with God was to go up with the little ones out of Egypt. They must be brought forth from thence at all costs; but neither faith nor faithfulness will rest here. We must not only count upon God to bring them up out of Egypt, but also to bring them on into Canaan.

But let us remember that the way to prove our entrance into the blessing is by fulfilling the responsibility. To say that I am counting upon God to bring my children to Canaan, and yet all the while educating them for Egypt, is a deadly delusion. My conduct proves my profession to be a lie, and I am not to wonder if, in the righteous dealings of God, I am allowed to be filled with the fruit of my own doings. Conduct will ever prove the reality of our convictions; and in this, as in everything else, that Word of the Lord is most solemnly true, "If any man will do his will, he shall know of the doctrine." We often

want to know the doctrine before we do the will, and the consequence is, we are left in the most profound ignorance.

Now, to do the will of God, in reference to our children, is to treat them as He does, by regarding them as part of ourselves, and training them accordingly. It is not merely by hoping they may ultimately prove to be the children of God, but by regarding them as those who are already brought into a place of privilege, and dealing with them upon this ground in reference to every thing. According to the thoughts and actions of many parents, it would seem as though they regarded their children in the light of heathens, who had no present interest in Christ, nor relationship to God at all. This is, assuredly, falling grievously short of the divine mark. Nor is this question, as it is too often made, of infant or adult baptism. No; it is simply and entirely a question of faith in the power and extent of that peculiarly gracious word—"Thou and all thy house"—a word the force and beauty of which we shall see more and more fully as we proceed.

Throughout the Book of Deuteronomy, the children of Israel are again instructed to set the commandments, the statutes, the judgments, and precepts of the law before their little ones; and these same little ones are contemplated as inquiring into the nature and object of various ordinances and institutions. The reader can easily run through the various passages.

I now pass on to that truly memorable resolution of Joshua, ". . . choose you this day whom ye will serve; . . . but as for me and my house, we will serve the LORD" (Josh. 24:15). Observe, "me and my house." "Eli . . . concerning his house: when I begin, I will also make an end. For I have told him that I will judge his house for ever for the iniquity which he knoweth; because his sons made themselves vile, and he restrained them not" (1 Sam. 3:12, 13).

Here we see that no matter what the personal character of the servant of God may be, yet if he fail in the due regulation

of his house, God will not hold him guiltless. Eli should have restrained his sons.

But how many parents have since trodden in Eli's footsteps! Through an utterly false idea in reference to the entire basis and character of parental relationship, they have allowed their children, from infancy to boyhood, and from boyhood to manhood, to exercise in the unrestrained indulgence of the will. Not having faith to take divine ground, they have failed in moral power to take even the human ground of making their children respect and obey them, and the issue has presented to view the most fearful picture of lawless extravagance and wild confusion. The highest object for the servant of God to set before him in the management of his house is the testimony therein afforded to the honor of Him to whose house he himself belongs. This is really the proper ground of action. I must not seek to have my children in order because it would be an annoyance and inconvenience to me to have them otherwise, but because the honor of God is concerned in the godly order of the households of all those who form constituent parts of His house.

What is sufficient for me is sufficient for those who are part of me. And shall I be so base as to train my children for the devil and the world? Shall I minister to and pamper that in them which I profess to mortify in myself? It is a grievous mistake, and we shall find it so. If my children are in Egypt, I am there myself. If my children savor of Babylon, I savor of it myself. If my children belong to a corrupt worldly religious system, I belong to it myself, in principle. "Thou and all thy house" are one; God has made them one; and what He has joined together, let no man put asunder.

We mourn over our lack of a broken will, and yet we are strengthening the will in our children. It is always, to our mind, a manifest proof of the weakness of parental authority, as well as of ignorance of the way in which the servant of God should rule his house, to hear a parent say to a child, "Will you do so and so?" This ques-

tion, simple as it seems, tends directly to create or minister to the very thing which you ought to put down, by every means in your power, and that is, the exercise of the child's will. Instead, therefore, of asking the child, "Will you do?" just tell him what he is to do, and let there not be in his mind the idea of calling in question your authority. The parent's will should be supreme with a child, because the parent stands in the place of God. All power belongs to God, and He has invested His servant with power, both as a father and a master. If, therefore, the child or the servant resist this power it is resistance to God.

But the sum of the matter is this: The willfulness of my children reveals the willfulness of my own heart, and a righteous God is using them to chasten me, because I have not chastened myself. This is a peculiarly solemn view of the case, and one that calls for deep searching of heart. To save myself trouble, I have let things take their course in my family, and now my children have grown up around me to be thorns in my side, because I trained them not for God. This is the history of thousands. We should ever bear in mind that our children, as well as ourselves, should be "set for the defence [and confirmation] of the gospel." But, let us not forget, that in order to subdue nature in our children, we must subdue it in ourselves.

Moreover, there must be the clearest understanding and the fullest harmony between the father and mother. Their voice, their will, their authority, their influence, should be essentially one—one in the strictest sense of that word. Being themselves "no more twain, but one flesh," they should ever appear before their children in the beauty and power of that oneness. In order to do this, they must wait much upon God together—they must be much in His presence, opening up all their hearts, and telling out all their need. Christians do frequently injure one another in this respect. ■

—Reprinted with permission of Rare Christian Books, 19275 Highway 28, Dixon, MO 65459.

Family Peacemaking Italian Style!

by Rich Cannon

*Even the most passionate of families can make peace,
as Atlanta area peacemaker Rich Cannon demonstrates.*

I come from a long line of troublemakers. We have a family legacy of disension, disunity, and general disagreement about most any topic brought up at the dinner table. For most of my life, we just accepted this as part of our uniqueness, part of what made us Italian, part of what made us Cannons. Energetic conflict was just part of being us. We would argue with passion, fight with zest, cheerfully hurl verbal potshots below the belt, and then we would have some pasta and all would be forgotten. Peace and harmony was not valued or sought after in our home.

But we were a strong family with sound Christian beliefs and each of us was blessed with a stalwart faith. My father is a pastor, and we grew up with truth and love in our home. In spite of our strengths, these little foxes that nibbled at the threads holding our family together eventually created a hole so big that we were coming undone.

Our family legacy of combat-style relating had deep roots that went back several generations, culminating in a tense relationship between my parents and my grandmother. Grandma was getting older, had recently battled cancer, and was no longer in a position to be on her own in South Florida away from the rest of the family. My parents and Grandma were unable to agree on a transition plan for her to move near them in Columbia, South Carolina. I spent many hours talking with my parents, talking with my wife, talking with my grandmother. It was very apparent to me that my grandmother and my

parents were not reaching a satisfactory compromise, so my wife and I invited her to live with us in Atlanta. She accepted our invitation, and we began to look for the ideal living situation.

The rest of the family was not supportive of our decision and communication with them dwindled to perfunctory conversations and stilted email. What I had decided to do by taking my grandmother in as part of my family was not an easy assignment, but I rested on 1 Peter 3:14 which says, "But even if you should suffer for what is right, you are blessed." I was trying to spare my mother the emotional ordeal of this living situation while at the same time providing an option for Grandma that made her comfortable and met her stringent criteria. I thought that once we had a plan to get Grandma out of South Florida, then all would be well. I seriously underestimated the power of the enemy to attack our family from all sides.

We had hardly put an offer on a house when the phone calls started. My two brothers were furious that I had done this, and my parents were making every attempt to stop it from happening. My father accused me of breaking the fifth commandment by not honoring him and Mom with this decision. My middle brother felt that I needed church discipline based on Matthew 18:15-17. And yet, I strongly felt that I was obeying God's command in 1 Timothy 5:4 to care for the widows in one's own family.

So I stayed my course even though our family was divided into two distinct

camps and arrayed into battle lines. We stayed away from the annual family gathering at the beach and focused all of our energies on the herculean task of moving Grandma from Florida to Atlanta and merging a family ranging in age from 16 months to 83 years.

Fortunately, I have another brother, a peacemaker. In pursuit of church discipline, my youngest brother contacted our church staff, who advised him that this was not a case for the elders but suggested that we contact the Peacemaker ministry in our church instead. After talking with them, my brother called me and strongly urged me to participate in Peacemaker mediation with him. Convinced that I didn't need this, I reluctantly agreed to the meeting.

From the very beginning, God used the Peacemaker process to bless me. First, I was forced to look at my own sin in the situation. Even though I was trying to do something to help my family, I had hurt them by not including them in the final decision and not seeking to find a peaceful resolution to their objections. I had made an idol out of being right about this situation. I was deeply humbled to realize that I could act based on the foundation of a right and good biblical mandate, and yet still be so full of pride and disregard for others in my family. I had moved forward with my plan in pursuit of accomplishing the objective and had lost the desire to maintain peace with my family. As I saw the situation through the eyes of my parents and brothers, and more importantly, through the eyes of God, I was quick to confess my sin and eager to find reconciliation with my family.

My younger brother and I continued to work through the Peacemaker process together and eventually

involved my other brother and my parents. It was a humbling experience for all of us. After all, we were a pastor's family. But we came out on the other side, and we are still seeing fruit from the experience. Our family now prizes peace and unity.

My mother and I started to work together on all matters concerning my grandmother. God even used one of Mom's friends to tell her that he had given me to her to share the load of caring for and loving my grandmother during her last years. My marriage was strengthened as my wife and I stood together in the face of family opposition and the challenges of opening our home to an elderly relative.

And finally, my assistant of seven years became a Christian as a result of watching the way my family worked through this situation together. She recognized the love of Christ working in our lives by seeing us willingly sacrifice for Grandma, willingly admit our sin before family members who had wronged us and had been wronged by us, and then joyfully accept the peace that God infused into the situation.

Now I can say that I come from a family of peacemakers-in-training. God has blessed us in countless ways because we pursued each other and pursued peace. Now we deeply desire to leave a different legacy for the next generation of Canons—already nine little ones and counting. The potential for conflict is mind-boggling, but we have a big God and He is working on us daily, helping us to raise children that are "peacemakers who sow in peace and raise a harvest of righteousness" (James 3:18). ■

—©Peacemaker® Ministries. Used by permission. For more information about biblical peacemaking, visit the Peacemaker Ministries web site at www.Peacemaker.net or contact Peacemaker Ministries at PO Box 81130, Billings, MT 59108 (406/256-1583).

I was deeply humbled to realize that I could act based on the foundation of a right and good biblical mandate, and yet still be so full of pride.

How Could Noah and His Family Care for the Many Animals on Board the Ark?

by John D. Morris, Ph.D.

Detractors from the Bible story of the Flood have scoffed at the idea of just a few people carrying out all the duties of animal care for a year. Without a doubt, it would have been a daunting task considering the number of animals and the frightening circumstances, but would it have been impossible?

Earlier studies have shown that the total number of animals in question are less than the millions the detractors envision. Noah was told to take two of each “kind” of animal on board, probably represented by today’s “families” or “genera” rather than species. For instance, the dog “kind” includes many species—wolf, domestic dog, dingo, coyote, etc. Furthermore, most animal types are small, only a few dozen are large, making the average size something on the order of a cat. (John Woodmorappe’s excellent book, *Noah’s Ark: A Feasibility Study*, looks into this issue in depth.) The great majority of today’s animals live in the sea and did not need to be on board.

But how about those inside? Cooped up for months, pitching and rolling with the Ark, surrounded by the noise of the storm and the presence of other animals (Genesis 7:21, 22). How would they cope? And what about the meat-eaters?

It’s well-known that all animals can survive on a meatless diet. Care must be taken to satisfy their nutritional needs, but it is possible. Some carnivores even choose a vegetarian lifestyle. Other animal studies have noted that some animals, such as the bear, hibernate to survive times of undue stress. Many other animals (and perhaps nearly all) are able to enter into a period of relative dormancy or estivation when faced with a

danger they cannot overcome and from which they cannot flee. In such a state they require minimal food and exercise, and excrete little. In such a state, aggressive tendencies are ignored. The presence of a common, overwhelming predicament eliminates former predator/prey relationships.

Scripture actually hints at such a situation. Noah was told to build an Ark equipped with “rooms” for the animals (Genesis 6:14). But the Hebrew word used is everywhere else rendered “nests,” (as in Deuteronomy 32:11), where it applies to birds, but it’s also applied to a place of rest and safety for humans too (Job 29:18). Is this an indication that the animals were to merely snuggle up and wait until the danger was over?

There is no way of knowing, of course, because this was a unique event, not repeatable nor testable in the present and the only One who knows didn’t give us all the details. But wouldn’t it be just like Noah’s gracious God to make the job easier for him?

One final thought: The origin of this mysterious hibernation ability has no ready explanation in science. Might we not suppose that the loving Creator endowed animals onboard the Ark with this survival mechanism? There was probably no need for such an ability before the Flood. All animals today are descended from those on the Ark and all have inherited it. Since science has no better explanation for its origin, this supposition, which fits all the facts, should be given due consideration. ■

—Reprinted with permission from the August 2005 issue of *Back to Genesis* (No. 200).

Truth in Advertising

by David L. Burkholder

One day at lunch I had a glass of Fruit Punch. The label proclaimed “Made with REAL Fruit Juice.” It looked good, a bright, appetizing red, and it had a good fruit-punch taste. And it only cost \$1.19 for a two-liter bottle. But imagine my shock when I turned the bottle around and found this disclaimer in fine print, “Contains 3% fruit juice.” Only 3%! About two good swallows. That borders on deceptive advertising. I didn’t really get what I was led to expect from the label. It was mostly plain old water and cheap sugars infused with food coloring.

Should I have been surprised? Many products today are touted to deliver above their capacity despite truth in advertising laws to the contrary. Pictures and words can easily misrepresent. We are constantly bombarded with slogans such as: “New,” “Only,” “Improved,” “Limited Supply,” “Last Chance,” “Free,” etc. Truth be told, most of these can be proved false, or at best misleading, simply by reading the ever present fine print at the bottom of the page.

As I reflected on my “fruit juice” experience I couldn’t help but relate it to an issue of much larger importance and one with more far-reaching consequences. I had to wonder just how many 3% Christians are running around out there, mislabeled, lacking genuine content. The label may be bold, giving the impression of authenticity and validity. However, the “fine print” may reveal less than genuine content, a mixture of lesser, cheaper ingredients. The label may just be a sham for lack of content, an effort to convince oneself, or the observer, into a false assumption.

My “fruit juice” experience really car-

ried no particular consequences. I probably got more calories than I did juice, but in the larger scheme of things, there were no lasting effects, no permanent damage. However, a mislabeled Christian poses a danger both to himself and to others. The danger to himself is that of missing the goal toward which he is ostensibly heading, that is, heaven. The danger he poses to others is that of their being led astray by his false expression of what it means to be a follower of Jesus. Eternal destinies are at stake here.

Jesus made it clear in Matthew 7:21 that not everyone calling Him Lord would enter heaven. That privilege is extended only to those who do the Father’s will, who show by a life of obedience to God’s Word that they truly are worthy of the name *Christian*, which means a follower of Christ. Just as simply proclaiming that you are a king doesn’t automatically confer royalty, so neither does proclaiming oneself Christian automatically confer sonship with God. There are corresponding obligations to be met. And these are spelled out in detail in the Word of God and attended in the life by the Holy Spirit of God.

In other words, there are observable evidences of whether or not one is truly Christian. And while the verbal expression is certainly valid and necessary, that in itself does not provide adequate identification. There must be more than bold proclamation. There must be content and authenticity to prove genuineness.

Now it is certainly cheaper to produce a fruit drink with only three percent actual fruit juice. And it can be doctored to look and taste like the real

thing. But for those who want real juice they must turn elsewhere.

So it is with those who would be Christian. It may be “cheaper” to follow the bold label, to simply make a statement. To find the real thing, however, one must go deeper than the label or verbal proclamation to determine actual ingredients. To be swayed by advertising without thorough investigation is to mislead oneself. True Christianity is evidenced by a life in conformity to the character of God. The person seeking a serious relationship with the Lord Jesus will search for those to follow whose lives model His in all aspects. And those lives do not necessarily shout bold proclamation, but they do “shout” silently. They stand out because they are genuine, and different.

A 3% Christian just won't make it. And neither will a 97% one. To follow Christ with the hope of heaven demands 100% commitment, evidenced by a life of discipleship and obedience to God's will. To be a follower of Jesus is a serious matter. And to claim to be one without a corresponding application to life of the principles that define such a life is at best deceptive and at worst, heresy.

The Apostle Paul writing to the

Corinthian believers challenged them to imitate him as he imitated Christ. He told them to look beyond him to Christ, and then decide whether his life was exemplary of one professing to be a follower of the Lord Jesus. It was not him that was to be prominent, but Christ. Paul made it clear in writing to the believers at Philippi that his all-consuming desire in life was to model the example of Christ and reflect in his life the righteousness which comes by faith in Christ.

That kind of example is safe to follow because it is genuine; it doesn't profess one thing and then deliver lesser quality. It is open for inspection, the contents out front in readable print. It is open, visible, and distinct. It delivers what the label proclaims.

So the challenge for each of us is twofold: we must be sure to be genuine in our profession of faith, and use caution whom we allow to influence us. We must be honest with ourselves, and evaluate so-called Christian labels carefully. Anything less than 100% will not pass muster. The Christian must be genuine and not engage in deceptive advertising. He must be the juice of real fruit, not some watered down substitute. ■

Modest Clothing Available

Editorial Note: It has come to our attention here at the *Sword and Trumpet* office that one of the Mennonite sisters in our community is seeking to support herself through a cottage industry of sewing modest clothing. We highly recommend that you patronize this business as you have need.

Modest Handmaidens
Quality Handmade Apparel for the Lord's Handmaid

239 Robin Roost Court
Broadway, VA 22815
Phone/Fax: 540-896-2670
E-mail: deborah@modesthandmaidens.com
Website: www.modesthandmaidens.com

Spring Sale!!!

Separated Unto God

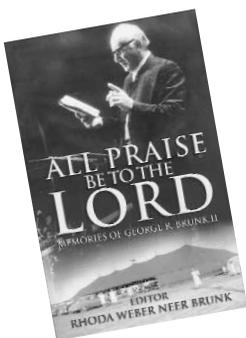
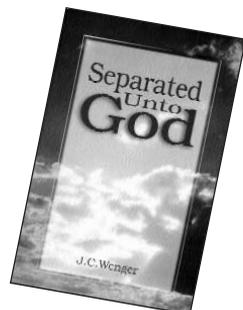
by J.C. Wenger

349 pages, trade paper

Description: How do we put the Biblical doctrine of nonconformity into practice? This book directs the reader to Christlikeness in every area of life.

Regular Price: \$12.95 plus postage

Sale Price: \$10.00 postpaid



All Praise Be to the Lord— Memories of George R. Brunk II

edited by Rhoda Weber Neer Brunk Peifer

228 pages, cloth

Description: Who was George Brunk II? This is the best book to read about GRB II written by those who knew him best. Take advantage of this excellent buy!

Regular Price: \$14.99 postpaid

Sale Price: \$10.00 postpaid

SYMBOLS OF DIVINE ORDER IN THE CHURCH

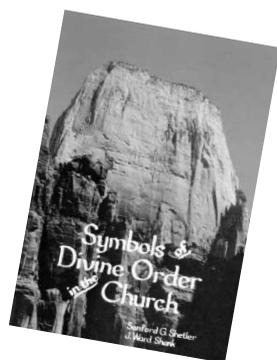
by Sanford G. Shetler

109 pages, trade paper

This little volume represents an effort to gather together some of the most significant writings on the symbols of Divine order in the Church as described in I Corinthians 11:2-16, including quotations from scholars of the Catholic, Lutheran, Reformed, Methodist, and Anabaptist traditions.

Regular Price: \$3.95 plus postage

Sale Price: \$3.00 postpaid



Why I Left the Contemporary Christian Music Movement

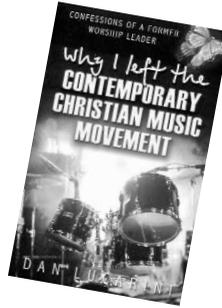
by Dan Lucarini

141 pages, trade paper

Description: Written by a brother who has "been there, done that," this book exposes in love the true dangers of this modern explosion.

Regular Price: \$11.95 postpaid

Sale Price: \$10.50 postpaid



Psychologized Man: A Biblical Perspective

by Martha Peace

26 pages, trade paper

Description: Confused by the debate over modern psychology? Get this book for a concise exposé of psychobabble.

Regular Price: \$3.95 postpaid

Sale Price: \$3.25 postpaid



Ready Bible Answers

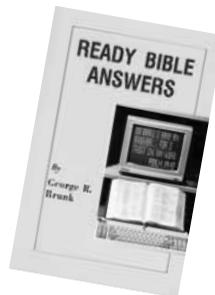
by George R. Brunk I

179 pages, trade paper

Description: This book written by the first editor of *Sword and Trumpet* shines the Gospel light on many questions which are frequently asked by earnest seekers after the truth.

Regular Price: \$5.95 plus postage

Sale Price: \$4.50 postpaid



The View from Round Hill

by J. Ward Shank

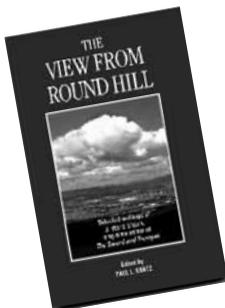
edited by Paul L. Kratz

200 pages, trade paper

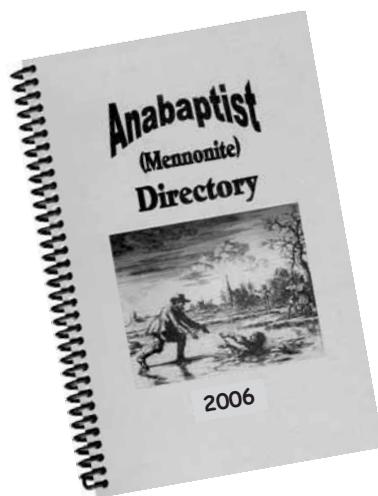
Selection of choice essays by longtime editor of *Sword and Trumpet*. George R. Brunk II characterized these as some of the best writings from a modern Anabaptist pen.

Regular Price: \$7.00 plus postage

Sale Price: \$4.00 postpaid



Anabaptist (Mennonite) Directory 2006



124 pages, listing churches and ministers not found in other major directories.

Based on adherence to an accepted doctrinal standard—Schleitheim, Dortrecht, 1921, 1963 or comparative.

Now available from:

Sword and Trumpet
P.O. Box 575
Harrisonburg, VA 22803-0575
at **\$11.99**, postpaid.