

# **CORINTH REVISITED: Studies in I Corinthians**

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Abilene Christian University  
Annual Bible Lectures

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## **PREFACE**

The Lectures and the featured classes contained in this volume are those which were given at the 74th Annual Bible Lectureship at Abilene Christian University on the theme: “Corinth Revisited: Studies in I Corinthians.”

The church at Corinth was one of the most troubled churches in the ancient world. Yet there is no problem faced by that ancient group that is not also faced by the church in these last days of the 20th Century. Quarreling, divisions, immorality, lawsuits, marriage problems, idolatry, arguments over women’s role, problems over spiritual gifts, and wrong attitudes about the coming resurrection are all issues included in this book. It could be a list of the major problems facing many churches of Christ in our day. But what a rich treasure for our study.

The Apostle calls them the “church of God” and calls them to face each challenge squarely, with insight that could only be found through inspiration. A new look at such problems is always a challenge and it can be a most exciting and helpful undertaking.

The primary purpose of the Annual Bible Lectureship is to further the cause of Christ in the world. The Lectureship Committee seeks each year to bring outstanding men and women to God to the campus to speak on the most relevant and helpful subjects facing the people of God. It is hoped that these lectures will be helpful not only to those who were able to attend in person, but also through this volume, to thousands of others for years to come.

**CARL BRECHEEN**  
Lectureship Director



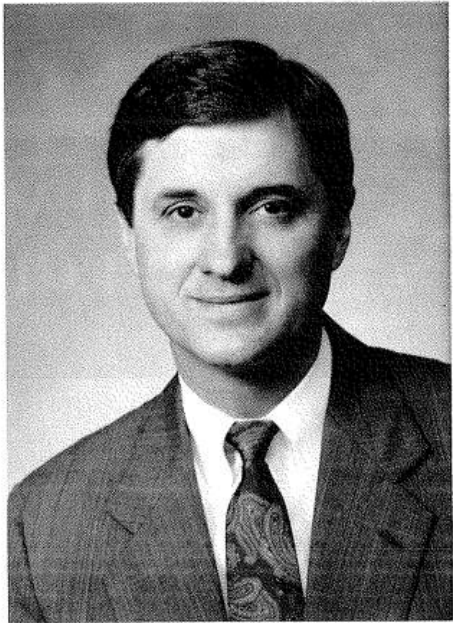
# **THEME SPEECHES**

## JIMMY ADCOX

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# Help For A Troubled Church

**Jimmy Adcox**

Every young preacher and excited new convert shares the naive expectation that everything associated with Christianity will be happy and positive. After all, if people really love the Lord, they will be naturally equipped to resolve whatever potential problems might be ahead. We fail to remember that while Christians are justified in Christ, the process of sanctification is ongoing. This means that well-intentioned Christians are very much in the struggle of outgrowing their sinful natures. In the meantime, that old nature may frequently raise its ugly head to wreck havoc with the ideal will of God for his people.

In the past, many of us responded to human weakness out of a rigidly patternistic approach to Christianity. Believing we could only be true New Testament Christians if we perfectly followed the pattern (a pattern determined unconsciously with a high degree of selectivity), we quickly wrote off Christians that manifested some variation from established orthodoxy and marked them as unfaithful. Divisions occurred because there was little room for Christians to question, study, or disagree. Church faithfulness was more technical than relational. Acceptance with God was earned by knowledge and performance rather than received by grace through faith. Labels were created to sanction such division and justify such exclusion.

While troubled churches have been created by such judgmental misunderstandings of the gospel, they have also been created by attitudes of selfishness. Much of the frustration

in troubled churches is caused either by those attempting to control the church or by those who would like to do so. In either case, the church is not being allowed to function as the church in its understanding of the gospel and its application to our situation and times.

The result of these problems in many troubled churches is quarreling, partisanship, poor communication, defensiveness, labels, personally-directed frustrations, efforts to manipulate and control, and even division. Differences may be prompted by economic factors, theological emphases, age differences, or social circumstances. In any event, personal agendas become more important than growing together as a church. Christ and the cross are shelved for an insistence on rigid dogmatism or an assertive exercise of Christian freedom.

### **Room For Troubled Churches**

Is there room in the kingdom for a troubled church? It might be better asked, is there any other kind? Efforts at restoration have often assumed that the church once existed in an ideal state. We know the churches to whom letters were first written were not perfect. The Roman Christians struggled with judgmentalism. The Galatian churches were susceptible to Jewish legalism. The Ephesians still struggled with the influence of spirits and superstitions. The Colossians were drawn to human philosophy and tradition. Even in Paul's joyful letter to the Philippians, there is reference to disagreement between two prominent Christian women that threatened to disrupt the church. The Jerusalem church did not begin full grown. They had squabbles over the neglect of Grecian widows in the daily ministry.

Some suggest that it is the divine intention for the church that we are to restore. Surely we must be intent on following the Lord's will in the life of the church, but if perfect conformity is necessary in order to be the Lord's church, then the true

church has never existed, since none has ever reached perfect maturity and performance. All Christians begin as infants in Christ. None of us ever grow to complete maturity in this life. Such a state can only be attributed to the finished work of Christ in eternity.

### **The Troubled Church at Corinth**

Perhaps no church was as troubled as the one at Corinth. Few preachers would accept an invitation to work with such a church today. Most churches who knew anything about this church would disclaim any association or relationship. Fellowship, if not formally withdrawn, would at least be withheld.

Consider the problems. Here was a church where quarreling was a way of life. Factions and jealousy developed around various prominent Christian leaders apparently based on personality or favoritism (1 Corinthians 1-4). Spiritual authority was resented and worldly wisdom was exalted. While boastful and proud in their self-asserted “wisdom,” they were unashamed of their moral compromise and tolerance. One of their own was living in open incest while warmly receiving the fellowship of the church (1 Corinthians 5). There were even lawsuits between Christians, taken before heathen courts where their ungodly greed and dishonesty was displayed before the world (1 Corinthians 6). They struggled with questions about marriage (1 Corinthians 7) and what to do about food offered to idols (1 Corinthians 8-10). They even turned the Lord’s Supper into a drunken feast and showed a complete lack of regard for the Lord whose memory they were honoring. They also demonstrated a lack of regard for each other, failing to wait on each other and to share equally in the fellowship meal (1 Corinthians 11). Their selfish use of spiritual gifts created chaos in the assembly and a competitive atmosphere between Christians (1 Corinthians 12-14). On top of all of that, at least

some of them questioned the resurrection from the dead, a doctrine we consider central to the Christian faith (1 Corinthians 15). What a mess! How could a church like this even be considered a church?

### **How Paul Viewed the Corinthian Church**

Paul was able to help this troubled church because he first saw them from God's perspective. His grasp of the gospel and his insight into their hearts prompted him to write:

To the church of God in Corinth, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus and called to be holy, together with all those everywhere who call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ—their Lord and ours: Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ (1 Corinthians 1:2-3).

Paul knew that their relationship with God did not begin or continue because of human worthiness or performance. They had been set apart by God and called to live a holy life. This was a call to a process of growth and development, not an accomplished feat. God's testimony had been confirmed in their lives through various spiritual gifts from God. In this they were not lacking as they eagerly awaited the coming of the Lord. They were God's people, saved by God's grace. And God wasn't finished with them yet! He was still at work in this imperfect church, bringing to completion the work he had begun.

Paul did not see it as his job to condemn and reject them, in spite of their foibles, but rather to affirm and help. He was more concerned about helping them grow up in Christ than in determining their status before God's judgment. Though he could judge their behavior, he refused to be judgmental about their salvation. As far as he was concerned, they were his brothers and sisters in Christ for whom he had great concern.

He knew they could only receive the strength and encouragement they needed in the fellowship of Christians and of God. In that context, help could be given and received. So he appealed to the best of their intentions and faith in order to find a starting point for correction and growth.

### **How Paul Tried To Help**

While Paul affirmed and valued them because of their faith in Christ, he did not overlook their immature behavior. In spite of the fact that they were God's saints, called to live a holy life, in reality they were far removed from living that calling.

The content of Paul's letter is determined by news he had heard from reliable sources and by questions they had written to him seeking answers. It is obvious they had theological misunderstandings that needed to be addressed. These inadequacies affected both their doctrinal correctness and their daily lifestyles.

Paul blamed much of their quarreling and division on their failure to focus on Christ and the cross. They had substituted human wisdom for a humble surrender to the foolishness of God. In their pompous pride, some had tried to demean Paul for his lack of eloquence and physical charisma while showing preference for other Christian leaders who seemed to have a stronger personal appeal. While clinging to a vision of life shaped by the world, they were missing the self-denying and self-emptying spirit which Paul had exemplified and to which they were called by Christ. Rather than dying to themselves for the sake of the gospel and each other, they were asserting themselves and their wisdom to the destruction of the church.

Paul knew that this worldly pride could keep them from hearing the spiritual counsel and guidance that he offered. So he reminded them that God had given to him words taught, not with human wisdom, but by the Spirit of God (1 Corinthians 2:12). Only a spiritually-minded man would be able to discern

the spiritual wisdom contained in such a message. Paul fervently called them to follow the self-giving spirit of Christ that does not squabble over worldly concerns, but keeps its eyes on Jesus and his life of submission to the true Spirit of God.

Most problems in the church occur when people quit looking to the Lord and listening to each other and assert themselves to the destruction of the body. This occurs when people think that they have infallible knowledge about the needs for the church and that they must enforce them on others for the welfare of all. A more humble spirit that spiritually discerns both the will of God and the true needs of people is more likely to provide positive encouragement for the upbuilding of the body.

While boasting in themselves and their favorite teachers, their lifestyles revealed they were not spiritual, but carnal. Paul tried to establish a basis for spirituality and true humility through which they could receive the helpful instruction which he desired to share with them.

While Paul did not feel compelled to judge their relationship with God, he did not hesitate to judge their behavior and its fruit. Preaching grace does not mean minimizing sin. Paul boldly and directly presented correction, reproof, and rebuke to these floundering Christians. He encouraged them to discipline a Christian living in open immorality. He rebuked them for going to court before heathens as if God's people could not discern a fair way of resolving differences. He condemned their immoral lifestyle and libertine justifications of sin and encouraged them to "glorify God in their body and in their spirit which are God's." He also answered their questions about marriage and encouraged them to avoid radical life changes that would distract them from single-minded devotion to the Lord. He encouraged them not only to live in knowledge, but to allow love to supersede knowledge. It is more important to act in love toward your brother than to

assert your freedom based on knowledge. Mutual love and consideration for one another should be observed in all one's decisions and practices, from eating meat offered to idols, to observing the Lord's Supper, to the exercise of spiritual gifts in the assembly. All things should be done unto edifying. They should also hold fast to the gospel's central focus on the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus and maintain a strong hope in the resurrection for the dead.

### **The Corinthian Church and the Church Today**

There are similarities between the problems in the church at Corinth and those we face in American churches. One of these is an atmosphere of moral laxity. The city of Corinth had a horrible reputation for immorality. A pagan temple in honor of the goddess Aphrodite at one time employed 1,000 temple prostitutes. As a metropolitan city of commerce and trade, Corinth became a stopping-off point for all kinds of seedy characters to whom the city appealed with a wide array of opportunities for fulfilling carnal desires. The circumstances for us are different, but it can hardly be denied that American life is saturated with its worship of sexual pleasure. It is naive to think that Christians are not struggling with their perspectives about human sexuality. We need to be reminded of the absolute nature of God's moral law, but even more, we need a theology of human sexuality that can mold outlooks that effect our behavior. Paul's theology in 1 Corinthians 6:12-20 deserves careful study and preaching in our culture today.

Another similarity centers on intellectual pride. Again the circumstances are different, but the effect upon Christians is similar. Corinth was a cosmopolitan city where a wide variation of lifestyles and practices converged. The same is true in our country. The world is becoming smaller. Even our most rural communities are being molded by the same influences that are felt in cosmopolitan and metropolitan centers. Our pluralistic

society promotes tolerance as the highest indication of intellectual virtue. It is considered acceptable to believe what you choose so long as you do not try to convince others or reflect negatively on other people's beliefs or practices. One system of thought is considered as good as another and lifestyle is simply a matter of personal preference. The pressures of such a society are intense, especially for Christians who value the exclusive claims of Jesus as the way, the truth, and the life. It is this uniquely Christian approach to life that will be viewed as foolishness by a world whose intellectual tolerance excludes all absolutes. Christians today must have a strong sense of faith that "the foolishness of God" is wiser than men.

Yet another area of similarity is an anti-authority trend. This tends to grow out of our spirit of pluralism, self-indulgence, and our uniquely American attitude of rugged individualism. We are a people who cherish our freedom to do as we please and resent any effort by others to influence the choices we make. This attitude carries over into the church. Much of the reaction to authority in the church has come because of faulty leadership models that exclude Christians from participating in the direction of the church. Hopefully, we are working through a faulty leadership model that will yield to leaders who draw members into every decision-making phase affecting the life of the church. However, our reaction against dictatorial leadership must not be carried over against genuine spiritual leadership. Paul's spiritual leadership of submission and sacrifice was rejected by many at Corinth because it didn't contain enough glitter and charisma and because they wanted to flex their own muscles of intellectual pride and immorality. Let's demand servant leadership, but then submit ourselves to the guidance and example of those truly spiritual people who exemplify the lifestyle of the cross.

A final area of common concern relates to love and sensitivity. An attitude of selfishness and a lack of love for others



prompted many of the problems in Corinth. Problems of quarreling and division, lawsuits between believers, differences over eating meat sacrificed to idols, insensitivity at the Lord's Supper, and competition over spiritual gifts would all have been resolved if there was genuine self-sacrificing love for one another. That is why Paul reminded them, "We know that we all possess knowledge. Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up" (1 Corinthians 8:1). It is also why Paul concluded: "And now these three remain: faith, hope, and love. But the greatest of these is love" (1 Corinthians 13:13).

### **Conclusion**

I have personally never known a time in my life when I have heard of more churches struggling through differences of opinion and times of transition. The factors at work in our churches today may be much different from those at work in the church at Corinth, but many of the theological principles that Paul applied to them can give us the focus we need to deal with our own struggles.

It is extremely important that we hold one another in fellowship even in the face of our problems. Only in the context of mutual fellowship and love can we challenge one another's thinking and offer to one another encouragement, instruction, and correction. Through mutual discussion, study, and an appeal for spiritual wisdom and discernment, we can help one another grow to become more like the church God wants us to be.

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# The Challenge of Unity

R. Gerald Turner

Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., in his new book **The Disuniting of America**, sounds an alarm regarding what he sees as the potentially catastrophic outcome of a growing emphasis on differences such as ethnicity and other group characteristics rather than on factors that would unify us as a nation. While acknowledging the healthy consequences of recognizing the contributions of all ethnic groups to the development of our country, Schlesinger worries that

instead of a transformative nation with an identity all its own, America increasingly sees itself as preservative of old identities. . . . The national ideal had once been **e pluribus unum** (one out of many). Are we now to belittle **unum** and glorify **pluribus**? Will the center hold? or will the melting pot yield to the Tower of Babel? (Schlesinger, 1991, p. 2)

Schlesinger's declarations and questions are both insightful and provocative: insightful because even the casual observer has to have noted the escalation in the demands of groups of all sorts and to have worried about the possible injury such "group centricism" would have on the unity of the republic; provocative because of the public scorn from various political constituencies that such "politically incorrect" questions can generate. No issue is hotter on American campuses, in literary journals, and among the intelligentsia of our country.

This divisiveness within our country occurs against an international backdrop of the news media daily chronicling

struggles of Soviet leaders to maintain their “Union of Soviet Socialist Republics” in the face of growing ethnic, tribal, and regional unrest. In addition, 1991-92 has been punctuated by the challenges facing leaders in Yugoslavia as they try to maintain a fragile union with the disgruntled Republics of Slovenia and Croatia. Similar struggles between nationalists and minorities are also challenging efforts to provide unified political and social evolutions in Czechoslovakia, Hungary, and Romania, among others.

As these fractionated countries seek to emulate the democratic forms of government and the capitalism-based economic system of the United States, their nationalistic-oriented leaders are also closely studying one other bedrock of American society: **e pluribus unum**, one out of many, the “melting pot” of many of the world’s nationalities into unified “Americans.” For decades, pride of homeland remained strong for immigrants coming to America and was properly noted and celebrated; but within a generation, the primary identity for all of the “teaming masses” was **unum**, “American.”

It is ironic that this current evaluation of our political, economic, and social formulations by Eastern Bloc countries is coming at a time, as described earlier, in which the “melting pot” unified history of the United States is coming increasingly under attack (Schlesinger, 1991). At issue are the proper presentation of America’s past and the role of various nationalities, ethnic groups, and minorities in shaping that history and the emphasis to be placed on the role of different languages and cultures in the overall American future. In a review of the work of Schlesinger and others, syndicated columnist George Will (1991) concluded:

The issue is how to give various participants in America’s drama their due without damaging the nation’s animating promise. . . .America originally

aspired to be a transforming nation, severing roots and dissolving ancient manners and mentalities. But today there is a contrary vision, an America of prickly groups irritably asserting their inviolable identities. Instead of a nation of individuals receiving free choices, it is to be a nation of indelible group identities.

It is therefore notable that such an attack on one of the foundations of the American Experiment occurs when the international need is so great for an example of people of diverse ethnic and cultural backgrounds who are living peacefully and productively together under a common, overreaching identity. Hopefully, this struggle will end like many before in our history, with the primary issues addressed while the basic unifying thread tying Americans of all backgrounds together as Americans will remain unraveled and strong.

### **Conflict within Human Nature**

Since the theme of the 1992 Lectureship is “Lessons from I Corinthians,” one might justifiably ask what this review of assimilation and unification issues in the United States and abroad has to do with the topic at hand. However, one can easily see that there are numerous parallels between the issues described above and the challenges to unity within the church that Paul addresses in I Corinthians. In fact, the unity issues, both in the United States and in the Corinthian church, have their roots in a profound conflict within human nature described vividly in the Bible.

As God reviewed the outcome of His handiwork, as recorded in Genesis, Chapter 1, His judgment on all that He had done was “It was good.” In fact, in the first chapter of Genesis, seven times there is a statement equivalent to “God saw that it was good.” Therefore, in these initial days of the existence of our universe and earth, the review described in Genesis was

entirely positive. The one who brought everything into being by the power of His word felt that the outcome was without flaw; “it was good.”

However, by the time we have the recounting of the creation story in the second chapter of Genesis, a discordant note is sounded. In fact, in reviewing His creation, God has now found something that He clearly evaluates as “not good.” Genesis 2:18 states, “The Lord God said: ‘It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him.’ ” (NIV) Therefore, after seven statements of “it was good,” we now have a “not good” evaluation. As we know, Eve was created and the first family was formed. God acted forcefully to address the unsatisfactory situation facing Adam.

However, it was only one generation before those who existed under the close observation of God were at odds with each other to the extent that the first murder occurred: Cain killing his brother, Abel, both sons of Adam and Eve.

Here in the first four chapters of Genesis is laid out one of the basic conflicts within human nature that evidently is never to be resolved in this age. On the one hand it was clearly identified by God as “not being good” for man to be alone, and yet within the first constellation of humans it was impossible for their association not to be marked by strife, anger, and even murder. Nevertheless, the desire to be around others is so great that today businesses exist primarily to provide opportunities for individuals to be together, and having good social skills is one of the western world’s most desired characteristics. But at the same time, one of the most accurate descriptions of humans is the extent to which we are constantly at war with each other as nations, are fractionated and polarized within nations, and are constantly bickering and quarreling within smaller units down to the family where, just as in Adam’s day, the carnage of familial strife destroys many lives.

We are unhappy alone, yet find it almost impossible to live harmoniously with others.

Of course, just the presence of other people is not ultimately satisfying. All of us have even felt alone in a large crowd. During July, 1990, I was the guest of the Moscow Mining Institute for one week. The Congress of the Communist Party was meeting, and I was in the Kremlin the day after Boris Yeltsin withdrew from the Party. I wandered away from my hosts and was walking among all the generals and communist officials who were grimly preparing to go in for the morning session. Soon, after receiving a few frowns, I felt very much alone and with some discomfort at being found out. Surely I was the only Christian capitalist in the whole compound. I truly felt alone among the 2,000 officials. I must add, however, that just as I was about to be taken over by my sense of uniqueness, I looked up, and coming across the Square from the old cathedrals was a U.S. student in an Ole Miss sweatshirt! What a welcomed sign; what a trip back to reality!

From early times, how one handled interactions with others was seen to have religious implications. It is noteworthy that in the Ten Commandments given to Moses (See Exodus 20) to guide the religious life of the Israelites, only four of these Commandments deal with the direct relationship that God expects humans to have with Him, whereas six are Commandments intended to guide how we are to respond to each other. Therefore, early on, the definition of one being right with God is heavily identified with the extent to which one is right with his fellow humans.

### **Unity in the Teaching of Christ**

The importance of harmoniously living with others is elevated by Jesus' final communication, or prayer, of any length with His Father, recorded in the 17th chapter of the Gospel of John, Knowing that He was about to be betrayed and killed, one

would expect that He would have those things of greatest value to Him on His mind and in His conversation. In His prayer recorded in this chapter, the defining theme of His last request to God was that His disciples live peaceably together; specifically, He asked that they be unified. Four times He pled for the unity of His followers. After His fourth plea, Jesus gives the reason for His concern. One might well expect this reason to be so that others will be attracted to join them, so that life might be more positive for them, or a number of reasons that might intuitively follow His concern. However, in verse 23 He states that His prayer to God for unity is based upon the incredible assertion that His disciples being in complete unity among themselves would “let the world know that You sent Me. . . .”

How could it be that the world would know about God sent Christ if His followers were unified? Just offhand, if one were to select those events or conditions that would prove to the world that God sent Jesus, the unity of believers would probably not be at the top of the list. However, it must be such an impossible human experience for a large number of people to develop complete unity that, if it were to occur over a sustained period of time, those seeing it or experiencing it would know that something miraculous, something supernatural, had to be involved. Observers would be attracted to want to share in this existence or at least find and understanding its origin. In trying to determine the source of this miraculous existence, observers would be confronted by Jesus Christ and His relationship to God.

A recent event at Ole Miss underscores the truthfulness of Christ’s assertion that public attention will focus even on short-term examples of unity among a large group of diverse people. On October 28, 1989, during the Ole Miss Homecoming football game with Vanderbilt University, Roy Lee “Chucky” Mullins made a touchdown-saving tackle on the Commodores’



star, Brad Gaines. The roar of the appreciative crowd quickly turned to silent concern as it was soon apparent that Chucky was seriously injured. As the extent of his injuries became known, the cracked vertebrae and the predicted paralysis from his neck down, it was obvious that this young man would face a terrible struggle. Deserted by his father soon after birth and left functionally as an orphan with his mother's death when he was in the seventh grade, Chucky obviously needed help. The public visibility of his injury (replayed repeatedly on television) and his heart-rending struggle to overcome one tragedy after another combined to create a groundswell of public support to help him. Our alumni and friends united in a tremendous effort to insure that Chucky's medical and rehabilitation needs would be met. Within a few months, \$890,000 had been contributed by thousands of people. In fact, over \$175,000 was collected at the next home football game with a major rival of Ole Miss, Louisiana State University.

One of the most remarkable aspects of this story was the national media coverage given this unified effort. Every major network, wire service, and newspaper in the country covered these events, and many did several follow-up stories, intrigued by this effort and wanting to understand why the Ole Miss family had acted in such a massive, unified way. One reporter after another would ask, "Other athletes have been injured as was Chucky. Why this tremendous response at Ole Miss when similar efforts didn't follow the tragedies elsewhere?" Efforts to understand the origins of this unified effort were still being pursued by journalists when Chucky's death on May 6, 1991, ignited them all over again.

What Jesus was talking about in John 17 was not a unified response to a single event, but a **state** of harmony where all events are addressed in a unified manner. Therefore, if there were ever a statement of how difficult it is to live in union, it would have to be Christ's prayer this final evening. Only

the power of God working through people absolutely committed to Him could bring about this convincing state of harmony. Beyond the transcending nature of miracles, beyond the most powerful philosophical or theological argument, and beyond reports of eyewitness accounts, the world would be convinced of the Sonship of Jesus if His believers were functionally unified.

### **The Corinthian Church**

By the time we learn of the Corinthian church, approximately 25 years after Christ's prayer, what do we find? For one, we find a church in a very important city in the world, a crossroads, with important trade connections (Holladay, 1979, pp. 8-9). The message of Christ has been preached, and there has been some significant response to it. But have the conditions been in existence that Christ stated would convince the world and the city of Corinth that God had sent Him? Sadly, the answer is "No." Before the Apostle Paul can get to the requested matters that the congregation had earlier written and asked him to address, his major concern filling the opening six chapters of I Corinthians is the disunity within the church at Corinth and his anguish and disgust at this condition.

1:10-13 "I appeal to you, brothers, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree with one another so that there may be no division among you and that you may be perfectly united in mind and thought. My brothers, some of Chloe's household have informed me that there are quarrels among you. What I mean is this: one of you says, 'I follow Paul'; another, 'I follow Apollos'; another, 'I follow Cephas'; still another, 'I follow Christ.' Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Were you baptized into the name of Paul?" (NIV)

3:1-4 “Brothers, I could not address you as spiritual but as worldly—mere infants in Christ. I gave you milk, not solid food, for you are not ready for it. Indeed, you are still not ready. You are still worldly. For since there is jealousy and quarreling among you, are you not worldly? Are you not acting like mere men? For when one says, ‘I follow Paul,’ and another, ‘I follow Apollos,’ are you not mere men?” (NIV)

6:1-8 “If any of you has a dispute with another, dare he take it before the ungodly for judgment instead of before the Saints? Do you not know that the Saints will judge the world? And if you are to judge the world, are you not competent to judge trivial cases. Do you not know that we will judge angels? How much more the things of this life? Therefore, if you have disputes about such matters, appoint as judges even men of little account in the church! I say this to shame you. Is it possible that there is nobody among you wise enough to judge a dispute between believers? But instead, one brother goes to law against another—and this in front of unbelievers? The very fact that you have law suits among you means that you have been completely defeated already. Why not rather be wronged? Why not rather be cheated? Instead, you yourselves cheat and do wrong, and you do this to your brothers.” (NIV)

From this account, the Corinthians had become so contentious that even the act that should have brought them into contact with the basis for Christian unity—their own conversion and baptism—was, in fact, a point of disunity (Chadwell, 1990, pp. 22-23). Conditions surrounding their conversions had become points of contention and oneupsmanship, with each trying to argue that the evangelist who converted him or her was superior to other evangelists,

thereby making those who responded to that messenger also superior to those who responded to other messengers of God's "good news." In fact, there seem to be some who claim to follow Christ only as if to do so gave them opportunity to be exclusive and arrogant. Although much could be said about the four groups associated with Peter, Apollos, Paul, and Christ, their existence points to an effort at justification by association, denying the power of God as the sole basis for salvation.

Paul's response to them and us is that the power is in the Gospel, not in the communicator of the Gospel. It is irrelevant who introduces one to God since the only power in salvation is from God. Therefore, there is no point of pride except in the praise of God for His action through Jesus Christ.

If their conversion was, in fact, a point of rancor and contention, we should not be surprised by the quality of the remainder of their interactions together. As was previously noted, jealousy, quarreling, disputes, and even law suits characterized the relationship that Christ had prayed would be based upon unity. Ironically, the outsiders who were to be drawn to God by the unity of Christ's believers were the very people who were being called upon to settle arguments and disputes among the disciples!

The descriptions of the actions of the Corinthian Church more closely parallel the list of those behaviors that Paul enumerates in the fifth chapter of Galatians as being acts of the sinful nature rather than those he describes in the same chapter as being the outcome of having a close relationship with God (fruits of the Spirit). Of the 15 descriptors of the sinful nature listed in verses 19-21, eight describe responses to others that destroy unity: hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions, and envy. Therefore, it is not surprising that Paul rhetorically asks in I Corinthians 3:3, ". . .since there is jealousy and quarreling among you, are you not worldly?"

(i.e., characterized by the sinful nature). Obviously the answer was and is “yes.”

Whatever one might want to say about the general direction of human nature—either depraved as some religious groups might argue, or noble and positive as humanistic groups would suggest—all can agree that human infants are certainly born into this world in a helpless state. The same activities required to meet basic needs that are natural to the struggle to overcome this helplessness through growth and socialization are viewed quite differently when we are very young than when we are much older. The fixation on our own wants and needs, which is so completely common and natural in our infant days, is viewed as selfish, egocentric, or narcissistic when we are adults. Therefore, the basic process of socialization is to get us to the point that the needs and rights of others can be considered and that our individual wants and needs can be delayed, modified, or denied. This process provides the foundation upon which satisfactory human relationships can be built. However, our helpless origin and continuing biological existence and our resulting preoccupation with self all funnel into the concept Paul called “the flesh” or the “sinful nature.” Our ability to control or transcend our egocentric motivations requires persistent effort and is central to understanding the tension between “it not being good to be alone” and our inability to get along with others. Most of human history and our experience testify to the need for divine assistance if unity is to prevail.

Toward this end and to help the church meet its goals of evangelism and teaching, Paul states in Ephesians 4:11-13 that Christ and God gave special gifts to some that they might be apostles, others prophets, others evangelists, others pastors and teachers. In verse 12, he states that this was done so that the body of Christ might be built up. And then in a most interesting statement, he concludes that the goal of building up the church

was that “we all reach *unity* in the faith and in the knowledge of God and become mature, attaining the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.”

Therefore, the Corinthians, like the Ephesians, had available to them those who had special gifts from God to help their members become more mature. Paul taught that once they reached that maturity, which is described by him as “attaining the fullness of Christ,” they would be unified. And as we would surmise from Christ’s prayer in John 17, were they to reach that fullness of Christ and experience the resulting unity, they would be positioned to convince the world that God sent Christ as His Son. As it was, all they could convince the world of was the need for arbitration among themselves.!

### **The Restoration Movement**

To come to more modern times, in the almost 200 years of the Restoration Movement, we have tried to follow with varying degrees of diligence the call of Christ’s prayer for unity. Certainly, the early grandiose expectation of this movement to unite all denominations has not proven successful. Within the last 90-100 years, most efforts at unity have been directed between and within congregations of the Churches of Christ. However, in too many instances, we have often resembled the picture of the Corinthian church that could find even in the supposedly humbling act of baptism opportunities for self-exultation, jealousy, and dissention. Although some would argue that inherent tensions exist between the restoration principle and the plea for unity, both are grounded in Biblical principle and neither can be viewed as irrelevant (Garrett, 1981; Hughes, R. T. and Allen, C. L., 1988; and Murch, 1962.). It certainly is worth noting, however, that Christ’s last concern was not church organization or acts of public worship, but unity—not the kind of balance of competing self interests that have been forged through political compromise, but the quality

of our interpersonal commitments to each other through our mutual commitments to Him.

What are the signs of a commitment to unity?

1. Use of Christ's will as the primary standard rather than our own motivations and emotions. Exclusiveness, jealousies, arrogance, prejudices, and anger can often be personally mislabeled as more noble callings. Surely this ability is one of the most pervasive talents of the human race. Honesty with ourselves and a growing understanding of the will of Christ as revealed through the Bible must be the primary bases of decisions and resolutions if unity is to be sustained.
2. Love of each other. If Christian maturity is defined by Paul in Ephesians as achieving the fullness of Christ, certainly that fullness is defined by His love for everyone. A sense of unity in the face of diverse backgrounds and normal disagreements requires a most profound, deep love that transcends all such differences as we struggle to be filled more with the fruits of the Spirit than with the "sinful nature."
3. Dedication to conflict resolution. One of the major complaints of the Apostle Paul in I Corinthians 6 is that no one in the congregation is dedicated to reducing the amount of strain and resolving the conflicts. There were no peace-makers (Matthew 5:9). Differences will occur, but if love—true Christian love—permeates a congregation, then resolution of these differences on the basis of the will of Christ is the goal of everyone (Chadwell, 1990).

As has been presented, praiseworthy instances of unified efforts by diverse groups of people do occur, giving us glimpses of the deep gratification that unity can bring. However, these events are newsworthy and notable by the exception. The Ole Miss family is admirably united in its support of Chucky Mullins only within months to be bitterly divided over whether its football fans should wave the Confederate flag at football games. The Yugoslavians are united in throwing off their repressive Communist government, only to be ravaged by civil war. The Soviet Union was united in thwarting the coup of Communist hardliners in August 1991 only to be racked by turmoil from seceding republics and highly partisan groups concerning how to create a post-communist society. And in our own country, the historic achievement of *e pluribus unum* is increasingly strained by ethnic divisions and demands by special, single issue enthusiasts.

All about us we see the less than successful efforts to deal on a prolonged basis with the conflict of its not being good to be alone and our difficulty in sustaining harmonious relationships with others when our solitude is broken. However, our own personal experience, and that of groups of varying size from small families up to nations of people, tells us that issues and causes that pull people together in a binding sense of unity of purpose provide some of the most deeply meaningful and gratifying of life's experiences. The end of such times is usually noted with regret because participants miss the strong sense of commitment and achievement that attended the unified effort. People recognize that such states, no matter how brief, are a higher, more rewarding level of existence and interpersonal relationship than they usually experience. A real sense of loss exists once the unifying event concludes or its goals are obtained.

In fact, the most deeply rewarding human experiences are those in which we most closely unite ourselves to another or



others: our conversions to the will of God; our marriage; the birth of our children; the unfailing devotion of a close friend; and, according to Jesus, the unity that can and should exist within the family of God. Truly, the world would want to experience the prolonged, sustainable unity that the power of Christ can create among those completely devoted to him. Given how rewarding brief experiences of unity are for humans, the sustained kind Jesus requests would be compelling in its attraction to outsiders.

In John 10:10, Jesus says that He came so that we might have life and have it abundantly. Our experience and our observations tell us that the abundant life is characterized by our experiencing love and unity. We are at our best under these conditions. The church at Corinth had settled for less: they were committed to seeking status, personal gain, and self-gratification. As a result, they were most unhappy, discord reigned, and the abundant life had not appeared.

Jesus prayed that his disciples be unified as were He and His Father, so that the world might believe that His Father sent Him. May we be committed to unity within our congregations for the abundant life it provides to all of us and the message it sends to a world so desperately needing it.

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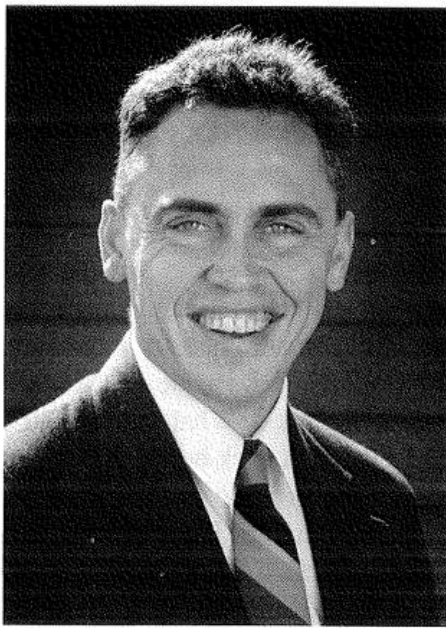
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## DAVID FLEER

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## **“The More Excellent Way”\***

**David Fleer**

To return to Abilene and the University after some years absence is an experience in remembering. Some things are so familiar. The administration building, the welcoming structure on the campus' westside. The familiar dormitories, sidewalks and pecan trees. What endears all of us to lectureships like this is the visit back home. It is a going back in time to a place and a people who have meant so much to our spiritual, emotional, and intellectual development. Young students with books in hand, a chapel inviting us to worship, a library calling us to work, are all such familiar sites. Familiarity is so reassuring. We know A.C.U.

Yet some things have changed. The view of campus from Judge Ely Blvd. has changed dramatically. The schools of business and Bible have relocated in beautiful structures. Some of the professors have changed. There are new faces and the once-familiar faces are grayer or balder. The students look younger than we may remember them to have appeared when we were here. To tell the truth, if we stayed around longer than a week, we'd be introduced to several people, studies, and locations quite unfamiliar to us.

The Biblical text for consideration in this paper is I Corinthians 12, the familiar “love chapter.” There is so much of this text that is familiar territory I hesitate to discuss it.

You know, for example, that of the 27 New Testament books, 20 are letters. First Corinthians is a letter. And we're experts in this type of literature. Consider a group from a

church of 50 adults. How many in this collection of people have written a biography? A book? A song? Published an article? Perhaps you know of a few, likely very few, in your group who have engaged in such literary activity. Now, how many have written a letter? Ha! Do you see the point? We know the literature! First Corinthians is a letter and we know about letters. This is familiar turf.

You know about letters because you receive them, too. All kinds of letters come your way. Some you wish to receive, some you likely don't open. Letters to "Dear Occupant" are a type of letter I care not to receive. Or I can tell the types of letters addressed to "Reverend" or "Pastor" or "Brother" Fleece. "Dear Mr. Fleece" is often different from "Dear David" and always distinct from "Dear Sweetheart."

First Corinthians, you know, is written to a church with some big problems: doctrinal error that would be heresy in any church today; some people denied that Jesus was physically raised from the dead (Chapter 15). There was sexual immorality that is, even today, so embarrassing that I prefer not to mention it. Paul discusses the latter in some detail in the fifth chapter. And this church in Corinth is not built on "good stock," people with a long and faithful heritage of Christianity or even Judaism or even being good, upright pagans. Consider chapter 6 where Paul discloses the fact that some had been part of the homosexual community before their conversion. That's familiar information. But, do you remember how Paul addresses this group? They are not called sinners, or weak ones, or heretics. Affirming their relationship with Christ, Paul calls them "the church of God . . . at Corinth" (1:2). They are "saints by calling" (1:2) and among all who "call upon the name of our Lord Jesus Christ" (1:2). These are positive identifications of a church with significant problems.

Lest we gather the wrong impression that Paul doesn't care about immorality, doctrinal heresy or the other problems which

beset the congregation, consider his own signature. Unlike his letters to the Philippians where he calls himself a “slave of Christ” or Philemon where he is a “prisoner of Jesus Christ,” to the Corinthians Paul claims to be “an Apostle of Jesus Christ by the will of God.” Paul is not claiming humility or laying foundation for personal identification as in the other letters; the writer is claiming authority. He is saying “Listen! I have some instruction from God Almighty. You had better listen!”

It is a perspective not so familiar today—stern expectation coupled with affectionate affirmation. The tone of the letter is unfamiliar to modern ears.

But the content is still so familiar. This letter was written in response to the reports from Chloe’s people (chapters 1-6, 1:11) and to the letter of inquiry from the church (chapters 7-16). It follows systematically from topic to topic. It is so familiar to our thinking and reasoning. Problems of disunity, personal morality, and of Christians taking one another to pagan courts are the material of the first section (chapters 1-6). Questions of marriage, remarriage and sexual ethics (chapters 7), meat sacrificed to idols (“the weaker brother”) (8-10), the role of women (11), communion (11), spiritual gifts (12-14), the resurrection (15), and giving (16) are addressed in the second half of the letter.

There, asking to be memorized and quoted, is the most familiar of all Corinthian chapters, thirteen. The love chapter. It’s not just in the Bible; it is found on plaques, posters, and on Hallmark greeting cards. We’ve heard it as a motto (“love never fails”) and have witnessed it during countless wedding ceremonies (“love is patient and kind . . .”). Probably the wedding is the most familiar place for the preaching of this text and the couple being married most often encouraged to follow its directions. But, are you familiar with this text’s original setting and the circumstances behind its first application?

The famous chapter 13 is found in a larger section where Paul gives some clear instruction on spiritual gifts (chapters 12-14). Evidently the Corinthian congregation was struggling with rivalry and classism concerning gifts from the Spirit. Those who were gifted with tongues thought quite well of themselves. They were proud and arrogant and looked down their noses upon those who hadn't received this particular gift. In chapter 12 Paul addresses the problem. He uses a wonderful and familiar analogy. He says that we Christians are like parts of a body. You are a hand and you a foot. You are a leg and you an ear. While we may give greater honor to some members of the body, all are equally important. Therefore, Paul concludes neither should you think too high nor too low concerning yourself.

In chapter 14, Paul continues the discussion of gifts by urging the Corinthians to seek gifts that build up the other person. The hotly pursued tongues is a gift that edifies the self. Prophecy is a gift that edifies others. Prophecy is a more effective gift. Do you see how Paul addresses the problem?

What a place Corinth must have been! Christians competing with one another. Some thinking themselves a cut above the rest. Others burdened with feelings of Spiritual inferiority. Sound familiar? It is. It is like your home congregation and mine. Multiple-staffed churches with youth ministers feeling like second-class citizens. Pulpit ministers, arrogantly comparing attendance figures with other congregations. Men, devastated because they weren't elected to the eldership. Women impressed they are something less than complete because of all the gifts barred from their use.

The Corinthian church was young and vibrant with gifts of the Holy Spirit. But, whose gift is most important? To whom shall we give the most attention and authority? In this setting Paul delivers the brilliant discourse of chapter 13. It is not another gift to pursue but an attitude he recommends. "Desire

the greater gifts,” Paul encourages, “but I will show you a still more excellent way” (12:31).

The “excellent way” this Apostle recommends is a way clearly defined. It is the way of patience and kindness, of not keeping score of wrongs, of believing and hoping and enduring. It is the way of love (13:4-8a).

Dividing our churches today are two theologies, embraced by older against younger Christians. For those upstart, young Christians, attendance and giving habits leave much to be desired. Yet, they are demanding changes in worship and programs and are even threatening to exit our fellowship.

Paul, the Apostle of Jesus Christ, demands the older Christian be patient with the concerns of this younger and different-thinking generation. Listen to them. Work with them. Love them. Resolve your differences. Don’t demand that they live and act according to your rules, exhibiting the behavior appropriate to the gifts you’ve received! Be patient.

Love keeps no record of wrongs. The ledgers we keep in our minds destroy relationships. Those who are different in our congregations can be perceived of as odd balls with whom we’d rather do without. The ones always calling for change. The woman who is always asking for a more spiritual male leadership. One way to rid ourselves of those thorn-in-the-flesh people with whom our lifestyle and ways of thinking are unfamiliar, is to build a case against them. Their acts of arrogance, rudeness, impoliteness, moral “over-sensitivity,” and failure are counted. And, once we’ve gathered a significant record, they’re dismissed from us. We leave the congregation over the insensitive eldership. We divorce after years of disturbing and annoying behaviors. We leave a friendship after months of building problems.

But love keeps no score of wrong. The divorced, the unfaithful, the adulterers, are all given second and third chances under the way of love.



Of course, there is a place of apology, repentance, and forgiveness. But, the attitude of love looks for, expects, and invites the apology and anticipates cleaning the slate and removing even the memory of wrong.

First Corinthians 13, so familiar. But listen to it!

If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. If I give all I possess to the poor and surrender my body to the flames, but have not love, I gain nothing.

The leading gifts, in their minds, Paul lists. The tongue-speakers in v. 1. Even if you have this most cherished gift but lack love you are like a clanging cymbal. To those who have the amazing gifts of prophecy and miraculous faith and knowledge, v. 2. Even if you do have a word for the church and are able to foretell the future, but lack love, you're nothing! To those who perhaps have the greatest gift of all - to give your possessions, your life, v. 3. Even if you have the gift of martyrdom, but lack love, it profits you nothing!

The excellent way is not some other gift. It's the way we treat each other. It's love. The way of God is patience, kindness, keeping no score of wrongs, delighting in truth, hoping and enduring. This is what will never end (v. 8). This is what is complete and perfect (v. 10). Everything else - everything, every gift, even the most wonderful, are only part of the picture. Love makes a church whole. Churches with the greatest gifts - knowledge and prophesy - are childish without love.

Sometimes, these words aren't so familiar. Instead we hear, "What does this church need? I'll tell you what this church

needs . . . is the gift of evangelism. We need to be creative and reach out to the lost and baptize some people.” Someone else says, “This church needs commitment . . . to daily Bible reading and prayer.” Someone else, “Our brotherhood needs to get back to its roots. Our traditions need to be held up with honor and respect.” Or, “We need to give book, chapter, and verse for everything we do and think.” Someone else believes strangely, “We need volunteers, people who commit themselves and their time.” “What we need is church growth, Biblical preaching, givers, a Sunday school program that attracts young adults . . . .”

Paul says to you, “Even if you baptize thousands, and read the Bible every day, and uphold all that Alexander Campbell taught, and have 200 Sunday school teachers and the greatest programs and the highest morals and greatest giving . . . but lack love . . . you have nothing! You’re like a child, you see dimly, you’re incomplete.” Familiar?

Love is the most “excellent way.” No wonder the beloved Apostle John says, “little children, let us love one another” (I John 4:7).

I certainly do not have the gift of prophesy. But, I believe we stand, as a brotherhood today, at a crossroads.

Which way shall we go? Church growth? Vibrant worship? The old paths? Spirituality? Work with the poor? God says, “Put love first.”

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\* I am indebted for the outline of this sermon to Thomas G. Long. *Preaching and the Literary Forms of the Bible*. Philadelphia: Fortress, 1989.

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# The Hope of Resurrection

Charles A. Siburt, Jr.

In Masfield's play *The Trial of Jesus* the Roman centurion who stood at the foot of the cross and who tradition named Longinus is heard talking with Procula, Pilate's wife, after the crucifixion. "Do you think he is dead?" she asks. "No, lady, I don't." "Then where is he?" "Let loose in the world, lady, where neither Roman nor Jew can stop his truth."

Matthew reports that when the resurrected Jesus appeared to the astonished disciples at Galilee, he sent them out with a commission to preach and to make disciples of all nations. You notice he did not tell them to describe what happened in the resurrection, but to announce its meaning, to interpret it. The meaning, he said, is that he is Lord, that all authority everywhere has now been given to him. That means a king has ascended his throne, the kingdom he came to inaugurate is now established, and the disciples are back in business. Nothing can stop his kingdom now. Not even death can stop it now.

In one generation, Jesus' disciples went from Jerusalem to the corners of their world. And three hundred years later, the Church was a reality throughout all of the Empire.

The only explanation for this phenomenal spread of the Christian faith was the resurrection at its center.

The resurrection faith was more than a conviction that Jesus had resumed his life for a time and appeared to some of his followers. It was a conviction, corroborated by the present experience of his power even years after

his death, that he was alive in a new and powerful way, that he shared indeed God's life. He was Lord, and his Lordship was exercised in the world through his life-giving Spirit.<sup>1</sup>

As appealing as this faith was, it did require some explaining. And that's what he is up to in I Corinthian 15. The Corinthians write, "Dear Paul, you preached a lot about the resurrection. We have questions." It's not that they don't believe in a resurrection—"No, God can't do that. . . You can't have a resurrection. . . People can't just get up out of the grave. . . ." That's not it. They believe in miracles. What they are saying is, "We have *already* been raised. So what do you mean when you say that we *will be* raised?"

The Corinthians have become arrogant and self-serving because of their conviction that they are already in full possession of God's life. They know God (8:2; 13:12), have all spiritual gifts (1:5-7), are spiritual people (3:1), are mature (2:6; 14:20), are strong (10:12), are already filled, rich and reigning in the kingdom (4:8). They have contempt for others who appear to be less well endowed, and because they are already perfect, there is no need for discernment in their behavior.

Apparently, their logic is something like this: If you believe you've already experienced the end of everything, what's the point in having the resurrection? Haven't we all died with Christ, and been made to sit with him in heavenly places, and been raised to walk with him in newness of life? Isn't resurrection a way of life we have already come to know? Why are you pushing that out in front of us? We have it. We live it.

If you find yourself saying to yourself, "Hey, I must be a Corinthian. I kinda believe that way myself," you have good grounds for it. The Gospel of John and the letters of Paul are full of it: "We have passed out of death into life. . . By this

we know that we have eternal life. . .” We are the resurrection people: we have experienced Easter.

The other problem they have is that they do not see any place in the ultimate and final God-given life for the body. “In dying, we have already gotten rid of that thing. This diseased, sick, aching, arthritic, migraine body doesn’t function well. The ole ticker’s about gone. And now you say “resurrection.” Look, it’s taken me 60, 70, 80 something years to get rid of that, and then you come along and say, “You’ve gotta get it back.” And they would say, “The old body’s worn out. Death gets rid of the body and frees the soul. We don’t want that body forever anyway. But we have immortal souls. Isn’t that enough?”

Fred Craddock tells this story:

I recall being at a men’s bean supper or something like that in a church basement years ago. Everybody was having a good time and eating some food that some of the men had stirred up. We were pretending that it was good. We had a program. And on the program was an elderly man—I don’t know how old he was; he seemed to be 80—and the Master of Ceremonies said the old man was gonna play a violin solo. He had once been a pretty good violinist and had played in an orchestra, and he was gonna play a medley of hymns.

The old man got up. I could tell by the difficulty with which he got out of his chair that we were in for a long evening. He took several minutes to get the violin case open. He picked up the bow by the wrong end. I knew that this was not gonna be my favorite program. He tightened strings, and he loosened strings, and he did whatever musicians do while everybody waits. He put the bow, held in stiff, arthritic fingers, up to the violin, and started to drag the bow across those strings.

We had screeching similar to dragging a fingernail across a blackboard. He started over and started over. Finally, he put down the bow and the violin and said, "I have never had more music in me than tonight. I have never been more unable to play than tonight."<sup>2</sup>

The issues are really as current today as they were then. What does it mean to be spiritual? What does a spiritual life look like? Does being spiritual mean that we are exempt from having to face the struggles of life that everyone else faces? Does it mean that we get to skip all the hassles of life in a physical body? Do we get to enjoy all the blessings and benefits of God's victory in Jesus Christ now, or do we have to hang in there until some distant day when the victory God has won in Jesus will be fully ours?

In response, Paul reminds them of the fundamental message of the resurrection (15:3). He reminds them of the core of their existence: ". . . by which you are being saved, if you hold it fast," (15:2); their salvation is both still in progress and conditional. He reminds them that Jesus first died, and then rose to a new life (15:3-5) to become life-giving spirit (15:45). There was first the sowing of the mortal body, then the spiritual body (15:44). So it will be with them. The whole reality of the spiritual life is not yet fully here but will happen only with their resurrection. It will be even better than their present life and is so certain that they can live now in sure hope of it.

So Jesus' resurrection is not the end of God's work. This is still the in-between time. Jesus is only the first fruits (15:20); his resurrection is only the beginning. Death, the last enemy, the enemy of what God is doing in the world and the enemy of all meaningful relationships, still has to be overcome for all others as well (15:21). People in the community continue to die (11:30). If there is no future resurrection, if the present is all there is, then they are fools to suffer for their faith

(15:29-32). Obviously not everything has been brought into subjection to the Lord (15:28). The spiritual life cannot be complete until then (15:24).

What, then, does the hope of resurrection mean? Paul says, "Instead of trying to prove that Christ is truly raised, let me tell you what our hope means."

(1) If Jesus is not raised, then I have been robbed of my message. It doesn't make any sense because you pull the heart out of it. It's empty.

(2) I have been robbed of any vision of the final end of everything: that vision of how God will be God in every way in every place; that vision of life being ultimately stronger than death; that vision of God as God of the living, triumphing over that last enemy, death. No, you've robbed me of that image.

(3) You have robbed me of the meaning of my life. A life that has been mistreated and punished, fighting with the wild beasts in Ephesus, stomped on, chased out, left for dead, . . . That has been the story of my life. Trouble, pain, and woe. Now you say "No resurrection." That makes it all for nothing.

But what runs through it all is this: all things created will come to an end. The end will be as God has purposed. And it will be victorious for God and for Christ. We will participate in that. That Paul knows is true. That keeps him going. It helps us not to be weary in well-doing, but to abound in the work of God, knowing that it will not be in vain. We're not left in a world of accident, or chance, or whatever. Ultimately, God will be God. God will be total and complete, gathering up his final purpose in all of life, including all the elements subject to pain and suffering and decay.

This message of the hope of resurrection was a message that won the world. When Paul set out to interpret this message as good news, he was talking to a world which believed that human life was controlled by supernatural powers, powers called "angels," not protective guardian angels, but enemies.



They were also called “principalities,” supernatural beings who controlled the various layers of heaven. It was like living in a world of countless minor officials that you have to please to get to God.

And then there were “powers,” a sort of catch-all word for unnamed forces in the universe, each one capable of determining your life. And as if that were not enough, there are also the celestial bodies of astrology—the sun, the moon, the stars. You had a lucky star, but there were also unlucky stars. And the height and the depth of the stars in the heaven, according to astrological charts, was how your life was determined.

To live in that kind of world was to languish in despair, be stuck in a pit of fatalism, and always be expecting doom and disaster. Listen to how Paul announces the meaning of the resurrection to that world. He’s writing to the Romans:

If God is for us, who is against us? For Christ Jesus, who died is now resurrected and sits at the right hand of God to make intercession for us. Therefore, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am sure that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God we saw in Christ Jesus our Lord (Romans 8:31-34; 37-39).

That was the message that won the world. It puts an end to fear and fatalism and despair. It said the world belongs to God, and to nothing else. And, therefore, nothing else in this world, not even death itself, need control us. The resurrection proved it. God has the last word, and the last word is “life.”

So now you can be free of the binding notion that your life is written in the stars. The fault lies not in your stars, but in

your own refusal to accept the gracious gift of human freedom. Now you have a choice because God's resurrection power is tougher than any other power that would deter, defeat, or destroy your life. So you don't have to dread living or fear dying. And you don't need to be in a hurry to get it over. It isn't over until God is through, and he isn't through yet. He won't be through until he has whipped every power that opposes life and resists his name. Your life is built on hope—hope for today, hope for tomorrow, hope for those who are oppressed, blind, enslaved, or imprisoned by sin or depression or prejudice or abuse or heartbreak.

The world has moved beyond the first century in many ways, but we still have our superstitions. For instance, if you believe that you are trapped in any way, or that your life is over at middle age, or at any other age, or you believe that you've been dealt a bad hand by fate in this life and must play life with a handicap, or that you can't get out of the rut that you are presently in, then you are in bondage to a superstition. You need to hear that God is in charge of this world. Nothing else is in charge. So you don't have to be trapped.

With the Jews of Jesus' day, the problem was a little different. They didn't believe in fate, but they believed that you were locked into a destiny because of what they called "the law." If you sinned, you were forever branded as a sinner. If you were diseased, you were branded as cursed. If you were of a different race, you were branded as unclean. So it was no accident that during his life Jesus made it a point to go to the sinners, the outcasts, and the foreigners, and forgive them, and heal them, and eat with them. And he told parables in which the sinners, the outcasts, and the foreigners march into heaven first, ahead of those who thought they had reserved seats there. The point that he was trying to make was that nobody, nobody is trapped in this life. We thought that when the world tells

us who we are, that is who we must always be. Jesus said, who God created you to be is who you can become.

The hope of resurrection doesn't say that you'll always win, or that you'll always be on a perpetual high. It does say that our suffering now can be for good, and not for nothing. It says that when you get depressed, that's just the way you are; it's not the way the world is. As Paul put it, "In Christ Jesus now you are free"—free to become who you were created to be. It sounds something like this:

Therefore we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day. For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen. For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal (2 Cor. 4:16-18).

The question is often put, "Can you change human nature?" And my answer is "No, you cannot change human nature. Human nature is given in the creation." It's determined by God. It is given to us. Our problem, however, is not that we have an imperfect or fallen human nature. Our problem is that our human nature is in bondage to superstitions and to myths about who we really are. Jesus revealed who we really are. That's the meaning of the Christian faith. Jesus revealed who we really are, and said we are children of God, every one of us. That's our real nature. And that's the way he approached everybody. And you know what happened? They said, "He freed me." They didn't say, "He changed my nature." They said, "He freed me."

Will Campbell wrote about the time when his nephew was hit by a car and killed while riding a bicycle. Will and his brother's families were very close. Campbell felt sorrow for the loss of the boy, and the boy's family. He described it this way:

The healing really began six weeks after the accident, at least for me. I was lying across the bed in mid-afternoon, neither asleep or awake, staring at the ceiling, speaking to no one. Brenda, my wife, woman and friend, came into the room, bellowing as she strode, 'Get up! Now I mean it, get up!' So I got up.<sup>3</sup>

The resurrection story finds its proper ending when new life comes to you, when you get up and begin to live again, when He is risen for you. That's why the ancients said, "He is not yet the Christ till he be Christ for you."

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<sup>1</sup>Luke Johnson, *The Writings of the New Testament*, p. 108.

<sup>2</sup>Fred Craddock, adapted from taped lecture.

<sup>3</sup>Will Campbell, *Brother To A Dragonfly*, p. 152.

## JAMES S. WOODROOF

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**Work and Ministry:** James Woodroof has been in the ministry/preaching for 35 years. He has served churches in Berea, Tn; Hickory, NC; West Columbia, SC; Little Rock, Ar; Memphis, Tn; Christchurch, New Zealand; Searcy, Ar; College Station, Tx; and Burlington, Ma. Since 1989, he has been serving an Adjunct Professor in the School of Bible and Religion at Harding University. He conducts meetings and seminars eight months of the year.

**Other Fields and Interests:** He is the author of several books: *The Divorce Dilemma* (1967), *Struggles of the Kingdom* (1975), *The Aroma of Christ* (1981), *Beyond Crossroads* (1982), *Four Realities* (1983), *Between the Rock and a Hard Place* (1989) and *The Church in Transition* (1991).

## **The Believer's Freedom**

**James S. Woodroof**

On August 19, 1991, the free world sat stunned and saddened to see the new-found freedom of the Russian people suddenly snatched away from them by a political coup. The prospects of a return to political bondage frustrated and outraged the Russian people. They had first tasted freedom barely two years earlier, and the insatiable longing of the common people to breathe free - something Americans take for granted - could be held back no longer. The coup failed. Freedom was still alive. A new Europe was born.

Can you ever forget those scenes of joy - sheer unrestrained joy - at the fall of the Berlin wall?! The tide of refugees surging through the cracks in the wall caused the soldiers of the Kremlin simply to lower their guns and stand helpless in the face of the turning tide. Total strangers embraced and wept for joy. Those atop the wall reached down and assisted others whom they did not know, but with whom they shared a common thirst for freedom. Citizens of West Germany opened their homes to the refugees, shared their food, their money, their clothes.

There were no strangers the day the wall fell.

Seldom has been expressed so boldly the insuppressible conviction: "Human beings were meant to live free!" Sadly, in the ensuing months the euphoria subsided. When came the day-to-day task of putting substance to the dream of freedom, it became obvious that eastern Europe was not prepared to live in freedom. Personal greed, ethnic prejudices and long-held racial hatreds surfaced and began to tear apart the fragile fabric

of freedom so recently woven. Republics began to rebel; riots broke out; age-old animosities, simmering for decades but held at bay by the iron list of the Soviet authorities, suddenly blazed anew and threatened to engulf and destroy the new freedom.

Perhaps the closest parallel to the eastern European birth of freedom is the freedom introduced by Jesus and experienced by his followers the first few years after his brief ministry. Freedom was one of the major planks in Jesus' platform. In his home town synagogue one Sabbath he asked for the scroll of Isaiah and stood up to read. The scripture he deliberately chose to read:

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has  
anointed me to preach good news to the poor.  
He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and  
recovering of sight to the blind,  
To set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim  
the acceptable year of the Lord.

And he began to say to them, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing" (Luke 4:18-21).

Later he told some of his fellow countrymen who had believed on him, "If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free" (John 8:31,32). He further claimed to be the only one who could truly liberate them: "If the Son makes you free, you will really be free" (8:36). Enraged by those remarks, the Jews took up stones to throw at him. Thus a life or death struggle ensued with the religious/political leaders of the Jewish nation over Jesus' efforts to free the enslaved people of his day.

Within a matter of months, Jesus' enemies had finalized plans to have him executed for high treason and blasphemy. "And when they had crucified him. . .they sat down and kept watch over him there" (Matthew 27:36). It looked as though the

powers of darkness had won and the enslaved people would remain hopelessly in bondage.

But then, at the darkest hour, when their hopes had vanished, he burst the bonds of death. “. . . They found the stone rolled away from the tomb, but when they went in they did not find the body” (Luke 24:2,3). “But an angel said to the women, ‘He is not here, for he has risen. Come, see the place where he lay. Then go quickly and tell his disciples that he has risen from the dead.’ . . . So they departed quickly from the tomb with fear and great joy, and ran to tell his disciples” (Matthew 27:5-8).

The wall had fallen. Those first two or three fearful, joyful believers soon became a tidal wave of human beings rushing through the opening to freedom. And a whole new age was born.

Can you visualize the scene of exuberance and joy which characterized those early days when freedom was new; when “they returned to Jerusalem with great joy, and were continually in the temple blessing God” (Luke 24:52)?

And all who believed were together and had all things in common; and they sold their possessions and goods and distributed them to all, as any had need. And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they partook of food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having favor with all the people.

Acts 2:44-47a

There were no strangers the day the wall fell.

The tide of refugees surging through the break in the wall caused the soldiers of the Sanhedrin to stand helpless in the face of the turning tide. Total strangers embraced and wept for joy. Those standing exuberant on top of the wall reached down and assisted others whom they did not know, but with



whom they shared a common thirst for freedom. Citizens of Jerusalem opened their homes to foreigners, shared their food, their money, their clothes, their new-found freedom.

And with great power the apostles gave their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all. There was not a needy person among them, for as many as were possessors of lands or houses sold them, and brought the proceeds of what was sold and laid it at the apostles feet; and distribution was made to each as any had need.

Acts 4:33-35

Years later one of the liberated ones reflected on this God-given freedom. Paraphrasing his statements along the line of the liberation theme it would read like this:

And you he liberated when you were enslaved through the trespasses and sins in which you once walked. . . But God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were enslaved through our trespasses, liberated us together with Christ. . . So then you are no longer strangers and sojourners, but you are fellow citizens of the saints and members of the household of God.

Ephesians 2:1-19

Thus again it was clearly affirmed: "Man was intended by God to be free!"

But it was a freedom difficult to maintain. The early Christians had to be reminded, "For freedom Christ set us free; **stand fast therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery** (Galatians 5:1b). There were Christians clinging to the old order of things who wanted to impose an old bondage on the new people of God. Exasperated, Paul blurts out, "I wish those who unsettle you would mutilate themselves" (5:12)!

And also, those who had been ushered into this new freedom were not always prepared to live in freedom. Paul reminded them,

**You were called to freedom, brethren; only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love be servants of one another. For the whole law is fulfilled in one word, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” But if you bite and devour one another take heed that you are not consumed by one another.**

Galatians 5:13-15

They had been called in this new freedom to live by the Spirit—to be motivated from above to an upward calling, a calling characterized by love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control (Galatians 5:22-23).

But they had not been accustomed to living by the Spirit. The Jew had long since been dependent on external restrictions, and the non-Jew was accustomed to no restrictions at all. The call to live in freedom by the Spirit was seen by some as an invitation to a lower standard of living rather than as a call to a higher plane of motivation. Thus they used their freedom, Paul said, as an “opportunity for the flesh.”

. . .fornication, impurity, licentiousness, idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, anger, selfishness, dissension, party spirit, envy, drunkenness, carousing, and the like.

Galatians 5:19-21

And thus they stood in danger of being captured again, either by the old religious system from which they had fled or by their own passions which warred in their members. Either would enslave.

They were not prepared to live in freedom.

It happened a long time ago. We read about it but often fail to get the point. Thus history repeats itself.

Here we are today - heirs of a religious freedom movement begun in America some 200 years ago. The American Restoration movement was a clarion call to throw off the shackles of ecclesiastical bondage and creedal slavery and to come into the freedom every Christian has as a birthright from God. When the reformers heralded this freedom it appealed to thousands longing to breathe free:

One of the first enthusiasts of the newly discovered freedom in Christ was Barton W. Stone. One of Stone's colleagues wrote of the Stone movement: "It is difficult to paint the zeal for liberty, and just indignation against the old aristocratic spirit, which glowed through every member of this new confederacy."<sup>1</sup>

Stone, himself, described a meeting between his group of Christians and a similar group known as Reformers:

They were free to think for themselves, without the dictation of ghostly bishops. . . .were drawn together by the spirit of truth as taught by our common Lord and experienced by us, the subjects of his kingdom.<sup>2</sup>

"The unity for which Stone pled was a unity in freedom rather than a unity in conformity. . . .Freedom was the cornerstone of the Stone movement."<sup>3</sup>

But it was a freedom difficult to maintain. Like other movements, with the passing of time ours reverted to walking by sight instead of faith; by the flesh instead of by the Spirit. Traditions gradually attached themselves like barnacles to a ship, slowing and impeding—like chains, shackling and enslaving. Today many congregations are sitting dead still in the water, uneasily aware there is no life, no movement, no freedom, and no joy; and not knowing what to do about it.

In April of 1989 the Churches of Christ in New England sponsored the Faneuil Freedom Forum in old Faneuil Hall in downtown Boston. The thrust of the forum was directed toward those who had fled authoritarian religion which had robbed them of their freedom. The refugees were encouraged to know confidently that the desire for freedom is God-given, and that they should stand fast and not submit to a yoke of slavery.

Though that plea still needs to be made even among mainstream churches, this is not the pressing need of the hour. The winds of change have begun blowing among us sufficiently to bring about the freedom for which Christians hunger. The walls of authority erected to guard the status quo are not as foreboding as they once were. Traditions are not nearly as sacred as they used to be. We are sensing that it is possible to be biblical without necessarily being traditional. There are ample opportunities today within the framework of the American Restoration movement to achieve the freedom all Christians desire.

But the freedom will not come overnight, nor will it come easily or without struggle. We stand nearly 200 years from the American source of our movement with all that the intervening years have brought. A movement which originally championed freedom is now perceived by many as inhibiting freedom. What began as an attempt to cut free from man-made traditions is now shackled by traditions of its own. We have become the very thing we originally opposed (divided over human creeds), and we now often oppose the very thing we originally tried to become (a people free of human creeds). This is a deviation of major proportions, and it will not easily be corrected.

There are those who, in the name of freedom, are eager to break from the traditions we have developed along the way. For years brothers throughout our fellowship have got in trouble for simple deviations from the norm: varying the order of our

services, changing the number of songs before and after prayer, or singing spontaneously during the Supper, etc.

But far more serious changes are being advocated today in light of the demographic prominence of the “baby-boomers” in our society and the mentality with which baby-boomers view everything—religion included. I am not attempting to justify or condemn these efforts to be relevant, but rather to look at the means and speed with which these changes are being implemented.

There will always be the slow and the fast, the turtle and hare in our churches. There will always be those who are eager to change and those who are reluctant to change. We might as well admit this up front. In view of the presence of these extremes and in view of the need for the church always to address each culture and each generation in terms which are relevant, we must answer a soul-searching question: “How will we treat each other during these changing times?”

There are those who will resist anything that is new and untried - anything we have not done before or that is perceived as threatening our identity. May I say kindly but clearly, “Such opposition to change is understandable but inexcusable. Change is inevitable, it will come; it must - unless we want the church more and more to resemble the Amish or Mennonite sects.

On the other hand, there are men (and women) who in the name of freedom are insisting on some pretty radical changes. Worship formats are being implemented by younger leaders which leave older members almost totally disoriented. The familiar is often replaced by that which is mostly unfamiliar. Maybe radical changes are needed, but the question still stares us in the face: “How will we treat each other in the presence of these changes?”

1. Will we treat each other with consideration? To do otherwise is like a man going up on the roof of a five story building with the desire to jump off because he had heard such

a jump will make his head feel airy and light. But his feet and legs look up and say, “But we can’t stand the landing.” If the man insists on jumping because he is “free” to do so in spite of the inability of the rest of his body to stand the impact, we would think the man to be out of his mind.

Often it is not the jump which scares us but the height. And sometimes it is not change, but the pace of the change, which causes feelings of disorientation. What can be done to bridge the gap between those who want change and those who fear change?

\*Leaders can set the pace of change in consideration of the slower ones in the body.

\*Leaders can announce months in advance any major changes that are under way, thus allowing time for the idea to sink in and give everyone time to get ready for the change.

\*Leaders should solicit input from every interested party, so that, as Ira North often said, “Every man has his say; no man has his way.”

\*Change is thereby not stopped but modified so the whole body can be brought along and unity can be maintained.

Other questions which should be asked:

2. Can the more liberated refrain from looking down on the less liberated? And vice versa. Are we willing to accept the Spirit’s instruction: “Let not him (the more liberated) who eats despise him who abstains, and let not him (the less liberated) who abstains judge him who eats; for God has welcomed him” (Romans 14:3)?

3. Are we able to die to ourselves, and not push our own opinions to the point of dissension, keeping these things between ourselves and God (14:22)?

4. Are we able, having been called to freedom, not to use our freedom as an opportunity to the flesh, but through love be servants of one another?

5. Are we willing not to bite and devour one another?

6. Are we willing to manifest the fruit of the Spirit - love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control?

7. Are we willing to "lead a life worthy of the calling to which we have been called, with all lowliness and meekness, with patience forbearing one another in love, eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace?"

8. Are the adversaries of change willing to be constructive in their criticism, loving in their resistance and agree to be biblical only - not necessarily traditional?

9. Are all of us willing to "submit to one another out of respect for Christ" (Ephesians 5:21)?

The walls of traditionalism and legalism are falling. There is a new wind blowing across the land, bringing freedom. There is no going back. The well-being of the church lies in the domain of the Spirit of the Lord which brings freedom (I Corinthians 3:17).

We must live by the Spirit. And "If we live by the Spirit, let us also walk by the Spirit. Let us have no self-conceit, no provoking of one another, no envy of one another" (Galatians 5:25,26).

If we are willing to live by the Spirit, or if we find ourselves unable to do so, we will revert to the flesh and go down in history as a people unprepared to live in freedom.

But if, in this crucial hour, we can summon from God the strength to live by the Spirit, we will find ourselves positioned to enter the new millennium with unity and purpose, with direction and enthusiasm, with faith and love, and therefore hope - a people prepared to live in freedom.

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<sup>1</sup>Richard McNemar, as quoted by Allen and Hughes in *Discovering Our Roots* (ACU Press, Abilene, TX, 1988), p. 104.

<sup>2</sup>As quoted by James DeForest Murch in *Christian Only* (Standard Publishing Co., Cincinnati, OH, 1962), p. 112.

<sup>3</sup>Allen and Hughes, op. cit., p. 105.

## WALT LEAVER

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# Ministry: What's the "Bottom Line"?

Walt Leaver

"Bottom Line". . . a term that means different things to different people. A salesman may determine his "bottom line" by the number of sales made, while a coach will look at his won-lost record. Net profits provide the "bottom line" for a business owner, and a report card does the same thing for a student.

The "bottom line" is determined by cutting through all the fluff and superficiality and examining those factors that are of utmost importance.

What's a minister's "bottom line"? Is it church attendance, or contributions, or the number of baptisms during a given time period? Do we determine effectiveness on the basis of popularity, or education, or the length of someone's sermons?

Perhaps Paul had considered similar questions. In the following passage, he provides excellent criteria for determining a minister's "bottom line":

*So then, men ought to regard us as servants of Christ  
and as those entrusted with the secret things of God.*

(I Corinthians 4:1)

To Paul, it wasn't important to be considered a great theologian or an excellent speaker. Success to him was not to be evaluated on the basis of statistics or popularity. Instead, Paul uses two simple, yet profound, pictures to describe what he considers to be vital qualities for an effective minister. His brief description provides a "bottom line" for us.

### Focused on Christ

Paul begins by saying he wants people to consider him a “servant” of Christ. In the New Testament, several different Greek words are translated “servant.” Two of the more familiar are “doulos,” a word which can also be translated “slave,” and “diakonos” which can also be translated “minister” and transliterated as “deacon.”

However, Paul uses an entirely different term in this passage, and it provides a unique perspective on what Paul considers to be vital to his ministry.

The term he selects is “huperetes,” which, though translated “servant,” literally means “under-rower.”

The word “huperetes” was a descriptive term used to identify some of the servants or slaves on the large warships in the Roman Navy. In peacetime these ships would be powered by large sails, yet during battle the sails were too slow and cumbersome.

Therefore, each warship had a large bank of oars and a room beneath the deck where these “huperetes” or under-rowers would operate their oars. In the front of that room the captain would stand, elevated by a small platform. His job was to give the orders to the under-rowers, and their job was to keep their eyes on him, responding to his instructions. When he said start, they’d start. When he told them to speed up, slow down, or stop they would respond to those instructions as well.

No glory or notoriety was associated with being an under-rower. Their names were not familiar to the Roman citizens of that day nor to the students of history. Their contribution to the cause was solely dependent upon their willingness to obediently respond to the one giving the orders.

Paul selected this picture to convey the ambition he had for this own ministry. He was not seeking public acclaim or ego gratification. His desire was not to “call the shots” or to be “in charge.”

On the contrary, Paul's goal was to be remembered as someone willing to work in obscurity, satisfied to be totally unknown as long as his eyes were always on the "captain" and ready to respond to His wishes and commands.

How does Paul's ambition compare to ours? Are we more concerned with the praise and recognition of others or with the approval of our "captain"?

Congregations everywhere have been blessed by Christ-like servants willing to be "under-rowers":

— Teachers who lovingly devote their lives week after week to students, not because of the acclaim or compensation, but because they are responding to what they are convinced God wants them to do.

— Prayer warriors who regularly and continually struggle in prayer on behalf of teenagers, missionaries, those with special needs, etc., and they don't give up in spite of the fact that their efforts are practically unknown — but they're doing it because they believe God wants them to pray.

— Volunteers who pour their lives and resources into all kinds of needy situations, sometimes anonymously, prompted by their desire to follow the example of the one they call their Lord.

People like this are representative of those whose eyes are on Jesus and who are responding to His love. They are willing to do whatever it takes to please Him.

We need to have that same desire. Our cry needs to be, "God, whomever you want me to be, wherever you want me to go, whatever you want me to say, I'm ready and willing to respond to you." This does not mean we are calloused or insensitive to other people. Paul himself warned against being a stumbling block (cf. Romans 14:13).

What it does mean is that first and foremost our allegiance must be to Jesus Christ. Paul was not interested in impressing anybody with himself, but in doing what Jesus called him to do. Should that not be our ambition as well?

Jesus knew the pressures of being pulled in every direction by well-meaning people wanting a piece of his time. His disciples approached Him early one morning outside Capernaum to inform their Lord that He needed to return to town because everyone was looking for Him. Jesus was prepared, though, because He had already that morning spent some time alone with his Father, seeking directions and instructions for the day from Him. Therefore, when the urgent request came from the disciples, He was able to explain that there were other places He was to go that day (see Mark 1:35-39). When we, like Jesus, learn to get our instructions from the “Captain,” it will help us to respond to those numerous interruptions that seem to pull at us all day long.

When others see us, do they see people who are sold out to God? Are they impressed by a desire on our part to want to please Him more than anyone else?

Nehemiah is another example of a man of God who seemed to know where to look for His instructions. After hearing the conditions of his fellow countrymen in Jerusalem, he spent months in fasting and prayer before the opportunity came from him to visit the city. After arriving in Jerusalem he waited three days before touring the city, but still admits, *“I had not told anyone what my God had put in my heart to do for Jerusalem”* (Nehemiah 2:12).

Nehemiah was not in Jerusalem by invitation of a committee of local leaders, or because of the popular vote of the citizens there. Regardless of the circumstances, he was convinced that God had given him that task, and he was there in obedience to God’s call. Later, when opposition came and frustrations mounted, Nehemiah must have found reassurance in knowing

he wasn't there to make a name for himself but to be obedient to the challenge God had placed before him.

Another benefit of knowing where to focus is the strength we gain to help us in very difficult times. Jehoshophat, King of Judah, was facing the dreaded reality of having three armies joining forces to attack him. He knew he was outnumbered and could easily be overpowered, but in his fear he turned to the Lord. After proclaiming a fast for the nation, he stands in front of a large group assembled at the Temple and leads a prayer for the nation. The closing words of his prayer are packed with insight and a recognition of the source of his power:

*"For we have no power to face this vast army that is attacking us, we do not know what to do, but our eyes are upon you" (II Chronicles 20:12)*

How recently have we found ourselves in situations where the challenge facing us is much bigger than the resources we have at our disposal? Jehoshophat was there! Not only are we outnumbered and overpowered; we don't have a clue about what to do to solve the situation.

Our focus is the key! The critical ingredient for real success, even in the midst of insurmountable odds, is not education, or tenacity, or networking. All of those things and more have value in their place, but the indispensable factor is focus. Are our eyes on the only true source of power? Are we ready to listen to Him and respond to what He says?

It wasn't long before Jehoshophat was put to the test when God sent word through Jahaziel that the army of Judah was to march on to the battle field the very next day. To an outside observer, this must have seemed suicidal, yet it was in direct response to keeping his eyes on the Captain and doing exactly what He said. Jehoshophat responded to God's leadership and experienced an incredible victory. The army of Judah spent

the next three days just collecting valuables off the bodies of dead enemy soldiers (see II Chronicles 20:14-26). The focus of Jehoshaphat was right, and God provided the victory.

Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego provide another example of how God will bless and protect those with a proper focus, even during tough times. Though Nebuchadnezzar had declared that anyone not bowing down to his ninety foot image would be burned in a blazing furnace, these three young Jews had their eyes focused somewhere else. They weren't looking at the king, or the furnace, or even the response of the crowd around them. They were looking at their God, and determined to do what they knew He commanded, regardless of the cost or consequences (see Daniel 3:1-12).

Like Jehoshaphat, these three young men were also put to the test. Their commitment to obey God only seemed to be making matters worse when the king ordered the furnace to be heated seven times hotter than usual. God honored their focus by delivering them from the burning furnace, providing both an impressive example of God's power, and a new appreciation from the king for the faith of these men (see Daniel 3:13-30).

Where is our focus? Whom are we trying to please? Who sets the agenda for our ministry or the priorities for our lifestyle?

How would we answer the questions Paul asks about himself?

*“Am I now trying to win the approval of men, or of God? Or am I trying to please men? If I were still trying to please men, I would not be a servant of Christ.”*

Galatians 1:10

The story is told of a proud, arrogant king who was captured by the enemy. Standing with his family before the conquering general to receive what everyone knew would be the death sentence, this proud king surprised everyone by begging that

the lives of his wife and children might be spared. He had been notorious for never asking anybody for anything, but had powerfully and ruthlessly taken from anybody whatever he wanted. Now, for the first time in his life, he's asking, even begging, for mercy. Not for his own life, but for those of his family.

The general was so surprised by this change in attitude that he spared the lives of all of them. Later, in private, the captured king asks his wife, "Did you notice the beautiful tapestries on the wall when we were standing before that general?" "No, I didn't see them," was her reply. "Well, did you see the expressions and intensity on the general's face when he was talking to us?" the king asked again. "No," she answered, "I didn't see them." Almost frustrated by her response the king then asks forcefully, "Woman, where were your eyes?" To which she responds, "My eyes were on the one who was willing to give his life for me."

Where are our eyes? Paul unashamedly wants us to know that his eyes are on Jesus, and unless he gets approval from Him nothing else matters.

### Faithful to God

After describing himself as an "under-rower," Paul provides a second picture to convey the ambition he had for his own ministry. The term Paul uses is "oikonomos," often translated "steward", or someone who has been given responsibility over a house, an estate, or valuables belonging to someone else.

The critical issue in Paul's mind is the requirement of a steward to be faithful, dependable, and trustworthy:

*"Now it is required that those who have been given a trust must prove faithful."*

(II Corinthians 4:2)

Perhaps Paul was familiar with the story Jesus told of the man who shares various “talents” with his servants before leaving on a journey. Upon his return, the master calls for an accounting, and those who had properly handled what had been entrusted to them were praised and rewarded (see Matthew 25:14-30).

How seriously do we consider our responsibility to God to be faithful stewards over what he has entrusted to us? What has He given us to administer?

### **His Message**

The bondage caused by sin in today’s world can only be answered by the eternal truth of God’s word. Jesus declared that, *“If you hold to my teaching you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth and the truth will set you free.”* (John 8:31-32).

Paul was later to remind his younger friend Timothy that one of his primary goals needed to be a correct handling of God’s word (see II Timothy 2:15). That is, be sure you are a faithful steward of what God has entrusted to you.

So much ignorance is recycled in today’s world. It’s similar to the old story of the man who stopped his car for a few moments in front of the jewelry store every morning en route to work at the factory. The store owner had noticed this daily practice and one day recognized the driver of the car when he entered the store as a customer. “Pardon me, sir,” the store owner asked, “but I’m curious to know why you pause each morning in front of my store.” “Oh,” the customer replied, “I stop each morning to set my watch by the clocks in your window. My job at the factory is to blow the whistle, and I want to be sure I’m accurate.” “That’s very interesting,” the jeweler responded, “I set my clocks each day by the factory whistle.”



God provides an unchanging standard that is desperately needed by the world. But as His "stewards" we must faithfully study and share what has been given to us.

### His Mission

Not only do we have a message but we also have been given a mission. Jesus left us with clear instructions:

*Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you.*

Matthew 28:19-20

As "stewards" of God we must be faithful regarding the proclamation of His message and the development of His disciples everywhere.

God has not called us to succeed but to be faithful. Noah would certainly not be successful today in the eyes of the world. He "preached" for more than a century and ended up with a congregation of less than ten, and they were all family members. But his faithfulness was pleasing to God, and that's of utmost importance.

Jesus asks, and then He answers an important question:

"Who then is the faithful and wise manager, whom the master puts in charge of his servants to give them their food allowance at the proper time? It will be good for that servant whom the master finds doing so when he returns. I tell you the truth, he will put him in charge of all his possessions."

Luke 12:42-44

Paul knew that his master is going to return, and we cannot lose sight of that same truth. We too must be faithful to both the message and the mission God has given.

Focused and faithful. To Paul these were two vital characteristics of the kind of minister he wanted to be. Are they characteristics that accurately describe each of us?

## G. P. HOLT

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## Marriage Is For Life

G. P. Holt

The greatest acts of God are associated with marriage and family life. The awe with which we approach it ought therefore also to characterize our marriage and family involvements. The respect and concern with which a person responds to God must shape his marriage and family behavior. Here are a few of the most striking acts of God related in some vital way to marriage and family.

There's the creation of human life and society. God created mankind as "male" and "female" and in the same creative breath instructed man and woman. "Be fruitful and multiply and replenish the earth. . . (Genesis 1:27-28). God understood the real nature of man and said, "It is not good that man should be alone (Genesis 2:18). The very nature of man's origin by God's creative action prompts the man to say to the woman, "This is now bone of my bones, and flesh of my flesh. . . Therefore shall a man leave his father and his mother, and shall cleave unto his wife: and they shall be one flesh" (Genesis 2:23-24).

Marriage is not a Jewish social institution. Marriage does not owe its origin to Christ's teaching. Marriage is part and parcel of man's nature.

Most young people look forward to marriage. Making the right choice has become more and more difficult. All young people have the right and the privilege to make their own choices of their life companions, but they need help. This does not mean making the decision for them. Few decisions in a

young person's life will have as many consequences as the choice of a mate. A careful selection pays big and lasting dividends. Just what does it mean to make the right choice? How can parents help their youth in this regard? Finding the right job is important; but if it becomes necessary to make a fresh start in some other field, this isn't so bad. But the satisfaction or dissatisfaction between man and wife isn't always as easy to adjust as changing careers. It takes thinking and planning. This is not a part-time job, but a life-time of love, sacrifice, kindness, and devotion. There can be an endless number of wrong turns which can read to frustrations, unhappiness, and sometimes separation, divorce, and fornication. Let us study some steps in planning how parents can assist both parties in their choices.

#### I. WHAT CAN PARENTS DO TO PREPARE CHILDREN FOR MARRIAGE?

- A. Help youth understand themselves. (1) Ability to face responsibility. (2) Interest, likes, and dislikes. (3) Personality characteristics, how to get along with others, how to give and take. (4) Physical health, stamina, willingness to hold up your part of the bargain.
- B. Help them know about the different kinds of people—to really know the real person from the phoney. Personal qualities, motives, goals, and ambitions are so important in people - if they are right.
- C. Encourage them to take a good look at the intended's family, associates, attitudes, and social behavior. They will have a new set of in-laws.
- D. Prepare them to give and forgive. We all have faults. (I John 1:8; James 5:16)

- E. Agree on the standard by which to measure conduct. (Amos 3:3) Life cannot be successfully built on the sand (Matthew 7:24-26).
- F. Together read I Corinthians 13.
- G. Teach respect for the Lord's church.
- H. Study dangers involved in marrying non-Christians. (Genesis 6:1-2; I Corinthians 7:1-17,39; I John 8:44; I Peter 3:1-2). Solomon loved strange women. (I Kings 11:1-10).

## II. WHAT SHOULD YOU LOOK FOR?

- A. Look for someone of similar background.
- B. Look for someone who has learned to be happy.
- C. Look for someone who can see deeper than "romantic" love. (The dream person may have "feet of clay.")
- D. Look for someone who can love you as you are. (This rules out the idea of reforming one another after marriage).
- E. Look for someone who is eager to work out differences as they arise. This may mean the swallowing of pride for the sake of understanding.
- F. Look for someone you can be proud to introduce to your friends. Young men study Proverbs 31.
- G. An engagement is not a time for sexual experimentation. An old saying "why buy a cow, when the milk is free" is true.
- H. Young ladies, don't scream at the sight of a mouse - and then crawl into a car with a wolf. Study Proverbs 31:1-9.

- I. Before setting the date, pray together to God for guidance. (Psalm 65:2; Hebrews 11:6).

### III. WHAT IS MARRIAGE DESIGNED TO DO?

Everyone will agree that marriage is intended to bring happiness. It should be the happiest, the fullest, the purest, the richest of all human relationships. When the marriage is unhappy, the husband suffers. The wife, the children, and the church suffer. There are no perfect marriages, because there are no perfect people. We all have faults and failures, but how to find happiness in a marriage and make it last until parted by death can only be found in the scriptures.

### IV. WHAT ARE THE RESPONSIBILITIES OF MARRIAGE?

- A. The obligation of the wife. (Ephesians 5:22-23)
- B. The obligation of the husband. (Ephesians 5:25-29)
- C. In these scriptures we will find that the duty of a husband is put in one word, "Love." It is not husband "Command your wife." It is husband "Love your wife."
- D. It must be a sacrificial love, "as Christ also loved the Church and gave Himself for it." (Ephesians 5:25)
- E. It must be a caring love, "So ought men to love their wives as their own bodies."
- F. To make a marriage you must learn to forgive. (Colossians 3:12,13).

Have you ever heard a friend say, when puzzled about something, "It's a mystery to me." That was the attitude the Apostle Paul took regarding the relationship of husband and wife and Christ and the Church. (Ephesians 5:23-32)

Few of us like to think about the mysterious, the uncommon things we hear or see. This is not only an everyday attitude for most of us, but also a widespread approach to spiritual realities. We want everything sharply defined, clearly explained, and thoroughly rational. But life refuses to be whittled down to our size. It frequently confronts us with the inexplicable; for example, the terminal cancer the doctor just discovered somewhere in your body, the bitter disappointment of an unfaithful friend in whom you had complete trust, or a marriage that after years of happiness falls apart right before your eyes. Why are marriages not lasting for life?

**Marriage is like buying a record.**

- A. The song you want is on one side but you must also take the song on the other side to get the song you want. There is a song that plays during the courtship — but after marriage you **must** listen to the flip side.
- B. You must learn to communicate, you must talk about intimacy, you must talk about the barriers to its achievement through the development of communication skills.
- C. You must learn to handle stress, change, burnout, and depression in your daily life, in marriage, and in your family life. Christian love is the glue for a good marriage (Ephesians 5:25).
- D. Today there is one divorce to every three or four marriages. There are many reasons for the rapid deterioration of today's homes: adultery, wife beating, abandonment, incompatibility, selfishness, and neglect are all given as reasons for divorce, but they all revolve around one fact. The spirit of Christ is not in that home and love has left that home. When the family lifts up Christ and His book of Divine love, that home will



be lifted to a higher spiritual plane than it has ever enjoyed previously.

## V. THE FOUNDATIONS OF A HAPPY MARRIAGE

This raises the question, “What is the foundation for a lasting, healthy, loving marriage and family?” This question is answered in at least one place in the New Testament, where the Apostle Paul takes the husband-wife love and illustrates Christ’s relationship to the church. Look at his concern for the foundation or basic attitudes necessary for a healthy marriage.

First, Paul stresses the importance of mutual respect and love between husband and wife. “Wives, be in subjection unto your own husbands, as unto the Lord,” and “Husbands love your wives, even as Christ also loved the church, and gave himself up for it. . .” (Ephesians 5:22,25).

## THE MYSTERY OF MARRIAGE

Second, Paul urges a self-forgetfulness that thinks of the other mate first and sacrifices for his or her good. This, in fact, is the root meaning of the word used in the original language of this passage for “love.” The wife who constantly and very obviously fights for her “rights” never sees the beauty of Paul’s admonition: “But as the church is subject to Christ, so let the wives also be to their husbands in everything” (Ephesians 5:24). The husband who is unsure and self-centered should listen to Paul’s description of love: “Even so ought husbands also to love their own wives as their own bodies. He that loveth his own wife loveth himself: for no man ever hated his own flesh; but nourisheth and cherisheth it, even as Christ also the church: because we are members of his body” (Ephesians 5:28-30).

Third, Paul says that strong, happy marriages call for the full commitment of each mate's life and body for the achieving, by God's grace and power, of marriage's "oneness" of love and service. Another New Testament passage says: "The wife hath not power over her own body, but the husband: and likewise also the husband hath not power over his own body, but the wife" (1 Corinthians 7:4). The husband who comes to a love of his wife like Christ's sacrificial love for the church lays the basic foundation for a lasting marriage. This kind of commitment, however, does not arise overnight. It requires the fullest possible understanding of that one in whose loving hands you are placing your very life as husband or wife!

Fourth, the Apostle shows throughout this discussion that an exclusive attachment for life to one's mate eliminates all thought, and certainly all practice, of sexual immorality. It is because of the very attitudes already mentioned that Paul concludes: "For this cause shall a man leave his father and his mother, and shall cleave to his wife; and the two shall become one flesh" (Ephesians 5:31). The commitment of one's life to the life of another, the oneness that results daily from this mutual giving, fills one's heart and life with positive moral thought and Christlike conduct.

Solomon once said, "The fear of Jehovah is the beginning of knowledge" (Proverbs 1:7). When we think openly and honestly about God, our hearts are awed.

## **MARRIAGE AND THE NEW LIFE IN CHRIST**

Marriage is the direct result of God's creative action. The marriage relationship best illustrates the love and life that God and his people experience. The present tide can be stemmed and the trend reversed. To the entire world we must proclaim: "Let marriage be held in honor among all, and let the marriage bed be undefiled; for God will judge the immoral and adulterous" (Hebrews 13:4, RSV).

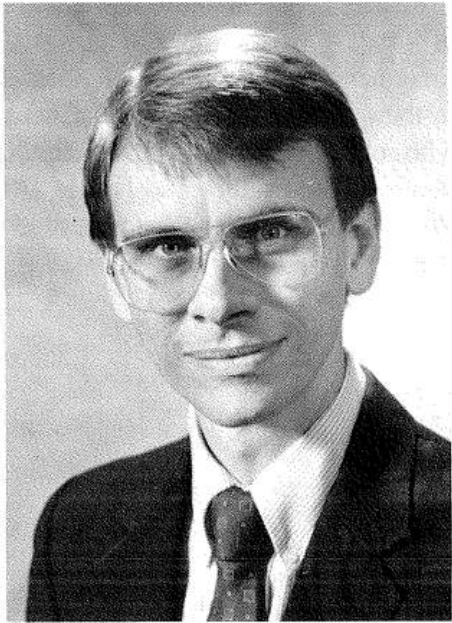
Readily apparent in this discussion is the continual association of God, Christ, the church, and marriage—not in any sacramental way, not in any formal or ritualistic sense, but in the qualities of life which Christ creates in every person who obeys him. These are the qualities vital to happy, successful marriages and homes. And in surrender to Christ alone is found the power to become “a new man” or “a new woman” (2 Corinthians 5:17).

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# **We Preach Christ Crucified**

**Jack R. Reese**

Few peoples in the history of the world have struggled as much as Americans over their sense of identity. The underlying question to many of our relationships is, “Who am I?,” or more specifically, “How am I perceived to be?” How do I come across to others? Do they like me? Do they trust me? If I changed how others perceive me, could I get ahead? What can I do to enhance my image? my public identity?

That is not to say that we all suffer from the burden of image management. Some of us are too busy simply living—working, playing, advancing, enjoying—to worry too much about how we are perceived by others. But by and large we are a people caught up in issues of identity, or more specifically, image: of style more than content, of impressions more than substance.

Neil Postman has described this current obsession with identity. In his widely-acclaimed book, *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, Postman describes life in the “Age of Show Business”: “In courtrooms, classrooms, operating rooms, board rooms, churches and even airplanes, Americans no longer talk to each other, they entertain each other. They do not exchange ideas; they exchange images.”<sup>1</sup>

In numerous ways we all are concerned about how we are perceived. We worry about the clothes we wear. (What is the “in” color this year? Are bright, flowery ties still in style? Are shoulder pads going out?) We are aware of what cars we drive, what part of town we live in, how our home reflects our status or our values.

And our concern for identity overlaps into the groups to which we belong, not the least of which is our congregation. Ask a member to describe her congregation and she is likely (and perhaps appropriately) going to supply some adjective: it's a friendly church, an evangelistic church, a dynamic church, an old church, a conservative church, a progressive church, a sound church, an open church, a biblical church, a New Testament church.

We likely know ourselves (and may be known in the community) for certain strengths or ministries. "Our church has a great single's program." "It has a wonderful youth group." "You would love our preacher." "We enjoy being together." "We have great retreats." "We have the neatest building." "We serve coffee and doughnuts every Sunday morning."

It is interesting to me, however, that we rarely use the language of the cross to describe our churches. I'm not sure that is a major indictment against the church. It is not surprising that this is the case. But we rarely describe ourselves to outsiders (or among ourselves) as a cross-centered church or a "cruciform" church or a church where members place themselves beneath the cross. In fact, that seems a rather odd thing to communicate about ourselves, and we are not even sure the world would have any idea what we meant.

That is not to say the world does not associate the Christian community with the cross of Christ. After all, for centuries, for millennia, Christians have talked about the cross, sung about the cross, and identified themselves with the cross. In the larger world of Christendom, churches have traditionally erected crosses on or in their buildings. Many people wear a small cross around their necks or even on their ears.

In our congregations, even if a cross is not displayed in the building, it is frequently mentioned in our services. We sing of "The Old, Rugged Cross" where our trophies at last are

laid down. And we affirm that “At the Cross, At the Cross” is where we first saw the light. And we declare that we fain would take our stand “Beneath the Cross of Jesus.” While our congregational and personal identities may not always be articulated in the language of the cross, we do not hide it from anyone. Nor do we express embarrassment about it. It is simply a part of what we believe, a part of who we are. If we have a crisis of identity within our congregation, it is not likely to be over the crucifixion of Jesus.

### **A Church in Crisis**

The church to whom the apostle Paul wrote in the city of Corinth was a church experiencing a crisis of identity. The church was as diverse as that of any city in the first century. Some had a Jewish background. Some were Gentiles. Some were slaves. Some free. Some were wealthy citizens and influential in the community as well as the church. Apparently most were poor, but some were very rich. A number of them had been conspicuously pagan before their conversion to Christ. This was not a homogeneous church with a clearly defined identity.

Even a cursory reading of 1 Corinthians exposes divisions which tore at the church. Apparently different groups identified themselves with different leaders (1:10-12; 3:4,5). Some of the division fell along socio-economic lines (11:17-34). This divisiveness had a serious impact on the community when it assembled (11:18,19).

But perhaps of greater concern was the division between the Corinthian church as a whole and Paul. This letter is a corrective letter, the second of its kind to that church. Some time later he visited them, an occasion he called “painful” (2 Cor. 2:1). He was frustrated at them, and they were apparently upset at him. At the time 1 Corinthians was written their relationship seemed ready to burst into open hostility.

Paul felt that some of them had judged him wrongly (9:3). In the letter he has to defend his actions; why, for example, he sometimes eats in the marketplace, sometimes not (ch. 8). He defends his tentmaking vocation as well as his right to make money through his preaching (9:3-14). Without question, Paul's relationship with them was strained.

At the heart of the problem was the presumed maturity of the Corinthian community. They sought a high level of spirituality and felt they had found it based in Hellenistic philosophy. They were enamored with wisdom and felt they had moved beyond Paul. They were pursuing spiritual meat while Paul was still preaching milk. And compared to Apollos, Paul did not speak with much eloquence. He was, in fact, ordinary—not one who should order them around. They, on the other hand, were extraordinary with their highly-developed wisdom. They were the truly spiritual ones and were impressed with their gifts, especially the ability to speak in tongues (a gift they may have thought made them on par with the angels, 13:1). By means of the spirit they had gained special wisdom. They had outgrown Paul.

### **The Heart of Christian Identity**

The Corinthian Christians were engaged in two idolatries: the desire for power and the desire for wisdom, typified respectively by Jews and Gentiles. They wanted power against each other and power against Paul. More than that, they wanted to see power demonstrated in their midst. They loved the manifestation of power as evidenced in the showiest of spiritual gifts. It is not surprising that speaking in tongues was the gift they most earnestly desired.

They were like the Jews who demanded a messiah who would come in power. God had acted powerfully in their past. They anticipated a messiah who would act mightily in their midst. The Jews constantly demanded of Jesus: "Show us a



sign” (e.g. John 6:30). Demonstrate your power; legitimate your authority; show us your kingdom.

The Corinthian Christians reflected this characteristic. And they demonstrated it with their internecine struggles and their opposition to Paul.

But the Christians at Corinth worshipped not only power but wisdom. They were consumed with the pursuit of wisdom. Like good Greeks, they “looked for wisdom.” In the words of Herodotus, “All Greeks were zealous for every kind of learning.” And the Greeks at Corinth were no exception. They prided themselves in their wisdom. It was their badge, their identity. Their understanding of the Gospel was wiser than Paul’s. It was more sophisticated, more on the cutting edge.

Power and wisdom were their ideals. Power and wisdom were their goals. Power and wisdom were their identity.

But Paul is rather pointed. Rather than giving them the power and the wisdom they demanded, God gave them the startling unexpected: weakness and foolishness. In the words of Gordon Fee, Paul confronts them: “So you think the gospel is a form of *sophia* (wisdom)? How foolish can you get? Look at its message. It’s based on the story of a crucified Messiah. Who in the name of wisdom would have dreamed that up? Only God is so wise as to be so foolish.”<sup>2</sup>

Rather than a God who clothes himself in wisdom or a God who impresses us with his power, our God has come in apparent weakness. What wisdom would have ever envisioned a crucified God? What human intellect would have ever conceived a God who would be humiliated, discredited as a failure, disgraced as a criminal? It was folly, madness.

It is no wonder that the Corinthian Christians ran from the notion. They underplayed the cross. They were somewhat embarrassed by the scandal of it. They spoke of other things. They pursued wisdom. They sought power. They constructed their lofty identity. They celebrated their superiority.

But Paul would have none of it. “We preach a crucified Christ.” We proclaim what may appear to be foolishness to the world. We declare what may appear weak to the world. We will not run from the scandal of Christ’s death but will confess it openly. We will not downplay the cross but herald it boldly. If the world think it foolish, so be it. It is at the cross that we will take our stand.

### **Living the Cross in Our Own World**

It has often been difficult for us in the 20th century church to identify with the Corinthian Christians. After all, we don’t exhibit the kind of party spirit they displayed. We don’t have anyone living in an incestuous relationship in our congregation. No one is getting drunk at the communion table. No one is gloating about their ability to speak in tongues.

Moreover, I fear that Paul’s strong injunction about preaching a crucified Christ is largely disregarded. Oh, it is spoken of and read. It is examined and evaluated. It is upheld and encouraged. It is sung about and preached. But the sheer scandal of it—and therefore its power—is lost because we have not grasped how Corinthian we are in the contemporary church. No less than Paul’s original readers, the church today is in danger of losing its identity in its pursuit of power and wisdom.

Our drive for power is subtle but is nevertheless manifested in several ways. Congregations are invested with status on the basis of size and location, or how well known the preacher is, or how much it has grown, or how influential it is among the area churches. Preachers too often vie for brotherhood prominence and the opportunities to speak at the “plum” lectureships. The assessment of their relative worth is often judged by the prominence of their congregations or their reputation as speakers.

Congregational leaders—elders, deacons, ministry leaders—are too often chosen because of their social status or business

accomplishments or their deftness in decision making. Spiritual maturity is difficult to discern.

For all of us, there is a tendency to be competitive, to want our way, to want to receive recognition for the things we do. It is not unusual for us to discover we are worshiping at the altar of power.

And like the Corinthian Christians, the contemporary church is vulnerable to the exaltation of our own wisdom. The attention of church leaders is too often turned to the design and implementation of its programs. We assume that if we think carefully through our strategies we can achieve no small measure of success. We promote our congregational strengths and ministries. We define ourselves by our youth program, our singles program, our preacher, our building—ourselves.

Or we may take pride in our correct understandings, our doctrinal precision, our ability to articulate the correct position on a given issue. In our history we have occasionally found pleasure in out-arguing other religious groups. At times we have been guilty of exclusivism or, more specifically, arrogance, like the Corinthian Christians.

We need to hear the indictment of Paul. Your wisdom is limited; your power is insufficient. Your pursuit of wisdom is futile; your drive for power is fruitless. They are the instruments of human desire. They are the objects of human longing. And they will subvert the ways of God within the church.

God's ways appear weak and foolish. The way of the cross will lead to suffering rather than glory. It will call for a ministry of hiddenness rather than a ministry of recognition. It will lead a congregation to faithfulness rather than success.

A congregation under the cross will not pride itself in its accomplishments or compare itself to others. Its worth will not be measured by size or acclaim. A church under the cross will not be arrogant, exclusive, or judgmental. It will never

assume that its understanding is the understanding of God and that its wisdom is superior to the wisdom of others. The cross foils all attempts at creating an air-tight system of doctrines which relies on the logic and expertise of its makers.

Rather, the cross propels the church into the world. It calls the church to suffer with the suffering of Christ. It summons the church to identify with the injured and oppressed people of the world. It bids the Christian to enter the world and die.

The way of the cross is not the way of glory but of sacrifice. It is the way of pain and embarrassment and humiliation and risk and folly. But nevertheless, this we proclaim. This we live.

And here is the irony. When we boldly put forward the scandal of the crucified Christ, there will be some who will encounter this Jesus and be touched and changed—not by our power and wisdom, not by our programs and correctness, not by our expertise and competence, not by our well-constructed image or carefully-conceived identity, but by the power of Jesus who, in his disgraceful death, offers grace to strengthen us with his power and imbue us with his wisdom.

To him be the power and the wisdom and the glory and the honor. Amen.

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<sup>1</sup>Neil Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business*. New York: Penguin, 1985, p. 92.

<sup>2</sup>Gordon Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987, p. 67.

## MIKE COPE

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**Work and Ministry:** For two and a half years, Mike preached for the Pine Valley Church in Wilmington, NC. In 1984, he began his work as pulpit minister for the College Church of Christ in Searcy, Arkansas. There he taught a Wednesday night Bible class with 1700 students. In August 1991, he became the pulpit minister for Highland Church of Christ in Abilene.

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## The Resurrection That Remains

Mike Cope

In John Updike's fourth and final novel about Harry "Rabbit" Angstrom, the local basketball star turned Toyota distributor through whom Updike scrutinizes four decades of American culture, Harry dwells on the bleakness of his late middle age. He is consumed by thoughts of impending death—thoughts fed by the crash of the Pan Am 747 over Lockerbie, Scotland.

As he dwells on "those bodies tumbling down like wet melon seeds" he fears his own approaching end. In an ICU room after a heart attack, Harry realizes that his obsessions with the wreck isn't so much about the victims as about himself:

He too is falling, helplessly falling, toward death. The fate awaiting him behind this veil of medical attention is as absolute as that which greeted those bodies fallen smack upon the boggy Scottish earth like garbage bags full of water. Smack, splat, bodies bursting across the golf courses and heathery lanes of Lockerbie drenched in night. What met them was no more than what awaits him. Reality broke upon those passengers as they sat carving their airline chicken with the unwrapped silver or dozing with tubes piping Barry Manilow into their ears and that same icy black reality has broken upon him; death is not a domesticated pet of life but a beast that . . . will swallow him, it is truly there under him, vast as a planet at night, gigantic and totally his. His

death. The burning intensifies in his sore throat and he feels all but suffocated by terror.<sup>1</sup>

Because of the deep and dark appearance of death it is often pictured as a river. In Greek mythology, it was the River Styx, a dreary, poisonous river, that ran between earth and Hades. One crossing would have to pay a fee to Charon, the boatman who ferried people across.

In John Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress*, Christian and Hopeful come to the Celestial City in the land of Beulah. But between them and the Celestial City is a deep, scary river through which everyone must pass.

Now I further saw, that betwixt them and the gate was a river; but there was no bridge to go over, and the river was very deep. At the sight, therefore, of this river, the pilgrims were much stunned; but the men that went with them said, "You must go through, or you cannot come at the gate."

. . . The pilgrims then, especially Christian, began to despond in his mind, and looked this way and that; but no way could be found by them by which they might escape the river.

Even the old spiritual said "I Have One More River to Cross." My brother, my sister, my father, my mother—they'll all be waiting, but they can't help me across.

There is a question lurking behind this fear of the river of death: Is death a transition or a final statement? Is it a period or a comma? This is the question that dogs us all of our lives. Everything is either dead or dying. I'm 35 and I'm dying. It may take me half a century to finish the job, but I'm headed toward death.

Can't you identify with the question? Have you buried a parent or a best friend and felt the chill blow over the river?

Have you sat up all night listening to pumps and watching air being taken in with great difficulty? Have you maybe flirted with the river with one of your own children? Do you still remember the exact location of the hands on the clock when the call came from the hospital?

Then come to the comfort of 1 Corinthians 15, a chapter that dares peek across the width of the river.

### **The Background for 1 Corinthians 15**

Paul's treatise on resurrection confronts a deep problem in the church in Corinth. Apparently the believers there were so filled with the "already" dimension of the Christian faith that they neglected the crucial "not yet" aspect. We might say, to borrow from modern categories, that their eschatological mindset was triumphal or overly realized.

We can feel the bitter punch when Paul chides:

Already you have all you want! Already you have become rich! You have become kings—and that without us! How I wish that you really had become kings so that we might be kings with you! For it seems to me that God has put us apostles on display at the end of the procession, like men condemned to die in the arena. We have been made a spectacle to the whole universe, to angels as well as to men. We are fools for Christ, but you are so wise in Christ! We are weak, but you are strong! You are honored, we are dishonored! To this very hour we go hungry and thirsty, we are in rags, we are brutally treated, we are homeless. (1 Corinthians 4:8-11).

As they read the letter surely the believers didn't miss Paul's tongue buried deeply in his cheek!

To the Corinthians, salvation implied a spiritual existence they already possessed fully, shown especially in their



glossolalia. They believed fully in the resurrection of Christ, which gave them this spiritual existence and freed them from the entanglement of the material world.

What they denied was the future, bodily resurrection of the dead. Such a resurrection would be unnecessary, maybe even disgusting, because their new life was lived on a spiritual plane. They had been released from concerns so material as to what will happen to the body.

### **Paul's Response**

While some might write off the Corinthians' misunderstanding as a minor problem of eschatology that just needed to be fine tuned, Paul's discerning mind spotted an attack on the heart of the Christian faith. For if the bodily resurrection of the dead is denied, belief in the resurrection of Christ is also jeopardized. While the death of Jesus was "once and for all," the same can't be said of his resurrection.

The resurrection of Christ is not "completed" in its full meaning and consequence until the future resurrection of the dead takes place. Therefore, Christ's resurrection cannot be separated from the future apocalyptic resurrection of the dead, because this first resurrection will reach its full significance only when all the dead have been raised. . . . The resurrection of Christ is therefore not so much an event in the midst of history as an event that inaugurates the end of history.<sup>2</sup>

In this great resurrection chapter, Paul reasserts the "not yet" dimension of faith and urges the church to relate spiritually to their bodies and to historical existence.

In the first eleven verses Paul establishes common ground. The Corinthians would agree with him that Christ has been raised: that is fundamental to the gospel which Paul had

preached, which they had believed, and on which they had taken their stand. The listing of resurrection appearances, then, wasn't to prove something they questioned but to place openly on the table their common belief.

We overhear an ominous note when Paul says that this is the gospel that will save them if they hold firmly to it. The possibility of their believing in vain is not just an outlandish hypothetical one.

In verses 12-28 we meet the issue undisguised: "For if the dead are not raised, then Christ has not been raised." The stakes are high! The resurrection of Christ set in motion a chain of events that involves the future resurrection of our bodies. His resurrection wasn't the final harvest of the season, but the firstfruits (v. 20).

If the dead aren't raised, then:

- Christ hasn't been raised,
- the gospel message and their faith are useless;
- they are false witnesses;
- they are still stuck in their sins; and
- death means perishing.

We can assume these are conclusion the Corinthians wouldn't be willing to live with. They had failed to make the connection. But Paul insists that they realize what is called into question by denying bodily resurrection: forgiveness of sins, hope for the future, even the character of God himself—the God who made our bodies in the first place.

Paul highlights the inexorable chain reaction begun by Christ's resurrection in verses 20-28. We have all been made alive in Christ. But there is a critical "not yet" aspect that awaits his return when the final enemy, death, is destroyed.

Then the apostle mocks certain of the Corinthians' (v. 29) and his own (vss. 30-32) actions if there is no resurrection. There is a simple explanation of what the baptism for the dead is: I just don't know what it is! But whatever Paul refers to,

we can assume the Corinthians understood that it was a foolish practice if there is no resurrection.

Likewise, Paul's dangerous "die-every-day" life ought immediately to be swapped for a safer "eat-drink-and-be-merry" one if the resurrection is all hype.

Beginning in verse 35 Paul wrestles with the question of what form our bodily resurrection will take. Though it's hard for us to imagine the nature of the body he describes, it's clear what Paul does not envision: either a disembodied existence or a mere resuscitation of our present bodies.

Rather than being resuscitated, our bodies will be gloriously transformed. There will be both continuity and discontinuity. Like seeds, our bodies will be planted in one form and raised in another. God will transform the natural ones we have now into spiritual ones (v. 44). "We will be changed," then, in the sense that our bodies will be clothed with immortality. They will be fitted for eternity.

With this fuller view of God's redeeming work in Christ, Paul can say confidently that death is swallowed up in victory.

### **Implications for Us**

There are so many ways this critical chapter intersects our lives—not only in what we believe but in how we live.

It certainly impacts the way we grieve. It takes us to the gravesides of parents, children, and friends and reminds us that Acts II of God's drama still remains. This Act has already been written; it just hasn't been performed.

In our grief for those we miss, we now remember that God will transform their "corruptible" bodies. The lame will walk; the deaf will hear; the blind will see; those with Alzheimer's will remember. I'll even be able to ask my daughter what it was like to be mentally disabled (retarded).

Actually, walking, hearing, seeing, remembering—these are just ways with our limited imaginations to try to guess what

the healing of transformation might encompass. But who knows what these glorious bodies will be like? As we grieve now, we shed both a tear of sadness and a tear of joyful anticipation.

This chapter also affects the way we live. How appropriate that Paul ends with a call for diligence in our Christian walk:

Therefore, my dear brothers, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain. (vs. 58)

Because of this great work God has accomplished and is still working out, we should be fully devoted to the Lord's work. Nothing—not false teaching nor immoral life options—should detract us.

And the chapter most certainly impacts the way we approach our own deaths. Just as there is a Christian lifestyle, there must be a Christian deathstyle. According to Paul, the scorpion of death still moves about, but the stinger of poison has been removed.

The old spiritual said that none of the people I know can usher me across the river of death safely. But it continues:

*My Jesus, he'll be a' waitin' there,  
and he can help me across.*

So Bunyan writes on:

Then they asked the men if the waters were all of a depth. They said, "No . . . you shall find it deeper or shallower as you believe in the King of the place.

They then addressed themselves to the water; and, entering, Christian began to sink, and crying out to his good friend Hopeful, he said, "I sink in deep waters; the billows go over my head; all His waves go over me."

Then said the other, "Be of good cheer, my brother; I feel the bottom, and it is good."

. . . And, with that, Christian brake out with a loud voice, "Oh, I see Him again; and He tells me, 'When thou passest through the waters, I will be with thee; and through the rivers, they shall not overflow thee.' " Then they both took courage. . . . Thus they got over.

This belief that Christ has conquered death and that God will transform our bodies explains a lot about John Lee Dykes, a former shepherd at the College Church in Searcy, Arkansas, who died in the summer of 1989. When, at age eighty-four, he was diagnosed as having a rapid-spreading cancer, he and his wife Gertrude, asked the church to pray for "his release"—not healing, but death.

On June 18 he woke up twice in his sleep between 1 a.m. and 3 a.m., both times saying clearly, "I want to go home." And at 4 a.m., he died.

An odd request—to go ahead and die. The world can't fathom it. But John Lee Dykes believed that what God had begun in the resurrection of Jesus Christ he would complete in the raising and transforming of his body.

"But thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ."

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<sup>1</sup>John Updike, *Rabbit At Rest* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1990), p. 176.

<sup>2</sup>J. Christiaan Beker, *The Triumph of God: The Essence of Paul's Thought* (Fortress Press: Minneapolis, 1990), pp. 72f.



# **FEATURED CLASSES**

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**Other Fields of Interest:** He is a frequent speaker at lectureships, workshops and special meetings on personal development for churches, youth groups, schools, businesses and other professional organizations.

He has recently written the book, *Learning to Love*, published by Gospel Advocate, 1988.



## **Habits of a Loving Heart**

**Willard N. Tate**

### **Doing the Right Thing for the Right Reason**

Students enroll in college for many reasons. Even the good students, the ones who work hard to make the most of their opportunities, put in the long hours for a variety of reasons. One student, whom I'll never forget, was there for the best reason possible.

Soap Pich was from Cambodia. As did the rest of the class, early in the term, he gave his lifeline, or brief life's story, in front of the class. Soap said that when he was about five years old his family enjoyed a middle-class lifestyle, which meant a lot of luxury and social prestige in Cambodia. But when the communists took control of the country, they immediately rounded up all of the rich and/or educated men and led them to a field where they were shot like animals.

Fortunately, Soap's father was one of the few people spared. He was needed by the communists because of his ability to keep the phone system working. However, he was closely guarded while he was working, and the family was also under constant observation. Soap told the class about how his father would play with him and the family dog his dad loved so much. When his father would go to the store on his scooter, the dog would ride with him. When his dad bought sunglasses or a hat for himself, he'd buy the same for his dog.

Then one day, Soap said, when they were returning from the store, the communists captured him and took him away. He never saw him again.

“You mean the dog?” the class asked.

“No, my dad,” Soap answered.

Soap was about seven at the time. The communists separated the rest of the entire family after that, so Soap was alone. He told the class how he cried himself to sleep every night for three months afterward.

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*“The loving heart seeks to do things for the right reasons.”*

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Soap said that there had been only one guard watching his father working on the phone lines. At any time his father could have overtaken the guard and made his escape, but the guard had repeatedly told him, “If you run, we’ll kill your family.” His father had seen it happen many times, and he didn’t doubt they would carry out their threat so he chose to stay to protect his family and, by doing so, lost his life.

Miraculously, Soap and the rest of the family escaped to America, and that’s how he came to be a student in my class. “My dad died so I could live,” he told the students in conclusion, “and he always wanted me to get an education.”

What kind of student do you suppose Soap was? How hard do you think he worked to take full advantage of what his father died to make possible? Love motivated his dad to give himself, and love motivated Soap to give his best effort day after day.

It’s entirely possible, of course, to do even the right thing for the wrong reason. A perfect example of that is found in John 8:1-11. Some “teachers of the law” and Pharisees brought to Jesus a woman who had been caught in adultery. It was right and proper that she (and the man involved) be punished for her immorality.

But why did those men bring her to Jesus? He wasn’t a judge. Were they concerned mostly with seeing the Law of Moses upheld? Did they want the woman to experience the forgiveness

of sins Jesus was preaching about? No, their reason was that they were hoping Jesus would say or do something that would allow them to accuse *Him* of violating the law. Their only goal was to create an incident over which they could condemn Him. The fate of the woman, physically or spiritually, was of no real concern to them. Love played *no part* in their motivation.

The loving heart consistently seeks to do things for the *right reason*. As the Lord told the prophet Samuel, “The Lord does not look at the things man looks at. Man looks at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart” (I Samuel 16:7). Our motivation for what we do means everything to Him.

### Jesus’ Clear Teaching

Jesus made the importance of our reasons for what we do and say unmistakably clear. “Be careful not to do your ‘acts of righteousness’ before men, to be seen by them,” He said in Matthew 6:1. “If you do, you will have no reward from your Father in heaven.” In other words, doing the right things in order to receive the praise of other people will get you that and nothing else.

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*“If . . . have not love, I gain nothing.”*

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Then He talked about three different kinds of good things we can do, things very important to devout Jews. First, He said, “When you give to the needy, do not announce it with trumpets, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and on the streets, to be honored by men. I tell you the truth, they have received their reward in full. But when you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your giving may be in secret. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you” (Matthew 6:2-4).

Next He said this about prayer: “When you pray, do not be like the hypocrites, for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the street corners to be seen by men. I tell you the truth, they have received their reward in full. When you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father, who is unseen. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you” (Matthew 6:5-6).

Finally, Jesus said about fasting: “When you fast, do not look somber as the hypocrites do, for they disfigure their faces to show men they are fasting. I tell you the truth, they have received their reward in full. But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face [in other words, dress and groom yourself just like always], so that it will not be obvious to men that you are fasting, but only to your Father, who is unseen; and your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you” (Matthew 6:16-18).

Giving to the needy, praying, and fasting are three important practices, not only to ancient (and modern) Jews, but also to Christians. Yet even such pious activities (not to mention teaching Sunday school, leading singing, preaching, etc.) can be done for wrong reasons. And Jesus made it perfectly clear what we can expect if we try to serve and worship Him for any reason other than love. In the first three verses of I Corinthians 13, Paul listed a number of outstandingly good things a person can do or possess: (1) speak in the tongues of angels, (2) have all knowledge and great faith, (3) give your life for the cause of Christ. Yet he concluded, “If I . . . have not love, I gain nothing.”

Unfortunately, there's a gospel of success that preaches well to an eager audience in America today. Serve God, says this heresy, and He'll make and keep you healthy, happy, and financially prosperous. But try selling that to Jesus' loyal followers in Africa, in China, in South America, or in much of our own country where poverty is a common way of life.

No, the rewards of God are not primarily material. If we look back at Matthew 5 and the beatitudes, we see Jesus offering such spiritual rewards as comfort, righteousness, mercy, and the privileges of being called God's children.

### **When Love is the Motivation**

What happens when love is the main motivation? What practical effects does it have in our lives? Let's look at several things that occur.

First, the goal of loving others will give our lives meaning. I spend most of my time with young people, and it amazes and saddens me to see how little meaning they have. When I ask students to write their life's philosophy in my class, many of them say that's the first time they've spent even a minute thinking about it. But the happiest people in the world are those who are convinced their lives have meaning and have tailored their lives accordingly.

Every once in a while, I'll come across a newspaper or magazine article profiling some extremely successful person in one line of work or another. This person invariably works longer and harder than 99 percent of the rest of us, week in and week out. But is the person unhappy about that? Is he or she complaining? No, the individual wouldn't have it any other way! Why? Because the person loves what he or she is doing and draws great fulfillment from it. Let me give you one such example of real success.

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*"The happiest people in the world are those  
whose lives have meaning."*

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In an interview a few years ago, Mother Teresa of Calcutta, India — the nun who takes the dying and other unwanted people off the streets and cares for them — was asked when a typical

day for her began. She answered that she started with prayer at 4:30. And what did she do after early-morning prayer?

“We try to pray through our work by doing it with Jesus, for Jesus, to Jesus. That helps us put our whole heart and soul into doing it. The dying, the crippled, the mentally ill, the unwanted, the unloved — they are Jesus in disguise” (a reference to Matthew 25:31-46: “Whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine. . .”).

Then she went on to explain her perspective of her life’s mission: “I don’t claim anything of the work. It is His [God’s] work. I am like a little pencil in His hand. That is all. He does the thinking. He does the writing. The pencil has nothing to do with it. The pencil has only to be allowed to be used” (*Time*, 12/4/89, p. 11).

Does that sound like a person who is motivated by love for God and others? Of course it does. Mother Teresa has learned that successful, fulfilling life. And as a result, people come from all over the world to volunteer their time helping in her work. She’s a poor woman who labors incredibly long and difficult hours, yet people desperately want what she’s got.

The reason is simple. Most people feel no real meaning in life; yet deep within each of us, God has planted the truth that life *ought* to have meaning beyond “eat, drink, and be merry.” And until we align ourselves with that purpose, we can achieve and buy all we want, and we’ll still be bored and frustrated and empty. Folks who spend their days buying cars and clothes and rings don’t seem to know — or are trying hard not to admit — that empty lives are just as empty when they’re filled only with material things. It’s very possible to be in *Who’s Who* and not know what’s what.

The actor Jack Lemmon summed this all up when he said, “Like a lot of people, I used to think success meant having money or fame. And I figured it ended all your problems. It doesn’t. They just change. You get some new problems just

as big. A man who sweeps streets can be a success if he loves what he is doing and he does it as well as he possibly can.”

Loving what you’re doing and having the right motives for doing it — that’s what will make you a success.

A second, related thing that love motivation will do is to give our lives direction. If we have direction, it becomes much easier to decide how best to spend our time each day. I hope you’ve started thinking about what kind of purpose God has for you. But how do you decide where to go from there?

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*“It’s possible to be in the Who’s Who and not know What’s What.”*

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It’s helpful to imagine you’ve just been told by your doctor that you have only six months to live. I don’t mean to be morbid, but given that reality, how would you choose to spend your time? What things do you know you’d just *have* to do? What things would you *like* to do? And what are some things you’re already doing — maybe things that seem pretty important now — that you know you wouldn’t do at all? If you answer those three questions, you’ll have a good handle on what’s really important and how you ought to spend your time each day.

It’s amazing what we can do when we understand our priorities and are properly motivated. A humorous story is told of an important football game played by a famous team. There were two minutes left in the game, and the team was six points ahead when they got possession of the ball again. The coach told his quarterback to play it safe and try to run out the clock, sealing the victory.

The young quarterback had ideas of his own, however. He went back to the huddle and said to his teammates, “Hey, coach says to play it safe. That’s what the other team thinks we’re going to do, so let’s surprise them and run a pass play instead.”

He threw the pass. But a defensive back from the other team (who had the speed of a sprinter) cut in front of the intended receiver, intercepted the pass, and took off running the other way for what looked like a sure, game-winning touchdown.

The quarterback, not known for being very fast, took off after the guy, ran him down, and tackled him at the five-yard line. It proved to be a game-saving tackle, as their defense shut the other team down while the clock ran out.

After the game, the losing coach came up to the winner and said, “Hey, all I had heard was how slow your quarterback was, yet he ran down my speedster!”

“Yeah,” the winning coach answered, “but you have to understand. Your man was running for six points. My man was running for his life.”

Knowing what you’re running for does make a difference. And we as Christians need to understand that we’re here to make the world a better place. We do that by sharing the gospel in love, and we do it by acting in love toward everyone we meet. Beyond that, God has a unique purpose for each of us, and we need to find it and direct our lives accordingly.

If we don’t we’ll be like the hound dog that starts tracking aimlessly. First he scents a deer, and he runs that for a while. Then he catches the trail of a jack rabbit, and next he flushes a covey of quail. By the time his owner finds him, he’s barking down a gopher hole. It’s so easy to follow every interesting trail that comes along and end up barking down a gopher hole when we don’t have our calling and direction clearly in mind.

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*“I’m doing a great work here. I can’t come down.”*

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The third thing a goal of love will do for us is to lift us above criticism. Criticism is a part of life, especially if you try to



change anything, even for the better. And handling it is so much easier if you know what you're doing and why.

You remember the story of Nehemiah, the Old Testament hero who was cupbearer to King Artaxerxes of Persia when God called him to go to Jerusalem and rebuild its walls. While he was doing that, four times his enemies came and criticized him and challenged him to come down. But all four times, he responded, "I'm doing a great work here. I can't come down."

It's so important that we, like Nehemiah, stay focused on our God-given purpose. Yet it's so easy to get distracted. And all too often, the things for which we're criticized and for which we criticize others in church are petty concerns. A week later, we don't even remember them, but the wounds we cause each other take years to heal.

So often the world criticizes us (and we *may* criticize others likewise) just because our meaning or direction is not understood. A great example of this is the story of the symphony orchestra that had practiced and practiced for a great concert. And in one piece, a flute player was positioned offstage so that at just the right moment, he could start playing, and his music would float in beautifully from the side. Since he couldn't see the conductor and vice versa, they had rehearsed the timing very carefully.

The night of the concert arrived, and when the time came, the flute music floated in from offstage right on queue. Then all of a sudden, there was a loud, squeaky sound, followed by silence.

The conductor was furious! He couldn't wait to confront that flute player after the concert and chew him out. When the concert ended, the conductor searched out the flute player and went striding toward him, his face an angry scowl.

Seeing him approach, the flute player said, "Wait, wait, let me explain what happened! I was counting time, and I came in perfectly, didn't I?"

“Right,” said the conductor.

“Well, right after I started to play, this monster of a guy came up behind me and said, ‘Say, you fool, don’t you know there’s a concert going on out there?’ He grabbed me and nearly choked me to death!”

The world can do the same kind of thing to us, even when we’re doing good deeds. It will choke us almost to death and say, “Fool! There’s a concert going on out there, and you’re disturbing it!” Criticism is inevitable. But having the right reason for what we’re doing can make all the difference in the world. It will give us strength and wisdom like Nehemiah’s to stay focused and get the job done.

### **Other Good Goals**

Although love is our primary, overriding motivation, other good goals are worthy of our pursuit as well. I’ll describe three briefly.

For one, we know it is God’s will for us to become more and more like His Son, Jesus Christ. “For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers” (Romans 8:29). God not only wants that, but He also works actively in our lives to bring it about, training us through discipline. As the writer to the Hebrews put it, “My son, do not make light of the Lord’s disciplines, and do not lose heart when he rebukes you, because the Lord disciplines those he loves, and he punishes everyone he accepts as a son” (Hebrews 12:5-6).

A good goal, then, is to work in cooperation with God as He develops Christlike character in us. We can accept His discipline, learn, and grow, or we can resist and be frustrated. The choice is ours. Have you made it a goal to become more like Christ, to devote yourself to prayer, fellowship, and the reading, study, and memorization of God’s Word so that He has something to work with as He forms Christ in you?

Another good purpose is to do something with our lives that will have lasting value, that will provide lasting benefit to others. Jesus said, “I chose you to go and bear fruit — fruit that will last” (John 15:16). The apostle Paul wrote, “For we are God’s workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do” (Ephesians 2:10).

This kind of goal really lifts us above the mundane, doesn’t it? So much of our time and energy seems tied up in material concerns like making a living, but Jesus told us not to worry about such things. Instead, He said, we should seek first the kingdom of God (see Matthew 6:25-33). So let me ask: What are you doing these days? What’s on your busy schedule for next week that will produce lasting, even eternal, value? If your honest answer is “Not much,” maybe you’ll want to rethink how you’re spending your life.

A third good purpose is to have something in your life that’s worth dying for. Is anything that important to you? Jesus said, “Whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me and for the gospel will save it. What good is it for man to gain the whole world, yet forfeit his soul?” (Mark 8:35-36).

In response to the question, “How do you want your life to end?” One of my students replied, “I don’t know. I never really thought about it.”

It’s really sad to reach college age without ever having thought about that, isn’t it? Yet the majority of people who are much older, without realizing it, have never considered that question seriously. It’s good to think about what you’d do if you had only six months to live and it’s also good to think about what you’d like to be remembered for when you’ve gone. What will people say was important to you?

Some people, sadly, will kill or die for money. Some will die for loved ones. Many are willing to die for their country,

and many more will die for a great cause like freedom. The greatest cause, of course, is the kingdom of God, and many people have died for their loyalty to Christ. Hebrews 11 tells us about just a few of them, and many others were martyred in places like Communist China, the Soviet Union, and Nazi Germany, to name just a few recent examples.

The Indians have a saying, and it's one we would all benefit from trying to apply: When you were born, you cried and the world rejoiced; live your life in such a manner that when you die, the world cries and you rejoice.

### **Don't Get Fragmented**

I have always been intrigued by lion tamers, and I wondered for a long time why they carry a four-legged stool into the ring when they perform. They also carry a whip and a pistol, of course, and the reason for those is obvious. But why the stool? It wouldn't even slow down, much less stop, a charging lion.

Then someone told me the reason. The lion tamer holds the top of the stool and points the four legs at the lion because a lion will try to focus his eyes on all four legs at once. And when he does that, he becomes somewhat paralyzed and more tame. The fragmenting of his attention confuses him just a little and makes him less likely to act up or attack.

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*"How do you want your life to end?"*

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What a lesson on life! Most of us are so busy, involved in so many different things, that we've got a lot more than four legs pointing at us. As a result, our attention is fragmented. We get caught up in just trying to get by from day to day, and we lose sight of the larger issues in life. The great causes and important works God has for us are easily overlooked or

endlessly postponed until some dreamed-of day when we'll have less responsibility and more free time.

We need a central reference point, Jesus Christ, and we need to stay focused on that point so that everything we do is in proper perspective. Questions raised earlier like "What would you do differently if you knew you had only six months to live?" and "What would you want to be remembered for?" will help you clarify your focus. I find that it also helps to remember that I'm never alone, never *really* by myself. The God who knows and cares about the intents of the heart is always with me - and you.

Years ago I heard a story told by a college football coach named Lou Little. He had a player on his team who wasn't very good, just a third-stringer. But the young man's father died, and just before the next game this young man went to the coach and asked, "Coach, is there any way I can start today against Fordham?"

Coach Little thought, "It's a big event, an emotional time for this young man. What could it hurt to let him start and be in there for just one play? Then I'll put the regular starter back in." So he told the young man, "Son you know I can't let you play for long, but sure, you can start and go for a play or two."

Well, the young man went out and played the game of his life. From the opening kickoff, he was in on every play. He was all over the field, blocking and tackling like a monster man. Coach Little left him in the entire game, which they won, and that player was the key to their victory.

After the game, Coach Little met him in the locker room, put his arm around him, and said, "Son, I can't understand. You never played like that before. What in the world happened?"

"You know that my dad died," the young man answered.

"Sure, I know," the coach said.

“And you saw my dad and me when he visited the campus, and we walked around the grounds a lot, always arm in arm, with me leading him.”

“Yes, I remember.”

“Well, what you didn’t know — very few people did — was that my father was blind. So today was the first time he ever saw me play.”

If we can understand and remember that life is played out in a big stadium called earth and that our heavenly Father is watching us, it will make a tremendous difference in what we do and why we do it.

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