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“Issue One!”

My favorite Friday night pastime is to tune into PBS's *The McLaughlin Group* ("From the nation's capitol, an unrehearsed program presenting inside opinions and forecasts of major issues of today") and listen to the delightfully entertaining host and his raucous panel discuss the political issues of the week. John McLaughlin, a former Jesuit, always begins the program with the words, "Issue One!" Other issues will follow, to be sure, but the first one is the biggie — the number one issue of the week in scandal-ridden Washington, D.C.

I thought of McLaughlin's "Issue One!" in church recently when we were singing "Rise Up, O Men of God." In the opening verse, William Merrill wrote: "*Rise up, O men of God! Have done with lesser things . . .*" O, the terrible toll that has befallen the church for focusing on "lesser things!" Boyce Mouton points out that when the Bolsheviks took over Russia in 1917, the Orthodox clergy were too busy debating what color of robes they should wear during Lent to even notice. One could almost laugh — until we realize some of the issues the church is busy debating today while the cultural barbarians have stormed the gates and are ravaging America.

Jesus indicted the Pharisees for their ridiculous, yea, *ludicrous*, behavior — straining out a gnat while swallowing a camel. "Will that be one hump or two?" The Pharisees would walk a mile just to swallow a camel! Jesus told them, "You have neglected the *more important*

("weightier", KJV) matters" — things like *"justice, mercy, and faithfulness"* (Matthew 23:23-24). Against these important matters things like "mint, dill and cummin" look pretty silly.

The Big Picture in Scripture has always been the weightier matters — matters that have spiritual muscle to them. Micah draws a contrast between offering thousands of rams and ten thousand rivers of oil with what God actually requires of man: *"to act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God"* (Micah 6:7-8).

The Bottom Line with God was as follows: *"For I desire mercy, not sacrifice, and acknowledgment of God rather than burnt offerings"* (Hosea 6:6). Jesus said The Great Commandment (and the one like unto it), *"is more important than all burnt offerings and sacrifices"* (Mark 12:33). But how often have we gotten burnt by sacrificing that which is *"more important"* on the altars of the mundane? We have argued over minuscule matters that don't matter while men, who do matter to God, go to hell.

The Essence of True Religion is summed up as follows *"This is what the Lord Almighty says: 'Administer true justice; show mercy and compassion to one another. Do not oppress the fatherless, the alien, or the poor. In your hearts do not think evil of each other . . . ' These are the things you are to do: Speak the truth to each other, and render true and sound judgment in your courts; do not plot evil against your neighbor, and do not love to swear falsely . . . "* (Zechariah 7:9-10; 8:16-17). James says that the religion God accepts as "pure and faultless" is *"to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world"* (James 1:27).

The apostle Paul understood the principle of "Issue One!" When he visited cosmopolitan Corinth, he resolved to know nothing among them except Jesus Christ and him crucified (1 Corinthians 2:2). O, for that kind of resolve in

the church today! He declared that the gospel — the saving story of Christ's death, burial, and resurrection—was a matter of "*first importance*" (1 Corinthians 15:1-4). With great passion he confessed, "Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel!" (1 Corinthians 9:16) Woe to us if the gospel is not "Issue One!" with us! Merrill's final verse in "Rise Up" reminds us to "*Lift high the cross of Christ!*"

The devil loves nothing more than to get the church preoccupied with "*lesser things*." God, of course, would have us to be concerned with greater things — matters of "*first importance*." We dare not make secondary what God has made primary.

Let's be wiser than serpents — especially "that old serpent, the devil" — and be gripped with the imperative sense of duty that marshaled our Master, who declared with great certainty, "*I must preach the good news of the kingdom of God . . . because that is why I was sent*" (Luke 4:43).

It's academic, Church. It's elementary, my dear McLaughlin. It's "*Issue One!*"

Bye-bye!

2

Breaking the Logjam

When I was about 10 years old, I got to spend a day with a lumberman at a logging camp in Oregon. I've never forgotten the experience. Maybe that's why I don't shed tears over the spotted owl or have much sympathy for the radical environmentalist wackos who are trying to shut down the timber industry in the Pacific Northwest.

We got up early that morning, before the sun was even up. After wolfing down some flapjacks we were on our way in Mr. Beach's truck. We left the town of Cottage Grove and drove into timber country, just as the sun finished burning off the mist in the mountain meadows.

What a day it was! I saw strong lumberjacks fell huge trees and heard them yell, "Timbe-e-err!" Burley buckers lopped off limbs (*tree* limbs, not their own!) before the logs were skidded to the landing where they were dumped into the river to float down to the sawmill.

I got to ride in the cab of a big log truck to the sawmill. What a terrifying but thrilling ride down the mountain-side that was! I'll never forget the sight of the sawmill as we rolled into camp. Boom men with spiked boots and long poles were walking on top of a mass of logs in a log pond. The scream of a headsaw could be heard above all else as its powerful teeth hungrily tore into the approaching logs. The smell of wet logs and fresh sawdust was not unpleasant.

One thing I didn't get to see that day was a "logjam" — a deadlocked jumble of logs in the river. But since then

I've seen plenty of logjams in life: in individual lives, marriages, churches, and the brotherhood.

I've seen brethren at loggerheads with one another over issues ranging from the ridiculous to the subliminal. Issues so silly, in fact, that they don't even merit the printer's ink on this paper (paper, incidentally, made from good Pacific Northwest timber).

The "logic" used in these endless quarrels is often illogical. What makes perfect sense to one is complete stupidity to another. Usually both sides are afflicted with "logorrhea" (excessive and often incoherent talkativeness).

One of the favorite pastimes of loggers is "logrolling," an exciting contest where lumberjacks tread logs and try to dislodge one another. The lumber camp is not the only place where people play this game!

(One wag cracked, "The lumberjack union was formed by a splinter group!")

Well, I've been on a roll myself and need to get back to this business of logjams in life.

One of my favorite writers, Norman Vincent Peale, tells the story about an old lumberman he once knew in the Northwest who told him about the logjams that often occur when logs are floated down the river in the springtime. "Sometimes, logs will get mixed up in an inextricable manner. But there is one log that is always the key log. If you can find that log and pull it out, the rest of the logs will fall into place and float down the stream."

When I read the story (*Plus Magazine*, March 1993) I thought to myself, "How wise. How simple!" We can break the logjams in life when we identify the "key log" that is causing the deadlock, remove the offending obstruction, see the rest of the logs fall into place and peacefully float down life's stream.

Then I wondered: "What is the 'key log' that causes

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99% of the logjams in life, in marital strife, within a congregation afflicted with 'logorrhea,' amongst a brotherhood at loggerheads over ill-logic?" The answer came in a flash — before you could even yell, "Timbe-e-err!"

But I wanted to be sure I was on the right log. So I asked my wife of 25 years the same question. I told her Peale's story, then asked, "Honey, what is the 'key log' that causes these logjams in life?" After only a few seconds of thought she gave the same one-word, five-letter answer that had come to my mind.

Pride!

The Apocrypha calls pride the beginning of sin. Pride has been called the master sin of the devil; the first peer and president of Hell. Elton Trueblood said, "A man who thinks he is righteous is not righteous — for the reason, primarily, that he is full of spiritual pride, the most deadly form that sin can take."

The key to breaking the logjams in our lives is simple: identify the obstructing log of pride, muster the courage to remove it and allow God to move in our midst once again — like a gently flowing stream in the beautiful timber country.

This "Viewpoint" is dedicated to the memory of Bob Beach and his family, who perished in a light airplane crash near Black Butte not long after my visit to the lumber camp.

3

Like a Forest

Driving to the U.S. border on winding Canadian Highway 33 in "Beautiful British Columbia"—and it is! —the following thoughts swept over my spirit like a gentle wind blowing softly through the treetops in an evergreen forest—just like the one that was all around us.

I have loved the forest ever since our family moved from the Midwest to Idaho when I was just a boy. *"I love the rocks and rills, thy woods and templed hills; My heart with rapture thrills like that above."* **Templed hills.** I like that! The church is like a forest. There are more than 40 references to forests in the Bible.

Forests once covered 60% of the earth's land area. Today forests cover 30% of the land. That's about the same percentage of those who call themselves "Christian" in the world.

"Like a tree" is the inspired definition of a godly man in Psalm 1:3. It stands to reason that a group of godly people, i.e., Christians, could be likened to a group of trees, i.e., a forest.

A forest is seen and known as such when trees stand together. A tree that stands alone cannot be called a forest. The church is made up of many believers. No believer can say he doesn't need others (1 Corinthians 12:12-26). The "tale of the lonesome pine" is not in God's book!

Most trees stand tall and true but a few of them are crooked. In the forest some trees are healthy and some trees are diseased. But more trees are healthy than are

sick! There are far more good people in the church than there are heretics and hypocrites.

And speaking of numbers, like a forest, the church cannot be numbered (Revelation 7:9). You can no more know the number of all true believers than you could count all the trees in just one national forest! A pox on those who try!

In the forest there are different varieties of trees. In Canada I saw fir, ponderosa pine, tamarack, cottonwood, quaking aspen, and white birch. They stood resplendent in accents of green, yellow, orange and red. God likes variety. Unity in diversity should be the strength and beauty of the church, just as it is in the forest.

Only the strongest trees can survive and grow at the highest elevation. However, they are the ones which receive the benefit of full sunlight, provide nests for soaring eagles, and a canopy of shade for the younger trees. There are spiritual giants in every church whom others look up to and depend upon.

Even at that, old trees must eventually make way for young trees. In a mature church the same will happen. Otherwise, there will be no growth. Elders must learn this difficult but vital lesson.

The tallest trees in the forest are most likely to be lashed by strong winds and hit by lightning strikes. So it is with leaders who stand tall for God. There is a price to pay for standing tall.

In the forest some trees are fallen and others are broken. Sin takes its toll in the church too. We must be like Jesus and bind up the broken (Isaiah 61:1) and restore the fallen (Galatians 6:1).

The trees in a forest are like a million church spires, pointing up to God. *"All the trees of the woods will rejoice before the Lord"* (Psalms 96:12). *"Break forth into singing, you*

mountains, O forest, and every tree in it!" (Isaiah 44:23). *"And all the trees of the field shall clap their hands"* (Isaiah 55:12). A healthy church, like a healthy forest, will be known for God-exalting praise.

Fire is the greatest enemy of the forest. Ninety percent of forest fires are started by humans (smokers, campfires, arson). Most church problems are started by the tongue. *"Consider what a great forest is set on fire by a small spark. The tongue also is a fire, a world of evil . . . (It) is itself set on fire by hell."* (James 3:5-6). Remember, only you can prevent spiritual forest fires!

But even a fire, whatever its origin, can cleanse and purify the forest. Yellowstone has made an amazing comeback. Such is also true in the church under fire (1 Peter 4:12-15). Fiery trials, even those inspired by Satan, can produce stronger Christian character.

Fire can actually produce new trees. A rancher in Washington showed me a hill full of young evergreen trees. He said, "For years the hill was bare. Then we had a fire. Some seeds are opened only by fire. Just look at what that fire produced!" Tertullian said it best: "The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church." Persecution produces prospects.

May the church be like a forest and fulfill the words of the prophet: *"Until the Spirit is poured upon us from on high, and the wilderness becomes a fruitful field, and the fruitful field is counted as a forest"* (Isaiah 32:15).

4

Deadly Debris

"The tongue also is a fire, a world of evil . . . set on fire by hell." —James 3:5 NIV

Aftermath is a new book by Donovan Webster which tells the amazing story of brave French men known as *démineurs*. They work at one of the most dangerous jobs in the world. Five days a week 125 *démineurs* search the beautiful countryside of France looking for unexploded bombs and shells left over from World War I.

"World War I?" you say. Indeed. And sometimes in their careful searching they even unearth unexploded shells from the *Franco-Prussian* War of 1870!

Most of their work is concentrated near Verdun, the bitter battlefield of fierce fighting during World War I. An estimated 12 *million* rounds still lie dormant but dangerous in French soil.

Leave Verdun and go to Normandy, site of the great Allied invasion, June 6, 1944. But be awfully careful when you get there because millions of rounds of unexploded ordnance lie buried in the beaches bought with the blood of Allied forces.

The Argonne Forest, where a hellish battle raged, still holds dark and deadly arsenal beneath its ground covering of green moss and tiny flowers. In fact, where fighting was the heaviest, warning signs inform you that the area is "off limits."

There are even *toxic* shells left in the countryside of

France. One percent of the number of corroded shells recovered each year contain the evil mustard gas from World War I . . . the same kind that nearly blinded a German infantryman named Hitler . . . who went on to wreak his vengeance, did he ever!

Thomas Hardy wrote

"Peace on earth!" was said,

We sing it,

And pay a million priests to bring it.

After two thousand years of mass,

We've got as far as poison gas.

Pete Jones, in "The Debris of War," wrote, "Across the landscape of France, these buried bombs, shells, land mines, and grenades take lives every year. In 1991, one of the most deadly years, 36 farmers died when their farm equipment struck pieces of ordnance which exploded under tractors and trucks. And these same devices bring death to those whose job it is to remove them. Since 1946, when the first organized efforts to clear France of the debris of war began, more than 630 *démineurs* have died doing their duty, and many others have been severely injured" (The Ford Meter Box Co., Inc.).

"War would end," said Stanley Baldwin, "if the dead could return." But they can't. And the deadly arsenal they launched yet lurks in fields and lanes to kill and maim the innocent. No wonder Shakespeare wrote, "O war! Thou son of hell!"

And then I think of the dangerous ordnance left behind from the War of Words. James calls the tongue "an intractable evil" (NEB), "full of deadly poison" (KJV). Think of the damage done by words—bitter debates, false accusations, half-truths, innuendo, outright lies, slander, gossip, backbiting—in the exploded, and unexploded, "shells" of books, tracts, journals, articles, pamphlets and

letters that litter the literary landscape. Loaded leftovers of bygone battles.

Solomon said, "The tongue has the power of life and death, and those who love it will eat its fruit" (Proverbs 18:21 NIV). But what bitter fruit!

Behind the words of war are awful attitudes. It is a sinister spirit that spews out wicked words. The sinful flesh produces spiritual land mines like "hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions and envy" (Galatians 5:20-21 NIV). The kingdom of God, sad to say, has been mined with such explosive ordnance. Even sadder, those who have mined the kingdom, like Saul, the Terror of Tarsus, think they are doing God a service.

The *démineurs* of France usually blow up the shells of bygone years on the spot. But sometimes it's too risky. So, once a month, they transport the deadly debris by truck to the English Channel. They bury the ordnance in the sand at low tide and detonate it at high tide.

That's the job of peacemakers. We didn't fight the wars of past years. But we must do all we can to clean up after them. In the aftermath of the war of words God calls upon us to be spiritual *démineurs*, seven days a week, and rid the killing fields of poisonous words and deadly attitudes.

"But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law. Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the sinful nature with its passions and desires" (Galatians 5:22-24 NIV).

As the children sing, "Let there be peace on earth . . . and let it begin with me!"

5

“I Want Scripture!”

My mother, may God bless her, was a stickler for Scripture. She made sure we five children read our Bibles every day. And on Sunday, that Day of Days, woe be to any of us who left our Bibles in the parsonage! So we faithfully tucked our little King James Versions under our arms and went to church.

Mom made us sit with her in the church pew. Two on her left, two on her right, baby brother on her lap. If you dared to misbehave you risked a thimble thump on the skull (*ouch!*) or a pinch of flesh between her thumb and index finger (*shriek!*). All without taking her eyes off her man in the pulpit, the preacher, her homiletic hero, our dad.

One fine Sunday, as fate would have it, Dad was gone—preaching in another pulpit, probably in a revival somewhere. We had a guest speaker that morning. Taking full advantage of Dad’s absence, all five of us were perfect terrors that day. Boy, did we pay for it Sunday afternoon! The thimble and the pincers were mere child’s play in the fate that would follow our folly.

We had a board meeting that fateful Sunday afternoon. Yes, a real *board* meeting! Dad and Mom always used this board, painted pink, with two nickel-size holes in one end, to spank us when we were naughty. (No, it wasn’t *naughty pine!*) We called it “The Pink Board.” It sure left us “in the pink!” Once we scrawled these words on it in crayon: “In case of fire, throw this in!” It didn’t work.

One by one Mom called us into the bedroom to take our medicine. My sisters wailed as they were being whaled. It sounded like the sobbing on the Sabbath at the Wailing Wall in old Jerusalem! One by one they exited the room of doom, sobbing, "Next!"

Cometh my turn. Mom, with real tears in her eyes, said, "Victor, this will hurt me more than it will you." (I should have said, "Well, Mom, I don't want you to be hurt so let's just call this off.") Then she asked me what she had asked the rest: "If you can tell me one thing the preacher said this morning, I won't spank you."

Well! Here was hope! Furiously I racked my brain—as my sisters must have racked theirs—to come up with what they had—nothing! Having failed miserably in the racking of my brain, my mother was now about to begin the whacking of my bottom! Like Abraham of old, Mom raised her weary arm, board in hand, ready to spank her sinful son. The Pink Board hovered in the air, like the sword of Damocles.

Suddenly I remembered! This was a miracle! Kind of like when the angel stayed Abraham's hand! A veritable ram in the thicket! "Mom!" I cried. "Now I remember! The preacher told a sad story about a little dog that was run over by a car!" Tears came to my eyes as I told her the story the preacher used at the invitation—but they were tears of relief that I would not get the spanking after all.

All for a naught—naughty lad that I was. Mom did not buy the tale of the dog. Not that the preacher had not told the story; he had. It's just that Mom wanted more. "*I want Scripture!*" I could not recall a one. Well, there went the ram! The Pink Board descended. The wind whistled between the two nickel-size holes during its short descent. *Wham! Wham! Wham!* End of my tale.

It's a good thing for some preachers that Mom isn't still

around. In fact, now that I think back on it, maybe the reason we five couldn't remember any Scripture in the preacher's sermon was because he hadn't used any. Perhaps *he* should have been stricken, smitten, and afflicted with The Pink Board.

"Preach the *word*!" Paul told Timothy (2 Timothy 4:2). Paul's own preaching was not with "persuasive words of human wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power" (I Corinthians 2:4). This was so that the faith of his hearers would "not be in the wisdom of men but in the power of God" (I Corinthians 2:5). Too much of hermeneutics is *humaneutics*.

"If anyone speaks," Peter said, "Let him speak as the oracles of God" (I Peter 4:11). Peter practiced what he preached! When Peter preached the Word, his hearers were "cut to the heart" (Acts 2:37). No one said, "Enjoyed the sermon." Their response was repentance, immediate and entire. Preaching that does not cut to the heart will never cut it with God.

The book of Revelation pictures Christ walking among His churches. He knows every deed—and misdeed. I believe the Christ of the candlesticks is still walking among the churches, crying, "*He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches!*"

Be like Jesus. Be like Mom. Be a stickler for Scripture. *I want Scripture!* It's the only thing that saves, strengthens, and satisfies.

6

“I Love You, Man!”

Love must be sincere. If there's one truth in Scripture that's clear as the noonday sun, it's this one. Older versions of the Bible call it *“unfeigned love.”*

To feign something is to fake it. And I can't think of a more contemporary example of feigned love than Johnny-on-the-dock. You know Johnny. You've seen him a hundred times — World Series commercials — the guy fishing with his dad and brother.

There they sit on the dock; contented as Calico cats; basking in the warmth of the afternoon sun; fishing poles held in their hands. Johnny's in the middle, wearing an unbuttoned flannel shirt and sporting a day's growth of whiskers on his face.

With a furtive glance he looks sideways at his equally disheveled, unshaven father. “Dad?” His voice conveys something is wrong. Dad looks at Johnny with concern. “What is it son?”

Johnny drops his head and screws up his face. “Well, Dad, you're my Dad.” (A profound truth, Johnny!) Then he turns on the tears. “*And I love you, man!*” Several sobs escape him. His shoulders shake.

But it doesn't do the trick with wise old Dad. He grabs his can of beer and says, “You're not getting my Bud Lite, Johnny.”

Johnny is deterred. Maybe even mollified. But only for a moment. He hitches his shoulders and scoots over to his brother. “Ray?” The whining voice is there again. But Ray

is a quick learner. Without missing a beat he looks straight ahead and curtly replies, "Forget it, Johnny."

What's with this guy? What's the deal with sneaky Johnny? I'll tell you what. Johnny's too much like . . . *us*. I'm talking Christians. I'm talking church. I'm talking *myself*!

We put on our Sunday finest and go to church. Supposedly to worship God. To express our love for His goodness and mercy. We sing a song. We mumble a prayer. We nibble at the emblems—our mind on a thousand other things. We give a dollar. We endure a sermon. We shake hands with the preacher. But we sure as—Johnny—don't love! That's why we leave so often without the blessing; empty and unfulfilled.

Just like Johnny, we don't receive. His father refrained from giving him what he wanted because Dad recognized feigned love—fake love—when he heard it. Do we really think that God is less discerning than Johnny's dumpy dad? Where do we get off thinking we can con The Almighty into sharing life's good things with us? (I do not consider a can of suds to be one of those things; surely it gets better than this!)

The greatest commandment in the Word—the most profound truth in the world—is to love God with all your heart, mind, and soul. Jesus said so. God wants your love more than your Lexus.

The second greatest commandment is to love your neighbor as yourself. All other commandments are rolled up in these two: unfeigned love for God and man—straight from the heart.

"*I love you, God!*" Better mean it when you say it. Or sing it. He knows. Believe me, He knows! You can't fool your Father.

"*I love you, man!*" We don't say it enough to one another.

People all over this world are dying to hear those words . . . but are dying without ever hearing them. Speak them! Mean what you say and say what you mean.

I don't know who first told the following story but I can only tell it in print; it's too difficult to get though in public. Yesterday was an old man's birthday. He was 91 and "home" was a small rented room with cooking privileges. He awakened earlier than usual, bathed, shaved and put on his best clothes. "Surely they will come today," he thought.

He wouldn't take his daily walk to the gas station to visit with the old-timers of the neighborhood because he wanted to be right there when they came.

He sat on the front porch with a clear view of the road so he could see them coming. Surely they would come today.

He'd skip his noon nap that day, because he wanted to be up when they came.

He has six children. Two of his daughters and their married children live within a few miles. They hadn't been to see him for a long time, and today was his birthday. Surely they would come.

At suppertime, his landlady brought him some ice cream and cake, but he didn't eat it. He was saving it to have with "them" when they came.

Nighttime came, and the old gentleman went to his room to retire. But first he knocked on his landlady's door and said, "Promise to wake me when they come."

It was his birthday and he was 91.

For the love of God won't someone say, "*I love you, man!*"?

7

“You’re Not Getting My Light, Bud!”

Sometimes Christians can be so selfish. Hmmm. Selfish Christians? Is that an oxymoron or what?

But they—we—are, we really are. We have the light. But we don’t like to share it with others.

What a travesty. What a tragedy! Children of light who will not share the light. What dorks we mortals be.

Case in point. The church in Jerusalem, of all places. A converted Saul of Tarsus tries to join their ranks and they treat him like he was a perverted Son of Tartarus.

“When Saul reached Jerusalem he tried to join the disciples. But they were all afraid of him, finding it impossible to believe that he was a disciple” (Acts 9:26, *The N.T. in Modern English*).

See what I mean? To paraphrase a popular TV commercial, it’s saying to Saul, “You’re not getting my Light, Bud!” You’re not getting our fellowship, prayers and support. As with one voice they sing, *a la* Ray Charles, “Hit the (Damascus) road, Jack. And don’t you come back no more, no more, no more, no more!”

Barnabas, an outsider, had to step in at this point and say to the insiders (including the apostles), “Hey! This man has seen the Lord! Heard his voice! Has been boldly preaching Christ! Get a life! For he has eternal life!”

For, indeed, Saul the antagonist was now a protagonist. He had gone from being a persecutor of the church to being a propagator of the faith. And what does he get for it? The cold shoulder. The Big Chill. The Deep Freeze. Rejection.

Why is it so hard for some of us to believe that other people really are true believers in Christ? Why can’t we just accept them at grace value?

I think it’s because we’re cursed by that same dark duo that dominated the Jerusalem church: fear and unbelief. We’re afraid of people. We can’t bring ourselves to believe that some people can really change.

Come on, folks! Really. Perfect love casts out fear. Love thinks no evil. Suspicion is a sin. A trusting, loving heart will manifest itself with an open, outstretched hand.

I would to God that we would simply have the courage to do what the Bible says: “Welcome one another, just as Christ has welcomed you, to promote the glory of God” (Romans 15:7, *Weymouth*). I wasn’t perfect when Christ received me. No way. Don’t laugh. You weren’t either. Pardoned, yes. Perfect, no. Let’s show a little grace. Share the light.

Nothing stirs my righteous indignation more than when someone questions the validity of a believer’s spiritual status. Especially when that believer lives across the seas, in a country where simply being a Christian has probably meant persecution and deprivation, maybe even imprisonment and torture!

To call into question their love, faith, repentance confession, and baptism is almost ludicrous. Baptism in Eastern Europe—especially in the Iron Curtain years—was as near a first century experience as one could possibly have. It meant crossing the line of demarcation. No return. Everyone—godless state officials in particular—knew what that meant.

It is to laugh to have their conversion called into question by those who preach and practice a quick dip of the untaught, unrepentant and unconverted in a heated baptism—and an even quicker dismissal—so we can beat

those unregenerated Methodist and Presbyterians to the restaurant.

Mark Twain was right. "Travel is fatal to prejudice, bigotry, and narrow-mindedness, and many of our people need it sorely on those accounts. Broad, wholesome, and charitable views of men and things cannot be acquired by vegetating in one little corner of the earth all one's lifetime."

A final word to all the converted Sauls and Buds of the world. You can have my light!

8

Burying Father Abraham

"Then Abraham breathed his last and died . . . and he was gathered to his people. His sons Isaac and Ishmael buried him . . . with his wife Sarah" (Genesis 25:8-10).

Yesterday, during my "morning Manna moments," I read the above account of Abraham's death and burial. A portion of the passage jumped out at me, the words fairly lifting off the page, like a skyscraper rising up from the pavement: *"His sons Isaac and Ishmael buried him"*

Hey! What is this? Isaac and Ishmael together? In the same place? With no harsh words? No fisticuffs? No pounding on each other? Astounding! Amazing! A miracle!

You remember how it all began. God promised Abraham and Sarah a son. Ten childless years came and went. Sarah suggested that her Egyptian maidservant, Hagar, serve as a surrogate mother. That's when the trouble started. Once Hagar was pregnant, well, hell hath no fury like a woman scorned—by another woman! Hagar the Horrible.

Sarah sent Hagar packing. On the road to Shur an angel assured Hagar that she would have a son (Ishmael), but added that he would live in hostility toward his brothers. Said he would be a wild donkey of a man. The angel then sent Hagar and Ishmael back to Sarah and Abraham.

Fifteen years come and go. Finally Sarah conceives and has a son, not a son of promiscuity but a son of promise, Isaac. When the boy is about three years old, Abraham throws a birthday party. Ishmael, now a strapping teenag-

er, tweaks the twerp. Whoa, baby! Hell Hath No Fury, Part II. Showing at a theater near you. Not too near I hope! The fireworks begin.

Off into the desert go Hagar and Ishmael again, this time for good. Ishmael grows up and becomes a skilled archer, perhaps wanting most of all to notch an arrow in the bowstring and send it deep into the heart of Isaac some day. He dwells in the desert—deserted by his natural father— brooding, dark, resentful.

The years pass by like the shifting, whispering sands of the desert. Both brothers eventually marry: Ishmael an Egyptian, Isaac a distant relative from Mesopotamia. Sarah dies. Ishmael does not come to the funeral. You can understand why.

Abraham remarries. Has six more sons. Sends all of them packing too. Puts his house in order. Leaves his entire estate to Isaac. Not a shekel for Ishmael! Breathes his last and gives up the ghost.

Word gets to Ishmael, living down on the border of Egypt, that his father has died. Ishmael is nearly 90 himself. He's lived long enough to realize a few things. You don't hold a grudge forever. The wild donkey has been tamed by time. He packs his bags and goes to the funeral.

The Bible says that Ishmael and Isaac buried Abraham together. With civility. With reverence. Without any recorded rancor. There is no mention of a tearful reunion, *a la* Jacob and Esau, but one wonders if at long last it did not occur.

Why? Because the death of a loved one sometimes causes us to bury more than the deceased. Sometimes we are moved to bury the hatchet, the hostility, the hatred. I'd like to think that when Ishmael and Isaac buried their father, they also buried the past; that when they laid Abraham to rest, they also buried the animosity.

32 Burying Father Abraham

Is that what happened when Father Abraham was buried? Maybe. At least I'd like to think so. But it leaves us with a lingering question.

If a bitter brother like Ishmael could humble himself and come to his father's funeral, why can't we? After all, we're not wild donkeys. We're sheep.

Why can't we—the spiritual children of Abraham (Galatians 3:29)—swallow our pride, forget our hurts, lay aside the injuries (real or imagined), and come to the memorial service for One greater than Abraham, remember His death, His burial, His resurrection, break bread together, drink the cup together, weep together, rejoice together, bury our differences, lay to rest the past, forgive one another, love one another, make a covenant with each other, mend broken hearts, and rise up like the Son with healing in our wings?

9

Of Altars, Tents and Wells

A Message for the Men of America

*"Isaac built an altar there and called on the name of the Lord.
There he pitched his tent, and there his servants dug a well."
—Genesis 26:25 N.I.V.*

Isaac was Abraham and Sarah's son of promise. At age 40 he marries Rebekah. Isaac and his baby boys, Jacob and Esau. A famine forces the family to live for a time in Philistia. Isaac becomes a wealthy man, incurring the envy of the Philistines who take fiendish delight in filling up the wells Isaac's sweating servants had dug.

What's a man to do? Isaac returns to Beersheba, the southernmost city in Judah, a place his father had once lived. Like John Denver, he is "back home" again. And it is good, yes it is! Then he does three things every man should do.

First, Isaac built an altar. This was a first for Isaac. His godly father Abraham, in contrast, had made a regular practice of building altars and calling on the Lord. In fact, you can trace the travels of Abraham by discovering the "trail of altars" he left behind (Genesis 12:7-8; 13:4,18; 22:9). And now his son is finally following in his father's footsteps. But not before he had gone through repeated failures living among the Philistines.

What changed his mind? God appeared to him at Beersheba and reminded him of His *person* ("I am the God of your father Abraham"), *presence* ("I am with you"), and *promise* ("I will bless you . . . ") Genesis 26:24. Thus assured, Isaac alters his priorities and builds his first altar.

The first thing a man must do is establish a relationship with God. Henry Whitney Bellows said, "I have never known a man, who habitually and on principle absented himself from the public worship of God, who did not sooner or later bring sorrow upon himself and his family." A man needs an altar—a place where he and his family can hear the voice of God and call upon the name of the Lord. Scripture, prayer and worship are the vital signs of a man's spiritual heart.

Second, he pitched his tent. Up to now, he had done this first—and suffered all kinds of trouble as a result. At long last he learned that it is more important to have a living relationship with God than it is to build an immense mansion to live with your relations.

But God's plan also calls for a man—once he has built an altar—to pitch his tent, that is, establish a godly home for his wife and family. Our society is cursed with derelict dads who refuse to even pitch a tent. "As a bird that wandereth from her nest, so is a man that wandereth from his place" (Proverbs 27:8). A *man's* place is in the home, too!

A house, however, is not necessarily a home. America's curse is too many houses, not enough homes. God intended for fathers to provide strong, spiritual leadership in the home (Deuteronomy 6:4-9; Ephesians 6:4). Charles Spurgeon said, "When home is ruled according to God's word, angels might be asked to stay with us, and they would not find themselves out of their element." Joshua set a fine example: "As for me and my house, we will serve the Lord" (Joshua 24:15).

Third, he dug a well. Wells were essential to survival in the dry and arid Middle East. Flocks and herds needed water as well as the women, children and servants. God expects a man to provide a living for his family (I Timothy 5:8) but not to the exclusion of the first two principles.

Another caution: digging a well does not mean digging a hole so deep that the family never sees you. Your presence is more important than your presents.

At Beersheba, Isaac discovered a forgotten principle that had worked for his father and would work for him. He got his priorities straight. And here is an amazing thing—the Philistines, who had caused him so much grief, seeing that the Lord was with Isaac, came to him and made a covenant of peace (Genesis 26:26-31). God's promise is true: "When a man's ways please the Lord, he makes even his enemies to be at peace with him" (Proverbs 16:7).

And that's not all! The same day the Philistines made peace with Isaac, his servants came running to him with welcome news—"We have found water!" (Genesis 26:32). Perfect timing! Because Isaac honored the Lord, he was blessed with peace and prosperity.

Men of America, learn the Isaac Principle. First, build an altar—establish a relationship with God for you and your family. Second, pitch a tent—make your house a home by building loving and lasting relationships with your wife and children. Finally, dig your well—provide a living for those who have grown to respect you because you have finally "set your house in order." And the blessings of Beersheba will be yours.

10

To See Your Face

The last time Jacob had seen his brother's face was not a pleasant thing to remember. Esau's face was twisted with loathing. Not for Jacob (this time!) But for himself. For in a moment of physical weakness, he had done something stupid. He had sold his birthright. For a blasted bowl of beans!

Then Jacob duped his feeble father into giving him the blessing due Esau. When Esau came in from the hunt, and found he had been tricked again, his face turned dark with blood—the blood of absolute hatred. He staggered outside and screamed full force to the raging wind, "I'll kill him!"

(Genesis 27:42 says he actually "consoled" himself with thoughts of killing Jacob. Some solace! Some comfort! What a twisted "Sweet Hour of Preyer!" Dwelling on death. Meditating on murder.)

Jacob was forced to flee for his life. He lived for many years with his uncle, where he became (by trickery) a wealthy man. Esau stayed at home; brooding, sullen, dreaming of the day when he would plunge a blade to the hilt into his brother's deceitful heart. He eventually married multiple wives and moved to the country of Edom.

And then one day God told Jacob to go back home. On the return trip, Jacob came to Edom. He was now in enemy territory. He sent messengers on ahead to Esau. They returned with a message that turned Jacob's blood to ice. "Esau's on his way. With 400 of his men."

Jacob sent gifts on ahead, hoping to pacify the wrath of Esau. He spent a sleepless night, wrestling with God in prayer.

Cometh the dawn. Would it be the last sunrise his eyes would ever see? On the horizon he sees the unforgettable red mane of Esau. The brother whom he had tricked. Twice. The brother who had sworn to kill him with his bare hands.

Jacob bows down. Seven times. His heart is beating madly. Then it almost stops. For Esau starts running. Pell-mell from hell, it seems to Jacob. He thinks wildly, "This is it! He's going to kill me! I'm going to die! And I deserve it!"

Esau's heavy chest slams into Jacob. The impact takes Jacob's breath away. Esau's strong, hairy arms wrap themselves around Jacob's neck in a muscular embrace. "He's going to strangle me!" thinks Jacob. And then Esau, strong, sweaty Esau . . . *kisses him!*

Jacob is overcome. Overwhelmed! He looks at Esau in wonder. Gone is the sound and fury. The leathery face is split with a huge smile. White teeth gleam like a row of alabaster boxes on a Hittite merchant's shelf.

And then Jacob manages to speak. "*To see your face is like seeing God, now that you have received me favorably*" (Genesis 33:10).

Would God that we would see God in the face of our brothers! No matter what we have done to them or they have sworn to do unto us!

To see your face is to see the Almighty. To know what you've gone through—*are* going through—*will* go through. That's enough to make me see the face of God in you.

Someone put it this way: "*If I really cared, who you are would be more important to me than who I am. Where*

you hurt would be more important than that I'm well. What you feel would be more important than what I know.

"I'd look you in the eyes when you talk to me; I'd think about what you are saying rather than what I'm going to say next—I'd hear your feelings as well as your words.

"I'd listen without defending. I'd hear without deciding whether you are right or wrong. I'd ask you why and how, not just when and where.

"I'd allow you inside me. I'd tell you my hopes, my dreams, my fears, my hurts; I'd tell you when I've blown it and when I've made it.

"I'd laugh with you but not at you. I'd talk with you, not to you, and I'd know when it's time to do neither.

"I wouldn't climb your walls. I'd wait until you let me in the gate. I wouldn't unlock your secrets. I'd wait until you handed me the key.

"I'd leave my solutions at home and put away my scripts; the performances would end.

"If I really cared about you, I'd be myself with you. And give you the right to be the same."

Seen God lately? Look into the face of your brother.

11

“Don’t Quarrel On The Way”

“To each of them he gave new clothing . . . bread and other provisions . . . Then he sent his brothers away, and as they were leaving he said to them, ‘Don’t quarrel on the way!’” — Genesis 45:22-24, NIV

Joseph was overcome with emotion. He couldn’t keep the secret any longer. It was time for the unveiling—the announcement that would change his brothers’ lives forever.

“I am your brother Joseph, the one you sold into slavery!”

The revelation was almost too much for Joseph’s brothers. Seeing their consternation, Joseph continued: “Do not be distressed . . . God sent me ahead of you . . . to save your lives by a great deliverance.”

This was a one-way conversation. The brothers were too staggered by it all. What could they say? They were guilty as sin. Found out. But Joseph was as full of grace as they were full of guilt.

The waterfall of good news continued. Go home and say, “Joseph is alive! God has made me lord of all . . . Come . . . to me; don’t delay . . . You shall live . . . and be near me . . . I will provide for you . . . Otherwise you and your household and all who belong to you will become destitute.”

You’d almost have to be spiritually blind not to see an analogy here. Jesus was “delivered over to death for our sins.” As prison bars could not hold Joseph, so the grave could not contain Jesus. Nor could the resurrected Jesus contain the Good News. “Don’t be afraid! It’s really Me!

God sent Me to save your lives by a great deliverance!"

It's hardly what one would call a fair exchange. We come to Christ with our sin and guilt. He forgives us and clothes us in robes of righteousness. He gives us bread and other provisions for our journey. Then He commissions to go back from whence we came with a grand and glorious message: "God has made Jesus Lord of all. Come to Him and you will live. Otherwise you will perish!"

But as we depart on our mission, He adds a word of warning: *"Don't quarrel along the way!"*

Does Jesus know us or what? Just like Joseph knew his brothers! Adam Clarke's comments are timely: "Children of the same parents are apt to envy each other, fall out, and contend; and therefore the exhortation in this verse must be always seasonable in a large family."

Issachar: *"Whose idea was it to kill Joseph anyway?"*

Zebulun: *"Not me! I'll bet it was Gad!"*

Asher: *"Don't swear!"*

Gad: *"Don't be an ass, Asher. Gad is my name!"*

Reuben: *"Hey, I'm the one who said don't kill him!"*

Naphtali: *"Reuben, Reuben, I've been thinking . . ."*

Dan: *"Judah, it's all your fault! You're the one who suggested we sell Joseph!"*

Judah: *"Well, we made a chunk of change didn't we?"*

Levi: *"It's not fair! Benjamin got more clothes than we did!"*

Benjamin: *"A guy named 'Levi' is complaining about clothes?"*

Joseph's wise admonition is especially true for the family of God! On our way to Canaan, carrying the Good News of salvation full and free, the Church must not quarrel along the way! "It was not likely if they disagreed among themselves that they would execute successfully the great commission Joseph had intrusted to them" (*Pulpit Commentary*).

The primary reason the Church has not fulfilled the Great Commission of Jesus today is because we have quibbled and quarreled about issues that are not primary. We are no better than the Canaan-bound brothers of Joseph.

"Isn't it great that we're forgiven?"

"O, I don't know. Could we really be forgiven after all we've done?"

"What grace! What mercy!"

"Well, I think it's too easy. Surely we must do something to earn this favor!"

"Let's sing our thanks to God!"

"O.K., but not so loud. Put down that guitar! Who authorized that?"

"O, for a thousand tongues to sing!"

"What are you, a premillenniaist? And did you say 'tongues?'"

"Let's stop and have a memorial meal to remember our redemption."

"All right. But only men must serve the supper!"

"I can hardly wait to tell the story of Jesus and His love!"

"Do you think it's just a story? What version do you use?"

"I love my gift Jesus gave me!"

"O, you're just a big show-off! Besides, my gift is better."

What fools we mortals be. There's no time for arguing. Let's hasten to Canaan with a sure and certain message: "Jesus is alive!" Don't abuse the news with your views. *Don't quarrel on the way!*

12

Maligning Moses

Moses was the meekest man on the face of the earth (Numbers 12:3), but that did not keep people from talking behind him! Even his siblings slandered him! "Miriam and Aaron began to talk against Moses because of his Cushite wife, for he had married a Cushite. 'Has the Lord spoken only through Moses?' they asked. 'Hasn't he also spoken through us?' And the Lord heard this" (Numbers 12:1-2).

One would think that the last five words of the above passage ("*And the Lord heard this*") would be enough to keep us from belittling a brother or slandering a sister. One of the first songs I learned in Sunday School was, "O, be careful little tongue what you say. For the Father up above is looking down in love, so be careful little tongue what you say!"

The surface reason for the vilification of Moses was his choice of a wife. He married a Cushite, a woman from Ethiopia. So the whispering campaign of Miriam and Aaron was probably race based. They would reject whom God would accept. But "God does not show favoritism, but accepts men from every nation who fear him and do what is right" (Acts 10:34-35). In Christ there is no Greek or Jew, barbarian, Scythian, slave or free. Christ is in *all* (Colossians 3:11).

The deeper, darker reason for their disparagement of Moses, however, was *place*. Not content to ride behind Moses, they were jockeying for position. "Has the Lord spoken only through Moses? Hasn't he also spoken

through us?" (I believe jealousy is to blame for 90% of the bashing that goes on in the brotherhood.) The jealous jockeys wanted the inside rail. But all they managed to "win" was the wrath of God who promptly called them out when they came down the stretch. "Moses . . . is faithful in all my house. Why then were you not afraid to speak against my servant Moses?" (Numbers 12:7-8).

Why indeed? Why are we so brazen as to backbite a brother? To foment criticism against a fellow Christian? To lambast a leader? Is it not because the only way we can pull ourselves up is to drag someone else down? We try to make ourselves look good by making someone else look bad; we blow out another person's light to let our own shine; burn our fingers to snuff out another man's candle. But we forget that when we speak against a faithful brother, we are speaking against one of *God's servants*!

Paul picks up on this in Romans 14:4, "Who are you to judge someone else's servant? To his own master he stands or falls. And he will stand, for the Lord is able to make him stand." It is sheer folly to judge or speak against a servant, especially when that servant's master is Almighty God!

Evidently it was Miriam who led the rebellion for when the cloud of God's presence finally lifted from the scene, "*there stood Miriam—leprous, like snow*" (Numbers 12:10). Friends, if God struck us with leprosy every time we spoke against one of his servants, we would probably stand as a colony of convicted critics and sing with one voice, "Whiter Than Snow!"

Aaron sought forgiveness from God for "the sin we have so foolishly committed" (Numbers 12:11), and Moses himself graciously prayed for Miriam's healing. Still, God told them to confine Miriam to the camp for seven days. "*And the people did not move on till she was brought back*"

(Numbers 12:15). And the people of God today are not going to move on as the united family of God until we are brought back to our senses and cease speaking against one another!

James says we ought to be "slow to speak." That's especially true of speaking against a fellow servant of God. Whether it's race, place, or whatever the case. "Brothers, do not slander one another. Anyone who speaks against his brother or judges him, speaks against the law and judges it. When you judge the law, you are not keeping it, but sitting in judgment on it. There is only one Lawgiver and Judge, the one who is able to save and destroy. But you—who are you to judge a neighbor?" (James 4:11-12).

Archbishop Leighton said, "If nobody took slander in and gave it lodging, it would starve and die." Remember the wise words of slow-speaking Calvin Coolidge: "I have noticed that nothing I never said ever did me any harm." Or anybody else for that matter.

Did the Israelites learn from Miriam's bitter experience? They did not. A few days later the legalistic law firm of Korah, Dathan and Abiram, along with 250 jealous leaders, accused Moses and Aaron of setting themselves up above the Lord's assembly. Result? The earth swallowed K D & A while fire consumed the 250 associates, "*men who sinned at the cost of their lives*" (Numbers 16:38).

Costly business, this belittling of brethren in the brotherhood. Those who chose to malign Moses were way out of line. Those who choose to speak against a brother for whom Christ died will pay dearly for doing so. The archangel Michael would not even bring a slanderous accusation against the devil (Jude 9). I'll not venture where angels fear to tread.

13

Gracious Truth

Moses delivered the law, but Jesus delivered the goods. "For the law was given through Moses, but grace and truth came through Jesus Christ" (John 1:17).

Some churches emphasize truth—at the expense of grace. Other churches stress grace—to the exclusion of truth.

Imagine that you're a stranger in town. You're looking for a church that is like the Word Himself—"Full of grace and truth" (John 1:14).

One fine Sunday you discover the Temple of Truth. Gracing the front are seven large pillars. Inside you are greeted by militant music—"His Truth is Marching On!" Stretched across the front of the auditorium is a large Bible banner: "AND YOU SHALL KNOW THE TRUTH, AND THE TRUTH SHALL MAKE YOU FREE!"

The minister's text is from Romans 3:23, "For all have sinned, and fall short of the glory of God." He gets as far as Romans 6:23 in his excellent exposition ("For the wages of sin is death . . ."), but time runs out before he can complete the verse ("but the gift of God is eternal life in Jesus Christ our Lord").

You leave knowing that you are a sinner, headed for hell.

The next Sunday you discover the Garden of Grace. In the courtyard are lovely fountains. Lush vines spill gracefully over the edge of the balconies. A beautiful rendition of "Amazing Grace" greets you as you walk into the spa-

cious sanctuary. Gold letters adorn the front of the church: "BY GRACE ARE YOU SAVED BY FAITH!"

The minister's text is from Titus 2:11, "For the grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men . . ." It is a most delightful delivery, but time expires before he can complete the verse ("teaching us that, denying ungodliness and worldly lusts, we should live soberly, righteously, and godly in the present age").

You leave feeling that you are wonderful, headed for heaven.

But a nagging doubt remains. You are led to wonder, "Where is the church that will teach both grace and truth?"

Truth without grace is not the whole truth. Simon the Pharisee represents the Temple of Truth. When a sinful woman came to a feast that Simon had given for Jesus, Simon thought to himself, "She is a sinner" (Luke 7:36). And that was the truth. Luke knew it (v.37) the woman knew it, Jesus knew it.

But Simon blew it. He offered no grace for the woman. His religion would rewrite Ephesians 2:8 to read, "For by *race* you have been saved through *fate*."

To trumpet truth to sinners ("Thou art a wretched fill-in-the-blank") and never share the sweet sound of amazing grace that "saved a wretch like me" is a perversion of truth. They need to know that His grace is greater than their disgrace!

Grace without truth is not true grace. The "grace invaders" represent the Garden of Grace. These traducers took liberties with Paul's teaching on grace. "And why not say, 'Let us do evil that good may come'? — as we are slanderously reported and as some affirm that we say" (Romans 3:8). To the contrary, Paul said, "Shall we continue in sin that grace may abound? Certainly not!" (Romans 6:1).

"Cheap grace" corrupted the churches in Pergamos and Thyatira, who were influenced by the "grace invaders"—the Nicolaitans and the false prophetess Jezebel (Revelation 2:14,20).

To offer grace to sinners—so that grace may abound ("once in grace, always in grace" is a prime example), and not tell the truth about holy and righteous living is a distortion of grace.

Grace with truth is the gracious truth. And who was more gracious than Jesus when telling the truth? Take the woman taken in adultery. The Pharisees took her, dragged her to Jesus, quoted Moses and said she should be stoned. But Jesus wrote in the sand and said that whoever was without sin—and still had the sand to do it—should throw the first stone.

When the last red-faced Pharisee had dropped his arsenal and slunk away like a whipped cur, Jesus told the woman, "Neither do I condemn you . . ." There was grace! But then He added, "Go and sin no more." There was truth!

(Please note the difference in Jesus' response and that of the slick postmodern who glibly gushes, "Oh, I don't condemn you either. Go ahead, it's not sin anymore.")

Let's eliminate the Pharisaism and Nicolaitanism in the life of the church. Let's imitate the gracious truth about grace and truth as modeled for us in the life of Christ.

Be a balanced church—full of grace and truth!

13

Cosmic Congregations

Great preachers have preached great sermons on how we need to build churches like the church in the New Testament. "We need to build a Bible church! Just like you read about in the Bible!" What they mean is that we should establish congregations built on a composite of the best churches we read about in the Bible—Jerusalem, Antioch, Philadelphia—you get the picture.

But churches in the biblical era had their share of problems. Does anyone really want to build a church today like the church in carnal Corinth, sleepy Sardis, or lukewarm Laodicea? The only truly *safe* church to pattern or model ourselves after is the church in Heaven! Somebody say "Amen!" Thank you. I heard that "Amen." All the way from Heaven!

Am I against looking to the New Testament for strong church ideals? Of course not. I may be a dork but I'm not a dolt. Acts is an exciting history book of the church. The epistles contain instruction that is inspired, insightful and instructive. But the Book of Revelation, perhaps the most ignored and/or abused book in the Bible, tells us what the church is like *today*.

Revelation is relevant! You can't go wrong modeling your congregation after the church in heaven. It's a cosmic congregation that doesn't have to debate "once saved, always saved" because they are truly saved forevermore. The church that now worships in heaven is a *perfect* pattern for the church that still struggles on earth. Consider just two verses in Revelation 7.

A church like the church in heaven will be innumerable. "*After this I looked and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count . . .*" (Revelation 7:9a). No church directory, congregational roll book or brotherhood yearbook can number the membership of the church in heaven. The Book of Acts cites 3,000, 5,000, then just uses the language of heaven—"multitudes." We count people because people count, but you can't count the people in the church that really counts! Only "The Lord knows those who are his" (2 Timothy 2:19).

A church like the church in heaven will be international and multilingual. "*. . . from every nation, tribe, people and language . . .*" (Revelation 7:9b). The day the church began, Pentecost, A.D. 30, there were men "from every nation under heaven" in Jerusalem (Acts 2:5). The church in heaven contains folks from *every nation under heaven!* And just like on the Day of Pentecost, they speak in every language! Heaven is not an exclusive club for just one race or one language, and neither is the church of the Christ who died for *all* peoples.

A church like the church in heaven will be reverent. "*. . . standing before the throne and in front of the Lamb*" (Revelation 7:9c). Who wouldn't stand in the presence of God on the throne and the Lamb at his side? "I stand amazed in the presence of Jesus the Nazarene!" (Charles Gabriel). The church in heaven *stands* in the presence of Royalty. "Holy God, to whom all praise is due, I stand in awe of You!" (Mark Altrogge). "All rise! All rise! To stand before the throne in the presence of the Holy One!" (Babbie Mason). Godly awe is a hallmark of the church in heaven.

A church like the church in heaven will be innocent. "*They were wearing white robes . . .*" (Revelation 7:9d). White robes is a recurring theme in Revelation. Robes

made white in the blood of the Lamb (7:14), symbolic of the purity, innocence and righteousness of those who wear the name of Christ (19:8). We cannot make ourselves righteous; only a holy and pure God can do that (2 Corinthians 5:21). But a holy God will empower us by his Holy Spirit to live holy and acceptable lives in his service. And the grace of God will teach us to say "No!" to ungodliness (Titus 2:12).

A church like the church in heaven will be jubilant. " . . . and they were holding palm branches in their hands. And they cried out in a loud voice: 'Salvation belongs to our God, who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb.'" (Revelation 7:9e, 10). Palm branches remind us of the jubilation in Jerusalem the day Jesus entered the Holy City. Every day is "Palm Sunday" in heaven! The music is loud but not obnoxious. The lyrics praise God for salvation. The Lamb at the center of the throne (7:17) is the very epicenter of praise and is praised forever, "day and night" (7:15). The worship of the church in heaven is so intense that it knocks angels flat on their faces before God and causes them to burst forth in a joyful seven-fold doxology: "Amen! Praise and glory and wisdom and thanks and honor and power and strength be to our God for ever and ever, Amen!" (7:12).

Now *there's* a church to emulate!

15

The Man Nobody Missed

I am not making this story up. It came to me near the end of 1998 via the Reuters news service on the Internet. It's legit.

It seems a dead German sat in front of his TV set for five years—the lights on his Christmas tree twinkling merrily away—and none of his neighbors noticed!

The poor fellow's name was Wolfgang Dircks, 43, divorced and disabled. He had reportedly threatened to whip anyone who ever asked about him.

Dircks lived in a block of 18-flats (small apartments) in Hamburg. A woman who lived in the same building said, "Someone said once that he had gone off to a home. I didn't ask anymore."

Two neighbors who lived on the same floor had moved in four years ago and therefore had never even seen Dircks.

Other tenants just went about their own business. A German newspaper (*Bild*) reported that the dead man's letter box (which should have raised eyebrows when it overflowed) had been emptied every now and then but no one knows by whom. (Should I ever move to Hamburg, remind me not to rent in this district!)

The landlords finally came calling only after the bank account from which Dirck's rent and bills were paid ran dry.

They found a macabre scene right out of *The Twilight Zone* or *The X Files*: a skeleton in a chair, its grinning death's head staring with empty eye sockets at a broken

TV set, a TV listing magazine still on his lap, open to the page for December 5, 1993, the lights still flashing on his Christmas tree. Someone could write a bad Christmas song about this story!

They say that dead men tell no tales. But this dead man tells a terrific tale. He is the man nobody missed.

I don't know much about this strange recluse. Reuters said he was a former toolsmith. But one thing I do know—he must not have belonged to the body of Christ.

If Wolfgang had been a Christian, someone surely would have come calling. Wouldn't they? I can understand someone not being missed for five days . . . but five *years*? Even a neighborhood dog would be missed sooner.

Christians care about each other. Had Wolfgang been a part of a vibrant body of believers in Hamburg, he would have been missed. And if that body was an authentic, caring body, someone would have come calling. Posthaste, not postmortem.

Scripture says, "See to it, brothers, that none of you has a sinful, unbelieving heart that turns away from the living God. But *encourage one another daily*, as long as it is called Today, so that none of you may be hardened by sin's deceitfulness" (Hebrews 3:12-13).

Had Dircks been connected with a really concerned church, he might have been missed the same day. The same writer goes on to say, "Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us *encourage one another*—and all the more as you see the Day approaching" (Hebrews 10:25). How many missing people are really missed in your church?

There are more than 50 "one another" passages in the Bible, any one of which might have prevented Dircks from becoming a bunch of bones in a leather recliner. Here are just 10 examples.

- ✱ "Be devoted to one another" (Romans 12:10).
- ✱ "Admonish one another" (Romans 15:14)
- "Care for one another" (I Corinthians 12:25)
- ✱ "Serve one another" (Galatians 5:13)
- ✱ "Bear one another's burdens" (Galatians 6:2)
- "Be kind to one another" (Ephesians 4:32)
- "Comfort one another" (I Thessalonians 4:18)
- ✱ "Pray for one another" (James 5:16).
- "Be hospitable to one another" (I Peter 4:9)
- "Love one another" (I John 3:11 *et al*).

We are all like sheep. Sheep sometimes go astray or turn up missing. If Wolfgang had been a sheep, and belonged to a church that took shepherding seriously, he might have been found in five hours still alive instead of being discovered in five years as a skeleton by the bill collectors.

"Suppose one of you has a hundred sheep and loses one of them. Does he not leave the ninety-nine in the open country and go after the lost sheep until he finds it?" (Luke 15:4-5). Well? *Do we?*

We *are* our brother's keeper.

16

In the Arena

Communion should be the crowning point of worship in the life of a true believer. In the simple act of partaking of the Lord's Supper, we actually commune — participate — are one — with the one body of Christ, the church.

It is my conviction that nothing unites the body of Christ around the world more than the weekly observance of the Lord's Supper. For at that singular moment we are one with Christ, one with all other believers in Christ.

I never feel more unity with the body of Christ than when I am partaking of the bread and the cup.

Communion is more than a vertical experience of communing with Christ. It is horizontal as well — a sharing with Christ's present body on earth, His church around the world.

Paul once asked a rhetorical question: "The bread which we break, is it not the communion of the body of Christ? For we, being many, are one bread and one body; for we all partake of that one bread" (I Corinthians 10:16-17).

I've broken bread as a member of the one body of Christ since I was 12. In recent years it has been a pure joy to commune with member of Christ's body in different parts of God's great world: in a bilingual service in the heat of the Caribbean; with a small but hardy group, dwarfed by the looming presence of a cold near-empty cathedral, in Great Britain; in a packed-out church building in Poland, once commandeered by German soldiers;

in a solemn supper at a Christian camp in Australia, "the land of the Southern Cross."

But just a few days ago, right here in America, I had a new spiritual experience in a Communion service.

I've never cared for the tiny little rectangles of hard bread in Communion. It's always reminded me of denominationalism, with hundreds of divided churches. My preference is an unbroken loaf of newly baked unleavened bread. I also like the Jewish matzos cracker with the stripes and pierced holes that remind us of Jesus' death on the cross.

On this Lord's Day, for some reason, it was different. Maybe it was because the images of a book I'd recently read still lingered in my memory. The noted novelist Paul L. Maier has outdone himself in a heart-wrenching tale of Nero's barbaric persecution of Christians in A.D. 64 (*The Flames of Rome*, Tyndale House, Wheaton, IL).

Or perhaps it was because I'd recently seen the epic 1951 film, *Quo Vadis*, a gripping dramatization of the struggle between Christianity and paganism in Nero's Rome.

In any event, as the silver tray containing hundreds of tiny pieces of bread was passed to me I saw this time, not a picture of divided denominationalism, but a vision of the past. Instantly the pieces of bread were transformed in my mind's eye to hundreds of stark white bodies, strewn across the sandy floor of an arena. Piled up upon one another. Members of the body of Christ — united in death.

As I selected one of the little pieces of bread, I thought of the supreme sacrifices made by multiplied thousands of believers who dared to remain faithful to Christ, "and did not love their lives to the death" (Revelation 12:11). This tiny piece of bread I now held in my hand (which

would soon become more of my heart than my stomach) was indeed the body of Christ — some unknown, unsung hero or heroine who lived and died for Jesus.

I hated to crush the bread between my teeth. I could barely swallow it.

Then, before I could recover, the large round tray (another arena!) was thrust into my hands. I looked down at the shimmering cups of dark liquid. I closed my eyes and again I saw the blood-stained floor of the arena — heard the cries of suffering — but above the cries, a triumphant song of the martyrs — *Christus regnat*. (How that song must have puzzled — and enraged — Nero and the blood-thirsty throng of 60,000 who filled the hippodrome that day!)

And then, as I put the cup with a trembling hand to my quivering lip, it dawned upon me that the cup truly is “a sign of our sharing in the blood of Christ” (1 Corinthians 10:16, *Williams Translation*). The blood of Christ, like His own body, is more — far more — than His blood alone. It is the blood of His crucified body — the church — in every generation!

“For as the body is one and has many members, but all the members of that one body, being many are one body, *so also is Christ* (I Corinthians 12:12).

The one body of Christ — past, present and future — it's all there in your communion tray. In the arena!

17

Mr. King, Meet God's Son!

A recent newsletter from the National Religious Broadcasters says Jerry Falwell interviewed CNN's Larry King on Falwell's new TV program, *Listen America*. He asked King what he would say to God if given the opportunity to ask only one question. King, a Jew, replied, "I would ask Him: Did You have a Son? If He says, 'No,' we've got to close a lot of places. And if he said, 'Yes,' that would reaffirm people like yourself and Christians all over the world. It would open us, who question that, into belief. It would answer so many questions. I think that's pivotal to the whole Judeo-Christian concept It would change the world, because we would have proof!"

The question Larry King would ask God is a legitimate question. But it is a question that God answered 2000 years ago. At the immersion of Jesus, "the heavens were opened to Him, and He saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting upon Him. And suddenly a voice came from heaven, saying, 'This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased'" (Matthew 3:17).

Later, at the transfiguration of Jesus, God again identified Jesus as His Son. "A bright cloud overshadowed them: and suddenly a voice came out of the cloud, saying, 'This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased. Hear Him!'" (Matthew 17:5).

Mr King would ask, "God, did You have a Son?"

"Yes. And His name is JESUS."

No need for a DNA test here!

Greek scholar Robert Morse (*Has Jesus' Identity Changed?*) has determined that in the New Testament Jesus is identified as the Son of God 127 times, and God is called the Father of Christ 161 times. This makes 288 times that Jesus is declared as God's Son. How many times does the world's Best Seller have to make the case? Surely the case for Christ's identity should be good enough even for CNN's *Burden of Proof*.

Consider only a few voices of corroboration from the Old Testament. "I will be His Father, and he shall be My son" (2 Samuel 7:14). "I will declare the decree: The LORD has said to Me, 'You are My Son, Today I have begotten You'" (Psalms 2:7). "For unto us a Child is born, Unto us a Son is given" (Isaiah 9:6). "And out of Egypt I called My Son" (Hosea 11:1). Did God have a Son? The inspired prophets surely thought He would!

To their testimony could be added that of the angel Gabriel when he spoke to the virgin Mary: "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Highest will overshadow you; therefore, also, that Holy One who is to be born will be called the Son of God" (Luke 1:35). Did the angel Gabriel lie to the young virgin?

When Jesus stilled the tempest, the disciples worshiped Him, saying, "Truly You are the Son of God" (Matthew 14:33). Were the disciples deluded?

The apostle Peter made what has been called the Good Confession: "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God" (Matthew 16:16). Millions of believers the world over have made that same confession, "in spite of dungeon, fire, and sword." Were all these confessors confused?

A Roman centurion at the foot of the cross cried with conviction, "Truly this was the Son of God!" (Matthew 27:54). Had the soldier lost his senses?

The greatest verse in the Bible, John 3:16, begins, "For God so loved the world that he gave His only begotten Son . . ." Is the greatest verse in the Bible a hoax?

A study conducted by Richard Hollerman (*The Deity of the Lord Jesus Christ*) shows that Christ made 104 claims that God was His Father. He called God "Father" (John 12:28), "My Father" (John 14:2), and "Abba, Father" (Mark 14:36). "Abba" means "Papa" or "Daddy." If Jesus is not God's Son, then he lied about who His father was. Do good men lie?

"Good men do not lie," wrote Fulton J. Sheen (*The Life of Christ*). "But if the Christ was not all that He said He was, namely, the Son of the living God, the Word of God in the flesh, then He was not 'just a good man;' then he was a knave, a liar, a charlatan and the greatest deceiver who ever lived." Hmmm.

Josh McDowell calls this "The Great Proposition" (*Evidence That Demands a Verdict*). What if God had a Son? "If God had a Son, then we would expect Him to: (1) have an unusual entrance into life, (2) be without sin, (3) manifest the supernatural in the form of miracles, (4) speak the greatest words ever spoken, (5) have a lasting and universal influence, (6) satisfy the spiritual hunger in man, (7) exercise power over death." Hmmm.

Mr. King, meet God's Son!

18

Perfect!

Ever since I was 10 years old I wanted to go to Yankee Stadium, "The House That Ruth Built." Just to be where "The Bambino," "The Sultan of Swat," hit 60 home runs! To look down at first base where "The Iron Horse," Lou Gehrig, graced the ground. To look out to center field where my boyhood idol, Micky Mantle, roamed the grass. To see that famous stadium facade; to gaze in wonder at the bronze plaques honoring ghostly greats; to be in the hallowed grounds where Don Larsen threw a perfect game against the Brooklyn Dodgers in Game 5 of the 1956 World Series, a game I listened to on the radio with bated breath when I was but a baseball-bonkers boy.

And now, at the age of 52—long past a player's prime—there I was, one of 49,820 baseball fans, on May 17, 1998. Upper Tier, Section U6, Row U, Seat 1, to take in a Sunday afternoon game. Twins versus Yanks. It was enough just to be there. To see the stadium. To savor the smells. I had absolutely no idea of the treasure that was in store for me! Nor did anyone else. Not even the Yankee pitcher, David Wells. But as he was soon to find out, all's well that ends Wells!

By the time the hefty lefty struck out the side in the third, I knew something special was going to happen. By the seventh inning the tension was thick in the air. Wells battled back from a 3-1 count on Molitor, a future hall of famer, and struck him out swinging. The place went wild! In the eighth we all got a scare when Coomer hit a hard,

one-hop shot to second, but Knoblauch knocked it down and threw him out. Whew!

Everyone was on their feet in the ninth, cheering like mad on every strike, booing lustily on every called ball. A fly out. We high-fived. Another strike out! We danced in anticipation. And now only Meares stood between Wells and baseball immortality. (I paused to pity Rubel Shelly and Marshall Leggett—who could have come to the game with me—but only for a scant second.) Meares lifted a lazy can of corn to right that was gobbled up by O'Neill. Yankee Stadium erupted in jubilation! A mighty roar drifted over The Bronx. "I don't care if I ever get back!"

Wells had retired 27 consecutive batters without surrendering a hit or a walk. His teammates had played perfect defense. No hits, no runs, no errors. My ticket stub instantly was worth 10 times the price paid. The Yanks lifted Wells to their shoulders (no small feat in itself) and carried him off the field while the P.A. blared Sinatra's "New York, New York" and 49,820 people went home happy. Even the cops and the cabbies were smiling! Wells had become only the 15th pitcher in the history of the grand old game to pitch a perfect game.

You're waiting, of course, for my "pitch." Here it is. A fat one. Right down the middle. You can't miss it. Hit it out of the park! *There has been only one person who ever lived a perfect life.* David Wells may have thrown "a perfect game," Jimmy Stewart may have had "a wonderful life," but Jesus Christ lived "a perfect life." Three times the author of Hebrews attributes *absolute perfection* to Jesus.¹ The perfect Christ was "holy, blameless, pure"²— "without sin."³

Paul testified that Jesus of Nazareth "*knew no sin*"⁴ while Peter declared that Christ "*did no sin.*"⁵ Even Pilate had to admit that he could find "no fault" in Him.⁶ There

has never been anyone like Jesus Christ. Never, ever. Thirty-three years without a sin! *No sins, no faults, no errors!* No wonder Philips Brooks called him "the condescension of divinity, and the exaltation of humanity."

Our human dilemma: we are imperfect. "There is not a righteous man on earth who does what is right and never sins".⁷ Yet we are to "be perfect,"⁸ even as God is perfect! Is it "strike three!" for humanity? If not for a Divine Substitute, yes! Good news! "God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that *in him* (emphasis mine) we might become the righteousness of God."⁹

In Christ—the only one who lived a perfect life and could die a substitutionary, vicarious death—we are presented "perfect"¹⁰ and "complete" to God.¹¹ Penitent believers are *in Christ* when they are "baptized into Christ."¹² *In Christ* there is "no condemnation."¹³ Now we are in "The House that Truth Built" and can go home singing. "When He shall come with trumpet sound, O may I then in Him be found: Dressed in His righteousness alone, Faultless to stand before the throne!"

¹ Hebrews 2:10; 5:9; 7:28

² Hebrews 7:26

³ Hebrews 4:15; 9:20

⁴ 2 Corinthians 5:21

⁵ 1 Peter 2:22

⁶ John 19:4

⁷ Ecclesiastes 7:20

⁸ Matthew 5:48

⁹ 2 Corinthians 5:21

¹⁰ Colossians 1:28

¹¹ Colossians 2:20

¹² Romans 6:3; Galatians 3:27

¹³ Romans 8:1

19

Surpassing Greatness

Baseball has been a love of my life since October 1951 when Bobby Thomson hit "the shot heard 'round the world" in New York's Polo Grounds off the Dodger's Ralph Branca. Radio play-by-play man Russ Hodges went crazy: "The Giants win the pennant! The Giants win the pennant! The Giants win the pennant!" I heard the exciting call over my father's Crosley radio.

In 1961 my father and a family friend, Ron Carlson, took me to Metropolitan Stadium in Minneapolis where I saw the Twins play the Yankees. It was Roger Maris Day (Maris was from nearby Fargo, North Dakota). He went 0 for 5 that day but a few weeks later he eclipsed Babe Ruth's record of 60 home runs by hitting #61 off Boston's Tracy Stallard in Yankee Stadium.

A few weeks ago I had the pleasure of taking my son, Lincoln, to Busch Stadium in St. Louis where we, along with 49,987 fortunate fans witnessed history. At 8:18 P.M. (CST), September 8, the Cardinal's Mark McGwire hit a screamer over the left field wall off the Chicago Cub's Steve Trachsel. It was his 62nd home run of the year, breaking the 37-year-old record of Roger Maris. The stadium erupted in a 10-minute standing ovation as fireworks lit up the night sky.

As I stood there, flanked by my son and old college chums Jerry Harris and Gary Bryant, the words "surpassing greatness" kept coming to my mind. We had just seen a cherished record surpassed. In fact, in the crowd that night were the sons of Roger Maris himself.

Great names from baseball's Valhalla flooded my thoughts. Like ghostly figures they walked through the left field wall and stood quietly in the outfield, pale bats resting on their strong shoulders: Johnny Mize (51 in '47), Micky Mantle (54 in '61), Ralph Kiner (54 in '49), Hack Wilson (56 in '30), Hank Greenberg (58 in '38), Jimmie Foxx—my Dad's hero— (58 in '32), Babe Ruth, "the Sultan of Swat" (60 in '27), and Roger Maris (61 in '61).

With one quick swing of the bat, McGwire had become the foremost king of swing. He now stood alone in baseball immortality. He had swept by all the mighty sluggers of the past. He had transcended the best. He had surpassed greatness. For baseball lovers such as myself, it was a magical moment of mythical proportions. (McGwire ended the year with a staggering total of 70.)

Well, move over Mark! For there is one man, if, as Josephus said, "it be lawful to call him a man," who has surpassed the greatness of every man or woman who has ever lived on planet earth—Jesus of Nazareth. Napoleon said, "I know men; and I tell you that Jesus Christ is no mere man. Between him and every other person in the world there is no possible term of comparison."

William Biederwolf said, "A man who can read the New Testament and not see that Christ claims to be more than a man, can look all over the sky at high noon on a cloudless day and not see the sun." Much more than "the man upstairs," Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God!

When Christ clashed with the Pharisees, He claimed surpassing greatness. In no uncertain terms He told them, "One greater than the temple is here . . . One greater than Jonah is here . . . One greater than Solomon is here" (Matthew 12:6,41,42). The temple of Herod the Great is gone, but the temple of Christ (the Church, 1 Corinthians

3:16) remains. The prophet Jonah is long dead, but Christ arose from the dead on the third day, just as He said! Solomon's kingdom, with its splendor and glory, has vanished, but Christ reigns on high as King of kings and Lord of lords (Revelation 19:16).

The transcendent greatness of Jesus is seen in a quotation from "One Solitary Life" (author unknown): "All the armies that ever marched, and all the navies that were ever built, and all the parliaments that ever sat, and all the kings that ever reigned, put together, have not affected the life of man upon this earth as powerfully as has this One Solitary Life."

We stand in the presence of surpassing greatness when we stand in the presence of Jesus the Christ. God gave Him a name above every name. Sound the roll call: Abraham, Moses, David, Alexander the Great, Charlemagne, Constantine the Great, Julius Caesar, George Washington, Abraham Lincoln. Great names all — but "at the name of Jesus" their knees shall bow and their tongues shall confess that "Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father" (Philippians 2:9-11).

Charles Lamb once observed, "If Shakespeare should come into this room, we would all rise; but if Jesus Christ should come in, we would all kneel." Now *that's* surpassing greatness!

20

Shadows in the Stable

The Christmas That Almost Wasn't

The hinge of history is on the door of a Bethlehem stable (Ralph W. Sockman).

But dark forces were at work to loosen that hinge the night Christ was born in Bethlehem.

Bethlehem! Burial place of Rachel—who died giving birth to Benjamin. Where David was anointed to be king of Israel. Where another king was about to be born!

Evil does not stand idly by when goodness makes its entry. To paraphrase Phillips Brooks: *O little town of Bethlehem,/How still we see thee lie!/Above thy deep and dreamless sleep/The evil forms flit by;/Yet in thy dark streets lurketh/The ever-cursing blight;/The hopes and fears of all the years/Will meet in thee tonight.* The darkness that hovered over Bethlehem the night Christ was born was not just natural nightfall.

What are we talking about? The dark side of Christmas. Heaven celebrated the birth of Christ with angelic praises. Hell fought it with demonic fury. And was all the more furious when the wicked plot was divinely thwarted.

The shadow of Herod the Great fell over Bethlehem — “house of bread.” And Herod was hungry! From his counselors he learned that Bethlehem, a scant six miles south of Jerusalem, had been pinpointed by the prophet Micah to produce one — One! — who would be Ruler in Israel!

That was enough for power-hungry Herod. Enter *Murder One*. He told the wise men he wanted to worship the new-

born king. Right. If murder is worship. Angels warned Joseph and Mary to take the Child and flee to Egypt. Herod's wrath was so great that the streets became rivers of red, flowing with the blood of Bethlehem's baby boys.

(The world is still cursed with those in high places who thirst for empowerment; who worship the high priestess of abortion; who callously legislate the deaths of unborn innocents.)

Herod the Great wanted Jesus dead for **earthly** reasons. Micah's prophecy, "He shall be great to the ends of the earth," aroused Herod's jealousy. But a greater — and more evil — power than Herod wanted Jesus dead . . . for **eternal** reasons.

A sinister shadow fell across the form of Mary as she lay gasping in pain in the twisted straw of the stable. It was the shadow of the Great Red Dragon, otherwise known as the devil, Satan (Revelation 12:1-6). John the Revelator records the obscene scene:

"Then being with child, she cried out in labor and pain to give birth A great, fiery red dragon . . . stood before the woman who was ready to give birth, to devour her Child as soon as it was born. She bore a male Child who was to rule all nations with a rod of iron, and her Child was caught up to God and His throne. Then the woman fled into the wilderness, where she has a place prepared by God"

Shadows in the stable. The Christmas that almost wasn't. To paraphrase Edmund Sears, *Still thru the cloven skies they come,/With evil wings unfurled,/And now their hellish music floats/O'er all the weary world.* Why should we be surprised? Ever since Eden the adversary has been prowling like a lion, "seeking who he may devour." Even a new-born babe. Especially the Christ Child!

Does it surprise you that the prince of darkness was present the night the Prince of Peace was born? It shouldn't. If

Satan desired the dead *body* of Moses through whom the law was given, think how badly he desired the new-born baby Jesus, through whom grace and truth would come!

Martin Luther wrote "Away in a Manger," delightfully describing "the little Lord Jesus, asleep on the hay." But another presence was not asleep! He stayed by the cradle too! Luther wrote of him in another hymn, "A Mighty Fortress is Our God," and described the dragon/devil as "our ancient foe" who seeks to "work us woe" — as a "prince of darkness grim," armed with "cruel hate."

And the hate of hell was strong in the stable that night. But the love and power of God above, blazing like the star that shone above the stable, was stronger! The mighty hand of God (perhaps through angels) reached down and stayed the evil intent of Satan.

For you see, this Child must live to learn obedience, to become the perfect sacrifice for sin, to bruise the head of Satan, and to become the Lamb of God which takes away the sin of the world — including our own.

The Christ Child was spared that night that we might be spared from our night of sin.

As Charles Wesley wrote, Jesus was *Born that man no more may die; Born to raise the sons of earth; born to give them second birth.*

This Christmas I will again thank God that Christ was born in Bethlehem. But I will also praise Him for banishing the shadows in the stable which would have taken Christ's life before He could give us ours.

21

A Word For The Weary

*"The Sovereign Lord has given me an instructed tongue,
to know the word that sustains the weary." — Isaiah 50:4 NIV*

If there is one thing I see in my travels more than anything else it is that people are discouraged. I get that way sometimes myself, so I don't hold it against anyone for getting discouraged once in awhile. My friend Joe Garman of ARM Prison Outreach, who probably travels more than I do, says, "I have never seen so much depression as I have this past year." What I'm talking about is a deep-down discouragement, a settled-in weariness. It reminds me of what Paul wrote in Galatians 6:9, "Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up."

Our fast-paced modern living has worn some folks down. Others have grown weary by years of sacrificial service in the church. I see these good, tired people and my heart goes out to them. They are not weary of doing good — they are worn out because they have done so much good for so many years. Some of them are not able to adjust very easily to the changes that have taken place in the world, society and the church.

But the church would not be where it is today were it not for the love and labors of those who now languish in the shadows of the past. I am a proud product of the past. God bless those people who blessed my life! Sound the roll call: nursery workers, Sunday School teachers, VBS workers, Bible camp faculty, godly elders, local ministers,

visiting evangelists and missionaries, solid married couples and families; the list goes on and on.

Think of the accumulated total of money given, years invested and talents shared by this block of believers. They helped build the local church, started new churches, sent young people to Bible camps, conventions and colleges, took their families and those who had no family to youth rallies, supported missionaries abroad and a myriad of ministries at home. No wonder they are tired!

There are the people who fought the battles, dug out the stumps, broke up the fallow ground, sowed the seed — often watering that seed with their own tears. The modern church is built upon a foundation of toil and sacrifice, hardship and suffering, survivors of the Depression years and War years who often went without — or went far out of their way — so that others could go to heaven.

Some of you reading these lines are thinking of someone right now who is living in the shadows of the past — tired, weary, discouraged, perhaps even unrecognized and unappreciated. Go to them. Today. Tell them what they have meant to you, your family and your church. If you can't go to them in person, pick up the phone and call them. Sit down at your desk and write them a card or letter. And don't delay. Some of them are lingering like the last leaf of autumn, flickering like a burned-down candle.

I try to make a regular practice of letting people who have blessed my life know how much I appreciate their investment in me. I get a joy out of writing those letters, but I'd like to think that it's nothing like the feeling they experience when they open that envelope or receive that visit or phone call. How do you measure the sweet rush of gratitude? Someone remembered! Someone remembered and is grateful!

Today in Washington our government gave the Medal

of Honor to one tired, old, Negro soldier who had been overlooked for his heroism on the front lines during World War II. I felt a catch in my throat as I watched him wipe away a tear with a bent, brown finger. How many "veterans" in the Lord's army have been overlooked or forgotten? They live in yesterday, yesteryear, yestertears. They deserve God's Medal of Honor.

If there's one passage I could share with those who are a bit discouraged, it's this one: "God is not unjust; he will not forget your work and the love you have shown him as you have helped his people and continue to help them. We want each of you to show this same diligence to the very end, in order to make your hope sure" (Hebrews 6:10-11).

Friend, God knows. Even if others don't. He'll never forget what you've done. And just in case no one ever told you — "Thank you." God loves you and so do I.

22

Where Sweet Birds Sang

Billy Graham once called New York City "the loneliest place in the world." But I know a place that's just as lonely. A small town somewhere in America. A house on a hill. Where soft winds blow. "Where sweet birds sang."

I first met Alan* when I lived in Springdale*. Alan ran the local grocery store and we became good friends. Alan had a kind face. But somewhere behind the kindness, if you looked closely enough, lurked pain and heartache.

Alan told me one day what had happened. A terrible car wreck. One of his sons was driving a car filled with local teenagers. They hit a bridge . . . and everyone was killed.

For years Alan had lived with that memory — revived every time a family member of the victims came into the store. Life goes on, even after tragedies. Mourners still have to put milk and bread on the table.

Then Alan's wife, Lorraine*, became ill. Something to do with her heart. Though not that old, she became an invalid. Alan cared for her as best he could while still running the store.

He set out all kinds of bird feeders in their spacious back yard. Soon an amazing variety of songbirds was visiting the house on the hill, flitting from feeder to feeder, filling the air with beautiful music.

*By shallow rivers, to whose falls,
Melodious birds sing madrigals.*

(Christopher Marlowe)

One summer afternoon I visited Lorraine at Alan's request. She was seated in the living room, watching the birds through the picture window. Their torrent of melody could be heard through the screen door. We spent a pleasant hour together.

In time, our family moved away from Springdale. But whenever we would return for a visit, I would see Alan. Still helping folks with their groceries. Still carrying sacks of groceries out to the cars at the curb. Still carrying a load. Still smiling.

Not long ago we were in Springdale and I stopped at the store. Alan's other son was running the store now. But Alan was still bagging groceries for folks. After my order was rung up, we talked.

"How's Lorraine?"

"Oh, she died last August."

"I'm sorry." I really was. I wish I had known so I could have been there. To help carry his burden. I told him so.

"Thanks, Vic. It just got to be too much for her. Her heart just gave out"

(I know, I know. Same thing with my mother a few years ago.) Then, impulsively, I asked, "Do you still have the bird sanctuary? I remember how Lorraine loved them so."

With a painful smile he answered quietly, almost quizzically. "You know, it's a funny thing. Since my wife died, the birds don't come anymore. I put the bird feed out, but they just don't come."

A big lump came up in my throat. I couldn't talk for a moment. But Alan, not noticing, continued to talk. "I stay here at the store as late as I can. I don't like to go home. It's too lonely. I have a bite to eat, watch the news and go to bed."

I patted Alan on the back and murmured something I

hoped would be understanding and comforting. At least I hope it was. I can't really remember what I said.

But I know what I said to God in the car — when I could finally see well enough to drive the car down the street.

"Dear God, here's a man who's so lonely. Please send someone to visit him. And if people won't go please send the birds back. And let them sing again."

Later in the day I came across this poignant passage in the book of Jeremiah: "After this, I looked around. The earth was barren, with no form of life . . . No people could be seen, and *all the birds had flown away.*"

It was William Shakespeare who wrote:

*That time of year thou mayest in me behold
When yellow leaves, or none, or few, do hang
Upon those boughs which shake against the cold,
Bare ruin'd choirs, where late sweet birds sang.*

My friend Alan is now in "that time of year . . . where late the sweet birds sang." And since I can't be there for him, because of geographical separation, I'm hoping — and praying — that someone will care enough to invest a few minutes, a few visits, with him . . . and ten million other folks like Alan who are dwelling in a lonely land where sweet birds once sang.

For the love of God, won't someone share the love of God with broken people?

*Names of people and places have been changed.

23

The Will To Triumph

During the last days of World War II, the body of an old Jew was found in a bombed-out basement in Berlin. Before he died, the old man had taken a piece of chalk and scrawled the following words on the wall:

I believe in the sun even when it is not shining;

I believe in love even when I do not feel it;

I believe in God even when he is silent.

Man needs a manifesto — a manifesto of faith; something to live by so that he can have something to die by. For every one of us, a day is coming when we will need to draw on that faith as never before. Jesus told Peter, "When you were young you used to fasten your belt and go anywhere you wanted to; but when you are old you will stretch out your hands and someone else will tie them and take you where you don't want to go" (In saying this Jesus was indicating the way in which Peter would die and bring glory to God.) Then Jesus said to him, "Follow me!"¹

*The day may come when I will never be able to walk again, but I will continue to keep in step with God, walking by faith.*²

*The day may come when I will never be able to hear again, but I will continue to listen for the still, small voice calling me,*³
*the voice of my Master.*⁴

*The day may come when I will never be able to see again, but I will continue to look to the hills from where my help comes, the Lord Himself.*⁵

The day may come when I will never be able to sing again,

but I will continue to have a melody in my heart,⁶ as I remember the songs I learned in my youth.

The day may come when I will never be able to talk again, but I will continue to commune with God, trusting that the meditations of my heart will be acceptable to Him.⁷

The day may come when I will never be able to write again, but I will continue to believe the things that are written in God's Word that assure me I have eternal life in Christ.⁸

The day may come when I will never be able to travel again, but I know that I will be carried on eagle's wings and be brought into the presence of God Himself.⁹

The day may come when I will never be able to get dressed again, but I will take comfort in knowing that I am clothed with Christ,¹⁰ dressed in His righteousness alone.

The day may come when I will not be able to keep up a home anymore, but I will remember that Christ has prepared a beautiful home for me in heaven.¹¹

The day may come when I will not be able to remember much of anything anymore, but may my last thoughts be that Christ died for my sins.¹²

The will to triumph through self alone is not nearly enough. Man needs a point of reference outside himself to rely upon. And for me that point of reference is God and God alone.

Everyone needs a manifesto of faith. Job had one. "Though God slay me, yet will I trust in Him."¹³ Habakkuk had one. "Though the fig tree does not bud and there are no grapes on the vines, though the olive crop fails and the fields produce no food, though there are no sheep in the pen and no cattle in the stalls, yet I will rejoice in the Lord."¹⁴ The apostle Paul, deserted by everyone, had one. "But the Lord stood at my side . . . The Lord will rescue me from every evil attack and will bring me safely to his heavenly kingdom. To him be glory for ever and ever. Amen."¹⁵

The last words from the Christ on the Cross was an act of the will. Jesus cried with a loud voice, "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit."¹⁶ Then he bowed His head and willed to die.

Create your personal manifesto of faith that you might have . . . the will to triumph!

Written on Good Friday, April 10, 1998, in honor of my uncle, Troy Knowles. Delivered at Milanowek, Poland, April 24, 1998.

¹ John 21:18, 18 TEV

² 2 Corinthians 5:7

³ 1 Kings 19:12

⁴ Revelation 3:20

⁵ Psalms 121:1

⁶ Ephesians 5:19

⁷ Psalms 19:14

⁸ 1 John 5:13

⁹ Exodus 19:4

¹⁰ Galatians 3:27

¹¹ John 14:1-3

¹² 1 Corinthians 15:3

¹³ Job 13:15

¹⁴ Habakkuk 3:17,18

¹⁵ 2 Timothy 4:17,18

¹⁶ Luke 23:46

24

Schindler's Lust

There is a scene toward the end of the award-winning film presentation, *Schindler's List*, that is forever seared in my soul. Oskar Schindler, a German war profiteer who spent his entire fortune rescuing Jews from the burning ovens of Hitler's hell, is presented with a token of appreciation from the grateful non-dead. The gift is a gold ring. Inside the ring, inscribed in Hebrew, are the words: "*Whoever saves one life, saves the whole world.*"

The ring is presented to Schindler by Itzhak Stern, a wise and observing little Jew who was Schindler's right hand man in the rescue operation. The film presentation does not record the story behind the ring's inscription. But in the book on which the film is based, *Schindler's List* (Thomas Kenally, Simon & Schuster, 1982), the details are revealed.

Schindler and Stern are talking one day. Schindler a nominal Catholic, Stern a devout Jew. "In times like these," Schindler said, "it must be hard for the churches to go on telling people that their Heavenly Father cared about the death of even a single sparrow." Stern agreed but suggested a verse in the Talmud which said, "He who saves the life of one man saves the entire world." Later, Stern came to realize that it was at that moment that he had dropped the right seed in the furrow.

Dear God, how very important it is to say the right thing at the right time!

As the persecution of the Jews in Poland turns from pogroms and persecution to an all-out "final solution" —

the systematic liquidation of a race, genocide, Schindler undergoes a conversion of sorts in his inner soul. No longer is he consumed with making profits on the war and spending his money on wine, women and song. Now his concern — his burning passion — is to rescue the perishing. And his lust for life turns into a list for life.

Schindler puts Jews to work in his factory that makes pots and pans. On several occasions he is arrested by the Gestapo for consorting with "subhumans." But he is not to be deterred. And when the destruction of the Jews escalates, Schindler and Stern begin preparing a list of Jewish people who might somehow be spared from the holocaust.

Like a man possessed, Schindler paces back and forth as Stern types the list on an old typewriter.

"How many?"

"Six hundred."

"More! More!"

Finally, when the list is finished, it dawns on Stern that Schindler is putting up his own money to buy their freedom. He asks, "You're buying them? This list is . . . *life!*"

Schindler devises a singular plan whereby more than 1,000 Jews are transported across the Polish border into Czechoslovakia where he puts them to work in a concentration camp making dummy artillery shells. He lays down the law to the German soldiers that his "prisoners" are not to be mistreated. Indeed, he provides for their every need until his money runs out.

Now for the scene that is seared in my soul. The war is over. The Jews are free to go. Schindler and his wife must flee for their lives. He was, after all, a member of the Nazi party. And the hunt for Nazis is on. Stern and the soon-to-be liberated Jews gather around Schindler and present him with the gold ring — made from the gold in their teeth, willingly given on behalf of the one who had filled

their mouths and stomachs while thousands of other Jews starved to death in other camps.

Schindler, a giant of a man, towering over the Jews, takes the ring and reads the inscription. "*Whoever saves one life, saves the whole world.*" He looks up and softly says, "I could have got more. I could have got more. I could have got more."

Stern reaches out to him and says, "You saved more than 1,000 people!" (Indeed, today there are more than 6,000 descendants of *Schindlerjuden* — "Schindler's Jews." Schindler was declared "a Righteous Person" by the Jews in 1961. He died in 1974 and is buried in Israel.)

But Schindler cannot be comforted. "I didn't do enough." He moves to the car in which he will make his departure. "This car. Ten people right there!" He jerks the Nazi pin off his suit lapel. "This gold pin. Two people! One more person!"

Then he falls to his knees in agony and cries, "One more person! I could have got one more person! And I didn't!"

The sound of his racking sobs haunts the night. And haunts me still.

Years ago my father preached a sermon I will never forget, "Judgment Day Wishes." Dad said, "When we see Jesus, that beautiful face, hear His wonderful voice, see the scars in His hands and feet, we will wish we had served Him better. And when we see that awful hell that we will escape, we will wish our praise of the Savior was much more fervent — that we had worked harder to tell others how to flee this terrible place!"

Friend, people are all that matter in life. Whether they live in Poland, Germany or America. They are of greater value than money or material things. So live that you won't have to wish, "I could have done more!" Let your lust for life be transformed into a list for life.

25

They Threw Them Bread

"The cowering prisoners will be set free . . . nor will they lack bread."

— Isaiah 51:14

On a peaceful day this August, Evelyn and I visited Stutthof Concentration Camp, the only camp in the evil Nazi network that functioned continuously from the outbreak of World War II until its end. There we learned the story of the Death March from Stutthof and the heroic efforts of some Polish peasant women who saved thousands of starving prisoners.

We passed through the infamous Gate of Death, just as 110,000 prisoners had done between the days of the camp's opening on September 2, 1939 and the camp's liberation on May 9, 1945. We walked out in the late afternoon sun, saddened and stilled by the knowledge that 65,000 of Stutthof's prisoners (3,500 of them children) never left alive.

"Lay a rose in their honor and leave," wrote Jan Gorec Rosinski, *"for this is the home of disgrace."*

German S.S. men told incoming prisoners, "You are now a number. You will die here when the time comes, not earlier and not later." A survivor from Belarus wrote, *"Name is replaced by number . . . our life is now a working machine . . . most everything ends in the cremation chimney."*

Prisoners at Stutthof, located only 3 km from the beautiful Baltic Sea, were fed a starvation diet and systematically worked to death. To hasten the liquidation of Jews and

Poles, a gas chamber. We stood inside and observed that the walls are still stained blue by the deadly Zyklon B gas.

In January 1945 the advancing Russian army forced the evacuation of Stutthof. Survivor Witold Zbaraskewski told of 3,000 people who were put on leaky barges with the promise they would be taken to Denmark. As soon as they were put out to sea, the plugs were pulled, drowning them all. The S.S. also set fire to the Jewish barracks, burning alive dozens of women who were too sick to make the march.

Eleven thousand prisoners were formed into nine columns and led on a bitter 46-day Death March through upper Poland in the dead of winter. About half of them died in the frozen mud and snow. But on the long march "man's inhumanity to man" was met — and conquered — by "woman's humanity to man," especially in the Kaszubian district.

A Lithuanian prisoner, Basis Sruoga, remembers: "In Kaszubian villages . . . crying women were standing by the road . . . They were throwing bundles of bread to us. S.S. men were ordering the Kaszubian women away . . . Rifle shots were fired, hungry people were killed."

Danish prisoner Martin Nielsen also recalled the brave Kaszubian effort. "Women at every occasion tried to throw some bread to us. I remember an old woman with a basket in hand, throwing bread. Later she was lying on the side of the road, with her mouth bleeding. She was hit by an S.S. man."

"Often we were given bread," said a Norwegian prisoner, "but it was not always possible to grab it. Guards were rushing people away from us, even shooting at those who waited by the road."

Perhaps the most poignant memory was shared by a Polish prisoner, Waclaw Miture. "Women brought bread in basket, hot coffee in bins . . . But the S.S. men did not

allow them to give it to us . . . When women, against the bans of the S.S., started pushing their way to prisoners with the bins of hot soup . . . the S.S. went mad . . . pulling the bins out of the women's hands, pouring the soup out, treading it with their shoes . . . They started hitting women with their gun butts, shooting to scare them off. These women who had bread in their baskets were not scared. They came near the column to throw slices of bread over the S.S.'s heads . . . *hundred of hands reached out for the bread with the gesture of indescribable despair.*"

Survivor Jan Jarzebowski: "We will never forget the help . . . often given to us risking their own lives, by the Kaszubian poor people. Only thanks to that help, more than half of the prisoners survived that cursed march."

The sinister shadows of Stutthof are with us yet today. There's a spiritual lesson to be learned. Satan is leading the world on a Death March to hell. These perishing prisoners need bread — "*bread that sustains the heart*" (Psalms 104:15). Christ is that bread, "*the bread that comes down from heaven, which a man may eat and not die*" (John 6:50). At the risk of a gun butt in the teeth, or rifle shots fired at us by men made mad by sin, we must meet the marching columns of starving millions with the Bread of Life.

Starving people do not want to hear about church fusses and fights, silly sectarian squabbles or how many angels can dance on the head of a pin. They are being herded to hell by forces that have been drained of every drop of the blood of kindness. What they need is to be met by a people who are fueled with a Kaszubian compassion; a people of passion who care enough and dare enough to share their bread with the soon dead; a people willing to risk life and limb to throw bread over the heads of the enemy . . . into hundreds, thousand, *millions* of hands reaching out for bread with the gesture of indescribable despair!

26

Sobered At Sobibor

The wind was sobbing in the treetops and drops of rain were falling like tears from heaven the day I visited Sobibor Death Camp. Here, in a lovely forest of white birch, located on the border of Poland and Ukraine, 250,000 Jews and 1,000 Poles were murdered by their Nazi executioners between the years 1942 and 1943.

"They picked a pretty place to do their dirty deeds," I murmured to my Polish companion, Kostek Jakoniuk. "And for what?" It is a simple question that defies a sane answer.

A bronze plaque mounted on a stone wall at the entrance of the camp informs visitors that on October 14, 1943, Jewish prisoners mounted an armed revolt, overpowered their Nazi guards and about 300 Jews managed to escape to freedom.

But what caught my eye was a quotation from Job 16:18 at the bottom of the plaque: "*Earth, conceal not my blood.*"

As I stood on the train platform and looked at the glistening railroad tracks — the same tracks on which trains transported so many of their deaths in this forest — I thought, "So many came here. So very few left." And then as I walked through the dripping-wet forest, I thought, "Their blood cries out from the ground — *beneath my very feet!*"

And later in the week I was moved to write the following . . .

Sobibor

is no more

And yet it lives — is *so* alive

Within the shadows of my mind.

The sky was gray

the day I came.

My face was wet —

not all was rain.

To think that here —

this quiet place

'midst trees of birch,

a displaced race

of people — *Jews* —

from far and near, were rounded up

and shipped, like cattle, in a train

To Sobibor.

A frightened man, a wife with child;

a boy, a girl, with sad, dark eyes;

an old grandmother, bent with age

were set upon by dogs —

who starved them, worked them

beat them, *killed* them

until the ground was red.

But could not *still* them, for I *hear* them;

their blood cries from the ground!

Beneath my very feet!

"Why did we die?"

They seem to cry —

"O, can you tell us, Sir?"

"What did we do

we homeless Jews,

that we should end up here?"

What can I say?

Why *did* they die?

Their bodies fed to flames?

Their smoke ascending to the skies?
 Their ashes floating
 down upon
 the trees of Sobibor?

They died because of pride and hate
 and sin and lust and greed and "fate."
 But these are words that are too late
 to help so many gone!

I whisper,
 "Friends, I know not why
 you had to suffer and to die.
 I'm here today, from a country far
 to just remember you."

Sobibor
 is no more.
 And yet it lives — is so alive
 within the shadows of my mind.



Kostek later wrote his own impressions of the visit to Sobibor in a letter to a supporter of POEM in America: "Today we went to a Sobibor Death Camp where during one year Nazis killed 250,000 Jews and Poles. *How much these people who were destroyed — and who were destroying — needed Christ. It would not have happened if the people knew Jesus Christ and His love.*"

Kostek knows. He saw, first-hand, what Nazism and Communism did to Poland. We struggle for meaning but this we know. *Hate destroys. Love builds.*

Jesus built His church on a love that never fails. Not even the Gates of Hell — manmade or otherwise — can prevail against His blood-bought, love-locked church.

27

Reconcilable Differences

Divorces are granted by the thousands every day in America because of "irreconcilable differences."

What in the world are irreconcilable differences? Differences I understand — a disagreement in opinion. Who was the greatest center fielder in the big leagues? You say Mays. I say Mantle. Some said DiMaggio. Others liked The Duke. Somehow we sandlot ragamuffins of the 50's differed without duking it out.

Are the differences you have with another person really irreconcilable — *impossible* to reconcile, to resolve, to settle? I mean, didn't I read somewhere that nothing would be impossible with God? That all things are possible with Him? Hmmm. Think I did.

Maybe that's our problem. We don't invite Him — God — to the table. We'd rather file for divorce — split a church — divide a brotherhood — before we would ask the Almighty to arbitrate.

Divorce in the world — among pagans — because of "irreconcilable differences," I can understand. Divorce in the church — among people reconciled to God by Christ — because of "irreconcilable differences," I cannot understand.

Understand what I'm saying. I'm *not* speaking here of dissolutions of marriage. No, no. It's the breaking of spiritual ties between believers — the fracture of fellowship — of which I speak.

To me, that's unspeakable. Members of the Body of Christ suing for separation from fellow members. It hap-

pens all too often. Nearly every week. No wonder we're so weak. We're known more for our *weak communion* than we are for our weekly communion!

I have three sisters and one brother in the flesh — scattered from California to Tennessee — and you couldn't separate me from them no matter how hard you tried. Why? Loyal Knowles blood runs hot in our veins. You'd seek in vain to divide me from them.

I have thousands of brothers and sisters in the spirit — scattered to the four corners of the earth — and you couldn't separate me from them no matter how hard you tried. Why? Royal Lamb's blood runs hot in our veins. Blood is thicker than bother.

Do we have differences? Of course! Are they great enough to divide us? No. Are they "irreconcilable?" Of course not!

Come with me to the Republic of Poland. There you'll find believers meeting in cities and countryside, in chapels and cottages. I know. I've been there. I have a passion for these people whose faith conquered the swastika, hammer and sickle.

Do they all worship the same way? No, they do not. Some use a chalice in the communion, others use individual cups. Wine is used in some churches, grape juice in others. Some pray one at a time, others all together. Some greet you with the holy kiss, others with a hearty handshake. Some of the women wear head coverings, others do not. Some sing contemporary, upbeat songs, others sing traditional, haunting songs — sung in the minor-key.

But do they all worship the same God. Yes, they do! They have learned to be diverse without being perverse. "Have we not all one father? Has not one God created us? Why then are we faithless to one another?" (Malachi 2:10, NRSV).

I'll tell you why our Polish brethren are faithful to each other and don't divide the Body of Christ as do their American cousins. It's because they've been through the fire together! When you have suffered together, as they have under the ruthless regimes of Nazism and Communism, the last thing you would want to do is splinter a church or wreck a relationship!

Soft living has lulled us into thinking we have the luxury to divide. Not so with believers in Poland. They know they need their brethren. But we needle our brethren — castigating faith, challenging for debates, carving up churches, consigning God-fearing, Christ-loving, fellow-believers to the eternal flames.

May God have mercy on us all! I've never had to apologize for our position, but I've often had to apologize for our disposition. Maybe Jackie Mason was right. He said, "I talk to myself because I like dealing with a better class of people." I talk to myself a lot these days!

The late Bill Jessup had it right. That I know. The last words — literally — that he ever spoke were these: "And I believe, Christian friends, there isn't *any* problem that two Christian people can have — who possess the mind of Christ and the spirit of Christ — there isn't *any* problem but what those two can solve at the feet of Jesus Christ!"

Then, his sermon finished, he died. Right in the evening service of the new church in Morgan Hill, California. What a way to go! What a message to remember!

Do we have differences? Yes. Are they irreconcilable? No.

Let us practice what we have preached: *In essentials, unity; in opinions, liberty; in all things, charity.*

28

Dead Men Walking

The Oscar-nominated movie, "Dead Man Walking," is based upon the true story of a compassionate Catholic nun and a death-row prisoner in the Louisiana State Penitentiary. The chilling phrase, "Dead Man Walking," is also found in best-selling author John Grisham's blockbuster novel, *The Chamber*. Grisham's book is about a Mississippi murderer's last days on Death Row. Both the movie and the novel describe the eerie scene when the warden leads the death-row inmate in a final walk to the Death House, crying, "*Dead man walking!*"

Those three words, I am told by Joe Garman, founder and president of American Rehabilitation Ministries, freeze the blood of every living prisoner. Joe recalls the day he was walking in the exercise yard of San Quention with Chaplain Harry Howard and they heard the words over the intercom, "*Dead man walking!*" Joe said every prisoner put his back to the nearest wall and stood stock still until the death-row prisoner was transferred.

Dead man walking! I've thought about it and have come to this conclusion: from the President to your paperboy, from the Queen to the choir director, from the media elite to the man on the street, we're all dead men walking. There are no exceptions. The corporate executive who climbs into a cab in Chicago is just as dead as the faceless cabbie who drives it.

Rudyard Kipling's *Danny Deever* contains this mournful line: *For they're hangin' Danny Deever,*

You can hear the Dead March play.

Friends, the Dead March plays for all of us. One way or another. We're all caught up in our own macabre Bataan death march — men marching relentlessly to the edge of eternity.

Lest you think me too cryptic, let me explain. Every person on this planet is a walking dead man of one kind or another. We're either dead *in* sin or dead *to* sin. God told Abimelech, "Behold, thou art but a dead man" (Genesis 20:3). He was dead though alive! So are we. One way or another.

The Bible says some are "dead in sin" (Ephesians 2:1), but others are "dead to sin" (Romans 6:2). Both men are susceptible to sin. But one man is insensitive to sin while the other is sensitive to sin. One revels, the other repents.

But make no mistake about it: both men are "dead men walking." The English economist John Keynes said, "We are all dead men." True. But I'd rather be my kind of dead man!

My kind of dead guy has fun. That's because even though he's dead — to sin — he's alive — to God. Dead, true. Even buried — with Christ in baptism (Colossians 2:12). But he is raised to spiritual life by the resurrecting power of God. And he lives each moment with zest. For God. For good. Because of grace. Let the band play on — a requiem for the redeemed!

Spiritually dead men don't look much different from sinful dead men. They may walk the street of San Francisco wearing the same pinstripe, three-piece suits made by Hart, Schaffner and Marx. They may buy their wives Chanel No. 5 from Saks Fifth Avenue. They may fly the same airline, eat the same food, vote the same party, but they're as different as night and day — on the inside, where it really counts. One walks with God his Maker; the other with the god of his own making.

One man is dead to sin, even in the dead of the night. Whether he's in Minneapolis, home of Billy Graham, or in Las Vegas, home of bawdy girls and gambling. The other man is dead in sin, even as he sins in the night, night after night, into eternal night. Real dead men don't go to bed with dead women — those who are dead while they live (1 Timothy 5:6). There is no porn again for the one who is born again.

What's a dead man to do? The world will tell you, "Live hard. Die young." Drive your Infiniti right into eternity. But I'd like to say, "Die hard — to sin. Live life to the hilt — for God. And you'll be 'Forever Young.'"

Those who wear loincloths in the Outback of Australia or those who wear Cotton Dockers in America are all headed for The Dock. It makes no difference if you wear Guccis or sandals, you a Dead Man Walking. It matters not a whit if you stay in a fine hotel in Atlanta with all the amenities or in a poor hovel in Africa with none, you're a Dead Man Walking.

Question is. *Which kind of dead man do you want to be?*

29

Fetal Attraction

Why am I drawn to the cause of the unborn? Because I was once there. As was every living person on this planet. Whether they're pro-choice (Why is the choice always death?) or pro-life. We've been there. Done that.

But for many unborn babies in America (try over one million a year), the womb is their tomb. They never get to do much of anything. What starts out as a pleasant playhouse suddenly turns into a bloody slaughterhouse. Wonder turns to horror. Dreams end. Snuffed out before they ever had the sniffles.

The creators of this carnage try to justify abortion by saying that the unborn baby is only "fetal material." They don't really die, according to this present madness, they "undergo demise." Demise! What a disguise! Fancy talk for killing babies. I don't buy it and neither should you.

The crux of the abortion issue is identity. What (more properly, *who*) is this "fetal material"? Just a piece of meat to be evacuated? If so, why does the fetus have eyes, ears, a nose, a tiny little mouth, fingers, fingernails, the works? We're talking little people here.

And beneath that soft satiny skin beats a heart ever so strong. And inside that tiny little head is a brain more intricate than the world's finest computer. And throughout that "fetal material" is strung a nerve center system that makes modern fiber optics look like, well, child's play in comparison. And when that nerve center is touched or tampered with, it sends out wave after wave of pain. It is beyond me why everyone does not feel their pain.

If wombs had windows the abortion mills would shut down overnight. If Mike Wallace and *60 Minutes* would take their famous hidden cameras into a women's clinic during one abortion there would be a national outcry. That's because the documentary would have to be rated Triple X for violence. No wonder Patsy Schroeder (D-Colo.) tried to block simple line drawings of a partial-birth abortion from being seen on C-SPAN (which, to their credit, C-SPAN, CNN and ABC News showed anyway).

There's no way around it — around the "fetal material" bit. We're not talking mere material. We're talking raw reality. An unborn baby is not a piece of meat, like a cancerous tumor. He or she is a person of meaning. And not just a potential person either. He or she is a person with potential — if allowed safe passage through the birth canal where they can breathe and live and exercise their full potential.

Is a tulip not a tulip because it is only a bulb? Is a rose not a rose until it unfolds? Is an evergreen not an evergreen because it is merely a seedling? What in the world is an unborn seal or whale, an unhatched bald eagle or spotted owl? Fetal figments? Animal lovers and environmentalists would scream to high heaven if people went around ripping up these babies before they get a chance to blossom and bloom. But some of the same people (not all of them, to be sure) will remain silent as a tomb at the slaughter in the womb. Today I propose a new organization— PETU (People for the Ethical Treatment of the Unborn).

There are none so blind as those who will not see. Not "cannot" but "will not." Much learning — education, propaganda, Christless agenda — has made them mad. Blind mad. Blind to their madness which cannot see a baby in a sonogram, which cannot hear a heartbeat in an ultra-

sound, which cannot admit that they themselves once looked and sounded exactly the same.

I've seen the signs that some women carry at the pro-abortion rallies: "Keep your (expletive deleted) hands off my body." Hey, I've got news for you. It's not your body, baby, we're concerned with; it's the baby in your body. You're as different as night is from day from your mother, right? She wasn't you and you weren't her. (If she was you then you'd be, well, *dead meat*!) The baby in your body is not you. There is a difference! She wants to live! Call her Peace. Hey, sister! Give Peace a chance!

Fetal attraction. Every professing believer ought to be drawn to the cause of the unborn. David said, "Is there not a cause?" Yes, there is. It's a cause I don't even have to pause to think about. In my heart I know I'm right. A moral wrong can never be a civil right.

Dante said that the hottest places in hell are reserved for those who in a great moral crisis, maintain their neutrality. Hell will have to do without me on this issue. Abortion. You're either for it or against it. There is no neutral ground. Take your stand, never forgetting the warning of Edmund Burke: "All that is necessary for the triumph of evil is that good men do nothing."

30

Simply Indispensable

Every man and his dog knows that certain things are absolutely necessary to physical life: light, water, food, air, shelter from the elements. Why is that when it comes to *spiritual* life, men immediately begin to deny the indispensable?

If a man is fortunate, he may live to be 70 or 80 — maybe even 100. But that is virtually nothing compared to eternity. And God has set eternity in the heart of man (Ecclesiastes 3:11). Sadly, however, many have chosen to expel the idea of eternity from their thinking and practice.

Madalyn Murray O'Hair has called heaven a "delusional dream." Bertrand Russell once boasted, "When I die I shall rot, and nothing of my ego will survive." Corliss Lamont waxed poetic in his denial of life after death: "While we're here, let's live in clover; for when we're dead, we're dead all over." Foolish ones. Atheists, skeptics and humanists like these are to be pitied. Professing themselves to be wise, they have become fools. For only fools dare proclaim, "There is no God."

Moral relativism is a dangerous philosophy afoot today. "What's good for you is not necessarily good for me; I determine what is good for me." Like Pilate of old they ask, "What is truth?" Absolute truth has no place in their world. It is no relative of theirs.

A recent poll revealed that 67% of Americans do not believe that such a thing as absolute truth exists. And 53% of those who say they are "born again" do not believe in

absolute truth either! Little wonder that 1 out of every 5 Americans is now infected with a sexually transmitted disease!

"Great peace have those who love Your law, and nothing causes them to stumble" (Psalms 119:165). I've got a satisfied mind — and it hasn't come from reading Russell or listening to Lamont. Those who choose God have found a peace that "passes understanding," a peace that leaves foolish philosophies in the dust.

I believe that there are absolutes — things that are absolutely necessary to pleasing God and attaining eternal life. For me, these are *simply indispensable* — vital and fundamental truths that are not subject to being set aside or neglected.

Faith is simply indispensable. "Without faith it is impossible to please Him, for he who comes to God must believe that He is, and that He is a rewarder of those who diligently seek Him" (Hebrews 11:6). Jesus declared, "If you do not believe that I am He, you will die in your sins" (John 8:24).

Love for God and man is simply indispensable. The greatest commandments, according to the Greatest Teacher, are to love God with all our being and love our neighbor as ourself (Matthew 22:37-38). Gentle John said, "He who loves God must love his brother also" (1 John 4:21). We must not bust that "must!"

Conversion is simply indispensable. Our Lord gave double emphasis to this truth in Luke 13:3 & 5, "Unless you repent you will all likewise perish." All have sinned; all must repent. New birth is a necessity. "Unless one is born of water and the spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God" (John 3:5). America's Pentecost will begin when preachers preach and sinners submit to Acts 2:38, "Repent, and let every one of you be baptized in the name

of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit."

Having the Holy Spirit in our lives is simply indispensable. "If anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he is not His" (Romans 8:9). Without this vital root there can be no real fruit (Galatians 5:22-23).

Abiding in Christ is simply indispensable. Jesus said, "He who abides in Me, and I in him, bears much fruit; for without me you can do nothing" (John 15:5). Only the faithful and the fruitful will find favor with God.

Confessing Christ is simply indispensable. "Whoever confesses Me before men, him I will also confess before My Father who is in heaven. But whoever denies Me before men, him I will also deny before my father who is in heaven" (Matthew 10:32-33). How we need bold confessors in these evil days when every one is "coming out of the closet" to openly parade their wickedness!

Seeking unity and holiness is simply indispensable. "Pursue peace with all men, and holiness, without which no one will see the Lord" (Hebrews 12:14). Here are two crucial areas where the average church in America is as weak as tea: seeking unity and practicing holiness. Yet, we will never see God until we start being peacemakers and begin to "cleanse ourselves from all filthiness of the flesh and spirit, perfecting holiness in the fear of God" (2 Corinthians 7:1).

These 7 cardinal truths are not the sum total of the Christian faith and practice, but they are some of what is involved in accepting and following Christ. At least they will do for starters. Start today! It's *simply indispensable!*

31

Building Healthy Attitudes

Attitudes can be good or bad, positive or negative, wonderful or rotten, beautiful or stinking, great or lousy, sweet or sour, optimistic or pessimistic. Bad attitudes come by nature. Good attitudes come by nurture. We are, by nature, negative. Of one man it was said, "He was born in the negative case, in the kickative mood." A baby may be born healthy but he does not automatically have a healthy attitude. He is selfish, demanding and loud. But we can, by God's transforming grace, become positive.

Our attitude will determine our altitude. How does your spiritual altimeter read? More people suffer from attitude sickness than altitude sickness! A healthy attitude will allow us to soar with eagles. An unhealthy attitude will force us to scramble with turkeys.

Joseph spent a good portion of his youth in prison. Yet he rose to second-in-command in all of Egypt. And he did it by building a healthy attitude. A poet has said,

Two men look out through prison bars.

The one sees mud; the other, stars.

One of my all-time favorite cartoons shows two men in a dungeon. They are bearded, bare-chested, bare-footed, clad only in ragged, knee-length dungarees. Both of them are clapped in irons, hanging by their wrists in chains bolted to the wall. One prisoner has a haggard look. But the other fellow is all smiles. His feet are pumping furiously. He says to his fellow-prisoner, "I'm not going to let this interfere with my jogging!"

Attitude is a choice. Charles Swindoll said, "The longer I live, the more I realize the impact of attitude on life. Attitude, to me, is more important than facts. It is more important than the past, than education, than money, than circumstances, than failures, than successes, than what other people say, think or do.

"It is more important than appearance, giftedness or skill. It will make or break a company . . . a church . . . a home. The remarkable thing is we have a *choice* every day regarding the attitude we will embrace for that day. We cannot change our past; we cannot change the fact that people will act in a certain way. We cannot change the inevitable. The only thing we can do is play on the one string we have left, and that is our attitude.

"I am convinced that life is 10 percent what happens to me and 90 percent how I react to it. And so it is with you . . . we are in charge of our attitudes" (*Pulpit Helps*).

Enthusiasm is a choice! Someone has said, "If life hands you a lemon, make some lemonade!" One of my favorite poems is about the boundless enthusiasm of a sandlot ragamuffin.

*I passed a sandlot yesterday,
 some kids were playing ball
 I strolled along the third baseline,
 within the fielder's call.
 "Say, what's the score?" I asked,
 and he yelled to beat the stuffin'
 "There's no one out, the bases full,
 and they're 42 to nothin'!"
 "You're getting beat, aren't you, my lad?"
 And then in no time flat,
 He answered, "No, sir! Not as yet.
 Our side ain't been to bat!"*

One of my favorite authors is Viktor Frankl, survivor of

Nazi concentration camps. Consider his testimony. "We who lived in the concentration camps can remember the men who walked through the barracks comforting others, giving away their last piece of bread. They may have been few in number, but they offer sufficient proof that everything can be taken from a man but one thing: the last of his freedoms — to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one's own way" (*Man's Search for Meaning*).

Forgiveness is a choice. Arthur Balfour said, "The best thing to give your enemy is forgiveness; to an opponent, tolerance; to a friend, your heart; to your child, a good example; to your father, deference; to your mother, conduct that will make her proud of you; to yourself, respect; to all men, charity."

Until we choose to give an enemy forgiveness, an opponent tolerance, and all men charity we have not grown in grace. Grace will make you gracious. Those who cannot extend the grace of God to fallen man, or a fallen brother, burn the bridge over which they themselves must inevitably cross.

Joseph chose to forgive his brothers. Jesus chose to forgive those who crucified him. Kim, the little "napalm girl" of the Vietnam War, chose to forgive the pilot who napalmed her village, killing her grandmother and two brothers.

"Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus" (Philippians 2:5 NIV).

32

One Of These Days

One of these days the Bible says that the trumpet of the Lord will sound,¹ the clouds will be rolled together like a scroll,² the Lord himself will descend from the heaven and will plant his feet on the Mount of Olives — and the mountain will be split in two from east to west, forming a very great valley.³ And in that valley (which the Bible calls the "Valley of Decision"⁴), every person who has ever lived or is alive shall stand before God.⁵

And then . . . at the name of Jesus . . . every knee shall bow . . . and every tongue shall confess . . . that Jesus Christ is Lord . . . to the glory of God the Father.⁶

One of these days, "at the name of Jesus," *every knee shall bow*. Every knee!

Bill Clinton's knee shall bow . . .

Hillary Clinton's knee shall bow . . .

Ted Turner's knee shall bow . . .

Jane Fonda's knee shall bow . . .

Prince Charles' knee shall bow . . .

Lady Thatcher's knee shall bow . . .

Saddam Hussein's knee shall bow . . .

Fidel Castro's knee shall bow . . .

Pope John Paul II's knee shall bow . . .

Billy Graham's knee shall bow . . .

Jesse Jackson's knee shall bow . . .

Desmond Tutu's knee shall bow . . .

Mikhail Gorbachev's knee shall bow . . .

Michael Jordan's knee shall bow . . .

Dennis Rodman's knee shall bow . . .
Clint Eastwood's knee shall bow . . .
Colin Powell's knee shall bow . . .
Norman Schwartzkopf's knee shall bow . . .
William F. Buckley's knee shall bow . . .
Jesse Helms' knee shall bow . . .
Newt Gingrich's knee shall bow . . .
Allan Greenspan's knee shall bow . . .
Bill Gates' knee shall bow . . .

Your knee shall bow and: . .

My knee shall bow before him who is King of
kings and Lord of lords.

One of these days, "at the name of Jesus," *every tongue shall confess*. Every tongue!

Madalyn Murray O'Hair will confess . . .
The Dalai Lama will confess . . .
Minister Farrakan will confess . . .
Shirley MacLaine will confess . . .
Larry King will confess . . .
Rush Limbaugh will confess . . .
Dr. Laura will confess . . .
Mike Wallace will confess . . .
Peter Jennings will confess . . .
Barbra Streisand will confess . . .
Amy Grant will confess . . .
Ted Koppel will confess . . .
Dan Rather will confess . . .
Diane Sawyer will confess . . .
Tom Brokaw will confess . . .
Bryant Gumbel will confess . . .
Barbara Walters will confess . . .
Eddie Murphy will confess . . .
Whoopi Goldberg will confess . . .
Oprah Winfrey will confess . . .

Marilyn Manson will confess . . .

Madonna will confess . . .

Kiss will confess . . .

Every Jew will confess . . .

Every Muslim will confess . . .

Every Buddhist will confess . . .

Every Hindu will confess . . .

Every agnostic will confess . . .

Every skeptic will confess . . .

Every atheist will confess . . .

Every Christian will confess . . .

Every backslider will confess . . .

You will confess and . . .

I will confess . . . that Jesus Christ is Lord, to
the glory of God the Father!

One of these days. It's eventual. It's inevitable. It's official. It's compulsory! Don't wait for that day of destiny to declare your devotion to Christ. Do it quickly. From the heart. Fervently. Now!

*Now is the accepted time; behold, now is the day of salvation.*⁷

¹ 1 Thessalonians 4:16

² Isaiah 34:4

³ Zechariah 14:4

⁴ Joel 3:14

⁵ 2 Corinthians 5:10

⁶ Philippians 2:10,11

⁷ 2 Corinthians 6:2

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From This Moment On

On a cold December day, I attended the funeral of an old friend. Later, I jotted down these somber thoughts on a scrap of paper.

He will never see another sunrise, he will never smell another rose, he will never enjoy another Christmas, he will never celebrate another birthday, he will never hold another baby in his arms.

He will never take another walk, he will never taste another apple, he will never plant another garden, he will never rake another yard, he will never feel the radiant heat of another bonfire.

He will never welcome another spring, he will never observe another rainbow, he will never light another candle, he will never stand before another rushing waterfall, he will never watch another eagle soaring in the skies.

And then my thoughts turned to the spiritual realm.

He will never attend another church service, he will never sing another song, he will never hear another sermon, he will never offer another prayer, he will never taste another Lord's Supper.

He will never greet another believer, he will never read another Psalm of David, he will never bring another offering to the Lord, he will never shake another hand, he will never pat another small child on the head.

He will never write another letter, he will never sign another check, he will never make another call, he will never speak another word, he will never take another breath.

What we take for granted is gone for him forever. Life is a precious gift from God. I then made strong resolve in my heart to live as follows.

From this moment on I will treasure the gift of life, I will live by faith and not by sight, I will trust a certain God in uncertain circumstances, I will tell Jesus all of my troubles, and I will go and sin no more.

From this moment on I will see each person as someone created in God's image, I will be more eager to listen than to speak, I will rest my soul in the promises of God, I will confess my every sin to Him, and I will partake of each Lord's Supper as though it were my Last Supper.

From this moment on I will pray in faith believing, I will read God's Word with hunger, I will preach His Word with power, I will write with a passion for God and with a fury against what sin has done to mankind, and I will live my life for others.

From this moment on I will refuse to sully my soul with suspicion, I will be kind—knowing that most people are dying to hear a kind word, I will refuse to be bitter, I will rejoice that mercy triumphs over judgment, and I will have grace for all who are surely headed for the grave.

From this moment on I will welcome each sunrise, I will plant more morning glories, I will stop to listen to the song of a meadow lark, I will glory in each sunset, and I will live each day so that I will have no regrets at night.

"I will not just live my life. I will not just spend my life. I will invest my life" (Helen Keller).