

ORGANIC FAITH

*A Revival Call to a
Disillusioned Church*

Chaille Brindley



*One Young Christian's Journey
to Greater Intimacy with God*

Notice: If you only have time to read one book today, I would like to suggest a better one. Pick up the Bible, the living Word of God, and delve into the heart of the Lord. Many shy away from the Bible opting to read more “contemporary” Christian literature. There is nothing wrong with these books (including *Organic Faith*) when read as a supplement to the Bible. But only the Bible contains the complete inspired truth of God. All other books are a poor substitute for the real thing.

Organic Faith shows my progression from a disillusioned Christian raised in the Church to a more mature believer walking in faith and focusing on a deeper walk with Christ. Please read the book in its entirety to understand my journey. The inner conflict and pain revealed in the first few chapters turns into joy, peace and freedom as I learn to focus on Christ and allow Him to transform me page after page.

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DEDICATION

To all of those who
are searching for something more.



ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Writing this section caused me to stop and consider all of those who have poured their time, love and wisdom into my life. I am touched by the Master’s grand plan in sculpting my life. Some of these people I have never met; their printed words live on in my heart. Others have discipleship or encouraged me. Still, others have contributed to this book by serving as an editor, drawing graphics, reviewing the text for “heresies”, providing a sounding board for ideas, etc.

I love you all and recognize your influence and contribution to the Lord’s work in and through me. May you be blessed as you seek Jesus Christ.

Thank you to the following:

Personal Mentors/Discipleship/Friends

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- Steve Hughes — Thank you for having the courage to challenge me to seek a greater move of the Holy Spirit in my life. Your meekness speaks volumes to the world.

Inspirations

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- Gary Wiens – *Bridal Intercession* showed me what God really sees when he looks at me, and I will never be the same again.
- C.S. Lewis – You make me stop and think. Sometimes that is good.
- David Wilkerson – Your autobiography depicts what organic faith is all about.
- Mike Bickle – The Intl. House of Prayer model and focus on prayer has inspired me.
- Charles Finney – Without faith it is impossible to please God.
- Jim Elliot – Your death produced life and encouraged

me to be passionate about Christ.

- Michael Card – Your lyrics and music have inspired me to sing the Scriptures and enjoy the sweet savor of Christ.
- Michael Brown – Your prophetic words strike right at the heart.
- Watchman Nee — Your words ring true in my soul leading me to count the cost and live by the Spirit.
- Voice of the Martyrs — Every report touches my soul.
- Next-Wave E-zine — Several ideas came from articles on this powerful Web site.

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INTRODUCTION

Toward the end of writing this book I almost gutted the entire project. I would tell people about the book. Then they would ask me to explain the concept. I struggled to capture the essence of ‘Organic Faith’ in a short sound bite. My mind journeyed back to lessons learned in journalism school and the pr business. In journalism, you write a catchy headline and lead paragraph; then you cut the essentials down into one paragraph describing the essence of the story. In marketing, a concept must be shortened to a few catchy words or phrases. I began to wonder, ‘If I can’t explain the book concept in two sentences or less, do I really have something here?’

Thank God for His mercy. The Lord used others and His Spirit to keep me from making a big mistake. In times of confusion, I reverted back to what I had always heard to be true even though the ‘conventional wisdom’ conflicted with my spirit.

The following pages include my journal notes, short stories, poems and prayers over the past year. Unlike most Christian books today, *Organic Faith* does not cover just one theme or follow any logical progression. It deals with my life and struggles as a single, young Christian man trying to dive deeper into Christ’s love and intimacy with Him. Just like life, you never know what will come on the next page, yet the Master weaves it all together to create something spectacular. We try to fit God and His work into boxes and easy-to-figure-out formulas. But faith requires steadfast obedience and trust

through chaos. *Organic Faith* cannot be melted down into one key concept because it continues to evolve as the Lord reveals more and more of His heart to me. The adventure lies in your own journey of faith.

Having grown up in a Christian family, I learned as a child how to play church really well. The religious trappings of modern Christianity took deep root in my life, and the Holy Spirit has spent most of the last year helping me unlearn everything that I thought I knew. If you don't want to be challenged to seek a deeper walk with Christ, do not read this book. According to the Bible, you are held accountable for your level of understanding; hence it is better to be blissfully ignorant than tortured by unheeded knowledge. But if you, like me, look around on Sundays and know that something is amiss, if you long for something more yet can't seem to grasp it, listen up. My journey may help you.

Some sections contain very strong rebukes to the Church. These words are written in love. I am applying all of these words first to myself. I believe the Lord has given me a message to tell other believers. The cry of God's heart is for intimacy with His children. The following pages do not come from a man who has it all together. Like everyone else on this planet, I'm still a work in progress. And I stand as guilty as the next man for allowing my life to be much less than what God desires. But I have learned that the failures of the messenger do not change the truth of the message, especially when God is the source of the message. May the Church have ears to hear what the Spirit is saying in these last days.

Please feel free to e-mail me your comments or questions to **chaille@organicfaith.com**.





Let's pray before we begin:

Father, in the name of Jesus, reveal Yourself to me as I read Organic Faith. Show me the areas in my life where I have not walked in faith. Open my eyes to spiritual truths that I have not seen. Help me to see things as You see them. Oh, Holy Spirit, consume my life and cause me to burn with passion for a greater relationship with Jesus.

Cause me to repent and turn from any sin within my heart. Help me to grow and forgive any of those within the Church, who have hurt me. As I seek Your face, reveal to me in greater measure Your love for me. As I read, help me to hear Your voice.

I am here seeking a deeper walk with You, meet with me. Transform me page after page. For this, I give You all the praise, honor and glory. Thank You for all You have done are doing and will do in the future. Amen.

-Chaille Brindley

-You, the reader of *Organic Faith*

SEEKING GOD



WHAT IS ORGANIC FAITH?

Quite simply, organic faith is the phrase that God gave me to describe His ultimate desire for me. It is a concept that I can hold onto when everything else seems to fail. I believe organic faith describes the type of relationship He wants to have with all men. In form, it differs from person to person. But ultimately God, the creator of the universe and the only One worthy of praise, is jealous for our lives. He seeks to hold our hearts in His trustworthy hands. God calls each person to an intimate, one-on-one relationship with Him.

Relationships are as unique as snowflakes. Each one differs, yet many of the ingredients are the same. Consider how two children interact differently with the same parents. Recall close friends in your life; each one holds a special place. Thus, it is impossible to come up with a concrete definition for organic faith. Discovering the meaning is part of the adventure. You must find it out for yourself. But here is what the Lord has shown me...

WHY IS ORGANIC BETTER?

Consider organic fruits and vegetables, produce grown without the use of fertilizers and other chemicals. Organic

produce costs more and usually looks less appealing. When it comes down to sales at the cash register, the majority of consumers are like me. They pick produce based on appearance and price. Most people are way too busy to give produce a second thought. However, there is a small minority of consumers that prefer organic produce. These consumers would rather pay more for the real thing. They are concerned about the potential health affects caused by the chemical additives.

Just like organic fruit is free from additives and impurities, we should seek a true, natural relationship with God through Christ Jesus, our Lord. Using the organic produce metaphor, something becomes an additive or impurity when Jesus is not the center. Every part of life must be lived to God's glory to accomplish His purpose in His power. Jesus, the precious cornerstone, must be the foundation for our lives. Any other foundation will not produce good fruit. It will eventually be thrown into the fire on judgment day. Impurities can include so many different things, even those things that have an outward appearance of righteousness.

**From Christian service to relationships to jobs,
everything is meaningless
without Christ.**

**We live in a world of messed up priorities
resulting in millions of
disillusioned people,
including many in the Church.**

Consider the two different types of consumers. One buys on price, convenience and appearance. The other buys based on the purity of the product. When it comes to God, what are you looking for? Is your relationship with God authentic? Are you willing to pay extra for the real thing?

Organic produce requires more care to protect and hard work to grow. In the same way, a living walk with God takes perseverance. You must be willing to press through the weeds to enjoy the light of God's revelation and joy. Without the use of chemicals, produce can be an easy target for pests and bacteria. Thus, an organic lifestyle stresses God's preeminence in supplying our every need and protecting us from evil.

Oddly, organic produce may look worse on the outside. No waxes are used to make the produce sparkle. The outer covering may show signs of infestation or bruising. Yet the inside where no pest has been remains pure because no chemicals are used on organic produce. The Christian life reflects this concept. People tend to judge others based on what they see. But God judges the inside, the heart. God loves a rowdy street biker, a drug addict or a homeless person just as much as a preacher, a businessman or a housewife.

The word 'organic' implies that something is alive not dead. Is your walk with God alive or rotting on the vine? You may think, 'Well, what does it mean to be alive? I go to church. I believe in God.' Good, that's a start. But there's much more to knowing God. Let me rephrase the question. Do you know God by name? If you honestly answer, 'No', you are missing out on the very purpose of life.

WHY IS FAITH SUCH A BIG DEAL?

The second part of God's message to me focused on faith. Fear, pride, and doubt keep Christians from experiencing life to the fullest. God's antidote is faith. According to Hebrews 11:6, without faith it is impossible to please God. Faith in God is the one common characteristic of the patriarchs, the prophets, the judges and all the godly men and women of the Bible. As explained in Hebrews, our predecessors did remarkable things because they had faith. Noah built the ark even though the earth had never experienced rain. Abraham

raised the knife against his son, Isaac, out of obedience to God. Moses led the Israelites out of Egypt; he stood against the mighty Pharaoh.

**Faith requires us to accept the unbelievable
in the face of all logic
and reason;
we take God at His word.**

Faith is being certain of what we do not see. People of faith do not put any confidence in things of this world. Instead, they look forward to a better country, a heavenly kingdom. Faithful men and women do not look back out of fear; instead, they dream about the unveiled hope before them.

A perfect picture of faith and doubt can be seen in the story of Peter walking on water. After spending time alone with the Father in prayer, Jesus joined the disciples out on the water. He could have done what most people would have done and obtained a boat to rendezvous with His disciples. But Jesus wanted to make a statement. He performed a miracle by walking on the surface of the water toward the disciples' boat. Amazingly, Peter asked Jesus for permission to walk out to meet Him on the water. What led Peter to make such a request? Was he trying to show off in front of the other disciples? Or did he see something special going on that he wanted to be a part of? I tend to think Peter acted impulsively; he wanted to personally experience the miraculous in his own life. For just a minute, Peter got it. Filled with faith, he stepped out of the boat and walked on water. While all the other disciples stood in the boat with their mouths wide open in shock, Peter dared the impossible to be with Jesus. Why could Peter walk on the water? Did it have anything to do with his abilities? No, Peter walked on water by the power of God. Yet, when the waters became rough, doubt crept into Peter's

mind. He took his eyes off Jesus, doubted God's power and began to sink. In desperation, Peter called out for Jesus to save him. Jesus caught Peter and scolded him for doubting.

Although this episode has led people to criticize Peter, I believe that Peter showed more grit than the other disciples. At least Peter got out of the boat; he left the safety of the boat (the familiar) for the uncertainty of walking by faith. Had Peter kept his faith in the mighty hand of God and ignored the waves around him, he could have walked directly to Jesus without fail. God never failed Peter; doubt caused Peter to sink, not the Lord.

What in your life is holding you back? Take a leap of faith and walk on the water. God can and will do the impossible in your life if you will only believe. Are you still in the boat? Jesus wants you to come to Him and experience His joy and His power. Fear and doubt can hold you prisoner. But faith in God will set you free. Has the weight of your sin caused you to sink? Do you feel that there is no way God can or will pick you up? Repent and experience God's grace; He longs to forgive and commune with you. Don't let anything hold you back. You will never experience the fullness of knowing God until you get out of the boat.

THE DISCIPLINE OF A STEADFAST PRAYER LIFE

As a bookworm, I could spend hours delving into the Word. But when it comes to prayer, I can quickly lose interest. My mind starts to wander. I think about the events of the day. Frequently, I feel as if no one is listening. I am tempted to stop.

**Why do I struggle so much with praying?
I want to pray,
but I have a hard time
'getting into it.'**

What kind of Christian am I? What does it say about me that I get distracted talking to Jesus, my savior? Then, I feel guilty about not wanting to pray.

These thoughts have haunted me for quite a while. I was comforted when Pastor Don Coleman (a close friend and spiritual mentor) told me that I am not alone. Many people struggle with prayer. When someone decides to press into God through prayer, Pastor Don explained that there is usually a dry period before God will pour down His revelation. God wants people to really seek Him. He wants people to press through the doubt and intellectual shackles holding them captive. God desires that we seek Him out of faith and submission, a thankful heart — not for any selfish purpose. I must go consistently before the Lord without the benefit of revelation to be able to enjoy the sweetness of hearing His voice. This requires discipline. I must be willing to pray even when it seems useless — even when the well is dry.

The enemy desperately wants to keep believers from receiving revelation through prayer. The devil will tell me how pathetic I look kneeling before an invisible God. He will say, “See, you aren’t getting anything out of this praying. You should stop and do something more useful.” Then the devil will try to make me feel guilty about not wanting to pray. He will try to convince me that I have no standing to come before God. The enemy will say that is the reason God has not provided revelation or answered my prayer. These are all lies spoken by the father of lies.

I must press through the dry season. I must discipline my soul to seek God in prayer even when I don’t feel that God is listening. Feelings can be deceptive, truth remains truth. God loves me; He really hears my prayers. I have standing before God because of the blood of Christ. God rewards those who diligently seek Him. Prayer is an act of faith — believing in what is yet to come.

As the deer pants for the streams of water, so my soul longs for You, O God. I am thirsty for more of You. I desire Your living water which fills the parched soul. Forgive me for drinking the sand. In a dry and weary land, Your steadfast love sustains me. You invite all who are thirsty to come and drink from Your cup. Oh, God, fill me to overflowing that Your glory may be clear to all.

INTO THE WILDERNESS

One key characteristic of mighty men of God is that they all spent time alone with the Lord. Look at Paul who spent a long time in the wilderness seeking the face of God before starting his ministry. Consider the lives of Moses, David, or Elijah; all of these men set aside time to pursue God one-on-one. Even Jesus, as both God and man, set the example for us by spending forty days and nights alone with His Father in the wilderness. Jesus frequently went away to pray and commune with the Father.

Pastor Don challenged me by asking if I had ever spent a full day alone with Jesus. I had to honestly say no. Most days, I give God 30 minutes here or 10 minutes there. On super spiritual days, I may spend an hour or two alone with the Lord. I realized that God has been getting the crumbs of my life. How can God be the most important thing in my life if I put my work, family and friends in front of Him? Even time spent at church doing ‘ministry’ can get in the way of my real purpose for being on the earth. My life’s purpose is to experience a deep relationship with Jesus Christ.

Not only do I need to spend more time alone with the Lord, I should give Him the best hours of the day. I am reminded of God’s indictment of the children of Israel in the book of Malachi. The Israelites brought blind and blemished lambs before the Lord as a sacrifice. They kept the best for themselves. This was God’s response: “Cursed is the cheat

who has an acceptable male in his flock and vows to give it, but then sacrifices a blemished animal to the Lord. For I am a great King, says the Lord Almighty, and my name is to be feared among the nations.” God accused the Israelites of lighting ‘useless fires.’ They did not fear the Lord or show Him proper respect. They held the name of the Lord in contempt and had a dim view of His glory. Then they expected God to accept half-hearted worship and blemished sacrifices. If we treat God the same way today, why should we expect Him to reveal His glory to His people? God will not manifest His presence unless the Church returns to the fear of the Lord.

Oh God, I often light useless fires. Forgive me for my selfishness. Forgive me for giving you blemished lambs. I have kept the choice things for myself. I have no right to be anything but totally dedicated to you.

In Matthew 7:21-23, Jesus talked about people who would not enter the kingdom of heaven. What had they done? Was their sin greater than others? No! Jesus said that He never knew them. Yes, they did good works in the name of the Lord. But Jesus described these works as evil. Only those who do the will of the Father will inherit the kingdom of God. What is the will of Father? The answer is to love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, soul and mind. First and foremost, God wants His people to be in an intimate love relationship with Him.

7-11 CHRISTIANITY

Americans like everything fast, convenient and easy. But a real relationship with God is none of these things. What God wants from us runs contrary to the American way of life. From restaurants and gas stations to package delivery and even religion, we want our needs met right away. This attitude has even taken root in the Church. God is treated as a

short order cook who is just waiting to fill our orders. Then once we receive what we want from God, we go about our life as usual. Selfishness and pride are at the center of what I call the 7-11 mentality.

Most Christians, including myself, are way too busy. We pencil God in for 15 minutes between shuttling children to sporting events and attending important business meetings. Instead, we should take our day timers and give them to God. Then, we let the Spirit help guide us in how best to use the time God gives us. Does my schedule reflect a life yielded to God or me trying to run my life? All too often, I honestly live according to the latter.

Failure to turn my time over to God reflects what I believe about God.

I put more stock in my ability to manage my life. But I will never experience the Lord's perfect peace and rest while I still hold the reigns to my life.

I must learn to let go and believe that God can run things better than I can. But what if God asks for me to drop everything and move to Pluto to start a church? Then I must go!

Jesus, please forgive me for not giving You my time. Forgive me for not trusting You. I give You my all, my time and my life. Fill me. Use me. Guide me by Your Spirit.

LIVING BY RULES INSTEAD OF THE SPIRIT

The topic of drinking alcohol came up during a discussion at my church's young adult fellowship. The bottom line —

should Christians drink? Some folks said no. Others said it is OK if done in moderation and with discretion. The non-drinkers said they did not want to dabble with something as dangerous as alcohol. Others said they did not want to hurt their public witness for the Lord. While we debated the point back and forth, the Lord showed me that we were focusing on the wrong thing.

All too often, Christians today focus on the rules and not a relationship with God. Jesus accused the religious leaders of doing the same thing. The heart of God is to know His people, not confine them with a tangled web of laws. But we want to know where the line has been drawn. This allows us to be ‘good Christians’ without having to give our lives to Christ. We confuse being a Christian with following a set of rules and parameters. Thus, we can go through life as we please and think that we are OK as long as we don’t break one of God’s rules. We ignore the most important thing to God – the establishment of a deep relationship with Him. So how do we go about this? It starts by hearing from God through reading the Bible and prayer. Personal times of worship and meditation on the Scripture open our hearts to the move of the Spirit. The Lord speaks to His children. Are you listening?

If we let Jesus reign in our lives, we would not have to be concerned about alcohol. We would be so filled with His Spirit and focused on the greater things that the debate over drinking would become a mute point. Each believer would know what was permissible for him because the Spirit would provide the necessary guidance.

Dear God, grow my desire to know You more. I do not want to be like the Israelites who You condemned for making sacrifices to observe the law but whose hearts were far from You. I want to seek the greater things of Your heavenly kingdom and not focus on the momentary trappings of the earth.

WHAT THE TEACHER FORGOT TO TELL YOU IN SUNDAY SCHOOL!

Whenever someone lays out the plan of salvation, usually they leave out the fine print. We, in our carnal thinking, describe all the fringe benefits — the spacious accommodations in heaven, the feast of the Lamb, healing on earth, a divine body and forgiveness of sins. But the sales pitch seldom defines what it means to accept Jesus as ‘Lord.’

Once a new convert starts to attend church, usually he or she associates making Jesus ‘Lord’ with trying to do good things such as giving to the poor or helping a neighbor in need. All of these actions are good. But God wants more than just good works in exchange for His Son’s blood. God demands our very lives.

According to the Bible, “You are not your own, you were bought with a price” (I Corinthians 6:19-20). Jesus said that anyone who tries to save his life would lose it. But those who give their lives to Christ will obtain eternal life.

Pastor Don recently asked me if I really wanted to go after Jesus. He asked if I would really let Jesus run the show. Of course I said yes.

**But I am learning that submitting to Christ
is not a one-time
decision.
I must take up
my cross daily,
deny my own desires and follow Christ.**

Making Christ Lord of my life takes desire, submission and discipline. These do not come cheaply. Jesus’ blood is truly the only free gift that will cost me everything.

The first step to being a good soldier is to receive the

love of Christ and to rest in His love. When asked what the greatest commandment was, Jesus responded — to love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul and mind. Before we “do anything” God wants us first to accept His love and love Him back. Then out of a deep relationship with the Lord, we will start to manifest Christ’s love as we walk in the Spirit. We spend so much time trying to do the right things that we miss the most important thing — our very reason for existence — to have a deep relationship with God.

In John’s gospel when Jesus speaks about bearing fruit he did not say that we would produce the fruit. Rather we carry the fruit, which actually comes from the deposit of the Spirit within the believer. The Gospel is so simple yet so hard. We must believe in the Lord and give Him the keys to our lives. Daily dying to self is the hardest part of being a Christian.

Dear Father, I want to truly make You the Lord of my life. God, please remove that which holds me back. May I not desire the things of this world. Instead, I want to be with You and daily filled by Your Spirit. I want to worship at Your feet. May I seek first the greater thing — to be with You.

STOP THE BRAIN

“Life is life, and you don’t have to always over-intellectualize everything.” That is what my roommate recently said to me when I was in one of those moods where I second-guessed everything. Yes, God gave us a brain. But sometimes it can become our worst enemy.

According to the book of James, a double-minded man is unstable in all he does. Worries and indecision toss him about just like the waves of the sea. Even though I know better, I worry, strategize and plan many areas of my life. But why worry? James goes on to say, “Why, you do not even know

what will happen tomorrow. What is your life? You are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes.” Why should I spend all of my time strategizing when I am not in control?

Jesus asked this important question, “Who of you by worrying can add a single hour to his life?” If worrying produces no benefit, then why do it? Jesus urged his disciples to consider the lilies. They do not labor or fret yet they are robed in splendor. If God provides for the grass of the field in such lavishness, how much more will he anchor my steps?

I just need to take a step back, breathe deep and let go. It’s not my life. I gave it away. The enemy knows my tendency to put everything under a microscope. He uses this as a way to divert my focus off Christ. What foolishness!

Thank You Lord for freeing me from worrying about my life. I am in good hands. You bring peace. I do not have to worry, plan or rack my brain about the future. You hold the future in Your grasp, and I know that You will never let me go.

THE SPIRITUAL CHECKLIST

How close I am to God does not depend on what God does. God desires to pour out his Spirit generously on all men. I am only limited by my hunger for the Lord. Those who are thirsty will drink. Those who are not will refuse to drink and will die of thirst. The Holy Spirit inspired me to apply this spiritual checklist — a way to measure to see if I am living in step with God’s desires for my life. These ideas are in no way exhaustive. But the checklist serves to let me know where I stand in my journey of knowing God.

1. Do I long to spend time alone with God?...Am I thirsty?
2. Is the Spirit actively involved in my life, revealing truth, comforting me and arming me for warfare?
3. Am I making disciples for Christ?

4. Do I live to worship and bring glory to God?
5. Am I serving “The Least of These” as Jesus did?
6. Do I care more about pleasing others than pleasing God?
7. Am I currently being disciplined and encouraged accountable by others? Am I confessing my sins to God?
8. Am I worried?
9. Am I living in way that requires active faith?
10. Am I connected to the lost? Am I really being salt and light?
11. When was the last time I was persecuted for Christ?
12. Do I love the Church despite its faults?
13. Am I living a Spirit led life?
14. Am I walking in submission to God and the authorities He has ordained in my life?

BLEMISHED WORSHIP

Lights! Camera! Action! Praise and worship can easily become a production — a big show. We are the actors, and the Lord is our audience. We put on masks and act out a part. I say ‘We’ because I am guilty of giving the Lord blemished worship.

People offer lifeless worship for various reasons. Some act out a part because they want others to notice them and think they are ‘really’ holy. Others so earnestly desire for the Spirit to supernaturally manifest His power in their life that they try to help Him along instead of waiting on the Lord in faith. Others orchestrate everything to the point that they turn worship into a ritual, a ceremony void of life and individual expression to God. None of these approaches honor God as He desires. Jesus said that there will come a time when real worshippers will worship in spirit and in truth (John 4:23-24). Jesus wants us to take off our masks and worship Him in truth. The Lord wants us to come as we are to sit at His feet and bask in the glory of His presence. We don’t need hymnals. We don’t need choir robes. We don’t need backup

sound tracks just in case our voice cracks. We don't even have to sing on key.

So what does it really mean to worship in spirit and in truth?

**True worship must be God centered.
Worship must be a sacrificial act
of surrender to God.**

We must set aside our agenda and schedule. We must not rely on human wisdom or formulas. We must not hide our sin and shame. We must not mock the Lord by putting on pretense; we must acknowledge His grace in our lives and accept His love. We are not putting on a show for God or anyone else. Instead, we lose ourselves as we marvel at the majesty of God. The story of David dancing before the ark comes to mind. David completely lost self-awareness. He simply let go and allowed the feelings welling up inside of him to come out. David's wife thought he was making a public spectacle of himself. David removed his royal robes and danced around in front of the multitudes in a simple tunic similar to what the slaves wore. She thought his actions common and vulgar. David responded, "I will celebrate before the Lord. I will become even more undignified than this, and I will be humiliated in my own eyes" (II Samuel 6:21-22). David resolved to let nothing hold him back from praising God with all of his might. David knew the key to true worship. He put the focus on God and strove to give Him maximum glory.

Worship connects us to the very heart of God. God is a spirit, and the physical world around us can blind us to God's spiritual truths. From mounting bills to struggles in family relationships to fear about the future, we can become overwhelmed by everyday concerns. Many Christians tend to focus on the here and now. But intimate worship transports us to God's Sabbath rest. Our concerns fade away as the

spiritual mysteries of God shine forth. Worship removes doubt and builds up passion for the Lord. We can give God our spirit as we worship and take on more of His Spirit. The Holy Spirit actually does His work while we worship. He conducts inner healing by stripping away the old and putting on the new.

Wouldn't church services be much better if we actually believed, or at least understood, the words that we sing? Week after week people in churches far and wide mouth the words without living out the lyrics. Christians sing about joy with a stone-cold face and dancing with feet firmly planted on the floor. Believers sing about making Jesus the center of their lives while refusing to relinquish control to God.

**On Sunday,
people sing about being
satisfied in God
alone while during the week,
they chase after everything else
but God.**

The church today is largely guilty of the same sin that Malachi warns the children of Israel about in the Old Testament. We are robbing God. We steal from the Lord by holding back the praise and glory due Him. We present blemished lambs of praise and worship. We mouth the words while our hearts remain silent. We light useless fires of praise. Once again, I use the word 'We' because I am not faultless in this charge. And I am not taking sides as to what form of worship pleases God the most. Stand, sit, kneel, raise your hands, dance, it does not matter. God looks at the heart not the action.

God made it clear through Malachi that He is almighty and should be feared among the nations. We bring praise half-heartedly before the Lord and expect for Him to be happy with it. God desires people who will worship Him in spirit

and in truth. We must be sincere and worship God as directed by the Spirit. Too often, we try to carefully schedule worship and praise time. But the Spirit, not man, holds the script. We simply have a small role to play.

As long as Christians bring spotted lambs, we will never fully experience God's blessing. He will not throw open the floodgates of heaven and unleash His Spirit to us in abundance if we hold back in praise and worship.

Dear Jesus, please forgive Your Church for seeking a worship experience rather than You. Raise up a new generation of worshippers - people who will worship in spirit and in truth. Tear down the show and regenerate Your people through the power of the Spirit. May my praise no longer be confined to this earth. Remove pride and fear from my life that I may know Your love, which allows me to come boldly into Your presence. May my praise be a sweet sound in Your ears.

Lead me to be completely sold out to You when I praise and worship. I will not listen to the lies of the devil or be impacted by the concern of others. I will not hold back. I will sing with purpose and dare to become more undignified than this. Amen!

GRADING SERMONS – YOU GET A B+

As a child (about 12 years old) I participated in a ministry competition through a major Christian denomination. I competed in a preaching competition. The theme was 'To Boldly Go.' I went up on the platform and preached a sermon reminiscent of the fiery preachers of the Great Awakening. There was plenty of hell fire and brimstone to go around for everyone. When I finished, one of the women in the small

audience look astonished. She said that she had never heard such fervent preaching coming out of a child.

Quite proud of my effort to scare everyone into witnessing, I walked to my chair and sat down. I was shocked when the score was announced at the end of the competition. I received a B+. I came in third in the competition. I was both angry and devastated. The two speakers that scored higher than me were definitely more entertaining. One of them had a great story to tell. The other told two relevant jokes. I skipped the entertainment and went straight for the jugular.

My sponsor went up to the judges and asked about my score. She explained to me that my sermon lacked balance. It was too aggressive and lacked appeal for the seeker. My sermon had no punch line or anecdote to keep the judges' interest. I asked what that had to do with anything. The entire trip back I steamed over the outcome. I talked about the destruction in the Church caused by trying to appease people when the message should be urgent and wake them up. My sponsor agreed. But she said that my presentation lacked any measure of grace.

In retrospect, the entire idea of grading a sermon is ludicrous. Yet thousands of Christians do it every week. I frequently do it myself. The sermon has become the pinnacle of the weekly church experience. Are we supposed to grade the performance of the messenger or be transformed by the power of the message? Do we really think we have figured out God and his hidden mysteries? Or has God in his mercy revealed it to pastors, teachers, evangelists, missionaries, prophets and apostles? When we depend on man's intellect or abilities, we set ourselves up for failure. The truths of God can only be spiritually discerned not intellectually discovered. This does not excuse us from studying the Bible or testing the teaching of others.

**Christians should follow the example
of the Bereans (Acts 17:11)
by searching the Scriptures daily.**

**We must know the Word for ourselves
and allow the Spirit to guide us in truth.
Simply relying on others to feed us
will not produce growth.**

Both our minds and our spirit must play an active role in discerning God's truth. We can only experience God in the spirit, but we know him in our minds.

Looking back, the preaching contest illustrates who I am and how I see things. It is clear to see the prophetic perspective implanted in me from a very young age. God designed me in the womb for a unique purpose. I desired to zealously preach the truth and call for repentance. That is the heart of the prophet. I will no longer make the mistake of looking to men to grade my performance. There is only one Jesus. He will judge me. I must stand true to His way and be what He created me to be.

Oh God, help me to fulfill Your purpose for my life. May I live and serve according to the gifting You implanted in me. Keep me from the pitfall of preaching truth without the blessing of grace. Guide me in what to say and with whom I should share it. Use my voice to bring glory to Your name and expand the Kingdom. May I no longer seek approval from men but only to do Your will in Your power!

IN THE CLUTCHES OF TEMPTATION

Having yielded to temptation and deliberately sinned, I feel far from God. Due to my own guilt and shame, I have wanted to stay away from God. I love God and know His

righteous standard. It pains me to know how far short I keep falling. I can relate to the prodigal son who went back to his father asking to be treated as a hired servant not a son.

**Sin really stinks. First the devil lies to you
saying its no big deal.
Then he turns right around
and convinces you that your sin
has become so great that God
wants to have nothing to do with you.**

All I can do is plead the blood of Jesus over my life, repent and ask for forgiveness. My feelings do not define my reality. God's truth defines my reality. God's love abounds despite my sin. God does not love me because of my actions. The Lord loves because His very nature is to love. God loves men to honor Himself.

My flesh is too strong for me to kill. Only God can empower me to change. Even the days that I feel righteous, I fall far short of God's righteous standard. There is only one place to turn. I will cling to the cross and be cured by the blood of Jesus.

BEAUTY IN BROKENNESS

Projecting shadows of reality,
we are all the same.
Afraid that others will discover our secrets,
we deny our condition.
Beyond repair, we cannot fix what ails us.
Can anyone make all things new?

Living in delusion,
we robe ourselves in grave clothes.

Surrounded by the stench of death,
 we long for it to be over.
 Plagued by our failings,
 we ask “Could anyone ever accept the real me?”

Confronted by the truth,
 we realize our need,
 yet we refuse the remedy.
 Denial poisons living water.
 We cry out,
 “Why am I still drowning?”

Out of options,
 I bow to God’s plan.
 Rejecting all else, I cling to the cross.
 Christ’s perfect love drives out all fear.
 Finally, I am at rest
 for there is joy in brokenness.

THE NAMES OF GOD

You can tell a lot about someone by his or her name. Names do more than just identify a particular person. By saying someone’s name, an image of him or her is formed in our mind. We begin to think about the characteristics of the person.

The change of a person’s name is used in the Bible to denote a major change in his or her life – just consider the lives of Abraham (Genesis 17: 5) and Jacob (Genesis 32:28). According to the Bible, the “overcomers” will undergo a name change when the Lord returns. “I will also give him a white stone with a new name written on it, known only to him who receives it” (Revelation 2:17). Given the importance the Bible places on names, what can we learn about God by His many names?

Studying the names of God helps us understand His nature and how He relates to people. Stop and think about the following names of God and how they show His majesty, love and holiness.

Elohim: God - The One and Only True God

Yahweh/Jehovah: Lord - He That Is Who He Is, the Eternal I Am

Adonai: Lord - Master

El Shaddai: God Almighty - The All-sufficient One

El Elyon: Most High - Possessor of Heaven and Earth

El Olam: Everlasting God - God Over Eternal Things

El Gibbor: Mighty God - The Only All Powerful God

Jehovah Jireh: The Lord Will Provide

Jehovah Rapha: The Lord Who Healeth

Jehovah Nissi: The Lord Is My Banner, the Lord Is My Victory

Jehovah Shalom: The Lord Our Peace, the Lord Gives Peace

Jehovah Tsidkenu: The Lord Our Righteousness

Jehovah Shammah: The Lord Is Present

Jehovah Sabaoth: The Lord of Hosts, Lord Almighty, King of Glory

Father -Matt. 5:16; 28:19

Messiah - John 1:41

King of Kings - 1 Tim. 6:15

High Priest - Hebrews 6:20

“I AM” - John 8:12

Word - John 1:1

Wisdom - 1 Cor. 1:30

Shepherd - John 10:11

Bridegroom - Mark 2:19

Redeemer - Psalm 78:35

Vine - John 15:1

Light - John 1:9

Helper - Psalm 118:7

Spirit of Truth - John 16:13

Comforter - John 14:10

THE NAMES OF GOD REVEAL HIS NATURE & HIS HEART

The list above is just a sample of the names used to describe God in the Bible.

The Old Testament law assigns great reverence to the name of God. It forbids the misuse of God's name. From Genesis to Revelation, God's people realized that there is power and divine authority in the proper use of the Lord's name.

Examine this promise in Proverbs 18:10, "The name of the LORD is a strong tower; the righteous run to it and are safe."

What name of God touches your heart? Or do you even know God by name? By studying the names of God your faith will be built up. As the prophet Joel prophesied, "And everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved" (Joel 2:32). We are commanded to act in the name of the Lord, which gives divine power to our lives. "And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him" (Colossians 3:17). If you have never delved into the identity of God, begin today by studying the Bible, memorizing Scripture and praying about the names and nature of God. As you seek to know God, He will reveal Himself to you.

REST FOR THE WEARY

The Pharisees and Sadducees seemed to constantly criticize Jesus for healing or doing other acts of kindness on the Sabbath. God instituted the Sabbath in the Old Testament as the

seventh day of the week. Like many of the ceremonies and rules in the law, the Sabbath points to Christ. It foreshadows the eternal rest awaiting all true believers in heaven.

The religious rulers missed this point. They focused on following the letter of the law when the fulfillment of it walked the very streets in front of them. Seeking to puff up their position and influence, the Pharisees and Sadducees added restrictions to the ordinances given by God. Then they defended their turf by chastising Jesus repeatedly on this subject. To make His point, Jesus continued to heal on the Sabbath. He said, “The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath” (Mark 2:27). This statement implies that God designed the Sabbath to be a blessing to man, not a burdensome web of regulations.

The Sabbath is modeled after the seven days of creation. According to Genesis, God rested on the seventh day. Why did God rest? Did the strenuous work of speaking the world into existence deplete His strength? Of course not. God rested to set a pattern for us. This pattern provides us a chance to recharge while serving as a weekly reminder of the sweet rest awaiting all believers.

Isaiah prophesied about Jesus, “His place of rest will be glorious” (Isaiah 11:10). Jesus invited us to experience His rest. He said, “Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest...For my yoke is easy and my burden is light” (Matthew 11:28, 30). Are you tired and run down? Jesus wants you to experience His rest here and now. Although you will not experience the fullness of Christ’s rest until the end of the age, you can walk in the Lord’s strength, peace and joy today. It all starts with believing Christ’s promises and dropping your burdens at His feet.

The author of Hebrews warns about those who hear the Gospel but do not believe. God said, “They shall never enter my rest” (Hebrews 4:3).

I long for the day when I will enter God’s complete rest. The Lord will wipe every tear from my eye. Jesus will make

all things new. There will be no more sin, death or disease. I will have a perfect body. And I will see God face-to-face. Until then, I will lean on Jesus my Sabbath. You don't have to toss and turn due to spiritual insomnia. Enter God's rest today and enjoy the peace found only in Jesus.

MY PERSONAL SEARCH PARTY

Overcome by a sea of choices, I jumped on a plane to get away and seek the face of God. Of all places, I flew to Missouri (my old stomping grounds). The trip provided an oasis to my parched soul. I went to Kansas City to spend time soaking in God's love and to visit the International House of Prayer (IHOP-KC). I figured, 'Who knows — God may just do something.' Although I did not see a burning bush, get caught up to heaven, or talk with an angel, the Lord gave me exactly what I needed. God revealed to me the depth of His love. Then He sent me back with a clear mandate — intercede, write and disciple.

I thought the Lord might give me a vision of a distant land to visit. But He didn't. I thought God might guide me to a wife. Instead, He asked, 'Am I not enough for you?' I thought my visit to IHOP-KC would result in some kind of signature spiritual experience. Although I thoroughly enjoyed my time in the prayer room and the training session, my time alone with the Lord during the trip proved more powerful.

Having gone on a search, what did I find? Well, the Lord showed me how times alone with Him can be extremely powerful. He confirmed the burden on my heart for the three-fold mission of intercession, writing God's revelation and discipleship. While in Missouri, I visited some old friends from college and my previous job. Along the way, the Lord gave me opportunities to encourage them and visa versa.

My visit to IHOP-KC gave me some examples of what it means to be completely sold out to prayer. I met people called to serve as full time prayer warriors. The passionate intercessors at

IHOP-KC perfectly blend worship and prayer to create an atmosphere of heaven on earth. I left with a stronger belief in the power of prayer. While reading *The Secret of Faith* by Charles Finney, the Lord helped me to understand how integral faith is to every action because whatever is not of faith is sin.

TEARS OF GOD

Heartbroken over man's depravity,
God cries for his wayward children.
Longing to see them come home,
He waters the earth with His tears.

With His arms wide open,
God calls to any that will listen.
Mired in self, doubt and deception,
men do what seems right to them.
Waiting at the front door of heaven,
God waters the earth with His tears.

Each man stumbles down the road of life,
seeking pleasure and finding only pain.
Looking in the distance,
the Father sees no one coming home.
He waters the earth with His tears.
So far from the answer yet so close,
men completely give themselves to death.
They invent new ways of doing evil, and
they forget the call of the Father.
God mourns; He has spent His tears,
and the earth goes without rain.

Filled with remorse, one son humbles himself,
and heads for home.
The Father sees him on the road;

he runs to him and embraces him.
 As the son repents and ask for forgiveness,
 the Father forgets the past and restores him.
 Overcome by the reunion,
 God waters the earth with His tears.

A WEeping INTERCESSOR

The Lord works in each person differently. Accepting this fact can be difficult.

**I tend to look around
 at what others have and think,
 ‘God, I want that.’**

I faced this exact problem while serving at a youth discipleship camp. During one of the extended worship times, the Holy Spirit fell on the crowd. Teenagers and kids began to prophesy and receive visions. Some fell down and began to laugh in the Spirit. Later in the week, I prayed asking for the Lord to move in such a visible way in my life. I wanted to know why I had never been ‘slain in the Spirit.’ My flesh wanted a signature spiritual experience.

The Lord responded by impressing the following on my heart, “You don’t need to fall down. That’s not how I work in your life. You cry.” I continued to pout. I wanted what others had. I thought, ‘Oh, great! Other people get pushed down by the power of God or laugh in joy. I get to cry!’

Then while studying the Word, the Spirit led me to read the following, “Since my people are crushed, I am crushed; I mourn, and horror grips me...Oh, that my head were a spring of water and my eyes a fountain of tears! I would weep day and night for the slain of my people” (Jeremiah 8:21,9:1). The Spirit revealed to me God’s call to be an intercessor like

Jeremiah. Overcome by emotion, Jeremiah cried over the sin and blindness of Israel. He foresaw the doom destined for hardhearted Israel. He broke down in tears as he saw the world through God's eyes. Sometimes, he could not even cry; his pain was too intense for tears.

Like Jeremiah, God was calling me to travail in prayer for others. As I prayed with various teenagers and kids at camp, I become overrun with intense emotion and pain. I felt like I stepped out of myself and could deeply relate with the burdens of others. Many times I wept as I prayed in faith for others. The tears changed from tears of pain to tears of joy as the Lord worked in the lives of others.

Now that I look back on it, I am so glad that God did what He wanted to in my life. I would not trade God's call for anything. God has set me in a crucial place as a watchman on the wall – a prayer warrior. He reveals His heart to me and even trusts me to experience the pain of others. At first, I worried what others thought about me. After all, I am a man. Men are not supposed to cry. Right? But I believe that the Lord is calling many more men to cry over the Church. God wants to raise up an army of intercessors starting with men who understand how crucial the call to pray really is.

THE INTERCESSOR'S BURDEN

As I walk through life, the Spirit shows me many of the things that are wrong with the Church, including my own faults. I can easily become burdened with the things that I see. If I allow it to ferment within my soul, feelings of anger, resentment and disillusionment can overshadow the light of the Spirit and the love of Christ for others. Bitterness blocks the flow of grace. I can become prideful and judgmental toward other believers.

Sometimes, I feel like calling down fire to purge the Church. However, I am keenly aware of my own sins and

shortcomings. I would not be spared if the Lord answered my prayer. Apart from Christ's work, I am no better than anyone else. Why does the Lord allow me to see all of these problems that I am powerless to fix? Frequently, I feel that I know the answers. Why won't anybody listen?

Things tend to be out of order in the Church. We are divided by fine points of doctrine not united through the blood of Christ. Pastoral and church leaders lack accountability. Churches have plenty of programs and ministries but little true discipleship and spiritual growth. Worship only goes skin deep. Christian families spend more time watching TV than praying or reading the Bible together. Public schools and pop culture is setting the standard of truth for the next generation not the Word of God. Fathers are too busy working to attend to their primary calling. Many Christians are just as busy and burnt out as non-Christians. Politics more than the Spirit plays a key role in many church decisions. Elders and deacons are given a pass from complying with Biblical standards.

Many 'Christians' spend little time alone with the Lord. There are still millions of people that have never heard about Jesus. Meanwhile, false religions flourish and dominate through deception and oppression. False spirits have deceived many, even in the Church. Why do so few see things as they really are?

You can see how it would be so easy to become frustrated, burnt out and disillusioned.

**A good friend and brother in Christ
recently told me
that most people
gifted with a strong sense of spiritual
perception are also called to be intercessors.
He said the reason why we see
is so that we can pray.**

God has not offered us truth so we can keep it to ourselves. God wants us to petition for the blind. God wants us to cast the burden upon Him. As I pray for the things that are wrong, the Lord changes my heart — enabling me to love others despite their shortcomings and failures. Christ shows me how I am no different than those I would so quickly dismiss. I am humbled before a holy God.

I pray because I must. I pray because it releases the pent-up feelings inside of me. I pray because I love Jesus. I pray because God listens. I pray because it leads to life and the fulfillment of God's call. I pray because God designed me to have a relationship with Him. I pray because the Lord restores my wounded soul. I love the Lord!



SERVING GOD



ON THE DECLINE

Attendance has been down a bit at the Tuesday night young adults group. The Lord has called me and another brother to co-lead the gathering. Nobody wants to lead a ministry on the decline. I feel confused about what should be done to curve the trend. Is the gathering losing its relevance? Or has the newness of the whole thing worn off? Are numbers really important anyway?

I don't want to start ministry building the way the Pharisees did. I want to be in God's will. But I am just not sure what His will is regarding the young adults group. As several stated tonight, there is a definite need for what this group can do — point young adults to Christ. There are not a lot of places for young adults to go. Many churches do not have any support group for them. The only reason we have one at my church is because a few of us really wanted it. I fear it has become just another something for me to handle.

Oh, God, show me Your will in regards to this group. Should we do things differently? How? Do we need to stop and start over? There are no sacred cows. We'll change anything and everything to be in Your will. We just want more of You.

Forgive the leadership. We are not keeping in touch with those who come regularly. Who will help lead this group? Raise up others who will help carry the leadership burden. Forgive me for not always loving the people in the group the way that I should. Help me to live out the kind of love described in I Corinthians 13. Amen!

HANDS OF GOD

Hardened by years of sweat and toil,
Scarred by the adventures of life,
Each reflect a different story with the same ending.

Dipped in the Savior's blood, ransomed from the flood,
Guilt has been wiped away.
Despite wrinkles and scars, they shine — a monument of grace.

What used to do evil has been transformed.
No longer held captive to a world full of emptiness.
They are free to accomplish a perfect purpose.

United under a master plan, each does its part.
Oh, how beautiful are the hands of the laborers.
Service, love and worship are their handiwork.

No matter the origin or trespass,
The Master chooses to use them all,
For we are the hands of God.

BY WHOSE AUTHORITY?

Control and authority have been hotly contested since the foundation of the modern Church. The Jewish religious leaders questioned Jesus about who gave Him authority to perform miracles and teach in the holy places. The Pharisees

and Sadducees even accused Jesus of being the devil and speaking blasphemy. Jesus stood up to them and proclaimed the truth in love to the people while He chastised the religious leaders for their blindness. They held tightly to the rules and institutions, which provided their power base.

**When Jesus Christ spoke against
the very foundations of
their man-made traditions,
the religious leaders
did everything they could
to prop them up.**

Issues of power and authority could have torn the early Christian church apart had it not been for the Lord. Members of the early Christian church fought over whom to follow. Some clung to the teachings of Apollos, who was known for his ability to deliver eloquent speeches. Others were suspicious of the Gentiles and followed Peter. Still others claimed to be disciples of Paul. In I Corinthians 1:10-17, Paul dealt with the divisions by pointing out the obvious — Christ is the head of the Church, not any one man or group of men. Apollos, Peter and Paul were only men. Salvation only comes through Jesus Christ. As issues of authority and control sprang up, Paul pointed to the Lord.

Does this mean that apostles, prophets, evangelists, teachers and pastors are not in positions of authority? The answer is both ‘Yes’ and ‘No.’ Believers given ministry gifts are called to feed the sheep, not manipulate them for building a religious empire or legacy on earth. Are ministers the final authority for the believer? Of course not. All leadership must be tested and compared to the living Word. Paul encouraged the early Church to set aside foolish teachings and pursue the truth. If someone preaches a gospel other than salvation

through the blood of Christ, then he speaks lies and furthers the devil's cause. We should be ever vigilant in these last days against untrue doctrine. The Word says that many will be deceived in the latter days by false teachings developed by men. Establishing authority is important. Just look at the letters in the New Testament. Paul, James, Peter, Jude and others all started off their letters by identifying their position and authority base. They frequently pointed to their position in Christ and the authority that He gave them.

Concerns over power and control have gripped the Church today. In too many local churches, the leadership tries to scheme, plan and control everything. There is no freedom in many churches today. Not only is God put in a box; the church members are imprisoned by being led to think Christianity is about rules — not a living relationship with Jesus. Instead of letting the Lord lead through the Spirit of Truth, men rely on their own wisdom and plans.

We act as if God needs a little help from us at times. But Paul in I Corinthians correctly identifies the source of revelation — the Holy Spirit. Paul did not rely on the wisdom or plans of men. He let the Spirit guide him in all truth and wisdom. We need more Spirit-led churches where the members organically live out their faith daily through a deep walk with Christ. We need more churches where the leadership steps aside and lets the Lord do His work. We need local assemblies where people can freely testify, prophecy, encourage, pray and praise as guided by the Spirit. Who controls the microphone in your church? Is it the Lord or men?

God, open the eyes of pastors, elders, deacons, teachers, evangelists, missionaries and priests all over the world to the new and living way. May churches spring to life and become the Church again. Forgive us for pursuing our own plans, which lead to ruin. Guide the leaders within the Church. May they

daily fall on their knees and seek Your face. Bring revival to our hearts! May the Spirit guide us as we delight in You!

LIBERATION: WALKING THE STREETS OF CARY TOWN

Hitting the streets, a bunch of young adults and teenagers from church went to praise the Lord, pray and witness on Cary Street, a popular shopping and hang-out spot downtown. It was the first time in a long time that I had witnessed on the streets or worshipped publicly outside of a 'religious' setting. Christ liberated me that night. The praise and worship flowed forth as I closed my eyes and focused on the Lord. Our worship was a witness to those who streamed out of the Byrd Theater. A few stopped and talked. I worshipped freely on the sidewalk as the Spirit flowed. I lost myself in the presence of God. I did not care about what anybody thought. We talked to two boys who were drawn by our worship. Although we prayed with them, they said that they were not ready to commit to Christ. *Oh, Holy Spirit, draw these two boys. Don't let them go!*

Then we went around and witnessed on the street and prayed for different things as the Spirit brought them to our attention. We prayed against evil spirits and the devil's counterfeits. We talked with several people about Christ. Many of them said that they were Christians. Even though we did not have a chance to pray with someone for salvation, I felt energized and released from fear. For I will not be ashamed of the gospel of Christ; I will no longer stand on the sidelines and let people go by me. I am going to get in the game and let the Lord use me. I will no longer ride the bench and wonder what would have happened if I would only take a chance. I saw tonight that all God desires is a willing heart. He will do the rest. He will provide the words, the direction and the power to accomplish His purpose.

Thank You, Jesus, for saving me! Thank You for setting me free. I no longer have to fear the rejection of men. For what is man compared to You? You, oh God, have accepted me as a son. I share in Your bountiful inheritance and glory. May I rejoice in the truth and Your salvation. Lord, give me a spirit of love, power and self discipline. May I not fear but step out in faith.

INTERCESSION BREAKTHROUGH

While attending a retreat with a few friends, I experienced a breakthrough in my prayer life.

**Despite God's call to be a prayer warrior,
I suffered from a
deep sense of spiritual inadequacy.
I loved to delve into the Word,
but prayer never came easy.**

At times, it felt like tough work. Similar to a grueling workout, I tried to avoid intercession at all costs. But with the sledgehammer of His love, Jesus removed the shackles of selfishness and doubt. The Lord freed me to accomplish His purpose.

The winter retreat was held at a 'Christian' camp in Virginia. One of my friends used to work on the summer camp staff. He told us stories about how he was discouraged from presenting the Gospel. Instead, the campers were taught a watered-down message about God (minus strong references to Jesus) mixed with humanist ideas. While we walked around the camp, I prayed for the summer camp kids and counselors.

Later that night, I went outside to the woods to pray. I looked up at the brilliant night's sky. The moon and stars shined brightly. As the heavens declared the glory of God, I

began to think about the many people who would never come to know God, the Creator and Author of life. Suddenly, I fell to my knees and cried out to God. I felt the weight of those who were blinded to the truth. My heart was burdened for the teenagers and the kids coming through the summer camp. While I interceded in prayer, tears flowed down my face. Extreme sorrow overtook me. I had never before felt such pain for complete strangers. The Spirit carried me into such a deep state of intercession. I felt sorrow for those who were blinded to the truth, especially the campers. The Lord made a breakthrough. He showed me His heart for the lost and shared His burden with me. God freed me to intercede in prayer, and I have never looked at prayer the same way since that starry winter night.

Thank You, Jesus, for giving me a new heart. Thank You for helping me see and experience the degree to which You care for us. May I never forget the power of prayer. Our prayers are an integral part of Your plan. Prayers are the building blocks of the kingdom. May I always desire to pray first. Please give me a heart to pray for those You have entrusted to me.

LISTEN UP

‘Hey... Chaille! Go over and talk to the guy on the pew behind you.’ Like a scene from *Field of Dreams*, a voice whispered instructions to me. I turned around to see an Asian man curiously taking in everything he saw. Having just finished praying that the Lord would use me, God suddenly gave me a chance.

Quickly the enemy flooded my mind with fear and doubt. My flesh started to make excuses. I could obey the Spirit’s direction or run away like a chicken. As soon as the pastor finished the prayer, I closed my eyes asked for strength and

turned around to speak to the Asian man. I asked him a few questions and quickly learned that he was a Chinese graduate student who was visiting the church meeting for the first time. His name was Singh, and he said that he was not a Christian. He explained that he had been raised to think of the Bible as a collection of fairy tales. The Lord gave me a few minutes to share the Gospel message and encourage Singh. Although he did not accept Jesus right away, he seemed willing to listen. Had I ignored the still small voice and walked out of the building without talking with him, he may have never been personally challenged with the Gospel.

I learned something important from this encounter about how God works. He creates the opportunities for ministry, and we have to choose if we will follow His leading. All too often, I ignore the spurring of the Lord and do my own thing. God has chosen to use His people to share the Gospel. Wow, what an awesome privilege and responsibility! In the book of Revelation, Jesus said to the churches, “He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.” Why do I walk around ignoring the guidance of the Spirit? I worry about what others may think. I act as if I must have a license before I can take a risk and actually care for others. Well, I’m tired of being deaf and walking around without the sweet melody of the Spirit ringing in my ears.

Spirit, allow me to hear and recognize Your voice. May I block out the noise of the world and follow the sweet sound of Your voice. Use me to carry the love of Christ to others. Bring people across my path that need to hear about Jesus. Draw Singh to yourself that he may come to know Christ as Lord and Savior. Make the seed that was planted in Singh’s life grow.

MEETING WITH VAN

Thank you, Jesus, for answering my prayer. You gave me an opportunity to encourage two other guys in their faith this week.

One of the guys is Van. He and I met to discuss life and the Word over a pot of coffee. Van left the meeting energized about the Bible. I could literally see the light bulb go on over his head as the Spirit began to reveal meaty truths to him. Van's excitement lifted my spirits.

Van and some of the other guys are a real answer to prayer. For months, I have been concerned about the young adults group. It never really grew to a 'viable' ministry. It lacked 'critical mass.' By all worldly accounts, it would be considered a failure. Yet, I knew God wanted to use people in the group to encourage each other. Our gatherings have value. Van and I will probably gather one-on-one at least a couple of times a month to break bread, encourage each other and explore the Living Word. Although God has not given the young adults group critical mass in terms of people or activity, He has poured out His Spirit.

Oh, Father. Pour out Your Spirit on all the people in the young adults group. From the active members to the people who come only on rare occasions, may our generation take back the Church for Your glory. May we no longer play games with eternity. May we take a stand and break the curses passed down from our forefathers. Live inside of us, guide us in truth and equip us to serve. Amen!

GETTING FREAKED OUT ABOUT WITNESSING

Sometimes too much of a good thing can become a bad thing. Having come close to finishing two books *Jesus Freaks*

and *Revolution: A Call to Holy War*, I was riding high a wave of emotion. I was all psyched up about witnessing and giving it all for Christ. These books emphasized dying to self and putting it all on the line for Christ. *Jesus Freaks* gave details about martyrs while *Revolution* called Christians to mobilize for Christ and serve Him at all costs. These were pep talks, which the enemy used to try to separate me from Christ.

Although the messages of the books were right on the mark, I used them as an unhealthy measuring stick for my value in the kingdom of God. After all, I was still alive. No one had ever tried to kill me for my faith in Christ. Although I have been ridiculed and shunned from time to time, I have never experienced the level of persecution described in those two books. I began to think, ‘Something must be wrong with me.’ I started to doubt the value and genuineness of my convictions. The devil took what the Lord intended for good and turned it around to create a wedge of condemnation.

It all culminated at a McDonald’s restaurant. While drinking a cup of coffee, I read one of the last chapters in the *Revolution* book. Amid a chapter on losing my life to save it, my mind began to wander. I looked around and started to think about the famous evangelist Smith Wigglesworth who, according to stories that I have heard, used to stand up in restaurants and pray for all the patrons’ food. I thought maybe that I should step out in faith and witness to everybody in the restaurant. As people came in the restaurant, I thought about witnessing to them. Suddenly, I started to feel like a caged animal. I was almost panicked to witness to everybody in the restaurant. I saw an old man on the other side of the aisle and thought about going up and talking to him. Fear rushed in my heart. I was not sure if God was leading me to talk with him or not. I received no real green light, but I felt like I needed to prove my dedication to the Lord. Flooded by doubts and fear, I rushed out the door. When I got in the car, I felt like a failure. All I wanted to do was to hide from God.

I drove to the Sunday night Bible study confused and upset. I described my burden to the group. I was not sure what God wanted me to do.

**Was I supposed to stop everybody
that I see and talk
to them about Jesus?
Would that be genuine or real?**

Would there be anything wrong with that? Although I am a people person, I have never really felt comfortable going up to complete strangers and talking to them about anything let alone a topic as dicey as religion. Would God require me to do something completely against my nature? What did God want? I wanted to please Him so badly. But I lacked understanding. Christ desires for me to deny myself, take up my cross and follow Him. But what exactly does that mean? In less than two hours, I was burned out.

My mind had short-circuited. I started to think that every person who went by me in the restaurant had been a missed opportunity. All of those people were going to hell because of me. I felt very far from God. The devil sure played me like a fool. He took zeal for the Lord and used it against me. At the Bible study, two friends pointed out the error in my reasoning. They brought me back to the crux of the situation. Christ does not love me for what I do for Him. He simply wants me to love Him with all of my heart, soul and mind. God does not expect me to evangelize the entire city by myself. Apart from Jesus I can do nothing of lasting importance. The Lord wants me to listen to His voice and obey.

**Most of the people I will reach
with the Gospel
will be people I already know.**

They are the people the Lord wants me to reach. Although He will use me to reach out to strangers on some occasions, He mainly wants me to press further into Him and let my light shine before men. Once again, I fell in the trap of trying to do instead of just being in the presence of God. For the Lord's yoke is easy and His burden is light. He will give me a real desire and the strength to do whatever He asks of me. Confusion, doubt, fear, and condemnation come from the devil, not Jesus.

SAYING GOODBYE

“Friends come in and out of our life like a busboy in a restaurant.” — *Stand by Me*

This sure seems to be true sometimes. One day I met with Ted, a good friend, and it appeared that he would be moving to Birmingham, Alabama. I knew that he has been unhappy at work and looking for a change. But I never really expected him to leave so soon. Just when we started to get close, he moved on. Although I was full of joy and happy to see him leave for greener pastures, I knew that I would miss him. While Ted lived in Richmond, I had the pleasure to be his friend and encourage him in his walk with Christ. I saw tremendous growth. The Lord brought him a long way. But I said goodbye with confidence because I knew he was in the Lord's hands. I hoped to keep up via e-mail and travel down to see him on occasions.

I am comforted in knowing that God is in control. The Lord is sovereign. He knows what is going on, and He will

protect His people. I shall continue to pray for my brothers in Christ. No matter where we live, we only lose touch if we let it happen. The Lord will provide new friends and people to disciple.

Father, forgive me for worrying about the future. I trust my friends to You. Please keep them in the palm of Your hand. Watch over them and protect them from getting too busy to seek You. May they never fall away from You. May they grow closer to You each year. I ask that You will provide them believers in their settings. People who love You and will encourage them. Help me to find new friends. Amen!

RUSH TO JUDGMENT

If anyone had the right to judge, it was Jesus. Yet more often than not, He offered forgiveness and acceptance to the repentant sinner. Consider the woman who washed Jesus' feet, she was known as a sinner, yet Jesus did not reject her. He offered her forgiveness and accepted her act of repentance. On many occasions, Jesus celebrated with tax collectors and prostitutes. He never rejected people because of past sins or their social status.

**Unfortunately, Christians today
are known more for
having a judgmental attitude
than loving others.**

Christians can be particularly judgmental about the most ridiculous things from hairstyles and clothes to body piercings and even music. I once met a brother who was a Jesus hippie. His name was Ivan. He loved the psychedelic music scene including Phish and The Grateful Dead. He followed the bands

around the country in his drug heyday. After Ivan accepted Jesus as savior, he dumped his addictions but kept the psychedelic music. I saw the band stickers on the back of his truck and asked him about them. He asked me what I thought. I told him that I did not care for the music played by either of the bands. Despite my own convictions to avoid most ‘secular’ rock music, I told him that I did not judge him based on the bands’ connection to the drug scene. After all, there are many Phish fans who do not use drugs or alcohol. Yet, these fans are just as crazy about the group as any pot smoker. Ivan was surprised by my response. He said that most Christians (Pentecostals are among the worst) would try to convince him to stop listening to ‘devil’ music. Some people would even go as far as trying to cast the demons off his truck. I guess they thought the stickers offered temporary housing for demons.

My response to Ivan was based on Romans 14. Paul wrote, “Who are you to judge someone else’s servant” (Romans 14:4)? Paul asked a very good question and made a great point in the process. Ultimately, I am responsible only to the Lord for my actions. I am not perfect, and I have no right to judge others on matters of personal conscience. Jesus will judge the nations not me. The Spirit also reminded me of Jesus talking about trying to remove the speck from our brother’s eye when we have a big plank in our own eye.

I can discern what is right for me based upon the Living Word and the guidance of the Holy Spirit. However, I have no right to beat my brother or sister over the head with my convictions. This does not destroy the foundation for strong church discipline. For just as we are separate, we are one through Christ. When one believer hurts, we all hurt. We should admonish one another toward a closer walk with Christ. And we are to submit to the leaders that God has ordained in our lives.

**Discipline occurs to bring repentance
and restoration
not guilt and shame.
It does not exist to simply empower leaders.**

Some things are blatantly against God's righteous standard and His Word. We must work to purge such sin from the body by tough love at times. Look at the example Paul gave in 1 Corinthians about the man sleeping with his mother. Paul encouraged the church to intervene and if necessary to expel the immoral brother. There is a foundational need for church discipline. Notice that Paul excludes non-believers from scrutiny because God will judge them. Frequently, Christians make an issue out of a particular action to puff up themselves, not because they are concerned about a brother or sister.

When we correct out of love for the other person, we are following a Biblical mandate. James said in his letter to the early Church, "My brothers, if one of you should wander from the truth and someone should bring him back, remember this: Whoever turns a sinner from the error of his way will save him from death and cover over a multitude of sins" (James 5:19-20). We are not supposed to 'mind our own business' when we see another Christian in trouble, yet we must always check our motives. Is this really a matter of personal conscience or behavior strictly prohibited by the Word?

Many Christians today act like a bunch of spoiled children arguing over who owns the ocean. We are petty. There is more that unites us than divides us. Yet, we focus on the smallest differences. Instead of condemning one another, we should love one another and encourage each other to live unto the Lord. I find myself frequently making spiritual comparisons with others. Usually, I pass judgment on them and walk away feeling good about myself. The Bible warns us to be careful

not to judge because we will be judged based on the same criteria we use for others. Ouch, I guess I better go a bit easier on others in the future. What would happen if we in the body started acting in love and unity? Would the world take notice? I believe it would be shocked right to its knees. The only time Jesus ever rushed to judgment was to condemn the ‘religious’ people of His day. He accused them of focusing on how clean the outside of the cup was when the inside was filthy.

Father, forgive me for having a judgmental spirit. Help me to love others and esteem my brothers and sisters higher than myself. Forgive me for slandering others behind their backs and even to their faces. Open my eyes to my own sin and depravity. Give me words to encourage and build up the Body of Christ. Help me to discern moments when words of correction are necessary. May I always speak to encourage others in their walk with You, never to feed my ego or make me look good. Amen!

DON'T START ANYTHING; BECOME SOMETHING!

Every day I hear about another ministry starting up in my city or around the world. With all these “ministries” being launched, why do Christians struggle to evangelize and disciple the world? Islam seems to have its act together and continues to grow at an alarming rate. Is God asleep? Why do so many ministries lack God’s fire and anointing? What does it take for God to send his fire to consume the altar just like He did when Elijah challenged the prophets of Baal?

Although God inspires some of these ministry ideas, others come from our own desires to please God or justify ourselves to Him. Sometimes we jump into a struggling ministry and try to help revive it. As King David discovered, God does not care about buildings or what we want to do for

Him. Instead, the Lord focuses on what He wants to do in and through us. In II Samuel 7, King David proposes to build a temple for the Lord. The idea even sounds good at first to the prophet Nathan. However, God had different plans. The Lord revealed to Nathan that God had not asked for any ruler to build Him a house. God announced that He would establish David's kingdom forever and would provide Israel peace and a homeland. David's son Solomon would be the one to erect a temple in honor of God. David responded in humility by rejoicing in the Lord's promises.

King David made the mistake of believing that God needed a temple built by human hands. But God had a better plan in mind. He desired to reside within His people – something David could have never thought of on his own. According to Acts 17:24-25, “The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in temples built by hands. And he is not served by human hands, as if he needed anything, because he himself gives all men life and breath and everything else.”

The apostle Paul wrote about Christ living in His people (Galatians 2:20). The Lord calls Christians to be living temples. We are to impact the world by radiating God's glory.

Today, churches tend to focus on constructing larger buildings or pioneering the latest ministry craze. When Jesus gave the great commission, He never mentioned buildings, Sunday services or programs. Jesus called His followers to make disciples of all nations, baptizing them, and teaching them to obey all of the Lord's commands (Matthew 28: 18-20).

**While there is nothing wrong
with Sunday services
or programs,
they are a poor substitute
for spiritual intimacy with the Lord
and other believers.
Large groups exist to foster
the development of small groups.**

Yet in the process of doing ‘ministry’ today, many baby Christians are left starving for nourishment. Discipleship is noticeably missing in the Church today. But isn’t discipleship Christ’s first directive?

Call me skeptical, but I am a bit leery of people wanting to build a ministry. I thought Christ called us to make disciples. Ministry flows out of a life dedicated to God’s glory, not a slick plan or program. Don’t get me wrong. Many organized ministries are doing fruitful service to God. But leaders must be held accountable to ensure that they have proper motives and aspirations.

**Just because there is a need
does not mean there is a call.**

Solomon, the builder of the temple in Jerusalem, eventually discovered, “Unless the Lord builds the house, its builders labor in vain” (Psalms 127:1).

SO DID YOU BRING ME ANYTHING TO EAT?

One day while trying to get away from everybody and everything, God created an incredible witnessing opportunity.

I had taken off the day from work to hike around the Blue Ridge Mountains and to seek the Lord. Hiking a couple of different peaks and driving along the Skyline Drive, I enjoyed being alone with God — my friend, my savior and my love.

The day consisted of hiking, praying, singing praises, reading the Word, taking in God's creation, meditating on God's love for me and witnessing to a stranger on the side of a mountain. Through beautiful scenery, the truth of God's Word, a gentle breeze and a miracle, God showed his sovereignty and love. The miracle came in the form of a witnessing opportunity. It started as one of the strangest encounters of my life and ended with God being glorified.

While sitting on the ground at an overlook eating lunch, a man named Scott drove his car up to where I sat. He got out looked around for a second and walked straight to me. He pointed to my lunch and asked, "Did you bring me anything to eat." Stunned by his question, I thought for a second and replied, "No, not really. I did not know you were coming." Then he sat down on the ground and began to talk about the view. I offered him some chips and fruit. He declined the food. We talked for a while about where we lived and what we do for a living. Scott suffered from the spirit of depression. His words expressed a negative worldview where pain, not joy, consumes his life. While looking out on the Albemarle County wine valley, I commented about the beauty of nature and how it reflects the glory of God. I then told Scott the purpose for my trip. He seemed intrigued and told me his 'religious' beliefs.

Scott said that he believed in God. But he did not consider himself a real religious man. Scott said that he had personally experienced God. He admitted trying to commit suicide more than once. The most recent time, Scott said that God told him not to do it. Shocked by his honesty, I asked Scott what he thought the purpose to life was. He candidly responded that he did not really know.

I went on to share with Scott that I believe the purpose to life is to have a close relationship with God. I told Scott that is the reason why God tried to stop him from killing himself. I explained how we need the blood of Jesus to remove our sin, which allows us to have a relationship with God and be with Him forever. As I talked more and more about Jesus, he began to get agitated. He told me that he had enjoyed talking with me but he had to go. He did not want to accept Jesus on the spot. Regardless, the seed had been planted.

Before Scott left, I asked if I could pray with him. He consented. I prayed for healing for his bad arthritis and back pain (earlier in the conversation he told me about his health problems — a contributing cause to his depression). Then, I proceeded to pray that Scott would accept the love offered by God. I asked that his eyes would be opened to the truths outlined in the Bible. As Scott got up to leave, I told him to consider why he had stopped at that particular overlook and talked to me. I said that it was a divinely inspired encounter set up especially by God. I told Scott that God wanted to get his attention. God desires to love him if he would only open his heart. If Scott would seek God, I said that he would find the answers to his questions. Scott turned around and looked at me and said that maybe I was right. He waved goodbye, jumped in his car and sped away down the road. I never saw Scott again. But I frequently think about and pray for him.

Is the above encounter God's model for ministry? Are we wasting our time with our campaigns, strategy sessions, seeker-friendly services and programs? It can't be as simple as seek God and He will do the rest?

**I feel like I have to win the battle
on my own. Yet the Bible
is full of stories where God,
not man, is the primary actor
in accomplishing God's will.**

Just look at the history of Israel where in battle after battle God routed Israel's enemies through divine acts. For example, Jehoshaphat defeated Moab and Ammon when God sent a spirit of confusion into their camps (II Chronicles 20). Moab and Ammon slaughtered each other without the Israelites ever having to raise their swords. God said to Jehoshaphat, "Ye shall not need to fight in this battle: set yourselves, stand ye still, and see the salvation of the Lord with you, O Judah and Jerusalem: fear not, nor be dismayed; tomorrow go out against them: for the Lord will be with you" (II Corinthians 20:17 - KJV).

Consider the encounter between Phillip and the Ethiopian eunuch in Acts 8:26-40. An angel of the Lord told Phillip to travel a particular road. While on the road, the Spirit directed Phillip to walk to a chariot and stay near it. Phillip kept his ears open for an opportunity to do the Lord's work. He heard an Ethiopian eunuch (official) in the chariot reading from the book of Isaiah. Phillip asked the official if he wanted help understanding the ancient text. The eunuch agreed, and Phillip explained the gospel to him. Convinced by Phillip's words, the eunuch accepted Christ and was baptized on the spot. God set up the appointment although he never fully outlined Phillip's mission. When presented an opportunity, Phillip simply spoke out of love and offered to serve. Having been grounded in the Scripture, Phillip helped the eunuch understand the mystery of the Gospel. God even handled the transportation to Phillip's next destination.

According to the Bible, the Spirit of God picked Phillip up and carried him away.

Are you suggesting that I simply lock myself in my prayer closet and let God bring people to me? No, not exactly. Above all, we should seek to know and worship God. Witnessing to the world will flow out of our walk with the Lord. Remember that an empty jar offers no life-giving water to the person that goes to drink from it. Simply seek God; live in a constant state of abiding in His presence. Then go out in the world and live as the aroma of Christ. Whether it be a person in the checkout line at a store, a neighbor, a co-worker or a workout partner at the gym, your life will emanate a bright light to a dark world.

There have been many times where people like Scott came into my life, and I remained silent.

**Although God will bring along
the opportunities,
we can choose to speak out
or keep quiet.**

Had Phillip never approached the Ethiopian eunuch, he may never have accepted Christ as his savior. Thus, we all play a vital role in God's plan. Although I did not give Scott physical food, I did offer him spiritual food to nourish the soul.

REACHING AN ORGANIC MINDED GENERATION

What does it mean to be a 'seeker friendly' church? When church planting experts talk about reaching the postmodern generation, what exactly do they mean? What is post modernism? I tend to view it as a nebulous concept – a buzzword tossed around by dreamers. People who want to be

on the cutting edge use it as a badge of cultural honor. Simply attaching ‘seeker friendly’ or ‘postmodern’ does little to tear down the roadblocks facing the church today. We must really seek to understand and engage this new culture while preserving the heart of the Gospel message.

Many outsiders in the world have rejected the established, mainstream church for good reason. All they see are a room full of hypocrites that rush to judge them and then push them into a mold. They feel left out unless they conform to certain standards, most of which have nothing to do with Christ or His commandments. If we are truly saved by grace, I have yet to see what someone’s hairstyle or attire has to do with their acceptance in the Church. Christians can be among the toughest critics in the world. Sure, a person will likely change over time and drop sinful behavior as Christ transforms the individual. But unfortunately, too many outsiders think they must have everything together and be perfect before they turn to the Christ.

Those raised inside the ‘mainstream’ church and converts that have been assimilated into the ‘Christian’ culture, do very little to tear down the barriers created by the enemy. Non-Christians do not fit and many times are not welcome in many churches. From the starchy Sunday clothes to the stained glass windows to the strict code of conduct and formal practices, non-churched people would feel like aliens on a foreign planet if they went to many church services. What would happen in your fellowship if a man in raggy clothes came in and lit a cigarette? What would happen if teenagers wearing punk or gothic clothing came in and sat down on the front row? Would these people be greeted with the love of Christ?

Let’s face it — the majority of American churches are designed to serve and appeal to suburban, middle class Christians. Oddly, the focus tends to be man, not God. Non-Christians are welcomed as long as they conform or stay quiet in the back row. Tons of programs are offered to appeal to the

baby boomers and their children. Order and planning take the place of organic worship, teaching and fellowship. Everything appears nice and tidy — a picture of perfection.

**Some churches put on a good show
and run like a
well-oiled machine.
Yet people pile through the doors
week after week
and leave unchanged.**

An entertaining program or a good speech is a poor substitute for the authentic work of the Holy Spirit. Many of these dead churches think they are doing such a good job on their own that they fail to call upon the Lord. Am I being too harsh? What about the plank stuck in my eye? I am only pointing out the problem as I see it. I am complicit in the crime just like the rest of the established church.

There seem to be several major reasons why the church today has failed to connect with postmoderns, especially non-churched youth.

1.) It's a Culture Thing: We Are Obviously Not of the Same Tribe — Most people are attracted to people of similar background, attitude, passion and culture. It all starts with appearance and goes from there. Unfortunately, many people cannot get beyond the appearance, no matter what they say to your face. Others will use culture as a shield against 'religion.'

Dress, decor and location play a small part in helping to create a connection. But if this is as far as you go, you will fail in the long run to reach postmoderns. Going beyond the shell, we must meet them where they are. Simply creating an alternative service at a church building will likely flop.

Instead, we must take Christ to them. Where do these people live, work and play? That's where the outreach should take place.

The enemy, with a substantial amount of help from nutty Christians, has done a good job stereotyping God as a killjoy. Outsiders think that the Christian life is dull and no fun. God is thought to be a harsh taskmaster who demands perfection. All non-Christians hear about are rules and rituals. Very few people tell them about the peace and joy experienced in a relationship with God. No wonder most people go running for their lives when someone starts to talk about Christ. Any outreach to postmoderns must destroy these lies while providing them outlets to discover God in a way fitting with their culture.

2.) Dead Religion — Postmoderns do not understand the typical 'Christian' culture. From the clothes to the language, they feel like aliens on a foreign planet. But most of this Christian culture has little or nothing to do with God and everything to do with decades of tradition and learned behavior. Sing, laugh, stand, sit, shake hands — we play our role to perfection every week. People sing songs about joy with stone-cold faces. Going through the motions, we punch our timecard and live a life without God.

**Ask a typical non-believer
what he sees
on Sunday morning
and he would respond a collection
of fake people
putting on a show
out of a sense of obligation.**

Just to make sure everyone is happy, the church offers tons of programs and activities, each with a dash of Jesus thrown in to appease God. Running from ministry to ministry, Christians keep busy — too busy. Then, we make the mistake of trying to offer all these programs to attract the non-believer. But postmoderns are not seeking programs or entertainment. They want to experience an organic relationship with God. It is the death in the modern church that has kept people away.

3.) Seeking a Direct Link to God — Many of the modern day churches are still working under the principles of the old covenant. Pastors and teachers are elevated into a position where God alone should be. Under the new covenant, God offers a direct relationship without the use of an intermediary. We individually receive direction from God, not an earthly priest. The old matrix leaves people locked in chains. They never grow because their faith has no roots of its own. Postmoderns want a direct connection with God. Unfortunately, all they see modeled in the established church is a system where the preacher ‘speaks for God’ and tightly holds control over the congregation.

In too many local churches, the leadership tries to scheme, plan and control everything. There is no freedom in many churches today for the Holy Spirit to do His thing. The pastor holds a tight grip on the microphone. Church members are not allowed to testify, worship and use their gifts freely. This results because pastors are afraid to administer Biblical discipline and avoid the whole issue by stifling the Spirit.

**Postmoderns want freedom —
something that is missing
in most churches today.**

4.) Real Community Not Superficial Relationships — One of the greatest desires for post moderns is to feel accepted by a group while preserving their individuality. Yet most Christian churches provide very little in the area of true fellowship. After service, we greet people and make polite conversation. We pretend to be interested and always say that everything is going well in our lives even when our house just burned down and our dog got run over by a truck. We feign interest in the lives of others and commit to pray for others even though we usually do not. Christians are not taught how to develop close, accountable relationships. Discipleship is almost a lost art in the Church. Vibrant small groups do not exist in many local churches. Yet authentic relationships are the one thing that churches should be able to offer outsiders. We know Jesus, the only source of true love. We have a wonderful how-to handbook in the Bible. Non-Christians, especially the younger generations, desire acceptance by a group. Many want role models and mentors but are too prideful to admit it. Instead of rushing to love those outside the Church, we frequently judge them first and offer kindness later.

A spirit of pride imprisons many in churches today. People are hurting in the Church but keep it to themselves. They do not want to be judged by the rumor mill. All too often we rush to judge, not to love.

**Very few are willing
to offer others
the same level of grace
that God gave them.**

WHAT DO YOU DO WHEN ‘YOUR’ MINISTRY CRUMBLES AROUND YOU?

Just consider the scenario, you are sitting in prison on the verge of being executed. Most of your friends have abandoned you except for a couple of loyal fellas. Your life’s work has begun to crumble as people and groups squabble among themselves. False doctrine has enticed some to fall away from the faith. How would you react?

Toward the end of his life, the Apostle Paul faced this dire situation while in Rome. Paul could have felt bitter, depressed or disillusioned. By the world’s perspective, Paul’s life was about to end in tragic failure. Dedicated to serving God, Paul gave up everything for God. Paul abandoned his earthly position of authority and power to travel around and preach the Gospel. Angry mobs tried to kill him on more than one occasion. He never settled down and had a ‘normal’ life. During his missionary journeys, Paul started many churches and led many people to Christ. Yet, the cares of the world had begun to influence these churches. They started to lose loyalty to Paul and fall away from the apostolic faith. Had Paul’s ministry to the Gentiles ended in failure? As he approached execution under the wicked ruler Nero, many of Paul’s friends had abandoned him. Only Luke remained by his side.

Paul wrote to his protégé, Timothy, “For I am already being poured out like a drink offering, and the time has come for my departure. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Now there is in store for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day — and not only to me, but also to all who have longed for his appearing” (I Timothy 4:6-8). Paul proclaimed victory. He did not allow the distress of his current circumstances to destroy his joy. It was never ‘Paul’s ministry.’ Paul understood that the battle belonged to the Lord. As Paul approached the end of his life, he focused his attention

on the Lord. He stood on the promises of God and believed in the reward promised to the faithful.

Almost 2,000 years later, Paul's letters stand as a central part of God's Word. Paul's influence cannot be measured. Just like Paul, if you have been faithful to God's call, He will take your efforts, even in death, and multiply them to accomplish a divine purpose. Do not despair but rejoice as Paul did.

**Even apparent failures
may birth revival
in a dry and weary land. God
tends to move through our efforts
one person at a time.**

May the Lord fill you with His Spirit and may His grace rest upon you.



THE MATRIX



WHAT IS THE MATRIX?

One of the most popular sci-fi/action movies of the past couple of years is the *Matrix*. The story line features a world where humans have been reduced to producers of electrical energy to feed computers. Humans are grown basically as an energy source and are then stored in small incubators. The Matrix, a computer-generated fantasy world, blinds them to the truth of their real life. The Matrix is a lie. In the movie, people do not rebel or try to escape because they accept the Matrix as reality.

Although far fetched, the story has many parallels with Christian theology. There is a Messiah figure in Neo and even a Judas character in Cypher. Just like the devil, the computers use lies and trickery to thwart humans. Going one step further I could not help but ask, 'Do we live in a Matrix?' Are we surrounded by a dream world based on deception?

In the movie, Morpheus, a prophet-like figure and leader of the rebellion, tells Neo the following: What you know you cannot explain, but you feel it. You have felt it your entire life. You know that there is something wrong with the world. You don't know what it is. But it's there like a splinter in your mind...The matrix is everywhere...It is the world that has been pulled over your eyes to blind you to the truth.

These words accurately reflect the war being waged over the human soul. Many people go through life blinded to the truth. Like those in the movie, they accept lies as truth and fail to live in the 'real world.' While the Lord builds His kingdom on truth, the devil uses bricks of deception. Through the years, lie is built upon lie creating a false reality – the matrix of our world. It is passed down from generation to generation. People will die to defend it because it is all they have ever known. A complex maze of little lies, the purpose of the matrix is to separate man from God.

Why do people fall prey to the matrix? The answer is quite simple. Most never know it exists. And even if they are shown its existence, they have a hard time accepting reality because the matrix tends to weave itself into the very fabric of ones soul.

**Only revelation from the Holy Spirit
can free the human mind
to accept reality as God sees it.**

People tend to see only the physical world not the spiritual realm behind it. Present pain or trouble clouds eternal vision. The Biblical story of Elisha facing off against the soldiers of Aram illustrates this point (II Kings 6:8-23). The king of Aram dispatched soldiers to kidnap Elisha, a prophet of God, because his prophecies assisted the Israelites in battle. When the soldiers surrounded the city where Elisha lived, he did not worry. Elisha's servant feared for his life. He asked, "Oh my lord, what shall we do?" Elisha responded, "Don't be afraid. Those who are with us are more than those who are against us." The servant must have thought that Elisha had gone mad. He saw only the flesh and bones soldiers around the city. He did not consider the unseen spiritual realm or the army of God sent to protect his master. Elisha prayed to God,

and He opened the servant's eyes. All around the city were angels with chariots of fire. Many Christians tend to respond to challenges the same way Elisha's servant did. At the first sign of trouble, instead of trusting God and praying for His deliverance, panic and fear takes control.

The devil attempts to tear down the Biblical foundations necessary for a victorious Christian life by attacking key doctrinal truths. He will use fine sounding arguments to confuse people. One of the devil's biggest targets is grace. The enemy will try to pervert grace into a license for people to do whatever they want because God will forgive them. Or he will try to detract from the power of the cross by leading people to accept a works-based plan of salvation. The enemy even uses this ploy against Christians.

Taking advantage of the performance-driven American culture, the matrix deceives people into thinking they can earn God's acceptance. The typical American Christian jumps from one activity to another with very little time to simply enjoy being with God. They spend most of their time trying to serve God through ushering, teaching Sunday school, singing in the choir, or assisting the poor. Rush! Rush! Rush! This usually results in burnout. Although there is nothing wrong with ushering or teaching Sunday school, these activities have no eternal value apart from God. If a Christians is too busy to have time to commune with God, something has to go.

The matrix extends beyond grace. It affects every aspect of life from a person's goals and priorities to self esteem. It taints how people look at God, each other and themselves. This chapter explores some of the various angles of the matrix. Hopefully by the end of this chapter, you can answer the question — "What is the matrix?"

THE PRAYER OF JABEZ VS. THE TRIALS OF JOB

Why does God bless us? This question has been discussed since the time of Job and is at the heart of the health and wealth teachings that have become popular today. The prosperity message appeals to many because it promises earthly blessing if we only ask God. It has made a resurgence over the last couple of years due in part to the *Prayer of Jabez* book series. Don't misunderstand me. Based on other writings by Bruce Wilkinson, the author appears to have good intentions. But some have corrupted the true message of the prayer of Jabez into a get-rich-quick scheme. Simply ask God (of course, say the magic words) and then you will be blessed. Expect your bank accounts to overflow and your garages to be filled with new luxury cars.

But what about sacrifice? Are we not fat enough? Should we treat God like a short-order cook? While contemplating the prosperity doctrine, the Spirit led me to I Corinthians 4: 8-17. Paul corrected the church in Corinth for boasting about material wealth.

**Paul did not forbid having wealth.
But he rebuked the rich
for putting their faith
in the blessing
instead of the One who provides it.**

He encouraged them to follow his example and to be willing to suffer on earth for the name of Christ, which leads to greater rewards in heaven. Frequently, those who follow after Christ will suffer and sacrifice. Wealth and prosperity on earth are not necessarily signs of God's blessing. For God's greatest gifts are not of this world — they are His love, His favor, His Spirit and His power. These are priceless.

Jabez received blessings from God because he was righteous and followed after Him, not just because he asked in faith. According to the Bible, God hears the prayers of the righteous. If we live in sin and seek to satisfy the desires of the flesh, we lose standing with the Lord, which makes our prayers ineffective. Yes, God does desire to bless His children. But what does it really mean to be blessed? Blessing can come in many forms ranging from financial prosperity to developing godly character through pain and trial. The same God who lavishes his people with earthly riches also allowed the trials of Job. In the process of receiving some of God's greatest blessings, we may have to be refined by the fire. The account of Jabez does not tell us if he suffered the way that Job did. Yes, we should come before the Lord and ask for Him to bless us. We should expect for Him to do great things in us and through us for His glory. But we should not be distracted by the temporal. Instead, we should focus on the eternal. We should recognize that each new day is a blessing from God regardless of our stock portfolio, fame or worldly success.

**Ultimately, God blesses His people
to bring glory to Himself
by expanding His kingdom
and exalting His name
throughout the world.**

LIES, LIES, IT'S ALL BUILT ON LIES

What is truth? Pilate asked this question during Jesus' trial.

Jesus claimed to be ruler of a kingdom not of this world and that He had come to testify to the truth. Pilate wanted to know what truth had caused such a great uproar among the Jews.

Christ challenged Pilate to look beyond the matrix. But

during his moment of decision, Pilate succumbed to the pressures of this world. Jesus knew what Pilate chose to ignore — most of this world is based on lies. Mankind has become so blind that we don't know the truth even when it is right in front of us.

Pilate asked the wrong question. Instead, he should have asked 'Who is truth?' Truth alone can be found in Jesus Christ. Truth can only be interpreted through the Holy Spirit — God's great truth detector. Even many of the traditions of the modern church are lies. Below is a short story that I wrote to highlight a simple lesson about truth and reality.

As Professor Charles Gibbons scanned the pages of the latest issue of *The Economist*, he looked up and saw a former student walking outside of the coffee shop. The man, Fred Johnston, entered the shop, stomped his feet and approached the counter. Fred ordered a cup of dark coffee and looked out the window. He had not yet noticed the professor on the other side of the shop. Fred appeared upset and deep in thought. He kept on saying quietly to himself, "Lies, Lies, It's All Based on Lies." The attendant handed Fred the coffee and gave him an odd look while Fred continued to mumble.

As he turned around, Fred spotted the professor waving to him from across the shop. The professor invited his friend to sit down and share what seemed to be bothering him. Hesitantly, Fred agreed to share. Back 15 years ago, Fred was one of Professor Gibbons' most promising students. Then Fred abruptly stopped working on his degree in English and headed off to seminary. Fred came from a long line of preachers, and he joined the ministry to fulfill his family's expectations.

Although Professor Gibbons believed in God, he disliked organized religion and tended to have a skeptical view of any

theology that required him to change his life in any way. He believed God created the world and then stood far off to let it function on its own.

Fred slumped into the chair and looked across the table to the professor. Having reached the peak of frustration and hopelessness, he did not even try to hide his torment. He said, “My entire life is based on a series of lies, and I can’t take it any more.” Extremely curious about his friend’s confession, the professor asked, “Who has been lying to you?”

Fred responded, “Everybody. The entire world is based on a series of lies; even those who I love and have trusted the most have been implicated in the conspiracy. Unfortunately, they still believe the lies are truth.”

It was not every day that the professor found such a blend of madness and honesty in a world full of masks and polite conversation. He probed for more details by asking, “Aren’t you being a bit paranoid?”

Then Fred unleashed a flood of truth. He said, “I’m tired of trying to live up to expectations of the people in my congregation. And I’m tired of perpetuating a fraud.”

Are you saying that you no longer believe in Christianity and are ready to join the ranks of those who despise dead religion?” asked Professor Gibbons.

Fred sighed and said, “I am not denouncing Jesus Christ, but the charade most people participate in on Sunday. You are right. For many, Christianity is a dead religion because they do not know Christ. All they know are the religious trappings handed down from generation to generation. Many churchgoers come, punch their time card and put on their Church face. They believe they can obtain enough of the Lord in one two-hour meeting to make it through the week. Then they try to go out the sanctuary doors and be holy on their own. Oh sure, they believe that grace saved them from their sins at the point of their conversion. But now they can please God by their own works and plans. Then when man falls, he

doubts God. The backslider looks around the service full of happy, perfect people and begins to doubt his salvation. The backslider is separated from God because of his sin. He starts to reject God's love and think that God does not love him. Yet, the pastor struggles with the same temptations and sin as the backslider. The Christian caught in a web of sin turns from God instead of running into His arms. Ashamed, afraid to admit his sin, the backslider runs away from God."

"Well, Fred, you have sure pointed out the hypocrisy in most religions including Christianity. And you have stated my case for some of my criticisms," said Professor Gibbons.

Fred continued, "Many so-called Christians tend to live dual lives. Around other believers or in some public settings, they put on religious language like someone does a coat. Then around the guys at the bar or around the card table, they slip back into old ways. Or even more common, Christians get in a fight at a store at Christmas time over a gift for someone they have not talked to or even thought about in almost twelve months. This attitude results from religious people compartmentalizing their lives. Everything has its place from family to work to God to fun and relaxation."

Wanting to comfort his friend, Professor Gibbons said, "Wait a minute, Fred. Although I do not believe in God the same way as you do, I do not see how you are responsible for any of your parishioners' misunderstandings or their sin. You exist to help people discover God; I think you are being too hard on yourself."

"Am I?" asked Fred. "In the Old Testament, God told the prophet Ezekiel that the blood of the people would be on his head if he failed to preach the message of repentance and reconciliation that God gave him. By furthering the lies, I am guilty of aiding the enemy."

"How exactly have you aided the enemy?" asked the professor.

Fred responded, "I have pushed people to build up my

local church versus grow in their walk with Christ. We have spent money on our own grandiose plans instead of feeding and clothing those in need. By what I emphasize, I have taught that the buildings and programs are more important than knowing God and developing relationships with others. Too many of my parishioners languish in sin alone because they do not have anyone that they can trust to build them up and encourage them in Christ. We are so busy trying to be perfect that we are far from God. I have preached about how to receive God's blessing, and other popular topics. I have sugar-coated the truth and given the people what they want. I have tried to give people practical steps on how they can better their lives, without emphasizing their depravity and need for an intimate love affair with Christ."

The professor interrupted and asked, "If you really believe all of this, which I don't, by the way, why did you participate in the conspiracy?"

Stung by the question, Fred stopped to consider a response. He said, "Until recently, I was blind to the truth and accepted the patchwork of lies that had become my reality. Most of this world is based on lies. Lies have been built on each other like bricks. It has reached the point that we have become surrounded by lies, and we don't know the truth even when it is right in front of us. We are blinded to the fact that much of what we accept as reality is a lie. For truth alone can be found in Jesus Christ. Truth alone can be interpreted through the Holy Spirit. Even many of the pillars of the modern church or society are lies from the devil.

"For years, I have preached based on denomination guidelines and frequently used the prepared materials sent out by the denomination headquarters. Then, one day I became unsettled after overhearing a woman in the grocery store describe how God had spoken to her in a dream. I pondered why I never heard anything from God. Most of what I knew about God came from others or studying. I never thought of

God as a friend who I could just hang out with. Wanting to know God deeper, I spent a day in the wilderness alone with Jesus. Ever since then, I have not been the same. My Bible studies have come alive; I enjoy talking with Jesus at all moments of the day. It's great."

Alarmed by the mention of dreams and visions, Professor Gibbons asked, "Fred, you're not seeing things or hearing voices are you?"

Sensing his friend's deep concern, Fred laughed and said, "Although God can speak audibly to people, God usually speaks through His Spirit and the Bible. Other people can be the mouthpiece of God. And yes, God does use visions and dreams to communicate His truths. And if you are worried about my sanity, I have never thought with such clarity in my life. Recently, I have learned just how much I do not know."

"It does seem that you have gone mad," said the professor. "If I did not know any better, I would think you had been brainwashed by some religious cult. You are really going to scare people in your congregation talking about Jesus as if you see, hear and know Him personally. I would not tell your parishioners about visions or dreams either."

With confidence, Fred responded, "I do know Jesus personally. He came and died so that fallen man could be reconciled to God. Emmanuel means 'God with us.' The entire life, death and resurrection of Jesus occurred so that all men can have an intimate relationship with the Creator. He wants to love you too. But you have to let Him."

Denying his own spiritual need, Professor Gibbons changed the focus. He said, "I have no intention of converting today, reverend. Let's get back to your dilemma. If you can do nothing to be holy and live up to your congregation's expectations, then what are you going to do? And if some of the very institutions you foster drive people farther away from God, what will you do with your congregation? After all of these great revelations, it seems unfair for you to be tormented

by the reality of always falling short and never being able to do anything about it.”

As they exited the coffee shop, Fred smiled and said, “I will run to the cross and enjoy the sweet presence of Christ my savior. He will fix all the problems. Through the blood of Christ, God has created a new reality for me. Regarding my congregation, I will try to spur them to receive God’s love, walk with the Lord and develop relationships with other believers. I must trust their fate to the Lord. By the way, thank you for being there to listen to me. Without you even knowing it, God used you to declare His truths and confirm His love for me. I am free from guilt and despair. I can sing a new song today.”

Professor Gibbons chuckled and said, “You sure are a funny man. And I am always more than happy to listen even to your crazy beliefs about God.”

The two men parted company. Fred walked away whistling, having once again realized the fullness of God’s love.

THE SPIRIT OF THE ANTICHRIST

The apostles Paul, John and Peter spent a considerable amount of time warning about false teachers and the spirit of the antichrist. John explained the spirit of the antichrist as anything that denies that Jesus is the Son of God who came in the flesh and died for the sins of man. The Bible plainly states that the spirit of the antichrist is active on the earth today.

False teachers take the focus off of Christ and place it elsewhere. There are numerous false religious and cultural ideologies in play today. Consider the ever-popular spirit of relativism, which denies absolute truth on religious matters.

Many believe that all religions are equally valid or there are many paths to God. Those who do not subscribe to this theory are characterized as intolerant. Yet we have forgotten what being tolerant means.

Being tolerant

means allowing something to go on that you don't agree with,

not denying the legitimacy or superiority of your beliefs over those of others.

Materialism has a strong grip on America. We see our wealth and prominence as God's seal of approval. Instead, we should be thankful and repent of our sins. For the Lord will soon pour out his wrath if we don't wise up as a country. Money and possessions have become America's god of choice. Many honestly believe that they are due peace and prosperity. However, we have no such guarantee.

Others want to look for the 'good' in people. They believe in the goodness of men instead of realizing mankind's depravity and sinful nature. Their salvation is based on good works, but they come up short when weighed on God's scale of justice. These are deluded into thinking they can stand before a holy God on their own merits.

Yes, the spirit of the antichrist is alive and well in the world. The Lord will come soon even while many in the 'Church' are being misled. Beware of false teachers. Dismiss any fine sounding arguments in conflict with the truth as revealed by the Holy Spirit through the Bible. Hold fast to Jesus, the author and finisher of your faith.

WHAT MAKES A HOUSE A HOME

While riding around my hometown of Richmond, Virginia, the Lord showed me what truly makes a house a home. My journey took me through Church Hill, a poor area of the inner city. Some of the houses are run down and in poor condition. Others have been renovated as yuppies move back to the city and try to live out an urban dream. Among the many well-kept or remodeled homes, one stood out from the others. It radiated not because of its exterior or immaculate interior. Actually, the building looked like a wreck. Plastic draped around the porch covering an area under construction. Once you walk inside, the house quickly shows its age and poor condition. In places, you can see through the ceiling to the rooms on the second floor. Paint and tile were stained from years of abuse. The frame of the house showed through certain areas where there was no wallboard. Most people would shake their heads and criticize this house. But it stands as a light in a dark city.

If the house seems old and run down, maybe it is the possessions inside that make it valuable? Are there expensive vases, artwork or jewelry hidden inside the four walls? No, the people living in the house own very little of worldly value. Yet people see the house as a beacon of hope and joy. The house springs to life because of the people inside it. They have been entrusted with a treasure and share it with others. A Christian couple owns this house. They are not the kind of people who play church on Sunday. They live the church 24/7. When I visited, their home was filled with neighborhood kids playing games and singing songs. In the main hall, visitors greeted one another with hugs and smiles. Adults and older teenagers were actively loving and encouraging young children. Wealthy friends came by and gave gifts to the children. Both whites and blacks intermingled without the hassle of a color barrier. Where most homes are filled with

shallow talk and fear, this house offered life because the love of Christ emanated from every room.

This couple did what many dreamers would consider unthinkable. They left the safety of the suburbs for the unknown of the city. They moved to the city out of a call from the Lord. Their obedience to God's plan has made it possible for others from the suburban church where they fellowship to make connections with needy people in the city. Listening to the voice of the Spirit, this couple lives out what it means to go dwell among those they are called to love.

In contrast across the street stood an old building with a church name painted on the side. A cross hung over the front entryway. It looked more like a large house than a church. Obviously, the church seated very few people. The small congregation probably included 50 people at the most.

Although it was a 'house of God', it looked dead. The building stands vacant most of the time except for a few services on Sunday and Wednesday. Maybe the No Trespassing sign placed prominently on the front keeps out more than just the vagrants. But come to think of it, why should a church try to keep anybody out at all?

The stark differences between the two buildings illustrate the deceptive mindset affecting the Church today.

**Many Christians believe in their hearts,
even if they will not
admit it with their lips,
that a Christian fellowship
must have a building
to be a 'legitimate' church.**

The existence of a permanent building gives the pastor and his flock spiritual status. But in this case, there appears to be more authentic ministry taking place at the home than

the church building. Of course, the building has nothing to do with it. The building only exposes the underlying heart problem.

What would happen if the people in the corner church turned the building into a home for a few single mothers and started to mentor them? What would happen if the building became a neighborhood recreation center for the children? In the effort to save what a small congregation has (its building) it loses the real prize. Some in the congregation raise objections. “Well, where would we meet for church services?” “Why do we have to give up our church building? There are government-run places where these kids can go play.”

Does a building used for services only a few times throughout the week really bring glory to God or does it build up our egos? The money would be better spent helping the neighbors across the street do the real work of the Church. The contrast between the two buildings caused me to stop and ask, ‘Are we building our kingdom or the Lord’s kingdom?’

The house on the corner stands as a real home because it has the love of Christ radiating from it every day.

Father, forgive my complicity in the crime. I have accepted the lies of the enemy as truth. Thank you for opening my eyes to the reality of what a real home is. A home is a place where Your love makes all things new. A real home is where people share their lives and the love of Christ with each other. Joy flows from room to room. God, make my house a home of love. May I be filled with your love and a desire to serve others in my community.

TWO TYPES OF PRIESTS

Church discipline and authority remain one of the most contentious issues in the Church. The battle traces its roots to

Christ. When Jesus establish His earthly ministry, He shook the very foundations of the establishment. Christ forever changed the rules of the game by tearing down the wall separating God and man. Jesus' sacrifices on the cross ushered in the new and living way.

The Bible described two basic paradigms — the Levitical priesthood and the Melchizedek priesthood. The Levitical priesthood was based on natural birth. The Melchizedek priesthood is based on a spiritual birth through Christ's blood. The Levitical priesthood stresses the priests' role to be the intermediate between God and the people. The Melchizedek priesthood changes the focus so man can directly commune with God. Under the new covenant and the new priesthood, God offers a direct relationship without the use of an intermediary. All believers become priests in the order of Melchizedek. We individually receive direction from God not an earthly priest.

**Many modern day churches
are still working under the principles
of authority established
under the Levitical priesthood.
Pastors and teachers are elevated
into a position where
God alone should be.**

Many times the people do this without any encouragement from those in leadership. People, including many Christians, so strongly desire earthly kings that they will elevate any man who seems worthy. We are not content with a God that we cannot see. Christians expect their leaders to be super humans without sin or defect. But even the best man falls short of God's glory.

Many church leaders foster the Levitical priesthood matrix because they want to be in control of the people. Wielding

words like ‘covering’, ‘submission’, and ‘accountability’, they try to keep the masses in line and the money pouring into the treasury. Yet, the Levitical priesthood matrix leaves people locked in chains. Most people in these types of churches never grow because their faith has no roots of its own. They only receive a minimal amount of food each week.

The enemy wins when people are constrained in the Levitical priesthood. The law cannot save. Salvation exists through Christ alone. Many have stayed weak in their faith because they have not understood the basic truths of the new priesthood.

The Lord will hold the leaders accountable. Those who encourage dependence on men and devotion to rules without a relationship are bringing wrath upon themselves. The Lord will hold the shepherds accountable for the sheep. Pride and fear can take away the love that only Christ can give.

DID CHRIST CALL US TO BE FLESH EATERS?

Jesus had a knack for saying what people did not want to hear. Consider Jesus’ discussion on the bread of life in John 6:25-66. Crowds followed Jesus after they literally tasted a miracle — the feeding of the 5,000. Jesus attempted to turn their focus from physical to spiritual bread. He claimed to be the bread of life that came down from heaven to give eternal life. The people scoffed and asked, “Is this not Jesus, the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know?” They doubted and questioned Jesus’ claim. He explained even further His role in providing the sustenance of eternal life. Jesus said, “I tell you the truth, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you.”

Notice how the crowds reacted. They asked, “This is a hard teaching. Who can accept it?” Some questioned, “How can this man give us his flesh to eat?” It is unclear if the references to physically eating Jesus’ flesh were made in jest

or if they truly did not understand the point Jesus tried to make. Regardless, Jesus' teaching did not fit into their preconceived ideas. Thus, many disciples turned back and no longer followed Jesus.

This teaching even caused Jesus' closest disciples to grumble among themselves. Jesus asked, "Does this offend you?" He recognized that this teaching contradicted everything they had been taught by the religious leaders. Indeed, they believed Jesus would rise up, seize control and become an earthly king. They did not understand the extreme suffering awaiting Jesus. He referred to His death on the cross, which brought atonement for the sins of the world.

**It appears that the natural impulse of man
is to reject the very nature
and purpose of God.**

**We love the Lord when He fills our bellies
or heals our sickness. But we run away
when He calls us
to die and drink His cup.**

Can you really share in Christ's life if you don't experience His death? Indeed, the very thoughts of God are foreign to man. Jesus tried to explain His atonement in a way the people would understand, but they could not get beyond their matrix. This story illustrates how the ways of God cannot be mentally reasoned. But they must be spiritually discerned as revealed by the Holy Spirit. Are you walking around in disbelief? What has the Lord been trying to show you that you have rejected? Believe in the Word of the Lord for He has called you to live a whole new life by experiencing His life and death.

THE COMPLACENCY TRAP

One of the greatest challenges facing the Church today has been a snare for mankind throughout the generations. It snagged the Israelites during Amos' day and attempts to snare many Christians today. The snare is the complacency trap where prosperity and blessing leads to laziness and unfaithfulness.

The children of Israel during the time of the prophet Amos thought they could do whatever they wanted because they were God's chosen people. They did not think that God would destroy them. They did not understand God's justice. They gave sacrifices yet did not repent. They sang songs of praise and lived unto themselves.

As a result, God sent disaster upon the Israelites, and they did not turn back to Him. God struck their economic and military might. God desires repentance. He said, "Seek Me and live." Yet, many reveled in their sin. Only a remnant held faithful to God. Most became complacent. They hoarded wealth and oppressed the poor. They actually longed for the judgment day because they thought that they would be spared. But God said that He would pass judgment on them. He denounced their 'religious feasts' and called their singing 'noise.'

The story of Amaziah, the priest of Bethel, shows how even the religious leaders turned away from the truth. They rejected the words of the prophet Amos. They preached a false message of security. Many churches today suffer from the same problem.

**Leaders trying to court favor
with men instead
of serve God
have lulled people into complacency.**

Many preach what the congregation wants to hear, not what they need to hear.

God, please forgive me for being selfish, complacent, lazy and foolish. Create in me a heart that desires to be with You and serve You. May false teachers no longer lead me astray. May I listen to the voice of Your true servants - those crying out in the wilderness. Forgive me for following the ways of the godless. May I be more like Christ and less like the world.

INVASION OF THE TIME SNATCHERS

One day, I woke up, wiped the sleep out of my eyes and gazed at the calendar in shock. The year 2002 jumped out like a bright neon sign. Where had the time gone? I remembered Y2K like it was yesterday. Suddenly, my mortality slapped me in the face. Unlike a car, we cannot slide under the hood and turn back the odometer. Time keeps marching on regardless of what we want.

If you are not careful, you could wake up some day and realize that you have wasted years of your life. No matter how wealthy, powerful, beautiful or smart you are, you can never add more time to the day or days to the year. Stop and consider your schedule. What do you spend most of your time doing? Are you a slave to your work? Do you feel like a chauffeur service for your kids? When was the last time you hung out with Jesus one-on-one? You can't remember? Stop right now and ask the Lord to reveal the time snatchers in your life. Confess your faults to the Lord and ask for His forgiveness. Lay your day planner at the Lord's feet and surrender all of your time to the King.

Are you weary and tired? The psalmsist wrote, "This is the day the Lord has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it" (Psalm 118:24). The Lord gives us breath each day. He numbers our days and calls us to seek first His kingdom. Time

snatchers can be things that appear innocent such as ministry, work, relationships, entertainment, home improvement projects, etc.

**Like a friend once asked me,
“Chaille, are you busy
doing nothing?”**

I am reminded of Luke 10:38-42 where Jesus visited Martha and Mary. Martha spent her time in the kitchen preparing meals and cleaning. According to the Bible, Martha was “distracted by all the preparations that had to be made.” Meanwhile, her sister Mary sat near Jesus listening to His every word. Martha asked Jesus to force her sister to help her. He responded by saying, “You are worried and upset about many things, but only one thing is needed. Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken from her.”

Wow! Jesus just slammed the door on busyness. Mary pursued a deeper relationship with Jesus while Martha tried to shoulder the burden herself. Notice that the cares of the world distracted Martha from what should have been her top priority. Martha just felt like she had to do these certain things first. Then, she would come and commune with Jesus. Have you ever felt the same way? I know I sure have.

This story should not be taken out of context to justify inaction when the Lord calls you to serve. Instead, Jesus identified Himself as the starting point and source for ministry. Communion with the Lord must never be ignored in order to serve or minister. The first requirement is to love Jesus, and He promised to never forsake us.

Jesus said, “Apart from me you can do nothing” (John 15:5).

**We can labor all day long
and do nothing
of eternal value
apart from God's blessing and power.**

Can we really change the heart of a man? No! Meaningful ministry must flow out of Jesus. Paul further explained the centrality of Christ to our every breath. According to Colossians 3:3-4, "For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God. When Christ, who is your life, appears, then you also will appear with him in glory." Paul basically claimed that we are invisible. When people look at us, all they should see is Jesus. How can this be if we spend our time doing instead of being with Him. In order to resemble Jesus, we must abide in His presence.

It can be easy to fall into the same trap that caught Martha. It happens everyday to well-meaning Christians. Churches are full of the walking wounded. Take for example Bill and Tammy Distracted. Both work full-time jobs to pay a huge mortgage. Between sports and homework, three kids take up the rest of the time. Oh, did I forget to mention that both Bill and Tammy spend four hours per week serving in various ministries at their church fellowship? They have no time to talk except for one hour per night when the kids are in bed. Their devotional/prayer life is virtually non-existent. Most of their weekly Word comes from the Sunday morning message. Bill and Tammy feel burdened and burnt out most of the time. They keep hearing about the joy of the Lord. But they do not experience it on a daily basis. Once or twice per month, they lose themselves in God's presence at a praise and worship service. Bill and Tammy accept their reality as the typical Christian life even though they are rotting on the vine.

Does this sound familiar? If so, you need to take a lesson from Mary. Start at the proper power source — Jesus. Then the Lord will take care of everything else. Consider temporarily stepping down from ministry activities. Try to figure out a way to live on less and reduce the amount of overtime at work. Reduce the amount of activities on the calendar. Your children may be way too busy just like you. Consider establishing a specific weekly times for prayer and Bible study as a family. As you rearrange your schedule to fit God’s plan, you will begin to discover the joy Mary experienced at the feet of Jesus.

COLORS

What would be your first reaction if you saw a picture depicting Jesus as a black man? Would you feel uncomfortable? Would you challenge the historical veracity of the image?

Stop and think for a moment, ‘What color is God?’

Racial barriers have become much more evident to me as I have started to hang out with more African Americans. While eating dinner with my good friend Pastor Don Coleman, I inquired about the attraction Islam has for black males. Giving me a peek into the African American psyche, Don responded, “Black males do not want to serve a white God. Islam is more attractive to them than Christianity because they think Allah is the god of dark skinned people.” He asked me, “When you see a painting of Jesus, usually what color skin does he have?” The answer — white.

I inquired even further, “Don’t they realize that God does not have a body as we know it?” Don pointed out that most people do not go beyond the surface. Regardless of your race or background, most people accept the prevailing bias established in the culture and use it as a basis for making their decisions. The devil does all that he can to fuel these lies. Don said that black Muslims accuse black Christians of selling out to the white man. The mere existence of the race

issue when it comes to God shows how far Christians are from the mind of God.

“For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways,” declares the Lord. “As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts” (Isaiah 55:8&9).

**God looks at
the world differently
than men do. Men see color,
nationality, position, and wealth.
God weighs the
worth of a person
by the heart.**

Even in the Church, division has sprung up, especially color barriers. But this is nothing new. The early Church dealt with the same issue. At first, the Jews did not want to let Gentiles join their exclusive club. The scene at Cornelius’ house in Acts chapter 10 demonstrates how God works. Much to the surprise of the Jews, the Holy Spirit came on the Gentiles, and they spoke in tongues and praised God. Hearing about Cornelius’ receiving a message from God, Peter said, “I now realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism but accepts men from every nation who fear him and do what is right” (Acts 10:34-35).

Even the original apostles had to overcome prejudices and deep-seated biases, so are we immune today? Religion then, as today, created artificial barriers. According to the Jewish law, Jews were not allowed to associate or visit with Gentiles. Peter and the other apostles clung to the old way of doing things (the law) while trying to spread the good news

about the new and living way. Had God not spoken to Peter in a vision and then sent him to Cornelius' house, he may have continued to treat Gentiles as second class citizens. The Spirit broke through and showed the early church leaders that simply being a Jew and following the law meant nothing. As Jesus pointed out during His earthly ministry, God can raise up a descendant of Abraham from rocks if He wants. God does not desire ritual or even sacrifice. God wants to know people from every tribe, nation and tongue.

Just like the early Church, Christians today must push past their prejudices and love those who are different from them. Even when the world reacts along lines of racial and ethnic prejudice, we must reply with the love of Christ. The world will not break free from the bondage of prejudice until Christians model the new and living way.

COUNTERFEIT CULTURE

Lies are the devil's primary weapon against the world and the Church. Satan tries to take the things of God and counterfeit them. The things of God satisfy our needs while the devil's counterfeits feed the lusts of the flesh. The Lord's provision leads us to enter eternal life, holiness and true joy. The devil's fare ends in death and corruption. Take being filled with the Holy Spirit — the devil offers alcohol as a substitute to drown sorrows away. After the buzz wears off, a drinker must endure a hangover and a deeper sense of depression. Each drink leads further down the road to destruction. Contrast this with the blessing of being overcome by the Holy Spirit. There's no contest. The devil loses out every time.

Yet many Christians settle for the devil's counterfeits when the Lord wants us to receive His choice blessings. From drugs and entertainment to wealth, material possessions and relationships, we drink the sand when the Lord holds out His living water. Counterfeits are designed to resemble

the original, yet they lack the essential qualities of the genuine article.

**People today are so apt to feed
their momentary impulses
that they never stop to inspect
the genuineness
of what they consume.**

This dangerous mindset has even tainted Christians. Many local churches are caught up in counterfeit religion focusing on everything but the Lord. From debating fine points of doctrine to constructing massive monuments to performing the latest flashy musical, Jesus gets relegated to a minority focus. Paul warned the early church in II Timothy 3:1,2a,5, “There will be terrible times in these last days. People will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money...having a form of godliness but denying its power.” Does this sound like many churches today? The décor appeals to the senses. The music entertains the masses. The sermon empowers us to live another week relying on cheap grace. Programs keep everyone in the family happy and entertained. Where is the focus on God? Where is the fire from on high? We have wasted our efforts on counterfeits while the enemy sits back and smiles.

The Lord wants to give you the real thing. It all starts with surrendering everything to God and asking the Spirit to reveal God’s heart to you.

If you want to experience the real thing in your life, pray this model prayer based on Ephesians 1: 17-23.

Lord, give me the Spirit of wisdom and revelation to know You better. Help me see with Your eyes that I may know Your heart. Enlighten me by Your Spirit so that I may know the

hope to which you called me. I reject the counterfeits offered by the devil. Reveal to me the riches of the glorious inheritance awaiting me as Your child.

Thank You for Your mighty power. It enables me to believe Your promises and receive the choice fare offered through Your sacrifice. Your mighty strength works in me completing the good work You started on the cross. Jesus, You are seated at the right hand of God ruling over all both in this age and the age to come. In You is the fullness of life, and You fill everything in every way. Crush me, fill me, mold me!

TEARING DOWN THE WALLS

I always love it when people ask me where I go to church. The question itself exposes a faulty premise. The church is not a place or building. Actually, the church is primarily spiritual not physical. It is both singular and plural at the same time. The Church transcends borders, denominations and culture.

Instead of asking where someone goes to church, get to the heart of the matter. Ask, ‘With whom do you fellowship?’ At its base, the Church is founded on relationships with other Christians and, most importantly, deep communion with Jesus Christ.

Many people mistake the Church for a building or particular fellowship of believers. In truth, it is the body of Christ consisting of all true believers everywhere from the resurrection of Christ to the rapture. I am the Church. If you are a Christian, you are the Church. Paul described the Church in 1 Corinthians 12 as ‘one body.’ Universally connected with each other through Christ’s blood, each part belongs to the others.

**The Church, based on Christ,
exists with no division.
All true Christians are one in spirit.**

An outsider might ask, “If this is true, why are there so many denominations?” Good question. Paul goes on to write, “Now the body is not made up of one part but of many...If the whole body were an eye, where would the sense of hearing be?...But in fact God has arranged the parts of the body, every one of them, just as he wanted them to be” (I Corinthians 12:14,17,18) The existence of many different types of people in the Church should not surprise anybody. God created each person to be different, and people tend to naturally flock to those of like mind and personality. Denominations sprung up as like-minded people joined together to study the Bible, worship and serve. There is nothing necessarily wrong with being involved in a denominational church.

The problem comes when groups or individuals try to detach from the Church. Paul wrote, “There should be no division in the body, but that its parts should have equal concern for each other” (I Corinthians 12:25). Artificial barriers of judgment and spiritual pride cause a crack in the wall. This gives room for the devil to work. When Christians begin to look down on others, they violate God’s design. There should be no spirit of competition between local church fellowships. Instead, the Lord calls churches to work together to build the kingdom of God.

I am involved in both a big denominational church and a home church. And I have seen a tension between them at times. In the past, I have heard leaders in denominational churches warn about the dangers of home churches. They say that home churches lack spiritual accountability and are sometimes led by crackpots and heretics. On the other hand,

I have also seen a judgmental attitude toward the institutional church and denominations among avid boosters of home churches. It's time for a spiritually reality check. They are both the Church as long as they hold to Christ. There are people going to hell and heaven in both the institutional church and home churches. There are dangers in both. Why can't we root for each other? The question is not why are there differences but why have we allowed superficial differences to create division? When we start name-calling, we act like a bunch of spoiled children. God desires unity, not grand-standing.

One of the best showings of solidarity I have ever experienced in the body of Christ happened in college. A group of students at the University of Missouri — Columbia met to pray for awakening and revival on campus. Christians from a wide variety of campus ministries joined forces to fellowship together as the body of Christ. Catholics, Baptists, Methodists, Pentecostals, Presbyterians, and independents set aside their differences to unite in prayer. Completely student led, the committee behind the weekend events decided on the name SPARC — Students Praying for Awakening and Rival on Campus. SPARC started with a prayer walk around the campus. In shifts students marched around the campus seven times praying for various needs. The entire weekend culminated in an incredible praise and worship service. SPARC captured the essence of what the Church is all about. In reality, there are no Catholics, Baptists, Pentecostals, Methodists or Presbyterians. There are only Christians.

Father, forgive Your children for acting like a bunch of brats. Forgive me for judging others just because they worship or 'do church' a bit differently. Fill me with Your love for others, especially my brothers and sisters in Christ. Help me to see beyond the matrix of the physical world to the reality of the

spirit world. I am the Church. Jesus, You are the head. Show me how to encourage others in the body. I want to do the things that You do. Unite Your people from every tribe, nation and tongue. Be glorified in Your Church. Amen!



ASSURANCE IN THE MIDST OF UNCERTAINTY



THE DAY THE COUNTRY FELL DOWN (SEPT 11, 2001)

Today, the United States was rocked by terrorism. By the end of the day, thousands were dead and two of the country's most notable structures were either damaged or destroyed. I stood in shock as I watched on TV while the World Trade Center collapsed right before my eyes. Some speculate that this terrorist attack will forever change our country. But I don't know. Sure those who lost loved ones will always bear the scars. But will America settle back into its routine within a few months? Will we continue to quickly hustle through the day missing life in the process? Sometimes we need moments that will cause us to slow down and fall to our knees.

**Has God allowed
this attack to wake up America?
America — the great giant —
sleeps firmly in the slumber
of success and pleasure.**

We have strayed so far from the Lord. Our hearts are full of self with no room for God or others. We slaughter the

helpless (unborn) everyday in the name of convenience. Even among the 'religious' people of the day, we desecrate the Lord's name with our selfish focus and our lifeless worship. We desire the blessings without following the Lord in obedience. We sing songs of praise and adoration while our hearts are far from God.

Jesus, restore America. Call us back to Your loving arms. May we hear Your call and find refuge in You, not in our economy or safe borders. As people look for answers, may they find them at the cross. We are a blessed people. We have wasted Your precious gifts. May we no longer wallow in our sin. Thank You for Your grace. My heart leaps with joy, for Your love has been made perfect in our weakness. As I cling to the cross, You are glorified. Let me stop and seek you. Jesus! Jesus! Jesus! Only You can save. Awaken me to the truth! Awaken America to the truth!

BUT I DON'T WANT TO GO TO NINEVAH!

The sluggish economy has hit the entire publishing industry very hard, including my family's business. We are blessed to be doing as well as we have been. Yet, our new publishing ventures, which fall directly under my authority, have struggled. My ego has taken a beating, and my toil has produced little tangible benefit. We closed down one magazine at the end of 2001. We have had to scratch plans to take over a second industrial publication. And we have to publish six instead of nine issues this year of the new magazine.

By most business analysis, I would be considered a big publishing failure. True, we are in one of the worst ad economies in the history of publishing. But these problems, failures and losses have crushed my confidence. I have found myself asking if I am suffering due to disobedience to God's direction. Am I out of God's will? Am I like Jonah, running

away from God's plan? Am I causing the entire ship (the family business) to be put in jeopardy due to my stubbornness? This explanation would in one hand make me feel better about my own abilities, but it would also sadden me because I love my job and the family business.

My good friend Pastor Don has helped me process the myriad of feelings, thoughts and questions flowing through my head. He asked a simple question, "Has God told you to go somewhere else and do something other than your current course?" I thought for a moment and said, "No!" Don then pointed out the obvious. He said that I could not be like Jonah in this case because he disobeyed a direct order from God.

But if I am not Jonah, why is this happening to my family business? Indeed, God has allowed this challenge because He is sovereign. He may be trying to remove my confidence in my abilities and seek Him more. God may be testing my faith in Him to provide. I don't know why. But I hope that I learn the lesson fast so things can return to normal. But what if God is trying to teach me patience and endurance?

Come to think of it, the company may never return to the high level of profitability that it experienced in the late '90s. God may be redefining my idea of what success is. God may be slowing down our growth so I have more time to focus on Him. Testing, trials and uncertainty sure can be tough.

**Although I have given my life to God,
I don't always like
what He allows me to go through.
But is God any less God
in a time of bankruptcy
as a period of financial prosperity?**

Of course not! God deserves praise in the bad times and the good times. The Lord may be testing me to see if I truly

love Him. Or do I only love God when things are going well? What does it mean for things to be going well on this earth when God looks at the world with an eternal perspective? There are so many questions. And I have so few answers. The only thing I know is that God is sovereign. He loves me and will one day give me a great inheritance. All I can do is enjoy his sweet presence, hear his voice and obey.

SCRIPTURE MEDITATION

*“The Lord your God is with you, he is mighty to save. He will take great delight in you, He will quiet you with His love, He will rejoice over you with singing”
(Zephaniah 3:17).*

TO SKI OR NOT TO SKI... THAT IS THE QUESTION.

One of the most burdensome lies entangling Christians today is the idea that our lives are divided into compartments. Some activities are thought to be ‘Christian’ while others are believed to be secular, outside of the care or jurisdiction of God. Although very few ever admit this is how they live, it has become the norm even among some die-hard Christians. Because the carnal mind lacks understanding, we tend to chop life up into little pieces. The major divisions are work, family, religion, play, health, entertainment, education, ministry and self. Frequently, we learn this pattern as a child from our parents or others. Then we simply mimic it in our own lives. Even some mature Christians divide their lives into compartments. But are we tricking ourselves?

I had to face this issue up close after a skiing trip with a few close friends. The next day, I met with Pastor Don. I talked to him about how it was difficult for me to figure out what God wants me to do in certain gray areas where the Bible does not lay out specific direction. Sometimes things are clear. Yet all too often the only thing that I hear is silence. The

Word offers little solace in seeking the proper path because it does not directly cover the specific situation. Is doing this or that a sin? Would God want me to spend my time doing something else? Is this God's will for my life right now? Questions can flood over me like a tsunami.

Pastor Don made a crucial point by asking a series of questions about my trip. He asked, "Why did you go skiing yesterday?" I responded that I love to go skiing. I had the money and the time. Some of my good friends were going. I went and had a good time. He then asked, "Did you pray about the trip before going?" I said, "No, I just went." He asked, "How do you know this was in God's will if you did not ask Him?" I stammered around for about a minute. Finally, I broke down and admitted my shallowness and tendency to do my own thing. My words were something like, "I stink. I am so stupid sometimes; I am so unworthy of God's love. I should have been locked in my room praying all day long instead of skiing. I should have given the money I spent skiing to the poor and not wasted it on my own enjoyment."

My friend kept on asking questions to the point that I was confused and ready to admit it. Pastor Don comforted me. He said that I was getting all worked up about nothing. My friend helped me to see the following — There is nothing in the Bible prohibiting winter sports. I broke no law. I enjoyed the beauty of God's creation. The entire day Jesus had a blast skiing along side me. I even spent some time praying while on the ski lifts and sang worship songs while jetting down the slope.

For years, I have tried to divide my life into Christian and secular activities. But this is a false line of demarcation. As a Christian, Christ lives in me. A true companion, Jesus never leaves me nor forsakes me.

**There are no compartments to life.
Jesus permeates all;
Christ constantly resides in me.**

I am made alive by Christ's blood. Unless the Bible prohibits my activities or the Lord expressly tells me not to do something, I can act in faith without fear or having to look over my shoulder. I am no more a Christian while praying in my room than when I am skiing down the mountain at 30 mph. I do not need to apologize for going skiing. In Christian liberty, I can enjoy God's provision and rest. I am free in Christ. But for some reason, I felt that I had to justify my actions to my mentor and the Lord.

Christ seeks to give us life to the fullest extent possible. Sometimes that means enjoying the slopes on a beautiful day. On other occasions that means sacrificing something for the cause of Christ, maybe even my life.

Lord, help me to walk daily in Your love and to enjoy Your blessings. May my heart be glad and rejoice in all situations. May I moment by moment be guided by Your hand and submit to Your will. I open my ears to hear Your voice. May I enjoy the blessings that You have given me with a free conscience. I am free in You. Tear down the walls constructed in my life; it all belongs to You. May I no longer have Christian or secular activities. I want everything that I do to be done to Your glory. Rend my heart and fill me with Your peace. May I realize Your hand in all situations. For You, who give me life, also call me to die.

YOU ARE THERE

Weighed down by all of life's cares,
I feel alone and have no rest.

Burdened by sin and the fear of others' expectations,
I dare not look up and ask for Your favor.
Despite my wicked past and present, You are there.

With arms opened wide Your Spirit calls me.
You long to hide me in the shadows of Your wings.
I do not understand Your pardon and acceptance;
Yet I cling tight to Your love for that is all I can do.
In the times of repentance, You are there.

As I look into the sky,
I ponder Your amazing love.
The stars declare Your glory;
You are robed in majesty.
I marvel at Your power and am amazed at Your mercy.
In the times of wonder, You are there.

No matter where I go or what I do,
You are there — desiring for me to return.
For Your love extends beyond the highest mountain,
It penetrates the very depth of my soul.
In the dark times and moments of jubilee, You are there.

Your love is like no other;
Only you can make me whole.
At the foot of the cross I find restoration.
Throughout my life, You are there.

HEARING VOICES

We live in a world full of confusion. From Madison Avenue marketing to longstanding religious beliefs to unwritten rules of socially acceptable behavior, the lines of right and wrong have become blurred. The masses suffer from a sea of opinions ranging from those clamoring for no

limitations to legalists demanding order. Everybody has a different idea of what it means to live a happy, successful life. Yet most of these center around satisfying our own cravings and desires.

Even in the Church, it can be difficult to find the right path. A question as basic as, 'Does God ordain one perfect will for each of our lives that is unique to our personality, skills and surroundings,' can bring a swarm of differing opinions. Some proclaim ultimate free will while others point to a sovereign God directing the step of man. Increasingly, I find myself swamped by a glut of talking heads.

Pick almost any issue, and there are plenty of people willing to tell their opinion. What's worse, I read the Bible and get confused. For example, God spent a considerable amount of time in the Old Testament calling His people out of the pagan culture around them. God commanded them to slaughter entire nations in the effort to preserve the righteousness of Israel. Yet in the New Testament, Jesus does the exact opposite by hanging out with known sinners including prostitutes, tax collectors and other despicable 'scum.' The Lord commissions His followers to go into the world and to make disciples. In the New Testament, James wrote, "Don't you know that friendship with the world is hatred toward God? Anyone who chooses to be a friend of the world becomes an enemy of God" (James 4:4). James encouraged the early Church to submit to God and flee from the temptations of the devil. The apostle John carries this even further. He wrote, "Do not love the world or anything in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him" (I John 2:15). Paul mentioned how bad company corrupts good character. He said that the Christians were endangering themselves every day by associating with people advocating false doctrine and a sinful lifestyle.

If Jesus walked the streets of our cities today, He would hang out among the 'sinners' of society. Jesus would be found

in coffee shops, bars and clubs. He would attend private parties with known sinners just like he did in the New Testament. He would be found talking with the homeless and winos in city parks. Jesus was always in the world but not of the world. He knew where to draw the line and how to meet people where they lived. Yet I find this concept difficult to grasp. How can I go to clubs and not sin? What about the lust caused by watching women in tight outfits dance to the beat? What about the allure of alcohol and the tranquility of a light buzz?

**If I must be around non-Christians
to witness to them,
how can I shield my life
from the temptations around me?
In the past,
the world has done
a much better job of influencing me to sin
then I have influencing it for Christ.**

My reaction tends to be to run away from the world. As a result, I have very few non-Christian friends. I find myself clinging to holy safety zones. In doing so, am I putting my light under a basket?

All the while, I know that God generously gives wisdom to those who ask for it in faith. Others are double-minded; the wind and the waves will toss them from here to there. But I will stand steadfast in God's truth. I will dare to take Jesus to the streets. Today, Jesus can be seen through His imprint on the lives of His people. If I try to completely isolate myself from the world, I will end up keeping God all to myself. How does this glorify God and fulfill the Great Commission (Matthew 28:18-20)? It doesn't.

The key to living holy in this world is to hold onto Christ with both hands. Never let go, not even for one second.

Walking in the world will force me to let God have complete control of my life - body, soul and mind. Either this test pushes me closer to Christ or farther away from Him. The Word calls Christians to walk in this world as if we wear a Jesus coat, which protects and insulates us from temptation while revealing the true character of God. Do you live the Great Commission everyday? When you're out in the world, do you wear a Jesus coat? Or do you only put it on for church services? Does the world see the love of Christ in your life?

No matter your past, if you desire to love others as Jesus has loved you, pray the following prayer. Confess your sin and forget it. Cling to the strong arm of God. Let Him work His will through your life. Jesus will do what is impossible for you to do on your own strength.

Father, help me to know Your path. Give me wisdom in reading Your Word and discerning Your way for me. I want to walk in faith as Jesus did. I am confused. I cannot grasp Your ways on my own. I need the Spirit to guide me into all truth. I want Your light to shine through me to all men. Be glorified in my life. Direct me to the lost; those You want me to love and serve. I will go. Equip me for all that I may face. I want to know Your voice and listen to You alone. Thank You for Your steadfast love and mercy. Amen.

A MATTER OF PERSPECTIVE — STRUGGLING WITH PAIN

While visiting a friend's house, I saw a portrait of peace through pain. My friend's father (Wendell) suffers from MS and his condition appears to be getting worse. Able to walk only short distances, Wendell struggles with pain everyday. My friend's house has been designed for wheel chair accessibility. Wendell uses the wheelchair some to get around the house. A once avid outdoor enthusiast and hiker, Wendell

fights daily against a disease attacking his body. Without a miracle, Wendell eventually may be confined to a wheelchair.

But you would never know about Wendell's pain by looking at his face. Beaming with the joy of the Lord, he loves to talk about Jesus, the Church, books, architecture, finance and guns. Wendell never once talked negatively about his condition or the 'raw' deal dealt him by life.

My legs work fine, but I always seem to find some 'reason' to complain. Wendell's peace in the middle of the storm convicted me of how short-sighted my vision tends to be. I don't believe that Wendell has accepted his condition. I am sure that he would rather be healed. Focused on things of eternal significance, Wendell trusts God. He realizes that his present sufferings are nothing compared to glory that awaits him in heaven. He longs for a day when he will receive a new, incorruptible body and be with the Lord face to face.

All too often, I shallowly focus on the here and now. Having never experienced the depth of Wendell's condition, it is hard to relate. Just maybe his sickness is a blessing because it requires him to be more dependent on God. It gives him a unique perspective. Through great trial, he can draw closer to the Lord and look toward His return with a greater expectancy than most.

Father, I long to have Wendell's vision and strength. Help me to see beyond the temporal and have a heavenly perspective. May I praise You in the good and bad times. Longing for Your return, may I trust You in all things. Be glorified in my life. Amen.



EVERYDAY OBSERVATIONS



WHY DO CHRISTIANS WALK AROUND NAKED?

When Jesus was tempted by the devil, He responded not with force but the Word. Jesus countered satan's attacks with the Word of Life. The Bible defeated the prince of the air because it contains truth and the promises of God. The devil lied and even twisted the Scripture to suit his purpose when tempting Christ. Will satan not do the same when attacking us? Scripture indicates that he is like a roaring lion seeking to devour every man.

How can we expect to defeat the devil when we leave our primary weapon at home? We walk around on the enemy's turf as vulnerable as lambs. Paul encouraged the early Christians to put on the full armor of God so that when the devil comes they may be able to stand their ground.

**Our primary weapon is
the Word of God.
But many Christians do not use it
in the daily struggle
with the enemy.
No, they walk around naked.**

Would a soldier run to the battlefield without his weapon? Why do Christians walk around without the Sword of the Lord?

God's Word is different than any other book ever written. The author of Hebrews wrote, "For the word of God is quick, and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the dividing asunder of soul and spirit, and of the joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart" (Hebrews 4:12 - KJV). The Bible is alive and deeply personal. It cuts to the core of the issue and exposes the inner heart. As the very words of God, the Bible reveals to mankind the heart and mind of God. It connects us to God and is a meaningful part of man's relationship with God. The apostle John connects Christ and Scripture even calling Jesus the "Word." Man can only come to the Father through the Son, and we learn about Jesus through the written Word of God as revealed by the Holy Spirit. King David understood the need to know God's Word. He wrote that he hid God's Word in his heart so that he would not sin against God.

Dear father, help me to follow David's example and hide Your Word in my heart. Create a thirst for Your Word. Enable me to commit passages to memory and recall them during the heat of battle. May I thirst for Your living Word and may it be as pleasing to my lips as honey.

ISN'T IT A BIT EARLY FOR CHRISTMAS?

Ask Christians what they think of Halloween and expect to get a bunch of different answers. Some believe it is the devil's holiday; they prohibit their children from going trick-or-treating. Others don't see any harm in kids going house to house to collect candy. Others are pretty much ambivalent about the entire holiday.

Every year on October 31, parents and kids present a wonderful opportunity for the body of Christ to spread the

Gospel. Halloween is the only day of the year that strangers willingly knock on your door wanting to interact with you. By simply attaching Bible verses to candy or dressing children up as Bible characters, a believer could be salt and light to the neighborhood. Which is better — to be secretly self-righteous or to publicly turn what the devil intends for evil into good? I compare the entire Halloween debate to the issue of circumcision for the New Testament believers. The key is the heart behind the action — not whether someone celebrates a holiday. If the Lord intends for a believer to forgo celebrating Halloween, the Spirit will make this known.

I shared these thoughts with a Christian mother at work. She did not plan on letting her kids go trick-or-treating this year. One of her daughters had complained, “That’s not fair. All my friends get to dress up and get candy.” The mother felt trapped. She had always let her daughters participate in previous years. But now, she had a change of heart. She felt it celebrated witches, evil spirits and the devil. Instead of being against Halloween, I encouraged her to be for spreading the Gospel.

**Why do Christians
always rally against something,
not for something?
We can make more of a difference
by focusing on Christ’s love
instead of wagging our fingers
in disgust at the world.**

I suggested that the mother and her children hand out candy with Bible verses on them. As someone came to the door, the greeter could share a Bible verse with the visitor and offer him spiritual candy.

The mother tried this approach combined with taking her

kids later that night to a church harvest festival. The kids had a blast and witnessed to the neighborhood kids too! This was the best Halloween yet. We must remember that in Christ there is liberty. We are not bound by rules established by men, only by what the Spirit imprints on our hearts. Who said that Halloween has to be the devil's holiday? Doesn't every day belong to God? We could carry this thought even farther. Instead of decorating a house with pumpkins and other harvest paraphernalia around the fall time, what if a nativity scene took its place? Talk about salt and light. You would surely make a statement to all your neighbors and bring glory to God. People would ask did Christmas come early this year for you? Then you would have an opportunity to answer.

IS HARRY POTTER EVIL?

Antithesis (www.antithesis.com), a contemporary Christian Web site, carried an article on Harry Potter (HP). The author admired the book series for its prose and ended up declaring the child wizard OK. However, he used little Scripture to defend his position. Instead, he focused on Christian liberty.

In the comment section on the Web site, some posters criticized the author's acceptance of the HP series. Others praised his openness and willingness to give HP a chance. This discussion led me to question many things deemed OK by some Christians.

While Christians are no longer bound by the law, we are called to be led by the Spirit. The Holy Spirit will never grant permission to do something in conflict with the Bible. Problems typically arise with 'grey areas' where the Bible does not give specific prohibitions.

Being led by the Spirit is not necessarily any less strict than following the law. Just consider what Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount where He compared looking at a woman

lustfully to committing the physical act of adultery. Jesus did not raise the bar; He identified the level of holiness God desires for His remnant.

Whether or not someone reads a HP book is up to their own conscience as guided by the Holy Spirit. What may be sin for one person may not be a sin for another person. The big problem is that if we don't have a deep one-on-one relationship with Christ, we may not hear the warnings voiced by the Holy Spirit. Do too many Christians try to make judgments about right and wrong for their lives without really hearing from God?

Before we consume any type of media or as parents allow our children to read or watch something, we must consider the following:

- What is my motive behind the action?
- Does the action glorify God?
- Can I honestly do 'whatever' in faith? Would Jesus disapprove?
- Will this sow a negative seed in my life?

Christians tend to focus on whether or not a particular action is a sin. In this case, you can line up Christians on either side of the issue. Some praise HP for encouraging growth in reading among students. They dismiss it as just fantasy. Others believe HP glorifies white magic and opens a doorway to the demonic realm. They view HP as a counterfeit to the real power and truth revealed in the Bible.

Where does Christian liberty end and holiness begin?

Each person is at different stage of maturity in his walk with God. Can we really expect the same level of maturity from a babe in Christ as a seasoned adult? We should understand where others are and love them to the next level of their walk. As people mature, they go from thinking about what following God will cost them to what they can sacrifice to honor and draw closer to God.

The real heart of the issue appears to be the attraction of

kids to the things of the world compared to the things of God. The HP debate shows how self-focused and worldly Christians have become.

We only have a limited amount of time on this earth. Yet Christians frequently trade lasting treasure in heaven for temporary pleasure on earth.

Many ‘church’ kids would rather read HP or dinosaur books than the Bible. We should be asking ourselves why.

THE FORGOTTEN MAN

There are many mighty warriors, powerful prophets and dedicated servants either mentioned or described in detail in the Bible. There are also examples of tyrants, prideful sinners and self-righteous religious leaders. I have wondered how God decided who made the cut. What did the Lord leave out and why? We know that God knows all and could have included much more. If the canonized Scripture had extended to the present, who would be mentioned? Would I make the pages of the Living Word?

Will my life be forgotten when I am gone?

Will I leave an imprint on the lives of many that I have known?

These questions have prompted me to create a fictional character named Jaurus. You will never find him mentioned in the Bible. Here is Jaurus’ story:

Jaurus lived during the day of Jesus’ earthly ministry. A fairly good man by the world’s standards, Jaurus obeyed as

much of the law as he could. He paid the required tithes and temple taxes. Jaurus dealt honestly with people and treated strangers with kindness. Jaurus heard Jesus speak on many occasions. But he always kept his distance from the crowds, choosing to listen from afar. Part of him desired to approach Jesus, but he could not get beyond his doubts. Many respected religious leaders called Jesus a troublemaker. Others went even further, accusing Jesus of being the devil himself. After all, Jesus consorted with the dregs of society including tax collectors, prostitutes and other known sinners. Yet, Jesus healed the multitudes, drove out evil spirits and spoke with authority not of this world. Jaurus could not figure out what to believe. In secret, the religious leaders were threatening to throw Jesus' followers out of the temple. How could God send such a dividing figure to be His messenger let alone the Messiah? Who should Jaurus believe?

One day Jesus walked through the streets of Jaurus' town. While talking to the crowd, He looked right at Jaurus. With an intense love, He peered right into Jaurus' soul as he talked about receiving the living water. Guilt and shame forced Jaurus to look away. Jaurus faced a decision to follow Christ or to run away. Weighed down by his sin and the cares of this world, he chose to run. Leaving his spot on the city wall, he ran out of the city toward the hills. Like a man being chased by a vicious animal, Jaurus ran as fast as his legs would carry him. Suddenly, Jaurus stopped to catch his breath. He realized the truth yet refused to accept it. He could not face Jesus. Jaurus knew the religious people were wrong about Jesus. But he could not accept Jesus' teachings. Jaurus lived the rest of his life trying to obey the law and died in his sin. Lacking faith, Jaurus tried to make it to heaven on his own. But he failed.

On the same day as Jaurus' personal encounter with Christ, a tax collector named Zacchaeus had a different experience. Jesus called to Zacchaeus and asked to stay at his house. As a

tax collector, Zacchaeus made tons of money by charging others more taxes than they really owed the government. Convicted by Jesus' teaching, Zacchaeus gave half of his money to the poor and made restitution to those he had overcharged. Jesus said, "Today salvation has come to this house, because this man too is a son of Abraham" (Luke 19:9).

Many criticized Jesus because he dined and stayed with a tax collector, the scum of society. Yet Zacchaeus, a wicked man, made the cut, appearing in Scripture and received forgiveness and salvation. The people in Jericho would have easily understood Jesus staying with a man as respected as Jaurus. Why did Jaurus not make the cut? He lacked faith and did not welcome Jesus. In the same way, each man is judged not according to his sin or his works but his acceptance of Christ. God included what He wanted in Scripture to convey the main theme of reconciliation. If I want my life to be worth writing about, I must accept Jesus, repent and walk in a relationship with Him. No matter how someone tries to keep the law on his own, he will only end up like Jaurus if he do not hold firmly to Christ.

CHURCH SHOPPING

When Christians move to a new city, one of the first things they tend to look for is a 'good' church. What makes a good church? Is it lively worship, dynamic children's ministry, nice facilities, a large congregation or charismatic pastors? How many people does it require to have a "good" church?

Most people ask friends or look around for churches in a particular denomination. They tend to treat looking for a new church home just like shopping for a new car. They visit a bunch of places, test drive the ministers and make a selection based on what appears to be the perfect fit. Having tried this method through the years, I have visited my share of churches. However, the consumer-based method to church hunting does

not work. Oh, yeah, I can locate a neat church with all the bells and whistles.

**But finding the right church home
requires something more
than a diligent search —
prayer must be the focus.**

Well, what exactly should I pray? To answer this question you must first explore why you ‘go to church’ in the first place. Many Christians go because they have always gone to a Sunday service. Others attend a church out of obedience to Christ or to satisfy desires for social interaction. Others mention the programs or the Bible teaching as a key to their spiritual growth. There is nothing wrong with any of this. Yet these are not the main reason to be part of a local church fellowship. As a matter of fact, the Bible never requires Christians to attend a Sunday morning service or to join a particular institutional church. Instead, the author of Hebrews wrote that Christians should not forsake the assembly of believers. Most of the gatherings during the early Church occurred in homes not designated church buildings. Don’t be surprised if God leads you to someone’s home, not a building with a steeple on top when you seek Him about finding a healthy church fellowship. Of course, there are many fine large churches as well. I am not picking sides in the home church versus large church debate. It’s all part of the Church; there is no division in the body.

All I want to do is encourage you to be open to wherever the Lord leads you. God may surprise you — big time. The Lord knows what you need and will supply it if you will only follow His direction. God calls us to assemble with other believers to mutually edify one another. We can do this corporately through prayer, teaching and worship. But the

focal point remains one-on-one relationships with other individuals and families in the Church. You could go every Sunday to a particular church service and still be missing out if you never develop lasting relationships there. Do you sit in the back and dart out of the building as soon as the last prayer is finished? Can you pick up the phone tonight and talk with a cherished brother or sister about your problems, pain and fear?

Your prayer should focus on finding true community with fellow believers, not a fiery preacher or a church with a ton of programs. If you are currently hunting for a new church home, seek God through prayer. Ask Him to bring other Christians into your life; God will respond as you step out in faith.

THE FORGOTTEN CHURCH

Ask most Christians about their local church, and you'll receive a variety of responses. Many will describe the pastor, the facility or the size of the congregation. Others will talk about close friends or activities at the church. Yet most would never really think to lump their family in as an integral part of their local church. The family has become the forgotten church in America.

The family is the first responsibility of parents, not serving others in the Church. Do you regularly get together as a family to study the Bible, pray and worship? Do you model the Church in your home? If the answer is no, you should consider setting aside one night during the week to seek God as a family. Make it fun and genuine. Your children should be given a chance to actively participate. If you encourage interaction, you may be surprised how much your family grows through the process. Remember — the Church starts at home.

“Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength. These commandments that I give you today are to be upon your hearts. Impress

them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you lie down and when you get up...Write them on the doorframes of your houses and on your gates”(Deuteronomy 6:5-7, 9).

FILLING IN THE BLANKS

Have you ever wondered why the Lord designed the Bible the way that He did? God could have given us the Cliff notes version of His Word. But instead, I frequently feel like I am reading the Encyclopedia Britannica.

At least, the encyclopedia is in alphabetical order. The Bible is for the most part arranged in chronological order although there are some exceptions, such as the book of Job.

Chapters tend to jump from one concept to another with little or no transition, especially in the New Testament. The Bible is not a self-help book full of how-to formulas and easy-to-understand plans. If you are struggling with pain or how to raise your kids, there are no easy-to-find categories on such topics. Although God does provide in the Bible principles and guidance on the issues we deal with in our every day lives, we may have to dig to find it.

**God divinely ordered His Word.
Its design forces us to rely on
the Holy Spirit for direction.**

The Lord does not want us to allow His Word to become a stumbling block to our relationship with Him. What if everything you need to know about every decision in your life was described in detail in one book? Would you ever need to pray? Would you go off and build your own Tower of Babel?

The Bible stands unique among all literature. God Himself breathed the words into being by inspiring His servants, prophets and apostles. The very words of the Bible are part

of God. In fact, the apostle John calls Jesus the Word. The Bible cannot be fully understood apart from God because the words themselves are spiritual, not physical, in nature. The Bible is alive. It meets each person where he is. According to Hebrews 4:12 (KJV), “For the word of God is quick, and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the dividing asunder of soul and spirit, and of the joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart.”

When you pick up and read the Bible, you are delving into the heart of God. The Bible is God’s love letter to His children. Only the Bible contains the complete inspired truth of God. All other books are a poor substitute for the real thing. Yet the Bible can be misused and misunderstood apart from the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Just read what the Bible has to say about understanding the mysteries of God.

“The Spirit searches all things, even the deep things of God. For who among men knows the thoughts of a man except the man’s spirit within him? In the same way no one knows the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God. We have not received the spirit of the world but the Spirit who is from God, that we may understand what God has freely given us. This is what we speak, not in words taught us by human wisdom but in words taught by the Spirit, expressing spiritual truths in spiritual words. The man without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually discerned” (I Corinthians 2:10-15).



WALKING IN THE NEW REALITY



DOING GREATER THINGS THAN JESUS DID

One day while jogging on a treadmill, I read some Scripture that perplexed me. Jesus was preparing His disciples before His crucifixion and ascension to the Father. Jesus told them that they would do greater things than He did because He would be returning to heaven. Then Jesus told them that whatever they ask in His name will be done.

**From driving out demons
to healing to other miracles,
Jesus gave His followers authority
to accomplish the purposes of the Father.
If this is really true,
why do many modern churches treat such
miracles as Christian folklore?**

Some consider such manifestations of God's power as something that happened a long time ago but does not occur today. Do I really believe in the power of Jesus' name?

Now, there are some conditions to Jesus' promise. Whatever I ask must be in His name. The request must be in keeping with Jesus' Spirit. It would have to be a request He

would have made to the Father while He walked the earth. I must believe in the power and authority of Jesus. The request must bring glory to the Father. God must receive the credit not man.

Jesus did not make this claim about the power of prayer only once. He continued to repeat His desire for His people to be powerful prayer warriors.

Dear Lord, please forgive me for doubting Your power. I seldom call on Your name. I try to do it myself. May I lean on Your strength and call on Your name more. May my prayers follow Your Spirit and bring glory to the Father. Teach me how to pray and how to tap into Your power to accomplish Your perfect purpose.

NEW CREATION

According to the Word, those who are in Christ are a new creation; the old has gone away, the new has come. I have been struggling with trying to figure out the differences between the pre-Christ and post-Christ versions of me. Has Christ really made a difference?

Here is a BEFORE and AFTER picture of what Christ can do.

<u>Old</u>	<u>New</u>
Death.....	Life
Selfishness	Christ Focus
Hate.....	Love
Bondage	Freedom
Condemnation.....	Grace
Led By Sinful Nature.....	Led By Spirit
Corrupt.....	Holy
Fear	Hope

WOW! What a DIFFERENCE CHRIST can make. I do not always walk according to the new reality of Christ's work in me. Every day I fall prey to the sinful nature. But I am no longer defined by sin; God sees me through Christ's work on the cross. According to Romans 12:2, believers should not conform to the pattern of this world. Instead, God's people must be transformed by the renewing of our minds. The pattern of this world is described above under the old column. What a horrible list!

Thank you Jesus for setting me free from the law of sin and death. Our mind are renewed by the work of Christ in our lives. As we spend time with the Lord, he takes the old and deposits the new inside us. Christ's sacrifice has revived and quickened my spirit. I can commune with the Lord in a new and living way. While in sin, my spirit was dead. But by Christ's blood my spirit lives, and the Spirit of God lives inside of me. The Creator of the universe could have picked any place to live, and He chose the hearts of His people.

DON'T WASTE TIME TRYING NOT TO SIN, INSTEAD FOCUS ON CHRIST!

After years of being a professional backslider, a spiritual mentor recently gave me sound advice on how to deal with habitual sin. He outlined the root of the problem. And it was not what I expected to hear. It had nothing to do with my lack of discipline or my surroundings. I could not blame my sin on past trauma or generational curses. My sin problem resulted from a Jesus deficit. I was trying to be holy on my own so that I could be close to Christ. But only at the foot of the cross, abiding in the sweet presence of the Lord, can I be set free. Despite all of my religious head knowledge, grace must have been the furthest thing from my mind.

As I start to spend more time with Christ, he renews my mind and kills my flesh. It all comes down to a classic

showdown. On one side the flesh stands against God; it desires to sin and seek pleasure. Flesh cannot be tamed. It must be killed. Unfortunately, it keeps on coming back to life. The Lord must put flesh to death every day. On the other side of the battle is the Holy Spirit. This is God's Spirit living inside the believer, and it desires to please God and transform the believer. The evidence of the Spirit winning the battle is the development of Christ-like qualities called the Fruit of the Spirit.

When temptation comes, sometimes the only remedy is to flee from the devil and run to Christ. Then the Lord can wash me and renew my mind through the power of the Holy Spirit. Christians must not let sin separate them from God. Instead, repent and turn to God. The enemy wants to use sin to keep Christians from communion with God. The devil will try to convince us that God does not love us because of our sin. He will try to deceive us into believing that we are the 'flesh' man. But in reality, we are a new creation. We are a spirit man, and we are no longer identified by our sin. We are sons of God by Christ's blood.

THE FAST & THE FURIOUS

Having just finished watching the movie *The Fast & The Furious*, I am still on an adrenaline rush. Or maybe I'm feeling adrenaline envy because I have never driven a car 120 mph. Regardless, when I look at my life compared to those of the characters in the movie, I live a dull existence. To quote a line from a different movie, "All men die; some men never truly live!" Too often this statement describes my life and the lives of millions on the planet.

A big reason why so many people love movies is because they can detach from their real-life problems and live in a make-believe world for two hours.

**Most people in modern America
live artificial,
pre-packaged lives.
Entertainment, food, and shopping
are the opiate of the masses.**

Unfortunately, Christians are almost indistinguishable from the world when it comes to materialism and seeking constant entertainment. We like to veg out as much as the next couch potato.

Most people today, including many Christians, don't know what it means to truly live. We have the wrong standards and seek fulfillment in the wrong places. We live ordinary lives because that is what everyone else does. So what does it mean to be alive? If I had one last breath, what would I want to be doing before I die? I could be racing a suped-up car on the streets of Los Angeles. Or I could be climbing Mount Everest. I could win the lottery or hit a game-winning home run.

But none of these will last. I know... my problem is that Christians are supposed to live a boring life. If a person is having too much fun, he must be sinning and will endanger his soul. Wait a minute — it's just that I am not seeing clearly.

**The life of a Christian
can be the most
on-edge existence around
if we plug into the right power source.**

Take Paul for example. His preaching caused riots in many cities and crowds tried to kill him on more than one occasion. In one encounter, a crowd stoned him to the point of death. Yet, he lived. A short while later, he went back to the same

city where the crowd had stoned him to see how the church was doing. That's one tough dude. Paul prayed for people, and God responded through miracles and healing the sick. Paul drove out demons by the power of God.

Or consider Elisha in the Old Testament. A battalion of angels on flaming chariots helped him defeat the Arameans when God struck them blind. Daniel sat in a lions' den without being harmed. Jonah caught a ride in a big fish. Samson brought the house down on the Philistines. Peter escaped from jail just before being executed. By comparison, life today is just plain boring, especially in the industrialized, free world. Is God not willing or capable of showing up in a big way today? I don't get it. Today is the time that the patriarchs and prophets of old dreamed about seeing fulfilled in their lifetime.

Jesus said that with faith the size of a mustard seed, we can move mountains. If I ask for anything in His name, He will do it. I guess that maybe all that I need is a different perspective on my situation. The Spirit of God lives inside of me. I can commune directly with the Creator of the universe. When I make requests, He actually listens and responds. The Creator has given me special gifts to complete His purpose for my life. God's Spirit has imparted to me a spiritual language to draw close to Him. Unlike all those fair-weather friends, God has promised never to leave my side. He has my back and has left me with a guardian angel just to keep watch. I will one day live in heaven with a glorified body at the biggest party in the history of history. And the best part... it's all free.

Wow, I feel a lot better about my situation now. All I have to do is daily walk in the new reality created by God. Then, I can experience real life — the kind that movie stars tend to search for but cannot find on this earth.

THE QUEST FOR THE HOLY GRAIL

One of most frequent statements that I hear from other young Christians is, 'I just wish that I knew God's plan for my life.' Discovering one's call has become the Holy Grail of Christian life. People tend to think that everything else will be fine once they hear God's master plan.

To answer the cry of the confused masses, some churches have embraced 'knowing your spiritual gifts' teaching based on personality tests. It all starts with the idea that God uniquely designs our personalities, gives us talents and abilities, and creates us for a unique purpose. This all makes good sense and lines up with Scripture. Unfortunately, some have taken the gifting theology too far by shifting the focus from God to pop psychology.

**According to this gift-focused theology,
most Christians
flounder around
in a miserable state
because they have never
discovered their gifting
and thus live fruitless lives.**

If we really spend quality time with the Father and desire to please Him, will He let us miss the destiny planned for us? I believe the real reason that many young Christians live unfulfilled lives is that they never realize the joy of a deep relationship with God. Instead, their 'faith' consists of dead religion, works, programs and rituals. They don't recognize the voice of God or obey when the Spirit directs them.

Do our natural abilities limit God's use for us? As I look at heroes in the Bible, many of them stand out as odd choices. Why did God use a man with a speech impediment to lead

the nation of Israel against Pharaoh? Why would Jesus invite a rag-tag bunch of men including fishermen, a tax collector and a political zealot to be the founding fathers of the early Christian Church? They lacked the training and the skill to be ideal candidates. Why did God pick the youngest of Jesse's sons to succeed Saul as king of Israel? Why was the Messiah born to a lowly carpenter and a young, obscure woman? Why did God use a persecutor and murderer of Christians to write volumes of the New Testament?

The Lord uses the foolish things to confound the wise. God's ways are higher than man's ways. His thoughts and understanding far exceed our comprehension. God used fishermen instead of trained religious scholars because they were willing and their lack of credentials brought maximum glory to God. If a person is naturally talented in an area, the world would encourage him to exploit this ability as much as possible. But what happens when a person is so good at something that he does not need God to succeed? As Christians, we can put on a good show under our own power. But our efforts will lack the anointing of the Holy Spirit and will produce nothing of lasting importance without God. In the Gospel of John, Jesus said, "Apart from me, you can do nothing" (John 15:5). Our natural talents and abilities mean little if we act out of our own power and understanding.

When I first took a gift assessment test, I scored far different from my actual calling. I completely misread my own talents and gifting. I discovered that it can be very hard to know oneself, and God knows us better than we know ourselves. While a gift test can be a helpful tool, it should never take the place of the Holy Spirit. Gift tests are only a starting point for your prayer as you ask the Spirit to reveal God's call and gifting. The gift teaching does come with some potential pitfalls. It can lead immature believers down the path of dead works because they try to fulfill their God given purpose without God.

Never let the results of a psychological test or your socio/economic background restrict what you think God can do with your life. Sure, God gave you certain natural talents and personality traits. God wants you to use them for His glory. These skills and characteristics will fuel your primary ministry and calling in life. But that doesn't keep God from calling you to do something completely against your nature. As you mature in your Christian faith, expect for God to keep on pushing you to tackle new challenges and develop new giftings. Although these may not be your primary calling, God will use even your weaknesses in His timing if you will submit to His instruction.

Remember that God will always equip his people to do whatever He calls them to do. This equipping may not be natural talents or personality traits. Instead, the Lord may give you what you need at just the exact moment it is required to accomplish His purpose. As you mature, you may discover that you are good at something you originally had no idea even existed.

**Life is more complex than a personality test.
While some may be called
to primarily use obvious natural talents
to glorify God,
others may be
destined
for a life
far different than what they would expect.**

The journey starts with a heavy dose of prayer and listening to for the voice of the Lord. With God, all things are possible.

CAN YOU DO THAT IN FAITH?

One of the guys at work is a strong Christian. He also happens to be a Green Bay Packers fan. One day I proceeded to taunt him after a rather disappointing loss for the Packers. I made a few sharp comments just to razz him a bit. The co-worker looked up at me with a smile on his face and responded by saying, “Brother, as long as you speak that in faith go ahead.” He looked back down at his computer screen and resumed his work. My mouth dropped to the floor; I walked back to my office like a scolded puppy dog.

Later in the year, I came across this concept again while reading a book on faith. I asked the question, ‘What does faith have to do with my actions?’ And as I delved into the issue I found out that faith should be the basis for everything that I say and do. When dealing with the issue of eating ‘clean’ or ‘unclean’ food, Paul wrote, “But the man who has doubts is condemned if he eats, because his eating is not from faith; and everything that does not come from faith is sin” (Romans 14: 23).

This led me to ask the question, ‘What makes something a sin? Jesus said that is not what a man puts in his body but what comes out of his heart that makes him unclean. Sin can be anything done in rebellion against God. Sin goes beyond the obvious wrong actions such as theft, deceit, adulterly or disobedience. Sin can include ‘good’ works such as giving to the poor, helping a neighbor or saying a kind word to someone. If we have ulterior motives, even kind deeds can turn into big traps. Our motivation and faith makes the differences not the action.

Charles Finney, the famous preacher, once wrote, “Don’t expect to break away from any sin in your unbelief. You may break away from the outward act — you may substitute praying for swearing, reading your Bible for reading unwholesome material, sobriety for drunkenness, honesty for theft, industry for idleness, and anything you please. But

that is, after all, only exchanging one form of sin for another. It is only varying the mode of your warfare.

**“Remember that in unbelief,
whatever your conduct is,
you are in rebellion against God.
Faith would instantly
sanctify your heart,
sanctify all your actions,
and render them, in Christ Jesus,
acceptable to God.**

“Unbelief is your great, heinous, damning sin — against which the heaviest thunderbolts of Jehovah are hurled.”

Next time before you act, stop and ask yourself — Can I do this in faith?

SERVING A SOVEREIGN GOD BRINGS PEACE OF MIND

Mistakes and failures tend to haunt me even amidst a chorus of praise. One negative comment can trump 100 positive ones. Having just finished running a Christian camp, I have had to mentally wade through both positive and negative feedback. Some comments were brought in love. Others were not. Fully aware of my mistakes, I have experienced an emotional roller coaster over the last week. For a while, I soaked in the praise. Then, I focused on the negative feedback and criticism. The criticism kept playing back in my mind. Each time, it grew more severe until I reached a point of complete frustration. I felt like a failure, a big loser. I began to doubt my gifting and calling to minister. Even worse, other Christians helped to fuel this negative spiral by making wounding comments. The devil had a good time

making me feel completely worthless.

Throughout the week friends tried to encourage me and to help me see beyond my current funk. One friend pointed me to II Corinthians 12: 9-10 (KJV). “And he said unto me, My grace is sufficient for thee: for my strength is made perfect in weakness. Most gladly therefore will I rather glory in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me. Therefore I take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in necessities, in persecutions, in distresses for Christ’s sake: for when I am weak, then am I strong.” This passage helped me to once again fall back on grace. God takes the weak things of man and makes them strong to glorify Himself. Another friend put it this way, “God is stronger than my failures.”

While I prayed, the Lord brought to my mind the genealogy of Christ in Matthew 1:1-17. Despite the devil’s best efforts, he was unable to disturb the line of the Messiah. Through times of rebellion, exile in foreign lands, and war, God secured the line of Christ. The Lord kept His promises despite the best efforts of man to mess it up. The Spirit helped me to see how God used imperfect people to play a role in the line of the Messiah. I need not fear making a mistake because I can’t stop God’s plan if I try. Many people skip over the genealogies when reading the Bible. But these records show God’s faithfulness from generation to generation. We can see God’s grand design through the ages and rest in His sovereign arms.

**As I prayed about the line of Christ,
I thought how I fit into the grand scheme.
Down through the ages
God looked to this very point
in time and saw me.**

When Christ hung on the cross, He suffered for me. The genealogy of Christ continues to this very day as more people are added to the family.

In Christ's saving arms, I am free from worry. Should I judge my ministry efforts? Paul said that he does not judge himself. No, I should pray and seek God's correction. If a brother brings a comment in love, then I should listen and seek God's direction. If another person, even a Christian, makes a comment in jest or out of anger, I should dismiss it. The Holy Spirit will guide me and let me know where I need to change. Too much self evaluation leads to negative thoughts and the dungeon of self condemnation.

Consider the following insight that Watchman Nee wrote in *The Spiritual Man* :

“If in God's light we see light, we shall know ourselves without losing our freedom in the Lord. But if all day long, we analyze ourselves, dissecting our thoughts and feelings, it will hinder us from losing ourselves in Christ.”

By God's grace I am free to live, love and serve.

YOU'RE NOT AS SMART AS YOU THINK YOU ARE!

Have you ever noticed how God does some seemingly strange things to display His power and get our attention? Just take a look at some of the stories in the Bible.

God caused a donkey to speak. God made the earth stop rotating on its axis for a day. God asked the prophet Hosea to marry a woman who would end up sleeping around to illustrate Israel's unfaithfulness. A big fish swallowed Jonah and helped him see God's point of view. Jesus healed the multitudes and fed more than 5,000 people with five loaves and two fishes. Peter walked on water. A poisonous viper bit Paul, and he did not die. The disciples prayed for people, and they were healed. Believers spoke in foreign tongues and prophesied as the Spirit came upon them. None of these things can be explained by science. They

are beyond comprehension. Weird manifestations and miracles still happen today. Yet many Christians are quick to suppress the Spirit saying, “I don’t see that as one of the miracles or Spiritual manifestations mentioned in the Bible.”

Some Christians, especially the more conservative thinkers, try to put the Holy Spirit in a box. But who do we think we are to limit God? What if these skeptical scholars were around when Elijah performed some of his amazing miracles? They might have told Elijah, ‘You’re being silly. You can’t feed yourself and two other people through a famine with only a one bowl of flour and one jar of oil.’ Although the miracle may have been a first, Elijah trusted in the power of God. Led by the Spirit, he proceeded in faith. This miracle defies explanation (See 1 Kings 17:9-16). Some might say, ‘Well, that’s in the Old Testament. God no longer works through divine miracles or manifestations any more.’ Oh yeah, who says? The new covenant does not eliminate the need for the supernatural. Many have doubted supernatural experiences because it has never happened to them. Smart, seminary-trained scholars cannot explain it. If something cannot be explained by brilliant men, it must be counterfeit. Right? Consider the words of the apostle:

“For the foolishness of God is wiser than man’s wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than man’s strength. Brothers, think of what you were when you were called; not many were influential; not many were of noble birth. But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. He chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things — and the things that are not — to nullify the things that are, so that no one may boast before him” (I Corinthians 1:25-29).

**The Bible makes it quite clear
that much of what God does
is foolishness to man.
We are kidding ourselves
if we think that we can
completely figure out God.**

He allows us to discover the essentials in the beginning. Then, we learn more day by day as we spend time with the Lord. But we will always remain God's children.

Yeah, some of what I have seen has caused me to feel uncomfortable. I have never been knocked over by the power of the Spirit. I have never experienced 'holy' laughter. I have never heard the audible voice of God. I have never seen a cripple restored to full health right in front of my eyes. But does that mean these things cannot happen to others? Are there some frauds out there trying to raise tons of money and make a name for themselves? Sure, there are those sowing bad seed. Conversely, there are many doing the work of the Lord with the supernatural taking place in their ministries.

By observing God move in bazaar ways, He has shown me that I have a lot to learn. I am no way near as smart as I think I am. But if I have the faith of a child, God can do a lot with me.

DISCIPLESHIP 101

Jesus gave us explicit instructions — “Go and make disciples of all nations.” Oddly, making disciples tends to be one activity that modern Christians and churches have a difficult time doing. Sure, there are plenty of programs and good teaching. But discipleship requires more commitment than many people can muster.

**Discipleship does not fit well
into the modern world of
pre-planned programs and
jam-packed schedules.**

If pastors provided an honest assessment, they would admit that most churches, especially larger ones, struggle to effectively disciple and care for the flock. People can come and go without anybody knowing they are gone. As the Lord has led me to disciple and encourage some younger Christians, I have struggled with the call to make disciples. I have so many questions. And the only answer that I can come up with is to simply love others as Jesus did.

But Jesus lived with His disciples; they were almost always by His side. This is not possible in today's society. Ok, maybe, looking at Paul's relationship with Timothy is more appropriate. Although they spent time together, they lived in different cities most of the time. Paul wrote personal letters encouraging Timothy to strive in areas of weakness. Paul consistently prayed for Timothy and longed to see him. Paul genuinely cared for Timothy. He spoke the truth in love.

Paul never let their relationship focus on either one of them. The focus remained Christ. Paul understood that he was not making a disciple for himself. Timothy was Christ's disciple. Paul simply showed Timothy how to connect with the Lord. Paul modeled through his lifestyle and teaching how to grow in intimacy with Jesus and serve the Church. Don't read this and try to go out and make a disciple on your own. The solo approach never works. The Spirit will do the heavy lifting.

The modern 'Christian' approach to discipleship is to set up a program, class or Bible study. Discipleship is not any of these although discipleship can occur in such settings. Pre-packaged, planned discipleship typically does not work.

Simply being assigned someone to mentor by pulling a name out of a hat lacks a true connection. People must be drawn to each other. In the real world, they have to want to be in relationship with each other. At its core, discipleship revolves around relationships. Younger believers are attracted to a deep, beautiful deposit of Christ in another person. The Lord places a desire to care for and encourage another in the heart of a mature Christian. The Holy Spirit makes a connection. As the two spend time together, the Spirit guides the relationship. Both parties learn from each other.

Do you want to carry out Christ's commission to make disciples? Set your agenda aside. Other Christians should not be treated as a project or a task to check off your list.

**People simply want to be loved
and encouraged.
It all starts with being available.
Pray and ask for the Lord
to bring about opportunities
to disciple others.**

Listen for the voice of God and keep your spiritual eyes open. Then when someone comes along, simply hang out and share your life (in Christ) with them.

STRUGGLING TO FIND A TANGIBLE GOD

Having just returned from an excursion to the Olympic Mountains, I should be flying high. Picturesque scenery surrounded me. From lush rainforests to the tranquil sunset on the banks of the Pacific Ocean, nature shouted God's presence and the genius of His master design.

But, today, I feel more like singing, 'I ain't got no satisfaction.' Maybe, I'm in a spiritual funk. Or maybe I'm

just coming off a mountain top experience (pun intended). Quite simply, I feel like a stepchild accidentally left at the mall parking lot with no way to get home.

My flesh wants to be fed by something tangible. God seems distant and intangible. According to the Bible, man cannot please God without faith.

**The apparent intangible nature of God
seems to be a key reason
why many reject Him.**

**We want something physical,
something we can see and touch.**

By definition faith is being sure of what we cannot see. I can relate with the children of Israel when they made the golden calf in Exodus 32.

The people became impatient waiting for Moses to return. Enticed by their flesh, they pushed Aaron to cast a golden calf. Then, they worshipped the image and engaged in a wide variety of drunken revelry and godless behavior. Why did they even bother making a god? Well, they recognized the need for God. According to Scripture, they wanted “gods to go before them.” The Israelites forgot God’s visible hand and His miracles. Right then, they demand something tangible and settled for a golden calf. The false god provided security and gave silent approval to their sinful behavior. What are the golden calves in my life?

Oh, how I long to see God face to face so this ping pong game of faith and doubt can be over. Yet, I know the receiving of God’s promises comes by faith. The development of faith cannot be side stepped. Abraham received forgiveness for his sin because he believed God, and his faith was credited to him as righteousness. According to Romans, “The words ‘it was credited to him’ were written not for him (Abraham)

alone, but also for us, to whom God will credit righteousness — for us who believe in Him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead” (Romans 4:23-24).

Dare I ask, ‘Is God an absentee father?’ To the world, God appears to have abandoned His children. In our flesh, we may feel the same way. Yet, the Bible proves otherwise. Nature declares God’s provision and care. God works behind the scenes using other people and circumstances to nurture His children. Sometimes, God does outpour His Spirit in a ‘tangible’ way through miracles and spiritual gifts. We can lose ourselves in worship and really feel the love of God. But be warned — feelings can be very deceptive. Truth remains truth despite what we may feel.

The Word as guided by the Spirit stands as the foundation for Christian truth. When you ‘feel’ alone, dive into the Word and see what God has to say about you. Quiet the doubts in your mind, praise God and believe. Remember the words of Jesus to Thomas, “Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed” (John 20:29). The blessings of God await those who overcome this world through faith in Christ.

PROXIMITY BLINDNESS

Have you ever noticed how we can be blind to God’s active work in our lives? Good friends pick up on it. Our dog even notices before we do sometimes. Overwhelmed by life’s cares, we are too close to our situation to realize the truth. One example in my own life illustrates this point. I went over to friend’s apartment to hang out, pray and watch a little Monday Night Football. My friend helped me see past the moment to the big picture. Struggling through a test of faith, I was complaining like a little child. I told my friend, “I’m struggling to receive something tangible from God — sometimes I feel like God is so far away. Where is God when we really need him?”

My friend listened and started to smile. I could tell he was holding back laughter. He saw something humorous in my situation, but I did not really feel like laughing. Less than a minute passed by, then he just let go and started to laugh. I begged him to let me in on the joke.

Once he regained his composure, he said, “You want something tangible. God has been revealing Himself to you for over a year by inspiring you to write a book about Him. And you want something tangible?” In an instant, I saw what my friend saw. The entire time, I had taken God’s revelation for granted. I couldn’t help but laugh at myself. Wow — I sure can be blind to my own reality.

You are now holding and reading part of my relationship with God. If you have never sat down and let the Lord reveal Himself to you through writing, take a chance. The Holy Spirit may open your eyes to truths about yourself and your walk with God that you never knew existed.

FORBIDDEN LOVE

King Solomon knew a thing or two about relationships. He had 700 wives and 300 concubines. Through his life, Solomon experienced the pain caused by ungodly relationships. Just like his father, women were his weakness and led to his downfall.

As a single, young Christian male, I understand the power of sexual lust and the enticements of the flesh. I can relate to the Apostle Paul when he wrote, “I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do...What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?” (Romans 7:15,24). Every day I wage war to walk in the spirit and not after the flesh.

**From media to spam e-mail messages
to billboards on the
side of the road,
the enemy constantly
bombards God's
people with lies
about what true love looks like.**

For 27 years, I have endured the battlefield of the mind and the soul. I wish I could say that I have lived every moment as unto the Lord. But like David I have sinned and found myself crying out, "Create in me a clean heart, O God; and renew a right spirit within me. Cast me not away from thy presence; and take not thy holy spirit from me" (Psalm 51:10-11 - KJV).

Through it all, God has proven faithful. I would not trade any of what I have had to endure because my trials and failures have provided the Lord opportunities to mold and shape me in His image.

Doing things my way only caused pain. The Lord has been showing me just how much he requires of His people — God requires everything. I am reminded of the words of Jim Elliot, a missionary who died at the hands of the Auca Indians. Elliot said, "He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose." Even if Christ called him to die, Elliot realized that he got the better end of the deal.

When we scratch and claw to get things on our own, we end up causing pain. Our actions reflect a lack of faith. Just consider how the sins of Abraham and Sarah has caused problems for generations. Had Abraham not slept with Hagar, the war and strife between the Arabs and the Israelis would have never happened. I don't expect my mistakes to lead to massive wars. But my sin will leave a trail of tears behind me.

Pressed on all sides by others' expectations, finding a wife has become somewhat a sore subject for me. The Christian community expects that young believers need to get married to be happy. Those who don't marry get attached with an unspoken stigma. Sometimes, I think of single Christians as the modern day lepers in the Church. Well-intentioned Christians try to set you up on dates. Friends and families press by asking, 'Are you married yet?' I am starting to reply, 'Yes, I'm married to Jesus.' This response causes some to roll their eyes and walk away.

Quite naturally, many people think in their heads, 'I wonder what he does for sex?' Well, I'm a 27-year-old virgin who has had to deal with a wide variety of sexual temptations. I have not always been pure in my thoughts or actions. But I stand today as a victor against sin through Christ. I know that man's flesh can be brought under submission to the spirit. One day I heard a radio preacher teach that if you are not married you need to find a good Christian singles group and start looking. He basically taught that the sins of the flesh are too great for most Christians. While I agree it takes a special call from God to remain single forever, looking at relationships the way the world does makes little spiritual sense. It all starts with prayer and keeping your eyes open for God's plan.

Through the blood of Christ, you are more than a conqueror. This includes sexual temptation and lust. These temptations don't just go away because you get married. In some cases, weaknesses carried over from your life as a single person can intensify once you get married.

**Learning how to submit
your life to Christ
and die to the sinful nature
can only come from God not marriage.
Too many people seek
in earthly relationships,
things they can only get from God.**

The radio preacher was right about the power of the flesh. We are no match for the flesh. Only Christ can kill the flesh. This truth points to the centrality of Christ as the cornerstone for every successful relationship. We are incapable of the purity, love and wisdom needed in life apart from God. I'm continually amazed when people ask, 'Aren't you tired of being alone?' This question shows their lack of spiritual understanding. When you are in Christ, you are never alone. The Spirit of the Lord lives in His people — the hope of glory. Is my flesh tired of being alone? Sure! But Christians do not live after the flesh. Believers should live to fulfill the desires of the spirit.

The apostle Paul devoted an entire chapter in his letter to the Corinthians on the subject of marriage. Paul encouraged the believers to follow God's individual call and gifting for their lives. He warned that married life carries with it certain troubles and limitations. Paul also wrote, "Now to the unmarried and the widows I say: It is good for them to stay unmarried, as I am. But if they cannot control themselves, they should marry, for it is better to marry than to burn with passion" (I Corinthians 7:8&9). Scripture never indicates that the unmarried life is inferior to being married. Instead, the Word recognizes the viability and importance of both. For God established the family as the base of earthly society, and marriage to Christ as the foundation of His heavenly kingdom.

Your earthly marriage is just a trial run for your marriage to Christ at the end of the age.

If you struggle with being single, confess any sin and cry out to God. Take heart! All perfect and good things come from God. The Lord knows what you need. Remember the words of Christ, “Seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own” (Matthew 6:33-34).

THE ULTIMATE CINDERELLA STORY

What does true love really look like? Does the prince ever run off with the fair maiden and live happily ever after? Various influences in my life have recently spurred me to study the marriage metaphor used in the Bible to describe Christ’s relationship with the Church. If you have never stopped to meditate on what this means, you are missing out on the very heart of God. One of the most complete pictures of the bride and groom concept is painted in the Song of Songs.

Described as the greatest of many songs written by King Solomon, this book of the Bible tells the story of an intimate love relationship between a Shulammitte maiden and a king. There are those that discredit this book as a portrait of God’s love for man due to the sensual language used by the author, but I find this hard to believe given that underneath the surface it clearly describes true wedded love.

**Although a man’s love
for a woman pales
in comparison to
God’s holy love for man,
it is the closest point
of reference for mankind.**

The story starts with the Shulammitte maiden expressing her longing to be with her lover the king. She describes his love as more delightful than wine. His name is like perfume poured out. Just the mention of his name arouses delight in the heart of the maiden. She expresses her desire to be taken away with him in private. She longs to be near her lover. Paul writes about this same kind of longing when he said, “I desire to depart and be with Christ, which is better by far; but it is more necessary for you that I remain in the body” (Philippians 1:23&24).

The maiden goes on to describe her imperfections. Unlike the beauties raised in the shade of the palace, the beloved has spent years tending the fields of others, which has tanned her skin. Having made it through a rough life, she bares the scars of her trials. Her justification shows her feeling of inadequacy compared to the greatness of her lover. The king quickly dispels the beloved’s apprehension. He describes her as a mare — the picture of grace, beauty and strength. A mare would stand out as the best among a team of horses. In the terminology of the day, this would be considered a great compliment even though today most women would never want to be compared to a horse.

The king uses the term “darling” to describe his affection for the maiden. The lover sees his beloved not for what she was but what she has become due to his work on her behalf. He provides her ornaments and jewels that bring out her inner beauty. In the same way, Jesus looks past the sin and sees a glorious, radiant bride. Adorned in white, covered by Jesus’ blood, the Lord looks at us through the completion of his work in us. We focus on the ‘work in progress.’ He sees the end and smiles with delight. Just like the beloved, who has been caught up in her own ugliness, we fear rejection for our sin and shame.

Her lover is a pouch of myrrh (fine perfume) laying on her heart. Thus, the king’s love captures her heart even when he is not with her in the flesh. Even though we do not see

God face to face today, His love should hold our hearts and remind us of what we have to look forward to when the Lord returns for His bride.

The king proclaims her beauty. He focuses on her eyes, the window to her soul. The eyes betray her innermost secrets. Her eyes are compared to doves, which indicate purity. Interestingly, the dove came down on Jesus after His baptism as a sign of God's favor and love. To me, the dove represents the Spirit of God resting on His people. The Holy Spirit offers enlightenment. It enables the bride to see beyond the here and now. Doves are known for having singular vision that focuses on only one object at a time. Just like a dove, our eyes should focus solely on the bridegroom. Yet many Christians live with double vision, trying to hold onto the things of this world and the world to come.

The beloved returns her lover's compliment by proclaiming his pleasant appearance. Their relationship is based on a reliable foundation. It is stable and secure just like the fate of all that trust in Jesus. Through the story, the king proclaims his complete infatuation with his beloved. Unique, she is like a rose among thorns.

Apart from each other, the king and his beloved declare their love. The Shulammitte princess searches for and finds him. The king says, "You have stolen my heart with one glance of your eyes" (Song of Solomon 4:9). Enraptured by her beauty, the king finds no flaw in his beloved. Likewise, God desires to intimately know man. Take a minute to consider that God ultimately wants to love you and me in the same way.

The king describes the Shulammitte princess as a garden locked up and a sealed fountain. She belonged to him and should not give herself to anyone else. God is just as much a jealous husband as the king in this story. He desires our devotion and love. Christians must have no person or thing above God.

Yet like the Shulammitte, we have a free will. Just as she rejects the king's knock at her door when she is sleeping, we

tend to reject God's call when it does not serve our needs. We offer up excuses just like the princess did. When we awaken, we come to our senses. We travel the streets looking for God as she did searching for her beloved. The watchmen (religious leaders) find us on the streets and abuse us because we are not where we are supposed to be.

Meanwhile, our lover, like the king, does not force his way on us. Instead, God shows his love through his patience. The king goes off to pick flowers, which reminds him of his beloved. In the same way, Christ returned to the Father and intercedes for us in prayer. Instead of chastising the Shulammitte, the king responds to her rejection by showering her with praises. Likewise, Jesus reaffirms us through His Word and Spirit.

The Shulammitte princess is not the only woman in the king's court. He loves and knows other women. There are other queens, concubines and virgins in the king's life. But the Shulammitte princess holds a special place in his heart and knows him better than the others. This illustrates the relationship between God and man. We are only limited in knowing God by our desire and love for him. He desires a Shulammitte princess but tends to get virgins and concubines.

**What makes the Shulammitte
unique is her hunger for
and delight in the king alone.
She loves him for his beauty
not his position or wealth.**

Would we love God if he withdrew his blessing, remained silent, refused to heal us or allowed a tragedy to harm us? Or are we motivated by a selfish love? God desires for us to reach a place where we love Him regardless of the fringe benefits. The Shulammitte princess expresses her desire to go away alone with the king. A heart sold out to God will desire

intimate privacy with Him.

The Song of Songs is just one of many wedding metaphors in the Bible. Others include Adam and Eve, Ruth and Boaz, and Esther and King Xerxes. The Bible starts and ends with a wedding. The greatest party in the history of the world awaits the bride of Christ at the marriage supper of the Lamb. Will you be there? What does your heart long for?

Paul used the wedding metaphor in Ephesians to describe Christ's relationship to the Church. Christ loves and died for the Church. As described in Genesis, the two become one. In the same way, we as individuals and collectively as the Church will be united with God, our lover, at the end of the age. As the king gave the Shulammite beautiful clothes and jewelry to wear, Christ provided his blood as our covering. In the end, we will see God face to face and be with Him forever.

The wedding metaphor describes a close relationship. Many of the most intimate moments in life are experienced in private between two lovers. Likewise, our personal walk with Christ should be the pinnacle of our spiritual lives, not a weekly church service. Although both private and group gatherings are critical to the development of our faith, our private walk determines our level of intimacy with God.

Probably my favorite aspect of the wedding example is the unconditional love offered by the king. The groom knows things about the bride that no one else does. He sees her completely exposed in her nakedness.

**The groom sees his darling
as she truly is
and loves her
regardless of her imperfections.**

God, the lover of my soul, sees me the exact same way. I cannot hide anything from Him, yet His love remains constant.

Truly, God's love is better than life.

Have you experienced the depth of God's love in your life? If you stop to let Him put the slipper on your foot, you will see that it fits. Indeed, Christ's love meets us where we are with unconditional acceptance and forgiveness. Grace remains the key to my Cinderella story. Open your heart today to receive even more of Christ's indescribable love. Just stop to consider that you are the recipient in the greatest love story ever told.



SEARCHING FOR SOMETHING MORE



WHAT IS THE GOAL?

Have you ever stopped to ask the question, ‘Why Am I Here?’ Most people have pondered this heavy question at one time in their life. Answers vary depending on your background and beliefs. Atheists deny the validity of the question. They believe we exist due to evolution. As a result, we have no set purpose. We live and then die as part of the natural order. Those who believe in God offer other explanations. Some believe that humans are generally good beings; we exist to do good works and live a happy life. Others believe in a god or many gods that demand our obedience to rules and practice of rituals. Some spend their time meditating, trying to reach a higher state of consciousness or a higher place in life through reincarnation. Many others try not to think about god or spiritual issues at all. They just want to make a ton of money and live a luxurious lifestyle.

All of the worldviews described above are void of real life. Each one is just as ridiculous as the others. Although these theories may make sense for a short time, in the long run they leave a person empty and hungry for the truth. The aim of life can be found in the Bible. The apostle Paul hit the center of the mark when he wrote these words in Philippians 3:8 & 9. “What is more, I consider everything a loss compared

to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them rubbish [dung], that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ — the righteousness that comes from God and is by faith.”

Paul identifies knowing Jesus as the greatest thing a person can do in this life. According to the King James version, everything else is dung by comparison. In Philippians 3:14-20, Paul writes about pressing on toward the prize and seeing beyond the here and now. The prize has nothing to do with wealth, intellect, religious practices, good works, fame, health or any other common pursuits of this world.

**Most people spend their entire lives
trying to store up what they believe
is treasure when it really is
just a pile of dung.**

**The greatest joy in this life is
to know God and to be transformed
by the relationship.**

Those who draw near to God are not left the same; they develop godly character including love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, meekness and self control.

Mankind struggles with the concept of knowing God because we cannot fully understand God. Our finite minds short-circuit when it comes to understanding the deep mysteries of God. Some things must be accepted on faith, which does not mean turning off your mind. Faith simply requires setting aside our pride, biases and plans to allow God to do His thing. All people sin from time to time. None of us are righteous enough on our own to stand before a holy, perfect God. Although God is merciful, he is also just and

holy. The debt for our sin (death) had to be paid before we could be spared. Salvation from sin only comes through Jesus, who took the punishment of the world on His shoulders. Because of Jesus' death on the cross and resurrection, man can stand before God and have an intimate relationship with the Creator of the universe. Let that concept sink in for a moment.

Who is going to pay for your sin? It's either going to be you or Jesus. Faith requires boldness and courage. Trusting God is not for the faint of heart. If you want the non-stop adventure of a lifetime, surrender your life to God and see what happens. You will never be the same.

**If you do not know the joy
of being in a deep relationship with God
through Jesus Christ,
you are missing out
on the very purpose of life.**

God wants to forgive you and revive your spirit. Open your life to God. Accept the blood of his only Son, Jesus Christ. According to the Bible, Jesus said that He is the way, the truth and the life. No man can come to the Father (God) except through Him. Thus, the only way to be purified to have a relationship with God is through the blood of Christ. I encourage you to stop and receive Christ's sacrifice for your sin. If you have any questions about how to receive God's grace for your sin, please find a Christian friend or minister. Feel free to e-mail me at chaille@organicfaith.com. I would love to listen and share with you.





Note on Bible Versions — BEING A BIBLE SNOB!

All of the Bible quotations in this book are taken from the New International Version (NIV) or the King James Version (KJV) of the Bible. When I started writing *Organic Faith*, I used mainly the NIV because I had always heard it was the easiest to understand. Since then, I have started cross-referencing three versions in my studies – the NIV, the New American Standard Bible (NASB) and the original KJV.

Although the NIV and NASB use modern language and sentence structure, KJV has become my favorite. King James has a way of stopping casual Bible readers in their tracks. You can't skim KJV and expect to get the gist of the passage. Modern readers must really concentrate and read KJV, which can produce a more beneficial time in the Word. In cross-referencing the different version, I have found the KJV to be more accurate in places where the newer versions leave out material. The King James language just seems to be more poetic and has a beauty to it, which is missing in most modern translations.

Some people carry their Bible version preference to the extreme. I have seen Bible teachers scold students for reading anything other than the KJV. Likewise, I have seen people discourage others from reading KJV claiming it is too difficult to understand. These Bible snobs can foster division in the Body of Christ and tear down immature believers. Choosing a Bible translation has become a volatile issue for some

Christians today. Many Bible snobs have shown a lack of grace toward other believers who do not recognize the ‘superiority’ of a favored translation.

Now there are some versions that should be avoided. Some pseudo-Christian cults have developed their own translations reflecting their false doctrine. Editors for these translations remove or reword key Scripture passages. One example is the New World Translation (NWT) used by the Jehovah’s Witnesses. The NWT rewords parts of the Bible ascribing deity to Jesus.

Why did I stick with NIV if I personally prefer King James? For starters, my version preference changed mid-way through writing the book. And more importantly, many people are accustomed to the NIV. I did not want the use of KJV to be a stumbling block to them. I personally went through every Bible reference and looked for what seemed to be the best choice as guided by the Spirit. In a few places, I inserted words to clarify the translation. These words are set off by brackets.

Keep in mind that the Bible is not like any other book. More than just words on a page, the Bible teaches spiritual truth, which can only be understood as the Holy Spirit reveals it. The Spirit not our intellect does the real work when studying Scripture. This may explain why the Lord has allowed so many different Bible versions to exist. Jesus said, “I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me” (John 14:6 – KJV). Truth can only be found in the person of Jesus as revealed by the Holy Spirit not words on a page studied by human intellect. The existence of numerous translations does not in any way undermine the validity of the Bible. The first thing the serpent tried to do when tempting Eve was discredit the very words of God. Satan asked, “Hath God said?”

Consider these words from the Bible:

“Being born again, not of corruptible seed, but of incor-

ruptible, by the word of God, which liveth and abideth for ever. For all flesh is as grass, and all the glory of man as the flower of grass. The grass withereth, and the flower thereof falleth away: But the word of the Lord endureth for ever. And this is the word which by the gospel is preached unto you” (I Peter 1:23-25 - KJV)

“So shall my word be that goeth forth out of my mouth: it shall not return unto me void, but it shall accomplish that which I please, and it shall prosper in the thing whereto I sent it” (Isaiah 55:11- KJV).

“All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness” (II Timothy 3:16 - KJV).

Followers of Jesus Christ serve the only sovereign God. Just as He created the world and all its creatures by His words, God is capable of preserving the integrity of the Scriptures. As you earnestly seek God, abstain from false teachers and study the Bible for yourself. The Holy Spirit will protect your hearts and minds from false doctrine. The decision to use a modern translation should not be a stumbling block either. Consider comparing a number of different versions. Or you could even study the original Greek or Hebrew as you dive deep into the treasures of the Bible. Don't be scared away from thorough Bible study by those claiming this should be left to seminary trained professionals. And don't feel like a junior level Christian if you use a modern translation. Enjoy delving into the living Word, God's love letter to you.





THANKS

Thank you for allowing me to share what the Lord has been doing in my life. I pray that something in this book has touched your life and challenged you toward a closer walk with Jesus Christ. I do not claim to have cornered the market on correct theology. I encourage you to compare every word in this book to the Bible and let the Holy Spirit guide you into all truth.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Chaille Brindley loves Christ and has experienced the struggle of working out his faith with fear and trembling. Raised in the Church, Chaille has traveled a journey of doubt and confusion familiar to many young believers. Today, Chaille works as a journalist in Richmond, Virginia. He spends most of his free time seeking God's face, mentoring others, writing, and interceding for whatever God lays on his heart.