

Wineskins Magazine

“Let the Walls Come Down”

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Table of Contents

Mending Walls By Mike Cope	2
Pleasures of the Flesh By Bob Hendren	4
The Water is Cold, The Night is Dark By Rubel Shelly	8
Book Review: Who is My Brother By Leonard Allen	11
God Still Rescues By Peter Ladu Lasu	16
They Said it With Mottoes By Leroy Garrett	19
Form and Function: A Distinction that Matters By Tim Woodroof	22
Melting Ice, Breaking Down Walls By Dennis Crawford	29
Polly and the Parable of Two Churches By Bob Rogers	34
Hope Network Newsletter: The Problem of Bootstrap Theology By Marcus Brecheen	36
AfterGlow: Tear Down This Wall By Phillip Morrison	42

Mending Walls

by Mike Cope
March – April, 1998

“Something there is that doesn’t love a wall,” wrote Robert Frost. It seemed to him that something in nature voted “NO” to the erection of dividing walls.

He could observe the way every year the ground would swell so the carefully stacked rocks tumbled over:

*Something there is that doesn't love a wall,
That sends the frozen-ground-swell under it,
And spills the upper boulders in the sun;
And makes gaps even two can pass abreast.*

The problem was that his neighbor, following an old proverb of his father, believed that “good fences make good neighbors.” They make sure boundaries are clearly defined. No amount of reasoning and experience could convince him otherwise.

Part of the unsettledness in Restoration churches right now is that old walls are slowly (and in some instances, rapidly) crumbling—walls that divide one group of Christians from other groups, walls that divide us by gender, by race, or by mental abilities.

This wall-tumbling movement is, it seems, ordained by God. It stems from more and more Christians finally owning up to their baptismal vows:

“You are all children of God through faith in Jesus Christ, for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham’s seed, and heirs according to the promise” (Galatians 3:26-38).

Of course, this is all very disorienting. With walls we feel safe and secure, protected from the heretics and barbarians storming the gates.

But the efforts of a few to stick their fingers in the cracks in the walls to hold them together are futile. Too many now realize through relationships built at Bible Study Fellowship, Walk to Emmaus, Promise Keepers, or any number of other ministries that not all Christ-followers understand all matters of doctrine the way “we” do. As Leonard Allen has insightfully written in this issue, “It is long past time for us to acknowledge the great stream of historic trinitarian Christian faith, a stream often muddy and polluted to be sure, but a stream that nonetheless has proclaimed the love of the Father, known the grace of the Lord Jesus, and experienced the fellowship of the Spirit.”

Too many now realize that Scripture permits all followers of the Lord to use their gifts—not just men. Too many know that the artificial separations based on skin color have been ungodly. And too many have learned how the Spirit has gifted our mentally handicapped sisters and brothers to exclude them any longer (as they have been in places) from the ministries of the church.

To his wall-building neighbor, Frost imagined saying:

*Why do (walls) make good neighbors?
Before I built a wall I'd ask to know
What I was willing in or willing out,
And to whom I was like to give offense.
Something there is that doesn't love a wall,
That wants it down.*

That “something” is actually a Someone: our God, who in Jesus Christ has proven himself an enemy of dividing walls (Ephesians 2:14). Let the walls come down!

Pleasures of the Flesh

Thoughts on Sectarianism

*by Bob Hendren
March – April, 1998*

“Now the works of the flesh are plain: fornication, impurity, licentiousness, idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, anger, selfishness, dissension, party spirit, envy, drunkenness, carousing, and the like. I warn you, as I warned you before, that those who do such things shall not inherit the kingdom of God” (Galatians 5:19-21).

The “works of the flesh are plain” Paul writes, or if you prefer, “the activities of the lower nature are evident.” These deeds that men and women find perverse pleasure in are evident, clear, obvious to any observant person, right? Well, in my experience, it would seem the first five and the last two are generally evident to most people, but the rest of the list doesn’t seem to be so plain. What I mean is we usually not only notice, but are deeply offended by anyone who engages in the seamy or irreligious works of the flesh. On the other hand, we do not find anywhere near the same heated attitude toward enmity, strife, dissension, and party spirit.

According to Paul, there are pleasures of the flesh that have nothing to do with sex, idolatry, or alcohol. When is the last time you saw some brother or sister brought to task for enmity, strife, jealousy, anger, selfishness, dissension, or party spirit? Have you ever encountered a questionnaire in some church, which you had to fill out and pass successfully in order to teach or wait on the Lord’s Table? What were the questions? Probably, mostly about marriage and divorce, which version of the Bible you read, etc. Do you remember any questions on whether you were a gossip, possessed a sectarian spirit, or had factious behaviors? Drunkenness and carousing might merit a warning or two, but when was anyone reprimanded for envy? Hair that touches your collar can get you off a waiting-on-the-table list, but party spirit may get you appointed to church leadership!

Malicious, hate-filled activities, overflowing with a sectarian spirit, often get you honored as a defender of the truth. Practitioners of such fleshly pleasures are not condemned, rather they are praised by their followers. In some fellowships power-mongers with divisive spirits are busily training others to follow in their footsteps. People who dote on strife, jealousy, and selfishness are not only leaders in some groups, but are actually admired for their unbiblical traits. Why are they not branded as the followers of the flesh they obviously are? Maybe only a few works of the flesh are “plain” to us, when all of them ought to be! The time has come to call those who practice such actions to accountability and repentance.

“Why such an extreme view?” you may ask. “Are you not over-reacting?” “Live and let live.” The indifference displayed by some Christians to the state of the body of Christ is not a sign of healthy spirituality. It is time to awaken to the incredible damage done to fellowships and persons by the people who regularly engage in the behaviors Paul mentions. Sectarianism is a virus of the soul; it will kill.

Deadly biological warfare looms over the world as scientists frantically scramble to concoct ever more dangerous combinations of killer diseases to be dropped on the unsuspecting heads of people. Prominent among these killer germs are tiny particles known as viruses. Some viruses can cause warts, but a good many can kill you. Sectarianism is a virus of the soul. It does not merely make you spiritually sick, or spiritually warty, it will kill you! None is immune from this threat. All of us need Christ as a sentinel in our soul to guard against such behavior. I must imitate the process of healing by first asking myself “Am I a sectarian?” Honest self-examination is the first step to uncovering this deadly virus.

How do I know if I am a sectarian? How do we know we are not a sect? This latter question was put to the late French evangelist Richard Andrejewski. His reply is to the point:

“We can’t...sectarianism is like war, it begins in the heart, and it begins at any moment. When I become angry and competitive, or determined to win by any means, when I lose my respect for other people’s liberty, when I become possessive and absorbed in concern for my own well-being, when I let my zeal for truth be turned not against error and confusion, but against human beings who oppose me—all this makes for a sectarian spirit.”

“These things come so naturally to human hearts that we can never be completely rid of them. Only the grace of God can keep a body of believers from becoming a sect.”

I heard a minister say publicly a few years ago that he believed so many young people divorced whose background was a certain conservative denomination, not because they had been so poorly taught on the subject, but that they had grown up in congregations where, on the first sign of disagreement, you either left or split the church. I have no statistics to back up his belief, but how can such an example serve to further cohesion in relationships? Our actions always speak more eloquently than our sermons.

The call to end sectarianism begins with self-examination done in an honest spirit. I must understand why I have a need to be a factious person, to cut myself off from other believers. Why do people join factions? Why do they practice sectarianism? No doubt there are numerous justifications for this behavior. The following are what I have encountered, perhaps you have others you could list:

- The most basic reason is that many people are human-centered rather than Christ-centered. They tend to desire to please some human being more than they desire to please Christ. The other “reasons” are variations on this theme.
- People are attracted to charismatic leaders and prefer to bask in the personality of the leader rather than focus upon God. Some persons are attracted to leaders who have a “savior” complex, who see themselves as those with exclusive insights from God. Loyalty to such a “godly” leader is mistaken for loyalty to God.
- People want leaders who effectively promote and express their particular slant on matters. Therefore, they give their loyalties to those who “give them a voice.”
- People think there may be only limited recognition and reward from others if they are simply loyal to Christ, but the faction offers them recognition and a sense of place. They may think, “Better to have recognition in a limited group than to be lost in the big picture.” This is the old

frog in a small pond syndrome. James Denney remarked, “The church of Christ was for them [the sectarians at Corinth] a stage on which they aspired to be conspicuous figures.”

- People sometimes enjoy the thrill of competition which a sect breeds. “It’s us against them!” can be an exhilarating experience. Never forget, there is a fellowship of sorts in a faction, even if it is a perverse fellowship. Just as there is loyalty in a seriously dysfunctional family, there can be a pseudo fellowship of the “unloving,” that is, those who cannot understand the grace and love of God may clump together for mutual reinforcement.
- People sometimes are convinced their narrow views are essential truth. They have a limited view of what God is able to do and whom he is able to accept. Many persons have a capacity to over-simplify complex matters and see things in an extremely rigid, black and white configuration. This appeals to persons who want others to think for them and maintain their comfort zones for them. The faction helps them believe they are the only “true believers.”

No doubt the whole of Christian truth is so expansive, so incapable of being thoroughly mastered by finite man, that groups historically spring to life clustered around some influential thought leader. These leaders catch a major emphasis of Christian doctrine and express it in compelling ways so that schools of thought form around their works. We may compare the influence of a Pelagius, Augustine, Calvin, Luther, Campbell, etc. to see how easily some may pass from appreciating their insights to being enslaved to their concepts. Can we ever get beyond these enslaving concepts and realize that truth can never be packaged in human-sized containers?

What could have been accomplished if the members of the body of Christ had some understanding and semblance of unity in Christ? The obvious solution to sectarianism is loyalty to Christ, but since much of our sectarianism is played out in some particular form involving a group of believers, a consideration of the body of Christ is an excellent starting point. An examination of the Corinthian correspondence reveals a group in the grip of a destructive divisive spirit. Paul saw in the chaotic climate of the Corinthian church fertile ground for the weeds of dissension. In chapter one, he asks, “Is Christ divided? That is, “Is Christ the property of sectarians?” Has Christ become the exclusive property of one group? Absolutely not! Even those of the “Christ party” (those claiming “I am of Christ...”) are censured for their sectarian attitude. The original language indicates all the “party watchwords are on one level, and all are in the same category of blame.”

Further, sectarianism had transformed their assemblies into harmful experiences (1 Corinthians 11:17). Paul’s answer for the sectarian attitude is found in the initial chapters and in chapter 12. We all began at the same point, baptized by the one Spirit into the one body of Christ and made to be “sustained” by the Spirit (12:13-14). Our religious status did not contribute to this, our social status was of no value in this transaction. We began as totally dependent on Christ. Like a human body we, as the body of Christ, are one unit with many differing parts, all of which are designed by God to promote the welfare of the whole body.

Initially, inferior feeling persons must recognize their value to Christ and other believers. One part may feel itself inferior, “because I am not a hand” the foot might say, reflecting on its supposed lowly status. “I am not part of the body.” No! Feet are absolutely essential to support the entire body. Correct walking will not come from stalking around on the hands. The foot must not envy the hand. The feet (persons) must realize God has placed them into an important function in the body of Christ. Ears may not draw as many compliments as eyes often do, for

seldom does anyone say, “What beautiful ears you have!” Still, ears are necessary and eyes hear not at all. Claim your place in His body!

Second, the more visible members, such as eyes, must not overvalue themselves. Paul may be referring to those who are “out front” more, such as leaders in congregational life and worship. If one of these parts exalts itself over the others, it ceases to serve the body and is transformed into an aberration. A body which consisted only of an eye or a foot would be a monster. The body disappears when one member (or clusters of members) see themselves as the whole body. Such an anomaly would be of no value, not even to itself. Even the most gifted member needs to realize, in profound humility, that he or she is nothing without other members of the body of Christ.

Third, mutual respect and an ability to feel the pain and enjoy the honor of the other members is necessary. “If one member suffers, all the members suffer.” As Eugene Peterson has noted, “The church is not what we organize, but what God gives, not the people we want to be with, but the people God gives us to be with...” Unity of the body is a gift, not an accomplishment of the members. Grace teaches us that each Christian is God’s gift to us. We may join a club, be accepted into the Army or Marine Corps, be rushed by a sorority or fraternity and acquire a host of associates, but only God can give us a fellow Christian.

The full solution to sectarianism would no doubt fill more books than the Internet has web sites, but this is a beginning for me. Perhaps for you as well. We can look at our own exclusivity, our tendencies to dismiss and despise other believers, and we can repent of our sectarian attitude. I can reflect on what it would mean if God treated me with the same contempt I direct toward those who disagree with me. Only the grace of God can inoculate us from the virus of sectarianism.

¹ Archibald Robertson and Alfred Plummer, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the First Epistle of St. Paul to the Corinthians*, 2nd Edition, The International Critical Commentary, Edinburgh: T T. Clark, reprinted 1967, p. 11

The Water is Cold, The Night is Dark

*by Rubel Shelly
March – April, 1998*

Much of the movie *Titanic* is based on Walter Lord's acclaimed book about the loss of more than 1500 persons to the icy bottom of the mid-Atlantic. His book is not a non-historical and quite impossible romantic tale between first- and third-class passengers. It is the simple and powerful telling of the events from the time a doomed ship struck an iceberg at 11:40 p.m. on the night of April 14, 1912, until it sank to the depths of the Atlantic at 2:20 a.m. on April 15. Its dialogue is taken from the official investigations of the disaster by the British and American governments.

The final two hopes for surviving the sinking of the *Titanic* were Collapsibles A and B. both had floated off the sinking Boat Deck with no passengers aboard. Boat A swamped and B flipped upside down. Hardy swimmers tried to reach them in water whose temperature was 28° F. About 30 men made it to Collapsible B in hope of living. Straddling the boat's stern, keel, and bow, they tried to hold on until someone could rescue them from otherwise certain death.

As they moved off into the lonely night, away from the wreckage and the swimmers, one of the seamen lying on the keel hesitantly asked, "Don't the rest of you think we ought to pray?"¹

Everybody agreed. A quick poll showed Catholics, Presbyterians, Episcopalians, Methodists all jumbled together; so they compromised on the Lord's Prayer, calling it out in chorus with the man who suggested it as their leader.

Sisters and brothers, the night is dark and the water is cold around us. As we cling to hope in a culture that perpetually threatens to sink the Ship of Zion, we do not have the luxury of praying sectarian prayers. We cannot afford to give an "uncertain sound" to others still splashing about in the water. We must pray and speak with a clear, distinct, and unified voice. And we can do that only if we break down the walls of sectarian rivalry and division. Such unity will come about only when gospel means more than cherished interpretation, when the single body of Christ means more than any denomination, and when Christ means more than all. For four years now, I have met once per month for two to four hours and twice a year for two to three full days with ministers from a variety of Christian backgrounds. About half are Pentecostal or charismatic; and all are thoroughly evangelical. We are confidants, advisers, and friends to one another. We have referred people to the various churches we serve. We have joined together to work for the common good of our city and to build up the body of Christ in it. God has drawn us together. We are acutely conscious of his presence in our times of prayer and ministry.

Which of the group was first to compromise a point of view or to repudiate his particular church heritage? It hasn't happened. So the differences are simply ignored and not discussed? No, we talk freely and non-threateningly about Calvinism, the Holy Spirit, baptism, communion, and eschatology. Then who wins the discussions? Jesus, for he has moved us past the caricatures we have carried of each other and corrected serious misunderstandings of one another's views we have brought from our various postures of sectarian prejudice.

So what is the purpose of such a group? We aren't sure! God created it, and we are trying to let him show first one reason and then another for the relationship he has given us in the Son. We wouldn't dare to set an agenda for it.

The one commandment we are being careful to obey is this: "I appeal to you, brothers, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you *agree with one another* so that there may be *no divisions among you* and that you may be *perfectly united in mind and thought*" 1 Corinthians 1:10). "Agree with one another" on the Holy Spirit and his gifts? Have "no division" in our baptismal theology? And "be perfectly united in mind and thought" on eschatology or church polity? Paul didn't require that of his first-century readers! (cf. Romans 14:1ff). In context, the agreement and unity he demanded of Christians then (and now!) was unity of witness to the centrality, sufficiency, and saving power of the cross of Jesus Christ (1 Corinthians 1:17-18; 2:1-5).

A king once had to take the leadership in calling Israel to observe their holy independence day, Passover. After the collapse of the Northern Kingdom in 721 B. C. and in connection with the cleansing of the Jerusalem Temple, King Hezekiah called people from both Judah and Israel to keep the Passover in the Holy City. Although many turned a deaf ear to his invitation, thousands began moving toward Jerusalem.

The Passover lamb was killed and the celebration began. Some from the north arrived too late, however, to perform the purifications that required several days for completion. So, although they "had not purified themselves, yet they ate the Passover contrary to what was written" (1 Chronicles 30:18a). Would the rekindling of faith be stopped in its tracks by their impurity and unauthorized feasting? "But Hezekiah prayed for them, saying 'May the Lord, who is good, pardon everyone who sets his heart on seeking God—the Lord, the God of his fathers—even if he is not clean according to the rules of the sanctuary.' And the Lord heard Hezekiah and healed the people" (2 Chronicles 30:18b-20).

Could we break down some Satan-inspired and human-erected walls in our time? Might we learn that we have misrepresented one another or exhibited shoddy prejudice toward others? Would it be worth it to abandon sectarian rivalry in order to "agree with one another" and "be perfectly united in mind and thought" in order to lift up Jesus before a world dying in its unbelief? Could we be gracious enough to pray (and ask to have prayed for us!) the prayer of Good King Hezekiah for those we believe to be flawed in their understanding and obedience?

The night is dark. The water is cold. We need to pray, proclaim, and plead with a single voice. Perhaps then the world could believe what so many want to believe—that Jesus is the Christ and that he can bring people out of their racial, social, and other divisions into wholeness. Jesus can still be heard across the centuries:

*I'm praying...for those who will believe in me
Because of (the apostles) and their witness about me.
The goal is for all of them to become one heart and mind—
Just as you, Father, are in me and I in you,*

*So they might be one heart and mind with us.
Then the world might believe that you, in fact, sent me. (John 17:20-21, The Message).*

¹ Walter Lord, *A Night to Remember* (New York: Rinehart & Winston, 1955; reprint ed., New York: Bantam Books, 1997), p. 117.

Book Review: Who is My Brother?

by C. Leonard Allen
March – April, 1998

LaGard Smith, *Who is my Brother? Facing a Crisis of Identity and Fellowship* (Malibu, CA: Cotswold, 1997). 281 pp.

Most students of restoration history have heard of the question put to Alexander Campbell in 1837 by a follower from Lunenburg County, Virginia. The woman was deeply disturbed by Campbell's statement that he found Christians in all Protestant groups and wanted to know how Mr. Campbell could consider anyone a Christian who had not been baptized by immersion for remission of sins. "But who is a Christian?" Campbell replied. "Everyone that believes in his heart that Jesus of Nazareth is the Messiah, the Son of God; repents of his sins, and obeys him in all things according to his measure of knowledge of his will." And he added: "I cannot make any one duty the standard of Christian state or character, not even immersion."

This reply troubled and shocked many of Campbell's followers. A whirlwind of controversy ensued for several months, and Campbell felt compelled to write more on the subject. In those further explanations and in years to come, he never rejected the position quoted above, though he did nuance and finesse it.

This book, in a way, reopens this old controversy. The author is troubled that a growing number of people in Churches of Christ today are quietly but quickly coming to acknowledge as fellow Christians all those who have faith in Jesus regardless of how they understand and practice baptism. He calls it a "quiet revolution." Caught up in a "frenzy of ecumenical fervor," Churches of Christ are experiencing now a "radical abandonment of settled doctrine" regarding baptism and fellowship. The "faith only" doctrine is replacing the historic insistence on the essentiality of baptism with the result that our "exclusive circle of fellowship" is breaking down.

Part I of the book responds to this quietly dangerous revolution. With urgency and deep concern, the author exposes what he sees as the underlying causes of this sea-change: biblical illiteracy, the frenzy for church growth, the recent impact of the Promise Keepers movement, and the retooling of our traditional theology to justify what people have already decided to do.

Part II, which is the heart of the book, lays out and develops a five-fold model of fellowship: (1) Universal fellowship is what we share with all people simply because we are human beings. (2) Faith fellowship is what we share with all those who love God and profess faith in Jesus; but because they have not experienced the new birth according to the biblical pattern, they are "still outside the boundaries of the kingdom." (3) "In Christ" fellowship is what we share with Christ and with all those who have been baptized as adults for the remission of sins; it does not depend upon complete doctrinal agreement but upon being united with Christ. (4) Conscience fellowship is a subset within "in Christ" fellowship; it recognizes that matters of conscience can and often do create enclaves within the larger body of Christ. Though often formed for legitimate reasons, they usually in fact create unhealthy tensions. (5) Congregational fellowship is the realm in

which koinonia is most fully lived out; table fellowship stands at the center, creating an environment where nurture, ministry, and discipline flourish.

The final section, “Rethinking Sacred Cows,” answers three questions: When and how is a member to be disfellowshipped? Who is a false teacher? And, Do believers who are not “in Christ” have any hope of eternal salvation?

In general this book is a restating of the exclusive view of fellowship traditionally held by Churches of Christ in this century. It is done with a style, a grace, and an unpredictability that is pleasantly surprising. On one hand, the author says that “not even Campbell could escape the fellowship enigma” regarding baptism and fellowship, and admits that he—and all of us—are caught in such an enigma. “Even where there are bright lines,” he allows, “the enigma of fellowship remains an enigma.” Yet on the other hand, an either/or polemic runs throughout the book that makes one wonder where the enigma went. But I should quickly add that there also runs through the book a spirit of charity, dialogue, and respect that is usually absent in works of this genre. And in a final chapter the author allows that God in the end will exercise divine mercy and clemency in ways that will most likely surprise us all.

My problem with this author’s restating of the traditional narrow view of fellowship is not its robust polemics or its sharp criticism of the spirit of the times. The basic problem is doctrinal. The author deplores “doctrinal dithering” and calls loudly for doctrinal purity. I agree. And that is, ironically, the deepest problem with this book—doctrinal softness or deficiency. A deficiency the author has received from his doctrinal tradition and here perpetuates. To put it differently, though this book claims that doctrinal slippage is sending us down the slippery slope, it is itself not doctrinal enough. Like many writings in this genre, it has slipped away from the central, anchoring, orienting doctrine of the faith: the Trinity.

This may at first sound like an odd, even outlandish, claim. “Of course we believe in the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Three in one, one in three. What’s the problem?” The problem is not believing in the Father, Son, and Spirit, of course; any biblicist does that. The problem is a Trinitarian theology, a functional doctrine of the Trinity that centers and deeply shapes all of one’s theology: In this sense the doctrine of the Trinity has been in steady recession since the seventeenth century, and that eclipse stands behind the rise of modern Unitarian, rationalistic, Christological, and other heresies. In more subtle forms it lies behind the line of “supernatural rationalism” that runs from the Christian philosopher Jon Locke down through Campbell and other progressive thinkers of his time. To put the problem over-simply, God’s relationality was overshadowed by mechanism. Mystery was eclipsed by method.

As a result, the doctrinal tradition the author so aggressively defends has been badly off-center. Though most have affirmed the Father, Son, and Spirit, we have had a very weak doctrine of the Trinity. Indeed, the doctrine of the Trinity has been in retreat in the modern West until the last couple of decades.

As I have stressed over and over to my theology students over the last decade, the Trinity is not about some strange heavenly arithmetic that theologians like to play with. It is, rather, a kind of shorthand for referring to what we know of God now that Jesus has come and the Spirit has been

poured out. Though a deep mystery, the Trinity is a crucially practical doctrine. For the way we understand God's way of loving and relating to people sets the pattern for how his followers relate to one another and treat one another.

The Trinity provides our pattern or exemplar for unity and fellowship. God leads a relational life as Father, Son, and Spirit. That life is characterized by submissive love, as each member of the Trinity pours his life into the other. In God himself there is an abundant outpouring of life, so abundant that it overflows and creates community with God's creatures—those outside the relationship within God. Through the sending of his Son and the outpouring of his Spirit, God pours this rich life into his creatures. As Diogenes Allen puts it: "The life of the Trinity is a perfect community for which we long; it satisfies our craving to be loved perfectly and to be attached to others properly."

We partake of the Trinitarian life in several ways: sacramentally (to use an awkward word) through observing Christ's ordinances, doxologically as we draw near to God and he to us, charismatically through divine gifts of grace, and pneumatologically through the mystery of the indwelling Spirit. The Trinity is the doctrinal center and fulcrum of the Christian faith. To change the metaphor, it is the prism through which all other doctrinal features of the faith are lighted and put in perspective. Indeed, the Trinitarian doctrine encapsulates and preserves the uniquely Christian view of God's relational nature.

When this doctrine functionally recedes, as it has done in the modern period and specifically in the doctrinal tradition of Churches of Christ, there are many, often subtle, consequences. One easily falls prey to sectarianism or overly narrow views of God's Kingdom; to various forms of legalism, all of which misconstrue the nature of God's relationality; to spiritual triumphalism which downplays the cruciform nature of discipleship; to constricted or mechanical understandings of the role of the ordinances or sacraments in Christian life, and other assorted ills and heresies.

For example, the rancor and division that has so marked this tradition is not simply an unfortunate consequence of garrulous or prideful personalities (one will always have those in good supply) but a theological problem. The author decries all this rancor and earnestly wants it put behind us. "Having decimated our own brothers through years of infighting," he laments, "We have rendered ourselves unable to fight the real enemy" (154). True. But sadly the theological agenda he promotes may well continue it. This is why I say that the main problem with the present book is a fundamental doctrinal weakness which has the effect of skewing in profound but often subtle ways the basic issues surrounding baptism and fellowship.

Let me focus now on the issue of baptism which usually has been the pivotal issue in the exclusive view of fellowship.

First, a historical issue. Though the author attempts to marshal Campbell and even Stone in support of his position, he either misses or chooses not to mention a key point in Campbell's view of baptism and fellowship. Early in his career, then again in 1837 and after, Campbell made a subtle but crucial distinction: though Christ's blood "really washes away" sin, the ordinance of baptism "formally washes" it away. Baptism thus serves as a formal, outward sign and seal of

forgiveness, bringing an assurance and joy of salvation that the unimmersed simply cannot experience. “The present salvation,” he concluded, “never can be so fully enjoyed (all things else being equal) by the unimmersed as by the immersed.” Similarly, he also distinguished between “inward and outward Christians,” asserting that it was possible for one who sincerely mistook the outward baptism to possess the inward.

Yes, Campbell emphasized different things at different times, and yes, this distinction often was lost by zealous disciples, but for Campbell, both early and late in his career, this distinction deeply shaped his view of who is a Christian. Among the branch of his heirs that became Churches of Christ this point was entirely lost.

Barton Stone held a more open view than Campbell regarding baptism and fellowship. Campbell excluded the unimmersed from “constitutional membership” in the church but not necessarily from eternal salvation. After 1826 Stone taught and practiced baptism for remission but never made it a condition of Christian fellowship (on this point the author is mistaken, p. 47). And Stone thought it inconsistent of Campbell to exclude from church fellowship any of those whom God had saved.

Second, a point about the meaning and practice of baptism today. The author is certainly correct that baptism is not a mere symbol. As he puts it, “Baptism doesn’t just stand for something; it does something” (p. 238). Yes. Baptism and other Christian ordinances are channels of divine life and grace. They are empowering. They are life-giving. They are dynamic. When one neglects them one is deprived of measures of divine life. As James McClendon puts it, they are performative signs that bring us more and more into the divine life and draw us more and more into the way of Jesus.

Such a high view of the ordinances or sacraments, however, requires a firm rootage in a proper Trinitarian theology (that is, in a proper understanding of God’s relational nature). Otherwise one too easily makes them magical or mechanical. Or one pronounces that the divine life can flow only in this way and in no other way. Yes, baptism is the normal sign of conversion. But as Campbell put it, he that “infers that none are Christians but the immersed, as greatly errs as he that affirms that none are alive but those of clear and full vision.”

The revivalistic milieu of early America, which focused so heavily on the private conversion experience, decimated the role of the ordinances in many Christian traditions. But today some of those traditions are beginning to rediscover believers’ baptism and some are calling for weekly communion. Methodist theologian Stanley Hauerwas says (with tongue only partially in cheek) that one of his goals in his ethics class at Duke is to make Methodist ministers feel guilty for not celebrating the Eucharist every week in their churches.

Today is not a time for preachers and teachers in Churches of Christ to be surrendering or downplaying a high view of baptism and weekly communion. Indeed, our challenge is to deepen and enrich the meaning of these practices by centering them more deeply in the Trinitarian life of God.

Now a few closing reflections. The author contrasts Churches of Christ to the “doctrinally rebellious denominations” (p. 225). But it seems to me that when we examine our own doctrinal history we fit too easily into the same category. Examine our track record on doctrines like the Trinity, the Spirit of God, grace and atonement, the unity of the church, et. al. No doctrine is more foundational than the Trinity; no doctrine nearer the heart of the gospel than grace; and no doctrine more important to an empowered life than the Spirit. We too have good reason to continue doctrinal renewal.

As for the “quiet revolution” that so troubles this author, not all the change stirring and troubling Churches of Christ today is due to secularism, biblical illiteracy, or cultural sellout, as the author seems to think. Some of it is, of course. But some of it is a fitful critique of and move away from earlier (nineteenth century) cultural accommodation. Campbell’s theological “system” was a brilliant response to early nineteenth century revivalism and the new spirit of individualism and liberty set loose in America. But his theology was deeply shaped by the culture of that time, including the bold conviction that one could stand free of culture and “just read the Bible.” The church has always been a cultural church, and some of the present upheaval has come as people have realized that nineteenth-century enculturation is not eternal and perhaps in some respects no longer even healthy.

In our time (call it post-modern, if you like) we are learning that our convictions about “the facts” are always, often unconsciously, schooled by our traditions, that we cannot stand entirely free of those traditions, and that any attempt to do so is bound to fail. The author’s theology is deeply formed by this particular tradition, but the force and import of that reality seems yet needs to temper his perspective.

Let it be said, finally, that this book continues an intramural argument in a small rivulet (the Churches of Christ) of the great stream of God’s Kingdom on earth. Some of the very language and terms of this internecine discussion would sound quite odd to the ears of many of God’s people alive today. Every tradition, of course, has its in-house discussions, its distinctive emphases, and (to the eyes of outsiders) odd practices. That’s OK. Such issues are worth arguing about—up to a point. But it is long past time for us to acknowledge the great stream of historic, Trinitarian Christian faith, a stream often muddy and polluted, to be sure, but a stream that nonetheless has proclaimed the love of the Father, known the grace of the Lord Jesus, and experienced the fellowship of the Spirit.

God Still Rescues

by Peter Ladu Lasu

(with thanks to Sam Shewmaker for his assistance in getting Peter's story)

March – April, 1998

God has always been at work in my life. I saw this when I was still in Sudan. I am a Sudanese by birth and have just graduated from the Nairobi Great Commission School. The things you are about to hear tell what happens in a country such as Sudan which has been at war for such a long time.

In Sudan, I went from a life of relative comfort to one of harassment, arrest, torture, starvation, despair, and hope in Christ; then release, danger, unspeakable horrors of killings, escape, and finally deliverance. In Southern Sudan, I had prospered as a young businessman, selling petrol, and owning a coffee store and several vehicles for transporting goods.

All was well in our family until one of my cousins left home to join the rebel movement, S.P.L.A., which opposes the Muslim government of Sudan. He left his wife and children which our family continued to look after. The government intelligence soon began to suspect that I was a rebel agent because I was caring for my cousin's children. I was violently seized and taken to a military prison. The cell I was taken to was like a very small house with one room into which about 200 prisoners were packed. It was so crowded that there was no room to lie down and sleep except by shifts. We had to stand most of the time.

It was very dark except for one small opening in the roof which let in the light by day. We were only allowed to go to the bathroom once a day. Whenever the room was opened at night we knew that someone was being taken out to be tortured or killed. I was severely beaten over a period of five months. Every day, our breakfast was a different type of torture. Our number diminished, until there were only about 40 of us left in that room.

There was a certain military sergeant who was one of the guards who knew all the secrets about what was happening, but he was also a devoted believer in the Pentecostal church. He asked for permission to preach the gospel to us, and after struggling several months with the authorities to gain permission, he was given a chance. He was allowed to take us out for an hour once a week and we had fresh air, fresh food and even special food from his own house.

He knew all of us were going to die, and spoke to us with that in mind. He spoke of the second death and the importance of not receiving the second death. After that preaching, all of us repented of our sins and he prayed for us. He then gave us some small New Testaments to take back to our cell. From that day, I had no fear of the death we were waiting to receive, having fully given my life to the Lord.

During the fifth month of my imprisonment, I was reading my Bible one day as usual about three o'clock in the afternoon. I was reading from the book of Acts 12:1-20, the amazing way an angel came and took Peter out of the prison. I began wondering whether God might look down on another Peter—myself—and deliver me from prison. By this time I believed that God could do

miracles if He chose to, and I was committed in my prayers. It was then my turn to sleep, and I prayed about this and went to sleep.

During the course of my sleep, before my turn to lie down was over, the door was opened and my name was called. At first I was confused because I was still thinking of Peter and the angel and the prayer I had prayed. But then I realized this is the way we were called to be executed, never to return to the cell. My turn to be called in the night had arrived.

The normal welcome to the office was to receive a slapping, or to be kicked or beaten immediately. Instead of being pushed to the floor, I was surprised that I was told to sit on the sofa. What was happening? The commandant of the prison began by apologizing for the beatings and keeping me in prison, and went on to say that their investigations had revealed that I was innocent, therefore they were releasing me immediately.

At first I could not believe him, and felt sure it must be a trick or a scheme of some kind. Getting out of that place seemed an impossibility. It took a lot of courage for me to ask him if he really meant what he was saying. He assured me he was serious, and advised me that there still might be those who would kill me, even after I was released, and that I should collect my things and leave and go to another place altogether.

There were heavy rains pouring down that night, but in spite of that, I went straight to my house that very night. I found that my mother had invited the church to come and pray for me in my house, and since there were heavy rains, they were not able to go back to their homes. At first they did not recognize me, as I had become so thin in prison. I had been quite heavy when I left them five months before, at about 180 pounds, but now I was down to about 120 pounds. They received me warmly and we rejoiced and prayed together.

I informed them that the commander had advised me to leave with the next convoy as it would be dangerous for me to stay in my home town. The convoy would leave in the morning for Juba. It was difficult for me to leave them so quickly and with the joy, we shared also the sadness of parting again. We prayed together, and they all prayed that the Lord who delivered me safely would continue to do so, through whatever lay ahead.

Early in the morning, I left my home, taking only a little money, and leaving everything else with my brother. I was heading to Juba from Yei with the convoy transport, a journey of about 100 miles, which should take a few hours. In actual fact, that journey took one month. We encountered land mines, shootings, and fighting along the way. On one day there was massive killing, about 270 people were killed. We had to bury them all in one grave.

We finally reached Juba, where I stayed for three days, recovering from every sort of shock and journey fatigue. Then I went on to Khartoum, where I was fortunate to find a job with the Danish embassy, as a driver for the Ambassador. I stayed there for two years until the Danish embassy was forced to close, due to the political pressures put upon western consulates by the Sudan Muslim government. The pressures were also felt by all Christians.

The Danish Ambassador generously helped buy a ticket for me to Egypt. In Egypt God was with me. I was able to find employment as a driver for a tourist company, and came to meet some members of the Church of Christ in that way. One of them, Mrs. Marty Lynn from Nashville, Tennessee, USA, put me in touch with the World English Institute, an evangelical correspondence course, in which I studied for two years while continuing my job. Mrs. Marty Lynn also introduced me to some elders in Nashville who taught me the fundamentals of Christianity. One of them talked to me about going to Bible school, and that he would be my sponsor. I had to consider whether to leave my job or not, and put myself in a position of trusting God for my provision. I thought about how God had delivered me from terrible agony, and now it was time to render service to Him.

In Nairobi at the Great Commission School, I was hit with another problem when my sponsor, L. E. Cranford, died. But thanks be to God, his widow continued to help me until I finished the two year course. Now I am equipped with the basic Bible training with an emphasis in missions. I now realize that I need to go a step further in my training in order to serve the people of Sudan very well.

There is no Church of Christ in Sudan. I would like to be able to continue my education, to enable me in the future to reach not only the poor and needy Sudanese, but also the educated not only within Sudan but those who are scattered throughout the world because of ethnic and political strife.

May God help me to rescue them, as He has rescued me.

They Said it With Mottoes

by Leroy Garrett
March – April, 1998

Mottoes reflect the values of a people, such as “A penny saved is a penny earned” and “Pretty is as pretty does.” They are evident in the business world, as in “Finger Lickin’ Good” and “We’re Ready When You Are.” Some have influenced history, as did Constantine’s “By This Sign Conquer!” and the Protestant Reformation’s *Semper Reformati* (Always reforming).

While mottoes risk oversimplification, they nonetheless express great truths in but a few words. They are catchy, witty, and easy to remember. They have a way of saying, “This is who we are and what we believe.”

Our Stone-Campbell pioneers realized the importance of mottoes or slogans. Some of them they borrowed from the Protestant Reformation, others they forged out of their own fiery struggles. They help to identify who we are supposed to be as a people. They reflect our heritage at its best.

“Where the Scriptures speak we speak, where the Scriptures are silent we are silent.”

Crafted by Thomas Campbell as a guiding principle for the Christian Association of Washington (1809), this motto was meant to strike a blow against human creeds and to exalt the Bible as the only rule of faith and practice. Campbell did not intend to make the Bible a rule of law for every detail in the life and work of the church.

When this motto is used to support a patternistic view of Scripture, it contradicts the unity principles set forth by Campbell in the *Declaration and Address*, where he allows for “some variety of opinion and practice” in the restored church. It rather means that we, “a people of the Book,” seek to unite all believers on the Bible and the Person the Bible exalts.

“We are Christians only, but not the only Christians.”

This motto is also turned on its head when some of us claim to be the only Christians. Our pioneers, in launching a movement “to unite the Christians in all the sects,” never doubted that there were indeed Christians in the sects.

It was a unity slogan. Believers can never unite on a human or sectarian name, but they can and must find oneness in the name of Christ. “Let us all be Christians, Christians only;” was their plea. They interpreted Acts 11:26, “The disciples were called Christians first at Antioch,” to mean that “Christian” is a divinely-ordained name. When all believers wear that God-given name and that name only (No hyphenated Christians!), then we will all be united under the authority of Christ.

When their zeal for “the ancient order” led some outsiders to accuse them of believing they were the only Christians, the negative phrase was added—“but not the only Christians.”

Our pioneers never held—certainly not Barton W. Stone or Thomas and Alexander Campbell—that they were the only Christians or that their church was the totality of the Body of Christ. They rather sought to bring an end to divisions among Christians, which they saw as “a horrid evil,” and one way to do this is for all believers and all churches to wear the name of Christ.

But the motto meant still more. If we honor Christ in wearing his name, we will also honor him in the way we live. In being “Christians only” we commit our lives to Christ and bear his likeness.

“In matters of faith, unity; in matters of opinion, liberty; in all things, love.”

Since the Protestant Reformation this motto has appeared variously as “In essentials, unity; in non-essentials, liberty; in all things, charity,” or “In fundamentals, unity, etc.” Through decades of controversy among our people the *Christian Evangelist* sought to stay the tide of division by making the motto part of its masthead, giving it still a different form: “In essentials, unity; in opinions and methods, liberty; in all things, love.”

For the motto to call for freedom in methods was in order since our Movement has, as historian Winfred E. Garrison observed, divided over methods more than theology.

Every party leader in our divided Movement agrees with this motto. The problem is that we cannot agree on what is essential or a matter of faith. Our pioneers were persuaded they had the answer to what is essential: *what the Scriptures clearly and distinctly state*. All else is opinion. We can unite on what the Bible actually says (matters of faith), they believed, but not on what we think it means by what it says (opinions).

Alexander Campbell identified essentials in terms of biblical facts, particularly “the seven facts of Eph. 4.” These seven he often reduced to three, “one Lord, one faith, one baptism.” These facts (principles) are the basis of unity, he avowed, but not theories, deductions, or theology about them.

We owe it to ourselves as we face a new century to revive this old motto, and to come to terms with what is really essential or matters of faith. As far back as John Locke, “the Christian philosopher,” as Alexander Campbell called him, unity-minded believers have insisted that nothing can be made essential to unity and fellowship that God has not made essential to going to heaven.

“Union (unity) in Truth.”

Thomas Campbell said it as early as 1809 in the *Declaration and Address*: “Union in Truth is our motto.” Unity is never to be at the expense of truth. But our pioneers realized that some truths are more important than others, and it is the more important truths (the essentials, again) that are the basis of unity.

Robert Richardson, Campbell’s biographer and our first historian, had a way of saying “The truth that saves is the truth that unites.” There are many truths (facts) in the Bible, but it is only the

truth of the gospel that saves and unites. He thus distinguished between the Bible and the gospel. The Bible educates us but the gospel (the truth) saves us.

So, to our pioneers “Union in Truth” meant unity in the truth or fact of Jesus Christ as Lord, not on biblical doctrine, which is subject to different interpretations (opinions). One might be wrong on various points of doctrine but right in his relationship to Christ. This means that unity is not contingent on doctrinal agreement but upon being “in Christ” together.

We thus sin against our own heritage when we predicate unity and fellowship upon doctrinal conformity rather than upon a mutual relationship to Christ.

Other mottoes, not as broadly current as the above, were identified with particular leaders, such as Barton W. Stone’s “Let Christian unity be our polar star.” He invoked this motto in his “Address to Churches of Christ” in pleading for the union of the Stone and Campbell movements, which was effected in 1832. This slogan, so pregnant in meaning, is carved in marble under Stone’s likeness on a cenotaph in the garden of the Disciples of Christ Historical Society in Nashville.

One of the Movement’s earliest historians, W. T. Moore, capsulated what he saw as the essence of the Movement in what may be the most meaningful motto of all: “We are free to differ but not to divide.” This is who we were at the outset, a people who allowed for diversity of opinion but abhorred division.

Free to differ but not to divide? Our multiple divisions imply that we believe the reverse of that: we are free to divide but not to differ! We in fact solve our differences by dividing, split after split.

Finally, there was Alexander Campbell’s “Expect great things, attempt great things, and great things will follow.” This homespun philosophy is a measure of the Movement. If ever there were a people who lived in the expectation of great things, and then went on to attempt them and to realize them, it was the followers of Alexander Campbell.

They said it with mottoes. These mottoes have a common ingredient in that they are about unity. They are in fact principles of unity. They reveal the true nature of our heritage: *We are supposed to be a unity movement!* It was a disdain for division and a love for unity that gave us birth as a people on the American frontier. This gave rise to still another slogan: *Unity is our business!* Is that really who we are?

Semper Reformata! If reformation is ongoing, is not restoration also?

Form and Function: A Distinction That Matters

by Tim Woodroof
March – April, 1998

This article is the second installment. It and the ones to follow will soon be available in book form, and can be purchased from Look Press, 800/863-5665.

He who lightly esteems hand-washing will perish from the earth. -The Talmud

Consider the apple. Round and firm. Red (or green or yellow) skin. Stem poking out of one dimpled end. To examine an apple more closely, all that is needed is a paring knife. Cut through its diameter. Observe the white and moist flesh, seed pod holding brown and hardened orbs. By dissecting an apple in this way it is possible to grasp the form of an apple—its *morphology*.

But there is more than one way to skin an apple, for there is more to this fruit than its form. Our understanding of *apple* is also determined by the *function* it fulfills, the purpose it serves and how it can be utilized. An apple is part of the reproductive system of the apple tree—by means of the seed wrapped within this fruit, the tree propagates itself and its species. We make use of the apple for food—it is a featured ingredient in pies, pastries and other desserts, keeping the doctor (if not the dentist) away. Apples are traditionally used as gifts for teachers, to express affection and, one would suppose, win favor. When rotten, the apple can be thrown to express disapproval.

Skinning the apple in this way requires a different kind of sharp instrument. It requires the “knife of logic” (to use Robert Pirsig’s memorable phrase¹). By going beyond morphology to probe the utility of an apple, we are able to think past skin and flesh and stem to consider what functions this fruit performs. The knife of logic allows us to focus on questions of purpose, utility, and—ultimately—value.

Skinning the Church

The restoration plea has fallen victim to people wielding paring knives. They have dissected the ancient church down to its smallest components, creating along the way a *morphology* of God’s people. They have described in minute detail how the first century church was organized, the rituals and ceremonies it observed, the modes of its worship, the manner in which it operated. They have catalogued the role of evangelists, elders, and deacons, the observance of the Supper, styles of singing, praying, and preaching; where the church met; how funds were collected and used; what ministries the church engaged in; what standards of morality were inculcated. And they have imagined that replicating those details in today’s church is what restoration is all about.

Assuming for the moment that their observations have been accurate (an assumption I do not accept, as we will see in subsequent installments), their greater mistake has **been in** thinking that there are no other ways to “skin” the ancient church. But there is more to the church than its forms. Like the apple, the church has a functional aspect which must also inform our

understanding of it. Having exhausted ourselves with measurement and definition and categorization, it yet remains for us to ask, “What was the mission of the New Testament church? What ends did it pursue? What purposes defined its identity and shaped its existence? What implications does all of that have for us?”

To answer such questions will require a different kind of sharp instrument than the one we have been using—a logical knife that takes us past the morphology of the New Testament church to probe questions of purpose, utility, and value. But in that probing, I see promise of understanding better what the ancient church was about, and hope that the modern church can rediscover what it is we are to restore.

Toward a Definition of Form and Function

Definitions are rarely fun but often necessary. So grit your teeth and let’s think more precisely about the meaning of *form* and *function* as these terms relate to the church.

By “form,” I mean those methods, behaviors, and rituals through which the people of God give expression to their life under God... the *means* they use to carry out the spiritual business to which God has called them. By “function,” I intend to denote the spiritual business itself... those *ends* which are definitional, fundamental, and central to our identity as God’s people. “Function” addresses mission; “form” has to do with methodology. “Function” is about purpose; “form” addresses the means by which purpose is accomplished. “Function” asks *what* and *why*; “form” asks *how*. “Function” is concerned with which mountains we are called to climb; “form” wonders by which route we should travel.

My dictionary defines *function* as the “duty, occupation, or role of a person,” while one of the definitions listed for form is “procedure.” That captures the distinction nicely. Functions have to do with “big picture” items on the church’s plate—the “roles” God’s people are called to *fulfill*. They define the reasons why we exist and the uses to which God puts us. Forms, on the other hand, describe the “pragmatics” in which the people of God engage—the tasks and “procedures” by which the church carries out its roles. Forms are the tangible methods by which the church conducts its mission.

As an example, you will soon read that I consider “worship” to be a primary function of God’s people. Whether we talk about the Patriarchs, Moses, or the church—people who claim to be in relationship with God are always called to worship him. In particular, Christians have a responsibility to magnify, adore, and praise their Father and Savior—it is part of our God-given “business.” *Whether* we should be a worshipping people is not debatable. It is one of the necessary “roles” to which we have been called.

How we are to worship, on the other hand, is open to much debate and variation. By asking “how,” we have stopped talking about function and entered a discussion of form. In Corinth, Paul encouraged the church to worship by ridding themselves of divisions (1 Corinthians 11:17), having women cover their heads (1 Corinthians 11:20ff), giving preference to prophecy over tongues (1 Corinthians 14, especially vss. 23-25), and ensuring that assemblies are conducted in

an orderly and reverent fashion (1 Corinthians 14:26ff). These were some of the *forms* through which the Corinthian Christians gave expression to the “worship” *function*.

But there is more to the function of worship than the particular forms practiced at Corinth. Identifying and imitating Corinthian forms will not necessarily ensure that the modern church functions as a worshipping community (any more than crafting wings in the shape of a bird’s will guarantee that you can fly). Indeed, the commitment of the modern church to worship in “spirit and in truth” may lead it to devise forms which would never have occurred to the ancient Corinthians.

The church needs forms—means, methods, mechanisms—in order to exhibit the functions to which God has called us. Just as words are required to articulate thoughts, so forms are necessary to accomplish function—they are the idiom in which we express religious purpose.

But to say that forms are *necessary* to function is not to say they are *synonymous*. The distinction between forms and functions in religious life, between the means for doing business and the essential business itself, is an important one. Failure to make such a distinction—to so confuse form and function that they become indistinguishable—is the source of much mischief in Churches of Christ today. Clarifying this distinction can lead us to new insights about the church and how it should conduct itself.

Biblical Distinctions between Form and Function

Though the words “function” and “form” do not occur in Scripture to define the religious life of God’s people, the distinction is very much in evidence. Take, for example, the idea of “covenant” and “sign.” When God made a covenant with Noah not to destroy the earth with water ever again, he set a *sign* in the heavens—a rainbow (Genesis 9:9-17). The same thing occurred when God established a covenant relationship with Abraham; he instituted a “sign of the covenant”—circumcision (Genesis 17:1-14). The Sabbath Day is also called a “sign,” symbolizing the covenant God made with Israel (Exodus 31:12-17).

But the sign was not itself the covenant. It pointed to the covenant. It symbolized the covenant. It was the form God chose to signify a covenant with his people. But the sign always pointed beyond itself to the ways in which God and his people were to function. In the end, it was the covenant, not the sign, which was vital.

Form and Function in the Prophets

This same distinction becomes evident in the prophetic writings. Israel had a hard time telling the difference between form and function. In the course of time, animal sacrifice became synonymous with holy living. Praying in the Temple was the same as behaving in righteous ways. Evidently, Israel had fooled herself into believing that, so long as she observed the *forms* of a godly people, actually *functioning* as a godly people was not required.

The prophets begged to differ. One of their most important tasks was to reeducate Israel to the difference between religious ceremony and righteous living—between the forms of Israel and her

true functions. To do that, they often played one against the other, minimizing temple and cultus and ceremony in order to emphasize justice, mercy, and faithfulness (see Isaiah 1:10-17; Joel 2:13; Micah 6:6,8).

The Israelites had managed to blur the line between religious forms (temple worship and sacrifice) and a religious function (holy living). They had succeeded in making the former synonymous with the latter. They had become meticulous about means and careless about ends. It is important to see, not that the prophets condemned such confusion, but that they made a clear distinction between the methods used to praise God and the lifestyle lived in submission to him.²

You find the same kind of language in the writings of David (Psalm 51:17), Jeremiah (7:9-10), and Hosea (6:6). Each of these writers makes it clear that there is a meaningful difference between the condition of a worshipper's heart and the methods he uses to express himself to God. Proper ceremony is no substitute for a yielded life.

Form and Function in Paul

This distinction was very much on Paul's mind. As someone who had once "put confidence in the flesh" only to throw it all away for the "surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus" (Philippians 3:4-8), Paul felt he had already wasted too much of his life on peripheral issues while ignoring the core of relationship with God. He developed a ruthless instinct for that which was "of Christ" and that which was "rubbish" in comparison, expending a great deal of energy teaching others to differentiate between "the form of godliness" and "the power" of it (2 Timothy 3:5).

Plow through his writings and you will turn up any number of references to this distinction between the essential business of the people of God and the particular (and transitory) ways in which that business is conducted.

Take, for instance, when he speaks to the Colossians of "shadows" and "reality" (Colossians 2:16-17). Here Paul points to religious forms (which are being urged on the Colossians by Jewish Christians), and distinguishes between them and the hard kernel of Christian faith. He recognizes a difference between religious behaviors (some of which were God-ordained) and the essence of religious life. Even in Old Testament times, such forms were a "shadow" of Christ. They themselves were not the point, but mere illustrations of the point. To focus on the shadow and miss the reality is (for Paul) the characteristic flaw of his ancestral people.

Paul makes the same distinction between form and function when he comments to the Romans on how to treat the weaker brother. What should they do about members of the church who have convictions about food laws and the observance of special days? Paul tells them not to judge each other. He reminds them to act out of love about such matters. But then he makes a pronouncement on the matter, indicating that there is a distinction to be made between that which is central and peripheral in the kingdom (Romans 14:17).

To the Galatians, Paul makes the same distinction: "For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision has any value. The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love"

(Galatians 5:6). Here again, Paul recognizes a difference between the trappings of religion (the forms—food laws, special days, circumcision) and essential religious business (the functions—Christ-centeredness, righteousness, faith). For Paul, the ability to see this difference is the necessary starting place for determining proper conduct as a Christian.

Form and Function in the Teachings of Jesus

It is in the teachings of Jesus, however, that this distinction between form and function is most evident. When accused of failing to encourage fasting among his disciples, Jesus responded that the new functions of the kingdom of God would need new forms to contain them. “No one pours new wine into old wineskins. If he does, the wine will burst the skins, and both the wine and the wineskins will be ruined. No, he pours new wine into new wineskins” (Mark 2:22). Notice that Jesus does not argue for a “wineskin-less” religion (a religion without forms). He simply states that (in time) forms harden and habituate. When that happens, such forms are no longer fit containers for the fermenting presence of the gospel. New wineskins (i.e., new forms) must be found to hold the essence of the kingdom.

Jesus was consistently enraged by the Pharisees’ tendency to cling to their forms at the expense of divinely mandated functions. They obsessed about food laws and what went into their stomachs, when they should have paid more attention to what came out of their mouths and hearts (Mark 7:1-23). They worried about proper etiquette on the Sabbath while ignoring God’s demand that his people show mercy (Matthew 12:9-14). They dissected the Scriptures, but missed entirely the living Word of God (John 5:39-40). They went to the temple to boast of their righteousness, yet returned home unrepentant and unforgiven (Luke 18_9-14). They were deeply worried about entering Pilate’s presence and becoming unclean for the Passover, but not at all concerned about falsely accusing and murdering the Son of God. Each instance was further evidence to Jesus that these men had placed the forms of religion above its function.

When Jesus distinguished between what was inside a man and what was on the outside, he was addressing ideas very similar to function and form. He touched on this idea in settling the great “hand-washing controversy,” insisting that uncleanness results not from dirty hands (failing to observe the “washing” form) but from a dirty heart (failing to understand the holiness function) (Matthew 15:17-20). He decried using external “acts of righteousness” (giving, praying, fasting) as a means of gaining glory from men, but divorcing those actions from their intended religious purposes (Matthew 6:1-18).

Most of the “woes” pronounced in Matthew 23 against the religious leaders of his day focused on this inclination to major in external forms and minor in the change of heart that is the essential function of religion. The Pharisees preached a good message, but would not practice it. They had the words right but missed the meaning (Matthew 23:2-4). They were fastidious about the form that oaths took but quite careless about honoring their commitments (Matthew 23:16-22). They were very concerned about external appearances, but neglectful of the internal transformations the Law was intended to foster.

Echoing the language of the prophets, Jesus included in these “woes” a statement that is, surely, his sharpest distinction between form and function. “You give a tenth of your spices—mint, dill

and cumin. But you have neglected the more important matters of the law—justice, mercy and faithfulness” (Matthew 23:23). Once again, Jesus draws a line between that which is peripheral and that which is central... between lesser matters and “the more important matters”... between the forms we use to interact with God and the basic functions to which God has called us.

Whether Jesus is discussing wine and wineskins, commands and traditions, heart-worship and mere ceremony, the desire to please God and external acts, the inside and the outside, or faithfulness and tithing, he is making a consistent distinction between the functions of religion and its forms. When it comes to religion and our life before God, there are principles and there are practices; there are ends and there are means. It is this distinction I am trying to get at by using the terms “form” and “function.”

And Now, A Word From Our Sponsors

A restoration slogan hints to us of the same distinction: “Doing Bible things in Bible ways.” “Bible things” suggests the same ends and purposes, the essential spiritual business, that I am calling “function.” “Bible ways” alludes to the means and methods I have designated “form.” Our movement has tended to focus on the latter, concluding that what was most needed for the church of our day was a closer scrutiny of *how* the early church attended to its business. So out came the paring knife to begin the meticulous dissection of church practices in Corinth, Rome, Ephesus, etc.

Perhaps we took for granted that we understood what “Bible things” are called for, that we grasped fully the business they (and we) should be about. Perhaps we thought such issues to be so basic as to need no comparable and careful study. Or, perhaps, we so completely confused form and function that we failed to note any difference between “things” and “ways”—and, thus, draw a distinction that could have made a real difference for us.

The result is that we have never found that logical knife which would allow us to probe the New Testament church for signs of its purpose and function. We can tell you how often early churches took the Supper, whether they cooperated with other congregations in benevolence and mission efforts, what role deacons played and why they did not have basketball hoops in their multi-purpose auditoriums. But ask us to tell you succinctly, not what they did, but who they were, what they most valued, the purposes they pursued most fervently, and we are likely to give you a blank stare.

Yet there is a great deal to learn about this aspect of church life. For it is precisely the issue of function in the New Testament church that bears greatest promise for teaching us who they were and who we, today, are meant to be. In fact, as I will suggest, it is a focus on function that can breathe new life into a restoration plea. We need to be busy restoring the New Testament church. But not the ways in which it conducted business. We need to restore the business itself.

¹ Robert Pirsig, *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*.

2 Some, no doubt, will counter that the prophets do not advocate getting rid of the temple or sacrifice or circumcision, but only that (in addition to these forms) Israel pay attention to holy living, etc. They are not saying that forms are dispensable, but that functions come first. There is certainly truth to that point. However, during times when certain forms were impossible (e.g., the destruction of the temple), Israel was still called to function as God's people. In reality, circumstances did "get rid" of the temple and the sacrifices—yet Israel could still function as a holy, worshipping, God-centered community.

Melting Ice, Breaking Down Walls...and/or Taking Humor Seriously

by Dennis Crawford
March – April, 1998

It could have been a scene straight out of *The Beverly Hillbillies*, or worse, maybe *The Grapes of Wrath*. It was moving day. We were moving our daughter and new son-in-law from Searcy, Arkansas to their new home in Austin, Texas. Our convoy consisted of a U-Haul truck, two cars packed with stuff, and my pickup. The pickup was loaded with various kinds of bulky, odd-sized items that wouldn't fit in the U-Haul truck. A cheapie blue tarp covered—theoretically—the contents of the truck. Actually, the plastic tarp had torn away from several key moorings, and had shredded into a thousand streamers. The blue streamers had been flapping in the breeze for the last eighty-five miles or so.

About half-way home, our ragamuffin motorcade pulled in for a pit stop.

It was only after we had stopped that I fully realized the significance of this whole scene. We probably looked like total idiots going down the road. Surely people had been pointing and laughing, or shaking their heads as we passed by. So, having taken this whole scene in, I did what any serious patriarch/family historian would do: I laughed until I cried, and called for the video camera.

Little did I know—when I asked for the camera—that my truck, the shredded blue tarp and my light-hearted attitude would set the stage for a...Crawford Family Moment of Truth.

I realized it was one of those moments because, for the first time, my son-in-law bristled at me. He was upset—and subtly expressed his dismay—that I wanted video footage of the ragged, floppy blue mess on my pickup. In this harmless moment, we almost crossed swords. I could tell he was out of his league. After I caught my breath, I think I said something like, “Lighten up. You take yourself way too seriously to travel with this family.” Now after a few years in the family, and some reprogramming, he's a lot more fun to travel with.

I don't know why our family takes itself so lightly. It could be in the blood. My dad, who made and lost two fortunes in his lifetime, had a very earthy way of shrugging off setbacks. When life knocked him down, he would—as he put it—“Just spit and go on.”

Maybe laughing at the family is a complex defense mechanism. Freud might say, “Ve beliff joo laugh at yourselfe to take ze sting away, before uzzers laugh at joo.” Could be. Or perhaps it's some genetic quirk, but whatever, we laugh at ourselze.

Family laughter brings up a larger issue. If the church is “family,” may we laugh at our-selves? I began thinking seriously about this a few months ago when I overheard a discussion concerning laughter at the expense of the church. The discussion was critical of preachers, teachers and writers who parodied, exaggerated the faults of and generally poked fun at the inconsistencies of Christians. Those engaged in the discussion thought that God's people should never be the brunt of humorous jabs. At first, this observation seemed too true to argue. Of course, the church is

sacred, holy, a royal priesthood—God’s possession. So, are the would-be humor-police right? It’s easy to check. Let’s think about it.

Breaking the Ice, Breaking Down Walls

In a practical way, every effective public speaker knows that humor builds bridges between speaker and audience. And breaks the ice. You can drive home a serious point with a laugh. Proverbs 17:22 is true: “A cheerful heart is good medicine.” A good laugh can make your day, as well as open your heart. No, the preacher doesn’t need to be a standup comic. But when you say, “A funny thing happened to me on the way to the pulpit,” everybody listens.

Funny things do happen. If, while preaching or teaching, I need to lighten up for a moment, I don’t tell an Aggie joke. One of my elders has Polish roots, and graduated from Texas A & M. But that’s all right. I hardly ever tell jokes. I can’t remember them anyway. So, I tell a joke on myself. I always have several recent, embarrassing antics with which to work, and no one has ever been offended laughing at me.

Recently I taught a one-shot class at our local Concordia Lutheran College on *What Is the Church of Christ?* I was concerned that the students might be difficult to work with, since they had probably heard that “one of those guys who thinks he’s the only one going to Heaven is coming.” So, to get them on my side, I began the class by making myself very human. I told them an incident like this one:

Recently, I had an emergency dentist’s appointment for a very small and quick procedure. The dentist’s office is just down the street from my house, so he asked me to come in at 7:00 a.m., before he usually begins his day. He said he could do the work in five minutes and have me out of there. So I got up at 6:30—with just enough time to throw on my sweats and comb the few hairs I have left. In minutes, I was in his office, out again and back home to dress for work. It wasn’t until I began to shave... that I saw it. Sticking to my neck...plain as day... as if it belonged there... the *Breathe Right* nose strip I had installed on my nose the night before. Every time I think about that I have to laugh. No telling what the dentist thought. I really should print WWJD on my strip, just in case I’m called out for some emergency in the middle of the night. At least I’d have a good story if the strip turns up on my neck. “Oh, yes, haven’t you heard? WWJD isn’t just for your wrist anymore.”

Every week something like that happens to me and I find one more reason to be humble. There are lots of places for the church to grow in humility, too. Take our printed materials. Like a four-year-old, who says embarrassing things in public he has overheard in private, our bulletin typos remind us that we can’t take ourselves too seriously. Some of my favorites are:

“The outreach committee has enlisted 25 visitors to make calls on people who are not afflicted with any church”... which goes well with... “remember in prayer the many who are sick of our church.” And one denominational bulletin reminds us why we don’t have choirs. Their bulletin announcement read... *“The choir invites any member of the congregation who enjoys sinning to join the choir.”* Yes, there it is, choirs and sinning go hand in hand. Maybe praise teams, too?

Laughter is a good sign. Actually, the inability to laugh at ourselves and our foibles may indicate the onset of mental illness. My mother, who had a rich sense of humor, first began to show signs of Alzheimer's when she became unable to "take a joke." Neither could she make a joke. Everything became literal and serious. Studies show the ability to see humor—even the absurd—in the idiosyncrasies of human behavior is one characteristic of a healthy, well-rounded personality.

Thank God for the freedom to laugh. In a totalitarian state, humor is scarce. Crack a joke about the regime and you may be treated to a long vacation in a beautiful gulag.

Then there are the Gospels. You can laugh there. In fact, if you don't enjoy reading humor that refers to laughable, self-righteous, inconsistent, religious people you'd better lay off the Gospels. Jesus constantly let the air out of the Pharisees' stuffed shirts.

Jesus said things about the hypocrisy and the spiritual blind spots of the Scribes and Pharisees that the common people had probably *wanted* to say for years. Don't get me wrong—Jesus didn't run down God's Law—he hit those who were making a mockery of God's law. He didn't treat the Law of Moses, or the prophets, lightly. But he probably did inspire laughter at the expense of the Pharisees.

Laughter? In the Gospels? Was Jesus "funny"? If that's a new concept for you, let's seriously consider it. In Matthew 7:1-5, Jesus discussed harsh judgment. He said, "Do not judge, or you too will be judged." From there, to illustrate, he could have said, "You people go around judging others for relatively insignificant problems when you have terrible flaws in your own lives." But did he say it that way? No, he chose to make it memorable—even humorous—by showing us a person with a log hanging out of his eye, headed toward another saying, "Here, let me help you with that speck in your eye." That's funny—and he deliberately said it that way.

Isolated incidence, you think? Think again. To illustrate the religious inconsistency of the Pharisees, Jesus could have said, "You people are so inconsistent. You are careful about keeping the small parts of the Law and lax about the things that really matter." Yes, he could have said it prosaically, but he chose to say it this way: "You strain out a gnat and swallow a camel" (Matthew 23:24). Get the picture? Here's the careful religious person painstakingly straining his wine through a piece of fine linen. Then he turns to his plate. *There's an entire camel on it. And he eats it. Hooves, head, tail and all.* Is that funny? Unless you caught the broadside of the joke, or you're missing a humor gene or two, you have to laugh. After you see the gnat and the camel, you'll never again be able to look at moral inconsistency with a completely straight face.

Humor With a Bite

William Zinsser, a prize-winning columnist, says, "With humor, writers [and speakers] can say important things, in a way that regular writers can't say it, or if they do, it's so regular that nobody is reading it." Translation? People may overlook a serious essay—but they'll read something funny. So, at times, humor is no laughing matter. Preachers, teachers and writers who use humor aren't just fooling around—well—most of the time, at least. Humor can, and should be, taken seriously.

Jesus wasn't a standup comic. His parody, exaggeration, and irony had a sharp edge. In Matthew 23, after his stinging (grossly exaggerated, comic?) rebukes of the Pharisees, he cries out, on the verge of tears, "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem... how often I have longed to gather your chickens together... but you were not willing."

"Wait," someone may say, "wasn't Jesus a man of sorrows? Didn't he have the sins of the world on his back?" Yes, he wept. Yes, as Isaiah 53 put it, Jesus was "a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief." However, sorrow, grief and suffering don't necessarily deaden your funny bone. Some of the funniest, most joy-filled people I've known, have struggled with debilitating illnesses, personal problems or overwhelming family tragedies. Suffering and sorrow don't have to put us in depression-city. On the contrary, Jesus said, "When you fast (really become contrite or agonize in prayer) do not look *somber* as the hypocrites do..." (Matthew 6:16).

Love and Laughter

The discussion concerning laughter and the church boils down to this question: can you love something and see the humor in it at the same time? Does laughing at the church's inconsistencies and human foibles mean that the humorist doesn't love the church? Or Christians? Of course not.

Bob Hope has entertained three or four generations and made a life firing off one-liners that made us laugh at everyone from the President to the Supreme Court. When Hope entertained the troops in WW II, he encouraged them to laugh at their Commanding Officers. Yet I've never heard anyone accuse Bob Hope of being the slightest bit un-American. Bill Cosby, with his comedy routine and television series, had us laughing ourselves silly at mothers, dads, brothers, sisters and grandparents. Bill Cosby is antifamily? No way. Then, in our fellowship, we have Paul Faulkner. In his Marriage Enrichment Seminars, with Carl Brecheen, he has the wives laughing at the "clod" husbands. And, he even gets the "clods" laughing at themselves. Paul Faulkner doesn't love, respect and encourage the family? You know better than that.

It's paranoid to see a sign of disloyalty to the church in every humorous jab from pulpit or pen. We'd have to quit teaching and preaching. Because preachers, teachers and writers must point out what is, and remind us what is supposed to be. There will always be disparity between our preaching and our practice. This tension between what is, and what should be, and all our little hypocrisies in between, is the perfect breeding ground for parody, comic exaggeration and irony.

Warning: Humor May Be Hazardous to Your Health

With humor, it's possible to get people to drop their guard and see themselves as they never have before. This can be dangerous. Some people may not appreciate that view. When the Pharisees finally got the punch line and saw themselves as they really were: blind guides, camel swallows, whitewashed tombs, prophet killers and snakes with huge phylacteries and long tassels, they didn't exactly roll in the aisles. They got together and decided to make some changes. Then, after one of Jesus' routines, they said, "We have a special place for those who get laughs at our expense. It's called a cross. Here, carry this crossbeam up that hill—see if that's funny."

In the rich tradition of the prophets, who used their own brand of biting sarcasm and irony, Paul told it like it was, and was chased all over the Mediterranean. As he ran with the Good News, he said of himself and his preaching brethren, “We are fools for Christ’s sake.” (1 Corinthians 4:10). Frederick Beuchner said, as he discussed preaching, “Anything worth telling is worth making a fool out of yourself to tell it.”

So we do. Ah, the power of a church, a people, who can laugh at themselves. People who can admit they are still learning how to worship. People who can confess they still don’t know how to love. People who can say, “Look at us. After all this time. Look at what a short distance we have come. We have ten miles behind us, and ten thousand more to go.” Talk about walls coming down. To laugh is to admit our human condition. To admit our weaknesses. To confess sin. To hear the Lord say, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in *weakness*.”

So, have I answered the question? May we use humor? If you do, you may get into trouble. You may be misunderstood. You could even be charged with blasphemy. So finally, everyone who wants to communicate the gospel must answer that for themselves.

For me, I answer it this way. Some Sunday mornings after we have sung “The Lord is in His holy temple, let all the earth keep silent before him”—I remind myself that the hymn is totally out of context in our assemblies. Even so, I feel quite somber and promise myself to cause no laughter in God’s solemn assembly today.

I step up on the podium with a prayer in my heart, open my Bible, unfold my notes and look out at the church. Then, ever so briefly, I look inside my own soul. In a brief glance I see broken-down convoys and shredded plastic tarps. In those glances, I see a weak and powerless stumble-bumbling people. And every Sunday I remember that in these very people, *in us*, God has promised to show his perfect power. I have to smile—grin even. And for me, at that moment, the question isn’t whether I may use humor in the pulpit or not. The question is—how *in the world* can I preach *without* it?

Polly and the Parable of the Two Churches

*by Bob Rogers
March – April, 1998*

(Following is a brief essay that I wrote the day after my mother's funeral in January, 1997. Psychologists tell us the death of one's mother is one of life's more emotional and stressful moments. I had nothing but wonderful memories of my mother and her funeral was the joyous occasion of a believer going home. My reaction to her death was to write my impressions after her funeral.)

In a little (population 10,000) town in central Oklahoma, there are two churches of Christ. The larger congregation is of the mainstream variety, practicing cooperation, and having a fellowship hall with an industrial strength kitchen. The small group has no paid preacher, eschews Sunday School, and does not believe in having social activities at the church building. The two groups have not been on the best of terms for the last couple of decades...each believing the other to be in error.

Early in 1997, a member of the smaller church, Polly, died at the age of 84. She and her husband of 63 years had formerly attended the larger church, but moved their membership when they felt the larger church became too "liberal." One of Polly's daughters still attended that "liberal" congregation.

Polly and her husband, Morris, lived in the area for more than fifty years. Polly was a warm Christian woman with the heart of a servant. She had many friends. If one were to look up "hospitality" in the dictionary, Polly's picture could accompany the definition. She was extremely good-natured and everybody loved Polly.

Since the attendance at Polly's funeral would be too great for either the funeral parlor or the smaller congregation's facility, Morris decided to have the funeral at the larger congregation. And this is where a miracle began to occur.

Morris planned the funeral in its entirety. He requested congregational singing led by one of his sons-in-law. He organized a singing group comprised of members of both congregations. He had eulogies and prayers by representatives of both groups. After the services at the cemetery, a large meal was served to the family and friends at the fellow-ship hall of the larger congregation, a meal served jointly by members of both congregations. It was a wonderfully warm and joyous occasion celebrating the life of Polly. It became an agape feast in the best and truest meaning of the word.

Members of the more conservative group were wearing aprons and serving "in a church building" right along with those they considered "liberal."

It suddenly struck me: I was in the middle of all this love and acceptance of each other because of the love we shared for this woman. Why couldn't folks get together in love and acceptance on

a regular basis because of a shared love of Jesus? Isn't that what the Lord's Supper is all about? A means of celebrating the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus?

Epilogue

For the past twenty years, we have been sending our annual Christmas letter to our friends who live out of town. The list has grown to about 120 people in eighteen states, as well as Australia, Russia, Africa, and China. Two-thirds of the recipients are members of the Church of Christ. I had expected the church members to understand what I was saying about my mother's funeral, but was unprepared for the response of people not of our fellowship. But the piece struck a responsive chord in other Christian groups as well, even in casual, name-only Christians. I received calls from Baptists to Catholics, nominal to devout, saying that they too wished we could achieve this unity...and knowing exactly what I was writing about.

Hope Network Newsletter: The Problem With Bootstrap Theology

by Marcus Brecheen

March – April, 1998

Marcus Brecheen is a preaching minister in Decatur, Texas. These reflections not only reveal Marcus' heart, but put us in touch with what it means to walk with Jesus in the real world. I commend these lines to *Wineskins* readers. ~ Lynn Anderson

Jim hadn't shaved in days. His hair was disheveled, his clothes were wrinkled, and he hung his head when he walked. If the eyes are indeed windows into the soul, his eyes betrayed a soul which had been ransacked beyond repair. During the four days since his life had fallen apart he had attempted suicide. Mary, his live-in girl friend of four years, had left him for another man, and Jim saw nothing to live for.

"Jim, aren't you going to eat?" I asked him over lunch.

"No, I'm just not hungry. I haven't eaten since she moved out." I was the preacher called in to save the day.

Had I slept through this class in graduate school? In all of my education had I somehow taken the wrong classes? Or was I just beginning my education? One thing was sure. It was finally time to see if all this Bible stuff really works in the trench.

Never had I been the first on the scene and witnessed such carnage as Jim's.

"Lord, what do I tell him? How do I help him? Please give me some way to minister to him." I pleaded. My thoughts turned to graduate school counseling classes: Family Systems Theory, triangling, co-dependency, and what Jim's relationship must have been like with his father. All those things have their place in the right setting, but they failed dismally in this crowded restaurant as Jim's tears trailed down his nose and fell into his lap. His broken heart was screaming for relief, but his sobs were answered only with a deafening silence.

It finally occurred to me that the only thing I had to offer was the one thing Jim needed most.

"Jim, there is hope for you. I'm not smart enough to work out all of your problems, but I have a friend who can. Jim, Jesus Christ loves you, and He doesn't want you to suffer like this. In fact, Jesus came that you might have a better life than you ever dreamed of. Jesus has pulled me out of a trench or two, and I am certain that no trench is too difficult for him. And Jesus specializes in the trenches everybody else runs away from."

He looked at me through red, swollen eyes with a stare which seemed to say, "I want desperately to believe you, and I have nowhere else to turn."

In the eleventh chapter of John's Gospel, Jesus' close friend Lazarus was sick. Trenches usually begin with sickness. Sometimes it is a physical sickness like Lazarus was suffering, but in Jim's

case it was a sickness of the heart. Sickness of the heart can be a ruthless foe, waking you up in the middle of the night or tugging on your coat in the checkout line at the grocery store.

There is only one thing to do when you are flat on your back looking up at an overcast sky. Send word to Jesus

Lesson Number One: Send Word to Jesus

Good thing Lazarus was blessed with smart sisters. John 11:3 says that Mary and Martha sent word to Jesus that the one he loved was sick. Trench-dwellers rarely understand that they are loved by Jesus, and that he cares enough to enter their trench with them. But first they need to invite him. Bootstrap theology makes this one difficult because there is a certain pride associated with climbing out of the trench by yourself. And as long as we think we can do it without Jesus, he will likely let us try.

Have you ever heard people say, “God helps those who help themselves?” That tired old cliché is most often uttered as we slip our hands around our bootstraps. “I think I can, I think I can,” works pretty well when reading a children’s story about a little train engine and teaching a child about the value of hard work. But what happens when you can’t? What happens when the bootstraps break?

The real trouble with “God helps those who help themselves” is that it can be found no-where in the Bible. Rather, what the Bible says repeatedly is that God takes great delight in helping those who have absolutely no hope.

And so when the bootstraps break and everything else has proven us helpless and hope-less, the only thing left to do is send word to Jesus.

That’s what Mary and Martha did. And that’s what Jim and I did after lunch. “Jim, repeat after me. ‘Jesus, I’m in bad shape. I’m sad, lonely, desperate, helpless, and without hope. I’ve tried everything I know how to try. I’ve even tried to die, and I’m sorry. So Jesus, if you really love me, I want to know you and have you as my friend. Please show me your friendship and your love. In Jesus’ name, Amen.’”

Jim wiped his eyes and shyly smiled. It was the first time he had prayed in thirty-five years. He wasn’t yet ready to become a Christian, but if this Jesus really loved him he wanted to learn to love Jesus, too.

God moves in mysterious ways, to be sure! Even after Mary and Martha sent word to Jesus, he stayed away for two more days. Why would Jesus do that? Why would he heal complete strangers sometimes, but not rush now to the side of a dying companion?

How is it that a woman can sneak up behind Jesus, touch the edge of his garment (Matthew 9:20), and seemingly rob Jesus of a healing; and yet Jesus will not offer his power from a distance to heal a friend to whom he was closer than a brother? After all, Jesus had healed other people from a distance (John 4:50). Why not now?

Lesson Number Two: God Will Break Your Heart to Save Your Soul

One of the hardest lessons we ever learn about God is that we are not God. He cares nothing for our agendas, plans, meetings, and schedules. What Jesus had to give the family and friends of Lazarus was actually better than a healing. He was not about to rob them of this blessing by conforming to their agenda for how saviors should act. So Jesus stayed away for two more days, and while he was away Lazarus died.

According to John 11:17, by the time Jesus arrived in Lazarus' hometown of Bethany, Lazarus had been dead for four days.

This was all according to plan because all good Jews believed that after a person died, their spirit hovered around the deceased body for three days. If a person was raised from the dead within three days, nobody would have notified CNN. After all, they believed the spirit never actually left until after the third day. Jesus comes marching into Bethany on the fourth day to comfort those who are grieving, only to be confronted by two sisters who rightfully preach, "If you had come when we called you, Lazarus would still be alive."

Remember, Jesus has something better to offer them than a healing. You see, Jesus will allow Bethany to grow hopelessly dark, all the while knowing that light is just around the corner. It may seem cruel to us, but what Jesus wants to do is remove every other crutch upon which we could lean. He wants there to be no doubt that when the light comes, it comes only from God.

And so as the sun sets and the street lights come on in Bethany, all hope vanishes. Lazarus has been dead for four days. Mary and Martha have never seen a darker night. And Jesus planned it this way.

Why does Jesus allow this? Why would Jesus intentionally let people hurt when he has the ability to make it all go away? Because humans are prone to bootstrap theology. Years ago a friend of mine was sick with cancer. Doctors gave the gloomy prognosis, "This is aggressive cancer. It's the most aggressive cancer that we know of. We can operate and remove most of it, but it always comes back. We can slow your death with chemotherapy, but your death will be soon." Darkness had enveloped Bethany! So we prayed, and we prayed some more. And we gathered together for prayer. We prayed on the way to work, and we prayed at work, and we prayed on the way home from work. God healed our friend. And there were those who whispered as they stooped over to grab their bootstraps, "Ain't chemotherapy marvelous!"

When my wife was pregnant with our only child, we did all the things first-time parents love to do. We called everybody we knew, furnished the baby room, and started thinking of names. We prayed for our baby, and we even talked and sang to our baby in the womb. We went to the doctor for a sonogram one sunny afternoon and stared in amazement at the fuzzy little shape of our baby on the monitor. We could see her little head, and she was kicking her legs and waving her arms. My wife and I both cried tears of joy. Suddenly the doctor turned off the machine and said sternly, "You need to go see a specialist." "What's wrong?" we asked. "I cannot find your baby's abdominal organs. Your baby has no abdominal organs, and she will not be able to live outside the womb."

“But doctor, there must be some mistake, some oversight.”

“No, there is no mistake. I’ve done more than 3,000 sonograms, and I’ve never seen this problem before.”

Once again, darkness had surrounded Bethany.

So we prayed, and we learned what it meant to pray without ceasing. We drove to Houston to see a specialist. In fact, we were able to see the very doctor who adapted sonogram technology into the office of the obstetrician/gynecologist. As we entered his office he was reviewing our previous sonogram, and the grimace on his face told us things didn’t look good. But as he began the sonogram, he quickly found that our baby’s abdominal organs had formed perfectly. While we cried tears of joy, there were those who stooped over again to grab their bootstraps, and said, “Aw, that first doctor must have made a mistake.”

That’s why Jesus let the cold chill of death creep through the lifeless body of his friend Lazarus. That’s why Jesus wanted Lazarus to stay dead for four days. Because with even the slightest margin of doubt, people always opt for the bootstraps. There was no other way for Jesus to prove to them that he was indeed the resurrection and the life. Yes, Jesus could have healed Lazarus. And in spite of his power to do so, Jesus allowed Bethany to grow dark while one of His closest friends passed away.

In John 11:35, John writes, “Jesus wept.” Only two words, but with more meaning than libraries full of theology. Two words pregnant with meaning. One of the shortest sentences in all of Scripture, but with enough power to light the world.

Even when Bethany is encased in darkness, the Son of God will weep with you through the night. Jesus will come and take his place next to you and share the burden of your sadness.

That was one of the greatest revelations for my friend Jim. He had known the loneliness of crying himself to sleep at night. He had tasted the sudden death of his heart’s greatest desire. A world once washed in pastel was now hued in gray. Jim was all alone in his trench. His closest friends peered into his abyss and shook their heads, “Better him than me.”

That’s why Jim wiped his eyes when I told him about Jesus. Jesus came from the back of the crowd, making his way through the fair-weather friends who stood safely above the trench. And without regard for the terrain, the depth, or the personal risk involved, Jesus descended the tear-drenched wall of Jim’s trench. Not to pull him out immediately, but first to throw a nail-pierced hand around Jim’s shoulder and weep with him.

Trenches don’t scare Jesus like they scare you and me. The darkness of Bethany never frightens the Son of God like it frightens the ones he loves.

So, in John 11:39 he tells them to take away the stone which covered the tomb of his friend Lazarus. In the King’s best English, Martha said to Jesus, “But, Lord, by this time he stinketh.”

The very one who sent word to Jesus in the first place that Lazarus was sick now tried to keep Jesus away because of the smell, as though Jesus didn't know what death smelled like.

Have you ever kept Jesus at bay while you tried to work out your problems? Bootstraps are always ready, ever encouraging us that we can fix things ourselves. We even get support from fellow boot-wearers. Self-help books line bookshelves across this land, encouraging, prodding, demanding that you pick yourself up and get on with the business of living. We are most often convinced that the sun has not yet sunk completely below the skyline of Bethany. But eventually we realize God's eternal scheme—that life will fail miserably without Jesus. And it's not until we realize this fact that we are ready to hear the voice of Jesus.

Lesson Number Three: Jesus Desires to Create Life from Death

John 11:43 literally says, "Jesus megaphoned, 'Lazarus, come out.'" No doubt there were those standing nearby who thought to themselves, "Uh, Jesus, Remember our third grade synagogue teacher, Mrs. Reubenstein? She taught us that the spirit leaves the body after three days. You could've made a difference if you had come when you were called. But take one good whiff and you can tell that Lazarus is as dead as a hammer.

Jesus was about to reveal an aspect of the Father which no sober person could have ever imagined. We read plainly in the book of Genesis that with a single word God is able to create. With his voice he created light, heavens, seas, the sun, moon, and stars, and every living thing upon this earth. God speaks worlds into existence because of power which no human will ever comprehend, and he does it all with merely a spoken word. So when Jesus stood outside the tomb of Lazarus and megaphoned for him to come out, there is solid evidence that if Jesus had not specified "Lazarus," the entire cemetery would have emptied!

Lazarus is not the only one who obeyed Jesus and came forth from the grave. So did my friend Jim. Never in all my life had I encountered anybody so hungry and thirsty for the things of God. Jim wanted to meet with Christians every day to talk about the things of God, so for three weeks every question he asked was answered from Scripture. One afternoon there was a knock on my door. Jim had come to my office with only one thing on his mind. "I want to become a Christian, and I want to do it right now."

So Jim was immersed into Jesus, and he was indeed a new creation. "Christianity is the strangest thing I've ever experienced," he said later. "Today I was sitting at a red light, and when the light turned green the man in front of me just sat there. A month ago I would have honked and shook my fist at him, but today I just sat there waiting patiently for him to realize what he was doing. I've never been so in love with life, so full of joy, so at peace in all my life." His description of his love for Jesus was as pure and innocent as a child. Like those of a newborn baby, Jim's lungs were finally filling with the fresh oxygen of the Holy Spirit for which they were made. And as Jim breathed, God taught him a lesson about tombs. Once you've left the cemetery you can no longer cast a casual glance toward a funeral procession.

God doesn't rescue people from hell simply to deliver them from eternal punishment. The "I Am" is more than fire insurance. God saves people for a reason: to be his workmanship

(Ephesians 2:10). And God's workmanship was reflected the very next time I talked with Jim. "I'm concerned about Mary. She has not named Jesus Christ as her Lord. I can honestly say that even though I still love her, I don't want her back unless she becomes a Christian. But I'm still concerned about her eternity. What should I do?"

"Jim, we need to pray for Mary. We need to pray that Jesus will somehow become attractive to Mary." And so we prayed. We prayed together, and we prayed by ourselves. We prayed at church and we prayed at home. And one day there was a now-familiar knock on my door. Outside stood Jim and Mary and Mary wanted to know what had come over him. She could not understand the Jim who didn't complain about his job any more. He looked the same on the outside, but deep inside there was a Jim she had never met. I sat and listened to Jim share the gospel of Jesus Christ with Mary. And as we arranged to meet again the next day, I prayed much more confidently than the first time, "Lord, thank you for being so faithful. I can hardly wait to see you prove your love to Mary."

Three weeks later Jim baptized Mary into Jesus and later that same year I had the privilege of performing their wedding ceremony. God had once again megaphoned toward a tomb, and another very precious person came to Jesus.

Conclusion

To be quite honest, when Jim finished describing the turn of events in his life for me that very first day over lunch, even I wasn't sure any good could come from it. God really should have called in an expert on an important case like this one. But He didn't. He called a rookie off the bench and into the Super Bowl.

God showed me that my place on his team was similar to a young Chicago Bulls basketball player named Stacy King. King was a rookie with the Bulls and played in a game on an evening when Michael Jordan scored 69 points. After the game he was asked for his reflections on the game. He said, "I'll always remember it as the evening Michael Jordan and I combined for 70 points." God's power was indeed made perfect in my weakness. What I couldn't do for Jim, God could and did.

AfterGlow: Tear Down This Wall

*by Phillip Morrison
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It's just an ugly gray piece of concrete, only one and a quarter inches across, and weighing eight-tenths of an ounce. But it's important because it was a gift from a friend, and because it came from the infamous Berlin Wall.

The wall was started on August 13, 1961, and eventually stretched for more than a hundred miles, separating East from West. Averaging ten feet high and five feet thick, it promised to stand for centuries as a barrier separating people.

But the human spirit cannot be contained by walls. President John F. Kennedy touched that spirit in June of 1963 with his "Tear Down This Wall" speech. And, through the long night of November 9, 1989, the world watched with fascination as the wall came down. Little old ladies with kitchen utensils pecked away, college students used more serious tools, and construction workers battered away with bulldozers and backhoes.

When the wall came down, new interest in Eastern European evangelism flourished. And the walls went back up. Not barriers of concrete and steel, but walls of doctrinal exclusion. Soon there was not just a Church of Christ in Moscow, but several kinds of Churches of Christ. Tests of fellowship were made over the number of communion cups, whether or not to have Sunday School, how churches could or could not work together, and what is to happen at the second coming of Christ.

Sin built a wall at the garden gate, and sinful people have been building walls ever since. I have resolved to spend less time building walls which keep people away from the Kingdom and spend more time building bridges.

Jesus came, not just to build a bridge, but to be a bridge linking God and mankind. Paul came to see the ancient conflict between Jews and Gentiles from a new perspective. "He tore down the wall we used to keep each other at a distance. He repealed the law code that had become so dogged with fine print and footnotes that it hindered more than it helped. Then he started over. Instead of continuing with two groups of people separated by centuries of animosity and suspicion, he created a new kind of human being, a fresh start for everybody. Christ brought us together through his death on the Cross. The Cross got us to embrace, and that was the end of the hostility" (Ephesians 2, The Message).

It took a four-year-old granddaughter to give those words special meaning. The Christmas Eve service was almost over when the Hallelujah Chorus began and our family stood. A man behind me said, "I can't see, would you please sit down?" As I sat, full of resentment that he had disturbed my worship, Annie slid off my lap, made her way to the aisle and back one row. Though the man was a stranger, Annie climbed up in his lap, hugged his neck, planted a big kiss on his cheek, and sat there for the rest of the service.

When the program ended, he tapped me on the shoulder again and said, “I apologize. I was way out of line.” My wall of resentment melted away, and I said, “It’s OK, and have a Merry Christmas!”

A child had led us, the walls had come down, and we were all made better by the experience. And I thanked God for the child of Bethlehem, who has torn down the walls and built the ultimate bridge at the cross.