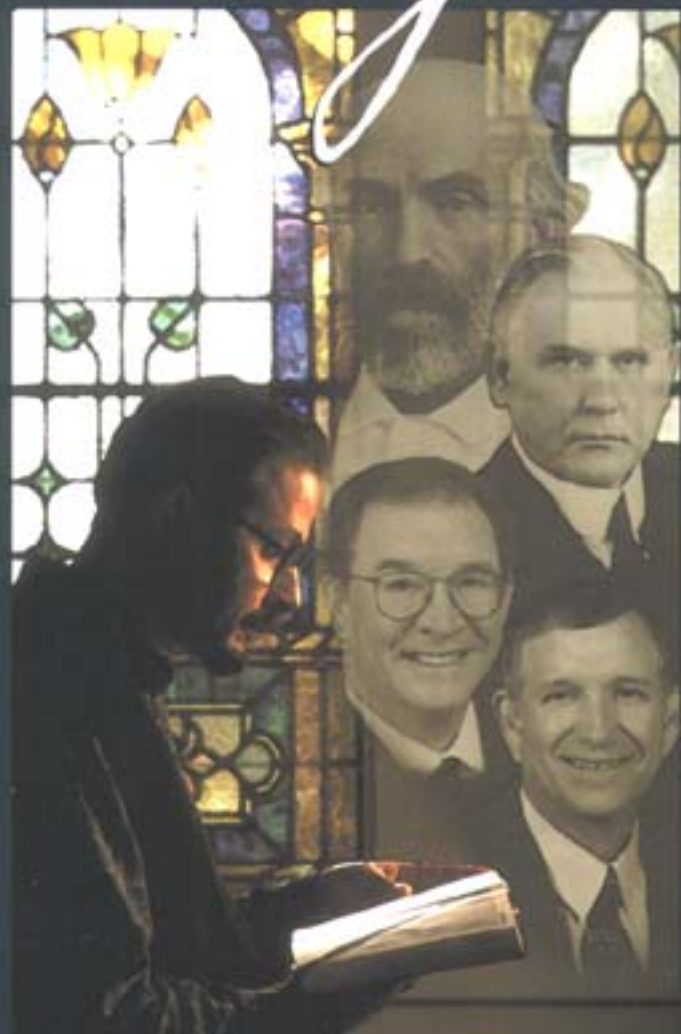


THEE OLD TIME

Religion



PAUL POWELL

Thee Old Time Religion

*Paul W. Powell
Waco, Texas*

On the Cover: "Thee Old Time Religion," the faith of our fathers, was good enough for Rufus Burleson, Baylor's second president, and George W. Truett, namesake for Baylor's Truett Seminary...and it is still relevant for today's leaders...Robert B. Sloan Jr., Baylor's 12th president; and Paul W. Powell, dean of Truett Seminary... And it will be just as relevant for tomorrow's leaders who are in preparation at Truett today.

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Dedicated To

Herbert H. Reynolds

Whose vision gave birth to Truett

To

John and Eula Mae Baugh

and

Paul and Katy Piper

Whose generosity gave a foundation to Truett

To

Robert B. Sloan. Jr.

and

J. Bradley Creed

Whose leadership gave structure to Truett

All of whom believe in Thee Old Time Religion

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Introduction

Historians Will and Ariel Durant acknowledge, in their book "The Lessons of History" that there has been "no substantial change in man's nature during historic times." In fact, they suggest that all of man's technological advances will have to be written off as merely new means of achieving old ends - the acquisition of goods, the pursuit of sex, overcoming competition and the fighting of wars.

Furthermore they suggest that some of these advances have hurt us as much as they've helped. In tripling our speed we have shattered our nerves; in increasing our comforts and conveniences we have weakened our physical stamina and moral fiber; in multiplying our ability to learn and report the events of the day and the planet we have robbed ourselves of peace and quiet; and in bettering the conditions of our workmen we have allowed our cities to fester with ghettos and slums. Then they add, "We are the same trousered apes at 2000 miles an hour as when we had legs."

Though the Durants do not believe in God in the same sense we do, i.e. the God of the Bible, they freely acknowledge man's need of religion. They write, "Even the skeptical historian develops a humble respect for religion, since he sees it functioning, seemingly indispensable in every land and age. To the unhappy, the suffering, the bereaved, the old, it has brought some supernatural comforts valued by millions of souls as more precious than any natural aid. It has helped parents and teachers to discipline the young. It has conferred meaning and dignity upon the lowest existence and through its sacraments have made for stability by transforming human covenants into solemn relationships with God..."

Furthermore, they add, "There is no significant example in history, before our time, of a society maintaining moral life without the aid of religion."

It is for just those two reasons, the fact that neither the nature of man nor the needs of man have changed through the years, that makes me an advocate of the old time religion. With all the changes about us, we have not moved beyond "the faith

once delivered unto the saints." It is just as relevant now as it was then.

Sin is still the curse of the human race. Salvation is still its greatest need. And that's what thee old time religion is all about.

It centers in Jesus Christ who is "the same yesterday, today, and forever." It is rooted in:

- His virgin birth - "A virgin shall conceive and bear a son" (Matthew 1:23).
- His virtuous life - "He was at all points tempted, yet without sin" (Hebrews 4:15).
- His vicarious death - "Christ died for our sins" (I Corinthians 15:3).
- His victorious resurrection - "He is not here, he is risen" (Luke 24:6).
- His visible return - "Behold he cometh ... and every eye shall see him" (Rev. 1: 7).

The central glory of the old time religion is not a great truth nor even a great movement. It is a great person - Jesus Christ himself.

He came not just to proclaim a message but rather that we might have a message to proclaim. He himself was and is the message. Without him there would be no forgiveness of sin, no deliverance from sin, no victory over sin. Without him there would be no gospel.

What the world needs is not a new religion. It needs a new birth. Only the Christ of thee old time religion can give that. Do you remember the words?

It was good for the prophet Daniel
It was good for the fiery furnace
It was good for Paul and Silas
It was good for our mothers
And it's good enough for me.

After preaching and pastoring for 46 years I still believe it.

That's the conviction that prompts these pages.

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1

Thee Old Time Religion

Jude 3

At the close of his early Los Angeles Crusade, Billy Graham's ministry was described in *Time* magazine (September 6, 1963) by an Episcopalian rector, who was quoted as saying, "I believe he's putting the church back 50 years."

At the minister's breakfast during the closing week of the crusade, Dr. Graham, who never responds to his critics, referred to the remark with kindness and humor: "I'm afraid I've failed. I had hoped to put the church back 2,000 years."

There are many today who feel that the simple New Testament faith, thee old time religion, may have been good enough for Paul and Silas, but it's not good enough for generation Xers. It may have been OK in the days of shepherds and ox carts, but not in this day of space shuttles and astronauts. To hang on to thee old time religion they say, is like driving a horse and buggy down an interstate highway.

However, I believe the greatest need in America today is to return to thee old time religion. America seems to have lost its soul. Our philosophy seems to be, "If it feels good, do it; if you get caught, blame someone else."

We're like the lady who went to the psychiatrist. She had a strip of bacon over one ear, a strip of bacon over the

other ear, and a fried egg on her head. She said to the psychiatrist, “Doctor, I’ve come to talk to you about my brother.”

We’re the ones who need help. We need to sing again:

It’s me, it’s me, it’s me, O Lord, standing in the need of prayer.

Not my brother, not my sister, but me, O Lord, standing in the need of prayer.

Not the preacher, not the deacon, but me, O Lord, standing in the need of prayer.

That was also the conviction of Jude when he wrote to admonish us to “... earnestly contend for the faith which was once delivered unto the saints” (verse 3). It had been his intention to write a treatise about our salvation, but because many were leaving the faith — thee old time religion — for new ideas, he felt it was more needful to write and encourage believers to defend the true faith.

The word *faith* refers to the whole of the Christian doctrine. All of God’s revealed truth from Genesis to Revelation, from creation to Calvary.

The faith was “delivered” to us, i.e. it was given to us, entrusted to us. We didn’t discover it. We didn’t develop it. We just received it.

It was delivered “once”, i.e. once and for all, full and complete, final and unchanging. There is nothing to be added to it or subtracted from it. We didn’t discover it and we didn’t develop it and we don’t need to debate it. It has been handed over to us in its completed form.

We don’t need to debate people sleeping together out of wedlock or homosexual marriage or lying under oath or otherwise. God has given us the final words on those

things and many others. That doesn't mean we shouldn't rethink, restudy and restate our faith. But we don't need to revise it. We don't need a new faith.

You may ask, "Do you mean that I should believe the same things my grandfather believed?" The answer is yes. Listen: He may not have known a computer chip from a potato chip, but if he understood and believed the whole of Christian doctrine correctly, you're to believe the same things about the faith that he believed. He may never have flown in a jet airplane, or talked on a cellphone, but that has no bearing on the truth. He was as up to date as we are.

Just because a thing is old doesn't mean that it is out of date or is no longer true. The sun is old, but it still warms the Earth. Water is old but it still quenches the thirst. Air is old but it still sustains life. The mathematical tables are old but two times two still equals four. The age of an idea or fact has nothing to do with truth.

We are to "earnestly contend" for our faith. We didn't discover it, we didn't develop it, and we don't need to debate it, but we are to defend it. We may not understand it all but we stand on it all. It was J. Gresham Machen who said, "The most important things are not the things about which we agreed, but the things for which we will fight."

Our mission then is to perpetuate thee old time religion. Years ago someone wrote a chorus entitled *Thee Old Time Religion*. It begins:

*'Tis thee old time religion, 'tis thee old time religion,
'Tis thee old time religion — it's good enough for me.*

The number of verses is endless but I want to focus on

just five of them as I give emphasis to Thee Old Time Religion. They are:

It has saved our fathers.

It makes you love everybody.

It will do when we are dying.

It will take us all to heaven.

It is good enough for me.

It's Me, It's Me, It's Me O Lord

First, thee old time religion has saved our fathers. At it's heart, thee old time religion is a soul saving religion. Jesus said, "For the son of man is come to seek and to save that which was lost" (Luke 19:10). And the apostle Paul wrote, "This is a faithful saying, and worthy of every acceptation, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners ..." (I Timothy 1:15).

What do we mean by sin and being lost? The word *sin* literally means, "missing the mark." That means, we may not be as bad as we could be and we may not be as bad as someone else, but we're not as good as we ought to be or must be. We have fallen short of God's standard. And our sin has separated us from God.

We therefore stand under the judgment of God, for the wages of sin is death (Romans 6:23) and no man can live on the wages of sin. And perhaps, worst of all, we can't save ourselves by being good or by being religious. That's called "the doctrine of total depravity." It doesn't mean we are totally bad. It means we are totally incapable of saving ourselves. We are helplessly and hopelessly lost unless God does something for us.

We don't like to hear that. All our life we are taught self-reliance. We are taught to carry our own weight, stand on our own two feet, lift ourselves up by our own boot-

straps.

I heard about an old preacher who preached on the depravity of man and after he was through one of his parishioners came up to him and said, "Preacher, I just can't swallow that doctrine of total depravity." The preacher responded: "You don't have to swallow it. It's already in you."

A young man preaching his first sermon said, "God said it; I believe it; that settles it." When he was finished, an old retired preacher came to him, put his arm around his shoulder and complimented him on his sermon. Then he said, "Young man, I liked your sermon. But let me make one correction: God said it and that settles it. It doesn't matter whether you believe it or not."

With all of our sophistication and advances, we have not moved beyond that. We need to be saved from our sins and saved from ourselves.

A part of the problem today is we have lost our concept of sin. When the president of the United States is not sure what the meaning of *is* is, we is in trouble. The more I know about Washington, the more it looks like the monkeys are running the zoo and the inmates are in charge of the asylum.

There is no known human antidote for sin. But there is a divine one. We are at God's mercy. But, the good news is that when we were helplessly and hopelessly lost, God acted in our behalf. "For yet when we were without strength (i.e. unable to help ourselves), in due time Christ died for us" (Romans 5:6).

Man can do many things by himself. He can build a rocket that will sail to the moon and back. He can build a submarine that will sail around the world underwater. He can build an airplane that will fly faster than the speed of

sound. But when it comes to salvation he is helplessly and hopelessly lost. Thee old time religion has a Savior in it. It has saved our fathers and it will save us.

“Preacher, I’m Not Mad at Anybody”

Second, thee old time religion makes us love everybody. We could use several refrains of that today. A man was shipwrecked on a deserted island in the South Pacific. Despite his radio calls for help it still took many months for rescuers to find him. When they did find him they were surprised to see three huts on the beach. They said, “We thought this was a deserted island and you were all alone.” The man said, “Oh, it is and I am.”

Then they pointed to the huts and asked, “Why are there three huts?” The man said, “The first one, there, that’s where I live. The other hut, that’s where I go to church. And, the third one, that’s where I used to go to church.” That’s about how ridiculous we are at times. We can’t even get along with ourselves, much less one another. And Baptists can sometimes be the worst of all.

I heard about six men who were marooned on an island: two Baptists, two Catholics, and two Jews. The two Jews got together and built Temple Beth El. The two Catholics got together and built St. Mary’s. The two Baptists split and formed First Baptist and Second Baptist.

We are bound to have disputes and disagreements. That’s inevitable. But when we do, we are to resolve them quickly and be reconciled to one another even if we have to eat crow. And the easiest way to eat crow is while it is still warm. The colder it gets the harder it is to swallow.

Don’t let disagreements canker into bitterness and resentments. To hold bitterness in you is like drinking poison and expecting the other person to die. It is like hold-

ing a burning match. If you hold it long enough, you're the one who'll get burned. Thee old time religion helps us there. It makes us love everybody.

It's tragic when churches and Christians are best known for their inability to get along, not just with the world but also with one another. But when that's the case, it's not the fault of thee old time religion. It's our fault. Either we don't have the real thing or we don't have all of it. Penicillin was discovered in 1928. It was not developed to the place where it could be used as an antibiotic against infection until 1940. Since then it has saved millions of lives. If you have gone to a doctor with an infection in recent years, chances are he prescribed some form of penicillin. Moreover, he said, "Make sure you take all of it." He knows that once you get to feeling better you may stop short of the full dose and if you do you won't completely kill the infection. So take it all.

Now if we do not take the medicine or if we do not take the full dose, we can't blame Alexander Fleming, who discovered it, or Howard Florey and Ernst Chain, who developed it, or the doctor who prescribed it. We can only blame ourselves for not taking it.

The same is true with thee old time religion. So take it all.

Mr. G. is a retired speech and drama teacher. He never knew his father. His father died while his mother was carrying him and his twin brother. She was sickly and when he and his brother were born they weighed only two pounds each. His twin brother died and friends wanted to prepare two caskets because they were convinced that he would not live either.

Mr. G. did live but life proved to be hard for him. His family was poor and he learned to fight for everything he

had. Fighting was to characterize his life for the next 56 years. His mother was a devout Methodist and took him to church every time the doors were open. In fact, he was convinced that his mother was a fanatical Christian.

When World War II started, Mr. G. was drafted into the military service. In boot camp he killed a fellow soldier. Rather than court martial him and sentence him to prison, the Army decided to ship him overseas and put him into combat immediately. In the next few years, Mr. G was to fight and survive three major campaigns in the South Pacific.

Until recently, I never saw Mr. G. without a white shirt and a tie. He explained to me, "Preacher, in those war years I spent so many days in water-filled foxholes that my clothes actually rotted off. I determined then if I ever got out alive I would always try to dress and look my best." And, he did.

After his military service he became a speech and drama teacher, first in public schools, later in junior college. But anger and violence continued to be a part of Mr. G's life. When he built his first home, the contractor displeased him and he whipped him on the job. Later, a leading businessmen in town criticized one of Mr. G.'s friends on the streets of Tyler, Texas, and Mr. G. beat him so severely that the businessman had to be hospitalized.

He had a disagreement with his neighbor and he shot his neighbor's dog and said, "I would have killed him too if he had come over." Though Mr. G. and his neighbor live within a stone's throw of each other and saw each other almost everyday, Mr. G. would not speak to his neighbor for 10 years.

Once Mr. G. got his truck stuck in the sand near his house. His neighbor, seeing what had happened called

out with an offer to pull the truck out with his tractor. Mr. G. said, "I hadn't spoken to him in 10 years and I wasn't about to speak to him then." So, he told the neighbor to get off of his land or he would kill him like he did his dog.

While teaching at a junior college, Mr. G. began holding extension classes in a nearby prison. In time, he gave up his junior college job and devoted all of his time to teaching inmates in prison. He said, "We got along just fine because I was just like them."

In prison he met a lot of men who claimed to have become Christians. But Mr. G. was never impressed. He called it "jailhouse religion." In time, however, two men touched him very deeply.

Mr. G. was a gifted teacher and one day an inmate-student said to him, "Mr. G., I hope you live long enough to know the one who gave you the gift you have." Mr. G. could never get away from that statement.

Sometime later he was sick and missed a day of work. He had missed only three days of work in 35 years as a teacher. After he returned to work one of the inmates who was a Christian said to him, "Mr. G., you look poorly today." He told the man that he was feeling poorly. The inmate replied, "When I get back to my cell, I'll get down on my knees and talk to the Lord about you."

Mr. G. was deeply touched by that comment. It was the first time he could remember anyone praying for him since his mother died. He was becoming more and more bitter and cynical and disliked himself more and more. He needed something in his life so he went to the prison chaplain for counsel. The chaplain shared with him a verse, "Behold, I stand at the door and knock: if any man hear my voice, and open the door, I will come in to him, and will sup with him, and he with me" (Revelation 3:20).

On his way home from prison that day, he pondered that verse. As he drove down the highway that day he decided to try it. So he asked the Lord to come into his life. Mr. G. said, "Right then, the Lord zapped me." Then he said, "I thought, this can't be. So I started to laugh. Then I started to cry. Then I started to laugh and cry at the same time. I prayed again and the Lord zapped me again." I don't know what Mr. G. meant by "zapped" but God had made a difference in his life and he has been a new man ever since.

Mr. G. knew he needed to find a church, join it, and be baptized. So he quickly made his profession of faith and followed Christ in New Testament baptism. Then having become a Christian, he wanted to make amends with people he had hurt. But he didn't know how to make things right with some people, especially his neighbor. After all, they hadn't spoken in 10 years.

The night he was baptized, his neighbor's mother-in-law was assigned to assist with his baptism and they became friends. Not long afterwards she died. Her husband asked his son-in-law to accompany him to Mr. G.'s house so he could tell him about her death.

As they walked to Mr. G.'s house he was in the yard working on his fence. He said, "I had a hammer in my hand and when I saw them I immediately threw it down so they wouldn't think I was going to hit them with it. The next thing I knew," Mr. G. said, "we were standing in the driveway weeping and hugging each other."

I had lunch with Mr. G. a little while after that and he said to me, "Preacher, I'm not mad at anybody anymore. I love everybody."

Friend, that's what thee old time religion does. Has that happened to you? It can. The answer to violence is

not legislation or education or recreation, but in salvation. The problem is not guns — rather the hearts of people, which need to be changed. And only God can change our hearts. That's the reason Jesus said, "Ye must be born again" (John 3:7). Only God can give us a new nature that is demonstrated by love.

I Won't Ever Have To Say Good-bye

Third, thee old time religion will do when we are dying. We've all got some dying to do. The whole world is like one giant hospital and every patient is terminal. Thee old time religion shows us how to die.

Listen to the apostle Paul, "For I am now ready to be offered, and the time of my departure is at hand. I have fought a good fight, I have finished my course, I have kept the faith: Henceforth there is laid up for me a crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, shall give me at that day: and not to me only, but unto all them also that love his appearing" (II Timothy 4:6-8). When he wrote that, Paul was standing on the edge of life ready to step into eternity and he says with calm assurance, "I am ready."

The late George W. Truett, longtime pastor of First Baptist Church, Dallas, once said, "Our people die well."

Other churches' people die well also. Cliff Jones, one of my former deacons and a close friend called me recently to tell me his cancer, which had been in remission for three years, had reappeared and spread to his liver and lungs. Doctors gave him only a few months to live. He had decided long before that he didn't want his friends to remember him as a 97-pound weakling. So he opted to forgo all treatments and enjoy whatever time he had left. Then he said in a matter-of-fact way: "The hard part is over ... tell-

ing my family and friends.”

He went on, “Preacher, you always liked a lot of attention. I’ll tell you how to get it. Just get cancer and let everyone know you’re going to die. You’ll have more attention than you can take care of.” Then he joked, “I can’t afford to get well now. I’ve told too many people I’m going to die.”

I asked, “Can I do anything for you?” He said, “Yes, pray for me, and work on the sermon.” He had asked me to preach his funeral sermon. I said, “It’s going to be a humdinger.” He said, “I sure wish I could hear it.”

Then Cliff said, “Fifty years ago I bought my ticket and made my room reservations. Now I’ve had all these years to study the way and I’m excited. It’s a lot like packing for a trip. In a way I’m looking forward to it. I don’t have any skeletons in my closet. I’m not ashamed of anything. I’m ready.” Cliff had thee old time religion.

Have you got anything better than that? If so, tell me so I can share it with others. If you don’t, why not try thee old time religion?

It’s Better Up Higher

Fourth, thee old time religion will take us all to heaven. It’s hard to get people interested in heaven nowadays — with comfortable homes and luxury cars, an abundance of leisure and plenty of fun things to do. That is, until tragedy strikes and then we become very interested.

We had best get interested now. The Bible says, “It is appointed unto men once to die, but after this the judgment” (Hebrews 9:27). There is an “after this” and we need to be concerned about it because we’re going to spend eternity in one of two places: hell or heaven.

“Jesus said, ‘Let not your heart be troubled: ye believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father’s house are many mansions: if it were not so, I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again, and receive you unto myself; that where I am, there ye may be also. And whither I go ye know, and the way ye know. ‘Thomas saith unto him, ‘Lord, we know not whither thou goest; and how can we know the way? Jesus saith unto him, ‘I am the way, the truth, and the life: no man cometh unto the Father, but by me’ (John 14:1-6). The shortest distance between heaven and Earth, between God and man is Jesus Christ. He’s not only the shortest way. He is the ONLY way. And no matter how good it gets here, it’s better higher up.

Truett, the Dallas pastor, was visiting a wealthy West Texas rancher on one occasion. After they had dined, the rancher said, “Come walk with me out across my land.”

They walked to the hillside near his home and he began to talk about his vast land holdings. He said, “Look yonder to the north, and as far as you can see I own all that land.” Then he turned to the east and said, “Look as far as you can see in that direction and I own all that land.”

He then turned to the south and pointed and said, “As far as you can see in that direction, I own all that land.”

And then he turned to the west and he said once again, “As far as you can see in the west, I own all that land. Look in any direction you want, north, east, south, west, and as far as you can see, all that land belongs to me.”

There was a long pause and then supposedly Truett turned and pointed up to heaven and said, “Yes, but how much do you own in that direction?”

It's Been A Long, Long Time

Fifth, thee old time religion is good enough for me. Fifty-one years ago at the age of 14 I put my faith and trust in the Lord. And that was the greatest decision of my life. Not once in all these years has Christ disappointed me or let me down. I have let him down and disappointed him often. But he's never failed me. I can say to you after all these years: thee old time religion is good enough for me.

Dr. Herbert H. Reynolds, president emeritus of Baylor University, had a serious heart attack several years ago. The next time he met with the trustees, we asked what thoughts he had during those critical hours when his life seemed to hang in the balance. He said, "My mind went back to the simple faith of my childhood: 'Jesus loves me: this I know, for the Bible tells me so.'"

That's thee old time religion. As you can see, it's not religion at all. It's a person – Jesus Christ. He's the savior. Come to him now. Then you can sing:

He has saved our fathers.

He makes you love everybody.

He will do when you are dying.

He will take us all to heaven.

And He's good enough for me.

2

The Gospel, the Power of God

Romans 1:16

In the dark days of World War II when the Nazis were marching across Europe threatening to invade the British Isles and the Japanese were hopscotching across the Philippines, a news commentator named Gabriel Heator always found something to be optimistic about. He began his broadcast each night by saying, "I've got good news for you."

That's my message here. I've got good news for you. The good news is that Christ died for our sins, was buried and was raised from the dead on the third day. That's called the gospel and the word *gospel* means good news. There are three parts to it.

First, Christ died for our sins. The good news is good news only because there was first bad news. The bad news is that "... all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23), and "... the wages of sin is death" (Romans 6:23). Apart from Christ all we have to look forward to is death. The good news is that God loves us so much that he would rather die than live without us. As Jesus expressed it, "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in

him should not perish, but have everlasting life" (John 3:16). Jesus has done all the dying that needs to be done for sin.

Second, Christ was buried. It used to trouble me that he was buried in a borrowed tomb. S.M. Lockridge helped me: "Why should he buy one? He was only going to use it three days."

Third, he arose from the dead. That means Jesus is alive, loose, and at work in the world today.

The gospel is amazingly simple: In the Old Testament God laid down his law to us. In the New Testament God laid down his life for us. In the Old Testament he laid down his law for us and we couldn't keep it. In the New Testament he laid down his life for us and all we had to do was accept it.

The gospel is not only amazingly simple it is simply amazing. "... It is the power of God unto salvation" (Romans 1:16). The word *power* means "ability." The word used here is from the Greek word from which we get our word *dynamite*. When you talk about power you must ask, "Power for what?" A chainsaw is power for cutting timber but not very effective for cutting butter. Dynamite is effective for blasting rocks but not very good for rocking a cradle. The gospel then is power for one thing: salvation.

The word *salvation* means "deliverance." I was preaching in Denison, Texas, one Sunday. I arrived early so I stopped at a roadside cafe to get a cup of coffee. A song on the jukebox captured my attention. It was entitled, *Savior, Save Us From Ourselves*. The gospel can not only save us from our sins; it can save us from our own selfish desires, our destructive behavior, our own enslaving habits and the consequences of our rejection of God.

When the gospel is believed, accepted, and acted upon it has the ability to save our souls. It can save us from our

sin and save us from ourselves.

The good news is that you don't have to continue to struggle under the weight of past mistakes and failures. You can be forgiven of the past. You don't have to continue to live in bondage to alcohol, drugs, lust, greed, anger, fear, worry, jealousy or anything else. You can be changed. And, you don't have to stay the way you are. You can have power for living; you can find new meaning for your life; you can discover a true friend in Jesus Christ; you can become a part of the family of God; and most of all you can have your destiny changed from hell to heaven.

That's good news!

There's a difference in good news and good advice. Good advice offers something you can do. Good news is something that has already been done. If you go to a friend for counsel and they give you advice and you do it and it works, it's good advice. But it is still something you do. If you come to Jesus, he does not tell you something you must do, but something he did 2,000 years ago for you. He died for your sins, was buried, and was raised for your justification.

The difference between good advice and good news is the difference between Ann Landers and Jesus Christ. It is the difference between do and done.

If you're tired of living and afraid of dying, I've got good news for you. Through trusting Christ, you can live until you die and then you can live forever. You can enjoy the abundant life now and eternal life then.

The gospel has the power to cleanse, to change and to comfort.

There are three truths concerning the power of God that we need to ponder:

*The gospel has the power to cleanse.
The gospel has the power to convert.
The gospel has the power to comfort.*

I Wish I Could Rewind My Life

First, the gospel has the power to cleanse. Several years ago Woody Allen was interviewed by a French television station. In the hour-long interview, one of the reporters asked him a most unusual question, "Do you believe in God?" Allen responded, "No, I am an atheist" (one who does not believe in God). But, Allen went on to say, "In my better moments I am an agnostic" (one who admits there may be a God but if there is he does not know him).

Then the reporter asked him an even more unusual question, "If there were a God and he could say one thing to you, what would you like to hear him say?" And Woody Allen responded, "You are forgiven."

Only God knows how many people there are in the world today who would love to hear those words, "You are forgiven." They have sinned, they have done wrong, they have made mistakes, they have regrets, they wish they could change the past. If they could only hear the words, "You are forgiven," life could be vastly different for them.

If you are one of those people, I have good news for you. Christ can and will forgive your sins if you come to him.

Once while dining at the home of a Pharisee named Simon, Jesus was approached by a woman of the street, a prostitute, a hooker who fell at his feet in humility and tears.

Jesus' host was incensed. If Jesus were really the Messiah, he would know this woman was a sinner and would have rebuked her. While Simon sat in judgment, condemn-

ing her for her past and unwilling to forgive her for what she had done, Jesus said, "... I say unto thee, her sins, which are many, are forgiven" (Luke 7:47).

Note Jesus' two statements about this woman's sins sit side by side: "are many, are forgiven." And that's what he will say to you if you will call on him.

The difference among men is not that some are sinners and others are not. The difference is in where they take their sins. Peter and Judas both failed the Lord miserably. Judas betrayed him and Peter denied him. They both were filled with guilt and remorse over what they had done. But Judas took his guilt to people who knew nothing of God's grace: the scribes and Pharisees. They said, "You made your choice — live with it." He couldn't, and took his own life.

Peter took his sins and failures to Jesus. And Jesus did not throw them back on him. Jesus forgave him and restored him. And Peter went on to become one of the great pillars of the church.

His promise to us is, "... Him that cometh to me I will in no wise [i.e., under no circumstance] cast out" (John 6:37). You can come to him with every assurance of acceptance. He invites you to come just as you are.

The scriptures say, "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness" (I John 1:9). "... And, the blood of Jesus Christ his Son cleanseth us from all sin" (I John 1:7).

We sometimes sing,
*What can wash away my sins?
Nothing but the blood of Jesus.
What can make me whole again?
Nothing but the blood of Jesus.*

*O, precious is the flow,
That makes me white as snow.
No other fount I know,
Nothing but the blood of Jesus.*

Some skeptic may ask, “How can blood wash away sin?”

And I answer, “I don’t know.” But I ask you, “How can water quench our thirst?”

“I don not know that either. But I know that it does.” And I’m not going to die of thirst trying to figure it out. I’m going to drink and live. Just so, I don’t know how the blood of Jesus cleanses sin, but I know that it does. And I’m going to trust it and be cleansed.

In him there is forgiveness and cleansing. That’s the power of the gospel.

Made New Again

Second, the gospel has the power to change. It can make us into new people. It did that for the apostle Paul. It can do that for you also. Paul writes, “Therefore if any man be in Christ, he is a new creature: old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new” (II Cor. 5:17).

Several years ago Scott Thompson, a friend, shared with me the testimony of his changed life. When he was in his early 20s he was production manager of a large steel company in Oklahoma. He had developed a serious drinking problem that almost cost him his marriage. It did cost him his job. One day, while drinking on the job, he fired a man. The man reported Scott’s drinking to his superior and as a result Scott lost his job.

He found himself with a wife, a little baby, without work and almost destitute. He was sitting at home one

Thursday by himself when the doorbell rang. The church down the street was having a revival meeting and a preacher and an evangelist had come to share the gospel with him.

They talked about the Lord and then Scott told them about his plight. He needed a job and he needed one desperately. The evangelist asked if he had prayed about it seriously. He said, "If you will, you'll be surprised how quickly God will answer."

Scott said he kept thinking about what the evangelist had said about seriously praying and he decided to try it. Moreover, he went to the revival meeting that night, and when the invitation was given he went forward and trusted Christ as his Savior.

He had been expecting his brother-in-law to call him from California with a job. He had managed to save back barely enough money for bus fare to California. On Saturday, the phone rang and it was a man in Houston he had not heard from in two years. He called to offer Scott a job. He asked the man, "How soon do you need me?" The man responded, "I need you Monday morning." So, Scott quickly gathered up his belongings, kissed his wife and baby good-bye and bought a bus ticket to Houston that very day. He found a boarding house and rented a room to stay in until he could earn enough money to move his family to Houston.

The next day was Mother's Day and he got to thinking: "Mother would want me to go to church tomorrow." But he didn't have a white shirt. So, he went down to a little Mexican store and with his last dollar and bought a white shirt. It was not the right size but it was the only one they had and the only one he could afford. The sleeves hung down to his hands and he had to roll them up and

still they looked bad. The next morning he got up to go to church and didn't even have enough money to ride the bus to church. So he walked from his boarding house to downtown Houston to attend First Baptist Church.

As he approached the church he noticed that everyone was well dressed. All the men had on coats and ties. He thought, "I can't go in looking like this!" Then he thought again: "Mother would want me to go." So he said to himself, "If I see just one person go in to the church in his shirt sleeves, I'll go in too." Just as the service was about to begin, up walked a man without a coat or tie, and entered the church. So, Scott followed close behind.

Inside he sat down next to a man and joined in the worship service. When it was time to greet the visitors the man introduced himself and found that Scott was new in town. He told Scott his wife had gone to visit her Mother for Mother's Day and taken all the children and he asked if Scott would join him for lunch. Scott said, "I didn't have a penny in my pocket, didn't know how I was going to eat that day." He gratefully accepted the man's invitation to lunch. Then they spent the afternoon together, and the man took him back to Training Union that night. And the man became a lifelong friend. He said that since that time his life has been indescribable.

In just a matter of a few days he had gone from being destitute to having a new job, a new church, a new home and a new friend, and, most of all, a new life.

He conquered his drinking problem, climbed back to the top of his profession and stayed there until he retired and moved to Tyler, Texas, years later.

We played golf together one day and he told me that he and his wife Bobbie had recently celebrated their 55th wedding anniversary. He said, "Before I became a Chris-

tian I embarrassed her with my drinking, humiliated her with my unfaithfulness, and impoverished her with my gambling. I don't see how she stayed with me. But since I became a Christian, a real love affair has developed between us."

About three years after moving to Houston, the company he worked for was being considered for a government contract so the government did a security check on their key employees. An FBI agent called Scott's pastor, Jim Parker, of River Oaks Baptist Church in Houston. After getting the pastor's recommendation, the agent said, "I don't understand about this man. I call Oklahoma and I hear about one man. I call Houston and I hear about another. It's almost as if we are talking about two different men."

Jim Parker replied, "You are. He is not the same man."

Scott is a living example of the scriptural truth, "If any man be in Christ, he is a new creature: old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new" (II Corinthians 5:17).

That's the difference Christ can make. Don't tell me a man can't change. Don't tell me a man can't be born again. I know too many living examples.

If you have a moral problem — you can become a new man.

If you have a marriage problem — you can become a new man.

If you have an attitude problem — you can become a new man.

If you have an alcohol problem — you can become a new man.

If you have an adultery problem — you can become a new man.

If you have a temper problem — you can become a new man.

In the movie *Burden of Proof* a secretary was talking about her boss' immorality and said, "The man could use a character transplant." If you need a character transplant, I know a great physician who specializes in this. God here invites us to come and to be reconciled to him. John Killinger said, "Jesus is God's answer to a bad reputation." But not just to a bad reputation — a bad character.

The good news of the gospel is that you don't have to stay the way you are. If you do, it's because you want to.

A Wake Instead of a Wedding

Third, the gospel has the power to comfort. In 1996 my 35-year-old daughter-in-law died of cancer. On her first birthday following her death, my son took our 8-year-old grandson to visit his mother's grave. When they got home he said, "Dad, I wish I had a VCR so that could rewind my life." He was using modern technology to express an ancient desire. How we wish we could turn back the clock and relive our lives.

William Barclay, who wrote *The Daily Bible Study*, a popular and practical set of commentaries that has enriched the sermons of many a preacher, once had a radio talk show where people could call in and ask questions. Someone called one day to ask, "Do you really believe the story of Jesus walking on the water and calming the tempest of the Sea of Galilee?"

Barclay responded by saying something like this: "I don't know. That happened a long time ago. But I do know this. I had a daughter who was about to be married. One night she and her fiance were crossing a small lake in a

boat and something happened, the boat capsized and they were both drowned. Instead of having a wedding, we had a wake.”

Then Barclay added, “I don’t know about that story in the Bible, but I know that in that hour Jesus came to me and he calmed the tempest of my soul.”

That’s the power of the gospel, the power to cleanse, the power to convert, the power to comfort.

George M. Dogherty, in his book, *One Way of Living*, tells this story: “Once I knew a man — a Scot, happily married though childless, whose wife was a leading spirit in the local church, but he never darkened the church door. ‘Come and talk to Alex about his attending church,’ his wife pleaded with me. And I did. Their home was a soulless unit in a vast mass-produced housing area where one was distinguished from another only by the color of the roof tile, except Alex’s house. His little plot of garden was very lovely. Crazy paving cut a curving pathway between two small lawns, smooth as green velvet. The private hedge stood trimmed straight as a stone wall. Yellow and red roses grew from loamy brown earth, and in the solitary apple tree birds were nesting and singing.

“Now, Alex,’ I ventured at last, after we had dined and conversed at length on subjects totally irrelevant to the main purpose of my visit, ‘why do you not accompany your wife to church each Sunday?’

“Alex removed his pipe after a seemingly interminable pause and pointed to the window. ‘Out there is my church,’ he said, ‘my garden is my religion. I can think about God as I putter around. I feel his presence in the cool soil trickling through my fingers and the sense of life is everywhere. My garden soothes me when I am tired, inspires me when I am depressed. There is my creed,’ he said, pointing to a

calendar on the wall with a picture of a garden that was a gardener's dream. Appended to the calendar was the quatrain from Dorothy Frances Gurney's *God's Garden*:

*The kiss of the sun for pardon,
The song of the bird for mirth,
One is nearer God's heart in a garden
Than anywhere else on earth.*

"My next visit to Alex's house was on the day of his wife's funeral. She had bravely born a long illness and Alex had tended and cared for her with moving devotion. At the hospital I saw that the strain had perceptively aged him. The funeral service, as in the custom with the Scots, was private and held at the home. When I arrived at the house, a dismaying sight met my eyes. The lovely garden was unrecognizable. The crazy paving was half hidden by rank grass between the crevices. The well-kept lawn had become two small plots of wild hay. The private hedge and rose bushes were wild and unpruned. Even the birds seemed silent amidst the scene of unkempt neglect.

"Upstairs, with mute compassion, I sat down beside Alex, broken and silent in the shade of an oaken coffin, head in hand, for she had been a good wife, his most precious possession. In the numbing emptiness that only the bereaved heart knows, he was oblivious to my presence.

"His garden had no message of love to fill the meaninglessness of the desert of bereavement. Alex's hope lay, and could only lie, in another garden of long ago where in a tomb, its stone rolled away, and God's own son risen walking in the quiet of the garden."

That's the gospel and it's the power of God.

Listen to the words of Jesus, "Come unto me, all ye

that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me; for I am meek and lowly in heart: and ye shall find rest unto your souls" (Matthew 11:28-30).

You don't have to hit bottom. You don't have to ride the elevator to its bottom. You can stop it anyplace you choose, you can get help anytime you seek it.

A yoke, you know, is a harness made of wood used to put around an animal's neck to distribute the weight evenly on the animal's shoulders so it can pull the load with greater ease.

There are single yokes and there are double yokes. The single yoke is put around the animal's neck and it pulls the load by itself. A double yoke is used to hook two animals together so they can share the load.

Jesus is here inviting us to yoke up with him and let him help us with the burdens of life. The load of life is too great for any man or woman or young person to bear alone. Link your life with Jesus and let him share the load and he will make life bearable.

Did you know that God has a lost and found department? And Jesus is in charge.

It comes down to this; there is power in the gospel to cleanse, to convert and to comfort. So may I ask you,

*Have you been to Jesus for the cleansing power?
Are you washed in the blood of the Lamb?
Are you fully trusting in His grace this hour?
Are you washed in the blood of the Lamb?*

You either need this yourself or you need to share it. For there are people all around you who need what the

gospel can do. They need their sins forgiven. They need their lives changed. They need their hearts comforted. Be a partaker, then a witness to the gospel — the power of the gospel.

If not now, when? If not here, where? If not you, who?

3

A Trust To Keep

II Timothy 1:13-14

Mr. Ezra Duke, founder of the onetime Duke and Ayres five- and 10-cent stores, was a dedicated Christian. Early in his life, as a farmer, he and his wife managed to save \$700, bought some five- and 10-cent dolls and opened their first store.

The day they opened, Mr. and Mrs. Duke knelt and gave themselves and their business to the Lord. They promised him that no matter what happened, however they prospered, they would remember him and honor him in all they did. God did prosper them and they saw that single store grow to a chain of 42 stores. They remembered their promise and were good stewards of all God entrusted to them.

In his later years, when speaking on the subject of stewardship, Mr. Duke said, "All my life I've heard people say, 'Trust God! Trust God!' The real question is, 'Can God trust you?'"

We can trust God. There's no doubt about that. But, can he trust us? The scriptures teach that God has put a lot of trust in us and he is depending on us to be faithful to it. The apostle Paul speaks of this when he writes, "Hold fast the form of sound words, which thou hast heard of me, in faith and love which is in Christ Jesus. That good thing which was committed unto thee keep by the Holy Ghost

which dwelleth in us" (II Timothy 1:13-14).

The word "committed" used here is a banking term. It means to make a deposit, to entrust, to hand over something to another person for safekeeping. Paul uses this word three times in II Timothy. He uses it first when he writes, "For I know whom I have believed and am persuaded that he is able to keep that which I have committed unto him against that day" (II Timothy 1:12).

He uses it again when he writes, "And the things that thou hast heard of me among many witnesses, the same commit thou to faithful men, who shall be able to teach others also" (II Timothy 2:2).

And he uses it here in our text. Together they comprise three committals:

The first is that which we have committed to God.

The second is that which God has committed to us.

The third is that which we are to commit to others.

First is the committal of salvation. The second is the committal of evangelism. The third is the committal of discipleship.

The emphasis of this passage is clear, we have a trust from God. The "good thing" which Paul says has been committed to us is the gospel. It is the good news that Jesus Christ is the Savior.

We are told to "keep" this good thing. The word "keep" is a military term. It means to protect, to guard, to watch over. It is the same word that Luke used in his gospel to describe the activities of some of the key witnesses to that first Christmas Eve. He wrote, "And there were in the same country shepherds abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night" (Luke 2:8).

And it is the same word Luke uses to describe those

16 soldiers who were charged with guarding Peter after he was arrested by Herod: "And when he had apprehended him, he put him in prison and delivered him to four quaternions of soldiers to keep him." (Acts 12:4).

The truth of the passage then is, God has committed his wonderful truth to us for safekeeping. And, just as the shepherds kept watch over their flock to protect them from danger and bring them safely back to the fold, just as the Roman guards kept watch over Peter to keep him from escaping, so we're to guard, to keep, to watch over and preserve the glorious gospel of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. That is our charge! That is our commission! That is our trust! We can trust God. The question is, can God trust us?

If we're going to keep the gospel, there are three things we must do:

We must stow it in our minds

We must show it in our lives

We must sow it in the world

If we're serious about doing what the Lord commands us, these are gospel imperatives. These are the best ways to preserve the gospel.

As I Lay Me Down To Sleep

First, we must stow it in our minds. The psalmist said, "Thy word have I hid in my heart, that I might not sin against Thee" (Psalm 119:11).

This is a great need in our lives today. Surveys indicate that more than 90 percent of households in America keep at least three copies of the Bible. Yet, in two-thirds of those households, the Bible isn't regularly read. In more than half, five of the Ten Commandments can't be recalled

nor can the four gospels be named.

This is one of the tragedies of our day. While so many have the Bible in their home and sometimes in their hand, so few have the Bible in their heart and in their head. I'm persuaded the greatest harm which can come to the Bible, and to the church, comes not from its enemies, but from its friends. It is not the atheist, the infidel, nor the skeptic who hurts the Bible. It is those patronizing people who claim to believe it, who fiercely or passionately defend it, but never read it, study it, or really know it. The average Christian does vastly more to hinder, to destroy, to pervert the word of God by his or her indifference toward it than a thousand Madelyn Murray O'Hares could ever do. Napoleon once commented, "Deliver me from my allies." The Lord must make such a lament himself today.

If we do not know what the gospels say, if we do not accurately understand them, if we have not committed scripture to memory, how can we guard it and protect it? How can we know when someone is twisting or perverting it?

Listen! Erosion may take longer than explosion, but the effects can be just as devastating. We can lose the Bible just as surely by apathy as by attack, by neglect as by scorn.

Ignorance of the Bible is appalling. Two deacons were discussing their Bible knowledge after a monthly deacon's meeting. One said to the other, "Do you know the Lord's Prayer?" The second said, "Certainly I do. What do you think I am?"

The first deacon said, "I bet you five dollars you can't quote it." The second man said, "I'll take that bet." The first man then said, "OK, let's hear it."

The second began, "As I lay me down to sleep, I pray

the Lord my soul to keep. If I should die before I wake, I pray the Lord my soul to take.”

The first pulled out a five-dollar bill, handed it to his friend and said, “You win. I sure didn’t think you knew it.”

By the way, that prayer first appeared on this continent in editions of the “New England Primer” about the time of the Revolutionary War. But the earliest record of the prayer is found in a devotional book dated 1160 A.D.

If the third line strikes you as morbid, remember how high the mortality rate among children was just four generations ago.

Some modern parents have taught their youngsters an additional couplet:

*If I should live for other days,
I pray the Lord to guide my ways.*

That’s a worthy addition — if we do our part!

Of course, the real Lord’s Prayer is recorded in Matthew 6:9-13.

Felicida Tores-Gomez, a member of my congregation when I was in Tyler, Texas, and who later served as a missionary in Mexico City, grew up in Cuba. She said, “When Castro took over the country he confiscated all the Bibles and closed the churches.” Then she added, “In times like that we soon learned our dearest possession was the Bible and the scriptures we had stored up in our mind.”

So, we must stow God’s word in our mind. I am pleading with you for less novel and more gospel. For less newspaper and more Bible. And, above all, read the Bible first. Don’t get the bad news before you get the good news.

Light and Letters

Second, we need to show it in our lives. The Bible is not simply to be learned, it is to be lived. It is not enough to hide it in our hearts; we need to heed it in our lives. The psalmist said, “Thy word have I hid in my heart, that I might not sin against Thee.” The whole purpose of studying and meditation and memory is to practice, to live out the scriptures.

What will ultimately make the difference is not how many times you have been through the gospels, but how thoroughly the gospels have been through you.

Do you know what is the most important gospel? It is not the first gospel, the gospel of Matthew. It is not the second gospel, the gospel of Mark. It is not the third gospel, the gospel of Luke. It is not the fourth gospel, the gospel of John. It is the fifth gospel, the gospel according to you.

People form their notions about Jesus Christ, his church, and Christianity more from us than from the Bible. They do not read the Bible. They do not attend church and listen to sermons. They do not watch Christian television. What they know of the scriptures is what they see in us and hear from us. So, if we’re going to preserve, guard, and keep the scriptures, we must live them out in our daily lives.

There are two analogies used in scripture to illustrate this — light and letters.

Jesus said to us, “Ye are the light of the world. A city that is set on a hill cannot be hid. Neither do men light a candle, and put it under a bushel, but on a candlestick; and it giveth light to all that are in the house. Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father which is in heaven” (Mat-

thew 5:14-16).

On another occasion Jesus said just as emphatically, "I am the light of the world" (John 8:12). At first this seems to be a paradox. Is Jesus the light of the world or are we the light of the world? We both are! He is the light and we are to reflect him.

It is like the sun and the moon. We say that the sun shines. And it does. It is a burning, blazing ball of fire. We also say that the moon shines. But it doesn't. The moon has no light of its own. It is, however, covered with a glassy-like soil that reflects light. And when it is in right relationship to the sun, it reflects more light — it becomes a full moon.

That's what happens when our lives are in right relationship to God; we reflect him more completely.

Jesus said, "Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father which is in heaven" (Matthew 5:16). The word "glorify" in the Greek means "to bring honor to the reputation of God." So, it is by the lives that we live that we enhance or we detract from the reputation of God.

A country preacher visiting a city church saw in its sanctuary a beautiful chandelier. He determined that he must have one in his church. When he presented the recommendation to the congregation, one elderly deacon strongly opposed it. The brother said, "I oppose this chandelier for three reasons: First, no one can spell it so we couldn't order it. Second, if we ordered it, there is no one in the church who can play it. Third, he said, what we really need is more light."

That's what our world need from us: more light.

The second analogy is of letters. The apostle Paul spoke of believers as "our epistle written in our hearts, known

and read of all men: ... written not with ink, but with the Spirit of the living God; not in tables of stone, but in fleshly tables of the heart" (II Cor. 3:2-3).

The letters he refers to are letters of recommendation. As a pastor, I am asked often to write letters of recommendation. When people apply for a job, they often list me as a reference. When young people are applying for admission to a university, or a young couple is applying for adoption of a baby, I am often asked to write a letter of recommendation for them. In these letters I am asked about their character, their honesty, their dependability, how they spend their free time, their home life and the like. What I say in those letters often determines whether the person inquiring enters into a relationship with the person being recommended.

The apostle Paul is saying that we — as believers — are living letters of recommendation for Christ to a skeptical world. And they're constantly reading us. We are not letters written on paper with ink. We are letters in flesh and blood. And what the lost world thinks of Jesus Christ is most often determined by what they read in our lives.

The late Edward R. Murrow, the outstanding, much-loved personality and one of the greatest geniuses in the whole realm of radio and television reporting, challenged people with this question, "Are you living a life or an apology?"

Do you ever get into any of the great battles of our time? Have you ever put yourself on the firing line against evil? Or have you indulged and pampered yourself throughout your days? It is a solemn question: "Are you living a life or an apology?"

We must live lives that are unapologetically Christian. No Christian can be sinless, but all Christians can sin less.

That's the challenge of the gospel. We must not only stow it in our hearts, we must show it in our lives. The world needs to see Jesus Christ in us and through us. If we're going to preserve the gospel, to protect it, keep it, then we must show it in our lives.

Seeds and Flowers

Thirdly, we must sow it in the world. Suppose a man should come to me with a bag of seeds and say, "I want you to keep these, preserve these until I return for them." I would probably say to him, "Sir, how long will you be gone?" If he should say, "I will be gone your entire lifetime and perhaps even longer," what would I do? How would I preserve them during my lifetime and for succeeding generations?

I could, of course, bury the entire sack of seeds in the ground, but they would decay and be lost forever. I might hide them safely in my house but weevils and rodents would soon eat them or succeeding generations would carelessly dispose of them.

If I really wanted to preserve them, the best thing I could do would be to plant them in the ground and let them grow and multiply until they had covered the whole Earth. The potential of a seed to multiply is almost beyond imagination. A common ear of corn has 14 rows of corn with approximately 40 grains per row. That means each ear of corn has approximately 560 grains on it. If I planted those grains of corn in the spring and half of them produced, it would be 280 stalks of corn.

Corn averages three ears per stalk. Two-hundred eighty stalks times three ears per stalk times 560 grains per ear equals over a half-million grains of corn in one year. Plant them again and the increase is almost beyond imagi-

nation. That fact, no doubt, is behind this statement, "You can count the apples on a tree, but you can't count the trees in an apple."

Someone else has said, "All the flowers of all the tomorrows are in the seeds of today." Destroy all the seeds and the fruits and flowers of all the tomorrows will soon vanish from the face of the Earth.

Jesus compared God's word to a seed when he said, "A sower went out to sow his seed ... and the seed was the word" (Luke 8:4-15).

If we want to preserve, to guard, to keep the truth of God, we can best do it by planting it in the hearts and lives of people and allowing it to reproduce itself for generations to come.

What can happen to the world of flowers physically can also happen to the gospel spiritually. If the gospel seed is not planted in hearts and lives, the gospel will eventually die. I can safely say of the Bible I hold in my hand, "All the Christians of all the tomorrows are in this book. Moreover, all the churches and all the preachers and all the missionaries of all the tomorrows are in this book." Let us cease to plant God's truth in the hearts of men and women, boys and girls and Christianity, the church and the truth of God will vanish from the face of the Earth.

How do we keep it? We don't have to go around defending it. Spurgeon said, "The Bible is like a lion. You don't need to defend a lion. Just turn him loose and he will defend himself." What we need to do is to turn the gospel loose in the world.

But how do we do it? It is such an awesome task. It seems beyond us. The word of God not only tells us what to do, but how to do it. Paul writes that we are to keep, to guard, to preserve his truth ... "by the Holy Ghost which

dwelleth in us" (II Timothy 1:14).

It is only in and through his power that we can successfully fulfill our challenge and keep our trust. The Holy Spirit is the secret of knowing, living, and witnessing for Jesus Christ in the world.

There are four stages in the Christian life: When you first become a Christian you think, "This is easy." When you've tried to walk with Jesus for a few months you say, "This is difficult." When you've tried to walk with him over a year or so, you say, "This is impossible." When you know the power of the Holy Spirit, you can say, "This is exciting."

Have you moved into the exciting stage of the Christian life? It is only as you do that that you will be able to stow God's word in your heart, show it in your life, and sow it in the world.

4

The Fellowship of Exes

I Corinthians 6:9-11

Frank Sinatra, who for years was one of Hollywood's leading actor-singers, flitted from woman to woman, abused alcohol, and was associated with the Mafia. But when "old blue eyes" and "The Chairman of the Board," as he was called died someone said, "I suppose God needed another voice in his heavenly choir."

Then Joe DiMaggio died. Though "The Yankee Clipper," who had been dubbed "Baseball's greatest living player" by the Baseball Writers of America, was the undisputed leader of the nine-time World Champion New York Yankees during his 13 seasons in pinstripes, his personal life was anything but a success. Because of his selfish and vengeful personality he had two failed marriages, an outcast son who died of a drug overdose, friendships severed instantly and irreparably with one wrong word and a string of one-night stands in the style of Wilt Chamberlain. He was married to Marilyn Monroe, who in the 1950s and '60s was America's sex queen. She too had flitted from man to man before she committed suicide by overdosing at the age of 36. (*Joe DiMaggio: The Hero's Life* by Richard Ben Cramer, Simon & Schuster).

According to a DiMaggio friend, Marilyn Monroe was the only woman Joe DiMaggio ever loved and his last

words were, "I don't feel bad about dying. At least I'll be with Marilyn again." Above the quote was a picture of Joe and Marilyn with the caption underneath, "Heavenly reunion."

Those are sweet thoughts we'd all like to believe but they are terribly misleading. They suggest that everyone is going to heaven, no matter what they believe or how they live. The fact is, not everyone is going to heaven. The scriptures assure us of that.

The apostle Paul writes: "Know ye not that the unrighteous shall not inherit the kingdom of God? Be not deceived: neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor effeminate, nor abusers of themselves with mankind, nor thieves, nor covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor extortioners, shall inherit the kingdom of God. And such were some of you; but ye are washed, but ye are sanctified, but ye are justified in the name of the Lord Jesus, and by the Spirit of our God" (I Cor. 6:9-11).

These words were originally addressed to the church in the city of Corinth. The name of Corinth, in the first century, was synonymous with every kind of vice and depravity. Because of its geographical location, it could easily be reached by the sea and was by far the most important port for east-to-west traffic in the Mediterranean.

In addition to being a typical seaport town, Corinth was also the center of worship for Aphrodite, the goddess of love. In Corinth was a beautiful temple dedicated to her. In the temple were 1,000 priestesses who were nothing more than public prostitutes. In the name of religion and in the very place of worship, every sort of sexual immorality was practiced. And, as always happens, where there is sexual license, there follows a host of vicious fellow-travelers: greed, blackmail, perversion, slander, drunk-

eness and the like.

Corinth was the most unlikely place in the world for the founding of a Christian church, yet a thriving congregation had emerged there as a result of the missionary work of the apostle Paul. And, as you might expect, some of the most unlikely people in this most unlikely city were converted to Christ. It is to them that Paul addresses these words. They are a part of a call and a challenge to the highest kind of living.

They begin with what I call “the roll call of the damned” or “the yellow pages of the unredeemed.” It is a catalogue of 10 kinds of people who will not go to heaven. The list is not exhaustive, only illustrative. But it does leave us wide-eyed. Let’s look at them:

Fornicators — Those who engage in premarital sex. Sleeping around — in and out of marriage — has become so commonplace today that we are no longer surprised at it, shocked by it or ashamed of it. But the Bible teaching is clear about what is acceptable to God: Sex under the seal and shield of marriage or total abstinence. It is chastity before marriage and fidelity in marriage. Sex is a wonderful gift from God for the procreation of the race and for the deepest expression of love and intimacy between a husband and wife. Beyond that it is wrong.

Idolaters — Those who worship idols.

Adulterers — Those who engage in extra-marital sex. The scriptures speak explicitly, “Marriage is honorable in all, and the bed undefiled, but whoremongers and adulterers God will judge” (Heb. 13:4).

Effeminate and abusers of themselves with mankind — Those who are homosexuals and lesbians. Homosexuality and lesbianism are not new. In the days of Moses, God spoke of it when he said, “Thou shalt not lie with man-

kind, as with womankind: it is an abomination" (Lev. 18:22). Plato, the Greek philosopher, was a homosexual. And in the Roman world it had spread like a cancer, with 14 of the first 15 emperors being practicing homosexuals.

In our day there are national politicians, Olympic athletics, prominent entertainers and even ministers who are homosexuals. What makes today different is that homosexuals and lesbians have come out of the closet and become visible and vocal. They clamor for respectability and acceptance of their lifestyle as legitimate. They want same-sex marriages legalized by the government and ordinations sanctioned by the church. And they aggressively push their agenda at every front.

Homosexuals and lesbians should be treated with civility and compassion and there is no place for verbal or physical abuse or threats on their lives. But their lifestyle can never be acceptable or respectable anymore than any of the other sins mentioned here. And, it certainly cannot have the church's blessing by sanctioning same-sex marriages or ordination. The reason is, it is contrary to nature and strikes at the heart of God's clearly revealed and unchanging purpose for human sexuality: the marriage of one man and one woman for life (Romans 2:7, I Timothy 1:10).

Thieves — Those who rob, steal and pilfer. The ancient world was cursed by petty thieves. Judas was among them (John 12:6, 13:29).

Coveters — Those who are greedy, grasping and always desiring more, especially that which belongs to another.

Drunkards — Those who indulge in uncontrolled drinking. In ancient Greece the standard breakfast was a piece of hard bread dipped in wine. Even the children drank wine in that culture. The reason was because water supplies were often impure. The wine of that day was very

weak, composed of three parts wine and two parts water. Nonetheless, it was intoxicating and could be made stronger. It did get control of men. Drunkenness was and still is a curse on society. With God it is never a laughing matter nor a harmless pastime.

Revilers — Those who speak reproachfully and abusively of others.

Extortioners — Those who swindle and prey on the trust and gullibility of others for their own gain.

Quite a depressive list. Some of you have loved ones who are homosexuals and lesbians. Some of you have loved ones who are alcoholics. Some of you have loved ones who are living in sexual immorality. My heart goes out to you. But I am compelled to tell you that such people shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven. I urge you to pray for them and to witness to them but never deceive them into believing that their lifestyle, though culturally acceptable, is eternally acceptable.

A word of caution: If you watch television and read the newspaper more than you read the Bible, then your morals will be determined more by the media than by the Master and you too may believe these things do not matter. They do matter. Those who practice these things will not enter into the kingdom of heaven.

It is a sobering list to remind us of a tragic truth. That's the bad news.

From the Uttermost to the Guttermost

Here's the good news. "And such were some of you. ..." The church in Corinth was made up of the dregs of society: people who had once practiced all these things. The church was made up of ex-adulterers, ex-drunkards, ex-thieves, ex-swindlers and ex-homosexuals. It was, in

the truest sense, a fellowship of exes. That's what every church is.

This passage speaks of both the breadth and depth of God's grace. It says that no one has to stay the way he is. No one is so far from God they can't come back. None is so deep in sin they can't be lifted. No one is so lost they can't be redeemed. He saves from the uttermost to the guttermost. Drunks can be changed. Homosexuals can be changed. Lesbians can be changed. Thieves can be changed. If the truth were known, every saint has a past and every sinner can have a future.

Paul follows his list of sins with a listing of how Christ has changed us. Frederick Buechner once wrote, "I think maybe it is holiness that we long for more than we long for anything else" (Frederick Buechner, *The Longing for Home*, San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1996, p. 130).

I think so, too. What follows Paul's challenge to live as redeemed people are three reasons for holy living. What God has done is our motivation.

He has washed us from our sins.

He has sanctified us for his service.

He has justified us in his sight.

Out of the Mire and Into the Choir

First, he has washed us from our sins. The word *wash* literally means to cleanse, to purify from defilement. David spoke of God's cleansing when he wrote: "I waited patiently for the Lord; and he inclined unto me, and heard my cry. He brought me up also out of an horrible pit, out of the miry clay, and set my feet upon a rock, and established my goings. And he hath put a new song in my mouth, even praise unto our God: many shall see it, and fear, and shall trust in the Lord" (Psalm 40:1-3).

The miry pit David refers to was an abandoned well that had gone dry and was now used to imprison a person. It would be filled with a mixture of mud and water until it was about waist deep on a man. He was then dropped into it with no way of escape. The mud would create a suction that made it impossible for him to escape.

Jeremiah himself was once put in such a pit and it took thirty men with a rope to pull him out of the mire (Jer. 38:6-10).

David tells us that the Lord found him captured in the muck of life and lifted him out and put a new song in his heart. He said, "God took me out of the mire and put me in the choir." What people want and need is a hand let down to lift them up. They are conscious of their weakness and need help. They both love and hate their vices but are powerless on their own to change. But Christ can change them. Kenneth Filkins has caught this beautifully in a poem entitled *The Pit*. Here's a bit of it:

A man fell into a pit and he couldn't get out.

Buddha said: "Your pit is only a state of mind."

A Hindu said: "This pit is for purging you and making you more perfect."

Confucius said: "If you would have listened to me, you would never have fallen into the pit."

A new ager said: "Maybe you should network with some other pit dwellers."

A news reporter said: "Could I have the exclusive story on your pit?"

A county inspector said: "Do you have a permit for that pit?"

A realist said: "That's a pit."

An idealist said: "The world shouldn't have pits."

An optimist said: "Things could be worse..

A pessimist said: "Things will get worse."

Jesus, seeing the man, took him by the hand and lifted him out of the pit.

(Randy Rowland, *Get a Life!* (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 1992), pp46-48).

Isaiah spoke of God's cleansing power when he said, "Come now, and let us reason together, saith the Lord: though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they be red like crimson, they shall be as wool" (Isaiah 1:18).

And John wrote in the Revelation, "And from Jesus Christ, who is the faithful witness, and the first begotten of the dead, and the prince of the kings of the earth. Unto him that loved us, and washed us from our sins in his own blood" (Rev. 1:5).

This all gives new meaning to the song:

Have you been to Jesus for the cleansing power?

Are you washed in the blood of the Lamb?

Are you fully trusting in his grace this hour?

Are you washed in the blood of the Lamb?

Are you washed in the blood, in the soul cleansing blood of the Lamb?

Are your garments spotless, are they white as snow?

Are you washed in the blood of the Lamb?

You Belong to Christ, Don't Shilly-Shally

Second, we are sanctified for his service. The word *sanctified* means "set apart." Not only does the Lord wash away our sins, but he sets us apart for his service. We now belong to him and he wants us to devote our lives to serv-

ing him.

Years ago I read a short essay in *Time* magazine that compared and contrasted President Richard Nixon with his then-Secretary of State Henry Kissinger. One line in the essay captured my attention. It said, "Kissinger has a servant's heart for Nixon." That's what the Lord wants from us.

Nineteenth-century U.S. reformer Wendell Phillips was a great orator and an avid opponent of slavery. At the age of 12 he heard minister and theologian Lyman Beecher speak and, he said, the great man looked down, pointed his finger at him and declared: "Young man, you belong to Christ! Live for him!" And Phillips said that from that hour he was dedicated to give his all to Christ.

He lived the life of a storm-petrel. He was boycotted in his business. Whichever way he turned he was hooted and hissed. Whenever he appeared on the streets of Boston rotten eggs pelted him and all kinds of insults were heaped upon him. He would go home at night to his invalid wife, and when she would see him come in and observe his weariness and his readiness to faint and quit, she would say, "Wendell, you belong to Christ. Do not shilly shally. Go back to your work and let them do to you as they please. You are working for humanity. You are working for Christ. Go on."

That is a word for all of us: You belong to Christ; do not shilly-shally around; live for him.

He Loves Us Anyway

Third, he justifies us in his sight. The word *justified* means to be put right with God. Because of what Christ has done for us on the cross we are now innocent, free, acquitted. Think about it! Fornicators and adulterers, set

right with God. Homosexuals and lesbians, set right with God. Thieves and swindlers, set right with God. Drunkards, set right with God. No matter who we are or what we've done, we can be made right with him. That's the good news. We have been washed, sanctified, justified in the name of the Lord Jesus and the power of his spirit.

Will Campbell in his autobiography, *Brother to a Dragonfly*, tells about his friend, P.D. East. P.D. was far from being a Christian. He was a foul-talking skeptic. One day as they were riding in the car together he said to Will, "I'm not too bright. But tell me what this Jesus guy is all about in ten words or less." Will thought for a little, and then said, "We're all jerks, but God loves us anyway." (Will used a stronger word than jerk but I will let you use your imagination.) P.D. then swung his car to the side of the road and stopped. He asked Will to repeat his definition. He did. Then P.D. counted the words on his fingers and said, "I gave you ten words. If you want to try again you have two words left."

You could write an explanation using every word in the unabridged dictionary and never improve on those eight words describing what Jesus is all about.

I have read that in a New York City cemetery there is a tombstone with one word inscribed on it: Forgiven. No first name. No last name. No date of birth and death. Nothing but the word "forgiven." If I could have only one word on my tombstone, or even better one word written by my name in the ledger book of heaven, it would be that word "forgiven."

Think of it! Fornicators purified, sanctified, justified! Adulterers purified, sanctified, justified! Thieves purified, sanctified, justified! Drunkards purified, sanctified, justified! Homosexuals purified, sanctified, justified! Lesbi-

ans purified, sanctified, justified! Anyone and everyone, cleansed, put right with God and made usable.

The proof of Christianity lay and lies in its power to change people. It could and does take the dregs of humanity and makes saints out of them. They were and are living, walking, proofs of the re-creating power of Jesus Christ. The power is still the same today for those who come to him.

There's an old Mayan folk story about a young man who ran away from home. His father saw him leaving and called out, "My son, come back. Come back."

The young man responded, "I cannot, Father, I am too far gone."

And the father said, "Come as far as you can and I will come the rest of the way to meet you."

That's what God is saying to you today: "Come as far as you can ... I will come the rest of the way to meet you."

I love the song:

*I've wandered far away from God,
Now I'm coming home;
The paths of sin too long I've trod,
Lord I'm coming home.
Coming home, coming home, never more to roam,
Open wide thine arms of love, Lord, I'm coming home.*

5

God, the Devil and You

I Peter 5:8-9

One bright, beautiful Sunday morning, most of the people of Selma, Alabama, were in the local Baptist church. The people were sitting in their pews talking about their lives, their families and the past week when suddenly, Satan appeared at the front of the church. Everyone started screaming and scampering for the exits, trampling each other in a frantic effort to get away from him.

Soon everyone had evacuated the church except one elderly gentleman who sat calmly in his pew reading his bulletin ... seemingly unaware that the devil was in his presence.

“Do you know who I am?” The man replied, “Yep, sure do.” Satan asked, “Aren’t you afraid of me?” “Nope, sure ain’t,” said the man. Satan was a little perturbed at this and queried, “Why aren’t you afraid of me?” The man calmly replied, “Been married to your sister for over forty years.”

There is a devil. He is no joke. And he’s not your brother-in-law. The scriptures speak of him when they record, “Be sober, be vigilant; because your adversary the devil, as a roaring lion, walketh about seeking whom he may devour: whom resist steadfast in the faith, knowing that the same afflictions are accomplished in your breth-

ren that are in the world" (I Peter 5:8-9).

I know what you may be thinking, "Surely you don't believe the devil, red suit and all. And why don't you talk about something more relevant?" No, I don't believe in the red suit and all that. The Bible never pictures him that way. According to scripture he always comes to us in disguise. He comes as an angel of light, as a trusted friend, as a smooth talker, but never as himself. Nonetheless he is a real person who has set himself against man. And if he is real, what could be more relevant? There is a serious disease at work in the human race and he is the source of it. But until we recognize him we will just rush around treating the fever and never analyze the disease. We're like people putting Band-Aids on cancers.

I believe in the devil for the same reasons Charles G. Finney believed in him: "I believe in the devil for two reasons: first, because the Bible says so, second because I've done business with him."

The Bible certainly says he's real. It mentions him more than 177 times. And I've done business with him before. I'm like that bruised and bleeding boxer who staggered back to his corner after a tough round. His trainer splashed cold water on his face, stopped the bleeding and rubbed him down while the manager spoke words of encouragement to him. The manager said, "Rocky, you're doing great. He hasn't laid a glove on you."

Half dazed, Rocky looked up through glassy eyes and said, "If my opponent hasn't laid a hand on me, you'd better keep an eye on that referee because somebody out there is beating the daylights out of me." If the devil isn't real, somebody out there is after me. Somebody wants to hurt me, ruin me. I have an enemy. How else do I explain evil?

The Bible never argues Satan's existence. He simply

appears at the dawn of human history without introduction or explanation. The scriptures present him as the enemy of both God and man and the Bible wastes no time revealing his character, his tactics and his intent.

These verses give us valuable insight into who he is, what his intentions are and how he operates. They remind us of three things:

The adversary we all face

The alertness we all need

The assurance we all have

Attack the Witness

First, there is an adversary we all face. The word adversary is a legal term that describes an opponent in a court of law. There's a saying among lawyers, "If you have the law on your side, argue the law. If you have the facts on your side, argue the facts. If you have neither, attack the witness." That's always the approach of Satan. He attacks the witness. He accuses the "brethren before our God day and night" (Revelation 12:10).

Our adversary is called the devil. The Greek word is "diabolos" which means a "false accuser" or "slanderer." That helps us see how he operates. From his first appearance that is his tactic. He slanders and falsely accuses both God and man. His intent is to get us to disobey God, to sin against him.

He asked Eve, "Did God say you could eat from every tree in the garden?" She responds, "No! We may eat the fruit of any tree but the one in the middle of the garden. God said if we eat it or even touch it we will die." The devil then said, "Ahh, you won't die! God knows the moment you eat it your eyes will be opened and you will become like him. And he doesn't want that" (Genesis 3:1-5).

Do you see his tactic? He accuses God of lying. He tells Eve, "You can't trust God. He doesn't tell the truth." He calls into question God's integrity.

We see his tactic again in the life of Job (Job 1:7-11). This time he afflicts Job to get him to doubt the goodness of God. Job is a good and godly man who was blessed with wealth, health, a large and loving family and a sterling reputation. But Satan accuses him of having a health and wealth religion. He tells God the only reason Job serves him is because he has been so blessed. "If he lost his blessings he'd lose his religion," accuses Satan.

God has great confidence in Job's integrity and permits Satan to attack him to test his faith. In Job's day the idea prevailed that since God is God he is the cause of everything that happens. That, of course, is not true. He may permit it but he does not cause everything. That's the case with Job as God allows Satan to bring trouble and tragedy into the life of Job which was attributed to God. Satan's intent was to cause Job to question the goodness of God and turn from being obedient to God. Systematically Satan destroys Job's wealth, his family, his health and even his reputation. Still Job remains true to God saying, "Though he slay me, yet will I trust him" (Job 13:15).

Don't miss the truth of Job's experience. It was not God who caused Job's problems. It was the devil. Job's troubles did not come because he was bad, but because he was good. They did not come because he lacked faith, but rather in order to destroy his faith. And in so doing we, once again, see his tactics. He gets Eve to doubt the honesty of God so she will disobey him. He gets Job to doubt the goodness of God so he will curse him.

All of God's servants have had to deal with the devil on this level. Immediately after his baptism, Jesus was led

into the wilderness to be tempted of the devil (Matthew 4:1-11). And, that was not the last time. Every time he considered the cross, temptation came to him (Matthew 16:22-23). It was always at the point of doing God's will God's way that Satan tempted Jesus.

Peter dealt with the devil. After the Passover, Jesus said to him, "Simon, Simon, behold Satan hath desired to have you, that he may sift you as wheat: but I have prayed for thee that thy faith fail not: and when thou art converted, strengthen thy brethren" (Luke 22:31-32). Sifting is a process of shaking in order to separate. Thus Satan put Peter in a position to shake his faith and to shake his confidence in the Lord in an effort to separate him away from his commitment.

The apostle Paul dealt with Satan often. In explaining his failure to make a scheduled visit he said, "We would have come to you, even I Paul, once and again; but Satan hindered us" (I Thess. 2:18). The word "hindered" literally means to throw up a roadblock. Satan prevented Paul from a God-appointed task in an effort to destroy his effectiveness and discourage him.

And you and I must deal with the devil also. If you are not encountering him on a regular basis, it is because you are going in the same direction with him. Satan is an equal-opportunity tormentor. He doesn't discriminate on the basis of race, creed, religion, national origin, sexual preference or age.

He is an adversary we all face.

If I Were the Devil

Second, there's an alertness we all need. We must be "vigilant" and "sober" for he is like a roaring lion going about seeking whom he may devour. The image is vivid.

It's the picture of a lion circling a flock of sheep looking for a prey. He is vicious, cunning, relentless.

The movie *The Devil's Advocate* is the story of a proud and ambitious lawyer who carries on a struggle with the devil. He has been raised in a religious home, knows right from wrong, but has great ambition and great pride. He is called upon to defend a client that he knows to be guilty of child abuse and yet struggles between his convictions and taking the case and defending his client to make a name for himself. In one scene the devil says to him, "You never see me coming. I'm always a surprise. I always give you what you want. And I never leave you."

A man and his wife were having financial difficulties and he gave her strict instructions not to spend any money unnecessarily for a while. He came home the next day and she had bought an expensive new dress. When he asked her why she did it she said, "The devil made me do it."

He responded, "Why didn't you say to him, 'Get thee behind me, Satan.'" She replied, "I did and he said it looked good from that side also."

If the devil can't get you from the front, he will get you from the back. If he can't get you going, he'll get you coming. He never lets up.

Why do we need to be vigilant? Because he is so deceitful. He is a liar and the father of all lies. He comes to us in the most subtle ways. He came to Adam and Eve as a serpent — the most subtle of all animals. The word "subtle" means smooth, cunning. And the root of the Hebrew word serpent means "to hiss" or "to whisper." He probably didn't come as a slimy, crawling snake but he came in a smooth talker whispering in Eve's ear. He's the master of deceit. He comes to us the same way.

He comes to us through our desires. James says that

we are tempted when we are “drawn away of our own lusts and enticed” (James 1:13-15). The word “enticed” is a fishing term. A fisherman doesn’t drop a bare hook into the water hoping a fish will get on it. He baits it to make it attractive to the fish. Sometimes he puts a live, wiggling minnow on the hook. Sometimes he puts a colorful plastic worm. Sometimes he puts a spinning, dancing, shining lure. He does this with the hope that the fish will swim by and be unable to resist the bait and take it.

The process is simple:

The bait is dropped

The desire is stimulated

The fish takes the bait

He’s hooked and cooked

Satan comes to you and me in much the same way. He does not hesitate to lie to us and through his deceit, ensnare us. But, we are always responsible. There is nothing outside of you that can make you sin. The one below us (Satan) appeals to that which is within us (our desires) to draw us away from the one above us (God).

He comes to us through difficulties. The apostle Paul had a spiritual experience that was so wonderful he was not permitted to talk about it. Such an experience could make a man proud. But, Paul also had some kind of intensely painful, physical infirmity that he described as a “thorn in the flesh.” He said it was a “messenger of Satan to buffet” him and keep him humble.

What was Paul’s difficulty? We don’t know. It was a “thorn” so we know it was intensely painful. It was “in the flesh” so we know it was a physical infirmity. And it came from Satan to “buffet” him.

The word “buffet” is the same word used in the gos-

pels to describe what the Roman soldiers did to Jesus. They punched him, slapped him, hit him. Paul says this experience kept him beaten down. In the same way Satan brings difficulties into our lives that can discourage us and bring us to the point of despair if we let them (II Cor. 12:2-7).

He is still using circumstances to drive people away from God. Ted Turner, the founder of CNN and Turner Cable Network and the largest private land owner in America, is an atheist. Part of his unbelief grew out of a family tragedy. His sister, Mary Jean, contracted lupus when she was 10 years old. She struggled for five years with the painful disease, sometimes creating nightmarish scenes at home with her tortured screams. "God let me die! Let me die!" she would implore.

Finally at the age of fifteen she did die and Ed Turner, Ted's father, was inconsolable. When a man counseled the grief-stricken father with "the Lord works in mysterious ways his wonders to perform," Ed lashed back, "If that's the type of God he is, I want nothing to do with him." He never returned to church, and young Ted abandoned the faith also (*Reader's Digest*, Sept. 1998, page 66).

When tragedy strikes have you ever heard a suffering soul or a broken heart cry out, "Why has Satan done this to me?" No, no. It's always, "Why has God done this to me?" Satan is so cunning that he causes the suffering of the world and God gets blamed. Blaming God is one of his favorite ways to discredit God. And he'll use you and me to help him if he can.

He comes to us through disguise. As the last days of his life approached, Jesus told his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem where he would suffer, and be crucified. When Peter heard this, in his characteristic impulsive way he rebuked the Lord saying, "Lord: this shall not be." And

Jesus responded to Peter by saying, "Get thee behind me, Satan: for thou art an offence unto me: for thou savourest not the things that be of God, but those that be of men" (Matthew 16:21-23).

At that moment, Simon Peter, Jesus' dearest friend, was the devil incarnate. Satan was using Peter to divert Jesus from his God's way of human redemption. And, Satan will come to you through your friends also. There are friends who bring out the best in us and there are friends who bring out the worst in us. We must be careful that we do not allow them to be instruments of Satan to lead us away from the will of God.

Satan will use any means possible to get us to doubt God's honesty, goodness or even justice if it will lead us to sin. And since he is the father of all lies and not limited to the truth, he tells us what we want to hear to get us to do what he wants us to do. If I were the devil that's what I would do ...

If I were the devil I would tell you I don't exist. That I 'm just a figment of the imagination. That I am just a fairy tale. I'm like Santa Claus, I turn out to be your daddy.

If I were the devil I would tell you there is no god. You're the only god there is. God didn't create you, you created God. You don't need God; you just need to discover the god in you.

If I were the devil I would say life is unfair. It doesn't pay to do right. Good guys not only finish last, but they get clobbered in the process. The wicked prosper as well as the righteous. It's talent and hard work that bring blessings, not obedience and godliness.

If I were the devil I would tell you the church needs you more than you need the church. All they want is your

money. Besides, spirituality is a personal matter. You need to have the attitude of Thomas Jefferson who said, "I am a sect unto my self."

If I were the devil I would tell you if you do go to church find one that agrees with you then choose what you want to believe from it and chunk the rest. After all, it doesn't matter what you believe just as long as you're sincere. One religion is as good as another. And I would encourage you to keep your eyes on the hypocrites and not on the good people in the church. Or I would have you counting bricks, tiles or whatever else there is to count in your church instead of listening to the sermon.

If I were the devil I would tell you everyone is doing it so it must be OK. Besides, there are no absolutes. The absolutes are obsolete in today's world.

If I were the devil I would tell you that pleasure is the chief end of life: So eat, drink and be merry. I would say you only go around once in life so you need to grab for all the gusto you can get.

If I were the devil I would tell you you are not responsible for the way you are. It's your parent's fault or it's society's fault. And even if it were your fault you can't change. You're trapped the way you are.

If I were the devil I would tell you God is not going to judge the world. In the end everyone is going to be saved. I'd tell you there is no heaven. There is no hell. And, there is no hurry.

In short, I would tell you what you wanted to hear to get you to do what I wanted you to do.

Our Advocate Jesus Christ

Third, there's an assurance we all have. We can resist

the devil in the faith knowing that whatever we experience our brothers around the world have experienced also. They have endured victoriously and so can we. That's our confidence. We have assurance because of three things:

First, we have assurance because of the power he gives us. We are to "resist in the faith." Trusting in God, we are not to yield to him. With resolve we are to refuse his approaches. Two things will help:

Stay in the Bible. Make sure you know the scriptures. Then when temptation comes, don't argue — quote. That's what Jesus did at his temptation (Matthew 4:1-11). He met each temptation by saying, "It is written." Then he gave Satan a word from God. We must do the same. You can't out-argue the devil. He's had thousands of years experience. So know God's word and don't argue, quote.

Stay on your knees. If we will humble ourselves under the mighty hand of God and cast our cares on him he will exalt us in time because he cares for us. We do that best from our knees (I Peter 5:6). In fact, we never stand taller than when we're on our knees.

The word "cast" is the same word used to describe the disciples placing their garments like a saddle blanket on the back of the colt Jesus rode in his triumphal entry (Matthew 21:7). In the same way you put a saddle blanket on a horse so we are to put our cares on Jesus and he will carry us.

Second, we have assurance because of the promise he makes us. Here's the promise, "There hath no temptation taken you but such as is common to man: but God is faithful, who will not suffer you to be tempted above that ye are able; but will with the temptation also make a way to escape, that ye may be able to bear it" (I Cor. 10:13).

The assurance from God is that we are not all that dif-

ferent from anyone else. What we experience, others have experienced. They triumphed over temptation and so can we. Beyond that, God knows our spiritual limits and he won't allow us to be overloaded.

Finally, we have assurance because of the person he sent us. While we have an adversary — Satan — we also have an advocate — Jesus (I John 2:1-2). The word “advocate” is also a legal term. It refers to one who pleads our case in a court of law, one who represents and defends us. Satan is the prosecutor and Jesus is the defense attorney.

One day, the scene will be something like this: We shall stand before the Lord and the devil, our adversary and accuser will be there. He will say to God, “This person either openly or in his heart has violated all of your commandments. He did not love his neighbor as himself. He did not love you with all of his heart and mind and soul. He is guilty of sins of both omission and commission. He stumbled and fell again and again. He is not worthy to enter into your kingdom.”

But, Jesus Christ our advocate will come to our defense. His response: “Father, all that the accuser has said is true. This person is guilty as charged. They are a sinner of the first rank, that we cannot deny. But I died for them. I paid the price for their sins and through faith and trust in me, they have been forgiven.”

The judge of the universe will rap his gavel on the desk and say, “Acquitted, pardoned, forgiven, set free!” And we shall all stand around the throne singing:

*“Jesus paid it all, all to him I owe
Sin had left a crimson stain,
He washed it white as snow.”*

6

The Demands of Discipleship

Mark 8:34-38

When I was in high school I worked for Butler's, a women's shoe store that specialized in cheaper shoes. The philosophy of the manager was, "Never walk a customer." What he meant was that if a lady came in the store and we didn't have what she wanted, we were to try to sell her what we had. If we didn't have her size we were to try to sell her a size smaller and tell her it would stretch or try to sell her a size larger and tell her they run small. If, after all that, we still couldn't sell her, as a last resort we were to call the manager and let him try. Under no circumstance were we to let her walk out of the store without making every effort to sell her something. It was hard sell all the way.

In contrast to that "hard sell" approach, Jesus readily let potential customers walk. A rich young ruler came to Jesus inquiring about discipleship. He would have made a prime candidate for the 13th apostle. Any church today would want him as its treasurer or as a member of its budget or finance committee. But he was overly impressed with his own goodness and enslaved by his wealth. So when he heard the demands of Jesus, "Go sell all you have

and give it to the poor," he turned and walked away sorrowfully. Though Jesus loved him he let him go. We'd have said, "Stay! Stay! Let's see what we can work out." But not Jesus, he would not cheapen discipleship by lowering the demands.

He not only let people walk, he invited them to do so. After he had fed the multitudes by multiplying the fish and the loaves, great numbers followed him. They were anxious to receive free bread. But, when he said, "I am the bread of life," suggesting that they must take him into their life in order to be his disciples, they found that less appealing. And the scriptures say, "From that time many of his disciples went back, and walked no more with him" (John 6:66).

Even those closest to him felt this was a difficult saying. So Jesus said to his 12 disciples, "Will ye also go away?" He not only would allow them to walk away but he suggested it as an option if they were not willing to pay the price.

There is an almost startling honesty about Jesus. No one could ever accuse him of misrepresenting his call or his mission. He never put the terms of discipleship in fine print in the contract. Jesus never tried to bribe or lure men by offering them an easy way. He never lowered the price to what he thought men were willing to pay. He rather called on people to rise to the level of his demands.

Another example of Jesus' honesty is when he said, "Whosoever will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me. For whosoever will save his life shall lose it; but whosoever shall lose his life for my sake and the gospel's the same shall save it" (Mark 8:34-35). And then he added, "Whosoever therefore shall be ashamed of me and of my words, in this adulterous and

sinful generation, of him also shall the son of man be ashamed, when he cometh in the glory of his father with the holy angels" (verse 38).

In these verses Jesus sets out the demands of discipleship. Jesus had been speaking about the high price he would pay for their salvation. He must suffer many things; be rejected by the religious leaders of his day, be crucified, and after three days rise again.

The thought of crucifixion was not a pleasant one. It was a cruel and inhumane way to die and was reserved for the worst of criminals. Simon Peter, knowing this, began to discourage Jesus for the very thought of it.

That's when Jesus said that he not only would have to deny himself, but those who would be his disciples must do the same thing. Jesus knew he would have to pay a high price to be our Savior and reminded us that we must pay a high price to be his disciples. This is not to suggest that we can buy our salvation or earn our way to heaven. It is, however, to suggest that there are demands for discipleship, serious demands.

What are the demands of discipleship? There are three set out in this passage:

It demands that we deny ourselves.

It demands that we dedicate ourselves.

It demands that we declare ourselves.

A Conflict of Wills

First, discipleship demands that we deny ourselves. Jesus is explicit, "Whosoever will come after me and let him deny himself, and take up his cross and follow me" (verse 34). I've spent most of my life trying to make that more complicated than it is. The phrase "deny yourself" literally means "say no to yourself." If a man will follow

Jesus he must begin by saying no to himself. He must say no to his own natural love of comfort and ease or safety and security. And he must say no to the course of action that is based on self-seeking and self-will. He must say no to the instincts and drives which prompt him to do things forbidden by Christ. He must do it so he can unhesitatingly say yes to the voice and command of Jesus Christ.

Saying no has never been easy for me. It's not easy for me to say no to my wife. It is not easy for me to say no to my children. It is not easy for me to say no to people who need my help. But most of all, I have a hard time saying no to myself. I do want to do what I want to do. I want my will to be done. Yet that's exactly what discipleship requires. I must say no to myself so I can say yes to Jesus.

Before we can become a disciple, we must turn from the idolatry of self-centeredness. There is not room for two on the throne of my life. God and I can't both rule. One of us has to move over. So, I must once and for all dethrone self and enthrone God. We must submit ourselves to a new king, to a new Lord who will replace self-interest. To deny one's self doesn't mean to belittle or berate yourself. It means to make God the ruling principle, the ruling passion of life. It means personal ambition, time, leisure, pleasure all become secondary to Christ.

That's what Jesus did. In the Garden of Gethsemane Jesus prayed, "O my Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me: nevertheless not as I will but as Thou wilt" (Matthew 26:39). The cross was an agonizing way to die. No man on his own would ever choose it as a way to die. So, in the Garden of Gethsemane there was a conflict of wills. Jesus did not want to go to the cross. If there was any other way he wanted that. Nevertheless, he yielded his will to God's will. Jesus said no to self so he could say

yes to God. That's what we must do also.

This usually comes down to something very practical:

I want to be a physician, but the Lord calls me to be a missionary. Then I must say, "Not my will, but thine be done."

I want a new home and the Lord says, "I'm the one who needs a new house." Then I must say, "Not my will, but thine be done."

I want to be one of the boys, to do what everybody else is doing. But the Lord says, "Come ye apart and be ye separate." Then I must say, "Not my will but thine be done."

I want to marry Bill, but the Lord says, "Be not unequally yoked together with unbelievers." Then I must say, "Not my will but thine be done."

If there is ever a clash of wills in our lives, our motto must be: "Thy will, O Lord. Nothing more, nothing less, nothing else." This can sometimes be a very costly decision. But it grows out of the conviction that he is Lord and has a right to make such demands. And it is a choice we voluntarily take on ourselves.

Many people want a crossless Christianity. They want discipleship without death. But true discipleship begins with a funeral. I must die to self. We must be able to say with the apostle Paul, "I am crucified with Christ: nevertheless I live; yet not I, but Christ liveth in me" (Galatians 2:20a). A young man went to an old saint and asked him, "Father, what does it mean to be crucified?" The old man reflected and then answered, "To be crucified means three things: First, the man on the cross is facing only one direction. Second, he is not going back. Third he has no further plans of his own."

Crucifixion does not mean self is dead but that we are

dead to self. It does not bring death to the personality, but rather to those things that bring condemnation and destruction to the personality. Commitment costs. The late Clarence Jordan ran a thriving and innovative ministry in south Georgia called Koinonia Farms. Both interracial and controversial, this work was opposed by many. On one occasion Clarence went to his brother, who was a lawyer, for legal assistance. Knowing the problems it would cause, his brother refused to help. Clarence said, "Brother, when you and I were young, we walked down the aisle of that little Baptist Church together. I think you need to go back and clarify what you told the pastor that Sunday morning. You need to tell him and those people that what you really meant to say was that you admired Jesus not that you want to follow him."

We must not forget who we are. We are not tourists. We are not vacationers. We are soldiers. Soldiers have to leave home. Soldiers have to live in tents and foxholes. Soldiers get shot at ... and sometimes they get killed. We must deny ourselves to be his disciple.

A Real Saint

Second, discipleship demands that we dedicate ourselves. Jesus said to be a disciple a person must "... Take up his cross and follow me. For whosoever will save his life shall lose it; but whosoever shall lose his life for my sake and the gospel's the same shall save it" (verses 34b-35). The key phrase is "lose his life for my sake and the gospel's."

There is no virtue in self-denial just for the sake of self-denial. The only reason to deny yourself is so you can dedicate yourself. The only reason to say no to self is so that we may say yes to something or someone greater than our-

selves.

Bach said there are only three great things in this world: an ocean, a mountain, and a dedicated man. Once a person has made his/her commitment and starts using his/her resources and applies his initiative, energy and enthusiasm, claiming the power of God, these move mountains, the sea, and the obstacles that seem insurmountable begin to wither away.

It is the dedicated who change the world. Mother Teresa who was known as “The Saint of the Gutters, “ devoted her life to living among the poorest of the poor, washing the wounds of lepers and untouchables in Calcutta, India. Someone said to her on one occasion, “I wouldn’t do that for a million dollars.”

She replied, “Neither would I. But I will do it for Jesus.” When asked how she would like to be remembered, she said, “As a pencil in the hand of God.” That’s dedication! That’s greatness!

Do you admire Jesus or do you want to follow Him?

The paradox of the gospel is that “We find life by losing it” — not by hoarding it or grasping it — but by investing it. Commitment gives meaning and purpose to life. It makes life worth living. We can’t succeed unless we bleed. Water does not become steam until it’s heated to 212 degrees Fahrenheit. Grain doesn’t become bread until it’s ground up. Grapes don’t become wine until they are crushed. So, we must die to self and dedicate ourselves in order to be useful and fulfilled. The simple truth is, real satisfaction is found in committing yourself to Christ and the gospel.

The movie *Braveheart* starring Mel Gibson was the true story of William Wallace, the Scottish patriot who led his countrymen in their fight for independence against En-

gland. In time, Edward I, called Longshanks, the king of England captured Wallace. After torturing him he was hanged and beheaded. His body was quartered and sent to the four corners of England and his head placed on a stake at London Bridge so all could see what happens to rebels. While he was in prison awaiting execution, the king's daughter-in-law, who had come to admire Wallace, said to him, "Recant and you might live." Wallace responded, "If I did I would already be dead. All men die, but some men never live."

In psychiatry they refer to "Sutton's law." The law originally came from a bank robber who was hauled into court to receive his sentence. When the judge asked him, "Willie, why did you rob that bank?" He looked at the judge in utter simplicity and said, "Why judge, that's where the money was." If you're looking for life, you'll find it in dedication. The only cause worthy of your highest and best is Jesus and his kingdom.

Let the Redeemed of the Lord Say So

Third, to be a disciple demands that we declare ourselves. So Jesus said, "Whosoever therefore shall be ashamed of me and of my words, in this adulterous and sinful generation, of him shall also the Son of man be ashamed, when he cometh in the glory of his Father with the holy angels."

One thing leaps out from this passage to meet us: the confidence of Jesus. He has just spoken of his death, he has no doubt that the cross stands out ahead of him, but nonetheless he is absolutely sure that in the end there will be triumph.

The last pages of Christ's activities have not yet been written. He will return. The first part of the passage states

a very natural and simple truth. When he comes into his kingdom he will be loyal to those who have been loyal to him. No man can expect to dodge all the troubles of some great undertaking and then reap all the benefits of it. No man can expect to refuse service in some campaign and then share in the decorations when the campaign is brought to a successful conclusion. Jesus is up against it in these days. If a man is ashamed under such conditions to show that he is a Christian, if he is afraid to show what side he is on, he cannot expect to gain a place of honor when the King comes.

Elsewhere Jesus is more explicit: "Whosoever therefore shall confess me before men, him will I confess also before my father which is in heaven. But whosoever shall deny me before men, him will I also deny before my father which is in heaven" (Matthew 10:32-33). If we want him to stand up for us in heaven, we must stand up for him on Earth. If we want him to claim us before the Father, we must claim him before men.

A man came out of church one day, and was greeted by the preacher who was standing at the door as he always was to shake hands. He grabbed the man by the hand and pulled him aside. The pastor said to him, "You need to join the army of the Lord!" The man replied, "I'm already in the army of the Lord, pastor." The pastor questioned, "How come I don't see you except at Christmas and Easter?" He whispered back, "I'm in the secret service."

The Lord has no secret service. He wants followers who will stand up openly and unashamedly for him. And, in time, they will.

Benny Valverde was in prison when he became a Christian. He grew up in San Antonio. When he was 8 years

old his father died. His mother worked so he was left at home alone much of the time. When he would go to the neighborhood grocery store there was a group of boys who bullied him around. Since he couldn't whip them he decided to join them. It wasn't long until he was in trouble with the law and sent to reform school. He had always been small for his age but in reform school he ate good food regularly and grew bigger than the rest of the boys. When he came back he was the bully.

He went deeper into crime until he was soon involved in the Mexican Mafia dealing in drugs. He began to carry a gun. One night he killed a man. He was arrested, convicted and sent to prison.

In the county jail, before being sent to prison in Huntsville, Texas, someone gave him a copy of the New Testament. He had a macho image to uphold before his fellow inmates. To read the Bible would be a sign of weakness. So he didn't read it until he was placed in solitary confinement. As he read it through something happened in his life. Although he did not openly identify himself with Christ at the time, he became a believer.

When he was taken to Huntsville he walked down the halls with his Bible in his hand until he began to see other men whom he had known back in San Antonio. Then he stuck the Bible in his pocket to conceal it. He couldn't let anybody see any weakness in him. In his cell he hid it under his bed and read it at quiet moments. He was trying to be a secret disciple.

Then his wife came to prison to tell him she was divorcing him. He had always thought she loved him, but he learned later she only feared him. The loss of his wife and children drove him to his knees in despair. Out of his distress he decided that he must go public with his Chris-

tianity. That's when he professed his faith in Christ and was baptized.

After he was released from prison he went back to San Antonio but soon decided he could not live for Christ there. Old friends and old haunts were too much for him. While he was in prison the youth choir of the church I pastored at the time sang there. So he moved to Tyler where I met him. Benny enrolled in Tyler Junior College where he earned a degree in criminal justice with hopes of becoming a chaplain. No longer a secret disciple, he now openly served Christ.

How do we go public for Christ? By professing our faith before a congregation of believers and being baptized.

In the old movie *Life With Father* William Powell is the father of two redheaded sons. Early in the movie his wife learns that her husband, an Episcopalian by birth, has never been baptized. She exclaims that unless he is baptized he wouldn't go to heaven and be with the rest of the family. To which he replies, "They can't keep me out of heaven on a technicality."

The Lord is not looking for a way of keeping you out, but ways to get you into heaven. But he won't lower the bar to get you in. Baptism is not a technicality. It was and is a public witness to a new way of life. It's an outward testimony to an inward commitment. It is not absolutely essential but it is extremely important. If you can be baptized, you ought to, beginning of a life of obedience to your new Lord.

If you are to follow him, that's part of the deal.

Are you ready to come under to the Master? Are you ready to become a disciple?

For three summers I preached at Paisano Baptist Camp, the old West Texas cowboy camp where George Truett, the

late longtime pastor of First Baptist Church of Dallas, preached for years. Once when Truett was preaching, a wild-living cowboy named Willie started down the aisle while Truett was in the middle of the sermon and when he got to the front he just stood there. Truett stopped his sermon and said, "Willie, what do you want" and Willie replied, "I'm ready to come under to the Master." That was the old cowboy's way of saying he was bowing to Jesus as Lord. He was ready to become a disciple.

I believe and I am prepared to argue that there is a place for extravagance, there is a place for beauty, in the Christian faith. But the cross was not and never can be primarily an ornament of beauty. It was and is an implement of dedication and death. Will you die to self? Will you take up the cross? Will you follow him? Will you come under to the Master? Those are the demands of discipleship.

7

The Family of God

Acts 28:13-15

Cartoonist Cathy Guisewite, who created the comic strip *Cathy*, spoke in 1999 at the commencement exercises of the University of Michigan, which she attended. She said, "I graduated with a class committed to open love, open thinking, open doors, open everything. ... Twenty-two years later, the people of my class are getting cash out of a machine, dinner out of a clown's mouth, and it isn't even possible to get a human being on the phone at the phone company. In Los Angeles the only chance of having a meaningful encounter with a person is if I smash into one with my car."

We do live in a cold and impersonal world where it's possible to live in a crowded apartment, drive down crowded freeways, shop in crowded malls, eat in crowded restaurants, and work in crowded offices and never have close personal relationships. Even the church, for some, is just another place to feel alone and out of place.

God created us to be social beings and we need closeness with others. In fact, the first thing in all creation that God identified as not being good was loneliness. After each creative act the scriptures say, "... and God saw that it was good." Seven times Genesis records that all God made was good. But when the Lord saw Adam alone He said, "It is

not good that man should be alone.”

Marriage came into being to meet the basic need of loneliness in our lives. There is in every one of us a loneliness for God that only he can fill. But there’s also a loneliness for other people. And our lives are never what they ought to be without close personal relationships. One sure evidence of that is that the worst kind of corporal punishment that can be imposed on a person is solitary confinement.

One of the reasons the church came into being was to meet this need in us. The church is to be a place of worship — a place where we meet God. It’s to be a place of teaching — a place where we learn the word of God. It’s to be a place of ministry — a base from which we do the work of God. It’s to be a place of fellowship — a place where we give and receive encouragement and inspiration from the family of God.

The New Testament church placed great value on the fellowship aspect of the church. And it was through that fellowship that it grew both numerically and spiritually (Acts 2:41-42; 46-47). Clearly these early Christians had something more than the experience of attending a large worship assembly. They also got together in homes where they ate together, prayed together, and talked about the Lord (Acts 5:42). It was in these small group meetings in the homes that they grew strong spiritually and reached out to the lost with the gospel. They knew that the road of discipleship was steep but they did not have to walk alone.

Many Christians today come to large public assemblies of the church, but they come as strangers and they leave as strangers without ever allowing their lives to touch. The social isolation of Christians from one another is a major reason for the spiritual weakness of the church to-

day. And the social isolation of Christians from non-Christians is a major barrier to evangelism. If we are to be the church and do the work of the church, we must return again to putting a greater emphasis on Christian fellowship.

We get a glimpse of the kind of fellowship that existed among Christians in our text. It is a brief excerpt from the life and journeys of the apostle Paul. He was on his way to Rome to stand trial on the trumped-up charge of sedition. He had been held in prison in Caesarea for more than two years, accused of being the ringleader of a band of insurrectionists (Acts 24:27). When Festus, the Roman procurator of Judea, finally heard the evidence against Paul he knew he was innocent of the charges but before a verdict could be rendered, Paul exercised his right as a Roman citizen to appeal to Caesar. Once the appeal was made, Festus had no choice but to send Paul to Rome.

The journey by ship was long and perilous and ended in a wreck. It was only by abandoning ship, and clinging to broken pieces of the vessel that they made it safely ashore to the island of Melita. From there they caught another ship and sailed to Puteoli on the toe of Italy. There he found Christian brothers and stayed with them for a week. Then he and his guards began their long journey to Rome (Acts 28:1-10).

The Christian brethren in Rome heard of this and traveled to meet him at Appii Forum, which was 43 miles from Rome, and to the Three Taverns, which was 33 miles from Rome. Then Luke, the author of Acts, adds this simple but insightful statement, "Whom when Paul saw, he thanked God, and took courage" (Acts 28:15b).

In this experience, like few others in the New Testament, we get insight into the kind of fellowship that existed among believers in the early church. And it reveals

the kind of fellowship we need in our churches today:

It is a fellowship of faith.

It is a fellowship of love.

It is a fellowship of encouragement.

The Tie That Binds

First, ours is a fellowship of faith. Twice in Acts 28:14-15 Luke uses the word “brethren.” That is one of five words that is used in scripture to describe Christians: They are called believers for their faith; disciples for their knowledge; servants for their works; saints for their holiness; and brethren for their love.

The term *brethren* is used almost 300 times in the new Testament to refer to Christians, twice as much as all the other terms put together. Why is this term used so readily? It’s because, as the scriptures declare, “You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus” (Galatians 3:26). And since we have a common father that makes us a family.

It is as simple as this: If God is your Father and God is my Father that makes us brothers and sisters in Christ. God, of course, is the focus. There can be no brotherhood without a fatherhood. And no man comes to the father except through Christ (John 14:6). That’s why the church is a fellowship of faith.

The Roman, Greek and Jewish cultures were littered with barriers as society assigned people to classes and expected them to stay in their place: men and women, slave and free, rich and poor, Jews and Gentiles, Greek and barbarians.

The Jews felt they were God’s chosen people and thus different from and superior to all non-Jews (Gentiles). And nothing so divides people as one person feeling and projecting the idea that they are superior to another. The most

radical of them felt:

*We are God's chosen few;
All the rest are damned.
There's no room in heaven for you;
We don't want heaven crammed!*

Slavery was an accepted part of life in the Roman Empire. Historians believed that slaves made up as much as a third or more of its population. They were not just household servants. They were doctors, musicians, teachers, artists, librarians, or accountants. Almost all jobs were filled by slaves.

Slaves had no rights. They were the sole property of their masters and entirely at their mercy. The master could do with the slaves as he would, just as you can with one of your animals. In fact, animals today have more rights and more advocates than slaves did then. And women were not treated much better. They were not seen in public with men. A man could divorce his wife at will, yet she had no recourse. She, too, was little more than his property.

But Christ changed all that. He came as the great wall-remover, tearing down the sin partition that separates us from God and blasting through the barriers that keep us from each other. The scriptures declare, "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female; for ye are all one in Christ Jesus" (Galatians 3:28). The Christian church was the first institution in history to bring together on equal footing Jews and Gentiles, men and women, slaves and free.

In the average church today you will find great diversity. There will be Democrats and Republicans, college graduates and high school dropouts, people of wealth and people on welfare. You'll find people who are high-class,

low-class, middle-class and people with no class.

But while many things divide us, one thing unites us. What is it? It's not politics or race, or education or our profession or our social standing; it is our common faith in, and commitment to Christ and his purposes. And that one thing that unites us — our common faith in God and our common commitment to his kingdom are greater than all the things that divide us. We are a church not because we are religious but because we are related. We are blood kin by faith in Christ.

In 1908 William A. Dunkerley, a British author, wrote a hymn expressing it this way:

*In Christ there is no east or west,
In him no south or north; but one great fellowship of love
Throughout the whole wide earth.
Join hands, then, brothers of the faith,
What 'er your race may be:
Who serves my Father as his child
Is surely kin to me.*

What It Takes

Second, it is a fellowship of love. Nothing impressed the ancient world more than the brotherliness of the early church. Celsus, a keen second-century opponent and critic of Christians, spoke of them with bitterness and scorn, yet acknowledged, "They recognize one another by secret marks and signs, loving one another almost before they are acquainted."

That's what happened in this experience. The Christians at Rome had never met Paul. They knew of him from reports they had heard and they had received a letter from him (the book of Romans) but they had never met him.

Nonetheless they cared enough about him to travel 43 miles on foot to meet him and to walk with him to Rome.

You might think that was a foolish thing to do. They could easily have waited in Rome for Paul to arrive. He was on his way there and they could meet him when he got there. But that's how love is. True love does not always wait. It goes to people and walks with them on the difficult roads of life.

It takes effort like that to build a fellowship. It does not happen automatically. Simply being brothers is no guarantee of a loving fellowship. Some of the darkest chapters in the Bible relate the tragic acts of brother against brother. Cain killed his brother Abel. Jacob cheated his brother Esau out of the family inheritance. Joseph's brothers sold him into slavery. And the prodigal son's brother had no sorrow at his brother's leaving and no joy at his return.

And being religious is no guarantee of a loving fellowship. The first argument in the Bible, which led to the first murder, sprang from a religious debate. Blaise Pascal, a 17th-century physicist and philosopher, in *Lettres Provinciales* wrote, "Men never do evil so completely and cheerfully as when they do it from religious convictions."

The reason, of course, is that we tend to believe that God is on our side. That makes every disagreement a holy war. Prime Minister Benjamin Disraeli of Great Britain once said of jurist Sir William Gladstone, one of England's most famous political leaders, "I do not object to Gladstone's having an ace of trumps up his sleeve, but merely to his belief that God Almighty put it there."

If it is not being brothers or being religious that guarantees a loving fellowship, what is it? It is being like Christ. Nineteenth-century evangelist D.L. Moody once refereed an argument between biblical scholars R.A. Torrey and

George Adam Smith. Torrey, the blazing conservative, insisted that certain Old Testament passages spoke of Christ, while Smith felt otherwise. Torrey blasted repeated salvos at his opponent, who remained silent. Moody finally blurted, "It is plain that the accused knows the Bible better than the accuser. Let's pray."

For Moody, an uneducated man who understood little of the debate, the issue was not who saw Christ in the Old Testament, but who demonstrated Christ in the present. The more we become like Christ, the more we realize we can be brothers without being identical twins. We can have disagreements without causing a division.

It is in the context of conflict in the church that Paul admonishes, "Let nothing be done through strife or vainglory; but in lowliness of mind let each esteem other better than themselves. Look not every man on his own things, but every man also on the things of others" (Phil. 2:3-4).

Then he points to Christ as our example for this. He writes in verse 5, "Let this mind be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus." The word *mind* does not refer to the intellectual grasp of Christ. We could never have that. It rather refers to his attitude and disposition. Jesus was God but he became a man. He was in heaven but he came to Earth. He was alive but he was willing to suffer and die. And he did it all for us. He put us first.

It is this humble spirit, this willingness to put others first that Paul holds up as the way to have peace and harmony in the church. The more we display this spirit, the more love and harmony we have in our fellowship.

Listen: If Jesus stepped down from his throne in heaven for our sake, surely we can come down off our high horse for his sake. The more we stand up for and defend our position as the only correct one, the less we consider the

other person's point of view, the less like Christ we are and the more conflict we have in the church. The only way we can have a loving fellowship is to have the mind and the maturity of Jesus Christ.

It is inevitable that we shall have differences of opinion but our disagreements should not cause division. Our fellowship is not based on agreement on every issue. Different opinions can be helpful in discerning the truth. The scriptures say, "... Iron sharpeneth iron" (Proverbs 27:17). By differences and debate we keep each other sharp. If everyone in the church thought alike, it would be like a baseball team with a roster full of left fielders. The church would not be effective if all members were the same, neither would they be challenged to grow if they thought the same way. Faith demands thinking critically.

But we must learn to disagree without being disagreeable. The more mature we become in Christ, the more we realize that in a disagreement God may be on both sides of the aisle. And the more we acknowledge that, no matter how thin you make the pancake, there's always another side.

And when there are differences we must learn to forgive one another. Neil Kinnock, a former Labour Party leader in England, commented on his aversion to Christianity. Said he, "I could never be a Christian because I could never forgive [my enemies]." Now there's a man who understood Jesus. We must learn to forgive. We must learn to put aside our differences.

To have a loving fellowship each member of the church must take upon himself the responsibility for the spiritual life of the other members. If a loving fellowship exists, no single member should have to struggle alone in the battle of life.

The writer of Hebrews tells us, “And let us consider one another to provoke [stimulate] unto love and to good works: Not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as the manner of some is; but exhorting one another: and so much the more, as ye see the day approaching” (Hebrews 10:24-25).

Throughout the Bible you will find an emphasis placed on the things that we, as believers are to do for one another. In fact, take the time to go through the Bible and underline the “one another” passages. This exercise will impress on you the importance of our interpersonal relationships with other believers in Christ.

The scriptures say that we are to: “Love one another” (Romans 13:8); “live in harmony with one another” (Romans 12:6); “care for one another” (I Cor. 12:25); “serve one another” (Gal. 5:13); “be kind to one another” (Eph. 4:32); “forgive one another” (Eph. 4:32); “have compassion for one another” (I Peter 3:8); “comfort one another” (I Thes. 4:18); “admonish one another” (Romans 15:14); “pray for one another” (James 5:16); and “edify one another” (I Thes. 5:11).

And we are told: “We must not pass judgment on one another” (Romans 14:13); “we must not envy one another” (Gal. 5:26); “we must not lie to one another” (Col. 3:9); “we must not speak evil of one another” (James 4:11); “we must not grumble against one another” (James 5:9).

Our fellowship is fragile and takes constant care. Paul sums it up, “For all the law is fulfilled in one word, even in this; Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself. But if ye bite and devour one another [chew on one another] take heed that ye be not consumed one of another” (Gal. 5:14-15).

There are dozens of additional “one another” passages, but these should be enough to demonstrate that the Chris-

tian life involves many important reciprocal relationships with other Christians. The church can never grow and prosper as it should without a proper emphasis on developing and nurturing our fellowship with one another in the church and with those we seek to lead to Christ.

I Need It More Than It Needs Me

Third, ours is a fellowship of encouragement. Scripture says that when Paul saw these brethren, "He thanked God, and took courage" (Acts 28:15). When Paul saw these fellow believers the first thing he did was thank God. Why God? Why not thank them? Because God was the source of their fellowship. There would have been no brotherhood without his fatherhood.

We may suppose from a casual reading of Paul's letters that he walked so close to the Lord, was so strong and dedicated spiritually that he was never in need of anything from any one. Didn't he say in response to a gift sent him from the church in Phillipi, "I have learned, in whatsoever state I am in, therewith to be content"? (Phil. 4:11). Didn't he say, "I can do all things through Christ which strengtheneth me"? (Phil. 4:13). That sounds pretty self-sufficient, doesn't it?

However, a close reading of the scriptures reveals that he was often down, discouraged, and afraid. At times he even despaired of his own life. This was one of those times. He had been imprisoned for years. He had just survived a perilous journey at sea. Now he faced a trial in Rome and he did not know whether he would live or die. When he saw these brethren it literally lifted his spirits and gave him fresh courage.

There were other times when the apostle Paul found strength from others. He wrote to Timothy, "The Lord give

mercy unto the house of Onesiphorus; for he oft refreshed me, and was not ashamed of my chains: But, when he was in Rome, he sought me out very diligently, and found me. The Lord grant unto him that he may find mercy of the Lord in that day: and in how many things he ministered unto me at Ephesus, thou knowest very well" (II Tim. 1:16-18).

These verses refer to an earlier prison experience of the apostle Paul. During that time, he said, Onesiphorus often "refreshed" him. Moffett translates that verse, "He often braced me up." J.B. Phillips translates it: "He put fresh heart in me." The Amplified Bible renders it; "He revived me like a breath of fresh air."

When life was tough, when the outlook was bleak, when friends deserted him, Onesiphorus was there like a breath of fresh air to strengthen and encourage the apostle Paul. That's what Christian fellowship is supposed to do to us.

Has that ever happened to you? It has happened to me many times when I have come together with the people of God. Just being with them, singing with them, praying with them has strengthened and encouraged me more times than I can count. In fact, because of this, I realize that I need the church far more than the church needs me.

That's what Christian fellowship is all about. You can't get that staying at home. You can't get that in front of the TV. You can get that only as you're infused by associating with your fellow Christians.

There is no man alive who does not need that kind of encouragement and inspiration from others. No matter how successful he may have been, no matter how self-sufficient he may appear, no matter how powerful he may be, no matter how much wealth he may have accumulated, he

still needs encouragement and inspiration from others.

What did these brothers in Rome do? They cared about the apostle Paul before they met him. They went to him and walked by his side. All of that strengthened and encouraged the apostle Paul. Those are the very things we need to do. We need to care for one another. We need to come to the aid of one another. We don't wait to be asked or to be sent for. We just go. And we walk with one another through the hard time. And in so doing we build a fellowship of hope.

Years ago in the great wheat region of western Canada a young girl wandered away from home late one fall evening. When her parents realized she was missing they called in all the neighbors and they rushed off through the wheat fields in every direction searching for her. They knew if they didn't find her soon she'd die from exposure.

A few hours later they returned with no success. Then someone came up with an idea. Let's join hands and like a giant comb go in first one direction and then another. That way we will find her. So they joined hands and several hours later they stumbled on her still, dead body. When they placed her in the arms of her mother, her mother cried out, "Oh God, why didn't we join hands sooner?"

Listen, you can't join hands with a clenched fist. God help us to open our hand in love to one another and save our lost world before it's too late.

8

Living Out Loud

Luke 19:10; John 20:21

On a missionary trip to the Amazon Valley of Brazil, I met a 90-year-old Brazilian named Hercules who had been the leader of his church in Beruni for over 50 years. Missionary Lonnie Doyle told me how his conversion occurred. He was from a large family, none of whom were Christians. When he was a boy his sister asked their father, "Is there a word from God?" His father replied, "Yes, there is a word of God, but only the priest can have it." The girl responded, "If there is a word of God it seems to me that we ought to be able to have it also."

So she began praying that if there were a word of God that it would come to her family. Shortly after she began to pray this prayer, a trader who traveled the Amazon River was given a Bible by a missionary, but the trader could not read. The only person he knew in the region who could read was the father of this girl. So the trader brought the Bible to their home and asked if the father would read it to him.

The father gathered his family around and began to read to his friend and to them from the book of God. As a result of that reading, Hercules and his whole family were saved and became lifelong followers of Jesus Christ.

Would you agree with me, that if there is a word from

God everyone deserves to have it? Well, there is and they do. And, according to that word, it is our responsibility to share it with them.

Jesus made this abundantly clear when he said, "For the Son of man is come to seek and to save that which was lost" (Luke 19:10). And, "As my Father hath sent me, even so send I you" (John 20:21). If he came to seek that which is lost, then seeking the lost must be important to us.

Tragically, most churches have all but forsaken seeking the lost today. George W. Truett, the famed and long-time pastor of First Baptist Church, Dallas, said, "When the church has lost her seeking note, she's off the main track." That's what's happened to many of our churches today. As someone has said, "We have become keepers of the aquarium rather than fishers of men."

I read and hear a good deal today about churches having "seeker services." The problem is, according to the scripture, "There is none that seeketh after God" (Rom. 3:11). People are not seeking the Lord. They are seeking to be entertained. They are seeking to soothe their conscience. They are seeking to feel good. But they are not seeking God. If there is any seeking, we have to do it.

The primary task of the church then is missions and evangelism. The church is an outpost of the kingdom of God to enlist recruits for his army, to equip them for his service and send them back out to advance his cause.

There are some who believe that the basic thrust of the church ought to be social issues. But that can never be for two reasons:

One is that only New Testament evangelism goes deep enough. Some who say the church isn't dealing with the problems of society don't know what the problems are. The heart of man's problems is the heart of man. We need to

have new hearts. And only Christ can give us that.

Second, only New Testament evangelism is broad enough. We believe in social action, the question is how can we best accomplish it? We believe that it is best accomplished by regenerating the individual and sending him/her to the front lines to bring the principle of Christ to bear in the place where they live, work and spend their leisure time. Winning people to Christ and then nurturing them in the faith is our primary task and we must not be diverted from it. We must recover the seeking note of the church today.

In May 2000 Lt. Gen. Claudia J. Kennedy, the Army's highest-ranking female officer accused a superior of sexual misconduct. In her first public remarks, after the accusation, which was later substantiated, she quoted French novelist Emile Zola: "He lived on earth to live out loud." Then she added, "Living out loud begins by telling a friend and then telling the people in authority who care" (Tyler *Courier Times-Telegraph*, May 14, 2000).

We Christians today need to begin "living out loud." We have been silent far too long. We need to tell a friend and then anyone who will listen to the good news of salvation.

What must we do to live out loud? Three things are essential:

We must involve more people than the pastor.

We must involve more places than the church.

We must involve more ways than preaching.

Trying to Get to Heaven Incognito

First, we must involve more people than the pastor. We must accept the responsibility that seeking the lost is every Christian's job. R.A. Torrey, while conducting an

evangelist crusade in Minneapolis years ago, asked a man he had seen in the congregation several nights if he were a Christian.

"I consider myself as such," was the somewhat dubious reply.

"Good," said Torrey, "Are you bringing other men to Christ?"

With a bland smile the man said: "That's not my business. I'm a lawyer. It's your business to bring men to Christ."

Quickly opening his Bible to the eighth chapter of Acts, Torrey said, "Please read this" pointing to the fourth verse.

The man read: "Therefore, they that were scattered abroad went everywhere preaching the word." "Ah, yes," said the lawyer, "But they were apostles, ministers like yourself."

"I think you are mistaken, sir," answered Torrey. "Read this," and he pointed to the first verse: "And they were all scattered abroad throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles."

In the New Testament, evangelism was the spontaneous result of conversion. It was not urged, exhorted, or promoted. It just happened. The church did it without scolding, special meetings or campaigns. It ought to be so today. I think it is safe to say that evangelism is inevitable in a spiritually robust congregation. The truth is we have reason to question the conversion or at least the commitment of any person who claims to be a Christian and does not share their faith.

G. Campbell Morgan in his book *How to Live*, told about a conversation he had after he finished preaching one evening. A man approached Morgan to tell him he had invited a fellow employee, one with whom he had worked

for five years, to attend the service. He then said, "My suggestion came as quite a surprise to my friend. He responded to my invitation by saying, 'Are you a Christian?' And when I answered, 'Yes, I am,' he replied, 'Well, I am too!' Here we had worked beside each other for years and we never knew that we were both believers in Christ. Isn't that funny?"

To the man's surprise, Morgan retorted, "Funny? No, it isn't funny at all! You both need to be born again."

Whether or not that was the case, I don't know. But it was inconceivable to Morgan that two men could be truly saved and work side by side for five years and not be aware of their kinship as brothers in Christ.

We cannot win the war for souls unless every Christians begin to see this as their responsibility. When the city of Athens was in danger of being destroyed, a famous Greek patriot warned the citizens in assembly that the city could not be defended by "paper soldiers."

He was referring to the mercenary soldiers who fought only for hire. He was addressing the prosperous people who had come to believe that money could do everything.

Christians of our generation are also confronted with the danger of becoming "paper soldiers" by thinking they can hire and pay mercenaries to do the work of missions and evangelism. It cannot be left to professionals. The best advertisement is never done by paid salesmen but rather by satisfied customers.

The label on a jar of honey said, "Bees have gathered nectar from 4,500,000 clusters of clover and traveled 150,000 miles to bring you this container of sweetness." But that's what bees are made for. The question is, "What were we saved for?" We were saved to share our faith with other people.

What, then, is the role of the pastor? According to scripture it is to equip the saints for the work of the ministry and to build up the body of Christ (Eph. 4:11-12).

Or, as Paul wrote to Timothy, “And the things that thou hast heard from me among many witnesses, the same commit thou to faithful men, who shall be able to teach others also” (II Timothy 2:2). It’s the pastor’s job to train and motivate every believer to be a witness for Christ. The scriptures teach the preacher-hood of all believers as well as the priesthood of all believers.

Howard Hendricks, longtime professor at Dallas Theological Seminary, said, “The greatest threat to Christianity is not Communism or atheism, but it’s Christians trying to get into heaven incognito without being involved or sharing their faith with others or serving the Lord with their whole hearts.” Until we have every Christian involved in witnessing we will never recover the seeking note of the church.

Learning to Cross the Street

Second, we must involve more places than the church. It’s estimated that less than 3 percent of the lost ever come in the doors of our churches. So, if we wait for people to come to us, we will never reach our world. If the great cathedrals alone would do the job, Europe would have been evangelized long ago. Recently my wife and I worshiped at two of the great cathedrals of London — Westminster Abbey and St. Paul’s. If it had not been for the tourists present, they could have fit the crowd into a good size Sunday school room. The church today needs a new platform for evangelism and it is not the crusade type platform. It is the living room where personal evangelism can occur.

We must see the church as the base, not the place of

evangelism. The church must become the launching pad. We go there to worship, train, prepare and gain encouragement, but the field is outside.

We must go to the world of lost people and not expect them to come to ours. Remember that Jesus met Peter at the docks, the woman of Samaria at the well, Matthew at his tax office and Bartemeus at his begging station. He went to them. Few came seeking him.

You may have seen the television commercial in which a little boy is being interviewed by a journalist who asked: "And what are you going to be when you grow up?" The little boy says, "I'm going to drive an automobile. I'm going to be an engineer on a train. I'm going to fly a jet."

Then he pauses for a moment as if in deep thought and adds: "As soon as my mama lets me cross the street."

The little boy is exactly right. We have to learn to cross the street before we start on a mission to reach our world. Milton Cunningham, a former Southern Baptist missionary to East Africa, said, "It's a sin to talk about wanting to go to Africa when you haven't been across the street to take the message of Christ to a neighbor."

Somehow we've got to get our people to cross the street. That's the only way we can recover the seeking note.

Nobody Ever Asked Me

Third, we must involve more ways than preaching. This is not to belittle preaching at all. Preaching is one way, a very good way, an effective way to present the gospel. The scriptures say, "It pleased God by the foolishness of preaching to save them that believed" (I Cor. 1:21).

But it is not the only way. Perhaps our greatest heresy is that we have taken one way of winning the world and made it the only way. There are other ways. One is to live

it. Let people see Christ in you. More people are won to Christ by exposure than by argument.

And a verbal witness is another. We can never win people to faith in Christ just by the life we live. We cannot by the life we live tell people that Jesus died on the cross, that he was buried, and that he rose again from the dead on the third day. Somehow that good news must be translated into words so that people can hear and understand. We must translate the gospel, not simply transmit it. We must share the gospel with people in their own language.

For the most part, people do not know what sin is and they're not concerned about sin. But they do know the ravages of sin. They know what it does. So we start with the symptoms they see. Christ did not die for loneliness, but for sin. But they are lonely and do not realize it is due to their sin. A big part of people's loneliness is caused by an absence of Christ. They have a deep hunger and they experience long nights without him. Pain is another entry point. Abuse, rejection, divorce, fears, insecurity, dark feelings, and depression are all entry points. Who can change our pain? We must tell them in words they can understand about Christ. We must start with their agenda, not ours.

And we must keep our focus on Jesus, not on other issues. The apostle Paul said that he knew nothing but Christ and him crucified. It's not evangelism to attack specific sins. It is not evangelism to try to make people Baptist. We just need to get them to trust in Jesus.

You may say, "They already know about Christ." Maybe so, but we need to tell them again anyway. I was visiting with my grandson on the phone recently and said to him, "I love you." He said, "I know that."

I then said, "You are my favorite boy in the whole

world." He responded, "I know that, too."

There are some things that people may already know but they need to be told again. They need to hear again of Christ's love for them.

If we will tell them, some will respond. Dr. Edwin Hughes Pruden tells of a visit in the home of one of his parishioners. The father was not a member of the church. During the conversation the husband said, "I have never accepted Christ, but I've never rejected him either because nobody has ever asked me to accept him."

The pastor waited and asked, "I wonder if you will accept him now?" The young man said, "I will." How many are still without the Savior because we have not loved them enough to ask them to receive him?

The greatest obstacle we face is fear or embarrassment. An incident in the life of Sen. J.P. Dolliver of Iowa who served from 1900 to 1910, demonstrated the impact that the gospel can make when we overcome the shame. While the senator was hosting a dinner party of a group of high government officials, he noticed his father, a retired minister, talking to a famous diplomat. He eased over toward his father to hear what he might be saying. He heard his father ask the man, "My friend, how is it with your soul?"

Embarrassed by his father, Sen. Dolliver wedged himself between the two and changed the topic of conversation.

A few months later Sen. Dolliver's father died. Among the many floral tributes was one of exquisite beauty. On the card were these words: "To the man who cared for my soul." It was from the distinguished ambassador to whom the pastor had dared to speak about eternal matter.

If we're going to meet our evangelism responsibility, we're going to have to overcome the shame of the gospel

and the fear of rejection.

We simply must have the courage to speak to people about their souls. Someone asked a group of Medal of Honor winners what courage was. These men who had won the nation's highest medal answered, "Courage is doing that of which you are afraid."

The difference among people is not that some are afraid and others are not. The difference is that some are mastered by their fears. If you're afraid, be afraid that you'll be controlled by your fear rather than being controlled by God. He will give you the grace to overcome your fear and to control your fear. He will give you grace and strength to seek after that which is lost.

Let me ask you two ordinary questions: First, when did you last lead someone else to Christ? Second, when did you last try?

We Christians must stop being spectators. We must get on the field and in the game. We must start living out loud. That's your job and mine. That's the old-fashioned evangelism we need.

9

Putting Missions On Good Footing

Romans 10:14-15

Corns and calluses, blisters and bunions, spurs and sprains, ingrown toenails and fungus infections are just a few of the fifty-odd ailments the human foot is heir to. Each year, people suffering from one or more of these ailments pay between 40,000 and 50,000 visits to podiatrists in the United States for help.

The human foot, composed to 26 bones, 19 muscles and more than 100 ligaments is one of the marvels of creation. No machine yet invented can yet match it.

The average American walks an estimated 115,000 miles - almost five times around the globe, 38 times across the United States from New York City to San Francisco, California during a lifetime. It's estimated that each step we take puts three times our body weight on our foot. For me that is about 600 pounds per step. The cumulative impact of these steps is hundreds of tons each day, yet the foot does its job for 70 years or more without caving in.

You may be wondering, "Why all this talk about feet?" It is because of their importance in God's plan for world redemption. The scriptures declare, "How beautiful are the feet of them that preach the gospel of peace, and bring glad tidings of good things!" (Romans 10:15b).

This statement about feet begins with the glorious fact of salvation. The apostle Paul writes, "Whosoever shall call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved" (verse 13).

- Whosoever - that means you;
- shall call - that means pray;
- upon the name of the Lord - that means Jesus;
- shall be saved - that means be made right with God, have your sins forgiven and have the hope of heaven.

Having said we can be saved by "calling upon the name of the Lord" he then moves back through the logical sequence of events that gets us there. He does this by a series of rhetorical questions. A rhetorical question is one to which no answer is expected but to which only one answer may be made.

He asks, "How shall they call on him whom they have not believed? And how shall they believe on him of whom they have not heard? And how shall they hear without a preacher? And how shall they preach, except they be sent?" (Verses 14-15a).

Then comes the statement, "How beautiful are the feet of those who preach the gospel of peace and bring glad tidings of good things." The words "beautiful" and "feet" just don't seem to go together. I have heard almost every part of the human body called beautiful except feet. I've heard people say, "You have beautiful hair . . . eyes . . . lips . . . hands . . . legs . . . even nails." But never have I heard anyone say, "You have beautiful feet."

Dirty feet! Smelly feet! Cold feet! But never beautiful feet. Why are feet singled out? It is because they are the instruments of divine mission. It is by means of the feet that the messenger gets to his destination to deliver the message. There is a sense in which, if the feet do not go

then the message does not go.

The message is the important thing, but the feet are the principle means of getting the message out. Reduced, then, to their lowest common denominator, missions and evangelism eventually come down to feet. Somebody has to go. Somebody has to deliver the message.

It's sobering to realize that the glorious purposes of God, the redemption of mankind, depend on something as seemingly insignificant and uncomely as ugly, smelly feet. But those are the facts.

Charles Haddon Spurgeon once said, "The gospel can be summed up in two words - come and go." "Come unto me. . ." and "Go ye . . ." I sometimes wonder when Jesus said "Go ye into all the world . . ." if he realized just how much going we would be doing today. We go on youth choir trips, singles ski trips, senior adult trips to Branson and a thousand other places. But the most important going we do is going across the street or across the world to carry the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Somehow, we must get people on their feet and in the field. Jesus does not need more fans. He has all the fans he can stand. What he needs is impact players.

Somehow we've got to get missions on good footing. We must either use our feet or pay to shod someone else to go and carry the gospel of peace.

Why is this so important? There are three reasons:

The lostness of the world

The love of Christ

The lateness of the hour

A Compelling Passion

First, we must get the gospel on good footing because of the lostness of the world. In the larger context of this

statement about feet, the apostle Paul shares with us the compelling passion of his life. He writes, "Brethren, my hearts desire and prayer to God for Israel is, that they might be saved" (Romans 10:1). Why was salvation the compelling passion of Paul's life? It was because he believed people without Christ were lost, i.e., not right with God, under the judgment of God, headed for an eternity without God.

It was this same passion that drove Jesus. He said, "I have come to seek and to save that which is lost" (Luke 19:10). Jesus was himself the first missionary. He left the ultimate comfort zone - heaven - to walk the dusty roads of Israel and redeem us from our sins.

This needs to be the compelling passion of our life also. Jesus said, "As the Father has sent me, so send I you" (John 20:21). We need to see people as lost. We stand at the factory gate and see workers. The Lord sees lost men, dying men; we stop for a school bus loading and we see children. The Lord sees lost people, dying people; we wait at a check-out line in the supermarket and we see shoppers. The Lord sees lost people, dying people; we wave at a man across the street mowing his lawn and we see a neighbor. The Lord sees a lost man, a dying man.

What is the compelling passion of your life? What drives you? Are you driven by ego? Money? Ambition? Politics? We need to be mission driven. Missions is not man's scheme for influencing society. It is God's plan for redeeming it.

Seeing the Cross

Second, we need to get missions on good footing because of the love of Christ. The apostle Paul said, "The love of Christ constrains us" (II Corinthians 5:14). The word

“constrains” in the original literally means “to hold, to keep.” Missionary service for the apostle Paul was dangerous and demanding. He had to travel long distances, brave the elements, endure scorn and rejection, submit to beatings and imprisonment, grieve over the desertion of fellow workers and struggle with immaturity and heresy within churches he had established. What could keep a man going under circumstances like that? What held him to the task? It was nothing less than Christ’s love for him and in him.

It is that same love for us and in us that keeps us going. And Christ has the same love for all people. Notice the number of times the apostle Paul uses the word “they” in this text: “How then shall *they* call on him whom *they* have not believed? And how shall *they* believe in him of whom *they* have not heard? And how shall *they* hear without a preacher? And how shall *they* preach except *they* be sent?”

Who are they? Often times I’ve had people come to me and say, “They say so-and-so.” I always ask them, “Who are they?” It usually boils down to one or two people. But, in this instance, the “they” refers to the whole human race.

Earlier in the passage the apostle Paul had said, “That if thou shalt confess with thy mouth the Lord Jesus, and shalt believe in thine heart that God hath raised him from the dead, thou shalt be saved. For with the heart man believeth unto righteousness; and with the mouth confession is made unto salvation. For the scripture saith, “Who-soever believeth in him shall not be ashamed.”

The word “ashamed” literally means, “be put to shame, be disappointed, be embarrassed, have cause to regret.” The person who comes to God through faith in Jesus Christ will never regret it. They will never be disappointed.

Then comes this all-encompassing statement, "For there is no difference between the Jew and the Greek: for the same Lord over all is rich unto all that call upon him" (verse 12).

Jesus had earlier commanded his disciples, "Go ye therefore and teach all nations" (Matthew 28:19). The word "nations" in the original is the Greek word "ethnos." It literally means, "all tribes . . . all races. . . all classes . . . all cultures."

G. K. Chestert once said, "All men matter to God. You matter. I matter. That's the hardest thing in theology to believe." In his newspaper column, Browning Ware put it beautifully. In a letter to a grandmother he said, "If God had a refrigerator, your picture would be on it. If he had a wallet, your photo would be in it . . . he's crazy about you."

Mother Teresa understood and believed that. She once said: "By blood and origin, I am all Albanian. My citizenship is Indian. I am a Catholic nun. As to my calling, I belong to the whole world. As to my heart, I belong entirely to Jesus." (Mother Teresa, quoted by Ruth A. Tucker in *Guardians of the Great Commission*)

If your heart belongs entirely to Jesus then you belong to the whole world. You don't just belong to your local church, or your city or your state or even your nation. You belong to the whole world because you belong to him.

The heart of missions is not crossing the sea. It is seeing the cross. Missions is a response to the love of Christ.

It's High Time

Third, we must get missions on good footing because of the lateness of the hour. Again, the apostle Paul wrote, "And that, knowing the time, that now it is high time to awaken out of sleep: for now is our salvation nearer than when we believed" (Romans 13:11).

Paul saw time as fleeting, opportunity as passing, salvation as approaching. One thing is for sure, salvation is nearer than it's ever been before.

It's getting late for the lost. If you're not a Christian, it's getting late for you. If you have a neighbor or a loved one who is not a Christian, it's getting late for them. We often sing as an invitation but seldom think of the implications of the song "Softly and Tenderly." Look at the words carefully:

*Softly and tenderly Jesus is calling,
Calling for you and for me;
See, on the portals he's waiting and watching,
Watching for you and for me.*

*Come home, come home.
Ye who are weary come home;
Earnestly, tenderly, Jesus is calling,
Calling, O sinner come home!*

The third line of that hymn is a haunting one:
*Time is now fleeting, the moments are passing,
Passing for you and for me;
Shadows are gathering, deathbeds are coming,
Coming for you and for me.*

*Come home, come home,
Ye who are weary come home;
Earnestly, tenderly, Jesus is calling,
Calling, O sinner come home!*

It's getting late for America. Recently *Time* magazine had an article on the boomer generation and called it "The generation that forgot God." As a result, we flaunt homo-

sexuality, condone abortion, tolerate easy divorce and joke about Dr. Kavorkian. Just recently Holland legalized euthanasia - doctor assisted suicide. While they assured the world that they had built safeguards around its abuse, you and I know that men are sinners and cannot be trusted. Ultimately euthanasia, like abortion, will be abused by society.

Fallen TV evangelist Jim Bakker was indicted for fraud by the federal government and forced to sit in prison for 5 years. During that time he renounced his faith-equals-for-tunes message and embraced the Jesus of the poor. After prison, instead of seeking the spotlights of television, he has devoted his life to preaching the good news of Christ in an inner-city ministry far from the public eye. As a result of his re-education and rededication he said, "I believe the four horsemen of the apocalypse are already out of the barn. They are saddled up; they are riding." I believe, as Vance Havner once said, "If God spares America he will have to apologize to Sodom and Gomorrah."

And it's getting late for the church. For you and for me. We've got to stop thinking of missions as an activity for only a few and to which the rest only give money. Missions must be the life of everyone who has been called by Jesus Christ. And, maybe for the first time in history, that is a real possibility.

When Lewis Shuck, one of our early Baptist missionaries went to China to serve, he traveled by steamer and it took six months to reach his destination. Today, in 18-20 hours by jet airplane you can be anywhere in the world. The increased speed of travel plus increased longevity makes it possible for almost everyone to be, at least, a short-term missionary.

Dr. Kerfoot Walker was a respected physician in Tyler

who gave up private practice to become the County Health Doctor. His wife, Marietta, is also a physician who served with the State Health Department. For years the Walkers have been involved in mission trips to Central America. We were visiting together one day as he neared his 65th birthday. I suggested to him that he ought to quit his job and go be the missionary he had always wanted to be. I reminded him that Moses didn't even begin his work for God until he was 80 years old. Kerfoot did just that and for the past five years he and Marietta have been living and working in Belize.

Joe Barrentine was a retired homebuilder. Our church wanted to build a church in Belize, Central America and did, in fact, build 11 churches in the last 12 years I was pastor in Tyler. I asked Joe to go to Belize, study the building situation and advise me. When he returned he sat down in my office and said, "Preacher, I will give you the next five years of my life." That five years stretched into 10 or more and during those years Joe made over 40 trips to Belize supervising the building of all of those churches.

Roland Baldwin came to our church from another denomination. Before I baptized him he said, "I have served in every capacity in my church; on the session, as an elder, as a deacon. But I never did anything significant for Christ. All we ever did was to decide on the color of the carpet for the sanctuary or whether we would have grape juice or real wine at communion. I want my life to count for something significant. I want to really be involved in the work of God."

The Lord had called him to preach when he was a student at the University of Texas but he went into business instead. He had a cush job managing someone else's estate. In the years that followed he made 15 mission trips to

Central America, one to Ecuador and one to Germany. Then at the age of 60 he quit his job and he and his wife Joanna went to Guatemala as missionaries. He stayed there until a stroke forced them to return to Tyler. Being unable to walk or talk, he is now confined to a wheelchair.

The last time I preached in the church he attends, as I gave the invitation, down the aisle he came in the wheelchair. Unable to walk or to talk, he was saying he wanted to give whatever there was left of him to the Lord Jesus.

Mary Gray was the campus physician for Stephen F. Austin University, Nacogdoches, Texas, 70 miles from Tyler. She lived in Jacksonville, 30 miles from Tyler. She began first listening to our worship services broadcast by radio and then began watching our television broadcast. She called me once or twice and we visited by phone. Mary was a member of another denomination but began visiting our church, joined, and I baptized her.

After her retirement she wanted to be involved in ministry so she began serving through our outreach center that fed, clothed and provided free medical help to the poor of our community.

Mary had a missionary heart and wanted to do more. We made contact with our mission board and she served as a relief physician at a Baptist hospital in Tanzania for medical missionaries who were on furlough. She served until she was no longer permitted to return due to her age. Until her death, she longed to go back to Africa and serve our Lord in his healing ministry.

Linda Petty and her husband, Eddie had a lawn sprinkler service. When Ed died in the prime of life, Linda sold the business and now is serving as a missionary in Nigeria. I could add to that list Reita Hawthorne and her husband Bill who are working in Romania, Roy Edmonds, a

middle aged contractor, who has a continuing ministry in Latvia and John Mark Bellington, the son of Brazilian missionaries, who quit his job with UPS and is now serving full time in Brazil.

But, we must not always think of missions in terms of going to a foreign land. It may involve going across town. In fact, it's a sin to talk about wanting to go to Nigeria as a missionary when you won't go to your neighbor across the street.

Anyway you cut it, it eventually comes down to feet. In 1979 Paul Harvey wrote an article about Salvation Army recruits entitled "It's Those Shoes." His words are a challenge to all of us:

"How would you like a job with long hours, hard work, low pay?

You may have to settle in Atchison, Kansas, population 16,000.

And on \$100 a week before taxes, you and your wife will have to live in a dingy one-room walkup.

And one pot of soup will have to last four days.

*But there is a fringe benefit: **You get a new pair of shoes.***

And in those shoes you can walk from here to Eternity.

You are a single girl; how would you like a job in Chicago?

Be sure before you apply because you will not work in an immaculate skyscraper office in the Loop.

You will work behind a shabby skid-row storefront patronized by winos and cockroaches and whores and the depraved and the diseased and the desperate.

But you will get a new pair of shoes - and guaranteed security - here and hereafter.

I set out to figure out why anybody would enlist in the Salvation Army.

Basic training is tedious. There are difficult years of extensive study and long hours of training - 130 hours of academic courses. And, in any spare time, trainees work as janitors in and around the school.

When a cadet graduates he is commissioned as an ordained minister and certified social worker. But all that certifies him or her for is another one to three years of internship understudying other officers.

But graduation includes one thing more: Those shoes, shiny, sturdy, "magic" shoes.

The Salvation Army's cost containment record is the envy of all industry and most charities.

Ninety percent-plus of all income goes to help feed, clothe or care for some desperate, destitute somebody.

You, as an officer of the Army, will be expected to support yourself or take-home pay of less than \$10 a day.

And it's a seven-day workweek.

And they are 16-hour days.

Our nation's military services are unable to fill enlistment quotas with much higher pay, limitless benefits and generous retirement.

Yet the Salvation Army has never in its history had to advertise for recruits. It's still an honor to be accepted and an accomplishment to graduate and a treasured privilege to serve in the Salvation Army.

It's got to be those shoes.

This Christmas time when you see a selfless lad or lass from the Army standing in the cold beside a curbside kettle - whether you drop a coin or not you will be greeted by a beautiful, fair-faced smile.

Smile back. And then glance at those beautiful shoes.

They walk where you and I would not care to, through

*byways that you and I would not dare to.
We all want to go where they are going without having been
where they've been. Good luck to us.*
(Tyler Morning News 12/16/79).

10

How to Preach Effectively

I Corinthians 2:1-5

According to a survey by the Barna Research Group, church workers are the “most occupationally frustrated people in America today” (*Dallas Morning News*, September 11, 1999). Why is this? I think there are two reasons:

First, we have lost our servant spirit. On the night he was betrayed, Jesus, meeting with his disciples, took a towel and basin of water and, moving about the room, washed his disciple’s feet. When he had finished he asked them if they realized what had just taken place. Then he said, “If I then, your Lord and Master, have washed your feet; you also ought to wash one another’s feet. For I have given you an example that ye should do as I have done to you.” Then he set their ministry in perspective when he said, “If ye know these things, happy are ye if ye do them” (John 13:14-17).

The real joy of the Christian ministry is found in being a servant. And one day when we stand before the Lord, he will not ask, “What was your title?” but rather, “Where is your towel?”

Second, we have lost our sense of the importance of preaching. Martin Lloyd-Jones, the great preacher of

London's Westminster Chapel emphasized the importance of preaching when he said, "The work of preaching is the highest, the greatest and the most glorious calling to which anyone can ever be called. That is true, not because there is anything special about those of us who preach, but because there is everything special about Him of whom we bear witness."

As heralds of the sacred scriptures, we have been entrusted with the greatest privilege of all — that of being voices through which the living God has chosen to speak.

The preaching of God's Word is important for three reasons:

It is the means by which people are saved. The apostle Paul said, "It pleased God by the foolishness of preaching to save them that believed" (I Cor. 1:21; I Peter 1:23).

It is the way to build the church (Acts 2:41). Calvary Church, Grand Rapids, Michigan, under the leadership of pastor Ed Dobson experienced phenomenal growth. Attendance had nearly quadrupled over a 10-year period and it occupies an impressive, debt-free 23-acre campus along a freeway.

When asked how this happened, Dobson said that he employed the only "strategy" he had received in the form of advice from his former pastor: "When you go up there to Grand Rapids, don't try to be an administrator, a CEO, a fund raiser, a staff boss, or anything. You only need to do two things: love the people ... and preach the Bible."

That approach to church building may be a little simplistic but it is at least foundational. Love the people ... and preach the Bible. That's the way to build the church.

It is the way to change society. The early church had no power and made no effort to change society through

protests, boycotts or political action. The only power it had was the power of the Holy Spirit as God's Word was preached and lived. (Acts 17:6; 19:19)

Likewise today we cannot coerce society — and especially the entertainment industry — into conformity to our values. But we can live and preach the Christian faith in a compelling and authentic way and indirectly change it by changing people one by one.

We must beware of an obsession with the insignificant. We need to quit splitting hairs over theories of inspiration and just get on with preaching God's Word with inspiration. As Spurgeon reminds us in this metaphor: "You don't need to defend the lion; just turn it loose and it will defend itself."

So the church today needs to return to a focus on preaching ... preaching effectively. The scriptures tell us how. To preach effectively we must:

Preach prophetically

Preach passionately

Preach plainly

Preach positively

Preach prayerfully

Mighty In The Scriptures

First, to preach effectively we need to preach prophetically. I don't mean that we should try to predict the future. Mark Twain was right, "It is best never to prophesy — especially about the future." The prophets were not primarily foretellers. They were forth-tellers. They were inspired preachers, both men and women (Acts 2:17; 21:9), who spoke forth the Word of God. Their favorite phrase was, "Thus saith the Lord."

Just so, preaching at its best today is telling people

what God says. R.A. Torey said, "If you wish to do an audience good after you get them, study, study, study the one book and preach, preach, preach that one book, and teach, teach, teach the one book, the Bible."

On the occasion of his formal farewell to his students in Bonn, just before his expulsion from Germany in 1935, Karl Barth declared, "And now the end has come. So listen to my piece of advice: exegesis, exegesis, and yet more exegesis! Keep to the word, to the Scripture that has been given to us."

Professor John A. Broadus, founding professor of homiletics at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Kentucky, believed fervently in the power of preaching. And he wrote and taught, "Our business is to teach God's Word. Our task is to set forth what the text contains ... to interpret and apply his text in accordance with its real meaning is one of the preacher's most sacred duties. He stands before the people for the very purpose of teaching and exhorting them out of the word of God."

This was the thrust of the last words he ever taught in the classroom. As he completed a Thursday class on the English New Testament, he knew his death was approaching. After reviewing the lesson, he turned to his students and departed from his lesson plan. He said, "Young gentlemen, if this were the last time I should ever be permitted to address you, I would feel amply repaid for consuming the whole hour in endeavoring to impress upon you these two things: true piety and, like Apollos, to be men 'mighty in the scriptures.'"

A student recording these last words said, "Then pausing, he stood for a moment with his piercing eyes fixed upon us, and repeated over and over again in that slow but wonderfully style peculiar to himself, 'mighty in the

scriptures, mighty in the scriptures,' until the whole class seemed to be lifted through him into sacred nearness to the Master." (A.T. Robertson's, *Life and Letters of John Albert Broadus*, Philadelphia: American Baptist Publication Society, 1901, page 430).

Broadus was never to set foot in the classroom at Southern Seminary again. In a matter of days, he was on his death bed. Like Paul, his exhortation remains: "Be mighty in the scriptures." Paul's final words to Timothy ring in our ears: "preach the word in season and out of season." Preach the word (II Tim. 4:1-5).

Here in Texas we have a saying, "All hat and no cattle." It's a way of describing someone who is all style and no substance.

That describes a lot of storytelling preaching today. It helps to have style, but for sure you must have substance. The only way to have real substance in preaching is to preach the Word of God. All else is fading. God's Word endures forever.

Some people say the church needs to catch the spirit of the age, to be attractive to the world. In order to catch and hold the attention of our young people, we are told we must ape the methods of the world.

When the church does that, it becomes anemic and fails to deliver the message. When the church identifies itself with the world, it becomes nothing more than a glorified social club or a night club. Our assignment then is always to "preach the word." And when we do we preach with power, for God's Word has power in itself (Hebrews 4:12).

Stop Fiddling Around

Second, to preach effectively we need to preach passionately, that is with a sense of conviction, of urgency; as

if it matters — because it *does*.

I believe that the most important thing that happens in any community is the preaching of God's word. Far more important than what happens at the city council meetings, or at the chamber of commerce, or at the school board is the preaching of God's word. Those things matter temporarily. What God says matters eternally.

There are different views of preaching. Harry Emerson Fosdick, one of the most famous preachers of the last century and pastor of Riverside Church in New York City, defined preaching as "personal counseling on a group basis." Some pastors still think of preaching that way today. But when the pulpit becomes a glorified advice center and the pew becomes a therapist's couch, then preaching loses its effectiveness. Allowing the "felt needs" of the people to set the preaching agenda invariably leads to a loss of power in preaching because sinners do not know what their most urgent need is. They are blind to their need for redemption and reconciliation with God. But focusing on the promise of heaven and the horrors of hell gives a preacher a consuming burden; it causes him to preach with passion.

In contrast to that definition of preaching, Puritan pastor Richard Baxter once remarked, "I preach as never sure to preach again, as a dying man to dying men." People don't need to have their fancies tickled. They need to have their hearts stirred. Like a lawyer before a jury we plead with men to come to Christ. This kind of passion, I believe, is the single greatest element missing from most preaching today.

Charles Wesley, who was at the heart of the movement that gave birth to the Methodist denomination said, "Set yourself on fire and the world will come to watch you burn." I believe that. But you can't burn out if you were

never on fire. And I know a lot more preachers who need to be fired up than there are who need to be hosed down.

“The Christian message is no longer played on a trumpet but on a violin,” said, Methodist Bishop Gerald Kennedy. A violin makes beautiful music but it’s hardly what you would use to call an army to battle. We are more apt to waltz to them than to march by them. Far too much preaching today is just “fiddling around.”

When I feel my passion waning I remember that it was on an ordinary Sunday, in an ordinary church, listening to an ordinary preacher, preaching an ordinary sermon, that God did an extraordinary thing in my life. Then I remember that what once happened to me when I heard someone else preach, might happen to someone else when I preach. That, like few other things I know, puts passion in my preaching.

Am I Going Too Fast For You?

Third, to preach effectively we need to preach plainly. Thee old time religion was sin black, hell hot, judgment sure, eternity long and salvation free. And preachers preached it like it is because they believed it like it was. We need that today. There is no substitute for simple, pointed preaching.

President Calvin Coolidge was an avid church attendee. Once when he returned from his church his wife asked, “What did the preacher preach about?” He said, “Adultery.” “What did he say about it?” she asked. He responded, “I think he was against it.” On another occasion he reportedly said, “I never heard a sermon I didn’t get something out of. But I have had some mighty close calls.”

When people aren’t sure what you’re saying, there can

be no power in your preaching. Some people almost pride themselves in speaking so they can't be understood. Federal Reserve Board Chairman Alan Greenspan is famous for that. He has been reported as saying, "If I seem unduly clear to you, you must have misunderstood what I said" (Fort Worth *Star-Telegram*, Dec. 20., 1999). That was said tongue-in-cheek but much of the time investors have to wonder what he means by what he says.

There's no virtue in being Ivy League or Ivory Tower. You should be down to earth, grass roots, simple, clear, understandable. Those who have been the most powerful and effective communicators have always done that.

Vince Lombardi, in his first team meeting as the coach of the NFL's Green Bay Packers, allegedly said, holding a football: "Gentlemen, this is a football. Am I going too fast for you?"

The scriptures say of Jesus, "The common people heard him gladly" (Mark 12:37). The apostle Paul warns, "For if the trumpet give an uncertain sound, who shall prepare himself to the battle?" (I Cor.14:8). And of his own preaching he said, "We use great plainness of speech" (II Cor. 3:12). Those are hallmarks of effective, powerful communication.

I was speaking with a preacher from another state who asked me how a preacher who had moved from his state to Texas was doing. I had heard the man preach a few times so I remarked, "He is a good man but when I hear him preach I leave scratching my head trying to figure out what he was driving at." Then I said, "Frankly he can't preach a lick." The man responded, "You mean by Texas standards?" And I responded, "Well, that's where he is."

A preacher had better know where he is and who he's preaching to. And if you're in Texas you'd better preach so Texans can understand you. While the biblical text never

changes, the audience does. When I left my last pastorate, the third-grade choir wrote me some letters I have treasured since that time.

One of them wrote, "It won't be much like it used to be without you. I'm sad you're leaving, but I will get over it."

Another wrote, "I'll miss you Paul. Thank you for baptizing me. I'm sorry for wasting your time."

The one I like best said, "Thank you for being our preacher. Thank you for making the sermons interesting. And a lot of times I knew what you were talking about."

And that's what I'm talking about. That may be the best compliment I ever received. When children understand you, it is probable that the adults do also. Preachers need to tell it like it is. So anchor to the Word and then proclaim it plainly.

Jesus Came Not To Condemn The World

Fourth, to preach effectively we need to preach positively. That's not to say there is no place for the negative. If we cut out all of the "thou shalt nots" in the Bible we would cut out a lot of scripture. But that's all some preachers dwell on.

Dean Merrill, vice president and publisher for the International Bible Society, has written a book entitled *Sinners In The Hands of An Angry Church*. We must be careful that we do not portray that we are angry people leading an angry church and serving an angry God. We need to preach forgiveness and hope and redemption. The Christian faith is primarily a positive religion.

Somebody has said, "When you preach, never leave Jesus on the cross and never leave the prodigal son in the far country." Always get Jesus down from the cross and

up from the grave. And always get the prodigal son out of the far country and into the father's arms. Always leave people with hope.

I simply remind you that God loves the Washington page and the victim of AIDS ... the college president and the nursing home resident ... the zoo keeper and the street sweeper ... the office flunky and the back alley junkie ... the cab driver and the financial adviser ... the chain-smoker and the goat-roper. God loves all people and so should we. And when we preach effectively we convey that message to them.

Jesus reminds us, "For God sent not His Son into the world to condemn the world. ..." Jesus came not to condemn the world. And neither should we.

There is power in the positive.

It Begins on Your Knees

Fifth, to preach effectively we must preach prayerfully. Great preaching doesn't begin in the study. It begins on our knees. Before the preacher can prepare the sermon, God must first prepare the preacher. If our hearts are not right, then our sermons can never be right. As a result we must always be passionate for our personal pursuit of God.

We never study a passage simply to prepare a sermon. We must always study to prepare our own hearts first and foremost. We cannot take others spiritually where we have not gone. We cannot share what we do not possess.

Robert Murray McCheyne, the noted Scottish preacher, said, "The greatest need of my people is my personal holiness." In other words, I must first of all be a man of God. What I say must be the overflow of who I am. My preaching must occur within the context of a dynamic relationship with God. And a preacher never stands taller than

when he's on his knees.

When we pray we do not just ask the Lord to give us a sermon or for him to bless our preaching. We pray that he will help us to receive the word in our own heart and live it out in our own life. Puritan minister and writer Thomas Watson wrote, "We take every word as spoken to yourself. When the word thunders against sin, think thus: 'God means my sin; when it presses any duty, God intends me in this.'" That kind of faithful, persistent prayer is the heart-beat of every vital ministry.

A Beeson Divinity School (Birmingham, Alabama) advertisement said the pastor's study should have at least two open windows: one facing out toward the world, the world of suffering and sin for which Christ died; and the other a skylight open toward heaven, toward the one in whose name we serve.

J.D. Gray, former pastor of First Baptist Church, New Orleans, said that every preacher ought to wear out his clothes in three places: the elbows in fellowship with great minds (studying); the shoe soles in fellowship with his people (visiting); the knees in fellowship with God (praying).

Powerful praying leads to powerful preaching. Like Jacob, who wrestled with the angel till dawn, we need to pray, "I will not let thee go, except thou bless me" (Gen. 32:26).

A fellow pastor told me once that he became pastor before he had been to the seminary. And he moved up the ecclesiastical ladder so rapidly that he had little inclination to go on with his education. On one occasion he had Carlisle Marney, longtime pastor in his church, for a meeting. Marney said to him one day, "I understand that you have tapes and you've written some books. I'd like to have

some of your tapes and the books you have written.”

My friend waited anxiously for some response from Marney. He said, “Finally on Friday, the last day of the meeting, he came into the office and laid the books and tapes on my desk and said, ‘Bill, you have a good voice and a good vocabulary. It’s too bad you don’t have anything to say.’”

That’s when my friend decided to go to seminary and get additional training.

We all need training. But education alone is not enough. If we are to have power in our preaching we must speak prophetically, passionately, plainly, positively and prayerfully.