

Wineskins Magazine

Christian Compassion

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Who is My Neighbor?

by Mike Cope

September – October, 1996

“And who is my neighbor?” a legal attorney wanted to know. An innocent enough question. A simple quest for clarification. Jesus had just told him that the focus of God’s word is on loving God with all our heart, soul, strength, and mind and on loving our neighbor as ourselves.

But the question isn’t as eager and innocent as it first might seem. For the desire to define “neighbor” is an attempt to limit it. Presumably, the expert in the law wanted a response something like this (according to Frederick Buechner):

A neighbor (hereinafter referred to as the party of the first part) to be construed as meaning a person of Jewish descent whose legal residence is within a radius of no more than three statute miles from one’s own legal residence unless there is another person of Jewish descent (hereinafter to be referred to as the party of the second part) living closer to the party of the first part than one is oneself, in which case the party of the second part is to be construed as neighbor to the party of the first part and one is oneself relieved of all responsibility of any sort or kind whatsoever.

What is the scope of “neighbor”? How far do my responsibilities extend? And when do they end? These are the questions he was subtly asking.

But Jesus refuses even to answer his question. He knows that the lawyer’s quiz implies limits to compassion. It hints at a line that may be drawn with God’s approval to distinguish between those who deserve my mercy and those who don’t.

Jesus is interested not in “Who is my neighbor?” but in the question “When am I a true neighbor?” He knows that the moment you start stapling exceptions to the second great commandment you aren’t much interested in obeying it. For love is the spontaneous overflow of a heart that forgets itself in the face of human need. It is the gracious response of a person who has already experienced the forgiveness and compassion of God through Jesus Christ.

Rather than define the borders of “neighborhood,” Jesus told a story. The story has lost a bit of its zip because we’ve spoiled some of its surprise by calling it “The Parable of the Good Samaritan.” We give the punch line before the set-up! Those who listened to Jesus likely weren’t expecting a scum-eating, half-breed Samaritan to be the model of godly action. And yet, he is the only one who offers true compassion. He doesn’t just love with his head, analyzing the tragedy before him; nor does he love with his heart alone, weeping over the plight of the poor traveler. He shows God’s true compassion. And what did his compassion look like? It was:

1) Unrestricted. After all, what less likely candidate was there for a Samaritan to help? He didn't interview the man to make sure he was worthy of help. He didn't question the man's judgment in traveling on that road.

2) Translated into action. Fortunately for the man who'd been beaten, the Samaritan didn't just pray for him and promise to call 911. He rolled up his sleeves, pulled out his wallet, and helped.

3) Costly. "Look after him, and when I return, I will reimburse you for any extra expense you may have," he told the motel manager.

It's a story that takes on a whole new life on these in-your-face, Rush-is-right, none-of-this-victimization-crap days. It isn't driven by political rhetoric from the left or the right. Rather, it is the heart of God—a God who is often described in Scripture as "full of compassion."

The story of the Good Samaritan is ultimately the story of Jesus Christ whose compassion was poured out on all those around him: on untouchable lepers, on the hungry and poor, on the half-blind disciples, even on the straight-as-an-arrow religious leaders. His compassion didn't limit "neighbor" by color, gender, income, health, or moral history. His compassion didn't just pity. Nor did it endorse sinfulness or foolish choices.

Compassion is a learned behavior that comes from setting our compasses on Jesus Christ. It is a way of looking at faces, seeing both the many destructive forces that have worked on them and the ever-present love of God that has pursued them. It is a way of remembering—that everyone we encounter is made in God's image. It is a way of confessing—that our salvation is a gift of God and not a well-earned perk.

But if we don't define neighbor, then how will we know whom we're to show compassion to? By glancing in the ditches once in a while. That's what the Samaritan did. And Jesus' response echoes centuries later: "Go and do likewise."

The Parable of the Secular Humanist

by Rubel Shelly

September – October, 1996

A little girl named Clarissa showed up for third-grade Sunday School class one day. It was a warmer-than-usual early September day. It was her first Sunday in a new town where she, her mother, and two brothers had moved last Tuesday.

Although her clothes were clean, they were old hand-me-downs that were faded and frayed. She wasn't quite as clean as her clothes, though, and her teacher picked up quickly on the odor.

She was brought to the classroom by her mother. She looked to be a hundred pounds overweight, and her decayed teeth showed when she spoke—even though she tried not to open her mouth more than necessary to get the words out.

Clarissa wasn't old enough to pick up on the coolness the teacher showed her mother. Her mother was so used to it from people at the Welfare Office and other public assistance agencies that she didn't really notice it either. Clarissa's father had died when she was not yet four years old, and her mother had had a tough time providing for her and her two brothers—aged ten and seven.

The teacher told a Bible story in the class, holding a couple of the regular children on her lap at times as they got restless. There was a paper to color. She raised her hand a couple of times when the teacher asked questions about the Bible story, but she was never called on. The teacher read a book titled "You are Special to God." But she never made eye contact with Clarissa.

After Bible class, her mother picked her up. Her younger brother was already in tow, and they went together to find her older sibling.

Church was pretty boring for Clarissa. She didn't know the words to any of the songs—though her mother did—and her feet dangled off the pew. A couple of times she wiggled, only to be scowled at by a lady sitting a few feet away. Once her hard-soled shoe made a loud click on the wooden bench as she tried to shift her weight to get comfortable. The lady shot her eyes toward her, pursed her lips, and hissed, "Shhhh!"

When church was over, the lady who had shushed her left by the opposite side of the pew. Clarissa wasn't old enough to notice that neither she nor any of the other church members spoke to her mother. But that wouldn't have surprised her if she had noticed it, for people usually treated her little family like that—at the utilities office, at the grocery store, on the street.

As they were leaving, everyone had to exit through one wide door. So the preacher shook her mother's hand and glanced down at her three kids. When her mother greeted him with her broad smile and Spanish accent—Clarissa's English was already better than hers—he smiled politely

and nodded. He said, “Glad to see you, Ma’am.” He reached for the next adult hand without even acknowledging the dark-skinned, dark-haired children with her.

The next morning, Clarissa went to her new school. Her mother left for work almost 45 minutes before she and her brothers had to catch the bus. But she got them up, gave them cereal, and made sure they were dressed. Clarissa didn’t catch the worried look on her mother’s face about start-up school supplies she knew all three children would need. That would have to be faced later.

When the people—some teachers, some volunteer parents—met her bus and got her to her room, Clarissa saw one of the biggest smiles she had ever seen. Her teacher leaned over to make eye contact with her. She told Clarissa her name, Miss Metcalf. Then she wrote Clarissa’s name on a name tag, pressed it gently onto her chest, and took her by the hand to introduce her to three other children.

Later that day, Miss Metcalf picked up on Clarissa’s discomfort at a new school and among strange children. She got down on her knees, hugged Clarissa, and invited her to eat lunch with her. Clarissa knew she had found a friend. She even went home that night to tell her mom she wanted to be a school teacher when she grew up. “I want to be jus’ like Miss Metcalf!” she said.

Within 48 hours, Clarissa had met three Christians and one “secular humanist.” Which do you think was a good neighbor to her and her family? Wonder who will have the most impact on her young life? Which one would Jesus point to and say, “Go and do likewise”? (cf. Luke 10:37b).

In this issue of *Wineskins*, we challenge all believers to be more sensitive to children, gay persons, the sick, minorities, strangers, the poor, criminals, deacons—human beings of all backgrounds. There is no way to be a follower of Christ without learning that we have neighbors, who those neighbors are, and how to show compassion to them.

Radical Compassion: Meeting the Lepers Among Us

by Darryl Tippens

September – October, 1996

Every believer, I suppose, eventually faces a personal crisis which transforms his or her faith. Elie Weisel, at 15, was cast into the absolute darkness of Auschwitz. Later, in his book called *Night*, he described his terrible, transforming epiphany:

Never shall I forget the first night in camp, which turned my life into one long night, seven times cursed and seven times sealed. Never shall I forget that smoke. Never shall I forget the little faces of children, whose bodies I saw turned into wreaths of smoke beneath the silent sky.¹

Everything important in Weisel's life changed forever. Afterwards, he wrote: "There are certain experiences that make you change whether you want to or not, when you must re-evaluate your relationship with the surrounding society, with man and with God and with yourself." While most of us, thankfully, will never encounter the horrors of a concentration camp, many of us will experience a crisis that will transform our understanding of self, community, and faith.

My transforming moment happened last year. A young man—let us call him "Mark"—was in great distress.² He was troubled by issues of "sexual orientation." His family had discovered that he was gay, and the revelation did not go well, to put it mildly. A Christian university graduate raised in a Christian home, Mark was lonely and desperate. A mutual friend had brought us together, hoping that I, somehow, as a representative of the church, could offer assistance, solace, and hope. I did what I knew to do, but what I offered proved too little, too late. Very soon after our meeting, Mark committed suicide.

"There are certain experiences that make you change whether you want to or not...." Weisel's words have proved inescapably true for me. I had to face my own sense of failure. (What more could I, should I, have done?) But I also had to face the fact that church, family, and community had failed Mark. Through his community's scornful words, cruel attitudes, and icy indifference, Mark found it literally impossible to go on. He internalized the community's hatred, and, I think, finally acted on the community's implicit message to him, "It would be better if you did not exist." And so he cooperated. As I rehearsed this young man's story, I was stunned by the unshakable conviction (which I find very hard to put into words) that Christians actually contributed to Mark's death.

I can hear the protests rising: "Don't blame us. We were just standing up for our principles. We are a loving, compassionate community, concerned for the poor, the orphans, and the widows." And of course, they are right. Or half right.

We must try to understand a terrible paradox that inhabits our communities and perhaps our own hearts. It is possible both to love and to hate—to feed the starving in Africa and to bear a contempt that kills. As Shakespeare reveals in *The Merchant of Venice*, we can be like good old Antonio, generous to a fault, while bitterly loathing Jews. One can love foreign missions and be

a racist. One can love the lost and be a sexist, a homophobe, or a bigot. This is the scandal of our religion: one can love and hate at the same time—easily. It is possible to be a cruel almsgiver, both generous and hurtful.

“There are certain experiences that make you change whether you want to or not...” The death of Mark has caused me to go back to the gospel, to reexamine the compassion of Jesus, and to reconsider why I am here on this earth. This side of Mark’s grave, the gospel sounds different to me, more urgent and more real.

So far as I can tell, I have one simple purpose on earth—to be like Jesus Christ in all things. To imitate his gentleness, his mercy, and his compassion. “A disciple is not above his teacher,” Jesus says. “Everyone who is fully qualified will be like the teacher” (Luke 6:40). The core quality in the heart of Jesus is compassion, Paul explains: “If there is any compassion and sympathy... let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus” (Philippians 2:1, 5). “How I long for you all with the compassion of Christ!” I am here to love as Jesus loved. I am here to notice people, to assist them, to enter into their lives. I am here to grow up into the perfect, radical compassion of Jesus Christ.

Sentimental Compassion

Of course, all Christians believe in compassion (in theory), and we practice a fair amount of it. We can point with pride to our famine relief in Ethiopia or our efforts to help the victims of hurricanes, earthquakes, fires, and floods. We do care for the orphan and the widow—at least modestly. Yet a great deal of our compassion is “sentimental.” By sentimental, I mean that it is prompted by occasional, raw emotion—often activated by the high drama of a particular crisis.

I do not criticize such sentimental compassion. It is useful and good. It feeds the hungry and alleviates a lot of misery. But sentimental compassion has certain limitations. Since it is stirred by feelings of kinship and brotherhood, it is most often practiced toward people “like me” or toward subjects I deem to be small and helpless (for example, hungry and helpless children). We bestow this kind of compassion most naturally on people with whom we can “identify.” But, unfortunately, this compassion can wear thin when the person in need doesn’t look like me (the Bosnian, the black inner city youth, the “welfare queen,” the street person, the AIDS victim).

Thus, if a white Church of Christ burns, we rush to rebuild it with our next Sunday’s contribution—for we feel a rush of pity since these people are “ours.” But if a black Baptist church burns to the ground, well, which of our white Churches of Christ would dream of helping out? The list of needy people who do not claim our sympathy is, sadly, a long one.

Sentimental compassion, good as it is, falls short of the gospel. We must go deeper to uncover true, gospel compassion.

Radical Compassion

Radical compassion marches into the dark places where sentimental compassion dares not travel. Rooted in *agape*, it is nourished by resources much deeper than feelings of brotherhood and

kinship. Yes, it feels, but it is also driven by a tough will to practice Christlike charity, whatever the cost. This kind of compassion is rare because it requires a violent uprooting of one's own self, and it challenges our primitive desire for personal security. An example from the life of Francis of Assisi illustrates what I mean.

One day Francis came upon a leper. Something inside urged the young man to spur his horse and gallop away from the disgusting, deformed beggar. But something else inside urged him to stop, to notice, and to love this outcast. Francis dismounted. He gave the leper some money, and then he kissed the leper's hand.

Francis turned on his own nature, as it were. He fought his pride and his squeamishness in order to show mercy. He knew that he must "press the man's rotten flesh against his lips."³ That experience proved to be the turning point in Francis' life.

Why should Francis kiss the deformed hands of diseased beggars? Why should Jesus love the prostitutes and the tax collectors? Why should an Albanian nun from Calcutta build an AIDS hospice in New York City? Such love is risky, incomprehensible, literally beyond logic. But it is the gospel, and we must learn how to practice it.

Disciplines of Compassion

Radical compassion is not acquired naturally, through human effort. It is received as a divine gift. It is a grace, the reward of living a certain way in the world. Rather than bemoan our failure to practice radical compassion, it would be better if we entered into the spiritual disciplines that make it possible for God to teach us how to show mercy.

Through a life of prayer, fasting, the practice of silence. The spiritual reading of Scripture, and meditation, God leads us to become radically compassionate people. When you make the *Kyrie eleison*, "Lord, have mercy" your hourly prayer, you will be surprised how easy it will be for you to extend mercy to those different from you.

When you live in the Gospels and watch your Lord at work among the lepers of his day, in time it will seem utterly natural for you to enter the lives of the lepers of your day. When you meditate at length on your own frailty and sin, you will find it easy to forgive others in the name of Jesus. Tragically, a Christianity divorced from the compassion of Jesus becomes distorted, rigid, and harsh.

In fact, if we do not move towards Jesus' radical compassion, we are likely to act violently towards those "beneath" us. We see this problem in the parable of the unforgiving servant ([Matthew 18:21-35](#)). A servant owed his master 10,000 talents. One talent represented 15 years' wages for a common laborer. If this servant were to give his entire annual salary to his master, it would take him 150,000 years to get out of debt! Marvelously, though, the master forgives the debt totally.

And what does this liberated man do? He turns violently to another man beneath him but in his debt. His fellow servant owes him a paltry sum (less than one year's wages): "But that same

slave, as he went out, came upon one of his fellow slaves who owed him a hundred denarii; and seizing him by the throat, he said, ‘Pay what you owe.’” The master in the story asks the wicked servant, and by extension, each of us, “Should you not have had mercy on your fellow slave, as I had mercy on you?” In church and society today we see a lot of verbal “seizings by the throat.” Tempers are hot. The anger runs deep on all sides. I wonder: would this be possible, if each remembered how great a debt he has been forgiven?

Surely, if the cruel servant had contemplated his own experience of grace, he would not have dealt violently with his brother. Spiritual violence flows from a lack of awareness of one’s own miraculous liberation. Today, many of the so-called “religious right” are known for their hatred of people who are not like them. Could this phenomenon be the inevitable consequence of not living a life of self-reflection? Jesus teaches us to pray, “Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors.” When this petition becomes our daily petition, the spiritual terrain upon which we meet our neighbors becomes level.

Costly Compassion

Radical compassion becomes possible when we move close to the heart of Jesus. Jesus is the template of biblical compassion. His compassion becomes our own. We observe him closely, then we do what he does. Such radical compassion is not soft, easy, or romantic. On the contrary, it is costly, even deadly.

When Francis of Assisi went into a period of prayer, it occurred to him that if he really obeyed the call of God to love this world’s lepers, he could well lose his good looks, his health, even his life! He was haunted by a memory of an old, hunchbacked woman in Assisi. The message came to him that, unless he turned back, the devil would place the woman’s ugly hump on his own back. Francis then saw that, truly, if he was to follow God he must be prepared to take the ugliness of the world on himself. It is not enough to throw a coin at a beggar. “He must go down into the suffering and poverty of the world and take the hump upon his own back.”⁴

Here we encounter the real offense in radical compassion. It is costly! Quite literally, in biblical terms, it takes “guts” (“*splankna*”).⁵ One must open wide one’s very self to another person, without restriction—a radically risky thing to do ([2 Corinthians 6:11-12](#)). True compassion is a sacrifice of one’s very inner being for another person. It is a gesture that leads easily to humiliation and injury.

Furthermore, radical compassion is certain to be misunderstood by the religious establishment which is dedicated to preserving the integrity and reputation of the community. When Jesus loved the outcasts, his critics seized upon this fact with relish. They refused to see this basic truth: that to enter into the life of a physically or morally diseased person is not to approve of the disease any more than Francis approved of leprosy when he pressed his lips to the hand of the leper. Such fine distinctions are lost to the Pharisees who look on with horror and dismay. Seeing only contamination and compromise, they righteously rise up in anger against radical compassion.

In the face of opposition, how do we practice the mercy of Christ? Such amazing love only grows in the deep soil of a life of devotion to our model, Jesus Christ. Through the daily disciplines of prayer, solitude, fasting, meditation, and acts of service, compassion is made possible. It may take a whole life to get there. Or, it may be thrust upon you quickly, in a transforming moment. “There are certain experiences that make you change whether you want to or not....”

And so, Mark’s untimely death is changing me. Today I am less concerned about “getting it right,” more concerned about loving right. Now I see that compassion is not “soft” or “optional,” but muscular and risky, the crowning Christian virtue. The words of John of the Cross follow me daily. “In the twilight of our lives, we will be judged on how we have loved. In the twilight of the twentieth century, I seriously doubt that Churches of Christ will be judged according to the myriad controversies that have enamored us. But I suspect we will be judged on how we have treated the rejected, the powerless, and the silent among us.

1 Elie Weisel, *Night* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1960), p. 43.

2 Details about “Mark” have been changed to protect the privacy of his family.

3 John R. H. Moorman. *Saint Frances of Assisi* (London: SPCK, 1976), p. 9.

4 Moorman, p. 10. (my emphasis)

5 *Splanchnon* is the Greek term for compassion. It denotes the inward parts of the body, the lower organs, which were thought to be the seat of emotions and the self.

At the Turning of the Century

by John McRay

September – October, 1996

In 1947, A & C Black, Ltd. reprinted the 1922 lectures of Albert Schweitzer under the title *The Decay and the Restoration of Civilization*, the first volume of which was subtitled “The Philosophy of Civilization, Part One.” In its opening pages Schweitzer, a man who earned five doctorates and yet chose to give his life in service to mankind as a medical doctor in Africa, exclaimed:

It is clear now to everyone that the suicide of civilization is in progress. What remains of it is no longer safe. It is still standing, indeed, because it was not exposed to the destructive pressure which overwhelmed the rest, but, like the rest, is built upon rubble, and the next landslide will very likely carry it away (p.3).

The second volume was published a year later, and it begins with this observation: “There is one elementary fact which is quite obvious. The disastrous feature of our civilization is that it is far more developed materially than spiritually” (p. 2).

Richard Neibuhr has reminded us in his book *Christ and Culture* that religion and culture are so intertwined that there is no discernible difference between them in our minds. Jesus was painfully aware of this when he said to the Apostles, “Behold I send you out as sheep in the midst of wolves.” They, like the ancient prophets before them, were sent to their own culture with the Word of God, and that culture devoured them...beat them in their synagogues, dragged them before governors and kings, delivered up by their own brothers and sisters ([Matthew 10:16](#)).

Schweitzer was right in 1922 and 1923. He was right in 1947 when his words were reprinted. And he is right today! Our civilization is, always has been, and always will be, more developed materially than spiritually.

The mission of the church has always been to take the Word of God to the culture as it exists in a given time. The mission remains the same—since both God and human nature remain the same—“Go teach all nations” (Matthew 28:18-20). But, equally important, is the church’s mission to itself. It must not only save the lost, it must also nourish the saved (1 Thessalonians 2:9-12; Titus 2:11-14).

A few years ago Time magazine described the “Unholy Row” among television pulpитеers in Texas, Virginia, and South Carolina, painfully reminding us that God’s church must be pure if it is to be a light to those in darkness. What must unbelievers think when a well-known television evangelist is sentenced to 45 years in prison for defrauding his followers!

What kind of world do we face today, as we get ready for a new century, trying to inculcate into its multifaceted culture the ever-appropriate and eternally indispensable gospel of Jesus Christ? How different is it from the world we are leaving behind?

At the end of World War II, we were not yet familiar with television, surrogate mothers, in vitro fertilization (test tube babies), talking automobiles with computerized dashboards, lesbian “marriages,” gay rights, AIDS, Watergate, personal computers, video cassette recorders, car washes, freeways, motels, supermarkets, or shopping malls. How things have changed in a half century!

Fifty years ago, the cultural context of America made the methodology of the church’s mission clear: homes with a father, mother, and children together were the norm; clear standards of right and wrong existed, even when they were not always practiced; honor and self-respect were prized highly; sex was viewed as personal, private, and meaningful only in the context of marital love—aberrations were not flaunted in public; homosexuality was considered an anomaly and its practice viewed with shame by those who knew that such aberrant tendencies had to be controlled; and the word “gay” was still a term describing people who were happy and wholesome.

That was a time when dope addiction was rare, usually the result of medicinal problems arising out of ill health and not a means of escaping the realities of a life with which one no longer had the ability or desire to cope; it was a time when people did not expect to have whatever they wanted the instant they wanted it—a time before McDonald’s built the first assembly-line fast food chain, teaching us that we need not wait long for anything.

My wife, who teaches sixth grade social studies in the suburbs of Chicago, asked her class recently what they would do if they did not have any food for dinner. A student from India said he would have to do without. Four children reared in this country raised their hands, and three of them said, “We would steal it!”

Fifty years ago, in the summertime, my family regularly sat on the front porch of our Oklahoma home, which was neither air-conditioned nor insulated, and waited for the house to cool down so we could go inside and sleep. Neighbors sat in each other’s front yards exchanging stories about their lives. The children listened with fascination and learned about their family history and that of their neighbors. Now, we shut our neighbors out, close our blinds, and turn ourselves into couch potatoes, mesmerized by the often mindless babble emanating from the television tube. Conversation is squelched and creativity is smothered.

I am not suggesting that the “good old days” were the best. In reality, there never were any “good old days.” Some times are better than others, and the mission of the church is more difficult in some cultural situations than in others. We are living in a time which has its own unique cultural phenomena and the church must recognize that its methods of spreading the gospel and nourishing the church in this society will be influenced by that culture.

Schweitzer’s words are very much apropos to our current situation—our culture is far more advanced materially than it is spiritually—but this has always been so. The 1990s are as different

as the 1980s were from the decades preceding them, in some ways better and in some ways worse. It is our task to minister to these needs in our time, not in the same way we ministered to society earlier, but with the same message. The world will determine the agenda and the church will provide the message—Jesus Christ, the same yesterday, today, and always (cf. Hebrews 13:8). As I look at the world we now face in this decade as we prepare for a new century, I see some areas in which our ministry will need refocusing to be most effective for Christ.

LONELINESS

Loneliness is one of the major problems of our time. The Census Bureau states that “In 1985, 20.6 million persons lived alone. They accounted for 11% of all adults, and their one-person households accounted for 24% of all households. Since 1960 the number of persons living alone has nearly tripled.” In the 1970s the number of men living by themselves increased 97% and the number of women by 55%. Sociologist Fran Goldscheider was quoted in the Chicago Tribune as observing that “it is conceivable that a young adult today could spend as much as 50% of his or her life living alone—before marriage, between marriages, and if it’s a woman, at the end of her life.

“The group that grew the fastest during the 1970s was the young adults, the majority of whom were young men. In that decade the number of never married people under 30 living by themselves more than tripled.” This changed in the 1980s when economics forced more young adults under 24 to move back with parents or remain with them. “In one respect the number of people living alone is simply a symptom of other changes: low birth rates, high divorce rates, long lives and late marriages.” Here is an area of ministry that must not be ignored in the 1990s—or the 2000s.

Loneliness exists even in marriages. Although 98% of the people in the U. S., in a 1980 study, said that two people sharing a home was the ideal living arrangement, almost half the marriages in this country end in divorce. Surprisingly, a nationwide survey, conducted by Philip Shaver and Carin Rubenstein, found that “the loneliest people are adolescents and young adults and that the elderly are not usually lonely” (In Search of Intimacy, 1982).

Sociologist Fran Goldscheider at Brown University is among those who are especially concerned about these conditions. Because the highest concentrations of people who live alone are the young and the old, she sees those groups becoming invisible to each other. She speculates that living alone reduces young people’s need to live in a family. She worries that “we are giving up the insurance system of the family, the one that protects and defends in crises, and that we are losing our ability to live interdependently.”

Loneliness is undoubtedly a major factor in the current drug abuse epidemic, the low performance of so many “latch-key” students in elementary and secondary school, the high rate of alcoholism among young people, and the “bee-hive syndrome” among homosexuals that causes them to group together and flaunt their immoral lifestyle in public.

MORAL AND

ETHICAL VALUES

A second major issue facing the church at the turn of the century is the change that is occurring in the moral and ethical climate of this country. The problem is not simply that what a previous generation regarded as wrong is now regarded as right, but that our generation is teetering on the brink of a moral dilemma in which there is no right and wrong—no black and white—only endless shades of gray.

We are already experiencing a breakdown in the ethical standards that society itself, not the church, has set for its politicians and its business people. This is reflected in the action of the Harvard Business School, which has established a faculty position called the “Chair for Ethics” in order to provide teaching on ethical behavior for its business majors.

Wall Street is constantly scandalized by the dishonesty of some of its leading figures. *Time* magazine reported that “What began as the decade of the entrepreneur is becoming the age of the pin-striped outlaw” (May 25, 1987, p. 22). Scores of banks, including some of the largest in the nation, have been closed by the federal government over marginal or outright dishonest practices at the highest levels.

Forty-nine of our national political leaders, found guilty of wrong-doing, were paraded before the public in cameo photos in this *Time* article, like criminals on a post office bulletin board. The article in the ethics section of the magazine proceeded to answer its own question, “What’s Wrong?” by pointing out that the heedless lack of restraint in their behavior reveals something disturbing about the national character....America... finds itself wallowing in a moral morass.... Ethics, often dismissed as a prissy Sunday School word, is now at the center of a new national debate. Put bluntly, has the mindless materialism of the ‘80s left in its wake a values vacuum?

I am concerned that presidents, senators, federal judges, supreme court justices, congressmen, and even law enforcement officers all over the nation are seemingly unable or unwilling to distinguish between right and wrong. Moral relativism is the order of the day. Ted Koppel, the ABC news commentator, exclaimed in a highly publicized commencement address at Duke University, that we have spent 5,000 years as a race of rational human beings, trying to drag ourselves out of the primeval slime by searching for truth and moral absolutes. In its present form, truth is not a polite tap on the shoulder. It is a howling reproach. What Moses brought down from Mount Sinai were not the Ten Suggestions.

I am sickened by the media circus created during our presidential elections. The distorted and caricatured images that are presented to the American people on national television are nothing but the product of deceit and professional manipulation. Jesse Jackson, a sometime candidate for that office, appealed to our communal sense of outrage by asking America to wake up to what is happening.

LOSS OF ROLE MODELS

One of the great tragedies of this whole ethos, and one which will have a long term affect on the church and the home as well as our nation, is the loss of role models, especially for our youth.

The entire world was shocked by the large scale breakdown in moral integrity during the Olympics in Seoul. What happened to Ben Johnson, “the fastest man alive,” when he lost his gold medal due to the use of drugs, has been shown to be unexceptional. Time again: “In the 1983 Pan American Games, nineteen athletes were disqualified and an additional dozen from just the U. S. track and field squad scuttled home before their events. In the 1984 Olympics eleven athletes, two of them medalists, were ejected from the Games for drug abuses. Before the Seoul Games began several Americans, including 1984 cycling gold medalist Steve Hegg and national swimming champion Angel Myers, were banned for substance use.”

This is a tragedy because of what it does physically to some of the finest young athletes in the world. In the 1984 Olympics Birgit Dressel, the West German heptathlete, came in ninth. In the 1986 European championships she came in fourth. In 1987, at the age of 26, she was dead, the victim of her body’s reaction to the profusion of drugs she took in order to be a great competitor.

Tragic as this may be for the athletes involved, it is even greater because of the loss of role models to the youth of the world. Athletes hooked on cocaine, both amateur and professional, have been severely penalized in recent years. Respected colleges and universities, even Christian ones, have been penalized for recruitment violations.

And what is true in athletics is also true in the field of entertainment. What shall we say of such prominent role models as Rock Hudson, Liberace, and Magic Johnson, whose sexual aberrations resulted in AIDS or being HIV-positive? Our nation and our world are facing a major and potentially devastating epidemic with this disease if some way is not found to reintroduce moral and ethical self-restraint into our society.

One of the most regrettable losses of role models is occurring in the homes of our nation. The nuclear family with a resident father figure is no longer the norm. Teachers in large city schools have been using old and respected TV shows as assigned viewing for the students so that they can see the kind of home with which they have no experience. And, as incredible as it may seem, in states allowing lesbian “marriages,” female parents are using TV programs such as these to provide the male role model which they recognize their adoptive children need.

NEGLECT OF THE POOR

I am sure the ancient prophets would not be happy with our indifference to the plight of the hungry, the poor, and the suffering in our society. We are often deeply moved by the educational channel pictures of the thousands of starving people in Africa. The images are haunting— children, whose swollen faces are covered with flies; men and women, whose leather-like skin is stretched over their bones until they appear as mere painted skeletons; mothers trying to nurse their infants with empty, flat breasts; and a few relief workers ministering to them with looks of utter disbelief and hopelessness in their eyes. And where are we? Where is the food? Some say there is simply not enough food for them all. In spite of the humanitarian concerns of the world there just isn’t enough food for everyone. But is that true?

Ten years ago (September 11, 1986), the *Chicago Tribune* carried an article titled “Food Oversupply Leads World’s Ills!” Incredible! Food oversupply? The lead sentence said, “The

single most important political and economic problem facing the world today is food surpluses, British Foreign Secretary Geoffrey Howe warned Tuesday.” The article continued, “The problem for the world today is food surpluses, not shortages, some countries are experiencing shortages but the world as a whole is not.” If this statement had not been made by someone of Mr. Howe’s stature, it would stretch credulity.

And in the face of this ungodly scenario American farmers are going bankrupt and losing their farms because the abundance of food production has lowered prices to the point where the federal government subsidizes farmers to produce less food. Large nations such as India and China, which once suffered widespread starvation, are now food exporters.

Perhaps I do not understand what is going on in today’s world. I am no economist and claim no expertise in such matters. But I am a Christian. I am a human being. And I do possess some measure of common sense. I know this situation is not right. It is deplorable, not only in God’s sight, but in the sight of every human being who senses moral outrage at such callous indifference to human suffering. If Jesus taught us anything...if Moses taught us anything... if the prophets taught us anything... they taught us this.

We have failed in so much during this century. A new century and a new millennium are now before us. May God grant us the vision needed to cope with them as human compassion dictates and human frailty demands.

What is it Like to Die?

*by David Hefelfinger, M. D., FAAP
September – October, 1996*

Several years ago, I cared for an eight-year-old boy who developed the sudden manifestations of an acute, inoperable brain tumor. I talked with his parents and told them about the problem. The mother's steadfast wish was that I provide care in her home during the terminal phase.

Since the tumor was already quite large, the terminal phase was not many months away. There was an extremely warm, loving and affectionate relationship between mother and son which touched me daily. As the child worsened, I made house calls to their home twice daily. His mother often read to him to help him pass the painful hours away.

One afternoon, as they were reading about King Arthur and his knights, recalling their battle exploits, this boy startled his mother with the question: "Mother, what is it like to die? Does it hurt?"

The inquiry caught his mother off-guard and, on the pretense of checking something in the kitchen, she excused herself promptly.

I watched her as she ran into the kitchen, with tears beginning to flow down her cheeks. We were already good friends before her child became terminally ill, but our relationship broadened and our dependence on God increased through this terminal illness. There by the refrigerator, I heard her pray an urgent prayer: "Oh God, this little boy of mine is about to die. Give me some answers that will take away his fear."

Immediately, I had the feeling that this kitchen had become a holy place for this prayer. We held hands and I prayed with her. In a short time, she dried her eyes, composed herself and went back into the room.

"You asked what it would be like to die," she said to her son. "Well, do you remember when you were well, how you used to play outside all day and come in so tired? You would eat supper and then sit down on the couch to watch television and fall asleep. And you were always amazed to wake up in your pajamas. What you did not know was that your father came, with his strong arms, and carried you upstairs and put you into bed.

"This is what dying is like, my dear," she said. "It is going to sleep in one room of God's house and waking up in another. It's going to sleep downstairs and waking up upstairs. Thanks to God's everlasting care and mercy, it does not hurt at all!"

The answer seemed to satisfy the boy. All anxiety drained out of his eyes. A few days later, when he did experience the great transition, he made the journey in gentle peace.

Life is very fragile — I learn this more each day. Caring for this boy in this Christian home taught me more than I had ever experienced in my previous years of caring for critically ill children. But mostly I learned that I am not in control of nearly as much as I thought.

This little story expresses my deepest faith about God and dying, and what lies in the great beyond. But now it has a special poignancy because I have seen it happen in someone else's life, and this will make it easier for me when I have to face it myself.

Mom, I'm Gay

by Anna M. Griffith

September – October, 1996

When I began working with an AIDS ministry, I naively assumed that I would be dealing with AIDS—people living with HIV disease and their families. Because many persons with AIDS (PWAs) are not gay, I perceived AIDS as being neither a “gay disease” nor a “GAY” issue. But in the minds of many Christian people and most church leaders, my vision of working with PWAs immediately translated to “unconditional endorsement of the gay lifestyle and unconditional acceptance of gays,” an unspoken barrier proving to be formidable. I soon realized that separating the two was not unlike the dilemma Solomon faced when he demanded that the child be divided with a sword.

Dealing with AIDS is not our most difficult problem. Underscoring the crisis is the thornier issue of homosexuality. The mere mention of the word in many church circles raises hostility. If someone suggests that we discuss the topic, that person may be branded a heretic because “we all know what we think about this....” Until the son or daughter of one of “us” finally confesses, “Mom, I’m gay”—a disclosure having the potential of throwing a religiously conservative family into chaos. The “we” and “they” are suddenly confronted in the same family—nuclear or church—with the disclosure carrying such disruptive potential that the ruptures may never heal. Yes, the topic spawns strong feelings and great controversy; but if we expect to tame its destructiveness, we must discuss it.

The Problem: Deep-Seated Polarities

The Judeo-Christian Community. In this community, we take our norms, in varying degrees, from the Bible. Passages such as [Leviticus 18:22](#) and [20:13](#), [Romans 1:24-32](#), and [1 Corinthians 6:9-11](#) state unambiguously the biblical teaching. Leviticus 20:13 prescribes death for homosexual activities and Romans 1 attributes to them all manner of deep-seated divine antipathies. Because generations of Christians have taken these and other scriptures seriously, we have simply concluded, “We cannot accept gay people. They look down on God’s values and reject his teachings. Because the Bible condemns homosexuality, God could not have made this lifestyle compulsory. Therefore, it must be a choice. Because it is a choice, then all gays are in blatant rebellion to God’s teaching.”

Conservative Christians, rightly so, deeply want to do God’s will to the best of their understanding, honor his Word, abide by his teaching, and ascribe to him great holiness. Deeply held values, truths that for generations have anchored our faith, must be protected at all costs.

This is all very straightforward and simple until one has to deal with it in his or her own family—including the church family—and then the position becomes agonizing. We have no quarrel with Scripture, but some of us did the best job of parenting we knew how; we sought counseling, therapy, and reason to no avail. What did we do wrong? We’ve asked ourselves

thousands of times. Many Christians have taken the simple route by rejecting their sons and daughters, insisting that homosexuality is a choice and one can understand it in no other way.

The Homosexual Community. Homosexuals generally contend that they were born that way, that homosexuality is an acceptable alternative lifestyle, and that there is no reason for them to change. If challenged with the biblical norms, they reason, “Look, God created me this way. I would never have chosen this lifestyle, but I didn’t have a choice. What’s more, he condemns this lifestyle that he created me to lead and now has sent this devastating disease to punish me for leading it. With all of this, he is terribly inconsistent, so I will have no truck with such a God. Anyway, those Scriptures were written 2,000 to 3,000 years ago and don’t apply to me now.”

With heart-wrenching agony, a second segment of the gay community affirms, “We do want to worship the God that we know and love, but mainstream Christianity will not accept this orientation (which we cannot change), so how can we come before him?” Many of these are presently organizing the rapidly growing gay churches.

I have talked with a third group of gays who say, “I could go either way, but I prefer my own sex. I don’t want to be a husband to a woman or a father to a family.” One of these even confessed, “I know the Bible is right—that God created us, and that he created us male and female. It is the only way that makes sense—the parts all fit together! I just happen to prefer men.”

The lesbians among these have often been hurt deeply early in life by the men whom they trusted. Therefore they want to have nothing to do with men while desperately craving the nurturing that comes so naturally to women.

Our Nuclear Family Background

Denial. My husband and I both grew up in conservative rural Christian communities with deeply held traditional values, so we understand and sympathize with those holding these values. When our son began (at six or seven) to manifest symptoms of homosexuality, we were alarmed but not dismayed. After all, God does not make mistakes; “Scott” would grow out of this, it was just a phase he was going through. We all have our quirks. We would just give him the love that we could and this would go away. But mostly we did not talk about it. We did not want to encourage it, after all.

Confusion. Finally, we had to admit his homosexuality, but our response was confusion. We simply did not understand his reticence to “change.” We knew he could change, because people are not created this way. We sought counseling, therapy, and pastoral advice. We prayed, cried, and became angry, all the while insisting that if he “really” gave his life to God, he could change. We still thought that if he did not change, he would be in open rebellion to God, forcing us to reject him, the path taken by some other Christian families. We took seriously what the Bible says, and we still do.

But presently it appears that we must agree to disagree with our son. Scott finally said, “Mom, I have wrapped myself like a pretzel around the Cross, and my sexual orientation did not change

one bit. It did absolutely no good whatever.” So now, we can find him in the first category above, partly perhaps because of our insistence that he had a choice, that he could change. We love him as unconditionally as is humanly possible. We insist that he respect our convictions which we believe adhere to Scripture. He insists that we do not “accept” him because we fail to acknowledge homosexuality as a God-sanctioned lifestyle. But we nevertheless accept him, and otherwise have a good relationship.

In summary, the position of conservative fundamentalists is that because the homosexual lifestyle is a matter of choice, all gays are condemned because they are in rebellion to God. The gay community wants nothing to do with us because we are intolerant of their lifestyle, our God is unjust and inconsistent—therefore irrelevant, and our view of Scripture is hopelessly obsolete.

Allow me to insist on one basic ground rule, however. The gay community has vehemently attacked the Christian community for our inconsistencies, homophobia, and intolerance which, to some extent, is accurate. But they have failed to understand our profoundly ingrained reverence for Scripture and for God’s holiness, at least the way we understand it. If they expect us to respond to them with tolerance, we have just as much right to expect the same from them. Is there any way out of this difficult impasse? I think so. Because we have a just and loving God who cares for all of us, we must try to find his way.

For Your Consideration

Scripture. Read the Scriptures again—carefully. If you have the tools, do some careful study in the original languages. From what I can gather, the Scriptures condemn homosexual behavior, not the tendency, not the person. They condemn the acting-out of the desire. I have known people who have chosen celibacy rather than offend their consciences or their understanding of God’s will for humanity.

Causes/Sources. Presently, experts have been unable to reach a consensus about why some go the gay route. Undoubtedly, early conditioning plays its part in some cases. Behaviorists emphasize the “dominant mother/retiring father” aspects. Some, at critical developmental stages, were molested or seduced by an older man and became “stuck” in that behavioral phase.

Other studies, such as one reported by the Associated Press in a story datelined San Francisco, October 31, 1995, suggest the presence of a defective gene: “Scientists have found new evidence that a gene inherited from mothers helps influence whether a man is homosexual. . . . Our result says that genes are involved in male sexual orientation,” said Dean Hamer, an author of the study.”

Thus the polarization derives from how one perceives the cause. If the cause is hereditary, gays distrust God and Christendom’s interpretation of him. If environmental, the Judeo-Christian community presumes that a homosexual can “change.” Therefore, if he refuses to, he is mean-spirited and rebellious against God’s ordinances. The problem is further compounded by a too-hasty resort to personal experience.

Can a gay person change?

“Or do you not know that the unrighteous shall not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived; neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor effeminate, nor homosexuals, nor thieves, nor the covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers, shall inherit the kingdom of God.

“**And such were some of you**; but you were washed, but you were sanctified, but you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, and in the Spirit of our God” ([1 Corinthians 6:9-11](#)).

This passage affirms that yes, people do change. A number of ministries and ministers are devoted to counseling, loving, and supporting those leaving this lifestyle. I may know someone who has led this lifestyle, but has left it, choosing to go straight. I could therefore conclude that this is a choice, that all gays can change if they want to. Leaning heavily on the above passage, some have a charismatic experience, are changed forever, and promptly offer that as a panacea. Others contend that if such people can change “at the drop of a hat,” then they were not really gay to start with. Apparently many factors may enter into homosexuality, probably many combined even in the life of any individual; so to attribute it to one cause or to attempt to treat it from one perspective is to miss the larger picture, and possibly to miss a more effective kind of therapy.

The scope of this article prohibits a discussion of all the suggested causes and all the factors that work (or do not work) to bring about change. But I have mentioned these to say that some can change but many cannot. Apparently God has changed some, but he has not changed all who have come to him. I refuse to attribute caprice to him, or lack of faith to others. Scott’s pretzel comment continues to haunt me. For some it may be a choice, but for many it is not. Some incredulously ask, “Why would anybody want to choose this lifestyle with its ridicule, its prejudice, and discrimination? He would have to be insane!” With a great deal of pathos a homosexual man said to me, “All I really want is to be like my father!” Most express a profound sense of sadness and loss. Many mourn the fact that they will never have a family.

This brings us to a little-discussed aspect of all sin. A dear friend reminded me that God did not give us commandments because he wanted us to hear his thundering voice or because he took delight in spoiling our fun. His precepts are ours because of his love. He wants to keep us from separating ourselves from him. He does not want to see us hurt. “He hates all sin because all sin hurts people... God is not mad because we broke His RULE; He’s mad because we broke His heart,” writes Stacey Mullins.

Did God Goof Up?

If homosexuality is genetic, I want to scream, “But, God, how could You goof up? How could You create us in Your likeness, male and female, with parts fitting together so well, then create some in such a way as to cause so much misery and alienation, and then condemn them for it?” And in this, the gays have a point. Here God doesn’t make sense. So they are drawn to the perspective that God didn’t goof up, this lifestyle is beautiful and normal, end of discussion.

But the Book must be my norm. I am accountable to it, and it is not that easy for me. He created us male and female and the parts do fit together. He created the first humans to be beautiful, whole, and perfect. But now we have babies with birth defects, Down syndrome, and any number of other irregularities. We have cancer, incurable diseases, natural disasters too numerous to count, and cataclysmic wars. Where do these come from?

All good things come from God, but we live in a fallen world. Sometimes the system within that world goofs up and we have to deal with it. For example, some scientists insist that a genetic weakness predisposes some to alcoholism. Do we therefore throw up our hands and consign all alcoholics to a permanent state of inebriation, refusing to minister to them in any way? Of course not! This brings me to the bottom line, a solution that I can live with.

The Solution

One gay who is also HIV positive told me, “I just feel like damaged goods.” I wonder why we cannot all make that confession, for we are all “damaged goods.” God’s most outstanding characteristic is holiness, and none of us can stand in his presence, for we are all “damaged.” If we cannot ultimately recognize ourselves in this description, we can never fully comprehend the magnitude of his sacrifice or our need for it.

We are ready to categorize our sins, but Paul didn’t do that in [1 Corinthians 6](#). Is the sin of adultery worse than pride? Is drunkenness worse than hate? Why is the homosexuality over which one grieves worse than the covetousness over which another never repents? Is one’s sin worse because he is found out, while another has a “better” sin because it remains hidden? Which sins are not covered by grace? Or, perhaps more to the point, for which sins do we feel no need for grace?

The only hope that any of us has is to bring all of our “damaged goods” before the cross, for indeed this is all we have to bring. We can attend therapy sessions, counseling, and support groups all of our days, but the only true cleansing, the only true healing, comes from the power of God himself, the cleansing River of Life.

And he does cleanse. Scott’s pretzel comment may have been born from the self that continues to cling so tenaciously to two worlds. I can only guess, but he may have wished for cleansing on his own terms, not God’s. Surrender to God is not so much a gigantic leap to the top of the mountain as it is a tortuous daily climb. We can only surrender to the extent that we know ourselves at any given moment. I had surrendered far more at 40 than I had at 30, more this week than I had last, and He only works with what I surrender.

Ultimately, I cannot determine who will or will not be acceptable before God. I cannot determine the limits of God’s grace. I can know what the Bible teaches. I can teach it to others. I can apply its principles to my life, repent when I am convicted, and extend that same opportunity to others. We are all on equal footing before Him.

New Life

by David Lee Beller

September – October, 1996

XYZ News Service—A small church burned yesterday in Collin, Texas. The newly renovated facility was the home of New Life Church. Arson was the suspected cause of the blaze, authorities said.

The darkness on the deserted street cloaked all movement. They quickly laid the trail of gasoline around the building. A dozen yards away bottle tops glinted in the pale light from the street lamp.

Flames tore the night. Falling glass panes clanged and the home-sewn curtains at the windows wagged in the low breeze of the growing fire. Casually the three men walked to their waiting car a block away, laughing. A multi-colored banner proclaiming “Praise Jesus” lifted from the wall, blackened, and disintegrated in the flames.

Later,

“Oh, Lord Jesus, Nora. Lord, help us!”

“Mmm?” she whispered, struggling out of her dream.

“Church house on fire,” he panted.

“What?”

“Call Jim — and Nathaniel. Stay here with the children.” He dialed 911 and handed her the phone. “I love you.”

“Be careful, Jesse.”

A strip of yellow light penetrated the curtains and fell across her face. From the second story window she could see over the high fence across the lot behind the warehouse. The clock in the hall struck two as the silhouette of her husband darted into sight, up the block toward the burning church. Her heart wailed with the sound of the approaching sirens. Could they make it in time? The trucks pulled up, sending more jets of light into the night sky.

She stood transfixed before the window.

Part of the roof fell in. She could see that Jim and Nate had arrived with their teenage boys. The men were helpless against the heat and smoke. They stood watching. Worried, she stroked the curtains with her free hand. Between her fingers and thumb she felt the embroidered stitches. They matched the curtains at New Life Church.

Next Day.

For the rest of the night Jesse couldn't sleep.

Six o'clock came early, and he resisted the temptation to drive by the church. What used to be the church, he thought.

Work was tedious and he was tired. A few people who knew him stopped to say, "Sorry, man. Saw the news," or, "Too bad." He didn't want to look at anyone, he felt ashamed for some reason. His insides boiled every time he thought of the searing heat and the blackened ruins.

On his way home, Jesse stopped, pulling his old Monte Carlo to the curb. He couldn't really look. "*Oh, God! Why?*" He stepped out of the car, over the nicely kept grass at the curb. Brother Tom works so hard to keep this perfect. His flowers — all dead. The lot was flattened. He could see the street beyond, the houses and beat-up cars, a kid on a bike. Yesterday the beautiful white building would have blocked his view of these things. He could trace its outline in his mind. Up the sidewalk to the double doors. Stairs are here, railings up to... up to what? Nothing. Burnt earth. Charred timbers and siding. The only thing above the ground was the foundation that lay in a grid before him. In his mind he could see the pews, the pulpit, the baptistry. Gone.

"*Peace, be still,*" he thought. "*No!*"

Day Seven.

"Mama, how come I feel like someone done kicked me in the stomach?" Abel wondered, half of his arm buried in a bag of Doritos. "Mama, why would somebody do us like that?"

"We don't know, son. And stop sayin' 'done kicked me,' boy. You sound like a clod."

"But Mama, ain't there somethin' we could do 'bout it?"

"Yes. You can thank your God that nobody was hurt. Besides, the police are trying to find out how it happened."

"My friend Bucky says the police ain't gonna do nothin', Mama."

"Hush, boy. You know I don't like you talking like that rabble from your school."

Jesse stared at Abel, then out the window. Anger consumed him. "A kick in the stomach?" he thought. No, a kick in the groin. He ached inside. His family, Nate's family, all the families were good people, faithful people. Why, God? Why? Abruptly, he stood up from the table, grabbed a sweatshirt, and went out.

Across town, James Jordan answered a knock at his door. Framed by the peep hole, he saw the face of Jesse Harper. Smiling, he opened the door. The two men, separated by three decades in age, embraced.

“How you doin’, man? Are you all right?”

“We’re okay. James, I’ve got to talk about this thing. Got to do something. I’m angry. I’m afraid I’m angry with God. No... I know I’m angry with him and I can’t stop it. I can’t pray. I don’t want to sing. Sunday worship was worse than digging for a splinter. And you know there are others feeling just the same. How can we deal with this? It’s senseless. We didn’t do anything to anyone, and God is supposed to be our protector, not our enemy. Help me!”

“Hold it, son, slow down,” James responded soothingly. “You have some terrible things going on inside you, but these are questions that need to be thought about. You’re on the road to making peace with this though, and that’s good.”

“Have a seat.” James motioned toward the couch and clicked on a table lamp. “See, Jesse, since we cannot find all the answers, mostly the best thing to do is to live the questions.”

“What do you mean?”

“You’ve been asking, Why? And How long? Live those questions! They’re the cry of a faithful heart.”

“I don’t get it.”

“Go home and read the Psalms, Jesse. Read Lamentations. You’ll see how those people prayed. They wrung the anguish out of their hearts in God’s presence. These are not the prayers of ‘nice’ people. Sometimes it gets pretty scary. Look at [Psalm 137](#).”

“You know, James, we all feel like this, even the kids. It’s something many families share.”

”You’re right, Jesse,” he said thoughtfully, considering a plan. “It is something we share. You just gave me an idea. I’m going to call the other elders. This is a time to remind the church that the Bible has something to say to Christians about their grief. It’s full of this stuff, just what you’re going through, right on the pages of Scripture.”

Day Thirty-two.

The bulletin had said this Sunday would be different.

Brother Morris wasn’t preaching. James Jordan and the other elders taught a lesson about dealing with unanswered questions, experiencing the pain together as a church, and about the hope they had in God.

“So you see, good folk,” James was saying, “we have to be faithful to God any way we can, and in situations like this—well, it’s best we present our complaints together, directly to the Lord himself!”

“Ancient Israel would come together to mourn and lament before God,” said another elder, “and sometimes they would fast for his deliverance. Look at [Esther 4:4 and 16](#). The nation is at risk so the people worship, calling out to God.”

A third elder, Jarvis McLellan, announced, “We believe we should lament to God as a church community. Next week we will hold worship at the old church lot. Please attend. It will be a day for healing to begin, but first we gotta let the pain out.”

Jesse wasn't convinced.

Day Thirty-nine.

“Dear Lord, I fear this morning,” Jesse prayed as he left his house. “I don't want to go. Please give me strength.”

From his bedroom window he had seen families gathering around the lot. People hesitated to stand where the building used to be, and instead gathered in clusters near the sidewalk as if it were any Sunday before the fire.

“*Where's Nora?*” he wondered. He found her near Jim's family, and bowed his head, her hand in his. James Jordan is praying.

“And so we plead for healing, Father, and hope, knowing that you can deliver us, this church. But today we weep, we moan, we wail. For our precious memories. For what might have been. For lost labor and lost treasures. In Jesus' name, Amen.”

Jesse moved to the center of the circle. “We have a great family here at New Life, and God has blessed us in the past. But I just don't know. I believe we should trust him, but I'm angry.”

He wiped a tear with the back of his hand and began to read from [Psalms 44](#): “Yet thou hast cast us off and abused us, and hast not gone out with our armies. Thou hast made us turn back from the foe; and our enemies have gotten spoil. Thou has made us like sheep for slaughter”

“That's right, that's how it feels!” someone shouts.

“And has scattered us among the nations. Thou hast sold thy people for a trifle, demanding no high price for them,” Jesse continued reading.

“Mmmmm Hmmmm. Sold us out”

“Not forever, sister. Not for good. No way.” Another voice reminds.

“Thou hast made us the taunt of our neighbors, the derision and scorn of those about us. Thou hast made us a byword among the nations, a laughing-stock among the peoples. All day long my disgrace is before me, and shame has covered my face, at the words of the taunters and revilers, at the sight of the enemy and the stranger.”

Jesse paused. Silence.

“All that has come upon us,” he read, “though we have not forgotten thee, or been false to thy covenant. Our heart has not turned back, nor have our steps departed from thy way, that thou shouldst have broken us in the place of jackals, and covered us with deep darkness. If we had forgotten the name of our God, or spread forth our hands to a strange god, would not God discover this? For he knows the secrets of the heart. Nay, for thy sake we are slain all the day long, and accounted as sheep for the slaughter.”

James Jordan joined him in the midst of the church, placing an arm around Jesse’s shoulder.

“This is how it feels, good people. But He has not abandoned us, though things can and do happen because of the actions of evil men.” He turned to Jesse. “Keep reading, son.”

“Rouse thyself! Why sleepest thou, O Lord? Awake!” Jesse was beginning to understand. “Do not cast us off forever! Why dost thou hide thy face? Why dost thou forget our afflictions and oppression?”

Jesse closed the Bible and rejoined his family, feeling now something of what James had meant by living the questions.

The service continued as several members offered prayers of frustration, prayers for healing, punctuated at times with poignant, tearful silence.

Everyone present felt that they had come to the end. Emotionally, they were exhausted, empty of the black despair they had felt earlier, and moving toward peace. Suddenly an old woman began to hum. Men and women joined her, singing softly, “We shall overcome, we shall overcome . . .”

“He doesn’t forget! He remember us! He is here now! He understands!”

Finally, Jesse joined in, and his strong baritone rang out above the others, changing the words to “He shall overcome.

The Church “God Loved Us”

by Mark Love

September – October, 1996

God’s love was revealed among us in this way: God sent his only son into the world so that we might live through him. This is love: not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. No one has ever seen God; but if we love one another, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us” ([1 John 4:9-12](#)).

Late in 1994 my wife Nancy and I found ourselves in the land of hopelessness. Her every breath carried with it the struggle of her life, and I know she sometimes wondered if it would be better for the breathing just to stop. The long, persistent betrayal of her body,¹ the aloof, patronizing judgments of her medical community, the painful history of family loss, and the struggle for her own life’s identity has conspired to make living an overwhelming enterprise. Though I loved her moment to moment, and spent hours at her side, my love seemed almost superfluous in the face of her struggle. She needed more than I could provide, her burden too great for me to bear. We had outrun our resources for life. We needed a power for life beyond what we possessed.

For a few months we lived in a half-death, a time during which Nancy was never left alone. I worked at home as much as I could, but I couldn’t always be there. I had responsibilities. I needed breaks. Sometimes I needed to be anywhere but there. So, Debbie would come and stay with Nancy on Wednesday evenings. She folded our laundry and did the dishes. Carolyn came and stayed with Nancy on Sunday mornings. Together they created a book of hope, pages filled with drawings, poems, and images of life. Linda and June made themselves useless for us, simply coming and being in our midst. (Sometimes useful people, like Job’s friends, just make things worse.) Dan, our elder, came and prayed. Shelley brought flowers and a prayer of God’s armor and prayed fervently with Nancy. One teenager, Marlaina, noticed my heavy heart and without our knowing, organized a “hope basket,” a little basket full of trinkets, gift certificates, and expressions of love. Wendy and Kay wrote notes from heaven.

The reality of our life today is that while Nancy has not been cured (her illness persists) she has been delivered—delivered from the darkness, hopelessness, and God forsakeness of her life. This deliverance did not come because we read stories of God’s compassion. Our deliverance did not come with some new theological insight or clarified understanding. Our deliverance came in the caring hands, loving arms, and tender words of our church community. Our salvation came because we experienced the love of God in a compassionate church.

Frankly, we found that when life is in the pit of despair it is of little comfort to know that our church has proper doctrine, or even to know heaven is our ultimate home. Our hope had to be measured by touch, by compassion, and by sensitive embrace. We live in a world that longs for such touch. The story of our struggle has revealed the stories of countless others in our church community lost in the abyss of hopelessness. Who could count the number of such persons in our

neighborhoods and communities? The church can be many things, but if it is not the compassionate presence of God in the lives of hurting people it is nothing.

WE'VE TRIED IT; IT DOESN'T WORK.

If only all stories out so well. Nancy strikes a fairly sympathetic figure. She is a victim of a disease beyond her control. She is a prominent church member. She is well liked by all who know her. She elicits our sympathy.

Many, however, who come to us for help are far less sympathetic figures. Day by day people walk into our churches,
who are victims of their own circumstances
who are not looking for solutions but fixes
who have learned all the lines, know the angles, and
are simply playing the game.

All too often in our giving, providing, and caring are met with
indifference
ingratitude
and intransigence
Few stories turn out as well as Nancy's.

In fact, though we might only whisper it, who could blame us for saying, "We've tried compassion and it just doesn't work." We've tried it. It doesn't work. We've tried it and found that it costs too much and pays too little. We've tried compassion and found it to be an extravagant waste and a diversion from other more worthy efforts. We've given, given, and given, only to be taken. We've hoped, and hoped more, only to be crushed.

It's true, isn't it? Don't we know it? The most cynical, burned out, used up, dry husk of a person in the church is the benevolence deacon. We've tried compassion and found our churches exhausted, spent, cynical, and protective. Maybe it's time we put this compassion thing under the microscope and reexamined it. Maybe we need to find a tougher compassion, a stronger compassion than what we have practiced. Perhaps a little means testing. We need a compassion that works. A compassion from God.

BY THIS WE KNOW LOVE ...

By this we know love, not that we loved God...."

We sing on Sunday mornings, "I love you Lord, and I lift my voice to worship you, O my soul rejoice!" My three-year-old friend, Sage, asks if she'll get to see God in heaven. "Yes, Sage." "I'm gonna give him a great big hug," she says. April, a college student in my life group, exclaims, "It is soooo easy to love God." She's right, isn't she? Who wouldn't love the "big guy?" The creator of the universe. The giver of all good things.

Yet, according to our text, in none of these expressions do we know love.

“By this we know love, not that we loved God... but in that he loved us and gave his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sin.”

Paul says it this way in [Romans 5](#): “One will hardly die for a righteous man—though perhaps for a good man one will dare even to die. But God shows his love for us in that while we were yet sinners Christ died for us.”

In this we know love – day after day God found people
who were victims of their own choices
who were not looking for solutions, but fixes
who had learned all the lines, sung all the right
songs, played all the right games
sinners
and he loved them and gave himself up for them.

Day after day God found in us
indifference
ingratitude
and intransigence
and he gave himself up for us.

In this we know love, not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his son to be an atoning sacrifice for our sins.

The day my son was born, I held that matted, gooey bundle of postpartum wonder and exclaimed, “Ah, this is the love of God.” The day, not long ago, that I looked at my wife and saw her as if for the first time and yet with complete familiarity, I thought, “No, in this I see the love of God.”

These are certainly powerful expressions of love. The love of child, spouse, and parent allow us to speak of God and his love. But they are love from our vantage point. As such, they are approximations, and distant analogies. In them we see as through a glass darkly, but we do not see love at its radiating core.

The love of God is not a love that is natural to us. We do not find it within our own resources. Our text says it is a love that “was revealed among us in this way.” Revealed to us. God’s love was something hidden or covered over from our knowing and understanding, now unveiled from heaven, manifest completely in the cross of Jesus. At the cross we behold the surprising, extravagant, and scandalizing love of God.

Brothers and sisters, if God loved us this way, we also ought to love one another.

THE CHURCH “WE LOVE GOD”

Is it possible to build, maintain, and grow a church that takes as its creed the phrase, “We Love God?” Yes. In fact, we do it well. It comes naturally to us. The church “We Love God” has

dynamic, celebrative, triumphant worship. “We Love God!” The church “We Love God” knows how to potluck. Such churches are growing, vibrant, and dynamic. We see them all the time. In love, fraternal. In stewardship, wise and prudent, professional and efficient. It is possible to maintain, grow, and sustain the church “We Love God.”

In fact, if we ever visited the church “God Loved Us” and read the requirements for membership we might not return. The visitors’ brochure might read:

“If someone asks for your coat, give them the shirt off your back as well.

“If anyone forces you to go one mile—go the second as well.

“Give to everyone who begs from you, and do not refuse anyone who wants to borrow from you.

“Love your enemies; do good to those who hate you. If you love those who love you what credit is that to you? Even sinners love those who love them.”

This is an extravagant, exposed way of being the church. Who could sustain such a life? Who would choose such a way to live in the world? “Why, it would never work,” we protest, “what with people always having their hooks in you. Just stencil the word ‘Welcome’ on our heads. We are the world’s doormat.” Paul said it like this, “We are being killed all day long. We are like sheep being led to the slaughter” ([Romans 8:36](#)).

And yet, we are called to live in this way. Our text declares that “God’s love was revealed among us in this way... that we might live in it.” We are called to live a way in the world which we cannot sustain. Though beyond our ability to conceive, this might be the whole idea of being the church. When we decide to live in a way we cannot sustain we become the church. The church “God Loves Us” is not a church sustained in our own power, realized in our own love. God’s desire is to be present in the world in a way not naturally known to us.

Who can sustain us in such a way in the world? God can. Paul reminds us that the extravagant, energizing, core love of God “has been poured into our hearts by the Holy Spirit” (Romans 5:5). For Paul it is the love of Christ which now controls us. This produces a scandalous stance for life. “While we live we are always being given up to death for Jesus’ sake, so that the life of Jesus might be manifest in our mortal bodies” (2 Corinthians 4:10-11; 5:14). Driven by the Spirit of God we are “more than conquerors” (Romans 8:37) in this exposed and extravagant way in the world. Dependent only on the mercy of God, the church becomes the sign of his compassionate presence.

A SIGN OF HOPE

The church is called to be the sign of God’s compassionate presence in the world in an extravagant way. We are not called to love only the sympathetic. We love not because it produces certain results. We love because God loved us. We live as Christians in the revealed love of God sustained by his Spirit. In the decision to be the church “God Loved Us” we function as a sign of hope for a struggling world.

Frankly, the world has had plenty of experience with the church “We Love God” and has found it wanting. While the church “We Love God” claims God as the object of its devotion, the world is shrewd enough to know that “we” are the subject of this church. The compassion of such a church tends to be condescending and paternalistic. Its service is often read by the world, “WE love God, and you don’t.” This love divides and defeats. However, compassion under the banner “God loved us” is inclusive and inviting. It provides real hope as we stand in solidarity with the world in the experience of God’s mercy. More to the point, the church that lives in the reality “God loved us” experiences a depth of God’s presence that gives its life a ring of authenticity and substance. People need such a compassionate church.

Nancy and I found deliverance in a compassionate church. We found a resource for life that went beyond the love of family or husband. We found in their compassionate touch a Spirit-inspired love born of the decision to be a church “God Loved Us.” We were not on-the-job training for them. They had decided years before to love a member dying of AIDS. They had decided many times to serve people who were inconvenient to love. Their love followed us into the pit of despair and together we found his love made complete in us.

“No one has ever seen God; but if we love one another, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us.”

¹ Nancy suffers from a syndrome called fibromyalgia, a condition thought to be related to rheumatoid arthritis. Though not life threatening, fibromyalgia is chronic and debilitating. For us, however, the eight-year pilgrimage in search of a diagnosis was as difficult as the disease itself.

Hunger: Up Close and Childlike

by Larry James

September – October, 1996

My wife and I teach a first and second grade Sunday School class in our inner city church. Our church enjoys the benefits and the challenges of a multi-cultural, multi-racial group. Every Sunday turns into a learning experience for all of us.

On a recent Sunday we welcomed two out-of-town guests to our class. The brother and sister duo lived in East Texas and were visiting relatives with their parents. As the other children welcomed them eagerly, they fit right in.

The refreshments Brenda brings each week provide one of the highlights of our class time. We try to keep things simple. Typically, we serve donuts or kolaches and orange juice. As usual, when the children discovered we had a snack prepared, they began circling our bags and asking what we had to eat. While serving the snacks that Sunday, I observed something that really touched and concerned me. When we invited our guests to join us for something to eat, they casually told us they were not hungry. Eventually they decided to drink some juice and nibble on a kolache. By contrast, our children eagerly received the food we served and asked if seconds would be available.

It should have come as no surprise. The children who regularly attend our Sunday School class often arrive hungry. Little children, residents of Dallas, Texas, know hunger as a regular part of daily life.

But, there is more. When class ended, several older elementary school children came to our room. They knew we brought snacks. I had to turn them away because we did not have enough for everyone.

“All our kids are hungry!” I told Brenda on our way home after church.

The faces of hungry children tend to put many things in perspective. A child’s hunger shifts my financial goals. Childhood hunger tends to refocus the ongoing welfare reform debate. It forces me to recognize the complex challenges associated with providing public education to these same kids. (My hunch is that learning and a growling stomach don’t work very well together.) The image of a six-year-old little boy with powdered sugar on his face asking for another donut deflates my crazy excitement about material trinkets, gadgets, and “toys.”

Hungry children in Dallas, Texas? They are here by the thousands. And it just shouldn’t be this way.

Questions flood through my mind as I replay this familiar, but tragic scene. Where are the people of God in times like these, in places like this? What are our churches doing? Can it be possible

that Christians do not see these very real and pressing needs? Have we lost touch with reality? How can we so easily, casually dismiss the powerful witness of so much of Scripture?

The presence of the church in any urban area should guarantee the existence of a compassionate, committed, continuing outreach to hungry kids.

“Defend the cause of the weak and fatherless; maintain the rights of the poor and oppressed. Rescue the weak and needy; deliver them from the hand of the wicked” ([Psalms 82:3-4](#)).

“Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these” ([Matthew 19:14](#)).

“For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat...” ([Matthew 25:35a](#)).

AfterGlow: Unlikely Angel

by Phillip Morrison

September – October, 1996

He could empty a pew faster than anybody I ever saw. Grossly overweight, dirty, constantly emitting the unmistakable odor of sweat (perspiration is much too dainty a word), he was an unwelcome guest in our respectable church. His ample, hairy belly always poured over his pants while pushing away his unbuttoned shirt. Most of us couldn't decide whether it was our sense of sight or sense of smell that was more offended.

But it was his habit of throwing both arms up and over the back of the pew that caused people to scatter. Sunday after Sunday I watched people flee, even give up their favorite pew rather than sit near this loathsome character.

Imagine my embarrassment when he cornered the visiting evangelist in the church lobby. As I tried to make apologies, the evangelist said, "You don't understand. I was talking to him because I wanted to! We grew up in the same small town, went to the same school, the same church. When we were in the same boys' training class at church, everyone thought he would become a famous preacher and I would be a nobody. I wonder what caused him to fall so far."

Those were kind words from our guest preacher, but I was still uncomfortable. I learned to tolerate our Sunday visitor, and even to be grudgingly grateful for his spiritual interest, but I never got used to the sight or the smell.

Months went by and nothing changed. Until one morning when the headline on a small newspaper item leaped from the page and forced itself into my consciousness. Our visitor had been stuck by a car the previous night and killed instantly. He had no possessions, no home, no friends. Efforts were being made to contact relatives in a distant state.

For three decades I have been unable to drive his image from my memory. Some days I can even see and smell as vividly as if he had me cornered again at church. And for three decades I have tried to avoid dealing with Hebrews 13:2. Was he really just a repulsive vagrant, skillful manipulator, master of every artful deceit? Or, was he an angel, sent by God to teach me how little I knew about compassion?

I don't know the answer to my own question, but I do know this: God used equally unlikely messengers to get the attention of self-righteous people. Today you'll not find me with my nose up in the air and my haughty disposition intact. You'll find me looking for angels in unlikely people and places.