

# **Wineskins Magazine**

**A Life Beautiful**

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## What the World Needs Now

*by Mike Cope*

*July – August, 1998*

As Christians follow the steps of Jesus in relating to the people of this world, we begin by remembering that, as an old song says, “this world is not my home.” We live here, work here, play here, and raise families here. But we don’t exactly belong here. That’s why early Christian writers would refer to the people of faith as “aliens.”

All these people were still living by faith when they died. They did not receive the things promised; they only saw them and welcomed them from a distance. And they admitted that they were aliens and strangers on earth. People who say such things show that they are looking for a country of their own.

“Dear friends, I urge you as aliens and strangers in the world, to abstain from sinful desires, which war against your soul. Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits.”

That is also why the apostle Paul would point out that since our lives have been redefined by the life, death, and resurrection of Christ and since we are now waiting for him to return, “our citizenship is in heaven.”

The most powerful thing the people of God can do in this world is to live as the people of God! God has placed us in communities of faith where the faith, hope, and love of the gospel can be lived out.

Admittedly, this “plan” has always been less than satisfying. Many seem to long for the “good old days” (fourth century) when Constantine declared Christianity to be the state religion. The problem is that Christianity always thrives best as a minority, and becomes anemic when it is declared a majority. We are healthiest when we live out kingdom values in the midst of ungodliness. The more quasi-Christian a nation becomes, the less vibrant is the health of the church!

A dangerous trend among believers today is the attempt to “return this nation to God.” It lives with the illusion that this was at one time a Christian nation. But Christ-followers have no ultimate allegiance to one country. We are loyal patriots wherever we live. Ugandan Christians are loyal to the country of Uganda. Brazilian Christians are loyal to Brazil. And U.S. Christians are loyal to the United States. But whether any one of these countries thrives or falls doesn’t ultimately effect us, for our hope is in God’s kingdom.

Sincere attempts to “return America to God” are as wrong-headed as if the church in Ephesus had started a “return Rome to God” campaign. That wasn’t the model Jesus set out for them. He wasn’t interested in “traditional Roman values” or “traditional American values.” He was interested in the kingdom which had broken through in his glorious ministry. He didn’t station

Peter in Rome to give a daily update on what the Roman Senate was doing; rather he sent Peter (and the other disciples) to city after city to proclaim that the kingdom had broken in.

We are called by Christ to live out the truth of the gospel in the midst of this world. Rather than scold the world and weep and wail over the godlessness around us, we should pray for the people of our world, live holy lives among them, and gently point them to the Father.

We are not of this world. We cannot conform to its thinking and living. John, who in referring to “the world” was speaking about the sinful values and behaviors rather than the people, warned:

“Do not love the world or anything in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him, for everything in the world – the cravings of sinful man, the lust of his eyes and the boasting of what he has and does – comes not from the Father but from the world. The world and its desires pass away, but the man who does the will of God lives forever.”

In a culture where things are worth killing yourself for, we remember that contentment is possible with much or little since God is the true source of life. In an environment where marriages are kept as long as they’re convenient, we remember that a covenant must be kept. Amidst a cacophony of raging voices, we trumpet the singular note of forgiveness. In a world where racism is rearing its ugly mug again, we announce that Jesus loves all the little children of the world. We are the light of the world!

We must not be “of the world” if we are to follow Jesus. Our lives must be distinctive. But we also must be “in the world.” Rather than escape, hide, build high walls, and then pull up the drawbridge, we must open ourselves to men and women who are lost – lost in every sense of the word.

When Paul wrote the church in Corinth about dealing with an immoral person, he made sure they understood he wasn’t talking about immoral people in the world:

“I have written you in my letter not to associate with sexually immoral people – not at all meaning the people of this world who are immoral, or the greedy and swindlers, or idolaters. In that case you would have to leave the world.”

And as a follower of the one who was accused of being a glutton and drunkard, that’s obviously not something Paul wants. He expects us to be involved in the lives of people who are greedy, who are promiscuous, who can’t be counted on, who dishonor marriage, whose language is peppered with four-letter words. What these people need isn’t “traditional American values”; what they need is God. And their initial contact will be through flesh-and-blood believers in God.

## Y2K: Doomsday in the Offing?

*by Rubel Shelly*  
*July – August, 1998*

Hundreds and hundreds of people will die on January 1, 2000! Just as they did on June 4, 1983. And just as they will on September 16, 2003. There is nothing mystical or monstrous about the much ballyhooed and terribly-overhyped Y2K date.

It is nothing short of phony alarmism for militia groups or religious leaders to be doing their imitations of Chicken Little over the so-called millenium bug. The sky isn't going to fall because of the rollover problem from 1999 to 2000 – or, in shortsighted computer date code – from 99 to 00.

It is easier to sell fear than information; panic than fact. With all due respect for the good work they do and whatever right things they stand for, Pat Robertson, James Dobson, and Jerry Falwell are terrorizing people with their doomsday scenarios. I know they are billing themselves as “responsible leaders” who allege their desire to warn people against “crazies” and “fanatics.” But if those terms are meant to signify people who ware untrustworthy and reckless, they stand self-labeled on this issue.

The United States government has been none too helpful on this, either. A congressional study “Investigating the Impact of the Year 2000 Problem” was released March 2, 1999. It merely recapped the near-endless series of Senate hearings from 1998 and added little new data. Many chapters summarized second-hand reports, and it was not beneath quoting unnamed sources for some of its more alarming statements.

On some days, Senator Robert Bennett (R-Utah), chairman of the Y2K committee, sounds like Chiken Little: “Widespread disruptions will have a negative effect on the world economy,” he says in one setting. Then he turns around to report that his committee findings show the Y2K problem will be merely a “bump in the road, but that it will not be crippling and it will not last for an undue period of time.”

By now, everybody knows there is a technology problem impinging on governments, financial institutions, power companies, hospitals, and everyone else who is computer-dependent. Ah, but that's you and mee too. Right? I get money from an ATM, make flight reservations through computerized systems, drive a car whose engine is controlled by a computer chip, and write editorials for *Wineskins* on a PC. (Note: Apple computers aren't threatened by this vexation.)

So are we all doomed when Y2K hits? Should we begin storing food and water? Buying electrical generators? Withdrawing all our cash from banks and investment instruments at year's end? Building bomb shelters against the Russian nuclear missiles that will be accidentally launched? Warning the world that the Anti-Christ is coming – with a bar code on his forehead? Give me a break!

On a scale from 0 to 10, the Y2K problem is not a non-problematic 0. Neither, though, is it the end-of-the-world-as-we-know-it (TEOTWAWKI) doomsday 10. It probably deserves about a 3 on such a scale. And it demands responsible preparation and precaution.

The banks and financial institutions are probably the best prepared at this point. You're going to be able to get cash, write checks, and use your credit cards on December 31, 1999, and on January 1, 2000. Chances are, any credit cards you hold may already be showing themselves "Y2K compliant." My wife and I have been using a Visa with an "06/01" expiration date for several months now. Unfortunately, not a single merchant has refused to let us charge items with it. That the charges went through is proved by the fact that we've been promptly billed for every one.

There have already been anecdotes of credit cards with post-2000 dates being rejected in a few places. Now they've been fixed. I've heard unsubstantiated stories of financial management programs crashing on home computers – but take them with a grain of salt. Most have been computing mortgage payoffs and projecting income from investments into 2000 and beyond for years already.

Social Security, TVA, Kroger, your bank – all have been working on this problem for a long time now. Not every glitch in every system in every place is going to be corrected prior to the magic moment of millennial rollover. Most of the ones that matter will be manually corrected and/or reprogrammed very quickly. Elevators will still work. (They aren't date-sensitive, says Otis Elevator!) Your VCR, automatic coffee maker, automobile engine, credit card (rats!), and payment-due coupons will still work.

Lest you be one of the people seriously inconvenienced by the millennium bug, you probably should pay attention to the little things most of us neglect. Keep printed-on-pager copies of your financial transactions such as bank statements, mutual-fund records, and payment receipts. In other words, keep the kinds of tangible records you would need for an IRS audit.

What about first-aid kits, flashlight and batteries, a few days worth of non-perishable foods, and extra rolls of toilet paper? You need those things under everyday circumstances – but won't die for the lack of them. What about generators, wood-burning cook stoves, a year's supply of dried foods, or guns and ammunition? Now we're getting creepy! A few Internet providers will make a quick (financial) killing by selling these things to people they have scared out of their wits. I don't want any of their "Y2K Survival Kit" clutter.

Here's what I predict we'll hear as we come to the end of 1999: "Scam artists bilk vulnerable people." Criminals will be more than happy to hold your cash, keep your stock certificates, and otherwise make you "safe" against their baloney-filled sandwiches of societal meltdown. And they'll be gone without a trace on January 1, 2000. The problem will not have been technology (the Y2K bug) but psychology (fear).

Dobson and Robertson quote Michael Hyatt's *The Millennium Bug* as their source of information. Falwell offers a bizarre interpretation of the Bible that has a likely-Jewish, likely-

already-born Anti-Christ among us. And Noah Hutchings writes *Y2k=666?* and touts the possibility tht computers might be a Satanic tool to bring down civilization.

As a Christian, I am embarrassed by the unvarnished poppycock and drivel that have surfaced over this issue. Yes, I believe in the personal return of Jesus Christ – but also believe Jesus’ statement that no special sign of his coming will be given. “no one knows about that day or hour, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son,” he said, “but only the Father” (Matthew 24:36).

As a Christian, I am angry at the exploitation of people through fear that was done at the year 1000 by various would-be prophets, in 1843 by William Miller, in 1981 by Hal Lindsey, in 1988 by Edgar Whisenant, and in 1999 by Hutchings, Hyatt, Falwell, et al. At best, it is misguided (evangelistic?) fervor that discredits responsible Christian faith. At worst, it is exploitation and hucksterism.

It is reasonable to get information and do prudent things in anticipation of the problems shortsighted technology could cause. It is unreasonable to give way to hysteria. That sort of human hysteria is, in fact, much more dangerous than anything that could happen to us from haywire technology.

## Divine Comedy in the Death Camps

### Darryl Tippens reviews *Life is Beautiful*

*by Darryl Tippens*  
*July – August, 1998*

Holocaust plots compose a rather large genre of film today, but we may safely say no one has fashioned a story that even remotely approaches the unusual tone or subject matter of Roberto Benigni's tragicomic *Life Is Beautiful* (Italian with English subtitles; PG-13; Miramax).

As controversial as it is lovely, the movie attempts the impossible – and succeeds. Benigni (co-writer, actor and director) uses comedy to expose the evils of the Nazi concentration camps while also weaving an unforgettable fable of familial love.

Understandably, some critics have been outraged at the presence of humor in so tragic a story. Richard Schickel, for example, calls the film a farce that trivializes the Holocaust. Is it legitimate to employ humor in a plot so rooted in horror, especially something as unspeakably monstrous as the extermination of millions in the death camps? Before we condemn *Life Is Beautiful* for sacrilege, we ought to ponder the powerful and redemptive purposes to which humor can be put.

Humor is, in fact, protean and complex, able to serve vastly different purposes. Though it can trivialize, it can also serve noble purposes. Consider, for example, God's derisive laughter directed against earthly powers who challenge divine authority (Psalm 2:4).

Humor can be profoundly subversive of institutional authority. In this case, Benigni (one of Italy's greatest comic actors who is often compared to Charlie Chaplin or Buster Keaton) uses humor with devastating effect, not to trivialize, but to expose the brutality of fascism.

"Comedy is simply a funny way of being serious," Peter Ustinov once quipped, a point close to Mark Twain's gem: "The secret source of humor itself is not joy but sorrow." Benigni understands this. In his hands irony, indirection, and humor become devastating weapons wielded against one of the most concentrated forms of human iniquity.

The first half of the story is pure, romantic fare, set in the magnificent hills of Tuscany. Guido (Benigni) is a buffoonish Jewish waiter, who uses humor to expose the madness of Nazi ideas of superiority. At one point he poses as a pompous school inspector, provoking hearty laughter at all pretensions of racial superiority. Guido also woos and wins Dora (Nicoletta Braschi), his pricipessa, the loveliest lady of the town. The attention to their marriage and the subsequent birth of their son Joshue (Giorgio Cantarini) momentarily distract us from the growing stranglehold of the Third Reich. Then the pastoral romance of the first half ends abruptly. Guido and his family are arrested and plunged, with shocking rapidity, into the inferno of a Nazi concentration camp.

In the camp, Guido devises a kind of game designed to keep Joshue, his son, hidden and alive. Guido's immense love drives him to take increasingly risky measures to safeguard Joshue. And though his wife is segregated in a different part of the camp, Guido's passionate devotion and ingenuity enable him to communicate with her and sustain her as well. The humor continues, but it is no longer funny. It is black, gallows humor – constantly critiquing the evil, never approving it.

This film is both romance and suspenseful melodrama, but it is also a fable of faith, hope, and love. The film dramatizes Victor Frankl's thesis that the survivors of the concentration camps were often not the strongest nor the healthiest, but those who had the greatest sense of hope and purpose.

Benigni's film goes one step further in suggesting that human charity is the most essential element to a meaningful life. It is love that makes life beautiful. And so in this cinematic parable we see the power of love to sustain – not everyone, we hasten to concede – but a remnant that makes a new beginning possible.

The film further suggests that redemption Love may be working invisibly in our lives. There is a loving Father-Husband who silently and secretly pours out his life so that beloved captives may go free. "Love is as strong as death," the Bible says. This Guido demonstrates decisively.

It is true, as some critics have pointed out, that the film tends toward sentimentality. The work shields us from the worst scenes of the death camps. Quite unlike *Schindler's List*, we are spared horrific scenes of starvation or brutal executions. But must an educated audience see mountains of corpses in order to understand the drama of the death camps? Not necessarily. The unstated and the unshown haunt this story of redemption. Every perceptive viewer knows precisely what is at stake – life – precious, innocent, and human. The Italians have had a rather long tradition of showing us the proximity of the unspeakably horrific (*The Inferno*) and the wondrously radiant (*The Paradiso*). Alberto Benigni, trying his hand at the same artistic paradox, has succeeded triumphantly.

*Life Is Beautiful* was the first foreign-language film in almost three decades to be nominated for the Best Picture Oscar. The nomination was more than deserved. Such sacred wisdom and rapturous beauty seldom meet in a work of cinema, whatever the language.

Roberto Benigni's *Life Is Beautiful (La Vita E Bella)* Courtesy of Miramax Films. All three photos by Sergio Strizzi.



## **Bus Ride to Justice**

### **The Story of a Faithful Gospel Preacher and Martin Luther King's Lawyer, Fred Gray**

*by Michael Casey*  
*July – August, 1998*

For too long Fred Gray has been unknown to most Christians. Gray, an African American, preacher and elder at the Tuskegee Church of Christ in Tuskegee, Alabama, has been an integral part of American history. Gray was Rosa Parks' and Martin Luther King's lawyer during the Montgomery Bus Boycott and has argued several landmark legal cases before the U.S. Supreme Court.

Gray has written his autobiography *Bus Ride to Justice: Changing the System By the System, The Life and Times of Fred Gray* which is published by Black Belt Press, P.O. Box 551, Montgomery, Alabama 36101. The book should be purchased and read by all readers of *Wineskins*. The book is a well-written story of Gray's rise from the ghetto of Montgomery to his success as both a lawyer and gospel preacher. It is an inspiring account of how he overcame the racial prejudice of the South and played a central role in transforming both Southern and American society for the better.

Gray makes it clear that his Christian commitment was central to his pledge to "destroy everything segregated I could find." He was born in 1930 and delivered by a midwife (African Americans were not allowed to use the hospitals) in a house that had no running water or indoor bathrooms. Both his parents were members of the Holt Street Church of Christ in Montgomery. His father died when Gray was two but his mother made sure Fred received a Christian education. Even though his mother could not afford it, starting with eighth grade, Fred was sent to Nashville Christian Institute, Marshall Keeble's Boarding school for young African Americans. Fred was selected by Keeble as a "boy preacher" to accompany him on fund raising and preaching trips.

After finishing NCI a year early, Gray went to Alabama State College, a historically black college in Montgomery. Blacks were not allowed to attend either the University of Alabama or Auburn. While in college, Gray decided to apply to law school and was admitted to Case Western Reserve Law School in Cleveland, Ohio. He was unable to apply to any of Alabama's law schools because they would not admit any African-Americans. However, Gray was eligible for state funds to pay his way in a law school outside of Alabama. Through this program he was able to finance a significant part of his legal education. His secret plan was to return to Alabama and practice law in order to combat segregation laws.

While at Cleveland he studied how Alabama law applied to legal cases. All of his research focused on Alabama law. At the same time he remained active in the local congregation in Cleveland. He returned to Montgomery in 1954, even though most of his professors thought he

had a promising career in the North and most church members were skeptical that Gray could remain a Christian and a lawyer!

Gray narrates the story of the Montgomery Bus Boycott that launched the Civil Rights Movement and Martin Luther King's career. While most histories of the Civil Rights Movement mention Gray they do not tell what he did in the courts to defend Rosa Parks, King and the bus boycotters. Gray eventually filed a lawsuit to declare unconstitutional Montgomery's laws mandating segregated buses. This successful lawsuit went all the way to the U.S. Supreme Court where the Montgomery Bus System was ordered integrated. Gray writes at the end of the story on the bus boycott:

"One could say that Mrs. Parks' refusal to surrender her seat on a Montgomery bus created an ever-widening ripple of change throughout the world ... A pebble case in the segregated waters of Montgomery, Alabama created a human rights tidal wave that changed America and eventually washed up on the shores of such faraway places as the Bahamas, China, South Africa, and the Soviet Union. And it all started on a bus" (pp. 96-97).

Gray was 25 and Martin Luther King 26 when the bus boycott started.

While the story of the bus boycott is clearly one of the highlights of Gray's book, his career was just starting. A few years later the city of Tuskegee, despite being 80 percent African-American, decided to gerrymander the city boundaries to exclude most black voters and keep the white politicians in control. The African-American leaders persuaded Gray to take the case. It also went all the way to the Supreme Court and here for the first time Gray actually argued the case before the justices. Gray writes:

"I entered the courtroom as another case was being argued. I felt weak with apprehension. I remembered my childhood in Montgomery. How could I, a black man, born in an Alabama ghetto, whose father died when I was two years old and whose mother had only a second grade education, argue a case before the United States Supreme Court?" (p. 4).

Gray did speak and spoke eloquently. He won the case, which is recognized as one of the landmark civil rights cases in American history – for it helped establish the precedent of "one man, one vote" and prevented disingenuous ways to discriminate against minorities. Thousands of African-Americans and other minorities are now elected officials in local, state and national elected bodies because of this case.

Many other important legal cases are described in the book, including Gray's efforts to protect the 1965 Selma marchers from white violence. Gray's unsuccessful attempt to become a Federal judge is told. Gray also became one of the first African-American state legislators in Alabama since Reconstruction. Gray also tells about the interesting and changing relationship that he had with George Wallace. Also, Gray became the President of the National Bar Association, the national organization for African-American lawyers.

What is amazing about Gray's career is that he remained an active minister for much of his legal career, preaching for various churches in Montgomery and later Tuskegee. Gray also tells the

story of how he and Alan Parker, a white leader and church member in Tuskegee, integrated the white and black Churches of Christ in Tuskegee.

As U.S. Representative John L. Lewis writes about Gray in his introduction to Gray's book: "We are blessed to have the story of his life. We can learn much from this courageous man."

## What's So Special about God's Love?

*by Bill Love*

*July – August, 1998*

**Jesus attracted losers like some people collect stray dogs and cats. He ate with people you and I would not be caught dead with. When the best people in town asked why he associated with street people he told the story of the Prodigal Son. Jesus pointed the parable at superior older brother types. But it also said something about God's love for prodigals. Have you ever wondered what is so special about God's love? Wouldn't any father treat his prodigal the same way?**

Let me tell you Ted's story and you can decide for yourself. It's a story that could happen, does happen somewhere every year.

Ted couldn't wait to leave home and enroll at the university. He would finally escape his older brother's shadow. Don was a hard act to follow; perfect in every way. He was Mr. Everything in high school; made straight A's, was the president of five clubs, all-district quarterback and, naturally, very popular with all the women on campus. Don had gone on to college and law school, following in ol' dad's footsteps. Not that Ted was a zero. He made good enough grades, played on the football team, was active in several clubs and dated some.

But now he could go to a university where no one had ever heard of big brother Don. The first year he had a lot of fun and his grades were poor. His dad harped on his poor performance all the next summer. Ted came back to school determined to do better and his grades did improve. It was an uneventful second year. He made friends, had a few wild weekends at the frat house and the hangovers to prove it.

It was in his junior year that something happened to Ted. For no apparent reason he suddenly had an urge to do something big, something different, to take a different direction. He went to the dean's office and changed his major from pre-law to drama. It felt good to strike out on his own.

The same week he received an application for a Visa card. he filled it out and sent it in. Within a month he also applied for MasterCard and American Express. Ted felt independent, in control, adult! No sooner than he received the cards than he maxed them out: a new stereo, a computer and software and new clothes. His parents knew nothing about any of this, In just a month or so he owed several thousand dollars. When "Past Due" notices appeared in his mail box he feared the banks might contact his dad. He took a part-time job at McDonald's sold some books, and even some plasma. he was beginning to see that he could never pay the cards off fast enough.

Ted went to a weekend party to forget his problems. He drank too much, did a little pot and was tempted to try cocaine for the first time. When he confided in a friend about his financial problems he received advice: "There's a way you could pay those cards off in less than a month. You're smart. There's nothing to it. The real action is not sniffing this stuff, it's selling." Ted said he wasn't interested, that his dad would kill him if he got caught.

The next day he got a call from the bank. The woman said he had to make a payment in the next ten days or they would contact his father. Ted called his friend and asked how to start dealing drugs.

His friend was right. Ted was successful, business was brisk, there was nothing to it. In a few weeks he paid off the cards and had plenty of cash left to buy the restored red Mustang he had lusted for. Ted was riding high, had more friends than he could count, partied every night. Many women on campus were eager to date him.

Then one night at two in the morning the phone rang on his dad's bedside table. "We're sorry to bother you, sir. This is the Dallas Police. We have your son here. He was arrested for possession of illegal drugs with intent to sell. We will release him on bond of \$5,000 pending a trial. Do you want to make bail?"

Ted's dad wired the money. The phone rang in Ted's apartment at 7:30 the next morning. It was the Dean of Men. "Ted, we don't allow drug use on campus, much less dealing. You are no longer a student here. If you wish you may apply next year. We are making no promises. You need to get your life together, young man."

Within the hour Ted had packed his things, filled the car with gas and was on the road for the five hundred mile trip home. He stopped by the newsstand to see if the paper reported his bust. It did, in detail, with his picture. As he drove down the Interstate, Ted didn't turn on the radio; he didn't feel like it. As the hours went by he had plenty of time to think. "I'll just have to come clean, tell the whole story and take what comes ... I deserve this ... What a fool to think I could get away with it ... What will Dad say? ... Will he even let me in the door or boot me out without a word? ... Who could blame him?"

It was dark when Ted turned the corner onto the street where he lived. Cars were parked up and down the street in front of the house. Getting out of his car he could hear music and see red, white and blue balloons through the window. What was going on? On the way up the walk he met his aunt Betty. "It's a party for Don. He's graduating from law school. And, it's his birthday. You see, good things happen when a young man is responsible, works hard and keeps his nose clean!"

Ted went around the house to sneak up the back stairs. "Of course it's a celebration for Don!" he thought. "What else? Big surprise!" His dad came into the room. "You all right, Ted?" "Yeah, Dad. I'm sorry. I really am sorry for messing up, for costing you all that money. I know I really blew it this time. Do you want me to leave? Could I just stay until I get a job and my own apartment?"

"We'll talk about it later. Don't mind telling you I'm very disappointed. You've dragged the family name through the mud! Do you realize that you could get jailtime! With this on your record you may have blown your own future! What were you thinking? ... I'm not sure I can trust you again. It'll take some time ... Look, you can stay up here if you want to, but I think you should at least come downstairs to wish Don a happy birthday and congratulate him on his graduation. That would be the decent thing."

That's Ted's story. Now back to our original question: What is so special about God's love? Look at the human love in this story. Ted's dad was caring but firm, accepting without approving. Without minimizing Ted's failure, he allowed for the possibility of negotiating a restoration. He made it clear that Ted would have to earn the trust and respect he had squandered so thoughtlessly. What more could his dad have done? We can understand Ted's dad and the way he dealt with his son. It was responsible love.

But, by the same measure, the prodigal's father is hard to figure. He ran out to meet his wayward son, threw his arms around his neck and said: "Put the best robe on him, a ring on his hand and shoes on his feet. Kill the fatted calf and prepare a feast! Let's celebrate! For this one of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!" He gave the party for the prodigal, not for the older brother who had stayed at home and tended to business! (Looking at it this way, the older brother had a point.)

How do you explain the prodigal's father? That was just Jesus' point. We can't understand our heavenly Father's love. When the Pharisees asked by Jesus ate with sinners he could have answered, "Because I hate to eat alone." What they did not see was that all human beings, themselves included, were sinners unfit to dine with God's son. The prodigal's father had two wayward sons. To eat with either of them would have been a gift of grace.

The Father is always running down the road to meet the prodigal or out into the field to coax the older brother into joining the celebration. He takes the initiative hoping that his unconditional love will bring us home and melt our proud hearts. God has no choice. He either loves us unconditionally or not at all. We could never clean ourselves up, make ourselves presentable, measure up to his holiness and earn his forgiveness. The Pharisees were not wrong about the sinfulness of the street people, they were just blind to their own sin.

No wonder the Pharisees couldn't understand Jesus. God's love is greater than anything we can imagine. He loves you and me more than anyone else loves us. More than our mothers love us. More than we love ourselves.

But eating with sinners was not the most extravagant way Jesus showed the Father's love. An even more lavish demonstration would blow everyone away. His disciples as much as his enemies. If the Pharisees thought Jesus' eating with the low-lives was a spendthrift and unreasonable gift – they had seen nothing yet.

## Mayberry Morality

by Angie Gray

July – August, 1998

“Jesus spoke all these things to the crowd in parables; he did not say anything to them without using a parable” (Matthew 13:34)

How long has it been since you’ve rolled your eyes at the antics of a clumsy and inept deputy sheriff or silently chuckled at the incomprehensible wailings of the town drunk as he rides an uncooperative dairy cow into town? How much time has passed since you’ve had an ongoing crush on Ms. Crump the grade school teacher or attended a revival at the All Souls Church? Can you remember the last time you sat in your own living room, nothing baking in the oven, but have almost been able to smell your Aunt Bee’s steamy fried chicken?

Flip the cable channels of the television set long enough and you will probably smell Aunt Bee’s cooking as it still wafts from a tiny kitchen in the heart of a fictional town in North Carolina. But open the doors of a large classroom in the non-fictional Twickenham Church of Christ in Huntsville, Alabama and feast on more than her cornbread and baked potatoes. There you will find people who are present because something familiar and timeless has beckoned them, something inspirational and valuable, something that speaks to their own humanity ... something Mayberry.

In June of 1998, the Twickenham church began a weekly Bible study based on episodes of *The Andy Griffith Show*. Walk down the halls of their building after class and you may hear several members whistling the famous theme song, smiling thoughtfully ... and holding their Bibles. They have just participated in meaningful discussion during a unique and insightful class that begins each week by watching a 20-minute episode of the classic sitcom. The class is called “Finding the way Back to Mayberry.” The response to this unconventional method of teaching has been overwhelming, and its popularity has even touched the members of the community. In fact, the show has become a source of shared ground to bring in people from many different backgrounds and walks of life and has crossed denominational lines.

Many Americans agree that *The Andy Griffith Show* was a very unique series, but is it really appropriate to be the topic of a continuous Bible class discussion? Joey Fann, class co-coordinator, has asked himself that question and also marvels that this avenue for the gospel has gotten so much recent attention. Local Huntsville television stations, two local newspapers, the *Washington Post*, *USA Today Weekend* and a Nashville TV station have all done segments on the class. Fann believes this is strong evidence of how popular and special the show is to many people in the country but moreover that the show highlights man’s humanity to man, a theme that stands the test of time. He says, “Although there are few direct references to the Bible ... the show is filled with basic morals and Christian principles taught by the Scriptures.”

“If you are familiar with the series,” continues Fann, “it is not hard to think of an episode that portrayed a specific moral value. For example, ‘Andy On Trial’ shows us the value of

friendship and how easy it is to put our friendships at risk when we are concerned with exalting ourselves, and it also shows how just saying 'I'm sorry' doesn't automatically fix everything."

As the class members view this particular episode they laugh at Barney's mischief, but his costly decisions eventually hurt Andy's reputation. And a few have been caught with watery eyes when they observed the value of close friendships during Barney's touching scene, defending Andy on the witness stand, which draws the episode to a close. "Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends" (John 15:13).

As the familiar theme song closes the show, hearts become more sensitive. A short outline is handed out to the attendees and class discussion ensues. The various comments are more open because each individual has related to a character in ways he or she may not have expected.

That sometimes we inadvertently put our friendships at risk is just one simple truth that is highlighted with Scripture during Twickenham class discussion. In 1 Samuel 20:4 we hear Jonathan say to David "Whatever you want me to do, I'll do for you." He even made a covenant with the house of David to reaffirm his oath out of love for him, "because he loved him as he loved himself" (v. 17). It was not Barney's intention to hurt Andy's reputation, and his promise of friendship proved true at a crucial moment. Even more important was Andy's forgiving response to the whole situation. "Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger ... forgiving one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you" (Ephesians 4:31-32).

Simple parables challenge our humanity and can even challenge our theology. For instance, in the Mr. McBeevee episode, Andy and Barney are challenged by Opie to believe in someone whose existence they question. But even when Andy made the decision to believe Opie's story, he did not have all the answers. He simply made the decision. This is a Christian example, admit it. We are also asked to believe in Someone that we often think doesn't make sense (Hebrews 11:1, John 20:29).

Mayberry morality. What a concept. *The Andy Griffith Show* is a series of parables from a time for which many long. Not only was it a time when one could leave the front door or the car unlocked and knew all of the neighbors, but, as Fann relates, "It is a place where people genuinely cared about one another, and where basic morals and ideals were a way of life."

In a world where situation ethics are the norm, people are still searching for absolutes, searching for examples of truth when society would ask that we only hold on to what is in our personal best interest. This is a welcome contrast to today's Springer, Seinfeld, and South Park situations where one begins to be tempted to snicker and smile at questionable values. Mayberry situations can still translate into our faith today and it is often easier to learn lessons from the interactions of familiar characters. Although the show is not in itself biblical, the characters and story lines exhibit biblical principles. "And, even though there was never a real Mayberry," Joey Fann says, "there was a time in our culture where the basic moral values of living were a way of life and not the exception."

The members of Twickenham have been very supportive of this approach to values. "It has been a team effort, really," says Fann. Brad Grasham and Lee Segrest, fans of Fife and members of



this church, had actually used the show before as material for a teenage class. This idea evolved and with applause from the eldership “Finding the Way Back to Mayberry” was created. The class has had attendees from teenagers to the “Andy Griffith generation,” and all have responded positively, taking the timeless truths to heart. Emily Harless, a teenager, said, “The class is so uplifting, but convicting. Its morals are for all ages. Most of my friends were surprised at how much it actually challenged them and were even more surprised that they even liked the show!” Stan Evans, father of three, also made an important observation: “Even when the characters go about things the wrong way, it does show their hearts’ intention. That is so much like us. We’re only human. It is easier to laugh at ourselves when we laugh at them. But then we find that our desire to change is greater, too.” Fann comments that this is the key to the class’s popularity.

Many visitors have driven in from outside of town just to see what the buzz is all about. Fann gets e-mail messages from people who love the idea, want to do the class at their church, or are just glad to hear about a program that promotes these values. One special thing about the response from the recent website posting has been the absence of the denominational boundaries. Fann has received messages from Catholics, Presbyterians, methodists, Baptists, and other churches interested in this concept. His response? “I wish we, as Christians, could find other areas of common ground besides Mayberry to gather strength from.”

The excitement that has been generated by this class is no surprise. Parents usually find themselves recounting morality tales to their children, tales they heard long ago from Aesop’s Fables or an old story-teller named Uncle Remus. Many a preacher will testify that waning attention is revived in the congregation when his sentence simply begins, “I heard a story about a man who....” Most notably it is known that Jesus himself usually did not tell his listeners anything without using a parable (Matthew 13:34). Simple narratives with loaded messages. John Harkin, Twickenham member, said in his prayer before the class, “God, thank you for this medium we all grew up with and help us to relate to it so that we can learn like you taught.” Jesus knows how we listen. We know it too.

At a surprising moment during the Mayberry class I visited, I began to understand an inner truth that I had been trying to articulate with difficulty for days. The class watched the first episode of *The Andy Griffith Show* when Andy’s Aunt Bee comes to live with them and raise Opie. However, she is not the tomboy the last housekeeper was, and Opie directly refuses her. In spite of the prompting from his father to accept Aunt Bee, Opie continuously uncovers reasons for her to leave. When the young sensitive boy sees how much she has been hurt by his actions, he finally trusts in what his father said and gives her a chance.

My flash of clarity came when I realized my prejudices have a serious influence on my expectations. It is difficult to trust that God is in control when I expect things to “turn out like they always do.” I have found that at times I become way too comfortable with the negative: “I know how it is going to be!” What kind of faith is that?

Sometimes unfortunate things happen, usually by surprise. But the changes of life do come. Sometimes they are so big we let them beat us down. A vital aspect of the pursuit of meaning in those changes is totally trusting in the Father, who has also “seen these things before” ... way before. To find the answers, we must trust that he speaks to us through mediums we may not

expect. Recently, he spoke to me through Opie. Through this fictional child, I recognized my own humanity, got to know a little bit about myself and consequently named my struggle. The challenge will be, as always, acting on the lesson.

Although the Bible class itself will, as most do, have a measurable duration, these lessons that *The Andy Griffith Show* teaches will never wear out. Our culture has made it increasingly more difficult to detect people who are predisposed to take responsibility for their own actions. It seems that people are eager to volunteer an excuse or appoint the blame to someone else, but how often will someone take unqualified responsibility? “God made us beings of choice,” says Fann to his class, “so by default we must deal with the consequences of our choices, both good and bad. We can’t listen to the lessons of society and pawn off the bad consequences if we try hard enough.” This show gives us a good example of how to take responsibility for our actions if we just adhere to the biblical values we have been taught.

As fortunate as the Twickenham members have been to have “found their way back to Mayberry,” this class is not God’s only tool to deliver the human race. It does not haul the directive of salvation through Christ, nor does it automatically fetch people into a relationship with God. But from these weekly meetings together, the members of this class have learned the biblical lessons these inspirational parables can provide. They have been renewed, challenged, and changed in surprising ways. Believe it or not, many of them hear subtle wisdom in the babbling of Barney Fife.

Many members have commented that through the avenue of this special class they have made amends with friends, learned from mistakes, or restored their original promises to be godly people. They have been reminded of basic Christian values such as character, personal responsibility, honesty and integrity. And many have come home to a new smell wafting from the heart of their homes in Huntsville.

The steam from Aunt Bee’s cooking no longer makes their stomachs roar. Nor does the anticipation of popcorn and lemonade Joey’s wife, Nicole, has prepared for the Mayberry class on a hot Sunday afternoon. It is, instead, the aroma of Christ that gives rise to their hunger for something more. Is it something Mayberry? Maybe. But I believe it is a scent of something heavenly.

## The Seeker

*by Andre Resner*  
*July – August, 1998*

Recently, I heard Barbara Brown Taylor tell the story of a place halfway around the world. In a pot between modern day Turkey and Russia, east of the Black Sea, numerous medieval churches are in ruins. A thousand years ago this place was a thriving center of Christendom. The best of the world's goods, people, and art went into the construction of magnificent buildings which honored God, which held and sheltered the people of God. Their architecture pointed up to a kingdom which was not of this world.

Today one can still see them, at least the parts which remain. They are shadows of their former selves, but here and there one can see a fragment sticking up through the tops of trees. All the best carvings and stonework have been long since carried away to decorate some other building or to sit as an exhibition in a museum. The old wrecked churches now function as soccer fields, or sheep pens, or sometimes even as garbage dumps.

Some walls remain almost completely intact and every now and then one can see, if one is really looking for it, the remains of a fresco up in a fragmented apse which has somehow survived the centuries. The remains of a face with one wide eye looking right at you or one arm raised in that distinct constellation with his hand blessing those who gather in his name.

It's a striking image to me, because I can't help but see the dilemma that the current church is in, and wonder whether one who was seeking could still find any remnant of Christ's presence, Christ's piercing eye, or Christ's overt blessing amid the remains that are the 20th century Christian church, Christian community, and its fragmented attempts to be his prophetic presence for justice and mercy in this world.

Many are seeking. I would say that the North American urban church sits quietly at the doorstep of thousands of seekers. Of course, not all are seeking for truth, for meaning, for love and justice. Some are just trying their best to pave a highway toward the American dream of material possessions and an eventual condo in Florida. But there are thousands whose nerve endings are alive and tingling. They are the seekers.

Just who is "the seeker"? Well, different people are seeking for different things and for different reasons.

There are the "spiritual orphans": those who witnessed the death of their childhood faith, a faith that was never really their own, but one of their parents. Since abandoning that, they've never experienced anything that adequately took its place. But now, here they are seeking again – giving it one last good shot.

A slightly different bunch are "the prodigals." These are the ones who out and out rejected the faith they once received. They went off and lived as they wished; tasted the forbidden fruits; and

have hit the wall. They want back. But they don't know if they can come back. They don't know if their Father will take them back; they have a hunch that the Father still loves them and would, in fact, receive them with tears and even forgiveness. But they are perhaps most afraid to come home because of the elder brother (read, "the church"), that the Father might not be around the day they come back, leaving the welcoming party to the discretion of a disgruntled sibling who has been faithfully (read, joylessly, resentfully) shouldering the load all these years.

And then, there's another kind of seeker altogether than these. The spiritual orphan and the prodigal have some connection to church in their past. When they start to seek they naturally turn, as one option, to the church, to give it at least another shot. I would guess that the seekers that are coming to "seeker sensitiv" services that churches put on are of the spiritual orphan or prodigal category. The seeker that I want to consider here, however, would be unlikely to darken the door of a church building in her search.

This seeker is the one who isn't satisfied with the way things are. He is the one who knows there must be more. Whose heart yearns for fulfillment. For love that isn't conditional. For a people, for even one person, whose words and actions are consistent. The seeker is the one who wants justice so badly that it drives her to anger, to cursing, to tears; she sometimes borders on cynicism, yet hasn't shut down and given up because of some inner fire that won't go out no matter how cold the wind blows from hardened pessimists on the one side or simplistic Bible thumpers on the other.

The seeker is often alone, is usually misunderstood, is a threat to those who have settled for the way things are. The seeker is a pioneer; all others look like settlers. The seeker is the nomad, the revolutionary, the one for whom the tent flaps of the universe are fluttering in the wind, yet even with the crisp sound of the flapping sometimes drowning out everything else, he resists the quick and easy attempts by the self-appointed orthodox, or the political, to staple things down prematurely, to slap quick-fix Band-Aids on what looks like cancer. The seeker cares about the systemic reasons for the current ills. Instinct says that things cannot stay the way they are without serious compromise. The seeker sees the bumper sticker on the '73 Chevy pickup that says "Stuff Happens," and says, "It sure does!" but then asks, yearningly, "Can redemption happen too?"

Because of this, the seeker knows that there are things which must be judged and overthrown. There are things which must ease in order for true peace, shalom, to be experienced in community, the seeker realizes that there are some things that are worse than death. Such things as phony life. Life that is anaesthetized by material possessions, by sexual obsession, by any new placebo which promises to take away the pain of the search not satisfied. The true seeker amens the psychologist Ernest Becker's claim that "Modern man is drinking and drugging himself out of awareness altogether or spends his time shopping, which is essentially the same thing."

The seeker operates with a keen hermeneutics of suspicion. She is distrustful of institutions and long-standing organizations, even – maybe especially – when they bear the names of former seekers martyred. She distrusts those who decorate the graves of the prophets. The seeker is leery of people who appear to have sold out to institutions for rewards financial, rewards of security for the future. He is suspicious of those who stand to gain in goods, power, or prestige and fame

if their solutions to life's ills are embraced. This is why seekers are leery – and rightly so – of preachers.

The seeker questions all rewards and promises of “security” especially at the cost of justice and equity in the present. The seeker envisions a time when, if there is a God, there will be some serious role reversal going on. The rich man will get his judgment for hoarding and for shutting his eyes and ears to the cries for scraps. And the poor man will get a name, and a place of comfort, and will know that even though the wealthiest of this world would not love him that the god of the universe does. And that God sees, knows, and will ultimately make the world's imbalanced scales of judgment right.

The seekers I am describing generally don't trust the church because their experience of church is that it won't allow the big questions, that Christians get proportionately more nervous as the questions get larger. That Christians feel threatened and become reactionary when pressed hard by doubt or by pain or by frustration. Seekers' experiences with conservative American Christianity are not good. They see people unwilling to acknowledge the enormity of evil in the world and the way in which a God who is all-loving and all-powerful is necessarily implicated in this evil, at least for allowing it to happen right under his nose, all apparently without lifting a finger to solve it. They see people with outdated words, ways, and rituals that seem unwilling to engage the difficulties in society right now, preferring to wear what seem like blinders so that they can have a kind of compartmentalized religion, clean, convenient, and relegated to the weekend. They have a sense that true faith and true religion ought to have a seamless quality to it from Sunday to Monday to Friday. That one's convictions about God and about God's vision for the community of shalom – true peace, justice, and equality for all – ought to impact the way one acts as an employer, as a justice of the peace, as a manager of a corporate office. They are suspicious of a Christianity that seems merely to rubber-stamp greed, prejudice, and exclusivism.

The seeker has seen the movie *Simon Burch* and identifies with the character of little Simon, the diminutive prophet in the church who asks during announcement time what coffee and donuts have to do with God. Who disrupts Bible class with theological questions when the teacher is trying to moralistically cookie-cutter the children into zombies who can sit for a long time in uncomfortable clothes on hard oak furniture. Simon is right. What does that have to do with God? Apparently, Jesus has left the building, and his disciples, those who were trying to keep the children from Jesus in the first place, have turned church into a systematic attempt to drive the children away. The minister finally tells Simon, “Simon, the church, worship services, and Sunday School all need a break from you. Will you please go away?”

So, can the seeker find a place at church? We know that some can. The spiritual orphan and the prodigal often do. Of course, they often find their way back home under a different roof, one that speaks a language they can understand. But what about the seeker that I've described here? Can this seeker find a place at church? Are there churches that would not be threatened by a Simon Burch in their midst? Yes, I believe there are.

The church that can become a haven for seekers is a church which has not given up on the search itself. It is a church which doesn't merely offer itself as The Answer man to the seekers' questions. That's simplistic. The seeker knows it's not that easy and distrusts the big brother with

all the answers to all the hard questions. The seeker needs to find a church which has not reduced everything down to bite size, a place where, no matter what the question, the answer is always, "Jesus!" This was the case in one Wednesday night fourth grade Bible class. Mrs. Cunningham told the students she was going to take them all out for dinner after church. She asked the class what they'd like to eat. Little Billy heard the question and wanted to say "pizza," but given the time and the place and the person who asked, he couldn't help but think he ought to say "Jesus."

The seeker of the most important things in life needs to find a church which seeks just as intensely as she does. The seeker needs to find in a church a group of people who are willing to knock on doors that are shut until they are opened to those previously prevented entrance. A church willing to genuinely keep Asking, Seeking, and Knocking. A church that will not stop praying to God "Thy kingdom come," because the true justice and peace and love that God imagines for people is not fully here on this earth yet.

Jesus was looking for seekers. His model disciple was one who was a lifelong learner, a lifelong seeker. One who refused to settle for anything that this world could offer. In the story that a man named Mark tells about Jesus we see two stories virtually back to back which illustrate a future church in ruins, and a future church which never gives up on seeking. In the first story two of Jesus' longtime followers, James and John, come to him with a request: "We want you to grant us one wish." Jesus responded, "What is it that you want me to do for you?" Now you need to know that at this point in Mark's story it appears that James and John have finally figured out who Jesus is and what that would mean for all those who were on the inside of this Jesus community. They figured he was going to take over power in Israel – political, religious, all of it. He would be number one in charge. And that meant that they would be in control, too. Visions of power, dominion, prestige, position, material possession all danced in their heads. By following Jesus, they had unwittingly hit the lottery and they came to Jesus to see if he could improve their position even more. "We want to be the vice-president and secretary of state for you when you set up your rule." And Jesus, in his typically understated manner, told them, "You have no idea what you're asking." The other disciples heard about what James and John did and they were very upset about it, probably because they hadn't thought of doing it first. It must have been one of the most disappointing times Jesus had with his followers, though as Mark tells the story Jesus had plenty of other times to choose from.

The other story comes right on the heels of this one. Jesus is leaving Jericho where there has been lots of commotion about his presence. One of Jericho's more embarrassing residents, one of its Simon Birches, heard that the commotion was because Jesus was passing through, so the blind beggar Bartimaeus started to shout out from his begging perch on the city limits: Jesus! Son of David! Have mercy on me!" Those around the man were trying to shut him up. They didn't want Jesus to see Bart. They were embarrassed by him and didn't want to bother Jesus with their eyesores. Jesus heard him and stood still. He told them to bring Bartimaeus near. They called over to Blind Bart: "Well, isn't this your lucky day! Jesus is calling you." Bart sprang up and left behind in a pile what were probably his only earthly possessions and in an instant stood before Jesus himself. And Jesus asked him, "What is it that you want me to do for you?" Do you recognize the question? Yes, it's the same question that Jesus had just asked James and John. But Bart answers it differently. He said to Jesus, "I just want to see again." I just want to see. It's

probably the one thing that Jesus wished his followers, those who were closest to him, would want. Those who had left all, like Bart, to be with Jesus. Those who had risked embarrassment, like Bart, to be with Jesus. But there was one big difference now that Jesus was on the cusp of entering into Jerusalem for his final days on earth: the disciples were looking past Jesus for their own payoff and Bart was still looking to Jesus with a simple request to just see again. It is maybe the one thing that God wants even today, a church so humble and so dependent on God that its primary prayer is

*“Lord, we just want to see. We just want to get it, just once. We just want to be give the courage not to give up, not to settle down, not to turn your community, what is intendend to be your very precense, the body of Christ himself on earth, into a soccer field or a sheep pen, or a museum or worse. Give us the hearts of seekers who know that it is only you who can give sight. Give us the renewed desire to just see again. Give us the courage to join others who have not even named you as God, creator, and redeemer, in a search for the Christ who still stands over a church partially in ruins, one eye looking intently at us, his hand raised in a blessing of those who meet in his name, who refuse to give up the search, to see embodied on earth a kingdom that is not of this world. To see through the ruins that it is still Christ the Lord who hasn’t given up on us. Amen.”*

## What it Means to Preach Jesus

*by James S. Woodroof  
July – August, 1998*

It was the darkest day of my life. I had never been aware of depression in my brief thirty-four years. But on that dark day in 1966, I experienced depression. I was ten thousand miles from home, supported by the 6th and Izard church of Little Rock, Arkansas, to plant the church in Christchurch, New Zealand. Having grown up in a Christian home, son of a preacher, nearing the end of my master's degree, with fifteen years of preaching experience, I was shocked to realize that I didn't know what I was supposed to be preaching! A dark day, indeed; but it was the beginning of a richly rewarding search for the heart of God and the answer to my question: "What have I been called to preach?"

A preacher once stepped to the podium and saw on the pulpit a note which read, "Sir, we would see Jesus." Five simple words requesting an audience with Jesus of Nazareth. The initial request was made out of curiosity by some out-of-town guests visiting Jerusalem during one of the annual Jewish holidays. Two thousand years later the request lying on the pulpit was made, more than likely, out of frustration over hearing too many subjects preached other than Jesus. Every sermon should allow the hearer to "see" Jesus: see what he saw, feel what he felt, think what he thought, "hear his voice," so that Jesus might "come in and eat with him" (Revelation 3:20). "We should see Jesus" should be the reference point of every sermon – spoken, written, or lived. Stripped to the bone, preaching Jesus means the hearer/reader/observer will see Jesus – up close and personal. Nothing else could possibly satisfy the request by the tourists in A.D. 30 or the writer of the anonymous note nearly twenty centuries later.

When Jesus is preached, Jesus himself is the message, not the church nor social issues nor morality – though these worthy subjects will issue from preaching Jesus just as fruit issues from root. Jesus is the root of the message! Jesus! Not politics or psychology or a preacher's pet peeve. To "preach Jesus" means just that – preach Jesus. Like Paul, who decided to preach nothing to the Corinthians but "Jesus Christ and him crucified" (I Corinthians 2:2), Oswald Chambers charged:

"Restate to yourself what you believe ... then do away with as much of it as possible, and get back to the bedrock of the Cross of Christ .... If we get away from brooding on the tragedy of God upon the Cross in our preaching, it produces nothing. It does not convey the energy of God to man; it may be interesting but it has no power. But preach the Cross, and the energy of God is let loose .... We preach Christ crucified."<sup>1</sup>

But what is the method of proclamation which so lifts up Jesus that all else is left aside, and speaker and hearer alike are ushered into the presence of the God-Man? There must be a door of access which gives audience to him. Admittedly, any attempt to analyze "preaching Jesus" runs the same risk as a scientist who attempts to analyze a tear. Citing lab data showing a tear's composition as water and salt is inadequate. A tear is more than water and salt, and preaching Jesus will always be more than what one could write about it.



“Preaching Jesus” will possess the same dynamic it possessed when Jesus himself personally lived out the message. Obviously, this claim has limitations, but only in degree, not in kind. The dynamic at work in Jesus’ hearers then must also be allowed to work in all who hear him today. And that dynamic centers around his identity. In all of Jesus’ interaction with people, he seems to have been initially and ultimately (and almost exclusively) concerned that people grasp his identity – who he was. It was central to all he said and did.

He asked his disciples, for example, “Who do people say the Son of Man is?” (Matthew 16:13). They told him what they heard (16:14). He pressed them further: “And who do you say I am?” (16:15). Peter responded: “You are the Christ ...” (16:16). Jesus declared that Peter’s answer had been given him from the Father (16:17) – the strongest possible endorsement he could have given Peter’s reply. He proceeded to assert that his church would be built on the rock of his identity (16:18). He was bold enough to predict, “When you have lifted up the Son of Man, then you will know that I am he” (John 8:28), and brave enough, when asked under cross-examination, “Are you the Christ, the Son of the Blessed?” to answer, “I am” (Mark 14:62).

Particularly in John’s gospel, Jesus constantly fields such questions as “Who are you?” and “Who do you think you are?” (John 8:53), and “How long do you hold us in suspense? If you are the Christ, tell us plainly” (10:24). Pilate asked, “Are you the king of the Jews?” (18:33) to which Jesus answered, “For this cause I was born, and for this reason I have come into the world, I must bear witness to the truth” (18:37). And did he ever! Jesus made over 150 claims in which, directly or indirectly, he declared his deity.<sup>2</sup> It was this upon which he staked everything: “Unless you believe that I am [the Messiah], you will die in your sins” (John 8:24), and for which he himself was “staked.” He was adamant about it! So much so that a strident critic eighteen hundred years later picked up on it and said this about him:

According to the first three Gospels, [Jesus] knew God as his Father and God’s affairs as his own .... According to Joh, he articulated positively his unity with the Father and present himself as the visible revelation of him. In any case according to both representations this was neither a mere feigning nor a transient surger of Jesus’ feeling in single heightened moments; rather his entire life and all his sayings and actions were permeated with this consciousness as from the soul.<sup>3</sup>

So, Jesus’ identity was no peripheral issue; it occupied center stage in his mind and ministry, in the preaching and writings of his followers, and in the critiques of his adversaries, both then and now. Should not his identity, then, be the dominant theme when we preach him today?

Specifically, however, to preach Jesus means to preach his identity in such a manner as to induce crisis, call for decision, and expect unreserved commitment. It is more than just the telling of fascinating stories of his life, as one would tell a bedtime story to a child. It is the proclaiming of Jesus as the object of intense scrutiny by his contemporaries in a drama that escalated until the question of his identity was finally resolved. Many concluded, “He’s the Messiah,” and they worshipped him; others concluded, “He’s an impostor,” and they killed him. Preaching Jesus today will call hearers to the same dilemma, the “dilemma of his deity” – that is, either Jesus was an egotistical maniac guilty of blasphemy, or he was the divine Son of God. This dilemma must be addressed by every hearer today – and resolved. Until it is, nothing else matters.

Jesus' own personal method of bringing people to this dilemma was consistent from beginning to end: he placed his hearers in the breach between (1) what they could hardly believe (his astonishing claims) and (2) what they could not reasonably deny (his phenomenal deeds).<sup>4</sup> The gospel records demonstrate this method both generally and specifically. It can be seen generally in that each gospel weaves the story about Jesus from a body of evidence consisting of "things difficult to believe" and "things impossible to deny," thus creating an increasing tension between the two until the reader is brought face to face with the issue of Jesus' identity.<sup>5</sup> Is he or is he not who he claimed to be?

It can be seen specifically in the healing of the paralytic<sup>6</sup> (Mark 2:1-12), in which Jesus intentionally placed his adversaries in the bind between his claim to forgive sins and his healing of the paralytic. His claim they could not believe; his healing they could not deny. Thus their dilemma. He brought them there by design: "'That you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins...' He said to the paralytic, 'Take up your pallet and go home.' And he rose ... and went out before them all" (Mark 2:10-12). And Jesus left them there to struggle.

Critics have picked up on Jesus' method of operation. A modern, twentieth-century adversary detected the "bind" in which Jesus caught his Jewish antagonists and charged Jesus with being "the comprehensive engineer of his own execution":

Jesus, knowing full well what he was doing, had quite deliberately forced [the council] ... by his skillfully planned and calculated activities .... He had himself made doubly sure that they would proceed to extremes against him by goading them with his words and behavior, so that any possible mitigation of their severity would be offset by the personal animus he had intentionally created.<sup>7</sup>

If even adversaries are conscious of both Jesus' claims to deity and his method of bringing his hearers to grapple with this issue, should not this also be the crux of our preaching – if we preach Jesus? There can be no submission to his deity without, first, admission of his deity.

But what does preaching Jesus mean to those who hear? That depends on the hearers – those who are listening.

So who is out there? The preacher addresses people with layers and layers of alienation ... the gathered congregation includes those who are profoundly burdened with guilt, whose lives are framed by deep wrong, by skewed relations beyond resolve, shareholders in the public drama of brutality and exploitation.<sup>8</sup>

Such supplicants have every right to hear Jesus preached! In such hearers there is a yearning for release – a yearning "that causes people to dress up in their heaviness and present themselves for the drama one more time. Sunday morning is, for some, a last, desperate hope ...."<sup>9</sup> These people have the right to hear Jesus preached – to experience, perhaps, what the psalmist was attempting to convey when he said, "Lift up your heads, O gates! And be lifted up, O ancient doors! That the King of glory may come in" (Psalm 24:7). To hear Jesus preached lifts up the head and opens the gates of the heart and allows the King of glory to come in.

Those who hear Jesus preached should feel like the woman who told the preacher, “You make Jesus seem like he was here just yesterday, and I missed him by twenty-four hours.” In fact, Jesus is timeless; he is as comfortable in the twenty-first century as in the first. “Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, and today and forever” (Hebrews 13:8). Those who hear Jesus preached will get the distinct impression that he is not only timeless, but timely; an ever-present breath of fresh air. A student from mainland China sat in the Gospel of John class for studying the life of Jesus. Impressed, he could restrain himself no longer. He raised his hand and remarked with a sense of awe, “I feel like the windows of my mind have been opened, and a breath of fresh air is blowing through it.”

Sometimes Jesus seems too fresh, too challenging. The longer we gaze at him, the more intense the struggle, the greater the cost, the more escalated the battle for the heart. Once past the curiosity stage – past the first frontiers of information into the rugged ranges of confrontation, the hearer may become frightened and want to turn back.

There is an aspect of Jesus that chills the heart of a disciple to the core and makes the whole spiritual life gasp for breath. This strange Being with His face “set like a flint” and His striding determination, strikes terror into me. He is no longer Counselor and Comrade; He is taken up with a point of view I know nothing about and I am amazed at Him. At first I was confident that I understood Him, but now I am not so sure. I begin to realize that there is a distance between Jesus and me; I can no longer be familiar with him. He is ahead of me and he never turns round; I have no idea where he is going, and the goal has become strangely far off.<sup>10</sup>

And so, when Jesus is preached, struggle is induced. And so he meant it to be. On one occasion great multitudes followed him, and he turned and said to them, “If anyone comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple. Whoever does not bear his own cross and come after me cannot be my disciple” (Luke 14:25-27). These hard words were spoken intentionally.

Elton Trueblood admits that Jesus’ presence is downright unsettling, saying, “After nearly two thousand years, [Jesus] is still the Great Disturber. To this day it is difficult to read his words and still be satisfied with one’s own life.”<sup>11</sup> Adolph Harnack agreed:

“[W]e may take up what relation to him we will: in the history of the past no one can refuse to recognize that it was he who raised humanity to this [highest] level.... Once more let it be said: we may assume what position we will in regard to him and his message, certain it is that thence onward the value of our race is enhanced.”<sup>12</sup>

Indeed it is! The world has not been the same since. What a depraved predicament this planet would be in had Jesus not lived! What light there is in this dark world shines because he lived and lives. How sorely the world still needs to hear him; how eagerly we need to proclaim him; how reluctantly, anything else. How unique his personality, his power, his presence. He is solid reality; his is the highest calling, the surest vision, the brightest hope, the noblest ethic, the broadest appeal, the clearest path, the safest road. He is, indeed, the “way, the truth, and the life” No one can come to the Father except by him.

Do whatever it takes to help your hearers see Jesus:

1. Immerse yourself in the the gospel records. Read them and reread them until you own them and they own you. Hold to the Gospels as a wheel holds to its hub, that is, as the center of the whole and that to which all else is attached. Also, saturate yourself with the apostolic letters in which the Spirit reflects on the implication of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection. Be knowledgeable in the prophets. Read everything, both new and old, on his life and times. Read both friend and foe, avid champion and avowed critic, one and all.
- Go to Israel (borrow the money, if necessary), and walk the streets, see the sights, endure the smells, enjoy the food, experience the culture, observe the customs. (Many of them haven't changed since Jesus himself lived there.) Then, come back home and speak out, not about the trip, but about Jesus. Your preaching will take on a dimension and a color unimagined by those who have not made such a trek.
  - Become proficient in the Greek language. Give whatever time it takes to know the language the Spirit used to record Jesus' life and thoughts. Knowing Greek allows one to walk through yet another door instead of peering through a window, and allows one's hearers to catch a glimpse of Jesus' glory that otherwise might escape unnoticed.

Experience the above until Jesus oozes from the very pores of your spiritual skin ... until you exude the aroma of Christ ... until you see through his eyes, hear with his ears; think his thoughts, pray his prayers, live his life and, should the times require, die his death. Track him until you are caught by him and can't escape. Know with John Baillie that in fact it is the constraint of Jesus Christ from which I find it most impossible to escape. I just cannot read the Gospel story without knowing that I am being sought out in love, that I am at the same time being called to life's most sacred task and being offered life's highest prize. For it is the love God has shown me in Christ that constrains me to the love of my fellow man. IF there be someone who is aware of no such constraint, I cannot, of course, hope to make him aware of it by speaking these few sentences. That would require, not so much a more elaborate argument a something quite diefferent from any argument. But I am not now arguing. I am only confessing.<sup>13</sup>

I, too, am only confessing. I know few certainties. But one thing I do know: "No one who puts his trust in [Jesus] will ever have cause to be ashamed" (Romans 10:11). But rather, like John who, seeing Jesus in all his glory standing among the golden candlesticks, fell on his face as one dead (Revelation 1:17), so we, as we come to see him more and more intimately, will fall on our faces in worship and praise. Then, when that high hour arrives and we take our place before the

hearers, we will be prepared to usher in those who come saying, “Sir, we would see Jesus,” for we ourselves will have seen him and through us, so will those who hear.

1 Oswald Chambers, *My utmost for His Highest* (Dodd, Mead & Co., New York, 1963), 330.

2 See James S. Woodroof, *Between the Rock and a Hard Place* (Searcy, AR: The Bible House, 1989), 143-156.

3 David Friedrich Strauss, *The Life of Jesus Critically Examined* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1972), 800.

4 Woodroof, 44-47.

5 This particular method is especially dominant in the gospel of John. Some scholars believe that the Synoptics record this quandary as a “given,” and place this identity dilemma in other contexts or treat it as background for other specific purposes peculiar to their gospel account. For further study, see Robert Stein, *The Synoptic Problem* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1987); David Rhoads and Donald Michie, *Mark as Story* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1982).

6 See also John 3:2, 3:16-19, 28-30, 39-42; 7:25-31; 9:13-34; 10:19-21, 10:30-38; 14:11.

7 Hugh J. Shonfield *The Passover Plot* (New York: Harper and Row, 1969), 137.

8 Walter Brueggemann, *Finally Comes the Poet* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989), 15.

9 Ibid.

10 Chambers, 75.

11 Elton Trueblood, *A Place to Stand* (New York: Harper and Row, 1969), 55.

12 Adolph Hamack, *What Is Christianity?* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1957), 68.

13 John Baillie, *A Reasoned Faith* (New York: Charles Scribners Sons, 1963), 118-9.

## The Bible Matters, But How?

*by Mark W. Hamilton  
July – August, 1998*

You may have had an experience like the one I recently had. My wife and I were visiting a church in my home town. The folks I had known since babyhood embraced us and our none-too-quiet children. All seemed to be going well – until the sermon began, that is. Then the preacher launched into a forty-minute talk on the current generation's lack of respect for God, sound values and so on. He concluded by saying that "change agents" in the church lacked respect for the Lord, and the great preachers of the past, and were in fact handing the church over to the devil! Never was I more steamed about a sermon, and despite the fact that my brother minister was of my grandparents' generation, I in my righteous indignation was ready to take him on. How dare he indict people I respect this way? How dare he insult ME? All the years of training in exegesis, languages, theology and the rest were about to pay off in overwhelming arguments and blistering quotations of everyone from Isaiah to Barth.

And then a funny thing happened. After the service ended, as we all shook hands in the foyer of the little building where I had first sung "Jesus Loves Me" and believed it, the preacher took me and my wife by the hand, touched our children's heads, and wished us well. Graciousness flowed out of every pore, and it was obviously genuine. I was floored! How could anyone be so spiteful one minute and so genial the next? Why the disconnect? And how could I have been so ready to answer in kind, to make all our religion an intellectual problem to be solved?

I tell this story because I think it represents on a small scale where we are in our tradition. All the informal and formal ties binding us together are soiled and frayed, but they do still connect us whether we like it or not. We often live better than our rhetoric. How, then, can we find ways to mend the cords? Can we stay together? Everyone knows by now that we cannot and will not go back to a past in which a few manipulative ministers did all the thinking (if that is the right word) for all of us. Yet, many of us across the spectrum of Churches of Christ pray and hope for unity, even as we despair of its happening. We cannot go back to the sectarian past, but are not very interested in the evangelical future with its bright lights and vacuous theology. Nor does the call of some of our obviously well-intentioned leaders to stop talking about differences and start evangelizing make much sense: how many film strips can you show before you need to grow yourself? Is there another way?

Fortunately, many people of all persuasions seek a way forward. Few really want divided churches and families, and many wish that the acrimonious, uncompromising (because ill-informed) sermons streaming from some of our more tradition-minded folks would grow silent. We also wish the evangelicals among us were more biblically and theologically self-aware, even as we admire their ministerial accomplishments. We need dialog, cooperative efforts of all sorts- and we need them now!

Where do we begin this dialog? The first place where it needs to occur – and indeed has occurred for several years now, even if with megacalories of heat and picowatts of light – is concerning

the nature and function of the Bible. When my preacher friend spoke, he cited the Bible. Not always very well, not always very carefully, but still with a reverence that I and the rest of us share. Perhaps, then, we can talk. Let's begin with some things on which we all agree. In any conversation where emotions are fiery, reaching agreement on some points, any points, is valuable. And we agree on far more than we disagree. First, everyone agrees that the Bible shapes our moral behavior. No one is calling for anarchy, a life without rules. We have learned well the lessons of the Corinthians: grace forbids, not inspires, a life without boundaries. Sometimes Scripture does this subtly. It narrates the evils of society and individuals without didactic comments. King David is a bandit, a poor father, and an adulterer. Abraham tries to fob his wife off on Pharaoh for money, and in the narrative order of Genesis 12 does so just after his call to follow God. When under pressure, Peter excludes Gentiles. Paul loses his temper with John Mark. Jesus excepted, no one in scripture wears a halo. The Bible is not a textbook for family values, for there are not exemplary families in it. (I encourage you if you doubt this to produce one.)

Having said all that, though, there can be no question that the Bible, often subtly but powerfully, articulates a moral vision. David pays for his adultery. Abraham incurs Pharaoh's anger and must wait and wait and wait for God's promised son. Peter courts embarrassment, and Paul must admit his own shortsightedness. The Bible's vision of appropriate human behavior asserts itself in laws, in stories, in the psalms (see, for example, Psalm 1). This moral vision challenges the easy assumptions of human virtue, mocks human pride, and calls everyone to a life of humility, detachment from material goods, and the quest to bring all humanity to God.

Second, we all agree that the Bible is the touchstone of our understanding of God. Not that Scripture portrays God always in the same way. God comes off as a warrior (Exodus 15), a husband (Hosea), a king, a farmer (Isaiah 27), and in countless other ways. Sometimes he is the only deity (Isaiah 40-45 and Jeremiah), and sometimes he has a court of subordinates (Deuteronomy 32, Psalm 82). Most of these portrayals operate at the level of metaphor, which the Bible resorts to because it realizes that God is not ultimately comprehensible or describable. This is not to say that we should not try; indeed, we must try if we are to serve the "Lord your God with all your heart, soul, strength, and mind." Still, the very variety of Scripture's pictures of God makes it clear that He will always be just outside our cognitive grasp. Third, we all agree that the Bible describes religious experience and molds it. The Holy Spirit has worked in the community of believers throughout history. No single period of time has a monopoly on this experience. During the same week I visited my childhood congregation, where the worship runs toward Stamps-Baxter and a stereotyped carrying-out of the "five acts" of worship, I also shared in an evening devotional with college students at my alma mater. The contrast in worship "styles" could not have been greater. Whereas one place stressed continuity, tradition, custom, the other emphasized personal emotion, innovation, and commitment. Who was right and who wrong? Who was more "biblical"? Could not God be in both places, as well as in my current congregation, where the songs are more likely to be by Bach and Beethoven than by Amy Grant? Frankly, the question is hard to answer. Spontaneity does not guarantee genuineness; sometimes careful planning can be a way of bringing days of genuineness to bear in a single moment. Tradition is also no guarantee of biblicalness, for it can be staid and unreflective – or it can be sensitive and thoughtful. Why can we not place a premium on variety and thoughtfulness, rather than pretending that personal psychology and cultural experience do not impact our worship?

Experience always counts for something, especially if we are allowed to define “experience” broadly enough to encompass every aspect of human life, the emotional, the intellectual, the relational, and the spiritual. But what we might call reflective experience counts for more. Appealing to the importance of experience is not a desperate search for the warm fuzzies, for God often offers us the cold pricklies, as Job and Jesus on the cross discovered. No, the appeal to experience is the recognition of the fact that as beings made in the image of God and now wearing the face of Christ, the realities of our lives have religious merit. Theology is, in part, reflection on God’s unfolding of his will in the specifics of our lives.

Most of us, I think, can agree that the Bible does these things, at a minimum. We might wish to quibble over some of the ways we express these basic ideas, but we could probably find wording to describe our fundamental agreement. So why state the obvious? Because in times of crisis, of superheated rhetoric and line-drawing, people who disagree with each other need to find pints of contact; otherwise there can be no hope even of continuing the discussion.

If I could talk about the Bible with my friend whose sermon contrasts so unfavorably with his exemplary life, what could we say? First, we would have to talk about the humanness of interpretation. All of us interpret Scripture; the only uninterpreted books are forgotten ones. All of us must decide whether, when 1 Timothy 2 simultaneously commands lifting hands in prayer and forbids women to wear jewelry and hairdos even as they are “silent” in church, we do none, some, or all of those things. All of us operate out of our cultural experience, and none does or can take the Bible “as it is,” for there is no “as it is” separate from the people who read it and pray to the God whom it reveals. Second, we have to talk about history, about how the thought processes and events of ancient times shaped the Bible itself, and how the thought processes and events of today shape us. Third, we must talk about the Christian tradition of interpretation, and the profound ways it bears on how we read Scripture. And finally, we should agree that interpretation is valuable only in so far as it leads us to godly, joyous, and generous lives. Readings of Scripture that make us more cramped, less kindhearted, more judgmental are wrong on their face. Perhaps my friend and I could read St. Augustine together, who once said that Scripture is all about “faith, hope, and love.” Or to take an older source, we could remember that the statement “Narrow is the gate, and straight the way that leads to life,” is a lament and not a call to action. Perhaps we could be known for our ability to compromise and agree rather than for our fascination with division. We can hope.



## Jesus Man

by Billy Lane

July – August, 1998

*Billy Lane submitted the following piece to **Wineskins** at my invitation. This unusual man knows life on the street among the poor and powerless. He is the gifted and passionate preaching minister for the Central Dallas Church of Christ, which hosts Central Dallas Ministries, a holistic center of compassion, empowerment and evangelism in the inner city of Dallas, Texas. As an African-American Billy daily experiences the dehumanizing impact of racism, yet because he is a thoroughly serious Christ follower, Billy joyfully demonstrates what it means to be a “Jesus man” in the midst of hatred and surrounded by the chaos of the inner city streets. I commend the following lines to the readers of Hope Network Newsletter. We expect this brief message to touch and convict you – and at the same time, ignite fresh hope. Read one.*  
– Lynn Anderson, President, Hope Network Ministries, Dallas, Texas

What does it mean to be a man in this world? A scene from Tom Willard’s *Buffalo Soldiers* provides a vivid description of the “calling” of manhood. For it is indeed a “calling,” and a male decides whether or not he will answer.

The main character in the scene is retired Sergeant Major Augustus Sharps, 10th United States Cavalry, and his family. A tiny congregation sits huddled in a small black church in the South, listening to a guest minister lament the injustice and inequality dealt to the black man of America by his white counterpart.

Suddenly the door to the church burst open. “Help me! For God’s sake, help me!” pleaded a young black man stumbling through the door. Chain shackles bound his ankles; his chest was bare and he wore only tattered trousers. As he collapsed in the aisle screams erupted and people struggled to their feet. Another voice shouted, “They’re coming! I can hear the dogs!” Through the open doorway all could hear the sound of baying dogs draw ominously closer.

Augustus slipped quickly from the pew and knelt before the tattered fugitive. He noted that the chains had gouged ugly gashes in the young man’s ankles. Blood flowed in dark red rivulets from a network of cuts on his back.

“Why, this man’s been horse-whipped,” Augustus breathed.

The barking dogs arrived at the doorstep followed by the pounding of hooves into the churchyard. Then an angry voice shouted from beyond the church door. “Get him on out here, Preacher! Get him on out here now, or we’ll burn the place to the ground.”

Augustus watched as the old preacher straightened his frock coat and stepped resolutely to the doorway, and stood framed by the dancing light of flaming torches. Augustus thought the old minister looked like a man about to descend into Hell. “Pleas Cap’n. This is a house of God,” the preacher begged.

“You got a boy in there that escaped from the prison gänge. We want him. Now!”

The voice came from a big man on the back of a huge horse.

Through the open door Augustus could see the man’s body, but not his face. The terrifying assailant wore a sack over his head; two holes cut in the sack revealed only his fiery eyes. A dozen more riders milled around their leader, all wearing the same macabre covering on their heads.

Augustus walked to the door and stood beside the preacher. Then Augustus’ big hands gently moved the preacher aside and he stepped past the old man, and strode out toward the mounted, hooded men. “Good evening, gentlemen. What’s the problem?” he asked, almost cheerily.

The mounted men snickered behind their masks; the horses snorted.

The big mad rode his horse around Augustus several times, then stopped, looking down, a gorch in one hand, a shotgun in the other.

“You’ve got an escaped convict in there. We want him.”

Augustus shook his head. “No, sir. The boy needs medical attention. I’ll take him to a doctor. Then I’ll send for the sheriff. This young man won’t cause any harm.”

The hooded man on the horse answered by firing his shotgun from close range, blowing Augustus’ leg out from under him and into a mass of mangled flesh and bone. As the story proceeds, the masked riders thundered their horses right into the church, roped the injured young object of their quest, and dragged him off into the night. Some terrified church members stampeded for the door. Others broke open windows and spilled out of the building, running pell-mell, screaming, into the darkness.

This scene, this one scene, sets into clear focus much of what it means to be a man in this world. When we speak of “being a man,” we often use words like responsibility, respect, sacrifice, commitment, integrity, patience, humility, sensitivity, courage, etc. Each one of these words accurately describes the actions of Augustus Sharps. Yet, there are two other terms that also characterize his actions as well: “justice” and “mercy.” What Augustus did that night definitely demonstrates what it can mean to stand for what is right and fair, while simultaneously being compassionate. This tension, this balance between justice and mercy, might well encompass all other terms we could choose to describe what it is to be a man.

Indeed our Lord Jesus Christ, on many occasions, faced this same tension. The Scriptures tell us in the Gospel of Joh, that on one occasion Jesus’ religious contemporaries dragged a woman before Jesus who they claimed to have caught in the very act of adultery.

“And the scribes and the Pharisees brought a woman caught in adultery, and having set her in the midst, they said to Him, ‘Teacher, this woman has been caught in adultery, in the very act. Now in the Law Moses commanded us to stone such women; what then do You say?’ And they were

saying this, testing Him, in order that they might have grounds for accusing Him. But Jesus stooped down, and with His finger wrote on the ground. But when they persisted in asking Him, He straightened up, and said to them, 'He who is without sin among you, let him be the first to throw a stone at her.' And again He stooped down, and wrote on the ground. And when they heard it, they began to go out one by one, beginning with the older ones, and He was left alone, and the woman, where she was, in the midst. And straightening up, Jesus said to her, 'Woman, where are they? Did no one condemn you?' And she said, 'No one, Lord.' And Jesus said, 'Neither do I condemn you; go your way. From now on sin no more'" (John 8:3-11).

This brand of manhood modeled by the fictitious character named Augustus was not new. Long ago it was embodied in Jesus. As "Teacher" he knew the Law; He was well aware of what justice demanded in this situation (although the case itself was precipitated by ill will and selfish motives). As Jesus, He sympathizes with our weaknesses, and He has been tempted in every way, as we are tempted. As someone caught in the middle, between a self-seeking group of leaders and a sinful woman, He confronted justice and exercised mercy.

Does this mean that the preacher in our opening scene and the other brothers who reacted to this terrifying mob differently from Augustus, were not real men? Not necessarily. What this scene does say eloquently however, is that manhood is not a club from which we receive a lifetime membership once we reach some specific objective in life (e.g. get a job, take a wife, have a child, support a family, receive a promotion). Real "Jesus style" manhood is a calling to which we continue to respond wherever, and whenever. There will continue to be situations and circumstances which challenge us to be men. We are told in the Gospel of Luke, "And Jesus kept increasing in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and men" (Luke 2:52).

Being a man results from a life-long process of conscious choices "to be" just that. Somewhere I heard it said, and it is worth remembering, "I am a male by birth. I am a man by choice."

## Book Review: The Poisonwood Bible

by David Fleer  
July – August, 1998

Barbara Kingsolver brings an expertise to her work as novelist that makes for detailed and enlightening reading. In her own words, “Three cheers for fiction writers who bother to get their facts straight. If there’s a special place for them in heaven, it needn’t be very large.” Kingsolver was trained as a biologist before turning to the vocation of writing. Her most recent novel, *The Poisonwood Bible*, brims with observant and rich detail of the flora and fauna of its primary setting, the Congo of Africa.

Kingsolver’s tale is of the Nathan Price family, Freewill Baptist missionaries to the Congo. Narrated in the voices of the five Price women, wife and daughters, the story begins with the family’s arrival in 1959 in the remote village of Kilanga. The terrors of wild animals, killer ants, poisonous snakes, malaria-infected mosquitoes, hookworms, crocodiles, and national political turmoil present challenges to daily life. While the Congolese have adapted to their environment, the missionary family finds their circumstances oppressive, but not as mind numbing as the denigrating character of their father and husband, the Reverend Price. Determined to plant his brand of Christianity in the Congo, Price converts no one and destroys the life of one and the faith of all the members of his family. An overbearing father, he either pays his children no attention or insults their being. Sunday meals are especially painful, “once he gets wound up in the pulpit he seems unwilling to give up center stage,” and tortures his family with unanswerable questions. The children are punished by copying by hand lengthy sections of Scripture and physical abuse. Five-year-old Ruth may describes her father’s punishment of an older daughter, guilty of the sin of pride. “He smacked her hard ... She sat there holding the side of her neck ... when she put her hand down you could see the bruise just as plain. It looked like Father was holding his hand in front of the kerosene light and making a shadow on her. But he wasn’t, he was in the other room a-reading his Bible.”

The Reverend Price’s abuse of the Congolese is accomplished with similar hypocrisy and cutting irony. His emphasis on baptism is threatening to his listeners. Does he wish to feed the children to the crocodiles? His sermons are either irrelevant (they have nothing to do with rain), or incomprehensible. He shouts the benediction, “Tata Jesus is bangala,” which without the proper intonation, means not “Jesus is precious,” but “Jesus is the poisonwood tree.” After neglecting his young and crippled children during a plague of ants, the Reverend Price “preaches God’s love” into the ears of one Congolese who paddles him and the children to safety. After a rare insightful revelation, “feed the belly and the soul will come,” Price, in redneck Georgia style, throws sticks of dynamite into the village river, and in a backward version of Jesus miracle of the loaves and fishes, creates a “holiday of waste.”

What the reader early perceives in Nathan Price to be Christian Fundamentalism gone to seed, eventually shows itself to be unraveling insanity. The doctrines of Christianity are first depicted as inappropriate to the jungles of Africa but eventually become life threatening. In a debate with a syncretistic but culturally adapted former missionary to Kilanga, Price interrupts a comment on

the inclusivity of the church with the retort, “In Christ!” as if to say “Bingo” and win the game. Yet, when word reaches the village that nearby missionaries have been sexually threatened and murdered, the Reverend stupidly responds, “The meek shall inherit [the earth].”

For an author who elsewhere argues, “Audiences now expect a good deal of accuracy in regional dialogue, setting and the portrayal of character,” Kingsolver lets slip some inaccurate readings of Christian Fundamentalism. For example, Price preaches from the Apocryphal books (her plot demands the story of Bell and the Dragon). On another occasion, Price, an uncompromising immersionist, is last seen sprinkling the children of the village (perhaps a sign of his insanity). Kingsolver, nevertheless, creates a caricature of a destructive and oppressive religion. As Price’s wife and daughters tell their story from the Congo and beyond, their faith in God first wavers and soon crumbles under their father’s deconstructive presence. One daughter finally loses hope in both father and God when she realizes, “If his decision to keep us in the Congo wasn’t right, what else might be wrong?” In the end she proclaims, “I am the unmissionary ... beginning each day on my knees ... forgive me, Africa, according to the multitude of thy mercies.” So undone from her early faith, another daughter worried, “we came in[to Africa] stamped with such errors we can never know which ones make a lasting impression.”

This is not easy reading, especially at a time when so many in the fellowship of Churches of Christ are leaving. Many part for a different flavor of Evangelicalism, where piety or the worship experience or the exposure to self-help programs seem more authentic. But not all expatriates are heading to the right. Some are fed up for different reasons. They have abandoned the Church of Christ for private and solitary needs, like coffee and literature on the weekend. Some have turned to mainline denominations. The cynical voices of *The Poisonwood Bible* represent their feelings of abuse and abandonment.

I received my copy of *The Poisonwood Bible* as a Christmas gift from my sister-in-law, a former member, in good standing, of the Churches of Christ. Her spirituality is now fueled and consoled through Kingsolver’s honest fiction. In the gift’s card she wrote, “Hope you enjoy it for no other reason than to recognize some people we’ve known.” I recognized the people, all right, but “enjoy” isn’t an apt term for such a troubling tale.

There was a genre of literature, popular a generation back, that celebrated the distinctive qualities of Churches of Christ; “Why I Left Lutheranism” or Batsell Barrett Baxter’s “When Your Church Has Left You.” For the last decade or so, I’ve anticipated a new wave of material, with the reverse title, “Why I left the Church of Christ.” I imagined the authors to now be associated with dynamic, large and Evangelical community churches. *The Poisonwood Bible* is a darker and more troubling flip side to happy Evangelicalism. It chronicles the destructive forces of Christian Fundamentalism.

If read as morality play, the novel is chock full of useful lessons. For example, “One should not allow religion to be co-opted by politics.” The Congolese fail to distinguish Christianity from democracy and finally vote out Jesus! Or, “Do not emphasize the unimportant.” Nathan Price’s first focus was the apparel of the village’s women. or, “One should be a good listener.” The Reverend never heard the wisdom offered from nearly everyone around. But, a deeper and more disturbing lesson lies beyond the morality tale.

Kingsolver's expertise in this novel, alas, is not in the detail of the doctrines of the Fundamentalists, but in the faith-shattering pain of religion gone awry. If the reader of this journal should brave entering the world created by Kingsolver, he or she will certainly locate in the voices of the Price women friends and relatives now gone from our fellowship. More challenging and upsetting, however, will be the realization that in one's own past lie vestiges of Nathan Price's misguided and poisonous beliefs.

## **AfterGlow: A Beautiful Cross**

*by Phillip Morrison  
July – August, 1998*

Is the cross of Jesus Christ the ugliest or the most beautiful object in all history? The answer depends on one's perspective. Rough, nail-scarred, blood-stained wood, symbolizing every wrong, every injustice, every indignity one could imagine ... how could it be described as anything but ugly? But, on the other hand, because it symbolizes God's love for his people and represents the ultimate sacrifice freely given ... how could it be described as anything but beautiful? People who wear crucifixes don't seem able to resolve this question. Some wear rough, crude emblems of His suffering while others wear precious-metal, jewel-encrusted symbols of His sacrifice. All things considered, I'll argue for the beauty of the cross.

On a recent Sunday, just a day after my father had died, I was both grieving for my loss and rejoicing in his victory. When I spoke to a man who still bears the physical and psychological scars of his war injuries and asked him how his week had gone, he told me how sad he was because his dog had died the day before. My first reaction was resentment. My dad and your dog? Come on! Then I realized how truly lonely my friend was, and how surrounded by friends and family I was. Life is beautiful.

Mat Dawson could have retired to a life of ease more than a dozen years ago. At age seventy-eight, he still drives his '85 Ford Escort, lives in a one-bedroom apartment, and continues to drive a forklift at Ford Motor Company where he has worked for fifty-nine years. He even works overtime to boost his earnings. Why? So he can add to the more than a million dollars he has given to schools and charities since 1994. Not bad for a guy who left school in the seventh grade! Life is beautiful.

Sarah Andrews was just a teenager when she asked her family to support her missionary dreams rather than bankroll a wedding. She took the message of Jesus to Japan, and stayed there through the terrifying years of World War II. Imprisoned and tortured, she shared her daily bowl of rice with fellow-prisoners weaker and sicker than she. "I've gone without food," she said, "but I've never been hungry." Life is beautiful.

Corrie TenBoom and her sister fretted about the fleas which infested their German concentration camp barracks until they learned that the guards in other buildings were systematically raping and torturing the women. They learned to regard the fleas as God's blessing of protection. Life is beautiful.

Abraham and Moses had passed retirement age (at least by twentieth-century standards) when God called them to further service. Despite the hardships and disappointments encountered, they are remembered for their partnership with God. Life is beautiful.

Esther, having become queen, could have forgotten her oppressed people and lived her life of ease, but she had been elevated to a place of honor for a godly purpose, a purpose that had to be fulfilled regardless of personal risk. She was beautiful and so was her life.

A national magazine cover pictured a refugee mother fleeing Kosovo, clutching her suckling baby to her breast. On the mother's face was written pain, anguish, even terror. But if the blanket were pulled back to reveal the baby's face, it would show peace, contentment, security, hope. Even in the midst of terror, life is beautiful.

Even when life is not pretty it is beautiful.