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Unity in Christ

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In Pursuit of Unity

by Rubel Shelly

September – October, 1999

It is a difficult thing to acknowledge, pursue, and implement. The unity of the Body of Christ is not, after all, an achievement we fabricate and offer to God. It is created by a gift of divine grace and offered to all those who seek to follow Jesus in true faith and daily obedience to his will (cf. Ephesians 4:1ff).

The human obligation is to pursue unity without compromising what one believes to be the truth. Yet the human presumption seems to be that one's own understanding at the moment is the truth and that anyone who holds a contrary view is wrong and unworthy of fellowship. Thus the arrogance of sectarianism. Thus the isolation of believers from one another. Thus the harsh judgments so often made by one person or group against another.

A humbler approach permits one to function within his or her own beliefs, maintain dialogue with persons of good faith who have different understandings, and work together with those persons in areas of shared conviction. Churches of Christ haven't been known for this humbler approach in the past half century or so. We have isolated ourselves and become known as "the people who think they are the only ones going to heaven."

Alexander Campbell represented a consortium of Protestant denominations in defense of the Christian faith when he debated Robert Owen in April of 1829 and preached for the largest church in Cincinnati – the Methodist Church – on the Sunday following. David Lipscomb drove a buggy for Roman Catholic sisters to assist in treating the victims of a terrible cholera epidemic in Middle Tennessee back in 173 and preached for both instrumental and a capella churches in his own fellowship. When I was 14 years old, I preached for an annual Decoration Day event in West Tennessee that had been co-hosted for years by the local Pentecostal Church, Baptist Church, and Church of Christ.

Today it is often presumed that Churches of Christ will not join community worship events or evangelistic outreach, will not help fund Christian ministries whose boards are not drawn exclusively from their own ranks, and will not permit believers from other fellowships to benefit directly from those parachurch ministries they do control (e.g., adopt children through a Church of Christ-sponsored home or child-care agency). There are exceptions to the rule, but they are clearly exceptions rather than the rule. The churches or agencies that are exceptions are typically castigated and no longer supported by those who subscribe to the more general and accepted policy of exclusivism.

The notable exceptions to the general rule of religious particularity are things such as community referendums on liquor by the drink, parimutuel gambling, so-called "adult entertainment" and the like. This is a distinction our Baptist, Nazarene, Presbyterian, and other religious neighbors find hard to understand. We can oppose evil with them but cannot jointly do something that we all believe to be holy?

The shepherds of my home church have adopted a different policy. We look for, are open to, and help create opportunities for believers from different backgrounds to share in spiritual experiences that give glory to the Lord Jesus Christ and show his compassion to people in need.

Yes, we have participated in community campaigns against alcohol and drug abuse, gambling, pornography, and abortion on demand. But we are even more interested in positive experiences of affirmation and fellowship.

“I knew it!” someone chortles. “You fellowship people from the denominations!” Well, yes and no. I/we fellowship Pentecostals, Baptists, and Methodists in ways hardly dissimilar to my/our fellowship of men and women from the Church of Christ. In matters where we believe something true, beneficial, and Christ-honoring is happening, I/we participate and affirm the event. In matters where we think otherwise about the event or process, I/we don’t.

For about a decade, we have been open to participation in community events of worship with others who honor Jesus Christ. Around holidays like Easter and Christmas and in season such as Thanksgiving, we are pleased to celebrate foundational events of our faith and to honor God as the giver of all good gifts. Good things ranging from pot-lucks to new friendships, from new first-time visitors to baptisms that unite families in Christ have resulted. A methodist minister recently used our baptistry to immerse a teenager who requested immersion after completing his Confirmation classes.

My relationship with ministers and pastors from other churches has led to events ranging from teaching hermeneutics to the entire staff of a Pentecostal Church to co-hosting a Lyle Schaller seminar with a Christian Church to preaching for an African-American Baptist Church on the anniversary celebration of its pastor’s 19th year of service. We have also hosted more than a dozen of these ministers to preach, teach special classes, or otherwise participate in events at Woodmont Hills.

After the burning of several church structures in the South in 1995 and 1996, our church linked arms with well over fifty congregations across denominations and racial lines to help raise money to rebuild them. Good Samaritans traveling along highways where thugs have beaten someone up don’t ask the victim’s name, race, and religious preference before stopping to help. They rush over and give aid. And that is true of Good Samaritan churches as well as Good Samaritan individuals.

Many of these activities have grown out of the most important trans-denominational event in which I participate. When the pastor of an 8,000-member church in Nashville was hit with a high-profile scandal within his congregation that was disrupting his church’s life, he phoned seven or eight ministers he believed he could trust. He asked us to meet with him on a Thursday morning to pray for him as he attempted to minister to a family being threatened by sin and a church being distracted by intense media attention.

After a couple of hours in tears and prayer, the group was getting up from a conference table to leave. Then a pastor from a Baptist Church asked all of us to sit down. “I don’t know about the rest of you,” he said, “but I need this sort of environment on a regular basis. I need people I can

trust to give me counsel and to support me in prayer as I try to honor the Lord.” We have been meeting once a month for over five years now, and twice each year we go away for a two- or three-day retreat. We study Scripture. We confess weakness, frustration, and sin. We encourage one another. We seek the Lord.

On the first Sunday of the new millennium, our churches – inviting people from all over Middle Tennessee who wish to join us – are planning to assemble in the 16,000-seat Gaylord Entertainment Center (formerly called the Nashville Arena) in downtown Nashville to worship together. We will bear joint and unified witness not to any denomination but to Jesus Christ. Without abandoning our separateness as congregations or our distinctives of belief and practice, we will use January 2, 2000, to affirm that Jesus Christ is Lord and call the people of our city to seek him with their whole hearts. All the money collected in an offering at the afternoon event – as well as the total Sunday morning offering of most of the churches sponsoring it – will be delivered to distinctly Christian ministries serving the poor of Nashville. The overhead expenses for renting the arena and costs related thereto will have been paid in advance by the churches and corporate or individual donors.

Then, in June of 2000, Woodmont Hills will help host a Billy Graham Crusade – perhaps the final one Dr. Graham will preach personally – in Nashville. In response to his preaching, people will be called to “make a decision to follow Jesus Christ” and come to the stage arena in Nashville’s new NFL football stadium for counseling about the implications of their decision. Respondents will self-select counselors out of their religious background or preference. I will be there – along with ministers from other Churches of Christ in the city and region – to assist those who respond and designate the Church of Christ.

There will always be believers in Jesus Christ who have particular takes on doctrines ranging from the trinity to baptismal theology to church government to eschatology. When we get to heaven, perhaps the first few millennia will be used for instruction that will get all of us convinced and uniform in our understanding. Until then, God calls his people to pursue unity amidst our flawed ideas and sinful behaviors. Our history and heritage say we are interested in this pursuit. Our actions need to match our words.

Unity Despite Diversity

by Mike Cope

September – October, 1999

Most peace accords hammered out in volatile areas are short-lived. Too many times we've heard hopeful announcements of new peace treaties in Ireland, the Middle East, and the Balkans, finding out only months later that the treaties had been broken.

A document cannot change the heart! As long as you still see people the same way, peace efforts are precarious.

I think the Apostle Paul knew that. He wrote the book of Romans, at least in part, to help a diverse church learn how to be one. He challenged them to accept one another as Christ had accepted them (15:7). He prayed for the day when their spirit of unity would allow them "with one heart and mouth [to] glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ" (15:6).

But after he finishes his careful appeal for unity, Paul launches in chapter 16 into extended greetings. It sounds like he's sitting in Corinth flipping through the pictorial directory of the Rome Church of Christ! "Greet Mary, Greet Urbanus, Greet Apelles," etc.

Could it be that this last chapter is a bit of Paul's brilliant strategy to unify the church? He wants greetings to pass between the house churches. And as those greetings are passed, new relationships can form and old relationships can deepen. Not only that, but his greetings then become a model of how they were to view one another. Paul knew that if he could get them to see one another differently, in light of the redeeming work of God in Christ, then there was a real chance for unity.

So Paul uses the language of diversity. Most of the people he greets have gentile names. But a few are Jews, or "relatives" as he calls them.

We tend to think of racial diversity through the experience of American history. But to Paul's audience, this diversity wasn't so much racial as it was cultural. Some grew up as keepers of the Law, while others didn't.

There is also gender diversity. Paul names seventeen men and nine women. He commends Phoebe, who is a deaconess of the church in Cenchrea. He also sends greetings to Priscilla, a "fellow worker in Christ Jesus," and to Junia, who, along with Andronicus, was "outstanding among the apostles."

Paul also uses the language of unity. The bond holding people together is the sacrifice of Christ. So five times he refers to their relationship "in the Lord" and four times to their position "in Christ." Phoebe is a sister in the Lord (v.1), while the men are his brothers (v. 14).

His deep concern for these friends is poignantly expressed when he sends greetings to the mother of Rufus, who, he says, has been a mother to him as well (v. 13). The promise from Christ that we would find, among his followers, many brothers, sisters, parents, and children had come true!

It makes me think of an older woman at the church we attended in the early '80s in Memphis. When Diane and I went to visit her in her nursing home, she asked if we'd like to see her family. That seemed curious, since we'd heard that she had no known living relative. But she smiled as she pulled out her Wooddale Church directory. She leafed through the pages, showing us her notes in the margin where she had recorded the dates and specifics of her prayers for her precious family.

It makes me think of Dickie and Becky Porche, who became like parents to our boys. When our daughter was still alive, several times we had to make middle-of-the-night emergency runs to the hospital, and we'd drop the boys off with them.

And I think of Charles Mattis, who's like a spiritual uncle to my older son, coming over every year before the first day of classes to challenge him and pray for him.

And I think of Bob Strader, a former football coach, who has written my seventeen year-old notes that sound like this: "Matt, I saw your game last night. You're a great middle linebacker. I love watching you play. But I especially enjoy seeing the way Christ is being formed in your heart."

These are some of the people in my Romans 16. There are many others!

Finally, you'll notice that Paul uses the language of affirmation. He tells the church how Phoebe has been a great help to many; how Priscilla and Aquilla risked their lives for him; how Epenetus had been the first convert in Asia; how Mary had worked very hard for the Christians in Rome; how Andronicus and Junia were outstanding among the apostles; how Ampliatus was loved in the Lord; how Urbanus was a fellow worker in Christ; how Stachys was his dear friend; how Apelles was tested and approved in Christ; and how Tryphena and Tryphosa worked hard in the Lord.

What a powerful way to end Romans! This plea for unity builds to this new way of seeing others. There can be true peace, lasting peace, because in Christ we have been made new.

Here's my challenge: to sit down, get a pen and a couple sheets of paper. Get in a quiet corner with your Bible open to Romans 16. Read the first sixteen verses a couple of times. Ask God to open your heart. And then write your own Romans 16. Write about all the people in your church. Include your friends and some you don't know well. Include the young and the old. Throw in a few you'd rather not be around. Then back away and be amazed!

The Unity Principle

by Doug Foster

September – October, 1999

The union of Christians is the will of God, the prayer of Jesus, and the means of bringing the world to believe in Jesus, therefore it must be right. That man is then engaged in a righteous work, who labors to promote this union, by removing every obstacle to it; ... But the man who acts a contrary part must be wrong, and engaged in a work in opposition to the will of God, the prayer of Jesus, and the salvation of the world. (Barton W. Stone, 1872)

Christianity is filled with paradoxes – things that just don't fit together. For example, a divine being is not human; a human being is not divine. Divinity and humanity are absolutely different, they are not compatible, one is the negation of the other. Yet at the very heart of Christianity is the belief that Jesus Christ is both human and divine (Philippians 2:6-7; 2 John 7). Here's another. God is sovereign over all things; he is ultimately in charge. Humans do not manipulate God. Yet humans have free will. If we want to, we can choose to defy God and his plans and even quench his Holy Spirit (Acts 17:24-26; Ephesians 4:30). And here's one more. Justice means people getting what they deserve, and God is a God of justice. Mercy is letting people off the hook – it doesn't go with justice. Yet God is both absolutely just and absolutely merciful (Acts 17:31; Titus 3:5)! Christianity is filled with paradoxes.

There is another profound paradox in Christianity. This one, I'm afraid, has been especially troublesome because we have failed to realize it is a paradox. It concerns the nature of Christian unity. First, the scriptures are clear that while Christ's body is diverse, there is only one body and all who are in Christ are members of that body (Romans 12:5; Ephesians 4:4). David Lipscomb said it plainly when he asserted, "It requires no negotiation or arrangements among men to unite them as one in Christ. If we are in Christ, we cannot help being one with all who are in Christ" (David Lipscomb in J.W. Shepherd, ed., *Salvation from Sin* by David Lipscomb (Nashville: Gospel Advocate Company, 1950), 299]. God himself creates that unity in Christ by adding all the saved to his church. We really have nothing to do with it – Christian unity is a gift from God.

Yet, there is another reality that seems to contradict the first. If the church is by its very nature one, why has it seldom looked that way? Since its very beginning Christ's church has suffered division – visible disruption of the unity supposedly created by God. Jesus himself knew this would happen. One of the things weighing most heavily on his mind as he faced death was the unity of his followers. He obviously anticipated trouble (John 17). He knew that the disciples then and those who believed later could and would break the visible unity of his church. Paul urged the Ephesians to "maintain" the unity they had been given through the Spirit (Ephesians 4:3). There was something they had to **do**. And face it, much of the New Testament was written in response to situations that either had the potential to cause division or already had.

So here it is: Christian unity is a gift from God that truly exists whether we acknowledge it or not, AND it is a responsibility, a calling, that every Christian either helps maintain or disrupt. What a paradox!

The founding leaders of the Stone-Campbell Movement had a deep sense of both the God-given unity of the church and their duty to recognize, proclaim, and keep it. Barton W. Stone and his colleagues in effect killed their new and highly successful Presbyterian denomination for the sake of unity when they issued the *Last Will and Testament of the Springfield Presbytery* in 1804.

We will that this body die, be dissolved, and sink into union with the Body of Christ at large; for there is but one Body, and one Spirit, even as we are called in one hope of our calling.

And Thomas Campbell, in his explanation of the purpose of the Christian Association, wrote in 1809:

The Church of Christ upon earth is essentially, intentionally, and constitutionally one; consisting of all those in every place that profess their faith in Christ and obedience to Him in all things according to the Scriptures, and that manifest the same by their tempers and conduct, and of none else; as none else can be truly and properly called Christians.

The leaders of this movement realized that Christ's church is one in its very essence. And they also understood that it was their responsibility to recognize and maintain that unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace in a visible way.

But paradoxes are strange things. Since they hold things together that reason says can't go together, humans generally emphasize one part over the other. When we fail to hold tight to both of the apparently incompatible truths, however, we fall into dangerous, even divisive, misunderstandings. If on the one hand we focus only on the fact that unity is already a reality, the obvious assumption is that there is nothing we can or should do to work for it. We easily slip into the notion that the people with whom we are visibly united are the only true Christians. We experience unity as a visible reality because we presume those not part of "us" are not Christians anyway. What seem to be divisions in the church are not divisions at all, but the exodus of heretics. The true church is still visibly one.

In 1806, editor and preacher Moses Lard gave the classic expression of this idea in an article titled "*Can We Divide?*"

*If one church becomes heretical, or fifty churches become heretical, they are to be repudiated. But this is no division of the body of Christ, but the creation of a faction. This faction is condemned in the New Testament, and is no part of the church. It is not a division in our ranks, but an apostasy from them. The case, therefore, presents no difficulties [Moses E. Lard, "*Can We Divide?*" Lard's Quarterly 3 (April 1866):333].*

If on the other hand we emphasize the idea that it is up to us to create the essential unity that God alone has already created, human ability becomes our focus. We fall into the assumption that by human effort we can take care of this and all other problems. Historically this has meant inventing organizations into which we can coax (or coerce) all Christians and Christian groups, but that ironically end up being the basis of new divisions. The naive notion that the solution to division among Christians is to design some new institution to deal with the problem has proven

to be just that – naive. God frustrates human arrogance that assumes we have the ability to do what God alone can do. The only way to avoid these destructive tendencies is to hold tenaciously to both parts of the paradox, and that is just not very easy.

In any discussion of unity we must deal sooner or later with the matter of just who are the Christians with whom we are supposed to be united. The Scriptures are clear that not all who claim to be followers of Christ really are. We have specific descriptions of beliefs and practices that will cut one off from the communion of the church. But the list of things that separate one from the body is pretty short if we stick to Scripture:

1. refusal to repent of personal sin against a brother or sister (Matthew 18:17);
- gross unrepentant immorality and greed (1 Corinthians 5:5, 11-13);
 - a lifestyle of selfishness (2 Timothy 3:2-5);
 - refusal to work (2 Thessalonians 3:6, 14);
 - denial that Christ came in the flesh (2 John 10); and
 - causing division (Titus 3:10).

Please notice that all but one are matters of personal morality – attitudes and the actions that result. There are and will be false prophets (Matthew 7:15-20). But Jesus says we will know them by their fruits, fruits that certainly include the items listed above and are reflected in the works of the flesh in Galatians 5:19-21.

It appears that the key to making unity visible has first to do with the mind. Divisiveness is essentially an attitude. So is unity. Issues don't cause division. Division is caused by people with a divisive attitude. Such people will always find an issue to promote their agenda. The foundation for unity is not that people have come to identical conclusions on all issues. The foundation for unity is being in Christ.

But how do we make an attitude of unity visible? How do we act in ways that do not compromise deeply-held convictions yet promote the visible unity that surely Christ had in mind in his dying prayer? I know of no easy answer in the current state of Christianity, but here are a couple of suggestions and an example. Regardless of how you define boundaries, you know some believers in Christ who are outside our "communion." They may be to your right and have a hard time recognizing you, or to your left whom you have a hard time accepting. Reach out in small gestures of kindness – an invitation to coffee or lunch, a card when they are sick or when they have done something noteworthy. Talk about your faith. Go slow. Start small. Act unthreateningly. Keep it up. Establish genuine friendship. Not so you can manipulate them, but because you honestly care for them and are truly concerned about Christian unity.

Many long-standing divisions among those who profess belief in Christ are kept in place largely by ignorance of one another's beliefs and practices. Arrange times for leaders and members from different groups to be together to explain ourselves to each other, frankly, openly, trustingly. Explore what you have in common as well as what apparently divides you. Pray together. Do whatever you can together that does not violate convictions – community service, disaster relief, counseling, worship. Seek the guidance of the Spirit of Christ, act and see what he will work in such efforts.

In February, 1999, in Pampa, Texas, a small panhandle city 40 miles northeast of Amarillo, three long-estranged bodies came together to worship and explore pieces of their common heritage. The leaders of the largest congregation of the Churches of Christ, the independent Christian Church, and the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) planned a joint meeting of their congregations for a Saturday evening meal and worship service. One congregation supplied the brisket, another the vegetables and bread, another the dessert. Over 400 people from the three churches assembled in the Disciples' building to eat, sing, and consider their past. Three points were made in the lesson that night:

1. We share a common heritage of unity and division,
 - We need to know our history to understand ourselves today (1 Corinthians 10:1-12), and
 - We need each other.

No convictions were surrendered by those who participated in that service. The leaders of the three congregations were not sure what would happen next. But they did know that unit is pleasing to God and that causing division or allowing it to continue is not.

It is not always easy to understand our part of the unity paradox. But we don't need to have everything figured out to know one thing for sure – Christ wants the unity of his followers. Divisive attitudes and actions are contrary to the will of Christ. Actions and attitudes that promote unity are pleasing to Christ. Furthermore, we don't have to do everything to do something. May God help us to be clear on our convictions, to grasp the reality of our unity in Christ, and with his guidance to **do something**.

Recommended reading:

Barry Callen and James North. *Coming Together in Christ: Pioneering a New Testament Way to Christian Unity*. Joplin, MO: College Press Publishing Company, 1997.

See a wide array of Stone-Campbell Movement documents, including the ones quoted in this article, on the Internet at <http://www.mun.ca/rels/restmov/restmov.html>

The Grand Canyon

by Timothy Alexander

September – October, 1999

I have an image of myself, thirty years from now, pudgy and gray, railing about the imperfections of the church. Nobody is listening. My wife is loyal, but listless, her head drooping at yet another tirade from her husband-who-never-grew-up. My children are nowhere to be seen. They shield their children from the embarrassment that Dad has become.

The Eagles had a song long ago called *Desperado*. The last lines speak to my sense of disconnection to my own fellowship.

*Desperado, why don't you come to your senses?
Come down from your fences, open the gate.
It may be rainin', but there's a rainbow above you.
You better let somebody love you before it's too late.*

My nightmare is waking up to an eternity of remembering all those opportunities I let slip through my fingers like a greased string, all those opportunities to have let somebody love me “before it’s too late.”

Yet there remains a single gnarled blackened stump that no fear of being unloved has been able to haul out of the field of my perceptions. It has been a constant presence, deeply embedded in my conscience. Over the years, this unyielding conviction has expressed itself in unpleasant, at times even sinful ways. If only I could take back some of the harsh tones and angry words ... but I can't. God knows I'm sorry and I know I've repented. But feelings linger. Memories can be stubborn, as well as soothing.

This immovable object is what I call the “Grand Canyon.” It is a divide so deep and wide that no bridge can be built across it, no tunnel can be dug through it. It is the distance between grace and law and it expresses itself to me in one simple question: “Are there Christians outside of my fellowship?”

For over a decade I have answered “yes” to that question. At first I answered “yes” because I was (and remain) bowled over by my own ignorance. If I accepted that others who called Jesus their Lord with sincerity could be lost in sin, then I had to accept that I could call Jesus my Lord and be lost in sin. I had to entertain the possibility I could be wrong, even if in my heart I thought myself to be right. Further study helped me to see a larger picture of God's purposes in history and frame my own experience, knowledge and convictions within that larger picture. That God's purposes are larger, and his family more expansive, than the limitations of my own relatively small fellowship is no longer an issue for me. They are and it is.

But the Grand Canyon looms large. That simple question reveals either grace or law. All other topics are peripheral, all other questions subordinate to that question. The answer to that question exposes salvation received or salvation earned.

My fellowship, at times, can resemble the Radio Shack of American Evangelicals. We have demonstrated a willingness to re-invent a number of wheels, the most recent turn being the various “men’s gatherings.” Many could not bring themselves to go to a Promise Keeper’s event because of its broad, multi-denominational character. But if “our” people do it, then it becomes acceptable. Much the same could be said for any number of service projects, relief agencies, social services, even educational institutions. I am thankful to have been blessed by many of these efforts and I hope they continue to do much good for many people. But my point is that at least some of the reason for their existence is found in our answer to the simple question: “Are there Christians outside my fellowship?” Answering “no” gives rise to the need to come up with a host of ministries because a “no” means not connecting with any ministry outside our fellowship.

There is a temptation to attempt to paper over the Grand Canyon. It is an old temptation, at least as old as Galatians 2. Peter thought he could finesse the distinction between grace and law. Paul called his bluff in 2:14, “How is it, then, that you force Gentiles to follow Jewish customs?” It is interesting Paul doesn’t criticize Peter for following customs. In order to promote peace Paul submits to a Jewish custom and has his head shaved (Acts 21). Paul is not against Jewish customs.

But Paul understands the real-life implications of forcing Gentiles to follow Jewish customs: Fellowship. Who is “in” and who is “out.” Not being willing to eat with somebody, even today, sends a strong message about what you think of that person.

The message sent into the world of the New Testament was even more stark. Offering, or denying, table fellowship sent a message of acceptance or rejection of the entire person. Paul said such behavior was “not acting in line with the truth of the gospel.”

The temptation remains today. Some well-intended, but misguided, people believe the Grand Canyon can be smoothed over. It is thought to be a mark of maturity, even leadership, to try to be credible to both sides of the Grand Canyon. Common sense tries to achieve consensus, strives for the middle ground. But the reality is, there is no middle ground. Either I accept there are Christians outside my fellowship or I don’t. No wiggle room, no fudging, no shiny shoes tap-dancing under a Hollywood smile. If I truly believe there are not Christians outside of my fellowship then I am bound to view the world through those lenses. Integrity means I will be concerned for the salvation of not only those who have never heard of Jesus, but for those who call upon Jesus differently than I call upon him.

On the other hand, if I accept there are Christians outside of my fellowship then integrity demands I treat them as brethren. Paul called Peter’s behavior “hypocrisy.” Peter thought he could have it both ways. As long as the men from James stayed away Peter sat at table with the Gentiles. But when the Jerusalem patrol appeared, Peter had a “coming to James” experience and withdrew from the Gentiles. Suppose Paul had never confronted Peter. Suppose the men from

James came, stayed a while, and then went back home. Would the Gentiles have welcomed Peter back at the table? I kinda doubt it.

Would you?

Mike Cope popularized a quote from T.S. Eliot's *Murder in the Cathedral*: "The last temptation is the greatest treason: to do the right deed for the wrong reason." The quote so captivated me I bought and read, and re-read, the play. The quote comes at the end of a sequence of temptations to Thomas Becket. Becket finds himself under immense pressure to yield his "means" in the service of the king's "ends." But Becket knew what any high school debater on ethics would end up telling you, that is – the ends do not justify the means.

The climax of the play comes when four knights in the service of the king kill Becket. The priests bar the door, hoping to prevent the killers from entering. Becket thunders to the priests:

*Unbar the doors! Throw open the doors!
I will not have the house of prayer, the church of Christ,
The sanctuary, turned into a fortress.
The Church shall protect her own, in her own way, not
As oak and stone; oak and stone decay,
Give no stay, but the Church shall endure.
The church shall be open, even to our enemies.
Open the door!*

I like the words Eliot places in Becket's mouth because they express an unfettered hope in the ability of God to sustain his church. A few lines later Becket says, "We are not here to triumph by fighting, by stratagem, or by resistance, not to fight with beasts as men." Those are sentiments that hold to the conviction God is stronger than our strengths and that only when we are weak, then we are strong.

Paving over the Grand Canyon turns the sanctuary into a fortress, trusting more in oak and stone than in the sustaining power of God. "Are there Christians outside of my fellowship?" is the acid test of whether we believe in a living God of and over history. If we answer "yes" then we proclaim trust in God's power to sustain the church in spite of our shortcomings and misunderstandings. We acknowledge the power of God to create a people for himself in all ages and circumstances. If we answer "no" then we proclaim trust in our ability to know it all and get it right. We acknowledge that it is only through our skill at finessing the details a church is maintained.

I do not want to end up like *Desperado*. I love my fellowship. I love ministry. I love preaching the gospel of Jesus, the message of the cross. I want to leave a legacy to my family of a man who followed God with joy, and not with anger.

But what do I do about the Grand Canyon?

What do you do about it?

Raising Children in a Violent World

by Kenneth Dye

September – October, 1999

It happened all over again today, and as CNN provided the early information, the details were chilling and sounded as if it were a replay from an earlier recording. “A man with a high-powered gun remained at large several hours after he stormed into the North Valley Jewish Community Center in Los Angeles. He sprayed the lobby with 20-30 rounds, wounding three young children, a teenager and an adult.”

Just a few short years ago teachers and administrators in America’s public schools listed their top discipline problems to be talking, chewing gum, making noise, running in the halls, getting out of turn in line, and not putting paper in the wastebasket. Today, the discipline problems being grappled with by those trying to educate grandchildren of the aforementioned gum chewers and litterers prove to be markedly different. Rape, robbery, assault, burglary, arson, bombings, alcohol abuse, gang warfare, pregnancy, abortion, and venereal disease top the list of concerns expressed by those charged with the teaching of America’s children. In the new millennium, educators face another, almost unimaginable problem – school violence.

Even a cursory reading of the newspaper over the last three or four years is sufficient to expose the magnitude of this growing problem. Some of the more highly publicized incidents include:

February 2, 1996 – Barry Loukaitis, age 14, of Moses Lake, Washington – killed one teacher and two students, wounded a third student.

October 1, 1997 – Luke Woodham, age 16, of Pearl, Mississippi – first killed his mother, then went into his high school and opened fire, killing three and wounding seven.

December 1, 1997 – Michael Carneal, age 14, of West Paducah, Kentucky – shot three students to death, wounded five others before being grabbed by a fellow student while trying to reload.

March 24, 1998 – Mitchell Johnson, age 13, and Andrew Golden, age 11 of Jonesboro, Arkansas – set off a fire alarm in order to draw schoolmates outside and then started shooting, killing four students and a teacher.

May 21, 1988 – Kip Kinkel, age 15, of Springfield, Oregon, killed both his parents, then shot 24 students at school. Two died, and, as he was wrestled to the ground, Kinkel yelled, “Shoot me!”

April 20, 1999 – Dylan Kliebold, age 17, and Eric Harris, age 18, of Littleton, Colorado killed 1 teacher and 12 students wounding 23 other students. They both committed suicide.

Who could have imagined that in just a few short years Americans would move from being concerned over students running in the halls and talking in the classroom to being concerned

about the issue of basic safety on school campuses? Has the world become so violent that even childhood no longer provides a safe haven for our offspring?

The answer is a simple yes. The solution to the problem however, is anything but simple. Following the Littleton tragedy, experts of every variety came forward, offering both opinions and prognostications, but few provided any real insights into how to curtail this juvenile reign of terror.

“Things like this are unpredictable,” they said. “Sooner or later human nature under pressure will explode, and no one is able to predict when or where.”

Peggy Noonan, in a *Wall Street Journal* article about the Littleton tragedy, said, “The kids who did this are responsible. They did it. They Killed. But they came from a place and time and were yielded forth by a culture. What walked into Columbine High School Tuesday was the culture of death. This time it wore black trench coats. Last time it was children’s hunting gear. Next time it will be some other costume, but it still will be the culture of death. This is the Pope’s phrase: it is how he describes the world in which we live.”

Noonan then begins to describe modern American culture in these terms: “The boys who did the killing, the famous Trench Coat Mafia, inhaled too deep the ocean in which they swam ... Think of it this way. Your child is an intelligent little fish. He swims in deep water. Waves of sound and sight, of thought and fact, come invisible through that water, like radar; they go through him again and again, from this direction and that. The sound from the television is a wave and the sound from the radio; the headlines on the newsstand, on the magazines, on the ad on the bus as it whizzes by – all are waves. The fish – your child – is bombarded and barely knows it. But the waves contain words like this, which I’ll limit to only one source, the news:

“...was found strangled and is believed to have been sexually molested ... took the stand to say the killer was smiling the day the show aired ... said the procedure is, in fact, legal infanticide ... is thought to be connected to earlier sexual activity among teens ... contains songs that call for dominating and even imprisoning women ... died of lethal injection ... had threatened to kill her children ... had asked Kevorkian for help in killing himself ... protested the game, which they said has gone beyond violence to sadism ... showed no remorse ... which is about a wager over whether he could sleep with another student ... which is about her attempts to balance three lovers and a watchful fiance ...”

“This is the ocean in which our children swim. This is the sound of our culture. It comes from all parts of our culture and reaches all parts of our culture, and all the people in it, which is everybody.

“It is corny to lay it out like this because we all know this. What I’m writing is not news. It is part of the reason that Hollywood people, when discussing these matters, no longer say, ‘If you don’t like it, change the channel.’ They now realize something they didn’t realize 10 years ago. There is no channel to change to. You could sooner remove an ocean than find such a channel.”

What then are we to do? Where, or to whom, are we to go?

My six-year-old granddaughter, Laurel, walked into my den the other afternoon when CNN was live with its coverage of the most recent killings in Atlanta. Mark Barton had killed his wife and two young children with a hammer. Then he gunned down nine people in two brokerage firms in downtown Atlanta.

Suddenly becoming very aware of the ocean in which my son's eldest fish was swimming, I reached to sweep from her sight my most recent issue of *USA TODAY* whose headlines screamed out for all to see, "Killer's First Victim Buried," "Atlanta Funerals Continue Today With Children," "Woodstock '99 Crimes Online," and "First Lady on Husband's Affair: 'Sin of Weakness.'" I reflected on the problem of fish swimming in such an ocean, of being bombarded from every direction, and quietly turned off the television, folded up the newspaper, and asked Laurel if she would like to play a game.

Once the fishes started to look remarkably like my precious grandchildren, I began an exhaustive investigation into the problem of cleaning up the ocean. Though many authors have contributed to the pool of information from which the rest of this article is drawn, by far the author who impressed me most is Gavin de Becker. First with his book *The Gift of Fear* and then with his most recent publication, *Protecting the Gift*, de Becker impacted me with a number of principles which I think should be examined and embraced by all who are concerned with trying to raise healthy children in a violent world.

Americans have to understand that we live in a very violent country. When newscasters reported that 19 children died in the Oklahoma City explosion many were distressed; however, in that week alone 70 children (most of them under five) died at the hands of an abusive parent. The tragedy is that this is a weekly occurrence.

According to de Becker, before we can deal with this whole dilemma of violence, we must begin to acknowledge it, to understand it, and to accept it. Denial is the ultimate mistake, and only when we take off our rose-colored glasses will we be able to see what is happening and, to some extent, to see what is about to occur. de Becker stresses the fact that we are not such private beings that our behavior is unobservable or our patterns undetectable. We can determine what will happen and who will do what by becoming more aware and by making better use of our intuition.

Intuition, according to de Becker, is our first defense mechanism in trying to smell out violence. It knows without knowing why. It knows even when there is no evidence. When our intuition says that there is something out there, curiosity is the way we answer.

Once one's curiosity is piqued by his intuition, the next step in becoming aware is knowing the pre-indicators of teen violence. One of the stronger statements in de Becker's book comes with the recounting of Robert Ressler's research on serial killers. According to this 1993 study, 100% of those studied had been abused as children, either with violence, neglect, or humiliation. Pre-indicators of teen violence are:

- *Addiction to media products*

- Addiction to alcohol and drugs
- Fascination with violence and guns
- Feeling ignored
- Chronic anger in childhood

Even though the content of what one is exposed to via the media matters greatly, an even more important factor is the amount of time one spends at its feet. Listening and watching too much prevents human interaction. The bigger issue arises, de Becker says, when media consumption replaces the rest of life. A friend of mine with grown children, when asked about the effect of the media on her family, replied, “My first two children were quite normal: they played outside and related to others well. My third son was fixated on television and never learned to relate to others. He wound up in prison.”

Finally, de Becker contends that RECOGNITION is more meaningful to young people than accomplishment, and RECOGNITION is available through VIOLENCE. Unhealthy families damage children in many ways, but one of the saddest is the destruction of the child’s belief that he has purpose and value. The Governor of Colorado, in response to the Littleton tragedy, said, “So many people knew that this was wrong, that this was going on; but nobody said anything. We were afraid that it would hurt the self-esteem of these kids if we said it was wrong.” Self-esteem, while obviously important to people of all ages, cannot fill the need young people have to be recognized.

Mark Barton, who recently took so many lives in Atlanta, left a written confession in which he wrote these gripping words, “I have been dying since October. I wake up at night so afraid, so terrified that I couldn’t be that afraid while awake. It has taken its toll. I have come to hate this life and this system of things. I have come to have no hope.”

Jesus placed the call before each of us to become “salt” and “light,” and so we must. However, now the stakes are much higher. They are life and death, the life and death of our children and grandchildren. Equipped with the awareness of what is going on, empowered with intuition, and filled with a faith with which we can make a difference, it is now our time to stand and become the purveyors of hope. Of course the challenge will not be easy and we are already swimming in that deep ocean, but we must begin now to teach our children not to inhale too deeply the ocean in which they swim.

Onward Christian Sheriff

by Ted Parks

September – October, 1999

“In the Book of God, we fail to find a single expression or example indicating that the child of God may engage in, carry on, upbuild or uphold a kingdom of earth” (David Lipscomb, minister of the gospel, in his 1913 book *Civil Government*).

To say that an “honest person could not be sheriff” is “limiting the power of the gospel,” said John Cupp, also a minister of the gospel, speaking in his office in Chattanooga, Tennessee last winter.

A lot more than 85 years stands between the publication of David Lipscomb’s book on government and John Cupp’s recent reflections on public service as his county’s chief law enforcement officer. Like his ancestor in the faith, John is a dedicated preacher. On the other hand, he finds himself a member of a church that, with the rest of America, has weathered two world wars, the sex-and-drug culture of the ’60s, and the sleaziness and advantage-seeking of American politics of the late ’90s. Unlike his turn-of-the-century counterpart, Cupp has chosen specifically to “engage in” and “uphold” civil government by bringing his Christian faith to the public arena.

The path to public service of John was ministry itself. He became involved in law enforcement when counseling families being pulled apart by drugs in the ’60s. In response to the counseling problems, John began piecing together what he could about drugs and drug addiction. As he grew more knowledgeable, people in public places turned to him for expert advice. After serving as Narcotics Instructor in the Chattanooga Police Department from 1973-78, Cupp was invited by then-Sheriff H.Q. Evatt to initiate the Narcotics Information Division of the Hamilton County Sheriff’s Department. During 14 years of work in drug education, John spoke to more than 450,000 people in schools, churches, synagogues, and businesses scattered throughout 27 states. His reputation reached all the way to Washington, where the White House chose him in 1987 as a consultant for the Drug-Free School Program.

To run for sheriff in 1994, John had to confront a political machine in place for 30 years. A high point of his first term of office was cracking the Signal Murder Case, a gruesome triple homicide that had baffled the sheriff’s department since the late ’80s. The people of Hamilton County in 1998 voted almost two-to-one to elect Cupp to a second term that will keep him in office until 2002.

The spiritual journey that would lead John Cupp to political office began with a strict Roman Catholic upbringing. During his high school years, John grew frustrated when his questions met with the unsatisfying promise that all would come clear with a little patience. He turned up the intensity of his religious search. John describes meeting the daughter of Flavil Orange, a preacher in Youngstown, Ohio, his hometown: “I went to church with her, terrified” of God’s

retribution for stepping outside his tradition. “The Oranges took me in as a son in the faith,” John remembers, adding that he was baptized into Christ on March 5, 1950 in Youngstown.

John attempted to preach his first sermon that year, then got the chance to attend Florida Christian College when the school offered him a \$150 scholarship. He left Florida Christian in 1952 to begin what would become a lifetime of preaching. From central Florida, John went to Miami, then, a year later, to Marathon in the Florida Keys. In March of 1955, John moved to Tennessee, where his ministry would become the matrix of his public service. Except for a three-year stint in Rochester, New York, John has ministered in the Chattanooga area since 1955.

John approaches the historically controversial relationship between the Kingdom of God and politics by emphasizing each individual’s right and obligation to live by Christian principles. “You *can* have high moral standards,” John insisted, illustrating with his own experience with the unhappy mix of alcohol and police get-togethers. Heavy drinkers at police functions noticed, he explained, when he stuck to his scruples about drinking. When a fellow officer would own up to an alcohol problem, he would remember John and turn to him for advice and help. “People respect your standards,” John says. “You don’t have to preach a sermon; you can walk a sermon; you can live a sermon.”

While John sees serving as a Christian sheriff as primarily an expression of his personal choice to follow Christian moral principles, the job brings him into contact with broader social issues, such as the way prisoners are treated. As sheriff, John is also jail keeper. He has stressed to corrections officers that, however repulsive inmates’ crimes, prisoners “are human beings, and they will be treated as human beings.” In a jail once plagued with inmate fighting, John is determined to reduce the inhumanity of the place. “The Golden Rule works wonderfully in police work,” he says.

John has also tried to use Golden Rule fairness in hiring, but not everyone thinks he has succeeded. A Sheriff’s Department officer accused John of reassigning him from DUI to regular patrol on political grounds. The Civil Service Board, however, ruled in John’s favor last December. John’s fairness came through in the press as the Chattanooga paper quoted him: “If I made a mistake, I want them to tell me, and if I’m correct I expect to be told.” John is committed to replacing “good ol’boy favoritism with hiring and promotion practices based on qualifications. He says that “running this office in a proper way,” with respect for the public, is his greatest Christian challenge as sheriff of Hamilton County.

Sheriff John Cupp is a model of how Christians can walk in the light of God’s kingdom and at the same time shine that light into the murk of modern life. But his active public participation in law enforcement runs counter to the pacifist strain often found in Restoration Movement thought. To ground his work in the teachings of the Bible, John cites cases from the New Testament where Christians seemed to legitimize the political system. He refers to Paul’s dependence on Roman jurisprudence in his appeal to Caesar, and Cornelius, a military officer portrayed as an exemplary convert to the faith. While the New Testament prioritizes allegiance to God over civil obedience when the two conflict, it is not accurate to say that “Because it’s government it’s bad,” John argues.

John Cupp would like to see more Christians confront the issues that surround them. Christians should be involved in public affairs “a whole lot more than they are now,” he insists. John understands that many Christians disagree with him, just as they did when he served as PTA president in the '60s. But he believes the time has come for Christians to make their influence felt, even if their service to Christ takes them to the halls of government.

Cupp is not the only Christian serving in law enforcement. The Fellowship of Christian Police Officers, for example, dedicates itself to strengthening the faith of peace officers from various traditions. He's not alone, even in Chattanooga, where Chief of Police James Dotson describes John as a mentor. Dotson, a former Baptist who is now active in a community church, praises Cupp as an “asset to the law enforcement profession.”

As historian Richard Hughes has pointed out, the response of Restoration Christians to civic duty became especially troubling at the start of the century when America faced the first of the international conflicts that would scar the next hundred years. Now, at the end of a century and the brink of a new millennium, believers still wrestle with their dual membership in heavenly and earthly realms, with Jesus' radical call for forgiveness and the prophetic roar for justice. As Christian Sheriff John Cupp moves forward in his quiet but faithful walk, he challenges other believers, wherever God has put them in the political and social structure, to serve both God and man with faith and integrity.

A Lot of Stuff I Know About Jesus I Learned from My Dog

*by Mary Emily Kreidel
September – October, 1999*

Good things come to those who wait for them, and Lord knows how long I'd waited for this good day. My parents had finally decided to let me have a dog! I started looking for the perfect animal and hours later, through an advertisement in the newspaper, I found her, a nine-week-old boxer/lab mix.

When we pulled up to the house where she was born and I saw her, I fell in love for the first time. She had a black coffee-colored coat, and when the sun shone on her, her coat looked like someone had drizzled honey on it. Her tail was docked so whenever she tried to wag it her entire body shook with delight. Her ears were floppy and she looked like "The Flying Nun" when she ran. I named her Cappuccino.

Soon after Cheeto (My little sister couldn't say "Cappuccino" at first and "Cheeto" just stuck) came home, I discovered what being a parent was like. Darling little Cappuccino, a nine-pound sweetheart when she first arrived home, grew into a fifty-pound nuisance within a matter of months.

She had premium dog food to keep her growing right, and yet she still felt the need to gnaw on everything else in our house. She started teething at about three months and now, at eighteen months, she still hasn't stopped. She chewed small things, she chewed big things; she chewed cheap things, she chewed expensive things. But it was a rare occasion when she actually chewed on one of her toys. She had an uncanny knack for only chewing on the things that were important to someone. I can't tell you how many of my brother's and sister's precious plastic animals I have replaced because Cappuccino needed a snack.

I felt true hopelessness for the first time when Cappuccino chewed on one of the most expensive pieces of furniture in our house: a solid oak serving piece that had a marble top and matched our kitchen table. The money it would have taken to replace that might as well have been ten million dollars to me, a fourteen-year-old girl with a limited income.

When Cappuccino got bored with chewing everything, she dug. I can't help but wonder if she overheard my family talking about putting in a swimming pool because she tried to dig us one in our backyard. On several different occasions, I had to fill three-foot-deep by five-foot-wide holes. We're talking BIG. I can't tell you how many times she redug the holes that I filled.

I was really scared when things got so bad that my mom said that if I didn't take responsibility for Cheeto and train her to be a better dog, Cheeto would have to be put to sleep or taken to the pound or sold or something. I tried my hardest to make her behave.

Even through her faults Cappuccino has taught me a lot about Christ. In spite of all the horrible things Cappuccino has done; in spite of all the things she has eaten; in spite of how incredibly

difficult it is to train her and how annoying she can be, I still love her with all of my heart. All of my anger and frustration melts away when she lays down next to me and snuggles me while I'm watching television. Or when I walk in the door and her tail is wagging so hard in excitement that she can't walk. Or even when she just looks at me with utter contentment in her eyes. She knows that I love her, and she loves me, too.

Every time I forgive Cheeto for some awful thing that she's done, I think of Christ and all of the times that he has forgiven me. And when she ate that serving piece, I knew that there was nothing I could do to make it up to my parents. I just had to ask them for forgiveness. And that's how I am with Christ; I can't do anything to fix my sins, I can just ask for forgiveness. I'm hopeless without Christ.

I love Cappuccino, a dog, more than a lot of things in this world. And I think, "Christ loves me, his child, a whole lot more than I love my dog."

Because he loves me like that, he is willing to pay the price for my sins, a price which meant dying on a cross. Just like I love Cappuccino enough to pay for the things that she has done, not with the horror of separation from God, but with money. The situations are very much alike.

Now I see that Jesus can use anything to show me his love.

Christian Criminology: Religious Values and Criminal Justice Policy

by Michael A. Hallett, Ph.D.

Associate Professor, Criminal Justice Administration

Middle Tennessee State University

September – October, 1999

It is nice to be invited to submit a piece of writing to *Wineskins* because it offers me the freedom to speak my mind about an issue not entirely welcome in my usual forum, that of the secular State university. The discussion to which I refer – a discussion about the moral and political comments of Jesus and how they *patently contradict* current criminal justice policy – is a theme uncofortably greeted by students – especially students who privately (not in the open classroom) describe themselves as Christians, but publicly want to “crack down” on criminals. Some vocal minority of self-described “civil libertarians” or “atheists” in the classroom claim the topic of Jesus has no relevance at all to criminal justice. But it seems to me that Christianity begs analysis of issues vital to criminal justice policy (and vice versa), including especially punishment, separation, redemption, vengeance, reaping and sowing and forgiveness.

The irony for me in all this is that I have long described myself as a civil libertarian *and* a “progressive liberal” – but still want to (tsk, tsk) talk about Jesus in the “secular” classroom. Rest assured that when I do talk about Jesus in this forum, I take the requisite defense of categorizing the Bible as “a literary document” and Jesus as “a literary figure” representing a distinct point of view worthy of discussion as to themes that repeatedly come up when discussing criminal justice. Inasmuch as the danger always exists that this discussion will break down into a diatribe about Christianity “*really*” means, I dismiss this as a convenient diversion from having to confront what Christianity actually does mean. As a Methodist minister friend of mine points out, however, all people of faith are necessarily, and must be by definition, “selective fundamentalists.” Let me, therefore, outline my own particular view of what “Christian Criminology” might take as “fundamental” and summon a dialogue about what **I** take Jesus as a religious figure (if not a literary one) to stand for in regards to crime and punishment. In order to do this, however, we will first have to establish some basic facts about the current state of crime in the United States.

Some Basic Facts: The Crime/Poverty Connection

In the study of crime we are especially confronted with the fact of poverty and its power in the world. In a society such as ours, but basically in any society, there are traditions of stratification and caste, and ours is not exception. These divisions are based on so many things including race, social class, gender, ethnicity, religious tradition, level of education and accomplishment, age, and many other things. Thus, on the one hand in the United States we have an admitted and profoundly high level of diversity among our population (being the nation of immigrants that we are), and on the other have a well-documented history of class warfare and hostility between various groups within our borders (the Civil War being only one demonstration of this). In sum, we are a nation of historically contested space and values.

Whatever one's thinking about various policies for prevention and control of crime, the phrase "war on crime" best captures the theme of our policies over the past thirty-five years. "In a presidential message to Congress in 1965, the 'war on crime' was launched. President Lyndon Johnson (on March 8, 1965) declared that 'we must arrest and reverse the trend toward lawlessness,' suggesting that 'crime has become a malignant enemy in America's midst'" (as cited in Quinney, 1999, p. 77).

The warfare impulse for establishing peace can be traced back to the Crusades, a religious war fought on behalf of the Catholic Church in the 11th through 13th centuries, which justified murder of the "Godless" in the name of religious salvation. As the author of the recent book *The Code of the Warrior* notes:

The idea of a Crusade that pits the pure against the evil in a drama of redemption and death is still our controlling image for dealing with difficult problems of otherness and conflict. ... This image may have the advantage of rousing a dulled and apathetic "public" to pay attention to the news ... but it carries the deeper disadvantage of fogging the causes of a problem by reducing its complexities to simple demons" (Fields, 1991, p. 167).

Crusades, at heart, are understood by many to be large scale, hostile attempts to integrate "others" who are somehow foreign into the fold and life-pattern of another group.

Now, in terms of crime, we must first of all note that the criminal law is a sphere of social control which seeks to impose a like behavioral standard upon all of our diverse groups. Key assumptions of the criminal law are that we are all equal, that we all have equal access to the benefits of society as well as to the law itself, and that the law will treat us all in the same way regardless of where we come from or who we are. (I note in recent editions of *Wineskins* considerable space devoted to the life of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., a man who most decidedly did *not* think secular law treats people equally.)

In regards to crime and punishment, the first undeniable fact is that most people who end up being incarcerated for crime in the United States are those we sociologically describe as "disadvantaged." At the same time, those most frequently *victimized* by crime tend to match the profile of those most frequently incarcerated – they also come from "disadvantaged" backgrounds. As the U.S. Department of Justice points out, people with annual household incomes of \$7,500 or less have roughly *twice* the violent victimization rate as members of households with annual incomes of \$75,000 or more. In addition, according to the same Justice Department data, children aged 12 to 15 who live in the inner city have roughly 100 times the rate of victimization of senior citizens living in any jurisdiction. Thus the characteristics of most victims match almost precisely the characteristics of most offenders, except in the case of one variable: victims tend to be younger than offenders. The social profile of most victims and offenders, then, is that of an economically disadvantaged, inner-city, minority male who comes from a broken home, is functionally illiterate, and whose dominant associations to this point in life have not at all been constructive in large part because the conditions of his life have not been constructive.

In criminology, two dominant perspectives (sets of theories) are used to explain why we have “good” and “bad” people: the so-called “volitional” (free will) and “structural” (social environment) perspectives. Each perspective attempts to answer the question: What factors best explain human criminal behavior? *Volitional* theories suggest that behavior is the product of carefree choice making; that social conditions are not at all important in determining how someone acts or does in life. The *structural* set of theories argue the flip side of the coin, suggesting equally stridently (and equally anti-humanely it seems to me), that human behavior is completely “caused” (not chosen) by forces outside the control of the individual criminal. From the structural perspective how one does in life is wholly the product of the environmental conditions which surround the criminal.

Criminology, then, provides a pretty bleak and simplistic view of human behavior either way. On the one hand, criminology depicts human beings as completely hedonistic and calculating masters of their environment, and, on the other, as beings unalterably vulnerable to their environment, like billiard balls on a table wholly directed by the forces impacting them. The first conclusion that must be drawn about criminology from a Christian perspective, then, is that criminology largely misses the *flesh and blood* reality of the human condition: that humans are both impacted by social conditions beyond their control, but also have the power to direct their lives, if only partially and according to countless combinations of variables too numerous and contingent to enumerate. Indeed, to many Christians and social scientists alike, the notion of “Christian Criminology” seems equally absurd – to Christians because Jesus operates with a power in the world far beyond what any academic theory can explicate – and to social scientists because the “biased” tomes of Christianity are not amenable to statistical formulae which can consistently and with predictability be broken down to enumerate the “inputs” and “outputs” of human life to give us *definite answers*.

Moreover, our political parties have somewhat different applications of the “volitional” and “structural” perspectives on crime, with fairly doctrinaire “conservative” and “liberal” accounts of the causes of and answers for crime in more or less constant circulation. Generally speaking, conservatives favor policies which offer disincentives for “bad” behavior, imposed as punishments after the fact, designed to “deter” offenders from making bad “choices.” Liberals, on the other hand, offer policies favoring incentives for “good” behavior, emphasizing rewards for non-deviant behavior before crime is committed, seeking to impact the social environment. Both parties assume, of course, that a formulaic tinkering of sorts, either before or after the fact, can influence crime positively, a perspective we commonly label “social engineering.”

Finally, to make matters worse, “criminals” themselves often see crime in an entirely different way than do either political party or criminology. From the perspective of many criminals, there is neither any incentive for good behavior, given the jobless environment from which they come, nor any real disincentive to committing bad behavior, since only a small fraction of criminals are ever actually caught for a given crime. As recently pointed out in a study of the conviction rates achieved by the FBI, the nation’s premiere law enforcement agency has a successful conviction rate of only about 27 percent. What we fail to see for all of our liberal carrots and conservative sticks regarding crime and punishment is that there is a clear and direct association between previous victimization and subsequent offending: that all of these things are going on at once.

Christian Criminology

“If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated me first” (John 15:18)

In studying the life and message of Jesus, we learn that he was in fact a teacher of “the way,” an educator of the “way to be” in the world. The Sermon on the Mount, the parables, Jesus’ own suffering, his moment of desolation on the cross, all dramatically speak to us about the human condition. Moreover, Jesus’ affinity for those rejected, his exultation of the marginal, his statement, “If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated me first” (John 15:18), dramatically challenge us to reconsider God’s “terms of acceptance.” We expend enormous energy in this society to be safe, or as my friend Hal Pepinsky explains, “We invest a lot in the illusion of safety – to the point where the production and maintenance of this illusion compromises our ability to achieve it.”

Criminal Justice, of course, is all about trying to make us “safe” – whatever it takes. Over the past 20 years we have spent a lot of time and money building more prisons and incarcerating many more (mostly low-level, non-violent) offenders, but when we watch the evening news, is the message about how we are demonstrably safer now than in the past?

The following items are all things asserted by the U.S. Department of Justice: that both abuse of children in the home, as well as the murder of children outside the home, are on the increase (with juvenile homicide up over 65 percent since 1985); inner-city single mothers are the leading abusers of children; teen suicide is up dramatically; violence in schools is at record levels; two-thirds of people in prison are functionally illiterate; 90 percent of people in prison come from “disadvantaged” homes; those most frequently victimized by both property crime and violent crime live in poverty; several compelling studies [the most recent from RAND] indicate that “the longer someone spends in prison, the more likely they are to reoffend.”

What strikes me deeply about these facts is the biblical notion of reaping and sowing: that we have a well-heelled cycle of violence and retribution – a model of reaping and sowing – much like the Prophets describe. If sending people into the violent environment of prison seems to induce them to commit more crime, then what have we accomplished? Moreover, when you examine the data historically and in a broad fashion, you find that *offenders* (especially violent offenders) invariably also have long records of themselves being *victims*. You find the reality of poverty in the lives of both offenders and victims contributing to their victimization. In the case of property crime, members of households with incomes of \$75,000 or more have a property crime victimization rate approximately half that of households with annual incomes of less than \$7,500.

The work of criminal justice, then, like the work of Jesus, is a vocation devoted to serving the poor – where we observe the biblical pattern of those with the least to lose, losing the most, holding true. Does Jesus’ promise that “the last shall be first and the first shall be last” have meaning here?

In chapter 10 of Matthew, Jesus gives leave to his disciples: “Do not think that I have come to bring peace, but a sword.” A little earlier (Matthew 5:27) he says: “Think not that I am come to

overthrow the law; I have come not to overthrow but to fulfill.” What is the law? In my view, the law is what he said it is: you reap what you sow – and if you sow destruction, in your personal life, or as a society, or elsewhere, destruction is indeed (with certainty) what you will get in return.

Do people have an “equal” chance in our society? Do all people have the opportunity to make equal “choices”? When you look at our society, at our so-called communities, our discipline-focused (rather than education-focused) schools, the cosmic and biblical thesis of reaping and sowing is dramatically supported. The law is fulfilled. Jesus is asked directly: “Master, which is the greatest commandment in the law?” He replies: “Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and all thy soul, and with all thy mind. This is the first great commandment. And the second is like unto it, Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself. On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets” (Matthew 5:17). By ignoring the structural forces which produce the conditions conducive to the crime we say we abhor, we only contribute to crime and suffering.

What is happening in terms of our crime problem, and our policies attending to it, is that we have a kind of apocalypse (an “unveiling”) taking place right before our eyes, but that we do not (wish to) see. At the heart of Jesus’ teaching about social justice is the Sermon on the Mount: do unto others, turn the other cheek, use your life for the sake of others and you will find it. We cannot possibly fight crime without addressing the underlying causes of crime.

If criminology is the study of crime, then *Christian Criminology* is the study of crime through the eyes of Christ. When you study crime, you find pretty quickly that the cycle of violence and victimization prevail over the long term. Like Jesus’, ours in criminal justice as a vocation concerned primarily with the poor. Jesus defined his vocation as being fundamentally attentive to the social experience of those who are marginal and most vulnerable, with those who endure poverty, and with outcasts, and so it is in criminal justice. But ours – especially in criminal justice education – is also a vocation devoted to helping the “blind” see (Luke 4:16-21). In regards to crime and punishment, we experience a kind of myopia which fixates on the most visible and immediate (an politically exploitable) aspects of the crime problem – violence and drugs – while inducing a plain blindness to the dominant kind of suffering associated with crime, the victimization of the poor and less powerful.

In our culture, we are focused on victory and on achieving victory through violent means. In all the news over the past summer about school shootings and crime, I see the common theme of guns. This quote by Daniel Berrigan describes where I believe we are:

We look around at our culture: an uneasy mix of gunmen, gun makers, gun hucksters, gun researchers, gun runners, guards with guns, property owners with guns. A culture in which guns put out contracts on people...[Yes!] We long for a community, we long for our own turf, the arts, a place where some ecology can heal us. And the big boot comes down. It destroys everything we have built. And we recoil. Perhaps in shock, perhaps in change of heart, we begin to savor on our tongues a language that is current all around us: “legitimate violence,” “limited retaliation,” “killing for love of the Kingdom.” And when the phrases make sense – that’s when we have

crossed over. We are now an army – we have disappeared into this world, into bloody, secular history. (1988: 169-170; *From Letter to Ernesto Cardinal: Guns Don't Work*).

Jesus, however, is focused not on victory or violence, but on mercy and service. A criminal justice system informed by the life and message of Jesus, in my view, would be less focused on “war,” and more devoted to mercy and service.

Resources:

Fields, Rick (1991). *The Code of the Warrior: In History, Myth, and Everyday Life*. Harper Collins.
Quinney, Richard (1999). “*The Prophetic Meaning of Social Justice.*” In *Social Justice/Criminal Justice: The Maturation of Critical Theory in Law, Crime, and Deviance*. Bruce A. Arrigo (Editor). Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing Company. Dr. Hallett’s forthcoming book is titled: *SACRED WORK IN CRIMINAL JUSTICE: Transforming Violence, Restoring Community*. He can be reached at (615) 898-5655 or online at [mhallett@mtsu.edu].

Contact information may be out of date

How God Used a Toothache

by Brent High

September-October, 1999

On a recent Friday morning I was reading the newspaper and noticed that Darrell Scott (father of Rachel Scott, a student who was killed at Columbine High School) was planning to speak Sunday afternoon at Two Rivers Baptist Church in Nashville. I really wanted to hear Mrs. Scott but was a little apprehensive about announcing anything to my youth group as the event was going to be at a Baptist church. So, rather than announce my plans in the main worship assembly, I told my high school kids I'd be going and invited anyone interested to ride with me. I expected to take two or three kids in my truck. Instead I ended up having to fire up the White House Church of Christ van as eleven of us made the short trek to Two Rivers.

I wish I could have recorded the looks on the faces of everyone we passed in the parking lot at Two Rivers as our van, with all its Church of Christ lettering, motored to a resting place. Shock. Disbelief. Happiness. I guess we broke traditional protocol, but we had a face-to-face meeting with God we would never have had if we hadn't taken the risk.

The service was unbelievable. Just five short months after the April 20 tragedy, Mr. Scott shared the "untold" stories from Columbine, the stories the media may never tell, the stories he has dedicated the rest of his life to sharing. He talked at length about the twelve students, including his daughter Rachel, who left this world on April 20. Of twelve students who died, eight professed to be Christians.

As Dylan Klebold and Eric Harris (the two gunmen) came down the hill behind the school to begin their assault, their first target was Mark Taylor. At the very moment bullets pierced Mark's body, he was witnessing to two of his friends about his relationship with Jesus Christ.

They next turned their guns on Rachel. Three weeks earlier Rachel had witnessed to Dylan and Eric and warned them about the violent video games to which they seemed to be addicted. Their first shot hit Rachel in the leg. A second plowed through her backpack into her midsection, knocking her to the ground. One of the gunmen walked over to where Rachel lay face down, still alive. He pulled her up by her hair and asked, "Do you still believe in God?" "You know that I do," Rachel managed to reply. Immediately after her reply a bullet entered her temple.

Mr. Scott shared the story of John Tomlin, another victim. John had been on mission trips to Mexico and was hungry to do more. During each school day he decided to do something small in the hope it might cause someone to think about spiritual things. He left his Bible open on the dash of his truck. At four o'clock one morning after the tragedy, Mr. Scott looked around as he was beginning an interview with NBC's Maria Shriver and noticed a circle of people around John's truck, talking about the Bible on the dash.

Scott spoke of his son, Craig, who escaped death after looking down the barrel of a gun. He escaped because his friend crouched next to him in the library, Isaiah Shoels, was black and a

more desirable target for the two gunmen who hurled numerous racial slurs in his direction before killing him execution-style.

Cassie Bernall's story has received more national attention. She too answered the gunmen's question, "Do you believe in God?" in the affirmative, taking a bullet after her response. A national "She Said Yes" campaign has resulted from the statements she and Rachel made, looking down the barrel of a gun.

Rachel's funeral was telecast on CNN. Millions of viewers tuned in, making it the highest-rated broadcast in network history. With millions of eyes tuned to the broadcast, Bruce Porter brought the message, asking "Who will take the torch?" referring to the torch Rachel, Cassie, John, Mark and others had dropped.

At that very moment a young man in Texas had a gun to his head, ready to take his own life. As he listened to Porter's plea, he lowered the gun, began to cry, and prayed for forgiveness. Not long ago he ran a thousand miles from Little Rock, Arkansas to Washington, D.C. with a torch in his hand.

Needless to say, by the end of the service I had been on an emotional roller coaster. My shirt had a hefty salt deposit from the tears I had shed, but I left the service encouraged, excited, and ready to share the "untold" stories with anyone I could. We all climbed back in our van and headed home. We were going to be just in time for Sunday night services.

I kept thinking on the way back how much I would love to share with the congregation that night just a tiny bit of what we had experienced. I was a bit discouraged because I didn't know how long it would be before I was in the pulpit again. As I walked in the door, two minutes before services were to begin, one of our elders pulled me aside and asked, "Has anyone said anything to you about speaking tonight?"

"No," I said.

"Well, Keith (our preacher) has a bad toothache. He's not going to be able to speak. I guess we'll just have a song service"

"Please let me speak," I butted in. "Something happened to me this afternoon I've got to share."

"Okay, you're on," he said.

During the opening moments of the service I prayed fervently that God would use my words to help someone realize their need for Jesus.

As I began to share some of the stories related here, I felt a peace and strength I have never felt before. Even though I had made zero preparation for this "sermon" my words seemed to flow like never before. Everything was coming together. In sports terms, I was "in the zone."

I pleaded with the young people who had never committed their lives to Jesus to do so. I told them they didn't have to know everything at first. That's what being born again is all about. Starting anew. I encouraged those who had given their lives to Jesus before and didn't have him at the center of their lives to make a new commitment.

As I stepped down from the pulpit with the words of *Just As I Am* resonating from the walls, I knew something special was about to happen. A teenager came forward, then a younger boy, then a mother, another teenager, and another, and on and on

Three came to commit their lives to Jesus for the first time and be baptized. Several others came to recommit their lives to Jesus. They came largely because of the stories associated with twelve young people from a Denver, Colorado suburb.

It only occurred to me about an hour later as I sat in a Subway sandwich shop that there was something special about the number of people who had responded at church that night. There were twelve.

“Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends. You are my friends if you do what I command. I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know his master's business. Instead I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you. You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you to go and bear fruit – fruit that will last. Then the Father will give you whatever you ask in my name. This is my command: Love each other.” (John 15:13-17)

Could it be that Gomer is My Name?

by *Francelia Powell*

September-October, 1999

Prostitute: A woman given to indiscriminate lewdness for hire; a harlot.

Whore: One who has unlawful sexual intercourse, especially for hire.

Adultery: Voluntary sexual intercourse by a married person with someone other than one's marriage partner.

Prostitute, whore adultery. Ugly, repulsive, offensive words. Words foreign to me, to you. Words that I occasionally read but almost never say out loud. Words that my mind resists, pushing them away from my soul, words that describe an unfortunate few who exist beyond the borders of my lifestyle.

I saw them as I drove 13th Street NW to and from my job in downtown Washington, D.C., eight o'clock in the morning, six o'clock at night. Women offering intimacy for the inanimate, union for a snort of euphoria, a piece of their soul for a price. I drove by, distant, insulted, removed. I made a joke, "The ladies are working;" no kindred spirit on this street.

Prostitute, whore, adultery, the words are not connected to me> I don't use them, yet my Lord used those words with the prophet Hosea to describe his beloved, his people, and their relationship to him. "Go take to yourself an adulterous wife and children of unfaithfulness because the land is guilty of the vilest adultery in departing from the Lord" (Hosea 1:2). Don't just talk, Hosea; experience the pain *yourself*.

Her name was Gomer. Gomer, the adulterous wife of a man of the eighth century B.C. Her lifestyle is as far removed from mine as that of the women on 13th Street – or are we all more connected than I want to believe?

When I was asked to share with a group of women the story of my spiritual journey, I certainly didn't plan to begin with those thoughts. As I prayed, though, and sought a metaphor with which to compare my relationship with the Lord, I was distressed to feel Michael Card's poignant *Song of Gomer* flooding my soul. I stood at the kitchen sink and listened to the song again and again. My tears rolled down my cheeks and slid into the dishwasher. Why did the words of this song pierce my heart so? Could it be that Gomer is my name?

I pledged my life to the Lord when I was 11 years old – at least that was when I made a decision to be baptized and become a member of His church. What were my thoughts, my motivation? I can remember agreeing with the visiting evangelist that this was the most important thing I would ever do, and I remember also the joy of becoming a part of the family, a fellowship of people who loved God and each other.

I responded to God because I felt a longing for something, and I believed this was the way to satisfy it. Not a bad beginning, perhaps, for an 11-year-old, but – like a wife who marries not because of the person her husband is but for the things he might provide – I violated our relationship whenever it seemed that God was either unable or unwilling to give me what I wanted. Over the next two and a half decades, the time came again and again when the Father, because he is love, couldn't possibly give me what I was asking for. How could he give me a stone when I needed bread, a snake when my soul hungered for fish? Never mind that I wasn't asking for bread and fish; to me, the stone and snake had more appeal. And so I departed from God.

I took other lovers. The lovers had names: boyfriend, education, job, money, spouse, children, success. The lovers were not intrinsically evil, but they were not designed to fit on the throne of my heart. That space is too big for them; they couldn't fill it. Nor were the desires sinful: love, esteem, appreciation, fulfillment, peace. God created those desires in me as he created my sexual desire, but just as that desire can be truly fulfilled only when I am led by his spirit in obedience to his will, so it is with the longings of my heart and soul. And his will is that I love him with all my heart, with all my soul, and with all my mind.

But I looked elsewhere for my satisfaction. And I came to know the slavery of addictions: relationships, work, food. I am Gomer. But the story of Gomer is an incredible love story, and that's my story, too. Foolish Hosea went out and bought – yes, bought – his wife back out of slavery, and so did the lover of my soul. The price was staggering – Himself – but he loves me foolishly, extravagantly, lavishly. Because of who I am? No, because of who he is. His name is Jesus, and my name is Gomer.

I read though Hosea again and heard God say to Israel, "Then I will cure you of idolatry and faithlessness, and my love will know no bounds." I listened to the song again, from a new perspective. I became Hosea listening as Gomer described her husband, her lover: "A fool to love someone like me, a fool to suffer silently ... simply more than I can see, how He keeps on forgiving me, how He keeps His sanity ... Hosea you're a fool."

I was confronted by the contrast of Hosea's love for Gomer, and, in the greater sense, God's love for me, with my love for others. Whom do I love "foolishly," "lavishly," without regard to receiving the same love in kind? My husband, my children, my family, certain friends? Until now, I've chosen to love people who seem to promise a pretty good return on my *love investment* in them. But what about when I feel cheated? What about the times when I feel that the outgo is more than the income? When I'm giving more than I'm getting? Even in the most loving relationships, those times come.

This business of unconditional love is impossible! Can I love my husband and refrain from being rude to him and self-seeking in our relationship? Can I love my children and not become easily angered? Can I love my friend and not keep a record of her wrongs? Can I love God when my child lies dying in my arms? Does my love always protect, always trust, always hope, and always persevere, even among those who reject my love? No. That's my present, or the now, of my walk with Jesus, but I have a future.

In looking at my past, I caught a glimpse of that future: “How wide and long, and high and deep is the love of Christ” (Ephesians 3:8). And because I know this love, I can be filled up “to the measure of all the fullness of God.” And God is love. I am an eternal being, and I have an eternity to become that which I was created to be: a lover. My Lord says, “Love each other as I have loved you” and “You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you to go and bear fruit – fruit that will last, then the Father will give you whatever you ask in my name” (John 15:12,16).

To love as I am loved. A foolish hope? Yes, but I’m beginning to want to be a fool of God. Unconditional love? Impossible! But my God deals in impossibilities: a camel passes through the eye of a needle, a virgin conceives by the power of the Holy Spirit, a Savior rises from death. “Blessed is she who has believed that what the Lord has said to her will be accomplished” (Luke 1:45). I believe!

The Day Innocence Died

by Paul Talley

September – October, 1999

The limits of my soul have been tested. My soul is haunted with their pain – parents, brothers, sisters, and friends. All have shed tears.

I sit, and I watch tears fall for five hours. No doubt I see only a fraction of the tears shed that day. Somehow God led me to this place of death. I watch as parents look frantically at the list of the living. And I watch as their hearts sink to find their child's name absent from that list.

I listen to the pain of regret. From friends' and parents' hearts, the irrational guilt flows. How can I comfort? How can I help? Confused, I wander from parent to parent, room to room. What words would I have? What connection could I find?

My name tag says "Youth Minister," my face says "youth." My age cannot be hidden. What could I give? I stand as a gap between parent and child. I am in a no-man's land, searching to heal. Her face is so vivid, her pain so real. I see her regret – taste her anguish. From a distance I watch her son try to comfort her, but his arms only offer stiffness and confusion. His face is twisted, puzzled. Struggling to help, I say all that would come to my mind. "Can I sit next to you?" His nod is silent. After a long pause I ask, "Who are you waiting on?"

"My sister, Lauren," he replied.

"Can I pray for her?"

"Yes," he nodded. So I do.

In others I see silent strength. A father holds his head high. There is a confidence about him. He has a quiet understanding and wisdom.

As I look into faces, I see souls. It looks as if hearts have been ripped from their places leaving bottomless voids, full of emptiness. Inside myself I yell to God, "Help me! Give me words! Teach me." But even God is silent. He is mourning the evil in the world.

In others I see bright glances of hope. They carry on with sunshine in their hearts and goodness on their minds. They are true servants – helping where they can, passing out drinks, getting blankets for the cold. They are helpful rays of light, placing to rest physical needs of the afflicted. Still others seek to protect. Standing with their backs straight, heads raised high, their blue uniforms give us comfort. But their eyes cannot lie. Inside the pressed pants and leather belts stand saddened men and women. Their eyes reflect the horror they have witnessed.

Outside are the vultures, circling about, waiting. They hide behind cameras and lenses, but their mission is clear. Information is what they seek. Standing between them and the families is a covered walkway into the school. A no-man's land between the pain and the fantasies.

Just inside the door is a list. A Schindler's list of survivors, and a great tragedy of pain. Behind the cursive lines of signature there is sorrow. Pain comes to those whose names are not present. The lists are hurriedly placed on a bulletin board filled with pictures and announcements of happier days when children played safely. A day before innocence died. A day before the pain.

Down the hall is a great gathering of families and friends; a collective silence murmurs through the room. Unasked questions float to the rafters like prayers. There is wailing, and mourning, as hearts separated from people's souls. Numbness. The basketball goals, chairs and space once used to uplift kids through play and folly, are now used to prop up wounded spirits and bruised hearts. Death enters the room with the Coroner. Her clinical call for loved ones' identities cuts us like razors. We sit numb, watching the world go on without us.

But God is there. Silently holding our chins in the palm of his hand. Angels attend us. Throughout the room silent prayers lift to the heavens. As angels bow down, and God is silent, we feel power. A greater love, feeling a greater pain. The war rages on; we are but casualties. Left in this world, but not forgotten. Grace, peace, and love are with us. Through his chosen ones, his will prevailed. I was numb, I was confused, and I was silent. But God used me. An instrument of his great love; a tool set on this earth to do his will. I do not understand it; I cannot chart it; but I see it. My mind will never forget the pain, but my heart will never forget the love of a Son who died on the cross, and the day I finally understood it – in Littleton, Colorado, April 20, 1999.

How Close Do We Even Want to Be?

by Danny Sims

September – October 1999

Wedgwood Baptist. How tragic when once unfamiliar words have horrible and heartbreaking images identified with them. Not too many knew of Wedgwood Baptist until this past week. But the church that was our quiet, friendly neighbor is now another place for flower memorials heaped along the roadside. Police and paramedics, red lights bouncing off the houses of our neighborhood, bright lights and cameras penetrating a dark Wednesday night and early Thursday morning, teenagers in shock, weeping and holding each other, frantic adults racing across the lawn These are the pictures we all have seen of Wedgwood Baptist.

The Altamesa Church of Christ, where I preach in southwest Fort Worth, is a growing “Wedgwood neighborhood” church of 1200. We’re just blocks from the other growing “Wedgwood neighborhood” church of 1200, Wedgwood Baptist. Much of our membership lives in the Wedgwood section of Fort Worth. My home is in Wedgwood.

How close are we? Our teenagers were invited, but decided not to go to last Wednesday’s “See You At The Pole” youth rally where Larry Gene Ashbrook killed seven, critically wounded two more, and victimized a community. My schedule this week could easily have been filled with funerals.

How close are we? Ashbrook might just as easily have driven another dozen blocks to our sanctuary. The night the rampage took place, our own Praise Assembly had just begun. Not knowing all that had transpired, we dismissed “quickly yet calmly” when news of the shooting was phoned in by police. Just minutes later, news and police helicopters droned overhead.

How close are we? We hosted a community-wide prayer service just 24 hours after the shooting. Eight hundred people came, including two members of the House of Representatives and many families of Wedgwood Baptist, who wept in our pews. A deacon from Wedgwood Baptist spoke. Media from all the local Fort Worth-Dallas outlets were here. A church from Littleton, Colorado sent flowers, as did the Jewish Community Center of Los Angeles, both of whom have also been targets of recent violent crimes. I remarked Thursday night that our community is larger than this corner of Fort Worth. We flashed across *Nightline* and *48 Hours* on prime time network television. Reporters called me to get a viewpoint from a nearby preacher.

How close are we? Our Youth Ministers, Raymond Schultz and Hai Cao, spent much of Thursday at a local high school where one of the victims had been a student, consoling teens. Our Counselor, Russ Bartee, was on the radio and coordinated with the Red Cross. Small Groups Minister Scott Strother was at the hospital. Outreach Minister Wade Weaver was talking to local media. College and Singles Minister Mark Aldriedge was on the phone with area churches. Our team was on call.

How close are we? At the prayer service, our Children's Education Minister, Patty Weaver, sang *Amazing Grace*, dedicating it to Sydney Browning, Wedgwood's slain Children's Choir Director. Sydney was the first one Ashbrook murdered. One of their little girls was described on television as lamenting out loud, "They killed my choir teacher! They killed my choir teacher!" I was overcome with emotion, realizing *it could just as easily have been Patty*. What would our little boys and girls have said?

How close are we? My son, a first grader, came home Thursday telling us one of his tiny classmates was "at that church." Our children go to school together. Members of Altamesa are neighbors of members of Wedgwood.

How close are we? In another twist, some of our members know and long ago attended church with the Ashbrook family. In his childhood, one of our deacons knew the man who unloaded his two handguns into the crowd.

How close are we? That may be the most important question asked in the aftermath. How close are we to one another? How close are we to tragedy? How close are we to our community? How close are we to our friends and fellow believers in other churches? How close are we to God? How close are we to the end?

How close are we to reaching those, like Ashbrook, who reportedly grew up in the church but regrettably not in the Lord?

How close do we even want to be?

At our Thursday evening community wide prayer service we offered folks the opportunity to write a note to the families of the martyred, the injured, or write whatever was on their heart. Scores of pages were left behind for those who grieved, poems for the injured, prayers for the families devastated by that senseless deed.

Saturday I delivered the book of original copies to Associate Pastor of Wedgwood Baptist, Mike Holton. Mike was deeply moved. In appreciation he tearfully said, "Thank you. All of us here love you over at the Altamesa Church of Christ. Thanks for what you did." As we visited, a young man came in. He immediately thanked me for our prayer service, saying his parents had attended. Apologizing to Mike for his unavailability at 2:00 that afternoon, he explained his plan to attend the funerals (three were held that day for victims of the shooting). Mike assured him, "It will all be fine. Somehow God will provide." When I asked what was happening at 2:00, Mike explained that chairs needed to be arranged for Sunday's service, and since most of their church was involved with the funerals he had no one to help.

Thirty members of the Altamesa Church showered Mike with supportive hearts and willing hands at two o'clock. We carried flowers and set up chairs. We quietly stepped inside the sanctuary. We prayed and sang a song. *O God, You are my God, and I will ever praise You* I believe God did provide, as much for us as for Wedgwood Baptist.

Then Mike asked us to help carry out several of their pews. Pews to be repaired by the manufacturer, who had traveled to be on site. Pews with cushions and fabric removed. Pews riddled with bullets. Pews heavy with sorrow. Pews where, as one of my church elders said, “soldiers died.” Thursday night the Wedgwood Baptist Church had come to cry in the pews of the Altamesa Church of Christ. Saturday afternoon the Altamesa Church carried out the pews at Wedgwood Baptist. Tears and service, service and tears.

We are close enough to do for a church that’s experienced loss exactly what we do for our friends who experience loss. We’re “just there.” How often have we heard it said, “Just be there for someone grieving, someone in shock. Don’t say anything. Just be there.”

How close are we? Close enough to bear one another’s burdens and practice the love commands of Christ: “Love your neighbor as yourself,” and “By this all men will know that you are my disciples, by your love for one another.” Close enough to emphasize for a rare moment all that we have in common, rather than practice the pattern of highlighting our differences.

How close are we? Close enough to love. Close enough to care, to “be there.” Close enough to do something instead of talk. Close enough to do, we’re convinced, the very thing Jesus would do, and died for his church to do. Close enough to do what Jesus lives through us – his body – to do.

That’s how close we are.

I do not wish to ever imply there are no differences between us and our Baptist friends or others in the churches all around us. Nor would I wish to ever ignore what we hold in common. I also do not wish to make us into a Baptist church, or any denomination (in fact, a denominational, institutionalized mindset is exactly what I want to see us move away from). Yet the question will inevitably arise, and has undoubtedly already been asked by someone, “Are we saying, ‘*Those Baptists are Christians?*’” In an age when many of our friends have said they were surprised a “Church of Christ” had a prayer service for a “Baptist Church” perhaps it’s time to recall a few things.

The early fathers of the restoration movement believed strongly that wherever people of good heart and mind openly and honestly approached Scripture they could for themselves learn what God wanted them to do to become Christians. Consider the words of F.D. Srygley. He was an early preacher in our movement who frequently wrote for the *Gospel Advocate*. One article written prior to 1910 was called “Are Christians In All Denominations?”

Are there Christians in the denominations? It seems to be a weakness in Christians of all ages to get into things they ought to get out of. If there are no Christians in any denominations, it is the only place except hell that they have all kept out of ... Let me say this clearly, a Christian is determined by his affiliation with Christ, not with any particular group When I accept someone who has believed and repented and been born again of water and the Spirit that does not necessarily mean that I endorse everything he says or does.

Reuel Lemmons, a few years before his death in 1989, wrote in *IMAGE* magazine,

I am hearing a lot today about people being baptized into the church. No one is baptized into the church. We are baptized into Jesus Christ, and then Christ adds us to his church. The only way we get into his church is by being added by him to it. When he buys one with his blood, he adds the one he has purchased to the host he has previously purchased and they become one fold.

Only the Lord knows who all his sheep are. Our trying to identify and brand them all puts us in a dangerous position. Really it is a little ridiculous for us humans to try to set the bounds of the Lord's sheepfold. That is His prerogative.

The center of the target of our faith is Jesus, Jesus, Jesus. We must not move over and center on church, church, church. He, not the church, is the author and finisher of our faith. He, not the church, determines what the truth is. If somebody finds it without our help, I do not doubt that the Lord will accept him. I surely would not want to object.

We need more Christism and less Church of Christism. That would be the plea of a truly un-denominational and non-sectarian church. We may not be able to maintain that plea. No other group in all of history has succeeded in doing it, and within 150 years after the noble effort of restoration we seem to be slipping in the same direction as all the rest.

N.B. Hardeman said (circa 1922),

I have never been so egotistical as to say that my brethren, with which I commune one the first day of the week, were the only Christians on earth. I have never said that in my life. I do make the claim that we are Christians only. But there is a vast difference between that expression and the one formerly made.

As my friend Randy Moody says, if you'd look at a picture of the Ryman Auditorium in Nashville during those famous sermons, you would see a banner hanging over Hardeman's head that read, *Christians only, but not the only Christians*. That was our plea. It was a good plea. It is a plea that we must make today. It is the plea I am making.

Let's go further back to 1837 and Alexander Campbell who was asked if he believed there were Christians in "the sects." In response, he wrote in the *Millennial Harbinger*,

If I observed that there be no Christians in the protestant sects, (then) there are certainly none among the Romans, none among the Jews, Turks, Pagans, therefore no Christians in the world except for ourselves. Now therefore, for many centuries there has been no church of Christ, no Christians in the world and the promises concerning the ever lasting Kingdom of the Messiah have failed and the gates of hell have prevailed against His church. This cannot be, therefore there are Christians among the sects.

Let's return to the old paths and preach what we used to preach. We want to be Christians only, but we should never make the claim or leave the impression that we are the only Christians.

I recommend that those interested in further study read *Reviving the Ancient Faith*, Richard Hughes, Eerdmans 1996; *Hearing God's Voice*, Tom Olbricht, ACU Press 1996; *Distant Voices*, Leonard Allen, ACU Press, 1993.

AfterGlow: Reasoning Together

by Phillip Morrison

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“Come now and let us reason together” As a young preacher, I intoned the words like a mantra. They seemed so logical ... so compelling ... so biblical. As written in Isaiah 1:18 they were all of those things. I was using the right words, but meaning something God never intended.

I was not inviting, I was challenging: Come and let me reason with you ... Come and let me tell you why my interpretation of Scripture is right and yours is wrong ... Come and let me tell you why my religion is right and yours is wrong. No wonder my “invitation” was routinely ignored.

From the beginning, leaders of the American Restoration sought to unite all Christians. Somewhere along the way, that noble objective became corrupted and, without ever intending it, a new denomination was created. Now, still in the name of unity, we continue to fracture the body of Christ. There is reason to insist that all Christians are in the body of Christ, assuming we have the right understanding of the body, the church. But we have taken a quantum leap beyond that biblical concept in insisting that all Christians are in the Church of Christ. Even that was not enough for many of us, so we insisted that people who would please God must be in the amillennial Church of Christ, or the non-institutional Church of Christ, or the multiple-communion cup Church of Christ, or the pro-Sunday School Church of Christ, or We don't understand all this ourselves; how can we expect others to?

Our Christianity does not depend on holding membership in the right organization, or even on doing right things. It depends on our being in right relationship with Jesus. The sovereign God of the universe is surely capable of deciding who is in such relationship without any input from me.

The burly security guard at the Pittsburgh International Airport looked as if he could start at nose-guard for the Steelers. He took my cell phone and waved me through the magnetometer. Then, in a gruff voice that seemed to carry through the corridor, he demanded, “Wait a minute! What are you doing with my friend's telephone?” I was momentarily too stunned to answer. Then his face broke into a grin that lit up the area, and he pointed to the WWJD display on my phone. “You've got my friend's telephone,” he said, obviously pleased. Then he fished in his own pocket for his key ring with its WWJD marking. We smiled, shook hands, and went our separate ways, bonded by relationship with the One who makes us strangers no more.

Is he a Christian? Where does he go to church? What commandments does he obey? What kind of life does he live? I can't answer any of those questions, important as they are. All I know is that he professes friendship – as I do – with the One who calls us friends (John 15:9-17). God will judge us both with mercy and grace.

A stranger approached me at a service station to ask directions. As we talked about where we live and what we do, when I identified my church relationship, the other man said, “Uh-oh, I hope you're not one of those people who think you're the only ones going to heaven and the rest

of us are bound for hell!” When I assured him that I had no such indictment to make, he said, “Well, in my part of the country that’s what people like you think!” I said, “Look why don’t we just start over and let me tell you that I’m just a Christian.” He smiled and said, “I can go with that. And, by the way, that’s all I am, just a Christian.”

Can’t we all go with that?