

Wineskins Magazine

Doctrine and Mystery

Volume 5, Number 1 January-April 2000

Contents

Communicating Christ: Head and Heart By Rubel Shelly

Martin Luther and Fred Rogers By Mike Cope

Father to the Fatherless By Charles W. Mattis

The Ministry Of Motherhood By Rick Atchley

Go With the Flow: The Contemplative Baptism By Carmen Perry Beaubeaux

Immersion in the Holy Spirit By Edward Fudge

Horrific Cult Began With Sublime Vision of Virgin Mary By Greg Taylor

The Invisible Grief By Anna M. Griffith

The Gritty Truth By Rick Gamble

Grace, Peace and a Flaccid Fleece By Jane Gibson

Refiner's Fire By Mollie Spaulding

Praying the Psalms By Lynn Anderson

AfterGlow: Mountaintop Experiences By Phillip Morrison

Communicating Christ: Head and Heart

by Rubel Shelly
January – April 2000

We live at an interesting juncture in human history. No, make that “fortunate” or “propitious.” And we must be wise enough to respond appropriately.

For fully 250 years, we have perpetuated a Post-Enlightenment culture. The intellectual hallmark of this period has been rationalism. The target of communication was the mind, and the goal was persuasion through argument. Facts, syllogisms, testimony – the sorts of things that lawyers present at trials had primacy.

The church adopted and affirmed this cultural model. We prepared and presented carefully structured arguments for the existence of God, the authenticity of Scripture as revelation, and the deity of Jesus. Study of the biblical text was crucial, and the original languages of Scripture (i.e., Hebrew and Greek) were important to know. A hermeneutical method to display our study tools was produced that generated reassuring outcomes consistent with the consensus tenets we had already embraced.

It wasn't such a bad model. God created us with rational powers, and he intends for us to use them. Doing so has produced scholarship and serious Bible study. We are theologically literate. We acknowledge the primacy of the Word of God as his vehicle for teaching us his will, and we encourage people to read and study it with seriousness. We employed a cultural paradigm with profit.

In the final decade or so of the 20th century, the cultural paradigm finally shifted. Science, logic and erudition hadn't solved our problems – as we were confident it would at the start of the century. Wars and crime escalated. Disease and poverty continued to abound. So it became popular again to speak of art and mystery. Out of an anti-intellectual bent came talk of intuition, feeling, and omen. Even the words “miracle” and “God” came back into vogue.

We have entered a Post-Modern culture. Its intellectual trademark is experiential learning, and the target of communication is the heart. The goal is not always persuasion but is often understanding and respect. Feelings, emotion, sensitivity – these now have priority over polemics.

Stories are more powerful than argument in the new culture. Music carries and imprints beliefs more effectively than prose creeds. It is a visual and oral culture, not a written one. Community is prized over rugged individualism. Arrogance, prejudice, and racism are hateful vices to be shunned.

Some will insist on preaching the gospel and doing church in the mode of the Post-Enlightenment paradigm and will denounce the new one. But each is a cultural model, nothing

more and nothing less. The new is far more like the first-century culture into which Christianity was originally born.

We can communicate Christ most faithfully by realizing where we are. At this turning point in history, mind and heart must meet. Facts are carried best in narrative. Truth is best authenticated by being modeled in healthy, respectful relationships. Doctrine must be allowed to live alongside mystery and in humility.

Reason and encounter, conviction and meekness, analytical and spiritual, written word and Living Spirit – the very “tensions” we meet in Scripture are with us. What a challenge. And what an opportunity, if we are wise rather than frightened.

Martin Luther and Fred Rogers

by Mike Cope

January – April 2000

Mr. Rogers – yes, THE Mr. Rogers, the “It’s-a-beautiful- day-in-the- neighborhood” Mr. Rogers – is an ordained Presbyterian minister. He is, as you might guess, a minister to children.

For many years, he and his wife visited one of his favorite seminary professors in a nursing home every Sunday afternoon. They would sing, talk, read scripture, and pray. One Sunday, the Rogers sang “A Mighty Fortress Is Our God,” which included these words (some of which, unfortunately, are omitted in some current hymnals):

*And though this world, with demons filled,
Should threaten to undo us,
We will not fear, for God has willed
His truth to triumph through us.
The prince of darkness grim,
We tremble not for him,
His rage we can endure,
For, lo, his doom is sure:
One little word shall fell him.*

When they finished the song, Mr. Rogers asked his old prof, “Dr. Orr, when it says one little word will fell him, what is that word?” Great question: What word has the power to bring down the prince of darkness?

Dr. Orr replied, “Evil simply disintegrates in the presence of forgiveness.”

I don’t know if that’s the word Martin Luther meant when he wrote “A Mighty Fortress.” But it certainly fits.

Forgiveness is an affront to everything Satan seeks to accomplish in this world. He works for alienation in whatever form it may come – alienation of humans from God and alienation of humans from each other.

But God trumped the evil plans of Satan through the cross and resurrection of Christ. “In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God’s grace that he lavished on us with all wisdom and understanding” (Ephesians 1:7f). Through a profound act of mercy, God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself, forgiving us where we didn’t deserve forgiveness (2 Corinthians 5:19).

And it is in response to this forgiveness that we choose to forgive those who have harmed us. “Forgive as the Lord forgave you,” Paul exhorted (Colossians 3:13).

Here's the foundational truth behind forgiving others: we forgive not because it will heal us (though it often does), not because we're such magnanimous people, and not because we're trying to ignore the past. Rather, we forgive because we have received forgiveness from God.

I know a woman who recently made the bold move of forgiving the man who abandoned her and their children years ago.

Why would she do that? Because she understands how radical God's forgiveness of her is. While she may not be responsible for the divorce (The old saying that there are always two sides to a divorce isn't always true! Sometimes one person makes evil choices that impact others.), she knows that in her own ways she has contributed to the darkness in this world. She realizes that God has made a profound move, forgiving her in Jesus Christ. And now, in deep gratitude, she has responded with a grace-shaped heart of forgiveness for one who doesn't deserve it.

Is there a bold step of forgiveness you've been putting off? Let me encourage you to take that first step. And here are some suggestions as you seek to do that:

1. Reflect long and hard on God's mercy toward you. Immerse yourself in the language of scripture – of how God has, in grace, reconciled you, redeemed you, forgiven you, chosen you, and adopted you. Personalize those passages, seeking to recognize how unworthy you were of this gracious act. (If you have a hard time with that, then back up a couple steps and reflect on how heinous sin – all sin, any sin, your sin – is to God. That puts his initiative in perspective.)
- Ask God to empower you through his Spirit, knowing that you need the Spirit's sanctifying work.
 - Work through some of the rich Christian material written on forgiveness such as *Embodying Forgiveness* by Gregory Jones and *Forgive and Forget* by Lewis Smedes.
 - Share your struggle to offer forgiveness with other Christians. Allow them to pray for you and encourage you.

- Start by praying for the person you are wanting to forgive. It's difficult to hold so tightly to grudges toward a person you are praying for!

- Keep telling yourself: This is more about actions than feelings. It isn't that we want feelings of resentment and bitterness to stay around; it's just that we can't directly do much about them. What we can do is choose to act in a forgiving way toward another. A reformation of the emotions usually follows – very slowly.

I think Mr. Rogers' old seminary instructor was right. If you want to deal a serious blow to Satan and his evil work, then, out of an awareness of God's mercy toward you, forgive someone. "One little word shall fell him."

Compassionate Father, we know that you have forgiven us of our sin. You've removed our sins from us as far as the east is from the west. And we sincerely want to mirror that forgiveness with others. But our hurts turn into grudges which turn into bitterness, and before we know it they become a part of our being. So please, move us through the power of your Spirit beyond these hurts to the life-sustaining power of forgiveness. Help us to forgive as you have forgiven us in Christ, through whom we pray.

Father to the Fatherless

by Charles W. Mattis

January – April 2000

The most significant marker event in my life occurred in May of 1965, two months before I turned six. In my mind it was yesterday. A navy blue Ford with yellow-stenciled letters turned into our driveway on that clear spring day. A well-decorated Air Force officer walked up our drive and rang the bell. My sister and I sat upstairs on my bed with the window open, looking out at that car while my mother answered the door.

Several moments later, my mother entered the room with tears in her eyes. Her news betrayed a cloudless blue sky. She told us that our father had been killed in Viet Nam. While the nation was trying to make sense of the war, I spent the rest of the '60s trying to make sense of why my father was killed in that war. My mother was only 40 but never remarried, stating that he was the only man she ever loved.

My mother, my sister, and I struggled with self-pit, doubt, depression, and with our different family roles. Unknowingly, I assumed the role as the man of the house, and placed the responsibility for everyone's happiness on my shoulders.

I remember feeling cheated and abandoned. I would dream about him walking through the front door and making everything all right. Thirty-five years later, I can still smell the cedar chest where my mother kept his uniform and his medals. I have tried to fill the void he left in many ways over the years, searching for what I missed in my relationship with him. Growing up, I searched for other men to fill his place, always coming up empty. Even as an adult, I seem to place unrealistic expectations on my male friendships. Because of God's grace, I was raised as a Timothy. My mother and grandmother were women of deep faith. Even though I shielded myself in relationships, anticipating the next tragedy, I saw how they responded by turning to God. If they still trusted him, maybe I could trust him. During my pre-teen years, I began to embrace the metaphor of God as Father. God was not only my heavenly Father, but he truly became my father. My faith deepened and when I was twelve, I gave my life to him.

Fast forward to 1983 when Mary Lee and I were considering marriage. I was afraid, not necessarily of getting married, but of being a dad. I thought because I didn't have a model, it would be impossible for me to succeed as a father. She encouraged me to see I knew more than anyone what I had missed, and what I needed in a father.

In 1987, I became a dad when Caroline was born, and then again in 1989 when Holton was born. They are among the richest blessings of my life.

Mary Lee is a woman of great faith and spiritual insight. She has helped me be a better dad, and has encouraged my spiritual leadership of our family. Her father was a tremendous influence on

my parenting, and I miss him dearly. The greatest influence on my fathering, however, has been God ... my father.

When I lose my cool with my children, I remember the patience of God. He was so longsuffering with the children of Israel and he is so patient with me. God's patience reminds me to be patient with my children. When I am critical of my children, I think of the grace of God. God has forgiven me, covered my sin, and removed it from me. God remembers my sin no more. God's grace prompts me to be more graceful and grace giving in my relationships with my children.

When I am tempted to micromanage my children, stalking their every move, reprimanding them at every turn, I remember God doesn't do that. He told Adam and Eve what he expected of them, and then gave them freedom to choose. He didn't stand next to the tree and say, "Eve, you are getting too close," or "Don't listen to that serpent." He gave them the ground rules, let them make their own decisions, and disciplined them when they disobeyed. I am challenged to do the same.

When I selfishly try to make my children into something they are not, I remember that God created each of us differently. God's creation celebrates diversity and so we have different walks. We each have unique expressions of ourselves and of our faith.

I must allow my children to be who God intended them to be, instead of forcing them into some mold of my design. God has called me to honor their uniqueness. It is not right for me to force them to fill my inadequacies.

Above all, God as my Father has taught me to love. The way that God the Father loves is how I try to love my kids. God shows his love for us every day in so many ways. I tell my kids I love them every day. I hug my kids every day, and I am going to keep hugging them as long as I can. I want them to know they are loved.

God loves me completely. There is nothing I can do to draw more love out of God; he already loves me ... completely. Whether I am worshiping him or disobeying him, he loves me. With my children I try to never withhold love based on performance, or obedience.

Finally, no matter what I do, I am a child of God. Remember Paul's words from Romans 8: "I am convinced that neither death nor life, nor angels or demons, nor the present or the future or any powers, neither height nor depth or anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord." No matter what I do, where I go, or what ever could possibly happen, I am a child of God and he loves me. No matter what my kids do, they will always be my children. They may do things that disappoint me, but there is nothing they can do to quit being my children, and there is nothing they can do to keep me from loving them.

The seeds of my faith were sown early in the wilderness of heartache and trial. His love has provided living water in the desert of self-pity, anger, and doubt. What would my life be like if my earthly father had lived? What kind of father would I be? Would I be a person of faith? I have no answer to those questions. What I do know is that my heavenly Father has provided for

me, sustained me, and revealed Himself to me through those events in my life. My only response is to say, "Thank you ... Father."

The Ministry of Motherhood

by Rick Atchley

January – April, 2000

I've seen her in every congregation where I have ever preached. She usually sits at the back of the auditorium. She is accompanied by two or three young children, but not other adult. She attempts to sing or listen to the sermon, but most of her time is spent just trying to keep her kids quiet. Coloring books and Cheerios spend much more time in her hands than the Bible.

If this wasn't frustrating enough, she has to endure countless gazes from those around her who have forgotten how their own kids behaved, and are now terribly "distracted" by hers. When the assembly is dismissed, she looks exhausted more than uplifted. She trudges with her troops back to the car, and wonders if it was worth it.

To many, she and her children were nuisances. To me, she is among the grandest of all saints. Before you take another look at her, read on. You are probably aware that the only family Paul ever mentions are his brothers and sisters in Christ. He never married. He never had kids. Yet there was one who was a son in the faith to him, and as dear as anyone he ever knew. That young man's name was Timothy.

Paul met him on his second missionary journey when he returned to the town of Lystra. In that little band of saints, there was an elderly sister and her daughter. Though both were Jews, the daughter had married a gentile man who apparently had never converted to the Christian faith (Acts 16:1-3). To this marriage a son had been born, and through the influence of these two ladies, he became a Christian. The brothers in Lystra spoke well of him, and an immediate bond was established between Timothy and Paul.

This young man, Timothy, apparently filled a void in the apostle's heart that had been there since John Mark's departure. Later Paul would write, "I have no one else like him ... Timothy, has proved himself because as a son with his father he has served with me in the work of the gospel" (Philippians 2:20, 22). It is not surprising then, that the last letter Paul ever wrote that became scripture was to Timothy. It might be surprising, though, to learn that some of Paul's last words to his son in the faith were to remind Timothy of the ministry of his mother!

What had this grand lady done? First, she had instilled in her son a respect for the Scriptures.

But as for you, continue in what you have learned and have become convinced of, because you know those from whom you learned it, and how from infancy you have known the holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus (2 Timothy 3:14-15).

First, notice that Timothy's exposure to Scripture began when he was a very young child. The first thing Timothy learned about was God. Paul reminded Timothy of that and of "those from whom you learned it," namely his mother and grandmother. Eunice and Lois did not take those

early years for granted. They shared the faith of their people so this young lad would have the moorings he would need as he grew up in a predominantly pagan environment. Surely this training prepared Timothy well for the first time he heard the gospel, and motivated him to accept Jesus as both Messiah and Lord.

Second, this great lady instilled in her son an authentic faith.

“I have been reminded of your sincere faith, which first lived in your grandmother Lois and in your mother Eunice, and I am persuaded, now lives in you also” (2 Timothy 1:5).

Faith is not inherited – it is learned. And so Eunice was not just a mother; she was a model. She understood that it would not be enough for her young son to read about faith from a scroll. He needed to see faith lived out in a life.

The word Paul uses to describe Timothy’s faith as being sincere literally means “non-hypocritical,” and Paul adds that this same quality of faith lived his mother Eunice. In other words, her love for God and his will was not phony. It was genuine to the core, and Timothy picked up on that. After all, no one knows better whether a parent’s Christianity is authentic than the children. Timothy saw something sincere in his mother that was appealing.

Third, this godly woman must have instilled in her son a desire to minister. Apparently, Timothy eagerly accepted Paul’s invitation to travel with him and be trained on the mission field. He had already been doing some preaching in the area. Even the fact that Paul had been stoned and left for dead the last time he had come through town did not deter the young man from answering the call. Now how can that kind of commitment to ministry develop, if it has been discouraged at home?

Could that be the reason why the number of young people among us who want to enter the ministry is in decline? Yet there was a woman who loved her son enough to share the Scriptures and her faith with him and loved God enough to let him go when the call came. Ask any mother of a missionary if that is easy. When Timothy left Lystra it is probable that he never made it back. It is significant that Eunice is never addressed in any of Paul’s letters. No doubt tears filled her eyes as she watched her boy walk out of town. But how her heart soared as she witnessed the fulfillment of what she had prayed and prepared for since he could crawl.

Fourth, and finally, perhaps the most amazing thing about this wonderful sister is that she did all of these things for her son with no encouragement from her husband. That is not to say that Timothy’s father was a bad man. He may have been a good man in many ways, but he left no spiritual deposit on his boy. That is not how God meant for it to be, but in that home, and in millions since, that is the way it was. Nevertheless, Paul found in the young man a deep sensitivity to spiritual things. Never underestimate the influence of a godly mother.

Now take another look at that woman mentioned at the first of this article. Does she need your glares and frowns? Does she need more discouragement? Or, could she not instead use some support, some respect, some appreciation? It bothers me that all some church folks seem concerned about with such a woman is how to keep her kids quiet.

It seems to me that we need to ask how we can help that sister hang in there when it doesn't even seem worth it, and how the church can assist her in making a spiritual deposit in those kids in the absence of a father who will do so.

Perhaps I empathize with these ladies more than most. I should, for I owe my salvation to one. You see, my grandmother was one of those women who dragged her two boys to church Sunday after Sunday by herself. At my birth, she was the only one of my grandparents who was a Christian. Yet her influence upon my father was profound, and I enjoyed the tremendous blessing of being raised in a Christian home.

Today I'm blessed to serve with a great church and have been afforded the privilege of addressing saints across the nation. My grandmother, on the other hand, served the Lord in an inconspicuous way in central Texas. She is not well known, she has received no honorary doctorates, her name has never appeared in any major publication, yet I want you to know that I would not be a Christian today, much less a preacher, if it were not for the stubborn faith of Ona Atchley. (By the way, her husband, my grandfather, later did accept Christ and became an elder and served the church. Godly wives can have great influence, too.)

So, take special care of those ladies who sit at the back of the auditorium. That little boy beside her could be the next Timothy. I wonder who will be his Paul?

Go with the Flow: The Contemplative Baptism

by Carmen Perry Beaubeaux

Regardless of whether or not one believes baptism is for the forgiveness of sins, believers of all faiths, from ancient times to the present, go to the water for sacramental healing, renewal, dedication, and confirmation.

The water has its ways.

As if for our education as well as our salvation, baptism leads us along a shoreline littered with the lofty constructions of our faith. Her wordless elegance summons us from these same halls where she is administrated, debated, defined and mandated. Baptism, and the solitary believer's relationship to her, is perhaps the most ecumenical expression in Christianity. As rain showers down upon the just and the unjust, the water of baptism does not understand fences – or rather, denies them.

Beyond the Political ... The Essence

*When we get out of the glass bottles of our ego,
and when we escape like squirrels
turning in the cages of our personality
and get into the forests again,
we shall shiver with cold and fright
but things will happen to us
so that we don't know ourselves.
Cool, unlying life will rush in,
and passion will make our bodies taut with power,
we shall stamp our feet with new power and old things will fall down,
we shall laugh, and institutions will curl
up like burnt paper.*

-D.H. Lawrence

It is interesting that in the ongoing discussion about essentiality, the essence of baptism is virtually ignored. If we could focus on the substance of baptism rather than the corrupted exterior, then we might find that biblical baptism is the alchemy – the spiritual elixir – of the ages.

Certain Sufi works held that the task of alchemy was not necessarily to turn base metals into gold, but to make the elixir, a perfectly harmonious substance in which all elements are in balance. In the science of balance, the key to alchemy provided a method by which one might discover the relationship that exists in every body between the manifest and the hidden. To understand the alchemy of baptism we must first delineate the aspects – and they are few: God, Water, and Soul. But we must be careful not to take elemental simplicity for simplistic,

methodological politics. Though baptismal water is by nature pure and unpretentious it is dismally polluted with words.

Why Water?

*Nature is always hinting at us.
It hints over and over again.
And suddenly we take the hint.*
– Robert Frost

We should not be misguided by the silent and primitive nature of baptism, for it is an intricate and inexhaustible stream of profundity. The precise depth of that stream is ineffable. Yet, echoing layer over layer, repeated in succession, we hear God ... water ... soul ... God ... water ... soul. How are these interrelated? We know that God wants soul and soul wants God. Could water be a common thread? Is the created element of water a vehicle, a language, a meaning in itself? Is there truth hidden beneath the surface? What is the elemental essence?

When I was a girl I remember those seasoned country-wise preachers who drew wisdom for their sermons from the farm life. These weathered and unaffected naturalists understood the world, and were therefore entrusted with the essence of its secrets. After a well-scriptured sermon on baptism they would stir the waters with words like: “Come to the water!” “The water waits to receive you!” “Bring your burden to the water!” “Let the water carry your sins away!” “The water will deliver you up!” But, today, those words have a backward tone. Modern Christians are too informed to believe that water – creation – is a participant in salvation – that creation supports our souls as well as our bodies. The learned Bible student winks at the words of the ancient psalmist:

*Let the heavens be glad
And let the earth rejoice
And let men say among nations
The Lord reigneth
Let the sea roar
Let the fields rejoice, and all that is therein
Then shall the trees of the wood sing out
At the presence of the Lord.*

I believe there is a theme of moral tension that is not being addressed on the relevance of baptism for modern Christians. The anxiety within the baptism discussion hints at something that goes deeper than dogma and pleas for unity. I think a battle is taking place between the longing for biblical purity and the realization brought on by our spiritually bankrupt culture that baptism – particularly adult immersion – is awkwardly mystic.

So we hide the richness of the mystery in moral certitudes, or alternately, dilute the emphasis down to symbolism and render baptism a mere event – a quirky awards ceremony – rather than a spiritual translation and transportation by a spirit guide into a kingdom world. By imposing our intellect on something so primitive in expression, so ancient in the movement of water and the movement or impulse of a soul, we avoid the principles, ideas, and elements that God has

provided us to explore. Baptism is a “holy place” in flux. It is divine performance art – yet, not absent of logic and method.

Jesus, as our High Priest, demonstrated a keen awareness of the essence, water, when he went to John to be baptized. At every pivotal point in biblical history water was a subtle but intriguing presence: the creation, the garden, the flood, the Red Sea, the crossing of the Jordan into the Promised Land, the water to wine miracle, the ministry by the Sea of Galilee. Water flowed down the side of the convicted and executed Lamb; the River of Life flows through history and humankind from the very throne of God.

Jesus met John in the wilderness stream much like the ark met Mt. Ararat in the receding flood. The dove brought confirmation to Noah that a new life was just around the corner. A place was being prepared. The drowning, destructive water delivered Noah and deposited him safely on the new shore. Noah was transported from death to life, old to new, before and after in the water. Water has the ability to kill and the power to save at the Creator’s word. “This is my beloved son in whom I am well pleased!” ... Confirmation once again swooped down from above and lit upon the shoulder of the New World! To the soul with perceiving eyes and ears the baptism of Jesus startles us out of the reality of death to a new hope: “Take hold! I am the ark of your deliverance!” Navigating the Word by the created essence of water should make as much sense to the soul’s journey as navigating the seas by the stars makes to the sailor’s voyage.

Baptism is the science and technology of reconciliation and spiritual renewal. It propagates the species of the “new birth.” God’s expression of water unites with his hand to wash our sins away – to purify us. What other expression could be more appropriate? Water, like God, speaks to us in many different voices and has the capacity, like God, to both bless and terrify us; to be hot, warm, cold; vaporous or solid; to move in mysterious ways; to bear us up and to accept our weight without discrimination; to initiate life and to sustain it. Water delivers us to our destinations. It defines our space, and establishes our perimeters. Like the creator’s work in the “miracles” of science, baptism by water is a miracle in the continuum of grace.

Faith/Impulse

Impulse is not a fourth element. Impulse is an attribute shared by the three – God, Water and Soul. By impulse, I don’t mean manufactured charisma in the emotional sense but rather impulse in the physical sense – pulse – the endless force radiating from the unseen but distinct pivot of creation – the persistent action from which originates the consummate acts of nature. It follows that impulse be the action, or compulsion, on which a new soul is born. The Spirit (heaven) and the water (earth) seduce the soul into unity and translate it into its own experience of childlike – Christlike – blamelessness. The Spirit reaches through the doorway of creation to capture the soul. This attraction, this impulse that carries us away is the “very moment” between the “straightway” the “and it was DONE!” Baptism is indeed a holy place – and it is perhaps the only place where passion and peace co-exist.

Compassion is often the action of impulse. Many of the miracles of Jesus appear to be moved by an impulse that is often called faith. The faith-impulse is a dimension we enter in baptism – it is a dimension that demonstrates the presence of the sublime. Faith-impulse is the submission of

bulky human genius for elegant, graceful, divine genius to take us according to divine will. Baptism is anything but a work of the intellect! We must, like Naaman, exchange rational thinking for the solemn, dark murk of uncertainty. In that brief moment, irrational faith takes precedence over reason and we sink deeply into the Unknown of love and the soul dies to awaken in God. We are submitting to live out the remainder of our lives in a new land, to speak a new language, to live under a new government. It is logical that we would desire a preliminary visit in order to make investigations and preparations to sustain ourselves in the event of a catastrophe. We get caught up in details rather than the moment – the perfect divine moment – that has been arranged for our export. Sane people do not easily submit to immersion.

Denominations that nurture emotionalism often dismiss the intellect. But when religion attends only to the intellect and rejects or anesthetizes the emotions, it is also unfulfilling. The spiritual life is emotional as well as intellectual. In order to navigate all possibilities, the well-nurtured soul walks in a determined “pattern of confusion” that bamboozles the logic of demons.

Whose Baptism? ... Whose Trust?

I stopped to hike a trail into blackwater swamp of tupelo and bald cypress ... I had this powerful sense of life going about the business of getting on with itself ... Things were growing so fast I could almost feel the heat from their generation: the slow friction of leaf against bud case, petal against petal. For some time I stood among the high mysteries of being as they consumed the decay of old life.

– William Least Heat Moon

It is interesting to hear Christians remark that they were not “saved” until years after their baptism. I think I understand what they mean. As the Spirit leads us on toward wisdom, we have difficulty looking back on our infancy without a little embarrassment. I would imagine that many of the early Christians had the same experience when they looked back on the day of Pentecost. The long and painful process of spiritual growth and clarity seems so much more significant than one’s brief moment of faith-impulse. But we must be careful not to measure the dreamlike world of infant faith against rational mature faith. In doing so, we judge ourselves as failures as well as others who are in their first stages of growth. Who would look back on their birth and say, “Well I was a darling then but I wasn’t a real person until I was forty-one”? By rejecting any part of our experience and education in the Spirit, we also judge the wisdom of the Spirit who led us every step of the way. Also, by judging our spiritual development, we take responsibility for the process and the results, rejecting the Teacher. God will adopt and Christ will clothe and the Spirit will guide the drunkard with her slobbery confession; the young, passionate poet with unrealistic expectations of the spiritual life, and the old fool who has exhausted every possible alternative, and even those who are being baptized out of a sense of duty – for that may be the most “emotional” response of all!

To interpret the faith-impulse in baptism with the word “obedience” is only adequate. Obedience or trust, as some call it, is certainly a feature of baptism – but it is a feature that we exuberantly overemphasize because it is something we can get our human hands around – that we can dissect and reassemble into “steps”: Hear. Believe. Repent. Confess. Be baptized – steps that resemble

the tapping, halting steps of the blind. And faith-impulse is no more work than accepting a drink of water is work when one is thirsty.

However, baptism becomes a work when we teach and administer it as a symbol or as an expression of our own faith and trust in Christ. Symbols are human genius and our own trust – much less the expression of our own trust, as some describe baptism – given the value of human trustworthiness is hardly worth the effort. It is through Christ’s trust we are saved in the expression of water, which is his grave of shed blood. If we exhibit trust and holiness, perhaps people will admire us, even love us. What trust I have is a gift turned into the soil of my humanness. We can’t make God more “real” by approaching him with our trust. God is revealed in his trust toward us. Our trust is at best a crude imitation of real Trust which we cannot know until we are conformed to it. In immersion the Spirit manipulates us – apprehends us from the lies and conventions that would own us. A thing must be immersed before it can be spilled out. God is Trust. I want to be filled with that Trust so that my own imperfect trust will be drowned in Grace.

Afraid of the Water?

*Turn away no more:
Why wilt thou turn away
The starry floor
The watry shore
Is giv’n thee till the break of day.
-William Blake*

*Do not say “Water! water is here, how can we go on further?!”
What! Did you think that you could see God and live?
-Babylonian Talmud*

I think modern Christians trivialize the sacred in baptism because we are intimidated by the nature of what we are participating in. Rather than recognize God/Earth / Man as a divine system that is in constant movement, we shatter the biblical pattern and reorganize the fragments to serve our own static articulations. We want methods and patterns, but we don’t want them to be divine.

In our natural infatuation with denominations of believers who have evolved beyond the need for ancient or primitive expressions of holiness and have effectively archived baptism in cold storage, we, as a church, are beginning to see our “charming” practice of baptism as uncomfortably pagan and occult. We prefer to live with our illusion that the creation – the world – is an antagonist to our spiritual journey. Still, our strong sense of history demands that we honor baptism with at least sentimental homage. Some believers might refer to baptism as being “old-fashioned” or excuse it as a cultural practice of biblical times or apologize for its strange nature by calling it an “outward expression of an inward grace.” Again, by stressing “personal expression” we alienate God and his expression of creation and grace.

When we are baptized we are leaving an illusion of “the world” and entering into The World – into the abundance of God. We begin again. In baptism we acknowledge our youth and our likeness to growing things dependent on water.

The water has its ways.

The Gospel According to Water

One touch of nature makes the whole world kin.

-William Shakespeare

Baptism is a spiritual, mental, moral and physical force. Combined with the numbing natural disaster of repentance, our senses are overcome – the moment forever surrendered to the care of long-term memory. The element of water has epic performances in the Old Testament, but it is interesting that most often the element of stone was used in memorial celebration of passages as well as the foundation for sacrament and rites such as circumcision. But the first miracles of Jesus reveal his relationship with water. Water transformed for him, held him up, listened to his voice, submitted to him, moved to suit his pleasure and will.

Baptism is not a creed or a human expression, rather, it is the Faith that underlies, borders, flows through, supports and showers its blessings on all through the one Lord, Jesus Christ. But baptism can never be the end of the quest. If it is, it becomes an idol.

Baptism is not a symbol that sets us apart in the world. Love is the attitude that defines us as Christians. Love, that comes to us in the invisible Person of the Holy Spirit in the water, is the action or work that marks us in the world as believers. In immersion the created essence of water perpetuates Truth. Unlike circumcision the mark we receive in baptism is hidden to human eyes, and beyond the moment of immersion, incapable of serving as a visual testimony of individual faith.

The water has its ways.

Until an individual can explain faith as well as he can explain the atmosphere – we must baptize on the compulsion of faith and grace alone. When, on the spiritual journey, humankind returns to the water – the womb of the Creator – she is returning into the Source of life. This process of the Spirit is no more symbolic than our births and deaths and just as compulsive and frightening. The laws of nature do not require us to “understand” everything about the atmosphere in order to receive life from our next breath and the laws of the Spirit, in a similar way, infuse the soul who longs to awaken in the arms of the Creator. Since we cannot know the fullness of the Spirit’s work in water immersion, we cannot “fully” prepare any soul for baptism. So baptism can be entered by anyone who recognizes the voice of his Creator and runs toward it.

Come to the Water ...

Nature imitates herself. A grain thrown into good ground brings forth fruit: a principle thrown into a good mind brings forth fruit. Everything is created and conducted by the same Master, –

the root, the branch, the fruits, – the principles, the consequences.
-Blaise Pascal

Immersion into the water expresses the purifying blood of Christ which covers us completely, hiding us in him and providing a way into the Family of God. The paradox of water being both an attraction and a danger implies that the mystical ascent of the soul is fraught with danger to both body and soul.

Therefore, since nothing about baptism expresses me or my affiliation to a particular denomination, arguments about the essentiality of baptism and the necessity of baptism are diversionary exercises that succeed only in distracting the contemplative seeker from the real truth – that baptism is not our method – it is God's. And it saves us from ourselves.

Immersion in the Holy Spirit

by Edward Fudge

Almost 2,000 years ago, Jesus Christ made atonement for sin and ascended to heaven to be exalted at God's right hand. Based on Jesus' accomplishments, God began to pour out the Holy Spirit on Jesus' followers on the earth. This gift, promised by God through the ancient prophets and again through Jesus, was nothing other than immersion in the very Presence and power of God and of his exalted Christ. Careful Bible study reveals that the same blessing is available to every believer in Jesus today who will seek, ask, and knock.

The Need for Pentecost

The greatest need of every Christian and every church today is a sustained consciousness of the personal Presence and power of the Living God. The Presence of God was the highest aim of Old Testament devotion (Psalm 27:4, 8; 42:1-2), and it will be the greatest blessing in the New Heavens and New Earth (Revelation 22:4).

The ancient Hebrew Prophets looked forward to a time of salvation, joy and praise – a time when God would dwell among his people (Isaiah 12:1-6; Ezekiel 36:228-28; Hosea 14:4-7; Joel 2:23-27; Micah 7:7-9, 14-15; Zephaniah 3:14-17; Zechariah 2:4-5, 10-11).

The means of God's Presence then would be God's Spirit (Isaiah 32:15-18; Ezekiel 39:29). God promised through Joel: "Thus you will know that I am in the midst of Israel, and that I am the LORD your God and there is no other And it will come about after this that I will pour out My Spirit on all mankind, and your sons and daughters will prophesy, your old men will dream dreams, your young men will see visions. And even on the male and female servants I will pour out My Spirit in those days. And I will display wonders in the sky and on the earth. . . . And it will come about that whoever calls on the name of the LORD will be delivered [or "saved"] . . . even among [those] whom the LORD calls" (Joel 2:27 – 30, 32)

The Background for Pentecost

Pentecost is part of the progressive biblical story of God drawing near to his people. The Old Testament reveals God over us. Throughout these earlier Scriptures, God is the creating, covenant-making, redeeming, judgment God. He is high and holy – removed from his people. The Gospels reveal God among us. Through the miracle of the Incarnation, we see and know God in the man Jesus of Nazareth. In his humanity, Jesus makes atonement for sin and removes all barriers between God and his people. Pentecost reveals God in us. Shortly before his betrayal and death, John's Gospel tells us, Jesus promised to return to his followers in the Spirit (John 14:18-21, 23). After his resurrection, Jesus promised his abiding Presence until the End (Matthew 28:20). The "signs" which Mark mentions are nothing but manifestations of Christ's own Presence and the coming of God's kingdom (Mark 16:17-18). Luke also emphasizes the continuity between Jesus' past activity in the flesh, reported in the Gospel of Luke, and his ongoing activity through the Spirit after Jesus ascends to heaven (Acts 1:1-2). The New Testament almost closes with Jesus again offering his own spiritual Presence to his people on earth (Revelation 3:19-20).

Although God's covenant people experience him as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, there is but one God, whom we see most clearly in Jesus of Nazareth (John 14:9). Similarly, to receive the Holy Spirit is to receive the Spirit of Jesus. We need never to be frightened of the Holy Spirit.

We may gladly welcome the Spirit of Jesus in his fullness, with whatever he may bring and do. It was fear, which prompted the elder of one congregation in the 1960s to exclaim: "We don't want any of that Holy Spirit stuff in this church!" He did not realize that a church without the Holy Spirit is a church without Christ or his Father.

The Blessing of Pentecost

The gift of Pentecost is the privilege given to every believer to be immersed in the personal Presence and power of the Living God and the Spirit of the crucified, risen and ascended Jesus Christ. This immersion in the personal Presence and power of God and the risen Jesus Christ is for all of God's people, not only a select few. That is strikingly clear in the preaching of John the Baptist, forerunner to Jesus.

"All the country of Judea was going out to him, and all the people of Jerusalem. And they were being immersed by him in the River Jordan ... And he was ... saying, 'After me comes One who is mightier than I, and I am not even fit to stoop down and untie the thongs of His sandals. I immersed you with water; but He will immerse you with the Holy Spirit'" (Mark 1:5, 7-8).

John here promises the crowds at large representing "all the country of Judea" and "all the people of Jerusalem" that Jesus would immerse them with the Holy Spirit. Jesus does not call his first apostle until seven weeks after this occasion – in Galilee, not in Judea (Mark 1:13-16). The most natural reading of Acts 1-2 strongly suggests that the outpouring or immersion of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost included the whole company of believers, not only the Apostles. Chapter one portrays the 12 disciples gathered (1:15). "They" remain the most obvious subject of Luke's verbs through the Pentecostal outpouring (1:23, 24, 26; 2:1-4).

The Gospels and Acts carefully distinguish immersion in the Spirit from immersion in water (Mark 1:7-8; Acts 1:5). The two may also vary in time. Sometimes immersion in the Spirit accompanies water immersion (Acts 2:38; 9:17-18); at others it precedes it (10:43-48); at others it comes afterward (1:14-17; 19:1-7). Yet this biblical distinction between immersion in water and immersion in the Holy Spirit never minimizes the need for – or the importance of – immersion in water (Acts 10:43-48). The two differ in purpose, for water immersion relates to forgiveness of sins, while immersion in the Spirit relates to empowerment for service.

The Diversity of Pentecost

Anyone who reads the Book of Acts very carefully will be struck with the enormous diversity which Luke reports, both in his descriptions for the Pentecostal experience and also in its effects. We find at least nine different expressions in Acts for this same blessing. Luke speaks of being immersed with or an immersion of the Spirit (Acts 1:5; 11:16), of being filled with the Holy Spirit (2:4, 4:8; 9:17; 13:9, 52), of the Spirit being poured forth (2:17-18), or falling on (8:16; 10:44; 11:15) or coming on (19:6) someone; of the gift of the Spirit or the Spirit being given (2:38; 11:17; 15:8); of the promise of the Spirit (1:4; 2:39); of times of refreshing (3:19); and of someone receiving the Spirit (19:2).

Luke also combines, overlaps, and interchanges various clusters of these descriptive terms. He identifies the Jerusalem outpouring on Pentecost as the promise, being immersed with the Holy Spirit, the Holy Spirit coming upon, being filled with the Spirit and the gift of the Spirit (Acts 1:4-8; 2:4-39). The Samaritan outpouring he portrays as receiving the Spirit and the Spirit falling on, which he contrasts with water immersion (8:14-17). Luke describes the Ceasarean outpouring as the gift or God's giving, the Spirit being poured out and falling, the Spirit received, and as an immersion (10:44-48; 11:15-17; 15:7-8). And the Ephesian outpouring, says Luke, involved the Holy Spirit coming on people who received it (19:1-7).

The Book of Acts also reports great diversity in the effects of immersion in the Holy Spirit. Luke mentions at least a dozen different manifestations of that experience:

1. Wind and fire (2:2-3).
 - Spiritual praise in language naturally unknown to the speaker (2:4-8; 10:46; 19:6). Even at Pentecost, those who speak in other tongues are “declaring the wonders of God,” not preaching the gospel as such (2:4, 11 NIV). Similarly, the Cornelius household was “exalting God” (10:46).
 - Signs and wonders (2:43; 6:8).
 - The house was shaken (4:31).
 - A vision of heaven and of the ascended Lord Jesus (7:55).
 - An overwhelming sense of awe (2:43).

- An extraordinary spirit of sharing and generosity (2:44-46; 4:32).
- Gladness and joy (2:46; 13:52).
- A praise-filled life (2:47).
- Bold proclamation about Jesus as Savior and Lord (2:14ff; 4:8-12; 5:31-32; 6:8-10).
- Wonderful cleansing of the soul (15:9).
- Prophesying, or supernaturally delivering a message from God (2:17-18; 19:6).

This scriptural diversity makes two things clear. First, that when someone is immersed in the Holy Spirit, we may expect any of these manifestations, or any others which may please God who is sovereign and who gives the Spirit. Second, that we must not require any particular manifestation on any given occasion, or judge the experience to be inauthentic solely by the absence of any particular biblical effect.

According to Acts, immersion in the Spirit is not a one-time event. Luke identifies this experience by the same clusters of descriptive terms in Jerusalem, Samaria, Caesarea and at Ephesus (Acts 1-2; 8; 10-11; 15; 19). This immersion in the divine Presence and power may also be repeated throughout one's Christian life. The earliest believers were "filled" again and again with the Holy Spirit – a term which Luke uses interchangeably with immersion in the Spirit.

Pentecost marked the beginning – not the end – of the time when God would pour out his Spirit on all flesh. No New Testament writer suggests that the immersion of the Holy Spirit or any of its manifestations were temporary, or that they were intended to end with some period or event now ancient to us. Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever (Hebrews 13:8). Jesus promised his Presence throughout the present age (Matthew 28:20). Believers across the centuries have testified to this same experience, among them such notable mainstream evangelists as John and Charles Wesley in the 18th century, and Charles G. Finney and Dwight L. Moody in the 19th century. God has been pouring out his Spirit for nearly two millennia now, on sons and daughters, young and old, servant and master, just as he began to do on the Day of Pentecost.

The Invitation to Pentecost

According to Joel's prophecy, John's proclamation, and Jesus' promise, this Pentecost experience is the privilege of everyone who believes in Jesus as Lord and Savior and who follows him. It is God's empowerment for "you and your children," for as many as God will "call" (Joel 2:32; Acts 2:39). It is appropriate, therefore, for us to conclude these thoughts with a biblical question, promise, and invitation.

The question is one Paul asked a group of disciples, "Have you received the Holy Spirit since you believed?" (Acts 19:2). He did not ask, "What do you know about the Holy Spirit?" but "Have you received the Holy Spirit?" We might ask ourselves the same question today. The promise is from Jesus, who pledged that God would give the Holy Spirit to all who persistently "ask," "seek" and "knock" (Luke 11:9-10, 13). The invitation is also the Savior's, who himself stands knocking at the door of his people's hearts, waiting and willing to share his intimate Presence (Revelation 3:19-20). Will you say Yes to Jesus today?

Invite him now – through his Spirit – to fill your heart, to shape your life, to gift and to empower you for service. He will immerse you with the very Presence of God, who will pour out his Spirit on you and fill you with that Spirit to overflowing. This is the Father's gift and promise to you as a believer, that the Spirit may fall on you, come on you. You can receive this personal Presence and power of God and of the exalted Jesus Christ, just as the first band of believers did on the Day of Pentecost. Indeed, these are times of refreshing for the people of God!

Horrific Cult Began with Sublime Vision of Virgin Mary

by Greg Taylor

January – April, 2000

The horror that left an estimated 929 cult members dead began with a sublime vision of Mother Mary, according to the sinister legend told by survivors of the Movement for the Restoration of the Ten Commandments massacre.

While world news organizations have tried to connect this tragedy to rebels and politics in the Great Lakes Region of Uganda, cult prophets instead claimed it to be connected directly to God. Ten years ago, cult co-leader and self-proclaimed prophet Credonia Mwerinde, 48, told followers that she saw a vision of Mother Mary in a backwoods cave in the mountains of Southwestern Uganda. Whatever Mwerinde did see that day in the cave led to the most destructive religious cult slaughter in recent world history. The March 17 Kanungu church inferno, which killed as many as 500 people, mostly women and children – and subsequent discoveries of more than 400 corpses in five mass graves at cult branches, has shaken Uganda at the roots, sparking cult hysteria and government monitoring of legitimate Christian churches.

What We Learned from Kanungu

I spoke with an ex-cult member, Mary Mugisha, 28, in Kanungu, less than a mile from the cult compound where 500 died. Telling me about life in the cult, Mugisha sat in front of a rough painting of a crucifix on her mud wall. Sadly, the picture of Christ imprinted by cult leaders on followers like Mugisha was even more distorted than the crude painting of Jesus on the earthen wall of Mugisha's hut. A member of the infamous Movement for the Restoration of the Ten Commandments from 1989-94, Mugisha was warned to escape the cult before it was too late.

“Leaders had locked me up in a storeroom for a week without food because I spoke,” Mugisha told me. “We were not to speak with out permission. My sister rolled peanuts under the door for me to eat. One of the leaders helped me to escape and warned me never to return.”

Though within sight of the cult compound in these terraced, scenic hills filled with banana plants, Mugisha – which means “grace” in her language – said she is still afraid to return to the site of the massacre, even to mourn her four siblings who died in the inferno. “If others go there with me, I may go,” Mugisha said.

The Marks of a Cult

The Movement for the Restoration of the Ten Commandments followed the characteristic lines of a pseudo-Christian cult. Leaders claim special revelation inconsistent with the biblical witness, exercise absolute authority over the group, and enforce their rule by physical and spiritual abuse and a secretive compound lifestyle.

The groups that get attention are the ones that murder their own disciples. Christian churches and democratic governments agree that this act is heinous and reprehensible. Before such a calamity as Kanungu occurs, however, defining cults is difficult for churches. Many in Uganda have been

asking, or have been afraid to ask, “What is a cult?” One of the problems with defining a cult is that there are many types: religious: political, philosophical, and artistic. Many worldwide Christian leaders define a religious pseudo-Christian cult as an organized group, led by a self-declared prophet, which holds classically heretical views about Christ, biblical authority, revelation, and eschatology and uses manipulation, fear, and abuse to promote their aberrant or unorthodox views.

Some Christians, on the other hand, fear overstepping their own authority to judge groups that call themselves Christian. Doctrines can provide clues of a cultic emphasis, but the most important characteristic of a cult is where the group places its authority. While showing Jinja area Christians photos of the burned rubble at Kanungu, I told them the first step the Movement for the Restoration of the Ten Commandments took to becoming a cult was to cast aside the authority of Christ and scripture and to locate their authority in men and their dreams.

Special Revelation

Self-proclaimed prophets of the cult, Joseph Kibwetere, 68, and Credonia Mwerinde, 48, claimed special revelation and total authority over their several thousand followers. Visions were fascinating to them and considered more weighty authority than scripture. They warned that the world would see doom because of failing to keep the Ten Commandments. Cult co-leader Joseph Kibwetere’s failed prophecy that Jesus would come in 2000 created anarchy among followers who had sold possessions and laid the proceeds at leaders’ feet to await Christ’s return. “Credonia Mwerinde” was the treasurer, and we would go and put money on the table in front of her,” Mugisha said. “(Mwerinde and Kibwetere) said that when we sold all our property, the world would be destroyed, but when the year 2000 came, the group started to complain and rise up against the leaders. I think that’s why they burned them,” Mugisha said.

Authority

Rather than being led by scripture and the Holy Spirit, cult followers were led by fear and intimidation. Leaders demanded complete obedience to directives that they claimed to receive from Mother Mary. They were not allowed to have Bibles and discouraged from reading anything without permission. “Mwerinde was really the one in charge of the whole cult,” Mugisha said. “She called herself Head of the Program.”

Mwerinde, with the help of Usula Kamuhangi, created the ‘Temple of Mary Church’ in the early ’80s after the first vision, then official opened the Movement for the Restoration of the Ten Commandments in 1990, with Kibwetere as the ostensible leader. Kibwetere claimed he also received a vision from Mother Mary, telling him to lead the worldwide restoration to obey the Ten Commandments.

Mugisha told me she had no choice except to join the group in 1989 because she attended the primary school where the cult compound is located in Kanungu. Mugisha remembers being punished for rebelling against leaders’ authority.

“They put me on dried banana leaves and set them on fire. They said this would chase away the spirit of my father,” Mugisha said. She believes her father, also a follower, was poisoned by Mwerinde, his own sister, in 1989 for quarreling with her.

Abusive Leadership

The Movement for the Restoration of the Ten Commandments was very secretive and abusive. “Leaders separated children from their parents, husbands from their wives. They moved them to other camps. You could not ask where someone was without being punished,” Mugisha said. “As a punishment for leaving the group, leaders burned my uncle’s house. They said Mother Mary burned the house because my uncle deserted the group. He built another house, and they burned that one also,” Mugisha said.

Cult leaders began in March this year calling members, ex-members, and neighbors to their cult headquarters in remote Kanungu, Uganda, where they said they wanted to dedicate a new church they had recently built. They sent for ex-member Mugisha, who now lives in Uganda’s capital, Kampala, 400 kilometers from Kanungu. “I was trying to get the fare to take a bus to Kanungu, because they were calling all members and ex-members to come dedicate the new church that they built. I didn’t get money in time, so I didn’t go March 17,” Mugisha said.

Had Mugisha gone to the dedication she might have been one more victim in the Kanungu inferno.

What We Lost at Kanungu

The Kanungu cult massacre has left a broad path of destruction. As investigators unearthed bodies in at least five mass graves, cult panic has hit Uganda, and police have dispersed religious groups suspected of having connections with cultic groups. Churches are scrambling to secure letters of approval from church boards and local government so they are not confused with the Movement for the Restoration of the Ten Commandments cult. Nick Fouts, who went with me to Kanungu, said one of the young village Churches of Christ near his home in Mbarara had suspended meetings until they could get letters from local church and government leaders confirming that they are not connected with the cult.

Some government officials are wrongly associating charismatic and Pentecostal churches with the Kanungu cult. A Ugandan parliament member said, “If I had the power I would outlaw these cults and sects and leave only the mainstream churches and Muslims.” In the early ’70s, Idi Amin banned all religious groups except for Roman Catholics, Protestants (primarily Anglicans), and Muslims, but this ban has since been lifted.

Ugandans have lost faith in many of their religious leaders. Government has lost confidence in churches. But maybe this will turn us all again to our true Lord. Perhaps we will again ask what it means to be a true servant of Christ, what it means to lead a body of believers. Maybe all of us in Uganda will again ask “Who is Jesus Christ?” and “What does it mean to follow Him?”

What Kanungu Burned in Our Minds

As I stood with Nick Fouts at the site where 500 Ugandans were burned to death, I tried to imagine what life must have been like in Kanungu. Had real life ever existed here? There were two flower arrangements on top of mounds where the remains of the dead were buried in mass. Buildings were abandoned, and idol-like statues of Jesus, Mary and the original landowner of the cult property were strewn about the children’s school classroom. The pit latrine, where six bodies

were found after the church fire, still emitted a pungent odor, and I wondered if more bodies were still buried nearby.

The Kanungu cult fire and killings have scorched the religious idealism of Ugandans. I, too, have been deeply affected by what I saw at Kanungu, calling me to thank God for my own “Restoration” heritage that stands in opposition to such abhorrent cults. Our authority and only head is Christ, our guide for faith and practice is the Bible, which we seek to understand through the Holy Spirit as God directs our lives and ministries. And when all the gold, costly stones and wood of our churches go up in smoke, our foundation will be revealed for what it is.

In Restoration history, we also had a church, which committed suicide. But this was a very different termination. On June 28th, 1804, Barton W. Stone, John Thompson and David Purviance wrote the figurative death certificate for the former Springfield Presbytery with a document they titled the “Last Will and Testament of the Springfield Presbytery.” They wrote: “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.”

The Springfield group encouraged their brethren not to mourn over the death of the Presbytery of Springfield but to “betake themselves to the Rock of Ages, and follow Jesus for the future,” to read their Bibles and see the judgment of God, and to prepare for death before it is too late.

The Kanungu-based Movement for the Restoration of the Ten Commandments left a legacy of death. Our Restoration movement, on the other hand, has laid down its own authority many times over, writing its own death certificate, and producing a legacy of new life with each deadly stroke of the Restoration editor’s pen or proclamation from the Restorationist’s pulpit.

Is it time some of our churches again write a Last Will and Testament?

The Invisible Grief

Anna M. Griffith

January – April, 2000

This time the situation was slightly better. Four women attended the earlier one.

This situation extends far beyond our fellowship. In 1997 the annual meeting of the AAR/SBL was held in San Francisco. One widely publicized session organized by the Centers for Disease Control was a panel discussion exploring how faith communities and the government could collaborate in working toward HIV/AIDS prevention. The CDC had tried for years to educate the public on HIV/AIDS prevention, but had achieved only moderate success because the most effective key for prevention lies in changing behaviors. As a governmental agency, they were prohibited from teaching morals. However, they wisely recognized that behavior modification lies in homes and faith communities, so they targeted this meeting for this important dialogue.

They scheduled the meeting for the very best time, reserving a large banquet room that would seat several hundred people. Only six people attended. The disappointment of the organizers and presenters was palpable. Worse, they have not endeavored such collaboration since then.

In churches, the “can’t talk about it” problem is perpetuated with a vicious cycle. Well-meaning church leaders sincerely believe that “we don’t have a problem here” because they have never heard anyone talk about it. Families believe that they cannot disclose their pain because they have never heard AIDS mentioned from the pulpit, discussed in a Bible class, or even discussed in their more intimate circles. When the topic fails to surface in church leadership circles, it simply becomes one that we cannot talk about. Another problem facing us in the Church of Christ – maybe even unique to us – is that of being “right.” In most of the contexts I knew about fifty years ago, we were God’s chosen people because we had figured out all of the “right” ways to do things. Because of this, we had been forgiven through baptism, and we simply would not sin any more. This viewpoint has always given us problems as to how to deal with sin. I have known a few people who march down the aisle at least once a month (or more often) so that the church can pray for the sins they have committed.

For me, the answer to this problem lies in 1 John 1:7 where the Greek verbs denote continuous action: if the Christian keeps on walking in the light, the blood of Jesus keeps on cleansing him or her. However, old convictions are hard to change. There can simply be no sin in the camp if we are “right.” However, if there is, we just won’t talk about it. This has been applied most rigorously to pregnancies outside marriage and AIDS.

Why Do We Feel So Inhibited in the Face of AIDS?

1) Fear

One of the more blatant reasons that “we can’t talk about it” is fear. Early in the epidemic, medical professionals truly were ignorant about the causes of AIDS and how it was spread. Much misinformation circulated, some in dramatic and sensational ways. Now we know that the

HIV virus is spread through bodily fluids and that, though infectious, it is not highly contagious – not contracted through casual contact. However, the early myths die very slowly.

I was under the impression that the level of fear was beginning to be negligible as more and more people become better educated and/or know someone who is seropositive. However, in the summer of 2000, I was lecturing to a group of graduate students who expressed the belief that we still “do not really know what causes AIDS,” and asked what I did to protect myself. Truly our level of fear puts AIDS on the taboo list. Only with difficulty do we discuss our deepest fears.

2) Ambiguities About Homosexuality

Most people in our nation associated AIDS with homosexuality. While the majority of new cases in recent years have been surfacing in heterosexual individuals, popular perspective still classifies AIDS as a “gay disease.” While Christians rightly adhere to the biblical injunctions against homosexuality, society is increasingly adamant that opposition to homosexuality is politically incorrect. Thus we take refuge in Ephesians 5:3-12 and refrain from discussing “such matters.” Truly, when I lecture about AIDS, people raise more questions about homosexuality (about which I know little) than AIDS (about which I know slightly more), but these should be two different issues.

3) Ambivalence About Death

Throughout history, death has been the ultimate enemy. The mysteries surrounding death – primarily revolving around whether there is an afterlife – and the futility of human efforts in postponing the inevitable have always made death a problematic subject. Every culture has ways of dealing with and speaking about death, some very carefully proscribed. However, twenty-first century North America is so pluralistic – so wide open to various cultural influences – that we do not in general have an ethnic consensus to help us deal with death and its issues. Various families and smaller communities often have established such traditions, but there is no consensus from the broader society.

In that wider social world, however, AIDS has forced at least one issue: It has led an entire generation of younger people to come to grips with their own mortality. In the natural course of life, that encounter usually occurs much later than it seems to be happening now. AIDS has filled the gap that an absence of war created, forcing us to contemplate our own mortality – often an uncomfortable exercise – so we avoid the topic. A truth that seems to be universally applicable: AIDS is not my (our) problem until it is my (our) problem.

Although death remains traumatic and difficult, in the church we usually deal with it more gracefully. Our deeply developed faith in Jesus death and resurrection and our vibrant belief in a glorious afterlife with the Father truly have removed the sting from death (1 Corinthians 15:50-58). However, the difficulties accompanying an AIDS death take us to a deeper, more universal level of difficulty.

4) Stigma

If we go the distance with a person with HIV disease – if we walk with him or her through the initial discovery until their death – we must be in accord with that person (Amos 3:3). To be in accord, society insists that “I’m OK; you’re OK,” but this presents a problem. “You have this

terrible disease; I don't. Therefore, I'm OK, but you are not. To be 'in accord,' society insists that we whitewash your problem, pretend to go along together, and all will be well."

The dilemma one now faces, of course, is that if I'm OK and you're OK, why did Jesus have to die? In fact, not one of us is OK. If one of us – just one – could have lived a perfect life, we would not have needed the one Perfect Human Being – God Himself – to intercede in sacrifice for us. The fact that no one is OK puts us all in accord with each other, but we are all at odds with God's holy righteousness. We come at last to our Waterloo.

If it is painful for us to face our own morality, it is next to impossible to face our own shame. We are so steeped in it that we cannot speak of it. We cannot stare it down. We are not OK.

But Jesus is. Jesus took our shame, and clad only in that shame, he hung suspended between heaven and earth as though he were fit for neither. He looked the enemy in the face and overcame death by the power of his own incorruptible life. Thus we have no choice but to take our stand at the foot of the Cross, bringing our shame and inadequacy (for that is all we have), and allow the blood of Christ to cover us.

5) Walking Alongside

If we walk alongside a person with AIDS, we must be broken enough to realize that God sees us both the same way – clothed only with Jesus' blood and lifted up again with his grace, as being new creations or having the potential to become such. If we cannot talk about AIDS (or any other taboo condition), the reason is that we have bought into society's mindset and ignored the scandal of the Cross. Society says, "We're all OK." Many Christians believe, "We're OK; you're not." But Christians who are awed by the scandal of the Cross believe that we can all be OK through that grace. Those who can't talk about AIDS and thereby stigmatize those who are affected simply are not acknowledging the power of the Cross – not in their own lives or as having the potential of regeneration in another's life.

6) A Way Out

Preachers and church leaders, we need your help. Please help us rediscover what an insult sin is to God's holiness; see clearly how sinful we really are; realize how universally we have all sinned – not just the marginalized people we would like to categorize as sinners not to take pride in "cleaning ourselves up;" understand the total truth of the meaning of 2 Corinthians 5:14-20; comprehend the height, length, and breadth of God's grace – the scandal of the Cross; understand that God in Christ has taken all of that scandal on himself; fathom what it means to be OK, not because we have analyzed ourselves into numbness to the scandal of sin, but because Jesus died and is now risen.

7) The Church: A Place for Healing

A person who is a Christian living with AIDS told me recently, "I'm just so tired of being the only sinner around." The reasons for this plaintive cry must be silenced. We are all sinners, saved by grace. When we can learn this, the church will become a hospital where we can all heal and be healed rather than a morgue where we shoot our wounded. We will be able to expose our sin, look it in the face, and find healing in the safe enclave of precious Christian fellowship. The invisible grief will then disappear.

The Gritty Truth

*by Rick Gamble
January – April, 2000*

One of the world's most beautiful buildings, the Taj Mahal, was built by Shah Jahan who ruled India for thirty years, beginning in 1628.

The white-marbled wonder was designed as a magnificent representation of the throne of God. It also served as a monument to the Emperor's cherished wife, Arjunand Begum, who was known by the title, Taj Mahal ("Crown of the Palace"). When construction began in 1631, the work was done by 20,000 stonemasons, gem cutters, and marble fitters. Even so, it took twenty-two years to finish the awesome structure, in which the Emperor's beloved was then buried.

But the Taj Mahal is in grave danger from a silent and insidious enemy. American President Bill Clinton described the problem eloquently during a recent visit. "Pollution has managed to do what 350 years of wars, invasions and natural disasters have failed to do," he said. "It has begun to mar the magnificent walls of the Taj Mahal."

Located in the north-central city of Agra, the fabled monument is surrounded. Human filth fills the city's main drain, diesel-fueled cars spew toxic fumes, and a ghastly, polluted pall hangs over the city. The situation is only worsened by the area's two million residents who must burn garbage and dung for heat because they have no stable source of power.

And so the white marble walls yellow and corrode. In the 1980s, environmentalists petitioned the Supreme Court to shut down 200 local iron foundries, but many remain open with the support of defiant workers. "They say if the Taj Mahal is going to make them jobless ... please take it out of this town and let us live in peace," says tour guide Rajiv Saxena. Two years ago, the city planted trees around the monument and banned all but electric vehicles from its vicinity. But critics say if more isn't done, corrosion will continue.

In the same way, the church is extremely vulnerable to the effects of the pollution surrounding her. Though she, too, was designed as a representation of God's throne, her original strength and purity is menaced by the moral environment that envelopes us. That's why we must continually and fervently petition our Supreme Judge for authority to shut down the sources and forces of spiritual pollution that threaten us.

But don't expect help from those in the world. People enveloped in impurities get used to the environment, and they don't take kindly to those who threaten their way of life. Like the people of Agra, those around us have no stable source of power in their lives. It's no surprise they've learned to rely on garbage.

But the bigger threat is that we, ourselves, will carry the pollution inside the church. Look for signs of creeping compromise in the way you think, act, and live. "Don't you realize that all of you together are the temple of God and that the Spirit of God lives in you?" writes the apostle

Paul. “God will bring ruin upon anyone who ruins this temple. For God’s temple is holy, and you Christians are that temple” (1 Corinthians 3:16, 17).

When we’re willing, God can keep us clean and renewed from the inside. But if we become careless and too accommodating the church – like the Taj Mahal – will become little more than a dingy mausoleum for the Emperor’s beloved.

Grace, Peace and a Flaccid Fleece

*by Jane Montgomery Gibson
January – April, 2000*

Did you see Bruce Willis in “the Kid”? He plays an embittered, middle-aged image consultant who inexplicably encounters his younger self, a chubby little “loser” who both embarrasses and horrifies the sleek business shark his adult self has become. Willis’ character, Russ Duritz, doesn’t remember much of his childhood, except that it was awful and left him with a cold disdain for his aging dad. Neither he nor his little ghost from childhood past understands why or how they could possibly be thrown together into the same moment in time, but little Rusty is even more aghast than grownup Russ. He can’t quite believe that his adult self isn’t married, isn’t a pilot, doesn’t even have the wonderful dog Chester that he just knew he would have when he grew up. The man’s detached, barren and elegantly cynical lifestyle is almost too terrible for the kid to comprehend; he pronounces the wealthy jet setter a “loser” himself. The two seem stuck with each other in Russ’ home, a wonderful Los Angeles mansion both beautiful and disturbing in its post-modern composition of symmetrical style and subdued color; it serves as a metaphor for Russ himself. Gorgeous and grotesque, elegant and empty.

The movie works on several levels; children as well as adults in my party laughed at the smart lines and smarmy scenes – that is, until we really saw and understood the pain these two feel at discovering themselves so pitifully disappointing to their own expectations. I sat there suddenly tasting the bile of remembered shame, that terrible acid of ugly duckling awkwardness we all feel at some point in childhood or adolescence. I hated the older Russ for his cruelty to and lack of sympathy for young Rusty. It was only later that I realized how like him I can be when thinking of myself, whether the me of third grade or the me of last week.

And I felt for both of them. The little boy was miserable because his dreams of becoming a better self someday were not going to come true. The man was miserable because that same former self reminded him of who he had been and might always be, no matter how hard he had worked to get rid of the “pathetic dweeb” he judged himself to have been. What little peace of mind either had had, looking at self had demolished it.

But what does Bruce Willis have to do with fleece? Or grace or peace, for that matter? Well, in fact, a lot. The movie’s obvious message is that we must “embrace our Inner Child” and seek self-knowledge by remembering the past (which is all true; Christians just use different vocabulary for the same process and include words like “forgiveness” and “compassion”). But there are other tidbits of food for thought, moments when you can almost feel a gentle nudge from an unseen Friend sitting beside you. God can use some quite shameless ways to get our attention, especially in movie theatres. It’s nice and dark, we have to be quiet and still, and generally we pay attention – the way we used to do for sermons that long, remember?

The hint was in the word “peace.” We watch this handsome and sarcastic Russ Duritz slash and burn his way through a day, decimating the ego of everyone in his path with an almost admirable cleverness and ruthless disregard for who or how rich and important they might be. He’s a soul

assassin who employs exactly the same method by which the Romans conquered Celtic Britain in 60 A.D., according to the historian Tacitus: “[T]hey make a desolation and call it peace.” He’s trying desperately to capture peace and insulated himself from his past. We do that, all of us to different degrees and in various situations. We medicate the pain, buy the self-esteem, while away the time, even slash and burn like Russ and the Romans, sometimes. It’s peace we seek, but we may not know that, may not even know what to call the longing that drives us to such extremes. It may look like ambition, as it does in the life of fictitious Russ. It may look like faithfulness to our talent, or even like devotion to God. It can drive us to compromise, lull us into complacency or create such a restless heart that we demand our inheritance and go off to a foreign land to squander it all. Peace is a big and very important word. We need to learn to recognize it for what it really is and understand how it does and doesn’t come to us.

Paul opens each of his letters with the greeting “grace to you, and peace,” to Timothy he adds the word “mercy.” Not only is Paul modifying Grecian and Hebrew typical greetings for the mixed populace that became the Church, he is also wishing them the essentials of Christian life, I believe. Like bread and water. Or bread and wine. And that, of course, is what Russ Duritz doesn’t understand. He doesn’t have a clue about the peace that comes from experiencing God’s grace. Too often, we don’t either.

And that’s why we resort to the fleece. I understand a person like Gideon all too well. He needs just one more sign that God is with him and that everything’s OK and that he’s in good and that he can do it and on and on; the insecurities never stop. It amazes me that God is so patient with Gideon, while he stands there almost asking the Sovereign Creator and Ruler of the Universe to heel and roll over and do fleece tricks. Make it wet, make it dry, do this, do that, prove to me that You’re there. Sound familiar? It does to me. Not that I’m that “wicked and perverse generation, always seeking a sign,” mind you. I just need to know that I’m all right and God’s really forgiven and forgiving me. We shouldn’t be too hard on Gideon; he’s about to march into battle. But so do I, every day.

Actually, there’s a character in the movie who tries to explain a little bit about grace and peace to Russ. She’s a fluffy bit of fleece played by actress Jean Smart, a news anchorwoman named Deirdre whom he has met at the first of the movie and helped, although grudgingly, with career advice. Deirdre is one of those rare people who, as the French would say, “feels good in her skin.” Aside from suggesting to Russ that little Rusty must be here to help him in some way, she tells him more than what the movie-makers probably intend for her to convey. It’s the same message that the English mystic Julian of Norwich gave to ancient Christians: All shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of things shall be well. She says that if Little Deirdre were suddenly standing before her, she would scoop her up in her arms and tell her, “Darling, don’t you worry. Everything’s going to turn out just fine.” After all, she reasons to Russ, how many of us really become the astronauts or prima ballerinas we envision as children? And it’s all right.

I thought of the strange way I was absolutely convinced, as a small child, that I was going to have a really good life, going to be a great success as a Christian – after all, nothing else really mattered. My parents gave me that idea. They exuded confidence in me; they seemed to enjoy me and like the things I said and did (before those rebellious years, of course). They seemed so sure that I would do well at whatever I tried. And if I didn’t, “Oh, well, you’ll do better next

time!” My mother must have scooped me up a thousand times and said the same thing as kind-hearted Deirdre. That’s why, I realized as I watched the scene, that I love my friend Larry Hall’s vision of God standing at our side each morning, saying, “Ready! Get set! I proclaim you the winner! GO!” It resonates so perfectly with what I’d been made to feel as a dearly loved child. I’m convinced now that God truly wants us to feel that way. Or at least act it until we eventually come to believe it. Little Rusty needed to know that he would someday be a winner, that he was already a winner in God’s eyes. He needed peace. And Russ needed to remember what he had been through as a child and see it through adult eyes to understand that the bad wasn’t his fault. He needed peace as well. Grace, peace and flaccid fleece.

That’s it. Accept grace from God, extend it to ourselves and to others in forgiveness and compassion, and peace – true peace – comes naturally. We’re forgiven. Trust God to make us who we are meant to be and take us where he wants us to go, and we can face the future with that “peace that passes understanding.” We’re being guided. Believe that he’s really making all things work for our good, and we face the bad, looking for what good there is beyond it. We’re protected. God doesn’t really scold Gideon for needing stupid fleece tricks, but his having given us his Holy Spirit might put us in a different category, as far as expectations go. Jesus says that his Father will give us his Spirit if we ask; perhaps the more Spirit we have, the less fleece we need.

This “grace and peace” combination gives us power to obey, not only in following, but also in resting. I saw in Russ Duritz’s frantic pace a type of headlong rush away from himself, away from any uneasy solitude that might give him too much time to think deep thoughts. You just can’t keep a sabbath unless you’re truly at peace, accepting of grace, and aware of God’s delight in you. The Accuser won’t let you rest.

Sometimes the “grace and peace” living comes easy, when things are going well and I’m surrounded by loving friends and family, cheering me on. But then there are those moments when I know my sin is forgiven but I’m still suffering its consequences, or if I’m under attack when I thought I had been doing my best. We’re told to pursue peace with everyone. And that would certainly seem to include ourselves. I tend to let shame and guilt and grief at sin so overwhelm me that I “make a desolation” of my heart and then try to “call it peace.” I march across my own soul like a Roman legion and hack away at every part of myself that looks the least bit ugly that day, impatient and fearful that I’ll never grow, never be a better person. Like Russ Duritz making snide fat jokes about his pudgy little child self, I put myself on a diet of penitence and try to lose the deadweight of remembered failures. I need to learn more about what Christian peace really is, and how to keep accepting the grace that plants it in my heart. I need to keep noticing fleece that God puts out in the morning dew even before I’ve asked for it, whenever he knows I’ll need the sight of it that day. “The Kid” was just a movie; I don’t get fixed in one big “Holy Smokes!” epiphany and stay fixed for good the way Russ and Rusty do. My kid appears all too often, some days. But she comes back to me with a Friend standing beside her, holding her little hand in his and smiling at grownup me with gentle humor, with “grace to me, and peace.” He has healed all the old hurts, and the new ones before they happen. Now, there’s a happy ending.

Refiner's Fire

by Mollie Spaulding
January – April, 2000

On Thursday, May 4, 2000, the U.S. Park Service started a controlled burn in Bandelier National Monument, near Los Alamos, New Mexico. What was meant to “fireproof” the forests by burning underbrush, soon became an out-of-control wildfire.

As my husband Wade and I left church on Sunday, May 7, we noticed a plume of smoke coming over the Jemez Mountains, southwest of Los Alamos. We did not think much of it, however, and had dinner at a local restaurant before going home. We tried to take naps that afternoon, but the smell of smoke had become so strong that we were unable to sleep.

We prepared for NUNYA (our Sunday night devotional with the youth group) and set out for the park where we would meet the kids. During our games and fried chicken supper, smoke billowed over us and planes began flying overhead. This was something new; Los Alamos is a “no fly zone” due to the National Labs.

Just as we began our devotional, a man stopped by our circle and asked us if we knew that the town had started an evacuation. After another few minutes, we dismissed the kids, and I went home to watch the news. Still not worried, Wade decided to take a couple of the boys to play their usual Sunday night basketball game.

I was nervous, so before he left Wade made a plan and we determined what each of us would pack if we did have to evacuate. He took the cell phone and told me to call him if the order came to evacuate.

At about 7:45 p.m. an evacuation of the Western area where we live was ordered, and I began to follow our plan. I called Wade to come home but he had to take some kids home from basketball. I called our parents while I packed. I was beginning to panic as I spoke to my dad. “Hey,” he said. “You are all right. Get some clothes for a couple of days and your photo albums. Then you take care of Simeon (our Weimeraner). Wade will take care of you. God will take care of both of you.”

Wade came home and we packed everything we could get into our two cars. As we waited in traffic to get down the main hill, I petted our dog, to calm both our nerves, and prayed, “God take care of my home” over and over. Bill and Jennifer McKerley, an elder from our congregation and his wife, had called to invite us to stay with them in White Rock. White Rock is a “bedroom” community for Los Alamos, and is ten miles down the hill.

For the next few days, we stayed glued to the television, watching the local cable channel and listening to the local AM radio station. BY Wednesday, they believed the fire was coming to a close. Wade took Simeon back to our house and spent the day in Los Alamos, rounding up and

making contact with the youth group. Then at 1:30 p.m. the call came to evacuate the entire city: Los Alamos was evacuated by 6:00 p.m.

That evening our congregation met at a home in White Rock. Wade and I had heard the news that the entire Western area was lost in flames. One of our members, Jobie Ogburn, already had a list of where families from our congregation had gone. We had a devotional of singing and praying. I was crying; I thought our house was gone, but it was good to be with family.

Then the relative safety we had been feeling was shattered when the call to evacuate White Rock came at 2:00 a.m. Wade slept with the television on that night and heard the news first. We woke everyone else in the house and were almost packed by the time they got dressed. While still packing, Wade called Tim Stidham, our preacher and Wade's close friend, to see where they were going. Tim told us where to meet in Santa Fe.

To add to our growing misery, Wade had driven our truck into Los Alamos that Wednesday but was with one of the kids on North Mesa when the call to evacuate Los Alamos came. The police began trafficking people down the canyon, so Wade was not allowed to get the truck. Then, since our car was packed so full with our clothes and stuff, we had to leave Simeon in White Rock. We filled lots of water pails and gave him the rest of the dog food and left quickly. Simeon cried in the back yard; he knew something was wrong. I cried for a long time, again chanting a prayer, "I don't care about the house anymore. Please protect my puppy."

Wade and I sat in traffic for an hour before getting out of White Rock. When we reached our rendezvous, the Wal-Mart parking lot in Santa Fe, Jobie was there with a list. Our congregation had been stopping by all night, giving her cell phone numbers and addresses where we could be reached in Albuquerque. We gave her our cell phone number and she gave us our "contact" in Albuquerque, the sister of one of our members. Wade and I set out for my cousin's house in Albuquerque. We hit the sack that morning around 6:00 a.m.

The next day was spent watching television. The Albuquerque stations had reporters in Los Alamos and ran 24-hour broadcasts on the "Cerro Grande Fire," as it had been named. We watched as the fire ravaged our town, devouring homes. We kept trying to identify things, but there were no more landmarks that we could see from the helicopter's viewpoint. The Netherwood Church of Christ in Albuquerque set up meals for the evacuees, and Wade and I were anxious to see our friends. As we walked into the church building that night, everyone said our names joyfully, and I almost cried with happiness at being with those people. I hugged as many people as I could, sat down and talked with them, and generally enjoyed being with my family.

As the days passed, our meetings at the Netherwood church became very important to me. I felt out of place, and impotent. I kept expecting to wake up and find out that the fire was just a horrible nightmare. We all felt that way. But being together, seeing the faces of the people I love made me feel like everything was going to be okay. I remember thinking, "If we can just all get together, it'll be alright."

By Saturday, we were being sent lists of homes destroyed. Our home was not on the list. For the first time in days, Wade and I began to hope that our house was still there. Others were not so lucky, however. Five families from our congregation lost their homes. Upon hearing that one of those families was going to the Glorietta Conference Center, which was housing evacuees, I said, "They shouldn't do that. They should be here with us!" I felt that our family should be together. We needed each other.

Some residents were able to go to their homes by the next Monday night. Wade and I went home on Thursday, the 18th, twelve days after our evacuation. Our home was not damaged. The worst that happened to my little family was that Simeon had to stay in the animal shelter in Santa Fe for a week. Animal Control picked him up in White Rock and kept him in Santa Fe. Countless animals were saved and sheltered during the evacuation by those wonderful, selfless people.

Life is not back to normal, though. Now, as I write, our church building is swarming with activity. The Churches of Christ Disaster Relief Effort of Nashville came to our aid almost immediately.

While we were still in Albuquerque, a representative came to inform us of the shipments that would be coming as soon as we got back in town. Our youth room is stacked full of brand new single and double mattresses and box springs. Our dining room is full of food boxes and cleaning supplies. A semi-truck parked outside is full of dinette sets and chests-of-drawers. We have volunteers from the congregation at the building almost 24 hours a day. The congregations in Espanola and Pojoaque have sent many strong backs to help unload the almost constant arrivals from Nashville. The deacon in charge of our treasury is working overtime with checks coming in from all over the country.

I have learned a few things since this all happened. I have learned what is really important to me in my home – my husband, my dog and our wedding pictures. I know what I can do without – pretty much everything else. I have learned that you can never underestimate the generosity of people. Northern New Mexico turned itself inside out to help the victims of the Cerro Grande fire.

And I learned this: in times of crisis, you need to be with your family. Not just your biological family, since both sets of our parents are in Texas, but with the people who love you and see you every day. I felt an indescribable need to be close to my congregation. When I saw the faces of my beloved friends in Albuquerque, I knew they were my family. I knew that we belonged to each other. A bond of love – the bond of Christ's blood connected us. I am a member of a beautiful, strong, resilient, out-pouring family. The love of Christ is shining, bursting out of everyone I see now.

So if you want to see what it is to be a true Christian family, a family committed to being Christ's light in this world, come see the family that's been refined by fire. God has refined us, is still refining us to be a mighty force in the world, in Los Alamos. We are a family of tragedy, refined by fire, shining and strong.

Praying the Psalms

by Lynn Anderson

January – April, 2000

“A lot of the time I feel like my prayers just bounce back off the ceiling,” Rex, a seasoned minister confessed, as a dozen Christian leaders leaned in around a table, eyes wide with the sense that something big hung in the air.

“Me too,” Jim chimed in, “And I hate to admit it but my prayer life is a roller coaster, with far more valleys than peaks. To be perfectly honest, sometimes my schedule is so hectic that I go weeks without really praying. Almost as if I have myself convinced that there are so many ‘more pressing’ things to do.”

“Wow, I thought I was the only one with a prayer problem,” James admitted. “Actually, at times I must be thinking I can do this on my own and – and while I’m ashamed to say it, I act as though prayer really doesn’t accomplish much anyway.”

Then Brad joined in, “Well, its a bit different for me; I usually stay pretty regular, and disciplined. But, I find myself praying the same old things over and over. My prayers get stale and rote.”

Rex spoke up again, “I hear that. Rote, stale, and repetitive. But what is worse, my prayers have become narrower and narrower. In fact, here lately they have been mostly about me: my needs, my family, and my ministry. Me. How do I break out of this?”

These lines were exchanged in a circle of people widely respected as effective ministers and men of God, not mere novices in the fait. Of course Rex and Jim and their friends, are not alone. Many Christ-followers, who really want to experience a vibrant prayer life, find themselves repeatedly stuck in the same ruts. Rote and stale and shallow prayers. Numbing, routinized repetition. Narrowing scope, till in many cases, prayers become little more than narcissistic laundry lists of self-centered concerns.

This is no small problem. So how do we break out of it? Most of us have discovered that New Year’s resolutions don’t help. Even if we hang with our promise till bitter January 30, by early spring numbness has overtaken our prayers. Resorting to gimmicks doesn’t get it either. Have you tried some of these: program your computer to remind you when it is “prayer time.” Or stand or jog or peddle an exercise bike to stay alert during prayer. Or use drive time to pray – and think of that red traffic light, not as an annoyance, but as a call to prayer. Or fill each square on your calendar with a person or project to pray for that day. Or – well, the list goes on. These gimmicks all help some, at least for a while so, if you find one helpful, use it. But understand that a human prayer gimmick may serve as a helpful crutch in the short run, but it will not revive your prayer life permanently. Believe me. I know. Been there. Done that.

How then do we nurture a sustained prayer life?

Rex piped up again, “At times I go beyond the gimmicks to some more substantial techniques. For example, for long periods I have relied on a small accountability group to keep my prayer life on track.” Most of the people in our circle agreed that they have found it difficult to impossible to even survive, much less grow spiritually without being part of a small group. But even when supported by an accountability circle, prayer can still grow repetitious and stale and self-consumed. Besides, given the mobile nature of today’s world, we do not always find our support group nearby.

Fresh prayer techniques show up nearly every day. Shelves in Christian bookstores groan under the weight of the latest volumes and tapes on prayer. Most of them are at least somewhat helpful. For example, you have likely prayed using the ACTS formula for a time (in prayer, begin with **adoration**. Then move to **confession**. Then **thanksgiving**. Then **supplication** for ourselves and on behalf of others.) That one has helped me – sometimes for long periods. But even the ACTS formula can become repetitious and self-consumed. As can the PUSH formula (Pray Until Something Happens). These and many other methods may be useful to a point. We definitely can learn from each other. But humanly-generated “prayer formulae” are always limited. Even the best technique will run its course and grow stale.

When it comes down to it, most of these widely-circulated prayer formulae are simply the published form of a personal devotional regimen that its author has found useful. And copycatting another person’s devotional disciplines is risky at best. We are not all wired up alike. So a regimen that may be very helpful in one person’s circumstances, given their unique temperaments and gifts, may not help you or me at all.

Besides, the truth is that sometimes not too long after a “prayer manual” is published, what its author thought was a sure-fire and universal “killer prayer technique” grows superficial, rote and stale even in his or her own experience. Something the books and tapes don’t tell us!

Then, of course, some “prayer agendas” which at first look like “the highway to Holiness,” in the long run, prove to be merely quick fixes, silver bullets that eventually turn out to be blind alleys only leading back through staleness to sporadic neglect.

Even when we use the Lord’s model prayer as an outline for our prayers (as I often do) still our prayers can grow stale – unless we assume the same long prayer roots which Jesus would have assumed.

“So, is it hopeless then?” queried Joe, one of the quieter persons leaning in around our table. “What can be done to stay fresh for the far journey, to keep our prayer lives vibrant and broad?”

Joe’s question – and our common quest – need not end in frustration. In fact real help has been around for a long time. A 3,000-year-old tradition helpfully supplies the most dependable answer to this question. We are not talking merely of some fad or quick fix. Rather, the great spiritual leaders of the Hebrew generations and of classic Christianity have, for centuries, consistently followed this same regimen of prayer and praise. Those giants of faith who have lived most consistently in the presence of God have prayed and sung the Psalms. It is no mere coincidence

that 150 of them lie at the heart of our Bibles. Nor is it coincidence that Jesus breathes lines from the Psalms in a variety of critical situations.

These poems and songs did not fall out of some worshipper's euphoric moment and get scribbled down on the back of a napkin at McDonald's. Rather, God-impassioned people thought their profound "God thoughts" over and over for long periods. They voiced their "prayers of the heart" in all kinds of circumstances, till they honed and refined their praises and beseechings into distilled classic formulations, ultimately weaving their devotional passions into intricately woven Hebrew poetry. Some Hebrew poetic cadences called for a specific number of lines per stanza, and specific numbers of words per line, even the exact number of letters per word. The Psalms represent the longest, deepest, broadest, most orderly reflections on God and callings out to him, afforded by the centuries. No liturgy runs deeper, hits truer or lasts longer. The Psalms are the central column of praise and prayer among the most passionate people of God for all time.

Yet, we really don't know that much about the Psalms. We are not even sure who wrote them. Some are attributed to David. Some to other bards. Some left anonymous. And we understand so little of what they say. They are bewildering, oblique at times, and at other times brutally frank and obvious. Sometimes, it seems, the more we read the Psalms, the less we understand them, but – paradoxically – the more we love them and long to live in them.

Some years back my friend Randy Harris alerted me to the power of reading the Psalms aloud, and that if we read five Psalms a day, we move through all 150 in a month. Eugene Petersen, in his book *Answering God*, provided a sort of map for praying the Psalms. Petersen points out that most of the Bible is God's word to us, but in the Psalms we answer back to God. John T. Willis, my friend and shepherd and an Old Testament scholar, pointed me toward the prayer power of the Psalms, as did Tony Ash. To these dear friends I shall be forever grateful.

While I have "prayed the Psalms" on and off for years it was not until 1998 that I embarked on a life-changing adventure with them. Two major speaking assignments triggered that. I was assigned four keynote messages on worship at Jubilee in Nashville that year. And Jerry Rushford asked me to deliver what he called "the last Pepperdine lecture of the millennium," on Psalm 23. In preparation for these two assignments I lived for a year in various genres of worship literature, and prayed five Psalms every day. During that adventure I discovered several powerful values and advantages of praying the Psalms.

First, I discovered that the Psalms give words to tsunami-level feelings for which my own words fail me. Some subterranean glimpses of my world, my God and myself defy my limited vocabulary and imagery. To express these I rely on the power of psalmic poetry. Poetry is not specific or linear; sequential or propositional. Rather, it gathers up metaphors and images that launch our senses in the general direction of inexpressibly gigantic feelings. For believers, the Psalms represent the inspired best of such poetry. Sometimes even the cadence, the sound of the Psalm, like the sound of music, engages soul-deep things, which cannot be expressed, in mere words. The famous ballerina Anna Pavlova was once asked by an adoring fan, "Anna, when you danced, what were you saying?" To which Pavlova replied, "If I could tell you, O wouldn't need

to dance.” And classic worshippers of the centuries would say, “If I could say all of what I experience, I wouldn’t need the imagery, the poetry, and the sound of the Psalms.”

To pursue this further, sometimes the Psalms give voice to deep feelings of which – up until the time a specific Psalm surfaced them – I was unaware, much less had words to express. Of course this kind of help from the Psalms does not come from a superficial reading, even from the first few readings. But given time, the Psalms can speak the unspeakable for us. That is one huge reason God gave them to us.

Second, as we pray all of the Psalms, lament as well as praise, they push us to explore emotional geography that we might otherwise avoid.

In our “happy, happy” kind of culture, we are programmed to avoid anything painful or negative. And with some serious downsides.

In the first place, it is really unhealthy to stuff painful and negative feelings, like anger, fear, shame, etc. Mental health professionals have long since discovered that swallowed anger will inevitably come out in destructive things like clinical depression or substance abuse or sexual acting out or the like. God knew this. And the Psalms not only push us out into those feelings, thus help us to admit them and own them. But the Psalms also provide God’s therapy for venting these feelings, processing them, and laying them honestly at His feet. God is inviting us to beat on his chest and to spill out our painful emotions to Him. He is big enough to allow us to beat on his chest, even to express anger and disappointment in him.

Public reading or singing or praying of these dark Psalms can bring healing and help to people as well. Not long ago a Christian woman, struggling with her faith confided, “I can hardly stand to go to church any more. Not that I don’t want to worship God. It’s just that I feel so discouraged, so disappointed, so depressed, and painful these days, and at church everything is so positive. They sing bright songs, say upbeat things, and smile so much – and seem to ignore the pain showing up on those pews. It doesn’t ring true to me. And it makes me feel so outside of everything there, and distant from my brothers and sisters.”

How eloquent. And what an indictment of a marketing mind-set invading the body of Christ. “Don’t talk about negative stuff at church. Bring ’em in. Give ’em a buzz. Pump ’em up and send ’em out grinning and feeling good.”

I have long been an advocate of “praise teams” to lead us in our worship. Still am. But I find myself wondering if we don’t also need “lament teams.” Every Sunday many on our pews are in some form of real lament. And the Psalms are about 60% “psalms of lament.” Even some of the Psalms we pillage for phrases to add to up-beat praise choruses, are actually Psalms of lament. For example, “as a deer pants for the water, so my soul longs after you” are words stripped from Psalm 42 and spliced into a warm expression of adoration and devotion. But the rest of the Psalm doesn’t sign well in a praise chorus. Listen to some of it: “My tears have been my food day and night” – “why are you downcast, o my soul? Why so disturbed within me?” “Why have you forgotten me? Why must I go about mourning? My foes taunt me, ‘Where is your God?’” This is merely one example of a psalm of lament, which is stripped of a few bright phrases.

Of course, the lamenting Psalms do speak their note of hope, even their finale of triumphal praise – with one exception: Psalm 88. This dark Psalm contains no hopeful note, nothing but lament and ends with the dismal words, “the darkness is my closest friend.” Flip open your Bible and read the whole of Psalm 88 aloud, reflectively. See what I mean?

It may please God, and be enormously helpful to a lot of people if some soon Sunday at your church you planned an entire worship assembly around Psalm 88.

God knows our needs and our long periods of darkness. That is why he left those dark Psalms in the Bible. We need them. Our churches need them.

Third, when we regularly pray the Psalms they keep our prayer life fresh. They lead us into a wide range of “prayer” subjects and emotions. And they keep changing focus from Psalm to Psalm. Thus, if in our regular personal seasons of prayer we first pray Psalms, they rescue us from our repetitious, narrow and self-centered ruts. We will find ourselves praying about issues raised in the Psalm of the hour. And these Psalms, ever contemporary and ever profound will springboard us in rich varieties of contemporary prayer concerns – which may have slipped off the screen of our consciousness. And prayer that began with a Psalm often moves on into a score of other real issues over which we may never have prayed in months – some maybe never before.

Fourth, praying the Psalms often helps us identify with the experiences of those around us, pulling us out of our narrow band of self-consumed prayer. When we are reading a Psalm, especially aloud in the presence of others, it may not seem at first related to our own feelings, but it may remind us of the feelings of others. I like the way Eugene Petersen expresses this: “I open the Psalms ... and find myself in the place of prayer, ready to pray. I look around and see thirty other men and women. ... They have come from thirty different places, were reared in thirty different homes, and in the past few hours have experienced thirty different combinations of emotions. Some come from brutalizing experiences, some from a birthday celebration; some are full of hate at what has been done to them, others brimming with joy over the incredible beauties of the day. ... I know that I am one with these people, but I didn’t feel at one with them, or in common with them.” But the praying of the Psalms moves us out of ourselves and into the concerns of others so that our prayers are energized by real connection with their feelings and needs.

Petersen continues, “When the congregation is led in praying Psalm 56, the prayer seethes with experiences of brutality and hate. Hate is the most remote thing from my life right now, but within moments I am praying the experience of hate, in tune with others who may or may not be experiencing it. I feel surrounded by friends, but in prayer I enter into common cause with persons who are desperately facing enemies. ... I will pray all the experiences of the community both local and worldwide.”

Thus – the Psalms not only rescue us from rote and repetitious prayer and release us from inward-turned self-focus in our prayer, but connect us with the feelings of others in the community. They move us; empower us to give comfort to others. Praying the Psalms together in the congregation conditions us to pray them much better when we are alone.

Fifth, praying the Psalms not only connects us with the community of faith here and now, but the Psalms also connect us with “the long story” of believers and worshippers down centuries past. At one level they connect us with the authors (real or imagined) as we struggle to sense the circumstances in their lives that gave rise to the specific Psalm we are now praying. In a larger sense, each Psalm carries the power to connect us with our ancient Hebrew forebears; to enter their laments and praises, and to feel one with their adoration of Yahweh. Since the Psalms were both hymnal and prayer book to the first century Christians, as we pray them now, we feel an awakening sense of our rootedness in the early church, and connect with the continuity of their worship. The Psalms also connect us with the fears and sufferings of saints who whispered these words in the catacombs, and while facing beast or sword or flame. We connect with the rising triumph of the Reformation as our lips speak and hearts burn with the same words and passions in the hearts and lips of those courageous leaders. Not to mention the reformers of the Restoration Movement. The psalms of suffering even link our hearts with our brothers and sisters, who this very year, lose jobs and homes and loved ones – even experience torture, even death – in places like Indonesia, India, some Arab nations, China, and parts of Africa.

Oh yes, praying the Psalms can weave us into the fabric of the family of faith across all time, can connect all believers with our current experience. Again in Petersen’s words, “Even when we pray the Psalms by ourselves ... We are not by ourselves: ... David danced these psalms before the ark and the Hebrews in Solomon’s Temple changed them. Children running down the slope of Olivet waved palm branches and shouted these psalms and Jesus in the upper room with his disciples sang them. The Corinthian Christians celebrated these psalms and the apocalyptic 144,000 fill heaven with them.”

When we authentically pray these psalms today, we are drawn into oneness with all believers of all times. We are, in a very real sense, praying with them.

Sixth, most importantly of all, regularly praying the Psalms can deepen and broaden our consciousness of God. Yes, the Psalms reflect the delights and laments of God’s people, and alert us to a wide range of prayer concerns, free us from self-centered prayers and lead us into the experiences of those around us, and link us up with the long story of the people of God. But in all of this, God is the center of focus. Adoration of him. Trust in him. Hope in him. Mercy from him. Blessings at his hand. Awe at his holiness. Confidence in his faithfulness. Amazement at his majesty. Frustration, disappointment, even anger at his sovereign choices. Warmed by his steadfast love. Stabilized by his eternal consistency. But always sensitizing us to the presence and the nature of God. Oh, how we need this. Else worship assemblies drift downward, into “golden calf” country, where the things move about us. The Psalms keep our eyes and hearts on Heaven. They remind us over and over again that worship is about God and not about us. They tug away at our hearts and souls to keep us “vertically aligned.”

Let me challenge you to pray five psalms a day, for one month. That will take you through the Psalms, then pray one psalm a day for the rest of the year. But don’t just read them. Stay with the Psalm before you until “God shows up,” whether that takes one minute or two hours. Read through that special Psalm reflectively, slowly, aloud first. Then pray through it carefully – in the first person. Then again, on behalf of others, in the second person. And finally in adoration of God and surrender to his will. But don’t stop praying when the Psalm ends. Go on from there to pray

about the issues and person that Psalm has prompted in you. Let the content of that Psalm shape your prayer list for the day.

So if you want a fresh approach to prayer that is not merely a gimmick or the latest fad, try praying the Psalms. This is the tried and true prayer path over which people of God have traveled most across three thousand years. And this path is not just for certain chosen contemplative souls, but a path there for everyone – it can become yours, given time and if you stay with it. On this path God can awaken, refresh, broaden and deepen your prayers. Don't knock it till you've tried it. I do not know anyone who has followed this path who ended up disillusioned or even disappointed. God's solution to your prayer life may actually be this simple, this old, and this obvious.

AfterGlow: Mountaintop Experiences

*by Phillip Morrison
January – April, 2000*

Mountaintop experiences don't always occur on high places. In May of this year I had a mountaintop experience 676 feet below sea level when I led a group of fifty-one pastors from twenty-two states, fifteen denominations, and six ethnic groups on a familiarization tour of the Holy Land. There were fifteen women and thirty-six men – from Catholics to Pentecostals – in our group.

I assigned different individuals and groups to be in charge of devotionals and worship times, and asked them to conduct the services as they normally would. We left the hotel in Tiberius early Sunday morning to go across the Sea of Galilee, which is really a lake locally known as Kinneret. Methodist pastors were in charge of the worship and, when we stopped the boat about half way across the Sea, a 63-year-old woman pastor from Tennessee preached a wonderful sermon. Then three other Methodist pastors presided at communion, using a chalice we had bought in Nazareth the day before, wine we had bought at Cana, and bread obtained from an Arab shop early Sunday morning.

When we finished our journey across the Sea and landed at Capernaum, I gave the preacher a hug, and thanked her for the message. She said, "No, I want to thank you for doing me the favor of asking, and I'd like to ask you for one more favor: When we get to the Jordan River this afternoon, would you immerse me?" I told her I would be honored, and that people often want to reenact their baptism at the Jordan. She said that it was more than that for her, that she had felt the need for many years.

While I was trying to comprehend the wonder of her request, another woman pastor, a Baptist from South Dakota, asked if I would immerse her. She said, "I want you to understand that I'm not reenacting anything or symbolizing anything; I need to be immersed to have my sins washed away!" Before we reached the Jordan, an Assemblies of God pastor from Florida and an independent pastor from Alabama made similar requests.

Remembering that the current at the baptismal site is swift and the footing a bit uncertain, I asked a Methodist minister if he could assist me. He said, "Sure I do that all the time. So many people in our church are requesting immersion that we have put in a baptistery!"

When we reached the Jordan and changed into our rented white robes, I explained to the entire group the requests that had been made. Then I reminded them that I had encouraged all of them to conduct devotionals, etc. in their customary way, and I said, "I only know one way to baptize. My understanding of Scripture, as well as my experience and practice, lead me to baptize people by immersion, in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, for the purpose of washing away sins and receiving the gift of the Holy Spirit. That's the only way I know to baptize here at the Jordan or anywhere else."

So Roland and I baptized Susan, Rosemary, Jerry, and Steven. We all sang “We Are One in the Spirit,” “There’s a Sweet, Sweet Spirit in This Place,” and other appropriate songs.

There in the river where Jesus was baptized by John, I gave thanks for the sacrifice he made to take away our sins, and for giving us his Spirit to strengthen us daily. In both communion and baptism a diverse group of believers had celebrated the death, burial, and resurrection of our Lord and Savior.