

Christian Odyssey

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Exploring Life and Faith

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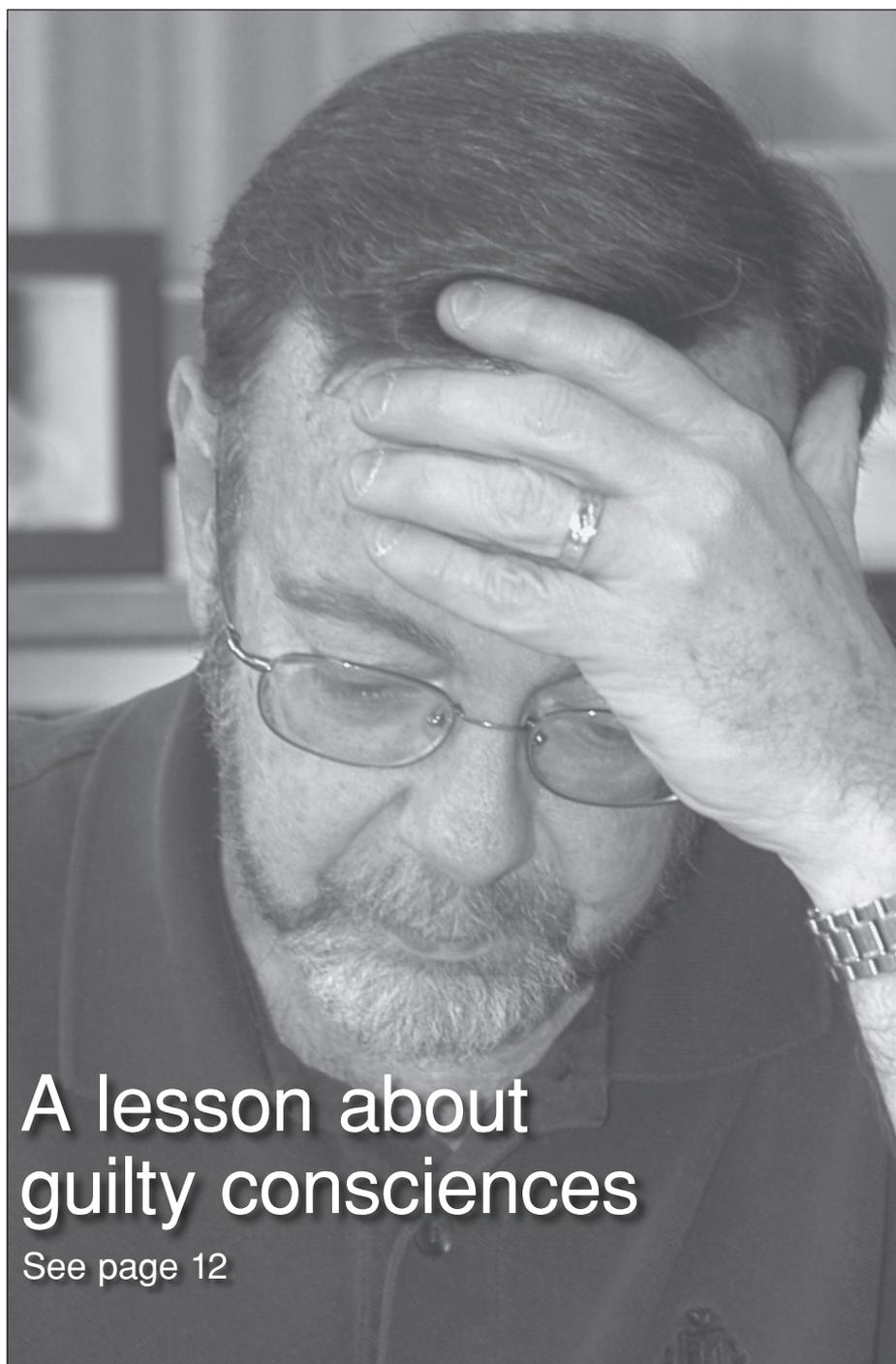
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Odyssey to get new look

Next month, *Christian Odyssey* will get a new look. We asked John Halford, who has been appointed editor, what we can expect from the new publication.



Why a new *Christian Odyssey*?

Well, first I should say that it is not a new publication. It is a redesign. We separated the former *Worldwide News* into two publications a year ago because we wanted a magazine that could serve as an outreach tool beyond the boundaries of our denomination.

The first year of publication has shown us the potential of such a magazine, and now we want to give *Christian Odyssey* an upgrade so that it will do the job even more effectively.

What will be different?

Well, the first thing you'll notice is that it will be in full color. The interior will also be redesigned. The articles will be shorter, and although space is tight, we will include a greater variety. The idea is to appeal to as broad a readership as possible with a down-to-earth, practical Christian message.

Why the name *Christian Odyssey*?

It captures the purpose of the magazine well. The American Heritage Dictionary defines *odyssey* as "an extended adventurous voyage or trip" or "an intellectual or spiritual quest." Merriam-Webster calls it "a long wandering or voyage usually marked by many changes of fortune." Homer's epic poem, *The Odyssey*, recounted the long and unpredictable wandering of Odysseus.

As Christians, we know our goal and where we're going, but the path there is as often difficult and dangerous as it is joyous and inspiring. The Christian life is a mixture of blessings and trials, and we can never be quite sure where God will lead us next or what challenges lie ahead. *Christian Odyssey* will be a help along the way, pointing readers, believers and "pre-believers" alike, to Christ's love and to the Bible and to the experiences and journeys of fellow Christians as sources of strength for the journey.

So you see it as a tool for evangelism?

Yes. But not the only or even the main tool. Media can never be as effective as one-on-one contact with other Christians who, by their example, show what the Christian faith should be like. But a carefully designed

magazine can supplement that, and also pioneer in places where personal contact is impossible or unwelcome.

What are the challenges?

There are two: First we must get the mix of features and articles right. We will retain some of the features, and some will move to *WCG Today*. We will be looking for material from a much wider pool. In the last two decades, many members and pastors have gained qualifications, experience and education. And I don't only mean formal education. This extraordinary journey we have been on together has given many of us something to say. My job is to help us say it. If you have ever wanted to write, now is your chance. It will be interesting to see what is "out there."

You said there were two challenges.

The other one is space. At the moment we have only 16 pages. We hope that finances will allow us to increase this before too long. But until then, we have a lot to get into a small space. But we'll be like those old sailing ships and pack a lot into a small space. Do you realize the *Mayflower* was only about the size of a London bus? The challenge is to get as much in as possible without crowding the pages.

What kind of articles are you looking for?

Practical ones—religious writers need to write to people, not at them. The other day I was asked, "Would you like an article about teenage prayer?" "Maybe," I answered, "but what would be even better would be an article on 'Helping Teens Pray.' And what would be even better than that would be something from a teen explaining how he or she learned, or is learning to pray." So we will retain the most popular features, but will be constantly looking for new, even more popular features and articles.

So I really do want to encourage aspiring writers to give it a shot. We'll help—one of the best things about an editor's job is helping new writers get their thoughts into print. So if you have an idea, email me (john.halford@wcg.org) and let's talk.

How can we help?

Don't be afraid to send suggestions and tell us what you think. You know what is one of the most popular pages of any magazine? Reader's letters. A candid and vigorous exchange of ideas keeps people coming back for more. So write to us. As Abraham Lincoln said, "It is the man who does not want to express an opinion whose opinion I want."

Sharing a secret

By Joseph Tkach

I've got a secret—and you probably have one, too. But truth be told, it's no longer a secret. It's been revealed in the gospel of Jesus Christ. It was hidden for a long time, Paul said, but at just the right time it was opened to the world.

The gospel is “the revelation of the mystery hidden for long ages past, but now revealed and made known through the prophetic writings by the command of the eternal God, so that all nations might believe and obey him” (Romans 16:25).

God had a mystery—a secret plan—a plan for all nations to be given eternal life in Jesus Christ. The Old Testament prophets wrote about God's plan, but very few people seem to have understood it.

An Old Testament secret

God whispered the secret to Abraham when he called him out of Mesopotamia. “Go to the land I will show you,” God said, “and I will bless you ... and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you” (Genesis 12:1-3).

Did you catch that? The blessing of Abraham extends not just to the Jewish people, but to people everywhere around the globe. But Genesis says very little about it. It doesn't even say that the blessing would involve eternal life. It was still a secret.

Centuries later, when God brought Israel out of Egypt, he



whispered again that his plan was bigger than the tribes of Israel. The plagues on Egypt were not just to punish Egypt or to impress Israel—they were also designed so that “the Egyptians will know that I am the Lord” (Exodus 7:5).

The plan went farther than Egypt, too. God told Pharaoh that he would show his power in Egypt so that “my name might be proclaimed in all the earth” (Exodus 9:16).

Apparently some of the Egyptians learned about the secret—there were “many other people” who left with the Israelites (Exodus 12:38).

When Israel was at Mount Sinai, God offered that they could

become “a kingdom of priests” (Exodus 19:6). They would help other nations come to God.

Israel seems to have neglected the offer, though, and we do not hear of it again until the New Testament. But God's plan remained—he was still determined to bring all nations to learn about what he could do for them.

When Joshua led the people across the Jordan River, was it just for Israel? No—Joshua said that God's plan was that “all the people of the earth might know that the hand of the Lord is powerful” (Joshua 4:24). The shepherd boy David had an inkling of what God was doing, too. He told

Goliath that “the whole world will know that there is a God in Israel” (1 Samuel 17:46).

Singing about salvation

Many of the psalms are about God's plan for all nations. Psalm 2 speaks to the Son of God: “Ask of me, and I will make the nations your inheritance, the ends of the earth your possession” (verse 8). “Kiss the Son,” the nations are advised. “Blessed are all who take refuge in him” (verse 12).

“Let all the earth fear the Lord,” Psalm 33:8 says. “Let all the people of the world revere him.” O, that everyone would know his goodness. “Shout with joy to God, all the earth!” (Psalm 66:1) “Come and see what God has done,” the psalmist says to everyone. “Praise our God, O peoples... Come and listen, all you who fear God; let me tell you what he has done for me” (verses 8, 16).

Indeed, the mission of the church is not based on a single scripture at the end of Matthew—it is based on what God has promised from the beginning.

Although the Old Testament is focused on Israel, various passages here and there remind us that God has a lot more than Israel in mind.

God sent his own Son into another culture in order to reach people. When we are involved in mission,

when we are sharing the blessing he has given us, we are taking part in God's plan to bless all nations through the Seed of Abraham.

“Sing to the Lord, all the
See Sharing a secret, page 16

God's plan remained—he was still determined to bring all nations to learn about what he could do for them.

The mission of the church is based on what God has promised from the beginning.

The Jonah Syndrome or “How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Meet the Assyrians”

By Neil Earle

“**S**how proper respect to everyone; love the brotherhood of believers, fear God, honor the king” (1 Peter 2:17).

A great code to live by, but much easier said than done. And why? Perhaps because our jaded society tends to make us suspicious and fearful of people different from ourselves, and that can't help but short-circuit human relationships.

Numerous studies show that the gospel is carried to new people most effectively by personal contact. Fuller Seminary's mission expert Charles Van Engen has written: “The world is ever more a stew-pot of people of very diverse cultures, religions and world-views working and living side by side.”

For this reason, Van Engen argues, “the local body of believers is the primary agent for crossing cultural barriers and experiencing reconciliation in Christ.”

Your Muslim or Buddhist neighbors may question your religion, but they cannot overlook the fact that you, John or Joanne Q. Christian, are different from other people on the block. Or at least we should be.

This is why at a time when Christians are asked to consider the importance of personal evangelism to the basic mission of the church, we need to reacquaint ourselves with the book of Jonah. As we seek to reach out to the world on a more personal level, the experiences of this Old Testament prophet can at the very least help show us how *not* to do mission.

Called to mission

Romans 15:4 tells us that every-



thing written in the past, that is, in the Old Testament, “was written to teach us, so that through endurance and the encouragement of the Scriptures, we might have hope.”

What is immediately hopeful about Jonah's story is that it shows us in stark terms that the source of genuine mission and outreach springs from the kindness and mercy of the great heart of God. Near the end of the book of Jonah, God asks Jonah the core question: “Should I not be concerned about that great city?” (Jonah 4:11).

That gets to the heart of effective biblically based mission. Yes, indeed. God was concerned about the cities of Jonah's day as he is concerned about the people in our cities today.

The biblical witness is consistent. Abraham pleaded for the life of Sodom (Genesis 18:23-32). Jeremiah urged his countrymen in Babylon to “seek the peace of the city.” Jesus wept over Jerusalem (Luke 19:41-44), and Jonah ... well, Jonah had some lessons to learn.

God had a challenging new assignment for Jonah, one that totally upset the prophet's comfortable worldview: “The word of the Lord came to Jonah son of Amittai: ‘Go to the great city of Nineveh and preach against it, because its wickedness has come up before me’” (Jonah 1:1). Jonah's reaction was far from exemplary—“Wellllllll... Not me, Lord—find someone else, please!”

‘Calculated terror’

What is going on here? A little background helps. Up till now

Jonah had been a successful prophet. His ministry had gone well.

Sometime in the long and prosperous reign of King Jeroboam II (c. 793-753 B.C.) God had given Jonah the opportunity to announce the good news that Israel would expand its borders (2 Kings 14:23-25). As a native of Gath-heper, a town in the area later known as the Galilee, Jonah was overjoyed to proclaim that his nation would expand northward. Perhaps this expansion would secure a buffer zone between Israel and the dreaded Assyrians to the north.



Our jaded society tends to make us suspicious and fearful of people different from ourselves, and that can't help but short-circuit human relationships.

The Assyrians—now there was a name to reckon with.

These fearsome practitioners of the art of war had already made their reputation with raids into Israelite territory in the previous century. Assyria's King Sargon II (722-705 B.C.) had received

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Syndrome

Continued from page 5

tribute from Israel around 841 B.C., and Adad-Nirari was banging at the gates of Damascus in 804 (Lasor, Hubbard and Bush, *Old Testament Survey*, page 207). Cunning and cruel, Assyria's swift-moving legions were the most dreaded military force in Jonah's day and Nineveh was the capital of Assyria!

The Assyrians believed in a policy of calculated terror. The Assyrian king Ashur-Nasir-Pal II (883-859 B.C.) inscribed his tactics on a stone monument: "I stormed the mountain peaks and took them ... with their blood I dyed the mountains red like wool. ...

"The heads of their warriors I cut off, and I formed them into a pillar over against their city, their young men and their maidens I burned

in the fire" (Finegan, *Light from the Ancient Past*, pages 202-203).

Ugh! How gruesome can it get! And God was asking Jonah to preach to these people? Impossible. Inconceivable! Jonah, like everyone else in the Ancient Near East, was all too familiar with the sins of Nineveh, its "evil ways and ... violence" (Jonah 3:8). This was too much for Jonah to handle. "A mission to Nineveh, to the Assyrians? Lord, you must be kidding," we can almost hear Jonah saying.

Fight and flight

In times of stress, psychologists tell us, we react with either fight or flight. Perhaps Finegan's words give us a partial insight into Jonah's flight reaction to God's calling: "But Jonah ran away from the Lord and headed for Tarshish.

He went down to Joppa, where he found a ship bound for that port. After paying the fare, he went aboard and sailed for Tarshish to flee from the Lord" (Jonah 1:3).

What a strange turn of events. A prophet trying to escape God's presence by leaving the territory of Israel! And the irony is he leaves from the exact same seaport where God will send the apostle Peter to start the gentiles on the road to salvation (Acts 10:5-6).

So now the lessons from Jonah begin to accumulate. For openers, the prophet seems to have had a rather limited concept of God.

Whether from a panicky fear of the Assyrians or from the shattering of his comfortable assumption that God was working only with Israel—he hightailed it to Tarshish, perhaps in the Western Mediterranean.

He was about to learn that God was a lot bigger than the Mediterranean. He would be faced with the uncomfortable fact

that this God he served loved all people—yes, even the dreaded Assyrians.

The action continues: "Then the Lord sent a great wind on the sea, and such a violent storm arose that the ship threatened to break up" (Jonah 1:4).

Where was Jonah during this storm? Incredibly, he was in the hold of the ship fast asleep (verses 5-6). What was going through his mind? Was he totally uninterested in the fate of the ship or—as seems more likely—was he still in shock over God's shaking up of his neat and tidy division of the world into good guys and bad guys?

Some expositors picture Jonah down in the hold in utter shock, perhaps curled up in a fetal position. Perhaps it was fear and loathing toward the Assyrians, or perhaps it was the trauma of a shat-

tered worldview, but Jonah was in deep, emotional disturbance.

We can almost hear him pondering down in the darkness of the cargo hatch: "Isn't Israel God's nation? Aren't they a special treasure above all nations (Exodus 19:5)? Why is God sending me to the wicked Assyrians? No, no, it can't be ... can it? ... Does God love Israel's enemies as much as he loves Israel?"

Deep down, Jonah may have suspected that this was the case (Jonah 4:2-3). But he has to work out this shattering new formula in his mind. Jonah had misread his country's history. God had called Israel to be "a kingdom of priests" (Exodus 19:6). Their founding father had been commissioned for an international mission of mercy—"all peoples on earth will be blessed through you" (Genesis 12:3).

Missing the boat!

Israel was to be a missionary nation (Isaiah 49:6). Jonah was being challenged to stretch his thinking; to be inclusive, not exclusive; to be generously ecumenical, not religiously self-satisfied; to be sharing the light, not narrowly looking down on others.

Jonah may well have known all this, but he needed time to process the shock. He may have been on a vessel but he was missing the boat. No wonder he is too distracted to notice that they're all about to drown!

And here is where the narrative gets deliciously ironic. The gentile sailors are terrified of the storm. They have "done something religious"—they have been calling out to their gods, a common procedure when in trouble (Psalm 107:23-37). The captain shakes Jonah awake: "How can you sleep? Get up and call on your god! Maybe he will take notice of us, and we will not perish" (Jonah 1:6).

Nope. Jonah remains obdurate. When it becomes clear that all this is his fault, he self-righteously boasts: "I am a Hebrew and I worship the Lord, the God of heaven, who made the sea

Jonah would be faced with the uncomfortable fact that this God he served loved all people—yes, even the dreaded Assyrians.

and the land” (v. 9). This would sound comical if so much was not at stake. The pagan sailors could well have asked: “If your God created the sea why did you think you could escape him on a boat?”

Ah—a logical question. But Jonah isn’t thinking logically. Neither do we in times of great mental and emotional turmoil. You can almost visualize Jonah thinking of his next move, his mind moving at the speed of light. He responds impulsively: “Throw me into the sea. All this is my fault!”

Incredibly, those pagan sailors refuse. They have more respect for human life than the so-called man of God. Ironic, isn’t it? Finally, events force them to do the deed, but with great reluctance. They do it respectfully, reverently, invoking God’s name (v. 14). So look who’s religious!

Further, when the storm subsides they offer sacrifices to God (v. 16). What potential converts these rough seamen might have made. But Jonah is oblivious to such thoughts. Into the sea he goes. Tragically, he chooses self-extinction rather than accept God’s mission.

We all know what happens next. Mercifully, God wasn’t through with his servant yet. A great fish swallowed up Jonah, the man of God. A man of God, all right, but a man who had head knowledge without corresponding heart knowledge.

But he was still Yahweh’s servant and, with his back to the wall, inside the great fish, Jonah prayed a beautiful prayer of repentance (Jonah 2:1-9). Notice the lessons here. His “death” in the sea reconciled the sailors to God (Jonah 1:16). His “resurrection” from the belly of the fish would result in the salvation of Nineveh (Jonah 3:10). In all of this, the recalcitrant Hebrew was an amazing foreshadowing of the Messiah, also from Galilee, Jesus the Christ (Matthew 12:40).

The still, small voice

But the repentance of Nineveh brought out the worst in this hot-headed prophet. Habits of a lifetime are not so easily overcome.

He resented God’s grace and mercy (Jonah 4:1-3) and erupted with one of the most ironic requests ever made by a biblical rarity: a successful prophet: “Now, O Lord, take away my life, for it is better for me to die than to live” (Jonah 4:3).

God does not respond in kind (just as well for Jonah!). In this experience and in the incident with the worm and the vine (verses 5-8), God twice approached Jonah in the soothing tones of a skilled Counselor: “My friend Jonah, come on now, be reasonable. Do you have a right to be angry about all this? Don’t you see what I’m doing here?” (Jonah 4:9-10).

What great lessons for us today, we New Testament Christians who are continually challenged to keep growing, to keep breaking new ground in our relationship with God. Perhaps we can all relate to Jonah—a sincere servant of God with a successful track record who still had so much to learn about the depths of God’s goodness and grace.

Yes, we need to stay humble before God’s overwhelmingly unfathomable love. God’s mission of mercy is for everyone who will hear—including the Assyrians. It is so splendidly all-encompassing.

This supreme reminder from the book of Jonah was stated more powerfully by another prophet, Isaiah. He too passed on a message about the greatness of God, about his loving concern for all people, all nations. And he reflected: “As the heav-

ens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts” (Isaiah 55:9).

God goes ahead of us

Perhaps Jonah was so busy being a prophet to Israel that he forgot the purpose of his nation’s existence—to be a nation of priests to the whole world, regardless of color, creed or birth.

Perhaps his involvement in his own country’s liturgy and service—the true religion of God—had blinded him to the fact that God looks on the heart.

The sinning Assyrians, idolaters, not commandment-keepers, found that God could be reached through attitudes of repentance and faith rather than religious ritual. Yes, even heathen sailors could turn to God once given a chance. You never know where God might be working.

These are profound lessons to ponder as the challenging 21st century unfolds. God wants us to expand our horizons, to be always ready for new opportunities that lie around us. From Jonah we learn that God is always ahead of us—the Creator of all wants to be the Redeemer of all (Ephesians 1:9-10).

In that hope we can recommit ourselves to the mission of making disciples—“of all the nations” (Matthew 28:18-20). God is already there ahead of us just as he was already working with ancient Nineveh before Jonah appeared, just as he later prepared the ground for Philip (Acts 8:26-40).

God wants us to succeed in our mission, for really the mission is his. He wants to use us to help spread more of his light to a dark world and ... avoid the Jonah Syndrome.

Perhaps Jonah was so busy being a prophet to Israel that he forgot the purpose of his nation’s existence—to be a nation of priests to the whole world.

BRING the children: Principles for effective ministry to children

Principle 5

Give Ministry Opportunities to Children

By Ted Johnston

This article concludes our "BRING the children" series presenting five principles for ministry to children.

So far we've noted that children's ministries are effective as they

- Bless children with Jesus' love (June)
- Relate to children at their level (July-August)
- Involve children in the lives of caring adults in the church (September)
- Nurture children in the way of Jesus (October).

In this article we'll discuss giving children opportunities to be involved in ministry.

Children's ministry is best understood as not only ministry to children, but also ministry by children. Effective children's ministries not only nurture children with Jesus'



love, they equip children to extend that love to others.

God ministers through children

The Lord spoke to a young Samuel, calling him to a prophetic ministry (1 Samuel 3). He chose a young shepherd-boy, David, to be Israel's king (1 Samuel 16). He chose a young virgin, Mary, to bear and nurture the Christ-child (Luke 1).

These biblical accounts show that God extends his ministry to and through people of all ages—children very much included. Effective children's ministries nurture and equip children and then give them opportunities for ministry.

Identity in serving

Children active in ministry within the church often develop a sense of belonging within their church family that will last a lifetime. A Barna Research Group project determined that Christians who made their initial profession of faith as children tended to remain followers of Jesus throughout their lives. We help children develop this sense of belonging by involving them in the ministries of the congregation.

Equip children to minister in your church

In the third article in this series (see *Involve Children in Your Life*), we discussed ways a



God extends his ministry to and through people of all ages—children very much included.

congregation can involve children in the weekly worship service:

1. Performing liturgical dance
2. Singing or playing musical instruments on the worship team
3. Performing drama (including puppetry)
4. Being involved in Children's Moments (children's sermons)
5. Receiving the offering
6. Ushering, greeting and parking
7. Caring for younger children
8. Giving announcements
9. Serving communion
10. Assisting with the audiovisual system

I participated in a worship service of a small congregation where children were involved doing many of the things listed above. It was inspiring to see the joy in their faces and in the response of the congregation.



Effective children's ministries equip children to extend Christ's love to others.

I spoke afterward with a 10-year-old girl who had presented one of the announcements. She did a wonderful job—speaking clearly and with conviction (I was moved to tears by a church announcement!). She was so happy to be an active part of her church.

Children can serve in many ways. Older children can assist in Sunday school classes with younger children. Children can write letters to home-bound members. They can visit nursing homes. The possibilities are nearly endless, but the principle is this: equip and then accompany children as they participate in the ministries of the church.

Conclusion

As we conclude this series, I challenge all of us to consider how we can make ourselves more available to the Holy Spirit to BRING children to our Lord and to involvement in his service.

- How can you bless children with

Jesus' love?

- How can you relate to children in your church at their level?

- How can you involve children more fully in your life and in the life of your congregation?

- How can you help children be nurtured in the way of Jesus and in the truth of his gospel?

- And, finally, how can you work to give children ministry opportunities within your church?

I pray that God will show you how, and that as he does so, you



Children's ministry is best understood as not only ministry to children, but also ministry by children.

will respond with passion and persistence.

Praying with great interest

By James Henderson



Have you ever heard the way an idea is phrased and thought "I've got to remember that"?

I have, and then gone right out and forgotten it!

I heard something recently, however, that I hope I can hang onto, and maybe it's something you'd like to remember too.

It was one of those rare days when I was able to sit in church with my wife, Shirley, and one of my sons just to listen and learn instead of having to speak.

Before the sermon someone got up to read a fairly long list of announcements that were in an already distributed bulletin, and I an-

icipated being slightly bored.

However, the man who delivered the announcements had a lively and friendly voice, and you could not help but listen. He referred to a couple who had just gotten engaged, and congratulated them on behalf of the congregation. He then said that he and others would pray for the couple "with great interest."

The phrase struck me immediately. "Praying with great interest."

Sometimes mine are sleepy-time prayers where I list all kinds of concerns to God between yawns and glances at a list I may have prepared. Or there are long silences during which I try to remember something that I think I should mention to God, and then get distracted by other thoughts.

It's more like praying out of duty or habit than "praying with great interest." I am barely in-

terested in what I'm saying myself, and yet I expect God to be riveted by each stumbling word I utter. Of course, God our Father listens to us anyway—what a great God he is!

Praying with great interest. What could it mean? I think it must mean that I am interested in the outcome of whatever the situation is. That this prayer is not just about my wishes and struggles, but also about others and what they may need or desire. It's about telling God that I'm concerned about someone else and about what may happen in that person's life.

Showing interest is an expression of love. Praying with interest stresses to God that we care for those we pray about.

Next time we act on prayer announcements or make intercession for someone, why not be specific and pray "with great interest"? It's something worth remembering!

James Henderson is superintendent of African missions for Worldwide Church of God.

Athanasius lists the New Testament writings

By Paul Kroll

The 27 books of the New Testament are the Scriptures of the church. They are understood to be written by the apostles or their close associates, such as Luke and Mark. Along with the Old Testament they comprise the official canon¹ of the church.



But in the early centuries of the church, before the New Testament canon had been established, there was a significant variety of opinion among Christian churches about what writings should be considered authoritative. Because of this, some Christian leaders were concerned that heretical writings might carry an undeserved authority. For example, a writing called the Gospel of Peter, which was a product of a Gnostic group that claimed to possess a secret knowledge of God, circulated in parts of the world in the early centuries.

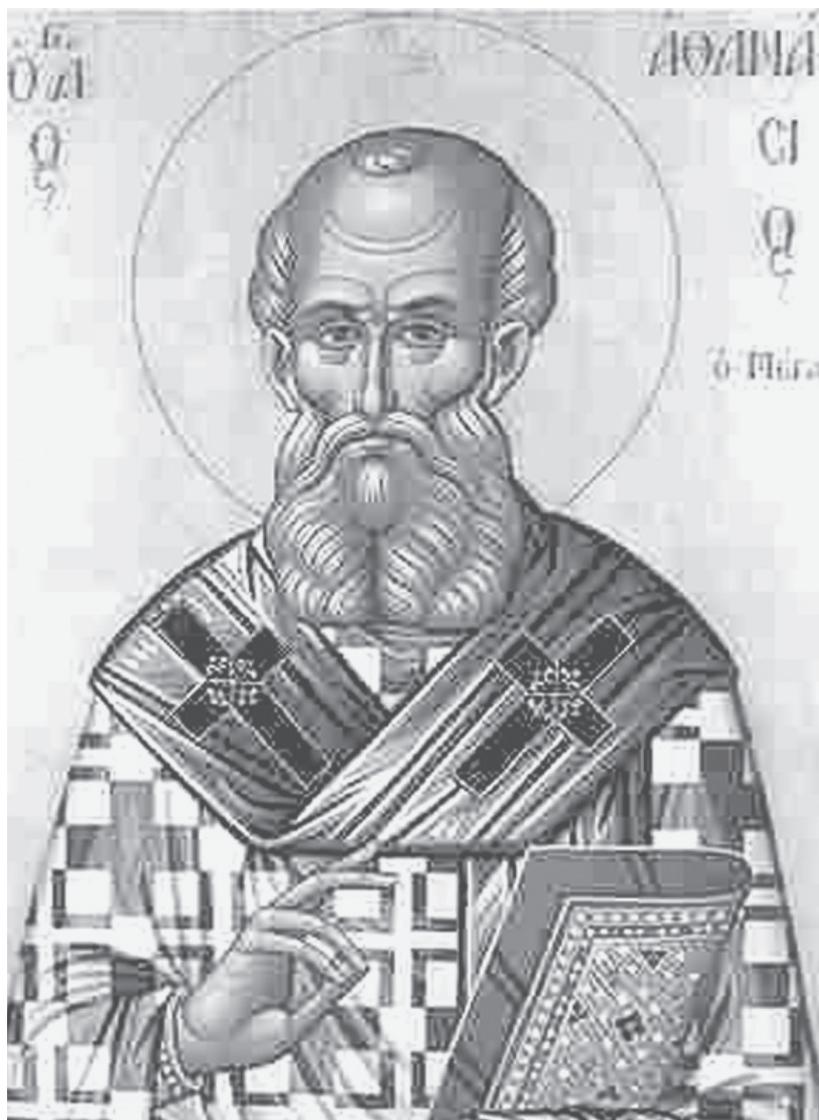
Some leaders also doubted the apostolic authority of certain writings, such as the book of Revelation and the second letter of Peter. The question about which writings should be considered authoritative for the whole church became more and more pressing as certain influential leaders began to form lists of their own to support their heretical teachings. Marcion, for example, teaching in the middle second century, rejected the Old Testament and most of what is today our New Testament, creating his own truncated version of just a few New Testament writings.

1. The word *canon* comes from the Greek *kanon*, where it meant a straight rod that could be used as a measuring stick. The word came to mean a standard, norm or, in a biblical context, an authoritative list of Scriptural writings.

2. The bishop of Alexandria was given the responsibility of informing his brother bishops well ahead of time each year about the date of the next Easter. Athanasius, in his long tenure as bishop of Alexandria (328-373) issued 45 such festal letters. In these letters, he gave an Easter homily and also took the opportunity to discuss some other matter of current importance to the church. In his 39th letter he dealt with the question of the canon of the Old and New Testaments.

Other heretics wrote compositions that claimed to record the acts of apostolic figures. Since some claimed the status of sacred Scripture for these writings, it's not surprising that this created confusion in the church.

Athanasius, Bishop of Alexandria, addressed this problem on Jan. 7, A.D. 367, when he wrote his annual Easter letter to his churches.² It was a landmark letter because it contained the same list of 27 books of the New Testament that are found in our Bibles today. So far as



Athanasius, bishop of Alexandria

we know, Athanasius was the first Christian leader to compile a list of New Testament books exactly as we know them today. Bruce Metzger, New Testament scholar, wrote, "The year 367 marks, thus, the first time that the scope of the New Testament canon is declared to be exactly the twenty-seven books accepted today as canonical."³

Here are portions of Athanasius' letter, in which he lists the books of the Old and New Testaments that he considered authoritative. The English translation is the work of the late F.F. Bruce: "Inasmuch as some have taken in hand to draw up for themselves an arrangement of the so-called apocryphal books and to intersperse them with the divinely inspired scripture, concerning which we have been fully persuaded, even as those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and ministers of the word delivered it to the fathers: it has seemed good to me also, having been stimulated thereto by true brethren, to set forth in order the books which are included in the canon and have been delivered to us with accreditation that they are divine."

[Athanasius then gives his list of Old Testament books and lists the 27 New Testament books.]

"Let no one add to these or take anything from them.... No mention is to be made of the apocryphal works. They are the invention of heretics, who write according to their own will, and gratuitously assign and add to them dates so that, offering them as ancient writings, they may have an excuse for leading the simple astray."⁴

Athanasius' letter was important because he was the

There was a significant variety of opinion about what writings should be considered authoritative.

bishop of a prominent city, Alexandria. He was one of the most influential theologians and apologists of the church at the time. Athanasius had spent much of his life battling the infamous Arian heresy, which had denied the co-essential divine nature of Christ.

We shouldn't think of Athanasius as sifting through a stack of writings, and pronouncing this one as Scripture and the next one as unscriptural. He was merely recognizing and recording what amounted to the general but unofficial consensus of the churches.

Some of the books not listed among the 27 continued to be considered something like devotional writings, such as the Shepherd of Hermas and letters of Clement. But these also

needed to be defined for what they were so they would not be confused as having the same authority as the writings of the apostles and their colleagues.

The first church councils to approve the New Testament canon met in A.D. 393 at the Synod of Hippo Regius and in A.D. 397 at Carthage, in North Africa, some 30 years after Athanasius published his list. The councils merely endorsed what had already become the consensus in the churches of the West and most of the East about the extent of the canonical books of Scripture.

3. *The Canon of the New Testament: Its Origin, Development and Significance*, page 212.

4. *The Canon of Scripture*, pages 78, 209.

A good way to go

By Tony Goudie

DUBAI—Chad and I cling to each other in the roaring rip tide of the Persian Gulf. We can feel the sand under us being scoured by the strong undercurrent as we are turned and twisted in the rough sea.

Chad is about to die. As we hold on to each other in the waves, my mind goes back some 37 years to my own death. Tonight we have both rejoiced, for these are no ordinary deaths. This is baptism.

Last September I had the privilege of conducting Chad's wedding. Now he and his wife and I rejoice at his burial.

I plunge him briefly beneath the water, and then we wade ashore and let the warm air dry us. The Middle

East sky is dark now and the humidity high. Pages of my Bible feel as clammy as damp blotting paper.

Oxymorons

How strange this must seem to those passing by. But then much of Christianity seems strange—full of oxymorons. An oxymoron is an apparently self-contradictory statement. They usually point out a poignant truth with wry humor. For example, efficient government, military intelligence, friendly fire and bitter sweet. And "he who will save his life must lose it."

The idea is oxymoronic. That is just what Jesus intended—a symbolic burial that symbolizes the beginning of new life.

The Bible firmly reminds us that

all have sinned, and have fallen short of the glory of God. Sin—now there's a word that has lost its currency. But it still pays wages—which the Bible says is death. There is no escaping what that means. But Jesus Christ loves us so much that he has already paid the cost for our sinfulness. That means we can accept his love for us and in him start the new, clean life he has already prepared for us.

In our quieter moments we all know that there are things not right with our lives and not right with our attitude to others. Many go to their graves with those feelings. But the best way to go to your grave is to do so voluntarily—like my friend Chad.

See A Good Way to Go, page 16

Lesson 31

A Lesson About Guilty Consciences

Mark 6:14-29

But when King Herod heard this, he said, "John, the man whom I beheaded, has been raised from the dead!"

By Mike Feazell

Herod Antipas was a man with blood on his hands. Of all his accomplishments, great and small, during his 33-year reign as tetrarch (he was not actually a king), he is best remembered for his murder of John the Baptist.



Maybe it's only when past deeds come back to haunt us that our consciences truly come to life. Most people spend their lives covering up their dark side, keeping their skeletons securely locked away in hidden closets under the back stairs of their minds.

Hiding from our sins

It's a sin management thing. Keeping the shame and horror of our sins out of sight and out of mind allows us to function in the light as normal, decent human beings.

It allows us to live with ourselves. But there's always that nagging fear that we have to keep pushing back into the shadows—the fear that somehow, some day, one of those skeletons is going to come to life, crash its way out of the closet, walk up to us in the middle of a crowd and wag its boney finger accusingly in our face.

That's what King Herod thought had happened. He had never

successfully managed to keep the memory of John's murder chained silently beyond the boundaries of his struggling conscience. Of all the people he had executed, certainly most of them enemies and criminals, this was the one he actually regretted.

It wasn't a political assassination or an act of revenge or even retribution. It was a simple act of cowardice, of embarrassment. He had made a boast in front of two women and was ashamed to take it back. So he murdered the one bright spot in his otherwise decadent, self-indulgent life. Why not? He had bowed to the ruthless demands of his wife, Herodias, before. It was easier that way. One more time shouldn't matter so much. But it did.

Clean conscience

What Herod didn't know was that the man he feared was John the Baptist raised from the dead was actually Jesus the Messiah, the King of the Jews whom his father had tried to murder 30 years earlier in the massacre of the babies in Bethlehem.

But you and I do know. And we know that Jesus can clean out all the skeletons in all our closets—if we want him to.

When we trust our lives to Jesus, we no longer have to manage our sins by hiding from our consciences. Jesus cleans our guilty consciences (see Hebrews 10:22), and God erases our sins from his memory.

Why suffer the misery of a guilty conscience when we don't have to? Isn't it time to unlock the closets for our Savior?



Herod Antipas had blood on his hands. [Artwork by Ken Tunell]

Lifestyle Evangelism

Joe Aldrich

By Terry Akers

Joe Aldrich, former president of Multnomah Bible College and Biblical Seminary in Portland, Oregon, has helped thousands of Christians become effective witnesses for Christ through his bestselling book and video, *Lifestyle Evangelism*.



Dr. Aldrich lays out in *Lifestyle Evangelism: Learning to Open Your Life to Those Around You* effective principles for proclaiming the kingdom of God and sharing one's faith in a world of darkness and confusion.

These principles are shown to be life-transforming for the givers and the receivers.

The key to successful evangelism, according to Aldrich, is to be relevant to others. The gospel message must reflect the actual lifestyle of the one proclaiming it, he explains.

The only way for believers to make the Light of the world meaningful and personal to seekers is for themselves to maintain an internal, healing relationship with Christ.

Evangelists must be willing to open their own lives to others to offer them the peace and healing they, themselves, have experienced.

Like Jesus, they must care for the lost and be free to enter their brokenness with compassion as he does.

“The best argument for Christianity is Christians: their joy, their certainty, their completeness.

“But the strongest argument against Christianity is also Christians—when they are somber and joyless, when they are self-righteous and smug in complacent consecration, when they are narrow and repressive, then Christianity dies a thousand deaths.”

Haddon Robinson of Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary writes in the Foreword: “If Jesus appeared on earth today as he did two thousand years ago, many churches would not elect him to their official boards.

“He would have disqualified himself because he ran with the wrong crowd.”

Lifestyle Evangelism teaches how Jesus received with joy the down-and-outers of society—those rejected by the mainstream.

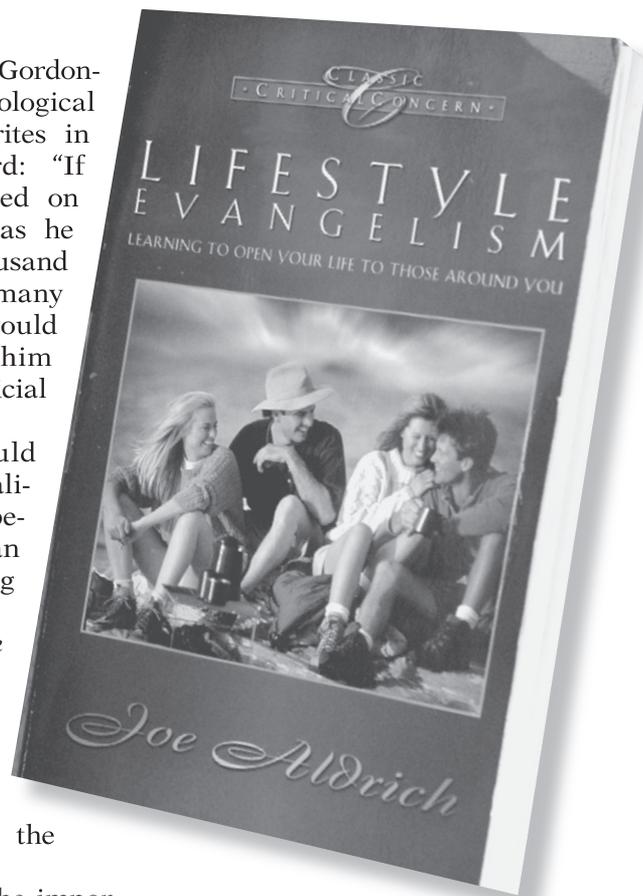
This book illustrates the importance of replicating his same con-

cern and compassion for the hurting and alienated in today's society. The gospel must be presented as truly good news! This is possible only when its relational quality is manifested in the lives of believers.

Like Jesus, we must become the “visible expression of the invisible God.” Aldrich writes, “People don't care how much we know until they know how much we care.”

The best argument for Christianity is Christians: their joy, their certainty, their completeness.

The key to successful evangelism is to be relevant to others. The gospel message must reflect the actual lifestyle of the one proclaiming it.



Dealing With Difficulties

A study of Hebrews 12:1-17

By Michael Morrison



After mentioning a long list of heroes who were faithful in difficult times, the author of Hebrews now addresses the readers directly, encouraging them to follow the example of the faithful. They should acknowledge the hardships they encounter—even be encouraged by them—and complete the journey they have begun.

Finish the race

In Hebrews, doctrinal information is often the springboard for practical application. After each section of information comes a brief section of exhortation, often with the words “therefore, let us...” Chapter 12 begins with **“Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles”** (Today’s New International Version used throughout).

What kind of witnesses surround us? Perhaps they are spectators in a stadium, watching us run the race—but since the author hasn’t used the metaphor of a footrace yet, the readers probably would not think of “witness” in that sense. Rather, the witnesses are people who can testify that it is possible to be faithful in the face of temptations, even in persecutions.

Examples of success surround us, so we should get rid of anything that distracts us, anything that slows us down—especially sin. Sin is like an octopus that grabs us first with one tentacle, then another, and another, until we are trapped. Sin makes it harder for us to follow Christ, or to trust in him for our salvation. So, to be faithful, we need to put aside sin or any other hindrance.

“And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith” (vv. 1-2). Here, the Christian life is compared to a race, perhaps a marathon, in which finishing the race is more important than coming in first. How can we finish? By keeping our eyes on the goal: Jesus. He is not only the one who calls us to faith in the beginning, he is also the one who will complete his work within us.

What kind of example did he set for us? **“For the**

joy set before him he endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God” (v. 2). Jesus kept his eyes on the goal—the joy set before him. Our salvation is the joy that motivated Jesus to endure the pain and shame of the cross. The cross shows us how much Jesus wants us to join him in his joy, to join him in his position of honor and authority next to God. And this sets an example that can help us endure our difficulties.

“Consider him who endured such opposition from sinners, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart” (v. 3). If we think about what he did, we will be encouraged to put up with the inconveniences that Christianity may bring us. As we focus on him, he will strengthen the faith within us.

As the author observes, the readers had not experienced what Jesus did: **“In your struggle against sin, you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood”** (v. 4). We should be willing to give our lives, because the life we have gained is far more than anything we might give up.

Children and discipline

The author then quotes Prov. 3:11-12 to give the readers a better way to view their problems:

“Have you completely forgotten this word of encouragement that addresses you as children?”

“It says, ‘My son, do not make light of the Lord’s discipline, and do not lose heart when he rebukes you, because the Lord disciplines those he loves, and he chastens everyone he accepts as his child.’

“Endure hardship as discipline; God is treating you as his children” (Heb. 12:5-7).

This does not mean



Do not lose heart when you are disciplined.

that every problem we face has been specifically caused by God, or that it is a punishment for something we did wrong. But problems can be turned for good in our lives if we look at them as athletic training that can help us be stronger and more faithful.

In the Christian life, difficulties are to be expected: **“For what children are not disciplined by their parents? If you are not disciplined—and everyone undergoes discipline—then you are not legitimate children at all”** (vv. 7-8). In Greek society, wealthy men often had mistresses, and they often had illegitimate children. They sent their legal children to school and trained them, but they often ignored their illegitimate children.

“Moreover, we have all had human parents who disciplined us and we respected them for it. How much more should we submit to the Father of spirits and live! Our parents disciplined us for a little while as they thought best; but God disciplines us for our good, that we may share in his holiness” (vv. 9-10).

He is speaking in general terms here, not commenting on parents who are too strict or abusive. Human discipline has temporary benefits, but divine discipline has eternal benefits, so we should be even more willing to endure it.

This is not always easy, but we will fare better if we are mentally prepared for it. **“No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it”** (v. 11). We may not see those results right away—especially peace—but we will enjoy the results if we endure the difficulties.

“Therefore,” since discipline has good results in our lives, **“strengthen your feeble arms and weak knees. ‘Make level paths for your feet,’ so that the lame may not be disabled, but rather healed”** (vv. 12-13, quoting Prov. 4:26). Don’t let the problems cause you to drop out of the race. Run straight toward the goal, even though it’s hard.

Don’t be like Esau

The author now shifts gears and makes a general exhortation: **“Make every effort to live in peace with everyone”**—don’t go looking for trouble—**“and to be holy; without holiness no one will see the Lord”** (v. 14). Since Jesus makes us holy by his death (10:10, 14), we need to trust in him for the status we need to see God.

But there is a danger: **“See to it that no one falls short of the grace of God and that no bitter root grows up to cause trouble and defile many”** (v. 15). How might people fall short of God’s grace? The “bitter root” probably refers to Deut. 29:18, which describes



In the Christian life, difficulties are to be expected.

someone who turns away from God. If we turn away from Christ, we will not receive his benefits.

“See that no one is sexually immoral, or is godless like Esau, who for a single meal sold his inheritance rights as the oldest son. Afterward, as you know, when he wanted to inherit this blessing, he was rejected. Even though he sought the blessing with tears, he could not change what he had done” (vv. 16-17).

Esau is an example to avoid: He gave up a long-term blessing for a short-term benefit. This is the choice the readers were facing, too: Would they give up eternal life with Christ for a little convenience in this world? If you do this, the author says, the time will come when the penalty will be irreversible. Esau repented in one sense—he decided he wanted the blessing—but it was too late, because it was part of the inheritance he had already sold.

Do not sell out the faith, the author says. Stand firm, and be faithful—and we do that by fixing our eyes on Jesus.

Questions for discussion

- What kind of sin tends to entangle people today? (v. 1) What pulls them away from faith in Christ?
- What joy is set before us? (v. 2)
- Do people now have different attitudes about parental discipline? (v. 9) How does this affect our attitude toward difficulties we may face?
- In what way are people tempted to be like Esau? (v. 16)

Sharing a secret

Continued from page 4

earth... Proclaim his salvation day after day. Declare his glory among the nations” (Psalm 96:1-2). “The Lord has made his salvation known and revealed his righteousness to the nations... All the ends of the earth have seen the salvation of our God. Shout for joy to the Lord, all the earth” (Psalm 98:2-4).

Everyone is involved

God wants everyone to come to a knowledge of salvation—to hear the gospel (1 Timothy 2:4). When our hearts are like the heart of God, we too want to see the salvation of all peoples, and we’ll do our part spreading his good news to others. Some of us will go to our own city to share the gospel. Others will travel within one nation, and some will go to other nations. Others will support them in prayer and finances and hospitality.

I encourage you to share the gospel, and to pray for those who share the gospel. I encourage each

congregation to train people in evangelism, encourage people in evangelism, and allocate part of their budget for evangelism training.

I encourage teens and adults to consider joining the Crossing Borders missions camp being organized by Lee Berger, our pastor in Austin and Waco, Texas (see the November-December *WCG Today*, page 16). The camp is only a week long, but it can change your perspective on what God calls the church to do.

The Great Commission is our mission, and that is why the WCG financial structure includes support for mission developers in other nations. Through this denominational initiative, every congregation has at least an indirect role in supporting overseas missions. Some choose to have more direct involvement, too, through “sister church” arrangements or other partnerships that can help indigenous churches share the good news of salvation.

We may help in different ways, but for each of us, the call is there: Go, preach the gospel, make disci-

ples of all nations, and teach them to do the same thing (Matthew 29:19-20). The secret is simply too good to keep to ourselves.

Good Way to Go

Continued from page 11

Wanted dead and alive

The Bible explains that in our human state we are dead to God and alive to sin, and that he wants to reverse this condition. He wants us alive to him and dead to sin. He wants us dead and alive.

So how is this changed life to be achieved? It can’t—not by us. But Christ has done it for us. He both represents us before God and substitutes for us before God. When we trust in Jesus, his death substitutes for ours, and he gives us new life in him. When we are “in Christ” we are both dead to sin in his death, and alive to God in his life. Being submerged in water is a way of picturing this transformation, this death to the old self and this resurrection to our new self in Christ.

In his Epistle to the Romans, St. Paul explains the idea behind baptism as a watery grave: “When we went under the water, we left the old country of sin behind; when we came up out of the water, we entered into the new country of grace—a new life in a new land!” (Romans 6:4, *The Message*)

That’s what baptism into the life of Jesus means. When we are lowered into the water, it is like the burial of Jesus; when we are raised up out of the water, it is like the resurrection of Jesus.

Through his own Son who became one of us for this very purpose, our loving God provides our escape from the prison of sin and its death sentence, which has taken hold of us all. That’s why I buried my friend in the Persian Gulf. He was ready to go.

Lectionary Readings for January 2006

Jan. 1, 2006
Psalm 148
Isaiah 61:10-62:3
Luke 2:22-40
Galatians 4:4-7

Jan. 15, 2006
1 Samuel 3:1-20
Psalm 139
John 1:43-51
1 Corinthians 6:12-20

Jan. 6, 2006
(Epiphany)
Psalm 72
Isaiah 60:1-6
Matthew 2:1-12
Ephesians 3:1-12

Jan. 22, 2006
Psalm 62:5-12
Jonah 3:1-10
Mark 1:14-20
1 Corinthians 7:29-31

Jan. 8, 2006
Genesis 1:1-5
Psalm 29
Mark 1:4-11
Acts 19:1-7

Jan. 29, 2006
Deuteronomy 18:15-20
Psalm 111
Mark 1:21-28
1 Corinthians 8:1-13