



Miracle in torn blue jeans

A little boy's love turned despair into hope.



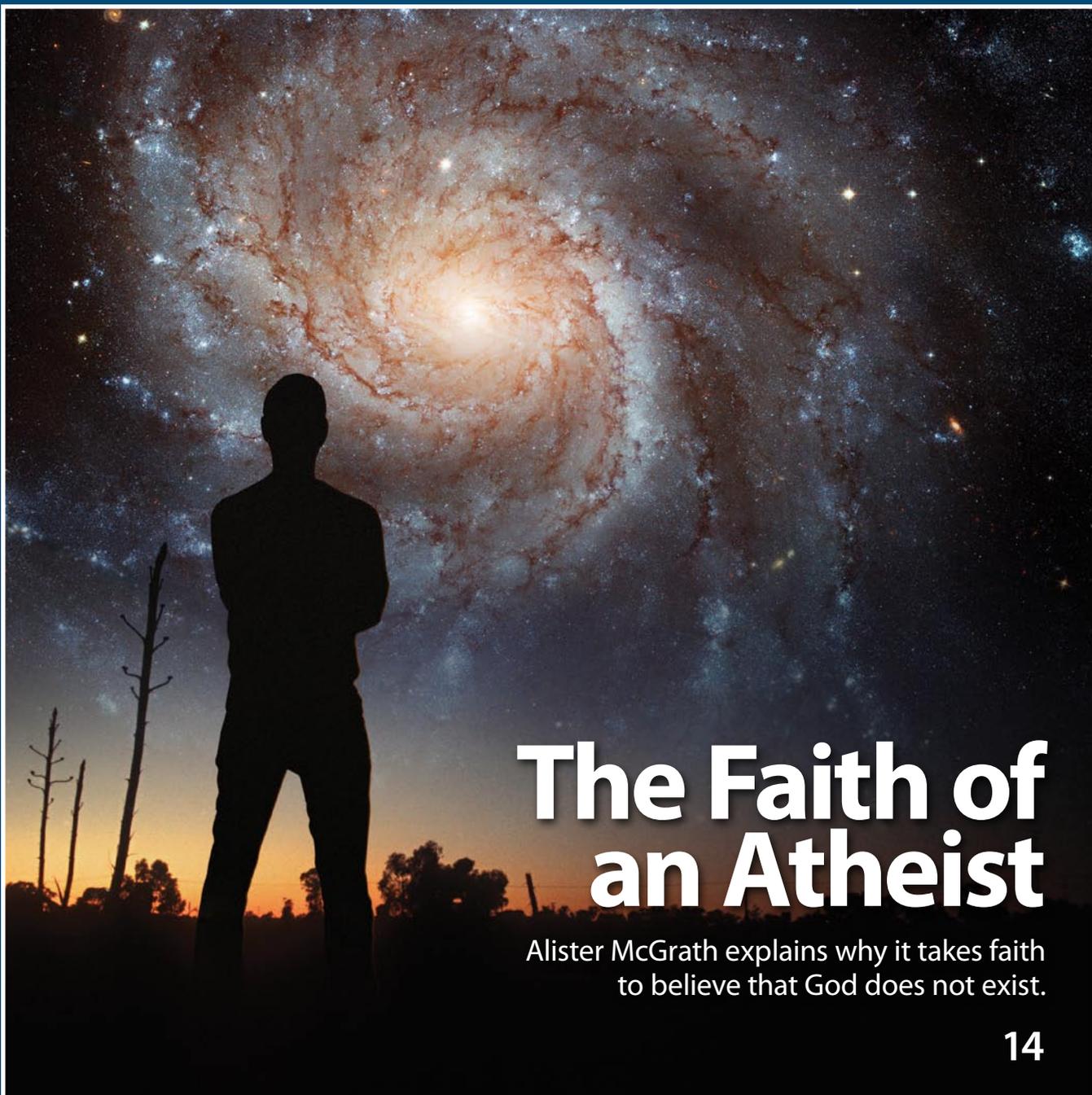
Will this play in Peoria?

Two very different congregations try a fascinating experiment in unity.

CHRISTIAN Odyssey

June/July 2006

Exploring Life and Faith



The Faith of an Atheist

Alister McGrath explains why it takes faith to believe that God does not exist.

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Letters to the Editor

It was disturbing to read your article, “Bible Prophecy: What’s it All About,” in the latest *Christian Odyssey* (April/May 2006). Your assertion that all Bible prophecy has been fulfilled in Christ really does a disservice to Christians by watering down the Word of God and encouraging a dismissal of important biblical revelations concerning the Kingdom of God. The prophets did not only speak about the sacrifice of Christ and his salvation as you assert by quoting 1 Peter 1:10-12. They also spoke about the “end time,” the return of Jesus Christ and the establishment of the future Kingdom of God. To dismiss countless scriptures on prophecy, including the Book of Revelation, as being figurative to fit your biblical paradigm will result in leading many away from biblical truths and knowledge. Until we become a Bible-centered church again, we will not reap God’s blessings.

J C (email)

Mike Feazell responds: Thank you for taking the time to respond to my article. Clearly, we do not see eye to eye on the topic, but I do appreciate your willingness to let me know how you feel. The “end time” and the return of Christ are not restricted to humanly calculated timelines; they involve the boundless redemption of all the fabric of the universe, including time itself. You might be interested in reading more about “the end” by visiting <http://www.wcg.org/lit/prophesy/theend.htm>.

Naturally, I cannot agree that God has not blessed the WCG, and forgive me if I take strong exception to your implication that the WCG is not a Bible-centered church. Nevertheless, it is refreshing to know that you are committed to the word of God and to serving God with zeal.

I just want to say thank you for your review of the book *Dawkins’ God*, by Alister McGrath. I’ve been looking for a book on this subject for some while, but never committed to a purchase—I didn’t want to end up buying some polemic based on half-baked ideas. I’ve seen a number of supposed ar-

guments in this area use an inadequate understanding of physics and was concerned that I didn’t have the knowledge to judge whether opponents of Dawkins were being balanced in their arguments.

Anyway, I was prompted to buy this title, and what a good balanced read it is! Intellectually, I’ve always felt on a back foot when dealing with Dawkins’ claims. Yet, McGrath’s analysis has enabled me to consider evolution, atheism and the supposed “logical link” between these two issues—without the uncomfortable feeling that I’m just being unreasonable!

Ian W (email)

We hope you enjoy the exclusive interview with Alister McGrath in this issue (page 14.)

I just felt compelled to write you and tell you how impressed I am with this issue of *Christian Odyssey*. It came yesterday and immediately I was drawn to the quality and color of the magazine. This morning as I got up to have my devotional time I began to look it over as my tea was brewing, and I honestly could not put it down until I had read the whole thing from cover to cover. It is powerful and lends a great deal of credibility to our denomination. I am extremely happy to lend my support in every way. There was no agenda, no bashing legalism; just Christ-centered, powerful, practical and grace-filled [material].

VH Ohio

We just received our copy of the new *Christian Odyssey*. It is really beautiful, what an improvement. It is like the magazine came to life all of a sudden. Amazing what color and a new format can do.

Joyce C (email)

I love the *Christian Odyssey* very much but have one small complaint. When the light shines on the new shiny paper sometimes there is a glare.

CH (email)

It is a trade-off. We can use a slightly less glossy, but still high quality paper, but the overall impression will be duller. What do other readers think about this?

Though the lead article (April/May) was cautious about the implications of Intelligent Design, it did point to our Great Creator God, and I laud that with all of my heart. I’m convinced that is what we as Christians need to do—get the attention and efforts off of who we are and what we are doing for God and on to who he is, what he does, what he’s about for humankind and onto the greatness, goodness, the love, and the desire that God has for us to live in communion and participation with him—that God is for us as no other is. In the recognition and acceptance of his love for us, he can and *will* do the transformational work in our lives that needs to be done. Certainly three and a half decades have shown me that I cannot. Only he can do it.

TM (email)

I laughed until I cried at John Halford’s orangutan, then read the rest of the article and cried again.

Connie W (email)

There appears to be a typo on page 20 of the April/May issue of *Odyssey*. In the second paragraph there’s a reference to 2 Corinthians 16:2. Since 2 Corinthians doesn’t have 16 chapters, 1 Corinthians would seem to be a better fit, as it also agrees with the context.

Steve C. Wisconsin

Thank you. Our mistake.

Letters for this section should be addressed to “Letters to the Editor.” Send your letters to Worldwide Church of God, PO Box 5005 Glendora, CA 91740-5005, or by electronic mail to john.halford@wgc.org.

The editor reserves the right to use letters so addressed in whole or in part, and to include your name and edit the letter for clarity and space. We welcome your comments.

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E ticket ride

By John Halford

You'd think that the transition from a legalistic religion to an understanding of the gospel of grace would make life easier. It does in some ways. But it is also an "E ticket ride."

E ticket ride? Today when you go to Disneyland, you pay a one-time entry fee, giving you unlimited access to everything. But before 1981, you needed individual tickets for each ride. They ranged from "A" tickets for the less spectacular rides, through B, C, and D for the more exciting ones. But the best attractions, like the Mat-terhorn Bobsleds, needed an E ticket.

E ticket rides were more expensive and the lines were longer, but they were worth it. You'd be strapped into your seat and warned "Keep your arms and legs inside the bobsled at all times" and "Don't get out until it stops." Then with a lurch you'd be off.

First was a long slow haul up an incline, and a brief moment to admire the view and catch a glimpse of less adventurous friends far below. Then you hurtled down towards what looked like a sheer drop. At the last second you were yanked at right angles to face another abyss and an even more impossible-looking hairpin bend.

"No way," you'd think. "We're going to come off." But as the bobsled careened around the track you realized that the ride only looked impossible. If you stayed with it you'd be okay.

In some ways a journey from legalism to grace is like that. You see, a legalistic approach to your relationship with God is "safe," like an A ticket ride. The pace is slow and the rules seem clear-cut. Don't eat "unclean" food, don't watch TV or fix the car on the Sabbath, pray and study an hour a day, and you might have at least the illusion of progress. With legalism, you can at least feel as though you know where you stand.

Oh, you won't be perfect. But like the Pharisee in Jesus' parable (Luke 18:11-13), who boasted "I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get," you can say "God, I thank you that I am not like other men — robbers, evildoers, adulterers — or even like this tax collector."

"But," Jesus explained, "the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, 'God, have mercy on me, a sinner.'" He was on an E ticket ride. Once you begin to really understand the depths of

God's mercy and grace, you want to please him. And the more you know him, the more fully aware you become of your own sinfulness. So, naturally, you want to make amends—to

do something to make up for your sins—and legalism tells you that you can do that. But the Bible tells you something entirely different.

"Should I bring an armload of offerings topped off with yearling calves?"

Would God be impressed with thousands of rams, with buckets and barrels of olive oil?

Would he be moved if I sacrificed my firstborn child, my precious baby, to cancel my sin?" (Micah 6:6-7 Message Bible).

No. That is not the answer.

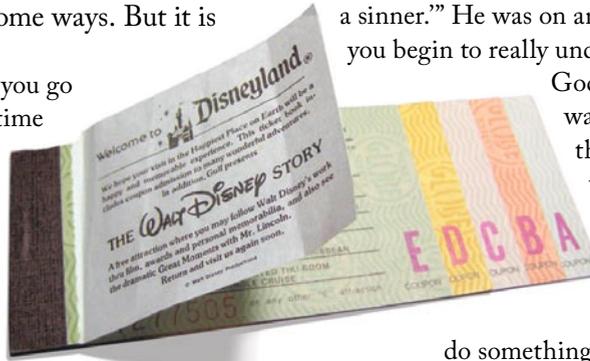
"He's already made it plain how to live, what to do, what God is looking for in men and women. It's quite simple: Do what is fair and just to your neighbor, be compassionate and loyal in your love" (v. 8).

Is that it? Yes. When we believe God loves us, we are free to love others. In other words, just hang on tight to life's bobsled, trusting in God's love and mercy. There is nothing you can do, or need to do, to get back into God's favor.

There are times on the journey when that is hard to believe. Moments when, looking at what the track looks like ahead, you think "There's no way..." But there always is. Jesus didn't promise an A, B, C or even D ticket ride. To trust in God's grace needs an all or nothing E ticket. But you can take rest in Jesus' promise to be with you, both on the long uphill climbs and the lurching, heart-stopping, nail-biting descents.

"I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one can snatch them out of my hand. My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all; no one can snatch them out of my Father's hand" (John 10:28-29).

Just stay in the bobsled, and don't get out until it stops. ●



Will this play in Peoria?

Peoria, Illinois: This midsized midwestern city is considered an ideal test market for the USA. They say that if you want to know if a new idea or product will be successful, find out if it “plays in Peoria.” So what two visionary pastors are attempting to do here is worth watching.

Cliff Parks is the pastor of the Peoria congregation of the Worldwide Church of God. The members are mainly Anglo-American, and live in the suburbs and surrounding rural towns.

Tony Pierce pastors the Christian Family Center Church, which is affiliated with the Southern Baptist Convention. The congregation is mostly black, and many of the members come from urban neighborhoods within the city.

Under the leadership of Cliff and Tony, these two churches are merging to become one congregation. For black and white congregations of the same denomination to merge is rare. If they come from different denominational backgrounds it would seem almost impossible.

As Martin Luther King once said, 11 am Sunday morning has become the most segregated hour in Christian America, and Peoria is one of the nation’s most segregated cities. So if this merger can be made to “play in Peoria,” it could have important implications for the future direction of racial reconciliation.

What prompted these two very different congregations to try to become one?

“After our denomination’s dramatic transition from legalism to orthodoxy, I knew that our church had to find new ideas if it were to thrive and grow,” explains Cliff Parks. “If we did not engage the membership in ministry, the church would eventually die. But we were a commuter church, with our members driving quite long distances to attend. We needed to plant a stake in the ground somewhere and claim a community.”

After studying the way Jesus impacted every

community he visited with practical ministry, Cliff realized that an effective community church needed to meet some specific needs of the community. “We weren’t in a position to do that by ourselves. So we tried to partner with some of the ministries that were already established. In this way we could provide needed willing workers to our ministry partners, and we could get the training we needed.”

Across town, Tony Pierce was having similar thoughts. He had come to Peoria 20 years earlier and planted an African-American church. After many years of struggle, that church was now established. But what was to be its mission?

The need

A 2002 TriCounty Commission report showed Peoria to be one of the nation’s most segregated cities. There are 19,000 African-Americans among a total population of approximately 115,000. Much of

“Martin Luther King once said, 11 am Sunday morning has become the most segregated hour in Christian America.”



the African-American population lived in areas of extreme poverty. The analysis of Peoria’s most segregated urban neighborhoods revealed a high crime rate, deteriorated housing, high unemployment, low family income, low birth weight and low educational achievement.

"The church is not supposed to turn blinded eyes, nor deaf ears, toward these problems," says Tony. "I told the leadership team and congregation that we would need to operate differently if we were to let Jesus use us to transform Peoria's destitute people, within our mission field.

"If we could begin to integrate the church in Peoria, one of our nation's great test markets, there would be genuine hope for the racial future of our nation."

The two pastors first met at an outreach program of Tony's church called Job's Partnership. It provides training to the chronically unemployed in both secular job skills and Christian core values.

issues, we began to see that one of the biggest ministry needs in Peoria was for a racially blended congregation," says Cliff.

Combined, they would be double in size, with approximately an equal number of African-Americans and European-Americans attending. There were also a small number of people from other ethnic backgrounds, primarily Indian, African, and Hispanic.

Tony was enthusiastic, but because an experiment of merging with another congregation was ending in failure, he was well aware of the difficulties. "I am grateful to Cliff for the love and courage that he showed when he



Reaching the goal—a truly multi-cultural and ethnically diverse, but truly integrated congregation.

Each week, as part of the worship service, the congregation repeats this pledge together:

I love Jesus more than all. I love Jesus more than class. I love Jesus more than gender. I love Jesus more than race. I love Jesus more than all that would separate me from the love of God. Therefore because Jesus loves and reaches out to all, including me, I will let him love and bring in all through me.

We love Jesus more than all. We love Jesus more than class. We love Jesus more than gender. We love Jesus more than race. We love Jesus more than all that would separate us from the love of God. Therefore because Jesus loves and reaches out to all, including us, we will let him love and bring in all through us.

Tony Pierce was one of the instructors. At every opportunity, Cliff would pick his brain, trying to discover how he could engage his WCG congregation in effective outreach ministry.

"We began our association with Job's Partnership by just being 'prayer warriors,'" says Cliff. "Five or six members of our church would sit in the class while instruction was being given and pray for the students."

As the friendship grew, the two pastors began to explore the possibilities of an even closer relationship.

The challenge that CFCC faced was that their ministries reached out both to African-American and to European-American populations. But the church was primarily African American, and it was rare for white people who came to Christ through their ministries to actually find a church home with CFCC. WCG had the same problem on the other side of the racial divide.

As Tony and Cliff struggled with this phenomenon, a bold solution began to present itself. Why not combine the congregations and become one big church?

"As Tony and I continued to meet and pray about these

requested that our two congregations work more closely together with the potential prospect of our leading the two of them to merge," he says.

They agreed to proceed cautiously. There were many things to consider. The racial and cultural differences could not be ignored. Surprisingly, there were not many doctrinal incompatibilities, but the churches did have to discuss worship styles and matters of governance.

During the "courtship," the congregations held four joint worship services over a twelve-month period to test the strength of their growing relationship. They needed to know what the experience of joint worship looked and felt like.

The services were held once a quarter. To begin, each church hosted the other at a typical service. That provided the opportunity for each them to experience the other's worship in the manner that they normally conducted it. The final two joint services were planned together by the combined leadership teams, to see what a merged worship experience would be like.

"We saw that we genuinely liked one another and

came to believe that God wanted us to merge,” reflects Tony.

In December last year, WCG and CFFC took the plunge and began to worship together as one congregation during Christian America’s most segregated hour.

Is it working? So far so good.

“We experienced the normal conflict that is needed to test the nature of any relationship,” says Tony. But there is a growing commitment to make the merger work.

The new congregation is still working out details, such

By the time you read this, the congregation will have moved to a new permanent location on the grounds of a former parochial school campus. The merged congregations have already spent many hours working together to renovate the buildings. The new facility is ideally located as a center for outreach and teaching.

The institution of a new worship service that reflects the people, culture, and traditions of all members is the most powerful symbol of invitation that any church can provide. Cliff and Tony believe that the new church will attract members of other ethnic groups as well.

The merged congregations have not yet finalized a



“The most segregated hour in Christian America?” Not here, it isn’t!



Tony Pierce and Cliff Parks share the worship.

as the order of services, musical styles, how to do communion, and what to study during Sunday school.

“We found that concentrating on the details instead of the strengths of the relationship could be counterproductive,” explains Tony. “That is especially the case if it seems like those details threaten to weaken the resolve of the intended commitment. Like in a marriage, we generally do not work out all the details before the wedding. We made our chief concern the strength of our commitment to one another. The new identity will emerge the longer we are together.”

Both pastors are being careful to respect each other’s differences, and also the natural concerns of their denominations. The pastors agreed that the merged congregation would recognize and support the denominational heritage of both their previously separate congregations. They will send reports and at least as much money as either did separately to both the Southern Baptist Conference and the Worldwide Church of God.

“We want to create a win-win situation for everybody if we can,” says Tony.

name for themselves, but they are strongly considering “Heaven’s View Community Church.”

“‘Come see what heaven looks like’ is the way we intend to promote the ministry,” explains Tony. “That statement captures the essence of what our congregation looks like, as we attempt to mirror the multicultural kingdom of God in heaven.”

“The community needs to see that Christians can do more than just talk about being one in Christ,” says Cliff. “They need to see that Jesus is able to overcome the things that may divide the secular community. There needs to be a place where people of any race can come to church and see a bit of their culture.”

“What we are doing may seem risky, and I don’t know what the next two years will bring,” Cliff admits. “But I believe that Jesus will take care of us one step at a time. For the first time in my pastoral career I feel that Jesus is using us not just to have an impact on one another within the congregation, but also on the community we worship in.

“I am scared to death and loving every minute of it.” ●

Going on a Guilt Trip?

By Mike Feazell

Guilt trips. They're all the rage, you know. Everybody's taking them. No date restrictions. Availability unlimited. People of all ages are welcome. But there are a few hidden costs.

Among other things, guilt trips cost you your stomach lining, your sleep, your sense of humor, your ability to have fun, your productivity and any realistic sense of who you really are and what your purpose really is.

But we stand in line for tickets anyway, as though it's our chief call and duty to leave the world of confidence and hope and set sail for the land of dread and gloom.

We stuff every mental container we own with depressing emotions, fear and blame, and then, with the whole load strapped on securely, we lug it across the gangplank and down the narrow hall to our inside stateroom deep in the bowels of the S.S. Guilty Conscience.

And yet we're religious people, people who know that God forgives sin and that we don't have to be crushed down with burdens of guilt.

Maybe that's the problem. Maybe religion is not the solution to guilt after all. Maybe, if the truth were known, we'd find that religion and guilt are sweethearts. After all, wherever you find one, the other will usually be buzzing nearby like some fat, annoying housefly.

That's because religion is designed to give people a list of things to do to stay on good terms with whatever deity they profess to worship. The trouble is, no one has ever kept their particular list of rules well enough to be absolutely sure their deity isn't one day going to hurl a nasty curse their way. Religion isn't enough. All it manages to do is make people feel worse for their failure. It pumps out guilt like some magic grinder gone mad. What people really need is some hope, some good news, not more religious talk about how bad they are.

Good news

Christians should know better, of course. We have the gospel—the good news. Sad to say, however, a lot of us are experts at turning even the gospel into religion, which means we end up spending

more time on guilt trips (or sending others on guilt trips) than we do resting at home with our Lord of grace.

Freedom from a guilty conscience is so foreign to most of us that as soon as it happens we start feeling guilty for not feeling guilty. It's as though we think we stand in better with God if we refuse to feel forgiven and clean.



Hebrews 10:19-22 says, “Therefore...since we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus...let us draw near to God with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience...”

This passage speaks of confidence—confidence to be at home in the presence of God, not hiding guilt-ridden behind a trashcan in the corner. That confidence is not confidence in ourselves or in how well we've behaved; it's confidence in God himself who loves us so much that he sent his Son to remove our guilt and give us all the privileges of beloved children.

The gospel, thank God, is not religion. It is the end of religion. It's good news, the good news that God loves you so much that he sent his Son to bear the curse of your sinfulness and be raised from the dead so you can be forever at peace with him.

You don't need religion to be at peace with God; you just need to trust your Savior. You don't have to pack your guilt trip suitcase with plenty of fear, doubt, worry and anxiety. You don't have to wonder whether God really loves you, or really forgives you, or really has saved you.

Instead of a guilt trip, why not believe the good news—the good news that cleanses you from a guilty conscience? ●



Turn-key or makeover?

By Shane Bazer

If you are thinking about finding a new church home, you might want to consider doing your shopping with a real-estate tip in mind. The “perfect” church might not be the best spiritual investment.

In the real estate market, a house that is in tip-top shape is often referred to as a “turn-key” house. If you buy the home, it is in nearly perfect condition. Someone else has done all the work and the only work you need to do is “turn the key” and move in. Such properties are popular, and they usually sell for a premium. Unfortunately, when it comes time to sell, you stand to make little profit unless the market has appreciated considerably.

My wife and I, on the other hand, have purchased fixer-upper properties. In the last 15 years we have bought seven and lived in three of them. These properties were “cosmetic” fixers, rather than fixers that needed highly qualified, skilled work. The types of improvements our properties have needed were new paint, flooring and fixtures. The most “construction” we have done was to tear out and replace kitchen and bathroom counters and sinks. When more difficult repairs needed to be done, we always hired skilled professionals.

We’ve put hundreds if not thousands of hours of labor into our properties. We have spent quite a bit of money on tools and supplies. Some people think we are a bit crazy and want to know why we do it. Let me share with you some of the benefits of getting involved in a fixer.

- The more work you put into a place, the more it feels like a home.
- You might wonder at times if all the work is worth it, but when the job is complete you realize it was worth every bit of effort you put into it.
- By doing most of the work yourself instead of paying others to do it, you discover and develop skills and talents you might not have realized you had.
- By choosing your own colors and decorating schemes, you can create an atmosphere that meets your particular needs.
- You have more pride in your property. You are more likely to take better care of it and want to share it with others.
- And of course, the financial rewards can be substantial.

I’ve found that it’s much the same with a church. (I’m speaking of a congregation, not a building, of course.)

- The more work you put into church, the more it feels like home.
- You might wonder at times if all the work is worth it, but when you see how your work has touched people’s lives, you realize it was worth every bit of effort you put into it.
- By doing some work yourself instead of paying others to do it, you discover and develop skills and talents you might not have realized God has given you.
- By choosing your own name, styles of worship, children’s church program, women’s and men’s ministry programs, etc. you can create an atmo-



“If you’re interested in “fixing-up” your church, make sure you aren’t all alone.”

sphere that meets your particular needs.

- You have more pride in your church. You are more likely to pray for it and take better care of it and want to share it with others.
 - And of course, the spiritual rewards can be substantial.
- If you are interested in “fixing-up” your church, make sure you aren’t doing it alone. Otherwise you will soon become overworked and burned out. Find a handful of others who see the potential and sit down together to assess the areas that need to be improved, figure out who has the skills and tools to do the job, and even consider whether you need to hire outside laborers to help.

As long as your church has the solid foundation of Jesus Christ and the leaders are supportive of the makeover project, it will be well worth it to roll up your sleeves and start making your church the glorious spiritual home it is meant to be. ●



Shane Bazer is the prayer ministry leader of Celebration Christian Fellowship in Raleigh, North Carolina. www.celebration-wcg.org

A new look at *The Good Samaritan*

By Joseph Tkach

The Good Samaritan is one of Jesus' most popular parables. We preachers often use it to encourage people to be unselfish and to be proactive in serving others. But there is more to the story than that. Jesus was doing far more than putting hypocritical religious leaders in their place. Let's take a closer look.

"A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, when he fell into the hands of robbers. They stripped him of his clothes, beat him and went away, leaving him half dead.

"A priest happened to be going down the same road, and when he saw the man, he passed by on the other side. So too, a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side.

"But a Samaritan, as he traveled, came where the man was; and when he saw him, he took pity on him. He went to him and bandaged his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he put the man on his own donkey, took him to an inn and took care of him. The next day he took out two silver coins and gave them to the innkeeper. 'Look after him,' he said, 'and when I return, I will reimburse you for any extra expense you may have.'

"Which of these three do you think was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?" (Luke 10:30-37).

The answer to Jesus' question was obvious. But I want to show you that Jesus was teaching far more than a straightforward lesson in social responsibility. Let's consider the context. Jesus was answering a lawyer who had asked, "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" (verse 25).

This man was a religious lawyer, priding himself in his understanding of all 613 points of the Torah. The religious leaders of Jesus' day were the inheritors of a system that had turned obedience to God into an obstacle course, so strewn with picky dos and don'ts that it left the average person on a permanent guilt trip.

This approach contradicted what Jesus taught, and confrontation became inevitable. The lawyers, along with the Pharisees, Sadducees, scribes and others in religious leadership, were constantly trying to discredit Jesus. There was a motive behind the lawyer's apparently innocent question.

So Jesus answered wisely, "Do what is written in the law. How do you read it?" (verse 26).

The lawyer knew the answer to that. "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and

with all your strength and with all your mind'; and, 'Love your neighbor as yourself'" (verse 27).

"You have answered correctly," Jesus replied. "Do this and you will live" (verse 28).

It was a good answer, as far as it went. But you know what lawyers are like. They are trained to look for some extenuating circumstance that might in some way limit the extent of the law. The lawyer knew that the command to "love your neighbor as yourself" was difficult, in fact, impossible to fulfill. So he thought he had found a loophole.

"And who is my neighbor?" he asked Jesus. That is when Jesus gave his famous parable.

Cast and location

Jesus set his story on the road from Jerusalem to Jericho, a distance of about 17 miles. Jerusalem was where the Temple was located, the center of the Levitical priesthood. The priests were the highest class of the Levites. They were supported by thousands of other Levites who served at lower levels, doing such tasks as keeping the altar fire going, lighting the incense, singing in the Temple chorus and playing musical instruments.

When they were not on duty, many of these priests and temple workers lived in Jericho, which had become a "bedroom community" of Jerusalem. They often traveled this road between Jerusalem and Jericho.

Travel in those days could be hazardous. One stretch of the Jericho road was known as the "Way of Blood," because so many people were robbed and killed there. This was where Jesus set the scene for his parable. People knew exactly where he was talking about.

In Jesus' story, the first to see the victim is a priest, but rather than get involved, he passes by on the other side of the road. He is followed by a Levite, a temple-worker. The Levite does the same—he passes by. Then along comes a Samaritan. A what? Jesus would have caused a stir with that. The Jews of that time did not often hear the words "good" and "Samaritan" used in the same sentence.

The Samaritans were a mix of Jew and gentile, and the Jews did not like them. They had names for Samaritans like "half breeds" and "heathen dogs," and considered them to be spiritually defiled. But in Jesus' story, it is this outcast who stops to help.

Not only does this Samaritan help, but he goes far beyond what most people do. He cleans the victim's wounds with oil and wine. Then he bandages them. People didn't carry first-aid kits back then. He likely would have had to tear up some of his own clothing to make a bandage. Next,

'Pocket History of Theology,'

by Roger E. Olson and Adam C. English

Reviewed by Paul Kroll

he puts the injured man on his donkey and takes him to an inn. He takes two silver coins, a considerable amount in those days, and promises to reimburse the innkeeper for any further expense.

This is an exceptional level of assistance, especially as the victim is a total stranger and someone who is supposed to be a social enemy. But the Samaritan did not let that stand in the way.

With this deceptively simple little story, Jesus impales the lawyer on his own hook. He asks him, "Which of these three do you think was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?" (verse 36).

What can the expert in the law say, except, "The one who had mercy on him."

Then Jesus delivers the knockout blow. "Go and do likewise," he says (verse 37).

Remember, this "teacher of the law" was from a class of people who prided themselves on how carefully they obeyed God. For example, they would not even pronounce God's name, considering it too holy to utter. They would even take a ritual bath to ensure purity before writing God's name. Along with the Pharisees, they were fastidious about observing the law in every detail.

The lawyer had asked what he needed to do in order to inherit eternal life. Jesus' answer was, in effect, "You have to do the impossible."

How could anyone be expected to live up to the standard of the Samaritan in this story? If that is what God expects, even the meticulous lawyer was doomed. But Jesus had chosen his words carefully. He was showing that humans cannot meet the perfect requirements of the law. Even those who fully dedicate themselves to it fall short. Jesus is the only one to fulfill the law in its deepest intent. Jesus alone is the Good Samaritan.

The robbers correspond to sin and the forces of evil, the devil and his dominion. The man who was beaten and robbed is representative of all humanity, helpless, hopeless and left to die.

The priest and the Levite represent the laws and the sacrifices of the old covenant. They are ineffective. The Good Samaritan is the only one who can help. The wine and the oil correspond to the blood Jesus shed for us and the Holy Spirit who dwells in us.

The inn could then represent the church, where God puts his people to be spiritually nurtured until he returns for them. Perhaps the innkeeper signifies the elders of the church.

Jesus used the lawyer's question to show how inadequate for salvation even the best human effort is, and how wonderful and sure is his work of redemption for humanity. Jesus, and only Jesus, can rescue us from the "Way of Blood." And he did it by way of blood. ●

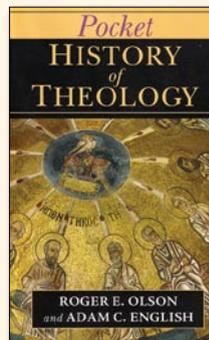
Joseph Tkach is Pastor General of the Worldwide Church of God.

I've just finished reading a fascinating and informative book called the *Pocket History of Theology* by Roger E. Olson, a respected professor of theology, and Adam C. English, an assistant professor of religion.

I know, theology is a boring subject. But, wait! Don't turn the page. Theology is an *exciting* subject because it's central to our Christian lives, and so is our knowing something about the history of the church, our heritage.

Theology is our study about God—how to rightly know and speak of him who is our Creator and Savior. Studying historical theology also connects us to two millennia of history and the ancestral people of our church.

This is why I recommend the *Pocket History of Theology*. It's a true pocket-sized book of 108 pages, so it's not a massive tome. I believe you'll find the book an easy and interesting read, concise and informative. Perhaps even inspirational. The book gives a bird's-eye view of the main currents of the Christian faith. And it discusses the vital theological issues the church has wrestled with from its beginnings to the present day.



Studying historical theology connects us to two millennia of history and the ancestral people of our church.

Olson and English present the story of the church's theological currents as a five-act play. They are: Act I: "A Story Takes Place," Act II: "The Plot Thickens," Act III: "The Story Divides," Act IV: "Reforming, Revising and Rewriting the Story," and finally, Act V, where we catch a glimpse of the state of the church's theological landscape today in an "Unresolved Plot."

Have a refreshing time in your favorite armchair, on the patio or in the park reading about the history of our Christian faith in *The Pocket History of Theology*.

Majors & Minors

By Rose Huff

“Mom, when can I get my ears pierced?” my 12-year-old son asked.

“Mom, I want a tattoo,” my 17-year-old daughter declared.

Family night is a real learning experience in our household. One of my children chooses the restaurant we will dine in (I rarely create edible and/or tasty food), and my other one chooses our entertainment for the evening—they trade choices each weekend. What I learn during our meal continually amazes me, yet validates my sense that children want parents to care about what the children care about in their developing world.

Curfews, slouchy oversized denims, My Space, gang affiliation, low-rise-midriff-baring clothing, mobile/cellular phones, afros, skater gear... A lot to digest for a parent attempting to remain somewhat knowledgeable of the social habits that are important to her children.

I have come to believe that King Solomon’s words are eternal: “There is nothing new under the sun, all that has been, will be again...” Our parents suffered the same angst about the interests and futures of their adolescents that we do as we struggle to manage our parental responsibility with love and morality. It is comforting for me to realize that the stages of emerging adolescent independence are fairly predictable, and as parents we can look for two common signposts on the path of a child’s pursuit of personal identity: 1) The child is consumed by what the child wants to do and finds his or her desires fully justifiable, and 2) The parent is disturbed by what the child wants to do, believing it to be a reflection of the parent’s skills as a

responsible custodian.

Remembering that my feelings are normal, but misguided, helps me get over myself and what I perceive others may think of my parenting decisions. Then I am better able to concentrate on morally responsible parenting. For me, it has come down to this: Majors and Minors.

When my child approaches me with a request for a “personal alteration,” I first evaluate it under the scope of major (implications) and minor (implications) of experimentation using the three “I”s: Is it Illegal? Is it Immoral? Is it Immoderate?

First, **Illegal**: My child’s desire for a piercing is not against federal or state law; however, it may be against school rules for males to have a visible piercing, thereby rendering it “illegal” in his context. Next, would his proposed piercing be **Immoral**—violating life or liberty for another human being by trespassing right or wrong behaviors? Finally, is the request **Immoderate**—lacking in balance of energy spent toward the behavior, financial expense to maintain the behavior, or rehabilitative expense to keep the behavior in check?

Once I pass my child’s proposition through the three “I”s, it is time to see how it passes through my filters of importance. This process allows me both to check my own biases and preferences, as well as to provide my children clear, meaningful, and morally sound guidelines for their conduct while clarifying for them my expectations.

It is a lot like a job description or promotion criteria—we need to know what our employer expects so that we can perform at a level that is meaningful and choice-driven as an employee. When I know what my superordinates in the workplace expect, I am better able to make positive and useful contributions toward the



The stages of emerging adolescent independence are fairly predictable, and as parents we can look for common signposts on the path of a child's pursuit of personal identity.

shared goals of the organization. Most people have experienced the frustration of an ever-changing, ill-defined set of expectations for the employee—it is disheartening and debilitating to human productivity and creativity.

In the same way, children need reliable, definable, and structured guidelines for behavior in their development. Some parents have difficulty maintaining rigid cause-and-effect consequences for their children because they want their children to either 1) like them, or 2) not suffer. Neither of those sentiments is a responsible position for a parent to take.

Children test us to know they are safe. Think of it this way: When you get on a roller coaster, what is the first thing you do? *You fasten the safety harness, then vigorously jiggle it to ensure that it has you reliably fastened!* Children “jiggle” our guidelines and rules to ensure that they will be secure for the roller coaster ride that is adolescence. It is easy to succumb to their whinings, complainings, and “I hate you’s,” but the bottom line is, as a parent, you are their authoritative sentry.

On the other hand, if my child's request is not illegal, immoral, or immoderate, then I grow as an individual attempting to understand an ever-changing world. The meanings of specific haircuts, denim styles/lengths, piercings, etc. and what they symbolized in my adolescence have changed, and so should my awareness. I don't have to agree with it or like it, but I need to be informed in order to make meaningful and rational decisions for my children's best interests in their ever-evolving world. ●



Dr. Rose Huff lives and works as an educational psychologist in Southern California.



Mary Magdalene

By Joyce Catherwood

(John 19:25-30; 20:1-18)

Probably have more reasons than anyone to respond with fierce loyalty to our Lord. He lifted me out of wretched conditions, conditions so desperate they are hard to describe. I lived in terrifying darkness, plagued with despair and depression. Often I didn't know who I was, where I was—I had lost complete control over my life. My family was ashamed and embarrassed.

In our culture, those suffering from madness are social outcasts. People would move aside and look disgusted or scared whenever I came near them. I became accustomed to the degrading name-calling and finger-pointing, believing it was all I deserved.

But one glorious day, a man named Jesus saw me and took pity. He walked right over to me, not at all put off by my wretchedness. I backed away terrified, stumbling to the ground. He knelt down and spoke calmly to me. He smoothed my dirty hair off my face with his big carpenter hands. I had no memory of the last time anyone had shown me any compassion. Then, in one split second, he healed my mind and filled my heart and soul with light and wonder and blessed peace!

So it shouldn't be difficult to understand why I began to follow him everywhere. I supported him financially out of my own means. I became a part of his traveling team, sharing countless miles and meals. I knew him so well. I knew what made him laugh, what made him exasperated, what made his heart heavy.

And at the end, no matter how frightening or gruesome things got, I could not leave him. I was there when they nailed him to the cross. I was there when he cried out “It is finished!” and died. I watched as they took him down from the cross and followed as they carried him to the tomb. Only then did I go home, determined to come back and properly prepare his body for burial.

I returned as soon as I could, while it was still dark. I was astonished to find the tomb empty. It angered me that anyone would steal his body after all that had already been done to him. I ran to get help. Peter and John rushed back with me, then left, confused.

Desolate and miserable, I began to sob uncontrollably. I looked into the tomb again and saw two angels, who spoke to me. Bewildered, I turned around and someone standing behind me said, “Why are you weeping?” It was still twilight and my eyes were flooded with tears, so I didn't recognize who it was at first. But when he spoke my name, I knew it was Jesus! I fell at his feet and hung onto him with all my might. We were laughing and crying at the same time. My master was alive!

Jesus finally had to tell me to let go because he hadn't yet ascended to his Father. He had delayed his ascent to heaven so he could comfort a weeping woman—amazing, yet so typical of my Lord.

The sun popped up over the horizon and cast a brilliant glow over everything. What a contrast to the darkness of the last few days. I don't think my feet even touched the ground as I ran to tell everyone the good news! I had seen the risen Lord!

The Faith of an Atheist

A discussion with Alister McGrath

Christian Odyssey: Many Christians, when confronted with arguments against the existence of God, become intimidated and go on the defensive, as though the absence of scientific proof of God makes atheism a scientifically sound position. You don't do that. Why not?

Alister McGrath: I persistently make the point that the evidence available is not—by itself—sufficient to bring us to a secure position of belief *or* disbelief. So if you arrive at either of those positions, you do so as a matter of faith. Atheists find this very threatening and they often get very angry. But I keep pressing the point—and

obvious to them that atheism is a faith, instead of a certainty supported by scientific argument. But until I have done that, they have not realized that it is a faith that, like Christianity, also has its fanatics and fundamentalists.

CO: What do you make of the current discussion about Intelligent Design? On the one hand it seems to offer a sensible approach to understanding the anomalies in the theory of evolution. But many scientists who believe in a Creator are suspicious of it.

AM: Intelligent Design is mounting an effective challenge to the idea that one can

explain every aspect of the world using evolutionary theory. The atheistic implications of Darwinism need to be challenged. The Intelligent Design lobbyists are also right to point out that there are areas that contemporary evolutionary theory can't explain. That is an important point to make because often you will find that evolutionists claim that the theory explains everything. But there are big gaps. Those are the strengths of the Intelligent Design idea.

I think my concern is that there are weaknesses as well. One is that some ID people point out gaps that we can't explain,

and argue that God helps us explain them. But if we had this conversation in ten years time, those gaps might not be there any more. It is the old 'God of the Gaps' problem. So my concern is that what is today unexplained eventually might become explained.

I suggest a better approach is to say that the fact we can explain things at all is very remarkable. My argument, like John Polkinghorne's, is not the individual gaps that science has problems explaining at the moment—it is the big picture itself that needs explanation. Scientifically it is easier and more acceptable, and it avoids this difficulty with advancing knowledge.

This builds on a point that we find in many 20th-century writers, like Albert Einstein and Ludwig Witt-



“I believe in Christianity as I believe the sun has risen—not just because I see it, but because by it, I see everything else.”

they eventually give way.

We have a generation of Christian leaders who seem to be genuinely intimidated about the credibility of their faith. They feel that they will not be taken seriously by the culture. They don't really have a deep sense of the truth of the gospel that enables them to regain confidence in the gospel itself, and also to rethink the ways that we present it.

CO: Apologists for atheism—such as Dr. Richard Dawkins—present atheism as the only approach a thinking person can come to. Dawkins can be quite withering in his approach. It is perhaps not surprising that many representatives of Christianity are afraid to enter the arena with him.

AM: Dawkins has clearly overreached himself. When I take people through his arguments, it becomes

genstein, to name two examples. The argument here is that the intelligibility of the universe itself requires explanation. It is not the *gaps* in our understanding of the world which point to God, but rather the very *comprehensiveness* of scientific understanding that needs an explanation. In brief, my argument is that *explicability itself requires explanation*. And Christianity gives us that explanation. It tells us about the “big picture.” I’m a C. S. Lewis fan, and I think this quote is one of his best: “I believe in Christianity as I believe the sun has risen—not just because I see it, but because by it, I see everything else.” And the Christian worldview helps us see why the sciences work.

CO: Your personal journey is from aggressive atheism to a vigorous support of Christianity at an intellectual level. What caused you to change sides?

AM: I think it was a process of about two months. I was, as you say, a very aggressive atheist as a schoolboy. I believed the sciences had made belief in God impossible. I believed that atheism was the way of the future, and that religion was an evil relic of the past.

So nowadays, when I read books expounding atheism, I can say: “that was me, once.” I can recognize the tone of voice very easily. There were several things that made me change my mind. I began to discover while still at school—although the implications didn’t crystallize until later—that the sciences cannot disprove God. Scientific knowledge is provisional. We think this *now* but as time goes on we might change our mind. But I didn’t see in my atheistic reading any recognition that scientists change their minds like this. I began to realize that maybe people might think atheism was right today. But what is further down the line? It was a nagging doubt—not yet a conversion.

Then I discovered two things when I went to Oxford University. One was that I had misjudged Christianity. It was far more intellectually resilient and more spiritually exciting than I had imagined. Christianity gave me a lens that let me see things. I found it to be true then, and have ever since.

The other thing was not just intellectual—it was personal. I noticed that my friends who were Christians had something about them that I did not have. It is extremely difficult to describe this. A sense of peace and purpose. An inner conviction. They discovered something that was not just *true* but was *real*. I have often reflected on how important that is.

I believe passionately that Christianity is intellectually true. Yet it also has the capacity to transform people’s lives. It’s a double-edged approach. Here is something I believe to be true, and I can argue its truth with anybody. But it also has the capacity to change someone’s life. In our postmodern culture, the criteria of truth seems not to be “is it right?” but “does it work?” I assure you that Christianity does work!

CO: Does the fact that you came to your Christian understanding from a position of a scientist and an atheist help you to think more profoundly about the truth of the gospel?

AM: I understand the atheist mind-set. I know the arguments that I used to use as an atheist. So I keep asking myself how I can develop approaches that are going to make sense to atheists and challenge their belief system.

That is natural for me because of my history and my experience. I think the difficulty is that if you have been a Christian all your life, you haven’t really developed an understanding of how the rest of the world thinks. We need to raise up a generation of apologists and evangelists who are able to enter into the mind-set of atheism and postmodernity, to be able to speak to it in terms it can understand, using arguments that are persuasive.

CO: It seems that the kind of person who makes a good pastor may not be effective in the role of evangelist or prophet.

AM: Pastors face challenges. They must be good pastors and preachers, and we can’t be good at everything. To engage with our culture demands a certain set of skills and tools that are not in the normal pastor’s toolbox.

My concern is that the churches do not seem to be encouraging Christians to think of themselves as public intellectuals. And we need people to engage with the issues that are being raised by others. If we don’t do this, the battlefield is left to the other side. Although there aren’t many of us doing this kind of thing, it is extremely important to be in there getting on with it.

CO: C.S. Lewis once described Christianity as being like “a big hall with many rooms leading off it.” The job of the evangelist is to get people into the entrance hall. It is in the rooms that you find the warmth, companionship and food. Unfortunately some of the rooms aren’t very friendly. The church is often not the product that we would like it to be.

AM: You have put your finger on a major issue. The gospel is radiant and wonderful—but its embodiment in the church leaves lots to be desired. I often wonder about this. If evangelism leads people into the church, will they want to stay there?

So I keep finding myself going back to Jesus. How does he interact with individuals? He sits down with people in a way that would often have been scandalous in contemporary Jewish society—but he accepts and welcomes them. In Jesus, I see someone who is strongly challenging prejudices. That observation doesn’t always give the answers, but it certainly sets things in perspective! ●



Alister McGrath is the Director of the Centre for Evangelism and Apologetics at Wycliffe Hall, and a Professor of Historical Theology at Oxford University. He is the author of many books, including *Dawkins’ God: Genes, Memes, and the Meaning of Life* and *The Twilight of Atheism: The Rise and Fall of Disbelief in the Modern World*.

Right idea... Wrong foundation

800 years ago, the people of Pisa in Italy decided to build a tower. The tower was to have bells that would ring out to the surrounding countryside as witness to the glory of God.

Things began to go wrong almost at once. After three stories had been completed, the tower developed an ominous lean to the north. Construction stopped for about 100 years. Then four more stories were added, built at an angle to shift the weight away from the tilt. But this caused the tower to begin to lean the other way.

Countless architects persisted with the curious structure for another century, trying to compensate for the ever-increasing tilt. The result was that the tower not only continued to lean, but took on a slight curve, like a banana.

The last story was added in 1372. Since then, generations of engineers have tried in vain to save the tower from its slow demise. World War II dictator Benito Mussolini ordered it to be straightened by adding hundreds of tons of concrete to the base. It only made matters worse.

The problem is the foundation. The tower is built on weak, unstable subsoil that could not support its weight. Sooner or later the tower will topple, although modern engineers have added 800 tons of lead to the base, perhaps stabilizing it for another 300 years.

Let's hope so, because it is one of the world's architectural treasures. But sadly, most people who see it don't think of it as a building dedicated to reflect the glory of God. The first impulse is to laugh, and then to wonder what's keeping it from falling down.

The leaning tower of faith

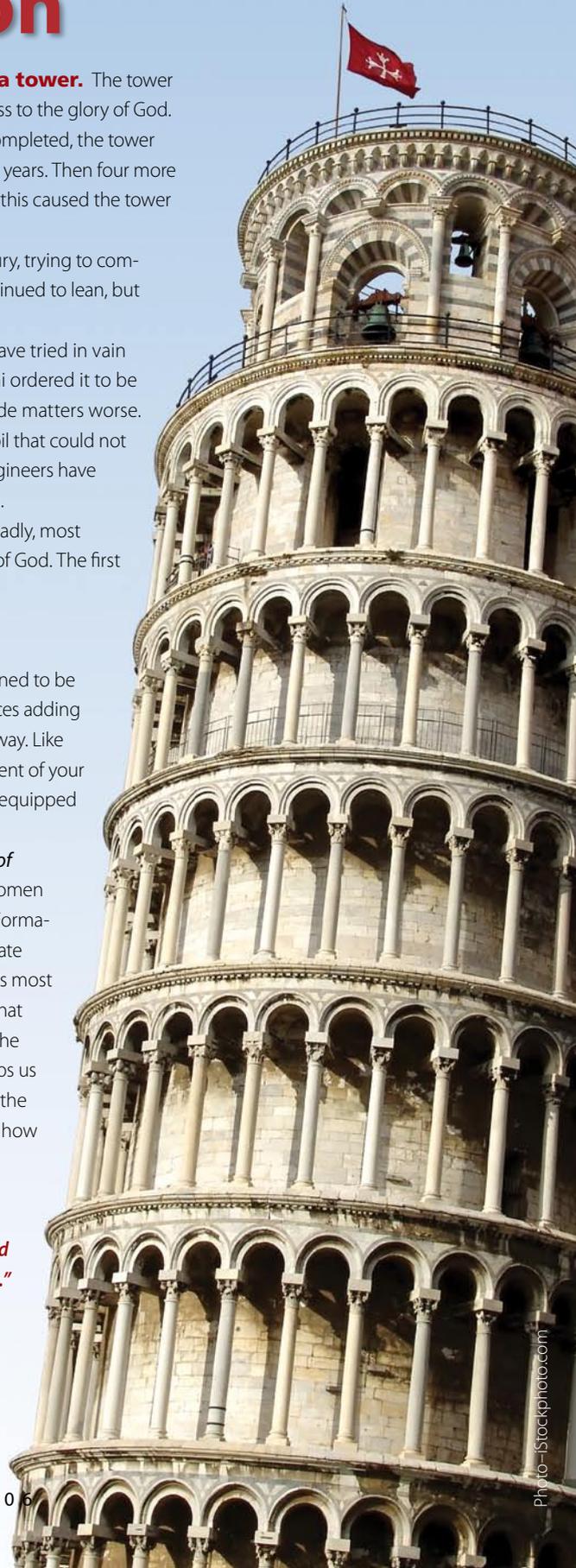
Do you ever feel that your faith is a bit like that tower? Most of us have not learned to be Christians in a systematic way. It has been a bit here, a bit there, with experiences adding up and knowledge of doctrine and the Bible coming together in a haphazard way. Like the builders of the Tower of Pisa, you keep going, but you are not really confident of your foundations. You'd like to be better equipped for the Christian life, and better equipped for service.

We have some classes that we believe will help you do that. *Foundations of Christian Faith* consists of four classes specially designed to equip men and women for more informed and effective service in the gospel. The first class, Spiritual Formation, provides practical help for students to develop their personal and corporate spiritual lives. Next, Survey of the Bible takes you on a grand tour of the world's most important Book. Then, Foundations of Faith takes you through the basics of what Christians believe and why—how we can know God, what God has done for the world through Jesus Christ, the reality and power of grace, and how God equips us for our journey of faith. And finally, Life and Teachings of Jesus Christ explores the life, death and resurrection of Jesus with an in-depth look at his teachings and how they apply today, including an important segment on the principles of sound Bible study.

"I have been filled completely and highly blessed by the classes. I recommend them to all! Thank you for the opportunity to study God's word in such a way."

"I'm thoroughly enjoying this class (SF) and highly recommend it."

Perhaps **Ambassador College of Christian Ministry** can help you too. For more information visit www.ambascol.org today.



The Protestant Church in Hitler's Germany and the Barmen Declaration

By Paul Kroll

On January 30, 1933, German President Paul von Hindenburg appointed Adolf Hitler Chancellor of Germany. But less than two months later, Hitler was the nation's dictator.

Many German Christians at first openly welcomed Hitler's Nazi party to power as a historic moment of Christ's work on earth through and for the Aryan "Volk." A leading Lutheran theologian wrote in 1934, "Our Protestant churches have welcomed the turning point of 1933 as a gift and miracle of God."

A "faith party" of "German Christians" began to develop and grow in influence. In their first national convention in April 1933, in Berlin, the delegates stated their goal to reorganize the 27 Protestant regional churches in Germany into a single, national church under the leadership of a national bishop.

The "German Christians" published a number of programmatic papers during 1932-1933 that give us an insight into their hopes and goals. They wanted an evangelical church rooted in German nationhood based on an Aryan model. "We want a vital national Church that will express all the spiritual forces of our people," stated one "German Christian" document from 1932.

On June 28, 1933, with Hitler's authorization, Ludwig Müller, a fervent Nazi, took over chairmanship of the council of the Federation of the 27 regional Protestant churches. A new constitution established a single "Protestant Reich Church." On September 27, 1933, Müller was elected national bishop by a synod dominated by "German Christians."

Restrictions were immediately placed on the clergy. They had to be "politically reliable" and accept the superiority of the Aryan race. Pressure was exerted to expel Jewish Christians from ministry. The Nazi "Führer Principle" was to be adopted by the churches, which was a claim that Hitler was "lord" over the German church and that its Christ and Christianity were uniquely Aryan.

Confessing Church and Barmen

Some German Protestant pastors, led by Martin Niemöller (1892-1984), stood in opposition to the "German Christians." In September 1933, Niemöller sent a letter to all German pastors, inviting them to join a Pastors' Emergency League. Niemöller asked the pastors to pledge themselves to be bound to Christ as Lord, teach

the gospel message of the Scriptures and the historic Confessions of the Church. Aryanism, a doctrine of racial superiority, was to be rejected as anti-Christian teaching.

In April 1934, the League created the Confessing Church. It included ministers and churchmen from Reformed, Lutheran and United Churches, as well as other church groups. The Confessing Church took its name from the fact that its members had pledged themselves to affirm the great historic Confessions of the Church.

The leaders of the Confessing Church met on May 29-31, 1934, at Barmen. Here they issued the historic Barmen Declaration, drafted by Reformed theologian Karl Barth (1886-1968) and Lutheran theologian Hans Asmussen with input from other Lutheran, Reformed and United Churches leaders. One of the original signatories of the Declaration wrote, in retrospect, that Barmen "appeared to us then like a miracle from God."

The Declaration was written in direct opposition to the national church government—the "Faith Movement of the German Christians"—rather than against the Nazi regime itself. It challenged Christians who were attempting to bring the Protestant church into line with the nationalistic ideals and aspirations of Nazi rule. However, since the "German Christians" were a proxy for the Nazi state, the Declaration became also a prophetic condemnation of Hitler's totalitarian rule.

The Barmen Declaration expressly asserts that Christ alone is the one Word of God—the source of all authority and truth—whom we must hear, trust and obey. It rejects the notion that other powers apart from Christ could be sources of God's revelation.

It stands on the principle that Christ cannot be co-opted by, used in the service of, or be remade in the image of religious or political ideologies created by fallen human beings and structures in opposition to God. Barmen confesses the reality that God's grace for us cannot be reinterpreted or replaced by ideas and programs growing out of human creaturely self-interest and evil designs.

In these ways, Barmen speaks not only to the times and crisis of the church in Nazi Germany, but to Christians throughout the history of the church and in our time and place. •



A miracle in torn blue jeans

By Michael Houghton

My wife and I moved to the Great Lakes area of the Mid-West eight years ago to pastor two small churches. I was convinced that I would serve those congregations until I retired, many years in the future.

But when I was 50, I was diagnosed with Parkinson's disease. I knew that meant I would have to give up the pastorate one day, but I still thought of that day as way off in the future. Last December the future arrived.

I was not ready. "I can still contribute," I pleaded with God, but to no avail. As I write, I realize that I am no longer healthy enough to even keep up with my two congregations, much less lead them. Living with this disease, which progresses daily in its relentless drive to strip me of my ability to feed myself, walk and care for myself was bad enough. But stepping back and letting others take over has and will continue to be the most difficult thing I have faced in my life.

The last few months of 2005 were the darkest months I have ever experienced. I found myself wishing that I could just go to sleep and wake up in the presence of the Lord. However, now that I have had some time to think and reflect, I realize that those few months were the most productive months of my life and of my ministry.

I was asking God for a miracle, and a small one at that. After all, I only needed about 350,000 dopamine-producing brain cells and everything would be normal again. Oh, how I desired to be well once more. To smell and taste my food again. To walk without falling. To climb my stairs upright instead of on all fours. I prayed and I prayed, but I was continually drawn back to Paul's answer concerning his thorn in the flesh: "My grace is sufficient for you" (2 Corinthians 12:9). Finally I knew that God was not going to heal me.

I was disappointed, but not with God. He has paid the price to do whatever he wishes with my life. But I was disappointed that sometime in the near future I would have to give up the work I love so much.



Small miracle

In the blackness of those weeks that stretched into months, God sent me a miracle that I almost did not see. In fact I am convinced that I never would have noticed it at all if I had not been sick. We have a young man in our congregation who attends with his sister. Let's call him "Kenny."

It would have been easy to overlook Kenny if I had been my usual "high gear all the time" self. But when God slowed me down, I began to notice this eight-year-old boy, who attended with his sister. Kenny's parents, although they did not attend themselves, were very supportive of him and his sister doing so. With his shirt half tucked in and half hanging out of his well-worn jeans, Kenny seemed like a normal, active eight-year-old. His hair was often uncombed, but he always had a huge smile on his face and was often trying to help someone.

Before my Parkinson's disease had progressed so far, I would never have noticed young Kenny. But, forced to the sidelines myself, I watched as he tried to get the attention of the men in our congregation. But you know how it is—they were just too busy to

give him more than a few polite sentences of conversation before moving on to more pressing tasks. Once in a while I saw the disappointment in his eyes, but it was quickly replaced by a smile as he spied another person.

I must admit that in my own pool of self-pity, I did nothing but watch this for several weeks. But one day the Lord brought us together. It was not on my volition (as it should have been) but because Kenny was excited about what he had learned in Sunday school. Since I was the only one in the room at the time, he came charging up to me.

His exuberance about an Abraham lesson was contagious. We talked for several minutes, and then it was time to go in for worship services. When I stood, Kenny asked me if he could help me. It broke my heart to realize that here I was thinking that God was really losing a good one if he let *me* go, and he sent an eight-year-old to minister to me. Kenny walked with me to my place, talking the whole time, and when I was seated he took a seat two rows behind me. After I preached he came up and asked if he could walk with me as I made my way slowly to the chair by the door where I sat to greet each person after services.

Kenny asked if he could carry my Bible, and he then offered to return the microphone to the sound table to save me a few steps. When he returned, he saw that I was not singing and must have figured that it was because I could not see the words projected on the wall. So he went and got a song book, found the right page and brought it to me. Even though I had not been singing because my

voice was worn out from preaching, his kindness and his smile brought a song to my lips. As we sang, he stood beside me, singing and patting my shoulder with his small hand.

Now Kenny and I are close friends, and he rushes to see me when I arrive and makes sure he is around when I leave so he can walk me to my car. A few weeks ago he said to me, "I love you, Pastor." He beamed from ear to ear when I told him that I loved him too, and that Jesus loved him even more. One Sunday we all shared the Lord's Supper. Before Kenny could eat his bread and drink his juice, he came over to me and asked, "Pastor, will you teach me how to be a pastor and a preacher for Jesus? When I grow up I want to be just like you."

It struck me then that the Lord will do just fine with or without me, because he is planting a fire of exuberance in the hearts of hundreds, maybe thousands, of Kennys all throughout his Body. Maybe there's one in your church.

Whenever I think of Kenny, or tell the story of his ministry to me, a minister who needed to be ministered to, I smile a huge smile, like Kenny's, with tears in my eyes.

I would ask you to join me as I thank God for the miracle in torn blue jeans that he has brought into my life. He has shown me that if all I ever did was pour whatever I can into young Kenny, this would be a significant and meaningful ministry. The Lord's church is in good hands—his own. •

In Other Words

A covenant of forgiveness

By James R. Henderson

How do you forgive someone and go on with your life? It is not easy, is it?

Some cultures have customs of forgiveness. For example, the Masai in Tanzania perform an *osotua*, a word meaning "covenant."

In his inspirational book, *Christianity Rediscovered*, Vincent Donovan relates how *osotua* works. If a sin has occurred between families within a community, it can be disastrous to the unity of the nomadic clan. It may threaten why they came together in the first place.

It is imperative that both the offending and offended parties be brought back together in an act of forgiveness. So the community prepares a meal, and both families must bring food. The offended must accept and eat the food prepared by the offender, and vice versa. The food is

called "holy food."

The idea is that when the food is eaten, forgiveness comes, and a new *osotua* begins.

Startling, isn't it? What a simple idea. Have you shared holy food with someone you don't like or whom you have offended? What about Communion? As you take Communion together, can a new covenant of forgiveness begin between you and someone whom you've offended or who has offended you? Or will you continue to carry the same resentment from holy meal to holy meal?

Donovan notes of the Masai custom, "A new testament of forgiveness is brought about by an exchange of holy food. What can one say?"

What a blessing when in our Lord and Savior we can say the same.

Tell Peter

by Eugene M. Guzon

The life of Peter, Jesus' friend and leading disciple, is a lesson for all who are discouraged. He struggled with the same despair but, through the faithfulness of our Lord, he found acceptance and forgiveness.

Peter was a man of contradictions—impulsive and bold, yet affectionate and loyal. He responded eagerly to Jesus' call (Matthew 4:18). He left his net, his boat, his fishing trade and his familiar surroundings. He was also the first of the disciples to recognize who Jesus was (Matthew 16:16).

However, his strong and positive leadership qualities had a down side. He could be too assertive, and would sometimes have to be brought back into line. Like when Jesus was foretelling his suffering and death, and Peter began to rebuke him, saying: "Never, Lord...this shall never happen to you!" Peter was firmly put in his place by the Lord's reply, "Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; you do

'Not me, Lord'

The night before Jesus' death, he said to his disciples, "This very night you will all fall away on account of me, for it is written: 'I will strike the shepherd, and the sheep of the flock will be scattered.' But after I have risen, I will go ahead of you into Galilee" (Matthew 26:31-32)

Peter found that hard to accept. He may have said to himself, "Maybe the others, but not me!" Soon, however, he denied the Lord three times, fulfilling Jesus' prediction. Just as the cock crowed and Jesus was led out by the soldiers, he turned his eyes to Peter. That gaze was too much for Peter to bear. He had betrayed his friend and his Lord in his hour of greatest need. Overcome with guilt, he wept bitterly.

During the next few hours, Jesus was beaten, crowned with thorns and killed by the soldiers. All the disciples were filled with grief, but perhaps none among them experienced the depths of Peter's discouragement and shame. How could he face the other disciples? Would they—would anybody—ever trust him again?



“Peter’s legacy is of one who failed, but through Jesus, had a new and meaningful life for the glory of God.”

Mentioned by name

The resurrection of Jesus brought new hope—and fresh anxiety. The angel at the tomb that morning told the women who came to

not have in mind the things of God, but the things of men" (Matthew 16:21-23).

Only a few verses before, Peter had been commended by Jesus as blessed to have the revelation of the Father. He was now reprimanded for being used as a mouthpiece for Satan. Knowing that his dynamic friend was also vulnerable, Jesus later told him, "Simon, Simon, Satan has asked to sift you as wheat. But I have prayed for you, Simon, that your faith may not fail. And when you have turned back, strengthen your brothers" (Luke 22:31-34).

The impulsive Peter answered Jesus with a solemn pledge of loyalty: "Lord, I am ready to go with you to prison and to death!" Brave words, but he was setting himself up for his greatest fall.

anoint Jesus body: "Don't be alarmed. You are looking for Jesus the Nazarene, who was crucified. He has risen! He is not here. See the place where they laid him. But go, tell his disciples *and Peter*, 'He is going ahead of you into Galilee. There you will see him, just as he told you.'" (Mark 16:6-7).

How do you think Peter felt about that? Not only had the Lord risen from the dead, but he had mentioned Peter's name in particular. Imagine how that must have made Peter feel. Why had he been singled out? Was it because of the denials?

By this time Peter must have known for sure that Jesus was indeed the Christ, the Son of the living God! All Jesus' claims about giving his life as a ransom for many were true. But would he have anything to do

Loving in deed

By Pete Ahlstrom

with Peter, after Peter had denied him—not once, but three times over?

Peter soon got his answer. Jesus still accepted him, trusted him and loved him, despite the way Peter had turned against him. Peter soon found out that the words, “tell Peter,” were an expression of love, confidence and forgiveness from Jesus.

“Tell Peter.” What loving words of assurance for one who had been unfaithful. The Lord was saying, “No matter what you have done, there is forgiveness, there is hope. I am alive. I am with you all the way. I offer you a new beginning.”

The rest is history. Peter spent the rest of his days proclaiming boldly the good news of the Lord he once denied. He became a mighty witness to the gospel of Jesus, finally sealing his faith with his own blood in martyrdom. Peter left us a legacy of one who failed, but with the power of Jesus, one who had a new beginning and meaningful life for the glory of God.

Do you feel discouraged? Are you, like Peter, dismayed at the extent of your inadequacies, the pressure of living your faith, and those times when you too may have denied Jesus in your life?

Jesus knows what Christians will be facing in this life. Our faithfulness will be tested many times—through temptations, through rejection, opposition and discouragement. But in those words to Peter, we can see the will of our Lord that we will be able to bounce back and prevail. And as those times come to us, we too can be a source of strength and inspiration for others.

Take heart! Be encouraged by the words of the Lord through the angel in the garden. His message is as much for you as it was for the one who felt he had gone too far to ever be accepted again.

“Tell Peter!” ●

Eugene M. Guzon is the National Director of the Worldwide Church of God in the Philippines

One day my mother helped throw her littlest brother out of the haymow.

The haymow, a hay storage area high up under our barn’s roof, was one of the five farm kids’ favorite play places.

The farm cats loved the haymow, too. There, they could run, jump, and chase each other to their hearts’ content. That day, as they frolicked, one of them misjudged the edge and fell out. The youngsters watched, fascinated, as it twisted, turned, somersaulted, and finally landed on its feet, unhurt, on the wooden “driveway” two stories below!

“Did you see that?” the kids asked. Their next question was perfectly logical (well, almost): “Do you suppose a person could land on his feet like that?”

The four oldest kids could only think of one way to find out. They grabbed their youngest brother’s arms and legs, dragged him kicking and screaming to the edge, threw him out, and watched to see what would happen.

Two things happened. First, Gilbert did not land on his feet. Second, it was about two weeks before any of the four older children could sit down again!

That all-too-true incident underscores the Bible’s emphasis on “love your neighbor.”

Because any of us can get “thrown out of the haymow” at any time. Sickness, accidents, divorces, natural disasters, wars, or crimes can do it.

We try to solve those problems ourselves. But sometimes, as with Gilbert, a “safe landing” just isn’t possible. The Bible teaches we’re to be there to pick each other up, help mend any broken bones, and get each other back on our feet, healed.

I went to church for many years without ever understanding what the Bible meant by “love your neighbor.” Finally, I learned it isn’t about feeling love; it’s doing it. Love means to help, to be kind, to give, to visit, comfort, and encourage, to show each other courtesy, patience, forgiveness, and mercy. We’re to do that for our own families, for the poor, immigrants, orphans, widows, and single mothers, for the sick, handicapped, prisoners, lonely, and elderly, for government workers, Christians from other churches, and even our enemies. We’re to help with needs they can’t meet, like food, clothing, housing, jobs, money, and justice.

Is it important? God sees how much we love him by how much we love our neighbors! Jesus said, “Whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me” (Matthew 25:40).

Biblical love is selfless. It means asking, “If Jesus were sick, out of work, hungry, or homeless, how would I help him?” It means walking where others walk. It means learning the real needs of our real neighbors. Above all, it means **doing**. ●

Jump Start is a column for writers who have never been published before. We want to help you see yourself in print. Contributions should be between 500-650 words long, ideally in Word for Windows format. Send to john.halford@wcg.org or to Worldwide Church of God, PO Box 5005, Glendora, CA 91740-5005 marked ‘Jump Start.’

Leaders in Truth

A study of Titus 1

By Mike Morrison

In the first chapter of his letter to Titus, Paul describes the qualities of a good church leader. He warns that some people try to lead believers away from the truth. Even in the 21st century, Paul's advice is still needed.

Introduction

Paul begins by announcing his role and his purpose: "Paul, a servant of God and an apostle of Jesus Christ for the faith of God's elect and the knowledge of the truth that leads to godliness..." (Titus 1:1).

In the Roman world, a slave in charge of the emperor's business had a higher social status than many free people did. Paul, as slave to the ruler of the universe, had tremendous importance and status. He was sent by Christ as an apostle or official messenger with two major purposes: 1) to bring God's people to faith and 2) to teach them truth to help them live godly lives.

Our beliefs and behavior are built on a solid foundation: They are "resting on the hope of eternal life, which God, who does not lie, promised before the beginning of time" (v. 2). Our hope is more than a wishful thought—it is as secure as God himself. Our eternity is secure because God has power over time itself.

This promise of eternal life was announced in the gospel: "at his appointed season he brought his word to light through the preaching entrusted to me by the command of God our Savior" (v. 3). Paul here combines a term usually used for the Father with a term usually used for the Son, and it is not certain here which one he means.

After describing himself and his mission, Paul begins: "To Titus, my true son in our common faith: Grace and peace from God the Father and Christ Jesus our Savior" (v. 4). Titus was a Gentile (Gal. 2:3), but Paul calls him a "true son," who faithfully continued Paul's work. Earlier, Titus had successfully dealt with a difficult problem in Corinth (2 Cor. 7:6-7).

Qualities of a good leader

Paul then announces the purpose of his letter: "The reason I left you in Crete was that you might straighten out what was left unfinished and appoint elders in every town, as I directed you" (Titus 1:5).

Titus already knew what Paul had told him, and he already knew the points Paul made in verses 1-4. But Paul includes these things in his letter because the letter would be read out loud in the churches in which Titus worked—and in this way the members in Crete would accept what Titus was doing, and then Titus could move on.

For the benefit of the congregation, Paul lists the characteristics of a good elder: "An elder must be blameless, the husband of but one wife, a man whose children believe and are not open to the charge of being wild and disobedient" (v. 6).

If we take Paul too literally, we might think that elders must be married, or that they cannot be remarried even after death has released them from their vows (Rom. 7:1-3). If we read this as a list of legal requirements, then Paul himself could not be an elder! However, his purpose is more general—he is saying that elders, *if* married, should be faithful in marriage (in that society, mistresses were common).

Elders should also be responsible in their families, but we should not take this legalistically, either. One child who went astray 20 years ago would not automatically disqualify an otherwise well-respected leader.

"Since an overseer is entrusted with God's work, he must be blameless—not overbearing, not quick-tempered, not given to drunkenness, not violent, not pursuing dishonest gain" (v. 7). An elder or overseer (Paul uses the words interchangeably) should not be bossy, irritable or selfish. "Rather he must be hospitable, one who loves what is good, who is self-controlled, upright, holy and disciplined" (v. 8).

After this list of personal virtues, Paul briefly addresses the doctrinal needs: A church leader "must hold firmly to the trustworthy message as it has been taught, so that he can encourage others by sound doctrine and refute those who oppose it" (v. 9). Elders must know the gospel and be able to pass it on accurately. They must teach the truth, and denounce the counterfeits.

False teachings

The believers in Crete needed good leaders because the truth was being distorted: "For there are many rebellious people, mere talkers and deceivers, especially



Lectionary Readings for

June–July 2006

those of the circumcision group” (v. 10). Paul’s greatest adversaries were Judaizers who taught that Gentiles should be circumcised and keep the laws of Moses (Acts 15:5; Gal. 5:3).

“They must be silenced,” Paul writes. If they teach a false gospel, they should not be allowed to speak to the congregation—a good leader must be willing to exclude them (Rom. 16:17). Why be so strict? “Because they are ruining whole households by teaching things they ought not to teach—and that for the sake of dishonest gain” (Titus 1:11). Some false teachers want money; others want to bolster their ego. Either way, it is dishonest gain.

Paul then quotes “one of their own prophets”—Epimenides, who lived on Crete six centuries earlier: “Cretans are always liars, evil brutes, lazy gluttons” (v. 12). This is a philosophical riddle: If Cretans are *always* liars, can Epimenides be telling the truth? Paul says, “This testimony is true.” Every culture has its own problems; the people of Crete had these.

Paul gives the solution: “Therefore, rebuke them sharply, so that they will be sound in the faith and will pay no attention to Jewish myths or to the commands of those who reject the truth” (vv. 13-14). Titus is to rebuke the false teachers, so the *members* will be sound in the faith, so they will not be led away from the gospel of grace.

“To the pure, all things are pure, but to those who are corrupted and do not believe, nothing is pure” (v. 15). This verse is a proverb that can apply to various situations. But in this context, it refers to Judaizers who declared all sorts of things “unclean.”

Even today, some overly zealous people see a problem under every bush, paganism in every custom. The problem is in the eye of the beholder, Paul says: “Both their minds and consciences are corrupted. They claim to know God, but by their actions they deny him. They are detestable, disobedient and unfit for doing anything good” (vv. 15-16).

Paul uses strong words, because he was passionate about the gospel of Jesus Christ. Those who teach legalism, he says, have a tragically distorted concept of God. By their focus on works, they show that they do not trust him to be the author of love and grace—God our Savior. ●

Questions for discussion

- If time had a beginning, will it ever end? (v. 2)
- Why does Paul list personal virtues before doctrinal accuracy? (v. 9)
- When churches today designate elders, what qualities do they consider? (v. 19)
- In a culture that values freedom of speech, should anyone be silenced? (v. 11)

Many churches assign passages of Scripture to be read on each Sunday: passages from the Old Testament, the Gospels, and the epistles. This is called a lectionary—from the Latin word *lectio*, meaning “reading.” The readings below are based on the Revised Common Lectionary, which is used by many churches. (Catholic, Lutheran and Episcopal churches may use a slightly different lectionary.) Sermons are often based on the readings. We are now in year B of the three-year cycle.

Readers have told us that they find it helpful to use this lectionary as a basis for their personal Bible reading and study. Here are the assigned scriptures for June–July 2006.

June 4

Pentecost

Psalm 104:24-35
Ezekiel 37:1-14
John 15:26-27; 16:4-15
Romans 8:22-27

June 11

Trinity Sunday

Psalm 29
Isaiah 6:1-8
John 3:1-17
Romans 8:12-17

June 18

Psalm 20
Ezekiel 17:22-24
Mark 4:26-34
2 Corinthians 5:6-17

June 25

1 Samuel 17:32-49
Psalm 9:9-20
Mark 4:35-41
2 Corinthians 6:1-13

July 2

2 Samuel 1:1, 17-27

Psalm 130

Mark 5:21-43
2 Corinthians 8:7-15

July 9

2 Samuel 5:1-10
Psalm 48
Mark 6:1-13
2 Corinthians 12:2-10

July 16

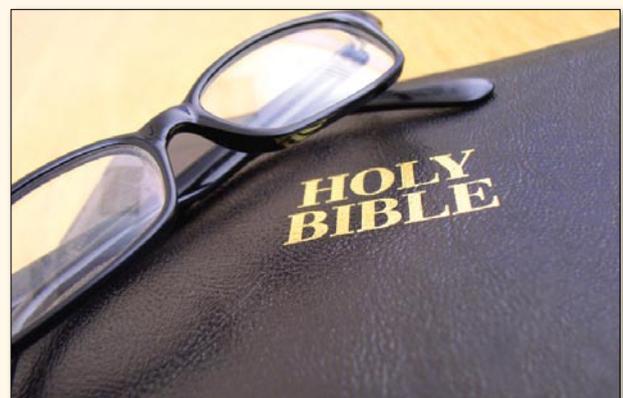
2 Samuel 6:1-19
Psalm 24
Mark 6:14-29
Ephesians 1:3-14

July 23

2 Samuel 7:1-14
Psalm 89:20-37
Mark 6:30-56
Ephesians 2:11-22

July 30

2 Samuel 11:1-15
Psalm 14
John 6:1-21
Ephesians 3:14-21



Hmm...

A very large amount of human suffering and frustration is caused by the fact that many men and women are not content to be the sort of beings that God has made them, but try to persuade themselves that they are really beings of some different kind.

Eric Mascall
Lecturer in Philosophy of Religion,
Christ Church, Oxford

Do all the good you can, by all means you can, in all the ways you can, in all the places you can, at all the times you can, to all the people you can, as long as you ever can.

John Wesley



Photo-iStockphoto.com

The earth laughs in flowers.

Ralph Waldo Emerson

What about the paradox of faith and reason? Are they mutually exclusive? Absolutely not. God has put enough into this world to make faith in Him a most reasonable stance, but He has left enough out to make it impossible to live by reason alone.

Ravi Zacharias

Superficiality is the curse of our age. The desperate need today is not for a greater number of intelligent people, or gifted people, but for deep people.

Richard Foster
Celebration of Discipline

It is not vanity to imagine ourselves in some heroic or glorious role, if we also keep our

feet planted firmly in reality. Somewhere within each humble or misguided person lies the capacity to find the true path and to accomplish feats of heroism. We may never find that buried capacity if we do not first save it in our imagination.

Phillip E. Johnson

No man has a good enough memory to be a successful liar.

Abraham Lincoln

The cross of Christ means that the salvation of God goes deeper down than the deepest depths of iniquity man can commit. No person can get beyond the reach of Jesus; He made a way back to the throne of God from the very heart of hell by His tremendous atonement.

Oswald Chambers
It is Finished

With us, there is a saying, *La esperanza muere ultima*. Hope dies last. You can't lose hope. If you lose hope, you lose everything.

Jessie de la Cruz
Retired migrant farm worker, quoted in
Studs Terkel, *Hope Dies Last: Keeping the Faith in Troubled Times*

Thank God for church ladies with typewriters. These sentences actually appeared in church bulletins or were announced in church services:

- Bertha Belch, a missionary from Africa, will be speaking tonight at Calvary Methodist. Come hear Bertha Belch all the way from Africa.
- The Fasting & Prayer Conference includes meals.
- The sermon this morning: "Jesus Walks on the Water." The sermon tonight: "Searching for Jesus."
- The peacemaking meeting scheduled for today has been canceled due to a conflict.
- Miss Charlene Mason sang "I will not pass this way again," giving obvious pleasure to the congregation.
- A bean supper will be held on Tuesday evening in the church hall. Music will follow.
- Potluck supper Sunday at 5:00 PM - prayer and medication to follow.
- This evening at 7 PM there will be a hymn singing in the park across from the Church. Bring a blanket and come prepared to sin.
- Low Self Esteem Support Group will meet Thursday at 7 PM. Please use the back door.

Reading someone else's mail?

Why not get your own subscription to *Christian Odyssey*? It's free—just send your request to Worldwide Church of God, PO Box 5005 Glendora, CA 91740-5005, or phone 1-800-423-4444, or sign up at www.christianodyssey.org