

# CHRISTIAN Odyssey

December 2010–January 2011

Growing Together in Life & Faith



I'm Dreaming of a  
**Quantum**  
Christmas

# Writing for *Christian Odyssey*

As you look through the redesigned *Christian Odyssey*, you will see that there is a strong focus on the people who make up Grace Communion International. We may be a small denomination, but we are actively involved in hundreds of congregations and dozens of countries. To know “what is going on” can be a source of encouragement and inspiration. It helps us pray for each other and to be renewed in our own Christian life.

To do this we need your help. We invite you to send articles and photographs that tell us about the people you know and what the individuals and congregation you attend are doing.

- Is your congregation involved in a successful outreach ministry? As you write, don't just tell us what you did—tell us how you did it, why you did it, and help us get to know one or two of the people involved.
- Do you know an interesting person, a fellow member of GCI who has had a strong positive impact on you? Tell us about that person.
- Do you have an inspiring story to tell that brings some aspect of Christian faith and life into focus? Share it.
- Keep it short, sharp and interesting. About 700–900 words is about right.

Not sure your idea is suitable? Then send an email to [john.halford@gci.org](mailto:john.halford@gci.org) explaining what you have in mind and how you plan to write about it. Don't

worry about “not being a writer.” We can guide you and shape your idea for publication.

If possible, send us your article as a Word for Windows document attached to an email. We can accept “hard copy” articles sent by “snail mail,” but please don't send handwritten work; it needs to be typed.

Be sure to include photographs. We also prefer these to be sent in digital format as email attachments. The pictures should be well lit, the subject should fill the frame, and peoples' faces should be seen clearly. Group shots are okay, but you should also include photos of people actually doing something, so that the photos illustrate the article.

**IMPORTANT!** We have to be very careful about publishing pictures of children. Any photos of minors where the subjects can be identified must be accompanied by signed permission from the parent or legal guardian.

Ideally there should be at least three choices for every one picture we use. Don't be afraid to send too many. They should be no smaller than 1600 x 1200 pixels, which would be 2-3 megapixels and larger. The ideal would be 5 megapixels or 2590 x 1940 pixels.

Unless it is that once-in-a-lifetime shot, photos taken on most mobile phones do not have enough resolution for publication.

We're waiting to hear from you. [co](#)

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# The **Miracle** Workers

By John Halford

**M**y favorite movie of all time is *The Miracle Worker*, the story of blind, deaf Helen Keller and her teacher, Annie Sullivan, whose love and patience taught Helen to read and speak. My favorite scene is the moment at the well where Helen suddenly grasps the link between symbols and objects. Today I was able to visit the place where the miracle happened.

Helen Keller was born in this quiet northern Alabama town. When she was 18 months old, she suffered an illness that left her blind and deaf. She grew up in a world of total darkness and silence. The little girl was intelligent, but unable to communicate or respond in any meaningful way.

Eventually her desperate parents hired a teacher and governess, Annie Sullivan. Annie took up the challenge of trying to reach through to the half-wild little girl. Helen would seem to enjoy it as Annie would allow her to feel objects, then, using a special finger alphabet, spell out the name of the object into her hand. But it was an exercise in frustration and futility. Helen could not make the connection.

Then one day the miracle happened. Helen tells it in her own words in her autobiography, *The Story of My Life*:

“We walked down the path to the well-house, attracted by the fragrance of the honeysuckle with which it was covered. Someone was drawing water and my teacher placed my hand under the spout. As the cool stream gushed over one hand, she spelled into the other the word *water*, first slowly and then rapidly. I stood still, my whole attention fixed upon the motions of her fingers.

“Suddenly I felt a misty consciousness as of something forgotten—a thrill of returning thought; and somehow the mystery of language was revealed to me. I knew then that “w-a-t-e-r” meant the wonderful cool something that was flowing over my hand. That living word awakened my soul, gave it light, hope, joy and set it free!”

Helen’s dark and silent world suddenly exploded into a new life. She learned 30 new words that day, and then in the next few weeks hundreds more. Helen went on to graduate with honors from Radcliffe College, and until she died in 1968, traveled the world as source of hope and inspiration to all she met. It all began that day at the well with a dedicated and loving teacher who loved her and believed in her potential.



Helen Keller with Annie Sullivan 1888

Helen Keller’s home has been preserved. The well pump is still there, although it is now covered with a protective roof instead of honeysuckle. Standing by the pump I tried to imagine the feeling of freedom and joy Helen experienced when she suddenly grasped language and her life was transformed. And it occurred to me that I, and probably you, have had a similar experience.

## The hour I first believed

I can vividly recall the time and place when I first really understood that Jesus loves me, redeemed me and will never leave me. I had heard he was my Savior all my life, but it was just another religious cliché. I was born into a Protestant family, and we later became Catholic, but when I was in my teens I abandoned it all. I became interested in Christianity again when I was 20, and was rebaptized. But looking back I realize that, even though I was sincere, I still had not really understood what it meant. Then one day, after working late, as I was praying in the photographic darkroom of the print shop where I worked, it hit me. Like Helen, I suddenly saw the connection between the



Helen Keller in 1904. The house where Helen grew up and the water pump where she first discovered the miracle of language.

symbol and the reality. Why then? Why there? I don't know.

I suspect that many people reading this can also remember a similar moment when it “came together,” and we suddenly knew we had a Savior. For the apostle Paul, it was on the road to Damascus. For “Doubting Thomas” it was a face-to-face encounter with Jesus after Jesus was resurrected. For the thief on the cross it was the agonizing moments before death. For me it was while praying in a darkroom. For you...?

As my understanding of Christianity has developed, I have come to appreciate that Jesus is not only my Savior but the Savior of all humankind. He came to bring the sights and sounds of salvation to a spiritually blind and deaf world. He said, “And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself” (John 12:32).

## Like Helen, I suddenly saw the connection between the symbol and the reality. Why then? Why there? I don't know.

All people! Our triune God—Father, Son and Spirit—is one God who dwells in an eternal communion of love, and he has passed on that connectedness to the whole creation, and most especially to us humans. More than that, the Son of God actually *became one of us*, permanently identifying with us and sharing with us his own perfect relationship of love with the Father. “For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him, and through him to reconcile all things to himself...” Paul wrote in Colossians 1:19-20.

Jesus isn't *trying to* reconcile the world to God; he's already done it. This surely affects how we look at our fellow human beings. They're not outsiders; they're insiders who don't know it yet, brothers and sisters whom he is drawing to himself just as he said he would.

We religious people are very good at pigeonholing others. “Saved and unsaved,” “righteous and unrighteous,” “insiders and outsiders,” and even “our church” and “their church.” But the

truth is, we are all in the same boat—lost, blind and deaf until the Son of God took up our cause and “the Light shines in the darkness, but the darkness has not understood it” (John 1:5).

Every human is somewhere along that path of being drawn home to Christ. Some of us, thank God, have already had our eyes and ears opened, and Jesus wants us not to sit in judgment of those still on the path, but rather to share in his work of bringing them home too.

Annie Sullivan yearned to bring the light of human contact, communication and friendship into Helen Keller's darkness. She could not force her mind open. But by months of persistent, unconditional love she built a relationship of trust and became the agent through which the miracle could happen.

Helen Keller was a devout Christian. Later in life, looking back on her years of silence and darkness, she wrote, “I always knew [God] was there. I just did not know his name.”

For many people, the connection between life and Jesus has not yet dawned. But God is both patient and relentless in his undying love. He never forces anyone to receive it, for then it would not be love, but he won't give up on even the most stubborn holdouts because even they belong to Jesus.

God has given us, those who already believe, the blessing of joining him in our small way in his ongoing work of making his good news known. Sometimes it might seem we aren't getting anywhere. That is why we need to encourage, support and inspire one another—and along the way learn something about what it means to live together in Christ in loving communion.

After all, God created us to stick together in love—to love one another just as Christ loves us and gave himself for us. By that love, Jesus said, others will know that we belong to him (John 13:35). God's gift of faith and salvation is a miracle—a miracle he wants us first to receive and then to live and tell others about.

*Christian Odyssey* magazine is devoted to helping the process in its small way by being a place where we share our stories, our faith and our hope as the Holy Spirit leads us into knowing our Savior and our Father ever more deeply. Just as the water from the pump triggered a new life for Helen Keller, so the water of the Word triggers a new life for all who receive it. [co](#)



# I'm Dreaming of a **Quantum** Christmas

By John Halford

**T**he wise men who came from the East to worship the infant Jesus were the scientists of their day. Known as Magi, they studied the heavens and the earth, seeking to understand the natural world, and make sense of the supernatural.

When they observed a mysterious sign in the sky, they knew it was significant. Exactly what they saw is not known. Was it a comet? A conjunction of planets? A unique special creation? Whatever it was, it guided these Magi to Jerusalem, and eventually to a house in Bethlehem where the infant Jesus was staying. There they worshipped him and gave him gifts.

The heavens have always been a source of inspiration to those who seek to understand the meaning of existence. A thousand years before the Magi, King David wrote:

*When I consider your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars, which you have set in place, what is man that you are mindful of him, the son of man that you care for him? (Psalm 8:3-4).*

David could have seen with the naked eye between 5,000 and 6,000 stars, and maybe five of the planets. He could not have known that some of those “stars” were galaxies, composed of millions of stars.

Today we know that those few thousand visible stars are just a handful of the estimated two to three hundred billion stars in our Milky Way galaxy. And our galaxy is just one of at least 100 billion galaxies. I'm being conservative; new data from the Hubble telescope suggests there could be as many as

500 billion galaxies “out there,” each with maybe 300 billion stars of its own.

We will likely never know for certain how many stars there are. Even if we did, old stars burn out and new stars come into existence every day. Astronomers have estimated that in each galaxy, one star dies and one is born at the rate of about one a year. Assuming a conservative 100 billion galaxies in the observable universe, there are about 100 billion stars being born and dying each year. That means an average of about 275 mil-

**Even if the origins of the universe can be described entirely by laws of physics, the question remains—how can we explain the origin of those laws?**

lion *per day*. In the time it is taking you to read this paragraph, maybe a million stars have collapsed and another million have burst into life.

There is far more going on out there than we have even begun to observe or measure. For example, about 70 percent of the universe seems to consist of what scientists call “dark energy.” By “dark” they mean it is beyond the range of our ability to measure and observe. Of the remaining 30 percent, 26

percent seems to be made of “dark matter.” Only four percent of the universe consists of material that we can measure, or even describe. And the more we learn about that four percent, the more mysterious it becomes.

As the English astronomer Sir Arthur Eddington put it, “Not only is the universe stranger than we imagine, it is stranger than we can imagine.”

### Is God necessary?

Even with the limited understanding of his time, David could write confidently, “The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands” (Psalm 19:1).

Well, not to everyone. In a recently published book, *The Grand Design*, physicists Stephen Hawking and Leonard Mlodinow argue that a belief in God is not needed to explain the origins of the universe. They claim that the theory of quantum mechanics and the theory of relativity help us understand how universes could have formed out of nothing. They argue that the Big Bang is a consequence of the laws of physics alone. Hawking has said; “One can’t prove that God doesn’t exist, but science makes God unnecessary.”

That is a bold claim, but is it right? Physicist and science writer Paul Davies doesn’t think so. While accepting that cosmology can probably now explain how our universe began, he says “A much tougher problem now looms, however. What is the source of those ingenious laws that enable a universe to pop into being from nothing? ... There is no compelling need for a supernatural being or prime mover to start the universe off. But when it comes to the laws that explain the big bang, we are in murkier waters.”

### Missing something big

Murkier waters indeed. Even if the origins of the universe can be described entirely by laws of physics, as Hawking asserts, the question remains as to how can we explain the origin of those laws? In a remarkably frank book about the state of research today, physicist Lee Smolin admitted that physics has come to an impasse. “The one thing that everyone who cares about fundamental physics seems to agree on is that new ideas are needed. From the most skeptical critics to the most strenuous advocates of string theory, you hear the same thing: We are missing something big” (Lee Smolin, *The Trouble with Physics*, p. 308).

So today, our astounding investigations into the incomprehensibly vast expanse of the known universe and the equally incomprehensibly miniscule world of sub-atomic particles have not, in fact, made God unnecessary. The unfathomable night sky still reflects the glory of God and the mysterious quarks join it in proclaiming the work of his hands.

In another recently published book, *New Proofs for the Existence of God*, Robert J. Spitzer argues that far from doing away with the need for God, cutting edge scientific discoveries have shown ever more clearly that faith is a rational response to the

state of our knowledge. If the scientific evidence we have today is taken seriously, Spitzer writes, “...they cannot help but transform our view of the universe, transcendence, our destiny and the meaning of life” (*New Proofs for the Existence of God*, pp. 10–11).

Twenty years ago, Astronomer Robert Jastrow anticipated this situation when he wrote, “For the scientist who has lived by his faith in the power of reason, the story ends like a bad dream. He has scaled the mountains of ignorance, he is about to conquer the highest peak; as he pulls himself over the final rock, he is greeted by a band of theologians who have been sitting there for centuries” (Robert Jastrow, *God and the Astronomers*, p. 107).

Reading that, it is tempting for religious people to offer a smug “We told you so.” But let’s be careful. Far from Jastrow’s picture of theologians sitting on the highest peak, theologians have more often preferred to squat complacently on the lowest slopes of scientific discovery, stubbornly clutching old ideas and resisting—sometimes viciously opposing—anything new and ground-breaking. Let’s not forget Copernicus and Galileo, whom the church attempted to silence because of their discoveries that the earth was not the center of the universe.

Theologians, just as much as scientists, need to ask whether we are missing something big, starting with the common perception among religious people that God is a rather remote, stern Judge “out there” somewhere, who is difficult to please and preoccupied with sinful behavior. But is that the God that Jesus came to reveal? Has our understanding of God been too narrow?

The Magi followed the star to worship Jesus because they knew his birth was in some way significant. They could not have known just how significant. They thought he was the new king of the Jews, the long-awaited Messiah. How could they know that he was, in fact, far more than that—the loving and faithful Creator of all they had studied, come to earth as a human being to heal and transform humanity into a new creation in himself?

As his life and ministry unfolded, Jesus showed us what God is *really* like, and he and his apostles told us of the purpose of the universe and human life. The Creator became one of us, not only forgiving all our sins by taking them on himself, but also giving us his own righteousness by becoming one with us. He died for us, rose from the dead for us and lives eternally for us, drawing us relentlessly into his new creation, into the love relationship he shares eternally with the Father and the Spirit.

As the carols remind us, “Long lay the world in sin and error pining ‘til he appeared, and the soul felt its worth,” and “Man will live forevermore because of Christmas Day.”

The brilliant lights of science, which are no more than human discoveries of what God has created, and the ancient glow of the gospel, which is nothing less than God’s revelation of his unfathomable love for all human beings, both lead us to Jesus. Through him alone we come face to face with the Creator who not only loves us more than we have imagined, but more than we *can* imagine. **co**

# A Neighborhood Watched

By Sue Berger

**T**he sight never ceases to intrigue me. I drive past it several times a week and my eyes rove over the landscape like I expect something to have changed, even though nothing has in several years.

The scene is a subdivision near my home. Several streets laid out in a typical grid and cul-de-sac pattern, nicely curbed and guttered. Underground utilities installed with pedestals sticking up at each house lot. Streetlights standing straight and tall like sentries over the neighborhood. But no houses. None. Haven't been for years.

So what draws me to scour the scene every time I drive by? Granted, there's the mystery of it all. Who started the project? Why don't they sell the lots? Is the land tied up in a lawsuit? Did the developer die? Is there a toxic dump under it? I soon exhaust all my fictional musings as to the current state of affairs, but still I am compelled to examine the scene every time I cruise by.

I feel sad that so much work and expense has gone into it; that it isn't what it was intended to be. There are supposed to be rows of houses, cars parked in driveways, kids skateboarding and riding their bikes, people mowing their grass and walking their dogs. It's obvious this is supposed to be a living, breathing neighborhood.

But it isn't. Just dry weed-filled lots. No flowers or manicured lawns. No birds frequenting a feeder filled with sunflower seeds. No basketball goals on the curb. No sound of swing-set laughter or barking dogs. No aroma of steaks on a backyard grill. No life.

Yet, I yearn for life for this neighborhood. The intent and potential is obvious. Just as obvious as my next line of reasoning is going to be. How much does God yearn over *my* obvious,

under-developed potential? Much has been invested in me. The plan laid out, the power lines established. Is my life a pulsing, throbbing community, or is it a barren, desolate wasteland? Granted, Jesus has already made me his own, and God loves me in whatever state I'm in, and I'm so thankful for that! But what Master Planner doesn't desire his development to grow into all he envisions it to be?

So I begin to question how I view others around me. It's so easy to see what I perceive to be wasted potential in my neighbors and be critical of how they're living their lives. Wouldn't my energy be better spent building relationships instead of settling for a take-no-risk wasteland? I may not agree with their choices of job, recreation or ministry any more than I approve of their house-trim color. But so what? Together, we're a living, breathing community, with all the diversity and creativity that our Developer intended. It certainly beats the alternative.

I think I'll go break some new ground. Maybe take a community college class. Volunteer. Get to know my neighbors. Explore the shops close to my home. Not only can I be an active part of my own community, just as you can be an active part of yours, but we can also be sure that the Wind of change will inevitably blow in our souls.

May our personal lives pulse with God-life. May others be drawn by his streetlights of love and peace, the sounds of joy and laughter and the aroma of grace and mercy. **co**



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**SPEAKING OF LIFE** By Joseph Tkach

## You belong, you are included and you matter



Jesus did not come just to forgive our sins; he came to *heal* our sinful nature and make a new creation of us. He doesn't force us to accept his love, but because he loves us so dearly, his earnest desire is that we turn to him and find true life.

Jesus was born, lived, died, rose from the dead and ascended to the Father's right hand as Lord and Savior and Mediator, having purified the sins of humanity. But he did not stop being human. He is still fully God and fully human. He is our advocate, our representative, standing in for us and sub-

stituting for us at the Father's right hand. As the apostle Paul wrote in 1 Timothy 2:4-6, "For there is only one God, and only one mediator between God and men, the *man* Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom for all people..."

God has declared in Christ that *you* belong to him; that you are *included*; that you *matter*. Our salvation comes through the perfect will of the Father, who is unswervingly committed to including us in the joy and fellowship he shares with the Son and Spirit.

When you are in Christ, you are included in the fellowship and joy of the life of the Tri-

une God. It means the Father receives you and has fellowship with you as he does with Jesus. It means that the love that God once and for all demonstrated in the incarnation of Jesus Christ is no less than the love the Father has *always* had for you—and always will.

That's why the Christian life is all about love. **co**

**Dr. Joseph Tkach**, president of Grace Communion International, comments each week, giving a biblical perspective on how we live in the light of God's love. [www.gci.org/media/speaking-life](http://www.gci.org/media/speaking-life)

# MALAWI SUMMER

They didn't know the country. They didn't know each other. But for Carrie, Alberta and Kayla, a summer spent teaching in a school in Malawi proved to be the experience of a lifetime.

By Kayla Shallenberger



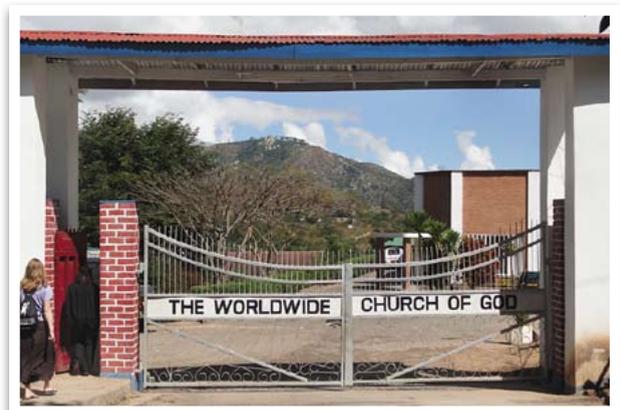
Carrie Smith of Pennsylvania, Alberta Gibbs of England, and Kayla Shallenberger (myself) of Ohio. We started off as complete strangers but parted as close friends.



Pastor Nihaka (One of the local pastors and the director of the school) and his wife took care of us while we were there. They provided us with food and accommodations and did everything they could to make us feel welcomed and comfortable.



Teaching in these classrooms was unlike any teaching experience I've had. Each class consisted of 50-70 students, compared to the 25 I'm used to from America! The three of us faced many challenges while teaching, as we learned how to adapt to a large class size, a new curriculum, different discipline strategies, and a different overall approach to teaching. We saw the challenges as opportunities to learn, and I think we all did. We learned from the teachers we observed and taught with, as well as from the students. On one of our last days, the Deputy Headmaster told me that the teachers felt like they had learned new teaching strategies from us as well.



These gates led to the school, Young Ambassadors Primary School and the church hall, which was also used for school purposes. The school was started by the church in 1996 with only 2 students. It now has about 400 students and consists of a Nursery class, Reception, and Standards 1-7. It is where we gladly spent most of our time! Conveniently, the house we stayed in was just behind these gates and down a small hill, still considered to be on school grounds.



This picture is of my cooperating teacher in Standard 5, Isaac, myself, and all of the Standard 5 students. It took me quite a while to learn all of their names—but I felt accomplished when I did! Each of these children became so dear to me. I loved sharing what I knew with them, but I think I learned even more from them. Saying goodbye to this class was the hardest of all my goodbyes!



Here we are with most of the teachers in the school. We really appreciated how welcoming all of the teachers were. They opened up their classrooms to us and trusted us with their students, which we were very grateful for. Many of the teachers also helped us with lessons or problems we were having in the classroom.



Church always involved a lot of singing and dancing. We had so much fun! Many of the people in the congregation only spoke Chichewa, Malawi's national language, so communication was often a challenge. Regardless, we always felt welcomed and accepted by everyone. It was amazing realizing that halfway across the world and in a different language, we all still belong to the same church and worship the same God.

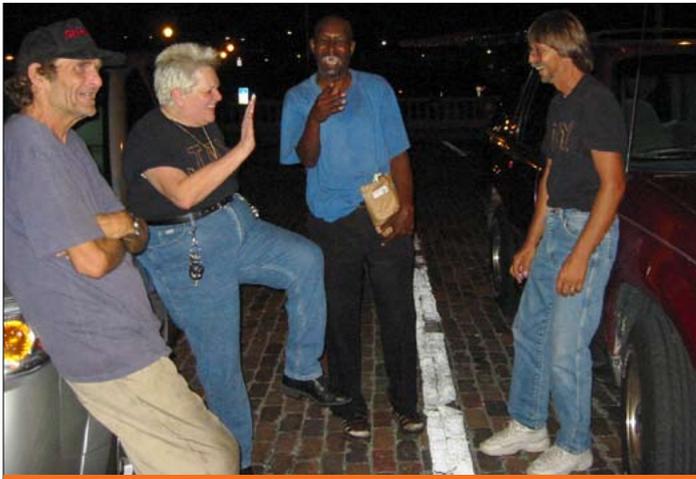


I believe that God used our trip in many ways and I hope that it impacted others as much as it impacted me. Alberta, Carrie, and I all went over for the purpose of teaching, although we realized that our mission extended further than only with the school. For me though, it was always about the children. I fell in love with every child I met and I tried my best to share that love with them. I will never forget the songs, smiles, hugs, and laughter from all of these amazing children.



We were constantly overwhelmed by the hospitality and generosity of the Malawians. They provided us with everything we needed, and more. They took care of us when we got sick, they took us out on trips to see the country, they brought us candles when the electricity went out, they made sure we never went hungry, and best of all—they always treated us with love.

# Bringing **J.O.Y.** to the Streets



Top Left: Todd and the Guys. Bottom left: Eloise and Todd having a laugh. Bottom right: Sara talking with Steve. It isn't just about food. It is also friendship and fellowship.

I live in Tampa, Florida, which is rated as one of the best places in the USA to live. Provided, of course, you have a home. Many people don't, and they spend their lives roaming the streets with their few possessions stuffed into old bags or a stolen shopping cart looking for food and shelter. And for hope.

It's true that some choose this lifestyle, but most don't. They are simply ordinary people whose problems have overwhelmed them, and for one reason or another they have fallen through the cracks of normal society.

When we see street people, we often tend to think, "There but for the grace of God go I." So one day, some of us in my local church decided to turn that around. We thought, why not take the grace of God to them? And that's how J.O.Y Ministries began.

**J**esus **O**nly **Y**ou = J.O.Y.

In November 2005 three of us began meeting in downtown Tampa on Friday nights. We filled backpacks with sack lunches, prayed for God's direction, then walked the streets looking for hungry people. When we found them, we offered them a lunch and stayed to chat as long as they were comfortable.

The street people were suspicious at first, but after a few weeks we could see that they had begun to trust us. Eventually, they accepted us and even came looking for us, so we moved to a fixed location, a public parking lot where we could bring our vehicles and more provisions.

There are now four core members of the J.O.Y. ministry who go out every Friday night to visit with our street friends. And we have been joined by volunteers from other Christian denominations who provide food, clothing, personal products, Bibles, prayer and funding. It is wonderful to see Christian people from different denominations working together to provide physical

and spiritual care to those in need.

Several youth groups have also come to help out. It is rewarding to see these young people begin to realize that the street people are just ordinary people who have been the victims of bad luck or bad choices.

Every Friday night, we prepare 80-90 sack lunches consisting of a sandwich, a bottle of water and an individual snack of potato chips or Cheetos. Then, after praying for God's direction and coordinating the night's activities and supplies, we drive to the location where we minister to those who come to meet us. We give everyone a sack lunch along with any clothing articles, personal care items, backpacks and blankets we have available.

Our brothers and sisters who live on the streets need these physical things, but I think the most important part of our ministry is the friendship we develop with them. We don't judge or condemn them. We remember



would like to show them the unconditional love of their Creator, Savior and Comforter, and help them understand that they too have a place in the family of God. **co**

that Jesus loves them as much as he loves us. We don't preach at them, but of course, we are always prepared to answer their questions. We spend as much time as possible just listening to them, encouraging them, and praying for anyone who desires it. We end each evening with a prayer circle and invite all to participate. Many do.

Where do we go from here? Well, we hope to establish a church. This church would offer nourishing food, both physical and spiritual. And this church would welcome everyone equally—not only the friends we serve on Friday nights, but anyone and everyone who would like to attend. That may seem an unnecessary statement, but homeless people often feel they are not welcome to worship with "respectable" folks. We

**FOR THE LOVE OF GOD** By Rick Shallenberger

## Treat Over Greet



Someone recently asked me why I have a "Happy Holidays" flashing sign on our porch rather than a "Merry Christmas" sign. The question was actually, "What kind of church do you pastor where you have a Happy Holidays sign rather than a Merry Christmas sign?" I jokingly said I was trying to not offend my Muslim friends and that since my wife's boss was Jewish, we didn't want to offend him either.

Truth be told, I've had the sign for several years, long before the "Happy Holidays vs Merry Christmas" debate came to light. And if you want my opinion, it's a ridiculous debate. Saying Happy Holidays doesn't take Christ out of Christmas anymore than saying Merry Christmas puts Christ *in* Christmas. Christmas is not about how we greet people; it's about God coming to earth in the birth of Jesus. It's about the hope and peace and joy and love he brings.

The enemy loves to get well-meaning Christians squabbling about a greeting or some other non-issue. Even to the point that these well-meaning Christians make some unwise decisions—such as boycotting a store whose employees are told to greet people with Happy Holidays. These well-meaning Christians don't realize that by boycotting the store and thus decreasing the store's revenue, they may actually be contributing to Christian employees losing their jobs. This is not treating others with love, but this is how the enemy loves to spoil the holidays, by getting us to focus on silly things like which greeting is more Christ-like.

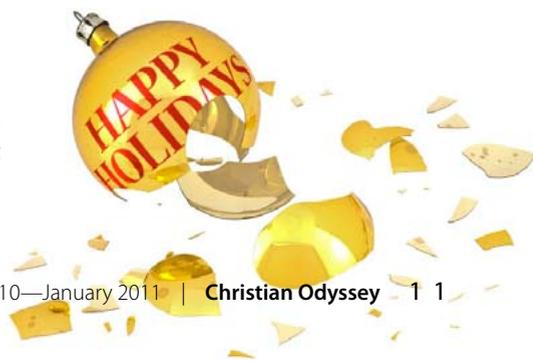
Jesus is more concerned about how you treat people than how you greet people. He reminds us that the New Commandment is to love one another. Judging how we greet each other during the holidays is not sharing love. It's making a mountain out of a

molehill, as the saying goes.

As a follower of Jesus, I'm not going to fall for the ridiculous debates about nothing and I suggest you don't either. Feel free to greet people with Happy Holidays, Merry Christmas, Happy Hanukkah, Happy Kwanza, or with any other greeting. Just make your greeting sincere. Ask God to give you his love for others so those others can sense your sincerity and they can see Christ in you.

Seeing Christ in you makes any greeting valuable, and it makes others feel valued and included. Have a blessed season.

—Pastor Rick **co**



# Pumpkins, by George!

By George Denn

**I** never had any aspiration to write, or to raise pumpkins, but here I am doing both! Twenty years ago, I was struggling to survive on the Minnesota farm where I was born and raised. Family farms as I knew them were changing rapidly. But I had been a farmer all my life and I didn't particularly want to quit and do something else. So I asked God that if it was his will, would he give me something right here in Minnesota to make a living and to serve him.

At this time I was struggling internally as well. That journey led me to the Worldwide Church of God on June 17, 1995.

I started a business raising and selling hay with the slogan, "Hay by George!" Then an idea started to form. If I would cut some corn stalks and put them into bundles, I thought people would buy them for fall decorating. So I purchased an old corn binder, a machine that was used in the early 1900s for cutting and tying corn into bundles. I figured that if my idea was a hit, I would somehow have to mass produce the bundles, and this antiquated machine was the only way I had to do it.

I sold nine corn bundles that first year for the sum of \$45. After a couple of years, I added straw bales to the corn bundles and I found out that by taking them to the end of my driveway on an old truck, my sales were much better!

One day, by chance, I was in town at a lumberyard when I ran into an old friend, Tony Foty. In the course of our conversation I found out that Tony was raising pumpkins. I told Tony that I might be in touch with him the next fall, because I thought pumpkins would go well with the straw and corn stalks.

When I called Tony the next fall, all he had left were 41 pumpkins. I brought them for \$1 apiece and sold them for \$2 apiece! In two days they were all gone!

Tony and I kept in touch after that, and by springtime Tony told me that his partner in the pumpkin business was dropping him. I told Tony that I had this whole farm that I thought would probably grow pumpkins, and if he didn't mind me being his partner, I wouldn't mind trying to raise pumpkins. In 2000 we grew four acres of pumpkins.

As we worked together that first year, I was able to share my faith with Tony. He saw firsthand how Jesus Christ had changed my life, and asked if I would baptize him. After talking to my pastor about it, I baptized my friend Tony on July 4, 2000.



The acreage I planted to pumpkins grew steadily from four acres the first year to the 60 acres I plant today. That's enough; 60 acres of pumpkins are a lot of work and I am no spring chicken anymore!

From the beginning of the pumpkin business, I chose to sell on the honor system. People pick their pumpkins and then put the payment into a payment box. Nobody is watching them to make sure they pay or that they pay full price. My customers are simply on their honor. Most people can't believe that I run the business that I do through the honor system, but as this year comes to a close, it looks to be my best year yet!

For me, the highlight of all this pumpkin raising is the people—those who have worked with me over the years and those I've met through the business. My friend and pastor, Doug Johannsen, told me, "George, you sure spread a lot of joy with

these pumpkins." Since that time I tell everyone who works on the farm that they are involved in the ministry of joy! So I guess spreading joy is my ministry, or better put, God's ministry that he blessed me to lead!

### The pumpkin thing

A highlight of each year is a fundraiser for our Grace Communion International district-sponsored winter camp, called "SnowBlast." I call our fundraiser "the pumpkin thing." The pumpkin thing is in its sixth year now and has grown to the point where we have to hold it over two separate weekends.

Some people drive as many as six hours to be there. We were able to raise \$2500 for SnowBlast this year. It is more than just picking pumpkins. It's fellowship, too, and I think that is the most important part. I have come to realize that God is using this pumpkin business for greater things than what can be seen. Like a spreading pumpkin vine, you never really know where it's all going to end up!

Every year something interesting ends up in the pay boxes. Just the other night I got this note in the pay box at my Eagle Lake site. I assume it's from a young mother. She wrote:

"I am truly sorry I do not have the money to pay for two pumpkins. I have two little girls that want one, and they have had a very hard life. I just want to see a smile on their faces, and

if a pumpkin can do that I will pay in any way that I can in the future. I am sorry I do not have the money to pay for them. I am not a thief. I would not normally do this, because if I had the money I would pay."

That was probably the most touching letter I have ever received in the boxes. I'm glad she took the pumpkins. I always have said if people were in need I hope they just help themselves!

I also prayed for her, that God would bless her and the two girls.

It's because of letters like that one, letters expressing simple gratitude for a big orange pumpkin or two, that keeps me doing all of this. That and the joy of seeing the smiles on faces, young and old, and seeing all the families, probably numbering into the thousands by now, out among the pumpkins taking pictures, laughing and having a good time together.

I can really see our triune God at work in all of this! And I know that at least for the time being, God has me exactly where he wants me to be. I guess until he moves me somewhere else, this is where I will stay. So to God be the glory! ☪

**George Denn** has written two books about his adventures with the pumpkins and the youth camps. Hey by George! and Hey by George! II. Xulon Press.

## The Greatest Birth Story



I was born in a Navy hospital in Pensacola, Florida. No one knew I was breach until the wrong end of me presented itself to the doctor. Fortunately I didn't take too long coming out and there were no complications. I did earn the affectionate nickname of "Froglegs" for the first few days of my life.

Everyone has a birth story. Children delight in hearing about their births, and mothers love telling the details of how their babies came into the world. A birth is a miracle and often brings tears to the eyes of those who witness it.

Most births quickly fade from memory, but there is one that will never be forgotten, even into eternity. It was ordinary from outside appearances, but its significance was felt around the world and continues to affect the lives of people everywhere.

When Jesus was born, he became Emmanuel, God with us. Until Jesus came, God was "with us" only in specific ways and with certain people. He showed his presence in the pillar of the cloud by day and the pillar of fire by night. He was with Moses in the burning bush and with Joshua when the walls of Jericho fell down.

But his birth as a human made him touchable, gave him eyes, ears and a mouth. He ate with us, talked to us, listened to us, laughed with us and touched us. He cried and felt pain. Through his suffering and sorrow, he understood our suffering and sorrow. He was with us and he was one of us.

By becoming one of us, Jesus answered the timeless lament: "No one understands me." Hebrews 4:15 says he is a high priest who can sympathize with us because he went through the same kinds of temptations we all face. As *The Message* puts it, "We don't have a priest who is out of touch with our reality." He has walked the proverbial mile in our shoes.

A common misperception is that God lives in a heavenly ivory tower, far away and far above us. But the Son of God came to us as one of us. And *God with us* is still with us. When he died, we died, and when he rose, we rose. Because he lives, we live. And because he started out as a baby just like we do, he knows us and understands us—and loves us anyway.

The birth of Jesus was more than the account of one more human born into this world. It was God's way of showing how much he loves us. ☪

**Tammy Tkach** lives in California. She travels widely as a speaker at conferences, and visiting GCI congregations worldwide with her husband, Pastor General Joseph Tkach.

# ASK:

**QUESTION:** I have heard that 2 Peter was not really written by the apostle Peter, and is known as a “pious fraud.” Does this mean we cannot trust it?

**ANSWER:** 2 Peter is written in a different style of Greek than 1 Peter is. Many scholars conclude that the two letters were written by different people. Some even say that 2 Peter was written in the second century, after Paul’s letters were considered to be part of the “Scriptures” (2 Peter 3:16).

But there are several possible reasons for one person to write in a different style, and it is not certain when Paul’s writings began to be considered on a par with “the other Scriptures.”

We accept this letter as authoritative not because we can prove that an apostle wrote it (even apostles can make mistakes), but because the writings have shown themselves to be, and were accepted in the early church as, accurate witnesses of the gospel of salvation through Jesus Christ.

**QUESTION:** Trinitarian theologians say that Jesus’ atoning work is “always effectual despite human decision.” Does this mean that everyone is saved whether they want to be or not?

**ANSWER:** The question stems from an assumption about what “effectual” means. We need to let the biblical evidence guide us in understanding this word.

Scripture says that Christ has reconciled the whole world, died for the sins of all humanity, and redeemed the entire universe. Scripture says he did it, and that is what these theologians mean when they say that his work was effectual. It does not necessarily mean that everyone accepts what Jesus has done.

Let’s use a financial analogy. Suppose Bill Gates transfers five million dollars into your bank account. It was an effectual transfer. You are a millionaire—even if you don’t believe it. The effectual-ness of the gift is based on the donor and the bank, not on the receiver.

The point that the theologians want to make is that atonement is 100 percent dependent on what Christ has done; it is not dependent in any way on what humans might or might not do. Our belief does not make it effective; neither does our repentance. Rather, atonement is effective because of what Christ has done, and that was done long before anyone comes to learn about it, long before anyone even has an opportunity to believe.

*In this column, Christian Odyssey can answer short Bible questions of general interest. Please send questions by email to the editor, john.halford@gci.org*

## Be Ye Perfect



Reading “Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect” in Matthew 5:48 reminds me of all my imperfections—which are many, to be sure. The imperfection I hate most in my life is that I’m not perfect.

Those who struggle with perfection know too well the feeling of never really being good enough. We are like those children learning to write the alphabet for the first time, who tear their papers up the second they see they have malformed a letter. It makes no difference that they made it to the “R” without a problem. If the “S” looks sloppy then in the trash it goes. Practically perfect people are hard on themselves.

In psychological terms perfectionism is the belief that perfection can and should be attained. When that belief transforms into thinking anything less than perfect is unacceptable, problems set in. Through a perfectionist’s eyes, a person’s self-worth is determined by flawlessness. Of course, ideas of perfection vary from person to person. Perfectionists set rigid standards of performance for themselves and sometimes for others. They never feel they “measure up.”

One of my favorite movie lines comes from Mary Poppins when she humorously replies, “We practically perfect people never make mistakes.” Poppins, like most everyone else, links perfection to lack of mistakes. Sometimes Christians make the same error in reading the Bible. Actually, the word “perfect” in the above scripture is *telios* meaning finished, full grown, mature, lacking nothing, or brought to completeness. It has nothing to do with making mistakes or not being good enough.

People commonly think that all perfection is about physical characteristics such as being good, successful, or sinless. When God speaks of perfection, he wants us to “be complete” by being spiritually one with his Son, Jesus Christ. This perfection is not designed to make us look good or perform flawlessly, but to let Christ’s life be manifest through us. Physical perfection is more concerned about actions we perform to a certain level, whereas spiritual perfection is about becoming totally dependent on God, letting him work through us to perform his will—not ours. It is not concerned about “self.”

The good news is that we are already perfect in God’s sight. We are reconciled through Jesus Christ and he lives in us. This comes not from our false concepts of trying to attain perfection or being good enough. It is a gift given freely to us. With Christ in us we are brought to completion and we lack nothing.

Will we make mistakes? Sure. But remember—the perfection spoken of in this scripture is not about what we do; it’s about what Christ does. His life in us makes us perfect. ☪

# The Virgin Will Give Birth to a Son

## A study of Matthew 1:18–23



In his book about Jesus, Matthew frequently says that Jesus fulfilled verses from the Old Testament. One example comes in the story of Jesus' birth.

### Miraculous beginnings (verses 18-21)

**“This is how the birth of Jesus Christ came about,”** Matthew begins. **“His mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph, but before they came together, she was found to be with child through the Holy Spirit.”**

Joseph knew how most girls become pregnant, and he knew that he was not the father. But **“because Joseph her husband was a righteous man and did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly.”**

Joseph and Mary were legally obligated to marry, and they were considered husband and wife. If Mary had sex with another man, it would be considered adultery, and Deuteronomy 22:23-24 required death for most such cases. Joseph did not want to humiliate Mary, but he wanted to call off the wedding.

**“But after he had considered this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, ‘Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit.’”**

The angel also announced that God had a special role for the child: **“She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins.”**

The name Jesus is the Greek form of Joshua, which means “God saves.” Jesus was a common name in those days, because many Jewish parents gave their children names that expressed faith in God. Many first-century Jews wanted God to save them

from the Romans. The angel announced a different kind of Messiah—one who would save the people from their own sins.

### A fulfillment of Scripture (verses 22-23)

Matthew tells us that **“all this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: ‘The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel’—which means, ‘God with us.’”**

But no one called Mary's child “Immanuel.” No one talks about “Immanuel of Nazareth.” The angel said his name should be *Jesus*. Immanuel was someone else.

Matthew is quoting Isaiah 7:14. In context, that is *not* a prophecy about the Messiah. Rather, it is the prediction of a child in the days of Ahaz, king of Judah, some 700 years before Jesus. Enemies were threatening to invade Judah, and Isaiah tells Ahaz not to worry. Isaiah gives him a time frame: a woman will conceive, and before her son is weaned, Assyria will take care of the enemies (Isaiah 7:1-17).

Ahaz presumably knew who the virgin was—perhaps his daughter—and she conceived in the normal way, after marriage. She had a boy and named him Immanuel, meaning “God with us.” She did not expect the boy himself to be God; rather, she was expressing belief that God was helping his people.

Isaiah's prophecy was fulfilled in the days of Ahaz, and Matthew says it was fulfilled *again* by the birth of Jesus. Jesus gave the verse a significance far greater than anyone had imagined: It was indeed a virgin who conceived, and her son was indeed God, who had come to be with his people.

Jesus did not have to bear the *name* Immanuel—he fulfilled the scripture in an unexpected way. What the boy Immanuel could signify only in his name, Jesus fulfilled in reality. ☪

## THE GREEKS HAD A WORD FOR IT

### πληρώω

The Greek verb *plēroō* means “to make full.” John uses this word to say that a house was “filled with the fragrance of the perfume” (John 12:3). *Plēroō* is often used in connection with Scripture, and the traditional translation is that a scripture was “fulfilled.”

Many people assume that this means that a prediction has come true. But in some cases, the scripture is not even a prediction. Matthew 2:15 says that Jesus fulfilled a scrip-

ture when he returned from Egypt. Matthew quotes Hosea, who says: “When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son.” Hosea 11:1 is referring to the past, not the future.

Matthew says that this event in Israel's past was given a new significance in the life of Jesus. Hosea used the word “son” in a figurative way to refer to the nation of Israel; Matthew is saying that a similar thing

happened to the child who was *literally* God's Son. He *filled* the scripture with new meaning; he gave it a new and deeper significance. ☪

**Dr. Michael Morrison** teaches classes in the New Testament at Grace Communion Seminary. More information about the seminary can be found at: [gcs.ambassador.edu](http://gcs.ambassador.edu).

H m m ...

Don't ask the Lord to guide your footsteps if you are not willing to move your feet.

**Anonymous**

**Beautiful young people are accidents of nature, but beautiful old people are works of art.**

**Eleanor Roosevelt**

Some people, no matter how old they get, never lose their beauty—they merely move it from their faces into their hearts.

**Martin Buxbaum**

I wish, brothers and sisters, that we could all imitate "the pearl oyster." A hurtful particle intrudes itself into its shell, and this vexes and grieves it. It cannot reject the evil, but what does it do but "cover" it with a precious substance extracted out of its own life, by which it turns the intruder into a pearl! Oh, that we could do so with the provocations we receive from our fellow Christians, so that pearls of patience, gentleness, and forgiveness might be bred within us by that which otherwise would have harmed us.

**Charles Spurgeon**

Make time to pray. The great freight and passenger trains are never too busy to stop for fuel. No matter how congested the yards may be, no matter how crowded the schedules are, no matter how many things demand the attention of the trainmen, those trains always stop for fuel.

**M.E. Andross**

We do not as churches seek political power or control, or the dominance of Christian faith in the public sphere; but the opportunity to testify, to argue, sometimes to protest, sometimes to affirm—to play our part in the public debates of our societies. And we shall, of course, be effective not when we have mustered enough political leverage to get our way but when we have persuaded our neighbours that the life of faith is a life well lived and joyfully lived.

In other words, we shall be effective defenders or proclaimers of our faith when we can show what a holy life looks like, a life in which the joy of God is transparently present.

**Rowan Williams**

The Archbishop of Canterbury



Christians sometimes try to assess how they or others are doing on the basis of such things as how successfully they conquer a particular sin, how much prayer and Bible study they do, how regularly they attend and give to church, and so forth. But rarely do we honestly ask the question that Scripture places at the center of everything: Are we growing in our capacity to love all people? Do we have an increasing love for our sisters and brothers in Christ as well as for those for whom Christ died who are yet outside the church? Are we increasing in our capacity to ascribe unsurpassable worth to people whom society judges to have no worth?

**Gregory Boyd**

*Repenting of Religion:*

*Turning from Judgment to the Love of God*

Repentance is not a behavior issue. It's a faith, or trust, issue. Jesus has already done everything that needed to be done to restore humanity to a right relationship with God. There's nothing we can add to that or take away from it. Repentance isn't about promising never to sin again. Nor is it about striving to be a better person. Repentance is about believing God's word of truth about who he is and who we are.

**Brian D. McLaren**

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I am only one, but still I am one. I cannot do everything, but still I can do something; and because I cannot do everything, I will not refuse to do something that I can do.

**Helen Keller**

We are susceptible to heretical teachings because, in one form or another, they nurture and reflect the way that we would have it be, rather than the way God has provided, which is infinitely better for us. As they lead us into the blind alleys of self-indulgence and escape from life, heresies pander to the most unworthy tendencies of the human heart.

**C. Fitzsimons Allison**

*The Cruelty of Heresy*