

THE Plain Truth

A Magazine Of Christian Understanding

Jul-Aug 2010

Church: Some assembly required

p.5

The day I fired myself

p.8

How does God judge us?

p.12

THE PLAIN TRUTH

ISSN 1675-3100



9 771675 310008

PP 12578/03/2011 (029394)

If necessary, use words

I am writing this from northern Thailand, Chengmai, where I was invited to attend the opening of a new school that some Christian friends are launching. Although Thailand is officially a Buddhist nation, the constitution guarantees freedom of religion. Consequently there are many foreign missionaries here. However, they have had very little impact—Thailand is only 2 per cent Christian.

I suspect that one reason for this is that Thais resist the typical aggressive Western approach to evangelising. My friends here, both of whom are native Thais, have a different approach. They understand the importance of example rather than confrontation. They have established several schools, language institutes and kindergartens, running them on Christian principles and values, without

being overtly “evangelistic”. It seems to work—the schools are a success, and several house churches have been quietly established. They are showing the value of St. Francis of Assisi’s famous teaching: “Preach the gospel at all times. If necessary, use words.”

The guest of honour for the opening was a senior government official (I’ll call him Mr. V) who, although not a Christian, helped us cut through the administrative red tape and open the school on schedule. We were grateful to Mr. V and invited him to come from Bangkok to be the guest of honour. Although influential, he is a humble and sincere man.

The opening went well. The next day was a holiday, and our guest of honour had planned to visit some of his family who live locally. So I was surprised to meet him in the hotel’s lobby when I came down to meet my friends for a late breakfast.

He looked terrible. He was tired and seemed on the verge of tears. What had happened to the sophisticated authority figure of the day before? He told us that he had not slept all night. He had had a serious falling out with a young man whom he had mentored for

by
John Halford

many years and loved like a son. He had been looking forward to spending the day with him. Instead the young man had left him after an insulting and angry outburst.

Poor Mr. V was distraught. He was used to being obeyed, but faced with this situation he was helpless. He wanted to talk about it. So talk we did, for several hours. Our plans for the day had to be shelved. I think St. Francis would have agreed that this was a time to use words. We spent a long, long time discussing the best way to attempt a reconciliation—forgiveness, tolerance, mutual respect, and being willing to overlook and forgive. Mr. V found Jesus’ parable of the Prodigal Son especially comforting.

By the end of the day, Mr. V was much relieved.

And next day, thankfully, he and the young man were able to meet and reconcile. At dinner that evening Mr. V was his happy self again. He told us later that he was impressed that we, who were really total strangers, had given so willingly of our time and our love. Of course, he didn’t decide on the spot to become a Christian. As with King Agrippa (see



Acts 26:28), you can’t expect a high official to make a decision after only a brief exposure to Christianity. We simply showed him how Jesus’ teachings would help him in this situation, and he was impressed.

As we go about God’s work, we often need the favour of this world’s governments. We show respect and deference to people in authority, but relationships with authority figures are usually based on what they can do for us. Mr. V allowed us to do something for him. We saw that behind the influential authority persona was a vulnerable human being who was bruised and hurting. He already had our respect and gratitude, but what he needed was love. Love can be hard to come by in the dog-eat-dog arena of power politics. But it is the inexhaustible resource of our kingdom, and we were privileged to share it with Mr. V. □

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9



12



19



18



17

Issue No. 2	Volume No. 9
July–August 2010	PP 12578/03/2011 (029394)
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The Plain Truth is published five times a year as funds allow, and is sponsored by the Worldwide Church of God Malaysia, which is a member of the National Evangelical Christian Fellowship of Malaysia. It follows a non-denominational editorial policy and provides a message of practical help, hope and encouragement from a Christian perspective.

- For Non-Muslims Only -

DONATIONS: Although we do not put any subscription price for THE PLAIN TRUTH, we gratefully welcome donations from readers who support our desire to bring spiritual knowledge and understanding to our increasingly secular society.

Cheques should be made payable to 'The Plain Truth' and mailed to the postal address listed above.

Printed in Malaysia by:
Hin Press & Trading Sdn Bhd (71078-D)
No. PT 45855, Batu 2, Jalan Kapar,
41400 Klang, Selangor, Malaysia

ISSN 1675-3100. Copyright Worldwide Church of God, 2010.

cover story

- 5 Church: Some assembly required**
Church's purpose is to help us build lasting relationships.

articles

- 8 The day I fired myself**
God doesn't control us, neither should we.
- 9 Nobody prepares you**
Old age can bring many problems.
- 10 Exclusive club... are you a member?**
God includes everyone in His redemption plan.
- 12 How does God judge us?**
God's judgment is based on grace, not works.
- 16 Our personal beliefs**
Are they accurate?
- 17 Can you eat only one?**
Resisting temptation.
- 18 What place does God occupy in your life?**
God should occupy first place in our lives.
- 20 Ever seen roasted corn grow?**
Good deeds produce chain effects.
- 22 Work hard for the Lord**
A study of 2 Timothy 2.

regular features

- 2 Editorial**
- 4 What our readers say**
- 15 Another angle**
- 19 Speaking of life...**
- 20 Bystander**
- 21 Hmm...**
Something to think about.

What our readers say:

I see a new back cover! It sure looks nicer than the previous one. As I live not too far from Klang, maybe I will drop by to help in packaging THE PLAIN TRUTH for mailing. As always, the articles in the Apr–Jun 2010 issue are uplifting and refreshing and provide great hope even if things around us don't look good, with catastrophic oil spills in the Gulf, unprecedented volcanic eruptions in Iceland resulting in flight cancellations and financial losses, financial crisis in Greece with demonstrations, and a host of other problems. Your magazine provides real hope and a solid future based on God's love for a fallen humanity. Keep up the good work!

Jayashree
Petaling Jaya

THE PLAIN TRUTH is interesting and informative. It gives hope to those who seek answers to life's questions. It guides me to live a better life and reduces my stress. Thank you!

Wong Choi Ying
Ipoh

THE PLAIN TRUTH gives different perspectives of bible stories through many interesting articles written by different writers.

Erwin Teo
Singapore

THE PLAIN TRUTH offers a wealth of spiritually stimulating articles and helps me to be a better child of God. Be assured, every issue is read from cover to cover! To show my appreciation, I am making a small contribution of RM50. There was no acknowledgement of my previous contribution.

Yong Thiam Siew
Petaling Jaya

Ed.: We are delighted to hear that you read the magazine from cover to cover! Thank you for your compliments and financial support. We apologise for the delay, but you will definitely receive an acknowledgement. Some readers give us their mobile phone numbers asking us to SMS them as soon as payment is received. That certainly will be faster.

THE PLAIN TRUTH strengthens me in my daily life. It helps me to know God better. The articles speak to me in various ways. It is

an encouraging magazine. Thank you for blessing me with this magazine.

Angeline Sundra Raju
Kuala Lumpur

I find THE PLAIN TRUTH very enlightening. It keeps me focused as I go about my daily life and put my faith in God.

Lim Chin Poh
Kuala Trengganu

THE PLAIN TRUTH articles are informative and interesting and my bible knowledge has increased.

Leonard Gomes
Kuala Lumpur

THE PLAIN TRUTH articles give new perspectives and help me grow in my bible knowledge. I appreciate the entire team for their dedication and hard work.

Rajagopal Doraisamy
Teluk Intan

THE PLAIN TRUTH gives me spiritual guidance and peace of mind.

Randy Wee
Singapore

THE PLAIN TRUTH surely is a magazine of Christian understanding. We are confused and find it hard to understand why there is so much suffering in this world. The articles explain in great detail why this is so, and in the process, we learn about God's great love for us, His children.

Boey Chee Ho
Penang

After all these years you still remember to send me the magazine. That's simply fantastic! Needless to say, your magazine is most lively and spiritually enlightening. I enclose a token sum that the good work may continue to be done.

Albert Ng
Alor Star

Congratulations. This is the only reading material I read for peace and tranquility. Every single word is read and pondered over leisurely. As a token of my appreciation, I would like to donate towards the cost of yearly subscription plus the cost for another reader.

Anonymous

THE PLAIN TRUTH contains articles of great interest. Messages of love are spread throughout the magazine—love all and hurt none. The articles are inspiring and the references make it easy to read and understand the Bible.

Harjit Singh
Ipoh

THE PLAIN TRUTH is a very good magazine. It enhances my faith and helps me in my daily life. It also helps me to find answers to life's most important questions.

Winne Fam
Petaling Jaya

THE PLAIN TRUTH is really interesting and meaningful. I really appreciate your sacrificial ministry to publish this great magazine. It helps me a lot to overcome this illusive world.

Salai Lau Jyan Shan
Bukit Mertajam

Although THE PLAIN TRUTH is sent free of charge, it is not without cost. Each copy is made possible by the generosity of others. So we are very grateful for those readers who send a donation, and make it possible for us to continue to publish the good news of the Gospel. Donations should be sent to the addresses listed on page 2 or sent electronically to the bank account:

The Plain Truth
A/C No: 1203-0386318-05-6
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Selangor, MALAYSIA.

We welcome your comments. Letters for this section should be addressed to: "Letters to the Editor", The Plain Truth, P.O. Box 2043, Pusat Bisnes Bukit Raja, Pos Malaysia Bhd., 40800 Shah Alam, Selangor, Malaysia. or sent via electronic mail to: ptasia@myjaring.net 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.

Church: Some assembly required

by
John Halford

Just across the road from our home there is a beautiful little country church. Many of our neighbours go there on Sunday morning to worship.

My wife's parents were married in that church, and her great grandfather donated the land on which it was built. I like the service. It is dignified and meaningful, and the congregation shares my preference for traditional hymns and music. The pastor is a good friend, and from time to time he has asked me to stand in for him. The people good-naturedly appreciate my clumsy attempts to handle the unfamiliar liturgy, and some have told me they wish I would come more often.

So why, most Sundays, do we make a round trip of about 100 miles to attend "our" church in the big city?

That is the closest congregation of the denomination in which I have membership and am ordained. But it is not just a matter

of brand loyalty. I feel more or less at home in most Christian churches, and I believe they are valid places to worship. The styles might be different, but I suspect that we are more concerned about styles than God is. Wherever and whenever Christians gather together in His name, Jesus said He would be there too. Why then, do I feel I should make the effort to drive

to my relatively distant congregation instead of just ambling across the road?

Does it matter?

I think about this sometimes as I make the Sunday morning drive. Does it matter where we go? Are we at liberty to just pick a church out of convenience? Or even to go nowhere? Surveys show that many people feel it is quite acceptable simply to watch a church service on television, never committing themselves to regular assembly. Others say that just talking about God and religion with friends at work or at an informal gathering from time to time is all the "church" they need.

But the Bible does place a high importance on belonging to a congregation. And not just belonging,

but supporting and participating in its life and work. One reason is that a congregation provides the opportunity for fellowship and joining in worship and communion. But another reason is that a congregation also requires *accountability*, something that, ironically, is often put forward as an excuse for *withdrawing* from regular congregational worship, and even leaving a church.

We don't like accountability. It implies restriction, discipline, correction and demands on our time and money—things we resist in life and certainly don't want from a church.

If we are honest, we must admit that there are often some disagreeable aspects of congregational life. We tend to get ourselves bogged down in distracting details and stir them into the church mix. But the

primary thing God is concerned about is our relationships. Jesus taught that lasting, productive relationships, based on mutual love and respect, are the substance of Christian life. Human societies and organisations rarely put the highest priority on this; they have different agendas. But a congregation of fellow believers should be a safe



place to nurture, maintain and, if necessary, repair relationships. To deny ourselves this environment is to miss out on a key aspect of the central dimension of our Christian lives.

I am not suggesting that regular church attendance makes us more righteous, or that to stay away is unforgivable. My long commute to worship does not make me more acceptable to God. Nevertheless, I think He does want me to have a strong commitment to my not-so-local congregation, and I do not take it lightly. The extra effort is definitely more worth than it is trouble.

The early church

We naturally tend to interpret the scriptures about congregational worship in terms of our modern

situation. But those instructions were not written against a backdrop of what has become the world's largest religion with over two billion adherents and a bewildering variety of sects, groups and denominations. We need to see what was written in the context of the first-century church.

After the initial surge, the church settled down to a slower growth pattern. The typical congregation in New Testament times seems to have been a relatively small number of people meeting in homes or public places. In some cases certain congregations may have been in contact with one another, and there is evidence of some rudimentary organisation and central authority. But most of the time the churches were on their own.

Paul himself seems to have been the linking factor in the churches he founded. Most of his letters have the flavour of a personal, intimate communication to

progress. "God is building a home," he reminded the church at Ephesus. "He's using us all—irrespective of how we got here—in what He is building. He used the apostles and prophets for the foundation. Now He's using you, fitting you in brick by brick, stone by stone, with Christ Jesus as the cornerstone that holds all the parts together. We see it taking shape day after day—a holy temple built by God, all of us built into it, a temple in which God is quite at home."²

In such a building, every part was needed. "From Him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work,"³ wrote Paul. This does not imply an easy-going "come when you feel like it" approach, does it?

These first Christians were, like us, frail and flawed human beings. Like us, they had their politics and



people he knew rather than that of a large, general audience. He never dreamed that his words would be endlessly dissected and analysed 2,000 years later in churches on continents he did not even know existed. He wrote to people he knew, gathered in little groups around the Mediterranean Sea.

Unlike today, where we have many choices, the early believers were a small minority, struggling to exist in what was often a hostile environment. With enemies, physical and spiritual, waiting to pounce, unity and harmony within the group were vitally important. That is why Paul and the other founding fathers focused their letters so much on *koinonia*, or community.

God's building

One of Paul's favourite analogies was to see the congregation as a building¹ that was a work in

quarrels. So how to handle such problems is often discussed. For example, when two long-standing members of the congregation at Philippi fell out, Paul urged them publicly to settle their differences.

"I urge Euodia and Syntyche to iron out their differences and make up. God doesn't want His children holding grudges," he wrote. "And, oh, yes, Syzygus, since you're right there to help them work things out, do your best with them. These women worked for the Message hand in hand with Clement and me, and with the other veterans—worked as hard as any of us. Remember, their names are also in the book of life."⁴

Was Syzygus successful? Let's hope so. Paul valued both Euodia and Syntyche, and did not want to lose either of them. So Paul urged them to reconcile quickly, for the good of the whole group.

The early church was taught to see membership in a congregation as a privilege and a responsibility. It was not a “useful option” or an “added benefit” to take advantage of if and when one felt like it. The instructions have the feeling of “this means you, so listen up” rather than “here are some general principles that you might want to think about in your planning meetings.” Hebrews 10:25 was an urgent warning to “Forsake not the assembling of yourselves together” because of a trend that needed to be nipped in the bud.

Breaking up is hard to do

Members who persisted in unacceptable or disruptive conduct might eventually have to be denied fellowship. But only as a last resort, after all other efforts to reconcile had failed. And even then, it was not done out of revenge or punishment, but as a last-ditch effort to bring the erring members to their senses. To be barred from fellowship was a serious matter. You couldn’t just shrug your shoulders and find another church that would have you. There was nowhere else to go.

Does this mean there is never a reason to leave a congregation? No. A church that is controlling and abusive does not deserve your membership, and you are better off out of it. But most congregations are not like that. They are just a group of imperfect believers struggling with the trials of life. Membership in a group like that should not be taken lightly. In our modern world, nearly every relationship is fraying—marriage, family, neighbours, friends. What should be strong committed relationships have become casual and negotiable. And sadly, that includes membership in a congregation.

Here I go

Reasons for leaving a congregation often sound righteous—a disagreement over a doctrine or a change of worship style. But often, the *real* reason is hurt feelings and wounded pride. We draw ourselves up, puff out our feathers and say, “Here I stand, I can do no other.” But what we mean is, “Here I go, I can’t stand the others.” The result is that people who were once friends now cross the road rather than pass the time of day.

If we are having difficulty with relationships in our church, it is all the more reason to stay and try to work things out. Jesus and his apostles urged their people to solve problems quickly. They knew that, if left to fester, hurts and grudges could spread to others and eventually destroy the *koinonia*. How much stronger, more robust and more influential would the Body of Christ be today if we would commit ourselves to working out differences rather than endlessly splitting and dividing?

A lesson from persecution

Some years ago I met a man in one of the old Soviet satellite countries who published a small Christian magazine on an underground press in his basement. The ruling regime ruthlessly suppressed Christianity, and this man had endured years of prison and persecution.

As he drove me around his city, he showed me a dramatic account of what life was like under Communism.

We stopped in front of a pile of rubble. “We built a

church here, but they bulldozed it,” he told me. We drove on, and after a few minutes, he stopped again and said, “We started a new church here, but they knocked this one down too.” He drove us to another site, and another and another, each time repeating the story.

“Finally,” he said, “once the authorities realised that European Communism was collapsing, they began to relax the restrictions a little.” They summoned the Christian leaders and told them they had permission to meet. There were two conditions. One was that they had to all meet together at a time and a place that the government chose. Secondly, the government would appoint the pastor.

The man selected was not the best speaker and certainly not the most educated. But it did not matter. Catholics, Baptists, Orthodox, Pentecostals and even Jehovah’s Witnesses would share a common service. “We were so happy to be able to meet that our differences did not matter.”

Then, when the Communist government finally fell apart, Western evangelists rushed in. Soon the group broke up into the various sects and denominations again. That brief moment of harmony has been replaced with competitive congregations glaring at each other over their “distinctives”.

“Of course, we appreciate the freedom, and we do have our different religious traditions,” explained my friend as he showed me yet another demolished building. “But you know, in some ways we were never happier than when we had no choice but to get along together.”

Obviously no one wants persecution. But today, where we have freedom of worship, many of us use that freedom to reduce our commitment. And we wonder why our witness is not as effective as it could be.

A place of safety

A church should be a safe place where there is genuine interaction—sharing the fun, pain, hope, joy, forgiveness and reconciliation of life. You can’t experience that as a loner, any more than you can really experience baseball, basketball or soccer by chasing around balls all by yourself. Real living must be experienced in community and fellowship.

Bryan Leech’s popular hymn, “We are God’s People” puts it nicely:

*We are a temple, the Spirit’s dwelling place,
Formed in great weakness, a cup to hold God’s grace;
We die alone, for on its own
Each ember loses fire:
Yet joined in one the flame burns on
To give warmth and light, and to inspire.*

When it’s all said and done, I suppose that’s why on most Sunday mornings my wife and I drive out of our little country town and head up Highway 50 to Cincinnati. I’m quite sure we could find rich and meaningful fellowship with any group of believers, but we find that our long-term friendships and shared history outweigh the convenience of proximity. We’ve been through good times and hard times with our church. We’ve shared hopes, joys, pains and sorrows, disappointments and successes. We feel a commitment there, and despite the long miles and significant tread wear, we would not have it any other way. ■

¹ 1 Corinthians 3:9

² Ephesians 2:19–22, *Message Bible*

³ Ephesians 4:16, *TNIV*

⁴ Philippians 4:2–3, *Message Bible*

The day I fired myself

by
Nan Kuhlman

I'm a control freak. I've known this for a long time, but when my patient and longsuffering husband pointed out to me that there is only a one-letter difference between "Nan" and "nag," I finally realised that something had to be done.

So I fired myself.

I fired myself as the manager of the universe. For as long as I can remember, I have confessed Jesus as Lord and Ruler, but I really didn't live as if I believed it. I was quick to say, "God is in control," but I acted as if I was the one responsible for everyone else's happiness, health, welfare and safety. That's a heavy and exhausting load to bear, but one we control freaks can't seem to resist.

I didn't take the firing gently. I needed to feel needed. At least I thought I did. It took a while for me to realise that what I really needed was to let others have the freedom of choice. I never wanted to see them suffer from their mistakes, so I did everything I could to prevent them from making any.

And what did I do to keep them on the straight and narrow? Nag, of course. Nag, and nag, and nag, and nag. But children don't need nagging, they need to learn how to take responsibility for and accept the consequences of their own actions. They need to feel the pain that comes from small bad choices as a natural deterrent from making bigger ones. And as much as it might seem otherwise, husbands don't need nagging either. A husband needs a wife, not a second mother.

Respect and freedom

After I fired myself from being my husband's keeper, I thought about the way God gives me freedom to make the bad choices and unwise decisions I make every day—even though it pains Him to see me make them. God isn't a control freak. He made human beings able to participate in and enjoy the same kind of mutual respect and freedom that the Father, Son and Holy Spirit share.

When we start thinking, "He might make a mistake: I have to change him," God wants us to think, "Trust me. Pray for him. He's not your project; he belongs to me."

It's hard to show respect for another person's freedom to choose when we're constantly trying to change

them. When we try to absorb them into our own vision of what we think they should be or do, we settle for a façade of control, and miss out on the joy of fellowship that God intended. When I fired myself as manager of my world, I was better able to see for what God truly expects of me and holds me responsible. I could stop taking too much on myself and start resting in Him, knowing that the Father, Son and Spirit have everything under control.

If only it were that easy. Don't get me wrong, when I fired myself, I acknowledged that my efforts at doing God's job were resulting in more pain and relationship strain than they were in changing anyone. But old habits die hard. I still have to remind myself often that "it's not my problem", and that I'd been fired as universe manager.

Richard Swenson gave a good summary about letting

God be God in his book, *The Overload Syndrome*. He wrote, "Since God is the author and creator of my limits, then it is probably OK with Him that I have limits. He probably does not expect me to be infinite and is a little surprised when I try. It is OK with Him if I am not all things to all people all the time, all by myself... God is not pacing the throne room anxious and depressed because of the condition of the world. He knows, He is not surprised, and He is sovereign. It is OK if we have limits. He is able."

If there's any comfort in this for us control freaks, it's that God has to watch us as we stumble through life, crying with us and helping us pick up the pieces at every wrong turn, yet He doesn't sweat it. He's willing to endure the good, the bad, and the ugly so that we can have the freedom to choose Him without nagging or coercion. As the saying goes, "Love is like a butterfly. Let it go, and if it comes back to you, it's yours to keep. If it doesn't, it never was."

So now I'm officially out of a job. I'm thinking about running an ad in the classifieds, something like this: "Ex-nagger, 40-plus years experience. Looking for people to love, respect, and encourage. Expect slight relapses." □



Nobody prepares you

I work for a parachurch organisation called Youth for Christ. Recently, several co-workers and I had an enlightening conversation during a work break. One lady shared a series of stories about her 88-year-old father-in-law who is now living in her guest room and his odd behaviour of showering at 2:00 a.m. Another man talked about his in-laws, who struggled to sell their home in Michigan to move closer to their daughter whom they expected to be their caregiver. This same man suggested that instead of being “Youth” for Christ, we were becoming “Senior Care” for Christ.

In 2006, the baby-boomer generation turned 60 and began a wave of retirement such as the U.S. has never experienced. Some 78 million boomers will retire over the next decade, representing 25 per cent of the population of the country. My co-worker was probably on to something when he suggested changing the focus group to seniors.

As I write this article, my father has just completed a nine-week stay in the hospital. He went to the operating room four times and spent six weeks in intensive care. He had fallen when a ladder collapsed under him and fractured the C7 and T9 vertebrae in his neck and back. Now he is in an intensive rehabilitation centre learning to move as much as he can. Whether he will be fully mobile is yet to be determined, and he still faces weeks or months in rehab. Nothing prepares you for this kind of emotional roller-coaster ride.

My mum currently faces the 40-minute one-way drive back and forth every day to visit my dad. She has been the one to consult with the doctors and make tough decisions on my dad's behalf. She is the one who will have to sort out bills from multiple doctors and institutions, and pray that the insurance satisfies the massive costs. She is the one who will have to make arrangements for the house to be remodelled to become handicap-friendly. It helps that she is a nurse, but that is of little consequence, because she cannot lift or move my father with her aging body.

I say that nothing prepares you for the difficulties of aging and all of the medical maladies that follow, but some 3,000 years ago King Solomon wrote these words of wisdom:

*Remember your Creator
while you are young,
before the days of trouble come
and the years when you say,*

by
Greg Williams

*“I find no pleasure in them.”
When you get old,
the light from the sun, moon, and stars will grow dark;
the rain clouds will never seem to go away.
At that time your arms will shake
and your legs will become weak.
Your teeth will fall out so you cannot chew,
and your eyes will not see clearly.
Your ears will be deaf to the noise in the streets,
and you will barely hear the millstone grinding grain.
You'll wake up when a bird starts singing,
but you will barely hear singing.
You will fear high places*

*and will be afraid to go for a walk.
Your hair will become white like the
flowers on an
almond tree.
You will limp along like a grasshopper
when you walk.
Your appetite will be gone.
Then you will go to your everlasting
home,
and people will go to your funeral.
Soon your life will snap like a silver
chain
or break like a golden bowl.
You will be like a broken pitcher at a
spring,
or a broken wheel at a well.
You will turn back into the dust of the
earth again,
but your spirit will return to God who
gave it.
Everything is useless!
The Teacher says that everything is
useless.¹*

“The days of trouble” have certainly come upon my father. The imagery that Solomon uses to show the effect of age on our physical frame is a reminder that the golden years might

not be so golden after all. It might not be a carefree life of golf and long walks on the beach with your sweetheart. It might instead be time spent in a doctor's waiting room and standing in line at the pharmacy more than time on the greens or dipping your foot in the ocean. Growing old and weak is not an easy journey.

It is difficult to be a spectator and limited caregiver in this hard journey. I couldn't help noticing that even more painful than being at my dad's bedside is the deeper pain of noticing his absence when I go home.

I live less than a football throw from my parent's back door. The Williams homestead is 40 acres, made



continued on page 11

Exclusive club...are you a member?

Recently I received in the mail a slick brochure advertising a new residential development catering to the high-class section of the population. It invited me to buy one of those beautiful houses set amidst lush landscape. Join the exclusive club of those who own a piece of the coveted real estate, the brochure urged. I threw it away since it was unlikely I would ever be able to rent, let alone buy, such property.

You have probably experienced many such similar examples. Unsolicited offers in the mailbox, or “spam” via e-mail and the internet, are an inescapable fact of life today. In our consumer-oriented society we

by
**Wong
Mein Kong**

not used in these advertisements by accident. They appeal to a very basic human desire of wanting to feel special, distinct from the others or the majority. This longing may manifest in many ways. It could be a wish for fame and recognition, or a drive for excellence and achievement. It could be motivated by competition and one-upmanship or a sense of superiority. Or it may be just an assertion of identity and individuality, or even a compensation for one’s perceived failings.

In a society where “upward mobility” in social class and economic advancement is a sign of success, people strive in those areas so as to be considered special. Others simply join exclusive or expensive



are constantly bombarded with advertisements for products and services, whether or not we can afford or even need them.

If we carefully examine the advertisements, we notice that certain words keep appearing. We are encouraged to own the “exclusive, unique” products, take advantage of the “limited, rare” offers, sample the “distinctive, special” services, and enjoy the “privileged” status. We can become one of the “select, elite” who have attained that “prestigious, preferred” life that we have always dreamt about or secretly yearned for.

Of course such persuasive words and phrases are

clubs, use certain brands of goods, own certain possessions, live in certain locations, attend (or try to get invited to) certain functions, mix with certain groups, in an attempt to show others or assure themselves that they belong to the select few and the privileged elite. Most of us probably harbour such aspirations. We would love to be included, and better yet, be acknowledged among the exclusive. When we fail we keep trying, even though disappointment waits for those who struggle and fail.

This desire to be special comes from our very humanity, our self-awareness and sense of self-worth and creativity. It reflects an innate search for meaning

and purpose to our life and existence. Deep down, human beings know that they are truly special and unique, different from other living creatures and the inanimate environment. The Hebrew poet and king, David, asked of God in awesome wonder, as he looked at the universe and the earth, “What is man that you are mindful of him?”¹ He realised human beings were meant to have a special relationship with the Creator which no other creatures can have. The first human family, Adam and Eve, at first experienced just that. Unfortunately, under the instigation and deception of Satan the devil, they lost trust in God and disobeyed Him. As punishment for their rebellion they were expelled from the Garden of Eden.

Ever since man has generally lived with little knowledge of God and no personal relationship with his Creator. Sin has distorted human nature and condemned mankind to a spiritually lost state, trying in vain to find direction and purpose to life. There is a hole in his soul that needs to be filled and a void in his heart that yearns to be satisfied. He is destined for a meaningless existence leading to eternal death. Man is totally unable to save himself or the civilizations he has created throughout history.

But God loves His human creation and desires to restore that special relationship with them. To enjoy eternal fellowship with God requires that man have eternal life. So God sent His only Son Jesus Christ to earth as a human being to die on mankind’s behalf for their sins.² Thus we can be forgiven and reconciled to our Creator and receive eternal life.³ It was a supreme act of sacrifice from God. On our part, we need to confess our sinfulness deserving of death, repent of our self-centred way of life and accept Jesus Christ as our Lord and Saviour.⁴

When we do, there is a remarkable change in our status. We now belong to the most exclusive club, the most distinctive group in the universe. We are adopted as God’s children in His family, and call our heavenly

Father “Abba”.⁵ This is a warm, familiar term that Jesus used to address God. It denotes the unique intimate relationship which is now offered to us as well. We are pictured as seated together with Jesus Christ in heavenly realms, and described as fellow citizens with God’s people and members of God’s household.⁶ We are “chosen by God and precious to Him” to become “a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God.”⁷ We are called “saints”, which means set apart, separated, devoted, and consecrated to God for a holy purpose and mission.

Can anything else be more special or privileged or prestigious? Yet this club is not “exclusive” in the snobbish sense. We cannot join on our own, but we are only admitted (by grace) by God, upon our confession that we don’t deserve or qualify (in humble repentance) and trusting in Jesus Christ to apply for membership for us (by faith). In fact, this club is the most “inclusive” because it is God’s desire that all mankind will accept His invitation to be its members.⁸ But God in His sovereign wisdom has given mankind the freedom and freewill to accept or reject His offer.

Those of us who have accepted God’s gracious work on our behalf are grateful for our special status in God’s eyes. That does not give us the right to withdraw behind the walls of an exclusive and privileged community, but to want others to join too. We must be a personal ‘advertising brochure’—or as Jesus puts it: “You are the light of the world. A city on a hill cannot be hidden.”⁹

One of our responsibilities is to be a witness and share with others the incredible spiritual benefits of being in God’s family—not only eternal life and fellowship, but experiencing love, joy, peace, hope, mercy, assurance, guidance, and power to live a life that God really intends for us. Do you want to be included? ☐

¹ Psalms 8:3–4

² John 3:16;

Romans 5:8

³ John 3:16;

Romans 5:8

⁴ Romans 10:9–10

⁵ Romans 8:15–16

⁶ Ephesians 2:6,19

⁷ 1 Peter 2:4,9

⁸ 1 Timothy 2:4;

2 Peter 3:9

⁹ Matthew 5:14

continued from page 9

up of my home, my parent’s home, my older brother’s home, and a surrounding apple orchard. My father is retired, but up until now, he had been quite active. I am accustomed to seeing him go about his routines: back and forth to the mailbox, across the road to feed his cats, riding his lawn mower twice a week through the summer months, and often showing up at my house (suspiciously around meal times). He was always available to pick up grandkids and happy to have you come into his living room to share a movie. This has been missing for more than two months now, and it has created a hole; the Williams homestead is not the same.

I realise that as my parents cared for me through the helpless stages of infancy and toddlerhood, that my turn has come to help them as they are aging and growing more helpless, but there is more to it than food, clothing and shelter. Life is about relationships at all stages, from the joy experienced at the day of birth until grief on the day of death. I am realising that the mere presence of my father, even in the mundane things, is a priceless value that won’t be replaced when he is gone. Having a loved one who is close by and always on standby to share a meal, a movie, or a simple conversation is the substance of life that the relational

God extends to His created children.

God, who exists eternally as Father, Son and Spirit, enjoys perfect relationship within Himself and it pleases Him greatly when His human children get along in peaceful, loving community. God has created us for relationship, and in the fullness of His plan He intends for you and me to experience whole, eternal relationships that will be liberated from loss and separation.

Growing old is one of the great challenges of this life, and death is the enemy because it separates us, if only temporarily, from our loved ones. But relationship is a divine quality that is experienced in this life and in the life to come. I believe that relationships represent the one precious treasure that we take with us from this life to the next.

Pain, tears and death are part of this human journey, but so are relationships. The journey I have shared thus far with my dad has been rich. I do not know how many days, weeks, or months we have left for this life, but the hope of eternity rests deeply in both of our hearts. ☐

¹ Ecclesiastes 12:1–8

How does God

Teachers evaluate their students based on their exam results. God also evaluates (judges) our lives based on how we live our lives on earth. Scripture tells us that God will judge *the living and the dead*.¹ That means everyone, sooner or later, must give an account to God at the end of their lives.

But how does God judge us?

Different ideas

There are many ideas as to how God judges us. Some believe God will weigh all our good deeds and bad deeds in a spiritual balance and, if our good deeds exceed our bad ones, we go to heaven (or attain a higher quality of life in the next birth), and if our bad deeds outweigh our good ones, we go to hell (or attain a lower quality of life in the next birth).

Christians also have different ideas of how God judges. Some believe we must attain a certain level of righteousness and do lots of good deeds to qualify for heaven. Others believe we are saved by grace through faith in Christ, not by how righteous we are or how many good deeds we do.

Let's look into God's word—the Bible—to understand how God judges us. But first let's look at the term *judgment*.

Meaning of judgment

The Greek word for judgment is *krisis*. It means *arriving at a crossroad and making a decision for or against the truth or reality*. It's about how we respond to God's truth revealed in Jesus Christ. Jesus tells us "I am the way, the truth, and the life."²

All those who believe in Jesus will have eternal life. Believing Jesus means entering into a personal relationship with Him and participating in God's life as His beloved children. It means trusting and sharing our lives with God. Those who don't believe Jesus cut themselves off from the wonderful life that God offers to them.

Sooner or later, in one way or another, everyone will hear the truth, including those who have died without knowing Jesus. Then they will have to make a decision to accept or reject Jesus—to say *yes* or *no* to God's offer of salvation through Christ.

Saved by grace through faith

Jesus came and settled all our sin for us. He took our sin into Himself and destroyed it on the cross. He also imparted His righteousness to us. In other words, He exchanged His righteousness with our unrighteousness (sin). Because of this wonderful exchange, God has declared *everyone* worthy and acceptable and righteous. All we have to do is accept Jesus as our personal Saviour and receive the gift of eternal life.

We cannot earn salvation by doing lots of good works. God offers it as a free gift. We are saved by grace through faith in Christ. While commandment keeping,



by
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good works and good behaviour are all important, they cannot save us.

For Christ's sake, God has forgiven all our sins. God loves us so much that He is willing to go to any length—even let His son Jesus die on the cross—to save us from sin and death.³ We are saved by grace through faith in Christ.⁴ Even that faith is a gift from God.

Scripture tells us that God has *already* forgiven, reconciled and accepted everyone for Christ's sake. Through Jesus' life, death, resurrection and ascension, all humanity are invited to partake of His divine nature.



Jesus offered to God perfect obedience and perfect sacrifice in our place and on our behalf. So there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ.

All who trust Jesus—who He is, what He has done, what He is doing and what He has become (God-Man)—are counted righteous before God. They receive the gift of eternal life through the Holy Spirit.

For Christ's sake, *God has judged everyone acceptable and worthy of eternal life*. He asks us to respond to His gracious offer and enter into joyful fellowship with Him.

od judge us?

Some principles

God's plan of salvation includes *everyone*. He has forgiven, reconciled and accepted the entire human race—past, present and future—for Christ's sake.⁵

God has judged humanity acceptable and worthy of salvation, not because of its righteous deeds, but because of His loving kindness towards us. That includes even those who do not yet know Christ.

So coming back to the question: How does God judge us? We will give four principles that will help us understand how God judges us. We will illustrate these principles using several parables.



Principle 1: Inclusion before exclusion.

Everyone is included in God's plan before anyone is excluded. God doesn't desire anyone to perish, but that all may come to repentance and receive the gift of eternal life.⁶ This offer is irrevocable—unchangeable.⁷ Any exclusion is only because God gives individuals the freedom of choice.

Principle 2: God's judgment flows from grace; it is not opposed to grace. Grace always reigns supreme. Mercy triumphs over judgment.⁸ We are saved

by grace through faith in Christ, not by keeping a set of rules, however helpful they may be.

St. Paul writes: "...if you confess with your mouth the Lord Jesus and believe in your heart that God has raised Him from the dead, you *will* be saved... For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek, for the same Lord over all is rich to all who call upon Him. For *whoever calls on the name of the LORD shall be saved.*"⁹

Principle 3: Judgment is based solely on people's response to God's invitation. It is based on their *faith or unfaith, their acceptance or rejection* of God's offer of salvation to them. And everyone will have to respond at some point in time.

Principle 4: Judgment takes place when Lord Jesus is revealed. The timing of this judgment may be different for different people. For example, it may be different for those who knew the truth and those who didn't know it in their lifetime. Irrespective of the timing, all will be judged after they have responded to His invitation.

Parables illustrating the principles

Let's now illustrate these principles with four parables.

1) Wedding banquets¹⁰

The banquets picture the wedding of the Lamb to the Bride.¹¹ Jesus is the Lamb of God and the Bride is the Church—all who believe in Jesus and accept Him as their personal Saviour.

Principle 1: All were invited—rich and poor, successful and unsuccessful, and the good and the bad.¹²

The Master splashed the banquet out of His royal abundance. All were counted worthy to attend the banquet. They just had to accept the invitation and enjoy the party.

Principle 2: The invitation was solely by grace through faith in the Lord. No one was required to show anything (list of good works, reformed life, etc.). All who *trusted* Jesus were counted worthy and received their wedding gowns which symbolised Jesus' righteousness. But one of the guests didn't have a wedding gown. He was cast out, not because He was not worthy, but simply because he trusted in his own righteousness (he wore his own gown) instead of trusting in Jesus' righteousness. Prophet Isaiah tells us that all our righteousness is like filthy rags to God.¹³

Principle 3: The judgment was based solely on their acceptance or rejection of the Master's invitation. All that the guests had to do was respond with a yes or no. Many (the less successful ones) joyfully accepted the invitation, but some (the more successful ones) rejected it.

Principle 4: The Master showed up only after they had responded to His invitation. He judged them only after they had made their decisions to accept or reject the invitation.

2) Talents and minas¹⁴

These parables are *not* about how much money the servants made with the deposits that they had received from the Lord. Rather, they are about whether they trusted the Lord and participated in His business (ministry). It didn't matter if they had lost their money in a bad business (like getting persecuted for sharing the gospel).

The first two servants trusted the Lord and participated in His business. They bore fruits—they made more money. However, the third servant didn't trust the Lord, so he didn't participate. He didn't bear any fruits—he didn't make any money. The Lord trusted him, but he didn't trust the Lord. He played safe. Jesus tells us that those who try to save their life will lose it and those who lose their life will gain it.¹⁵

Principle 1: All the servants were equally favoured by the Lord as they all received money. As far as the Lord was concerned, they were all worthy and acceptable business partners.

Principle 2: The servants didn't deserve the money, but the Master gave them freely.

Principle 3: All the servants had to respond to the Lord's business proposition. The first two servants trusted the Lord, so they acted and made more money. The third servant didn't trust the Lord, so he didn't even bother to try.

Principle 4: The Lord appeared after they had responded to His business proposition. He only appeared after a *long* time.¹⁶ He was hidden to the servants until they had responded. Then He rendered judgment based on their response—their acceptance or rejection. The first two servants were praised for having faith in the Lord while the third servant was rebuked for being faithless.

3) Wise and foolish virgins¹⁷

This parable is *not* about how much Holy Spirit they had. Holy Spirit is God, not some gas or oil. As in the other parables, this is about trusting the Bridegroom and accepting the wedding invitation.

Principle 1: All ten virgins were equally favoured and invited to the wedding party. The wise and the foolish were both worthy and acceptable.

Principle 2: The party was fully paid. It was free for them. They didn't have to pay any money or show a list of good works or good behaviour.

Principle 3: They were judged solely by their response to the Bridegroom's invitation—their acceptance or rejection. Half of them had faith and accepted the invitation while the others didn't have faith and they rejected it.

Principle 4: The Bridegroom delayed His coming and appeared to them only after they had responded to the invitation. He was hidden to them until they had made their decision.

4) Sheep and goats¹⁸

This parable is *not* about how much good works they did. Salvation is by grace and we receive it by faith in Christ. While good works *are* important, they don't merit salvation. We do good works because we want to imitate Jesus who cared for the people. Jesus wants us to participate in His caring ministry.

This parable, like the other parables, is about *trusting* Jesus (King) and entering into a personal *relationship* with Him. The phrase, "whatever you did for one of the

least of these brothers of mine, you did *for me*," refers to a personal relationship with Jesus who empowers us through the Holy Spirit to do good works.

Principle 1: Both the sheep and the goats were equally favoured by the King. Both were acceptable and qualified as paschal sacrifices.¹⁹ Both were invited to God's kingdom.

Principle 2: The sheep and the goats didn't have to show anything to inherit God's kingdom—it's by grace.

Principle 3: The sheep trusted the King and participated in His caring ministry (faith-in-action). They built a personal relationship with Him which gave them the motivation to care for the people. The goats, on the other hand, didn't trust Him, so they didn't bother to build a personal relationship and participate in His caring ministry.

Principle 4: The King was hidden to both the sheep and goats. They didn't see Him until after they had responded. The King was hidden from them "in the least of His brethren." He only showed up after they had responded. The King praised the sheep and rebuked the goats. It didn't matter how much or how well the sheep cared for the people.

Final judgment

God is love. He loves us unconditionally. He has forgiven all our sins for Christ's sake. Jesus has *redeemed* us by His life, death, resurrection and ascension. He has done everything that needed to be done for us (the banquet is all ready). He has judged us *worthy and acceptable*.

God has closed His law books and has written all our names in the Book of Life. There is no condemnation for those who are in Christ. While commandment keeping and good works are important, they don't save us. Jesus saves us. We are saved by *grace* through faith in Christ.

God's judgment is based solely on our *response* to His offer of salvation. Jesus, the King of kings and Lord of lords, will appear again to judge the living and the dead. All who accept His invitation to His heavenly banquet will receive the gift of eternal life. It is free for simply trusting Jesus. All those who reject His offer cut themselves off from the abundant life that He offers to them. It's a choice everyone must make *individually*. Hell is what we create for ourselves. It is totally unnecessary and no one in his right mind will desire it.

God the Father is inviting you to His Son's wedding banquet. The banquet is on! It will pale into insignificance all the human banquets ever put together. Jesus will judge you based on your response to this glorious splash where there will be pleasures forevermore. He is waiting for you to respond. Would you say yes? ☐

Reference

Capon, Robert F., *Kingdom, Grace, Judgment*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: William Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2002.

¹ 2 Timothy 4:1;

1 Peter 4:5

² John 14:6

³ Romans 8:31–39

⁴ Ephesians 2:8–9

⁵ Romans 5

⁶ 1 Timothy 2:4;

Titus 2:11; 2

Peter 3:9

⁷ Romans 11:29

⁸ James 2:13

⁹ Romans 10:9–13

¹⁰ Matthew

22:1–14; Luke

14:15–24

¹¹ Revelation 19:9

¹² Matthew 22:10

¹³ Isaiah 64:6

¹⁴ Matthew

25:14–30; Luke

19:11–27

¹⁵ Matthew 16:25

¹⁶ Matthew 25:19

¹⁷ Matthew

25:1–13

¹⁸ Matthew

25:31–46

¹⁹ Exodus 12:5;

Leviticus 16

Was John Lennon right?

The late John Lennon wrote and sang the song entitled 'Imagine'. This song was written during the height of the US war in Vietnam, the Nixon administration and the peace movement that took hold of the nation. You can still hear the song played regularly as it was one of John Lennon's most popular hits.

Lennon asks us to imagine that there's no heaven or hell. There's only sky above us. Then he imagines having to live just for today—there is nothing to kill or die for and no religion to believe in. He equates this with people living life in peace.

Religion is very important to billions of people in the world. Each religion has its experts who teach, guide and correct their adherents, so that their lives are right with their God, or gods.

What's the point of having so many religions yet so little godliness?

Why do we fear, despise, or even hate others who do not follow our religious precepts? Why does humanity have a history of horrendous killings because of religion? Was John Lennon right after all?

Karl Marx wrote that religion is the opium of the people. He thought that religion made people live an illusion and that they needed to be freed from it to

regain true happiness. Is religion really what is making the world miserable? What's the point of it all if it only brings trouble?

What about those who want nothing to do with religion, or any dealing with God? Are they happy? Are they living problem-free, worry-free, disaster-free and harmonious contented lives eventually to end in blissful peace? I don't think so. They seem to be facing the same troubles as the rest of humanity. No, dumping religion is not the answer to a peaceful existence.

A religious man once asked Jesus an important spiritual question. He wanted to know which was the greatest commandment in the laws of his faith.¹ Jesus answered: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the first and great commandment. And the



by
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Ramoo**

second is like it, 'You shall love your neighbour as yourself'. On these two commandments hang all the law and the Prophets."²

A religious belief should lead us to love and worship our Creator, however we understand what that means. But that love and dedication is surely inadequate if we fail also to love what He has created. How can a religious belief be acceptable to God if it leads us to hate our fellow man? "If anyone says, 'I love God,' yet hates his brother, he is a liar. For anyone who does not love his brother, whom he has seen, cannot love God, whom he has not seen."³ Those who have resorted to violence to promote God have failed. They have never really known Him.

Sadly there are those in all the major religions who promote violence to protect and promote their religious reasoning. But there are also those from every

faith who have grasped the essence of true religion. They can be found often in the most destitute of places, their kind hands tending to the sick, comforting the traumatised, feeding the hungry, giving hope to those who have lost everything, and putting a smile on the faces of the lonely. They reflect God by their very presence.

This is the

religion the world needs. It is what Jesus taught and what He did by example.⁴ He hated no one but endured the worst kind of hate. He hurt no one but was humiliated for everyone. He committed no violence but suffered a violent and brutal death.

What's the point? His "religion" was to tell the world of the love of God, and His plan to save humanity, not destroy it. That is the truth that we need to hear. Doing away with religion will not make this world a better place. What we need is to understand that God is reaching out to everyone, to save humanity. Christians know that He did this through His Son, Jesus Christ. Because of Him, we can 'imagine' a world at peace.

If we want the world to imagine it too we must live as if we believed it. □



¹ Matthew 22: 35–36

² Matthew 22: 37–40

³ 1 John 4:20

⁴ John 3:16

Our personal beliefs

Recently I saw some photos of very old advertisements. One ad encouraged its readers to lose weight by swallowing tape worms. Another ad tempted young men to acquire more sex appeal by smoking cigarettes.

We wouldn't have been enticed by *those* ads, would we? Worms and cigarettes? But many people back then were prompted to buy those products. Perhaps we too would have found those ads believable if we had lived in that time and that society.

Our beliefs and resulting behaviour are conditioned by our social environment, perhaps more than we realise. The famous French philosopher and scientist Blaise Pascal said, "People almost invariably arrive at their beliefs not on the basis of proof but on the basis of what they find attractive."

More important than the products we may buy are our beliefs about human life. These are the beliefs that shape how we conduct ourselves, how we relate to other people and, most vitally, how we relate to God. We who live today *need* to be sure that our beliefs are accurate, and not wrongly influenced by the changing, and often misguided world around us.

Some thoughts about thinking

Do you remember what happened in the Garden of Eden? God had told Adam and Eve not to eat the fruit from a certain tree. But Eve thought the fruit looked delectable, so she picked it and ate it. Adam also ate, and humanity has suffered ever since.

It is not pleasant to admit, but we are all inclined, like our original parents, to decide for ourselves what to believe and what to do based on what looks appealing.

Losing weight and attracting the opposite sex occupy the thoughts of many today. These pursuits may not be wrong, but shouldn't we give our most serious attention to our convictions about spiritual matters? After all, our personal concepts of God affect our thoughts, our words and actions, and may even determine our eternal destiny. That ought to prompt us to be absolutely certain that our personal theology is correct.

Some modern thinkers claim that beliefs about God are just a matter of personal taste—"if it works for you it's okay." Others conclude that God is unknowable, that absolutely there is no absolute truth. Still others promote the idea that our thoughts and words are creative in the sense that they *determine* our own reality—that we can change the physical world around us by thinking positive thoughts and speaking the 'right' words.

But truth *is* real, absolute, and unchanging. We *need* to build our personal belief system on provable unshakeable truth, and be willing to discard erroneous ideas.

Whose opinion counts anyway?

Let's ask ourselves what our personal beliefs are based



by
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on. Often they come from TV programmes, books, friends or family, or majority opinion. But these sources may be questionable because so often they come from human opinion and change with the times, just as those old faded ads about how to lose weight and how to attract the opposite sex.

Today, religious teachings are often tarnished by faulty human reasoning. Jesus described the religious teachers of His society this way, "But in vain they do worship me, teaching for doctrines the commandments of men."¹ He warned His followers to beware of human-devised religion, and human thinking which often is faulty.

You and I need more than reliance on our own thinking. We need to base our religious convictions on the Word of God—untarnished and unpolluted by human thought. God does not govern the universe based on our opinions, voting, human logic, or human wishes. Simply put, our beliefs mean nothing unless they agree with the revealed truths given to us by our Heavenly Father. We may be thankful that He has told us how to learn of Him, and He promises blessings when we do seek to learn of Him.

Building the right beliefs

Scripture advises us to "Test everything. Hold on to the good."² That can be a bewildering task in this age of many conflicting religious beliefs, but scripture itself gives some tips for sifting the true from the false.

1) Respectfully seek God's will. God becomes knowable when we put aside our own thinking and humbly and sincerely ask Him to reveal Himself to us. Reverence for God is the beginning step for learning of Him.³ Truth comes from Him. When we look to Him to teach us, the Holy Spirit enlightens us as we seek His will.

2) Study the Bible regularly. Jesus, in praying to the Father, said, "Sanctify them by the truth; your word is truth."⁴ He was referring to God's words that are recorded in scripture. That is where we find spiritual truth that is totally reliable. God didn't leave us to wonder what to believe.

We learn of Jesus and His teachings through the illuminating pages of scripture. Here we also learn of God the Father. It is in scripture where we find, as Peter said, "everything we need for life and godliness."⁵ Granted, many Biblical passages are difficult to understand, but when we pray for discernment the Holy Spirit comes alongside and increases our understanding.

3) Focus on Jesus. The main object of our learning should be our Lord and Saviour. Only He has been resurrected from the dead. Only He has the power to give eternal life. He not only shows us the way to eternal life, but He guarantees our salvation when we

continued on page 19

Can you eat only one?

I'm sure you've heard the phrase, "I can resist anything but temptation." When someone says this, we usually laugh, nod our heads and agree. Yes, temptation is hard to resist. And many might say resisting temptation is no fun either. When was the last time you saw or heard of someone turning away from any kind of temptation? If you believe advertisers, TV and movies, you would think it's the only way to live. Don't deny yourself anything: eat whatever you want, buy whatever you want, do whatever you want. You'll be happier if you do. You'll have more fun and enjoy life more.

Other than seeing that slogan on a bumper sticker, few talk about resisting temptation these days. It's a bit old-fashioned, isn't it? What's the point? Does it matter? Paul told Timothy: "People who want to get rich fall into temptation and a trap and into many foolish and harmful desires that plunge men into ruin and destruction."¹ I imagine those CEOs who got caught with their hands in the cookie jar are regretting giving in to the lure of riches—some from their prison cells.

Joseph is one of the few biblical characters who not only didn't give in when tempted, he emphatically refused and ran away. It didn't seem to do any good, as he was then falsely accused and imprisoned. Some reward, huh? It seems so at first glance, but as it says in Genesis 39:21, "The Lord was with him; He showed him kindness and granted him favour in the eyes of the prison warden." His story did have a happy ending.

Joseph didn't resist Potiphar's wife's aggressive come on because of legalism or self-righteousness. A person who actively turns away from temptation might be judged to be both. But that's not how God looks at it. As we've already seen in Paul's words to Timothy, giving in

by
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to lusts is foolish and leads to destruction.

Joseph was able to resist for three reasons:

1. He knew it would be a betrayal of the trust placed in him by Potiphar.
2. He knew it was a sin against God.
3. He made the decision ahead of time.

We don't know if Joseph anticipated his master's wife's advances, but he knew God and what his real Master expected of him. He trusted God, understood sin and its consequences and had already made up his mind not to betray God or man in his actions. He could have given in to other temptations as well—

anger at God, self-pity, pride in his position in Potiphar's house and in the prison, and lust for power and money.

We're faced with many temptations, though usually not as dramatic as those of Joseph. Temptation is a part of human life that hasn't changed in thousands of years and resisting is just as important now as it was in Joseph's day. Why is it important? As C.S. Lewis said in *Mere Christianity*, every time we make a choice,

we're becoming different on the inside. We become more in harmony with God, or a "hellish creature", prone to "madness, horror, idiocy, rage, impotence, and eternal loneliness."

Contrary to prevailing opinion, resisting temptation is important. Let's trust God, keep His trust and plan ahead to resist. It's a plan that will help us not only avoid the destruction giving in will bring, but also as Lewis said, lead to "joy and peace and knowledge and power." □

¹ 1 Timothy 6:9



What place does God occupy in your life?

When Christians talk about where to put God in their lives, it should always be in first place. God should always take top priority and this should be the way. Jesus Christ Himself told us to seek first God's kingdom and His righteousness¹. Many Christians depict the situation with a picture of the cross in the centre of a symbol of the heart.

Misplacing God

Although putting God first above all else is the ideal, unfortunately that may not be the case sometimes. Occasionally, we *misplace* God. To *misplace* God is to put God wrongly or incorrectly in our lives. Usually it is done unintentionally or unknowingly. It may even be done with good intentions to please God. Nevertheless, the result is God is no longer number one in our daily Christian walk.

So how could well-meaning believers *misplace* God? And how do we do that? It is usually done through ignorance or lack of understanding. For example, if we value church traditions as more important than the spirit of the law, then we have *misplaced* God. When we think that the day of worship is more significant than the worship itself, then we are saying God is no more of first importance.

Some Christians may still have an immature view of the converted life and tend to judge matters in a legalistic manner. We must realise that church attendance, like many other Christian practices, although essential, does not save us. Christ does². Similarly, any gifts, even from God, cannot be equated with God. The ability to speak in tongues, the gift of healing, the talent to prophesy and other gifts cannot take precedence over the Word of God.

How do we prevent ourselves from *misplacing* God? One way is to keep learning about God and His nature continuously. Review our assumptions and the way we do things in church. Question practices that contradict clear teachings from the Bible. After all, we are expected to grow in grace and in knowledge!³

Displacing God

Besides *misplacing* God, sometimes Christians may also *displace* God from being number one in their lives. We may push God down to number two, or three or eight or whatever number without even realising it. We may still believe in God and consider ourselves

by
**Wong
Teck Kong**

as Christians but the fact is we are on very dangerous ground as far as our spiritual state is concerned. *Displacing* God just means that we consider that there are things in this world that are more essential to us than God.

As Jesus Himself explained in the parable of the sower,⁴ there are indeed many cares and concerns that may take us away from Christ. Financial worries, career development, relationship issues, family problems and personal health are just a fraction of the daily worries that rob us of a close union with God. Modern living can be stressful with some experiencing one crisis after another. It is easy to be distracted with so many matters to deal with. Slowly at first but gaining momentum over time, God is being edged out from the top spot in our lives.



Hopefully when in an emergency we will still call out to God for help. Hopefully we can still remember God even though we have *displaced* Him. And at times God may use a severe trial to wake us up. Not having time for God over a prolonged period is surely *displacing* God. That means we are on the slippery slope as far as Christ is concerned⁵.

Replacing God

Finally, we come to the part on *replacing* God. To *replace* God basically means that we have substituted God with something else that we think can do the job of God in our lives. It may be money, our intelligence and talents, other people or even other 'gods' found in the various

religions of the world. We not only have *replaced* God, we have also *replaced* our beliefs and value systems. In short, we are no longer believers. The Bible likens this situation to a dog returning to its vomit or a sow wallowing in the mud after it has been washed⁶.

From *displacing* God to *replacing* God is but a small step. Christians must in the first place always be focused in their calling. God must always take precedence over all else. Invest sufficient time, money, thoughts and effort for Christ. As the apostle Paul said, let nothing separate us from the love of God.⁷ When we *place* God right in the centre of our lives, Christ will prepare a *place* for us and take us to that *place* when we meet Him⁸. That's a *place* worth waiting for! □

¹ Matthew 6:33

² John 10:9

³ 2 Peter 3:18

⁴ Matthew 13:22

⁵ Matthew 10:37

⁶ 2 Peter 2:21,22

⁷ Romans 8:35

⁸ John 14:2,3

Baptism

When should a person be baptised?

A lot of people see baptism as something you do when you get your life straightened out. Others see it as the thing to do when you are ready to fully commit yourself to straightening out and flying right. But that's not really what baptism's all about!

Baptism, as a sacrament is often called a visible sign of an invisible reality. But *what is* the "invisible reality"? Many think the invisible reality is *their* devotion and commitment to Christ. In other words, they think they cannot be baptised until they are ready publicly to show *their* commitment to follow Christ. They think baptism is a sign of something about *them*.

But baptism is not a sign of something about us. It is a sign of something about God.

The Grace Communion International *Statement of Beliefs* says this about baptism:

"The sacrament of baptism proclaims that we are saved by Christ alone and not through our own

repentance and faith. It is a participation in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, in which our old selves have been crucified and renounced in Christ and we have been freed from the shackles of the past and given new being through His resurrection. Baptism proclaims



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the good news that Christ has made us His own, and that it is only in Him that our new life of faith and obedience emerges."

In other words, baptism signifies our union with Christ in *His* life, death, burial, resurrection, and ascension. That is a union that already exists through what Christ has done on our behalf 2,000 years ago.

It is not a declaration about how committed to Christ we are; it is a declaration of how committed Christ is to us. We don't have to worry about whether we are ready; Christ is the one who is ready. We don't have to be righteous enough; Christ is the one who is righteous for us.

If you are waiting until you are totally sure and ready, or committed enough, how long are you going to wait? When are any of us ever "ready" enough or "committed" enough?

Like the Ethiopian eunuch in Acts 8:36, maybe it's time to ask, "Why shouldn't I be baptised?"

Baptism is not about how ready *we* are or how

committed *we* are to God; it is a testament to how committed *God already* is to *us*.

So what are you waiting for? □



continued from page 16

look to Him.

Let's be sure to build our spiritual beliefs on the rock-solid, unshakeable Foundation, our Lord and Saviour.

4) Learn from reliable Bible teachers. As students of God's Word we need to be taught by other Christians who accurately explain the Bible. Then we should be like the Bereans, a group who, after hearing the Apostle Paul preach, "examined the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true."⁶ Likewise, readers of this magazine should search the scriptures to verify that

¹ Matthew 15:9

² 1 Thessalonians 5:21

³ Proverbs 1:7

⁴ John 17:17

⁵ 2 Peter 1:3

⁶ Acts 17:11

⁷ 1 Peter 1:25

what we say is true. For those of us who have proven that the Bible is the Word of God we need to stand firm. Scripture remains rock solid and endures forever.⁷

For those readers who have not yet savoured the good Word of God, you have a pleasant surprise coming. Scripture is enlightening and does indeed direct us to the abundant life here and now, and ultimately forever. □

The bride's story

I had been dreaming of this day since I was a little girl because my groom and I had been promised to each other since childhood. Our year of engagement had been full of anticipation and careful preparation for our wedding feast.

I fasted all day as required, so I felt a little light-headed. I tried hard to concentrate while reciting the prayers of atonement as part of my preparation. Though I had shed some nervous tears earlier, I had to smile when the groom's messengers arrived and I watched them lay out the garments and ornaments and perfume I was to wear. My dear groom had been so extravagant I could hardly believe my eyes.

As evening drew closer, I stood proudly as my friends clothed me in my exquisite bridal gown and ornaments. I let down my hair as is expected of a bride and carefully placed the crown of fresh myrtle leaves on my head. Over it all was placed the long white veil of betrothal. And then I waited until dusk turned to darkness.

With much joy and shouting, my groom and his friends "searched" the village for me. Finally I saw the torches as they entered my parent's courtyard. "Come see the treasure I have found," my groom said as he lifted my veil and our eyes met. We walked out on to the street into a procession filled with music and dancing. My groom led me proudly to his house and into the room reserved for the women. Surrounded by my maidens, I sat on the special platform prepared for me. I was not accustomed to being the centre of

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attention and it was exhilarating.

I could see into the room where the feast was spread for the men. Everything was just perfect! My father-in-law was bursting with satisfaction and was being more than generous with the wine. So much time and expense had gone into the preparations, and the wine was extremely important.

After a few hours, I noticed confusion among some of the servers. I was stunned to learn they had run out of wine! This was the ultimate embarrassment and disgrace to the family. I couldn't hold back the tears as they fell on my lovely wedding dress. Then I saw Mary of Nazareth leave our women's table. She spoke to my father-in-law and then approached her son, Jesus the carpenter. I heard Jesus tell the servers to fill up the six big water jugs in the hallway, right to the brim. Then He told them to dip some out of a jug and give it to the master of the feast, who, when he tasted it, immediately asked my groom why he had saved the best wine till last.

My groom and his father were speechless. Their reputations were saved, and the biggest day of my life didn't end in disgrace. Mary told me later Jesus was at first reluctant to do this because it was not time for His power to be shown publicly. Jesus went on to do the most amazing things and was finally crucified, then raised from the dead! So we will never forget how He chose our wedding feast to begin His great work and, at the same time, touch our lives in such a beautiful way. □

Ever seen roasted corn grow?

In Southern Africa, we enjoy green maize, or corn, during the summer months. We eat it roasted, cooked, steamed, pounded, or grilled. Having just finished some roasted corn, my thoughts turned to a saying of the Kiluba people of the Democratic Republic of Congo. They say "Mataba makange amenanga". The English equivalent is: "Roasted maize (corn) grows."

As I crunched a few more bites of roasted corn, I pondered over the saying. Literally speaking, of course, only fresh corn grows, not roasted corn. But it takes caring hands to roast corn, and that's the point of the proverb. Roast corn is a metaphor for good deeds, and like seeds sown in fertile soil, good deeds will germinate, grow, and bear more good deeds.

Wise King Solomon had the same lesson in mind when he wrote, "Cast your bread upon the waters, for after many days you will find it again."¹

by
**Kalengule
Kaoma**

For a few days while I stayed in Lubumbashi, I interacted with a number of Kiluba people. Their generosity certainly reflected their proverb, "Roasted maize grows."

All of us, including the Kiluba, have a lot to learn about good deeds, of course. But in the meantime, all of us can practise roasting some corn with full assurance that it will grow!

Do something good for someone. That person will remember your caring hands and perhaps do something for someone else.

"Do for other people as you would like them to do for you," Jesus said. That's how roasted corn grows. □

¹ Ecclesiastes 11:1

All I have seen teaches me to trust the Creator for all I have not seen.
Ralph Waldo Emerson

God alone can make a man a believer. Our part is to accept or reject His initiative.
John Powell

The life we share together as people of God is a reflection of the inner life of God, the Trinity.
Michael Jinkins

God reveals Himself in Jesus by the power of the Holy Spirit.
Michael Jinkins

Modern man has lost any sense of God's nearness, but Christianity teaches that God reveals Himself through every single thing He has ever brought into being, whether a created object or historical event.
R.C.Sproul

The final judgment has begun, the last days had suddenly overtaken mankind, so that in the presence of Jesus hidden things were revealed, the first things were made last and the last things first, and all things were laid open and naked before His eyes.
Thomas Torrance

The more you read the Bible; and the more you meditate on it, the more you will be astonished with it.
C.H.Spurgeon

Religion is the story of what a sinful man tries to do for a holy God; the gospel is the story

of what a holy God has done for sinful men.
Roy Gustafson

Jesus Christ is the center of everything, and the object of everything, and he that does not know Him knows nothing of nature, and nothing of himself.
Blaise Pascal



If the church is to be the witness God calls us to be, we must be ruthlessly honest with ourselves about the areas in which we are not where God wants us to be. And it is painfully obvious that one central area in which we are not remotely close to where God wants us to be is in our relationships with one another. Because of the pervasive, individualistic mindset of our culture, modern Christians tend to view their relationship with God strictly as an individual thing. Church is usually thought of as a weekly, large-group gathering of believers who are for the most part strangers to one another. Even worse, we tend to identify the church as a building that simply houses individual Christians once a week for worship.
Gregory Boyd

We can only begin an upright course of life when God, of His good pleasure, adopts us into His family.
John Calvin

The Bible calls the good man's life a light; and it is the nature of light to flow out spontaneously in all directions, and fill the world unconsciously

with its beams.
Horace Bushnell

If God forgives us, we must forgive others. Otherwise it is almost like setting up ourselves as a higher tribunal than Him.
C.S.Lewis

Remember, Christ was not a deified man,

are one and the same.
A.W.Tozer

We must face the fact that many different saviours can be smuggled in under the name "Jesus", just as many different deities can be disguised under the term "God" and vastly different ways of living can be promoted under the name "Christianity". Jesus can be a victim of identity theft, and people can say and do things with and in His name that He would never ever do.
Brian McLaren

God has "put forth" Jesus so that, through His faithful death, all those who belong to Him can be regarded as having died. God raised Him up so that, through His vindication, all those who belong to Him can be regarded as being themselves vindicated.
N.T. Wright

Our Lord made discipleship hard and lost many prospective followers because He called them to a pilgrimage, not a parade—to a fight, not to a frolic.
Vance Havner

Theology belongs in the pulpit, the school, the workplace, the family, and everywhere. Society as a whole is weakened when theology is neglected. Without a systematic application of theology, too often people approach the Bible with a smorgasbord mentality, picking and choosing what pleases them.
R. J. Rushdooney

Why do we believe what we believe? By what authority do we believe in this God and not some other?
Michael Jinkins

One of the marks of spiritual maturity is the quiet confidence that God is in control—without the need to understand why He does what He does.
Anonymous

The woman was made of a rib out of the side of Adam; not made out of his head to rule over her, nor out of his feet to be trampled on by him; but out of his side to be equal to him, under his arm to be protected, and near his heart to be loved.
Matthew Henry

When we are reading, we often find something that attracts our interest. It's not earth-shattering, or life-changing. But it's worth cutting out and keeping, or sticking on the refrigerator door; or maybe sending to us for this page!

We invite all our readers to contribute news items, quotes, or poems, that make you say 'Hmm'. It could be in today's paper, or in a book hundreds of years old. Try to send the original clipping, or a copy of the page to:

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Work hard for

In this letter (2 Timothy 2), Paul gives final exhortations to Timothy, encouraging him to be a faithful worker in the word of truth. The work will be difficult, but it will be worth it.

Strengthened by grace (verses 1–7)

Paul exhorts Timothy: You then, my son, be strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus. “Strong in grace” could have several meanings: 1) to be confident in God’s grace toward humanity, 2) to emphasise grace in preaching, or 3) emboldened by God’s grace, to be confident in all of life.

Paul knows that he is going to die, and Timothy will die, too. So Paul wants him to train some replacements, to create an expanding network of teachers: And the things you have heard me say in the presence of many witnesses entrust to reliable men who will also be qualified to teach others. This is a good principle for ministry today.

Timothy will encounter problems, persecution, and sometimes even boredom. Timothy needs to be mentally prepared for the challenges. So Paul reminds him that he needs to be committed: Endure hardship with us like a good soldier of Christ Jesus. Timothy is not alone—he is enduring it “with us”. And he is not working for himself—he is working for Christ.

No one serving as a soldier gets involved in civilian affairs—he wants to please his commanding officer.

It’s OK to be *involved* in secular affairs—Paul sometimes worked as a tentmaker—but Timothy should not be *entangled* in the secular world, looking there for his sense of self-worth. He is primarily a servant of Jesus, and he should seek to please Jesus, even if he has a secular job.

Paul moves to another metaphor: Similarly, if anyone competes as an athlete, he does not receive the victor’s crown unless he competes according to the rules. Paul hints at a “victor’s crown” for Timothy, when the work is done the way his commander wants it done.

A third metaphor: The hardworking farmer should be the first to receive a share of the crops. Paul again hints that Timothy will receive something in return.

Paul was not the first to use soldiers, athletes and farmers as examples of diligence—various Greek writers used the same three metaphors. Paul uses this trio to point out that gospel work involves toughness, focus, obedience and hard work. He concludes by inviting Timothy to see himself in these metaphors: Reflect on what I am saying, for the Lord will give you insight into all these.

The gospel (verses 8–13)

Paul now moves to another topic, and a different style. He begins with a pithy saying: Remember Jesus Christ, raised from the dead, descended from David. This is my gospel... It’s about Jesus, summarised here by His resurrection and His role as Messiah in the line of

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David.

Paul sometimes gave more prominence to the crucifixion, but as he sat on death row, the resurrection might well grow in importance. And Jesus’ Davidic role may be what got Paul into the most legal trouble: he was proclaiming that Christ was king.

It is the gospel for which I am suffering even to the point of being chained like a criminal. But ironically, God’s word is not chained. The work is still being done, because Paul gave the message to reliable workers who could teach many more.

Therefore I endure everything for the sake of the elect, that they too may obtain the salvation that is in Christ Jesus, with eternal glory. Why should Timothy work hard and risk persecution? Earlier, Paul hinted at a reward. Here, he emphasises the results it has for other people—he wants others to become aware of and grasp the salvation that is (already) in Christ. That is something he can feel good about forever: the reward is intrinsic to the work.

Paul includes another summary of the message—this one has rhythm to make it easier to remember. Here is a trustworthy saying: If we died with Him (and we did), we will also live with Him; if we endure, we will also reign with Him (another hint of reward).

And what happens with the opposite extreme? If we disown Him, he will also disown us. If we are faithless, he will remain faithful, for he cannot disown Himself. In the first three pairs, we are like Christ. In the fourth, Paul breaks the parallelism: If there is any failure in the process, it is because *we* have rejected our Saviour. If we follow Him, we will get what we want: eternal glory. If we reject Him, we will also get what we want: He will let us leave. His desire for us continues; the question is, whether we will continue to desire Him.

Good work (verses 14–19)

In another change of style and topic, Paul begins to warn Timothy that some doctrinal discussions are a waste of time: Keep reminding them of these things—of the central truths of the gospel. Warn them before God against quarreling about words; it is of no value, and only ruins those who listen. What words were people arguing about? We do not know.

In contrast to fruitless arguments, Paul advises Timothy to do his best to present himself to God as one approved, a workman who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the word of truth. Timothy needs to work with the gospel correctly, with no regrets when he presents himself to God.

The context, in the verse before and the verse after, is not people who refuse to work, but people who use the truth in a crooked way. They distort it, argue about irrelevant concepts, or go on and on without ever getting anywhere. So Paul advises, if you don’t want to be embarrassed, then avoid godless chatter, because those who indulge in it will become more and

or the Lord

more ungodly. Don't waste your time with pointless discussions.

If we give them "equal time", their teaching will spread like gangrene. And then Paul gives a specific example: Among them are Hymenaeus and Philetus, who have wandered away from the truth. They say that the resurrection has already taken place, and they destroy the faith of some.

We are not sure how those two men got that idea. Maybe they took Paul's idea that we are raised with



Christ, to conclude that we already have *all* that God has to offer. That idea would not be very attractive to an apostle on death row! They probably thought their idea was the most important teaching in the church, but Paul says it was a waste of time, and it had caused some people to reject Christianity.

Even though some people lead others astray, nevertheless, God's solid foundation stands firm, sealed with this inscription: "The Lord knows those who are His," and, "Everyone who confesses the name of the

Lord must turn away from wickedness." The Greco-Roman world had many buildings with inscriptions.

If God's church had a foundation stone, what would be inscribed on it? Paul says it would have a promise, and a warning. God will be faithful to His people, and His people need to stay away from sin. If we want the results of righteousness, we need to do what is righteous. We need to be faithful to our commanding officer.

A noble instrument (verses 20–26)

Paul turns from the building, to objects inside the building: In a large house there are articles not only of gold and silver, but also of wood and clay; some are for noble purposes and some for ignoble. Some are fine dinnerware; others are good for scraping mud off your boots. Some are ornate decorations, and others are chamber pots.

But what is Paul's point in this analogy? If a man cleanses himself from the latter, he will be an instrument for noble purposes, made holy, useful to the Master and prepared to do any good work. There's a good way to live, and a bad way. If we want the results of righteousness, then we need to put wrong ways out of our lives. So Paul advises Timothy to flee the evil desires of youth, and pursue righteousness, faith, love and peace, along with those who call on the Lord out of a pure heart. All of us who follow Christ should love these virtues.

And then Paul returns for a third blast against fruitless disagreements: Don't have anything to do with foolish and stupid arguments, because you know they produce quarrels. Some people may try to divert your attention toward *their* favourite topic of disputation, but don't take the bait.

The Lord's servant must not quarrel; instead, he must be kind to everyone, able to teach, not resentful. Just teach the truth; don't get involved in personal attacks (which were common in the ancient world; there was intense competition for status and honour, often at the cost of insulting and tearing down possible competitors).

Paul explains how to deal with enemies: Those who oppose him he must gently instruct, in the hope that God will grant them repentance leading them to a knowledge of the truth, and that they will come to their senses and escape from the trap of the devil, who has taken them captive to do his will. They have a distorted view of reality, and they unwittingly serve the devil's purposes. But we do not condemn—we hope for the best, praying that God will eventually help them see the truth.

When personal resentment rises up within us, we need to respond not only with prayer for our opponent, but also prayer for ourselves, that we too might escape the trap of the devil. ■

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