

THE Plain Truth



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Your connection with God

Many think God is ‘over there’ and we are ‘over here’. They think God and man are not connected. But that’s a myth.

The truth is: God and man are connected. Indeed, they are inseparable. Man has no separate existence apart from him. We exist only in him.

This article explains our connection with God as he sees it in the *spiritual realm*. It goes beyond our physical, temporal existence.

You were in Christ before you were born

You are here by design, not by accident. You were *in* Christ before you were born, before the foundation of the world, before time began.¹ You were in *God’s heart and mind before he created you*. He knew you all along.² So your history is much longer than your physical existence on earth.

God created you for adoption into his family so you could participate in his abundant life. That’s the reason why you are here on planet earth. That’s your (and everyone’s) destiny.

You were in Christ when he was on earth

You were in Christ when he was on earth 2,000 years ago. You were in him when he was baptized, when he received the Holy Spirit and when his Father declared, “This is my beloved son in whom I am well pleased.”

You were in him when he was tempted in the wilderness for forty days. You were in him

when he preached the gospel, healed the sick, cast out demons and raised the dead. You were in him when he was falsely accused and condemned to death, when he pleaded with his Father, “let this cup pass from me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as you will.” You were in him when he was mocked, scourged, stripped naked and crucified on the cross, when he cried out, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” You were in him when he died on the cross.³ His death was your death.

That means Jesus knows what it means to be you—what it means to be hungry, weak, tempted, accused, ridiculed, persecuted and condemned. He knows everything that you go through in life because he is Immanuel (with you) in your life. Indeed, he knows you more intimately than you know yourself.

You were in Christ after his death and resurrection

You were in Christ when he rose from the grave and

by
**Dr. P.
Sellappan**

ascended to heaven. You are now seated with him at the right hand of God. That is how God sees you.

The risen Christ is *in* you today. He is with you (and in you) wherever you go, whoever you meet, whatever you do. He is with you in your fear, guilt, shame, confusion, sickness, suffering and death. He is with you in your good and bad times and in your joys and sorrows. *Indeed, he is with you every moment of your life whether you believe it or not, know it or not, feel it or not.*

You have always been in Christ

Jesus lived and died and rose in your place. He died your death (because of sin) and lives your life (because of his gift of righteousness to you). Several scriptures attest to this truth. For example:

Apostle Paul declared to the Greeks at Athens, “*For in him we live and move and have our being.*”⁴ This tells that we have always been in him.

Sharing his own conversion experience, he told the Galatian churches that God opened his eyes and *revealed his son in him* which gave him the zeal and motivation to go and preach Christ *in the Gentile nations*.⁵ By revelation, he discovered that the risen Christ had taken abode *in him*.

On another occasion he told the Colossian churches that “He [Christ] is before all things and *in him all things [including our life and our time] hold*

together.”⁶ Again he said, “...God has chosen to make known *in the Gentile nations* the glorious riches of this mystery, which is *Christ in you*, the hope of glory.”⁷

The truth is our life is *mystically* bound up in his such that we can never separate ourselves from him.⁸

Coming as the last Adam, Jesus *undid* the works of the first Adam and *recreated us in his image and likeness, holy and blameless*. He obeyed God *perfectly* and lived the *true* human life that the first Adam failed to live. He lived *vicariously* for us as us.

If we *try to separate* ourselves from him (which is impossible) or *live contrary to our true* life in Christ (which is possible) we will experience hell because that would be *contrary to reality*. Only *living in him and aligning our life to his* by his Spirit will produce the peace, joy and freedom that God had always intended for us. □



¹ Ephesians 1:4,11

² 1 Corinthians 13:13

³ 2 Corinthians 5:14

⁴ Acts 17:28

⁵ Galatians 1:16

⁶ Colossians 1:17

⁷ Colossians 1:27

⁸ Romans 8:38–39

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What our readers say:

Dear Readers,

We like to hear from you! We would greatly appreciate if could kindly give us some feedback on how the Plain Truth has benefitted or impacted you, even if it is only in a small way. Just email your comments to ptasiamy@gmail.com or sms/apps to 0192600962/ 0172559244. Your feedback is greatly appreciated. Many thanks.

You are sending the PLAIN TRUTH magazine free of charge. Surely it costs money to produce such a colourful and glossy magazine! How do you do that? Who pays for the printing and postage costs?

Ed: The PLAIN TRUTH (Asia) is more than 12 years old now. It is produced locally by a small group of dedicated people (all volunteers). We print about 15,000 copies each issue (4 issues per year) and distribute freely to all who request it within Malaysia and Singapore. It is financed entirely by local funds—partly from contributions received from readers like you and partly by Grace Communion International. Sure, it costs quite a bit of money to print and distribute, but God has always provided for it. Thank you for your prayers and support for this ministry. They are greatly appreciated.

The PLAIN TRUTH gives an in-depth understanding of the bible. It definitely helps me to grow spiritually as the different writers explain the mystery of God's plans and works.

Alfred Chin Hon Yin
Penanpang

The PLAIN TRUTH gives true insight into Christianity. It is the best spiritual magazine I have come across so far.

Anthony Ang
Singapore

Some teachings in the PLAIN TRUTH are provocative and it makes me think hard about my own beliefs. Even though I disagree with some of your 'truth', it does provide me with some insights and encourages me to seek the truth.

Donatus Justin
Keningau

Ed: The Bible exhorts us to grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ (2 Peter 3:16). That means we must be willing to admit errors

and embrace God's truth as he reveals it to us. The Plain Truth attempts to present the Gospel of Grace as accurately as possible but some readers may find our teaching somewhat radical. We trust the Holy Spirit to lead us to Christ who is the ultimate Truth.

The PLAIN TRUTH has taught me to trust in the Holy Scriptures. I thank all the authors and staff for your helpful and enriching messages. Thank you.

Pauline Malini Navaratnam
Malacca

When I encounter problems and stresses in my life, reading the articles in the PLAIN TRUTH gives me great strength and emotional support. It helps me deal with upheavals in my life with a positive attitude.

Subramaniam
Kuala Lumpur

Often, after a hard day's work, I am overwhelmed by the daily problems and stresses of life. However, reading the articles in the PLAIN TRUTH brings healing and releases my tension. Thank you for the problem-solving magazine.

Sally Sum
Port Kelang

The PLAIN TRUTH encourages me in so many ways. It especially works together with the Word of God. Thanks to all who labour to send this wonderful magazine. Keep up the good work and God bless you all.

Glory
Kuala Krai

Even as a decade-old Christian, your magazine is one of my spiritual foods. It widens my knowledge and uplifts me every time I read your magazine. God's truth surely sets us free. It is indeed my pleasure to sow into the ministry. Please keep sending the magazine. Thanks and God bless you all.

Christine Chaang
Petaling Jaya

Thank you very much for sending the PLAIN TRUTH magazine. I pray that more and more hearts in our nation will turn to Jesus Christ through the Gospel message

that you have been proclaiming ever so zealously. The world needs him. Enclosed is a small love gift. You are always in my prayers. God bless you all.

Eric B. R.
Subang Jaya

Thank you for the good job your team is doing. Keep going. Enclosed please find a small contribution of RM100 to your great magazine. God bless.

Naidu
Sungai Petani

I hereby enclose a cheque for RM500 being contribution to the PLAIN TRUTH ministry. May God continue to bless the hands that are doing.

Datin Sri Chung Geok Siew
Klang

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 3 or sent electronically to the bank account:

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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.

God with us

by
John McLean

Joy to the World! Philip Yancey tells the story of a young boy with artistic talent who lived in a Spanish village. On the wall of his house hung a painting of Jesus, who stood looking out of the frame with a very formal, severe, other-worldly expression on his tight face. A halo surrounded his head. He held a large staff in his hand, and a sheep lay benignly at his feet.

One day, while his father was in the fields, the boy took the painting off the wall and made some alterations to the picture. He turned the halo into a straw hat, he changed the tight-lipped stare into a friendly smile, enlarged the eyes, made the staff into a country walking stick and transformed the sheep into an energetic, frolicking puppy.

When the father returned home he was horrified. The boy was beaten for his sacrilege. Then he was shamed by being forced to march through the village with his desecrated painting while people looked on, their pious judgments and shocked condemnations tutting the air.

The Jesus of the young boy's painting was altogether too normal, too common, too approachable, too joyful a human being for the religious perceptions of the day.

Human beings have often wrestled with similar conceptions in thinking about God—all down through history. Surely God is entirely Other. Certainly not one of us. And... well, not common, and every day. And yet the Gospels present us with an entirely different picture of Jesus.

God as one of us

Celebrating the Christmas festival is designed to enlighten and inspire us through the most amazing miracle and mystery imaginable. God actually does become one of us! He takes on flesh and blood. He meets us where we are. He chooses to enter our world of time and space, of hunger, tiredness, and pain, of joy and sorrow. And he does so in the form of a tiny baby!

This is a most amazing thing for us to contemplate. The One by whom all things were created, the One who “is before all things, and in (whom) all things hold together,”¹ the One who sustains it all, the source of

life, chose to be dependent in many ways on a young woman. He chose to fully enter our world—and not at the seat of imperial grandeur and power, but at the outpost of empire, on the edge of Asia, to a family who knew what it was like to be refugees, in the most humble and human of circumstances. Born in a manger, because there was no room at the inn.

This is why theologian Karl Barth can write of “the obscene secularity” of the gospel. In Jesus, divinity was clothed with humanity. He was one of us—with all the messiness and commonality that entails. In Jesus, two things that don't otherwise go together

now are united—divinity and humanity. In becoming one of us, Jesus unites himself with us forever. This union with Christ is beyond our limited ability to adequately explain in the limitations of language, yet in the person of Jesus we get a glimpse. The good news is that it is real. There is no longer the separation of the physical (the secular) and the sacred (and religiously pious). In Jesus, the barriers have come down. “In Christ”, everything finds its meaning and purpose. All of life, not just the religious bits, is “in Christ”.

This is both intimately individual and personal, and entirely cosmological in its reach (see Ephesians 1 and Colossians 1). Jesus was “Immanuel—which means *God with us*.”² He gave visible expression to the invisible God. He came to show us the face of the Father. “He who has seen me has seen the Father.”³ *In Jesus, the Communion of Father, Son and Spirit is “earthed” among us.*

Jesus came to show God not as an abstract principle

or a remote theological idea. He was a person, a human being. One of us. With us, he identifies with our humanity—with our suffering, our hardship, our common, every day realities. He feels our loneliness, grief, sorrow, loss, hurt, rejection and pain. He feels and understands our joy, happiness, thrill and elation. He fully identifies with our lives, and does so in a way that shows us who and what God is really like. He does so in ways which give us, and all humanity, hope. He



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The irony of it all

So one atheist was Christmas shopping with another atheist. The mall was crowded, but people were jolly. The Yuletide music was blaring and all of a sudden Atheist #1 starts singing aloud to the song, “O come let us adore Him. O come let us adore Him. Christ the Lord.”

Atheist #2 is appalled. “How can you sing that stuff?” “Oh I don’t listen to the words. I just like the music,” he answers.

“Yeah, that’s what my fifteen year-old says when he listens to explicit rock lyrics, but I don’t believe him either.”

It’s hard to think of Christmas carols containing explicit lyrics, but it might seem that way to people who don’t believe in Christ. There is irony in an atheist singing about adoring Christ the Lord.

Biblical events show that God is not above a little irony. He blessed Sarah and Abraham with their son Isaac when Sarah was beyond childbearing years. A mere shepherd boy named David killed the giant Goliath. Joseph’s brothers relied on him for deliverance, even though they sold him into slavery. And perhaps the greatest irony of all was the birth of Jesus.

People were looking for a Messiah with a flaming sword. Even though Christ’s birth fulfilled numerous Old Testament prophecies concerning everything from his lineage to where he would be born, people did not recognize him. They were expecting someone strong

by
**Barbara
Dahlgren**

and powerful, not a helpless child. They were looking for a king, not a baby born in a manger. The irony of it all was that this baby in the manger was the King.

He was called Emmanuel which means God with us.¹ God became one of us. Miraculously, God became flesh and lived among us. He brought salvation to everyone—from the poorest shepherd to the richest Magi. John tells us about Christ becoming flesh in John 1:14 and goes on to say, “We have seen his glory.” But many did not see Christ’s glory. They could not see beyond him being a baby in a manger.

Much of our faith depends on what we see when we look in that manger. Some look and see a prophet or good, moral teacher. The atheist might just see a baby. The agnostic doesn’t know what he sees. What do we see when we look in the manger? Do we see the Son of God, Emmanuel, and the Savior of humanity?

I think God smiles when he hears an atheist sing, “O come let us adore Him.” In some ironic way the atheist is giving honor to the one he denies. On the other hand, Christians can be mindful and jubilant when they sing these explicit lyrics: “Joy to the world, the Lord is come!?” They are honoring the one who came to save even his enemies, and that might just be the most joyful irony of all. □

¹ Matthew 1:21–
23, Isaiah 7:14

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didn’t come into the world to condemn it, but to save it.⁴

The wonderful exchange

In love, God took the initiative and enters our world and takes us into himself. He does not deal with us at arm’s length, but up close and personal—with us, as one of us. In Jesus, God’s power is shown in the limitless nature of his self-giving, self-emptying love. In the process, he redeems our humanity, makes us his brothers and sisters, children of the Father, and includes us in the life of the Triune God. The one who “being in very nature God,⁵ didn’t think so much of himself that he had to cling to the advantages of that status no matter what. Not at all. When the time came, he took on the status of a slave, became *human*! Having become human, he stayed human. It was an incredibly humbling process. He didn’t claim special privileges. Instead, he lived a selfless, obedient life and then died a selfless obedient death—and the worst kind of death—that of crucifixion.”⁶

Here is the wonderful exchange that Christmas

contemplates, that God became like us that we might become like God. Christ places himself at the hands of sinful humanity and accepts death that we might be offered life; the source of life assumes temporal humanity to redeem the creation from futility.

After his death, resurrection and ascension, Jesus sent the Holy Spirit, the Comforter, to be with us. Not just alongside us, but within us. Jesus’ promise was that in him, we would be one—“I am in my Father, and you are in me, and I am in you.”⁷ This is the promise of Christmas—to share the life and love of God, made possible by God first coming among us and giving himself to us. That’s worth celebrating.

And that’s why the arrival of Jesus as a baby was announced by an angelic chorus. And why the angel said, “I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people.”⁸

God is with us. God is for us. Joy to the world, indeed □.

¹ Colossians
1:15–17
² Matthew 1:23
³ John 14:9
⁴ John 3:17
⁵ Philippians 2:6
⁶ Philippians
2:6–8
⁷ John 14:20
⁸ Luke 2:10

The best Christmas gift

It was billed the wedding of the year. The millionaire father had gone all out to make his first daughter's wedding a memorable event.

The who's who of the town were on the guest list, and the gift registries were sent to all guests with the invitations.

On the big day guests arrived in their hundreds with their gifts. The groom was neither rich, nor from a rich family. Despite the fact that the father of the bride was a rich man, the guests bought some very expensive gifts for the couple, no doubt to impress the father of the bride.

As the couple moved into their small flat, they started opening the gifts to see what they got and from whom. There was hardly enough space to store all the gifts. But there was one package the daughter particularly wanted to see. What did her rich father buy for her? After going through all the big stuff, she realized that none of these were from her father. But among the smaller parcels there was one wrapped in brown paper. On opening it, they realized it was an expensive leather-bound Bible. They opened the first page. It read: "To

our beloved daughter and son-in-law on your wedding day, From Mom and Dad. Matthew 6:31–33; 7:9–11."

She was deeply disappointed. How could her parents give her a Bible? The resentment remained for years. Eventually her father died. A few years later, on the anniversary of her father's death, she saw the Bible her parents had given her on her wedding day. She took it off the shelf where it had been left unopened all those years. She opened that first page and read those words again: "To our beloved daughter and son-in-law on your wedding day, From Mom and Dad. Matthew 6:31–33; 7:9–11."

by
**Takalani
Musekwa**

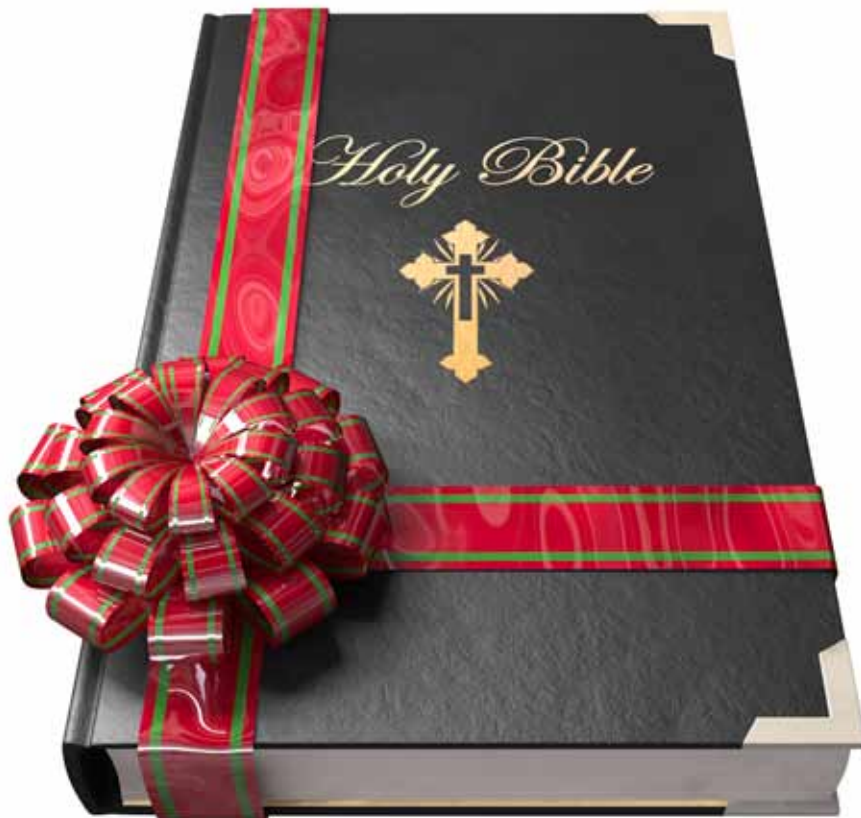
She decided to open the Bible to Matthew chapter 6 to read those verses. As she opened the page, there was a piece of paper stuck there. It was a cheque in her name from her father. It read: "Pay Portia Zulu (not her real name) or bearer the sum of One Million Rand only." Her eyes nearly popped out!

She then read the verses quoted: "So don't worry about these things saying 'What will we eat? What will we drink? What will we wear?' These things dominate the thoughts of unbelievers, but your heavenly Father already knows all your needs. Seek the Kingdom of God above all else and live righteously, and he will give

you everything you need."¹

Then she turned the page to read Matthew 7:9–11: "You parents—if your children ask for a loaf of bread, do you give them a stone instead? Or if they ask for a fish, do you give them a snake? Of course not! If you sinful people know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your heavenly Father give good gifts to those who ask him."

She started crying. How could she have misread her father like this? He loved her so much, yet she thought he didn't. What a tragedy!



A gift too wonderful

In a few days, the world will once again be celebrating Christmas. Many are already worrying about what gifts they should buy for their family and friends. Many are wondering what gifts they will receive from their loved ones. Sadly, few know of the Christmas gift they have already received! The reason they do not know about it is because the gift came as a "baby wrapped in pieces of cloth and lying in a feeding box."² Like Portia who thought brown paper and a Bible couldn't be worth

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Does forgiveness require blood?

In the context of the teaching on sacrifice, we are often asked: “Doesn’t the bible say that without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sins?”

Well that’s not exactly what it says. Let’s look at Hebrews 9:22: “*According to the law almost everything is purified with blood, and without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness.*”

First point to notice: “*According to the law.*” Many things that were introduced by the law only find their full and final meaning in Christ. The book of Hebrews is focussed on helping people who were totally invested in the message of the law, to see beyond the shadows and types of the law and realize its true meaning.

As such the sacrificial systems were only a type: God spoke to us in sacrificial language because that is what we could understand, but he brought that conversation to a final conclusion in the perfect sacrifice. For a God who, ‘does not require sacrifices and offerings’, the perfect sacrifice is the one that forever invalidates our sacrificial systems. He is the perfect sacrifice, because He is the first real sacrifice: a self-sacrifice, a self-giving of love. He is the perfect sacrifice because He subverts our perverted understanding of sacrifice.

If this law system worked, Jesus’ coming would have been unnecessary. Jesus, therefore, did not come to simply affirm the message of the law, but to turn it upside down ... to reveal the substance behind the shadows. He fulfils the law not by meeting its every requirement, but by bringing its shadows to an end.

The second point to notice is: “... *almost* everything is purified by the blood”. That little word ‘almost’ becomes very problematic if one thinks that

by
Andre Rabe

forgiveness is not possible without blood. That is also why the whole verse is often not quoted, so that the phrases ‘*according to the law*’ and ‘*almost everything*’ can be avoided.

The background to this verse is the Levitical sacrificial system. The amazing thing about this Levitical requirement for atoning sacrifices was that they did not always require blood!¹ If a person was too poor to afford the usual sacrifice, then a grain offering was accepted. God was not going to allow blood to stand between His desire to forgive and a person in need of forgiveness!

So then, even under the law, blood was not always required as a pre-requisite for forgiveness.

In the very chapter in which the perfect sacrifice of Jesus is discussed² we are again reminded that sacrifice and offerings was not required by God! *His blood was what we required, not what God required.*

And now His blood speaks of better things than the blood of Abel.³ The blood of all innocent victims, since Abel, called for vengeance, called for retributive justice. Unfortunately we have often reduced the message of the blood of Christ to speak the same message as Abel’s blood when we referred to it as the blood God required to enable Him to forgive sins. No! His blood has a better message—*His blood calls for forgiveness not vengeance!*

This is why *His blood purifies our conscience*—it communicates God’s absolute, unreserved forgiveness even while we were at enmity against Him. □

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¹ Leviticus 4:1, 6:7

² Hebrews 10

³ Hebrews 12:24

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anything, they are tragically ignorant of what God has given us in Jesus Christ. The New Living Translation puts it this way: “Thank God for his Son—a gift too wonderful for words!”³

You see, your parents may give you a wonderful gift this Christmas, but sadly, they have also given you sin. Yes, you will die! Before you blame your parents, please realize that they also got that from their parents, who also got it from their parents, who got it from our human ancestor Adam.

However, there is good news! Great News! The news was delivered by an angel to a group of shepherds about 2,000 years ago. He said to them: “I am bringing you good news that will be a great joy to all the people. Today your Saviour was born in the town of David. He is Christ, the Lord.”⁴ In the gospel of Matthew, we learn that God appeared to Joseph (Jesus’ earthly father) in a dream saying, “She [Mary] will give birth to a son, and

you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins.”⁵

Like Portia, don’t miss out on the joy of a wonderful gift. In Christ there is life. The birth of Christ was a precursor to his second coming. When he comes again, “He will remove all of their sorrows, and there will be no more death or sorrow or crying or pain. For the old world and its evils are gone forever.”⁶

Like the Wise Men of the East, be wise this Christmas. Open your Bible and discover the great news of the gift of God. Receive your gift this Christmas. You can also give this magazine as a Christmas gift. You can send for a FREE subscription for a loved one. It may be the greatest Christmas gift you have ever given. They may find Christ through it. Don’t be deceived by the wrapping! Merry Christmas! □

¹ Matthew 6:31–33

² Luke 2:12

³ 2 Corinthians 9:15

⁴ Luke 2:10

⁵ Matthew 1:21

⁶ Revelation 21:4

And the government shall be upon his shoulder

I fondly remember my dad as being a self-styled philosopher. He would often say, “there’s only one kind of government that really works, and that is a benevolent dictator!”

All of us listening would object fiercely. “There’s no such thing as a benevolent dictator, Dad. Look at Hitler, Stalin, Idi Amin, Mussolini, Fidel Castro. They all messed up.” Then Dad would mention Antonio de Oliveira Salazar of Portugal, who gradually became more and more powerful during his rule from 1932 until 1970.

And indeed, he seems to have been something of a benevolent dictator. He re-drafted Portugal’s systems along authoritarian lines, kept the country out of World War II, equipped the merchant navy and the national airline and improved rural education. Most interestingly, he lived in frugal simplicity. He was one of the few in history who ruled unselfishly.

People have been experimenting with various forms of government since the dawn of history.

Back in the time of ancient Israel, God spelled out to his chosen people exactly how the nation should be governed. Moses was in charge, carrying God’s instruction directly to the people. This was theocracy, God’s perfect way of governing. But the people were not satisfied with an invisible God. They began to look enviously at the nations around them, wanting to have a king. These gentile kings lived in luxury and power, and were all but worshipped by their subjects. Why did the Israelites desire a king? Why did they eventually even demand a king? Perhaps the temple prostitutes were a magnetic attraction, much like internet porn today. Things got worse and worse and King Manasseh of Judah seems to have hit bottom as far as idolatry is concerned. “He burned his own son as a sacrificial offering. He practised black magic and fortune telling. He held séances, and consulted spirits from the underworld.”¹

As we say, the rest is history—the sad saga of failure upon failure occupies a fair section of the Bible. Sometimes a king would return to keeping God’s laws, and the land would prosper for a while. But first the northern kingdom of Israel and later the kingdom of

by
Hilary Jacobs

Judah succumbed to inevitable failure. Human kings were not the answer.

In recent times we have tried communism, socialism, capitalism, democracy and some variations on these.

Winston Churchill, Prime Minister of Great Britain during World War II, was known for his witty remarks. He said, “democracy is the worst form of government except for all the others that have been tried,” and, “the inherent vice of capitalism is the unequal sharing of blessings; the inherent virtue of socialism is the equal sharing of miseries.”

The prophet Jeremiah pinpointed the problem. “The heart is deceitful above all things, and beyond cure. Who can understand it?”²

About three hundred years before Jeremiah’s time, God had warned Israel about the dangers of being ruled by a king. In 1 Samuel 11–18 we read of a whole

list of problems a king would create. “He will take the best of your fields and vineyards and olive groves and give them to his attendants. He will take a tenth of your grain and vintage and give it to his officials and attendants.” Does any of this sound familiar? Why do greed and self-interest seem to rise to the surface and spill out in corruption and violence? Jeremiah had the answer!

But the prophet Isaiah had the solution.

“For unto us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful, Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Of the increase of his government and peace there will be no end. He will reign on David’s throne and over his kingdom, establishing and upholding it with justice and righteousness from that time on and forever. The zeal of the Lord Almighty will accomplish this.”³

My dad never understood who Jesus was. He lived through two world wars, and witnessed a great deal of suffering with no apparent solution.

But he wasn’t altogether wrong about the benevolent dictator. One day I will be able to say to him, “Dad, you were right! You just had no idea who the benevolent dictator was going to be.” □



¹ 2 Kings 21:6

² Jeremiah 17:9

³ Isaiah 9:6–7

Slay them with love

One of the most difficult tasks for us is to continue to love someone who is constantly critical of us or hates our guts. More often than not the one who hurts us most is the one we know well, trust and even love.

How do we deal with this situation? What should be our reaction to such situation? Should we get angry and retaliate with counter criticism, mudslinging and hate? Let me relate to you a story I read that inspired me a great deal when I was faced with a similar situation.

Ice cream for the soul

A story related by a mother about her son. "Last week I took my children to a restaurant. My six-year old son asked if he could say, grace. As we bowed our heads he prayed aloud, 'God is good. God is great. Thank you for the food, and I would even thank you more if mom gets us ice cream for dessert. Amen!'

Along with the laughter from the other customers nearby I heard a woman remark, 'That's what's wrong with this country. Kids today don't even know how to pray. Asking God for ice-cream! Why, I never...'

Hearing this, my son burst into tears and asked me, 'Did I do it wrong? Is God mad at

me?' As I held him and assured him that he had done a terrific job and God was certainly not mad at him, an elderly gentleman approached the table. He winked at my son and said, 'I happen to know that God thought that was a great prayer.'

'Really?' my son asked, 'Cross my heart.' Then in a theatrical whisper man added (indicating the woman whose remark had started this whole thing), 'Too bad she never asks God for ice cream. A little ice cream is good for the soul some times.'

Naturally, I bought my kids ice cream at the end of the meal. My son stared at his for a moment and then did something I will remember the rest of my life. He picked up his sundae and without a word walked over and placed it in front of the woman. With a big smile he told her, "Here, this is for you. Ice cream is good for the

by
Joe D'Costa

soul some times and my soul is good already."

Jesus did it too

Jesus Christ was arrested at the culmination of his three and a half year ministry. During his ministry he was slandered, ridiculed and accused of various things. Many a time the leaders tried to kill him but he escaped or they were too many people around for his enemies to do anything to him. Eventually when he was arrested, they scourged him, crowned him with thorns and eventually crucified him.

What were his final words before he died? Were they words of criticism, anger or contempt? No! Instead, they were words of love, an outgoing concern for his tormentors. He said, "Father forgive them for they do

not know what they are doing."¹

Jesus knew what would befall the people who stood nearby, the same people who said that they should release Barabbas and crucify him. Yet, he hoped that God would not punish them.

So should we

What should be our reaction as Christians? The answer is obvious. Let us learn to return hate with love, criticism with praise, bitterness with sweetness. An eye for an eye and a tooth for a

tooth will make everyone eyeless and toothless.

"Here's what I propose: 'Don't hit back at all. If someone strikes you, stand there and take it. If someone drags you into court and sues for the shirt off your back, gift-wrap your best coat and make a present of it. And if someone takes unfair advantage of you, use the occasion to practice the servant life. No more tit-for-tat stuff. Live generously'. You're familiar with the old written law, 'Love your friend,' and its unwritten companion, 'Hate your enemy.' I'm challenging that. I'm telling you to love your enemies. Let them bring out the best in you, not the worst. When someone gives you a hard time, respond with the energies of prayer, for then you are working out of your true selves, your



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Good will to all men?

On the day Jesus was born, a choir of angels sang: “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men on whom his favour rests.”¹

Or something like that. The original language is a bit cryptic and it is difficult to translate it. Consequently there are many variations of this angelic hymn of praise.

The traditional rendering—the one you’ll find in the carols and Christmas cards—is “Peace on earth, Good will to men.” Whatever version you settle on, one idea comes across clearly. God “favours” us—he has “good will” toward us. Let’s think about that for a moment.

Earlier in my ministerial career I was privileged to work in Southeast Asia. My congregation was mainly young Chinese, whose previous experience with religion had been very different from my own. Most had come from a mixture of Buddhism mixed with ancestor worship and paganism. These dedicated young people had no difficulty understanding that God had to be obeyed, but the idea that God actually loved them was harder for them to grasp. When I visited the temples where they had once worshiped, I began to see why.

Although there were many gods, none of them seemed to be showing much goodwill toward humanity. Instead, they seemed to be the very opposite of what their names implied. The natural proclivity of the rain god was a drought, and in order for it to rain, he had to be persuaded with offerings and incantations. The same approach was needed to get a good harvest, or a healthy baby. From the look on the face of the Goddess of Mercy it was obvious that you did not want to catch her on a bad day.

The relationship people built with these gods was defensive. They assumed that the default mode of these “deities” was to withhold their blessings. You had to buy their favour with gifts or burnt offering or special temple money (that you had to buy with real money). So it was not surprising that members of my congregation were interested in what they had to do in order to win



by
John Halford

the favour and stay on the right side of the God of the Bible. Legalism came naturally to them.

Thankfully, most of us who have grown up in the Western tradition don’t have that problem.

Or do we?

Our relationship with God, although perhaps more sophisticated than burning incense or offering special money, often has the nature of a transaction. We believe God is displeased with us, and that Jesus came to be a sacrifice for our sins and to show us how to live to keep him from getting displeased with us again. If we accept Jesus, and then shape up to his example, he will put in a good word for us. Even then, it will be touch and go, since we have such a knack for falling short of perfection. And, of course, people who don’t accept him before they die have no hope at all. But is this so different from the temple worshippers who assume that the natural mode of their gods is to be angry, or at best indifferent to us?

Jesus did not come just to throw some wannabe good guys a lifeline. He came because God—Father, Son and Holy Spirit—love us and want us. Far from wanting something from us, God put everything on the line to redeem us and make us new. Surely there can be no more sincere a demonstration of God’s positive feelings towards us than the birth, life, death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus.

As Paul wrote in his epistle to the Romans, “We can understand someone dying for a person worth dying for, and we can understand how someone good and noble could inspire us to selfless sacrifice. But God put his love on the line for us by offering his Son in sacrificial death while we were of no use whatever to him.”²

The gospel is not just good news. It is better news than we could have possibly imagined. ■

¹ Luke 2:14

² Romans 5:7–8

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God created selves. This is what God does. He gives his best—the sun to warm and the rain to nourish—to everyone, regardless; the good and bad, the nice and nasty. If all you do is love the lovable, do you expect a bonus? Anybody can do that. If you simply say hello to those who greet you, do you expect a medal? Any run-of-the-mill sinner does that. In a word, what I’m saying is, ‘Grow up’. You’re kingdom subjects. Now live like it. Live out your God created identity. Live generously and graciously toward others, the way God lives toward you.”²

¹ Luke 23:34

² Matthew 5:38–44

³ John 15:20

Choose love, not hate

Jesus warned us, “Remember the word that I said to you, a servant is not greater than his master. If they persecuted Me, they will also persecute you. If they kept My word, they will keep you also.”³

You have a choice. Would you choose to love or hate. Would you choose to return hate and criticism with love? If we are followers of Christ the choice is clear. What will we choose? Let today be the starting point of a new and different life—a life of love at all cost. ■

You are a

The Greek word for *adoption* is *huiothesia* (pronounced *hwee-oth-es-ee'-ah*). It means *adoption as a son into the divine family of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit*.

God created humanity for adoption

Long before he created the universe, God planned to create *beings like him* and *adopt them into his family*.¹ He was thrilled at the idea of sharing life with billions of beings like himself, each with their own unique and distinct personality. This was the reason why he created humanity—why we are here on planet Earth. Humanity was the focus/object of his love.

So, to adopt us into his family, he *created us in his image and likeness*.² Wow! We have been adopted into the most joyful, creative, powerful, wealthiest and wisest family. He has raised our status from a mundane and mediocre existence to his glorious and dynamic life.

Apostle Paul was so overwhelmed with this thought that he exclaimed, “Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, *who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ. For he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight. In love he predestined us for adoption to sonship through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will—to the praise of his glorious grace, which he has freely given us in the One he loves. In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God’s grace that he lavished on us. With all wisdom and understanding, he made known to us the mystery of his will according to his good pleasure, which he purposed in Christ, to be put into effect when the times reach their fulfilment—to bring unity to all things in heaven and on earth under Christ.*”³

Read that passage *again* and ponder what God had planned for you before you were born, before the beginning of time. This shows how much he is interested in you and values you.

Yes, God created you so you might participate in his abundant life. He desires for you to experience his kind of life—his joy, peace, freedom, excitement, creativity, passion, friendship and adventure. And he *freely* offers it to you because you are his dearly loved son (daughter).

Before we delve into God’s adoption plan, let’s first clear some common misconceptions—errors—why God created us and why Jesus came to the earth.

Common misconceptions

1. God created humanity because he needed workers to assist him (to run the universe or rule over his angels). No, God is *almighty* and he doesn’t need our assistance to manage his business (even though we do *serve* him).
2. He created us because he needed people to



by
**Dr. P.
Sellappan**

worship him so he could feel good about himself. No, he doesn’t need our worship to satisfy some lack in his life (even though we do *worship* him).

3. He created us to test us whether we could keep his laws (e.g. the Ten Commandments) perfectly. No, he didn’t create us to test us on law keeping (or perfect his judging skills).
4. *He sent Jesus to purchase/redeem us from the devil*



*after we fell. No, the devil never owned us. We have always been God’s property as the Psalmist plainly tells us, “The earth is the LORD’s, and everything in it, the world, and all who live in it.”*⁴

5. He sent Jesus to *pay the penalty of our sin* so we could be saved (although it certainly does include that). No, sin was *not* the *main* reason why he came. *His primary mission was to unite*

adopted!

us to God and adopt us into his family. Adoption was the reason why he came to the earth. But in the process, he also dealt with our sin because adoption *requires* that we be holy and blameless.

God is *all-sufficient*. He doesn't need us nor does he need anything from us. He created us because he *desired* us, not because he lacked something. God is

our lives with them. Why? It's because we cannot relate to them in any meaningful or intelligent way. We cannot share our innermost feelings, thoughts, desires and plans with them as they cannot fully understand us.

God adopts us because we are his kind. He created us in his image and likeness. We resemble him. We bear his blueprint, his DNA. Let's convince ourselves by looking at a few scriptures:

"We are his [God's] *offspring*."⁵

"...Look to the Rock [Jesus Christ] from which you were cut and to the quarry from which you were hewn..."⁶

"...you are gods [Elohim]; you are all sons of the Most High."⁷

"...I have said you are gods [Theoi]."⁸

"What is mankind that you are mindful of them, a son of man that you care for him? You made them a little [while] lower than God [not angels]; you crowned them with glory and honor and put everything under their feet."⁹

Sin hijacked God's adoption plan

God is holy and righteous. So to fit into his family, we too must be holy and righteous. Otherwise, it will be like adopting militants, criminals, robbers and cheats into his family. That will be a disaster!

Humanity sinned. Sin estranged our relationship with God (and with one another). It blurred our vision. We lost knowledge of who God is, and who we are in Christ (children of God). It robbed us of the good life that he intended for us. It reduced us to a low quality life—a life filled with fear, tension confusion, anxiety, sadness and depression.

That's what sin produces. It produces *self-centred* living—competing, striving, stealing, deceiving, boasting, hating and killing. God's life, on the other hand, is *other-centred*—loving, giving, sharing and valuing others. And these two lifestyles—God's and ours—are diametrically opposite. They are totally incompatible.

God is holy and righteous, but we are not. Sin and righteousness *cannot* coexist in his family. That means we must be holy and

righteous to enter his family. But that is impossible! We can never make ourselves holy and righteous, even in a million years. Many have tried (and continue to try) but in vain. That's why we need Jesus. Only Jesus can make us holy and righteous.

Jesus restored God's adoption plan

Jesus came and destroyed the sin that stood between

a *giving* God. He wants to share his life with us so that we might experience his kind of life (like a married couple producing children and sharing their life and possessions with them).

Adoption is of the same kind

We would be crazy to adopt creatures of a different species (like cow or monkey) into our family and share



us and God. He became sin for us.¹⁰ He took our sin into himself and died on the cross. As our *human representative*, he died *humanity's death*. He was buried, but rose on the third day. He is *alive* today. As our human representative, *he raised humanity to life*. That is, in his death, he destroyed our old self, and in his resurrection, he *recreated* us holy and righteous. *He remade us brand new*. That's what God believes about our life, whether we believe it or not, know it or not, feel it or not.

*The risen Jesus shares his life, holiness and righteousness with us. He is our righteousness.*¹¹ That is how we become holy and righteous. And *because we are holy and righteous and have Christ's mind, God can now adopt us into his family*. Indeed, he sent his *Spirit of adoption* to include us in his life. With his Spirit inside us, we now have the privilege to call God Abba Father.¹² The Spirit helps us to build an *intimate* relationship with God.

Adoption of the destitute

We don't hear rich and successful people offering their children for adoption. Rather, they adopt other peoples' children—kids who are homeless, poor, weak, hungry, orphans.

Like these destitute kids, we were at one time *spiritually destitute*. We were blind, confused, depraved and helpless. We were without God, given to all sorts of sinful passions. Paul describes our former condition thus:

"...you were *dead* in your transgressions and sins, in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient. All of us also lived among them at one time, *gratifying the cravings of our flesh and following its desires and thoughts*. Like the rest, *we were by nature deserving of wrath*."¹³

"...you were at that time separate from Christ, *excluded* from the commonwealth of Israel, and *strangers* to the covenants of promise, *having no hope and without God* in the world."¹⁴

God sent his son Jesus to rescue us from our pitiful condition. Jesus assured us: "*I will not leave you as orphans...*"¹⁵ Indeed, he has come and is present with us today.

Paul talks about God's love thus:

"...because of his great love for us, *God, who is rich in mercy made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions—it is by grace you have been saved*. And *God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus*, in order that in the coming ages *he might show the incomparable riches of his grace, expressed in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus*."¹⁶

"...now in Christ Jesus *you who once were far away have been brought near* by the blood of Christ."¹⁷

God sent his Holy Spirit

God did everything that needed to be done so we could be adopted. And he has sent us his *Spirit of adoption* to draw us into his family.

Long ago, Prophet Joel prophesied, "...it shall come to pass afterward, *that I will pour out my spirit upon all flesh*; and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your old men shall dream dreams, your young men shall see visions."¹⁸

Apostle Peter, quoting Joel, tells us: "In the last days, God says, *I will pour out my Spirit on all people*. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your young men will see visions, your old men will dream dreams."¹⁹

[Note that the term *all* in the above scriptures is used in an *objective* sense. When Jesus was baptised, the Holy Spirit descended upon him like a dove. As a human representative, he received the Holy Spirit on behalf of *all* humanity. But to *subjectively* experience the new life in Christ, we must individually *receive* the Holy Spirit.]

This prophecy was fulfilled on the Day of Pentecost in AD 31. God poured out his Holy Spirit upon the believers.²⁰ About 120 received his gift of adoption. Then another 3,000 received. Since then the Holy Spirit has been actively pursuing and drawing people to his family.

The Holy Spirit is the *Spirit of fellowship*. The Spirit empowers us to *commune* with God and develop an *intimate relationship* with him. Paul writes about this intimacy thus:

"For you did not receive the spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received the *Spirit of adoption as sons*, by whom we cry, "*Abba! Father!*"²¹

"And because ye are sons, *God hath sent forth the Spirit of his Son into your hearts, crying, Abba, Father.*"²²

Adoption guarantees our inheritance

Through his life, death and resurrection, *Jesus has united us with God permanently and eternally*. The Father has given *all things* to his son Jesus.²³ And *Jesus shares all things with us*. As *God's adopted children, we share in Jesus' relationship with his Father. He has made us heirs and co-heirs with Christ and has given us all the rights and privileges to participate in his divine life*.²⁴ In Christ, *we inherit all things*. He *himself* is our true inheritance. And his Holy Spirit *guarantees and seals* our inheritance.²⁵

God loves us *infinitely and unconditionally*. *He loves us as much as he loves his son Jesus*. He loves everyone—believers and unbelievers—the *same*. His love doesn't depend on how good we have been or how many good things we have done. *He loves us because he is love. That is his nature and character. Love means sharing everything, withholding nothing*. That is how much he loves us.

Let's live our adopted lives!

For too long, we have been duped into believing a false god(s) and a false self (identity). We have been taught to believe that our religious works could save us and grant us a good life, now and in the future.

The *true God* and *our true selves* are vastly different from what we have been taught to believe. Discovering the true God and our true selves will free us to live the abundant life that Jesus promised us.²⁶ It is time that we *woke up* and discover our true God and our true selves, and revel in his glorious purpose for us.

The Good News of God's adoption of humanity into his family is going out everywhere so that all may hear, believe, receive and participate in his life. Thanks to the work of the Holy Spirit. Millions are hearing and discovering their true selves and enjoying their new life in Christ. They are living their heavenly life on earth now. Why not join them? □

¹ Ephesians 1:4–6

² Genesis 1:26

³ Ephesians 1:3–10

⁴ Psalms 24:1

⁵ Acts 17:28

⁶ Isaiah 51:1

⁷ Psalms 82:6

⁸ John 10:34

⁹ Psalms 8:4–6, Hebrews 2:6–8

¹⁰ 2 Corinthians 5:21

¹¹ 1 Corinthians 1:30

¹² Romans 8:14–16, Galatians 4:4–6

¹³ Ephesians 2:1–3

¹⁴ Ephesians 2:12

¹⁵ John 14:18

¹⁶ Ephesians 2:4–7

¹⁷ Ephesians 2:13

¹⁸ Joel 2:28

¹⁹ Acts 2:17

²⁰ Acts 2:1–4

²¹ Romans 8:15

²² Galatians 4:6

²³ John 3:35, Matthew 28:18

²⁴ 2 Peter 1:3–4

²⁵ Ephesians 1:13–14, 2 Corinthians 1:22

²⁶ John 10:10

Redeemed and sanctified

Scripture uses some words that may be unfamiliar to us. But there is meaning in all Scripture, even in those strange-sounding words. Let's look at the terms "redeemed" and "sanctified" to see what they mean and how they apply to you and me.

Ancient Israel was redeemed

"Redeem" means "to recover ownership by paying a specified sum", or more simply, "to be freed." We see the word first applied to the Israelites when they were slaves under Egyptian captivity. The Lord instructed Moses to tell the Israelites He would deliver them from captivity and make them His own people. "Therefore, say to the Israelites: 'I am the Lord, and I will bring you out from under the yoke of the Egyptians. I will free you from being slaves to them, and I will *redeem* you with an outstretched arm and with mighty acts of judgment. I will take you as my own people, and I will be your God...'"¹

The Lord redeemed Israel in a physical sense, freeing them from slavery and leading them to a bountiful land—not because they deserved it, but because of His grace. As they lived in the Promised Land, they experienced abundant blessings when they obeyed His laws, but suffered difficulties when they turned away from Him to follow their own ways.

Christians are redeemed

The Lord has redeemed *us* in a far greater way. As Christians we are not burdened by trying to keep numerous physical Old Testament laws and rituals. "Christ *redeemed* us from the curse of the law by



by
Paul Hailey

becoming a curse for us, for it is written: 'Cursed is everyone who is hung on a tree.'"²

We have been redeemed—brought into God's own spiritual family. "But when the time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under law, to *redeem* those under law, that we might receive the full rights of sons."³ Our redemption is spiritual and eternal. "...Jesus Christ, who gave himself for us to *redeem* us from all wickedness and to purify for himself a people that are his very own, eager to do what is good."⁴ What a magnificent gift that is!



Ancient Israel was sanctified

To be sanctified means "to be set apart or separated unto God." God gave Israel special laws and rituals to set them apart, to make them distinct and different from other nations as His special people. They were to observe His laws as an example to other nations. This was so vitally important that God commanded them to observe the weekly Sabbath as a reminder the Lord had sanctified them."⁵

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Antihistamine

One of the scariest events in my life was when we offered to look after a pet bird, a cockatiel or a budgie for a friend. My eldest daughter was less than a year old at the time.

Even though this occurred more than 34 years ago, I can still see the scene as I walked into the lounge, seeing her sitting on the floor with a happy face, but blown up to look like some icons that adorn some homes.

There are many people whose lives are at risk from a bee sting, or even peanuts. Some can become physically ill if they eat a pizza, or drink too much cows' milk. Yet others must avoid all wheat products. All wheat products? Are you kidding!? We call bread 'the stuff of life'. The wheat family has sustained most of animal and human life on this planet from the beginning. So much so, that when Jesus calls himself 'the bread of life', that has been one of the easiest metaphors to understand in all ages. Methuselah would have grasped it just as easily as a child in preschool today.

Yet the stuff of life can result in a lot of misery for some and even threaten their lives. Somewhere, we took a really serious wrong turn, and in the process we seem to have lost our way.

Spiritual allergies

But, believe it or not, there is a far more serious allergy which we may be unaware of.

Have you noticed how some Christians will react to the word 'works'? It is as if their intellectual arteries constrict and their brains freeze so that every thought they think becomes a stutter.

The reason for this is that for far too many Jesus' life ended at Calvary on the cross. Worse, they collapse the period between Jesus' birth and death into a ritualistic fulfilment of the Old Covenant and the Law.

The fact though, is that Calvary, for us, is not the end, but a beginning. Of course, even for Jesus it was not the end, but simply a turning point in his ministry to mankind. Some Christian leaders and teachers have recognised the problem that too many have become stuck, like a car in deep sticky mud, in a gospel which is completely focused on salvation, and ends when one has been saved. There is nothing to follow, other than a bunch of fuzzy ideas about 'the life in Christ' (which consists of 'worship' which has been reduced down to listening to and participating in Gospel music, and reading Christian books), and going to heaven after one dies without having any idea what one would be doing for all eternity in heaven.

Now, please don't misunderstand me. I am not against Gospel music. I am not campaigning against Christian books or against participating in worship at church.

Salvation, for us, is not an end. It is a beginning—even for God. Yes! It is the beginning of a new life for

by
Elmar Roberg

us, and a new relationship with us, for God!

It was probably because of his intense interest in true science and his deep regard for the founding fathers of our faith that Thomas F Torrance developed a passion to search for a better understanding of who God is. In the process, he discovered the extent to which Greek—pagan dualism—had infected Church teachings, not least regarding the nature of God. That there is no separation between the being of God, the I AM, and what God does. Like light, which at the same time is a particle and a wave, so God is at the same time one Being in three persons and love. Every time we call God 'he,' we are acknowledging His being, and whenever we say 'God is love' we are acknowledging what he does.

It was the great work of Athanasius, a 4th century deacon that culminated in the Council of Nicaea and the formulation of the Nicene Creed. Athanasius opposed the prevailing teaching of much of the church known as 'Arianism', namely that Jesus was a created being who was not always God. The Nicene Creed has become the single most important and unifying statement of faith for the whole Christian Church for the last 1,700 years.

Amazingly, science has shown us that pure white light is made up of a perfect combining of pure red light, pure green light, and pure blue light. And so also in nature, in white light these three are one. And what's more, good science was able to discover and confirm that the speed of light was one reliable constant in the universe.

Contracts and Covenants

Following on his brother Thomas, James B Torrance further clarified our understanding of covenants when he showed the difference between contract and covenant. Sadly, the Latin Bible, which was more influential in church teaching than even the King James Version, compounded the problem by using the Latin word for 'contract'. *A contract has conditions. A contract is only fulfilled when all conditions have been met.*

A covenant on the other hand, has no conditions. It does, however, have obligations. Every person who intends to get married (enter into the Biblical marriage covenant) knows that life cannot be the same once the words 'I do' have been expressed and accepted.

Participation is foundational to a covenant. A contract can involve independent execution, but a covenant requires joint action by both parties to be successful.

And so it is with the New Covenant that has been written in Jesus blood. When we die with him, we are also resurrected with him as new persons.

What's more, these new persons have ascended with Jesus into the heavens and are seated with him, and in him, at the right hand of God.¹

Why? For our benefit? No, not really. The benefit

for the soul

that each of us receives is simply contingent on God's purpose which is to reconcile the whole of creation to himself (Oops! There is another allergic reaction—am I suggesting Universalism? No way! But that is another story for another day).

Yes, there is nothing we can do to earn God's love expressed in his saving grace, which we call 'salvation.' Paul emphasises this in Ephesians 2:8–10 and many other places.

Everything we have done prior to salvation, intentionally or not, has made the necessity of God's unmerited pardon essential!

But once we have accepted that pardon, once we have allowed ourselves to be included in Jesus' birth, life, brutal torture and death on the cross, he has taken us up and incorporated us into his resurrection and (for us) new life in him and with him.

Led by the Spirit

Now, we can no longer stand by and observe. Now, the Spirit leads us to participate in the Work of Jesus to complete the 'project' or 'quest' he set out on from the foundation of the world. It is living evidence of the incarnation—God becoming man in Jesus—that God

¹ Ephesians 2:6,
Colossians 3:1

not only invites us, but earnestly wishes and desires for us to participate with him in what he is doing. Sometimes, that can be very, very hard work, even to the extent of enduring massive and long persecution by people and groups who think they are pleasing him.

Allergies are caused when the body becomes confused about what is good and acceptable as opposed to what is harmful and to be rejected.

Fortunately, the cure can be fast and effective.

I don't remember what we did when my daughter blew up like a balloon. Whatever it was, she was quickly restored again and there was no lasting effect as a result of the experience.

The most amazing thing was that she was completely oblivious of what was happening to her during this whole episode.

The Bible reassures us that the one true God has been intimately involved in our lives even whilst we have been completely unaware of this. And when he shines his pure white light into our lives, everything changes in an instant. We can never ever be the same again. □

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Christians are sanctified

We too are set apart unto God to be examples for the rest of the world, by observing spiritual laws (summed up by love) rather than physical laws. "...we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all."⁶ By accepting Jesus as Lord and Savior we have been permanently set apart for holy use, for His honor and glory.

We are not saved by good works. However, Jesus expects us to do good deeds to glorify God. "In the same way, let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven."⁷ It is reassuring to know that God prepares the way for each of us, leading us to opportunities to do good works based on our personal abilities and opportunities.⁸ Wherever we live and whatever our abilities or limitations, God provides ways for you and me to help or encourage others, including tactfully spreading the good news of salvation through Jesus Christ.

The word "sanctification" also refers to the lifelong process of growing in obedience to the Word of God. The Holy Spirit prompts us to become more like Jesus. Our role is to learn His will through study, worshipping and sharing with other Christians, struggling to resist sin, and seeking righteousness.

God meant it when He (They) said "Let us make

man in our image, in our likeness..." God's "image" is believed to refer not to shape or form, but to perfect character. To be made into God's image is much more than having our sins forgiven and being saved from death. The words "redeemed" and "sanctified" help us understand God's greater purpose. They describe a loving God working with us and in us, bringing us into an eternal loving relationship with Him.

"And we, who with unveiled faces all reflect the Lord's glory, are being transformed into his likeness with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit."⁹ Some day our transformation will be complete and permanent.

"How great is the love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are! The reason the world does not know us is that it did not know him. Dear friends, now we are children of God, and what we will be has not yet been made known. But we know that when he appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is."¹⁰

Praise God! □

¹ Exodus 6:6–7

² Galatians 3:13

³ Galatians 4:4–5

⁴ Titus 2:13, 14

⁵ Exodus 31:13

⁶ Hebrews 10:10

⁷ Matthew 5:16

⁸ Ephesians 2:10

⁹ 2 Corinthians
3:18

¹⁰ 1 John 3:1–2

Take time to think

by
Gordon Green

I've never considered myself to be mechanically minded. Oh, I've wired plugs and changed the oil in my car a few times but whenever it came to more complicated repairs—like fixing toys, the toilet or the swimming pool—I quickly called in the experts. But that changed about fifteen years ago when one day I watched my father-in-law repair his lawnmower. I said to him "Wow, you are so good at fixing things. I've never been able to fix those kinds of things or do anything like that." In his usual forthright manner, he shot back, "That's because you don't take the time."

His words changed my life.

Now, whenever I encounter a problem—whether it is my car or my lawnmower, I try to take the time to think about it and do my best to resolve it. It usually works! But over the years I have learnt that this approach is not only applicable to repairing toilets and lawnmowers! Too often we do not take the time to solve many of life's problems.

While writing this article I found myself singing a popular '60's song by Percy Sledge called "Take time to know her". It's about a young man who can't wait to get married to his girlfriend and does not listen to his mother's advice: "Son, take time to know her. It's not an overnight thing. Take time to know her. Please, don't rush into this thing." But he doesn't listen to her and gets married. Then he "came home a little early one night...." No prizes for guessing what happened!

Can thinking be working?

Ravi Zacharias wrote; "One of the tragic casualties of our age has been that of the contemplative life—a life that thinks, thinks things through.... A person sitting at his desk and staring out of the window would never be assumed to be working. No! Thinking is not equated with work. Yet, had Newton under his tree, or Archimedes in his bathtub bought into that prejudice, some natural laws would still be up in the air, or buried under an immovable rock."

But this is not new advice! Once again King Solomon digs deep into his gold mine of wisdom and shares his riches with us. For example, in Proverbs 14:15 he teaches us that "wise people think carefully about everything." He also advises, "The plans of hard-working people earn a profit, but those who act too

quickly become poor."¹ Solomon even instructs us to stop what we are doing, bend down and "consider the ways" of the tiny, hardworking ant.² The word 'consider' means to continually turn something over in your mind and in so doing you begin to understand. It was used of ancient astronomers to describe what they did to seek an understanding of the universe. They would lie on their backs in a field all night and "consider" the heavens as it unfolded before them in thousands of small dots of light.

Nothing ranks higher for mental discipline than regular study of God's Word, but too often we read the

Bible no differently from the way we read the sports page, the comic strips, or the classifieds. Have you given up reading the Bible because you find it boring, irrelevant or too difficult to understand? Do you rush through your Bible study so that you can get "more important" things done? There is a better way—apply it, and you will never be the same again:

Let it melt in your mouth

The great English preacher Charles Spurgeon wrote; "Fix your thoughts upon some text of Scripture before you leave your bedroom in the morning—it will sweeten your meditation all the day. Always look God in the face before you see the face of anyone else. Lock up your heart in the morning and hand the key to God and keep the world out of your heart. Take a text and lay it on your tongue like a wafer made with honey and let it melt in your mouth all day. If you do this, and meditate upon it, you will be surprised to notice how the various events of life will help to open up that text.... Let your soul be so full of the Word of God that at all the intervals and spaces when you can

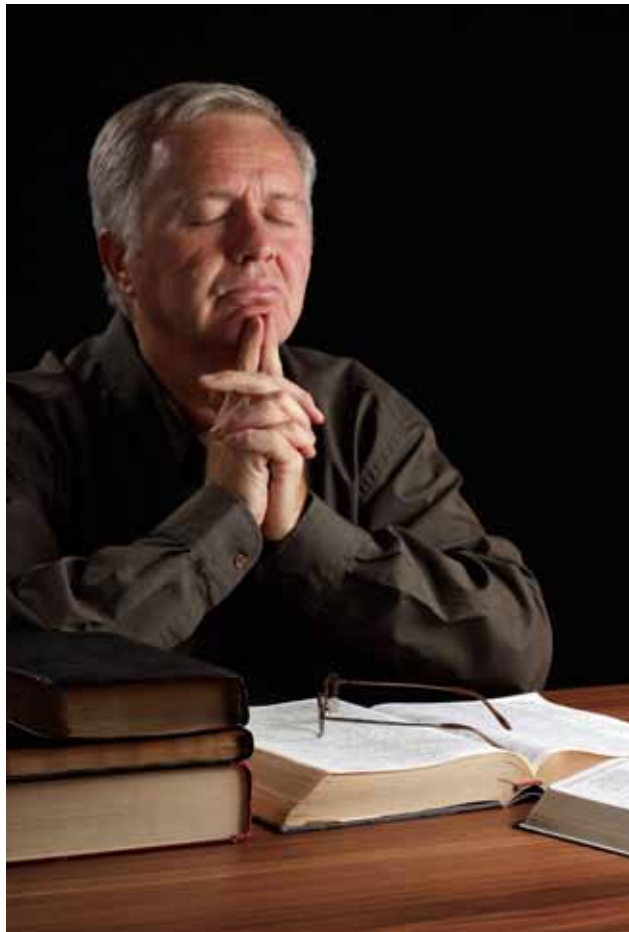
think upon it, the Word of God dwelling in you richly may come welling up into your mind and make your meditation to be sweet and profitable."

Take the time to consider as you read the scriptures. They are "God-breathed."³ As you read, God is communicating with you personally. Ask questions like, "What are you saying to me today, Lord?" and "Is there something in your words that I need to see that I'm not seeing?" The Bible is an immense gift, "but only if the words are assimilated, taken into the soul—eaten, chewed, gnawed, and received in unhurried delight." □

¹ Proverbs 21:5

² Proverbs 6:6

³ 2 Timothy 3:16



Are youths important to God?

I received a video clip on my mobile phone showing a group of teenagers nonchalantly entering a sundry shop run by an elderly couple. Within minutes the teens can be seen becoming unruly and soon two of them pull out wooden clubs which they use to attack the elderly owner. The others in the group demand that the man's wife empty the cash register and before leaving they begin to beat the elderly man again just to put fear into the elderly couple. The CCTV camera in the shop recorded the entire incident and anyone who watches it would be sickened. The criminals involved were just in their early teens. Incidents like these involving youths are becoming commonplace. Today the world has changed so drastically that an entire market of modern technology has mesmerized present day teenagers, causing them to be hooked to the cyber world through smart phones and other gadgetry. Families are becoming disconnected when children are more involved with the virtual world than building strong family ties.

There was a time when people would freely advise or admonish misbehaving teens in public places to set them straight. Today nobody does that as today's teens can become extremely rude and even violent to anyone who tries to correct them. No doubt there are still many well-mannered young people around but the slide towards aggressive and uncouth behavior among many teenagers and youths is obvious in society. What is more worrying is the increase in cases of depression, suicide and mental illness among youths. Technology does not build character or bring peace of mind. It doesn't give our teens any purpose for their lives and neither does it inspire them to realize their full potential. There is a dire need for young teens and youths to connect to God.

For many teenagers God is someone that may be more suitable for their parents or grandparents. It isn't something that they are interested in. Some may feel that perhaps they just need to follow their parents to their respective places of worship as an obligation and nothing more. Many have never prayed because they have never known the need to connect to God. A better question to ask is whether God is interested in connecting with young teens.

The answer to that question is that God has his arms wide open to receive any teen unto himself. In the gospel of Matthew is recorded an incident when people brought little children to Jesus that he might put his hands on them and pray for them but the disciples of Jesus began to stop them. However, Jesus instructed that the children to be freely allowed to come to him



by
**Devaraj
Ramoo**

“It is imperative that we adults, parents, teachers and friends of these young people steer them towards a realization that God is most relevant in their lives.”

to be blessed and stated that the Kingdom of Heaven consists of those whose innocence is like that of children.¹ The prophet Samuel was called personally by God when he was just a small boy. Samuel being just an innocent boy responded and God began to guide him and use him to become a great prophet.²

King David was passionate about God even as a teen. When the Philistines were in battle against ancient Israel, both armies had gathered at a place called Sochoh. The Philistines then taunted the Israelites by sending out a giant of a man called Goliath to challenge any Israelite warrior to a fight. The account of the incident states that all the men of Israel were dreadfully afraid to face Goliath who not only was taunting them but also insulting God. Then David a mere youth, untrained in battle came forward in the name of the Lord God and brought down the giant with a single slingshot.³ David being a teenager had more passion and fervent desire for God than any of the battle hardened soldiers of Israel. Even Jesus when he was a boy revealed where his primary interests lay.

In the gospel of Luke we can read of an account of Jesus when he was only twelve years old. His parents had taken him to Jerusalem for the Feast of the Passover. After the Feast they began their journey back and later discovered that Jesus was missing. When they began searching for him they finally found him in the temple, sitting in the midst of the teachers, both listening to them and

asking them questions. All who heard him were astonished at his understanding and answers.⁴ His excuse to his parents was that he was involved in his Father's business or the things of God.

It is a fallacy to think that God is only relevant to adults or the elderly. Our teenagers and youths are precious treasures in the sight of God. It is imperative that we adults, parents, teachers and friends of these young people steer them towards a realization that God is most relevant in their lives. The greatest gift and guidance that we can give our youths is the knowledge that there is a great God who seeks a wonderful relationship with them. This divine relationship is what will protect our youths from the pulls of crime, uncouth behavior, mental illness or drug addiction and will give them the discernment to use modern technology wisely. We cannot simply condemn teenagers and youths for waywardness. We need to tell them that Jesus who was the Word who always existed with God came to this world to give his life as a living sacrifice that all may have an eternal relationship with him. Our youths are just too precious to be left unguided. □

¹ Matthew 19:13–14

² 1 Samuel 3:1–21

³ 1 Samuel 17:1–58

⁴ Luke 2:40–49

It's a wonderful life: Meaningful community

Last time we talked about the importance God places on each of our lives. To him we are a great creation, and in our fellowship with Christ he is well pleased. This time I'd like to continue our look at *It's a Wonderful Life* and unpack how George Bailey's life became truly wonderful.

Throughout the film George dreamed about building skyscrapers and bridges. He wanted to get out of Bedford Falls and change the world around him, but somehow every time he tried to chase those goals he hit a wall. And after years and years of trying to get out of town, George started to feel like a failure. He'd lost



by
**Dr. Joseph
Tkach**

As the movie reaches its climax the community of Bedford Falls gathers round George to help him in his time of need. And with every familiar face we remember how George impacted their life. We see Mr. Martini come forward, the man who George helped move into a beautiful house. We see Mr. Gower, George's first employer, and even brother Harry Bailey, whose life George saved at the very start of the movie.

That's the moment that we realize that George didn't need to build skyscrapers, bridges, or train stations to change the world. He'd impacted the living, breathing community around him just by being him. By his



sight of the most important lesson we can ever learn: that we're created by God to live in relationship with him and with those around us.

That is what his name means: Emmanuel, God with us. Throughout his ministry Christ lived among others, joining them in their struggles and triumphs. And that's how we're called to live as well, not as solitary, isolated people dedicated to chasing goals that will fade after we're gone. Instead God wants us to join with him in his redemptive ministry to this world, bringing many sons and daughters to his glory.

everyday actions George Bailey made the world a better place.

The movie ends with a close-up on the book Clarence gifted to George. On the title page Clarence sums up this lesson well: Remember, no man is a failure who has friends. This Christmas season I hope you'll join me in celebrating the miracle of God's relationship with us and with his people. And I encourage you to invite others to join in this beautiful celebration sharing in the joy of our new life of grace in Christ. □

No room for Jesus

As I was standing in line at Disneyland, looking around at all the people having fun, the thought struck me—There doesn't seem to be any room here for Jesus. He didn't seem to be anywhere I looked—in the lines, on the rides, in the restaurants. Lots of people and a few non-people like Mickey Mouse and Sleeping Beauty, but no Jesus.

In the days before the birth of Jesus, Joseph and Mary travelled to Jerusalem for the census on hot, dusty roads. Those roads must have been filled with others going in the same direction.

At Disneyland, there's always a seat for us on the rides, but when Joseph tried to find a place to stay in Nazareth, he was told every space was taken. There was no room for them (Luke 2:7).

No room—no room for the Savior of the world. No room for the one who was to redeem every human from his or her sins. So he was born in a stable, a place for animals. The one who would be called a king was squeezed in between the donkeys and the sheep.

They squeezed him out of the inn and then they crucified him clear out of this physical world. The whole world has been squeezing him out ever since. He's been squeezed out of churches, and replaced by ritual and legalism. He's been pushed out of schools, and replaced by evolution and humanism. He's been shoved out of Christmas, and replaced by Santa and consumerism.

Sometimes we Christians do that to Jesus. Our lives are full of so much busyness, we squeeze him right out of our lives. Then we try to squeeze him back in—between the shopping and the Internet, or the bills and the dishes. Sometimes there just isn't any room for him at all.

Is there a way to keep this from happening? There's no formula. It's not easy. It won't happen in one day or just because you pray about it once or twice. Spiritual transformation takes a lifetime, through practicing the disciplines of prayer, study, meditation and fasting. By interacting with God on a daily basis, we can, as Dallas Willard says, "bring our personality and total being into effective cooperation with the divine order."

Making room for Jesus in our lives is a matter of our hearts. What is closest to your heart? Or as Matthew says, where is your treasure (Matthew 6:21)? If Jesus is your treasure, he will have your heart and you won't have to make room for him. There won't be room for anything else. □

by
Tammy Tkach



Deep church

It was a sunny day. In the outside lane on the busy freeway, an expensive sports car, top down, raced along the road, passing everything in sight. The driver was busy. In his extended arm, he held a “selfie” stick out in front of him, taking photos of himself and his car, apparently oblivious to the rest of the road users and the potential danger he might cause to himself and others.

Hyper-individualism

“Hyper-individualism.” It’s the word used by researcher, author and well known social commentator Hugh Mackay to describe the state of Australian society and the loss of community. Not just a focus on the self, but an active promotion of, even obsession with, “me”—my wants, thoughts, desires. My world. My life. What I had for breakfast, what I think of the coffee I am currently drinking. And a growing assumption that everyone else must be as interested in me as I am.

Yet deep down, we know there is something seriously flawed with this. Deep in the human psyche, we know we need meaningful friendships, lasting relationships and deep connections. We know we need human contact, to love and be loved. At the abiding core of what it means to be human, we know we need one another.

This is why philosopher and author Alain de Botton writes that “one of the losses modern society feels most keenly is the loss of community”. As our society becomes increasingly technocratic, mobile, secularised, densely populated but increasingly fractured, “social isolation”—loneliness—is one of the biggest social problems in our nation. What an irony. An increasing focus on the self, and an accompanying increase in isolation and loneliness.

Theologian James Torrance is fond of reminding us that our view of God determines our view of ourselves, and indeed, of everything else. God dwells, in his very Being, in fellowship, communion. He has never been a lonely, isolated, solitary, aloof and separate being. God’s very existence is relational.

There is nothing mechanical, abstract, or impersonal about God. God, John tells us, is love. We were created for communion by the God whose very being is communion.

This is so fundamental we can’t afford to miss it, gloss over it, forget it, or move on to something else. Good theology starts with God, not with ourselves. When we start with ourselves, we get a skewed view of the gospel, and of life. Such an approach can leave us with a distorted theology that actually feeds hyper-individualism, rather than answering it. You may have come across the line that runs like this: I know God loves me. I am his beloved. I have the Holy Spirit! So I don’t really need you, or anybody else. I certainly don’t need church. All those difficult people! It’s all about me, and I’m okay in God.

by
John McLean

This is partly true—you are beloved by God. But when we start with God, we see the obvious, unavoidable, ineluctable truth is that this means we share in the life and love of God—a love that is inclusive, that reaches out to others in grace and kindness. A love that indeed is self-emptying, service focused and other-centred. Nothing could run more against hyper-individualism than the other-centredness of God revealed in the Incarnation, in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, and brought to communal life in the creation of the church.

Easter and Pentecost

At Pentecost, God breathes life into the new creation of the church through the Spirit. The good news of Easter is followed by the good news of Pentecost. Pentecost is in fact the culmination of a season of celebration that begins with Easter. The two go together. The Spirit of the Risen Christ brings the church to life. This Holy Spirit creates the church, a communion of people in fellowship with God—and one another.

Jesus came from the inner life of God to show us who God is, and to save us—not just from sin, but for fellowship. God’s purpose is sharing his life and love with humanity—with creating communion. And the church is part of this plan—“a long range plan, in which everything would be brought together and summed up in him, everything in deepest heaven, everything on planet earth.”¹

Mere-Church, Me-Church, or Deep Church

It’s easy—fashionable, even—to dismiss church. After all, church is made up of other very imperfect people. And people are messy, have their faults and idiosyncrasies, and, let’s be honest, are often difficult, complicated and hard to love. Why put up with that? In any given congregation there’s usually a lot of diversity. People are different, think differently, have different opinions, are not necessarily “my” crowd.

So it’s easy to condescend to church—Mere-Church—as a dysfunctional group of people who are sometimes judgmental, frequently boring and often apparently hypocritical. The church clearly has lots of weaknesses, faults and problems. It often fails to live up to its high calling. So, why bother?

Much easier to do Me-Church. Just me and God. With no one else to spoil it. No one else to put up with, be patient with, serve, be gracious to, or just plain tolerate. Just me and God, who loves me in spite of everything I do (or don’t do). I can just sing the hymns I want to. Or not sing at all, if that is my prejudice. Sorry, preference.

Clearly, the Pentecost notion of church flies in the face of individualism, let alone hyper-individualism. C.S. Lewis coined the phrase Deep Church, which gets at understanding church from the inside, at the often

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Being a Christian means accepting Christ as your savior, your God. That's why you are called a 'Christian.' If you remove Christ, there's only 'ian' and that means 'I am nothing.'

Manny Pacquiao

True faith means holding nothing back. It means putting every hope in God's fidelity to His Promises.

Francis Chan

A sum can be put right: but only by going back till you find the error and working it afresh from that point, never by simply going on.

C.S. Lewis

We fail in the work of grace and love when there is too much of

us and not enough of God.

Suzanne Woods Fisher

We need never shout across the spaces to an absent God. He is nearer than our own soul, closer than our most secret thoughts.

A.W. Tozer

Remember as you go about your day that you may be the only Jesus some of your friends, neighbors, and family will ever see.

Wanda E. Brunstetter

You have the privilege of presenting a picture of what heaven will be like to those around you.

Elizabeth George

His grace is cheapened when you think that He has

only forgiven you of your sins up to the time you got saved, and after that point, you have to depend on your confession of sins to be forgiven. God's forgiveness is not given in installments.

Joseph Prince

God created me—and you—to live with a single, all-embracing, all-transforming passion—namely, a passion to glorify God by enjoying and displaying his supreme excellence in all the spheres of life.

John Piper

The human body is the best work of art.

Jess C. Scott

Jesus first, others next, and yourself last spells J-O-Y.

Linda Byler

The love of Christ always helps us see beyond the faults of others.

Victor Manuel Rivera

Don't become so well-adjusted to your culture that you fit into it without even thinking.

Michelle Anthony

When we start to realize how amazing God's story is, a question naturally arises: "Who am I that I should get to be a part of the greatest story ever told?"

Michelle Anthony

Our conduct is an advertisement for or against Jesus Christ. That's why unity in the body of Christ is so important.

Elizabeth George

Life is hard. If anyone tells you

otherwise, they're lying. But life without faith is even harder.

Lori Hatcher

In the words of a pastor friend, "Christianity is less about holding on to God and more about God holding on to you."

Lori Hatcher

The Bible changes your perspective on the people, events, and circumstances of your day.

Elizabeth George

God loves each of us as if there were only one of us

Augustine

The will of God will not take us where the grace of God cannot sustain us.

Billy Graham

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hidden spiritual structures beneath the surface of things. There is always more going on than we see. We never see the church whole and complete. Deep church captures the concept of the Trinitarian realities at work from which the church is formed, from which your congregation draws life.

Church is made up of congregations of ordinary people, with all their human faults and flaws, in and through whom Christ chooses to be present to the world. Church takes place in worship, baptism, Eucharist, but also in the ordinary stuff of everyday life—love, service, kindness, compassion. A smile to those who need it. Food for the needy. Help for the marginalised. Being a comfort, encouragement and edification to others.

Church gives expression to the nature of God. It is participating in his mission, his ministry, his work on earth. It is the place we learn to love one another, and all mankind, the way the Father, Son and Spirit love one another. It is the very antidote to hyper-individualism, loneliness and isolation.

At Pentecost we celebrate the Holy Spirit, and the Spirit's creation of Deep Church—of other-centred communion, participating in the life of the Triune God. So celebrate the life of your congregation, and the other congregations that

make up the Body of Christ. And share the Spirit of communion, grace and love when and wherever you can.

The Holy Spirit brings us into fellowship. Pentecost draws us out of isolation, separation, and into communion with the Father, Son and Spirit—and with one another. The Holy Spirit is the Spirit of adoption, whereby we call God Father, Jesus Brother, and one another sisters and brothers. The Holy Spirit is always in relationship, creatively animating life and fellowship. So our life is life together, not life in isolation.

The church is not an accident of history, to be confined to an unenlightened past, but part of the divine plan of God. The church is not a wish-dream, a utopian society, or the Kingdom of God. Nor is it God's "Policeman" on earth to judge and punish sinners.

The Holy Spirit opens us up to be other-centred, as God is. That is, the Holy Spirit doesn't create a closed community of the church, but opens the church up to the whole world, in love and genuine care for all others. In the Spirit, the church's mission functions so that all may have access to the Father through Jesus (Ephesians 2:18). □

¹ Ephesians 1:6–10

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