

"Holding fast the Faithful Word . . ."



The *Word and Work*



"Holding forth the Word of Life."

March, 2005

In This Issue--

If Satan can't pull us off one side of the fence, he'll try to push us off the other.

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Human evil. Natural disaster. Divine judgment. Satanic opposition. What a complex picture!

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We ought not uphold higher standards than God does. Is that possible? Well, some folks (not many) are hyper-moral.

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Paul's constant pressures brought anguish to his heart, tears to his eyes, restlessness to his mind and groaning to his mouth.

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"You can know the power in my ministry is God's because you can trace so little of it in me."

* * *
Real trouble occurs if any part of our body decides to go on strike. Nancy's teeth ran away! (Parts of Christ's body do the same.)

* * *
Revival! If the Lord did it *there and then*, He can do it *here and now*.

NEWS and NOTES

Edited by Bennie Hill, BHill40482@aol.com

Ladies Inspiration Day: The LID is coming soon. Theme: "Spring Cleaning for Heart and Soul." Where: Sellersburg, IN Church of Christ. When: April 2. Registration starts at 8:30. Lunch will be provided.

LeCompte Church of Christ (LA) announces a Spring Revival with Bro. Bennie Hill for April 22-26, 2005. Prayers are covered for this time of fellowship and the study of God's Word. Bro. Dillard Fontenot serves the congregation as their minister.

In the News:

No Longer a Fantasy! For decades, the subject of cloning was largely the stuff of science fiction, but when Dolly the sheep was born in 1996 fiction became reality. Today, embryologist Ian Wilmut, who led the team of scientists that brought us Dolly, has been given permission by the British government to clone human embryos for medical research. The announcement has aroused worldwide interest and renewed debate over the scientific and ethical implications of cloning.

Jack of All Trades & Master of None? "Lord, we've got a problem. I thought you called me into ministry to reach the hurting, to care for the spiritual and physical needs of the people you would lead my way. You never mentioned budgets, committees, carpets, or banquets. Lord, I spend more time making decisions about who gets the van, who should repair the boiler, and

where we should buy Sunday school literature than I do preparing my sermon. I thought my gift was exhortation. Why are you asking me to do administration?"

Those were the sentiments of a "preacher" (at least that's what he was called to be) quoted in *Christianity Today*. Questions: Who do you think is asking him to do administration of all kinds, more than exhorting -- the Lord, or the church? What results might there be if he were allowed mainly to exercise his spiritual gifts? Is his the only church that makes this mistake? What about ours? Where are those gifted in "helping" and/or "administration," who can and will exercise their gifts so that teachers and proclaimers can better teach and proclaim? This is a very crucial problem in almost every congregation (except the mega-ones).

The Spirit and the Word: "A walk in the Spirit will, of necessity, be a walk in accordance with the Word the Spirit has inspired. The parallel between Ephesians 5:18-21 and Colossians 3:15-17 is significant. The same results are said to flow from being filled with the Spirit in the first case, and being filled with the Word in the second. To remain filled with the Spirit, and thus enjoy His continuing sanctifying work, will mean continuing to be filled with the Word. The relationship is obvious." --J.O. Sanders, quoted in Highlands' bulletin

THE WORD AND WORK

"Declare the whole counsel of God"

Alex V. Wilson, Editor

Dennis L. Allen, Missions

Bennie Hill, News & Notes

The Word and Work is published monthly except December by Portland Ave. Church of Christ, Inc., 2500 Portland Ave. Louisville, Ky. 40212. Subscription: \$11.00 per year; bundles of 10 or more to one address = \$10.00 per subscription. Address correspondence to Word and Work, 2518 Portland Avenue, Louisville, KY 40212.

Periodicals Postage Paid at Louisville, Ky. POSTMASTER: Send address changes to: Word and Work, 2518 Portland Ave., Louisville, KY 40212.

Vol. XCIX	March 2005	No. 3
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In This Issue

We're Overseas, So Enjoy Some Re-runs -- Alex V. Wilson . . .	66
An Essential G, 4 Important S's, and some Work to Do -- Alex V. Wilson	67
Suffering and the Will of God	69
Sins, & Infirmities	76
Facing Problems and Pressures	82
Even Weaklings Can Qualify	85
It Takes All Kinds of People to Make a Church	88
Oh God! Do It Again!	92
Voices From The Fields	IBC
News and Notes -- Bennie Hill	IFC

We're Overseas, So Enjoy Some Re-runs

Alex V. Wilson

Ruth and I re-visited the Philippines in early 2001. That was a blessing, but it also knocked lots of time from our schedule—including time I needed to prepare W&W. So in that issue we re-ran a number of my articles that had appeared in previous years. Some folks commented favorably, so we'll try it again.

This time she and I will be in Zimbabwe for the first time, visiting Robert and Joy Garrett who've ministered there for over 40 years. This isn't a vacation, by the way. We'll both teach there a number of times. We look forward to fellowship with our African brothers and sisters. Your prayers will be appreciated. The weeks leading up to this trip have been filled with a number of incredibly intense problems. Continue to pray for conditions in Zimbabwe. According to one report the unemployment rate is 80%. Nationwide elections are scheduled for March 31.

Don't pray only for us, of course. Several folks whom a lot of you readers know spend a great deal of time traveling far and near. For them too, it's not vacation but ministry and spiritual warfare. T. Y. Clark comes to mind as the oldest mile-accumulator among us, with his numerous trips to the Philippines. Earl Mullins and Paul Kitzmiller have made many trips to Russia, and soon will go again. As I write, Earl C. Mullins Jr. is on a round-the-world trip to the Philippines and Zimbabwe. Dan Wilson has made ministry trips to Russia and Ukraine this year. But Martin Brooks has no doubt ministered in more countries than any of the others. As an experienced missionary, he now visits workers in a number of lands (including Afghanistan, Iraq, and Bosnia, among others). He counsels, comforts, trouble-shoots, investigates possible new fields to enter, and helps plan strategy (including what to do if missionaries are kid-napped). See his letter in last month's W&W.

Thank the Lord for "located ministers." They play a vital part in the building of God's kingdom. But don't forget to pray for those whom He calls to on-the-road or over-the-oceans ministries.

An Essential G, 4 Important S's, and some Work to Do

Alex V. Wilson

The Bible makes it very clear that we are saved by God's **grace**, not our works. It is unearned from start to finish. In fact, He saves us not because of our good works but in spite of our bad works. Wonder of wonders!

Let's unpack this truth in more detail. We are **SAVED** by grace – forgiven, justified, accepted, adopted. God “saved us so that, having been justified by his grace, we might become heirs....” (Titus 3:4-7).

We are also **SANCTIFIED** by grace. Our Father provides us with strength to defeat sin and live righteously. “Sin shall not be your master, because you are not under law, but under grace” (Rom. 6:14). Let's celebrate that fact with Charles Wesley:

He breaks the power of cancelled sin,
He sets the prisoner free;
His blood can make the foulest clean;
His blood avails for me.

He cancels sin's punishment; He also breaks its power.

Third, we **SUFFER** by grace! That is, His undeserved favor can stabilize us, enabling us to endure problems and pressures victoriously. Amid continual sufferings, Paul wrote, “The Lord said to me, ‘My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness’.... That is why, for Christ's sake, I delight in weakness, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong” (2 Cor. 12:9-10). What an incredible statement; re-read and ponder it. As the New English Bible puts it, “*My grace is all you need.*” And that grace is available for you and me as much as for the apostles.

Sing it with John Newton:

Through many dangers, toils and snares
I have already come;
‘Tis grace has brought me safe thus far,
And grace will lead me home.

In addition, we **SERVE** by grace. Hear Paul again:

“I... do not even deserve to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace to me was not without effect. No, I worked harder than all of them – yet not I, but the grace of God that was with me” (1 Cor. 15:9-10). Paul worked. He worked hard. In fact, hardest of all. And yet, “not I, but God’s grace: He forgave me, called me to serve, appointed me as an apostle, motivates and guides and empowers me. All these are His free gifts. What privilege!” And we can say the same.

Salvation, sanctification, suffering, service – all by grace.

On The Other Hand

Through the decades *Word and Work* has emphasized the grace of God. Even when such teaching was rare or even opposed in many places (believe it or not). Yet even the most basic and precious truths can become over-emphasized, or taught in an unbalanced way. *If Satan can't pull us off one side of the fence, he'll try to push us off the other.* Tom Williams made some wise observations in *Gospel Tidings*:

For the past few years there has been an unmistakable trend among many churches ... to present a God of limitless tolerance who accepts us where we are, warts and all, *and makes no demands in return.*

Theology has been adjusted to address the felt needs of the present generation who were raised on a diet of *instant gratification and self-fulfillment*. According to opinion polls, this generation wants enough religion to help them through their marriages, their financial woes, and their addictions, but *not enough to hamper their lifestyles.* [My emphasis – avw]

What a distortion of grace. For Scripture shows that God’s grace not only brings us salvation, but also “teaches us to say ‘No’ to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives” (Tit. 2:11-12). Yes, grace can hamper our lifestyle! It calls us not only to trust in Christ’s cross but to bear our own cross. Yet don’t forget, Jesus promised that in losing our life we would find it.

Another Distortion of Grace

A second way that grace can be distorted is by an overly-passive view of holy living. We saw above that sanctification is by grace, it’s not a do-it-yourself-on-your-own matter. But the Lord gives us a part to play. He calls us to participate actively, and indeed He won’t

make us holy unless we do so. Ponder these passages: "If by the Spirit you put to death the misdeeds of the body, you will live...." (Rom. 8:13b). "Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit" (Gal. 5:25). "His divine power has given us everything we need for life and godliness.... He has given us his very great and precious promises, so that through them you may participate in the divine nature.... For this very reason, make every effort to add to your faith goodness; ...knowledge; ...self-control; ...perseverance; ...godliness; ...brotherly kindness; and ...love" (2 Pet. 1:3-7).

Without Him, we can't. Without us, He won't. What God has joined together, let no man put asunder. In Christian conduct both God's side and ours are obvious. Let us not divorce them.

Continue to work out your salvation

With fear and trembling,

F-O-R

it is God who works in you

to will and to act

according to his good purpose.

(Phil. 2:12-13)

! < < < ! SUFFERING ! > > > !
and the Will of God

Sooner or later, most of us cry out from hearts ripped and torn,
"O God, where are You?"

* * *

A young boy named Peter wrote a letter to God and sent it to a newspaper advice-columnist. He'd been taught that God would protect, preserve and heal. But Tommy, his brother, was dead. So he wrote, "Dear God, why did you let Tommy die? When he was hit by the car, my mother prayed to you to let him live, but you *wouldn't*. My little brother was only two years old, and he couldn't have sinned so bad that you had to punish him that way. You could have saved my little brother but *you let him die*. You broke my mother's heart. ***How can I love you?***"

* * *

During the 2nd World War, a young German soldier wrote from Stalingrad, Russia, to his pastor back in Germany: "In Stalingrad, to ask the question of God's existence means to *deny* it. I have searched for God in every bomb crater, in every destroyed house, on

every corner, in every friend, in every foxhole, and in the sky. *God did not show Himself*, even though my heart cried for Him.

“If there is a God, He is only with you in the hymnals and the prayers, in the pious sayings of the priests and pastors, in the ringing of the bells and the fragrance of the incense, but *not in Stalingrad.*”

* * *

An atheist said, “If I had the power to fashion the universe and remake it nearer my heart’s desire, there would be no blind, no deaf, no dumb; there would be no crippled, and each child born would live free of disease and possess a mentality capable of withstanding all the rebuffs of life. There would be no deaths by accident. There would be no earthquakes, cyclones or tornadoes. Unless and until such a condition comes to pass, when we may live free from disease, sorrow and suffering, *there is no God in this vast universe worthy of homage.*”

No Simple Answers

No sane person would claim to have easy solutions to the problems of evil and suffering. Sometimes we can only groan--which is very Biblical, by the way (Rom. 8:22- 23; 2 Cor. 5:1-4; Jn. 11:33; 12:27-28). But we might also glean helpful insights by examining Luke 13, where four types of suffering can be discerned.

Verses 1-3 tell us of some “Galileans whose blood Pilate had mixed with their sacrifices.” We know both from inside and outside scripture that Pilate was a brutal, violent ruler. Obviously on this occasion his troops had invaded the temple itself and slaughtered some worshipers there. Here was **suffering due to human evil.**

Christ went on to mention eighteen people who died when a tower in Siloam fell on them. He implied that in both these cases the sufferers were not especially wicked folks. In this latter instance we have **suffering due to natural evil.** A tower collapses while people happen to be nearby. Maybe its foundations were undermined by erosion, or maybe an earthquake made it fall.

Then Jesus told a parable:

“A man had a fig tree, and he went to look for fruit on it, but did not find any. So he said to the man who took care of the vineyard, ‘For three years now I’ve been coming to look for fruit on this fig tree and haven’t found any. Cut it down! Why should it use up the soil?’ ‘Sir,’ the man replied, ‘leave it alone for one more year, and I’ll dig around it and fertilize it. If it bears fruit next year, fine! If not, then cut it down.’”

This story refers first of all to those Jews to whom Messiah came. They produced no good fruit of righteousness and faith in Him. That is another example of human evil. But the Master's words, "*Cut the tree down!*" came to pass at the destruction of Jerusalem not one year but forty years later. After giving His people many chances to repent, the Lord sent punishment by means of the Roman army. That was **suffering due to Divine judgment**.

Next we read of a woman at a synagogue "who had been crippled by a spirit for eighteen years. She was bent over and could not straighten up at all" (NIV). She "had been possessed by a spirit that left her enfeebled" (Jerus. Bible). Jesus later said that Satan had kept her bound for those eighteen years. Here was **suffering due to Satanic hatred**.

Our Lord set her free and filled her mouth with praise. But think of the long, weary years she had endured because of disease caused by the Fiend.

Human evil. Natural disaster. Divine judgment. Satanic opposition. What a complex picture! Don't blame everything on God, as some do. Don't blame everything on the Devil, either. And don't think evil men are always to blame. Often we don't know which it is.

And often there is overlapping. Job's sheep and shepherds were destroyed by lightning, and his children were killed by a tornado. Those were natural evils, which were caused by Satan, but also permitted by the Lord. His camels were stolen by Chaldean raiders, a case of human evil; but they were incited by the Devil, yet allowed by God. Let's continue to examine these four kinds of suffering.

A Closer Look

Satan surely can and sometimes does cause natural catastrophes and also sickness, as we saw. Yet the Bible mentions these facts very rarely. Far more often we read of him as the source of false ideas and teachings, or of temptations to sin. Those are obviously his major weapons.

God's judgments are mentioned repeatedly. We read many examples of the principle, "Cut down the barren fruit-tree now--or at least next year, if they refuse to repent." Sometimes He punishes sin with **instant** punishment. David's child of adultery died soon after birth. Ananias and Sapphira were struck dead within hours of their fraud.

But sometimes punishment is **delayed**. We've already noted that Jerusalem's fall didn't occur till God gave its inhabitants four dec-

ades of opportunity. In OT times, king Manasseh was the very worst ruler that Judah ever had, yet he reigned the longest -- 55 years! For God knew that toward the end of his life he would repent.

Sometimes God seems **not** to punish grievous sin at all in **this** life. Corrupt people may get away with their crimes and never be brought to justice. Indeed, base and depraved men often prosper and succeed more than others. The psalmists repeatedly complain of that fact, especially in Psalms 37 and 73. For while the wicked may have a ball, many of the godly suffer afflictions of all kinds. Joseph, Job and Jesus, among others, fit into that category.

The puritan preacher Matthew Henry wrote, "We cannot judge about men's **sins** by their **sufferings** in this world; for many are thrown into the furnace as *gold* to be purified, not as *dross and chaff* to be consumed."

Does "Nature" Exist? Is it Free?

Well, what about "**natural**" **calamities**--those caused by **nature**. For me this is the most difficult category to grasp. For scripture makes no direct mention of "nature" as some independent force working in the world. After the massive earthquake in Turkey in 1999, John Piper went so far as to say,

No earthquakes in the Bible are attributed to Satan. Many are attributed to God. This is because **God is Lord of heaven and earth....** 'He looks at the earth, and it trembles; He touches the mountains, and they smoke' (Psa.104:32)... Earthquakes are ultimately from God. **Nature does not have a will of its own.** And God owes Satan no freedom. What havoc demons wreak, they wreak with God's permission (Job 1-2; Luke 22:31-32). [World magazine, 9/4/99. Lest we leave a wrong impression, I hasten to add that Piper urged us to weep with those who weep, and to "step forward with sacrificial love" for victims of catastrophes.]

Well, I disagree with some of his statements, but his emphasis is correct. **At least some and perhaps many "natural disasters" are definitely sent by the Lord.** The locust plagues in Joel's day certainly were; God called them his great army! He also sent the famine, drought, blight and mildew mentioned in Amos 4. And we remember the flood in Noah's day, and the destruction of Sodom. Insurance companies call tornadoes, floods and lightning "acts of God," and a number of them are. But *all* of them? No; read on.

Human evil (selfishness) or error (negligence) play a part in some natural calamities. In the Philippines many floods and landslides are due to denuding of forests by lumber companies, contrary to law. Commercial boats there sometimes capsizes because selfish

owners vastly overload them, contrary to law. And in the U.S. careless disposal of chemical waste has poisoned more than one community. People play a part. Again, several years ago in Tennessee defective or worn-out electrical wiring started a devastating fire at a fine Christian college. Materials were lost which were very valuable in exposing evolution and supporting divine creation. The electric problem was not deliberately caused, but could inspections have prevented it? It was ruled an “**accident**”; that word comes from a Latin term meaning “**it happened.**”

Satan may have a role, too, in natural disasters. We already saw that he caused the lightning and tornado that hit Job’s family and camels. But our main question now is, *Does nature have a will of its own? Or does “nature” at least have a freedom of its own, given to it by God in His sovereignty?* Someone wrote, “There is **randomness** in the universe. We live in an imperfect world, a place where even the universe has been affected by the fall! (Rom. 8:17-20).”

Maybe God gives to “nature” itself a certain degree of free will, as He does to humanity. Maybe to some extent God adopts a hands-off, let-it-alone policy towards the physical universe and the way it works (a policy which He chose to establish at the beginning). Please notice how my statement is phrased: “maybe...a certain degree ... to some extent.” Mysteries remain. Dogmatism is out of place. And we must remember such verses as Eph. 1:11, “In [Christ] we were also chosen, having been predestined according to the plan of *him who works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will* (NIV).

As I meditated about “nature,” this thought came to mind: the ageing process! Ever since sin entered the world, our bodies and minds “naturally” start to decline as time passes. Hair turns gray, eyesight starts to decline, hearing to diminish, and physical strength to deteriorate. Sooner or later mental powers begin failing and memory wanes. (Ask me about it.) This process varies greatly from person to person, depending on such factors as genetics, circumstances, diet and even attitudes we take. But if you live long enough it will catch up with you to some extent sooner or later. Now we know God numbers the hairs of our head, but does He decide which of them will fall out next Monday? Does He choose which individual hairs to turn gray by the end of April?

It seems to me that the Lord set up the universe in such a way that the entry of sin triggered processes that affect us all in some ways. At creation He *sovereignly* determined that those processes would come into effect “*naturally.*” He can and occasionally does intervene in such developments, but in general He allows them to play out without His interference.

Don't get me wrong. **Christians cannot be deists**, believing in a "watchmaker god." He didn't just make the universe and then stand back as a passive spectator to see just what might happen next. If we believe the Bible we must believe in miracles, God's supernatural interventions in His creation. **He still can, and does, intervene. But only as and when He chooses to do so.** And most often He chooses to work "naturally."

More than that, perhaps as a result of human sin He sometimes(?) or often(?) lets the winds, rains, temperature, etc. run their course without intervention or control. Maybe it was natural geological forces which caused the unparalleled tsunami in January. After all, Jesus did not say that *God* made the tower of Siloam fall. And Eccles. 9:11 says, "I saw that the race is not to the swift, or the battle to the strong, nor does food come to the wise or wealth to the brilliant or favor to the learned: but time and chance happen to them all." Hmmm; *time and chance*. There is food for thought.

Human Evil (including me?)

We have analyzed suffering from Satanic opposition, divine judgments, and the randomness of nature in a universe that has become disordered by sin. Last, consider human evil. People often say, "How can God do this to me?" and "Why did God let this happen?"

Yet God did not invent terrorists' bombs nor torture chambers; men did. **Men, not God**, distill and sell whiskey that pickles men's livers and ruins their brains, destroying health and homes. Men, not God, sell crack to kids, enslaving minds and bodies. Men, not God, sell and smoke tobacco that ruins lungs and lives. Men, not God, drive vehicles recklessly, crippling and killing. Men, not God, abuse children, batter wives, nag-nag husbands, seduce girls, and entice boys. Not God! Not God, but people!

God gives us lots of freedom, for without it there could be no love. And **in giving us freedom of will, God has freely given up some of His control over His world. He now shares His control of the world with imperfect beings. He has freely chosen to limit Himself to some extent. In His omnipotence He chose to limit His omnipotence! He sovereignly chose to reduce or ration His sovereignty in some ways! In giving us freedom of choice God grants us the right to misuse it; but when we do, we can't reasonably blame Him.**

God brought Israel to the border of Canaan and said, "Here it is. Go in, and I'll give it to you. I will empower you to drive out its peoples." But they refused to believe Him, so they refused to obey Him. They thus doomed themselves to wander in desert lands for forty years--but it was neither the Lord's fault nor desire. Centuries

later Jesus said, "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, how often **I have longed** to gather your children together as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, **but! You! were! unwilling!**" It was neither His fault nor desire.

The German philosopher Goethe said, "If I were God, this world of sin and suffering would break my heart." Yes, it **did!** That's part of what Calvary meant.

A sorrowing, bitter mother blurted out to a Christian, "Where was God when my son died?" The believer replied, "He was exactly where He was when His own son died. He was in heaven, with a broken heart."

When Joni Eareckson was an active, athletic teenager--who loved to ride horse-back and swim -- a dive into Chesapeake Bay one day broke her neck. That was over thirty years ago, and she's been paralyzed from the neck down ever since. For some time she wrestled bitterly with God about her condition, but then learned to accept it. Listen to what this beautiful, talented quadriplegic writes,

God began His earthly existence in a stinky stable. He got angry. He was lonely. He went without a place to call his own. He was abandoned by his closest friends. He wept real tears. **This is a God I can trust. I know my tears count with him.**

Back to Luke 13. This rich chapter shows Jesus' **power** to liberate and heal a woman enslaved and enfeebled by the Evil One. Second, it shows His **compassionate eagerness** to do so, for He performed this miracle on the sabbath day. He knew that doing so would arouse heated opposition from religious leaders, and it did. He could have waited till the next day to heal her; after 18 years what difference would it make? But He would not hesitate.

Third, we hear His **insistence that we must repent**, all of us. We cannot fathom all the mysteries of sovereignty and suffering. We cannot determine the depths of others' sins by the amount of their sufferings. But since we too have sinned, we should repent. Twice He said it, for emphasis. "Do you think [they] were worse sinners...because they suffered this way? I tell you, no! But unless **you** repent, you too will all perish.... Do you think they were more guilty than all the others...? I tell you, no! But unless **you** repent, you too will all perish."

Jesus is compassionate, but He is not namby-pamby: He demands that all repent. True, we can trust Him, as Joni said. True, our tears count with Him. He stands yearning for us to come to Him. But when we come, let us come with submission: He is the King.

Sins, & INFIRMITIES

In our congregation we studied various aspects of sin as brought out by O.T. passages like Exodus 34:6-7, and Psalms 32:1-5 and 51:1-6. Three terms keep recurring: “Sin” means **failure**, *not doing what you should do*. “Transgression” or “rebellion” mean *doing what you should not do*. “Iniquity” or “wickedness” mean *being what you should not be*.

Then we went on to see that the Christian can overcome all three varieties, “through Christ who strengthens me.” That doesn’t mean that iniquity (the moral twistedness of our heart) dies, nor quits fighting, nor goes away. Our “flesh” or “sinful nature” (another term for iniquity) keeps on warring against the Spirit. Gal. 5:17 makes that clear: “The sinful nature desires what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit desires what is contrary to the sinful nature. **They are in conflict with each other....**” But “by the Spirit” we can “put to death” the evils of our “earthly nature” (Col. 3:5; Rom. 8:13).

We need to be honest about this inner foe who attacks us in these three disguises. It’s easy to just brush off our problems with excuses like “Oh, everybody does it” or “Lots of people are worse than I am.” An unknown satirist wrote,

Take the term “sin.” There’s a word we could all live without. I mean, who wants to be told they’re guilty of--**sin**? No one I know. Yet that kind of thing goes on in churches regularly.

So I think we should follow the lead of noted...personalities who, after having been involved in various questionable activities, replaced any references to sin with terms like “*moral failure*” and “*momentary lapse*.”

Wouldn’t our churches be more cheery places if we all did the same? Many already are...like the SMNAV (Shirley MacLaine New Age Version) of Rom.3:23 illustrates: “For all have experienced momentary lapses and have come up a tad shy of the Divine Entity’s absolute ideal, but hey, nobody’s perfect. So don’t worry. Be happy!”

Well, that hit the nail on the head, in a roundabout way. Someone else wrote more directly, “**God Calls Sin by its Right Name**”:

Man calls sin an ACCIDENT;
God calls it an ABOMINATION.
Man calls sin an ERROR;
God calls it ENMITY.
Man calls sin FASCINATION;
God calls it FATALITY.

Man calls sin INFIRMITY;
God calls in INIQUITY.
Man calls sin a LIBERTY;
God calls it LAWLESSNESS.
Man calls sin a TRIFLE;
God calls it a TRAGEDY.
Man calls sin a WEAKNESS;
God calls it WILLFULNESS.

We must not dilute what sin means, nor downplay how serious it is, nor how harmful is the devastation it causes.

On the Other Hand...

At the same time we must not go overboard in the opposite direction. We ought not uphold higher standards than God does. You ask, Is that possible? Well, what I'm thinking of is the fact that some folks' consciences are too strict. They are hyper-moral. They consider things to be sins which are not. The *opposite error* is just as dangerous, or more so, than this one; but both should be avoided.

So, let's return to the saying quoted just above. "Man calls sin an *infirmity*; God calls it an iniquity....Man calls sin a *weakness*; God calls it willfulness." Those statements are only partly true. Note some scriptures:

"The Spirit helps us in our *weakness*. We do not know what we ought to pray for...." "I put this in human terms because you are *weak* in your natural selves" (or, "because of the *infirmities* of your flesh," kjv; "because of your natural *limitations*," rsv). [Rom.8:26; 6:19a.] Both those examples speak of mental weakness, the limitations of our understanding. Then we read of believers whose "faith is *weak*" (Rom.14:1). The context shows Paul is speaking of those who had under-developed knowledge, due to scruples from their former religious teaching. Therefore their conscience was overly strict about dietary prohibitions.

Elsewhere Paul writes, "The Lord said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in *weakness*.' Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my *weaknesses*, so that Christ's power may rest on me. That is why, for Christ's sake, I delight in *weaknesses*, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am *weak*, then I am strong" (2 Cor. 12:9-10). This speaks of Paul's **toils, difficult situations, & persecutions**--the pressures of **circumstances too hard to bear by our own strength**.

Once more: Heb. 4:15-5:3 tells us we have a high priest who is able to "sympathize with **our weaknesses**, since he has been

tempted in every way, just as we are--yet was without sin. Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in **our time of need**. Every high priest....is able to deal gently with those who are **ignorant and are going astray**, since he himself is **subject to weakness**.”

David Seamonds' helpful book, **Healing for Damaged Emotions**, has valuable insights: “Somewhere between our **sins**, on the one hand, and our **sicknesses**, on the other, lies an area the Scripture calls ‘**infirmities**.’” We are not responsible for our sicknesses, usually at least. We are responsible for our sins. For our infirmities and weaknesses, sometimes perhaps we are not and sometimes perhaps we are. It depends on how we react to them. Think about it as we continue.

The Greek word used in the passages above is *a-sthenos*, meaning without strength, a weakness or infirmity. Sometimes the weakness is **physical**: an infirmity of the body when it is sick, feeble or worn out; or the natural weakness and frailty of the body even when it is healthy. Other times it refers to infirmity of the **soul**: lack of strength required to (a) understand a matter, because we are slow-minded; or (b) lacking strength to restrain corrupt desires or inclinations to sin.

Thus, writes Seamonds, it often “refers to mental, moral and emotional weaknesses. **Infirmities in themselves are not sins, but they do undermine our resistance to temptation**. In the New Testament, infirmities are **qualities in human nature which may predispose or incline us to sin, sometimes without any conscious choice on our part**.”

They include the emotional wounds some people have experienced during childhood and adolescence. There are many examples. The scars of long-ago painful hurts: brutal treatment by parents; violence between parents; rejection by family members or classmates; sordid, ugly sexual experiences; frequent teasing, humiliating nicknames and put-downs; a home where criticism is constant and praise is rare, if ever, etc. etc.

Such traumatic experiences scar us deeply. “The memories are recorded, and they directly affect our concepts, feelings and relationships. They affect the way we look at life and God, at others and ourselves.”

We preachers often give people the mistaken idea that the new birth and being ‘filled with the Holy Spirit’ are going to automatically take care of these emotional hang-ups. But this just isn't true. A **great crisis experience of Jesus Christ, as important and eternally valuable as it is, is not a shortcut to**

emotional health. It is not a quickie cure for personality problems.

It is necessary that we **understand this**, first of all, so that we can **compassionately live with ourselves** and allow the Holy Spirit to work with special healing in our own hurts and confusions.

We also need to understand this **in order to not judge other people too harshly but to have patience with their confusing and contradictory behavior**. In so doing, we will be kept from unfairly criticizing and judging fellow Christians. They are people, like you and me, with hurts and scars and wrong programming that interfere with their behavior.

Jesus said in Matt. 7:16 that **by their fruits you shall know them**. That is true, of course. If someone who calls himself a Christian displays constant hate or continual dishonesty, or gives way to furious outbursts of anger without repenting of them and seeking to make amends, or repeatedly commits sexual immorality, obviously he or she is a fake believer--not a real one. Paul, after listing such "works of the sinful nature" as impurity, debauchery, hatred, fits of rage, selfish ambition, envy and drunkenness, says, "I warn you, as I did before, that *those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God*" (Gal. 5:19-21). Yes, **by their fruits you shall know them**.

But [continues Seamonds] it is also true that **by their ROOTS you shall understand them and not judge them**. Over here is John who may appear to be more spiritual and responsible as a Christian than Bill. But actually, considering John's roots and the good kind of soil he had to grow in, Bill may be a saint by comparison. He may have made much more progress than John in really being conformed to the image of Christ.

"Some may object: **'What are you doing--lowering standards? Are you denying the power of the Holy Spirit to heal our hang-ups? Are you trying to give us a copout** for responsibility so we can blame life, heredity, parents, teachers, and mates for our defeats and failures?

"I answer, **God forbid!** What I am saying is that **certain areas** of our lives need special healing by the Holy Spirit. Because they are not subject to ordinary prayer, discipline and willpower, they **need a special kind of understanding, an unlearning of past wrong programming, and a relearning and reprogramming transformation by the renewal of our minds**. And this is not done overnight by a crisis experience."

Here's a true example. Derek Prince, a quite well-known Bible teacher, wrote, "For several years after I entered fulltime ministry, I

was tormented by terrible bouts of depression. My main difficulties were in my thought life. I was habitually prone to negative, pessimistic thoughts. God showed me that this was really a denial of my faith in Christ (Rom. 8:28).

“I deliberately set out to re-educate my mind, ‘bringing every thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ’ (2 Cor. 10:5). I cultivated positive, optimistic reactions and thought-patterns, based directly on the promises of God’s Word. This initiated a process of strict mental discipline which lasted several years. At the end, however, I was not just temporarily delivered, I was ‘free indeed’ (John 8:36).”

To Conclude: Some people have *very deep inner wounds*--usually problems resulting from emotional trauma. These may cause ongoing major difficulties. The **cure** for such deep-seated crises is found, **first of all and most of all**, in receiving Christ as Lord and Savior, thus finding peace with God and receiving the gift of the Holy Spirit who comes to indwell and empower. Christ imparts new birth --new life --wonderful change. **B-u-t, don’t expect all problems to disappear, and all hang-ups resulting from years of sin and sadness, evil and error--to evaporate.** Your new birth introduces you to wonderful transformation of life, but it is just the beginning.

Physical birth is a wondrous thing. We are thrilled as we hold the newborn baby in our arms. But that infant still must learn to walk, and talk, and be potty-trained, and develop social relations, and go to school, and get a job, etc. etc. Spiritual birth is similar; there’s still much growing to do.

Expediting Growth and Recovery

How can we expedite that growth, and find help from above to overcome our weaknesses and infirmities? First, by soaking our hearts in God’s Word, getting to know Him better. Second, via worship: delight in Him, magnify and praise Him--privately and publicly. Third, we need to cultivate fellowship with other believers who can love, advise, rebuke and comfort us patiently--but not too patiently! (Classes and fellowship groups are important here; face-to-back-of-the-head meetings are not adequate.) Fourth, pray--privately, and in small groups, and with the whole congregation.

Fifth, as we saw above, some believers have abnormally severe physical/mental/ emotional/ spiritual difficulties, resulting in continuous crises. In such cases, they should seek out mature, Biblically sound counselors for one-on-one, in-depth therapy. There may be such a counselor in your church. If not, there may be counseling centers in your community where men or women with Biblically

based training can minister to your needs. You are blessed if that is so.

6th, keep focused on Christ Himself, moment by moment. He is a friend who sticks closer than a brother. To be sure, He works through human preachers, teachers, friends and counselors. But--it is **HE** who works through such aids. Don't lose touch with Him.

"Finally, brethren"--to review: (1) Don't excuse sin: repent of it! (2) Realize infirmities and weaknesses are not sins, yet they do need working on. (3) Take courage--recovery and growth are possible, by the grace and power of the Lord.

The words of hymnwriter T. O. Chisholm form a perfect conclusion to this study.

Bring Christ your broken life, So marred by sin,
He will create anew, Make whole again;
Your empty, wasted years He will restore,
And your iniquities Remember no more.

Bring Him your ev'ry care, If great or small—
Whatever troubles you—O bring it all!
Bring Him the haunting fears, The nameless dread,
Thy heart He will relieve, And lift up thy head.

Bring Him your weariness, Receive His rest,
Weep out your blinding tears Upon His breast;
His love is wonderful, His pow'r is great,
"And none that trust in Him Shall be desolate."

Blest Savior of us all! Almighty Friend!
His presence shall be ours Unto the end;
Without Him life would be How dark, how drear!
But with Him morning breaks And heaven is near!

Facing Problems and Pressures

Do you ever feel absolutely floored by your problems? Do you ever feel like a spiritual weakling--anemic, washed-out, "too pooped to pop?" Are you tempted to give up serving the Lord, or maybe even following Him at all? Then you are probably about average! A college friend of mine used to say, "If at first you don't succeed, you're about average."

But did you know that even the apostle Paul sometimes felt crushed, fearful, restless? Take a close look at the picture of this man that emerges from *2nd Corinthians*, which is perhaps his most self-revealing letter.

PAUL'S OUTER PROBLEMS

First, we see his *physical weakness*. Speaking of mankind in general, he says, "Our outer nature is wasting away." Speaking of himself in particular (and perhaps Timothy), he says, "When we came into Macedonia our bodies had no rest." He mentions an agonizing "thorn in the flesh" which he suffered. He does not tell us specifically what the "thorn" was, so we don't know; but the context reiterates "weakness... weaknesses... weaknesses." In addition to bodily problems, he implies that he lacked poise or glitter of personality, for his critics sneered, "His letters are impressive and moving but his actual presence is feeble"—"in person he is unimpressive." (References for this paragraph: 2 Corinthians 4:16;7:5; 12:7-10; 10:10.)

Second, Paul faced staggering *outward trials and tribulations*. At the letter's opening in less than six verses Paul mentions "afflictions" four times and "sufferings" four times. He summarizes, "We experienced affliction in Asia; we were so utterly, unbearably crushed that we despaired of life itself." And on throughout the letter the term "affliction" sounds like a phonograph record stuck in a groove: "I wrote you out of much affliction... We are afflicted in every way... All our affliction... We were afflicted at every turn." (1:3-8; 2:4; 4:8; 7:4-5; etc.) Talk about troubles!

Third, more demoralizing than the persecutions from outside the church were the *criticisms from within the churches*, especially in Corinth. To that church had come men who opposed Paul's ministry and authority as an apostle of Christ. They too claimed to be apostles, and boasted of their impressive abilities and spectacular experiences. They felt Paul could not measure up to them--why, just look at his many troubles and constant problems! His weaknesses made them suspect that he was not a Spirit-filled man at all, and thus not a true apostle. Their belittling of Paul and exalting of themselves may

be seen in 10:9-18; 11:4-6, 12-21. They claimed to be super-Christians, "superlative apostles" (11:5; 12:11) but Paul concludes that they were "false apostles, deceitful workmen, disguising themselves as apostles of Christ" (11:13). Yet their hostility to Paul seemed to affect at least some of the Corinthian church members, whose attitudes towards Paul were beginning to sour.

PAUL'S INNER STRAINS AND STRESSES

These weaknesses, persecutions and criticisms beat upon Paul like blows from a sledgehammer. The Corinthian letters reveal the resulting tensions and turmoil in his mind and heart. Even in 1st Corinthians he had reminded them, "I was with you in *weakness and fear and trembling*" (2:3). But 2nd Corinthians paints a more detailed picture: "I wrote you out of much affliction and *anguish of heart* and with *many tears*... At Troas *my mind could not rest* because I did not find Titus there... We are *perplexed*..." (Say this doesn't sound like the victorious life, does it?) "Here in this body we *groan*, and long to put on our heavenly dwelling (i.e., our resurrection-body)... While we are still in this tent, we *sigh with anxiety*. . . We had fighting without and *fear within*... Apart from all external trials, there is the *daily pressure* upon me of *my anxiety for all the churches*." (2:4; 2:12-13; 4:8; 5:2-4; 7:5; 11:28-29)

Wait!! What's going on here? Those reactions and feelings of Paul don't sound like anything I've ever heard or read about the "deeper Christian life." That preceding paragraph sounds like just the opposite of "We are more than conquerors through Christ." Was Paul not such a great Christian, after all? Or do we have some distorted ideas about what a "great Christian" is? Could Paul sing with us, "And now I am happy all the day"?

Those are important questions, and well worth pondering. What, for example, about the *anxiety* which Paul says he experienced daily (11:28)? Our Lord Jesus repeatedly warned us against anxiety (Matt. 6:24-34 alone has five warnings; also Matt. 13:22; Luke 10:41 and 21:34). And Paul himself later wrote, "In nothing be anxious." How do we reconcile these directives with Paul's admission, "My anxious concern for all our congregations" is a "responsibility that weighs on me every day" (NEB)?

There seem to be two possible solutions to this apparent contradiction. (1) We might conclude that anxiety (which Webster defines as "painful uneasiness of mind") is forbidden only if it is selfish in nature. That is, it is wrong to worry about yourself and personal problems (because such worry springs from self-centeredness and/or lack of faith), but it is all right to have painful uneasiness of mind about the unsaved, and the problems of other people, and the needs

of the church. Support for this view may perhaps be found in Phil. 2:20, where Paul *commends* Timothy for being “genuinely *anxious* for your welfare” (RSV). Then *two* chapters later he *forbids all anxiety!* (4:6). The same Greek word-base is used in 2:20 and 4:6. Yet because Paul praises Timothy for having this attitude, most translators consider that anxiety has a commendable aspect as well as a blameworthy one. Thus Phil. 2:20 is variously rendered: Timothy “will *care* truly for your state” (ASV); he “takes a genuine *interest* in your welfare” (NIV).

But there is another possibility: (2) Perhaps anxiety is always wrong, even if it is concern with the problems of other people or the glory of the Lord. Perhaps when Paul wrote, “In nothing be anxious” he really did mean NOTHING. . . no-thing at all! If that is so; and all anxiety, worry and fretting are prohibited for believers, then we must conclude that Paul was often guilty of this sin. That fact should not shake us up too much, however. After all, he never claimed to be sinless or to have reached perfection. In Phil. 4: 11 (written about five years after 2nd Corinthians) he says, “I have *learned* to be content” in all circumstances. It was something he had to learn, as his faith grew during the years. He did not discover any slick spiritual trick or have any push-button experience by which he reached instant maturity. He had to keep learning and growing, as you and I do.

HUMBLE HONESTY NEEDED

Whatever be the correct answer to the contradiction just noted, let’s return to Paul as presented in his self-portrait, 2nd Corinthians. Here he is: Saddled with physical weaknesses. Confronted with endless afflictions, troubles and persecutions. Counterfeit apostles accusing him of being an inferior apostle if even an apostle at all. In fact, they hinted, because of his weakness and humiliation, maybe he is just a second-rate Christian. They imply that his message, while true, is incomplete. He does not know or experience the *full* gospel they preach. Here is Paul: Sometimes with fears. Sometimes in tears. Often in weakness and anxiety. *Where then is the victory?*

Here it is: *He never quit!* He kept trusting. He kept going, and growing. And God used him (and how!). As he kept trusting, he found God’s comfort amid afflictions (1:3-7); God’s sufficiency amid anxieties (3:5). He received boldness (3:12) and confidence (5:6, 8) to counteract his fears. He did not faint or lose heart (4:1,16) in spite of his tears. Knocked down, he was never knocked out (4:9b, Phillips translation). Sorrowful, he was always rejoicing (6:10). Such is the paradox of Christian living and serving in this world.

But before we turn our attention from Paul’s problems to God’s provisions, let’s notice his humility in revealing his weaknesses and

tensions. He does not hide his trembling fears, anguished tears, restlessness and pressures. Sometimes, if we have testimony meetings at all, we share only the glowing victories and successes and statistics. Is our church fellowship realistic enough and are we individually humble enough so that we feel free to share our needs, weaknesses, sins and defeats as well as victories and blessings?

Speaking in Manila, John Stott emphasized this need for realism in Christian service:

There are some Christians in leadership roles who think they must give the impression to the people they are serving that they never do anything wrong and never sin. And if sometime it becomes known that they are not perfect and they make mistakes and commit sins, they fear their ministry will be despised. I suggest that the very opposite is true. Nothing discourages people more than the image we present if we pretend that we are really exceptional. They will think, "My pastor just isn't human. I could never attain that level." We need to be willing to be known for what we are.

Holy Father, help us to be humble and honest. Sustain us, so our faith won't fail and we won't give up. May we experience Your divine sufficiency amid the pressures of life. For Jesus Christ's sake, Amen.

Even Weaklings Can Qualify

[Sequel to the above article]

Paul the apostle often experienced "fears within and foes without" (2 Cor. 7:5), as we saw in the preceding article. Outward afflictions overwhelmed him; boasting critics in the church sneered at him. *These constant pressures brought anguish to his heart, tears to his eyes, restlessness to his mind and groaning to his mouth* (2 Cor. 2:4; 2:13; 5:2-4).

He felt daily *anxiety* for all the churches (11:28). Earlier we presented two possible explanations of the contradiction between Paul's anxiety and his prohibition of anxiety (Phil. 4:6). Further study solves the problem, for William Barclay in his book *New Testament Words* shows quite conclusively that there is a *virtuous* type of anxiety (deep concern or burden for God, our fellow-men, etc.: Phil. 2:20; 1 Cor. 12:25; 2 Cor. 11:28) as well as a *sinful* type of anxiety (worrying because we doubt God's love and power, or because our values are out of order: Matt. 6:25-34; Luke 10:40-42).

But the bigger question still remains and hounds us: Why is life so full of afflictions and foes and fears and tears? One time a young

man in Manila asked me in desperation, "Why is life so hard? When I love someone, she does not love me in return; and when someone is attracted to me, she is not a person whom I can love. Why is life like that?" The Bible does not answer all the questions which perplex our minds and pierce our hearts, but it does provide helpful insights to strengthen our faith.

God's PURPOSES in Our Problems

One reason for problems is *that we might experience, and then share, God's consolation*. "The God of all comfort comforts us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God" (2 Cor. 1:3-4).

Someone has observed that God, comforts us, not to make us **comforted**, but to make us **comforters**. A preacher I know has been used by God to counsel and console people suffering from nervous depression because he himself once suffered months of similar hopeless despair, before God delivered him. Our sorrows should make us sympathetic, and God's comfort provides us with testimonies to share.

A second purpose in our problems is this: *to knock self-dependence out of us*. "We were *so* utterly, unbearably crushed that we despaired of life itself. Why, we felt that we had received the sentence of death; but that was to make us rely not on ourselves but on God who raises the dead" (1:8-9).

Confidence in our selves -- our abilities or training or experiences or knowledge or past successes -- is one of the most subtle enemies of the Christian. It infiltrates our hearts so sneakily that perhaps we fail to notice for a long time. But our Father sends troubles to wake us up, as William Cowper observes in his great hymn, "'Tis My Happiness Below":

Trials make the promise sweet;
Trials give new life to prayer;
Trials bring me to His feet,
Lay me low, and keep me there.

How we need this ministry of affliction in our lives, to deflate our proud self-sufficiency. John Stott points out, "An honest and humble acknowledgement of the hopeless evil of our flesh, even after the new birth, is the first step to holiness. To speak quite plainly, some of us are not leading holy lives for the simple reason that we have too high an opinion of ourselves. The only way to arrive at faith in the power of the Holy Spirit is along the road of self-despair. No device exists to settle this issue for good. The power and subtlety

of the flesh are such that we dare not relax for one moment. The only hope is unremitting vigilance and dependence" (*Men Made New*).

A third purpose in our problems is, *to demonstrate God's power*. "We have this treasure [that is, the Gospel salvation] in earthen vessels, to show that the transcendent power belongs to God and not to us" (2 Cor. 4:7; see vs. 8-11, too).

Paul here compares himself to a clay pot which was used in those days as a lamp. Oil was placed in the pot, a wick was lit, and there was light. The important thing was the light, not the container. The latter was usually small, cheap, and unimpressive-looking; just a plain earthenware vessel. But the light it held was a valuable treasure. In the same way Paul was not very impressive (nor are we). Yet he bore a fabulous treasure, the divine light of the Gospel of Christ's glory (vs. 4-6).

Paul seems to be saying: "If I were personally impressive or overwhelming, if you did see me bristling with power, what would make me any different from any other powerful, impressive personality in the world? As it is, you see me in all my weaknesses, in this 'earthen vessel,' but this is exactly where God can be God. You can know the power in my ministry is God's because you can trace so little of it in me. The way I am you can be sure 'that the transcendent power belongs to God and not to me'" --*A Theology of the Holy Spirit*, by Frederick Dale Bruner

God's POWER In Our Problems

This theme of the inter-relatedness of problems and power is developed at greater length in 1st Corinthians, chapter 12.

To keep me from becoming conceited because of these surpassingly great revelations, there was given me a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan to torment me. Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it from me. But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you for my power is made perfect in weakness." Therefore, I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me. That is why, for Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong (2 Cor. 12:7-10).

Paul asked God for subtraction: take away this thorn. But instead, God gave him addition: along with your thorn, I will give you sufficient grace. "My grace is all you need," as the NEB translates it. Outer difficulties and inner weaknesses are intended to keep us humble, for only then are we useable. God taught Paul that power comes not through deliverance from all weaknesses, but through ac-

cepting and enduring those which are His will. Until Christ returns, Christians will experience various weaknesses -- perhaps physical, or mental, or emotional, or circumstantial. But God's grace is available amid them all.

"Some weaknesses are apparently never to be overcome, they are to be used. They can in fact become the source of divine power in its perfection. Paul's opponents said, 'ONCE we were weak, NOW we are strong' (see 1 Cor. 4:10). Paul, however learned to say, 'WHEN I am weak, THEN I am strong.'" (Bruner). God uses us, *not* because we are *able*, but because we are *feeble*. He delights to use the foolish, the weak, the low and despised, the nobodies, "so that no human being might boast in the presence of God . . . As it is written, Let him who boasts, boast of the Lord" (1 Cor. 1:26-31).

It Takes All Kinds of People to Make a Church

When I was a small boy, I read a story about a little girl named Nancy, who didn't like to brush her teeth. She neglected them so much that one night they decided to run away. When she woke up the next morning, she was shocked to discover she was totally toothless.

She soon found them swimming and washing themselves in the sink. "Oh, pleethe, little teef," Nancy lisped, "come back where you belong." But they refused because she never cared for them properly. So she begged and coaxed and promised and cried until finally they felt so sorry for her they decided to go "home," but only on the condition that she would brush them twice every day without fail. As a small boy I was impressed by this story with the importance of coordination in the body. Real trouble occurs if any part of our body decides to go on strike! But long before Nancy, the apostle Paul made the same point.

Christ is like a *single* body with its many limbs and organs, which, many as they are, together make up *one* body. . . . Suppose the foot should say, "Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body," it does belong to the body nonetheless. Suppose the ear were to say, "Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body," it does still belong to the body. If the body were all eye, how could it hear? If the body were all ear, how could it smell? . . . If the whole were one single organ, there would not be a body at all; in fact, however, there are many *different* organs, but *one* body. (1 Cor. 12:12 ff. NEB; emphasis added)

Paul stresses two points here: unity and diversity. He wants us to remember that our diversity springs from unity and that our unity expresses itself in diversity.

Unity

Repeatedly the New Testament proclaims the unity that exists among Christians. We have the same Father, so we are one family. We have the same Savior, so we are one redeemed people with one common salvation. We have the same indwelling Holy Spirit, so we share one new birth and new life. We have the same Bible to follow, the same holiness of conduct to seek, the same enemy to fight, and the same destiny to hope for.

Remember all this. Apply it. Live it out. "We are one in the Spirit, we are one in the Lord . . . and they'll know we are Christians by our love."

Diversity

In spite of our unity, we come from different races, nations, and cultures. We have various temperaments and varying degrees of wealth and education. We have distinct interests and abilities. We come from differing backgrounds and have been taught sometimes conflicting interpretations of Scripture.

Thus we have various strengths and weaknesses. Your eye is good for looking at things but useless for holding a spoon. Your ear is suited for hearing but not for chewing or digesting (if you don't believe that, try putting your rice into your ear the next time you eat.)

Unity in Diversity: The Apostles

The New Testament gives several striking examples of the rich diversity among Jesus' earliest followers. Consider the brothers Peter and Andrew. The former was a natural leader, noisy and impulsive, always the center of attention; the latter was a follower, quiet and often unnoticed.

Two other apostles show even greater contrast. Matthew had been a tax collector, an agent of the IRS. Tax collectors were hated by the Jews as traitors, because they were willing to milk their countrymen in order to help the Roman Imperialists. When Mark and Luke listed the twelve apostles in their gospels, they omitted any mention of Matthew's former occupation. Probably they felt, "Why remind our readers of that embarrassing fact? Why stigmatize our brother?" But Matthew himself mentioned it! He never ceased to be amazed that a social outcast like himself was selected by King Jesus to be not only saved but an apostle.

On the other hand, another apostle was Simon the Zealot (or "the Patriot" or "the Nationalist," as some modern translations put it). The Zealots were the party of Jews who favored armed rebellion against Rome. They opposed paying taxes to the foreign, pagan emperor because that was treason against the Lord, Israel's true king. A man named Judas had founded the Zealots about twenty-five years before Jesus' public ministry. The revolution he led was squashed and he himself was killed by the Romans. Yet the movement lived on until A.D.73, when it ended with mass suicides at the Masada fortress.

The zealots were *zealous*. Today we would call them activists. Their most fanatical members carried daggers hidden under their robes. If a good chance arose to assassinate a Roman soldier or Jewish traitor (such as a tax collector), they might put their daggers to work. Those men were the first century's *terrorists*!

Before becoming a follower of Jesus, Matthew probably had some choice names for men like Simon: "Dirty rebel! Left-wing extremist! Radical destroyer of peace and order! And who knows--maybe he's an arsonist or assassin!" And before knowing Jesus, Simon had probably spat with contempt whenever he thought about guys like Matthew: "Double-crosser! Filthy capitalist pig! Stick-in-the-mud reactionary!"

But now, since each of them had been captivated by Jesus and had joined his band of followers, that new loyalty to him replaced and transformed their former loyalties. Imagine the impact this pair would have on an audience in an open-air evangelistic meeting. Some of the hearers might jeer and boo as Matthew gave his testimony, but then listen with astonishment to Simon. Others might react just the opposite, and be turned off by Simon but deeply impressed by Matthew's witness. But *all* would sit up and take notice at the sight of an ex-Zealot and an ex-tax collector living together in love.

Antioch's Team of leaders

The church leaders in Antioch provide another example of unity amid diversity (Acts 13:1). Manaen had grown up in court as a boyhood friend of Herod Antipas. He had been invited to the high society parties given by the Rockefellers and Kennedys of that era. Simeon, "called the Black" (Good News Bible), was almost certainly a black man from Africa (Acts 11:19, 20). Lucius too was from the North African city of Cyrene, hundreds of miles west of Egypt. Barnabas was originally from the island of Cyprus. And Saul had come from Tarsus, north of Antioch, but had gotten his seminary training in Jerusalem under the famous Professor Gamaliel.

What differences! *Geographically*, they sprang from far-distant regions. Simeon was a black man, creating *racial* differences. Being an aristocrat, Manaen was distinct *socially* and *economically*. *Academically*, Saul outranked the rest with a Ph.D. and/or Th.D. Manaen's *political* background was with the Herodian-party. *Theologically*, Saul had been a Pharisee.

Yet despite all their differences, they harmonized in serving Christ and leading his church. What a model for us to follow. We should be seeing the same sort of thing today: modern-day Simons and Matthews, Sauls and Simeons and Manaens, all in coordination under the direction of the Holy Spirit.

Insights from the Fourth Century

A fascinating analogy is found in the writings of Cyril of Jerusalem, a Christian leader during the 300s. He raised the question, Why did Christ use *water* as a symbol of the Holy Spirit (in John 7:37-39, for example)?

Then he answers. First, because water is so *important*. "Plants and animals need water for their life," just as we need God's Spirit. Second, because like the Holy Spirit, "water *comes down from heaven*, as rain." And third, because water "comes down in one form [rain], but then *works in many different ways*."

"One and the same rain falls on the whole world. But then it becomes white in the lily, red in the rose, yellow in the hyacinth. It takes one form in the palm tree, quite another in the vine. In each it is different, although in itself it is always the same. So it is also with the Holy Spirit, who is one and undivided but yet gives himself to each as He will. Although the Holy Spirit is of one kind, He nevertheless works every variety of virtue. He helps one to speak, gives to another the power to drive out demons, enlightens another to prophesy, bestows on another the gift of interpreting divine Scripture. In one He works in this way, in another in that way, although He Himself remains the same."

Well said, brother Cyril. As the Holy Spirit is one but delights in variety, so the church is both one and diverse. Because of our *oneness*, we need each other. An individual Christian neglecting fellowship with other believers is about like an amputated arm--useless. Because of our *diversity* we need each other. You can do for me what I cannot do for myself, and I can do for you what you cannot do for yourself. And this is the way our Father means for it to be. Let's bloom together as one garden of the Holy Spirit. Let's work together as one body of Jesus Christ.

God on the move--

Oh GOD! Do It AGAIN!

Compiled by the Editor from Various Sources

It happened in Canada, not too far away. It happened in 1971-2, not too long ago. Certainly if the Lord did it there and then, He can do it here and now.

What are we talking about? *Spiritual awakening*, or *revival*--a deep moving by the Lord that stirred His people from their apathy, stripped them of their smug self-righteousness, and strengthened them to serve Him and others.

Where and How It Began

Saskatoon is a city of 130,000 in the middle of Canada's mid-western province of Saskatchewan. The minister of a Baptist church there, Wilbert McLeod, was deeply concerned about his congregation. For two years he had given himself to a ministry of prayer for them, but conditions seemed dry and almost dead. He invited the twin evangelists, Lou and Ralph Sutura of Ohio, to hold a campaign for the church, yearning for his flock to walk nearer to God and to rescue the perishing around them.

So the meetings began on October 13, 1971. From various eyewitness reports we glean the following information. There was no hype or high pressure in the services, and no sensationalism. "The Sutura Twins made no attempt to promote themselves in any part of the crusade.... The meetings have broken with the tradition of a highly advertised talent display." About two hundred people attended the opening meetings, and "the Lord really honored His Word, as given in 2 Chron. 7:14. The whole congregation got right with God and with one another. Two brothers who had not associated with one another for many, many years confessed their faults to each other" and later sang together in some of the meetings. Some families drove thirty miles out of the city, early in the morning, to ask forgiveness from those against whom they had held a grudge for many years.

The campaign stretched from one week to two. Then as attendance increased, the meetings moved to another meeting hall, and two nights later moved again to a chapel with a capacity of one thousand. When that was insufficient, a fourth place was used, seating 1,800. For some weeks the week-night attendance there averaged 900, and two meetings per Sunday drew "approximately 1700 at each and an overflow meeting of four hundred. Hundreds lined up outside the church waiting to get in." Denominational boundaries

were transcended, as followers of Jesus from various backgrounds flocked to meet God afresh.

Spontaneous Testimonies

An eyewitness gave this description: "No excessive emotionalism was manifest, but a contagious joy was evidenced as people, spontaneously, testified before the huge crowds, of the wonderful release that God had given as they died to self and gave their lives to Christ. About 40% of those that spoke were young people, some of whom had been delivered from drugs, alcohol and other binding habits.

"A significant number of people who had suffered from mental breakdowns were completely healed. One young woman, who had been diagnosed as a schizophrenic, is a living vibrant testimony to what God can do when all else fails. She had received over thirty electric shock treatments, was taking twenty pills a day, and then living in defeat. Her doctor had said that there was no hope for her. But, as she gave herself completely to Christ, He set her free.

"Numerous homes, some already broken up, have been reunited. One young woman, whose husband had left her, was in such a state of depression, that she was contemplating suicide. But that night, after Christians had prayed for her until the morning hours, she also found joy and release in giving her life to God. A few nights later her husband also put his trust in Jesus Christ, and today they are happier than ever before.

"The unspoken theme of the revival is honesty before God and man. As a result God has spoken to many to make restitution for thefts in the past. Businessmen of the city have been more than surprised as people have called on them to pay for stolen goods."

This matter (restitution) is what the local newspaper emphasized when it finally mentioned the spiritual awakening. On Nov. 12, the *Star Phoenix* gave several instances:

One man told a recent meeting he had defrauded the Workmen's Compensation board and would report his actions and repay what he owed. Bob McPherson, manager of Zeller's County Fair, said two persons had confessed to stealing from his store. One was on welfare and offered to repay a portion from each check. Another admitted theft and offered to work, free of charge, to pay for what was taken. Blair Bustard, manager at The Bay, said a customer appeared last week wanting to pay for something stolen previously. Frank Hammond, Manager at Simpsons-Sears, said two persons appeared recently, wanting to pay for stolen property. A store employee paid money into the lunchroom coffee fund for coffee he had taken without paying.

Taking Time to be Holy

Another result of the revival was that people quit being in a rush to "get the meeting over with so I can get home and do what I really want to do." Services ran for three hours or more, and usually were followed by what became known as "afterglow" sessions which sometimes lasted till after midnight. "Here each one is given a chance to share what God has done for them. No one needs coaxing as people with a holy joy in their voices express their love for the Savior. Here also the opportunity is given to tell of a spiritual need in one's life. A unique feature of these groups is that several lay people will relate to the one with the need, and counsel and pray that one through to spiritual victory. As people have continued to get right with their Lord, we have noticed that the majority of them have confessed to a spirit of pride, selfishness or self-will. In the past it has always been 'my husband, my home, my car, my family, my business,' etc. Now the emphasis is upon the Lord Jesus Christ and others."

Thus people escaped from the tyranny of the clock. A taxi driver could hardly believe his ears when a lady asked him to take her to a church meeting after midnight. What church is usually open at that time? Even the times of some of the regular meetings were irregular, not by design but due to shifting from one meeting-place to another, etc. Yet "the public sought out the meetings in unprecedented numbers. It was as if they would not be denied. There was no escaping the conviction that this was the work of the Spirit of God acting sovereignly in defiance of all the gimmicks and fanfare that have come to characterize evangelistic crusades in our modern day."

Marks of the Revival

The preceding quotation is from H. Robert Cowles, at that time the editor of *The Alliance Witness*, a fine Christian journal. He traveled two thousand miles to see the awakening for himself. We continue with some of his evaluations:

"It was a revival of *the Word*. 'Suddenly the Bible has all sorts of verses that *mean* something,' one man expressed it... The church was being the church. The saints, empowered by the Holy Spirit, were doing the work of the ministry. Believers were witnessing to the unconverted. Christians were sharing their experiences with each other. The Holy Spirit was using both ministries to edify and add to His church.

"It was a deep work of God that *did not stop with the forgiveness of sins* and conversion to Christ, wonderful as that peace with God

is. It moved on to deal with sin in the inward parts of the believer and to bring death to self and a willingness to say honestly that Jesus Christ is *Lord*.

"It was a revival of *love*. It closed the generation gap. Estranged husbands and wives, radiant in their newfound joy, were like newly-weds. Sisters long out of fellowship embraced each other in tears of joy. And perhaps the ultimate in love: a mother of three children testified with a holy glow on her countenance that God had given her love for the woman who robbed her of her husband.

"It was a revival that *loosed reluctant tongues*. Timid people who 'couldn't have been paid' to stand up before a group were testifying fearlessly, and honestly, 'This is just fantastic,' they would remark, hardly able to believe the wonder of it all.

"It was a revival that brought *restitution*. It was a personal revival. 'Revival is God's finger pointed at me,' was a recurring theme. As the Holy Spirit convicted of sin, people hastened to walk in the light.

"It was a revival of *joy without fanaticism, confession without impropriety*. There were healings, but they were peripheral to the *main emphasis of believers being honest with God* and with each other so that their prayers would not be hindered. And in that climate the *unconverted pressed into the Kingdom*." (End of quote from Jan. 19, 1972)

Comings and Goings

As news about the revival spread, people drove in from two, three, even five hundred miles to get in on what God was doing. "Carloads of students from area Bible schools came to let the Lord transform them and returned to let the Lord transform their campuses." One of the Saskatoon preachers traveled to far-off Toronto to speak at a seminary. As he shared what God had done and had taught His people in the awakening, the Holy Spirit moved powerfully among his hearers, both students and faculty. The seminary dean later told him, "God accomplished more in a day and a half than in the last fifteen years."

After seven weeks of nightly meetings, often followed by "after-glow" sessions, plus daytime "men only" and "women only" meetings, the center of activity shifted from Saskatoon to Regina, one hundred fifty miles south. And again, the movement soon spread into neighboring towns and cities. Teams of lay-people whom God had touched spread out to visit places with picturesque names like Swift Current and Moose Jaw. Other teams went farther off, to Toronto,

Vancouver, Winnipeg, and cities in the U.S. The Lord used them to bring many to repentance and renewal. For example, among the fifty or so people who publicly responded one night at Winnipeg were three *preachers* who came "to meet God."

And so God carried on His work powerfully. Fifteen years later it was reported that those areas most deeply touched by this revival were the ones where congregations had grown the most, and where there were the most people entering Bible schools, enlisting in various types of ministry, and going into missionary work around the world.

We conclude by recounting the reaction of one of the preachers in Saskatoon just as the revival was beginning. He generously offered his church-building as a meeting place after the attendance outgrew the first two chapels. He even cancelled some activities previously planned for his congregation, because he realized that *God was on the move* and he didn't want to miss out on it. Yet, at the same time his heart was divided. So that night he took an obscure seat in the balcony of his own church building and, as he later confessed, critically watched the service unfold. He felt the song service was below average. And the movement of the service seemed "clumsy and inelegant." He had been wondering why God had sent the revival to the Baptists anyway, instead of to his church. After all, his was the largest evangelical congregation in town.

But "*suddenly God came upon that service*. It was taken over by the Holy Spirit of Almighty God and everyone knew it." Hearts were stirred and broken by the Lord, including that preacher's, who humbled himself and again got right with God. In the following days he and his flock were richly blessed and used along with other churches and leaders who humbled themselves before God. And in the end that preacher testified, "In all my ministry I've never seen anything so quiet, so dynamic, so deep." How glad he was that he hadn't missed out while *God was on the move!*

--Reprinted from October '92 W&W

VOICES from the FIELDS

Tim & Dawn Yates
Oct. 29, 2004

Charlestown, NSW Australia

[This letter was misplaced for some time, so goes back a long ways. Sorry. -avw]

Nothing describes the ministry here in the last few months more than "growth." Our last newsletter focused on the positive influence of the "40 Days of Purpose" campaign. Now we can begin to report about how things have grown since that time.

Our "spring" growth began with an amazing 85 people involved in our Christmas-in-July program. What a wonderful experience to have our church filled with people to whom we are reaching out with the Gospel! The Kid's Club program (ages 8-12) also had over 80 kids at one of its special programs, and continues to have nearly 50 kids on a regular basis. That's amazing for a ministry that has only been running for a year and a half.

In February of this year (2004) -- the beginning of our school year -- Dawn and I agreed to start up our Youth Group again. We started with just four high schoolers. It has now grown to about 20 and some of them are starting to make decisions to follow the Lord! Praise God for His work!

Of course, the challenge is in incorporating this new growth into the church. Our worship services have reflected this by including more people involved in the program.

We are happy to say that we have recently been approved as citizens of Australia! While it won't be official until a swearing-in ceremony in January, we are delighted to have dual-citizenship and to travel and live freely between the US and Australia! This means no more paperwork!

Finally, we'd like to mention that Lord willing, we will be on furlough between the end of June and the end of September of 2005. We would sincerely like to visit all of our supporting churches, but need to start booking now and have heard from very few of you. Please schedule now for churches, camps, VBS and anything else you would like us to attend. We look forward to hearing from you and to seeing you.

Passing Through

*When thou passest through the waters,
they shall not overflow thee -- Isaiah 43:2*

"When Thou passest through the waters,"
Deep the waves may be, and cold,
But Jehovah is our refuge
And His promise is our hold;
For the Lord Himself hath said it,
He the faithful God and true;
"When thou comest to the waters,
Thou shalt not go down, but through.

Seas of sorrow, seas of trial,
Bitterest anguish, fiercest pain,
Rolling surges of temptation,
Sweeping over heart and brain,
They shall never overflow us,
For we know His word is true;
All His waves and all His billows
He will lead us safely through.

Threatening breakers of destruction,
Doubt's insidious undertow,
Shall not sink us, shall not drag us
Out to ocean depths of woe;
For His promise shall sustain us,
Praise the Lord, whose word is true!
We shall not go down or under,
He hath said, "Thou passest through."

-- Annie Johnson Flint