

Alpha Talks

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Table of Contents

Introduction Alpha Sermon.....	3
Talk 1: Christianity: Boring, Untrue, and Irrelevant? Is This All There is?.....	9
Talk 2: Who is Jesus? Why Should I Care?.....	22
Talk 3: Why Did Jesus Die? Why Am I Not Where I Want to Be?	33
Talk 4: How Can I Be Sure of My Faith?.....	42
Talk 5: How and Why Should I read the Bible? How Does God Speak to Me?	56
Talk 6: Why and How Do I Pray?	72
Talk 7: How Does God Guide Us?	90
Talk 8: Who is the Holy Spirit?	102
Talk 9: What Does the Holy Spirit Do?.....	116
Talk 10: How Can I Be Filled with the Spirit?	125
Talk 11: How Can I Resist Evil?	138
Talk 12: Why and How should we Tell Others?.....	155
Talk 13: Does God Heal Today?	164
Talk 14: What About the Church?	177
Talk 15: How Can I Make the Most of the Rest of My Life?.....	203

Introduction Alpha Sermon

January 5, 2003

I am not a natural evangelist. I have never found it easy to talk to my friends about Jesus. Some persons find this to be the easiest thing in the world. I am not one of them. Few people would accuse the United Methodist Church of being pushy in this area.

I became a Christian through the Christian community. As a young person, I found that the people of the church possessed a quality of life that I knew I wanted in my life. Of course, the church did not focus upon itself. It helped me to look to Christ. I took my first steps toward following Jesus within the youth group. The church I attended was from the wrong side of the tracks. I was embarrassed to say what I church I attended, even though I loved the church and the people in it. I never went through a phase when I was “obnoxious” about my faith. If anything, I tend to be rather timid and even fearful. My years as a pastor have helped me get over that phase, but those feelings still lurk around inside me. I find it especially difficult if I know someone is of a different religion, such as Jewish or Muslim. I admit that I have stumbled many times in sharing my faith.

The Alpha program is ideal for the many ordinary Christians who share my fear and lack of giftedness in sharing our faith. It is evangelism for ordinary people.

I would like for you to hear a few things about the United Methodist Church that ought to concern us all.

At the same time, we can see signs of new life. Our South Indiana Annual Conference is establishing new churches and encouraging mergers of smaller congregations to meet the needs of their communities.

Alpha currently runs in more than fifty countries. It works in a variety of cultures. Nicky Gumbel suggests New Testament principles upon which he has based Alpha.

First, evangelism is most effective through the local church. Although crusades like those of Billy Graham can reach many people and re-vitalize many churches, we will bear more lasting fruit if we make evangelism part of the ongoing program of the local church. If someone becomes a Christian through a program of the local church, they become familiar with the place and the people, and are therefore much more likely to remain true to their Christian discipleship.

Such an approach mobilizes a whole army of evangelists. When someone volunteers to help in an Alpha course, he or she is engaged in evangelism. Alpha puts evangelism within the grasp of ordinary people who would be terrified at the thought of evangelism. Our vision of the evangelist is often the outgoing person; alpha encourages the shy or quiet person to share his or her faith.

Such an approach is based upon our friendship circles. Peter brought Andrew; Philip brought his friend Nathanael; the woman at the well went back and told everyone in her town; Matthew the tax collector threw a party and invited all his co-workers to meet Jesus.

Second, evangelism is a process. The birth of a child is a wonderful event. It is preceded by a process and it is followed by a process. Alpha is a ten-week

course involving a total of fifteen talks that include a weekend and a celebration party at the end. People need time to think, watch, listen, and to talk through their questions and difficulties. Each person is beginning at a different stage. Some are already Christians but will often say that at the start of the course they were Christians without any real experience of God. Some are atheists. Some have lifestyles very far from that which Christianity accepts. Some are alcoholics, compulsive gamblers, and so on. We welcome them all. Some will complete the course and still not be Christians at the end. We hope they will be unable to say they have not heard the gospel. For nearly all of them, Alpha will enable them to take a step forward in their relationship with God. The fifteen sessions enables us to give longer time to aspects of the Christian faith than would be true under other circumstances.

Third, evangelism involves the whole person. It appeals to the mind because we believe that Christianity is based on the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The bible is the primary text. We appeal to the heart by inviting people into a love relationship with Jesus. It appeals to our sense of right and wrong, and thus invites us to reflect upon the course of our lives and to repent and turn to Christ. We appeal to the will in that as Jesus called for a decision, so does Alpha call for a decision in our relationship toward Jesus.

Fourth, models of evangelism in the New Testament include classical, holistic, and power evangelism. Classical evangelism proclaims the good news in words. Holistic evangelism involves the ministry of social action and caring for

the total person. Power evangelism involves prayer for physical, spiritual, and emotional healing.

Fifth, evangelism in the power of the Holy Spirit is both dynamic and effective.

Sixth, effective evangelism requires the filling and re-filling of the Spirit.

I cannot describe myself as a natural evangelist. However, I do have much sympathy and feeling for those outside of the church. Even though I have spent much of my life in the church, my preaching and teaching has an eye on the person still questioning and seeking. Samuel Shoemaker has a wonderful poem entitled, "I Stand by the Door."

I stand by the door.
I neither go too far in, nor stay too far out.
The door is the most important door in the world –
It is the door through which people walk when they find God.
There's no use my going way inside, and staying there.
When so many are still outside and they, as much as I,
Crave to know where the door is.
And all that so many ever find
Is only the wall where a door ought to be.
They creep along the wall like blind people,
With outstretched, groping hands.
Feeling for a door, knowing there must be a door,
Yet they never find it. ...
So I stand by the door.

The most tremendous thing in the world
Is for people to find that door – the door to God.
The most important thing people can do
Is to take hold of one of those blind, groping hands,
And put it on the latch – the latch that only clicks
And opens to the people's own touch.
People die outside that door, as starving beggars die
On cold nights in cruel cities in the dead of winter –
Die for want of what is within their grasp.
They live, on the other side of it – live because they have not found it,
Nothing else matters compared to helping them find it,

And open it, and walk in, and find God ...
So I stand by the door.
Go in, great saints, go all the way in –
Go way down into the cavernous cellars,
And way up into the spacious attics –
It is a vast, roomy house, this house where God is.
Go into the deepest fo hidden casements,
Of withdrawal, of silence, of sainthood.
Some must inhabit those inner rooms,
And know the depth and heights of God,
And call outside to the rest of us how wonderful it is.
Sometimes I take a deeper look in,
Sometimes venture in a little farther;
But my place seems closer to the opening ...
So I stand by the door.

There is another reason why I stand there.
Some people get part way in and become afraid
Lest God and the zeal of God's house devour them;
For God is so very great, and asks all of us.
And these people feel a cosmic claustrophobia,
And want to get out. "Let me out!" they cry.
And the people way inside only terrify them more.
Somebody must be by the door to tell them that they are spoiled
For the old life, they have seen too much:
Once taste God, and nothing but God will do anymore.
Somebody must be watching for the frightened
Who seek to sneak out just where they came in,
To tell them how much better it is inside.

The people too far in do not see how near these are
To leaving –preoccupied with the wonder of it all.
Somebody must watch for those who have entered the door,
But would like to run away. So for them, too,
I stand by the door.
I admire the people who go away in.
But I wish they would not forget how it was
Before they got in. then they would be able to help
The people who have not yet even found the door,
Or the people who want to run away again from God.
You can go in too deeply, and stay in too long,
And forget the people outside the door.
As for me, I shall take my old accustomed place
Near enough to God to hear God, and know God is there,
But not so far from people as not hear them,
And remember they are there, too.

Where? Outside the door –
Thousands of them, millions of them.
But – more important for me –o-
One of them, two of them, ten of them,
Whose hands I am intended to put on the latch.
So I shall stand by the door and wait
For those who seek it.
“I had rather be a door-keeper ...”
So I stand by the door.

Sermon to Go

The text of this message is on <http://geocities.com/georgeplast/sermons.html>

Key Points

1. The word “evangelism” often makes us uncomfortable.
2. Alpha is evangelism for ordinary people.
3. Alpha works within the local church.
4. Alpha works with our friendship circles.
5. Alpha views evangelism and conversion as a process.
6. Alpha involves the whole person: mind, heart, and will.
7. Alpha opens people to the work of the Holy Spirit as a source of transformation of our lives, power to live the Christian life, and to experience the fullness of the Spirit.

Exploring New Ideas

Alpha may be a new idea to you. You might consider setting aside time to learn what Alpha has to teach. You might reflect upon your friendship circles, considering folks who may need this exposure to Christian teaching. You might consider helping by hosting one evening or assisting with a meal.

Let’s Live It!

Think of evangelism as an act of love for people about whom you care. Are there people in your family, co-workers, neighbors, and friends, who need Christ? If so, pray for an opportunity to invite them to a church event. Alpha would be a good way to begin.

Talk 1: Christianity: Boring, Untrue, and Irrelevant? Is This All There is?

Introduction

As a young person in the Lutheran church in Austin, MN, I thought the church was quite boring. I intentionally sat at the end of the pew so that I could place my head on the armrest. It became a headrest for me. Apparently, many people have had that experience. Robert Louis Stevenson once entered in his diary, as if recording an extraordinary phenomenon, "I have been to church today, and am not depressed." Oliver Wendell Holmes wrote, "I might have entered the ministry if certain clergymen I knew had not looked and acted so much like undertakers." The view that the Christian faith is dreary and uninspiring is broader than many of us ministers would like to think.

I continue to deal with questions concerning the truthfulness of Christianity. In our modern culture, the option of not believing in God has become a live option for many. A completely secular life has become persuasive to many persons. In Europe, many have turned their backs on the church and on God. Many people live lives that appear quite happy and meaningful, while at the same time have no connection with any religious community. Further, we live in a multi-religious context. We hear many competing religious claims. Yet, religion has contributed to the tensions in our world, especially with terrorism and the Middle East.

I wonder about whether Christianity is relevant. How can something that happened to a Jew two thousand years ago in the Middle East have any relevance to my life and to the matters that face the world today?

I had the good fortune of having a mother who made sure that I went to church. The church to which she brought me was one in which the preacher taught the bible in an open and direct way. It proved to be a loving and gracious community, one that provided models of adult life that I lacked at home.

We live in a secular culture that does not have adequate knowledge about Jesus, the church, or Christianity. One hospital chaplain in England listed some of the replies people gave him to the question, "Would you like Holy Communion?" These are some of the answers:

No thanks, I am a member of the Church of England.
No thanks, I asked for cornflakes.
No thanks, I have never been circumcised.

You may not be a Christian and wonder why anyone would be. You look at the Crusades, the witch-hunts, religious broadcasting, boring music and sermons, and wonder how it can be relevant.

You may not yet be a Christian, and you are thinking of becoming one. However, you worry that becoming a Christian means you will need to become narrow, judgmental, arrogant, and a worse person than you are now. You may think you have to become Republican or Democrat, or that you have to like organ music, or say praise the Lord every time you turn around.

You may already be a Christian, but you consider leaving. Jesus is not the problem, but the Christian community has become a problem. The bible

becomes a problem because of passages that seem barbaric. You may be bored with the faith. You may have fatigue with the meetings and programs.

You may have concern for the theological challenges occurring in the Christian community.

You may be new to the Christian community, and you want to learn the lay of the land. I want to introduce you to what I have discovered. I hope I can steer you away from the mistaken beliefs, needless sidetracks, and dead ends.¹ I hope I can steer you away from bad teaching, as well as bad teaching about teaching.

No matter how secular we become, the question of a meaningful and purposeful life is an important one. In the movie *City Slickers* a baby boomer in the throes of a mid-life crisis wonders aloud, "Have you ever reached a point in your life when you say to yourself, 'This is the best I'm ever gone look, the best I'm ever gonna feel, the best I'm ever gonna do – and it ain't that good?'" He decides to face his loss of confidence by participating in a western cattle drive. While he is riding alongside the drive boss, Curley, the grizzled old cowboy begins a discourse on the meaning of life:

"Do you know what the secret of life is?"

"no. What?"

"This," holding up one finger.

"Your finger?"

"One thing, just one thing. You stick to that and everything else don't mean s_____"

"That's great. But what's the one thing?"

That's what you've got to figure out."

We have two important birthdays. One is when we receive the gift of life. The other is when we discover why.

¹ Brian McLaren, *A Generous Orthodoxy*, p. 15-18.

A man was on a business trip to New York. He tagged along with some friends of us to a brief discussion with young married couples, a group led by a Christian. This man grew up in a home with no religious instruction. He graduated from one of the large universities with little contact with religion. A few days after the seminar, doctors diagnosed him with polio. The leader of the seminar visited him in the hospital. Over the process of several months, the leader and friends helped him and his family. He reached out for faith. However, after a surprisingly good recovery, he came to the home of the leader of that seminar around Christmas. "I do not know what I am looking for, but I think I am looking for somebody to thank." The leader said, "I think I know who you mean. Let us thank God now."²

In the earliest days of the church, these believers of the Way (Acts 9:2) experienced a bond through their conviction that they had finally found the one thing that gave their lives meaning. As followers of Jesus Christ, they had embarked upon a new way of life that offered them a definite sense of purpose.

I have come to think of Christianity as exciting, true, and relevant. The Gospel of John (14:6) has Jesus say, "I am the way and the truth and the life." If he was right, and I believe he was, then there can be nothing more important in this life than our response to him. If you are searching for that one thing in life that will give your life fullness and meaning, this series of talks will invite you to consider Christianity in your quest.

I. Directions for a lost world

² Samuel Shoemaker, *How to Become a Christian*, 1953, p. 28.

One of the metaphors the bible uses is that of exile. In exile, people experience separation from home, emptiness, and longing for home. In exile, people wonder if they will ever be home again. They wonder if meaning and purpose will belong to them. The divine answer is one of return home, and therefore reconnection with the center of life.

God created men and women to live in a relationship with God. Without that relationship, there will always be hunger, emptiness, and feeling that something is missing. Prince Charles once spoke of his belief that, for all the advances of science, “there remains deep in the soul, a persistent and unconscious anxiety that something is missing, some ingredient that makes life worth living.”

Among the more important skills we need to learn in order to live well a human life is to ask good, simple, direct questions. One such set of questions simply asks, “Is this all there is.?” We have an example of such questioning by Nicodemus. He was a spiritual person, but he felt that something was still missing. Late one night, Nicodemus came to see Jesus and said, “Teacher, you must tell me. Is this all there is to life? There has to be something more than what I have experienced so far.” Jesus answered, in essence, “If you want a new life, you’ve got to begin again at the very beginning. You’ve got to start out on a brand new way.”

Many of us have a sense that life must be something more to life, something more lasting, and something more substantial, than what typically occupies our attention. We long for a life that is rich with meaning and full of

purpose. If this longing remains unfulfilled, we carry around the gnawing suspicion that something is missing.

For a brief period near the end of his life, Albert Camus, the philosopher, attended a small Methodist church in France. In conversations with his pastor, Camus had this to say about his own search: “This man Nicodemus! He is seeking something that he does not have. I feel right at home with Nicodemus, because I too am uncertain about this whole matter of Christianity. The reasons I have been coming to church is because I am seeking. I’m almost on a pilgrimage – seeking something to fill the void I am experiencing. I am searching for something that the world is not giving me.”³

Bernard Levin once wrote an article called “Life’s Great Riddle, and No Time to Find Its Meaning.” In it, he spoke of the fact that in spite of his great success as a columnist for over twenty years, he feared that he might have “wasted reality in the chase of a dream.” He wrote:

To put it bluntly, have I time to discover why I was born before I die? ... I have not managed to answer the question yet, and however many years I have before me they are certainly not as many as there are behind. There is an obvious danger in leaving it too late ... why do I have to know why I was born? Because, of course, I am unable to believe that it was an accident; and if it wasn’t one, it must have a meaning.

Levin is not a Christian and writes emphatically, “For the fourteen thousandth time, I am not a Christian.” Yet he seems to be very aware of inadequate answers to the meaning of life. He wrote:

Countries like ours are full of people who have all the material comforts they desire, together with such non-material blessings as

³ From “Conversations with Camus,” by Howard Mumma, in *The Best Spiritual Writing of 2001*, edited by Philip Zaleski (HarperCollins, 2001), p. 192.

a happy family, and yet lead lives of quiet, and at times noisy, desperation, understanding nothing but the fact that there is a hole inside them and that however much food and drink they pour into it, however many motor cars and television sets they stuff it with, however many well balanced children and loyal friends they parade around the edges of it ... it aches.

Some people spend much of their lives seeking something that will give meaning and purpose to life. Leo Tolstoy wrote a book called *A Confession* in 1879 in which he tells the story of his search for meaning and purpose in life. He had rejected Christianity as a child. When he left the university, he sought to get as much pleasure out of life as he could. He entered the social world of Moscow and St. Petersburg, drinking heavily, living promiscuously, gambling, and leading a wild life. However, it did not satisfy him. Then he became ambitious for money. He had inherited an estate and made a large amount of money out of his books. Yet, that did not satisfy him either. He sought success, fame, and importance. These he also achieved. He wrote what the *Encyclopedia Britannica* describes "one of the two or three greatest novels in world literature." However, such success left him asking the question; "Well fine ... so what?" to which he had no answers. Then he became ambitious for his family, to give them the best possible life. He married in 1862 and had a kind, loving wife and thirteen children, which, he said, distracted him from any search for the overall meaning of life. He had achieved all his ambitions and happiness surrounded him. Yet, one question brought him to the verge of suicide; "Is there any meaning in my life that will not be annihilated by the inevitability of death which awaits me?" He searched for the answer in every field of science and philosophy. The only answer he could find to the question, "Why do I live?" was that "in the infinity of space and the infinity of

time infinitely small particles mutate with infinite complexity.” As he looked around at his contemporaries, he saw that people were not facing up to the first order questions of life, such as where did I come from, where am I heading, who am I, and about what is life? Eventually, he found the peasant people of Russia had been able to answer these questions through their Christian faith, and he came to realize that only in Jesus Christ do we find the answer.

Not much has changed since he died in 1910. Freddie Mercury, the lead singer of the British rock group Queen, who died at the end of 1991, wrote in one of his last songs on *The Miracle* album, “Does anybody know what we are living for?” In spite of the fact that he had amassed a huge fortune and had attracted thousands of fans, he admitted in an interview shortly before his death that he was desperately lonely. He said, “You can have everything in the world and still be the loneliest man, and that is the bitterest type of loneliness. Success has brought me world idolization and millions of pounds, but it’s prevented me from having the one thing we all need – a loving, ongoing relationship.”

He was right to speak of an “ongoing relationship” as the one thing we all need. Yet, no human relationship will satisfy entirely. Nor can it be completely ongoing. There always remains something missing. That is because God creates us to live in a relationship with God. Jesus said, “I am the way.”

No matter how much we get or what we achieve, sooner or later, we want something more. More of the same will not help; we need something beyond our experience. Augustine made the comment that our hearts are restless until they find rest in God. Every substitute will bring dissatisfaction.

Life without a relationship with God through Jesus Christ is like the television without the antenna. Some people seem quite happy, because they do not realize that there is something better. Once we have experienced a relationship with God, the purpose and meaning of life should become clear. We see things that we have never seen, and it would be foolish to want to return to the old life. We understand why God made us.

II. Reality in a confused world

Sometimes people say, “It does not matter what you believe so long as you are sincere.” However, it is possible to be sincerely wrong. Adolph Hitler was sincerely wrong. His beliefs destroyed the lives of millions of people. Muslim fundamentalists who kill American civilians and kill other Muslims sincerely believe Allah told them to do this. However, they are sincerely wrong. These are extreme examples, but they make the point that it matters what we believe, because what we believe will influence how we live.

Other people’s response to a Christian may be, “It’s great for you, but it is not for me.” This is not a logical position. If Christianity is true, it is of vital importance to every one of us. If it is not true, Christians are deluded and it is not great for us – it is very sad, and the sooner we are put right the better. As C. S. Lewis put it, “Christianity is a statement which, if false, is of no importance, and, if true, of infinite importance. The one thing it cannot be is moderately important.”⁴

Is it true? The linchpin of Christianity is the resurrection of Jesus Christ. This belief is more than intellectual assent to an historical fact. Such truth involves more than reading a book about it. It involves personal trust, taking the

⁴ C. S. Lewis, *Timeless at Heart*.

risk of entrusting our lives into the hands of God, as we know God through Jesus. As we come into relationship with the one who is truth, our perceptions change, and we begin to understand the truth about the world around us.

III. Life in a dark world

The Gospel of John has Jesus say, “I am ... the life.” In Jesus, we find life where previously there has been guilt, addiction, fear, and the prospect of death. It is true that all of us were created in the image of God and there is, therefore, something noble about all human beings. However, we are all also fallen; we are born with a propensity to do evil. In every human being, the image of God has been to a greater or lesser extent tarnished, and in some cases almost eradicated, by our separation from God. Good and bad, strength and weakness coexist in all human beings. Alexander Solzhenitsyn said:

The line separating good and evil passes, not through states, nor through classes, nor between political parties ... but right through every human heart and through all human hearts.

I am not a nice person simply because I did not rob banks or commit other serious crimes. Only when I begin to see my life alongside the life of Jesus Christ do I realize how much wrong exists in my life. Many others have had this same experience. C. S. Lewis wrote:

For the first time I examined myself with a seriously practical purpose. And there I found what appalled me; a zoo of lusts, a bedlam of ambitions, a nursery of fears, a harem of fondled hatreds. My name was Legion.⁵

We all need forgiveness, and in Christ, we find it. Marghanita Laski, debating on television with a Christian, made an amazing confession. She said,

⁵ C. S. Lewis, *Surprised by Joy*.

“What I envy most about you Christians is your forgiveness. Then she added, “I have no one to forgive me.”

What Jesus did when he was crucified for us was to pay the penalty for all things that we have done wrong. He died to remove our guilt, to set us free from addiction, fear, and ultimately death. He died to bring us into fellowship with God, with each other, and with the world in which we live.

On July 31, 1991, some people celebrated a remarkable event. On the last day of July 1941, the Auschwitz sirens announced the escape of a prisoner. As a reprisal, ten of his fellow prisoners would die of a long, slow starvation, buried alive in a specially constructed, concrete bunker. So all day, tortured by sun, hunger, and fear, the men waited as the German commandant and his Gestapo assistant walked between the ranks to select, quite arbitrarily, the chosen ten. As the commandant pointed to one man, Francis Gajowniczek, he cried out in despair, “My poor wife and children.” At that moment, the unimpressive figure of a man with sunken eyes and round glasses in wire frames stepped out of line and took off his cap. “What does this Polish pig want?” asked the commandant. “I am a Catholic priest; I want to die for that man. I am old, he has a wife and children ... I have no one,” said Father Maximilian Kolbe. “Accepted,” retorted the commandant, and moved on. That night, ten men, including the priest, went to the starvation bunker. Normally they would tear each other apart like cannibals. Not so this time. While they had strength, lying naked on the floor, the men prayed and sang hymns. After two weeks, three of the men and Father Maximilian Kolbe were still alive. The bunker was required for others,

so on August 14 the remaining four were disposed of. At 12:50pm, after two weeks in the starvation bunker and still conscious, the guards finally gave the Polish priest an injection of phenol and he died at the age of forty-seven. On October 10, 1982 in St. Peter's square in Rome, some people put Father Maximilian Kolbe's death in its proper perspective. Present in the crowd of 150,000 was Francis Gajowniczek, his wife, his children, and his children's children. Indeed, that one man had saved many. The Pope described Father Maximilian Kolbe's death: "This was victory won over all the systems of contempt and hate in man – a victory like that won by our Lord Jesus Christ."⁶

The death of Jesus was even more amazing because Jesus died, not just for one person, but also for every person in the world. If you or I had been the only person in the world, Jesus Christ would have died instead of us to remove our guilt. When God removed our guilt, we have a new life.

Jesus not only died for us, he also rose again from the dead for us. In this act, he defeated death. Most rational people are aware of the inevitability of death, although today some people make bizarre attempts to avoid it. The *Church of England Newspaper* described one such attempt:

In 1960 Californian millionaire James McGill died. He left detailed instructions that his body should be preserved and frozen in the hope that one day scientists might discover a cure for the disease that killed him. Hundreds of people in Southern California have put their hopes of one day living again in this process that freezes and preserves human bodies. The latest developments in Cryonics technology scientists call neuro-suspension, which preserves just the human head. One reason why it is becoming popular is that it is much cheaper than preserving and maintaining a whole body. It

⁶ Bishop Michael Marshall, *Church of England Newspaper*, August 9, 1991.

reminds me of Woody Allen in *Sleeper* where he preserved his nose.⁷

Such attempts to avoid the inevitability of death are plainly absurd and unnecessary. Jesus came to bring us eternal life. Eternal life is a quality of life that comes from living in a relationship with God and Jesus Christ. Jesus never promised anyone an easy life, but he promised fullness of life. This new quality of life starts now and goes on into eternity. Our time on earth is relatively short, but eternity is vast. Through Jesus, we not only can enjoy fullness of life here, but also we can be sure that it will never end.

Christianity is not boring. It is about living life to the full. It is the truth. It is relevant. It transforms the whole of our lives. The theologian and philosopher Paul Tillich described the human condition as one that always involves three fears: fear about meaninglessness, fear about death, and fear about guilt. Jesus Christ meets each of these fears head on. He is vital to every one of us because he is the way, the truth, and the life.

⁷ John Martyn, *Church of England Newspaper*, November 2, 1990.

Talk 2: Who is Jesus? Why Should I Care?

A missionary working among children in the Middle East was driving her jeep down a road when she ran out of gas. She had no gas can in her car. All she could find was a potty chair. She walked a mile down the road to the nearest gas station and filled the pot with gas. As he was pouring the gas into the tank of her jeep, a large Cadillac occupied by wealthy oil sheikhs drew up. They were fascinated at seeing her pouring the contents of the pot into the jeep. One of them opened the window and said, "My friend and I, although we do not share your religion, we greatly admire your faith."

Some people see becoming a Christian as a blind leap of faith. I will grant that most of us make our first steps of faith in Jesus with little historical background as to why it is sensible to do so. I want to examine some of that background.

No serious historian could maintain the position that Jesus was a mythical figure who never existed.

First century sources outside the gospels add almost nothing to our knowledge of Jesus. As far as contemporary history was concerned, the appearance of Jesus into human history was not a significant event. Tacitus, an historian of the early second century, refers to the first persecution of Christians under Nero in 64 AD. He then observes, in explaining the origin of the name "Christian":

This name originates from 'Christus' who was sentenced to death by the procurator, Pontius Pilate, during the reign of Tiberius. This detestable superstition, which had been suppressed for a while, spread anew not only in Judea where the evil had started, but also in

Rome, where everything that is horrid and wicked in the world gathers and finds numerous followers (Annals 15, 4).

A letter of Pliny, also early second century, refers to the Christians as believing in a gross superstition, singing hymns "in honor of Christ as if to a god." The Talmud is largely silent. The writers design the references to portray Jesus as magician, seducer, and political agitator, thereby justifying his condemnation. Josephus has several references that are of note. One, in Jewish Antiquities, contains the following:

Ananus, thinking that he had a favorable opportunity because Festus had died and Albinus was still on his way, called a meeting of judges and brought into it the brother of Jesus who is called Messiah, James by name, and some others. He made the accusation that they had transgressed the law, and he handed them over to be stoned.

The purpose of this reference is to show that the trial of James was illegal and that Ananus was dismissed from being High Priest because of this event, which occurred in 62 AD. We find another reference in The Testimonium Flavianum. It does have some Christian additions. Without those additions, this is how the text reads:

At this time there appeared Jesus, a wise man. For he was a doer of startling deeds, a teacher of people who receive the truth with pleasure. And he gained a following both among many Jews and among many of Greek origin. And when Pilate, because of an accusation made by the leading men among us, condemned him to the cross, those who had loved him previously did not cease to do so. And up until this very day the tribe of Christians, named after him, has not died out.

One of the points this evidence makes is that Jesus, and the church as it existed throughout the first century, remained on the margins of Roman civilization. Far from being partners, the church invited people to abandon

Roman civilization, and its system of economic, political, and military power. As with its founder, the church remained little more than an annoying pest to the Romans.

In case you think that the New Testament documents themselves are not reliable, I would remind you that we have thousands of early Greek manuscripts of the New Testament. This textual support is far more than we have of other ancient works, such as Herodotus, Thucydides, Caesar's *Gallic Wars*, Livy's *Roman History*, and the histories of Tacitus, have far fewer manuscripts often dating from around 900 AD. Those who wrote the texts of the New Testament did so between 40 and 100 AD. This small interval of time between the death of Jesus in 30 AD and texts about him suggests strong historical reliability as to his existence. The papyri evidence goes back to the second century, while excellent documents exist from around 350 AD. This suggests the authenticity and general integrity of the text as we have it today.

All right, we know that Jesus lived.

However, who was Jesus?

Who was Jesus? Was he a practical teacher? Was he a social revolutionary? Was he an ancient magician? Was he a prophet who expected the end to come soon? Without discounting the contributions of religious leaders like Buddha, Mohammed, or Confucius, Christians believe Jesus is unique. God became present to human beings in a new way. Jesus is the heart of God. Here is what a human life full of God, a life devoted to love of God and neighbor, would look like.

Martin Scorsese said he made the movie *The Last Temptation of Christ* in order to show that Jesus was a real human being. The Jesus Seminar has done work during the 1990's to establish the human dimension of Jesus, so much so that several of the scholars call for a demotion of Jesus. The issue today is that people have no problem believing Jesus was a man who was tired, hungry, emotional, angry, loved people, experienced sadness, experienced temptation, learned, worked, and obeyed his parents.

Comedian Billy Connolly spoke for many people when he said, "I cannot believe in Christianity, but I think Jesus was a wonderful man."

We will need to take some time to reflect upon the credibility of the Jesus who calls us to follow him. His family tree is less than impressive. Yes, it includes Abraham and David. It also includes Tamar, Rahab, and Bathsheba. We know little about his early life. He lived for thirty years in Galilee. He acknowledges the importance of the message of John the Baptist. He becomes neither public official nor economist, neither general nor renowned author. He was a great storyteller and something of a poet. His family thought he was crazy (Mark 3:21). Religious leaders suspected a demonic source to his life (Mark 3:232). Eventually, Jewish leaders and Roman leaders would execute him as a heretic, blasphemer, false prophet, and seducer of the people. While other religious leaders, such as Buddha and Mohammed, lived long lives and had long ministries, Jesus died young and after no more than three years of ministry. How can this be the Son of God? This man calls us to dedicate our lives to him.

Christmas is more than a fine sentiment. It commemorates what God did to satisfy our deepest desires. The coming of Jesus into the world is a love story. Christmas reminds us that God is so passionately in love with us that God gives us something of God's own self. God became present to us as a helpless baby born in a humble stable. God is not far off. God came here. Human beings, in their quest for meaning and fullness of human life, may not have known they searched for God. In Christ, God has found us. Christians call this Incarnation, meaning that the unseen God became visible in Jesus. Clement of Rome, one of the early church writers, said it well.

“Through Christ we see as in a mirror the spotless and excellent face of God.”

Is there any reason for thinking that Jesus was more than a wonderful man or great moral teacher? This question is so crucial because the New Testament makes extravagant claims concerning Jesus. People understandably question these claims. The church takes its stand with the faithfulness and truthfulness of this witness to what God has done in Jesus.

The Gospel of John is an important witness to the significance of Jesus for humanity. For example, John refers to Jesus in this way:

John 14:6 (NRSV)

⁶ Jesus said to him, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.

We can have a relationship with God through Jesus.

Human beings have a profound longing for meaning, fulfillment, and wholeness in their lives. Freud suggested that people hunger for love, Jung

suggested we hunger for security, and Adler suggested we hunger for significance. Jesus offers satisfaction of that longing:

John 6:35 (NRSV)

³⁵ Jesus said to them, "I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty."

Many people walk in darkness, depression, disillusionment, and despair.

They look for direction.

John 8:12 (NRSV)

¹² Again Jesus spoke to them, saying, "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life."

Many people fear death. John finds an answer in Jesus:

John 11:25-26 (NRSV)

²⁵ Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, ²⁶ and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?"

John shows that Jesus continues to have significance for us:

John 14:9 (NRSV)

⁹ Jesus said to him, "Have I been with you all this time, Philip, and you still do not know me? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, 'Show us the Father'?"

John has a portrait of Jesus in which he makes it clear that if you want to know what God looks like, look at Jesus.

People have burdens consisting of worries, anxieties, fears, and guilt.

Matthew 11:28 reminds people that they can come to Jesus and find rest. Jesus also said, to people who lack direction, "Come, follow me," as in Mark 1:17.

Jesus announced the coming of the reign of God, even if in an unconventional way. God would cancel the debt of others. The presence of

Jesus meant some judgment entering the world dividing light from darkness, sin from righteousness. The New Testament even suggests that Jesus will be the criterion of judgment. People will need to take their stand with Jesus, as in Luke 12:8:

Everyone who acknowledges me before others, the Son of Man also will acknowledge before the angels of God.

The New Testament goes on to make extravagant claims about Jesus.

John makes the connection between God and Jesus clear.

John 10:33 (NRSV)

³³ The Jews answered, "It is not for a good work that we are going to stone you, but for blasphemy, because you, though only a human being, are making yourself God."

John 20:28-29 (NRSV)

²⁸ Thomas answered him, "My Lord and my God!" ²⁹ Jesus said to him, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe."

People need to test and verify such claims. I want to suggest that we cannot do so by historical research or mathematical theorems. In such matters, the test is our lives. We commit our lives to him. We join ourselves to a community of other people who take their stand with Jesus.

To what sources in the life of Jesus can we turn?

First, we can turn to the teaching of Jesus.

He taught primarily in two ways. One was in aphorisms as short, memorable sayings designed to make people reflect upon their lives. Two was parables, stories that often leave one puzzling about one's life and about one's relationship to God. Great teachers do more than convey information or provide entertainment. They provide inspiration through their passion for what they teach

and their love for their students. The passion of Jesus was God, and his love for those whom he taught was obvious to all. The teachings of Jesus and the New Testament became part of the literary reference of literature. If one wants to understand the literature of Western civilization, one needs to understand the New Testament.

Here is an example of his teaching.

Matthew 5:3-5, 9

“You’re blessed when you’re at the end of your rope. With less of you there is more of God and his rule.

“You’re blessed when you feel you’ve lost what is most dear to you. Only then can you be embraced by the One most dear to you.

“You’re blessed when you’re content with just who you are—no more, no less. That’s the moment you find yourselves proud owners of everything that can’t be bought.

“You’re blessed when you can show people how to cooperate instead of compete or fight. That’s when you discover who you really are, and your place in God’s family.

Happiness is a by-product of a life led to please God.

Second, we can turn to the conduct of Jesus.

Jesus welcomed children. Jesus welcomed the outcasts, such as toll collectors, prostitutes, Gentiles, and others. This welcoming and accepting conduct was a way of healing in a strict caste system that separated clean from unclean. He healed some of the sick he met. He cast out demons. Jesus gave his life that others might live. He had the courage to face the powerful, even when death was the likely outcome. He willingly embraced his fate.

Third, we can turn to the character of Jesus.

He opened his life to friendship with others. Children felt comfortable coming to him. Prostitutes and sinners could come to him and still feel accepted.

He had good humor, though this is often lost on 20th century ears. Jesus became angry at the right things. Jesus was faithful to the vision God had given him.

Fourth, we can turn to prophetic fulfillment.

As we look back upon the Hebrew Scripture, we find in particular prophecies concerning the suffering servant of the Lord. Whatever Isaiah 52-53 meant in its time, it was relatively easy to look back through the life and death of Jesus and find Jesus the fulfillment of them. Psalm 22 also became a fruitful source of theological reflection upon the fate of Jesus. The question we must answer is whether we can find in the life and death of Jesus the embrace of God.

Fifth, we can turn to his resurrection.

Some claim that Jesus did not actually die on the cross, but that Joseph took down the body early and Jesus later recovered. Others suggest that the disciples stole the body. Still others said that the authorities stole the body. Today, we find many scholars who will say that no one actually buried Jesus. Rather, the Romans simply placed his body in a mass grave, along with all the others they crucified. Today, few people deny that within weeks after his death, the disciples, and in particular Peter, James, the disciples, the 500, and Paul, all had some kind of vision of Jesus. The disciples experienced grace, forgiveness, acceptance, and love. Was it a hallucination? Did they simply grieve so much for Jesus that they conjured him up? Historical events being contingent, we will never have answers with the certainty we might like. However, what the disciples experienced became available to all humanity. This event settled for them the question of whether Jesus was from God. Jesus is alive and with God.

Why should you care who Jesus is? People often need guidance in their lives. Jesus is a teacher who will provide that guidance. People need someone to bring healing into their relationships. Jesus will bring healing. People need to form their core character and values. Jesus will help us focus upon what we value in life. People need to know that they participate in what God is doing in the world. That fact that Jesus connects with what God was doing in Israel helps us to know that our union with Christ connects us that God is doing in the world. People look for signs of life in world dominated by death. Jesus is the resurrection and the life.

Various forces and addictions may oppress us. We need liberation.

We may be sick from a disease of thought and soul, and we need a cure.

We may be wandering, lost, and confused, and need a teacher.

We may feel empty, and need to connect with God.

We may suffer because of social ills and need society to respond to us in a way that respects our worth and dignity.

We may need to connect with a community that has a large vision.

All of this can be like receiving new life, moving from death to life, from darkness to light. We need to move from the false self, to the self God intends us to be. We need to move from alienation and toward reconciliation.

Some people who have answered the question of why they care by placing their trust in Jesus. They follow him.

In the end, the personal decision to follow Jesus will always be a matter of faith. To see God at work in Jesus of Nazareth in a way significant today, and

significant enough to share with others, will always be a risk. The life of Jesus lays hold on humanity, empowers a change of direction, and brings the activity of God into human community. Christians invite people to reflect upon the source of their lives and to find the fulfillment of their lives in Jesus. His parables invite us to see the kingdom all around us, and yes even in Jesus. His sayings point the way to challenging our own values, as well as those of our culture. His healings and exorcisms challenge us to experience the power of God directly, rather than through safe institutions. His death invites us to live sacrificially, in service to others. His resurrection invites us to see the work of God where others do not and to experience explosive power. 1,975 years have passed since he died. They are testimony enough that this holy man is deserving of the many who love him and follow him.

Talk 3: Why Did Jesus Die? Why Am I Not Where I Want to Be?

Many people today go around with a cross on their earrings, bracelet, or necklace. We are so used to seeing this that it does not shock us. We might be shocked if we saw someone wearing a gallows or an electric chair on a chain. We would be shocked to see a replica of a Nazi gas chamber as a lapel pin. The cross was a form of execution. Leaders abolished it in 315 AD because Roman leaders considered it too inhumane.

Yet, most people consider the cross as the symbol of the Christian faith. A high proportion of the Gospels are about the death of Jesus. Much of the rest of the New Testament concerns itself with explaining what happened on the cross. The central service of the church, the communion service, centers on the broken body and shed blood of Jesus. People often build churches in the shape of a cross. When the apostle Paul went to Corinth, he said, "I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified."⁸ He also offered the paradox that exists within Christianity.

1 Corinthians 1:18-25 (NRSV)

¹⁸ For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. ¹⁹ For it is written,

"I will destroy the wisdom of the wise,
and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart."

²⁰ Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? ²¹ For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, God decided, through the foolishness of our proclamation, to save those who believe. ²² For Jews demand signs and Greeks desire wisdom, ²³ but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to

⁸ I Corinthians 2:2.

Gentiles,²⁴ but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God.²⁵ For God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength.

Most leaders who have influenced nations or influenced the world historians remember because of their lives. Believers remembers Jesus as much for his death as for his life.

Let us discuss the last moments of the life of Jesus.

Jesus made his next significant decision in 30 AD when he decided to go to Jerusalem at Passover. While there, and as peasants gathered in great number, he prophesied against the Temple, and using prophetic symbolism destroyed it. Judas, one of the Twelve, betrayed him, as is typical of most leaders of movements among peasant groups. He had a final meal with his disciples in an upper room. Then they went to Gethsemane for prayer. Officers of the High Priest arrested him. One of his disciples had a sword and injured one of the officers. Jesus remained true to his non-violent principles and went quietly, with dignity and grace, confident in his God. Peter denied he even knew Jesus. The rest of the disciples abandoned him. The council of religious leaders reviewed him. They decided it best if they silenced Jesus. They sent him to Pilate. It was enough for him to know that Jesus was popular among the peasants to decide quickly that he needed to silence Jesus. He would not give in again to peasants. Jesus had only moral and spiritual power, and that was no match for Rome on this day. The Romans would release Barabbas, a true criminal. They could have released Jesus. They would not do so. On his way to crucifixion, soldiers made Simon of Cyrene, father of future leaders in the church

in Jerusalem, Alexander and Rufus, to carry the cross. He cried out, "My God! My God! Why have you forsaken me?" He died as a criminal upon a cross outside the western wall, April 7, 30 AD. Joseph of Arimetha buried him according to Jewish law.

Why is there such concentration on the death of Jesus? What is the difference between his death and the death of Socrates, or one of the martyrs, or war heroes? Why did he die? What did it achieve? What does it mean when the New Testament says he died for our sins?

We are convinced that one has died for all; therefore all have died. And he died for all, so that those who live might live no longer for themselves, but for him who died and was raised for them.⁹

The death of Jesus on the cross seems an inspiring and interesting event of long ago. Yet, how does it affect us? Does it alter our situation in the world? Did it make any difference to the people who lived at the time of the crucifixion? Does the cross bring wholeness into human life and healing in our relationship with God?

These are difficult and important questions. The New Testament suggests God did something for us we could not do for ourselves. The life of Jesus shows the costliness of reconciliation. God is the one who pays that cost. Friends, we call this grace. Here is the way that Charles Wesley put it.

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

⁹ 2 Corinthians 5:14-15 (NRSV)

Now, let us reflect on what Jesus did for humanity. In the New Testament, the writings of John stress the incarnation, the presence of God in the incarnate Word. Paul preaches Christ as crucified and risen, the human situation changing dramatically because of his death and resurrection. Some Greek authors almost equate incarnation and atonement. In the West, the death of Jesus atones. For Christians, the point of the cross is the love of God for us, where God comes to us and creates a bridge, setting us on the right path.

To understand the Christian view of the crucifixion, we need to deal with the problem or predicament in which humanity finds itself.

Our country emphasizes development in intellectual and physical ways important for us to lead reasonably happy lives. We often forget the purpose of this development. We are in this space and time briefly. As our lives intersect with the lives of others, we will weave a story. We are responsible to God for that story.

Some people devote their lives to the fleeting notoriety of fame, to the superficial comfort that riches bring, and to the avoidance that addiction to alcohol and drugs bring.

Many who are empty think they are full. Many who have a fatal disease think they are in perfect health. Many who live in emotional and spiritual bankruptcy think they are rich.

Unhappiness, dissatisfaction, and discontent with one's life are like a pain in the body, reflecting a deeper cause. We direct our lives toward political involvements, education, high moral standards, science and technology, fame,

fortune, pleasure, and power. Sadly, none of these aims will cure the sickness we feel.

We would do well to reflect upon our reason for being here. We devote much of our energy to daily matters. We rarely set aside time to reflect upon the foundation and direction of our lives. Without nourishing this dimension, we become weak and shriveled, developing vague discontent and disconnection with others and with ourselves. We become confused and restless.

We need some sense of urgency to find the cure to this illness. The sand in our hourglass rapidly diminishes. If a path leads to fulfillment, we must not lose a single hour in finding it.

So where are we? Many Americans have great knowledge, a high standard of living, and physical lives longer than any time in history. Our sickness is of a different sort. It becomes obvious to others, and at moments, to us.

In some ways, we do not know where we are, and we do not know that at which we aim. We might describe this condition as “lost.” We need to find a way out of this dilemma.

Americans have some puzzlement over why so much brutality exists in the world. Here is a short record of the shame and tragedy of human history: Crusades, 30-year’s war in the 1600’s in Europe, Indian Wars, Slavery, Nazi Germany, homicide bombers, September 11, 2001, and war in Iraq. Although America through its government has participated in this brutality, I am grateful that we find these things hard to understand. Our ideal for recognition of the rights of others has a firm foundation in our history.

The shame of human history suggests what happens when we move toward autonomy from God. We become as people lost at sea. Our separation from God is the source of much of our pain, confusion, bitterness, violence, tragedy, heartache, and disillusionment. Many modern people treat God as an unnecessary add-on to life, and therefore disagree with this. The New Testament says this separation from God is death, a genuine tragedy, and a disease for which we genuinely need healing.

Here are a few ways this disease finds expression in human life.

In our desire to find the best life we can have, we choose paths that do not get us there, and we lack the will to stay on the right path if we find it. We feel as if we have broken rules of which we have little knowledge.

We have noble desires for love, strong families, a good life, joyful and healing words, and happiness. We also hurt people we love, feeling the allure of fame, wealth, and status.

We develop ideals toward which we regularly fall short of realizing.

Our genuine interest in respecting ourselves often ends in selfishness and egoism. Can we not at least factor in the interests of others?¹⁰

Our loss of hope and confidence in the future lead to cynicism, pessimism, and skepticism, often arising in our autonomy from God.

We may not realize the depth of the problem we have created. We experience shame and guilt at inconvenient times. We have lost something; we

¹⁰ Mark 8:34, 36 (NRSV)

are not sure what it is. Yet, God has not lost sight of us, for God loved the world enough to give us Jesus, so that through him we could have eternal life.¹¹

God made us with unique gifts and experiences. We have a limited time to share those gifts. The human predicament of alienation and separation from God and others does not have to be. God wants us to find our home.

I now want to suggest that God has taken action to heal the alienation and separation between God and humanity.

The bible uses several images to explain the result of the cross. One is the theme of justification, which arises out of courts of law. A second image is that of the marketplace, in that God has cancelled the debt of humanity toward God. A third image arises from the temple and the sacrificial system, focusing on the need for forgiveness of sin and freeing us from guilt. The fourth image is that of family or home, in that a broken relationship experiences healing through reconciliation. In using these images, the New Testament rejects the claim of their Jewish heritage that forgiveness occurs only in the sacrifices offered in the Temple in Jerusalem. They offered Judaism and the world the possibility of receiving forgiveness and reconciliation through the death of Jesus.

In our attempts to understand the cross, we are in danger of making it purely intellectual. We want Jesus as the agent of social change, the revolutionary, or the master of interpersonal relationships. In the process, we reduce the bitterness of the cross to an intellectual presentation that no longer genuinely influences the way we live.

¹¹ John 3:16 (NRSV)

The cross completes and focuses the reconciling and healing work of Jesus. Since Jesus died in rejection and as a blasphemer, no one has to die in the rejection in which Jesus died. A sad fact of history is that many innocent people have died at the hands of the powerful. The suffering of Jesus does not spare humanity suffering. However, God takes the death of a human being into the community of Jesus' own dying so that he or she has a hope beyond death. We are so distant from the ancient purpose of animal sacrifices that we have lost an understanding of its healing power. Part of the animal sacrifice was for the family to share together in the meal, restoring a sense of community within the family. The sacrifice restored relationships within human community and with God. Jesus bore the consequence of our separation from God. We no longer die alone and without hope. The cross represents a just and good person suffering for others, his death becoming the ultimate act of service, motivated by love. All service has a vicarious and substitution aspect. Since all service is "for" another, the death of Jesus is "for us."

Have you lost direction? Look to the cross.

Ernst Kasemann suggested that people count as lovers of the cross only as far as it enables them to come to terms with themselves and others, and with the powers and enticements of the world. Under the cross, humanity attains adulthood. We cannot share in the glory of the risen Lord except in the discipleship of the cross.¹² Good Friday reminds us that we receive help from God as God laid aside power and turned toward us in love. Power forces us to

¹² Ernst Kasemann, *Jesus Means Freedom*, 176.

change. Love moves and influences us to change. In the cross, God says, "See how much I love you. See how you must love each other."

Here is a prayer you might consider if you have not started the Christian life.

Gracious God, I am sorry for the things I have done wrong in my life. [Take a few moments to ask the forgiveness of God for anything particular that is on your mind.] Please forgive me. I now turn from everything that I know is wrong. Thank you that you sent your son, Jesus, to die on the cross for me and for all humanity, so that I, and the world, could experience forgiveness and freedom. From now on, I will follow and obey him as my Lord. Thank you that you now offer me this gift of forgiveness and your Spirit. I now receive that gift. Please come into my life by your Holy Spirit to be with me forever. Through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

Talk 4: How Can I Be Sure of My Faith?

I became a Christian when I was nine years old. The witness of my mother and the witness of the church were important in that decision. Coming from a family dominated by an alcoholic father, I recognized something going on in the church of which I wanted to be a part. As I grew through my teen years, I had few questions regarding why I was a Christian. Concerns for assurance of the Christian way of life did not come into my life until I went to college.

Christianity is about a relationship with God, who loves us and wants the best for us. This relationship is one that has changed me gradually over the years. I cannot imagine my life apart from this relationship with Christ. Paul writes about the change that God works in us through Christ.

So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us. So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us; we entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God.¹³

The way people experience this change in their lives varies greatly. Some have been in church for years before it “took.” Some have not been in church or heard a credible presentation of the gospel, and suddenly they hear it and experience change. Some have led relatively good lives, discovering in Jesus the grace they need to move beyond perfectionism. Some have led morally reprehensible lives, discovering in Jesus both forgiveness and transformation. Some have experienced great bondage and need liberation. Some have

¹³ 2 Corinthians 5:17-20 (NRSV)

experienced separation, alienation, and meaninglessness, and need to re-discover the center of their lives. What matters is not so much the experience as the fact that receiving Christ into our lives makes us children of God. John puts it this way.

John 1:12 (NRSV)

¹² But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God ...

Good parents want their children to be sure about their relationship with them. God wants us sure about the love of God for us. Yet, most of us go through seasons of life when we wonder whether God has a loving relationship with us. Many Christians wonder if they are, think they might be, are not sure, or think of themselves as partially Christian. For most persons who respond this way, I am confident that it expresses a degree of humility. Such responses reflect the ambiguities of the human world. We recognize that God has a lot more to do with us and through us in order for us to become the persons God wants us to be. Yet, we make great advances in our relationship with God and in living the Christian life if we can increase our assurance that we are Christians on the way to the fullness of a human life in Eternity. John puts it this way.

1 John 5:13 (NRSV)

¹³ I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, so that you may know that you have eternal life.

John indicates that the Father, Son, and Spirit provide us with the assurance we need. Human life does not have absolute foundations. Neither does Christian life. What we can explore are good reasons for us to have confidence in the Christian way of life.

First, the bible is a faithful witness to the love of God shown in Jesus Christ.

Our feelings are good indicators of our anxieties, fears, hopes, and dreams. We need to listen to them carefully. However, just as our reasoning about our experience may prove faulty, our feelings apart from the context of our lives also prove faulty. Feeling or mood can derive from what we ate for breakfast, how late we stayed up the night before, and so on. We need more than feeling close to Jesus or distant from Jesus. We need assurance of the love of God for us that move us from our feelings and toward what God has shown us in Christ.

We find in the bible an important image of becoming a Christian in the image of Jesus making a home with us. To the church at Laodicea, Jesus says:

Revelation 3:20 (NRSV)

²⁰ Listen! I am standing at the door, knocking; if you hear my voice and open the door, I will come in to you and eat with you, and you with me.

In this case, it refers to the church opening its doors to Jesus, who will be present as the church participates in the Lord's Supper. The artist Holman Hunt (1827-1910), in his painting "The Light of the World," shows Jesus standing at a door overgrown with ivy and weeds. The door represents the door of one's life. Jesus knocks at the door and awaits a response. Jesus wants to come in and be part of our lives. Hunt says that he purposely did not paint a handle on the door because it can open only from the inside. We have to open the door to let Jesus in. Jesus will never force his way in. He gives us the freedom to choose. It is up to us whether we open the door to him. If we do, "I will come in to you and eat with you

and you with me.” We make a new home in which Jesus is present. We increasingly make our lives a home in which we welcome Jesus into every part of our lives. We are not always consciously aware of that presence. Yet, Jesus is there, influencing every part of our lives. The key to this home is taking our stand with Jesus. Jesus put it this way.

everyone who acknowledges me before others, the Son of Man also will acknowledge before the angels of God.¹⁴

People in America take their stand with a philosophy, a political ideology, another religious faith, or even ignore the matter as inconsequential. Christians take their place alongside Jesus.

We also find the bible bringing this promise of the presence of Jesus into close relationship with us in the promise of eternal life. Our denial of death and our attempts to run from it expose us to the risk of living a human life with a mask of unreality and inauthenticity. The attitude we take toward dying and death will determine the quality of our lives. To accept our finitude and therefore to accept that our lives begin and end, is only part of dealing with life in a Christian way. We also need to understand and accept our craving for the eternal. We find this life beginning now.

John 10:10 (NRSV)

¹⁰ The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.

Here is how John refers to those who follow Jesus.

John 10:28 (NRSV)

²⁸ I give them eternal life, and they will never perish.

¹⁴ (Luke 12:8 NRSV)

Death appears to rob our lives of the worth, dignity, respect, and significance we crave. For most of us, death means that 100 years after death, it will not matter that we lived. If our lives have lasting significance, it will be because God makes it so. God loves us so much that God does not want to spend eternity without us. God will preserve the essence of who we are in the presence of God.

We find the proclamation of the resurrection of Jesus as the source of the confidence of the apostles in the presence of Jesus today and the promise of eternal life for the future. The resurrection is a victory over death. The resurrection assures us that Jesus is alive, bringing the fullness of life to us today. It assures us of the future. History moves toward a gracious end defined by God in Jesus Christ. The promise of the bible is that we move today toward a new heaven and a new earth. In that new world, pain, sin, and suffering will be gone. We will see Jesus face to face. Paul put it this way.

1 Corinthians 13:12 (NRSV)

¹² For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known.

The promise is that we will receive new bodies.

1 Corinthians 15 (NRSV)

Now I would remind you, brothers and sisters, of the good news that I proclaimed to you, which you in turn received, in which also you stand, ² through which also you are being saved, if you hold firmly to the message that I proclaimed to you—unless you have come to believe in vain.

³ For I handed on to you as of first importance what I in turn had received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, ⁴ and that he was buried, and that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures, ⁵ and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. ⁶ Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers and sisters at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have died. ⁷ Then he appeared to James, then

to all the apostles. ⁸ Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me. ⁹ For I am the least of the apostles, unfit to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. ¹⁰ But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace toward me has not been in vain. On the contrary, I worked harder than any of them—though it was not I, but the grace of God that is with me. ¹¹ Whether then it was I or they, so we proclaim and so you have come to believe.

¹² Now if Christ is proclaimed as raised from the dead, how can some of you say there is no resurrection of the dead? ¹³ If there is no resurrection of the dead, then Christ has not been raised; ¹⁴ and if Christ has not been raised, then our proclamation has been in vain and your faith has been in vain. ¹⁵ We are even found to be misrepresenting God, because we testified of God that he raised Christ—whom he did not raise if it is true that the dead are not raised. ¹⁶ For if the dead are not raised, then Christ has not been raised. ¹⁷ If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins. ¹⁸ Then those also who have died in Christ have perished. ¹⁹ If for this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied.

²⁰ But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have died. ²¹ For since death came through a human being, the resurrection of the dead has also come through a human being; ²² for as all die in Adam, so all will be made alive in Christ. ²³ But each in his own order: Christ the first fruits, then at his coming those who belong to Christ. ²⁴ Then comes the end, when he hands over the kingdom to God the Father, after he has destroyed every ruler and every authority and power. ²⁵ For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. ²⁶ The last enemy to be destroyed is death. ²⁷ For “God has put all things in subjection under his feet.” But when it says, “All things are put in subjection,” it is plain that this does not include the one who put all things in subjection under him. ²⁸ When all things are subjected to him, then the Son himself will also be subjected to the one who put all things in subjection under him, so that God may be all in all.

²⁹ Otherwise, what will those people do who receive baptism on behalf of the dead? If the dead are not raised at all, why are people baptized on their behalf?

³⁰ And why are we putting ourselves in danger every hour? ³¹ I die every day! That is as certain, brothers and sisters, as my boasting of you—a boast that I make in Christ Jesus our Lord. ³² If with merely human hopes I fought with wild animals at Ephesus, what would I have gained by it? If the dead are not raised, “Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die.”

³³ Do not be deceived:

“Bad company ruins good morals.”

³⁴ Come to a sober and right mind, and sin no more; for some people have no knowledge of God. I say this to your shame.

³⁵ But someone will ask, “How are the dead raised? With what kind of body do they come?” ³⁶ Fool! What you sow does not come to life unless it dies. ³⁷ And as for what you sow, you do not sow the body that is to be, but a bare seed, perhaps of wheat or of some other grain. ³⁸ But God gives it a body as he has chosen, and to each kind of seed its own body. ³⁹ Not all flesh is alike, but there is one flesh for human beings, another for animals, another for birds, and another for fish. ⁴⁰ There are both heavenly bodies and earthly bodies, but the glory of the heavenly is one thing, and that of the earthly is another. ⁴¹ There is one glory of the sun, and another glory of the moon, and another glory of the stars; indeed, star differs from star in glory.

⁴² So it is with the resurrection of the dead. What is sown is perishable, what is raised is imperishable. ⁴³ It is sown in dishonor, it is raised in glory. It is sown in weakness, it is raised in power. ⁴⁴ It is sown a physical body, it is raised a spiritual body. If there is a physical body, there is also a spiritual body. ⁴⁵ Thus it is written, “The first man, Adam, became a living being”; the last Adam became a life-giving spirit. ⁴⁶ But it is not the spiritual that is first, but the physical, and then the spiritual. ⁴⁷ The first man was from the earth, a man of dust; the second man is from heaven. ⁴⁸ As was the man of dust, so are those who are of the dust; and as is the man of heaven, so are those who are of heaven. ⁴⁹ Just as we have borne the image of the man of dust, we will also bear the image of the man of heaven.

⁵⁰ What I am saying, brothers and sisters, is this: flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable. ⁵¹ Listen, I will tell you a mystery! We will not all die, but we will all be changed, ⁵² in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed. ⁵³ For this perishable body must put on imperishability, and this mortal body must put on immortality. ⁵⁴ When this perishable body puts on imperishability, and this mortal body puts on immortality, then the saying that is written will be fulfilled:

“Death has been swallowed up in victory.”

⁵⁵ “Where, O death, is your victory?
Where, O death, is your sting?”

⁵⁶ The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. ⁵⁷ But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.

⁵⁸ Therefore, my beloved, be steadfast, immovable, always excelling in the work of the Lord, because you know that in the Lord your labor is not in vain.

In that day, God will transform us to be like Jesus.

1 John 3:2 (NRSV)

² Beloved, we are God's children now; what we will be has not yet been revealed. What we do know is this: when he is revealed, we will be like him, for we will see him as he is.

Eternity is not simply a continuation of our space and time, only without death looming in the future. A continuation of this space and time would indeed be hell. In other words, eternal life refers to a quality of time, and not just endless time. Eternity is not reincarnation. The uniqueness and significance of this human life is not something that any theory ought to destroy.

Here is the way C. S. Lewis puts it in *Chronicles of Narnia: The Last Battle*, 1956:

The term is over: the holidays have begun. The dream is ended: this is the morning ... all their life in this world ... had only been the cover and the title page: now at last they were beginning Chapter One of the Great Story which no one on earth has read: which goes on forever: in which every chapter is better than the one before.

Second, we find confidence of the love of God in the word, deed, and fate of Jesus.

Assurance depends upon shifting our focus away from self and toward Christ. The presence of Jesus in our lives and the promise of eternal life do not depend on us. To suggest it does would be arrogance. Confidence in the love of God for us rests on what Jesus has done for us, not on our achievements. Eternal life is a gift. A relationship with Jesus today is a gift. As Paul wrote:

Romans 6:23 (NRSV)

²³ For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.

This gift cost Jesus his life. It costs us a willingness to turn from a way of life without God, a way of life into which we have invested a significant portion of our lives, and turn our lives to God in faith. The older we are when we make that decision, the harder making that turn will become. We call this repentance and faith.

What is faith? We exercise faith all the time, when we test our assumptions by making commitments in spite of the fact that we do not have sure and certain knowledge. Faith is a form of thinking, although it has the character of an intuition or insight that the answers to our questions lay in a certain area. Christian faith trusts the revelation of God in Christ, considering the New Testament as faithful witness to that revelation. Christian Faith is leaning our whole weight upon Jesus and what God has done through him. God loved the world so much that God sent the Son, so that we would not perish, but have eternal life. The love of God sees the mess human beings make of individual and corporate life, giving the gift of the Son to die for us. Through the cross, God offers everlasting life to all who believe.

Faith is not the sum of our beliefs or a way of speaking or a way of thinking. Faith is not simply intellectual assent of what God has done in Jesus. Faith is a way of living. Faith is practical commitment to conform one's life to that of Jesus, to lay one's life alongside Jesus, and to allow our transformation into the image of the Son. To acknowledge as Savior and Lord is meaningful insofar as we try to live as Jesus lived and order our lives according to his values. We do

not need to theorize about Jesus. We need to make him present in our time, our culture, and our circumstances. Only a true practice of our Christian faith can verify what we believe. Maurice Blondel could say that if we really want to understand what, do not listen to what they say, but watch what they do.

Some Christian authors make a mistake in separating faith and life. They suggest that God has saved them, while living a life without the fruit of such a conversion. They suggest that intellectual assent is enough. Jesus issued a severe warning to such ways of thinking.

Matthew 7:21-22 (NRSV)

²¹ “Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven. ²² On that day many will say to me, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many deeds of power in your name?’

Clearly, Jesus did not separate faith from a life of obedience. Further, Paul and Peter encourage us to examine our faith and life as to their genuineness and fruitfulness:

2 Corinthians 13:5 (NRSV)

⁵ Examine yourselves to see whether you are living in the faith. Test yourselves. Do you not realize that Jesus Christ is in you?—unless, indeed, you fail to meet the test!

2 Peter 1:10 (NRSV)

¹⁰ Therefore, brothers and sisters, be all the more eager to confirm your call and election, for if you do this, you will never stumble.

The New Testament is quite clear that transformed lives are the result of genuine faith or trust one places in Christ:

1 John 2:4 (NRSV)

⁴ Whoever says, “I have come to know him,” but does not obey his commandments, is a liar, and in such a person the truth does not exist;

1 John 3:10 (NRSV)

¹⁰ The children of God and the children of the devil are revealed in this way: all who do not do what is right are not from God, nor are those who do not love their brothers and sisters.

James 2:14-17 (NRSV)

¹⁴ What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not have works? Can faith save you? ¹⁵ If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, ¹⁶ and one of you says to them, “Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill,” and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that? ¹⁷ So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead.

Theologically, justification, regeneration, sanctification, and glorification are different ways of reflecting upon the one experience of placing our trust in Christ. Salvation is the one work of God, in which we are “conformed to the image of His Son.” Genuine assurance of salvation results from seeing this transforming work of God in our lives, and not from the memory of an experience or an empty intellectual assent. Salvation and discipleship belong together. Saving faith is repentance, surrender, and obedience. None of this is a matter of human work, but rather, of the work of the Holy Spirit in us.

One way to think of the suffering of God in the cross is that we see here the supreme example of divine love. Love often suffers. Forgiveness arises out of suffering. God bears human alienation and its effects in the cross, in order for human beings to experience the fullness of life possible today and in eternity. The barrier or distance people often experience from God is a result of our sinfulness. In fact, Mark has Jesus utter the cry of separation from God:

Mark 15:34 (NRSV)

³⁴ At three o'clock Jesus cried out with a loud voice, “Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani?” which means, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”

This cry has such significance because of who Jesus is as the Son. God experienced separation from God. God has bridged the separation between God and human beings that human beings experience. The cross gives us every reason to have assurance of the forgiveness we need. Guilt and condemnation are what God experienced in Jesus. Here is the way Paul puts it.

Romans 8:1 (NRSV)

There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.

Third, assurance in Christian life comes from the gift of the Holy Spirit, who lives within us.

John Wesley called this the witness of the Spirit. I want to focus upon two aspects of the way the Spirit dwells within us.

The Spirit transforms us from within.

The Spirit produces the character of Jesus in our lives. Paul calls this the fruit of the Spirit.

Galatians 5:22-23 (NRSV)

²² By contrast, the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, ²³ gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against such things.

The Spirit causes this fruit to grow. Such changes in character are observable, but will generally not occur overnight. God is more like a gardener, working with us to bring fruit to maturity in us and through us.

The internal presence of the Spirit will bring changes in our relationships with God and people.

We develop a new love for God as Father, Son, and Spirit. We become increasingly concerned with growing that relationship through prayer and meditation.

Our relationships with others change.

We develop new interest in the people around us, whether in family, neighbors, work, and community. We have a new concern for those who hurt and appear lost. When we are not Christians, church is often a place to avoid. We develop a new desire to be with other Christians.

We also receive a witness from the Spirit that we are children of God.

Romans 8:15-16 (NRSV)

¹⁵ For you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received a spirit of adoption. When we cry, “Abba! Father!” ¹⁶ it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God,

Such internal assurance can come to us in a variety of ways.

Carl Tuttle came from an unhappy childhood in which his father abused him. After he became a Christian, he wanted to hear what God was saying to him. He decided to go into the country where he could pray for a whole day without anyone interrupting him. This season of prayer did not speak to him. However, he went home and picked up his two-month-old baby. As he held his baby, he started crying. “Zachary, I love you. I love you with all my heart. No matter what happens in this life, I will never harm you, I’ll always protect you. I’ll always be your father, I’ll always be your friend, I’ll always care for you, I’ll always nurture you, and I’ll do this, no matter what sins you commit, no matter what you do, and no matter whether you turn from me or from God.” Suddenly, he sensed

he was in the arms of God, and God said, “Carl, you are my son and I love you. No matter what you do, no matter where you go, I’ll always care for you, I’ll always provide for you, I’ll always guide you.”

Assurance in the Christian life works in this way. We have the assurance of promises in the bible of the presence of Jesus today and of eternal life forever. We have the assurance of what God has done for humanity in Jesus. We have the assurance of the Spirit living in us to form us to be like Christ and to give us profound witness that we are children of God. Assurance does not rest on our feelings or our achievements. We find assurance in Christian life as we direct our attention toward God as Father, Son, and Spirit. We have assurance of the love of God, of forgiveness from God, and of the personal presence of God in Jesus and in the Spirit. We have assurance of our future with God.

Talk 5: How and Why Should I read the Bible? How Does God Speak to Me?

I became a Christian before my teen years. When I was around 16 years old, I bought a study bible, a Schofield Reference Bible, and I started studying Paul's letter to the Romans. I have wrestled with the bible throughout my life. Its strange and often troubling stories have attracted me throughout my years as a Christian. I enjoy studying it. I enjoy sharing what I have learned. The Psalms often refer to the one whose delight is in the law of the Lord. My assumption has been that if I am to be a good Christian, I must take the bible seriously. My hope is that every Christian will have delight in reading the biblical text. I like the way Augustine put it.

Scripture is God's house, and God wants us to play in it.

The bible sells millions of copies throughout the world. The average American household has 3.2 bibles. Twenty seven percent of the people in the USA have five bibles. The bible in its various translations consistently outsells other books. In an age supposedly secular, the bible remains of passionate interest.

The bible is powerful. It has influenced people toward new life, a new world, a new belief, a new conception, and a new faith.

In recent times, interest in the occult has risen. People play with ouija boards, see occult films, have fortunes told and read horoscopes. They want to get in touch with the supernatural. The tragedy is that they seek to communicate with supernatural evil forces. God offers to people who read the bible

communication with a higher power for good. To meet with God as the source of life is much more thrilling, satisfying, and wiser.

The bible is precious. Nicky Gumbel tells of visiting the Soviet Union. He met a man in his sixties. When Nicky showed him a recently printed Russian bible, the man pulled out a Russian New Testament that was close to one hundred years old.

Why is the bible so popular, so powerful, and so precious? We find in Matthew this quote from Deuteronomy 8:3.

Matthew 4:4 (NRSV)

⁴“It is written,
‘One does not live by bread alone,
but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.’”

The bible is like a stream of water rather than a static pool. It continually seeks to communicate with people.

First, the bible is a manual for life.

God works through the bible. The first source of the Word of God is Jesus, the Logos, Word, or communication of God in person. If we are to know God, it will be because God reveals who God is. God has done this in Jesus. If we are to know what God wants of humanity, God must tell us and show us. God has done that in Jesus. The bible is a faithful witness to what God has done in Israel and in Jesus.

The primary way we know about Jesus is through the bible. Paul reminds us that God has created the world in such a way that there are traces of the image of God in all creation.

Romans 1:19-20 (NRSV)

¹⁹ For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. ²⁰ Ever since the creation of the world his eternal power and divine nature, invisible though they are, have been understood and seen through the things he has made. So they are without excuse;

The Psalms also show how nature declares the glory of God.

Psalm 19 (NRSV)

¹ The heavens are telling the glory of God;
and the firmament proclaims his handiwork.

² Day to day pours forth speech,
and night to night declares knowledge.

³ There is no speech, nor are there words;
their voice is not heard;

⁴ yet their voice goes out through all the earth,
and their words to the end of the world.

In the heavens he has set a tent for the sun,
⁵ which comes out like a bridegroom from his wedding canopy,
and like a strong man runs its course with joy.

⁶ Its rising is from the end of the heavens,
and its circuit to the end of them;
and nothing is hid from its heat.

Science explores the wonders of the world God has created. God can also speak to people through prophecy, dreams, visions, and other people. Though all of these ways are important, within Christianity, they must all accord to the witness of the biblical text.

Here is how a disciple of Paul put the matter of the inspiration of the biblical text available to him, which was probably the Old Testament:

2 Timothy 3:16-17 (NRSV)

¹⁶ All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, ¹⁷ so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work.

The bible did not drop out of heaven from God. God did not dictate it to a single individual. Rather, God worked through fallible human beings to offer faithful

communication of who God is and what God wants. This occurred over a 1500 year period, by people who were told the story orally, kept court records of kings, wrote philosophical texts, wrote poetry, fished for a living, wrote history, and so on. God became involved in this text in a way similar to the way God is present in Jesus. God was not present in Jesus in an obvious way, for many people dismissed him, even as others believed him. The bible is a humble text. It comes with strange and puzzling stories. It contains practices, such as slavery and the role of women, which seem strange to modern ears. This suggests that we need a discerning read of the biblical text. On one occasion, Jesus debated with the Pharisees that they were not strict enough in their interpretation and application of the text.

Mk7:9 How expert you've become at putting aside God's commandment to establish your own tradition. 10 For instance, Moses said, 'Honor your father and your mother' and 'Those who curse their father or mother will surely die.' 11 But you say, 'If people say to their father or mother, Whatever I might have spent to support you is korban ... 12 you no longer let those persons do anything for their father or mother. 13 So you end up invalidating God's word with your own tradition, which you then perpetuate. And you do all kinds of other things like that!

Enough scholarship has entered the public sphere to make many Christians wonder if one can rely upon the bible. Yet, further study can help mature our views. The bible is a truthful witness to the God of Israel and to the God of Jesus Christ. We can appreciate the varying use of myth, legend, history, sayings, court records, poetry, prophecy, apocalyptic, parable, and letters. The bible is not a philosophical text. Plato and Aristotle produced such texts in a way that remains useful today. The bible is not a scientific text. Galileo, Newton, and

Einstein produced such texts that remain useful today. The bible is not a modern historical or biographical text. The truth is a good bible study will expose us to things we did not learn in early Sunday school classes. For some people, new discoveries mean loss of faith. One wonders if faith so easily shaken is genuine faith. One way to approach thorough bible study is to study it in context, in terms of both literary and historical context. This approach recognizes the historical distance between the reader who interprets and the text. The goal is let the text speak with all its strangeness and unfamiliarity. The bible speaks to us from a different historical period and culture. Good bible study will help us to experience that difference. Yet, the value of the bible is that as we read it today, it helps us to consider questions, such as, what is valuable in life, to what end, for what purpose?

Jews and Christians have accepted the present text of the Old Testament as truthful concerning what God wanted to say through Israel. Some Christians accept other texts, called apocrypha, as part of their rule or standard of faith. Christians have also accepted the New Testament as a faithful witness to what God was doing through Jesus Christ. Archeologists have also discovered other texts, mostly Gnostic in nature, that speaks of Jesus Christ. Regardless of the connection with the New Testament, we need to make a judgment today as to whether the early church made the right decision in accepting the New Testament texts as reflecting apostolic tradition. This decision is critical. If the New Testament is already untrue as a witness concerning Jesus, if the New Testament already distorts whom Jesus of Nazareth was and what God was

doing through him, then the New Testament is of no value today. It reflects a church already apostate and fallen from the truth.

If we accept the bible as a trustworthy witness, we can also acknowledge that the bible has difficulties. Here is the way a New Testament text refers to the writings of Paul:

2 Peter 3:15-16 (NRSV)

¹⁵ So also our beloved brother Paul wrote to you according to the wisdom given him, ¹⁶ speaking of this as he does in all his letters. There are some things in them hard to understand, which the ignorant and unstable twist to their own destruction, as they do the other scriptures.

Many of the great teachings of the church have their difficulties. After all, every classic teaching of the church stands or falls on whether it accurately reflects biblical texts. The teaching of the church on the Trinity is a clear example of this fact. Every teaching concerning who God is and who Jesus is must take certain biblical texts seriously. The church interpreted them in a way that led to the doctrine of the Trinity. The point is any difficulty we find in the bible is one that ought to cause further study and prayerful reflection. Such an approach will lead to the transformation of our lives. We have actually made a prior decision to trust the witness of the text that it does in fact communicate truthfully who God is and what God wants. We struggle with the text. We argue with the text. We wonder how passages connect with each other into a coherent teaching. We wonder if we can live the way the bible recommends.

One key to interpreting this text is to see it through what God has done in Jesus Christ. Jesus himself appears to have viewed the text through love for God and love for neighbor. "On this all the law and the prophets hang." The Torah and

the oral tradition often became hindrances to the love of God and neighbor. In that sense, we always need a discerning read of the text. Jesus did not view himself as giver of a new code. He offered a new way of life with God and with people. Christians in every age and in every culture live within the continuing dialogue with the bible.

First, this means that our creed, what we believe, must have consistency with our dialogue with the bible. The bible is a faithful witness to what God has done in Jesus Christ.

Second, this means that our way of life, our conduct, must have consistency with our dialogue with the bible. The bible corrects and trains in right living. We find out what God considers wrong. We find out how we can live a holy life. The Ten Commandments are consistent guides in life.

Some things are clear in the bible. Several key places in the New Testament are good texts for prayerful and focused reflection. I want to share a few of them.

One text is the beatitudes as recorded by Matthew.

Matthew 5:3-12 (NRSV)

³ "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

⁴ "Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

⁵ "Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

⁶ "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.

⁷ "Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.

⁸ "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.

⁹ "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.

¹⁰ "Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

¹¹ "Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. ¹² Rejoice

and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

A second text is from Paul, as he describes the fruit of the Spirit.

Galatians 5:22-23 (NRSV)

²² By contrast, the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, ²³ gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against such things.

A third text is the great hymn to love Paul constructed.

1 Corinthians 13 (NRSV)

If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. ² And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. ³ If I give away all my possessions, and if I hand over my body so that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing.

⁴ Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant ⁵ or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; ⁶ it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. ⁷ It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

⁸ Love never ends. But as for prophecies, they will come to an end; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will come to an end. ⁹ For we know only in part, and we prophesy only in part; ¹⁰ but when the complete comes, the partial will come to an end. ¹¹ When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child; when I became an adult, I put an end to childish ways.

¹² For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known. ¹³ And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love.

A fourth text is from Peter.

2 Peter 1:5-8 (NRSV)

⁵ For this very reason, you must make every effort to support your faith with goodness, and goodness with knowledge, ⁶ and knowledge with self-control, and self-control with endurance, and endurance with godliness, ⁷ and godliness with mutual affection, and mutual affection with love. ⁸ For if these things are yours and are increasing among you, they keep you from being ineffective and unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ.

We also find a list of vices in Paul.

Abusive language
Adulteries
Anger
Boastful
Carousing
Cowardly
Craftiness
Dissensions
Drunkenness
Enmities
Envy
Evil
Factions
Faithless
False witness
Foolish
Fornication
God haters
Gossips
Greed
Guile
Haughty
Heartless
Idolatry
Impurity
Insecurity
Insolent
Inventors of evil
Jealousy
Liars
Licentiousness
Male prostitutes (malakoi)
Malice
Mischief-maker
Murder
Polluted
Quarrels
Rebellious toward parents
Revels
Revilers
Robbers
Ruthless
Silly talk

Slander
Sodomites arsenokoitai
Sorcery
Strife
Thieves
Vulgar talk
Wickedness

All of this may appear like a list of rules. We want our freedom. At this point, the bible appears to take enjoyment out of life. If we could compare human life to a game for just a moment, we would recognize that a game without some rules would be chaos. Most likely, people would make up rules, probably for their advantage. What I suggest, however, is that God says yes to so much in life. God has placed this world here for us to enjoy. God has put us with other people so that we can enjoy those relationships. God has said that a few things are wrong. In that sense, the bible is a rulebook. It tells us what is “in” and what is “out.” People cross the boundaries of proper relationships. Listening to such instruction, that we might call it wisdom from the ages, is actually an increase in freedom and enjoyment.

The bible is a revelation of what God wants of us. That is why, as Christians, we enter into serious dialogue with the bible. We need to hear what God says through those who wrote this text.

Second, the bible is a love letter from God.

God speaks today through this text. The point of the bible is to help people come to Jesus. John notes with sadness that many people study the bible, and yet miss Jesus.

John 5:39-40 (NRSV)

³⁹ “You search the scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that testify on my behalf. ⁴⁰ Yet you refuse to come to me to have life.

The bible is not about itself. The bible points the way to Jesus Christ. It points us to what God is like as shown in Jesus. It points us to the form of life God wants.

Martin Luther once wrote:

Scripture is the manger or cradle in which the infant Jesus lies. Don't let us inspect the cradle and forget to worship the baby.

God speaks in many ways today. The primary way is through the bible. What happens when God speaks today through the bible?

First, God brings faith to those who are not yet Christians.

David Suchet, a Shakespearean actor known for his portrayal of Hercule Poirot, tells of his conversion. He lay in a bathtub in a hotel in the USA when he had impulse to read the bible. He read a Gideon bible, and came to faith in Christ. He said in *Family Magazine*:

From somewhere I got this desire to read the bible again. That's the most important part of my conversion. I started with the Acts of the Apostles and then moved to Paul's Letters – Romans and Corinthians. And it was only after that I came to the gospels. In the New Testament I suddenly discovered the way that life should be followed.

Secondly, God speaks to Christians.

As we read the bible, we experience a transforming relationship with God through Jesus Christ. This is the way Paul put it:

2 Corinthians 3:18 (NRSV)

¹⁸ And all of us, with unveiled faces, seeing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another; for this comes from the Lord, the Spirit.

As we study the bible, we encounter Jesus Christ. As we spend time with Christ and the bible, we will find that God will shape our character to be like Christ.

Reading the bible will bring joy and peace, even in crisis.

Psalm 23:5 (NRSV)

⁵ You prepare a table before me
in the presence of my enemies;
you anoint my head with oil;
my cup overflows.

God can guide us through the bible.

Psalm 119:105 (NRSV)

¹⁰⁵ Your word is a lamp to my feet
and a light to my path.

Reflection upon the bible can even bring healing.

Proverbs 4:22 (NRSV)

²² For they are life to those who find them,
and healing to all their flesh.

The bible is a defense against spiritual attack. The best example of this is in Matthew 4:1-11, where Jesus quotes from Deuteronomy 6-8 in his struggle with the temptations from Satan.

The bible has power. Here is how Hebrews put it.

Hebrews 4:12 (NRSV)

¹² Indeed, the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing until it divides soul from spirit, joints from marrow; it is able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart.

It has power to pierce our defenses and get through to the center of whom we are.

The bible can speak to us in quite specific ways. A verse from the bible speaks to the condition we face at this time and place. It becomes a way that God speaks to us.

Third, how do we hear God speak through the bible?

Time is our most valuable possession. The pressure on time tends to increase as life goes on and we become increasingly busy. A saying goes like this: “money is power, but time is life.” If we are going to set aside time to read the bible, we have to plan. If we do not plan to do it, we will never do it. If you have never read the bible regularly, a good place to start is seven minutes per day. You will want to increase it as time goes on. We know that Jesus arose early for prayer.

Mark 1:35 (NRSV)

³⁵ In the morning, while it was still very dark, he got up and went out to a deserted place, and there he prayed.

We need to find somewhere we can call our own. We need to begin with openness to receiving what God wants to say to us now. One might try reading one of the gospels. One might also read classic texts of the bible. A good study bible will help.

Christians need to read the bible in order to grow in faith and life. Listening to a sermon Sunday morning is not enough to bring maturity. At this point, one of the many daily reading plans available can help people read the bible every day.

Bible study is a good discipline. This means utilizing the many helps, such as study bible, bible atlas, multi-volume commentaries and bible dictionaries, introductions to the Old and New Testaments, theologies of the Old and New Testaments, concordances, and so on. One might even want to gain some knowledge of Hebrew and Greek, the languages in which the bible was originally written.

One way to engage in good bible study is to ask good questions. Too often, Christians who read the bible are afraid to ask questions of the text, especially if one wants to argue with a text. When a text attracts us, we might try memorization, often by using the text while jogging, while driving, and in other ways throughout the day. One might also try remembering certain meaningful passages. One will come across passages that have an attraction. Reflect upon them with the goal of learning why it attracts at that stage of one's life. In idle moments, such as while driving or exercising, simply meditate upon the verse repeatedly. To explore the theological dimensions of a text, we might ask questions like this: what does the text teach us about God, about humanity, and about the relationship between God and humanity? With some narratives and stories in the bible, it can be helpful to reflect with the use of the five senses. What would you, in your imagination, see, touch, smell, hear, or taste? With the same intent, one could use the gift of imagination to put oneself into the story, imagining the characters in the stories, and even placing oneself in the story. Of course, none of this imagination tells us what actually went on in the story. Using our imagination in this way allows us to explore the issues with which we are dealing in our lives. Another way of personalizing the text is to reflect upon it to the place where one paraphrases the text, using words common to one's life and experience. With some texts, we might accept a challenge that moves us toward change of personal and communal life. What does the text say? What did the author intend to communicate to the first hearers? What situation does the passage address? What is the central idea? What does the text say to believers

today? What meaning does the passage have for us today and for me as individual? What does it say to me as a reader? What do I as a reader say to the text? What claims does the passage make upon us today?

Of course, the purpose of this study is to allow the bible to shape our lives.

We need to remember a truth:

Luke 6:47-49 (NRSV)

⁴⁷ I will show you what someone is like who comes to me, hears my words, and acts on them. ⁴⁸ That one is like a man building a house, who dug deeply and laid the foundation on rock; when a flood arose, the river burst against that house but could not shake it, because it had been well built. ⁴⁹ But the one who hears and does not act is like a man who built a house on the ground without a foundation. When the river burst against it, immediately it fell, and great was the ruin of that house.”

D. L. Moody pointed out:

The bible was not given to increase our knowledge. It was given to change our lives.

To return to the beginning, what will happen if we take delight in the reading the bible?

First, we shall produce fruit.

Psalm 1:3 (NRSV)

³ They are like trees
planted by streams of water,
which yield their fruit in its season,
and their leaves do not wither.
In all that they do, they prosper.

Our lives can produce the fruit of the Spirit. It will produce fruit in the influence we bring upon the lives of others. We rightly read the bible for personal benefit. Yet, it also changes our lives in a way that influences other people toward Christ. We need to become a blessing to our friends, colleagues, neighbors, and our society.

Second, we shall have perseverance in the Christian life.

As Psalm 1 reminds us, “their leaves do not wither.” We shall not dry up or lose vitality. Great spiritual experiences are not enough. We need daily centering of our lives in Christ. Without a center, the storms of our lives will cause our lives to split apart. Life is tough. Life is difficult. With a center, changed circumstances will not cause us to fall apart.

Third, delighting in the bible will cause us to prosper.

I do not mean materially. We will prosper in terms of the fullness, meaning, and purpose of life that we need to live the best life we can live. We can begin the healing we need in our relationship with God, people, and society. This is far more important than wealth.

I hope that the bible will become your delight.

Talk 6: Why and How Do I Pray?

Most polls show that 90% or more people in modern America pray. Most of those prayers originated in what parents taught them. We pray that God would bless certain persons close to us. We pray for help when we face trouble. We pray when we want something badly enough and are afraid that we will not get it. As adults, many of us continue with child-like notions of prayer. Prayer is about what we want and what we think is good for us. Maturity in our life of prayer will bring us to a different level of the meaning of prayer.

What is prayer?

At the beginning of such a discussion on prayer, we need to be quite clear. The test of prayer is bearing fruit, not how good I felt. Especially, do we bear the fruit of compassion and love? Everything said here has the objective of helping us be at this point.

Prayer makes several assumptions. It assumes God is, and that God takes a personal interest in us as individuals. It assumes that we want a relationship with God. This is a major step of faith in our walk with the Lord. Prayer will never have the sustaining power in our lives that we need until we experience prayer as sustaining our friendship with a God who cares for every one of us. Until we come to this experience of prayer, it will be a duty rather than a privilege.

It can be difficult to believe God loves us as individuals. We seem too small and insignificant for God to spend much time with us. The universe is so vast! To experience the power of prayer is to believe that even in the midst of

such a universe, God cares for each individual. In God's sight, the vast expanse of the universe does not compare to the significance of our lives.

What is "big" enamors us, for "big is better." Fortunately, God cares for those in whom God has breathed life. God's care and knowledge of the whole creation does not preclude God's care for and knowledge of you and me. In the midst of the vast expanse of the universe, God has a unique place for every life, a unique reason for why we are here. Prayer is the personal appropriation of this faith that, indeed, God does care for us individuals. God is no longer a theory. God is the one in whom we place our trust. We enter fellowship with God, not just believe the creed of the church about God. In true prayer, we move from the intellectual affirmation that God exists, and place ourselves at God's disposal. In true prayer, we move from ritual to what the ritual intends, genuine relationship with God.

Christian prayer is to the Father.

In the prayer Jesus taught us to pray, Jesus said, "Our Father, who art in heaven," in Matthew 6:9. God made humanity in the image of God. Who we are is a reflection of something within the nature of God, related to will, rationality, feeling, and purposeful action. We have the privilege of a family relationship with God, in which we can call God, "Father." The Aramaic word, "abba," is the familiar word in the household that the child used: "daddy." Our relationship with God has the potential for remarkable intimacy when we pray to the Father.

This Father has heavenly power. The fact that the bible and Christianity affirm that the source of life is in God suggests that we need to take prayer

seriously. Andrew Murray once said, “The power of prayer depends almost entirely upon our apprehension of who it is with whom we speak.” We live in an immense universe. It came into existence 15 billion years ago as the result of a collision of subatomic particles. The universe two billion years light years across. The universe has a hierarchy of five identifiable levels of collections of galaxies. The Milky Way, our own galaxy, is 100,000 light years in diameter and two billion light years across.

Christian prayer is through the Son.

We acknowledge that we have no right to come to God in prayer based upon our own achievements or goodness. Rather, we come to God because God bids us to do so in Christ. Our prayer is in the name of Jesus. He is our High Priest, as Hebrews puts it. God gives us the privilege to use the name of the Son in prayer. If I wrote a check for a million dollars, it would be worthless. If Bill Gates wrote a check for a million dollars, it would be worth it. In the same way, we have no standing in ourselves to approach God. We can approach God because of grace and love from God, shown clearly in Jesus.

Christian prayer is prayer is by one Spirit.

Even with all our difficulties in prayer, God has not left us alone. God has given us the Spirit to live within us and help us to pray. Here is how Paul puts it.

Romans 8:26-27 (NRSV)

²⁶ Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words. ²⁷ And God, who searches the heart, knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.

When we pray, God prays through us by the Spirit who lives in us.

Why Pray?

Prayer is in the way in which we develop our relationship with God. Jesus set the pattern for Christians by his own life and example of prayer. The prayer I propose is growing friendship with God. God adopts human beings into a new family, where new relationships need to develop. Prayer becomes a delight at the heart of the relationship. God made human beings as conversation partners with whom God can relate. God has made human beings for a heart to heart relationship with God. Close friends talk often and spend time with each other. Conversation is central to friendship. A healthy relationship with God involves making prayer central rather than incidental. Prayer is the means for our growing in this friendship with God.

Prayer brings us to greater openness to change. To pray is to change. It helps us face our own darkness, the shadow side of our personality. Prayer is the central avenue God uses to transform us. Prayer is to become what we are. We often make prayer an isolated part of life. Prayer is to unite all of life. It is integration of God, self, and life. God is the ground of our being. God is at the center of who we are.

Jesus encouraged us to ask.

Luke 11:9-10 (NRSV)

⁹“So I say to you, Ask, and it will be given you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you. ¹⁰ For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened.

Prayer is the expression of human desire. The passion of the heart tends to come to fruition in life. Such a central craving of our lives tends to organize our

attention and energy toward that end. Such prayer calls us into alliance with forces from outside us. Such desire can be evil, of course. That is why we need the correction of the New Testament to be sure that what we desire is of God. Many prayers fail at the point of refusing to confront honestly, what we genuinely desire. Prayer that does not arise out of our passion in life is too weak to achieve anything. We pray that God would remove a sinful habit, while at the same time not take the steps necessary to remove the habit from our lives. We may petition God for forgiveness, yet not take the steps necessary in genuine repentance. We may pray for our friends, yet they cannot count upon us to be sensitive and generous to them. Do we care about our friends at all? We may ask for great and noble things in prayer. Yet, if our character does not match that for which we pray, our prayer is not sincere. We may pray for missions, while at the same time offer nothing else that might aid Christian mission. We may pray for peace, while at the same time not become devoted to the cause of peace in the human family.

Does God always answer prayer?

I will grant that some passages in the bible imply that the promise to answer affirmatively is absolute. Yet, when we look at the record of the bible, we also discover many accounts of unanswered prayer.

Lamentations 3:44 (NRSV)
⁴⁴ you have wrapped yourself with a cloud
so that no prayer can pass through.

Habakkuk 1:2 (NRSV)
² O LORD, how long shall I cry for help,
and you will not listen?
Or cry to you "Violence!"

and you will not save?

Moses prayed to enter the Promised Land, yet he did not enter it.

Paul wanted his thorn in the flesh removed.

2 Corinthians 12:7b-10 (NRSV)

⁷Therefore, to keep me from being too elated, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to torment me, to keep me from being too elated. ⁸Three times I appealed to the Lord about this, that it would leave me, ⁹but he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness." So, I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me. ¹⁰Therefore I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities for the sake of Christ; for whenever I am weak, then I am strong.

Even Jesus prayed for removal of suffering at Gethsemane. The Bible also recognizes that whole groups of people will experience lack of answered prayer.

Isaiah 1:15 (NRSV)

¹⁵When you stretch out your hands,
I will hide my eyes from you;
even though you make many prayers,
I will not listen;
your hands are full of blood.

James 4:3 (NRSV)

³You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, in order to spend what you get on your pleasures.

Job 27:8-9 (NRSV)

⁸For what is the hope of the godless when God cuts them off,
when God takes away their lives?
⁹Will God hear their cry
when trouble comes upon them?

Jeremiah 11:14 (NRSV)

¹⁴As for you, do not pray for this people, or lift up a cry or prayer on their behalf, for I will not listen when they call to me in the time of their trouble.

Complaint about unanswered prayer is nothing new. Yet, it is unreasonable to allow such experiences to cause the abandoning of prayer.

First, much of the greatest praying is not petition at all. Think of prayers for adoration, confession, thanksgiving, consecration, and communion. Petition is only one aspect of the experience of prayer. Prayer is a gift of communion between God and us. Prayer brings transformation of us, even if we are disappointed in external results.

Further, we are not wise enough to substitute our wish for the will of God. Imagine what the world would be like, if God answered all our requests positively. God must deny many of our prayers. No is as real an answer as Yes. There are times when, if God would answer the specific petition, God would also deny our true desire. St. Augustine tells of the time in his life when he was not a Christian. He intended to go to Rome. He overheard his mother praying that God would stop her son from going to that wicked city. St. Augustine went, and her prayer was unanswered. Yet, when he arrived in Rome, he met Ambrose, a man of God, who led him to Christ. God knew the substance of her desire, and therefore denied the specific request.

Another reality is that we often fail to see how often God answers our prayers in ways that we do not expect. In fact, we may not even like the way God answers our prayer. Often, we seek a specific result in prayer. God often gives us an opportunity to be the channel for answered prayer. God may grant us wisdom sufficient to get what we request. We childishly look at prayer as a way to bypass the use of our own intelligence and work. Results come only as we think and work toward the desired end.

Consider what this world would be like if prayer could accomplish everything. We jump to the conclusion that our prayer is unanswered. In reality, many of our greatest desires demand time, patience, persistent search, long waiting as conditions of their fulfillment. We too soon give up on a prayer as unanswered; what we need is patience and persistence. We are not ready for the reception of the gift that we desire. God cannot give to us until we are prepared and proved our spirit by persistent prayer. We become disappointed in not receiving that for which we ask. We measure the value of prayer by external changes. Yet, the saints of prayer knew that the value of prayer is determined more by entrusting ourselves to God. We who pray must be ready of have our requests denied. God looks at the desires of our hearts.

Though the Bible does not deal directly with this issue, we can share its confidence in the freedom of God to help people. God must not answer many prayers. However, God is able to answer all good prayers. God does not remake the world for the asking, not because God cannot, but because God must not. It may be convenient for us today that it does not rain, but that does not mean, in the great scheme of the universe, that it would be good for God to abide by such a request. We can have confidence in the freedom and power of God. However, due humility will restrain us from making a presumptuous application of this truth to prayer. We need to pray about everything, in submission to the will of God. This is both more humane and more Christian than falsely limiting our prayers to what we might think permissible. Our faith is not in prayer itself. However,

prayer in faith asks everything in submission to the will of God. It desires never to force its wish on God. Rather, it seeks to align its wish with the will of God.

How should we pray?

One common way to pray is by the mnemonic device of ACTS.

Adoration begins prayer with praise of God.

Confession moves us to look honestly at who we are and what we have done to obstruct our life of prayer and our witness in the world.

Thanksgiving reminds us of the source of the life we have, as well as family, friends, and nation.

Supplication is another way of reflecting upon our petition and intercession for self and for others. Intercessory prayer helps us experience internally the way our lives connect our lives with others.

God acts in persuasive ways. In prayer, we open ourselves to the purpose of God in the world, seeking to become part of bringing the will of God into our lives and into our world. The issue in this view of the divine presence of the world as persuasive is whether love is stronger than evil. The resurrection of Jesus gives us good reason to believe that this is the reality. God knows the strength of love to bring the best possibilities into reality. God knows the strength of love that makes for the greatest flourishing of life and the richest emergence of values.

Prayer is conversation.

The prayer of conversation is the free and natural exchange of ideas between persons. The more wide the range of subjects included in their conversation, the more rich their fellowship. To pray is to let Jesus into our lives. Jesus knocks and seeks admittance into our daily lives, not simply at the stated time and place for prayer. Whether we know it or not, that is where we need God the most. We need to speak with God about our daily experience. Such experiences need not be great or important. We need to speak with God about the little things that make up our daily lives. We need to tell God when we are happy and joyful. We need to tell God when we are sad or worried or when we do not know what to do. Everything that concerns us is a concern to God as well. Our daily lives are different when we are conscious of the presence of the Lord at our

side. Our work becomes easier. Our difficulties no longer frighten us.

Human contrariness or unpleasantness that we experience at the hands of others cannot disturb our peace. People who have learned the secret of a happy Christian life have learned this experience of daily renewal.

The Lord's Prayer

Another well-known approach in prayer is to follow the Lord's Prayer as a pattern. It is an aid in praying. Jesus intended it to help the person who recites it to discover the loving closeness of the Father.

The use of the word "**Father**" was something reasonably distinctive to Jesus. Often, the bible uses royal images, referring to God as King and Majesty. One has to be careful in approaching such a fearful figure. However, when Jesus uses "Father" here, and in parables, he suggests intimacy of relationship. Jesus did not go to the names of God in the Old Testament, dominant among them Elohim, Yahweh, and Adonai. He chose a word similar to saying to God, "Daddy." It expresses the closeness of his relationship with God. It also expresses the desire by Jesus that his followers participate in that relationship. It expresses closeness to and love of God in relationship. It expresses our sense of being children of God and becomes the promise of salvation, for God will not forsake the children of God. Addressing God as "Father" also suggests a family. We are to be children of the Father, reflecting in our lives the life of our Divine Father. We need to take on the family resemblance of this family. We find this resemblance described in places like the Ten Commandments, the Sermon on the Mount, the fruit of the Spirit, and other such texts. When we pray, "Our

Father,” we acknowledge the presence of others every time we pray. We can pray so selfishly. The presence of others with us before “Our Father,” means that we bring the needs and concerns of others before God.

The traditional use of “**hallowed**” is archaic, yet it rolls easily off the lips of most congregations. This prayer may ask God to hallow the name of God, now and fully in the future. It could also be a request for human beings to hallow the name of God.

To “hallow” is to praise God, to be in gratitude, for what God has done. To “hallow” or “revere” is to give honor, to set apart, to focus, upon the reality and power of God. Without such an experience, we simply offer pious prayers with little meaning.

We often begin praying in such a lazy way. We ought to ponder the reality of the presence of God. This prayer begins with God, not with our needs and us. Before we start telling God our troubles and trials and petitions, we focus upon the glory of God.

Thy kingdom come is a broad petition. For many, this prayer is simply for the future coming of the kingdom. Yet, Jesus also said we do not know the time. This petition comes before the petition concerning the will of God. This suggests that we need to understand better what the kingdom of God is before we can properly pray for the will of God. We want the rule of God to come in our lives. Jesus envisioned a kingdom dominated by the love of God and neighbor, a kingdom of forgiveness from God and for others, and a kingdom where God seeks the last, least, and lost.

It refers to the reigning activity of Christianity in human hearts and society. Yet, this reign will come in the way Jesus re-presented God to humanity. Jesus came teaching, healing, and living in a way he hoped would bring people under the influence of the Father. He did not choose to coerce people into the rule of God. He wanted to invite and persuade people toward the Father. This is a big petition, a huge desire. To pray in this way is to focus one's mind and heart in such a way that it becomes real in our lives. We have no choice about the kingdom of God. It has already come in Jesus. God is the one who brings the kingdom. It is a result of God's design and doing. Wherever the reign of Christ is experienced, the kingdom of God is present. This is not a prayer for those who want things to stay the way they are.

Thy will be done is the primary limit to prayer. Prayer is an attempt to unite our will with the will of God. Remember the story from Mark 14:36, where Jesus prayed that the cup of suffering would pass. That was the petition. Yet, he made sure that he submitted to what God wanted in this situation. We are to put ourselves in the center of the will of God. To pray "Thy will be done" is to pray, "Here I am, Lord, send me." The most dramatic example of the life of prayer in the life of Jesus is Gethsemane. At this critical moment at the end of his life, Jesus took his disciples to this remote garden to pray. His prayer was that the will of God would be done, rather than his own. This story reminds us that the will of God may be tough and demanding, but it is not to be dreaded. If we as Christians come to dread the will of God, it will be a negative witness to those around us.

Praying for the will of God is quite common. We often view the will of God like an obstacle course. If we make one false move, we plunge to disaster. If we make a mistake, the anger of God awaits us. Further, we want to know what God wants us to do with our lives, what job God wants us to have, and how we can have happiness. We might experience the temptation to ask God to give us health, wealth, and ease. Further, we often assume the will of God is something we must determine through great effort, for it is a narrow, hidden path.

The will of God is a curse to the demon, a law for the one who views his or her life with God as a servant, and freedom for one who has the profound experience of being a child of God. This petition invites us to consider the freedom the will of God brings to us.

Give us this day our daily bread is the first petition for daily needs. With Jesus, his disciples, and the people of Galilee, discovering food for the day was an important matter. As an occupied and oppressed land, the agenda of those in power was to allow the peasants to survive, but not thrive.

This part of the Lord's Prayer is a commitment not to worry about such matters. The use of "us" and "our" is a reminder that we have a responsibility to those around us. If we selfishly pray for God to meet "my" material needs, while having a blind eye to the needs of those around me, we have not fulfilled the commitment implied in this prayer.

Many churches who claim they are the genuine apostolic churches do so because they emphasize speaking in tongues, healing, and miracles. While these manifestations were part of the early church, holding property in common

was present in the church in Jerusalem, and generosity was a major emphasis throughout the churches of Paul and John.

Regardless of the political or ideological stance one takes, an honest appraisal of American Christianity can hardly be satisfied with the tendency to provide anxiously for oneself and neglect the needs of others. We are to live our lives entrusting our basic needs and ourselves to God. God is the giver. God is the one who gives us what we need. God keeps on giving day by day. We are dependent upon God for all of life. God provides the resources for us to meet our needs. This does not mean we are to work any less. It means we dedicate the use of our talents to the giver of life. We receive from God by faith all that we need to meet the demands of life.

Forgive us, as we forgive is a prayer for pardon. There have been several translations for this part of the prayer. "Debt" recognizes our indebtedness to God and to others. "Sin" recognizes the ways we have morally fallen short. "Trespass" refers to entering places we do not belong. "Sin" recognizes that something is not right with the world. We are in bondage, we grasp at things selfishly, we are wounded, sick, and paralyzed. Whatever word we use, there is no way any of us can repay the debt we owe. We cannot make it right on our own. Forgiveness comes from beyond us. Sin is separation from God. Forgiveness is reconciliation with God. Forgiveness is a gift of God. In Jesus, God has already forgiven us. In the cross, God has already forgiven us. Yet, we ask for forgiveness because we need the healing power forgiveness brings into our lives.

Forgiveness is a difficult matter. The forgiveness of sin raises the question of justice. Do we have the right to continue in sin, because we know God will forgive us? If God forgives, does that remove the moral seriousness Paul displays in other passages? No matter how much we sin, we know that God will have more than enough grace to cover our sin. Well, it seems as if we will increase grace the more we sin. Paul recognized the paradox of forgiveness arising out of grace. Here is how he responded.

Romans 6:1-2 (NRSV)

What then are we to say? Should we continue in sin in order that grace may abound? ² By no means! How can we who died to sin go on living in it?

Paul has an instinctive and gut reaction to such wrong-headed thinking. He goes on to give what he thinks are good reasons for this gut reaction. After all, our union with Christ in baptism means one way of life, that of sin and death, has ended; a new way of life has come. Grace and forgiveness have the objective of ending the sickness and alienation that sin has brought into human life.

Our hesitation to forgive places the other person on probation. We hold on to resentment and bitterness. We seek revenge. We “meditate” upon the wrong done to us. In all of this, we drive a great chasm in the relationship between the one who did wrong to us and us. It can also be quite difficult to receive forgiveness. It can be harder to forgive someone who does not think they need forgiveness. We discover this truth in another encounter between Jesus and his disciples.

Matthew 18:21-22 (NRSV)

²¹ Then Peter came and said to him, “Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?” ²² Jesus said to him, “Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times.

Many places in the world need this grace. After the Civil War, Abraham Lincoln wanted the North to extend mercy to the South. This did not happen, and it introduced rivalry between the segments of the country for decades. After World War I, those who had victory kept those defeated in debt in a way that prepared the way for World War II. After the second war, Harry Truman wanted to rebuild Europe and Japan, and an ambitious program began, largely funded by American dollars. After the downfall of the Soviet Union, American assistance is an important part of the rebuilding of Russia and Eastern Europe. Portions of the world, especially in the Middle East, need this grace and forgiveness in order to restore relationships.

Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil seems like a strange petition. This is not a prayer for God to excuse us from the trials of life. The cross teaches us that Christians are not exempt from such experiences. However, it is a prayer that God not abandon us in the midst of such trials. The feeling of aloneness and abandonment is what makes temptation so fearful. It is not a prayer for special treatment. Evil is what threatens to destroy us. This is a prayer for the future, for strength to meet the challenges of the future.

One helpful metaphor for living is that life is a test. This metaphor suggests that each person is responsible for his or her life. It also suggests that we are responsible to someone. It suggests that we are agents of history, and not simply shaped by history. The bible often uses words like trials, temptations, refining, and testing. We reveal our character in the various tests we have in life. Often, such tests are not of our choosing. Few of us like tests. Some tests in

school we have had great anxiety in taking. Life thrusts such tests upon us. We will rise to the occasion and pass the test, or we will discover that we could not pass the test. In some cases, failing a test may help us to redirect our lives. Because life tests us, we must not fear to test life. Every human decision has an open-ended character to it. We can revisit every decision and impulse.

For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory forever.

Amen. This conclusion to the prayer is not in the oldest manuscripts of the New Testament. Many scholars think it is the response of the congregation to the reciting of this prayer. In any case, it is a fitting conclusion.

“Amen” simply gives our assent to what we have prayed. We commit ourselves to be the person described in this prayer. We give our assent to being a partner with God in bringing about the kind of world God intends.

When should we pray?

The New Testament exhorts us to pray always.

1 Thessalonians 5:17 (NRSV)

¹⁷ pray without ceasing,

Ephesians 6:18 (NRSV)

¹⁸ Pray in the Spirit at all times in every prayer and supplication. To that end keep alert and always persevere in supplication for all the saints.

The thrust of this exhortation, I suspect, is that we develop a prayerful attitude or perspective on life. We develop a prayerful attitude in our relationships within the family, the greatest challenge most of us faces, and in all our relationships.

Yet, most people will find that they need to set aside specific times for prayer. The combination of bible reading and prayer is often our practice. Jesus encouraged such times, and made such times for himself.

Matthew 6:6 (NRSV)

⁶ But whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

Mark 1:35 (NRSV)

³⁵ In the morning, while it was still very dark, he got up and went out to a deserted place, and there he prayed.

We will also find it helpful to pray with other people. This will occur in worship for most people. It can also occur in small groups. Although it can be hard, we need to learn to pray in the presence of others, but always to God.

Prayer is at the heart of Christianity, because the heart of Christianity is a relationship with God.

Talk 7: How Does God Guide Us?

Everyone makes decisions concerning their lives. Many are small decisions. Some are the “big stuff.” For most people, we can narrow the big stuff into three areas. One is the choice of intimate relationships we will have, and in particular, what we do about family. We have an original family over which we had no choice to belong. We have a choice concerning marriage and family. Two is job and career. We will spend much of our lives working. We want to choose well. Three is the matter of how we will view our lives as lived well and meaningfully. This is the matter of what we will do with God.

Guidance from God relies upon our relationship with God. We read in a psalm the following words.

Psalm 32:8 (NRSV)

⁸ I will instruct you and teach you the way you should go;
I will counsel you with my eye upon you.

We will also find in John the character of the intimate relationship Jesus has with those who follow him, and the guidance that arises from that relationship.

John 10:3-4 (NRSV)

³ The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and the sheep hear his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. ⁴ When he has brought out all his own, he goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow him because they know his voice.

God wants us to discover the will of God.

Colossians 1:9 (NRSV)

⁹ For this reason, since the day we heard it, we have not ceased praying for you and asking that you may be filled with the knowledge of God’s will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding,

Ephesians 5:17 (NRSV)

¹⁷ So do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is.

God has concern for each individual. God loves us and wants to speak to us about what we should do with our lives. God is in the small stuff as well as the big stuff.

God has a plan for our lives.

Ephesians 2:10 (NRSV)

¹⁰ For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life.

Some people do not trust God enough when it comes to this plan. Yet, when the bible informs us that God has elected, chosen, and predestined us in Christ, as difficult as those topics may appear to us, we at least have the assurance that God has turned toward humanity in love and grace. Human life is the fruit of a loving and caring God, seeking to bring forth fruit that will last. Some people wonder if God wants the best for us. Faith may be nothing more than trusting in the goodness of the purpose of God for our humanity in general and for our lives in particular. In faith, we entrust our lives to the good purpose of God. In faith, we entrust the lives of those for whom we care most deeply to the good purpose of God. In faith, we entrust nation and world to the good purpose of God. I wonder if we can trust what Paul says on this matter.

Romans 12:2 (NRSV)

² Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect.

Jeremiah faced a situation where the people wondered if God had a future for them. He then spoke these words.

Jeremiah 29:11 (NRSV)

¹¹ For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the LORD, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope.

God has prepared a good plan for our lives, a plan that will lead to the best life we can lead. In the case of Jeremiah, the people wondered if God still cared, given the mess they had made of their lives. Today, many people muddle through life. In our secular society, the last place many people will go for guidance is the church or God. Yet, the church and God is precisely what they need.

If we are to find out the plan God has for us, we need to ask God about them. We do not want to embrace a plan of life without the assurance that God is in the plan. Jesus lived his life by the Spirit (Luke 4:1) and did what he saw his Father doing (John 5:19). Many of our failures in our plan of life arise because we have not taken seriously seeking what God wants. We might even be afraid that if we listened to what God wanted, God would contradict what we want.

Therefore, we do not even ask.

God will guide us when we prepare ourselves to do what God wants rather than insisting on what we want. God guides people who can honestly have the perspective of the psalmist.

Psalm 25:9 (NRSV)

⁹ He leads the humble in what is right,
and teaches the humble his way.

Psalm 25:14 (NRSV)

¹⁴ The friendship of the LORD is for those who fear him,
and he makes his covenant known to them.

God will guide those with the perspective of Mary.

Luke 1:38a (NRSV)

³⁸ Then Mary said, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word."

Here is how the psalmist put it.

Psalm 37:5 (NRSV)

⁵ Commit your way to the LORD;
trust in him, and he will act.

We have the privilege of consulting with God, committing our way to God, and trusting that God will act in the course of life.

We can have confidence that God cares enough to guide us. The question that faces us in a practical way is how. Not every decision will include all these elements. However, I would like to offer several ways that God can guide us, if we can open ourselves enough to what God wants.

First, the bible is one way God guides us.

If we are open to this guidance, many issues remain closed to us. We read of the God of Israel and the Father of Jesus Christ. We read the Ten Commandments, the Holiness Code, the virtues and vices lists, and the household rules. Some things are reasonably clear. God has closed the door on certain ways of life. God will not lead us into a form of life that contradicts such guidance. An obvious area is our sexuality, one that causes so much confusion to many of us. God will not lead us into adultery or a promiscuous use of our sexuality. God will not lead us to a pattern of life that involves violence, anger, greed, lying, and so on. In such matters where the bible is reasonably clear, our only job is to commit our lives to reject what the bible rejects. Of course, such general counsel from the bible does not reveal a particular will of God for us in specific situations. A life of singleness is a special calling to particular individuals.

Although the New Testament makes it clear that Christians are to marry other Christians, the bible does not tell us whom we should marry. Yet, habitual reading of the bible can offer insight into what we are to do today that may prove to be a way that God guides us in some situations. When a verse attracts us or intrigues us, we need to follow where it leads us.

Second, the Spirit guides us.

Sometimes, the guidance God gives is quite personal. The Spirit lives within us. We develop enough sensitivity that we hear the unique voice of the Spirit addressed to us. We recognize the voice of a family member or good friend on the telephone. In the same way, continual openness to the Spirit develops our ability to hear the voice of the Spirit. In the journeys of Paul as narrated by Luke, we learn that the Spirit told him not to go east, so Paul continued going west until he arrived in Greece. How does God speak to us through the Spirit?

The Spirit guides us when we pray.

Prayer is not simply a matter of us telling God our problems and even the way we think God should handle it. If we told a doctor our problems and offered the prescription, we would have stepped over a quite necessary boundary. In the same way, we need to learn to listen to the Spirit. Luke may portray this guidance at one juncture in the history of the early church.

Acts 13:1-3 (NRSV)

Now in the church at Antioch there were prophets and teachers: Barnabas, Simeon who was called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Manaen a member of the court of Herod the ruler, and Saul. ² While they were worshiping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, "Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them." ³ Then after fasting and praying they laid their hands on them and sent them off.

Often, we simply have openness to what seems like a gut feeling, a feeling of the heart, an insight, an intuition, or an impression. Openness to such subtle movements of feeling is an important way for us to maintain openness to God. Some traditions call this “affective prayer.” We can develop such a life of prayer as we develop self-awareness. Some things about self we know and others know, and so they are public knowledge. Some things, we know and others do not, and so it is a secret. Some things we do not know about self and others do know, and so we are blind to them. Some things, neither do others know nor do we know, and as such are unconscious. We need to grow in our openness to becoming increasingly aware of who we are. We also need to develop depth in human relationships, gain comfort with our feeling and gut instincts, face reality, having openness to risk, and consider the importance of relationships. In this form of prayer, we become open through meditation upon the situation to receive rather than simply focus upon our ability to analyze the information we have. Both are forms of thinking, but they are different ways to think. If we are to discern the will of God, we need to become open to both forms of thinking.

We need to become open to such feeling with care, under the assumption that we are in the process of allowing God to shape us into the image of Christ.

We need to test such feeling.

1 John 4:1 (NRSV)

Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God; for many false prophets have gone out into the world.

Again, we need to consult the clear wisdom of the bible in all matters. We need to consider whether following through on our insight will help us and others grow in love and bear the fruit of the Spirit. We need to ask if it strengthens, encourages, and comforts. Further, decisions over which we struggle, once we make a decision in line with the will of God, will lead to peace.

The Spirit guides through that about which we are passionate.

Many people assume that, in the matter of doing the will of God, if we imagine the last thing in the world we want to do is what God wants us to do. Although that may sometimes be the case, it rarely is. Rather, God uses the things that attract us and easily keep our attention to guide us into what God wants in our lives.

The Spirit guides in unexpected ways.

The bible gives accounts of people who receive guidance in ways that most of us have not experienced. Visions, dreams, and hearing audible voices are not the way most people hear from God in their personal experience. However, some people are more open than others are to receiving the insight or intuition received in such means. If we are open, God can still guide in such ways.

Three, good use of our rationality guides us.

Christianity does not ask of its members to abandon basic reasonableness in dealing with life choices. We do not need to ask God if God wants us to get up in the morning. We do not need to consult God as to which items of clothing God wants us to wear today. John Wesley said that God normally guided him by

presenting reasons to his mind for acting in a certain way. Sometimes, we simply need to gain clarity about the situation and decision facing us. We need to figure things out. Once we do, a sense of peace and clarity may arise as to what we ought to do. This is an important clue to the way that God guides us.

The big decisions in life require an effort of reasonableness and rationality. Choosing a partner that, we trust, will be for life, is a time to allow our rationality to guide us. In making such a choice, we need compatibility in spiritual life, compatibility in personality, and physical compatibility and attraction to each other. We need to exercise our rationality in terms of career or job, making sure that it utilizes our abilities, gifts, passions, and personality. In such matters, we need to have a long view of our lives, asking whether our future self will look back today on the decisions we make and be glad we made the decisions we did.

Four, the counsel of other Christians guides us.

Proverbs encourages us to seek wise advice.

Proverbs 12:15 (NRSV)

¹⁵ Fools think their own way is right,
but the wise listen to advice.

Proverbs 15:22 (NRSV)

²² Without counsel, plans go wrong,
but with many advisers they succeed.

Proverbs 20:18 (NRSV)

¹⁸ Plans are established by taking advice;
wage war by following wise guidance.

In seeking such counsel, we still have responsibility for our lives. We cannot shift responsibility to others or blame them. In the context of spiritual counsel,

submitting to the wisdom and counsel of another Christian can be quite appropriate, assuming that the relationship focuses upon honoring God. Seeking counsel from people with Christian faith, wisdom, and respect, is simply a wise thing to do when confronting a difficult life choice. Non-Christians can offer us important insight into human life in general and even into us if they know us well. The reason for this is that the grace of God influences all persons, and may break through in surprising places and persons. We need to be open to those break-through moments of grace.

We may find it quite helpful to have one other Christian with whom we owe mutual support and accountability for the way we think, feel, and act. In such relationships, we may discover patterns of behavior and thinking that the other person encourages, and other patterns that he or she would discourage.

As we seek counsel from others, the temptation is to seek advice from someone whom, we suspect, will agree with us. In professional counseling, one diagnosis involves the patient who leaves a therapist and seeks another whenever the therapist gets too close to a painful truth. Seeking advice can be much the same way, desiring confirmation for what one already wants to do from the other person.

Five, circumstantial signs can guide us.

We often use the image of open and closed doors at certain junctures in life. Most of us have stories of times that we wanted something badly, but the timing did not seem to be right. Our lives took a different course than we might

have liked. We may look back and be grateful. We may look back and wonder how our lives might have been different if we would have taken another road.

Michael Bourdeaux devoted himself to helping Christians living in Communist countries. This passion arose out of reading a letter from Varavva and Pronina that told of suffering and death at the hands of the KGB in the old Soviet Union. The letter came from Paris because he had developed a reputation based on his knowledge of Russian language and culture. In 1964, he went to Moscow. He went to the demolished sight of the old churches of St. Peter and St. Paul. Where two beautiful churches had been, now existed a 12-foot high fence. He saw two women climbing over the side of the fence across the square. As he followed them, they asked what he wanted. He told them that he received a letter from Paris that was from Varavva and Pronina, describing conditions of Christians in the Soviet Union. The two women then introduced themselves, of course, as Varavva and Pronina. A flood of emotion overcame all of them. He received his sense of divine calling upon his life in that moment. God can use the circumstances of our lives to speak to us and call us to our life work.

Do not try to get your life perfect.

We will not live our lives perfectly. As Christians, we will not discern properly the will of God perfectly. Living our lives with God at the center is not easy. In fact, it often makes life harder. I like the image of an artist striving to create the best picture he or she can create. I am not sure of all the factors that determine the choice of color, lines, and perspectives that the artist must make. Yet, the artist has a sense of moving a certain direction. The good thing about

artists is that they can have various drawings on cheap paper for their mistakes. They can also destroy the painting if they do not like where it ended up. The point is that the artist has a sense of what the picture needs to look like. No one right answer exists. Another artist might make different choices. Yet, this artist, at this time and place, makes these choices that, he or she hopes, will lead to a good painting.

The important difference in my illustration is that we have only one life to lead. The choices we make, although often subtle and ambiguous, will determine how we influence the lives of others and how we allow the lives of others influence us.

Do not be in a hurry.

Guidance from God may come quickly. It may take years. We may have a sense that God is going to do something with our lives, but not be sure what it will be. We need the quality of patience in seeking the will of God. We may hear God correctly, but we get the timing wrong. We may make mistakes. In both cases, God is powerful enough to take our missed steps and opportunities and turn it into good for us.

A mother wished to encourage her young son's progress in playing the piano. She bought tickets for a concert by Ignace Paderewski. The seats were near the front. It was not long until the mother was talking with a friend. The boy slipped away. At 8:00 pm the lights went out and the spotlight shown on the stage where the Steinway piano was. It was only then that people noticed the boy on the bench, innocently picking out, "Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star." The

mother was embarrassed. She started up to the stage to get him. Just then, the master pianist appeared on stage. "Don't quit, keep playing," he whispered to the boy. Leaning over, Mr. Paderewski reached down with his left hand and began filling in a bass part. Soon his right arm reached around the other side, encircling the child, to add a running obbligato. Together, the old master and the young novice held the crowd mesmerized.¹⁵

Maybe this illustration helps us to understand better what Paul meant.

Romans 8:28 (NRSV)

²⁸ We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose.

¹⁵ (Leadership, Spring 1983, 92).

Talk 8: Who is the Holy Spirit?

Many people know a certain amount about God, Jesus, the bible, the church, and Christian life. Yet, for many persons, it does not seem to become real to them. Many people go through the motions of a Christian life. Finally, something happens to them. A crisis in their personal life may begin this change. It may simply be an insight they receive while walking along a beach, in the forest, or in the mountains. It may be while reading a book or involvement in a bible study. However, something happens, and the Christian message becomes quite real to them, in a way they had not experienced before. Most likely, the church, the pastors, and the Christian friends that surrounded them lived and taught genuine Christian faith. However, it did not seem to take hold in them.

We speak of real revelation only when we speak of the revelation that is real for us. It is the revelation that reaches us. An objective revelation as such, even in the objectivity of scripture, preaching, and sacrament, becomes nothing more than an idol if it does not reach into humanity. This taking up of humanity into the event of revelation, because of which humanity sees itself as children of God, is the work of the Holy Spirit or the subjective reality of revelation.

A little one-line joke says, “No, God did not depart and leave us in charge.” The gift of the Holy Spirit makes it clear to all that God fully intends for the people of the church to be empowered, not by their own energy, but by the energy of the Holy Spirit.

One way to understand this application of the reality of Christian teaching to the individual is through the work of the Holy Spirit. Since this third person of

the classical teaching on the Trinity receives little attention among certain segments of Christianity, I want to spend some time talking about the Holy Spirit. My concern is this. If the church today is not careful, the experience of the Spirit in the New Testament church will feel quite alien when we read about it. When folks hear the story of Acts, some of them wonder, "Why doesn't something big like this ever happen around here?" However, others say, "God! I hope nothing like this ever happens around here. That is what those 'pentecostals' do. We do things decently and in order." The Holy Spirit is not something the Pentecostals own.

I mentioned the Trinity. This teaching of the church often confuses people. John Wesley said that he believed God is Three and One, although the manner how he did not comprehend. He said the mystery lays in the manner. The manner in which God exists as One, and yet as Father, Son, and Spirit, is something he accepts and affirms, even if he has no theory as to how.¹⁶ We do not turn away from believing and committing ourselves when we face mystery. Human life is a mystery, in that we do not know the future. We are mysteries to ourselves, yet, we commit ourselves to various projects and persons. Other people are mysteries, yet, we commit ourselves in relationships. Mystery does not stop us from engaging it. If we understand the Holy Spirit in the context of the Trinity, we understand the Holy Spirit as the revelation to us of the gracious will and favor of God toward us. The Father has a gracious purpose for each of us. The Holy Spirit works with the Father to show us that purpose, and to empower to make that purpose real in our lives. In another sermon, John Wesley pointed

¹⁶ John Wesley, Sermon 55, "On the Trinity," par. 15.

out that the Holy Spirit is the giver of all spiritual life, understood as righteousness, peace, joy, holiness, and happiness, and by the “restoration of that image of God” in which God created us.¹⁷

The Holy Spirit is a person, thinking, speaking, leading, and even grieving.

The Holy Spirit is the Spirit of Christ, the Spirit of Jesus, the Spirit of God, the Spirit, the Advocate or Counselor, or, of course, the Holy Spirit. For this reason, we might think of the Spirit as the personal presence of God or of Christ in our lives. John refers to the Spirit as *parakletos*, a word that means something like, “called alongside to help.” John also refers to this Spirit as “another” *parakletos*, suggesting that the Spirit is the personal presence of Jesus to us.

The Spirit fulfills the work of Jesus in the world. The Spirit gives the hope of new life for humanity, so that death does not have the final word.

The Holy Spirit appears as the anonymous face of God. The Spirit is anonymous because the Spirit glorifies the Father and Son. It indicates how very close the Spirit is to us, as close as the breath in our bodies. While the Spirit of God is not exactly the same as our spirit, the bible uses the same words for the two realities. The anonymity of the Holy Spirit reflects the fact that the fullness of God that God shall reveal in the future is not yet our experience in the present. The anonymity of the Holy Spirit also gives us the possibility of having a relationship with God in the present. The third Person in the Trinity, the Holy Spirit is the love with which God loves both God's own self and humanity. The Holy Spirit is also the love with which humanity loves God and humanity. The

¹⁷ John Wesley, sermon 110, “On the Discoveries of Faith,” par. 7.

Holy Spirit represents the subjective aspect of God. The Holy Spirit is the sighing individual, the yearning of the individual after God.

What I want to do in this chapter is to focus upon the person of the Holy Spirit. I want to discuss who the Spirit is and what we can learn about the Spirit through the activity of the Spirit in the bible.

The Spirit was involved in creation.

The opening verses of the bible make this clear to us.

Genesis 1:1-2 (NRSV)

In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth,² the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters.

The word for “wind” in both Hebrew and Greek is also the word for “spirit.” Here, we see the Spirit bringing order out of chaos. The Spirit brings new things into existence. The Spirit continues to bring this newness into the lives of people and churches. The Spirit brings order and peace into chaotic lives, freeing people from harmful habits and addictions, and from the confusion and mess of broken relationships.

Further, we find that humanity shares in the Spirit simply in virtue of being human beings.

Genesis 2:7 (NRSV)

⁷ then the LORD God formed man from the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man became a living being.

The Spirit of God animates the physical body of human beings, giving us an orientation of our lives toward God. People and churches can be dry as dust, but the Spirit is the one who animates and gives life. Many people are hungry for a

full and meaningful life. The Christian and the church have the opportunity of pointing people to God through their becoming windows of the life-giving Spirit for others.

The presence of the Spirit in the life of the church and believers relates to the phenomenon of life in all its breadth in the world, from creation, to sustaining life, and to the consummation and fulfillment of life in the end. Individual life has its source in the Spirit. The word “spirited” comes closest to expressing the meaning of Spirit here. Spirit is the principle of life and vitality in the universe. We see evidence of this spirit in psychological and sociological factors. We cannot explain humanity solely by reference to the social world or to physics and biology. We come face to face with ourselves, thereby liberating ourselves from captivity to biological drives or from the shaping by the social world.

The Spirit of God is active in creation, breathing life into the world that God has made. This presence in creation helps us to understand the role of the Spirit in bringing life to human beings. The Spirit of life gained victory over death in Jesus. The Spirit teaches us to know Jesus of Nazareth and moves our hearts to praise God through faith, love, and hope. Yet, the work of the Spirit does not limit itself to making intelligible what would otherwise be unintelligible. The same Spirit who gives life to all creation also gives new life to believers now by dwelling in them.

The Spirit comes upon particular people at particular times for particular tasks.

The same Spirit that animates creation works in the lives of the people. The Spirit has a purpose in coming into the lives of people. We find this reminder in Job:

Job 33:4 (NRSV)

⁴The spirit of God has made me,
and the breath of the Almighty gives me life.

In the Old Testament, we find that the Spirit filled people for artistic work.

Exodus 31:3-5 (NRSV)

³and I have filled him with divine spirit, with ability, intelligence, and knowledge in every kind of craft, ⁴to devise artistic designs, to work in gold, silver, and bronze, ⁵in cutting stones for setting, and in carving wood, in every kind of craft.

The Spirit animates us all, as the source of life. As such, people can use talents without dedicating them to God. When one offers such talent to God, it has the opportunity of touching people and changing lives.

Gideon is one example of the Spirit coming upon someone for leadership. This story, from the time of the Tribal Federation recorded in Judges, is one example of the Lord providing leadership when Israel experienced oppression from the Midianites. God called Gideon to lead Israel. Gideon protested his weakness. Gideon became a leader because the Spirit of God came upon him. God often uses the weak, inadequate, and ill equipped to accomplish wonderful ministry.

Reverend E. J. H. "Bash" Nash was a clerk in an insurance office. He did not have an impressive personal presence. Here is what the obituary notice said about him.

Bash was a quiet, unassuming clergyman who never made the limelight, hit the headlines or wanted preferment, and yet whose influence within the Church of England during the last 50 years was probably greater than almost any of his contemporaries, for their must be hundreds of men today, many in positions of responsibility, who thank God for him for it was through his ministry that they were led to a Christian commitment.

Those who knew him well, and those who worked with him, ever expect to see his like again; for rarely can anyone have meant so much to so many as this quietly spoken, modest and deeply spiritual man.

Samson was another leader of the Tribal Federation period of the history of Israel. He received strength and power because the Spirit came upon him. Even when Philistines overpowered him and bound him with ropes, he gained his freedom because the Spirit of the Lord came upon him with power.

In the New Testament, we find that human beings often have fears, habits, and addictions that bind them. A bad temper controls them. Patterns of thought, such as envy, jealousy, or lust, have control of them. The Spirit of God still frees people from that which oppress them.

The Old Testament knows the Spirit as powerful force for the moral formation of the people. Here are some examples.

Isaiah 30:1 (NRSV)

Oh, rebellious children, says the LORD,
who carry out a plan, but not mine;
who make an alliance, but against my will,
adding sin to sin;

Micah 3:8 (NRSV)

⁸ But as for me, I am filled with power,
with the spirit of the LORD,
and with justice and might,
to declare to Jacob his transgression
and to Israel his sin.

Psalms 51:10-11 (NRSV)

¹⁰ Create in me a clean heart, O God,
and put a new and right spirit within me.

¹¹ Do not cast me away from your presence,
and do not take your holy spirit from me.
Psalm 143:10 (NRSV)

¹⁰ Teach me to do your will,
for you are my God.
Let your good spirit lead me
on a level path.

The prophet in Isaiah 61 says that the Spirit of the Lord came upon him.

For what purpose did the Spirit come upon him?

Isaiah 61:1-2a (NRSV)

The spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me,
because the LORD has anointed me;
he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed,
to bind up the brokenhearted,
to proclaim liberty to the captives,
and release to the prisoners;
² to proclaim the year of the LORD's favor,

In like manner, we may feel quite helpless when the problems of the world confront us. With help from the Spirit of God, we have something to offer a hurting world. The Spirit can mend broken hearts, bring freedom to those in captivity, release people from hate and even the messes into which they have gotten themselves.

We find in the Old Testament that the Spirit is the source of renewal. The Spirit moves people toward pleasing, obeying, and glorifying God. Our deepest sense of joy and fulfillment in life comes from the love of God and the power of God. In discovering the purpose of God for us, we find our purpose.

The Father made a promise to give the Spirit to us.

God promised a new covenant. God would not have promised a new covenant if the old covenant were sufficient. However, we find Jeremiah speaking in this way.

Jeremiah 31:33 (NRSV)

³³ But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the LORD: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people.

The law would become internal, rather than imposed from an external source.

The law would no longer be a weight from outside, but would be a source of energy welling up from within. How was this to happen?

Ezekiel offers an interesting possibility.

Ezekiel 36:26-27 (NRSV)

²⁶ A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you; and I will remove from your body the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. ²⁷ I will put my spirit within you, and make you follow my statutes and be careful to observe my ordinances.

God will change us by giving us new hearts. Jackie Pullinger spent 20 years working in Hong Kong. She gave her life to working with prostitutes, heroin addicts, and gang members. She began one talk by saying that God wants us to have soft hearts and hard feet. The problem is that many Christians have hard hearts and soft feet. We need hard feet in our willingness to do the hard work of being a faithful servant. We also need soft hearts; filled with compassion for those who have chosen the wrong course in this difficult project we call human life.

The prophet Joel tells us to whom God will give this Spirit.

Joel 2:28-29 (NRSV)

²⁸ Then afterward
I will pour out my spirit on all flesh;
your sons and your daughters shall prophesy,
your old men shall dream dreams,
and your young men shall see visions.

²⁹ Even on the male and female slaves,
in those days, I will pour out my spirit.

God will not limit the gift of the Spirit to the Jewish people. God will not even limit this gift to men. Rather, all humanity will receive this wonderful gift of the Spirit, the source of human life. Regardless of background, race, color, or rank, the Spirit of God will come. God will be generous with this gift of the Spirit.

After these prophecies of a new covenant and a new spirit, the Jewish people returned to what they knew. They knew about the Law, so they now committed themselves to obeying that Law perfectly. They knew about the Temple and its sacrifices, so they rebuilt the Temple. They knew about political oppression, so they sought their own political state, achieving some measure of freedom during the period of the Maccabees.

From the Christian perspective, the promise of the Father, given to these prophets, had its fulfillment because of the gift of the Son, Jesus of Nazareth.

John the Baptist links the Spirit and Jesus.

Here is the way Mark puts it.

Mark 1:7-8 (NRSV)

⁷ He (John) proclaimed, "The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. ⁸ I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."

Our lives may be hard and dry. When we immerse ourselves in the Spirit, we steadily become a vessel for the Spirit to work through us. The Spirit filled Jesus, of course. We find this in the account of his baptism.

Mark 1:9-11 (NRSV)

⁹ In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. ¹⁰ And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. ¹¹ And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."

Luke says he returned to Galilee in the power of the Spirit. He quoted from the previous passage to which we referred in Isaiah, and he then said, "Today, this Scripture is fulfilled in your hearing." (Luke 4:21)

John predicted the presence of the Spirit.

John tells the story of Jesus attending the Feast of Tabernacles.

Thousands of Jews went to Jerusalem to celebrate the feast, looking back to the time when Moses brought water from a rock. They thanked God for providing water in the past year and prayed that God would do the same in the coming year. They looked forward to a time when water would pour out of the temple, becoming deeper and deeper and bring life, fruitfulness, and healing wherever it went, as prophesied by Ezekiel 47.

Priests read this text at the Feast and enacted it visually. The high priest went to the pool of Siloam and filled a golden pitcher with water. He would then lead the people to the temple, where he would pour water through a funnel in the west side of the altar, and into the ground, in anticipation of the great river that would flow from the temple. According to Rabbinic tradition, Jerusalem was the navel of the earth and the temple of Mount Zion was the center of the navel.

On the last day of the feast, Jesus stood up and proclaimed these words.

John 7:38 (NRSV)

³⁸ and let the one who believes in me drink. As the scripture has said, 'Out of the believer's heart shall flow rivers of living water.' "

The promise made to Ezekiel would not have fulfillment in a place, but in a person. Out of Jesus will flow the river of life. For those who enter into a relationship with him, waters of life will flow from Jesus through the believer and

to others. This river of living water will bring abundant life, fruitfulness, meaningfulness, and healing. John goes on to explain what this means.

John 7:39 (NRSV)

³⁹ Now he said this about the Spirit, which believers in him were to receive; for as yet there was no Spirit, because Jesus was not yet glorified.

The Spirit, the source of life, is the living water to which he just referred. For the New Testament, however, not even the life, death, and resurrection immediately brought the gift of the Spirit. Here is the way Luke states it.

Luke 24:49 (NRSV)

⁴⁹ And see, I am sending upon you what my Father promised; so stay here in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high.”

Luke goes on to give another version of this promise.

Acts 1:8 (NRSV)

⁸ But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”

They still waited. Apparently, one time in which they prayed together, we find this account from Luke.

Acts 2:1-4 (NRSV)

When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. ² And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. ³ Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. ⁴ All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.

The promise of the Father became real in their lives individually and as a community of faith. Peter explains what happened this way:

Acts 2:33 (NRSV)

³³ Being therefore exalted at the right hand of God, and having received from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit, he has poured out this that you both see and hear.

The people who heard the sermon by Peter asked what they must do. He told them to repent, experience baptism, and receive forgiveness. Then he promised that they would receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.

Acts 2:39 (NRSV)

³⁹ For the promise is for you, for your children, and for all who are far away, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to him.”

Paul makes this abundantly as he suggests that no one can proclaim Jesus as Lord except through the Holy Spirit (I Corinthians 12:3). He often connects the Spirit of the risen Lord with the Holy Spirit. Of course, he writes about the gifts of the Spirit given to every individual. One thing clear in I Corinthians 12-14 is that these gifts God gives for the common good. Through the diversity of gifts, the Spirit binds Christians together. The nature of the Holy Spirit is to bring into the body of Christ the spirit of love, patience, understanding, and cooperation. The Spirit brings vitality, but not chaos. He encourages the church to emphasize “the higher gifts,” and to “Make love your aim, and earnestly desire the spiritual gifts.” He identifies the fruit of the Spirit in Galatians 5:22-23 as love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.

Spiritual renewal will draw us closer to Christ, bring dynamic experience of prayer, open us to sudden outpouring of the Spirit, and motivates us for mission in the world. The promise of the Father is for all persons. The Spirit is not just for

special persons, places, or tasks. Every Christian receives this gift, including you and me.

Talk 9: What Does the Holy Spirit Do?

John 3:5-8 (NRSV)

⁵ Jesus answered, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. ⁶ What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. ⁷ Do not be astonished that I said to you, 'You must be born from above.' ⁸ The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit."

The term "born again" has become cliché. One can even use the term to advertise cars. This text uses the term to refer to people "born of the Spirit." Physical birth requires a man and woman coming together to create a new life. Spiritual birth requires the Spirit of God and the human spirit coming together to create a new life in a spiritual way. When in John, Jesus says, "You must be born again," this is what John meant. Becoming a Christian means opening ourselves to the influences of the Holy Spirit. Each Christian is born again. We may not know the exact moment that this birth occurs. However, on a parallel with physical birth, we need to know that we have experienced spiritual birth.

Physical birth means birth into a family. Spiritual birth means birth into a Christian family. We can interpret much of the work of the Spirit in terms of family. The Spirit gives us assurance of our relationship with the Father and helps us develop that relationship. The Spirit produces a family likeness. The Spirit unites us with other brothers and sisters in Christ, giving each member of the family different passions, gifts, and abilities. The Spirit empowers the Christian family to grow.

I want to look at each of these aspects of the work of the Spirit in us as Christians.

Children of God

Humanity received forgiveness of its sins in the cross. God buries our sins in the depths of the sea.

Micah 7:19 (NRSV)

¹⁹ He will again have compassion upon us;
he will tread our iniquities under foot.
You will cast all our sins
into the depths of the sea.

As Corrie Ten Boom put it, God “puts up a sign saying, ‘No fishing.’”

The Spirit wipes the slate clean. The Spirit also brings us into a relationship with God as children. Of course, humanity has a common Creator and common Father, and in that sense, all humanity are children of the same Heavenly Father. Yet, we become children of God in a special sense when we intentionally open ourselves to the Spirit of God and to the influence of that Spirit. We need this spiritual birth to become genuine children of God.

It is all that we can say that we are part of the family of the Son of God, hearers and doers of the Word of God. As long as the Word is there, and we are here, Christ remains external and we continue in separation. Receiving the grace shown in Christ into our lives, Christ is not only there, but also here.

Romans is among the most significant theological texts in the New Testament. We find a powerful description of this experience of becoming children of God in this letter.

Romans 8:14-17 (NRSV)

¹⁴ For all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God. ¹⁵
For you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but

you have received a spirit of adoption. When we cry, “Abba! Father!”¹⁶ it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God,¹⁷ and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ—if, in fact, we suffer with him so that we may also be glorified with him.

First, we have no higher privilege or honor than in becoming children of God, and therefore part of the family of God. In adopting us as children into this family, God has acknowledged our worth and dignity to such an extent that God wants to walk with us through the journey of our lives. This fact needs to sink into us deeply. God loves us that much. Our lives have meaning because God has cared for us this much.

Second, we have closest possible intimacy with God. Paul says that the Spirit allows us to say, “Abba.” This word suggests a child saying something like, “dear Father,” or “Daddy.” Jesus invites us into this intimate relationship with God when we receive the Spirit. John Wesley, who had been religious before his conversion, could still say about his conversion, “I exchanged the faith of a servant for the faith of a son.”

Third, the Spirit gives us the deepest possible experience of God. The Spirit identifies with our human spirits. I want my children to know and experience my love for them. God wants us to have that relationship as well. We can know truths about God, and have that type of relationship with God. We can experience acquittal by the judge for our sins, and have that experience of God. We can also have the profound experience of love, in which the Spirit invites us into the fellowship of love found in the Trinity. We can then experience the profound, healing influences of love.

Fourth, becoming a child of God gives us a profound sense of security. We are “heirs,” Paul says.

Developing the Relationship

Physical birth brings to completion development at a certain critical stage of gestation. It also is the beginning of a new form of life and the beginning of a new relationship. Relationships with parents, siblings, and neighbors deepen over a long period. This happens as we spend time with them. It does not happen overnight.

Our relationship with God grows and deepens as we spend time with God. The Spirit helps us to develop our relationship with God. God brings us into the presence of the Father. We have access to the Father through the Son, by the power of the Spirit. Steadily, the Spirit helps us to remove the internal barriers we have to develop our friendship with grace and with God. We do not have to do anything to get the attention of God. God already gives each of us undivided attention.

The Spirit helps us to pray. The place, position, or forms of prayer do not matter so much, but whether we pray with sincerity. Without the help of God, prayer can easily become lifeless and dull. In the Spirit, we are caught up in the Trinity, and prayer becomes the most important activity of our lives.

The Spirit helps us understand the Word of God. The Spirit can enlighten our reading of our sacred text. If we are not in the family, reading the bible can be frustrating and alienating. Yet, when we read the text as part of the family of God, we come with a desire to know what God is saying to us through the text. Belief

and faith precede genuine reception of the text of the bible as the Word of God. At that point, the bible can become part of our spiritual growth.

The Spirit enables us to sustain our relationship with God, for we cannot be in a relationship with God simply on our own. The Spirit brings us into this relationship, helps us to sustain it, and helps us reach the goal of Christian life.

The Spirit can work in us with a soft but insistent voice, telling us that our lives are empty and meaningless, but that there are chances of a new life waiting if we only open the door to the Spirit, fill the void, and conquer its dullness. The Spirit can work in us, awakening the desire to strive towards the inspiring against the dullness of the average day. The Spirit can give us the courage that says "Yes" to life in spite of the destructiveness we have experienced around us and within us. The Spirit can reveal to us that we have hurt somebody deeply, but it can also give us the right word that reunites the other with us. The Spirit can make us love, with the divine love, someone we profoundly dislike or in whom we have no interest. The Spirit can conquer our sloth towards what we know is the aim of our lives, and it can transform our moods of aggression and depression into stability and serenity. The Spirit can liberate us from hidden enmity against those whom we love and from open vengefulness against those by whom we feel violated. The Spirit can give us the strength to throw off false anxieties and to take upon ourselves the anxiety that belongs to life itself. The Spirit can awaken us to sudden insight into the way we must take our world, and it can open our eyes to a view of it that makes everything new. The Spirit can give us joy in the midst of ordinary routine as well as in the depth of sorrow. The Spirit can create

warmth in the coldness we feel within us and around us, and it can give us wisdom and strength where our human love towards a loved one has failed. The Spirit can throw us into a hell of despair about ourselves and then give us the certainty that life has accepted us even when we felt rejected by others and even rejected ourselves.

The Family Likeness

Children take on the physical characteristics of their parents, to varying degrees. As we spend time in the presence of God, the Spirit transforms us.

Here is the way Paul put it.

2 Corinthians 3:18 (NRSV)

¹⁸ And all of us, with unveiled faces, seeing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another; for this comes from the Lord, the Spirit.

The Spirit develops certain fruit in our lives, as Paul describes it.

Galatians 5:22-23a (NRSV)

²² By contrast, the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, ²³ gentleness, and self-control.

We also find a similar list in Colossians.

Colossians 3:12-13 (NRSV)

¹² As God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. ¹³ Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive.

The Spirit develops these characteristics in us. It takes time for fruit to develop.

The same is true of fruit of the Spirit.

Unity in the Family

In John 17, Jesus prays for the unity of those who follow him. In

Ephesians, the author exhorts us:

Ephesians 4:3 (NRSV)

³making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.

The Spirit lives in all Christians. The Spirit desires the unity of the children of God. Ephesians goes on to say:

Ephesians 4:4-6 (NRSV)

⁴There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, ⁵one Lord, one faith, one baptism, ⁶one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all.

Regardless of race, gender, social status, or culture, the same Spirit unites all Christians. What is important is the unity the Spirit provides. Denominational tradition is secondary to this gift of the Spirit. Christians have the privilege of belonging to a global family.

Gifts for all the Children

Great variety exists in the family of God. Biological children of the same parents are not identical. The same is true of the body of Christ.

We find several lists of gifts in the New Testament. Here is one way to list them.

Apostleship
Assistance or helps
Compassion or mercy
Discerning of spirits
Evangelism
Exhortation
Faith
Generosity or giving
Healing
Leadership or administration
Leading with diligence

Pastor and teacher
Prophecy
Teaching
Tongues
Tongues interpretation
Utterance of knowledge
Utterance of wisdom
Miracles

All good gifts are from God. Spiritual gifts include natural talents transformed by the Spirit. Jurgen Moltmann points out, “In principle every human potentiality and capacity can become charismatic, that is, a gift of the Spirit, through a person’s call, if only they are used in Christ.”

God gives all Christians gifts. All Christians receive the Spirit. All Christians have spiritual gifts. We have an urgent need to exercise these gifts. Among the many challenges facing the church in America is that many Christians do not use their gifts. The few who do use their gifts can quickly become exhausted in this situation. Too many Christians are spectators instead of participants on the field. David Watson put it this way:

In different traditions, the church for years has been either pulpit-centered or altar-centered. In both situations, the dominant role has been played by the minister or priest.

God does not require us to have many gifts. God does call us to use the gifts we have.

The Growing Family

The church family needs to grow if it is to influence the world for Christ. This growth is the work of the Spirit. In the Book of Acts, we hear these words from the risen Lord,

Acts 1:8 (NRSV)

⁸ But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”

The Spirit gives us the desire and ability to tell others.

Murray Watts tells the story of a young man who wanted to commit his life to Christ, but became paralyzed with fear at the thought of telling others about his faith. Finally, an elderly saint counseled him to forget about other people and the rest of the world. Forget about his family. His conversion could be a secret that just he and God could have together. He felt a great weight lift from his shoulders. “I do not have to tell anyone?” he asked. “No,” the man said, “Not if you do not want to.” “Is this right,” the young man asked. “It is right for you,” said the elderly saint. He went home, prayed, received Christ into this life, and then told his family, “Do you realize, that it’s possible to be a Christian without telling anyone?”

The Christian family is not static. It needs the influx of new people who experience the power of the Spirit, and who then tell others.

Every Christian experiences birth in the Spirit. The bible also indicates that people can live in the fullness of the Spirit. I want to talk about that next.

Talk 10: How Can I Be Filled with the Spirit?

In an ideal world, the Holy Spirit would fill every Christian from the moment of conversion. However, we are creatures of time. We require development, experience, and time. Spiritual life is more like a journey. We do not begin at the destination.

Fenelon once put it this way: “The Wind of God is always blowing, but you must hoist your sail.” I want to help us hoist the sail, so that we can catch the surprising movements of God.

Key Verse: (Eph 5:18 NRSV) Do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery; but be filled with the Spirit.

Such expansion of the human mind and spirit is important in terms of both knowledge and apprehension of truth and in terms of impact upon others. Could we not use a higher level of imagination and thrusting out into fresh creative and innovative realms? What greater time than this for the achievement of “souls on fire,” not the fire which is merely of this world, or the false fires of human concoction or construction, nor the fires enflamed by demonic or evil forces, but rather the fire which is the illumination, contagion, warmth, and power of the Holy Spirit of God! It may not be an error at all that causes Paul to use alcohol and drunkenness in comparison with the operation of the Spirit: “Be not drunk with wine, but be filled with the Spirit.” Several years ago, William James wrote, “Sobriety diminishes, discriminates, and says no; drunkenness expands, unites, and says yes.”¹⁸ The point is not to advance drunkenness, of course. Rather,

¹⁸ William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, p. 387.

when the Holy Spirit fills us, we start removing barriers between God and us; we give a full “Yes” to God. That is the potential of those filled with the Spirit.

Introduction

As I speak of the role of the Holy Spirit, I trust that what I share is infused with the bible and with the best of my own heritage. I want due emphasis upon reason and the role of faith, and a concern for how the life of the Spirit connects to the whole of life, as well as what is particular, lively, dynamic, and unpredictable.

I look to the Jewish and Christian heritage for guidance in the primary emphasis to the role of the Holy Spirit discovered there. That means that I emphasize, not just a religion of the human spirit, but rather of the Holy Spirit. While this includes or even emphasizes the experiential side of religion, it does not permit subjectivity to predominate. This also suggests a contrast with other ways of examining religion. We have creeds, but we fellowship, worship, and serve without creedal agreement. We disagree on matters that, to some, are of great importance. We may have other differences of opinion that we do not normally share as communities of faith. We are not all from one organization as Christians. Yet, most Christians willingly and gladly join with people of other communities of faith. We regard our fellowship as embracing all people who are open to God and to the Spirit, even though our ethnic differences often show themselves on Sunday morning.

Thomas Merton once said that everything humanity is and does is “wounded with contingency.” If this is so, human beings must be constantly open to the fresh breeze of the divine. For whatever God is, God is the richest source from which we have our beings and experience fulfillment as persons.

The delightful thing about the doctrine of holiness in the mystical tradition, as well as from John Wesley, is its emphasis upon the perfection of love. One reason Wesley emphasized love was that he saw its connection with moral earnestness as tighter than that of faith. An exclusive focus upon faith, as one might derive from the Reformed tradition, can lead to relieve in being freed from the burden of the law and a relaxed attitude toward the transformation of behavior. The Wesleyan emphasis upon love of God and neighbor involves serving God and neighbor in whatever way one can. For Wesley, Christian faith must not set aside moral responsibility and transformation. However, the question is whether the emphasis in the perfection of love is upon the relational dimensions of love or upon some kind of internalized or interior life. If we specify relation, then we clearly emphasize others; but if the interior life dominates, then preoccupation with self is the prime activity. Too much preoccupation with the self may bring the activity of the Holy Spirit to a screeching halt, as the yogic posturing of gazing at one’s navel seems to provide evidence. We do not need a spirituality that makes us obsessive about us. We need a spirituality that helps us focus on others.

For John Wesley, the Spirit is active in creation is also active in all persons to help them open their lives to God. The Spirit makes salvation available to all

persons because the Spirit is at work at the preparatory level, what Wesley called prevenient grace. The Spirit is also at work in helping people accept the forgiveness God offers in Christ, and therefore in justification. The Spirit opens us to new birth or holiness as the inner work of the formation of a new, healed person in Christ. We need this re-creation or new creation because we are not all right by nature. Jesus becomes our Lord who gives us a new sense of direction or purpose. God has a plan for our lives, and we want to discover that plan. We receive new priorities and values. We have a new concern for the people around us, especially in our homes. We have a new capacity for love. We have new policies regarding making and spending money. We have new peace and joy. We form new habits. We learn the value of prayer. For Wesley, we also have an inner witness and assurance that we are children of God through the Spirit.

Every Christian has the Holy Spirit. Some Christians seem to have only the pilot light of the Holy Spirit in their lives. They go through most of their lives with a small, flickering light. Others have the full power of the Spirit. We sense the glow of that presence in many ways. They respond to crises with grace and dignity. Their enthusiasm attracts us to God. Their willingness to serve, without constant reference to self, becomes a strong witness.

Another way to look at this process is that of Wesley's teaching on sanctification. God seems to love growth. Human life does not begin with a fully mature adult, but with a helpless infant. The infant experienced birth quickly, but will only slowly arrive at adulthood. In the spiritual life, this growth occurs through the influence and power of the Holy Spirit. We exercise the same faith in this

process of growth as we showed in our conversion.¹⁹ Making the transitions in personal growth we need to make in our lives, from infant to the various stages of adulthood, do not detract from the importance of our birth. In the same way, the various transitions we may make in our spiritual growth do not detract from the importance of our conversion or new birth. In fact, the process of growth and maturity completes the intent of birth.

The issue we face is this: How can I experience the full power of the Spirit? How can I be drunk with the Holy Spirit?

One question we might have is this: What happens when people experience the Holy Spirit?

A good place to begin is the bible. We shall now consider the outpouring, filling, and baptism of the Spirit in Acts.

1. Pentecost in Acts 2:2-4, has a group of people longing for the Holy Spirit. The good news is that on Pentecost all of them were filled. "{2} And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. {3} Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. {4} All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability."
2. Samaria in Acts 8:14-17, the Holy Spirit fills people who are receptive. "Now when the apostles at Jerusalem heard that Samaria had accepted the word of God, they sent Peter and John to them. {15} The two went down and prayed for them that they might receive the Holy Spirit {16} (for as yet the Spirit had not come upon any of them; they had only been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus). {17} Then Peter and John laid their hands on them, and they received the Holy Spirit."
3. Paul in Acts 9:17-19, is an example of the Holy Spirit filling someone who is hostile to the gospel. "So Ananias went and entered the house. He laid his hands on Saul and said, "Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus, who appeared to you on your way here, has sent me so that you may regain your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit." {18} And immediately something like scales fell from his eyes, and his sight was restored. Then he got up and

¹⁹ John Wesley, Sermon 45, "The New Birth," IV.3.

- was baptized, {19} and after taking some food, he regained his strength. For several days he was with the disciples in Damascus ...”
4. Ephesus in Acts 19:1-7, the Holy Spirit fills those who previously were uninformed as to whether there was a Holy Spirit. “While Apollos was in Corinth, Paul passed through the interior regions and came to Ephesus, where he found some disciples. {2} He said to them, "Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you became believers?" They replied, "No, we have not even heard that there is a Holy Spirit." {3} Then he said, "Into what then were you baptized?" They answered, "Into John's baptism." {4} Paul said, "John baptized with the baptism of repentance, telling the people to believe in the one who was to come after him, that is, in Jesus." {5} On hearing this, they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. {6} When Paul had laid his hands on them, the Holy Spirit came upon them, and they spoke in tongues and prophesied-- {7} altogether there were about twelve of them.”
 5. Cornelius in Acts 10:44-46, is an example of an unlikely group of people filled with the Holy Spirit. Until now, the Holy Spirit filled only Jewish people. (Acts 10:44-46 NRSV) “While Peter was still speaking, the Holy Spirit fell upon all who heard the word. {45} The circumcised believers who had come with Peter were astounded that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles, {46} for they heard them speaking in tongues and extolling God.”

What did they experience?

Before we go there, allow me to suggest that some denominations have the hidden assumption that in some manner regeneration and entire sanctification, as two definite and distinct crises, are the essence of all religion, at least in this world. Some will add that one of these experiences will have the element of speaking in tongues. Thus, we have the ceaseless rounds of people seeking these in some curious sense final experiences of the Spirit. At least the popular mind frequently cannot get away from this. I hope I have made clear that, in my view, spiritual growth may have many such experiences that move us to further love toward God and toward others. Every experience of God is proleptic in that it remains open to amendment, deepening, and broadening in

the future. Every experience of God is proleptic in that it becomes a taste of the fullness we will experience in eternity.

Acts 10 relates the experience of a centurion named Cornelius and his family and friends when they were filled with the Holy Spirit.

Acts 10:44-45, "While Peter was still speaking, the Holy Spirit fell upon all who heard the word. {45} The circumcised believers who had come with Peter were astounded that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles,"

What made Peter stop preaching? It must have been something extraordinary. It may have been similar to Pentecost. What matters is not the outward manifestation. What matters is the inward movement of the Spirit. If you are in love, you may feel a tingling in your spine. You would not seek the tingling; you would seek the person you love.

The filling of the Spirit will have an influence upon our lives that others, if they are open, will see. We can see this in the way the church set apart people full of the Spirit.

(Acts 6:3 NRSV) Therefore, friends, select from among yourselves seven men of good standing, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we may appoint to this task, (Acts 6:5 NRSV) What they said pleased the whole community, and they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and the Holy Spirit, together with Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolaus, a proselyte of Antioch. (Acts 6:10 NRSV) But they could not withstand the wisdom and the Spirit with which he spoke.

Simon the Magician offered money for such power.

(Acts 8:18 NRSV) Now when Simon saw that the Spirit was given through the laying on of the apostles' hands, he offered them money,

Some have an overwhelming experience of God's love. Here is how Paul puts it.

Romans 5:5, "and hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us."

In addition, we have these words from Ephesians.

Ephesians 3:14-20

"For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, {15} from whom every family in heaven and on earth takes its name. {16} I pray that, according to the riches of his glory, he may grant that you may be strengthened in your inner being with power through his Spirit, {17} and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, as you are being rooted and grounded in love. {18} I pray that you may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth, {19} and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God. {20} Now to him who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine,"

Nikki Gumble shares this example. A couple that argued all the time. They reached their fiftieth anniversary. Their children gave them a gift of sessions with a counselor. They argued on whether to receive the gift. In the first session, they argued. The counselor stopped them and said he was going to do something he had never done before. He got up, walked over to her, and kissed her on the lips. He turned to the man and said, "That is what she needs at least three times a week." The man said, "All right, I will bring her in three times a week." Some people just do not get it.

The people in Acts 10 released themselves in praise, as stated in 10:46, "for they heard them ... extolling God." Spontaneous praise is full consciousness of God, as we find in II Samuel 6:14-16, 20-23. Worship should include our whole

personality, mind, heart, and emotions. Note that the English have difficulty expressing emotion. The Semitic culture in which Jesus lived was much more emotional. Should our love for God involve emotion? What would happen if we expressed our love for our spouse in intellectual terms? Should we express emotion in public? We should have concern for true emotionalism. We do not have to give ourselves to pure emotion with no order involved. However, to what danger do we expose ourselves if we avoid emotion? How about cold rationality? How about lack of passion?

The people in Acts 10 received a new language. In Acts 10:46, “for they heard them speaking in tongues.” It did not happen always. The gift of tongues is one of many spiritual gifts. It is not the only gift or even the most important. People experience the fullness of the Spirit without speaking in tongues. I do not think we have any such thing as first class Christians who do and second class Christians who do not. It is one of the manifestations of the Holy Spirit working in people’s lives. This gift puzzles many people. Consequently, we need to give it some attention.

What is the gift of tongues? Paul says that it is a form of prayer.

I Corinthians 14:2, For those who speak in a tongue do not speak to other people but to God; for nobody understands them, since they are speaking mysteries in the Spirit.

Paul also says it transcends the language barrier in I Corinthians 14:14. The speaker in full control – one is not possessed.

As an aside, the only experience I have had with tongues was a concert in an Assembly of God congregation. Someone behind me stood up and spoke in

tongues. Another person across the room stood up and interpreted. I will admit that it puzzled me, especially since the content of the message was that people needed to receive Christ. The point of the meeting was to make this offer. I was not sure why one needed a special message in tongues for this.

Why are tongues helpful to some people? (I cannot speak from experience, so what I have to say here is what others say). It helps some people offer praise and worship. Human language is so limited. They find help when praying under pressure. They find help when praying for others.

Does the New Testament approve of speaking in tongues? The context of I Corinthians 14 is excessive public use of tongues in church. Paul gives guidelines for speaking in tongues, thereby suggesting that Paul allowed its use and expression. Do not forbid in v. 39. I would like every one of you to speak in tongues in v. 5. I thank God that I speak in tongues more than all of you in v. 18. However, in church tongues must be interpreted to be understood in v. 6ff.

How could a person receive this gift? First, Paul makes it clear in I Corinthians 12-14 that everyone is to strive for love. However, we can also eagerly desire a specific gift. We need some discernment as to which gift to eagerly desire. We can ask God. We can cooperate with the Spirit, as with any other gift. If your gift is teaching, you must start teaching. Any gift requires the exercise of faith and perseverance in order to develop.

Would you like the Holy Spirit to fill you?

Bill Bright, in How to be Filled with the Spirit, writes about "Yates Pool," a famous oil field. During the depression, a man named Yates owned a sheep

ranch. Unfortunately, he did not have enough money to continue to pay on the mortgage. It looked like he might lose the ranch. Like many other people at the time, he was forced to live on government subsidy. Each day as he tended to his sheep he undoubtedly worried how he was going to pay his bills. Sometime later, a seismographic crew appeared on the scene and suggested that there might be oil on his land. He gave them permission to drill after a lease contract was signed. At 1,115 feet, the men struck a huge oil reserve. Subsequent wells that were dug revealed even larger quantities of oil. Mr. Yates owned it all. The day he bought the land, he also received the oil and mineral rights. He had been living on relief. He was a multimillionaire living in poverty. Even though he owned all the oil with its tremendous potential, he did not realize he owned it.

Many Christians have a vast reservoir of power available through the Holy Spirit, but do not tap into the rich resources they have. The wind of God is a powerful thing - it is a Spirit that can fill and teach and inspire and convert people in any age and in any nation. Just as we have difficulty harvesting the power of physical wind, we American Christians do not always make good and efficient use of this holy power. We do not move smoothly and swiftly when we feel the breath of God. We do not allow the Holy Spirit to flow at full power into our community of faith.

What are the common hindrances to being filled with the Spirit?

First, we may experience the hindrance of being too comfortable with our Christianity. We are so comfortable with us that we no longer want to find out

about the needs and hurts of others. Comfortable Christians only want to deal with people who think, look, and act like themselves.

Second, we may experience the hindrance of intellectual laziness. We no longer want to learn more about our faith or our world.

Third, we may experience the hindrance of individualism. Faith or spirituality is strictly a private affair. Living in a community of faith is too complicated. They want God, but they have no time for church. Such persons often end up with a god of their own making. Jesus and the apostles do not make community an option.

Fourth, we may experience the hindrance of neglect in prayer. We are simply too busy to bring our joys, concerns, and requests to God.

Fifth, we may experience the hindrance of selfishness, or "me first." In the church of the apostles, "All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need" (2:44-45). Nothing was more important to these Christians than the well-being of the community, nothing was more critical than meeting the needs of their brothers and sisters in the faith, and so church members who owned lands or houses sold them and donated the proceeds to the church. As a result, "There was not a needy person among them" (4:34).

Sixth, we may experience the hindrance of absent faith or unbelief.

There are three barriers listed in Luke 11:9-13.

"So I say to you, Ask, and it will be given you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you. {10} For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened. {11} Is there

anyone among you who, if your child asks for a fish, will give a snake instead of a fish? {12} Or if the child asks for an egg, will give a scorpion? {13} If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!"

1. Doubt in v. 9-10 that if you ask, you will receive that for which you ask.
2. Fear in v. 11-13 that God will not do what is good.
3. Inadequacy in v. 13 that one is worthy of this gift.

"How much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him?"

Song: Rise in Me

"Shall we ask God now? Someone may need to have the pilot light lit. We want to invite the Holy Spirit to minister to us: wherever you are, whether you might want to ask Christ into your heart for the first time, or wherever you might be in your walk with the Lord ~ might you tell God, "I want more of you. Would you fill me with the Holy Spirit?" When we ask to be filled with the Holy Spirit, whether it is for the first time, or because we have leaked, we will receive Him.

"I invite you to prayerfully consider these questions. Take time alone to talk with God. Take a walk, or find a quiet place to be still. However, take this time to speak to Him and to listen for His voice. The Alpha small group leaders, helpers, and I will go now to the Chapel. We will be praying there, and we encourage you to come over after you have had some time alone with God. Come by so that your small group leader might be able to pray with you, or talk with you about whatever you want. I will be available there to talk or pray as needed. Later, we will all meet back here for the next talk at 3:00. For now, though, let's go spend some time alone with God."

Conclusion

Being filled with the Spirit is not a one-time experience.

1. Peter was filled several times in Acts 2:4, 4:8, 31
2. We are to be continuously filled in Ephesians 5:18.

Talk 11: How Can I Resist Evil?

The church needs to form Christians who take evil seriously, and who will therefore resist it.

One reason Christianity has had such a beneficial effect upon humanity is that knows when to lift humanity up, and where to keep humanity down. When we become discouraged with our sinfulness, Christianity offers hope and forgiveness. When humanity is full of itself and its own importance, when pride runs away and lifts up humanity, Christianity reminds humanity of its sinfulness.

Temptation reflects the reality that human beings have moral choices to make. When we come face to face with other human beings, we have moral choices. When we confront the possible future self we will become, we confront a moral choice. The experience of temptation reflects the fact that we are self-destructive beings. Although we may desire the best for us, we do not automatically know what is best or, when we do know what is best, often do not choose it. Such moral choices are so significant because they build our character. Either we trend toward our best self and the person God wants us to become, or we rebel and deny that best self. We take ourselves with us everywhere we go.

The bible portrays this battle in terms of the personification of evil in the devil or Satan. The devil tempts Jesus. Jesus casts out demons that oppress people. We find two key references to the influence the devil exerts on human behavior.

1 Peter 5:8-11 (NRSV)

⁸ Discipline yourselves, keep alert. Like a roaring lion your adversary the devil prowls around, looking for someone to devour.

⁹ Resist him, steadfast in your faith, for you know that your brothers and sisters in all the world are undergoing the same kinds of suffering. ¹⁰ And after you have suffered for a little while, the God of all grace, who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ, will himself restore, support, strengthen, and establish you.

¹¹ To him be the power forever and ever. Amen.

Ephesians 6:10-12 (NRSV)

¹⁰ Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his power. ¹¹ Put on the whole armor of God, so that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. ¹² For our struggle is not against enemies of blood and flesh, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.

When living with the freedoms that modern society enjoys, even Christians can lose sight of the battle in human history between good and evil. Evil regimes, institutional torture and violence, mass murder, rape, abuse of drugs, terrorism, atrocities, abuse of children, occult activity, and satanic rituals, are part of human life and history.

C. S. Lewis points out in *Screwtape Letters*, that people need not become either obsessed or negligent of the devil.

There are two equal and opposite errors into which our race can fall about the devils [demons]. One is to disbelieve in their existence. The other is to believe, and to feel an excessive and unhealthy interest in them. They themselves are equally pleased by both errors and hail a materialist or a magician with some delight.

Too many people become open to the evil side through spiritualism, palm reading, ouija boards, channeling, astrology, horoscopes, witchcraft, and occult powers. The bible seems clear on this point.

Deuteronomy 18:10 (NRSV)

¹⁰ No one shall be found among you who makes a son or daughter pass through fire, or who practices divination, or is a soothsayer, or an augur, or a sorcerer,

Leviticus 19:26-28, 31 (NRSV)

²⁶ You shall not eat anything with its blood. You shall not practice augury or witchcraft. ²⁷ You shall not round off the hair on your temples or mar the edges of your beard. ²⁸ You shall not make any gashes in your flesh for the dead or tattoo any marks upon you: I am the LORD.

³¹ Do not turn to mediums or wizards; do not seek them out, to be defiled by them: I am the LORD your God.

Galatians 5:19-21 (NRSV)

¹⁹ Now the works of the flesh are obvious: fornication, impurity, licentiousness, ²⁰ idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions, ²¹ envy, drunkenness, carousing, and things like these. I am warning you, as I warned you before: those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God.

Revelation 21:8 (NRSV)

⁸ But as for the cowardly, the faithless, the polluted, the murderers, the fornicators, the sorcerers, the idolaters, and all liars, their place will be in the lake that burns with fire and sulfur, which is the second death.”

Revelation 22:15 (NRSV)

¹⁵ Outside are the dogs and sorcerers and fornicators and murderers and idolaters, and everyone who loves and practices falsehood.

If we participate in such things, we need to repent and receive the forgiveness God offers. Christians can focus so much upon the work of the enemy that they lose the biblical focus upon the work of God. The antidote to the work of evil in the world is to focus upon the work of God.

What are the devices of evil?

Evil has the objective of destroying good. Paul put it this way.

2 Corinthians 4:4 (NRSV)

⁴ In their case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God.

Human beings have an instinctive awareness of this battle. Whenever we experience shame or guilt, whenever we fall short of ideals we have set, we are aware that we do not easily make morality and goodness part of our lives. We experience the attack of evil.

We find in both the temptation story of Adam and Eve and the temptation of Jesus that the force of doubt is an important device. “Did God really say?” “If you are the Son of God ...” We experience this form of doubt when we justify the wrongs we have done and said.

We have a graphic example of temptation in Genesis 3. Eve isolates herself from Adam. While alone, the thought arises to do something God forbade, namely, eating fruit from one particular tree. It bothers us that the command of God concerns such an unimportant thing as fruit. Yet, often we reveal our character in small events. An angry word, a selfish act, lustful meditations, inappropriate consumption of food and expenditure of wealth, and so on, can reveal who we are and what we value. In the small act of disobedience, Eve discovered who she was. She wanted to lead her life independent of God. She also wanted to bring Adam into her orbit. Then, they broke the familiar relationship they had with God in Eden by hiding from God. The secretive nature of sinful behavior becomes clear. Yet, even though Adam and Eve sinned together, the sin disrupts their relationship with each other. The experience of authenticity they had in Eden with God, with each other, and with nature, remains

a hope, but is not human life. Chapter 3 of Genesis shows the disruption of love for God, while Chapter 4 shows the disruption of love for the neighbor. The Ten Commandments reflect concern for love for God in the first four commandments and love for the neighbor in the last six.

Temptation is not the same thing as sin. A thought to move in a direction we know is against the will and purpose of God reminds us of how sinful we are. The temptation would not be present if we our sinful nature were gone. However, we have a choice as to whether we will meditate and reflect upon the sin, or reject it. The point of this battle is that moral failure become part of our lives. The more we sin, the easier sin becomes. Sin will become a power that masters us.

The person God wants us to be is to love God with all that we are and to love our neighbors as ourselves. The fruit of the Spirit defines this kind of person carefully:

Galatians 5:22-23 (NRSV)

²² By contrast, the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, ²³ gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against such things.

To bear this fruit in our lives is to become increasingly like Christ. As with natural fruit, spiritual fruit ripens slowly. Every circumstance is an occasion to bear this fruit, or to show and develop their opposite. Temptation occurs when circumstances arise to show the opposite. For example, love is a difficult fruit to show when difficult people are in our lives. Joy is difficult when we confront circumstances of sadness and sorrow. Peace is difficult in circumstances of confusion and chaos. Patience is difficult when we have to wait for something we

want now, causing anger to arise. We build character as we pause and consider how we treat the person in front of us and as we consider the kind of person we want to become. We build faithfulness when circumstances confront us with the choice to do so. We build integrity when we defeat the temptation to be dishonest. We build humility when we refuse pride. We build endurance every time we do not give up when the easier path would be to do so. Defeating the temptation toward self-destruction brings us closer to becoming like Christ.

Temptation arises because of desires we have. Our struggle is to orient our desires toward a life of excellence. Every circumstance is an occasion in which we will orient desire toward the best human life or settle for something far less, and even self-destructive. This self-destructive impulse is difficult for many to understand, largely because we have an inadequate understanding of sin. The human condition is not one of lack of knowledge, but of an improper ordering of desire. I stress this because sin is often twisting proper desire. Fulfilling sexual desire in a way that makes us the best person we can be is a matter of faithfulness to another human being. Sexual immorality, adultery, and lust are wrong. Desire for improvement in our material condition is a matter of doing so while also respecting the personal and property rights of others. Therefore, theft, greed, and envy are wrong. Integrity, humility, and wisdom move us toward the best persons we can become, while deceit, pride and foolishness move us toward the worst we can be. The paths of life we choose lead us to different places. All of them sparkle and beguile us. All of them have the possibility of leading us away from the person God wants us to be. One road goes to wealth.

Another road goes to excitement, variety, and stimulation. Still another leads to status. These roads will not bring us closer to the person God wants.

Of course, the struggle with temptation does not stop with desire. We then have the choice of whether we will meditate and reflect upon our desire toward self-destruction. Martin Luther had an interesting way of reflecting upon this portion of the process of temptation.

You cannot keep birds from flying over your head but you can keep them from building a nest in your hair.

We generally do not admit its self-destructive force, for that is the deceptive nature of sin. Evil rarely announces itself as evil. Most people would turn it away if evil appeared with horns and pitchforks. Instead, evil appears to us at least allowable and understandable, only human, and possibly good.

The final birthing of temptation leads to behavior. We give in to the self-destructive force of our desire and thought. We give in to whatever caught our attention. Here is how James put it.

James 1:14-16 (NRSV)

¹⁴ But one is tempted by one's own desire, being lured and enticed by it; ¹⁵ then, when that desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin, and that sin, when it is fully grown, gives birth to death. ¹⁶ Do not be deceived, my beloved.

What is our position?

As Christians, God wants to bring deliverance from the sickness or disease of sin. Here is how we hear this word from Colossians.

Colossians 1:13 (NRSV)

¹³ He has rescued us from the power of darkness and transferred us into the kingdom of his beloved Son,

Christians have the privilege of moving from the slavery of sin and darkness and into the rule of forgiveness, freedom, life, and healing. We are in Christ. We belong to Christ.

Your favorite sports figure probably has played for several teams. The manager of a team the player left would not call him or her and ask why he or she was not at practice. As Christians, we are part of a new family, a new team, and belong to Jesus.

Further, evil has actually already lost the battle. Here is how the New Testament puts it.

Luke 10:17-20 (NRSV)

¹⁷ The seventy returned with joy, saying, "Lord, in your name even the demons submit to us!" ¹⁸ He said to them, "I watched Satan fall from heaven like a flash of lightning. ¹⁹ See, I have given you authority to tread on snakes and scorpions, and over all the power of the enemy; and nothing will hurt you. ²⁰ Nevertheless, do not rejoice at this, that the spirits submit to you, but rejoice that your names are written in heaven."

Colossians 2:17 (NRSV)

¹⁷ These are only a shadow of what is to come, but the substance belongs to Christ.

The cross of Jesus gives us the potential for great freedom. Realistically, we spend a life of Christian discipleship and spiritual formation discovering the layers of that freedom. Yet, we no longer need to surrender to guilt, or the fear of death. We can have confidence in the moral battles of a human life because we know the end of the story. God will put an end to evil.

How do we defend ourselves?

As with any battle, we need to have ways of defending ourselves. The New Testament does have a description of what we need for this battle.

Ephesians 6:10-17 (NRSV)

¹⁰ Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his power. ¹¹

Put on the whole armor of God, so that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. ¹² For our struggle is not against

enemies of blood and flesh, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places. ¹³

Therefore take up the whole armor of God, so that you may be able to withstand on that evil day, and having done everything, to stand firm. ¹⁴ Stand therefore, and fasten the belt of truth around your

waist, and put on the breastplate of righteousness. ¹⁵ As shoes for your feet put on whatever will make you ready to proclaim the gospel of peace. ¹⁶ With all of these, take the shield of faith, with

which you will be able to quench all the flaming arrows of the evil one. ¹⁷ Take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.

We need the belt of truth, Christian teaching that we gain through bible study, sermons, Christian books, tapes, and so on.

We need the breastplate of righteousness, which comes through living in right relationship with God.

We need the shoes of the gospel of peace, involving our readiness to speak the gospel to others in word and deed. Our willingness to show our faith in Christ to others is a good defense against evil.

We need the shield of faith, which fights against the forces of cynicism and skepticism.

We need the helmet of salvation, recognizing that God has accomplished our salvation in the cross, that our present life of growth in Christ is a continual healing from the effects and power of sin, and that we have the hope of full healing in life with God in eternity.

We need the sword of the Spirit, a probable reference to our need for the Word of God to dwell within us in a way that increases our sensitivity to sin and our confidence in gaining victory.

How do we attack?

As with any battle, we can go on the attack as well. Here are some of the elements of the attack we need to defeat evil. Here is how Paul spoke of this battle.

2 Corinthians 10:3-5 (NRSV)

³Indeed, we live as human beings, but we do not wage war according to human standards; ⁴for the weapons of our warfare are not merely human, but they have divine power to destroy strongholds. We destroy arguments ⁵and every proud obstacle raised up against the knowledge of God, and we take every thought captive to obey Christ.

Prayer

Spiritual warfare involves prayer. Jesus was a person of prayer. We need to be persons of prayer. One hymn puts it this way: "Satan trembles when he sees the weakest Christian on his knees."

Action

To pray is to change. Genuine prayer engages life. Prayer and action go hand in hand in carrying out the offensive against evil.

A Path toward freedom

We do not have to give in to self-destructive forces. Here are some simple reminders of ways we can gain the important internal victory we need in order to become the person God wants us to become.

First, we simply acknowledge that we are human beings, and therefore not angels or demons. Human beings have these choices to make. We will move toward either our best self or our worst self. Consequently, surprise, shock, or discouragement that we experience temptation is not a proper response to wrong desire. In one sense, such a reaction reflects the false expectation of perfection. It will also lead to misplaced anger toward self. Even when we follow through to the point of wrongful behavior, we do not need to beat ourselves up too much. We need to learn from what we have done, reflecting upon the process enough not to repeat it, and then move on with life.

Second, we need to become aware of the pattern temptation takes in our lives. Keeping a journal can help one discern this process. I would recommend taking out 30 minutes per day and simply write down everything that comes to your mind. If you do that, and then give yourself time to reflect upon what you have written, you will start to notice patterns in your life. Some of those patterns you will notice as trending toward the best, and some will be self-destructive. We need to consider when we are most tempted. It might be a particular day or time of day. It might be a place. It might be when we are with certain persons. We need to consider the feelings we have when we are most tempted, such as hurt, anger, or sadness.

Third, we need to open ourselves to the help God can give. We are not alone in this battle to become the person we can be. Even in our weakest places, God is with us.

Hebrews 4:15-16 (NRSV)

¹⁵ For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin. ¹⁶ Let us therefore approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.

God is patient. If we consider the age of the universe, the age of this solar system, the age of the earth, the emergence of life, and the emergence of humanity, we recognize the patience God has. Further, God has brought into existence entities that are genuinely independent of God. They do not exactly mirror the will and purpose of God. This genuine independence is what makes choice so important. The patience and love of God does not end because we have difficulty making choices that reflect the will and purpose of God.

The fact that we experience temptation toward our false self and destruction of the true self God intends forces us to move outside self and toward the help that others can give and toward the help God can give. We recognize our interdependence. If we succeed in this battle to win for ourselves our best self, to win for ourselves the person God wants, it will be because we have opened our lives to the influence of other persons as mentors. We will also open self to God as the one who is the source of life, the one who sustains life, and the one who completes life.

Christians throughout history have struggled with temptation. Often, this means the discipline of physical or biological drives, bringing them into line with the gospel. This discipline is important in that it acknowledges that this world is finite, temporal, and therefore is not of ultimate significance. This discipline focuses our attention upon our relationship with the Eternal and Infinite, with

God, and with the development of relationships with God and self that reflect what God wants. This discipline places into proper perspective our appetite for food, sex, material comfort, pleasing other people, and getting what we want. Asceticism and mysticism often misused this discipline. In fact, they focused upon the enemies of lust, greed, pride, anger, envy, gluttony, and laziness. Yet, when we tell ourselves, "Do not lust," "Do not desire material things," "Do not consume inappropriate amounts of food," "and so on, we have already acknowledged their power over our thoughts and potentially our behavior. Our focus upon the enemy increases the power of the enemy, even if we desire its defeat.

Further, when we struggle in a particular area of our lives consistently, we can become discouraged. We need to remember, however, that gaining an inner victory is the most important victory we can gain. The greatest battles we face in life are not with other people (including parents), but with our fear, anxiety, and doubt. Our greatest battle is with self.

The experience of temptation toward our false self and our self-destructive tendencies leads us to consider the way in which we can gain an internal victory. If we speak of victory, we acknowledge a battle. The question before us is the best way to wage the battle.

First, we need to focus our attention upon what is excellent.

Temptation presents itself to us first as a thought upon which we dwell and meditate. When we meditate upon self-destructive qualities and behaviors, we strengthen the attraction they have to us. Every time we try to block a thought of

our minds, we drive it deeper into our minds. By focusing upon resisting a thought, we re-enforce its power over our lives. One reason why diets fail so often is that they keep our attention upon food. Further, we focus our attention upon the foods we enjoy, but can no longer have if we are to stay on the diet. A person enjoys warm bread. The same person commits to a diet that includes protein and vegetables, and excludes bread and other carbohydrates. Therefore, that person will think about bread. Another person has a problem with sexual desire, focusing upon variety. The person experiences attraction in the presence of beauty. Instead of appreciating beauty, the person fights against acknowledging it. The person suppresses this attraction, which will then emerge in other ways. A third person has a problem with wanting material comfort. By choosing a life of poverty, the person acknowledges the hold that material comforts have.

The easiest way to resist what tempts us toward self-destruction is to dwell and meditate upon things that move us toward excellence. Paul must have had something of this in view when he said:

Philippians 4:8 (NRSV)

⁸ Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things.

We need to pay attention to those things that get our attention. We need some discernment, making sure that the things upon which we think, reflect, and meditate are things that move us toward our authentic self.

Second, we need to reveal our struggle to a spiritual friend or support group.

Our habits are such because they have become automatic. Some of our habits are to our benefit. Some of our habits are roadblocks toward becoming our best self. Anger in certain settings may feel automatic, as if we could not control it. The same may be true of our sexual desire, desire for material comfort to the point of inappropriate debt, desire for others to like us, lying to protect our selves or get others to like us, and failing to keep promises because it puts us at a disadvantage. When we approach such struggles as if we are in it alone, we keep our struggle a secret. Keeping such matters secret enhances their power. We may want to communicate the illusion that everything is under control. Yet, if we could have handled such areas of our lives alone, we would already have done so. Willpower and personal resolutions are not enough.

We do not make changes in our lives easily. We are so deceptive that we will pretend to ourselves that we do not have a problem. We are often afraid to talk about it. In order to gain internal victory, we will need to acknowledge our vulnerability and seek the aid of other people and of God. Soldiers do not go into battle alone. They are part of a team. Confession of our struggles and failures to other human beings is an important dimension of gaining internal victory.

Conclusion

I want to emphasize that Christianity is not a form of dualism. The forces of good and evil are not equal. In fact, evil must feed off a prior good; evil must

rebel against a good that already exists. God is the creator of the universe. God will redeem the creation, even the fallen part of that creation.

We often wonder about Heaven and Hell. Hell may be a self-imposed prison for those who turn away from and rebel against their created openness to God. Dorothy Sayers, in *Introductory Papers on Dante*, (1954) p. 12, put this principle in an interesting way.

There is no power in this world or the next that can keep a soul from god if God is what it really desires. But, if in seeing God, the soul rejects Him in hatred and horror, then there is nothing more that God can do for it ... but give it what it desires.

As one modern proverb puts it,

Sin is humanity's way of telling God to leave it alone. Hell is God's way of saying okay.

C. S. Lewis, in *The Great Divorce*, provides a picture of heaven and hell. Hell is the place where Satan and his demons operate. A man has arrived in heaven and his teacher shows him around. He goes down on his hands and knees, takes a blade of grass and, using the thin end as a pointer, he eventually finds a tiny crack in the soil in which is concealed the whole of hell.

“Do you mean then that Hell –all that infinite empty town – is down in some little crack like this?”

“Yes. All Hell is smaller than one pebble of your earthly world: but it is smaller than one atom of this world. The Real World. Look at yon butterfly. If it swallowed all Hell, Hell would not be big enough to do it any harm or to have any taste.”

“It seems big enough when you are in it, Sir.”

“And yet all loneliness, angers, hatreds, envies and itchings that it contains, if rolled into one single experience and put into the scale against the least moment of the joy that is felt by the least in Heaven, would have no weight that could be registered at all. Bad cannot succeed even in being bad as truly as good is good. If all Hell's miseries together entered the consciousness of yon wee yellow bird on the bough there, they would be swallowed up without

trace, as if one drop of ink had been dropped into that Great Ocean to which your terrestrial Pacific itself is only a molecule.”

Talk 12: Why and How should we Tell Others?

We need to learn to share with others the faith in Christ we have.

Some people will say that religion is a private matter. Others will emphasize that doing is more important than speaking. We need to remember that actions can lie, just as much as words can lie. Even for the person who lives the faith, someone must have told them about the Christian faith. Further, Jesus tells us to share this good news. Jesus tells people to go to the lost sheep, to tell John, to all you meet, and to make disciples. The primary missionary challenge is at the end of the Gospel of Matthew.

Matthew 28:18-20 (NRSV)

¹⁸ And Jesus came and said to them, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. ¹⁹ Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, ²⁰ and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age."

Second, people need the Lord. People need to hear the good news. If we were in the desert and discovered an oasis, it would be extremely selfish not to tell the thirsty people around us where they could satisfy their thirst. Even Sinead O'Connor recognized this thirst of the human race.

As a race we feel empty. This is because our spirituality has been wiped out and we don't know how to express ourselves. As a result we're encouraged to fill that gap with alcohol, drugs, sex, or money. People out there are screaming for the truth.

Third, we have received good news we want others to know. The joy of a new baby is something we share with others. When we have experienced good news, we want our friends and neighbors to know. When we appreciate what Jesus has brought into our lives, we want to share with others.

How do we go about telling others?

I want to mention two dangers. One is that we become insensitive to others. We can become so excited that we do not seriously consider the spiritual journey of the other person. The opposite danger is fear.

Telling others about Jesus arises out of our own relationship with God, and in that sense is quite natural. If we view this form of verbal witness as something alien imposed upon us, we will never feel comfortable sharing our faith. As we walk with God, it should become quite natural for us to talk to people about that relationship in cooperation with the Spirit of God.

Presence

Here is the way Jesus said it to his disciples.

Matthew 5:13-16 (NRSV)

¹³“You are the salt of the earth; but if salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything, but is thrown out and trampled under foot.

¹⁴“You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid. ¹⁵No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house. ¹⁶In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.

Jesus calls us to have a wide-ranging influence. In order to exercise this influence, we need to be in the world. We must not withdraw into what John Stott calls our “elegant little ecclesiastical salt cellars.” Yet, God calls us to live a different lifestyle from the world, so that we may be effective as salt and light in it.

Salt in the days of Jesus kept food from going bad. Christians need to help human society toward the good. Our words and moral standards are part of our

influence in our society. We aim toward better social structures, working for justice, freedom, and dignity for the individual, and helping to abolish discrimination. We do it also by our social action to help those who are casualties of our society. To this end, God calls some Christians to get involved in local or national politics. God calls others to spend their lives like Mother Teresa and Jackie Pullinger “ministering with the poor.” God called us to play a part in this to a greater or lesser extent.

Light is effective in darkness. We need to allow the light of Christ to shine through us. We do this by our good deeds. We can summarize our good deeds as loving our neighbors as ourselves.

Living out the Christian life is the most appropriate way of passing on the Good News to those who live in very close proximity to us. This applies to family, colleagues at work, and roommates. At work, people should notice our consistency, honesty, truthfulness, hard work, reliability, avoidance of gossip, and desire to encourage other people. At home, our patience and kindness count far more than words. If we become Christians and the spouse does not, this form of witness becomes increasingly important.

Persuasion

Many people today have objections to the Christian faith. They have questions they want answered before they will come to faith in Christ. They want truth to persuade them. Paul referred to this form of persuasion.

2 Corinthians 5:11 (NRSV)

¹¹ Therefore, knowing the fear of the Lord, we try to persuade others; but we ourselves are well known to God, and I hope that we are also well known to your consciences.

We also find a similar engagement by Paul in Thessalonica in Acts.

Acts 17:2-4 (NRSV)

² And Paul went in, as was his custom, and on three Sabbath days argued with them from the scriptures, ³ explaining and proving that it was necessary for the Messiah to suffer and to rise from the dead, and saying, “This is the Messiah, Jesus whom I am proclaiming to you.” ⁴ Some of them were persuaded and joined Paul and Silas, as did a great many of the devout Greeks and not a few of the leading women.

We also find this approach in Corinth.

Acts 18:4 (NRSV)

⁴ Every Sabbath he would argue in the synagogue and would try to convince Jews and Greeks.

Part of our Christian education and training in discipleship needs to be able to give good reasons for what one believes. Many people genuinely want answers to their questions. “Why does God allow suffering?” “What about other religions?” Of course, sometimes, such questions can be a smoke screen to avoid their real issue. We need prayerful discernment in such questions people raise. Such theological questions may mask the moral change they sense God would require. They may not want to make the change in their way of life that commitment to Christ would bring.

Proclamation

The heart of telling others is the proclamation of the good news of Jesus Christ. It is announcing, communicating, and proclaiming the Christian faith to those outside the faith. We can offer this witness in many ways. One of the most effective ways is bringing people to hear the gospel explained by someone else. When we are newly Christian, we may have many friends who do not know

Jesus. We need to make a list and invite them to the appropriate Christian gathering where they can hear the gospel message. In John 1:42, the writer tells us that Andrew brought Simon to Jesus. William Temple made the comment that this is, "The greatest service that one human being can render another." Many of us can be like Andrew and bring others to Jesus. Most of us do not know Albert McMakin. He discovered a relationship with Christ. He was a farmer, and brought a neighboring farmer's son with him to revival meeting. That farmer's son was Billy Graham.

If we have an opportunity to tell another about Jesus, the most effective way is to share with others what Christ means to us. We find an example of this in Acts.

Acts 26:9-23 (NRSV)

⁹ "Indeed, I myself was convinced that I ought to do many things against the name of Jesus of Nazareth. ¹⁰ And that is what I did in Jerusalem; with authority received from the chief priests, I not only locked up many of the saints in prison, but I also cast my vote against them when they were being condemned to death. ¹¹ By punishing them often in all the synagogues I tried to force them to blaspheme; and since I was so furiously enraged at them, I pursued them even to foreign cities.

¹² "With this in mind, I was traveling to Damascus with the authority and commission of the chief priests, ¹³ when at midday along the road, your Excellency, I saw a light from heaven, brighter than the sun, shining around me and my companions. ¹⁴ When we had all fallen to the ground, I heard a voice saying to me in the Hebrew language, 'Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me? It hurts you to kick against the goads.' ¹⁵ I asked, 'Who are you, Lord?' The Lord answered, 'I am Jesus whom you are persecuting. ¹⁶ But get up and stand on your feet; for I have appeared to you for this purpose, to appoint you to serve and testify to the things in which you have seen me and to those in which I will appear to you. ¹⁷ I will rescue you from your people and from the Gentiles—to whom I am sending you ¹⁸ to open their eyes so that they may turn from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God, so that

they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me.'

¹⁹“After that, King Agrippa, I was not disobedient to the heavenly vision, ²⁰ but declared first to those in Damascus, then in Jerusalem and throughout the countryside of Judea, and also to the Gentiles, that they should repent and turn to God and do deeds consistent with repentance. ²¹ For this reason the Jews seized me in the temple and tried to kill me. ²² To this day I have had help from God, and so I stand here, testifying to both small and great, saying nothing but what the prophets and Moses said would take place: ²³ that the Messiah must suffer, and that, by being the first to rise from the dead, he would proclaim light both to our people and to the Gentiles.”

Before people believe God is trustworthy, people will need to have some sense that the church is credible and that individual Christians are credible. Before people read a text called the bible, people read the text of our lives. God wants to speak through the unique messenger we are to a world that needs what we have to say through word and deed. Through our spiritual gifts, passion, abilities, personalities, and experiences, we can help bring other people into the family of God. What I would like to do now is to give some ways one can work through the unique story we have to tell others.

We have a testimony or witness to share with others as part of our life message. At this point, we do not have to prove a legal case. Yet, we are the greatest authority on the ways God has worked in our lives. We can learn to share our story by working through four areas of our lives. We need to ask ourselves what our lives were like before Jesus became important to us, what happened when we realized we needed Jesus, the time and place we committed our lives to Jesus, and the difference Jesus has made in our lives.

We have life lessons as part of our life message. God has taught us many lessons in life and discipleship through our experiences. People can learn from what we have learned. We are wise if we write down the major life lessons we have had so that we can share them with others. We can learn from success and failure, from our faithfulness and our unfaithfulness. We may have gone through a time when we lacked financial resources. We may have gone through pain, sorrow, or depression. We may have learned from critics. The point is, life experience is an important source for learning.

We have passions that are part of our life message. God cares about everything in the world. Since we are not God, God gives each of us a passion or something about which we care deeply. God gives us different passions so that everything God wants to happen in the world will happen. No one can do it all.

We have good news as part of our life message. The good news is what God has done in Jesus Christ. In Christ, God shows us what God is like and what God intends humanity to be. We need to learn how to make friends, be a friend, and bring our friends to Christ. Friendship is the best way to share the good news with others. As Christians, we need to have friends who are not Christians. God loves each person. Every person matters to God. Love leaves no choice but to share the love of God for them. Paul gives some good advice at this point:

Colossians 4:5 (NRSV)

⁵Conduct yourselves wisely toward outsiders, making the most of the time.

God does not want anyone to remain lost, isolated, alienated, or alone. God wants the redemption of all. God has made us to be a member of the family of

God, to model the character of Christ, to bring glory to God, to be a minister of grace, and to be a messenger of good news to others.

The image I have in my mind is that of bringing people to the door of life with Christ. We can stand by the door, and direct those whom we influence to walk through the door. We cannot walk through the door for them. Anyone who is a Christian today is so because others have faithfully shown the way. However, at some point, we want to say “Yes” and walk through the door. I want to encourage Christian parents in particular that we cannot make our children walk through the door. However, we can be as faithful as we can be in pointing the way. Our part is faithful witness in word and deed. The rest, we need to leave to God. We may never see the fruit of our faithful witness to others. We may be one stage in their journey.

Conclusion

During the war, a man was shot and lay dying in the trenches. A friend asked if he could do anything for him. He responded, “No, I am dying.” The friend wanted to know if he could send a message to anyone. “Yes, you can send a message to this man. Tell him that in my last minutes what he taught me as a child is helping me to die.” The man was the soldier’s old Sunday school teacher. When the message got back to him, he said, “God forgive me. I gave up Sunday school teaching years ago because I thought I was getting nowhere. I thought it was no use.”

When we tell people about Jesus, we never know the influence we will have. Such effort is never a waste. For the gospel is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes (Rom. 1:16).

Talk 13: Does God Heal Today?

When God heals someone today, we get a glimpse of the future when the final redemption of our bodies will take place.

Romans 8:23: and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies.

Issue: Should I expect God to heal people today?

We gain knowledge of the natural healing processes of the body through doctors. We may also gain access to spiritual resources that can shorten the process, even to the point that we may call it a miracle.

What is the place of healing in the modern world?

Roman Catholic and Reformed churches followed the lead of Aquinas and limited the operation of the gifts of the Spirit to the early church so that, as Luther said, the greater works could be done, namely, converting, preaching, and teaching. With Protestant conservative and liberal thought aligned against healing ministry, it fell to sectarian groups to promote this ministry. In the 1800's, New Thought (Phineas Quimby) Christian Science (Mary Baker Eddy) and the Pentecostal movement revived healing ministry.

In the 1900's, psychological healing, connecting the health of mind and body, had new support. Medical professions increasingly noticed that piecemeal healing is not always appropriate; many physical illnesses can have a psychic factor. The literature notes the influence of stress upon the body. However, vast cultural upheaval can affect physical and mental health as well. The body

absorbs the anger, resentment, and hostility; the fear and anxiety; the guilt and self-punishment; and the egotism and self-centeredness of the person.

In my experience, prayers for healing raise questions about the nature of God and the presence of evil.

The questions of the philosopher Epicurius are old questions that are yet unanswered. Is God willing to prevent evil, but not able? Then God is impotent. Is God able, but not willing? Then is God malevolent. Is God both able and willing? Then, why does evil exist at all?

These are appropriate questions for us to ask. Those who believe in God cannot avoid such questions. God has created a world that is not simply a copy of the will and desire of God. Rather, God sees value in a world free and independent, rather than a world that becomes a puppet on a string. Evil is real and costly enough for God as well as for us.

When tragedy strikes us, questions like these arise in powerful ways. It may be through something that happens to you, and you wonder what you did to cause it. It may be through what happened to a friend. It may be something that happens in the world, such as ramming the world trade center and the Pentagon on September 11, 2001. It may be through a massive natural disaster, like the tsunami that struck Asia in December 2004. Such questions are not new. The bible asked them long ago. I would connect them with theological matters like the providence of God, the nature of evil, and the nature of human freedom. I suggest that these are complex problems. We will not solve them in this

message. However, I hope I can stimulate some thought and prayer. We must be willing to go deeper in our relationship with God in order to face such questions.

Evil and sin are the risk that God takes in extending freedom. The independence that we experience as persons implies permitting evil and its consequences. God intended genuine independence. What we sought was autonomy from God. It has led to our enslavement to the forces of sin and death. The risk of autonomy that God made in making independent persons also opened God to the possibility that we would consider God nonessential and even nonexistent. The fact of evil strengthens the appearance of the nonexistence of God.

Here is part of the problem. We want to be in charge. We want the world to behave according to our desires. We want the church to do what we want. We want others in the family to meet our needs. We do what we can to arrange our world to our liking. When the world does not operate according to our plans, we become anxious. The reality of senseless suffering, especially when it happens to a close friend or family member, or to us, immediately causes one to wonder about God, especially God's power, goodness and justice. The temporary success of evil can especially cause us to wonder who is in charge. I hope such experiences also cause us to wonder about another possibility. This world is not all there is. If we are to find genuine fulfillment, healing, and wholeness, it will not be here, but in eternity.

Thus, our prayers must always leave matters in the hands of God, who has a view of the world and our lives that we can never duplicate. We must come to a place of trust.

I want to share with you some elements of healing in the Bible.

We might note the promise in the Torah to those who obeyed.

Exodus 23:25 You shall worship the LORD your God, and I will bless your bread and your water; and I will take sickness away from among you.

Psalm 41:3 The LORD sustains them on their sickbed; in their illness you heal all their infirmities.

We might also note the character of God. Exodus 15:26, "I am the Lord, who heals you."

We might also note some examples of physical healing. One is the story of Naaman in II Kings 5 and the story of Hezekiah in Isaiah 38-39.

We might also note the New Testament teaching on physical healing.

One is from the teachings of Jesus. The major theme of the preaching of Jesus the kingdom of God, as in Mark 1:15. The present nature of the kingdom is clear in that Jesus viewed the kingdom as coming near in his ministry. The kingdom is also future, in that history moves toward a climax that God determines.

The healings of Jesus are about 25% of the gospel narratives. We need to note that Jesus did not heal everyone. Therefore, the question we ask today one could also ask of Jesus. Why are some people healed and some people not healed?

Matthew 4:23, Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom, and curing every disease and every sickness among the people.

(Mark 6:56 NRSV) And wherever he went, into villages or cities or farms, they laid the sick in the marketplaces, and begged him that they might touch even the fringe of his cloak; and all who touched it were healed.

(Luke 4:40 NRSV) As the sun was setting, all those who had any who were sick with various kinds of diseases brought them to him; and he laid his hands on each of them and cured them.

(Luke 6:19 NRSV) And all in the crowd were trying to touch him, for power came out from him and healed all of them.

(Luke 9:11 NRSV) When the crowds found out about it, they followed him; and he welcomed them, and spoke to them about the kingdom of God, and healed those who needed to be cured.

We can also note the commissioning of the disciples by Jesus. We find a commissioning of the twelve in Matthew 9:35-10:8, of the seventy-two in Luke 10:1-20, and to all the disciples in Matthew 28:17-20, Mark 16:15-20, and John 14:9-14. Jesus commanded the disciples to go into the world and to do everything that he taught them. Jesus commanded the disciples to heal, so that God gives the same commission to us.

Further, we can note the physical healings in Church History. We can refer to many examples of healing and miracle in Acts.

Acts 3:10 (Acts 3:10 NRSV) and they recognized him as the one who used to sit and ask for alms at the Beautiful Gate of the temple; and they were filled with wonder and amazement at what had happened to him.

Acts 5:12-16 (Acts 5:12-16 NRSV) Now many signs and wonders were done among the people through the apostles. And they were all together in Solomon's Portico. {13} None of the rest dared to join them, but the people held them in high esteem. {14} Yet more than ever believers were added to the Lord, great numbers of both men and women, {15} so that they even carried out the sick into the streets, and laid them on cots and mats, in order that Peter's shadow might fall on some of them as he came by. {16} A great number of people would also gather from the towns around

Jerusalem, bringing the sick and those tormented by unclean spirits, and they were all cured.

We can also note records of physical healing in some of the early centuries of the church.

Irenaeus (130-200)

Origen (185-254)

Augustine (354-430), in his book the City of God, (Book XXII, Chapter 8) writes about people being healed. He has a rather gross story of Bishop Innocence, who had a disease that involved pus in the rectum.

Our next question concerns the experience of healing today.

Nowhere does the bible say that healing ended with the first generation of Christians. Nikki gave some examples. One is an Alpha group in Zimbabwe that referred to healing of one of the members. She went to the Alpha weekend in need sight. She went to the doctor and he said that he was just as surprised that he could find no evidence of the disease that she had.

When God heals someone, we receive a hint of the future world.

Someday, we will die. We may need to help others prepare for death, as in the hospice movement. God does not heal everyone. Some are. People receive great blessing just because someone prays for them.

Here are some guidelines in the practice of the prayer for healing. We must always remember that neither the prayer nor the one who prays performs any act of healing. Rather, God heals.

Simplicity is important, so we do not recommend a technique or particular words we use. We simply ask God.

Love is important – If we cannot pray in love, we should not pray.

Mark 1:41 (NRSV)

⁴¹ Moved with pity, Jesus stretched out his hand and touched him, and said to him, "I do choose. Be made clean!"

Matthew 9:36 (NRSV)

³⁶ When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.

Here are some general guidelines as we pray for healing.

We may have words of knowledge in I Corinthians 12:8

We may have pictures that we have in our minds

We may have sympathy pain that we know does not belong to us

We may have impressions of a word or condition

We may hear or see a word.

When we pray, here are some questions we might ask:

Where does it hurt?

Why does the person have this condition?

How do I pray?

After the prayer, follow up in later days with questions like: How are they doing? The healing may be immediate or gradual. Even Jesus had a gradual healing.

What next? Reassure the person of the love of God. We need to avoid placing guilt upon the person prayed for. The disciples lacked faith; Jesus never said that the person who needed healing lacked faith.

Healing of emotions

Few people today doubt that human beings have layers of mental experiences that lay below their consciousness. Such layers can have profound impact upon the mental and physical health of the individual. However, what people might likely debate is that we have layers of mental experiences above or beyond consciousness. Unconscious experience connects consciousness backward, in particular, to childhood experiences that continue to shape life today. However, our consciousness may connect forward by intuitions and insights to realities that lay beyond us. In his sense, healing ministry in the church can tap portions of our mental experience that otherwise would be lost to

us. Yet, this healing ministry does not find its limit in a sacrament of healing. As one becomes part of caring community, discovers new friends in the journey of life, participates in the sacraments, one can receive the healing presence of Christ.

Nathaniel Hawthorne, in his little classic *The Scarlet Letter*, at one level, tells the story of the connection between health of soul and body. The woman story made peace with herself, others, and God, in spite of her admitted sin. She experienced new life in the community and with her daughter. She did not allow her sin to define the rest of her life. She became a “Sister of Mercy” by her choice. The community slowly dissolved its hatred of Hester for her sin and replaced it with love. Arthur Dimmesdale, the pastor with whom she committed sin, however, could not let go of the sin. He was “conscious that the poison of one morbid spot was infecting his heart’s entire substance.” He carried the guilt within him throughout the rest of his life. The result was noticeable decline in physical health. Hawthorne notes:

He looked now more careworn and emaciated than as we described him at the scene of Hester’s public ignominy; and whether it were his failing health, or whatever the cause might be, his large dark eyes had a world of pain in their troubled and melancholy depth.

Roger Chillingworth makes this note.

A bodily disease, which we look upon as whole and entire within itself, may, after all, be but a symptom of some ailment in the spiritual part.

A sickness, a sore place, if we may so call it, in your spirit, hath immediately its appropriate manifestation in your bodily frame. Would you, therefore, that your physician heal the bodily evil? How may this be, unless you first lay open to him the wound or trouble in your soul?

Roger Chillingworth goes on to note that a strange connection between soul and body.

I would now like to shift our attention toward healing of damaged emotions. What are some of the evidences that we may need emotional healing?²⁰

One of the most common is a deep sense of unworthiness, a continuous feeling of anxiety, inadequacy, and inferiority, an inner nagging that says, "I am no good. I will never amount to anything. No one could ever possibly love me. Everything I do is wrong." I think of Moses, who responded to the call of God upon his life with great hesitation. He doubted whether he could speak well enough. He doubted that he had the courage to do what God wanted. He would rather herd sheep in anonymity than lead the Hebrew people out of slavery and into a new land. He did not view himself as good enough. The apostle Peter was a person who felt unworthy of being in the presence of Jesus. At one point, he even asked Jesus to depart from him, since he was such a sinner. We all know that he denied he knew Jesus three times. He wept over what he had done. Yet, Jesus restored him by giving him the commission three times to feed his sheep.

Another is the perfectionist complex. This is the inner feeling that says, "I can never quite achieve. I never do anything well enough. I cannot please myself, others, or God." This kind of person always gropes, strives, usually feeling guilty, driven by an inner thought of ought and should. I think of the Apostle Paul here. As he describes himself before his conversion, he believed he

²⁰ David Seamands, *Healing of Damaged Emotions*, p. 15-18.

perfectly followed the law. He wanted perfection in thought and life. Yet, his conversion showed him that even he needed grace and forgiveness.

A third kind of damaged emotion is super-sensitivity. Such a person has usually been hurt deeply. He or she reached out for love, approval, and affection. Instead, he or she received the opposite. The scars of such experiences remain buried deeply within. Such people see things other people do not see and feel things other people do not feel. I think of Hosea, who reached out for love and affection from his wife, Gomer. Yet, she would not give him the gift of her love. He experienced the emotional devastation of that experience. Yet, through his pain, he received an insight into the pain in the heart of God over the lack of faithfulness on the part of Israel.

Rudy Tomjanovich was 25 years old when a fight broke out in a close game while he played for the Houston Rockets. Rudy rushed over to break it up when a player whipped around, swung as hard as he could, and landed the punch on Rudy's face. It fractured his skull, broke his nose and cheekbones, and nearly killed him. He eventually recovered. Several months later, a reporter asked Rudy if he had forgiven the player who had hit him. When he said yes, the reporter could not believe it. How could he forgive? "I knew if I wanted to move on with my life, I had to let it go. I did not do it for him. I did it for me. I did it so I could be free."²¹

A fourth kind of damaged emotion consists of people filled with fears. They are often so afraid of losing the game of life that they have a simple way out – they never get into the game. They just sit on the sidelines. They say, "I do not

²¹ Joel Osteen, *Your Best Life Now*, 2004, p. 160.

like the rules, the referee, or the goals.” Fearful people live on “If only.” However, since the “if only” never happens, they rarely accomplish what they would like. The fearful are defeated and indecisive. I think of Jonah, whom God called to give a message to the people of Nineveh. Yet, he went the opposite direction. He did not like the people to whom God sent him, he did not like the message of repentance and mercy, and when the people did repent, he did not like the mercy of God shown to them.

A fifth area of damaged emotion is sex. Although sex mixes in with all the other damaged emotions, I want to give a special word about it. Americans have been weaned on lack of discipline, indecency, and sensuality. It is difficult for anyone to grow to young adulthood without suffering some damage in the sex department of their personalities. Sex is pleasurable, and for that reason tempting to think it will bring into our lives something it cannot bring. I think of the story of the woman at the well in John 4. She clearly had serial sexual relationships with men, trying to find answers to the meaning and happiness of her life in sex. Yet, she experienced healing as she opened herself the living water that Jesus would bring into her life.

A woman married, and for several years could not have a normal relationship with her husband. She could not give herself to this man. She loved him. Yet, she could not stand to be physically close. She tried to change, but she could not do it. One day, she had a dream that reminded her of an incident that occurred when she was a young girl. Some boys sexually assaulted her while she was at swimming. She was so angry and so filled with hatred toward those

boys, she screamed, “I hate you! I hate you! I’ll never let another man touch me as long as I live.” When she awakened, she realized that she still had all that anger and hatred buried in her mind. She recognized that what the boys did was wrong, but that she would not hold on to the anger any longer. She was not going to allow the pain from the past to poison her present and future. She forgave the boys. From that moment, the healing process began in her relationship with her husband. Some times, we need to uncover the root of our bitterness and anger in order to bring healing to our lives.²²

Does the gospel have a message for these various kinds of emotionally damaged persons? If it does not offer healing for all of them, then we had better put a padlock on our church doors, quit playing Christianity, and shut up about our good news.

Conclusion

It is important to persist in praying for God to heal people. Take a long view toward everything: reading the bible, praying, church, and healing. Jesus commanded us to do it, regardless of what we see. It is easy to get discouraged, especially if we do not see immediate, dramatic results. We do not want to burden anyone who does not experience immediate healing. We simply place the need and the person before God, and then trust God for the situation and the person. When God does heal, thank God and give God the glory.

We are going to spend time in ministry with each other. You will spend time in your small groups, sharing areas of healing you may need in your life, such as in your family, in your emotional life, physically, intellectually, and

²² Joel Osteen, *Your Best Life Now*, 2004, 155.

spiritually. Are there places in your life where you need the healing presence of Christ? Let us be open during this time to the surprising ways God may act. I will be here if a person or group would simply like to pray with me.

Talk 14: What About the Church?

Note: for Alpha, this talk is too long. As of March 23, 2005, I do not where I would cut this discussion of the church.

When you think of church, about what do you think?

Abraham Lincoln said, "If all the people who fell asleep in church on Sunday morning were laid out end to end, they would be a great deal more comfortable."

A pastor talked with a small boy and showed him around the church. He pointed out the memorials. "These are the names of those who died in the Services." The boy asked, "Did they die in the morning service or the evening service."

Hard pews, unsingable tunes, enforced silence, and excruciating boredom are just a few of the ingredients many people have of the church.

Clergy have a strange role in the church. People over-identify the church with the clergy. The longer one is clergy, the more likely one develops a skill that would be useless anywhere else but in the church.

An elderly woman walked into the local country church. The friendly usher greeted her at the door and helped her up the flight of steps. "Where would you like to sit?" he asked politely. "The front row please," she answered. "You really don't want to do that," the usher said. "The pastor is really boring." "Do you happen to know who I am?" the woman inquired. "No." he said. "I'm the pastor's mother!," she replied indignantly. "Do you know who I am?" he asked. "No." she said. "Good," he answered.

Some will associate church with a denomination. Only slowly do we realize that the one church of Jesus Christ gathers in the many churches of the denominations.

Some will associate church with a building.

For others, church is a duty one must fulfill occasionally. One ditty goes like this:

So when I've nothing else to do
I think I'll pay a visit,
So when at last I'm carried in,
The Lord won't say, "Who is it?"

Fortunately, many churches want to bury such views of the church. As we read of the warm fellowship of the New Testament, many churches want to be like that. Life is about learning the value of relationships, and therefore consists in learning how to love. The church is the place God has chosen for us to fulfill that purpose of our lives.

I want to talk with you about the church. As I do so, I realize that many people today struggle with the validity of any religious organization. Religion seems to be at the root of many of the problems in the world. My challenge to us would be this: In a pluralistic world, we can judge the value of a religion based upon the benefits it brings to its non-adherents. In other words, does our faith cause us to reach out to those not part of the church with the same love that God has? Do we love the lost in the same way that God does?

The church struggles today. World wide, the visible church is nearly 1.9 billion people in 270 countries, 34% of the population of the world. The church is growing in places like Africa, Asia, and Latin America. These are areas of the

world that struggle to move from a pre-modern and primitive culture and move into modern culture. The church has learned to do that. In Europe, the church has declined for decades. The church in America has hovered around 25% to 33% of the population as being relatively active in the church. During the 1990's, while the American population increased 13%, church attendance declined 3%.

Today, many Americans struggle with the church. I wonder if you have ever felt like an ambulance driver bringing injured people to a hospital where there is an epidemic spreading among the patients, doctors, and nurses. What do you do? I hope you try to help the hospital get the epidemic under control again, so they can get back to helping people heal. People who enter the church need discernment, for there is plenty of sickness that masquerades as church.²³

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, in his book *Life Together*, suggests that our disillusionment with the church is a good thing. It removes our false expectations of perfection in a human community. The sooner we give up the illusion that a church must be our vision of perfection in order to love it, the sooner we can move on to the reception and giving of grace as the foundation of Christian fellowship. We all need more grace than we know in order for friendship and relationships to continue and mature.

Frankly, perfect people do not need the church. People who are sinners, in need of grace and forgiveness, in need of growth, are the ones for whom the church can be a wonderful place. Bonhoeffer suggested that those who love the dream of community more than the Christian community itself becomes a destroyer of Christian community. We hinder God from working in our fellowship

²³ Brian McLaren, *A Generous Orthodoxy*, 21.

when we no longer give thanks for the community to which we belong. We do not have to have great experiences or discoverable riches. We might experience the church in its weakness, small faith, and difficulty. If we complain that everything in the church is paltry and petty, we close ourselves from the blessing God wants to give to us, even through what we consider weakness.

I want to talk about five central understandings of the church in the New Testament.

The people of God

The Christian community came to think of itself as an *ecclesia*, not a synagogue. One of the significant factors in this is that in the first century, the Jewish people defined the membership of a synagogue by the number of males involved. In contrast, the secular society of the first century defined *ecclesia* as an association consisting of both male and female. Further, the secular connotation meant that the term was free for people to give new content to it. The church of Jesus Christ consists of all persons who have professed their faith in Christ.

I want to talk about the meaning of baptism as a way of talking about the church as the people of God.

Baptism is a visible sign of what it means to be a Christian. All Christians submit to the water of baptism, ignoring the boundaries established by people: race, gender, or economic class. The water of baptism becomes a meeting place for individuals, Christian community, and God. Every time the church baptizes a person, we are saying that person is part of the plan God has to change the

world into what God intends. In that sense, baptism is a prophetic act. Baptism is our "Yes" to God and our "No" to that part of the world that rebels against what God wants. The sacrament declares the intention of the participant to orient life toward Christ. Parents make a decision to orient their family life toward Christ when they bring their children forward for infant baptism.

During the baptism ritual, the congregation re-affirms its commitment to orient its life toward Christ. Christians as individuals and the church as a community define themselves by their fellowship with Christ. Baptism, far from being a ceremony, reminds the church of its core beliefs and values in a world that would often distract it from its central purpose of fellowship with Christ.

Baptism symbolizes spiritual rebirth, the gate through which one passes into the body of Christ. Though baptism is an individual experience, it also identifies the individual with the Christian community. We need the support of other people to correct us, support us, and tell us the story of the Christian faith.

Baptism is participation in the death and resurrection of Christ (Romans 6:3-11), symbolizing breaking the power of sin and becoming a new and liberated people. Major changes in life rarely occur without the pain of suffering, of changing and growing, of letting go and trusting God. We transfer ownership of our lives from self to God. We re-direct faith from self to God.

Baptism means conversion, pardon, cleansing, forgiveness of sins, and a new ethical orientation through the work of the Holy Spirit. None of this occurs all at once. Time matters in the development of Christian life. Baptism is a reminder that believers still have much upon which to work in orienting one's life to Christ.

Baptism means receiving the gift of the Holy Spirit. Just as the Spirit raised Jesus from the dead, the Holy Spirit raises to new life the person baptized. God pours out the Holy Spirit on the baptized person as the first installment of the life to come, nurturing the life of faith in the heart.

Baptism means the kingdom of God has broken into this world. Baptism is a sign that the person baptized has become part of a new reality that looks forward to the victory that Christ will have in this world. The church acknowledges its hope for a world transformed into what God intends, as God has shown humanity in Christ.

This is an act of initiation into the family, recognizing one as part of the family of God. Baptism publicly identifies us with Christ. The focus is not us. The focus is not our decision. The focus is Christ and our identification with Christ.

We might consider several images of the context of this gathering of believers.

One is celebration. This larger gathering of people, occurring weekly, is a time to receive the inspiration that large gatherings of people can provide. We may also choose to participate in larger worship settings of denominational or other Christian assembly that may give us inspiration.

Two is the congregation. In this view, the congregation is a medium-sized gathering of people where people can form lasting Christian friends. People can learn their passion, gifts, and abilities and use them.

Three is the cell. Another name is small groups. Normally, we might think of two to twelve people. Such groups exhibit confidentiality, intimacy, and accountability.

The Family of God

The church is in essence a new sort of “communion” or “fellowship” in which each individual finds identity and fulfillment through the other and in relation to Christ. In this fashion, the distinctive love symbolized by Christ’s own broken body is reenacted in the communal fabric of the church. Augustine in particular developed the theme of a fellowship of love.

I will never forget one of the first ministry classes I attended. As people shared some of the reasons they felt led to enter the ministry, one person said that he wanted to work with people. The leader said, “That is because you have not worked with many people yet.”

People can be frustrating, of course. Our sense of calling to work in the church needs to be far deeper than simply to help people. Yet, we need to remember that we frustrate ourselves as well. What would we do without other people?

Here is a little exercise that I that I hope you find stimulating.

1. Name the five wealthiest people in the world.
2. Name the last five Heisman trophy winners.
3. Name the last five winners of the Miss America contest.
4. Name ten people who have won the Nobel or Pulitzer Prize.
5. Name the last half dozen Academy Award winners for best actor and actress.
6. Name the last decade's worth of World Series winners.

How did you do? The point is, none of us remember the headliners of yesterday. These are no second-rate achievers. They are the best in their fields. However, the applause dies. Awards tarnish. We forget their achievements. Accolades and certificates are buried with their owners.

Here is another quiz. See how you do on this one:

1. List a few teachers who aided your journey through school.
2. Name three friends who have helped you through a difficult time.
3. Name five people who have taught you something worthwhile.
4. Think of a few people who have made you feel appreciated and special.
5. Think of five people you enjoy spending time with.

Was that easier? The lesson is simple: The people who make a difference in your life are not the ones with the most credentials, the most money, or the most awards. They are the ones that care.

We heard about the good news because of the church. When we say yes, we become a child of God and part of the family of God. With the presence of the Father, Son, and Spirit, the churches have their unity. We belong to one family. The diversity of the churches does not destroy this family resemblance. We need to continue the work of reconciliation between the churches in the places God has placed us. In John 17:11, Jesus prays that believers may be one. In Ephesians 4:3, we have the exhortation to “make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit.” One way to think of the church is like this. The Christian teaching on the incarnation is a particular showing of who God is and what God wants of humanity. The churches also need to become a particular showing of the one church of Jesus Christ. The various churches need to help the world see the one church of Jesus Christ. The churches differ on various points. Individuals within

this body of believers differ. Sometimes, we differ on quite important points. The prayer for unity needs to combine with our serious engagement with truth. As Rupertus Meldenius of the Middle Ages said,

“On the necessary points, unity; on the questionable points, liberty; in everything, love.”

As we grow closer to Christ, we will grow closer to each other. David Watson observed that from the airplane, the various divisions of land that looked so impressive on the ground look less so from the air. The differences within a local church become less impressive as well. Many of us have witnessed in Crawfordsville the painful effects of churches not taking seriously this call to love each other. We have seen churches choose the option of splitting up all too quickly, instead of talking to each other and working through their differences. We have the same Father, and therefore are brothers and sisters, whether we acknowledge the family resemblance or not. John puts it clearly.

1 John 4:20-5:1 (NRSV)

²⁰ Those who say, “I love God,” and hate their brothers or sisters, are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen. ²¹ The commandment we have from him is this: those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also.

Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ has been born of God, and everyone who loves the parent loves the child.

Father Ramiero Cantalamessa addressed a large gathering from several denominations in the following way.

When Christians quarrel, we say to God: ‘Choose between us and them. But the Father loves all his children. We should say, ‘We accept as our brothers and sisters all whom you receive as your children.

God calls us to fellowship, or *koinonia*, with each other. This Greek word means sharing with each other, even to the point of material wealth. Christian fellowship cuts across race, color, education, background, and every other cultural barrier. Such fellowship ought to be the distinguishing mark of the church within every community. John Wesley said, "The New Testament knows nothing of solitary religion." God calls us to fellowship with each other. Fellowship is not optional. Professor C. E. B. Cranfield put it this way,

The freelance Christian, who would be a Christian but is too superior to belong to the visible church upon earth in one of its forms, is simply a contradiction in terms.

The writer of Hebrews urges his readers in the same direction.

Hebrews 10:24-25 (NRSV)

²⁴ And let us consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds, ²⁵ not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day approaching.

People lose their enthusiasm for the faith and love for their Lord because they forsake Christian fellowship.

The church is the fellowship of friends of God and friends of each other, and friends of the world.

One common illustration of this is a young Christian frustrated by the church visiting an older and wiser Christian. They were at a campfire. The old man took one of the burning coals by a stick and moved it away from the rest of the coals. Soon, the coal lost its ability to give off heat. He then moved the coal with the rest of the coals, and it began to burn brightly again. As frustrating as the family of God can be, we need that family to grow in faith, hope, and love.

The body of Christ

Paul had a powerful experience of the unity between the church and Christ. In Acts 9:4, after persecuting Christians, Paul heard a voice saying, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" When he persecuted the church, he persecuted Jesus. As the body of Christ, we re-present Christ to the world in our word and deed. One song puts it this way.

He has no hands but our hands
To do His work today;
He has no feet but our feet
To lead men in His way;
He has no voice but our voice
To tell men how He died;
He has no help but our help
to lead them to His side.

The body of Christ image suggests the unity of the church. We find Paul expounding upon this in I Corinthians 12. A body functions as a unity and for the good of the whole body.

The body of Christ image also suggests the diversity of the church. Everyone has a place to belong in the body of Christ. Every part of the body is valuable, for every part has an important role to fulfill in the body functioning in a healthy way. Therefore, no part of the body should view itself as more valuable than other parts. Such envy of other parts of the body is simply not appropriate in the body of Christ. We need to see each other as part of a team. We are each part of the whole.

All of this suggests the inter-dependence of the members of the body of Christ. One member of the congregation of John Wimber met somebody in great

need. He tried to get help from someone in the church, but during the week, no one could help. He then said he ended up having to let him stay with him for the week. He then asked, "Don't you think the church should take care of people like this?" John Wimber then said, "It looks like the church did."

The church is wherever we are. The church acts when we act faithfully to what God calls us to be and to do in this situation. We need a better vision of the whole church being ministers of the gospel.

A Holy Temple

The New Testament church had no buildings, except as people become part of that building. We find this in Ephesians.

Ephesians 2:22 (NRSV)

²² in whom you also are built together spiritually into a dwelling place for God.

Jesus is the chief cornerstone. Jesus is the foundation of the church. The apostles and prophets are the "living stones" in which the church consists. The Tabernacle, and later the Temple, was the center of worship life in Israel. Through Jesus Christ, we gain access the Father in this new temple, a dwelling constituted by the dwelling of the Spirit. Jesus has become high priest for those who want access to the Father.

The service of Holy Communion, Eucharist, or the Lord's Supper, is a time when we remember the one sacrifice Jesus made for the world in offering himself in love for the salvation of the world. As we receive the bread and cup, we look in four directions.

We look back with thanks. We remember the broken body and shed blood of Jesus Christ on the cross.

We look forward with anticipation. We remember the death of Jesus in a meal. A meal is often a celebration of a great occasion. In this way, the Lord's Supper reminds us of the wedding supper we shall have with Christ in eternity.

We look around at the Christian family. Sharing the bread and cup with other believers symbolizes our unity in Christ. As Paul put it,

1 Corinthians 10:17 (NRSV)

¹⁷ Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread.

We eat and drink together, reminding us that Christ died for us all.

We look up in expectation. Jesus promised to be with us until the end of this age. He promised to come to take us to himself. His presence brings conversion, healing, and witness in the world.

God is free to show us grace in surprising ways. Yet, the church recognizes the Lord's Supper (also called communion or Eucharist) as a special means of grace. The Lord's Supper is not about the individual or the community that celebrates it. The Lord's Supper, through the elements of bread and cup, direct our attention from self and community and toward Christ. Christ is the one present in this meal. When we partake of the bread and cup, we declare our desire for Christ to live in us and to become the body of Christ in the world as we depart from the table.

Christians kneel at the same altar, regardless of race, economic class, or gender.

The Lord's Supper has its foundation in the table fellowship Jesus had with his disciples, the meals of the risen Lord with the disciples, and the centrality of the Supper in the apostolic churches. This meal anticipates the heavenly banquet of the church with Christ. Everyone who participates in this Supper enters into a fellowship with Jesus and with others who partake of the meal. The meal anticipates the fellowship God wants with humanity. The Supper becomes a meeting place for individuals, Christian community, and God.

John Wesley said that he invited to the table of the Lord all whom he invited to Christ. Denominational affiliation is not a consideration. The Eucharist exemplifies the oneness and unity of the people of God. The Lord's Table becomes an anticipation of the unity of all Christians and churches that we already have in Christ.

We receive healing of spirit, thought, emotion, mind, and body. As those on the path of transformation, we seek to bring healing to a broken world. The matter of whether children receive communion is one best left to the beliefs and values of parents. The Lord who embraced children in his earthly life would not turn children away. Communion becomes a teaching moment between parent and child as to what the church means in receiving bread and cup.

The Supper is our "Yes" to what God wants in the world and our "No" to that part of the world that rebels against what God wants. The sacrament declares the intention of the participants to orient life toward Christ. We make this clear when we announce that the bread is the body of Christ and the wine is

the blood of Christ. The Lord's Supper is about Christ; it is not about us. We identify with Christ. We express our desire to have Christ live in us.

The supper of the Lord is a thanksgiving to the Father, a memorial of the crucified and risen Christ, an invocation of the Holy Spirit, a community of the faithful, and a meal of the kingdom of God.

The Bride of Christ

We find a reference to this in Ephesians 5:32, where, in the context of discussing marriage, we hear these words, “This is a profound mystery, but I am talking about Christ and the church.” The Old Testament could speak of the relationship between Israel and God as that of husband and wife. We then find in Ephesians these words.

Ephesians 5:25-27 (NRSV)

²⁵ Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, ²⁶ in order to make her holy by cleansing her with the washing of water by the word, ²⁷ so as to present the church to himself in splendor, without a spot or wrinkle or anything of the kind—yes, so that she may be holy and without blemish.

This image helps us to capture the vision God has of the church, even if the church of history, and of our experience, falls short. We can only get a taste now of what God intends to come in fullness in the future.

Our response to this love of Christ for us is to love him in return, in holiness and purity. Our worship is the expression of our love and reverence for God with heart, mind, and body. The Westminster catechism puts it well, “The chief end of humanity is to glorify God and enjoy God for ever.”

Our witness is our response of love toward others. We want to tell others of the good news and draw them into the church. Our witness is the

contemporary expression of the truth God has delivered for all ages. The same is true of our worship.

A community of the Spirit

If we ask what constitutes true community, we are brought to this last and most elusive of the images, the creative work of the Spirit. As commonly used in the New Testament, “Spirit” refers to that mode of divine activity whereby God indwells and empowers not merely human subjectivity but also human *inter*-subjectivity. True community embodies the distinctive love of Christ, and in that sense, it belongs to the Son. It also derives from the creative work of the Spirit, and in that sense, it is the “fellowship of the Holy Spirit.” Paul and early Christianity wove themes of community and Spirit tightly together. Augustine and Aquinas even described the Holy Spirit as the soul that animates the body of the church.

Consequently, the church also lives in the power of the life-giving Spirit. The presence of the Spirit in the life of the church and believers relates to the phenomenon of life in all its breadth in the world, from creation, to sustaining life, and to the consummation and fulfillment of life in the end. The word “spirited” comes closest to expressing the meaning of Spirit here. Spirit is the principle of life and vitality in the universe. We see evidence of this spirit in psychological and sociological factors. We cannot explain humanity solely by reference to the environment. We come face to face with ourselves, thereby liberating ourselves from captivity to biological drives or from the shaping by the environment. As a result, we ask questions and receive answers and commands. We do not receive

clarity in either answers or commands, whether in general form or specific application.

The Spirit of God is active in creation, breathing life into the world that God has made. This presence in creation helps us to understand the role of the Spirit in bringing life to human beings. The Spirit of life gained victory over death in Jesus. The Spirit teaches us to know Jesus of Nazareth and moves our hearts to praise God through faith, love, and hope. Yet, the work of the Spirit does limit itself to making intelligible what would otherwise be unintelligible. The same Spirit who gives life to all creation also gives new life to believers now by dwelling in them.

The Spirit fulfills the work of Jesus in the world. The Spirit gives the hope of new life for humanity, so that death does not have the final word. Among the positive insights of 20th century, biblical exegesis has been this connection between the giving of the Spirit and eschatology. The Spirit is the awakening power by which the risen Lord created the church as a provisional representation of the whole world of humanity that God justifies in Christ. However, we must also make the future saving work of the Spirit related to the creative work of God.

The New Testament closely relates the work of the Spirit with that of the Son, in creation, in the creation of the church, and in consummating human history and creation. The risen Lord imparts the Spirit to believers.

Benefits from participation in church life

Here are a few benefits from uniting to a local church.

A church family identifies us as genuine believers. The diversity of the Christian community in backgrounds, social status, race, political beliefs, and so on, is a powerful witness in the world to what Christ can do.

A church family moves us out of self-centered living and toward other-centered living. The local church is a school in which we learn to relate to others within the family of God. We learn values that help us in family, work, and community. We can practice unselfish, sympathetic love. We learn to care for others and share in the experiences of others. The imperfections of our lives unite with the imperfections of the lives of others. This sense of community involves commitment to each other as the body of Christ, just as we commit ourselves to Christ.

A church family helps us develop spiritual strength. Involvement in a local church is not passive attendance, but participation in the full life of the church. We do this through love, prayer, encouraging, teaching, honoring, accepting, forgiving, and bearing with each other. These are family responsibilities we owe to each other. Christian living may seem easier in isolation. However, we will never confront our tendency to deceive ourselves if we do not participate in Christian community. We will never find healing from our disease of sin unless we engage in life together.

The body of Christ needs the unique gifts and passions that we are. God has a unique role for us to play in life and in the church. This ministry is the assignment God has given to us. The local church is the place God has designed for us to discover, develop, and use these gifts.

We will share in the mission Christ has in the world. We can see signs of the work of God in the world outside of the church. We can also see signs of the failure of the church to be what God intended it to be. Yet, the Christian community is the primary place in which we hear about the good news in Christ and seek the transformation of human life into what God intends. Christ works through us in the world. If the world is to see Christ, it will be because the church re-presents Christ to this world, to this culture, in this time and this place.

A church family will help us remain faithful to the mission of Christ. Temptation to lead a life that does not reflect the purpose of God in the world is always present. The local church and its relationships help us to remain faithful through teaching and accountability. We become involved in the lives of others, and they become involved in our lives. We have responsibility for each other. When we are weak, others are strong and can help us. When we are strong, we can help others who are weak. Isolated, unaccountable people are always open to temptation.

Marks of a healthy church fellowship

I would now like to offer some characteristics of healthy fellowship, appreciating the insights of Rick Warren along the way.

First, genuine fellowship encourages authenticity. Sharing from the center of one life to another moves us beneath the surface. This authenticity occurs when people share their hopes, dreams, fears, temptations, and struggles. They share hurts, feelings, failures, doubts, fears, weaknesses, and ask for help and prayer. Too many Christian communities pretend, play a role, reduce themselves

to politics, engage in superficial politeness, and stay with shallow conversation. People wear masks to cover up their true self. Openness and trust are essential for authentic fellowship. This form of authentic fellowship requires courage and humility. We face our fear of exposure, rejection, and being hurt again. We need to take such risks if we are to grow spiritually and to gain emotional maturity. We grow in relationships with God and with each other as we take steps of faith.

Second, genuine fellowship encourages mutuality. Mutuality is the art of giving and receiving. It encourages interdependence. It encourages reciprocal relationships, sharing responsibilities, and helping each other. We gain consistency in our Christian life when other people share that life with us and encourage us. We gain accountability, encouragement, serving, and honoring with each other. We are not responsible for all persons in the local church, but we are accountable to them.

Third, genuine fellowship encourages sympathy or empathy. Sympathy is entering in and sharing the pain of others. It meets the need to have another human being have regard for us, acknowledge our presence, and consider us worthy of their attention. It meets the need to have our feelings validated. Such recognition of each other builds fellowship. The problem is that we are often in such a hurry, engaged in our activities, and preoccupied with our hurts, that we do not pause and focus our attention upon another human being. We might engage in fellowship in differing ways, all valid and important. We may share life together, we may study together, we may serve together, and we may suffer together. In the latter case, Christians suffer for their faith in ways alien to most

Christians in America. Such persecution, ridicule, and martyrdom, are thankfully not generally part of the American church experience, but remains part of global Christianity. American Christians need to develop a special caring for Christians in such situations. In our times of crisis, grief, and doubt, we need each other the most. When circumstances overwhelm us, the strength of others can pull us through. We need a small group of friends to have faith in God for us. When God seems distant to us, other people can come close carry Christ to us in unexpected ways. This is what Job meant when he suggests that he friends should simply listen to him in his suffering, rather than pass judgment (Job 6:14, 13:5, 21:2).

Fourth, genuine fellowship encourages mercy. Fellowship is a place of grace. Those in fellowship do not rub in mistakes, but rub them out. Fellowship happens when mercy wins over justice. All of us need mercy, for we all stumble and fall. We require help to get on the right track. We grow when we offer mercy to another. We grow when we receive mercy. Forgiveness is essential for fellowship. Bitterness and resentment destroy fellowship. We hurt each other out of our imperfection and sinfulness. When done intentionally or unintentionally, hurting each other requires mercy and grace to maintain fellowship.

The grace and mercy of God shown in Christ is the motivation for our mercy toward each other. When another person hurts us, we have the choice of moving down the path of resentment or resolution. We can forgive people for what they have done to us, whether they ask for it or not. This forgiveness frees us from resentment and bitterness. However, trust is a matter of openness to the

future that one needs to build a relationship. One builds trust over time. If a hurt occurs, we will need to rebuild trust. Forgiveness of someone who has a record of hurting us is important. However, we do not have to continue trusting the person.

Among the challenges the church has in building community is that so many of us come from unhealthy homes. We learned unhealthy skills in relating to others. We need to unlearn those skills, and learn new skills. People need genuine, authentic fellowship, but often do not have the relational skills they need to become part of such a fellowship and contribute to such a fellowship in a positive way. The author of Ephesians stresses the concentration, energy, and effort it takes.

Ephesians 4:1-6 (NRSV)

I therefore, the prisoner in the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, ² with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, ³ making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. ⁴ There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, ⁵ one Lord, one faith, one baptism, ⁶ one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all.

Fifth, genuine community takes truthfulness. We need to learn to lovingly speak the truth (Ephesians 4:15), even when we would rather ignore an issue. I have seen pastors and others speak what they consider truth in an unloving manner. We need to check self first. We may be the one who fails to love the community sufficiently to earn the right to speak in love. I have also seen people pretend or deny that problems exist. Many local and national fellowships have the fear of truth. People often do not have the courage to speak truth. The fear of

conflict will lead to superficial relationships. Living with the frustration of unresolved problems leads to unhealthy communities. It creates a sick environment of secrets where gossip thrives. Truthful relationships in a marriage, a family, a friendship, or a local church, need to face the tensions within the relationship. Facing conflict can lead the way to genuine community. We need to care enough to confront and resolve the underlying barriers to fellowship and friendship. Among the fears we may have is separation. If we face the conflict, we may split or separate the fellowship. Generally, such separation will not happen. If handled with respect to all parties, it need not occur. However, if separation does happen, it may be the best for all. Although God desires reconciliation in human relationships, we live in a human world. Such reconciliation may not always be possible. In that case, we can at least seek separation in as Christian a way as possible.

Sixth, genuine community takes humility. I like the way I Peter puts it.

I Peter 5:5b NRSV

And all of you must clothe yourselves with humility in your dealings with one another, for "God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble."

Humility builds bridges. It soothes relationships. Pride builds walls. Overly estimating one's own importance, smugness, and stubbornness, will destroy genuine fellowship. Pride blocks the grace of God, while humility opens up the doors of the fellowship for grace to flow through. We need this grace to grow, change, heal, and help others. We receive grace by admitting we need it.

When we admit weaknesses, when we are patient with the weaknesses of others, when we are open to correction, when we honor and praise others, we practice humility. Humility is not a quality that puts oneself down. Rather, humility means less focus upon self and more focus upon others.

Seventh, genuine community takes courtesy. Courtesy is respect for our differences, being considerate of the feelings of each other, and being patient with people who irritate us. This virtue suggests caring for another person to understand them better. It means caring enough to share the doubts and fears of others without being judged. We are all difficult at times. However, some people are uniquely qualified to belong to that class of persons known in Christian communities as "difficult to get along with." They often have emotional needs, insecurities, irritating mannerisms, and poor relational skills. Such difficult persons test fellowship. When a Christian community bends its life and purpose to satisfying such persons, it makes for an unhealthy community. A healthy community can tolerate such difficult people, with the hope that its health will open possibility for change in the difficult person.

Eighth, genuine community takes confidentiality. People need a safe place in order to open up and share their deepest hurts, needs, and mistakes. This virtue for healthy community means that gossip is always a sign of lack of health. Gossip causes hurt and division. Church leaders need to confront it. The person who gossips may leave the fellowship, but the unity and health of the church is more important than one individual.

Ninth, genuine community takes frequency. We need to develop the habit of meeting together. We need to spend time together in order to build relationships. We need community for our spiritual health. When we realize that, we will make Christian fellowship a higher priority for our lives.

Conclusion

Becoming part of a healthy church is important to leading a healthy Christian life. A Christian community meets the deepest human need for a reason to live, a community to which to belong, values to live by, a mission to live out, and a power to live on. Our commitment to Christ, our reception of baptism and the Lord's Supper, make us part of a global church that has existed through centuries. We ought to appreciate the privilege of being part of this global family. Yet, commitment to a specific, local body of believers moves us closer toward being the persons God wants us to be.

If the church today were closer to these New Testament images, we have fewer experiences of boredom and dullness. The church would then be more exciting, and sometimes, it is. The church consists of people who belong to God, have a bond with each other as a family, re-present Christ to the world, has the presence of Christ in their midst, and loves the Lord as the love between husband and wife.

Here is the way one young couple put it.

We have been coming to church for a year now and it already feels like home. The atmosphere of love, friendship, and excitement is impossible to find elsewhere. The joy of it far exceeds any evening at a pub, party, or restaurant ... I am shocked to say (although I continue to enjoy all three). Both of us find that Sunday's service and Wednesday's gathering are two high points of the week. At

times, it feels like coming up for air, especially as by Wednesday it is easy to be drowning in the deep waters of working life! If we miss either, we feel somehow “diluted.” Of course, we can keep talking to God together and alone, but I feel that the act of meeting together is the bellows that keep on fanning the flames of our faith.

Talk 15: How Can I Make the Most of the Rest of My Life?

We receive the gift of this human life only once. We might wish, as D. H. Lawrence said, to have one life in which to make mistakes and another life in which we can profit from them. However, this human life is not a dress rehearsal for life. We are on the stage called life immediately.

We have undoubtedly done or said things that we regret. Some may be severe. With the help of God, we can make something of the rest of our lives. Paul lets us know how this can happen.

Romans 12:1-2 (NRSV)

I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. ² Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect.

What should we do?

First, we need to break with the past.

God calls Christians to be different from the world around us. As Paul put it, God does not want us to conform to the pattern of this world. As the Phillips translation puts it, we are not let the world squeeze us into its mold. Since we are such social creatures, the pressure is on to be like the people around us. It takes conviction and courage to be different.

God calls Christians to be a chrysalis rather than a chameleon. A chrysalis turns into a beautiful butterfly. A chameleon has the power to change color. To change color is to match the background. Similarly, chameleon Christians merge with their surroundings, happy to be Christians in the company of other

Christians, but willing to change their standards in a non-Christian environment.

The chameleon Christian experiences an almost unbearable tension in his or her life and, unlike the chrysalis Christian, does not reach his or her potential.

God does not call Christians simply to fit in with their background. The fact that we are in the world, and therefore in a culture, means that this particular culture becomes part of us. Yet, we can prayerfully discern those places where we need to differ from our culture. This does not mean oddness. A relationship with Jesus Christ should bring integration of our personalities toward health, wholeness, and healing. The more like Jesus we become, the more we become the best self God intended us to be.

Following Christ allows us to shed patterns and habits that bring us and others down. Here is an alphabetical list compiled from the various lists of vices in the New Testament.

Abusive language
Adulteries
Anger
Boastful
Carousing
Cowardly
Craftiness
Dissensions
Drunkenness
Enmities
Envy
Evil
Factions
Faithless
False witness
Foolish
Fornication
God haters
Gossips
Greed

Guile
Haughty
Heartless
Idolatry
Impurity
Insecurity
Insolent
Inventors of evil
Jealousy
Liars
Licentiousness
Male prostitutes (malakoi)
Malice
Mischief-maker
Murder
Polluted
Quarrels
Rebellious toward parents
Revels
Revilers
Robbers
Ruthless
Silly talk
Slander
Sodomites arsenokoitai
Sorcery
Strife
Thieves
Vulgar talk
Wickedness

Although the bible does not lift out sexual sin as if it is worse than any other, it does use the image of marriage and family often enough to deserve closer discussion. Many people in modern society return to the traditional wisdom concerning sexuality after discovering the way one can degrade others and oneself through the perversion of sexual desire. At this point, sexual desire is somewhat different from other appetites. Few people want to do other things with food instead of eating it or eating things that are not food. A food perversion is rare. Perversions of sexual desire are numerous, hard to cure, and frightful.

Sexual desire is not like other natural desires. The church recognizes that the path of perversion of the sexual desire is an illusion. Genesis 1 and 2 make it clear that a man shall leave his parents and create a new bond with his wife. Jesus made clear that this ideal remains the pattern for his understanding of family. In the Old Testament, we find the pattern of relationships in the families become a metaphor for the relationship between God and Israel. God is the parent who loves the child, must often discipline the disobedient child, and can even feel pain when the child disobeys. God is the husband or lover who continues to love, even as Israel pursues other lovers. In the New Testament, the metaphor continues, as the church becomes the bride of Christ. Such biblical metaphors and images continue in the history of the church. The ideal relationship between God and the people of God, between husband and wife, is one of mutual love and faithfulness.

The New Testament continues with its assumption that the household consists first of the relationship between husband and wife, parent and child, and master and slave. I would emphasize that the New Testament focuses upon the soft use of power required from the one in authority. Given the hierarchical structure of first century Roman and Greek civilization, the New Testament encourages those in authority to use their power in nurturing ways that model the serving character of Christ and the fruit of the Spirit.

This pattern for the proper expression of human sexuality has good grounding in common sense. Many scientists will say that our genetic structure drives us to reproduce the genes in another. Yet, most of us recognize that more

is at work than genes desiring reproduction. We are not human beings in general, but only as male and female. The single life is a valuable and worthwhile contribution to human community when it involves a full dedication of oneself to God and to some form of ministry. Yet, when we have the capacity to enter into an intimate, faithful, and sexual relationship with a member of the opposite sex, we discover dimensions of our humanity that we would not otherwise discover. Every constitution of the family is worthwhile, whether as single persons, married without children, single with children, and married with children. However, we recognize the importance of children to develop their identity in relationship to both the same sex parent and the opposite sex parent. These early relationships are important for the development of healthy adults.

The matter of human sexuality particularly falls under the injunction of Paul to honor God in the body and to consider our bodies as temples of the Holy Spirit. What we do with our bodies is important to God. Our bodies are the only bodies we will have in this life. Scientifically, we know that this is the only time that this set of genes has ever existed or ever will exist. We have a unique gift to offer, and we can offer that gift only with this body. We will only be in these bodies a brief time. The same is true as we come face to face with others. They are unique gifts who will live a relatively brief time. We need to honor them as temples of the Holy Spirit.

The bible also recognizes that human beings cross these boundaries regularly. The Holiness Code of Leviticus 17-26 is one example. Although not quite as specific, the New Testament also offers its list of sexual activities that

transgress the boundaries of acceptable Christian behavior: Adulteries, Fornication, Impurity, Licentiousness, Male prostitutes (*malakoi*), and Sodomites *arsenokoitai*. When it comes to sexual boundaries in the biblical tradition, the apodictic argument is typical: "You shall not." This form of argument assumes that what it prohibits is self-evident. The statement does not require rational argument in its favor, for the writer considers its truth as obvious. It does not consider the possibility that its opposite might be true. Of course, modern society no longer considers the sexual boundaries I have discussed as self-evident. In that setting, the church will need to consider whether it can arrive at satisfactory reasons for continuing these boundaries, or making reasonable adjustments. The modern church will have to persuade others in ways other than apodictic statements.

The result of not following what the New Testament says is the broken marriages, broken hearts, hurt children, sexual disease, and messed up lives. Christian marriage can be a channel of blessing to others. It is never too late. Through the love of God, Jesus can bring forgiveness, heal scars, and restore wholeness to lives that have been torn apart.

We need not to allow the world to squeeze us into its mold. We need to show our world something better. When light shines, people will be attracted to its glow.

Second, we need to make a new start. Paul says we need to be transformed. We need to make the changes that will move us from the chrysalis and into a beautiful butterfly.

God does not ask us to leave behind anything that is good. However, God does ask us to get rid of the rubbish. Until we leave the rubbish behind, we cannot enjoy the wonderful things God has for us. It would be like a homeless person inheriting a fortune, and then refusing to take advantage of the inheritance. Christians have inherited the riches of Christ. We need to leave behind the things that do not reflect Christ. Evil is what we leave behind.

Romans 8:29 (NRSV)

²⁹ For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn within a large family.

This statement by Paul is a key to understanding the apostolic vision of human life. The reference to foreknowledge and predestination refer to the purpose of God to form humanity into the image of Jesus Christ. If we want to know the form of life God wants for humanity, we need to look to Jesus Christ. If we want to know what God is like, we look to Jesus Christ. This apostolic vision continues to form the mission of the church and the purpose God has for each person.

God wants us to become like Christ.

We might remind ourselves of Genesis 1, where God forms humanity in the image and likeness of God. God acts with will, intentionality, and intelligence. In this sense, human beings reflect the image of God. When human beings act, they do so by willing, intending, and rationality. Since we have responsibility for what we do with our lives, our actions are not the result only or even primarily out of biological instinct. We pause, reflecting upon the choices of thought and

behavior that lay before us. In that moment, we are aware at a tacit level of our freedom to choose from various courses of action. We think through the choices so that we have in our minds good reasons for the choice. Among the most significant choices we make relates to our character. We relate to others, making choices concerning how we will relate to them. We make choices concerning life plans relating to what we will do and accomplish with our lives. The responsibility we have for our lives is clear at this point.

In the apostolic vision of human life, sin distorts the purpose God has for humanity. This distortion is not total. Humanity has an orientation toward God and reflects what God wants. We find this reflection of God in humanity in the human struggle toward the good life, truth, peace, and justice. Yet, sin has so distorted the struggle that we often deceive ourselves as to what is good, true, peaceful, and just. For this reason, God sent Jesus on a mission to restore the purpose of God for humanity that God determined in creation.

One way to think of the apostolic vision for Christian life is to suggest that as members of the family of God, we develop certain family resemblances. God wants us to be like the Son. The point of our lives is far more like the development of character than it is accomplishing a specific task. We continue to value the unique and gifted place we have in the plan God has for humanity. God values our individuality, worth, and dignity. God has no interest in destroying it. Yet, we become our best self through turning our gaze toward Christ.

Several key places in the New Testament are good texts for prayerful and focused reflection. Such texts reveal the treasures available to us when we

realize that what matters in our lives is to become like Christ. I want to share a few of them.

One text is the beatitudes as recorded by Matthew.

Matthew 5:3-12 (NRSV)

³ "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

⁴ "Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

⁵ "Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

⁶ "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.

⁷ "Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.

⁸ "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.

⁹ "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.

¹⁰ "Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

¹¹ "Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. ¹² Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

A second text is from Paul, as he describes the fruit of the Spirit.

Galatians 5:22-23 (NRSV)

²² By contrast, the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, ²³ gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against such things.

A third text is the great hymn to love Paul constructed.

1 Corinthians 13 (NRSV)

If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. ² And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. ³ If I give away all my possessions, and if I hand over my body so that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing.

⁴ Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant ⁵ or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; ⁶ it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. ⁷ It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

⁸ Love never ends. But as for prophecies, they will come to an end; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will come to an end. ⁹ For we know only in part, and we prophesy only in part; ¹⁰ but when the complete comes, the partial will come to an end. ¹¹ When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child; when I became an adult, I put an end to childish ways. ¹² For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known. ¹³ And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love.

A fourth text is from Peter.

2 Peter 1:5-8 (NRSV)

⁵ For this very reason, you must make every effort to support your faith with goodness, and goodness with knowledge, ⁶ and knowledge with self-control, and self-control with endurance, and endurance with godliness, ⁷ and godliness with mutual affection, and mutual affection with love. ⁸ For if these things are yours and are increasing among you, they keep you from being ineffective and unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ.

One final text is from Paul.

Romans 12:9-21 (NRSV)

⁹ Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; ¹⁰ love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor. ¹¹ Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord. ¹² Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer. ¹³ Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers.

¹⁴ Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. ¹⁵ Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. ¹⁶ Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly; do not claim to be wiser than you are. ¹⁷ Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. ¹⁸ If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all.

¹⁹ Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath of God; for it is written, "Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord." ²⁰ No, "if your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink; for by doing this you will heap burning coals on their heads."

²¹ Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

Genuineness of love suggests without masks. We need to dedicate ourselves to be in reality the persons we want to be in the future. We need to keep our enthusiasm for serving the Lord. We need to seek harmonious relationship wherever we can.

How do we do it?

First, we need to present our bodies. God wants us to offer all we are to serve God. We offer our time, the most valuable of our possessions. This means allowing God to order our time so that we fulfill the priorities God has for us. We offer our ambition to God, so that we seek the kingdom of God first. This does not mean that all our former ambition is gone, but that we present them to God. We offer possessions to God. Selfishly accumulating wealth, with no regard for the suffering of others around us, is something forbidden to us. Generous giving, as well as respect for private property, is part of the Christian life. We offer what we see, hear, speak, and touch, to God. We can become slaves to sin, or we can experience the freedom that offering our bodies to God suggests.

Second, we need to become living sacrifices. Doing all this may involve some sacrifice. William Barclay suggested that Jesus came, not make life easy, but to make people great. We learn to go the way God wants instead of what we want.

In many parts of the world, becoming a Christian involves physical persecution. More Christians have died for their faith in this century than in any other. Many experience prison and torture. Modern society allows great freedom for all religions, for which we can all be thankful. Christians living in modern

society will have different types of sacrifices to make. In some cases, it can still cause division from family and friends. It can cause tensions in certain work places.

Why should we do it?

First, so that we can discover what God has planned for our future. We need to discern the will of God, which is good, pleasing, and perfect. Too many people think that God wants to spoil their lives. In reality, God has given us this life to enjoy. If our child told us that he or she would do anything we want, as loving parents we would not put the child in a closet for the day. God loves us far more than any parent. The will of God is good for us. We tend to think that we can go through life on our own will and judgment. Yet, all of us needed help to get to where we are today. We can open our lives to the influence that God wants to exert upon us.

Second, so that we can offer proper thanksgiving for what God has done for us. God has made the greatest sacrifice possible, arising from the love God has for us. C. T. Studd said, "If Jesus Christ be God, and he died for me, nothing is too hard for me to do for him." Here is the way Hebrews puts it.

Hebrews 12:1-2 (NRSV)

Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, ² looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God.

As we look at Jesus, who endured the cross, we see how much God loves us. Truly, it would be absurd to deny the God who loves us this much our trust. Paul put it well.

Romans 8:32 (NRSV)

³² He who did not withhold his own Son, but gave him up for all of us, will he not with him also give us everything else?

Our motivation for living the Christian life is the love of the Father. The model of our lives is the Son. The means by which we can live this life is the power of the Holy Spirit.

Most of us want to live with fullness, happiness, and meaningfulness. Such decisions are far from easy. We learn from the diversity that we see as we engage other human beings, beginning with family, and continuing with our community, schools, places of work, and religious communities. We recognize that others will not come to the same conclusions to which we have come. We end up struggling with questions of identity and purpose. Who are we? Do we matter? Once we work through such questions, we have worked through our basic plan of life. These are questions regarding moral life. How shall we live? Many people live aimlessly, without direction or purpose. Many people discover that without some sense of direction and connection to a worthy end, their lives will have little meaning. Many people discover that they need to discern what matters most. Without discerning this, we easily become distracted and get off course.

One way to work through matters of our basic plan of life is to consider the direction of our lives. We need to know that what we do with our lives glorifies

God, brings us closer to an appreciation of the people of God, helps to grow toward Christ-like character, develops the heart of a servant, and helps us represent Christ to others.

What gives our life its center? We might also refer to the foundation or ground, or even to the end toward which we live our lives. However, settling the question of what gives our lives a center of gravity is one that brings clarity to our lives. If we know that we want our lives to honor God, we have added a certain course of action, and have subtracted many others.

What character will I develop? We take ourselves with us wherever we go. We change jobs. Our families change. We change. Yet, we must live with the person we have been, are, and will become. For the Christian, the decision is settled. We want our lives to reflect Christ.

What influence will I have upon the people and groups of which I am a part? We determine our influence as we reflect upon our spiritual gifts, our passion, our natural abilities, our personalities, and our experiences. This question concerns the service or ministry we want to bring to others.

What will I say to the world with my life? The point of our lives is to share in the mission God has in the world. God is moving the world to a gracious end that God has defined in Jesus Christ. We need to discover our place in that mission.

In what community will I invest my life? Human community shapes who we are, whether our family of origin, our neighborhoods and schools, and places of work. The family we choose, either as single persons, spouse, or children, are

important communities as well. They are places we need to live out our faith. Yet, when we choose to be part of a community of faith, we are with people who share our desire for growth in faith, hope, and love.

All of this suggests a sense of accountability. We are accountable to the best person we can become. We are accountable to the people who become part of our lives, and to the way we become part of their lives. We are accountable to the way we have worked with God to become part of what God is doing in the world.

How great God is. What a privilege to walk in a relationship with a God who loves us this much, and to serve this God all our lives. It is the best, most rewarding, fulfilling, meaningful, satisfying way to live. In this Christian life, we find the answers to the great questions of life.