

Faith Networks

A Newsletter for Cooperation in the Churches of God

December, 2005

God Moments

We pray for God's involvement in our lives, but do we expect it? Jesus said he would never leave nor forsake us, but often we pray with the low expectations of a skeptic.

We are not alone in this. Once Peter was imprisoned (Acts 12), and in correct response, the brethren in Jerusalem gathered in prayer. By the grace of God, Peter escaped prison—but when he appeared at the doorstep of the prayer group, they refused to believe that their prayer had been answered!

On the one hand it should be an encouragement to us that the early church, as infused with the Spirit of God as they were, could have the same doubts that we encounter daily. And it is also an encouragement that God can and does answer a prayer that is prayed in little faith. On the other hand, it often seems God is in some remote corner of his universe on some more important endeavor than my poor problems.

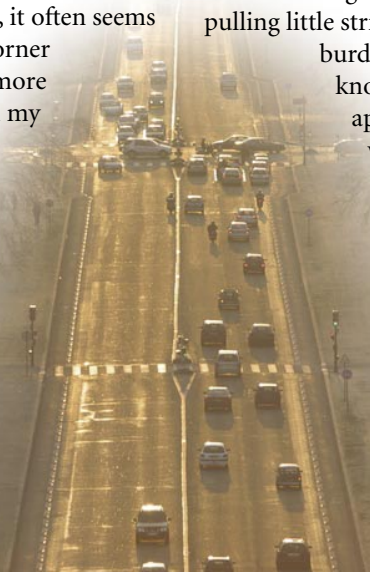
Some time ago, when I was going through one of my periodic trying times, an acquaintance suggested keeping a journal of "God moments." At the end of each day, I was to open

my journal and write down the incidents where God's day intersected with mine. Often I pray for God's protection on my family and me. At the end of the day I might recall that if I had not been delayed at the office, I might have been engulfed in the middle of a jackknifed eighteen-wheeler instead of in the traffic back-up behind it. One time a friend happened to pop into the office on a particularly dreadful day, and he was able to lend some perspective that made the day easier.

After two weeks of logging God moment after God moment, it finally penetrated my bullet-proof head that God is right there every day pulling little strings and easing major burdens without my even knowing about it, let alone appreciating it. A burden was lifted and gratitude resulted. If you have any doubts that God has forsaken you, keep a journal of your God moments. And then say a prayer of thanks.



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A Baptism to Remember

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I have been wanting to be baptized for several years now, and something always seemed to delay it. I think I know why now. First, God was saying I wasn't fully ready—he had to do more work with me. This year I have been through many life-changing experiences. The biggest was my husband Jay coming to know God the way I do with the Holy Days and wanting to attend church!

Then there was finally being able to keep the Holy Days as a family without conflict in the immediate household. Oh, how wonderful it was to hold Passover with my family and having them for the first time really comprehending the significance of unleavened bread. Thanks to my sister Lisa it was quite a memorable experience. My oldest child finally understood through the Bible we really are to keep Passover and the Days of Unleavened Bread. This year was a year of answered prayers for me.

This year's fall Holy Days were wonderful but a little tense—mainly Atonement. I tend to think it may be Satan trying to knock us off our path by throwing rocks in it. But God guides us over them. When Lisa had asked us to go to the Feast of Tabernacles this year and Jay wanted to go I was so happy. As thoughts of the Feast came to mind so did baptism.

I felt God was preparing me through Trumpets and Atonement. This was the first year I fasted without having too many problems. I knew the Feast would be a good opportunity to get baptized. Then I emailed Ron Dart and we discussed some of my life and walk

that lead up to me asking for baptism. I explained my physical problems [Jen has Cystic Fibrosis and uses a walker] and my struggles in this life and what I feel God has done for me.

So he said he would do it for me. The day came, and I was nervous and excited. As we talked about going under the waters of baptism, he asked if we wanted to go to the ocean. My daughter Jade didn't think I should, but I tried. The ocean was rough, and the sand was shifting badly. They got me out there and tried to get me under. I can't even recall how many times. I started to hyperventilate. So we decided the pool was a better idea. I was kind of keyed up by then. I am not afraid of the water, but I am afraid of drowning! I had thought I could just do it. I had been feeling confident.

But when they got me in the pool I was still unsure. I was still willing, but the emotion of it all overtook me. I was still breathing heavy. But I was calming down and was able to put my trust in Ron Dart and Brent Kern to get me down and back up safely. I will never forget the patience and kindness of these men and all the witnesses around me. I will always remember the closeness I felt to Mr. Dart at that moment as I hugged him. It reminded me of hugging my grandfather. I think it's because of the way he carries himself and the way he interacts with people, it just had a familiar feeling of the way Grandpa was. Grandpa was a loving, God-fearing man and played a big role in our faith. I cried as I came up out of those waters and

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hugged Mr. Dart.

At that moment it really struck me that this symbolic act of going under the waters of baptism, and dying to one's self, should never be forced on someone. It also made me understand that when people sprinkle infants and they grow up believing they don't need to be immersed, parents are robbing their children of something so significantly important to their walk with God.

When we went back to do the laying on of hands my heart was filled with joy and love. As I was prayed over and welcomed into the family of God, and God was asked to help me with my patience as a mother and wife, I started to cry again and so did my sister. My experience has taught me that baptism should happen when one is older and can comprehend the meaning of the change in one's life that takes place before and during baptism. It is an experience that is intensely special and intimate, and should only be entered into after one gives careful consideration to what it means to them and God. This means no parent should make their kids feel like they have to get baptized just because they ask them, or just because it makes parents feel good that their kids are been baptized. It's not about making others feel good or feel that their kids are safe because they had it done. It's about one's relationship with God.

I wrote this because I wanted to share what my baptism experience has meant to me in hope it might help others if they are struggling with a decision about baptism.

Feeding the Inner Man

“What our civilization continues to forget is that we have souls, and when souls are not fed, they distort and warp themselves. And souls today go largely unfed. Every day they must soak up the desolation of the contemporary landscape” —Edward Oakes



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Lay aside for the moment all the theological arguments about the human soul and consider what this man had to say. He uses the word “soul” in the sense of what the Apostle Paul might call, “The inner man.” Edward Oakes was writing in the Journal *First Things* about the decline in art. If you want an illustration of what he means by the “desolation of the contemporary landscape,” just consider the state of popular music. Music, or what passes for music, is in decline on every front. Rap music is not music at all. Country music has lost its heart and is turning out stuff that all sounds the same. The romantic ballad has been replaced by utter vulgarity. It is almost as though the artists have set out to ridicule art, to bring us to the place where we will applaud what the artist knows to be nothing but trash.

The article itself was not that important, but it made me think about something we often neglect—The care and feeding of the inner man. I sometimes hear from people who talk about “being fed” spiritually, and they are quite specific about it. They speak of going to church to be fed, yet often coming away empty, dissatisfied. As one who is supposed to be doing some of the feeding, I take this very seriously, and it brings to mind a private talk between Jesus and Peter.

In the few days between Jesus’

resurrection and ascension, He appeared to his disciples on the shore of the Sea of Galilee. They were fishing, and Jesus had prepared a meal for them along the shore. After they had eaten, Jesus took Peter for a walk along the shore. “Simon, son of Jonah,” Jesus asked, “do you love me more than these?” Peter was a little surprised by the question, and he responded, “Yes, Lord, you know that I love you.” As they continued to walk, Jesus said, “Feed my lambs.” *Three times* on this walk, Jesus challenged Peter on his love and urged him to “Feed my sheep” (John 21:15-22).

I can’t help wondering what Peter thought Jesus meant by this. Jesus was using a well-known metaphor, so Peter must have understood the pastoral theme of spiritually feeding the people of God. Later, Paul would develop the concept more directly in a letter to Timothy. “Till I come,” he said, “give attendance to reading, to exhortation, to teaching. Neglect not the gift that is in thee, which was given thee by prophecy, with the laying on of the hands of the presbytery. Meditate upon these things; give thyself wholly to them; that thy profiting may appear to all. Take heed unto thyself, and unto the teaching; continue in them: for in doing this thou shalt both save thyself, and them that hear thee.” (1 Tim 4:12-16)

There is no mistaking what Paul is

telling Timothy. Prepare diligently and present effectively. He was to teach, to exhort, and in the process save not only those who heard him, but himself as well. This is what feeding the sheep means.

But for a long time, people have been finding church inadequate or even irrelevant. It doesn't mean they don't believe, only that they see no reason to go to church. Forty percent of Americans belong to no church, but the vast majority of that group consider themselves religious or spiritual on the personal level. The reasons why these people are unchurched vary widely, but the most common reason is that they do not feel fulfilled by church. When people no longer want to listen to a sermon, there is no point in blaming the people. What they are telling me is that they are forsaking their church because they "aren't being fed."

And there is another side to this. When Paul was on his way back to Jerusalem, he called a meeting of the elders of the Ephesian church. He had done all he could for them, and he had one last warning and commission for them. The warning was this: "For I know this, that after my departing shall grievous wolves enter in among you, not sparing the flock. Also of your own selves shall men arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away disciples after them."

The only preventative Paul could offer them was the same one he urged upon Timothy: "Take heed therefore unto yourselves, and to all the flock, over the which the Holy Ghost hath made you overseers, *to feed the church of God*, which he hath purchased with his own blood" (Acts 20:28).

Paul's chief concern was the feeding of the inner man, a concern also shared by Peter, who had it burned into

his consciousness by Jesus. He wrote: "The elders which are among you I exhort, who am also an elder, and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, and also a partaker of the glory that shall be revealed: *Feed the flock of God* which is among you, taking the oversight thereof, not by constraint, but willingly; not for filthy lucre, but of a ready mind; Neither as being lords over God's heritage, but being ensamples to the flock" (1 Peter 5: 1-3).

So we have established that the leadership of the church has a responsibility to feed the flock, to nourish the inner man. But that is not all there is to it, not by a long shot. Paul wrote to the Ephesians telling them that he prayed, "That he would grant you, according to the riches of his glory, *to be strengthened with might by his Spirit in the inner man*; That Christ may dwell in your hearts by faith; that ye, being rooted and grounded in love, may be able to comprehend with all saints what is the breadth, and length, and depth, and height; And to know the love of Christ, which passeth knowledge, that ye might be filled with all the fulness of God" (Ephesians 3:13).

Is this something that just happens automatically? Or does it happen from living a life with the Bible open in front of us? Paul wrote elsewhere of the continual struggle he had to promote the Gospel, saying, "Though our outward man perish, yet *the inward man* is renewed day by day" (2 Corinthians 4: 16).

So for those of us to teach the Gospel, it is your "inward man" that concerns us, and I would think it concerns you as well. What do you feed your inward man? Or do you give it any thought?

Sheep & Shepherds

Some metaphors from the Bible are distant to our culture. They don't bring all the strength of visualization to us they brought to people two and three millennia removed. So when Ezekiel scolds latter day shepherds for not going after the lost sheep it's hard to grasp the associated sense of leading a flock of sheep through unfenced pastures to find fertile grazing grounds and springs of pure water.

We haven't lived through range wars when farmers, who had no benefit of barbed wire fences, resented cattle and sheep wandering through their food crop. Nor do we fully appreciate the bravery of a teenage boy taking a lamb out of the mouth of a bear or a mountain lion. There was no gun. It was bare-handed, one-on-one combat with a wild beast. How do you adequately visualize that if you've never spent the night in the woods with only a flock of sheep for company—nothing but you standing between the lamb and extinction? It is up to you to defend it against frightening aggressors. Sometimes you are the only one there to chase a silly lamb back to the flock when it begins to wander off into the wilderness. It's up to you to count them, feed them, or protect them. Maybe that's what God saw in David's character that caused Him to choose David as King of Israel. When the sheep were in danger, selfish ambition was not in his thought process.

But like all metaphors, this one eventually breaks down because humans aren't really sheep. Humans are required to develop character, which means humans must choose right over wrong. Like Adam and Eve's dilemma with the trees of good and evil, humans must struggle to choose what is right.

That's why shepherds are required to guide rather than beat the sheep. In his book *They Smell Like Sheep*, Dr. Lynn Anderson

describes an experience on a tour bus in Palestine. The guide eloquently described how the shepherd developed a relationship with his sheep. The good shepherd did not drive the sheep but led them, never abusing them. In the middle of this description the group was distracted by a scene outside the bus window of a man chasing a herd of sheep, throwing rocks at them, beating them with a stick and urging his dog to attack them.

The guide stopped the bus, got off, and accosted the man for treating the sheep in such a cavalier way in the middle of the description of the good shepherd. The sheep-chaser stopped and blurted out, "Man you've got me all wrong. I'm not a shepherd. I'm a butcher!"

What's the difference between a leader who is a shepherd, and one who is a butcher? Dr. Anderson lists four differences:

- The shepherd is not a hired hand. He doesn't run from the enemy. Jesus gave the example in John 10 of the hired hand that runs when he sees the wolf coming. He abandons the sheep. The hireling takes the job to gain power or for the visibility, but when it requires standing against uncomfortable criticism, he runs away. Or, as Dr. Anderson describes, hirelings do the "organizationally expedient thing in order to personally dodge the wolves and save their own reputational skin, and in so



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doing, leave the flock vulnerable”

- The shepherd leader isn't a cowboy. He doesn't drive the herd with whips and spurs.
- The shepherd leader isn't a sheriff depending on his badge to force the herd. He depends on his relationship. The sheep aren't expected to go someplace he has not been. Jesus “leads us in the paths of righteousness.”

- Shepherds aren't disconnected CEO's that rule from isolated offices in ivory towers. Churches are about relationships and shepherds spend time with the flock.

Distorted leadership models have done much harm to the church over the centuries. The true model of a nurturing shepherd that God intended was reflected in the life of Jesus Christ.

Just a Cup of Cold Water

The news is overwhelming, depressing, and relentless! Over and over, personal tragedy, heartache, and misery are broadcast daily on my television screen. Whatever the cause—evil men, weather, or mistakes in judgment, the inevitable human anguish is never-ending. I sit transfixed, staring blankly at the TV set, flipping the news channels, attempting to absorb the immensity of my fellowman's suffering. God-fearing or lawless, rich or poor, life plays no favorites with upheaval and loss.

Listen to their cry, “Please can you give us water to quench our thirst.” Oh, who can help? Where are the relief workers? Where is the Red Cross?” Their needs cry out for attention; I shudder at their plight.

And others beg, “Please, Mister, do not rush by. My mother's dying and has no place to lay her head.” He cannot stop, he has his orders, there are others on ahead. A sigh for their pain, if only a kind passing word was said.

It's a common plea, “Just a cup of cold water for my child, please.” Turn off that TV. Switch the radio down.



I can't bear another word! This sad, sad news is making me depressed. Then my conscience speaks, “Where is the mercy God in His grace shows me?”

Jesus said, “Whoever in the name of a disciple gives one of these little ones even a cup of cold water to drink, truly, I say to you he shall not lose his reward.” (Mt. 10: 42 NAS) Is this human suffering by fate or by chance, or is it a great God sending a warning to those He loves? It frankly matters not.

Our example is that of Jesus, who was moved with compassion when the masses followed him for hope and healing. He pitied them as wanderers without direction, as sheep without a shepherd (Mt. 9:36), a hurting people who do not know where to find a drink.

Shaken out of my comfort zone to find a sense of perspective to the suffering of life; will this be my turning point? So I pause to ask— Can I give a cup of water in compassion from my heart?



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The Leiter Side of Motion Pictures

This ongoing series of columns by Ramona Leiter (pronounced “Lighter”) explores the spiritual implications of movies old and new

Nothing is more important to me than my relationship with Jesus Christ. I look at everything through the lens of my faith. Each experience, each bit of knowledge, everything I read, listen to, or watch provides a chance to deepen my understanding of God and of the world around me. I listen to sermons, participate in Bible Studies, and read inspirational articles and books (such as *Mere Christianity* and *My Utmost for His Highest*). But I have found that it is hard or impossible to share these things with my unchurched friends and family.

There is something, though, that anyone (young and old, college educated or high school dropout, male or female, atheist, agnostic) can identify with—and that is movies. Everyone has their favorite film or film genre. It may be hard to start a conversation with a friend about God or the Bible, but they could open right up if you talk about Luke Skywalker, or Neo of the *Matrix* trilogy.

And it is surprising what spiritual applications can be drawn from the cinema. Yet the movies you talk about don't have to be as obviously “religious” as *The Passion* or *Ben Hur*. Much has been written about the spiritual themes and applications of the *Star Wars*, *Matrix* and *Lord of the Rings* films. The recent spate of superhero films such as *Spiderman* and the *Incredibles* also invite Christian comparisons. But it doesn't stop there. All kinds of films can be used for further examination of one's own life,

for discussion starters with friends and family, and for evangelism in general.

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In this column we will explore how you can use movies in this way, from crime dramas and adventures to westerns and musicals, from classic movies of the 30's and 40's to the latest releases at the multiplex.

These days it isn't necessary to limit conversation to just those latest releases in the theater. Every small town has one or more video rental stores with a wide collection of movies old and new. Many libraries let you check out videotapes and DVDs for free. Bargain bins next to the checkout lanes at Wal-Mart offer classic movies for \$1.99. And if you get an inexpensive monthly subscription to *Netflix* on the Worldwide Web (www.netflix.com), you'll have a bottomless selection of classic and contemporary movies, TV comedy and drama series collections, specialty items like History Channel documentaries, and much, much more.

Consider starting a neighborhood weekly or monthly discussion group for adults or teens or families, where you all agree to watch a certain film and then talk about it over a meal or snacks. In this kind of environment you don't need to be heavy-handed with pushing your own theology ... you can just bring up spiritual applications of points in the film as a natural part of the conversation.

In the next issue of *Faith Networks*, we'll take a look at an unusual film phenomenon in an era of increasingly violent and sexually explicit movies:
Chick Flicks for He-Men .

A Hummingbird's Tale

Most summer mornings, and again at dusk, we are treated to a visit from a ruby-throated hummingbird. It visits the hanging petunias on the front of the house, after which it moves around to the side of the house where there are other flowers it likes. Sometimes it is the male, with the iridescent red throat, and sometimes it is the female, who is all green.

One night in early July, after we had worked outside all evening, my wife informed me that the hummingbird was in our garage! It seems that, after his visit to the petunia hanging outside the garage, the bird made a wrong turn and entered through the open garage door. It was now dark, and the bird seemed attracted to the lights in the back of the garage. He had already exhausted himself from flying around up high in the garage, which offered no escape, as our garage ceiling is very much higher than the height of the doors.

By the time I found him among all the things stored on a high shelf below the lights, he was semi-conscious, and offered no resistance to being handled. When I got him outside, he revived a bit and flew out of my hand *and back into the garage, toward the lights!* Another search was followed by another capture with no resistance. This time, we closed the garage doors as soon as we got him outside. I laid him in a petunia, hoping he would recover, and we went to bed. He did recover, and we continued to enjoy his visits as he pollinated our beautiful flowers.

Can you see yourself in the hummingbird? I can. How many times have I busily beat my wings, trying to

do it all, just to find that I am *stuck in the garage?* How many times has my loving Father gathered me up from exhaustion, led me to rest and freedom to do *His will*, just to watch me catch my breath and *fly back into the garage?*

Have you ever returned from the Feast of Tabernacles with renewed zeal and energy- determined to do things differently ... just to find that, within a few weeks, your old routine has retaken control of your life? Have you ever received clarity of purpose and action from God as a result of prayer, study, and fasting ... just to be immediately overwhelmed by everyday concerns to the point that the purpose and actions are never realized?

I have had both of those experiences—more than once. I have finally realized that God has trained me to do a work for Him—leading people to His Son (John 6:29)—*but I have been too busy flying around in the garage to go out and do some pollinating where the flowers are.*

Does this ring true with you? If so, join me in applying Matt. 6:33 with renewed focus. “Set your mind on God’s kingdom and his justice before everything else, and all the rest will come to you as well.” (REB) God promises to see to our needs if we will see to His.

God has so much for us to do. He lovingly saves us from our fruitless and sometimes destructive ways. Let’s use that freedom to work in His fields—*to pollinate where the flowers are. They’re waiting.*



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Bait and Switch

Have you ever seen an appealing ad in the newspaper for a bargain on an item you'd been really wanting? The price was right, and it was **just** the model you'd admired at a friend's house. You rushed down to the store to make sure they didn't "sell out." You asked the salesman at the store about the item in the ad, and he took you right to it. But just as you were about to snap up the item you came for, the salesman began pointing out all kinds of reasons you might be dissatisfied with your purchase. Perhaps he pointed out that its features were limited, its appearance less than desirable, its cost not in line with its quality. And before you knew what was happening, he steered you down the aisle to a bigger, better, brighter model ... at only a "modest" increase in price. And by the time you headed home, you may have found yourself the owner of an expensive item you never intended to buy when you responded to that appealing ad for a bargain.

Does that scenario sound familiar? It should ... it happens all the time in the world of salesmanship. The tactic even has a name: "bait and switch." The store lured you in with the "bait" of a low-priced item, then "switched" you to a higher-priced substitute.

We can rightfully resent this kind of manipulation by others of our weaknesses. But sometimes the Lord can use these very same weaknesses to work things together for our good!

Have you ever considered what **first** appealed to you about the "things of God"? Are they the same things that appeal to you the most now? Sometimes it is almost embarrassing to think about what you first lavished your attention on in the field of religion. For many of us, it was not the awesome truth of

the sacrifice of our Savior and His offer of eternal life. And it probably wasn't the life of sacrifice we are called to in His service. More likely, it was something much more mundane and comparatively "unspiritual."

In my own case, I was an 18-year-old agnostic when I was first challenged openly by God to begin to find out about Him. I knew nothing about the Bible, so a direct appeal to read it to find out about Jesus would have fallen on deaf ears. However, as a freshman university student taking the required basic Natural Science courses, I was fascinated by the claims of evolution. So when I was confronted by material claiming to "disprove" evolution, it was just the "bait" that could "hook" me. I began looking into this "radical" material, and once I became suspicious that life didn't just "happen" on earth, I was hungry to find out what other explanation made sense. That led me to begin investigating the claims of the Bible to be the revelation of a higher power. And what began as just intellectual curiosity about duck-billed platypuses turned soon into a quest to understand the meaning of life as revealed in the scriptures. I discovered there the Creator and His ways that could lead to happiness in **this** life, and the provision He made through his only begotten Son that I might have **eternal** life.

When I took the bait of satisfying my intellectual curiosity, the Lord switched me to the much more valuable "purchase" ... the knowledge that my Savior had purchased me with His own blood! This is just the opposite of the way in which the world's salesmen operate. They lure you to gain an



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advantage over you. The Lord draws you to Himself to bless you beyond your greatest expectations.

What can we learn from this “bait and switch” analogy?

1. *Some folks feel almost guilty that they didn't start right out desiring the deep things of God.*

They may even question their conversion, if they spent quite a while in focusing on what they now consider peripheral, even “shallow” issues. My husband's first enthusiasm in this area was speculative prophecy. As a high school student, he began receiving articles in the mail that claimed to reveal “news in advance” about catastrophic events soon to come upon the earth. He dabbled in these speculations for years, fancying himself “above” his high school and college buddies because he had the “inside scoop” on prophecies of the Bible. Yet during all that time, he never seemed to make the connection between the prophecies of the Bible ... and his **own** life. It was “head knowledge,” not heart knowledge. It was not that the literature he received didn't make that connection, for it did. But he just tuned out the “personal” application!

Yet several years later, when we married, he shared with me all of the Bible study materials he had been storing up. That is where I began my quest. And my zeal and interest then prompted him to begin considering the deeper things of God.

No one becomes mature over night. God's timing is perfect. It is not important what topic started you down the path of Christian growth. And it is not profitable to compare your growth pattern with others. What **is** important is that you continually grow.

2. *In our zeal to want to “spread the Gospel,” we sometimes forget the “little things” that first drew us to the Bible and to God.*

I see a tendency among many groups and individuals to feel the only “holy” way to reach out to the unbeliever or the Biblically ignorant is with large doses of “doctrine.” Thus, many such individuals and groups focus almost totally on such topics as the Sabbath, or the pagan origins of some holidays, in their evangelism efforts. There is certainly nothing wrong with addressing these topics. But are we forgetting that God often reaches out to people “where they are”? Maybe what would be more effective bait for some people would be the promise of solutions to some of their personal problems in life ... addictions, abuse, fear. For others, effective bait might be an appeal to their concerns about social or political problems ... poverty, war, violence.

Some of our reluctance to use these kinds of topics in evangelism may be a response to past experiences in religious organizations with which we are now disillusioned. Since some of these organizations **did** use the kind of topics I am suggesting in their evangelism, we may reject those methods just because we don't want to be like them. If we are not careful, we may reject effective, Godly methods just because we reject others who used those methods. If we feel that we sorely missed some of the deeper things of God in our past affiliations, we may feel we must force-feed these “deeper things” to everyone right away!

I think the balance in this is evidenced by the Apostle Paul's approach:

“I have become all things to all men, so that by all possible means I might save some.” (I Cor. 9:22 NIV)

As we consider how we might share the Gospel with the world, as we take up our place among the “fishers of men,” let's be sensitive to the leading of the Spirit. Let's ask the Lord to reveal what bait He would have us use, to begin to draw **each individual** to Him.

The Simple Faith About Obedience Toward God



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“Trust and obey, for there’s no other way,” goes a beautiful hymn. Who do we trust and obey? God, of course. What do we obey? The Ten Commandments always come to mind. Is that all there is to it?

When Jesus was asked, “Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?” he replied:

‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’ This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments. (Matthew 22:37-40)

The trouble with most of us, though, is we simply don’t know what genuine love is. Love, in this society, does not last. Marriages fail. Friendship is based on convenience, then discarded or neglected. As long as good is happening in our lives, we think good thoughts about God. But when the unthinkable happens; when the tragedy hits my family, my community, I may cry out, “Why did God do this?” “How could a God who loves me allow this to happen?” Our love for God waxes and wanes with our circumstances.

The earliest church allowed this to happen. The church in Ephesus held to the right teachings and held teachers and apostles to a high standard, and rejected those who didn’t measure up. They endured hardships and persecutions and remained steadfast. But they discarded and neglected their first love—the greatest commandment. (Revelation 2:1-7)

These words to the church tell us

that just gritting our teeth and obeying the “Thou shalt not’s” is not enough. God is after our hearts.

He wants us to love his character and his way of being and doing. He wants us to love him enough to want to become like him. This love is a love that does not fail when times get tough.

Paul wrote to the Corinthian church about “the most excellent way.” Inspired by the Holy Spirit, he describes genuine love. This is the kind of love God expresses. This is the kind of love he wants us to express. I don’t steal, but do I envy? I don’t lie, but am I rude? I donate. I rest on the Sabbath and travel to meet with others on the Holy Days. But am I keeping a list of wrongs of someone else? Can I look with kindness and mercy on the “publicans and sinners” of my time? (I Corinthians 13)

“If you love me, you will obey what I command.” Jesus taught. (John 14:15)

Jesus taught us to obey God’s law. He also taught us to go beyond mere obedience into a mindset of love. This love wants the best for everyone, including our enemies. This love returns blessings for insults; offers prayers for those who would do us harm; does good to those who would do us evil. This love will say, “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.” (Luke 23:34)

My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends....This is my

command: Love each other. (John 15: 12,13, 17)

Obedience to the Ten Commandments is merely the beginning. It is only the basics of being in relationship to God and others, but without love—love toward God and love toward neighbor—our obedience to

law alone makes us critical and cynical of those who have failed to live up to the letter of the law. We stand with the Pharisee thanking God that “we are not as other men are” while God is busy saving and forgiving those who have responded to his love, with love. (Luke 7: 36-48)

Winter Family Tournament 2005

Lexington

Come join us at the Winter Family Tournament in Lexington, Kentucky beginning Friday evening December 23rd and running through Monday, December 26th.

You will have the opportunity to hear such outstanding speakers as Ron Dart, Guy Swenson, David Antion, Bill Jacobs, Pam Dewey and Jeff Henderson as well as Dr. Tom Roberts and Gilford Monrose from the Church of God 7th Day.

To make reservations at the Four Star Griffin Gate Marriott Resort in Lexington call 1-800-391-6690. Be sure to mention the Church of God to get the specially discounted rate of only \$48 per night.

Check it out at www.cogcincinnati.com/tournament to register and get more information.

See you in Lexington!

New Evangelistic Tool Available

Not a few Church of God members attend community Bible fellowship groups, which are growing in popularity across our nation. These are generally nondenominational studies, often held in homes. Many people in attendance at these meetings may have a number of doctrinal differences with people from a Church of God background, but I've yet to find one person whose faith has been shaken from attending a community Bible fellowship. People in these meetings generally respect the beliefs of others.

The quick label some might hang on these Bible fellowship groups is "Protestant." Protestant or not, our own Sabbatarian Church of God people are finding time to attend these study groups regularly. So why are they doing it? Could one reason be that we are not providing God's people with a structured, systematic way of studying the Bible? Are God's people missing something they are not getting in Sabbath service each week? Are they yearning to learn more about the Bible than we have provided?

CEM recognized this trend and took steps to fill this need with Bible Study books that will be an ongoing series for biblical education. Individuals can use these books at home for private Bible study. Many may want them to use as an evangelistic tool where they invite their friends and neighbors to become a part of their home fellowship group. Women may want to host a study any day of the week with lunch or refreshments. Evening studies can work well with men and women together—maybe with refreshments.

Churches can also use these new books on the Sabbath to systematically study God's Word. These Bible Study books are the next step beyond the YEA Sabbath School lessons that CEM offers.

Ideally, churches would schedule an hour Bible study before the worship service and have YEA classes for children and young people *at the same time*. Parents would be freed from the distractions of their children to study God's Word with undivided attention.

The beauty of this ongoing Bible Study series is that every student is to have his own book to prepare for class by reading the lesson and answering the questions. Almost anyone can facilitate the interactive class discussion by following the necessary, easy-to-use Leader's Guide.

This new evangelistic tool embarks on an exploration of one of the most important sections in the Bible the very beginnings of the Christian faith and walk, titled, *The Breakout*. This series from the Book of Acts makes the connection to Abraham's call and commission. Abraham was not merely called to be blessed, but to be a blessing. Abraham and his seed were to change the world. The first thing God had to do was break the church free from tradition and to impress upon them the importance of doing what Abraham was originally commissioned to do—be a blessing to the whole world.

Jesus' commission makes it clear in the Greek: "Go therefore and make disciples of all the Gentiles, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age."

For more information on *The Breakout*, see the facing page.



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and perfect will of God.”

This transformation or change is a glorious one. “But we all with unveiled face, beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, just as by the Spirit of the Lord.” II Corinthians 3:18. We are becoming like Christ.

I have been constantly amazed and grateful over the years for the way God has provided elements necessary for me to bring about this transformation into a Christian. Time and time again God has begun to convict me about an issue in my life. The he has placed just the right message, led me to scriptures, or placed books in my hands helping that growth along.

One of the areas He has offered me a new coat of paint is the area of thanksgiving in prayer. It has been a challenge for me to pray thanking God for what he has already done in my life and what I know he will continue to do

in my life and the lives of others. I am trying to become a grateful ‘praiser’ not just a petitioner in my prayers. Realizing the awesome power and mercy of our Father in heaven. And thanking God for the small victories he affords to me throughout each day. Jesus provided a wonderful example of this in John 11:41-42 as he stood in front of Lazarus’ tomb.

Mary Engelbreit is quoted as saying “If you don’t like something change it; if you can’t change it, change the way you think about it.” The Bible says it this way. “...be renewed in the spirit of your mind, and that you put on a new man which was created according to God, in righteousness and true holiness.” Ephesians 3:23-24

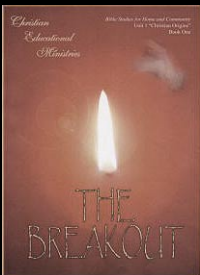
I cannot change the past. I cannot control the future. But I can control with God’s help how I live and view each day. Change in this area of my life has brought the peace that passes understanding and I am grateful to God for allowing me not only just one more coat of paint but the beginnings of entire remodeling.

Christian Educational Ministries

New Evangelistic Tool

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Just One More Coat of Paint

Change has always been interesting to me. Just recently we completed an addition onto our home. It is very satisfying to sit in my reading chair and contemplate the pleasantness of our new family room. But as I sat there this morning a thought came to me. We will probably apply at least one more different color of paint to this room before we die. This wasn't a particularly morbid thought – just a reality that very few things remain static, fresh or the same over time. And neither should we.

Even though I often enjoy something new it isn't always pleasant when God dictates a change in my life. Sometimes I am motivated to change by thoughts or conviction. Many times I have needed to have

my circumstances altered. “Now no chastening seems to be joyful for the present, but painful, nevertheless afterward it yields the peaceable fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it.” Hebrews 12:11 NKJV

No matter how God chooses to communicate his desire for our growth it is necessary that we do change over time. Paul states it this way in Romans 12:2. “And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind that you may prove what is that good and acceptable



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