

VOICE

AN INDEPENDENT CHURCH JOURNAL • JULY|AUGUST 2015



Let the peace of God rule in your hearts.

—Colossians 3:15



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Editor.....Dr. Les Lofquist
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Cover painting by Jim Connelly Jim is an alumnus of
Moody Bible Institute and a graduate of Cornerstone
and Syracuse Universities. You can see more of his
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Irreconcilable Pursuit of Christ & Coolness



Les Lofquist
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

My frequent travels take me to some unusual places, but one that always catches my attention is in central Indiana. There, alongside Interstate 65, is a billboard proclaiming the “Birthplace of Cool.”

James Dean was born in Fairmount, Indiana, in 1931. But it wasn’t until 1955, when his movie “Rebel Without a Cause” was released, that cool was truly born. When that film hit the theaters, youth culture exploded into middle-class white America and so did the concept of cool.

James Dean was edgy, rebellious, a misunderstood loner. He played by no one’s rules but his own. And following this most cool cultural icon came many others for my generation, especially in music. Elvis pushed trans-generational, wholesome pop singers like Perry Como and Pat Boone off the scene much to the delight of his fans. Then rockers joined Elvis and everything exploded as my generation came of age: sex, drugs and rock and roll ruled the 1960s.

The American “Youth Culture” which was born in the 1950s and exploded in the 1960s is a phenomenon that just will not cease. It won’t stop because my generation, like Peter Pan, refuses to grow up.

I shake my head as I see photos of 72-year-old Mick Jagger prancing on stage singing about his continued lack of satisfaction fifty years after the Rolling Stones hit our radio stations. Knowing that Jane Fonda, at age 77, continues to slither about with “youthful sexuality” makes me reflect on the Proverbs 31 women I know whose godly lives are in stark contrast and are so refreshingly pure and sweet. Harley riding grandparents dress themselves with whatever cool they can, despite how silly they may appear in their bad boy apparel. Advertisers on television attempt to lure the AARP crowd into self-deception: “you can reverse the effects of aging.” Many aging Baby Boomers remain trapped in their days of youth.

All of these indicators, and many more, tell me that my generation is unwilling to assume maturity as a desirable destination. The effects on local church ministry and leadership can be most harmful when this mindset controls those who are in the prime years for leadership responsibility but continue to cling to immaturity.

To this day coolness feeds the American longing for perpetual adolescence. It’s all around us, saturating our culture. We can’t escape it. It’s an attitude, a habit, a feeling, a worldview. And it’s sad.

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DEFINING COOLNESS

In their book *Cool Rules: Anatomy of an Attitude*, Dick Pountain and David Robins supply a definition of cool: “an attitude of permanent, private rebellion.”¹ The teenage years are the crucible of cool, when teens adjust their mannerisms, words and appearance, acquire possessions and arrange their lives in an attempt to be accepted. The stakes are high: winners get happiness and losers get misery. It leads to that attitude where kids distance themselves from authority and rather than directly confront it, they simultaneously attempt to be acceptable to their peers and scandalous (in varying degrees) to their parents.

Cool appears in many forms, such as teenage sarcasm and mockeries which provoke the adult world's fears of irrelevance. Then there's the for-profit advertising world selling certain kinds of images to exploit our insecurities. Coolness involves trendiness and seeks freedom from labels, norms, and imposed constraints. It shuffles around with an ironic detachment and nonchalance based on narcissism, an exaggerated admiration of yourself. It gives rise to the feeling that the world revolves around you and most definitely should share your moods, your likes and your dislikes. Coolness is intrinsically judgmental and exclusive; it can ultimately define itself only by excluding what is Uncool. It is a deeply held virtue among people my age.

And if Cool is a profound virtue, then the worst sin you can commit against it is to be judgmental, that is, to make disparaging value judgments about someone else's attitudes and lifestyle choices. The next worst sin is to do precisely what I am doing here, namely attempting to define and analyze Cool. (Guess I'd better say "oops.")

CHRISTIANS AND COOLNESS

My generation of Christians has pursued the idol of trendiness and undiscerningly dragged it into the church. I've seen it and heard it in many ways and in many different places over the last number of decades.

Permit me a little testimony here. I was not raised in any church and I never went to a church youth group. I came to faith in Christ after High School and my early Christian experiences were as a student in a Bible Institute just three months after my salvation. There I noted that the Christians I met were an anxious lot. Most of them grew up with two social circles (church youth group and public school friends) and seemed to be overly worried about their status as cultural outsiders. They wanted to be "in," yet that "in crowd" was the very group I left when I trusted Christ. They loved to quote Paul's words about "becoming all things to all men" (1 Corinthians 9:20-22) while I embraced the shame of following Christ after I explained my new life to family and friends back home. I took great comfort

in studying the Bible where persecution, hardship and opposition were the norm for the Old Testament prophets and the New Testament disciples.

To me it seemed way too many of my college classmates wanted to be hip and relevant. But I knew as Christians we were "out" as far as the world was concerned. I knew that because that's exactly what I thought right up until I repented of my sins and trusted Christ as my Savior only months earlier. And that's what I heard as I announced my salvation to everyone I could in my hometown. I consciously decided to leave the world of coolness when I came to Christ, and then I saw all sorts of Christian kids terribly afraid they were somehow going to be left out of that world! It was a more than a little puzzling, even disheartening, to me. Forty years later, I look at many of the churches that have been led by my generation and I wonder sometimes if we'll ever grow up.

Sadly, my generation's lust for coolness is nothing but idolatry. And John warned us to keep ourselves from idols (1 John 5:21). Now the chances of Americans today bowing to Baal or burning incense to Diana of the Ephesians are not great. But to place

anything above the Lord God Almighty is to give it preeminence, which is idolatry. To become too attached to a philosophy or thing is to place it above God and elevate it to an idol. Something that has taken the place of God is an idol. That may be money, a relationship, some possession, our job, or our popularity. And a lust for acceptance and popularity is what coolness is all about and that's why I wrote above: my generation's lust for coolness is idolatry.

AND IT CONTINUES

Now twentysomething Brett McCracken sees the same things in his own generation as they struggle to adapt themselves to their understanding of how Christians should function in this world. It seems the hippies of the 1960s have become the hipsters of today.

McCracken has written about his concerns in his book *Hipster Christianity: When Church and Cool Collide*. Here is one of his salvoes: "as with all things cool, no one in Christianity is really talking about this in any sort of direct way. The talk is usually about 'contextualization' or 'postmodernity' or 'meeting the culture where it's at.' But it all really boils down to one simple desire: the desire to make

LES LOFQUIST'S ITINERARY

July

- 19 Rivers Edge Fellowship, Pecatonica, IL
- 21-24 Biblical Ministries Worldwide Board Meeting, Lawrenceville, GA
- 26 Church of the Open Door, Grand Rapids, MI

August

- 2 Bethany Bible Church, Belleville, MI
- 5-7 Pioneer Bible Camp, Eden, UT
- 23 Colonial Baptist Church, Cary, NC

September

- 13 Portage (IN) Bible Church
- 14 Indiana Regional, Portage, IN
- 20 Fish Lake Bible Church, Sturgis, MI
- 25-26 Calvary Bible College Board Meetings, Kansas City, MO
- 27 Shawnee (KS) Bible Church

Christianity cool. And this desire is bigger and stranger and more difficult than we'd like to admit. It comes with implications, baggage, and inherent problems that need to be discussed. The question of cool is loaded, and it's time we stopped dancing around it."²

After his book was written, McCracken adapted his thoughts into an article in *The Wall Street Journal* entitled "The Perils of 'Wannabe Cool' Christianity."³ His assessment of this mindset is that it is "the impulse to rehabilitate Christianity to make it cool." Reminding me of the attitude of permanent, private rebellion inherent in my own generation, McCracken observes: "one of the most popular - and arguably most unseemly - methods of making Christianity hip is to make it shocking. What better way to appeal to younger generations than to push the envelope and go where no fundamentalist has gone before?" He concludes with this profound statement. "As a twentysomething, I can say with confidence that when it comes to church, we don't want cool as much as we want real."

The sins of the fathers have been passed along to the sons.

THE BIBLE & COOLNESS

How should we live as Christians in a culture that is driven by style and worships the cult of youth, popularity, and appearances? A culture where the greatest fear seems to be becoming old-fashioned, out of date, passé?

Solomon's words in Ecclesiastes echo through the generations. There is no new thing (Ecclesiastes 1:9-10); we only forget what has come before (Ecclesiastes 1:11). We are born rebels (Ephesians 2:1-3), yet each new generation that rebels believes its insurrection is novel. Seeking to set ourselves apart from the majority, to impress the world with our unique style and way of living, is part of our fallen human nature.

Here's something else to consider. There's a very good reason why churches and Christianity, and indeed Christians, tend not to be noted by the world for their trendiness. The problem with trying to make Christianity fashionable is Christ Himself. He said in John 15:18-19 "If the world hates you, know that it has hated me before it hated you. If you were

of the world, the world would love you as its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you." Jesus is warning us about a harsh reality: as long as we follow the Jesus of the Bible, the world will hate us no matter how cool we try to be...because we represent Him and He represents righteousness, accountability and judgment. Watch how any Christian, no matter how attractive or winsome or popular, is treated by the media when speaking out in the name of Christ. It gets ugly in a hurry.

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to be different as new
creations in Christ.*

Christ Himself very specifically and deliberately welcomed the least cool of His world. He consciously reached out to the most socially unappealing, to those with the least outward attractiveness and social status. Jesus was for misfits and outsiders, for those mocked, rejected or overlooked by others. He had total compassion on all those who were excluded or looked down on by society for being "uncool" or weird or odd; those who didn't fit. He didn't exclude them and He doesn't tolerate our exclusion of them today. The church exists for such as these: for the least, the unlovely, the social outcasts and outsiders all of whom God has called according to 1 Corinthians 1:26-29.

I'm certainly not saying that Jesus loves you more if you're some kind of nerd or weirdo. Nor am I advocating an unfashionable appearance. I don't think we need to deliberately try to make ourselves or our church embarrassing or uncool, any more than we need to deliberately go out looking for suffering. What I am saying is that we'd better make sure our churches aren't too

cool and too sophisticated to include the weirdos, oddballs and socially awkward. And we had better make sure our churches follow God's pattern for churches regardless of whether the world approves or not.

As Paul said in 2 Corinthians 4:13, "We have become, and are still, like the scum of the world, the refuse of all things." You can't make Christianity cool without rebuilding it in your own image. Let's not labor to make the world love us, instead let's love them and shrug off any hatred they throw our way. Our faith sets us apart and we should dare to be different as new creations in Christ.

Jesus told us we that we will face hardship and persecution for His name's sake (Matthew 10:22-26, 34-39; Luke 21:16-17). Paul told Timothy that if you live a godly life, you will suffer persecution (2 Timothy 3:12). Peter said that we should expect to encounter fiery trials (1 Peter 4:12) and rejoice when we do (vv. 13-14), then entrust ourselves to our faithful God (v.19). James also addresses trials, writing that we should consider it joy when those hardships come (James 1:2-3). In Hebrews 13:13 we are instructed to go to Christ, outside the camp, bearing His reproach which is the exact opposite of seeking popularity! The Bible issues a clear and decisive call for mature and selfless sacrifice from those who know Christ as Savior, rejecting the love of the world.

Being a devoted follower of Jesus Christ has never been and will never be considered socially popular. But we don't follow Christ to fit in with the "in crowd" or to find acceptance. We follow Christ because He died for our sins and as His redeemed people, He has commanded that we follow Him in obedience. We are to be in the world but not of the world (1 John 2:15). In the world there's a wisdom that is foolishness to God; we are to seek the wisdom of God, which the world considers foolish (1 Corinthians 1:18-25; 3:18-21).

We need to acknowledge that the pursuit of Christ and coolness is irreconcilable. Detached individualism, alienation from authority and outward rebellion are sins that have no place in the Christian's life because these are things opposed to Christ's sovereign rule in our lives. They tend to cause self-centeredness

and elitism (“I am superior to you because I am the arbiter of all things acceptably cool, things that are known only to me and my friends and obviously not to you”). Condescension is not Christian... humility is, along with a godly sense of community, respect, family and love.

CONCLUSION

The culture of the world is always changing. *The cat’s pajamas. He’s a dreamboat. That’s just swell. Groovy. Far out. He’s the bomb. Phat. It’s so dope.* The phrases of popular culture have a limited shelf life and the wrong words can mark you as a fossil from some forgotten decade. Doesn’t that prove the point that we should resist being driven by ever changing fads and trends? One day you too will be an old-timer, hopelessly out of fashion, so why pretend otherwise? Why not obey the Bible’s commands to walk with wisdom and seek maturity, to be like Christ and not like whoever is the cultural icon of your day.

McCracken believes this mindset and lifestyle of “Wannabe-Cool Christianity” has become “far too accommodating and accepting of sin, something that should actually shock and disturb us. If it’s uncool to draw lines about what behavior is permissible and prudent for the Christian, then Christians should start getting used to the idea of being uncool.”⁴ Amen to that.

Another series of warnings come from David Wells. In his book *The Courage to Be Protestant*, he writes: “The born-again, marketing church has calculated that unless it makes deep, serious cultural adaptations, it will go out of business, especially with the younger generations. What it has not considered carefully enough is that it may well be putting itself out of business with God.”⁵ That’s a serious consideration!

And Wells asks these sobering questions. “What is the binding authority on the church? What determines how it thinks, what it wants, and how is it going to go about its business? Will it be Scripture alone, Scripture understood as God’s binding address, or will it be culture? Will it be what is current, edgy, and with-it? Or will it be God’s Word, which is always contemporary because its truth endures for all eternity?”⁶ He asks if it is *Sola Scriptura* or *Sola cultura*?

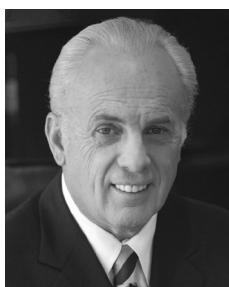
Wells is right when he asserts that a careful biblical theology must undergird the local church’s ministry if it will be rightly related to Christ. But many churches are neglecting the Bible and traditional doctrine. It’s not that these churches “want to deny it or reject it, but it is something of an embarrassment to them. At least in their own churches, they want to conceal it. They want it hidden, kept in the background, made to disappear from what they are doing. It is rather like a family secret. Family secrets are true, but they should be kept private. They should not be divulged.”⁷ Then Wells observes: “Everywhere in the marketing approach [type of churches] theology and Bible knowledge are downplayed, and then we are dumbfounded when commitment evaporates and ignorance reigns! The gelding is castrated, as C.S. Lewis observed in another context, and yet we expect it to be fruitful.”⁸

Let’s not be embarrassed of Christ and His Word, hiding His teachings lest we be exposed as His followers, trying to make Christ’s commandments acceptable to the skeptical world through a veil of coolness. Let’s resolve never to lose God’s blessing, to be “put out of business with God” as Wells wrote, in the irreconcilable pursuit of both Christ and coolness.

END NOTES

1. Dick Pountain and David Robins, *Cool Rules: Anatomy of an Attitude* (London: Reaktion Books, 2000), p. 19.
2. Brett McCracken, *Hipster Christianity: When Church and Cool Collide* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book, 2010), p. 20.
3. Brett McCracken “The Perils of ‘Wannabe Cool’ Christianity” in *The Wall Street Journal*. Updated version posted online August 13, 2010 at www.wsj.com
4. McCracken, *Hipster Christianity: When Church and Cool Collide*, p. 200.
5. David Wells, *The Courage to Be Protestant* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Erdmans Publishing, 2008), pp. 49-50.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 4.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 40.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 45.

The Legacy of Long-Term Ministry



John MacArthur

John MacArthur has been the pastor-teacher of Grace Community Church in Sun Valley, California since 1969. He is also President of The Master's College and Seminary as well as prolific author and featured teacher with the Grace to You media ministry. He is a member of IFCA International.

A recent poll suggests that the average pastor stays at his church for only three to four years.¹ But that hardly seems long enough to be truly effective.

In times past, pastoral tenure was typically measured in decades—when the longevity of men like John Calvin (who ministered in Geneva for 25 years until he died), Charles Simeon (who served in Cambridge for over 50 years), John Stott (who pastored in London for over 50 years), Jonathan Edwards (who preached in Northampton for over 20 years) and D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones (who served in London for nearly 30 years) was the rule, and not the exception. Even in recent times, W. A. Criswell pastored in downtown Dallas for nearly 50 years and Adrian Rogers in Memphis for 32 years. There are others in large churches to be sure who have demonstrated long time endurance serving a single congregation, but they are rarer these days. Long-term pastorates in smaller churches are an even more rare exception to the rule.

I remember before I started my ministry at Grace Community Church, my dad said to me, “I want you to remember a couple of things before you go into the ministry. First, the great preachers, the lasting preachers who left their mark on history, taught their people the Word of God. Second, they stayed in one place for a long time.” These were two sound pieces of wisdom. When I first came to Grace Church, most people thought that I would only stay a year or two, because I had been an itinerant communicator to youth groups. But in my heart, I knew I wanted to do the two things my dad advised: one was to teach the Bible expositively, especially to go through the whole New Testament, knowing, secondly, that such a goal would require staying in one place over the long haul. I knew that was the only way I could continue to nourish my own soul, effect generations with God’s truth, and manifest integrity of life through long visibility.

As I look back on over four decades of ministry in the same church, I want to encourage

you to embrace a long-term perspective in your church. While remaining in the same place may not always be God’s plan, here are ten practical suggestions that may enable you to sustain an enduring ministry.

There are others in large churches to be sure who have demonstrated long time endurance serving a single congregation, but they are rarer these days.

1. Don’t arrive unless you plan to stay.

Pastors of past generations, like Calvin and Edwards, considered a call to a church similar to a marriage. In a sense, they were betrothed to their congregations; and faithfulness and loyalty to that union sustained them even through hard times. Pastors today need to learn from their examples. You need to see churches as more than stepping-stones to something bigger. No matter what size the congregation or challenges it presents, you must believe that God has called you to that flock. Even the greatest trouble and disappointment is God’s means of humbling you and breaking your self-confidence. We are all truly powerful and useful only when we are weak. Accept the benefits of trials. If you’re committed to stay when you arrive, and affirm that commitment regularly, you will prepare your heart to endure.

2. Learn to be patient.

Humble patience with people may be the most important virtue you’ll ever exercise. After all, your goal as a pastor should be to bring the convictions of your congregation into line with the full message of God’s Word, and their lives to spiritual maturity. And this is a process of sanctification that takes time (decades not just

months or years). It only comes from trusting the Spirit's power in using His Word as it is faithfully proclaimed week after week, year after year.

3. Don't be afraid to change.

Not only will your people change as you instruct them spiritually, but you will also be changed. As you begin to unfold the Scripture, the Truth will alter the way you teach and the way you conduct ministry. You cannot know everything that the Bible is going to say until you have dug deeply into it. You may think you have everything wired, but inevitably you will come to passages that change the way you think and the way your church must respond. You and your people must be flexible, allowing the Word of God to shape you and your church, as you submit to Scripture.

4. Study to know God, not just to make sermons.

The key to avoiding debilitating weariness in ministry is personal spiritual renewal. If your heart first and then your preaching is passionately alive to spiritual things, then you can expect your congregation to be passionately alive to spiritual things. Such passion, of course, must come first and foremost through your concentrated study of the Word of God. And here's the key: Don't study to prepare sermons; study to know the truth, to rejoice in the glory and grace of God, and to be conformed to His will. Sermons should never be the primary goal of your Bible study; they should only be the overflow of it. When you study, seek an accurate understanding of who God is and what He expects—first and foremost, this is for your own devotion and holiness. And then, from the abundance, instruct your people, urging them to follow you as you follow the Truth, written and Incarnate.

5. Be thankful and be humble.

As a servant of the Chief Shepherd, you need to be grateful for the flock that Christ has entrusted to you, and regularly tell both them and the Lord of your deep gratitude. Contentment begins with confidence in God's providence. Your church may not be as big or as financially well-off as the church down the road, but you can be content

if you trust that God has sovereignly placed you exactly where He wants you to be. It also helps to always remember that, no matter your circumstances, you are unworthy of what you've been given.

Don't think you deserve a bigger ministry than you have. It is grace that has placed you in such a noble calling. Learn to define success in terms of faithfulness, and not in terms of popularity. The measure of your ministry is not determined by numerical growth, but by adherence to truth in life and message. While many preachers seem to work for earthly glory, godly preachers humbly labor for the glory that is yet to be given to them, in the presence of their Lord.

6. Don't lose sight of the priority.

As a pastor, your duty is to shepherd your flock—this means nourishing them on the Word of God, leading them toward Christ-likeness in tender affection, while protecting them from error. You are a pastor. You are not primarily an event coordinator, a financial analyst, a vision-caster, or even a leader. Your ultimate responsibility is not to innovate or administrate but to disseminate divine truth. Only in that way will you be training up people within your congregation to live and serve effectively and obediently for the honor of God and the impact of the gospel. A church environment dominated by the Word and the Spirit will produce a congregation that will serve alongside you so that you will be able to concentrate on what you are called to do: teaching the Word while humbling yourself before God in dependent prayer.

7. Expect to work hard.

If you're faithful to your calling, you will find it to be a difficult and relentless task. Pastoring is not like an assembly line that stops and lets you walk away. It is a kind of blessed bondage that requires discipline and sacrifice. Still it brings the purest joys and most lasting, even eternal satisfaction.

Enduring pastors are not undisciplined people who show up on Sunday for an improvised pep rally. Nor are they men with a few years' worth of sermons who take them from church to church. Rather, they are disciplined men whose lives are brought into line so that they

can invest their physical and spiritual energies into the flock God has given them. It's a consuming task, but it comes with the promise of long-term impact as your congregation is taught the truth and sees it lived out over decades. They will trust you and you will find them your crown of rejoicing. Moreover, being forced to keep studying and preaching through Scripture will expand your own understanding of divine revelation so as to increase your usefulness and the body of your life work. This will bring the blessing of learning from others because it requires that you be a diligent and constant reader of the best of biblical, theological, and biographical material.

8. Trust the Word to do its work.

People in churches today are starving for theological, expository preaching, but don't even know it. To be sure, they realize the vacancies in their life, the shallow places, the lack of insight, the absence of understanding. They realize that they cannot solve their numerous problems and dilemmas. They're looking for divine answers, and they're being offered human, artificial substitutes that can't help. Long-term exposition will satisfy their hearts and, at the same time, increase their appetite for more. And God has given us the deep treasures and fresh truths of His Word, the riches of which no amount of years can exhaust.

9. Always depend on the Lord.

Obviously, a ministry that rests solely on human strength, cleverness, or survey strategies, even if successful numerically, is doomed to be short-term and superficial. A lasting spiritually transforming ministry must be built by God's power released through His truth. And He always blesses His truth and the labor of a true man of God. When you realize that you can't resolve all the problems in your church, that you can't save the unbelievers who attend your services, that you can't cause spiritual fruit in your people—you will fully rest on God who can, accepting your weakness and inadequacy, and relying solely on the power of the Word through the Spirit.

10. Don't leave just to leave.

When you approach your pastoral ministry as a life commitment and serve

your flock as I have described, you will find it hard to leave. We are, generally, not called away from, but called to a people. Leave your current ministry for another only if you have a true calling to that other place. The fact that a new opportunity pays better, has a larger facility, promises respite from current problems, or provides a platform for greater influence, doesn't necessarily make it a right move and can play to ambition. So make sure that when you leave, your reasons are spiritually compelling. And also, do your best to ensure the flock you leave behind is well taken care of before you go. That is a vital part of your legacy.

CONCLUSION

John Fawcett is a name you may not immediately recognize. In the late eighteenth century, Fawcett pastored a small, poor church in Wainsgate, England, where his salary was only 25 pounds a year.

In 1773, Fawcett was invited to become the pastor of a much larger church in London. Initially, he accepted the new position. But as his belongings were being loaded for the journey, the people from his church came to bid him farewell.

The tearful goodbye was so moving that John's wife, Mary cried out, "John, I cannot bear to leave!" "Nor can I," he responded, "We shall remain here with our people." Their belongings were taken back off of the wagons, and John Fawcett remained in Wainsgate for the entirety of his 54-year ministry.

Years later, as he reflected on his decision to stay, Fawcett penned the words to his most-well-known hymn: Blest Be the Tie that Binds. The familiar words of that song resonate with the loyalty and love that characterized the pastor who wrote them.

"Blest be the tie that binds, our hearts in
Christian love;
The fellowship of kindred minds is like
to that above.
Before our Father's throne,
we pour our ardent prayers;
Our fears, our hopes, our aims are one,
our comforts, and our cares."

Fawcett's story illustrates the legacy of long-term commitment in pastoral

ministry.

This article originally appeared March 10 and 11, 2015 on The Master's Seminary blog Preachers and Preaching online resource. Reprinted by permission.

END NOTE

1. LifeWay Christian Resources national survey as cited by Thom Rainer, "8 Traits of Effective Church Leaders," posted on ThomRainer.com, June 11, 2009.

Six Perils of Ministry



Steve Johnson

Steve Johnson is Senior Pastor of Oakwood Bible Church of Portage, MI. He also serves on the IFCA International Publications / Communications Committee.

Paul's exhortation to the Ephesian elders in Acts 20:28 was for them to "be on guard" in two areas. First, be on guard "for yourselves," and second be on guard "for all the flock." I believe that the order in which Paul listed these was intentional. A pastor's first duty is to keep watch over his own life, because if he fails on the personal level he won't be of use in shepherding the flock of God.

There are several important areas in which pastors must take responsibility with respect to themselves. Space in this article does not allow discussion of all of them, so I have chosen to limit the list to what I call six perils of ministry. If any of them gets their grip on us, our effectiveness in ministry will be diminished and possibly destroyed.

LAZINESS

To a large degree much of our work is not seen by our congregation; whether it is time spent in prayer, study for preaching, visitation, meetings, or church administration. For the most part we work on our own timetable. We determine when we start our day and when we end it. We set our own priorities on the use of our time. That requires a great deal of self-discipline to avoid becoming lazy and neglectful of our duties. It is too easy to goof off when we should be working.

When it comes to the use of our time, we have a two-fold accountability. First, we are accountable to God. When Paul addressed the Elders at Ephesus he reminded them that they had been made "overseers" of the flock by the Holy Spirit. Oswald Sanders emphasizes that they did not hold office by apostolic succession or popular election, but by divine appointment. They were accountable to the Holy Spirit.¹

Second, we are accountable to the people we serve. If we are to earn their respect and trust, they need to know that we are responsible with our time. We must remember that they have to report to work at a set time and meet the expecta-

tations of their employer. It is no different for us. If we expect our people to sacrifice their time for the ministry, be in attendance at services, to work all day and be at meetings at night, then we had better set the example ourselves by putting in an honest week's worth of work. It is true that our people don't always see the work we do or realize the hours we put in. They don't see the time we spend in the hospital emergency room or waiting room, or the nights we spend at the bedside of a dying church member. But still, there is no room for laziness in the ministry.

A pastor's first duty is to keep watch over his own life, because if he fails on the personal level he won't be of use in shepherding the flock of God.

ENVY

We could call envy living in the shadow of someone else's success. This is a killer virus that none of us pastors like to admit has afflicted us.

There is a fable that Satan's emissaries were trying to tempt a holy man who lived in the Libyan desert. Try as they might, the demons could not get the man to sin. The seductions of the flesh and the onslaught of doubts and fears left him unmoved.

Angered by their failure, Satan stepped forward. "Your methods are too crude," he said. "Just watch." He whispered in the holy man's ear, "Your brother has just been made Bishop of Alexandria."

Instantly a malignant scowl clouded the holy man's face. "Envy," Satan said to his cohorts, "is our final weapon for those who seek holiness."²

If you have never been bitten by the bug of envy, then Satan hasn't gotten to you...yet. He will. Since our ministries are public, our greatest temptation may be envy. We risk com-

paring our ministries to others. And if we don't do it, our people will do it for us. They will inform us about the great things going on in other churches in the area. Or after you have poured out your heart preaching a sermon on a text of Scripture, someone after the service will tell you about the powerful sermon they heard Swindoll or MacArthur preach from that same text last week on the radio.

We work hard, only to see other churches growing while ours is struggling. We are faithful to the Word, but we lose people to those vibrant, exciting churches. We usually console ourselves by pointing out that the Bible preaching is weak at those churches, or the doctrine is suspect, and their methodologies are worldly, or at least questionable. Our ministry is about depth, and we aren't into the "numbers game." But none of that hides the fact that their church is growing and ours is not. Deep inside us is the feeling that we are in some way being cheated by God.

In Matthew 20:1-14 Jesus told the parable of the landowner who hired a group of workers in the morning for a wage that they agreed upon. He then hired other workers throughout the day, right up to the eleventh hour. At the end of the day they all received the same wage. It seemed so unfair. The landowner paid those who were hired late in the afternoon the same as those who had worked all day. But it was fair, because those who were hired at the beginning of the day received the wage they had negotiated. Those who were hired later didn't negotiate a wage. They were just happy to be hired and to receive whatever the landowner would decide to pay them. And so, speaking for the landowner, who represents God, Jesus said in Matthew 20:15, "Is it not lawful for me to do what I wish with what is my own? Or is your eye envious because I am generous?"

When we surrendered our lives to God for ministry we agreed to go wherever He sent us and do what He wanted us to do. We chose to be His humble servants, recognizing His sovereignty over our calling. Envy is a rebellion against God's sovereign rights. He can do what He wishes with His own. He can be more generous with others if He chooses,

and we have no right to complain. Envy is also a sin against God's goodness. Whatever we have, be it little or much, big church or little church, it is a gift from God that He has placed into our trust. Jesus said in John 3:27, "A man can receive nothing, unless it has been given him from heaven." Envy is based on the assumption that our gifts and abilities are something we are entitled to have. Remember, envy is what caused the Pharisees to kill Jesus. He got the attention they wanted. Francis Schaeffer said, "There is no such thing as small people and big people, only consecrated people and unconsecrated people."

I must confess there was a time when the virus of envy had infected me. After years of slow and steady growth in our church, we seem to have stopped and I was discouraged. To make it worse a few other churches in town were exploding in growth. It got to where I hated to open the newspaper on Saturday and look at the religion section, because there always seemed to be an article about one of those churches. They got all the attention and free promotion. Then it got even worse, as the fastest growing church in town bought property just to the south of my church and built a huge new building. My church is practically in their shadow. I tried my best not to let all of this bother me. But it is tough when you see other churches have the appearance of God's blessing while you feel like He has passed you by.

I finally reached the point where I realized that I was guilty of the sin of envy, and it was eating away my joy and sense of contentment. I had to confess it and seek release from it. And so, one afternoon I left my office to slip home for lunch. Instead of going straight home I felt compelled to take a detour and pull into the parking lot of the big new church. I parked facing the building and began to pray. I confessed to God my sin of envy and asked to be released from it. I thanked the Lord for my church and what He had given me to do. I told Him that I don't always understand how He works and that I may not agree with all of the doctrine or methodologies of this church. But if what I was looking at was His blessing, then it was not for me to question. He may bless my ministry in other ways

that are not as visible. I just want to be faithful to what He has called me to do. Then I prayed that He would bless the ministry of this church and other growing churches in the area, thanking Him that they might be able to reach people for Christ that I can't. And while we may have our differences, we are working in His kingdom and preaching the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Each pastor and church leader is accountable individually to God for what they do and how they serve Him.

I drove away with a new peace and contentment, reminded of the response of Paul when word came to him in prison that there were some who were preaching the Gospel for selfish reasons and insincere motives. He replied in Philippians 1:18, "...whether in pretense or in truth, Christ is proclaimed; and in this I rejoice."

PRIDE

Proverbs 16:5 says, "The Lord resists a proud heart." No matter the size of our churches or the level of recognition we may receive, public preaching and teaching, coupled with the satisfaction some people receive from our ministry to them can plant the seed of pride. We may easily slip into the snare of enjoying our work for the wrong reasons. Oswald Sanders called it egotism, and said, "The leader who has long enjoyed the admiration of many followers stands in peril of this danger"³

For some, an additional source of pride can come from college and seminary degrees they have earned, or books they have written. Unconsciously such achievements can give a false impression of superiority, or a desire for people's approval and applause, forgetting how ordinary we really are.

Pride can also be at the root of envy and jealousy. One of the reasons we become envious of someone else's success is because we believe we are deserving of it. We believe we are as good as the popular guy. We can preach just as well as he can, maybe better. It has been said that there are three lessons every minister has to learn: 1. Humility. 2. Humility. 3. Humility.

A proper attitude is that which Paul described in Philippians 2:3-4, "Let nothing be done through selfish ambi-

tion or conceit, but in lowliness of mind let each esteem others better than himself. Let each of you look out not only for his own interests, but also for the interests of others.”

DISCOURAGEMENT

Discouragement is a subtle peril. We are deeply involved in the lives of people and their spiritual progress. Our lives are spent trying to grow and advance our churches. But all too often the very people who have given us the greatest joy can also give us the heaviest sorrow. The ones who lift us up can also let us down. It has been rightly stated “God’s people have a unique capacity to sweeten or spoil our days, to thrill us or to cast us into the depths of depression. One moment we may feel that there is no other place to be but where are, and the next we wish we could be anywhere else.”⁴ And then there are the awful feelings of failure that can obscure our thinking. Our personalities are different, of course, and those of us cursed with a melancholy temperament are more prone to feelings of discouragement. The glass is always half empty to us.

Is discouragement a sin? Only if we stay in that condition and let it defeat us.

DISAPPOINTMENT

A few years ago our church had an opportunity to buy the house and property along the west edge of our parking lot. Our church is land-locked and we have no place to expand our present campus without losing parking lot, which is already insufficient. As soon as the property went on the market our Board swung into action. We did all the preliminary work, called a congregational meeting and got the approval to make an offer. The offer was accepted by the seller. We had an inspection done on the house. Financial pledges were received. Everyone seemed excited about the prospect of acquiring the additional land for future expansion. Then it came to the night for the final vote of the congregation to approve the actual purchase and financing. Our constitution requires a 75% majority approval. We missed it by one vote.

After the meeting we ran into several people who were in favor of the purchase but didn’t attend the meeting.

They assumed the approval was a “shoe in.” They never thought that there might be a few no votes, otherwise they would have been there and voted yes. (I think even those who voted no were surprised).

We were disappointed. And we could have called for another meeting to take another vote and it might have passed. But the seller had already been patient enough with us. So we decided that the outcome of the first vote was in the sovereign will of God. If He wanted us to have the property He would give it to us. There was no sense in us making it into a divisive issue.

If you are a pastor, don’t expect that your people will always buy into your vision or share the same passion you have for the church. Remember, we live and breathe church. It is our life. Our people have jobs and other responsibilities that demand their time and attention. We have to be patient with them.

We will also become disappointed when people don’t seem to heed our preaching. We exhort, instruct, rebuke, and plead, with all the passion we can muster. But they don’t seem to change. They seem unaffected. In addressing the subject of defeat and disappointment, Knute Larson stated that he learned to rest in two assurances: “God is sovereign, and people will do what they want to do.”⁵ He found that truth very liberating, and so can we if we realize that it is not our job to change people or to fix everything. We are simply to do what we are called to do and do it to the best of our ability, then rest in the sovereignty of God to get things done.

CRITICISM

“There is nothing else that so kills the efficiency, capability and initiative of a leader as destructive criticism...It tends to hamper and undercut the efficiency of man’s thinking process. It chips away at his self-respect and undermines his confidence in his ability to cope with his responsibilities.”⁶

No pastor or leader lives a day without criticism. And humility and character will never be more tested than when criticism comes. I received a birthday card from a lady in my church, and in the card she included a note criticizing a decision I had made. I didn’t mind the criticism, I just couldn’t figure out why she put in a birthday

card! It felt like she was saying, “Happy Birthday...jerk.”

Most of us find it hard to resist desiring the approval of people. It gives us a feeling of affirmation. I am truly thankful for every compliment and affirmation I get. But I also know it is unrealistic and impossible to please everyone. Paul made it clear in 1 Corinthians 4:3-4 that he didn’t really care if he was judged by any man. He knew it was the Lord who judges him. (See also Galatians 1:10).

If criticisms are just, we should be thankful for them and receive them as part of God’s gracious discipline to help make us better. If they are unjust, we should commit our case to God who judges rightly, thanking Him for the privilege of walking in the footsteps of Jesus, who experienced injustice to a much worse degree than we will ever know. If we are true to the Lord and true to our calling, we can leave the outcome of every situation to Him.

CONCLUSION

We need to remember that a pastor’s first duty is to keep watch over his own life. If he fails there, he won’t be of use in shepherding the flock of God. The above six perils of ministry are important areas in which pastors must take responsibility with respect to themselves. As I wrote at the beginning, if any of these six perils gets a grip on us, our effectiveness in ministry will be diminished and possibly destroyed.

END NOTES

1. Oswald Sanders, *Spiritual Leadership* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1967), p. 79.
2. As told by Erwin Lutzer in *Pastor to Pastor* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1987), p. 61.
3. Sanders, *Spiritual Leadership*, p. 156.
4. Derek Prime and Alistair Begg, *On Being a Pastor* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2004), p. 298.
5. Knute Larson, *Measuring Up* (Sisters, Oregon: Multnomah Books, 1993), p. 116.
6. R. B. Abella, as quoted by Sanders in *Spiritual Leadership*, p. 120.

Common Myths of Leadership



Glenn Daman

Dr. Glenn Daman is Pastor of River Christian Church in Stevenson, WA. He graduated from Western Seminary and earned his D.Min. from Trinity Evangelical Divinity School. He has published three books related to the small church and is Director of the Small Church Leadership Network at www.smallchurchleaders.org. He is a member of IFCA International.

In recent years there has been a proliferation of books and articles written about leadership, each sharing the latest principles that assure the reader that if faithfully applied they will guarantee success. However, there is little difference between secular books on leadership and those you find in Christian bookstores. Since the principals work in the business world, the assumption is that they will work in the church. The problem is that this redefines the church as a business where people are consumers and the product being pitched is the quest for a fulfilled and happy life. Consequently numbers of people adapt the principles without question. Yet many of the accepted principles of leadership, while having some benefit, become a myth when we make them absolutes for all those called to be biblical leaders.

When we look at Christ's comments on leadership as well as Paul's qualifications for leaders, we find a radical difference between the biblical concept of leadership and the secular, business model. In Mark 10:35-53 Christ points to greatness and leadership as being defined not by achievement and power but by service and sacrifice. Furthermore in the parable of the stewards, Christ points to faithfulness rather than results as the basis of our evaluation. In John 7:18 Christ points out that a true leader within the kingdom seeks to bring glory to God rather than attention to himself. So also Paul points to character and the proclamation of truth as the measure of leaders. But this radically differs from the model adopted by the church today. In the process of formulating our view of leadership we have made certain qualities and characteristics to be prescriptive and in so doing created a number of false myths regarding leadership within the church.

1. EFFECTIVE LEADERS ACHIEVE GREAT ACCOMPLISHMENTS

We are enamored with achievements. We evaluate people by what they accomplish rather

than the character they possess. Our culture celebrates athletes who bring wins to their team even though the person continues to manifest a lack of character. The same attitude permeates the church. Speakers at conferences are chosen because of their accomplishments and popularity even when their theology is suspect. We reward and celebrate the pastor who has the fastest growing church rather than the one who has remained faithful in his service. But there are several problems with this view of leadership. First, Scripture continually points out that real, eternal accomplishments are the work of God

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rather than the work of man. In the end we can accomplish nothing in our own strength. John the Baptist understood this when his disciples were becoming concerned that John was losing his popularity with the people. In response he reminded them, "A man can receive nothing unless it has been given him from heaven" (John 3:27). If we accomplish anything it is not due to our abilities but God's sovereignty. Second, the true measure of an effective leader is not accomplishment but faithfulness. Far more important than what we achieve is how we went about our work. Were we faithful to our calling? Were we faithful in obedience? There are many pastors throughout the history of the church who have never accomplished great things, they were never recognized for great achievements, but they faithfully proclaimed the Scriptures and lived before Christ and in the process influenced the people that they came in contact with.

Third, a great leader is not someone who accomplishes great things, but one who faithfully fulfills the task God has given him, no matter how small or insignificant. In Luke 16:10 Christ reminds us, "He who is faithful in a very little thing is faithful also in much; and he who is unrighteous in a very little thing is unrighteous also in much."

2. EFFECTIVE LEADERS ARE SUCCESSFUL

We are a society enamored with success. No one sets out to be a failure, to work diligently and in the end have nothing to show for it. We measure success by the accomplishment of goals, the attainment of visible results and the numerical growth of the church. When these are not attained then we consider our efforts to be a failure. Yet the reality is that many in the Scriptures were failures by these standards. Elijah failed in bringing about a national revival on Mt. Carmel. Jeremiah failed to stop the slide towards spiritual idolatry. Moses failed to take the people into the Promised Land. Even Christ was seen by the world as a failure for he was not able to bring about the re-establishment of the kingdom of Israel. At the end of His life we find that He was a king without a kingdom. The only reason we regard these individuals as successful is that Scripture pulls the curtain back and reveals a different story. The prophets were not called by God to orchestrate revival but to affirm the justice of God in judging Israel. The "failure" of Christ was in reality the foundation for an even greater triumph, the salvation of lost humanity and the establishment of a spiritual and eternal kingdom. While the world celebrates success, biblical leadership often is not about success but failure. We need to recognize that what we view as success may in reality be a failure and what we regard to be a failure may in reality be a success. In God's economy of leadership, the strong are weak and the wise are foolish. There is no formula for success, for success is determined by God. Instead we need to have the same mindset as John the Baptist when he states that Christ must increase and he must decrease. It is in our failure that God often becomes the most evident.

3. EFFECTIVE LEADERS RISE ABOVE OBSCURITY

If we are honest, you and I have to admit that we would love to be the one whose name and photo is on the latest brochure of some conference, where people know our name. Even if we do not openly admit it, we have our "superstars" in the Christian community, people whose names and faces are recognized and people who are regarded as the game-changers of church history. However, the problem with any book on church history is that it does not tell the whole story. It draws attention to those who became recognized, but fails to give recognition to the obscure. Yet the reality remains that the church is not built upon the pillars of the great, but upon the shoulders of the unknown, those who never were recognized beyond the realm of their small parish. These were the people that took the gospel to unreached tribes and towns. If you are never recognized by your fellow pastors and churches, if your ministry has been in the forgotten corners where no one seems to notice, take heart... for your ministry is the very foundation upon which Christ builds the church. When Christ was with the disciples, observing the people give their gifts to the temple, He did not draw attention to the person that the rest of the crowds gave recognition to, rather He drew the disciples' attention to the obscure widow who gave the smallest gift. She, not the recognized religious leader, was the one God praised. It does not matter whether we are recognized by our peers, it only matters that we are recognized by Christ. The real measure of a leader is not one who brings glory to himself but one who brings glory to God (John 7:18).

4. EFFECTIVE LEADERS DEMONSTRATE EXCEPTIONAL ABILITIES.

In the secular world, leadership is based upon charisma and abilities. These very qualities become the standard by which pastors are measured. An effective leader is one who can rally people to his vision and possesses communication skills that can capture people's attention. But oddly enough these are the very things that Paul saw as a hindrance to his ministry. Instead of seeking to be the skilled orator who draws people to himself with his per-

sonal charisma, Paul sought to divest himself of these very qualities. We read in 1 Corinthians 2:1-4, "And when I came to you, brethren, I did not come with superiority of speech or of wisdom, proclaiming to you the testimony of God. For I determined to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and Him crucified. I was with you in weakness and in fear and in much trembling, and my message and my preaching were not in persuasive words of wisdom." Instead of great oratory skills and personal magnetism being a strength in ministry, Paul saw it as an impediment for it drew people to him rather than to Christ. "So that your faith would not rest on the wisdom of men, but on the power of God" (1 Corinthians 2:5). We have too many people in the church who have fallen prey to the very sickness that plagued the church in Corinth. Instead of following Christ, they were following their favorite preacher. Consequently, we become enamored with the messenger rather than the message. We see the power of the gospel to be in the communicator's ability rather than the intrinsic nature of the Scripture. Like Paul we need to rest in the gospel so that people will not be following us but Christ.

5. EFFECTIVE LEADERS MAKE SIGNIFICANT DECISIONS

We are told that a great leader is a great decision maker. He is the person who lives by the motto, "The buck stops here." These individuals have a knack for understanding the situation and making wise and relevant decisions that lead to positive outcomes. When others are unclear and indecisive, they can make a decision quickly and confidently. While making decisions is important, the problem is that the focus becomes the wisdom of the leader rather than the guidance of God. We do not leave room for God's sovereignty and His unseen hand. Biblical leadership is not about leading but following. Proverbs 16:33 states, "the lot is cast into the lap, but its every decision is from the Lord." The point is that ultimately it is not our decision, but God's sovereignty that determines the outcome. In reality most of the significant events that shape our life and the direction of the church are not seen as a major decision, but turn on

what we might consider at the time to be a small insignificant decision at the time. Those events and decisions that change the direction in our life we consider trivial at the time. It is often more “blind luck” than wise decisions that determine our effectiveness. Yet, in reality it is not “blind luck” or being at the right place at the right time or chance, but the unseen work of a sovereign God who orchestrates even the trivial events to move us in the direction He chooses. This is why great leaders are not necessarily great decisions makers, rather they are individuals who allow God to lead through the unexpected and the trivial and in the process trust God to guide them to accomplish what He desires.

6. EFFECTIVE LEADERS ADVANCE IN POSITIONS

When a person graduates from Bible college or seminary there is the unspoken assumption that he will either start as a pastor of a small church or as an associate on staff at a larger church, then as time progresses he will move upward to a senior pastor position or to a larger church. Just as in the business world, so also we often have the same mindset in the church: a successful leader will advance in positions of prominence within the church. A pastor who spends his whole ministry in a small church is often regarded as someone who is unable to “make it.” We view such a person the same way we would regard a person who spends his whole career in the mailroom of a large corporation. They may be effective but not someone we should take seriously. Just as a truly talented and hard working employee will move out of the mail room to bigger and greater responsibilities, so a truly effective pastor will eventually become the pastor of a larger church. If they fail to do so, something must be wrong. However, what is wrong is not the abilities or work ethic of a small church pastor, but of our misguided perception that the position and size of the church reveal the effectiveness of a leader. The effective pastor is not the one who attains a certain position, but one who understands the importance of positioning. Ministry is not about what position we attain in the hierarchy of the church, but allowing God to position us where His purpose can be achieved. What

the church needs today are not position seeking pastors, but pastors who are submissive to God’s positioning of their life, who see the value and worth of every act of service and every place of ministry who embrace the lowest of positions and are willing to be a servant rather than a king, even in the church.

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7. EFFECTIVE LEADERS LEAD THE CHURCH IN NUMERICAL GROWTH

We live in a society where bigger is always better. Every time we turn on the TV products are sold with this mantra. While this may be true of the size of the bag of dog food, we have mistakenly adapted that notion into the church. Over and over again we are told that the healthy church is a growing church and if our church is not growing numerically then it is dying and something is wrong with the church or with the leadership of the church. Programs offered are touted as the latest program to bring about larger numbers. Attend a church conference and recognition is always given to the church with the most increase in attendance and the greatest number of baptisms. Small church pastors often dread or even avoid going to the very conferences that are designed to encourage them because they come away feeling a failure. The messages proclaim that if we prayed more, preached better sermons and had better programs we would experience an increase in attendance. But in Scripture we see the opposite. Gideon was only effective after he pared his army down to a small handful. Christ focused more upon spending time with twelve men than the masses of crowds. Even when the masses were flocking to Him, He recognized their consumer driven adulation would eventually cause them to

abandon Him. The kingdom of God is built upon the narrow way that few find. Does this mean that the mega-church is driven by faulty theology and practice? Not at all, there are many large churches that effectively lead people to Christ and disciple them. But they are the anomaly rather than the norm. The kingdom of God is not recognized by its growth but by its message. The pastor of a small church who faithfully communicates the gospel is just as important as the pastor who proclaims Christ to thousands.

8. EFFECTIVE LEADERS HAVE A CLEAR VISION

Read any book on leadership today and the common theme is that great leaders have clear vision and are able to “sell” the vision to the people who rally to the cause. To support the importance of vision as a necessary quality of an effective leader, the latest books on leadership lament that only 4% of pastors have a clear vision. They argue that the problem today in the church is a lack of vision on the part of the leadership. In support they point to the mega-church and the rapidly growing church as the models. In many ways we have been duped like the Emperor wearing his invisible new clothes. If only 4% of pastors have the necessary clear vision, then either God has lost the Church or our understanding of leadership is faulty. I suspect the latter. What the Church and people need is not a clear vision, but a clear message and the unwavering trust that God will guide the church. But this goes counter to the refrain of business where goals, performance standards, and organizational growth determine success. In his book *Upsidedown Leadership* Taylor Field writes of Oswald Chambers: “He was dubbed by another missionary as the ‘apostle of the haphazard,’ because Oswald emphasized so strongly that we discover God’s will through what he called ‘the haphazard circumstances of life.’ He was the anti-planner. He wrote to his wife, Biddy, these words in a letter: ‘I never see my way. I know God who guides so I fear nothing. I have never farseeing plans, only confident trust.’”¹ Abraham did not understand God’s will and vision when he left Ur to go to a land he did not know. Paul had a vision of going to Asia Minor,

but God redirected him to Macedonia. The apostles' vision of the future was shattered on the Cross. James warns us against the danger of thinking that we can clearly see and determine the future: "Come now, you who say, 'Today or tomorrow we will go such and such a church and spend a year there and develop this program or get these results.' You do not know what the church will be like tomorrow. All your plans are a just a vapor that appears for a little while and then vanishes away. Instead, you ought to say, 'If the Lord wills, we will establish this program and do this or that.' But as it is, you boast in your arrogance; all such boasting is evil" (paraphrase of James 4:13-16). Our task as leaders is not to see the future, but to trust God for the future and do the things he has set before us.

9. EFFECTIVE LEADERS ARE SEEN AS CUTTING EDGE

Many believe: woe to the pastor who is doing ministry the old fashioned way. A pastor who is effective is one who is on the cutting edge, who is leading the church in dramatic changes. They employ the latest techniques for worship, evangelism and program development. Bible colleges and seminaries seek to recruit students by advertising that they will prepare them in the cutting edge of ministry. Can you image how effectively a college would attract new students if they advertised: "Come to our school and we will teach you to lead a church like your parents attended?" Those graduating from Bible college and seminary are encouraged to start new churches in order to establish a church that is not confined by past traditions. Suits and ties, hymns, choirs, long messages, biblical and exegetical preaching, the biblical story, seminary education, church buildings, traditional church, and denomination tags are out. Jeans and shorts, contemporary choruses, worship bands, short-topical homilies, hip church names, "my story" and metanarratives are in. This is not to say that we should not adapt to the culture in which we live. Certainly Paul recognized the importance of cultural adaptation in 1 Corinthians 9:19-23. However the problem comes when we mistake relevance for substance. We can become so cutting

edge that we lose our focus upon the centrality of the gospel. The unchanging message of the gospel is what impacts people, not how hip we are. Worship is ultimately an expression of the heart rather than some musical style. The church loses its significance when it is more concerned about relevance than truth, when marketing and program techniques are seen as the key to evangelism rather than the proclamation of the gospel.

10. EFFECTIVE LEADERS ARE POPULAR

"If the world does not like the Church, then something is wrong" has become a popular theme in Christian books today. The world labels us as bigots, and we believe it. If our message is not popular we are told that something must be wrong with both the message and the messenger. To preach on sin is to be judgmental. To point to God's justice is to minimize grace. To confront our cultural values is to be outdated. Yet, we have overlooked Christ warning that the world will hate us because they hated him. The gospel is inherently offensive to a world that seeks the acceptance of their sin and the affirmation of their lifestyles. The message of Scripture reveals the rebellious heart of people and they will reject it, for people love darkness rather than light because their deeds are evil. One of the indicators of systemic sickness within the church is not the negative attitude the unchurched has of Christians but the acceptance of the Church by the world. If we are popular with the world then we need to reexamine our message. Christ warns, "Woe to you when all men speak well of you, for their fathers used to treat the false prophets in the same way" (Luke 6:26). We need leaders today who are more concerned about faithfully proclaiming the Scriptures than they are about offending the sinner. The message of Christ was not "God loves you and accepts you as you are." Rather "Jesus began to preach and say 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand'" (Matthew 4:17). He did not call us to accept everyone and overlook their sin, He called us to urge people to repent of sin and embrace a life of obedience. It was this message that led the people to cry, "crucify him!" We

can expect no better response. People want a loving God but not a just and holy God. They will embrace us if our message is the former, but reject us if we proclaim the latter.

CONCLUSION

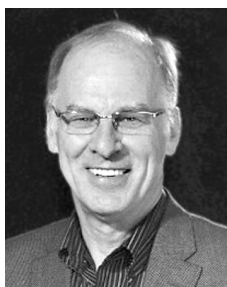
Too many times in our churches we accept principles that are popular in the secular world without carefully examining the validity of them from a biblical perspective. If we are to be effective as leaders, we need to avoid the danger of giving a biblical nod to secular principles.

Instead we need to examine carefully the pages of Scripture and develop a theology of leadership that is derived from Scripture where the focus is not merely upon accomplishment but character. Where success is not measured by superficial standards but faithfulness, in both following Christ and proclaiming His Word. We need to refocus upon these values, for then we will truly be relevant and effective.

END NOTES

1. Taylor Field, *Upsidedown Leadership* (New Hope Publishers, 2012), p. 65.

Open But Cautious: A Continental Divide?



Paul Seger

Paul Seger is General Director of Biblical Ministries Worldwide of Atlanta. He is also President of the Board of Directors of IFCA International.

One of the spectacular drives in North America is Independence Pass in Colorado. On Highway 82 you come to a sign that says “Continental Divide 12,095 feet.” Without the sign you would never notice that you just passed a critical point on the continent. Practically, this means that a drop of rain behind you could end up in the Gulf of Mexico and a drop of rain in front of you could end up in the Pacific Ocean. One inch makes a radical difference for the journey of that raindrop.

There are some theological issues like that. The starting point for every doctrine sets a trajectory that ends up in totally different theological destinations. Which side of the continental divide you begin the journey makes all the difference where you end up. I believe the continental divide is hermeneutics. It separates and sources the two rivers.

How you read and interpret the Bible determines your final conclusions on all sorts of doctrinal issues. And as I argue in this article, your hermeneutics will determine your conclusions on the debate over the role and function of spiritual gifts today: whether sign gifts have ceased (cessationism) or not (non-cessationism or continuationism).

IS THIS REALLY IMPORTANT?

Some conclude that cessationism is a relatively minor topic compared to the many other more important doctrines the church teaches. Others believe cessationism is a major issue that has practical ramifications for working together in a local church, believing this is a continental divide kind of doctrine. Some churches exist with members of the congregation on both sides of this issue. Other churches seek a position of unity and consistency in every member's beliefs and practices on this issue.

Those who hold to cessationism believe that the sign gifts of miracles, tongues and prophecy ended during the First century. This position states that sign gifts were pointers that authen-

ticated messengers during a transition time in history as God shifted from an Old Testament era to a New Testament economy. By necessity, there needed to be direct or audible revelation because the New Testament was being written. Miracles were proof that God was validating and authenticating the messengers of the new dispensation.

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more important doctrines.*

Anyone could claim to speak as a voice for God, but when miracles accompanied that message there was supernatural credibility. It's hard to ignore genuine miracles. They were happening during the Early Church era as the New Testament was being written. Cessationists believe that God may still do the miraculous today, but it is not the norm and Christians do not have “the gift” of performing miracles. By definition, miracles are those acts that only God can perform, superceding natural laws (that's why we call them supernatural). But in the early church they seemed to occur with some frequency.

Non-Cessationists believe that the sign gifts never ceased. Those who hold this position believe that even after the canon of Scripture was complete, there continued to be ongoing communication from God apart from Scripture. This includes the ability to perform miracles, to speak in tongues and to prophesy. In other words, there is no difference between the historical period of the early church and the rest of church history. Non-cessationists believe that we should expect the same kinds of miraculous manifestations as those in the first generation of the New Testament church.

With cessationism on one side and non-cessationism on the other side, a third position is sometimes posited which is identified as “open

but cautious.” Those who hold to this view are not involved in the radical elements of the Charismatic movement yet they do not want to close the door on the possibility that the sign gifts have been discontinued. I have observed that while those who hold to this position do not generally practice speaking in tongues and they rarely see a healing and they are cautious about prophecies... yet they still suggest there could be people today with all those gifts.

It is my argument that there is no third position - there are only two. You are either a cessationist or a Charismatic. To take the “open but cautious” position is like trying to sit on top of the Continental Divide and not go in either direction while leaning toward the Charismatic position. You may resist saying that the Charismatics are wrong and have no desire to be involved in the excesses of the movement. You may not want to be so dogmatic as to say the sign gifts ceased. But the theological Continental Divide drives you in one direction or other. “Open but cautious” is really “open and Charismatic.”

When the words “open” and “cautious” are juxtaposed, they cancel each other. Either the sign gifts continue or they don’t. “Open” implies a belief in the possibility of sign gifts but “cautious” means there is hesitancy. The belief in continuing communication from God is the foundational first step for every Charismatic.

The dilemma of the “open but cautious” position is the impossibility of staying neutral. There is not a no-man’s land on the Continental Divide. You are on one side or the other. Where you land will determine where you end up. The “open but cautious” proponent is already on the Charismatic side of the theological divide. That person is “open and Charismatic.”

Some have wondered why those who are open but cautious hesitate to disassociate from the Charismatic movement, even with some of its extremes. One of the reasons is that there is no credible way to do it once you are on that side of the theological divide. Once the premise of continuing communication from God is accepted, it’s all downhill from there. The extremes in the Charismatic movement are merely the logical extension

of the theology on that side of the continental divide. “Slain in the spirit” by hitting people on the forehead to fall backwards becomes legitimate since “new” revelation indicates that is something to do.

Once you are on that side of the Continental Divide, you give up your right to critique no matter how wild things become. If God is still communicating in addition to Scripture, then no one has a right to say that a certain “prophecy” is invalid. If someone hears a “voice,” the open but cautious position has no basis to criticize that “voice” regardless of how bizarre. Some however seek to dampen the radical element by suggesting that it takes discernment to determine whether the prophecy is genuine or not. Theologians like Wayne Grudem espouse the idea that “prophecies” in the New Testament era are frequently inaccurate, not because God’s communication is fallible but because man’s interpretation of the prophecy can be fallible.¹ That approach ultimately renders prophecy impotent. It comes down to an argument as to whether your discernment is more genuine than the other person’s prophecy. It is your word against theirs.

HERMENEUTICS: AT THE CORE

At the core of this issue is the subject of hermeneutics and the debate surrounds whether or not the book of Acts is transitional. The non-cessationist holds to the view that the book of Acts is the norm... that we should expect (or at least not be surprised) to see everything happening today that happened back then. Conversely, the cessationist would approach the book of Acts as a hinge between the Old Testament and the New Testament.

The question is whether Acts is descriptive or normative. Was Luke telling us what happened or what should continue to happen?

There are obviously things we do today that are similar to the book of Acts: Christians meet together regularly in churches, we evangelize, baptize, observe the Lord’s Table and give to the needs of others. But there are things in Acts that no one is reproducing today. If Acts were meant to be the norm today, then we would expect the following to take place:

- Experience violent wind and tongues of fire during prayer meetings (Acts 2:2-3)
- Christians communicating the gospel in languages they have never learned (Acts 2:6)
- Those who never walked would be healed by the faith of the healer (Acts 3:7)
- Liars would die on the spot (Acts 5:5)
- Shadows cast by certain people could produce healing in others (Acts 5:15)
- Believers could disappear as a means of travel (Acts 8:39)
- Dead people would be raised and come back to life (Acts 9:40; 20:9-10)
- Believers could accurately forecast global events (Acts 11:28)
- Angels would open prison doors and free persecuted Christians (Acts 12:6-10)
- Enemies of God would be physically blinded by light (Acts 13:6-12)
- Prison doors of persecuted Christians would miraculously open (Acts 16:26)
- Handkerchiefs would heal people (Acts 19:11-12)
- Immunity from snake bites (Acts 28:1-5)

It is convenient to cherry-pick the things in the book of Acts that we like or that can be replicated. It is a little more difficult to raise the dead or disappear. Though we would like to think we are just like the early church, it is obvious that something is different.

We know that Acts is transitional because:

- There is obviously something different before and after Pentecost, so at least the first chapter is transitional
- The role of apostles and prophets was temporary and transitional (Ephesians 2:19-21; Acts 2:43; 5:12 ; Hebrews 2:3-4 and 2 Corinthians 12:12)
- The appointment of deacons transitions from none to some (Acts 6:1-6)
- The first church council acknowledged they were in transition (Acts 15)

Remember that Acts is historical, narrative literature. Consistent hermeneutics does not make the narrative sections of Scripture normative; we certainly don’t do that with the stories of

the Old Testament.

OTHER INDICATIONS IN THE NT

There are other indications in the New Testament that the sign gifts have ceased. Note that the purpose of sign gifts is to validate the messenger. Hebrews 2:3-4 states that “God bore witness by signs and wonders and various miracles” as He gave new revelation. Since the canon is complete, we don’t need the sign.

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Healings were not performed by the average Christian in the New Testament. We mainly have record of the Apostles performing healings. In addition, there are instances of healing by Stephen and Philip who were apostolic delegates. The only exception is when Ananias healed Paul which was a rather unique occasion in history. So even in the book of Acts, the gift of miracles was not practiced regularly by all believers.

Also we see the decline in the New Testament of the miraculous. There are diminishing occurrences of miracles through the book of Acts until finally, at the end of Paul’s ministry, he leaves Trophimus in Miletus on his sick bed (2 Timothy 4:20). Paul himself had to live with physical ailments (2 Corinthians 12:8).

CONCLUSION

Some conclude that cessationism is a relatively minor topic compared to the many other more important doctrines the church teaches. Others believe cessationism is a major issue that has practical ramifications for working together in a local church, believing this is a Continental Divide kind of doctrine. Some churches exist with members of the congregation on both sides of this issue. Other churches seek a position of unity and consistency in every member’s beliefs and practices on this issue.

Should this become a point that

we raise in our fellowship with other Christians? Is this issue a big enough reason to leave a church?

Since many non-cessationists are believers, there must be some level of fellowship and friendship. We are in the same Body and we rejoice in our mutual salvation in Christ alone by faith alone. It is however difficult to function in a local assembly when people are both on different sides of the Continental Divide. It is possible to temporarily manage the differences, but ultimately those theological raindrops are going to end up in different oceans.

ENDNOTE

1. Message by Wayne Grudem at a Desiring God conference: www.desiringgod.org/conference-messages/by-series/1991-conference-for-pastors. See also Grudem’s book *The Gift of Prophecy in the New Testament and Today* (Crossway, 2000).

Clarifying Terms in Catholic Evangelism



Larry E. Miller

Larry Miller is a graduate of Dallas Theological Seminary and ministered as a pastor for over 30 years in Louisiana. He is currently Executive Director of Equipments Ministry International, a ministry to assist in lovingly evangelizing Roman Catholics. He is a member of IFCA International. You may contact him at equipmentsministry@cox.net.

During recent years I have been able to present a seminar in several churches aimed at helping them more effectively and lovingly evangelize lost Roman Catholic people. When I receive feedback from the participants, one of the most helpful parts of the seminar seems to be the comparison of terms that are differently understood by most Roman Catholic and evangelicals. Often evangelicals will conclude that a particular Roman Catholic person is saved because of the use of certain terms. They may say, “yes I was born again,” or “yes, I have received Christ,” or “yes, I believe I am going to heaven based on faith.” However, in many cases their Catholic friend actually mean something different than our Bible based understanding.

The differences in meaning are real and determinative when one attempts to communicate the biblical grace Gospel. God gave us the Holy Scriptures as a written revelation of “words,” words with intended meaning, and meaning with intention of being understood.

In this article I will present, in summary form, several examples of terms that need clarification in the process of sharing the Gospel with our Roman Catholic friends.

AUTHORITY

This issue often arises in a person’s mind and sometimes is expressed verbally with questions like, “How do I really know what truth is?” or “Who am I to believe when I hear what appear to be contradictory ideas about how to get to heaven?” or “We are just sharing different opinions and my opinion is as valid as yours.”

As Biblicists our ultimate authority is the inerrant Holy Scriptures. We attempt to be diligent in developing accurate understanding of biblical/theological terms. A logical question might be, “well, doesn’t a Roman Catholic person do the same?” A typical Roman Catholic lay person may or may not understand he has a different approach to the authority issue. Three important tenants of hierarchical Roman

Catholicism dominate the approach to the issue of what the truth is supposed to be for them.

First, even in the post-Vatican II environment, the official Roman Catholic position is that Tradition (note capital “T”) is authoritative alongside, if not above, Scripture. Note this statement in *The Documents of Vatican II*: “both sacred tradition and sacred scripture are to be accepted and venerated with the same sense and devotion and reverence... Sacred tradition and sacred scripture form one sacred deposit of the word of God, which is committed to the church.”¹

Often evangelicals will conclude that a particular Roman Catholic person is saved because of the use of certain terms.

Second, according to the Roman Catholic approach to hermeneutics (i.e. Bible interpretation) as declared in *The Documents of Vatican II* (p. 118), “The task of authentically interpreting the word of God, whether written or handed down, has been entrusted to the living teaching office of the Church.” Thus what the Roman Catholic Church declares a passage of Scripture to mean is considered to be the infallible interpretation in the mind of a Roman Catholic person.

Third, the official Roman Catholic dogma emphatically declares that apostolic authority to govern the church belongs to the Pope and the bishops: “the apostles took care to appoint successors in this hierarchically structured society... Therefore, this sacred synod (Vatican II) teaches that by divine institution bishops have succeeded to the place of the apostles as shepherds of the Church, and that he who hears them, hears Christ” (*The Documents of Vatican II*, pp. 39-40).

PAYMENT OF SIN PENALTY

We in IFCA International understand the Bible to teach that the physical and spiritu-

al death of Jesus Christ on the Cross was and is the adequate, and the only adequate, payment for the penalty for sin pronounced upon mankind by God. It satisfied the just demands of God. Therefore, He can now justify, forgive, deliver us from condemnation while remaining a just God (Romans 3:26). And Christ's death was a "once for all event" (Hebrews 9:24-28; 10:10-12). He will not, He cannot, be crucified again as payment for sin.

Roman Catholic dogma declares the necessity of the death of Christ as a payment for sin. However, they teach that Christ's one death is not considered a sufficient payment. This represents a major deficiency in their thinking. Follow carefully these statements from *The Complete and Updated Catechism* of the Catholic Church, hereafter referred to as *The Catechism*.² This work is widely considered the most accurate and authoritative post Vatican II instruction manual for Roman Catholics (and it bears the imprimatur dated in 1994 of Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, who later served as Pope Benedict XVI).

"The new life received in Christian initiation [baptism] has not abolished... the inclination to sin... which remains in the baptized such that with the help of the grace of Christ they may prove themselves in the struggle of the Christian life. This is the struggle of **conversion** directed towards holiness and **eternal life** to which the Lord never ceases to call us" (Paragraph 1426, emphasis mine). "Grave sin [committed after baptism, which placed us in the Church] deprives us of communion with God and therefore makes us incapable of eternal life, the privation of which is called the 'eternal punishment' of sin" (Paragraph 1472). In other words, committing a grave sin after one is in the body of Christ by grace changes our standing such that eternal life has been lost. So according to *The Catechism* "Christ instituted the sacrament of Penance for all sinful members of his Church, above all for those who, since Baptism, have fallen into grave sin, and have thus lost their baptismal grace... It is to them that the sacrament of Penance offers a new possibility to convert and to recover the grace of justification" (Paragraph 1446).

These and numbers of other statements could be included. In summary, the official Roman Catholic view is that the death of Christ was necessary to get one started along the way toward eternal life, toward heaven. But once a person gets sidetracked by sin, he loses this "gift of grace" and must be converted again. And this conversion requires some works on his part, in order to establish once again a life he hopes will lead to eternal life. In other words, the one death of Christ was not sufficient to pay for all future sins.

When one considers the implications, this is a huge difference in understanding.

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"merited favor."*

BORN AGAIN

If you asked a Roman Catholic person if he is "born again," he might reply "yes of course." But he may mean "I was born again when baptized as an infant." Support for this as the official Roman Catholic view comes from *The Catechism*.

The seven sacraments of the Church Baptism, Confirmation, Eucharist [The Mass], Penance, Anointing of the Sick, Holy Orders, and Matrimony are "all instituted by Jesus Christ our Lord" (Paragraph 1114). "The ordained priesthood [ordained by the Roman Catholic Church] guarantees that it really is Christ who acts in the sacraments through the Holy Spirit for the Church" (Paragraph 1120). The sacraments are necessary for salvation (Paragraph 1129). They act *ex opere operato* [literally: "by the very fact of the actions being performed"] (Paragraph 1128). This means independent of any faith on the part of the recipient. And they are *efficacious* because in them Christ himself is at work: it is he who baptizes (Paragraph 1128). Furthermore, "Through Baptism we are freed from sin and reborn as sons of God; we become members of Christ, are incorporated into the Church...

'Baptism is the sacrament of regeneration through water in the word.' This sacrament is also called '*the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit*'" (Paragraphs 1213, 1215).

Of course as Biblicists we understand that being "born again" is synonymous with "regeneration" (Titus 3:5) which occurs in response to the convincing ministry of the Holy Spirit (John 16:8-11) and our faith response (John 3:16), even faith alone (Ephesians 2:8,9). This is a destiny determining difference.

SAVED BY GRACE

Surely we would agree here. Classically evangelicals have understood grace to mean "God's unmerited favor" or "God's riches at Christ's expense," or "All that God is now free to do for us on the basis of the Cross" (Romans 3:24; Ephesians 2:8,9 among many).

When a Roman Catholic person speaks of being saved by grace he most likely understands grace to mean "merited favor." This understanding is based on *The Catechism*. Regarding merit, "Since the initiative belongs to God in the order of grace, **no one can merit the initial grace** of forgiveness and justification, at the beginning of conversion. Moved by the Holy Spirit and by charity, we can then merit for ourselves and for others the graces needed for our sanctification... **and for the attainment of eternal life**" [emphasis mine] (Paragraph 2010).

FAITH

We might define faith as believing and relying on the Bible. As regarding salvation we would define it as trust or reliance on the finished work of Christ without any meriting work as a condition for that salvation.

The typical Roman Catholic person might understand faith as something like believing in God and what the Roman Catholic Church says. In *The Catechism* we read, "Whoever says 'I believe' says 'I pledge myself to what we believe'" (Paragraph 185). So a person of faith believes what the Roman Catholic Church has determined is to be believed. Also, "Believing' is an ecclesial act. The Church's faith precedes, engenders, supports, and nourishes our faith. The Church is the mother of all believ-

ers. ‘No one can have God as Father who does not have the Church [i.e. the Roman Catholic Church] as Mother’” (Paragraph 181).

Furthermore, “The disciple of Christ must not only keep the faith and live on it, but also profess it... Service of and witness to the faith are necessary for salvation” (Paragraph 1816). This certainly sounds like faith + works as a condition for salvation. And this is typically what a Roman Catholic lay person understands. In a Bible Study I was once conducting, the educated and sincere woman spoke with knowledge beyond my expectation. To the question, “How does one get to heaven?” she quickly answered, “Jesus died to open the doors of the kingdom that I might get there by faith plus good works, perhaps by way of Purgatory.”

JUSTIFICATION

Some Roman Catholics (and some evangelicals) may have a sufficient appreciation for the issue of justification to enter into conversation about it. The common evangelical understanding of justification is that a person is justified or made “right with God” when he is reconciled to God through faith in the person and redemptive work accomplished by Christ. Justification means a person is declared righteous by God and the imputation of the righteousness of Christ. Some of the readers will be familiar with Luther’s declaration, “It [this doctrine of justification] is the *articulus stantis et cadentis ecclesiae*, the article by which the church stands or falls.”

Herein lies a very basic difference we have with the Roman Catholic system. The decisions of The Council of Trent on justification, which met from 1546-1563, “are still the official doctrines of the Roman Catholic Church.”³ As this Council was concluding, the inherent view of justification (as opposed to the imputed view) was approved by a vote of 32 to 5, and the Council opted for a transformationist view of justification.⁴ This view teaches the gradual input of righteousness, slowly making a person more justified, more right with God. And a Roman Catholic never knows when he has received enough righteousness, therefore he can never be certain of eternal salvation. Even to this day it is considered heresy if one claims to have

certainty of salvation.

What a difference!

DON'T CLOUD AND CONFUSE EVANGELISM

In summary, these and other terms, if differently understood by the evangelical and Roman Catholic individuals, will make communication difficult and often cause the evangelical to assume that the Roman Catholic person is a believer when that may not actually be true. As an example, if a Roman Catholic friend says “yes I was born again and received Jesus Christ as my Savior,” you might think, “here is a brother in Christ.” But he might be saying, “I was baptized as an infant, thus born again. And I receive Jesus Christ every Sunday when I partake of the Eucharist.”

Or if a Roman Catholic friend says yes to the question, “Do you believe the Bible,” you might assume we have the same authority base. But your Catholic friend might mean “yes, I believe the Bible plus Tradition. And I really can’t interpret the Bible. I will need to depend on the priest to tell me what it means.”

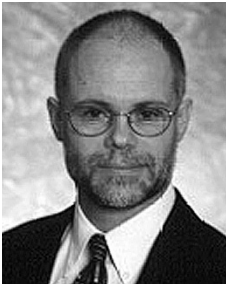
Or he might say, “yes I know we are saved by grace.” But he may be thinking that grace includes “merited favor,” rather than an unmerited gift as we understand the Bible to teach.

So it becomes clear that we must be careful to clarify word meanings in our loving effort to explain the biblical grace Gospel to a lost Roman Catholic person.

END NOTES

1. Walter M. Abbott and Joseph Gallagher, *The Documents of Vatican II* (New York: New York Guild, 1966), p. 117
2. *The Complete and Updated Catechism of the Catholic Church*, (Double Day, 1995). The numbers indicating location of the information are paragraph numbers not page numbers. This book was originally published as *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (Vatican City, Rome: Urbi et Orbi Communications, 1994).
3. Klaas Runia, “Justification and Roman Catholicism,” in D. A. Carson’s *Right with God* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1992), p. 209.
4. *Canons and Decrees of the Council of Trent*, translated by H.J. Schroeder (London: Herder, 1941), p. 42.

Metrics of a Dynamic Sending Church



Rob Heijermans

Rob Heijermans currently directs Biblical Ministries Worldwide Canada. He is a church planter who works with newcomers in Canada's capital and seeks to establish a network of multi-ethnic churches across the country.

If I were to guess, having read only the first couple of chapters of Acts, from where God would launch His international missionary venture, I would have to say, “Well, from Jerusalem - where else?” It seems like a logical choice. So much happens there: the Triumphal Entry, the passion and resurrection of the Lord Jesus, the coming of the Holy Spirit, those heady first days of the Church and it will be Christ’s capital during His millennial reign. One could be forgiven for thinking this is a no-brainer.

God has other plans, and as He unfurls His missional banner in the middle chapters of Acts, we begin to see why He chooses Antioch as the beginning of “the end of the earth” (Acts 1:8). What are the metrics of this dynamic sending church and what can our churches learn today from Antioch?

1. VISION

The church at Antioch is established by men with a cross-cultural vision. Acts 11:19-20 indicates that persecution expands the ministry of the Jerusalem church geographically, but not culturally. The Jerusalem congregation, scattered throughout Judea and Samaria by the persecution ignited by Stephen’s martyrdom, goes “as far as Phoenicia and Cyprus and Antioch,” but they target only unbelieving Jews with the good news of Christ.

Other men, however, understand the Gentiles’ need for the gospel and preach to the Hellenists in Antioch. These visionaries are Cypriots and Libyans, the latter group being named in Acts 2:10 as being represented at the Feast of Pentecost when the Church was born. God moves in a dramatic way, and “a great number who [believe turn] to the Lord.” (Acts 11:21) When word of the Gentiles’ response reaches the church in Jerusalem, they send Barnabas up to Antioch to check things out.

They send the right man.

The choice of Barnabas is clearly not arbitrary. Not only his character - “he was a good man, full

of the Holy Spirit and of faith” (Acts 11:24) - but also his Cypriot nationality qualify him to represent the apostles and find out just what’s going on in Antioch. As a Jew he can understand the consternation of the apostles, and as a Cypriot he can connect culturally with the preachers, some of whom may be known to him from earlier days.

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During his stay, many more people come to Christ. Things are getting out of hand in the best possible way, so Barnabas goes to Tarsus to look for Saul and solicit his help.

Why Saul? Well, for Barnabas, this is a no-brainer. He is no doubt responding to the leading of the Holy Spirit, but he also knows Saul to be God’s “special instrument...to carry [His] name before the Gentiles” (Acts 9:16) and has seen him in action preaching boldly and disputing against the Hellenistic Jews in Jerusalem (Acts 9:28-29). He is clearly the right man for this job - specially chosen, a Jew’s Jew as well as a Greek-speaking Roman citizen, bold, and articulate. Who better to navigate the potentially turbulent waters in a church composed of newly converted orthodox Jews and pagan Gentiles? Saul goes.

2. PREPARATION

Barnabas and Saul teach in Antioch for a full year, and “a great many people” graduate from their school. This is church-based training at its best, with outcomes nobody could possibly have predicted! The personal warmth and people skills of Barnabas (a loyal, godly man who has already advocated on Saul’s behalf and will later do the same for his cousin, John Mark) combined with the theological savvy, biblical knowledge and debating skills of Saul make for a faculty few seminaries today could rival.

3. DEVOTION

But this training is not a mere academic exercise. Though they “[meet] with the church” for an entire year, the number of “contact hours” with their students is not the instructors’ only concern. They desire implementation, and that’s just what they get.

Acts 11:26 tells us that “in Antioch the disciples are first called Christians.” By whom? Scripture, as well as history, seems to indicate that this term is first used as a nickname, perhaps even a pejorative one, by Gentiles outside the Antioch church. Richard Rackham writes: “This systematic organization had a further effect. It attracted the notice of the Antiochene public. The pleasure-loving city was noted for its epigrams and witty nicknames, and they soon coined a name for this new body. Its watchword was *the Christ* - *CHRISTOS*. That was a title not very intelligible to the outsider, but it was very like another word - *chrestos*, which meant a good worthy fellow. So with an intentional confusion they dubbed the followers of the Christ *the CHRESTIANOI* or *the worthy folk*. For it seems most likely from the evidence of early MSS and inscriptions, and the passage in Suetonius about one *Chrestus* who disturbed the Jews at Rome, that this was the original form of ‘Christian.’ In Agrippa’s mouth (xxvi 28) the word has a ring of contempt; and if, like ‘Nazarene,’ it was a term of reproach, we can understand why the disciples were slow to adopt a title in which they would otherwise naturally have gloried...”¹

Clearly, the effect of the disciples’ training is noticed by the community at large, and pejorative or not, the appellation “Christian” links them to the Lord they have come to know and love. Many of them will die for His sake, and the fact that outsiders notice their devotion to Christ and their transformed lives speaks volumes about the instruction they have received.

4. COMPASSION

During this year of intensive training, the believers in Antioch get the chance to express their devotion to Christ in practical terms. Agabus, a prophet who has come from Jerusalem, stands up and predicts a widespread

famine during the reign of Claudius Caesar. This Syrian congregation determines, “everyone according to his ability,” to send relief to their brethren in Judea. They dig deep and come up with an offering that Barnabas and Saul then carry south to the elders in Jerusalem for distribution. (This magnanimity is even more impressive when one considers the centuries of bitter enmity between the Syrians and the Jews, enmity that still exists.)

After the parenthetical, and somewhat amusing, account of Peter’s rescue from prison in Acts 12, Luke picks up the Antioch narrative in Chapter 13.

5. COMPOSITION

In Acts 13:1, we read that the leadership, not just the congregation at large, is ethnically diverse. Some of the preachers and teachers are identified: Barnabas, a Cypriot; Simeon Niger (probably a dark-skinned or dark-haired Jew, possibly from North Africa); Lucius (a Libyan); Manaen (a Palestinian Jew who was one of Herod the Tetrarch’s advisors); and Saul (a Turkish ex-Pharisee who was also a Roman citizen).

A multi-ethnic church is only as diverse as its leadership. There are congregations that crow about being diverse and international, while their leadership teams are as white as the driven snow. Or some other solid color. This is not true in Antioch, another reason why this congregation is so well qualified to lead the charge to the end of the earth.

6. SUBMISSION

One of the striking things about the leaders of this church is their sensitivity to the Holy Spirit. We are told in Acts 13:2 that while they are worshipping the Lord and fasting (the language suggests this was a regular occurrence), the Spirit sets apart Barnabas and Saul, two of the best players on their varsity squad, for a special mission.

There is no mention of hesitation or discussion. The all-too-frequent disconnect between what we call worship in our churches and obedience to the clear prompting of the Holy Spirit does not exist in the Antioch congregation.

We are not told why the leaders are fasting and praying. It may well be that they are seeking God’s direction

about how to use all this great training! Perhaps they are saying to Him, “Lord, things are good here. Our church is vibrant and thriving, people are coming to Christ, we’re learning to understand and communicate the Scriptures. There is a good spirit in the congregation. We’re making an impact on our city. What do you want us to do now?” If so, the Spirit’s instruction is a direct answer to their question.

7. RESOLUTION

“Then after fasting and praying they laid their hands on them and sent them away” (Acts 13:3). That verb *autois apolusan* (“they sent them away”) signifies not simply resignation, but resolution. The leaders do not take this action grudgingly. There is no suggestion in the text that they resent the Spirit collaring two of their best men to be sent who-knows-where to do who-knows-what. This verb *apoluo* is also translated “divorce” in the New Testament and in other first century Greek texts. It evokes not only resolute action, but also separation - in this case, embryonic separation such as one sees in biological processes. The church at Antioch longs to reproduce itself, and it is willing to give its best leaders to make an eternal impact in “the end of the earth.”

CONCLUSION

How can a North American church become a turbo-charged sending church like the church in Antioch? By following Antioch’s example.

Perhaps your church needs to re-imagine its vision and start looking beyond its attractively packaged programs and comfortable facilities to another world that may exist in your own community, a world of people with different world views, different native languages, different cultural distinctives, different religious practices, different food preferences and different personal habits. If it’s impossible for your church to send someone to them (and it rarely is), don’t worry...they’re coming to you.

You can and should prepare missionaries yourselves. There are hundreds of good resources available (an excellent choice is the non-formal, church-based strategy of Bible Training Centre for Pastors²) that can enable you to begin

preparing people in your church for ministry between and beyond your four walls. Reading books such as Neal Pirollo's excellent volume *Serving As Senders Today* and Paul Beals' *A People for His Name* will help you to understand your role and develop a strategy for sending and serving your own missionaries.

Are the people in your church simply warming pews? Is your church in survival mode? What is your congregation's reputation in your community - do they know you're there? Do you exhibit the same qualities that caused outsiders to call the disciples in Antioch "Christians?"

How ready is your church to meet the practical and financial needs of others, even if it means setting aside other goals and projects? Giving is not, and never has been, an economic matter. It is a matter of priorities. Is your church willing to re-order its financial priorities in order to effectively fulfill the Great Commission? If you are not sending your own people to make disciples of all nations, are you ready to help other like-minded congregations send theirs? If not, why not?

If one were to sit in the front row of your auditorium and look back at your congregation, what color would one see? And what colors would one see on a drive through your neighborhood? One would expect that a local church dedicated to fulfilling the Great Commission would reflect the demographic of its city. Perhaps your church can seek some creative ways to reach the internationals around you. (Providing Bible-based ESL classes is a great approach.) Renting part of your building to an ethnic congregation is not the solution - you will simply be encouraging them to be ethnocentric and narrow in their vision. Becoming a landlord is not obedience to Christ.

If God is clearly leading members of your congregation to serve Him on foreign soil, rejoice! Serve God with an open hand, letting Him take from it whatever or whomever He pleases to accomplish His purpose through you. You will be amazed by what He does and by how He provides.

How willing is your church to say "Goodbye?" When you send your people to "the end of the earth," do you view their departure as a reproductive act? Do

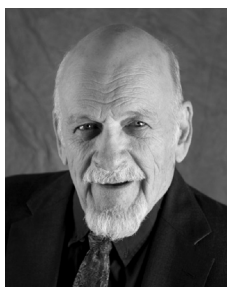
you insist that the churches they establish look just like yours, or can you allow foreign cultures to shape and color congregations that, while meeting biblical criteria, are very different from yours?

Antioch provides a powerful model for any church that would fulfill Christ's command to make disciples of all nations. Using these seven metrics, your congregation can evaluate itself and prepare itself to be a dynamic sending church.

END NOTES

1. Rackham, Richard, *The Acts of the Apostles: An Exposition* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Books, 1978), p. 170.
2. Bible Training Centre for Pastors is located in Atlanta. Find out more about them at www.bibletraining.com

The Challenge of Hospital Chaplaincy



Joseph P. Smith

Joe Smith graduated from Moody Bible Institute and pursued a Master's degree in Hebrew at the University of Wisconsin, Madison. He pastored in Wisconsin and Minnesota and planted churches in Michigan. He now serves as IFCA International Director of Healthcare Chaplaincy.

The Lord allowed me to serve eight years as a hospital chaplain, six of those years as the Director of sixteen chaplains in six hospitals. The entire time I visited patients in a sixty bed Oncology unit. If you were to ask me for one hundred interesting anecdotes from my fifty-one years of ministry, about ninety of them would come from this service. I visited, prayed with, read Scripture to, and encouraged about twenty patients a day. Besides all this, I was often called on to serve other staff, family members, and other "significant others."

THE UNIQUENESS OF HOSPITAL CHAPLAINCY

The role of a hospital chaplain is significantly different from a pastor's role in visiting the sick. These differences mean that good preparation for the role includes something more than ordinary pastoral training.

First of all, you do not control the hospital. It's extremely frustrating for some pastors to minister where you are not in charge. The chaplain's aims are to rightly relate people to God. The hospital's perspective is that you are there to provide comfort to the sick. Those aims do not always clash, but they do often enough to require enormous diplomacy. The most frustrating part is that often decisions about how you will serve are made by people who are managers, accountants, or even the lawyers. Their main concern is not the spiritual condition of the patient, but the smooth and safe direction of the institution.

Then, the people you serve did not come to the hospital to "get saved." They are not helplessly gathered against their wills to hear what you have to say. They have a right not to hear you. Or put another way, you must earn their permission to minister. And you need to do it over and over again. Every new patient you see has a right to say no to your visits.

Also, you are confronted with every worldview under the sun. In ministering to church people, there is at least some consensus about God and the world. But the hospital chaplain

might be faced with atheists, polygamists, people who do not live in reality at all, or even demonists. You find yourself needing to understand not only the structure of non-Christian thought, but the culture of it.

You will see human problems on a scale you couldn't imagine. You visit victims of rape, assault, unfaithfulness, and every chaotic perversion of God's good world. And you may walk from the room of a victim to the bedside of the perpetrator. You must be prepared to proclaim the solace of the Gospel to both, without making personal judgments.

In most cases, you don't know the spiritual history of the person you're helping. He's not a blank tablet. He has received teaching that may be contrary to Scripture. Or in the absence of teaching, he has experiences that he invests with metaphysical meaning. Many just think as the society thinks, that goodness has a spiritual reward, but there are some who manifest faith in karma, reincarnation, and previous lives effects on this one.

On top of all this, your opportunity to intervene is limited. If you're seeing twenty people a day, equal time for all would be twenty-four minutes for each. And with the new emphasis on shortening hospital stays, you're unlikely to have more than one opportunity.

There is no time for theoretical theology. People are not asking academic questions. A good hospital chaplain made the mistake of answering a question from the person in "the other bed" about whether suicides go to hell. He couldn't understand being reprimanded for his theologically correct answer. But the patient he didn't know in "the other bed" was hiding his wrist restraints because he had attempted suicide.

Another good chaplain walked in on a conversation where a mother was being told that her two year old daughter had aggressive leukemia. The mother turned to the chaplain and cried out, "How could God do this!" The chaplain said, "God didn't 'do this.' Sickness is in the

world because of sin.” But the chaplain didn’t know that the woman, a Catholic, had just divorced her husband because he was engaging in homosexual acts, and her priest had told her she should stick it out. To her, the Chaplain was saying her little girl was sick because of her (the mother’s) sin of divorce. “But the chaplain couldn’t know that,” is the excuse. Yes, and it’s also the reason you don’t defend God with abstract theology when you can’t be sure how it will be understood. Nothing is abstract in the face of disaster.

HOW TO MINISTER AS HOSPITAL CHAPLAIN

So, how is it possible to minister effectively against these odds? Simple caring, empathetic listening, quiet confidence, and reality in prayer are the answer. But the majority of visits result in never getting down to real heartaches. To get to the core of a quandary in such short time doesn’t happen every time. But the fact that you get to see so many people means good results are not infrequent.

However, one reason for this article is to promote a plan that is a key to making hospital chaplaincy effective, and that is the endorsement of women as hospital chaplains. I know this will initially strike some as opposition to our IFCA International understanding of the role of women in ministry. But before you close your mind to this, hear what I have to say.

Some institutions have required ordination as a basis for chaplaincy. But this is easily challenged. Roman Catholic nuns are frequently assigned to hospital visits, and in the view of the institutions, have often done a better job than priests. I can’t imagine a hospital administrator who would deny them chaplaincy positions.

Besides, there are situations where women visitors have a distinct advantage. I have been called to be bedside of a beaten rape victim, and realized the hopelessness of a man dealing with this.

Women who are having mastectomies do not welcome male chaplains very often. There are many heartaches women suffer because of things happening in their bodies that they can’t discuss with a man. No amount of training can overcome this.

I was called to the side of a woman who believed that Satan was coming

into her bedroom and having sex with her. She may have been as needy as anyone I ever served, but a man shouldn’t touch this with a ten foot pole.

A significant percentage of patients are children. Chaplains who can present the Gospel in Bible story form, are invaluable here. The hospital chaplain who can model Biblical parenting to the mothers of patients, is what is often needed.

I believe that the Biblical prohibition of women in ministry forbids certain offices to them. But it does not prohibit the use of their gifts in a proper way. The chaplaincy is not about power and headship, it’s about empathy and consolation. Women could be commissioned as patient care providers by their local church, and serve effectively under the authority of others who are properly invested as church leaders.

There is one way I have seen that women can be effective in chaplaincy you may never have considered, and that is by singing. Of all the words that are remembered in the midst of panic, the words of a hymn or a good gospel song are often used by God. The hardest heart, in the midst of the deepest trouble, can often be penetrated by simple plain music. I can’t explain why men are usually not used this way, but there is something about a woman’s voice that can teach in a non-threatening way the most recalcitrant.

How the patient reacts to the chaplain visitor often determines the outcome of any intervention. Women can often overcome this barrier in the short time we have to reach out. For this reason, the IFCA Board of Directors has approved a policy that would allow the IFCA Commission on Chaplains to endorse qualified women to serve as hospital chaplains. These women would serve under authority of their local church, and would report to their IFCA pastor and the IFCA Commission on Chaplains. And they would have a ministry in the hospitals in situations our male IFCA chaplains could not have. For this, all of us can be grateful.

If you would like to learn more about how to serve as an IFCA endorsed hospital chaplain, contact the me at IFCA International Home Office or at hospitalchaplain@ifca.org. It’s a wonderful ministry!

We Welcome these Men to our Fellowship

Mr. Premend Choy
Lautoka, Fiji Islands

Mr. Adam Landrum
McAllen, TX

Mr. José F. Marco
Edinburg, TX

Rev. Rob Morris
Hobart, WA

Dr. Narayan Nair
Lautoka, Fiji Islands

Dr. Larry Overstreet
Winona Lake, IN

Mr. Michael P. Roe
Hanford, CA

Mr. Parker J. Schnetz
Yelm, WA

Fellowship News



IFCA ED Les Lofquist recently spoke at Piedmont International University with Southeast Church Extension Director Dan Nave. Here they are with (L to R): PIU President Charles Petitt, PIU Professor and IFCA member Dr. Alex Brown, Les Lofquist, Dan Nave.



Southeast Church Extension hosted its first IFCA Youth Summit in Lawrenceville GA at BMW's Pilgrim's Rest House. In attendance were (from L to R): Johnny Oceguela, Charles Logan Shoaf, Dan Nave (host), Travis Huseby (host), Jerry Smith, Wayne Price and Caleb Walker. The purpose was to begin explaining IFCA Youth Ministry to youth workers in the Southeast.



IFCA Air Force Reserve Chaplain Col. Bill Dickens served two deployments in the past few years in Iraq and Kuwait. He also serves as Administrator of Calvary Christian School in Covington, KY. Reserve duty chaplains always have a unique role serving in two ministries and Bill is a great representative of these fine servants of Christ.



The Atlantic SE Regional recently met at the JAARS Conference Center in Waxhaw, NC. They had a great time of fellowship and encouragement.

Death of His Saints



Henry J. Sweeney

Henry J. Sweeney, age 82, died March 10, 2015 at his home in Angels Camp, CA.

He was preceded in death by his first wife Margaret and his daughter Patricia Lynn Sweeney. Henry is survived by his wife Dodie Sweeney, son Michael Henry Sweeney, son-in-law Michael Lee Sweeney, and two grandchildren.

He was born on Sept. 24, 1932, in Brawley, CA. From his early years, he always enjoyed helping others. He found his true passion in pursuing the Lord's work and followed that passion. He went to Multnomah School of the Bible in Portland, OR to work toward becoming a pastor and missionary and graduated in 1954. He was a home missionary for the American Sunday School Union from 1960 to 1964 then a youth pastor in at Grace Church of Albuquerque, New Mexico. Henry joined IFCA in 1966.

Brother Sweeney went on to pastor churches in Indian Hills, CO and California churches in San Luis Obispo, Victorville and Rail Road Flat. A quote at his memorial was "Henry loved the Bible more than anyone I know."



Cyril John Barber

Cyril John Barber, aged 80, passed away on Sunday, April 12, 2015 in Hacienda

Heights, California. Born in Pretoria, South Africa on May 18, 1934, Cyril was born to his parents Charles Stanley & Muriel Radford (Cook) Barber. Cyril was married to Aldyth Ayleen Aereboe on April 13, 1957 in South Africa and together they had two sons, Allan and Stephen.

Cyril grew up in South Africa and attended school at Kearsney College and Witwatersrand Technical College (B.Com.). In 1962, only a few years after marrying Aldyth, Cyril moved his family to Canada to study at Winnipeg Bible College (B.R.E. degree), then to the United States with the purpose of studying at Dallas Theological Seminary in Texas (Th.M.). He then received his second Masters Degrees in Library Science. He subsequently went on to receive a Doctor of Ministries degree from Talbot Theological Seminary in California. With his combination of degrees, he served as a professor and librarian at Trinity Evangelical Divinity

School, Rosemead Graduate School of Psychology and International Theological Seminary. He became a member of IFCA International in 1972.

Whether as a pastor, a professor, Sunday School teacher, or home Bible-study leader, Cyril had a passion for sharing the Word of God. For several years he was on the counseling staff at Insight for Living, started by Charles Swindoll. In recent years, he served as interim pastor at Plymouth Congregational Church in Whittier. His love of studying the Bible resulted in him writing over 30 books (including *The Preacher's Library*) and articles on theology and Scripture studies including articles for *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* and *Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible*.

Cyril is survived by his wife, Aldyth, his two sons Allan and Stephen and their wives, five grandchildren and three great grandchildren.

What God Has Done: He Saves!

Editor's Note: This is the fifth installment in a series of six articles entitled "Kids Can Discover God's Greatness"



Mark Steiner

*Mark Steiner is
Founder & President of
DiscipleLand in Fort
Collins, Colorado. Visit
www.discipleland.com
where IFCA members
are entitled to discounts.
Or call 800.284.0158.*

Children need to know that God is involved on earth and that He genuinely cares about them. They wonder, "What has God Done?" Jesus Christ's most costly and significant accomplishment on earth was to secure our salvation. The Lord's crucifixion and resurrection defeated death for us all. Jesus' selfless act freed people who were enslaved to sin.

Here's a succinct response to the question, "What has God done?" God Defeated Death! The Lord frees enslaved people. He is selfless! In salvation, God liberates humanity from the penalty and power of sin (Isa 12:2; Col 1:13-14). He seeks, saves and seals us through the work of Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit.

GOD SEEKS

The Lord pursues people who need His love and forgiveness (Ezek 34:11-12; Luke 19:10). The Holy Spirit is like a gentle dove that seeks peace between God and people (Gen 8:10-11; Mat 3:16-17).

- The Lord knows. God examines people inside and out - nothing escapes His scrutiny. (Psa 139:1-4; 1 Jn 3:19-20)
- The Lord blesses. God extends His benevolent hand to all people. (Gen 1:28; Mat 5:44-45)
- The Lord convicts. God exposes personal sin and warns of coming judgment. (Ezra 9:15; John 16:8-11)
- The Lord draws. God motivates people to desire forgiveness from Him. (Jer 24:7; John 12:32)
- The Lord calls. God invites people to believe in Him and follow His ways. (Isa 45:22; Mat 11:28-29)

GOD SAVES

The Lord pays the debt for all who trust in Jesus Christ's payment for their sins (Psa 79:9; Acts 4:12). The Holy Spirit is like a bank deposit that holds the purchase of salvation for all who believe (Pro 20:6; Eph 1:13-14).

- The Lord dies. God's innocent Son takes the place of guilty people. (Isa 53:5-6; 1 Pt 3:18) [substitution—Passover/Communion]
- The Lord pays. God's sinless Son delivers the ransom price for sinful people. (Psa 34:22; 1 Pt 1:18-19) [redemption]
- The Lord frees. God's holy Son satisfies every demand of divine Law. (Jer 31:33-34; Rom 7:5-6) [propitiation]
- The Lord chooses. God selects undeserving people who embrace the truth. (Deut 7:6; 2 Thess 2:13) [election]
- The Lord acquits. God declares individuals "righteous" through faith alone. (Gen 15:6; Rom 5:8-9) [justification]

GOD SEALS

The Lord confirms believers as His treasured possession (Mal 3:17; Eph 4:30). The Holy Spirit is like a legal seal that secures believers as God's property (Esth 8:8; 2 Cor 1:21-22).

- The Lord raises. God confers new life upon sinners who were spiritually dead. (Ezek 37:14; Eph 2:4-6) [regeneration]
- The Lord befriends. God reconciles with people who were formerly His enemies. (Ezek 37:26-27; Rom 5:10-11) [reconciliation]
- The Lord adopts. God welcomes wayward children into His own family. (Jer 3:19; Rom 8:15-16) [adoption]
- The Lord indwells. God resides forever within all who trust His Son as Savior. (Num 27:18-19; Rom 8:11) [indwelling]
- The Lord owns. God identifies His followers with a mark of ownership. (Gen 17:11; 1 Cor 12:13) [circumcision/baptism]

Action Step: Our theology molds us into the

people we will become: our knowledge, character development, and conduct patterns. Each day, discuss one of these topics together with your child. After you read the related Bible verses, simply ask probing questions and pursue the conversation. May it be your daily ambition to know God intimately, to love Him passionately, and to serve Him selflessly!

Ready or Not



Cathy A. Harvey

Cathy Harvey is a mom of three and grandmother of five. She has been married for 38 years to Stephen Harvey, her best friend from college. She works as the Administrative Assistant to the Dean of Shepherds College, a college for students with intellectual disabilities, in Union Grove, Wisconsin.

My daughter was struck by a car and killed May 2, 2013. It was her 34th birthday. She was biking her way home from the local community college to arrive home in time to meet her daughters getting off the school bus.

My last words to her before heading off to work were, "Happy Birthday, Anna!" Her last words to her girls were probably a good-bye with her big smile as they hopped on the bus, a routine since their first day of school. Her day started with well wishes coming via Facebook and pinging text notices on her cell. The last sentence on her FB page, speaking of her educational goals cheered, "Getting near the end!" How prophetic those words turned out to be.

We just never know. . .

I imagine most people reading this have some understanding of the Bible and the Lord Jesus Christ as Savior and Redeemer of all who come to Him. But, if not, there is no stronger reason to become a follower of Christ than to have the utmost assurance of an eternity in Heaven. One of the Scripture passages we chose for Anna's funeral was 1 John 5:11-13: "And this is the testimony: God has given us eternal life, and this life is in his Son. He who has the Son has life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have life. 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."

Death is not a respecter of persons. It comes at times when least expected, whether we are ready or not. I was sitting on the couch decompressing from work wondering why no one was home. I arrived in time to take my granddaughter to her dance lesson. It was unusual for Anna and the girls to not be home, so I called her cell, but there was no answer or text reply. I had no sense of something being amiss; I assumed she thought I might be late and called a neighbor for a ride. I did not know, just two and a half miles away, death had already taken her.

I was sitting on the couch eating a peanut butter sandwich unwinding in front of the TV when the coroner and deputy sheriff knocked on my door. Two men, dressed in black—ready or not, they came. . .

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It is difficult to explain how I tried to absorb the coroner's simple, direct statement that our daughter was on her bike, hit by a car, and killed. One sentence. He looked at me with poise and a quiet calm. I returned his gaze and heard his words softly echo in my head as I envisioned them circling my brain. In the first four seconds I already knew where Anna was, and I felt relieved for her. Her struggled life was over; I would not have wished her back to this hard life. I knew for sure Anna was in Heaven and that we would one day see her again. She had finished her race and was ready for eternity.

I hope you are ready as well.