

INTEGRITY is published each month and seeks to encourage all believers in Christ to strive to be one, to be pure, and to be honest and sincere in word and in deed, among themselves and toward all men.

Integrity

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ON HAVING A HIGH BOILING POINT *(continued from page 162)*

and do the wrong things, we cannot claim to be tolerant.

It is easy for us to defend our grumbling by saying, "But I have a legitimate complaint!" Of course. Otherwise there would be no need for patience. People who are never subjected to heat do not need a "high boiling point." But when we are disposed to complain about our brethren, we should check on the real reason for complaining. It might tell us an unpleasant truth about ourselves.

Unfortunately, when some of us talk about loving our brethren, we have in mind those brethren who share our general religious outlook, who are always nice to us, and who correspond reasonably well to what we think the ideal Christian should be. They may slip occasionally,

but only in matters that are not too important to us. We can even "love" the unsavory characters in general, as long as we do not have to be close to a particular one. But that love is not "always specific, always costly." It is merely the love of pagans, which falls short of the Christian specification that "love is patient."

We should not be surprised that some of us do not measure up to the Biblical obligation of tolerance. The numerous exhortations to forbearance in the New Testament suggest that our problem has always afflicted the church. Yet this fact should not encourage us to be content with the status quo. Let us not rest until what was said of the apostles can be said of all of us: "When reviled, we bless . . . when slandered, we conciliate."

May 1979

Integrity

Editorial: On Having a High Boiling Point

The Lord out of the Whirlwind

Julie Duncan

"A Time for Praying, and . . . for Settling Bees"

Don Reece

New Life for Your Church

Edward Fudge

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ON HAVING A HIGH BOILING POINT

It is a sign of great progress that so many of our people have learned to be genuinely tolerant. But, unfortunately, some of us who have a reputation for tolerance are in fact merely indifferent to things that upset others, or have only shifted positions without any real change in attitude. Those who are indifferent just do not care one way or another, and have no authentic fellowship. And those who have only changed the focus of their intolerance may get along very well with brethren who agree with their so-called liberal viewpoint, but lose their cool when someone takes a position which really disturbs them, and, consequently, they begin to break fellowship by avoiding, finding fault with, and/or—to use James' colorful word—"groan against" their fellow Christians. In either case, Christ's purpose for us is frustrated.

"Forbearing one another in love" is a vital mark of the church, and a synonymous requirement is to have a "high boiling point" (the root meaning of "longsuffering"). This enabling love is, as Markus Barth puts it, "always specific, always costly"—to us as it was to Christ. His love, far from being selective, was such that he died for us while we were still *enemies*, and he insists that we likewise love *our* enemies, who are identified as those who hate, curse, abuse, and persecute us. This is no easy task. Jesus had to put up with a people who sorely tried his patience and provoked him to exclaim, "Faithless generation! How long am I to put up with you?" But love enabled him to succeed; and so can we.

"Putting up with one another in love" presupposes fellowship with people who—as we perceive them—do wrong, have bad attitudes, and hold false views. It implies a unity in diversity which is not to be curtailed by restricting "freedom for the other" or by a narrow definition of "diversity." The whole concept of forbearance is meaningless unless it relates to people who annoy us and worry us. Until we can put up with those who say

(continued on back cover)

The Lord out of the Whirlwind

CLUES TO AN UNSOLVED RIDDLE

JULIE DUNCAN

Normal, Illinois

The problem of evil has haunted the mind of man from Aeschylus to Camus. Robert Gordis has pointed out that although Job is a work of literary genius, the universal appeal lies not therein, but rather in its theme: "for it is concerned with the most agonizing issue confronting man."¹ For the most part, while leading relatively comfortable lives, we are content to gloss over and live above the disturbing issues and unanswered questions of life. However, when we hit a rough spot, we are then momentarily jarred into asking questions with a little more urgency. And when we meet with tragedy beyond normal proportions, as some of us have done, what was a casual inquiry becomes—as happened with Job—a cry of the utmost sincerity raised to a steady pitch of desperation.

The immeasurable value of what the poet has done is to compel us to embark on a journey we might not normally have chosen while living in relative ease. As the story of Job unfolds we become increasingly involved with his search for answers. The conflict in which he is caught up is not that of the agnostic, the atheist, the nihilist or the humanist; rather it arises out of the distinct position of one who believes in a God who should be both good and all-powerful. For us as Christians, who also accept that God should be both good and all-powerful, this means that Job's fate cannot be separated from ours. We must see that whatever illumination he comes to is inextricably bound up with our own destiny.

Job cannot throw up his hands at cosmic meaninglessness and take refuge in despair, nor can he bring himself to believe that God is irrelevant and find solace in human love. Job sees himself as a marked man. Someone is picking on him, and, ironically enough, it is the very One from whom he should be able to expect fair play. Thus his agony stems from the fact that he sees himself pursued by, and contending with, a Person. Yet this is also ultimately his consolation.

Satan's Question

"Does Job fear God for naught?" The question Satan raises in the prologue sets the stage for the drama and must shape our interpretations of what happens therein. As we will later see, the climax of the story becomes more meaningful in the light of Satan's challenge. This fact does not prove the original homogeneity of the poem with the prose section; it rather makes the ongoing disputes about it irrelevant to the issue. The fact is that the work in its present form is meaningful as a literary whole.

Jon Levenson has drawn an indispensable distinction between biblical and literary criticism. To the biblical critic, the problems of dating and authorship are of impor-

tance. The literary critic, however, accepts the text as it is because those reading it and involved with its authorship saw fit to leave it in its present form. "The historian of literature must recognize a measure of authority in the traditional text because of its acceptance by twenty-four hundred years of readers."² Levenson's comment is pertinent, not only to this particular issue, but to those questions of authenticity raised throughout the work.

The question Satan has raised is whether man is capable of serving the ideal for its own sake, without hope of reward.³ As Samuel Terrien has observed, "Job stands at the center of the Bible and says this hard shocking word, 'it does not pay to be religious.'"⁴ The question of utilitarian religion can only be posed within the framework of the Hebraic understanding of God and his relationship to man. First of all, He is not an impersonal force or nebulous power. He is a Person. Secondly, he does not look indifferently upon events on earth. He is, on the contrary, intimately involved with the happenings of man. Far from being morally indifferent, his hand can be seen moving among his people, rewarding good and punishing evil. He is not a static idol to be appeased, but rather a Personality with whom his people have entered into a relationship.

Implications of the Question

There are two implications behind the question Satan raises. The first is that there might *be* another reason for serving God other than out of fear or hope for gain. The second is that God is Someone who might *want* to be served for reasons other than out of fear or hope for gain. Within the framework of a theological system where God is either amoral or an impersonal force, or, as in the case of primitive religion, a deity to be appeased because he wields power, Satan's question becomes meaningless.

An added dimension to Job's situation is the specific nature of his own faith. Job's belief was such that it could not be separated from the course of events in his life. His faith was the interpretive factor in all that happened to him. He could not see those things which befell him as unrelated to his God. Terrien has put it, "The faith of Job was not the belief of his Friends. This was the reason for which he was pursued by a reality which, in his torture, appeared like enmity. The Friends, on the contrary, believed in a God who respected the decencies and amenities of their existence."⁵ Job saw a God who had not kept a safe distance, but who had disruptively broken into the smooth course of daily life. Yet it was this very faith which allowed him to experience the God who tears the curtain and allows us into his presence.

The challenge of Satan, the Hebraic concept of God, and Job's perception of His relationship to the events of his own life are all important factors to keep in mind as we move toward the climactic point of the whole story. The book of Job offers no neat solution to the problem of evil. Still, because it takes this as its theme, we may justifiably expect that light will be thrown upon the issue. Judging from the numerous and widely varying interpretations proposed by scholars and literary critics, it is evident that the God speeches are indeed perplexing. The truth is, when we finally reach the moment when it is expected we will find the key to the bewildering problem we have been scrutinizing, we only find ourselves confronted with a baffling mystery—a riddle. We only know that Job's position is radically altered from that previous to

those two chapters. We the readers find ourselves desperately sifting through those few short moments for clues to Job's change of heart.

In answer to those who deny the authenticity of the speeches, Levenson's distinction between the biblical and the literary critic is pertinent. To those who suggest that the speeches are only crude taunts which dissolve the story into absurdity there is a twofold answer. First of all, we may expect that any author who has occupied himself so long and intimately with his theme will not allow his work to crumble into nonsense at the crucial point. The other element of this rebuttal has to do with the Hebraic world view, which does not include absurdity or purposelessness.

The Overwhelming Presence of God

Nonetheless, there remain radically varying interpretations among those who assume the authenticity and literary integrity of the whirlwind segment. However, I have found that they fall into two general categories. One of these is that God wins Job over by his display of might. Such a view is represented by David Howard when he says of Job and his friends at the theophany: "They are bludgeoned into silence by the towering majesty of God."⁶ Job, when confronted by the overwhelming presence of God, has no alternative but to shut his mouth. Levenson expresses the same idea when he says that "God forces Job into a position of contrition."⁷

On the most extreme end of this view Job is simply crushed by brute strength. I have not encountered any critics who go to this length. In most cases they mitigate such a view by explaining the process whereby Job changes: the overwhelming presence of God causes him to forget his questions and his pain. Howard quotes *The New Bible Dictionary*: "His problems evaporate when he realizes the greatness of God."⁸ Although Gordis presents a much more intricate and carefully thought out interpretation, he sounds somewhat like Howard when he says, "When man steep himself in the beauty of the world his troubles grow petty, not because they are unreal, but because they dissolve within the larger plan. . . ."⁹ Gordis mitigates the "might makes right" idea by explaining the new knowledge to which God brings Job. There is also an important distinction between Howard and Gordis in that Gordis points out that Job's problems do not cease to exist. Still I think even his view must be judged to overlook the full scope of what Job has undergone.

Perhaps the mistake of criticisms which lean in this direction is their failure to recognize the full extent of the "beating" Job has taken. He is a man who has met with unimaginable catastrophes. Most of his loved ones are dead, and he is hopelessly estranged from those who remain living. He has been tormented emotionally, undergoing psychological, if not physical, abuse from those around him. He has been used as a test case by his friends, and they have reviled him when he has refused to fit into their theories. Moreover, we may assume that from the opening of the story almost to the end Job has lived in the agitation and frustration produced by constant physical pain. There is something indelicate, if not brutally insensitive, about using the word "petty" for all of this—under any circumstances.

We may ascertain, by probing more deeply into the story and into the nature of suffering as we know it, that there is another dimension of Job's *metanoia*. As we read the book it becomes evident that the result of Job's suffering—his estrangement from

God—becomes also the source of his suffering. In chapter 29 there is a poignant lament for the days when he was close to God:

Oh, that I were as in the months of old,
as in the days when God watched over me;
when his lamp shone upon my head,
and by his light I walked through darkness.

It is plain that the answer for the man in such a predicament is not “bludgeoning.” The question at stake is whether we perceive Job’s lowered head as mere surrender to brute strength or concede something more at work—something more complex than the tipping of balances through weight and strength.

Severe physical pain obstructs the normal thought processes. Logical explanations and reasoning make little difference to a person in pain, not because they are faulty or untrue, but because they are simply irrelevant. The question we may justifiably ask is: is it even possible for a man who has fallen to Job’s state to find solace in *any* kind of acquisition of knowledge, however true? Anyone who has known grief or pain, or been close to someone who has, has seen that aspect of consolation which is wholly irrational. The bereaved person finds a moment of peace as the sun rises; the invalid in severest pain obtains some relief in the stroke of someone’s fingers; the man in the throes of depression experiences momentary solace in strains of music. The “poem” bringing consolation does so before it is explicated. There is an aspect to consolation which is wholly inarticulate.

The topic leads us back to the “riddle.” Job has hit rock bottom; nothing anyone has said or done throughout 37 chapters has alleviated the intense suffering which has caused him to cry out again and again and again. In a few short moments . . . Job is quited. Is it the silence of an animal cowed into submission by its master, or the silence of a man released from agony?

Once we are aware of Job as a human being like ourselves, with all the complex needs entailed therein, we must agree to something at work in this passage which goes not only beyond brute force but even beyond rational explanations. Robert Duncan, in an article in *Christian Scholar’s Review*, has said of the theophany: “. . . what emerges from this encounter is not a logical and precise explanation of Job’s anguish and frustration, but a new vision of the Almighty which begets trust and repentance.”¹⁰ In regard to this he has quoted William Barrett: “Anyone who has had any personal experience of a spiritual crisis will know that recovery does not come through the acquisition of any new abstract ideas. The progress from sickness to health is a change of being, rather than a change in thought.”¹¹ Most significantly of all, we may find our proof of this kind of change in his own words: “I had heard of thee by the hearing of the ear/but now my eyes see thee.”¹² The gap which has been bridged is that between theoretical and experiential knowledge. Job recognized the inadequacy of all we mouth or hear about God as opposed to an experience of his presence. Something has been transacted here which goes immeasurably beyond the articulation of theological systems—and it brings Job to his knees.

The Existentialist Explanation

The other main category into which interpretations fall is existentially-oriented. Generally speaking, it says that God’s presence *alone* saves Job by showing him God is

with him in his suffering. In its most extreme form it involves a sentimentality which is wholly unfounded by the text. In the course of his discussion on the Whirlwind Speeches, Gordis quotes a writer who has taken this extreme: “It is as though a child who, lost and alone at night in a dense forest . . . were suddenly to hear the steps and the voice of his father, were to feel himself lifted up in paternal arms and carried home.”¹³ There is nothing “cosy” about the theophany. When God comes to Job, he does not invite him to sit back and relax; he commands him to gird up his loins. The value of a view like Gordis’s is that it gives proper attention to the tone of the text, for God’s words are not soft or soothing. The majestic poem of God’s creation takes up the bulk of the text, and the questions he confronts Job with take up the rest. The deanthropocentrization Job undergoes is a necessary element constituting his change of heart. In other words, while the rationalist explanation *alone* is not enough to explain the outcome of the theophany, neither is the existentialist. Both the text and our own experience testify to the complexity of the needs of a suffering man.

The Theophany a Paradox

Samuel Terrien, in his discussion of the bafflingly harsh and aloof attitude of a God who has shown himself to man, has explained the contradiction in this way: “Every time man senses God’s love when it is truly God’s love and not a sentimental sweetening of the human variety, ‘its such an odd sort of mercy, it sometimes looks like a punishment.’”¹⁴ In the final analysis, the climactic theophany crowning the book of Job is a paradox. The poet implements that dramatic device whereby what is being said is in direct opposition to what is taking place. Juxtaposed to God’s *words* which shrink Job to his proper place, we have his *act* of coming down to meet man. The Creator of all the universe—the One who has shut in the sea with doors and caused the stars to sing on the first morning—has stooped to meet one lonely man upon his pile of ashes. That awesome act must momentarily still every rational word and explanation upon our lips. Then we may begin to see what is at work in the theophany.

Again we may call upon the testimony of personal experience. There is something in the nature of suffering which asks for more than one kind of consolation. We cry out for someone who will identify with us in our pain—who will not remain unmoved and stand aloof as Job’s friends did. And yet, for the very reason that we are so weak and vulnerable, there is that in us which begs for Someone or some thing beyond, or larger than, ourselves. The uniqueness of the Judeo-Christian revelation is that its God is named *Immanuel* or *Jahweh*. Perhaps in the theophany God has done what only God could do. He has been two things at once to Job. He has gathered up both sides of him, filling his deepest longings for someone to be both near and beyond him. The result of such an experience is not that Job’s problems drop away on all sides and he forgets his pain. His pain and his loss remain. That is the very reason why his repentance in the midst of them is significant. Job does not receive the answer to his question, but Satan does to his. His sneering suggestion that Job serves God because it pays is silenced. It is silenced when man meets God and bows his head, not because of what God does for him, or to him, but because of *who God is*.

The thing which elevates Job to heroic distinction is the tenuous position he has chosen to maintain. With the onslaught of calamity he does not sit passively, piously

mouth the right things, pretending to sit firmly atop the situation. Neither does he abandon his faith, plummeting to despair and defeat. He has chosen the slippery and terrifying position of a point somewhere in between. Levenson made a perceptive observation of his situation: "Job walks the narrow ridge between empiricism which denies faith and faith which denies experience."¹⁵ Job, with his pain in one hand and his faith in the other, refusing to let go of either, cries to Heaven.

Making Sense out of Suffering

There are two extreme reactions which we are susceptible to in our attempts to make sense out of suffering. Atheists and agnostics may throw up their hands in defeat and despair, resigning themselves to the absurdity of man's predicament in the universe. Theists and specifically Christians may feel compelled to offer reasons and solutions, their strident cries to justify God covering up the sounds of misery around them. The story of Job is the story of a man who has faced his severe pain without the anesthesia of conventional religion and self-deception, or despair and sheer hatred. Thus he has won a meeting with a severe God and obtained a severe mercy.

The words of Aeschylus describe most movingly the process which Job has undergone: "As pain that cannot forget, falls drop by drop upon the heart, and in our despite, against our will, comes wisdom to us by the awful grace of God." The heart which is able to feel the drop by drop of pain is the heart which is not numbed by the self-pity of despair nor the self-deception of false piety. It would be most tragic if in all our philosophical and theological speculations about Job we should fail to hear this message for ourselves. More than an *answer* to the why of suffering, Job is a *question* of how we will bear our own and respond to that of others. Let us not fail, as the Friends did, to recognize in that pain-wracked visage of Job the face of a man like ourselves. Hence we might obtain wisdom—by awe-full Grace. □

1. Robert Gordis, *The Book of God and Man* (Chicago & London, 1965), p. 7.
2. Jon Levenson, *The Book of Job in Its Time and in the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge, Mass., 1972), p. 18.
3. Gordis, p. 154.
4. Samuel Terrien, *Job: Poet of Existence* (New York & Indianapolis, 1957), p. 20.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 99.
6. David M. Howard, *How Come, God?* (Philadelphia & New York, 1972), p. 109.
7. Levenson, p. 26.
8. *The New Bible Dictionary*, p. 637.
9. Gordis, p. 133.
10. Robert L. Duncan, "Problem of Evil: A Comparison of Classical and Biblical Versions," *Christian Scholar's Review*, ed. George K. Brushaber, Vol. III, No. 1 (1973).
11. William Barrett, "Existentialism As a Symptom of Man's Contemporary Crisis," in *Spiritual Problems in Contemporary Literature*, ed. Stanley Romaine Hopper (New York, 1957), p. 140.
12. Job 42:5.
13. Gordis, p. 128.
14. Terrien, p. 241.
15. Levenson, p. 24.

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REACTION

"A TIME FOR PRAYING, AND A TIME FOR SETTLING BEES"

DON REECE

Radford, Virginia

"The children of the world are wiser than the children of light." So said the Lord in Luke 16:8.

The truth of this statement is today being heavily underscored by what must be one of the most extraordinary and amazing "arguments" that has ever been made against the Restoration Movement: that there is no authority for the Restoration concept itself.

This objection has been made by several writers and in several different publications over the past few years, but perhaps the most notable example of it is that which appeared in a recent *Integrity* article [by C. Barry Willbanks, December, 1978]. In the middle section of this article, which is subtitled "Is the Concept of Restoration, as Historically Defined, a New Testament One?" the writer, after baldly asserting that "the answer is no," proceeds to examine each New Testament passage in which the words "restore" and "restoration" appear, and concludes that in each case the restoration envisaged was relational, i.e., restoration to fellowship with God such as existed before the Fall and will exist again only after the final resurrection. He then jumps from this to the conclusion that, therefore, our historical concept of restoring "the ancient order" is a departure "from sound New Testament theology," is "uncanonical in the highest sense," and that our efforts to do so "must be judged as graceless perversions." A more glaring example of unmitigated sophistry and shifting and con-

fusing of the issues would be difficult to imagine.

He is right, I think, in his analysis of the passages cited, and in his conclusion that the restoration there envisaged is that of future perfection. This type of restoration, however, is the ultimate hope and objective of every sect in Christendom—from Catholic, Orthodox, and Protestant, to the new Unification (or Moon) Church. The restoration, on the other hand, to which we are distinctively committed, is, as he correctly states it, the "restoration of the ancient order"—i.e., the restoration of the Apostolic Church in teaching, sacraments, worship, polity, etc. That there is not, and could not be, specific Scriptural authority for this type of restoration should be apparent to any sane person from the fact that the apostasy which made it necessary did not occur until after the New Testament was written. To argue, therefore, on the above basis, that our position is not valid is not only to compare apples with oranges, but is also to beg the question.

None of the Restoration pioneers, so far as I know, ever claimed or imagined that there was authority for the kind of effort they were making. They took it for granted that if the teachings, sacraments, worship, polity, etc. of the Church had been changed or corrupted it could not but be right to correct them—that if the Church was, in the words of Barton W. Stone, "off the foundation of the Apostles and Prophets," it could not but be right to put it back onto that ancient

foundation. The premise on which they proceeded was stated quite clearly by Thomas Campbell in the *Declaration and Address*:

Were we, then, in our Church constitutions and managements, to exhibit a complete conformity to the apostolic Church, would we not be, in that respect, as perfect as Christ intended we should be? And should not this suffice us?

In this they operated on the same common sense assumption as did a truck driver with whom I once “thumbed” a ride from Vesta to Fort Chiswell, Virginia. In the town of Hillsville he took a wrong turn with the result that he ended up in Galax (30 miles to the southwest) at about the time he should have been pulling into Fort Chiswell. He did not reach for a company handbook, or rush to a telephone to inquire of headquarters in Norfolk whether he had authority to put himself back on course. He simply turned his truck around, drove back to where he took the wrong turn, took an extra-long good look to be sure he was now taking the right one, and then, when reasonably certain he was back on course, went trucking on down the road. That is exactly what the Restoration Fathers did. They found the Church off the apostolic foundation in much of its teaching and practice, and proceeded, to the best of their ability and understanding, to put it back onto a more Biblical basis. They no more thought they needed authority for what they were doing than the truck driver thought he needed authority for getting himself back on course.

I am reminded of the story of the Pennsylvania parson who called on a neighboring farmer to talk to him about his soul. When he arrived, the farmer was busily engaged in settling a swarm of bees, and paid little or no attention to his efforts to talk religion. The preacher thereupon knelt down and began to pray for him in a very excited and emotional manner, with the result that the bees settled on him, and almost stung him to death.

The farmer, who had to beat them off him, was himself badly stung in the process, and also ended up losing the bees. When it was all over he turned to the preacher and said: “Preacher, the Good Lord God Almighty made a time for praying, and He also made a time for settling bees—and he gave you credit for having enough sense to know not to try to mix them!”

To those who argue that there is no authority or theological basis for the kind of restoration for which we plead I answer in the spirit of that farmer: “The Good Lord Jesus Christ gave you credit for having enough sense to know that if his Church became corrupted in faith and practice He would want you to correct or restore it. He didn’t insult your intelligence by telling you to do what a common, ordinary truck driver knew to do without being told!”

But the children of the world . . .

Supplementary Note: I know, of course, where those who make this objection “are coming from.” I know that many of them have had some bad experiences with extreme forms of Restorationism (as have I), and I suspect that some of them have been so soured by these that they want to chuck the whole concept. Hence the argument that the concept itself is without validity. I also know where the Russian Communists “were coming from” when they rejected Christianity—for I have read enough history to know that for many years previous the Russian Orthodox Church, the only “Christianity” they knew anything about, had allied itself with the Czars and been used as an instrument of oppression. But I cannot believe that this justified them in rejecting *true* Christianity and making atheism the religion of the state. And no more can I believe that extreme forms of Restorationism is any justification for rejecting the principle itself. *One does not need to run past Jerusalem in order to get away from Rome!* □

New Life for Your Church

EDWARD FUDGE

Athens, Alabama

Would you like to see new life come into your local church? What preacher worth his salt wouldn’t! How many dollars, and words, and hours do you suppose are spent every week in churches across America in quest of that very thing? The totals would surely be staggering! There is only one source of true life—and it doesn’t require dollars or much “doing.” It is definitely *not* found in gimmicks or gadgets, projects or promotions, organized plans (as such) or man’s “sweat” and “great ideas.” But it is sure to work—and it has been here all along.

Switch on your imagination with me for a few minutes. The time is the Beginning. It is the sixth day. Pretend that you are in the middle of the story. God has just taken dust from the earth to form a human creature. “Adam” is the Hebrew word for this fellow—it means both “dust” and “man.” The rest of Paradise is perfectly ready, and God is making one in His own image to rule over it all.

But imagine now that a curious angel is standing in the bushes near where God is working this sixth day. And this curious angel has a curious idea. He will make a man, too—just like God’s! So he watches carefully, and everything that God does, he does. A basic body . . . a basic body for the angel’s “man.” A head—a head. A pair of ears, of eyes, of arms, of legs. The same. Then the fine tuning. Organs for the inside, finishing touches on the outside. Not bad for a mud-man—and the angel’s looks like a clone of God’s.

But then God does something the copycat angel cannot do. He breathes into His man’s nostrils the *breath of life*—and the real Adam becomes a *living soul!* The angel breathes, then pants, then puffs and blows like the wolf at the pig’s house—but nothing happens. He sits down in desperation and disappointment, just as Adam gets up, stretches, runs and sings for the very first time, then comes back again to fall down before the Creator in true creaturely worship.

There are many books and classes and sermons and seminars today on the general theme of “How to Have a Lively Church.” And far too many of them are like the angel and his mud-man—in method, and in the disappointing result. People can plan, and organize, and arrange, and “pep-talk,” and nothing happens. They can outline their project, synchronize their watches, hit the streets, and wear themselves out—and still have a lifeless, motionless mud-man of a church. Most people who have lived long enough to be concerned about the whole affair will not only agree that what I am saying is true, they can probably name some places and churches where they have seen it happen!

Life can come only from life. And only the living God, through the Holy Spirit, testifying of the divine God-Man Jesus Christ, giving faith through the gospel, regenerating hearts that are dead in sin, enlivening through the gospel truth, building, confirm-

ing, establishing—only GOD can give life to a church. Without Him there can be much “religious” activity. There can be great commotion and noise and dust of battle and sweat of work. There can be the grandest of projects and sincerity of heart. There can even be many prayers, urgently beseeching God’s blessing on *our* ideas! But there will be no *life*. Only life can give life.

The Preacher with the Deadest Audience of All

There is a story in the obscure book of Ezekiel which illustrates this truth perfectly. Ezekiel is not one of the better-known books of the Bible, of course, and he doesn’t make the sermons very often. But he was a faithful and true man of God, and the Lord spoke good words through him. So we can be sure that what he recorded will be worth our while. Even if we do need a thumb-index to find him.

Ezekiel lived during the Babylonian captivity of the Jews. Daniel was there, too, but Daniel was a princely fellow who served God in the king’s court. Ezekiel was more our kind of man—a commoner—and he lived among the people. They often thought him a bit peculiar, however, because of his strange visions and dreams, and because of the strange way he sometimes acted out his message in pantomimes.

On this particular occasion (reported in chapter 37), God took Ezekiel in a vision to a desolate battlefield. Whatever great battle had transpired there was long forgotten. Poppies were growing everywhere (the Bible didn’t say that, but we can imagine it to make the vision modern). And scattered over the ancient battleground Ezekiel saw bones. Human bones. Skeletons, once covered with flesh and skin and filled with life . . . but now bare and lifeless. There they lay—parched by the sun and washed by the rain. Disjointed. Dead.

Then God gave Ezekiel what was probably the most hopeless assignment ever given to a preacher in any age.

“Preach to these dead bones!”

“Preach to what?” Ezekiel might have responded. “Why, Lord, who ever heard of such a thing? I can’t preach to dead bones! I’m the only living thing in a hundred miles, Lord! Except you, of course. Except you.” (Ezekiel didn’t say that, of course, because he had a much better acquaintance with the Living God than most of us. Like Abraham long before, he knew God as a God who raises the dead and calls things that do not exist as if they did. So he didn’t reason with God, or argue. He just started preaching.)

When Ezekiel obeyed and started preaching, those dead bones started moving. The old “gospel song” tells it vividly, even if it is sometimes sung irreverently. The bones started moving—finding each other—and joining together according to the original arrangements that God made when He first formed Adam out of dust. The toe bones connected to the foot bones. The foot bones connected to the ankle bones. Ankle bones to the shin bones. Shin bones to the knee bones. And so on, right on up the line, until that field of dry bones was full of perfectly-fitted skeletons. But that wasn’t the end of the story! Ezekiel kept right on preaching, and God kept right on working, and those bones started growing muscles. Then tendons and ligaments. Then skin. Where once there was only death, now there was *life*! What an experience that must have been for Ezekiel!

“Here’s the point,” God said. “Tell the house of Israel: ‘You are like that valley of dry bones. Here you are in captivity, separated from your homeland by a vast desert, cut off from your temple, your priesthood, your ancestral inheritance. As a nation, you are as lifeless as a skeleton. But GOD is still alive. And GOD is able to bring life from death! GOD can put those bones together—and grow strong muscles, and lay on fresh new skin! GOD can put LIFE where DEATH once was. Believe God. Trust God. Look to God. Depend entirely on God. Some of you will see it happen before your very eyes, inside of 70 years. Sure things look hopeless. But God works most mightily in the midst of hopelessness. Hear, O Israel, you will see the glory of the Lord God!’ ”

Something else strikes me about Ezekiel’s vision here. When he “got home” that night from his vision, he couldn’t even pat himself on the back. Not one of those skeletons came by and shook his hand and said, “Nice sermon.” Nothing he had ever learned about preaching had done the job. Quite the opposite! The first rule of secular homiletics is to find an audience with potential. What happened on that deserted battlefield had transpired without money, without organization, without human planning, without education—without anything we usually think is necessary for results. GOD had acted. But God used Ezekiel.

God Is the Same Today!

God is ready to move into our churches today, just as He moved into that valley of dry bones. He can still give life in the place of death. Supposed obstacles are no hindrance to God—you might even say that, with Him, the more “hopeless” the better. And God can do His work without any of the crutches and supports we humans generally assume are necessary. But God also still usually works through human servants. Servants like Ezekiel, who will trust Him as God, who will be outlandishly obedient, who will do things in ways they have never done them before, simply because God says to do it. People who will—to put it bluntly—let God *be God*.

Does it surprise you to find God using the same kind of language to describe spiritual life today? Jesus stressed the divine initiative when He talked with Nicodemus in John 3. That good Jewish ruler had a lot going for him. He was prominent in the community, active in his “church,” and a respected member of the Court. But Jesus told him he needed to be born a second time—to start over completely—to have a new and different kind of *life* from any he had previously known. And Jesus explained why. “That which is born of flesh,” He said, “*is* flesh. That which is born of spirit is *spirit*. Marvel not that I say unto you, you must be born again.” Plants reproduce plants. Animals reproduce animals. Humans reproduce humans. But it takes a work of God to bring into being spiritual life.

Churches may be filled with people who have been through the baptistry, who are scrupulous in church attendance, who live good moral lives, who are active and sacrificial in every church project and program—but who are as dead as Ezekiel’s dry bones so far as real spiritual life is concerned. (And make no mistake, God has a definite place for baptism, church attendance, morality and dedication, but that place is not in *generating spiritual life*.) There are likely thousands of “church members” who have memorized the correct “formulas,” learned the “steps of salvation,” and studied all

their "distinctive doctrines," but who know deep in their own hearts that the whole business is resting on their own shoulders, and who have very little true assurance of salvation or peace with God on a day-to-day basis. And this is every bit as true in those churches which stress "assurance" as in those which stress "perseverance." Religion for them has become rationalized and systematized. But they are simply not born again from above. They do not have the life of God. And no matter how hard they try, or how well they mean, or how sincere they might be, people like this never make a living church.

Now they might very well copy a pattern of externals. They can get two arms, and two legs, and two ears and eyes. But when the real Adam gets up and praises God, their man will lie in the mud. "Restoration" can never do the job. "Reformation" cannot generate life. What is needed is "regeneration." And that is a work of God, based on the finished work of Christ, in the power of the Holy Spirit, through the

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preaching and faith-ful hearing of the objective Good News about God's representative work for sinners in His Son Jesus Christ.

This is the way Paul describes his own ministry in 2 Corinthians 4. "God who said, 'Let there be light!' has shined the light in our hearts," Paul says. Those who do not believe have been blinded by the god of this world. We are part of a cosmic struggle, a conflict spanning human history—between God and Satan. And while the end is already determined (we see that in Jesus' victorious resurrection, based on His sinless life!), Satan is still pictured as a "roaring lion." The work of regeneration is not a work man can perform. It is a work of God. "Of His own will begat He us, by the word of truth," James writes, "that we might be a kind of firstfruits of His creation" (1:18). "Being born again, not of corruptible seed, but of incorruptible," Peter declares, "by the word of God, which lives and abides forever" (1 Pet. 1:22-23). John the Evangelist records it this way: "To as many as received Him, to them gave He power to become sons of God, even to as many as believed on His name. Who were born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of man, but of God" (1:12-13).

Some object that this is too "supernatural." They want to be able to understand their religion, to explain it—and there is nothing wrong with faith seeking understanding. But we must not forget one fact: God is a supernatural God! He is the one who creates from nothing. He is the God who simply says, "Let light be!" and light comes into being. He is the God who makes dry bones come together, and grow flesh, and live again. And He is the God who alone can come in the gospel to men and women who are "dead in trespasses and sins" and, for the sake of His beloved Son, "quicken them," give them *life*, raise them up and make them walk and leap and praise God!

This is the work God does through the true gospel. And in accomplishing this enormous task, the sovereign God has willed to entrust the gospel to us poor vessels of clay! To Him be the kingdom, the power and the glory for ever and ever! Let all who serve the living God say "Amen!" □

INDEX TO VOLUME TEN

Compiled by Don Reece

ARTICLES

- Brown, Sara L., Moral Behavior
in the Young Child 152
Virtue and Morality: The Stages 8
Duncan, Julie, The Lord
out of the Whirlwind 163
Edwards, Bruce, Jr., "We Despaired
of Life Itself"..... 99
Fudge, Edward, New Life for
Your Church 171
Garrett, Leroy, A Precipitous Journal 73
Griggs, Daniel, A Hermeneutic
that Divides, and Grace 13
Hatcher, Gene, A Necessary Forum 70
Haymes, Don, Biblical Ecology: Man and
Nature in the Religion of Israel (1)..... 115
Biblical Ecology: Man and Nature in
the Religion of Israel (2) 131
Resisting the Slanderer 3
Higgs, Elton and Laquita, A Means
of Togetherness 70
Holden, Allen, Jr., Love Thy Neighbor 26
Huddleston, Dave, We Are Protestant
and Catholic and Jew 103
Jones, Joseph F., For We Walk by Faith 67
Ketcherside, W. Carl, Are We a Church? 108
Freedom from Sectarianism 42
Instauratio Magna 92
An Open Forum 12
Playing It Safe 56
We Need Integrity 74
Lane, Tom, An Analysis of
Liberation Theology 147
Grace Frees 60
Life More Adventurous 106
Ledbetter, Hoy, Alternative Television? 114
God's Reconciling Community 28
The Magnificent Church 50
A Matter of Perspective 98
The Microcosmic Congregation 51
A New Pope 34
Notes on Various Topics 146
Notes Regarding This Issue 66
Old Light Anti-Burgher Seceder
Presbyterians and Others 130
On Having a High Boiling Point 162
Pitfalls of Distinctiveness 159
Problems with the Right of
Private Judgment 18
A Reassessment of Goals 77
Thanksgiving and Forgiving 82
Trying to Learn 2
Lemley, F.L., How the Bible Says 94
Musick, David W., The Motive for
Christian Service 38
Parks, Norman L., Administrative
Integrity 57
A Prophetic Voice 75
The Two Models Again 22
Plaster, Douglas, The Ministry
of the Word 126
Randolph, Robert M., For Freedom
Christ Has Set Us Free 19
Reece, Don, The Gospel in Water 121
Praying . . . and Settling Bees 169
Reynolds, Jim, A Model for
Church Leadership 135
Robinson, Grady James, Kids These
Days: Their Questions Don't Fit
My Answers 14
Sims, Jim, On the Value of *Integrity*:
A Personal Testimony 72
Smith, John, Baptism and the
Liberal Mind 43
Spradlin, Michael, I Dream of Flying 125
Stewart, Hugh V., Beyond Guyana 111
Thoroman, Darrell E., A Pledge
from the Treasurer 71
Thoroman, Dean A., Mirrors and
Crystal Balls 69
Willbanks, C. Barry, Is the Concept of
"Restoration" Valid for Today's
Bible College? 83
Worley, E. Neil, Decisions and Divisions 138
Zenor, C.W., The Restoration Concept 157

POETRY

- Earl, G.B., On "The Power of Sin" and
Debates with Atheists 124
Harris, Wayne, Theological Hairspray 40
Higgs, Elton D., The Desert Transformed... 62
Of Dogs and Sheep 93
Jacob at Peniel 156
Huddleston, David, "In My Last Prayer
God Did All the Talking" 141

VOICE FROM THE PAST

- Adams, John, Quoted 37
Campbell, Thomas, Propositions from
the *Declaration and Address* 142