

INTEGRITY, a journal published by an independent nonprofit corporation, is basically a ministry of reconciliation which utilizes the varied talents of a large community of believers who seek accurately to reveal God to both the church and the world so that all may become one as he is one.

Integrity

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so, then worship of *ourselves* is also idolatry. At times in our worship we are much like the tax collector in Luke 18. We are busy telling God how wonderful we are for being at church meetings every Sunday, and for singing hymns, and taking the Lord's Supper and hearing sermons. We are not worshipping God. We are worshipping an idol — ourselves. We are no better than the Jews of Hosea's day. And all the while, God is saying to us, "I desire mercy, not sacrifice."

Repentance

The story of Hosea did not have to have a bad ending. God told Hosea to take back his wife, even after her un-

faithfulness. The point was that if they would repent and get their hearts right, God would be willing to take back his people in spite of their unfaithfulness to him. And God is not turning his back on any today to whom the message of Hosea 6:6 applies. God is not interested in any of our outward actions unless they are a fruit of our "mercy" — hearts that are completely surrendered to Him. We can perform all kinds of religious rituals each week, but if we are flirting with other Gods including the god of self, then we need to change our inward persons. Through the message of Hosea, God still calls us to be cleansed of all self-righteousness and to give to Him our total selves.

October-December, 1982

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Oct.-Dec., 1982
Vol. 13, No. 8

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Manuscripts and letters to the editor should be sent to the editor's address. Other correspondence requests for subscriptions and back issues, contributions, etc.) should be sent to the business address.

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Making Our Move

The first week in November, if God permits, I will move to Atlanta to begin my new work as preaching minister of the Brookvalley Church. However, except for some minor transitional changes, it will be business as usual for *Integrity*, since the members of the board are unanimously committed to maintaining publication without interruption and to retaining me as editor.

For several years we have been blessed with the privilege of working with the high quality men and women who make up the *Integrity* board. Not only have they been very capable coworkers, but they have also been good friends (in the full sense of the term), and we will certainly miss our frequent and close association with them. On behalf of all of our readers, I would like to express our appreciation to them, for we owe much to their dedication to this project.

On the other hand, I am very excited about working with the outstanding Christians at Brookvalley, and I am confident that God, who has opened so many sticky doors for us in recent months, has blessed us with a special ministry. We really believe that at Brookvalley we will have the sort of spiritual fellowship many of our readers can only dream about. We say this with gratitude and in hope that new possibilities for communion will continue to open up throughout the country.

I suspect that a good many readers, especially those who must fight discouragement within their own congregations, would like to hear more about the Brookvalley Church, but for now all we can do is invite you to visit us whenever you are near Atlanta. The building is located at 1146 Sheridan Road, NE, just inside the Atlanta city limits, off Cheshire Bridge Drive and I-85. (My wife and I would also like for you to have our home address: 1930 Fisher Trail, Atlanta, GA 30345.)

Please note that this issue will span three months, in order to get us back in step with the calendar. And we are prepared to do whatever is necessary to keep on schedule next year.

As we bring this year to a close, we must pause to thank our loyal and patient contributors, without each of whom, it seems, we could not have survived, especially in a year of great economic difficulty for many of us.

—HGL

The God in Chains

W. CARL KETCHERSIDE
St. Louis, Missouri

In that era, designated by one of our more famous poets as "the elder days of art," the fertile minds of the Greeks populated the universe with gods and goddesses, conjured up out of the mists of superstition which hung like the fog of death over the civilized world. Faith accepts the concept that God made man in his own image, but primeval ignorance assumes that man can make gods in his own image.

As no stream can rise above the fountain which gives it birth, not even gods can transcend their creators, so the natural and artificial deities were endowed with all the tragic failures and vices to which fallen man had become heir. Thus the gods lusted and fought, hated and destroyed with all the fury which was projected by imagination to the cloud-wreathed courts on the brow of Olympus.

As an introduction to my principal theme I want to mention one of the gods who was somewhat of an oddity. He loved men, whom it was said he created from the dust of the ground. Prometheus, whose name means "Forethought," was the brother of Epimetheus, "Afterthought," who spent his life repenting of mistakes he should have avoided. The brothers belonged to the mythical race of Titans, and Prometheus looked with compassion on mankind doomed to live in a world of cold and darkness. Risking the jealousy and hostility of Zeus, he stole fire from heaven and conveyed it to earth in a hollow reed.

In revenge, Zeus chained Prometheus to a rock on the highest crag of

Mount Caucasus. Each day a vulture with curved beak gnawed and tore away his liver. Each night it grew back again. Thus was signified the impossibility of the grim symbol of death triumphing over the life of the gods. The suffering of Prometheus as one who brought life and light to the world of forlorn humanity caught the fancy of poets of all ages, and his lot became the theme of literature from Aeschylus' great tragic drama, *Prometheus Bound*, written in 472 B.C., to Shelley's *Prometheus Unbound*, written in 1819 A.D., in which the shackled giant is made to say:

The crawling glaciers pierce me with
the spears
Of their moon-freezing crystals, the
bright chains
Eat with their burning cold into my
bones.
Heaven's winged hound, polluting
from thy lips
His beak in poison not his own,
tears up
My heart; and shapeless sights come
wandering by,
The ghostly people of the realm of
dreams,
Mocking me . . .

How fortunate it is that we may know the true and living God and not be condemned to wander through the mental aisles of fable and fantasy. We serve One who, as the Eternal Word, actually spoke man into being from the dust of the ground, and who, when he saw man dwelling in a realm of darkness and despair, left the glory world to share his lot of suffering. He brought light, for it

was said, "In him was life, and the life was the light of men, and the light shines in the darkness and the darkness is powerless to overcome it." He brought fire, for he said, "I have come to fling fire upon the earth, and how I wish that it were already kindled."

I am concerned that he also is chained! But his links were not forged by a jealous God. Rather, he is chained by those to whom He has brought life, those who profess to be His friends. Not upon some lonely mountain height, but in the midst of the teeming world which he seeks to save, we have fettered him with chains of our own contriving, and he is inhibited and restrained because of our own tragic littleness, bigotry and intolerance.

Traditions

We have chained him with our *traditions*. Confusing cultural contingencies with the divine will revealed through the holy apostles and prophets, we have sought to perpetuate the human judgment of our fathers, and to "attempt the Future's portals with the Past's blood-rusted key," to borrow a phrase from James Russell Lowell. We have measured God's will by the way we have done, rather than testing what we have done by way of God's will. It has not been so much a matter of what is the divine purpose, as what has been our prescribed policy.

Skeletal hands reaching out from the sepulcher have throttled every new approach, and condemned us to treading the tortuous trails of yesterday even when they have led us away from the crying needs of today! We have mistaken wallowing in the old ruts with walking in the old paths. Candor forces us to admit that while we have often failed to restore the spirit of the primitive saints, we have been remarkably successful in recapturing the spirit of the primitive Pharisees.

It is true that while deploring a liturgical approach to God, we have developed a ritual and any departure from it is regarded as a betrayal of the word of God. Our songs are often stereotyped, our prayers patterned and our praise programmed. If the Holy Spirit wanted to infiltrate our worship, and there is no clear sign that He does, He would have to apply for the privilege and might be assigned a five-minute spot right after the offering on the first Sunday of next month.

Our position makes us look askance at our young people who urge us not to get so uptight about sharing with God and to "hang loose and let Jesus put it alltogether." We drive from us those who would pry open the windows looking in the direction of glory and let the fresh winds of heaven waft away the musty odor of our monastic staleness.

I trust it will not startle you to tell you that we have lost Jesus in the Bible and lost the Bible in the church. We must now rescue Jesus from the Bible or become like the scribes and Pharisees to whom Jesus said, "You search the scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life, but their purpose is to testify of me. And you will not come unto me that you might have life."

Life does not come from searching the scriptures. The scriptures do not produce life eternal. The scriptures are a gift from God just as life is a gift from God. We have confused the love letters with the Lover; the Captain of our salvation with his orders; the fodder with the Shepherd; and the prescription with the Physician. We have eclipsed the Son of God with the wisdom of the sons of men. And by worshipping the scriptures we often end up with a head full of quotations and a heart empty of Jesus. Of what use is a road map if we are not going home to Him? The prodigal could have been preoccupied with a road map and remained in the pig pen!

We must recover the Bible from the church. The people of God have carried the word of God captive. Once more the book of God has been lost in the temple of God. It has been buried beneath a pile of partisan practices, cultural customs, institutional inventions, doctrinal deductions and sectarian sham. Traditions are like parasite plants which grow up and entwine themselves around the trunk of truth, and appear, at first, to support it rather than the opposite. Left alone they sap the strength and multiply their foliage until life is stifled and the tree deadened by what once appeared to be innocent and harmless development.

Prejudices

We have chained him with our *prejudices*. Prejudice is the progeny begotten by ignorance and conceived by pride. It confronted Jesus upon every turn. It motivated James and John to suggest calling down fire from heaven to consume a Samaritan village in a holocaust of vengeance. It flung a cringing woman, whose immoral liason was interrupted, down at his feet to see if he would sentence her to death beneath a barrage of stones. Its blinded frenzy drove nails into his hands and feet and a pang of passion into his pulsating heart.

The kingdom of heaven has been victimized by prejudice almost from its inception. Prejudice provoked the murmuring of the Hellenists against the Hebrews in the community of saints in Jerusalem. It joined hands with legalism in a vain attempt to enforce circumcision upon the Gentiles at Antioch. It turned worshipers at the temple into a riotous mob seeking to rend the limbs of Paul from his body because they saw a foreigner with him on a street in Jerusalem.

Prejudice is like the nine-headed Hydra of Argos which Hercules undertook to slay only to learn that each time he cut off a head two more grew in its place. After all the centuries which have

passed we must still contend with racial, cultural, social, political, ethnic and religious prejudice, and the "holier-than-thou" attitude which injects poison into the very body of Christ and renders it incapable of that universal love which prompted God to send His Son into the world.

Prejudice is the clabbering of the milk of human kindness. It is a cataract growth of slimy false pride over the eye of the inner man. It makes a caricature of the cross of Christ and converts the church from a company of the compassionate into a hold of hostility and even hatred. No one who walks in the steps of our Lord can do so while supported by a mental crutch of racial, sexual or social superiority, for "in Christ Jesus there is neither Jew nor Greek, neither male nor female, neither bond nor free, but we are all one in Christ Jesus." And in the context of the agony of our own day we may add, "There is neither black nor white, neither red nor yellow." We are all one!

Nothing is more detrimental to the fulfillment of the ultimate purpose of God than the false assumption that Jesus is a white man's Savior and that the faith once delivered is an export product of western culture. We must constantly stifle the vagrant thought left over from our carnal yesterdays that men are saved by our sacrifice rather than by His. The church is not the dispenser of grace but the recipient of it. We do not take Christ to the world for He came to it before we did. We can only point to Him and His greatness while resisting the ever-present temptation to point to ourselves.

We will never destroy prejudice by delivering diatribes against it from the pulpit. Ignorance is eliminated by teaching and not by sermonizing. And education in both grace and knowledge of the truth is the antidote for all of our prejudices. Ben Hecht, in "A Guide for the Bedevilled," made the statement: "Prejudice is a raft onto which the ship-

wrecked mind clammers and paddles to safety." And Charlotte Bronte, in her novel *Jane Eyre* wrote, "Prejudices, it is well known, are most difficult to eradicate from the heart whose soil has never been loosened or fertilized by education; they grow there firm as weeds among stones."

Jesus deliberately moved into a world filled with selfishness and seething with prejudice. And he moved through that world challenging its smugness and status symbols. His parables were like dynamite to entrenched greed, and like piercing darts driven into the fat underbelly of social tyranny and inequality. In view of this it is to our shame that those who lead in the fight for justice and equality before the law are frequently outside the pale of discipleship, driven by a sense of humanitarian concern rather than of reverence for His will "who made of one blood all nations of men." Our love should be as deep as the love of God, our mercy should be as wide as the mercy of God, our grace should be as broad as the grace of God.

Sectarianism

We chain Him with our *sectarianism*. We are the heirs of a noble ideal. The historical movement which gave us being was born in the hearts of devout men, most of them within the Presbyterian background, who could no longer tolerate the toils of partisan bondage. They were, to quote the words of one of them, "aware from sad experience, of the heinous nature and pernicious tendency of religious controversy among Christians; tired and sick of the bitter jarrings and janglings of a party spirit," As a result of this feeling they inaugurated what another of them called "a project to unite the sects, or rather, the Christians in all of the sects."

Their earnest attempt was frequently met with scoffing and jeers. Boorish roughs in frontier settlements sometimes sought to break up their gatherings.

Violence reared its ugly head upon some occasions, and hardship and suffering were the daily lot of those who sought to propagate the idea that men could be Christians only without allowing themselves to be herded and driven into exclusivistic corrals or branded with a mark of allegiance to a sect or faction.

The dream was magnificent. The vision was glorious. But Satan is always lurking in the purple shadows, ready to move in and divert any reform into another sect, and to betray its adherents into becoming more intolerant than those whom they vainly sought to reform. That we are not altogether free from the nauseating taint of the party spirit, which is a work of the flesh, is evident "at sundry times and in divers manners." Although we may feel that we have fled from Babylon and returned to Jerusalem, the years of bondage have left their mark upon us, and we still unthinkingly use "the speech of Ashdod" which we brought with us from the land of spiritual exile.

I still go to meetings where men arise during open forums to ask, "How do you find the attitude of 'your brethren' as compared to that of 'our brethren'?" Regardless of the attitude of anyone else, the attitude of such a questioner is sectarian. Like Peter on the morning before the crucifixion, his speech betrays him. So long as we think in terms of "our brethren" and "your brethren" we are still infected with the virus of sectarianism. The family of God is not divided into ours and yours, but it is one, and it is His!

The Jews forgot that they belonged to God and concluded that God belonged to them. The result was a selfish spirit of superiority which severed them from the desperate agony of a world dying in need of their witness of God. Instead of acting as leaven to the masses of mankind they spent precious time quarreling and bickering over political and theological points of view, until they were splintered

and fragmented into all types of sects by the time "the Word was made flesh and dwelt among men." It is significant that he allied himself with no Jewish party and wore no sectarian label.

We must never lose sight of the danger of hiding ourselves from the very world we are called upon to penetrate with our witness. If we build walls to shelter us from contact with those who are outside, it is those behind the walls and not those outside them who are the prisoners. One of the tragedies of our day is that we have allowed fear to drive us into seclusion where we have no contact with others who believe in the one Lord. Our buildings become monasteries and retreats, and we resign ourselves to holding the fort instead of storming it.

It is time for us to rise above the provincial thinking which is evident in so many areas and to recapture the concept of the body of Christ. That body is greater than any party, sect or segment, and greater than all of them taken together. It is mightier than any movement within it and that includes the restoration movement. Thomas Campbell did not restore the church. It had never ceased to exist. Just as there has never been a time since the original creation that the breath of life has not flowed in and out of the nostrils of man, so there has not been a time since the new creation when the body of Christ has not been pulsating with the life of the Spirit. A body cannot die as long as its head is alive!

Jesus has never been a head without a member, a shepherd without a sheep, a king without a subject, or a teacher without a disciple. It is true that if some of these were with us now we would not receive them and would no doubt disown them, but that is proof of our own sectarianism and not of theirs. It still remains true that "The Lord knoweth them that are His." I am persuaded that God has children upon this earth who never heard of Alexander Campbell.

The term "restoration movement" would strike no responsive chord in their hearts. We are not joined to Jesus because we are in the restoration movement but because we are in the body of which He is the head. In the restoration movement I can serve the body of Christ, but the body of Christ need not serve in the restoration movement.

Restoration movements come and go! They rise and wane! They flourish and disappear! But the community of the redeemed ones goes on forever. The gates of hell shall not prevail against it. If we allow this restoration movement to fail in uniting the Christians among the sects, if we fall out by the way and end up as quarrelsome sects, God can wipe us off the map and start another historical movement. He is not out of Presbyterians yet! If we decline our destiny and prostitute our purpose we can be lost among the welter of multiplying sects, but God's purpose will still triumph. He will bring forth judgment unto victory! He will not fail, nor fail His will.

From our fortunate stance, two thousand years this side of the invasion of the earth by the Prince of peace, we can glance retrospectively upon the ancient Greeks and their myths and fantasies, with a smile of condescension. We can feel a sense of compassion for brilliant philosophers who engaged in reciting tales in the market place of a god chained to a rocky promontory because of his love for mankind. And as we read dramatic poems about the agony of Prometheus struggling to be free, we can be smug in our knowledge that a god cannot be chained.

But let us not be too smug and forget that the apostle to the Gentiles wrote that men can hold back or restrain the truth by their unrighteousness. Even as we sit here tonight, amidst these attractive and almost opulent surroundings, filled with exultation at a fellowship so rich and full, sharing in pleasantries and banter with one another, our Lord may

be struggling to free Himself from the bonds of our imposition.

Jesus left the ecstasy of glory to share the agony of our suffering. He came into the stinking and wretched slave quarters where the lash of the taskmaster of sin lacerated our souls. He unlocked the clanking chains clamped on our hearts, and set us free. I plead with you now to liberate him from the fetters we may fasten upon him within our factional walls. Roll away the stone from the door of our parties which we have transformed into sepulchers and let the living Lord come forth. Let the world hear again those reassuring words, "It is I! Be not afraid!"

Friendless and faint, with martyred
steps and slow,
Faint for the flesh, but for the spirit
free,
Stung by the mob that came to see
the show,
The Master toiled along to Calvary;
We gibed him, as he went, with
houndish glee,
Till his dim eyes for us did overflow;
We cursed his vengless hands thrice
wretchedly —
And this was nineteen hundred
years ago.
But after nineteen hundred years
the shame
Still clings, and we have not made
good the loss
That outraged faith has entered in

his name.

Ah, when shall come love's courage
to be strong!
Tell me, O Lord — tell me, O Lord,
how long
Are we to keep Christ writhing on
the cross?

And now, in the final moments of this message I come with two requests. I ask you to pray fervently in my behalf that I shall not fail to preach peace to them that are afar off, and to them that are nigh, and to lift up my voice for the unity of all believers until my tongue is silenced by the chill finger of death.

And I plead with you to consecrate and dedicate your youthful vigor to the battle against tradition, prejudice, and the sectarian spirit until the sunset comes, and the Savior calls, and the glorious acclamation of triumph rings in your ears, "Well done, thou good and faithful servant!" Glory awaits, and tomorrow will be brighter than today!

EDITOR'S NOTE: The foregoing was an address at the North American Christian Convention in Indianapolis in 1973. We have printed it not only because it is so timely almost a decade later, but also because we would like to place in the hands, if not in the ears, of our readers, some of whom may not have been fortunate enough to hear Carl speak, an example of truly great preaching. I suspect you will want to hang on to this.

— notwithstanding the fact that they always took their Bibles with them and, instead of drinking, tried to share the good news with those who congregated there. These young men had stopped

working with another church in the area because its leadership so strongly opposed their unusual ministry.

On one occasion an elder in that congregation criticized them and tried very hard to get them to stay out of bars, no matter what their purpose for being there. But they talked with the Lord about it, and then decided to try a new bar in the area, one that they had not visited before. The first person they saw when they entered was the elder's son! He ran over to meet them, delighted to see them. He said his life was a mess and that, when they came in, he had been planning how to commit suicide. He said, "I have been sitting here trying to pray, and I just can't." The young men replied that he had probably done more praying than he thought, and they proceeded to rescue him from almost certain disaster.

The Old Testament tells a fascinating and relevant story about a man named Job. Job was a wise, wealthy, and particularly righteous man. He was so cautious about doing anything to offend God that when his children would have a party, he would offer a sacrifice the next morning for them, in fear that they had unwittingly committed some sin. But one day calamity struck. Job suddenly lost all his wealth and all his children, and his body was stricken with such affliction that he despaired of life. He moved out to the garbage dump, where he spent his nights in sleepless pain and his days being an object of ridicule to all who passed by. His friends who came to comfort him were deeply touched by his condition. When they saw him, they broke into tears and cried out. They sat in sympathetic silence for seven days and nights — which must have been some kind of record. And when they spoke, they hindered more than they helped. Their basic premise — that Job was afflicted because he had sinned — was wrong. And Job was wrong in his attitude toward God.

In some respects there is not much distance between Job and the young man in the bar and the rest of us. Job too had tried to pray and was sure that God paid no attention to him. And I suppose that many of us have left our prayers with a feeling of deep discouragement.

There is no lie more dangerous than that which says that we cannot pray — *and pray successfully*. The tempter is never more triumphant than when he convinces us that our voice is too weak to reach God. God has wonderful hearing ability, and he has a heart that yearns for us to talk to him. He gets the message even when our voices are too weak to form words, and he understands when our minds are so confused that what we say is nonsense to anyone else.

But a word of warning! God may not answer our prayers by providing us with answers to all our questions. It is significant that God never did tell Job why he suffered like he did. No, God did not answer Job's questions. He just made those questions irrelevant. The comfort he got — and the comfort we need — came from knowing that God, *like he is*, is where he is.

Our usual approach to distress is to ask a bunch of questions that will never be answered. Our guilt may ask, "Which of my sins brought this on me?" Our righteous indignation may cry out, "Why would God deal so harshly with me, since I have tried to be so good?" Our unbelief may question, "If there is a God, why is there not justice in this case?" In our perplexity we ask, "Is this divine discipline, deserved punishment, or Satanic aggression? Or is God too weak or unconcerned to intervene?" We all ask such questions, and I repeat: *they will never be answered*. They will not be answered because they do not need to be answered. All we need to know is that God, *like he is*, is where he is. That was enough for Job, and it will be enough for us.

Making the Questions Irrelevant

HOY LEDBETTER

A preacher friend was telling me about two young men in his congregation who regularly spent their evenings in the local bars. This practice had resulted in their receiving some criticism

A Complete Joy

TOM LANE
Cincinnati, Ohio

Thomas Aquinas once observed that happiness is the natural state of man. Man was made for contentment, for deep purpose, for fulfillment in communion with his Maker, his fellow men, and the universe about him. Joy is God's intention for His creatures.

It seems, though, to have long been the tragic experience of many people that life, with all its cares, can become drudgery and burden. The nineteenth century German philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer said that life is 'but disillusion, an annoying and pointless interruption in the flowing calm of eternal nothingness.

Sadness, fear, and discontent are widespread sentiments in our day of turmoil and uncertainty. It's true, ours is a day when many people busily pursue pleasure, fun, entertainment. But entertainment and self-indulgence cannot disguise the dissatisfaction which still plagues those who remain unrooted in life's true purpose and values.

Yet amidst the despair and meaninglessness which seems so much the temper of our times, there are those vital, vibrant people who, under the same stresses as others, experience peace and joy. These people are not unaware of the dangers and problems of life. They have a profound sense of the importance of life and the gravity of the human condition. Nor do they frivolously or fatalistically assume they have no power to change things and so might as well be happy anyway. Rather, these are people who have found beneath life's ups and downs the joy which God gives.*

The Christian knows a joy that comes from companionship with God, the source of life's meaning and value. In the face of any situation, the Christian remains secure in heart because of his relationship with God. Then, in joy, the Christian can understand life's adversities, and transform the world by God's grace.

The Joy of God's Love

An important Scripture passage which indicates the source of the Christian's joy is 1 John 1:1-4. In this introduction to his epistle, John explains his purpose for writing.

As one who had personally witnessed the earthly life of the Son of God, John wrote to "proclaim . . . eternal life which was with the Father and was made manifest to us."** John testified about Jesus, so that his readers might believe, and thus join together in fellowship with one another and "with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ." John adds, "We are writing this that our joy might be complete."

Our joy, John hints, is found in our fellowship with God. Joy consists in our coming into harmony with our Maker, with His purposes and love. As the psalmist put it in a prayer of petition and dedication, "Thou dost show me the path of life; in thy presence there is fullness of joy" (Ps. 16:11).

One of the purest joys of life is for us to be in the company of others whom we love and who, we know, love us. And so there is abundant joy to be had in our

life in the presence of God who loves us. He cares about us, and desires to lead us along paths of right living. Though we had strayed from His paths, He showed His love for us to the ultimate degree in offering His only begotten Son as the atoning sacrifice for our sins: "In this the love of God was made manifest among us, that God sent his only Son into the world, so that we might have life through him" (1 Jn. 4:9). We "rejoice in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received our reconciliation [to God]" (Rom. 5:11).

Now, through the work of Christ, God receives us as His adopted children (Jn. 1:12, 13). We may freely and confidently approach Him as our Father. He lives within us and empowers us through His Holy Spirit. We give our lives to Him in trust and obedience. This sharing of His life with ours is what John calls our fellowship with Him.

What a marvelous delight it is to know that Someone loves us, lives within us, and looks after us! Let us cultivate our awareness of God's continuing presence with us, that we might know ever more deeply the joy of companionship with Him.

God Gives Us Meaning

Our life of faith is a life of joy that comes from living in the presence of One who first loved us, and whom we love in return. We also find joy in our relationship with God, because in Him we find the key to life's purpose and value. Our lives, we come to realize, were meant for this very fellowship with God. Our purpose is to share our Creator's love. This fellowship we pursue in the context of our total existence; all that we do, we do in the name of the Lord Jesus (Col. 3:17). Therefore every facet of our lives comes to have meaning and value for us as a gift from our loving Creator and Father, a gift which we by our thankfulness for life and by our service to Him can offer back to Him in love. God's love

for us confers value and importance upon us. He honors us by making us His daughters and sons! Our lives have meaning as we pursue this exchange of love with our heavenly Father, both now and throughout eternity.

And while our lives receive meaning because of God's love, our lives also gain direction from the precepts of right living which God gives to us. God's Word teaches us how we must live in order to please Him, and, indeed, to be true to that very holy nature which God designed us to have.

The Christian life is a life of disciplined purity and service to God and our fellow men. We strive, with God's help, to keep in check those inner desires which if they ruled us would destroy our peace and joy. That we live under discipline does not mean our lives are an intolerable grind. Instead, by our life of holiness and service we are freed from the oppression of sin and self to be the best, most fulfilled people we can be. There is joy in the self-discipline to which our Father calls us. Happy are we who delight in the law of the Lord (Ps. 1:1, 2)!

A common cause of the joylessness of many people in our society today is that they have no meaning to their lives. They do not recognize life's eternal, spiritual significance. They see their lives as a chance happening, a succession of passing events with no ultimate significance. They look for fun, they seek after pleasure, but joy eludes them. In ignoring or rejecting God's standards for pure and purposeful living, they lack authentic direction in life.

In God, we find our life's reason, and come into harmony with the whole meaning of existence. No longer do we think our lives a pointless fluke of an impersonal, uncaring universe, as Schopenhauer might have said. Our lives now make sense to us, and become dear to us, for we know why we are here, and how we should live. In discovering our meaning and value there is great joy.

Power, Too

Our joy is the joy of communion with our loving heavenly Father. Within this fellowship which we have with Him, we find meaning and value to our lives. But how does this joy stay with us in a world which often presents us with problems and trials? How can we be joyful in a world which contains suffering, disorder, and death? How can we rejoice, for instance, when others oppose us because of our labors for Christ, or when disease threatens us, or when, in an erratic national and world economy, even our ability to sustain our physical lives may become a struggle?

Genuine joy, we find, is not an uncertain blessing which may be swept away if our lives' fortunes seem to change for the worse. Rather, joy can keep our minds at peace even in the face of great adversity. For our joy does not depend upon any outward circumstances of our lives, but upon our enduring relationship with God. Nothing can take that away from us (unless we let it). We can count on Him to be faithful to us always. "What can separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us" (see Rom. 8:31-39).

In fact, when we face distress or testing, our Father supplies us with the strength to withstand any threat these may pose to our faith and hope. Though we may find ourselves afflicted in many ways, we are never crushed; though we may be perplexed and see no way out of difficulty, we are not driven to despair, for we know that God will not forsake us (2 Cor. 4:7-11). God's grace at work in us is most evident to us when we are most beset (2 Cor. 12:9). And God's power working within us is immeasurable beyond all we could ever think to ask of Him (Eph. 1:19; 3:20). It is sometimes easy for us to let ourselves be distracted

from our joy by the distressing state of a fallen world, or by our own personal problems. Let us switch our focus from problems to possibilities, and to the One who is our secure foundation, our source of power to overcome, and our assurance that all things will be set right in the end.

We can even rejoice that problems come upon us, for these give us opportunity to exercise our faith and so stimulate its growth (Jas. 1:2-4). It is the resistance of the weights against his muscles that enable the bodybuilder to increase his strength. The labor of physical training is his tool and joy. It is by putting our faith into action in serving God and in confronting life's difficulties that our faith is strengthened, as we discover how much God can do in us and through us. Our knowledge that God will gird our minds and renew our hearts with His power insures that our joy will remain even in spite of obstacles and testing. And then, that joy will keep our minds and hearts at peace, so that our joy itself equips us to endure.

Joy in Our Fellow Christians

God gives us joy, for He gives us His direction, His strength, and Himself in fellowship with us. In addition, God gives us the joy of fellowship with loving sisters and brothers in the faith.

God, by drawing each of us into communion with Himself, gives us a common identity as members of His family, and so summons us into loving relationship with each other. John, in the preface to his First Epistle, explained that he wrote to confirm others in their faith and fellowship with God, as a consequence of which others "might have fellowship with us." John again identifies our relationship to God as the basis of our relationship with each other when he writes: "If we walk in the light . . . we have fellowship with one another" (1 Jn. 1:7).

John found joy in his fellowship with God, and in his fellowship with other

believers. We can, too. What is it about our fellowship together that gives us such joy?

First, we rejoice that we have the company and encouragement of others who have the same faith in God as we. Also, because of our love for God and our Christlike compassion for others and concern for their spiritual redemption, we rejoice that God's truth has found lodging in others' hearts. John, in a letter to one friend and Christian co-worker, wrote: "I greatly rejoiced when some of the brethren arrived and testified to the truth of your life, as indeed you do follow the truth. No greater joy can I have than this, to hear that my children follow the truth" (3 Jn. 3, 4). Paul, whose letters are filled with concern and joy for his fellow Christians, told the believers at Colossae, "Though I am absent in body, yet I am with you in spirit, rejoicing to see your good order and the firmness of your faith in Christ" (Col. 2:5). We, too, are glad when others come to know God and serve Him faithfully, and we devote

ourselves to carrying God's message of forgiveness and abundant life to others. And in serving others and helping them to find faith in God, we have the joy that comes from giving ourselves to others in love.

Ours is the joy that comes from knowing God and practicing His ways. This joy is the natural product of our faith in Him. Our joy is our sense of fulfillment and wholeness which comes from our obedience to God's plan and purpose for us. From this sense of harmony with our Creator we gain a peace that transcends understanding, an inner contentment that sustains us whatever our lives' fortunes, and the courage to face any circumstance. Let us have confidence in our Father, that we may have the joy He alone can give. "Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice" (Phil. 4:4).

*John S. Kennedy, in his foreword to Bertrand Weaver, *Joy* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1964), p. ix.

**All Scripture quotations are from the Revised Standard Version.

The Ministry of Waiting

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Several years ago the little congregation I served as minister was preparing to take some very big steps. They were not momentous actions, but they were such that we had to take much care and plan each phase with some precision. Elders and deacons were chosen, the church constitution was re-written, our sense of mission increased, our pulses beat faster. In the midst of all that activity I received a short note on a postcard from a friend who lived across the country. It was a supportive, generous communication which included these words: "Young man, as you seek to lead God's

people, go slow."

"Go slow" was the last advice we wanted to hear. We were marching to Zion! Let those refuse to sing who never knew our God!

Precipitous? Yes. But we were the ones who got wet. There is a time when all deliberate speed is warranted, and there is a time when it is not. But how can a Christian strenuously seeking to do what is right at all costs, know when to run and when to walk and when to sit still?

A good counselor can help. The more experienced leaders of the church

must realize their duty to younger leaders in this regard — without losing a sense of joy in the gospel or the urgency of mission.

But every Christian must bear his own load, in the last analysis. To study, to decide, to plan, and to execute are all necessary to mission. But if all these infinitives are changed to verbs, the subject will always be the first person pronouns “I” and “we.” And this is just not adequate for verifying a true mission.

The mission is verified by allowing God to speak. First, before any planning, any organizing, any goal-setting, comes

the ministry of waiting, listening, standing in the Presence. Scripture must not merely be consulted, it must be studied, lived into, prayed over, and listened to. The inner prod of conscience, though not always a complete guide, must nevertheless be brought into the process of listening — what does your heart say? And the greater life and teaching of the whole church of God must be allowed to have its effect, too, if we really believe that God is still alive and active among us. God must be permitted to speak. Without this commission, the mission is likely to become a vanity and striving after wind. □

Mercy, Not Sacrifice

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Hosea? That’s one of those obscure books toward the back of the Old Testament that’s difficult to locate (because the pages in that section of everyone’s Bible are still stuck together due to lack of use!). Having accepted an invitation to speak at a college retreat on the book named after God’s prophet Hosea, I began trying to do some research on the background of the book, and although I found that many other people had not studied much in Hosea either, I did manage to gather some important facts.

An Adulterous Wife

For some reason, God told his prophet Hosea to go out and marry one of the local “ladies of the evening” — certainly not the type of thing God usually asks of those who serve him. As the story unfolds in ancient Israel, Gomer, the wife Hosea has chosen, bears him children. They are given some unusual names, such as “not loved,” or “not my

people.” How would you like to go through life with such a label?

Finally, God lets Hosea know what all this is about. The marriage and the children are an illustration for next Sunday’s sermon! The sermon is going to be about how God has rescued the children of Israel, nurtured, cared for them, and loved them just like a husband would his own wife. And yet she has turned her back on him. She bore him only children of disobedience. Then she began to court other nations with their sinful idolatry.

There is a very pertinent message in this Old Testament book for New Covenant people. As we take a close look at Hosea, it begins to speak to Christians clearly — in quite a serious way.

Acceptable Patterns of Worship

We see Hosea charging the Jews with taking part in the adulterous sins that went along with the idol worship of the

surrounding nations. They had become drunkards and harlots. Their consciences no longer wanted to listen to the words of the true God. It wasn’t that they weren’t continuing in the patterns of *worship* set down for them in the Old Testament Law. They were continuing in the celebrations: the yearly festivals, the new moons, and even the sabbath days were observed. They were even still offering the sacrifices and burnt offerings which, under the law, were for the atonement of sin. The *form* of their worship was not the Israelites’ problem in Hosea’s day. There was something even more important that they were lacking.

In 6:6, Hosea makes a statement that surely must have made his listeners take notice with suddenly attentive ears. Speaking the very words of God, the prophet told those idolatrous Jews this: “For I desire mercy, not sacrifice, and acknowledgement of God rather than burnt offerings” (NIV).

God didn’t care that they had all the external things correct. They could have been at the synagogue every day of the week (and twice on Saturdays), or offered sacrifices and burnt offerings every morning at the temple in Jerusalem, and he would not have been impressed. Why not? Because their *hearts* were not right. Their *souls* were not converted.

Religious Rituals

For me to read Hosea 6:6 is like turning on a light in a dark room only to find it full of junk! The alarming fact is that there is still a sense in which God wants, from his people, mercy (the right inward person) and not just sacrifice (the right form of worship). He wants acknowledgement of Himself rather than burnt offerings. All too often, the church of the twentieth century is busy worrying about sacrifice — the outward motions of worship — while disregarding mercy — the true conditions of our hearts. How

does this happen? We would do well to look at some instances of our “sacrificing” that concentrate on just the motions of worshipping God, and not often enough on our “mercy” (what’s happening on the inside of us). In the case of the Jews, the religious rituals weren’t enough to get the job done. Religious rituals aren’t enough to get the job done today, either.

Many times we think that if we come to worship the Lord dressed in the right clothes, pray the right prayer phrases at the proper time, sing the right number of hymns (hymns, by the way, that are often so familiar that we long ago ceased to listen to what we are singing to the Lord), have a “special number” sung at just the right time (to get us “in the mood” to listen to the Word preached), sit through a sermon, sing an invitation hymn, and go home “feeling” like we’ve worshipped, then we’ve done enough to please God. (After all, what more could he ask?) And all the while, God is saying, “I desire mercy (the inward person in my control), and not sacrifice (the outward form of worship).”

There are many other elements of worship that we could mention. But it is important to remember that worship isn’t just something we do in a building. Real worship is something God desires from a right heart, and not just the right actions, whether on Sunday mornings or any other time and place.

Idolatry Today?

Those Jews of centuries ago had all the right forms to their worship. But God didn’t care, because they did not first have a heart that was completely turned over to Him. Just as Hosea’s wife had been flirting around with other men, the Israelites were flirting around with other gods.

Perhaps today we do not worship carved statues, but the principle still applies. Isn’t idolatry the worship of anything other than the true God? If that is