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Integrity

INTEGRITY, a journal published bimonthly by an independent nonprofit corporation, is intended to be a ministry of reconciliation which utilizes the varied talents of a large community of believers. These believers, united in faith, but divergent in opinions, seek to accurately reveal God to both the church and the world so that all may become one as He is one. Accordingly, it should not be assumed that the views expressed by individual authors necessarily represent the opinions of either the editors or the Board as a whole.

The most dramatic error in the article was that it reported that we had 45 visitors for a Sunday service. (I wish.) Instead, I said "4 to 5" on an average in December of 1992.

The article makes it seem that we decorate Christmas trees in our building. We do not. In December 1992 we did have two pretty trees and wreaths left over from a Saturday wedding. They were pretty and I said so. Generally, we do try to have some seasonal artificial flowers and some artificial greenery.

Also, the article reported the wrong number of elders. But it was factual when it said that we have a very high caliber of eldership whom I appreciate, respect and love very much.

We have had a good number of baptisms and restorations. However, the article mentioned that the restored had been out of faith for 10 or more years. I do not know where this came from nor its significance to the article.

Again, I appreciate this publication's interest in our congregation but I thought it important to "set the record straight."

Sincerely,

Larry Fitzgerald, Evangelist
Munday Church of Christ
Munday, Texas

(Ed's. Note - JBK)

We received the article referred to above in the mail. It was part of a letter on stationery which was entitled "Munday Church of Christ" and it was signed: "Larry Fitzgerald." We did not think it necessary to call or write to verify this since we had received an article in the past from Dr. Fitzgerald. However, in the future we will verify any letters or articles to be sure that the purported author has written the article.

We are very sorry for any confusion which has resulted.

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May/June 1994
Vol. 25, No. 3

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God's Love--The Final Solution

"This love of which I speak is slow to lose patience--it looks for a way of being constructive. It is not possessive; it is neither anxious to impress nor does it cherish inflated ideas of its own importance.

Love has good manners and does not pursue selfish advantage. It is not touchy. It does not keep account of evil or gloat over the wickedness of other people. On the contrary, it is glad with all good men [and women] when truth prevails" (I Cor. 13:5-6--Phillips).

Probably no word is more misused or overused than "love." But it is the one thing that both the church and the world needs. Without it the church will never come close to the oneness for which Jesus prayed (John 17). Without it the world will continue on a path toward destruction.

Today, many things threaten to split the church further. We have seen that the optimism of Alexander Campbell that Christians could rationally understand the Bible alike was misplaced. Not only do doctrinal and interpretive differences separate us, but more and more, politics, ethics, and class differences are used to drive a wedge between Christians. "Evangelical Christians" are told not to trust Christians in "mainline" churches. "Correct" views on abortion and homosexuality have taken the place of church doctrinal tests of fellowship. As important as these issues are, they must not become the modern day equivalent of the Galatian heresy which held that Jesus alone was not adequate to make one a "true" Christian. It is one thing to oppose certain practices as being against God's will. It is another thing to say that one is not a Christian unless he or she holds the same view as we do.

Love is at the root of our needs and our solutions. Love produced by God's Spirit (Gal. 5:22) is the only love that is adequate to the enormous tasks we face.

The articles in this issue came to us at different times, without us asking the authors to write on a certain theme. But you will notice that each author in different ways and from different angles offers love as the key to what he or she is trying to teach or encourage us about. Even Satan's ambassadors are affected by it! Love is "the one thing that still stands when all else has fallen" (I Cor. 13:8--Phillips).

"The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship that is ours in the Holy Spirit be with you all!" (II Cor. 13:14--Phillips).

J. Bruce Kilmer, Co-editor

Who We Are and Why We Are Here

KEN HENSLEY

What explains the church better than anything else? What is the reason for the church? Why do we exist? What is our mission, our aim?

Before you begin to wonder whether or not one who asks such questions has any right being a minister, let me explain. I have answered those questions many times before. In college, I wrote papers, discussed articles, and listened to lectures concerning such questions. Since assuming a pulpit position, those questions continually creep into my study, for they are at the heart of authentic ministry.

I also have a confession to make. I have answered a few of those questions, if not incorrectly, then naively. It seems so simple: Why does the church exist? Fundamentally, it is simple. In practice, we have made it to be a complex, often dividing, question with a myriad of confusing answers.

No longer do I hold out our mission as simply being one of investigating and implementing rules. I no longer can convince myself that the reason the church exists is solely to correct everyone else. Yes, we are to be quick to warn others, "save yourself from this corrupt generation," but only as quick as we are to warn ourselves. Do I trivialize doctrine? By no means. Do no rules exist that we are to follow? Not at all.

When Jesus, who knew full well about God's mission--he was God--was asked to tell what the greatest (or most important) commandment was, he replied: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind" (Matt. 22:37). There's the reason we exist! Therein lies our mission. So fundamental it's simple: Love God with all you've got.

The key to effective and meaningful worship is not found in making sure all five "acts" are covered during the service.

Giving is not pronounced spiritual just because the giver was cheerful. We do not go "into all the world" because that's what Christians are supposed to do. All that we are, all that we do, is to be a result of our deep, abiding love for God. It is a heartfelt response to the love of God that is the church's distinguishing mark--not what we do for him, but what he has done for us.

Perhaps in discussing our mission and reason for existence we have too often started with our responsibilities. Wasn't this what Paul was reminding Titus of when he wrote, "he saved us, not because of righteous things we had done" (Titus 3:5). Whenever our human duties are the first to be used in explaining or defining the church, we have lost our proper focus. Remember, "a man's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions" (Luke 12:15).

Indeed, our life as Christians finds meaning only in the atoning sacrifice of Christ. We express gratitude to him, observe and keep his commands, not to earn our merit, not to lend definition to the church, but to show our love to God for his act of redemption. It might be good for us to be humbled enough to understand that the church is greater than any one of us. The church of God will not live or die depending solely upon you or me. No, the church is sustained by the same hand that gave it life.

Going into all the world to make disciples is not wrong. We should never undermine or minimize biblical instruction concerning worship. God really, truly does love a cheerful giver. Yet, authentic Christianity is not self-serving--it serves the holy and living God. That is why before Paul instructed the Corinthians on their responsibility of being ambassadors for Christ he first said this: "We make it our goal to please him" (II Cor. 5:9).

I can answer the questions at the

beginning of this article with a confidence grounded firmly in biblical precedent. What is our mission? Why do we exist? Why are we here? To love God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength...and to

We Are Different

ALINE EDSON

We are not different by accident; it is the way God created us right down to our fingerprints. Clearly the way he made us tells us he doesn't despair at our differences; I do not think God reacts with shock and surprise as we often do toward one another. Had God wanted to avoid the consequences of human difference that spring from a free will, he certainly had the option and the power to have made us robots or clones of each other. But that wouldn't have been creation; that would have been manufacture. There wouldn't have been creative excitement for God or humans in the production of carbon copies.

On the other hand, the likeness that we bear to God and to each other comes from the fact that we were created in his spiritual image—all of us. We are fully endowed and able to meet his demands (to love him and each other) because all bear this spiritual likeness to him and to each other. We can all do justly, love mercy and walk humbly with our God without (as they say) regard to race, creed, color or national origin. Within every human heart there is the capability of loving God and people because it was put there at creation—in this we are the same.

All of this, of course, is abstract thinking, but it sheds some light on the finer details of day-to-day living with God and each other on earth in a semblance of harmony. For instance, if we

please him in all we do.

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acknowledged it was all right to be different in any and all ways so long as it did not affect our attitude toward God or others, might it not be easier to love one another? We might not try so hard to hammer one another in molds of sameness on issues that won't live beyond the grave. We could recognize that difference is all right, that there is wonderful excitement and stimulation in diversity. Might we not provoke one another to love and good works by the very presence of diversity? And could we not also appreciate the wonderfully diverse uses of imagination which is also a gift of God?

Not one of us is smart enough to chart another soul's day-to-day path to God. Each soul must work out its own salvation with fear and trembling before God. Paul remonstrates with us about trying to force opinions on each other in Romans 14. He clearly says that it's all right for differences to exist so long as our faith before God is what it ought to be.

We bring to our relationship to God and his Son the total of all our different experiences, different reactions, different relationships, different capabilities, different levels of achievement, different circumstances of birth, ad infinitum. We cannot possibly all look and sound alike. We bring all that we are and have to him. We love God because he first loved us and gave his Son for us. We are brothers and sisters in the great family of God

based on our spiritual likeness to him.

At the divine level of creation, we were given free choice and from this comes differences. But he wants us all—no matter where our choices (generational as well as individual) have led us—to come to him holding nothing back, redeemed by the blood of his Son, led by his Spirit and willing to love him and each other so long as we shall live. We are not to be conformed to this world (nor to each other), but to be transformed by the renewing of our mind in order to find God's perfect will. In this our hearts share the same pursuit, but we are different. The only unity we'll ever enjoy is in diversity because we are diverse by God's creative design.

In Matters of Faith, Opinion, and Apostasy

LARRY DOTSON

"This is my commandment, that you love one another. Fervently love one another from the heart; with all humility and gentleness, with patience, showing forbearance to one another in love. Above all things, keep fervent in your love for one another."¹ "But how to love and receive our brother as we believe and hope Christ has received both him and us, and yet to refuse to hold communion with him is, we confess, a mystery too deep for us."²

There are some religious leaders among Churches of Christ (a capella) who believe our fellowship is in the midst of a crisis situation, and they have gone on the offensive to sound the alarm. Entire journal issues and lectureship themes have been devoted to articulating this crisis and exposing those who are responsible for it. This crisis has been referred to as the "New Movement." Its proponents have been labeled as "false

We need to acknowledge human difference while embracing spiritual likeness. We need to look not on the things that are seen which are different and temporal, but on the things that are unseen which are the same and eternal. We need to be sure we are putting the emphasis where it belongs. God loves us the same even though we are different. To him be the glory!

Aline Edson, who has completed full careers in both teaching and civil service and raised four children, lives in Kerrville, Texas, with her husband. They are members of the Sydney Baker Church of Christ.

teachers," "liberals," "extremists," "the new breed," etc. who are influencing others to "drift" with the winds of change. Because those advocating change have chosen to stay and stand fast in the Churches of Christ, rather than to give up and go away, the consensus of their critics seems to be that, as one writer put it, "We have no alternative but to begin 'marking' those who have espoused false teaching." It has also been suggested that even those who listen to such people will be held accountable by God for sanctioning sin and error.

As I understand it, the opposition to the "New Movement," regards the teachings coming from those within the "New Movement" as the "signs of apostasy." Those sounding the alarm believe that this apostasy is the result of a "new hermeneutic." Those who use this new method of interpreting the Bible no longer condemn instrumental music,

prohibit women from speaking in the assembly or teaching and praying in mixed gender adult classes. They sanction methods with no first century precedent, and accept those baptized in fellowships other than the Church of Christ. Are these changes in attitude the work of "savage wolves" and will they "wreak havoc in the brotherhood" and "damn men's souls"?

What Is "Sound"?

The New Testament speaks of "sound doctrine," which is from God, as well as the "strange" doctrines of demons and humans. In his letters to Timothy and Titus, Paul wrote that sound doctrine conforms to the gospel (I Tim. 1:10-11, II Tim. 1:8-13), to "the word" (II Tim. 4:2-3), to the "trustworthy message" (Titus 1:9), and to the things that constitute moral, upright behavior (Titus 2:1-15). The first believers continued steadfastly in the "apostles' doctrine," and John wrote of abiding in the "doctrine of Christ" (II John 9-10). Paul also wrote of the "word of truth" which holds the key to our salvation (Eph. 1:13, Col. 1:5), and he encouraged the Thessalonians to "hold the traditions" which they had been taught (II Thess. 2:14-15).

I believe that the apostles' doctrine, the doctrine of Christ, the word, the trustworthy message, and the word of truth all pertain to one and the same teaching: the gospel facts about Jesus Christ -- who he is, why he came, what he did, the promise of his resurrection, the power and glory of his return, and the transforming impact his grace has on the lives of those who believe. I believe that when Jesus calls us to "abide in my word" (John 8:31), he is calling us to believe, hold fast, and live out those things he taught about himself and what our relationship to others ought to be. And I believe that when we use another standard by which we measure the "soundness" of others, or when we focus on doctrines for the sake of doctrine or for

the purpose of defending a system of religion, we go beyond that which is written.

As I understand it, the false prophets, false apostles, false brothers and sisters, and false teachers referred to in the New Testament are condemned because their "destructive heresies" focus, not on abiding in Christ, but in following after the teachings of humans. The Bible says these false teachers seek to bring people into the bondage of the law by spying out their liberty in Christ (Gal. 2:4). They seek to be teachers of the law and have an unhealthy interest in controversies and quarrels about words (I Tim. 1:3-7, 6:4). They lead people's minds away from the simplicity of Christ (II Cor. 11:3-4, Col. 2:8-10). They insist upon the observance of religious rules and rituals (Col. 2:16-21, I Tim. 4:3, Heb. 13:9-16) and introduce teachings that retard the unity of the faith through the knowledge of and maturity in Christ (Eph. 4:13-14). They deny Christ, speak evil of things they don't understand, and entice others to follow the desires of the flesh (II Peter 2:1-19). They cause divisions by adding obstacles which are contrary to the basic truths of the gospel (Rom. 16:17, 6:17), and they refuse to acknowledge that Jesus came in the flesh (I John 4:1-3, II John 7).

Judging A Brother

When religious leaders go public with accusations of false teaching and "tell it to the church" by way of their pulpits, magazines, and lectureships, the church has the responsibility to "try the spirits." Anyone who lets their religious leaders decide for them or speak for them has abrogated a scriptural duty. Those associated with the New Movement have been referred to as "self-appointed change agents," but if their critics are not willing to open their pulpits to them, or to give them space on the pages of their magazines, or to invite them to make their own case before the lectureship councils which are convened to try them, have

they not assumed the role of "self-appointed judges"?

Was not Jesus himself the victim of charges made by accusers who claimed that "this man said," "we heard him say," and "he stirs up the people"? A "brother (or sister) in error" is still a brother (or sister) and deserves to be heard by the "brotherhood" (and sisterhood) in his or her own words. It is grossly unfair when someone is painted as a false teacher with the paint from someone else's bucket. What has our movement come to when our own "gospel preachers" don't receive the same respect that was accorded the Baptists, Methodists, and Presbyterians by those who originated that movement: "Neither do we pretend to acknowledge persons to be ministers of Christ, and at the same time, consider it our duty to forbid or discourage people to go hear them, merely because they may hold some things disagreeable to us, much less to encourage other people to leave them on that account."³

When a religious leader writes that God will hold entire congregations responsible for the presence of these "false teachers," citing verses from the Bible that speak of food sacrificed to idols and acts of sexual immorality (Rev. 2:14-16), has he properly applied the scriptures, or has he employed a scare tactic? Can a religious leader who labels another leader as being "filled with hate for the church" objectively outline the views of that leader? When a religious leader criticizes a "misguided gospel preacher" for taking a position identical to one held by Barton W. Stone ("It is of grace--it is all of grace."), contending that such a belief "means universal salvation" and cites Hebrews 2:9 as the proof text, has he rightly expounded the word of God or exploited it for his own purpose? When a religious leader insists that "the word of God" limits our fellowship to those who share the same form and meaning of baptism as we do and then fails to cite any verse from God's word which specifically enjoins us to withhold

fellowship from such believers, has he taught us to receive one another as Christ also received us, or has he taught us to us for doctrine a commandment composed by humans? When religious leaders place paid notices in secular newspapers in order to discredit believers with whom they have not personally shared their concerns, do they "love the brethren with a love that worketh no ill"?

When religious leaders seek to exert influence and pressure on members of independent, autonomous congregations of which they themselves are not members, have they not sought to become, de facto, apostles and bishops? When they exploit and aggravate the differences of opinion that exist in every congregation to the point that some withdraw from those with whom they once walked hand in hand, do they not share some responsibility for that alienation and division? Has our movement which grew out of a conviction of the "enormous evils of schisms and partyism" not come full circle when our religious leaders huddle together in various cliques and employ the same tactics against our own that were once used to drive our religious forebears from the midst of the Baptist associations with whom they had chosen to affiliate? Is it not just as appropriate today to ask, "Who is making divisions and schisms? Who is rending the peace of the churches? Who is creating factions, swellings, and tumults? We who are willing to bear and forbear, or they who are anathematizing and attempting to excommunicate?"⁴

Cookie Cutter Unity

Some of our religious leaders claim to be advocates for unity but, in reality, what they insist upon is that others be in union with them. This is essentially what differentiates their restoration plea from the one first associated with our movement. In the first plea, the final word in determining fellowship was the love of Christ and Christian character, but in the

one heard too often today, it is knowledge and religious form that determine the limits of Christian unity. Consequently, our response to other believers who don't measure up to our standards is not unlike that of the unmerciful servant (Matt. 18:33), the laborers in the vineyard (Matt. 20:21), and the elder brother (Luke 15: 29-30). Whenever some of our own dare to act like the man born blind (John 9:30-33), there are always those who are ready to cast them out.

On two different occasions, Jesus informed religionists who were pre-occupied with the outward behavior of others that "I desire compassion, not sacrifice." The followers of Moses had this same problem (Num. 11:26-29) as did the disciples of Jesus. Whenever we're tempted to insist on a fixed, one size fits all, cookie cutter mold that all must conform to, does not Jesus remind us that "he who is not against us is for us" (Mark 9:38-41) and that our job is not to look to others but to follow him (John 21:21-22)? I believe if God had intended to provide a "blueprint" for the church, he would have revealed it the same way he did for those things for which there was a specific, detailed plan (e.g. ark, tabernacle), by setting it forth all at one time, in one place in scripture, and in such a way that not only the preacher but the parishioner, unschooled in original Greek, uninformed in hermeneutics, and uninfluenced by congregational creed, clerical coaching, or correspondence course, could simply open the Bible and behold the pattern.

Our religious leaders who insist that "truth" cannot be compromised for the sake of unity, have left us with a legacy of a fellowship divided against itself over such "truths" as musical instruments, orphans' homes, Sunday Schools, communion cups, details concerning the timing and nature of Jesus' return, sponsorship of TV programs, Bible translations, women's head coverings, fellowship halls, and kitchens — all in the name of looking to a pattern which apparently can only be seen "through a

glass, darkly" since its details are dependent upon the vision of the beholder. Truly, it is our institution and its principles and patterns that we love "more than these" (John 21:15).

Controversy's Answer

The Bible says that Jesus is the "mystery of God," that in him are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge, that in him we have been made complete, and that we are to fix our eyes on him, the author and perfecter of our faith for "in him we live and move, and have our being." Therefore, I believe that in order to find an answer to the continuous controversies that plague our fellowship, we need to "go out to him, outside the camp" (Heb. 13:13), resolving to linger no longer on those things which are but a "copy and shadow." We need to bow down at the throne of his grace rather than stand boldly before the altar of our "restored church." When ours is a grace which *inspires* our obedience rather than a grace which requires our obedience, a grace in which our desire to be in the eternal presence of the One who redeemed us is stronger than our fear of the fires of Hell, a grace which recognizes the difference between living for Jesus and being "faithful to the church," a grace which will remind us of our own unworthiness when we're tempted to despise the unworthiness of those who appear in our eyes to be "feeble, less honorable, and uncomely," then we can let the church decrease in order that Jesus might increase, and we can wish "the grace of Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the holy Spirit" to all who give glory to the Father, who lift up the Son, and who proclaim the gospel, even when they do so in ways which differ from our own. And we will never be "graced to death" by those accused of wanting only to preach "Jesus, Jesus, Jesus."

And so, the question remains: Is the "New Movement" a threat to the church Jesus is building, and will those who

concur and cooperate with it hear him say to them, "I never knew you?" Our movement was founded on a belief that "no man has a right to judge, to exclude, or reject his professing Christian brother, except so far as he stands condemned, or rejected, by the express letter of the law." I believe those who are being asked to reject, inform on, or fall out with their brothers and sisters in Christ should proceed very carefully when the lines of battle have been drawn by partisan religious leaders. As I understand the Bible, the spiritual bond we have with one another is second only to that we have with Jesus himself, and I don't believe that union should be dissolved over doctrines of religion.

For example, "choral groups and solos," the controversy *du jour*, are being condemned because they "isolate individuals to the exclusion of the collective whole and thus to the exclusion of scripturally enjoined reciprocity." Does this objection uphold the express word of God and defend the gospel, or is it an example of using human reasoning to justify opposition to something with which some are unfamiliar or uncomfortable? Is the real issue regarding instruments of music or "spectator" worship whether they conform to our pattern, or whether the God who looks not on the outside will hear the melody in a person's heart above the sound of an organ and will hear that same melody when the lips are silent?

Does the "silence" of women in the churches refer to restricting their participation (Acts 21:9, I Cor. 11:5, 14:34), or is the issue one of authority and headship? Is it the Bible that prohibits a woman from teaching a man who is willing to learn from her, or from teaching a 12 year old baptized boy? Is the Bible the real authority for limiting the attendance at a church "business meeting" to men only, and is a "better safe than sorry" philosophy or the fear of "radical feminism" appropriate justification for limiting the exercise of gifts that some women may have and may be willing to

share?

With regard to fellowshipping and cooperating with "non-Church of Christ" groups, do we stand on the side of those whose love for unity originated the movement to which we owe our religious heritage, or do we cast our lot with those who have "fine tuned" the first unity plea to the degree that others are worthy of our association and cooperation only if their views and practices perfectly overlay the chalkline of "primitive Christianity" which has been drawn to measure, compare and commend (II Cor. 10:12-13)?

Twenty-one years after the principles of the first restoration plea were put forth by his father, Alexander Campbell wrote, in a letter to a Baptist minister, that "our views and our aims are now fully developed" and that "in no supposable event do we have anything to fear from intimacy with your churches or pastors."⁵ And 53 years after these principles were first expressed, Alexander Campbell's journal was still defending the practice of recognizing Christians of other groups: "There are myriads of people who are in error on baptism, of whom, nevertheless, we are compelled to say, 'They are not of the world'...Has it, we ask, come to this, that such as these, in whose presence many of us are dwarfed almost to nothingness, must hear our feeble and unworthy lips saying to them, 'Stand by thyself; come not near to me; for I am holier than thou'? We have only to say that we have not so learned Christ."⁶

The Real Challenge

I believe the challenge facing our religious leaders is not to "arouse the church from lethargy" in order to aid them in thwarting the "New Movement," but to remind us of God's unyielding love for us in order to rekindle our unfeigned love for one another. We will never be "knit together in love" until our spiritual identity with the Christ transcends the bond of unity we have in our imperfect understanding of the law of Christ.

I believe that each person should be "fully convinced in his own mind" before letting what "the church teaches" cause him to disown and cast aside someone whom God may have foreknown and justified. We should be wary of those who act unilaterally to "mark" certain individuals and certain congregations, encouraging others to avoid those with whom they have not "reasoned together." Are not all of us, including our religious leaders, subject to the influence of personality, pride, and ego? Can not our partisan interests produce biases and blind spots which can detract from our objectivity and cause us to misconceive and misrepresent the views of others? If, in the faith we contend for, apostasy can occur over matters of religion, separate and apart from our beliefs about, and trust in, "Jesus Christ and him crucified," is it not time to reexamine that which we regard as "sound doctrine"?

If the church is a "living, vibrant organism" whose parts have been placed and arranged by God himself, should we reject any within that organism because they have differences from us? Can we use the word of God to say to them, "I have no need of you"?

This text has never been unseasonable amongst the opponents of reform and of change; for as there

can be no reformation without change—and as all who preach reformation preach change, the consequence must be that those who will not change must, to justify themselves, denounce the reformers; and no text does better than this—"mark them who cause division and avoid them."⁷

—Alexander Campbell

ENDNOTES

1. John 15:12, I Peter 1:22b, Eph. 4:2, I Peter 4:8a.
2. Thomas Campbell, "Declaration and Address of the Christian Association of Washington (PA)," 1809, p. 22.
3. Ibid, p. 24.
4. Alexander Campbell, "Millennial Harbinger," Vol. IV, 1840, p. 557-58.
5. Alexander Campbell, "Christian Baptist," Vol. VII, 1830, p. 203.
6. Isaac Errett, Co-Editor, "Millennial Harbinger," Vol. V, 1862, p. 123, 129.
7. Alexander Campbell, "Millennial Harbinger," Vol. III, 1832, p. 604.

Larry Dotson works as an Education Specialist for the Navy Recruiting Command in Nashville, TN. Larry and his family are Centerville residents and are members of the non-instrumental Church of Christ there.

your congregation and we were really involved. Boy, was that eye opening! We had no idea folks in churches could get into such sharp conflict over so many different things. When I got transferred here we decided that we would find a church so large that we could go and worship without getting noticed."

The First Church Fight: Practical Reflections on Acts 15

CRAIG M. WATTS

Not long ago I was visiting with some people who were looking for a place to worship. Naturally I suggested our home congregation. "How many members do you have?" asked the man. I told him. "Actually we're looking for a church that's quite a bit larger than yours. The last church we were in was near the size of

I'm sure that some of you find your own feelings reflected in those words. While it can be rewarding and fulfilling to be active in the life of the church, it can be tremendously frustrating as well. You come up with a good idea only to see it shot down in a committee. You attempt to put your talents to work but you feel unappreciated. With the best of intentions you design and promote a program for the church but later you hear that certain people are resentful because they didn't play a key role. Sometimes it is painful to be involved. You find yourself ambushed by troubles you could never have expected.

I've heard people say, "Christians shouldn't have these sorts of conflicts. Not at church. Of all places, there should be peace and harmony here." But the fact is that in the closest relationship on earth there are conflicts. Not many people who have been married any length of time can say they never have conflicts with their spouse. But that doesn't mean that there is a shortage of love in the marriage. Poor communication, perhaps. Differences in goals or values, perhaps. But love and conflict are not mutually exclusive.

Sure, it's true that pride and pettiness account for a fair amount of the tension that can exist in a church. Christians—ministers included—can make a big giant deal about some little pygmy issue. Few of us entirely avoid getting into tug-of-wars over trivia. We may make some bold statement about some minor matter, and then, like it or not, we are committed. We can't back out without losing face. So we dig in to fight World War III over something that is hardly worth the energy it takes to blow your nose.

But not every cause is petty. And our motives are not always fatally flawed. Sometimes there are genuinely important issues that lead to conflict in the church—not just in our congregation, mind you, but the church worldwide. And sometimes Christians fight with one another simply because they care so much: about one

another, about the truth of God, and about the mission of the church.

Early Church Conflict

It's been that way from the very beginning, all the way back to the first century. If you think the church back in the days of the apostles was all peace and tranquility, think again. Whenever there is change you can pretty much count on having conflict. The early church went through some big changes and they had some battles to match. The text in Acts 15 speaks about one of the biggest.

As most of you know, when the church started out, its membership was made up entirely of Jews. Jesus was a Jew, and so were the twelve apostles. Martha, Mary, Salome; all were Jews. They kept the law of Moses, worshipped in the temple, continued to circumcise their baby boys, ate kosher foods, and sang the Psalms pretty much like they did before Jesus came into their lives. The only difference was that now they experienced Jesus as their savior and they followed him, as well as Moses' law.

But something happened. The apostle Peter got this wild notion that he should preach the good news of the saving power of Jesus Christ to a non-Jew. He said God told him to do it. So he went to the home of Cornelius, an officer in the Roman army, talked to him about Jesus, and the man and his entire family got baptized.

That was quite a surprise to the rest of the church. But it turned out all right. Cornelius had been hanging around Jewish synagogues for years, so he knew the rules pretty well and fit in okay. But then Paul the apostle got really indiscriminate with his preaching. He started telling every Tom, Dick and Harry about Jesus. He didn't seem to care if they knew the first thing about Moses and the law. "Jesus is enough!" he taught. Paul was bringing in all sorts of strange characters, people who didn't know

Abraham from Amos. They'd show up at the kosher church potluck meals with pork chops. They were making a mess of everything. Finally, a good, respectable, orthodox delegation from around Jerusalem showed up in Antioch where Paul had been preaching. These folks began to teach, "Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved." In other words, "You have to become Jews before you can be accepted as Christians."

Paul and his companions weren't about to put up with that stuff. In Acts 15:2 the text says they had "no small dissension and debate with them." To put it another way, these early Christians had a first class, knock down, drag out fight. Finally, in order to come to an understanding, they all agreed to go to Jerusalem and discuss this matter of accepting non-Jews into the church with the rest of the apostles and leaders.

I think that we can learn something about handling significant conflicts by looking at how this first big church fight was resolved. Several things took place.

Solving the First Fight

First of all, despite their differences, they honored each other *as Christians*. In the heat of conflict it's terribly tempting to doubt the spirituality and goodness of the folks who take the opposite position. Somebody has to be the bad guy, and we know it can't be right-thinking people like us. People who disagree with us on matters we believe are important must be morally twisted. Right? Not long ago many people in our country said, "You can't trust the Russians. They're not like us. You can't reason with them. They don't feel the same way we do." But, in fact, that very attitude stood in the way of understanding and reason. The first big church fight was able to be resolved because the church members had the wisdom and the grace to see each other as genuine Christians.

Second, the earliest Christians found

that good decisions are not made in isolation from the broader leadership of the church. I suppose it was tempting for the opposing parties to retreat behind their respective walls. There they could proclaim how right their views were and how wrong were the others. But, in fact, these pioneers of faith did something else. They called upon other respected leaders and all of them sat down together. They revealed their views. They shared their differing experiences. Together they sought the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

Too often the church has been fractured because Christians have neglected to pin their hearts and minds to those outside of their own circle. The arrogance of ignorance has been the source of who knows how many denominations. The earliest Christians realized that division was not the answer to the problem they were having. Instead of closing their ranks, they opened their hearts to a larger number of spiritual leaders. In making that move the constructive resolution of conflict became possible.

Third, the first church fight was resolved peaceably because the people came to see that there was more than one legitimate concern in the controversy. We want things to be simple, don't we? Black and white, light and darkness, right and wrong. It is frustrating to have questions muddled with complexity. But life is often complex.

When some of the Jewish Christians saw how the apostle Paul was accepting Gentiles into the church, the issue was plain to them. These Pharisee Christians waved their Bibles in the air and insisted, "It is necessary to circumcise these Gentiles and charge them to keep the law of Moses." God said it. I believe it. That settles it. If you start playing fast and loose with the truth of God, pretty soon you won't have anything worth affirming left. This is an important point.

But it wasn't the only point. The fact was that God had acted among the Gentiles. Peter had seen it. Paul had

seen it. The Holy Spirit was alive and well and working in the lives of people who were not brought up in the tradition of Moses. So while the one group had a legitimate concern about preserving the scriptural traditions they had been taught, it was also a crucial concern to accept people into the church whose lives demonstrate the grace and power of God in Christ.

It is hard to admit that there may be legitimate concerns voiced by those who differ with us about abortion or war or any number of other issues. But only when we do, are we likely to move toward unity and understanding.

Fourth, compromise is valuable and it is not a betrayal of faith. Some people seem to think that compromise is always the same thing as apostasy. But often compromise is a more adequate expression of faith, rather than a departure from the faith.

The first church fight found its resolution in a compromise. A letter was sent out to all the churches where there were non-Jews. It said "abstain from what has been sacrificed to idols and from blood and from what is strangled and from immorality." Not the whole law, as some

wanted enforced, but a middle position was taken. We need to learn to seek for faithful compromises to the issues that plague the church in our time. Those who go into battle with an "all or nothing" mind-set need to learn from the first church fight.

Fifth and last, grace is paramount. The most crucial statement in the first century controversy over the inclusion of the Gentiles was made by Peter. He said, "We believe that we shall be saved by the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will." Not by moral goodness, not by superior intellect, not by spiritual perfection, but by the mercy of God in Christ are we saved. We are all inadequate. We need to keep this in mind as we deal with others in their inadequacy. We are saved by grace or not at all. There is no room for self-righteousness or harsh judgment. A people saved by grace need to live gracefully, generously, lovingly. That's what it took to deal with the first church fight. And that's what it takes today.

Craig M. Watts is minister to the First Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in Louisville, Kentucky.

Looking Over Jonah's Shoulder

ELMER PROUT

I

Jonah. What comes to mind when we hear that name?: A disobedient prophet? A repentant city? A dried-up vine? A huge fish or sea creature?

Our thoughts dash back and forth among those and other possibilities. All of them miss the mark. In our pursuit of those ideas we join the crowds who "have been looking so hard at the great fish that

they have failed to see the great God" (G. Campbell Morgan).

Jonah, of course, didn't fail to see God. As a matter of fact, it was precisely because he saw God so clearly that Jonah ran so frantically: "That is why I was so quick to flee to Tarshish. I knew that you are a gracious and compassionate God..." (Jonah 4:2).

We live in an age when it is tragically easy to confuse opposition to sin with

hateful attitudes toward sinners—sinners other than ourselves, of course! Thomas John Carlisle's poem about the angry Jonah can help us avoid the hate—the-sinner trap.

I do not hate You, God.
Please understand.
You are OK, A-One,
the Very Best,
second to none I know,
great and beyond
my criticism so
I say Amen
to You and all Your good
intentions—but
I might be right about
Your indiscretion in
forgiving folks
gladly and shamelessly
upon the least
evidence of regret.
I think
You carry love too far.

II

"The word of the Lord came to Jonah... 'Go to the great city of Nineveh'. . . But Jonah ran away from the Lord and headed for Tarshish" (Jonah 1:1-3).

What could Jonah have been thinking of when he headed out like that? He was a Hebrew. He worshipped "the Lord, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the land" (Jonah 1:9). Where, in the land or on the sea which God had created, did Jonah think he could hide? Thomas John Carlisle brings the matter into sharp focus:

No Problem

*Whither shall I flee
from Thy presence?*
presents no problem
when one ignores
who owns
the sea
and the sky.

But it was not only that God owned land, sea, and sky. God owned Jonah as well. It was that divine ownership from which Jonah was determined to escape.

Centuries later we read Jonah's story. We laugh and shake our heads at the prophet's foolish attempt to evade God. But is there nothing of Jonah's spirit in us? Do we never make our own trips to Tarshish?

Perhaps when I read Jonah's tale the message might become more sharply personal if I read "Elmer" every time the fleeing Hebrew's name appears. In any case, one thing is certainly, even if unfortunately, true—there are times when "Elmer" buys a ticket for Tarshish.

Come to think of it, you might try your own name in place of the son of Amittai, too. All of us need to be very clear about where we hope the ticket we have purchased will take us.

III

"But the Lord provided a great fish to swallow Jonah, and Jonah was inside the fish three days and three nights" (Jonah 1:17).

The carnival had come to town. One exhibit especially caught my attention. The sign read: "See the huge whale that couldn't possibly have swallowed a man. Where does that leave Jonah?" I couldn't wait to step inside the tent. As I walked slowly around the creature which was on display, questions began to form. The next day in Sunday School I hurled those questions at the teacher. "What kind of fish swallowed Jonah? Did the fish in the carnival come from the ocean near Joppa? What did Jonah do for air while he was in the whale? What did he eat? Was he able to sleep?" Childish questions but real to a boy of ten.

Inside Jonah

I was so obsessed
with what was going on
inside the whale
that I missed
seeing the drama
inside Jonah.

—Thomas John Carlisle

That gets to the point, doesn't it? Whether we are ten or sixty-seven it is not the fish which holds the clue to Jonah's experience. It is Jonah in his relationship with God who calls for our attention.

What was going on inside Jonah? Reluctance. Resistance. Rebellion. Refusal. Run-away. All of that on Jonah's part. Thankfully the story is not only Jonah's. It is also God's story. Actually, it was God's story first and last. So when Jonah repented and returned to God, there was the divine redemption and restoration to set him on his feet and off on mission again.

That is the drama which went on inside Jonah. Is it possible that the same drama is being played out in some of us today?

IV

"But the Lord said . . . 'Nineveh has more than a hundred and twenty thousand people who cannot tell their right hand from their left, and many cattle as well. Should I not be concerned about that great city?'" (Jonah 4:10,11).

"...and many cattle"—what is going on? Is it really God who is concerned about cattle? God's concern for people; yes, I understand that. I approve. But

The deadline mentioned in the last issue for sending your letter or article for the special 25th anniversary issue has been extended to August 15, 1994.

four-legged critters? Why should a repentance-preaching prophet waste even a moment on beasts—especially if those beasts belong to a pagan nation? Let the fire fall!

Anticlimax

Annoying and disappointing
to say the least.
After all
this meddling
mercy
bringing in children
and cattle
at the end
as if their fate
were any
concern of ours
unless we should be
able to herd
the cattle out
before the city
is burned and buried.

—Thomas John Carlisle

God's mention of the cattle doesn't seem to make much sense . . . unless God still means what he said at the creation: "It is good. It is very good!" Cattle and all!

So there we have it—an invitation to join the Creator in his desire to save all of his creation. He calls us to join him in his "infinite capacity for caring."*

*Quotations from *You Jonah!*, poems by Thomas John Carlisle (Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1968).

Elmer Prout, a minister and missionary in the Stone-Campbell movement for many years, presently ministers to the Church of Christ in Shaftner, California.

Intercepted Correspondence

The following "Intercepted Correspondence" is a continuing feature begun in the January/February 1988 issue of *Integrity*. These letters are *Integrity's* version of C.S. Lewis' *Screwtape Letters* and Os Guinness' *Gravedigger Files* and are written by two different *Integrity* board members.

To refresh your memory and inform new readers, our imaginary setting has Bruce attending WordPerfect computer classes, where he accidentally begins intercepting subversive communication between two devils on his computer screen. The *Integrity* board decides that we must inform Christians everywhere of the destructively evil plots of the nefarious teacher Apollyon and his young student Ichabod by publishing the letters for as long as they can be intercepted.

Dear "Moral Relativist:"

The news reporter to whom you refer is, as you might have guessed, one of our agents, acting under cover just like yourself. His "Moral Theory of Relativity" was a master stroke, coming at precisely the right time and into a most receptive societal atmosphere. We expect this to be a major penetration into the Enemy's stronghold--perhaps the most effective penetration since we inspired Charles Darwin's revolutionary theorizations. We have brought so many clusters of current learned "philosophers," professors, counselors, judges, and others of high and influential standing to embrace our council-conceived Theory and in such a brief period of time that we have simply been astounded. And it's hard to astound me, I assure you. My advice to you, and to all others of our ilk, is simply *carpe diem!* We must not waste any time, nor overlook any opportunity, nor spare any effort to further our cause since the Enemy, who seems to anticipate and know our plans, will certainly strike out strongly against us in ways that we cannot predict.

With reference to any attempts to seduce Brother Whitesoul, you may be encouraged to learn that our secular control of the media is paying great dividends in this area--without their producers necessarily having any motivation other than to raise their audience rating. Have you not noticed a

rash of headlined incidents in which "men of the cloth"--a priest here, a minister there--were accused of sexual misconduct, child molestation, pornographic tastes in movies and/or t.v., and risqué magazines and the like? Believe me, the number is legion, and growing. In our favor, any such incidents or tastes held by the "clergyman" are still viewed as irregularities, or even sins, by the at-large public; and disclosure of such incidents involving the clergy elicits a "Naughty, naughty!" reaction in a certain class of citizens who think nothing of indulging in such matters themselves, but yet are roused to shame, shock, scorn, or even anger when the guilty individual is masked as one of the Enemy's agents. We have high-placed representation in all of the common types involved in this subversion: radio, television, movies, magazines, photography; you name it, and we're there riding a crest the Enemy has found extremely difficult to neutralize or destroy.

Just in case you may have forgotten Chapter Seven in our *Manual of Clerical Subversion*, I will be bold enough to mention a tried and true approach you might utilize with Brother Whitesoul. He does a great deal of counseling, especially with troubled young girls as well as ladies. Selection of a location advantageous to our purpose is important: if possible at all, the counseling should be done in an

area of absolute privacy. No windows through which an observer might witness a tender, sympathetic embrace of that grieving wife whose husband denies her his affections. Or, a timely consultation in the home while he is at work; or clandestine meetings away from familiar folk and in secluded places; to this, add a sincere, consoling embrace...but you get the message.

A little ingenuity helps here, and you've plenty of that. As is ever in our favor, even Whitesoul is human, and you have found one who, being emotionally unstable, is tailor-made for this type of situation. She might actually assume the role of sexual aggressor; and even if unsuccessful in this role toward Whitesoul, she may resentfully become a second Mrs. Potiphar!

Ideally, Snugrug would be at hand to hear and transmit immediately and widely any concocted story about Whitesoul's aberrant behavior. Chapter Seven of the *Manual* suggests numerous other alternate and equally effective procedures you might follow. I suggest that you review this matter.

Addressing your final thought, indeed we have had (and still have) agents working with Geraldo, Donahue, and the other self-appointed omniscients of that ilk. There is joy in our company when their counsels follow our party lines, and their ratings rise.

Yours for successful salacious subterfuge,

Uncle Apollyon

My Dear Unabashable Uncle,

Acting on your seasoned advice, I renewed the assault on Brother Whitesoul. I sought out every troubled woman--young and old--I could uncover gossip about in the congregation and suggested that they go to the minister for *absolute private* counseling. Then I put in a word to the preacher about how often during the past few weeks damaging tales had

gotten out concerning confessions shared in confidence, so that he would take extra precautions to keep his counseling sessions secret. Well, with all this priming, you can imagine my surprise when Brother Whitesoul invited me to sit and pray with him about all of these troubled people who were coming to see him, and about his ability to minister to them without any interference by the Adversary! Since I could hardly refuse without running the risk of blowing my cover, I agreed and met with him for over an hour.

This was the first time I had been involved at such close quarters with intense prayer activity. Of course, I had led the obligatory prayers in public, but like most others, I just used these occasions to skate around on the surface of talking to God, mixing pious protestations with entertaining verbiage. When Whitesoul began to pray, however, with just the two of us there, I began to sweat! You see, every bit of our Infernal Father's support was squeezed out of the room by this man's initial prayer. He went right to the core of the Adversary's power to hinder prayers by confessing his own sins and asking to be shown any failing that he was not admitting or was not aware of. I can tell you, it is excruciating to be in the presence of someone who without a flutter of hesitation sits there and tells the bald-faced truth. Besides listening to him drive out all my support, I was wondering what I was going to do when he paused for me to pray. It was impossible in that situation merely to utter the drivel I was used to mouthing. I thought I had better try to fake some real struggling in prayer for the minister's counseling activities if I was to maintain my opportunity to influence him.

Suffice it to say that I've never spent a more uncomfortable hour than that. It wasn't just being deprived of my wanted source of power from Below; I had to really speak to the Enemy! I was trembling right down to the soles of my feet, because I'm not such a fool as to

underestimate how dangerous it is to confront the Great Thunderer. For the first time in my memory, I felt absolutely naked and defenseless. I was sure that the jig was up—He would reveal to Whitesoul what I really was, and I would be out of there with a foot on my backside and a malediction following me out of the door. What I *did* encounter was even more devastating: I was met with a strangely tender concern and a sadness (for *me!*) that were even more difficult to sustain than righteous anger would have been. I found myself stammering something about being a sinner and being sorry I had offended Him and wanting to understand more fully how to share His great love. I offered these mumblings, of course, only as hypocritical pieties, but in spite of all my bad intentions I found myself longing to be enveloped by the

great Love I felt in the room. Never before had I felt the seduction of being invited to lay aside the burden of all my pretensions and lies and accept *His* yoke. I got out of there somehow, but I was shaken to my core. Brother Whitesoul looked at me rather strangely, since he had never before seen me without the poise and self-assurance that come from a perfectly maintained shell of deceit.

This is not the Enemy I have been taught to abhor. What I encountered in that room was not a Tyrant determined to crush me into submission to satisfy His petty lust for power. For the first time in my existence, I felt *loved!* This was a most disquieting experience. Can you help me sort it out?

Your unsettled nephew,
Ichabod

Book Review

Conspiracy of Kindness

Steve Sjogren (Vine Books, Servant Publications, Ann Arbor, MI., 236 pages). 1993.

Review by HENRIETTA C. PALMER

Although there have been few real conspiracies against the church in our country, stories continue to thrive about Proctor and Gamble's logo and other groups who supposedly are plotting against Christianity! Steve Sjogren begins his book about servant evangelism by frankly admitting that he is involved in a conspiracy, but it is a godly one—a conspiracy of kindness. Paul wrote of it in his letter to the Romans: "God's kindness is meant to lead you to repentance" (Rom. 2:4, RSV).

After exploring many kinds of evangelism and experiencing high rates of rejection, the author describes a refreshing new approach to sharing God's love with

others. He offers practical suggestions for many outreach projects with no guilt, no stress, low risk and high grace results. Steve Sjogren works with a church in the Cincinnati–Dayton area, and they have launched twelve other churches in their area with plans for an eventual twenty. Last year these area churches touched well over one hundred thousand people with the love of God in a tangible way.

Jesus sent his followers to sow the seeds of God's love to the ends of the earth. Unfortunately, too many Christians are fearful of the unknown and are more comfortable sowing seeds within their own church building or in groups where they will be accepted. Sjogren tells us about

the South American evangelist Luis Palau who says "Christians are a lot like fertilizer. Piled up in one place they will burn a hole in the ground beneath them. But spread out over a large field, they can do a lot of good!" That's what servant evangelism is all about—taking God's love out into the community and touching lives with kindness in a practical, tangible way.

Too often Christians study about ways to do evangelism and think they must have answers to every possible question before they begin to share God's message with others. More people than ever are hungry for God. But if we approach unbelievers with a message of "Get right with God or get left," we are forcing them out. Sjogren agrees there is a time and place for verbal presentation of the gospel. But he also believes that we need to love with our actions first, and then offer words of love to explain precisely what God's love is all about.

Servant evangelism is showing God's love to others through actions. Sjogren tells us how teams of four or five Christians go out into the community to serve others through free car washes, giving away free cans of cold drinks at ball games, shopping centers and at crowded, backed-up intersections. Sometimes they station themselves in a park by a jogging trail or bicycle path and offer free popsicles to those who go by. On cold days they offer coffee giveaways at major bus stops. One of their most

popular and successful projects has been free Christmas gift wrapping at the local malls. Whatever the project, signs are displayed telling the people the service is absolutely free and no donations are accepted. Since few people will refuse a free service from a friendly person with a big smile, the acceptance rate is very high! Most people ask why they are out serving others for free, and they tell them "We are showing you God's love in a practical way." This has led to many opportunities to talk with people, to invite them to their church and to have spontaneous prayer with them. Many hearts have been touched by the reminder that God loves them.

The author stresses the importance of making the projects short (one to two hours) and repeating appearances in popular locations. Most of all, it has to be fun for the team members so they will truly serve with kindness and love. The author describes over thirty projects and suggests equipment and supplies needed for each of them. After reading Sjogren's book, you will want to accept his invitation to pick up a squeegee and start washing windshields. He guarantees you will have fun as you begin your conspiracy of kindness!

Henrietta C. Palmer, a retired elementary school principal, actively serves the Troy Church of Christ in Troy, Michigan, along with her husband Bill, an elder there. Henrietta has served as *Integrity* Board secretary for many years.

Readers' Response

Dear Editors:

I appreciate the attention you gave to the Munday congregation in a recent article in your publication. However, there were several errors in the article which I would like to correct.

First, I was *not* the author of the

article. It was written by a well-meaning third party who had interviewed me. I would have preferred that it had been written in an interview format. In any case, I did not have the chance to read the article before it appeared in print.

(Continued on the back cover)