

November/December 1995
Volume 26, No. 6

Integrity

Editorial: Jesus: the Way, the Truth, and the Life

The Tender Mercy of God

Hoy Ledbetter

Christmas Weakness

Craig Watts

Practical Grace

Jerome S. Dowdy

A Response to the Article:

"Is Baptism Necessary for Salvation?"

Don A. Stowell

God Speaks to Us Today

Diane G. H. Kilmer

1995 Index

1995 Index, Continued

UNITY, cont'd

- From Bitterness to Forgiveness: Theological Reflection on Congregational Reconciliation - SEPT/OCT
- Make a Stand for Unity Next Summer! - JULY/AUG
- A Proposal to the Church - SEPT/OCT
- Speak Up for the Church! - MAY/JUNE
- The Walls Between - MARCH/APR
- Why There Are Schisms in the Body - SEPT/OCT

WOMEN

- Prayer, Pearls, and a Prohibition: I Timothy 2:8-14 - MAY/JUNE
- *Rocking the Roles* by Robert Lewis and William Hendricks - MAY/JUNE
- Tongue-In-Cheek Hermeneutics - MAY/JUNE

- *Women Caught in Conflict: The Culture War Between Traditionalism and Feminism* by Rebecca Merrill Groothius - MAY/JUNE

WORLD CONVENTION OF CHURCHES OF CHRIST

- Make a Stand for Unity Next Summer! - JULY/AUG

WORSHIP

- More Questions About Worship - MARCH/APR
- *In Search of Wonder: A Call to Worship Renewal* - SEPT/OCT
- *Singing from the Heart: Discovering Worship that Rejoices and Restores* by Jack W. Hayford (book review) - MARCH/APR
- Worship Planning 201 - MARCH/APR

Integrity

4051 S. Lincoln Rd.
Mt. Pleasant, MI 48858

ADDRESS
CORRECTION
REQUESTED

Nonprofit Organization
U.S. POSTAGE

PAID

Royal Oak, MI
Permit No. 696

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.

November/
December 1995
Vol. 26, No. 6

Editors

Diane G.H. Kilmer
J. Bruce Kilmer

Layout Editor

Noreen Bryant

Board of Directors

Kathleen Blakely
Bruce Bryant
Noreen Bryant
Brant Lee Doty
Elton D. Higgs
Laquita M. Higgs
Kay Kendall
Diane G.H. Kilmer
J. Bruce Kilmer
Curtis Lloyd
Curtis D. McClane
Henrietta C. Palmer
William Palmer
Amos Ponder
Keith Price
Karl W. Randall
Jan Van Horn
John Van Horn

Editorial Advisors

Hoy Ledbetter
Joseph F. Jones

Editorial Address:

4051 S. Lincoln Rd.
Mt. Pleasant, MI 48858

Jesus: The Way, the Truth, and the Life

Certain truths about God are evident. Paul said it this way: "For since the creation of the world, God's invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that people are without excuse" (Rom. 1:20). A person looking for the truth behind our existence will see the evidences of God's character throughout creation. His imprint is everywhere, still suggesting order and power, eternal implications and purpose, in spite of the brokenness of our planet.

To know Jesus is to know the Source of all the answers to our questions about our existence, our purpose, our nature. God's nature and character determine what is truth. By "being in very nature God," yet "being made in human likeness," Jesus was truth incarnate. He is the only way to God.

"I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father, except through me" (John 14:6).

The apostles understood this when they took the message of salvation to the world: "There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among mortals by which we must be saved" (Acts 4:12).

The Christmas season is often a time when people who do not yet know Jesus may be more open to discovering additional pieces to add to what they've already found is true. Every day many of you are looking for those points of common agreement about truth in your conversations with not-yet-believers. May the Holy Spirit give you words to lead the way to Jesus, the Great Satisfier of our thirst for life and truth.

And may this year-end issue of *Integrity* encourage all of us as we seek to become closer to the truth.

Bruce and Diane Kilmer
Co-Editors

Subscriptions are by written request. There is no subscription charge, but we depend on your contributions, which are tax-deductible. Please send c/o:
Jan Van Horn, Treasurer, 4860 Livernois, Troy, MI 48098.

Back Issues are available from Amos Ponder, 1269 Pickwick Place, Flint, MI 48507

The Tender Mercy of God

HOY LEDBETTER

For some days now, off and on, I have been pondering a phrase used by Zechariah when John the Baptist was born. He spoke of "the tender mercy" of our God, who brought about the incarnation with all its accomplishments. Tender mercy. What a wonderful expression to capture our meditation during Christmas!

I cannot think of another passage in which that combination occurs, but some do come close. "Bowels of mercies," the phrase in which the KJV couches Paul's conjunction of affection and sympathy, is similar. And we may recall God's grief over the waywardness of his people in Hosea's time, when he asked, "How can I give you up, Ephraim? How can I hand you over, O Israel?" To give them what they deserved would be unthinkable. "My heart," he said, "recoils within me; my compassion grows warm and tender."

We can be sure that his compassion still grows warm and tender. When we have done such bad things, and so many of them, that forgiveness is impossible by all human calculation, his compassion can produce a pardon beyond the skill

or will of anyone else. No matter how mean we may be, it is no vain cry for us to echo the publican's plea, "God, be merciful to me, the sinner!"

When we have left our family, squandered our resources, and, having no place else to go, come home a beggar, his compassion will not only grant us a place but will throw a party.

When decision and direction are so elusive that life seems aimless, and distress and depression dominate the mind, his tender mercy grants us guidance.

And even though some pains cannot be evaded, we have good reason to know that his compassion reaches into hospital and hearse, and it surely grows warm and tender when we are overwhelmed by disease or death.

God has been very careful to present himself to us in this way. We may talk about his power, and it is important. But power is powerless to draw us to him, unless it is manifested in tender mercy. And that thought deserves an extended meditation.

Hoy Ledbetter, founding editor and Editor-in-Chief of *Integrity* for 15 years, currently serves First Christian Church in Albany, Georgia with his wife, Jary.

Christmas Weakness

CRAIG WATTS

In Michel Tournier's novel *The Four Wise Men*, a young deposed prince encountered the infant Jesus in Bethlehem. Prince Taor had been reduced to rags. Daily he dreamed of retaking the throne that was rightfully his, and exercising the power that was his birthright. He resented the poverty

into which he had fallen. But after seeing the Christ child, his perspective changed.

Some time later, another person asked Prince Taor, "What did Bethlehem teach you about power?" The prince answered, "The example of the crib . . . taught me the strength of weakness, the irresistible

gentleness of the non-violent, the law of forgiveness . . . In view of all this, I laid the gold coin struck with the effigy of my father, King Theodinos, at the child's feet. It was my only treasure, my only proof that I was the legal heir to the throne of Palmyra. In relinquishing it, I renounced the kingdom to search for the other kingdom promised me by the Savior."

This is a lesson that many—even among those who pledge allegiance to Jesus—need to learn today. A considerable number among the religious community continue to bewail the loss of the

Christmas declares to us the strength of weakness.

Christian dominance of society. Not trusting in the persuasive power of the gospel, they would legally impose their version of Christian behavior on the general population. They long for the bygone days of

Craig Watts, a contributing writer to *Integrity* for many years, ministers to the First Christian Church in Louisville, Kentucky.

Practical Grace

JEROME S. DOWDY

Our God is a romantic. The man after his own heart was a poet and musician (Acts 13:22). To our Lord, it is impractical to live a life of security in the workaday world. A life of sacrifice that rises above the obstacles is more his delight (Romans 12:1).

In addition, our Lord does not often allow us to have a fair fight, as strange as that might sound. God likes to stack the odds against us, then allow us to overcome valiantly. Fairness has nothing to do with

Blue Laws that would restrict business and entertainment on Sundays. They want officially sanctioned and orchestrated prayers in public schools. They look for a righteous rule that is enforced by the worldly power of governmental authorities.

We don't best uphold the reign of the one born in a manger by seeking to impose his will on those who don't honor his name. Rather than trying to enlist the structures of society to reinforce our way, we need to recognize ourselves as outsiders who follow the one "who was in the world..yet the world did not know him" (John 1:10). Faith in Jesus leads to a minority status in a world gone wrong.

Christmas declares to us the strength of weakness. At the center of the celebration is the One who came in vulnerability and "emptied himself, taking the form of a slave" (Philippians 2:7). Service, not dominance; forgiveness, not force; gentle persuasion, not majority rule; is the way to honor the Lord at Christmas and every other time of year.

it. For we must remember that, as long as we follow the will of the Savior, we will certainly conquer in Christ's name (Romans 8:37). The fact that the victory is ours from the beginning is often not apparent at first to our short-sighted vision.

In the Grand Plan of the Great Romantic, our Lord Jesus is the Knight in Shining Armor; we are the Damsel in Distress; Grace is the chivalry that rescues us. Yet, the Knight wishes the Damsel not to be frail and helpless. Grace covers and overlooks

her limitations when necessary and likewise fills the needed gaps.

"Grace" in the Bible can only be understood from the context of the law of Moses, as the free gift is contrary to the concept of earned salvation (Romans 11:6). The goal may be just beyond our grasp. Grace gives us credit for those few extra inches that we lack to reach it, and God rewards the effort we put forth to attain the goal, rather than condemning the lack of stature, as the Law of Moses did. God rewards the interior person for his or her willingness, although we may be bungling and clumsy on the outside. "We have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us" (II Corinthians 4:7).

If Hebrews 11 is the "faith" chapter, and I Corinthians 13 is the "love" chapter, Romans 4 through 8 are the "grace" chapters and well worth reading again if you haven't lately. In these "grace" chapters, the concept of "imputed" grace is clearly presented in detail, along with the explanation of the mechanics behind it. Those legalists who promote the concept of "infused" grace have not been paying attention. With "imputed" grace, God overlooks our shortcomings and gives us credit for righteousness without works (Romans 3:21-22; 4:3-4; Ephesians 2:8). With "infused" grace, it

Those legalists who promote the concept of "infused" grace have not been paying attention.

is believed that God actually empowers us with the ability to overcome our shortcomings; thus, the Law of Moses is accentuated, not eliminated, in this view, and I can provide no biblical support for this second

idea, especially in light of Romans 3:20, Galatians 2:21, and Ephesians 5:4.

Infused grace believers state that in Romans 7:14-25, Paul is giving an account of the condition he was in before salvation. But this is simply not true. When Paul says, "I have the desire to do what is good but I cannot carry it out" he is giving an accurate account of our present weakness in the flesh as Christians—not the account of a sinner. For later he says, "the carnal mind is hostile to God" (Romans 8:7). When in Romans 7:22-23 Paul says "in my inner being I delight in God's law; but I see another law at work in my members waging war against the law of my mind," he cannot be speaking of his former pre-salvation condition, because he would be demonstrating an agreement with God's will in his mind, not the hostility the carnal mind exhibits.

The key and the trick is this: "If I do what I do not want to do, it is no longer I who do it, but sin living in me that does it" (Romans 7:20). It follows that if our mind is in alignment with God and his will, when we sin, it will be the type of sin we do not wish to do. Sin takes the form of a faltering step; a goof up; a mistake. Thus, we can lean on our Father's love and grace in Christ, and serve him with our mind and will. But, if we sin willfully and determinedly, we are living out of step with Romans 7:20, because then we are sinning because we want to! The mechanics of grace are herein exemplified to the maximum!

Yet grace also enables! God has placed his concern on the development of our character while building us up, yet not tearing us down by imposing the requirement of the law upon us. We will receive a heightened spiritual awareness of right and wrong and a guide to character growth (Titus 2:11).

Definitions Examined

After spending some time looking up the various verses where the word “grace” appears, I find myself in agreement with Thayer’s Lexicon concerning the definition of “grace.” Entry #5485 “charis” has a number of meanings, but the meanings we are dealing with in our salvation is the implied meaning:

1. “kindness which bestows upon one what he has not deserved” and
2. “the merciful kindness by which God, exerting his holy influence upon souls, turns them to Christ, keeps, strengthens, increases them in Christian faith, knowledge, affection, and kindles them to exercise the Christian virtues.”

We’ve already dealt primarily with the first definition; now let’s discuss the second.

Against the Odds

God’s style is to conquer in a big way, against the odds. When he called Gideon to deliver the Israelites from Midianite captivity, the opposing army gathered in the valley below was innumerable, as thick as locusts (Judges 7:12). Gideon had gathered 32,000 men to fight—a number already too few for a serious battle. God said, “There are too many.” He did not want Israel to claim the victory on human terms (Judges 7:2-3). He had Gideon announce that anyone with any apprehension should go home. Twenty-two thousand left. Ten thousand remained.

God’s style is to conquer in a big way—against the odds.

“Too many!” God protested. He then had Gideon take the army down to the stream to drink, and only the men who

lapped water from their hands like dogs were allowed to fight, so a mere 300 men remained to fight a swarm (Judges 7:4-7). God won the battle through the few he had chosen, and Israel was delivered, by God’s enabling and miraculous grace. Imputed grace serves to humble; infused grace would still induce pride.

The war we fight as Christians is mildly different from the war the Israelites fought to possess the promised land. We fight our weaknesses, our character flaws, our sinful traits—these are our enemies. And thus our journey to the real promised land is accomplished as a growth process, “little by little” so our characters adjust to our progress of grace (Exodus 23:30).

If you are like me, you do not enjoy taking on a challenge unless the natural odds for success are stacked in your favor. I would prefer to march in against my “enemies” as an army of 1,000 attacking a mere 10. I would envision conquering the enemy, slaying, then dancing victoriously while poking its corpse with a stick. God, however, has a different design. He sends us, an army of ten, armed only with his grace, against an enemy of 1,000—not much room for pride in ourselves in that ratio. The experience is often frightening and painful, but we always learn, grow, and can only prostrate ourselves before his amazing grace and cry “Abba Father!”

Moses sent a group of men to spy out the Promised Land (Numbers 13:17-14:10). As long as the people thought it was easy, they were content enough. But they discovered “giants” in the land, so they wailed and were afraid and wanted to choose a captain to lead them back to Egypt—back to the bondage of sin from which Moses (typifying Christ) had delivered them. Only Joshua and Caleb maintained faith, and alone inherited the Promised Land after 40 years.

Likewise, we are on our own sojourn through the wilderness—our Christian life and personal trials. It is easy to feel daunted, but God chose us to be slayers of giants—to clear magnificent hurdles by his grace, as David slew Goliath with only a sling and stones from a brook.

Personal glory is not to be any part of our sojourn. In fact, I Cor. 1:26-30 presents us as a group of people “least likely to succeed.” Don’t be insulted, because we, as losers in this world, enter the world to live as winners riding solely on the wings of God’s grace given us in Christ Jesus.

Jerome S. Dowdy and his wife, Shawna, attend the South Redford Church of Christ. They work together as factory employees and produce the *Christian Independent Newsletter* in their spare time.

A Response to the Article, “Is Baptism Necessary for Salvation?”

DON A. STOWELL

After reading brother John Loftus’ article, “Is Baptism Necessary for Salvation” (July/August 1995 *Integrity*), I found some of the same arguments many denominations use to excuse us away from baptism. Brother John’s subtitle “Have We Forgotten Unity,” and the paragraphs that follow brought up past thoughts which I have faced with others. Why is it that when we emphasize baptism, we are considered legalistic and not practicing unity? Why is it we are wrong?

Under the “Ten Clusters of Questions,” Brother John had some good thoughts. Yet, there are flip sides to some of those thoughts. (As I write this article, it is without the knowledge of Greek, Hebrew, Aramaic, or much of the history of baptismal cleansing.)

Point #1

John questions, “Why is it that the New Testament never states that anyone who has not been baptized will go to hell? Can we honestly conceive of a loving God who would condemn a person to hell who deeply

loved him—except that the person failed to be baptized?” My response: If Acts 2:38 says that repentance and baptism is for the forgiveness of sins and the gift of the Holy Spirit, and Galatians 3:27 says that in baptism we clothe ourselves with Christ, and Romans 6:1-4 indicates that baptism is a death, burial, and resurrection with Christ, and I Peter 3:21 tells us that baptism saves us, then what happens if we are not baptized?

Point #2

John states, “Perhaps baptism was a divine requirement to a people who understood its meaning. If so, then what would God think of believers in today’s culture who failed to be baptized because baptism was not viewed in the same way?” My response: Baptism is a divine requirement whether people understand its meaning or not. If people do not understand the Bible passages regarding baptism, then certainly they ought not to be baptized. However, people who are people of the Book will mature in their understanding of many

divine requirements. A 10-year-old baptized believer will learn more about the impact of baptism as well as about the impact of the Holy Spirit as he or she matures.

Point #3

John writes, "Isn't it true that throughout the gospels we see a Jesus who is much more interested in heart attitudes than any outward act?" My response: This should be the whole basis for this article! Certainly, a divine command needs a heart-felt attitude and response! Otherwise, baptism isn't necessary.

Point #4

John uses Scripture as he writes, "He (Paul) also stated that 'Christ did not send me to baptize, but to preach' (I Corinthians 1:14-17). Could Paul really say this if baptism was the exact point of salvation?" My response: Others besides John have been convinced of the unimportance of baptism because Christ did not send Paul to do that. However, look at the whole context of that statement. While he includes Paul's thankfulness of not baptizing many, John indicates that Paul minimized baptism. This isn't true. Paul minimized people's need to pledge allegiance to the person who baptized them!

Point #5

This point, that Paul taught baptism as a response to God's grace (Gal. 3:27, Rom. 6), and point #3 in John's article need to go together to get the full impact of the article. These two points should solidify the need for baptism, not challenge it!

Point #6

"When our kids offer a sincere commitment to help us around the house, should we condemn them when they forget to do

something we consider important?" My response: This is a good point, but neither do we reward our kids when we have already instructed them in their behavior and they forget it. We continue to teach them until they do what they've been told.

Point #7

John writes, "Many unbaptized people . . . have received manifestations of the fruits of the Spirit. . . testify to answered prayer. . . zealously evangelistic. . . have an inner strength. . . I myself experienced this three months before I was baptized." My response: Why, then, would anyone need baptism for any reason if these things exist? I believe in the work of the Holy Spirit to convict one of sin, but I also believe there is no indwelling of the Holy Spirit until conversion and baptism (Acts 2:38).

Point #8

John questions, "Why is it that omitting to be baptized is so grievous a sin when compared to the person who fails to evangelize. . . doesn't care for orphans and widows. . . fails to visit those in prison or feed the poor?" My response: Baptism is one of the things that leads us to salvation. The others John mentions are results or responses because of our salvation. "True religion," James writes, is to care for orphans and widows. An unbeliever (a real unbeliever) may do this, too. So does he or she have "true religion?"

Point #9

"There are many people in other Christian churches who read their Bibles and who cannot see it any other way than what their particular denomination teaches. Some of these people are poor, unintelligent, illiterate, downtrodden, and abused. How will God judge these people because they could not see the error of their church

leaders . . ." My response: Good point. However, while we are not going to personally judge someone else's salvation based on ignorance because of the lack of teaching from a church leader, we must admit that some teaching is simply refused. Some church members won't read the Scriptures. Some won't hear sound doctrine. What I am saying is, those who have heard can accept or decline the invitation. Then where's the judgment?

Point #10

John's last point tells us, "Most of us will say that my children, at the earliest stages of their lives, were not yet accountable and so were safe in God's hands. But what if my wife and I misjudged their faith and baptized them before they were fully accountable? . . . like infant baptism, is their baptism null and void? . . . what if they are never rebaptized, thinking they had already fulfilled their duty to God?" My response: a child's faith is

much more tender than that of an older person. However, it is much unlike infant baptism, because it demands a reasonable understanding and response to what salvation is (including the subject of sin and repentance). If we would use John's argument in everyday life, then we would never get jobs, because we would never know everything about the job to get it done well. So we learn more and more about the job, just as we learn more and more about God's wonderful grace and baptism.

Finally, in a conclusive response of my own, I will say that the legalists will commit to a "baptism only" "style" of teaching. It appears that the legalist will consider the grace of God, the confession of sins, and repentance to be of no value. I fully disagree with that approach. However, just because there are those who are legalists, doesn't mean that we must go to the other side of the spectrum and denounce the value of baptism and its meaning.

Don A. Stowell serves Calvary Christian Church in Swartz Creek, Michigan, as senior minister.

God Speaks To Us Today

DIANE G. H. KILMER

Have you ever wished God would give you specific instructions for an important decision you are facing? Have you ever wanted to just pick up the phone, tell God your problems, and then hear his answers? When you cannot find your exact dilemma addressed in the Bible, do you ever wish God could just drop a direct, personal response to you in your mailbox?

Alexander Campbell's rational approach to these needs for direct contact with God has dominated the thinking of us Stone-Campbell heirs. Personal experience of

God has been de-emphasized in reaction to emotional Pentecostalism. We've been taught that the gifts of the Spirit as described in I Corinthians 12 were for the first century only, the apostolic era, or until the Bible was assembled—when "the perfect comes"—as I Corinthians 13:10 is interpreted. We've been warned that to waver from the belief that today God speaks only through the Bible is to put ourselves in spiritual danger.

About 25 years ago I began a personal study of every scripture in the Bible on the

Holy Spirit. Jesus's excitement over the coming gift of the Holy Spirit recorded in John 14-16 stood out in particular:

Nevertheless, I tell you the truth: it is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away, the Helper will not come to you, but if I go, I will send him to you. 16:7

If you love me, you will keep my commandments. And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever. This is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, because he abides with you, and he will be in you. I will not leave you orphaned. 14:15-18.

But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you. 14:26

These three chapters in John show that Jesus believed that all his followers ("followers") would be better off spiritually with this special gift of the Helper and would be enabled to do more to glorify God than if Jesus himself remained on earth in human form (14:12 & 13). During my study I also noticed that Paul's teachings regarding the Holy Spirit were not given with a limited era in mind. I discovered that many well-respected Christian commentators offered convincing reasoning that the phrase "when the perfect comes" in I Corinthians 13:10 refers to the event of Christ's second coming, which definitely fits the context. Eventually, I came to the conclusion that the Church of Christ teachings restricting the activities of the Holy Spirit today were people's interpretations and opinions, and I

couldn't agree with them. I prayed to God and asked that if his Spirit was available inside me for guidance and instruction, that God would teach me how to listen to his voice.

God gladly honored my request, not leaving me "orphaned." The following information is gleaned from some of my experiences throughout the past 25 years when looking for guidance from God through direction from his Spirit, as Jesus promised around 2,000 years ago.

Helpful Basic Principles

First, I've found that approaching God for guidance within the framework of the following basic principles helps me to hear him more clearly:

1. We should not limit God. It's very important that we do not approach him with pre-conceived ideas of how he'll answer us or what he'll say. So that we don't confuse our wishes with God's guidance, we should approach him with an open mind.
2. We should believe the scriptural promises that God will give us wisdom and discernment. Just as God gave Solomon "a discerning heart and an ability to distinguish right from wrong" (I. Kings 3:5 fl.), he will give the same to those who ask (Matthew 7:7-11, James 1:5).
3. We should honestly want to know God's will! The answer may require us to change our thinking or actions. Are we really willing to hear it?
4. We should be willing to say "Thy will be done." God should be approached with humility and with an intention to obey. It is more appropriate for us to ask him what his perspective is in a given situation, rather than request that we have our way. God will never guide us in a way that is contrary to

Scripture. One day a woman told me that she had met a very attractive man in her therapy group, and had begged and begged God to let her know if she should divorce her husband and marry this man or not. She wondered aloud to me why God was not answering her prayer. The reason, of course, was because God had already expressed his opinion about fidelity and divorce in the Bible. She wasn't really interested in his perspective but wanted a new revelation.

God Guides in Many Ways

Five methods that God uses to communicate to us will be discussed in this article, but in no way is this an exhaustive list. No one can imagine all the methods the source of creative communication uses...a being who has been known to use burning bushes, talking mules, and incarnation to speak to his human creatures!

1. *God communicates to us through the Bible.*

II Timothy 3:16 teaches:

"All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness."

Knowledge of what the Bible says about God and his ways is necessary in order to test what we think we're hearing from him. Also, the Spirit speaks through the Bible itself to give us answers to many of our questions. Many of us have experienced poring over Scripture, looking for answers of comfort or hope. Then a verse we've read a thousand times before suddenly jumps off the page at us, giving solid advice and counsel regarding our specific need.

My husband, Bruce, will never forget what happened one night when he was feeling particularly discouraged during his second year of law school. School was

hard; it was all-consuming; it was exhausting. "Was it worth it?" he asked in prayer that night. "Am I wasting my time?" While perusing the scriptures, looking for any word of guidance or encouragement, he suddenly came upon these words and he knew that God was using them to speak directly to him:

If you will walk in my ways and keep my requirements, you will govern my house and have charge of my courts, and I will give you a place among these standing here . . . Not by might, nor by power, but by my spirit, says the Lord of hosts (Zec. 3:7; 4:6b).

Bruce believed these words and they gave him the courage to carry on, even though we wondered if the words were about earth or heaven, or both. Now, twenty years later, Bruce has served (and continues to serve) the church as an elder. Also, his current occupation as a regional court administrator places more than 80 courts and judges in Michigan under his charge. We believe God gives guidance through scripture.

2. *Two-way prayer is another method God uses to guide us.*

God responds to the individual's prayer request, as we already noted regarding Solomon. Part of Jesus' excitement in John 16 regarding the coming of the Holy Spirit upon his disciples was that it would begin a new era when all believers would have a portion of God's Spirit living in them, enabling a very direct line of communication and intimacy with God unavailable to "the masses" in the past. Paul describes this possibility in I Corinthians 2:10-16:

These things God has revealed to us through the Spirit; for the Spirit searches everything, even the depths of God. For what human

being knows what is truly human except the human spirit that is within? So also no one comprehends what is truly God's except the Spirit of God. Now we have received not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit that is from God, so that we may understand the gifts bestowed on us by God. And we speak of these things in words not taught by human wisdom but taught by the Spirit, interpreting spiritual things to those who are spiritual.

Those who are unspiritual do not receive the gifts of God's Spirit, for they are foolishness to them, and they are unable to understand them because they are spiritually discerned. Those who are spiritual discern all things, and they are themselves subject to no one else's scrutiny. 'For who has known the mind of the Lord so as to instruct him?' But we have the mind of Christ.

How do we recognize God's voice? Jesus taught that we will know his voice and follow him (John 10:3-5). I still laugh about a specific prayer time 25 years ago when Bruce and I lived in Japan as missionary/teachers. I was alone in our bedroom, on my knees begging God again for the third time, with tears, for what I considered a perfectly legitimate request. Suddenly a voice said loudly, "No! Now get up and don't ask me again!" I jumped up and began quickly wiping tears away and readjusting my attitude before it occurred to me that the voice was God's and that he had spoken into my head . . . in English! That was my point of discovery that conversational prayer with God is available today. The New Testament is filled with examples of the Spirit giving direction.

During conversational prayer with God, I've learned to ask God a question, then quiet my mind to listen for an answer. Usually (although not always) a brief phrase or a few sentences come into my mind which answer the question. How can we know it's God's voice we're hearing? Couldn't we be having a conversation with ourselves? Or with Satan? These are good questions, and I've learned to answer them this way: Always test what you hear by asking these questions:

- Is what I'm hearing consistent with Scripture? God's Spirit never leads us contrary to what he's already revealed in the Bible.
- Does what I hear lead me toward Jesus and spiritual freedom or toward sin or bondage?
- What do my most trusted Christian friends think about the answer?

After a particularly exasperating day coping with a bad-tempered, power-hungry manager who tended to create anxiety and anger in every office cubicle he entered, I sat down and asked God why the man behaved like this. The answer that came into my mind was: "His efforts to control everyone are based on fear—he doesn't know that I am here to trust." That answer rang true. No red flags came up when I "tested" it. And the information made me look at the spiritually needy manager in a whole new way.

Recognizing God's voice takes practice. Eventually you are able to discern what thoughts are your own and what ones are originating from another thinking being. Ideas that do not reflect the character of God as revealed in the Bible, that stir up rebelliousness, arrogance, or pride, are not from God, but from the Evil One. Satan and his forces can whisper into our minds. The Spirit helps us to discern who is speaking.

Sometimes God gives direction to groups of praying people, "for where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them" (Matthew 18:20). Bruce and I have often received clear direction when we brought our decisions together to the Lord in prayer (such as new jobs, schooling, moving, etc.). I remember the first time we got down on our knees at the living room couch and asked God to make it clear to both of us whether Bruce should accept a new job offer. Then we got quiet and

Bruce and I have often received clear direction when we brought our decisions together to the Lord in prayer.

"listened." Soon my mind became busy, clearly sorting out the pros, cons, and our own pre-set priorities. Eventually we looked up at each other, asked each other if we'd heard anything, and discovered that both of us felt very peaceful about not taking the job. Time affirmed the decision when months later that company went out of business under negative circumstances. From this incident we learned that since God's Spirit is living in both of us, God can easily communicate the same answer to us.

After many years of practice receiving direction from God, a different kind of "answer" came up one year. Bruce was offered a new job opportunity that would move our family to another city. We did all the usual footwork to make the decision: gathered the facts about the job, city, schools, and church. Prayed and talked and prayed some more. But as the deadline approached, we just didn't receive any direction one way or the other, and our anxiety level was heightening. Finally, during a time of prayer

with our minister, Bruce and I suddenly felt a sense of peace. When we talked together later, we discovered that we both felt that God didn't have a preference this time, that he was leaving it up to us, that we would be "walking in his will" either way, so it was our choice.

In his book *Celebration of Discipline* Richard Foster describes this same "corporate prayer" for guidance working for hundreds of people at a time. I've personally experienced decision-making like this among smaller groups of 12 to 40 people who received the same unified guidance from God at one time (see brief description of an example in "Free to Celebrate," *Integrity*, Nov./Dec. 1985).

The book of Acts is filled with disciples praying together for direction. And in Acts 15 you see the group testing what they hear. They are sure the guidance is consistent with Scripture before they say with confidence: "It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us . . ." (Acts 15:28).

Guidance heard in corporate prayer must be tested:

- Is the guidance we believe we are hearing from God consistent with Scripture?
- Does the guidance lead toward Jesus and spiritual freedom?
- Are these trusted Christian friends "of one mind" on the decision?

I suggest three additional "tests" to any decisions that a corporate prayer group makes:

- No one should end up with more "power" over another.
- Never should a "bruised reed be broken." Christ's humble, gentle attitude must prevail.
- Everyone's freedom of choice should still be intact . . . the same freedom that the father gave his prodigal son in Jesus' parable (Luke 15:11-31).

3. *God often uses Christian advisors or mentors to give us his direction.*

As a young woman looking for any information I could find about living life sensitive to the Holy Spirit inside me, I discovered a book at my grandmother's house that introduced me to my first author/mentor: *The Helper* by Catherine Marshall. Since that time I've also received godly guidance from Christian teachers and friends, prayer partners, early church writers, and contemporary authors. Several proverbs, including these two, support the idea that others can be used by God to provide guidance: "Plans fail for lack of counsel, but with many advisers they succeed" (Proverbs 15:22) and "As iron sharpens iron, so one person sharpens another" (Proverbs 27:17).

Paul encourages Titus (in Chapter 2:1-10) to establish mentor relationships among young and old, men and women, slave and free. Richard Foster's chapter on "Corporate Guidance" in *Celebration of Discipline* offers excellent, comprehensive instructions regarding mentoring.

The same tests apply to advice given by a spiritual advisor that apply to group guidance (see #2 above).

4. *Sometimes God uses circumstances to give us direction.*

The book of Acts records many circumstances which gave Paul and others direction as to where and when to preach. The passage in Acts 16:6-10 is a good example of how Paul interpreted not being able to enter various ports or countries as the Holy Spirit guided them. One day, at age three, my youngest child did something particularly independent, which reminded me that parenting my children would not be a full-time job forever. So I prayed right there that God would clearly guide me into my next "era." No "instant" answer came. But

during the next few months he reminded me of my (dormant) writing skills and began opening up opportunities for me to write, including articles for *Integrity*. Eventually he led me back to college, where I finished my degree under some of the best English and religion teachers around. After graduation, I asked God if there was a job where I could make money using my newly-polished writing skills yet still be home and available to my children when they came home from school. A few months later I was hired by a marketing firm to work part-time for them at my home computer! Step-by-step God has been using circumstances to guide me into the next "era."

5. *God uses dreams and visions to impart to us wisdom and direction.*

If we believe that the Spirit is active and alive today, then we can also believe Joel's prophecy, as repeated by Luke:

"In the last days," God says, "I will pour out my Spirit on all people.

"Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your young men will see visions, your old men will dream dreams.

"Even on my servants, both men and women, I will pour out my Spirit in those days, and they will prophesy" (Acts 2:17-18).

Through reading and talking to others, I've discovered that this way of receiving guidance from God still occurs today, and my own experiences verify this fact. Dreams and visions are frequently recorded in the Old and New Testaments, but I'll focus on just one for now: Peter's experience in Acts 10. You'll remember that Peter is outdoors in the middle of the day when he sees the vision of the large sheet filled with "unclean" animals, birds and reptiles. A voice tells him to eat, Peter verbally resists, then

these words are spoken: "Do not call anything impure that God has made clean." The vision, repeated three times by the Spirit, prepared Peter for the invitation to the house of Cornelius, a Gentile, and clarified in Peter's mind that Jesus' salvation was also meant for the Gentiles.

A vision is defined by W. R. Inge, an English Christian intellectual and writer who lived from 1860 to 1954, in this way:

"Vision begins when thought ceases, to our consciousness, to proceed from ourselves. It differs from dreaming, because the subject is awake. It differs from hallucination, because there is no organic disturbance: it is, or claims to be, a temporary enhancement, not a partial disintegration, of the mental faculties. Lastly, it differs from poetical inspiration because the imagination is passive. That perfectly sane people often experience such visions there is no manner of doubt."

This definition applies to Peter's experience, and to contemporary Christians to whom I have spoken. Dreams and visions must be tested like anything else we believe we are receiving from God:

- What they reveal must be consistent with what has already been revealed in scripture. In Peter's case, he could see that offering salvation to the Gentiles was consistent with Old Testament teaching: "I now realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism, but accepts people from every nation who fear him and do what is right" (Acts 10:34).
- A vision or dream from God will teach the receiver God's perspective on something. Peter was given a visual understanding of God's inclusive gospel.
- A dream or vision from God always generates spiritual freedom and a closer relationship to Jesus. Once Peter

understood how big the picture was, he also better understood the heart of Jesus.

In regard to dreams . . . I'm one of those people who dream in full color with lots of details and fully developed story lines. Sometimes these dreams are nightmares. A long time ago I turned over to God this ability to have vivid dreams, praying that he be in control of them. Sometimes I still have dreams that have no meaning or simply reflect the day's spicy food. But once in a while I wake up from a dream that stirs me up in a way that makes me ask God, "Did you want to teach me something from that?" Then a kind of understanding may come to my mind, sometimes sentences with an explanation.

One time God used one of my dreams to help minister to someone else. My sister Judy called me from Tennessee one night, requesting prayer for her friend, Rachel, and Rachel's seriously ill 10 year old son who had just entered the hospital. That night I dreamed that my daughter and I were in a similar situation. I woke up in the dark, weeping, and immediately discerned that God used my dream to help me pray for Rachel with real empathy. While praying for her and her sick child, a Scripture came to my mind (Lamentations 3:22-24) along with a strong sense of urgency to pass it on to Rachel. The next morning I told my sister of the unusual night, and she took the whole thing seriously, printed up the Scripture on her computer into banner form, and put it up in the boy's hospital room. Recently, Rachel wrote me the rest of this story:

How I clung to the hope that if God cared enough to use you many miles away to care for us then surely he had not abandoned us. During the long days that followed, we spent time

memorizing this verse. Little did we know what was ahead for us.

On our sixteenth day in the hospital, the doctors began to prepare Michael for some tests for the following day. The agonizing pain that would follow this preparation is unequaled in his world to this day. For 6 to 7 hours, our son was absolutely violent with pain. He thrashed so and cried out so, I could barely manage him. There would be no help from the doctors for this pain—he would have to bear it. At some point in my crying out to the Lord, I asked the Lord to give us some way to make it through the night. Then very quietly, Michael began to whimper, “This I recall to my mind, therefore I have hope . . .” (Lam. 3:22-24).

For the rest of the time, as long as I held Michael tightly and as long as he repeated the words of that verse or sang *Silent Night*, he could endure. I shall never forget the faithfulness of God on that night or how his mercies have been there each day since.

We were all amazed at how the Holy Spirit had guided my sister and me to “prepare the room” ahead of time for God to encourage Rachel and her son throughout that ordeal.

What If God Doesn't Answer?

“Sometimes God doesn't speak,” says Marion Bond West, a noted Christian writer and teacher. The bottom line is this: we are his creatures, and we must not be demanding but be willing to wait, humbly and patiently. Ronald Davis, a respected Christian teacher in Michigan who has written several articles for *Integrity* readers, wrote

me a letter on the subject of guidance, and advised: “Be ready at any time or place to hear God. It won't necessarily be at special set-aside times for prayer but throughout the day or night.”

You may have heard people speak of hearing from God “in God's time.” But I think that when we have to wait for an

Be ready at any time or place to hear God.

answer, it is often because God is waiting for humans to change, move, listen, etc. God does not cross his own boundary of giving his human creatures “free will.” Therefore, he often waits “in human time”—until all people and circumstances are ready—before he works his will.

After a prayer seminar I taught last year, a 90-year old Christian woman who had attended the class sent me a letter describing her own interesting experience in regard to waiting for God's answer to her prayers:

When talking to my minister years ago, I said I could not remember ever having received an answer to prayer. He said, “Go home, write down the prayers you are making now, put the list away and after a time look at it and see if you have had answers.” So I did, and forgot about the list. Several years later my husband and I returned from a trip to Hawaii and I was so “up” after the trip that I was cleaning *everything*. I opened a desk drawer and found my list, and to my amazement every single prayer had been answered and when the answer was “no” I realized the “no” was the correct answer! At the bottom of the page I

had written, “I hope that some day we can go to Hawaii,” never dreaming we would! Isn't God wonderful?”

Another reason we may not be hearing from God is because we didn't obey the last instructions he gave us, or there is an unacknowledged sin that must be dealt with. I learned this lesson the hard way after I ignored sending the perfect letter of condolence to a young woman to whom I had been witnessing. Week after week she, a receptionist at the chiropractor's office, and I had had discussions about faith in Christ when I came in for treatment for an injury. When I learned that there had been a death in her family, a letter to her came into my mind, line by line, that would have taught about the hope of resurrection which believers have in Christ. I believe the Spirit suggested that letter. But out of pure procrastination I ended up never sending it.

Another reason we may not be hearing from God is because we didn't obey the last instructions he gave us or there is an unacknowledged sin that must be dealt with.

During the next few weeks my prayers seemed to be going nowhere. The usual companionship I felt was missing. I finally asked, “What is wrong?” and then the unwritten letter came to my mind. I got the point and acknowledged my disobedience and Christ forgave me immediately, of course, which cleared the lines of communication at once. But that particular opportunity had been lost forever. I've tried to obey promptings from the Holy Spirit ever since.

Room For Mistakes

One more important word regarding not hearing from God: sometimes we misunderstand him. Sometimes we just didn't hear him right or we missed the communication which can also come in the form of thoughts, Scriptures, songs, confirmation from others, or even burning bushes(!?!). Remember this: God can redeem our mistakes! He provides us a gracious space of time and opportunity in which to learn, to grow from toddlers to veterans. Communicating with God was as natural as breathing for Adam and Eve before the Fall. Lavishly gifting us with a portion of his own Spirit is God's way of restoring as much of that original, Garden of Eden communication as possible on a planet that is still in the process of redemption.

God does provide guidance to his children today. As Ronald Davis also wrote in his letter to me:

God speaks to his children as I speak to my own children. It is only natural that he does it. It would be unlike him not to talk to us. The God who loved us to the death is one who is a passionate, loving, and reckless God. He seeks us even when we want nothing to do with him.

Jesus explains this intimate arrangement like this:

Before long the world will not see me anymore, but you will see me. Because I live, you also will live. On that day you will realize that I am in my Father, and you are in me, and I am in you. Whoever has my commands and obeys them, he is the one who loves me. He who loves me will be loved by my Father, and I too will love him and show myself to him (John 14:16-20).

God has arranged for the possibility of our receiving direct guidance from him through the work of his Holy Spirit. Practical advice for receiving guidance from God boils down to this:

- *Ask* God . . . with an honest desire to know his will.
- *Listen* carefully . . . be *watchful*.
- Don't isolate yourself; ask for *advice* from trusted Christian friends.
- Be prepared to *wait* for an answer!

Diane Kilmer grew up in the a cappella Churches of Christ. She attended Michigan Christian College, Abilene Christian University, and received her B.A. in English from Michigan State University. Diane has served on the Integrity Board for more than 13 years, 9 of those years as Co-Editor.

1995 Integrity Index

ANTINOMIANISM

- Identity Markers and Alleged Antinomianism - MARCH/APR

BAPTISM

- Is Baptism Necessary for Salvation? - JULY/AUG
- Readers' Response - JAN/FEB
- A Response to the Article: "Is Baptism Necessary for Salvation?" - NOV/DEC

BIBLE CHARACTERS

- Gomer - JAN/FEB

BIBLICAL INTERPRETATION (BIBLE STUDY)

- All Things to All People - JAN/FEB
- Gomer - JAN/FEB
- Prayer, Pearls, and a Prohibition: I Timothy 2:8-14 - MAY/JUNE
- Tongue-In-Cheek Hermeneutics - MAY/JUNE

BOOK REVIEWS

- *Rocking the Roles* by Robert Lewis and William Hendricks - MAY/JUNE
- *In Search of Wonder: A Call to Worship Renewal* - SEPT/OCT
- *Singing from the Heart: Discovering Worship that Rejoices and Restores* by Jack W. Hayford - MARCH/APR

- *Women Caught in Conflict: The Culture War Between Traditionalism and Feminism* by Rebecca Merrill Groothuis - MAY/JUNE

CHRISTIAN GROWTH

- Think on These Things - JAN/FEB
- Moving the Widow - SEPT/OCT
- Readers' Response - SEPT/OCT

CHRISTMAS

- Christmas Weakness - NOV/DEC
- Tender Mercy of God - NOV/DEC

CHURCH

- From Bitterness to Forgiveness: Theological Reflection on Congregational Reconciliation - SEPT/OCT
- A Proposal to the Church - SEPT/OCT
- Speak Up for the Church! - MAY/JUNE
- What is the Church's Function? - MARCH/APR
- Why There Are Schisms in the Body - SEPT/OCT

GRACE

- All Sufficient Grace - JULY/AUG
- Amazing, Transforming Grace - SEPT/OCT
- How Broad Is the Grace of God? - SEPT/OCT

GRACE, cont'd

- Identity Markers and Alleged Antinomianism - MARCH/APR
- Journal Entries: Temptation, Spirit, and Grace - JULY/AUG
- Practical Grace - NOV/DEC
- Transforming Grace: Saved and Serving by the Goodness of God - JULY/AUG
- Two Meditations on Sin and Grace - JULY/AUG

GUIDANCE

- God Speaks to Us Today - NOV/DEC

HOLY SPIRIT

- Readers' Response - JAN/FEB
- Journal Entries: Temptation, Spirit, and Grace - JULY/AUG

HOMOSEXUALITY

- Readers' Response - JAN/FEB

HOSEA

- Gomer - JAN/FEB

JACKSON, LEE

- Back to the Future - MARCH/APR

JONES, JOSEPH F.

- An Ambassador of the Message - MARCH/APR

MARRIAGE

- *Rocking the Roles* by Robert Lewis and William Hendricks - MAY/JUNE

MEDITATIONS

- Two Meditations on Sin and Grace - JULY/AUG

MERCY

- The Tender Mercy of God - NOV/DEC

MUSIC

- Tradition - JAN/FEB

OKLAHOMA BOMBING

- Interview With an Oklahoma Rescuer - MAY/JUNE

PEPPERDINE LECTURES 1994

- Identity Markers and Alleged Antinomianism - MARCH/APR

POETRY

- Moving the Widow - SEPT/OCT

POLITICS

- All Things to All People - JAN/FEB

PRAYER

- God Speaks to Us Today - NOV/DEC

RESTORATION MOVEMENT

- Back to the Future - MARCH/APR

SEXUAL TEMPTATION

- Journal Entries: Temptation, Spirit, and Grace - JULY/AUG

SIN

- Meditations on Sin and Grace - JULY/AUG

SUFFERING

- God Intends Us To Suffer (But Not Too Much) - JAN/FEB
- Interview With an Oklahoma Rescuer - MAY/JUNE

TEMPTATION

- Journal Entries: Temptation, Spirit, and Grace - JULY/AUG

TRADITION

- Tradition - JAN/FEB

UNITY

- All Things to All People - JAN/FEB
 - Back to the Future - MARCH/APR
- (continued on back cover)