

Good News Unlimited

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Why Go To Church? —

Part 1

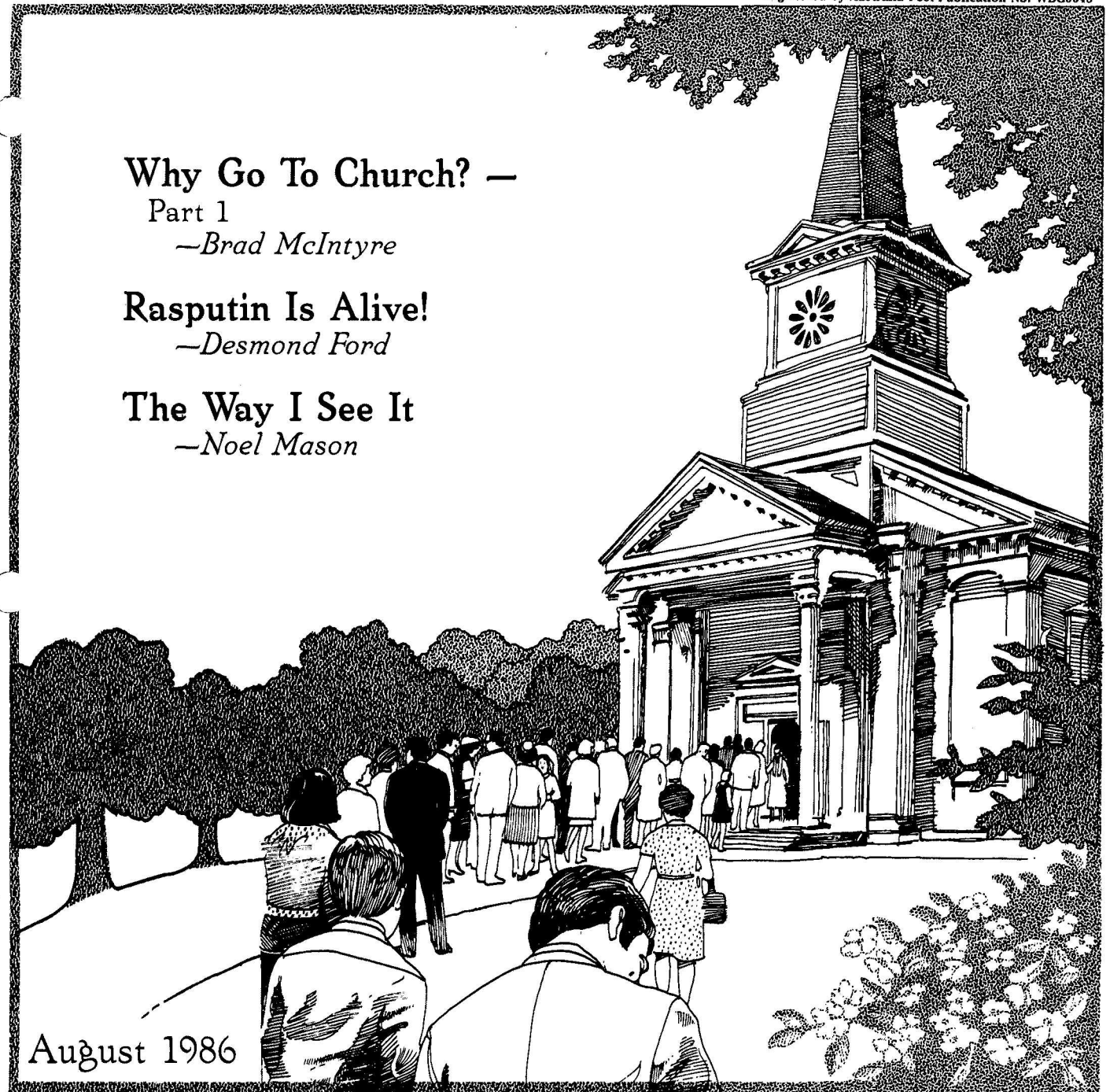
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—Noel Mason



August 1986

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Editorial

From whatever perspective one may choose to look at it, one will feel compelled to conclude that the church has fallen upon hard times. As Lesslie Newbigin says in his recent book, *Foolishness to the Greeks*, "In the areas dominated by modern Western culture (whether in its capitalist or socialist expression) the church is shrinking and the gospel appears to fall on deaf ears" (p.3). Ever since the Enlightenment, Christians have found it difficult to communicate the gospel to modern people.

In the final chapter of his book, Newbigin lists seven requirements for a genuine missionary encounter with Western culture. The first requirement is a recovery and firm grasp of a true doctrine of lost things. The gospel is the good news of the kingdom and kingdom is an eschatological concept. The second requirement is the development of a Christian doctrine of freedom (p. 137). Third, there is a need for a "declericalized" theology, a theology that has been wrought out at the coal face, at the place where faith wrestles at personal cost with the hard issues of public life (p. 143). The fourth requirement is a radical theological critique of the theory and practice of denominationalism. Newbigin believes that the modern church must patiently seek again what the Reformers sought—"to restore the face of the Catholic Church" (p. 146). Fifth, we need to recognize that our understanding of Christianity is culturally conditioned. It cannot be otherwise. Sixth, we need the courage to hold and proclaim a belief that cannot be proved to be true in terms of the actions of our society. All understanding of reality involves a commitment, a venture of faith (p. 148). Newbigin's final requirement for a missionary encounter with Western culture is that such an encounter must flow spontaneously from a community of praise (p. 149). Such a community will tend to draw men and women from grey wastelands of a secularized and disenchanted world.

As you think about Newbigin's seven requirements for a missionary encounter with Western culture, keep in mind that he has served for nearly forty years as a missionary in India and has been very active in international mission and ecumenical organizations. He has been exposed to many different cultures and has therefore seen the great need for Christians to become sensitive to the influence of their own culture.

Of the seven requirements, the one that interests me most at the moment is number three—the need for a "declericalized" theology. Just recently I had the opportunity to attend a seminar in psychological counseling at a state university. On the way home I listened to one of the popular religious radio stations. The contrast was striking. It was like visiting two different worlds in one day. I saw immediately the need for a "declericalized" theology rather than a canned theology from a different time and culture.

As Christian missionaries we need to give far more thought than we do to expressing our faith (without compromise) in a form that truly engages the secular person in his own culture. With God's blessing, when this task is done, the church will experience greater success in its missionary enterprise.

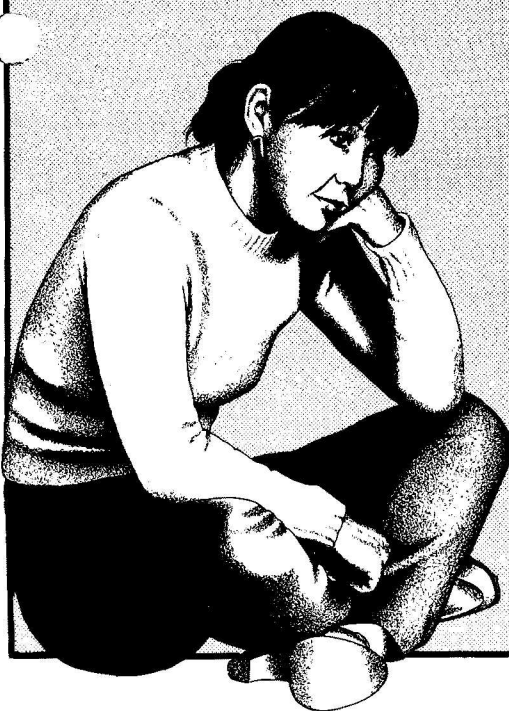
—Noel Mason



WHY GO TO CHURCH ?

Part 1

by Brad McIntyre



WHY GO TO church? When there are so many other things to do and so many other social groups to belong to, why take the time to drag the family to church each week? I'd like to begin by listing four reasons why we sometimes neglect church attendance.

First, we're too busy. Things come up, our schedule gets clogged, and pretty soon we've shoved church to the fringes of our life. This can happen easier than we think.

I'm not talking now about those occasional conflicts in our schedule that come up, like a camp out or visiting relatives or some special event. I'm talking about that kind of busyness which ruthlessly drives us until we lose sight of the transcendent dimension of life. We then get used to replacing church with other things, always promising ourselves, "Well, I'll get to church one of these days when things slow down a bit." But as you well know, putting off going to church becomes a habit, and one day we realize we no longer miss church nor think about it much.

This is the kind of busyness we must beware of. It's not wrong to be busy. I'd rather be busy than bored! But when we're too busy to worship God with other believers, we're too busy. Period!

Putting off going to church becomes a habit, and one day we realize we no longer miss church nor think about it much.

And this is where planning comes in. I learned years ago that if I wanted to integrate something important into my lifestyle, I must consciously plan to do it ahead of time. Once attending church becomes a preplanned part of our weekly routine rather than something we decide to do at the last minute if we're in the mood, then we will gain control over our busyness, our priorities will be clearer, and we will find ourselves in church more often.

Hurt Feelings

A second reason why we sometimes neglect church is hurt feelings. Here is where the church shows its humanness. Even though we profess to know Christ, we will still hurt one another occasionally. This is inevitable. If we take the doctrine of sin seriously, then we're forced to admit that we're all sinners in need of grace and that from time to time we're going to blow it—we're going to offend someone sometime.

Let us use our hurts as stepping stones to building more intimate relationships with those who have hurt us by speaking the truth in love, by praying with and for one another, by acknowledging both our frailties and the power of God's transforming grace.

We must be very realistic about this. If you join a church filled with imperfect human beings like yourself, you're going to get ticked off now and then at someone. And if you want to, you can always make this an excuse not to attend.

"Well, so and so said this or that and that really got to me. So I'm going to stay home a few weeks to teach them a lesson." We can easily begin to think this way so that whenever we're offended or hurt or mad at someone or some decision the church has made, we bail out for a few weeks to nurse our wounds.

It's sort of like a marriage in which whenever there's an argument, the wife packs her bags and moves in with mother or the husband walks out the front door, slamming it behind him and refuses to talk for a week. Nothing is really accomplished. There is no conscious and intentional working out of the problem. We merely wrap ourselves in a protective cocoon of self-pity and sit there, supposedly teaching everyone else a lesson!

It's really kind of dumb when you think about it. Yet too often we're willing to play this game. And every time we do, it backfires because we're the ones who suffer; we're the ones who are now isolated; we're the ones who miss out on the fellowship; we're the ones who miss worship.

Listen, you can't live in this world without getting burned now and then. You can't belong to any social group—including the church—without being hurt occasionally. There is no perfect church, and if there were, it would cease to be perfect the day you joined! So staying home from church because you're hurt or offended is not the way to go.

Wouldn't it be better as Christians to be open and honest with each other about our hurts and seek reconciliation according to the spirit of the gospel? Wouldn't it be more Christlike to acknowledge that we are all imperfect, that we all do our fair share of hurting each other and that we all are equally in need of God's grace? Isn't it healthier to work out our differences on the spot and in Christian love rather than to run and hide behind a mask of self-pity, to bear grudges and skip church?

If we believe and accept the gospel of Jesus Christ, then let us live by the gospel of Jesus Christ, loving one another as Christ loved us, forgiving each other as God in Christ has forgiven us, bearing with one another just as God bears with us every day. Let us use our hurts as stepping stones to building more intimate relationships with those who have hurt us by speaking the truth in love, by praying with and for one another, by acknowledging both our frailties and the power of God's transforming grace.

Spiritual Pride

The third reason we may skip church is spiritual pride. "Why do I have to go to church? I can worship in my own home. I know more than most of those people

anyway. They can't teach me anything I don't already know. Anyway, people spend too much time involved in religious things. They should be out in the real world working for social change, helping people where they're at, not sitting in a church building, stuck on themselves like some religious clique."

How shall we respond to such comments? First, let's affirm that one can indeed worship in private (and I hope we all do), that it is possible to know more about some things than other church members, and that Christians should be involved in the "real world" and not merely their own cultic activities. I am in full agreement with these concerns. ^{a.} **I**n neglect private worship, and often the church can suffer from spiritual incest—an unhealthy inbreeding which results in a narrow sectarianism.

But why go to the other extreme? Why neglect public worship just because private worship is also legitimate? Why feel that you can learn nothing from others simply because *in some areas* you may know more than others? Why sell out to a "religionless Christianity" simply because Christians should be involved in secular issues?

A Christian who is too smart or too good to fellowship on a regular basis with the saints is too smart or too good for Christ.

Such an attitude, I feel, stems from an omnipotent ego. It reveals an insidious spiritual pride, a sick individualism so common in today's society. It's a form of spiritual "machoness" lacking not only humility but an intelligent understanding of the nature of the church. Persons with this attitude may think they are head and shoulders above everyone else, but their real problem is ignorance. They are ignorant of the nature of the

church, they have no theology of Christian worship whatsoever, and they lack those fundamental characteristics of Christianity, namely, love for the brethren and humility of heart. A Christian who is too smart



or too good to fellowship on a **C**lar basis with the saints is too smart or too good for Christ. You don't find Christ by yourself out in the woods week after week. You find Christ among his people, in the Word and Sacraments—the church, the worshipping community. That's where Christ is.

To Get or to Give?

Finally, we may use the excuse, "I don't go to church because I don't get anything out of it. The music is dull, the sermon is boring, the lesson studies are irrelevant and the people are old-fashioned."

This excuse is closely related to the last one regarding spiritual pride. It's rooted in a fundamental self-centeredness, as if we come to church only to get and never to give, as if the church exists only to stroke us or meet our needs without asking for anything in return, as if we're entitled to the privileges of church membership without bearing the brunt of the responsibilities as well.

It's like a child who loves it when mommy fixes him supper, but who never thinks about doing the dishes for her afterwards, or who never considers that mommy might like to have supper fixed for her sometimes!

"I never get anything out of church." Well, what do you bring to church? What do you give to your church in terms of time and talents? Have you ever considered taking a leadership role in your church in

order to change the things you don't like? If the sermons are boring, have you talked to your pastor about it? If the group studies are irrelevant, have you ever thought about offering new ideas or teaching the class yourself? If the nursery care is not up to snuff, have you ever considered volunteering to watch the children now and then?

In other words, have you ever considered that when you miss church, the church misses you? When you stay away from church, the church is deprived of your spiritual gifts, gifts which God has given you for the specific purpose of building up the body of Christ.

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And this is the problem with the excuse, "I don't go to church because I don't get anything out of it." It's a self-centered excuse, like most of our excuses. Do we go to church to get or to give? That is the question.

Conclusion

I've been focusing on the negative—Why people *don't* go to church. We saw four primary reasons: (1) busyness, (2) hurt feelings, (3) spiritual pride, (4) self-centeredness. I'm not making excuses for the church. The church is not perfect and the church has done much to hurt itself over the centuries. Many of the criticisms of the church are well-founded.

But the imperfections of the church are no reason to abandon it and sell out to either a secularized Christianity or an individualistic, macho, self-centered piety. The church, despite its faults, will be around long after

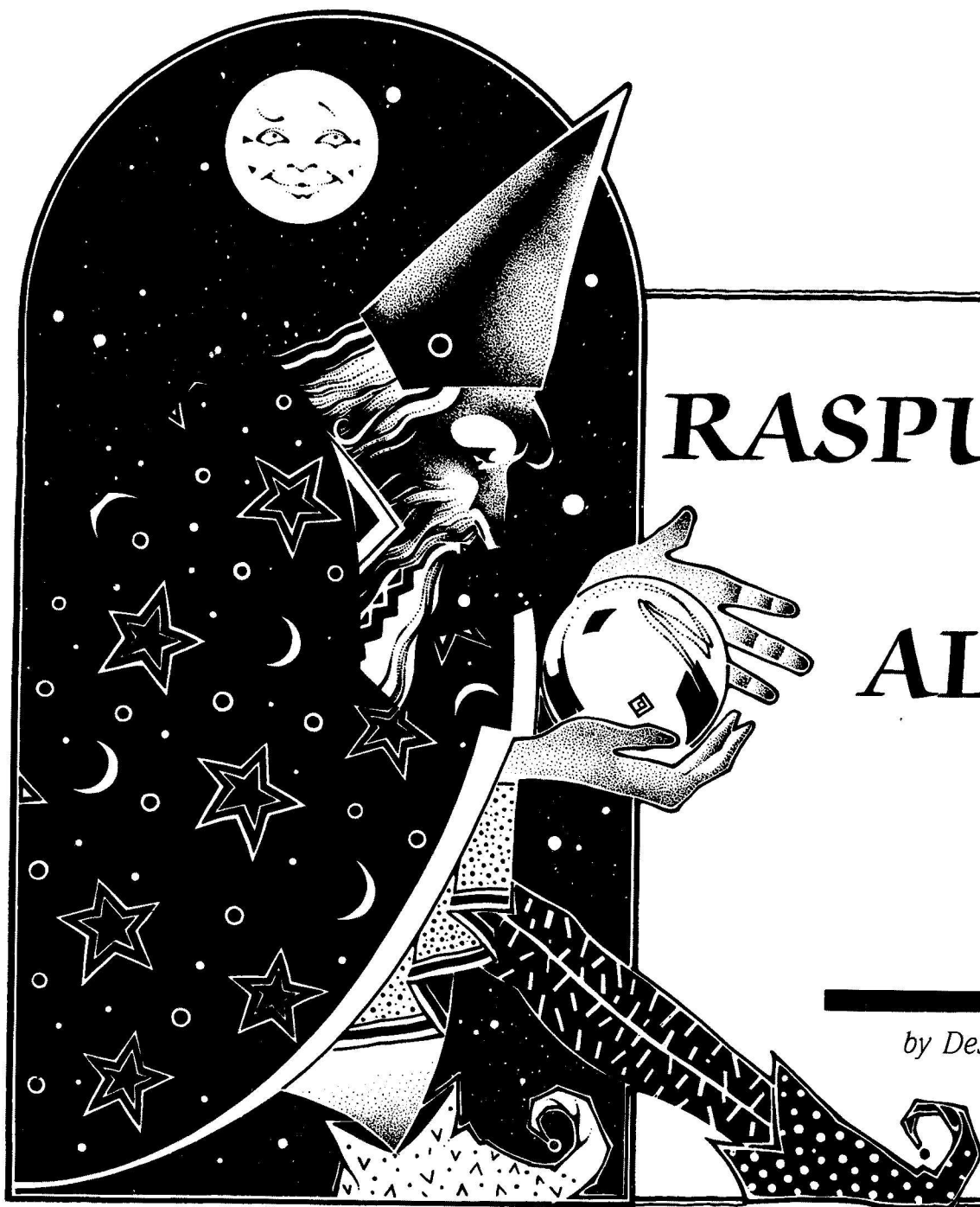
you're gone, and the worshipping community of believers will exert a more far-reaching influence for Jesus Christ in the world than any of us ever will playing Lone Ranger.

Despite the drawbacks of "organized religion," would you honestly prefer disorganized religion? totally unstructured religion? blatant individualistic religion in which everyone does his or her own thing? extreme irresponsible and charismatic religion which can't settle down into any local community of faith, but which hops around from church to church supposedly following the guidance of the Spirit? I wouldn't. It's been a struggle for me, but I now realize that even though the church needs me, I need it more. And I need structure and form as well as enthusiasm in my religion. I also need to realize that I am not an island; I need the support of solid Christian fellowship.

In my next article I will discuss the positive reasons for going to church. We will then deal with issues such as public worship, faith development, religious discourse, community and mission.



BRAD McINTYRE



RASPUTIN IS ALIVE!

by Desmond Ford

ALMOST EVERYBODY has heard the name Rasputin, but very few know the meaning of that name. Rasputin's real name was Grigory Novykh. But he was given the surname Rasputin by local villagers while still a youth. The name means Debauchee. Before the age of twenty he had been influenced by a heretical religious sect and accepted their teaching that sinning was a necessary prerequisite to salvation.

Rasputin became a wandering "Holy Man." He had the reputation of possessing unusual abilities to cure the sick and was extremely popular with

many. He visited St. Petersburg in 1903 at a time when that city's high society was entertaining itself with mysticism and the occult. They received him warmly and he was introduced to the imperial family in November 1905, and eased the sufferings of the young Alexis, the son of Empress Alexandra. Alexis was a hemophiliac and heir to the Russian throne.

While in the company of members of the royal family, Rasputin maintained the posture of a holy man. But outside the palace he acquired numerous mistresses and

seduced a large number of women. By the end of that decade everybody except the royal family regarded him as a profligate. But complaints to the emperor were ignored.

During World War I when the Russian emperor had personal command of the army, Rasputin became chief advisor to the empress who had much to do with the controlling of domestic matters. Probably as a result of Rasputin's influence, many capable officials were now replaced by unscrupulous substitutes and the war effort was greatly hindered. Next came a

conspiracy designed to rectify matters by assassinating Rasputin. He was invited to the home of one of the princes for a midnight supper and there he ate cakes and drank wine that had been poisoned. Because he gave no sign of reacting adversely to the poison, his host panicked and shot him. Despite his wounds, Rasputin fled to the courtyard where he was shot again and then bound and thrown through a hole in the ice into the Neva River where he finally died.

The phenomenon of a man professing holiness engaging in profligacy is not one limited to Russia in the early part of the twentieth century. Strangely, there have been abundant parallels through all the centuries in many places. Sin is exceedingly subtle and wears many guises. If one reads the classic *The Pilgrims Progress*, one encounters Talkative. He, too, thinks he is bound for the Holy City and he has a mouth full of religious jargon which he's happy to release to all who will listen. Bunyan has him refuted and rebuked by the true pilgrims to Zion.

Many shepherds of the flock have felt it their duty to warn against what has theologically become known as antinomianism. Particularly is this the case at times of revival of the gospel. Wherever the good news of grace is proclaimed, and the message of the forgiveness of sins and the imputation of Christ's righteousness, there are always unbalanced minds who twist heavenly truths. This happened in the days of Luther, the Wesleys and indeed during every revival known to church history.

Sin is exceedingly subtle and wears many guises.

There is a fascinating book written by Hannah Whitall Smith entitled *Religious Fanaticism*. Hannah Whitall Smith was ideally suited for the writing of this volume. She was very prominent in religious revivals of the nineteenth century and was the author of widely read books which brought blessing to millions. Constantly she found her own work impeded by religious enthusiasts who

lacked either balance or integrity and this particular book is the result of those experiences. The book concludes with this gem:

Pure religion undefiled was altogether apart from them, and resided not in the region of the emotions, but in the region of the will. 'Pure religion', says Fenelon, 'resides in the will alone'. And again, 'the will to love God is the whole of religion'. I endorse these sayings with all my heart and am thankful beyond words that out of all my feverish search for emotional religion I was brought at last to see that a quiet steadfast holding of the human will to the will of God and a peaceful resting in His love and care is of infinitely greater value in the religious life than the most intense emotions or the most wonderful 'experiences' that have ever been known by the greatest 'mystic' of them all.¹

Hannah Smith felt that the root of many religious aberrations was uncontrolled reliance upon feelings and emotions. Her own husband was a very emotional man, and at the height of his powers made a mistake in his relationship to the other sex which cut short his career and led to a collapse in his health and an early death. No wonder then that his wife in all subsequent years called upon Christians to check their impressions with Scripture and to remember that emotion as God's gift was like the waters of a river bringing blessing and fruitfulness only if rightly hemmed in and directed.

Religious historian Merle D'Aubigne wrote:

Whenever a great religious ferment takes place in the Church, some impure elements always appear with the manifestations of truth. We see the rise of one or more false reforms proceeding from man, and which serve as a testimony or countersign to the real reform. Thus many false

messiahs in the time of Christ testified that the real Messiah had appeared. The Reformation of the sixteenth century could not be accomplished without presenting a similar phenomenon.²

... remember that emotion as God's gift was like the waters of a river bringing blessing and fruitfulness only if rightly hemmed in and directed.

D'Aubigne has a chapter in this book (which is an abridgement of his History of the Reformation) entitled *The New Prophets*. These were men who aspired at direct revelations from heaven as a priority above holiness of heart. They had no wish to be tied to the word of God and felt that they could be guided by impressions from the Spirit.

A simple clothier, Nicholas Storch by name, announced that the angel Gabriel had appeared to him during the night, and that after communicating matters which he could not yet reveal, said to him: 'Thou shalt sit on my throne.' A former student of Wittenberg, one Mark Stubner, joined Storch, and immediately forsook his studies; for he had received direct from God (said he) the gift of interpreting the Holy Scriptures. Another weaver, Mark Thomas, was added to their number; and a new adept, Thomas Munzer, a man of fanatical character, gave a regular organization to this rising sect. Storch, desirous of following Christ's example, selected from among his followers twelve apostles and seventy-two disciples. All loudly declared, as a sect in our own day has done, that apostles and prophets were at length restored to the Church of God.³

The result of all of this was the famous or rather infamous Peasants Revolt which in the name of Christ was responsible for so much devastation, profanation and shame on the cause of true religion.

All error is dangerous, but the error which is most dangerous is that which seems closest to the truth. It is in the grand epistle on justification by faith that two questions are raised—Do we then make void the law through faith? Shall we sin then that grace may abound? In other words, the apostle was telling us that wherever the truth of God's free grace is proclaimed aberrations of doctrine and behavior spring up as a result of unbalanced minds and immature or incomplete perceptions of truth. W. H. Fitchett wrote long ago that "Truth is often of a scale too large for the tiny curve of human vision; and in partial truth there is deadly peril. Heresy itself is often truth only half seen, or seen in distorted perspective."⁴

In Wesley's day there came a breach with the Moravians on this very issue. Wesley was in debt to the Moravians for his understanding of the gospel. Nevertheless, he found among this group antinomian teachings and behavior which threatened the revival beginning to spread throughout all England. It was in 1739 that Philip Henry Molther, a Moravian minister, had come to London. He was a man of many gifts and was deeply mystical. His views of truth were narrow and at times distorted. He rightly affirmed that Christ was, for a believer, everything. So logically "all beside was nothing." What he forgot was that some things which will not pass before God as roots are nevertheless acknowledged by him as fruits. Molther taught that the ordinary duties of Christian morality and the simplest acts of Christian worship were irrelevant and sometimes even evil. Inevitably some of Molther's followers abused his teachings, and the result was instant and visible mischief in the new societies of Methodism. Charles Wesley described those who had accepted the new theology: "Lazy and proud in themselves, bitter and censorious towards others, they trample on the ordinances and despise the commands of Christ." John Wesley wrote in his journal thus:

My soul is sick of this sublime

divinity. Let me think and speak as a little child! Let my religion be plain, artless, simple! Meekness, temperance, patience, faith, and love, be these my highest gifts; and let the highest words wherein I teach them be those I learned from the Book of God!

When Wesley addressed the societies where the heresy was spreading, he was told bluntly that he was preaching up the works of the law which, as believers, they were no more bound to obey as subjects than they were bound to obey the law of France.

One of them said, when publicly expounding Scripture, that as many went to hell by praying as by thieving. Another said, 'You have lost your first joy; therefore you pray; that is the devil.' You read the Bible; that is the devil. You communicate (take the ordinances); that is the devil.⁵

Whenever holy talk is not accompanied by a holy walk, that is antinomianism.

Whenever man uses the righteousness of Christ as an excuse for sin, that is antinomianism.

In our day it is rare that antinomianism should be as blatant as that. But it has many subtle forms. Whenever holy talk is not accompanied by a holy walk, that is antinomianism. Whenever man uses the righteousness of Christ as an excuse for sin, that is antinomianism. And the very worst antinomianism of all is to assume that belief in the truth is sufficient to face the judgment bar of God, and that faith, hope and love are not essential in the daily life at home and abroad. It is so easy to forget that "the devils believe and tremble" (Jas 2:19).

The very strength of the cross lies in its two-fold revelation of

God's hatred of sin and his love for the sinner. To accept one without the other is not the gospel. What God has joined together, man should not put asunder. Law and gospel go together, faith and works go together, justification and sanctification go together. There are things which must be kept distinct but which should never be separated. We are saved by faith alone, but the faith that saves is never alone. We are not saved by faith plus works but by a faith that works. God always gives his gifts with both hands—justification and sanctification. He justifies no one that he does not proceed to sanctify.

Who can read the teachings of Jesus without seeing his view of the matter? It was he who told the story of the two builders at the close of the Sermon on the Mount and concluded the story with a punch line about obedience. It was Jesus who declared: "Why do you call me Lord, Lord and do not the things that I say?" In ten different ways, on the last night of his life, to the disciples in the upper room he said, "If you love me, keep my commandments."

The path of truth and the path of error are very close together like the dividing line at the points of railway tracks. But the failure to see that the cross of Christ has for its purpose our total redemption and our deliverance from sin's power as well as its guilt is to have a truncated gospel. Believers must indeed die to law as a method of salvation, but they never die to obedience as a standard of salvation. If our Lord was "obedient unto death" so must we be.

In his little book entitled *Today's Gospel—Authentic or Synthetic?* Walter Chantry writes:

The evangelical wing of the partisan church is saturated with doctrine and practices which have no biblical foundation. Many teachings and habits touching the Gospel are as much the products of human invention and tradition as were the indulgences of Tetzels. And certain doctrines in our midst are quite as dangerous.

In the central issue of the way of salvation, large segments of

Protestantism are engrossed in neo-traditionalism. We have inherited a system of evangelistic preaching which is unbiblical. Nor is this tradition very ancient. Our message and manner of preaching the gospel cannot be traced back to the Reformers and their creeds. They are much more recent innovations. Worse, they cannot be traced to the Scriptures. They have clearly arisen from superficial exegesis and a careless mixture of twentieth century reason with God's revelation.

When excitement of the latest campaign has subsided, when the choir sings no more thrilling choruses, when large crowds no longer gather, when the emotional hope and the evangelist's 'invitation' has moved to another city, what do we have that's real and lasting?

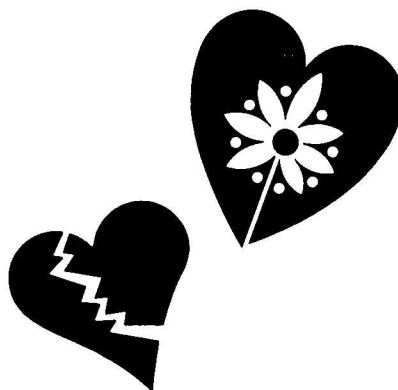
The resulting product is a dangerous conglomerate—just the sort that Satan uses to delude the souls of sinners. What cult does not learn to use verses of the Bible and half truths to establish their views? That has been the devil's strategy from the beginning (Genesis 3:5). By selling another gospel to our generation, Satan has been employing many sincere men in preaching a dethroned Christ. The glories of the Savior are being hidden even from his servants because preachers will not give careful attention to the gospel of God's word alone.

Products of modern evangelism are often sad examples of Christianity. They make a profession of faith, and then continue to live like the world. 'Decisions for Christ' mean very little. Only a small proportion of those who 'make decisions' evidence the grace of God in a

transformed life. When excitement of the latest campaign has subsided, when the choir sings no more thrilling choruses, when large crowds no longer gather, when the emotional hope and the evangelist's 'invitation' has moved to another city, what do we have that's real and lasting? When every house in a mission village has been visited, what has been done? The honest heart answers, 'very little.' There's been a great deal of noise and dramatic excitement, but God has not come down with his frightful power and converting grace.

All of this is related to the use of a message in evangelism that's unbiblical. The truth necessary for life has been hidden in a smokescreen of human inventions. On the shallow ground of man's logic, large numbers have been led to assume they have a right to have lasting life and have been given an assurance which does not belong to them. Evangelicals are swelling the ranks of the deluded with a perverted Gospel. Many have 'made decisions' in modern churches and been told in the inquiry rooms that their sins have been forgiven, will be surprised as Tetzels customers to hear 'I never knew you; depart from me' (Mt 7:23).⁶

Nothing less than a broken heart will do. This is always the result of beholding God's love and grace in



the gospel. Such a heart will not only cry, 'Thou, O Christ, art all I want; more than all in thee I find,' but also, 'What shall I render to the Lord for all his benefits towards me?' Having given him our hearts in response to his so great salvation, is there anything, great or small, that we would want to keep from him 'who loved us and gave himself for us'?

1. H.W. Smith, *Religious Fanaticism*, p. 270
2. M. D'Aubigne, *The Life and Times of Martin Luther*, p. 496.
3. Ibid, p. 497.
4. W.H. Fitchett, *Wesley and His Century*, p. 305.
5. Ibid, p. 307.
6. W. Chantry, *Today's Gospel, Authentic or Synthetic*, pp. 12-15.



DESMOND FORD

HAVE mercy upon me, O God, according to thy lovingkindness: according unto the multitude of thy tender mercies blot out my transgressions.

Wash me thoroughly from mine iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin.

For I acknowledge my transgressions: and my sin is ever before me.

Against thee, thee only, have I sinned, and done this evil in thy sight: that thou mightest be justified when thou speakest, and be clear when thou judgest.

Behold, I was shapen in iniquity; and in sin did my mother conceive me.

Behold, thou desirest truth in the inward parts: and in the hidden part thou shalt make me to know wisdom.

Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean: wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow.

Make me to hear joy and gladness; that the bones which thou has broken may rejoice.

Hide thy face from my sins, and blot out all mine iniquities.

—Psalm 51:1-9



THE WAY I SEE IT



THERE ARE, NO DOUBT, many reasons why the great majority of people in Western civilization no longer take the Bible seriously. However, it seems to me, that the great majority of westerners have never engaged in any serious study of the Bible because they think that its message is no longer credible in an age of science. "The Bible is full of fairy tales and legends" is a popular stereotype. More seriously, many would agree with the famous theologian, Rudolph Bultmann, who said, "One cannot use electric light and radio, call upon modern medicine in case of illness, and at the same time believe in the world of spirits and miracles of the New Testament." Like Bultmann, many believe that the Bible reflects an unrealistic world, and therefore its message is no longer plausible.

Christians of all faiths need to recognize that the Bible's message does come to us in the framework of a three-deckered universe, a world picture that no one accepts today (Php 2:10; Ex 20:4, etc.) But before we start jumping to the conclusion that therefore the message of the Bible is irrelevant, we had better pause for a moment and note how notoriously difficult it has been to construct a worldview that will stick! It seems it was only yesterday that I was taught the Steady State worldview, yet today it's the Big Bang and there are already signs that this newcomer is undergoing serious modification. Perhaps it's time for us to ask, not which worldview grasps more of the material aspects of the universe, but which one makes the most sense out of life as we experience it on this planet. It may be that the worldview that answers the question, "Why are we here?" rather than, "How did we get here?" may take in more of reality than all the scientific worldviews ever postulated.

Conflicts with the Bible

However, my objective in this article is to express a concern I have for interpreting the Bible correctly.

by Noel Mason

Recent conflicts between fundamentalists who proudly and defiantly assert that they take all the Bible *literally* and their moderate counterparts reminds me that the Bible has often suffered at the hands of sincere yet misinformed Christians. I am thinking of "The Trial That Rocked the Nation," (July 10, 1925), when Clarence Darrow representing the American Civil Liberties Union and William Jennings Bryan, representing the World's Fundamentalist Association, engaged in a very emotional debate over the meaning of Genesis

Christians of all faiths need to recognize that the Bible's message does come to us in the framework of a three-decked universe, a world picture that no one accepts today.

1. Consider the following excerpt from the records of this trial:

Darrow read from Genesis:

'And the morning and the evening were the first day.'

Then he asked Bryan if he believed that the sun was created on the fourth day. Bryan said he did.

'How could there have been morning and evening without any sun?' Darrow inquired.

Bryan mopped his bald dome in silence.

There were snickers from the crowd, even among the faithful...

'And you believe that God punished the serpent by condemning snakes forever after to crawl upon their bellies?'

'I believe that!'

'Well, have you any idea how the snake went before that?'

The crowd laughed, and Bryan turned livid.

His voice rose and the fan in his hand shook in anger.

'Your honor,' he said, 'I will

answer all Mr. Darrow's questions at once.

I want the world to know that this man who does not believe in God is using a Tennessee court to cast slurs on Him...'

'I object to that statement,' Darrow shouted.

'I am examining you on your fool ideas that no intelligent Christian on earth believes.'

Was this conflict between two sincere people really necessary? Judged from the perspective of our increased knowledge of biblical literature we may have to conclude that neither lawyer really understood the intention of the writer of the creation story of Genesis 1:1-2:4.

I am thinking, too, of the famous debate between Wilberforce and Huxley in the days following the publication of *Darwin's Origin of Species*. Once again the Bible was brought into unnecessary conflict with a scientific theory. Who can estimate the terrible loss the cause of Christianity has suffered through these unnecessary conflicts between science and religion?

Two Kinds of Interpreters

We may say with Mark Link that modern Bible interpreters fall into two main groups.¹ There are *literal* interpreters and *contextual* interpreters. The *literalists* focus primarily on the text of the Bible whereas the contextualists focus on both the text and the context (literary, historical, social and political, etc.)

Behind the literalist method of interpreting the Bible lies a view of revelation and inspiration which guarantees the text immunity (at least in the autographs) from the personal and cultural eccentricities of the biblical writers. The literalist I am thinking of, would heartily agree with St. Gregory who wrote on one occasion: "Most superfluous it is to inquire who wrote these things—we loyally believe the Holy Spirit to be the author of the book. He wrote it who dictated it; He wrote it who inspired its

execution." The literalist has a distinct advantage—everything is very simple and clear—"The Bible says it, I believe it."

Behind the contextualist method of interpreting the Bible there also lies a definite view of revelation and inspiration. The contextualist believes that the Bible is the word of God but he believes it didn't just drop from the sky; it is not altogether immune from the influence of the culture of its times. God's word comes to us in the words of men. It comes to us in the swaddling clothes of various cultures. The Bible was written in at least three languages (Hebrew, Aramaic and Greek) and language itself is a cultural phenomena.

The contextualist insists that before a text can be safely interpreted and applied today, it must be understood in the light of its historical, social, political, literary and cultural contexts. All of these contexts impact upon the theology of the text.

All this may sound like a lot of hard work to the literalist.

It is hard work and it's work we cannot avoid if we want to fully understand the Bible and reach some degree of unity of interpretation.

Interpreting Genesis 1:1-2:4

Space does not permit me to develop the life situation of the creation story of Genesis 1:1-2:4. We do know from archaeology that it was written in a world of polytheism and idolatry. This is also reflected in many books of the O.T.

It may be that the world-view that answers the question, "Why are we here?" rather than, "How did we get here?" may take in more of reality than all the scientific worldviews ever postulated.

Consider the following passage from Deuteronomy (4:15-19).

Therefore take good heed to yourselves...beware lest you act corruptly by making a *graven*

image...in the form of any figure, the likeness of male or female, the likeness of any *beast* that is on the *earth*, the likeness of any *winged bird* that flies in the *air*, the likeness of anything that creeps on the ground, the likeness of any *fish* that is in the *water* under the earth. And beware lest you lift up your eyes to *heaven*, and when you see the *sun* and the *moon* and the *stars*, all the host of heaven, you be drawn away and worship them...

Anyone who cares to read Genesis 1:1-2:4 in the light of this passage and the archaeological discoveries of the Mesopotamian world will see immediately the primary intention of the biblical writer. The first creation story is a bold polemic against the polytheists of the ancient world who worshipped the sun, moon and stars, etc. We must not impose upon this story a twentieth-century evolutionary model nor should we try to make it answer questions it was not designed to answer.

In spite of the contrary assertions of the literalists, the contextualist interpretation of the Bible is more conservative or orthodox than the literalist. A *conservative* interpretation is one that *conserves* the intention of the original inspired author. May I say, with a chuckle, of course, that I think that the literalists are really the liberals and the contextualists are the conservatives for who takes the greatest liberty with the text? That's the way I see it. Can you see it that way too?

1. M. Link, *These Stones Will Shout*, p. 10.



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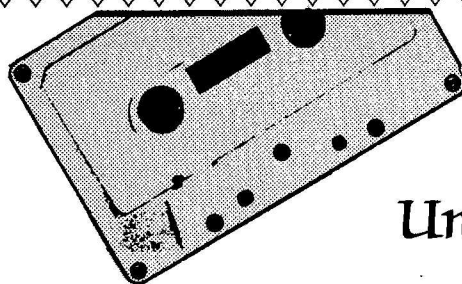
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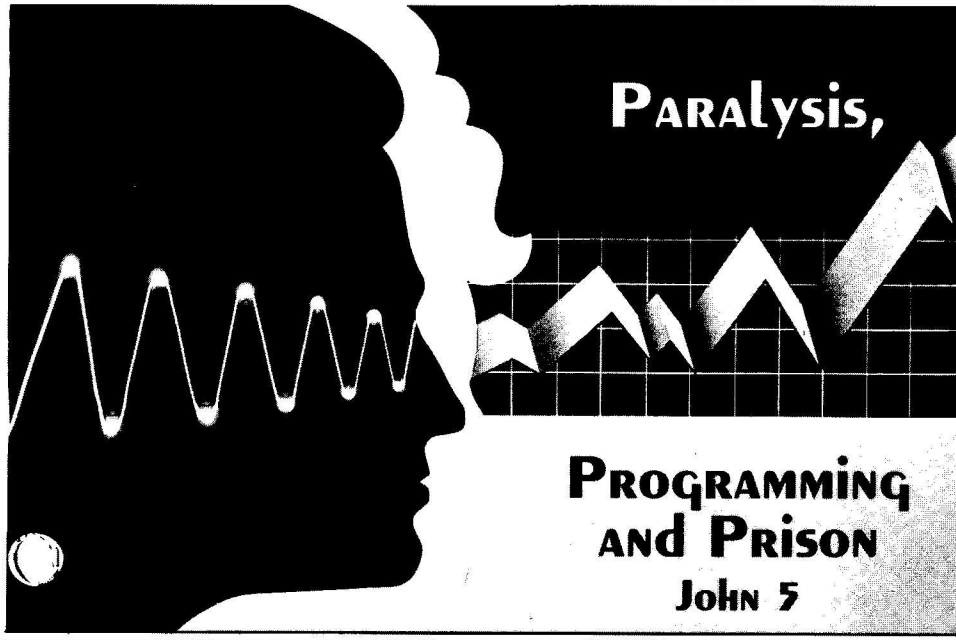
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A Foot with No Feeling

IN A HOTEL room, the weary doctor pulled his sock off, noticing the feeling in his heel had gone. Stunned, he slowly sat down on the bed and thought. The horrifying conclusion came to him that he must have leprosy for hadn't he served as a missionary to lepers in India these many past years? He reached for a pin and stuck it in his foot. No feeling. He must be right. His thoughts raced off like some shocking tidal wave suddenly spilling into a empty valley.

After an unending night, a second pinprick caused him to shout "ouch" with pain, but filled him with joy as it calmed his fears. He recollected that he'd been on a train for hours that previous afternoon and it must have made his foot numb. Oh, but what a terrible night it had been, thinking he must live separately from his family for the rest of his life, subject to a disease that would worsen and spread and make him an outcast from society forever.

A dreadful night, a horrible night, a terrible night — followed by a wonderful morning thanking God it was just a nightmare. But think how awful it would have been if it were true. For many people in India it IS true. It was an experience Dr. Brand

has never forgotten for it gave him tremendous sympathy for the men and women he serves who do have leprosy.

Programmed to Be Paralyzed

John 5 tells the story of a man who wasn't a leper, but he was unable to move because of a paralyzing disease. He had been like it for 38 years. The Bible doesn't say he was born like it, so maybe there was a time in his life when he was able to move freely and run around like most of you. Perhaps one day he woke up stiff and gradually became stiffer until he could barely move. Or maybe he had a sudden accident which left him paralyzed. The story doesn't say.

When Jesus met him in one of the five porches of the Sheep Pool which lay near the Gate of Bethesda, he could only move very slowly. He was there because it was believed that the waters had miraculous powers. It was said that every so often an angel came down and troubled the waters. The one who made it to the water first would be healed of any disease. Around the pool lounged

many invalids—the blind, the lame and the paralyzed. Sometimes their relatives or friends stayed with them and helped them to get down to the waters to be healed. This man had no one to help and whenever the waters were agitated, he couldn't move fast enough to get there first.

The first time the book of Luke tells us about Jesus going into the synagogue to worship, he read the following Scripture which explained his work. "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me because the LORD has anointed me to bring good tidings to the afflicted; he has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to those who are bound" (Is 61:1). Surely this poor paralyzed man was oppressed and bound by his sickness. Jesus was going to set him free.

It was said that every so often an angel came down and troubled the waters. The one who made it to the water first would be healed of any disease.

He said to him, "Rise up and pick up your pallet bed, and walk." And the man did as Jesus said and was immediately healed and able to stand and walk around. Can you imagine what it was like for this man who had been programmed to be paralyzed for 38 years to suddenly be programmed to move?

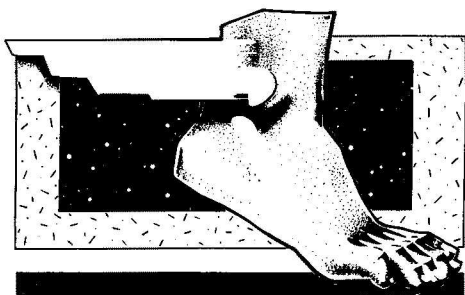
The Importance of Programs

Those of you who know how to use computers probably know a great deal more about programming than I do. I work on a computer that sets type at a printing shop and it has

several programs. I know how to use the machine, but I can't change the programs. Some of you probably could. When I go into work each morning, starting at 7:00 a.m., the first thing I do is switch on the line tamer (not a lion tamer), which is a separate machine that controls the flow of electricity so it remains stable. Before we had the line tamer, the program was often "blown" when the electricity varied throughout the day.

After that I switch on the machine and put in a program disc, and enter the main programs. One is called IPMAIN and one just MAIN. Then I read a file that tells the computers the STANDARDS I need to use in this program, and then I read another file called WIDTHS, because every time I change the styles for printing, the widths of the letters are different.

A lot of you won't follow what I'm talking about, and it really doesn't matter. The point is that when I first switch on the machine, unless I follow a certain procedure, calling up the programs I need, and hitting the right keys, I won't get anything on the screen. Or if I do, the machine will make a loud noise and throw up a code, telling me I've messed up.



Even when I have the whole machine programmed, I still have to follow a certain procedure and use the correct keys or I can't put in more than one or two inches of characters without the rude noise and the code being thrown up at me again. Or maybe the machine will get completely stuck and I will have to start all over again. Those of you who have computers know that the machine will usually do whatever you tell it without problems if it is programmed properly and if there are no glitches or bugs in the program.

In fact, when I first worked there,

the machine often went wrong and wouldn't work. Because I was new, one mechanic who kept coming gave me dark looks and I felt all squirmy in the stomach wondering what I'd done. After a while, when it kept playing up, another man came, who listened carefully to me. He took away the circuit board all full of wires and complicated workings and replaced it with a new one. Since then, we've never had a problem or had to call them in again. He said it wasn't my fault at all which made the squirms leave my stomach. You see, it was the program that was at fault. If the program goes wrong, the machine won't function properly and will often break down.

Programmed for Life

Our bodies function as though they were computerized and they have lots of programs. One of them you could call HEALTH. Many people are born with a good HEALTH program, but by their bad eating habits and lack of exercise and sunshine, they cause the program to break down. Others have sickness thrust upon them. They may have been born with a defective program. Many people are born with a tendency towards certain diseases like heart disease, diabetes and mental illness. This explains why sometimes even very little children are born with terrible diseases like cancer and die very early. Other people aren't born with a terrible disease, but cause it by their bad habits like smoking or taking drugs or alcohol. Still others may be damaged by an accident. So sometimes sickness happens to people; other times they bring it on themselves.

The Bible doesn't exactly tell us if the paralyzed man was born with his disease, or whether he caused it, or received it by accident. However, Jesus did say to him, "Go and sin no more, lest something worse come upon you." Maybe that was a warning that he

had brought the disease on himself and had better change his life in the future. But whatever happened, the poor man's HEALTH program had broken down and Jesus came along and fixed it. He's a wonderful mechanic you see and he's in the business of fixing bad programs.

Surprisingly enough, the healing of this man's body was not Jesus' first interest. He wanted to heal the man's spirit. Jesus wasn't interested in healing people just to live for this life. He wanted them to live forever.

Our bodies function as though they were computerized and they have lots of programs.

The story of this paralyzed man has an even deeper meaning. He was a symbol of Israel who, under Moses, had been 38 years in the wilderness, powerless to enter the promised land because of their unbelief. The Israel of Jesus' time was still in the same condition as that of old. They still claimed Moses as their father, were still paralyzed by unbelief and waiting for God to show himself in a miraculous way, just as the paralyzed man was waiting for the stirring of the waters.

If you'd asked them what was God's program for their lives, they'd have told you it was the Bible (the Old Testament only, at that time). That sounds very good and they know the Bible well. Many of them had the whole book memorized by heart. But Jesus said to them later in the chapter, "You search the Scriptures, for in them you think you have eternal life, but they are they which testify of me" (v. 39). You see, God's program is IN a book, but it is not a book. God's program is a person. You can know the Bible very well, and read it often and yet miss out on eternal life, if you don't find Jesus there as your Savior.

Jesus, God's Program

What does it mean that Jesus is God's program? The rest of John 5

tells us. Jesus says he is God's program and that he can do nothing without consulting him (v. 19). He says he is the Creator, that he can and will perform awesome miracles (v. 20). He says he is Life—he has life within himself and can give it to others (v. 26). He says he is the Judge of this world (v. 27). God has given Jesus the job of deciding men's destiny on the basis of their sins.

And what does that mean to you and me? If we accept Jesus as God's program, he says we will pass from death to life and we won't be damned for our sins. In fact, when we believe in Jesus, he tells us we have ALREADY passed from death to life this very moment. It doesn't mean we won't physically die one day, but our eternal life, the one that really matters, is secure. One day, Jesus is going to speak and everybody living and all those who have died throughout the ages of this earth will hear that voice and be raised. Everybody in this world, whether they like it or not, will encounter God's program. Whether they believe in Jesus or not, is the deciding factor of how their destiny will turn out.

Jesus did say to him, "Go and sin no more, lest something worse come upon you." Maybe that was a warning that had brought the disease on himself and had better change his life in the future.

How foolish it is not to accept Jesus as God's program for our lives. Why, it doesn't just affect the life to come, but it changes everything down here. It's like putting a new computer disc inside your brain. Just about everything in your life is different and better, though it doesn't mean everything will be easy.

The Story of the Silver Stitches

How much Jesus can change lives is illustrated in a story Fulton Oursler



once told: He was invited once to visit a very famous museum at a center of crime detection. This was not a museum that was open to the public, but one used to train policemen, with all sorts of items that criminals had once used. In a glass compartment he saw an unusually embroidered scarf, covered with silver stitches, and being curious about it, asked the story behind it.

It seems that about a hundred years before, there had been a woman prisoner who had returned to prison about 50 times until they just kept her in. She was an alcoholic and back then it was treated as a crime, not a sickness and there weren't any treatment centers in those days. She was a broken-down, ugly, dirty, toothless, old hag who had lived a life of evil. One day two other prisoners were thrown into her cell, one a woman about 27 years old, the other the woman's baby. Maybe our old crone looked at this young woman who was a thief and robber, and saw how her life would turn out and how the baby must follow one day. Whatever impressed her mind, she began to reach out in love and kindness to this girl and her child, tending to them in sickness and urging the woman to a better life for the child's sake.

Somehow that old lady got hold of a Bible and learned of Jesus and accepted him as God's program for her life. She was often heard wandering through the prison,

repeating Bible texts to the prisoners.

The day came when the young woman realized the old lady was going to die. "Please," she said, "don't you have some little item you can leave me to remind me of you and my promise to lead a better life?" The old lady possessed nothing but what she wore, but she thought about it.

Everybody in this world, whether they like it or not, will encounter God's program. Whether they believe in Jesus or not, is the deciding factor of how their destiny will turn out.

From then on, in the early, early dawn, when others were still sleeping and the guards were not yet on duty, the old lady bowed her head in a tiny shaft of dawn light and sewed on her head scarf the following words with silver thread. "I will instruct thee and teach thee in the way that thou shalt go—I will guide thee with mine eyes—thy home is in heaven." That was the story behind the embroidered head scarf—but maybe you are asking, "Where did she get the silver thread from in that prison?" It came from her head. Her own silver hair was threaded through an old hair pin hidden in her cap—for there were no needles and no thread and the guards would never have allowed her to complete her precious task.

A person's life can be very wretched and may have been filled with all sorts of sin. But God's program, Jesus, can come to all, even those in prison. When he is received, what hope and joy it gives people. How lives are changed. Now, all you computer buffs out there, when you are immersed and fascinated with your latest program, won't you stop for a minute and think about God's program, Jesus, and what he can do for you?

Letters

Tremendous Help

Sirs:

Enclosed is a contribution to your work. I really get a blessing from your writing and speaking, and hope that you can share it with more and more people who don't know Christ. It's a tremendous help to my own life and, I think, a far better approach to Christianity than is prevalent today in evangelicalism.

I missed your 1985 Summer Congresses, and would like to obtain literature or tapes of the talks given there. Please send me a catalog.

Y. L., San Jose, California

Ducks and Drakes

Dear Mrs. Ford:

I just read your extremely touching story about Aunt Ruth and am writing on the slim chance that you might have a "Ducks and Drakes" doily yet. God bless this dear woman and my heart is broken for her that she can no longer do this work for God. Please tell her that many know of her and love her at a long distance for her heart and hands she dedicated as long as she could.

But, I feel that \$30 is just too low of a price considering what REALLY went into the work . . . so much love for God too! So would like to send along a \$50 donation instead.

Should you be out then please just keep it as payment for a doily that I know she would like to be doing but can no longer. And God bless you both in your dedicated service to Him and to those of us who hunger and thirst after His righteousness.

In His love,
K. K., Palo Alto, California

The Lord's Portion

Sirs:

Greetings to all at GNU. I sold the Lord's portion of my cattle and am sending a

check to you. The amount is not much for five fine calves and a cow, but that's the way it is, so the Lord will just have to make it work harder. I also have to help our little group here. Thanks for the tapes and paper which we enjoy very much. Love to all.

M & M, Texas

Just Wants Reassurance

Sirs:

I have always struggled with my religion, not knowing if I'm good enough or worthy, or if I'll ever be saved . . . I just want reassurance. I'm confused. I'm fed up with being told I'm not good enough. I'm tired of not feeling good about my religion. Please help me.

T., Wyoming

["Whosoever will may come." "God justifieth the ungodly." "Whosoever believeth in him shall not perish but hath everlasting life." These and many other Scriptures assure us that we come just as we are. We do not need to try and make ourselves better first. God will see to that after we have turned our life over to him.]

Never Satisfied

Sirs:

I read with interest your article entitled "The Great Commission and the Second Coming," in the April *Good News* . . . You have portrayed God as never going to be satisfied until a certain number of those who love and serve him have been sacrificed to him. Just like the gods of old who demanded human sacrifice. Never satisfied until a certain number have been tortured and killed in his name—only then will he move to relieve this planet of its suffering, stagnation, and death!

Babies are being born every day to starve and die, people grow old and suffer

terribly in dying, children are being born horribly disfigured, man's inhumanity to man goes on and on, and you would have us believe that God is demanding more martyrs to his cause? More killings? More torture? What sort of God does the Bible portray? After reading the article, I considered the life of Jesus Christ. I could not find in his life one hint of Jesus being that sort of person.

I don't really expect you to answer all these questions, but I'm sure there must be an answer that doesn't bring into question the character of God.

Yours sincerely,
F., South Australia

[Note from Desmond Ford: Good question. No, God is not demanding human sacrifice. The article had no intention of conveying that. God did not invent bombs or bayonets. Most pain is the result of sinful actions by men abusing their God-given freewill. It was a great risk for God to take, but apparently he thought freedom was essential for worshipping creatures. Revelation 6:11 is only saying that God who could have ended the world immediately after the cross has in his wisdom decided that only when the conflict between good and evil has a worldwide showdown (a repetition of Calvary in a global but not atoning sense) will a universe of intelligent beings have seen such a complete demonstration of the nature of evil that sin will never rise up a second time. See Ephesians 3:9,10; Revelation 15:4; 16:5. Compare with Revelation 6:11 Christ's prophecy of Matthew 24:14-31. Not until the gospel has been proclaimed to the whole world will Jesus return, and that proclamation inevitably leads to a bloodbath — what Jesus called The Great Tribulation. This is the significance of Revelation 6:11. Thank you for being frank about your reflections on the article.]

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