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Jesus—Supreme Forgiver

**Too Many Beds
in the Ward**

Why Joseph Why?

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Editorial

**'Then the Lord said to Cain,
'Where is your brother Abel?''
(Genesis 4:9).**

This is the second question
God asked. The first was,
'Where are you?' Where a
man is in relation to God, is primary,
and following closely is the ques-
tion of his relationship to his
brother.

Cain is the world's first mur-
derer. When we think of him, we
who have not killed anyone, are apt
to think of Cain from a separated
vantage point. When we imagine
him clubbing his brother, Abel, to
death, it is easy to see him as alto-
gether different from ourselves; a
monstrous and wretched figure. The
kind of person that is banished from
present society by imprisonment.

Yet how different was he re-
ally? According to Genesis he was
the first human-being to be born.
His mother called him Cain to sig-
nify that she had 'gotten a man from
the Lord.' He was a child of hope.
God had promised Cain's parents
that the woman's offspring would
bruise the serpent's head; the final
victory would be carried by the
'good' against the 'evil.' Perhaps
Eve believed that victory would be
wrought by Cain. But it was not to
be. The failure begun at Eden's tree,
was disappointingly perpetuated in
this son. Hatred and brutality soon
sprang up, and soon he had shed
blood.

Cain was not the Christ-child.
He was, and is, the human race,
apart from Christ. He demonstrates
that the world problem is inherently
a religious one. After the God-hu-
man relationship has been fractured,
the religious constitution of human
beings is still present, but it is dis-
turbed. Cain is religious. He engages
in religious acts; rituals that are pleas-
ing to God. The first murder takes

place not far from an altar.

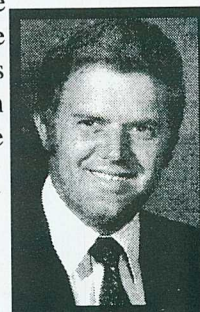
The spiritual capacities built
into men and women by God, can
function in either a salutary, or nox-
ious way. Religion can be strong to
save, or to damn. Religion can help
you to be good, or it can intensify
wickedness. It was said that Louis
XI never sinned quite so gleefully
as after he prayed. Daily news bul-
letins evidence the fact that a large
percentage of criminals attend
church.

The question, where is your
brother? is a religious one. It ex-
amines Cain's relation to God. The
counter-question, am I my brother's
keeper? heightens the same issue.
The acid test for worthy religious
belief, is the brother test. Does my
religion take me closer to my
brother's needs? Does my religion
ease me of my concern for others?

Cain's religion contrast's
markedly with the religion of the
gospel. Cain asks, 'Must I be my
brother's keeper?' The gospel says,
'You that are strong ought to bear
the infirmities of the weak.' Cain
says, 'What I do is my business, and
it affects no one but me.' The gos-
pel says: 'No man lives to himself.'
Cain says: 'Every man should look
out for his own interests.' The gos-
pel says: 'Bear ye one another's
burdens, and so fulfill the law of
Christ.' Cain was manifestly not the
Christ. But God was still interested
in him, and the punishment that was
given him was tinged with grace.
So it is for us. Though we have vio-
lated one another and made of our-
selves vagabonds and strangers,
there is grace
for us, because
Messiah has
come. And in
him we place
our trust.

R J Allen

R J ALLEN



Jesus — Supreme Forgiver



RON ALLEN

‘How many times shall I forgive my brother when he sins against me? Up to seven times? Jesus answered, “I tell you not seven times, but seventy times seven”’ (Matthew 18:21).

These words of Jesus are set in a chapter that deals with the problem of the offensive brother. Jesus had said, ‘Confront the errant brother; if necessary take someone else along with you. If the brother is willing to acknowledge his fault, you have won your brother over. If not then look on him as you would one outside the community.’

This begs the question: Is there nothing at all that can be done for the brother who does not repent? Jesus went on to show that we are to learn to forgive repetitiously, generously—even when repentance by the offending person is not forthcoming.

Forgiveness is not some easy option for those with no stomach for confrontation. It is a necessity. All human relationships are precarious. They are hard to manage and easily disturbed. We are often irritated, or disappointed in the way others treat us. Unless we have some mechanism by which we can process positively wrongs we inflict on each other,

we shall fail in the art of living.

The religion of the Bible is very realistic. No attempt is made to paper over the cracks and blemishes in communal life. To speak of a problem called ‘sin’ is to be utterly practical. It must be remembered, though, that ‘sin’ cannot be limited to glaring offenses like robbery and murder. These are just the tip of an iceberg of irregularities in human nature. Other transgressions may be hidden, or else, even have a facade of respectability—envy, for example. Pride, vindictiveness, malice and greed, these are terribly damaging wherever they occur.

In Jesus’ story, the prodigal sins grossly. His wrongs are crude and easy to see. But the older, well behaved brother, is full of bitterness, and his inner resentments prevent him from enjoying the company of his father and brother.

When Jesus speaks of an extravagant, spend-thrift forgiveness, he is recognizing something dysfunctional in human life that requires frequent and far-reaching remedial attention. So, even after I have confronted the brother who sins against me, and even after he will not repent and enter into community with me, I can still reach out to him by maintaining a forgiving spirit toward him.

When the paralytic was brought to Jesus, he questioned: ‘Which is easier? To say rise up and walk or to say, your sins be forgiven?’ Thus did Jesus indicate that forgiveness is not easy. Forgiveness is never cheap. It is arduous and exacting. There are many things that might be done in service to another. You

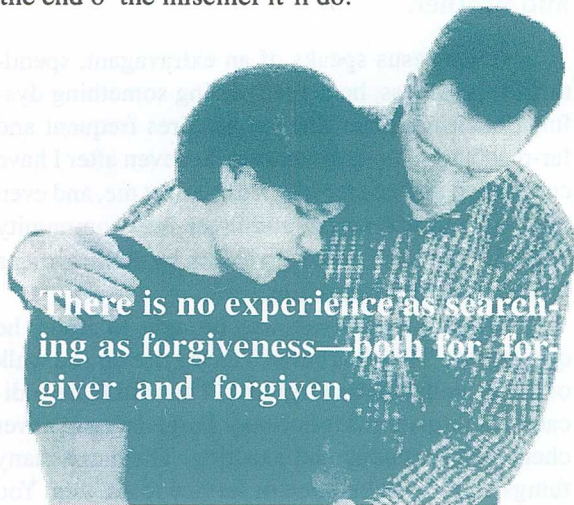
can feed a hungry brother; clothe him if he is cold; take him to a hospital if he is sick. Yet none of these would cost as much as forgiving him if he had done you wrong.

There is an element of sacrifice in forgiveness; of self-substitution. In the act of forgiving, the wrong does not vanish. It is present in all its soreness, and the forgiver feels it, and is crushed by it.

A woman appears on the evening news. Her son has been arrested for a terrible crime of violence. The community is vocally hostile. The news-media joins in the call for swift retribution. Everyone is braying for this man's blood. All, except his mother. She says: 'He is my son. I love him. I will never give him up.' Does she count his crime less? No. She feels the measure of it more than all others. She has forgiveness in her heart but it is killing her. Loving someone doesn't make forgiveness smooth. It makes it rough and jagged. It cuts and hurts. Which is easier? To make a sick person well, or to forgive?

In George Elliot's *Adam Bede*, Adam has eyes for pretty Hetty Sorrel. Adam is honest and plodding. Hetty is vain and shallow. But Adam is intent on marrying her. Along comes Arthur Donnithorne; swashbuckling and rich. He sweeps Hetty off her feet in a short affair, then leaves her. Later, she is alone and pregnant; her life in ruins.

Donnithorne knows he has wrecked both Adam and Hetty's lives. He comes to Adam wretchedly, asking him to forgive him. Adam does forgive, but not without anguish. 'There's a sort o' damage sir', he says to Donnithorne. 'That can't be made up for ... it's like a bit o' bad workmanship; you never see the end o' the mischief it'll do.'



There is no experience as searching as forgiveness—both for the forgiver and forgiven.

There is no experience as searching as forgiveness—both for forgiver and forgiven. In forgiveness, the drama of the human story is played out in utter poignancy. It is as if the characters come to court. The chief actors are together in the same room. Victim and assailant; abuser and abused. They meet and face each other. But they are not alone. The wrong done is there as well. Its presence is palpable.

The havoc wrought by the wrongdoer is etched on the victim's face. He wears the scars but does not bear them alone. The perpetrator has not been left unscathed by what he has done.

He has worn the crime in loathing heaped upon him by his own conscience and the contempt of the community. He is tortured also by his inability to undo what has been done. He stands helpless before the ruin that he has wrought. There is no redemption for him or for his victim—save in forgiveness.

In Czarist Russia, Timothy Osipovic was orphaned. He was raised by an uncle who was appointed his legal guardian. When he was seventeen, he discovered that his parents had left him a fortune but his uncle had squandered much of it. So mad was he that he fought with the uncle; wounding him in the hand. As a result, he was tried in the courts and banished to Siberia.

Fortunately for Timothy, his uncle had not spent all his inheritance and he was able to live a simple and comfortable life in Siberia. He married, and in the course of time began to read the Bible. He was drawn to Jesus Christ. But he still had many dark days in which he brooded over the wrong his uncle had done.

One day he sat in his yard reading the gospel. He prayed aloud: 'If only Christ would come to see me.' And then it seemed as if a voice spoke in reply, 'I will come.' Timothy was filled with joy. From that day forward he instructed his wife to set another place at the meal table. People would come to visit and they would ask, 'Are you expecting someone?'

'A most honored guest', he would reply.

Christmas was coming and it occurred to Timothy that if Christ should come at Christmas he should make fit company for him. So he went into the village and invited every waif and every outcast he could find, to come to his home for dinner at Christmas.

On Christmas-eve the table was set. Gathered around it were an assortment of derelict and hopeless types. At the head of the table was a place with

knife and fork and plate generously furnished with food—but still no honored guest.

Just as Timothy was about to ask the blessing the door was flung open and there stood a man, starved, disheveled and very worn. Timothy stared hard at the weathered face. It seemed familiar to him. Yes! It was his uncle.

Shivering with cold and stammering for words the uncle spoke. 'Timothy, I have been searching for you many years. My life has been ruined by what I did to you. I have been looking for you to ask forgiveness. I had lost my way tonight and only stumbled to your door by chance.'

Then Timothy found words. 'Thank you God. You answered my prayer. You sent him. Let us rejoice. Christ is among us.'

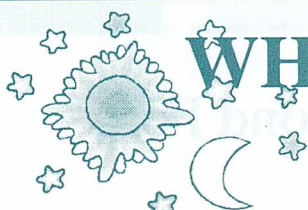
Many have lost the privilege of fellowship

through a wrong done. Years are spent in a wilderness of lost intimacies; where men and women remember and grieve, grieve and remember. Forgiveness is required.

It needs to be granted and received. Where it is received, Christ is present. Where it is bestowed, Christ has

come. At the

table where Christ is a guest, there is brotherhood, peace and joy.



WHY JOSEPH, WHY?

Elizabeth Price

Why did Joseph do all those confusing things to his ten brothers? So far as they were concerned, the heinous sin of their earlier years was a prank of immaturity, a mere peccadillo of youth.

It was a long way from where they were at now that they had grown up and become model citizens. They were over the sibling rivalry habit, the murder habit and the slave-selling habit against Joseph, and had moved on with their lives. Isn't it the mark of a mature, balanced adult, to improve oneself and move on? It is this same healthy attitude that is taught today, that we should overcome bad habits and live a model life from here on, so that God will overlook the past. He will recognise it for immaturity. But we are grown up now and can play happy families. Being good is portrayed as the passport to heaven.

The only snag is, it doesn't work. Joseph knew that it doesn't work and Jesus said it doesn't. It doesn't even work for the very best of dedicated pious people. Just listen to what Jesus said about them as they seek to enter heaven. They said to him, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, drive out demons in your name, and in your name perform many miracles?' These were not only good people, they were *very* good people! And Jesus does not ignore them. He replies: 'Then I will tell them plainly, "I never knew you. Out of my sight; your deeds are evil."'



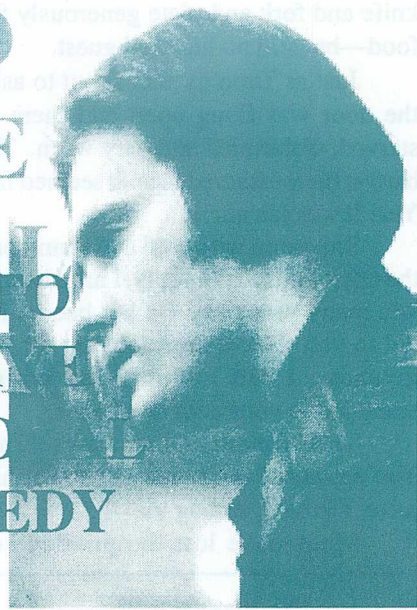
Joseph knew, too, that getting over bad habits doesn't wipe out the past. This is why he invested so much emotional pain in dragging his brothers backward into the future. He refused himself the luxury of offering them cheap grace and easy kinship, by forcing them to bring the darling of the family to him; their youngest brother Benjamin.

They must yield the whole family basis to him, and Joseph would spend however long it took to bring them to that realisation. He would deprive himself of their kinship, deprive himself of being reconciled with his father, until it was done on a basis that would stand for eternity.

Likewise, Jesus—our Joseph. He knows we are sinners, but to have a right relationship with him we must have peace with our father. It is never on the basis of how good we are. We surrender good and bad, just as Joseph's brothers did, because eternity is based on Jesus' goodness—not ours.

Two thousand years ago Jesus deprived himself of heaven so that he could put his whole family on a footing that will stand for eternity. When we put everything in His hands, we feel our brother's arms around us—as Joseph's brothers felt his arms around them—and he unites us with the father. * * *

HOW TO SURVIVE PERSONAL TRAGEDY (5)



TOO MANY BEDS IN THE WARD?

The New Testament never uses the word 'chance' except in the story of a parable. Chance is atheism. God has given freedom to men, but it's like the freedom of the waves of the sea which come 'thus far and no further.'

In a classic piece of literature, we read of Emmie, a little sick girl. She says, 'If I call to God, how would he know that it's me? There are such a lot of beds in the ward.' Yet we know that even amongst humans, the people who have the most responsibility, are the ones with the ability to care for all the details. So if we want something done we usually ask a busy person to do it.

It has often been pointed out that if God is great to the point of infinity, it follows that he is aware of every stick and stone, every creature great and small. Infinite love shelters the least as well as the greatest.

We do not mean by this appeal to God's providence, that believers are never hurt, or troubled. In Luke 21 we find an apparent contradiction that may help us to understand the providence of God.

Desmond Ford

'And ye shall be betrayed both by parents and brethren and kinsfolk, and friends; and some of you they shall cause to be put to death . . .' (Luke 21:16-18).

Note also Luke 12:6-7: '... but even the very hairs of your head are all numbered. Fear not therefore: ye are of more value than many sparrows.'

He who notices our every trouble and who numbers the hairs of our head, only permits events to happen for which we shall praise him in eternity. Could we see all things as God sees them, we would choose as he chooses.

Unless providence attends all things in our lives, it is difficult to see how it could order anything, inasmuch as the greatest events depend upon smaller ones.

John Wesley wrote to one skeptic as follows: 'You allow general problems but deny a particular one. What is a general problem—whatever kind it be—that includes no particulars? Is not every general necessarily made up of its several particulars? Tell me any genus, if

you can, that contains no species. What is a whole that contains no parts? Mere nonsense and contradiction?’

A biological illustration of God’s guidance being extended to details, is found in the sequence of events which led F. W. Robertson to choose the ministry, rather than soldiering, as a calling.

‘If I had not met a certain person, I should not have changed my profession; if I had not known a certain lady, I should not probably have met this person; if that lady had not had a delicate daughter who was disturbed by the barking of my dog, if my dog had not barked that night, I should now have been in the dragoons or fertilising the soil of India.’

He became one of the greatest preachers of his era, and despite a short life which terminated when he was thirty-seven, he set in action ripples of beneficent action and influence which are still widening in our own day.

It is because of this wonderful truth about God’s love, perpetual care, and supervision, that the Bible is so full of hope and good cheer. Of course the very best example of God’s providence is found in the death of Christ itself.

‘Him being delivered by the determinate counsel and foreknowledge of God, ye have taken, and by wicked hands have crucified and slain.’ (Acts 2:23).

For of a truth, against thy holy child Jesus . . . the people of Israel were gathered together, for to do whatsoever thy hand and thy counsel determined before to be done’ (Acts 4:27,28).

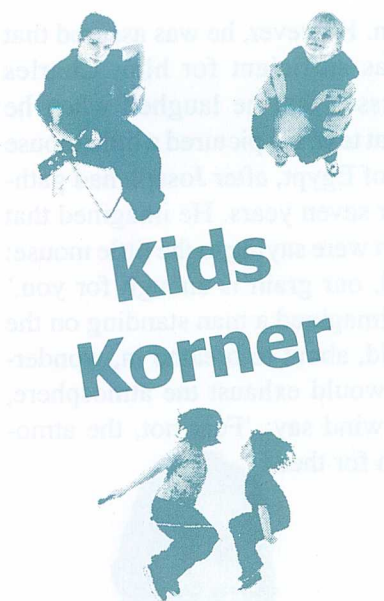
It is clear from these verses that both God and man, both Divine sovereignty and human freedom, were involved in the death of Christ. Compare John 10:17-18.

Belief in God’s providence does not mean that God always answers our prayers affirmatively. He does answer all of them, but he answers some of them negatively—and for the very best reasons. Consider 2 Corinthians 12:7-10. Paul’s request was repeatedly answered with a

‘no’ from heaven. However, he was assured that God’s grace was sufficient for him. Charles Spurgeon confesses that he laughed when he thought about that text. He pictured a little mouse in the granaries of Egypt, after Joseph had gathered them up for seven years. He imagined that the sacks of grain were saying to the little mouse: ‘Don’t be afraid, our grain is enough for you.’ Then Spurgeon imagined a man standing on the edge of the world, about to breathe in, wondering whether he would exhaust the atmosphere, yet hearing the wind say: ‘Fear not, the atmosphere is enough for thee.’



There aren’t too many beds in this world’s ward. God, the great healer of the universe, is in control. His providence superintends the great and the small. We have a physician who cares for our every pain or problem.



A SPECIAL CATCH

Dorothy O'Neill

Today we are going fishing out on the lake with Peter, Thomas, James, John and some of the other disciples of Jesus. They must catch fish to sell and have money to buy food for their families, but they are also going fishing for another reason. They want to be together. Jesus, their Master and best friend has been killed. He was put to death on a cross in Jerusalem, and they are very sad.

Just think for a moment how awful it must have been to see him suffer and die.

But there is a rumour going around that Jesus has risen from the dead. Some of his friends have seen him and talked with him. It's unbelievable, yet he told them before his death that this would happen. Peter and the other men in the boat are confused. They can't work it out, they don't understand, but they do understand about fishing and how good it is to be with your

friends when you are sad and confused.

Have you ever felt like that—sad and all mixed up?

Down on the lake it is dark. The sky is starry, but soon it will be dawn, daylight will come and the sun will rise. The water is calm, and the boat rises and falls gently.

It has been a long night and the men in the boat are very tired. They have been fishing all night and have not caught any fish—the nets are empty. No one talks or laughs or tells jokes. They don't feel happy.

Have you ever felt like that when you've tried very hard to do something and it hasn't worked out?

Now it is getting lighter. Wait a minute . . . there's someone standing on the shore of the lake! It's a man . . . it's Jesus! He's waving his hands and shouting to his friends in the boat: 'Have you caught any fish?' The Disciples don't know that it is Jesus and reply, 'We haven't caught a thing, our nets are empty.' Jesus replies, 'Throw your nets on the right side of the boat and you'll catch some.'

Peter throws the net on the



right side of the boat and the net fills with fish, big silver fish and little ones all jumping around in the net. So many . . . look out the boat is beginning to tip over with the weight of them!

Peter suddenly jumps out of the boat and thrashes through the water towards the shore. He runs up the beach towards Jesus. Look at his face, he can't get to Jesus quick enough. Jesus is alive! Jesus is alive! This is the best news of all.

This is the best news for you and me, to know that Jesus is alive.

Jesus is now bending over a fire he has made and is carefully placing some fish on the hot stones to cook. Yes, he is cooking fish for his friends who he knows will be hungry after being out all night fishing. Peter has now reached Jesus, he can't believe what he is seeing, Jesus so real he can touch him if he dares, but he can't, it is too awesome.

The last time he saw Jesus alive was when he, Peter, was standing near another fire in the courtyard of the high priest's house, and he had said that he didn't know Jesus—just when Jesus had needed a friend more than anything—Peter had been afraid to say that he knew him. Afterwards, when he had realised how badly he had treated Jesus he had gone away and cried and cried.

He is not crying now he is so happy, but he not sure if Jesus has forgiven him. Jesus straightens up and turns to Peter, he is smiling at his dear friend. Tears run down Peter's face, tears of joy. Peter is forgiven! They are friends, it is so good!

Peter suddenly remembers the others he must run and tell them: He shouts, his voice ringing across the beach. 'It's Jesus! He's alive!'



Being the Church THE CHURCH AS FAMILY

Hal Miller

Have you noticed that the New Testament never bothers to define its most important ideas? For instance, what is the Kingdom of God? Jesus uses the phrase all the time but never once says what it is. He is only willing to say that it is 'like' some things. It almost seems that Jesus deliberately refuses to define it, he paints pictures about it instead.

These pictures are multiple and open-ended. They are subject to change and interpretation, and they evoke more than any definition could. Thus, Jesus doesn't say the Kingdom of God is like just one thing, he says it is like a man who went out to sow, like a woman who searches for a lost coin; like someone who found treasure in a field and like a dozen other things.

This multiplicity of metaphors is very important for us Westerners. We have a penchant for defining things, for getting them safely under wraps. But when we do so, we rob ourselves of both the evocative character of metaphor and the richness of the multiple images which mark the New Testament's understanding of the most important aspects of our life.

Take one important idea, 'church.' Like the kingdom of God, church is never defined in the New Testament. Rather, it is pictured by dozens and dozens of metaphors. One author counts ninety six different ones, but there are probably even more than that. The Church, for instance, is *ekklesia*. An *ekklesia* is a political assembly, something which you cannot say 'is' in the way we normally think. The *ekklesia* doesn't 'is'; it happens! An *ekklesia* is like a 'picnic.' Picnics 'happen.' And you aren't a member of a picnic. You are either there or not.



The Church is not just *ekklesia*, though. It is also a body, a nation, a net, and many other things. I emphasize this because one thing we (with our bent toward defining) tend to do, is get trapped in a single image. And this warps our vision and stymies our growth. Define the Church as *ekklesia*, for instance, and we can understand decision-making better and give richness to the idea that Christ is among us uniquely as we gather. But we lose the importance of commitment and bonding. These are emphasised by other metaphors like body and family.

Unfortunately, the metaphor that dominates most of Western Christianity doesn't help us much; we usually envision the Church as a corporation. The Pastor is the C.E.O, there are committees and boards. Evangelism is the manufacturing process by which we make our product, and sales can be charted, compared and forecast. Of course, this manufacturing process goes on in a growth economy so that any corporation-church whose annual sales figures aren't up from last year's is in trouble. We are quite single-minded in our captivity to the corporation metaphor. And it isn't even biblical.

Many renewal movements, at least, have focused on a biblical metaphor—the body. But here, too, it is possible to become warped in our thinking by latching on to even a fruitful metaphor like body and treating it as the dominating metaphor for Christian life together. It is not that thinking of church as body is bad, rather, it's good. But it is only one aspect of who God's people are. Becoming captivated even by the image of the Church as a body will put serious limitations on our vision, for although the Church is a body, it is much more than a body.

Renewal movements have come to rely on the body metaphor for a number of reasons. One is that they are, more or less consciously returning to the New Testament for nourishment. And in the New Testament, the body metaphor is obvious. Paul, for example, has spun out the body metaphor at greater length than any other. He is more specific than Jesus and certainly more fully developed than the little snatches of priesthood imagery we get here and there.

The body metaphor also pictures the Church as having a variety of interdependent roles. As renewal movements have moved away from a one-dimensional concentration on the pastor or priest, as the sole actor in the church, the body metaphor has been very helpful. Hence, we concentrate on it.

Further, the body metaphor tends to be self-contained. When you use the body metaphor, you are looking at yourself, at the Church as church. It is understandable that renewal movements would have this perspective. For a church in its youth tends to focus on its own life, developing the definitions for its life and the patterns for its relationships. As you grow up, however, you begin to look without, and the body metaphor becomes less helpful.

Other images, however, can rise to fill the need. Though renewal movements have tended to concentrate on the body, the family is the New Testament's single most common metaphor for the believers in Jesus. For the New Testament writers, family imagery falls thoughtlessly from their minds onto paper. They call each other 'brother' and 'sister;' we enter the kingdom of God by a 'new birth' and are 'children of God.' Paul claims to be 'once again in childbirth' with the Galatian Christians; he tells the Corinthians 'they have many teachers but not many fathers.' Again and again, though they never spell it out, New Testament writers assume they are a family with other Christians and act on the basis of that vision.

Consider some of the ways the family metaphor may help us where the body metaphor either lets us down or distorts our vision. Although there may be many more than these—and other applications are (as engineering books say) left as an exercise for the reader—four stand out.

First, the way a body is one and many, is different from the way a family is one and many. The

uniqueness of individuals, for instance, is much more strongly portrayed in a body than in a family. The eye is not an arm and so (obviously) cannot have the same function. But is a brother not a sister? In the family, the role distinctions blur, anyone can do the dishes or carry out the garbage. Old family acquaintances say to me, 'Oh yes, you're Ray Miller's boy.' They might have said the same about either of my brothers, for seen in the family, our roles were not all that distinct.

In an age of independence and struggle for identity, it is no wonder that we have latched onto the body metaphor with its strong affirmation of the indispensability of each part. But I wonder whether we have not played that particular melody enough. Perhaps it's time to hear the counterpoint, that we are all children of the same God and we share that relationship in common. Maybe that's all the identity I need: to be the Creator's boy, instead of emphatically a particular, unique individual. Renewing the family metaphor can help us to come to terms with the things we all share in common, things which are just as important as the things which make us each unique.

Second, although differences in a body are cast in terms of role and function, differences in a family are not—at least not basically. In a family, differences are in terms of maturity. Children listen to mothers and fathers, not (in the first place) because they have a different abstract role, but because they are more mature, wiser, and better able to cope with the unpredictability of life; children trust their parents. The body metaphor has as its goal, to get people involved in doing what is uniquely theirs to do. The family

metaphor teaches them how to do it. In a family the older members are better able to do the things that the younger members do also, and the younger members look to the older for guidance and models of living. Understanding the Church as family, will mean that the younger members of the family will learn to take their cues from those who are older and wiser from their walk with God.

Similarly, the body focuses more on accomplishing tasks, but the family more on day-to-day existence. Thinking about the Church as family, makes a person's specific gifts less relevant. It doesn't matter what your gifts are; the fact is we need someone to take out the garbage, and here you are. The same

Western culture has almost entirely fragmented the extended family. As a result, we experience a deep longing for the things the extended family used to provide

thing is true of relationships. In a family, it doesn't matter what another person's gifts are; we are loving them or putting up with them or nourishing them, because we are part of the same family, not because they have a particular gift.

This brings out a third significant difference be-

ing church as family doesn't even acknowledge that there is such a decision. Being in a given family isn't a matter of choice at all; you just end up there. The family where you are gives you both your possibilities and limitations. It gives you people with whom you must deal. People in a family are not necessarily



tween the body image and the family image: The Church as body, is oriented towards tasks, while the Church as family, expresses and nurtures our need for community. Western culture has almost entirely fragmented the extended family. As a result, we experience a deep longing for the things the extended family used to provide—a network of close relationships outside the immediate; the stimulation of others who are different and yet closely related, a sense of security in having options beyond the immediate ones (just in case things don't quite work out).

The Church as family can be a way of incarnating an answer to these longings. Perhaps the reason Paul and others did not spin out the family metaphor, is, that it seemed so obvious to them. Because they experienced extended households as a fact of life, it was easy to see how the Church repeated that pattern. As children in a family learn most (for good and ill) by imitating, so new Christians learn not what their gifts are, but how to exercise them, discovering what they are in the process. Children imitate the way you eat, the way you deal with others, and the things you deem important. What we mean by Christian growth is largely just this process, a process which in the Church as family, is spontaneous, not a programmed one.

Church as family also points to the tragedy and fallacy of one of the most important decisions of Christian life for us—finding the right church. See-

friends, they may not go bowling with each other, and they may not even particularly like each other. But they are still family.

In fact, of course, we do have a choice about church—which seeing church as family can obscure. Nonetheless, the family metaphor can help us see that we should not be constantly looking for the 'perfect church' any more than we should for the perfect family. In an important way, being part of a church is a given reality as well as an important choice.

If we are to keep our need for community from driving us into little enclaves of friends—making churches as Christian cliques—we need to recover the vision of church as family. Although the Church as family emphasises relationships, it does not do so in an exclusive way. This insight brings out a fourth importance of recovering this metaphor for us: it will help us deal with growth.

Ask yourself, 'How do bodies grow?' The answer is, in two ways. First, as we 'grow up,' we are growing in a positive way, gaining strength, agility, and so on. But a body only grows that way for a limited part of its life. Bodies naturally come to the place where they stop growing—and that is good and natural. If bodies don't stop growing when they come to that point, they grow only in the second way—not growing up but getting fat. Families, unlike bodies, can grow indefinitely. But in order to do so, they have to grow in a very different way than bodies do. Bod-

ies grow by expanding, families grow by multiplying.

Think of the way a family grows. A woman and a man marry, and before long a child is born. That child is nurtured and fed and taught, and before long finds another to marry. The family has grown again, this time by incorporating someone from outside. These two children may not continue to live with mum and dad. They may begin another household, and once again, before long, they have children. The children grow and then they marry and create new households, and so on. They all continue to be one family—an extended family. All care for each other in different ways. But they also have formed a multitude of families.

Part of the reason many churches have a major issue about growth, is because we have conceived of it in terms of the body metaphor rather than the family metaphor. Bodies come to an optimum size; if they continue to grow, they merely get fat. One way to deal with this problem is by dividing, and when you think of the church as a body, you naturally have problems with such a prospect. When a body divides, it is a terribly traumatic thing—we call it amputation or dismemberment. And its effects are not healthy at all, for the amputated member, cut off from the body, dies. Yet this is the way our churches, subconsciously perhaps, deal with growth—they find an issue or a personality to divide over.

But as a family grows it doesn't divide, it multiplies. This is a very good thing. It is hard for parents to see their children leave, but it is joyful as well, for by 'losing' a daughter, the family gains a son and keeps the daughter to boot. There are grandchildren and great grandchildren, and when the family gets together again

as a whole (a family reunion) they can have a kind of peace and contentment in being together, which could never have happened had they continued to live together.

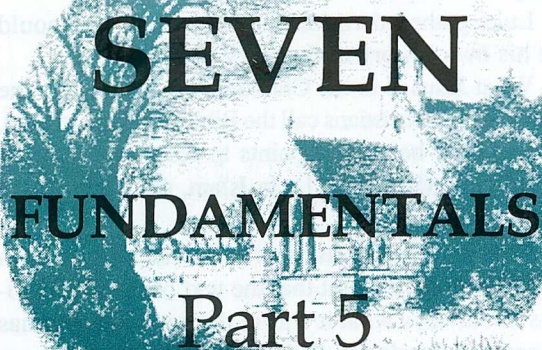
The vision of the Church as a body has been a very important thing for Christians to catch hold of and we shouldn't ignore the insights it gives, but we can also enrich them with the insights of envisioning the church as family. It can show us how we touch the world. It can show us about Christian nurture. It can show us the dynamic way in which new groups of believers form and gain integrity. And it can show us some things about evangelism, for families are the way the human race has expanded from Adam and Eve to overpopulation—bodies are not.

But the need is not met merely by saying, 'Yes, family is a good metaphor for church' and leaving it at that. Rather, we need to look into that metaphor and bring out its implications just as Paul did with the body metaphor. We might even be surprised at some of the things that come out.

Heaven forbid that we should simply replace the domination of one metaphor for another. The body metaphor is crucially important and we need to live out of it. But we need to realise that it in itself is not adequate to capture what God intends us to be. For that, we need an ever shifting variety of visions of the church, including the realisation that the church is family.

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SEVEN FUNDAMENTALS Part 5



Roy Gee



Scriptures

‘Later, knowing that all was now completed, and so that the Scripture would be fulfilled, Jesus said, “I am thirsty.” A jar of wine-vinegar was there, so they soaked a sponge in it, and put the sponge on a stalk of a hyssop plant, and lifted it to Jesus’ lips. When he had received the drink, Jesus said, “It is finished.” With that, he bowed his head and gave up his spirit’ (John 19:28-30).

Every Christian statement of belief I know, mentions the Bible, or Scriptures, as a book to believe in and uphold highly. In fact, many creeds, to show respect, put the Bible first in their list of beliefs.

(I understand the logic of placing the Bible first because, all the following beliefs on the list are supposed to come from the Bible. However, a quirk of the human mind assume that what is first is most important. The Gospel of Christ should come first in my opinion. The Bible is, after all, the primary witness to the Gospel.)

SCRIPTURE IS COMPLETE

My wife, Bennie, and I, visited Durham Cathedral in England in March 1999. I had an unusual experience that doesn’t sound much in the telling, but it was very unusual to me. We were examining a stained-glass-window. I can’t remember every detail in the window, only my response to the window. The window portrayed three great saints: Moses, Paul and Saint Cuthbert, the man who began what became Durham Cathedral. The three stood side by side, co-equals. My strong impression was that when the window was made the Christians at Durham had a more open-ended view of the Christian faith than I have.

The artisans placed Moses, Paul and their man from Durham on an equal level. What St. Cuthbert contributed was as valuable as what Paul had written. It was as if—in the minds of the creators of the window—they were still working out what the faith was, still discovering Christianity, still creating it, so to speak.

There is a degree to which Christianity has to change and adapt. Anything that doesn’t change disappears. The fact that Christianity is still with us shows that it changes and adapts. Five hundred years ago most people did not have the conception of the universe that you and I have—and they were Christians. We have a much different understanding of our

weather, and world, and oceans than those who lived half a millennium ago—and they were Christians. Christianity has adapted to the modern scientific world (though it is often uncomfortable with it).

However, we must also insist on Jude's statement: 'I must write and ask you to defend the faith God has once for all given to his people' (Jude 3). The written foundation of our faith, the Bible, is complete. The canon is closed. We cannot bring new writings to the Bible and say, 'Well, that sounds good, let's put it in the Bible, because the Bible is an open ended work.'

The reason why the Bible canon is closed and complete, is because the Bible is the only original source of the gospel. The Old Testament canon is closed because the Hebrew people decided what the Hebrew Bible was. That is what we call the Old Testament. (The Apocrypha, while honoured by ancient Hebrews, was not included). Because Jesus and the early church used the Old Testament, modern Christians still use it.

The New Testament canon is closed because there are no more apostles alive. The writing of the New Testament was founded upon the apostles, or close associates of the apostles, writing for them. We cannot bring new writings that contain a new gospel and include them in the sixty-six books of the Bible. That's because the Bible is complete.

THE SCRIPTURE IS TRUSTWORTHY IN CHRIST.

Since the enlightenment, new methods of biblical criticism developed in the West. Some applications of these methods have been painful to Bible believers who have had to change their minds on some things. Similar tools of critical study are now being applied to the Koran, and Muslims are beginning to feel the pain. For example, biblical criticism has challenged our thinking about such things as Bible manuscripts, how they were written, how they were collected, how to account for variants; whether there were editors. I suspect that many of us had vague thoughts during childhood, that the Bible was handed down (complete) from heaven. Perhaps on golden plates. Now we pay more attention to what Bible-writer Luke told us:

'Many have tried to tell the story of what God has done among us. They wrote what we had been told by the ones who were there in the

beginning and saw what happened. So I made a careful study of everything and then decided to tell you exactly what took place' (Luke 1:1-3).

Luke gathered various histories so that he could write his own history of the story of Jesus.

What Jesus is to the Christian, the Koran is to the Muslim. While Christians call the Bible the Word of God, we do so only because it points to Jesus, the ultimate Word of God. (See John 1). In Islam, the Koran is the word of God.

Now ancient manuscripts of the Koran have been found. It is quite evident that the text of the Koran today is not always what it was in the past. The text has changed and developed. This is very upsetting to those who believe the text came from heaven. The author, Salman Rushdie was sentenced to death (a *fatwa*) for questioning the foundation of Islam. Some modern critical scholars have had to flee their homes and come

to the West because they are taking a new look at the Koran. We Christians sympathise (except for the *fatwas*) with Muslim believers. We too have had traditional assumptions about Scripture origins challenged by modern scholarship.

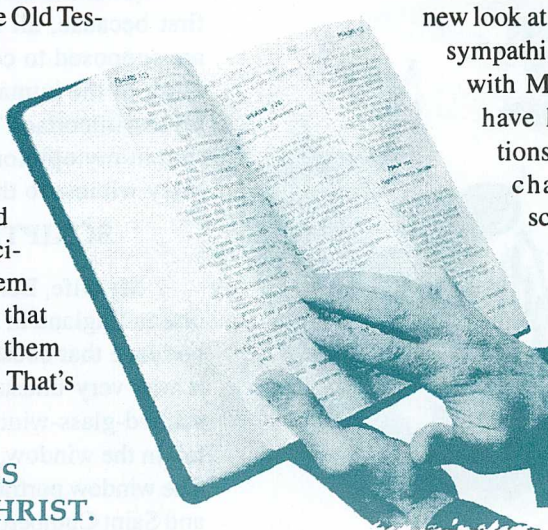
Despite changing views of how the Bible came to us, we know the purpose of Scripture. John tells us: 'These are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God. And that by be-

lieving, you may have life in his name' (John 20:31).

We may have to change our opinions a little, regarding what certain Scriptures mean, but the purpose of the Bible is trustworthy. You can find Jesus through the ministry of Scripture. You can have faith in him. You can have eternal life.

Kathleen Norris has written three best sellers, the most recent one being, *Amazing Grace*. She writes about the difficulty of Christian vocabulary. Kathleen was raised as a Christian, but when she went away to college she left all that 'kids stuff' behind. Now, in later life, she is returning.

Now she is up against some tough words: judgement, for example. (She is confronted with all the judgmentalism you see in churches.) Blood, atonement, hell. She struggles with the sexism you find in Scripture.



Kathleen was invited to speak at a Catholic women's College. A questioner asked: 'How in the world can you find comfort in the language of the Bible that has caused so much harm? How do you defend the sexism, the judgmentalism, the narrowness?' Kathleen responded: 'I don't turn to the Bible for comfort. But I have to tell you this. The religion of the Bible saved my life, it saved my husband's life. And it saved our marriage!'

It is unfair to ask the Bible to do things it is not intended to do. The Bible was not given to answer every question we might whimsically think up. It does not pretend to be a manual on every detail of ethics, history or science, or politics. It is not always a great comfort. You can trust the Bible's purpose. It will help you place your faith in Jesus Christ, the Son of God. You will receive eternal life.

THE SCRIPTURE IS FULFILLED IN CHRIST.

With his cry, 'I am thirsty,' Jesus is showing that he is fulfilling the Scripture. Scripture is not about dates or inconsequential details, or about this, or that or anything we want to make it speak to.

Scripture is about Christ. The fact that Jesus, hanging upon the cross for us, cried, 'I am thirsty' is more important than any prophetic dates we might conjure up. The Scriptures are about our Saviour.

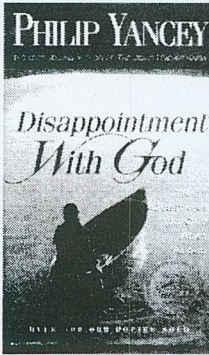
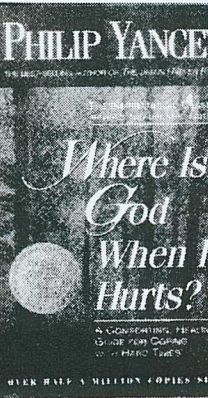
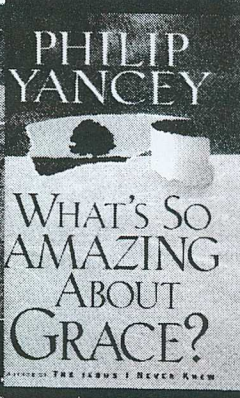
When we approach the Bible we are to put on our Christ glasses, our gospel glasses. We recognise that all of us bring our preconceptions to our reading of the Bible. By putting on our gospel glasses we are simply admitting to one of our preconceptions. We have come looking for Christ. When we hear him say, 'I am thirsty,' we also hear him saying, 'I thirst for you. I am longing for you. Come to me and I will give you rest.'

Chuck Swindoll was with a group of four Bible scholars. They were talking about their favourite versions. One scholar said, 'My favourite is the King James Version.' Another said, 'My favourite is the New American Standard Bible.' A Third scholar said, 'I prefer the New Revised Standard Version because it is not only scholarly, it is inclusive, women are included in the language as well as men.'

The fourth scholar said, 'My favourite translation is my mother's.' Everyone laughed and asked, 'What do you mean?' He answered, 'My mother used to translate the Bible into her life. That's the best translation I ever saw.'

That is what we are supposed to do. When we come to the Scriptures, we are to find Christ and his gospel. We are to find that he is longing and thirsting for us; calling us to come and enter fellowship with him.

* * *

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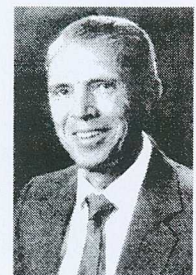
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