

October-November 2005

BA

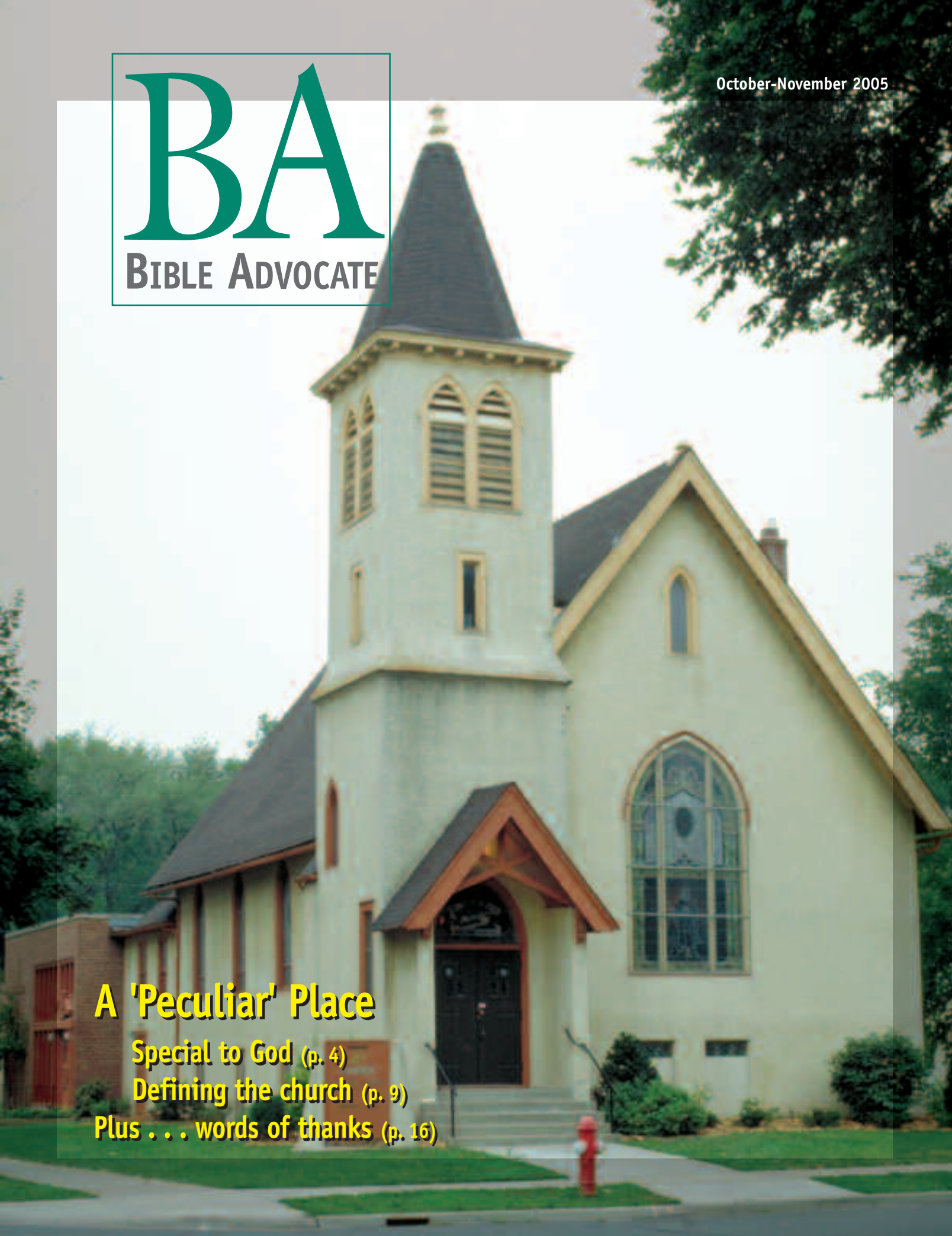
BIBLE ADVOCATE

A 'Peculiar' Place

Special to God (p. 4)

Defining the church (p. 9)

Plus . . . words of thanks (p. 16)





ARTICLES

- 4 **A Peculiar People** — by Jason Overman
- 9 **What is the Church?** — by Brian Knowles
- 13 **Coming Home** — by Raul Romo
- 16 **Thanks, Church!**
- 18 **When Brethren Battle** — by George Angelo
- 22 **Moving Day** — by Brenda Sprayue

DEPARTMENTS

- 3 **First Word** — Of Times and Seasons
- 8 **Questions & Answers**
- 12 **Perspective** — The Church Scattered
- 14 **Wealth** — Giving: Godly Stewardship
- 21 **Understanding Scripture** — General Epistles
- 24 **Mail Bag**
- 30 **International Tour** — The Philippines
- 31 **Last Word** — Church Alive

27 CoG7 IN ACTION

Publications

MTS

Disaster Relief

70-year marriages



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Coming in the December BA: Annual prophetic issue — Why the Second Coming?

In the October and November issues of *Now What?*: a Christian and AIDS, a seriously ill child (<http://nowwhat.cog7.org>)



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Of Times and Seasons



Summer is on the downhill now, and autumn is a white frost and brown leaf away. It's a fine time of year to reflect on time. We started on this topic last issue (p. 22) and plan to continue it next.

For today's Jews, the civil year begins October 4, 2005, a day known to them as Rosh Hashanah. The Bible calls this a memorial of trumpets (Leviticus 23:23ff), the first day of the seventh Hebrew month. Ten days later comes Yom Kippur, or Day of Atonement. Read Leviticus 16 for the sacred ritual performed by the Levitical high priests on this holy day.

From the fifteenth to the twenty-first of the seventh month (October 18-24), ancient Israel marked its most festive occasion under the old covenant: the Feast of Tabernacles, or Ingathering. It had two major purposes: first, to remind the Hebrews of their wilderness wanderings when they lived in tents, or booths; and second, to celebrate the bounty of harvest — a kind of national Thanksgiving to the Lord.

During this fall festival of tabernacles, the birth of the Lord Jesus may have occurred in Bethlehem. A key text on the Incarnation, John 1:14, could be translated, "The Word was made flesh and *tabernacled* among us."

Other lines of truth support this tentative conclusion of an early fall birthday for Jesus. One of these is explored further in this issue (p. 25). For these reasons, many of our brethren select a time in October to remember and rejoice at the birth narratives of our Savior Jesus Christ, as recorded in Matthew 1, 2 and Luke 2.

Both Canada (on October 10) and the United States (on November 24) will celebrate national days of Thanksgiving under the dateline of this issue. Pages 16 and 17 contain personal glimpses of God's grace and generosity to His people this year in the Church.

The BA promotes neither Jewish feasts nor the popular Christmas holiday for Christians. We do, however, urge that our readers sincerely and soberly celebrate Christ's birth in its season and that you seize every opportunity for thanksgiving to God for all He has given us through the Son and by His Spirit.

In all times and seasons of life, "Therefore, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God" (1 Corinthians 10:31).

— Calvin Burrell

A Peculiar People

Being God's treasured possession means much to the church — and matters more.
by Jason Overman

If you were to summarize the Bible in one short sentence, what would it be? The summary I like best is that the Bible is the story of God and His people. Whether we are thinking of Israel in the Old Testament or the church in the New, God consistently desires a people for Himself.

"I will be your God, and you shall be My people" is the divine intention Moses delivered to Israel after he received the covenant, and it is repeated often throughout the Bible (Leviticus 26:12; Jeremiah 31:33; 2 Corinthians 6:16; Revelation 21:3). The rest of Scripture is simply the story of how God makes good on this promise.

In the King James Version,

writers as diverse as Moses (Deuteronomy 14:2), David (Psalm 135:4), Paul (Titus 2:14), and Peter (1 Peter 2:9) employ the word *peculiar* to describe God's people throughout the ages. What does it mean to be a peculiar people? Note that the King James word *peculiar* does not mean "weird" or "strange." Other translations make clear that *peculiar* means "special." Israel is God's "treasured possession"; the church is "a people that are his very own" (NIV).

So what are the implications of being God's treasured possession — His peculiar people? The church should ask, "Who are we, and what does God have in mind for us?" These questions can be answered only by attending to the story that

Scripture tells. By examining the experiences of Israel and the church, we recover a faithful image of that ancient people that shapes our own.

A price for a people

Scripture reveals the simplest truth about the people of God: We exist as a result of God's gracious initiative, and by that alone. Our lives are a gift. David explains, "Know that the LORD, He is God; it is He who has made us, and not we ourselves; we are His people and the sheep of His pasture" (Psalm 100:3).

"I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt" is among Scripture's most familiar state-



Skjold Photographs

ments. The Exodus was foundational for Israel. Once she was captive and without hope, but in the first Passover God came to her as Savior. A lamb was slain, and Israel was saved. Only as she oriented herself to the blood of the lamb was her life secured (Exodus 12).

This ancient story points forward to a greater one, as we know. On a Passover hundreds of years later, another Lamb was killed and another Exodus occurred (Mark 14:1; Galatians 1:4). On this night the Giver and the Gift were fully revealed. In the cross of Jesus Christ, the Lamb of God, we come face to face with God's sacrificial love (Romans 5:8).

The New Testament testifies that the church does not exist

of its own accord but is rather the result of Christ's own intention and costly act. "I will build My church," He says (Matthew 16:18) — a church "purchased with His own blood" (Acts 20:28; Psalm 74:2).

Such is the price for a people. Such is the gift of love that shapes our lives. He "loved the church and gave Himself for her" (Ephesians 5:25).

A commandment for a community

Deliverance, of course, is not the end of the story. Recall what happened to Israel: The story of salvation was followed by the story of command. God did not save this people to do as they pleased but to serve their God.

After the Exodus, God spoke the Ten Words at Mt. Sinai, and Israel learned that freedom is the entrance to a new life — one that reflects the God who rescued her.

The order of things is important here. Israel was not called to obey God so she might be delivered but *because she was delivered*. Commandment always follows deliverance, a theme apparent in these passages:

I bore you on eagles' wings and brought you to Myself . . . obey My voice . . . (Exodus 19:4, 5).

I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt . . . You shall have no other gods . . . (20:2, 3).

I am the Lord who brings

you up out of the land of Egypt . . . therefore be holy . . . (Leviticus 11:45).

God delivered Israel, not because she deserved it but because He loved her. God called Israel to lovingly obey Him in response to His love — the very heart of covenant life (Deuteronomy 7:8, 9). Israel's identity as the covenant people, then, resulted both from God's deliverance and God's command. These two are inseparable, each a movement of divine grace. And each was necessary for creating and sustaining a community whose character was consistent with its Maker.

Once more, Israel's story corresponds to our own. The New Testament conspicuously follows the same two-step pattern. "God so loved the world" precedes "If you love Me, keep My commandments" (John 3:16; 14:15). The commands of the Sermon on the Mount follow the deliverance of the multitude from their sins and diseases (Matthew 4:23-25; 5-9). Christ dies for us and then calls us to "observe all things that I have commanded you . . ." (26-27; 28:19, 20).

Paul's writings eloquently reveal the same theme. "Having

been set free from sin, you became slaves of righteousness" (Romans 6:18). "For you were bought at a price; therefore glorify God in your body and in your spirit, which are God's" (1 Corinthians 6:20). For God's peculiar people, deliverance leads naturally to discipleship. Jesus is both deliverer and commander in this community; He is Savior and Lord!

A temple for a tribe

The shared memories of Exodus and Sinai, Cross and Commission, bind and define Israel and the church as God's peculiar people. They lay the foundation upon which the whole is to be built. These events greatly affect people as their shape and extent are fully realized.

As Israel wandered from Sinai, she did so as a dramatically altered people. This is portrayed by how she was carefully ordered around the tabernacle — three tribes on each side (Numbers 2) — and how she closely followed it. When the tabernacle moved or stopped, so did the people, each in their place. This was no loose affiliation but a tight-knit family. This

unity was possible because the tabernacle made the merciful, holy God of Exodus and Sinai present in Israel (Leviticus 26:11). Here the historic God of her common past was freshly revealed and known. Here in this sacred space God's sacrificial character was celebrated and emulated. Yes, God called all Israel to "Be holy, for I am holy" (Leviticus 20:7; 1 Peter 1:16). She was to exhibit to the world that character represented at her core. As she was so gathered and unified by God's atoning love, she became the mirror — the witness — to her sacrificial God in the world.

In the New Testament, this story again reaches its climax. In Christ the God of Israel takes flesh and "tabernacles" among us (John 1:14). In Him we meet the true temple (2:21), priest, and sacrifice (Hebrews 7-10). Around Him twelve disciples and all their descendants are gathered and ordered. On the Day of Pentecost, the tabernacling Father in His Son — by the gift of the Spirit — became present in the midst of those gathered, and the church was born.

This loving unity is a favorite theme of Paul's. We are the body of Christ (1 Corinthians 12:12), the temple of God (3:16). The church is many but one, a gathering from all the earth's tribes. It is a "fitly framed" temple in which God dwells (Ephesians 2:19-21) and a "fitly joined" body becoming the perfection and fullness of the crucified Christ (4:11-16). Yes, the church is called upon to model the sacrificial life at its heart: "Take up [your] cross, and follow Me" (Matthew 16:24).

For

God's peculiar people,
deliverance leads nat-
urally to discipleship.

Jesus is both deliverer and commander in
this community; He is Savior and Lord!

The love that moved God to give His Son, and Christ to give His life, now animates us by the Spirit as one people. Christ calls us to lay down our lives for each other. When this love is lived, the world cannot help but notice (John 15:12, 13; 17:21).

A culture for a country

The practical effect of all God's effort in delivering, commanding, and tabernacling with a people was that a new society came into being. God's plans for Israel were not modest. He was not interested in a new religion, nor content with personal relationships. God wanted nothing less than "a holy nation" (Exodus 19:6) whose every member, activity, and institution conformed to His will. This meant that Israel was, in principle, a counter-culture, an alternative social reality in the midst of her neighbors. "I am the Lord your God, who has separated you from the peoples" (Leviticus 20:24).

Israel was to be separate but not segregated, distinct but not exclusive. She had to be visible and accessible. Israel was not different just to be different but because she was God's. This difference made her distinguishable to the world — a "light to the Gentiles" (Isaiah 42:6).

In continuity with Israel, the church is a distinct social phenomenon. She too is a "holy nation" (1 Peter 2:9) among the nations (Philippians 2:15). Jesus clearly envisioned His people to be in the world — in fact, sent to the world — but not of it or like it (John 17:14-18). He referred to His people as "the light of the world" and "a city on a hill"

God was not interested in a new religion, nor content with personal relationships. God wanted nothing less than "a holy nation."

(Matthew 5:14).

Paul enlarged on this distinction between the church and the world. He told the church in Rome not to be "conformed to this world" but "be transformed" (Romans 12:2). And to the church in Corinth, flirting with disaster, he added, "Come out . . . and be separate" (2 Corinthians 6:17). These churches had to resist the tug of Roman culture while bearing a new culture, a radical new vision for authentic community that looks forward to consummation (Revelation 11:15).

The church is a glimpse and foretaste of this coming day. She knows that in Christ the world has ended — and will end — and that this hope is her power to be now what she is to be fully then.

'Peculiar' look

So what does it mean to be a peculiar people? In a humanistic, self-sufficient world, it means that we faithfully celebrate our dependency as new creations of Christ. In a materialistic, self-indulgent world, it means that we have relinquished control of our lives to Christ's command. In a world of self-centered individualism, being God's very

own people means that we are lovingly bound and accountable to a family whose members are the bearers of Christ in the world. And in a world of self-negating, nationalistic conformity, being peculiar people means that we courageously stick out by modeling a Christ-shaped counter-culture for all to see.

It is fair to ask if the church today is living up to this biblical model and story. Or have the stories that the world tells captivated our minds and distorted our shape? Maybe it's a little of both.

The church becomes safe and irrelevant when it is reduced to a corner of our lives, when it is just one act among many, when it is incidental rather than inherent to our faith. But the church begins to recover itself when it returns and rehearses its story carefully, lovingly, and often — when it realizes that church is not somewhere we go but something we are. **BA**

Jason Overman serves the congregation in Jasper, AR.

Questions & Answers

How important is the church to our relationship with God? If it is pertinent, then how should we choose a church? Should the people in the church factor into our choice?

From the beginning, God has consistently placed man in community. Though individuals can have relationship with God, one of His first recorded statements is “It is not good for the man to be alone” (Gen. 2:18, NIV). Whether family, tribe, nation, or church, God created us to live our lives connected to others.

The “church” concept is developed in the New Testament. Jesus’ great commission (Matt. 28:18-20) calls for ongoing efforts to make disciples and bring them into relationship with God and with each other. Is there a better context in which people might be won to Christ, instructed in His ways, and encouraged to serve? The idea of living for God outside the church would have been unthinkable to Paul, who referred to it as the “body of Christ.” In fact, if a “Lone Ranger” Christian set out to carefully fulfill Christ’s commission and Paul’s instructions, he would soon find himself right in the middle of a church!

The question now becomes “Which church?” As you indicate, each denomination and congregation has its own unique flavor. As someone has said, if you’re looking for a perfect church, you’re going to be disappointed. Even if you could find one, it probably wouldn’t let you join!

Because churches are composed of people, perfection waits for Christ’s return. But there are qualities that recommend some denominations and congregations over others, and the people in those churches are a factor. You may wish to consider your options using questions like these: Are the teachings and practices of this church in agreement with God’s Word? Are members of this church doers, not just hearers, of God’s Word (James 1:22-25)? Does this church lift up Jesus and

give Him all that is His due? Does this church produce mature, obedient disciples of Christ? Are leaders of this church persons I can respect and to whom I can submit (1 Thess. 5:12-13; Titus 3:1)? Is this church a place where I will be encouraged and enabled to develop and serve?

And perhaps most important: Is this the church to which Christ is calling me (Eph. 4:11-13)? Many people seem to “shop” for the church that can best serve them. Somewhere in the mix should be the question “Which is the church the Lord Jesus would have me serve?”

— Elder Loren Stacy

We need the church. God never intended for us to live our lives apart from it. At the heart of God’s plan of redemption is the church family into which the redeemed are brought through the supernatural work of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor. 12:13). We are adopted into this family for spiritual nurture and growth, edification, fellowship, discovery and exercise of our spiritual gifts, corporate worship, evangelism, and outreach. And the world needs the church. Imagine what this planet would be like if the church were to suddenly disappear.

Perhaps the best measure of the church’s importance is Christ’s love for and relationship with the church — as a groom to his bride. Paul points out that Jesus gave His very life for His bride, the church (Eph. 5:24-27) and waits with anticipation to present her to the Father at His return.

If the church is that important to God and to Jesus, if it is integral to the plan of redemption, if it is designed to play an important role in our spiritual development and provide greater opportunity for evangelism, then the church should be important to Christians as well. How can we ignore or neglect what is so dear to God’s heart?

— Elder Whaid Rose



What is the Church?

Beyond the differences, we can get to the core of Jesus' desire for His people. by Brian Knowles

Skjold Photographs

To non-Christians, the church is not one entity but many. It has many faces, many standards, and many theologies. It is difficult, in fact, to calculate just how many Christian denominations are in the world, but it is certainly more than a few thousand. Each group has circled its wagons around a set of distinctive teachings — its credentials of authenticity.

The church, therefore, can be viewed from myriad perspectives. From each viewpoint, it looks different. Churches have beliefs, collective personalities, structures, images, doctrines, dogmas, and liturgies. To one degree or another, all are variations on biblical themes. Ideally the leaders of most Christian organizations seek to move in

the direction of biblical authenticity. Given the benefit of the doubt, they truly want to be what Jesus called “my church” (Matthew 16:18).

Why, then, do we see so many conflicting approaches to doctrine and practice? One answer lies in the possibility that we are inaccurately defining the *church*.

Not an organization

Biblically speaking, the church is not an ecclesiastical organization. Organizations are structures the church creates to do its work. They are, at best, tools. Like all tools, some are superior and others are inferior — as tools. Church organizations are the products of Christians exercising their free agency, their judgment, and their collec-

tive wisdom. Consequently, they are laden with “the human element.”

When outsiders view this element, they may conclude “This cannot be God’s church.” They are both right and wrong. They are right in that no organization is, in itself, “God’s church.” But they are wrong for looking at the human element in an organization to decide the issue.

The most common word translated “church” from the Greek New Testament is *ekklesia*, but when Jesus was teaching His disciples, He didn’t use that word. If Jesus spoke Hebrew, then He used one of two words: *edah* or *qahal*. In the Old Testament, *edah* is often translated “congregation,” while *qahal* is rendered “assembly.”

In either case, the word Jesus used does not imply an organization in the modern corporate, ecclesiastical sense. Rather, the church is a witnessing body, a congregation, an assembly, or a group of individuals that rallies around the teachings and person of Jesus Christ.

In the book of Acts, the original group was called “the sect of the Nazarenes” and “the Way” (Acts 24:5, 14, NKJV). In its initial form, the church was a Jewish sect. By the time Paul had done much of his work, the church was no longer exclusively Jewish. Though the leadership was still Jewish, the body of Christ became a mixture of Jews and Gentiles representing all walks of life.

The body of Christ

The apostle Paul explained to the Corinthians their role in the divine scheme of things by comparing the church to a human body:

The body is a unit, though it is made up of many parts; and though all its parts are many, they form one body. So

it is with Christ. For we were all baptized by one Spirit into one body — whether Jews or Greeks, slave or free — and we were all given the one Spirit to drink (1 Corinthians 12:12, 13).

The indwelling Holy Spirit — not some organizational affiliation — makes us members of Christ’s body.

The church is the body of Christ — the people who together witness to the truth of the gospel of Jesus Christ. In preparing His first team, Jesus

opened their minds so they could understand the Scriptures. He told them, “This is what is written: The Christ [the Anointed One] will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, and repentance and forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things” (Luke 24:45-48).

The first apostles personally witnessed our Lord fulfilling the Scriptures in His messianic role. They went into the world to tell what they’d seen and experienced. Jesus said to this little group prior to the church’s first Pentecost:

“You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8).

The initial witnessing body was a mere 120 people (v. 15). Together, in the power of the Holy Spirit, they got the pump primed for future generations of gospel preachers. As the numbers of disciples grew, those who were added remained faith-

ful to the teachings of the original apostles as they had learned them at the feet of Jesus.

The apostles’ teaching was Jesus’ teaching. The main point here is that Jesus commanded His disciples to take His own teachings to the far-flung regions of the earth (Matthew 28:18b-20). Theirs was both a message about the person of Christ and about His teachings. Jesus’ message was their message. Ours, too, should be His and theirs.

Gospel of the kingdom

The gospel is the central message of the church, and preaching the gospel is its core activity. The word *gospel* means good news from God for the world. Each church has its understanding of the true gospel and preaches it with conviction. Paul made plain that it is important to preach the authentic gospel, not some counterfeit (Galatians 1:6ff.).

The product of effectively preaching the gospel is the birth and growth of congregations of Christians everywhere. Once congregations are formed, they constitute the collective body of Christ in the world. In each community, whether Jewish or Gentile, they are salt and light (Matthew 5:13, 14). Together, Christians are a people of God:

But you are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, His own special people, that you may proclaim the praises of Him who called you out of darkness into His marvelous light; who once were not a people but are now the people of God, who had not obtained mercy but now have obtained mercy (1 Peter 2:9, 10, NKJV).

Online

What are you looking for in a church? A certain style of music? Warm fellowship? Youth activities? While many of us may think this criteria is valid, one writer believes otherwise. Read Dan Burrell’s article “What Do We Need in a Church?” in the *Bible Advocate Online* (www.cog7.org/BA).

The gospel message insures that, as a body, Christians are a people of grace. We have been gifted with the matchless mercy of God. Our sins have been covered by the blood of God's messianic Lamb. Like the rest of the world, we once walked in darkness. We were dead in our sins, but now we are alive in Christ (Ephesians 2:1). We have much to praise God for.

Jesus bought us with the price of His blood; therefore, He owns us (1 Corinthians 6:20). This grace message means that, to the degree that we are pliable instruments in His hands, the Lord can use us to accomplish His purposes in the world. God often uses the most humble people to achieve the most marvelous things (vv. 26, 27). When we are close to God in Christ, God can make us fruitful for His kingdom.

The power of the church is the Holy Spirit (Acts 1:8); the food of the church is the Word of God. If God's servants feed His flock nutrient-dense spiritual food, the church can grow and thrive on it (John 21:15-17; Ephesians 4:11-16; Acts 20:20-28). A well-fed body is equipped to do good, productive work.

Church tensions

The church is one thing, and it is many. There is only one real body of Christ (Ephesians 4:4). It

Appointment

*Father, today
we march to face a foe.
We do not know
if he be great or small,
Goliath or Lilliputian
in size.*

*Yet, Lord,
with quickened step we go,
not dragging feet, or slow,
for You have always led
us forth with victory song.*

*Get glory, Lord;
that is our heart's desire.
Our courage fire
white-hot for the fray.
Be explanation for our
strength this day.*

*Our faith rests
in leadership divine.
Our lives are Thine;
lead where 'ere you choose.
We follow, Lord,
our hearts at peace in Thee.*

Petey Prater

is not an organization but a spiritual organism that transcends organizations by often creating them as tools to do its work.

The church is a witnessing body, one that has received the apostles' witness to Jesus the Messiah. The church is here to imitate Christ, who imitated God.

Being in Christ's body is a "boot camp for eternity." Fiery trials test us, and we face the enemy every day. We are here

to overcome, to triumph over the world, the flesh, and the Devil.

On the other hand, we are here to taste the powers of the world to come – to experience and rightly apply the gifts and manifestations of the Holy Spirit. We are called to separate ourselves from the world's evil in anticipation of the eternal victory that is ours in Christ, while remaining in the world to minister to it.

The church is all of these things, and more. The wheat and the tares grow together in each Christian organization. We don't all speak the same thing. As a body, we are not yet unified in doctrine or practice, yet we are still one in Christ.

Perhaps by engaging in dialogue with each other, we can move incrementally closer to the ideal of unity. Ultimately, real cohesiveness will be the product of the leadership of Jesus Christ, not of human effort.

Until real unity is achieved, we are still duty-bound to obey the Lord's command to love one another, as He now loves us (John 13:34, 35). **BA**

Brian Knowles is a Christian writer living in Monrovia, CA. Scripture quotations were taken from the *New International Version*, except where noted.

The Church Scattered

by **Richard A. Wiedenheft**

The second chapter of Acts describes how, after the Day of Pentecost, the disciples of Jesus enjoyed wonderful fellowship. They worshipped together, ate together, prayed together, and learned together (Acts 2:42). Some even sold their properties to raise money so brethren from far away could participate fully. What an exciting and glorious time!

This extended “church convention” was undoubtedly necessary for the new body of believers. But it could only be temporary because the great news of the risen Messiah needed to be proclaimed to the world. And if they continued in Jerusalem, the believers would never fulfill their mission to the world.

Acts 8:1 says that a persecution broke out against the church and that God used this evil to shake up the Christians’ comfortable community in order to accomplish a far greater purpose. He wanted His followers to be scattered throughout the world, sharing the message of His great salvation in every community (Matthew 5:13-16).

Perhaps there is a lesson in this for us. Modern researchers have learned that within two years of their conversion, most Christians no longer have any

non-Christian friends. My own experience and observations (and probably yours) confirm this. We Christians tend to exist in a church ghetto. In fact, it has been said that the central activity of Christians is congregating. Sure, we work and study and live next to non-Christians, but we don’t really know them — and, consequently, they can’t see the depth of Jesus’ love in us.

Of course, we must avoid the ways of the world, and we need to assemble with one another (James 1:27; Hebrews 10:25). But if the primary measure of our Christianity is how frequently and how long and how well we congregate, we may be like the new church after Pentecost. Will it take a great persecution to push us out into our communities that are full of people God loves?

I certainly don’t want to see persecution, but I would like to see the church, including me, put far more emphasis on being salt and light and evangelists to the unsaved around us. I would like to see Christians develop relationships with the unsaved, demonstrating the love of Jesus to them and recognizing that this is kingdom work of the highest order.

Here are some specific suggestions that may help you and your church become more

involved in doing kingdom work among the unsaved:

- Pray every day for God to provide you with opportunities to demonstrate and/or talk about His love to others of His choosing.
- Try to do at least one thing every week to cultivate a relationship with an unbeliever.
- Dedicate time in church every week to inviting people to share their experiences in getting to know and minister to non-Christians. Share failures and opportunities missed; celebrate successes. Pray for one another in this vital work.
- Whenever you plan a church social or recreational activity, try to design it so members can invite non-Christian friends and relatives and build relationships with them so they can see the love of Jesus in action.

The church gathered in fellowship is indeed beautiful, and important kingdom work goes on there. But I suggest that just as beautiful and just as important is the work done by individual Christians — evangelists all, dispersed into their communities, demonstrating the love of Jesus Christ in ten thousand ways, planting seeds of the gospel in the hearts of the unsaved.

Coming Home

by Raul Romo

Through my early years, we lived as a normal family. My father, raised Catholic, worked as a truck driver, which often kept him away from home for days at a time.

Meanwhile, my mother, raised a Methodist, stayed home to take care of my brother and me and to teach us about the Lord she had known. We did not attend church, partly because Dad and Mom were from different churches. At that point, my dad's provision and my mother's love and teaching were enough to satisfy my young mind and heart.

When I was eight years old, my parents moved from the Mexican state of Sinaloa to Tijuana, Baja California. There my dad was introduced to the Church of God by an uncle from Los Angeles, and he started attending.

The first time she attended the Church of God in Tijuana, my mother wept. It seemed to her that she had finally come home after so many years of churchlessness. She immediately felt secure in the arms of the Lord and in the warm fellowship of His followers.

Today many are still looking for this kind of home — a church home. Some, like my dad, are lost in the world and long to be with a loving, nurturing Father. Others, like my mother, feel as if

they are lost sheep because they are away from church fellowship they once knew. Still others, as was my case, have heard of the "unknown God" and built an altar, but are still trying to find Him real and personal.

Our society is often confused regarding church: too many churches, differences in doctrine, divisions, lack of love, hypocrisy among members, and scandals among the clergy. These and other problems have brought negative attention to the church and caused many to question its legitimacy.

People use the church's imperfections as an excuse to go their own way. But the Bible asks us to join the body of Christ, maintain its unity, set a good example for others, and continually grow in the church. Once we have come to know the love of the Lord, our hearts will always long for this family of faith.

Many verses in the New Testament encourage believers to stay together, but none is more explicit than Hebrews 10:25: "Let us not give up meeting together . . ." (NIV). Jesus himself attended the synagogue every Sabbath (Luke 4:16).

When we meet as His church, God blesses us with His presence and with eternal life (Matthew 18:20; Psalm 133).

He satisfies our spiritual thirst through the Word and the fellowship of the Spirit. And there are other blessings for staying together, such as brotherhood and accountability, that pave the way for our spiritual growth.

Equally important, we have the responsibility and privilege of joining forces in combating evil. We can conquer much more as a group than we can individually (Ecclesiastes 4:9-12).

There are good reasons that you should consider attending church. God gave this institution that is home for many of us, and He wants you to be part of His family, too.

Jesus is still calling: "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest" (Matthew 11:28). And the Father is still looking for true worshipers:

"Yet a time is coming and has now come when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for they are the kind of worshipers the Father seeks" (John 4:23).

Come home to the church!
Come home to worship God!
Come home to Christ! **BA**

Raul Romo serves the North Dallas congregation in Carrollton, TX. Scripture quotations were taken from the *New International Version*.

Giving: Godly Stewardship

by LeRoy and Hope Dais

Your boss informs you that he is leaving on a year-long trip to Africa. He puts you in charge of his multi-million-dollar business and asks you to continue his practice of contributing generously to the church and charity.

This is not much different from our privilege as children of the One who owns all things. After Creation, God appointed Adam as His steward over the earth (Genesis 1:27, 28). As Adam's descendants, we continue to care for what God commits to us. He owns and provides everything we have (Psalm 24:1) — even life itself.

What does God want us to do with His things? We must provide for our families (Proverbs 13:22), save (6:6-8), and invest (Matthew 25:14-30).

Most important, we should give, acknowledging God's own-

ership and gift of His Son (2 Corinthians 8:7-9). Giving is an important part of worship!

Old Testament giving

Giving to God began with Cain and Abel (Genesis 4:3, 4). Noah, Job, Abraham, and Jacob made sacrifices to the Lord, undoubtedly a common practice among the righteous then.

Abraham is the first person reported to give a tithe (14:18-20). His grandson, Jacob, also promised to tithe in return for God's blessings (28:20-22). These men gave out of gratitude and to honor God, not out of obligation. Later, tithing became a legal obligation under Moses' law (Deuteronomy 12, 14, 26).

The tithe "is the LORD's. It is holy to the LORD" (Leviticus 27:30). It was the designated inheritance of the Levites, who served in the tabernacle

(Numbers 18:21-28) and temple. Instead of a large land area like the other tribes had, one-tenth of the other tribes' produce belonged to the Levites.

The Israelites gave offerings in addition to the tithe. Building the tabernacle in the wilderness, they were so caught up in the excitement of giving that Moses had to restrain them from giving more (Exodus 36:5-7).

New Testament teaching

None of the New Testament texts that mention tithe (Matthew 23:23; Luke 11:42; 18:12; Hebrews 7:4-9) indicates that tithing continues as a law under the new covenant.

Jesus, however, asked His disciples for greater commitment than a tithe: "He who finds his life will lose it, and he who loses his life for My sake will find it" (Matthew 10:39). And "whoever of you does not forsake all that he has cannot be My disciple" (Luke 14:33). Jesus stressed that following Him calls for a complete surrender of ourselves and our possessions to God.

On this point Paul counsels further:

I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that you present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, which is your reasonable service (Romans 12:1).

Under the old covenant, God accepted dead animals in sacrifice. Now the only acceptable worship for believers is to offer ourselves — alive — wholly to the Lord. Transformed to God's will (v. 2) our lives can become His instruments of righteousness (6:12, 13).

Paul cites churches in Macedonia as examples of those who made such a commitment (2 Corinthians 8:5). Having given themselves to the Lord, the poverty-stricken brethren in Macedonia begged to give for the poor in Jerusalem. So great was their desire that they gave “beyond their means” with great joy.

Christians recognize tithing as a starting point, rather than the goal, in their giving. It is a standard that we can expand as God provides. The tithe reminds us to give the first of our income to the Lord. Not everyone gives the same amount; that’s why the idea of proportionate giving is significant (2 Corinthians 8:12). God determines our generosity by our capacity and our attitude.

Paul states God’s purpose for increasing our reaping:

God is able to make all grace abound toward you, that you, always having all sufficiency in all things, may have an abundance for every good work . . . you are enriched in everything for all liberality (2 Corinthians 9:8; 11).

God increases our income, not so we can build and fill larger storehouses, but so we can become more generous in our giving.

To whom should we give?

Numerous charities are worthy of our financial support, but our primary giving should be to the church to provide for preaching and teaching the gospel. Under the old covenant, the tithe supported those who performed the spiritual

duties in the tabernacle and temple. When Jesus sent out the twelve disciples (Luke 9) and later the seventy (Luke 10), He told them to not take food or extra clothing. Their needs would be provided by those to whom they ministered. Jesus said, “The laborer is worthy of his wages” (Luke 10:7).

Paul argues that those in gospel work should be paid just as those who make a living through warfare, farming, or shepherding (1 Corinthians 9:7-11, 14).

Paul also says, “Let him who is taught the word share in all good things with him who teaches” (Galatians 6:6). Those in gospel work should be supported by believers who give to the Lord by giving to the church. The more generous the support, the more workers can share the gospel with more people.

The Bible also says much about the Lord’s concern for the poor. Psalm 140:12 says, “I know that the LORD will maintain the cause of the afflicted, and justice for the poor.”

When God’s people undo the heavy burdens of the oppressed and share bread with the hungry, then light will break forth and healing will be experienced, with abundant blessings (Isaiah 58:6-11).

God blesses us with more than we need so we can share with those who lack. However, “Whoever shuts his ears to the cry of the poor will also cry himself

and not be heard” (Proverbs 21:13).

Jesus said that when we minister to the thirsty, the hungry, the stranger, the naked, the sick, and the prisoner, we minister to Him. However, if we fail to do so, we are withholding ministry from Him (Matthew 25:34-45). What a staggering thought!

Generous givers

God wants our hearts. He is looking for believers who give to causes they deeply believe in, with a view to eternal value. With the Scripture’s instruction and the Spirit’s inspiration, we can become generous givers. We can learn to give joyfully with an eternal perspective, to prefer giving to receiving, to recognize God’s ownership, and to give as an act of worship. We can learn to be motivated by our love for God and Christ.

LeRoy and Hope Dais

serve in the Conference offices in Denver, CO.

Thanks, Church!

In what specific ways are you thankful for your church this year? How has God shown unique care for you and/or your church family?

I am thankful that our church family has responded so faithfully to the needs of others through intercessory prayer and benevolence; that we are being revived by the Holy Spirit to be faithful to God, to build up one another, and to share the gospel; that we have a pastor who leads by example and that we can share him with other congregations, camps, and retreats. I am thankful for those who provide leadership for our youth and who prepare the fellowship meal each Sabbath day.

Finally, I am thankful that our names are written in the Lamb's Book of Life and that we are nearer today than in any time in history to the second coming of our Savior Jesus Christ.

— James Frits
San Diego church

I lived in Holland during the German occupation, World War II. God saved me five times out of the hands of Nazi murderers when I had no papers or solid excuses. The Lord also prevented me from going to Indonesia to kill people I had never seen. The same God provided 4+ years of free food, brought to us seven days a week by one Nazi

officer, while hundreds in my hometown died of hunger.

Once a wild, thoughtless, rebellious nut who hated others, now I am the happiest Aussie, for I have heard the call and enjoy studying God's Word. All I have learned is from the Lord, who saw my desperation to understand the Bible. In April I was 80. Am senile and enjoying it every day.

— Elder David Lazones
East Burwood, Victoria,
Australia

My pastor-husband and I decided to live next to our church facility, and our children befriended the neighborhood kids. As their pals became part of our family, church was natural. Now they are slowly learning about our wonderful Savior!

God added two super-energetic youth workers, Mark and Robin Sullivan, to encourage these young people. We are enjoying a good turnout for our Wednesday night youth service, and some of them are coming on Sabbath. One of these neighbors even attended Spring Vale Academy last year. We may not see all the fruit of this labor now, but we trust that the seeds we plant will bring forth fruit in the future.

— Mary Chesney
Harrisburg, PA

I appreciate the blessing of Sabbath assembly. I'm thankful for pastors and leaders who are devoted, unselfish servants while also working outside the Church to support their families. I'm thankful that though we were two small, struggling churches in the same city, we are now one church, hoping and striving to grow spiritually and in numbers. I'm thankful for the connection with the larger body of the Church, giving us inspiration and support through conferences, literature, instruction, and fellowship with members around the country.

— Ruth Wertz
Camp Hill, PA

I am thankful for my church always being there when I need it. When a close friend died, I didn't feel like going to church, but I needed to. I was holding everything in, but as the hour passed, I couldn't handle it. Somebody was there for me to cry on their shoulder. Also, I am thankful I could be involved with my church and develop my gifts.

— Armando Galvan
Chicago, IL

My family and I are not always present in church, but we consider ourselves part of the San Diego congregation. It welcomes us each time we visit from Mexico. A sister makes our

Thanks, Pastor!

Brother Vega has shown us how to be faithful to the laws of the Lord and still be with others without compromising, and to live by God's standards in a society that may not know about them. He has taught us that faith is doing what God wants and trusting in Him for the outcome. The world is a brighter place for having in it Pastor and Sister Vega. May the wind always be at their backs, and may God hold them in the hollow of His hand.

— Linda and Joseph Macias
Washington, D.C.

My life has been blessed to see someone so dedicated to the Lord. As soon as Pastor Vega starts preaching, I experience the mighty power of God touching my heart. As Pastor Vega shares real experiences in his life, I see that I have had similar ones. Many times when the sermon is over, I feel that I come off a cloud.

— Evelyn Morales
Germantown, MD

I met the Vegas in Colombia when I was around ten years old. Pastor Vega used to share



Pastor Antonio and Alba Vega, Lanham, MD

the Scriptures when he visited my home weekly. I will never forget his preaching and the way he cared for our congregation. I have been part of the Lanham, Maryland, congregation for nine years. The Vegas still have the same love and zeal for the work of God.

— Enoc Reuto
Laurel, MD

day brighter simply by smiling; children reflect God's joy; others take interest in our plans. We've known some there since childhood, though we're parted by two countries. For every member, I am thankful.

— Simha Ramirez
Monterrey, Mexico

In a critical moment in my academic life, I was submitting applications for college. My church family prayed for me, gave me advice, and always let me know that the ultimate decision was in God's hand. They helped me remember that "all in

good time" is exactly what it means.

By the way, I got accepted for the fall 2005 quarter!

— Tity Monterroso
La Puente, CA

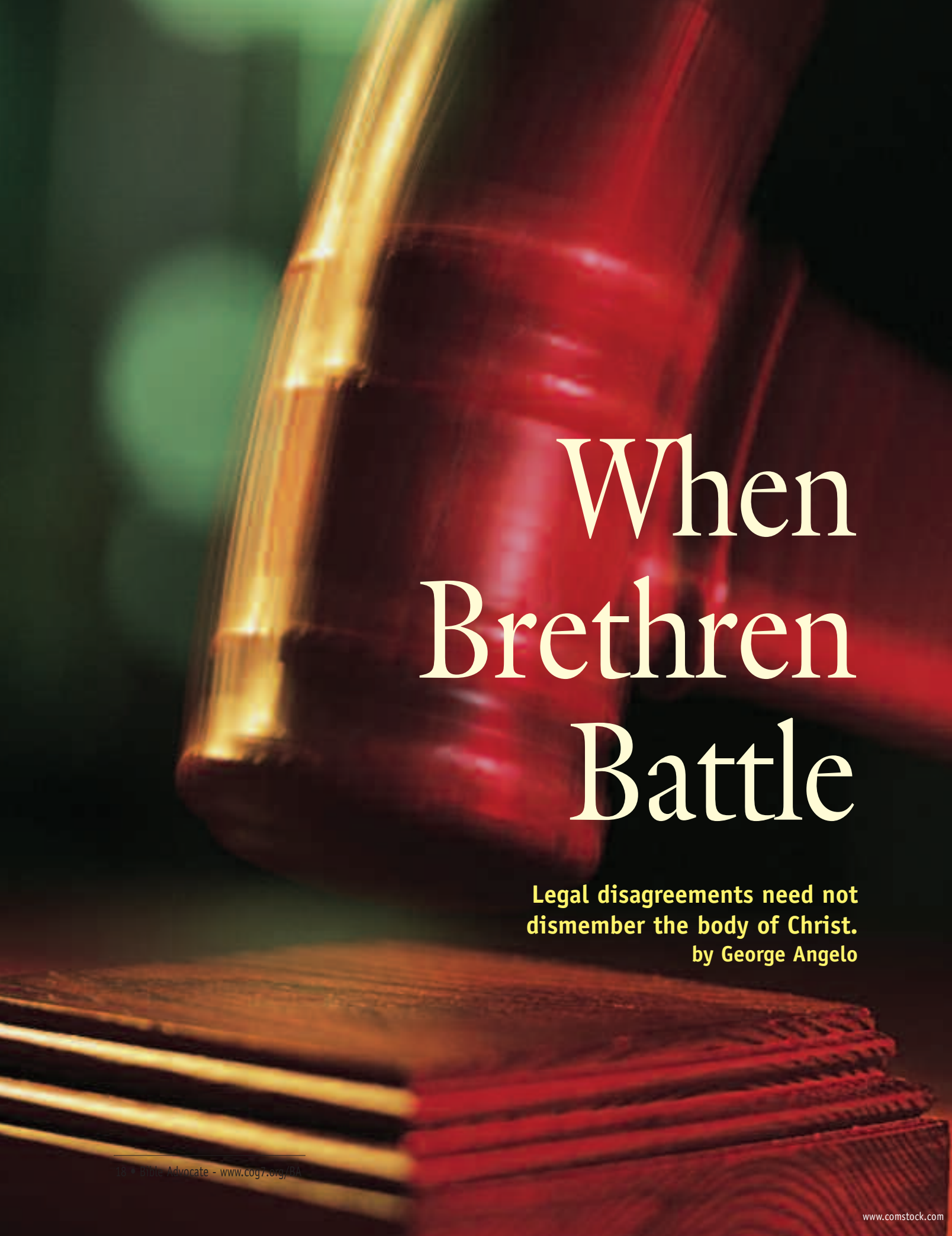
Our son Jason recently passed away with cancer. When my husband, Steve, first heard that Jason was sick, he put out a plea to our church through the Web. Within hours, prayers and calls and financial arrangements for Steve to get to Jason were given to us through our church family throughout the world.

For the next four months, I

was upheld by my home church family and totally cared for through God's servants all over the world. All of our financial responsibilities were met during this time. I have never experienced such an outpouring of love and compassion through my church.

I will always stand in awe of the compassion shown to me. I am so thankful for the witness it is to the Sabbath and for the blessings of being part of this family of God.

— Daneen Henderson
Heavener, OK



When Brethren Battle

**Legal disagreements need not
dismember the body of Christ.**
by George Angelo

Two men attending the same church arrive to service at the same time. Although glimpsing each other, they pretend not to see one another. They make sure they sit in different sections. Fearing they will make eye contact, they fix their eyes forward throughout the service. After the pastor's closing prayer, the men gather their families and prepare to leave. They say hello to friends on the way out, but neither lingers.

Each man cringes, realizing he has chosen the same exit, and pretends not to see the other. Driving home, both men tell their families that they will be looking for a new church. One a home owner and the other a building contractor, they had a dispute over a home-improvement contract. The dispute ended in small claims court.

If these church-goers had taken their dispute to a Christian conciliation and dispute resolution service, where forgiveness and reconciliation are as integral to the process as is settling the dispute, the two men would feel free to attend the same church, and their relationship would have been restored.

Christian conciliation is a biblical alternative to law courts. Trained mediators in dispute resolution, forgiveness, and reconciliation urge the parties to restore their spiritual relationships, while helping them reach an amicable agreement.

Both parties may bring legal counsel, their pastor, or anyone who will offer support and encouragement. The terms of the mediation process are

agreed on before the start: prayer at the beginning, during, or after the process; will Bible passages be used? The method is negotiable, but not the foundation. The parties agree that the process will be guided by Christian principles of love, accountability, and forgiveness.

Trouble in Corinth

In 1 Corinthians 6 Paul chastises the church in Corinth for taking their disputes outside the church:

Does one of you, when he has a case against his neighbor, dare to go to law before the unrighteous and not before the saints?

. . . I say this to your shame.

Is it so, that there is not among you one wise man who will be able to decide between his brethren, but brother goes to law with brother, and that before unbelievers? (vv. 1, 5, 6).

Corinth was the largest city in Greece in the first century, serving the trade demands of the Roman Empire and its conquests. Commercial opportunities abounded in Corinth, and members of the Corinthian church were probably involved in business disputes. Like anyone else in the commercial community, they could take

their cases to the Roman courts to solve their problems. Interested only in solving problems that might hinder economic interests, the courts did not care about the relationship between the parties at the end of the trial.

Paul declares in 1 Corinthians 6:7: "Actually, then, it is already a defeat for you, that you have lawsuits with one another. Why not rather be wronged? Why not be defrauded?" Life's conflicts pale compared to the eternal bond believers have in Christ. It is better to practice sacrifice and love toward one another and keep harmony in the church.

Seeking restitution

Does this mean that Christians should never seek restitution in secular courts? Sometimes one Christian cannot persuade another to submit to conciliation and dispute resolution. One believer might claim that his seeking the other's forgiveness is all that is needed to restore the relationship. Does the offended party have to accept his forgiveness and never bring up the matter again?

Not necessarily, says Kevin Lewis, associate professor of theology and law at Talbot

Christian conciliation and dispute resolution is a biblical alternative to the court system.

School of Theology (Biola University). “Many people believe that God is a forgiving God, and of course He is. But He is also a God of justice. And we must balance what Paul is saying in 1 Corinthians 6 with what he says in Romans 13:1-7. Paul affirms that we have the right to seek justice in the law courts because the courts have been set up by God in order to keep the peace and see that justice is met.”

According to Lewis, the three-step process outlined in Matthew 18 works when pastors are able to resolve the problem. In Matthew 18 Jesus instructs us to first approach a brother with the problem. If that does not work, approach the offending brother with another brother. If this does not work, take the problem to the church.

This process works perfectly if the church leadership solves the matter while reconciling the parties. “But if there is economic harm involved,” Professor Lewis says, “there needs to be more than forgiveness involved. One Christian who has harmed another financially might expect

to get away with saying he is sorry and requiring the other to accept his seeking forgiveness as a solution to the wrong.

“However, forgiveness is multi-faceted. One brother can forgive another for the harm done to the spiritual relationship, and then agree to reconcile that relationship. But one is not required to accept forgiveness for an economic harm without restitution. Most pastors are not trained or prepared to deal with these situations beyond the point of having everyone forgive each other.”

Enforcing agreement

Agreements in Christian conciliation and dispute resolution are enforceable in a court of law. If an agreement is not honored, an option remains to go to court to enforce the agreement. Or if a fellow Christian is unwilling to participate in a conciliation process, then one is free to go to the law courts. In Romans 13:1, 2, Paul explains that we are subject to the law of the governing bodies. One cannot claim immunity from lawsuits and also avoid the conciliation process. Believers can consider resorting to law courts once they've exhausted attempts at conciliation.

Resolution does not come easy simply because it is sought in a Christian setting. Despite sharing the same beliefs, Christians sometimes get angry at each other. Randal Lowry, professor of law at Pepperdine Law School and founder and director of the Straus Institute for Dispute Resolution, says Christians can be as disrespect-

ful to each other as anyone else – maybe more.

Dispute resolution and the attempts to mediate can be a stressful and emotional experience. Sometimes the worst in people comes out. Professor Lowry says that one of the objectives of the mediators is to remind both parties during heated moments that they share the same values. Reconciliation through mediation is a process that requires patience, prayer, and perseverance.

Healing and forgiveness do not always happen during the conciliation process. But the mediators set the groundwork making forgiveness and reconciliation possible in the future.

Biblical alternative

In his letter to the Corinthian faithful, Paul warns that lawsuits cause division in the church. There are never two winners at the end. Paul encourages us to put our common faith and values ahead of petty disputes. Christian conciliation and dispute resolution is a biblical alternative to the court system. While Christians may seek justice through the courts after all better means have been tried, they should consider our litigious society and remember that, as Professor Lowry says, “The world is watching.” Most of all, remember Paul’s words in Ephesians 4:32: “Be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving each other, just as God in Christ also has forgiven you.” **BA**

George Angelo writes from Marina del Rey, CA.

Want to Know More?

Ask your pastor about Christian conciliation. Or enter “Christian conciliation” into an Internet search engine, and you will be directed to many services in your area.

Learn more about the Straus Institute for Dispute Resolution at <http://law.pepperdine.edu/stras/>.

— *George Angelo*

Seven short letters by four writers are among the Bible's most readable . . .

General Epistles

About three-fourths of New Testament books — 20 of 27 — have personal salutations and closings that reflect the usual letter form of the first century and are therefore called Epistles.

Thirteen of these letters are from Paul's pen and are titled for the churches or pastors to whom they were specifically written. Seven other New Testament letters were addressed to less specific audiences and are therefore called General Epistles. These seven are titled for the men who wrote them: James; 1 and 2 Peter; 1, 2, and 3 John; and Jude.

James: For those who seek the ethical and lifestyle implications of faith in Christ, James has it! His five chapters will remind the reader often of the teachings of Jesus Christ and the wisdom of Proverbs. Humility before God, obedience to His Word, control of the tongue, patience under trial, and fervent prayer are major themes in this practical book.

James contains the central New Testament passage on the necessity of good works — not to gain sal-

vation but to confirm the validity of saving faith. James should be read in harmony with Paul's gospel of salvation by faith in Christ, not in opposition to it, and vice versa.

Peter: The two letters from Peter's pen are different in many respects, yet both remain favorites of Christian readers. The first is a classic exhortation to holiness, faithfulness, and submission in the face of trial and suffering that often came upon early believers in the Roman Empire. It contains some of the New Testament's greatest texts of devotion and encouragement.

The second letter is more doctrinal than the first. It warns believers against the false teachers of Peter's day and urges them that the Day of the Lord is still at hand, regardless of what scoffers say.

John: Three of the seven General Epistles are attributed to the apostle John, who also wrote the fourth Gospel and Revelation. The style and vocabulary of John's Gospel and his epistles are noticeably alike. His concern in each epistle is

to defend the truth recently revealed in the Living Word and to expose those who would deceive others about the gospel.

How may one who hears the Word know for sure he is on the right track? For John, the test is threefold: 1) belief in Jesus Christ; 2) obedience to God's commands; and 3) love for all the brethren.

Jude: In this postcard written to Christians everywhere, Jude battles for the true faith against those who would deny Jesus Christ by turning the faith into permissive excess. Jude's single chapter is remarkably similar to the second chapter of Peter's second letter: Both use some of the Bible's strongest language to denounce false teachers who were threatening the purity of the first century church. The last two verses of Jude are a classic Christian doxology.

An eighth book, **Hebrews** is often classed with the General Epistles. In common with 1 John, it has neither address nor salutation and can be seen as essay instead of epistle. Although Hebrews' content is closer to Paul's writings than to the General Epistles, its authorship is uncertain.

Hebrews is an extended comparison and contrast between faith in the Lord Jesus and the Hebrew religion that preceded it — specifically, the old covenant given to Israel through Moses. By remarkable examples and teachings, the author highlights the superiority of Christ and stresses the danger of returning to the shadows of the old after having been enlightened by the new and living way that is in Him.



Corel Photos

Moving Day

An unexpected kindness and an invaluable lesson. **by Brenda Sprayue**

It took nearly a week to drive all our possessions and our two children across the country from Chicago to Phoenix for my husband's new job. It had been an exhausting trip, and we were nearly out of both money and energy. But the worst was ahead of us.

The day we moved into our new home happened to fall on Thanksgiving Day. Everyone we knew lived in the Midwest, so the four of us unloaded the truck ourselves. It was no small job. My four-year-old son pulled smaller things in his wagon, and my eight-year-old daughter carried a steady supply of lighter boxes. It bothered me to have

to ask them to work with us, especially on a holiday. We had been working since early morning without a break. We were getting slower and slower.

"You doing OK?" my husband would ask regularly as we struggled up the steps with the couch or a mattress.

"I'm fine. You?"

"Yep."

Other than that, conversation was nonexistent. Even though no one said so, I could tell we were all starting to feel sorry for ourselves. We were stuck doing this backbreaking work on a day that families are supposed to be feasting and playing together. We weren't feeling very grateful as we started our new life.

Warm invitation

At 2:30 in the afternoon, we still hadn't stopped for lunch, but no one was complaining of hunger. I think we all wanted to get the job finished. I had just started to wonder where we could get something to eat on Thanksgiving Day (and how to pay for it!).

I began praying, *Father, I believe You brought us here safely, and You will also take care of us.* I set down the box of books I was carrying, sighed, and headed back to the truck for more.

That's when I saw a man walking up the sidewalk. "Time for a break," he said, smiling. He introduced himself as our neighbor. "You folks need to come on over and get some lunch. We just finished eating, and we have a ton of leftovers. Everything's on the table waitin' for you."

My husband and I hesitated, but the kids started cheering. Seeing we needed a little more convincing, he said, "I just moved here myself two months ago, from Georgia. I know exactly what you're going through. While we've been cooking, we've been watching you work. To be honest, you folks are startin' to drag a little. Y'all need to come and get some nourishment. These kids need to eat!"

Comfort food

He was right. We followed him home and were met by his daughters, two babies, and several other relatives. We lost our shyness the minute we smelled the food. Sliced turkey with all the trimmings was laid out on the table.

The amazing thing is, it didn't end there. We had been back at work for a couple more hours when he showed up again. "OK, folks, we're havin' dessert now. Y'all need to come over for some pie," our neighbor said. We felt we had imposed enough, but he insisted.

One good meal and a huge helping of kindness can really change your perspective! We suddenly felt as if our Father had gathered us, His well-loved

children, into His arms for comfort. We thanked our Comforter for whispering in our neighbor's ear the words that caused him to open his heart and his home to us.

New perspective

A few weeks later, I tried to express in a card what our neighbor's kindness meant to us. The cookies I baked just didn't seem like thanks enough. Then it dawned on me that feeling as if my thanks were inadequate was perhaps the beginnings of true gratitude, the kind that really humbles you. It stirs in you a desire to give to others from your place of blessing, to attempt to make someone else feel what you have felt.

My neighbor's act of generosity — a beautiful reminder of God's faithfulness — changed the way I look at those around me. As I start my new life here, I want to keep that giving spirit alive by being more aware of people who might also be in need of some nourishment — for body and soul. **BA**

Brenda Sprayue now writes from Marion, IN.

Feeling as if my thanks were inadequate was perhaps the beginnings of true gratitude, the kind that really humbles you.

Mail Bag

Paradise and pain

We enjoy the BA, but some of the colored pages are hard to read. "Ten Days to Paradise" [April-May '05, p. 25] was a joy – the first time I've read something I feel comfortable with on three days and three nights in the tomb.

E. H.
Maple Ridge, B. C.

The articles on pain have been helpful. I had three heart attacks, and then my wife died. It has been difficult to adjust. I need your prayers.

J. B.
Evarts, KY

Joys in June

I always admired Michael Landon's . . . faith. It's all the better to read of a son, Michael Jr., whose roots of Christian heritage and faith are today producing quality "Hollywood" before the multitudes ["Faith, Family, and Film," p. 16]. I pray for other directors to select such wholesome storylines. Imagine the positive influence that would have on the American family.

"Marriage on the Rocks" [p. 4] well described the plight of today's blended family. So many people are hurting in these very fragile families. My prayer is to equip people with a combination of faith, healthy marriage, and parenting skills that will move the pendulum more in line with God's ideal.

M. M.
e-mail

Kudos for July-August

Seeing God move powerfully among non-Sabbatarian believers,



we asked the Lord why, if the Sabbath is so important (yes, we still believe it is blessed and holy) ["First Word," p. 3]. We believe His answer was James 2:10. If we were judged on other points the same way Sundaykeepers are often judged, we would also be condemned. Who among us is performing up to the standards of a holy God except through the filter of the blood of Jesus? I believe God is just as concerned, if not more so, about how we treat people. There is no room for finger-pointing when we realize we are all still growing — in different areas at different times. Thank God for His grace and mercy that are new every morning.

S. J.
Walker, IA

Your new cover is excellent. The box with the huge BA and title underneath gives an impression of modernity, putting the reader in a frame of mind to accept BA's teachings as current truth — not old-fashioned, Ma and Pa Kettle-type stuff. The frame of the cover picture keeps *Bible Advocate's* traditional framed look, while allowing a larger picture, toned a little more deeply at the edges.

Though I have long recognized

the *Bible Advocate* as an excellent teacher of Christian living, I also like its turn to apologetics.

H. M.
e-mail

"Why Believe" [p. 4] takes me back to college philosophy class [but] does not refer to the glaring error of logic in the first tenet of Pascal's wager. To [Desmond] Ford and us, the non-believer stands to lose nothing for his belief. But to the unregenerate, if he were to sacrifice his unbelief on this whim and it were (soon or late) to be proven that God does not, in fact, exist, he will have lost that portion of his irretrievable life to a myth that only denied him the "good life" that he could have lived. We sophomores referred to this as "Blaise's blunder."

If there were such a flawless argument for belief, all sentient beings would be forced to acknowledge atheism to be a criminal choice and unbelief to be insane. Indeed, if such a perfect argument did exist, free choice wouldn't be quite so free for a great many pagans.

E. S., Jr.
Susanville, CA (inmate)

The "mantrack" discoveries of the Paluxy River near Glen Rose, Texas, were proven to be a cluster of hoaxes as far back as 1986 ["Mail Bag," p. 24]. For Christians to believe in a hoax like this is like an evolutionist pointing to Piltdown Man (also a hoax) as proof. In-depth information is at www.asa3.org/ASA/PSCF/1988/PSCF9-88Hastings.html.

W. E.
North Miami, FL

Congratulations to Pastor Jeff Endecott for his thoughtful, skillfully written presentation on the nature of Jesus ["Fingerprints," p. 18]. It reflected wise restraint in not attempting to "connect the dots" where the human mind is incapable. Instead, it reminded us of the glories that we can experience. Too many arguments result in futile attempts to resolve and capture the complexities of the Godhead, and there is insufficient eagerness to celebrate in praise what we can easily understand. "Fingerprints" gave us excellent insight and guidance!

R. S.
e-mail

Valuable resource

I've received BA for several years, read every issue cover to cover as soon as it comes, some two or three times, keep all issues in a file, and am creating a master index on computer so I can quickly find any article. While the BA freely sets forth the beliefs of CoG7, I have never felt condemnation for those who might not share those beliefs. I am an independent minister, retired, who has always observed Sabbath. Researching the subject of first fruits, I committed myself to honor the Lord by giving, in addition to Sabbath, the first day of my week to reverence and serve Him.

T. B.
Pueblo, CO

Reader concern

I hope and pray that the new look/format BA will not become just another slick Christian-type magazine geared toward enticing the world, while diminishing or rejecting biblical doctrines that the Church knows to be true. Time will tell which way you'll go.

A. P.
Williamsville, NY

Was Jesus Born in October?

by Gabriel Guzman

The Bible does not directly report the date of Jesus' birth, but it may guide us to the season.

When Jesus was born, Levitical priests were in charge of the Jerusalem temple and its tasks. According to 1 Chronicles 24:7-19, the priests were divided into groups for annual temple service — 24 groups of priests serving in the temple, evidently for two weeks each.


The Gospel of Luke gives the next clue: "There was in the days of Herod, the king of Judea, a certain priest named Zacharias, of the division of Abijah. His wife was of the daughters of Aaron, and her name was Elizabeth" (1:5).

Zacharias was in the division of temple workers called Abijah, the eighth to serve, according to 1 Chronicles 24:10. With each division serving two weeks, the eighth would correspond to the fifteen and sixteenth weeks of the year. Counting from the ancient Hebrew new year (roughly March 21), this brings us near to July 1-15 on our calendar.

Thus, Zacharias began temple service about July 1 and finished it about the middle of the same month. "So it was, as soon as the days of his service were completed, that he departed to his own house. Now after those days his wife Elizabeth conceived" (vv. 23, 24). In this way Elizabeth, the wife of Zacharias, became pregnant after mid-July.

The Bible tells us that Mary the mother of Jesus became pregnant when Elizabeth was in her sixth month (Luke 1:26, 27, 31, 36). Because Elizabeth was six months pregnant when the angel appeared to Mary, and if, as the text implies, Elizabeth became pregnant during the last days in July, then Mary's conception occurred in the latter days of January. In His humanity, Jesus also fulfilled the nine months of gestation in Mary's womb. Counting nine months from January, we arrive at the last days of October for the date Jesus was born in Bethlehem.

Gabriel Guzman is a member who lives in Mesa, AZ.



*Who, beholding summer's bounties —
sun-ripening grain and fruited trees —
can fail to kneel in prayer and say,
“Thank You, Lord, for all of these”?*

*Or on a glowing autumn day
can view Thy lavish beauty poured
across the earth and wind-swept sky,
and fail to say, “O, thank You, Lord”?*

*Can watch spring spread her carpets green
over hills of rain-drenched sod,
blue sprinkled with forget-me-nots,
and fail to whisper, “Thank You, God”?*

*Or witness earth from winter's sleep
caressed awake by soft, warm rain
and feel life surging, fail to say,
“I, too, shall surely live again”?*

Matsu Crawford

CoG7 in Action

GC Ministries

What's new with . . .

Publications



- Free Literature Fund Sabbaths: October 29 and December 31

Spring Vale Academy

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NFYC

- "Surf's Up" Challenge October 22

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- Pioneer Missionary Training in December



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Keith Michalak, Director

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- **Free Literature Fund Sabbaths** are just ahead: October 29 and December 31. Put your money where you minister by giving to Publications.

When: if not now . . . when?

Celebrating Marriages

The BA offers double honor to those who reach extraordinary heights of marital longevity. Several CoG7 couples of 70+ years were married in the same month. The Church celebrates God's faithfulness through these folks:

Edward and Mary Fischer of Eureka, SD, married 70 years (October 3)

Elder Harold and Kathleen Carlson of Springfield, MO, married 70 years (October 5)

Art and Hulda Fischer of Eureka, SD, married 73 years (October 11)

Elder W. T. and Winnie McMickin of Mesa, AZ, married 71 years (October 25)

Also, Bill and Esther Truitt of New Cumberland, PA, married 70 years (June 17)

And we congratulate two couples who, by comparison, are almost newlyweds. Albin and Clara Schlenker of Alfred, ND, were married 50 years on July 21. And Francisca and Melquiades Colchado of Houston, TX, were married 50 years on January 17. May the bliss continue!

SWORD at Sis-Q

SWORD Camp at Sis-Q Meadows, Oregon, in July was a combination of fun and growth in the Lord. "A Warrior's Heart" was the theme; recreation alternated between archery and paintball. The Sis-Q woods are a great place to enjoy "woods ball."

The young men met with Pastor Heber Vega for spiritual food, and the young ladies met with Lisa Marie Buster of Lisa Marie Ministries. Pastor Vega also brought evening messages about the need to be involved in local and national church.

Camper numbers increased to 33 this year from Canada, Michigan, Texas, California, Oregon, and Washington.

Teaching in Kenya

Robert Crawford, a Jamaican pastor living in England, reports from his teaching tour in East Africa on August 15:

"Things have gone pretty well here. Training was a blessing. Total attendance was 51 from Kenya, Zambia, DR Congo, Tanzania, Uganda, Rwanda, and Burundi. Guest speaker was

Deacon Courtney Johnson from England. I have traveled to Zambia and DR Congo to strengthen the administrative bodies of the Church. I am now in some deep rural areas and shall have a lot to report when I am settled. We leave soon for Burundi and Rwanda to see the progress there. It is hard sometimes, but He gives grace."

This and That

One year from now, the **North American Ministerial Council** will meet in Overland Park, Kansas, October 3-7, 2006, and the **International Ministerial Congress** will meet near Sao Paulo, Brazil, November 13-18, 2006. IMC delegations may contact Ramon Ruiz, president: ramonruiz@hotmail.com.

Youth leaders: Make your plans for Fall Challenge, sponsored by National FYC. This is an excellent opportunity to build youth leadership, socialize as a church, and support the youth ministry of our collective body. October 22 is the suggested date. Information packets are online at <http://fyc.cog7.org>, or



Fifty students enrolled at Spring Vale Academy, Owosso, MI, in mid-August, with more openings for second semester starting January 8, 2006. Please call 989-725-2391 for an information packet, or visit the Web site at <http://sva.cog7.org>.

contact directors Kurt and Kristi Lang at 541-995-8678; nfyc@cog7.org.

Mark and Robin Sullivan of Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, have been appointed Northeast District youth coordinators. Mark is a professional graphic artist and designer; Robin is a private piano teacher. Both are long-distance runners. Contact them at fyc-ne@cog7.org.

Pioneer Missionary Training

PMT Level 1 to Tijuana, Mexico.

Participants will meet in San Diego on December 20, travel to Tijuana, and return January 1, 2006. The program mixes classroom training and field experience. The team will live with families in the Mexican church.

PMT Level 2 to South America. A ten-day trip to Argentina is available to those who have recently completed Level 1 training in Mexico.

For either trip, applications are due by October 30. The team will be selected by November 15. Contact Kurt Lang (541-995-8678; nfyc@cog7.org) or Bill Hicks (423-323-7191; carlylehix@aol.com).

Consider This

To make a major gift to the Church and increase your retirement income at the same time, or to increase your earnings on



Sabbath, July 30, was "graduation day" for the '04-'05 LITES team: Andrew Fernandez, Philip Leach, Tim Steinhauser, Melissa Miller, and Caleb Noble. Applications for the winter-spring term are now being accepted, with a December 1 deadline. For an application or information about the ministry, visit <http://lites.cog7.org> or contact LITES at P.O. Box 172, Stanberry, MO 64489; 660-783-9544; lites@cog7.org.

stock to 6 percent or more (for those 65+), contact the Church's

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A Storm, a Crash, a Win!

While the world's eyes were fixed upon the Asian tsunami the end of last year, a typhoon struck the northern Philippines with great fury. Through the Disaster Relief Fund, the Aeta tribe of the heavily damaged region was ministered to by members from the Metro Manila and Tagaytay churches. Pastor Mike Dizon reports baptizing six precious souls, including the chieftain and his wife, after four nights of gospel preaching in Real, Quezon, April 17-21 — a follow-up to the disaster relief work there.

Pastor Dizon reports that en route to those meetings, their small covered truck lost its brakes and crashed into a shallow river, destroying a guitar, dozens of eggs, and the windshield. Marveling that no one was injured, they proceeded to the mission site, where twelve people surrendered to the Lord. And the chieftain donated a piece of land for a new church!

God is blessing the efforts of His children as they reach out with help in times of great need, and the most precious fruit of all is souls for His kingdom. Thank you for your continued support of the Disaster Relief Fund!

CoG7 Activity

October 8 - Parkland Super Sabbath, Stony Plain, Alberta; contact 780-472-1227

October 14-16 - Oktoberfest camp, hosted by Jasper, AR, church; contact Jason or Stephanie Overman (870-446-5736 or 870-577-3647)

October 18-25 - Fall Festival in Harrisburg, PA; contact bchesney@paonline.com; 717-671-7246

October 22 - NFYC "Surf's Up" Challenge

October 22 - Oklahoma Fellowship Meeting in Wister

October 29 - New York City Super Sabbath; Whaid Rose speaking; contact *Richard*. Wiedenheft@cog7.org; 570-906-5965

International Tour

The Philippines

The Church in the Philippine Islands began in the 1930s, under the auspices of the Salem, West Virginia, headquarters.

The work flourished first in Mindanao Island through Wincelao Rodriguez, an Adventist pastor who received CoG7 literature from a friend in the U.S. Pastor Rodriguez researched the Church's teachings, shared it with his SDA friends, and sought the Salem church for assistance. Elder Potenciano Carinio, a Filipino working in the U.S., was sent to serve, conducted a mass baptism in 1938, and became the first general overseer.

From that time the work grew in both Mindanao and Luzon. In spite of the Japanese occupation in the forties and internal factions related to various world headquarters in the fifties, sixties, and seventies, the work grew. Following Elder Caranio, the work was led by Elders Lorenzo Quinanolo, Rufino Baclaan, Benjamin Dingal, Hilario C. Rosell, and others.

The Church here has always been influenced by visits of American leaders. A missionary from the Salem church, Charles Carpenter, came in 1940, and Elder Charles Adams visited in 1962.

Pastor Baltazar G. Wooton, secretary-treasurer from 1969 to 1977, began correspondence with Robert Coulter of the General Conference in Denver. Elder Coulter then came to Bukidnon, Mindanao, for a Unity Conference in September 1980, and he facilitated cooperation of nine ministers and much of the membership in Mindanao. In this conference, Elder Cesar E. Valdez became president, with Elders Ruperto B. Quiamco, Baltazar G. Wooton, Benjamin Dingal, Exequiel Barangot, Alberto Patagoc, and Elias Flores as leaders. With the new solidarity, the Church survived its challenges and grew as never before.

Elder Coulter visited the Philippines again in 1990, accompanied by Missions Abroad direc-

tor Elder Victor Burford, who also attended the forty-fourth National Conference in May 2000.

Elder Cesar E. Valdez was succeeded as president by Elder Lucio Esic in 1996 and by Elder Miguel Dizon in 1998. During his term, the Church established a Bible Training Institute, with nine graduates now serving in the province of Lanao del Norte. When Elder Wooton became president in 2000, the work was extended to the Visayas region, and a number of churches were organized. In February 2003 Elder Bill Hicks of the U.S. and Elder Phil Kordahi of Australia visited the Philippines. They were met with a warm welcome at the Ministerial Council held in Opol, Misamis Oriental (see photo).

The Church owns land in the town of Opol, about twenty minutes' drive from Cagayan de Oro City. There stand the convention center, the FYC building, and other buildings and facilities suitable for conference use. The Philippine national office, built adjacent to the local church at Cagayan de Oro, is newly renovated.

After 2000, Pastor Mike Dizon returned to Luzon and began the Metro Manila project, helped by Missions Abroad. Congregations now exist in Novaliches, Quezon City; Calamba, Laguna; Mayondon, Los Banos, Laguna; and in Tagaytay City, Cavite — all in Luzon.

The Philippine Conference is a growing church, with about 70 men serving as pastors or associates and 18 with missionary licenses. There are 84 congregations scattered over the islands with an approximate membership of 4,500.





Church Alive

The Church of God (Seventh Day) was once labeled “Sardis,” the name of one of the seven churches in Revelation. God’s complaint against Sardis was that its name signified it was alive; but it was, in fact, dead (Revelation 3:1).

It’s frightening that something dead — a church, in this case — can appear to be alive. As a CoG7 leader, I sometimes struggle that I can, consciously or subconsciously, make things in our church look prettier than they really are — to give a semblance of life. Even more frightening is that there can be movement in dead things. As one wise preacher observed, maggots make dead things move!

This is both a sobering reality and a reminder that while we create structures within the Church to help it function well, the Church is not an organization. Rather, it is an organism — a living, breathing entity. Therefore, we should regularly check its vital signs to be sure that it is alive. Such vital signs include a deepening love for God expressed through worship and obedience, love for others demonstrated through evangelism and service, unity of spirit in our relationship with one another, and fruitfulness in ministry.

We must believe that life exists in our church. If the vital signs indicate otherwise, that is legitimate cause for concern. But I have good news: There is life in the Church of God (Seventh Day)! Traveling throughout the Church in my capacity, I have a unique perspective. I wish I could take you with me to some of the bright spots within the General Conference where aliveness is clear and definite, places where our members are connecting with God, with one another, and with the unchurched in their communities, and where the Lord is blessing His people with fruitful ministry.

During a Sabbath fellowship with an East Coast congregation, a brother shared with me his vision to plant a church in a neighboring state. A year later I learned that he had planted a church in that area. Earlier this year I was privileged to speak at a special gathering sponsored by his congregation. I was moved not only by the passionate worship and warm fellowship but also by the fact that they had already outgrown their rented facility and needed to move into a larger one. As the elders shared with me their vision to reach their community for Jesus, I thanked God for one more reminder that there is life in our church.

Of course, in some of our churches the light does not shine as brightly. We are a denomination of mostly small congregations, and many of them struggle in various ways. Yet through the abundant grace of God, we see and experience life, both in local congregations and in G. C. Ministries. Space on this page is not sufficient to detail the good things God is doing through missions, youth, Ministries Training System, and our other ministries. And since this issue includes our annual Thanksgiving observance, let me take this opportunity to thank God for these blessings.

Whatever the motivation for the Sardis label once given us, the truth is that CoG7 was never dead. We’ve faced difficult times and weathered storms along the way. We haven’t grown in size to match some other churches, but we’ve always been here. May we never pretend to be what we are not, but always be grateful for what we are through the grace of God. And as we look to Jesus, the author of life, may our vital signs show that we are a church alive, to the glory of God.

— Whaid Guscott Rose
General Conference President



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