

September - October 2017

BA
BIBLE ADVOCATE®

Sola Ecclesia

Communication



2017: Reforming-Transforming



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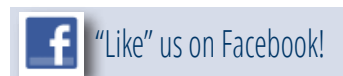
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A publication of the

Church of God (Seventh Day)

This magazine is published to advocate the Bible, represent the Church, and glorify the God of grace and truth.

Volume 151 • Number 5

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The BIBLE ADVOCATE (ISSN 0746-0104) is published bimonthly by Bible Advocate Press, 330 W. 152nd Ave., Broomfield, CO 80023. Periodicals postage is paid at Broomfield, CO, and at additional offices. Subscription is free to any who ask. POSTMASTER: Send address changes to Bible Advocate Press, Box 33677, Denver, CO 80233-0677.

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Bible Advocate Press
P.O. Box 33677
Denver, CO 80233-0677
phone: 303/452-7973
fax: 303/452-0657
e-mail: bibleadvocate@cog7.org
orders: bap.orders@cog7.org

Notice: Send all address changes and other correspondence to the address above.

Publications Agreement No. 40042428

The Bible Advocate Online appears at baonline.org.

Recovering Church

What an appropriate time to be writing this First Word. I returned home from General Conference Convention in Springfield, Illinois, yesterday and am still buzzing with gratitude and happiness for our special time together.

Together is the operative word. There is no “Church of God” if we’re not with Him *together*. Be it worship services or business meetings, preaching, prayer, or fellowshiping, we cannot transform our dreams into reality, or be a vibrant 21st century church, all by ourselves.

Sola ecclesia reminds us that we cannot go it alone. Islands of isolation cannot rightfully guard or declare the best of the Reformation: Jesus Christ and Holy Scripture alone, precious grace and faith alone. These *solas* are the possession of the church and give the church its definition and identity.

Ironically, this is where the five hundred-year-old Reformation suffers its greatest criticism. Its prized *solas* unintentionally reinforced a kind of individualism that historians claim led like dominos from subjectivism to sectarianism to skepticism to secularism. That the Reformation is responsible for all this is debatable. That the church since (local and universal) is known more for relentless schism than the unity of the Spirit is not. It’s a tragic legacy.

Sola ecclesia is an antidote. Though no official *sola*, it was implicit in the Reformers’ stress on the priesthood of all believers, a peculiar people that exists to praise Him who called us from darkness to light before all (Exodus 19:5; 1 Peter 2:9). This recovers the significance of the “one body” of Christ in salvation, retrieving the real importance of the “church of the living God, the pillar and ground of the truth” (Ephesians 4:4; 1 Timothy 3:15).

As I watched the children’s program on Sabbath morning at convention, I recalled that my personal faith is not private or apart from the church. Before I accepted Jesus, it nurtured me in Him. Before my baptism, it taught me. Before I accepted the call to ministry, it cultivated my gifts for His service. Where would we be without the church?

This BA is dedicated to the unofficial and overlooked sixth *sola*. As Kevin Vanhoozer notes, the other five are “seeds for a perennial reformation of the church,” inspiring it to “hold fast to the gospel, and to one another.” *Sola ecclesia* means transforming vision into reality *together!*

— Jason Overman





Church Alone?

The role of the church in
God's plan of salvation.
by John Lemley

Upon first glance, a reader of this issue in our Reformation series might exclaim, “*Church alone!* Doesn’t the *Bible Advocate* staff know that this phrase was not a tenet of the Reformers? Don’t they know it represented the position of the Counter-Reformation? The Reformers taught against it. The Roman church emphasized it. Why is *church alone* in the magazine?”

This article will offer answers.

Justified church

As with all phrases popularized by the Protestant Reforma-

tion, each is an integral part of defining *justification*, God’s declaration making a sinner His child. We are justified by grace through faith in Christ alone. Scripture alone is the source for our understanding.

The Roman church, on the other hand, insisted that the church’s traditions, sacraments, and authority structure were also necessary ingredients. Justification outside of Rome’s church was impossible.

The Church of God (Seventh Day) has historically embraced the position of the Reformers. In *Christian Youth Herald and Gospel Call* (1955) Elder Kenneth Freeman (1911-1976) wrote, “He [a man in one of Spurgeon’s meetings] could not look to the church for this power, for the church cannot save (though it helps us KEEP saved); it is Christ who saves.”

These two understandings

of the purpose and nature of church differ vastly. Is the church the means of salvation, or is it a community of believers? Jesus gave the church the message of salvation to share, but Christ is the only way to be saved. He did not give the church the power to save in itself. Instead, the church was committed with the good news that does save. Unfortunately, a sad legacy of Protestantism is that, in reaction to Catholic *sola ecclesia*, many undermined the importance of the church altogether. Emphasizing a personal salvation that embraces an individualism of “me and my Bible” is dangerous – and often spiritually fatal – because it discards the body that God provided: His church.

God’s people in the book of Acts valued the church, not as a means of salvation but as a community of the saved who encouraged each other to keep strong

in faith. Those who “received his word” after Peter’s sermon on the day of Pentecost were added to the group of believers (2:41). Daily the Lord added to the church (v. 47). No hint is given of a “go it alone” mindset. These believers jumped right into fellowship, sharing possessions and hospitality. When Peter and John were released from prison, they “went to their own company,” and the assembly “with one accord” prayed, “grant to Your servants that with all boldness they may speak Your word . . .” (4:23-31). This is the justified church in action.

My story

My family learned of the Church of God (Seventh Day) by listening to Elder Kenneth Freeman on the *Faith for Our Time* radio broadcast. We had looked at many churches over the previous sixteen years. We knew we couldn’t be the only Bible-believing people in the world. Jesus said He would build His church (Matthew 16:18). We read about this church in the book of Acts. But where was it? Elder Freeman made it clear to us that the Church of God (Seventh Day) strives to *help* people become good Bible men and women and *grow* strong as followers of Christ.

We studied through the Searchlight Bible Correspondence Course, read all of the tracts, and subscribed to the *Bible Advocate* and *AIM* magazines. We were relieved to find no hint of the exclusivist teaching of other churches. Church of God repeatedly emphasized that the church isn’t the way; *Jesus is*. The church is the family of the

saved who witness of Him and glorify Him together.

We were overjoyed to have finally found a church family! What a joy it was to be with others who believed that God’s truths are defined in the Bible alone and that all the credit for salvation goes to God through His Son Jesus Christ. This is what we had earnestly prayed for. We were home at last!

As a result of my childhood experience, I am especially excited when I meet others with a similar story. This turns to disappointment, though, when I discover that they follow a modern anti-organization, individualistic mindset. God answered their prayers, revealing precious Bible truth to them. He introduced

exhort one another. All these internal blessings, and more, are compressed in Hebrews 10:24, 25:

And let us consider one another in order to stir up love and good works, not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as is the manner of some, but exhorting one another, and so much the more as you see the Day approaching.

Another purpose of God when designing the church is to spread the gospel. In a *Bible Advocate* article (November 16, 1953), Elder Clayton Faubion wrote these words about the church: “We claim no power to save, only as we are able to lead souls to the Savior by the help of

“Embracing an individualism of ‘me and my Bible’ is dangerous because it discards His church.”

them to His people, but they say, “No thanks.” They fall prey to the “I want it my way” schismatic philosophy of our culture. Such independent thinking has no place in God’s church.

God’s idea

God designed His church to benefit all His people as they serve, bear burdens, express kindness, offer forgiveness, teach and admonish, love, comfort, share and edify, and pray for and

the Holy Spirit.” The New Testament church knew its purpose: Preach the gospel; reach the lost.

The apostle Paul addressed 2 Corinthians to the church of God at Corinth, with all the saints in Achaia. Note how he identifies their purpose: “And all things are of God, who has reconciled us to Himself through Jesus Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation” (5:18). God has committed to us, the church, the word of reconcili-

ation; we are ambassadors for Christ (vv. 19, 20). Here is the church on mission, faced outward.

Some readers may remember outreach tools developed within the Church of God to help us be effective ambassadors for Christ: EMGAM (Every Member Gain a Member) in the 1950s; *The Evangelette Program* for youth in the 1960s; biennial convention themes such as “The Night is Far Spent – the Day is at Hand” in 1968; the thick *Church Growth* notebook of the 1970s; *Master Plan 2000*, and ACTS seminars.

We have a history full of inspiring, workable, effective plans, prayerfully prepared by our men and women who caught the vi-

You also, as living stones, are being built up a spiritual house, a holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ . . . 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 (1 Peter 2:5, 9).

Here’s a biblical picture of *sola ecclesia*. Peter wrote these words to Christians scattered throughout five provinces of the Roman Empire (1:1). These believers weren’t alone but had elders and were to “greet one another” (5:1, 14). Peter taught about what it meant to be God’s

tion through Jesus Christ.

The gospel of God and justification by faith are not only *personal* but also *social* because our message is about God’s coming kingdom that the church already witnesses to and strives to be a foretaste of. The church is much more than an option tacked onto our born-again experience. It is more than a voluntary association. It is the very elect family of God.

Sola ecclesia

How do the Reformation *solas* we’ve covered this year fit in with the *church alone*?

We are a built spiritual house because of *Christ alone*.

We are a royal priesthood who live by *Scripture alone*.

We are a chosen generation by God’s *grace alone*.

We are a holy nation of the redeemed by *faith alone*.

And anticipating the last issue of 2017, we are God’s own special people for *His glory alone*.

Because of these gifts from God, we are blessed to be Christ’s bride. And we carry, live, guard, and witness this blessing to the whole world together as the family of God, with leaders, gifts, fruits, and members fitly framed together in love and truth.

This is why *church alone* is in the *Bible Advocate*. **BA**

“The church is much more than an option tacked onto our born-again experience.”

sion to unite our efforts in soul-winning. They stand tall among us; their passion motivates us. They follow in the footsteps of people like the house of Stephanus, who “addicted themselves” to the ministry of the saints (1 Corinthians 16:15, KJV). May we all be that kind of addict!

Priesthood of believers

A common Reformation theme was the priesthood of all believers, drawing from the apostle Peter:

flock, addressing servants, wives, husbands, youth, and the elderly.

The church is God’s own special people. Whosoever will may be included for His glory. All are gifted, as God gives His Spirit to all, not to just a select few (1 Corinthians 12). And all have direct access to the throne of grace (Hebrews 4:16). In God’s church every Christian benefits from the blessings of godly fellowship. In addition, every Christian has the same calling: to tell others the good news of salva-

John Lemley and his wife, Lois, live in Vancouver, WA. They attend the CoG7 in Kalama, WA.





How Good and Pleasant

by Lettie Siddens

The first big snow in the valley last winter was postcard perfect: an accumulation of about six inches, temperature in the twenties, and no wind. The flakes were alive and clung together in tenacious unity. The trees were wrapped with white capes, and the rails of the decks were wreathed in white stoles. Even the fence posts wore earmuffs. When the sun shone, the whole snowscape reflected rainbow rays. In every direction one could see unity, peace, and serenity. The view stirred me to sing aloud in adoration of the mighty Creator.

Today again we have snow, this time preceded with freezing rain. The temperature is about as before. Now a strong northeast wind drives the flakes into heaps, leaving spaces of bare ground here and there. Trees wave their branches, trying to keep warm. The deck rails stand desolate as the snow swirls around the foot of each post. The fence posts around the pasture hunch their backs to the wind, and the wires shiver. The landscape seems filled with disharmony — cold and unloving. There is no benediction of the beneficent blessing of heavenly light. My heart is filled with anxiety, distrust, and restlessness.

Cobwebs hang in every corner of the house; wood ashes rest on top of the refrigerator and on the rungs of the lowest chair. The windows need washing. No, not today!

I steal to the bookcase to escape. What book will fit my mood? There is *The Works of Flavius Josephus*, inherited six years ago, and I haven't read it yet. I carry the book to the chair and table near the window. The first page says it was translated by William Whiston, professor at the University of Cambridge, and printed in Edinburgh. There is no

copyright date, but a name in flowing script on the flyleaf includes 1813. The print is small, and I pause to get a reading glass from the rolltop desk. Carefully turning the fragile pages, I continue reading.

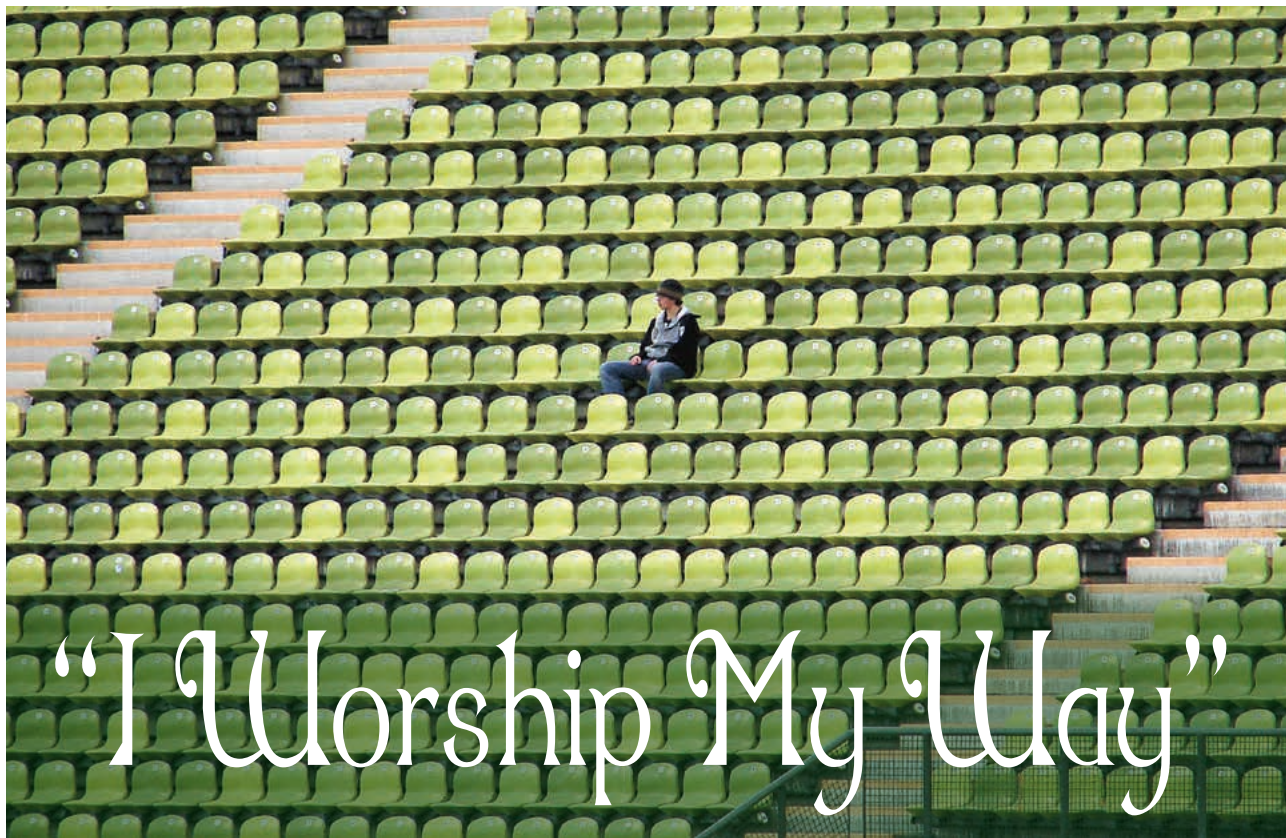
How sad to read the history of people — not just the Jews, but people of every nation — making the same mistakes generation after generation. The heavenly Father repeatedly calls His people back from sin. They are grateful and return (or refuse to). Time goes on, and again they or their children drift away.

This makes me think. How are Sabbatarian Christians today responding to God's call? Have the cold winds of envy, dogma, and distrust blown them into little heaps and drifts, scattered here and there in the disheartening world? What a different picture we would see if the Holy Spirit would cause the flakes to cling together in unity and cover the whole earth! If only the world could see our unity, peace, trust, and serenity:

Behold, how good and how pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity! It is like the precious ointment upon the head, that ran down upon the beard, even Aaron's beard that went down to the skirts of his garments; as the dew of Hermon, and as the dew that descended upon the mounts of Zion: for there the Lord commanded the blessing, even life for evermore (Psalm 133, KJV).

Wouldn't that stir Christians everywhere to sing out in adoration of the Creator Lord of the Sabbath and respect for His holy day? **BA**

Lettie Siddens writes from Marceline, MO.



“I Worship My Way”

Finding the church beyond
me, myself, and I.

by Roger Palms

“I have my truth!”
Who hasn’t heard that statement over and over? When someone tells me, “I have my truth, you have yours,” I want to ask, “Is that a true statement?” Is truth a philosophy, or is truth a person? The bottom line is, what have the “my truth” people done with the Son of God who said, “I am the way and the truth and the life” (John 14:6)?

I keep running into these “my truth” people. They are also the people who say, “I’m religious, but I don’t attend church.” When I am told, “I worship God my

way, you worship God yours,” I am likely to reply, “Let’s pray and tell God what you just said.”

Then there is the statement “I believe in a higher power, but I’m not religious.” To that I will usually reply, “I’m not religious either. Religion is humanity’s attempt to reach up to God. Christian faith is about my ‘yes’ to the One who came down from the Father to redeem us.”

Severed body

Then there is the person who tells me, “I can pray to God anytime; I don’t need to go to a church to do that.”

So I reply, “What is the church? Church is not simply a building on the corner. Church is the body of Christ. If I want to be free of the church, I am saying that I want to be free of His body. And if I am free of the

body, what then? If the hand is cut free of the body, what happens to the hand?”

The church is one body in Christ. No matter where believers gather in the world, they are together as one. That’s what we read in Romans 12:5: “so in Christ we who are many form one body, and each member belongs to all the others.” When I declare my independence from the local church, I have declared my independence from the universal church, because we are told, “For where two or three gather in my name, there am I with them” (Matthew 18:20).

Scattered parts

Recently a woman told me, “I have my church among online friends.” What she is saying is that she is part of a body of scattered parts. In which of those

parts does God choose to dwell? Or, put another way, we are told, “For we were all baptized by one Spirit so as to form one body . . .” (1 Corinthians 12:13). Which of the scattered parts is the part that is baptized?

What is the church? We are told what it is: It is the company of redeemed people. Jesus is the head of that body, held together by Him (Ephesians 4:16). We don’t hold His body together; He does. And in this body the Holy Spirit dwells (Romans 8:9). We are going to have a difficult time asking the Holy Spirit to dwell in fractured and fragmented pieces of the body scattered here and there. First Corinthians 12:25 tells us that there should be no division in the body.

Finding community

Recently I learned about a young millennial couple who have rediscovered the church. They found it to be a caring body, one for the other. They were drawn to a people who wanted to grow in their faith. Prior to that, they only occasionally attended a church service.

Now they have discovered where the Spirit of Christ dwells, and they are eager for more of what the Spirit offers them. They are finding it not in independence but in community — exactly as God designed the church and its members to be. **BA**

Roger Palms, former editor of *Decision* magazine, writes from Fort Myers, FL. Scripture quotations are from the *New International Version*.



Why a Body?

Is Facebook “the new church”? With its 2 billion monthly users rivaling the size of global Christianity, its cofounder and CEO, Mark Zuckerberg, thinks so. In a recent speech, the god of social media claimed that his technological behemoth offers “purpose” and “community” as church membership sinks.

The claim is bogus, of course. As pastor Skye Jethani responded on Twitter, “Facebook gives us the impression of community without all the drawbacks of actual human interaction.”

“. . . churches are messy,” Peter Ormerod reacted in an op-ed piece. “They are not organised by any algorithm or tailored to the individual end user.”

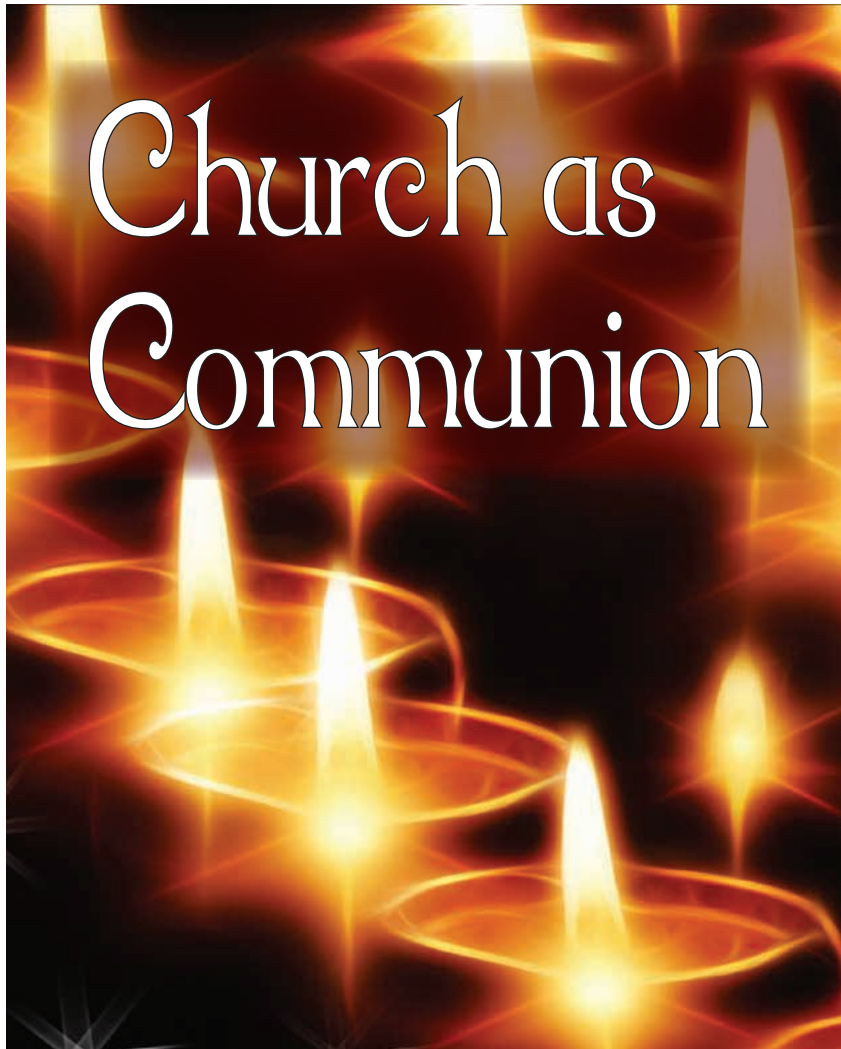
Of greater concern than Zuckerberg’s misguided boast are the subtle ways we Christians buy into it. Technology tempts us to think we can escape the body. Facebook-as-church is counterfeit, the latest form of the ancient gnostic heresy that denied Christ had come in the flesh, that bodies are insignificant. Jethani understands what is really at stake: “The downside of social media & tech is that it dis-incarnates us & ultimately cannot satisfy our deepest longings for human connection.” The issue, then, is *incarnation*.

The church can’t deny the body, because “the Word became flesh” (John 1:14). Messiah says, “A body You have prepared for me” (Hebrews 10:5). Why a body? As God’s image-bearers, humans are rational, emotional, and spiritual creatures, yet all wrapped up in a body awkward, defenseless, and, yes, messy — whereby we relate and thrive. And it was good. *But sin!*

Incarnation is central to Christian faith because, as Hebrews explains, by “the offering of the body of Jesus Christ,” we are sanctified — body, soul, and spirit (10:10). But incarnation goes further still. Looking for the best metaphor to describe the redeemed church, Paul selects one that is *incarnational*. Church is not a disembodied aggregate of convenient bits of tech, but a local, visible, and tangible community: “One body in Christ . . . the body of Christ” (Romans 12:5; 1 Corinthians 12:27). The church incarnates our Lord’s incarnation. We need bodies in the body!

Facebook is a tool, but it can also be a temptation. Being the church requires that we are *present* with and for each other, as grace and truth mingle within the limitation and vulnerability that shared incarnation assumes. Being the body may be messy, but it is gloriously and meaningfully *real*.

— Jason Overman



Fulfilling the call to influence
in Christian community.
by Hector M. Alvarenga

In modern society it's normal to observe a spirit of individualism, egocentricity, and discord. Unfortunately, the same spirit can damage the church, causing it to fall into superficiality, detachment, indifference, isolation, and suspicion.

Nevertheless, despite these threatening and negative aspects, there is hope for our churches.

Without a doubt, that hope is to return to the pattern of the early church recorded in Acts and, following that pattern, continue within the parameters of the communion characterized by the early Christians.

Church origins

Acts describes the development of the Jerusalem church and the Spirit's coming on the day of Pentecost (chapter 2), as well as Paul's dauntless preaching of the gospel and making converts all the way to Rome (chapter 28). The community of believers born of these "acts" had a penetrating influence

across the world because of their formation by the Spirit from the beginning. The result could be seen:

Those who accepted his message were baptized, and about three thousand were added to their number that day. They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. . . . All the believers were one in heart and mind. No one claimed that any of their possessions was their own, but they shared everything they had (2:41, 42; 4:32).

The identity and increasing success of the early church relate to how believers lived together in authentic communion. Understanding and practicing what *communion* expressed in Acts and in the New Testament should be the goal of our congregations today.

Koinonia

In Greek, the term *koinonia* best describes the spiritual and social unity of the church, because the word can be translated different ways: *communion, association, fellowship, participation*. This shared status creates communication and community. Growing Christians lived within this framework from conversion. It was both a social and spiritual fellowship, recorded in the words of John: "We proclaim to you what we have seen and heard, so that you also may have fellowship with us. And our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ" (1 John 1:3).

Even today, this *koinonia*, within the life of the church depends on communion with God

continued on page 26

Questions & Answers



Is it enough to confess our sins to God privately, or is the church needed for confession?

We've all heard the saying "Confession is good for the soul." But for many, confession is an abstract idea that isn't part of their daily lives. Many associate confession exclusively with a person speaking to a priest or telling their sexual secrets to an accountability group. But confession simply means telling the truth about our sin. Deception brings death. Truth-telling brings life.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer's book *Life Together* gives great insight into confession. He explains that while we enjoy fellowship with one another as saints, we remain alone if we cannot openly admit our sin to each other. Without confession, we live with lies and hypocrisy. Through confession we embrace the gospel truth that we are sinners in need of God's loving grace. Through confession we break through to true fellowship because we break through to community, to the cross, to new life, and to certainty.

Community. No matter what community we otherwise enjoy, if we're isolated in our sin, we remain alone. We shouldn't settle for a superficial fellowship that allows us to be only saints, never sinners. Admit not only that you are a sinner but also what sins you commit. In transparency we find true communion with each other as we truly are.

Cross. At the cross Jesus died publicly to sin, and in confession we participate in the public killing of the flesh. Just as Jesus died publicly, so our flesh must die in the presence of others.

New life. Public confession effects a true break with the past. As long as sin is kept private or confessed to God alone, we may remain linked with our past, the victim of dark memories and longings. But as we name these for what

they are, we break free from our sinful past.

Certainty. In confessing to others, we break the cycle of continual unrepentant confession to God and have certainty that our sins are forgiven. How many of us are caught in a perpetual cycle of sinning, confessing to God, and then turning back to sin? The way out is to confess to others, receiving the concrete assurance of their, and God's, love and forgiveness (Proverbs 28:13; John 20:22, 23).

When we are isolated, we are most vulnerable to temptation, but in the context of confessing relationships, we are most resilient. Painful though it be, there is joy in confession. Each time we confess, it becomes easier to be honest about our sin and, in turn, more difficult to return to it.

At the same time, we should be careful to confess in ways that are discreet, safe, and focused on repentance. Careless confession to immature and untrustworthy people is as bad as no confession. But the rewards of finding true fellowship with maturing and trustworthy siblings in Christ are great. Glorious peace is found in fellowship in which nothing is hidden. Rest and safety follow in the assurance of true communion.

The Christian life is a group adventure, not an individual quest. Christians die in the dark isolation of sin every day. The cure is confession within community. Escape from guilt and growth in grace happen through communion with Christ and the church. In community we confess our faults and failures to God (1 John 1:9, 10) and to one another (James 5:16) in pursuit of forgiveness and healing from sin and its terrible effects. By God's grace we find healing and true communion with God and each other through confession.

— Elder Israel Steinmetz

Welcoming the marginalized
into the body of Christ.

by Gordon S. Grose

How do we encourage a mentally ill person to follow Jesus? Such persons may experience strange (to us) thoughts, express their feelings unpredictably, and/or severely test their personal relationships, including those with us. If we're in a Bible study with such a person, how do we make them feel welcome, help keep them on track with the discussion, and enable them to grow spiritually?

Take, for example, Carl Johnson. He had a dream that expressed how he felt about himself.

Our whole family was at the beach. I reached down into the water and picked up a rock, a piece of petrified wood with strong-looking hieroglyphics. Immediately, I had this doubt: I was worthless, stupid, crummy, messed up. The whole family attacked me, total condemnation:

"You're absolutely worthless. There's nothing you can do about it."

"See, I told you so," my dad said. Right at the end, only mom was left. Everyone else had gone. "In about one-and-a half hours you're going to hell," she said. "Our whole family is going to hell." I started screaming, screaming, screaming.

Carl's screams woke him up. Although some details remain unclear, such as the meaning of the hieroglyphics, we understand the main point: Carl felt total

Disciplining the Mentally Ill

condemnation from his family. He suffered with feelings of worthlessness and helplessness — that he was bad enough to lead his family to hell. He felt he was under God's condemnation as well.

Perhaps at first we respond to Carl by suggesting that he follow Jesus. But several years prior to this, Carl did respond to the invitation at a Billy Graham Crusade. He underwent baptism, joined a local church, and now meets regularly with men for prayer. The truth is, though he's a follower of Jesus, Carl has mental illness.

False condemnation

Carl was deeply suspicious of others' motives. After church he challenged the pastor, "You preached about *me* this morning, didn't you!" Although his pastor reassured him that he had not singled Carl out, the next week — in fact, every week — Carl issued the same challenge.

How does someone like Carl deal with his sense of doom and overcome his fear to follow Jesus? How does someone with

whom we share "one Lord, one faith, one baptism" (Ephesians 4:4, 5) feel included in that fellowship in the Spirit?

Carl sought out a Christian counselor for help. Little did he or his counselor know that their relationship would last over ten years of bimonthly sessions. Each time Carl revealed his fear that God had condemned him, and he brought a scripture carefully selected to prove his point. To further convince his counselor, he shared the most negative, hostile interpretation of each passage.

"There. See!" he said as he read Matthew 12:31 about blasphemy against the Spirit. "I've committed the unpardonable sin, and God has condemned me."

His counselor, an experienced pastor, patiently read the whole passage in context with him and gently suggested an alternate interpretation.

Slowly, Carl backed down from his rigid interpretation, from applying Scripture in the most hostile way against himself — until next session.

"There, see! I told you God



condemned me,” he said, citing Hebrews 6:4-6 about crucifying again the Son of God. Or he cited 1 John 3:10: “anyone who does not practice righteousness is not of God”

¶ Patient counselor

Month after month, year after year, Carl brought Bible passage after Bible passage to voice his greatest fears. A careful reading of the context and the counselor’s patience allowed Carl to express his doubts about himself, his fear, and even his hostility toward the counselor (e.g., when kept too long in the waiting room) without shame or hostility in return.

God’s providence of a counselor comfortable in dealing with Scripture interpretation helped bring healing to Carl. He could work out his distrust of others’ motives in the sessions. During treatment, Carl needed hospitalization only once, a major victory for his family, for society, and for him. Therapy helped avoid that family disruption, a high cost to taxpayers, and the shame of being locked up.

Important steps

The body of Christ can disciple the mentally ill. “But I’m not a counselor!” you say. “How can I do this?” While counseling provides specialized skill and time for slow, patient healing, Christians in local churches can take important steps to help.

Familiarize yourself with the signs of mental illness. Join your local mental health association, such as the National Alliance on Mental Illness, or NAMI (*nami.org*). Get to know people who suffer from this condition.

Befriend that mentally ill person. Spend time with them. Learn about their life, family, and how they cope with life.

In a December 15, 2015 *Psychology Today.com* blog, noted psychiatrist Allen Frances, MD, writes about the importance of friendship with the mentally ill. He quotes Virgil Stucker, who spent his adult life in therapeutic communities that encourage resocialization and recovery of people with severe mental illness:

I have lived most of the last 40 years in nonprofit healing

communities with people who are diagnosed with mental illness. My family and I often walk with, dine with, socialize with, work with, and play with people who too often are treated as society’s castaways.

The takeaway? It’s stated at the beginning of Frances’ blog: “Neglect makes mental illness worse, inclusion makes it better.”

Share the Lord, as appropriate, with people who struggle with mental illness. You may find, as with Carl, you’ve befriended a believer. As a disciple of Jesus, you can buddy with them in your small group or Bible study. Help the mentally ill understand your group, and help your friends understand the mentally ill.

Body support

Several years after discontinuing therapy, Carl e-mailed his therapist to ask if he was the same person he had seen for counseling. “I’m a 1,000 times better than when we were meeting,” he wrote. “I learned to put into practice things you taught me.”

We never know the impact our life has on someone else. But what matters as Christians is that we are all of one body. Whether well or ill, we all need to follow Jesus more closely. As one body, we all need others to help us. **BA**

Gordon S. Grose writes from West Linn, OR. Scripture quotations are from the *New American Standard Bible*.



Adapted from *Tragedy Transformed: How Job’s Recovery Can Provide Hope For Yours* (BelieversPress, 2015), by Gordon S. Grose.



What did we forget to be?
by Dorothy Nimchuk

“I’m going to be a Power Ranger when I grow up!” declared our four-year-old granddaughter. “You can be anything you want to be,” assured her dad.

She then reversed his earlier question. “Daddy, what do you want to be when you grow up?” Caught somewhat off guard, he responded that he was already grown, with a family and a growing business of his own. After duly considering this, our granddaughter asked, “But Daddy, what did you forget to be?”

New commandment

Our heavenly Father might want to ask a similar question. We might claim to be following in the light and truth of the gospel, but fail miserably to do so. Sometimes our actions don’t quite measure up to our commitment because we’ve forgotten how to love our fellow believers. Satan, the father of lies and author of confusion, delights in filling our minds with complaints, dragging us down into the “poor me” syndrome.

Jesus provides the antidote for this: “Again, a new commandment I write to you, which thing is true in Him and in you, because the darkness is passing away, and the true light is already shining” (1 John 2:8). When we leave the darkness of sin behind, we are to walk in Christ, the Light of the world. Obedience cannot be left behind, for in our keeping

His commandments, God’s love is perfected in us (v. 5). Many of the Jews continued in darkness, refusing to permit the light of the gospel to shine upon them. We may find ourselves groping for light but walking in that darkness when we fail to extend God’s love to our brothers (v. 11).

What inspires us to act, to serve, even as Christ served? Love, a motivational force that requires us to respond in kind. The Spirit’s leading inspires us to action through love. Just as without faith it is impossible to please God, so without love it is impossible to fulfill His purpose for us. We may find ourselves on the fringe, not wanting to let go of that darkness entirely — one foot in, one foot out.

Paul’s admonition to the church at Corinth sends a message to us all. We may do good deeds, have successful careers,

quote scriptures, understand the prophets and their message, and master multiple languages. But all of these accomplishments are nothing without love (1 Corinthians 13).

Vibrant Christians

It's impossible to be a vibrant 21st century church without having vibrant 21st century Christians. When we walk in the light of love, we can truly function as a vibrant church, Christ centered, Spirit formed, and Bible based.

May we express gratitude to God for the benefits of His love, emulating that love in our relationships with others.

But how *do* we love those individuals who tend to chafe, to push our buttons, to intrude in our personal space, and who are downright nasty toward us? Do we have a *high-hattitude* toward them? Do we have a *combattitude*, always looking for a fight or confrontation? Rather, we must view such people through the filter of the love of Jesus, who lifted the downtrodden, consoled the grieving, helped the weak, and relieved their suffering. Sibling rivalry should never be a part of our church families. Jesus operated with a servant attitude, and so should we, regarding the needs of others above our own.

The entire Bible is God's love story, and it's all about Jesus: His part in Creation; the Genesis 3:15 promise of a Savior-Messiah; the words of the prophets regarding the same; His coming, ministry, loving sacrifice, and future earthly reign as Lord. Christ is the Light of the world,

but some people prefer the dark. Jesus said, "And this is the condemnation, that the light has come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil" (John 3:19).

The old commandment was obeyed from a legalistic standpoint — to the letter and with many added, man-made restrictions and traditions. Jesus gave us a new commandment, yet not new as it was the same as the

“It's impossible to be a vibrant 21st century church without having vibrant 21st century Christians.”

old: two great commands — love God and love one another — now patterned after Jesus' love and administered through His Spirit (Matthew 22:34-40; John 13:34; 1 John 3:11; Deuteronomy 6:5; Leviticus 19:18).

The first great commandment (love God) demands that we serve no other gods and make none either, that He be honored. We are to revere and remember His holy name and Sabbath. The other commands make reference to our relationships with others:

love your neighbor, treat them right, and don't transgress against them. If we love our fellow man, we will in no wise slander, murder, violate, covet, or misuse them in any way. The new commandment is the old commandment redefined by love, motivated by love, enacted by love.

Remembering Jesus

Do we consider ourselves to be "grown up" Christians? Or has Satan crippled us, cutting our Spirit supply and replacing it with his lies of false doctrine, with *combattitudes* instead of attitudes motivated by the love of God? Do we love enough to confront when necessary? Do we do so with a loving attitude, or speak with *high-hattitudes* from our self-righteous perch on our self-appointed judgment bench?

What have we forgotten to be? To be like Jesus! Christ should be central to our existence. Everything we do should be focused on and approved by Him. Because God so loved this world, He left us the legacy of His written Word and the promise that His Son, the living Word, would return to claim us as His own for eternity.

May we not forget to be a vibrant 21st century church by being vibrant 21st century Christians in service to our Lord, motivated by God's great love. **BA**

Dorothy Nimchuk and her husband, Nick, serve the CoG7 in Medicine Hat, Alberta.



Bible, Doctrine, and Churches — Oh My!



by Whaid Rose

It's been said that schism among brethren is the unintended consequence of the Protestant Reformation. The potential for division increases when Christians read and interpret Scripture for themselves. The Reformers were warned of this potential but, considering the alternative, they persisted.

To be fair, schism preceded the sixteenth century Reformation. The "Oriental churches" departed after the Chalcedon controversy in the fifth century. And the Great Schism of 1054 created the Eastern Orthodox Church. Early pre-Reformation separatists, including the Waldensians and the Albigenses, set the stage for the Reformation.

Yet concerns grew as the Reformers formulated their doctrines, chief among them being ecclesiology — the nature of the church, membership in it, and how it is to be governed. Most separatist groups believed the church to be a volunteer association, free of human creeds and dogmas. Such disposition gave rise to the Radical Reformation in reaction to the new Protestant movement, reflecting a desire for more thorough reforms.

Members of the Radical Reformation were known as Anabaptists — so named for their "rebaptizing" adults and staunch opposition to infant baptism (see "Did You Know?" p. 23). From the Anabaptists sprang the Mennonites, followers of Menno Simons, a priest who rejected Catholicism in favor of Anabaptist teachings. Later skirmishes among them led to the formation of the Amish sect, named after its founder, Jacob Amman.

Following the English Reformation, precipitated by Henry VIII's fuss with the Pope over the annulment of his marriage, groups such as the Quakers, Puritans, and Methodists sprung up. The Quakers'

official name, the Religious Society of Friends, reflects its emphasis on personal relationship with Christ: "I have called you friends . . ." (John 15:15). *Quaker* is derived from the words with which its leader, George Fox, implored a court judge: "Tremble before God!"

The Puritans sought to "purify" the Anglican Church of all remaining vestiges of Rome. Methodism was founded by John and Charles Wesley, sons of an Anglican minister who were driven by a quest for holiness and the gospel. After migrating to the Netherlands to escape persecution, Puritans (and Pilgrims) brought the Bible and Christianity to the New World.

Thus, the quest for a biblical ecclesiology both preceded and followed the sixteenth century Reformation. While the Reformation's necessity and impact are undeniable, it wasn't a "cure all" or restoration of all things. The Reformers had feet of clay, and some of their reforms missed the mark.

But in the final analysis, we come back to those principles about the church that drove both the Reformers and the radicals: The church plays an important role in God's salvation plan — not to be confused with the teaching that there's no salvation apart from the Roman Catholic Church. The church is not a building, and not every church is a church. Its unity is derived, not from papal edicts but by commitment to its one Lord, informed by one Book. The free practice of one's faith is an inalienable right.

These principles, vigorously defended by non-conformists whose core values resemble our own, must never be taken for granted.

A person stands in silhouette on a stone ledge, looking out at a large splash of water against a sunset sky. The water is splashing upwards and outwards, creating a large, textured wall of water. The sky is a mix of orange, yellow, and blue, suggesting a sunset or sunrise. The person is on the left side of the frame, looking towards the right. The water splash is the central focus, with the person's silhouette providing a point of reference.

Sea Path (Exodus 14:15, 16)

**When the waters part
and the seabed becomes a footpath again,
it's time to choose
between crossing over or staying put.
As always, the invitation offers freedom
from enslavement to the safe
while omitting details of the desert
that leads to the dangerously different.
We've passed through these walls of water
often enough to know
the promise is not a land
the desert is not a void
the journey is not an escape.
When we go where the Lord will lead
and leave what the Lord is done with,
the choice is always clear
and the movement is always forward.
Let's go.**

Robert L. Kinast



Small Talk

■ [Leadership]

by Caitlin Meadows

“Hi! How are you?”
“I’m well, thanks! How are you?”
“I’m good!”

And with that, social etiquette deems both individuals free to part ways.

This exchange is made countless times at each church gathering. No second thought is given to the other person’s answer. We generally don’t wonder if “I’m well” or “I’m good” is true. Trained to be polite, we hardly even listen to the response.

As an introvert who has adapted to extroversion, I often handle small talk like this as something to get over with as quickly and painlessly as possible. I fear saying the wrong thing and creating an awkward moment.

However, when the typical response above is substituted with a real answer that expounds upon the reason for the answer provided, I’m suddenly jolted out of my “autopilot” rhythm of etiquette. Now I must engage. My mind must shift gears and focus. Small talk transforms into conversation. In this subtle way, I am given the opportunity to selflessly serve my brother or sister.

How? Through communication. In this situation, I quickly

switch off autopilot and turn on what should always be my default setting: intentionally communicating with grace.

Intentionality

As Amber Riggs has written in “Why Jesus-Followers Should See Themselves as Leaders” (*Artios Magazine.org*), whether we are an official ministry leader or not, every person who has chosen to follow Christ is re-created by Him to lead (2 Corinthians 5:17, 20). Our daily communication is the most practical way that we can influence our circles for Christ. Conversely, it is the most practical way that we can deter them from Him.

For this reason, we must not be lackadaisical in our conversations. We must approach our interactions with others with the intention of pointing them to Jesus. Our minds must be made up ahead of time to be forgiving of others as well, because sometimes miscommunication occurs that can be hurtful. Handling our daily communication with this sort of mindfulness avoids the complacency of small talk, opting instead to communicate with grace.

We all communicate every day; we cannot avoid it. Therefore, we must have a basic understanding of what commu-



nication involves. It occurs when two or more individuals send and receive a message. They do this using both words (spoken and written) and nonverbal cues (e.g., facial expressions, gestures, and tone of voice). Using these communication symbols, here are three ways to avoid small talk and intentionally communicate with grace.

Listen

Listening is more than just hearing. Humans have this wonderful ability to tune things out. In effect, our brains can hear all sorts of sounds without processing them. Remember suddenly catching yourself missing important information in high school and college lectures? Your mind had drifted. You weren't listening.

When we choose to actively listen to a person attempting to communicate with us, we are non-verbally communicating back to them selflessness and humility. "Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others as more significant than yourselves" (Philippians 2:3, ESV).

By giving our time to allow another person to communicate with us, we are serving them. We are showing them, through our undivided attention, that they are valuable and that we respect

their thoughts and needs. With humility we listen to understand, suspending our thoughts to better comprehend what the other person is sharing.

Through our simple body language, like eye contact and nodding, the person we're in conversation with knows their message is being received.

Clarify

While showing that we're listening in this way, seeking clarification takes our listening a step further.

When it's our turn to speak, *SkillsYouNeed.com* suggests clarifying the person's remarks to validate them. Doing this demonstrates that we're putting effort into understanding the situation they're sharing. Another benefit of clarification is that it helps reduce the occurrence of misunderstandings. To clarify is to put in your own words the message you're receiving. Examples of clarifying responses are

"So, what you're saying is . . ."

"In other words, you feel . . ."

"Am I right to understand that you . . ."

These sorts of responses might seem unnatural, but they go a long way toward avoiding frustration and conflict that frequently result from miscommunication.

Relate

As members of the body of Christ, we are a community made up of individuals in relationship with Christ and with each other. Small talk should be avoided because it is usually superficial.

To avoid superficiality and communicate intentionally with grace, we must relate with one another in our conversations. By sharing about our similar experiences and offering empathy, we develop mutual trust. In our conversations with one another, we can cultivate appropriate relationship by connecting on a personal level.

But how?

Are you beginning to feel a bit exhausted just thinking about having this sort of in-depth conversation with everyone you encounter each week at church? If so, relax. Communicating intentionally with grace can (and sometimes must) be short and sweet. And that's OK! What matters is where our motivation lies as we approach one another. Is it wrong, like my usual default of wanting to get interactions over with? Or is it with the intention to lovingly and gracefully serve others?

Christ as our king enables us

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Faith at the Crossroads

Choosing God's
family for life.

by **Claudean Boatman**

The summer I turned eleven, my father gave me an ultimatum that set me on my life's course.

He sat beside me on the picnic table bench in his backyard, elbows resting just above his knees and a hand-drawn chart clasped in one hand. The sun glinted off the cuff snaps on his blue plaid cotton shirt. His wife

stood in front of us, hands on her hips. Smoker's cough occasionally interrupted his words.

He pointed to the chart. "This is how many hours a week you spend with your mother. This is what you spend with me. If you want to go to church, you have to do it at your mother's house. You have two weeks to decide. If you insist on going to church while you're here, you can't come back."

I stared at the chart as it shook in his hand. He made his case: Spending an hour in the little church across the street took away time he deserved.

I forced myself not to look at him or his wife, determined that they wouldn't see me cry.

The night before, the two of them picked up my three sisters and me for our every-other-weekend visit. We drove the hour from our home to theirs. As usual, we went straight to the trailer house, connected to the main house with a breezeway. We shared the two bedrooms in the trailer while our two stepsisters slept in the main house.

Of the four of us, I was the only one facing this decision, because I was the one who loved going to church.

Shoulders stooping, my father stood and walked inside. “Think about that,” he said. Then I was alone. Still fighting tears, I walked to the side of the house. I didn’t want anyone, especially my stepmother, to see me.

Special daughter

Thoughts swirled in my mind. Every other week, my sisters and I visited my father and his wife. He didn’t pay much attention to us. Instead we were told to play outside or in those little trailer house bedrooms. We didn’t laugh during meals or stay together in the living room after dinner.

Just a few times before this summer day, I had felt that I mattered, that I was my father’s favorite. I had a vague memory of him before he left us. He sat with me at dawn before he went to work. He leaned on the kitchen counter as he silently drank his coffee and I my hot chocolate. During those few quiet moments, I was special.

Another of those rare moments came during our camping trip the summer before, when I was ten. We stayed in a national forest campground, our camper surrounded by pine and aspen trees. My father popped corn over the campfire one night while we sat on logs near the fire. My sisters and I slept on the floor of the camper shell along with our stepsisters.

The next morning before daylight, I climbed over them to be the first one up. Coffee and water boiled above the campfire, and my father handed me a cup for hot chocolate. I sat near him on a log. In the stillness we fed the chipmunks leftover popcorn

and watched the fire dim as the sun rose. The spell was broken as, one by one, others got up.

In those times, it was just the two of us, making me feel as if I were his special girl.

But now I had a decision to make. I lifted my head. The church across the street came into view. It wasn’t fancy or big, but it was a place I felt welcome. The children’s teacher knew my name. She always seemed glad I came.

The steeple cross rose from the church roof like a crossroads. That’s how I felt: at a crossroads. Though I didn’t understand why

called him — to help me with two questions: Do I give up my church? Do I give up my father?

Looking back, I am glad he didn’t say he felt sorry for me or tell me exactly what to do. He just listened and prayed. Brother Grant encouraged me to search the Bible myself, then prayed with me for wisdom.

One scripture sealed my decision: “But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well” (Matthew 6:33). I wanted to be important to my father, to feel his love and know his approval. But this verse told

“Do I give up my church?
Do I give up my father?”

my father wanted me to choose, I sensed that making the right decision really counted.

When church time came, I sat in the trailer house bedroom instead of walking across the street. My father and his wife took us home late in the day. I crawled out of the blue Rambler and followed it with my eyes as they drove away.

Kingdom first

Two weeks to make a decision, and I didn’t know where to start. My mother didn’t go to church, so I decided to talk to someone who did. I asked my pastor — Brother Grant, as we

me that God’s kingdom comes first. Seeking God before anything else was my responsibility. Working out the consequences was God’s.

I wrote to my father explaining my choice. Going to church was part of my faith, so that was what I was going to do. Brother Grant read the letter before I mailed it. He affirmed my words and agreed that I’d left the door open for a relationship if my father wanted it.

My father broke all contact with me. My sisters received birthday cards and Christmas presents; he never sent any for me. If I answered the phone when he called, he hung up. I

would be lying if I said that those things didn't make me sad. Mostly, though, I experienced peace that confirmed my choice was the right one.

Spiritual growth

That summer gave me a glimpse of the local church's potential in the life of a child. I found wise counsel, people who prayed for me, and people who adopted this spiritual orphan. My church taught me to use biblical principles and prayer to guide me. Though I never knew my biological father's spiritual lead-

When I began reconnecting with my father, I clearly came with my faith intact and no hidden agenda. Building a new relationship was awkward. At first I made the thirty-minute drive to their house and stayed for a half hour. Eventually I worked up to a couple of hours and tried to make cheerful talk about the weather, school, and their yard — with varying degrees of success. The encounters were never comfortable, but I kept making the effort.

My father died two weeks before I turned 24. We were as reconciled as he, or perhaps his

“ Seeking God before anything else was my responsibility. ”

ership, several godly stand-in fathers taught me. Sometimes they even made me feel as I did when it was just my father and me staring at the morning campfire — that I was someone's special little girl.

During the five years my father didn't talk to me, I continued to grow in my relationship with God. About the time I got my driver's license, my father and his wife moved closer to us. I felt it was time for me to establish a relationship with him. Another Bible verse guided me: “If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone” (Romans 12:18).

wife, would allow. At his funeral I found myself grateful for both decisions I had made: choosing faith over father and choosing reconciliation without compromising faith.

Decades later, I look back on that day without confusion or bitterness. Instead, I feel like God's special little girl who has the best Father ever. **BA**

Claudean Boatman writes from Windsor, CO. Scripture quotations are from the *New International Version*.



Small Talk

continued from page 19

by His grace working through us to lead on His behalf — even through our various communications with each other, for apart from Him, we really cannot bear His fruit (John 15:4). But when we live each day surrendered to Him, Christ infuses us with both the desire and the ability to reflect His character in all we say and do. As a result, we no longer must hide behind small talk. Instead we can communicate intentionally with grace. **BA**

Caitlin (Stacy) Meadows and her husband,

Adam, live in Hudsonville, MI. For more on effective Christian communication, see Caitlin's article “4 Ways Active Listening Increases Your Influence” at ArtiosMagazine.org.



Are you interested in learning more about deepening your influence for Christ in your everyday life? If so, check out ArtiosCollege.org.

Reminder

Beginning with the fourth quarter, quarterly orders must be made through the cog7.org online store. Use the link at baonline.org. If you need help with setting up your order, call the General Conference office at 303-452-7973.



Did You Know?

- While names like Martin Luther and John Calvin are familiar to us today, lesser-known individuals among the “radical” wing of the Reformation paved the way for much church practice we now take for granted. Unlike the mainline Magisterial Reformation, which, like Catholicism, sought to conform all society to the teachings of the church through civil law, the radicals pressed for a free church of intentional believers unattached to and uncoerced by political power.
- The Radical Reformation developed an ecclesiology that rejected state-church violence in favor of independent churches that conducted their own affairs, taking the New Testament church and Jesus’ teachings as their model of governing. Believer’s baptism was the seminal teaching that spelled opposition to established churches. The radicals’ rejection of infant sprinkling earned them the pejorative nickname Anabaptists, or Rebaptizers.
- Adult baptism and the Radical Reformation emerged in Zurich, Switzerland, in 1524, a mere seven years after Luther nailed his thesis. But Anabaptism is thought to have officially begun on January 21, 1525. On this day a group of dissenters, including Felix Manz and Conrad Grebel, rebaptized adults for the first time after discussions with Reformation leader Ulrich Zwingli broke down, and the Zurich city council ruled that infant baptism was biblical.
- The political implications of Anabaptist practices (adult baptism, pacifism, and the separation of church and state) branded Anabaptists as radicals by Reformation and Catholic leaders alike. State persecution followed, swift and harsh, on all sides. Felix Manz was one of the first to be martyred for the cause. After several arrests for rebaptizing, he was sentenced to death. With his mother, Anne, encouraging him, he was executed by drowning on January 5, 1527.
- Persecution only fanned the flames of the Radical Reformation as communities committed to Jesus and the New Testament began popping up all over Switzerland and Germany. In Strasbourg, Michael Sattler was the first to systematically outline the Anabaptist position as he pleaded with the city’s Reformed leaders for the lives of his imprisoned brothers. This resulted in his famous Schleitheim Confession, written on February 24, 1527.
- Today, Mennonites, Amish, and the Brethren are direct progeny of the Radical Reformation. But the new ecclesiology they developed by returning to biblical roots at risk of death profoundly influenced Evangelical Christianity and political freedom of religion throughout the West. On May 20, 1527, Michael Sattler was tortured and burned at the stake for his seven articles in defense of discipleship in community. His wife, Margaretha, was drowned two days later.

Sources — J. Denny Weaver, *Becoming Anabaptist* (Herald Press, 2005).

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• Sabbath Celebrating • Distinct Yet Inclusive • Passionate in Worship • Compassionate in Service • Engaging in Witness • United in Fellowship • Committed to Discipleship



Spirit Led, Grace Grown

Step by step to
transformation.
by Jody McCoy

A mother was making pancakes for her sons, Kevin (five) and Ryan (three). The boys began to argue over who would get the first pancake, so she said, “Now boys, Jesus would let His brother have the first pancake.”

Kevin got the message. He turned to his younger brother and said, “Ryan, you be Jesus.”

Grace means sacrifice. Grace is never free; it always costs someone. As humans, we’re far more interested in receiving grace than giving it. “Ryan, you be Jesus” is our nature. But we also understand that we need to extend grace to those who have forgiven us. So we’re willing to

give grace to those who deserve it. After all, that’s only fair. We’re giving to those who are giving to us.

Conditional love

The apostle Paul said that a few of us may even be willing to die for a good person, perhaps for someone who would die for us (Romans 5:7). This is conditional love: We love those who love us back. Paul contrasted this with God’s love: “But God commendeth his love toward us, in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us” (v. 8).

Would you be willing to suffer and die, not for people who would die for you but for people who would abandon you, despise you, spit on you, mock you, and crucify you? That’s who Jesus died for; He died for us: “All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way; and the LORD hath laid

on him the iniquity of us all” (Isaiah 53:6).

Jesus loves us not because we’re good but because He’s good. That’s unconditional love. Human nature loves those who love us, but we have no strength to love those who harm us. But Jesus did: “For when we were yet without strength, in due time Christ died for the ungodly” (Romans 5:6).

Jesus died for us when we wouldn’t die for Him. He provided a way we can follow, despite our weak nature: “We love him, because he first loved us” (1 John 4:19). Even if we lack the ability to give grace to those who don’t deserve it, we can see that Jesus is worthy of our love. After all, it’s only right to give our lives to the One who gave His life for us. Jesus led in kindness so that we could follow His kindness in kind. We can live for Him because He died for us.

Christlike love

When we give our lives to Jesus, He gives us His Spirit, including the power of His unconditional love. With this power, we can transcend our own need for what is fair and enter into His sacrificial grace. We can forgive because we've been forgiven. His presence in us gives us the power to love even those who hate us. In His Sermon on the Mount, Jesus described His own good nature, the nature He wants to give us:

"Ye have heard that it hath been said, Thou shalt love thy neighbour, and hate thine enemy. But I say unto you, Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you; That ye may be the children of your Father which is in heaven: for he maketh his sun to rise on the evil and on the good, and sendeth rain on the just and on the unjust. For if ye love them which love you, what reward have ye? do not even the publicans the same?" (Matthew 5:43-46).

I like to go to used book stores. One day the title of an old book caught my attention: *Why Does Jesus Make Me Nervous?* about the Sermon on the Mount. The author said that we find Jesus' sacrificial nature so foreign to us that it's terrifying. We prefer to believe that Jesus isn't serious when He tells us to love our enemies. Instead, we absolve ourselves with the belief that no one can actually do that. But we're left with an uneasy feeling that Jesus is serious because He was human and He sacrificed His life for His enemies. In other

words, *Jesus makes me nervous.*

Day to day, we think we're doing OK because we love those who love us back. Then Jesus comes along and says that even non-Christians do that; it's just human nature. He tells us that He wants to give us His sacrificial nature. He wants to transform us from mortal humans into immortal children of God. Now what am I supposed to say to that?

A sacrificial nature is willing to give grace to those who don't deserve it. I don't want to do that, because that's not fair. The very idea grates against everything in my nature. But I do want



immortality. I want God's grace, but I also want to keep my rights under the law. Can't I just get the benefits of Jesus' sacrifice without letting Him change my nature? Can't He sacrifice His life for me without me becoming a living sacrifice for Him? Can't I just accept Him as my Savior without accepting Him as my Lord?

In reality, what I'm saying is, "Jesus, You be Jesus. I want your gift of grace, but I don't want to be like You."

Vision for the Church

How does this apply to our church?

The plan to transform our vision of a vibrant 21st century church into our reality (TVR) is a spiritual journey to help us surrender our hearts and allow God's Spirit to transform us into Christ's giving nature. TVR follows the pattern of our personal spiritual journey. In the first stage, we give our lives to the One who gave His life for us. We respond to Jesus' love.

When we give our lives to Jesus, He gives us His Spirit, including the power of His unconditional love. We now have two natures: His sacrificial nature and our old selfish, human nature. Our responsibility is to let go of the old nature so that we can participate in His grace. This process of letting go of our need for justice, our rights under the law, takes time. Each time we give of ourselves to others, Jesus gives more of Himself to us, and we grow in His giving nature. This is stage two.

With His nature, I care about justice for others because His law of love lives within my heart. However, I no longer need justice for myself. Through the power of His unconditional love in me, I can suffer injustice for others, just as Jesus suffered injustice at my hands for me. That's not human; that's divine. When others see the power of His love in me, they will say, "I don't know what you have, but I want that!"

The third and final stage of TVR is Loving Obedience. This is the Great Commission, where we allow Jesus to work through us to rescue the lost world He

loves. One day the door of grace will close, all suffering will end, and paradise will begin. The opportunity to be a living sacrifice for Jesus is now, while the door of grace is still open.

Jesus grieves for those in peril, and we have the opportunity today to be His friend. We'll talk about that next time. **BA**

Jody McCoy is executive director of the CoG7 and lives in Austin, TX. Scripture quotations are from the King James Version.



Church as Communion

continued from page 10

and His Son as the source of our shared truth and purity.

The variety of words in the *koinonia* family (*koinonos*, *koinoneo*, *koinos*, *koinonikos*) expresses an abundance of related ideas that build on Christian *koinonia*: sharing things in common, companionship in society, participation, having a common faith, communicating with one another, and contributing to the needs of others. Obviously, using the *koinonia* word group represents an involvement without reservation in the body of Christ. Believers have real communion as lives are shared with each other through God and His Son.

The old Latin phrase *communio sanctorum* ("communion of saints") speaks of this shared life,

identifying the church as a body of members in full communion one with the other. That is, the body, whose head is Christ, communicates with all its members so that they perform all kinds of activities: internal or external, for preservation or growth, for spiritual or social development.

Characteristics of communion

The early chapters in Acts relate basic characteristics of the church as communion:

- intimate friendship and fellowship with one another;
- continuous study of apostolic teaching and doctrine;
- sharing bread with joy and simplicity of heart;
- encouraging one another to love and good works;
- labor in the community to meet its physical needs;
- prayer and worship of God in unity and sincerity.

These distinguishing characteristics remind us that to be fervent like the early church, every believer must be influenced by the Holy Spirit. As Acts shows, with this interrelated fellowship completed through the Spirit, the early church influenced the wider world with its message and lifestyle, practicing and projecting spiritual and social communion in such a way that "the Lord added to the church daily such as should be saved" (Acts 2:47).

Current communion

The church is supposed to be a place of true communion formed by the love of the Spirit. All are part of it, sustained by prayer and worship, and energized by studying the Word of

God. It is where communion is actual society, community, a vision of brotherhood and family – life shared by the Spirit. This church makes its mark in history only with our submission to the Spirit.

After almost two thousand years since the church's extraordinary birth on the day of Pentecost, its influence continues, invading lives and transforming hearts. In the middle of our chaotic world, the church does this best when it follows the example of the early church. The distinctive features described in Acts that made it so vibrant need to be emphasized today. The church will continue to influence the world if our communion is defined by the love of God and friendship in Christ Jesus.

Let us be kind and compassionate to each other. Let us take practical steps to share needs. Let us pray and work together, fulfilling the will of God. If we do this, surely we will be a model of community that attracts anyone seeking true communion with Christ Jesus. The church has a mandate to influence others by making God's love known. We will meet this challenge only in *koinonia*, as the community of saints. **BA**

Hector M. Alvarenga pastors the CoG7 Houston Avenue church in Houston, TX. Scripture quotations are from the *New International Version*.



Unexpected Lessons

What a visitor learned during the Jasper flood. **by Jenny Stephens**

I go to church on Sabbath to praise and learn a lesson, but on a rainy day last April, while I visited the congregation in Jasper, Arkansas, God had a surprise — and a lesson — for all of us.

After services, when the meal was finished and cleanup was underway, the creek nearby rose about ten feet. About fifty of us got caught in the church building.

We watched as the water rose onto the porch at our feet, then became a raging river. As the water began to rise downstairs, what do you suppose the reaction was? The children were sent upstairs. They seemed to be in an almost celebratory mood, happy for more time to be together, playing and singing and making beds to rest on.

Downstairs the rest of us made plans and did what was needed. Calm and thoughtful busyness ruled. Throw carpets were put in front of the church entrance in hopes of keeping the water out, but soon they were washed away in the river outside. We couldn't stop the water from coming in. Brother James found a push broom and swept continuously twenty to thirty minutes to keep the flood out of the sanctuary.

During this time, we found candles, placed them around, and moved furniture from rising water. One tough soul (my brother John)

braved the torrential rain and rising water to move what cars he could to higher ground. Our new car would have surely been a loss without his effort. We filled containers with water for drinking, located towels, and notified Emergency Medical Services of our situation. We planned for a possible night stay in the church.

Then the lights went out. Brother Jay waded through the church, candlelighter in hand, and lit the candles. No panic, no fear.

From the candlelit classroom came the sound of children singing "The Wise Man Built His House Upon the Rock" — "And the rains came tumbling down!" Joy and trust.

Meanwhile, with the downstairs mostly abandoned, the adults found places to sit in the pastor's office upstairs. Someone found a guitar, and a young girl, Naomi, led more singing. On the couch Sister Vicki began to say, "Lord, stop the rain, stop the rain."



Though still stormy-looking outside, within a few minutes, the rain stopped. Then a little more time passed, and the water began to recede from our church. When the river had receded several feet, Brother Billy got his big truck and began ferrying a few persons at a time through the water to higher ground at Don and Kathy Lawson's home nearby.

You probably know the rest of the story: We all got out safe. Some things were lost and damaged — cars and church.

Wait. *The church — we have always been safe*, I kept thinking after it was over. Why did no one panic? Why was there peace in our midst as the water rose? This is what I learned on that rainy Sabbath in April:

Peace. We trust God when life is uncertain. "I will never leave you . . ."

Love. What would we ever do without the helping hand of our fellow brother and sister? We need each other.

Faith. What would we do without God's constant presence, without His promises to us? And oh, what joy that we have a way to go through this when we are in need: to our heavenly Father, as Sister Vicki showed — "Lord, stop the rain."

Was the Jasper flood just a small picture of life, for what we all can anticipate? Yes. Storms come. They threaten our lives, but we are prepared. We are standing on the Rock. **BA**

Jenny Stephens attends the Hammondville, AL CoG7 with her husband, Terry.



Convention Business Session 2017 Springfield, Illinois

Members of the General Conference met in business session at the Crowne Plaza July 4-7. Samuel Holland, the presiding officer, called each day's meeting to order.

A Registration Committee for the business session was appointed by the chairman: Rex Miller (chair), Amber Michalak, and Martha Muffley. He also appointed a Resolutions Committee: Joshua Gutierrez (chair), Mark Caswell, and Greg Lincoln.

President Loren Stacy and Executive Director Jody McCoy led us through presentations that provided an overview of accomplishments during the previous biennium, and included reports by each of the Conference ministries. Treasurer Greg Lincoln reported on a successful audit and gave a financial overview.

A bylaw amendment to allow electronic voting for those present during the business session was adopted.

A bylaw amendment was adopted to allow volunteers involved in the children's program to vote during the elections of the board of directors and Nominating Committee.

The following members were elected to a six-year term on the board: Samuel Holland, Daniel Flores, Mark Caswell, and Reuben Zaragoza. The following members were elected to the Nominating Committee: Bruce Noble and Monica Schlenker.

By mid-morning on Wednesday, the business session began reviewing the bylaws revision proposal. Members proposed various amendments to the proposal, following a reading of each article, the Preamble, and General Norms.

On Friday afternoon, the enabling motion was amended before being adopted by the Conference in Session. At 4:45 p.m., the meeting was adjourned *sine die*.

The newly adopted bylaws are available at cog7.org/bylaws.

The following members have agreed to serve on the Amendments Committee for the 2019 Convention: Israel Steinmetz (chair), Joshua Gutierrez, and Makayla Ross.

— Samuel Holland, Chairman
Conference Board of Directors

Look for more convention articles, plus videos, at churchright.org.



G. C. Ministries News

ARTIOS • MISSIONS • PUBLICATIONS



John Klassek (left) and Tluang Kung

Convention 2017 was wonderful. I reported on our missions work in 32 countries through ministries such as Orphans and Widows, Cristo Viene, PMT, and SHINE. The outstanding service of the SHINE board was recognized at our Missions lunch on Thursday, and we heard from guest speakers John Klassek (Australia) and Tluang Kung (Myanmar), who play valuable roles in our international work. At the Women's Ministries luncheon we shared how they can support women around the world and their vital ministries.

—Bryan Cleeton



Convention 2017 was an exciting time for Artios Christian College. It gave us an opportunity to reintroduce ourselves to Conference members under our new name and look. Most importantly, it gave us an opportunity to share about Artios' commitment to equipping leaders for a vibrant 21st century church.

The highlight of the week was Artios' inaugural commencement ceremony. Twenty-two of our 48 graduates walked the stage in recognition of their commitment to being equipped for leadership. Hundreds more were inspired to pursue leadership training through the college's focused, flexible, and financially sustainable courses and programs.

— Israel Steinmetz



Publications



It was a blessing to attend Convention 2017 and to participate in the business, worship, and fellowship of the gathered church. I enjoyed visiting with many friends of the *Bible Advocate* at our booth and breakfast Thursday morning. The *Publications by the Numbers* report, given at the beginning of the week, noted the hard work of our small staff since the '15 Convention. This includes the production and distribution of almost half a million pieces of literature sent to over 80 nations, even as our website (baonline.org) has attracted thousands of visitors from over 160 nations worldwide. BAP rejoices in the opportunity to support the Church of God, and share the grace and truth of Jesus Christ around the globe.

— Jason Overman



Ministry Through the IMC

Zone 2

Brother Carlos Velasquez shares the good news in Havana, Cuba, as a Cristo Viene evangelist. CoG7 brothers and sisters regularly meet in the city of Las Piedras for Sabbath services.



Zone 3

Enrique Vega and brethren held annual Lord's Supper services earlier this year in Santa Cruz de la Sierra, Bolivia. Pastor Vega is a Cristo Viene pastor-evangelist who serves the Iquique, Chile congregation.



Zone 4

Rajendra Sundas (right) baptizes new believers in Kathmandu, Nepal. More than 20 CoG7 congregations are planted here in various parts of the country, and a fledgling orphans and widows ministry is developing.



Pastor Ruang Nei Uk dedicates a new church building in Chin Hills in western Myanmar. A graduate from CoG7's Asian Christian Theological seminary will serve this congregation and actively share the gospel in the surrounding region.



Zone 5

In March, Disaster Relief Funds (DRF) assisted 50 families near Mzuzu, Malawi, who were affected by a nationwide food shortage. Pastor Nehemiah Tembo leads the church in this country.



Daniel Roagem Fungulane baptizes new believers near Tete, Mozambique, where CoG7 started in 2016, helped by brethren in Portugal. Several missions have been formed in the northern part of the country, as well as a new congregation in Maputo, the nation's capital.



Zone 6

Phil Kordahi visited Perth, Western Australia, June 15-18. IMC Secretary John Klassek and a growing fellowship meet regularly here in the world's most isolated major city.





The Family of God

A Bill Gaither song talks about the blessings of being in the family of God, with members cleansed by the blood of Jesus and becoming joint heirs with Him.

Have you thought of how important the concept of family is throughout God's Word? Take a moment to do so now. We believers worship God – Father and Son. Jesus taught us to pray, "Our Father who is in heaven, hallowed be Your name" (Matthew 6:9, NASB throughout). When we believe in Jesus, receiving Him as Savior and Lord, we become "children of God" (John 1:12). Before the creation of the world, God chose all who believe in Jesus to be adopted as sons (Ephesians 1:5). Peter refers to followers of Christ as "the brotherhood" (1 Peter 2:17). In Galatians, we are called "a household of the faith" (Galatians 6:10). In 1 Timothy, we are called "the household of God" (3:15) – brothers and sisters.

God has built the need for family into the very fabric of humanity. If we have a good family experience, we cherish it. If we have a bad family experience, we long for a good one. Some, unfortunately, fall into cults and street gangs in search of family, of some place to be accepted and loved. You and I were made to live in close relationship with others. You and I were meant to be part of a family, and so is everyone else!

Might this reality be a key to more effective evangelism and to numerical church growth? Recall Christ's new commandment: "that you love one another, even as I have loved you, that you

also love one another. By this all men will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another" (John 13:34, 35). I suppose that Jesus could have issued membership cards to those He considered His true followers. Instead, He chose His own gracious and sacrificial love to be the identifier. More specifically, He chose the expression of His own gracious and sacrificial love within the family of believers, within the church, to be the identifier. "Love one another," He commanded us. "Love one another," echoed John and Peter and Paul in their epistles. When people see that Christlike love demonstrated among us, they will know that we are followers of Jesus. They will know that they have found the family of God.

There is much more to being a Christ-centered church than just acknowledging and witnessing to who Christ is. We must also demonstrate that we are His. We do this in loving one another as Christ loved us. Graciously. Sacrificially. Tangibly. As we love our fellow believers in these significant and visible ways, those who do not yet know Christ will notice. Looking for genuine love and family, they will be attracted to us, and to the One who motivates and enables us. They too will be attracted to Christ.

None of us can do this alone; we must do it together. We must do it as the church, as the family of God.

– Loren Stacy



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