
Dialogue

Volume 4 Issue 3

Strength for the church's journey into wholeness in Christ

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The subject: *The Bible*

As “postmodern” thinking slowly becomes the way of the world (and if you can define postmodern, you probably haven’t been overcome, yet), how people think about truth is shifting. It seems that most people don’t have a solid sense of truth being something revealed to them, something that exists outside of themselves. Most think about “what’s true for me.” So they would be likely to say, “FOR ME, it seems that people don’t have a solid sense of truth, but that’s just my opinion. Yours may differ, and that’s OK.”

This is a challenge for anyone who believes that Jesus is the Truth, who believes that the revelation of Jesus and further revelations of God’s Spirit delivered in the Bible are truth from outside ourselves, truth before which we must humble ourselves and to which we should conform our thinking and behavior. Receiving the word of God transforms us. Not having “ears to hear” kills us.

So let’s talk about that. One of our “proverbs” says: *The Bible should be known and followed, and that is a group project.* So we have four of our friends engaging our minds and hearts around the Bible. Jerry Macolino tells us why he is a “Bible person.” Will O’Brien allows us to reprint an article about how to be authentic in the struggle to hear God through the Bible. Gwen White focuses where it all begins for us, on Jesus, as revealed in the Bible. Bob Rowen-Herzog shows us how to reflect on the truth down deep as our lives change.

Why I Love the Bible

If you would ask me why I trust the Bible, I would be able to tell you of the historical evidence regarding why the Bible is trustworthy. If you would ask me why I study the Bible, I could cite Scriptural references about its truth, power and relevancy. But I was asked to consider why I love the Bible. And, afforded with the opportunity to consider it, here’s why.

The most meaningful part of my journey with Jesus has been my



ever-deepening relationship with Him. He has become as real to me as any other person I know. And through the years (over 23 so far), I have come to know Him primarily through the Bible, where I find His word(s). I’ve come to know His character, comfort, guidance, encouragement, and transforming power in my life. As a new follower, I could not develop the “habit” of Bible reading. Then someone helped me understand that Jesus wanted to have a relationship with me, that is, a dynamic, day-to-day encounter with Him from now through eternity, and that what God has spoken to us in Jesus has been given to us through the Bible so that we can know Him. In fact, it is difficult to know Jesus at

all if one doesn’t know the Bible. Somehow, by the power of God’s Spirit, the records of him become alive and we can “see” Him (see John 1:1 and 1:14). Carried along by this new thought, I began the adventure of knowing Jesus experientially through the pages of the Bible.

Maybe the best way to explain why I love the Bible is to tell you how Jesus has connected with me through His word. Last October my wife Marcie gave birth to our daughter, Abigail. We knew from testing that she had a chromosomal abnormality, and that she wasn’t expected to live long. I had prepared myself for her short life, to spend as much time with her as I could and to pour my love into her. She was stillborn; I hadn’t expected that. I started to wonder if God really cared for me or my family. Now, throughout the pregnancy John 11 had become important to me; I went back there again. I found that Jesus didn’t keep Lazarus from dying, but He did weep over his death. God impressed that thought upon my heart. I wrote in my journal, “He does care! He weeps with me!”

Another example began this past January. I received two themes for the year, one of them being Malachi 4:6 – “He will turn the hearts of the fathers to their children, and the hearts of the children to their fathers.” I had thought at the time that I would have to rearrange my priorities, use of time, focus on my kids, as a cognitive and willful exercise in obedience to this scripture. Instead, as I memorized, meditated and prayed about this verse, I found that my heart (imagine that!) was being changed. I was enjoying my children more,

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laughing more and scolding less, playing more and “tasking” less.

One last story. Marcie and I went on our second honeymoon this past May. Now, we each have our “core issues”, and when one of us is in the pits many times the other can carry the load. When we’re both facing our core weaknesses it can get mighty ugly. In fact, we had quite an ugly get-away in March, and the memory was still fresh in our minds. So, here we are at our same honeymoon paradise, and facing the possibility of not only ruining the trip but of re-opening up recent wounds. So, we took some time alone with God, and I went to the word, as is my habit. I was led to the Song of Solomon, looking for verses on what kind of man I should be. I was forcibly struck by 8:6 – “Place me like a seal over your heart.” Here the beloved (wife) was staking claim to be the most treasured possession of her lover’s (husband’s) heart. I immediately knew that I needed to allow Marcie that place in my heart as my beloved, and was able to communicate that to her. From that point on, the best of times; never before has there been a more celebratory second honeymoon (at least to my knowledge).

Why do I love the Bible? It’s Jesus’ Word(s) to me. It’s living and active, and He speaks to me, reminds me of Who He is, helps me know what to be and do, right when I need it. It’s powerful, so I’m able to be changed by it - not just my thinking but my core being, my soul, my heart, and my actions.

Jerry Macolino

Wrestling with the Word

THE BATTLE FOR THE BIBLE—what it means, and how we interpret and apply it to our lives and our world—has been waged for at least two thousand years. History is replete with the casualties of that battle. The Scriptures have served as propagandistic fodder for slavery, subjugation of women, even ethnic cleansing. Yet many of us believe the Bible is profoundly life-giving, offering a vision of justice, salvation, peace, and human dignity. While the Bible has been used to justify militarism and nationalism, it has also motivated powerful witnesses of peace and nonviolence. The same Bible sometimes wielded to oppress and exploit has also inspired healing ministries and freedom movements.

The Word of God is essentially liberating. But the Word itself must be liberated from dangerous distortions, untruths, and half-truths. To open our lives to the guiding truth of the biblical revelation, we may need to unlearn much of what we’ve been taught about the Bible.

For several years, I have been part of an informal, grassroots initiative called the “Alternative Seminary.” The seminary brings together people seeking to unite socially committed discipleship with serious intellectual study of the Scriptures.

In weekly classes, we try to grasp the historical, cultural, and literary dynamics of the biblical texts, while also seeking prayerful personal applications of the Scriptures in our lives and our world. We question the text—and let it question us. Along the way, we seek to develop skills of “biblical literacy”—skills that I fear are greatly lacking among many Christians today.

Biblical literacy is a dynamic process that includes all of our lived experience of faith and discipleship. While I would hardly claim to offer a full-fledged program of biblical literacy, I believe our study groups have gleaned some lessons that can help other Christians toward a faith more firmly rooted in the living Word.

IN OUR EFFORTS TO BECOME more biblically literate, we must begin by naming the factors that distort our vision and prevent us from grasping the scriptural texts in their fullness. I am convinced that the largest single barrier to our understanding is individualism.

Individualism is perhaps the most per-

vasive and powerful force in Western culture, especially in the United States. As a philosophy, a cultural paradigm, and a mode of being, individualism is a bulwark of our political and economic systems, central to many of our most closely held values.

Inasmuch as individualism grows out of the biblical teaching that each person is valuable and bears the divine image, it is the fount of human rights and personal freedom. Yet individualism fuels the atomizing and alienating effects of consumer capitalism and quickens the deterioration of community.

Individualism has also shaped Western Christianity. We stress individual salvation and speak of one’s “personal relationship with Jesus.” Many Christians bring a consumer mentality to matters of faith, “shopping” for the church that best satisfies their private spiritual needs.

Consciously or unconsciously, individualism also shapes our interpretation of Scripture. Whether in private reading or even within communal worship, I usually hear the biblical text addressed to me personally and uniquely. I try to discern its meaning for my life—while the person beside me applies it to her or his life, likewise acting as a private consumer of the text.

This individualism would have befuddled biblical writers. Although the biblical worldview certainly values each unique person, the Hebraic culture understood each individual as belonging to and fulfilled in a

Dialogue

WHY? *This quarterly journal is a gift to everyone who wishes to be a part of the ongoing dialogue we share in Christ that forms us and deepens us as a real church. Whether you just arrived or have been with us from the beginning, we want you to be part of the conversation and an informed member of the team. We hope you will work with us to build a safe place to experience and share the love of Jesus Christ. Dialogue is a crucial part of that.*

If you would like to respond to any of the articles printed, that would be great. We have never turned a response away, yet — but we reserve the right to do so.

community. The radically individualized person apart from community would be an anomaly to the biblical mindset.

The biblical writings are addressed to a people: in the Hebrew Scriptures, it was the Israelites; in the New Testament, the discipleship communities and house churches of those committed to Jesus. The narratives are part of a culture and history shared and shaped by a people. Scripture's commandments, teachings, and liturgical practices make sense only within a covenanted community with a common life.

Certainly, each individual makes a personal choice to participate and respond. But that choice is not separate from life in the community. Even those sections of Scripture with apparently greater personal emphasis (such as the Proverbs and the "personal" epistles like Philemon and Timothy) were ultimately incorporated into a canon with communal application.

RECOGNIZING THIS COMMUNAL EMPHASIS can help us overcome distortions in our readings of Scripture. For instance, the "hard sayings" of Jesus (turn the other cheek, take no thought for what you are to eat or wear, leave your family behind, love your enemies) strike us as unrealizable ideals. In fact, such teachings are absurd within an individualist paradigm. But Jesus is imparting an ethic for disciples who are to witness to the world not as isolated persons but as a community.

Similarly, we cringe at the story of the rich man whom Jesus counsels to sell all his possessions (Mark 10:17-22). Only a handful of saints could ever do that, we think. But we miss that this story is part of Jesus' teaching on a new way of communal economic sharing (10:28-31), a way of living that Jesus insists is both practical and possible. Gospel economics are not a matter of heroic individualism but are rooted in ancient covenantal practices.

Paul's writings have been particularly skewed by the individualist paradigm. As Krister Stendahl and other biblical scholars have argued, we moderns read Paul through the lens of Augustine, Luther, and the introspective conscience of western individualism. As a result, Paul is diluted into a theologian of personal salvation with a minimal or even conservative social viewpoint. Yet scholars like Neil Elliott, Elsa Tamez, and Ched Myers have helped increase understanding of Paul as a builder of communities very much rooted in Jesus' radical vision.

How can we begin to put aside this filter of individualism so endemic to our own culture? A primary way is to situate ourselves within a community as the context for our Bible reading. Within our Alternative Seminary, we've encouraged study group mem-

bers to covenant together as community. (In fact, a small house church grew out of our first study groups; other groups have formed prayer circles or have continued to meet for more life-sharing and discernment.)

Structuring our lives so that we read Scripture within a committed community of fellow believers and disciples is a fundamental challenge to our cultural values. Whether such groups happen through a church, an intentional community; or some other structure, they would ideally include serious life-sharing, reflection on our social context, mutual accountability, and prayerful attention to the presence of God's Spirit. The core biblical image of covenant is itself a guide for our Bible study.

A SECOND OBSTACLE TO BIBLICAL LITERACY is our tendency to overspiritualize scriptural texts. For centuries, the Christian church has struggled with the theological tension inherent in the doctrine of Incarnation, which was colored by the early influence of Greek thinking. Unlike the holistic understanding of the Hebrews, in which the natural and divine were interactive and indivisible, the Greek mind tended toward platonic separation of spirit and matter. The undertow of this spiritual-material split has often led to a diminution of the material and a belief that the Christian life is primarily about the realm of the Spirit, as opposed to our fallen, earthly life.

As this dualistic theology evolved, church leaders stressed symbolic and allegorical understandings of biblical texts. Scriptural images drawn from ordinary human life and the created order were read as pointing to "heavenly things" and matters of the soul. As a result, the overwhelming biblical testimony regarding matters of money, power, possessions, justice, violence, and community relationships is often marginalized, allegorized away, or rendered invisible.

This overspiritualizing of Scripture has often played into the hands of ecclesiastical powers that blatantly pervert and trample on biblical ethics and practices. We see church leaders taking on the secular trappings of hierarchy and princely supremacy, "lording it over" the people, in direct violation of Jesus' teaching about power among the disciples (Mark 10:42-45, John 13:12-16). Churches and denominations amass great wealth, defying New Testament community practices, while entreating the poor to look for "riches in heaven."

Jesus' own prayer is instructive: "on earth as it is in heaven." The complex narratives about covenant and kingship

in the Hebrew Bible are not mere foreshadowings of the heavenly reign of Christ, but genuine struggles over power dynamics in human governance and community. Jesus' parables, while yielding many textures of meaning, fundamentally address basic issues of land and food as expressions of God's will—in complete continuity with the covenantal and prophetic traditions of the Israelites. Jesus' crucifixion, though it is theologically understood as part of God's salvific plan, was also very clearly the execution of a political rebel who challenged the imperial status quo.

Modern "liberal" Christianity has opted for an equally problematic approach. Seduced by post-Enlightenment rationalism, many liberal Christians have rejected much of the spiritual underpinnings of the biblical world. Embarrassed by miracles and theophanies, angels and demons, we want to downplay or explain as "symbolic" anything but the material and moral in the Bible. We reduce Jesus to little more than an enlightened sage, a noble ethicist—not someone filled with and offering us the incomprehensible power and Spirit of God.

Thus, much of our Bible reading is trapped between simplistic overspiritualizing and vapid materializing. We lose both the Bible's very real challenges to our social and communal practices, and the possibility of genuine spiritual power. We must recover a worldview that is more biblical, one in which both the spiritual and material dimensions are potent, real, and compelling.

Our biblical literacy is also compromised by limited familiarity with the broad arc of biblical narrative. More often than not, we consume the Bible in fragments. We know a few famous stories, some choice passages and quotes. But we are far less aware of how the revelation of Scripture functions as a whole.

In many churches, we experience the Scriptures only through the piecemeal quality of the lectionary. While the lectionary is a powerful tradition, if we depend on it for the entirety of our biblical understanding, we run the danger of receiving a splintered and distorted Scripture.

In academic biblical scholarship, we sometimes find a similar pitfall. Valuable tools such as source criticism, form criticism, and textual criticism can lead to the Bible's being dissected into pericopes, literary units, and fragmented threads. In either case, we lose the meaning, truth, and power of the story: a fundamentally coherent unfolding of divine revelation and the saga of communities responding to that revelation.

Such fragmented biblical reading
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increases our tendency to interpret passages outside their broader context. A telling example of this is the traditional interpretation of the story of “the widow’s mite,” recounted in both Mark 12:41-44 and Luke 21:1-4.

On its own (as we usually hear it), the story lends itself easily to moralizing about the heroic sacrifice of this poor woman, who gave of her subsistence. Yet this story occurs within Jesus’ “Jerusalem ministry,” in which he has been confronting the abuses of the Temple system and the corruption of the religious leaders who wield power in violation of God’s will.

This specific passage immediately follows Jesus’ excoriating of the scribes for—among other things—financially exploiting vulnerable widows, and it immediately precedes his announcement of the destruction of the Temple. Were we more attuned to the flow of narrative and the broad biblical story, we would see how this account fits into the pattern the Gospel writer is weaving. We would hear echoes of the Torah’s constant concern for widows, as well as the voices of Hebrew prophets like Isaiah and Amos, who condemned the religious establishment for exploiting the vulnerable.

So is the widow’s mite a story about boundless generosity and self-sacrifice—or is it poignant and tragic evidence undergirding Jesus’ judgment against the Temple state? Preached once a year, extracted from its context, this widow is offered as a model to encourage giving to the church. Yet in its context, it suggests a very different reading: nothing short of a condemnation of the use of religion to victimize those who are powerless.

ANOTHER WAY TO DESCRIBE this blind spot is our lack of adequate understanding of the “intertextuality” of biblical writings. The authors of Scripture and their audiences were steeped in the narrative traditions and unfolding history of a common people. All the writings, particularly in the New Testament, are filled with allusions to that tradition, and depend on a deep awareness of it for argumentation and exposition.

We see this most clearly in the epistles, where Paul and other writers explicitly quote Torah and the prophets (or make implicit reference to them). The writers call forth layers of meaning and understanding that their audiences would have grasped, but which we might miss unless we too are steeped in the broad narrative of Scripture.

In describing Scripture’s intertextuality, I sometimes think of the modern technological phenomenon of hypertexting on the Internet. Many words, phrases, and images in Scripture function like hypertext, linking the hearer or listener to other passages and narratives and meanings.

In the gospels, for example, Jesus’ “forty days” in the wilderness clearly link to the Israelites’ forty years of wandering in the desert. That simple reference situates the entire Gospel story within a broader context of God’s relationship with Israel.

Similarly, when studying Jesus’ feeding of the thousands, we might fail to see what would have been starkly obvious to the early listeners: These stories of “feeding in the wilderness” explicitly evoke the Exodus 16 account of manna, which is both a tale of divine provision and the beginning of divine instruction on economic principles and practice of the covenant community.

If we are serious about being biblical people, we must immerse ourselves in the whole Bible. We cannot afford to settle for a splintered version of God’s revelation. We must gain a fundamental understanding of the broad arc of the biblical story, so we can be more open to the power of the biblical revelation for all aspects of our lives.

FOR SIX YEARS, our alternative Seminary groups, guided by the Spirit, have become more attuned to reading the Bible. We have had powerful, exhilarating, disturbing, and transformative encounters with God’s Word in Scripture. And we have been reminded that loving God with one’s whole heart and mind includes the intellectual work of serious Scripture study.

We need to make appropriate use of biblical scholarship—but in a careful, circumspect, amid self-critical way. An awareness of the historical and cultural context of a text can shed light on how we might apply our faith in our own historical context. Familiarity with the varying styles of literature within Scripture can prevent misreadings.

Consider, for example, how modern scholarship has shaped our consideration of the Gospel stories of Jesus’ healings. We traditionally read these as acts of deep compassion for individuals in distress—which they are. But historical scholars have highlighted the cultural issues around “cleanliness” and “uncleanliness” in Second Temple Judaism, calling us to a more complete understanding of Jesus’ ministry. In addition to healing the disease, Jesus also liberates people from an oppressive social bondage and prophetically challenges a whole socio-religious system that marginalizes certain classes of people. This broader understanding has profound implications for our own discipleship.

Scholarly tools must not be the exclusive domain of professional academi-

cians. Lay readers and communities of committed disciples can and should make use of them—remembering, though, that intellectual Scripture study must always be balanced by a listening of the heart and by the faithful commitment of our whole lives.

We also must recognize the importance of scriptural interpretation that comes from the margins of society, far from the world of formal scholarship and intellectualism. Much of Scripture itself is voices from the margins—so we must read with an attunement to the margins. Bible study groups among persons who are homeless, in prison, in recovery programs—all bring different and exciting dimensions to understanding God’s Word.

I am also convinced that Christians must approach the New Testament with a greater understanding of its essential Jewishness—including the Jewishness of Jesus, his ministry and teaching, and the earliest communities. We would do well to avoid an overly Christological interpretation of the “Old Testament.” By reading the Hebrew Bible on its own terms, rather than projecting Jesus backward into the earlier testament, we can better understand how Jesus represents a continuation of the Israelite traditions. Our Alternative Seminary has had rich experiences of interfaith courses, where Jews and Christians together study and reflect on Hebrew biblical texts.

We have had to learn to free ourselves from assumed readings and meanings, practicing a “hermeneutic of suspicion” toward the standard interpretations of well-known passages. As difficult as it can be, we have much to gain when we approach even the most familiar biblical texts (Adam and Eve, David and Goliath, the Good Samaritan) as if we’ve never heard them. We must probe for fresh aspects, listen for new voices (including the silent voices), let ourselves be surprised. Occasionally, our Alternative Seminary groups include participants who were raised without religion or church and have never heard some of the most famous Bible stories. Invariably, such persons offer astonishingly fresh reactions that open us all.

I DO NOT MEAN TO SUGGEST that if we follow these suggestions for studying the Scriptures, we will finally “get it right.” Our goal must not be to simply substitute “progressive” interpretations for traditional ones.

I do believe, though, that our efforts toward greater biblical literacy can lead us to a more profound faith. And while we may have just as many disagreements and varying interpretations, I am convinced that our efforts to grasp the biblical witness more completely can lead us to a

more authentic discipleship.

Of course, the real test of any biblical interpretation is in the very lives of Christians, in our active discipleship. Jesus himself defied simple answers as to whether he was or wasn't the Messiah—he simply told people to look at the fruit of his ministry and decide if it conveyed truth and power. As activist-scholar Wes Howard-Brook has said, we must “stake our lives on the reading.”

For me, the ultimate clue to how we discern power and meaning in the Bible comes from Scripture itself. Genesis 32 gives us the cryptic but compelling story of Jacob wrestling with a shadowy figure who is—a human adversary? An angel? The Lord? This story becomes the foundation of the people who will undertake the great faith journey in history. Through this ancestor and his divine fisticuffs, the people are named “Israel”—those who wrestle with God—a people simultaneously blessed and wounded.

The truth of the Bible comes through a wrestling with the revelation. That wrestling happens with our minds, our hearts, and, ultimately, our lives within a community of committed disciples. A truthful wrestling will both bless and wound us. We take that blessing and wounding into the uncertainties of history and humanity, empowered to live as the people of God.

William O'Brien

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The Jesus I Meet in the Bible

I love the Jesus I meet in the pages of the New Testament. The loving Rebel who reveals a Father who will not be restricted to the rules conceived by the fearful power brokers in the culture of the day. The reckless Healer who dignifies women, children, the ill, (even the mentally ill? I dare to think so), and sinners of every kind. His wit, intelligence, determination, and above all else, His grace, strike me repeatedly. I love the surprises He consistently delivers to his contemporaries and to me. Like when He chooses to reach out his hand to

touch the leper who must have been as hungry for human touch as he was for physical healing. Like when He speaks to women with such obvious compassion and respect: the woman at the well, the woman with the hemorrhage, the adulteress. The way He confronts the systems of injustice with love: praising a poor widow for her gifts over the rich and refusing to use his power for violence. The way He challenges (sharply!) and comforts (tenderly!) His friends: Peter on the eve of His arrest and later over breakfast, Thomas in extending his wounds to the skeptic for inspection, Martha, in her compulsive service and in her grief over Lazarus' death. He is a Friend like no other.

I'm still fascinated by the depth of the revelation of His Person that is found in the gospels. I keep learning, no matter how many times I read and reread them. His courage and clean anger: turning over tables in the temple, preaching peace, non-violent resistance, and healing victims in the face of religious restrictions. He is able to disappoint others' expectations of Him (particularly his family's, where psychological baggage inhibits humans) in order to fulfill a higher calling. He is so free! I discover deeper parts of myself as I meditate on these passages repeatedly. Sometimes I'm paralyzed and need friends to carry me to Him. I'm not there by my own will. But He heals me anyway! Sometimes I'm overly bold and think myself accomplished and He is grieved by His love for me and must call me to abandon my self-preoccupation. Sometimes I'm startled by Him walking across the waters and must face hidden fears that disturb me and surrender the control I obsessively seek. Sometimes I'm appropriately powerful and He rejoices and uses me to heal others as I see in the pages of Acts. Often I'm reduced to amazed gratitude as He nurtures me and provides purpose for my life. I live into these

stories in ways that only narrative like this can offer. The Jesus I meet in the Bible shapes my life.

There have been times when I read the pages of the Bible and wept because I felt excluded. As a woman that can be painfully easy. There are so many references to men and their special place with God. I grieved for a long time that I related to a God who was different from me because He was He and I was she. But slowly I've begun to see in what I read a deeper truth. I read with new eyes and all that I've mentioned above begins to emerge. Men certainly dominated the culture in New Testament times and men wrote all the words we have, but look at all the references to women and their place in Jesus' life and work. Somehow the glory of that shines through. These weren't perfect men, nor were there perfect women among His followers, but still these glimpses of equality in love shine out: neither male nor female, Jew nor Greek. Not gender, nor race, nor culture, counts against or for us. There is no merit system with the Jesus I meet in the Bible. No privilege except that which we all share as people He loves. We all inherit as sons. All of us as sons, even us daughters! That's what I've learned. That's what I love. The value He places on us all is wonderful and demanding. That is what's set me free to explore my own failures and abilities as His follower, His friend, His disciple.

I know I've only seen a small bit of what is yet to be revealed. So I'll keep reading my Bible daily and keep listening to the Spirit enliven it again and again in my experience. I'll keep meeting Jesus again and again in stories I've known and loved and still will learn anew.

Gwen White

On E.T., Silas and the Bible; Lessons in Phoning Home

*We are again soldiers in an ancient war,
Seeking out some half-remembered shore
We drink our fill and still we thirst for more
Asking, "if there's no heaven, what is this hunger for?"*

*Our path is worn, our feet are poorly shod
We lift up our prayer against the odds
And fear the silence is the voice of God
And we cry Allelujah, Allelujah
We cry Allelujah*

Emmylou Harris, "The Pearl"

Thirty-three has been a watershed year for me thus far.

I remember way back when I was thirty-two eagerly anticipating turning thirty-three, for a number of reasons. It was Larry Bird's number, whom I grew up idolizing playing basketball as a wee tyke, it was also the number on the back of the Rolling Rock beer bottles, which I grew up idolizing during my high school and college years as a slightly larger tyke. Thirty-three also represented the embodiment of visual symmetry as I would pen the number on the 'age' line on all those forms I was forever filling out – it appealed to my balance-starved left brain.

Thirty-three has some slightly more profound historicity as well. Scholarly accounts of Jesus' life approximate his ministry beginning at this magic age. This factual nugget represents a dangerous precedent in that he quickly met his storied demise within the next three or four years of his life, depending on which accounts you read. I think that means I have some ground to make up as far as my

own "ministry." I am reminded of Tim Robbins admonition to Morgan Freeman in 'The Shawshank Redemption' – that he was going to 'get busy livin' or get busy dyin' as Robbins' character methodically digs himself out over the course of several years into that marvelous redemptive scene upon his escape. Writing this article represents my own genesis of digging toward redemption – an initial foray into the art and science of livin'... heeding the words of Moses to his people in Deuteronomy – *"I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses...now choose life, so that you and your children may live and that you may love the LORD your God, listen to his voice, and hold fast to him."* (Deut. 30:19-20)

My trek toward redemption has been defined by two fairly seminal events this year – seeing the film 'E.T.' in all its remastered splendor twenty years after its original release, and having my first child, Silas Emmanuel, be born. These events, though seemingly discordant, represent the confluence of many years of experience, thought and emotion.

There is nothing else that makes one feel so enamored with nostalgia more than having a film stick around long enough to reach its ballyhooed 'Twentieth Anniversary Re-Release.' I can remember as a just-pubescent boy sitting in the theater watching this movie, sobbing uncontrollably, as E.T. and Elliot said their emotionally charged farewells to one another. Now maybe it was just because I was a sucker for the Neil Diamond kitschy soundtrack, but I believe that this movie and the emotional response it inspired in me represented a great deal more. I had a similar experience watching the movie a second time, this time with my then-pregnant wife with me – although my sobs were a little more stifled in a failing testosterone-saving attempt to control my

emotions. It was a bit overwhelming to have the same emotionally wrought resonance with the farewell scene, to have all my fears of abandonment and loss played out on the big screen. In one brief yet timeless moment of cinematography I was simultaneously grieving over years of loss with my family and with my faith in God, while also remaining steadfastly hopeful for grace and redemption watching E.T. place his magically glowing finger so gently on Elliot's head, assuring him that "I'll be right here."

Voltaire has written, 'God created man in his own image and man repaid him in kind.' As a people of faith we struggle to understand and perceive the infinite with limited, finite tools – most notably our limited imaginations. In a desperate attempt to grasp the Divine we anthropomorphize God, projecting very human characteristics onto a suprahuman God through our broken relationships with the world. This was my experience as I sat in the darkness of the theater watching the farewell scene in E.T. – feeling the overwhelming loneliness and isolation of my experiences with my family and craving the saving, redemptive power of God that I had read about for many years in biblical narratives, but had yet to taste fully. Like E.T. I had felt the abject despair of being thrust into a lonely, threatening world, and longed for reunion with the 'mother ship', or in more biblical terms, a return to the paradise of the Garden. Adam and Eve had experienced a similar isolation after having eaten of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, blocked from their return by *"cherubim and a flaming sword flashing back and forth to guard the way to the tree of life."* (Genesis 3:20) By the nature of our brokenness we have been thrust from the safe confines of union with God, adrift with a burning desire to taste the fruit of that

union again. This insatiable thirst for the divine is manifested in very human ways as we long to connect with something transcendent through such means as physical gratification in sexual union, substance abuse or some other form of addiction. Even if the gratification is merely momentary, we are for that brief instant sated – only to resume the search even hungrier.

I can't help but think about birth metaphors these days as I ruminate on the subject of longing for God. I marvel at the journey that my son Silas made during his birth – from the warm and soothing aquatic confines of his mother's womb to the starkly bright and cold outside world. Resting in the calming presence of God is akin to re-experiencing the safety of a mother's womb. This imagery is pervasive throughout the Hebrew Bible as God longs for the restoration for the nation of Israel in Isaiah, "*For a brief moment I abandoned you, but with deep compassion I will bring you back. In a surge of anger I hid my face from you for a moment, but with everlasting kindness I will have compassion on you, says the LORD your Redeemer.*" (Isaiah 54:7-8). The English word 'compassion' is a translation from the rich Hebrew word, 'rachamin' which means 'enwombing.' What a glorious comfort it is to hope for the return to an all-encompassing love from our God as Mother.

All of these descriptions – re-experiencing the womb, returning to the Garden or, for E.T., hooking back up with the mothership – all share some variation on the theme of returning 'home.' This theme avails itself in generations of story telling and myth in a myriad of cultures, both classical and popular, from Homer's epic journey in the Iliad to Homer's escapades that invariably lead him back to Marge and the kids on the Simpsons. Each of us has an unyielding desire to return home, to experience the feast laid out in joyful splendor by the father for the prodigal son. Yet this quest is often marked by a flurry of energy expended in pursuits that distract us from the very thing we so ardently de-

sire – the communion with God for which we were created. T.S. Eliot has written so eloquently on the subject of returning home, "And the end of all our exploring will be to arrive where we started and know the place for the first time."

It is precisely this circuitous journey that Jesuit priest Thomas Merton has described in his model of 'true self' and 'false self' in relationship to God. In seeking union with the Divine one is consumed at times with the false self, that which is ego-centric, small and ultimately alienating and isolating. The false self remains individualized and fragile and one needs to continually feed this image to keep it alive – it is readily apparent how consumed the Western culture is with this false self as an entire community of materialism and self-indulgence has been fashioned around this identity. The false self remains separate from God and therefore relationship with God is something that needs to be attained. In contrast, the true self that we long to return to exists as pure and unabated communion with God – letting go of fragile ego boundaries to experience a change in consciousness. It is not something to be attained, rather it is something to be enjoyed as one experiences the freedom of being released from the fragility of having to be beautiful enough, smart enough or pious enough. It must be stressed that the false self is not 'bad', just that it is not all that one was created to be – the true self should never be confused with complete loss of identity, rather the self is preserved, not absorbed or consumed by God. The stark and complicated beauty of grace is that there is relationship between the human and the Divine – one ultimately has to make the decision to choose life, to say yes to this scary and mysterious journey in seeking God. This mystery has been embodied in Christ who through grace allows the relationship between the

human and the Divine to exist.

Granted, this is not easy stuff to wrap one's head around, but that is the very nature of mystery. Increasingly the population of the United States has identified itself as believing in God, yet are remiss to declare an identity as 'Christian', as the evolution of a perceived dogmatic and cold institutional church has left their thirst for something transcendent unquenched. One only has to witness the explosion of New Age culture replete with crystals, chakras and Della Reese from 'Saved By An Angel' to confirm the desire for a little mystery. My intent is not to demonize the institutional church, because it does serve as a template for the pursuit of the Divine, rather my wish is to raise our collective attention to incarnational moments and to implore the church to entertain the mysteries of life and of God as we seek more clarity in these often times fuzzy images.

Many times my own perception of the mystery of God is skewed by my inattention. That is why I am supremely grateful for the gift of seeing the birth of my son this past year to jolt me awake into the possibility of experiencing God in new and radical ways that aren't necessarily tangible. For a brief moment during Silas' birth I was able to move outside the limitations of my gray matter and rest in the transcendent truth and beauty of creation as the veil of my skepticism and disbelief was lifted seeing him burst into this world. Yet even in this time of great beauty and mystery I was grounded by the earthiness of the process – with all sorts of blood, tears and other body fluids to christen my little boy. This is one example of the many paradoxes representative of our bemused God – in the same instant being ethereal and earthy – that at the very least demands our attention and our faith as we continue to groan with all of creation for further revelation. We get these rare glimpses into the mysterious

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nature of God when the meta-physical and the physical collide in resplendent glory and humbling grace – we realize that we do not serve a small God, that He is bigger than all of our doctrinal boxes can contain.

It is through this lens of incarnation that we may glean the universal truth of the stories contained in the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament. These stories serve not merely as relative snippets of proof-text truths to be invoked to merely regulate behaviors or legitimize one's political agenda, rather they are profoundly accessible companions as we course along the path of obedience in seeking God's face. We can take great comfort in the vitality of the holy Scriptures as we become intimately familiar with the common yearning for redemption, as well as the privilege of having our own individual, contemporary narratives woven into the grander story of God and His people.

Then we can truly identify with these complex, earthy characters in the passion play revealed in God's Word – we become the wayward nation of Israel, described in Hosea as the adulterous wife. We become the unclean woman, broken and bleeding for years, desperately cleaving to Jesus' cloak in search of healing. We become the Christ – unjustly convicted, hanging on the cross, bloodied and unscrupulously abandoned, crying out to the Father, as a weary head drops in abject defeat. Yet through remarkable grace we also become the restored nation of Israel, betrothed in righteousness and justice, love and compassion. We become the woman freed from the bleeding and suffering with one faithful fistful of Jesus' clothes. We share in the joy and mystery of the resurrected Christ in triumphant victory over the tomb.

As we learn again to read this drama of God and His people we

can appreciate how time and time again these stories remind us of how the mundane details of our own narratives can become transcendent, thus allowing us access to the true communion with God for which we were created. Let me offer one final E.T. reference: remember that it was a collection of ordinary objects – found art items like an old record player, some discarded aluminum foil and a used Speak 'N Spell game – that was pieced together to become extraordinary, thus allowing our little alien friend to offer up his desperate plea and prayer for reunion. The ordinary of our lives can miraculously become extraordinary and in repeated moments of incarnation allow us to 'phone home' and experience the character of God in our own redemptive reunion.

Robert Rowen-Herzog

Readers Respond

Sometimes people offer us unsolicited materials. Most of the time we print what they offer...

Thinking About the Occult

From Clinton Ohlers

A few years ago I met an anthropologist for coffee. He was on furlough, back from Southeast Asia where he had been working for twenty years. He wanted to talk with a Christian about Christianity—not just as an academic exercise—he was considering becoming one. After the initial small talk, I asked him something I really wanted to know, "Why are you—an anthropologist—interested in Christianity?" In college I had divided my minor between anthropology and history, and learned well enough that professional anthropologists tended not to smile upon the spread of Christianity, at least not into the indigenous cultures they studied.

His answer had two parts. Living among tribal animists, he explained,

persuaded him that the supernatural existed. There were more phenomena that they attributed to spirits than he could explain rationally. Catholic and Lutheran missionaries also lived in the region where he worked. He had been deeply impressed by the missionaries' willingness to live in poverty out of love for their God. His animist companions, on the other hand, lived in fear of the spirits they sought to worship and appease. He wanted a God people loved.

Recently another friend asked me a good question about the occult. The Bible is clear, she said, that we aren't supposed to do things like contact spirits or try to converse with the dead, but what exactly is its reason for that? She added that it was like the Bible's injunctions against pre- and extra-marital sex. They are clearly there, but it is helpful to know why. I've been thinking a lot over a whole string of answers, but the more I think about it, the more I think the anthropologist understood it best.

God loves us and the spirits don't.

In the West, opinions concerning things such as Ouija boards, tarot cards, and the like, range from the idea that they are harmless forms of entertainment to the belief that they are direct channels to malevolent spiritual beings. As a more middle-ground position, a Christian friend of mine once argued that there might also be something akin to neutral spiritual forces that could be tapped through occult activities. He was, however, uninclined to pursue his theory further.

In the early 1940s, the writer C. S. Lewis proposed that our scientifically minded culture, inclined to view everything in terms natural law, might eventually switch from denying the existence of supernatural beings to viewing the paranormal simply as another natural force like gravity or electricity. Lewis considered this the most dangerous position, since it would make something innately harmful seem, as my friend mused, neither good nor bad, just there.¹

I recently asked Rod for his point of view as a pastor on activities like Tarot card readings. His comments reflected their potential harmfulness:

I, for one, do not take these traditionally fruitful avenues for Satan

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lightly. When in their presence I rebuke them in prayer and attempt to play a part in the spiritual battle they engender. I recommend that people do not play around with them, even touch them -- since they deal in calling on spirits (with a serious player, at least).

The New and Old Testaments address the occult in a number of places. Given our current cultural vantage point, it is Paul's admonition in Galatians 5 that I find most interesting. Paul writes, "The acts of the sinful nature are obvious." Among a number, he lists sexual immorality and impurity, hatred, discord, selfish ambition, jealousy and envy, drunkenness, idolatry and sorcery (v. 19-20). During New Testament times the term sorcery covered what we call occultism today: spiritism, divination, spells, curses, mediumistic practices of contacting spirits, and others.²

Why were occult activities obviously wrong to Paul's first readers? They almost certainly saw attempts at telling the future apart from God's revealing it as an act of lack of faith in Him. They may also have more frequently observed and recognized demon possession than we do, as in Acts 16:16-18 where it is linked with mediumship. While the New Testament was still being written, early followers of Jesus likely were highly attuned to the foundation laid by the Jewish Scriptures. In Deuteronomy, for example, God warned that there should be no one among God's people who "practices divination . . . interprets omens . . . or casts spells, or who is a medium, a spiritist, or who consults the dead" (Deut. 18:10-11). So harmful were mediumistic practices that God mandated in His Covenant community, under the Law, to practice them was a capital offense (Leviticus 20:27).

To seek out the guidance of spirits and follow God's will at the same time is a profound contradiction. Perhaps the most sublime case of systemic oppression was told to me by a friend who grew up in the Philippines. Her father spent close to two decades there translating the New Testament into a local tribal dialect. Ancestor worship was the cultural tradition. To my friend's mind, a pattern emerged. In times of crisis, a family would call a local shaman to divine the cause. The shaman would seek out the spirits of the deceased and typically discover one who required the sacrifice of a valued animal in his or her

honor. The resulting sacrifice and feast would represent a substantial economic hardship. Unfortunately, the pattern would be reinforced by the apparently coincidental end of the crises. After one incident, my friend's family put a young girl through high school after her family sacrificed the livestock set aside to pay for it at the command of a deceased ancestor.

In my own spiritual journey, I became a Christian shortly after a period of interest in South American shamanism. I began to practice Ananda Marga Yoga in order to achieve the meditative states necessary for shamanistic spirit journeying. While I wasn't convinced that the supernatural really existed, nor did I achieve guru status in meditation, one thing did become clear: every religious tradition which sought to interact with spirits recognized a great number of nefarious ones. As one South American shaman put it, a certain class of them, were "always trying to deceive." On the cusp of the '90s, this was something that the American New Age movement seemed to downplay if not ignore. This worried me. If merely psychological, "spirit contact" could really distort your thinking. If real, it would be a hazardous route to spirituality.

A few years after becoming a Christian, I had my hunch tangibly reinforced at a church seminar. During a time of prayer that followed a young woman fell to the ground, manifesting demonic possession. A Kenyan friend of mine, experienced in deliverance ministry, along with a few others, immediately began to minister to her with prayer. The incident passed, but was not resolved at that time. Following up later, I learned she had been coming to church after being involved in the occult. It was not until after she renounced her involvement and turned away from it that she was able to experience full deliverance.

Occult practices are simply becoming more and more a part of our common cultural experience. At one end, they are accepted in the mainstream as viable spiritual options. At the other, they even make successful marketing tools for private businesses—take, for example, the regular tarot card readings at the popular dinner spot, Rembrandt's, here in Philly.

Part of the danger is the apparent innocence of many occult activities. Exposure to the demonic may not result only from a straight-forward pursuit of the spiritual entities. The "game" nature of

many of these things also serves as a seemingly harmless port of entry. Typical progression of involvement can go from "playing a game," to thinking there is something to the game and pursuing it further, followed by seeing the game as a "device" that makes contact with spirits possible, to at higher levels, scrapping the game as a mere prop and contacting spirits directly.

To recap Paul's point, the truth is that our quest to fulfill legitimate spiritual desires can go as wrong as our quest to fulfill physical ones. We shouldn't maintain nonchalant or "middle-ground" attitudes toward the occult. We also should not live in fear of it, or of involvement we may have had in the past. Like all of the sins in Galatians 5, we are to repent, turn from them, and if they continue to maintain a hold on our lives, seek further ministry from our brothers and sisters in Christ. As surely as light drives out darkness, God has a remedy: "Live by the Spirit" (v. 16).

¹ C.S. Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters* (New York: Collier Books, Revised, Macmillan paperback edition, 1982), 33

² Edward F. Murphy, *Handbook for Spiritual Warfare* (Nashville, Tenn.: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1992) 164

Goal Check *April-June 2002*

This is a regular feature of this publication. We want everyone to have some facts so we can have authentic dialogue! We adopted these goals in October of 2001 and January of 2002. Every quarter we evaluate our progress toward meeting them.

Network Goals

- **Deepen our skills for growing our cell network and encouraging the process of coming to faith in Jesus Christ.**

We have had significant Cell Leader Training Times and also trained Prospective Cell Leaders.

- **Assign Circle Venture to help us share our resources.**

Our CV Director, Pam Rowen-Herzog, has re-envisioned the day-to-day work of Circle Venture.

- **Create more mission teams to lead us in particular aspects of ministry.**

The Orkney House Team formed. The Frederick Douglass Support Team took the first steps and accomplished another project. The Computers Partners Team is still re-forming. A team called The Shalom House Team had a formation meeting. An prospective Arts Show Team held a showing. The Venue Team met and took first steps to forming.

- **Develop our capabilities for helping new and old believers to mature in Christ.**

Our classes in Center City on the Art of Christian Meditation and Friendship in Proverbs have been helpful. We have done substantial work on an overall strategy.

- **Perfect the means we use to grow love and connect our mission as a network of cells and congregations.**

No significant development.

- **Increase the activity of our Damascus Road Team in overseeing our structures and training further people.**

New team members received training.

- **Better organize our people to extend the kingdom by reimagining the communication of our vision for a network of cells and congregations lead by a team of Cell Leader Coordinators and Pastors.**

Our Cell Leaders have deepened in their understanding and in regularly communicating the life of the network in their cells. We updated our Resource Persons list.

- **Hold quarterly training times based on an updated version of our "Public Meeting Plan."**

Devin Greenwood and Rod White have combined to plan two worship team leaders meetings this year. We have long-term plans and a developing website for sharing among the network teams.

Congregational Goals

Center City

- **Organize a series of events that get us out of our "box."**

No significant development.

- **See a visible increase in our diversity through the work of our Damascus Road Team and our united attempts to help everyone bridge barriers.**

No significant development.

- **Be ready to move or expand our location by February, when our present lease ends.**

Paul Kohl and The Next Building Team and the Venue Team have both done a lot of research, but with few results. The Atlantic Conference Bishop has promised help in raising funds for a possible purchase.

- **Initiate experiments in corporate prayer, and experience the work of gifted intercessors organized for regular prayer.**

Lent finished well. There has been little further development.

- **Raise \$120,000 for our Common Fund from October 2001 to September 2002.**

From January-June we received \$49,470, about \$11,000 less than our 2002 goal.

- **Show compassion in Center City in new, practical ways under the leadership of Circle Venture and Circle Counseling.**

No significant new development.

- **Improve the tools we use to work together and improve the means we use to tell people about how they can share their time, money and gifts.**

We created a class on Being and Doing Good Effectively. We helped artists find a viewing. We reformed the Radius as a quarterly "newspaper."

Northwest

- **Cultivate relationships with the surrounding community – including the people, schools, businesses, churches and community organizations.**

The Super Bowl Party helped. A Step Team and other area groups have used the building.

- **Continue to build a sense of community among the current membership.**

Ongoing, incremental progress.

- **Expand the number of covenant members.**

The New Dimensions members were officially combined with the Circle of Hope members.

- **Continue to improve the quality of the building. This would include having at least one kitchen operational.**

Much improvement has been made.

- **Build an effective ministry to youth and young adult.**

A Youth Mission Team is in the works. We are getting ready to host the CCDA Youth Convention this summer. Significant contacts have been made through Hope Café.

- **Increase the level of security during the public meeting.**

No significant action.

- **Continue to develop an effective worship time that is rich and dynamic and that allows us to experience God in a deep and meaningful manner.**

Consistent improvement.