

GOOD NEWS FOR THE STRUGGLING CLASS

Charles D. Uken
chuckuken@aim.com

September, 2019

To the memory of my mother

Theressa Roskamp Uken (1918-2008)

a widow, and elementary public school teacher

who struggled with uncertainty about her eternal salvation
until she found release by praising God for his providential care,
and whose passion it was to serve Jesus Christ and be his witness.

And to the memory of my grandparents

Bert (1894-1977) and Anna (1893-1988) Roskamp

Who provided a home on their Washington State dairy farm
for my mother, my brother and me (a widow and orphans) after my father died,
and who showed hospitality to ministers, missionaries and immigrants.

PREFACE

This book has been written from the perspective of a missionary going to a foreign country. Associating with and listening to the needy is like entering a foreign country. The chapter “The Struggling Class” describes the cultural values of America’s poor. Their homes are often in a different neighborhood, a neighborhood of trailer courts, rental apartments or townhouses. Most of them are not integrated into the social life of a church. Their family structure is marked by the brokenness of infidelity and divorce. Children often grow up without a faithful, loving and committed father. A large percentage negotiate complex government assistance programs that offer rental and food assistance, social security disability income or child supplemental income, and health care. Young men may be sucked into gang life and spend some time in jail or prison. While addiction and abuse affect people of every social strata, their effects devastate the lives of the poor.

I use the term struggling class because the poor struggle to survive and expend considerable effort and ingenuity to do so. It is a term with which we can all identify. It focuses on people’s abilities and not on their insufficiencies or inabilities. In some ways their struggle differs from ours and in other ways it is the same. We can stand together in the struggle.

The good news is that God is that God has a special concern and providential care for the poor and marginalized.¹ He is a just God. He will repay those who enslave and take advantage of the weak. He is the liberator of slaves and the savior of sinners. Those of the struggling class are victims of an entertainment industry that glorifies power and sexual liberty. Infidelity is the new cultural norm. Thus, children of the struggling class grow up without the parental guidance that God intended that every family should provide. God sees when women are abandoned by their lovers, and he knows how women can be a lure to young men who have no self-discipline or moral anchor. God does not hold the sinful guiltless.

Because of God’s special concern for the poor and sinners , he sent his Son to live among the poor. This Son was born to poor parents, lived in Egypt as a refugee, was received gladly by the poor of the land, rejected by the authorities, and died only owning the clothes on his back.

The next major section of the book describes salvation as an invasion of this world by a foreign Lord. The world belongs to God by right since he is the Creator, but because of the rebellion of human sinfulness and demonic power, it is being held under

¹ In his article, “The Lord’s Motivated Concern for the Underprivileged,” in the Calvin Theological Journal, 1980, Vol. 15(1), pp. 5-26 David H Engelhard shows that as part of God’s covenant people the disenfranchised in Israel had primary rights that included being the recipients of the harvest gleanings, the third-year tithe, and just protection in court. Also, see the NIV Study Bible note on Exodus 22:21-27 for references from the writings of Moses, the psalmists, the prophets, and the teaching of Jesus that state that the poor and defenseless are objects of God’s special concern and providential care..

the dominion of darkness and the lie. In the presentation of the good news, Jesus is described as bringing heaven to earth. He said, "The kingdom of God has come near." We know what heaven, the kingdom of God, is like through the miracles and teaching of Jesus. In heaven, the new creation is freed from the curse of sin. People will love and adore God and they will love other people with generosity and concern for their welfare. There will be no brokenness, no separation between God and man, nor separation that divides people.

In the presentation of the gospel, the Bible explains clearly how people become like the god, or gods they serve. Those who serve false, human-made gods, will become like them and will suffer their doom. Our God is the Creator of heaven and earth (Genesis 1:1) and he is alive and active, able to help and defend his people (Psalm 115:3, 9-13), Gods made by humans, are unable to save anyone (Is 44:9-20; 56:5-7) and will be destroyed. If Israel ignored God's commands and began to worship idols, God would judge them severely, "I will destroy your high places, cut down your incense altars and pile your dead bodies on the lifeless forms of your idols, and I will abhor you. (Leviticus 26:30).²

The call of the gospel, as taught by Jesus, is to repent. We, like Jesus, call men to forsake idolatry and turn to God. The call is to believe the good news, to trust in Jesus for the forgiveness of sins and to submit to him in faithful obedience. He calls us to become his disciples, take up our cross, and follow him (Luke 9:23). This challenge is directed at both rich and poor alike. Jesus called Peter and John, he called the rich, young ruler, and he called the woman taken in the act of adultery. The call was the same for them all, and today he calls us as well.

In the section on discipling the struggling class, we recognize the call of the gospel to bring every aspect of life under the control of God. Much of the lifestyle of the struggling class is self-defeating. It perpetuates a life of brokenness and poverty. Infidelity must stop. Those who are lazy must get back to work (2 Thessalonians 3:11-12), even though they consider the work demeaning and ill-rewarded. The abusive and the addicts must learn to love, to praise God, to be reconciled, to forgive and to be forgiven.

In the final section of the book we are challenged to "do church" in such a way that those of the struggling class can not only participate but also lead. Their testimony of God's liberating power can be an example to others in their orbit of relationships. Since they, like us, have received the Holy Spirit, they can bear witness of God's love and make disciples for Christ. The church organization must not be dependent upon

² See Ezekiel 30:18, Nahum 1:14 concerning the destruction of the idols of Memphis and Nineveh, respectively. Nebuchadnezzar dreamed of a great statue that represented various world kingdoms beginning with Nebuchadnezzar's Babylonian Empire. The statue was destroyed by a rock cut out, but not by human hands, and it filled the whole earth (Daniel 2:31-35). That rock represented the kingdom that God would set up and that would never be destroyed. It would "crush all those kingdoms and bring them to an end, but it will itself endure forever." (Daniel 2:44).

expensive buildings or a professional clergy. Programs must be simple, Biblically sound, and reproducible over and over again in any setting.

It is my prayer that you the reader might understand and put into practice Jesus' mandate to "proclaim good news to the poor" and freedom for the oppressed. (Luke 4:18).

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INTRODUCTION

The Bible has good news for struggling class. Salvation in all of its richness is for those who are fallen, broken, weak, rejected, down-cast, passed by, poor, sick, marginalized, oppressed, burdened, despised and overlooked. God took pity on his chosen people when they were slaves, in bondage in Egypt; and he delivered them through Moses, with signs and wonders, and brought them to the Promised Land. Jesus said that he came to seek and to save that which was lost. He called those who were weary and burdened to come to him and find rest for their souls (Matthew 11:28). Paul said that God chose the lowly, the weak, the despised and uneducated (foolish) of this world (1 Corinthians 1:26-27).

This salvation comes to people, not through merit or good works, but solely by grace through faith in Jesus Christ (Ephesians 2:5, 8). The payment for sin and the work of perfect obedience has already been accomplished by Jesus through his incarnation, ministry, death, resurrection and ascension to heaven to intercede for us. As a result, those who were far away have been brought near and united with him through the working of the Holy Spirit in their hearts (Ephesians 2:14-18). In fact, the prodigal who squandered his father's inheritance and returned home with the rags on his shoulder was celebrated with more honor than the elder son who was always with his father (Luke 15:11-32).

In the dramatic telling of the imprisonment of Paul and Silas in Philippi, when an earthquake opened the prison doors, and the jailer ask, "What must I do to be saved," Paul replied, "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved—you and your household" (Acts 16:31). Then Paul and Silas "spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all the others in his house" (Acts 16:32). After the jailer washed their wounds, "then immediately he and all his household were baptized." (Acts 16:33). Evidently, slaves were included when whole households embraced the faith and were baptized. In his instructions for family living Paul addresses husbands, wives, children and slaves (Ephesians 5:21-6:9). So even though there was a hierarchy of authority, when it came to participation in the sacrament of the Lord's Supper all come as equals. Paul sharply rebuked the Corinthian church because some who were rich separated themselves from and went ahead with their feast, thus "humiliating those who have nothing" (1 Corinthians 11:22).

The church is the Body of Christ where all her members have been baptized into Christ and have clothed themselves with Christ, and where there is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor male and female, but are all one in Christ Jesus (Galatians 3:28). In this unity in diversity, all are given the Spirit and have received gifts for the building up of the church, the Body of Christ (1 Corinthians 12), so that even a

“lesser” gift is vitally important for the well-being and working of the whole body. Even married women who were known for their hospitality and good deeds, and who became widows and were on the roll of those receiving assistance, were known for praying both day and night (1 Timothy 5:5, 10). Older women were instructed to urge young women on how to live fruitful lives in the home (Titus 2:4-5), and thus partially fulfill Christ’s command to make disciples.

So, if this is true, why is it that these very people don’t feel at home in the common suburban, middle-class church? Why is it that they are ministered to, that is, helped in a multitude of ways, but are not invited to minister to others? Why is a church that sees itself as a close-knit, loving family perceived as exclusionary and elitist? Why do so many frequent large churches where they can remain hidden and unnoticed, and live a life that is not transformed to conform to the likeness of Christ? Why is the gospel presented in such a way that people can assent to it and be assured of God’s love and eternal life, but never learn submission and obedience in the face of hardship and rejection?

Church members enjoying the benefits of stable families, good professional training, and community connections have found jobs in leadership and management. Around them and under their supervision are those who belong to the service sector and earn little more than the minimum wage. This superior societal position has hindered them from developing meaningful relationships with the working poor. How many workers accept the invitation of a boss who invites them to church; and how many bosses fail to invite for fear of being accused of undue coercion?

Why do neighborhood churches disband when its members move to newer subdivisions instead of being transformed by evangelism and ingrafting of converts from among those who recently moved into the neighborhood? Could it be that those who moved followed a formal Christianity and had never learned what it meant to be weak and humble as children and to embrace, restore and build up the broken and fallen? Why didn’t leaders see the neighborhood change and make adjustments in ministry? Why does the church recognize the need to change only when its membership has been reduced to the old, the frail, and those who lack the energy to implement something new?

And why are churches stuck on an organizational model that demands huge outlays of money for building and personnel, like seminary-trained pastor, youth leader, secretary, music ministry, and more? People of the struggling class may have many things, but what they don’t have is a lot of money. So, while demands for ministry services increase, the resources diminish; and the result is that the church disbands and does not minister at all.

Finally, if by God’s blessing an emerging church of service-sector and blue-collar workers is organized, the succeeding pastor often has difficulty adapting and does not

have the same vision for growth and ministry. As a result, the recently organized church stops growing and often flounders.

God has transformed me through ministry to people of the struggling class. Because I have seen the hesitancy, the timidity, and the mistakes that churches in South and North America make, I have been impelled to write this small book about the good news for the struggling class.

THESIS

The thesis of this book is that the church should adopt a cross-cultural, world mission approach to ministering to the poor in America. Let the reader ask whether his or her church is overlooking neighborhoods of poorer people, like trailer courts and apartment complexes. I will be using “class” to refer to a people group that lives by a set of cultural norms. It’s a way of life with customs, habits and expectations. This people group is part of the “all nations,” races, tribes, countries and neighborhoods that Jesus commands us to disciple--to baptize into his name and to teach to obey all that he has commanded (Matthew 28:18-20). The goal is to establish culturally relevant churches that generate the resources, financial and people (servant leaders) to grow and multiply. A church is a gathering of believers who devote themselves to the teaching of the Bible, to fellowship, communion, prayer, and sharing their resources (Acts 2:42-44).

Our focus will be on what is involved in bringing people to God and into the fellowship of his family. While God is concerned for the welfare of the poor, his purpose is not merely to improve their sense of well-being and lot in life. His primary purpose is to bring people to himself. God had compassion on his people who were in bondage, suffering from the cruelty of their Egyptian masters (Exodus 3:7). God delivered them with a display of his mighty power and brought them to himself (Exodus 19:4) at Mt Sinai where he entered into a formal covenant relationship with them (Exodus 20:1-17, 24:3-11).

God delivered them from bondage, but the hardship continued as they were called to trust in God as they made their way through the wilderness. Before they entered the Promised Land, God would bring them through trials, testing and suffering. The people complained against Moses, but God provided manna each morning for food (Exodus 16), water from the rock (Exodus 17:6), and victory over those who attacked them (Exodus 17:8-13). God, the God who would heal them, promised not to afflict them with the diseases of the Egyptians if they listened carefully to his voice and did what was right in his eyes by obeying his commands (Exodus 26-6). Even if life was difficult, they were not to serve other gods like the golden calf (Exodus 32:1), nor participate in pagan festivals (Numbers 25:1-9) but serve God alone. Life was so hard that the “rabble with them” began to crave other food and that provoked the people to wail, “If only we had meat to eat! We remember the fish we ate in Egypt at no cost—also the cucumbers, melons, leeks, onions and garlic. But now we have lost our appetite; we never see anything but this manna!” (Numbers 11:4-6). When they heard the report of their leaders, the spies, about the strength of the cities and the people of Canaan, they grumbled against Moses and Aaron, “Wouldn’t it be better for us to go back to Egypt? . . . We should choose a leader and go back to Egypt.” (Numbers 14:3-4). After the forty years of wandering in the wilderness, they still had to face the Canaanites with their strong warriors and their walled cities before they could settle down in the new land. Even then, they were warned not to associate with the inhabitants in their worship of

pagan deities. God forbade them from entering into a covenant with them and intermarrying with them (Deuteronomy 7:2-3).

While God is concerned about the poor, he is most concerned about their bondage to the demons that tempt and oppress them (Ephesians 6:11-12). Once they are freed, God will make sure that their needs are supplied (Matthew 6:33). Jesus warns them, and us, that even inordinate striving after material and social welfare is serving the god of money (Matthew 6:24). Even if someone never climbs up the rungs of the socio-economic ladder, they can flourish and thrive for God where they are.

The term “struggling class” came to me as I thought about the people I talked with and prayed with who were waiting in line for a food truck, the single mothers whom I visited and who were getting government assistance of various forms, broken men who received social security disability, inmates at a county jail, residents of broken-down trailer houses in a depressed rural area, and many others. Every term that I could think of defined them by their needs and carried pejorative connotations. I also realized that these people were making it through life without me or the church. They did so with considerable skill and ingenuity. Eureka! They were struggling and we were not giving them credit for their ability and resources. They’re the struggling class.

Someone in the struggling class can draw on many resources—public assistance, WIC (food for women, infants, and children), food cards, rental assistance, childcare, education programs, emergency room medical treatment, rescue missions, and church food pantries, in addition to working for a minimum wage. In some ways, those who struggle will go “shopping” for the best deal, “What program will provide them with the most for their effort?” For instance, an “in church” food pantry ranks higher than waiting in line for the distribution from a food truck at the same church. The last place that an inmate wants to go after being released from jail is to the rescue mission and be counted among the homeless. Much preferable is to live with a family in their home and sleep on a sofa in the living room.

In my mind the struggling class is tightly associated with what the government classifies as living in poverty. However, using the term “struggling class” allows us to identify ourselves with them because we also struggle in multiple ways even though we have a better income. This term also allows us and even forces us to address the spiritual dimension of poverty. We, like them, struggle to make ends meet. We, like them, work to take advantage of the best opportunities. And further, like them, we can make a god of ourselves and seek to determine our own destiny, in our own way, to satisfy our own fleshly desires (power, lust, prestige). Our purpose is not to add another social or diaconal program on the shelf that a customer can choose to satisfy his or her needs. Our purpose is to turn our hearts to God--to listen, to trust and to obey his will; and then to help others in their circumstances of life to join us in doing the same. Our call is to leave the bondage of Egypt and take the difficult pilgrimage to the Promised Land.

Throughout my ministry I have been very, sometimes painfully, aware of class and social differences. The gospel needs to be translated into the language and culture of each people. Ministering among those with wealth or the lack of it is often trickier than going to another country and another language. The gospel addresses both the rich and the poor, but it does not allow them to separate themselves from each other. We will be writing about churches for the struggling class. These churches need the gifts and resources of the “privileged.” The believers who are financially rich, though, need to humble themselves (James 1:9-10), associate with the those of low position (Romans 12:16) and consider others as being better than themselves, and take into consideration their interests as well as their own (Philippians 2:3-4). The rich need to be freed from the bondage of wealth and understand the privilege of serving as equals with others in the fellowship of faith.

Our calling is to come alongside of those who struggle, even as Christ came alongside us with His Spirit (John 14:15-17). The world, both rich and poor, desires the fish, the leeks and melons of Egypt, and the straw to help make bricks (Exodus 5:6-21). It wants to please pharaoh and curry his favor (Exodus 5:21) instead of pleasing God and trusting in his provision. God is sending us like Moses to make him known among the people (Exodus 9:16) and call them to worship God through Christ (Exodus 5:1; 8:1; 9:1).

THE STRUGGLING CLASS

To use the word “class” in the USA is controversial. “We don’t have classes in America,” many say. “That’s what exists in more backward countries. We are a land of opportunity.” The reality is that people are more bound to a social standing and way of life than they are willing to admit. Everyone is born into a family tradition, even if fractured, that is difficult to break out of. To do so means going contrary to the expectations of everyone that we’ve ever known.

Class is not the same as caste. The lines that circumscribe class are mostly invisible and ill-defined; yet, the hold that class has upon a person is so real that a poor person can win a fortune in the lottery, and then squander it all within a year because of the spend-thrift habits that he/she customarily lives by. It’s the way of life that controls the person and from which it is difficult to free oneself.

We are all acquainted with class to some degree. In school, children are divided into age groups so that most eight or nine-year-old students are third-graders. Some larger schools may have an advanced third-grade class of fast learners while the others are considered average. Many school districts place disruptive high school age teens in an alternative education high school where a different norm of discipline applies.

A class can be most any group of people who share some affinity. Wycliff Bible Translators are currently using accelerated translation methods (MAST – Mobilizing Assistance Supporting Translation) to provide scriptures to small tribes so that its members can read God’s word in their heart language. To this date these people have had to hear the word of God in church worship and education in a trade language common to the whole nation. In a similar vein, blue-collar trailer park people have a “language” that diverges from the “language” of suburban highly educated professionals, yet if they attend a suburban congregation, they are expected to understand and be touched in their heart by the “language” spoken there.. In a formal work setting, receptionists in a doctor’s office, for example, are able to communicate perfectly well at work with both patients, nurses and doctors. However, placing the doctor and his or her family in the same living room with the receptionist’s family would probably strain relations. Expectations of how to correct a child’s misbehavior to what constitutes pleasant conversation will differ. Expect the classes to clash.

Let me compare our interaction with members of the struggling class to a traveler going to a foreign country. The first thing we need to do is get permission to travel there. We apply for a passport from our country that certifies our identity. We indeed are citizens of the USA (or Canada, for example). We have a language, customs and laws that regulate our lives. In like manner, we belong to the Kingdom of God, specifically the kingdom (nation) where Jesus is the King, Messiah, Christ. God is the center of our worship and we are regulated by the law of love.

When we travel to some other countries, we need a visa allowing us to enter. That requires us to send a picture, a form properly filled out and a money order to pay the fee. Our application is added to a pile of others that a consulate employee examines one by one. If our application is in order in every detail, a visa is approved and put in our passport. The whole process may take from one to three weeks depending upon the efficiency and the number of staffers allotted to the visa-issuing office.

In a similar manner our attempt to gain access to the heart of a person may be a long, laborious process of repeated, brief visits over an extended period of time. At other times it is quick and easy. A person may open their door and say, "Come in. Would you like a cup of coffee? Yes, you can pray for me: This is what I'm facing. I need help."

The application for a visa demands that we agree to abide by the laws of the country that we are visiting. The host country expects that we respect its authority. The people will be very hospitable, but they want to be treated with respect. We will certainly find some of their customs strange, but we don't have a right to poke fun of them.

To get to know these aliens and foreigners (to us), we need to find out what their relationship is to God. We already know that if it is not the Creator of the universe, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, it is an idol, a false god made by the imagination of the person, often the SELF (Jeremiah 10:6-15). That false god has its origin in Satan, God's adversary and the father of all lies. To know someone, we need to ask what they believe about God, and how that belief guides their living. What are the inconsistencies between a claimed faith in God and habits that are contrary to God's commandments? If they claim God's forgiveness and mercy, does this motivate them to change or to continue in sin with a calmed conscience? As we probe like this, we need to ask ourselves what are the inconsistencies in our own life between the faith we profess and the life that we live.

I like to take what people tell me at face value, to accept what they say as the truth of their reality. At the same time, I realize, that even as I am trying to impress them, they are trying to impress me. We and they seldom tell the whole story, and so we deceive each other. So, it's good to probe deeper, to ask questions, to seek further clarification. To push like this can be awkward and uncomfortable, even embarrassing and shameful.

If we want to peer into a person's heart to know what controls them (their god), then we must allow them to ask us questions and peer into our heart. There are secrets that we keep hidden, but if they are sins of any nature, we must confess them. In revealing our own frailty, temptations, and sins, we are showing others how we have redemption and freedom from the power of sin. We will be sharing how our sins are being dealt with in a loving way. Through God's love we are forgiven and overcome by the Spirit of Christ living in us. Being open like this is the greatest advertisement for the truth about God's rule (the kingdom) administered by Christ, the One loved by the

Father (Matthew 17:5) and by the resurrection shown to be Lord of all (Matthew 28:18). We will be demonstrating how we have been “rescued from the dominion of darkness and brought . . . into the kingdom of” Christ where we enjoy “redemption, the forgiveness of sins” (Colossians 1:13).

We have asked permission to enter their lives, their world. Our goal is to invite people to enter our life, our world. To them it is foreign. In reality, it’s God’s country, an inheritance and birthright prepared for them and us by the work of Christ. We desire that they make this their home, their present and eternal family.

We are called to understand the people that God is calling us to reach. Timothy Keller and Allen Thompson teach us the importance of demographic and ethnographic research as one of the steps in the church planting process³. The authors remind us that ethnographic research is not new at all, but is even found in the Bible. As practiced by the Apostle Paul, it was largely intuitive. When speaking to those of the synagogue of Pisidian Antioch, Paul argued that Jesus was the Messiah (i.e., Christ), the Son of God, by referring to the world-view of his listeners, a world-view derived from the Old Testament Scriptures (Acts 9:20, 22; cf. 13:14-48). In Athens, on the other hand, Paul was face to face with the Gentile, Greek pagan idolatrous faith and worldview. There, when talking to Greek philosophers he pointed out the foolishness of worshipping idols when one of their own poets had said, “We are his offspring,” referring to the Creator God. From here Paul went on to testify to the fact of the resurrection of the man Jesus from the grave, saying that through him God would judge the world with justice (Acts 17:22-31).

Most of the struggling class are not mentally or physically challenged. These demand a more specialized ministry appropriate to their needs. Like us, they need the love of Jesus and his salvation; but we do not include them in our challenge to disciple the working poor. Getting to know people of the struggling class, that is, of the working poor, is a matter of actually seeing people. When we shop at a supercenter like Walmart, we have a tendency to not “see” the associates. They are there to do a job, stock shelves mostly, answer questions of clients and help them find things, attend the checkout lanes or supervise a department. Every worker wears a light-weight shirt or pin with the store logo so they are easily identifiable. They are our go-to people when we need help, but have we stopped to look at the clothes they wear under their uniform or the shoes they use? Have we taken note of how they speak? Do they have an accent that reveals that they are immigrants or come from an immigrant home environment? Have we asked ourselves what their home life might be like, if they are single or married (do they wear a wedding band?), if they have children, where they live, or how they spend their free time?

³Timothy J. Keller and J. Allen Thompson, *Church Planter Manual, Redeemer Church Planting Center*,(2002,p.76ff).

While traveling, have we noticed the housekeeping at the motel we stay at? Do we notice the people at the fast food restaurant where we pick up a quick snack? Or at a more upscale restaurant, the receptionist, or the waitress who takes our order, or the busser who cleans our table and sets it up for the next party? Do we actually see the people who work at homes for a landscape business?

Now if we are the owners of a cleaning service, we take note who our workers are. We know them by the complaints or compliments that we received from office managers or from homeowners. We know them by whether they call in sick every Monday morning or if they are steady-eddie's that never fail. But I would guess that we do not know them as fellow believers in our local church. And when we hand out the pay-checks, we might not even want to ask ourselves how they spend it. We probably don't want to know about conditions at the place where they live. We don't want to go there lest we feel pity for their plight in life. All we want to know about is whether they do their job.

Another way to understand the struggling class is to examine census data. Every census block has information about marital status, income, age, and race. This is helpful, but it will not reveal to us the existence of a trailer court on the edge of a suburban neighborhood, nor does it reveal information about attitudes or political affiliation. The planning department of city hall may have a wealth of information about neighborhoods. It's a matter of getting to the right office and asking questions. The local police department can probably help you identify neighborhoods with high crime, or domestic violence rates.

Public schools will help us understand the struggling class. Walk into the school office and volunteer to mentor a child, or do anything useful. We will soon observe the order or lack of it in the classroom. We can easily gather information about the percent of children who are eligible for free hot lunches, and what the graduation rate is if we are helping at the high school. Interacting with both staff and students puts us at the heart of the life of the struggling class.

If we have identified a trailer court or a neighborhood where poor people live, we can walk the streets and talk with whomever might be out and about. We might ask if they have a prayer request, if they have a church where they regularly worship, or if they would accept an invitation to our church. However, if we walk the streets of the neighborhood, the residents might find that suspicious. It's much better to be up front and clear about our intent, and there is nothing quite as open as identifying ourselves as being from a local church and asking if there is a prayer need.

Still another way to know people of the struggling class is to talk with them as they stand in line to sign in to get food at the mobile food pantry that comes to our or another church. Most people who volunteer staff the sign-in table, unload the truck and bag loose fruits or vegetables, or help carry food to a client's car. Greeting the clients as they wait in line, talking with them, handing out tracts or invitations, talking with those

who are social or praying with those who express some need, help us understand them. When I have done this, people have asked if I am the pastor of the church. The people are eager enough to get help with food, and that in itself is a demonstration of love, but the people are also asking an unspoken question, "Do you care about me, for who I am? Are you interested in what I am going through?" Many, of course, don't want us to know lest we judge and condemn. They don't know for sure whether we are with them or against them, whether we understand. That's the beauty of prayer. We can stand with people, identify with people's hurts and needs, and pray their prayer to our kind and compassionate God. That's intercession.

The moral breakdown of society has negatively affected the struggling class more than other levels of society. For example, in the fall of 2012 the Grand Rapids Press reported that 51% of children were born out of wedlock, 71% in Detroit and 85+% in Chicago. Sue Thomas of MILive.com on July 7, 2011 headlined an article with these words, "Michigan's sharp rise in births to unwed moms means a lot more children growing up in poverty." Some of these have decided to live together without the formality of marriage, but probably most of these families are inherently unstable, some breaking up because of conflict, the lure of temptation, and adverse circumstances.

Children in these homes often grow up without a stable, loving, supporting father. They receive inconsistently applied discipline, move to a different home on alternate weekends because of custody issues, and are left to fend for themselves in choosing friends, watching television, the use of spare time and when and what they eat. In some school districts up to 100% of the children qualify for the free lunch program because of a dozen or so risk factors.

More than half of the people in the struggling class are without a regular church home. The older generation went to church when they were children. Their children don't go except for a vacation Bible school or maybe midweek teen club midweek if the church provides transportation. Knowledge of the Bible is woefully lacking. What they've heard is, "God is love. He made everything. He answers prayer. Jesus is your friend. Try to be good and be kind to others." Bible memory work and crafts are geared to emphasize these themes. I have seldom seen any story or lesson that taught about the judgment of God for sin.

For some, the church fits into the world of resources upon which they can draw on. Mobile food pantries are a way to supplement the food supply. It frees up money that can be used for supplies not covered by any assistance program, like soap, hygienic paper products, diapers, etc. If asked, some have told me what church they attend. Some tell me that they belong to a worshipping, serving community of faith. Others tell me where they get some assistance, or maybe send the children to a week of summer Bible school.

Some of the men have difficulty holding a job. They have difficulty being submissive to orders, suffer from chronic pain and are easily injured. This brings them

to emergency rooms for treatment of various ailments like back pain, carpal tunnel syndrome, etc. This may prompt them to abuse pain killers, alcohol or drugs. Eventually a doctor may declare that they are unable to work and they move to Social Security disability. A good number spend money on tobacco to the detriment of nourishing food for themselves and their children.

Where the family has broken down, meal time is an individual affair. Both children and adults scoop what is cooked in the pot onto their plate, take it into the living room, and watch what is on television.

Morality, or lack of it, is learned from peers at school or on the street, from social media, movies and the example that their parents give. They may hate how their parents treat each other, and yet adopt the same habits (shouting, for example) that will lead them to do the same thing.

Discipline is applied inconsistently, often with shouting, maybe screaming. A parent, more likely the mother, after a violent screaming scene, may hug the child and show affection as a means of making up and trying to reestablish the relationship. The relationship continues, but the child has not learned to obey and continues to do what he or she wants. Fathers often are not involved in discipline but when they are, they can be brutal and mean.

It would be a mistake to equate the struggling class with low income. It can characterize people with a broad range of wealth, background and neighborhoods. Once, I offered to help a "poor" worker--so poor that he couldn't contribute to the church--do his income tax report. I could do it for free since I had the computer program to do so. To my surprise, he was earning more than I was!

Here is another surprise, but it shouldn't be. Five years ago, I gave a series of messages at the evening service of a church that was without a pastor. Although the whole church was invited, the topics were specifically chosen for preparing a group of about ten candidates for church membership. One white family and two African American women attended the service with some regularity. On Thanksgiving Day, Dan and Virginia and their three teenage children formally transferred their membership to the church. Their oldest son Carl professed his faith.

The Van family had recently moved to Wyoming, MI from Colorado to be closer to aging parents. They sold everything and bought a house in foreclosure that badly needed repairs. They moved at the depths of the housing crisis and economic downturn. Dan couldn't find work in the building trades (he was a carpenter) so he took a job at \$10 an hour. After work he worked at installing floors, painting and repairing their small home to make it more livable. Virginia continued to home-school their teenage children and help her husband with the remodeling. Carl was very shy and didn't talk a lot, but he found part-time work.

When I visited with them and reviewed the extensive questionnaire for profession of faith with Carl, I noticed how sparsely their home was furnished, but it was clean and

well-ordered. The family had one computer that all of the members shared. Carl completed the questionnaire in the allotted time. Although he was quiet, he was very articulate when he met with an elder and me to share his answers and his personal testimony.

This struggling family had it together with God, with family and with church. The two African American women, however, did not follow through with their initial expressed desire to join the church. In comparison with the Vans their lives were filled with broken relationships. Although the church was starting to bridge the gulf between them, it did not have mentors who were equipped to come alongside them, love them and coach them to wholeness with God, with family, and with the faith community. The Vans, on the other hand, came from the same spiritual-cultural tradition and had little trouble making the transition to a new church.

Several years later, maybe seven, I happened to see one of the elders. I asked him about the Van family. Where they still attending church? He thought a while before answering. No, he hadn't seen them for quite some time. I was not totally surprised: Maybe, their teen children did not fit in with the other teens of the church. Maybe, they never found a place in the church to minister to others. Maybe, they became judgmental in regard to changes being made as the church moved forward. Was income disparity creating separation?

No one wants to be identified with poverty. I hope I'm using a more acceptable term, the struggling class. Still, one person reading this paper might say, "I draw unemployment, and this does not describe me." Political candidates use the term, "middle-class," a term that most common folk will accept, "That's me." Pastor Ondersma of the PIER Church where I belong, wrote, "Poverty has nothing to do with money, it has everything to do with broken relationships. The turning of the tide of poverty is the rebuilding of relationships. First with Almighty God and then with those who have experienced broken relations with others in the past."

When I read Pastor Ondersma's words, I was asked myself, "When and where did the struggling class begin?" Then it hit me. It began when Adam and Eve broke faith with God and they sought to hide themselves from him. They were expelled from Eden and from then on Adam had to fight weeds and till the ground by the sweat of his brow. His wife would suffer the pain of childbirth and be the victim of male domination and often abuse (Genesis 3). Their first-born son murdered his brother and became a "restless wanderer," a fugitive on the earth (Genesis 4:12).

Once a couple with marital problems came to my church. Ron, the husband, was a home builder, who drove a beat-up truck, got the work done, but without finesse. He had the reputation of being a hard worker even though he sometimes showed up at the work site late. His wife Claire was more refined and started to feel disrespected. They decided to take a marital counseling class together, but nothing changed. So, they divorced.

Not long after this Ron found a divorcee, the mother of some teens that came to our youth group. They started to live together and had a child. After a time, they married. This was a stormy relationship and ended in divorce as well. Some time passed and then I heard that Ron found another woman who was married to an alcoholic husband. She left her husband and, according to reports, found a harmonious relationship with Ron.

Ron never seemed to lack for money, but he lived in a house that was not finished. His son and his girlfriend moved into the trailer that Ron at one time lived in. Old vehicles were parked in the yard and beer cans littered the entrance. It was a picture of rural Kentucky poverty in Appalachia.

One day, when Ron was attending our church with his first wife, I received a call from his mother who was concerned about his spiritual welfare. I learned that he grew up in a solid Christian family, graduated from a Christian high school and had a brother who was a church elder, father of a stable family. It was in another church that Ron bought into the pastor's preaching on male headship, that the pastor interpreted as meaning the absolute authority of the husband over his wife. Surrender to the Lord Christ and servant love for one's spouse was not understood or practiced, and so in a matter of about 15 years Ron moved from stable middle-class to a life of chaotic poverty.

If followers of Christ learn how to identify with, communicate with, and minister to the working poor, they soon discover that he are able to communicate well with those in any social income level. It's not just the poor who struggle with addictions and relational problems. When the rich find themselves broken like the poor, they discover that the good news for the poor is good news for them as well. Jesus ministered to the common people, most of whom were poor, but a wealthy Nicodemus sought him out. He called Matthew, a tax collector who had considerable wealth, to be one of his disciples, and Matthew immediately left his tax collector's booth and followed. Prominent and wealthy women also followed him (Luke 8:1-3).

While poverty is more about broken relationships than it is about money or lack of it, the American church is woefully absent from neighborhoods and school districts populated by a large percentage of people that qualify for some type of assistance, even for something as simple as the free hot lunch programs at schools. And the church is absent because its leaders believe that it's impossible to start and grow a church where there is so little money and so few resources. I am sure that Jesus does not like to see this happening. Jesus came to minister among people like this.

I use the term struggling class because most other words define people by their lack—poor, for lack of wealth; needy, for lack of opportunity; underclass, for being at the bottom of the social scale; welfare class, for lack of resources; etc. The fact is that the struggling class of America displays a great amount of resourcefulness. Those on public assistance have learned how to navigate a complex government bureaucracy

and rely on a complex network of family and friends. Probably more than any other group, they live one day at a time. They are like the birds that do not sow, or cultivate, or harvest or store in granaries, but depend on what our heavenly Father provides (Matthew 6:26). An example of this is someone who draws unemployment, lives on reduced income, and only looks for work a week before his insurance benefit expires. And he usually finds something!

If we have identified the struggling class, and if we have gone through the, at times, painful experience of adaptation and learning the new language, if struggling people have stamped a visa in our passport as we tried to enter their world, then we face a further challenge. Do we pull people out of their world and bring them into our world, our class if you will? Or, do we see it as God's calling in our life to help them join together to form a body of Christ's followers in the world that to us is foreign? Will we encourage them to open their eyes to the opportunity to provide daycare for working mothers who live near them? Can they share resources and information to build each other up? Can they join together to sing God's praises, and to study the Bible together, and to pray for God to act in miraculous ways? Can we encourage them to issue visas, not just to us, but to others near them who need forgiveness and the power of the Holy Spirit to turn from sin and overcome it? Finally, are we willing to grant them a visa if they come to us, asking, "Will you allow me to share an insight or a reproof that will help you in your relationship with God?" I believe that our answer will be "yes" to all of these questions once we understand God's special concern for the poor.

GOD'S SPECIAL CONCERN FOR THE POOR

IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

It's good news that God, the all-powerful Creator, is the defender of the weak and lowly. "A father to the fatherless, a defender of widows is God in his holy dwelling. God sets the lonely in families, he leads out the prisoners with singing; but the rebellious live in a sun-scorched land" (Psalm 68:5,6). Psalm 146:9 repeats this theme, "The Lord watches over the foreigner and sustains the fatherless and widow, but he frustrates the ways of the wicked." He heard both Abel and Naboth's plea for justice. To Cain God said, "Your brother's blood cries out to me from the ground" (Genesis 4:10). Centuries later God told Elijah, "Go down to Ahab king of Israel. . . . He is now in Naboth's vineyard, where he has gone to take possession of it. Say to him, "This is what the Lord says: Have you not murdered a man and seized his property? In the place where dogs licked up Naboth's blood, dogs will lick up your blood—yes, yours." (1 Kings 21:18-19).

To be rich, powerful and well-favored, and then to be proud is very dangerous. God does not allow anyone to occupy his position. Hannah, the mother of Samuel, in sorrow and anguish cried out to God asking for a son. The Lord heard her prayer and in gratitude she praised God, "The Lord sends poverty and wealth; he humbles and he exalts. He raises the poor from the dust and lifts the needy from the ash heap; he seats them with princes and has them inherit a throne of honor" (1 Samuel 2:7-8). Overcome by the angel Gabriel's announcement that she would be the mother of the Son of the Most High, the One who would assume the throne of the eternal kingdom promised to his father David, Mary sang, "He (God) has brought down rulers from their thrones but has lifted up the humble. He has filled "the hungry with good things but has sent the rich away empty" (Luke 1:52-53). Jesus said at the end of the parable of the workers in the vineyard that the first would be last, and the last first (Matthew 20:16). See also Matthew 19:30, Mark 10:31 and Luke 13:30. In fact, Jesus said that the person who wants to be greatest in the kingdom must be the servant of all (Mark 9:35). His brother James, who became one of the principal leaders of the Jerusalem church wrote,

"Believers in humble circumstances ought to take pride in their high position. But the rich should take pride in their humiliation—since they will pass away like a wild flower. For the sun rises with scorching heat and withers the plant; its blossom falls and its beauty is destroyed. In the same way, the rich will fade away even while they go about their business" (James 1:9-11). The despoiling of the rich and powerful is seen in the great liberation and salvation of Israel from Egypt. God appeared to Moses at the burning bush at the base of Mount Sinai, and said, "I have indeed seen the misery of my people in Egypt. I have heard them crying out because of their slave drivers, and I am concerned about their suffering. So, I have come down to rescue them from the hand of the Egyptians and to bring them into a good and spacious land" (Exodus 3:7-8). After

seeing God's mighty miracles performed through Moses, having experienced the impoverishment of his land and the loss of his firstborn, the Pharaoh was finally willing to let Israel go.

And Israel did not go empty-handed. God made sure that they would be paid for their years of slavery. In the wake of the last plague, the death of the first-born, the Egyptians literally drove their slaves out. As they were leaving, the Israelites "asked the Egyptians for articles of silver and gold and for clothing. The Lord had made the Egyptians favorably disposed toward the people, and they gave them what they asked for, so they plundered the Egyptians" (Exodus 12:36).

So, if Egypt was brought low and Israel was exalted through her liberation by the Lord's mercy and power, she must never forget God and start to oppress the poor and the weak. If God opposes the proud, Israel must never become proud because of the prosperity that God provided. That pride would provoke God to become her enemy to teach her humility.

In the legislation that God gave Israel at Mt. Sinai in the wilderness through Moses, God made special provisions for the weak: the Levite who had no inheritance of land, the widow and the orphan, and the foreigner who lived among the people. God said, "Do not mistreat or oppress a foreigner, for you were foreigners in Egypt" (Exodus 22:21). "At the end of every three years, bring all the tithes of that year's produce and store it in your towns, so that the Levites (who have no allotment or inheritance of their own) and the foreigners, the fatherless and the widows who live in our towns may come and eat and be satisfied, and so that the LORD your God may bless you in all the work of your hands" (Deuteronomy 14:28-29). "When you reap the harvest of your land, do not reap to the very edges of your fields or gather the gleanings of your harvest. Leave them for the poor and the foreigner residing among you" (Leviticus 23:22). "If any of your fellow Israelites become poor and are unable to support themselves among you, help them as you would a foreigner and a stranger, so they can continue to live among you" (Leviticus 25:35). "If anyone is poor among your fellow Israelites . . . do not be hardhearted or tightfisted toward them. Rather, be openhanded and freely lend them whatever they need" (Deuteronomy 15:7-8). "Do not take advantage of a hired worker who is poor and needy, whether that worker is a fellow Israelite or a foreigner residing in one of your towns. Pay them their wages each day before sunset because they are poor and are counting on it. Otherwise they may cry to the LORD against you, and you will be guilty of sin" (Deuteronomy 24:14-15). The widows Naomi and Ruth were blessed by the faithfulness of a wealthy landowner of Bethlehem named Boaz (Ruth 2:2-9). Proverbs 14:31 says, "Whoever oppresses the poor shows contempt for their Maker, but whoever is kind to the needy honors God."

In the fiftieth year, the Year of Jubilee, Israelites who lost their land, their inheritance from the Lord, because of poverty or who sold themselves to pay a debt had the debt cancelled, were given their freedom, and could return to their land (Leviticus

25:13, 28, 54). God considered the land his and the people his tenants (Leviticus 25:23). Even though sold into servitude, they could not be made to work as slaves, but rather like hired workers (Leviticus 25:40)

In Isaiah's day the people complained that God was not helping them even though they offered sacrifices and fasted with prayers, but God's answer to this complaint was, "Yet on the day of your fasting, you do as you please and exploit all your workers" (Isaiah 58:3). He continued, "Is this not the kind of fasting I have chosen: to loose the chains of injustice and untie the cords of the yoke, to set the oppressed free and break every yoke? Is it not to share your food with the hungry and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter—when you see the naked, to clothe them. . . . Then you will call, and the LORD will answer; you will cry for help and he will say: Here am I" (Isaiah 58:6-7,9a). "Blessed are those who have regard for the weak; the LORD delivers them in times of trouble" (Psalm 41:1).

In his prayer at the dedication of the temple Solomon made this request, "As for the foreigner who does not belong to your people Israel but has come from a distant land because of your great name and your mighty hand and your outstretched arm—when they come and pray toward this temple, then hear from heaven, your dwelling place. Do whatever the foreigner asks of you, so that all the peoples of the earth may know your name and fear you, as do your own people Israel, and may know that this house I have built bears your Name" (2 Chronicles 6:32-33).

Although Solomon received the Queen of Sheba and treated her royally, he did not treat the Canaanites still living in the land that way. He conscripted them to serve as slave labor, a practice that continued to the time of the captivity (2 Chronicles 8:7-8). Not only did he oppress the Canaanite, he also took advantage of his fellow Israelites. To build the temple, and probably his other projects including palaces and cities, he conscripted 30,000 laborers from all Israel and sent them in shifts of ten thousand a month to work in Lebanon. He had 70,000 carriers and 80,000 stonecutters in the hills. A man by the name of Adoniram was in charge of the forced labor (1 Kings 5:13-16). After Solomon died, the northern tribes under the leadership of Jeroboam asked that his son Rehoboam "lighten the harsh labor and the heavy yoke" that they had suffered during his father's reign.

The northern tribes were torn away from the line of David because Solomon married foreign wives and worshipped their idols (1 Kings 11:1-5, 11). God used the social unrest provoked by the oppression of those outside the tribe of Judah to bring this about.

In a time of seeming prosperity, in the time of King Jeroboam II of Israel Amos spoke out against the oppression of the poor, "They sell the innocent for silver, and the needy for a pair of sandals. They trample on the heads of the poor as on the dust of the ground and deny justice to the oppressed" (Amos 2:6-7).

Even rich and privileged women were reprimanded, “Hear this word, you cows of Bashan on Mount Samaria, you women who oppress the poor and crush the needy and say to your husbands, ‘Bring us some drinks’” (Amos 4:1). He warned that the time would come when they would be taken (into captivity) with fishhooks (Amos 4:2). The Lord continues his charge against Israel, “You levy a straw tax on the poor and impose a tax on their grain, therefore, though you have built stone mansions, you will not live in them” (Amos 5:11). He pleads, “Seek good, not evil, that you may live” (Amos 5:14). “Let justice roll on like a river, righteousness like a never-failing stream” (Amos 5:24).

In the perilous time before the fall of Jerusalem, King Zedekiah made a covenant with the people of the city to proclaim Jubilee, freedom for the slaves. But then the king and the wealthy of the city changed their minds and forced the poor back into slavery. The word of the Lord came to Jeremiah, “This is what the LORD says, ‘You have not obeyed me; you have not proclaimed freedom to your own people. So I now proclaim “freedom” to fall by the sword, plague and famine’” (Jeremiah 34:17). In just a few short years the wealth, power and privilege that the rich enjoyed was totally destroyed by Nebuchadnezzar’s besieging forces.

When David was facing great danger, possibly when he was fleeing for his life from King Saul, and later from his son Absalom, David humbled himself to the position of the poor when he made his appeal to God, “But as for me, I am poor and needy; may the Lord think of me. You are my help and my deliverer; you are my God, do not delay” (Psalm 40:17). Even as king at the height of success and power, he understood that God took the side of the poor. Nathan came to him with the parable of a rich man who stole a poor man’s only lamb. By taking Bathsheba and killing her husband, David was trampling on the rights of the poor. Convicted of sin, without innocence to stand upon, and completely broken David pleaded with God for forgiveness (Psalm 51) and the Lord graciously answered (Psalm 32). He knew in his heart that God was the defender of the weak and the poor.

When we speak about God’s special concern for the poor in the Old Testament, we need to remind ourselves that God also calls the poor to moral responsibility. They are not merely victims of abuse or neglect. God calls everyone, both rich and poor, to be holy and righteous. In the Law of Israel, God reveals himself to be just. He tells his people, “Do not pervert justice; do not show partiality to the poor or favoritism to the great, but judge your neighbor fairly” (Leviticus 19:15). This a warning to all of us engaged in ministry to the poor to excuse their sin. We may understand what circumstances influenced the person to engage in criminal behavior. A child may grow up with the presence, love and guidance of his father, but that does not excuse his disobedience and disrespect to his mother. “Whoever disregards discipline comes to poverty and shame, but whoever heeds corrections is honored” (Proverbs 13:18)

Many of the poor are suffering the consequences of their own folly. Sloth and laziness will bring someone into poverty (Proverbs 6:9-11, 10:4-5) All hard work brings a

profit, but mere talk leads only to poverty” (Proverbs 14:23).. Those who conceal their sin continue to be plagued by it. “Whoever conceals their sins does not prosper, but the one who confesses and renounces them finds mercy. Blessed is the one who always trembles before God, but whoever hardens their heart falls into trouble (Proverbs 28:13-14). But if we have escaped the consequences of our sin, we must never gloat over the disaster of others lest we suffer God’s punishment in our life (Proverbs 17:5). I once laughed when my brother was punished. What did my mother do? She took me by the arm and punished me as well. Israel was punished for her idolatry, but the nations that scorned her and gloated over her also entered condemnation.

Yet God is merciful to those whom he has humbled. He let them suffer from their folly, yet he saves and redeems those who call out to him in their trouble (Psalm 107:6, 13, 19, 28, 41). We might think, “They are getting what they deserve,” but we should be careful lest we become proud and suffer the same fate. We need to humble ourselves before God, and imitate his forgiving and compassionate ways to others.

IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

God's concern for the poor and needy continues to be revealed in the New Testament. Besides writing more of the New Testament than any other writer, Luke also highlights God's special concern for the poor more than any other. Like a good reporter, Luke crafts his message by what facts of eyewitness (Luke 1:2; Acts 1:1) he relates and by the way he orders them. Like those eyewitnesses he is a "servant of the word" (Luke 1:2), not a creator of it.

What is God the Father doing by sending his Son into the world? His purpose for the salvation of the world is framed in terms of his love and concern for the weak, the helpless and the fallen, all those beat down by his arch enemy Satan. Satan, the deceiver, has exalted himself up with a desire to take God's place. Like the king of Tyre, Satan in the pride of his heart said, "I am a god; I sit on the throne of a god in the heart of the seas" (Ezekiel 28:2). Because of his pride, sin, and violence God took him down (Ezekiel 28:16). God did the same to all the other ancient kingdoms, including the corrupt government in Jerusalem, that raged against God's people [footnote: Isaiah 13-24; Jeremiah 46-51; Ezekiel 27-32]. By toppling the proud, God is opening up a place for the poor and humble to thrive.

Mary, the mother of Jesus, a young virgin received a visit from the angel Gabriel who announced the birth of a son through the conception of the Holy Spirit (Luke 1:35). The angel told her to name the child Jesus. "He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over Jacob's descendants forever; his kingdom will never end" (Luke 1:31-33). This what Mary celebrated in song when she visited her relative Elizabeth, the mother of John the Baptist, "My spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has been mindful of the humble state of his servant [That's Mary]. . . . He has brought down rulers from their thrones but has lifted up the humble. He has filled the hungry with good things but has sent the rich away empty" (Luke 1:46,47, 52, 53).

Luke continues his narrative. At the outset of his ministry, Jesus defined his purpose and ministry using a text from the prophet Isaiah. "Jesus went to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, and on the Sabbath day he went to the synagogues, as was his custom" (4:16). There Jesus opened the scroll that was handed to him, and he read these words from the Prophet Isaiah (61:1-2), "The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor" (Luke 4:18,19).

Jesus repeated this same theme when John the Baptist from prison sent messengers to him. John heard about all that Jesus was doing, so he sent two of his disciples to Jesus, asking, "Are you the one who is to come, or should we expect

someone else?” (Luke 7:19). Note Jesus reply, “Go back and report to John what you have seen and heard: The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is proclaimed to the poor” (Luke 7:22, 23; Matthew 11:2-4).

Luke’s emphasis on the poor can be seen by comparing his record of the Beatitudes with that of Matthew. While Matthew interprets the spiritual significance of the first and fourth beatitudes, “Blessed are the poor in spirit. . . . Blessed are those who hunger and thirst after righteousness” (Matthew 5:3,6), Luke simply writes, “Blessed are you who are poor. . . .Blessed are you who hunger now” (Luke 6:20,21). The poor, those who hunger and thirst, who seek God belong to the kingdom. All of their needs will be satisfied, as Jesus said, “Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened to you” (Luke 11:9; Matthew 7:7). The first and greatest gift is the Holy Spirit (Luke 11:13), but also included is our physical and emotional well-being in the life. “And do not set your heart on what you will eat or drink; do not worry about it. . . . But seek his [the Father’s] kingdom, and these things will be given to you as well” (Luke 12:29, 31; Matthew 6:31, 33).

Included in Luke’s report of the Sermon on the Mount are these words, “Do not be afraid, little flock, for your Father has been pleased to give you the kingdom. Sell your possessions and give to the poor. Provide purses for yourselves that will not wear out, a treasure in heaven that will never fail” (Luke 12:32,33).

A pharisee was surprised that Jesus did not wash [his hands, Mark 7:2ff]. Jesus then explained that what is inside the heart reveals whether one is defiled or clean. “But now as for what is inside you—be generous to the poor, and everything will be clean for you” (Luke 11:41).

Luke reports that on another occasion, when Jesus and his disciples were being hosted at a meal in the home of a Pharisee, Jesus said,

“When you give a luncheon or dinner, do not invite your friends, your brothers or sisters, your relatives, or your rich neighbors; if you do, they may invite you back and so you will be repaid. But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, and you will be blessed” (Luke 14:12, 13).

This reflects the God’s desire that the poor be at the table at the banquet of salvation (Luke 12:23).

All the synoptic Gospels tell the story of a rich, young, ruler. He had everything the world offered: wealth, youth, and position. In addition, he had a rich heritage based upon the Lord’s commandments, yet he was not satisfied. Jesus told him, “You lack one thing. Sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven” (Luke 18:22). Upon hearing this, the man turned away.

One person who heard the message of Jesus and took it to heart was Zachaeus, a chief tax collector, evidently wealthy and supervisor of other tax collectors (Lk 19:1-2). When Jesus indicated his desire to go to his house, he immediately came down from

the tree and welcomed Jesus gladly (Lk 19:6). In response to Jesus' message, he responded, "Look, Lord! Here and now I give half of my possessions to the poor, and if I have cheated anybody out of anything, I will pay back four times the amount." Jesus replied, "Today salvation has come to this house" (Luke 19:8-10).

Along with Mark Luke tells of the widow's offering of two very small copper coins. What value did Jesus give that? He said, "this poor widow has put in more than all the others. . . . She out of her poverty put in all she had to live on" (Luke 21, 3,4; Mark 12:42-44).

Jesus told a parable about a rich man who ignored a disgusting ("covered with sores") beggar at his gate. Lazarus was given a name whose meaning is "helped by God." With no personal name, the rich man's only support was his wealth and this was taken away at his death. Although rejected by man in this life, Lazarus was not forgotten by God in the hour of death. He was taken to Abraham's side, while the rich man was abandoned to the torment of Hades, the realm of the lost dead. Jesus implied that had he listened to Moses and the Prophets, the Old Testament scriptures, and been concerned about the plight of the poor (Luke 16:29), he would not be in torment.

And we must not omit the Parable of the Good Samaritan that teaches that our neighbor is anyone who is in need. We are to love our neighbor, especially one in need, as we would love ourselves. The Samaritan was neighbor to the man beaten up by thieves because he showed him mercy. Jesus said, "Go and do likewise." (Luke 10:37).

Jesus said, "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light" (Matthew 11:28-30). For people who were hungry and weary Jesus multiplied five loaves and two fish that he broke, gave thanks for, and gave to his disciples to distribute to a crowd of at least 5,000 men (Matthew 14:21). The significance of this was not lost on the people. They asked for a further sign, "What will you do? Our ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness" (John 6:30). Sadly, they wanted more perishable food, while Jesus was offering himself, the true bread from heaven, the bread of life (John 6:32, 35). Whoever believes in him will live forever (John 6:51).

Matthew records Jesus' last major discourse before betrayal, suffering and death. That discourse is capped with Jesus telling about his return in glory to sit on his glorious throne in judgment. As a shepherd separates sheep from goats, so Jesus will separate those who are his followers from those who are not. About his sheep, his followers, he says,

"Then the King will say to those on his right, 'Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I

needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me” (Matthew 25:34-36).

The Christian church, formed at the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on the Day of Pentecost, had as one of its identifying characteristics the selling of their property and possessions in order to give to anyone who had need (Acts 2:45). It did what Israel failed to do by not obeying the Law of Jubilee (Leviticus 25:8-55) the church did by the power of the Spirit. Each fiftieth year Israel did not blow the trumpet everywhere in the land to proclaim liberty to all (25:9,10). The slaves were not freed. The land that an Israelite was forced to sell because of poverty was not redeemed and given back to the family. Debts were not cancelled and the land did not receive its rest. In sum, the poor were not cared for, but rather exploited.

On the Day of Pentecost the Holy Spirit was poured out. The Apostles received freedom and power to bear witness to his resurrection (Acts 1:8), Those who turned to God and were baptized were “devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer, . . . They were together and held everything in common” (Acts 2:42, 44).

With the increase to over five-thousand (Acts 4:4) of the number of men who became disciples, some of the needy were being overlooked. Part of it took on a certain ethnic discrimination, by overlooking the need of Greek speaking widows. When the Hellenistic (Greek speaking) Jews complained against the Hebraic Jews because their widows were being overlooked in the daily distribution of food, the apostles did not ignore the complaint. The cries of the weak and marginalized were heard. The Apostles appointed deacons, leaders with Greek names, to administer daily distribution of food. (Acts 6:1-6).

Dorcas, whom Peter raised from death, was “always doing good and helping the poor” (Acts 9:36). Making robes and other clothing were just a couple of ways that she helped widows (Acts 9:39). The centurion Cornelius, who with his whole household (family and servants) was devout and God-fearing, gave generously to those in need and prayed to God regularly (Acts 10:2). Upon hearing Peter’s message, he and his household received the outpouring of the Holy Spirit and were baptized (Acts 10:44-48), in spite of the fact that they were Gentiles.

The Apostle Paul was concerned about the division in the Corinthian church caused by the exclusion of the poor when it gathered for its love feast, the celebration of the communion supper in memory of the Lord Jesus. He wrote, “Some of you go ahead with your own private suppers. As a result, one person remains hungry and another gets drunk” (1 Corinthians 11:21). They were not “discerning the body of Christ” and were thus eating and drinking “judgment on themselves” (1 Corinthians 11:29). The rich acted like club members at a feast while the “servants” looked on, wishing they could participate. These were not treated as brothers and sisters of one family, sharing

together on an equal basis—all being sinners redeemed by the blood of Jesus and participants in the benefits of his offering.

Paul also devoted two chapters in his second letter to the Corinthian church urging them to contribute liberally towards the offering of the Gentile churches towards the “poor among the Lord’s people in Jerusalem” (2 Corinthians 8-9, Romans 15:26, Acts 24:17). When the issue of whether Paul and the others who preached the gospel to the Gentiles were allowed to baptize their converts without first being circumcised, that is, being Jews, the Synod in Jerusalem gave its blessing on the practice. In reporting this decision to the Galatians Paul wrote, “All they asked was that we should continue to remember the poor, the very thing I had been eager to do all along” (Galatians 2:10). This was not reported in the Synod’s final requirements for the Gentile churches (Acts 15:29), but evidently was communicated to the delegates--Paul, Barnabas, Judas and Silas--by word of mouth (Acts 15:27), so much so, that Paul remembered it as one of the most important things to remember.

When Paul left Ephesus to go into Macedonia, he instructed Timothy to stay there (1 Timothy 1:3) and continue to administer the church in matters of worship, the selection and appointment of elders and deacons, and more. He was to devote himself “to the public reading of Scripture, to preaching and to teaching (1 Timothy 4:13). He also gave instruction about which widows were worthy of support and what their ministry in the church should be (1 Timothy 5:3-16). Provision for a ministry like this need to come from somewhere; so he tells Timothy to “command those who are rich in this present world not to be arrogant nor to put their hope in wealth, which is so uncertain, but to put their hope in God, who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment. Command them to do good, to be rich in good deeds, and to be generous and willing to share. In this way they will lay up treasure for themselves as a firm foundation for the coming age, so that they may take hold of the life that is truly life” (1 Timothy 6:17-19).

James, the brother of Jesus, wrote, “If a brother or sister is without clothing and in need of daily food, and one of you says to them, “Go in peace, be warmed and be filled,” and yet you do not give them what is necessary for their body, what use is that? Even so faith, if it has no works, is dead, being by itself” (James 2:15-17). He was illustrating the general principle, “Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world” (James 1:27).

The Apostle John in his first letter says that if we understand the love of Christ that led him to lay down his life for us, we will be ready to lay down our lives for other believers. “This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers and sisters. If anyone has material possessions and sees a brother or sister in need but has no pity on them, how can the love of God be in that person? Dear children, let us not love with words or speech but with actions” (1 John 3:16-18).

JESUS BECAME POOR THAT WE MIGHT BECOME RICH

When we talk about poverty and riches, it's profitable to look at who Jesus was in his humanity. Paul wrote, "For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich" (2 Corinthians 8:9).

To leave the glory of his preexistence to be born as an infant was a huge step in his humiliation on the way to the cross. But this was not all. Jesus was born into humble circumstances. There is no record that Joseph owned a donkey on which Jesus' pregnant mother could ride from Nazareth to Bethlehem. When they arrived in Bethlehem, there was no guest room for them, so Mary gave birth in a place where animals found shelter, and laid her first-born in a manger (Luke 2:7). Their first visitors were humble, rustic shepherds who heard about his birth from an angel who appeared to them at night, along with a chorus of the heavenly, angelic army (Luke 2:8-20). When it was time for Mary to go through the purification rite demanded by the law, and for Joseph and Mary to go through the rite of redemption of a first-born son, they presented an offering of a pair of doves and two young pigeons (Luke 2:24) because they could not afford a lamb (Leviticus 12:8).

Evidently Joseph and Mary settled down in Bethlehem where they found a house and Joseph provided for the family by exercising his trade of carpentry. Before two years had elapsed (Matthew 2:16), magi from the East supplied them with gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. But these gifts did not make them wealthy; because that same night, Joseph being warned in a dream, fled to Egypt to escape King Herod's murderous threat. There Jesus lived as a refugee with his family among others of the Jewish community.

By the time he entered his ministry, Jesus' family consisted of his mother, his brothers James, Joseph, Judas, Simon and two or more sisters (Mark 6:3). Joseph probably had passed away. Mary was a widow but not destitute since she had children who could provide for her. Jesus was a carpenter, having learned the trade from his father. His brothers may have learned the same trade, although we have no way of knowing for sure. This put them in the category of the self-employed, not servants in a wealthy landowner's employment or share-croppers on his land.

During his ministry Jesus and his disciples stayed at other people's homes (Matthew 10:9-11) and were supported by donations, some of which came from wealthy women who accompanied them (Luke 8:1-3). Judas Iscariot, acting as treasurer, carried the money bag, bought provisions for the group and distributed some of their funds to the poor (John 13:29). He also stole from it (John 12:6). Jesus' only possessions when he died were the clothes that he wore (Matthew 27:35).

Never did he use his divine power to accumulate wealth, prestige and power for himself or his immediate associates. Witnessing the multiplication of the loaves of

bread and the fish, the people wanted to make him king, but he sent his disciples in a boat to the other side of the Sea of Galilee, dismissed the crowd, and withdrew up a mountainside by himself to pray (John 6:15, Mark 6:45-46).

When Jesus next met the people in Capernaum, he explained why he would not repeat the miracle every day: He was the Bread of Life (John 6:48). If manna was a sign for the people to be faithful to God and follow Moses through the wilderness as his appointed leader, so now through this sign Jesus was making his appeal to the people to follow him as the One whom God had sent to give them eternal life (John 6:35-40, 53-58). They wanted him to serve them and supply their needs, but Jesus wanted them to accept him as Lord Messiah and to follow and serve him.

Jesus' life was in stark contrast to the Sadducees, especially those of the priestly class, and the Pharisees and teachers of religious law, all of whom held positions of authority, prestige and power. They enjoyed the wealth that came with their position.

Jesus was poor commoner and that was a scandal to the vested interests. Nevertheless, he saw everyone with a heavenly perspective. Everyone in his eyes was poor, needy, helpless, lame, lost, foreign, refugee, wretched, and sinner. He told the Pharisee Nicodemus, a prestigious member of the ruling council, "I have spoken to you of earthly things and you do not believe; how then will you believe if I speak of heavenly things?" (John 3:12). He needed to be born again. (John 3:3). He had to receive the kingdom like a little child (Mark 10:15). Children saw and understood. They accepted without reserve, without measuring the consequences, implicitly trusting the One who was leading them. On the other hand, the learned scribes and Pharisees were "blind guides" (Matthew 23:16), unable to discern the truth.

The man born blind, most likely a beggar, was healed by Jesus, He accepted and defended his Healer before he saw him (John 9:31). Then, when he saw Jesus, he believed (John 9:38). To the Pharisees who were observing, Jesus said, "If you were blind, you would not be guilty of sin, but now that you claim you can see, your guilt remains" (John 9:41).

Likewise, the rich man would not receive the "treasure in heaven" unless he sold everything, gave to the poor, and followed Jesus (Mark 10:21). Had he done so, he would have received a hundred times as much in the present age—with persecutions—and in the age to come eternal life (Mark 10:29-30). He, like so many, was blinded by the world—the cravings of sinful man, the lust of the eyes and the boasting of what he has and does (1 John 2:16).

This was not the full extent of Jesus' poverty. That was exposed by his ignominious death. Betrayed by one of his disciples and defended by a scared fisherman with a sword, Jesus was arrested and led away for trial and death. Even his clothes were divided among the soldiers who crucified him. But God did not abandon his Son to the realm of the dead, nor let his faithful one see decay (Psalm 16:10; Acts 2:27; Acts 13:35), but raised him from the grave and gave him all authority in both

heaven and earth (Matthew 28:18). Paul in his letter to the Philippians tells us to have the “same mindset as Christ Jesus,” who made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, and humbled himself by becoming obedient to death. “Therefore, God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.” (Philippians 2:6-11).

Now if that is the way God heard the prayer of the Son he loves, rejected and abandoned by men, God will also hear our cry for help considering his love for us (Ephesians 2:4-6). He will not abandon us to death, but raise us up at the coming of Christ at the Last Day (1 Thessalonians 4:13-17; 1 Corinthians 15).

JESUS COMMAND TO MAKE DISCIPLES

THE COMMAND TO DISCIPLE THE POOR

There is no specific command to make disciples of the poor. They are included in Jesus' command to make disciples of all nations, tribes, and peoples (Matthew 28:19). It so happens that the world has more poor, common folk than it has privileged elite.

Through his miracles Jesus showed that he had the power to shake off the curse that came upon mankind through the sin of Adam. Through his death and resurrection, he received kingdom power and authority (Matthew 28:18), and that kingdom is expanding throughout the world through his witnesses. At his return, at the last judgment, he will defeat the last enemy death, cast out the evil one, and vindicate his holy, believing followers. Those believers—poor, rejected, persecuted and killed for his sake—will be vindicated and reign with him forever. (Revelation 6:9-11; 20:11-22:5).

Included in this expansive vision of the Kingdom of Christ is his mission to proclaim good news to the poor, literally to evangelize, bring the gospel to the poor. Every human being is poor and needy, dead in trespasses and sin, estranged from the fellowship of God, but Christ through his shed blood paid the price of forgiveness so that out of sheer grace anyone can come near to God through faith in Christ. At this level, the rich have no advantage over the poor. All are sinners and all have access to this salvation by grace through faith. In Ephesians 2:1-22. Paul takes pains to show that even the heritage and obedience to the Law by the Jews gave them no advantage over Gentile believers. Because of Christ, they all have equal access to salvation and fellowship with the people of God. This is the good news that Christ and his church proclaims to the poor.

In his parable of the great banquet, Jesus tells of a certain man (God) who prepared a great banquet (salvation) and invited many guests (His people, the children of Abraham), "Come, for everything is now ready" (the Savior has come), but they all began to make excuses. Upon hearing this, the man sent his servant to "Go out quickly into the streets and alleys of the town and bring in *the poor*, the crippled, the blind and the lame." In other words, those despised and overlooked are being welcomed to share the riches of the banquet. Because there was still room, the master told his servant, "Go out to the roads and country lanes and make them come in, that my house will be full" (Luke 14:15-23). In this way Jesus was opening the door for the mission to the Gentiles and their inclusion into the people of God and the riches of salvation.

The Apostle Paul describes those who accepted Christ in the church at Corinth, "Brothers and sisters, think of what you were when you were called. Not many of you were wise by human standards; not many were influential; not many were of noble birth. But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. God chose the lowly

things of this world and the despised things—and the things that are not—to nullify the things that are, so that no one may boast before him” (1 Corinthians 1:26-29).

Even slaves were baptized and belonged to the church and were expected to live exemplary lives for the sake of Christ (Ephesians 6:5-8; Colossians 3:22-25; 1 Corinthians 7:20-23; Titus 2:9-10). James writes that the believer in humble circumstances should “take pride in his high position” (James 1:9) as someone chosen by God to share in the riches of glory.

JESUS' INSTRUCTIONS TO MAKE DISCIPLES

When Jesus began his ministry, he said, “The kingdom of heaven is at hand. Repent and believe the good news” Mark 1:15). In the region of Galilee “Jesus went through all the towns and villages, teaching in their synagogues, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and healing every disease and sickness. When he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd” (Matthew 9:35-36). In these circumstances, Jesus said to his disciples, “The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few. Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field” (Matthew 9:37-38; Luke 10:2)).

Answering his own prayer, Jesus chose twelve apostles (Matthew 10:1-4). He sent them (“apostle” means “sent one”) to be engaged in the same ministry to the same people, to the “lost sheep of Israel” (Matthew 10:6). Jesus commanded them, “And as you go, proclaim this message: ‘The kingdom of heaven is near.’ Heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse those who have leprosy, drive out demons. Freely you received, freely give. Do not get any gold, or silver, or copper to take with you in your belts—no bag for the journey or extra shirt or sandals or a staff, for the worker is worthy of his keep” (Matthew 10:7-10). In essence, Jesus was telling his disciples to follow his example, to do what he did. Jesus did not take money with him but lived from the support of those who received his message. He was telling his disciples to go out and do the same.

Not long after this, Jesus appointed seventy-two others to go ahead of him to every place where he intended to go (Luke 10:1). How did Jesus recruit all of these volunteers? Certainly, some of them were cured or freed from demonic oppression. Others were simply called to follow him.

This principle was combined with the principle of bringing the gospel to the listener freely, without any charge. What the evangelist was required to do was to give graciously even as he had received graciously. In Philippi the Apostle Paul and Silas received lodging and support from Lydia (Acts 16:15) and the other believers. The Philippian church continued to provide support even after the evangelists were driven out of the city (Philippians 4:14-18). When they ran out of financial resources, Paul supported himself and his companions by making tents and by joining himself to the tent makers Aquila and his wife Priscilla. He did not make use of his right for support as a preacher of the gospel, but provided his preaching and leadership as a free gift to the Corinthians (1 Corinthians 9:18). Whether paid or not, Paul was compelled to preach the gospel (1 Corinthians 9:16). He had received his commission from Christ (Acts 26:16-18) and he would discharge it whether supported financially or not.

Jesus, first of all, gave freely of what he had received. He had divine power to heal and give life. No one could make him do this out of obligation. He did these things

out of a heart of compassion and love. The only thing that he desired was that people, especially the religious leaders, recognize him for who he truly was: The Messiah.

It may have seemed that Jesus was even discouraging people from following him. He warned them to count the cost: they must be willing to give up everything in order to become a disciple (Luke 14:33). They would be rejected and persecuted by both religious and civil authorities, even by father, mother, wife, children, brothers, and sisters. They might even lose their lives. The organization Open Doors in its “World Watch List 2019” clearly points out that those especially vulnerable to persecution in Muslim, Hindu or Buddhist countries are converts. Even one’s very life must be relegated to second place while Christ must have precedence (Luke 14:26). “Do you want to follow me?” Jesus asks. Just remember that I don’t have a place that I can call my own. “Foxes have dens and birds have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay his head” (Matthew 8:20).

What do we learn from Jesus instructions?

1. Go to where the common people lived, in the towns and villages (Matthew 9:35). In a time when a family could cultivate two or three acres, rural areas were densely populated and villages were within convenient walking distance. With the industrialization of agriculture today rural areas are being depopulated. Urban areas are where people, mostly common people, now live.
2. Minister to those “harassed and helpless” (Matthew 9:36), like lower-income urban workers today in trailer courts, inner cities, or blighted neighborhoods, or to ghettos formed by race or ethnic immigrants.
3. Proclaim the good news, heal the sick and cast out demons (Matthew 9:35; 10:1, 7, 8). This includes calling people to repentance. This does not need to be updated since human nature is the same and people’s afflictions are similar.
4. Depend on your hearers for their hospitality and support (Matthew 10:11), but don’t use this for personal gain (Matthew 10:8), like Simon Magus of Samaria, who wanted to buy the gift (miraculous power) of the Holy Spirit with money (Acts 8:20-21), and was rightly condemned.
5. Expect rejection and persecution, even as Jesus was rejected and persecuted (Matthew 10:16-25). If you follow Jesus to the down-and-out also expect rejection by fellow church members. You won’t be affirming their complacency or excuses.
6. Do not be afraid. Be bold and courageous. The Holy Spirit will help us speak what we ought (Matthew 10:20). Fear Christ, not people. Our heavenly Father will care for you (Matthew 10:28-33).

THE GOOD NEWS: A KINGDOM VIEW

INTRODUCTION

We evangelical Christians in North America have been living in the light of the Reformation. We have emphasized the love and grace of God in the face of sin and disobedience. We have assumed that people believe in a loving creator God, lawgiver and judge. Because of our sin, we have a sense of guilt and a fear of dying. We have an uneasy dread of a possible Judgment Day and of eternal suffering in hell. The good news is that God gave his Son (John 3:16; Romans 5:8) for an offering for sin (Isaiah 53:5,6; 2 Corinthians 5:21). Since God is reconciled to the world and his wrath fully satisfied (2 Corinthians 5:18-19), he offers us salvation, forgiveness and fellowship with him, as a free gift received by faith in Jesus (Ephesians 2:1-10). Praise God! Our guilt is removed and there is no longer need to fear punishment. God accepts us as we are.

Our desire is that people come to the point where they pray what is known as the Sinner's Prayer: "Lord, I confess that I am a sinner and have done what is wrong in your eyes. Please forgive me. I believe that Jesus died on the cross and paid the price of my sin. I accept him right now as my Lord and Savior. Please help me to live in a way that pleases you. Thank you for your wonderful salvation. Amen."

Based on this prayer we assure the person that they are saved and will go to heaven. We ask, "Where is Jesus?" If the person answers, "In heaven," we reply, "Yes, that's true, but he now lives in your heart." Further, we assure them that they are now a brother or sister in the faith.

Then we urge the person to read the Bible and pray every day and to become a regular attendee at worship in a Bible-believing church. People are often taken aback because they did not agree to this when they prayed. They did not agree to become a disciple and a follower of Jesus. They desired love, acceptance and forgiveness. And we have not impressed them with the need to obey God's will because we are deathly afraid of offering salvation based upon our works of the law. We've learned Paul's teaching in Galatians that we are saved apart from the works of the Law, so much so, that we have relegated the fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22,23; Romans 12:1,2) to an afterthought.

Once I met a young man on the street whose breath was reeking of alcohol. I judged that he could be dealing with doubt and a sense of weakness and guilt, so I ask him, "Do you have the certainty that when you die, you will go to heaven?" His answer, "Oh, sure. Everyone goes to heaven." So, right away, I felt compelled to tell the bad news that not everyone is accepted if they continue to hang on to their life of sin. It so happened that this was how we ended our conversation. He was determined to continue his pattern of life, and also to justify himself by thinking, "What right does this old man have to tell me what to do? He represents an old-fashioned way of life still preserved by a white, elite segment of society. It has no relevance to me."

I asked myself, “Are we giving assurance of salvation based upon someone repeating the sinner’s prayer? Is this type of assurance the message that the church has been giving to our generation? Is this what television preachers are giving? Is this how we believers communicate the good news to people around us? I do not think we mean this, but it seems that this is what the world is hearing.

A friend asked me, “How do you present the gospel in a world that has lost a sense of guilt, but is very alive to shame?” A missionary to Guinea, West Africa described a shame culture like this: “You are only wrong if you get caught. If you get away with “the wrong” deed, you are clever.” The amount of ridicule or shame heaped on you is the measure of the seriousness of your wrongdoing. In a world of social media young people are shamed for not joining in “the moment,” for not being in the “in-group.” I believe what my friend was describing was the fact that we live in a society where each person believes they have the right to determine what is right for themselves. The inevitable result is conflict with those who believe differently and live by other rules.

The church is not immune to this. We live one way out in the open, but in a hidden world inside ourselves, we are ashamed of what we think and how we act. The internet has opened up a world of violence and pornography, a world that we have allowed to take over our thoughts and imagination. Then we act it out with tragic results.

Women have risen up to unmask the sexual impropriety of powerful men, who are now shamed in public. In the wake of this movement, educators are now asking, “How do we teach ‘consensual sex’ to high school teenagers?” Long ago the world has rejected the will of God as taught in the Bible that sexual relations outside of the covenant of marriage is sin; and that adultery includes lust (Matthew 5:28). In a pluralistic society, this language is excluded from the public square and from being taught in public schools. We hear society pushing us away, “This is what you believe. It’s OK for you and your church, but don’t push that on me. We live in a free country and I have the right to believe the way I want.”

Reflecting on these things, I began to realize that we have not been giving repentance the importance that the Bible gives it. Jesus began his ministry with these words, “The kingdom of God has come near.” Judgment is close at hand. “Repent, and believe the good news” (Mark 1:15). On the Day of Pentecost, Peter charged his audience of killing Jesus, the one God showed to be both Lord and Messiah by raising him from the dead (Acts 2:36), and then he called them to repent and be baptized (Acts 2:38). Paul, in a Gentile world, called the idolaters of Athens to repent because God “has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed” (Acts 17:31).

Repentance means a change of mind and heart. The New Living Translation of the Bible translates the Greek word *metanoia* as “turn from sin and turn to God.” More fundamentally, it is a turning from serving false gods (oneself included) to serving the

true, living God. So, with this in mind, it seemed to me that we should begin presenting the gospel in a way that presented Jesus first. This is where the Apostles began. The Gospels that we have, I believe, were the first evangelistic presentation of Christ to the world of that day, that included both dispersed Jews and idolatrous, pagan Gentiles. They called people everywhere to leave idols and serve the true God by becoming disciples of the One that God sent to be the atoning sacrifice for the sins of the whole world and to be Lord of all. An integral part of the message was that all would one day have to give account to this Lord on the Last Day, the Day of Judgement, the Day when God's justice will be fully revealed. That justice was revealed in the cross and the resurrection if only people would see it, but on the Last Day that justice will confront all men whether they like it or not.

Using the traditional gospel presentation, it is possible to leave our listener's idolatry intact. Let me illustrate. Public school teachers, and the media, regularly challenge young people: "Become all that you want to be." So, the teen leaves school, matures in the world, and eventually fails to achieve their dream. With this sense of failure, they hear a Christian say, "Recognize your sin. Jesus died to pay the penalty of your sin. Accept him as your Savior and Lord. Confess your sin and profess your faith in Christ by praying."

Our listener follows our leading. They are freed to follow their dream without the bondage of guilt and shame. They feel free to leave the past behind and strive to overcome future challenges. Think of a situation in which someone tries to start a business, but they were failing at it. They were lazy, stubborn, prideful, unwilling to take advice, selfish, spend-thrift, etc. They were losing their family through overwork and neglect. They recognized their faults, accepted Jesus. They trusted in God for success and were able to devote more time to family. Then, their enterprise moved forward with success. They think, "Jesus is helping me achieve my dream. Praise God!"

The problem is that their dream is a product of their god—the god of self-determination. "I myself am free to determine my destiny in the way that I desire." With this mentality, our listener is actually using God as an aid to accomplish his own personal desires. They have not renounced the god of SELF and surrendered to the true God. Only by surrendering to Christ their right to determine their own goals (Mark 8:34, 35) will come to know the true God and experience true blessing and joy.

We who claim to be followers of Christ need to examine ourselves to see if we are hanging on to some false, self-made god. Then we are called by Christ to help our listener identify their self-made god, considering that they often have so little knowledge of the true Creator God. The problem is not so much a failure in regard to specific sins, but a failure to surrender to the true God who is both lawgiver and judge, the one who has revealed himself as Savior and Lord through his Son, Jesus Christ. This is how we understand Jesus' challenge, "Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save their life will lose it,

but whoever loses their life for me and for the gospel will save it" (Mark 8:34-35). The denial of the god of SELF is the denial of the god of position, power and wealth (Mark 10:21-23), the god of family (Mark 10:28-30; Luke 9:59-62), or the god of tradition (Mark 7:6-13). Without the denial of self, and the surrender to Jesus, we are actually children of our father, the devil, the original liar and murderer" (John 8:42-45). This is harsh language for all who are deluded by their own self-will and their own self-determination.

So, considering these things we want to return to how Jesus presented himself as the fulfillment of the good news promised by God through the prophets. We are led to the basic outline of the gospel, the good news, as it comes to us in Mark's record of Jesus' first words, "The time has come. . . . The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news!" (Mark 1:15).

OUTLINE

This section introduces you to the outline of a gospel presentation. This mini-presentation can be used to talk with people who may be friends, co-workers, or even complete strangers while doing door-to-canvassing in a neighborhood. It introduces Jesus Christ in a positive and summary way. It also gets people thinking about the implications of becoming a follower of Jesus. At the conclusion, you ask if the person will accept an invitation to come to church, or will allow you to make a follow-up visit to clarify the details and answer questions.

ABBREVIATED GOSPEL PRESENTATION

Jesus said, “The kingdom of God has come near. Repent, and believe the good news” (Mark 1:15)

1. You'd like to go to heaven, right? (a)

2. Did you know that Jesus brought heaven to earth? He showed us what heaven will be like. (b)

(wait for an answer, then explain briefly the following)

Look at his miracles: no sickness, hunger, blindness, storm, death, etc.

Look at his teaching: Love God (no one rebels against God in heaven.

Love neighbor (everyone lives in peace)

Look at Jesus crucified, risen from the dead, lifted up to heaven.

3. You become like the god you serve (Psalm 115:8). Idols (statues) have mouths that don't speak, eyes that cannot see, ears that cannot hear, noses that cannot smell, hands that cannot feel, feet that cannot walk. People who make them and trust in them will be like them. Their destiny is the trash.

All human passion: lust, money, power, fame, family, etc. will end at our death.

4. If we follow Jesus, we become like him. We obey him. We share his eternal life.

5. There is a negative consequence to following Jesus. Jesus brought heaven to earth, but what did the world do to Jesus? *(wait for an answer)*. It hated him and killed him. Was the world able to destroy him? *(wait for an answer)*. No. It could not because Jesus rose from the dead on the third day, the day that we celebrate as Easter.

If you decide to follow Jesus, you will face all sorts of obstacles. People will ridicule you, reject you. They may put you out of the family. People will not want you to

change. But don't worry. Even if someone were to kill you, you will be raised like Jesus. You have eternal life and no one can touch that.

6. What does Jesus want us to do? Repent (Mark 1:15). Identify what earthly thing you serve. This is the thing that controls you. It's your god. Once identified, confess this thing and the control it has over you. Then renounce it. Ask Christ to forgive you and free you from it. (c)

7. Believe the good news: (Mark 1:15; Acts 2:38ff.) Tell others that you belong to Jesus. Be baptized (pledge allegiance to Christ), join the fellowship. The Christian life is the beginning of heaven. We were dead in our sins but now God has raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in heavenly realms (Ephesians 2:1, 6).

*a The word "heaven" is what most people understand as an existence after death that is filled with peace and happiness, with nothing bad. I believe that people want an eternal existence that is better than what they have now.

*b Here heaven is synonymous with the "Kingdom of heaven" (Mt 4:17). Jesus said, "The kingdom of God has come near" (Mark 1:15) Jesus is the embodiment of what the perfect kingdom of God is like. The Christian hope according to the Bible's teaching is a new creation (2 Peter 3:13; Revelation 21:1, 3-4). At Christ's return everyone will be judged (Matthew 25:31-33; 2 Corinthians 5:10). All those who belong to Christ will enjoy resurrected bodies like his (Philippians 3:20-21) and live in a creation that shares the nature of the resurrection (Romans 8:18-21).

*c Points 6 and 7 demand some time. It's not always easy for us or anyone else to identify the bondage, the evil, the worldly things that control us. There will probably be resistance to joining a fellowship where we confess our sins, receive assurance of forgiveness, and pray for each other; a place where we are stimulated to trust and produce good deeds, and love others as have been loved by God.

WE BECOME LIKE WHAT WE SERVE

This is an extended version of the presentation of the gospel, the good news of Jesus. It is too long to go over with someone in one session. It is meant to inform the mind of the Christian who is sharing the gospel with someone who is showing interest in become a disciple of Christ. As you spend time visiting with a person, you will discover teachings that are most relevant or most needful.

Somewhere in your relationship with a person, you will encourage them to read one of the Gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke, or John) for themselves. The Gospel writers introduced Jesus to their first-century A.D. readers. I have written a self-help Bible study on the Gospel of Luke, that is designed to accompany the reading of the Gospel in order, from Chapter One through Chapter Twenty-Four.

The Acts of the Apostles, along with the reading of one of Paul's epistles, like Ephesians, is a good introduction to the new life that is lived out in the church, the family of God that lives out the heavenly life in this world. As Ephesians 2:10 says, "We are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do." The phrase "for us to do" comes from the Greek verb *peripatéo*, which means "to walk." This means to live in obedience as a disciple, a follower of Christ. "Follow God's example, therefore, as dearly loved children and *walk* in the way of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us" (Ephesians 5:2). I've prepared self-help studies to serve as an aid in the reading of these books as well.

One of the best indicators that God is working in the life of a person is their reading of scripture to find direction for their life. This is not easily monitored. However, when someone has a Bible and a self-help study pamphlet, you can ask, "How are you doing with the reading? Do you have any questions?" When a person concludes the reading of Luke, for example, and gives you the study pamphlet, you can check their answers for errors. This will help you understand the person's comprehension of what they read. Often, a person responds to a question, not by what they read, but by what they themselves think. Errors are opportunity to study that portion of scripture more in depth in order to clarify its meaning. It is also an opportunity to encourage the reader not to give up. We are all on a journey of understanding and obedience. We should never give up.

These self-help studies will be posted in another part of the web site. They are available as a resource to be used as needed.

Another indicator that the Spirit of God is working in a person's life is their regular attendance at worship and their making friends with others of the fellowship. While we have introduced the person to Christ, we should also introduce the person to other members of the church, which is Christ's Body. There is no need for me to think that I alone am responsible to supply all that a person needs from Christ. Christ has provided

many gifts and talents in the family to help us all grow to maturity. See Ephesians 4:10-16 and 1 Corinthians 12.

So, with these words we introduce the first section of the gospel presentation: We become like the self-made (idol) god we serve, which is death; or we become like Christ whom we follow and share in eternal life.

We can start our conversation by asking, “How are you? How is it going in your life? Do you have something that you would like me to pray for?” Then early on, we may ask, **“Would you like to go to heaven when you die?”** I have not met anyone yet who doesn’t want to go to heaven, to live in eternal happiness. Everyone wants a place of no suffering, death, separation, injustice, violence. They want peace, prosperity, security, and friends all around. People long for love, justice, respect, healing, and sense of worth. Ecclesiastes 3:11 says that God “has set . . . eternity in the human heart; yet no one can fathom what God has done from the beginning to end.” To be human is to know God and understand the workings of his mind; and we want to be with him forever. Paul directed the thoughts of his Athenian audience, pagan philosophers, to the Creator who “gives everyone life and breath and everything else” (Acts 17:25). He continued, ‘God did this so that they [the world’s inhabitants] would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from any one of us. For in him we live and move and have our being” (Acts 17:27-28). Created in his image and likeness (Genesis 1:27), we desire his acceptance and life with him forever.

Next, we can ask, **“Do you know that Jesus brought heaven to earth?”** Most people have not thought of Jesus this way, but with some reflection and a little prodding a person realizes that, with his miracles Jesus was painting a picture of heaven. There’s no temptation in heaven and no place for the devil. Jesus healed the sick, gave sight to the blind, cleansed lepers, and even raised people from death. Jesus forgave sins (Mark 2:1-7; John 8:11), thus freeing us from guilt, shame and condemnation. Since he multiplied bread and fish for a large crowd of hungry listeners (Mark 6:32-44; cf. Mark 8:1-10), Jesus shows that he satisfies our basic needs and longings. He also calmed a choppy sea by commanding gale-force winds to cease (Mark 4:35-41), thus giving his disciples safety in time of danger.

By reaffirming God’s law of love (Mark 12:29-31 quoting Deuteronomy 6:4-5 and Leviticus 19:18), he is telling us that in heaven God rules. He has his way in everything. In heaven, people love God, and they love all of God’s children—peace with God and peace among mankind. No one in the kingdom of heaven is hiding from God, as Adam did and how we now hide our sin and shame. We love God and want him near and are praising him all the time (Revelation 4 and 5). Further, the new creation is filled with people from every nation, tribe, people and language (Revelation 7:9). No longer do they hate, cheat, lie, and defraud others. No longer do people need to protect

themselves with weapons, walls and doors (Revelation 21:25). Family ties will not separate us from others since we will be like the angels (Matthew 22:30). Distinctions that have meaning for societal life in this world, and that separate people, have lost their relevance in the kingdom. Paul writes, “There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus” (Galatians 3:28). So, in our living out the heavenly life here on earth, we do not allow these distinctives to separate us from each other.

Further, heavenly manifestations indicated that Jesus came from heaven. While the infant Jesus was lying in a feeding trough, the glory of the Lord shone around the shepherds and an angel said, “Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord.” (Luke 2:10, 11). At his baptism, Jesus heard his Father’s voice from heaven, “You are my Son whom I love. With you I am well pleased.” (Mark 1:11, a reference to Psalm 2:6,7 where God asserts, “I have installed my king on Zion, my holy mountain. I will proclaim the Lord’s decree: He said to me, ‘You are my son; today I have become your father’” [Psalm 2:6]. This is a royal title taken from 2 Samuel 7:14). John the Baptist saw the dove descend upon Jesus, and also heard the voice, “This is my Son whom I love. With him I am well pleased” (Matthew 3:17). On the mountain of transfiguration: Jesus’ clothes became dazzling white, . . . and a cloud appeared and enveloped them –and a voice said, “This is my Son whom I love, listen to him.” (Mk 9:7)

To fulfill the Scriptures, Jesus died on the cross as a sin offering, an atonement sacrifice, for the sin of the world. Isaiah wrote, “He was pierced for our transgressions” (Isaiah 53:5; cf. John 19:34). “The Lord makes his life an offering for sin” (Isaiah 53:10; cf. 1 John 2:2; 4:10).

Finally, God raised Jesus from death and the grave—an angel with appearance of lightening came to the women who had come to the tomb to anoint his body. He said to the women, “He is not here; he is risen, just as he said. Come and see the place.” (Mt 28:8). This spiritual body of Jesus was no longer subject to the curse of sin, to suffering and death. Jesus could appear and disappear and even eat in the presence of his disciples (Luke 24:42, 43). The Apostle Paul states that we also will enjoy in eternity, in the new creation, bodies like that of our Lord Jesus. “Our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ, who, by the power that enables him to bring everything under his control, will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body” (Philippians 3:20, 21).

So now you know how Jesus brought heaven to earth. This is what he meant when he said, “The time has come. . . . The kingdom of God has come near” (Mark 1:15).

We become like the god we serve. When we become a follower of Jesus, we become like him, and we share in his destiny. When we serve idols, we become like them.

In Psalm 115:3-8, we read about idols, that mouths that do not speak, eyes that do not see, ears that do not hear, noses that do not smell, hands that cannot feel, and feet that cannot walk. Then the Psalm says, “Those who make them will be like them, and so will all who trust in them” (115:8). Someday idols, man-made images, will end up in a pile of dust.

What about American idols? One that dates from my teenage years is Elvis Presley. He died from an overdose, though his music and legend live on, and people profit from tourists who visit Graceland, his former mansion. Many other popular music stars share that same fate, and yet millions follow their music and imitate them. He’s earned a name for himself, but he is no longer around to defend or interpret it. At one time could stand and receive the applause of the crowd, but he could not live with himself and rest in God’s care. See Psalm 73:10 about understanding the popularity of worldly people.

What about those who make money their aim in life? Jesus said, “You cannot serve both God and money” (Matthew 7:24). Your heart will be with one or the other, not both. To someone who was in a contentious argument with his brother about dividing an inheritance, Jesus answered, “Who appointed me a judge or arbiter between you?” (Luke 12:14). Then he said, “Watch out! Be on guard against all kinds of greed” and told a story of a man who had made a lot of money and who said to himself, “Now I can take it easy and enjoy life!” To his kind of person, Jesus said, “You fool! This very night your life will be demanded from you. Then who will get what you have prepared for yourself?” (Luke 12:20).

Psalm 49 says that wealth cannot pay the ransom or redeem the life of oneself or another (49:7). They take nothing with them when they die (49:17), even though some of Egypt’s ancient royalty thought they could. Grave robbers and archeologists know differently. Those who trust in riches are “like the beasts that perish” (49:12). But God will redeem from the realm of the dead those who trust in him, and he will take them to himself (49:15). Asaph, the author of Psalm 73, cries out to God. Despite a certain longing for the security and power of money, he cries out, “Yet I am always with you; you hold me by my right hand. You guide me with your counsel, and afterward you will take me into glory” (73:23, 24).

And we could make the same statements about all manner of idols that people follow or pursue, like travel, sports, or entertainment.

Idols do not have life in themselves. Those who follow gods of their own creation, like fame or wealth, have eyes but do not see Jesus for who is; they have ears but do not understand his teaching; they have feet, but do not make any effort to obey his call (Matthew 13:11-16; 2 Corinthians 2:6-16). Death characterizes those who follow

the “ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient” (Ephesians 2:1-2).

What about Jesus? **Those who follow Jesus will become like him and share his destiny.**

When Jesus called his first disciples he said, “Come, follow me, ... and I will send you out to fish for people.” (Mark 1:17). What does fishing for people look like? “Jesus went through all the towns and villages, teaching in their synagogues, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and healing every disease and sickness (Mt 4:23; 9:35). When he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them because they were like sheep without a shepherd (Matthew 9:36). That is Jesus fishing for people.

Those who follow Jesus will learn from him and fish for people just as he did. He said, “The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few.” (Matthew 9:37). So he gave his 12 apostles authority to do exactly what he was doing—drive out impure spirits and to heal every disease and sickness (Matthew 10:1), and they went out proclaiming that the kingdom of God was near (Mt 10:7).

During his ministry Jesus said, “Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light” (Matthew 11:28-30). I am in debt to my friend Carl Bosma, colleague from Brazil missionary days who gave me the insight that he learned from a farmer in his congregation. The humble ox is the experienced, steady, strong, obedient one. The farmer puts a younger, inexperienced ox next to it. Both are under the same yoke but the humble ox is beside the inexperienced one, leading, teaching, assuring, and steadying. Jesus is like the humble ox yoked together with us. He’s teaching and helping us obey the Father’s commands (Ephesians 5:1-2). The way that Christ does this is through his Spirit that lives within us (Romans 8:4-8; Galatians 5:16-25)

When we follow Jesus, we not only become like Jesus, but we also share his destiny. To Martha, Jesus said, “I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me will live, even though they die; and whoever lives by believing in me will never die” (John 11:25) Then he raised Lazarus from death. Later Jesus himself rose from the dead. This all proves that he has the power to do what he promised. He’s alive and he will come again. At the last day those in the graves will hear his voice and come out (Jn 5:28). John in his First Epistle (3:2) writes, “But we know that when Christ appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is.”

Further, by following Jesus, we will be treated by the world in the same way that the world treated Jesus. Jesus, the Man from heaven, brought heaven to earth, but the world treats heaven as though it were an alien enemy. John writes that “though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him. He came to that which

was his own, but his own did not receive him” (John 1:10,11). In the Upper Room the day before his crucifixion, Jesus warned his disciples, “If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated me first. If you belonged to the world, it would love you as its own. As it is, you do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world. That is why the world hates you. Remember what I told you. ‘A servant is not greater than his master. If they persecuted me, they will persecute you also. If they obeyed my teaching, they will obey yours also” (John 15:18-20).

Followers of Jesus will be rejected by the world, even by those whom we count as closest to us, like family and friends (Matthew 10:21-22, 34-39). This is the cost, in the here and now, of following Jesus (Luke 14:25-33).

Even if we suffer because of following Christ, we should not worry. The world killed Jesus, but could not keep him there. God raised him from death. Praise God, Jesus lives forever and has been received back into heaven where he reigns in glory. Even if we become martyrs for the faith, we along with Christ, will reign with him and share his glory. The eternal life that we receive by faith (John 3:16) cannot be extinguished by death (Romans 8:31-39).

What do we do to start experiencing heaven, the kingdom of God, already in this life? We repent of our idolatry and believe in Jesus by trusting and obeying him. This will be explained in the next sections: repentance, grace and faith.

REPENTANCE

In the first section on “Becoming like the god we serve” we asserted that “Those who follow Jesus will become like him and share his destiny.” In this section we explored to some extent what it means that “the kingdom of God has come near.” With Jesus the kingdom became manifest in a new way. Through his miracles Jesus displayed the power of God (cf. Matthew 4:25); through his teaching he taught what kingdom living is like (cf. Matthew 5-7). In his human body Jesus brought heaven to earth. When he began his ministry Jesus was saying, “Watch me. Listen to me. I’m telling you who I am. Give me the honor that I deserve.” And the proper response was not to watch and demand more miracles, more food, more displays of power and more healings. The proper response was not to join him in a revolt against the Roman occupiers of Israelite territory. The proper response was, “Repent. Believe the good news” (Mark 1:15), become my disciple, follow me.

Starting with Chapter 8:9 Matthew gives three sets of miracles, each set followed by a call to discipleship. The first set relates the cleansing of the leper, the cure of the centurion’s servant, and the healing of Peter’s mother-in-law and concludes with Jesus’ call, “Follow me, and let the dead bury their own dead” (Matthew 8:22).

The second set of miracles includes the calming of the storm, the casting out of many demons from two possessed men, and the healing of a paralyzed man let down through and opening in the roof (Mark 2:4). Then Matthew tells of Jesus’ call to him at this tax collection booth, “Follow me” (Matthew 9:9).

The third set of three miracles includes the healing of the woman with the issue of blood and the raising back to life the daughter of synagogue leader, the healing of two blind men, and the restoration of speech to a demon-possessed man. Then Jesus told his disciples, “The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few. Ask the Lord of harvest, therefore to send out workers into his harvest field” (Matthew 9:37, 38).

What did Jesus mean by calling us to repent? Repent means to change our mind, change the direction of our life, change our allegiance, loyalty, and citizenship. Repentance means to change from following false gods to following the true God in the person of Jesus. The way Jesus gives meaning to “repent and believe the good news” (Mark 1:15; cf. Matthew 4:17) is not by calling us to leave our nets, our worldly priorities, and follow him (Mark 1:17, 18; Matthew 4:19, 20), to learn from him and receive his Spirit to enable to live the way he lived.

On Pentecost, Peter called the people to repent. By killing Jesus, they showed themselves to belong to another kingdom, serving a different god. Jesus had said, “You have a “fine way of setting aside the commands of God in order to follow your own traditions!” (Mark 7:9). By creating their own tradition, they were creating a god after their own image instead of submitting to the true God revealed through the Law and the prophets. So, Peter spoke about Jesus using the Old Testament prophecies (Psalm

16:8-11; 110:1), and he ended his message by saying, “God has raised this Jesus to life God made this Jesus whom you crucified, both Lord and Messiah” (Acts 2:32-33, 36). The audience was cut to the heart. They realized that they were not following the true God. They had not realized that it was Jesus who came from God. This Jesus whom they had rejected was shown to be Messiah from God. With the resurrection, the truth came home. They asked Peter and the other disciples, “Brothers, what shall we do?” Peter’s responded, “Repent and be baptized.” (Acts 2:38).

Later on, in Athens, Paul was distressed when he saw all of the idols there. To the Greek philosophers Paul spoke about the unknown God who is the Creator of all things, and on whom we are all dependent for everything. He concludes with these words, “Therefore since we are God’s offspring, we should not think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone—an image made by human design and skill. In the past God overlooked such ignorance, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent. For he has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed. He has given proof of this to everyone by raising him from the dead” (Acts 17:29-31). This was an urgent call to leave false gods to serve the true God.

Repentance means to transfer of allegiance from false gods to the true God. For example, when immigrants become citizens, they pledge allegiance to our country. They swear, “I pledge allegiance to the Flag of the United States of America, and to the Republic for which it stands, one Nation under God, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all.” By taking the step to come to America, they were repenting. They changed their mind. They saw no hope or future in their place of birth, so they decided to become part of a new country with a new way of life. They transferred their loyalty from their old country to their new one.

John in his first epistle (2:15-16) tells us, “Do not love the world or anything in the world.” What is the world like? It dominated by the “lust of the flesh,” sexual pleasure, addictions of every sort, and bodily comfort and ease. It also lures with the “lust of the eyes,” prompting us to covet the latest new thing, and promising that this will make us happy and satisfied. And those of the world are characterized by the pride of life, the drive for power, position, and praise. John concludes by writing, “The world and its desires pass away, but whoever does the will of God lives forever.” Peter puts it this way, “As foreigners and exiles in this world (we’re citizens of heaven) keep away from sinful desires that wage war against your soul. (1Peter 2:11). By not loving the world or anything in the world we are repenting. We are transferring our allegiance from a kingdom that has no future to a kingdom that promises eternal life.

Near the end of his life, Frank Sinatra wrote a song that ends with these words. They are the words of an unrepentant soul:

For what is man, what has he got?
If not himself, then he has naught
To say the things he truly feels

And not the words of one who kneels
The record shows I took the blows
And did it my way, and did it my way

He says, and many Americans like him echo his words, "I say what I feel, I obey myself. I do what I want, I may suffer, but that's OK. I do it my way." Listen to Jesus' probing question, "What good is it for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul?" (Mark 8:36). To repent would be to "say the words of one who kneels." I no longer want to do it my way. I'll do it your way, O Lord.

We need to change direction. Jesus told the story of a wayward son who left his home but returned to his father when he came to his senses. The son did not like his father's rules on the farm, so he took his father's wealth and squandered it on partying and wild living. His friends were nothing more than leeches who sucked the life out of him. They got him hooked on drugs, alcohol, sex, and the drive for success. As a result, he lost family and everything of value, and became a slave to a pig farmer. There he wished that he could eat the fodder that the pigs ate, but no one gave him even that. Finally, after hitting bottom, he came to his senses, "I will set out and go back to my father and say to him: Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired servants. So, he got up and went to his father." (Luke 15:17-20). He returned, willing to be a servant and serve his father. He left from wanting to serve himself to wanting to serve his father.

Now, for someone to identify their false god, and turn from it, is not easy. It can start with remorse for doing something wrong and suffering the consequences. During one-on-one counseling at the county jail an inmate would sometimes say to me, "I just can't forgive myself." Besides being in jail for some infraction, he was abandoned by a wife who divorced him and who convinced a judge to bar him from seeing his children. He was sorry and vowed never to do "it" again, but it was too late for him to get back what he had lost.

The important thing here is to help the person understand that his sin is first against God. He may have hurt others and himself, but that was secondary to his offense against God. Psalm 107 says, "Some sat in darkness, in utter darkness, prisoners suffering in iron chains, because they rebelled against God's commands and despised the plans of the Most High. So he subjected them to bitter labor; they stumbled, and there was no one to help. Then they cried to the Lord in their trouble, and he save them from their distress" (107:10-13). "Let them give thanks to the Lord for his unfailing love" (107:15).

A person may not be able to forgive himself. What he needs is God's forgiveness and then an acceptance of God's discipline in his life. Both Judas and Peter had an agenda for the Messiah other than what Jesus outlined for himself (Matthew 16:21-23). Judas betrayed Jesus and could not forgive himself, nor could he face the other disciples; so, he went out and killed himself. Peter denied Jesus and

went out weeping bitterly (Luke 22:62). Judas was not serving Jesus; he never was. He was intent on profiting from the disciples' money bag, their expense account, so to speak (John 12:6). Peter was serving the Lord, and he returned to the Lord for grace and forgiveness. Not only was he forgiven, but he was reinstated into apostolic leadership (John 21:15-17). Paul wrote, "Godly sorrow brings repentance that leads to salvation and leaves no regret, but worldly sorrow brings death" (2 Corinthians 7:10). To be sorry for doing wrong and suffering the consequences is not enough. We need to feel sorry for a broken relationship with God and return to him. Worldly repentance leads to self-pity and self-punishment. Repentance towards God produces peace because of the payment for our sin by Christ on the cross.

GRACE

It may seem that an emphasis on abandoning our own passions, desires and goals in order to serve the true God is a way of earning salvation by our own effort. This is not true at all. Repentance means that we quit trying to save ourselves. We realize that we are unable to free ourselves from sin. Romans 7:14-19 says, “We know that the law is spiritual, but I am unspiritual, sold as a slave to sin. I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do. . . . For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out. . . . but the evil I do not want to do—this I keep on doing.”

Paul in Ephesians 2:1-10 explains who it is that saves us. “As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins, in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient. All of us also lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our flesh and following its desires and thoughts. Like the rest, we were by nature deserving of wrath. But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions—it is by grace you have been saved. And God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus, in order that in the coming ages he might show the incomparable riches of his grace, expressed in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus. For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast. For we are God’s handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.”

Salvation is not dependent upon our own meritorious work, but on what Jesus has done for us. Jesus did and does for us what we cannot do for ourselves. “All of our righteous acts are like filthy rags,” Isaiah says (64:6). “There is no one who does good, not even one” (Psalm 14:3; Romans 3:10). “All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Romans 3:23). We are unable to obey God adequately, and we are unable to atone for our sins. In fact, all of our efforts to pay for the damage that we have inflicted does not restore the situation to what it was before our sin. Suppose that we swindled a large amount of money, got caught and then promised to pay it all back. Even if we could pay the money back, how can we pay for the effort of investigation that led to our apprehension? How can we restore that trust that once existed? We’ve failed and we fail in our payment.

I like to summarize quickly the work of Christ in saving us. He obeyed for us, he died for us, he rose from death and earned eternal life for us, he ascended to heaven where he intercedes for us, and he will return to raise us from death and take us to himself.

First, he obeyed God perfectly. Adam, the father of humankind, sinned and consequently brought death into the world. We also inherited from him a sinful nature

(Romans 5:12). However, it is through the obedience of Christ that we are made right with God through faith in Christ, this all by the grace of God (Romans 5:17-19). Jesus said, "When you have lifted up the Son of Man, then you will know that I am he and that I do nothing on my own but speak just what the Father has taught me" (John 8:28). He also said, "Do not believe me unless I do the works of my Father. But if I do them, even though you do not believe me, believe the works that you may know and understand that the Father is in me, and I in the Father" (John 37-38). And in the Garden of Gethsemane Jesus prayed, "Abba, Father, . . . everything is possible for you. Take this cup from me. Yet not what I will, but what you will" (Mark 14:36).

Second, Jesus by his death is the atoning sacrifice for our sins and for the sins of the whole world (1 John 2:2). God made him who was perfectly sinless, to be accounted as a sin offering (2 Corinthians 5:21) so that God might be reconciled with us, not charging our sins against us (2 Corinthians 5:19). As Isaiah prophesied, "Surely he took up our pain and bore our suffering, yet we considered him punished by God, stricken by him, and afflicted. But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was on him, and by his wounds we are healed. . . . The Lord laid on him the iniquity of us all." (53:4-6).

Thirdly, Jesus rose from death to earn eternal life for us. "By his power God raised the Lord from the dead, and he will raise us also" (1 Corinthians 6:14). "For as in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive. But each in turn: Christ, the firstfruits; then, when he comes, those who belong to him" (1 Corinthians 15:22-23). "Our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ, who, by the power that enables him to bring everything under his control, will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body" (Philippians 3:20,21). As John writes in his First Epistle, "But we know that when Christ appears, we shall be like him for we shall see him as he is" (1 John 3:2).

Fourthly, in heaven Jesus intercedes for us. At God's right hand He prays for us so that the condemnation of Satan and our sin is null and void (Romans 8:34), just as he prayed for Peter while on earth, "Simon, Simon, Satan has asked to sift all of you as wheat. But I have prayed for you, Simon, that your faith may not fail. And when you have turned back, strengthen your brothers" (Luke 22:31, 32), he also prays for us in heaven.

Lastly, Jesus will return from heaven, and raise us up from death to be with him forever. "For the Lord himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. After that, we who are still alive and are left, will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will be with the Lord forever" (1 Thessalonians 4:16, 17). See also 1 Corinthians 15:50-57. It will be at this time that he will judge the living and the dead (2 Timothy 4:1; Revelation 20:12)—ourselves

included (2 Corinthians 5:16)—and cast out Satan (Revelation 20:10) and all of his followers (Matthew 25:31-46; Revelation 20:15).

If we think of repentance as a work of merit, we have missed the point of grace. Repentance, the change of heart and mind, does not earn salvation. If we are honest, even our repentance is often partial, tentative and limited to our cloudy thinking. Repentance means that we have come to a place where we understand that we cannot save ourselves and that Jesus accomplished for us everything that was necessary to be accepted by God. Paul wrote that “confidence in the flesh,” the rite of circumcision, membership in the family of Israel, and righteousness based upon the law is nothing. He added, “I consider them garbage, that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ” (Philippians 3:8-9). He also wrote that exercising the gift of tongues, prophesying, and giving all of one’s possession to the poor earn us nothing (1 Corinthians 13:1-3). By living in the love of God and letting his loving be revealed in the way we think and act is to live by grace. Our salvation is completely earned for us by Christ and is received by the grace of God through faith in Christ.

Paul comes back to this theme in Titus 3:4-7,
“But when the kindness and love of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy. He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us generously through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that, having been justified by his grace, we might become heirs having the hope of eternal life.”

Here we note that “washing of rebirth” is “regeneration,” (Greek *paliggenesia*) the being born again, being born from above by the Spirit (John 3:3; 5, 6). Through the initiative of our parents, we are born into this world. Through the initiative of the Father, we are born through the Holy Spirit into the kingdom of God, a new and eternal world.

Even our evangelizing, telling others about the love of God and the judgment to come is not a meritorious deed that earns eternal life. We are not to boast that “even the demons submit to us” in Jesus’ name (Luke 10:17), but that our “names are written in heaven” (Luke 10:20), something that is a gift of God earned for us by Christ.

To waken the soul to hear and understand is a supernatural act of the Holy Spirit. God may use our words, but they are only one of the things that he uses to touch the consciousness of sin, and quicken the sense of helplessness that calls out for help. We speak to the dead. They cannot hear. It is God who gives them life in order to hear and to act. Ezekiel wrote God’s message,

“I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean; I will cleanse you from all your impurities and from all your idols. I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart

of flesh. And I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws” (Ezekiel 36:25-27).

Moreover, the Apostle Paul wrote, “The Spirit searches all things, even the deep things of God. For who knows a person’s thoughts except their own spirit within them? In the same way no one knows the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God. What we have received is not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, so that we may understand what God has freely given us. This is what we speak, not in words taught us by human wisdom but in words taught by the Spirit, explaining spiritual realities with Spirit-taught words. The person without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God but considers them foolishness, and cannot understand them because they are discerned only through the Spirit.” (1 Corinthians 2:10-14).

We cannot change the heart. It is our task to bear witness to the truth, and then allow the Spirit of God to apply that truth to our listener how and when he wills. I have noticed that God works in such a way that He gets the credit and not us. New converts do not like it if we boast about them as the fruit of our labor. They know that it was not us, but God. If we boast, it hinders rather than helps the conversion process.

It is well to remind ourselves of the words of Jesus, “So you also, when you have done everything you were told to do, should say, ‘We are unworthy servants; we have only done our duty’” (Luke 17:10).

BELIEVE THE GOOD NEWS

Jesus said to the people at the beginning of his ministry, “The Kingdom of God is near. Repent, and believe the Good News.” **Now we explain what it means to believe the Good News.**

Belief is not just some intellectual assent, like, “I believe there’s a God. I believe the Bible tells the history of Israel and the life of Jesus.” This is not what Jesus meant when he said, “Believe the Good News.” He meant more. He meant a faith that compelled the listener to act upon it.

Let’s put ourselves in the shoes of the people at our southern border who have left Honduras, Guatemala, and El Salvador. They are afraid of the drug lords, the violence, the lack of law and order, the lack of hope and a future. They believe in a better life up north. And they are right. They will do anything. They leave everything to come here. They act on their belief.

Others from those same countries do not leave. The March, 2019 issue of the National Geographic article had a picture of a street preacher, a former gang member, on a platform with a mike in hand. He was preaching at the memorial service of a convert who was released from jail and then was killed by an opposing drug gang. The reporter talked with a man in the audience, a former gang member and a convert. He told the reporter, “You walk with God, or you walk with the devil. You cannot serve both.”

Those men believed the words of Jesus. While they did not physically leave the area, they left the world of fear and terror. They believed in Jesus and in their heart entered a new world—the kingdom of God, and with it, eternal security. Immediately, they went back into the territory of the drug cartels, not to be submissive to their authority, but to preach to their former buddies. They want them to experience the true freedom that they had found.

Believing the Good News is to believe that God through Jesus will fulfill all of his promises. So real was the resurrection from the dead that Paul could go through any rejection, hardship or persecution because he understood that “our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us (Romans 8:18; See also 2 Corinthians 4:17). As he wrote, “If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied” (1 Corinthians 15:19).

The heroes of faith listed in Hebrews 11 did great things, forsook the riches and the pleasures of this world, and even suffered martyrdom because they were looking forward to their reward. They had confidence in what God had promised in the future, and they were certain that the God they could not see would fulfill his promises (Hebrews 11:1).

When Peter said on Pentecost, “Repent,” he also said in the same breath, “and be baptized” (Acts 2:38). He was saying, “If you believe that Jesus is the Messiah, then

profess it—be baptized.” Peter was following what Jesus told the eleven disciples shortly before he rose to heaven, “All authority in heaven and earth has been given to me” (Matthew 28:18). Then he added, “Therefore go and make disciples, baptizing them into the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you” (Matthew 28:19-20) The reason that Jesus said “therefore” was because he wanted those who had accepted him to accept him as Lord. They would become disciples, be known as disciples (baptism), and obey like disciples, obeying what he commanded. Jesus said, “If you love me (that is, if you believe me), you will obey what I have commanded” (John 14:15).

Jesus said, “Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me” (Mark 8:34). This taking up our cross means to take upon ourselves the mark and name of Jesus. This is baptism.

As you know, baptism means to die to this world and be raised up to a new life. It is death to the domination of Satan and the world and sin. It is becoming alive and being united with the living Christ. It is offering our bodies as instruments of righteousness, not instruments of wickedness. It is being a servant of Christ, not a slave to sin and self (Romans 6).

By taking up the cross and being identified with Christ through baptism, we are professing his name to everyone. In Muslim, Hindu or Buddhist countries, those who are baptized are often ostracized and persecuted by family, neighborhood and even the government. Some are killed. Jesus knew about this beforehand. He himself was rejected and killed for obeying his Father. Taking up his cross includes professing his name: “If anyone is ashamed of me and my words in this adulterous generation, the Son of Man will be ashamed of them when he comes in his Father’s glory with the holy angels” (Mark 8:38).

On Pentecost Peter continued his instruction to the new believers, “Save yourselves from this corrupt generation.” (Acts 2:40), which certainly included the joining of a new fellowship. Had the synagogue rulers and its people decided to be baptized and become followers of Jesus, the Messiah, they certainly would have formed the nucleus of the new church. Instead, as it was, the new believers met in the temple courts, the large open, public space in front of and along the sides of the temple proper to hear the continued teaching of the Apostles. Certainly, what they taught is what we have in the Gospels of the Bible.

They also ate together, fellowshiped, and prayed together in their homes. Here, too, the teaching of Jesus was shared with those who were not able to go to the temple courts. Many of the wealthier people sold their properties and possessions and gave to those who were in need. Signs and wonders were performed by the Apostles and in answer to prayer (Acts 2:42-47)

We may have grown up experiencing church attendance as an onerous obligation, but it is so necessary for the development of our life as Christians. People

from broken homes and with hard-luck experiences need and have a deep-down desire to be loved and accepted, not judged and rejected. This is found in a church where the large group gathers for instruction, like the Apostles who met daily in the temple courts. It also was found as they met in homes, in small groups, for personalized discipleship and mentoring, and for confession of sins, doubts, and fears, and where everyone intercedes for one another in prayer. The extended family that many gave up was replaced by a new family, the family of believers.

When Jesus ministered, he brought the good news of forgiveness, salvation, and a new life. It is in the context of the believing church that the followers of Jesus begin living as though they are in heaven. The kingdom of this world and the weakness of the flesh is an ever-present reality, but it is the kingdom of heaven that forms our new identity. More and more we learn what it means to love God and give him priority in everything, and we learn how to love our fellowman. This is the beginning of heaven being lived out in here on earth. This brings us into conflict with the present world order and we may suffer for it. The suffering is well worth it. Not even death can separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus, our Lord. There will be a Day when the Lord Jesus returns and every enemy will be judged and cast out, and we will share in a new creation. This is the fulfillment of the Good News.

DISCIPLING THE STRUGGLING CLASS

WHERE IT BEGINS

Discipleship begins with someone first accepting Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord. The principle call of the gospel is to leave the world of sin and by faith in Jesus enter the kingdom of God, the realm where we worship God and love others. In Colossians 1:13, Paul writes, “He (the Father) has delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.” It is in this kingdom that we “walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him, bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God” (Colossians 1:10).

Some churches have a discipleship program. For some, this is a series of lessons that prepare people for profession of faith or for baptism. This often is a review of the basic gospel message: that we have all disobeyed God’s law with the result that we are lost and separated from God’s favor, that we are restored to God’s favor by grace through faith in Jesus Christ, and that in gratitude for God’s gracious gift of salvation we gladly devote ourselves to love and serve God and our fellowmen.

It often adds instruction in discovering and using spiritual gifts for the building up of the church and advancing its mission. Hopefully, this will help the new member become an active church member and engage in some form of church ministry.

This approach to discipleship is based upon a reality that once existed in many areas of the country. As recently as the mid-1970s the church evangelized and won converts in a culture where premarital sex was understood as adultery. If a woman became pregnant in a dating relationship, the couple often got married. If not, she often opted to give her child away for adoption since she was not able to provide for its upbringing. Marriages were understood as uniting one man with one woman, and at the wedding ceremony the couple pledged to be faithful to each other until death separated them. In the resulting homes, children grew up with the nurture, love and discipline of both father and mother. This held true even when a couple was “incompatible,” and had to “put up with each other.” Somehow, they made it work out of a sense of obligation even if it was a struggle.

In that world, it was generally understood that work, gainful employment, provided an income to live, a place to live, and often some recreation. The work ethic was the basis for success and well-being. Work, along with living within one’s means and saving, either by investing in a home or depositing funds into the bank or stocks, provided status and security for the future. It would also allow one to help their children get a higher education.

It was a time when people accepted the Biblical world-view and standard of morality, even if they did not go to church. Some people associated terrible storms with

judgment and they had a fear of death and hell, even while resolutely rebelling against the authority of the church. A gospel presentation that focused on helping people understand that eternal security was based on God's promise was very meaningful. By trusting in the completed work of Christ, they did not have to fear the future, but could live with joy and confidence.

Today, this world no longer exists in American society at large. Date sex is practically universally practiced. If a woman becomes pregnant, she keeps her child even though she may never marry or live with its father. She receives governmental aid to live independently of both parents and the father of her child. She can receive and reject whom she will. As a result, her children often do not grow up receiving loving discipline of both father and mother.

This way of living is frowned upon by the church, and the poor have interpreted this as rejection. A common phrase is, "I was injured by the church." Maybe they were shamed by gossip or expelled harshly. As a result, at least two generations of members of the struggling class have grown up without a firm knowledge and conviction of the validity of a Christian world-view and a respect for God's law. They may have largely bought into the prevailing media's critique of the Christian faith, which it interprets as extremely narrow-minded.

When someone from the struggling class decides to accept Christ, a program of discipleship that entails attending several classes to prepare for church membership is not enough to modify a way of life that has held sway in the home for over a generation or two. It is for this reason discipleship should take the approach of twelve-step recovery programs like Alcoholics Anonymous that highly encourage daily participation at meetings. As reported in the book of Acts, the new converts who were added to the church through baptism, devoted themselves to the Apostles' teaching, to the fellowship, to celebrating the Lord's Supper, and to prayer (Acts 2:42). They met **daily** in the temple courts and shared meals together in their homes (Acts 2:46). The making of disciples involved activity that transformed people to become active participants in a new way of living, a new lifestyle. It was a **daily** reinforcement of putting of the old way of life and its sinful ways and adopting a new way of life that was patterned after the life of Christ. It was a community of mutual encouragement, forgiveness, and strength to endure hardship. Even when sinful behavior was disciplined and involved shunning, it was done with love and a view of restoring the sinful brother through repentance (1 Corinthians 5:1; 2 Corinthians 2:5-8). Those of the struggling class need the basics of the Biblical message, and they need constant support to establish behavior patterns. They need a lot of fellowship along with hearing the Word, lots of praise, much prayer, all bathed in love and compassion.

Another reason for my going to quite some length in expounding the Biblical message about finances, work, marriage, and more is that it is possible to downplay the hard reality of the consequences of a life of sin. Preaching about judgment does not

attract like a message of total love and acceptance. A pastor might think, “The way these people live is just cultural. We as a church must adapt our ways to appeal to them.” The trouble with a “feel-good” message is that it leaves people to continue practicing behavior that further enslaves them into a lifestyle of poverty. It allows people to think they are OK, when in reality they are drifting on a raft that will plunge down a waterfall into the abyss of hell.

Discipling the struggling class is very difficult. It is hard to display always the love of Jesus, and at the same time deliver a rebuke like he did. Illustrative is Jesus’ healing of the lame man at the Pool of Bethesda and his consequent warning to the man (John 5:14). After multiplying the loaves, and the consequent teaching about being the bread of life, Jesus faced the reality that many of his disciples turned back and no longer followed him (John 6:66). But this provided the opportunity to challenge the Twelve, “Do you want to go away as well?” (6:67). Peter replied, “To whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life, and we have believed, and have come to know that you are the Holy One of God” (6:68-69). Jesus did not compromise the truth, and he was not afraid to call people to a decision and commitment, even though this call could lead to rejection. We need to make the same appeal to repentance and decision, and if necessary, face the pain of rejection. Acting like this, Jesus drew together a community of people who believed in him and who were willing to be transformed by His Spirit. It is a community that has endured and expanded throughout the world, and it is a community that is experiencing in this present world the beginning of the blessings of heaven.

I trust these studies may inform the reader’s thinking and even serve as a study guide for those who want to be disciples of Jesus.

UNDERSTANDING HOW PEOPLE MAKE DECISIONS

Very few people are prepared to make a decision with our first contact. Circumstances will not allow us to spend an hour explaining the gospel. We may only have two or three minutes. More importantly, because of their background, experiences in and outside of church, people are not able to understand nor accept what we are talking about. We need to ask ourselves, “At this juncture in their lives, what can our listeners understand? What can they accept? What can they decide? What can they believe and obey?”

James Engel and Wilbert Norton in their book “What’s Gone Wrong with the Harvest?” (Zondervan, 1975), display a table that shows a person’s possible response to the proclamation of the gospel. Those most removed from making a decision only become aware of a Supreme Being, but have never heard about Jesus Christ. Others have a vague awareness of the Christian religion, the church, and the labels that the media attaches to various branches of Christianity. Exposure to a further proclamation of the gospel should lead our listener to understand the fundamentals of the faith, like the main elements of the Apostles Creed, the Ten Commandments and the Lord’s Prayer.⁴ Later contact and instruction may lead our listeners to grasp the implications of the gospel: people need to repent, leave a life enslaved to this world and surrender to Christ and his authority and love. An important step towards making a decision is to have a positive attitude toward the gospel. It makes sense and it brings benefits both now and for the future. At this point, our listeners may come to realize that what is going on in his life is wrong and needs to change. This is personal problem recognition. “I can’t believe the truth about Christ and continue to live the way that I have been living.” Finally comes the decision to act, to repent, to turn from sin, and to transfer trust to Christ and follow him.

Anywhere along this journey, people can reject the message. They may ignore it for a time, or decide that it will not work for them. This may be a temporary or a permanent moving away and turning back. If people show no response, it may be necessary to wait six months or a year before making further contact to ask how they are, and test whether they are willing to hear another part of the teaching about Jesus. If someone shows acceptance by starting to attend worship services, personal engagement can occur weekly or monthly, depending upon how much our listener can absorb and put into practice..

Follow-up and confirmation also follow progressive steps of growth. Immediately following a decision, new believers are likely go through severe testing. A spouse may be aghast at the decision and this will affect their marital relationship. They may lose their job, be involved in an accident or become sick. There may be a death in the

⁴ Various Creedal statements of the Protestant Reformation, including the Heidelberg Catechism, expound these three things.

family. New believers may have thought that they would not sin anymore or be tempted to drink alcohol again. They face the reality that their life is not easier, but more complicated and difficult. They need to be assured that Satan does not want to let them go, but that Christ's love is stronger. Maybe they thought that there would not be any sin in the church. However, they will soon realize that they need to learn how to forgive other Christians who are walking along with them on the journey of faith. They will need to correct the language they use to describe Christians. Instead of calling them hypocrites, they will now describe them as fellow travelers along the way who are struggling with sin and temptation. They will learn that it is a mark of authenticity to admit sin, ask forgiveness, and seek help to overcome. They will learn that after identifying one area of sin that must be confessed and overcome, they will identify another area, and then another, and still another, in a process that is life-long.

While this is happening, the new believer should be incorporated into the church, the body of believers. This may involve a new-members class, baptism, and discipleship meetings with a more mature member of the church. In the fellowship of believers, the new Christian will be helped to share his or her testimony, and learn how to explain the way of salvation to others.

In our ministry, we may encounter someone who rejects our message and invitation to follow Christ. It is helpful to understand that this may not be the last word from that person. The person may have plateaued at a certain stage along the way to a decision. God may need to orchestrate experiences to prompt the person to actually hear what we or some other Christian has told him.

On Pentecost, Peter found an audience fully prepared to make a decision. These were people who knew about Jesus and how he was crucified. They also believed the prophetic scriptures. They heard the sound of a rushing wind and heard the disciples and those with them speak in other tongues. They were ready to make a decision based on Peter's explanation of the outpouring of the Holy Spirit by quoting from the Prophet Joel (Acts 2:17-21) and applying it to that present moment. After the people heard Peter's indictment of their participation in the rejection of Jesus and his crucifixion, they asked, "Brothers, what shall we do?" (Acts 2:37). Peter challenged them to repent and be baptized; and they followed his instructions.

As for the Apostle Paul, whenever he came to a city, he first went to the synagogue where he argued that Jesus was the Messiah by extensively quoting passages from the Jewish scriptures (The Old Testament) and explaining their significance (Acts 13:13-48). Gentile followers of the Jewish God were prepared by their disgust of pagan idolatry and the weekly instruction from the Scriptures to hear how the life, death and resurrection of Jesus fulfilled prophecy concerning the Messiah. Once they understood the truth, they were ready to decide. They understood the implications and were ready to obey and follow the Messiah. The Jewish members of

the synagogue, by and large, were unwilling to change their thinking about the traditions handed down from generation to generation.

When meeting a pagan audience, Paul used a different approach. He saw a need, healed a cripple and the sick, and cast out evil spirits. These miracles, as Paul explained, were the powerful works of a living Christ. In Lystra (Acts 14) the people concluded that Paul and Barnabas were gods and merited sacrifice. In this context, Paul was constrained to proclaim that God was the Creator of all and the only one who deserved worship. Paul and his companions were creatures of God just like his audience. At that moment, Paul was not so much concerned about explaining the gospel, but about stopping their attempt at worshipping him and Barnabas.

In speaking with the Greek philosophers in Athens, Paul directed their attention to their longing for the one true God, by noting their erection of an altar to “The Unknown God,” by quoting from their pagan poets, and by directing their thoughts to the Creator who made all things and governed the destiny of peoples and nations. Then he called them to turn from idols to serve the true God, because this God would judge them through the Messiah, the one risen from the dead (Acts 17:22-31). Even then, only a few accepted. For most of them, the idea of resurrection from the dead was foolishness (Acts 17:32). Even after valiantly trying to connect with their worldview, the majority still considered him a foreigner babbling strange ideas.

What follows are various stories about people who were ready to decide to follow Christ and others who were not. I trust that they will help you see people as those on a journey, moving toward or away from Christ, moving forward or shrinking back in their walk with the Lord.

This principle played out in my interactions with Miriam, an immigrant from Bosnia. I first met Miriam in the client line at a mobile pantry that came to our church once a month. I was handing a half-sheet of paper with a scripture passage and greeting the people with “Hello, how are you? By chance do you have something that you’d want me to pray for?” In her short reply, I noticed that Miriam had an accent, so I asked what nationality she was. She said, “Bosnian.” I asked, “Are you Muslim?” She replied, “Yes.” Then for the next several months, she made a very successful attempt at avoiding me. As the months passed, she told me a few things about herself in little bits at a time. She said that she divorced her husband because of his abuse. I surmise that in America she now had the freedom to resist and put an end to it. She had two boys about eight to ten years old who often came with her. They are in school, getting accustomed to America faster than their mother. She said that her parents still lived in Bosnia and that they communicated at least once a week. I asked her, “What do you know about Christianity?” She was non-committal, but did say, “After midnight I watch Joel Osteen on television, and I like what he says.” After maybe a year and a half had passed, I asked her if she would accept a New Testament along with a self-help Bible

study on the Gospel of Luke. She said she would. I may have seen her one more time, but never had opportunity to ask her if she read the story of Jesus. This woman had a curiosity about Christianity and about Christ, but she did not feel free to make a decision that would certainly cause her to feel the wrath of those dearest to her—her parents. If she is to move closer to a time of decision, she will have to go through some crisis, call out to God for help, see a vision or hear a supernatural word from God, or meet someone else, maybe some other Muslim who was converted.

Once I met a Muslim man who was vocal in expressing his beliefs and who had been talking with other Christian men where he worked. One evening, my wife and I went to a dollar store to buy some birthday cards. We chose this particular store because its cards carried Bible verses just behind the cover. I told the son of the owner who was at the cash register that I appreciated the Christian music and the cards. He replied, “Joe, in the next aisle, is a Muslim. I bet you’d like to talk with him.” So, I introduced myself to Joe. Right away, Joe said, “So you’re a Christian. Tell me if a Christian can pray for forgiveness and have all of his sins forgiven. Then, can he keep on sinning and have all of his future sins forgiven as well, based on that one prayer?”

That was a loaded question. It was evident that Joe was asking questions. He was curious. Since he was a man in a position of authority in the Muslim family, he had more freedom to make a decision, even though he was arguing against Christianity. Other men where he worked in construction were witnessing to him, probably explaining some version of the sin-salvation-service outline and urging him to confess sin, ask for forgiveness, and receive Jesus for the eternal forgiveness of sins.

My answer began by saying that once someone becomes a follower of Christ he no longer desires to sin; rather, he makes progress in leaving it behind. But I also explained that when Christ died, he died for all of my sin, in fact, he died for the sin of the whole world; so indeed, all of our sin is forgiven forever. Then Joe replied, “Jesus did not die. He was too good for that. Allah took him straight to heaven. It was someone else that died on the cross, and the people thought it was Jesus.” Previously, I had been challenged to prove the resurrection of Jesus, but this was the first time that I was challenged to prove his death.

This interchange showed how a wooden presentation of the gospel can overlook a point of crucial importance to someone from a different cultural and religious background. My prayer was that it helped Joe move forward in his readiness to make a decision.

In our second term of missionary service in Brazil, Lisa came to church with her two girls in their pre-teen years. She was seeking a new way. She had found a clump of dark feathers in her pillow, a fetish planted there by her spiritist husband, and she linked that “curse” to the sicknesses and problems that were plaguing her family. She had accepted Christ and was starting to prepare for baptism by taking lessons from the catechism, which I gave her by going to her home on a weekday afternoon. This was

when her husband was home after sleeping following his third-shift job at the bakery. With blurry, sleepy eyes and obvious disinterest, he sat on the couch with his wife during the lesson. In due time he started to attend worship with his wife. Once he got into an argument with the Sunday school teacher, a military sergeant, about the Trinity. He came to me for a better explanation. Well, how do you explain a mystery to a “rational mind?” Two weeks later, he asked me to visit him. He said that about mid-afternoon he was praying to his “guide,” an indigenous Brazilian, transformed into a spiritist deity. As he was praying, he saw this man sprout horns from his head and legs that transformed themselves in to calves legs with hooves. Suddenly, he knew it. He had been worshiping and seeking help from a demon, and the help that he got was only making his life worse. Within a couple of weeks, he presented himself at church for baptism.

The next three stories illustrate how women in Brazil came to faith and what that taught me. It started shortly after our arrival to the city of Bauru. The pastor of the Central Presbyterian Church passed on to me about 200 copies of the Gospel of Matthew in a trial, more up-to-date translation. To hand these out like a gospel tract would be as good as throwing them into a waste basket. I had also noticed that most homes had received at one time or other a Gideon’s New Testament that was gladly received and then quickly relegated to the bottom of some drawer along with clothing or other objects. I decided to make a self-help Bible study with multiple-choice or true-false questions. A topical study where people were forced to jump from one text in one place to another text in another place would be confusing, I thought. Opened ended questions, a favorite in North America and which I translated, tended to be answered with, “Jesus,” “faith,” or something similarly vague, which usually missed the intent of the question. The multiple-choice format would be easily corrected and would force the reader to make choices between right and wrong answers, some of them tricky.

What happened? My, own adolescent daughter, who was somewhat of a rebel, was prompted to ask for the study on Matthew when she witnessed the trauma caused by the motorcycle accident of two young men of the youth group. They ran into the back end of a truck and could have died, but survived even though they suffered gruesome, but minor injuries. After completing Matthew, she asked for the study on Romans. In the time that she did these studies, she turned from someone in the loyal opposition to a person who, in effect, was telling me, “Dad, I’m now on your side. I’m going to cooperate with your efforts to control that rebellious nature of mine. I want to live for Christ.”

The next woman visited our church and showed a willingness to read the Bible using the Matthew course. She had been studying with the Jehovah’s Witnesses, but had not made a commitment with them. She did, however, adopt the idea that Jehovah is God alone and that Jesus was his non-divine son. When she was finished with the study, I visited her and corrected the study. I came to the question about Jesus calming

the storm on the Sea of Galilee, “Is Jesus the Lord of nature?” () True () False. She left it blank. I asked her why. She said, “I was taught that only Jehovah is the Lord of nature.” Then her eyes opened wide and she exclaimed, “After reading the book of Matthew, I see that Jesus can do everything!” In that moment, she came to understand that Jesus was indeed the Second Person of the Trinity. A short time later, she and her husband joined the church and within the year, her two sisters and their families also joined.

The third woman was Sonia, whose aunt was single and a long-time member of the Central Presbyterian Church. Twice I met with her and another sister or brother and attempted to explain the gospel. Each time our discussion came to an inconclusive end. Their excuses or doubts were not answered satisfactorily, or if they were, they were unwilling to surrender their lives to Christ.

In due time Sonia’s sister Beth came to faith along with her husband John. John was a fervent Catholic who was troubled by Catholics who made confession on Saturday, took part in the mass on Sunday and lived a self-centered and crude life the rest of the week. Their common language was immoral and laced with profanity. Sonia’s aunt urged him to seek out the pastor of the Central Presbyterian Church, who led him to saving faith. John and Beth went through this decision process together. As a result, the noose was tightening around Sonia. Both John and Beth forcefully argued the cause of Christ. Sonia visited our church—it was closer to her home—and I gave her the Matthew Bible study. When she finished, I asked her if I could explain the gospel to her. This would be my opportunity to talk about our need, about how Christ paid for our sins, and how he calls us to say that we are sorry, to ask forgiveness, and to ask Christ to come into our heart. She said, “I don’t need you to explain anything. I have read the story of Jesus. How do I accept him?” Right there she prayed along with me to receive Jesus into her life.

These stories taught me that the good news of Jesus as recorded in the Gospels is Jesus himself, through the recorded witness of the evangelists, calling people to put their faith in him and to become his disciples. What Jesus said and did constitutes a powerful, maybe the most powerful evangelistic tool that God has put at our disposal.

I have learned in the course of years that what we did in Brazil does not work in quite the same way 35 years later in a North American context. People here, in general, are unwilling to read the Bible unless they have already come to church on a somewhat regular basis. However, we used these self-help Bible studies with great profit in the weekly ministry to inmates at the Oceana County Michigan Jail. We literally had a captive audience with a lot of time on their hands. So, to take advantage of this opportunity, we developed more studies in both English and Spanish: Acts, Romans, John, James, and Ephesians, and I John. We were unable to gauge the effectiveness of this type of ministry because we were not able to accompany the inmates after they

were released. We have faith that their reading of the gospel in due time produced the fruit of changed lives.

Today, people can read the Bible from their cell phones. They have been bombarded by competing messages from YouTube, social media, television, and more. I rarely find someone who has the time and the desire to sit and study the Scriptures. For several years, based upon my Brazilian experience, I would knock on doors in a certain neighborhood filled with people receiving government rental assistance, and ask, "Would you like a self-help Bible study that you can do in the privacy of your own home to learn about what Jesus said and did?" More than half of the people would accept. Their names and addresses were dutifully recorded in the log of my visits. About a month or two later, I would drop by again, "How are you doing with the Bible study of the Gospel of Luke?" Over 90% of the time, I heard, "It's on the night stand by my bed. I have not forgotten it. I just haven't gotten started yet." I finally realized that in the three minutes that people gave me at the door, I was not communicating anything substantive about who Jesus is and the blessings that result from following him.

Within the last year, I would continue to knock on a door, introduce myself and my companion, offer an invitation to church along with a token gift, like packets of hot chocolate, or an artificial flower, and ask how they are doing and if they have a prayer request. Then, after a pause and a sense of some receptivity, I would ask, "I'm sure you would like to go to heaven, right?" "Did you know that Jesus brought heaven to earth? Just look at his miracles. Remember what he said about forgiveness, about love for God and for our fellowman." "Do you know that you become like the God you serve?" Those three minutes would help me gauge whether to only leave an invitation to church or continue to engage the person in a conversation that would be welcomed on their part. If the person would become a regular attendee at worship, they would then be motivated to read the Bible.

I have shared, mostly from personal experiences, what lies behind someone's decision to follow Christ. As you share the gospel, you, too, will be able to add to your memory the stories of people who have come to faith. You will see what crucial part you played in the life of the new convert. You will also realize that you were but one of a series of events that God was using to bring someone into his family.

You are not limited to your own personal experience, however. As you build relationships with fellow believers, you may ask, "Tell me how you came to faith. What caused you to move from a critical bench warmer to an enthusiastic member serving in the body of Christ? What happened that revealed the Spirit igniting a flame in your heart?" What you hear will help you better understand the Spirit's work. You know that a car moves forward on tires rolling on the pavement. Through a person's testimony, you will be able to see the tread marks that the tire leaves on a specific section of road.

We meet people who say, "Two things we never talk about are politics and religion. Period." For them religion is something to argue about. Our task is to help

them understand that Jesus comes to them to meet their deepest needs and longings. Others are inquisitive and would like to learn more and are willing to try something. They are willing to accept an invitation from a friend. And then once in a while someone says, "I'm convinced. What do I do now?"

DISCIPLESHIP AND ASSISTANCE

Helping people in need can run the gamut from giving a quarter to someone begging on the street corner to canceling a debt that can run into the thousands of dollars. It can be help that addresses some immediate need like ordering a fast-food sandwich to alleviate someone's hunger pangs or it can be a program with counseling and mentorship to help someone out of drug or alcohol addiction. There are those who want to help someone or who have a world-encompassing vision to make this world a better, safer, more hospitable place where people can thrive and experience a sense of well-being. They can devote themselves to these causes with a clear conscience and gain a great sense of satisfaction. A person that is bent on evangelism and discipleship can fall into the trap of evaluating a diaconal program by how many "professions of faith" or baptisms result from this work. For example, a mega church sponsoring a how-to-grow-a-church conference might say, "We established a car repair and maintenance ministry to help single mothers, and as a result so many mothers came to our church and then were baptized." Or, a church might maintain a food pantry and sponsor a food truck where once a month the needy may pick up staples to supplement their food needs, promoting it as a means of evangelism. Programs such as these are not designed for evangelism and discipleship and they should not be promoted as such.

Diaconal programs work best when they come with no pressure for those who are being served to demonstrate gratitude or respond with a faith commitment. Often, some volunteers have made the disparaging remark, "These people don't even say thank you. How ungrateful!" But what would we expect from people of the world? They judge us as they would judge service at Walmart or McDonalds, and if it isn't up to retail store standard (even though it's free), they readily complain. They may be ungrateful, but at least they are free. They are not being coerced or manipulated to make a hypocritical decision as the homeless did when, in former times, rescue missions required the men to attend a worship service before they could eat and then go to their beds.

With this in mind, some churches do not provide evangelistic outreach as a prerequisite for providing diaconal assistance. Evangelism is there, as an option for believers to seize the opportunity, which rarely happens since they are not trained for it. Some churches offer a regular worship service while the doors are open for their food and clothing distribution. Worship ministry, however, is going on in a separate space. Those who want to can attend, but without feeling pressured. While people were waiting in line to receive food from a mobile pantry, I have handed out a piece of paper with a scripture passage and an invitation to church. While doing so, I've asked, "How are you doing?"; commented on how beautiful their children were; and asked if they might have a prayer need. It was walking with the people, assuming their position in line, and trying to encourage the volunteers at the truck be as generous as possible.

The verbal, personal gospel witness was present, but it did not factor into the eligibility of a person being benefited. It came without judgment as to a person's worthiness. I presume that this is how the successful car ministry of the mega-church was conducted and how it eventually produced evangelistic results.

A paternalistic body-soul, social-spiritual, service-evangelism ministry can lead to bitter frustration. "We are here for you and we will provide everything you need," but unspoken is the expectation that out of gratitude the person will attend church worship and be saved.

This is a rare occurrence but it did happen. A thriving conservative suburban church promoted the work of a pregnancy resource center in its pro-life message. A couple of women met Helen, a Bosnian woman who was about to enter an abortion clinic. They assured her, "We'll take care of all your needs. Please reconsider and do not get an abortion." She decided to go full-term with the pregnancy and gave birth to a lovely girl. Other volunteers came alongside to give her emotional support. Still others found her a reliable used car and paid several months for apartment rental. Then the helping women asked the deacons of the church to visit her to provide a church witness and offer help. With fear and trepidation, they drove into the apartment complex where "their lives could be in danger" from addicts and inner-city types. At the end of the visit, the deacons presented some gift cards from a super store. The helping women were not happy. They had wanted, and even demanded that the deacons continue paying the rent and providing other help at the level that they started. The "unfeeling" deacons were looking at the line-item allotted to assistance in the total church budget. The helping women said, "Our rich church can do this." As a result, the women decided to pool their resources and pay the rent and Helen's other needs. They were going to prove that they would keep Helen from falling into the secular government welfare system. "This is what the body of Christ should be doing in this world."

The helping women helped Helen get a job to help her become financially independent. The first job was running a fork-lift on a factory floor that she physically could not handle. She got sick, she had recurring headaches, the baby got sick and needed treatment, so she quit. Eventually, Helen found a job cleaning apartments at an assisted-living and retirement complex. There she found a caring environment among the clients whose living quarters she cleaned. Often, they gave her gifts to show their appreciation for the excellent job she did. Even so, this job did not adequately provide for the rent and other living expenses. Nearing the end of the two years, the caring women warned Helen, "When this year's rental contract ends, you will be on your own. We cannot continue to pay it any longer." Helen, meanwhile was talking to her neighbors and learned how they got government rental assistance and other types of social programs. She did indeed get out on her own; no longer dependent upon the church community.

During this time, Helen was urged to attend church. We listened to her testimony where she declared her love for Jesus. She was a Christian, not a Muslim. And, yes, she wanted her baby baptized. For this, I explained that she needed to take seriously the command of the Lord to train up her child to love and respect the Lord. For this to happen she needed to regularly attend church along with her baby and her 10-year old son. The caring women realized that she would not fit in very well into the culture of the suburban church that was quite far away. They introduced her to a more down-to-earth, welcoming church that was closer by. Even so, it was difficult for her to understand the English worship, so I felt the need to find a Bosnian New Testament. To my astonishment, I could find no Bible in the Bosnian language. What I did find was an online Bible in the Serbian language “Sveto Pismo” that is also spoken by Bosnians and which Helen understood. I printed out the New Testament in installments and asked her to read them. It became evident that she was not reading on her own. In fact, she misplaced these scriptures and could not find them on one of our visits. She also showed disinterest in her relationship with God by the fact that she only attended worship when she knew that one of the caring women would be present at the church they recommended. Reasons for not attending worship usually included, “I had a migraine,” or “The baby had a fever.”

To enable Helen to hold a better paying job, one of the caring women asked my wife to give her some English lessons. My wife is a volunteer for English Language Learners at a church that hosts the program of a Christian agency that ministers to refugees. During these visits, my wife asked if I could play with her boy to help keep him from interrupting the lessons. The boy was unmanageable—Helen was not giving consistent, loving discipline, and thus failed to provide the structured life that he needed. In the course of time, we met Helen’s older daughter who was gainfully employed and living with her dad and who was obliged to care for the baby while Helen was working. In this and other small ways, Helen was still partially dependent upon her ex-husband. Quite frequently, the boy would also stay with his father. Once when I was trying to keep him occupied, I asked if his dad would not be willing to take his mother back. After all, I reasoned to myself, he had not remarried, and had room where he lived for Helen, his son, and Helen’s illegitimate daughter. The boy’s matter-of-fact reply was that his mother was to blame for the separation.

I believe that this is what probably happened. Helen, along with her husband, daughter and son immigrated to the United States in the aftermath of the violence of the war in the Balkans. Helen picked up on the freedom that American women enjoy and which her husband throttled, even to the point of using physical force. She started a relationship with another man, got pregnant and looked for a way out by seeking an abortion. This is when the caring women stepped in.

All that was done was done to express the love of Christ. Discipleship was not possible because Helen never experienced the new birth of regeneration. Could

someone, probably a pastor, have visited the husband to help him to understand the American culture that infected his wife and to forgive her error and be reconciled to her? Did he claim to be a Christian like Helen, or was he a cultural Muslim? All indications lead me to believe that he was not faithful at prayers in the mosque. Would he rise up in righteous indignation and kick someone like me out of the door? At various times I met family members and friends, like at a birthday party. Knowing who I was, all those close to Helen's ex-husband were very aloof to me. It seemed to me that while the benefits of the caring women were welcome, I was not. I represented an outside force, the rule of what we understand to be the kingdom of heaven.

Over the course of two years, God's dear people were trying to disciple Helen, save her from sin's consequences and enfold her into the body of believers. During all this time, Helen needed to repent of the sin of her heart that led her to resist her husband, rebel and be unfaithful to him. He certainly should have been more understanding and loving, but she, even though she considered herself Christian and right with God, still needed to understand how she was bound to the kingdom of the flesh and needed to make a break with it, by repentance from sin and faith in Jesus Christ. The caring women who were most directly involved were highly concerned to meet her social needs and even put pressure on her to live up to expectations, that is, learn English and get a good job, etc. What they also uncritically accepted was her experience with her husband, his intolerance and violence. I was the only one who heard what the boy said. Even though she may have thought the same, Helen's adult daughter would not share her feelings with any of us.

In retrospect, it probably would have been better for the church leaders to help the caring women understand that a proper response to the promise, "Don't get an abortion; we'll take care of your needs," would have been to get Helen and her children onto public assistance as quickly as possible—case worker and all—and to keep in contact through visits, an occasional gift card, birthday celebrations, and more. They would also provide her with the scriptures in her own language, and if possible, call her to repentance by showing her how she was captive to sin and this-world's system. They would also urge her to confess her sin, ask for forgiveness from her ex-husband and other family members and seek reconciliation.

DISCIPLESHIP AND ADDICTION

Alcoholism and drug addiction or drug dependency lead to all manner of misery for those near to the addicted person. The litany of crime and violence, domestic abuse and neglect, workplace underperformance and unemployment prompt children to be ashamed of their home, and spouses to shelter the user from public scorn. Divorce with its consequent stress, weakened immune response, and diminished income can be a contributing factor on the road to poverty. When we minister to the struggling class, we will be compelled to urge an addicted person to accept Christ and begin a new life. The Apostle Paul wrote, “Don’t you know that when you offer yourselves to someone as obedient slaves, you are slaves of the one you obey—whether you are slaves to sin, which leads to death, or to obedience, which leads to righteousness?” (Romans 6:16). We see what is happening even though the user may deny it.

When addicted people come to the point of realizing that they no longer have control over their actions, they are ready to seek help. Here is where a 12-step program like Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) is vital to a person’s recovery. However, AA is not automatically a part of discipleship to Jesus Christ. I say this because AA does not promote any particular faith in the true God, only an acknowledgment of “a higher power, however you understand it.” Some participants of AA will go to the extent of professing that their higher power is a cup of coffee. A person can practice the twelve steps through the mutual accountability that AA provides and be free from alcohol, and yet never enter a relationship with Christ and enter his eternal kingdom. For those who have received Christ, and who believe in the true God, and have surrendered to Jesus as Lord, the twelve steps are a vital part of discipleship and recovery.

Ideally, the alcoholic who has received Christ should be able to be part of a small group where the participants confess their sins and hold each other accountable, as they study the word and pray together. In a small group, however, the application is to a myriad of sins and ills, whereas AA is a gathering of people who are battling one major addiction, which is alcohol. Both have their strong points. While we may encourage someone to be part of a focused 12-step program, we will also encourage the person to join a small group at church so that he or she may start to love and be concerned with the weaknesses of others no matter what those may be.

Even if we cannot be part of AA because we do not have an alcohol addiction, we should be familiar with the twelve steps. We can reference them in a myriad of situations.

The following Twelve Steps are copied from <https://www.alcohol.org/alcoholics-anonymous/>:

Step 1: We admitted we were powerless over alcohol—that our lives had become unmanageable.

Step 2: Came to believe that a Power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity.

Step 3: Made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God as we understood Him.

Step 4: Made a searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves.

Step 5: Admitted to God, to ourselves, and to another human being the exact nature of our wrongs.

Step 6: Were entirely ready to have God remove all these defects of character.

Step 7: Humbly asked Him to remove our shortcomings.

Step 8: Made a list of all persons we had harmed, and became willing to make amends to them all.

Step 9: Made direct amends to such people wherever possible, except when to do so would injure them or others.

Step 10: Continued to take personal inventory and when we were wrong promptly admitted it.

Step 11: Sought through prayer and meditation to improve our conscious contact with God, as we understood Him, praying only for knowledge of His will for us and the power to carry that out.

Step 12: Having had a spiritual awakening as the result of these Steps, we tried to carry this message to alcoholics, and to practice these principles in all our affairs.

The Twelve Steps are a set of guiding principles in addiction treatment that outline a course of action for tackling problems including alcoholism, drug addiction and compulsion.” Substitute “Jesus Christ” for “a Power greater than ourselves” (Step 2) and “God as revealed in the Bible” for “God as we understood Him,” and the twelve steps become the steps of discipleship for any believer. In fact, the twelve steps have their roots in an evangelical Christian organization, the Oxford Group, whose main focus was to promote peace and reconciliation through a relationship with Jesus Christ. It was founded in 1931 by a Lutheran minister, Dr. Frank Buchman. Four years later AA was founded as a fellowship of alcoholics working together to overcome their drinking problems.

We have met an alcoholic or a drug addict and we immediately recognize the problem and know the solution. If only the individual recognized it! Right here we need to confront our own addiction to sin. What is the thing, or habit that we obey and that we cannot seem to shake off? If we are disciples of Jesus, and if we profess it, we have also pledged ourselves to identify the sin in us, confess it, and ask forgiveness and

reconciliation with God and man. We understand that this is a way of life, not just a one-time event. Therefore, I ask, "Are we addicted to nicotine? Are we overeating?" What does the Bible say about gluttony? Isn't that what overeating is? Have we made excuses like, "I tried to quit, but it made me irritable, impossible to live with?" Or, "I just couldn't sleep with hunger pangs." Or, "I'm under a lot of stress and I compulsively reach out for a can of pop or a cookie." When we talk like this, aren't we doing the same thing that an alcoholic or addict does: make excuses, blame shift, or minimize the consequences?

Once we have learned the outline of a Biblical presentation of the gospel, we should be able to illustrate it by references to the lives of people as recorded in scripture. In addition, we should be willing to expose our souls to the people with whom we are talking, "I'm a living example of someone who was a slave to sin. I was blind to my own faults. When I became aware of the evil inside of my heart, I discovered that I was powerless to free myself. That was when I turned to Christ. That was when I began to seek God and receive his power. That was when someone from the family of God came to me to encourage me. That was Christ's messenger to help me."

Supposing that we have financial, family, social and spiritual well-being. Let's not kid ourselves in thinking that we do not struggle like those of the struggling class. In fact, if we cannot share our struggles with sin, we will not be able to help those who are struggling. The so-called losers of this world are quick to recognize spiritual smugness. How shallow is our comfort if we have done everything possible to avoid all trouble, especially suffering for professing and obeying Christ! But if we have embraced Christ and what it means to suffer for him, we receive his comfort and are able to share that same comfort with others (2 Corinthians 1:4).

DISCIPLESHIP AND MONEY MATTERS

Maybe near the beginning of a relationship with someone from the struggling class, we will receive a request for financial help. Listen to this. Atesha (not her real name) is a nurse's aide, so she has some education beyond high school. At the office, she unburdened to Jodi, the head nurse, a middle-aged mother of three and an active believer in her church. Atesha is living with her boyfriend in the home of her boyfriend's parents. Her mother would not allow Atesha to let her boyfriend to live with them, so had to move out. Her boyfriend asked her to marry him so they are engaged. Now she is pregnant. Her fiancée's uncle promised them \$80,000 for their wedding, but then backed off because he said that he has three kids in college and that is a big drain on his finances. How can they get married if they don't have the finances to pay for a wedding—a dress, tuxedos for the men, reception banquet, photographer, honeymoon, etc.?

Her boyfriend's parents face eviction because the landlord said that they didn't pay the rent. Atesha says, "But I paid it." Jodi asks, "Didn't you give a check to the landlord? Didn't you get a receipt?" "No, I paid cash." Jodi wonders, "Did she give the money to her fiancée's dad, who kept it for himself and didn't pay the rent?" Her fiancée can't work because he has cancer. He used to be on his father's health insurance, but he was taken off because he is now too old to be eligible. That's Atesha's hard luck story. Then she asks Jodi, "Could you loan me \$150 to buy medicine for my fiancée? We just don't have the money right now and he needs it really bad. When I get paid, I'll pay you back."

Jodi and another staff member suggest that Atesha lower her expectations for a wedding. "It doesn't have to be so elaborate. You can buy a used wedding dress for half the price. After all, it was only used once and is like new; and the reception doesn't have to be in a restaurant. It can be buffet style like my wedding in the church fellowship hall." Atesha takes the time to listen, but right away changes the subject and goes back to doing her work.

Jodi goes home and thinks about Atesha, her poor performance in the office and how she comes to work all stressed out. She realizes that although Atesha professes to be a Christian, she is living out a different set of values. Someone is telling Atesha's inner self what to do, and it's not Jesus Christ. Jodi wonders how she can get through to her. She already knows about church and Jesus in a superficial way. What can she ask or what can she say that will make living for Jesus meaningful? Atesha isn't giving her an opening. Jodi wonders what to do and she prays about it.

Reviewing all of what Atesha has been saying about her life's saga, Jodi decides to tell her something when she brings up her daily troubles again. She says to herself, "I'll tell her, 'I think you're being taken advantage of. You're in a trap—your mother wants you out of the house. Your boyfriend is sick and wants money for medicine. He's

not working. He doesn't have insurance. He's no longer on his father's insurance. Now you're pregnant. And they need money for rent or they will be evicted. What if the story-line about how they handled the rent payment is a lie? Do you have a way out?"

Jodi is hoping that she will have an opening to say, "I know a preacher who will marry you for free. You'll have to meet with him and he'll give you a good base for your life together. I saw it happen, a wedding, right in the Sunday morning worship service and reception afterward." That opening never came.

When Jodi learned that Atesha professed to being a Christian, she might have asked if she wanted a better life, and then in the same breath asked, "Do you know that Jesus brought heaven to earth?" And after a short explanation of that, she might have been able to ask, "Do you know that a person becomes like the god (idol) that they serve? And share that idol's destiny?" That might have led to a snack at McDonald's. At any rate, it would have left Atesha with something to ponder.

In dealing with requests for money or financial help, it's well for us to keep the Biblical teaching about money in mind. As we do this, keep in mind that Jesus and the apostles were talking to people of the struggling class more than any other group of people.

Also keep in mind that God is speaking to us first of all. It's easy to see the fault in others and overlook our own. Jesus told us to remove the plank in our own eye before we try to remove the dust out of someone else's (Matthew 7:1-5).

Paul writes that greed is idolatry (Colossians 3:5). Atesha craves a large, showy wedding, something beyond her family's means. The love of money (greed) gets in the way of true worship of God. We understand that worship acceptable to God includes giving him priority in our lives by obeying his commandments. Paul writes that the love of money is the root of all kinds of evil (1 Timothy 6:10). To gain more money, people will be deceitful when selling a car or property. It prevents them from being honest when they prepare a paper for a school assignment (cheating). An applicant will misrepresent a past work history or academic achievement to try to get a better paying job. The question uppermost is what will help them get the most money, not what is God-honoring or beneficial to their neighbor whether prospective employer, client or colleague.

What God wants is to be honored by our worship, worship from a believing and submissive heart. In the Old Testament, no one would be accepted in worship or receive answer to their prayer if they did not bring an offering. God said, "No one is to appear before me empty handed" (Exodus 34:20). Even pagans knew this principle. Balaam, in service to King Balak of Moab, hoped that God would curse Israel if the king placated God with lavish offerings, seven bulls and seven rams (Numbers 23:2). It didn't work because God does not change his purpose through bribery (Numbers 23:8). Naaman, a Syrian general, brought rich gifts to the man of God so that he would be cured of his leprosy, but he learned that obedience (to wash in the Jordan River) was

better than sacrifice (2 Kings 5:5, 10). King Saul offered a sacrifice so that God would bless his troops in battle, but he did not wait for Samuel, God's appointed servant, to offer it. Later, he and his troops offered thank offerings for the victory over the Amalekites. However, he did not obey the Lord by completely destroying the Amalekites and their possessions. Instead, he kept the best of the cattle and plunder while destroying the weak and despised (1 Samuel 15:9). When Samuel met Saul and heard the noise of feasting of the people, he said to Saul, "Does the LORD delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices as much as in obeying the LORD? To obey is better than sacrifice, and to heed is better than the fat of rams. For rebellion is like the sin of divination, and arrogance like the evil of idolatry" (1 Samuel 15:22-23). God delights in offerings, but only if given with a submissive heart.

When Israel brought offerings to the golden calves at Bethel and Dan, they were worshipping false gods, not their Liberator from Egypt, as Jeroboam claimed (1 Kings 12:28). They were doing the same when they presented offerings at shrines dedicated to the deities of heaven or to the gods of the nations around them. They desired a blessing for their crops, their herds and families, but they were displeasing to God, the fount of every blessing. Therefore, God punished his people by delivering them into the hands of their enemies and eventually letting them be taken into exile (2 Kings 17:22-23; 24:19-20).

When people present offerings in obedient worship, God blesses them and cares for them. Proverbs says, "Honor the LORD with your wealth, with the first fruits of all your crops; then your barns will be filled to overflowing and your vats will brim over with new wine" (Proverbs 3:9-10). Malachi charged the people with robbery, robbing God of the tithes and offerings. "Bring the whole tithe into the storehouse, that there may be food in my house. 'Test me in this,' says the LORD Almighty, 'and see if I will not throw open the floodgates of heaven and pour out so much blessing that there will not be room enough to store it'" (Malachi 3:8-10).

After the people returned to Jerusalem from exile, they dedicated themselves to building their own houses while leaving the temple in ruins (Haggai 1:4). Consequently, they did not receive the Lord's blessing. They planted much, but harvested little. They ate, but never had enough. They drank, but never were filled. They put on clothes, but did not keep warm. They earned wages only to put them into purses with holes in them (Haggai 1:6).

By the world's reasoning, the church is robbing the poor of their means to keep a roof over their heads and food for their babies when it passes the offering plate. This could not be further from the truth. Jesus told us not to worry about food or clothing, the necessities of life. Concern about these things skews our thinking so that we prioritize our own concerns. Jesus said that pagans run after these things. Don't worry because God knows that we need these things and he will provide. We are to seek first of all

God's kingdom and his righteousness, that is, to obey his will, and all these things (the necessities of life) will be given to us as well (Matthew 6:33).

Jesus is echoing a theme that threads its way throughout the Bible. The person who meditates on God's law and makes it his delight to please him will prosper in whatever he does (Psalm 1:2-3). "The LORD watches over the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked leads to destruction" (Psalm 1:6). "The wicked borrow and do not repay, but the righteous give generously" (Psalms 37:21). "The LORD makes firm the steps of the one who delights in him; though he may stumble, he will not fall, for the LORD upholds him with his hand" (Psalm 37:23-24). "I was young and now I am old, yet I have never seen the righteous forsaken or their children begging bread. They are always generous and lend freely; their children will be a blessing" (Psalm 37:25-26).

Psalm 34:19-20 says, "The righteous person may have many troubles, but the LORD delivers him from them all; he protects all his bones, not one of them will be broken." This prophetic passage speaks of Jesus whose bones were not broken to hasten his death on the cross (John 19:36), but was delivered from death through the resurrection. In like manner, even though a believer is killed for his allegiance to Christ, he will reign with Christ and be raised from death at Christ's return (1 Thessalonians 4:16; 1 Corinthians 15:49, 51-57).

Jesus taught that the kingdom of heaven is like a treasure hidden in a field. When a man found it, he sold everything to buy that field. It is like a merchant looking for fine pearls, who when he found one of great value, sold everything he had to buy it (Matthew 13:44-45). Thus, Jesus taught us to deny ourselves, take up our cross and follow him (Mark 8:34).

Some of those in the struggling class feel they are too poor to give. Instead of giving, in their mind, they should be receiving. Yet, these same people will buy a lottery ticket each time they buy pop and cigarettes from the convenience store. They consider their life so difficult that when the IRS rebate check arrives, they believe they deserve respite, so they fly to Orlando to spend a weekend at Disney World.

Some preachers, even some on TV, cater to lust to get money. So they call "giving to the cause" seed money or an investment that brings personal wealth from God. It becomes not an investment in the treasures of eternal life, but an investment in self and personal prosperity. Jesus said that the widow, when she gave a penny, gave more than the rich did because she gave all that she had to live on for that day. She did not know when the next penny would be given to her for her next meal (Mark 12:44). Jesus did not say that by giving a copper coin she would leave the temple and be given a gold one. She gave trusting only that God would provide her next meal.

Atesha lives in a universe governed by greed. Her mother has pushed her out of her house, her boyfriend's uncle turned back on his promise of a generous wedding gift, her boyfriend is no longer covered by insurance and now he is begging her for money to buy medicine, and his dad is asking for more rent money. The call to her is that she

come to Jesus and find rest for her soul. When she does that, though, she will find that “her world” will abandon her. She will be giving up everything to find a life blessed and protected by a loving and generous heavenly Father. She’ll find a new family in the body of believers. She’ll find help, but she will also be challenged to totally surrender her will to God’s.

In talking about the gospel, strugglers will bring up problems that they have with payday loans, credit card debt that is choking them, rent payments that are behind schedule, lack of funds for school supplies and medicine, difficulty in paying for bus tickets or childcare. The list is endless. People need to learn how to give. In the very process of giving the first part of their income to God, they begin to put thought into managing their finances in a way that pleases God, and not thoughtlessly spend the money at hand on their cravings and desires.

This topic is so important that Bill Hybels and the Willow Creek Community Church in a wealthy suburb of Chicago found it necessary to offer a course for new converts on money management and stewardship. The church of the struggling class would do well to have a trained financial counselor available to administer a short course and/or help someone with one-on-one help.

DISCIPLESHIP AND WORK ETHIC

Charles Murray, in his book *Coming Apart: The State of White America, 1960-2010* (reviewed in Newsweek magazine January 23, 2012), calls the work ethic of the struggling class “jerk ethic.” What he means is that a person will work when forced to, draw unemployment compensation for the time allowed, become a couch potato watching TV or surfing the net, and start looking for work a week or two before unemployment payments come to an end. He is buying leisure, not contributing to a retirement account or saving for a down-payment on a house.

“Jerk ethic” labels people as being lazy, but talk with someone and you will hear something like this: “If I find temporary work, I will be making less than my unemployment compensation, I’ll have the expense of driving to and from work, and I will no longer be eligible for unemployment compensation. I can’t supplement unemployment insurance with other work. I do expect to eventually be called back to my job.”

The problem is that people cease to be productive. They, by informal conversation and by example, are also teaching their children to get by with the minimum. If it’s true that temporary employment is not economically prudent, the unemployed could dedicate some hours of what would be their normal work day to work for free, that is, volunteer time and services to those in need or to non-profit organizations. Paul wrote in Titus 3:14, “Our people must learn to devote themselves to doing what is good, in order to provide for urgent needs and not live unproductive lives.” This develops character, teaches children how to be generous, provides opportunities to develop friends and contacts, and trains a person for a promotion or a better job. If I were interviewing a job applicant, and picked up on this, I’d be impressed!

The struggling class has learned the rules of the game. They are not stupid. They have a good mind and use it to their advantage. If they can afford it, they will get a car. If not, they will learn bus routes, schedules, and transfer points. A single mother soon learns how to access government programs to supplement rent, child care, food, and medical insurance. If she gets married and her husband has a job, she loses much of this aid. Nonetheless, the primary question is, “What pleases God?” not, “What is economically advantageous?” We need to learn that the obedience of faith is rewarded later, after it has been tested.

In spite of the welfare system, work continues to be the dignified and respectable way of making a living. People who can’t find work or don’t have a job, especially for men, find themselves with a lack of purpose.

Atesha has a job. Her boyfriend is out of work because of illness. She is pregnant. Will she get an abortion? Probably not. She has announced her pregnancy and is quite proud of the fact. She is looking forward to motherhood. It will not be too

long before she gives birth and will have to take unpaid leave to recover. She could be back on the job within a month with childcare provided by the in-laws. If that relationship sours, she could very well enter the welfare system.

In the meantime, she is working, but she is not excelling on the job. Jodi is quite frustrated with her lapses and seeming inability to learn from correction. She goes through the routine of doing what is expected of her, but that little extra that results from taking an interest in the plight of sick patients is missing. "It's about me and my plight." She's feeling sorry for herself and not for others. She could excel, but as it is, she is a borderline employee. She will not get fired, but based on peer reviews she won't get a raise. Since she begins to feel unappreciated, she is likely to quit and look for a job elsewhere.

Men do not enter the welfare system like women. They father children and are required to make child-support payments to the mother, even if they do not already do so out of love for their children. They may enter the system because of a work-related injury or other disability. Back pain and torn-muscle injury are two common ailments. It seems that a lack of joy and fulfillment in work leads to a propensity to injury. No ethically responsible doctor will tell a patient that his pain is all in his head. He will order a whole battery of tests (x-ray, CT-scan, etc.) and if the problem is still undiagnosed, he could very well prescribe opiates for pain. As a result, the man is in danger of becoming an addict.

Work is part of the way that we express our Christian faith. Paul writes about the putting off of an old way of life and putting on a new way that is characteristic of following Christ. He writes, "Anyone who has been stealing must steal no longer, but must work, doing something useful with his own hands, that he may have something to share with those in need" (Ephesians 4:28). Paul tells the new church in Thessalonica to "keep away from every believer who is idle and disruptive" (2 Thessalonians 3:6). He uses himself as an example for the believers, "We were not idle when we were with you, nor did we eat anyone's food without paying for it. On the contrary, we worked night and day, laboring and toiling so that we would not be a burden to any of you. . . . For even when we were with you, we gave you this rule: 'The one who is unwilling to work shall not eat'" (2 Thessalonians 3:7-10).

In Paul's day, those who couldn't be employed, like widows, were supposed to be supported by their children and grandchildren (1 Timothy 5:4). Work was so important that to prevent younger widows from being idle, and going about from house to house being busy bodies, Paul wrote that they should be encouraged them to marry, have children and manage their homes (1 Timothy 5:13-14). Older widows who had no family to care for them were to be put on the "list of widows," if they had been faithful to their husbands, and were well-known for their good deeds, such as bringing up children, showing hospitality, serving the Lord's people, helping those in trouble, and devoting themselves to all kinds of good deeds (1 Timothy 5:9-10). Another calling of these

widows, along with older women, was the general call to teach younger women “to love their husbands and children, to be self-controlled and pure, to be busy at home, to be kind, and to be subject to their husbands, so that no one will malign the word of God” (Titus 2:4-5). Even those who receive charity have a calling to be useful and to serve others.

Young men can have real difficulty working if they have not experienced the example and training of a loving father. It’s hard to work through negative thoughts if the work is both a drudgery and low paying. How does a young man get up early and persist day after day doing tiring labor at a task that is non-challenging? Can the young person do well at a starter job, well enough to earn a recommendation when applying for a job that is more challenging and pays better? It’s difficult, but not impossible, if one does it for the sake of Christ.

Another area where young men can have difficulty is learning submission. Without a father, they easily could have gotten by with continued disobedience. An overworked, tired mother long ago gave up following through with her threats of punishment when her children did not heed her instructions. Dad was not there to back her up as a unified voice of authority in the home. The boy is blessed if he learns submission at school in the classroom setting or by engaging in a sports program. If the boy does not learn how to cooperate and follow instructions at home or school, he will be tempted to join a gang where he will be forced to submit to some leader on the street.

Understanding authority, using it wisely and submitting to it is clearly taught as part of the new life in Christ. Paul begins Chapter 5 of Ephesians urging his readers to “Follow God’s example . . . as dearly loved children and walk in the way of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us” (5:1,2). We are not to be drunk with wine, but to be filled with the Spirit (Ephesians 4:18). Therefore, disciples of Christ, enjoying the filling of the Holy Spirit and reflecting Christ’s love in all of their relationships, are being urged to submit to each other out of reverence for Christ (Ephesians 5:21). Based on this principle Paul instructs wives to submit to their husbands, and for husbands to give up themselves in love to their wives, which is also a type of submission to wives. (Ephesians 5:22-28). Developing this same theme, Paul addresses children and parents, especially fathers, and slaves (employees) and their masters (employers). He writes, “Slaves, obey your earthly masters with respect and fear, and with sincerity of heart, just as you would obey Christ. Obey them not only to win their favor when their eye is on you, but as slaves of Christ, doing the will of God from your heart. Serve wholeheartedly, as if you were serving the Lord, not people, because you know that the Lord will reward each one for whatever good they do, whether they are slave or free. And masters, treat your slaves in the same way. Do not

threaten them, since you know that he who is both their Master and yours is in heaven, and there is no favoritism with him” (Ephesians 6:5-9).

Paul also writes, “The authorities that exist have been established by God.

Consequently, whoever rebels against the authority is rebelling against what God has instituted, and those who do so will bring judgment on themselves” (Romans 13:1-2).

Paul is saying that if we are believers, we are submissive to Christ. He is our Teacher, Lord and Master. He saved us for this very purpose, to learn from and follow our Teacher and Lord. God our Father provides for us and cares for us in both life and death. At the same time, as a loving father, he expects and demands respect and obedience. In our service to him, he disciplines us to conform us to the likeness of his Son, for our good and for his glory (Hebrews 12:4-11). It is he who sent his Son to be with us, to be submissive even to the point of death, to pay for our guilt on the cross, and earn for us eternal life through the resurrection. With such sacrificial and loving care, God puts us in relation to his Son who is both our example and Lord.

Masters, employers, and managers, even when they give orders, must treat employees and servants with dignity, respect and fairness. Abusive and degrading language and vindictive and harsh punishment should never be part of a Christian manager’s style of leadership. Employers can also foster a healthy work environment by offering training on the job or outside of it, to help the employee become a better person.

Employees who are believers should serve customers and employers as though they are serving Jesus Christ himself. This is not easy, especially if the customer is unreasonable, angry, tired and mouthy. How can the server at the deli or meat counter see Jesus and serve him if the physical human being in front of him is unreasonably demanding and verbally insulting? How can he obey cheerfully if the order was given in a demeaning way? It is only by faith and by the grace of God. We have faith to trust in God for eternal life, we need faith to see Jesus as we work in the world. Our work is service to him.

People would do well to ponder on what the book of Proverbs says about the relationship of sloth, laziness and poverty. For example, in Proverbs 20:4 the teacher writes: “Sluggards do not plow in season; so at harvest time they look but find nothing.” Moreover, in chapter 6:6-11 the wise father instructs the son to examine the life of the ant and warns him about laziness because it leads to poverty.

⁶ Go to the ant, you sluggard;
consider its ways and be wise!

⁷ It has no commander,
no overseer or ruler,

⁸ yet it stores its provisions in summer
and gathers its food at harvest.

⁹ How long will you lie there, you sluggard?
When will you get up from your sleep?

¹⁰A little sleep, a little slumber,
a little folding of the hands to rest—
¹¹and poverty will come on you like a bandit
and scarcity like an armed man.

Interestingly, verses 10-11 are used again in Proverbs 24:33-34 to support the example story in verses 30-31, in which the teacher observes:

³⁰I went past the field of the sluggard,
past the vineyard of the man who lacks judgment;
³¹thorns had come up everywhere,
the ground was covered with weeds,
and the stone wall was in ruins.

Moreover, Proverbs 26:13-16 teaches us that the lazy person comes up with outrageous excuses to avoid work.

¹³A sluggard says, “There’s a lion in the road,
a fierce lion roaming the streets!”
¹⁴As a door turns on its hinges,
so a sluggard turns on his bed.
¹⁵A sluggard buries his hand in the dish;
he is too lazy to bring it back to his mouth.⁵
¹⁶A sluggard is wiser in his own eyes
than seven people who answer discreetly.

In fact, in connection with laziness and sleep in Proverbs 6:9-10 and 6:14, Solomon writes in Proverbs 19:15: Laziness bring on deep sleep, and the shiftless man goes hungry. However, in sharp contrast to laziness, diligent labor brings its just reward. In Proverbs 10:4, for example, Solomon observes: Lazy hands make a man poor; But diligent hands bring wealth. Similarly, in Proverbs 13:4 Solomon makes a similar contrast. A sluggard’s appetite is never filled, but the desires of the diligent are fully satisfied.

Some wonder why the owner of a company does not appreciate their labor by giving them a promotion or pay raise. The boss may be an ungrateful tightwad, but the problem might also be with the worker. Proverbs 10:26 suggests that laziness may be the problem: “As vinegar to the teeth and smoke to the eyes, so are sluggards to those who send [hire] them.”

Unless our teaching is coupled with the student’s willingness to learn, our efforts will be in vain. How will teaching about financial management, about marriage and about the value of work be of any value unless a person has a desire to change? Teaching is worthwhile but results in no beneficial effect unless it is put into practice. As Theodore Dalrymple writes in his book, *Life at the Bottom: The Worldview that Makes the Underclass* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2001), “the worst poverty . . . is not material poverty but poverty of soul” (p. 143). Discussing the case of a certain woman in his

⁵ Cf. Prov 19:24.

hospital in England with a colleague from India, Dalrymple concludes that her problem was not poverty. "Her problem was that she accepted no limits to her own behavior, that she did not fear the possibility of hunger, the condemnation of her own parents or neighbors, or God. In other words, the squalor of England was not economic but spiritual, moral, and cultural" (p. 139).

In his report *The Negro Family: The Case For National Action, 1965*, Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan explains how Jim Crow discrimination in the South and lack of jobs for black males in the North, exacerbated by the post-war welfare program of aid to dependent children was destroying the African-American family. Influenced by these findings President Clinton pushed through welfare reform. In Michigan, the name for the welfare agency was changed to the Family Independence Council. Single mothers are now required to work, and instead of a stay-at-home mother caring for her children, she brings them to childcare, which is then subsidized by the government. And this is done for the sake of the children. The program has changed somewhat, but not the net effect. The infection of broken homes and welfare has spread to the white community and is increasing from one generation to the next.

DISCIPLESHIP: MARRIAGE AND ABUSE

Atesha is not married yet she is carrying a child by the man that she is living with. She believes that she has found true love and has proven her love by giving herself body and soul to her lover. But is he worthy to be a husband and father to the child that will be born? Atesha thinks so, but Jodi doesn't know. Jodi has not pried into the details of Atesha's life. She has only heard what Atesha complains about. Apparently, he lost his job because of his cancer. Jodi wonders, though, if he lost his job for some other reason and made up the story about his illness. It seems obvious they didn't wait to cohabit until the boyfriend had the resources to rent or buy a house. He was still dependent upon his parents and not able to leave their home and provide for his bride. The couple did not wait to have sexual relations until they were ready to leave their parental homes and establish their own.

Cohabiting looks like marriage without the legal document. In the couple's eyes, the paper has no value, only their love for each other is what counts. This is erroneous. Cohabiting does not have legal sanction. Moreover, it does not receive the church's (and God's) blessing. It may or may not receive the blessing of the parents. The couple did not pledge faithfulness to each other until death do them part before God, family and witnesses.

On one level, Jodi and Atesha live in the same world. They are American residents and citizens. They are both subject to the laws of the land and are influenced by the cultural "movers and shakers." They work at the same place, probably shop at many of the same stores, hear the same news, and are involved in some way with social media.

Yet at another level, they belong to different worlds. Jodi is in the world but not of it (John 17:16). Jodi's citizenship is in heaven (Philippians 3:20). Even though living in this world and largely abiding by the laws and customs of her culture, she has her mind and heart set on hearing what the Lord of her kingdom is saying. To him she has pledged ultimate loyalty and aims in everything to please him.

Concerning sexual morality and marriage, the kingdom of this world is raging against the kingdom of God. This conflict is not always formal, overt, and codified into civil law. Rather, as Paul describes it, the conflict rages within our own soul. It is the conflict of the flesh, the sinful nature, at war with the Spirit of Christ. The desires and acts of the sinful flesh are obvious, at least to believers, Paul writes. They are "sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions and envy; drunkenness, orgies and the like" (Galatians 5:19-21). This is contrasted to the fruit or deeds of the Spirit: "love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control" (Galatians 5:22-23).

The law of our country gives license to consenting adults to have sexual relations with the same gender or opposite, with people in a marriage or outside of one. An adult having sex with a minor is a terrible crime, but if the minor turns sixteen it no longer is. An affair between “mature,” adult lawmakers is allowed. Immorality is alright, but if you are a lawmaker or state official, you are not allowed to use government resources to cover it up. Adultery is permissible, but not the use of government funds.

But Jesus teaches, “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall not commit adultery.’ But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart” (Matthew 5:27-28).

Our legal system gives individuals the right of no-fault divorce. Reasons can be personal or financial conflict, incompatibility, or merely not feeling sexually attracted as before—“Our love has grown cold.” Or, “this other person where I work listens to me and understands me. Therefore, it’s time to move on. And it isn’t good for the children if mom and dad fight all the time. They’ll understand if we do what makes us happy.” But Jesus said, “I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, makes her the victim of adultery, and anyone who marries a divorced woman commits adultery” (Matthew 19:1-9).

It is God’s will that those who belong to him marry only those who also are believers. Paul writes that the prospective spouse “must belong to the Lord” (1 Corinthians 7:39). The people of Israel were not to marry foreign idolaters, lest love for them lead his people to worship their pagan deities. Malachi writes, “Judah has desecrated the sanctuary the LORD loves by marrying women who worship a foreign god” (2:11). God seeks godly offspring, children who worship and obey him as their parents do (Malachi 2:15). Therefore, he instructs his people to keep his commands in their hearts and to impress them upon their children (Deuteronomy 6:6-7). The marriage bond is not to be dissolved. God hates divorce (Malachi 2:16 RSV); or as the NIV2011 translates the Hebrew, “‘The man who hates and divorces his wife,’ says the LORD, the God of Israel, ‘does violence to the one he should protect’ says the LORD Almighty. So, guard yourselves in your spirit, and do not be faithless.” (Malachi 2:16).

Marriage in the New Testament Gentile church is held in such high regard that the Apostle Paul says that a believing brother or sister should not divorce their spouse if he or she is willing to live with them. However, if the unbeliever leaves, he should not to be forced to stay. The believer is not bound in such a circumstance. However, to remain married, even to an unbeliever, is preferable. It gives room for the unbeliever to turn to the Lord and it allows for the sanctification of the children (1 Corinthians 7:12-16).

Much of this Biblical perspective is affirmed by a secular British psychiatrist who works in a slum hospital and is on call to treat prison inmates, where he has treated over 10,000 patients. In his book, *Life at the Bottom*, Theodore Dalrymple devotes a chapter to abuse. It’s a topic that needs to be addressed because so many single

mothers have told me that they divorced their husbands or separated from them because of abuse. It ranks with adultery as a justifiable cause for separation. I've asked what that looks like, but single women don't like to talk about it, probably because of a sense of guilt and shame caused by their abusers' treatment. I appreciated his presentation because it pulled back the curtain of shame that people are not willing open, unless they have first opened up their hearts to the Lord and allowed him to heal them at the core of their being.

In his chapter on abuse, "Tough Love," he rales against liberal elites whose views, largely adopted by our culture, have "turned the poor from a class into a caste." (p. 47). He writes, "The sexual revolutionaries wanted to liberate sexual relations from all but the merest biological content. Henceforth, such relations were not to be subject to restrictive bourgeois contractual arrangements—or heaven forbid, sacraments—such as marriage; no social stigma was to attach to any sexual conduct that had hitherto been regarded as reprehensible. The only criterion governing the acceptability of sexual relations was the mutual consent of those entering upon them" (p.46).

Dalrymple has seen the failure of this philosophy firsthand and how it has affected the poor. He continues, "Not for a moment did the sexual liberators stop to consider the effects upon the poor of the destruction of strong family ties that alone made emergence from poverty possible for large numbers of people. They were concerned only with the petty dramas of their own lives and dissatisfactions" (pp. 46-47).

Because of his vast experience, Dalrymple has come to the point where he can identify "a man's propensity to violence" from "his face and bearing as any other strongly marked character trait" (p. 38). He notes that women in general live in denial and do not recognize an abuser, and so they universally "think of themselves as victims alone rather than the victims and accomplices they are" (p.39).

I was once called to counsel a couple where the man was accused of abusing his wife. This was the second marriage for both of them and many thought it was a precipitous and unwise decision for both of them. While counseling them, I observed how she was manipulating and provoking her husband. He showed no violence in my presence, but I could see where her provocation could lead. Later, connecting what she had said much earlier about being sexually abused by her adoptive father, I realized that she had learned how to blackmail and manipulate her father to get her way as a child; and now she was using that same strategy to get her way with her husband.

Dalrymple concludes that inflamed jealousy is the principle cause of abuse in men and he ties that to sexual license. "If people demand sexual liberty for themselves, but sexual fidelity from others, the result is the inflammation of jealousy, for it is natural to suppose that one is being done by as one is doing to others—and jealousy is the most frequent precipitant of violence between the sexes" (p. 42). The great majority of abusive men that Dalrymple has met are "flagrantly unfaithful."

An abusive man, devoid of self-worth in almost every area of life, education, job or social standing, derives a sense of status by the control he has over “his girl.” Lacking any other wealth, he possesses the one thing that he can control. This is how Dalrymple describes his jealous control.

“Thus when I hear from a female patient that the man with whom she lives has beaten her severely for a trivial reason—for having served roast potatoes when he wanted boiled, for example, or for having failed to dust the top of the television—I know at once that the man is obsessively jealous: for a jealous man wishes to occupy his lover’s every thought, and there is no more effective method of achieving this than his arbitrary terrorism. From his point of view, the more arbitrary and completely disproportionate the violence, the more functional it is; and indeed, he often lays down conditions impossible for the woman to meet—that a freshly cooked meal should be waiting for him the moment he arrives home, for instance, though he will not say even to within the nearest four hours when he is arriving home—precisely so that he may have an occasion to beat her. Indeed, so effective is this method that the mental life of many of the violently abused women who consult me has focused for years upon their lovers—their whereabouts, their wishes, their comforts, their moods—to the exclusion of all else” (p. 44).

In a more civilized setting, the jealous husband, who is losing control of his wife, will call the pastor, “You have to help me. Make my wife come back. The Bible says, ‘Wives, submit to your husbands in everything.’ Make her do what she is supposed to do.” These men never remember the rest of the context where Paul writes that the husband should love and care for his wife as he cares for the wellbeing and comfort of his own body. He must sacrificially give and humble himself even as Christ humbled himself and gave himself for the church by dying for her sin on the cross (Ephesians 5:25-29). In addition to this ignorance, he demands that the pastor drop everything and do his bidding immediately, that very hour. The outcome he wants is for his wife to apologize and return like a submissive dog, with tail between its legs.

Why don’t abused women just leave? It’s because, writes Dalrymple, these women believe “in the inevitability of male jealousy” (p.43). Thus, they decide it’s better to live with the abuse they know than the abuse they don’t. In addition, they believe that a single woman, alone in the neighborhood, opens herself to being preyed upon by everyone (p. 43). Also, some of those who have left an abuser to find relief with a non-violent man, leave that one as well because they find him to be “intolerably indifferent and emotionally distant” (p. 46).

This way of living out the curse—“Your desire will be for your husband, and he will rule over you” (Genesis 3:16)—is often perpetrated in the lives of their children. “The social trend to these kinds of relationships is self-reinforcing: for the children they produce grow up supposing that all relationships between men and women are but

temporary and subject to revision. From the very earliest age, therefore, the children live in an atmosphere of tension between the natural desire for stability and the emotional chaos they see all around them. They are able to make no assumption that the man in their lives—the man they call ‘Daddy’ today—will be there tomorrow” (p..44-45).

An outcome of this type of home is that children grow up into lawlessness. They don’t distinguish between legitimate and illegitimate authority. Against any type of restraint or even an intended sign of affection such as a hug, they threaten, “Don’t you touch me!” With men coming in and going out of her life, the mother is the sole authority in the home. Yet, she often undermines even that authority by not supporting the discipline of her child by a school teacher or principal.

The curse of Genesis 3:16 could be lived out in a positive way where the wife submits to her husband and where the husband loves, cherishes, provides for and supports his wife. In such a home, the husband stands behind his wife when she is disrespected by a child; and if the father discourages rather than encourages by his force, he listens to his wife when she wants him to “tone it down.” United, firm and loving discipline, even if buttressed by appropriate force, exercised by the parents, provides a safe environment where children can thrive and feel the guidance of an all-providing God who is all-together loving, holy and forgiving.

Considering these things, what should the church do? It should unabashedly preach and teach what the Biblical standard is. We, the clergy, often do not touch certain subjects because we know that they may create a stir in the congregation, or offend an influential family who is tolerating sin among its relations. Further, we may feel that teaching Biblical truth about these issues will keep seekers and visitors from coming back. Nevertheless, because the church is the pillar and ground of the truth (1 Timothy 3:15), it is obliged to address these topics in a serious and urgent manner (2 Timothy 4:2-5).

It used to be, in my youth (the 1950s), that only sexual immorality was a justification for divorce. Where infidelity was suspected, a spouse could hire a private detective to catch the offender in the act, like observing the spouse usher another person into a motel room, or photographing the suspect making out in a car by the side of a road. However, today the church cannot rely on the state to buttress the Biblical teaching of sexual morality, marriage, and divorce. Because of this, the teaching, discipling church will find itself more and more in conflict with public practice and the media police.

Jodi and Christians like her will often be challenged. They need to pray for openings to speak the word. Maybe it will be loving commiseration, “Would you like to have breakfast with me where we can talk about what is going on?” It may be a sharp barb, “What did you expect when you did wrong?” At other times, we may be compelled to speak up when morally offensive entertainment is proposed for an office party.

It will be necessary to be vigilant at home about what is allowed on TV and the internet. What friends will our children be allowed to be with? If they spend the night at a friend's home, what type of supervision will be in place? How will parents and the church teach the youth about sexual morality?

In certain church circles, it is not proper to speak about these things. Sexual messages can be displayed on TV all of the time, but some think that the preacher should not speak about such a dirty topic from the holy pulpit. A church that ministers to the struggling class needs to address these things continually. People of the struggling class are immersed in the ways of the world, and the world is generally immoral. Its prevailing spirit is, that everything is okay, as long as "no one gets hurt." That is the delusional fiction that many live by.

DISCIPLESHIP AND RECONCILIATION

In the very act of accepting Christ and seeking to follow him, new believers will be dealing with their relationships. They need to stop continuing in sin and this may cause some old friends to withdraw. They may have to say to others, "I'm quitting this. The reason is that I have a new Leader. It is not me and it is not you. It's Jesus."

At the same time, we will need to teach new disciples how to resolve conflict situations. Some relationships, like parent-child or husband-wife, need to be restored. By confessing our own sins, we can help the new believers confess their sins, thus taking the first step towards restoration. Further, our aim is to bring the convert into the family of God. If anger, bitterness and rage are not dealt with, these emotions can destroy relationships within the body of Christ. As a family of God, we need to be brothers and sisters who live reconciled one with another.

Broken relationships are a huge problem in our society, especially in the struggling class. It's rare to find people who can trace their heritage beyond their grandparents. People move into and out of marital relationships, into one church and then out and then quit church altogether, into one job and then on to another. Some may cling to a very unhealthy relationship that is akin to oppressive bondage. They fear brutal, even murderous retaliation if they were to speak up and leave.

As they disciple new believers, church leaders will be called upon to help them make God-honoring decisions, and to help restore broken relationships and make them healthy. This is probably the most difficult and heart-wrenching part of discipleship. We live in solidarity with the new convert and feel their pain. We can speak the will of God into that situation, but it is still the convert's responsibility to obey and suffer through the consequences. We need to let go and trust that they feel and know Christ's companionship through it all. They have to do it, but as we watch and pray, we suffer along with them. We too need to trust that God will fulfill his promises.

Books have been written about forgiveness and reconciliation, but what follows are a few passages of Scripture that have been helpful to me. They have helped guide me to restore relationships without my being torn apart trying to please individuals holding conflicting positions. This is just a short outline but it has helped pull me back to the basics. Reconciliation with God is the model and foundation of our reconciliation with others.

To be reconciled, both sides need to make changes. In our relationship with God, God took the first step. The eternal Son became human and bore the curse of our sin and paid its punishment on the cross (2 Corinthians 5:21). "He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world" (1 John 2:2). In this way God has been reconciled to us. Instead of being hostile towards us, he is now favorably inclined towards us, not counting people's sins against them. He forgave the sin of the world and does not hold it against them (2 Corinthians 5:18,19).

Based upon God's work, the Apostle Paul pleads, "We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. We implore you on Christ's behalf: Be reconciled to God" (2 Corinthians 5:20). On our part, we need to recognize and confess our own sin. We need to repent, change our minds and adopt God's position and submit to it. Instead of being hostile towards God, blaming him for our troubles, and excusing our faults, we are now favorably inclined towards him. Instead of charging him with evil, we recognize his loving intent towards us and embrace it. This is a life-long process that molds our life into conformity with Christ. This then is the model that we follow in becoming reconciled to others.

In a conflict situation, the first thing that we must do is listen to what the other person is saying. They are accusing us of something. What have they seen or heard from us? In our opinion, they may not be interpreting the situation correctly. That may or may not be true; but either way, we need to understand their point of view.

Then we need to examine ourselves to discover what we indeed have done wrong. Where is my life not in conformity to God's will? Do I really love that person? Am I judging and making decisions based on only partial and erroneous information? Have I failed to keep promises? Do I say one thing and do another? Do I hide and keep secrets and use that to my advantage? I need to come to a point where I can say, "Do you mean to say . . . ?" (rephrase the other person's accusation). "I can understand why you think this way. I indeed did do this" (admit and confess my sin). "Will you please forgive me?" (Seek their answer). "Will you come alongside me to help me make the change that I need to make?"

We need to confess our sin as soon as possible. In Ephesians 4:24, Paul writes, "In your anger do not sin: Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry." Moreover, in Matthew 5:25, Jesus teaches us, "Settle matters quickly with your adversary who is taking you to court. Do it while you are still together on the way, or your adversary may hand you over to the judge, and the judge may hand you over to the officer, and you may be thrown into prison."

If we have sinful behavior, it is often habitual. By asking for help, we are giving the other person the right to correct us when we err, and we will not contradict or get angry when they do. What we are doing is letting our adversary become God's agent to purify us.

The next thing we need to do is to forgive what the other person has done to hurt us. Here we need to do what God did for us—absorb the cost and not take vengeance. Our sense of justice drives us to pay back and get even, but that is not our job; it is God's. Paul gives us plenty to think about and act upon in Romans 12:14-21. "Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse. . . . Live in harmony with one another. Do not be proud, but be willing to associate with people of low position. Do not be conceited. Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everyone. Do not take revenge, my dear friends,

but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written, 'It is mine to avenge; I will repay,' says the Lord. On the contrary: 'If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink. In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head.' Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good."

To "heap burning coals" on our enemy's head by returning good for evil does not mean that it is our desire to inflict mental anguish and punishment on our enemy. It means rather that the person may feel ashamed and convicted of their evil. When we read about the suffering and cruelty inflicted upon Christ and realize that he was innocent, while we were the sinful and guilty ones; and that it was for us that he died, we begin to sense our own shame and guilt. In this way, Jesus "heaps burning coals on our head."

If we, on the other hand, return evil for evil, if judge and condemn and pay them back in like manner, they will feel justified in continuing to treat us with contempt and evil. Instead of feeling guilt, they instead feel a sense of righteousness. Because they feel themselves righteous, they will not repent. They will not feel the need to make a change.

This conforms to the teaching of Jesus in his Sermon on the Mount, "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you" (Matthew 5:44). In this way we imitate God who lavishes his gifts of rain and sunshine upon both the just and the unjust (Matthew 5:45).

Finally, we have a natural tendency to try to find allies to sympathize with us and take our side in the conflict. We'll share the "facts" from our perspective and omit what is self-condemning. Instead of doing this, we must go to our adversary and point out his or her fault, just between the two of us (Matthew 18:15). While we do this, let us be ready to listen to their point of view. This may modify our judgment. It may also cause us to make changes in ourselves. This often ends the matter. If it doesn't, we need to seek help from some wise, mature believer or church leader (Matthew 18:16-17).

God doesn't want us to suffer in silence, absorb condemnation until we are depressed and filled with guilt, or run away and abandon ship.

A helpful book about forgiveness is Lewis B. Smedes' *Forgive and Forget: Healing the Hurts We Don't Deserve* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1985). We need to understand that this is one side of the equation. For reconciliation to occur the other person must do the same. I look for the other person to change his behavior—I change to conform to God's will; he changes to conform to God's will. The result is unity between us both. If the other person is slow to recognize his or her own faults and change, I will not let that hold me back. Unilaterally, I will submit to Christ and do what he wants me to do. When someone converts, he or she must go through this process in dealing with family members, friends or colleagues. When I decide to follow Christ, I enter into conflict with my sin and the world that is under the control of the evil one. God through Christ is reconciled to me; I, through confession and faith, am reconciled to

God. As God forgave me, I forgive others. I absorb the pain and count the cost, but I call those around me to recognize their sin as well and to be reconciled to me. At its heart this is evangelism and discipleship working its way out in our relationships.

A CHURCH OF THE STRUGGLING CLASS

INTRODUCTION

I use the term “church of the struggling class,” not “church for the struggling class,” because this is a church where members of the struggling class are not only welcomed and celebrated, but where the church cannot fulfill its mission without their witness, their gifts, their finances and other resources, their time, their participation in ministry, and their spiritual gifts. This is a church that recognizes that it cannot grow both spiritually in faith and good works, and in number of adherents, unless it extends its reach to the diverse classes that live in its shadow. By reaching out and discipling members of the struggling class and forming a diversity of small groups, the church can expand to new neighborhoods. In so doing, long-term members and those with greater resources are able to learn how to be like Jesus, seeing people as he saw them and ministering like he did. As believers open up their hearts to the mission of Christ and to the struggling class, they will discover how they themselves are struggling to throw off the allure and power of this world that brings them into spiritual bondage.

Further, the purpose of this book is to help the church fulfill its mandate to go and make disciples (Matthew 28:19). This is not about a mandate to alleviate poverty. Our prayer, however, is that people leave poverty as they overcome the destructive lifestyle that has pulled them into poverty for so long. We would love for everyone to be able to live in safe neighborhoods, but more than anything else, we desire for people not only to be safe to live with but also to be a haven for those around them who live in distress. More than earning more money, we desire that those in the struggling class learn generosity with what little they have, and to be grateful. In short, we desire for the church of the struggling class to be a church that makes disciples, winning the lost and helping them to follow Christ.

MEETING AND MAKING FRIENDS

Building relationships is key to effective evangelism and discipleship. To build relations we must first make contact. We can only lead and teach if we have built a relationship of trust. People need to know that we, like them, struggle with sin, confess it, and yield to God. They need to know that if we were in their situation, we would do what we tell them to do. Like Paul, we want to be like a nursing mother who cares for her children, sharing not only the gospel but also “our very lives” (1 Thessalonians 2:7, 8), and like a father who encourages, comforts and urges his children to live lives worthy of God (1 Thessalonians 2:11,12).

We may be tempted to say that we don't have time to make contact with those of the struggling class. Let's confess it—we don't have time because our lives are filled with us. Our lives are filled with activities centered on our family, school, job and church, and all of these ties are in suburbia. Probably more than anyone else in the church the pastor is isolated from people of the struggling class. The deacons work with outreach ministry to the poor. The evangelism director deals with programs like Vacation Bible School. A missions committee maintains contact with missionary support, both local and foreign.

However, the pastor works most closely with the leadership in the council of elders and deacons. This is very important because each one would like to pull the pastor in one direction or another, and in the midst of them, the pastor is trying to lead and urge the whole group to follow the Lord's will as preached and taught from the Word from week to week. The pastor, too, will need to visit the sick, those in crises, those who have gone astray, and encourage the discouraged. The sheep of the flock, often wounded and scared, need attention. The elders of the congregation should be leading this work, but often they will excuse themselves, “I'm too busy this week.” Or, “Pastor, you can do it so much better.” So, how is the pastor to break out of this loving community and venture into a neighborhood where he is a stranger, and knock on the door of people who may not want him there. To break out, the pastor needs to consciously make time, find that contact, and make that call. The strugglers are not coming to him, so he has to go out to them.

The suburban church of Reformed persuasion generally grows biologically. Christian families have children and send them to Christian schools and bring them to church. These children attend church school; and when they profess their faith usually take a pre-profession course. This is a family nurture and academic process to mold the faith and character of those who have been born to believing parents. The emphasis is upon conserving those who have been born into a church family.

However, the biological method of church growth and evangelism has encountered hard times. The almost universal use of contraceptives has led to families limiting the number of children to three or less. It's a recipe for zero growth.

One way of making friendships with those outside the fellowship of the church is through marriage. It's highly discouraged but church youth will occasionally date and marry someone from outside of this community. The probability of losing our youth through marriage to an outsider is as high as it is for gaining the outsider. If the outsider decides to affiliate with the church, he or she needs to adopt this cultural and educational system. Some do this and thrive and even become leaders in the church. Others don't thrive but tolerate the system for their family's sake.

The high cost of Christian school education effectively excludes children of the struggling class. Parents are drawn to and promote the education of their children whether at Christian schools or public schools. Thus, the acquaintances of parents involved in the education of their children at Christian schools are quite distinct from those of parents who are involved with PTA, games, etc. at the public schools where their children attend. Moreover, those who home school their children are likely to gravitate to a third set of associations.

We believers of Christian Reformed persuasion generally hold to the idea that parents who make baptismal vows are obligated to send their children to Christian school, if there is such a school within driving distance. It so happens that not every family has an income that allows it to pay full tuition, especially if the family has more than one child. So sometimes, a church decides that it should help that family by supplementing the cost of Christian education. This demonstrates the solidarity of the community of faith where those who have much share with those who have less. It's a program that works admirably as long as the large majority has a high income. However, it breaks down where the large majority does not have sufficient income.

This system of covenantal responsibility and unity also breaks down if a church member with a lower income, a member of the struggling class, does not lead an exemplary life. It's a strictly guarded secret how much aid a particular family gets, but in a tight community people suspect who it might be and feel free to criticize if the family takes a trip to Disney World, "something that we responsible stewards of our finances would not do," or signs a lease for a new car. Struggling Joe's family belongs, yet it really does not belong. It is not in the same class as the rest of the church. His children, too, are not invited to the same parties and they cannot meet the expectations of others, like the ability to take outings to a ski resort, for example, unless it is subsidized by fundraisers. Subsidizing a church or school program for someone in the struggling class is a way of making contact and being intimately involved in people's lives, but because of its structure, it can only include a few. It cannot be offered to the community at large.

Another way of making friends with those of the struggling class is by sponsoring a mobile food pantry once a month. This is an opportunity to meet a felt need of many low-income people. If a volunteer from the church, hands out literature (gospel tracts, invitations, scriptures, etc) and talks with people and prays with those who mention a problem, the church will begin to connect with some of the clients.

I have done this at a couple of churches for several years; and although I'm a volunteer, the people often ask me, "Are you the pastor?" If the pastor does this, I'm sure that people would confide in him and seek him out for spiritual help. If he must deny a request for rent money, for example, he will have opportunity to explain the mission of the church and how the people can be part of it. Connected in this way with the pastor, some may feel drawn to worship.

We need to guard ourselves from thinking that our generosity will cause people to be thankful, and that this thankfulness is a step they are making in becoming a disciple of Christ. The use of worldly power and privilege to exert influence over others does not foster true fellowship in the body of believers. What is likely to happen is that those who are touched by the gospel in this way will probably seek fellowship in other churches, maybe a mega-church where they can attend anonymously. Having been injured in some way in the past, they test the waters and only dive in when they feel secure. In their hiding, they find safety, and in their freedom, they can decide when they want to go forward at an altar call or join a small group.

Jodi, her pastor, and members of the close-knit mono-culture suburban style church meet people of the struggling class all the time. Jodi and many like her are in close contact with people at work and learn of their struggles with children, an unfaithful spouse, with debt, etc. Some church members get to know a certain waiter or waitress at a favorite restaurant. The struggling class is everywhere, but at the same time far away. Our relationships are often formal and superficial. Opportunities to share the gospel are limited and often fleeting. We frequently recognize them when the opportune time has gone. We kick ourselves because we blew it, but it's a step in the right direction if we've recognized that there was that opportunity.

Because our worlds are so far apart, it is necessary for us to become like missionaries who travel to a foreign country, learn its language, reside in its land and in a certain way subject ourselves to its rules. The Apostle Paul did this to win the people of the various cultures where he ministered. He wrote in 1 Corinthians 9:19-23, "Though I am free and belong to no one, I have made myself a slave to everyone, to win as many as possible. To the Jews I became like a Jew, to win the Jews. To those under the law I became like one under the law (though I myself am not under the law), so as to win those under the law. To those not having the law I became like one not having the law (though I am not free from God's law but am under Christ's law), so as to win those not having the law. To the weak I became weak, to win the weak. I have become all things to all people

so that by all possible means I might save some. I do all this for the sake of the gospel, that I may share in its blessings.”

To place ourselves in a position where others are teachers and we are students, where they own the place and we are clients, where they are in and we are out, makes us feel very uncomfortable and insecure; but it is the way to be as one struggling when we meet those who are struggling. When we moved to Brazil in 1967 as missionaries, we saw the children playing and heard them talk with each other. They could speak much better than we could. Our minds were thinking like university students, but our tongues were babbling like a babe in a crib. I always depended upon their love and kindness to overlook my weakness and ignorance. We need to approach members of the struggling class in the same way,

I believe that the best place to meet people is in their homes, the place that is theirs and where they regulate life as they want. The question then becomes, “How do I become a guest in someone’s home?” Sometimes, since we are neighbors, we bring a card or a small loaf of my wife’s home-baked bread at Christmas time. Some have invited us in and this has led to a conversation of a spiritual nature

To make an evangelistic call is more difficult, but it is not impossible. A boys’ club or girls’ club leader is likely to meet one of the parents of a community child. A leader can be right up front, “It’s so wonderful to have your child in our club. He’s just like one of us. Could I stop by your place to get to know you and your family better. Is that OK? What would be a good time?” On this visit, it would not be difficult to ask, “How did your child hear about the kids’ club? How did your child like it? What were some of the highlights? What did you think of your son’s activities? Are there any issues that came up that we could address to make the program better?” The leader can ask about the family, its background, work, etc. He or she can say too, “I’d like to share what motivates us and what is the most precious thing in my life.” Then continue to talk about the love of Jesus and what he desires of us. After a couple visits, the leader might ask, “Would you like to study the Bible with me?”

Initial contact can be made on the job, knocking on doors to leave an invitation, or when we meet someone on a neighborhood prayer walk. This is not fruitless. Once I dedicated an hour a week to walk the streets of a trailer court. I knocked on a door, and introduced myself in this way, “We recently moved to this area and found a church we really like. Would you accept an invitation?” In three months, I had knocked on the door of every trailer and four families visited the church worship service. I also identified some families who could use some help in buying gifts for their children at Christmas time. One woman who was deathly ill was cured by the anointing of oil and prayer (James 5:14,15). After visiting the church several times, she fell back into a life of prostitution. This was a woman who grew up in a home of Reformed persuasion and then married a non-believer of a different culture from whom she was separated. She

had a concerned sister, a member of a suburban Reformed church who tried to help, to no avail.

Still another way of making friends with people of the struggling class is to hold a back yard Bible club, a Vacation Bible School of one class, one teacher, one helper with one host home where children who live nearby hear a Bible story, learn a memory verse, sing songs, do a craft, play games and learn how to pray. At the conclusion of the sessions, the volunteers can visit the home to present a Bible study book to the parents and show how to read a story to their child is done. Some of the parents visited in this way have read all the Bible stories several times.

I believe it is important never to misrepresent our intentions. We might say right up front, "Could we meet for lunch at a restaurant, or could I come to your place to talk about what the Bible says about what it means to be a Christian? I would love to get to know you better. I'd love to hear your story." They can accept, but we give them the freedom to turn us down. Respecting them even in this is recognizing their dignity and their responsibility. It's important that we do what God wants and trust His Holy Spirit to have prepared the way in their heart even before we made contact.

HOMOGENEOUS GROUPS

The idea behind the struggling class as a homogeneous group is that people like to worship and fellowship with their “own kind.” Birds of a feather flock together. Some new church starts specifically target a certain demographic. For example, the core team may be composed of young adults who are led by a recent graduate from seminary. The music, the fellowship, the preaching all fit recent college graduates, young professionals, newly married, etc. An elderly couple visits and within 15 minutes decides that the place is not for them. The music is too loud. Sermon illustrations and application do not apply to them at all. They think the message is shallow, but the regular attendees think it is awesome and hits home every time.

Believers are all one in Jesus Christ, but the rich have difficulty relating to the poor, African Americans have difficulty relating to Latinos. Hispanics from Puerto Rico do not feel comfortable with those from Mexico or from El Salvador. Imagine trying to put a chief executive officer and a Burger King employee in the same small group. The employee would probably feel so intimidated that he or she would not share anything, lest he be ridiculed. The CEO probably would not share his struggle with priorities or difficulties in personal relationships. Like in AA, one alcoholic confronting another in love, the CEO would need someone in a similar position to confront him with his less than ethical business dealing. This is why a small group of women feel a kinship and freedom to share without men being present.

Inmates, too, after a fashion, comprise a certain demographic. Many times, I've talked with inmates who came to a Monday night worship service in the jail recreation room. They told me how they liked it. They felt comfortable. It was a service especially geared to their needs. A volunteer counselor would often invite an inmate to come to his church when he was released. However, once free in society, the former inmate never attended the church where the volunteer was a member. He just did not feel comfortable there. Just driving into the parking lot told him that he did not belong. He felt like a piece of junk, like his car, in comparison to all the others who belonged. The truth is that all those in that church were also needy sinners, but the former inmate saw himself as unworthy in comparison. We need to take this sociological phenomenon into consideration when we strive to disciple the struggling class.

In 1913, Rev. William Van Wijk, then pastor of the Oakdale Christian Reformed Church in Grand Rapids, wrote a 16-page booklet entitled *City Evangelism, Why and How* (*Stadsevangelisatie, Waarom en Hoe* [Grand Rapids: Eerdsman and Sevensma]). Large ethnic Dutch Grand Rapids churches felt a desire to evangelize their neighborhood, but they realized that they represented a foreign element in the city. So they established chapels, small churches that could call neighborhood people to Christ and gather them into a congregation where they could play a meaningful and important role. The churches hired evangelists who received their training at the Reformed Bible

Institute (now Kuyper College). This school was founded to train men and women in evangelism and discipleship making. Many of these chapels became Christian Reformed Churches. Unfortunately, the chapel was viewed as an inferior type of church, when it should have been respected as a peer among the churches. The true pastor was the missionary evangelist, but because he had not graduated from seminary, he could not administer the sacraments of baptism and the Lord's Supper. Over time, this changed, but the evangelist still served under restrictions. Women could serve on the steering committee because it was not a true council of elders and deacons. The steering committee served the role of a church council but its decisions needed to be approved by the sponsoring church. The chapel, the church of the struggling class, never entered the ranks of a "true" church until it measured up to the standards of the suburban church. The tragedy was that when the chapel became a church with a seminary-trained pastor it became non-evangelistic and traditional and it ceased to grow through the evangelization and discipleship of people from the community.

Now that we know what the homogeneous principle looks like, and how it can help us start new congregations, we need to confront its limitations. "Koinonia" is a Greek word that means "a partnership," "a sharing in," "a fellowship." The Spirit-filled early church, immediately on the heels of Pentecost experienced a heightened koinonia. The believers "devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. . . . All the believers were together and had everything in common. . . . They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts" (Acts 2:42, 44, 46). It was a church that was growing. The "Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved" (Acts 2:47).

The koinonia of a vibrant, growing church can also turn into "koinonitis," a term coined by missiologist Peter Wagner to describe a church that is so loving and sharing among its own members that it grows isolated and distant from the world around it. The members are talking and visiting together before and after worship. They get caught up on what is happening with their friends. Potluck meals and fund-raising events for mission projects, like sending their youth on a serve project to Latin America, help bind the people together. Yet, a visitor would feel totally out of place. There is humor that only the members pick up on. Reference is made to events that are meaningful to longstanding members but meaningless to a newcomer.

Years ago, there was a group of people who effectively evangelized their neighborhood. The core team was made up of people with an ethnic Dutch background and a Reformed heritage who had a heart for evangelism. Volunteers canvassed the neighborhood, conducted Vacation Bible School, and picked up neighborhood children for Sunday school. The minister preached down-to-earth evangelistic, Bible-based messages and people from the neighborhood accepted the gospel and joined the church. In its initial stages of growth, the church reflected the cultural makeup of the

neighborhood. The church members became a close-knit family of faith. Over time, pastors came and pastors went. Evangelistic outreach varied depending upon pastoral leadership, but visitors were rarely led to conversion and growth through discipleship.

Today the church is trying to draw new members from the neighborhood, but its family unity and cohesiveness hinders it from ministering outside of its shell. It adheres to the gospel message, but it continues to follow the traditions of the past, clinging also to the way evangelism was done 50 years ago. When a visitor comes, the people are very friendly, but the church family is hard to break into. The people love their church and wonder why visitors do not continue to attend and then join.

In many cases, the neighborhood around the church has changed. As the members became more prosperous, they moved away to the newer suburbs where they joined churches with a style of worship, doctrine, and social level similar to their own. They were being part of a gradual transplant to a new area, often preserving the way of life and the traditions they've always held, occasionally updating them to fit the times and a new generation.

Although they moved to a new home, some members, out of loyalty to the church and a desire to continue fellowshiping with longtime friends, commuted to attend worship and the church's other programs. In the neighborhood around the church young families bought the homes that were put up for sale. Some of them became rental units. These new residents saw this as a step up from what they had before. The church members, now commuters to worship, saw the change of the neighborhood as a step backward. In fact, the neighborhood lost the stability that it once enjoyed. The struggling class moved in while those with suburban values moved out. With the passage of time, the size of the congregation diminished and the median age of its members grew increasingly old, out of touch with the new reality, and too weak to keep the program of the church going. Finally, the remnant decided to sell the building to a new congregation. Another homogeneous fellowship group (maybe Hispanic, maybe African American, maybe other) moved in.

It is at the point where the church was at its most vibrant, enjoying success by almost every measure, that it should have been seeking a vision and working hard to reach people groups other than its own, and doing this by starting satellite worshiping groups to reach new people moving into the area.

The Apostle Paul's mission to the Gentiles lays precedent. It wasn't merely that those who were dead in trespasses and sin were made alive by the love and grace of God through faith in the Lord Jesus (Ephesians 2:1-10), but those who were far away, separated from Israel and its covenant with God, were brought near by the blood of Christ (Ephesians 2:11-13). Through their acceptance of Jesus as Lord and Christ, the Gentiles were brought near to become part of the "new humanity" that God was creating (Ephesians 2:15). Paul wrote, "So in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith, for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with

Christ. There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (Galatians 3:26-28). Jews don't stop being Jews, slaves don't stop being slaves, and males don't stop being males, and people of the struggling class don't stop living in trailer houses, but everyone who accepts Christ is united in Spirit, and they can all celebrate that in a large assembly for worship.

By abdicating its responsibility to win and gather those who are far off culturally and socially, the church misses out on the joy and victory of the peace in Jesus that overcomes social barriers. Who knows what joy might be in store for a CEO and a Burger King employee opening up their hearts, confessing their sins, and encouraging one another in the faith, if they were to take part in the same small group?

REPRODUCIBLE

A multiplying church can reproduce itself within the constraints of the means at its disposal. Many contemporary Western churches assume that a church can continue and grow as long as it has a building and a leader with the equivalent of a doctor's degree (Three years of seminary on top of a four-year college education). The Bible, on the other hand, emphasizes the filling of the Spirit, the Word of God and submission to Jesus' command to love one another and go out to make disciples. In an article in *Christianity Today* (April, 2019), Kate Shellnutt reports on how Thai church revival was tabulated by Dwight Martin in a comprehensive national church database. "In village after village, Thai people who had never before heard the name Jesus responded by the dozens to follow him. In a single day last December, 309 people began following Christ as FJCCA [Free in Jesus Christ Church Association] teams visited four villages for the first time. . . . Martin finally asked the pastors outright, 'Who taught you how to do this?' They didn't understand the question. After a pause the wife of one of the pastors said, 'We just read what Jesus and Paul did in the Gospels and Acts and do the same thing'" (p. 30-31) Shellnutt added, "FJCCA now plants more churches in two weeks than more than 300 evangelical missionaries with the Evangelical Fellowship of Thailand do in an entire year" (p. 31).

We don't experience church planting here in America today because we live in a different culture, a culture that has been infused by a Christian tradition for centuries. However, our secular, scientifically saturated thinking hinders us from experiencing the supernatural infused with magic, spirit powers, both good and evil, and miracles. Further, families in tribal areas probably are intact and interrelated, so that whole villages can come to a decision in one corporate decision whereas we live in a hyper-individualistic society where a person is allowed to do his own thing. However, it would be well for us to accept that the power of God is capable of penetrating every culture in every age. After all, Jesus said that he received all authority in heaven and earth, and that he would be with his followers even to the end of the age as they went out to make disciples (Matthew 28:18-20).

When Wayne Ondersma, the pastor of the PIER church, was promoting back yard Bible clubs, small miniature vacation Bible schools, he said, "Back Yard Bible Clubs are small, simple, sound and reproducible." The size will be limited by the size of the porch or back yard. The home owner and volunteers will invite a large number of children realizing that obstacles will hinder a great number of those invited from actually coming. Those who teach and conduct these clubs are often hindered by complicated teaching materials. Actually, the instruction for the teacher can be very simple, "Read the story from the Bible several times, then read the same story from a Child's story Bible several times, in order to learn it by heart. Then tell the story in your own words and apply it to the life of the children." In Brazil in the early 1980s, teachers with a

fourth-grade education, but able to read and write well, had no difficulty accepting this assignment. Most of them were mothers but they executed it very well. So did teenagers. It doesn't take a lot to conduct a Bible school that is simple and scripturally sound.

This is not small thinking. This is thinking that has been stretched—it thinks multiplication. It envisions volunteers of the struggling class leading and teaching, yet it doesn't throw a burden on a new convert that is too heavy to carry. Let them watch and help and then let them assume leadership according to the level of their spiritual maturity.

All this is much easier and highly possible when parents conduct home worship. Family devotions with the reading of the Bible or a Bible story book for children, prayer and discussion at mealtime around the kitchen table are the nursery of worship that can be conducted in a believer's back yard for neighborhood children. To hold family devotions is a tall order for a family that is not accustomed even to eat together. To prepare a meal and call the family to the table requires discipline. Someone will want to finish the internet game, or talk with a friend, each one with his own agenda. "Kids, come to the table now!", Mom says, and now she has to enforce it. If Dad is not cooperating, she has to talk with him privately and they have to come to some agreement on how to make this happen. Once the family is finished eating, each person will want to get up and go. Once again, Mom or Dad has to call everyone back. You see, the parents are learning how to exercise steady, loving and even forceful authority. What is true for family devotions is also true for getting the family together and heading for worship in church. Really, it's no different than going to a movie or going shopping, when the family comes in tow. Teaching and worshipping together and exercising loving authority are exactly what is required for a back yard Bible class. This may be a tall order, but it is possible when more mature believers disciple and mentor new ones.

The question is, "Does the Bible envision such a thing?" Yes, it does. For example, In John 4:4-42, Jesus spoke to a Samaritan woman at Jacob's well just outside of the town of Sychar (4:5). When she wanted the living water that Jesus spoke about, Jesus told her, "Go, call your husband and come back." (John 4:10-16). When she said that she had no husband, to her embarrassment, Jesus pointed out that she was living with a man after having been married and divorced five times. She perceived Jesus' supernatural knowledge and concluded that Jesus was a prophet (4:19) and asked Jesus about the proper place of worship (4:20). In response to her question, Jesus informed her that the time was coming and had come when "the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth . . ." (4:23). She then acknowledged that she knew that the Messiah is coming (4:25) and Jesus told her that he indeed was the Messiah (4:26). When the arrival of the disciples interrupted the conversation, she left

her water jar and ran to the village and told the people, “Come, see a man who told me everything I ever did. Could this be the Messiah?” (4:28-29).

Can we envision a woman, the daughter of drug addict, who was obligated to protect her younger siblings as they bounced from one foster home to another, and who, in her adult life, has given birth to five children with five different men, all abusers, and is now living with a sixth, go tell others about the love of Jesus? What would make her eligible to tell others about the Savior? Would she have to push out the man in her life? Or, would she have to get married to him in order to tell others? After receiving Jesus as Lord, when and how can she start serving in the church, the Body of Christ?

It’s out of a convert’s deepest tragedy that his or her testimony comes. The Samaritan woman said, “Come see a man who told me everything I ever did” (John 4:29). Because of the woman’s testimony, many Samaritans believed in Jesus (4:39).

Andrew and Philip are other examples of who shared the gospel with others as soon as they began to follow Jesus. Andrew was one of the disciples of John the Baptist (John 1:40). Andrew was with John on the east side of the Jordan, where John was baptizing (1:28). When John saw Jesus passing by, he testified, “Look the Lamb of God!” (1:36). When Andrew and the other unnamed disciple of John heard John’s testimony, they followed Jesus (1:37). After spending a day with Jesus, “[t]he first thing Andrew did was to find his brother Simon and tell him, ‘We have found the Messiah.’” (John 1:41).

Like Andrew, Philip is another example of a disciple who made a disciple. As soon as Philip answered Jesus’ call to follow him (1:43), he found Nathaniel and told him that they had found the one Moses wrote about in Deuteronomy 18:15.

In Acts, Luke records twice (Acts 22:3-16; 26:12-18) how Paul gave testimony to how the Lord Jesus appeared to him on the way to Damascus and commissioned him to be his “servant and witness” (Acts 26:16). Although he was a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent man, God showed him mercy (1 Timothy 1:13). Out of this experience, he would write, “Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came to save sinners—of whom I am the worst. But for that very reason I was shown mercy so that in me, the worst of sinners, Christ Jesus might display his immense patience as an example for those who would believe in him and receive eternal life” (1 Timothy 1:15-16). From Paul’s example we see that the new Christian confesses his sin, and does not boast about it; but in sharing his witness, he celebrates the love, mercy and power of God. When the new believer learns how to share his testimony, he/she will tell others, “God did this great thing for me. He can do the same for you.” Strugglers who have found peace have a story to tell and in so doing they become instruments of multiplication in God’s hands.

Unfortunately, in many established churches, members believe it is the paid staff that should be the ones bringing people to Christ. They say, “We hire the pastor to preach moving sermons, the youth group leader to inspire young people to commit their

lives to Christ, and the outreach director to deliver help to the needy. I'll help if I have time, but don't ask me to say anything. Speaking? That's their job. Let them to do it." However, this view of the church is wrong because it violates the biblical teaching of the priesthood of all believers (1 Peter 2:9) that emphasizes that each one should reach one (2 Cor 5:18).

Moreover, the church of the struggling class doesn't have the luxury to hire such a staff. They are the staff. They need a leader and he may receive a full wage or he may not, but the people are the ministers, missionaries, counselors, educators, therapists and more. As each part of the body does its part, it is knit together in love and grows in every respect (Ephesians 4:15-16), both in maturity and in numbers to the praise of God.

This principle of reproduction should operate in every church because it is the teaching of the Gospels and Epistles and the Reformation's emphasis on the priesthood of all believers. It's God's will for every church, but it is especially crucial in the church of the struggling class. Those who have lived in dependence, and have often done the wrong thing, need to know that by faith in Christ they are rich and heirs of eternal life. Through the power of the Spirit they can overcome sin, and through that same Spirit are given the gifts, talents and experiences to be productive in his kingdom. A false humility and piety, and small, poverty thinking should not be catered to in the church. The church of the struggling class has been given from Christ all the resources that it needs to reproduce and grow. Leaders and believers on their knees will be praying for those in desperate situations and they will be asking the Lord to help them see the resources to alleviate them. God will answer their prayers with his Spirit (Luke 11:13).

THE DANGER OF PATERNALISM

Paternalism is an unhealthy relationship where a stronger person or organization dominates and controls a weaker one through generous help. We give, and along with the gift, we control. We provide and keep them dependent. Because we believe they can't learn, we don't teach them and give them responsibility that could lead to independence. We may think, "To give is already a stretch, and now you are asking me to teach besides; that's just too much." For example, it's easier for me to make a meal than to take the time to teach my daughter how to make one. It's more laborious and time consuming to help this awkward and inexperienced child to measure, cut, mix, fry, boil or bake, than to do it myself. Giving and providing is only half the job if we want to help someone. To train someone for independent living costs much more.

An extreme example of paternalism is a helicopter mom who suffers separation anxiety when she says good-bye to her child who leaves for college. Mother wants to call every day to see how her child is doing. At every freshman orientation, the college makes sure that parents know it is not OK to do this. The child needs to be their own. The parents are told, "Your kid will do just fine. Just relax."

The key to a healthy relationship is to support children while they are dependent children. At the same time, they need to be trained to obey, learn from their parents, and help around the house to their level of ability. At times, they need to be corrected and disciplined if they prove to be rebellious. At home, they learn to abide by the rules of the house. At an appropriate time, children will receive their parents' encouragement and blessing when they leave for college, military service, or get married. Parents may be quaking, afraid that their children will mess up, but they need to let them go and allow them to learn on their own and suffer the consequences of their own errors. This is exactly how they once learned when they started their new home.

In a similar way, new converts must be trained and encouraged to lead and train others. Mistakes are bound to occur as we do this. Sometimes, we give too much freedom and responsibility too soon, and at other times a person may demand a position when they are not ready. For this reason Paul warned that an overseer "must not be a recent convert, or he may become conceited" (1 Timothy 3:6).

Paternalism was often practiced by the mother churches of chapels (emerging churches). For example, chapels usually received financial subsidies from larger, more prosperous churches; but the larger churches also controlled the chapel. Moreover, the chapel people couldn't adequately fill the roles established by the sponsoring church. Consequently, these roles continued to be filled, year after year, by more capable people from the sponsoring church. For example, a Sunday school teacher may not mentor and give opportunity to a chapel member. Instead, she continues on in her position because, in her opinion, no one else can do the job as well as she. Or the highly principled teacher does not allow the lesson to be "watered down" by choosing

material that is easier to both understand and easier to teach. Unfortunately, however, when converts are not trained to fill roles of ministry and leadership, they continue to act like Sunday school children.

The Christian Reformed Church at one time had a fund for smaller churches. The number of these churches was increasing due to the migration of people from rural areas to urban centers. The youth of the church did not see opportunity on the farm and were going away for better jobs or a higher education in the cities. With declining membership, these rural churches could not pay denominational ministry shares, nor could they keep on paying an adequate salary for a full-time pastor. You see, a full-time pastorate was something the people expected and the denomination demanded of its clergy. Consequently, these churches were in a difficult situation. The people of the church had been trained to demand a full-time seminary-trained clergy person and, to complicate matters, the denomination imposed a salary standard as well. Pastors were not trained to seek non-pastoral positions. Lay people were not trained to fill the pulpit or allowed to administer the sacraments. Eventually, the denomination decided that the growing number of smaller dependent churches could not be supported in this way. Denominational aid was gradually reduced and finally eliminated. Many pastors left these churches and the churches closed. Others continued on with lay leadership and interim or bi-vocational pastors.

The cycle of paternalism was broken, but I have not heard where it has led to growth. The hemorrhage of funds allocated to non-growing, shrinking congregations has stopped. In its place, Home Missions and classical renewal have had only limited success in motivating small, struggling churches to grow. Sometimes the strategy is to shut down the old and rebirth a new church with people who have dedicated themselves to a new, evangelistic church plant.

Diaconal aid can also be given in a paternalistic way. This is done when the deacons help a family with the expectation that those on the receiving end will show gratitude by attending church, and/or finding employment. If the needy family doesn't fulfill expectations, the relationship sours. It is better to help just to be helping without requiring anything in return. Then the recipients are free to not follow us, and we are free to stop aid.

Sometimes our feelings of compassion are so great that we do not allow someone to suffer the consequences of their own unsustainable stubborn foolishness. The book of Proverbs has a lot to say about the consequences of foolishness. Here are some examples. "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge, but fools despise wisdom and instruction" (Proverbs 1:7). "For the waywardness of the simple will kill them, and the complacency of fools will destroy them" (Proverbs 1:32). "The wise woman builds her house, but with her own hands the foolish one tears hers down" (Proverbs 14:1). There are many more such passages. By jumping in too soon, or by helping too much, we do not allow God to speak to the conscience through the suffering

that he inflicts. Sometimes a person will hear God speak through a chaplain in jail when he has refused to hear the preacher in church. It was while feeding pigs that the prodigal son's conscience was pricked and he came to his senses and decided to return to his father (Luke 15:17-20). It is good to show mercy and to alleviate pain, but there are many situations where it is best not to help, but to allow the person to suffer consequences of their foolish actions.

An example might be that of a believing mother with children who continues to live with her idle, addicted husband. She enables his vice by calling his employer, "Henry can't come to work today. He's sick." The church may help once when a shutoff notice comes from the electric company, but it does not help a second time. Although the church has the financial resources to pay the bill again, it may tell her, "This situation is unsustainable. We won't be part of enabling this man in his waywardness. If you want us to, we can help you find a place at a women's shelter." But she refuses. She doesn't want to confront her husband by telling him that she is going to move out if he doesn't seek help for his addiction. She's afraid of his rejection and anger. Eventually the day comes when the electricity is shut off or an eviction notice arrives for unpaid rent. Now she has to move. What she so dreaded has happened. She has become the victim of inaction. A positive outcome would be more likely had she acted in faith and confronted her husband sooner rather than later.

My wife and I regularly give rides for people to make it easier for them to come to church. We hope that once they know the way and like it, they will make it to church on their own. Other times there is a real need and we do this for a long time. I have seen people walk three miles to do business or shop, but they were not willing to walk a mile to church. If there is no ride, they do not come even though they could walk.

Eventually, all such help in providing a ride has to come to an end. Considering this, I am slow to offer a ride to church. I'll encourage the person "without wheels" to ask another family member for a ride, or maybe a friend or neighbor. If they take the challenge and are enthused about the faith, this could be their way of inviting someone to church and at the same time sharing their faith

Some people in desperate need will seek a ride, or some money, or some other benefit. Their reliance is on material things to fulfill their desires. Others will wait on the Lord. They will pray and will obey God even if abandoned, even if it hurts. They will wait till God opens the door. We may pray with them, giving them nothing but ourselves, and when the answer comes, they know it was God and not us. We can be agents of God's grace, but often we get in the way by giving things and wanting some of the credit. Some are users of God's benefits for their own agenda, others are submissive followers. We, too, can have our agenda and not allow God to have his way. Let us not create paternalistic dependence!

STARTING A CHURCH

In this book my goal has been to establish the need to start churches of the struggling class. The most important person for this job will be the church planter. He should have a strong sense of the Lord's call on his life to do this work. Personality-wise, he needs to have a vision of what the as-yet-to-be church will look like, its place, its people, its worship, and its ministry. As a leader he needs to share his vision with others and gather a core of similarly-motivated families to join him in this effort. He needs to be a leader, someone who will take the initiative, and go beyond the shadow of someone who might have at first prompted him to pursue this work. And he needs to be a man, the husband who is "faithful to his wife" (1 Timothy 3:2) and manages his family well (1 Timothy 3:4) since he will be ministering to people who have been wounded by broken relationships. Even if their lives are fractured, they will want to know their pastor can be trusted, and is someone who practices what he preaches.

Suppose a suburban church feels the call to start a church of the struggling class. Where will it find such a person to form a core team and lead an emerging church? A normal church council would have an almost unanimous answer, "We need to hire a worker and appoint a committee to oversee his work." By this very decision, the new church will be dependent on a budget greater than what the struggling class can support. It is easier for the suburban church to allocate money than it is to mobilize a team of lay volunteers to evangelize and disciple those of the struggling class. Should we mobilize a team of volunteers for the ministry? Who can mobilize this team? The person they would be looking to for leadership is the pastor of their church.

Can a team, like a husband and wife together with a few more people, start a church?. It can, but someone will inevitably become the leader. The team members together may form a Bible-study group with the purpose of growing the number of its participants. However, team must understand that the tendency of a group will be to settle to what is comfortable for the majority. A good leader with a vision is needed to keep the group focused. He or she will also have to allow some people to leave if they do not desire to make the necessary sacrifices in time and resources. In fact, the leader may feel the necessity to ask someone to leave if they are hindering the growth of the group into a church. Sometimes, the leader will stand alone, but he must trust God to move in the hearts of those who will follow in obedience to Christ. If this happens, the leader must interpret this leaving as neither discipline for error, nor a failure of the group as a whole to care for the spiritual needs of its members. Leadership by consensus may bring peace, but it will not move forward.

In church planting, a big obstacle to overcome is conducting church like a business or corporation, where the board hires and judges the performance of the CEO (the pastor). The ruling elders exercise authority over the teaching elder while the

teaching elder, the pastor, hopes that ruling elders hear and understand. The pastor is not used to exercising spiritual authority over the elders and deacons in a way that emulates the type of leadership that Jesus exercised over his disciples. We are not used to thinking of the members of the board as the pastor's disciples. Will the church allow the pastor to be a disciple-making type of leader? This is the question facing every church council and every pastor.

In addition, the head pastor of a suburban church rarely has experience evangelizing and discipling people from the struggling class. He is used to pastoring the congregation and managing the education of the church youth. He is the coordinator of the church's paid employees if the church does not have an administrative assistant. He is at the center of a homogeneous group that is resistant to accept outsiders. Yet he is the person who needs to cast the vision for the work and convince the board to allow him to dedicate a portion of every week to evangelizing and training a team of disciples who, in turn, are capable of making other disciples (2 Timothy 2:2). The pastor may feel totally inadequate, but that's a good thing. It makes him rely on God and not on himself. It also forces him, and those who accept his leadership in this, to learn from the very people that they evangelize. They may know the scriptures, the Bible, but they also need to read another book—the people of the struggling class. By listening to the people that they are leading to Christ, they are learning how to read the scriptures in new way, a way that communicates truth to the broken and downcast.

I've heard of a pastor who kept to himself inside his study while the church was conducting vacation Bible school. Why didn't he take part? He was exercising his gift! Why didn't he step out and be an encourager of those who were selflessly working? The pastor could be monitoring the Bible school leadership, encouraging and praying for them. He could call a group of people to pray together with him while the Bible school was in session. He could step forward at the opening assembly, and visit classes and mix with children during craft time. Better yet, to greatly increase the attendance of neighborhood children, he could motivate teachers to be part of back-yard Bible classes and be instrumental in helping people open their homes, invite neighborhood children, and host the classes.

The church could also host block parties, or a "hot-dog" in the park neighborhood picnic, or sing carols in a neighborhood terminating with hot chocolate for everyone. At all of these events the pastor could be a visible presence. As these are occurring in trailer courts or near apartment complexes, teachers and volunteers could be collecting names and addresses for further contact through visits to the home. Here again the pastor could train people for the work.

In addition, the pastor might dedicate an hour a week to engage in door to door canvassing with a team whose leader is charged with the duty of scheduling, record keeping, etc. In so doing, he will be training others in how to work in the trenches, so to speak. All the while, the pastor is primarily the pastor of the flock. All the activities I've

mentioned may be peripheral to his main work, but the flock knows that the pastor's heart is out seeking the lost. As involvement in ministry among the struggling classes increases, leaders will emerge. The pastor may ask someone, "Can we count on you to organize a community event at the social hall of the _____ trailer court? Can you give the message?" Or, a recovering alcoholic might see the need to start an AA meeting. Or some ladies will form a single-parent support group. The suburban church will be ministering to suburbia, but it is not overlooking neighborhoods of the struggling class. It's becoming known as a mission church for everyone. Through this, shouldn't God be calling someone to a pastor-evangelist ministry? If so, the pastor might encourage and mentor this person. The church might feel prompted to call him to part-time youth work or to oversee the outreach ministry. And also encourage him to take online seminary courses to better interpret the Bible and preach. Somewhere along this journey the one called to plant a church of the struggling class will know his target audience, he will have a vision on how to proceed, and he will be in a position to invite others with a mission passion to join the core team under his leadership.

One of the challenges of the core team will be to find a place for worship. I know of one large church of Reformed persuasion in a community that over time has largely become Hispanic. It's an island of Caucasian wealth in a sea of Hispanic poverty. So, the church hired a Hispanic evangelist who did a good job. He started Sunday afternoon services in the same auditorium used by the main congregation. When the church built a new church plant on the outskirts of town, the Hispanic congregation moved with it. Now the meeting place was farther removed from the former part of town where most Hispanics lived. It also was meeting in social hall of an upscale building. Its wealth put a distance between the existing Hispanic congregation and the town's people. As a result, the Hispanic congregation ceased to grow. It would have been more advantageous for the Hispanic congregation to have rented a vacated store downtown for worship and its outreach ministries. There, the leaders might have been like Jesus' disciples learning to minister to the spiritual and social needs of the struggling class. Unfortunately, it was too connected to the sponsoring congregation and was not able to make deep inroads into the Hispanic community and its brokenness.

Several years ago, I heard a guest lecturer from a New York seminary speak in a church planting class at Calvin Seminary. He was cooperating with a new church in New York City that was started by laymen from a Nigerian mega church. Its mission was not only to gather Nigerian immigrants for worship but also to bring in other city residents. These Nigerians were transferred to New York on business and they started a church to reach New Yorkers. Members of this mega church have started churches in many other countries as well. Its members have been inspired and empowered to start international churches wherever their jobs take them. They share loyalty in doctrine and inspiration to the mother church and probably also send back a percentage of the

offerings. All the team members needed to start a church was that each one bring a chair, a Bible and a simple musical instrument like a zither, mouth organ, tambourine, or guitar. Together the people rented a meeting place, sometimes for only one day a week. This is how the Nigerian workers in the US have started churches that win and assemble American-born residents.

In our work in Brazil, we arranged the use of schools or community centers for meetings of emerging congregations. In the United States stores and restaurants can serve the same purpose.

A great obstacle to forming a congregation of the struggling class is the brokenness and chaos surrounding the lives of the new converts. Just a thing as simple as sitting down at the table to share a meal may require a tremendous amount of self-discipline and the discipline of children. To demand that everyone stay seated around the table for Bible reading (maybe from a Bible storybook), and prayer is another quantum leap. Working out fractured relationships and learning how to manage finances are other huge challenges. As long as a home is so chaotic it cannot serve as a meeting place for Bible study or for a support group. For a congregation to be functioning well, it needs enough mature members who are able to give of themselves to help others, and with enough compassion to love the unloved. Some of the greatest ministers in our church were like the Samaritan woman. They have been washed, sanctified, formed into the likeness of Jesus. They've been disciplined and are no longer broken; rather, they are healed and have become strong.

The path to becoming a leader, a partner in ministry, a volunteer teacher, musician, evangelist and more is something like a beginning piano student. At first, learning a piece of music by daily practice is a struggle. Then a point comes where the young player is making music and loving it, even going ahead to pieces of music not yet assigned. The joy of banging the keys is so great that playing the piano becomes a form of recreation and relaxation. Then the student meets another child who would like to learn. She says, "I can teach you," and she does and even earns some money doing it!" In like manner, the people who minister among the broken and needy will come to a place where they see results. It is doable! Victory is exciting! They experience emotional highs. They say, "If only so-and-so could do what I'm doing, he'd share the same victory and joy. It demands dedication and sacrifice, but it's worth it." As a result, they feel confident enough to teach or mentor others.

The struggling class church will be composed of people who are breaking out of their tradition and creating a new one patterned after Christ. The first leaders of this church, people from established churches, are also people who are breaking out of their tradition. They have decided to leave the security of the established church to birth a new one.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am in debt to the late Dr. Roger S. Greenway who was my mentor in my Doctor of Ministry program at Westminster Seminary. This book, in a way, is a version of my doctoral dissertation, but now enriched by life and ministry in the United States for the last thirty-plus years.

It was Pastor Wayne Ondersma who prompted me to write. In one of our frequent times of sharing, he said, “You ought to write this down,” and so I have done so. That first effort over two years ago has been revised and updated with suggestions of fellow servants of Christ, and with further experience ministering to the struggling class in the context of the PIER Church of Grand Rapids, where I am a volunteer and where Wayne Ondersma is pastor.

I am grateful to my wife Clarice who read the document and made numerous corrections and pointed out areas that were unintelligible. The same can be said of my daughter Elizabeth Lindemulder, who did the same. She also asked probing questions that begged for an answer.

Ben Meyer, a church planter and church-planter trainer in Mexico with Resonate Worldwide gave words of encouragement and highlighted phrases that might be interpreted as racist or chauvinistic.

Emeritus Professor at Calvin Theological Seminary, Carl J. Bosma and I have shared many experiences and have grown in our understanding of what it means to be a witness and make disciples during our missionary church-planting ministry in Brazil. He critically read the completed manuscript and made suggestions that ranged from the more persuasive use of scripture to the correcting of grammatical errors like the use of split infinitives and ending a sentence with a preposition. Only he would note that Luke’s use of the word poor in his Gospel (ten times) was more than Matthew and Mark’s together (four times each), and how that could reinforce my exposition “God’s Special Concern for the Poor.” It was he that pointed out that Jesus’ words, “repent and believe the good news” (Mark 1:15) meant “become my disciple,” by what immediately followed in verse 17, “Come, follow me.” Other similar observations made their mark on the final revision of this book.