

GOOD NEWS FOR THE STRUGGLING

Making Disciples of the Poor

Charles D. Uken

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Cover: Klondike Trail near Skagway, Alaska

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THE CHALLENGE

Chinese philosopher Lao Tzu once said, **“Give a man a fish and you feed him for a day. Teach him how to fish and you feed him for a lifetime.”**

A greater challenge is to motivate him to want to fish; that is, to desire to work and become self-sufficient.

A greater challenge yet is to be freed from bondage to the things of earth, which are all transitory, and to seek the will of God as revealed in the Bible. This book explores God’s intent to save and bless those who are poor both materially and spiritually.

I challenge you, the reader, to look beyond seeing the poor as objects of mercy, but to see them as potential servants of God--leaders of families, evangelists, elders, deacons--people who are filled with the Spirit and display his gifts of love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.

ENDORSEMENTS

“I am recommending this book because the struggling class in North America is growing, and well-informed ministry for and with those who are struggling is a critical and growing need. God is concerned for the poor, and in this book, Charles Uken shares practical ministry insights about how to share God’s love in a complex and rapidly changing world.”

Peter E. DeBoer

Senior Development Representative, Kuyper College

“Most Christians who care about God’s integral mission are familiar with the Lausanne Covenant’s declaration that “evangelization requires the whole church to take the whole gospel to the whole world.” Increasingly the church in the West is conscious that the world’s people and faiths are present in their backyards. Even so, Charles Uken challenges the white middle-class church in North America to not overlook yet another group of neighbors so close we might not see them: the struggling class. This brief book packed with Biblical reflection, good news, and discipleship and ministry insights for cross-cultural ministry with the struggling class will move you to compassion and action in ways you might not have considered.”

Reverend Benjamin D. Meyer

Worldwide Church-planter trainer with Multiplication Network

Former missionary with Resonate Global

“In the country of India there is a class system that is in place which serves to keep people separated from each other. Human determination places humanity at different social or economic levels. To cross those lines would be degrading those at a higher level or interestingly would be a religious infraction. In India they believe in the religion that teaches: ‘The works of a human determine the level of advancement to nirvana. If a person is good in their life, they will advance to a higher level of righteousness until they reach heaven. If they are bad, then they will degrade into a lower being and only in

humility will they be able to turn around the evil effect.’ In America we Christians can treat people in this way too. If you are not middle-class and successful in your work, you are a lower class and in some instances people have been turned away from the faith and shunned.

Chuck has brilliantly led us to realize that the problem isn’t physical or economical, but spiritual, that both the rich and the poor share a common struggle found in the gospel. He equalizes the problem, thus equalizing all people to our great need for Christ. But Chuck also does something that is unexpected! In the power of this equalization, the gospel tells all people from all backgrounds, races, and ethnicities that we can walk side by side with each other and live out the power of the gospel in true unity. I personally thank Chuck for this treasure and pray that I and many will live out this true gospel.”

Pastor Wayne A. Ondersma
Pastor, the PIER Church, Grand Rapids, Michigan

Good News for the Struggling is a practical guide that prompted me to think more deeply and pray harder about missions and witnessing. I never once considered the feelings or culture of anyone. They just needed Jesus and then become like me—a responsible, great employee who had a great work ethic and loved their family and country. Then I’d be discouraged when they didn’t respond the way I wanted. This book challenged my previous thoughts of how to witness and be a mentor. Real-life examples taught me to really, really respect and love the person. They are people who have their own background like I have mine, and who was I to judge, roll my eyes, and try to change them except that they become like Christ? We love him. He is our deliverer, provider, redeemer, everything! I’m learning how to walk alongside someone if this is needed and to continually depend on God to move them forward.

Patti Rich
Member of the PIER Church, Grand Rapids, Michigan

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PREFACE

From the outset the reader should be aware of the author's presuppositions:

First, the Bible is the revelation from God to men. As the book of Hebrews states, "In the past God spoke to our ancestors through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom also he made the universe" (1:1-2).¹ I make liberal use of quotations from the Bible in this book.

Second, the invisible is as real as the visible, the spiritual is more important than the material, and the eternal is more enduring than the temporal.

Our first impression of people is from the outside. How they look, how they dress, what they drive, where they live, what their occupation is, what they do to relax, who they hang out with, and so on. But what is invisible is more important than the visible. What is their purpose for living? What values control the way they spend their money. Is it a pack of cigarettes, a steak for dinner, the latest cell phone, bus tickets, or monthly car payments? What values determine their use of time? Watching videos? Engaging in sports? Cooking meals? What do tattoos tell us about the people who have them? Aren't they making a statement of what they hold dear inside? What do people say? Don't they talk about their experiences? Or what's on their mind, what's making them elated or irritable? Jesus said:

Each tree is recognized by its own fruit. People do not pick figs from thornbushes, or grapes from briars. A good man brings good things out of the good stored up in his heart, and an evil man brings evil things out of the evil stored up in his heart. For the mouth speaks what the heart is full of (Luke 6:44-45).

The spiritual is more important than the material. God made all people with a sense of his existence (Rom. 1:20). He made them with a yearning for life and for eternity (Eccles. 3:11). He also made mankind with a conscience—a sense of right and wrong, of fairness and justice

¹ The Holy Bible, New International Version. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2011. Unless otherwise indicated, all verses cited in this book come from the New International Version (NIV) translation.

(Rom. 2:15). Everyone operates out of a value system. The question is whether or not these values recognize God as the supreme lawgiver and judge, or whether they exalt the self. Do I aim to please myself, or some other person, or do I live and act to please God?

The soul is more important than the body. As we age and become old, we see the changes that our body goes through. One day our organs will give out and our bodies will decompose through cremation or through rotting in the earth. Our soul, however, lives on to enjoy eternal joy or to suffer eternal torment (Luke 16:19-31). The existence of the soul should not minimize the importance of our bodies. They are “members of Christ himself” (1 Cor. 6:15) and “temple[s] of the living God” (2 Cor. 6:16). And one day we will have to give account to God for how we live in the body. “For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each of us may receive what is due us for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad.” (2 Cor. 5:10).

Because of these presuppositions, good news for the struggling class is not to be found first of all in government programs, or urban renewal projects, tax policies, educational opportunities, law enforcement and justice systems, or in some kind of entertainment. The good news comes to us through our culture, and at the same time it is countercultural. Our changing culture does not have the last word; only the eternal God does. While we live in a technologically advanced society, we who read the Bible are able to travel through the cultures of Abraham, David, Ezekiel, Jesus, and Paul. Reading history or keeping abreast of current affairs, we are able to live in the world of the reformer John Calvin or visit the unsung church planters throughout the world. These all lived as part of their culture but had a calling from outside of it.

The good news consists in following Christ. His commands are not onerous. His yoke is easy and his burden is light (Matt. 11:30). As we work in this world, our eyes are on the world to come. Jesus keeps us focused on what really matters: “Store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moths and vermin do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal” (Matt. 6:20). This world is not our home, and the grave is not our destiny. Our real home is in heaven with Christ and our destiny is in a new creation where death and tears are no more (Rev. 21:1-4).

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 town houses. 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, 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 stratum, 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 has a special concern and providential care for the poor and marginalized.² 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 the dominion of

² In his article, "The Lord's Motivated Concern for the Underprivileged" (1980), 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.

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 or between 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 suffer their doom. Our God is the creator of heaven and earth (Gen. 1:1), and he is alive and active, able to help and defend his people (Ps. 115:9-13). Gods made by humans are unable to save anyone and will be destroyed (Isa. 44:9-20). If Israel ignored God’s commands and began to worship idols, God judged 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” (Lev. 26:30).³

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, trust in Jesus for the forgiveness of sins, and submit to him in faithful obedience. He calls us to become his disciples, take up our crosses, 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, even though they consider the work demeaning and ill-rewarded (2 Thess. 3:11-12). The abusive and

³ See Ezekiel 30:18 and 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 (Dan. 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” (Dan. 2:44).

addicted must learn to love, praise God, reconcile with others, forgive, and 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 will not only participate but 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 the witness of God’s love and make disciples for Christ. The church organization must not be dependent upon 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).

INTRODUCTION

The Bible has good news for struggling class. Salvation in all of its richness is for those who are fallen, broken, weak, rejected, downcast, 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 (Matt. 11:28). Paul said that God chose the lowly, the weak, the despised, and uneducated of this world (1 Cor. 1:27).

This salvation comes to people, not through merit or good works, but solely by grace through faith in Jesus Christ (Eph. 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 (Eph. 2:14-18). In fact, the prodigal son 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, an earthquake opened the prison doors, and the jailer asked, "What must I do to be saved?" Paul and Silas 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 addressed husbands, wives, children, and slaves (Eph. 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 came as

equals. Paul sharply rebuked the Corinthian church because some who were rich separated themselves from the poor and went ahead with their feast, thus “humiliating those who have nothing” (1 Cor. 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 is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus” (Gal. 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 Cor. 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 Tim. 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 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 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 pastors, youth leaders, secretaries, a 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. 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 (Matt. 28:18-20). The goal is to establish culturally relevant churches that generate the resources, finances, and people (servant leaders) to grow and multiply. A church is a gathering of believers who devote themselves to the Bible, fellowship, communion, prayer, and communal sharing of 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 (Exod. 3:7). God delivered them with a display of his mighty power and brought them to himself (Exod. 19:4) at Mount Sinai where he entered into a formal covenant relationship with them (Exod. 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. They complained, were unfaithful, rebelled, and were disciplined with forty years of wandering in the wilderness. Yet through it all God provided.

While God is concerned for the poor, he is most concerned about their bondage to the demons that tempt and oppress them (Eph. 6:11-12). Once they are freed, God will make sure that their needs are supplied (Matt. 6:33). Jesus warns them, and us, that inordinate striving after material and social welfare is serving the

god of money (Matt. 6:24). Even if someone never climbs up the rungs of the socioeconomic 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 in various forms, the broken men who received social security disability, the inmates at a county jail, the 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, 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 me with the most for my 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. It is much more preferable 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.

First, we must understand that God wants the poor to be part of his kingdom. Jesus said, “Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God” (Luke 6:20). The reason that the poor are not in the kingdom is a result of their sin, a reality that is

true for all people (Rom. 3:23). Lack of material resources or family heritage does not keep people away from God. These verses should call us to take responsibility for our own sin. How do we respond to injustice, to the abuse heaped upon us, to our circumstances? Do we keep our word or run away? Do we fight? Do we rebel? Do we break vows? Do we escape into a world of drugs and alcohol? Do we need to understand the relationship between our sinful desires and actions and our separation from God and from others? We need to ask how sin brings separation and then suffering and poverty.

Second, as we consider ourselves poor, we need to be assured that God sent his Son Jesus to become poor that we might become rich (2 Cor. 8:9).

Third, we, like them, struggle to survive. We, like them, work to take advantage of the best opportunities. And we, like them, make ourselves into little gods trying to guarantee our own destiny, in our own way, to satisfy our own carnal desires: power, lust, prestige. Our goal is not to add another social or diaconal program to a buffet that a customer can choose to satisfy their needs, thus freeing them from responsibility to act in faith and submission to God. We cannot become like little providences. Our purpose is to turn our hearts to God, to listen, trust, and obey his will, and then help others in their circumstances join us in doing the same. Our call is to leave slavery in Egypt and make the difficult pilgrimage to the promised land. We need to trust God's promises; and we need to help others, including the poor, to do the same.

Sometimes we need to say, "Go ahead and do it your way. See where this will take you! That way will not go well for you. When you are ready to let go of your sin and trust God, know that we will pray with you and show you how to trust and obey. This will be your doorway to peace and joy."

Fourth, to win the poor we are to be like them. The poor are part of the "nations," the *ethne*, the rustic peoples, the gentiles, which also includes the various socioeconomic classes. Paul is our example: "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” (1 Cor. 9:22).

Fifth, God wants to use the poor to win others for Christ. They need to be disciplined for a transformed life so that their testimony and the Scriptures may be effective in the discipling of others. With reason, God uses former drug and alcohol abusers to help free those who are in the clutches of these vices. He uses former inmates to help those who are incarcerated. He uses divorced people to teach struggling couples how to resolve conflict together.

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. Although we are writing about churches for the struggling class, we should be aware that these churches also need the gifts and resources of the “privileged.”

Believers who are financially wealthy, however, need to humble themselves (James 1: 9-10), associate with those in a lower position (Rom. 12:16), and consider others as being better than themselves, taking into account their interests as well as their own (Phil. 2:3-4). The rich need to be freed from the bondage of wealth and take it as a privilege to serve as equals in the fellowship of faith. “Believers in humble circumstances ought to take pride in their high position” as children of God and heirs with Christ of the riches of eternal life (James 1:9). In God’s sight we are all poor and needy. He wants us all together to share in the riches of his grace.

Our calling is to come alongside 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. It wants to please pharaoh and curry his favor (Exod. 5:21). However, God wants to take us out of bondage to this world system and bring us to himself so that in our wilderness we rely on

him and not on ourselves. God is sending us like Moses to make him known among the people (Exod. 9:16) and call them to worship God through Christ (Exod. 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, then squander it all within a year because of the spendthrift habits that they customarily live 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 almost any group of people who share some affinity. Wycliffe Bible Translators are currently using accelerated translation methods to provide scriptures to small tribes so that its members can read God’s word in their native 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 for example, doctor's office receptionists are able to communicate perfectly well at work with 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 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.

When we travel to some other country, we need a visa from that country 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.

Similarly, 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 (Jer. 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 feel awkward and uncomfortable, even embarrassing and shameful. But it's necessary.

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 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 (Matt. 17:5) and by the resurrection shown to be Lord of all (Matt. 28:18). We will be demonstrating how "he has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves," where we enjoy "redemption, the forgiveness of sins" (Col. 1:13-14).

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 process. 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 worldview of his listeners, a worldview derived from Old Testament scriptures (Acts 9:20, 22; cf. 13:14-48). In Athens, on the other hand, Paul was face to face with the pagan Gentile faith and worldview. There, when talking to Greek philosophers, he pointed out the foolishness of worshiping idols when one of their own poets had said, “We are his offspring,” referring to offspring of 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 people in 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 client questions and help them find things, attend the checkout lanes, or supervise a department. Every worker wears a lightweight 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, if they have children, where they live, or how they spend their free time?

While traveling, have we noticed the housekeeping at the motel where we're staying? Do we notice the people at the fast-food restaurant where we pick up a quick snack? Or at a more upscale restaurant, do we notice 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 receive from office managers or from homeowners. We know them by whether they call in sick every Monday morning or if they are steady Eddies 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 paychecks, 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 at the mobile food pantry that comes to our or another church. Most volunteers staff the sign-in table, unload the truck, 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 helps 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 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 percent of children in Grand Rapids were born out of wedlock, 71 percent in Detroit and more than 85 percent in Chicago. On July 7, 2011, Sue Thomas of MLive Media Group 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 most of these families are inherently unstable, some breaking up because of conflict, 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 must fend for themselves in choosing friends, watching television, using spare time, and deciding when and what they eat. In some school districts, up to 100 percent 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 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 they can draw from. 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, and more. If asked, some have told me what church they attend. Some tell me that they belong to a worshiping, serving community of faith. Others tell me where they get some assistance or maybe send the children to a weeklong 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 and carpal tunnel syndrome. This may prompt them to abuse painkillers, 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 television while eating.

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

Discipline is applied inconsistently, often with shouting or screaming. A parent, most 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. Often fathers 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, Michigan, 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 otherwise repairing their small home to make it more livable. Virginia continued to homeschool 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 them and reviewed the extensive questionnaire for a 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, I happened to see one of the elders. I asked him about the Van family. Were 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 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 (Gen. 3). Their firstborn son murdered his brother and became a “restless wanderer,” a fugitive on the earth (Gen. 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 and got the work done, but without finesse. He had the reputation of being a hard worker even though he sometimes showed up at the worksite 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 son’s 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 urban poverty.

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 embraced 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 discover that they 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 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 what they 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. 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, cultivate, harvest, or store in granaries but depend on what our heavenly Father provides (Matt. 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 new language learning, 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 day care 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, study the Bible together, and 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. This is the topic of the next chapter.

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
(Ps. 68:5,6).

Psalms 146:9 repeats this theme: "The Lord watches over the foreigner and sustains the fatherless and the 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" (Gen. 4:10). Centuries later God told Elijah, "Go down to meet 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, well-favored, and then to be proud is very dangerous. God does not allow anyone to occupy his position. Hannah, the mother of Samuel, cried out to God in sorrow and anguish, 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 Sam. 2:7-8).

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 . . . (Exod. 3:7-8).

After seeing God's mighty miracles performed through Moses and experiencing the impoverishment of his land and the loss of his firstborn, 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 firstborn, 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" (Exod. 12:35-36).

So, if Egypt was brought low and Israel was exalted, 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 he 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, 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" (Exod. 22:21). Similarly, God said:

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 your 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 (Deut. 14:28-29).

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 canceled, were given their freedom, and could return to their land (Lev. 25:13, 28, 54). God considered the land his and the people his tenants (Lev. 25:23). Even though sold into servitude, they could not be made to work as slaves but rather like hired workers (Lev. 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" (Isa. 58:3). Isaiah continued:

Is not this 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,
and not to turn away from your own flesh

and blood?

Then your light will break forth like the dawn,
and your healing will quickly appear;
then your righteousness will go before you,
and the glory of the Lord will be your rear
guard.

Then you will call, and the Lord will answer;
you will cry for help, and he will say: Here
am I. (Isa. 58:6-9)

Psalm 41:1 gives this assurance to those who show mercy:
“Blessed are those who have regard for the weak; the Lord delivers
them in times of trouble.”

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 Chron. 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 Chron. 8:7-8).
Not only did he oppress the Canaanites, 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 (1 Kings 12:4).

In the seemingly prosperous 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) and declares: “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: “Therefore 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’ for you, declares the Lord—‘freedom’ to fall by the sword, plague and famine” (Jer. 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” (Ps. 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 (Ps. 51) and the Lord graciously answered (Ps. 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” (Lev. 19:15). This is 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 without 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” (Prov. 13:18).

Many of the poor are suffering the consequences of their own folly. Sloth and laziness will bring someone into poverty (Prov. 6:9-11, 10:4-5). “All hard work brings a profit, but mere talk leads only to poverty” (Prov. 14:23). Further, to continue in a life of sin does not receive God’s blessing. “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 (Prov. 28:13-14).

On the other hand, 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 (Prov. 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 (Ps. 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 eyewitnesses he relates and by the way he orders them (Luke 1:2; Acts 1:1). Like those eyewitnesses he is a “servant . . . of the word” (Luke 1:2), not a creator of it.

What did God the Father do 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 beaten down by his archenemy 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” (Ezek. 28:2). Because of his pride, sin, and violence God took him down (Ezek. 28:16). God did the same to all the other ancient kingdoms, including the corrupt government in Jerusalem, that raged against God’s people. By toppling the proud, God is opening up a place for the poor and humble to thrive.

Mary, the mother of Jesus, 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 is 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. . . . 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 1:47, 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. “He [Jesus] went to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, and on the Sabbath day he went into the synagogue, as was his custom” (Luke 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; Matt. 11:2-4).

Luke’s emphasis on the poor can be seen by comparing his record of the Beatitudes with that of Matthew’s. 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” (Matt. 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; Matt. 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 this 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; Matt. 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).

In the face of so much poverty, Jesus emphasizes almsgiving. A Pharisee was surprised that Jesus did not wash his hands (Mark 7:2). 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. Although they cannot repay you, you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous.” (Luke 14:12-14)

This reflects God’s desire that the poor be at the table at the banquet of salvation.

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 on the Lord’s commandments, yet he was not satisfied. Jesus told him, “You still 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 Zacchaeus, a chief tax collector, evidently wealthy and supervisor of other tax collectors (Luke 19:1-2). When Jesus indicated his desire to go to his house, he immediately came down from the tree and welcomed Jesus gladly (Luke 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 said to him, ‘Today salvation has come to this house . . .’ (Luke 19:8-9).

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 Hell. 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 a neighbor to the man beaten up by thieves because he showed him mercy. Jesus said, “Go and do likewise” (Luke 10:37).

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 (Matt. 14:21). The people did not understand the significance of this miracle. They asked for a further sign, “What will you do? Our ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness . . .” (John 6:30-31). Sadly, they wanted more perishable food, while Jesus was offering himself, the “true bread from heaven” and “the bread of life” (John 6:32, 35). Whoever believes in him will live forever (John 6:51). In line with this, on another occasion 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” (Matt. 11:28-30).

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.’” (Matt. 25:34-36)

The Christian church, formed by the outpouring of the Holy Spirit at 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). What Israel failed to do by not obeying the Law of Jubilee (Lev. 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 (Lev. 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 canceled, and the land did not receive its rest. In sum, the poor were not cared for but rather exploited.

This changed, however, at Pentecost when the Holy Spirit was poured out. The apostles received freedom and power to bear witness to the resurrection of Christ (Acts 1:8), Those who turned to God and were baptized “devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. . . [They] were together and had everything in common” (Acts 2:42, 44).

With the increase to over five thousand men (Acts 4:4) 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.

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 Cor. 8-9; Rom. 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” (Gal. 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 in Ephesus (1 Tim. 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 Tim. 4:13). He also gave instruction about which widows were worthy of support and what their ministry in the church should be (1 Tim. 5:3-16). Provision for a ministry like this needs to come from somewhere, so he told 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 Tim. 6:17-19)

Interestingly, the poor were in Paul's mind when he, for the last time, instructed the Ephesian elders on his final trip to Jerusalem. Paul reminds them of how he ministered among them, encouraging them to imitate his pattern. He ended his message with these words:

“I have not coveted anyone's silver or gold or clothing. You yourselves know that these hands of mine have supplied my own needs and the needs of my companions. In everything I did, I showed you that by this kind of hard work we must help the weak, remembering the words the Lord Jesus himself said: ‘It is more blessed to give than to receive.’” (Acts 20:33-35)

James, the brother of Jesus, wrote:

Suppose a brother or a sister is without clothes and daily food. If one of you says to them, “Go in peace; keep warm and well fed,” but does nothing about their physical needs, what good is it? In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead. (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. He writes:

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 and in truth. (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 Cor. 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 firstborn 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 firstborn son, they presented an offering of "a pair of doves or two young pigeons" (Luke 2:24) because they could not afford a lamb (Lev. 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 (Matt. 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, an angel warned Joseph in a dream, causing the family to flee 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 had probably 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 work put them in the category of the self-employed, not servants in a wealthy landowner's employment or sharecroppers on his land.

During his ministry Jesus and his disciples stayed at other people's homes (Matt. 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 (Matt. 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: "my Father's will is that everyone who looks to the Son and believes in him shall have eternal life . . ." (John 6:40). 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 a 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 a 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 of God 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" (Matt. 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—along 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” (Ps. 16:10; Acts 2:27, 13:35), but raised him from the grave and gave him all authority in both heaven and earth (Matt. 28:18). Paul in his letter to the Philippians tells us to have the same mindset as Christ Jesus:

Who, being in very nature God,
did not consider equality with
God something to be used to his own advantage;
rather, he made himself nothing
by taking the very nature of a servant,
being made in human likeness.
And being found in appearance as a man,
he humbled himself
by becoming obedient to death—
even death on a cross!
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. (Phil. 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 “great love for us” (Eph. 2:4-5). He will not abandon us to death but will raise us up with the resurrection of the dead (1 Thess. 4:13-17; 1 Cor. 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" (Matt. 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 (Rom. 1:4), and that kingdom is expanding throughout the world through his witnesses (Matt. 28:18). At his return, at the last judgment, he will defeat his last enemies, 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. (Rev. 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. 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 could 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, 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 alike 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* [emphasis mine], 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 compel them to come in, so 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 Cor. 1:26-29)

Even slaves were baptized and belonged to the church and were expected to live exemplary lives for the sake of Christ (Eph. 6:5-8). James writes that believers from humble circumstances should “take pride in their 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 God has come near. 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. (Matt. 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” (Matt. 9:37-38; Luke 10:2).

Answering his own prayer, Jesus chose twelve apostles (Matt. 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” (Matt. 10:6). Jesus commanded them to follow his example and do what he did. Jesus did not take money with him but lived from the support of those who received his message. He told 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 and the other believers (Acts 16:15). The Philippian church continued to provide support even after the evangelists were driven out of the city (Phil. 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 Cor. 9:18). Whether paid or not, Paul was compelled to preach the gospel (1 Cor. 9:16). He had received his

commission from Christ and he would discharge it whether supported financially or not (Acts 26:16-18).

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 had to 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 Report 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. Christ must have precedence (Luke 14:26).

What do we learn from Jesus' instructions?

1. Go to where the common people lived, in the towns and villages (Matt. 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, rural areas today are fairly depopulated. Urban areas are where most common people now live.
2. Minister to those "harassed and helpless" (Matt. 9:36), like lower-income urban workers today in trailer courts, inner cities, blighted neighborhoods, or ghettos formed by race or ethnicity
3. Proclaim the good news, heal the sick, and cast out demons (Matt. 9:35; 10:1, 7-8). This includes calling people to repentance. This instruction 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 (Matt. 10:11), but don't use their support for personal gain (Matt. 10:8), like Simon Magus of Samaria, who wanted to buy the gift of the Holy Spirit with money, and was rightly condemned (Acts 8:20-21).
5. Expect rejection and persecution, even as Jesus was rejected and persecuted (Matt. 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 (Matt. 10:20). Fear Christ, not people. Our heavenly Father will care for you (Matt. 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 Day of Judgment and of eternal suffering in hell. The good news is that God gave his Son (John 3:16; Rom. 5:8) as an offering for sin (Isa. 53:5-6; 2 Cor. 5:21). Since God is reconciled to the world and his wrath fully satisfied (2 Cor. 5:18-19), he offers us salvation, forgiveness, and fellowship with him, as a free gift received by faith in Jesus (Eph. 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 on 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 (Gal. 5:22-23; Rom. 12:1-2) to an afterthought.

Once I met a young man on the street whose breath reeked of alcohol. I judged that he could be dealing with doubt and a sense of weakness and guilt, so I asked him, "Do you have the certainty that when you die, you will go to heaven?" His answer was, "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 on 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 in West Africa described 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 part of 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. What is hidden then comes out into public view.

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 (Matt. 5:28). In a pluralistic society, Biblical language is excluded from the public square and 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. Repent, and believe the good news!” (Mark 1:15). At Pentecost, Peter charged his audience with 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, *metanoia* is a turning from serving false gods (oneself included) to serving the true, living God. So, with this in mind, it seems to me that we should begin presenting the gospel in a way that presents 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 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 people 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 to "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 lead. 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, and spend-thrift. 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 their 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 will they come to know the true God and experience true blessing and joy (Mark 8:34-35).

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.

Jesus clearly states his radical 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 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.

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, coworkers, or even complete strangers while doing door-to-door 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?

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.

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

Here heaven is synonymous with the “kingdom of heaven” (Matt. 4:17). 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 Pet. 3:13; Rev. 21:1, 3-4). At Christ’s return everyone will be judged (Matt. 25:31-33; 2 Cor. 5:10). All those who belong to Christ will enjoy resurrected bodies like his (Phil. 3:20-21) and live in a creation that shares the nature of the resurrection (Rom. 8:18-21).

Wait for an answer, then explain briefly the following:

- a. Look at his miracles: Jesus cured the sick, fed the hungry, restored sight to the blind, calmed storms, resurrected the dead, and more.
- b. Look at his teachings: Jesus told his disciples to love the Lord their God and love their neighbor as themselves.
- c. Look at his last days: Jesus was crucified, risen from the dead, and lifted up to heaven.

3. You become like the god you serve (Ps. 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.

When we serve our own interests, we are like idol images: We don't see God, we don't hear him, we don't see him, we don't reach out for him, we don't run to do his will. Like images, we are dead in relation to God.

All self-made gods (passion, lust, money, power, fame, family, and others) will end at our death.

4. If we follow Jesus, we become like him. We obey him. We share his eternal life. We obey God like he did. We seek purity, like he was pure. We speak truth like he did. We forgive others like he did. We help others, including the weak, like he did. We share his destiny: we will be resurrected from the dead like him.

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.)

The world hated and killed him. But was the world able to destroy him?

(Wait for an answer.)

No. The world could not destroy him 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 and 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, your god. Ask these questions:

- a. Do you accept God's law, or do you pick and choose the ones that you like?
- b. Do you pray: "God, please give me this. I need it so bad"? Or, do you pray, "I surrender. Help me do what you want me to do"?
- c. What is it that you think will make you happy? This could be your god.
- d. What do you worry about? This could be your god.
- e. What do you need to feel safe? This could be your god.
- f. Do you avoid God's light? You continue in darkness if you don't want to read or hear the Bible, if you don't understand what you read, and if you understand but don't want to obey it.

Once you identify your god, confess this thing and the control it has over you. Then renounce it. Ask Christ to forgive you and free you from it. Repent: Turn to God. Recognize that "God is light; in him there is no darkness at all" (1 John 1:5). Jesus is "the light of the world" (John 8:12). Whoever follows him will have the light of life. Those who come into the light see their sin and confess it (1 John 1:7-9). You are forgiven because you have an advocate, Jesus Christ, who is the "atoning sacrifice for our sins" and the sin of the world (1 John 2:1-2).

7. Believe the good news (Mark 1:15; Acts 2:38). Romans 10:9 says, "If you declare with your mouth, 'Jesus is Lord' and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved."

Tell others that you belong to Jesus. Be baptized (pledge allegiance to Christ) and 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 the heavenly realms" (Eph. 2:1, 6).

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, resistance to entering a place where we are stimulated to trust, produce good deeds, and love others as we have been loved by God.

EXPLANATION OF OUTLINE

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 becoming a disciple of Christ. As you spend time visiting with a person, you will discover the teachings that are most relevant or most needful to that person.

MEASURING INTEREST

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. 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 contemporary readers. I have written a self-help Bible study on the gospel of Luke, designed to accompany the reading of the gospel in order.

The book of Acts, 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. 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 . . .” (Eph. 5:1-2). I’ve prepared self-help studies to serve as an aid in the reading of these books as well.

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 check 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 an 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.

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 4:15-16 and 1 Corinthians 12:12-31.)

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 with no suffering, death, separation, injustice, and violence. They want peace, prosperity, security, and friends all around. People long for love, justice, respect, healing, and a sense of worth.

Ecclesiastes 3:11 says that God “has also set eternity in the human heart; yet no one can fathom what God has done from beginning to end.” 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).⁴ Created in his image and likeness (Genesis 1:27), we desire his acceptance and life with him forever.

JESUS BROUGHT HEAVEN TO EARTH

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 Jesus was painting a picture of heaven with his miracles. 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, 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 the winds to cease (Mark 4:35-41), giving his disciples safety in time of danger.

By reaffirming God’s law of love (Mark 12:29-31 quoting Deut. 6:4-5), 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 (Rev. 4 and 5). Further, the new creation is filled with people “from every nation, tribe,

⁴ Originally, this line comes from the Cretan philosopher Epimenides, as noted by the footnotes for the New International Version.

people and language” (Rev. 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 (Rev. 21:25). Family ties will not separate us from others since we will be “like the angels” (Matt. 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” (Gal. 3:28). So, in our living out the heavenly life here on earth, we do not allow these distinctions 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; cf. Ps. 2:6-7). On the mountain of transfiguration, Jesus’ clothes became dazzling white and a cloud appeared and enveloped them. A voice said, “This is my Son whom I love. Listen to him!” (Mark 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” (Isa. 53:5; cf. John 19:34). “The Lord makes his life an offering for sin” (Isa. 53:10; cf. 1 John 2:2, 4:10).

Finally, God raised Jesus from death and the grave. An angel with the appearance of lightning came to the women who had come to the tomb to anoint his body. He said to the women, “He is not here; he has risen, just as he said. Come and see the place where he lay” (Matt. 28:6). 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. “But 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” (Phil. 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

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, idols that have 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 he could stand and receive the applause of the crowd, but he could not live with himself and rest in God’s care.

What about those who make money their aim in life? Jesus said, “You cannot serve both God and money” (Matt. 6:24). 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 replied, ‘Man, who appointed me a judge or an

arbiter between you?’ Then he said to them, ‘Watch out! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed . . .’” (Luke 12:14-15). He then told a story of a man who had made a lot of money and who thought he could now take it easy and enjoy life. To this 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 49:7 says that wealth cannot pay the ransom or redeem the life of oneself or another. They “take nothing with them when they die” (Ps. 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” (Ps. 49:12). But God will redeem from the realm of the dead those who trust in him, and he will take them to himself (Ps. 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” (Ps. 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 he is; they have ears but do not understand his teaching; they have feet but do not make any effort to obey his call (Matt. 13:11-16). 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” (Eph. 2:2).

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. When he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. (Matt. 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 workers are few” (Matt. 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” (Matt. 10:1). And they went out proclaiming that the kingdom of God was near (Matt. 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” (Matt. 11:28-30). I am in debt to my friend Carl Bosma, a colleague from my 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, and 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. The way that Christ does this is through his Spirit that lives within us (Rom. 8:4-8; Gal. 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 11:25-26). Then he raised Lazarus from death. Later Jesus himself rose from the dead. These events prove 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” (John 5:28). John writes, “But we know that when

Christ appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is” (1 John 3:2).

Further, by following Jesus, we will be treated by the world in the same way that the world treated Jesus. Jesus 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 (Matt. 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 dead. 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 will reign alongside Christ and share his glory. The eternal life that we receive by faith cannot be extinguished by death (Rom. 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: TURNING FROM FALSE GODS

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 (Matt. 4:25). Through his teaching he taught what kingdom living is like (Matt. 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 to repent, to believe, to become his disciple, and to follow him.

Starting in chapter 8, 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” (Matt. 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 an opening in the roof. Then Matthew tells of Jesus’ call to him at his tax collection booth.

The third set of miracles includes the healing of the woman with the issue of blood, the resurrection of the daughter of the synagogue leader, the healing of two blind men, and the restoration of speech to a demon-possessed man.

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 repentance is by calling us to leave our nets, our worldly priorities, and follow him (Mark

1:17-18; Matt. 4:19-20), to learn from him and receive his Spirit, enabling us 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 observe 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 (Ps. 16:8-11; 110:1), and he ended his message by saying, “God has raised this Jesus to life . . . God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Messiah” (Acts 2:32-33, 36). The audience was “cut to the heart” (Acts 2:37). 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?” to which Peter said, “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 allegiance from false gods to the true God. For example, when immigrants become citizens, they pledge allegiance to our country. By taking the step to come to America, they ended their allegiance to their old country. 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 is 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 that “The world and its desires pass away, but whoever does the will of God lives forever” (1 John 2:17). Peter puts it this way: “As foreigners and exiles [in this world] . . . abstain from sinful desires, which wage war against your soul (1 Pet. 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 a 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

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, the way I feel. 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, becoming 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 15:18-20). 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. This remorse is important, but it is not the whole of repentance.

The important thing here is to help the person understand that their sin is first against God. They may have hurt others and himself but that was secondary to their 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 saved them from their distress. . . .

Let them give thanks to the Lord for his unfailing love . . .
(Ps. 107:10-13, 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 (Matt. 16:21-23). Judas betrayed Jesus and could neither forgive himself nor 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 (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 Cor. 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. Paul writes:

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. (Romans 7:14-15, 18-19)

Paul also explains in Ephesians 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. (2:1-10)

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 our righteous acts are like filthy rags,” Isaiah says (64:6). “There is no one who does good, not even one” (Ps. 14:3; Rom. 3:10). “All have sinned and fall short of

the glory of God” (Rom. 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 the investigation that led to our apprehension? How can we restore the 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 (Rom. 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 (Rom. 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).

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 Cor. 5:21) so that God might be reconciled with us, not charging our sins against us (2 Cor. 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 has 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 Cor. 6:14; 1 Cor. 15:22-23; Phil. 3:20-21; 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 (Rom. 8:34). Likewise did he pray 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).

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 Thess. 4:16,17; 1 Cor. 15:50-57)

It will be at this time that he will judge the living and the dead (2 Tim. 4:1; Rev. 20:12)—ourselves included (2 Cor. 5:16)—and cast out Satan (Rev. 20:10) and all of his followers (Matt. 25:31-46; Rev. 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 by our cloudy thinking. Repentance means that we have come to a place where we understand that we cannot save ourselves, and Jesus accomplished everything necessary for us 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 on the law are all 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 . . .” (Phil. 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 Cor. 13:1-3). By living in the love of God and letting his love be revealed in the way we think and act is to live by grace. Our salvation is completely earned for us by Christ and we receive it by the grace of God through faith in Christ.

Paul comes back to this theme in Titus:

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. (3:4-7)

Here we note that “washing of rebirth” means “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 our sense of helplessness that makes us call 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. (Ezek. 36:25-27)

Moreover, it is impossible for someone to hear and understand a message from God unless the Spirit lives within that person. 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 Cor. 2:10-14)

We cannot change the heart. It is our task to bear witness to the truth, then allow the Spirit 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 has come near. Repent and believe the good news” (Mark 1:15). From this verse, 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” in Mark. 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 a National Geographic article had a picture of a street preacher, a former gang member, on a platform with a mic 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 wanted them to experience the true freedom that they had found.

To believe 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” (Rom. 8:18; cf. 2 Cor. 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 Cor. 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 (Heb. 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 on earth has been given to me” (Matt. 28:18). Then he added, “Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you” (Matt. 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], keep my commands” (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 (Rom. 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 and sinful 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," he said, encouraging them to join the new fellowship of believers (Acts 2:40). Had the synagogue rulers and its people decided to become baptized and follow 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 alongside 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 in answer to prayers (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 desire to be loved and accepted, not judged and rejected. This need can be met in a

church where the large group gathers for instruction, like the apostles who met daily in the temple courts. This need was also met as they met in homes and in small groups for personalized discipleship and mentoring; for confession of sins, doubts, and fears; and for intercession of prayers. 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 others. This is the beginning of heaven being lived out 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, “For he has delivered us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.” It is in this kingdom that we “live a life worthy of the Lord and please him in every way: bearing fruit in every good work, growing in the knowledge of God” (Col. 1:10).

Some churches have a discipleship program. For some, this is a series of lessons that prepare people for their profession of faith or baptism. These lessons often review the basic gospel message that we have all disobeyed God’s law, resulting in God separating us from his 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 others.

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

This approach to discipleship is based on 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 worldview 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 from 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 the 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 worldview 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 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 off 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 Cor. 5:1; 2 Cor. 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, and 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 in 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 always display 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. Jesus asked, "You do not want to leave too, do you?" (John 6:67). Peter replied, "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and to know that you are the Holy One of God" (John 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.

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 of experiences in and outside of church, people are neither 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? A Communication Strategy for the Church and World Evangelism*, display a table that shows a person's possible responses to the proclamation of the gospel. Those most removed from making a decision only become aware of a supreme being, having never heard about Jesus Christ before. 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.⁵ 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's 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 level of a response, our listeners may come to realize that what is going on in their lives 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, to transfer trust to Christ, and to 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 on how much our listener can absorb and put into practice.

⁵ Various creedal statements of the Protestant Reformation, including the Heidelberg Catechism, expound these three things.

Follow-up and confirmation also follow progressive steps of growth. Immediately following a decision, new believers are likely to 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 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 reminded that Satan does not want to let them go, but they also need to be assured 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 it. 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 lifelong process.

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 should 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 and applying it to that present moment (Acts 2:17-21). 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 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 the prophecies 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 the people concluded that Paul and Barnabas were gods and merited sacrifice (Acts 14). 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 worshiping 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 follow Christ and others who were not. I trust that they will help you see people as 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 were 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 noncommittal 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 I never had the opportunity to ask her if she read the story of Jesus. This woman was curious 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, 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 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. 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 conversation was the first time I had been challenged to prove his death.

This interchange shows 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 preteen 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 plagued her family. She had accepted Christ and started to prepare for baptism by taking lessons from the catechism, which I gave her by going to her home on a weekday afternoon. This lesson was given 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 midafternoon he was praying to his “guide,” an indigenous Brazilian, transformed into a spiritist deity. As he prayed, he saw this man sprout horns from his head and legs that transformed themselves into 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 another 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. Open-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, despite suffering gruesome but minor injuries. After completing Matthew, she asked for the study on Romans. In the time she did these studies, she turned from someone rejecting parental authority to someone telling me, “Dad, I’m 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 undivine 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 longtime 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 ended inconclusively. We could not satisfactorily answer their excuses or doubts, or if we did, 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 and took part in the mass on Sunday but 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, Sonia slowly started coming closer to Christ. 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 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 thirty-five 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. To take advantage of this

opportunity, we developed more studies in both English and Spanish: Acts, Romans, John, James, Ephesians, and 1 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 on 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 percent of the time, I heard, “It’s on the nightstand by my bed. I have not forgotten it, I just haven’t gotten started yet.” I finally realized that in the three minutes 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), ask how they are doing, and hear 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 fellow man. 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 if they feel receptive. If the person expresses a desire to read the Bible, I offer a copy of the self-help Luke Bible study.

The aim is to help people start with the story of what Jesus said and did.

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 benchwarmer 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, and 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 megachurch 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 were baptized.” Or a church might maintain a food pantry and sponsor a food truck once a month for the needy to pick up staples supplementing 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 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 McDonald’s, 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’ve gotten something for free, no strings attached. 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 without feeling pressured. While people were waiting in line to receive food from a mobile pantry, I have handed out pieces of paper with a scripture passage and an invitation to church. While doing so, I've asked, "How are you doing?" I've commented on how beautiful their children were and asked if they might have a prayer need. I was walking with the people, assuming their position in line, and trying to encourage the volunteers at the truck to 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 megachurch 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," the church can say, 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 does 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,” they thought.

The helping women helped Helen get a job to help her become financially independent. The first job was running a forklift 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 ten-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, the Sveto

Pismo,” 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 only attending 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 an English Language Learners program 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. She was obliged to care for the baby while Helen was working. In this and other small ways, Helen was still partially dependent on 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 violent wars 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. It was at this point 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 understand the American culture that infected his wife, forgive her error, and reconcile with 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 with meeting her social needs and even put pressure on her to live up to expectations, that is, learn English and get a good job, and so on. 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 on to 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 and seek reconciliation with her ex-husband and other family members.

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?" (Rom. 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 twelve-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, believe in the true God, and surrender 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 twelve-step program, we should 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:

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

Step 2: We came to be aware 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: We became willing to ask God to help us remove our 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.

(Ackermann 2023)

These twelve steps are a set of guiding principles in addiction treatment that outlines 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” (step 3), 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 onetime 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 and 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 gospel presentation, 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.”

Suppose that we have financial, familial, 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 Cor. 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 live with them, so she 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, and honeymoon?

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, reflecting on Atesha's poor performance in the office and how Atesha 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 storyline 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, 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?" 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 (Matt. 7:1-5).

Paul writes that greed is idolatry (Col. 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, "the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil" (1 Tim. 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 their past work history or an academic achievement to try to get a better paying job. The question uppermost in their mind is what will help them get the most money, not what honors God or benefits their neighbor.

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 an answer to their prayer if they did not bring an offering. God said, “No one is to appear before me empty-handed” (Exod. 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 (Num. 23:1-2). It didn’t work because God does not change his purpose through bribery (Num. 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 Sam. 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 Sam. 15:22-23). God delights in offerings but only when given with a submissive heart.

When Israel brought offerings to the golden calves at Bethel and Dan, they were worshiping 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, 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 firstfruits of all your crops; then your barns will be filled to overflowing, and your vats will brim over with new wine” (Prov. 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’” (Mal. 3:10).

After the people returned to Jerusalem from exile, they dedicated themselves to building their own houses while leaving the temple in ruins (Hag. 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 (Hag.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 (Matt. 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 (Ps. 1:2-3).

“For the Lord watches over the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked leads to destruction” (Ps. 1:6). “The wicked borrow and do not repay, but the righteous give generously” (Ps. 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” (Ps. 37:23-24). And in the next lines: “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” (Ps. 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 but was delivered from death through the resurrection (John 19:36). 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 Thess. 4:16; 1 Cor. 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 (Matt. 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. In their mind, they should be receiving instead of giving. 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 for “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 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, not thoughtlessly spending 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 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*, 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. By informal conversation and by example, they teach 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 workday to work for free, that is, volunteer time and services to those in need or to nonprofit 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 work 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, childcare, 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 men, find themselves lacking 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 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, and more), and if the problem is still undiagnosed, he could very well prescribe opiates for pain. As a result, the man could be 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 they may have something to share with those in need” (Eph. 4:28). Paul tells the new church in Thessalonica to “keep away from every believer who is idle and disruptive” (2 Thess. 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 Thess. 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 Tim. 5:4). Work was so important that to prevent younger widows from being idle and going about from house to house being busybodies, Paul wrote that the church should encourage them to marry, have children, and manage their homes (1 Tim. 5:13-14). Older widows who had no family to care for them were to be put on the “list of widows,” if a widow had been “faithful to her husband, and is well-known for her good deeds, such as bringing up children, showing hospitality . . . helping those in trouble, and devoting herself to all kinds of good deeds” (1 Tim. 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 easy? 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. A father 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, therefore, 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 on wine . . . [but to] be filled with the Spirit" (Eph. 5:18). Therefore disciples of Christ, are being urged to "submit to one another out of reverence for Christ" (Eph. 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 (Eph. 5:22-28).

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 to the likeness of his Son, for our good and for his glory (Heb. 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 in 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:

Go to the ant, you sluggard;
 consider its ways and be wise!
It has no commander,
 no overseer or ruler,
yet it stores its provisions in summer
 and gathers its food at harvest.

How long will you lie there, you sluggard?
 When will you get up from your sleep?
A little sleep, a little slumber,

a little folding of the hands to rest—
and poverty will come on you like a bandit
and scarcity like an armed man.

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

A sluggard says, “There’s a lion in the road,
a fierce lion roaming the streets!”
As a door turns on its hinges,
so a sluggard turns on his bed.
A sluggard buries his hand in the dish;
he is too lazy to bring it back to his mouth.
A 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, Solomon writes in Proverbs 19:15 that "Laziness brings on deep sleep, and the shiftless go hungry." However, in sharp contrast to laziness, diligent labor brings its just reward. In Proverbs 10:4, for example, Solomon observes: “Lazy hands make for poverty, but diligent hands bring wealth.” 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, marriage, and 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. Theodore Dalrymple was a secular British psychiatrist who served on call to treat inmates at a hospital in a slum

neighborhood. There he treated more than 10,000 patients. He wrote in his book, *Life at the Bottom: The Worldview that Makes the Underclass*, “the worst poverty . . . is not material poverty but poverty of soul” (Dalrymple 2001, 143). Discussing the case of a certain woman in his 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 or the condemnation of her own parents, neighbors, or God. In other words, the squalor of England was not economic but spiritual, moral, and cultural” (Dalrymple 2001, 139).

In his report *The Negro Family: The Case For National Action*, Daniel 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 Agency. 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 (Phil. 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 to please him in everything.

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, according to Paul. 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" (Gal. 5:19-21). This Paul

then contrasts with the fruit or deeds of the Spirit: “love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control” (Gal. 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,” adults 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” (Matt. 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, and marries another woman commits adultery” (Matt. 19:9).

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 Cor. 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 (Mal. 2:15). Therefore, he instructs his people to keep his commands in their hearts and to “impress them on your children” (Deut. 6:6-7). The marriage bond is not to be dissolved. So, guard yourselves in your spirit, and “do not be unfaithful” (Mal. 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, the believer is not bound by a marital commitment. 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 Cor. 7:12-16).

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 to 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 rails against liberal elites whose views (largely adopted by our culture) have "turned the poor from a class into a caste" (Dalrymple 2001, 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. (Dalrymple 2001, 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. (Dalrymple 2001, 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” (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” (Dalrymple 2001, 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 manipulated and provoked 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. Now she was using that same strategy to get her way with her husband.

Dalrymple concludes that inflamed jealousy is the principal 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. (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. (Dalrymple 2001, 44)

In a less violent setting, the jealous husband, who is losing control of his wife, will call the pastor and say, “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 (Eph. 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 its 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" (Dalrymple 2001, 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. Also, some of those who have left an abuser to find relief with a nonviolent man, leave that one as well because they find him to be "intolerably indifferent and emotionally distant" (Dalrymple 2001, 46).

This way of living out the curse—"Your desire will be for your husband, and he will rule over you" (Gen. 3:16)—is often perpetrated in the lives of their children. As Dalrymple writes:

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. (Dalrymple 2001, 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; he would show wisdom by heeding her appeal to “tone it down” if she observes him using unreasonable and excessive force in exerting his will. United, firm, and loving discipline provides a safe environment where children can thrive and feel the guidance of an all-providing God who is altogether 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 foundation of the truth” (1 Tim. 3:15), it is obliged to address these topics in a serious and urgent manner (2 Tim. 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 investigator 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, 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, 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 Cor. 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 Cor. 5:18-19).

Based on 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 Cor. 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 lifelong 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?" (reconcile with them).

We need to confess our sin as soon as possible. In Ephesians 4:26, 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 them 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, but God's. Paul gives us plenty to think about and act upon in Romans:

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.⁶ 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."⁷

⁶ Paul is quoting from Deuteronomy 32:35.

⁷ Paul is quoting from Proverbs 25: 21-22.

Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good. (12:14-21)

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 we 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 . . .” (Matt. 5:44). In this way we imitate God who lavishes his gifts of rain and sunshine upon both the just and the unjust (Matt. 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 (Matt. 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 (Matt. 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.

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 finances, their time, their participation in ministry, and their spiritual gifts. This is a church that recognizes that it cannot grow both quantitatively and spiritually 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” (Matt. 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 gratefulness and generosity with what little they have. 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 Thess. 2:7-8). We also want to be like a father who encourages, comforts, and urges his children “to live lives worthy of God” (1 Thess. 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. 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 doors 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 on 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, and more at the public schools where their children attend. Moreover, those who homeschool 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 a 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 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 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, and more) and talks with people and prays with those who mention a problem, the church will begin to connect with some of the struggling class.

I have done this kind of volunteering 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 the opportunity to explain the mission of the

church and how people can be a part of it. Connected in this way with the pastor, some may feel drawn to worship.

We need to guard ourselves from thinking our generosity will cause people to be thankful, and 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 those who are touched by the gospel in this way will probably seek fellowship in other churches, maybe a megachurch 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 monocultural 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, and more. 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 only after the opportune time is 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:

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. (9:19-23)

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 talking 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, 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 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, and more. He or she can say too, "I'd like to share what motivates us and 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 walking 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 unfortunately fell back into a life of prostitution. This woman had one more opportunity to turn and become a disciple through neighborhood visitation.

Still another way of making friends with people of the struggling class is to hold a backyard 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. 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, and so on. An elderly couple visits and within 15 minutes decides that the place is not for them. The music is too loud. Sermon applications and illustrations 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 Hispanics. 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. Once free in society, however, the former inmate never attended the church where the volunteer was a member. He felt uncomfortable 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, pastor of the Oakdale Christian Reformed Church in Grand Rapids, wrote a sixteen-page booklet entitled *City Evangelism, Why and How*. Van Wijk was the pastor of a large, ethnic Dutch, Grand Rapids church and felt the desire to evangelize his neighborhood. However he realized that his church represented a foreign element in the city and knew that people that were being evangelized would not feel comfortable or accepted by his parishioners. So Van Wijk wrote the booklet encouraging other churches to establish 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 communion. This restriction changed over time, 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. 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, however, 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 fundraising events for mission projects, like sending their youth on a service 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 to the ways 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 worshipping groups to reach new people moving into the area.

The Apostle Paul's mission to the Gentiles sets a 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 (Eph. 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" (Eph. 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 (Eph. 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. (Gal. 3:26-28)

Jews don't stop being Jews, slaves don't stop being slaves, 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 preaching of the word, and submission to Jesus' command to love one another and go out to make disciples. In an article in *Christianity Today*, Kate Shellnutt reported 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." 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" (Shellnutt 2019).

We don't experience church planting like this 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 a supernatural that is 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 he received all authority in heaven and earth, and he would be with his followers even “to the very end of the age” as they went out to make disciples (Matt. 28:18-20).

When Wayne Ondersma, pastor of the PIER church, was promoting backyard Bible clubs (small miniature vacation Bible schools), he said, “Backyard Bible Clubs are small, simple, sound, and reproducible.” The size will be limited by the size of the porch or backyard. The homeowner 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 and 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. Then let them assume leadership according to the level of their spiritual maturity experience.

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 and 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 an internet game, or talk with a friend, each with their 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. 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 backyard 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 outside the town of Sychar. When she wanted the living water that Jesus spoke about, Jesus told her, “Go, call your husband and come back.” 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. Through further dialogue Jesus revealed himself to her as the Messiah. He said, “I, the one speaking to you—am he.” Then she returned to town to tell the people about Jesus, and they came out to see him.

Can we envision a woman—the daughter of a 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 (John 4:39).

Andrew and Philip are other examples of disciples 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 1:35-42). Andrew was with John on the east side of the Jordan, where John was baptizing. When John saw Jesus passing by, he said, "Look, the Lamb of God!" When Andrew and the other unnamed disciple of John heard John's testimony, they followed Jesus. After spending a day with Jesus, the first thing Andrew did was to find his brother Simon and tell him they had found the Messiah.

Like Andrew, Philip is another example of a disciple who made a disciple. As soon as Philip answered Jesus' call to follow him (John 1:43), he found Nathanael and told him they had found the one Moses wrote about.

In Acts, Luke records twice 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 Tim. 1:13). Out of this experience, he would write:

Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world 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 Tim. 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, they 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 do it.” However, this view of the church is wrong because it violates the biblical teaching of the priesthood of all believers that emphasizes that each one should reach one (1 Pet. 2:9).

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 ultimately the people are the ministers, missionaries, counselors, educators, therapists, and more. As each member of the body does its part, it is knit together in love and grows in every respect, both in maturity and in numbers, to the praise of God (Eph. 4:15-16).

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, false 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. 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 goodbye 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 on their own. The parents are told, "Your kid will do 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 those parents 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 Tim. 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 opportunities 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 clergyman 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 whether it has led to growth. The hemorrhage of funds allocated to nongrowing, 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, or finding employment. If the needy family doesn't fulfill expectations, the relationship sours. It is better to help 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" (1:7). "For the waywardness of the simple will kill them, and the complacency of fools will destroy them" (1:32). "The wise woman builds her house, but with her own hands the foolish one tears hers down" (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. 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 the 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 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. 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” and manages his family well (1 Tim. 3:2, 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. The church council and its pastor should ask, “Should we mobilize a team of volunteers for the ministry? Who can mobilize this team?”

Can a team, like a husband and wife together with a few more people, start a church? It can, but one of them 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, the team must understand that the tendency of a group will be to settle on 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 not consider asking someone to leave as a discipline for error or a failure of the group 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 the temptation to conduct 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 accepting 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 Tim. 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 a 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 could have exercised his gift! Why didn't he step out and encourage 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, 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 backyard 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 picnic in the neighborhood park, or sing carols in a neighborhood, ending 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. In this effort they would hand out invitations to worship, pray for the sick and needy, and present the gospel. While evangelizing they would also be surveying the community—taking a pulse of its people. By forming a team, the pastor would be training others 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 the involvement of the church 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. In the midst of the missionary-minded church, 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. Or to 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. 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 the social hall of an upscale building. Its wealth put a distance between the existing Hispanic congregation and the town's Hispanic population. 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 megachurch. 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 megachurch have started churches in many other countries as well. God has inspired and empowers its members 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 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 to do so 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 discipled 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 makes music and loves it, even going ahead to unassigned pieces of music. 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.

CONCLUSION

God has a special concern for the needy. He wants them to experience blessing, well-being, both body and soul, both for now and for eternity. Jesus himself promised:

Blessed are you who are poor,
for yours is the kingdom of God.

Blessed are you who hunger now,
for you will be satisfied.

Blessed are you who weep now,
for you will laugh. (Luke 6:20-21)

Blessed are the poor in spirit,
for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Blessed are those who mourn,
for they will be comforted. (Matt. 5:3-4)

Many churches are not welcoming people who do not look or act like the majority of the members. From the pastor down to the youngest member, very few have made a disciple. To be sure, many parents have trained their children to know the stories of the Bible and to live by them. This is discipleship being lived out within the confines of the family unit. But how many have talked with a beggar on the street, told them of the love of God, and invited them to follow Jesus? How many have brought a Thanksgiving basket of food to a single mother, prayed with her, and told her what a blessing it is to follow Christ? More likely volunteers have taken that basket to the door, and then said, "Hi! Here's a gift for you!" and walked off hoping that the card in the basket would be enough to motivate the recipient to come to a worship service and say, "Thank you."

James, the brother of Jesus, wrote, "Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says" (James 1:22). I trust that you will review in your mind the message of this book, and that you will identify one thing that you can put into practice.

Pastors, do you know who visited worship last Sunday? If no one visits, do you have an invitational business card that you can give any unchurched person that you meet? Have you ever asked someone if they are certain of going to heaven when they die? When you visit a parishioner in the hospital, have you prayed with a person in the adjoining bed? Have you talked with an obviously distraught person in the waiting room or prayed with them?

Church members, are you hesitant to invite someone to worship because you believe that they will not feel welcome? If this is true, do some church shopping until you find a church that makes you, a stranger, feel accepted.

When visiting churches, I am always welcome, especially when people learn that I'm a pastor. I'm dressed appropriately, and the people know that I share the faith. But I also know that in the same church someone who does not dress appropriately, has different color skin, and speaks with an accent likely will be greeted with blank stares.

Finally, and maybe this is the place to begin: Tell a colleague or a friend about your concern for the struggling class. Tell them that you are afraid to act alone. Your friend is likely to be afraid as well. Then get together to pray so that God will lead you both to do one act of charity or evangelism. God will answer your prayer and give you the strength to do what you know is right.

WARNING! If you begin speaking about Christ and his claims, you will face opposition and rejection. You might be surprised that some of the rejection will spring up among your Christian brothers and sisters in the church. Following Jesus is not popular. People will reject you like they rejected him. Jesus knew that this would happen. He told 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.” (John 15:18-20)

Is helping others worth the effort if it brings distress to your life? As you share you will make plenty of mistakes. Likely, you will say the wrong thing, you will visit at an inconvenient time. You will be helping the way you can, but it will be judged as not enough. People will lie and take advantage of you. Some will make promises that they do not intend to keep. You may even be left paying for someone else’s debt because you cosigned for them. That’s a costly learning experience! Ouch.

What reward do you get if outreach isn’t valued by your family or your church? For this, you need to look to the one who sends you. Listen to what Jesus said about you, “Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you” (Matt. 5:11-12). He just told you what your reward will be!

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