

# THE Plain Truth

FEBRUARY 1996

## THE EVIL WITHIN

ALSO:

**A CHURCH REBORN  
GANG-PROOF YOUR KIDS  
BURDENED BY DEBT?  
THE SCANDAL OF GRACE**



# THE Plain Truth

A MAGAZINE OF UNDERSTANDING

Volume 61, Number 2: February 1996



## COVER STORY:

### *Sin—The Evil Within*

Is sin an arbitrary list of dos and don'ts imposed by God to deny us pleasure? Is it a medieval superstition whose time has passed? Salvation from sin is the dominant theme of the Bible. But even many Christians have failed to see sin for what it really is.

COVER ILLUSTRATION BY KEN TUNELL

14

## FEATURE ARTICLES:



### *The Scandal of Grace*

4

In human society, it's a scandal when anyone found guilty of a serious crime goes unpunished. Yet, through what can only be called the scandal of grace, God forgives every evil we have committed and opens the way for our spiritual rebirth.

### *Sharing Your Faith Through Fellowship*

8

Sharing our faith doesn't come easily for most of us. But sharing our faith can begin when we learn how to effectively listen to others.



### *How to Avoid Being a Spiritual Weirdo*

18

Followers of Christ sometimes cross the line from merely having personal opinions to being spiritual weirdos. If someone you know is afflicted, remedies are available.

### *Burdened by Debt?*

23

Have you prayed enough? Have you studied your Bible enough? The debt-propelled Christian is living a lie. Salvation cannot be law and grace, a totally free gift and at the same time a debt to be paid.

## DEPARTMENTS:



Personal A church reborn .....	1
About This Issue .....	2
Letters .....	3
Family Gang-proof your kids .....	11
Questions .....	22
Commentary The road to orthodoxy .....	27
Cornerstones .....	28

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# A Church Reborn

*This month's "Personal" originally appeared in the Winter 1996 issue of Christian Research Journal. We share it here to help inform and update our readers on what the Holy Spirit is doing within the Worldwide Church of God.*

**D**URING THE past 10 years, the Holy Spirit has blessed the Worldwide Church of God with unprecedented growth in doctrinal understanding and in sensitivity to the world around us, especially other Christians. Yet the scope and speed of changes since the death of our founder, Herbert W. Armstrong, has confounded both supporters and detractors.

It's worth pausing to take a look at what we have lost and what we have gained.

Our beliefs and practices have undergone a continuous process of revision under the direction of our pastor general, Joseph W. Tkach Sr. (my father), who succeeded Mr. Armstrong. Before he died this past September, my dad appointed me to succeed him.

I am grateful for the collaborative leadership style that my father introduced. I am also grateful for the unity among those who assisted him and who continue to assist me as we yield to the authority of Scripture and the work of the Holy Spirit.

Gone are our obsession with a legalistic interpretation of the Old Testament, our belief in British Israelism, and our insistence on our fellowship's exclusive relationship with God. Gone are our condemnations of medical science, the use of cosmetics and traditional Christian celebrations such as Easter and Christmas. Gone is our long-held view of God as a "family" of multiple "spirit beings" into which humans may be born, replaced by a biblically accurate view of one God who exists eternally in three Persons, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

We have embraced and now champion the New Testament's central theme: the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Jesus' saving work on behalf of humanity is now the focus of our flagship magazine, *The Plain Truth*, rather than end-time prophetic speculation. We proclaim the sufficiency of our Lord's substitutionary sacrifice to save us from the death penalty for sin. We teach salvation by grace, based on faith alone, without resort to works of any kind. We understand that our Christian works constitute our

inspired, grateful response to God's work on our behalf—"We love because he first loved us" (1 John 4:19)—and that by these works we do not "qualify" ourselves for anything, nor do we compel God to act on our behalf. As William Barclay put it, "We are saved for good works, not by good works."

My father articulated to the church the scriptural teaching that Christians are under the New Covenant,



not the Old. This teaching resulted in our abandoning past requirements that Christians observe the seventh-day Sabbath as "holy time," that Christians are obligated to observe the annual festivals commanded to Israel in Leviticus and Deuteronomy, that Christians are required to triple tithe, and that Christians must not eat foods that were

"unclean" under the Old Covenant.

All these changes in the space of 10 years? Many are now advising us that profound course corrections of this magnitude are without historical precedent, at least since the days of the New Testament church.

The leadership and faithful members of the Worldwide Church of God are deeply grateful for God's mercy in leading us into the light. Yet our progress has not been without costs. Income has plummeted, costing us millions of dollars and requiring us to lay off hundreds of long-time employees. Membership has declined. Several splinter churches have broken off from us to return to one or the other of our previous doctrinal and cultural positions. As a result, families have separated and friendships have been abandoned, sometimes with angry, hurt feelings and accusations. We are deeply saddened by this and pray that God will bring healing and reconciliation.

No personal confession of faith in our new beliefs

*Continued on page 26*



## ABOUT THIS ISSUE

**F**OR MORE THAN 15 years, Proctor & Gamble has been the target of malicious rumors. Among other things, the rumors maintain that the company endorses satanism, and that its logo promotes a satanic agenda. Some believe the allegations originated with a small group of zealous but misguided Christians who were sincerely trying to thwart the work of the devil.

Rumors and gossip about mysterious agendas and conspiracy theories form a backdrop for Monte Wolverton's "How to Avoid Being a Spiritual Weirdo." Monte not only offers a lighthearted look at some of the extremes that can befall well-meaning Christians, but he creatively depicts his thoughts with his own unique graphic style.

Department editor Keith Stump addresses the hot, contemporary topic of sin in our cover story. Keith demonstrates that sin is more than a behavior or an action, sin is a definition of the human condition. The fact of sin brings us to the gospel. Sin is the evil within, and only through Christ can sin be conquered.

Senior editor Paul Kroll's "The Scandal of Grace" is the companion article to "Sin—The Evil Within." Grace is the flip-side of sin. Paul shares the wonderful truth that the sheer power of grace always triumphs over the ugliness and evil of sin.

We hope you have noticed that we are beginning to offer quality products to our readers. We do not plan to overwhelm you with offers, but we do want to make products we have produced, or that we heartily endorse, available to help you in your Christian walk.

In the difficult financial climate that many of us share, we want to do all we can to make this magazine available without charge to our subscribers. And we know that many could not afford a subscription price, especially those on fixed incomes, as well as those who are in prison.

Many of you have asked our advice on purchasing books, tapes and videos that assist in worshiping and serving God. It is with this in mind that we will make available a variety of high-quality products that are biblically faithful and academically reputable. Be sure to watch our pages in the coming months for these offers.

We are pleased to share these offers with you and hope you who are able will use them as opportunities to help financially support us as we share the gospel of Jesus Christ. And, as always, let us know how you feel about how we can better serve you. We are dedicated to proclaiming Jesus Christ, and hope it shows!

—Greg Albrecht, editor

**ABOUT OUR COVER:** Artist Ken Tunell vividly portrays sin in huge flaming letters to remind us that because of sin, we all need a Savior, Jesus Christ.



*Plain Truth* design director Monte Wolverton creates another "spiritual weirdo."

## THE Plain Truth

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## Mission Statement

### • Who We Are

The *Plain Truth* magazine is published by the Worldwide Church of God. The church has members and ministers in more than 125 countries and territories. The church proclaims the gospel of Jesus Christ and helps disciples of Jesus to follow him (Matthew 28:19-20). The gospel announces that redemption and salvation are available through Christ. It also conveys the hope of the future coming of the fullness of the kingdom, beginning with the return of Jesus Christ.

### • How Your Subscription Has Been Paid

Your subscription is provided by those who voluntarily contribute to support this work. We are grateful to the members of the Worldwide Church of God and our extended family of co-workers for their generous tithes and offerings.

Contributions to help us cover publication costs are welcomed, and are necessary, to help us share this message of hope. The Worldwide Church of God, in accordance with responsible Christian stewardship, uses an external, independent auditing firm.

### • Personal Counsel

If you have any questions about the church or our beliefs, please write us at the address nearest you or call us at the toll-free telephone number listed on the inside cover. We want to help you better understand the gospel of Jesus Christ, and have ministers willing to visit you at your request. Visitors are also welcome to attend weekly worship services of the Worldwide Church of God.

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## LETTERS



### At Greater Risk

Recently I read an article in the August issue titled "At Greater Risk" by Sheila Graham—it really helped me. I am trying to recover from alcoholism and depression myself.

Please, if you would, I'd love to receive *The Plain Truth* to read on a regular basis.

R.M.

Benwood, West Virginia

### Bathroom Evangelism

I love *The Plain Truth*—I keep it in the bathroom. All my guests read it and enjoy it—'cause they stay in the bathroom longer. Another way to witness.

These magazines are passed on and on. My friends and family look forward to them, too.

Sheri Illingworth

Portland, Oregon

### Boundary Markers

I appreciated the articles on religious barriers in the August issue. I was moved by the humble way your church has accepted God's truth—that what we must truly count on is that we accept what Christ gave us when He died on the cross—our salvation.

I grew up in a church so heavy in doctrine that there was little time to learn about Jesus. I spent all my time trying to figure out which rules I was following, breaking or forgetting. I always wondered how God came up with all that stuff for us.

As an adult, I finally accepted the truth Jesus gave me. He is the truth and I belong to Him, and I have the Holy Spirit guiding my life to prove it!

I feel free to be God's unique and special child, and I don't have to jump through any hoops to be blessed by His grace.

Mary Jordan

Albuquerque, New Mexico

My wife and I were never so taken with one of your articles as we were by the one titled "Boundary Marker" Christians" by Paul Kroll.

The article says what we have believed for years, and brought out facts we felt were so basic that we left a "fundamentalist" church because it denied them. Love of God and love of fellow mankind is all Christ asked of us.

George Myers

Clayton, Georgia

### We're on the Internet

Thank you so much for your monthly magazine, *The Plain Truth*. I have been receiving it for many years and continue to look forward to each new issue.

Both my wife and I have noticed positive change in the magazine's emphasis.

Does the Worldwide Church of God have an Internet home page yet? I trust you will publish your home page address when the time comes, and you are actually on the Internet. I look forward to it. You have so many wonderful things to offer the Internet world.

Richard E. Leffler

La Mesa, California

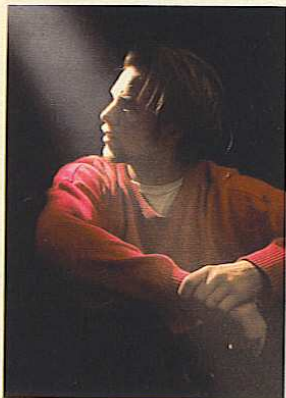
• Yes, we are happy to report that the *Worldwide Church of God* does now have a home page on the Internet. Our address is <http://www.wcg.org>. Be sure to check it for an advance look at Plain Truth articles each month.

### Sabbath Rest in Christ

For the past six or seven years that I have been reading your literature, I felt very confident you were sincere in honoring God and His holy law, but on

Continued on page 26





Barry Stahl — PT

# The Scandal of Grace

*Is the gift of salvation  
God freely offers  
us too good to  
be true?*

by Paul Kroll

**I**F ANY PART of grace is a source of controversy, it's that God forgives sin to a fault. Grace simply doesn't play by the rules of fairness in our world. This bothers, confuses and even offends some Christians.

Philip Yancey recounted a story in *Christianity Today* that illustrates how scandalous grace really is.

## Scandal of Grace

Yancey was listening to a good friend of his, whom he called Daniel, confide a stunning decision he had made. Daniel had decided to leave his wife of many years for another woman.

Yancey listened with dismay, realizing the decision would inflict damage not only on Daniel, but on his wife, his children and others close to him. But Daniel was not to be dissuaded. He felt he just had to go to the "other woman."

Then Daniel dropped a bombshell on Yancey. "The reason I wanted to see you tonight was to ask a question," he said. "Do you think God can forgive something as awful as I am about to do?" (Nov. 23, 1992, issue of *Christianity Today*).

How would we reply to such a question? What Daniel was determined to do is defined as adultery in the New Testament.

Jesus (Matthew 19:17-19), Paul (Romans 13:9-10) and James (2:8-11) with one voice condemned adultery as sin. It is a breach of the basic law of love that should govern relations between people.

God hates adultery. God hates divorce. These are serious violations of God's way of love.

Yet, can God forgive adultery and divorce? Of course he can. God can forgive all sin, and he does so under his free and unmerited grace.

But we can well understand why Yancey asks us, "Do we fully appreciate the scandal of unconditional grace?"

We don't have to go far to find examples of this scandal. The Bible

itself contains some particularly glaring ones.

King David committed adultery with Bathsheba and then conspired to have her husband, Uriah, murdered. (The story is told in 2 Samuel 11:1-12:25.)

Through God's grace, after David repented he was forgiven of these sins. He did, however, suffer the consequences of his actions (as Daniel will).

Another particularly offensive sinner was Saul, who later became the apostle Paul. His hatred toward Christians led to the jailing and torture of a large number of them. He was a material witness to the death of at least one person, Stephen (Acts 22:19-20; 26:9-11).

These were realities Paul had to live with for the rest of his life (1 Timothy 1:12-16). But his sins were forgiven under grace.

## Grace Is Not "Fair"

Think about how God's forgiveness in such cases violates the fairness standards of our human society.

Both David and Paul were involved in particularly egregious conspiracies to murder. In our Western societies, both would have been investigated, arrested, tried and found guilty.

In some places, David and Paul would have been executed for their crimes. But God, in acts of grace, forgave both men so they might attain to and maintain their relationship with him. That's the scandal of grace.

Charles Swindoll, in *The Grace Awakening*, offers a poignant story of God's grace that thoroughly plays havoc with our human standards of fairness.

He asks us to imagine that we have a 6-year-old son who has been brutally murdered. The authorities have found the killer, charged him and put him on trial.

As the bereaved parent, you are faced with a choice. If you act as a vigilante and kill the murderer

**"Almost any evangelical church worth anything will teach that salvation is by grace. But after somebody accepts grace, then grace is virtually forgotten.... Most churches preach grace and live works."**

WILLIAM D. HENDRICKS,  
EXIT INTERVIEWS

The Plain Truth



yourself, that is vengeance. If you are content for the authorities to try the killer in a court of law and execute a proper penalty, that is justice.

"But if you...plead for the pardon of the murderer, forgive him completely, invite him into your home, and adopt him as your own son," wrote Swindoll, "that is grace" (page 42).

And that is exactly what happens to sinners who are under grace. Human beings, no matter how despicable their actions, are forgiven upon repentance and belief in and acceptance of Jesus Christ as their Savior.

God will then adopt them as his children and give them eternal life at the future resurrection of the dead.

That's not fair, we might think. Why should a cold-blooded killer have an opportunity to receive the same spiritual inheritance and riches as his innocent victim?

Yet that is what God promises all who come under grace. That's the scandal of grace.

### Running From Grace

No wonder God's grace almost sounds too good to be true. And perhaps it is our shocked disbelief at the extent of grace that makes us sometimes unthinkingly try to escape from its guaranteed blessings to us.

William D. Hendricks found that Christians—and churches—sometimes try to desert grace for works. When Hendricks interviewed disillusioned ex-churchgoers for his book *Exit Interviews*, he found many of them complaining about "Christian legalism."

One individual told Hendricks: "Almost any evangelical church worth anything will teach that salvation is by grace. But after somebody accepts grace, then grace is virtually forgotten.... Most churches preach grace and live works" (page 266).

But why would we run from grace when what we need and want is freely given through it? We can find the answer by looking at some spe-

cific reasons why Christians sometimes substitute human works for God's grace.

***"Spiritually speaking, you and I haven't earned anything but death. Like it or not, we are absolutely bankrupt, without eternal hope, without spiritual merit.... So there's nothing we can earn."***

CHARLES SWINDOLL,  
THE GRACE AWAKENING

Many Christians run from grace because it's embarrassing to admit they cannot receive God's blessings because of their good behavior.

### Paying Our Way

Jerry Bridges has served since 1955 with The Navigators, an international Christian organization devoted to helping laborers fulfill the great commission of Matthew 28.

Bridges has had a life-long interest in the meaning of grace and has dedicated himself to helping God's people in their Christian walk. This voice of experience insists that Christians often unthinkingly try to

merit God's grace by doing works.

He wrote in *Transforming Grace*: "My observation of Christendom is that most of us tend to base our personal relationship with God on our performance instead of on His grace. If we've performed well—whatever 'well' is in our opinion—then we expect God to bless us. If we haven't done so well, our expectations are reduced accordingly. In this sense, we live by works rather than by grace."

We know we're saved by grace. Yet sometimes we create our own performance boundary markers that we think tell us if we're worthy to receive grace.

These can take many forms. Wittingly. Abstaining from certain foods or drink. Living by a list of dos and don'ts.

Perhaps one reason why performance seems to overwhelm grace is that in this world very little comes to us as adults by grace—for free.

To receive a wage, we recognize

## FAITH AND WORKS

**T**he two sides of discipleship—faith and spiritual works—operate together in the Christian under grace.

Christians, of course, are not saved by their good works. As Paul said, "It is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast" (Ephesians 2:8-9).

People who have true faith abandon all efforts to obtain God's blessings or salvation by doing religious deeds. They completely trust in Christ and rely on God.

God's grace does it all, as far as salvation is concerned. God's grace calls us, justifies or makes us right with God, sanctifies or sets us apart as his people, strengthens us spiritually, equips us for his spiritual service, gives us a lasting hope, and saves us eternally.

However, we are not saved by our belief or emotional feeling apart from

a conversion that reveals itself in a new life. James said, "Faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead" (James 2:17).

Jesus tells us that we have a new life in him, and he in us. "I tell you the truth," said Jesus, "whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be condemned; he has crossed over from death to life" (John 5:24).

When we live the new life in Christ, belief and deeds work together. Believers demonstrate, by God's grace, an ongoing action-response to the grace he gives.

We are not passive observers of grace. Because Christ lives his life in us, we do good works even though we are saved by grace alone. "We are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do" (Ephesians 2:10).

Faith and works, then, are organically bound together. Christians, who enjoy a new life in Jesus Christ, completely trust him for their salvation. And because Christ lives in them, they are empowered to show evidence of that trust by a life lived in accordance with the will of God.



that we must work. However, that's not the way grace works.

As Charles Swindoll puts it: "There is no wage relationship with God. Spiritually speaking, you and I haven't earned anything but death. Like it or not, we are absolutely bankrupt, without eternal hope, without spiritual merit.... So there's nothing we can earn" (*The Grace Awakening*, page 25).

### Could It Be Pride?

Yet, we instinctively seem to want to pay back something to God for his favor. Is it pride that makes us want to work for grace? Are we embarrassed to accept God's gracious salvation as a gift?

We could never work enough to either earn or repay God for any part of his grace. We cannot give God anything for his mercy because we have nothing to give him.

To think so can lead us into self-righteousness and into the clutches

of legalism. And that creates what Swindoll says is the most dangerous heresy on earth: "The emphasis on what we do for God, instead of what God does for us" (page 19).

### Admitting Sin

Many Christians run from grace because it forces them to admit they are spiritually bankrupt before God.

Stanley Hauerwas and William Willimon write in *Resident Aliens*: "It is difficult to receive forgiveness, because such an attitude reminds us of our utter dependency on God" (page 91). And it reminds us of our sinfulness.

But humanly speaking, we would rather forget both. How many times have you heard someone say, or perhaps you've said it, or thought it, your-

self, "Well, I'm a good person."

The apostle Paul spent the first few chapters of his letter to the Romans making one central point that contradicts this view of ourselves. He said all human beings are sinners and fall short of God's glory.

"There is no one righteous, not even one," he wrote. "There is no one who does good, not even one" (Romans 3:10, 12). This means God treats all people as equals, as equally sinful, in his plan of salvation.

Of course, humanly speaking, some people are considered worse sinners than others. There are the more notorious forms of sin, committed by people looked upon as immoral.

Such sins include murder, rape, stealing, sexual immorality, drunk-

*"It is difficult to receive forgiveness, because such an attitude reminds us of our utter dependency on God."*

STANLEY HAUERWAS  
AND WILLIAM WILLIMON,  
*RESIDENT ALIENS*

## NOT GUILTY!

The Greek word translated "grace" in the New Testament is *charis*. It was a common word that described a person's charming quality that won favor from others. *Charis* also described the kindness of superiors when they showed favor to inferiors—as a king to his subjects.

It may come as a surprise that in the New Testament Jesus used the word *charis* only in the ordinary sense of giving thanks. But Jesus taught grace. He lived grace. He embodied grace.

As John wrote in his Gospel: "Grace and truth came through Jesus Christ" and he was "full of grace and truth" (John 1:14, 17).

The apostle Paul seized upon the word *charis* and used it to signify God's gift of salvation, which is freely given to undeserving sinners.

Paul used the word *charis* twice as often (about 100 times) as all the other New Testament writers combined. None used it so often and so consistently to describe the

eternal purpose of God toward human beings as did Paul.

The New Testament doesn't give us a one-sentence definition of grace. The most succinct definition of grace—in what amounts to a confessional statement—is found in Paul's letter to the Ephesians.

He wrote: "It is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast" (Ephesians 2:8-9).

In time, *charis* or "grace" came to define for the church the unique acts of God that saved sinners through Jesus Christ. "Grace" for us today is a shorthand way to describe God's entire plan of redemption.

God's grace or *charis* provides us with everything we need for salvation as a free, unearned gift.

Of course, grace is not a commodity or item of spiritual goods dispensed by God. Rather, grace describes the *freeness* of God's saving acts on our behalf—his graciousness toward us.

To speak of "free grace" is redundant. The word *grace* itself tells us that we are speaking about God's free gifts leading to salvation for human beings.

Grace is free, unmerited pardon of the sins of guilty sinners who

deserve only judgment and death. Grace justifies sinners by declaring them "not guilty" in his heavenly court.

Grace credits the righteousness of Jesus Christ to sinners and justifies them before God. That means grace cannot be claimed as a right, and therefore must be received as a gift from God.

Not even faith counts as an act of merit on the part of sinners receiving grace. We are not justified because we have faith. Our justification comes by grace, through the faith of Jesus Christ, as Paul explained it. Faith acts as a conduit to make it possible for us to receive God's grace.

What is God's grace? It is a quality of God that results in his lovingly providing us with everything we need for salvation.

Theologian and Christian teacher Lewis B. Smedes gives us a wonderful definition of grace. He says: "'Grace' refers to all that God is and does on behalf of His children, particularly to His free, utterly amazing decision to adopt, justify, forgive, renew, and glorify them as His new creation in Christ" ("Grace," in *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, rev. ed., vol. 2, page 551).



eness, drug abuse and so on.

Then there are the sins so-called nice people commit. These include gossip, not forgiving others, impatience, bitterness, cutthroat competition in business, judging others and so on.

We may put up with these sins because they are perpetrated by the "good" people of our community. But they are still sins.

Our problem is we tend to categorize sin. But God doesn't. In his eyes, if we are guilty of one sin, we are guilty of all sin.

Sin has not so much to do with actions, as it does with our being. We all live in a state of sin.

We are broken and besmirched by our sinful nature. Because we live in a state of sin, acts of sin are inevitable. But the acts are only symptoms of an underlying problem with our nature.

That means the saintly missionary and the serial killer all need the same amount of God's grace. In short, every one of us stands as an equal—as a sinner—before our heavenly Father.

Grace has no meaning unless humans are sinners before God. "There's no need for grace if there's no such thing as sin," points out William Hendricks (*Exit Interviews*, page 285).

Hendricks calls on churches to make their congregations aware of both sin and grace. "There's only one remedy for sin: the forgiveness that is found in Christ," he continues. "We need to call sin sin. But then let's also call grace grace" (page 285).

### Spiritual Flops

Many Christians run from grace because they see themselves as spiritual failures and not deserving of God's blessings.

Many Christians walk around with a heavy load of unnecessary guilt. They may accept that they are sinners, but now they worry about not measuring up spiritually. They're afraid of taking advantage of God's grace.

Why do they think they've forfeited God's blessings? Because they don't feel they are good enough. So they think they don't deserve God's favor.

Of course, we're not deserving of God's grace. No one is.

God says that while we were sinners, he forgave us our sins. Grace is what makes it possible for sinners to become saints.

If you are under grace, you are forgiven. Forgiveness and redemption were "done deals" long before we existed as human beings.

God intended from the beginning of his creation to offer salvation to all human beings (1 Timothy 2:4; 2 Timothy 1:8-9; Titus 1:2-3). That promise became a reality with the work of Jesus Christ some 2,000 years ago.

### Too Much Grace?

Some Christians run from grace because they think other people won't be motivated to stop sinning.

Whenever grace is discussed, it always seems some people are ready to throw cold water on God's promises. They say, "We have to be careful not to stress grace too much because people will abuse it."

It should go without saying that grace does not allow us to do as we please and live in sin. Yet some continue to twist God's grace into an excuse for sinful living.

The book of Jude warns about "godless men" who preach a false grace.

They "change the grace of our God into a license for immorality and deny Jesus Christ our only Sovereign and Lord" (Jude 4).

The apostle Paul warns us as well, "Do not use your freedom to indulge the sinful nature" (Galatians 5:13). Some people may, indeed, interpret grace as a right to sin.

If they do, by definition, they are most certainly not under grace. If a person is truly living under grace,

then he or she is not using it as a cover for sin.

### Grace Teaches Us

Of course, Christians do sin (1 John 1:8-10). But grace reminds us of our sins. It moves us to seek forgiveness and to come under the will of God.

Grace instructs us to do Jesus Christ's will and to keep his commandments.

In the words of Paul, "The grace of God that brings salvation... teaches us to say 'No' to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, up-right and godly lives" (Titus 2:11-12).

The grace that forgives us and saves us also instructs and moves us toward God. It confers spiritual discipline.

We obey God's will because we are under grace, not because we feel an obligation to earn it or to appease him.

Grace actually provides everything necessary for us to be and remain righteous in God's sight.

Grace forgives our sins. Grace releases us from sin's dominion. Grace makes us righteous in God's sight.

Grace teaches us—motivates us—to live godly lives.

Grace gives us the victory through the work of Jesus Christ, enabling us to live lives pleasing to God.

Grace releases us from death and gives us eternal life.

As Christians under grace, we will present ourselves as living sacrifices to God, to do his will (Romans 12:1). These are acts of appreciation because we are under his grace.

But our sacrifice does not pay (or repay) God for a single sliver or ounce of grace, which is scandalously free to each of us. □



*"Our relationship with God is based on either works or grace. There is never a works-plus-grace relationship with Him."*

*"Before we can learn the sufficiency of God's grace, we must learn the insufficiency of ourselves."*

JERRY BRIDGES,  
TRANSFORMING GRACE



*Our relationship with others depends on the state of our relationship with God. When we fellowship in Christian love with others, he is the One with whom we truly fellowship.*

## SHARING YOUR FAITH...

# Through Fellowship

by Sheila Graham

**S**OME OF US have a hard time expressing ourselves. We're not good with small talk. We're not witty. Get us away from familiar folks and surroundings, and we're not even sure of what to say.

Some don't even go to church because they can't stand the thought of talking to people they don't know. Others go to church, but arrive at the last minute, sit in the back row and hurry out the door at the last "Amen."

Yet, as Christians, our responsibility is to communicate with others, to share our faith. "Let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds. Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another" (Hebrews 10:24-25).

But how can we share our faith and encourage one another in living Christian lives if we aren't getting together and communicating with others?

My editor doesn't like writers to promise three, seven or 10 keys to instant eloquence or to instant anything else, and he's right. There's no such magic formula. But let me share with you a few lessons I've learned as a self-confessed nonverbal type.

### You Can Learn to Talk to Others

I've learned that you can learn how to talk to other people. And, what better place to learn than at worship services.

Practice at church. Begin by getting to know people who find it easy to talk to others. All you have to do is ask them how they are, and then stand back and listen.

If they reveal a problem they've had that week, and you had something similar happen to you, share your experiences with them. You'll find letting people talk about their

problems helps them to know others care.

Next week, talk to these people again. Since you talked to them before, you'll have something in common to discuss, and then talk to one or two more people.

### Effective Listening

One of the most important, and most neglected, aspects of communicating with others is effective listening. The apostle Paul encouraged Christians to "carry each other's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ" (Galatians 6:2).

To share each other's burdens, we need to know what those burdens are. Many times, friends or acquaintances are most receptive to seeking a closer relationship with God when they are suffering some kind of trial. But unless they feel comfortable discussing their problem with you, they won't.

When people are expressing their feelings, they deeply appreciate being heard. If you are a good listener, they will talk to you.

One of the ways you can be a better listener is to listen with an open mind. If you act shocked and begin to judge and find fault, and then try to correct the individual, you've lost your opportunity to help.

This world is not an easy place, and some people have a more difficult time coping with life than others. Haven't we all made mistakes in judgment and then had to suffer the consequences? Listen compassionately. People need sympathy, not judgment.

Another way to be a good listener is to listen actively. If you're not sure you understand, rephrase what your friend is telling you.

For example, "If I understand you correctly, you are saying..." "In other words,

**The Plain Truth**



you thought that..." "You felt that way because..." "I see, you mean that..."

Repeating what your friend said in your own words helps you focus on what he or she is saying. It also limits misunderstandings.

Be supportive. If you are able to help, do so. Also, offer to pray about the problem. Let your friend know you have a close relationship with God, and that God cares when we suffer.

### Who Am I?

James gave us another clue for sharing our faith. "Confess your sins to each other" (James 5:16).

That's right, to share our faith, we must be able to share ourselves. We must be able to admit that we have sinful human nature as well. We have our faults just like everyone else. Sharing yourself means you admit (confess) that Christian or not, you've made your mistakes. This will help people better relate to you.

It's not easy for most of us to reveal who we are. We fear if others really know what we're like, they will lack respect for us and reject us. The opposite is often the case.

Say, for example, that you haven't let John, a friend at the office, know that you are a Christian. John's a nice guy, but once in a while he tells an off-color story.

You nervously laugh at his jokes, but you're cringing inside. After all, you don't want John to think you're some kind of goody-goody.

You're not doing John a favor by keeping from him how you really feel. Some day John may need a friend he can talk to about God.

How do you let him know? Begin by offhandedly mentioning something funny your child said at church last weekend. Or talk about why your church softball team lost its last game. Letting John know you are involved in your church sends him the message that you are a Christian.

He won't be as surprised as you might think. Long ago, he has probably sensed something different about you. Knowing you are a Christian explains it for him.

He may kid you about it. That's OK. Or, he may not show any further interest, but if he does, you have the opportunity to share your personal convictions about Christ.

Be ready for these opportunities when they come. You never know under what circumstances you may find yourself able to share your faith.

My son-in-law is the vice president of an electrical company in a large city in Texas. One weekend an elderly African-American woman in his church asked for his help.

A windstorm had snapped a tree limb,

which had fallen and knocked out the power to her home. Alan, also a master electrician, set to work repairing the damage.

Alan knew Willie Mae well. He, and others, had helped her out before.

She was taking care of some of her grandchildren and also had opened her home to others at times. She had built a small house behind her home practically all by herself to free up her home to provide shelter for family members and others in need.

After repairing the damage, Alan had to call a city inspector to get the power turned back on. When the inspector came out, he was not happy with what he found. The wiring in Willie Mae's house was not up to city code.

Alan began to explain her situation, citing her humanitarian efforts in the neighborhood. He told the inspector that she couldn't afford to have electrical work done by licensed electricians. Alan said he was there because they attended the same church.

The inspector, also African-American, listened with interest to this young white man, here in the middle of a black neighborhood on a Sunday afternoon, defending this elderly woman.

"What church do you go to?" the inspector asked. Alan told him that he attended the

*To share each other's burdens, we must know what those burdens are. If you are a good listener, people will feel comfortable talking with you.*



Worldwide Church of God. The inspector said he would like to attend next week.

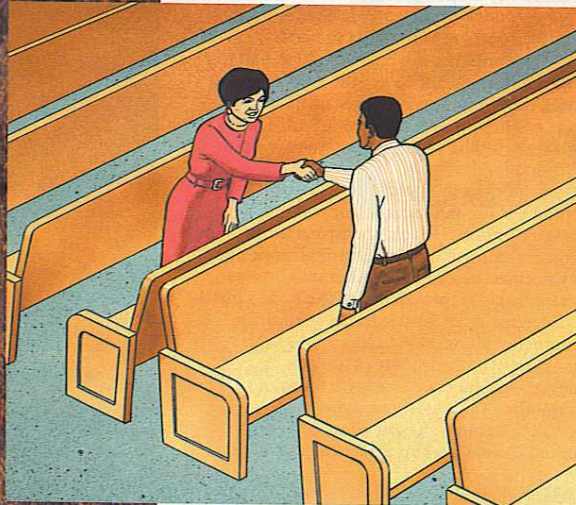
Alan did not go out that weekend expecting to share his, and Willie Mae's, faith with someone he didn't know, but when the opportunity came, he took advantage of it. If he had been embarrassed to admit he was a



***Before we can encourage our brothers and sisters in Christ, we have to get to know them and allow them to get to know us. We call that fellowshiping.***

Christian, this chance to share his faith would not have happened.

Of course, in sharing information about yourself, you don't want to go to the extreme and talk nonstop about yourself and your walk with Christ. You need to discern when to tell what about yourself, and to whom you should tell it. But don't be secretive about



ILLUSTRATIONS BY BRUCE HEDGES

being a Christian.

Make yourself available to people. Sooner or later, they're going to find out you're not perfect, and they will feel closer to you because you're not.

#### **How Not to Offend**

The apostle Paul said not to offend each other. "Let us stop passing judgment on one another. Instead, make up your mind not to put any stumbling block or obstacle in your brother's way" (Romans 14:13).

One of the quickest ways to turn people off is to be judgmental. Who wants to talk to someone who, when you express some belief you have, self-righteously condemns you for your weakness in the faith, plus a general lack of good sense.

Paul said it's OK to have some differences in beliefs. Some believe it's OK to eat meat. Others are strict vegetarians.

Some Christians believe the moderate use of alcohol is fine. Others feel even taking one drink is a sin.

Some keep certain days holy to God. Others keep other days, and some feel every day is sacred. Paul said we should not condemn people for living according to their consciences (Romans 14).

Once we know how people believe, we shouldn't offend them.

My grandmother was a teetotaler. She was so conscientious about avoiding alcohol that she wouldn't eat a bite of fruitcake if she suspected it had rum in it.

My grandmother was a fine Christian woman, well-known for her service and kindness to others. Though she knew I believed having a glass of wine with dinner was not a sin, I never drank an alcoholic beverage in front of her. Nor would I have tried to force my belief on her in any way.

"For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking, but of righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit, because anyone who serves Christ in this way is pleasing to God and approved by men" (verses 17-18).

Why judge people about such inconsequential things as food and drink, and days and times, and risk driving them away from Jesus Christ?

#### **The Importance of Fellowshiping**

Sharing our faith with others doesn't usually happen unless we get acquainted with other people. We have to get to know them and allow them to get to know us before we can talk about the gospel of Jesus Christ.

And before we can encourage our brothers and sisters in Christ, we must get to know them. We call that fellowshiping.

After looking around for and finally finding my teenage daughter after church one day, I asked her where she had been. She replied, with a big smile, "Fellowshipping."

It may not be exactly the kind of communicating I'm talking about here, although teens certainly can and do share their faith among themselves and with adults.

Fellowshipping involves sharing our lives with others. It involves really listening to others, so we know their problems and can pray effectively for them. It means studying God's Word so we can give an answer to those who ask.

Fellowshipping also means maintaining a close, intimate relationship with God. Our relationship with others depends on the state of our relationship with God. When we fellowship in Christian love with others, he is the One with whom we truly fellowship.

"Our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ.... God is light; in him there is no darkness at all. If we claim to have fellowship with him yet walk in the darkness, we lie and do not live by the truth. But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin" (1 John 1:3, 5-7). □

**The Plain Truth**



# Gang-proof Your Kids

**P**HILIP WAS a good boy from a good family. His dad owned a restaurant, and the whole family worked there. Philip had even gone to school to become a professional chef. He seemed to have it all.

But things changed.

Philip started hanging around with some tough guys in the neighborhood. These guys really seemed to have it all—money, women, nice cars, jewelry.

Philip wanted in. He could see that it would take years working in his father's restaurant before he could afford the things his friends already had.

Philip started small, just selling a few bags of cocaine. But quickly, he found that to make the kind of money the others made, he'd have to join a gang.

## Gang Controlled

The gangs controlled certain neighborhoods, and only their members could sell drugs in those places. If others tried, they'd be run off, beat up or even killed.

Most of Philip's new friends were gang members, and they filled his head with descriptions of how loving, powerful, protective and fun gang membership can be.

Soon after he took the gang oath, one of Philip's friends was shot and killed by a rival gang. Philip was impressed by the genuine emotion and concern shown by his new brothers as they decorated a tree with flowers and gang paraphernalia to mourn the loss of their friend.

Philip felt like he belonged with

and was loved by these other young men. He dedicated his life to the gang and vowed to fight to the death to defend his new brothers.

That's how a boy from a good family became a member of the Latin Kings, one of the most ruthless and perhaps fastest growing youth gangs in North America.

from the close family he had loved as a child.

Philip's story is actually quite common. Unlike the stereotype, many gang members aren't from single-parent homes, nor are they homeless runaways.

Many street gang members come from families where both parents



MATTHEW HARRIS — PHOTOEDIT

When I met Philip (not his real name), he was serving a lengthy prison sentence for narcotics sales and assault. He had become one of the leaders of the inner-prison gang system and was feared by many of the men there.

I found him to be a frightened, lonely and unhappy young man who was now somewhat estranged

**A Los Angeles gang demonstrates gang signs. The "family" orientation of gangs is appealing to youngsters who yearn for close relationships.**

live at home. Some of the youths even come from wealthy, upper-middle-class neighborhoods.

Unlike gangs of 20 to 30 years



## FAMILY

ago, however, today's youth gang organizations are much more violent and coldhearted.

Regardless of background, once he or she takes the gang oath, the life of a child gang member becomes riddled with violence, fear and death. Gangs recruit children as young as 8 to begin their indoctrination into "the brotherhood."

### Gang Families

Initially, values such as love, loyalty, brotherhood and even respect for God are promoted. Children are told that the gang will be the family they've never had.

Even kids from solid family backgrounds can often feel neglected because of their parents' busy schedules. The "family" orientation spoken of by gang recruiters sounds so appealing to these kids. So does the money, power and protection.

Once a person is sworn in, a gang member cannot leave the gang. Often, the only way out is to be "beat-down," a violent ritual where as many as 30 gang members will punch, kick, strangle and abuse the defector for a predetermined period of time. If he lives, he can leave.

The other, more common way to resign from a youth gang is to be murdered by your own friends. I have talked to prison inmates who have survived attempted murder, motivated by their desire to leave a youth gang.

One man told me he had been found hanging from a rope in a prison barracks. A guard cut him down just in time to save his life.

As getting out of a gang is a dangerous option for a teen, what can parents do to make sure a child never becomes a gang member?

As a result of my ministry to for-

mer gang members, I spoke with Jonathan Davis, vice president and Youth Program coordinator for the YMCA in Springfield, Massachusetts, and community activists, gang experts within the Connecticut state prison system, and former gang members about this problem.

Following is a compilation of their suggestions, along with my own recommendations:

#### 1. Spend time with your child.

Many gang members feel they never had enough time with their parents. Even if they knew their parents loved them, they often felt as if the job or other priorities were more important.

This leaves a child vulnerable to a gang sales line about brotherhood, love and acceptance. One gang member told me how his dad would buy him things, but never had time to play with him.

#### 2. Know the telltale signs.

The chart on the next page contains hand signals, gang symbols and secret codes from some of the most popular U.S. gangs. Similar signs can be found in other countries.

If you notice dramatic changes in dress, which involve the same colors day in and day out, special beads or jewelry, hand signals, strange verbal code words, and other signals being used by your child, he or she may be in danger of gang involvement.

If you see your child spending time with kids who use these signs or wear gang colors, it may be time to change your child's friends and get help from your church and community support organizations.



PHIL MCCARTEN — PHOTOEDIT

Graffiti, hand signals, gang symbols, tattoos and secret codes are gang signs. If your child dresses in the same colors or wears special beads or jewelry day after day, or uses hand signals or strange verbal code words, he or she may be in danger of gang involvement.



MARK RICHARDS — PHOTOEDIT



## FAMILY

One state official told me that if you find out that your child has already taken a gang oath, you may actually need to move to a new neighborhood to ensure your



DEBORAH DAVIS — PHOTOCREDIT

child's safety. Unfortunately, violence will follow anyone who tries to "resign" from most youth gangs.

**3. Get involved in community gang prevention activities.** Many churches, youth groups and civic organizations have aggressive community watch or gang prevention services. Pitch in and involve your child in these activities.

Sports, family oriented events, educational and cultural programs help keep children from the influence of youth gangs.

**4. Take your child to prison.** It's amazing how much of an impression can be made by visiting gang members who are doing time for their crimes. Often, state or local prisons have outreach programs that allow inmates to speak to children who are at high risk of becoming gang members.

If you suspect that your child is vulnerable to gang recruitment, contact your nearest Department of Corrections for more information. Nothing convinces like the real-life horror stories inmates can tell.

**5. Instill Christian values in your child.** Deuteronomy 6:7 gives us some good advice about moral principles: "Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk

along the road, when you lie down and when you get up."

Guiding your child into a personal relationship with Jesus Christ is the best way to avoid gang activity of any kind. Coming to know God the Father and our Lord and Savior can be extremely helpful. Participating in worship services and youth activities under the direction of a youth pastor can help.

**6. Love unconditionally.** Never let grades, performance in sports or even obedience at home become a condition for your love and affection. These things are important, but love should be without qualification.

We must follow the lead of our Father. Romans 5:8 tells us, "God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us."

It's also important to show your child what John understood so well: "There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear, because fear has to do with punishment. The one who fears is not made perfect in love" (1 John 4:18).

Gangs use fear to intimidate and motivate. A child who knows God realizes, despite all the talk, gangs who use fear do not know God.

**7. Set limits and don't back down.** Many children freely roam from after school till bedtime. This is prime gang recruiting time.

As parents, we must be sure we know where our children are and with whom they're spending time at all times!

Curfews and other rules should be set and maintained, especially if youth gangs have been active in your neighborhood. Following the other steps outlined above will make it easier to stand firm when you need to.

—Joel Rissinger

The gang symbols in this article are not exact representations, and the hand signals may well have changed by the time we went to press.

## SAMPLE GANG SIGNS



INGLEWOOD  
FAMILY  
GANGSTERS  
(Bloods)

VAN NESS  
GANGSTER  
(Bloods)

BRIM BLOODS,  
BLACK P STONE  
BLOODS



OUTLAW BLOODS

GRAPE STREET  
CRIPS



PIRU, FRUIT TOWN,  
LUDERS PARK, LIME  
HOOD

EAST COAST CRIPS



BLOOD STONE VILLAINS  
(Bloods)

BOUNTY HUNTER



DENVER LANES  
(Bloods)

MENLO GANGSTER CRIPS,  
MAIN STREET MAFIA CRIPS



RAYMOND STREET  
CRIPS

HOOVER CRIPS



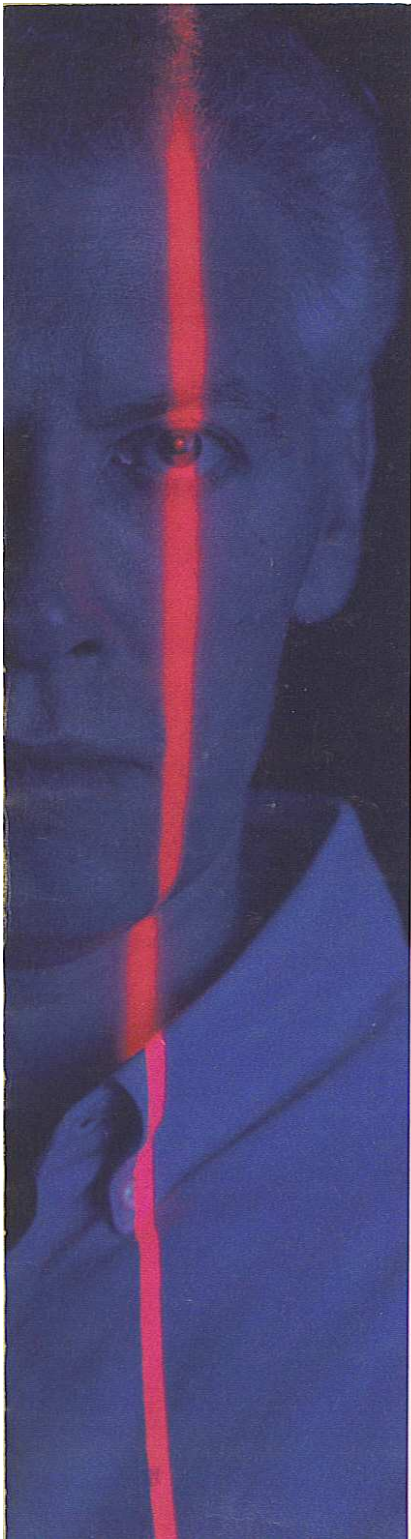
MILLER PARK  
GANGSTER  
(Bloods)

BLOODS

WATTS,  
WEST SIDE

ARTWORK BY JODY EASTMAN. PRIVATELY GATHERED INFORMATION FROM SOURCES WITHIN THE CONNECTICUT DEPARTMENT OF CORRECTIONS





*Many fail to recognize the true nature of sin—and how to escape its deadly grasp.*

# The Evil Within

by Keith W. Stump

**T**HE SUBJECT of the radio call-in talk show was the Oklahoma City bombing—the deadliest terrorist attack ever on U.S. soil. Most callers voiced their anger and outrage. But a few expressed other points of view.

“How can you judge the bomber as being an evil person?” one caller demanded. “Whatever happens in this world is for the ultimate good of everyone involved. It’s all part of a great plan.

“Evil is an illusion. Death is an illusion. Love and good is the only reality. All there is, is love!”

Another caller claimed the alleged bomber was also a “victim.” “How can you lay the blame on him?” she asked.

“He’s a scapegoat. It’s *society* that drove him to do what he did. Society failed him. We’ve *all* failed him!” she said. “He’s a victim of circumstances, a product of his envi-

**The Plain Truth**



ronment, a pawn of his upbringing."

These comments are extreme examples of attitudes that are common in our modern world. Many people today see themselves as "victims," refusing to take responsibility for their own lives and actions by blaming their faults, failings and wrongdoing on others.

Many also question whether sin and evil really exist. Some value-free psychologies and New Age teachings promote the notion that sin is a medieval superstition whose time has passed. Sin and evil have been relegated to merely being a "point of view," a "subjective judgment," or a genetically transmitted weakness.

Even those who still believe in the concept of sin often define it according to their own consciences, or according to the particular circumstances at hand. To many, there is no absolute right or wrong.

Others regard sin as just an arbitrary list of dos and don'ts imposed by God to deny us pleasure—an idea reflected in the familiar epigram, "Why is it that everything I like is either illegal, immoral or fattening?"

Amid this modern confusion about the nature of sin and evil, what is one to believe?

The concept of sin has been part of nearly all religions throughout history, with a wide range of nuances and emphases. It's easy to forget this today, when sin is viewed by many as a flawed or outdated concept.

Yet as a theological reality, sin continues to be a prominent belief in Christianity. No other religion places such a strong emphasis on sin and salvation. Salvation from sin is, in fact, the dominant theme of the Bible.

Christianity offers a unique solution to the problem of sin, guilt and death. The New Testament teaches that God's forgiveness is not an act of leniency in overlooking the penalty of sin.

The justice and righteousness of God required that the very Son of God—Jesus Christ—die as an atoning sacrifice for sins. He took our place, substituting for us, bearing our sin.

He was "the Lamb of God, who

takes away the sin of the world" (John 1:29).

But we are getting ahead of our story. What, first of all, *is* sin? And what makes sin so bad, anyway?

### Complex Phenomenon

In the New Testament, the word translated as "sin" is from the Greek *hamartia*, literally, "a missing of the mark." But the Greek word provides only a partial guide to the understanding of sin.

Sin *does* involve a deviation from a standard. It *does* involve individual acts of lawbreaking.

But sin in its fullest sense encompasses much more than that. It is *more* than simply a failure to achieve an established criterion of behavior or external standard of conduct. It is a far more complex phenomenon.

There is a difference between "sins" and "sin"—between one's specific misdeeds and one's essential sinfulness. The word *sins* refers to wrong actions; *sin* refers to the principle or power within us that provokes those wrong actions.

Under the old covenant, ancient Israel focused on sins rather than on sin—on outward acts rather than inner inclinations. The New Testament shifts the emphasis from sins to *sin*. The real issue is our sinful, fallen nature, not the actions that express it. Acts of sin are an expression of a seriously flawed inner nature.

In its fullest sense, sin is a condition—a state of being.

### Lawlessness!

The familiar King James translation of 1 John 3:4 ("sin is the transgression of the law") is misleading. The Greek words for "transgression" and "the law" do not, in fact, appear in the Greek text.

The verse literally states that sin is *anomia*, a Greek word meaning lawlessness or iniquity.

Lawlessness describes a fundamental condition or state of being. It refers to sin as a *way of life*—living independently of God's will. Lawlessness spotlights the essential character of sin—the rejection of the will of God as the guiding principle of one's existence.

Lawlessness is a state or condition of rebellion against God—rejecting divine rule, living contrary to God's expressed will, as evidenced by the ongoing, habitual commission of sin. "The sinful mind is hostile to God," the apostle Paul declares (Romans 8:7).

The primary feature of sin is that it is directed against God, even when the wrong we do is against ourselves or other human beings (Genesis 39:9; Psalm 51:4). That is because it is God who established the standard of right and wrong in the first place.

Lawlessness is the essence of sin.

Sin is not just doing specific things that are unlawful. It is an orientation—an alignment—that characterizes the sinner's entire existence, not just occasional slips, misdeeds and lapses in conduct. Most people, including many Christians, have failed to see sin in this profound perspective.

Sin is much more evil, sinister and pervasive than specific actions or behaviors. Sin defines the state in which we live—a state of disequilibrium from God. Sin defines our rebellion against God.

An anonymous maxim spotlights this condition of defiance: "Sin is man's declaration of independence from

God." Sin is rejection of God's will in favor of self-will. Sin substitutes reliance on God with self-reliance. This exaltation of the self over God is the root of all sin. That's why it has been said that sin is less the act of a criminal than the act of a traitor.

So we see that sin is properly defined in terms of humanity's rela-

*The  
Christian  
life is an  
ongoing  
struggle to  
hold sin in  
check with  
the  
assistance  
of God's  
grace.*



# THE SEVEN DEADLY SINS

**W**ho has not heard of the fearsome seven deadly sins?

In the traditionally accepted list, the seven deadly sins—also called capital sins—are pride, envy, anger, sloth, avarice, gluttony and lust.

The term *seven deadly sins* had its origin in the Middle Ages, when religion was a powerful force in Europe, and the common person was much more concerned with salvation and the life to come than the average person is today.

The frightening expression was intended as a warning to Christians of the "deadly" consequences of these particular sins, believed to be those that most seriously jeopardize one's eternal welfare if committed willfully—and those from which all other sins branch.

The seven deadly sins were widely depicted in medieval art, often in lurid detail. Religious authorities hoped that vivid images of sin and its fearful consequences would provoke onlookers to righteous living. The seven deadly sins were also a common theme in literature, as in the "Parson's Tale," one of Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* (14th century).

The categorizing of sins into transgressions of varying types and degrees of seriousness has no specific basis in New Testament writings. It is a development of later centuries, when the simple teachings of Christianity were amplified into an elaborate theological system with a complex variety of terms to designate the ways in which human beings go astray.

Indeed, preoccupation with individual vices and transgressions such as the seven deadly sins can obscure the true nature and scope of sin. Sin is much more than a catalog of faults and misdeeds. And overcoming sin involves something other than the exercise of self-discipline under the threat of punishment.

tion to God. Sin *breaks* human beings' relationship with God.

Humans were made for communion with God. This unique relationship is expressed by the word *image*. The Bible tells us that humans are made in God's "image" and "likeness" (Genesis 1:26).

Men and women were designed with the capacity to have a special relationship with God. It sets them apart from the rest of creation.

It is at the heart of what it means to be human.

In creating humanity, God endowed human beings with minds possessing a spiritual component. Its presence creates an inward desire—an urge or longing—for contact with our Creator, a yearning for a loving relationship with God. Humans have a need and desire to connect with God and worship him.

But the sad reality is otherwise. "All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God," the apostle Paul declares (Romans 3:23). Sin is all-pervasive. It saturates every aspect of human existence. The pain, heartache, suffering and death that mark human experience is the result of sin.

## Out of the Heart

Sin proceeds from a sinful nature (Romans 7:24-25). It is part of our essential humanity—a fundamental condition of existence, a basic feature of the human mode of being.

It is a nature or power within. Our sinful nature inherently pulls us toward sin, like iron filings are drawn to a magnet.

Jesus spoke of sin's reality and power, and of the sinful inner nature of human beings. He traced sin and evil to the human heart and will: "For out of the heart come evil thoughts" (Matthew 15:19).

The prophet Jeremiah put it this way: "The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure" (Jeremiah 17:9).

A sinful act is the expression of a sinful heart and nature. The outward act is prompted from within.

Throughout his epistles, the apostle Paul portrays sin as a force, a power, a "law" (Romans 7:23) ruling within human beings. He speaks of humans being "under sin" (Romans 3:9), of "slavery" (Galatians

4:3) to sin, and of our "sinful nature" (Romans 7:5).

We are "in bondage" (2 Peter 2:19, King James Version)—captive to lusts and desires, subject to the tyranny of our passions, inclinations and dispositions. We are under sin's power and condemnation.

Sin is powerful! It infects—and affects—every aspect of a person's being. It is persistent and stubborn (Romans 7:14-25). It is a malignant power that holds humanity in an iron grip.

Sin is also deadly. The ultimate penalty for sin is death (Romans 6:23). Apart from Christ, all are "dead in...transgressions and sins" (Ephesians 2:1).

The Bible warns that unrepentant sinners—those who deliberately reject the saving grace of God—will ultimately perish in a lake of fire (Matthew 10:28; Revelation 20:14-15). God does not treat sin lightly.

How, then, can we triumph over sin? How can we be rescued from bondage to sin and the fearful prospect of eternal condemnation?

## Divine Antidote

Against this grim background of sin and its consequences, the gospel proclaims the good news of reconciliation by God's grace through faith in Jesus Christ.

"God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him" (John 3:17).

We need not despair over the hopelessness of our sinful condition. An awareness and acceptance of the reality of sin is the first step toward salvation—the restoration of fellowship with God.

In the history of religions, methods of escaping the consequences of sin have varied widely. From ancient times, rituals of atonement, acts of penance and rites of expiation have been set forth as the solution to humanity's sinfulness.

But the Bible reveals that Christians cannot earn forgiveness and salvation by works of merit. No acts of penance, no amount of lawkeeping, no works or labors, can remit sin and impart eternal life (Galatians 3:21).

Humans are helpless to reform themselves, helpless to free them-

**The Plain Truth**



selves from sin. We cannot solve our own sin problem!

There is only one cure for the disease of sin. The solution to sin necessarily involves an inner transformation made possible by the atoning work of Christ on the cross.

Salvation—deliverance from the bondage of sin and death—comes only through the internal working of divine grace. Grace excludes all human merit.

God foreknew humanity would sin, and showed his tremendous love for us in providing a means for its removal: "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life" (John 3:16).

As God in the flesh, Jesus Christ was sinless. He took upon himself the collective sins of humanity—"to give his life as a ransom for many" (Mark 10:45). His substitutionary death satisfies the demands of justice that sin be punished, and answers God's judgment against every sinner (Colossians 1:14; 1 Peter 2:24; 3:18).

His death can release us from bondage to sin and death. His sinlessness can be imputed to us.

Our faith and belief in Jesus Christ restores fellowship with our Creator and begins the process of inner cleansing. It turns us from death to life.

Repentance follows faith, and involves us forsaking our sinful past. Repentance is a complete change of orientation, a new loyalty and allegiance to God, a change of mind and attitude. It entails not merely *acting* in a different way, but a wholesale *reorientation* of the self—from self-will to God's will.

This reorientation can occur only by grace, and by a miraculous new birth from above.

The repentant sinner experiences forgiveness and a new birth. The sinner is regenerated. The Holy Spirit dwells within the believer, empowering the new Christian to do the will of God (Romans 8:5-15).

The Holy Spirit leads the Christian to a personal relationship with God, to "participate in the divine nature" (2 Peter 1:4). It smashes the barrier that sin erected between ourselves and God. It heals the bro-

ken and tarnished image, enabling us to at last know God.

### Ongoing Struggle

Of course, the old sinful nature continues to exist alongside the new life in Jesus Christ. The Christian life is an ongoing struggle to hold sin in check with the assistance of God's grace.

Christians are to "make every effort" to be holy (Hebrews 12:14). Discipline and struggle are part of our quest.

God's role doesn't relieve us of personal responsibility. But the battle against sin will not ultimately be won by our own striving to subdue the flesh. In Christ, we have the victory over sin. Victory has been won, and given to us—shared with us—by grace. It is ours to lose.

Experienced Christians are deeply aware of the futility of human efforts to maintain their new orientation. To be saved is not to be free from acts of sin. Sin remains an active force in a Christian's life.

Believers still commit sins. But they do not yield to the *practice* of sin. They do not slip back into a pattern of sin as the basic orientation of their lives—they do not keep on sinning (1 John 3:6).

Their lives are no longer characterized by sin, but by repentance and growth. The sinning Christian is not lost because of his sins, because he confesses them and receives God's mercy, forgiveness, strength and power.

### Release From Sin

The gospel proclaims the joy of salvation in the midst of our turbulent and corrupt world. We need the salvation that God offers through Jesus Christ.

The worst sinner can have an incredible future! Jesus assures us, "I tell you the truth, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be condemned; he has crossed over from death to life" (John 5:24).

Christ has given Christians the priceless gift of salvation. If you have not already done so, come to him in faith and belief, asking him to give you a new life. By the grace and power of God, Christ's victory over sin can be yours! □

## "ORIGINAL SIN"

God did not create human beings inherently wicked: "God saw all that he had made, and it was very good" (Genesis 1:31). Humans were created innocent and without sin.

Sin entered human history when Adam and Eve misused their free will and disobeyed God's command by eating the forbidden fruit after being tempted by Satan (Genesis 3:6). They fell from their initial state of created goodness. They chose sin—and paid a staggering price.

A tragic change took place in their original pure nature. They became spiritually marred and broken, warped and corrupted—"tainted goods," spiritually speaking. Their relationship with God was destroyed by sin.

As the parents and representatives of the human race, their sin had unique significance. Like a deadly virus, it infected all future generations, as the apostle Paul explains (Romans 5:12-21). Sin and its consequences invaded the world and captured it.

The "fall" of Adam and Eve was a great poison that influenced every level of human nature. The seeds of sin took deep root within the human soul. As a result of their "original sin," a corrupted nature and distorted spiritual outlook passed from Adam and Eve to their descendants.

Humans begin life with a sinful nature (Psalm 51:5), a nature inclined toward self, an inner tendency to go one's own way rather than God's—to choose self and self-interests over God and God's will. It is a consequence of the first human sin.

In a very real sense, humanity's nature is "fallen." We have a bias toward evil (Romans 7:19). Human nature, the thinking of the natural man, is characterized by a fundamental inversion of values, and is governed by "enmity against God" (Romans 8:7, New King James Version).

It is only through the work of the Holy Spirit that the desires of the sinful nature can be triumphed over.



# How to Avoid Being a Spiritual

# Weirdo

*Spiritual weirdos often place a great deal of importance on the peripheral issues of Christianity and forget the central point of the gospel: Jesus Christ.*

by Monte Wolverton

**H**ISTORY IS punctuated by people who were zealous about unusual opinions. Society celebrates a few of these people as visionaries—courageous folk who were ridiculed for their unorthodox ideas, only to have those ideas accepted later.

## History's Heroes

Galileo flew in the face of church tradition when he maintained that actually the earth was not the center of the universe.

He was found guilty of heresy, forced to recant, and held under house arrest for eight years, until his death.

Columbus (according to popular opinion) asserted that the world was round, against the prevailing thought of the church.

Given the glory our culture affords such legendary pioneers, it's natural for some people to believe that their own unusual notions will one day be validated as well.

Oh, sure. Everyone laughs now, but someday they'll see.

Anyway, don't people have a right to their opinions?

Of course they do. There's plenty

of room—yes, even in Christianity—for diversity of opinion.

## Crossing the Line

But, when does a follower of Jesus Christ cross the boundary line from merely having personal opinions to being a weirdo? More specifically, a spiritual weirdo—a person who asserts odd and irrational ideas on religious and metaphysical subjects?

There are two major components to weird ideas. The first and most important element concerns the content of ideas.

Merely having an extraordinary idea isn't enough. The idea needs to be irrational.

The other major component of "weirdness" concerns how you express and share your ideas. You will enhance the chances of having your thoughts qualify as weird by obstinately declaring that your ideas are the *only* correct ones. Then, attempting to dogmatically impose them on other people.

Peculiar and irrational ideas combined with dogmatic and uncompromising insistence on one's own correctness are the perfect recipe.

Unfortunately, we can get carried away by our weird ideas at times.

**The Plain Truth**



You might be familiar with a few of the more well-known examples.

### Mighty Morphing Mega-Missionary

"Hey! You there! Not so fast!

"Are you saved? Come with me right now and we'll get you saved! Don't try to get away. Repent or perish!"

Ranking high on the list of those people who are giving Christianity a bad name is the overly enthusiastic Mighty Morphing Mega-Missionary, who confuses personal evangelism with high-pressure salesmanship.

Yes, Jesus commands Christians to proclaim the gospel and share their faith. However, people don't genuinely come to Jesus Christ through coercion. They are drawn by God the Father, and encouraged through the Christlike conduct of friends or relatives. It's through these relationships that they begin to understand the mercy and love of God.

### Prophecy Professor

Sure, it looks like a sunny day, but it's really the beginning of the greatest drought the world has ever seen! Sure, it looks like a mere rain-storm, but it's only a harbinger of catastrophic floods to come!

Sure, you may think it's just a little quake, but it's really the precur-

sor of California's fall into the Pacific Ocean!

Every event in the newspaper is a portent of dreadful happenings looming on the horizon, happenings pinpointed in time through detailed mathematical equations painstakingly extracted from enigmatic scriptures by the Prophecy Professor, laboring into the wee hours at his kitchen table.

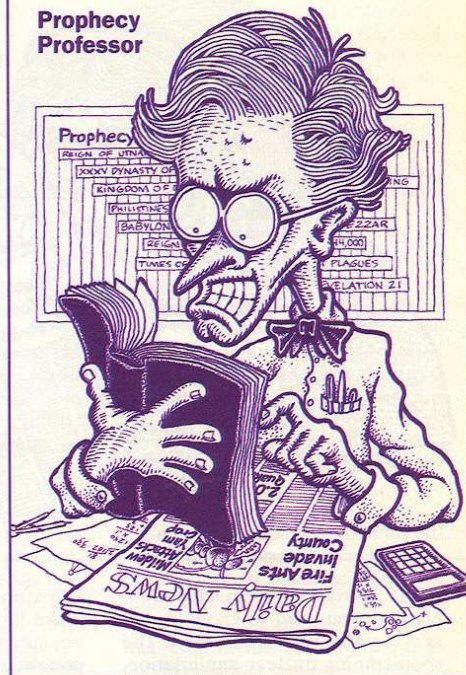
Because Prophecy Professors are so busy pointing out impending doom, they have little time or inclination to offer acts of Christian service to those in need.

Jesus warned us of trials and of a great tribulation, and he promised that he will return, but he called us primarily to joyfully focus our attention on things above, on his redemptive work.

### Conspiracy Buff

Don't look now, but the Beast is taking over our banking system. Soon, you won't be able to use a cash machine without his knowl-

### Prophecy Professor



edge. And you know those little surveillance cameras in banks? The Beast is watching!

Doctors and drug companies are in cahoots to keep us all unhealthy. Communists have taken over our education system.

The universal product code is the Mark of the Beast.

The Conspiracy Buff might take these statements seriously.

Of course, nefarious activities are afoot in all corners of the globe. But Christians are called to live lives of peace and joy, not of constant fear and anxiety. Paranoia over real or imagined conspiracies is not part of the spiritually healthy Christian life.

### Survival Sage

Is your bomb shelter ready? Do you have it stocked with plenty of freeze-dried lasagna?

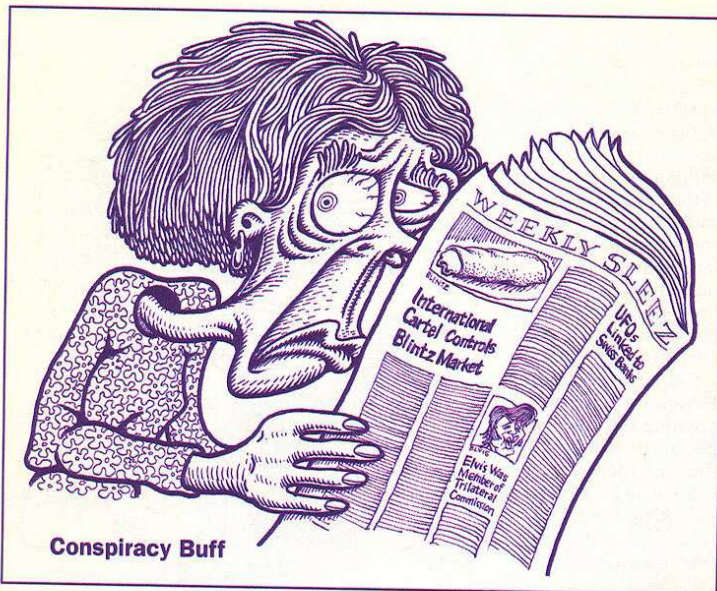
Have you saved gold bullion—because it'll be the only medium of exchange in the postnuclear-cataclysmic world.

And don't forget the assault weapons you'll need to defend your stash of food and money.



Mighty Morphing Mega-Missionary





**Conspiracy Buff**

The Survival Sage can tell you everything you need to know to preserve your own skin from the soon-coming nuclear annihilation. As long as it doesn't interfere with the preservation of his skin.

Jesus knew that many Christians would live through perilous times. He expected us to take reasonable precautions. But he warned that those who make self-preservation their god risk losing eternal life.

Christians are called to look out for others, as well as themselves. They trust Jesus Christ with their lives. Certainly, they should exercise prudence, but should ultimately place their lives in the hands of their Lord and Savior.

#### **Doctrinal Dictator**

Do you know the *real* meaning of Revelation 7:4? What about Ezekiel 1:15-21?

You won't find accurate, true answers to questions about the Bible in any book or commentary, because true answers haven't been revealed to scholars. They appear only to the select few who are initiated into the inner fold of the Doctrinal Dictator.

Doctrinal Dictators often have little formal biblical education. The main reason their interpretations differ from those of responsible

Christian scholarship is that they make illogical assumptions and do not accept sound principles of interpretation, feeling free to recklessly use and abuse scriptures to support their conclusions.

Sound biblical doctrine is not a secret. Never has there been a greater number of reliable commentaries, dictionaries, modern translations and other books to help you understand the Bible.

While many points continue to be debated (and not all positions are equally valid), the basic gospel message comes through loud and clear: God is reconciling the world to himself and offering forgiveness of sin through Jesus Christ.

Everyone who believes in and obeys the Son of God will be saved. Everything else is secondary.

Some of the unbalanced characters described above may sound familiar. We

all have the potential to be irrational and odd, to be stubborn and annoying, and to pretend to be an expert and to push our opinions on others.

#### **It's Nothing New**

Since humans have always had this potential, spiritually unbalanced people are nothing new. A major theme in the apostle Paul's epistles to Timothy and Titus is the contrast of "sound doctrine" with "foolish and stupid arguments" and "myths" (2 Timothy 2:23; 4:3-4).

People who wanted to be "teachers of the law" were unsettling the early church with their unsound notions (1 Timothy 1:7).

All these heresies had one thing in common. They placed great importance on peripheral issues and deemphasized the central point of the gospel: Jesus Christ.

Many spiritual weirdos endorse a particular way of doing things to attain salvation. Spiritual weirdos claim to have uncovered the *truth*.

Spiritual weirdos claim to have found the key to *life*. Jesus Christ, on the other hand, says, "I am the way and the truth and the life" (John 14:6).

Christ is the antidote to spiritual





## Doctrinal Dictator



weirdness. Paul would agree. He had been obsessed at one time with his own brand of weirdness: a hatred of anything Christian.

After his conversion, Paul's ministry and writings focused on Jesus, and he charged Timothy to use this as a pattern or filter to discern sound teaching from heresy.

"What you heard from me, keep as the pattern of sound teaching, with faith and love in Christ Jesus. Guard the good deposit that was entrusted to you—guard it with the help of the Holy Spirit who lives in us" (2 Timothy 1:13-14).

### What Can You Do?

If you or someone you know is afflicted with spiritual weirdness, remedies are available. Most of these remedies involve exposing yourself to other ideas, discussing those ideas, and connecting with other Christians.

**Go to church.** Involvement in a doctrinally sound Christian fellowship is one of the best remedies for spiritual weirdness. There is no substitute for weekly worship in a gathering of believers.

**Join a small Bible study group.** Bible study groups are springing up every day. You can join one at your church, or begin one with friends and neighbors. Collective study will expand your understanding of God's Word.

**Get involved in serving others.** Helping people is a remedy for those of us who become isolated from others. Ivory towers are fertile breeding grounds for weird ideas.

Bring your Christianity down to earth by becoming involved in projects that help those who need the love and concern of one who follows Jesus Christ.

**Take a course at a Christian college.**

Some Christian universities offer evening courses for part-time students. Getting together with other Bible students and a knowledgeable

instructor increases understanding.

**Subscribe to a reliable Christian publication.** The magazine you are holding in your hands is such a publication, but, of course, there are many others: *Christianity Today*, *Moody*, *Christian Research Journal*, *Tabletalk*, *The Christian Reader*, *Discipleship Journal* and *Decision*, for example.

**Consult authorities.** Commentaries, Bible dictionaries and encyclopedias, translations in modern English, thousands of other reference works and books addressing every Christian subject—you'll never begin to read them all. But if you have a question, chances are you can find it discussed from every perspective in a few good reference sources. Your pastor or your Christian bookstore can point you in the right direction.

**Come to Jesus Christ.** If emotional conflict and pain lie at the bottom of spiritual eccentricity, bear in mind that Christ heals. Whatever your pain, your trauma, your conflict, God invites you to bring it to him in prayer.

As the apostle Paul writes, "And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus" (Philippians 4:7). □

## PRIVILEGED INFORMATION?

A common assumption of many spiritual weirdos centers on the belief that God reveals special truth to certain isolated individuals.

It's true that God did reveal himself in visions and theophanies (visible manifestations). But the greatest revelation of God was when he came in the flesh, in the person of Jesus. He said, "Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father" (John 14:9).

The risen Christ leads his body, the church. And he does so through human beings, who must be instructed by the written revelation of God and be led by the Holy Spirit.

Peter reminds us that the source of teaching is not specially gifted human beings, but the Holy Spirit,

who operates within the church collectively.

"Above all, you must understand that no prophecy of Scripture came about by the prophet's own interpretation. For prophecy never had its origin in the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit" (2 Peter 1:20-21).

Christians make their greatest contributions when they work in healthy cooperation with other Christians. The Holy Spirit leads us to cooperate and learn, not to exalt and isolate ourselves. Christians share a common salvation, not an eccentric set of special doctrines unknown and unavailable to the vast majority of the ungifted, uncalled and uninitiated.



## QUESTIONS

**Q** What did Jesus mean when he said to the thief on the cross, "I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in paradise" (Luke 23:43)?

**A** As Jesus hung on the cross dying, one criminal crucified with him taunted: "Aren't you the Christ? Save yourself and us!" (Luke 23:39).

Many people assume that the criminal who insulted Jesus did so only once. But the New Revised Standard Version makes clear that the criminal "kept deriding" Jesus. He repeatedly asked Jesus if he was the Messiah and then derisively challenged him to prove his Messiahship by giving them physical salvation.

The other crucified criminal chided the one who was deriding Jesus: "Don't you fear God?... We are punished justly.... But this man has done nothing wrong" (verses 40-41).

He then displayed his faith in Jesus by saying to Jesus, "Remember me when you come into your kingdom."

Jesus encouraged the man by assuring him, "Today you will be with me in paradise."

**Though one thief hurled insults at Jesus Christ as he hung on the cross, the other repented and asked that Christ remember him in his kingdom. Christ acknowledged his faith.**

Shortly after that, they died.

Many assume that Jesus was saying that both of them would go to heaven that same day. Yet Jesus did not ascend to God the Father until several days later. Where, then, is

the paradise to which Jesus said they would go?

Originally a Persian word for garden, *paradise* came to have a variety of meanings. Among them was the common Jewish belief that paradise was that part of Hades in which the righteous dead awaited their resurrection and ultimate reward. Because Jesus Christ was not resurrected until three days after his crucifixion, this is the paradise to which Jesus referred when he

ings helps us focus on the importance of what he was saying.

Examples of this usage abound. Nine are in the book of Luke alone (Luke 4:24; 9:27; 12:37, 44; 18:17, 29; 21:3, 32; 23:43). Whatever Jesus said immediately following "I tell you the truth" was always an emphatic teaching.

The emphatic teaching to the thief on the cross was "Today you will be with me in paradise." This statement assured the thief that whatever he had done during his life God had forgiven, based on the thief's repentant faith in Jesus. The former bandit would be in the resurrection of the righteous.

While we might speculate about what Jesus meant by paradise, this passage does not give us enough information to draw any definitive conclusions. Jesus was not primarily commenting about the state of the dead, but on this man's assurance of salvation. He was using terminology familiar to the people of his day.

One criminal saw a dying teacher and mocked. The other saw the dying Messiah and believed.

While it is easy to dismiss deathbed conversions, especially of professional criminals, the example of the thief on the cross tells us to judge less hastily.

Our past does not nullify genuine repentance and faith in Christ, no matter how late in life our turning to Christ may occur.

The danger lies not in a late conversion, but in a delayed conversion. A delayed conversion can easily become no conversion at all. And without conversion, there is no salvation. □

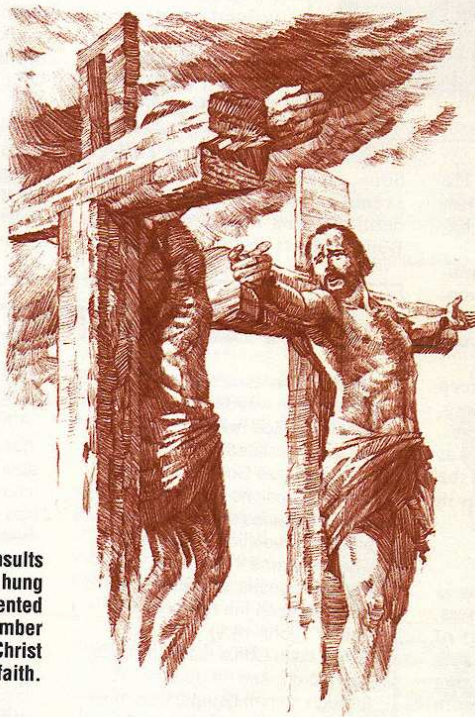
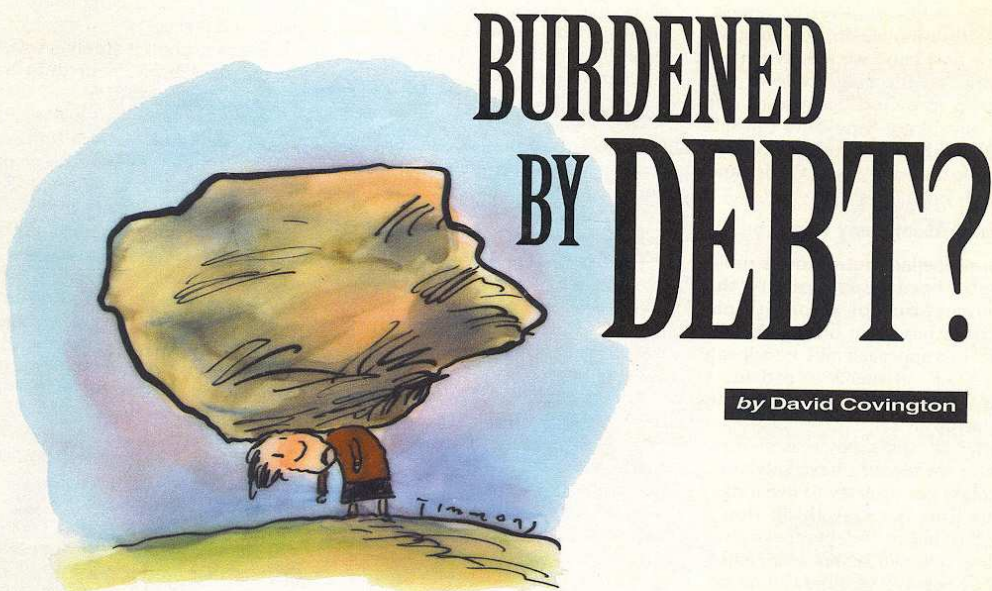


ILLUSTRATION BY KEN TUNELL





*The debt-propelled Christian is living a lie. Salvation cannot be law and grace, a totally free gift and at the same time a debt to be paid. Without Christ, each of us has a debt of death that can never be repaid.*

**I**T IS FINISHED." These were the final words our Lord and Savior spoke on the cross (John 19:30). I find these words extremely meaningful to me in my personal Christian walk. They represent a statement of account for my spiritual debt with God. I keep this statement in my records as a most valued possession.

Yet, there was a time when I felt it was never finished. I never knew for sure if I had done enough.

Had I prayed enough? Had I studied God's Word enough?

Had I somehow overcome enough weaknesses and developed enough virtues to be accepted by God? Had I possibly built enough character to gain eternal life?

Of course, I never knew for sure, so I kept pressing on. It seemed the bills were getting lost in the mail, but I knew there was much I yet owed. So, I labored on.

The problem was that I was building my spiritual finances on the wrong foundation, a shaky one that would not stand. It was like the bumper sticker that reads: "Make way! I'm debt-propelled."

#### **The Debt Owed the King**

The servant who came before the king in Matthew 18:21-35 was debt-propelled. We are told that he owed 10,000 talents.

If someone today who had a debt of \$10,000 were brought before a judge, he or she might plead for mercy:

"Just give me some time. I can pay it off. I can make installments. I'll put it on my credit card."

Most in such a situation would think they could eventually pay it off. And they probably could, given enough time.

Apparently, the servant in Matthew 18 thought he could satisfy his debt.

This was once my philosophy. I kept working, determined to pay off the debt, to be reconciled to God.

I thought if I could just accomplish enough spiritually, God would accept me as his own son. He would eventually find me pleasing. He would justify me, if I just kept working off that debt.

#### **How Much Do You Owe?**

There are many problems with the debt-propelled approach. First, we owe more than we could ever possibly repay. In the parable, the servant owed the king not 10,000 dollars but rather 10,000 talents. One talent is a weight of silver roughly equivalent to the amount it would take a common laborer 15 years to earn. So, 10,000 talents is the equivalent of 150,000 years of a laborer's income.

The whole point Jesus was making was



that the debt can never be repaid, no matter what we do, how long we live or how good we are. When we understand the magnitude of the debt we owe God because of our sins, we will not believe we can satisfy our debt by our own labor. We will ask only for Jesus Christ and his mercy.

### Troubled About Many Things

Debt-propelled motivation is problematic because it leads to the misconception of a conditional salvation based on our works. To some, this approach may be appealing because it seems to provide a prod to keep us in line, to keep us in control.

After all, some may reason, if we believe we already have salvation, we might not even try to live a righteous life. We may think that a monthly bill of indebtedness gives us direction and serves as a control for our passions and indwelling sin.

This approach may seem to make sense, but it leads to one of two conclusions. It will, on the one hand, lead to perfectionism, anxiety and a sense of spiritual superiority. Or it will lead to discouragement, depression and overwhelming guilt.

Neither of these conclusions can be described as the good news of the gospel.

### The Pharisee and the Tax Collector

Luke 18 describes two men with unrepayable debts. One is a Pharisee who proudly stood up and recounted his many good works.

But he did not see that he owed God a debt. If anything, he felt God owed him something.

The other man, a tax collector, went before God and realized he had a debt he could never repay. He simply asked God for mercy. And mercy alone. And he got it. You can, too.

When we are in Christ, we have salvation. He accomplished the work of redemption, atonement, justification and reconciliation on the cross.

When we accept him, "it is finished." In *No Wonder They Call Him the Savior*, Max Lucado wrote, "All of us are signing on Jesus' credit card, not ours" (page 37).

The gospel of grace produces

peace. The person who is out working to pay off his debt to God will never be content. For that person, it is never finished.

### Not Law and Grace

Bob George, in *Classic Christianity*, describes three ways we can try to find acceptance with God. The first two are deceptions of Satan meant to keep us from God.

The first way is through the Law. The Pharisee of Luke 18 had done such good works that not only did he not see his unrepayable debt, but he felt he had something to boast of before God.

The second way is that of the debt-propelled Christian. This deception says that we are accepted before God on the basis of both law and grace.

In describing this second misconception, George writes, "'God's grace has made it possible for man to work for His acceptance and forgiveness' or 'God loves us unconditionally if we keep all the rules.'" This is, George says, "a meaningless contradiction" (page 124).

John Stott shares his frustration with such an approach. In his commentary *Romans: God's Good News for the World*, Stott writes, "If you confuse such opposites as faith and works, then words will simply lose their meaning" (page 293).

The debt-propelled Christian is living a lie. Salvation cannot be law and grace, a totally free gift and at the same time a debt to be paid.

Being debt-propelled may appeal to our self-righteous, sinful nature, but it is a destructive heresy. Debt-propulsion says grace is absolutely free. Your debt is paid. But send in your monthly payment with low interest anyway.

Such confusion will lead us away from God and steal the peace of Jesus Christ from our lives.

### Gospel of Grace

The third way that Bob George describes is salvation by grace, and grace alone. It is a free gift, period. No ifs, ands or buts.

This is typified by the tax collector of Luke 18. He well understood finances, but he asked for something we never see in our world's economy. He asked for an unre-

payable debt to be completely forgiven, and it was.

He was accepted freely. And, if you are in Christ, your debt has been canceled as well.

For the believer who has accepted Christ as Savior, it is finished. The debt is paid. There is no record of it in heaven. Paul writes in Romans 13 that our only debt is to love one another. We are debt free before God. He has accepted us.

Not because God owes us anything. Not because we could ever repay him. Not because God sweeps our debt under the rug. But because Jesus became sin for us and took the unpayable bill of 10,000 talents upon himself.

Jesus Christ paid the highest price to make the forgiveness of our debt possible.

In *My Utmost for His Highest*, Oswald Chambers wrote: "Never build your case for forgiveness on the fact that God is our Father and He will forgive us because He loves us.... It makes the cross unnecessary, and the Redemption 'much ado about nothing'" (page 326). It is only because of our Savior Jesus that we can say, "It is finished."

### Your Statement of Account

How sure are you that if you were to die or Jesus Christ were to return right now you would spend eternity with him?

If your answer is not 100 percent, "I'm sure!", then please ask yourself if you heard the King correctly. Are you looking to yourself or to the one who paid the price and canceled the debt, Jesus Christ?

If you look to yourself, it will never be finished. Without Christ, each of us has a debt of death that is the result of sin. Unless, and until, we accept Christ's payment, we are responsible for the balance on our own account.

If you are in Christ, your account is marked, "Paid in full!" Believe it. For that is the gospel, and you can bank on it. □

*David Covington and his wife, Jennifer, live in Roanoke, Virginia, pastoring two congregations. David has his master's in counseling from the University of Memphis and is a National Certified Counselor.*

**The Plain Truth**





**JESSICA**  
Sophomore  
New Jersey

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Ambassador University was my first choice of colleges not only because of its academic reputation but also its Christian environment. After a year of attending Ambassador,

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## PERSONAL

Continued from page 1

has been required of members, nor have members been expected to automatically embrace new beliefs. We have stressed the need for personal faith in Jesus Christ, and we have instructed our pastors to be patient with members and understand their struggles to understand and embrace doctrinal and administrative changes.

Despite the material losses, we have gained much. As Paul wrote, whatever was to our profit in what we embraced before, we now consider worthless for the sake of Christ. We take courage and comfort in knowing "Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, and so, somehow, to attain to the resurrection from the dead" (Philippians 3:7-11).

We are grateful for those fellow Christians—Hank Hanegraaff, Ruth Tucker, David Neff, William G. Brafford, and friends at Azusa Pacific University, Fuller Theological Seminary, Regent College and elsewhere—who have extended the hand of fellowship to us as we sincerely seek to follow Jesus Christ in faith. We welcome

the blessing of being part of, not just a small, exclusive, physical corporation, but the body of Christ, the community that is the church of God, and to do all we can to help share the gospel of Jesus Christ with all the world.

My father, Joseph W. Tkach, subjected himself to the truth of Holy Scripture. In the face of opposition, he insisted that Jesus Christ is Lord. He was a humble and faithful minister of Jesus Christ who allowed God to lead him and the Worldwide Church of God into the riches of God's grace. Relying on God in faith and in fervent prayer, we fully intend to stay the course on which Jesus Christ has set us.



Joseph Tkach  
President

## LETTERS

Continued from page 3

July 21, 1995, I received *The Plain Truth* in which you inform us of the change you people have made in the observance of the Fourth Commandment of the law of God.

That, my dear friend, caused in me a collapse not only physically but in my faith in you as well. Because how could you confuse the law of God with the law of Moses? You are confusing the moral law of God with the ritual law of Moses. If your change persists, I will not follow you anymore.

Julius Velez  
Escondido, California

I just received your August issue, and I am very happy that you were bold and courageous enough to change your historical position regarding the Sabbath.

I know it takes courage to change a widely held view you have held for many years, at the risk of losing many followers, but you stood strong in obedience to the Lord and did what was right.

I was a member of the Worldwide Church of God when Herbert Armstrong was alive. I now belong to a nondenominational church. It took insight from the Holy Spirit to see that I was being led wrong regarding the Sabbath. I was really convinced that all who didn't

worship on Saturday were headed for hell. My heart leaps with joy to know that you will do what is right rather than what is good for you and your church.

Mazina Brown  
Duluth, Georgia

### Ministerial Welcome

Enclosed is a \$25 contribution which I hope helps to defray the cost of *The Plain Truth*. I am a Presbyterian minister who has found no basic theological error in your magazine, and who now rejoices—as did an article in *Christianity Today*—that you are joining the mainline evangelical folks.

Welcome—and thanks. I began to read *The Plain Truth* because my mother, a staunch Southern Baptist, received it from a cousin who is a member of the Worldwide Church of God.

Alvada Durham  
Union Point, Georgia

● Thank you for your comments and for your contribution to our ministry of providing the Plain Truth magazine subscription free to all who request it. Christianity Today's editorial by David Neff, the magazine's executive editor, is reprinted by permission on page 27.

### All One in Christ

To answer the remarks of David Knoll on "Luke's Legacy to Women" ("Letters," November), I would like to thank God that women are not "equal" to men in most cases, or there would be twice as many wars, murders, rapes, assaults, robberies, twice as many deadbeats who don't support their own children.

Mr. Knoll should read the last part of 1 Peter 3:7 along with Romans 8:17, both of which he noted.

As far as 1 Timothy 2:14, yes, Eve was deceived and sinned, but Adam deliberately sinned.

Most of the verses he listed refer only to physical issues for orderliness' sake, which he'd know if he had continued to 1 Corinthians 14:40—that is not about not being equal, just having different roles.

In Christ there is neither male nor female. We are all one in Christ.

Karen Cain  
Oconto, Wisconsin

*The Plain Truth* welcomes your comments. Letters for this column should be addressed to "Letters to the Editor." The editor reserves the right to use or not use comments so addressed, in whole or in part, as deemed in the public interest, and to include your name and edit the letter for clarity or space.

The Plain Truth



## COMMENTARY

# The Road to Orthodoxy

*This editorial by David Neff, executive editor of Christianity Today, is reprinted by permission from the Oct. 2, 1995, issue of that magazine.*

**E**VANGELICALS know this: A high commitment to following God's will is essential to Christian discipleship; so also is a strong commitment to all the truth we glean from Scripture.

But we also know this: Without an informed theology and experience of grace, these discipleship essentials can lead to legalism, spiritual pride, and isolationism.

That is exactly what happened in the Worldwide Church of God (WCG). Their founder, Herbert W. Armstrong, discerned certain "truths" in Scripture (including the need to keep all of God's law in order to be saved), and he placed a high demand for commitment on his followers (including, for example, a "triple tithe," comparable to what God's Old Covenant people paid). The result was not only a flawed theology, but, in many cases, legalism, spiritual pride, and isolation.

After Armstrong died, the church's new leadership emulated his commitment—and in their search for truth, left behind many of the individual "truths" he had taught.

One of the first doctrines to be questioned after Armstrong's death was his teaching that believers were not born again until the resurrection. Re-examining that teaching in the light of Scripture led the WCG leaders (who seem to function as a team) to reject their church's teaching that human beings were themselves destined to become gods,

which, in turn, led them to revise their doctrine of the nature of God, which, in turn, led them to teach the biblical doctrine of the Holy Trinity. "It was a domino effect," they recently told CT.

In a recently published doctrinal statement, the WCG teaches in the clearest possible terms not only the Trinity, but also salvation by grace through faith. Most evangelicals should have no quarrel with this new statement, although differences in church practice and eschatology will still distinguish the WCG. Its traditional disciplines of tithing and attendance at festivals, which many believed were essential for salvation, the WCG now considers to be helpful, but optional practices.

CT met with a representative leadership group several years ago and was convinced of their commitment, both to Christ and to authentic biblical truth. That commitment, we have learned, has exacted a high price. Many members have felt betrayed by the changes and have left to join splinter groups. The change in teaching about the tithe has resulted in drastically reduced income, necessitating layoffs and downsizing of operations. Just as painful as the layoffs has been the grieving for alienated family members.

WCG leadership believes the departures have now slowed significantly. When WCG members gather this month for their annual Feast of Tabernacles worship service, there will be 30,000 fewer in attendance. (Past events have typically drawn about 85,000.) Of those who will stay away, perhaps a third are not worshiping anywhere.

Despite the losses, WCG leaders remain confident. "We believe the

Holy Spirit is leading us to these things," they told CT. "We now know much more of what it means to take up our cross and follow Jesus," they said.

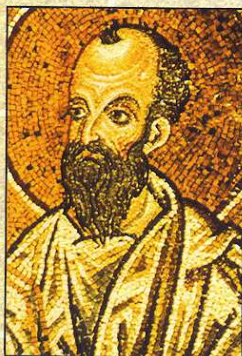
Ironically, the question around which much of the change has revolved is this: Are there Christians in other churches? (Armstrong taught that Mother Rome and her Protestant daughters together constituted Babylon the Great.) The WCG had benefited much from the Scripture scholarship of non-WCG scholars, but it had not considered them Christians because they were not sabbatarians. Suddenly, its leaders faced the dilemma squarely: either these scholars are not Christians, or the Sabbath is not the criterion of Christian identity. Armstrong's view was then decisively abandoned.

CT readers will be glad to know that they are no longer considered among the harlot daughters of the Great Whore. But how will we respond? Sadly, Christians outside the WCG have been suspicious and slow to extend the right hand of fellowship. (A few leaders have been helpful, WCG leaders say: Hank Hanegraaff of the Christian Research Institute and Ruth Tucker of Trinity International University, for example; and faculty from Regent College, Fuller Seminary, and Azusa Pacific University have also helped inform the transition. But by and large, Christians have made the WCG journey of faith and doctrine more difficult.) CT commends the WCG leadership for its courage in pursuit of truth. Can we now welcome their people into this transdenominational fellowship we call evangelicalism?

—David Neff



## CORNERSTONES



Detail from an Italian mosaic in the cathedral of Monreale, Sicily, shows a solemn but kindly looking apostle Paul. The mosaic dates from the 12th century.

have proposed it was a deforming bodily affliction, possibly affecting Paul's legs. A second-century description of Paul (preserved in the apocryphal work *Acts of Paul and Thecla*) tells us he was small in stature, with a bald head, meeting eyebrows, a somewhat prominent nose and *crooked legs*. (Compare with 2 Corinthians 10:10.) Others have suggested the

thorn was stammering speech, attacks of malarial fever, epilepsy, migraine headaches, earaches or an eye disease impairing his vision. The latter possibility is deduced from Paul's letter to the Galatians, where he remarks, "If you could have done so, you would have torn out your eyes and given them to me" (Galatians 4:15).

There is insufficient data to decide the matter beyond all doubt. Whatever the affliction, God gave Paul the strength to endure it, and Paul came to appreciate it as a reminder that he must glory not in himself, but in God.

### RELIGION

#### ► Attention Church Pastors!

The Promise Keepers organization is sponsoring a National Pastor's Conference at the Georgia Dome in Atlanta, Georgia, Feb. 13-15. The mission of the conference is to reignite pastors with hope, vision and courage in their calling, so they will be equipped to bring revival to their churches and spiritual awakening to their

### MYSTERIES

#### ► "A Thorn in My Flesh"

What was the mysterious thorn in the flesh that afflicted Paul, the apostle to the gentiles?

Paul wrote that he had received remarkable visions and revelations from God (2 Corinthians 12:1-4). But he added, "To keep me from becoming conceited because of these surpassingly great revelations, there was given me a thorn [Greek: *skolops*] in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me" (verse 7).

The language indicates that the infirmity was physical (*in my flesh*), painful and humiliating. The Greek word *skolops* means "anything pointed"—like a sharp stake or thorn—implying some painful ailment or disorder.

Many suggestions have been made concerning the nature of this thorn. Some

### ART

#### ► Symbols of the Evangelists

Early Christians often used signs and symbols to represent persons and concepts important to the faith. The most widespread Christian symbol today is the cross, representing the redeeming work of Christ.

Because the physical appearance of many biblical personalities was unknown, they were represented in

Christian art by emblems or attributes. Jesus is often depicted as a lamb (John 1:29; 1 Corinthians 5:7). A dove symbolizes the Holy Spirit (John 1:32).

But many Christians have wondered about the less obvious symbolism used to

represent the Gospel writers (often called the four evangelists)—a winged man for Matthew, a lion for Mark, an ox for Luke and an eagle for John.

Each writer was assigned a symbol based on the opening passages of his Gospel. The

Details from an eighth-century English illumination symbolically depict the four evangelists according to their traditional attributes.



The Plain Truth



**"God will never love or accept  
you one ounce less or one ounce more  
than He does *right this minute*."**

—Bob George, *Classic Christianity*

communities. As many as 70,000 clergymen are expected to attend.

In addition to addresses by prominent church leaders, and worship and prayer, the conference will offer opportunities for clergy to network regionally with other pastors and foster fellowship between leaders of different Christian denominations.

A special conference for youth workers will take place Feb. 11-12, just before the clergy conference. For more information, call toll free 1-800-888-7595, or write c/o Promise Keepers, P.O. Box 18376, Boulder, CO 80308-1376.

symbolism was derived from the visions described in Ezekiel 1:10 and Revelation 4:7.

Matthew's symbol is a winged man because he traces Jesus Christ's genealogy, which stresses his humanity.

Mark is represented by a winged lion because he begins his Gospel with the voice of John the Baptist "crying in the wilderness" (New King James Version), analogous to a lion's roar.

Luke's emblem or attribute is an ox or bull—a sacrificial animal—which recalls the priest Zechariah's burning incense inside the temple before the morning sacrifice.

John is shown as an eagle, a reference to the soaring inspiration of his Gospel's eloquent prologue.

**February 1996**

## BOOK REVIEW

### ► "Footprints"

You've seen the poem everywhere—on cards and calendars, posters and plaques. The author of "Footprints," Margaret Fishback Powers, has written the true story behind the poem that has inspired millions of people over the years.

Powers' book is a quick read, only about 100 pages, but after you finish it, you feel you've shared a lifetime of experiences with this woman and her family.

No holds barred, she tells her family's story—from her and her husband's romantic courtship to several close calls with death.

She describes the walk on the beach with Paul, her husband-to-be, when the thoughts behind "Footprints" began to come. And the anxiety that caused the words of the poem to fill her mind late that same night, as she wrote with pen in one hand and flashlight in the other.

The poem becomes a theme in her life as she and Paul struggle to serve Jesus Christ while trying to make a living and while raising two daughters.

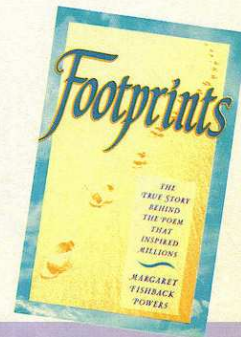
Then, the original

poem is lost, and so is Powers' motivation to write. She is shocked to find the poem displayed in bookstores under other authors' names. Powers fights the bitterness welling up in her, but finally comes to the decision that eases her pain and restores her creativity.

You'll want to read this memorable story of how the inspiring and faith-filled words of the poem "Footprints" came about,

from the author herself.

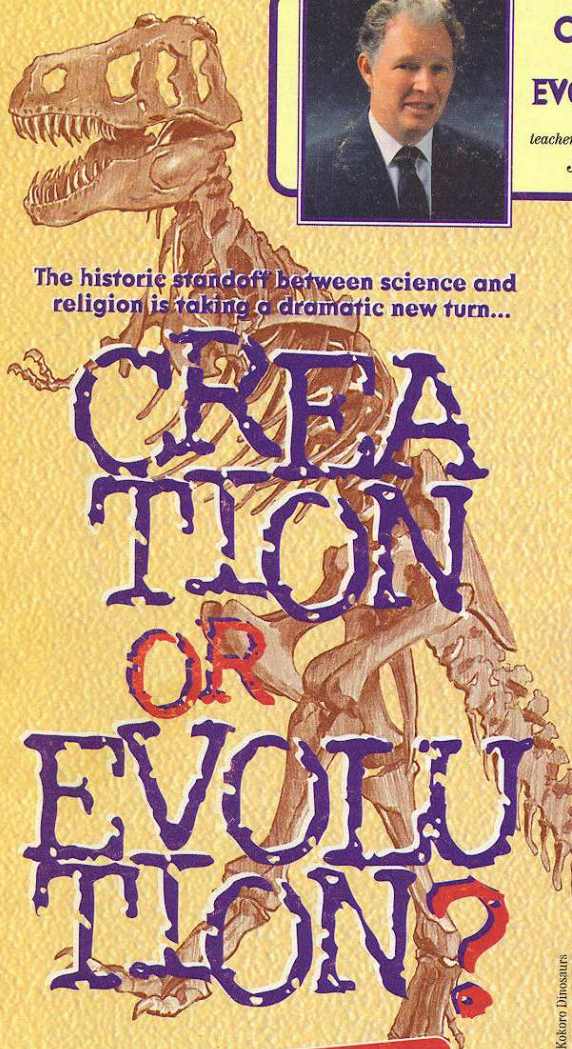
—Sheila Graham



*One night I dreamed a dream.  
I was walking along the beach with my Lord.  
Across the dark sky flashed scenes from my life.  
For each scene, I noticed two sets  
of footprints in the sand,  
one belonging to me  
and one to my Lord.  
When the last scene of my life shot before me  
I looked back at the footprints in the sand.  
There was only one set of footprints.  
I realized that this was at the lowest  
and saddest times of my life.  
This always bothered me  
and I questioned the Lord  
about my dilemma.  
"Lord, you told me when I decided to follow You,  
You would walk and talk with me all the way.  
But I'm aware that during the most troublesome  
times of my life there is only one set of footprints.  
I just don't understand why, when I needed You most,  
You leave me."  
He whispered, "My precious child,  
I love you and will never leave you  
never, ever, during your trials and testings.  
When you saw only one set of footprints  
it was then that I carried you."*

Written by Margaret Fishback, Thanksgiving, 1964, Echo Lake Youth Camp, Kingston, Ontario, Canada © 1964 by Margaret Fishback Powers





## CREATION OR EVOLUTION?

presented by  
teacher, journalist and minister  
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This carefully researched video, *Creation or Evolution?*, has been prepared especially for you as a *Plain Truth* reader.

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