

January - February 2020

A black and white photograph of a snowy forest. Tall evergreen trees are covered in snow, and sunlight filters through the canopy, creating a bright starburst effect in the center. The overall mood is serene and peaceful.

Reconciled



2020: The Ministry of Reconciliation



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Peace and Pieces

Greetings, BA readers! It's an exciting new year, and we have an exciting new theme to go with it. Following the Great Commission last year, 2020 is dedicated to what the apostle Paul called the "ministry of reconciliation" (2 Corinthians 5:14-21). We have all year to explore this profound text, but here's the heart of it: "Now all things are of God, who has reconciled us to Himself through Jesus Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation . . . God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, not imputing their trespasses to them, and has committed to us the word of reconciliation" (vv. 18, 19).

This message makes us "ambassadors for Christ." On His behalf we implore a shattered and dying world "be reconciled to God" (v. 20). What a responsibility. Do we understand it, and are we up for it?

We see the need all around us. *Everywhere!* Sin breaks us into pieces, beginning with our relationship with our heavenly Father. But in Christ, God has made peace. This means that we can be put back together again. This isn't just a message we share with others; it's a life we model as new creations in Christ. If we are at peace with God in Him, we can be reconciled to one another and not fall to pieces.

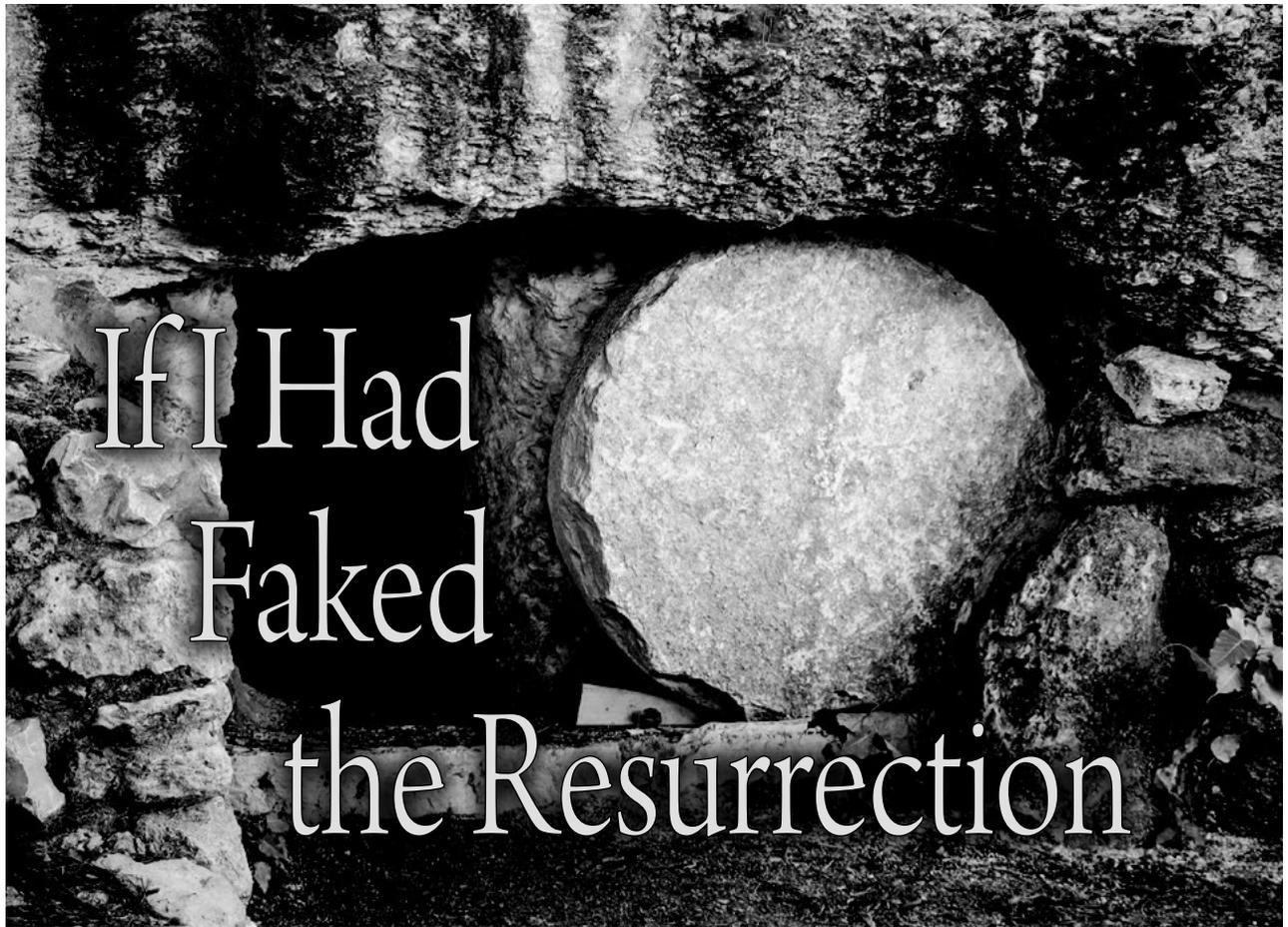
We introduce other exciting new features in this issue, starting with the beautiful photography gracing our covers this year. A big thank you to Wendy Gedack, wife of Pastor Troy in Colorado Springs, Colorado, for sharing her talent and seasonal photos with us. Her art captures, frame by frame, the peace of God and His design for the full reconciliation of creation that we all anticipate.

We're also excited about two other items that we hope will cultivate a new generation of BA readers and writers. You big people, put a little one on your lap and enjoy "Kids Time" together (pp. 16-17). And spread the word about the LeRoy Dais Young Writers Challenge, taking place in early 2020. We're accepting submissions now and will announce winners in four categories in the November-December issue. Encourage your young people to participate (see p. 10 for details).

Despite a world in pieces, Jesus is at work in His church, and there's so much to be excited about. Peace!

— Jason Overman





If I Had Faked the Resurrection

We are reconciled
only if He is risen!

by **Josh McDowell**
and **Bob Hostetler**

I set out as a young man to refute Christianity. I met some young Christians who challenged me to intellectually examine the evidence for Christianity, and I agreed. I aimed to show them, and everyone, that Christianity was nonsense. I thought it would be easy. I thought a careful investigation of the facts would expose Christianity as a lie and its followers as dupes. But then a funny thing happened.

As I began investigating the

claims of Christianity, I kept running up against the evidence. Time after time, I was surprised to discover the factual basis for the seemingly outlandish things Christians believe. And one of the most convincing categories of evidence I confronted was this: The Resurrection accounts found in the Gospels are not the stuff of fable, forgery, or fabrication. I had assumed that someone, or several “someones,” had invented the stories of Jesus Christ’s resurrection from the dead. But as I examined those accounts, I had to face the fact that any sensible mythmaker would do things much differently than Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John did in recording the news of the Resurrection.

As much as I hated to, I had

to admit that if I had been some first century propagandist trying to fake the resurrection of Jesus Christ, I would have done at least ten things differently.

1 I would wait a prudent period after the events before “publishing” my account. Yet few historians dispute the fact that the disciples of Jesus began preaching the news of His resurrection soon after the event itself. In fact, Peter’s Pentecost sermon (Acts 2) occurred within fifty days of the Resurrection. And textual research indicates that the written accounts of the Resurrection — especially the creedal statement of 1 Corinthians 15:3-8 — are astoundingly early in origin (possibly within *two years* of the event, according to Lee Strobel

in *The Case for Christ*). Such early origins argue against any notion that the Resurrection accounts are legendary.

2 I would “publish” my account far from the venue where it supposedly happened.

In *Apologetics: An Introduction*, Dr. William Lane Craig writes:

One of the most amazing facts about the early Christian belief in Jesus’ resurrection was that it originated in the very city where Jesus was crucified. The Christian faith did not come to exist in some distant city, far from eyewitnesses who knew of Jesus’ death and burial. No, it came into being in the very city where Jesus had been publicly crucified, under the very eyes of its enemies.

3 I would select my “witnesses” carefully. I would avoid, as much as possible, using any names at all in my account, and I would certainly avoid citing prominent personalities as witnesses. Yet at least sixteen individuals are mentioned by name as witnesses in the various accounts, and the mention of Joseph of Arimathea as the man who buried Jesus would have been terribly dangerous if the Gospel accounts had been faked or embellished. As a member of the Sanhedrin (a Jewish “supreme court”), he would have been well known. In *Scaling the Secular City*, J. P. Moreland writes, “No one could have invented such a person who did not exist and say he was on the Sanhedrin if such were not the case.” His involvement in the burial of Jesus could have been

easily confirmed or refuted. Perhaps most important, I would avoid citing disreputable witnesses, which makes significant the record of Jesus’ first appearances – to *women* – since, in that time and culture, women were considered invalid witnesses in a court of law. If the accounts were fabrications, author Paul Maier says the “women would *never* have been included in the story, at least, not as first witnesses.”

4 I would surround the event with impressive supernatural displays and omens. As Jewish scholar Pinchas Lapide writes in *The Resurrection of Jesus: A Jewish Perspective*:



We do not read in the first testimonies [of the resurrection] of an apocalyptic spectacle, exorbitant sensations, or of the transforming impact of a cosmic event. . . . According to all New Testament reports, no human eye saw the resurrection itself, no human being was present, and none of the disciples asserted to have apprehended, let alone understood, its manner and nature. How

easy it would have been for them or their immediate successors to supplement this scandalous hole in the concatenation of events by fanciful embellishments! But precisely because none of the evangelists dared to “improve upon” or embellish this unseen resurrection, the total picture of the gospels also gains in trustworthiness.

5 I would painstakingly correlate my account with others I knew, embellishing the legend only where I could be confident of not being contradicted. Many critics have pointed out the befuddling differences and apparent contradictions in the Resurrection accounts. But these are actually convincing evidences of their authenticity. They display an ingenuous lack of collusion, agreeing and (apparently) diverging much as eyewitness accounts of any event do.

6 I would portray myself (and any co-conspirators) sympathetically, even heroically. Yet the Gospel writers present strikingly unflattering portraits of Jesus’ followers (such as Peter and Thomas) and their often skeptical reactions (Mark 16:11, 13; Luke 24:11, 37; John 20:19, 25, 21:4). Such portrayals are unlike the popular myths and legends of that (or any) time.

7 I would disguise the location of the tomb or spectacularly destroy it in my account. If I were creating a Resurrection legend, I would keep the tomb’s location a secret to prevent any chance that someone might discover Jesus’ body. Or I would

record in my account that the angels sealed the tomb or carried the body off to heaven after the Resurrection. Or I might have taken the easiest course of all and simply made my fictional Resurrection a “spiritual” one, which would have made it impossible to refute even if a body were eventually discovered. But, of course, the Gospel accounts describe the owner of the tomb (Joseph of Arimathea) and its location (“At the place where Jesus was crucified, there was a garden, and in the garden a new tomb . . .,” John 19:41), and identify Jesus’ resurrection as a bodily one (20:27).

8 I would try to squelch inquiry or investigation. I might pronounce a curse on anyone attempting to substantiate my claims, or attach a stigma to anyone so shallow as to require evidence. Yet note the frequent appeal of Jesus’ disciples to the easily confirmed, or discredited, nature of the evidence, as though inviting investigation (Acts 2:32; 3:15; 13:31; 1 Corinthians 15:3-6). This was done within a few years of the events themselves. If the tomb were not empty or the Resurrection appearances were fiction, the early Christians’ opponents could have conclusively debunked the new religion. William Lillie, head of the Department of Biblical Study at the University of Aberdeen, says of the citation (in 1 Corinthians 15) of the resurrected Christ appearing to more than five hundred people, “What gives a special authority to the list [of witnesses] as historical evidence is the reference to most of the five hundred brethren being still alive. St. Paul says in effect, ‘If

you do not believe me, you can ask them.’”

9 I would not preach a message of repentance in light of the Resurrection. No one in his right mind would have chosen to create a fictional message that would invite opposition and persecution from both civil and religious authorities of those days. How much easier and wiser it would have been to preach a less controversial gospel — concentrating on Jesus’ teachings about love, perhaps — thus



saving the adherents of my new religion and me a lot of trouble.

10 I would stop short of dying for my lie. In *The Case for Christ* Lee Strobel has written:

People will die for their religious beliefs if they sincerely believe they’re true, but people won’t die for their religious beliefs if they know their beliefs are false.

While most people can only have faith that their beliefs are true, the disciples were in a position to know without a doubt whether or

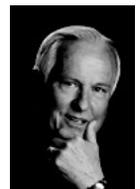
not Jesus had risen from the dead. They claimed that they saw him, talked with him, and ate with him. If they weren’t absolutely certain, they wouldn’t have allowed themselves to be tortured to death for proclaiming that the resurrection had happened.

Trusting Christ

These are not the only reasons I believe in the truth of the Bible and the reality of the Resurrection. But these were among the “many infallible proofs” (Acts 1:3, KJV) I encountered in my attempts to prove Christianity wrong, which eventually led me to the conclusion that Jesus Christ was who He claimed to be and that He really did rise from the dead. I could not resist the awesome love of God who sent His Son to die for me and then rise again in order to adopt me into His family.

On December 19, 1959, I trusted the risen Christ as my Savior and Lord, and He radically changed my life. I’ve seen Him do the same for countless others, and I pray, if you haven’t done so already, you will let Him do the same for you. **BA**

Josh McDowell is a speaker, author, and traveling representative for Campus Crusade for Christ.



Bob Hostetler writes from Las Vegas, NV. Scripture quotations are from the *New International Version*, unless otherwise noted.



Don't be an Alexander and squander your inheritance.

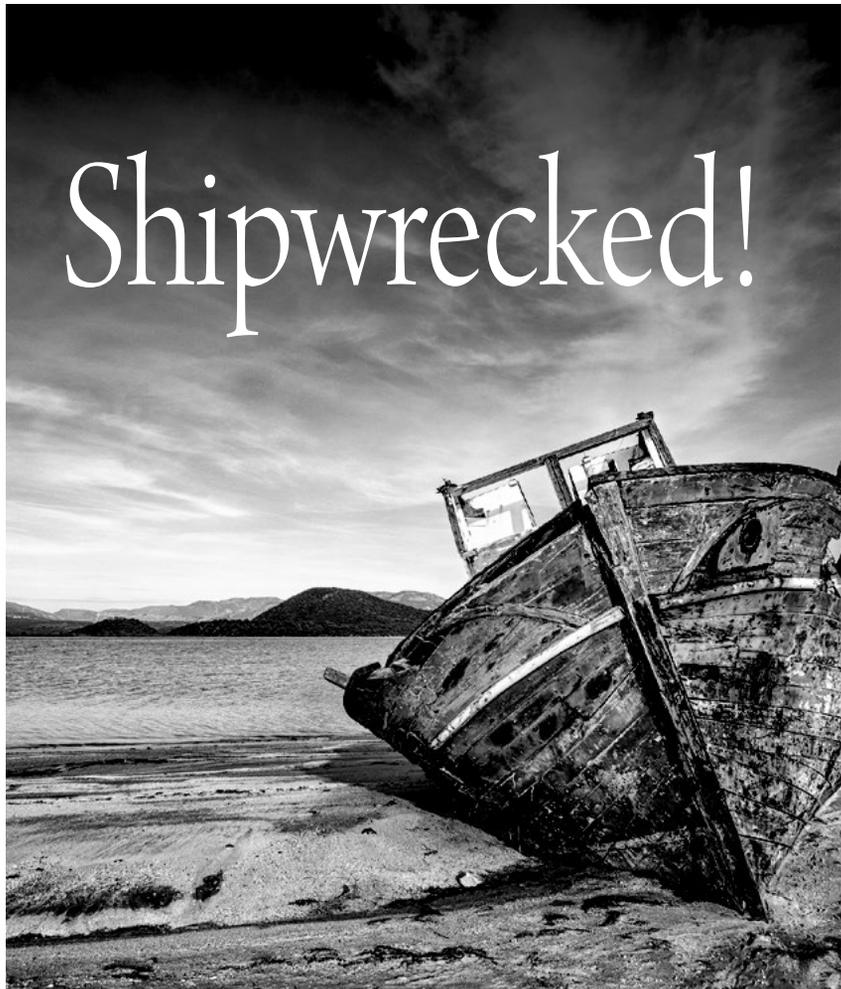
by Dorothy Nimchuk

Venturing out on the lonely highways and byways of Asia Minor in the days of the early church put travelers at risk of robbers, beatings, and other perils. Seafaring journeyers also faced multiple dangers, and the apostle Paul experienced them all, on land and sea alike. Perhaps the hardest thing he had to endure was the betrayal of one close to him, one who had labored with him in the Lord's vineyard, only to turn against him.

In Paul's own words, "Alexander the coppersmith did me much evil. The Lord reward him . . ." (2 Timothy 4:14, KJV). Paul did not have much else to say about Alexander, but possible clues could expand our knowledge and understanding.

Under Demetrius' leadership, the metalworkers of Ephesus raised a great ruckus against this apostolic giant and his teachings. The work of the church in their city diminished the smiths' business opportunities as people turned to worship the Lord instead of the local goddess, Diana.

During the uproar, one Alexander was put forward to speak to the crowd to allay the situation, but was shouted down because he was a Jew (Acts 19:34). It is possible, but not proven, that this Alexander was the same man who later caused trouble in the Ephesus church and was put out of the fellowship along with Hymenaeus (1 Timothy 1:20).



Though he started well, Alexander evidently made some serious mistakes regarding his faith that hurt Paul in the end. He needed to remember the person and work of Christ and to hold firm to his faith to the end.

Reconciliation through Christ

Preeminent in all things, Christ reconciled all things to Himself, thus making peace through His blood. The Jews had held little regard for Gentile nations, aliens and strangers from the wealth of a relationship with God. But Christians now believe that Christ's death accomplished two things: reconciliation as the "wall of partition" between

Jew and Gentile was torn down (Ephesians 2:14, KJV) and the indebtedness of our sins remitted in full. We have only to claim the receipt for payment that guarantees our future by accepting Christ as Savior and Lord of our lives.

The coming of Messiah with His gospel message revealed the riches of that Genesis-generated mystery: Christ in us, who gives hope for a glorious future for all humanity. Christ's final instructions to His disciples were to go into every corner of the world making disciples. In the same place where worship of Diana had reigned supreme, Paul and his co-workers made some

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Two stories of siblings and
God's reconciliation
through others.
by Priscila Sanchez

In the Bible we find a wonderful story of reconciliation between two brothers, Jacob and Esau (Genesis 33). For a long time they lived separated from each other due to Esau's anger and Jacob's fear. Jacob, influenced by his mother, Rebekah, stole the blessing that by law belonged to his brother.

Esau's anger and frustration was so great that one day he said, "The days of mourning for my father are near; then I will kill my brother Jacob" (27:41).

The reconciliation between Jacob and Esau didn't happen by chance. Jacob eventually recognized his wrongdoing and repented. But before his encounter with Esau, Jacob sent messengers to his brother on several occasions to speak with him and prepare for the reunion. The work of these reconcilers who went ahead of Jacob was fundamental, offering gifts of livestock to allay Esau's anger (32:1-20).

Finally, Jacob abased himself before his brother and carefully presented his wives and children; they were part of the process of reconciliation too (33:1-8).

As Romans 15:4 says, everything written in the past is intended to teach us. I found out how the story of Jacob and Esau is like a story in my own family and how peacemakers are needed to bring reconciliation.

Needed: Peacemakers

Family history

In the seventies, my grandfather Francisco had a strong conflict with his older sister, whom we affectionately called Aunt Lola. He did not accept the relationship she had with the man she finally married and who became Uncle René.

My grandfather and his sister were close. When my grandfather was born, their mother passed away, so both lived with their father. Not long after, their father married again and had sixteen more children. Since my grandfather and his sister were the oldest, they were forced to take care of their siblings, born year after year.

The family's living conditions and poverty forced them to find their own means to survive. So my grandfather and his sister left their home in the small town where they had been born and moved to Mexico City. They were only 13 and 11 years old, respectively.

It is probably because of this experience that their relationship as brother and sister was so strong. My grandfather thought that his sister would never marry. When she did, he became so frustrated, he told her that from that moment on she was no longer his sister.

Aunt Lola emigrated with her husband to New York. After thirty years, then old and retired, they returned to Mexico with the intention of seeing my grandfather at least once more before he died.

Reconciliation

The encounter in Monterrey, Mexico, was something that marked my life and the life of my whole family. My aunt and grandfather both stared into each other's eyes, as if remembering their childhood, as if they were asking for forgiveness and forgiving each other. Not being able to say a single word, they merged into an endearing, long hug. I felt



as if time had stopped. And in that moment, I understood what reconciliation means and what leads up to it.

As with Jacob and Esau, this reunion didn't happen by chance. The whole family got involved, talking with both parties about the need to meet at least once before they died, since they were already older. We talked with them separately, invested time to persuade them, encouraged them to overcome the constant fear of rejection, exhorted them to overcome pride, and promised we'd be with them throughout the reconciliation process.

In the end, the family felt that even if the main objective were not achieved, it would have been worth the effort to move toward reconciliation.

Critical ministry

These two stories — Jacob and Esau and my own family — tell us about the valuable work of

peacemakers. Without them, the goal of reconciliation would not have been achieved. For that reason, the Bible talks about reconciliation as a ministry — within families and among those outside the faith.

We live in a world of broken human relationships because of selfishness, arrogance, and petty differences. Life evaporates like water. As time goes by, people continue to live under the influence of anger, separation, and pain. How much reconciliation is needed among these broken people!

But that's not the most important issue. The main reconciliation that human beings need is with God. All other relationships depend on this one. Even in this, peacemakers are needed to reach those who don't know Christ. The Bible says, "All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation" (2 Corinthians 5:18).

This is not just a ministry of the pastor but of all believers. Actively participating in the great task of reconciliation between God and humanity represents the true medicine that sick people need due to sin. Human beings cannot heal themselves because they don't realize they're separated from God.

Calling

Peacemakers have a message to share: Jesus, the great reconciler of humanity. This is what the apostle Paul says: "God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting people's sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation" (v. 19).

The extraordinary work that Christ has done, and to which we all are called, produces wonderful gratification. It is about restoring what has been broken, recovering what was lost, and redeeming what was condemned. These are not minor things, nor things that just anyone can do, but only those who have been reconciled to God as Christians: "We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. We implore you on Christ's behalf: Be reconciled to God" (2 Corinthians 5:20).

Let's take our calling seriously.

BA

Priscila Sanchez writes from Dallas, TX, and attends the Melbourne Ave. congregation. Scripture quotations are from the *New International Version*.





Bible Advocate presents the 2020

LeRoy Dais Young Writers Challenge

The *Bible Advocate* is excited to announce its first-ever writing contest for young writers. Named in honor of LeRoy Dais, who dedicated himself to the GC Publications ministry and the distribution of God's Word for nearly sixty years, the contest is one way we can show our commitment to cultivate a new generation of BA writers. Today's young people are tomorrow's leaders, so we want them to share their gifts and thoughts and dreams with us, the church.

Therefore, we call on all dads, moms, grandpas, grandmas, pastors, youth leaders, friends, and family to encourage the young people in your life and congregation to participate in this contest. It will be fun and eternally rewarding!

Here are the details.

Age categories: 14-17 years (boys); 14-17 years (girls); 18-21

years (boys); 18-21 years (girls). First place and runners-up articles will be awarded in each category.

First place recognition includes publication of the articles in the November-December 2020 BA print magazine and BA Online; award announcement and presentation by GC President Loren Stacy and BA editor Jason Overman at the 2021 convention; and \$250 awarded to the youth/SWORD group of the winners' congregations.* Runners-up in each category will be announced in the BA magazine and at convention, and will be published in the BA Online.

Participation and submission rules

- Writers must live in the US or Canada, be baptized believers of Jesus, and fit the age categories outlined above.
- Articles may be on the subject

of their choosing, but should be Bible based and include personal experience or cultural observation that inspires and informs. A key verse must be included (note the Bible translation used). No fiction or poetry.

- Submissions must be original and unpublished, with quotes and sources properly identified.
- Articles must be 500-600 words in length and written in English. They should include the author's name, age, parents' names, and congregation they attend.
- Articles must be submitted in a Word document attached to email and addressed to bibleadvocate@cog7.org. Please include WRITING CONTEST in the subject line.
- Submission deadline: **April 30, 2020.**
- Immediate family members of the BAP staff may not participate.

For more information, contact Sherri Langton at sherri@cog7.org or Jason Overman at jason.overman@cog7.org.

* Prize money is graciously given by an anonymous donor.

Questions & Answers



If the Ten Commandments are for Christians, why aren't the feast days?

With many Christians, we view the Ten Commandments, summarized in the Great Commandment of Jesus to love God and neighbor, as God's will for all people at all times. The commandments, written on stone, held a central place in the old covenant, and they hold a central place in the new also — written on our hearts (Jeremiah 31:33; Hebrews 8:10). Often called the Decalogue, the Ten were distributed in Scripture before the old covenant was given to Israel at Mount Sinai. They may rightly be seen as a summary, or constitution, of God's moral law under the old covenant, and they are reconfirmed in the New Testament after the old covenant ended at the cross.

Israel's festival calendar is not like her moral law. The feast days belong to old covenant *ceremonial* statutes. They were annual, seasonal pilgrimages to the temple in Jerusalem for sacrifice and offering, celebrating the present harvest and past mighty acts of God (Exodus 23; Leviticus 23). The festivals centered on this particular people, place, time, and manner of worship (Numbers 28-29). Full participation was reserved for circumcised members of the covenant people of Israel. This rule was there from the start (i.e., Passover, Booths, Exodus 12:48; Leviticus 23:42). The resident alien ("stranger") could participate to some degree, but Jewish males were required to make the three annual visits to the temple (Exodus 23:17; Deuteronomy 16:16; Numbers 9:13).

This same pattern is also seen early in the New Testament: The Jews went up to Jerusalem and the temple to keep the festival (Luke 2:42; John 5:1; Acts 18:21). But the new covenant would soon replace this style of nation-focused, temple-centric worship. Discussing this very issue, Jesus said to the Samaritan woman: "The hour is coming when you will

neither on this mountain, nor in Jerusalem, worship the Father. . . . But the hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth" (John 4:21, 23). Other references to a "feast of the Jews" and to Jesus in John (5:1; 6:4; 7:2) highlight the nationalistic nature of these times, and their fulfillment in Christ.

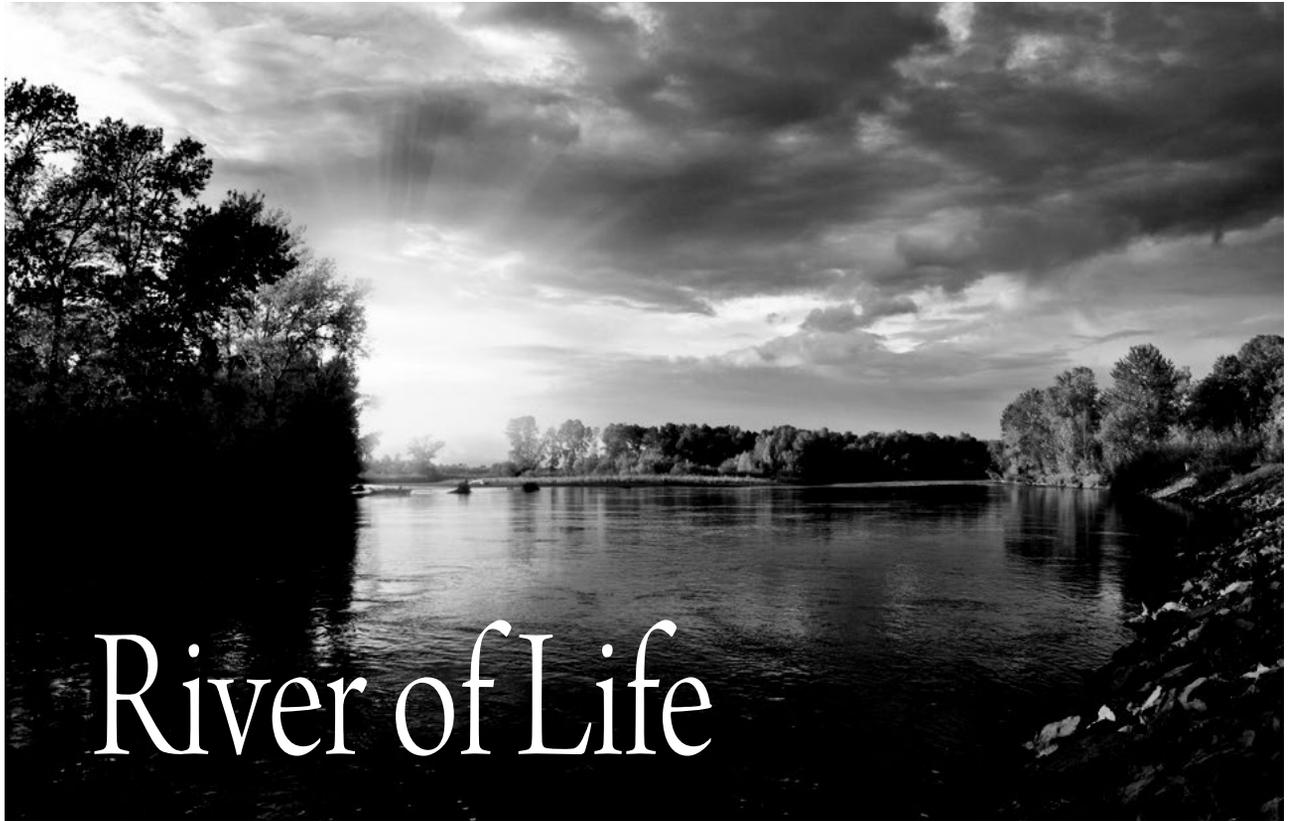
While the moral law remains intact for Jesus' disciples, circumcision, pilgrimage, animal sacrifice, and the minutiae of the temple calendar are no longer required of the new covenant believer. Whoever and wherever we are, and whenever we meet, Christ is the center of our worship and obedience.

Christians who "keep" the feast days today admit that they are not keeping the details prescribed by Levitical law. Nor can they. Just locating the ancient Hebrew dates on any modern calendar is fraught with uncertainty — and often division. So we are cautious. The Church of God (Seventh Day) extends liberty to those who would celebrate annual Hebrew festivals, as long as their remembrance is Christ centered and not imposed as a requirement of faith.

New covenant believers have Christ's final sacrifice to their credit and God's moral law written on their hearts. The old ceremonial laws no longer bind believers for covenant faithfulness. Indeed, Passover and Pentecost in the New Testament are understood anew in Christ and the Spirit. Rightly celebrating any of God's mighty acts and blessings in times of remembrance can be biblical and beautiful.

Nothing is inherently bad about a church calendar that includes these and other days of remembrance, provided that our highest joy is anchored in the fullness of Christ's grace and truth, not in the types and shadows of old covenant festivals.

— Jason Overman



River of Life

Imagining the past on
Jordan's narrow banks.

by **Bob Blundell**

Along the muddied banks of the Jordan, thin reeds, the color of sage, reached toward the sky, bending gently in the breeze. A silver mist clung to the water's surface, and as the sun pierced the clouds, the haze glistened in the morning light. I would have preferred solitude, being alone with my thoughts and reflections. But there were other travelers standing along the water's edge this morning. They had come, like me, to pay homage to this sacred place and all that had transpired here.

A surreal sense of tranquility hung in the air. Human voices had faded to muffled whispers,

as if to acknowledge the respect and silence that the river demanded. The only other sounds were those created by God himself – the fluttering murmurs of the birds in the trees and the gurgling melody of the water as it made its journey to the sea.

I leaned against the cold steel of the railing, a modern-day boundary built along the river's edge. Its bright blue paint symbolized a contrast of the new versus the old, a reflection of our world today versus our beginning. I watched the flow run steadily past me, carrying leaves from the palms that dotted the banks. There were deep furrows etched along the surface, like scars on an ancient warrior.

The river was narrower than I had imagined, hardly twenty yards at its widest point. The eddying stream was the color of burnt jade, dark and murky. The

ripples spun and turned along their path. As I reflected on all that the Jordan had witnessed over the centuries, I was suddenly struck by my own frailty and insignificance.

I closed my eyes and tried to imagine what it must have been like. As the warmth of the sunlight touched my cheeks, I began to see it unfold before me.



There to the south, in the shallowest part of the river, stood a man. He had appeared one day walking out of the desert wearing clothing of camel hair and a leather belt. His name was John. He was gaunt, with hair the color of wood smoke and a beard tangled and twisted as a fisherman's net. His face was dark as tarnished bronze and weathered. Even from a distance I could see

his deep-set eyes gleaming in the sunlight.

On the shore behind him, a small fire burned, sending wisps of blue smoke curling into the air. Huddled near the flames, seeking shelter from the morning chill, sat two of his followers. These men had left the lives they had known, committing themselves to his teachings and to the God he had been sent to prepare the way for.

I peered through the slate-colored mist and could see a second figure emerge from the opposite bank. He was tall, clad in a simple alabaster robe that hung to His sandaled feet. Hair, the color of cinnamon, fell to His shoulders, and I could see His mahogany eyes shining in the sunlight like a candle flickering in a gentle breeze. I knew instantly who He was, and I felt my heart race. I watched Him as He stepped into the river and made His way across to the other side where John stood. Waiting.

When they came together, Jesus gently caressed the man's face, like a father's loving touch of his only son. Then they waded toward the middle until dark streams of water swirled around their waists. And I watched as John baptized Him, just as he had done to so many others before Him.

As our Savior's head emerged through the surface, a dazzling beam of light cascaded through the clouds like a dove sailing toward the earth. And a thunderous voice sounded from the heavens, shaking the ground around me: "This is My Son in whom I am well pleased."

Wind gusted across the surface of the Jordan, churning a pale blue mist into the air before

disappearing, as if sucked into the clouds. As quickly as it had departed, calm once again settled over the ancient river.

The images in my mind began to slowly fade. My eyes fluttered open, and I squinted into the morning sunlight filtering through the trees. There was a sweet smell in the air, like honeysuckle, and I took a deep, calming breath, awed by the moment. I knew I could never fathom what it would have been like that day. Had I been standing there in the shallows when the Holy Spirit spilled down from heaven, the beauty would have been like none ever seen by human eyes.

Below me, the dark water flowed. Always moving. Relentless in its journey. This river had seen many extraordinary miracles over the centuries. Sins had been washed away. New lives had been formed. Like so many of us in our modern world, there would have been people who had lost their way. People who had stepped into the water, broken and full of despair, only to emerge with joy and peace in their hearts. Free of the bondage of sin.

I knew this moment along the Jordan would remain with me for as long as I lived. Overwhelmed with gratitude, I knew I would always be reminded of the power and glory of God in one of His greatest creations. **BA**

Bob Blundell writes from Friendswood, TX.

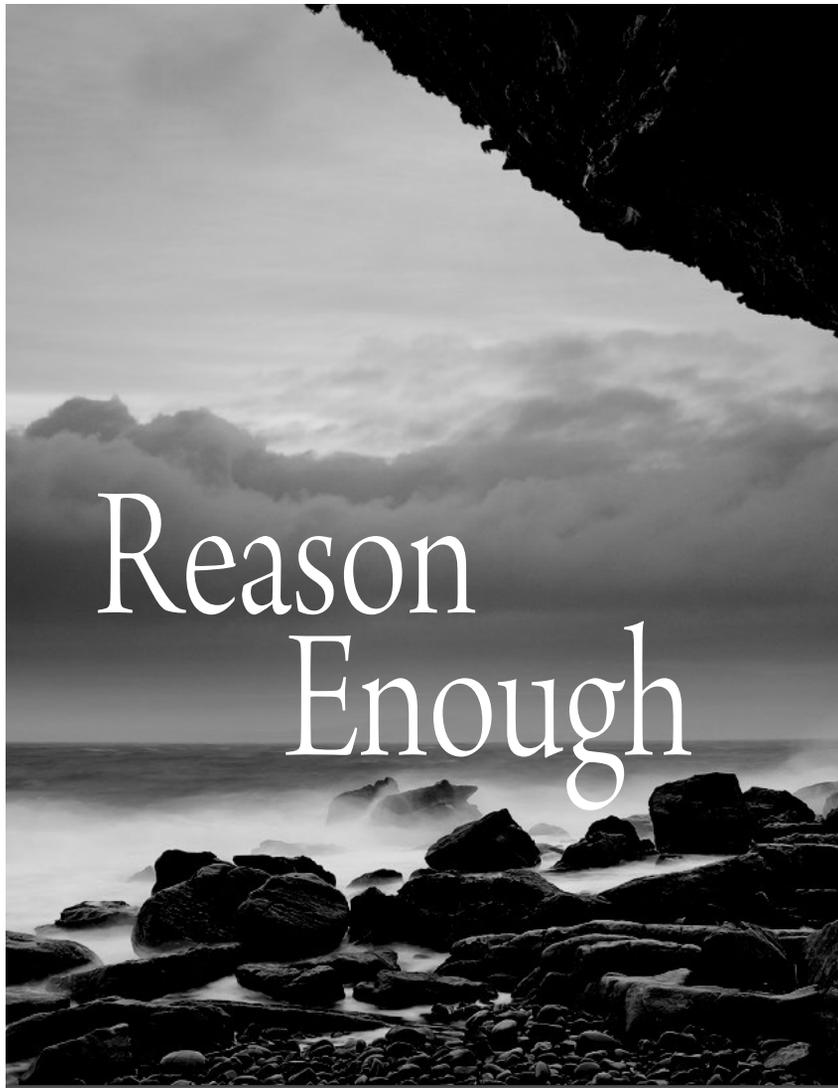


Meet our cover photographer, Wendy Gedack

Wendy lives in Colorado Springs, Colorado, and is married to Troy Gedack, pastor of the Colorado Springs Church of God. They have two children, Kaylee and Joshua, both attending college in Colorado.

Wendy has been blessed to live in the Colorado mountains since 1981, when she moved there from Iowa. Her love for the mountains and God's handiwork inspired her to pick up a camera and start documenting the magnificence of nature.

Wendy's keen eye for photography can be seen through her ability to capture light and depth, drama and character of a scene — all born out of a deep appreciation and desire to be surrounded by nature. Through the tools of photography, Wendy crafts composition and style to create images that awaken the senses to God's creation and the beauty of visual arts.



Reason Enough

Don't let doubt and
disappointment derail your faith.
by Kim Y. Nowlin

Like many other women, I can look you in the eye and carry on an intelligent conversation while overhearing two or three other conversations taking place around me. It's a gift and a bother. My husband calls it eavesdropping. I call it paying attention.

We recently sat at a restaurant enjoying a pleasant buffet-style

breakfast while on vacation. Our table overlooked tranquil Alaskan waters amid unusually blue skies and snow-crested mountain peaks. We chatted aimlessly about the day's activities, neither of us in a rush to end the moment.

A middle-aged couple approached a nearby table and sat down, their breakfast plates between them. I couldn't see the woman's face or hear her muted words, but within seconds the man's features grew tense.

"You know what?" He paused, then moved his plate aside with an air of resignation. "It's just not worth it anymore."

My heart winced. I knew he meant *every word*.

Within a matter of seconds, the couple left, their scarcely touched plates a testimony of their frustration with each other or life in general. I stared at their food, momentarily mourning the almost palatable sorrow. What had caused the couple to wave the white flag — to surrender to despair?

It's doubtful they came to such a tragic place in their lives within an hour, a day, or even a week. It may have taken months, years, or decades before they reached the point where they would rather give up than try.

I believe that's what happens when people walk away from their faith. It's rarely an overnight decision. It's a slowly deteriorating, day-by-day choice made by a person who doesn't get what they expect or think is deserved. Disappointment follows, then despondency, and finally bitterness takes root, followed by *It's just not worth it anymore*.

Maybe those who stray from the faith have lost a loved one before they deemed it was time. Maybe their health has gone downhill, and they question the fairness of it all. Maybe their finances are a constant struggle, and they wonder where the God of blessing is hiding. Maybe their spouse left them for someone else, and they blame God for not intervening.

But maybe . . .

If they dared believe God is good even when circumstances are not, they would find themselves in a place of unwavering faith, like the apostle Paul. Whether resting in a warm bed or shipwrecked on an island, he remained steadfast. Whether eat-

ing with friends or stoned by enemies, he remained true to God.

Whether he was abased or he abounded, Paul never once said, "It's just not worth it anymore." His life proved that persevering faith is not just about waving a hallelujah flag when times are great but walking through the hardships of life with an abiding trust in Jesus Christ.

Paul said, "I have fought a good fight, I have finished my course, I have kept the faith" (2 Timothy 4:7). What a beautiful testimony of perseverance in spite of trials and tribulations. Paul went on to offer this assurance to all believers: "Henceforth there is laid up for me a crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, shall give me at that day: and not to me only, but unto all of them also that love his appearing" (v. 8).

I prayed for the distressed couple, and I trust God will stir their hearts to hope once again. That is the same prayer I have for those who are ready to give up on God, to take another path, or to return to the bondage from whence they came.

If ever anything was worth it, Jesus Christ is that one thing. He is the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Him (John 14:6). He is reason enough to fight the good fight, reason enough to finish the race, and yes, He alone is reason enough to keep the faith.

BA

Kim Y. Nowlin writes from San Angelo, TX. Scripture quotations are from the King James Version.



Shipwrecked!

continued from page 7

serious inroads with this gospel message. So it seems that Alexander had a good start.

But there's more to the gospel. While yet in our sinful nature, we were invited to die with Christ in baptism, ending our slavery to sin, and then being created anew in Him (Romans 6). Instead of the burdensome ordinances of animal sacrifices, we become living sacrifices, following the dictates of the Holy Spirit.

We can't do this without God's help. Jesus felt the need for daily communion with His Father. That same daily renewal in God's presence is necessary for us to steady the course of our lives. Maybe that's something Alexander lacked. Without this contact with the Father, we can easily slide back into old haunts and habits, to get caught up in common, everyday trappings, to even become an enemy of the gospel.

Warning

That's why Alexander's story is so troubling — and a warning. In the day of judgment, some will be properly shocked to hear that they have been rejected. After all, haven't they prophesied in Jesus' name, cast out demons, and performed many wonders in His name? Yet Jesus declared that He would tell them, "Sorry, I don't know you, for you have ignored My words and followed your own ways" (see Matthew 7:23). Reconciliation effects change and brings us into conformity with the will of God. It appears that Alexander didn't conform

to God's will. He didn't realize that while yet *in* our sins, Jesus saved us *from* our sins and offers new life in Him. Though we are created anew to perform good works, grace alone through faith saves us.

If we're not careful, we too can end up like Alexander — lacking complete commitment in our faith. What holds us back from total devotion and servitude to our heavenly Father? Church splits? Personalities? Doctrine? Family upsets? Worldly attractions? Where do we stand? Are we teetering on a shaky fence or standing firmly on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, leaning on that Rock — Christ the Cornerstone, our hope of glory?

Having begun in faith and a good conscience, Alexander floundered and his faith shipwrecked (1 Timothy 1:19, 20). With one foot in the fledgling church and the other yet involved in his craft, Alexander desired the best of both worlds. As a result, he squandered the promised inheritance he could have enjoyed in Christ.

The same thing can happen to us. Without the peace that reconciliation brings through Christ, we are lost and undone. Our love of God and our fellowman is paramount to our attaining that peace: "[Christ] Himself is our peace . . ." (Ephesians 2:14). May we all claim that peace today — and keep it, by the grace of God! BA

Dorothy Nimchuk writes from Medicine Hat, Alberta.





"What did you think of the sermon today?" asked Dad as they rode home from church.

"Well, pastor used some big words that I don't really understand," replied Brian. "He kept talking about recon . . . reconci. . ."

"Reconciliation," finished Mom. "Do you know what it means to be reconciled?"

"No, not really. And I also didn't understand what pastor meant when he said that God made Jesus to be sin for us. I thought Jesus was perfect, sinless. It doesn't make sense to me."

"Yes, it is difficult to understand," Mom replied. "Maybe this story I once read will help you understand better what God and Jesus did for us. It is a true story that happened quite a long time ago."

"The boys and girls in the one-room schoolhouse were being very unruly and were whispering constantly one day. So, the master thought of a plan. 'Children,' he said, 'we are going to play a new game. The next one who whispers must stand in the middle of the floor. He must stand there until he sees someone else whisper. The one he names must come and take his place. This will go on until it is time for school to be dismissed. The one who is standing at that time will be punished for all of you.'

"Well, the children thought the new game was very funny. First, Tommy Jones whispered to Billy Brown and was at once called out to stand on the floor. Soon someone else was caught whispering and had to take Tommy's place. This continued until it was almost time to go home.

"Then everyone became good and careful not to whisper. Tommy Jones was standing again, for the fourth time, and he began to be worried that no one else would whisper. But to his great joy, he saw little Lucy Martin whisper to the girl in front of her. Now Lucy was a wonderful student, and this was the first time she whispered that day.

But Tommy didn't care. He called out, 'Lucy Martin!' and went proudly to his seat.

"With tears in her eyes, little Lucy got up and stood. It seemed a shame that dear, gentle Lucy would be punished for all those unruly boys and girls.

"With less than a minute before school would be dismissed, suddenly, an awkward boy who sat right in front of the master's desk turned around and whispered so loudly even the master heard him.

"Elihu Burritt, take your place on the floor,' said the master sternly. The awkward boy stepped out quickly, and little Lucy Martin returned to her seat, sobbing. Just then the bell struck and school was dismissed.

"After all the others had gone home, the master took down his long birch rod and said, 'Elihu, I suppose I must do as I said. But tell me why you so deliberately broke the rule against whispering.'

"I did it to save little Lucy,' said the awkward boy, standing up very straight and brave. 'I could not bear to see her punished.'

"Elihu, you may go home,' said the master.

"Elihu Burritt took the punishment of all the boys and girls in his class in order to save little Lucy. In a similar way, Jesus took all the sins of the world on Himself and took our punishment too. He did this in order to reconcile us to God. *Reconcile* means to make right. Now, instead of being enemies of God, we can be His children, part of His own family, with all the rights and privileges of children. All this was made possible because Jesus took our sin and punishment."

"Wow, Jesus did all that for me?" exclaimed Brian. "It makes me love Him and want to please Him to show Him how grateful I am."

"And I'm sure Jesus is pleased to hear that," replied Dad. "That gratitude is part of His plan of reconciliation too."

Word Search: Read 2 Corinthians 5:14-21 in the NKJV.

Then find words from this text in the Word Search puzzle below. The following words are hidden in this puzzle (forward, backward, diagonally): *love, compels, died, reconciled, ministry, Jesus, world, committed, sin.*

Y	T	Q	M	K	K	J	I	R	S
V	R	J	E	H	D	C	G	E	L
D	E	T	T	I	M	M	O	C	E
I	L	F	S	C	I	O	X	O	P
E	P	O	N	I	S	E	S	N	M
D	Q	B	V	U	N	I	I	C	O
C	V	P	S	E	N	I	R	I	C
L	Z	E	Y	L	J	Z	M	L	W
E	J	W	K	X	J	N	H	E	G
O	W	O	R	L	D	G	C	D	V

Art Time: Crown of Thorns Coloring Page



Science Fun: Jesus' Death Saves Us

With the help of an adult, do this fun experiment that demonstrates what Jesus' death does for us. You will need: a saucer, a coin, a cup, food coloring, some water, a short candle, a drinking glass, and matches.

Directions

Put a saucer on a table. Then, put a coin on the saucer, fairly close to an edge. The coin represents you.

Put about a quarter cup of water into a cup. Add some food coloring and mix it well. The colored water represents our sins. Pour it into the center of the saucer, but make sure it covers the coin as well. Just as the coin is covered with water, we're all covered with sin.

Place the candle in the center of the saucer. The candle represents Jesus. Light it. The flame represents Jesus' life.

Now, wait a minute or so. Then take the glass and turn it upside-down. Place it over the candle. Watch what happens. This represents Jesus giving up His life to take our sins and thus save us.

Kids Time activities are abridged from the BAP children's curriculum. Order at cog7.org/online-store.



Hostility

by Amber Mann Riggs

Tuba players can be difficult neighbors. Denise discovered this firsthand as a property manager for an apartment complex. “He just didn’t understand that he shouldn’t play his tuba at two o’clock in the morning.”

Of course, situations like this tend to escalate quickly. Neighbor A (the tuba player) wakes Neighbor B. Neighbor B parks in Neighbor A’s parking space. Neighbor A plays longer and louder the next night. That sort of thing.

It didn’t faze Denise. She enjoyed sitting down with both neighbors and mediating their dispute. She loved helping them reconcile with one another. She delighted in making them partners in establishing a peaceful neighborhood.

Partnership

Being a Christian is all about being in partnership with God. In fact, each time God initiated a covenant with humanity, it was a partnership with a specific purpose in mind. From the first partnership in the Garden of Eden, God’s goal was clear: men and

women spreading His kingdom by reflecting His character and ways, until God’s peace covers the entire neighborhood of earth. Since that first partnership failed, every subsequent one has aimed to get that goal back on track.

For Noah, Abraham, Sarah, Moses, and the Israelites, being in covenant with God indicated one thing: They all wanted what God wanted. They wanted to see God’s glory fill the earth. And they wanted to be part of making that happen. When Jesus invited His disciples into the new covenant, it indicated the next stage of this partnership. Jesus made it possible for humanity to be recreated in God’s image, to reflect God’s character and ways from the inside-out power of His Spirit, rather than the outer clothing of laws.

What’s more, this new partnership is available to everyone on earth. With and through these covenant partners, God is renewing creation as His presence gradually spreads throughout the entire earth. Eventually, Christ will return, put the finishing touches on this work, vanquish all evil, obliterate the chaos of sea and darkness, grant His partners eternal life, and live with us on a renewed earth — His forever home.

The apostle Paul described the new partnership this way:

If anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come. The old has gone, the new is here! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation (2 Corinthians 5:17, 18, NIV).

This language of reconciliation is revealing. Reconciliation indicates replacing hostility with partnership. To be hostile toward someone is to be at odds with them, but to be reconciled is to want the same thing they want. Every single one of us was born at odds with God. As sons of Adam and daughters of Eve, we want to do things our way and not God’s way. Therefore, by nature, we are hostile to God. By nature, we reflect selfish desires into this world that go *against* God’s desires for this world. Coming into covenant with God, we renounce this. When we enter into Christ’s body and invite His body and blood into ours, He begins transforming our desires into His. That’s reconciliation.

Reconciled to God’s desires, we get to partner with Him in bringing about even *more* reconciliation. This includes restoring

or Hospitality?

spirited, embodied souls to the purpose of bringing the systems of this world into alignment with God and His ways. However, all of this reconciliation has one thing in common: It is accomplished by abandoning our hostility.

Breaking the cycle

There is a difference between working with God to put things right and pursuing a rightness shaped by our own desires and means. The first is justice; the second is often vindictiveness.

Let's say someone commits a crime. Godly justice protects past and prospective victims by removing the offender from society, but it also gives the perpetrator a chance to come face-to-face with the need for repentance and personal restoration. Vindictiveness, however, hopes they will rot in jail after being a victim of crime themselves.

Hostility can also be less subtle. It can come through biting words and baiting words. Name-calling. Trying to put someone in their place and make them feel small. Passive aggression. Making it more difficult for someone to do their job. Reconciliation, on the other hand, invites them to explore new ways of thinking

and interacting. If we want to help someone become reconciled to God, we first have to start wanting what God wants for them. This begins with releasing our hopes of payback that they will "get what they deserve."

Yes, if someone is hostile to God, they will be hostile to us. However, we don't invite one another to reconciliation by reciprocating that hostility. After all, it is a well-known observation that when a human perceives an attack, whether physical or verbal, we fight, flee, or freeze. Partnering with Christ, we get to be the ones who break this cycle. Instead of hostility, we can respond with the ambassadorial hospitality of God's new creation — partners with God, reflecting His character and ways.

Changing our communities

Hostility makes itself known even in Christian circles. Our tuba-like blats disturb the peace in our families, our churches, and our workplaces. Words we may not hear spoken aloud make their way onto social media newsfeeds. Sometimes it's obvious; sometimes it's subtle. But it's often present.

Regardless of your sphere of influence, you have the power

not only to practice peace but also to teach it. How might this teaching impact our congregations? Our children? What difference would it make if we more intentionally responded to this hostility with the hospitality of Christ? What arguments might be diffused? What relationships restored?

Together, we can partner with Christ in spreading God's kingdom by reflecting His character and ways, until His glory covers the entire earth. **BA**

Amber Mann Riggs

is dean of administration for Artios Christian College. She lives near Eugene, OR, with her husband, Bryan, and their four daughters.



Read more practical leadership articles in Artios Christian College's *Lead Up* section at baonline.org/lead-up/.

Peace in Christ

Reflections on what it means to be together.

by Jason Overman

In exploring the ministry of reconciliation this year, we will spotlight six chapters from the Bible to aid us in understanding it and all its implications for life in the church.

But before we jump into our first selection, here's a fascinating piece of trivia. Have you ever wondered how the Bible got the indispensable divisions of what we call *chapters*? They aren't in the original languages. It so happens that Cardinal Stephen Langton, working from the Latin Vulgate in 1205, created the divisions we take for granted and find so useful today. (Wouldn't it be something if our associate editor, Sherri Langton, is a descendant of his?)

The message

Do you have a favorite chapter? I have several, and Ephesians 2 is definitely among them. If your Bible is handy, read it in conjunction with these reflections on reconciliation. The word *reconcile* appears only once in this chapter, but every verse here relates to its message and meaning: "That He might reconcile them both to God in one body through the cross, thereby putting to death the enmity" (v. 16).

Reconciliation is about restoring relationships — how the broken are healed, how the alienated find family, how enemies become friends. Ephesians 2 tells this story in two parts, with Christ and our togetherness in Him at the center of both:

1. Saved in Christ (vv. 1-10)
2. United in Christ (vv. 11-22)

Peace with God

The first half of Ephesians 2 tells the cosmic story of our relationship with God. It's a before-and-after tale. Once we

were dead in trespasses and sins. Once we walked according to the course of this world and the Prince of Evil. Once we were children of disobedience and wrath (vv. 1-3). Our need for reconciliation was dire. Captive to our fleshly nature, we were enemies of God — as far from Him as life is from death.

But God, in His rich mercy, great love, and exceeding kindness, entered into the dark chasm of alienation to bridge the gulf in Christ: "by grace you have been saved" (vv. 4, 5). Our before-and-after hinges on Christ. The *once* is *now* reversed. Now we are made alive with Christ. Now we are raised up with Christ. Now we are seated with Christ. This is God's saving peace, and it is ours together in Christ (vv. 4-7).

None of this is of *ourselves*; it is an unaccountable gift of grace received in empty-handed faith (v. 8). The spirit that *worked* in us to disobey (v. 2) has been defeated, our own meager boastful *works* dismissed (v. 9). This

EPHESIANS 2

happened so that God's *workmanship* might be revealed to make new creations of us, for *good works*, in Christ (v. 10). That old *walk* in death has been exchanged for a new *walk* in life (vv. 2, 10).

Peace with others

Our cosmic reconciliation from death to life in Christ, in the first half of Ephesians 2, prepares the way for the second half of the chapter. With our relationship to God restored in Christ, our relationships with one another must now be reassessed. Paul does not present this salvation and reconciliation in individualistic terms, but as what God in Christ has done for *us, together*, collectively. And so God's cosmic tale takes a turn to the local and the reality of animosity between Gentile and Jew.

Linking to the *before* way in the flesh (v. 1), in verse 11 Paul recalls how these Christian Gentiles and Jews were *once* defined and divided by their uncircumcision in the flesh and circumcision in the flesh made by human hands. Once again, flesh separates. In addition, the Gentiles were once without Christ and God, once aliens from Israel, strangers to her covenants of promise, once without hope (v. 12). The need for reconcili-

ation was desperate, captive to fleshly identities. Both enemies of each other, this reality was as far from unity as death is from life.

"But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ" (v. 13). Here we see a biblical synonym for reconciliation: *peace*. Jesus is our peace. He made peace. He preached peace. He has broken, abolished, and put to death on the cross all obstacles of flesh and ordinances of law that once separated and caused enmity. New creation continues. In the peace of Christ, God has created one new man, one new body, with access to the Father by the Spirit (vv. 14-17). This is God's uniting peace, and it is ours together in Christ.

The challenge

This applies not only to Jew and Gentile but to every sort of division humans can imagine.

The beauty of Ephesians 2 is how we learn that in Christ, God has brought near all who are far off — near both to Him and to each other. In this new relationship strangers and foreigners become fellow citizens and members of the household of God. Now we are looking forward as we are being built up together, fitted together, growing together into a holy temple in the Lord,

a dwelling place of God by the Holy Spirit (vv. 19-21). What a ministry to belong to, what a responsibility to share together.

Pointing our spotlight on Ephesians 2 puts the spotlight squarely on us. Are we, the Church of God, walking as a new creation in the peace of Christ together? Pray we can embody in our unified life this message of reconciliation — *saved and unified* — in the cross of Christ. The Bible may be divided into many chapters, but Christ is its singular message. **BA**



Online Extras

For this issue, read about a teen's predicament with a pen pal and a woman who lived as a prodigal, until God transformed her life. Visit baonline.org, and let us know what you think!



The love of Christ and the
ministry of reconciliation.

by Israel Steinmetz

What compels you? What drives you to do what you do? What motivates you to act? These questions arise whenever I read 2 Corinthians 5. This passage so captivates me that I plan to write six articles on it in this year's *Bible Advocate*. It's compelling, not the least because it begins with Paul saying that Christ's love compels Christ's followers to live for something greater than themselves: "For Christ's love compels us, because we are convinced that one died for all, and therefore all died. And he died for all,

that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised again" (vv. 14, 15).

What follows is Paul's impassioned plea for those who have received Christ's love to share His love with the world, to embrace the ministry and message of reconciliation. Each verse of the passage is pregnant with meaning, some of which will be delivered in coming articles. But let's begin with this one word: *compel*. In English it communicates the idea of being forced, persuaded, or obliged to do something. These words attempt to express the range of meaning in the Greek word *synechō*.

Definitions

Throughout the New Testament this word refers to those

taken or overcome with sickness or fear, to the men who struck and mocked Jesus, and to the internal impulse that drove Him to the cross despite His suffering. It refers to those who stoned Stephen plugging their own ears, compelling themselves to not hear his words. Luke also uses *synechō* to describe Paul's internal compulsion to share the gospel. Interestingly, Paul uses the word twice. Once in Philipians to express how he is torn between two desires: one to stay alive and minister and the other to die and be with Christ. The other time is here in 2 Corinthians to describe the way in which Christ's love compels us to live for Him.

Among the metaphorical uses of *compel* in Greek are these: to be held by, closely occupied with any business, to be afflicted

with, to urge. As we read Paul's entreaty to the Corinthians, we sense each of these meanings. The love of Christ is like a crowd pushing us forward, a boat forced through a strait, a police officer arresting us, a disease that overwhelms our body, a business that monopolizes our ambitions, an urgent need that must be met. The love of Christ compels us. It motivates us. It moves us. It makes us live a certain way.

Christ's love

What is this love that captures and compels us to live? Paul simply says it is Christ's love. Christ's love that brought Him to the earth and drove Him to the cross. Christ's love that caused Him to empty Himself of His divine privileges to become like His creation in order to save them from sin and death.

Jesus said it this way:

"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. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him" (John 3:16, 17).

And the apostle John described it like this:

This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him. This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins (1 John 4:9, 10).

This is the love of Christ that lives and dies and rises again to

save. It has inspired thousands of poems and songs, like Frederick Martin Lehman's "The Love of God," which describes the breadth and depth of God's love in its final verse:

Could we with ink the
ocean fill,
And were the skies of
parchment made,
Were every stalk on earth
a quill
And every man a scribe
by trade,
To write the love of
God above,
Would drain the
ocean dry.
Nor could the scroll con-
tain the whole
Though stretched from sky
to sky.

since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. No one has ever seen God; but if we love one another, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us" (vv. 11, 12).

This is divine love — love that grows and gives and greets the other. This is the love Paul commends in 2 Corinthians 5, love that compels us to live for Christ and for the world that Christ loves. Jesus died for us. As we join Him in death, we rise to new life in Him with new purpose for our lives. No longer do we live for ourselves; now we live for Him who died for us. And we realize He died not only for us but also for the whole world. So we live in love for them on His behalf.

“The love of Christ compels us. It motivates us. It moves us. It makes us live a certain way.”

This love is not a "fancy or a feeling" but an action of self-giving, self-sacrifice, prioritizing the good of the beloved. We love Him because He first loved us. But God's love is not intended to be simply given to us and returned back to Him. As John continues in his letter, "Dear friends,

Challenge

This is where it all begins. Before we discuss the details of what it might look like for us to be messengers and ministers of reconciliation, we begin here with love. Without it, there is no reason, no motivation, no compelling force to make us live for

someone other than ourselves. With it, we dare not continue living for ourselves or for anything less than the person and work of Jesus Christ.

And here is the incredible challenge of Paul's impassioned plea in 2 Corinthians 5:14-21. If we are not acting as Christ's ambassadors, what does that say about us? If we are not practicing the ministry and preaching the message of reconciliation, why aren't we? If we are not embodying new creation in Christ, what are we doing? Contrary to much of Christian history and our own Christian practice, evangelism is not simply one task of the church

him. But you know him, for he lives with you and will be in you. I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you" (John 14:15-18).

Mission

Out of love for Christ we obey His commandments, trusting Him for the presence of the Holy Spirit, who allows Christ himself to live within us. This intimate connection among love, obedience, the Spirit, and being Christ's messengers is evident here in John 14 and again in John's version of the Great Commission:

“If we are not acting as Christ's ambassadors, what does that say about us?”

or a specialized duty for super Christians. It is not something we must be specifically called to or particularly gifted for. It is the fundamental response of Christ's followers to God's love,

"If you love me, keep my commands. And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another advocate to help you and be with you forever—the Spirit of truth. The world cannot accept him, because it neither sees him nor knows

Again Jesus said, "Peace be with you! As the Father has sent me, I am sending you." And with that he breathed on them and said, "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive anyone's sins, their sins are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven" (20:21-23).

We also see it in Matthew's Great Commission:

Then Jesus came to them and said, "All authority in

heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age" (28:18-20).

And look — here it is again in Luke's version: "You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth" (Acts 1:8).

Entrusted

Jesus came to this earth with a mission — the very mission of God — to redeem and restore all of His creation from the terrible effects of sin and death. Jesus' time on earth was not the end of this mission but the beginning of the end, an ending He has entrusted to His followers.

Indwelt by His Spirit and compelled by His love, we share that love with the world, living for the One who died for us. This is the essence of what it means to love God, to obey His commandments, to be filled with His Spirit. The love of Christ compels us! **BA**

Israel Steinmetz is dean of Academic Affairs for Artios Christian College and pastors New Hope United. Scripture quotations are from the *New International Version*.



The Dusty Bible

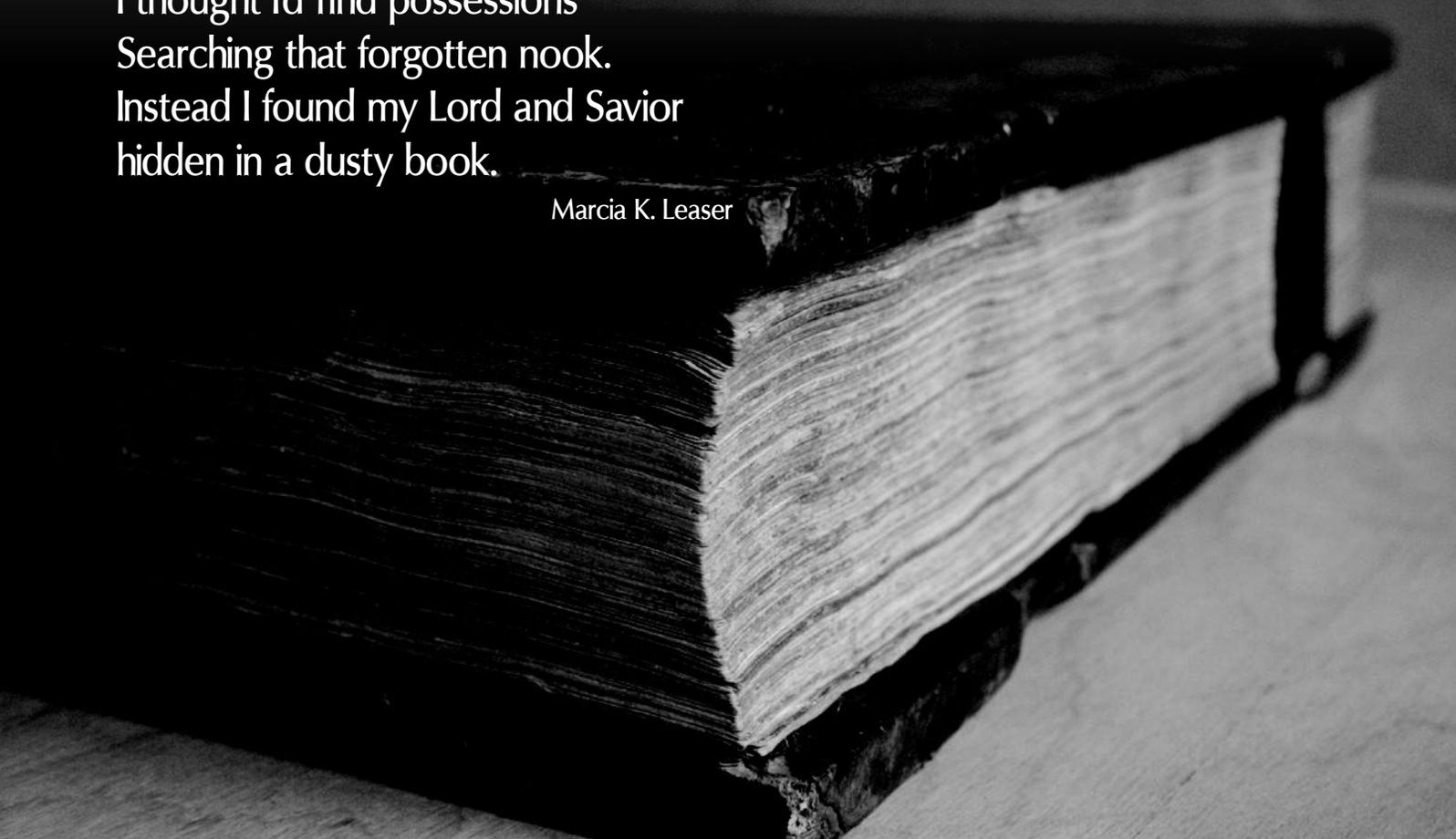
I found an old, old Bible
Tucked away with other books.
And felt perhaps a treasure lay
within its pages — so I looked.

I didn't find a treasure rare
inside the book itself.
But upon the faded pages
were gifts beyond man's wealth.

The words told a wondrous story
A time I'd never seen.
A cross with blood upon it,
a Man who died for me.

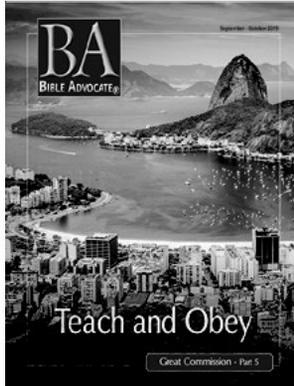
I thought I'd find possessions
Searching that forgotten nook.
Instead I found my Lord and Savior
hidden in a dusty book.

Marcia K. Leaser





Readers Write



Great omission

Wonderful issue of the BA [September-October 2019]. . . . Wonderful opening opinion about "obedience" as the great omission. I agree. We are called by God to be *humble, obedient, loving servants and friends of Jesus*. For this to happen we need to *know* Jesus not only as Savior, Lord, and Master, we need to *know* Jesus as *our best friend and king* so we can walk with Him, talk with Him, live like Him, and love like Him when we reach out to everyone we meet and offer to produce true happiness, great joy, inner peace, good health, and well being in the lives of everyone. When we know what Jesus did and we do it, we will become best friends and the Spirit of Truth will guide us on a daily walk and talk of carrying out the Great Commission with *No Omission!*

B. M.
Email

Q&A online

I was just reading in Q & A in the brand new *baonline.org* site the answer to "Why does our statement of faith (#10) repeat 'as

a result — not a cause — of redemption, believers should. . . .'" written by Calvin Burrell [November-December 2018]. Excellent write-up by the way! I also thoroughly enjoyed another response I just read this afternoon where you answered the question dated September 3, 2019 (an extension from the answer that left me hanging when reading the current BA online): How do we know what is abolished from the old covenant? Very clear explanation!

D. N.
Email

Editor's note: I'm happy that you have discovered the new online Q&A section at baonline.org. Our archive of Q&A's from past issues is growing. Readers can submit questions from there as well.

Holy days

If the apostle Paul was keeping the Holy Days (Book of Acts), shouldn't we also keep them?

B. B.
Carney, MI

Editor's note: The book of Acts indicates not only the early church's awareness of Israel's festival calendar, and its association with the temple in Jerusalem, but also some freedom in the apostle's formal observance of the holy days — even some tension with the temple as the center of worship. Moreover, we find no expectation that Gentile believers were making the pilgrimage to Jerusalem or keeping the holy days in any other mandated way. See further explanation in the Q&A on page 11. For a more in-depth study, see our free booklet,

The Feasts, Jesus, and the New Covenant Community, at <https://publications.cog7.org/>.

Learning about CoG7

I send my greetings from Slupsk in Poland Pomerania. I am interested in William Miller's Movement and the churches sprouted up thereby. I observe the Sabbath too. I would like to know your history, teachings of your denomination and the life of your believers. Remain with God.

J. Z.
Slupsk, Poland

*Editor's note: Greetings to all the saints in Slupsk. To learn more about the history and teachings of the Church of God (Seventh Day), I recommend beginning with *The Journey and This We Believe*. Both books may be purchased at our online store at <https://cog7.org/online-store/>.*

Precious memories

We enjoy the *Bible Advocate*. I do not remember it ever not being in our home, even when I was a child. My father was a farmer and a minister in our church. I remember when the BA was called *The Bible Advocate and Herald of the Coming Kingdom*. We also received the *Harvest Field Messenger* and children's paper *The Sabbath School Missionary* with Sabbath school lessons in it for the younger ones. May God richly bless you.

L. L.
Meridian, ID



Evangelism Training

Some of the best-attended workshops at our 2019 convention offered training in evangelism and discipleship. How wonderful that our members want to be trained to make disciples of Jesus!

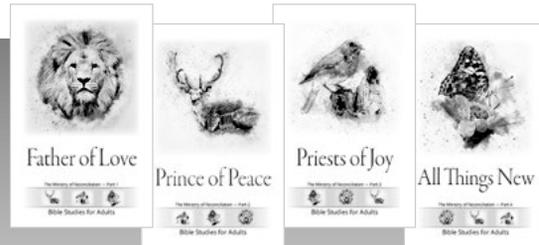
The good news is that training in evangelism and disciple-making is available to every member and congregation of our church. **GC Missions Ministries** provides weekend training programs. Elders Bryan Cleeton, Daniel Flores, and Ramon Ruiz have been developing and testing this program throughout our Southwest District, in both English and Spanish. Contact Bryan at gcmisions@cog7.org for more information.

Artios Christian College's Center for Vibrant Leadership offers instruction and coaching, with Elder Whaid Rose serving as the center's dean. Contact him at (882) 462-1630, ext. 771. Artios features individual online courses related to evangelism and disciple-making. Contact artioscollege.org.

Elders Michael Vlad and Larry Zaragoza provide their workshops and booklets: *Steps to Sharing Your Faith* and *Steps to Mentoring/Discipleship*. Contact them at outreachministries@yahoo.com.

When it comes to evangelism and making disciples of Jesus Christ, we can't be content with learning that we ought to share our faith, lead people to Christ, and teach them how to live as His disciples, or that it's good to do so. And we can't be content with feeling ashamed if we don't. We need to actually carry out the Great Commission. Let's get started!

— Loren Stacy
GC President



New 2020 Adult Quarterly Series

This year's quarterlies are dedicated to the ministry of reconciliation. What is reconciliation and this essential ministry? The exciting truth is revealed in one of the Bible's most profound passages: 2 Corinthians 5:14 – 6:2.

The Author of the ministry of reconciliation is our heavenly Father. The first quarter seeks to praise and exalt Him: for "all things are of God" (v. 18). We will learn who God is as our loving Father, the ground and source of all good relationships.

The Center of the message of reconciliation is Jesus Christ. The second quarter focuses on what God has done through Christ: "For He made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us . . ." (v. 21). We will learn what Jesus accomplished as the Prince of Peace, the healer of all relationships.

Remarkably, we are the ministers of reconciliation – God's priests! The third quarter surveys our role "in Christ." No longer living for ourselves, we are compelled by love to be "ambassadors for Christ," bringing reconciliation on His behalf (v. 20).

In the fourth quarter we stress that the purpose of God's ministry of reconciliation is nothing less than the new covenant and a new creation (v. 17). We'll learn how as workers together with God, salvation dawns every day (6:1, 2).

— Jason Overman



On Mission ...

John Klassek (left) and
Ramon Ruiz

Around the World

Continuing our popular series from last year, we offer this *On Mission* conversation – IMC Secretary John Klassek interviewing Ramon Ruiz, IMC president and former Mexico Conference president. During a recent visit in Dallas, Texas, they talked about the goals of the international Church.

The following is an edited transcript of the video interview, which can be viewed in its entirety at http://imc.cog7.org/media/imcramon_yt.html.

John Klassek (JK): Brother Ramon, welcome to Conversations. It's wonderful to explore the journey of faith that we share. Were you called to faith as a youth, or did you come to Christ later in your life?

Ramon Ruiz (RR): Well, later in my life, yes. When I was about twenty-two years old, I was baptized, and I came to the ministry immediately. I abandoned my medicine studies and went to study ministerial pastoral training, and it changed my life. Absolutely!

JK: And since then you've served in many years of ministry.

RR: More than forty years.

JK: And what were some of the roles you were involved in?

RR: I have been pastor in several churches in Mexico. I was an overseer in the northeast, in two states in Mexico, and was president of the Church in Mexico for more than twelve years. Right now, I am living in Dallas, and I have been working as president of the International Ministerial Congress for many, many years. Robert Coulter was the founder and first president of the International Ministerial Congress in 1978. Then Brother Jerry Griffin was president for four years, and then me – from I think 1994 in the Corpus Christi session of the IMC.

JK: Over those years you've

seen the International Ministerial Congress grow. Can you tell us a little about the composition of the congress?

RR: Well, at the beginning we started with eleven members — just eleven countries in 1978. But with God’s help and working hard, right now we’re about sixty countries around the world. We have our church in five continents, and this is because our people have worked very hard.

JK: So what is some of the work within the congress that’s happening at the moment?

RR: We are trying to get a better administration to work. We are calling people to help us because the work is very hard, and there is a lot of work. So we need a better organization and a better administration, and that is why we are looking for people. We have a lot of people working with us right now. At the beginning, there were just a few, but right now we have more than — I don’t know, more than thirty-five to forty-five people involved in the International Ministerial Congress work.

JK: Over those years that you’ve now served as president, what’s been the greatest joy while you have had a holistic oversight of the International Ministerial Congress? What’s brought you the greatest sense of reward?

RR: I should say that the fellowship of the people around the world. Wherever we go, we find the same thing — people are very lovely and together serving God. And our treasure, and more important treasure, is the people. I enjoy, as well, our understanding of biblical points. We have

very, very good hermeneutics. I have studied in interdenominational seminars for many years, and looking back I can see that our doctrinal creed is very, very good. And there are a lot of things that we enjoy. For example, we are a different people around the world, but we maintain the unity of all the people.

JK: That unity becomes sometimes like family, doesn’t it?

RR: Yes.

JK: Within that family environ-

ment and the church community, what are the greatest challenges that you see and the personal challenges you’ve experienced?

RR: I think to maintain this unity, because the Bible tells us about unity in all its pages. The model for this is the unity between Jesus and God. This is the example, the paradigm. So we need to be only “one.” It doesn’t matter what language you speak or what color your skin is, or culture or the economic situation. We are only one in Jesus Christ. It’s easy to say, but it is

IMC

The purpose of the International Ministerial Congress (IMC) is to facilitate doctrinal unity and coordinate the evangelistic mission of the Church.

- Charter members (1978): 10
- Current members (2016): 44
- New members: 5 (Pakistan, Zimbabwe, Burundi, Spain, Myanmar)
- Largest membership: Mexico



- Smallest membership: Zimbabwe



- Presidents: Robert Coulter (US), Jerry Griffin (US), Ramon Ruiz (Mexico)
- Zones: 7 (established in 2007)
- Languages: English, Spanish, French, Portuguese, Swahili, and others
- *This We Believe* translations: 8 (English, Spanish, Portuguese, French, Urdu (Pakistan), Burmese (Myanmar), Cebu (Philippines), Swahili (East Africa))



difficult to maintain this unity. And the other challenge for me is establishing the Church in those countries where we don't have any contact. We are talking about more than one hundred countries. So I have a dream to establish at least one congregation in every country around the world. And this is one of the principal objectives of the IMC. The other one is maintaining doctrinal unity.

JK: We have within the International Ministerial Congress a ten-point vision that is helping us articulate our collective journey together. Do you want to make any comments about the ten-point vision?

RR: We are trying to share this vision around the world. It's a challenge for us, and I think this is a form to learn easily about the principal aspects we as Christians must know very well. For example, we need to know clearly that we are centered in Jesus Christ, because Jesus Christ is central not just in the Bible and the church but in all things. So, this is one example. I can also say that we are a church that passionately teaches about the Holy Spirit. We are a family, and we know that the Holy Spirit is the presence of God and that Jesus Christ is in our hearts, to encourage us to go to all these countries to preach the gospel. These

teachings about the ten-point vision are well received wherever we go.

JK: What encouragement would you give for somebody wanting to serve within the body of Christ, within the International Ministerial Congress? Is there anything you would like to pass on from your experience?

RR: As I say, I think we need to work hard in the evangelism programs and pastoral training for better education. Fortunately, we have many, many pastors with a lot of knowledge, good education, and we're calling all of them to teach our people. Maybe they don't have the opportunity to go to seminars, but we can go to teach them. We can grow in education and grow in membership — not just in quantity but in quality.

JK: Finally, Brother Ramon, is there anything in your personal vision that you would like to see in the IMC as we move forward?

RR: Well, right now we are moving to get a better administration, as I told you. I think this is the challenge because until now we have been the International Ministerial Congress. But the goal is to have the opportunity to be a global church, as a global organization. Not to be the same people, because God made us different from each other, but to maintain the unity and to share our understanding about the principal points of the Bible. For example, we have a sentence to share with all our people around the world, that our church is a people who keep the Ten Commandments of God and have the testimony of Jesus Christ. So this is very important for us.

JK: Very encouraging and a very exciting future. Brother Ramon, thank you for your comments, and we pray that God continues to bless and encourage you as you serve us in the congress.

RR: Thank you very much!





Reconciled to God

It was Saturday night, June 25, 1960. As they did from time to time, my parents took our family to a Youth for Christ rally at the old Church of the Open Door in downtown Los Angeles. The main event that evening was a film built around a Billy Graham crusade held somewhere in Africa. It concluded with Billy Graham presenting a gospel message and making his usual altar call.

The film ended, and a Youth for Christ leader invited those of us in the auditorium to respond to the gospel as well. He asked us to bow our heads, close our eyes, and raise a hand if we wanted to receive Jesus as our Savior. I raised my hand. When I opened my eyes, an usher was standing next to me, asking my parents if he could take me to the prayer room. They agreed! There in the prayer room he helped me pray. I asked Jesus to forgive my sins and to come into my heart as my Savior and Lord.

Though young, I knew what I needed to know to make that decision. I knew that the wages of sin is death. I knew that I sinned — a lot. And I knew that “God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son [Jesus], that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life” (John 3:16, KJV).

My most vivid memory of that night was the way I felt as I rejoined my family. I felt light, as though something heavy had been removed from me. Forgive the cliché, but I literally did feel that I was walking on air. I remember telling one of my brothers, “You’ve got to do this too!”

Then, I didn’t have the biblical knowledge and vocabulary I needed to explain my experience.

Now I do. Now I know that I had been delivered from the domain of darkness and transferred to the kingdom of God’s beloved Son, in whom I have redemption, the forgiveness of my sins (Colossians 1:13, 14). Now I know that I have been saved by God’s grace through faith in Jesus (Ephesians 2:8) and have been set at peace with God (Romans 5:1). Now I know that I have eternal life and will not come into judgment because, by believing Jesus and receiving Him as my Savior and Lord, I passed from death to life (John 5:24). No wonder I felt light!

In 2 Corinthians 5 the apostle Paul describes all of this as “reconciliation.” He tells us that God through Jesus Christ is reconciling the world and us to Himself. Our sins had separated us from God (Isaiah 59:2), but in Christ we are restored, placed in good relationship with God, reconciled to Him. For those who believe in Jesus and receive Him as Savior and Lord, God accomplishes this by attributing our sins to Jesus and Jesus’ righteousness to us. Because Jesus died for our sins in our place, the penalty for our sins has been paid. With sin no longer separating us from God, we are reconciled to Him. In Christ, we are brought back together. In Christ, all things are made new (2 Corinthians 5:17).

That’s what I experienced June 25, 1960. I hope you’ve experienced this too.

— Loren Stacy



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Learn more at gcmissions.cog7.org and on Facebook: "GC Missions" and "IMC."

