



Mooroolbark Christian Fellowship

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Women in Church Leadership: An Introduction

By Joseph Tkach



In 2003, we announced in the WN that the Worldwide Church of God would be formally considering the role of women in the church. We invited members and pastors to send us their research. As we expected on this controversial issue, we received a variety of responses. Some were well thought out; others gave opinions without any particular support.

Members of our doctrinal team read these papers and discussed the issue for several months—and several more months of discussion are scheduled. In this issue of the WN, we are publishing an introduction to the topic. This article is a committee product, and although not every member of the doctrinal team sees this issue in exactly the same light, we present here some introductory matters that we agree on.

The question is sometimes phrased as “women in ministry,” but we should note that we have always had women in ministry. That is, we have always had women who served in the church, in a variety of roles, and we’ve had women who were leaders of groups within the church (although their role as leader was not always acknowledged with a specific title).

The question before us is whether women can be ordained as elders. A related question would be whether women can serve in leadership offices that are generally reserved for elders, such as senior pastor, district superintendent, etc.

This is not simply an academic question. In some of our smaller congregations, women are already serving in roles of spiritual leadership. As the Worldwide Church of God has learned more about spiritual gifts and lay ministries, we have also observed that gifts in areas of spiritual service, such as worship, biblical studies, public speaking and pastoral care, are not limited to men.

In some cases, women are currently serving on congregational leadership teams, not because of any push for feminine representation, but because the congregation believed, and the district superintendent agreed, that these particular women

had spiritual maturity and belonged on the pastoral leadership team.

Before we entered this study, some members of our doctrinal team felt that these women could be ordained as elders; other members believed that the Scriptures forbid the ordination of women as elders, and some were undecided. Our goal is to understand what the Bible says to us about this subject. We are in agreement on the introductory issues, as the article below presents them.

We plan to publish more articles as we continue to work through the questions in a systematic way. Our next paper will be on the subject of ordination: just what does it mean to ordain a person to a role in the church? Future articles will examine the major relevant scriptures to see what they do and do not teach.

We believe it is just as important for members to see how we reach our decision, as it is to read the final decision. It is my prayer that we will all learn from the process, and be filled “with the knowledge of his will through all the wisdom and understanding that the Spirit gives, so that [we] may live a life worthy of the Lord and please him in every way: bearing fruit in every good work, growing in the knowledge of God” (Colossians 1:9-10).

In Jesus’ service,
Joseph Tkach.

Women in Church Leadership: An Introduction to the Question

The Worldwide Church of God Statement of Beliefs does not say anything about women in church leadership. However, it does say that the Bible is “fully authoritative for all matters of faith and practice.” Our question, then, is what the Bible says about women’s role in the church. Our starting point, and the final authority, is Scripture.

Our Statement of Beliefs also says that we are willing to grow in knowledge, willing to respond to God’s guidance. We recognize that we do not always understand Scripture perfectly. Some parts of Scripture are difficult to understand. Others parts are easy to understand but difficult to apply.

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Scripture often calls on us to resist trends within society; at other times it encourages us to follow cultural customs. For example, Scripture includes the following command: “Greet one another with a holy kiss” (Rom. 16:16; 1 Pet. 5:14). Although Christians in some cultures have no problems with this command, people in America generally do, and in the WCG we have long considered this command to be based in culture and not a timeless truth. We encourage members to implement the principle of the command, without obeying it literally, even though Paul probably never thought the day would come when a kiss would be offensive rather than friendly.

When Peter and Paul wrote their commands for a holy kiss, they were influenced by their culture. When Paul told slaves to obey their masters (Eph. 6:1), he was accommodating himself to culture. He was not advocating slavery itself. There is no question that some of his commands apply only to his culture. Others just as clearly are timeless, and there are a few in the middle that are debatable.

So, the question is, how do we tell when a biblical command is based on culture and in need of modification for the different cultures we live in today? How do we tell when a command is timeless? When Paul writes that he does not permit a woman to teach or have authority over men (1 Tim. 2:12), is he just expressing his own opinion (after all, he states it as what he does, and not as a command), or should we treat his policy as a permanent rule for the church?

How do we decide what God's will is? It is a question not just of what Scripture says, but what it means for us today. Should we apply it literally? Or should we (as with Rom. 16:16) analyse what principle lay behind Paul's words, and follow that? Let us look at an example of a conflict between Scripture and culture. Although this example is not an exact prototype for the issue of women in the church, it does help illustrate the question.

Comparison with slavery

In 1 Tim. 6:1-2, Paul tells Christian slaves to respect their Christian masters, and he never commands the masters to free their slaves. Is Paul therefore supporting slavery, as many 19th-century Americans argued? Or was he simply going along with culture, so the gospel would not be seen as an enemy of society—“so that God's name and our teaching may not be slandered”?

Slavery had a few positive functions in ancient society, but Paul could have challenged slavery itself as demeaning, as contrary to the love that should characterize God's people, and as a violation of the created order. But he did not; neither did he challenge the political system of Rome, the frequent

brutality of the army, or unfair methods by which taxes were collected.

Nevertheless, the gospel challenges culture. It challenges us to treat poor people with respect, not to favour the rich (Jas. 2:1-7). The gospel challenged Jews to treat Gentiles as equals; it challenged Philemon to treat his slave Onesimus “as a dear brother” (Phm. 16). If masters treated their slaves as family members, then slavery would soon disappear—and in this way the gospel challenged the attitudes that allowed slavery to exist. The gospel sowed the seeds that undermined the injustice of slavery—but the Bible does not attack slavery directly.

Some people today say that the gospel sows the seeds that undermine gender restrictions, too. Galatians 3:28 says, “There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.” This verse is about equality in salvation, but does it sow the seeds for leadership equality within the church, too? Is it not possible for people to have equal importance within the church without having the same roles? However, the church no longer treats Jews and Gentiles differently; we denounce as unjust the existence of slavery; should we also stop differentiating between men and women when it comes to leadership in the church?

In other words, when Paul said that women should be silent in the churches, was he simply going along with his culture, just as he went along with slavery, knowing that the gospel would eventually correct the problem? Did he expect his comments in Gal. 3:28 to eventually counteract his comments in 1 Tim. 2:12? Or was he so close to his culture that he never really thought about it, just as he probably assumed that a holy kiss would always be fitting and appropriate? Or was Paul giving a policy that provides permanent guidance for the church?

History

The church has not always been on the right side of cultural questions. When it came to slavery, some Christian churches were in the forefront of the move for emancipation. But in the 20th century, many churches resisted the cultural move for social equality for the descendants of those slaves. Sometimes culture is right and sometimes it is not.

Culture sometimes asks ethical questions, but for Christians, culture cannot answer them. Rather, we look to Scripture as the foundation for what we do. Even if some cultures in the 1930s said that we should treat Jews as subhuman annoyances, the gospel says that Christians should have resisted the cultural trend, even though some church bodies went along with it. But when it comes to the authority of women in the church, it seems that the church is responding to culture rather than being an initiating force.

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Nevertheless, we believe that the scriptural record as it pertains to women in roles of leadership requires careful study and a detailed response to the question of the ordination of women as elders.

Dealing with differences

The issue does require careful study. When it comes to a holy kiss, we can't just say, "The Bible says it, I believe it, that settles it." That approach may sound humble, but it is simplistic and arrogant, because it assumes that "I" have the only accurate understanding of what Scripture teaches.

The truth is that we all come to Scripture with some assumptions from our own culture. Some of us come from a culture where women are expected to submit to men in particularly restrictive ways; others of us come from a culture that encourages women to think for themselves and to take leadership roles.

Some cultures today are similar to ancient culture in their attitudes about women; others are quite different. Some people are afraid that any change in gender roles will cause more social chaos; others feel that changes are necessary. Each of us needs to be aware of the bias we bring to the Bible and, through discussion with one another, see how our particular bias might be influencing our understanding. In that way we let the Bible speak to our biases.

Prayer is an indispensable part of the process—we want to discern God's will, rather than assuming that we have already got it right. We want to understand why some sincere Christians come to different conclusions on this issue, and then we want to decide which explanation seems more likely to be what God intended when he inspired the Scriptures. We want the Holy Spirit to guide us into all truth (John 16:13)—and that means that we don't have it all yet. No one does.

Since no one group has a perfect understanding of all the issues, there are some differences of opinion on biblical interpretation, even when there is agreement on the most basic doctrines of the faith. Some Christians think that the Bible instructs women to be completely silent in church; others do not, even when those holding each view have an equal belief in the authority and accuracy of the Bible.

Some Bible-believing Christians believe that women must wear a covering on their head when in church; others do not. The question we have is not whether to believe the Bible; it is how to understand what the Bible is teaching. Are the biblical restrictions on women cultural, like the holy kiss, or are they permanent, like the prohibition on adultery?

Since conservative Christians are divided on this issue, we would be naïve to think that we will achieve unanimous agreement. No matter what conclusion we come to, some members will think we have not weighed the evidence fairly. What should they do then? Is this issue important enough to leave the church? We don't think so (and it is possible that not even the doctrinal team will be unanimous). Our unity depends on Christ, not on complete agreement on every point of doctrine.

There are many doctrines that are essential to Christian faith—for example, the church must teach that there is only one God, and that we are saved by grace through faith in Jesus Christ. Yet there are many other doctrines that are not essential to our faith, but are practical guidelines or policies for our physical life, and these may differ from culture to culture, or from one time in history to another.

We want to get them right, but we must also understand they are not essential to what it means to be a Christian. We believe that eldership of women is one of those doctrines. It is a policy matter, not part of the Statement of Beliefs. People do not need to leave the church if they think we are wrong about the millennium, nor do they need to leave if they think we are wrong about women's role in the church.

No matter who our congregational elders are, they are not perfect, and we all have to respect them anyway. We have to weigh what they say, accept the true and overlook minor mistakes. That will be the case whether an elder is or is not a woman. We might like to be part of a church with all the guaranteed correct answers, but such a church does not exist. Spiritual growth does not depend on being in a perfect church. Rather, we must learn to do the best we can in the circumstances we are in, trusting in Christ to cover us with his righteousness.

Some members will be disappointed if we permit women to be elders; others will be equally disappointed if we do not. We do not know how many hold one opinion, or how many the other—for our task, it does not matter. Our job is to discern what God wants us to do, and we will therefore concentrate on prayerful study. We will be consulting with pastors and their supervisors frequently as we share the preliminary results of our research, and we will keep you informed in the WCG News and on our web site.

We do ask for your prayers, and for you to study the issue along with us. We will all learn, and as we share the strengths and weaknesses of various arguments, we hope the great majority of us will agree on the results.

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Hope or hype: Are Christians just cockeyed optimists?

(Adapted from the British Plain Truth)
By John Halford



John, the last survivor of Jesus' original 12 disciples, wrote the Book of Revelation when he was an old man, living in exile in a Roman penal colony.

VERSAILLES, Indiana—

*When the skies are bright canary yellow
I forget ev'ry cloud I've ever seen,
So they called me a cockeyed optimist
Immature and incurably green.
I have heard people rant and rave and bellow
That we're done and we might as well be dead,
But I'm only a cockeyed optimist
And I can't get it into my head.
I hear the human race
Is fallin' on its face
And hasn't very far to go,
But ev'ry whippoorwill's sellin' me a bill,
And tellin' me it just ain't so.
I could say life is just a bowl of Jello
And appear more intelligent and smart,
But I'm stuck like a dope
With a thing called hope,
And I can't get it out of my heart!*
South Pacific; Rogers and Hammerstein

Am I, like Nellie in *South Pacific*, also just a cockeyed optimist? Like her, I'm stuck on hope, and I can't get it out of my heart.

I believe that although the world is a pretty awful place now, it is going to get better. I believe God is alive and interested in what is happening to us here below, even though sometimes it doesn't seem like it. And I believe that although I am getting older, I will live forever. I also believe that you probably will too.

You see, a verse in Revelation 1:18 alters everything we know about being alive: "I am the Living One; I was dead, and behold I am alive for ever and ever! And I hold the keys of death and Hades [the grave]." Let's take a closer look and unpack this verse, because it revolutionizes our understanding of what it means to be a human being.

The person who wrote this was John, the last survivor of Jesus' original 12 disciples. When he wrote it, he was an old man, living in exile in a Roman penal colony. While there, he was given a remarkable vision of what the future held for the world in general and the followers of Jesus in particular.

Beyond the grave

John recognized the speaker of these words as Jesus, who had been executed about 60 years before. Now, six decades later, he appears and claims that he is the "living one," who "was dead." John knew that. He had seen Jesus after he was resurrected and ascended to heaven. But then Jesus says he will stay alive forever and ever. He also claims to have a key that will unlock the way to defeat the power of the grave, not only for himself but for others too.

Considering our experience of life and death, this is a preposterous statement. In the days when these words were written, an average life span was around 45 years. Few made it past their three score and ten. Today, better health and hygiene have extended the average life for people living in the richer parts of the world. It isn't unusual to find birthday cards for a 100th birthday on sale. The United Kingdom has about 8,000 centenarians. By 2030 that number may increase to more than 30,000.

It is estimated that about half the children born in a developed European nation today can expect to live past 100. Some researchers believe it may be possible to extend human lives to perhaps 150 or so years. But that is about it. Inevitably even the fittest of us have a date with the grave.

No wonder we get excited when scientists come up with something (such as Viagra) that can prolong just one aspect of our lives. But realistically, no one should expect to live "for ever and ever." But here is Jesus claiming he has a way to overcome the power of the grave.

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If true, this is the most astounding breakthrough in longevity ever announced. If it is not true, this article is just the ramblings of a cockeyed optimist, and you are wasting your time reading it.

So am I, like Nellie, “immature and incurably green”? Are you, if you believe it too?
Smoke and mirrors?

The only evidence we have for believing such an outrageous statement is that Jesus Christ was resurrected from his grave, and eventually ascended to heaven, where he still is. When it comes down to it, the Christian faith stands or falls on that.

St. Paul, one of the first, and arguably the greatest evangelist, was honest enough to admit that. He wrote in 1 Corinthians 15:15-19: “If there’s no resurrection, there’s no living Christ. And face it—if there’s no resurrection for Christ, everything we’ve told you is smoke and mirrors, and everything you’ve staked your life on is smoke and mirrors. Not only that, but we would be guilty of telling a string of barefaced lies about God, all these affidavits we passed on to you verifying that God raised up Christ—sheer fabrications, if there’s no resurrection” (Message Bible).

“If corpses can’t be raised,” continues Paul, “then Christ wasn’t, because he was indeed dead. And if Christ wasn’t raised, then all you’re doing is wandering about in the dark, as lost as ever. It’s even worse for those who died hoping in Christ and resurrection, because they’re already in their graves. If all we get out of Christ is a little inspiration for a few short years, we’re a pretty sorry lot.”

But Paul goes on to reassure the Corinthians (and us), “But the truth is that Christ has been raised up, the first in a long legacy of those who are going to leave the cemeteries” (verse 20).

But how can he be so sure? Where is the evidence that Jesus was resurrected and is alive?

Willing to adjust

We cannot prove to a sceptic, beyond all shadow of doubt, that God exists, and that the Bible is true. But that does not mean that we have no evidence, or that the evidence is so shaky that every whiff of criticism can blow it away.

The Christian message has always had its critics. Some criticisms have been valid, and have caused us to think about our understanding of the Bible. It was silly and shortsighted, for example, for medieval theologians to insist that the sun went round the earth when the evidence clearly showed that the opposite was true.

Today, the increase in knowledge in nearly every field continues to challenge traditional ideas, and

some concepts we have taken for granted do need to be adjusted.

But this does not mean that the core beliefs of our faith are being undermined, or that the whole idea is so flimsy that we have to go back to the drawing board every time someone brings up an awkward question.

Some people have worried, for example, about the idea behind the best-selling novel *The Da Vinci Code*. It is based around the search for evidence that Jesus was not crucified, buried and resurrected as the Gospels tell us. Rather, he married Mary Magdalene, moved to France and had children, founding a family line that survives to this day. The church suppressed this information, and tried to destroy it. But the truth was preserved by secret societies, and the evidence of who Jesus really was is buried under the Louvre in Paris. If exposed it will bring down the whole edifice of Christian belief. And only one man and woman can unveil the truth—you know the sort of thing.

The author clearly says it is a work of fiction. Nevertheless it unsettles some people who worry that there might be something in it. Oh how we love conspiracy theories!

The right to believe

But why do we assume that what we believe is so vulnerable? Why not turn the argument around and ask how good is the evidence that Christianity is not true? Or to put it another way, how much proof do you need before you have the right to say you believe something?

Let me go (humbly and respectfully, I hope) on the offensive. You see, I don’t believe that the theory of evolution, as it is usually explained, is good enough to be the only acceptable explanation for the origin and development of life. I believe other explanations exist, and that to dismiss them out of hand is arrogant and unscientific.

I am not suggesting that evolution is a load of bunk. I have seen enough evidence to acknowledge that it, or something like it, might explain how life develops within a species. Charles Darwin was a careful scientist, as are many who followed in his footsteps.

I have seen professional palaeontologists at work, and I am impressed by the meticulous care with which they sift and evaluate their evidence—such as it is. I think they make a plausible case for what they call microevolution—that is, change and development within a species. But to extrapolate that evidence to show that it accounts for the actual origin of those species, is, I think, stretching things. I don’t think they have proved their point beyond all shadow of doubt, and I believe other points of view

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deserve to be heard. One of those points of view is that there is a Creator God and he created the cosmos (including life) for a purpose, and that purpose includes the eternal destiny of what is now the human race.

Now, I don't expect the above paragraphs to cause dyed-in-the-wool atheists to throw in the towel and head for the nearest church. But I also do not accept that it gives them the right to ridicule me, because it is not a ridiculous thing to say.

You see, there is no conclusive evidence that there is not a Creator. No one has proved that God does not exist. There are no serious questions about the fact of Jesus' existence. If we measure the Gospels by the same standards we evaluate other historical literature, we must conclude that they are a reliable record of what Jesus said and did.

Scholars will always quibble about the details, but the questions do not threaten or undermine the essential components of Christian belief, including the death and resurrection of Jesus.

Based on the standards that we believe other things, my faith in the message of the Bible should not be considered uneducated, immature, foolish or naive. It is not therefore the ramblings of a cockeyed optimist to believe that a man born 2,000 years ago was crucified, buried, resurrected and ascended to heaven, and is still alive today.

Still much to learn

If there is one thing that the last few decades should have taught us is that no one, believer or non-believer, should be calling each other foolish or naive. It should be obvious to all that there is a tremendous amount still to learn.

What is being discovered on the frontiers of knowledge should cause everyone to be willing to re-evaluate even the most entrenched ideas. Tried and tested physical laws seem to break down at the sub-atomic level. Constants such as the speed of light might not be quite so constant after all. Traditional physics is being turned on its head.

Isaac Newton proved the ancients were wrong in their explanation of reality. Then Albert Einstein showed that Newton was wrong in some of his ideas, and once again reshaped our understanding of the universe.

The more we look into it, the cosmos seems to be ever more intricate, mysterious and marvellous. And let not those who believe in God be smug and say we told you so, because we didn't. No one anticipated the discoveries that are revolutionizing our understanding of reality. What is interesting is that scientists, trying to find words to explain what they are learning, resort to

terms that sometimes seem more appropriate for theology than physics. But why not? Truth, after all, is truth, and genuine discovery poses no threat to a proper understanding of our Creator.

Nothing that has been discovered has undermined the faith of this cockeyed optimist. On the contrary, it has reinforced it. I see no reason not to be "stuck like a dope on a thing called hope." In fact, in this ever shifting and rather dangerous world, it makes more and more sense.

So can we talk about hope for a while?

An anchor for the soul.

"Faith, hope and charity," wrote St. Paul in 1 Corinthians 13:13, "and the greatest of these is charity." He did not go on to say which of the three is the least, but chances are you'd opt for hope. Unlike faith, the way we use the word *hope* today carries with it an element of uncertainty.

You buy a lottery ticket hoping it is the winning number. You plan a picnic hoping it doesn't rain. You know you can't have absolute faith that you will win the jackpot or not get wet. You just hope you don't. Hope is what you have when you can't have total faith.

But that is not the way the Bible uses the idea of hope. It is much more than a sort of decaffeinated faith. The writer of the New Testament epistle to the Hebrews describes hope as an "anchor for the soul" (Hebrews 6:19).

Sailors drop an anchor when they want their ship to stay in a fixed position in the ever-changing environment of the sea. An anchor stops your drifting. You know where you are.

You need some anchor points in this world, which sometimes—and never more than now—seems to be adrift. Old ideas are found to be wrong. Trusted institutions are shown to be unreliable. Traditions are abandoned. Who can you trust? What can you count on? Where are we headed? Have we lost the plot? Is there a plot?

Into this sea of uncertainty, the Bible brings some fixed points—things you can count on no matter what else happens. It tells you that there is a God. Then it tells you that he is benevolent and loving, and wants good things for you.

That is not as obvious as it might seem. Many people believe in "gods" that are anything but benevolent. Some are nasty bits of work indeed, and their followers are told that it is best to keep out of their way unless you want something they control—such as rain, fertility or wealth. And then you'd better approach them carefully, and make it

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worth their while. Even some people who claim to believe in the God of the Bible have a level of understanding that is not much more sophisticated. However, it is not how the God of the Bible reveals himself.

Tom Wright, Bishop of Durham, explains it like this: “Christian hope isn’t optimism, a vague sense that things will probably turn out all right.

“Christian faith is trusting—and going on trusting through thick and thin—in the God who made unbreakable promises and will certainly keep them.

Christian hope is looking ahead to the time when, according to those promises, God will make the world over anew, completing the work he began in Jesus” (*Hebrews for Everyone*, Tom Wright, SPCK 2003, page 67).

The resurrection of Jesus to eternal life, and all that it implies is not just the wishful thinking of cock-eyed

optimists. Nor is it just the refuge of naive people who won’t face reality. It is an idea that has been carefully examined by educated and brilliant people, who have chosen to believe it after considering the alternatives. It can be defended and supported. There is no evidence to show that it isn’t true.

That is why I say that the scripture I quoted at the beginning transforms everything we know and believe about our existence. I don’t believe “the human race is falling on its face,” although I think it is time we fell to our knees. There is hope for us, and that hope is based on who Jesus was, and still is.

That hope cannot be casually dismissed as superstition. And when you take it seriously, and let it provide a foundation for how you live your life, the more it becomes a reliable and comforting anchor for your soul.

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Window on the World

From Randal Dick
Superintendent of missions

Who cares what happens to Haiti?



By Barbara Edwards

Haiti’s Economy

- Gross domestic product (GDP): \$3.9 billion
- GDP per capita: \$480
- GDP growth: -1.7%
- GDP per capita growth: -3.8%
- Literacy: 50.8 percent
- Life expectancy at birth: 49.1 years
- Undernourished population: 50 percent
- Telephones per 1,000 people: 10
- Doctors per 100,000 people: 25

Analysis by Steve Schifferes, BBC News Online economic reporter. Source: World Bank, United Nations Development Program.

Haiti’s People

Population: 7,750,000 (estimate)
Ethnic Groups: African descent (95 percent, African and European descent (5 percent)
Religions: Roman Catholic (80 percent), Protestant (16 percent); Voodoo practices pervasive.
Education: Six years compulsory
Health: Infant mortality rate—93 out of 1000 (estimate 2001)

CIA: The World Factbook—Haiti; “Haiti, Microsoft Encarta Online Encyclopedia 2004

This is Haiti’s bicentennial year, but there is not much to celebrate. Dire poverty, illiteracy and corruption are only a few of Haiti’s maladies. Is it

any wonder that these long-suffering people are discouraged and disillusioned?

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Haiti is only 600 miles from the United States. It has long been the poorest nation in the Western Hemisphere. Globally, it is on the bottom rung of the economic ladder. Why is Haiti always in such a desperate state? Can anything be done to help?

Surprising parallels

The United States and Haiti share a common history. Both threw off European colonialism and became the first independent nations in the modern Western Hemisphere. Independence for one immediately led to freedom for its slaves, whereas the slaves of the other had to wait more than 80 years. One became a weakened, isolated, pariah state following its independence; the other became the strongest and richest nation the world has ever seen.

What happened?

In 1492, during a time of challenge, exploration and conquest, Christopher Columbus landed on Haiti's north coast at present-day Cap Haitien. The country was mineral-rich and abundant in fruits.

It is reported that Columbus wrote, "I have found paradise." The Arawak, the original inhabitants, called the island *Ayti*, meaning "land of mountains." However, in honour of Spain, Columbus' sponsor, he named the island *La Isla Espanola*—The Spanish Island, which is modern-day Hispaniola.

The Arawaks embraced Columbus and his conquistadores as allies against the Caribs, a cannibalistic, cruel, ferocious and warlike people. However, the Spanish used their military superiority to enslave both the Arawak and Caribs. Through abuse, sickness and forced labour, the native population was decimated within 40 years.

The Spanish ceded one third of Hispaniola to the French in 1697. (The eastern two thirds of Hispaniola is today the Spanish-speaking Dominican Republic.) The French renamed their new colony Saint-Domingue. They established a flourishing slave-plantation system, and by the end of the 18th century,

Saint-Domingue was the world's richest and most profitable colony. The population at that time totalled more than 450,000 slaves from West Africa, more than 25,000 free mulattoes (people of mixed white and black ancestry), and about 30,000 French planters. The merchants and plantation owners became prosperous, while the slaves were subjugated and condemned to lifelong forced labour. Any attempt at rebellion or resistance was met with savage brutality.

The French colonies in the Caribbean were involved in fighting elsewhere in the Western Hemisphere, including participation in the United States' fight for

independence. About 800 Haitian volunteers fought in the American Revolution, where they gained valuable military experience. Sixteen years later the French Revolution established another republic founded on the principles of Liberty, Equality and Fraternity.

The revolution in France inspired the Haitian slaves to revolt against their oppressors. Ex-slave Toussaint L'Ouverture led it. He freed the slave population and in 1798 became governor-general. Toussaint L'Ouverture was a brilliant man whose vision was for a free and equal Haiti working in harmony and cooperation with the French. But it was not to be.

Napoleon Bonaparte intended to dominate the world, including the Western Hemisphere. An independent ex-colony was not in his plans to re-establish the French Empire. He sent an army of 40,000 to regain control over Saint-Domingue and to re-impose slavery. But the Haitians had tasted freedom and were determined not to allow the oppression and cruelty of slavery to be reinstated.

The military campaign was brutal. Thousands of Napoleon's men were lost to yellow fever and guerrilla warfare. He was defeated, and in 1804, the independent Republic of Haiti was proclaimed. Slavery was outlawed—a bold and radical move. Haiti was the first and for a time the only country in the Western Hemisphere where slavery was forbidden.

The European colonial powers refused to recognize Haiti's independence. Even the newly independent United States did not formally recognize Haiti, fearing that the concept of freedom from slavery would "infect" slaves on U.S. soil and disrupt its flourishing economy. So, from the moment of its birth, Haiti became an international pariah state— isolated and weak. And that is the way it has been for 200 years.

After two centuries of nationhood, Haiti has little to celebrate. Although nominally Christian, Voodoo shares the stage as a sanctioned religion. The strongman political culture has resulted in 37 coups d'etats. The country is seriously overpopulated— currently about eight million, but nobody knows for sure. It is stripped of natural resources, and desperately needs development. But the world has other priorities, and the outlook for this tiny country is grim.

What does Haiti need?

Prayers are needed! Too simplistic? With our human eyes and understanding we see Haiti's greatest needs in terms of political, social and economic reform. But Haiti's greatest need is spiritual. Understandably, considering its sad

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history, many Haitians are ready to give up. Foreign investors likewise see little potential.

God sees Haiti differently. He does not look on it with natural eyes. He mourns over the atrocities. He sees the tears and hears the prayers. He sees beyond the physical poverty. He sees Haiti washed as clean as snow.

Haitians need help, not only from the international community to aid the reconstruction of their country. They need friends to aid them in the reconstruction of their hearts. The people struggle with a poor self image and a sense of fatalism. They have lost the capacity to hope. John Halford, making a pastoral visit, was told: "Forget about us. Nothing ever works here."

Our church in Haiti

Haitian Christians (including WCG members) realize that their kingdom is not of this world. Although they are affected by the country's pervasive pathos, they try to keep their priorities from becoming blurred.

The WCG in Haiti began in the 1970s. The church has had several resident ministers. Blaise Franklin, the current pastor, moved back to Haiti from the United States about 20 years ago and established a bakery business. For many years his home was the meeting hall, office and social centre.

For a while, the roof of his home became a workshop where members could be trained and employed. The love and dedication of Mr. Franklin and his family has been a major factor in the survival of our small congregation in Haiti. Life has not been easy, and it still isn't.

A few years ago, the church purchased an old home, which was remodelled into an office and meeting hall. In 1997, they decided to serve the community by using the premises as a kindergarten and school—Les Ambassadeurs' Centre Educative Classique Evangelique (CECE).

The children receive a Christian education from kindergarten to primary school (called *fondamentale*). They leave the institute at age 12 or

13. Mr. Franklin is the academic director. Enrolment is 217 children —180 in kindergarten and 37 in primary school.

Because of the insecurity and economic situation, many parents cannot pay tuition, so the survival of the school economically is a constant struggle.

You can help

Jack Brunet, pastor of the French-speaking Caribbean churches, visited Haiti March 25 to 29. He reported: "The members are fine, not injured, just tired and disillusioned living in a country where there is no real hope. The only hope is in Christ. The last time John Halford and I came to Haiti, we saw Haiti like the doors of hell; but I can say today, it is the hall of hell. Because of the fight to survive, the insecurity, the anarchy, the transportation problems, it is difficult for the brethren to come to church."

So, please do not forget Haiti in your prayers. The greatest need for the members is to be encouraged to be a light in Haiti's darkness. Pray that their hearts will be engaged upward—that the future kingdom will be more real to them than their present circumstances.

Pray for vision and that they will come to know Jesus Christ intimately. Pray that they will make Christianity attractive to onlookers and be transformed to manifest the love of God. Pray that God will raise up dynamic and committed leaders—leaders with integrity and a heart for God.

Encourage the members. Let them know that we are a worldwide church and they are integral to the body. They are not an abandoned little outpost of the church. Author John Eldredge said that "it's the little platoons that change the world." E-mail messages can be sent to Mr. Franklin at < jblaise12@ transnethaiti.com >.

During the recent crisis in Haiti, the church was greatly encouraged to receive messages of support from many parts of the world. God cares about Haiti. He has not forgotten them. Neither should we.

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Bible Study

Paul's Anguish for His People:

A study of Romans 9

Romans chapters 9-11 are a problem: Are these chapters a digression, or a main point?

Paul has stopped describing the gospel, and begun to talk about the role of the Jewish people in God's plan.

One theme that Paul continues from earlier chapters is that God does not show partiality. Salvation is not just for the Jews—it is for Gentiles, too. But has God given up on the Jews? No way!

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Answering objections

When Paul wrote this epistle, he was in Corinth, hoping to travel to Rome on his way to Spain (15:23-24). But first, he planned to take a gift from the Greek churches to Jerusalem (vv. 25-29), and he knew that many Jews viewed Paul and his gospel with hostility.

So when Paul wrote to the Romans, he had one eye on the Gentiles, and another on the Jews in Jerusalem. Paul is not only rehearsing his message to Gentiles; he is also rehearsing what he will say in Jerusalem.

He's answering an objection: If the gospel is promised in the Jewish Scriptures, then why are so few Jews accepting the message? Paul claimed that the gospel was rooted in the Old Testament, but why should anyone believe the gospel if the people who knew those Scriptures best, the Jews, didn't accept the message? The Jewish rejection of the gospel was undermining Paul's message.

Had God given up on the Jewish people and turned to the Gentiles instead? And if he did that, can we be sure that he won't abandon the Gentiles, too? Why were most Jews rejecting the free gift that Paul was offering?

Advantages of the Jews

Paul begins chapter 9 with a strong assertion: I speak the truth in Christ—I am not lying, my conscience confirms it through the Holy Spirit—I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart.

Chapter 8 ended with rejoicing and confidence in God's love, and then all of a sudden Paul says he is full of anguish. He hasn't even said why—he delays that for rhetorical effect until verse 3. He just said that nothing will be able to cut us off from the love of Christ, and yet he says, "For I could wish that I myself were cursed and cut off from Christ..." He is making a huge contrast, wishing for something he has just said is impossible.

What has filled him with anguish? It is for the sake of my people, those of my own race, the people of Israel (vv. 3-4). Just as Moses offered to give himself up for Israel (Ex. 32:32), Paul also says that he is willing to be cut off from salvation, if such were possible, so his people could be saved.

Why does he begin with a three-fold assertion that he is telling the truth? Probably because some people thought that Paul had abandoned his people.

Paul has deep concern for his people, and he is convinced that without Christ, they are headed for destruction, despite all their advantages. He lists some advantages: Theirs is the adoption; theirs the

divine glory, the covenants, the receiving of the law, the temple worship and the promises (v. 4).

Gentiles had many of these advantages, too—they can be adopted through Christ, offered the divine glory, a new covenant and wonderful promises. But Paul is referring to special events in Israel's history: when God adopted the nation at the exodus, when God's glory filled the tabernacle, the covenants given to Abraham, Moses, Levi and David, the sacrificial rituals and the promises given through the prophets.

Those things were a head start in salvation, one would think, but they hadn't helped much. The Jews were so proud of these good things that they were overlooking the best thing—Christ. If salvation is in Christ, then it's not in the law and the temple worship, and many Jews were not willing to admit the relative unimportance of something that had always been an important part of their culture and religion.

Paul lists two more Jewish advantages in verse 5: Theirs are the patriarchs, and from them is traced the human ancestry of the Messiah, who is God over all, forever praised! Amen. This verse is one of the few in which Jesus is called God. The grammar is sometimes debated, but it seems most likely that the Messiah is being called God and given a praise doxology appropriate to God. But Paul's main point here is that Jesus is a Jew, the fulfilment of the promises given to the patriarchs.

So if Israel has all this, what's the problem? Paul doesn't directly say! But he implies that since the Jews have rejected Jesus, they are missing out on salvation, which gives the appearance that God's promises to them have been broken.

God's freedom to choose

Paul begins to address the problem in verse 6: It is not as though God's word had failed. For not all who are descended from Israel are Israel. The root problem is whether God's word is true, whether he is faithful to his promises. Paul then points out that we can't expect all Jews to be inheritors of the promise.

In verse 7 Paul gives evidence: Nor because they are his descendants are they all Abraham's children. Some of Abraham's descendants are not counted as his children; they are disinherited. Paul quotes Genesis 21:12 as proof: It is through Isaac that your offspring will be reckoned. Ishmael was Abraham's son, but he was not counted as a descendent for the purpose of the promise—the promise was given to the children of Isaac.

In other words, it is not the natural children who are God's children, but it is the children of the promise who are regarded as Abraham's offspring. This was how the promise was stated: At the appointed time I

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will return, and Sarah will have a son (vv. 8-9, quoting Gen. 18:14). Only Isaac was a child of promise. But God's selectivity did not stop there—not even all the children of Isaac were counted among the chosen people.

Verses 10-13: Not only that, but Rebekah's children were conceived at the same time by our father Isaac. Yet, before the twins were born or had done anything good or bad—in order that God's purpose in election might stand: not by works but by him who calls—she was told, "The older will serve the younger" [Gen. 25:23]. Just as it is written [Mal. 1:2-3]: "Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated."

The word *hated* doesn't imply hate as we know it—the construction is a Hebrew figure of speech to emphasize the love for the other. God blessed Esau, but he did not choose him for the covenant he gave Israel. Instead, the promise was carried through the line of Jacob.

All this supports the point Paul made in verse 6: not all the Israelites are God's people. God can choose the people he works with, and when, and for what purpose. He had a special purpose for Israel, and he did not choose everyone for that role.

But Paul has not yet solved the problem he began with—if God is not giving salvation to all of Jacob's descendants, what good is it to be a descendent of Jacob? It looks like God is not keeping his promises.

God's freedom to give mercy

In verse 14, Paul approaches the question from a different angle: What then shall we say? Is God unjust? God chooses some people and not others, and this doesn't look fair—especially if you think that God made a promise to save all the Jews.

But Paul answers in verse 14: Not at all! For he says to Moses, "I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion" (Ex. 33:19). It's a matter of mercy, not justice. The surprise is not that some people are left out—the miracle is that some people are saved. God can give mercy to whomever he wants, without being unfair to the others (Matt. 20:15).

Paul concludes, It does not, therefore, depend on human desire or effort, but on God's mercy (v. 16). Salvation is by grace, not by what we want or do.

God's freedom to harden hearts

It is easy to show that mercy is fair, but Paul also has to include the opposite, because it seems that Israel is being hardened. He begins with the example of Pharaoh: For Scripture says to Pharaoh: "I raised you up for this very purpose, that I might display my power in you and that my name might be proclaimed in all the earth" (v. 17; Ex. 9:16). God tells Pharaoh: "I put you in a position of power so I could show the world that I have far more power.

You will be an object lesson of what happens to people who resist my purpose."

Therefore, Paul summarizes in verse 18, God has mercy on whom he wants to have mercy, and he hardens whom he wants to harden. Both of these can be fair. We have to accept what God does, and not judge him by our own understanding.

However, Paul knows that his case is more difficult, so he says in verse 19: One of you will say to me: "Then why does God still blame us? For who is able to resist his will?" The objection is that it's not fair for God to punish people for disobedience when he made them disobey. Paul does not say whether the accusation is true—he just pulls rank. Who are you, a mere human being, to talk back to God? He quotes Isaiah 29:16: Shall what is formed say to the one who formed it, "Why did you make me like this?"

Paul asks questions that emphasize the gulf between God and humans: Does not the potter have the right to make out of the same lump of clay some pottery for noble purposes and some for disposal of refuse? Here Paul refers to Jeremiah 18, where God says that he can change his plans for Israel depending on how *they* respond to him.

Then Paul asks another "what if" question: What if God, although choosing to show his wrath and make his power known, bore with great patience the objects of his wrath—prepared for destruction? (v. 22). The marvel is not that God rejects his people—it is that he is so patient with those who reject him.

God's freedom to call his people

In verses 23-24, Paul asks another "what if" or hypothetical question: What if he did this to make the riches of his glory known to the objects of his mercy, whom he prepared in advance for glory—even us, whom he also called, not only from the Jews but also from the Gentiles? What if God's patience is designed to help us appreciate his mercy? If God is patient with those who oppose him, how much more is he patient with those who turn to him?

Paul has dismissed the question about fairness and is now moving to statements about God's calling. He starts by showing from the Old Testament that God is saving not only Jews, but also Gentiles.

As he says in Hosea: "I will call them 'my people' who are not my people; and I will call her 'my loved one' who is not my loved one." In the very place where it was said to them, "You are not my people," they will be called "children of the living God" (Rom. 9:25-26, quoting Hos. 2:23 and 1:10). Hosea is talking about the restoration of Israelites who had fallen away, but Paul is adapting the verse to say

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that God is calling Gentiles, who had never been part of God's people.

God can reject Israelites who persistently reject him. He has no further obligation to them—they are in the same category as Gentiles. So, if he can make these rejected Israelites his people again, then he can make anyone his people. He can choose people he previously ignored, just as he did with Abraham and Israel. What God did with the Jews, he can also do with everyone else.

Paul moves into a slightly different idea when he quotes Isaiah 10:22: Though the number of the Israelites be like the sand by the sea, only the remnant will be saved. For the Lord will carry out his sentence on earth with speed and finality (vv. 27-28). The word *remnant* is important.

It is just as Isaiah said previously [in Isa. 1:9], Paul says in verse 29: Unless the Lord Almighty had left us descendants, we would have become like Sodom, we would have been like Gomorrah. The surprise is not that many Jews reject the message, but that some accept it. If we were left to ourselves, we would be desolate. But because God has been merciful, a remnant of people are responding. God's word has not failed—Isaiah's prophecy has come true. A remnant is being saved.

Israel missing the goal

"What then shall we say?" Paul asks in verses 30-31. That the Gentiles, who did not pursue righteousness, have obtained it, a righteousness that is by faith; but the people of Israel, who pursued the law as the way of righteousness, have not attained their goal." The Jews were trying hard to be righteous, but they failed, and God gave the Gentiles, who were ignoring it, righteousness.

Why did Israel not attain their goal? Because they were trying to be righteous through the law. They focused on the law that made them distinctive and failed to see that it was leading them to Christ. They had a good goal, but they were pursuing it in the wrong way. They pursued it not by faith but as if it were by works (v. 32). The Jews focused on their advantages, but those things are ineffective in salvation. What we need is faith in Christ.

They stumbled over the "stumbling stone"—Christ (v. 32). As it is written: "See, I lay in Zion a stone that causes people to stumble and a rock that makes them fall, and the one who believes in him will never be put to shame" (v. 33, quoting Isa. 28:16). The word of God predicted that most of the Jews would stumble against Christ, and that has come true. But the person who believes in Christ will be saved. A remnant will be saved.

In this chapter, Paul stated the problem—explaining that only a few of the Jews accept Jesus as the Christ. This should not be surprising, for it was predicted in Scripture. But that is not the end of the story, as we will see in the next two chapters.

Questions for discussion

- Have I ever wondered why Jews don't accept Jesus?
- How concerned am I for the salvation of my people? (v. 3)
- What advantages do I have in salvation? (v. 4)
- Is it fair for God to save some people and let others continue walking toward disaster? (v. 14)
- Is God fair, or are we even allowed to ask the question? (v. 20).
- If God saves a few Jews, does that solve the problem, or do I still have questions? (v. 27).

Michael Morrison

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The Gospel of Mark Lesson 13: Mark 2:1 - 12

A Lesson About Healing

A few days later, when Jesus again entered Capernaum, the people heard that he had come home. So many gathered that there was no room left, not even outside the door, and he preached the word to them. Some men came, bringing to him a paralytic, carried by four of them. Since they could not get him to Jesus because of the crowd, they made an opening in the roof above Jesus and, after digging through it, lowered the mat the paralysed man was lying on. When Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic, "Son, your sins are forgiven."

Now some teachers of the law were sitting there, thinking to themselves, "Why does this fellow talk like that? He's blaspheming! Who can forgive sins but God alone?"

Immediately Jesus knew in his spirit that this was what they were thinking in their hearts, and he said to them, "Why are you thinking these things? Which is easier: to say to the paralytic, 'Your sins are forgiven,' or to say, 'Get up, take your mat and walk'? But that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins...." He said to the paralytic, "I tell you, get up, take your mat and go home." He got up, took his mat and walked out in full view of them all. This amazed everyone and they praised God, saying, "We have never seen anything like this!"

This is a story about a lame man whose friends believed that Jesus could heal him. At last they found a way to get their friend before Jesus by opening the roof and letting him down by ropes attached to his bed. But Jesus didn't heal the man's lameness—he forgave his sins.

The teachers of the law didn't like that, and with good cause. How could a mere man forgive sins, something that only God had authority to do? Jesus knew their thoughts, and he asked them a question, "Which is easier, to say to the paralytic, 'Your sins are forgiven,' or to say, 'Get up, take your mat and walk'?"

It's a rhetorical question. Both statements would be impossible for anyone but God. If Jesus had authority to make the lame walk by merely uttering the word, then he also had authority to forgive sins, because the power to do either was in God's domain, not man's.

Today, a team of doctors might be able to restore the ability to walk to people with certain kinds of problems. Even after the operation, however, the person would still need a long period of therapy and rehabilitation. But no one, not even the finest doctor, can simply say, "Rise up and walk," and cause it to happen.

Which is easier?

Which is easier to say to a paralysed man, "Your sins are forgiven," or "Rise up and walk"? It seems to me that "Your sins are forgiven" is easier.

Why? Sins are between people and God, and their forgiveness is therefore invisible, like God is invisible. You can't see or taste the forgiveness of sins. You can see a leg fixed. It's physical. You can see the withered leg; you can see the whole leg; you can see the difference.

Anyone can say, "Your sins are forgiven," and there is no immediate evidence that the person is a fraud. If someone says to a paralytic, "Get up and walk," the evidence for or against the person's authority over sin is immediate and visible to all.

Evidence

The forgiveness of sins is something that becomes real to you as you believe it, not as you see it. The lame man in this story could not see his forgiveness; he could only decide whether to believe that what Jesus said was true. To believe it would lift a great burden of guilt and fear from his shoulders. It would bring joy, peace and comfort. To not believe it would leave him feeling the same old estrangement, alienation from God and fearful expectation of judgment.

The man's joy in being forgiven was experienced through faith, not through sight. The healing of his legs, on the other hand, was experienced through sight—he didn't need faith to walk; he simply had to get up.

Either way, it takes God, for no human could heal the legs or forgive the sins. That was Jesus' point. Sure, it's easy to say, "Your sins are forgiven," but how can anyone know for sure that the sins really are forgiven? So Jesus healed the man to show that when he says, "Your sins are forgiven," they really are forgiven.

By grace through faith

Salvation is by grace through faith. We receive it by grace—we don't do anything to get it; it's God's gift to us, free and clear. We don't get any document, title or deed as proof that it is done. We just have to believe it or not believe it.

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If we don't believe the gospel—this amazing good news that in Christ's life, death and resurrection we are saved—how can we experience that salvation? How can we enjoy and benefit from the knowledge of something if we don't even believe it is so?

Unless we believe the gospel is true, we will go on living as though Christ had not died and been raised for us. But when we believe the gospel, we are overwhelmed by the joy of what Christ has done for us. We begin to live abundantly in his love—resting in his love for us as well as showing his love to those around us.

Can God heal your physical ailments? Yes. Does he heal the physical ailments of everyone who asks? No. What does he say to everyone who asks? He says what he said to the paralysed man, "Your sins are forgiven." Which is more important?

A sign

Jesus told the Pharisees, "So that you may know that the Son of man has power on earth to forgive sins, I say to the lame man, 'Rise up and walk.'" To believers, this is unnecessary. We already believe that the Son of man has power to forgive sins. We don't need a sign of Jesus' power to demonstrate the fact that he has authority to forgive sins. We feel it and know it as the Holy Spirit bears witness with our spirit (Romans 8:16).

Believers didn't need visible signs that their sins are forgiven. Signs are usually for unbelievers. Paul was an unbeliever and an enemy of the gospel, in that he persecuted believers. When Jesus appeared to him in person on the road to Damascus, he became a believer. Many others became believers when they witnessed the signs given by Jesus and the apostles. Sometimes, though, we wish we did have a sign, because we fall into doubt about the things God has told us. We sometimes doubt whether God really loves us. We often doubt whether God really has forgiven us. Sometimes we even doubt, though we hate to admit it, whether God is really there at all. And our doubt makes us worry all the more that if God is there; he must not love and forgive sinners and doubters like us.

Our Saviour is Jesus. Faith doesn't save us, Jesus does. In our moments of strong faith, we trust him completely and all fear is gone. In our moments of doubt, we fear condemnation. May we learn to trust Jesus to have faith for us when we are in doubt, for it is his righteousness and his faith on our behalf that God accepts. Jesus represents us before God. He stands in for us. And it is for his sake that we are clean and saved. Let our faith be in Jesus, not in our faith.

Myth about physical healing

A rumour goes around that if people really trusted God for healing, they would be healed. So when people aren't healed, they feel guilty. They look for the

supposed "secret sin" that is keeping them from being healed. Christian friends and family may tell them they need to pray that God will show them their sins so that he can heal them. They might tell the sick person that he or she needs more faith, and prescribe more prayer and Bible study and fasting as the way to get God to heal them.

That's not gospel; it's religion. It's superstition. It reduces God to the level of the ancient pagan gods, tyrants, who cared little for the plight of humans and acted only when they had something to gain, or when a stronger god forced them to. The Father of Jesus Christ is not like those gods.

Religion, as a formula for getting right with God, has no place in the gospel. Our relationship with God is not a business transaction: you, human, bring me six chickens and say the magic words and then I will be good to you. Our relationship with God does not and did not start with us. It started with God, God sees it through, and its foundation is his love, not his convenience.

The reason we pray, as Jesus did, "Your will, not mine, be done," is that God's will for us is unwaveringly good, never bad. God is not vindictive; he is love. In this, in his commitment to love us and see us through all things, he does not change (Malachi 3:6). In this, Jesus Christ is the same, yesterday, today and forever (Hebrews 13:8). That's what all this covenant business is about—it's about God's faithfulness to be our God and for us to be his people. It's not about our faithfulness, because if it were, it would be over. God is faithful to his word of promise to love us regardless of what we do.

If we live as his enemies, in constant ungodliness, giving little or no regard to our Maker and Redeemer and his good plans for us, then our lives can never be anything more than the miserable, selfish stabs at happiness that we can conjure up for ourselves. But God is no less faithful to us, regardless of what we do. He continues to leave his door open and the porch light on, even when we are holed up in our shack with our door barred shut. He stands out there and knocks, even when we put in our earplugs and crawl under the bed.

The point is: God is faithful. That's how he is, and that's how he will always be. When you look at Jesus Christ, you see how God is. He sacrifices himself for sinners, and calls on the Father to forgive even those whose greed, pride, selfish ambition and jealousy led them to torture and murder him. In that, we all have a stake; we all have greed, pride, selfish ambition and jealousy. But for Christ's sake, God forgives us. Because he is faithful, because he is true to who he is: Lover and Redeemer of his creation.

We pray for healing, but we trust ourselves to the One who cares for us. We believe he will do what is right

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and good for us. We live by faith, resting in his hands, because he is good.

The main thing

Like the paralytic, we know our sins are forgiven, and that's what really matters. If we are healed physically too, that's an added blessing. But we should remember that the paralytic died. Lazarus, who was raised from the dead, died. Every person who was ever healed eventually died, and unless Jesus comes back before we die, we'll die too, whether we were ever healed of a disease or not.

Physical healing is great, and we praise God for the wonderful healings he has given and continues to give, but we look ultimately to something that lasts forever. Like those cited as examples of faith in the

book of Hebrews, we look for a better country, a permanent one, a heavenly one, promised to us by the One who is faithful (Hebrews 11:13-16). Praise God, our sins are forgiven!

Reflection

- Have you doubted God's love for you? What do you think caused your doubt?
- Why do you believe God has forgiven your sins?
- How would you describe God to a small child?
- What is the most memorable time in your life when God gave you help?

J. Michael Fezell

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If you would like to discuss with us any information printed in this free booklet please contact:

The Mooroolbark Christian Fellowship

Tel. (03) 9726 8898