



# *Bible Study Guide*

## *No. 29*

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## The Radical Consequences of Justification

By Thomas F. Torrance

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**J**ustification means justification by Christ alone—that is the reference of the expressions *sola fide, sola gratia, sola scriptura*, used in Reformed theology. Justification means that we look exclusively to Christ, and therefore that we look away from ourselves altogether in order to live out of Him alone.

That radical nature of justification is expressed and its radical consequences drawn by the Scots Confession: "We willingly spoil ourselves of all honour and glory of our own salvation and redemption, as we also do of our regeneration and sanctification".

This is something that very badly needs to be reiterated today within the Churches of the Reformation. Justification by Christ alone means the rejection of all forms of self-justification and all forms of justification by anything or out of any source other than Jesus Christ. Let us consider what this means in several areas of doctrine and life.

### **Natural goodness**

(a) At the Reformation, Justification by the Grace of Christ alone was seen to set aside all natural goodness, and all works-righteousness; but this applies to all goodness, Christian goodness as well, that is, to "sanctification" as it came to be called. The Scots Confession in several articles, such as the twelfth and the fifteenth, powerfully drives this home. All that we do is unworthy, so that we must fall down before you and unfeignedly confess that we are unprofitable servants—and it is precisely Justification by the free Grace of Christ alone that shows us that all that we are and have done even as believers is called in question.

Justification by Grace alone remains the sole ground of the Christian life; we never advance beyond it, as if justification were only the beginning of a new self-righteousness, the beginning of a life of sanctification, which is what we do in response to justification. Of course we are summoned to live out day by day what we already are in Christ through His self-consecration or sanctification, but sanctification is not what we do in addition to what God has done in justification. And yet that is the tendency of the Westminster Catechisms, where we

have a return to the Roman notion of infused sanctification that has to be worked out through strict obedience to legal precepts—hence the exposition of the Ten Commandments takes up the greater part of the Catechisms.

But the Scots Confession laid the axe to the root of any such movement when it insisted that we have to spoil ourselves even of our own regeneration and sanctification as well as justification. What is "axed" so radically was the notion of "co-redemption" which in our day has again become so rampant, not only in the Roman Church, but in Liberal and Evangelical Protestantism, e.g., the emphasis upon existential decision as the means whereby we "make real" for ourselves the *kerugma* [proclamation] of the New Testament, which means that in the last resort our salvation depends upon our own personal or existential decision. That is the exact antithesis of the Reformed doctrine of election, which rests salvation upon the prior and objective decision of God in Christ. It is Justification by Grace alone that guards the Gospel from corruption by "Evangelicals," "Liberals," and Romans alike.

### **Natural knowledge**

(b) Justification by the Grace of Christ alone calls in question not only all natural goodness but all natural knowledge. Natural knowledge is as much the work of the flesh as natural goodness; it is a work of the natural man.

It is at this point that Karl Barth has made such an immense contribution to the Reformation. We cannot separate knowing and being for they belong to the same man, and it is the whole man, with his knowing and his acting, with the whole of his being, who is called in question by Justification.

Justification puts us in the right and truth of God and therefore tells us that we are in untruth.

Now, let it be clear that Justification by Grace alone does not mean that there is no natural goodness in man, but that man with his natural goodness is called in question. Jesus Christ died for the whole man (with his good and his evil) not for part of him, the evil part, but for the whole man. He died for all men, the good and the bad, and all alike come under the total judgment of His Death and Resurrection; all

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alike have to be born again in Him, and made new creatures.

That is the radical nature of the Gospel, which becomes so clear to us when we communicate at the Holy Table in the Body and Blood of our Lord, for there we feel ashamed for our whole being, for our good as well as for our evil. But the same applies to our natural knowledge.

Justification by the Grace of Christ alone does not mean that there is no natural knowledge—what natural man is there who does not know something of God even if he holds it down in unrighteousness or turns the truth into a lie? But it does mean that the whole of that natural knowledge is called in question by Christ, who when He comes to us says: "If any man will come after me, let him deny himself, take up his cross and follow me."

The whole man with his natural knowledge is there questioned down to the root of his being, for man is summoned to look away from all that he is and knows or thinks he knows to Christ who is the Way, the Truth, and the Life; no one goes to the Father but by Him.

The theology of Barth can be described, then, as the application of Justification of the whole realm of man's life, to the realm of his knowing as well as the realm of his doing. In that, he has sought to follow through the radical consequences of the Reformation from which our forefathers resiled (def: recoiled, withdrew) led when they took refuge again, like the Romans, in the works of the natural man, for justification.

But if we are to take the Scots Confession seriously, then we have to apply this not only to natural knowledge but to all Christian knowledge; we have to learn to spoil ourselves of our own vaunted knowledge, we have to let our own theology be called into radical question, by Christ.

If we translate the word "justification" by the word "verification," we can see the startling relevance of this to modern theological and philosophical discussions. Justification by Grace alone tells us that verification of our faith or knowledge on any other grounds or out of any other source, than Jesus Christ, is to be set aside.

Justification has an epistemological as well as an ethical reference - epistemologically it insists that the only legitimate demonstration of Christian truth is that which is in accordance with its nature, which is Grace, and that to seek justification of it on any other ground is not only fundamentally false in itself but to falsify the Gospel at its very basis.

But apart from the contemporary debate on "verification," Justification means that at every point in our theological inquiry we have to let our knowledge, our theology, our formulations, our

statements, be called into question by the very Christ toward whom they point, for He alone is the Truth. Justification means that our theological statements are of such a kind that they do not claim to have truth in themselves, for by their very nature they point away from themselves to Christ as the one Truth of God. Therefore whenever we claim that our theological statements or our formulations have their truth in themselves we are turning back into the way of self-justification.

Out of sheer respect for the majesty of the Truth as it is revealed in the Holy Scriptures, we have to do our utmost to speak correctly and exactly about it—that is the meaning of orthodoxy and the way of humility—but when we have done all this, we have still to confess that we are unfaithful servants, that all our efforts fall far short of the truth.

Far from seeking justification on the ground of our "orthodoxy," we can only serve the Truth faithfully if we point away from our statements and ourselves to Christ Himself, and direct all eyes to Him alone. He who boasts of orthodoxy thus sins against Justification by Christ alone, for he justifies himself by appeal to his own beliefs or his own formulations of belief and thereby does despite to the Truth and Grace of Christ. Once a Church begins to boast of its "orthodoxy" it begins to fall from Grace.

### **Tradition**

(c) Justification by the Grace of Christ alone calls in question all tradition. The radical consequence of Justification was keenly felt in this direction at the Reformation. Concentration upon the Word of God, the self-utterance of the Truth, and the acknowledgment of its primacy, cut the strings of prejudice and prejudgment and made clear the path of faith and obedience.

Justification here meant that faith is determined by the objective Word of God as its ultimate authority, and so it was freed from the shackles of every lesser authority, for devotion to the Truth of the Word (the whole Truth and nothing but the Truth) inculcated a readiness to rethink all preconceptions and to put all traditional ideas to the test face to face with the Word.

In other words, sheer attachment to the Word of God as the real object of knowledge meant detachment from all other sources and norms of knowledge, and the demand that all traditional ideas and notions had to be tested at the bar of the Word. That did not mean that tradition was to be despised, but that it was to be subjected to the criticism of the Word and the Spirit, and corrected through conformity to Jesus Christ.

The Reformation stood, therefore, for the supremacy of the Word over all tradition, and for theological activity as the repentant rethinking of all tradition

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face to face with the Revelation of God in Jesus Christ. But that applies no less to the Reformed and Evangelical tradition; to our Presbyterian tradition as well as to the Roman tradition.

When we examine our own position today, it is astonishing to find how close we have come to the Roman view even in the Church of Scotland. How frequently, for example, we find that appeal is made to "Christian instinct" or to "the mind of the Church" over against the plain utterances of Holy Scripture, and often just at those places where the Word of God offends our will, opposes our habits, or cuts against the grain of our desire!

And how massive is the effect of our several traditions upon the interpretations of the Bible! How easy it is to allow the Presbyterian tradition to determine our reading of the New Testament, especially when it is a question of justifying our tradition before the critique of others!

There can be no doubt that every one of the great Churches of the Reformation—the Lutheran, the Anglican, and the Reformed—has developed its own masterful tradition, and that that tradition today exercises massive influence not only over its way of interpreting the Bible and formulating its doctrine but over the whole shape and direction of its life.

Those who shut their eyes to this fact are precisely those who are most enslaved to the dominant power of tradition just because it has become an unconscious canon and norm of their thinking.

It is high time we asked again whether the Word of God really does have free course amongst us and whether it is not after all bound and fettered by the traditions of men. The tragedy, apparently, is that the very structures of our Churches represent the fossilization of traditions that have grown up by practice and procedure, have become so hardened in self-justification that even the Word of God can hardly crack them open. There is scarcely a Church that claims to be *ecclesia reformata* [church reformed] that can truthfully claim to be *semper reformanda* [always reformed].

### Systems and orders

(d) Justification by Christ alone calls in question all systems and orders, and calls them in question because Jesus Christ alone is central and supreme in the one Church of God. In any true theological system, Justification is by reference to Christ alone, for conformity to Christ as the Truth of God for us is the one ultimate principle of unity.

Likewise Justification in ecclesiastical order or polity ought to be through appeal to Christ alone. Our quarrel with the Church of Rome in doctrinal matters concerns the centrality of Jesus Christ, the primacy and supremacy of Christology which is so

obscured and compromised by Roman doctrines of merit and tradition, and above all by Mariology.

In our debate with the Church of England over questions of order, we are also concerned with the centrality of Christ, and the primacy of Christology—and therefore the doctrine of the Church as the Body of Christ is in the forefront.

It is Justification by Christ alone that makes it so, for He alone is the ground and Head of the Church, and in Him alone is the Church's unity constituted and its order maintained. But for that very reason Justification by Christ alone disallows any appeal from one Church to another for recognition of its orders, as it also rebukes the self-justification of a Church in calling in question the orders of another Church.

Justification by Christ alone means that we renounce the way of the flesh in seeking honour from men, or justification from one another; and therefore

Justification by Christ alone means that in any movement for reconciliation between Churches, the question of the recognition of orders cannot have priority without radical betrayal of the Reformation, nay, without radical betrayal of Christ for He is thereby ousted from His place of centrality.

It becomes more and more clear that in the ecumenical movement it is the doctrine of Justification by Christ alone that is at stake, and that it can just as easily be sinned against by those who shout loudest that they are upholding the Reformation tradition as by those who make no such boast. He is truest to the Reformation tradition who is always ready to subject it to the ruthless questioning of the Word of God.

### Ministry and worship

(e) Nowhere does Justification by Christ alone have more radical consequences than in regard to the pastoral ministry. Justification by Christ is grounded upon His mighty act in which He took our place, substituting Himself for us under the divine judgment, and substituting Himself for us in the obedient response He rendered to God in worship and thanksgiving and praise.

In Himself He has opened up a way to the Father, so that we may approach God solely through Him and on the ground of what He has done and is—therefore we pray in His Name, and whatever we do, we do in His Name before God. Thus the whole of our worship and ministry reposes upon the substitutionary work of Christ.

Now the radical nature of that is apparent from the fact that through substituting Himself in our place there takes place a displacement of our humanity by the humanity of Christ—that is why Jesus insists that we can only follow Him by denying ourselves,

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by letting Him displace us from a place of centrality, and by letting Him take our place.

At the Reformation this doctrine had immediate effect in the overthrow of Roman sacerdotalism—Jesus Christ is our sole Priest. He is the one and only Man who can mediate between us and God, so that we approach God solely through the mediation of the Humanity of Jesus, through His incarnate Priesthood.

When the Humanity of Christ is depreciated or whenever it is obscured by the sheer majesty of His Deity, then the need for some other human mediation creeps in; hence in the Dark and Middle Ages arose the need for a human priesthood to mediate between sinful humanity and the exalted Christ, the majestic Judge and King.

There was of course no denial of the Deity of Christ by the Reformers—on the contrary, they restored the purity of faith in Christ as God through overthrowing the accretions that compromised it; but they also restored the place occupied in the New Testament and the Early Church by the Humanity of Christ, as He who took our human nature in order to be our Priest, as He who takes our side and is our Advocate before the judgment of God, and who once and for all has wrought out atonement for us in His sacrifice on the Cross, and therefore as He who eternally stands in for us as our heavenly Mediator and High Priest.

The Church on earth lives and acts only as it is directed by its heavenly Lord, and only in such a way that His Ministry is reflected in the midst of its ministry and worship. Therefore from first to last the worship and ministry of the Church on earth must be governed by the fact that Christ substitutes Himself in our place, and that our humanity with its own acts of worship, is displaced by His, so that we appear before God not in our own name, not in our own significance, not in virtue of our own acts of confession, contrition, worship, and thanksgiving, but solely in the name of Christ and solely in virtue of what He has done in our name and on our behalf, and in our stead.

Justification by Christ alone means that from first to last in the worship of God and in the ministry of the Gospel, Christ Himself is central, and that we draw near in worship and service only through letting Him take our place. He only is Priest. He only represents humanity. He only has an offering with which to appear before God and with which God is well pleased. He only presents our prayers before God, and He only is our praise and thanksgiving and worship as we appear before the face of the Father. Nothing in our hands we bring—simply to His Cross we cling.

But what has happened in Protestant worship and ministry? Is it not too often the case that the whole

life and worship of the congregation revolves round the personality of the minister? He is the one who is in the centre; he offers the prayers of the congregation; he it is who mediates "truth" through his personality, and he it is who mediates between the people and God through conducting the worship entirely on his own.

Nowhere is this more apparent than in the case of the popular minister where everything centres on him, and the whole life of the congregation is built round him. What is that but Protestant sacerdotalism, sacerdotalism which involves the displacement of the Humanity of Christ by the humanity of the minister, and the obscuring of the Person of Christ by the personality of the minister? How extraordinary that Protestantism should thus develop a new sacerdotalism, to be sure a psychological rather than a sacramental sacerdotalism, but a sacerdotalism nonetheless, in which it is the personality of the minister which both mediates the Word of God to man and mediates the worship of man to God!

Protestant Churches are full of these "psychological priests" and more and more they evolve a psychological cult and develop a form of psychological counselling which displaces the truly pastoral ministry of Christ. How frequently, for example, the minister's prayers are so crammed with his own personality (with all its boring idiosyncrasies!) that the worshipper cannot get past him in order to worship God in the name of Christ—but is forced to worship God in the name of the minister!

How frequently the sermon is not an exposition of the Word of God but an exposition of the minister's own views on this or that subject! And how frequently the whole life of the congregation is so built up on the personality of the minister that when he goes the congregation all but collapses or dwindles away!

There can be no doubt that the whole concept of the ministry and of worship in our Reformed Churches needs to be brought back to the criticism of the Word of God in order that we may learn again the meaning of Justification by Christ alone in the midst of the Church's life and work.

Jesus Christ must be given His rightful place by being set right in the centre, as Head and Lord of the Church, as its sole Prophet and Priest and King, and that means in the midst of our preaching, in the basic notion of the ministerial office, in the fundamental mode of worship, and in the whole life of the congregation as the Body of Christ alone.

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**Teens In Small Churches**

By Jonathan Buck

*Pastor: Barrie, Huntsville, North Bay, Peterborough, and Sudbury congregations*

**M**ost weeks our 15-year-old son is the only teenager at church services. He has no friends even close to his age and there's none of the usual bait that churches dangle out to attract teens to church, like a youth worship band or a zillion activities.

At times I worry he's missing out on a whole chunk of his life—spiritually as well as socially. I've often wondered, then, if we as a family should attend a church with a high-octane youth program that offers missions overseas and a summer camp with impressive baptism statistics. Well, why not, if it makes life more exciting and increases our son's chances of becoming a turned-on Christian?

On the other hand, can God not call our son right just where he is? Does he have to attend a church full of artificially pumped-up action to win him over? Or can teenagers in small churches turn out just as balanced socially and spiritually as the rocket-powered teens in large churches?

But how do you keep your kids coming to church when there's nothing much for them to come to? Oh, I hear what the Christian youth gurus say, that it's vital we get our teens to "take ownership" of the church and involved in the worship service, but what if your child isn't the praying type, doesn't like leading songs or taking ownership of anything but the food table? What do you do then?

Well, after thrashing all this around in our minds and checking out youth programs in other churches, my wife and I concluded that God knows our circumstances and he certainly knows our son, so our best bet is to stay where we're at and love the lad, whether he comes to church or not, and let God take care of the rest. With that in mind, we're not putting any pressure on him to be somebody he isn't, and whether he gets involved in services or not, is entirely up to him. Frankly, we're just glad our son comes to church at all, for no other reason than it's lovely to have him with us. And if he doesn't end up a spiritual superstar, it doesn't matter. Missionary whiz kid or disinterested observer, God loves him either way.

Having said that, we also deeply appreciate even the tiniest efforts made by others to make church attractive to a lonely teenager and get him involved. What made my son look forward to church for many a month, for instance, was a man in his 80s who always came to church with a box of donuts and on entering the hall each week he'd get my son to taste

one to see if they were up to standard! It wasn't much, but that one little gesture made a world of difference for our boy, and I bet it stays with him as a memory for life.

As a memory of what, though? Of knowing what it's like to be loved. And isn't that what church is for? It's the best place on earth, outside one's own family, for experiencing the heart of the gospel, which is knowing you're loved. And knowing you're loved can happen just as effectively in a small church as a large one. My wife and I can both vouch for that, having also spent our teenage years in a small church with only two other teenagers. We loved getting involved because the adults enjoyed our company and appreciated our help.

And here we are, a generation later, with our own son now helping out in church, and clearly for the same reasons. He shovels snow off the pathway to the hall entrance, helps the soundman carry in his equipment, sets and resets chairs before and after services and sweats a bucket keeping the little kids amused. None of what he does is massively spiritual or exciting, but he does it without being asked and without any incentive or reward—and without any high-powered youth program, either. It remains to be seen if he'll keep coming to church, but in my mind the church has already done its job because in knowing he's loved my son carries the heart of the gospel with him wherever he goes—in the church or out of it.

But what if geography and circumstance land you in a small congregation that isn't youth-minded at all? Maybe the adults are fed up with trying to "win the youth to church" because they've done it for years only to see most of their teens leave the church anyway. It can be disheartening, but small churches have taught me that any gesture of love by an adult to a teenager can have a lasting impact. I just asked my son, for instance, what kind of donuts the 80-year-old man used to bring. It took him just seconds to remember!

Perhaps in small churches the impact of adults on teens is greater and more frequent, too, because teens and adults have little else to do other than work and mix together. All available bodies are needed and appreciated, just like a family. Having grown up in a church like that myself, and now having seen the same impact of a church like that on my son, I am convinced the size of a church doesn't matter. God can reach our kids wherever they are.

## **How To Make Your Congregation Youth Friendly**

By Ted Johnson

*Co-director of Generations Ministry for the US Worldwide Church of God*

All Christians share in the challenge and responsibility of making our congregations places where people of all ages are encouraged and enabled to become increasingly mature disciples of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. That mission involves helping others meet Christ, know Christ and serve with Christ. A primary aspect of this disciple making challenge is to engage youths (children, teens and college-age young adults) in the life of each of our congregations. If we are to do that, we each need to contribute to making our congregations more youth-friendly. This article is written to help us in this important work.

### **Why should we care?**

Before looking at how we can create youth-friendly congregations, let's first ask, why should we care? Let me share some important answers to this legitimate question.

1. People need the Lord—and that includes young people. Jesus came to seek and save the lost—and children and teens who do not know Jesus are as lost as adults apart from Christ. We share in Jesus' work to seek and save lost youths when we invite, bring and welcome lost youths into a youth-friendly congregation.
2. The church is always one generation away from extinction and thus youths are the church's future. While we do not fear extinction (believing Jesus' promises that the church will prevail), we do have the responsibility to work to see that the church continues into the next generation.
3. As workers in Jesus' harvest of souls, we are sent to go where fruit is both present and ripe for harvest. The experience of the church throughout Christian history shows that children and teens are a significant harvest field. Studies show that most Christians in our culture come to Christ before age 18 (with most of those doing so before age 14). God is doing a particularly fruitful work among children and teens—throughout the world—including our fellowship. We have both the opportunity and responsibility to join him in this important part of the harvest.
4. Jesus showed in his earthly ministry that youths are to be full participants in the work of the church. By scolding his disciples for making it difficult for children to come to him, Jesus shows us that the

church is to be a place where children are sought out and welcomed.

### **Four essential needs**

Having addressed the why of making our congregations more youth-friendly, let's now discuss the how by asking, what does a youth-friendly congregation look like? Following are several indicators for your consideration.

A youth-friendly congregation works to meet the four essential needs that are shared by all youths. (The basic content of this list and some of the ideas for the rest of this article are taken from *The Youth Friendly Parish* by Michael Anderson.)

First, young people need a sense of belonging. They need a meaningful place in a group that they value—where they feel they belong. For us, this means they are able to say, "This is my church."

But many young people don't find a sense of belonging in church. They might be more apt to say, "This is my parents' church." Our goal and challenge is to help them find a sense of belonging in our congregation.

Second, young people need respect rooted in valued skills. They need to be helped to develop skills to serve within the group, and then they need to have those skills affirmed as valued by the group. Many youths in church feel like unneeded and unappreciated appendages. Our goal and challenge is to equip our youths and then give them a meaningful place in real ministry.

Third, youths need a sense of self-worth. This is related to the second need, but goes even further, where youths feel accepted and valued for simply being—for their presence as people, not merely for their contribution as workers. Our goal and challenge is to consistently show our youths that they are deeply valued and loved as individuals.

Fourth, youths need reliable and predictable relationships. In particular, they need a few relatively close relationships with members in the group. Our goal and challenge is to see that each youth is connected to other youths in friendships and to at least one adult in a mentoring relationship. Youths spend much of their lives—particularly during their teen years—searching out the fulfilment of these four needs. To do so is not selfish, nor

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ungodly. Rather, these needs are part of how God has made us.

Certainly youths can seek to meet these needs in unhealthy, ungodly ways (in gangs or cults, for example), but in our congregations they should have these needs met in ways that help them come to know Jesus and then grow as his followers.

### Reaching out

Let me encourage each of us who are adults to ask how we might reach out to youths in our congregations to help them meet these needs. In addition to the ideas noted above, consider the following:

1. Give youths opportunities to learn and then to perform tasks that are valued within the congregation. For example, they might participate in scripture reading, music performance, ushering, gathering the offering or serving as a greeter. Note that it is important to train them for these tasks so that they do them well. As they perform well, tell them. Show respect based on real achievement.

2. Look for opportunities to affirm young people—send them the message that they are special and essential to you and thus to the congregation. We often send a contrary message by ignoring young people, interacting with them only when we need to correct them. But for them to feel loved and appreciated, positive interactions need to far outnumber the negative.

We can have positive, affirming interactions in various ways. For example, remember and use their names; send them birthday cards or handwritten notes any time of year. Spend time talking with them—give focused attention; if they are small children, get down on their level, eye-to-eye. Ask for their input and then use it.

3. Pray with and for the young people. Have a list in your congregation of youths for whom you are continuously praying. And let them know you are praying for them (but don't brag about it)—ask them for concerns and needs they have that you can address in your prayers.

4. Spend time with a few youths. Many youths spend little time with adults. Try to provide a few youths with such opportunities and do not confuse taking a kid along on an adult activity as spending time with them. Get into their world—and be a mature, wise, caring and consistent presence with them where they are. It will pay big dividends in their lives.

5. Learn about their world. Respect the youths enough to go to the effort to get to know their

concerns, culture, needs, preferences and challenges. Find out what they watch on television and in movies; what they listen to; what they read. How do you do that? Ask them and then listen lovingly and non-judgmentally.

The point here is not for an adult to act like a teen (trust me, teens hate that)—rather the point is for the adult to understand the teen. A second part of this approach is to look for what is good and godly in the youth's world and then use that as a bridge to connect your world of Christ with what is consistent with Christ in their world.

6. Really listen. One of the greatest desires of young people (teens in particular) is to be heard. Youths are often timid around adults, so it will take some time for them to learn to trust you with their inner thoughts. Therefore, be patient and keep an open ear.

### Working together

Having considered some ways to meet the needs of youths, let us now consider how we can work together to see that these things are happening more consistently and intentionally in our congregations. I recommend to you the following specific strategies:

1. Provide at church a setting in which teens can gather to express and discuss their needs and fears. Providing a teen small group moderated by a caring and mature Christian adult can do this. The small group could meet before or after services, or during the teaching part of the main service (though the better strategy is to make the main service entirely teen friendly and then have the teen small group before or after main church).

2. Provide times when youths can get away together and with caring, mature Christian adults. Retreats are great. So are trips to fun places. Many groups of congregations offer Discovery Weekends, SEP camps and other events for youths. Take advantage of these opportunities to build closeness among your youths and for them to bond more closely with adult sponsors and leaders.

3. Plug your youths—your teens in particular—into meaningful, consistent ministry within your congregation. Do not just have a youth day at church a couple of times a year when the teens take over the worship service. Rather, give them a place in ministry week-in and week-out.

For example, do you have youths on your worship team? How about a drama team? Are youths frequently offering congregational prayers and helping with ushering. Do you have a mature youth on your congregation's advisory council? Think

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about how youths can be active in all the ministries of the congregation.

Much more can be said about helping your congregation to be more youth-friendly. I will stop here; however, and simply ask that you take this challenge personally. You cannot do everything, but you can do something.

I ask that you pray about this, asking God what he would have you do, given your circumstances, your abilities and your gifts. God wants to use you to co-minister in his disciple making work with children, teens and college-age young adults. Seek his direction and he will grant it to you.

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# Entering God's Rest

## A study of Hebrews 4

**T**he letter to the Hebrews weaves theology and practical application. After each doctrinal section, it urges the readers to do something as a result. This often takes the form of "Therefore, let us do such and such."

As part of that pattern, chapter 4 begins with the word therefore, meaning that the exhortations we read in chapter 4 are built on a point made earlier. So our study of chapter 4 must begin with a review of chapter 3. Chapter 3 tells us to look to Jesus, because he is superior to the angels and to Moses. To make the point, he quotes Psalm 95:7-11:

"Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts as you did in the rebellion, during the time of testing in the desert, where your fathers tested and tried me and for forty years saw what I did. That is why I was angry with that generation, and I said, 'Their hearts are always going astray, and they have not known my ways.' So I declared on oath in my anger, 'They shall never enter my rest'" (Heb. 3:7-11).

Don't be like your unbelieving, disobedient ancestors, he says. They refused God so many times that he set them aside and shut them out. Don't test his patience he seems to say. Listen to what God is saying now.

To develop this point, he elaborates on the last part of the quote from Psalm 95: "They shall never enter my rest." What is this rest, and what can we learn from it in connection with Jesus? This brings us to chapter 4.

### How we enter

"Therefore, since the promise of entering his rest still stands, let us be careful that none of you be found to have fallen short of it" (4:1). We can paraphrase the thought in this way: God makes it possible for us to enter his rest, so we need to make sure that we accept his offer. If we do not keep our faith in him (the main exhortation of this book), we will fail to enter.

How do we enter? Verse 2 tells us, "For we also have had the gospel preached to us, just as they did;

but the message they heard was of no value to them, because those who heard did not combine it with faith." The author urges us to be diligent, then he talks about the gospel. This implies that we enter God's rest by means of the gospel.

The ancient Israelites had the gospel in a veiled form, in symbols such as the bronze snake, the washings, the sacrifices and festivals. But despite the miracles, the people did not have faith in God and the message did not do them any good.

We do not have to make the same mistake. "Now we who have believed enter that rest" (v. 3). Believe what? Believe the gospel. All who look to Jesus, who have faith in Jesus, are entering God's rest.

But wait! Didn't God rest thousands of years ago? How can it be possible for us to enter something that is long gone? The author deals with this by bringing up the objection: "And yet his work has been finished since the creation of the world. For somewhere he has spoken about the seventh day in these words: 'And on the seventh day God rested from all his work'" (vs. 3-4).

Genesis tells us that God rested on the seventh day (Gen. 2:2). That is, he had finished the creation. (He continues to work in the sense of upholding all things.) But the author of Hebrews observes that God's work has been finished ever since, which means that God is still resting.

God is still in his rest, and it is open for humans to enter. It was available for the ancient Israelites; otherwise there would be no point in saying, "They shall never enter my rest" (v. 5). Even though they refused to enter, God's rest was available to them.

### Still available for us

God's rest is available to us, too: "It still remains that some will enter that rest" (v. 6). The offer is still open, and it is made even more clear and compelling through Jesus Christ.

The Israelites at the time of Moses, "who formerly had the gospel preached to them, did not go in, because of their disobedience" (v. 6). Their disobedience was evidence of their lack of faith.

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They did not believe that God would give them what he had promised.

"Therefore God again set a certain day, calling it Today, when a long time later he spoke through David, as was said before: `Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts'" (v. 7). Many years after Moses, God again spoke about rest, urging people to not harden their hearts and thereby fail to enter his rest. Hear him today, David urged. The offer was still good. People could enter God's rest, could be secure in his promise, if they listened with faith and willingness.

The author then eliminates another possibility: "For if Joshua had given them rest, God would not have spoken later about another day" (v. 8). The "rest" that Psalm 95 was speaking of was not the Promised Land. It was something that the Israelites, with few exceptions, failed to enter. They did not respond to God with faith and willingness.

### Our Sabbath-rest

The author then concludes: "There remains, then, a Sabbath-rest for the people of God" (v. 9). Is he bringing up a new subject? No--he is still on the same subject, using different words to develop it further. He is saying, Since people did not enter God's rest in Moses' day, nor in Joshua's day, and yet we are still exhorted in the Psalms about God's rest, the conclusion is that this rest still remains for the people of God today. It is still available.

Why does he call this a Sabbath-rest? He is not slipping in a command for the seventh-day Sabbath. That would be totally out of context. His exhortation throughout this book is telling Jewish people to look to Jesus. He is not urging them to do a better job of keeping Jewish customs.

The ancient Israelites, who had the Sabbath, did not enter the rest he is talking about. God's rest is entered by faith--by believing the gospel (vs. 3-4). The author is not interested in a day of the week--he is concerned about how people respond to Jesus. A person who keeps the weekly Sabbath but rejects Christ has not entered God's rest. We enter God's rest only by believing the gospel of Jesus Christ. Why then does he call this a Sabbath-rest? By using this word, he indicates that this is what the Sabbath pointed to. Just as the bronze snake pointed to Jesus' crucifixion, and the washings pointed to forgiveness, and the sacrifices pointed to Jesus, similarly, the weekly Sabbath pointed to something spiritual: our rest through faith in Christ.

It is available--we may enter God's rest. Don't put it off--do it today!

"Anyone who enters God's rest also rests from his own work, just as God did from his" (v. 10). God rested from his creative work, but what kind of work do we rest from? What do we quit doing when we

come to have faith in Christ? The work of trying to earn our salvation, the work of trying to qualify for the kingdom. When we look to Jesus for our salvation, we quit looking to ourselves.

### Practical applications

The author again draws a practical conclusion: "Let us, therefore, make every effort to enter that rest, so that no one will fall by following their example of disobedience" (v. 11). Since the rest is available to us, let's enter it with faith. Ironically this requires effort, not passivity. If we disobey God by refusing his Son, we will fall!

Why should we be so careful to respond? "For the word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart" (v. 12).

Just as Psalm 95 said, we must hear God's message with faith and obedience. His word contains both promise and command. It calls for our response. And as Hebrews 4:13 says, nothing is hidden from God's sight. He sees everything we do and knows our thoughts, and we must give account to him. That is why we must respond, while it is yet today, with faith in Jesus Christ.

Then comes another practical application:

"Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has gone through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold firmly to the faith we profess" (v. 14). Again, the exhortation is not to a day of the week, but to Jesus Christ, our Saviour.

Here's the thought of the entire chapter: Since God's rest is available to us and God judges us on how we respond, we need to keep believing in Jesus, because he is the one we need. He became human, so he understands our weaknesses, but he lived without sin, so he can be our Saviour.

Hebrews 2:16-18 tells us that Jesus became human so he could save us humans. "He had to be made like his brothers in every way, in order that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in service to God, and that he might make atonement for the sins of the people. Because he himself suffered when he was tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted."

Since Jesus has done this, we can be sure that he will help us now. "We do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are--yet was without sin" (4:15). Jesus knows what it's like to suffer and to be tempted to quit. He can strengthen us, if we trust him.

We need rest, and Jesus offers us rest. Today, if you hear his word, believe it, and enter his rest.

*Michael Morrison*  
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### Lessons from the Bible

# A Lesson About Hard Hearts

The Gospel of Mark, Lesson 21: Mark 4:1-13

*Again Jesus began to teach by the lake.... the Twelve and the others around him asked him about the parables. He told them, "... to those on the outside everything is said in parables so that, 'they may be ever seeing but never perceiving, and ever hearing but never understanding; otherwise they might turn and be forgiven.' "*

At first glance, this passage seems to say that Jesus taught in parables specifically for the purpose of preventing people from understanding what he was talking about. A closer look, however, reveals just the opposite.

#### Master teacher

Jesus was not deliberately trying to prevent his listeners from understanding what he was talking about. He was doing just the opposite—using parables as a means of relating the invisible kingdom of God to everyday, visible, real life examples and situations the common person could easily relate to.

Parables were a teaching method quite familiar to Jewish teachers and audiences. They were tools for making things easier to understand, not more difficult. In the hands of Jesus, the great master teacher, these tools would have been even more effective. He came to bring good news to the poor, not confuse them with stories impossible to comprehend.

#### Faithful

The key to understanding this passage lies in the scripture Jesus quoted to make his point to the disciples about the use of parables. He was quoting Isaiah 6:9-10, a passage that chided Israel's blindness and deafness to God's love. The translation is easily misunderstood unless the context of Israel's struggle with God throughout its history is taken into consideration.

The Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures, noted this problem, and took care to include the sarcastic tone of the wording in its translation. The Septuagint, we should note, was the foremost translation of Jesus' day. In his commentary on Mark, William Barclay paraphrased Jesus' intent this way: "Do you remember what Isaiah once said? He said that when he came with God's message to God's people Israel in his day they were so dully un-understanding that you would

have thought that God had shut instead of opening their minds; I feel like that today" (The Gospel of Mark, Westminster Press, 1975).

Israel, as God's own people, had already failed to keep their covenant with God and had ended up a conquered people and an occupied nation, first by the Babylonians and eventually by the Romans. But God promised to be faithful to his covenant regardless of Israel's unfaithfulness (compare Malachi 4:6). He promised to redeem them in spite of themselves (compare Hosea 11:8-11), and he would do it through the Messiah, the Anointed One, who would be sent to redeem the people and bring them back to God.

But God knew that in the hardness of their hearts, they would also reject their own Messiah. As John wrote in the fourth Gospel, "He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him." But even that would not stop God from redeeming his people, and through them, the whole world. In their rejection of Messiah, Israel's sin against God would reach its full measure. They would kill their Saviour, but God would raise him from the dead, and his death and resurrection would become the very means by which God would transform the hearts of not only Israel, but also the gentiles.

#### New heart

Jesus was saying that stubborn, hard-hearted people couldn't understand the things of the kingdom of God even when they are taught in the plainest possible language. It takes a new heart, a heart only God can give (compare Ezekiel 36:26).

Sin alienates us from God, and since we are all sinners, we are all alienated from God—not because he rejects us (he is eternally faithful), but because we reject him. In our alienated state, we are incapable of reconciling ourselves to God. We neither know God nor want him meddling in our lives. Even our concept of God is askew; we think of him as a great butler in the sky who is not worth his salt unless he does everything we ask, or as an angry

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super-being who is always ready to dish out punishments.

Unless God himself takes the initiative to reconcile us to him, we remain helpless, with no future beyond death. That is exactly what he has done in Jesus Christ. In Jesus we learn exactly what God is like, because Jesus Christ is the exact representation of the Father (Hebrews 1:3; see also Colossians 1:19-20).

### Gift

We learn through Jesus that God is merciful, patient and full of grace. God is not against humanity; he is for it. "For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world," Jesus said, "but to save the world through him. Whoever believes in him is not condemned..." Through Jesus, our minds are released from the bondage of sin, and we are freed to put our trust in our Creator and Redeemer.

No one understands the things of God apart from the grace he has made manifest in Jesus Christ. "The secret of the kingdom of God has been given to you"

(Mark 4:11), Jesus told the disciples. Yet before his ascension, even they did not understand the parables, because their hearts were still hard, too. The Holy Spirit, who leads us into all truth, especially the truth of the gospel, soon melted their stony hearts into hearts of flesh, just as God had promised through Ezekiel.

God never forces us to love him, for love forced is not love at all. Instead, God frees our minds and hearts from all the barriers, rooted in sin, which would otherwise stand in the way. "His divine power has given us everything we need for life and godliness," Peter would later write, "through our knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness" (2 Peter 1:3).

Freedom, however, is worthless unless it is exercised. That will be the topic of our next lesson, as we look at the parable of the sower.

J. Michael Feazell

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## “Tell Peter”

By Eugene M. Guzon

**A**s Christians, our sincere desire is to express our devotion to God in everything we do, but sometimes the journey is just too difficult. Disappointments crush our spirits. It is a struggle to keep our tempers under control. It is hard to overcome every temptation. It is a challenge to remain loving and forgiving, and to trust God. And whenever we fail, we suffer the feelings of defeat and discouragement. We feel we have let God down. If you are a typical Christian, you know how it feels to be disheartened due to trials and disappointments. It is even possible that, today, as you are reading this, there is a burden in your heart that keeps your spirit down. Discouragement is considered by many as a 'universal disease'. Medical authorities say that depression, gloom, despair and discouragement kill ten human beings for every one that dies from typhoid, influenza, diabetes or pneumonia. Discouragement is caused by fear, doubt, fatigue, failure and rejection. It usually happens when reality doesn't match our expectations and aspirations for ourselves and others. An inner battle rages, slowly crippling us and robbing us of the joy and enthusiasm to live a meaningful life.

The life of Jesus' friend and leading disciple, Peter, is a lesson for all who are discouraged. He struggled

with the same despair, but, through the faithfulness of our Lord, he found acceptance and forgiveness.

Been there, done that

Peter was a man of contradictions - impulsive and bold, yet affectionate and loyal. He responded eagerly to the call of Jesus to follow him, (*Matthew 4:18-20; 14:28-31*). He left his net, his boat, his fishing trade, and his familiar surroundings. He was also the first of the disciples to recognise who Jesus was (*Matthew 16:16*). But when Jesus was foretelling his suffering and death, Peter began to rebuke him, saying: 'Far be it from you, Lord; this shall never happen to you!' Peter was firmly put in his place by the Lord's reply: 'Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; you do not have in mind the things of God, but the things of men' (*Matthew 16:21-23*).

Peter, who, only a few verses before, had been commended by Jesus as blessed to have the revelation of the Father, was now reprimanded for being used as a mouthpiece for Satan. Jesus said later, 'Simon, Simon! Indeed, Satan has asked for you, that he may sift you as wheat. But I have prayed for you, that your faith should not fail. And when you have returned to me, strengthen your brothers' (*Luke 22:31-34*).

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Jesus knows what Christians will be facing in this life. Our faithfulness will be tested many times. The enemy through different ways - through temptations, rejection, opposition and discouragement will buffet us. But, in those words to Peter, we can see the desire and the will of our Lord that we will be able to bounce back and prevail. And as those times come to us, we too can be a source of strength and inspiration for others.

The impulsive Peter answered Jesus with a solemn pledge of loyalty: 'Lord, I am ready to go with you to prison and to death!' Brave words, but he was setting himself up for his greatest fall.

'Not me, Lord'

Peter's difficulty in accepting Jesus' caution showed most clearly the night before the Lord's death. Jesus said to his disciples, 'All of you will be made to stumble because of me this night, for it is written: I will strike the shepherd, and the sheep of the flock will be scattered. But after I have been raised, I will go before you to Galilee' (Matthew 26:31-32).

Peter found that too hard to accept. He may have said to himself, 'Maybe the others, but not me!' But, soon, he denied the Lord three times, fulfilling Jesus' prediction. Just as the cock crowed and the soldiers led Jesus, he turned his eyes to Peter. That gaze was too much to bear. He had betrayed his friend and his Lord in his hour of greatest need. He was no different from Judas. Overcome with guilt, he wept bitterly.

He knew of what happened during the next few hours. Jesus was beaten, crowned with thorns, and killed by the soldiers. All the disciples were filled with grief, but perhaps none among them knew the depths of Peter's discouragement and shame.

Judas hanged himself on a tree for betraying the Lord. Could not Peter have thought of doing the same? How could he face the other disciples? Would they - would anybody - trust him ever again?

Mentioned by name

The resurrection of Jesus brought new hope, and fresh anxiety. The angel at the tomb that morning had told the women who had come to anoint Jesus body: 'Don't be alarmed; you seek Jesus of Nazareth who was crucified. He is risen! He is not here. See the place where they laid him. But go, tell his

disciples - and Peter - that he is going before you into Galilee; there you will see him, as he said to you.' (6 Matthew 26:31-32).

How do you think Peter felt about that? Not only had the Lord risen again, but he mentioned Peter's name in particular. Wow! Imagine what powerful effect that could have had upon Peter - 'and he asked me to meet him in Galilee!' - but why?

By this time Peter knew for sure that Jesus was indeed Christ, the Son of the living God! All his claims about giving his life as a ransom for many were true. His redeeming work had been accomplished. But would he have anything to do with Peter, after being denied by him?

'But he mentioned me specifically. Could it be that Jesus was willing to accept me still, trust me still and love me still even if I denied him so? I wonder...'

Peter soon found out that the words, 'tell Peter' were an expression of love, confidence and forgiveness from Jesus.

'Tell Peter' - what loving words of assurance for one who had been unfaithful. Could the Lord be saying, 'No matter what you have done there is forgiveness and there is hope. I am alive. I am with you all the way. I offer you a new beginning.'?

The rest is history. Peter spent the rest of his days proclaiming boldly the good news of the Lord he once denied, but now without any doubt. He became a mighty witness to the gospel of Jesus, finally sealing his faith with his own blood in martyrdom. Peter left us a legacy of one who failed, but, with the power of Jesus, had a new beginning, and meaningful life for the glory of God.

So - do you feel discouraged? Are you, like Peter, dismayed at the extent of your inadequacies, the pressure of living your faith, and those times when you too may have been tempted to deny Jesus in your life?

Take heart! Be encouraged by the words of the Lord through the angel. His message is as much for you as it was for the one who felt he had gone too far to ever be accepted again.

"Tell Peter"!

**Eugene M. Guzon is the National Director of the Worldwide Church of God in the Philippines.**

## **Listen... you might be worth your weight in gold!**

By Denys Fell

In the November 2004 issue of The Plain Truth there was a statement that got the cogs in my mind cranked-up into overdrive. It was in the article 'Face to face with cancer' by Julia McGuiness: *'When I was travelling to visit my husband in hospital after his operation, only one or two at church asked how I was, and even then they stuck to how tired I was, rather than how I felt emotionally. People don't know what to say. They feel they have to have the answers, but all they need to do is to listen.'*

**L**isten? That's easy isn't it? If only it was! I would like to share with you my experiences that taught me many lessons about listening and to show you what a good listener does.

### **Getting it completely wrong**

I joined the Samaritans in 1994. The charity was on the lookout for good listeners. I thought I was a good listener (along with 97% of the population, apparently).

I completed the preparation classes and began taking calls. One of the first calls was from a lady in Glasgow, who, I hope, is a very forgiving lady. We'd been on the phone for about half an hour when she asked, 'What did you say your name was?' 'Denys,' I replied.

'Well, Denys, when I rang up I was feeling depressed. Now, after talking to you, I feel even more depressed!' she lamented.

It was back to the drawing board. A colleague told me about the Chinese verb 'to listen'. There are four separate characters that make up this word.

The first is 'Ear', which is rather obvious.

The next is 'Eye' - what is the body language saying to us? Are we giving plenty of eye contact?

Then there's a character that denotes undivided attention. We're fully focused and concentrating on what's being said. This takes effort.

One time I received a call from a gentleman whose story involved his time in the Merchant Navy. I was trying to follow one particular journey, but unfortunately, by the time he'd reached Hong Kong, I had dozed off. It was so brief I thought he wouldn't notice, but, sure enough, he did.

If I'd done my job properly I would have been paraphrasing and reflecting his comments throughout the call. For example, if I'd asked 'You were unhappy in Hong Kong yet everything seemed

fine in Singapore. What happened?' he would have known that I was 'on board' with him.

### **You've got to have heart**

The fourth aspect of the Chinese verb is 'Heart' - and how very important that is. Please permit me to give you a third and final example of how I got this aspect totally wrong.

I was on a shift that went from 7pm to 2am. About 10pm I received a call from someone having great difficulty in articulating their particular situation, so they apologised and, after a couple of minutes, hung up. This happened about every hour. By 1pm I was beginning to be slightly impatient. 'Is it a health problem?' I enquired. 'Is it a financial problem? Is it a relationship problem?' There was no progress made and the phone went down.

At 2am my colleague and I were tidying things away and looking forward to going home. The phone rang and my colleague answered - it was my earlier caller.

This time the reception was very different: 'Take your time, there's no hurry,' my colleague said. 'It sounds as though you're in a very difficult situation.' There were oodles of compassion for the next 90 minutes, which is how long the call lasted. The caller was heartened and strengthened. I was listening in the next room, having uncharitable thoughts, desperate for the call to end so I could get home.

It was the lowest point of my Samaritan 'career' I decided in my own mind to leave, having taken only a few months of calls, but fortunately recanted later. I thought I was a good listener and had quite a bit to offer. I was wrong. You need heart, empathy; people don't care what you know if they know you don't care.

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### Beginning to get it right

Two events then worked together to help me understand what it really means to listen:

I welcomed a caller at the Samaritan centre. Let's call him 'John'. From the outset John was intense, trembling with emotion.

Four years earlier he had suffered a marital breakdown that he very much regretted. His wife had remarried and started a family. John had tried desperately to handle this loss, but to no avail. He had sought help and solace from just about every angle.

His 'friends' commented, 'There's plenty more fish in the sea'. Others said, 'I know how you feel. It's happened to me.'

He sought the help of a doctor and psychiatrist. He turned to alcohol and drugs. He frequented prostitutes. He had heavy workouts at the gym to try to divert that intense pain and overwhelming heartache.

Now, knocking on suicide's door, he had turned to the Samaritans. 'Have you got the answer?' he asked me repeatedly. He desperately wanted to be freed from that painful and lonely condition. We shared what I felt was a good exploration of his situation and how he felt. As John was leaving I asked his permission to call him at a time convenient to him. His situation called for much, much more emotional support. John refused and I never saw him again. Over the preceding four years John's emotions had been boiled, stewed and torn apart and were now erupting like a volcano. If only they had been adequately expressed and handled earlier.

It was then that I came across a definition of a good listener, which I have made my own. It's from the book "*When someone you know is hurting*", by Greg Richards: 'Good listeners don't respond to our crises with easy or shallow philosophies, they don't preach at us, they don't offer us cures. They set the stage for the hurting person to express themselves freely and completely.'

Remember where we started? Marion Stroud just wanted someone to listen to how she was feeling emotionally. John's emotions had been stifled and began to fester and destroy him.

Some time later I took a call from a man in the armed forces. He was so angry with his wife that he was going to tie her up with some heavy-duty ropes. After I had listened for a while I asked, 'How are you feeling now?' He replied that he was feeling much better and calmer. Those powerful emotions had been dissipated and a tragic situation had been averted. And I was beginning to be an effective help through listening.

### Listening to ignite the human mind

You've almost certainly experienced it: you're telling someone about a subject that you find interesting and absorbing, but they're looking bored, yawning, checking their watch and interrupting you. Result? Your zeal for the subject wanes and you think it's not worth telling your story.

On the other hand, having someone listen who looks intrigued, asks searching questions and wants to know more - then almost certainly you will step up a gear.

In her book *Time to think - listening to ignite the human mind*, Nancy Kline explores this phenomenon. She states, "**To help people think for themselves, first listen. And listen. Then – listen**". And just when they say they can't think of anything else, you can ask them the question, "What else do you think about this? What else comes to mind that you want to say?"

The next time someone asks for your help with a problem, remember, that the brain that contains the problem usually also contains the solution - often the best one. Then set up the conditions for them to find it.

Setting up those conditions can sometimes be surprisingly simple. I lost count of the number of calls I took in which all I said consisted of mainly 'oh...I see...um'. After a while I would ask the caller how they were feeling and they would reply, 'I'm feeling so much better now. After talking to you I've begun to see a new way of looking at my situation.'

Research in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* indicates that individuals who express their feelings live longer than those who do not.

Those who were communicative about their distress and who appeared more capable of externalising their negative feelings upped their chances of life quality and expectancy. This world sorely needs good listeners who "**set the stage for the hurting person to express himself or herself freely and completely**".

Sometimes that stage is surprising. A colleague informed me of the time he held the hand of a patient in a hospice for twenty minutes or so. The patient then said, 'Thank you so much. That meant a great deal to me.' In this situation the listening was more in the focussed attention and heart than in the eye and ear.

As Henri Nouwen wrote in *Out of Solitude*: 'The friend who can be silent with us in a moment of despair or confusion, who can stay with us in a moment of grief and bereavement, who can tolerate not knowing, not curing, not healing and face with us the reality of our powerlessness, that is the friend who cares.'

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### **The proof of the pudding**

I have been involved with publicity for the Samaritans since 1994. In the early days I found myself speaking to various groups, schools, young farmers, businessmen, clubs and societies. Of course I was recommending that the Samaritans are a good source of help along life's way, but I'd never actually rang the charity myself.

So I began to feel like the proverbial, bald-headed man selling hair-restorer. We all have certain issues that may not be weighing us down too heavily but we would nevertheless appreciate exploring. A survey commissioned by the Samaritans and Radio 2 looked closely at the whole subject of feelings and how we deal with problems. One question was:

When you are feeling low, exactly what would make you feel better? 'Being listened to' was the top answer.

So I took a deep breath and rang the Samaritans. Maybe I was fortunate to have the volunteer answer that I did (and not a version of the erstwhile me) but throughout that reasonably brief call my subconscious mind kept throwing up the thought, 'Denys, this is an absolute luxury.'

And that is what it was. The stage was set. My mind was set alight because a good listener was in operation.

*If you are a good listener, and I hope you are, you are worth your weight in gold.*

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