

Forgiveness Can Be Good for Your Health

Got lingering anger, stress or high blood pressure? You may need to forgive someone (or to be forgiven yourself).

That's the conclusion of an increasing number of social scientists. Religion has long held that forgiveness is an important component of a fruitful life. A recent *Christianity Today* article outlined secular research that also supports its personal and societal benefits.

Thirty years ago, Kansas psychologist Dr. Glenn Mack Harndon searched in vain to find studies on forgiveness in the academic digest Psychological Abstracts. Today there exist an International Forgiveness Institute and a ten-million-dollar "Campaign for Forgiveness Research" (Jimmy Carter and Desmond Tutu are among the ringleaders). The John Templeton Foundation awards grants in the field.

Harndon says forgiveness "releases the offender from prolonged anger, rage and stress that have been linked to physiological problems, such as cardiovascular diseases, high blood pressure, hypertension, cancer and other psychosomatic illnesses."

He's big on this theme. When I ran into him in Washington, DC, recently, he spoke enthusiastically about attending an international gathering in Jordan that saw forgiveness between traditional individual enemies like Northern Irish and Irish Republicans, Israelis and Palestinians.

University of Wisconsin psychologist Robert Enright and his colleagues discovered that "forgiveness education" may have helped college students who felt their parental love reservoirs were low to develop "improved psychological health." Self-esteem and hope increased while anxiety

decreased.

Daily life brings many sources of conflict: spouses, parents, children, employers, former employers, bullies, enemies, racial and ethnic bigots. If offense leads to resentment and resentment grows to bitterness, then anger, explosion and violence can result. If parties forgive each other, then healing, reconciliation and restoration can follow.

I shall always remember Norton and Bo. Norton, an African-American, was bitter toward whites. Bo, who was white, called himself a "Christian" but seemed a hypocrite for his disdain for blacks. One day in an Atlanta civil rights event in the late 1960s, Bo and his buddies assaulted Norton by clobbering him with sandbags. Animosity ran deep.

Several months later, my roommate spoke with Norton about faith and knowing God personally. Norton placed his faith in Jesus and believed he was forgiven. He experienced what Paul, a first-century believer, described in the New Testament: "...Those who become Christians become new persons. They are not the same anymore, for the old life is gone. A new life has begun!"

Meanwhile, Bo began to realize his hypocrisy and placed God back in the "drivers seat" of his life. Three years after the assault, Nort and Bo unsuspectingly encountered each other at a conference on the Georgia coast. Initial tension melted into transparency and forgiveness. By week's end they were publicly expressing their love for each other as brothers.

Earlier this year, Nobel Peace laureate Elie Wiesel sang Germany's praises for observing remembrance for Holocaust victims. But he urged the German parliament to go farther, to seek forgiveness for the Third Reich's behavior. "We desperately want to have hope for the new century," he declared. Recently German President Johannes Rau asked the Israeli Knesset for forgiveness for the Holocaust and pledged

to fight anti-Semitism in Europe.

Forgiveness can be contagious. It can make an important difference in families, neighborhoods, workplaces and nations. A good relationship takes two good forgivers.

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A Famous Revolutionary's Surprising Past

Written by Rusty Wright

Quiz: What famous revolutionary, born in May, wrote the following words? (The answer may surprise you.)

"Says Christ... 'I am the vine, you are the branches; he who abides in Me and I in him, he bears much fruit, for apart from Me you can do nothing....' Our heart, our reason, history itself, and the word of Christ, all call to us loudly and decisively that a union with Him is an absolute necessity, that... only He can save us."

Was it Pope John Paul II? Martin Luther? Billy Graham? Mother Teresa?

A seventeen-year-old German student wrote this as part of a school essay. Descended from a long line of rabbis, his father had become a nominal Christian for social and economic reasons. The lad went off to study at the University of Berlin where he became enamored of the writings of the recently deceased dialectical philosopher Hegel as well as of other law and philosophy professors.

Soon he became disenchanted with Christianity, viewing it as a means of oppression and social control. His doctoral dissertation expressed his disdain with religion. A few years later he affirmed that "man makes religion, religion does not make man" and saw religion as "the opium of the people." He felt "the social principles of Christianity are hypocritical."

Thirteen years after his touching essay on union with Christ, Karl Marx wrote (with Frederick Engels), "A specter is haunting Europe—the specter of Communism. . . . The proletarians have nothing to lose but their chains. They have a world to win. Workingmen of all countries, unite!"

Now, over 150 years after The Communist Manifesto was first published, we might say, "A specter is haunting Europe—the specter of democracy" (albeit with a few bumps). During the collapse of the Soviet Union, Moscow demonstrators held up a banner reading "Workers of the World, We Apologize."

Ironically, much of the democratic fervor that swept former Communist states during the last decade was fueled by religious commitment. Influence by the Catholic Church in Poland and the Protestant church in East Germany and Romania were but a few examples. Prayer meetings led to demonstrations that eventually brought down despots. A "revolution by candlelight", some have called it.

The hunger for spiritual fulfillment is a deep human longing. The dedication that filling a spiritual void can bring has sparked social reforms too numerous to detail. Eighteenth century British parliamentarian William Wilberforce spent decades opposing the slave trade. He endured ridicule and ill health as he took on the moneyed establishment on an issue that affected their pocketbook but apparently not their conscience. Wilberforce's Christian conviction drove and sustained him to a successful end.

One of Wilberforce's chief encouragers was John Newton, a

pastor and former slave trader who found faith during a storm at sea. He is perhaps best known for writing the ever-popular song, "Amazing Grace."

Another supporter was John Wesley, founder of Methodism. The last letter Wesley ever wrote was to Wilberforce encouraging him to continue his uphill fight: "O be not weary of well doing! Go on, in the name of God and in the power of his might, till even American slavery (the vilest that ever saw the sun) shall vanish away before it."

Karl Marx learned to hate Christianity. How might history have differed had the young Marx met intelligent but sensitive believers who could have explained the faith's intellectual roots while demonstrating Jesus' concern for the poor and suffering? Could knowing Wilberforce or Newton or Wesley have made a difference?

What about today's socially concerned? As they watch spiritual leaders, will they see the compassion and passionate dedication to justice and truth that past heroes of the faith displayed? Or will they see moral compromise and indifference? Might a future Karl Marx be watching?

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Freudian Slip: When Christians Drop the Ball

The Jewish doctor, urged to flee Vienna during 1937 Nazi advances, is said to have replied that his "true enemy" was not the Nazis but "religion," the Christian church. What inspired such hatred of Christianity in this scientist?

His father Jakob read the Talmud and celebrated Jewish festivals. The young boy developed a fond affection for his Hebrew Bible teacher and later said the Bible story had “an enduring effect” on his life.

A beloved nanny took him to church as a child. He came home telling his parents about “God Almighty.” But eventually the nanny was accused of theft and dismissed. He later blamed her for many of his psychological difficulties and launched his private practice on Easter Sunday as an “act of defiance.”

Anti-Semitism hounded the lad at school. Around age twelve he was horrified to learn of his father’s youthful acquiescence to Gentile bigotry. “Jew! Get off the pavement!” a “Christian” had shouted to the young Jakob after knocking his cap into the mud. The son learned to his chagrin that his dad had complied.

In high school he abandoned Judaism for secular science, humanism and Charles Darwin. At the University of Vienna he studied atheist philosopher Ludwig Feuerbach and carried his atheism into his career as a psychiatrist, distrusting the biblical documents. Religion was simply a “wish fulfillment,” he taught, a fairy tale invented by humans to satisfy their needy souls and to avoid responsibility for their actions. The doctor was Sigmund Freud.

Freud became perhaps the most influential psychiatrist of history, affecting medicine, literature, language and culture. A recent survey of the nation’s leading journalists and historians listed the top 100 news stories of this century. Prepared for the Newseum, a journalism museum in Arlington, Virginia, the poll rated Freud’s 1900 publication of *Interpretation of Dreams* as number 86. He ranked higher than the U.S. entry into World War I, John Glenn’s first earth orbit, the Berlin Airlift, Microsoft’s founding and the Chernobyl nuclear disaster.

Obsessed with the “painful riddle of death,” Freud once said

he thought of it daily throughout life. His favorite grandson's death brought great grief: "Everything has lost its meaning to me... I can find no joy in life." In 1939 he slipped into eternity, a willful overdose of morphine assuaging cancer's pain.

As an adult, Freud had encountered at least a few credible Christians, notably a professor, a pastor and a physician. Perhaps by then he was too set in his ways. Suppose that instead of bigotry and presumed dishonesty, the young Freud had met still more intelligent, honest and compassionate believers who welcomed him, respected his Jewish heritage and showed God's love, who could tactfully explain the faith's rational roots and its message of forgiveness. Would psychology—and history—be different?

There are many reasons why people reject faith, including intellectual doubt, emotional confusion and anger over life situations. Nonthinking or hypocritical Christians can make matters worse. Some (many?) people who claim to be "Christians" but don't have a genuine relationship with God can do the same. Not everything done in the name of Christ is an example of people following Jesus.

The racist or anti-Semitic hate group that quotes Scripture, the philandering minister, the abusive parent or spouse, the church leader with his hand in the till—all can breed scorn and skepticism.

Yet along with the hypocrites are many faithful followers of Jesus who feed the hungry, clothe the poor, aid disaster victims and help the hurting find comfort and spiritual life. "Christians aren't perfect," reads a popular bumper sticker, "just forgiven."

These faithful seek to emulate their Leader who, according to the Bible, "committed no sin, nor was any deceit found in His mouth." The not-so-faithful believers would do well to follow

their example, seek spiritual help and clean up their acts. Then maybe some future Sigmund Freuds would warm up to the message that faith can bring true meaning and hope even in life's most difficult circumstances.

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Valentine's Day Brings Back That Lovin' Feeling

February is known for cold weather, presidents' birthdays and Cupid's delight. As Valentine's Day approaches, hearts flutter, lovers sigh and Charlie Brown hopes that little red-haired girl will like the card he's been gathering up the courage to give her.

Love, sex and amorous relationships have dominated the news over the past year. Not every culture is as comfortable as ours with public displays of affection. In one Malaysian state, laws ban total darkness in movie theaters "to prevent immoral acts like kissing, cuddling and other activities," as one official explained it. Public kissing there usually rates a \$70 fine.

In Venezuela, extended public kissing and embracing can get you arrested. "If you kiss for more than five seconds, the police will grab you," complained one young woman whose friends were jailed. "It's ridiculous," grouched a 24-year-old man. "Whoever invented this law must not have a girlfriend."

Defining immoral kisses can be difficult admitted one policeman, but "when you see it, you should know it." (Has he been reading U.S. Supreme Court decisions?)

Kids often have unique insights into adults' urge to merge. A friend passed along from the Internet children's answers to questions about love. What do people do on a date? Lynnette (age 8): "Dates are for having fun, and people should use them to get to know each other. Even boys have something to say if you listen long enough."

Martin (age 10) sees the bottom line: "On the first date, they just tell each other lies, and that usually gets them interested enough to go for a second date."

When is it OK to kiss someone? Pam (7): "When they're rich!" Curt (7): "The law says you have to be eighteen, so I wouldn't want to mess with that." Howard (8): "The rule goes like this: If you kiss someone, then you should marry them and have kids with them....It's the right thing to do."

How does one decide whom to marry? Allan (10): "You got to find somebody who likes the same stuff. Like if you like sports, she should like it that you like sports, and she should keep the chips and dips coming." Allan may find it prudent to slightly revise that theory in a few years.

This season pundits ponder, "What is genuine love?" Popular speaker Josh McDowell delineates three kinds of love that can inform kids' (and adults') attitudes: love if, love because of, and love period. Love if and because of are based on personality or performance: "I love you if you go out with me, if you have a good sense of humor, if you sleep with me. I love you because you're attractive, intelligent or athletic."

But the best kind of love says, "I love you period: even with your weaknesses, even if you change, even if someone better looking comes along. Even if you have zoo-breath in the morning. I want to give myself to you."

Paul, an early Christian writer, eloquently described this unconditional love: "Love is patient and kind. Love is not jealous or boastful or proud or rude. Love does not demand its

own way. Love is not irritable, and it keeps no record of when it has been wronged. ...Love never gives up, never loses faith, is always hopeful, and endures through every circumstance. Love will last forever....”

Committed unconditional love could probably heal many romantic rifts. Solid spiritual roots that help produce it can help undergird stable relationships. And the children have noticed that families and adult relationships can use some strengthening.

How can a stranger tell if two people are married? Derrick (8): By “whether they seem to be yelling at the same kids.” And how would the world be different if people didn’t get married? Kelvin (8): “There sure would be a lot of kids to explain, wouldn’t there?”

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West Africans to African-Americans: “We Apologize for Slavery”

Rusty Wright presents a contemporary example of a new Christian offering repentance for past sins committed by his people and reconciliation through Christ in moving forward in the forgiveness of God. This is an excellent example of how those with a Christian worldview can work to bring healing to those wounded by past, grievous sins.

The president of the West African nation of Benin has a message for African-Americans: His compatriots are sorry for their ancestors' complicity in the slave trade. During December, he's going to tell them that at a special Leadership Reconciliation Conference on his soil.

An often-overlooked facet of slavery's ugly historical stain is that black Africans sold other black Africans into slavery. When rival tribes made war, the victors took prisoners and made them indentured servants, often selling them to white slave merchants. Tribal animosity seethed.

Benin president Matthieu Kerekou says intertribal hostility over the slave trade still exists. Many of his people have never seen descendants of their forebears who were shipped off to the Americas.

Kerekou attended the National Prayer Breakfast in Washington last February and sought African-American church leaders to whom he could apologize. The pastors offered forgiveness. As a result, 125 Western leaders will gather with tribal chiefs from across Benin for the reconciliation event. U.S. Senator James Inhofe (R, Oklahoma) and Congressman Tony Hall (D, Ohio) will participate along with pastors, athletes, celebrities and representatives of European (former) slave-trading nations.

Brian Johnson, an African-American living in Virginia, heads a U.S. sponsoring group COMINAD (Cooperative Missions Network of the African Dispersion) and works with many black churches. Johnson says the infamous "Gate of No Return" that stands on the Benin beach where slaves embarked will be renamed the "Gate of Return" and/or destroyed. African-Americans will be granted Benin citizenship.

Plans exist for a larger reconciliation event in 2000. A ship will sail the old slave route from the Canary Islands to Benin and business leaders will host an international business exposition to help stimulate trade.

Johnson says President Kerekou's mission has a spiritual flavor motivated by the president's own recent commitment to Christ. "In the same way that God offered forgiveness by presenting His Son, who was offended first," Johnson notes, African-American church leaders want to offer forgiveness to the descendants of their ancestors' captors. Both the president and the pastors hope to effect reconciliation and to provide an example to help ease global racial tensions.

Johnson says the realization that blacks sold other blacks into slavery has been hard for many African-Americans to handle. "This made it difficult to just hold the white man responsible," he notes. "This creates some problems in our own psyche. We have to deal with another angle to this and it makes it difficult. It's not [merely] a black/white thing."

He says the problem is in human hearts. " 'All have sinned,' " he claims, quoting the New Testament. "All of us need to confess our wrong and appeal to [God] for forgiveness."

Former Senator George Aiken of Vermont once said that if we awoke one morning to find everyone were the same race, color and creed, we'd find a new cause for prejudice by noon. Russian novelist Leo Tolstoy lamented that "Everybody thinks of changing humanity, but nobody thinks of changing himself." Perhaps Johnson's and President Kerekou's prescription is worth considering.

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Churches That Equip

I STILL REMEMBER THE SINKING FEELING IN THE PIT OF MY STOMACH. I was a university student, a young believer, and my faith in

Christ seemed like a house of cards that had just crumbled. For awhile, the Christian life that had been so exciting and joyful became a myth. I felt rootless, adrift, and confused.

One of my fraternity brothers had just asked me some questions about Christianity that I couldn't answer. This bothered me deeply until Bob Prall, a pastor and campus Christian worker, answered them for me. "Always remember," he advised as he finished, "just because you don't know the answer, doesn't mean there is no answer."

For the next two years I followed him around, watching as he shared Christ with skeptics, listening to his speeches, and observing how he dealt with non-Christians. Bob's loving, learned example and teaching helped me sink my spiritual roots deeply into God's truth and provided a foundation for three decades of interaction with unbelievers. I shall always be grateful to him for equipping me in this way.

Just as Bob helped me, a number of churches across North America are helping equip their members to answer effectively questions that non-Christians ask. Maybe their stories will encourage you.

Conversation and Cuisine

Dennis McCallum pastors Xenos Christian Fellowship in Columbus, Ohio. He is keenly interested in reaching "postmoderns" for Christ, and Xenos members have developed some successful methods of equipping members for outreach. In his book, *The Death of Truth*, McCallum outlines a practical plan using dinner-party discussion groups. "It's not impossible to communicate with postmodern culture," he claims, "it's just more difficult." Just as missionaries need to learn the language and customs and build relationships with those they seek to reach, so we must understand and befriend today's postmoderns.

Xenos' "Conversation and Cuisine" gathers Christians in a home with non-Christian friends for food and discussion. Guests are assured it's not a church service and that all opinions are welcome. Topics include "To judge or not to judge," "Forgiveness in relationships," "Views of the afterlife," and current events.

After dinner the facilitator presents several scenarios for discussion. For instance, in a session on judging, he might describe a situation of racism in the workplace and ask participants to decide "OK" or "bad." Next the facilitator tells of a mother who chooses to leave her husband and children for another man. The participants also vote. The point is to create a bit of confusion and help participants realize that—in contrast to today's "tolerate all viewpoints" mindset—they themselves sometimes make judgments that they feel are entirely appropriate.

This dialogue can lead to discussions of, for instance, Hitler's Germany. Was killing Jews merely a cultural tradition that should be respected?

The aim is not to preach, but gently to lead non-Christians to rethink their presuppositions. Sessions don't always include a gospel presentation. They may be "pre-evangelistic"—helping unbelievers reconsider their own relativism, appreciate that some universal or absolute truths might be necessary, and realize that Christians may have some answers. Church members can then continue the relationships and share Christ as appropriate. "Once people's thinking has been thawed—or even shocked—out of their totalistic postmodern pattern," claims McCallum, "they will have a new receptiveness to the gospel."

Xenos is also committed to grounding youth in God's Word. Its curriculum uses age-appropriate games, stories, and study to help grade-school through university students understand and explain God's truth. High school home meetings designed for secular audiences involve adult-student team teaching: kids

reaching kids. Campus Bible studies reach Ohio State students.

Kellie Carter's New Age background could not save her mom from breast cancer. Disillusioned with God after her mother's death, Kellie sought answers in crystal healing, astrology, and meditation. Then a friend invited her to a Xenos campus Bible study, where she debated Christianity with attendees.

"The amazing thing here was that I was getting answers," Kellie recalls. "These people knew what they believed and why. I wanted that." Scientific and historical evidences for Christianity prompted her to trust Christ as Savior.

Kellie later invited Jeremy ("Germ") Gedert to a Xenos meeting about anger, a problem he recognized he had. Subsequent Bible studies on fulfilled prophecy pointed Germ to faith in Christ. Now Germ claims God has given him "great relationships, controlled temper, and a real vision for my life with Christ" plus "an awesome wife (named Kellie Gedert)." Equipped students are reaching students.

Xenos offers courses, conferences, papers, and books to help Christians understand and communicate the gospel in modern culture. For information visit their web site at www.xenos.org.

Spreading the Passion

When George Haraksin became a Christian while studying at California State University Fullerton, he switched his major to comparative religions so he could investigate Christianity's truth claims. Through his involvement in New Song Church in nearby San Dimas, he found his biblical and apologetic knowledge strengthened and was able to teach classes on New Age thinking. Study in philosophy and ethics at Talbot Seminary fanned his passion for communicating biblical truth, which Haraksin now spreads as New Song's Pastor of Teaching and Equipping.

"Ephesians tells us to equip the church," he notes. "People learn on three levels: a classroom level, a relational level, and at home." He and his co-workers seek to use all three levels to help prepare members to be ready to answer questions non-Christians ask.

New Song's leaders integrate equipping the saints into their regular gatherings. Some sermons handle apologetic themes. Weeknight classes cover such topics as "Evangelism and the Postmodern Mindset." Monthly men's breakfasts may deal with "Evidences for the Resurrection" or "Is Jesus the Only Way?" New Song has also invited faculty from the International School of Theology to teach courses on "Developing a Christian World View" and other theological topics.

"I'm trying to find people within the church who have that sort of passion (for apologetics) and gifts for teaching," Haraksin explains. "As I identify them, I'm trying to come alongside them, develop that passion, and develop them as leaders."

If people have questions about science and Christianity, he wants to be able to refer them to a member with that specialty who can help them. He's setting up an apologetics network at the local church level.

New Song member Jeff Lampman received a phone call and letter from a cousin with unusual perspectives on the Bible. "I had no idea how to respond to him," Jeff recalls. He showed the letter to Haraksin, who recognized Jehovah's Witness doctrines. When two Jehovah's Witness members showed up at Jeff's door, he invited them to meet with him and Haraksin. "I was very uncomfortable at first," Jeff explains, but he grew in his knowledge of the Bible as he watched Haraksin in action over the next six months.

The experience "taught me why I believe what I believe," Jeff remembers. "Before, if somebody asked me why I believe what I

do, I wouldn't have a clue as to how to respond to them. Now I do. George [Haraksin] was a tremendous help. I feel a lot more confident now and know where to go to get resources to defend the faith effectively." He continues to apply what he's learned as he interacts with skeptical co-workers and helps equip and encourage other Christians to learn.

Not everyone at New Song is interested in apologetics. Haraksin estimates that about 10 to 20 percent are thirsty enough to attend weekly meetings if personally encouraged to do so. Others want answers on a more spontaneous basis when they encounter a skeptic. Still others have little or no interest.

"There is still an anti-intellectualism in the church," Haraksin notes. People want to know "Why can't I just love God? Why do I need to know all this other stuff?" Society is on information overload, and some "people don't want to take the time to read and study," which can be frustrating to a pastor with a burning desire to see people learn.

Haraksin tells of a woman who questioned Jesus' deity. At another church she had been told not to ask questions but to spend time in personal devotions. Haraksin answered some of her concerns individually and encouraged her to enroll in New Song's "Jesus Under Fire" class, which she did. She could ask questions without fear of causing offense. Soon she became a solid Christian, committed to the church.

"We're relational people in a relational culture," Haraksin notes. We're still learning." This product of his own church's equipping ministry is helping to light some fires.

Issues and Answers

Barry Smith is Pastor of Discipleship Ministries at Kendall Presbyterian Church in Miami. He has a keen desire to see adults and youth understand Christianity's truth. Sunday

schools have featured quarters on apologetics and on Christian ethics. The heart of Kendall's apologetics emphasis is "Issues and Answers," monthly dinner discussions relating faith to the secular world.

The meetings arose out of conversations between Smith and hospital chaplain Phil Binie, who had served on the staff of L'Abri in Switzerland and Holland. (L'Abri is a network of Christian study centers founded by the late Dr. Francis Schaeffer.) The core group is composed of Kendall members—both men and women—who are professionals in the community. Leaders include a *Miami Herald* editor, a federal judge, a medical professional, University of Miami professors, an attorney, and a musician.

Core members invite friends and colleagues to join them. Families, including children, gather at a home and enjoy mealtime conversation. After the 45-minute dinner, youth workers spend time with the children while a group member guides an hour-long presentation for the adults. Smith led one on the problem of evil: "If God is good, where did evil come from?"

Journalistic ethics dominated another discussion. A judge handled the separation of church and state. An English professor covered "deconstructionism" and literary analysis as they apply to the Bible, a somewhat perplexing but highly relevant theme. (Deconstructionism includes a tendency to seek a text's meaning not in what the original author likely intended, but in what readers today want it to say.)

Smith says that at least one person has professed faith in Christ through a personal search that attending the group prompted. All of the non-clergy members at first felt uncomfortable sharing their faith outside the church; now all feel more at ease. Smith especially notes one couple (a psychology professor and an attorney) who began the program as young Christians and have experienced dramatic growth as they

have understood how Christianity makes sense in their work settings.

Smith emphasizes that the “Issues and Answers” format is easy to replicate and need not involve professional clergy leadership. It started informally and at first was not even an official church ministry. “The idea,” he explains, “was simply to find people trying to contextualize their Christianity in the marketplace who could share with us how they do that.”

Scheduling seems the biggest obstacle; professionals’ crowded calendars can be hard to mesh. But Smith is encouraged by what the program has accomplished in its two years. He sees a revival of interest in the works of Francis Schaeffer and enthusiastically recommends them to both believers and seekers.

The apostle Peter told believers, “Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect” (1 Peter 3:15). Paul wrote that God gives spiritual leaders to the church “to prepare God’s people for works of service” (Eph. 4:12). Xenos, New Song, and Kendall churches are taking those admonitions seriously and are seeing fruit for God’s kingdom.

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Christians to Muslims and

Jews: “Crusades Were Wrong”

Written by Rusty Wright

Why would modern Christians retrace the steps of the eleventh-century Crusaders? To apologize for the atrocities of their ancestors.

Their “Reconciliation Walk,” which ends this summer in Jerusalem on the 900th anniversary of the Crusaders’ storming of the city, has garnered intriguing response across Europe and the Middle East. Representatives of Israel, the Palestinian Authority, Judaism, Islam and Eastern Orthodoxy will attend the July 15 Jerusalem event.

The Crusades’ outrages have long seemed one of history’s ugly abscesses. The thought of killing to reclaim a “holy land” in “the name of Christ” seems a sick farce.

The Crusaders’ committed horrible atrocities, raping, murdering and plundering Jews, Muslims and other Christians en route to Palestine. When they reached Jerusalem in 1099, blood flowed freely. Jews fled to a synagogue and Muslims to a mosque. Crusaders burned the synagogue, killing about 6,000 Jews, and stormed the mosque, butchering an estimated 30,000 Muslims. They left a legacy of fear and contempt in the Muslim world.

That’s why when Reconciliation Walk leader Lynn Green entered a Muslim gathering at a Turkish mosque in Cologne, Germany on Easter 1996, he didn’t know what to expect. He was in the city where the medieval Crusades began in 1096 with other Christians determined to retrace the steps of the eleventh-century Crusaders and apologize to Muslims and Jews for the horrors committed against their forebears in the name of Christ.

The Imam’s (leading teacher’s) public response was startling.

"When I heard the nature of your message," he told the crowd, "I was astonished and filled with hope. I thought to myself, 'Whoever had this idea must have had an epiphany.'" In further conversation, the Imam told Green that many Muslims were starting to examine their sins against Christians and Jews but haven't known what to do, and that the Christians' apology was a good example for Muslims to follow.

125 Christians formally presented the "Reconciliation Walk" statement of apology in Turkish, German and English to about 200 Muslim disciples at the Cologne mosque. Loud, sustained applause followed. The Imam, the most senior imam in Europe, sent copies of the statement to 600 mosques throughout Europe. The Walk was off to a promising start.

The 2000-mile, three-year walk across Europe, through the Balkans and Turkey and south to Jerusalem has sought to build bridges of understanding and to turn back over 900 years of animosity among the world's three major religions. Response has been surprisingly warm. Audiences at synagogues and mosques have lauded the gesture, often in tears, and encouraged its proclamation. Nationwide press coverage and government protective escorts in Turkey brought crowds into the village streets to receive the walkers enthusiastically.

The Reconciliation Walk Message says the Crusaders "betrayed the name of Christ by conducting themselves in a manner contrary to His wishes and character. ...(By lifting up the Cross) they corrupted its true meaning of reconciliation, forgiveness and selfless love." The messengers "deeply regret the atrocities committed in the name of Christ by our predecessors. We are simple followers of Jesus Christ who have found forgiveness from sin and life in Him," they explain. "We renounce greed, hatred and fear, and condemn all violence done in the name of Jesus Christ."

The walkers cite Jesus' biblical affirmation that He came to "proclaim release to the captives, and recovery of sight to

the blind, to set free those who are oppressed.”

Observers have found the Walk absorbing. International School of Theology church history professor Dr. J. Raymond Albrektson called it “a commendable and necessary venture, and better late than never.”

Duke University Professor of Religion Eric Meyers, who is Jewish, commented, “Reconciliation between Christianity and the Jewish people or Christianity and the Islamic world is certainly a laudable and noble aim.” Meyers hoped that what he called “God’s universalistic vision” would not be overlooked.

George Washington University Professor of Islamic Studies Dr. Seyyed Hossein Nasr, a Muslim, remarked, “Every effort by both sides to bring Christians and Muslims closer together and to unify them before the formidable forces of irreligion and secularism which wield inordinate power today must be supported by people of faith in both worlds.”

Apologizing for 900-year-old sins won’t restore the lives lost. But in a modern world where religious differences can prompt turf wars and ethnic cleansing, maybe it can provide an inspiring example to emulate.

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Elvis Is Dead. (Deal With It.)

Elvis Lives

At least in the hearts of his fans.

And they are everywhere.

Twenty years after his death, our culture is still fascinated with the raven-haired, swivel-hipped entertainer. His songs fill the airwaves. His face graces postage stamps and velvet paintings in the U.S. and abroad. Thousands of the faithful annually trek to Graceland, his Memphis home, to pay homage to the king of rock and roll.

The National Association of Amateur Elvis Impersonators promotes the cause while the "Flying Elvi" (plural of "Elvis," get it?) jump from 13,000 feet. Featured in a hit movie, these Las Vegas daredevils combine skydiving with Elvis nostalgia. They're even available for Las Vegas weddings: 'Why settle for just one Elvis look-alike,' asks the ad, "when you can have the entire ten-Elvi team in attendance on your special day?" They "make terrific groomsmen as well as perfect Las Vegas-style witnesses."

Internet sites tout Elvis fan clubs and even Elvis baby food. A Santa Cruz, CA, mall displays a plaque commemorating an Elvis sighting. Former NFL coach Jerry Glanville often left two tickets for Elvis at the will call window on game days.

"Elvis is Greek" announced a college fraternity newsletter. Three members of Tau Kappa Epsilon at Arkansas State University discovered in a safe deposit box Elvis's signature on a membership scroll and photos from his honorary induction. "It's amazing what computers can do with photos," cracked one cynic.

Even academics are into Elvis. The University of Mississippi has held International Conferences on Elvis Presley. Scholarly seminars included, "Civil Rights: Martin Luther King, Jr., and Elvis"; "Elvis, Faulkner, and Feminine Spirituality"; "Elvis: The Twinless Twins' Search for Spiritual Meaning (Elvis's twin brother died at birth), and "Elvis 'n' Jesus."

America. What a country!

Hound Dog?

What is all this about, really? My own informal, nonscientific survey yielded fascinating analyses from many levels of society.

"It's a national joke," claims a San Diego housepainter.

"I gave my wife an Elvis Valentine's Day candy box," admits a Miami interior designer. "Our cat is named Elvis Presley," explains his wife. "He's fat with a black coat, white collar, and eyes that glaze over—Elvis in his later years." The husband quips, "The other day, we had an Elvis sighting—in a tree." (Was a hound dog responsible?)

A Sacramento van driver attributes today's craze to "all the lonely people who sit around and watch TV. "Besides," the driver says, "Elvis's grave wasn't marked right, and there's evidence he's not really buried there. I read it in the tabloids."

A California mayor feels people need to link up with something, to create a sense of belonging. "They could be seeking memories of better times," she reasons. "Some people wish he was still alive. My husband is an Elvis fan. He knows Elvis is dead, but he likes the music."

A southern California doctor wonders if fans may be bonding with a romanticized part of their youth. He adds, "People who don't have God make a god out of all sorts of things."

Indeed. Deep reverence and even worship characterize many pilgrims to Graceland. Some hold candlelight ceremonies, offer flowers, and display icons.

One scholar at Mississippi's International Conference notes that "without looking at spirituality, you can't explain the Elvis phenomena....There's a tremendous force that brings people back to Graceland."[\[1\]](#)

Are You Lonesome Tonight?

Elvis's August 16, 1977 death brought an unusual outpouring of grief—feelings of loneliness and despair. Those feelings, though perhaps not as intense now as when he died, are still very real in many people.

"I get so depressed," admits a Texas woman. "Anytime I've got anything bothering me, I can get in my car and turn on the stereo and listen to Elvis and just go into a world of my own. It's like he's right there singing directly to me...It's like he's always there to solve everything."^{2} "I sit and talk to him," claims a New Jersey follower. "I feel he hears what I say to him and he gives me the will to go on when things are really bad...Somehow you talk to Elvis.. I know if anybody ever saw me, they would probably tell me I was crazy, but I do. I love him. I talk to him and I know he understands and I feel so much better after. I think I always will." ^{3}Some fringers actually believe Elvis is still alive. My informal survey encountered no actual Elvis spotters, though a few claimed they had seen the Energizer Bunny.

"I'm not a weirdo like that," you might say. "What's this craze got to do with me?"

Years of interacting with people on six continents have convinced me that nearly everyone is looking for happiness and fulfillment in life. Some seek it through fame, success, wealth, or career. Others look to relationships, friends, or family.

Pursuits from sports to sex can be driven by the need to fill a void. Probably everyone has at least one "Elvis" in his or her life, a person or idea or team or goal or possession or practice to which they are devoted and from which they seek happiness.

Many feel a spiritual emptiness, a need to personally connect

with something that represents greatness, something that will replace inner loneliness with friendship, fear with love, and desperation with hope.

Loneliness is rampant today. Broken marriages, fragile relationships, and general incivility have raised emotional armor over hurting hearts. Newspaper personal ad sections swell with pleas for companionship. Lonely singles and lonely marrieds search cyberspace for someone to connect with. Humans need belonging and acceptance.

Once I was in a motel room convalescing from surgery. My best friend had just deserted me. Some coworkers had betrayed me. The inner pain felt like the worst argument I'd ever had, multiplied by a trillion—like I was being reamed out by an emotional Roto-Rooter. Loneliness ran deep.

Then a close friend called to ask how I was doing. What a lift! Everyone needs friendship to counter loneliness.

Love Me Tender

We also need love. Los Angeles psychiatrist William Glasser says everyone needs to love and be loved and to feel a sense of worth—both to themselves and to others. He says we each need to become involved with at least one other person who cares for us and for whom we care, someone who will accept us for what we are but tell us when we act irresponsibly. Without “this essential person,” he writes, “we will not be able to fulfill our basic needs”[\[4\]](#) It's nice to be accepted based on our looks, personality, or performance, but these criteria can also bring fear and pressure. What if my looks change or I don't perform well? Will I still be loved?

To be loved unconditionally, to be accepted in spite of our faults, can bring peace and contentment and motivation to excel. “You are so special to me,” says a spouse “I want to please you,” feels the mate.

Human love is great but not perfect. People can disappoint us or give us wrong advice. Those you trust can show their selfish side, use you for their own ends, or discard you. Is there something better?

Besides friendship and love, we also need hope. A study showed that many of the 31,000 Allied soldiers imprisoned in Japan and Korea during the 1940s suffered from lack of hope. Although they were offered sufficient food, more than 8,000 died. Psychiatric researcher and editor Dr. Harold Wolff believed many of them died from despair. He wrote, "Hope, like faith and a purpose in life, is medicinal. This is not merely a statement of belief, but a conclusion proved by meticulously controlled scientific experiment." {5} Ultimately, however, searches for hope based purely on human endeavor lead to emptiness. For most of us, there will always be someone faster, richer, more intelligent or articulate, better looking or more popular than we are. Our favorite teams will lose. Our heroes will show their faults. Even if you reach the top, what then? According to the latest statistics, the death rate in this nation is still 100 percent.

Oddly enough, some clues to solving our struggles with loneliness and our quest for love and hope may lie in one of the songs Elvis recorded. Few may realize that Elvis's only Grammy Award for a single came for his 1967 recording of "How Great Thou Art," a famous hymn. The lyrics, which likely reflected his own spiritual roots, speak in "awesome wonder" of God's creation of the universe as a majestic display of His power.

The God this song alludes to is described elsewhere as a friend of those in need. If we let Him in our lives, He promises to be there in our successes and in our failures, when others praise us and when they desert us, when things are going well and when we're painfully lonely.

"How Great Thou Art" also tells how all this is possible.

Because of God's great love for us, He sent His Son here to die, to carry the burden of humanity's injustices, selfishness, and wrongs.

God's love is endless, and He offers us hope. When we tell Him our problems, unlike Elvis, He can do something about them And not only can we rely on Him for our needs today, but the Bible promises a new heaven and earth in the future, free from death, sorrow, crying, and pain.[\[6\]](#) Jesus Himself promised, "I tell you the truth, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be condemned; he has crossed over from death to life" John 5:24).

Friendship, love, and hope— from one who cannot fail us. Sounds great. But is it true?

Jesus Is Alive. Live with It!

Jesus said the final test of the truth of His claims would be His resurrection. Historical records indicate that he was executed on a cross and declared dead. His body was wrapped like a mummy and placed in a solid-rock tomb. A huge stone sealed the tomb's entrance where an elite Roman guard kept watch.

On the third day the stone had been rolled away and the body was missing but the grave clothes remained in place. Hundreds of people witnessed him walking around alive again. Cowards became heroes as ten of His previously frightened disciples were martyred for their faith.

Some years ago, as a skeptic myself, I discovered that His resurrection is actually one of the best-attested facts of history.[\[7\]](#) It's all true!

If you're longing to link with someone great, He's the greatest. Since Jesus is alive, you, too, can know Him as a friend.

Elvis Presley is dead. Chances are, you might have hints that some of the “Elvises” in your life really have little or nothing lasting to offer. But Jesus is alive. Care to meet Him?

Notes

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6. Revelation 21: 1,4.
7. See, for instance, Josh McDowell, *Evidence That Demands a Verdict*, San Bernardino (CA): Campus Crusade for Christ. 1972.

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Jesus Must Have Risen: Disciples’ Lives Changed

At Easter, some might wonder what all the fuss is about. Who cares? What difference does it make if Jesus rose from the dead?

It makes all the difference in the world. If Christ did not rise, then thousands of believers have died as martyrs for a hoax. If he did rise, then he is still alive and can offer peace to troubled, hurting lives. Countless scholars—among them the apostle Paul, Augustine, Sir Isaac Newton and C. S. Lewis—believed in the resurrection. We need not fear committing intellectual suicide by believing it also. Where do the facts lead?

Paul, a first century skeptic-turned-believer, wrote that “Christ died for our sins... he was buried ... he was raised on the third day ... he appeared to Peter, and then to the Twelve (disciples). After that, he appeared to more than 500 at the same time, most of whom are still living” (I Corinthians 15: 3-6). Consider four pieces of evidence:

1. The explosive growth of the Christian movement. Within a few weeks after Jesus was crucified, a movement arose which, by the later admission of its enemies, “upset the world.” What happened to ignite this movement shortly after its leader had been executed?

2. The disciples’ changed lives. After Jesus’ arrest and crucifixion, most of the disciples fled in fear. Peter denied three times that he was a follower of Jesus. (The women were braver and stayed to the end.) Yet 10 out of the 11 Disciples (Judas committed suicide) were martyred for their faith. According to traditions, Peter was crucified upside down; Thomas was skewered; John was boiled in oil but survived. What turned these cowards into heroes? Each believed he had seen Jesus alive again.

3. The empty tomb. Jesus’ corpse was removed from the cross, wrapped like a mummy and placed in a solid-rock tomb. A 1 1/2 to 2-ton stone was rolled into a slightly depressed groove to seal the tomb’s entrance.

A “Green Beret”-like unit of Roman soldiers guarded the grave.

Sunday morning, the stone was found rolled away, the body was gone but the grave clothes were still in place. What happened?

Did Christ's friends steal the body? Perhaps one of the women sweet-talked (karate-chopped?) the guards while the others moved the stone and tiptoed off with the body. Or maybe Peter (remember his bravery) or Thomas (Doubting Thomas) overpowered the guards, stole the body, then fabricated—and died for—a resurrection myth.

These theories hardly seem plausible. The guard was too powerful, the stone too heavy and the disciples too spineless to attempt such a feat.

Did Christ's enemies steal the body? If Romans or Jewish religious leaders had the body, surely they would have exposed it publicly and Christianity would have died out. They didn't and it didn't.

The "Swoon Theory" supposes that Jesus didn't really die but was only unconscious. The expert Roman executioners merely thought he was dead. After a days in the tomb without food or medicine, the cool air revived Him. He burst from the 100 pounds of graveclothes, rolled away the stone with his nail-pierced hands, scared the daylights out of Roman soldiers, walked miles on wounded feet and convinced his disciples he'd been raised from the dead. This one is harder to believe than the resurrection itself.

4. The appearances of risen Christ. For 40 days after his death, many different people said they saw Jesus alive. Witnesses included a woman, a shrewd tax collector, several fishermen and over 500 people at once. These claims provide further eyewitness testimony for the resurrection.

As a skeptic, I realized attempts to explain away the evidence run into a brick wall of facts that point to one conclusion: Christ is risen.

The above does not constitute exhaustive proof, rather a reasoned examination of the evidence. Each interested person should evaluate the evidence and decide if it makes sense. Of course, the truth or falsity of the resurrection is a matter of historical fact and is not dependent on anyone's belief. If the facts support the claim, one can conclude that he arose. In any case, mere intellectual assent to the facts does little for one's life.

Major evidence comes experientially in personally receiving Jesus' free gift of forgiveness. He said, "I stand at the door and knock; if anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him" (Revelation 3:20).

Worth considering?

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When the Good Guys Don't Win

Pop! Pow! Gunfire crackled from the house next door. My neighbor John, high on marijuana, was shooting at his friend who crouched in fear behind a corner of the building. No one was injured and the arrival of police calmed John down.

That's strange, I thought to myself another sunny morning as I left my home to jog. *Why would my car windshield be covered with ice crystals? It's July.* As I drew nearer, I realized the "ice crystals" were broken glass, courtesy of some Fourth-of-July vandals.

Fear, confusion, anger, helplessness. Life can seem out of control when we are violated. Each nighttime creak could be an

intruder. Were the walls thick enough to stop bullets should John's cannabis exploits resume? What did I do to deserve this?

An alleged rape victim feels cheated when the DA refuses to prosecute the accused perpetrators. A medical exam showed rape trauma; two reliable eyewitnesses saw her pushed partially clad down some stairs and heard her screams for help. "It seems to me that I am the one on trial," she complains in frustration. A rape is the only crime where the victims are treated with disrespect."[\[1\]](#) An African-American mother says she's paranoid that her well-behaved teenage son will be falsely suspected of being a criminal because of his race. Fear and fury drive her to nag him before he goes to the store: "Keep your hands out of your pockets. Don't reach under your shirt. If there's an itch, just live with it. In winter, keep your jacket open."[\[2\]](#)

Terrorist Massacre

Members of a multi-racial Cape Town, South Africa, church were enjoying a beautiful duet when the front door burst open. Terrorists sprayed the congregation with automatic rifle fire and tossed in two grenades, leaving 11 dead and 53 wounded. Lorenzo Smith pulled his wife, Myrtle, to the floor and lay on top of her to protect her. The second grenade exploded 6 feet away, sending a piece of shrapnel into her left side near her heart but missing him entirely. She died en route to a hospital.

"You're no longer working here," the personnel chief informs the career employee. The stellar worker had ruffled feathers by challenging ethical and financial misconduct of several company officers. Instead of applauding his integrity, the company showed him the door. Whistle blowing can be lonely.

Palestinians find their homes bulldozed. Israeli shoppers are massacred by suicide bombers in a crowded marketplace.

Rwandans are maimed and slaughtered in tribal violence.

Bad things sometimes (often?) happen to good or seemingly innocent people. What should be done? How can the victims cope?

First, recognize where the problem stems from.

Why Suffering?

“Why is there suffering in the world?” ranked first in a national survey to determine the top 40 questions of life.[{3}](#) Many human efforts to alleviate suffering and achieve happiness have borne some fruit, but each also contains examples of failure. Consider a few:

Psychology. Many psychologists offer hope based purely on human resources. Still, sometimes even the best and brightest give up in despair. Legendary psychoanalyst Bruno Bettelheim, who used his own survival of Nazi horrors to help heal others, eventually took his own life. Upon learning of his suicide, one colleague remarked, “It was as if the [psychological] profession itself had failed.”[{4}](#)

Marxism. Pointing at class antagonism as the culprit, Marxism aimed to create a “New Man” in a harmonious society devoid of such antagonism. Instead, it created an elite “Rich Man” as party chiefs lived in luxury while the masses remained disillusioned. “Workers of the World, We Apologize,” read the Moscow demonstrators’ banner as the Soviet Union crumbled.[{5}](#) Today’s Cubans eat lots of bananas and ride bicycles. North Koreans starve.

Capitalism. Is this political theory the answer? The market economy has raised standards of living, yet even nations like the United States boil with crime, racism, sexual discrimination and homelessness

Could we be missing the root of the problem? Could much human

suffering be rooted in something deeper than flawed political systems or philosophical constructs? Could there be something wrong with the human heart?

Heart Disease?

History is replete with confirming evidence. A United Nations conference on the role of the university in the search for world peace ended early because “the delegates began quarreling too vociferously.”^{6} Various attempts to establish utopian societies with uniform equality have crumbled due to internal strife.

“Everybody thinks of changing humanity,” noted Russian novelist Leo Tolstoy, “but nobody thinks of changing himself.”^{7} Simon Bolivar, the great liberator of Latin America, admitted in his later years, “I was all my life a slave to my passions. The essence of liberty is precisely that one can liberate oneself.”^{8}

“We have met the enemy,” announced the comic strip character Pogo, “and he is us.”

If, then, we live in a flawed world with people determined to live out their own inner sicknesses, what can we do? How do we cope with the resulting, unjust suffering? “Seek justice” was a North Carolina woman’s strategy as she recently sued her husband’s lover for destroying her marriage, winning a million-dollar settlement. Sometimes the right cause prevails in court. Often, though, both sides end up bitter and poorer.

Are there any other solutions? Anything that works?

- **Choose to look out for others.** In a commencement address at Duke University, ABC News commentator Ted Koppel said: “Maimonides and Jesus summed it up in almost identical words: ‘Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself,’ ‘Do unto others as you would have them do

unto you.”^{9} After Hurricane Andrew devastated parts of Miami, I returned to my hometown to help rebuild. I was amazed to discover that thousands of volunteers from around North America had come at their own expense to help the poor reconstruct their homes. Most were with Christian mission organizations, motivated as Good Samaritans by their love of God and love of people.

- **Lessen the pain by sharing it.** During a particularly trying episode in my own life, my best friend deserted me, some trusted co-workers betrayed me, and my health and finances suffered. Close friends and my faith helped me emerge wounded but growing. Building friendships takes time and effort. Initiating communication, offering to help another move or to carpool, listening to hurts, offering a compliment or word of encouragement . . . all can help build strong bonds. Giving often motivates others to respond in kind. “Bearing one another’s burdens” can make them lighter for both of you when you each need it.
- **Eliminate bitter roots.** Asking and/or granting forgiveness can help heal hearts. As Alabama governor, George Wallace preached “Segregation now! Segregation tomorrow! Segregation forever!” Two decades in a wheelchair gave him time to reflect on life, suffering and God. He eventually confessed his wrongs and asked forgiveness of his former racial and political enemies. South African Lorenzo Smith, who lost his wife to the grenade in church, turned and forgave his wife’s murderers. “Bearing a grudge can corrode your soul,” affirmed one wounded warrior. “If you nurse bitterness and refuse to forgive, it can keep you in bondage to your enemies. If you let it go and forgive regardless of your opponent’s response you’re free.”

When the good guys don’t win, you can curse the darkness. Or you can recognize the root problem and light a candle. May

yours shine brightly.

Notes

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