

“I Can’t Forgive Myself for Not Being a Virgin”

I am writing you in order to possibly get some advice on something that has been laboring me for a long time now. I am an extremely strong Christian who is attending a Christian university in order to become a Youth Pastor as a career/mission. Unfortunately though I have made some very bad choices in my life, and I continually have trouble giving them entirely to God. The biggest battle that I face day in day out is the fact that I am no longer a virgin, and I’m not married. Three months ago I broke up with my girlfriend of two years, because I could no longer live with myself continuing having sex outside of marriage. Since then I have fully given myself to Christ once more, except for the fact that I can not live in peace with the fact that I would not be able to give my virginity to my wife if I get married. I was just wondering if you had any advice for me in how I could possibly live with myself a little better than I am now. I realize that I made an irreversible mistake, and that I must suffer the consequences of my actions, so if you don’t have any advice for me than I completely understand. Thanks for being there for people to ask their tough questions to. I know I appreciate it greatly.

Consider the dynamics of the Lord Jesus’ exchange with the woman caught in adultery. He looked right past her sin to the precious soul underneath, with total love and acceptance. The same way He looks at you! When He told her, “Go and sin no more,” He was acknowledging that she had sinned but the grace of His acceptance was a shame-buster. Don’t you know that the shame just fell off her in chunks? Those words communicate the ability to move forward, beyond our sin, into the life of holiness and righteousness God calls us to.

It’s true you can’t give your virginity to your future wife. But you can give your purity to her. Consider the response of

a godly young woman accepting this truth about you and forgiving you for it anyway—as the Lord Jesus said, “He who is forgiven much, loves much.” It prepares you to love this kind of special woman that more more!

I think the enemy of your soul has succeeded in keeping your focus on yourself and your sin—now confessed and repented of, so it’s GONE—instead of on Jesus. He has no condemnation for you, and He invites you to give Him your shame since He knows how to deal with it . . . He despises it! (Heb. 12:2) He makes it wither up and disappear!

Don’t let Satan have another minute of your life. Every time you are tempted to wallow in your remorse and guilt, turn it around and thank the Lord for forgiving and cleansing you. (Have you let Him cleanse you? [1 John 1:9] If not, thank Him for cleansing AS WELL AS forgiving you.) But He’s probably preparing a young lady right now for you who will deal graciously with your past. That young lady might just be someone who has committed the same sin as you, who will not only forgive but fully understand. Then you can both rejoice together in being understood and giving each other lots of grace.

I hope this helps.

Sue Bohlin
Probe Ministries

“My Friend is HIV+”

A person I love very much was diagnosed as being HIV positive. He was infected at the age of 16. If he had been diagnosed with cancer or some other disease the first thing people would

say or think is "How terrible, I will pray for this person." or "I'm sorry. " They would also wonder about the injustice of it. Unfortunately, that is not the reaction a person gets from the church when they let people know they have AIDS. The first thing they want to know is "How did you get it. "

Because of this reaction my friend has been totally turned off to Christianity. No one at are church knew about him because he was afraid of what people would say. Only his family knew. One day at church the subject of AIDS came up and quickly his fears were realized. Comments such as it being God's judgment and people getting what they deserve for making immoral choices. You should have seen his face. He was shattered. So was I.

I know that not all churches are like this but so far I haven't found one that wasn't. I try and tell myself that this is not our savior talking. If he were here he would forgive and love the person afflicted with this disease. I try to talk to him about Jesus loving and healing the leper. But faced with what is said in our church its hard for him to remember that.

There are so many people struggling with this terrible disease. People who make the same bad choices lots of teenagers in the church are making, but fortunately they only got pregnant or got someone pregnant. They were lucky enough not to get AIDS. When someone repents, God casts that sin as far as the east is from the west. Too bad we can't do that. It doesn't matter how you got the disease. That person needs to be shown the love of Christ. Don't wait until it's your loved one. Learn the facts about this disease. CHURCH, I beg of you don't let ignorance stop you from being a witness. We are His hands and feet. Lets use them to show a group of people rejected by the church His love. God has not reected those who have AIDS. He is loving them and He is expecting us to do the same. Please pray about this issue.

I am so very, very sorry to hear about this horrible

experience. You are so right about the church's judgmental reaction and how it grieves not only the person who has it, and the people who love him, but the Father's heart.

The reason it's so easy for people to react so strongly is that, unlike cancer or stroke or other life-stealing disease, HIV is usually contracted through an immoral lifestyle choice, either sex or drugs. But, of course, as the disease has spread, innocent people get it from those who weren't innocent, and the accompanying unfair judgment just adds to the pain.

You're right, too, all churches aren't like this, but it's hard to find a grace-based church that knows the truth about how God accepts us no matter what. Our church, for example, embraced a man who eventually died of AIDS, and he was greatly loved. But part of that process was educating them about their own risk to exposure to him, and assuring them that unless they came in contact with his body fluids they had nothing to worry about. Which is why some of us particularly delighted in hugging him and kissing him on the forehead to communicate that we cared.

Let me share something someone e-mailed me. I love this story and I bet you will too.

***Slandering The Blood of Jesus** One night in a church service a young woman felt the tug of God at her heart. She responded to God's call and accepted Jesus as her Lord and Savior. The young woman had a very rough past, involving alcohol, drugs, and prostitution. But, the change in her was evident. As time went on she became a faithful member of the church. She eventually became involved in the ministry, teaching young children. It was not very long until this faithful young woman had caught the eye and heart of the pastor's son. Their relationship grew and they began to make wedding plans. This is when the problems began. You see, about one half of the church did not think that a woman with a past such as hers*

was suitable for a pastor's son. The church members began to argue and fight about the matter. So they decided to have a meeting. As the people made their arguments and tensions increased, the meeting was getting completely out of hand. The young woman became very upset about all the things being brought up about her past. As she began to cry the pastor's son stood to speak. He could not bear the pain it was causing his wife to be. He began to speak and his statement was this: " My fiancée's past is not what is on trial here. What you are questioning is the ability of the blood of Jesus to wash away sin. Today you have put the blood of Jesus on trial. So, does it wash away sin or not?" The whole church began to weep as they realized that they had been slandering the blood of the Lord Jesus Christ. Too often, even as Christians, we bring up the past and use it as a weapon against our brothers and sisters. Forgiveness is a very foundational part of the Gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ. If the blood of Jesus does not cleanse the other person completely then it cannot cleanse us completely. If that is the case, then we are all in a lot of trouble. What can wash away my sins, nothing but the blood of Jesus.... end of case!!! God Forgives.. So should we.

Bless you, _____.

Sue Bohlin

Probe Ministries

“I Can't Forgive God for

Taking All Those People in the WTC!”

I saw a distraught woman on the news asking, “Pray? Who do we pray to? God took all those people in the buildings !” It’s obvious there is so much hurt and a sense of betrayal toward God for allowing such a horrific thing to happen. I’m having a rough time forgiving God for allowing such terrible evil in the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon.

I’m so glad you wrote.

A lot of people struggle with anger toward God when we experience pain or when bad things happen. (I completely understand, and carried anger toward Him for many years myself for allowing me to get polio, and not healing me when I begged Him to. That story is [here](#).)

In his excellent book *I Should Forgive, But . . .* [1998, Nashville: Word Publishing, p. 143-157], Dr. Chuck Lynch addresses this issue. There are three problems with a perceived need to forgive God.

*1. It implies **an offense**. But God does not and can not sin against us. He does not morally offend us and does not need to be forgiven.*

The number one complaint against God is that He failed to protect. We can be angry that He did not protect us, or He did not protect other innocent people. We believe a good God does not let bad things happen to good people. Bad things only happen to bad people. Therefore, if bad things happen to good people, God “did us dirty.” But we live in a fallen world; bad things happen to people, period. Our longing for a perfect world where nothing bad happens is a perfectly legitimate longing for the Eden we were created for, and God will re-create that perfect world in the future. . . but we

don't live there yet.

If God doesn't "perform" as we think He should, we think He has offended us. The real failure is not with God's performance, it's with our misperception of His character.

We are upset when we realize that God knew the bad thing was going to happen and He didn't stop it. Why not? Because He is graciously patient now, but His full wrath will be poured out on sin and unrighteousness at a later time.

Acts of nature such as weather tragedies, birth defects and diseases, as well as the consequences of things like terrorist attacks, are also perceived as offenses by God against man.

Many people believe it's God's job to keep their lives free from pain and loss, especially if they are faithful to Him. They fail to remember two things:

- God does not suspend the natural laws of nature for believers. He also does not violate the gift of free will to humanity, even when a person's choice means others will be hurt.
- While we have the promise that all pain and tears will be wiped away in heaven, this is earth.

2. It implies **accountability**. We demand to know the "WHY???" We think God owes it to us to explain why He does what He does, and why He allows the things that He does. And if He doesn't explain it to us [and often, if not usually, He doesn't], then many cut off fellowship with Him. "I'll show You, God, I won't believe in You anymore/I will live in rebellion/I will ignore You!"

God does not owe us an explanation. He is not accountable to us. He does as He pleases (Ps. 115:3), and He has the right to be the sovereign Lord without explaining to His creatures

how his actions today, in time, fit into the big plan of eternity.

*3. It implies **payment**. Somebody has to pay for sin. Jesus paid for our sins—but who's going to pay for God's "sins" against us?*

Our anger against God is like a red light on a car's dashboard. It alerts us that something is wrong and we need to deal with what we're thinking and thus, what we're feeling. The red light tells us we need to grow into acceptance of our losses and adjust to them over time. When God allows bad things to happen, we get mad because of our loss and hurt. We don't need to forgive Him; we need to ask for grace to accept what He has allowed to happen.

God doesn't sin against us; He does things we don't like. He understands our anger the same way a parent understands a child's anger when the parent allows the doctor to give the child a shot. Just as a parent acts in the child's best interest, God is always acting in our best interests even in the midst of horrific evil and pain. He can do that because He is much bigger and more powerful than we can even begin to imagine.

God allows us to experience pain because His goal is our growth and maturity. He is in the process of developing a mature and solid Bride for His Son Jesus, and He knows that the best way for us to grow is often through pain. Even the Lord Jesus, although the Son of God, "learned obedience from what He suffered" (Heb. 5:8). God has a bigger plan than keeping us comfortable.

The real issue is to put aside the misconception that God needs to be forgiven, and move through to trust and acceptance.

I hope this helps.

Sue Bohlin

Probe Ministries

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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The Most Important Decision of Your Life

Probe's founder, Jimmy Williams, shares how to know God and go to heaven when you die.



This article is also available in [Spanish](#).

I have come to share a message that changed my life. I was not a bad boy—but not a good boy either. I went to church with my parents and was baptized when I was 12.

If you had asked me if I were a Christian, I would have said yes. But for twenty-one years God was just a formal idea to me rather than a personal friend. I professed Christianity, but I lived my life as a practical atheist.

At the University, I studied music. I loved to sing, especially the tenor arias from the great operas. As I neared my final year, I was having success with my career goals, but

my heart was empty. I felt that something was missing from my life. I did not know at the time that, as the empty stomach calls for food, I was suffering from spiritual hunger.

Pascal, the great French physicist eloquently expressed this hunger when he said, "There is a God-shaped vacuum in the heart of each man which cannot be satisfied by any created thing, but only by God, the Creator, made known through Jesus Christ."

Augustine, the great theologian and bishop speaks of the same hunger: "Thou hast made us for Thyself, O Lord, and our hearts are restless until they find their rest in Thee."

I thought I had many unsolvable problems then, but I soon discovered that solving my spiritual hunger helped many of my other problems to vanish.

I met a fellow student, an athlete, who had the radiance of a Christian on his face. A simple conversation with him changed the entire direction of my life that day in September, 1959.

He told me that just as there are physical laws in the universe, so are there spiritual laws which govern our relationship with God. They are called "laws" because they are universally true. For example, we do not break the law of gravity. . . it breaks us. Jump off a high building and we discover the truth about the law of gravity.

So what are these spiritual laws? I will share with you the four my friend related to me that day. And like the law of gravity, they are true, whether we believe them or not.

I. God loves us and has a purpose for our lives.

Jesus tells us in John 10:10, "I have come that you might have life, and that you might have it more abundantly." That is one of the reasons He came to make our lives rich and full of

purpose.

Everything in this room has a purpose—the microphone, the piano, the stage, the chairs, the sound system, the lectern. What is man's purpose? What is your purpose? This is an important question.

Why is it that most people are not experiencing the abundant life Jesus promised? The second law tells us:

II. Man is sinful and separated from God; thus, he cannot know and experience God's love and plan for his life.

The Bible tells us in Romans 3:23 that "All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God." God has given us standards to live by in such things as the Ten Commandments. And James tells us that "if a man keeps the whole law (the Ten Commandments) but offends in **one** place, he is guilty of all."

I am not saying that every person is as bad as he/she could be; I am saying that every person has fallen short of the mark, has failed to meet what God has required. And what God requires of us in our personal standard of behavior and righteousness is as unattainable as throwing a rock and trying to hit the North Pole.

Humans have tried to address this problem of personal, moral failure in various ways. Some, in the face of some 4000 years of documented history which records horrific, bloody, and unending incidents of man's inhumanity to man, some have actually persisted in the belief that man is basically **good**.

Others, more realistic and honest about man's tendency toward selfishness and evil, have attempted to explain the reason man displays such destructive behavior. Here are three explanations widely held across the world:

(1) Some suggest that man's moral failure is **biological**; that it is simply the vestigial remains of aggression from our primitive, animal, evolutionary past.

(2) Others argue that man's moral flaw is basically **sociological**, that man lacks the proper environment necessary for upright behavior.

(3) Still others insist that the human problem is essentially **intellectual**, and if people knew more, they would understand what was right, and they would do it. Curiously, in the United States, over 35,000 laws and statutes exist simply to try and enforce the Ten Commandments! We *do* know what is right, but we choose often not to do it!

These three theories have one thing in common: each one approaches the human moral condition from the standpoint of what man lacks.

The **biologist** tells us that more time is needed for man to work out and eliminate the remnants of his primitive aggression. Tennyson optimistically hopes for this in his poem, *In Memoriam*: "Moving ever upward, outward, let the ape and tiger die."

The **sociologist** tells us that what humans basically need is a proper or better environment, and if they had it, human behavior would improve. Modern America is a vivid and tragic example that abundance will not make people good.

Others suggest that man's lack is **information**, and therefore education is the answer. We lack sufficient time; we lack a proper environment; we lack the necessary information.

But our real dilemma is not what is *lacking*, but what is *present*! And every academic discipline has to allow for and explain what it is:

Biology calls it primitive instinct;

Philosophy calls it irrational thinking;
Psychology calls it emotional weakness;
Sociology calls it cultural lag;
History calls it class struggle;
Humanities calls it the human flaw, or *hubris*;
The Bible calls it sin.

Jesus speaks of this presence in Mark 7:15-23 as something which comes from within man, something which issues forth from his inner life:

*"Listen to me, all of you, and understand: there is nothing outside the man which going into him can defile him; but the things which proceed out of the man are what defile the man. . . .Are you too so uncomprehending? Do you not see that whatever goes into the man from outside cannot defile him; because it does not go into his heart, but into his stomach, and is eliminated? . . .That which proceeds out of the man, that is what defiles the man. For from **within**, out of the heart of men, proceed the evil thoughts and immorality, thefts, murders, adulteries, deeds of coveting and wickedness, as well as deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride and foolishness. All these evil things proceed from within and defile the man."*

Albert Einstein echoes this when he said, "It is not the explosive power of the atom which I fear: but rather the explosive power for evil in the heart of man which I greatly fear."

"All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God."
(Romans 3:23).

And if this sinful condition were not bad enough, we learn from the Bible that there are consequences for our sin: "For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life, through Jesus Christ, our Lord." (Romans 6:23)

What is the meaning of death? Death always means separation. *Physical death* is a separation of the soul/spirit from the body. People who are present when someone dies can actually observe the moment when this takes place.

Spiritual death is also a separation, from God Himself. Man's sin keeps him separated from the one he seeks to know. Mahatma Gandhi, the great Hindu teacher, speaks of this separation when he says in his autobiography, "O wretched man that I am! It is a constant source of torture to me that I am separated from the One I know to be my very life and being, and I know it is my sin that hides Him from me!"

T.S. Eliot expresses this same despair when he says:

"We are the hollow men,
We are the stuffed men,
Head piece filled with straw.
No head—No heart.
Life does not end with a bang,
But with a whimper."

Feelings of this separation, this alienation, have prompted men through the ages to try and find a way to bridge this gap, this estrangement, from God. And historically, all of these attempts originate with man, and reflect his own efforts to reach God by trying to be good, trying to keep the Ten Commandments or the Golden Rule, or by observing some religious practice.

The problem with these approaches is that one never knows when he or she has been good enough or done enough! Karl Marx said that "Religion is the opiate of the people," meaning that it appeared to be something necessary and helpful for humans, whether true or not. And many people console themselves by attending church, trying to be basically good and decent, and drugging themselves into believing God will accept them for making such efforts. Marx believed these naïve human

inclinations should be eliminated.

Actually, the teachings of Jesus agree with Marx on this point. Jesus taught that religion is the enemy of Christianity, because religion represents man's best attempts to reach up and find God. And it is interesting to note that in Jesus' day He was most critical of the self-righteous, religious people He encountered: the "good" ones.

He said, "Those who are well do not need a physician." (Matthew 9:12) When does someone go to the doctor? When well, or sick? What Jesus was implying is that the notion that one's good deeds or relatively good life were already sufficient to bridge the gap between himself and his God, then what Christ came to accomplish through His sacrificial death on the cross is totally negated and unnecessary. In other words, He was saying, If you have drugged yourself into believing that your own good works have secured your salvation, then He, the Great Physician, can do nothing for you.

This is what Paul was getting at in Ephesians 2, 8-9 when he said: "For by grace have you been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works, that no one should boast."

The Ten Commandments were never given by God with the expectation that man would keep them flawlessly. They were given as a guide, a teaching tool. Or, in medical terminology, the commandments parallel the purpose of an X-ray machine, which can only *reveal* the condition of the broken bone within a human body. It identifies the problem but can provide no solution for knitting the bone back together.

This is what Jesus was trying to say to the Pharisees, to recognize the true spiritual condition of their lives, in that as good and righteous as they tried to be, they were still hopelessly short of the mark which God required. A gospel preacher once pointed out that it was not difficult to get

people saved, but it was extremely difficult to get them *lost*! We must first honestly face our true spiritual condition.

Once we have come to grips with this fact of our own personal sin and failure before God and accept it as true of ourselves, we are ready to consider the third spiritual law:

III. Jesus Christ is God's only provision for man's sin; through Him we can know and experience God's love and purpose for our lives.

The second spiritual law reveals to us the bad news about man's condition. This third law now gives us the *euaggelion*, the gospel, the good news from God:

"But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us." (Romans 5:8)

We have established that "religion" is defined as man's best efforts to reach up and find God. Christianity is unique and exactly the opposite and is defined as God's only effort to reach down and find man. Religion is spelled "**Do.**" Christianity is spelled "**Done!**"

Jesus stated the purpose of His divine mission in John 6:38-40:

"For I have come down from heaven, not to do my own will, but the will of Him who sent Me. . . And this is the will of Him who sent Me, that of all that He has given Me I lose nothing, but raise it up on the last day. . . For this is the will of My Father, that every one who beholds the Son, and believes in Him, may have eternal life: and I myself will raise him up on the last day."

John the disciple, an eyewitness, recounts to us the last words Christ uttered on the cross: "When Jesus had received

the sour wine, He said, 'It is finished!' And He bowed His head and gave up His spirit" (9:30). "Mission accomplished!" "Done!"

It is for this reason that Jesus had told his disciples, "I am the way, the truth, and the life; no man comes to the Father except by me." (John 14:6) He claimed to be the One who, by His Incarnation and death, had come from heaven to build a bridge made of Himself, which could alone completely span the spiritual chasm between sinful human beings and a holy God.

The exclusiveness of this statement by Christ offends many. It is too narrow, they say. But honestly, some things in life *are* narrow. I have always appreciated a narrow-minded pilot, for example, who insists in landing his plane on the runway!

One of most beautiful cities in America is San Francisco, California. You may know that at the opening into the vast San Francisco Bay there stands a gigantic, rust-red suspension bridge called the Golden Gate Bridge. It allows people and cars to get back and forth from the city on the South to the picturesque little seaside village, Sausalito, and the Napa Valley on the North. People have a choice if they want to get to Sausalito: they can take the bridge, or they can swim in the cold Pacific with its treacherous currents flowing in and out of the Bay. Everyone decides to trust the Bridge.

This bridge is also narrow. And since it was built in the 1930s, no one has ever petitioned the city of San Francisco to put up another bridge alongside the Golden Gate so people can get to Sausalito. It is not necessary, not needed. Now the real question is whether Jesus' claim to be the bridge, the only bridge, which gives access to God, is true.

There is a story recounted about a certain man who operated a drawbridge over a large river which he raised and lowered, allowing the boats to pass through. One day he brought his small son with him to the drawbridge. Late in the morning a

large boat approached filled with people. As he was raising the drawbridge to let the big ship pass, his little son fell directly on to the great gear wheel. Horror-stricken, the man was faced with the decision of imperiling the many lives of those on the swift, oncoming craft, or saving his son. Moments later, the crushing of the little son's body in the machinery was accompanied by the tears and the crushed heart of a father who sacrificed his beloved child for the lives of the strangers on the boat.

That is the significance of the Cross. Jesus' life for ours. He is our substitute, our bridge, and access to God. He died so we might live. He was separated from God the Father ("My God, my God! Why have you forsaken me?") so we might not have to be. . . for an eternity.

"All we like sheep have gone astray,
Each of us has turned to his own way;
But the Lord has caused the iniquity of us all to fall on
Him.
He was oppressed and He was afflicted,
Yet He did not open his mouth.
Like a lamb that is led to slaughter,
And like a sheep that is silent before its shearers,
So He did not open His mouth. . . .
He was cut off out of the land of the living,
For the transgression of my people to whom the stroke was
due. . .
Although He had done no violence
Nor was there any deceit in His mouth.
But it pleased the Lord
To crush Him, putting Him to grief;
If His soul would render Himself as a guilt offering. . .
By His knowledge the Righteous One,
My Servant, will justify the many,
As He will bear their iniquities."
—Isaiah 53

What this means to you and to me is that if we were the only two people who ever lived on planet earth, Christ would still have come and do what He did just for the two of us. That is how much He loves us. He had you and me specifically in mind as He carried that cross up the *Via Dolorosa* on that day in Jerusalem two thousand years ago. And on that Cross He took your place and mine and bore our Hell so that we might have the chance at Heaven.

Now it is most important to make something crystal clear. I want to pose a question. If the above things are really true, how many people did Jesus die for? We find the answer in John 3:16: "God so loved the world that He gave His only-begotten Son that whosoever believeth on Him should not perish, but have everlasting life."

We learn from this that Christ died for the world. His death is sufficient for every human being who ever lived on the planet.

But we must ask a second question: Does that fact that Christ died for *all* mean that everyone is a Christian? Obviously not. His death is *sufficient* for everyone, but it is only *efficient* for certain ones. Which ones? The fourth and final spiritual law tells us:

IV. We must personally receive Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior into our lives in order to become a Christian.

John 1:12 and 13 tell us that "As many as received Him, to them He gave the authority to become children of God, to those who believe on His name. . who were born not of blood (through inheritance), nor of the will of the flesh (human will power), nor of the will of man (priestly pronouncement), but of God (the new birth)."

The Bible speaks of receiving Christ as similar to receiving a

gift. We have seen this mentioned in Romans 6:23 and Ephesians 2:8,9 above. This “gift” concept marks out an approach to God that is diametrically opposed to any and all religious systems based on human effort we have already discussed.

The “spirit” of gift-giving is one of **grace**. How does one accept a gift? The appropriate response is “Thank you.” If you were to try to give money in exchange for a gift given you, the other person would be highly insulted and offended. The graciousness of the gift-giver would be spoiled by such a response. Grace is God’s unmerited, undeserved favor.

We cannot earn this gift.

We do not deserve this gift.

We can only say “Thank you.”

What God has so graciously provided for our salvation is so unlike the way humans think about such things, that no human would ever have thought up such a solution to the fallen, human condition.

And so we humans have a choice with respect to our personal salvation. We can continue our own religious efforts with the uncertain hope of being acceptable to God when we die, or we can accept the free gift of God, His Son’s death on our behalf. And when you come to think about it, if God intended for man to achieve his own salvation through self-effort, then He made a terrible mistake: He let His own Son die on the Cross, which was evidently (along this line of reasoning) not really necessary! Salvation through self-effort negates the very significance of the Cross and Christ’s death on our behalf.

Now how do we receive this gift? We do it by exercising faith through the exercise of our will. It is a personal faith decision one makes on the basis of the facts stated above.

The experience goes by many names: conversion, being saved, being born again. Let's look at Jesus' conversation with Nicodemus in John chapter three. Nicodemus was a Pharisee, the group Jesus was so often critical of because of their self-righteousness. But Nicodemus is drawn to Jesus and comes to see Him. He says, "Rabbi, we know that you have come from God as a teacher; for no one can do these miracles that you do unless God is with Him." Jesus said to him, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God."

Nicodemus took Him literally: "How can a man be born when he is old? He cannot enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born, can He?" Jesus answered, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of . . . the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God. That which is born of the flesh is flesh; and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit."

Here Jesus contrasts physical birth with spiritual birth. Physical birth is an event. It happens at a moment in time and, we each celebrate the occasion once a year on our birthdays. Likewise, spiritual birth is an event, one that can occur at any time and any place when a person understands what Christ did and reaches out to personally receive the Gift He offers: "But as many as received Him, to those He gave the authority to become the children of God, to those who believe *on* His name (John 1:12)." Observe the verbs in this verse. It is our part to believe that what Christ did for us is true, then to receive Him into our lives as our Savior, and become a child of God. This is done by an exercise of our will, which actively decides to abandon all self effort to reach and attain a righteousness acceptable to God, but rather to reach out to Him in faith and receive the Gift which He offers us. And notices the verse states that we are to believe *ON*, not *IN*. Believing in something does not necessarily call for trust. Believing on something does. This is the true nature of faith. To "believe *on*" means to "*count on*."

The story is told of a great trapeze artist at the circus. Up on the high wire, he would ride back and forth across on a bicycle with a long pole. Then he would do it again with his attendant sitting on his shoulders. After that He asked the audience if they believed he could carry one of them across. The entire audience loudly exclaimed they believed he could. He looked at a particular man on the front row and asked if he believed, and he said "yes." Then the trapeze artist said, "Climb up the ladder, get on my shoulders, and I'll take you across." If the man responds and *entrusts himself* to the man on the bicycle, he is demonstrating the equivalent of the biblical faith called for by one who desires to become a Christian and to be born into the family of God.

It is important to understand the nature of faith in our lives. Faith is something that we employ all the time. Faith that a chair will hold us up; faith the on-coming driver will stay in his lane; faith the plane will land safely. Everyone has faith—atheist, agnostic, Christian. The real issue is not having faith, in large or small quantities, but rather to have a *worthy object* for our faith. If you walked out on a frozen pond, which would you prefer, a little faith in a sheet of ice two-feet thick, or a lot of faith in an inch of ice? Faith is important, but the *object* of our faith is all-important.

To believe on Christ is to trust Him and Him alone to make us presentable and acceptable to God. We decide that He is the most reliable object of our faith and we are saying that when we stand before God, we are not trusting in our own merits to attain eternal life, but rather in the merits of our Substitute, the spotless Lamb of God who stands there with us, our Savior and our Redeemer.

Revelation 3:20 gives us a picture of how this spiritual birth occurs: "Behold, I stand at the door and knock; if any one hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him, and will dine (fellowship) with him, and he with Me."

Picture Jesus standing at the door of your life, your will, seeking entrance. He is a gentleman. He will never force His way into our lives. But we learn here that if we open the door of our life to Him and receive Him as our Savior, He will respond.

If I were to come to your home and knock on the door, you would have essentially three responses: (1) you could tell me to go away, (2) you could ignore me and play like you were not at home, (3) or you could invite me in.

The same is true of Jesus. He waits to be invited. He treats each person with integrity and will not come where He is not invited or wanted. It is our choice. But if we *do* open the door (that's our part), He *will* come in (that's His part). And Jesus doesn't lie. If we open, He will come.

We do this through prayer. The specific words we use are not important, but rather the attitude of the heart. Here is a short prayer which contains the major elements of receiving Christ:

"Lord Jesus, I reach out to you at this time in my life to claim the gift you have offered me. I confess I have sinned and fallen short of what you require of me. I thank you for dying on the Cross for my sins, and I thank you for your forgiveness. I open the door of my heart and life and invite you to come into me, and make me the kind of person you want me to be. I trust you now as my personal Savior and from this day forward I *trust in you alone* to make me presentable and acceptable before God when I must give account of myself and my life. Thank you for coming into my life, and I know you are there now, because you promised that if I opened the door, you would come in. Amen."

If you prayed this prayer right now, and it expressed the desire of your heart, then where is Christ? He is now inside you. Before, He was on the outside looking in. Now, He is on

the inside looking out. The word "Christian" means "Christ *in* one." That is why the body is called the temple of God. A temple is a place where God dwells.

How do you know he is there? We are back to the question of faith. Above, we spoke of exercising faith and trust that Christ's death on the Cross for us is true and that we are called upon to respond by believing *on* it. To answer this question, we must exercise faith again.

Let's say I came to your home and knocked. You opened the door, invited me in, and we went into the living room and sat down to chat. And let's say after a time, you got up, went to the door, opened it and said to me, "Come on in, Jim!" You did this several times, while I remained on the sofa in the living room! This would not only be silly; it would be clear evidence that you did not *really* believe I was already in your home!

So it is with Christ. Faith is when you stop saying "please" to God and you start saying "thank you." Unless you trust in faith that, regardless of how you *feel*, Christ was true to His Word and actually entered when you invited Him, you can never get on with your new life in Christ, because you keep "going to the door" in uncertainty, not truly believing He did what He said He would do. And so once you have invited Him into your life, *believe that He is there*, and begin to trust that by saying, "Lord, thank you for coming into my life and making me a child of God and a member of your family."

Perhaps this train illustration will help to understand the difference between fact, faith, and feeling. The *engine* of the train represents the facts . . .the truths about Christ's death and its implications to us. The *coal car* represents faith. . .the energy needed to make these facts a reality to us. The *caboose* represents our feelings . . .which may vary every day and every moment depending on our circumstances, emotions, and state of mind.

The train will run with or without the caboose, and one would never think of trying to pull a train with the caboose! So it is with our life in Christ. This decision we have made concerning our salvation has nothing to do with how we *feel* at any particular time.

If someone were to ask me if I were married, I wouldn't respond by saying, "Well, I feel married today," or "I'm working at being married," or "I think I'm married," or "I hope I am." And yet these are the very kinds of statements we often hear when we ask someone if they are Christians. In fact, these responses are a strong indication that the person does not really understand what Christ did for them, and He is probably still "standing outside" knocking at their door. This may be the case for many just simply because they lack the proper information and no one has ever clearly explained how they can become Christians.

Let's ask another question: Is it presumptuous to assume that when I die I will go to heaven?

"And the witness is that that God has given us eternal life, and this life is in His Son. He who has the Son has life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have the life. These things I have written to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, in order that you may know (not "hope") that you have (present tense; not "*will* have") eternal life." (I John 5:11-13).

What we learn here is that a Christian receives eternal life not at death, but at the Second Birth. To receive Christ and "have the Son" is also to have eternal life as a **present possession**. No Christ, no eternal life. Possess Christ and also possess eternal life. We can see why this would be so. At our physical birth, our parents gave us the only kind of life they possessed—human life. When we place our faith in Christ and are born spiritually into the family of God, He gives us the only kind of life *He* possesses—eternal life.

That is why the apostle Paul could say with confidence, "To be absent from the body is to be present with the Lord" (2 Corinthians 5:8). And that is why Jesus could say to the believing thief on the cross, "Truly I say to you, *today* you shall be with Me in Paradise" (Luke 23:43).

As a non-Christian, it always made me angry if someone said with confidence, that they knew they would go to heaven when they died. That is because I had assumed that what they implied is that they had done enough "good things" already to merit heaven. But that wasn't their reasoning at all. They were simply giving testimony to the fact that they had received the gift of eternal life promised them when they recognized the futility of their own religious efforts and turned to Christ and received Him into their lives as the Bible instructed them to do.

To not have this certainty in the Christian life is to live out one's days motivated by fear. God does not intend this for His children, and plainly states it over and over again, that our lives are to be lived out with a motivation of love and gratitude for what God has done for us. We want to live for Christ. Our good works become, not a means of gaining our salvation, but the results of having been forgiven and a desire to please our Heavenly Father out of grateful hearts which have received mercy.

Where does one go and what does one do after he/she is born again?

Newborn babies need a lot of care. Birth is followed by a process of growth and development and time. When this natural development in a little baby fails to proceed as intended, we consider it sad, a tragedy. In the spiritual realm, the new birth goes through a similar process. New Christians need a proper environment so they can begin to grow spiritually and mature in their Christian faith. Here are several suggestions to speed your growth along:

- **Begin to read the Bible.** Jesus said, “Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds out of the mouth of God” (Matthew 4:4). Jesus is saying here that if we want to obtain a word from God, we must go where He has revealed Himself. He has done so in the Scriptures, not Shakespeare or the morning paper. Peter says, “Like newborn babes, long for the pure milk of the Word, so that you may grow thereby” (1 Peter 2:2).

The Bible is a big book. In fact it's 66 books! Many people get bogged down by starting in Genesis. They quickly get bogged down in the “begats” and abandon Bible reading in despair. What kind of nourishment do little babies begin with? Milk. Then pabulum. Then baby food. Then finally meat.

Start with the Gospel of John. It is the baby food section. Get a Bible that you feel free to mark up so you can underline things which are meaningful to you. Read the Bible like you eat fish. When you come upon a bone, something indigestible, don't choke on it. If you don't understand it, say “Father, I don't understand this, but I trust that as I grow, I will come to understand it. It's probably meat I can't digest yet.” Mark Twain observed, “It's not the things about the Bible that I don't understand that bother me; it's the things about the Bible that I *do* understand that bother me.” There is plenty that we do understand even as young Christians to feed our souls. It is through the Bible that you let God talk to you.

- **Make prayer a habit.** This is how we talk to God. Prayer can happen at any time and any place, not just on Sunday. It can be long or short, eloquent or plain, important or trivial, and with or without “thee” and “thou.” It can be done with eyes open or shut, standing, kneeling, or lying down. It is talking to a Person, your Heavenly Father. He promises never to leave you or forsake you (Hebrews 13:5), and therefore is accessible to you 24 hours a day everyday. Prayer can involve:

(1) *confession of sin*, as it occurs, with assurance that “If we confess (agree with God concerning) our sin, He is faithful

and just to forgive us our sin and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness" (1 John 1:9).

(2) *praise and thanksgiving*,

(3) *intercession* (asking for others), and

(4) *petitions* of any kind which may burden one's heart. Paul says, "Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known unto God, and the peace of God which passes all understanding shall guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus" (Philippians 4:6,7).

- **Fellowship with other Christians.** Seek out the encouragement that comes from being and sharing with other Christians. Hebrews 10:24-25 says, "Let us consider how to stimulate one another to love and good deeds, not forsaking our own assembling together as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another." A hot coal removed from the fire and placed apart from the others quickly dies out, but left in proximity to other coals it burns brighter and longer. Christianity was never intended to be a solo affair. It is best served by a community of believers who mutually strengthen, support and challenge one another to "run a good race" (Hebrews 12:1,2).

- **Baptism.** Our Lord left us only two ordinances to faithfully observe: baptism and communion. Therefore, in obedience to the Lord's command, every new believer should soon arrange to express his/her faith commitment to Christ—in His death, burial, and resurrection—by a personal, visual rite of public baptism. ("Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit" [Matthew 28:19].)

- **Share Christ with others.** Jesus told the first disciples, "Follow me and I will make you to become fishers of men" (Mark 1:17). If you know of a good bargain somewhere, you tend to want to tell your friends. One sign of being a Christian, is that you have a strong desire that others might know what you have discovered yourself. . .that God loves them and wants

them to know Him. But notice this is a *process*. No one is a “natural” born fisherman. It takes time and skill to catch fish. Learning how to share effectively with others is a learned experience as well. Study the life of our Lord and see how He dealt with people. Read the book of Acts and observe how Paul and others were effective in helping others clarified their own spiritual experience and joined the family of God.

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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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The Sinfulness of Humanity

Over the last couple of years we have witnessed some incredible events in our world. In Europe, communism has become a thing of the past. In South Africa, apartheid finally appears to be on the way out. The former Soviet Union is in the throes of reorganization as it moves toward democracy and free enterprise.

Such events, coupled with recent successes on the battlefield, have caused many Americans to feel tremendously optimistic about the future. It has become fashionable to appeal to a new world order in which nations will cooperate with one another in a spirit of peace, and some have even suggested that we are on the edge of the millennial kingdom.

Don't get your hopes up.

It's easy to be optimistic when looking at the trend of world events, but it's a little more difficult when one takes human nature into consideration. The sinfulness of humanity may be an uncomfortable subject, but it is absolutely necessary to understand sin in order to understand both ourselves and the world in which we live.

Many people like to focus on our tremendous potential as a society, maintaining that the only thing preventing us from fulfilling that potential is inadequate education. For example, consider the following statement from the second Humanist Manifesto:

Using technology wisely, we can control our environment, conquer poverty, markedly reduce disease, extend our life-span, significantly modify our behavior, alter the course of human evolution and cultural development, unlock vast new powers, and provide humankind with unparalleled opportunity for achieving an abundant and meaningful life.

Humanists recognize the fact that such utopian dreams are not guaranteed, but they believe our potential for progress is essentially unlimited. If we as a society decide that we really want to achieve something, we are capable of achieving it.

The Bible presents a very different view of humankind and our future. From a biblical perspective, we have all violated God's laws, and our continuing tendency is not to seek the well-being of others but to seek our own satisfaction. Consider the following words from Romans chapter 3:

There is none righteous, not even one; There is none who understands, there is none who seeks for God; All have turned aside, together they have become useless; There is none who does good, there is not even one.

These words may sound pretty pessimistic, especially when compared with modern humanism, but they are true. We all know our own failings. God says that we are to be holy just as He is holy (1 Peter 1:15, 16), and we cannot honestly say that we meet that standard. You and I recognize that we have selfish desires, that we rebel against God, that we often find it easier to cheat people than to love them. The Bible tells us that everyone else has the same problem. As Paul put it, All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God (Rom. 3:23).

Forgiveness for Sin

Thinking about the sinfulness of humanity is unpleasant at best, but we must first understand that all humankind has sinned if we are to realize that, even so, all is not lost. The most important thing to realize about human sinfulness is that forgiveness is available!

The Bible says that we have all broken God's laws, and we all deserve punishment as a result. Jesus Christ, however, came to take that punishment on our behalf. Let me explain it this way. We have been sentenced to death because of our sin. God's justice demands that the sentence be carried out. If He were to simply lay the sentence aside, then He wouldn't be a very fair judge, and He is always fair.

At the same time, God's love demanded that He provide a way of forgiveness. He provided that forgiveness through Jesus Christ. By dying on the cross for our sins, Jesus paid the penalty that we should have had to pay. He took the punishment for our sins.

Since God's justice has been satisfied in the person of Jesus Christ, we are able to have peace with God through Jesus (Rom. 5:1). All we have to do to experience that peace is to place our trust in Jesus, believing that He died to take the punishment that we deserved (John 3:16). When we trust in Christ, our sins are forgiven. We no longer need to be afraid

of death or of God's future judgment. We have been declared righteous in Christ, and we are at peace with God.

The idea that someone would or could take our punishment seems very strange to many in today's culture. The film *Flatliners* provides an excellent illustration of the way our world thinks about sin and life after death. In the film, several medical students take turns killing and then reviving one another, hoping to learn something about life after death. In their near-death experiences, they are confronted with past sins, in which they have offended not God but other human beings. They themselves must atone for their sins by making peace with the people they have wronged. There is no mediator to take their place. In addition, the sins for which they suffer are much less grievous than one might expect. What could a person do to obtain forgiveness for actions much worse than teasing another child or even causing another person's accidental death? Apparently nothing. Reflecting the perspective of many in our culture, *Flatliners* seems to say that there is no God to offend, no Christ to bear our punishment, and no hope for those who have committed grievous sin. What a sad perspective!

The Continuing Presence of Sin

When we accept God's forgiveness by placing our trust in Christ, we are completely freed from the penalty of sin. At the same time, however, we continue to experience the presence of sin. We still have the capacity, even the tendency, to rebel against God and to act independently of Him (Gal. 5:16-17). God's goal for us as Christians is that we would consistently obey Him, and the indwelling Holy Spirit works to change us from the inside out, but the process won't be completed until we are in the presence of God in heaven (Rom. 8:12-25; 2 Cor. 3:18; 4:7-18). In the meantime, we continue to struggle with the fact that we are sinful people.

As fallen creatures, we will always want to say no when God says yes and yes when He says no. All too often, we seek to

please ourselves rather than to please God.

This thought doesn't sound very encouraging, and some have maintained that talking about the sinfulness (or depravity) of humanity causes Christians to have a pessimistic attitude about life. I disagree. Understanding that everyone is sinful gives us a realistic appraisal of life, one that explains the headlines we see in each morning's paper. If our natural tendency as sinful people is to seek power and control for ourselves or to lie, cheat, and steal, then we should expect people to act that way. Expecting these actions doesn't make them right, but it makes them understandable. Recognizing the sinfulness of humanity doesn't excuse crime, but it does protect us from the disillusionment that so many experience when their optimistic ideals eventually fall apart.

The belief that all persons are sinful can actually be a very liberating concept. We no longer place expectations on ourselves or others that no one could fulfill. We no longer demand perfection, for we expect a degree of failure. With regard to current events, we do not join those who continually hope for some kind of global transformation apart from divine intervention. We recognize that sinful people will continue to govern every nation, even our own, and that they will always seek their own interests.

The founders of this country believed in the sinfulness of humanity; indeed, this view of human sinfulness is central to the United States Constitution. We do not believe in giving any single individual limitless power, because we do not trust anyone enough to put him or her in that position. We regard a system of checks and balances, through which each person's decisions must ultimately be approved by others, as safer than a government in which unlimited power is entrusted to one individual.

I am not saying that humanity should simply accept its lot; we must certainly work to improve our society. A proper

understanding of human nature, however, prevents us from seeking to fulfill impossible goals through unrealistic means and keeps us from placing too much faith in humanity. We need to be involved in the political and social arenas, but we should not place too much hope in our involvement. Human sinfulness will keep us from doing all that we would like, but we must continue to do all that we can.

The Politics of Sin

Many people believe that humanity is basically good and that all we need to do to improve our society is provide a healthy psychological and physical environment. This belief is appealing because it makes us feel like we are in control of our own destiny, but unfortunately it isn't true. Humans are not good creatures in a bad environment. If anything, we are sinful creatures in a relatively good environment.

In this country we elect representatives who promise to uphold our interests in the public realm. Yet year after year we are disappointed when they break their promises. They may institute some helpful programs and make a few choices that we agree with, but often the entire exercise seems futile. One reason behind this sense of futility is that politics is built upon compromise, but another reason is that political programs are unable to deal with humanity's real problem—sin. Barry Goldwater, who served many years in the United States Senate, said it this way:

We have conjured up all manner of devils responsible for our present discontent. It is the unchecked bureaucracy in government, it is the selfishness of multinational corporate giants, it is the failure of the schools to teach and the students to learn, it is overpopulation, it is wasteful extravagance, it is squandering our national resources, it is racism, it is capitalism, it is our material affluence, or if we want a convenient foreign devil, we can say it is communism. But when we scrape away the varnish of wealth,

education, class, ethnic origin, parochial loyalties, we discover that however much we've changed the shape of man's physical environment, man himself is still sinful, vain, greedy, ambitious, lustful, self-centered, unrepentant, and requiring of restraint.

That is a pretty profound statement, and it is one with which the Bible would agree. Political programs have no effect on society's real problem, the fact that we are all sinful and self-centered.

When we look at the seeming hopelessness of the situation, it is easy to see why some Christians have grown apathetic. They say, We try as hard as we can and it doesn't do any good. Why bother to keep trying? Theirs is a good question. Many Christian activists felt the same way at the end of the 1980s. Christians had been more involved in this country's politics than ever before, and there were several events in which they seemed to pull out all the stops. Many Christians lobbied intensively for the confirmation of Robert Bork to the U.S. Supreme Court, seeing him as a vital tool in their aim to bring an end to the abortion industry in this country. Their efforts failed. The troops were marshalled several more times during legislative battles on Capitol Hill, but they fell short more times than they succeeded. Many grew weary in the fight. I know I did.

Looking back on that decade, we have to ask, What did we expect? Did we expect our politicians to abandon the appeal of special-interest groups in favor of altruistic ideals and biblical ethics? We should not have been so naive. The sinfulness of humanity means that people will always tend to enhance their own power and seek their own interests. When they do otherwise, we take their actions as grace, but we do not expect them to act in accordance with anything but their own interests.

That's why we as believers must continue to be active in political and social causes. True, we do struggle with our own sinfulness, but we are being transformed by the person of Jesus Christ, transformed to the extent that we should no longer fit comfortably into our culture (Rom. 12:1-2). Jesus said that we are the salt of the earth and the light of the world, and what He meant by that is that we are to be distinctive representatives of God in a world that is trying to forget Him (Matt. 5:13-16; cf. Phil. 2:15). If we abandon our culture, we abandon that duty. We realize that we won't necessarily win the day, but we might. In any case, we'll have done the right thing.

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