

# THE SOWER

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The Sower is the bi-monthly magazine of Spirit & Truth Fellowship International, a non-profit organization, and is published in Indianapolis, Indiana.

## JESUS IS ALIVE!

THE SPIRIT OF THE LORD IS ON ME, BECAUSE HE HAS ANOINTED ME TO PREACH GOOD NEWS TO THE POOR. HE HAS SENT ME TO PROCLAIM FREEDOM FOR THE PRISONERS AND RECOVERY OF SIGHT FOR THE BLIND, TO RELEASE THE OPPRESSED, TO PROCLAIM THE YEAR OF THE LORD'S FAVOR.

(LUKE 4:18 & 19)

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# LETTER FROM THE PRESIDENT

**Mark Graeser**

Genesis 2:2 says that after God's work of creation, He rested from all His labors, and set aside the seventh day as a day of rest for humankind. There is great wisdom in heeding the call of "Sabbath," which means a time of rest. I have not been one to take my need for mental and spiritual rest seriously enough. When one works for God, the work seems endless, and sometimes overwhelming. I steal times of rest rather than give myself to them. There is a subtle feeling of guilt that ministers deal with if they are not "always abounding in the work of the Lord" (1 Cor. 15:58). But to be effective, healthy, and good examples of balanced persons, we all need to find ways to nourish and replenish our souls lest we get tired and vulnerable to temptation.

At the Servant/Leaders Conference last September I announced my intention to take a three-month sabbatical. After nearly 10 years of full time service in this sometimes intense ministry, and several years within that time of feeling the full responsibility for the ministry, I was ready to admit to myself and our community that I had gotten tired and needed a time of refreshment. There is a lot that goes on behind the scenes in the spiritual battle, and continually dealing with spiritual opposition to our ministry can be draining.

But as Beatle John Lennon said, life is what happens while you're making other plans. The administrative and spiritual needs of the ministry, as well as my seminary work, have continued to require me to man my post until now. But it looks like I will finally be able to begin my sabbatical by the time you read these words. Having Dan and Lori Gallagher move to the area so Dan could begin to help with the administrative oversight of the ministry has made such a sabbatical time possible for me. But it has also been necessary for me to be around to help him transition to his new job in the Home Office.

Those who know me well doubt that I will actually do much resting and playing (I do struggle with workaholism), but the first thing I'll do is seclude myself for a week and pray, sleep, and read in solitude to clear my head and just spend time with God and the Lord. I'll see where it goes from there. I do have some seminary work to complete this semester, but that should be interesting and fun because it involves independent study. I don't have to make the drive to Richmond twice a week until the fall, my last year.

My plan is to reconnect with some old passions, and to explore some new things. I put down the flute some 30 years ago because I "got into the Word," and thought that I didn't really need to be making music when there was a world out there that needed to be saved. I realize I miss it. Though I have a Masters in Fine Arts in Sculpture, I gave that up as well in favor of pursuing God's call on my life. But somewhere deep in my soul is the feeling that these things are still a part of who I am and that I should let them back in my life as a way of staying connected with the whole of who I am. I am more than a minister of the Gospel and one who plays a leadership role in the church. It is those things that I need to nurture in this time, and I ask for your prayers.

I want to shed a few pounds and get back in shape for running longer distances. I have committed to running in the Indianapolis Mini-Marathon (13 miles) in May. Being healthy physically is important to my spiritual health, and though I am in reasonable shape for someone my age, I'd like to feel more on top of my physical life. I want to be productive for God well into my 80's, ministering, writing, and contributing in various ways.

So I'm going to get off the treadmill for a while, and see what comes up. I appreciate your prayers for me, my family, and the ministry that has grown to the point that its workings do not depend on any one person's contributions. We are learning to rely on our Head, the Lord Jesus, to be the one who does the heavy lifting. The rest of us need to learn to let him do that, and rest from time to time.

*Mark Graeser*

# GOOD NEWS!

The gospel message is truly Good News.

Everyone loves to hear good news, and that has been true for centuries. Almost 3,000 years ago Solomon penned the following proverb: “A cheerful look brings joy to the heart, and good news gives health to the bones” (Prov. 15:30). The Bible is full of good news about many different subjects. Of course, not all God’s good news is marked out for us in bold letters, so we must search it out of the text. But if someone had published a newspaper (let’s say, “The Jerusalem Gazette”) since the time of Adam, some of the good news might have been:

“Extra! Extra! Read all about it! Good News! God promises...” Wait! Stop the presses! Before we go any further, it would be wise to explain to our young and Internet savvy readers what an “Extra” is, because they have never seen one. To do that, we need to set the historical context of the “newspaper.”

Getting the latest “news” has always been of primary interest to us humans. The earliest way to get the news was by word of mouth. However, news by word of mouth is notoriously unreliable. To remedy that, as early as a few centuries before Christ, the Romans began to publish primitive “newspapers:” the *Acta Diurna*, the *Acta Senatus*, and the *Acta Publica*. The *Acta Diurna* gave accounts of the Roman army, while the *Acta Senatus* reported activities of the Roman Senate. The *Acta Publica* was more like our newspaper today, and recorded a variety of things of interest, such as trials, sacrifices, obituaries, etc. Not widespread or published daily like our modern newspapers, these papers would be periodically posted in public places.

By the time of Christ, however, the *Acta Publica* was published daily in Rome and often included activities of the Royal Family (ancient). “Newspapers” continued to develop through the centuries, and by 1620 the first newspaper in English was printed in, of all places, Amsterdam. 1774 saw the first daily paper in the United States, and the trend toward more and more news reporting has finally led to such things as CNN’s 24-hour continuous news coverage.

The obvious problem with a morning paper is that it cannot keep people updated on important news that occurs during the day. We today get around that by tuning into the “evening news” on radio or TV. Before those media existed, however, the problem was solved by the introduction of the “Extra,” an additional or “extra” newspaper, usually very limited in scope, that would come out late in the day to inform the public of developments in stories of great interest. Publishers would employ newsboys to go out on the streets and aggressively sell the late edition. Thus, the well-known cry, “Extra! Extra! Read all about it,” came into the English language.

With that background, we are now in a position to delve into the Bible and find all the good news. We start our search in Genesis, and as we continue through the Old Testament, a startling picture develops. Although things happened that were certainly good news, like the following possible headline: “Walls Of Jericho Fall By Themselves—Conquest Made Easy,” the Bible does not call anything that happened in the Old Testament, “good news.” In fact, although the Hebrew language has a word for “news” (which can be good or bad depending on the context), it appears only once in the Old Testament. That one occurrence is the messenger who reported Saul’s death to David, thinking he had delivered good news (2 Sam. 4:10; this is also the Septuagint’s only use of *euangelion*, “good news”). What seems worse, as we search the Old Testament for “good news,” it turns out that many of the prophetic declarations, written down in what we know as the prophetic books, are not only not called “good news,” they are called a “burden.”

Words of reproof and correction are rarely a blessing, and it was often a burden to the prophet to deliver them. For example, “The burden of the word of the LORD to Israel by Malachi” (Mal. 1:1 KJV); “The burden of Nineveh. The book of the vision of Nahum the Elkoshite” (Nah. 1:1 KJV); “The burden which Habakkuk the prophet did see” (Hab. 1:1 KJV); “The burden of the word of the LORD...” (Zech. 9:1 KJV). Unfortunately, the NIV and many other modern versions read “oracle” or “message” instead of “burden,” and thus do not properly communicate the difficulty of chastising people and foretelling the destruction associated with the Day of the LORD. “Burden” is the proper translation.<sup>1</sup>

In contrast to the “burden” spoken by many prophets, think how refreshing, how exciting, and how inspiring it must have been to hear the message of John and Jesus. Imagine being a Jew near Jerusalem at the time of Christ. Life was harsh, and the Roman occupation made things almost unbearable. Nevertheless, history tells us that at that time there was an increase in Messianic expectation, and people’s hopes were generally high (this expectation was in part due to information spread earlier about the Messiah being born, the interpretation of the book of Daniel, and, of course, the Adversary conjuring up false Messiahs (Cp. Acts 8:9)). Given that scenario, imagine traveling down a street near Jerusalem and, seeing a crowd, walking over to see what was happening. Upon approaching the crowd, you hear a man talking, and you catch the sentence, “Repent, and believe the good news!”

Good news? There is good news? That’s a change! What is it? The good news John and Jesus proclaimed was that the Kingdom of God was near: “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near” (Matt. 3:2; cp. 4:17; 10:7; Mark 1:15; Luke 10:11). Now *that* was something to get excited about!

In contrast to the one appearance in the Old Testament (about something that was not really good news at all), “good news” (*euangelion*) is found 76 times in the New Testament. This fact is made even more amazing when we take into account how much larger the Old Testament is than the New Testament.

Every Bible reader should be aware that God considers the message in the New Testament “Good News.” However, this is hidden to many people because quite a few modern versions continue to use the word “gospel” in their translations, as did the older translations like the King James and most people do not know that it used to mean “good news.” Webster’s 1828 Dictionary defines “gospel” as “a good or joyful message,” and relates it to the life of Christ and salvation. Today, however, when the average person hears the word “gospel,” he thinks of a more modern definition. The 2003 Miriam-Webster’s Dictionary does not even have the definition of “good message,” and although it recognizes that “gospel” can relate to the message of Christ, it also lists this definition, which is the more usual way the word is used in public: “something accepted or promoted as infallible truth or as a guiding principle or doctrine; ‘took her words as gospel.’” It is safe to say that many Bible readers, when reading the words, “Repent, and believe the gospel,” do not know the crowd was being asked to believe “the good news.”

After the death and resurrection of Christ, there was more “good news.” God has now made it available to be saved, i.e., to have everlasting life in Paradise, simply by having faith in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ (Rom. 10:9 and 10). The message of salvation through Christ is a dominant theme throughout the New Testament. Paul writes by revelation to the church at Corinth: “...I told the Good News to you.... For I delivered to you first of all that which also I received: that Christ died for our sins according to the scriptures; and that he was buried; and that he has been raised on the third day according to the scriptures” (1 Cor. 15: 2b, 3, 4).

It certainly is good news that anyone and everyone can have the blessings of everlasting life simply by believing in the atoning death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. No wonder the word “good news” appears so often in the New Testament! No wonder God commands us to spread the message of Christ and of salvation!

Spirit & Truth Fellowship International works to provide books, tapes, seminars, and websites that present the good news, and help others present it. Recently we have even come out with “The Good News Class,” a video class that presents the simple “good” message of salvation, as well as some of the meatier material in the Word of God, that helps to flesh out the amazing goodness of the “good news.”

What a blessing it is for Christians to live in an age so full of good news: Christ has been raised and is coming back! We will all get new, wonderful, bodies! Earth will be re-made into a Paradise!<sup>2</sup> Thank God we can go out into the world and present “good news” rather than “the burden of the word of the LORD.” Let’s take advantage of this wonderful age we live in, and go forth into all nations, bringing the Good News people so desperately need.

**(Endnotes)**

<sup>1</sup> R. Harris, G. Archer, B. Waltke, *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament* (Moody Press, Chicago, 1980), Vol. 1, pp. 1421 and 1422.

<sup>2</sup> For further study on Paradise, visit [www.TruthOrTradition.com](http://www.TruthOrTradition.com), Topic: Christian’s Hope.

# THE VINE

## THE FELLOWSHIP COMMUNITY SECTION

### Developmental Stages of a Fellowship

By Dan Gallagher

Through the years I've experienced the joy, and at times the pain, of both hosting and belonging to a small group. These groups have been related to my work, personal, and religious life. At times I've been confused by what seems like the continually changing nature of the small group, asking myself, "Why can't things just stay the same?"

Well, the simple fact is that, just like people, small groups go through phases of development or stages of growing up. The following are the various stages that I've adapted from the information presented by Neal McBride in his book, *How To Lead Small Groups*. Having a clearer understanding of the developmental stages will help us enjoy and embrace these changes. Understanding this process has helped me through the growth process in the various fellowships with which I've been involved.

#### **Phase One: Birth and Infancy (Forming)**

The birth and infancy phase is characterized by tentatively initiating behaviors in the group, whose members come to the first meetings with hesitancy. The first phase is generally short, and provides certain information and processes that are vital to the group's formation.

#### **Phase Two: Childhood (Norming)**

Children are notorious for testing those around them. This same type of testing takes place during the childhood phase of group development. The members learn what is acceptable, how and how not to behave, what is and what isn't permissible, what is and what isn't expected of group members. This process of learning the boundaries is called *norming*. Every group has its norms, spoken or unspoken.

#### **Phase Three: Teenage (Conforming)**

Every teenager goes through a time of questioning and conforming. The conforming phase is a time of transition, with questioning and adjustment being the two major components of this phase. It's natural to question. Voicing agreement or disagreement with relationships and activities comes naturally, and so may happen. Don't be surprised if everything seems to be going well and then suddenly one or two members begin to question and/or complain about various aspects of the group. In most cases, this is a healthy step in the group's development.

Major or minor adjustments may be necessary. A change in schedule, altering the format, or time spent working through relational issues are examples of potential realignments.

#### **Phase Four: Maturing (Performing)**

The fourth phase of the group development portrays a mature and functioning group. Now the group is really clicking. Ideally, maintaining your group's life has become a shared process, with everyone taking responsibility. Nevertheless, conscious and deliberate steps must be taken to monitor the dynamics and procedural details, and doing so ensures continuing vitality.

Be alert for "mid-life crisis." Boredom with the routine, unresolved conflicts, ambiguous norms, conflicting schedules, lack of variety, and so on, could all trigger this affliction. Evaluation and adjustment are important considerations.

#### **Phase Five: Fruitful (Reproducing)**

One of the purposes of the fellowship is to help its members in their growth toward spiritual maturity and the full expression of their gifts and callings. Reproduction is not always necessary for the continuation of the fellowship, although it does demonstrate a healthy and mature condition. Fruitfulness can be evidenced by the growth in the individual members, new members being added, and the need to plant other groups.

Healthy fellowships generally see themselves as wanting to grow to the point where they split into two viable fellowships. This requires that the fellowship have a vision that splitting is healthy and will keep growth happening. In order for this to be accomplished, there should be a continual preparation of the hearts of its members. A split actually results in two new fellowships, which begins the developmental process again at Phase One.

#### **Phase Six: Old Age and Demise (Reforming)**

Not all fellowships split or continue for an indefinite period of time. The “old age” phase can happen by design or default. A mature, successful group doesn’t conclude in one last meeting. Actually, the process of coming to an end should take place during a number of meetings. Reflecting on and celebrating the struggles and successes experienced by the group during its lifetime is a vital element to this phase. Careful attention must be given to ending the group on a positive note and paving the way for the members’ future involvement in new groups.

Gaining an understanding of the developmental stages of small groups has helped me tremendously. As I saw my fellowships going through these changes, I would at times question my leadership ability or even the commitment of those in attendance. Now I embrace the changes, knowing that they are indicative of growth and a maturation of the group. Recently my wife and I moved to another part of the country, which resulted in us having to close our fellowship. Knowing we were in the closing phase (*Old Age and Demise*) enabled us to celebrate it as the natural culmination of a successful group. Allowing for the grieving that should accompany a loss helped everyone transition in a healthy way. It is our goal to build a healthy community and knowing the developmental stages of small groups will assist us to accomplish this.

**Fellowship Sponsor:** Janis Erickson

**Location:** Wayzata (Minneapolis), MN

The Wayzata, Minnesota fellowship has about eight people who meet every Sunday afternoon, as well as every Friday night for what they’ve affectionately labeled “Family Night.” This is a time when they gather to watch a wholesome movie, eat popcorn, and hang out together. The fellowship is hosted by Janis Erickson who stated, “*We do this to build in our hearts the idea of the family of God.*” The fellowship originally began by watching the Free Indeed videos, featuring John Schoenheit. After speaking with John Lynn, Janet decided to do live teachings. Right now they are focusing on the integrity of God’s Word and on having the joy of the Lord in their lives.

Janis indicated that when she started the fellowship in September of 2004, it seemed like they had a revolving door. The fellowship began with ten people, but would fluctuate down and then back up again. Janis said, “*It was a challenge to me. I had to decide that it wasn’t the numbers that counted, but the people in the fellowship getting blessed, even if it was just two or three other people who would attend.*” Janis has learned that successfully running a fellowship involves much more than merely setting a time and picking a place to meet. “*Our success has come from praying MUCH for the people in the fellowship. For every minute of service, I try to pray that same amount for the people and the move of God’s Word.*”

Every farmer knows that he can’t merely sow, but must also tend to his crops, and Janis has strongly demonstrated this principle. “*I started out by sending invitations to people I knew and followed up each invitation with a phone call. I think a lot of times making a friend and then sharing the Word with them is the most effective way of witnessing that I have found. My main focus has been to just love people and fight for them spiritually, to pray and call them as often as possible, to stay in touch with them and strongly encourage them. I depend on and trust God for strength, wisdom, and discernment.*”

The growth in a fellowship should not be measured only by the number of those who attend. One thing that should be evident is Christ-like transformation that occurs in its members. Janis exemplifies this: “*I used to start to feel really ill sometimes, right before fellowship, but I determined that I would do the fellowship regardless. I have seen how God has done miracles in this area. I would walk through the door of the meeting room and get healed from head to toe as soon as I stepped in the room.*” She has learned much about what makes a fellowship successful: “*prayer, trusting God and Jesus Christ and just loving the people will go along way in starting and maintaining a fellowship. Make sure that people feel accepted and not judged. We need to endeavor to find out what people’s gifts and longsuits are so we can implement them in the fellowship. That way everyone is able to give in those areas that they are able to give best in. It just isn’t me teaching and doing all the giving, but everyone gets an opportunity to give and grow.*”

# FUEL FOR THE FIRE

*Fuel for the Fire* is written by the Teens and Twenties of Spirit & Truth Fellowship International.

## **MAKE A DIFFERENCE FOR THE LORD**

God bless you! As winter is winding down, new life is about to begin. The trees will begin to bud and the flowers will begin to bloom. In the youth community, we too, have many new beginnings. I (Ryan Maher) want you to think about how you can get more involved in your youth community. The Youth Council has a vision to serve the youth community in many different ways. Some of those ways include being a “voice” for the youth community, organizing different events, helping improve our youth conferences, providing outreach possibilities, and other youth oriented activities. As a community, there are many things we can do when we put our heads together.

We (the youth) are the future of this ministry and we need to rise up to that challenge. We need to be in each other’s lives in real and authentic ways, speaking truth and life. We are working hard to build a cohesive team of those willing to serve among the youth. Each one of us has something great to offer the body of believers. The Youth Council’s heart is to help you get, and stay, connected in many different ways, to spice up your local youth fellowship (or to help you start one), and to encourage you to step out of your comfort zone for the Lord. The Youth Council consists of six members (myself, Matthew Johnson, Whitney Ricciardi, Jonathan Flesher, Jenee Klotz, and Bethany Flesher) but it’s going to take your help to really get the community fired up. I want 2005 to be the year that our youth community explodes exponentially, accomplishing much for the Lord.

“Where is God calling me to step up and to step out?” “What could I be doing for Him and His kingdom that I have just ignored?” These are questions that have been running through my mind lately, and I have felt the gentle tug of God. I challenge you to run to God and ask “What can I do for you that I am not currently doing?” “Who can I help?” “What can I say to someone that might change his life forever?” “What can I do?” Maybe it’s getting a group together and witnessing at a local coffee shop or university. Maybe it’s passing out TruthOrTradition.com business cards or flyers around your campuses. Or maybe it’s stepping out and inviting a friend to your fellowship. Maybe it’s starting a fellowship. There are many things that we could do for God if we choose to. I don’t want to give in to my selfish desires and just live a mediocre life. I want to create possibilities for God and the Lord Jesus Christ by walking in obedience to them.

What is going to be the legacy of your life? How will you be remembered? God is calling all of us to step out of our comfort zones and make a difference for Him. Will you do it? Let’s make a commitment together to have our lives stand for something greater than ourselves.

P.S. If you haven’t heard John Lynn’s bi-monthly tape “You Are The Only You God Has (Nov/Dec 99),” I highly recommend it.

## **Ways to spark life into your fellowship and tell people about Jesus Christ:**

- Run a weekend class of one of our audio seminars or Free Indeed videos (see enclosed price list)!
- Volunteer at a local soup kitchen
- Host a free car wash: Contact a local business and ask to host a free car wash, while accepting donations for your fellowship / church
- Have your fellowship pass out TruthOrTradition.com business cards and articles
- Wear a TruthOrTradition.com t-shirt or hoodie (coming soon)
- For more creative and fun ideas, e-mail your Youth Council at: youthcouncil@CESonline.org

## **Live Out Loud 2005 Feedback**

There is a great deal I want to say about Live Out Loud 2005! I am so tremendously blessed that I was able to experience how awesome our God truly is. I am so thankful for my parents because without them I would never be the person I am today. They are the ones who encouraged me to go to LOL. Before going to Live Out Loud I cared more about what the world thought of me than what my own Creator did. Being at LOL helped me see this. God’s plan IS better than mine. I felt like a whole new person when I came home. Now I want to strive to be Christ like and a good example for my friends. My walk with my Heavenly Father has unquestionably been strengthened. I am kind of a shy person, but at LOL God was working so strongly in me that I introduced myself to many people and made numerous friends.

My favorite activities were Praise and Worship and small groups. I want to thank everyone who was in my small group for being so caring and accepting of me without hesitation. When in Praise and Worship, I could raise my hands or jump up and down and

NOBODY would look at me differently! I have never felt more at home with God and Jesus Christ than with that group of like-minded believers. When I got home and went back to work, I started witnessing to my coworkers, letting them know my beliefs and talking to them about theirs. One girl believed in speaking in tongues but does not believe she can do it. I tried to explain to her she could, but I am afraid it went in one ear and out of the other. This might change though; I did my part and planted a seed, now it has to be her choice to act on it. After coming home from LOL, my view of the world has definitely changed. I see what a stronghold the Devil truly has on this world, and I want to do my part in setting people free.

On our way home from Live Out Loud we stayed in Indy, and that was so awesome. At the Blackburn's, we met more amazing Christians. I am on fire, and I want to go out and tell everyone what a great, wonderful, awesome God we have. As Ryan Maher said in his teaching, "If we share the Gospel our whole lives and save just one person, we have accomplished our goal." I want to thank Spirit and Truth Fellowship International for putting on a fabulous conference and for having such a great ministry for teens and adults. I cannot wait until Teen Camp!!!

I love you guys, and God Bless,

Whitney H.  
Haysville, KS

## **What's the Big Deal about Gossip?**

We all hear a lot of talk about how wrong gossip is but do you truly know just how destructive it can be to the Body of Christ?

Here's a few questions you might want to see how well you can answer, and if you can find a scripture verse to back up your thinking:

- How would you define gossip?
- Why is gossip so destructive?
- What should you do when you hear someone gossiping?

Having a tough time coming up with clear biblical answers? Well, in the next issue of *Fuel for the Fire* we'll be covering the above questions and more, but until then here are a few verses you can think about and perhaps even commit to memory.

### **Psalm 35:28**

My tongue will speak of your righteousness and of your praises all day long.

### **Proverbs 12:18**

Reckless words pierce like a sword, but the tongue of the wise brings healing.

### **Proverbs 18:21**

The tongue has the power of life and death, and those who love it will eat its fruit.

### **Proverbs 26:20**

Without wood a fire goes out; without gossip a quarrel dies down.

# THE CONTENDER

## What Is Easter? How should we relate to this holiday?

BY SHAWN MERCER

Many Christians are aware that the word “Easter” does not occur in the original Hebrew and Greek manuscripts. As a matter of fact, the only place it can be found in an English version of the Bible is in the King James Version, which reads:

### Acts 12:4 (KJV)

And when he had apprehended him, he put *him* in prison, and delivered *him* to four quaternions of soldiers to keep him; intending after **Easter** to bring him forth to the people.

This passage describes Herod’s plan to have Peter put to death “after Easter.” The Greek word for “Easter” is *pascha*, which refers to the Jewish Passover festival celebrated from the 14<sup>th</sup> to the 21<sup>st</sup> of Nisan (Ex. 12:18). In the case of the KJV, it seems that “the Acts of the Apostles had fallen into the hands of a translator who acted on the principle of choosing, not the most correct, but the most familiar equivalents.”<sup>1</sup> In this case, the fact that Easter was familiar to 17<sup>th</sup> century readers explains how the word got into the KJV, but it does not help us understand that the Passover and Easter are two different things, and that what Acts refers to is the Passover, not “Easter.” Modern versions of the Bible all translate *pascha* as “Passover.”

What we know today as the Easter festival developed after the New Testament period. The New Testament does not mention a Christian festival in which the death and resurrection of Christ were celebrated, but what we do see is that some of the earliest Christians continued to hold the Passover feast. As late as Paul’s trip to Jerusalem in which he was arrested and jailed, which was in the late 50’s AD, or 30 years after the birth of the Christian Church, many Christians in Jerusalem were proud of the fact that they kept the law.

### Acts 21:20 (NIV)

When they heard this, they praised God. Then they said to Paul: “You see, brother, how many thousands of Jews have believed, and all of them are zealous for the law.”

It was common for these “zealous” Christians to maintain their adherence to the Law by observing the Passover feast, which became a feast of commemoration. It was no longer a time of waiting for future atonement with God, but of remembering that He had provided the payment for the sins of His people through Christ. This was a very sensitive topic for early Christians, because not all Jews who converted to Christianity were comfortable with the idea that Christ had fulfilled the law and they no longer were required to keep it. The Church Epistles later given by the Lord to Paul made clear that participating in the Jewish feasts was no longer necessary (Col. 2:16-17). Paul had ruffled a few feathers by teaching things like “circumcision nor uncircumcision means anything” (Gal. 6:15). The charge that Paul was teaching converts to “turn away from Moses” put the whole city of Jerusalem in an uproar and resulted in his arrest (Acts 21:21).

While many Jews who became Christians retained the custom of keeping the Passover feast, it was less likely that the Gentile converts would be attracted to keeping a festival that was not actually required by God. As Christianity began to spread through the ancient world, Gentile Christians began to celebrate the death and resurrection of Christ in a less Jewish way. Unfortunately, as was often the case with Jewish-Gentile disputes, many of the forces guiding Christianity were radically opposite of those desiring to maintain the Jewish roots of Christianity. Eventually, the celebration of the death and resurrection of Christ was infused with elements that have little to do with the Jewish feasts or the actual events of Christ’s death.

### Date Controversies

For centuries, the date for the celebration of the resurrection of Christ was hotly disputed. The earliest Jewish Christians, primarily those in Israel, Syria, and the East, naturally wanted to celebrate on the 14<sup>th</sup> of Nisan, the date of the Passover. “Churches in

Asia Minor (following the Johannine tradition that the death of Jesus occurred at the time of the slaying of the Passover lambs) celebrated the Christian *Pascha* on 14/15 Nisan, regardless of the day of the week on which this date might fall.”<sup>2</sup> This practice presented an interesting situation for the Church. Those Christians who maintained the Jewish date looked to the Jews to determine it. “In Judaism, the calendar is lunar. Each month, Nisan included, includes the phases of the moon, and the Passover falls on the 14<sup>th</sup> day of the month, that is, the full moon.

The determination of this date was a secret process jealously guarded in the Jewish Temple and later, synagogues, and it was according to this calculation that Christ observed the feast.”<sup>3</sup> In order to celebrate the death and resurrection of Christ on the actual Passover date for a given year, the Church would have to rely on the Jews, something they were not willing to do. Not only would the Church have to acquire the date from the Jews, but the fact that the 14<sup>th</sup> of Nisan could be on any day of the week did not appeal to them either. “The Hebrew Passover falls on any day of the week, and this did not suit the Christians. They wanted a Holy Week beginning with Palm Sunday, proceeding to Good Friday and ending on Easter Sunday, commemorating the resurrection.”<sup>4</sup>

Those Christians who fought to celebrate Easter on the 14<sup>th</sup> of Nisan were known as “Quarto-decimanians,” most of whom lived in the Eastern part of the Roman Empire. “The Western Christians observed Easter on a Sunday, the Eastern in many cases were Quartodecimanians and preferred the 14<sup>th</sup> day of the lunar month. It was a foretaste of the schism that was to split the Eastern Orthodox Church from the Roman Catholic.”<sup>5</sup> The date for celebrating the resurrection was thus included amidst the great Christological controversies at the Council of Nicaea in 325. *When Jesus Became God*, by Richard Rubenstein, describes the atmosphere of the Nicene council.

“One underlying question was this: To what extent were the values and customs of the ancient world still valid guides to thinking and action in a Christian empire? Some Christians, among them were Arius and Eusebius of Nicodemia, had a stronger sense of historical continuity than others...By contrast, the strongest anti-Arians experienced their present as a sharp break with the past. It was they who demanded, in effect, that Christianity be ‘updated’ by blurring or even obliterating the long-accepted distinction between the Father and the Son.”<sup>6</sup>

In the same spirit of breaking with the past, the council unanimously decided that the Resurrection celebration would not be on the Jewish date, but would fall on the Sunday following the full moon after the vernal equinox. Interestingly, the Sunday celebration actually still allowed for the possibility that the Church would celebrate on the same day as the Jews. Once again, the East and the West handled the situation differently. The West established a rule that if the date matched the Jewish Passover, the Church would wait another week to celebrate. Conversely, the East continued to celebrate even if the day coincided with Passover.

To this day there is still disagreement concerning the date of the Easter celebration. The Protestant and Roman Catholic dates of Easter coincide, but, due to a different method of calculation, the Eastern Orthodox Church’s observance can be up to five weeks different than the Western churches. Desire for Christian unity has in recent years brought forth the idea of a universal fixed date for all Christian churches.

### **Pagan Elements**

It is no secret that much of the modern Easter celebration has developed from pagan sources. The word “Easter” itself was essentially adopted by the Church from paganism.

The English word Easter and the German *Ostern* come from a common origin (*Eostur, Eastur, Ostara, Ostar*), which to the Norsemen meant the season of the rising (growing) sun, the season of new birth. The word was used by our ancestors to designate the Feast of New Life in the spring. The same root is found in the name for the place where the sun rises (East, *Ost*). The word Easter, then, originally meant the celebration of the spring sun, which had its birth in the East and brought new life upon earth. This symbolism was transferred to the supernatural meaning of our Easter...”<sup>7</sup>

Another common view taught by Bede, the English historian of the early 8<sup>th</sup> century, is that the word derives from “Eastre,” a Teutonic goddess of Spring who received offerings in the month of April. While both explanations are plausible, it is clear that the word “Easter” is anything but biblical.

The Encyclopedic Dictionary of Religion states that the custom of Easter eggs may be based upon ancient fertility cults (Indo-European), the Persian association of eggs and spring, or the fact that some early Christians abstained from eggs during Lent.<sup>8</sup> It is not hard to see how Christians could have adopted the egg as a symbol of the tomb of Christ, or even their new life in him. Further, the rabbit is pre-Christian and represents fertility due to its rapid rate of reproduction. The rabbit has not actually been adopted as a part of the “Christian” celebration of Easter, but it has become a common symbol of the day in many cultures. Much like Christmas, the celebration of Easter has diverged greatly from the original remembrance of our Lord’s death on the 14<sup>th</sup> of Nisan.

## Balance

As modern Christians, we must decide how to engage a world that has lost interest in the true origins of our faith. Should we condemn modern holidays as pagan abominations? Or should we wholeheartedly accept our culture with an attitude of concession? As with so much in our modern world, we are to find a balance that allows us to exercise true spirituality and yet still engage the culture in which we find ourselves.

Imagine telling your loved ones at Christmas, “I’m sorry, I don’t give gifts because I’m a Christian.” Or on Easter, “I don’t celebrate the resurrection of the Lord on Easter because I’m not a pagan.” Clearly, there is some level of absurdity that can be reached by trying to avoid all the non-Christian elements of our culture. For example, in an article published by The Restored Church of God titled “The True Origin of Easter,” the author correctly identifies the pagan elements of the modern Easter celebration, but we believe he goes too far in his zeal to avoid them. Concerning sunrise services, he states, “Observing sunrise services is serious to God! He so hates this vile practice that he will ultimately destroy all who persist in it (Ezek. 9)!”<sup>9</sup> Can this be the same God who inspired the following scripture?

### 1 Corinthians 8:7 and 8 (NIV)

“...Some people are still so accustomed to idols that when they eat such food they think of it as having been sacrificed to an idol, and since their conscience is weak, it is defiled. But food does not bring us near to God; we are no worse if we do not eat, and no better if we do.

God has revealed that it is not an outward demonstration that He requires, but the inward dedication of the heart. We know that God did not raise Jesus from the dead on Sunday morning (actually, it was on Saturday between 3 p.m. and sunset—see page 15) on Saturday afternoon. Does God not honor the hearts of people who trouble themselves to get up in the dark on Easter Sunday, get dressed, and go to a gathering place to pray, sing, and affirm the resurrection of the Lord? We believe He does.

The Bible uses an interesting word to refer to our ability to relate to things it does not specifically mention—FREEDOM (1 Cor. 8:9)! Remember, with freedom comes responsibility. It is not a sin to have a Christmas tree, or to hide some eggs out in the back yard for the children to find. Please understand, we are not saying that knowing the truth is not valuable, but we feel you can know the truth and still celebrate many modern customs. For example, a Christian can know that Christ was not born in December and that no early Christians had Christmas trees, and still have a Christmas tree of his own.<sup>10</sup> He can know that Christ was crucified on the Jewish Passover but still show his devotion to the Lord in a Sunrise Service. What we as Christians must do is to teach ourselves and others the true freedom that Christ has given us. Many Christians are very blessed to take the opportunity that Easter provides to honor the Lord and his resurrection, and we think that is just fine with God (and the Lord Jesus).

As we consider what honoring the Lord will look like this season, it may be helpful to remember the words of Paul in Romans.

### Romans 14:5 and 6 (NIV)

One man considers one day more sacred than another; another man considers every day alike. Each one should be fully convinced in his own mind. He who regards one day as special, does so to the Lord.

God has given us freedom from all kinds of bondage. Do not let the true meaning of this Easter season be lost to you in a secular sea of eggs and rabbits (and chocolate—which early Christians did not have), but remember that much of the true meaning of the death and resurrection of the Lord is about the freedom we now have to celebrate that from our hearts, and pray and sing to bless and honor him, even if we do it on a day that is not actually “Passover.” May we praise the Lord every day, forever and ever.

### (Endnotes)

<sup>1</sup> H. B. Hackett, D.D., Ed., *Dr. William Smith’s Dictionary of the Bible* (Baker Book House, Grand Rapids MI, 1981) p. 637.

<sup>2</sup> Watson E. Mills, Ed., *Mercer Dictionary of the Bible* (Mercer University Press, Macon GA, 1990), p. 224.

<sup>3</sup> *The Encyclopedia Americana* (Americana Corporation, New York NY, 1947) pp. 506,507.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> Richard E. Rubenstein, *When Jesus Became God* (Harcourt, San Diego CA, 1999) pp. 73,74.

<sup>7</sup> Francis X Weiser, *Handbook of Christian Feasts and Customs* (Deus Books Paulist Press, New York NY, 1963) pp.130, 131.

<sup>8</sup> *Encyclopedic Dictionary of Religion* (Corpus Publications, Washington D.C., 1979) p. 1139.

<sup>9</sup> David C. Pack, “The True Origin of Easter” (The Restored Church of God, Feb. 8, 2004, <http://www.thercg.org/books/ttooe.html>).

<sup>10</sup> Visit TruthOrTradition.com, Topic: Holiday Myths, “Was Jesus Christ Born on December 25?”

# THE BURIAL OF JESUS CHRIST

## Starring Joseph of Arimathea

Joseph of Arimathea is one of the unsung heroes of the Bible, but from looking at Christian writings through the centuries, it seems that his heroism has gone largely unrecognized. As we set forth the biblical truth regarding how significant a role this man played in human history, we trust that you will be encouraged by the magnificent precision of the God-breathed Word and also be inspired to fulfill whatever role God sets before you as you walk with Him day by day. As we will see in regard to Joseph of Arimathea, it may turn out to be far more important than you think in the moment.

Except for the Gospels' accounts of Jesus' burial, Joseph of Arimathea is mentioned nowhere else in the Bible. It is extremely significant that Joseph is the only person who Scripture clearly indicates believed that Jesus would rise from the dead after three days and three nights just as he said he would (there were others who believed that Jesus was the Messiah but were confused by his death). Joseph's conviction, courage, and commitment to Jesus and to the truth led him to "stand in the gap" when God needed him to do so, and what he did made possible the striking witness of the empty tomb, which was a catalyst for many to believe in the resurrection of the Son of God.

That Joseph is not well known is due in part to two translation errors in the King James Version in Isaiah 53:9, a verse that occurs in the most vivid Messianic prophecy of the suffering and death of Jesus. We will cover these mistranslations one at a time.

### Isaiah 53:9a

(KJV) And he **made** his grave with the wicked, and with the rich in his death...

The word "made" is a mistranslation, and thankfully it is corrected in many modern versions, such as the New International Version.

(NIV) He **was assigned** a grave with the wicked, and with the rich in his death...

This correction is one key to the little puzzle we are putting together. The NIV properly translates the Hebrew word *nathan* as "appointed" (see Ex. 30:16; Num. 35:6; Josh. 20:2; 2 Kings 8:6; 1 Chron. 16:4; Ezra 8:20 et al), and that begs an important question: *who appointed Jesus to be buried with the wicked?*

The sacrifice of the Messiah had been foretold since Genesis. He was to die for the sins of others, even as was typified by animal sacrifices all through the Old Testament. God had appointed that one righteous man would die for the unrighteous many. This is important: the death of Jesus, and even the way he died, was not an accident. David had portrayed it in Psalm 22 almost 1000 years earlier. Furthermore, because Jesus was hung on a tree, he was "cursed" even as the Law says, "because anyone who is hung on a tree is under God's curse" (Deut. 21:23; Gal. 3:13).

Thus, prophetically speaking, it was God who assigned Jesus a grave with the wicked, because culture and custom dictated that criminals were buried apart from the rest of the people, and they certainly were not buried "with the rich." Knowing that fact brings to light the other translation error in Isaiah 53:9, which few Bible versions recognize, and that is the word "and" in the phrase, "and with the rich."

It is interesting that the phrase, "and with the rich" is not translated that way in a number of versions. For example, the New English Bible reads: "He was assigned a grave with the wicked, a burial-place among the refuse of mankind..." This translation and similar renderings in other versions are based upon the knowledge that the wicked and the rich were not buried together.

This fact has led to a number of explanations of the phrase, "and with the rich," by various scholars. Some have suggested that metaphorically the word "rich" stands for the wicked as does "poor" for the godly in some verses of Scripture. With a marginal note to that effect, Rotherham's Emphasized Bible reads: "And appointed with lawless men was his grave, and with the wicked his tomb..."

Other scholars suggest that the “rich” became rich by oppressing others, and thus were actually wicked. These suggestions by scholars are guesses, designed to make sense of why the Messiah would be assigned a grave with both the wicked and the rich.

Other translations take a different tack, however. The Darby Translation, for example: “And men appointed his grave with the wicked, **but** he was with the rich in his death...” The New American Standard Bible: “His grave was assigned with wicked men, **Yet** He was with a rich man in His death...” And it is most significant that the New King James Version changes this verse from the original KJV and reads, “And they made His grave with the wicked – **But** with the rich at His death...” It is important to know that the Hebrew word translated as “and” in this verse is a conjunction or introductory particle that is translated as “and,” “but,” “or,” “now,” “then,” “when,” “so,” and other ways as well. Thus the translation “but” in the verse is completely appropriate if it fits the context, which it does.

Because the Hebrew text does have the words, “with the rich,” and because there is no reason to make the word “rich” a figure of speech or understand it as anything but literal, we think the above three translations that translate the conjunction as “but” make the most sense. We also believe that because Joseph of Arimathea read Isaiah 53:9 in the Hebrew, he may well have recognized that it was a prophecy about the Messiah’s burial. Although it is possible that Joseph helped to fulfill this prophecy without realizing it, we believe there is a good possibility that God worked in him to realize that he was one person who could do so. How did he do it?

The answer is found in the Four Gospels. Although Joseph is mentioned in each of them, we will not look at all four because the records are quite similar.

### **Matthew 27:57-61**

- (57) As evening approached, there came a rich man from Arimathea, named Joseph, who had himself become a disciple of Jesus.
- (58) Going to Pilate, he asked for Jesus’ body, and Pilate ordered that it be given to him.
- (59) Joseph took the body, wrapped it in a clean linen cloth,
- (60) and placed it in his own new tomb that he had cut out of the rock. He rolled a big stone in front of the entrance to the tomb and went away.
- (61) Mary Magdalene and the other Mary were sitting there opposite the tomb.

Jesus died at what would be 3 p.m. our time, and the Passover (a special Sabbath [John 19:31], not the weekly Sabbath) would begin at sunset. Joseph knew that he had to act quickly, and John 19:38 tells us that he went to Pilate “secretly for fear of the Jews.” Given what Scripture says about Joseph, this does not mean that he was a fearful man. Rather, it is saying that he was prudent.

Luke 23:50 and 51 says that Joseph was a member of the Sanhedrin, the ruling council of Judaism, and that he had not voted for the execution of Jesus. Perhaps he was the lone dissenter. In any case, the council must have known of his allegiance to Jesus, and, given their propensity for evil, he knew that they would stop at nothing to eradicate the memory of this man who had so threatened their evil empire. Therefore, Joseph acted wisely, and went to Pilate without their knowledge. He also knew that Jesus was a public figure over which there was much dispute, and since there was little time to get Jesus into the grave before sunset, he did not want there to be a public debate over what to do with the body.

In Matthew 27:58, the word “asked” means to boldly implore (the KJV reads “begged”). Joseph’s going to Pilate and persuading him to give him Jesus’ body was no small feat. As a Jew, entering the court of a Gentile like Pilate would have made Joseph ceremonially unclean to eat the Passover the next day, and touching the dead body of Jesus would compound his uncleanness. What a testimony to how much Joseph loved Jesus and how focused he was on seeing the truth of God’s Word come to pass, even at the expense of his being able to celebrate the most sacred of Jewish holidays. Perhaps Joseph recognized that Jesus was the true Passover Lamb that year.

Jerusalem was about 25 miles from Joseph’s hometown of Arimathea, so why would he have had a tomb cut out of the rock *there*, and why was it so close to Golgotha? Once again, we assert it was because Joseph believed that Jesus was the Messiah, knew that he must be buried “with the rich,” and fully expected him to rise from the dead after 72 hours. As we will see, it was this act of faith that made possible the witness of the empty tomb in a prominent place where everyone would know about it. Criminals and the indigent were not given much of a burial, if any, and usually in a place provided by society or government for that purpose, because such burial grounds were unclean. Had Jesus been buried “with the wicked” in an obscure place, no witness that he had actually been raised from the dead would have been possible then or throughout history.

Properly understood, Matthew 27:59 confirms the fact that Joseph did not expect Jesus to be in the grave permanently. It says that he took Jesus’ body and “wrapped it in a clean linen cloth.” The Greek word for “wrapped” means that Joseph “rolled up” the body, and the word for “cloth” is *sindon* (like a sheet), a different word than that used of the traditional burial wrappings that were strips of cloth wound around the body after it had been covered with ointments and spices.

It is significant that verse 61 says that Mary Magdalene and the other Mary were sitting there watching what Joseph did. They saw that Joseph did not bury Jesus according to custom. It is also necessary to understand that Jesus was not crucified on what we would call Friday, because in that case he could not have been in the grave “three days and three nights” (as Scripture said he would be and was) and have been up from the dead before sunrise on Sunday when the women came to the tomb.

John 19:31 specifically says that the day after Jesus’ crucifixion was “a special Sabbath,” that is, *not the weekly Jewish Sabbath*, which fell on what we call Saturday. Putting together Scripture with the calendars available today, we see that in the year Jesus died, the Passover was on a Thursday. Jesus died at 3 p.m. on Wednesday and rose from the dead on Saturday between 3 p.m. and sunset. This had to be because according to the Jewish reckoning of time, the next day, the fourth day, started at sunset, and Scripture said he would rise “the third day.” Thus, when the women returned to the tomb before sunrise on Sunday, he was not there —“He is risen!” (Note that the angel did not say to them, “You *just* missed him!”).

A study of all the verses related to this subject shows that the women saw that Joseph did not embalm Jesus (on Wednesday), so they went home to prepare the proper spices to do so, which they could not do on Thursday (the High Sabbath) or Saturday (the weekly Sabbath). They believed that Jesus should have a proper burial, but the Sanhedrin had made sure that the tomb was sealed and guarded for three days (Matt. 27:63-66). That meant that the earliest they could get into the tomb was Sunday morning. As would be expected given their close relationships with Jesus, they were there as early as possible.

Late Wednesday afternoon (the day of preparation for the Passover), when Joseph and the women had left the tomb, Nicodemus entered the picture, and what he did is recorded only in the Gospel of John. As with the subject of the four others crucified with Jesus<sup>1</sup>, the principle of narrative development is crucial to understanding how to put together the different Gospels’ accounts of Jesus’ burial and get the whole picture of what actually happened.

In John 19:38 and 39, the NIV blurs the fact that Nicodemus (the same man in John 3 and 7) came to the grave later—after Joseph had left. As a man of means, he would have had plenty of help to do what verse 40 says “they” did—“wound the body in linen clothes with spices, as the manner of the Jews is to bury” (KJV). The Greek word for “clothes” is *othonion*, which means “grave wrappings or bandages.” Therefore, “they” could not be Joseph and Nicodemus, because we already know that Joseph simply wrapped the body in a sheet (*sinclon*). It is also noteworthy that the women saw Joseph but not Nicodemus. The women watched Joseph, saw that he had not given Jesus a “proper burial” and went off to buy the spices to do it themselves. Then, after Joseph and the women had gone, Nicodemus and his helpers came (you would want helpers if you were carrying 75 pounds of spices and a bunch of cloth) and they gave Jesus a more formal burial, but one that did not anticipate his resurrection.

What Nicodemus did is why, when Peter and another disciple ran to the tomb, they saw the *othonion* (John 20:5), the mummy-like linen grave wrappings that had been around Jesus but were then empty. Nicodemus also loved Jesus very much, and in order to honor him with a proper burial he was willing to make himself unclean for the Passover by touching Jesus’ dead body, but he apparently did not believe Jesus would rise from the dead, as evidenced by his embalming his body. Although Joseph did not anoint Jesus’ body according to custom, it was he who most honored him by believing his words that he would rise from the dead.

Let us summarize the sequence of events. On Wednesday afternoon, as soon as Jesus was dead, Joseph went quickly to Pilate, persuaded him to give him the body, took it to the nearby tomb he had had cut in a rock, wrapped it in a sheet and rolled the stone in front of the opening. The women, who dearly loved Jesus, saw what he did and went home to prepare the spices for a proper burial. Shortly after they left, Nicodemus came and prepared the body according to the Jewish burial custom. Thursday, Friday, and Saturday passed, and early Sunday the women returned to the tomb, only to find the empty tomb—Jesus had risen from the dead.

The heroism of Joseph of Arimathea in the burial of Jesus stands out vividly in His-story. Quite a number of other people did come to believe that Jesus was the Messiah, but when Jesus died they were caught off guard and confused. Since childhood, their Jewish culture had taught them that the Messiah would live forever (John 12:34). They expected him to get an army together, conquer their Roman oppressors, oust the Pharisees and Sadducees, and rule the world. When Jesus died on the cross, they did not know what to do, and many were scattered. In contrast, Joseph believed that Jesus would rise from the dead, and as we have seen, acted accordingly, burying him “with the rich.”

Suppose that Joseph of Arimathea had not stepped up and followed God’s leading based upon the prophecies in His Word? Suppose that Jesus’ body had been buried in the ground in an obscure and unclean area? Would that have stopped God from raising him from the dead? Absolutely not.

***But it would have negated the reverberating witness of the empty tomb!!!***

And that is why Joseph of Arimathea is a true hero.

One man, a man with strengths and weaknesses like all men, a man whose heart was no doubt pounding like a piston as he approached Pilate's palace, but a man who kept going because he loved Jesus and believed that he was who he said he was. One man who was prepared for both the crucifixion and the resurrection of Jesus. One man who stayed when even the disciples closest to Jesus had fled. One man who believed the Word of God, having no idea of the centuries-long ramifications of his obedience.

Joseph was the only Joseph God had. What about you? You too can believe the written Word of God and act accordingly. Who knows where the resurrected Lord Jesus will lead you in your walk with him? Who knows the everlasting impact of your following him day by day into whatever situations he knows you can handle with his help?

The witness of the empty tomb still beckons to you—Jesus is alive, and he wants to live his life in you as you live for him. What else is there to do?

**(Endnote)**

<sup>1</sup> Visit TruthOrTradition.com Topic: Home Study\Ready Made Teachings, "Five Crucified."

## **Further Study Material**

### **90 minute audio teaching**

### **You are the Only You God Has (Nov/Dec 99)**

This tape shows how Greek philosophy has infiltrated Western theology and distorted God's revelation of Himself as a personal, loving Father into little more than an "omnipotent," "omniscient" abstraction. Closely aligned to this is the issue of what kind of "foreknowledge" God has, according to Scripture. This teaching vividly brings to light the reciprocal relationship between the Creator and each "you" who chooses to walk with Him. It magnifies the urgency of individual obedience, and shows why prayer is such a vital tool in changing history from what it would have been.

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# GIVE OUT LOUD 2005: Live Out Loud Youth Conference 2005

## Luke 6:38

Give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together and running over, will be poured into your lap. For with the measure you use, it will be measured to you.

The 2004-2005 Live Out Loud on New Year's weekend at the Sherman Lake YMCA Camp near Battle Creek, Michigan brought together more than 160 young people, making it the biggest youth event in our history—something that was immediately apparent from the excitement and energy in the room. The participants were assigned to cabins according to their sex and age so they could relate to each other, with each cabin having a youth coordinator and an adult supervisor. The cabin groups then became the small groups for the conference, which met once a day and discussed various themes and shared their hearts together.

This year's theme, "Give Out Loud," focused on various ways that each of us can give of ourselves. We opened with praise and worship, focusing appropriately on God and His wonderful Son, Jesus Christ. Then Kathy Lunardini, the Event Coordinator, set the heart of the weekend by focusing on the theme, emphasizing how God is constantly giving to us.

After dinner we had more praise, worship, and manifestations, and then several teachings. Billy Darr shared about how much God has given to us, and how we are thus able to give to others. Ryan Maher shared how the love of God is expressed in giving. God so loved that He gave, and Christ so loved that he gave, so what about us? Surely we are in a position to give too. Ryan challenged us to live a life of service, putting others before ourselves. He asked, "What would it take to step up and make a difference in someone else's life?" The final teaching of the night was by Bethany Flesher, who taught that to her Give Out Loud means giving her whole heart. She said that God has placed each person in the Body as it has pleased Him, and that we must do what it takes to tap into His energy and step out and give what we have.

Friday opened with a session of praise and worship, after which Matthew Johnson introduced the Youth Council. Anita Graeser talked about the heart of the Youth Council, and how and why it got started, after which she introduced the members of the Youth Council, each of them shared a little of his or her life and vision. Shawn Mercer then shared from the Word that God wants us to have whole families, and will help us to build sound relationships. We cannot help the hand we have been dealt as to our families, but we can determine what we can do with what we have been dealt. Anita taught about family and social systems, which provide the environment for so much of our behavior. She focused on the command in the Word of God to honor your parents, even when there may be family problems that make that difficult.

Caitlyn Theisen, Kelly Bosier, Jenee Klotz and Katie Crookston then shared on interpersonal relationships, beginning with a skit portraying some of the things that hurt relationships, and how to build good ones: be honest, be open, listen to each other, show respect for the other, keep your commitments, be willing to invest your time and energy in others (this may involve giving up things that you want to do), and work to guard each other's hearts. We get hurt enough in the world without contributing to that hurt by hurting each other.

Friday afternoon there were workshops on various subjects. There was a seekers workshop for people who wanted to know more about Christ and Christianity. There was a workshop on speaking in tongues, one on the interpretation of tongues and prophecy, one on how to do a teaching, and one that was general question-answer. That evening, New Year's Eve, John Schoenheit taught on resolutions, and shared that since Jesus Christ came that we might live life to the full (John 10:10), we position ourselves to have a more fulfilled life if we get clear ideas of what we want, what it will take to get it, and then go after these goals. He shared that people can either be like clams, and sit, wait, and hope that something good will float by, or we can be like fish, and swim after what we want.

After John's teaching, there was a dance until 11:30 when everyone brought in the New Year with praise, worship, and prayer, a powerful way to start 2005. We counted down the last few seconds until midnight, at which time a great sound arose, mainly because someone thought to bring a boxload of noisemakers—and 160 young people had fun blowing horns in each other's ears.

On Saturday, Mark Graeser opened the new year with a prayer that started a season of prayer, with manifestations. Gary Theisen presented the first teaching of the day, about making disciples. He showed from the Word what a disciple is, and what a disciple does. Disciple-making comes from being a good disciple, and we need patience and persistence to be strong followers of the Lord.

Then Whitney Ricciardi shared about her experience as a missionary in India, where there are millions of gods, and many people very devoted to them. They worship idols, care for and even clothe them. Most people "believe in God," but not the true God. Whitney shared that she saw lepers, and people worshipping demons, and was reminded that Jesus' exhortation to cleanse the lepers

and cast out demons is still pertinent. Nate Graeser, a senior at Indiana University who runs a fellowship there, taught next. He shared on the calling of God, and asked if people were preparing themselves for theirs. He emphasized each person's unique calling by God, and that we should not compare ourselves to others in that regard, and we must walk circumspectly so that we are not talked out of obeying God and having His blessings in our lives.

Kathy Lunardini closed out Saturday morning by sharing how important it is to take a stand on the Word of God. That afternoon there was personal prophecy for those who wanted it, small group time, recreation, and plenty of time to just hang out. The evening opened with praise and worship, after which Ryan Maher did a presentation of the TruthOrTradition.com website. Josh Anderson taught on four keys to breaking bondage in our lives: know the truth; have the right perspective; set the right priorities, and believe in the Christ in you. Courtney Rogers followed Josh, and shared that because we are in a spiritual battle, we need to use the right weapons—specifically the sword of the spirit—and we need to make right choices. She set before us the goal of being “spiritually alive in 2005.”

Saturday evening closed with a mini-play titled “Choices,” put on the by some Arkansas saints. It was a hard-hitting play about a man faced with the choice of either staying with an old friend in a lifestyle of drugs and ungodliness, or choosing to leave that behind for a godly lifestyle. He chose Christ, while his old friend ended up dying of an overdose. Sadly, one of the young men at the conference, who earlier that year at our Teens & Twenties Camp had made the choice to leave drugs and choose Christ, got a phone call that one of his best friends had died of a drug overdose. He asked to come up after the play and give a short testimony that, especially under the circumstances, was very powerful.

The night ended with a challenge to decide what you want to get rid of in your life, and what you want to see more of, and then a call for those who wanted to accept Christ or rededicate their lives to come to the front of the room, where their was prayer and ministering. Give Out Loud officially closed Sunday morning at 10 AM, but you would not have known it at noon because the building was still packed with people who were in no hurry to end the wonderful weekend. And isn't that the way it should be? After all, it is surely good and pleasant when brothers and sisters live together in unity (Cp. Ps. 133:1).

# FAMILY NEWS, VIEWS, AND FEEDBACK

Dear Sower,

Regarding my experience with the Good News Class, let me say that religion is really important to me. It gives me a purpose, as well as hope and security. I have had different experiences with people of different religions, especially Christianity. I'm proud to say I'm a Christian, but I've had some bad experiences "going to church," so I've stayed away from any type of gathering. Most I've experienced have been boring, and I found myself only listening and not questioning or interacting in any way. With all due respect to tradition, I'm for more openness and honest discussions. What good is preaching or teaching if no one completely understands your point?

The biggest reason I have been avoiding participation at any church is trust. How can I share a part of my past with someone without worrying about him treating me differently afterward? I think that's why some people act differently in church instead of being themselves and being okay with who they are no matter what they've done. I want to trust people because I love teamwork and its mutual benefits, but I've not seen it like I want to.

But I loved the Good News Class, which answered a lot of the questions I've asked. It challenged many of the traditional teachings that I'd been taught while growing up. The teachers, and those interviewed were real. We broke into small groups and discussed certain topics, during which time certain unanswered questions that we probably always wanted to know were answered.

An atmosphere like the Good News Class where you are allowed to learn by listening and discussing what you've heard is helpful to build a base of trust and understand each other. We could express what we really felt or believed without worrying that someone would hold it against us. I for the most part felt that everyone was simply being himself, which made the whole experience that much better. I benefited in a lot of ways and feel more focused as a Christian. From the bottom of my heart I thank all who had a part in putting the Good News Class together.

David Zahedian  
San Jose, CA

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Dear Sower,

I am someone who has been exposed to many different faiths. As a child, my mother took me to Buddhist, Quaker, Hari Krishna, and Metaphysical meetings as well as Methodist and various other Christian churches. I have always held the belief that any move towards spirituality is a good move. I have often been a critic of "organized religion" because of the hypocrisy and judgmental nature of some people therein, and turned away from it. The words of Jesus Christ that I read in the Bible seemed to me to be true, but that many other things I read there didn't make sense. It was difficult to decipher the true meaning of many passages, so I dismissed it all.

I've often longed for a deeper understanding of Jesus' life and teachings but didn't feel that the churches I attended gave me that understanding. When I attended the Good News Class, I was surprised to hear that Christianity was not a religion but a relationship to God. This sparked my interest in figuring out more of what the Bible has for us. In the Good News Class, many teachers from various backgrounds explained different parts of the "Big Book" in simple, loving terms. Sometimes they were even funny! We broke into groups after each part and were free to ask questions and give opinions even if they were not in agreement with the group leader. We were free to express our doubts without fear of being criticized. There was some thought-provoking debate, and everyone came away with new understanding. It's a lot to learn and sometimes I felt overwhelmed by all the information given in one weekend, but the Good News Class gave me a jumping off point in my search to understand Jesus' connection to my life.

I especially enjoyed the speaking in tongues part. I had a spiritual epiphany and found myself quietly talking to God in a new language. I am a professional voice-over artist, and have actually had a job speaking a made up language on a well known video game. At the recording session I had to write down every made up word and read from my script, because improvising was impossible. If you try to improvise you end up sounding like a caveman, oga boga oga boga! Speaking in tongues was an entirely different experience. There was a powerful rush of energy and light that poured through me, and I felt deeply connected to God.

I highly recommend the Good News Class to anyone who has ever wanted a deeper understanding of the Bible, especially if you have doubts or questions.

Christiane Crawford  
San Fransisco, CA

[For more information on Speaking in Tongues, visit [www.TruthOrTradition.com](http://www.TruthOrTradition.com), Topic: Manifestations, "What is Speaking in Tongues and why does God Say to do it?"]

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Dear Sower,

In reminiscing about my experiences as a Christian, I first remember a childhood filled with time spent worshipping the Lord. Bible studies, youth camps, and my parents' fellowship were all an integral part of my youth. I don't remember exactly when it all started fading into the background, but I do know that I ended up spending most of my teen years around a "not-so-Christian" crowd. Most of my friends during that time were either atheists, agnostics, or like me, unable to form logical arguments on behalf of the Body of Christ. Last Spring, however, I spent a weekend attending the Good News Class. Midway through, as I was sitting in awe of this great presentation, I couldn't help thinking, "I wish my friends back home could see this!"

I don't know exactly why it happens, but at some point in their walk, many Christians forget that the Bible makes sense. That is what the Good News Class was for me. A reminder that the message God gave us is gift-wrapped in a package that appeals to both the mind and the spirit. The Good News Class also delves into many integral subjects that I believe most people don't even hear about. Interpreting the Bible, administrations, and speaking in tongues are just a few of these subjects that are made palatable for the learner.

The most interesting part of attending the Good News Class was seeing the variety of people there and listening to their thoughts and opinions. Everyone felt eager and comfortable enough to discuss what thoughts and emotions each session provoked in them. No one was left untouched. Although many still had questions about Christianity itself, they all felt like they experienced something unique and thought-provoking.

It was a great experience, and I would sincerely recommend it to anyone.

Noah Zaharias  
Monte Sereno, CA

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Dear Sower,

God bless you all, and thanks so much for your hearts and efforts. I would like to share my heart with you about the Good News Class that we held in South Bend, Indiana. It was a privilege and tremendous opportunity to be able to have an "international" class, as Moshe Amegashie from Togo, Africa was able to join us. Bruce Klimek, Mike and Mary Patten and myself, Michele Norton, also participated.

We were all so blessed. Bruce was “blown away” (his words!), Moshi was blessed and surprised to see “Togo” at the end of Session 7, and I felt relief. As a class community, we were “juiced,” as it were, and in the short time the class ran, there was only a little fatigue.

I felt relief that the class presentation was not like other Bible classes I have taken. Not that they were bad, just that this one is more exciting, with no one person doing all the teaching. It was varied, with art, music, graphics, and “home movies.” The most important and exciting aspect was the students, both on the video and in our class. What diversity--the youth, the professionals, the more mature. I am so thankful that God does not have “cookie cutter kids.” We are all different, and express our multifaceted God in different ways. This class has shown me that I need not fear bringing anyone to see it. I cannot wait for the next class, and I pray for God to work in those future students and in me to help guide them!

Michele Norton  
South Bend, IN

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Dear Sower,

Just want you all to know that you are all such a blessing! The Lord Jesus used one of your tapes to minister to me today. He took me to a new level of understanding and I realize how much more work he wants to do with my heart. The tape was Goodness and Kindness from the seminar “Growing up in Christ, Part One: Fruit of the Spirit: Developing the Character of Christ.” That is such a powerful tool for the Lord to use when one is having conflict with another. I saw how bare my fruit is in kindness, but I was not ashamed. I am very excited to know that this is an area in which Christ is going to cleanse my heart and work with me in developing some good tasting kindness.

As for grace, I sure do have to receive it, but I have not been very good about giving it to some. You know, the undeserving ones (ha, ha!). It sure was a wake up call when I am in the midst of trying to justify my bitterness or harshness towards one who seems so heartless, to hear that Jesus died for us while we were yet still sinners. I will say, I got a glimpse of his grace when listening to this tape, and it left me thinking, what kind of love is this? What a Savior we have!!!

May Yahweh and our glorious Savior continue blessing this ministry with all the resources you all need to get the job done, and may His love continue to bond the Body of Christ together in peace and in one mind and in the rejoicing of His glory, His splendor, the Creator, and His Son.

You are all so precious,

Shawannah & Scott Grady  
Colwich, KS

# INTERNATIONAL NEWS AND FEEDBACK

Dear Sower,

Thank you very much for the material I received from you. Also thank you for my question you answered about the Sabbath and clean/unclean foods.

I find this organization you belong to puzzling. You give me the impression of being very happy people, humble and genuinely desirous to share all the “pearls of great price” you glean from the Scriptures. So far, I have not met before a Christian group like yours, doing good for the sake of doing good.

I owe you my first ‘REAL’ speaking in tongues experience. It’s difficult to put in words, but you definitely allowed me to make the difference between past experiences and now. So I am thankful therefore.

I express here all my gratitude for the nice people you are. Why don’t More people understand that humor is a great asset in sharing the truth of the Gospel?

God bless you and all the staff for the many efforts put into this ministry,

Glynn  
Brussels, Belgium

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Dear Sower,

I thank my God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ for all of you. So here I am coming back to the air, renewing my commitment to standing with you.

In Bulacan, my church is the only one that adheres to or follows the Unitarian beliefs. My vision is to continue to plant more fellowships that will follow the same line of teaching. I am so happy to be a part of an organization that really teaches the truth. I really missed the days when John L., John S., and Mark would visit the Philippines and have seminars and conferences, where they boldly taught the sound doctrine of the Bible. We do hope to see you again here.

It is sometimes very wearying to stand for the truth alone, which it seems I’ve been doing here all along. How I wished that I’d be back to the fold, contending together with you and never giving up fighting for the truth. The Philippines really need the truth, for there are many Christians here still holding on to traditions. Our country must be liberated from all forms of wrong teachings.

I am so glad for all of you, and I know that God, our Father, will continue to prosper you. Keep up the good work, thank you very much.

Edgar S. Gavino  
Philippines

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Dear Sower,

Greetings in Jesus’ name.

I would like take this moment to express my full appreciation to your work. It was good to me to receive your magazine with different News, it has encouraged me so much.

I just let you know that what is happening here in Tanzania, especially in the circle of the students in Universities and Colleges. I became a committed Christian when I was in Secondary School, I thank God that I went through with my studies up to the college where I studied Mechanical Engineering as a Full Technician Certificate (FTC). Then after graduating from the college in June 2002, I sensed the call of God among the youth here in Tanzania, especially the students in the Colleges and Universities. I have been working

in this ministry almost now two years, and I thank God for His faithfulness and His provision. I also thank you very much for your provision of the resources materials in books and tapes.

The coming weekend I will be traveling to the other region for Leaders Training Seminar. It is just one day from morning up to evening, and I am suppose to teach on:

- Transforming Small Groups
- Understanding the Students Fellowship and the Role of the Leader of the fellowships.

I hope that you will pray for the great impact in this generation, especially for the students life. As long as we have an opportunity, let us use it effectively for spreading the Gospel. We are living in moral corruption worldly. I just want to ask you to pray for me because I want to hold meetings and teach the Word. It is not simple just saying that I want to do this, because here in Tanzania it includes some funds, that is the context of our culture I can not run away from that. I need a breakthrough concerning this matters.

Much love,

Daniel A. Sinkonde  
Tanzania, East -Africa

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