

# *Relationships*



## *Where Grace is in Place*

Karen & Ron Flowers  
with  
Roberto Badenas ♦ Adrian Bocaneanu ♦ Bryan Craig  
Karen Holford ♦ Willie Oliver

Reprinted Articles by  
Susan Eastman ♦ Noelene Johnsson ♦ Ardis Stenbakken

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Prepared by Karen and Ron Flowers  
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*Families Reaching Families*  
*Empowering Families for Growth & Change*  
*Making Families Whole*  
*Family Seasons*  
*Peace & Healing: Making Homes Abuse-free*  
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# Preface

Overlooking the city of Prague from the western slopes above the Vltava River is ancient Prague Castle. Nestled within its grounds is the thousand-year-old Gothic Cathedral of St. Vitus. On a tour of the castle we found a wall outside the cathedral grounds on which a majestic statue of Paul, carved in bronze, stood in its niche looking down on tourists and worshippers. We gazed on the inscription “*gratia autem Dei sum id quod sum et gratia eius in me vacua non,*” and recognized the words of 1 Corinthians 15:10: “By the grace of God I am what I am and His grace to me was not in vain.”

More than a decade has passed and this motto of the great apostle of God’s grace is emblazoned still upon the retina of our memories. Grace was Paul’s glorious theme. Of the 155 New Testament references to it (Greek – *charis*), 133 belong to him. Grace opens his epistles, closes them and saturates everything in between. This towering theologian of the early Church did not arrive at an understanding of God’s grace through reason alone. From the moment he encountered Christ on the Damascus Road, grace was a living experience for him. His was a heart and conscience changed from dead works to serve the living God. Hear his passion in Acts 20:24: “I consider my life worth nothing to me, if only I may finish the race and complete the task the Lord Jesus has given me—the task of testifying to the gospel of God’s grace.”

Taproots of culture in societies touched by Christianity “still stretch toward grace” Philip Yancey reminds us, despite our secular drift. Many say *grace* before meals, are *grateful* for kindness, *gratified* by good news and *gracious* in hosting friends. Something free of charge is *gratis*.<sup>1</sup> However, while grace has found its way into our language, it has not largely found its way into our hearts. “The doctrine of grace and salvation through Jesus Christ is a mystery to a large share of those whose names are upon the church books.”<sup>2</sup> Sadly, it seems this hundred-year-old commentary remains true. Yet, experience has shown that a deeper appreciation of grace has immediate and profound effects upon the soul. We are drawn closer to God and to others. Without that appreciation, relationships are marked by *ungrace*.

This edition of the Family Ministries planbook is dedicated to this great theme. May the Spirit of Christ draw near and the gift of transforming grace possess our hearts more fully as we dwell upon this singular quality of God, manifested in our Lord Jesus Christ, the personification of Grace.

Karen and Ron Flowers, Directors  
Department of Family Ministries  
General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists

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<sup>1</sup> Philip Yancey, *What’s so Amazing About Grace?* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1997), 12, 13.

<sup>2</sup> Ellen G. White, Ms. 27, 1889.

# *Grace Changes Everything*

by Bryan Craig

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## **Introduction**

Seventh-day Adventists believe families are important. We see the family as the primary unit of society, the place where social behaviour and spiritual values are constructed, interpreted and transmitted from one generation to the next. The emotional ties that bind families together create incredibly important bonds of attachment that influence us, often for the rest of our lives.

Social researchers consider marriage to be the cornerstone of the family. They believe it is difficult to develop a happy, secure family environment when the marriage relationship is not stable and vibrant. If a couple is not committed to their marriage, then this lack will inevitably sabotage their family and contribute to problems within it.

When God created and celebrated the first marriage (cf. Genesis 1, 2), it was His intention that our ability to give and receive love would inspire us and enable us to build high quality interpersonal relationships with one another. Human beings all want love and intimacy. By giving and receiving love we grow in our understanding of one another and experience greater closeness and trust.

## **Marriage and Family Are Being Severely Tested**

As social climates rapidly change around the world, homes and marriages are being severely tested. Clear evidence reveals that the increase in family breakdown, the debilitating stress with which many families live, and the changes in contemporary family structure have left many couples and families confused and bewildered. Changes have brought about alterations in the pattern of the family life cycle, shifts in expectations of one another in the family, and the emergence of a wide variety of family forms. Several significant changes serve to highlight the social transitions in marriage and family:

**Changes in the family life cycle.** Marriage and childbirth are being delayed as men and women choose to remain single longer. The birth of the first child is occurring later in the family life cycle. Women are questioning their traditional role with the majority now working and fewer being economically dependent.

**Changes in expectations about marriage.** Most couples today get married for emotional security and social status, not for economic support. Many couples are confused about the meaning of love and find it hard to trust in the face of their own dysfunctional and abusive childhoods. When difficulties arise in the marriage, couples are more likely to consider the option of separation and divorce than in the past.

**Changes in parenting styles and roles.** Traditional authoritarian styles have given way to more democratic or sometimes permissive approaches to child rearing. Many dual career or dual earning couples fail to sort out their family roles.

**Changes in family structures.** The ease with which many relationships now end has helped to produce a variety of family structures (e.g. single parent families, step-families, remarried families).

**Changes in our sense of community.** There has been a shift away from a community of shared values to a society that is fiercely individualistic. This often leaves marriage and family with a sense of alienation and isolation.

Amid all these changes, many have wondered whether anybody still values or believes in family. Younger couples are often afraid to commit themselves to marriage and many choose other types of relationships instead.

### **A Message of Grace for Difficult Times**

We hunger for love and intimacy. We crave the assurance, the knowledge, the feeling that we are special and are understood by another human being, that someone else is committed to caring about us. With competing interests and conflicting values, however, many people find the development of long term relationships in marriage a difficult and exacting enterprise. Misunderstandings are common. A failure to connect, to form and maintain healthy relationships, leaves many couples confused, disenchanted, and alienated. Few seem to have an adequate model for resolving anger and conflict; reconciliation and forgiveness are difficult. Many couples search for clues to revive a dying or stagnant relationship. For many, relationship issues have become their number one concern.

In this context Paul's letter to the Ephesians seems particularly appropriate. Ephesus was a church passing through difficult times. Arguing and fighting were rife among the "committed" faithful, deep divisions were beginning to appear in the congregation. The letter to the Ephesians follows a style of discourse typical of Paul. First, he emphasises the grace of God as the only basis for salvation and healing. Then he points out the behavioural implications, showing how grace is revealed in the life of the believer. Chapters 1-3 establish the basis for redemption and Christian unity. There the apostle argues that "in Christ" God has destined us to be His sons and daughters. As such we all receive special blessings (Ephesians 1:5-8) and are all made alive by the grace of God (Ephesians 2:4-10). Paul states that true peace and harmony within the community of faith are attainable only through Christ. He affirms that:

- Christ destroys the barriers that separate (2:14).
- Christ breaks down the walls of hostility (2:14).
- Christ creates unity out of diversity (2:15).
- Christ unites us all into one family (2:19).

**Paul's favorite theme: grace.** Peace, harmony, and the development of a sense of unity and togetherness are all made possible and achievable through the grace of God. It is only as God, who is immense in mercy and love, embraces us with His incredible goodness and grace that we can become anything or achieve anything. Paul's emphasis on grace

constitutes the cornerstone of his argument about how unity in the church can be achieved and effective relationships between members can be built.

Grace is Paul's favourite theme. For him, the grace of God was not merely a sedative for discomfort. It had transformed his life. God's grace is the dynamic that brings about reconciliation and inspires the development of responsible and satisfying relationships. And it is by grace and grace alone that Christian believers will be motivated as they come together in unity of purpose. As Charles Stanley says in his book *A Touch of His Peace* (1993), "Where grace abounds, peace thrives. Where grace is stunted, peace shrivels."

Having stated his case for grace in the first three chapters of his letter to the Ephesians, Paul turns (chapters 4-6) to providing practical suggestions on how grace works in the life—how to "live a life of love" (5:2), "a life worthy of the calling you have received" (4:1, 2).

### **Ways Grace Influences Marriage**

By the grace of God marriage can be transformed. When we learn how the Holy Spirit empowers us and we invite His presence in us, we discover the key to "grace-full" marriages and families. Gerald May in *Addiction and Grace* (1988) says, "The power of grace flows most fully when the human will chooses to act in harmony with divine will" (p. 139). Here are a number of ways according to Paul that grace works in the life of the believer. They are vital for happy, healthy marriages. They are simple yet effective ways for us to maintain "the life of love."

**Accentuate the positive (Ephesians 4:1-3).** Grace leads us to choose to focus on the positive and not the negative. Paul mentions four personal values that will help "keep the unity of the spirit through the bond of peace" (vs. 3):

- *Humility* - humbly serving the needs of others (vs. 2).
- *Gentleness* - being gentle and respectful, showing that we care and are unwilling to take each other for granted (vs. 2).
- *Patience* - being slow to avenge wrong or retaliate when hurt by another person (vs. 2).
- *Forbearance* - bearing with one another in love. Mutual tolerance enables two human beings to live together in peace and love (vs. 2).

These four qualities are essential for both people in a marriage to have if they are to build bridges of understanding to each other, to take responsibility for their relationship, and to encourage each other's sense of self esteem.

**Communicate in love (Ephesians 4:15, 29).** Good relationships depend very much on open honest communication. The essence of honest communication is a willingness to be vulnerable—to share the fragile and tender parts of ourselves with another, to risk opening our fears and doubts, and to actively listen to another's thoughts and feelings. Self-disclosure on our part is an invitation to intimacy with another. It invites the other person to know and understand who we really are.



Many relationships flounder because people are simply not willing to trust themselves with another person. Fear drives them to hide parts of themselves from the other person or to engage in a variety of negative exchanges that inhibit understanding and prevent the growth of the relationship. God's grace motivates us to communicate love and acceptance rather than using defensive, self-serving, manipulative tactics. If, instead of the gracious communication of love and acceptance, there is invalidation, minimizing of the other person, indifference or criticism, such toxic exchanges will tend to destroy the relationship and lead to either an escalation of conflict and misunderstanding or to withdrawal and silence.

**Deal constructively with anger and conflict (Ephesians 4:25, 26, 31).** Paul counsels us to stop recycling our gripes and disagreements. Here he indicates that God's grace enables us to recognise the times when we are angry and to deal with these feelings constructively. Many people think that anger is a sin. They even quote Ephesians 4:26 as their proof text. But anger is a God-given emotion. It acts as a warning system to tell us when we have been hurt by another person. Paul is not condemning anger but pointing out that we need to deal with our hurts and disagreements and not let the days go by without resolving them amicably. Holding on to anger leads to bitterness, resentment, and a desire for revenge.

An inability to deal with anger and conflict is one of the common causes of distress and failure in marriage. "Getting rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice" (cf. vs. 31), suggests that we must learn how to put the past behind us by getting rid of the ghosts of the past.

**Forgive one another (Ephesians 4:32).** While we are called to forgive, in reality forgiveness is not that easy to do. Though forgiveness may not be able to eliminate the consequences of wrong done, true forgiveness means that we are willing to release another person from the full weight of our judgment and condemnation, especially when they have done nothing at all to deserve that release. Letting go of bitterness, resentment and pain is truly an act of grace, a gift from God. It maintains the vitality of relationships and ends any risk of alienation or rejection.

In *25 Surprising Marriages* (1997) William J. Peterson tells the inside story of the married life of Billy and Ruth Graham. While God has mightily used these two, their marriage is a study in the blending of two strong wills, in making adjustments, and in learning to forgive. With forceful personalities, yet differing views on many things, their experience, especially in their first few years, has often been marked by conflict. "She admits, 'Life in the Billy Graham household is not a matter of uninterrupted sweetness and light'" (p. 351). Despite Billy's Baptist beliefs, for example, she has remained a staunch Presbyterian. His first parish eventually changed its name in order to have wider appeal when she remained unconvinced that she needed to be rebaptized by immersion. Although he has espoused religious views and biblical positions very different from hers, he acknowledges her as a better Bible scholar than himself and admits that she has helped him to be more balanced in his views of other religious denominations.

“Once when Billy preached a sermon on the Christian home, he asked his wife (as he usually does) what she thought of it.

“She responded: ‘It was a good sermon except for one thing.’

“‘What was that?’

“‘The timing.’

“‘The what?’

“The timing. You spent eleven minutes on a wife’s duty to her husband and only seven on a husband’s duty to his wife” (p. 351).

“They’ve come from two different worlds; they live in two different worlds, but together they have built a strong relationship that has brought blessing to the world” (p. 364). One of the key reasons for their happiness is a favorite saying of Ruth’s: “A happy marriage is a union of two forgivers” (p. 352).

Forgiveness involves at least two distinct aspects:

- *Unconditional forgiveness.* One part of forgiveness is that unconditional forgiveness which we give to those who have hurt us because Christ has forgiven us (Eph. 4:32). Such forgiveness is not natural for us and we must rely on God’s Spirit to help us. It is to be given first within one’s own heart—that is the hardest part—and then offered humbly, sincerely and with awareness that we as forgivers are not more righteous than the one we’re forgiving. Such unconditional, grace based forgiveness has a freeing effect upon the forgiver, and may create an environment where the offender is drawn to repent, though it is not given for that reason.

- *A conditional process.* Another aspect of forgiveness has to do with a process which the two persons enter (Luke 17:3, 4). It can only be effective when the first aspect of forgiveness is present with the one who has been hurt and when humility, confession and repentance are present with the offender. If the process is to lead to reconciliation, there must be reciprocity which involves dialogue, a working through of issues that caused the hurt, and a commitment to communicate, handle anger, and solve problems more effectively so that the wounding and estrangement does not continue.

**Be mutually submissive (Ephesians 5:21).** The principle of equality and mutuality in Christ is clearly established by Paul in Ephesians 2:14-16. The grace of God enables us to submit to one another out of love rather than assuming a position of superiority, domination or control over another. Paul admonishes men and women, husbands and wives to be “filled with the spirit” (5:18), in order that they might live a life of love and respect towards one another (5:33). Here in Ephesians 5:21 Paul is laying out a central principle which pertains to all Christian relationships, especially to the examples which follow—the marriage relationship (Eph. 5:22-33), the parent-child relationship (Eph. 6:1-4), and the master-slave (employer-employee) relationship (Eph. 6:5-9). Paul is telling us that we need to be willing to offer ourselves in the nurture and service of one another. To show that we accept, respect, and care for one another and have developed a sense of mutuality and accept each others gifts, we must avoid any kind of useless power struggles that result in one being dominant over the other.

**Be committed to loving one another (Ephesians 5:1, 2).** Paul invites us to “live a life of love.” This is the epitome of the call of grace. Only in the context of grace do we find ourselves motivated to freely and graciously love each other in ways the apostle summons us to do. Love is a choice to behave towards another person in gracious ways that reflect how we feel about them. Paul’s notion of love implies more than just a feeling of fondness and affection. For him, love involves *commitment* and *action*.

*Commitment* is a vital ingredient of a long term relationship, an essential component of any love relationship. To make a commitment is to make a statement of loyalty, a pledge to remain faithful and true to the relationship and to the other person. It is a quality that contributes most to the growth, development, and stability of the marriage and family relationship.

Love is also an *action* word—an attitude that shows in our behaviour. Love is a *choice to behave* towards another person in loving ways that may reflect how we *feel* about them, or perhaps in some cases, *in spite of our feelings* toward them at the time. Sometimes our choice to love may be in the midst of feelings of confusion, frustration, even anger and hate. The following love story illustrates how a commitment to love can confront and resolve difficulties and make possible lasting relationships.

Robert Fulghum (1997) tells of advertising for love stories at one of his lectures and having a respectable, middle-aged businessman show him a pale blue perfumed envelope:

“He said, ‘Before you read this, you should know that I’ve had it for at least ten years, that it’s from my wife, to whom I am still married.’ Inside the envelope was a matching sheet of stationery, with these words written with pen and ink:

*“My dearest Harry:  
I hate you, I hate you, I hate you.  
Respectfully, with all my love, Edna.*

“I smiled and looked up, anticipating the rest of the story.

“He smiled as he refolded the note and put it back in the envelope.

“‘That’s it.’ he said, and walked away” (pp. 4, 5).

Close relationships produce many feelings, but committed love can confront and resolve difficulties and make possible a lasting relationship. This is the nature of love that we are urged to exhibit in harmony with the life of grace we have been called to live.

## **Conclusion**

Just as the apostle Paul was focused on the grace of God, so we need to “re-vision” our lives with grace at the centre of our being. We, too, will become passionate about God’s incredibly extravagant love for us when we embrace the grace with which He is embracing us. The good news of God’s goodness and kindness towards us, when owned and integrated into our lives, will radically change our marriages. Grace opens the way for us to

experience gracious interpersonal relationships that build confidence, trust, and respect in one another, and helps to relieve the stress and anxiety that can come from life together. Grace makes us gracious people!

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# *Children of Grace*

by Ron Flowers

## **Introduction**

Recently, I went to our local airport to meet our son who was coming for a brief visit. There were many waiting at the international terminal. As I entered the waiting area outside the secure baggage claim, I noticed several families with small children. One man among them stood with a video camera poised, waiting for the sliding doors with their opaque glass to open—the last barrier separating loved ones.

I was curious. These people with all the children seemed to be waiting together. Who were they planning to meet? What would the man with the camera be filming? Would it be a dignitary? A long awaited relative? Maybe a grandmother coming to visit her grandchildren? The air was filled with expectancy. Everyone's eyes were riveted on the doors to the secure area. The children were especially quiet and focused.

Then, the heavy opaque glass doors slid apart. A man in this early 30's stepped out, a piece of luggage slung over his shoulder. One arm clutched a large diaper bag. In the other nestled a baby girl, perhaps 8 or 9 months old. He stopped in the doorway and unfolded her from his chest, extending his arms as widely as he could while still clinging to her and proudly presented her to the waiting crowd. The man with the video camera leapt into action, filming everything. A young woman sprang from the crowd, ran to the waiting man and scooped the baby from his arms, smothering her with kisses. Then it seemed as if almost all the adults and children in the waiting area descended upon this little group of three—the man, the woman and the baby.

I was too far back to hear what was said, but I could see that the child was ethnically different from the man and the woman. I guessed, correctly as it turned out, that I was watching a special moment in the life of a young husband and wife—the bringing home of their adopted child.

A man near me was standing at the edge of the crowd his eyes intent on the scene, waiting for his turn to greet the baby. He looked so much like the man with the child that I guessed they were brothers.

The joy erupting from the group was contagious. I caught the eye of the man nearby and said, "This looks like a happy family event."

"Oh, yes!" he beamed. "My brother and his wife have adopted a baby from Kazakhstan. They were there together a few weeks ago to meet the baby and make preliminary arrangements. A few days ago my brother went back alone to bring her home. She's eight months old. These people here are our family. Quite a few are from our church."

"Have they named her already?"

“Yes,” he said. “Theresa. It’s the name of our grandmother.”

Theresa seemed a bit overwhelmed at first, but it did not take her long to respond to all the love—the touching and cuddling, the cooing and laughter, the delight and joy that breaks out around a new baby. Suddenly, her eyes fastened on someone in the group and her face lit up with a broad grin.

“There’s one for the family album,” I commented. The new uncle beside me grinned too and moved closer for his moment to meet his new niece.

The glass parted again and our son emerged. “God bless all of you,” I called back over my shoulder as I rushed to greet him.

### **The Significance of Adoption**

Adoption is the deliberate act of choosing a child to be one’s legal offspring, so the child belongs with full rights and privileges in the family. It is a very extraordinary act—this act of adoption—to deliberately choose a child and give to him or her so special a place. As one little boy was overheard to say proudly to his playmate, “You were just born into your family; I was adopted into mine.” Whether natural born or joined to the family by adoption, however, happy is the child who has the security of knowing he or she is wanted and loved.

**The New Testament adoption metaphor.** The primary template Jesus employed to design His new spiritual community was that of a household, a family. In God’s design, we are to understand about church from our life in family. The reverse also becomes true. Our life in the church, the family of God, gives greater understanding and strength to our life in family at home.

One of the family terms used in the New Testament with significance for the family of God is “adoption” (*hiothesia*). It is freighted with meaning. Notice Romans 8:15-17:

“[Y]ou received the Spirit of adoption by whom we cry out, “Abba, Father.” The Spirit Himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs—heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ . . .” (NKJV).

The use of the term *adoption* conveys a very important message to us as believers. It is God’s way of convincing us that He has deliberately chosen us as His children, though we are not naturally entitled to this status. We have every right to call Him “Father.” We are heirs.

Other verses help fill out the meaning of the concept of *adoption* into God’s family:

Galatians 4:5 (NKJV) – “to redeem those who were under the law, that we might receive the adoption as sons;” “receive the full rights of sons” (NIV)

Ephesians 1:3 - 6 (*The Message*) - “How blessed is God! And what a blessing he is! He’s the Father of our Master, Jesus Christ, and takes us to the high places of blessing in him. Long before he laid down earth’s foundations, he had us in mind, had settled on us as

the focus of his love, to be made whole and holy by his love. Long, long ago he decided to adopt us into his family through Jesus Christ. (What pleasure he took in planning this!) He wanted us to enter into the celebration of his lavish gift-giving by the hand of his beloved Son.”

“We owe everything to grace, free grace, sovereign grace. Grace in the covenant ordained our adoption. Grace in the Saviour effected our redemption, our regeneration, and our adoption to heirship with Christ” (E. G. White, *God’s Amazing Grace*, p. 54).

### **Grace in the Covenant**

**David and Mephibosheth.** A story that speaks of God’s covenant grace unfolds over several chapters in 1 Samuel 20:8, 16; 2 Samuel 9:1, 3, 7. Best friends David and Jonathan, knowing they must soon part company because of the paranoia of Jonathan’s father, King Saul, meet secretly in a meadow for the last time. Deeply troubled by the impending loss of his friend, Jonathan turned to David and asked, “If something should happen to me, will you promise you’ll care for my family?” The Bible says David and Jonathan made a covenant that day in the field.

Some years later, in a decisive battle against the Philistines, both Saul and Jonathan died. The news dispatch brought pandemonium and panic to the palace. A nursemaid, in whose care was the youngest son of Jonathan, Mephibosheth, fled with the child. Snatching up the five-year-old prince whose legs couldn’t possibly respond to her haste, she ran. And as she did, she tripped on a threshold and dropped the boy. Through this unfortunate accident, he became a cripple for life.

Refuge was found for Mephibosheth in an obscure town called Lodebar, with a family named Machir. He grew to manhood there, hating himself apparently, no doubt hating the king who sat upon the throne that was rightfully his, and—as is often the case when we despair inside—hating God for life’s unfairness.

During Mephibosheth’s Lodebar years, David’s empire reached its zenith—stretching from the Euphrates in the north to the Nile in the south. No king had enjoyed Israel at such a peak. Reminiscing one afternoon, David’s mind wandered back to the covenant with Jonathan. And his thoughts became audible: “Are there any descendants of Jonathan yet alive?”

Now there was a man named Ziba who had served both Saul and Jonathan as an aide, and David had retained his services. For fifteen years this man, Ziba, had sat on this secret. “There is yet one son,” he told the king, “Mephibosheth. He lives in Lodebar in the house of Machir.”

The king immediately dispatched men to retrieve Jonathan. As the last living heir of the line of Saul, one can only imagine the terror in the heart of Mephibosheth at that thought of meeting David. Years before, David’s men had assassinated his older brother Ishbosheth while he napped. Now they had found him at last as well.

The poor miserable man was brought to the audience chamber of King David and deposited in a heap before the monarch. In a moment he expected that the king would rise from his throne, reach for the mighty sword of Goliath which had been his weapon for years, and with one swift stroke put an end to the household of Saul.

Mephibosheth was not at all prepared for what happened next. David did rise from his throne, and stepping forward, looked down upon this boy now grown to manhood, the child of his best friend. In loving, tender tones he spoke.

“Mephibosheth.”

Not daring so much as to lift up his eyes and look at the king, Mephibosheth in one sentence revealed all of the bitter feelings that he had about himself, about the king, and about God.

“What do you want with such a dead dog as I am?” was his pathetic response.

“Don't be afraid,” David said to him, “for I will surely show you kindness for the sake of your father Jonathan. I will restore to you all the land that belonged to your grandfather Saul, and you will always eat at my table” (2 Sam. 9:7, *NIV*). On that day David also gave Ziba, Ziba's 15 sons and 20 other servants to wait upon Mephibosheth and his family. He was royalty indeed, all because of a covenant that was made before he was ever born.

God is like that. Sometimes we are afraid of God, when we are aware of our mistakes, and think He is angry and stern. But all the stories in the Bible are there so we can discover that the King of Heaven is also loving and kind, always ready to forgive and give us another chance. Because of Jesus we can be part of His family again, and know we are special because of who Jesus is, both our Creator and Redeemer. It still seems incredible, but all of this is because of a covenant that God the Father made with His Son Jesus to save our world and us, even from the foundation of the world.

**A parental covenant.** What difference would it make in parents' bearing and rearing children and to the children themselves if decisions about them were rooted in covenant commitments made by the parents before they were born? What would be the impact upon children to know that they are “children of grace?” That their lives spring from a covenant between a father and mother who love each other and want to have children in their home as an expression of that love?

We do not know what led the young husband and wife in the airport to make the decision to adopt. Maybe they planned it this way along—not to add by natural means another life to an increasingly crowded planet, but to care for a child already here. Perhaps they reached the decision out of the pain of infertility, or stillbirth, or the untimely death of a natural-born baby. Adoption is often Plan B, a couple's love finding a way in the midst of their pain to bring children to their hearts and to their home.

One day, however, this couple made a commitment to adopt a child. Plan B took center stage. After they reached the agreement that they would adopt—i.e., after they



covenanted together—it was just a matter of carrying out the details. Just as God took great pleasure in planning our adoption (cf. Eph. 1:5), so they must have found great delight in working out all the details to get ready to receive a child.

And so this young would-be-father set out for a little known country on the far side of the world to take care of the legal arrangements and bring the child home. It's a long journey from Almaty (the Kazakhstan capital) to Washington, DC. After many hours of flying over and back, after caring for the many legal details and physically and emotionally caring for this child, I can imagine the young dad was quite spent. Yet the thrill of arrival, the anticipation of meeting his wife—Theresa's new mother, and the satisfaction of a mission accomplished flush him with renewed energy.

"It's okay, Theresa," I can hear him quiet the child's fears. "One more bottle, one more diaper change, and then I will place you in the arms of your new mom."

Let us not miss the divine parallel—the grace-driven mission that Jesus undertook when He stepped over the parapet of heaven on a journey to a far-off land to bring His children home. With what joy Jesus laid the children of the world in His Father's arms on the night before His crucifixion (John 17:6-12).

"We owe everything to grace, free grace, sovereign grace. Grace in the covenant ordained our adoption. Grace in the Saviour effected our redemption, our regeneration, and our adoption to heirship with Christ" (E. G. White, *God's Amazing Grace*, p. 54).

### **The Effects of Grace**

If they're typical, this "airport family" as I call them will be discussing for a while just who's face little Theresa noticed in the crowd that made her light up with the smile. There will be a vying for the honor of sparking that first baby grin . . . .

**Personal delight.** The sense of being adopted, of being graciously accepted and enfolded in family makes us smile too, even in our sleep! We can't help it! Notice the restfulness, the calm, the self-surrender evident when one grasps that they are indeed "children of grace":

"As we fully believe that we are His by adoption, we may have a foretaste of heaven. . . . We have a nearness to Him, and can hold sweet communion with Him. We obtain distinct views of His tenderness and compassion, and our hearts are broken and melted with contemplation of the love that is given to us. We feel indeed an abiding Christ in the soul. *We abide in Him, and feel at home with Jesus.* . . . We have a realizing sense of the love of God, and we rest in His love. No language can describe it, it is beyond knowledge. We are one with Christ, our life is hid with Christ in God. We have the assurance that when He who is our life shall appear, then shall we also appear with Him in glory. With strong confidence we can call God our Father" (E. G. White, *God's Amazing Grace*, p. 54 italics supplied).

**Fellowship.** The effects of grace spill over into the life. We view others with new eyes. Realizing that we ourselves are children of grace we begin to grasp that others are as well. This is the foundation for Christian fellowship.

“All who have been born into the heavenly family are in a special sense the brethren of our Lord. The love of Christ binds together the members of His family, and wherever that love is manifest there the divine relationship is revealed. . .” (E. G. White, *God’s Amazing Grace*, p. 54).

### **Conclusion**

“Love to man,” wrote E. G. White, “is the earthward manifestation of the love of God. It was to implant this love, to make us children of one family, that the King of glory became one with us. And when His parting words are fulfilled, ‘Love one another, as I have loved you’ (John 15:12); when we love the world as He has loved it, then for us His mission is accomplished. We are fitted for heaven; for we have heaven in our hearts” (E. G. White, *God’s Amazing Grace*, p. 54).

“Love to man is the earthward manifestation of the love of God.” We do not violate the spirit of this if we put “children” in the place of “man.” “Love for *children* is also the earthward manifestation of the love of God.” That is the meaning of this passage for parents.

Loving children day and night, season after season of their developing lives, keeping before them that they are children of God’s grace, can be a taxing task. The best news is that Jesus is there for parents. Call upon Him. His Spirit administers grace freely to those who need help to know how to guide their youth, or who perhaps need personal re-parenting in the presence of healing, restoring love such as only Jesus can provide.

And to youth who may not have parents they can count on as conduits for God’s love, He is accessible to you also. Encounter Him in His Word. Hail Him in prayer; He is within prayer distance. He is there for you who are struggling mightily with intrapersonal and interpersonal issues, who may never have a parent or mentor to guide and prepare you or walk beside you in your journey into adulthood.

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# Radically New

by Willie Oliver  
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**Text: John 15:9-12; 13:34, 35.**

## Introduction

At the beginning of the millennium:

- Bill Gates was worth \$90 billion, up from \$6.4 billion in the seven years since 1992.
- The average full-time employed male college graduate over the age of 25 in the U.S. earned \$49,982 while his female counterpart earned \$35,408.
- For every dollar earned by full-time, year-round employed White men, Black men earned 74 cents, White women earned 73 cents, Black women earned 64 cents, Hispanic men earned 61 cents, and Hispanic women earned 53 cents.
- The U.S. minimum wage was \$5.15 an hour (\$10,712 a year for a full-time worker).
- The 200 richest people in the world (4 women, 196 men) were worth \$1 trillion—enough to pay 93.3 million people the U.S. minimum wage.
- About 10 million U.S. workers earned the minimum wage.
- Because many employers (e.g., some small businesses, restaurants, and bars—places that tip) are exempt from paying the minimum wage, and many others simply avoid it (e.g., domestic worker employers), 2.8 million workers earned less than the minimum wage.
- The majority of those earning the minimum wage or less are women and people of color (Weber, 2001, p. 1).

The questions I raise for our study and consideration today are: first, in the light of love as a New Testament ethic, should Christians participate in society's subordination of people based on their race, class, gender, nationality or sexuality; or rather, love people regardless of their social status as Christ loved us? And second, how can love as a principle shared in the gospel of John inform the way we negotiate relationships so that we are willing to give our best to whatever God's will is for our lives?

My hope is that as we explore these questions, the Lord will give us insights to experience a radical renewal in our lives and as a result enjoy the peace and contentment that God wants to bless us with each and every day of our lives. My topic today is titled: Radically New.

**The Text: John 15:9-12; 13:34-35.**

**John 15:9-12.** <sup>9</sup>I've loved you the way my Father has loved me. Make yourselves at home in my love. <sup>10</sup>If you keep my commands, you'll remain intimately at home in my love. That's what I've done—kept my Father's commands and made myself at home in his love. <sup>11</sup>I've told you these things for a purpose: that my joy might be your joy, and your joy wholly mature. <sup>12</sup>This is my command: Love one another the way I loved you. Put your lives on the line for your friends" (*The Message*).

**John 13:34, 35.** <sup>34</sup>Let me give you a new command: Love one another. In the same way I loved you, you love one another. <sup>35</sup>This is how everyone will recognize that you are my disciples—when they see the love you have for each other” (*The Message*).

### **Radically New**

Merriam-Webster’s collegiate dictionary defines *radical* as “marked by a considerable departure from the usual or traditional.” *New* is defined as “different from one of the same category that has existed previously” (*Merriam-Webster*, 1993-1996).

### **The Book of John**

In purposeful parallel to the opening words of Genesis, John describes God as speaking salvation into reality. This time God’s word takes on human appearance and crosses the threshold of history in the person of Jesus Christ. Jesus articulates the word and it comes to pass: forgiveness and judgment, healing and illumination, mercy and grace, joy and love, freedom and resurrection. Everything broken and fallen, sinful and diseased is called into salvation by God’s spoken word.

To be sure, someplace along the line things went terribly wrong and are in serious need of being repaired. The repairing all takes place by the speaking—God speaking salvation into existence in the person of Jesus Christ. Jesus in this instance, not only utters the word of God; He is the Word of God.

Keeping company with these words, we begin to realize that our words are more important than we ever thought they were. Saying “I believe” for example, signals the difference between life and death. Our words increase in self-respect and significance in conversations with Jesus. For Jesus doesn’t enforce salvation as an answer; He recites salvation into being through unhurried dialogue, close personal relationships, empathetic answers, fervent prayer, and—putting all in concert—a sacrificial death. We don’t indifferently stroll away from words like that (Peterson, 2005).

### **The Narrative**

The context of this narrative finds Jesus in Jerusalem just before the feast of the Passover having supper with His disciples as He gets ready to go back to the Father. He gets up from the table, sets aside His robe and puts on an apron. Then He pours water into a basin and begins to wash the feet of His disciples. When He gets to Peter, Peter pitches a fit and at first refuses to have Jesus wash his feet; but quickly realizes that not being washed by Jesus means not having anything to do with Him.

No sooner has the lesson of humility and servant leadership been taught than Judas leaves the supper hell-bent on betraying Jesus. He couldn’t possibly be Messiah. He couldn’t possibly be the Son of God after stooping to the lowly level of servant. And just before Jesus predicts that Peter will deny Him three times before the rooster crows, He takes the time to emphasize an old lesson, but in a radically new way::

<sup>9</sup>I’ve loved you the way my Father has loved me. Make yourselves at home in my love. <sup>10</sup>If you keep my commands, you’ll remain intimately at home in my love. That’s what I’ve done—kept my Father’s commands and made myself at home in his love.

<sup>11</sup>I've told you these things for a purpose: that my joy might be your joy, and your joy wholly mature. <sup>12</sup>This is my command: Love one another the way I loved you. Put your lives on the line for your friends" (John 15:9-12 *The Message*).

<sup>34</sup>Let me give you a new command: Love one another. In the same way I loved you, you love one another. <sup>35</sup>This is how everyone will recognize that you are my disciples—when they see the love you have for each other" (John 13:34, 35 *The Message*).

A believer is motivated by the wonder of Jesus' *love*, which is patterned after the Father's *love* in its quality and extent. *Make yourselves at home in my love* might seem to be mystical but Jesus makes it very concrete. Obedience to the *Father's commands* is the same for a disciple as it was for the Son (14:15, 21, 23; 1 John 2:3; 3:22, 24; 5:3). Active dependence and loving obedience are the proper paths for all of God's children. Jesus had great *joy* in pleasing His Father by living a fruitful life (Heb. 12:2). The purpose of His teaching is to give people an abundant life, not a joyless existence (John 10:10). The commands for His disciples to obey are for their *joy* (John 17:13).

One primary *command* was given by Jesus to believers: they must have mutual love (*Love each other* is repeated in John 15:17). Christians grow by caring for and nurturing each other. The standard for that love is Christ's example of humble sacrificial service: *in the same way I loved you* (Walvoord & Zuck, 1983-1985).

### **Do Christians Support or Resist Prevailing Views?**

It is amazing how much like the world we are—professed disciples of Jesus. Jesus is crystal clear about His reason for coming to the world and yet, rather than employing His paradigm for living, we are blind, indifferent, ignorant, prejudiced and oppressive.

Like much of the secular world we also discriminate by race, class, gender, nationality and sexuality. These interlocking social systems are interconnected, historical processes of domination and subordination that identify the social position of individuals to determine whether to advantage or disadvantage them; to like or not like them, to be oppressors rather than liberators. In short, our love is not extravagant, unconditional, and available to all.

A prevailing view is that one must belong to the right race. You must be of the right social class—well educated—preferably Ivy League, in a prestigious occupation with a large income, living in the right area of town, having the right club memberships, wearing custom-made clothes, expensive fragrances and having the right social networks, driving the right car and living in the right house.

You must also be of the right gender. After all, let's just be like the Pharisees and thank God that we were not born a dog, a publican or a *woman*. Let's keep them in their right place, where they belong—in the kitchen and taking care of children. Certainly not in our board rooms or pulpits; certainly not leading our churches or institutions.

And, of course, you must be of the right sexual orientation—heterosexual and married. We don't want to see gays or lesbians in the church, because ours is a pure and unspotted religion. We are often even uncomfortable with too many single adults in our congregations; afraid that what they have is contagious. They may even take off with our spouse. We must remind people around us that we are the remnant. The remnant of what, I ask? To be relevant we must be salt. To be worthwhile salt we must be in contact with whatever we are salting.

We are invariably like the social functionalists who believe that inequality is inevitable and desirable. After all, poor people are poor simply because they are lazy and lack motivation. Positions in society should be ranked—say the social functionalists—by order of importance. Since important positions in society require more training and education, those individuals, by definition, should receive more rewards—occupational prestige, high incomes and lots more leisure time. And we should make sure that our church's wage scale is also determined by this same socially-constructed notion.

Jesus knew His disciples would try to be like the world—taken up with status and prestige and hoping the rich young ruler would join their ranks. “No,” He says: “Do it this way.” Radically change your thinking and ways, and follow My new commands.

“My dear friends, don't let public opinion influence how you live out our glorious, Christ-originated faith. If a man enters your church wearing an expensive suit, and a street person wearing rags comes in right after him, and you say to the man in the suit, ‘Sit here, sir; this is the best seat in the house!’ and either ignore the street person or say, ‘Better sit here in the back row,’ haven't you segregated God's children and proved that you are judges who can't be trusted? Listen, dear friends. Isn't it clear by now that God operates quite differently? He chose the world's down-and-out as the kingdom's first citizens, with full rights and privileges. This kingdom is promised to anyone who loves God. And here you are abusing these same citizens! Isn't it the high and mighty who exploit you, who use the courts to rob you blind? Aren't they the ones who scorn the new name—‘Christian’—used in your baptisms?” (James 2:1-7 *The Message*).

Essentially, Jesus is saying: Your behavior must be marked by a considerable departure from the usual or traditional. It should be different from one of the same categories that have existed previously. You must love one another like the Father loves me and I love you. Your love must be prodigal, unconditional, a no-respecter-of-persons kind of love.

### **Implications for Family Ministries**

I propose that the implications of these verses for Family Ministries are phenomenal. It is relatively easy to love people across the ocean, across the country or across town; much easier than to love people who sit across from me each day at the dinner table. I am talking about an effective ministry to the *and*.

But when we have strong and healthy marriages we are more likely to have strong and healthy families. In these kinds of families, the discipleship of children is more likely to

take place; faithful stewardship is more likely to be practiced; and a faithful witness is more likely to be experienced.

Yes, “This is how everyone will recognize that you are my disciples—when they see the love you have for each other” (John 13:35 *The Message*). May it be that the prayer of the little boy: “Dear God, help the bad people to be good. And help the good people to be nice” is never said about us in our families. May we be grace-oriented and filled with love in our marriages, in our parenting, in all our other family relationships, and relationships with our peers and people everywhere.

### **A Personal Illustration**

Jessica, our daughter—at that time a freshman in one of our Adventist colleges several hundred miles away from home—called me two days before I was to see her for “spring break” and stated: “Daddy, I don’t want you to be surprised when you see me. I’ve pierced my ears.” I was silent for a moment, took a deep breath and said: “Sweetheart, there isn’t anything you could do that would ever make me quit loving you. You know I believe that earrings won’t necessarily keep you from heaven. However, some people in the Adventist church may judge you because you are wearing them. You do have a responsibility to the community. Make sure you know why you have done what you have done. Go back and read your Bible, and be convinced in your own heart. Stay close to Jesus and study hard.”

Are we radical in our love? Are we truly discipling our children and others, and are we allowing them to grow up and develop their own relationship with Jesus? Is ours a prodigal love, genuinely concerned about the well-being of others? Or, are we simply interested in controlling people and keeping up appearances? And, are we only interested in certain assignments, working with certain people, feeling superior and on-top-of-the-world? Are we willing to teach people to fish, or are we simply content to provide them with fish every day?

### **The World’s a Better Place When Christians Love**

Leonard Sweet, a prominent seminary professor and scholar, tells the story of one of his students who was about to graduate and received an appointment by his Bishop to an insignificant parish somewhere in his denomination. The student considered his placement below his abilities and complained vociferously to one of his peers. The seminary professor overheard the conversation and was greatly captivated by the response given by the other student who said: “You know, the world’s a better place because Michelangelo didn’t say ‘I don’t do ceilings’.”

Sweet later expanded on the seminarian’s clever remark and wrote: “The world’s a better place because a German monk named Martin Luther did not say, ‘I don’t do doors.’” “The world’s a better place because an Oxford don named John Wesley didn’t say, ‘I don’t do preaching in fields.’” “The world’s a better place because Moses did not say, ‘I don’t do Pharaohs or mass migrations.’” “The world’s a better place because Noah didn’t say, ‘I don’t do arks and animals.’” “The world’s a better place because Samuel did not say, ‘I don’t do mornings.’” “The world’s a better place because David didn’t say, ‘I don’t do giants.’” “The world’s a better place because Peter did not say, ‘I don’t do Gentiles.’” “The world’s a better place because John didn’t say, ‘I don’t do deserts.’” “The world’s a better place because

Mary didn't say, 'I don't do virgin births.'" "The world's a better place because Paul didn't say, 'I don't do correspondence.'" "The world's a better place because Mary Magdalene didn't say, 'I don't do feet'" (Sweet, 1994).

I have added to Sweet's list: The world's a better place because Sojourner Truth didn't say, "I don't do speeches." The world's a better place because Nelson Mandela didn't say, "I don't do prisons." The world's a better place because Gandhi didn't say, "I don't do non-violence." The world's a better place because Martin King didn't say, "I don't do dreams." The world's a better place because Rosa Parks didn't say, "I don't do buses." The world's a better place because Mother Theresa didn't say, "I don't do poor people."

My brothers and sisters, this world will be a better place—in our homes, our marriages, our parenting of our children, in our places of employment, the church, our neighborhoods, and every human enterprise we are involved in—when we love one another. We will have an effective ministry to the *and* when as disciples of Christ we love extravagantly, generously, and lavishly. We will make a difference in our world, so that we will never have to use the words "we don't do . . ." regarding the love that God expects to be exemplified in our lives everyday.

Finally, let us never forget that the world's a better place—thank God—because a humble Galilean from Nazareth—Jesus Christ—didn't say, 'I don't do crosses.'" (Sweet, 1994).

The world will know that we are His disciples, not because we keep the Sabbath, pay tithes, don't dance, and don't eat cheese—although these are all admirable Christian practices—but because of our radical and prodigal love for others.

**John 15:9-12.** <sup>9</sup>I've loved you the way my Father has loved me. Make yourselves at home in my love. <sup>10</sup>If you keep my commands, you'll remain intimately at home in my love. That's what I've done—kept my Father's commands and made myself at home in his love. <sup>11</sup>I've told you these things for a purpose: that my joy might be your joy, and your joy wholly mature. <sup>12</sup>This is my command: Love one another the way I loved you. Put your lives on the line for your friends" (*The Message*).

**John 13:34, 35.** <sup>34</sup>Let me give you a new command: Love one another. In the same way I loved you, you love one another. <sup>35</sup>This is how everyone will recognize that you are my disciples—when they see the love you have for each other" (*The Message*).

May God bless us to this end is my prayer!

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Willie Oliver presented this devotional message at the General Conference Family Ministries World Advisory in Buckeystown, Maryland, March 2006. Used by permission.

# *The Love Experience*

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## **Program Overview**

**The Love Experience** is a creative potpourri of interactive marriage strengthening activities based on the 1 Corinthians 13 “love chapter.” It is designed to provide an organizing theme and program ideas for a marriage enrichment seminar or retreat. These activities may also be set up one by one in a quiet corner at church where couples can avail themselves of ideas and supplies for in-home marital growth. They can easily be adapted for a campmeeting or family camp setting as well.

### **Advance Preparation**

♥ **Atmosphere.** A warm, pleasant ambiance goes a long way in setting the mood for romance and marital growth. Choose a large, attractive room with plenty of space for couples to move about freely and find enough quiet space to reflect and enjoy one another apart from other participants. Set comfortable chairs in pairs around the edges (or perhaps in an adjoining space or out-of-doors) with adequate space between them where couples can sit and talk together. Relaxing music playing quietly in the background will also contribute to the atmosphere and increase couple privacy.

♥ **Activity stations.** This seminar is experiential, employing fourteen activity stations. Stations are labeled A–N. Instructions for the set-up of each station, along with a list of the materials needed for the couple activity are provided for each station. Instructions for couple activities are outlined in the handouts associated with each station. One copy *per couple* of the appropriate instructions should be placed at each station.

In the experience of the author, it works best to set up one table for each activity station. On the table, you will need to place the handouts that give instruction for each couple activity—enough for one per person or one per couple as indicated. You will also need to provide activity supplies as listed in sufficient quantity to allow everyone in attendance to participate. Throughout the seminar, the leaders will need to tidy up the stations from time to time to keep them attractive and replenish supplies.

In addition to placing the materials needed for the couple activities on the tables, it is important to make the stations look fun and inviting. This will encourage the couples to participate in the many opportunities to grow together. Coordinating tablecloths, flowers, candles, decorative gift boxes, copies of songs about love, books of love poetry, hearts, ribbon and other attractive accessories reflecting the love theme can all be used to make the stations attractive. Let your creativity flow freely!

♥ **Take-home bag.** Each couple will need an attractive bag or box in which to put the things they will collect at the various stations of *The Love Experience*. You will need to put two pencils or pens in each bag as many of the station activities involve writing.

### **Introducing *The Love Experience***

It is important to set the stage for *The Love Experience* by inviting the couples to enter with you into a time of quiet reflection and worship through a variety of couple activities built on 1 Corinthians 13.

♥ A few basic instructions are needed to keep the program running smoothly:

- Couples are invited to participate in the activities provided and to spend time together as a couple contemplating the meaning of each for their marriage. It is less important for the couples to complete all of the activities than it is for them to take the time to dialogue and reflect on the meaning of each activity for their relationships.

- Couples are free, of course, to skip activities that do not appeal to them.

- The stations are not sequential, so couples may move about as time and space allow.

♥ Introduction

- A nice way to set the stage for *The Love Experience* would be to show the video/DVD/PowerPoint presentation of *The Father's Love Letter*. Resources maybe downloaded from [www.fathersloveletter.com](http://www.fathersloveletter.com). As an alternative, Barry Adam's book *Father's Love Letter: An Intimate Message from God to You* (Camp Hill, PA: Christian Publications, Inc., 2003) could be read with a quiet musical accompaniment or given to each couple to read together with soft music playing in the background.

- Alternatively, 1 Corinthians 13 could be read or presented through an illustrated PowerPoint with a musical accompaniment.

- A short song service using songs about love could also provide a focusing activity at the beginning.

### **Concluding *The Love Experience***

As couples may not all finish *The Love Experience* at the same time, it may be helpful to provide simple refreshments in an adjoining room where couples can mingle and relax until the time has come to close the seminar together.

The Responsive Readings Nos. 712, 713 or 788 from the *Adventist Hymnal* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1985) can be used to close the seminar together. If you wish to plan a more elaborate closing, a couple communion service or an agape meal could provide a nice conclusion to the program.

## Activity Station Set-Up Instructions and Materials Lists

You will want to decorate each table attractively in keeping with the love theme. Some general ideas are provided in the Activity Stations section of the Program Overview and additional suggestions specific to each station are included here.

### Station A – 1 Corinthians 13:1

**Materials needed:**

- One copy per *couple* of Handout A-1.
- One copy per *person* of Handout A-2.

**Station setup:**

- Decorate the table attractively.
- Provide sufficient copies of Handouts A-1 and A-2 as listed above.

### Station B – 1 Corinthians 13:2

**Materials needed:**

- 4 gift boxes.
- Decorative wrapping and heart stickers or cutouts.
- Assorted packing materials.
- Heart-shaped pieces of paper with Bible texts about God's love printed on them.
- One copy per *couple* of Handout B-1.

**Station setup:**

- Decorate 4 gift boxes attractively with wrapping paper and heart stickers or cutouts of various colors and sizes. Number the boxes 1-4 on the top. Inside the box lids of all four boxes, write these instructions in large print: SEE WHAT YOU CAN FIND IN HERE.
  - Fill Boxes 1, 2 and 3 each with a different kind of packing material, i.e. shredded paper, tissue paper, torn newsprint, polystyrene pellets, etc. Put nothing else in these boxes.
  - Fill Box 4 with Bible texts about God's love printed on heart-shaped pieces of paper. Put multiple copies of each of the texts you decide to use and refill the box as needed throughout the program.
- Provide sufficient copies of Handout B-1 as listed above.

### Station C – 1 Corinthians 13:4, 7

**Materials needed:**

- Large hearts cut out of construction paper of different colors.
- A variety of relatively challenging puzzles or materials for alternative activities that require patience (a needle with a small eye and thread; instructions and rope for tying a complex knot; two spoons, a jar of dry beans, and a bowl with instructions to transfer 10 beans from jar to bowl without using your hands, etc.).

- One copy per *couple* of Handout C-1.

**Station setup:**

- Spread out the assorted large paper hearts randomly on the tabletop.
- Place one of your puzzles or materials/instructions for an alternative, patience-developing activity on each heart.
- Provide sufficient copies of Handout C-1 as listed above.

**Station D – 1 Corinthians 13:4a****Materials needed:**

- Flower petals.
- An attractive basket with a choice of hand creams that would appeal to both men and women.
- One copy per *couple* of Handout D-1.

**Station setup:**

- Scatter the flower petals around your basket of hand creams.
- Provide sufficient copies of Handout D-1 as listed above.

**Station E – 1 Corinthians 13:4b****Materials needed:**

- Large, attractive flat-bottomed dish.
- Coarse sea salt or brightly colored gravel (such as you might put in the bottom of an aquarium).
- A basket filled with enough tea lights for each participant to light one.
- Matches.
- One copy per *couple* of Handout E-1.

**Station setup:**

- Cover the bottom of your flat-bottomed dish with a layer of coarse sea salt or a coordinating color of gravel. In a basket alongside, place enough tea lights for each participant to light one. Alongside, place sufficient matches to light them and a small glass dish for used ones.
- Provide sufficient copies of Handout E-1 as listed above.

**Station F – 1 Corinthians 13:5a****Materials needed:**

- Bouquet of flowers or bowl of aromatic potpourri.
- Shallow dish or an assortment of small bottles of sweet smelling oil.
- Attractive basket filled with cotton balls.

- Bowl labeled “For Discarded Cotton Balls”.
- One copy per *couple* of Handout F-1.

**Station setup:**

- Arrange activity supplies attractively on the table.
- Provide sufficient copies of Handout F-1 as listed above.

**Station G – 1 Corinthians 13:5b****Materials needed:**

- Large paper cross.
- Assorted wrapped small gift boxes.
- Pads of brightly colored Post-It Notes or small squares of colored paper.
- Sheets of colored paper suitable for making symbolic love gifts.
- Several pairs of scissors.
- Glue.
- One copy per *couple* of Handout G-1.

**Station setup:**

- Create a large paper cross and hang it on the wall behind the station table.
- Arrange the small gift boxes as a centerpiece for the table.
- Provide pads of brightly colored Post-It Notes or small squares of colored paper and glue (Post-It Notes/paper squares will be attached to the cross as part of the couple activity). Sheets of colored paper and glue will also be needed for making symbolic love gifts.
- Provide sufficient copies of Handout G-1 as listed above.

**Station H – 1 Corinthians 13:5c****Materials needed:**

- Assorted colored sheets of construction paper sufficient for each couple to use three sheets.
- Several pairs of scissors.
- Glue.
- One copy per *couple* of Handout H-1.

**Station setup:**

- Create several samples of the woven mat described above and scatter them around the edges of the table.
- Arrange supplies for the couple activity attractively in the middle of the table.
- Provide sufficient copies of Handout H-1 as listed above.

**Station I – 1 Corinthians 13:5d****Materials needed:**

- Large cloth or burlap sack filled with small stones (sufficient for one stone per *person*).
- One copy per *couple* of Handout I-1.

**Station setup:**

- Place the large sack filled with stones in the center of the table.
- Provide sufficient copies of Handout I-1 as listed above.

**Station J – 1 Corinthians 13:6****Materials needed:**

- Pictures of as many of the couples in attendance as possible.
- Several copies of the *Adventist Hymnal*.
- Thank you cards.
- Envelopes.
- One copy per *couple* of Handout J-1.

**Station setup:**

- Place the couple pictures you have been able to collect in protective plastic sleeves and arrange them around the edge of the table with a trail of pretty ribbon linking them together.
- Provide the supplies for the couple activity and sufficient copies of Handout J-1 as listed above.

**Station K – 1 Corinthians 13:7a****Materials needed:**

- A display of protective items, i.e. rubber gloves, bandages, bubble wrap, an egg box, safety goggles, sunglasses, sunscreen, umbrella, whistle on a ring of keys for calling for help, a shield, a tent kit, etc.
- A large drawstring bag.
- One copy per *couple* of Handout K-1.

**Station setup:**

- Place the protective items in the bag and close the draw string.
- Provide sufficient copies of Handout K-1 as listed above.

**Station L – 1 Corinthians 13:7b****Materials needed:**

- The makings of a key ring for each *person*.

- short chains.
- large heart shaped tag cut out of heavy card stock with reinforced hole for chain to pass through.
- key shape cut out of cardboard with reinforced hole.
- Colored marker pens.
- Assorted valentine cards.
- One copy per *couple* of Handout L-1.

**Station setup:**

- Scatter the valentine cards around the tabletop.
- Place the makings of a key ring as listed above in several attractive baskets.
- Provide sufficient copies of Handout L-1 as listed above.

**Station M – 1 Corinthians 13:7c****Materials needed:**

- Assorted colored paper cut into large flower shapes.
- Envelopes sufficient for one per couple.
- A bouquet of fresh flowers with a card attached that reads “Hopes and Dreams,” or a bouquet of helium filled balloons with the words “Hopes and Dreams” written on them with a marker pen.
- One copy per *couple* of Handout M-1.

**Station setup:**

- Place the attractive bouquet of fresh flowers or balloons on the table with supplies for couple activity as indicated.
- Provide sufficient copies of Handout M-1 as listed above.

**Station N – 1 Corinthians 13:8****Materials needed:**

- Lengths of ¼ inch ribbon in assorted colors cut suitable for making a bookmark, enough for each *person* to have three lengths of different colors.
- Hearts cut out of colored card stock, approximately 1 inch in diameter.
- Glue.
- One copy per *couple* of Handout N-1.

**Station setup:**

- Make several samples of ribbon bookmarks as directed on the Handout N-1 and leave them on the table.
- Provide the supplies needed for couples to make a bookmark each for husband and wife.
- Provide sufficient copies of Handout N-1 as listed above.



***The Love Experience – 1 Corinthians 13:1***

**If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels,  
but have not love,  
I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal.  
and all my elegant words come back to me, empty and hollow.**

Love is a word that is often used in many contexts without much thought. We love ice-cream, we love our pets, we love to go to the lake. . . . But the biblical revelation that GOD IS LOVE and LOVE IS GOD fills this word love with so much meaning, it will take us an eternity to comprehend it.

God's love is all around you in His omnipresence.

It is in every breath you take, every beat of your heart  
because He is the source of your life, and His Spirit inspires you.

God loves you extravagantly.

Let His love cascade over you like a refreshing fountain.

Soak up this love that will not let you go  
until your heart is full to overflowing,  
and you feel you have more than enough to share with your Beloved.

♥ Take some time to meditate on God's love for you. In a few minutes of quiet reflection, look around you, inside yourself, into the eyes of your spouse, and back over your lifetime in your mind's eye. What evidence do you find there that God loves you extravagantly?

**Love has many meanings:**

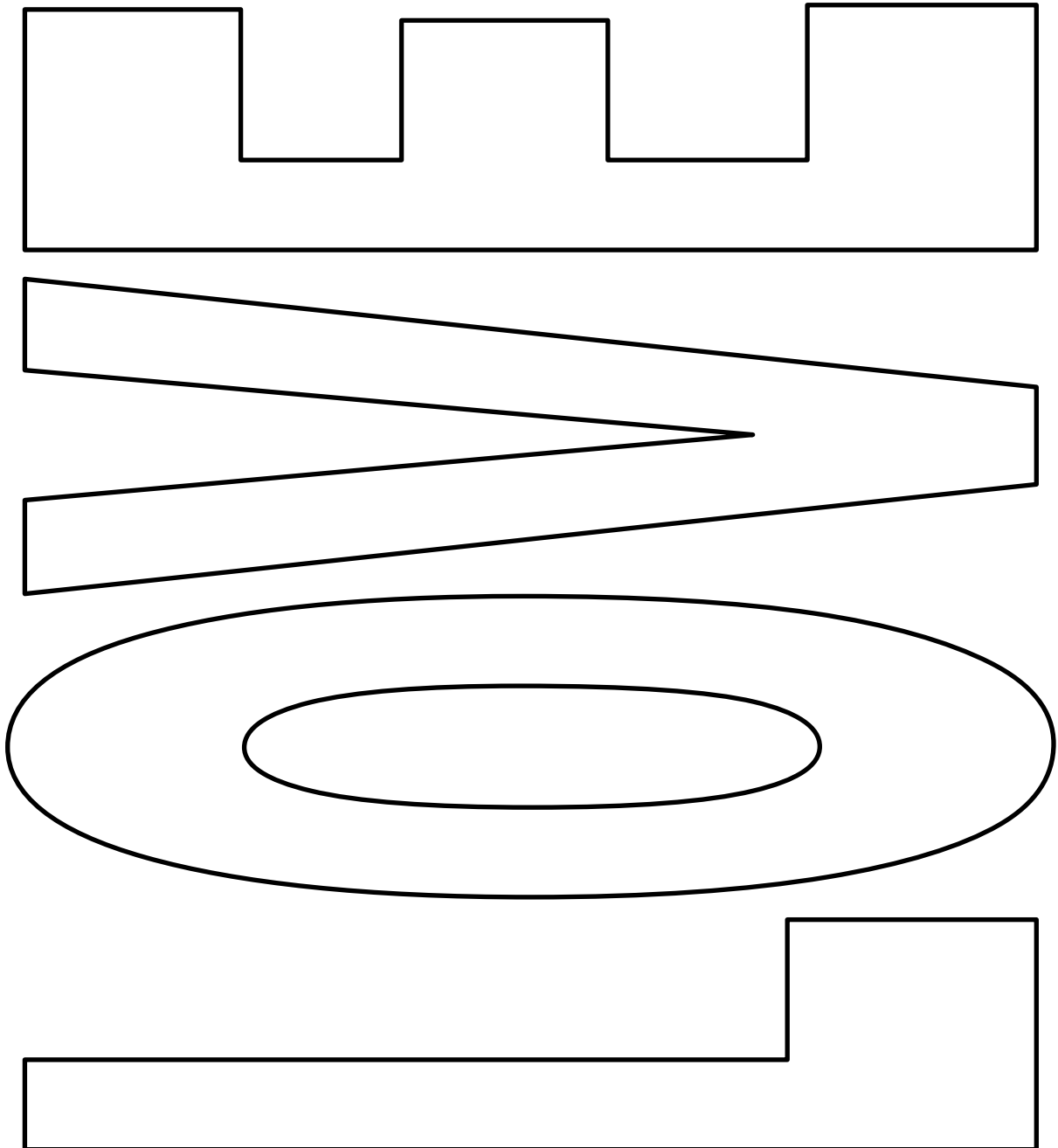
♥ Take your copy of Handout A-2 and write some of the new insights you have had into God's love inside the block letters L-O-V-E so it is no longer a hollow, empty word, but one filled with fresh new meaning.

**Something to think and talk about together:**

♥ When you are both ready, share with each other something you have just learned or experienced about God's love for you.

♥ In the space around the letters in Handout A-2, write some of the ways your Beloved has helped you experience God's love. Give this to your Beloved as a gift of gratitude.

***The Love Experience – “LOVE”***



***The Love Experience – 1 Corinthians 13:2***

**If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge,  
and if I have faith that can move mountains,  
but have not love, I am nothing,  
and all my brilliance is wasted,  
because I never took the time to care for others.**

**If I give all I possess to the poor,  
and surrender my body to the flames,  
but have not love, I gain nothing,  
and everything I have sacrificed has been just a shallow show.**

♥ God has put me here to share His love with hurting and lonely humanity.  
How can I be a channel of His amazing love to the significant people in my world?

**Genuine love is more important than anything else.**

- ♥ Look inside the boxes on the table, one at a time in order.
- ♥ Follow the instructions under each lid.

**Some things to think and talk about together:**

- ♥ What connection do you see between the boxes and 1 Corinthians 13:2?
- ♥ Which Bible verse speaks to me most of God's love? Choose a verse to give to your Beloved that you think will bless them in their experience right now.
- ♥ Ask yourself: What might be holding me back from a richer experience of God's love for me?
- ♥ What can I do to open myself more completely to God's love so I can be a better channel of His love to others?
- ♥ Finish this sentence and share it with your Beloved: One thing I would like to do today that I hope will make God's love more real in your life is . . .

## ***The Love Experience* – 1 Corinthians 13:4, 7**

### **Love is patient. . . . Love always perseveres.**

Love is patient.

It doesn't force its own time frames on other people, but gives them the space to develop and change as they mature and the Holy Spirit moves in their lives.

Love is patient.

It doesn't rush others and add stress to their lives, but understands that every person works comfortably at different rates.

Love is patient.

It forgives seventy-times seven, even when the other person repeatedly makes the same mistakes. Love let's go of retaliation and revenge, but it does not enable the abuse of loved ones.

Love is patient, even when someone takes a long time to respond to our love. Love keeps on trying, even when faced with enormous challenges.

Love always perseveres.

It keeps on working at the relationship, even when it would be so easy to give up.

♥ Take some time to reflect on the areas in your life where God has shown you His patience.

### **Love doesn't give up.**

♥ On the table are some activities that require patience for most people. Take a few minutes to give them a try.

### **Some things to think and talk about together:**

♥ What can these activities teach me about God's patience?

♥ How can an experience with God's patient love help me to be more long-suffering with you, my Beloved?

♥ Ways you have demonstrated great patience in our relationship . . .

♥ My thanks to you for continuing to love me when I have been a slow learner . . .

### ***The Love Experience – 1 Corinthians 13:4***

#### **Love is kind.**

It comforts the other person when they are hurting.

Love is kind.

It confronts gently, even when others do things that are hard to understand.

Love is kind.

It acts out of a desire to make the other person happy.

Kindness offers its gifts to another human being as if they were being offered to God, remembering that even a cup of water, given in love, is a gracious gift to Christ. Each act of kindness can be like a pure drop of God's love into a thirsty heart.

♥ How do you know from experience that God is kind? Think of specific instances when God has shown His kindness to you.

#### **Kindness is a healing balm for a Beloved yearning for love.**

♥ Decide which of you needs most to experience the healing balm of kindness today and who is in the best position to be the giver of this gift. Let the person needing this gift of love most choose a hand cream. As the giver, place a generous amount in the palm of your hand and sit down with your Beloved. Massage the cream gently into their hands.

#### **Some things to think and talk about together:**

♥ Notice that even as you rub the soothing cream into your Beloved's hands, your own hands are also comforted and the rough spots smoothed.

♥ How does this experience speak to you of the boomerang effect of kindnesses shown?

♥ Memories I have of times when your kindness to me has meant so much . . .

♥ Ways I would like to show my kindness to you as we continue our marriage journey together . . .

### ***The Love Experience – 1 Corinthians 13:4b***

#### **Love does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud.**

Love does not envy.

Real lovers celebrate giftedness in their Beloved.

Love does not boast.

Instead of putting self forward, love looks for ways to encourage others and to enable them to become all that they can be.

Love quietly gets on with whatever it takes to keep life running smoothly for others.

Love is not proud, but lovingly honors others and celebrates their successes.

♥ Envy, boastfulness and pride are at the core of the sinful human nature. Think of times when it has been difficult for you to celebrate the gifts of others. Pause to ask God to flood your heart with His agape love so that you will be able to feel secure enough to be able to empower others.

#### **Love builds others up.**

♥ Think of some of the character traits or gifts that make your spouse the special person that they are.

♥ Light a candle in honor of your Beloved. As you place it in the bowl, take this opportunity to affirm them for specific things that make them the person that you love. You may want to complete the sentence “I love you because . . .” many times over as your affirmation.

#### **Some things to think and talk about together:**

♥ Meditate together on the scene of Jesus washing His disciples’ feet at the Last Supper and His willingness to take on the role of a servant.

♥ Share with your Beloved times when they have “washed your feet” symbolically through service to you that you have really appreciated.

♥ Take this opportunity to affirm them for the many ways they give of themselves in service that often go unnoticed or unappreciated.

### ***The Love Experience – 1 Corinthians 13:5a***

#### **Love is not rude.**

Love shows respect for others, even when they have very different ways of doing things.

Love blesses; it does not put others down or shame them.

Love uses encouraging words that make others feel valued and cherished.

♥ What evidence do you see in Scripture that from Creation God has been absolutely bent on blessing humankind, no matter how many times and ways we turn away from Him?

#### **Love blesses and encourages.**

♥ Dip the cotton ball lightly in the oil and anoint the forehead of your Beloved as you pray a special blessing for them.

♥ If you are not sure what to say, adapt one of these blessings from Scripture:

May the Lord bless you and keep you;  
the Lord make his face to shine upon you and be gracious to you;  
the Lord turn his face towards you and give you peace.  
Amen. (Numbers 6:25)

May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God,  
and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you, now and always.  
Amen (2 Corinthians 13:14)

May God himself, the God of peace, sanctify you through and through.  
May your whole spirit, soul and body  
be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.  
Amen (1 Thessalonians 5:23)

#### **Some things to think and talk about together:**

- ♥ Tell your Beloved the ways in which they have been a blessing from God in your life.
- ♥ How have you grown and what have you been able to become because of your Beloved's encouragement?
- ♥ Things you could do that would make me feel valued and cherished . . .

## ***The Love Experience – 1 Corinthians 13:5b***

### **Love is not self-seeking.**

Love can put aside its own needs for awhile in order to freely meet the needs of others.

Love looks for ways to make the other person happy, even though it may involve personal sacrifice.

Love is willing to give up cherished plans and ideas for the one it loves.

♥ Reflect on the personal sacrifices Jesus was willing to make when He willingly agreed to become one-flesh with you and move into your neighborhood.

### **Love sacrifices.**

♥ Both husband and wife choose one of the colored Post-It Notes or squares of colored paper. Write a note of thanks to Jesus for the sacrifices He has made for you. Stick/glue it on the large cross on the wall behind the activity station in gratitude for His incredible gifts of love.

♥ Think of a gift you would really like to give your spouse if you had no limits on your time, energy, abilities, finances, etc. Take one of the larger pieces of colored construction paper and tear/fold/cut it to create a symbolic representation of the gift you would like to give. Think about giving a relational gift.

♥ Present your gift to your spouse with a kiss.

♥ Are there things you could do today to make this gift a reality?

### **Some things to think and talk about together:**

♥ Recite John 3:16 to one another. When it is your turn, insert the name of your Beloved in the blanks: “For God so loved \_\_\_\_\_ that He gave His one and only Son that if \_\_\_\_\_ believes in Him, he/she should not perish, but have eternal life.”

♥ If God loves you and your Beloved this much, how can you live out His love for you in your marriage?



### ***The Love Experience – 1 Corinthians 13:5c***

#### **Love is not easily angered.**

Love calmly looks for peaceful solutions.

When something irritates, love looks for acceptable alternatives.

Love holds its own ideas loosely and keeps its mind open to receive others' perspectives.

Love sees others through lenses of generosity.

When anger flares, love looks beneath the surface for the feelings and conditions that fuel anger as a secondary emotion—things like hurt, the disappointment, fatigue, a sense of inadequacy, fear of rejection. . . .

Love looks for ways to help others feel less vulnerable.

Perfect love dissolves fear.

Love does not run from conflict, but seeks resolution in ways that make everyone feel like a winner.

♥ What do you make of Paul's counsel "In your anger do not sin. Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry?" What changes would you need to make if you were to take this counsel to heart at a deeper level than ever before?

#### **Love hears all sides and seeks cooperative solutions.**

♥ Husband and wife each choose a different colored sheet of construction paper.

♥ Read the entire set of directions below before beginning your project:

- Use the scissors provided to cut the sheets of paper into 1 cm. wide strips, but stop cutting about 1 cm. short of the edge of the paper. Strips will thus remain attached to one another on one end.

- Husbands should cut their strips parallel to the short side of the paper. Wives should cut parallel to the long side of the paper.

- Weave the two sheets of paper together by passing the strips from one of your pieces of paper over and under the strips from the other's piece of paper. See the sample provided or ask one of the seminar leaders for help if the directions are not clear.

- When you have finished weaving your strips together, glue your entire creation onto a solid sheet of paper to preserve your weaving.

Handout H-1 *The Love Experience – 1 Corinthians 13:5c*, p. 1.

- Take your creation with you as a reminder of the satisfaction you feel when together you do something that neither of you could have done alone.

**Some things to think and talk about together:**

♥ How does reflecting on God's love for both myself and my Beloved affect my response when we are in conflict?

♥ Look at your woven creation. Notice how the pattern you created represents both the way you contrast and the way you complement one another. Notice how much stronger your finished mat is than either of your separate sheets of paper alone. Though the process of working cooperatively together may not always be smooth and easy, in the end it produces the most satisfying results. Think of some times in your marriage journey when you have experienced this kind of collaboration in resolving a real-life problem.

### ***The Love Experience – 1 Corinthians 13:5d***

#### **Love keeps no record of wrongs.**

Love does not maintain a file of offenses because it knows that such files have a way of growing into something bigger than the original wrongdoing.

Love knows that the walls we choose to build between ourselves and others when we have been hurt often create the greatest barriers to closeness in relationships.

Love wants to believe the best about the other person and recognizes how easy it is to misinterpret actions and motives.

Love lets go of resentment and the human desire to retaliate to make way for forgiveness and new beginnings.

- ♥ What do you know about love because you know the Great Forgiver?

#### **Love forgives.**

- ♥ Find a quiet spot to reflect on the meaning of a fable told by Lewis Smedes in his classic book *Forgive and Forget* (New York: Harper & Row, 1984).

- ♥ Both husband and wife take a stone with you from the large bag on the table.

There was a man living in the village of Faken by the name of Fouke. Fouke was a tall, thin, angular man who “seemed to spray righteousness from his thin lips over everyone who came near him; so the people of Faken preferred to stay away” (p. xiii).

In stark contrast to her husband, Fouke’s wife Hilda was short and fat and round. She loved people and her love drew them to her. She certainly respected her husband for his righteous living, and she loved him too. But he kept her at arm’s length and denied her the intimacy for which her heart yearned.

Another man, drawn to Hilda’s winsome ways, offered her love. And one day, Fouke came home to find the two of them in bed in one another’s arms.

Many thought Fouke would divorce Hilda, so righteous was he. He surprised them all and kept her as his wife, “saying he forgave her as the Good Book said he should.” But in reality, he hated her more every day for betraying him and tarnishing his reputation in the village.

As the fable goes, “Fouke’s fakery did not sit well in heaven” (p. xiv). So every time Fouke nursed his hatred toward his wife, God sent an angel to drop a pebble into Fouke’s heart. Fouke felt a stab of pain as each pebble fell, and the pain made him hate Hilda even

more. One by one the pebbles multiplied, causing Fouke to be bent over from the sheer weight of them.

Finally, God in His mercy sent an angel to offer Fouke healing from the terrible pain that now drew all the joy from his life. The only cure for a wounded heart, the angel told him, was to receive the “miracle of the magic eyes” (p. xiv).

Fouke was not sure he wanted to be cured. His wife had been unfaithful to him and that fact would remain forever. The angel agreed, but offered a word of hope: “You cannot change the past, you can only heal the hurt that comes to you from the past” (p. xiv). But to be healed, Fouke would have to ask for the magic eyes.

At first Fouke fought the idea. He had come to rather enjoy nursing his hatred. But one day when the pain was great, Fouke asked for the miracle and the angel gave him the magic eyes.

And somehow, as the days passed and Fouke looked at Hilda through his new eyes, he saw his wife as he had never seen her before. It was a truly wonderful and amazing transformation. He saw her for the first time as others saw her and felt mysteriously drawn to her. In time, she was no longer the woman who had wounded him, but rather a beautiful woman with a heart yearning for love. And even as Hilda was transformed before his eyes, his own features began to lose their sharp angles and he felt his back begin to straighten. At last, Fouke “invited Hilda to come into his heart again, and she came, and together they began again a journey into their second season of humble joy” (p. xv).

### **Some things to think and talk about together:**

♥ Talk together about times when you have been able to offer one another forgiveness and new beginnings.

♥ What “stones” might you still be carrying in your heart that you would like to be released from today?

♥ Offer your stone to your Beloved as a symbol of your desire to erase any record of wrongs you have been keeping and to enter with them into a new “season of humble joy.”

### ***The Love Experience – 1 Corinthians 13:6***

#### **Love does not delight in evil but rejoices in the truth.**

Love keeps on looking for good in everyone.

Love is generous with appreciation and finds sincere and genuine ways to show gratitude.

Love explores each moment, hoping to discover things to celebrate together.

♥ If you were to pick a hymn of praise to be “your song” of gratitude to God for His goodness to you, which would you choose? Share your selection with your Beloved.

#### **Love sings a new song!**

♥ Think of some things about your Beloved that make you want to sing their praises. You may not be a poet, but think about how you could personalize for your Beloved the celebration of Solomon (Song of Solomon 4:9-15) and Shulamith (Song of Solomon 5:10-16) for one another. Take a few minutes to write down your celebration of your Beloved and share it with them. If circumstances permit, you may like to go outside for a walk as you share.

Solomon:      How beautiful you are, my darling!  
                    Oh, how beautiful!  
                    Your eyes behind your veil are doves.  
                    Your hair is like a flock of goats  
                                    descending from Mount Gilead.  
                    Your teeth are like a flock of sheep just shorn,  
                                    coming up from the washing. . . .  
                    Your lips are like a scarlet ribbon;  
                                    your mouth is lovely.  
                    Your temples behind your veil  
                                    are like the halves of a pomegranate.  
                    Your neck is like the tower of David,  
                                    built with elegance; . . .  
                    Your two breasts are like two fawns,  
                                    like twin fawns of a gazelle that browse among the lilies.  
                    Until the day breaks  
                                    and the shadows flee,  
                    I will go to the mountain of myrrh  
                                    and to the hill of incense.  
                    All beautiful you are, my darling;  
                                    there is no flaw in you.

Shulamith: My lover is radiant and ruddy,  
                  outstanding among ten thousand.  
His head is purest gold;  
                  his hair is wavy and black as a raven.  
His eyes are like doves  
                  by the water streams, washed in milk, mounted like jewels.  
His cheeks are like beds of spice  
                  yielding perfume.  
His lips are like lilies  
                  dripping with myrrh.  
His arms are rods of gold  
                  set with chrysolite.  
His body is like polished ivory  
                  decorated with sapphires.  
His legs are pillars of marble  
                  set on bases of pure gold.  
His appearance is like Lebanon,  
                  choice as its cedars.  
His mouth is sweetness itself;  
                  he is altogether lovely.  
This is my lover, this is my friend.

**Some things to think and talk about together:**

♥ What does it feel like to know that God knows all about you and still rejoices in the truth about you?

♥ What would you most like to celebrate about God's love for you?

♥ Write a thank you note to your Beloved for the ways in which they have made God's love and acceptance of you seem real. Take it home with you and present it to your Beloved when they least expect it.

### ***The Love Experience – 1 Corinthians 13:7a***

#### **Love always protects.**

Love places a high priority on safety and security in relationships.

Love recognizes every person as God's child and treats them with the dignity and respect befitting their royal status.

Love safeguards the physical, emotional and spiritual well-being of all.

Love guards against abuse and violence, taking special care to protect the vulnerable.

Love provides safe haven where all can be discipled for Jesus Christ and become the persons that God intends them to be for His service and glory.

♥ How has God been your Protector, your Refuge, your Shelter, your Shield?

#### **Love watches over all entrusted to its care.**

♥ Take turns pulling items out of the drawstring bag on the table. How do all of the items in the bag offer protection in some way?

♥ How do they remind you of God's protection throughout your marriage?

♥ What different dimensions of our responsibility to protect one another does each represent?

#### **Some things to think and talk about together:**

♥ Times I have appreciated your protection of me . . .

♥ Times when I feel especially vulnerable and in need of protection . . .

♥ More ways I would like to offer you safe haven in my love . . .

### ***The Love Experience – 1 Corinthians 13:7b***

#### **Love always trusts.**

Loves risks believing the best about your Beloved.

Because human nature can offer only conditional love, love returns daily to drink deeply from the well of God’s love for the grace to love without condition.

Loves pours its energy into creating intimacy with one’s Beloved, refusing to be drawn away by other allures.

Love earns trust by being trustworthy and faithful.

Love keeps covenant—in prosperity and adversity, in sickness and in health—as long as life lasts.

♥ How can you affirm from your own life journey that God is a faithful marriage partner who has betrothed His people to Himself forever in love and compassion? (See Hosea 1:19.)

#### **Love keeps its promises.**

♥ Make a key ring for your Beloved using the supplies provided. On the “key” you may wish to write an inscription such as “Key to Joseph’s Heart.”

♥ Complete the sentence “My heart safely trusts in you because . . .” and write it on the tag. Present your gift to your Beloved with a kiss.

#### **Things to think and talk about together:**

♥ What are some of the most important promises that significant people in your life have kept for you?

♥ What are your favorite promises of God? How do you know you can trust Him to keep them?

♥ What promises would you like to make to your Beloved today? How are they the same or different from the ones you made on your wedding day?

♥ Take this opportunity to renew your promises to each other before God, and ask Him to help you keep them.



### ***The Love Experience – 1 Corinthians 13:7c***

#### **Love always hopes.**

Love hopes because with God there is always a future.

Love looks beyond the present to see what God wants to do with our relationship. Love seizes every opportunity to grow in grace together and to find new ways to experience God's love through our love.

Love is quick to see potential in a person. Love supports one's Beloved in their stretch toward maturity and wisdom.

♥ What does it mean to me personally to know that with God there is always hope, always a future, always opportunity to grow toward maturity and wisdom?

#### **Love dreams generously.**

♥ This is a time to think about your dreams as a couple and about what you think God's dreams are for you. What dreams do you have individually and together that you might cooperate with God to make a reality in the next year? Take time to think individually as husband and wife, and then share together.

♥ Write your dream plans on three of the flower-shaped pieces of paper:

- Dreams you wish to make a reality for the wife . . .
- Dreams you wish to make a reality for the husband . . .
- Dreams you wish to stretch for together in your relationship . . .

♥ Place your "flowers" in the envelope provided and seal the flap. Write "Our Hopes and Dreams" on the front, along with today's date.

♥ Pray together, asking God to help you stretch toward His dreams for you and your dreams for your personal development as well as for the growth of your marriage.

♥ Make a plan to open your envelope a year from now to celebrate the blossoming of hopes and dreams that God has helped you grow toward together.

#### **Some things to think and talk about together:**

♥ What was this experience like for us?

♥ Is this something we might like to do every year on our wedding anniversary?

## ***The Love Experience – 1 Corinthians 13:8***

### **Love never fails.**

Alone we are vulnerable. As a couple we are stronger. With God, our love is “as strong as death. . . . It burns like blazing fire, like a mighty flame. Many waters cannot quench [our] love; rivers cannot wash it away” (Song of Solomon 8:6-7). “A cord of three strands is not quickly broken” (Ecc. 4:12).

Let us bind ourselves together with God.

♥ In what new way would I like to experience being bound together with my Beloved and God?

### **Love strengthens.**

♥ Both husband and wife choose a piece of colored ribbon to represent themselves in the marriage relationship. Together choose a third color to represent God’s love and presence in your marriage.

♥ Observe how strength is added when two ribbons are twisted together, yet how easily they untwist from one another.

♥ Add the third strand by braiding (plaiting) three ribbons together. Note how much stronger three is than one or two.

♥ Create a bookmark for each of you by braiding three ribbons together and securing them at each end by putting glue on two of the paper hearts provided and sandwiching the ribbons in between.

### **Things to think and talk about together:**

♥ How does your understanding of God’s love strengthen your love for one another?

♥ When braiding your cord, each ribbon has to remain pliable to accommodate the others. How is this true in your relationship with God and with each other?

♥ In what new ways would you as a couple like to experience being bound together with God? Take this opportunity to receive God anew into your marriage and to ask Him to bind you together even as He draws you to Himself.

# *Called to Prodigal Parenthood:*

## *Reflections for Parents on the Parable of the Lost Son*

by Karen and Ron Flowers

The following may be used as a resource in developing a seminar for parents or a parent discussion group. It may also be distributed to parents for personal and couple reflection.

The reflections are based on Jesus' familiar story of the lost son recorded in the Gospel of Luke. Henri J. M. Nouwen's personal thoughts on this story, written in his book *The Return of the Prodigal Son* (Doubleday, 1992)\*, stimulated many of the questions posed in this seminar. Nouwen's book has been translated into a number of languages and is widely available internationally in Christian bookstores and from Internet book distributors. We highly recommend it as a supplementary resource. The seven reflections are:

- "A Tale of Two Prodigals"
- "Leaving Home"
- "Letting Go"
- "Return of a Prodigal"
- "The Welcoming Father"
- "The Elder Son"
- "The Party: A Hallmark of Grace"

Each reflection includes a number of activities for personal and group consideration.

As a visual aid, you may also wish to obtain a print of Rembrandt's famous painting "The Return of the Prodigal Son." You can order a print of this masterpiece from an online Internet source such as <http://www.allposters.com>. Public libraries may have books of paintings by Rembrandt available for loan. The painting may also be downloaded from <http://www.adventistfamilyministries.org/world>, the GC Department of Family Ministries website. Because this work of art is now in the public domain, there will be no infringement on copyright law if you wish to make a copy for each participant.

### **A Tale of Two Prodigals**

The parable of the prodigal son contains all one ever needs to know about God and His love affair with humankind. After gazing long at Rembrandt's portrayal of the parable in oils, Henri Nouwen reflected in his book *The Return of the Prodigal Son*:

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\*Quotations from Henri Neuwen are from THE RETURN OF THE PRODIGAL SON by Henri Neuwen, copyright © 1992 by Henri J. M. Neuwen. Used by permission of Doubleday, a division of Random House, Inc.

I came to see [the painting] as . . . not only the heart of the story that God wants to tell me, but also the heart of the story that I want to tell to God and God's people. All of the Gospel is there. All of my life is there. All of the lives of my friends is [*sic*] there. The painting has become a mysterious window through which I can step into the Kingdom of God (Nouwen, 1992, p. 15).

### Reflection Activities

• **Dramatize the story** recorded in Luke 15:1-3, 11b-31 by enacting it as a drama or by reading it aloud with readers taking the parts of the narrator and the various characters. You may wish to use a modern version to pick up the dialogue in the language of today.

• **Reflect on the context and setting of the story** as carefully recorded by Luke. Large crowds followed Jesus wherever He went (14:25). On this particular occasion, Luke specifically mentions that tax collectors and other “sinners” pressed in close to hear Him (15:1). Seeing how Jesus received these outcasts, the Pharisees and the teachers of the law began to mutter again about Jesus’ persistent and unbecoming habit of welcoming sinners, even eating with them (15:2)!

- What connection do you see between the immediate setting and the story Jesus told?
- How does the parable of the lost son provide an arresting response to the Pharisees accusations?
- What good news do you think Jesus was trying to get through to the Pharisees?
- Why do Pharisee-types especially need the good news of the Father’s unconditional love, abundant forgiveness, spontaneous joy and exuberant celebration at the return home of one lost child?

• **Study the word “prodigal.”** Although the Bible does not use this term, it has become common to refer to Jesus’ parable as “the prodigal son.” Look up “prodigal” in the dictionary.

- How does this word that connotes “profuse expenditure” appropriately describe the lost son?
- How does this same word also describe the compassionate father?
- How does this word describe Heavenly Father?
- In what sense is the parable Jesus told a “tale of two prodigals”—a prodigal son and a prodigal father/Heavenly Father?

• **Ponder the painting.** If you have a print of Rembrandt’s painting, look carefully at each character in the artist’s portrayal of the parable.

- Do you see yourself mirrored in any of these portraits?
- Whether or not you have the painting to look at, ask yourself, Do I see myself as a modern-day participant in the story, or am I just an observer [like the two women and the seated man in Rembrandt’s painting]?

- Why do you think some people choose to remain observers rather than entering into the story as modern-day participants?
- Can a person fully experience the good news of Jesus' story as a mere observer?
- With which character in the story do you most closely identify? The bedraggled, returning son? The indignant older brother? The compassionate father? Are there ways in which you have at different times identified with all three? What is the good news in this story for each of these participants?

### Leaving Home

Only when I have the courage to explore in depth what it means to leave home, can I come to a true understanding of the return (Nouwen, 1992, pp. 34, 35).

#### Reflection Activities

- **Re-enact scenes from the parable.** You may wish to bring the actors from your drama back on stage to call further attention to significant lines as part of the reflection activities suggested in this resource. You might reenact the scene (with perhaps the entire family as witnesses) around the son's shattering one-liner: "Father, give me my share of the estate," and the narrator's matter-of-fact report: "So he divided his property between them" (15:2). It might be very effective to have the various actors "freeze" the action on stage at this point in the drama, allowing for a minute or two of silent reflection before opening discussion.

- **Reflect on the phrase "my share."** Luke's terse report of the younger son's demand which sets this drama in motion—"Father, give me my share of the estate" (15:12a)—may need more explanation for modern hearers than it did for the crowd listening to Jesus. This was not the request of an impetuous youth, eager to see the world and find his place in it. Eugene Peterson's language from *The Message Bible* brings us closer to understanding what was really happening here: "Father, I want right now what's coming to me." In the cultural milieu of the time, parents had the unequivocal right to live off the income from their estate until death. The son's request was tantamount to saying to his father, "I wish you were dead."

At this point you may wish to call actors into action again, reenacting the same scene from the drama, but this time highlighting the real meaning of the scene by adapting the son's lines in a monologue like the following to convey the full measure of his disrespect and rejection:

"Father, I wish you were dead! But I can't wait around for you to keel over. Stop right there. I don't even want to hear a word about how you've worked all your life to provide for us and for yourselves in retirement. How you take care of yourself and the old woman is your problem. Maybe you can talk my brother here into pushing the two of you around and cleaning up your messes since you think he's so perfect. He'll never have the wit to leave this hole and make anything of himself anyway. But as

for me, I am the rightful heir to half of this estate, and I want what is coming to me right now!”

Henri Nouwen (1992) reflects on this scene in these words:

The son’s “leaving” is . . . a much more offensive act than it seems at first reading. It is a heartless rejection of the home in which the son was born and nurtured and a break with the most precious tradition carefully upheld by the larger community of which he was a part. . . . [It is] a drastic cutting loose from the way of living, thinking, and acting that has been handed down to him from generation to generation as a sacred legacy. More than disrespect, it is a betrayal of the treasured values of family and community. The “distant country” is the world in which everything considered holy at home is disregarded (p. 36).

• **Reflect on the “leaving” scene.**

- What are the feelings that grip a parent when a child “leaves for a far country”?
- What is the natural human response?
- How do you think the response of the prodigal father begins to pave the way for his son’s return from the very beginning?
- In what sense have all human beings, even professed Christians, “left home”?
- How do you react to Nouwen’s insight: “I leave home every time I lose faith in that voice that calls me the Beloved and follow the voices that offer a great variety of ways to win the love I so much desire” (p. 40).

• **Contemplate the Father who has embraced humanity and who waits to embrace us personally.** On the night Jesus was born, the heavens were ablaze with angels announcing the good news of His birth: “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to humankind on whom his favor rests” (Luke 2:14). In the person of the Babe born in Bethlehem, “shalom”—wholeness—has been restored to the universe; heaven and earth are reconciled; God’s favor rests on humankind.

Because Jesus is our Representative, God again embraced humanity in His declaration at the Jordan: “You are my Beloved, on you my favor rests.” On that day, God announced to every human being who ever lived, with all the pride of a Father and in the hearing of the universe, “You are my Son, chosen and marked by my love; delight of my life” (Matthew 2:17, *The Message*; cf. E. G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, p. 113).

- Why is it so hard sometimes to hear God’s voice calling us Beloved?
- What draws us so easily into a frenzy of competition and striving to prove we are worthy of the love and acceptance our hearts crave?
- How does the world’s criteria for determining human worth—using measures such as beauty, intelligence, wealth and performance—work against our acceptance of God’s declaration of our worth by virtue of the value He has bestowed on us as our Creator and Redeemer (cf. Isaiah 43:1-7)?

- How can we better convey the good news to our children that all the love, acceptance and freedom to “become” that they are looking for is waiting for them at “home”?

### Letting Go

There are two lasting gifts we can give to our children—roots and wings.  
- Anonymous

#### Reflection Activities

- **Share your satisfaction as a parent.** In what sense is it the task of parenthood to “work ourselves out of a job” as our children grow toward to maturity? Share some of the great moments of satisfaction you have experienced as a parent—times when you know you have done a good job at giving your child a secure sense of belonging. Times when you feel good about the way you have encouraged them to try new things, affirmed their abilities or allowed them to develop their own preferences and explore new pathways different from your own. What makes giving your child “wings” both wonderfully rewarding and scary at the same time?

- **“The Hardest Part of Love.”** In the musical *Children of Eden*, Steven Schwartz’s song “The Hardest Part of Love”\* is sung as a poignant duet between God and Adam who have both lost sons to a “far country.” Reflect on these words from Schwartz’s song from the vantage point of Heavenly Father, Adam and yourself as parents sharing a common experience:

Oh, this son of mine I love so well, and oh, the toll it takes.  
I would give to him a garden and keep it clear of snakes.  
But the one thing he most treasures is to make his own mistakes.  
Oh . . .

He goes charging up the cliffs of life, a reckless mountaineer.  
I could help him not to stumble, I could warn him what to fear.  
I could shout until I’m breathless, and he’d still refuse to hear.  
Oh . . .

But you cannot close the acorn once the oak begins to grow,  
And you cannot close your heart to what it fears and needs to know:  
That the hardest part of love is letting go. . . .

And the rarest part of love . . . and the truest part of love . . . is letting go.

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\*Lyrics from ‘The Hardest Part of Love’ from the musical play *Children of Eden*, written by Stephen Schwartz, ©1991 by Grey Dog Music, reprinted with permission.

• **Read the following quotation and reflect on the parental task of “letting go”:**

Especially in need of the divine Shepherd’s care are parents who have invested heavily in their children, only to have them reject the values they hold dear. Our heavenly Parent knows all about this experience. As He looked across the valley at the city that personified children dear to His heart, He wept. He experienced all the emotions parents feel when children ignore counsel, behave in disappointing ways, and turn their backs on home. . . . But God places such a high value on human freedom that even when children’s choices set them on a path away from Him, He respects their decision. Meanwhile, He sustains parents whose tears and heartache intermingle with His own as they reluctantly respect their children’s decisions too. He will guide those parents in knowing whether or how to seek after a wayward son or daughter—when to go like the shepherd in search of a lost sheep, and when to wait patiently at the gate with the father of the prodigal (Flowers, 2005, p. 45).

- Why is human freedom so important to God?
- Why is “letting go” so necessary in the development of children, yet so hard for parents?
- What evidence do we have in Scripture that letting go is hard for God too? (See Hosea 11; Matt. 23:37 for starters.)

• **Ponder Rembrandt’s painting again.** Giving your child “wings” always carries with it an element of risk. There are no guarantees in Christian parenting.

- How does the father’s face in Rembrandt’s painting reflect the effects of the anxiety and pain a parent feels when a youth—at least for a season—appears to reject parental values and heads off on a risky path that leads away from home?
- How can parents help each other to manage the natural anxiety that arises during these seasons, making it possible for us to maintain connections with our children and give them appropriate space to develop as persons with an identity apart from ourselves?
- How can it be that allowing our children to become their own persons, and even to make mistakes, may in the end be part of creating the best likelihood that they will return “home” to family and faith?

### **Return of a Prodigal**

Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired men.

– The Prodigal Son in Luke 15

• **Meaning in a missing clause.** With the publication of Robert Alter’s book *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, biblical scholars developed a new interest in the stories of the Bible as a primary means of conveying important theological truth. Alter brought a new awareness of



various literary techniques that had been carefully developed by the Bible writers for their unique purpose of conveying the story of God's love to humankind.

Dialogue is the primary means through which the Bible writers tell stories. They put words in the mouths of the characters to reveal their character traits, to unfold their interactions with others, to expose the motives behind their actions and to highlight the spiritual lessons the particular narrative is meant to convey. For example, the repetition of detail by a Bible writer is now understood to be purposeful rather than a mark of primitive writing skills. Such repetition signals the reader that this detail is important to understanding the message that the writer is trying to communicate, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit.

Another literary technique used by Bible writers is a deliberate variation or change in the way a character's lines are repeated by the narrator or reported by another character. Sometimes the speaker will leave out something or change what he has said when repeating himself on another occasion. *Any change in dialogue, however slight, is also a signal to the reader to pay close attention.* It is not likely, Alter contends, that these are mistakes or indicators of poor storytelling. These shifts in language and detail are deliberate on the part of the Bible writer. *Readers can be quite sure that a significant piece of the intended message is likely to be lurking in and around this change.*

One such shift in dialogue occurs in the story of the prodigal son. The change occurs between the speech that the prodigal practices for delivery when he meets his father and the speech he actually delivers when he arrives home. In Luke 15:17, the gospel writer records the practiced speech:

*When he came to his senses, he said, "How many of my father's hired men have food to spare, and here I am starving to death! I will set out and go back to my father and say to him: Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired men."*

In vs. 21, we find the actual speech delivered:

*The son said to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son."*

The omission is obvious. The son never delivers the part of his speech about his father making him like one of the hired help. If, as Alter suggests, this omission is not a mistake on the part of the writer, what message is it that Jesus and Luke want to make sure we readers do not miss? What is the essential spiritual truth that is highlighted by this omission?

When the prodigal practiced his speech, he knew what he had done. He knew what he deserved. But he believed his father would listen to him only if he duly repented and offered to work for him like a slave for the rest of his days. He knew an apology and a willingness to submit to hard labor was not enough to restore him to sonship, but it was the best he could offer in repayment for all that he had done. Perhaps his father would take pity on him and spare his life.

• **Rejoice in the good news.** If we miss the omission, we may conclude that the prodigal was right in his reasoning. The father is indeed benevolent, but there is a price to be paid. However, there is good news—incredible good news—in this story that this omission is deliberately meant to underscore. The good news is introduced in vs. 20:

*But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him.*

In this moment, the good news of the father's grace soaked through to the core of the prodigal's being. You don't have to clean yourself up or make yourself respectable to come home! The omission in vs. 21 is the writer's way of putting this good news in large print, to bring the message home for all who have eyes to see.

Robert Capon in his book *Parables of Grace* puts it simply:

We are not forgiven . . . because we made ourselves forgivable or even because we had faith; we are forgiven solely because there is a Forgiver. . . . We may be as unable, as the prodigal was, to believe it until we finally see it; but the God who does it, like the father who forgave the prodigal, never once had anything else in mind" (Capon, 1988, pp. 140, 141).

The missing piece in the prodigal's speech stands as a timeless reminder that with Heavenly Father, there are no intermediate steps between forgiveness and celebration. Luke repeated Jesus' story just the way he did to make sure this news gets through. Ask yourself: What difference has this good news made in my life? In my relationship with my spouse and children?

• **Reflect on the prodigal's journey home.** Henri Nouwen knows the difficulty of the prodigal's journey, a journey common to all who turn their hearts toward home:

Although claiming my true identity as a child of God, I still live as though the God to whom I am returning demands an explanation. I still think about his love as conditional and about home as a place I am not yet fully sure of. While walking home, I keep entertaining doubts about whether I will be truly welcome when I get there. As I look at my spiritual journey, my long and fatiguing trip home, I see how full it is of guilt about the past and worries about the future. I realize my failures and know that I have lost the dignity of my sonship, but I am not yet able to fully believe that where my failings are great, "grace is always greater". . . . One of the greatest challenges of the spiritual life is to receive God's forgiveness (pp. 52, 53).

- What makes it so hard to receive God's gift of grace, to allow Him to cast all our sins into the depths of the sea and give us a new beginning?
- How would you describe the feelings of the lost son as it breaks over him that the scenarios he has devised to make himself acceptable are pure craziness and as he gives himself over completely to the father's compassion and forgiveness?
- Imagine yourself falling into Heavenly Father's arms. Feel his strong arms holding you tight, even as He calls for the party to begin. Imagine yourself resting so

fully in God's love and grace that the new creature God has declared you to be in Christ could actually emerge?

- Why is it necessary to become the returning lost son, and to give yourself over completely to the embrace of Heavenly Father, before it is possible to become the welcoming parent yourself?

### **The Welcoming Father**

The son started his speech . . . . But the father wasn't listening. He was calling to the servants, "Quick. Bring a clean set of clothes and dress him. Put the family ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. Then get a grain-fed heifer and roast it. We're going to feast! We're going to have a wonderful time! My son is here—given up for dead and now alive! Given up for lost and now found!" – Luke 15, *The Message*

• **Small group Bible study.** Drawing from the following Bible passages and others like them that come to your mind, work in small groups to create your own psalm to or about Heavenly Father.

Gen. 17:7-8 (cf. Ps. 105:8-10); Ps. 9:7-9, 12; Ps. 23 (cf. John 10:11-16); Ps. 34:18; Ps. 51:1; Ps. 91:1-4; Ps. 94:14; Ps. 103:1-18; Prov. 3:12; Is. 49:15-16, 25b; Eze. 33:11; Hos. 11:1-4, 8-9; Micah 7:18-19; Zeph. 3:14-17; Matt. 7:9-11; Matt. 23:37; John 3:16-17; John 16:23-27; Rom. 1:18-32; Rom. 5:1-11; Rom. 8:31-35, 38-39; 1 Cor. 5:18-19; Gal. 4:4-7; Eph. 2:4; Heb. 13:5b-6; James 1:17-18; 1 Peter 5:7; 1 John 4:7-10, 19; Rev. 15:3-4.

- Print the verses of your psalm on cards or pieces of paper.
- Rearrange them to create a meaningful tribute of praise and gratitude.
- Use a refrain such as "His love endures forever" as it is used in Ps. 136 to bind your psalm together.
  - Number your cards and give each group member one or more to read in turn, and reading your refrain all together like a congregational response.
  - Read your psalm responsively in your small group in praise of Heavenly Father.
  - Present your psalm to the large group as time allows.

• **A living portrait.** If you were to draw a living portrait of Heavenly Father from the stories of the Bible and from your own experience as God's child, what would He look like?

- How does the story of the prodigal Father contribute to your portrait?
- How would you describe His hands? His embrace? His presence? His tone of voice? His care? His encouragement? His correction? His love?
- How does your portrait reflect the words of Jesus, "Anyone who has seen me, has seen the Father" (John 14:9; cf. Heb. 1:3)?

• **Drawn by the hands.** Nouwen notes that “the true center of Rembrandt’s painting is the hands of the father” (p. 96)—hands that seek only to heal and to bless.

Here is the God I want to believe in: a Father who, from the beginning of creation, has stretched out his arms in merciful blessing, never forcing himself on anyone, but always waiting; never letting his arms drop down in despair, but always hoping that his children will return so that he can speak words of love to them and let his tired arms rest on their shoulders (pp. 95, 96).

- What draws you to these hands?
- Do you agree with Nouwen that ultimately, the call of the parable of the prodigal is for us to become the Father and extend our arms to our own lost children, family members, and the world (cf. 2 Cor. 5:18-21)?
- What will you say and do today to reach out to heal and bless your children and those closest to you in the name of Christ?

### **The Elder Son**

Outwardly, the elder son was faultless. But when confronted by his father’s joy at the return of his younger brother, a dark power erupts in him and boils to the surface. –  
Henri Nouwen

- **Re-enact the scene recorded in Luke 15:25-30.**
  - Why do you think Luke devotes a full one-third of his rendition of Jesus’ story to the reaction of the older brother?
  - What evidence is there that despite the fact that eldest son has never left home, he is also a lost son?
  - How does his reaction to the party thrown for his brother betray his heart?
  - How do you know that his obedience and service have not been so much out of love as out of duty?
  - From your own experience and that of others whom you know, in what ways can you attest to the truth of Nouwen’s observation about the elder son:

The lostness of the elder son . . . is much harder to identify. After all, he did all the right things. He was obedient, dutiful, law-abiding, and hardworking. People respected him, admired him, praised him, and likely considered him a model son. Outwardly, the elder son was faultless. But when confronted by his father’s joy at the return of his younger brother, a dark power erupts in him and boils to the surface. Suddenly, there becomes glaringly visible a resentful, proud, unkind, selfish person, one that had remained deeply hidden, even though it had been growing stronger and more powerful over the years (Nouwen, 1992, p. 71).

The elder son bore witness to the same event as did the father—the return of a son that was as good as dead. In the father, the homecoming generated spontaneous joy and celebration. The other cannot receive this joy, because “joy and resentment cannot coexist”

(Nouwen, p. 73). He cannot bring himself to go in and enjoy the party. In his self-righteous bitterness, judgmentalism and “frozen anger,” the older son allows the darkness outside to engulf him.

- Why is it so hard for him to rejoice in his father’s forgiveness and generosity?
- **Contemplate the elder son in Rembrandt’s painting.**
  - How does Rembrandt’s portrait of the elder son expand your image of him as a person?
  - What do you think is significant about the fact that he stands erect and motionless on a platform above the dramatic scene playing out before him?
- **How would you finish the unfinished story?** Jesus did not tell His listeners the end of the story for the elder brother. Did he come to see himself as he really was—a lost son also needing to be found by his father? Did he receive the father’s gracious gift of forgiveness? Did he join the celebration and revel in amazing grace? We simply don’t know.

If you could write the end of this story the way God would like to see it written for every “elder brother” everywhere, how would you write it? What depth of meaning would such an ending give to the Bible passage, “With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible” (Matt. 19:26)?

### **The Party: A Hallmark of Grace**

And they began to have a wonderful time. – Luke 15:24, *The Message*

Even as the parable of the prodigal ends with a party of outrageous proportions for a lost son returned home, the Scripture is fairly bursting with party imagery:

• **Jesus introduced party-going as a hallmark of grace.** He inaugurated His ministry at a wedding festival (John 2:1-11). By His very example, Jesus at the very least gave us permission to party. But much more, Jesus introduced party-going as a hallmark of grace. At Cana, Jesus’ mother profoundly summed up the human condition when she said: “They have no wine.” In the imagery of the wedding feast there is also a grand symbol of Christ’s mission as it would work its way into the everyday lives of real people, in real families, struggling with the brokenness that sin has wrought in human relationships. With the water to wine miracle the announcement is made: In Jesus Christ, the common water of human relationships as we know them can be transformed into a divine elixir of love the likes of which mortals have not tasted since Eden. The good news of the Cana story is that this party and its miracle can be our party and our miracle if we will but unclasp our hands to receive God’s good gift. Of course there will be relational skills to learn and practice, but the planting of divine love within us and the turning of our hearts toward one another is God’s work. We have only to open our hearts to His miracle of grace.

• **The Grand Heavenly party.** Just as there is a party at the beginning of Jesus' sojourn among us, so there is a party at the end. In Revelation, the bridegroom who has passionately wooed His beloved is finally united with His cherished bride. The universe rings with celebration! This is *the* party for which God lives, and acts and is.

• **God's party invitations.** Between Eden and the New Earth, God finds every opportunity to pass out invitations and give us a taste of what that party will be like.

- Lepers outside Samaria (2 Kings 6:24-7:9) think to throw themselves at the mercy of the enemy because they know starvation of body and spirit is worse than death. Instead, they find Banquet Tables groaning with a feast fit for a king—and free for the taking!

- Would-be partygoers wait in anticipation of a coming Bridegroom (Matt. 25:1-13) who will open the doors wide—for whoever follows Him in. It's a party to which you cannot *buy* a ticket. But anyone who waits for the Bridegroom can come in on His coat-tails.

- A Rich Man is so determined to fill his house for a party (Matt. 22:1-14) that he turns from his respectable guest list of friends and relatives who are filled with excuses about why they cannot come. Instead, he sends his servants out two times into the alleyways and backwoods to bring in anybody with legs, even if their legs don't work. All that matters is that they are ready to party!

- An ecstatic Woman (Luke 15:8-10) hollers to the neighbors to drop everything and come over to celebrate—all because she found a marriage coin she was sentimental about.

- A dumb sheep without enough sense to come in out of the cold gets lost and is found (Luke 15:1-7). The Shepherd wakes the village with his rejoicing.

• **Types of Heavenly Father.** It is common practice, at least in English, to capitalize any name or image for God. If we follow this rule in the party stories of Scripture, the waiting Father, and the Bridegroom, and the Banquet Tables, and the Rich Man, and the Woman and the Shepherd should all be capitalized. They are all God-figures—types of Heavenly Father, Son and Holy Spirit. The good news of all these stories is that our God still revels in His creation. He can't wait to swing the doors open to a party that defies the wildest human imagination. Everything has been made ready through the perfect birth, life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. And God is everywhere in Scripture, passing out tickets and party garments to anyone who will come.

### **Have You Joined the Party?**

What do your children know about the celebration? How will you invite them to join you there? Perhaps they are already inside enjoying the festivities that have already begun as sinners one by one accept Jesus Christ. Perhaps you must wait longer at the gate, a prodigal Parent with arms outstretched like Heavenly Father. Our job is to make sure none miss the party because they have not heard the sound of the music of grace in our families

and churches. To all the invitation has gone out: “Come, you blessed of my Father. Inherit the kingdom prepared for you!”

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# *Let Your Heart Sing*

A Multigenerational Worship Experience

by Karen Flowers

## **Introduction**

The following reading drama may be used as a Sabbath worship service or as an afternoon or evening program. Its purpose is to bring the entire church family together in a celebration of God's amazing grace to humankind in Jesus Christ. The setting is Ancient Rome. The good news is expressed in the words of the apostle Paul as recorded in his personal letter to the Church in Rome.

**Script.** The script in English is excerpted directly from the biblical text using Eugene Peterson's *The Message Bible*. (When preparing the script in other languages, you may want to consider the use of a more modern version of the Bible where such is available.)

The program is written as a simple drama, using a "responsive reading" format. It can be easily adapted to any setting and requires minimal props.

Note that the script will need to be duplicated for the entire cast and congregation. For this reason, the text has been formatted in English as a handout for easy duplication.

**Hymn singing.** Appropriate hymns have been selected for congregational singing throughout the program from the *Seventh-day Adventist Hymnal* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1985). As an alternative, some of the musical selections may be rendered as special numbers.

## **Cast.**

- The apostle Paul is seated at the table at the front—pen in hand as though writing a letter—for the entire program. However, as the drama progresses, Paul's monologues will be more effective if he looks up and addresses the congregation as though they were the church at Rome, returning his attention to pen and paper only occasionally.

- Ten reader "soloists" should be scattered throughout the congregation. The good news will be conveyed best if the readers stand to their feet and speak excitedly to fellow believers when it is their turn to "read." When their readings are short, reader "soloists" should remain standing throughout the entire section of the script in which they participate.

- A worship leader should offer a brief introduction to the program, introducing the actors and preparing the congregation for the drama. This is also the time to tell the congregation that for today, they are the Church in Rome and to point out the responsive reading nature of the program. The portions of the script marked "All" will be read by the congregation all together. Note that there are also portions for "Men" and "Women," and for the "Congregation on Right" [as you face the front] and "Congregation on the Left." Numbered reader parts will be read by reader "soloists" selected in advance.

- A music director will lead the congregational hymn singing and introduce special numbers as necessary.



- Musicians as desired.

**Props.** A small table with chair should be set at the front, with a quill pen, ink bottle and paper “scroll” in place for Paul’s writing of his letter to the church in Rome. You may also wish to design appropriate costumes to the times for Paul and the ten reader “soloists.”

As the drama opens, Paul is seated at the table at the front, looking wistful as he takes quill in hand, dips it into his ink bottle, and begins to write as he delivers his monologue.

## Let Your Heart Sing: A Letter to All God's Friends

**Worship leader:** As the drama opens, the apostle Paul sits alone, penning his letter to the believers in Rome—Christians whom he has never met but to whom he will deliver what Martin Luther would later declare to be “the clearest gospel of all.”

### Reading 1: From Romans 1, 3 (TM)

**Paul:** *I, Paul, am a devoted slave of Jesus Christ on assignment, authorized as an apostle to proclaim God's words and acts. I write this letter to all the Christians in Rome, to all God's friends. . . .*  
*I thank God through Jesus for every one of you. That's first. People everywhere keep telling me about your lives of faith, and every time I hear them, I thank him. And God, whom I so love to worship and serve by spreading the good news of his Son—the Message!—knows that every time I think of you in my prayers, which is practically all the time, I ask him to clear the way for me to come and see you. . . . I so want to be there to deliver God's gift in person and watch you grow stronger right before my eyes! . . . And that's why I can't wait to get to you . . . , preaching this wonderful good news of God.*  
*It's news I'm most proud to proclaim, this extraordinary Message of God's powerful plan to rescue everyone who trusts him, starting with Jews and then right on to everyone else! . . .*

**All:** The basic reality of God is plain enough. Open your eyes and there it is!

**Reader 1:** By taking a long and thoughtful look at what God has created, people have always been able to see what their eyes as such can't see: eternal power, for instance, and the mystery of his divine being. So nobody has a good excuse.

**Reader 2:** What happened was this: People knew God perfectly well, but when they didn't treat him like God, refusing to worship him, they trivialized themselves into silliness and confusion so that there was neither sense nor direction left in their lives. They pretended to know it all, but were illiterate regarding life. They traded the glory of God who holds the whole world in his hands for cheap figurines you can buy at any roadside stand.

**Reader 1:** So God said, in effect, “If that's what you want, that's what you get.” It wasn't long before they were living in a pigpen, smeared with filth, filthy inside and out. And all this because they traded the true God for a fake god, and worshiped the god they made instead of the God who made them—

**All:** the God we bless, the God who blesses *us*. Oh, yes!

- Reader 1:** Worse followed. Refusing to know God, they soon didn't know how to be human either—women didn't know how to be women, men didn't know how to be men. . . . They abused and defiled one another, . . . all lust, no love. And then they paid for it, oh, how they paid for it—emptied of God and love, godless and loveless wretches. . . . They keep inventing new ways of wrecking lives. . . .
- Reader 2:** So where does that put us? . . . Scripture leaves no doubt about it:
- Reader 1:** “There's nobody living right, not even one,
- All:** nobody who knows the score, nobody alert for God.
- Reader 2:** They've all taken the wrong turn;
- All:** they've all wandered down blind alleys.
- Reader 1:** No one's living right;
- All:** I can't find a single one.
- Reader 2:** Their throats are gaping graves,
- All:** their tongues slick as mud slides.
- Reader 1:** Every word they speak is tinged with poison.
- All:** They open their mouths and pollute the air.
- Reader 2:** They race for the honor of sinner-of-the-year,
- All:** litter the land with heartbreak and ruin,
- Reader 1:** Don't know the first thing about living with others.
- All:** They never give God the time of day.
- Reader 2:** This makes it clear, doesn't it, that whatever is written in these Scriptures is not what God says *about others* but *to us* . . . ! And it's clear enough, isn't it, that we're sinners, every one of us, in the same sinking boat with everybody else? . . .
- Paul:** *But in our time something new has been added. What Moses and the prophets witnessed to all these years has happened. The God-setting-things-right that we read about has become Jesus-setting-things-right for us. And not only for us, but for everyone who believes in him. . . . Since we've compiled this long and sorry record as sinners . . . and proved that we are*

*utterly incapable of living the glorious lives God wills for us. God did it for us. Out of sheer generosity he put us in right standing with himself. A pure gift. He got us out of the mess we're in and restored us to where he always wanted us to be. And he did it by means of Jesus Christ.*

**Hymn:** “Redeemed” (SDA Hymnal, No. 337 or 338)

### **Reading 2: From Romans 5, Part 1 (TM)**

**Paul:** *By entering through faith into what God has always wanted to do for us—set us right with him, make us fit for him—we have it all together with God because of our Master Jesus. And that's not all:*

**Men:** We throw open our doors to God and discover at the same moment that he has already thrown open his door to us. We find ourselves standing where we always hoped we might stand—out in the wide open spaces of God's grace and glory, standing tall and shouting our praise.

**Paul:** *There's more to come:*

**Women:** We continue to shout our praise even when we're hemmed in with troubles, because we know how troubles can develop passionate patience in us, and how that patience in turn forges the tempered steel of virtue, keeping us alert for whatever God will do next. In alert expectancy such as this, we're never left feeling shortchanged. Quite the contrary—we can't round up enough containers to hold everything God generously pours into our lives through the Holy Spirit!

**Reader 3:** Christ arrives right on time to make this happen. He didn't, and doesn't, wait for us to get ready. He presented himself for this sacrificial death when we were far too weak and rebellious to do anything to get ourselves ready. And even if we hadn't been so weak, we wouldn't have known what to do anyway.

**All:** We can understand someone dying for a person worth dying for, and we can understand how someone good and noble could inspire us to selfless sacrifice. But God put his love on the line for us by offering his Son in sacrificial death while we were of no use whatever to him.

**Reader 4:** Now that we are set right with God by means of this sacrificial death, the consummate blood sacrifice, there is no longer a question of being at odds with God in any way. If, when we were at our worst, we were put on friendly terms with God by the sacrificial death of his Son, now that we're at our best, just think of how our lives will expand and deepen by means of his resurrection life!

**All:** Now that we have actually received this amazing friendship with God, we are no longer content to simply say it in plodding prose. We sing and shout our praises to God through Jesus, the Messiah!

**Hymn:** “**To God Be the Glory**” (*SDA Hymnal*, No. 341)

### Reading 3: From Romans 5, Part 2 (TM)

**Paul:** *You know the story of how Adam landed us in the dilemma we’re in—first sin, then death, and no one exempt from either sin or death.*

**Reader 5:** That sin disturbed relations with God in everything and everyone, but the extent of the disturbance was not clear until God spelled it out in detail to Moses. So death, this huge abyss separating us from God, dominated the landscape from Adam to Moses. Even those who didn’t sin precisely as Adam did by disobeying a specific command of God still had to experience this termination of life, this separation from God.

**All:** But Adam, who got us into this, also points ahead to the One who will get us out of it.

**Reader 6:** Yet the rescuing gift is not exactly parallel to the death-dealing sin. If one man’s sin put crowds of people at the dead-end abyss of separation from God, just think what God’s gift poured through one man, Jesus Christ, will do! There’s no comparison between the death-dealing sin and this generous, life-giving gift. . . .

**Paul:**

*If death got the upper hand through one man’s wrongdoing, can you imagine the breathtaking recovery life makes . . . in those who grasp with both hands this wildly extravagant life-gift, this grand setting-everything-right, that the one man Jesus Christ provides?*

**Reader 5:** Here it is in a nutshell: Just as one person did it wrong and got us in all this trouble with sin and death, another person did it right and got us out of it.

**All:** But more than just getting us out of trouble, he got us into life! . . .

**Reader 6:** All that passing laws against sin did was produce more lawbreakers. But sin didn’t, and doesn’t, have a chance in competition with the aggressive forgiveness we call *grace*.

**All:** When it’s sin versus grace, grace wins hands down.

**Paul:** *All sin can do is threaten us with death, and that's the end of it. Grace, because God is putting everything together again through the Messiah, invites us into life—a life that goes on and on and one, world without end.*

**Hymn:** “Amazing Grace” (SDA Hymnal, No. 108)

#### **Reading 4: From Romans 6, 8 (TM)**

**Reader 7:** So what do we do? Keep on sinning so God can keep on forgiving?

**Paul:** *I should hope not! If we've left the country where sin is sovereign, how can we still live in our old house there? Or didn't you realize we packed up and left there for good? . . .*

**Reader 8:** Could it be any clearer? Our old way of life was nailed to the Cross with Christ, a decisive end to that sin-miserable life—no longer at sin's every beck and call! What we believe is this: If we get included in Christ's sin-conquering death, we also get included in his life-saving resurrection. We know that when Jesus was raised from the dead it was a signal of the end of death-as-the-end. Never again will death have the last word.

**Paul:**

*When Jesus died, he took sin down with him, but alive he brings God down to us. From now on, think of it this way: Sin speaks a dead language that means nothing to you; God speaks your mother tongue, and you hang on every word. You are dead to sin and alive to God. That's what Jesus did.*

**Reader 7:** That means you must not give sin a vote in the way you conduct your lives. Don't give it the time of day. Don't even run little errands that are connected with that old way of life. Throw yourselves wholeheartedly and full-time—remember, you've been raised from the dead!—into God's way of doing things. Sin can't tell you how to live. After all, you're not living under that old tyranny any longer. You're living in the freedom of God. . . .

**Reader 8:** So don't you see that we don't owe this old do-it-yourself life one red cent. There's nothing in it for us, nothing at all. The best thing to do is give it a decent burial and get on with your new life. . . .

**Reader 7:** This resurrection life you received from God is not a timid, grave-tending life. It's adventurously expectant, greeting God with a childlike “What's next, Papa?” God's Spirit touches our spirits and confirms who we really are. We know who he is, and we know who we are:

**All:** Father and children.

**Reader 8:** And we know we are going to get what's coming to us—

**All:** An unbelievable inheritance! . . .

**Paul:** *All around us we observe a pregnant creation. The difficult times of pain throughout the world are simply birth pangs. But it's not only around us; it's within us. The Spirit of God is arousing us within. We're also feeling the birth pangs. These sterile and barren bodies of ours are yearning for full deliverance. That is why waiting does not diminish us, any more than waiting diminishes a pregnant mother. We are enlarged in the waiting. We, of course, don't see what is enlarging us. But the longer we wait, the larger we become, and the more joyful our expectancy. Meanwhile, the moment we get tired in the waiting, God's Spirit is right alongside helping us along. If we don't know how or what to pray, it doesn't matter. He does our praying in and for us, making prayer out of our wordless sighs, our aching groans.*

**All:** He knows us far better than we know ourselves, knows our pregnant condition, and keeps us present before God. That's why we can be so sure that every detail in our lives of love for God is worked into something good. . . .

**Reader 7:** With God on our side like this, how can we lose? If God didn't hesitate to put everything on the line for us, embracing our condition and exposing himself to the worst by sending his own Son, is there anything else he wouldn't gladly and freely do for us?

**Reader 8:** And who would dare tangle with God by messing with one of God's chosen? Who would dare even to point a finger? The One who died for us—who was raised to life for us!—is in the presence of God at this very moment sticking up for us.

**Paul:** *Do you think anyone is going to be able to drive a wedge between us and Christ's love for us? There is no way! Not trouble, not hard times, not hatred, not hunger, not homelessness, not bullying threats, not backstabbing, not even the worst sins listed in Scripture. . . . None of this fazes us because Jesus loves us. I'm absolutely convinced that nothing—nothing living or dead, angelic or demonic, today or tomorrow, high or low, thinkable or unthinkable—absolutely nothing can get between us and God's love because of the way that Jesus our Master has embraced us.*

**Reader 7:** (8:14): God's Spirit beckons. There are things to do and places to go!

**Hymn:** "The Wonder of It All" (SDA Hymnal, No. 75)

### Reading 5: From Romans 12

- Women:** If you preach, just preach God's Message, nothing else;
- Men:** if you help, just help, don't take over;
- Women:** if you teach, stick to your teaching;
- Men:** if you give encouraging guidance, be careful that you don't get bossy;
- Women:** if you're put in charge, don't manipulate;
- Men:** if you're called to give aid to people in distress, keep your eyes open and be quick to respond;
- Women:** if you work with the disadvantaged, don't let yourself get irritated with them or depressed by them.
- All:** Keep a smile on your face. Love from the center of who you are; don't fake it.
- Men:** Run for dear life from evil; hold on for dear life to good.
- Women:** Be good friends who love deeply; practice playing second fiddle.
- Men:** Don't burn out; keep yourselves fueled and aflame. Be alert servants of the Master, cheerfully expectant.
- Women:** Don't quit in hard times; pray all the harder.
- Men:** Help needy Christians; be inventive in hospitality.
- Women:** Bless your enemies; no cursing under your breath.
- Men:** Laugh with your happy friends when they're happy; share tears when they're down.
- Women:** Get along with each other; don't be stuck-up. Makes friends with nobodies; don't be the great somebody.
- Men:** Don't hit back; discover beauty in everyone. If you've got it in you, get along with everybody.
- Women:** Don't insist on getting even; that's not for you to do. "I'll do the judging," says God. "I'll take care of it."



**Men:** Our Scriptures tell us that if you see your enemy hungry, go buy that person lunch, or if he's thirsty, get him a drink. Your generosity will surprise him with goodness.

**All:** Don't let evil get the best of you; get the best of evil by doing good.

**Hymn:** "Like Jesus" (*SDA Hymnal*, No. 492)

### Reading 6: From Romans 9, 11

**Paul:** *Hosea put it well:*

**Congregation on Right:** "I'll call nobodies and make them somebodies;

**Congregation on Left:** I'll call the unloved and make them beloved.

**Congregation on Right:** In the place where they yelled out, 'You're nobody!'

**Congregation on Left:** they're calling you 'God's living children.'"

**Paul:** *Isaiah maintained this same emphasis:*

**Reader 9:** "If each grain of sand on the seashore were numbered  
and the sum labeled 'chosen of God,'  
They'd be numbers still, not names;  
salvation comes by personal selection.

**All:** God doesn't count us; he calls us by name.  
Arithmetic is not his focus.

**Paul:** *Isaiah had looked ahead and spoken the truth:*

**Reader 10:** "If our powerful God  
had not provided us a legacy of living children,  
We would have ended up like ghost towns,  
like Sodom and Gomorrah."

**Paul:** *How can we sum this up? All those people who didn't seem interested in what God was doing actually embraced what God was doing as he straightened out their lives. And Israel, who seemed to interested in reading and talking about what God was doing, missed it. How could they miss it? Because instead of trusting God, they took over. They were absorbed in what they themselves were doing. They were so absorbed in their "God projects" that they didn't notice God right in front of them, like a huge rock in the middle of the road. And so they stumbled into him and went sprawling. Isaiah (again!) gives us the metaphor for pulling this together.*

*“Careful! I’ve put a huge stone on the road  
to Mount Zion,  
a stone you can’t get around.  
But the stone is me! If you’re looking for me,  
you’ll find me on the way, not in the way. . . .*

**All:** Have you ever come on anything quite like this extravagant generosity of God, this deep, deep wisdom? It’s way over our heads. We’ll never figure it out.

**Reader 9:** “Is there anyone around who can explain God?  
Anyone smart enough to tell him what to do?  
Anyone who has done him such a huge favor  
that God has to ask his advice?”

**All:** Everything comes from him;  
Everything happens through him;  
Everything ends up in him.  
Always glory! Always praise!  
Yes. Yes. Yes.”

**Hymn:** “**How Great Thou Art**” (*SDA Hymnal*, No. 86)

## Coat-Hanger Grace

by Karen Flowers

Eeeee, eeeee. Eeeee, eeeee. It was the sound of coat hangers grating on a metal rod stretched across the back seat as Jeremy leaned forward and pushed the hanging clothes aside so he could see his father better. "Daddy, when are we going to get there?" he asked, for what seemed like the hundredth time.

"I told you I don't know!" Daddy replied gruffly. "If I knew, I would have told you. Now, play with your toys and don't ask again! We're late, and I'm trying to get there as fast as I can."

Jeremy tried to be patient. He played with his cars, then he looked at the pictures in his book again. He made faces at his little brother for awhile and made him laugh. Then he counted the cars on a train chugging along beside the station wagon. But Jeremy was so tired of riding in the car. He just wanted to be there so he could stretch his legs and get something to eat and maybe find a friend to play with. His mom had said they were going to a camp where there would be lots of other families with kids. But she hadn't said it was going to take this long.

Eeeee, eeeee. Eeeee, eeeee. It was Jeremy again, pushing the coat hangers. "Daddy, are we almost there? I'm hungry. You said we were going to get there before dark, and it's getting dark. How much longer will it take?"

"Jeremy, didn't I tell you not to ask again?" his father replied firmly. "I told you before, I don't know when we're going to get there. Your asking over and over again will only make it take longer. I can't

concentrate on my driving with those coat hangers squeaking in my ear! So stop moving the coat hangers and entertain yourself with the toys Mom brought for you. Okay?"

Jeremy really did try, but somehow he couldn't manage to sit still another minute. And before you know it, it was eeeee, eeeee. Eeeee, eeeee, and Jeremy's question all over again.

This time Daddy just slammed on the brakes and pulled the car over to the side of the road in a cloud of dust. His face was red as he turned around and yelled at Jeremy: "If you ask me that question one more time, you're going to be sorry. And don't you dare touch those coat hangers!" Then he spun the car around and headed home, all the while muttering under his breath that there was no point going to the camp to have fun as a family if they couldn't even get along in the car.

The few minutes that his Daddy drove toward home and away from the camp seemed like a very long time to Jeremy. Meanwhile his daddy was thinking about what he had said and the anger in his voice when he had said it. And the more he thought about it, the worse he felt. Jeremy's daddy knew the trip had been long and that it's very hard for a small boy to sit in the car hour after hour. And he knew he needed to say "I'm sorry" for losing his patience and yelling at Jeremy.

But it's hard to say "sorry," isn't it! It's hard even for mommies and daddies! But Jesus tells us to say "sorry" when we've said or done something that hurts

someone else because until we do, there will be something between us that may keep us from loving and enjoying each other as God made families to do. Saying "sorry" is God's way of giving us a chance to try again and treat each other better the next time.

It wasn't long before Jeremy's daddy pulled the car to the side of the road again. This time he held Jeremy tight in a big bear hug as he pulled him from the car. "I'm sorry for yelling at you, Jeremy," Daddy said. "You really have been very good at playing with your toys. I really didn't know the trip was going to take this long."

Jeremy liked the feel of his dad's strong arms around him. He buried his face in his shoulder and hugged him tighter than ever and then said, "It's okay, Dad. I love you. Can we play ball over there in the grass for just a few minutes before it gets too dark?"

"Yes, sure we can," Dad grinned, as Jeremy dug his ball out from under the car seat and threw it to his father. Now this story happened a long time ago. Jeremy is all grown up and his dad has grown much older. But you know what? Neither Dad nor Jeremy has ever forgotten the coat hangers, or the hug, or that little grassy spot by the side of the road where Daddy and Jeremy played catch. That's how good grace feels.

# *The Sweet Aroma of Grace*

by Karen Flowers

Dr. Luke tells the story in his gospel of a dinner party at the home of a Pharisee named Simon (cf. Luke 7:36-47). Simon had invited Jesus, along with a lot of other important people, to be his guest. It was truly a splendid banquet he had prepared, and Simon didn't want anything to go wrong.

You know that when Jesus was here, the roads in Palestine were mostly dirt roads. So when you were a guest at someone's house for dinner, it was customary for a family member or a servant to wash your feet as you came in. It was a thoughtful gesture, provided by the family you were visiting, to cool you off and to clean the dirt out from between your toes before you reclined on the floor around a low table to eat.

But Simon was much more concerned about impressing the important people he had invited than he was about honoring Jesus, God's Son. He didn't even welcome Jesus with the usual refreshing foot bath or greet him personally when He arrived!

Sometime during the meal, a woman silently slipped into the dining room. At first Simon didn't notice her. If he had, he would certainly have quietly signaled one of his servants to take her out of the house immediately. She was certainly not the kind of person he would have invited to his dinner party.

Actually, Simon knew the woman well. But he took care never to be seen with her in public because she was known all over town for her sinful life. The gossipers still

whispered about her, and respectable people still looked down their noses at her, even though everyone knew her sinful ways were all in the past now. Jesus had forgiven her sins. Now, she asked God every day to help her live as a child of God.

When the woman heard that Jesus was coming to town and that He would be spending the evening at Simon's house, she could think of only one thing. She wanted to do something special for Jesus. She wanted to honor Him, to thank Him, to demonstrate her love for Him. She had been thinking of how she could do this for a long time, but this was her chance! All day she shopped for just the right gift. Finally, after looking in all the best shops, she settled on an exquisite box filled with the most wonderful perfume that money could buy.

Quietly she slipped into the banquet hall with the beautiful box under her arm. She would have spent everything she had to honor Jesus. She knew for sure He was the Messiah because He knew all about her sinful past and loved her just the same. Seeing that Jesus had not received even the most basic act of hospitality, she knelt before Him and washed His feet with the very expensive perfume. *[At this point in the story, you may wish to place a small amount of perfume or aromatic lotion in each child's hand, instructing them to take deep breaths of the wonderful aroma while they rub their hands together until it is all gone. Be alert that you may have to help a child rub in the perfume/lotion, so as not to get it all over their clothing, etc. Depending on the size of the congregation*

*and the sanctuary, you may wish to include the adults. In this way you can fill the room with the pleasant scent.]*

The sweet-smelling aroma from the woman's perfume instantly filled the room. Everyone at the banquet table turned to look. When Simon saw who the woman was and what she had done, he scolded Jesus. He said that if Jesus was really sent from God, He would never have allowed a woman with such a bad reputation to get anywhere near Him, let alone touch Him. But Simon was really trying to turn the attention away from himself. He was worried that Jesus and his important guests might somehow find out about some of the sinful things *Simon himself* had done with this woman.

Of course, Jesus knew all about Simon's sins. But He didn't embarrass or scold Simon. He just told him a story about a generous moneylender who forgave two men their debts—one who owed him a little, and one who owed him a lot. When He had finished His story, Jesus asked Simon a very important question: So who do you think will love the moneylender more? The man whose big debt was forgiven, or the man whose little debt was forgiven? Simon got the point of the story, though he didn't really want to admit it. "I

suppose . . ." he said, "the man who owed the big debt loved the moneylender more."

Jesus knew that Simon was a sinner just like the woman with the bad reputation. We are all sinners in need of much forgiveness. All of us are like the debtor who owed a big debt. But the good news Jesus wanted Simon to understand is that God is like the generous moneylender. God knows we cannot make up for all the wrong things we have done. He knew the whole human race would die because of sin unless He forgave us and gave us new life in Christ. But God is so kind and gracious He sent Jesus to die so our sins could be forgiven.

This good news made the woman with the bad reputation want to give Jesus the very best gift she could buy to show her love. Doesn't this good news make you love Jesus and want to give your heart to Him? The Bible says God thinks this is the best gift of all. Did you know that God and all the angels have a party whenever one child decides to follow Jesus? Wouldn't you like to start a celebration in heaven by making that choice today? Let's thank Jesus right now for His wonderful gift of forgiveness and for making us His sons and daughters in Christ!

# *Bubble Solution*

by Karen Flowers

About the time your great, great grandfather was born, two men named Andrew Pears and Thomas Barratt started the A. & F. Pears soap company in England. Back then, most companies depended on salesmen going door to door to sell their products. Very few businessmen spent money on advertising. In fact, when Mr. Barratt's son-in-law suggested that they give away copies of a painting of a little boy blowing soap bubbles to advertise their soap [see <http://bubbles.org/html/history/bubhistory.htm> for a print of the picture], Mr. Barratt thought it was such a crazy waste of money that he pulled all of his investments out of the A. & F. Pears soap company. But after giving away hundreds of paintings with the name A. & F. Pears stamped on the back, the soap company sold more soap than ever. The A. & F. Pears soap company is remembered to this day as the place that started the fun that made blowing soap bubbles popular with families around the world.

If you do a search on the Internet for "soap bubbles," you will find many websites that will tell you all about how to make the best homemade bubble solutions. They will tell you the best techniques for blowing the strongest, biggest, most-colorful, longest-lasting, bubble possible. You'll find answers to questions like "Why do bubbles have color? Why are bubbles round? Why do bubbles pop? What is the biggest bubble ever made? You'll find instructions for making bubble-blowing tools out of paper, wire, clothes hangers, string, hula hoops and tin cans. You'll even find the story of a

man who calls himself Professor Bubbles and goes all over the world entertaining children and grown-ups with his amazing bubble creations.

I like to blow bubbles. [*Blow bubbles into the air periodically as you talk.*] I like to watch bubbles. I like to look at their colors in the sunlight. But I especially like to see them pop!

When I see the bubbles pop, it makes me think of a story Jesus told. It's a story about a poor man who owed the king a great debt—more than he could pay off in a lifetime of hard work (see Matt. 18:23-27). One day the king called him in and said, "Pay me what you owe me." But the poor man didn't have any money to pay. Now the king was a very powerful king. He had the power to take everything the man had and even to make slaves of his whole family. But the king was also a merciful king. When he saw that the man couldn't pay, the Bible says he "took pity on him, canceled the debt and let him go" (vs. 27). Just like that! Just as fast as a bubble pops and is gone, the debt was paid in full! Erased from the records! Forgiven!

The story about the king who forgave the great debt is also a story about God. The Bible says that God loves us so much He sent Jesus to earth so that our sins might be forgiven! Erased from the records! Our debt paid in full! (cf. Eph. 1:7; Col. 2:13; Luke 23:34; Rom. 5:6-11). Would you like to blow a few bubbles at home this week to celebrate what Jesus has done for you and say thanks to God for being so

gracious? Don't you think blowing bubbles is a good way to remind your family of the good news of God's forgiveness?

(Give each child and adult in the congregation a page of instructions for creating their own wire hoop and bubble

solution at home, as well as the addresses for Internet sites where they can learn more about bubble blowing. If you have time and resources, you may want to make a small bottle of solution and a small wire hoop for each child to take home.)

### **Bubble Solution**

1 part dish soap (where available, the Dawn or Joy brands work well) to

10 parts water (distilled water works best) to

¼ (.25) part glycerine or white Karo syrup (optional)

[Note: Some recipes recommend bringing the mixture to a boil for 5 minutes, allowing it to cool before using. Others recommend aging the solution for a minimum of 10 hours.

[Glycerine is available at most pharmacies, though it is likely to be expensive there. It may be available at a considerably cheaper price at a farm or animal supply store. Karo syrup (a white sugar syrup) is the least expensive alternative.]

### **Bubble Blowing Tool**

You can create your own simple bubble blowing tool using wire or a coat hanger twisted into a loop at one end.

### **Starter Bubble Websites**

<http://bubbles.org>

<http://www.zurqui.co.cr/crinfocus/bubble/form.html>

<http://www.zurqui.co.cr/crinfocus/bubble/tube.html>



## *The Profound Significance of “And”*

by Roberto Badenas  
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All dictionaries state, in quite similar terms, that *and* is a coordinating conjunction, a part of speech that has the function of connecting words, terms, phrases and sentences together. The original meaning is close to “next, also, in addition, as well as, plus, added to” (Ferguson, 1977, p. 67).

It is paradoxical to recall that one of the most divisive controversies in the history of Christianity happened over the use of the connecting “and.” This controversy took place on the old continent between the oriental and the occidental church and gave place finally to the first big division of the Christian believers into catholic and orthodox.

Following their study of John 15:25b some Church Fathers concluded that the Holy Spirit proceeds *only* from the Father. This is what they affirmed in the creed promulgated in the First Council of Nicea (325 A.D.) and later modified in the First Council of Constantinople (381 A.D.). It was called the “Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed.” But following a series of New Testament texts that relate the Spirit to the Son (Rom. 8:9; 15:5; Gal. 4:6; Phil. 1:19; 1 John 5:6; 1 Peter 1:1), other Church Fathers concluded that the Spirit should be related as well to the Father as to the Son. For both the Spirit *and* the Son share in the fullness of God’s nature and therefore the Father, the Son and the Spirit are “of one essence.” These theologians reworded the creed just adding the equivalent of an “and” to the polemic phrase in Latin, making it to read that the “Spirit proceeds from the Father *and* from the Son (*filioque*)”.

This connecting “and” was first added to the Nicene Creed at the Synods of Toledo in Spain between 400 A.D. and 589 A.D. to oppose the Arian heresy which taught that the Son was a divine creature, but not God. Through many discussions, the great majority of the Western churches retained a creed with the “and.” But the Arian and the orthodox retained a creed without the “and.” After many centuries of conflicts between the so-called Trinitarian and the anti-Trinitarian sectors of the church, the break became definitive in 1054 A.D. with the Great Schism of the East and West.

Church politics, authority conflicts, ethnic hostility between groups, linguistic misunderstanding between Latin and Greek, personal rivalry, and secular motives, all combined in various ways to divide orthodox from catholic. And constantly the *filioque* question (that little “and”) was used to reinforce such division.

Because of this “and,” or because of the lack of it, over the years, creeds, decrees, theological statements, hymns and prayers have been formulated: some to clarify and defend, others to attack and reject the doctrine of the fundamental, absolute and mysterious unity in the personhood of God.

## The “AND” in the Nature of God

Despite the limitations of our ability to make accurate assertions about the inner essence of God, from our reading of the Bible we find a basic truth: God is unity, connection, and communion. “And” is in the very nature of God.

All along, starting in its first pages, the Bible presents God’s existence as relational and social. In the first account of the creation of the human being God speaks of Himself in a surprising plural form: “Let *us* create the *adam*” (Gen. 1:26). Through history, God continues to reveal Himself to mankind in many ways (Heb. 1:1-2), and through many names. These names speak to us about His nature (thus we learn, for example, that God is Eternal and Almighty). They teach us about His character (Holy and Merciful). They instruct us, finally about His relationships with us (Lord and Savior).

But God reveals Himself particularly through a mysterious language that speaks of three *personal characters* within the Deity, existing in relationship, designated with the specific terms of “Father” and “Son” and “Holy Spirit” (Matt. 3:16, 17; 28:19, cf.; Isa. 42:16). By the way, it is interesting to observe that the term for “Spirit” in Hebrew is a feminine word (*ruach*), and that the terms “Father” and “Son” (or “Parent” and “Child”), are borrowed from the language of family.<sup>1</sup>

Although we cannot understand God’s essence, because revelation does not explain this mystery and because our own minds are limited, we are compelled to recognize that in the Bible the divine nature is depicted as “three-in-one” or “triune.” The nature of this “Trinity” within a single God has been much discussed and understood in different ways. For some “Father,” “Son,” and “Spirit” are just three names to express three basic ways of being God. For others the three names designate three *persons* within the Deity, although we all acknowledge that we do not understand what we mean here by the word “person” and that this non-biblical term is certainly an anthropomorphism.<sup>2</sup>

Nevertheless, “Scripture compels us to maintain that there are personal relations between the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit, independently of creation and of time; in other words we maintain that Scripture reveals to us a social Trinity and an intercourse of love apart from and before the existence of the universe” (Strong, 1907, p. 326).

As Beckhof puts it, “It goes without saying that, when we speak of the Trinity of God, we refer to a trinity in unity, and to a unity that is trinal . . . . Since man is created in the image of God, we learn something of the personal life of God from the contemplation of personality as we know it in man . . . . Personality does not develop nor exist in isolation, but only in association with other persons. Hence, it is not possible to conceive of personality in God apart from an association of *equal* persons in Him . . . . In virtue of the tri-personal existence of God there is an infinite fullness of divine life in Him. Paul speaks of this *pleroma*

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<sup>1</sup> Seventh-day Adventist belief no. 2 reads: “There is one God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, a unity of three co-eternal Persons” (Ministerial Association, 1988, p. 16).

<sup>2</sup> “A person is a term fulfilled in relations . . . . It expresses the mutuality or reciprocity of indwelling whereby the love which is God passes and repasses between Father, Son, and Holy Spirit” (Turner, 1969, p. 350).

(fullness) of the Godhead in Eph. 3:19 and Col. 1:9; 2:9. In view of the fact that there are three persons in God, it is better to say that God is personal than to speak of Him as a Person” (Berkof, 1949, p. 85).

If Scripture clearly teaches that God is one, it teaches us clearly also that He is Spirit, *and* at the same time, Father *and* Son. But we have to underline that this “and” means more than just “collection of persons,” and even more than “togetherness of beings.” It implies “oneness and unity” (Deut. 6:4).

The important point for us here is that God’s nature of love produces perfect harmony in the divine “AND” (1 John 4:8; John 17:22-24).<sup>3</sup>

### **The “AND” in Family Life**

The Bible states from its very beginning that humankind has been created in God’s likeness (Gen. 1:26). Besides many other things, this means that we have been created in the image of a relational God. Humans are created as social beings. Nobody is meant to be alone. God explicitly states about the human being that it is not good to be alone (Gen. 2:18).

Humankind was created for relationships. We can say that we were created for “and’s.”

In the earliest account of the creation of the first human beings we read: “Male *and* female he created them” (Gen. 1:27). It is our contention that this ‘and’ is part of the image of God, part of the likeness.

If this divine “and” connects beings that are different, this implies that the couple, and therefore the home, is the first, the smallest, but the basic society unity involving “AND.”

Reflection on our own “and” as being in the likeness of God opens to our minds the mystery of marriage and family living. And we soon realize that family is “the repetition in time and space of the supreme beauty of the self-giving love within God’s inner-Trinitarian life” (Lee, 1986, p. 119).

Oneness, “one-fleshness” is the object of this “and” in marriage and family living (Gen. 2:24, 25). For it is in the home that we learn—for better or for worse—the meaning of connections. Home is formative in our understanding of “and” in our lives.

Connections—another way of saying “and”—has been demonstrated in research, to have the most powerful bearing on the solidity of marriage. Connectedness is also a determinant of effective transmission of values. It has proved, for example, to be foundational in helping adolescents to avoid at-risk behaviors.

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<sup>3</sup> “Attention has also been called to the nature of love, which presupposes a subject and an object, and calls for the union of these two, so that, when love has its perfect work, three elements are included” (Berkhof, 1949, p. 90).

## The “AND” in Church

In the church we are called to be one. One people with one message and one mission. We serve one Lord. We rejoice in one faith. Indeed, we are called to be one. What do we do therefore, with all the obvious racial, gender, ethnic, cultural and theological differences and tensions among us? (Pollard, 2000, p. 8).

Demographers say that such an ‘intensive diversity’ has never before existed as it does in our world today. The tendency is for diversity to be divisive when it increases without being accepted. No society, group, community or family can pretend to be safe from conflicts and division. Not even God’s Church.

As diversity increases, unity within the church becomes more and more difficult. The enemy knows that the best way to defeat us is by dividing us. Thus he will use all possible means to divide the church, to divide our families, to divide ourselves within.

Although “we are not of the world” we are still living in this sinful world and the problems of our society have a profound impact on our way of thinking and feeling. All types of human conflicts affect us as well as the members of our families and churches within the great family of God.

The need for “AND’s” in the church is great. But it is not new. This basic need existed already in the church from the very beginning. Even Jesus prayed for unity among his followers (John 17:20-23).

Paul wrote a lot to his churches on the subject of unity. Perhaps the best example can be found in his epistle to the Ephesians:

“What we know about God and what we do have a way of getting broken apart in our lives. The moment the organic unity of belief and behavior is damaged in any way we are incapable of living out the full humanity for which we were created.

“Paul’s letter to the Ephesians joins together what has been torn apart in our sin-wrecked world. . . . Like a surgeon skillfully setting a compound fracture, Paul “sets” this belief in God into our behavior before God so that the bones—belief and behavior—knit together and heal.

“Once our attention is called to it, we notice these fractures all over the place. There is hardly a bone in our bodies that has escaped injury, hardly a relationship in city or job, school or church, family or country, that isn’t out of joint or limping in pain. There is much work to be done.

“And so Paul goes to work . . . showing how Jesus is tirelessly bringing everything and everyone together. . . . Every detail in our lives contributes (or not) to what Paul describes as God’s plan of reconciliation worked out by Christ” (Peterson, 2002, p. 1593).

### **United by the Father**

The Epistle to the Ephesians is like a beautiful tapestry on the theme of unity. Throughout the letter there is a golden thread, stating beautifully that we are divided by sin but united in God. Our basic unity is found in the Father from which the whole family in heaven and on earth derives its name (Eph. 3:14-17).

My four-year-old daughter, Sonia, looked at a picture of Jesus in a book of stories. Turning to me, she said, “How much I would like it if Jesus could come out of the book to hug me!”

My daughter expressed the deepest feeling of the human heart. We have seen wonderful pictures of God in nature. We have seen amazing pictures of God in the Bible. But we are not fully satisfied. We still want, like Sonia, for our heavenly Father to come out of these impersonal pictures and meet us personally.

Why are we not simply satisfied with the idea that God is the Creator of all, the Supreme Lawgiver? Why do we need a personal God? Imagine approaching a small child who is crying because he misses his father. Would he be comforted if we explain to him the logic of his father’s absence? The best explanations cannot avoid the fact that the small child still wants his dad.

We cannot satisfy our thirst for God with pictures, with philosophical, or even theological explanations. We want the hug of our Father.

### **United in the Son**

The good news of the Gospel is that our Father has come out of the pictures. A God who wants to be called “Father” is a God who wants to hug His children.

What seemed impossible has become true. God has been incarnated! We are not alone anymore. “For to us a child is born, to us a son is given” (Isa. 9:6). Jesus is the visible Person of the invisible God. He came out of the book. “The Word became flesh” (John 1:14, 18, *NIV*). God is not only Father. He is Father *and* Son. He is not only over us. He is also among us. Jesus is Immanuel, “God with us”—the beloved “And” (Matt. 1:18-25; Isa. 7:14).

If we were already united in the Father, we are even more united through the Son, because he has become our brother. “Consequently, we are no longer foreigners and aliens to each other, but fellow citizens with God’s people and members of God’s household as well as members of God’s family” (Eph. 2:19).

The tapestry of unity depicted in the epistle to the Ephesians repeats in different ways the same basic motive: we are united forever through Jesus Christ. God’s special agent to bring all of us together is his own beloved Son. The love of Christ fills us with its four dimensions (Eph. 4:14-21). Christ becomes our model of unity and love in our family life and in our personal life (Eph. 5:1-2).

### United in the Spirit

The unity sought by God is not only a logical deduction from the fact that we all have the same Father. This unity comes also from a historical event: The Son was incarnated; He has given his life for us and saved us from our sins. He was resurrected. He will come back.

But there is still a work to be done at a personal level in our personal life. The God who has entered history wants to enter our personal history in what Paul calls the *inner being* (Eph. 3:16). Unity comes not only from above and from outside, unity has to be worked inside us. God grants us, “according to the riches of his glory, to strengthen us with power through His Spirit in *the inner man*” (Eph. 3:16, *NASB*).

Unity is worked out by another “And.” “After listening to the message of truth, the gospel of your salvation, you were sealed in Him with the Holy Spirit promised” (Eph. 1:13, *NASB*). Filled with the Spirit (Eph. 5:18) we are “built together into a dwelling of God in the Spirit” (Eph. 2:22, *NASB*).

### United in Our Diversity

Why does Paul insist so much in these threefold links of unity—unity in the Father, unity in the Son and unity in the Spirit? (Eph. 4:3-6). Why Paul does not make his point on the question of unity on the argument of the *unity* of God. Why, on the contrary, does he deliberately prefer to work his argument on what would appear to be the *diversity* of God?

He has certainly his reasons. And we had better try to understand them:

1. We are united in the Father: The church is God’s household (Eph. 2:19), an amazing family made up of an enormous diversity of nations, tribes, tongues and people.
2. We are united through the Son, who has reconciled us to God and to each other through the cross (Eph. 2:16). The life we enjoy now in His church is the life of one vigorous body, vitally united to the head, despite the fact of the great diversity of its members.
3. We are united by the Spirit, who builds up together the body of Christ (Eph. 4:12).

All these three theological developments have in common the factor that they work on the argument of “AND”: *unity within diversity*. Thus, Paul invites us to be *imitators* of God (Eph. 5:1), who is at the same time “one” *and* “diverse”.<sup>4</sup>

My conclusion after reflection on this epistle is that Paul has, besides his theological and biblical reasons to appeal to the Trinitarian understanding of God, additional reasons—pedagogical and existential—having to do with religious education.

1. To be united in the Father (God above all) reveals the importance of common: Faith—Orthodoxy.

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<sup>4</sup> “Though they are all works of the three persons jointly, creation is ascribed primarily to the Father, redemption to the Son, and sanctification to the Holy Spirit” (Berkhof, 1949, p. 89).

Doctrine—Theology  
 Law—Practice  
 Rites—Liturgy

2. To be united in the Son (God with us) reveals the importance of shared:
  - Love—Grace
  - Solidarity—Fellowship
  - Justice—Humanitarian and social service
  - Mission—Evangelization
  
3. To be united in the Spirit (God working in us) reveals the importance of being united in:
  - Hope—Prophecy
  - Worship—Prayer
  - Spirituality—Spiritual gifts
  - Ethics—Sanctification

The fullness of God is revealed in Scripture. We need these three pictures of links to God to have a deep and complete spiritual experience of communion with Him and with each other (Eph. 6:10-17). Otherwise—if we have only one or two links – we lack something, and we shall distort our perception of God and of religion.<sup>5</sup>

The “mystery of Christ” has now been revealed to His holy apostles and prophets through the Gospel (Eph. 3:4-6). “The manifold wisdom of God” is made known to us (Eph. 3:10) through different ways (Eph. 4:11-12), resulting on “the unity of the faith” (Eph. 4:13, 14-15) in accordance with the truth as it is in Jesus” (Eph. 4:20-21).

### **The “AND” in Family Ministry**

In this sense we can perfectly say that Family Ministry is a ministry of the “AND”. Family Ministry stretches toward the quality of the “AND” in the nature of God and in the church, starting with families.

People are not meant to be isolated from one another; humankind is interconnected. “No man is an island, entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main” (John Donne).

“As persons created in God’s own image we are never to be thought of in isolation or as an island to ourselves. As God in the mystery of the Trinity is never in isolation, so man is never in isolation to himself but is to be thought of as a member of the community” (Guernsey, 1982, p. 66).

The quest of unchurched people today is for meaningful relationships. “In a highly mobile society accompanied by the breakdown of the extended family as well as of the

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<sup>5</sup> “The structure of the NT is basically triadic and it is verified in the three aspects of the Christian experience of God, dominion, communion and possession. There are closely linked with the decisive moments of revelation. God over us, God with us and God in us” (Turner, 1969, p. 345).

traditional family unit, relationship has become an increasingly valuable commodity because it is so difficult to obtain and maintain. The postmodern age is an anonymous age with a yearning for relationship” (Poe, 2001, p. 27).

How important it is then, to understand the work of restoration of the divine image in humankind regarding relationships—regarding our “and’s.” This was the main mission of Christ: “He stooped to this fallen world that he might restore in man the divine image” (White, 1900, p. 187).

Those of us who work with families have a special mission to understand the profound significance of “and” and to labor for the restoration of this aspect of the image of God in marriage and family relationships.

As the Family Ministries workers we are called to be the “Knights of the Order of the Ampersand”!

### **Conclusion – Prayer (on Ephesians 4:2-6)**

“Dear Father,

In the same way that you have come out of the picture to be closer to us, in the person of your Son, help us also today to come out of all our excuses and be closer to our family, closer to the people we meet around us.

Help us to become an incarnated evidence that we are with the Father and with all His children. Give us the blessing of being united to You through the Son forever.

Help us to grow together despite all our diversity, despite all our tensions, being diligent to preserve the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. Help us to be active factors of unity within your beloved church and within this broken world.

Help us to remain till the end in one body and one spirit, just as also we were called in one hope, united in God “who is over all *and* through all *and* in all”.

Build us together into a dwelling of God in the Spirit, so that we may live a connected life and may accomplish the mission you have given us in one perfect unity of love, faith, and joy.

Under the graceful wings of the Father, and in the name of Jesus, through the power of the Spirit. Amen.”

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# *Building an Effective Ministry to the “And”*

by Karen and Ron Flowers

Often we think of families as mere collections of individuals. But to minister to families well, we must expand our vision to see families as intricate, dynamic systems of relationships. The individuals that make up families will not be lost to our view from this wider perspective, but the “ands”—that is the relationships that connect them—will also be evident. It is the “and” between husband *and* wife that defines a marriage. It is the “and” in father *and* daughter that creates a parent-child bond. It is the “and” connecting a cluster of families that brings a church into fellowship as the “family of God.”

## **Thinking of Family in Terms of the “Ands”**

Anyone in ministry senses intuitively that it’s not enough for the pastor to merely officiate at events that put the “and” in place—like weddings, baby dedications, baptisms, etc. Ministry experience quickly brings home the lesson that the health of relationships—or ill-health as the case may be—has a profound effect not only on the well-being of individuals and families, but also on the church itself. The *quality* of the “ands” matters a great deal in people’s lives and in the life of the church. Furthermore, there doesn’t seem to be any direct line association between baptism and healthy family relationships. Scripture speaks much about the growth process in the Christian life, and certainly there is much learning and growing to do as Christ’s followers learn to apply the principles of His kingdom to their relationships. So at the surface, the importance of an effective ministry to the “and” seems clear enough.

At another level, however, our thinking in the church has been impacted almost imperceptibly by the ideas of thought leaders in the world around us. It has been about 400 years since the prominent British educator John Locke declared the individual to be the foundational unit of society. Since that time, less and less attention has been given to understanding the relational ties that connect human beings with one another. It is in this individualistic milieu that the Adventist church has grown up. This shift of focus attention from connectedness to the rights and autonomy of the individual has spread pervasively around the globe.

For example, you can go to the United Nations website and find all manner of publications on global trends and statistics regarding youth, women, children and other vulnerable individuals. But since the 1994 International Year of the Family, no resources have been put in print by the U.N. on the state of the world’s families. Even in a country with all the resources of the United States, the government has for the better part of two decades stopped monitoring the state of its marriages and families closely. What we know about the state of marriage and family, we know because of the commitment of a few, self-appointed academic watchdogs. Unfortunately, we know even less about state of marriage and family in the church.

It has rightly been observed that wherever the modern philosophy of individualism is found, some appreciation for the importance of family and group has been lost. The concept

of the “and”—as something distinct and important apart from the individuals that make it up—is relatively new among today’s family professionals. Actually, this idea was largely off their radar screens until a revolution occurred in the thinking of natural scientists.

It was around the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century that it began to dawn on biologists, for example, that to understand a pond, you had to do more than an in-depth study of the different animal, vegetable and mineral components that were present there. To fully understand the life of a pond—or any of its component parts for that matter—you also had to know how these various parts related dynamically to one another. You had to find answers to questions like “Who eats what?” “Who protects what?” “Who cleans up after what?”—and “under what circumstances,” etc. It was the natural scientists who first recognized that the whole is “bigger than the sum of its parts” because the kinds of “ands” that bring the component parts together also contribute to making the whole what it is.

The legendary British astrophysicist Sir Arthur Eddington (1882-1944) summed up this new way of looking at things when he wrote in his book *The Nature of the Physical World* (quoted in Anderson & Guernsey, 1985):

We often think that when we have completed our study of one we know all about two, because ‘two is one and one.’ *We forget that we still have to make a study of ‘and’* [italics added] (pp. 7, 8).

Social scientists soon applied this new insight to the study of human beings in relationship. William Blevins (1993) explains this shift in thinking among family professionals in his book *Your Family Your Self*:

From a systems perspective, the functioning of particular family members, to some degree, is shaped by the family unit. How individuals behave is understood and assessed in terms of their functioning within the total family matrix, rather than as persons separate from the family group (p. 14).

Systems thinking revolutionized how family professionals understood families and the best way to help them grow toward health and wholeness. Before the eyes of family professionals were opened to these new insights, they relied on analysis of individual family members in isolation to try to understand their behavior and the overall functioning of the family. But such an approach has similar limitations to those that might be experienced by an art curator trying to fully appreciate a still-life painting by using a magnifying glass to examine its various component parts at close range.

### **A New Look at Relationships**

But with the introduction of a systems perspective, professionals who work with families were suddenly handed insights as dramatic in their effects as three-dimensional (3-D) glasses. Children around the world have been awed as what appeared to be ordinary pictures appeared to jump from the page when they donned special 3-D glasses. So with these new “glasses” of understanding, the family system came alive in front of the eyes of family professionals. “Systems glasses” brought the “ands” into focus and allowed them to get a dramatic inside-look at the inner workings of relationships. These new “glasses”

helped us to see the family unit as the living, dynamic organism that it is. With them, we had a new framework for making sense of people’s behavior and the interaction between family members.

**Wholistic bonds.** This new focus on the relational “ands” that connect people to each other in the family helps us to better comprehend the teachings of Scripture about the bonds that unite us in family and community of faith. These are not mere legal relationships. They are close bonds of attachment. They are the warm, intimate bonds of covenant, commitment, faithfulness, fidelity, love, mutuality, caring. (Gen. 2:23-25; Ruth 1:16-17; Prov. 5:15-19; Song of Songs 2:16-17; 8:6-7; Mal. 2:14; Matt. 19:4-6; Eph. 5:21-6:4 ). So passionate and tender are these images of family that God makes them symbols of His own love, compassion, and tender regard for humankind and the intimate relationship of love and friendship He longs to have with His creation (Is. 49:15; 54:5; 62:5; Hos. 2:19-20; 11:1-4, 8-9; Matt. 23:37; Eph. 14-6; Rev. 21:2:1-7; 22:17).

These kinds of close bonds draw upon every aspect of our being. The “ands” that hold us together as family are wholistic—that is, they are physical, emotional, intellectual, social, and spiritual. It is the nature and quality of the “ands” that connect us—our relationships in marriage, parenting, extended family, friendship and fellowship as brothers and sisters in Christ—that have the greatest potential to secure or to undermine the essential, life-sustaining qualities rightly identified by church leadership as the strategic goals of the church—unity, growth and quality of life.

While the importance of “and” is a relative newcomer to the thinking of social scientists, it stretches into eternity past in God—whose unique essence embodies the paradox of one God in three Persons. It is in the image of a relational Trinity, this eternal “Us,” that we were created (Gen. 1:26). Humanity is thus fashioned with the capacity and yearning for intimate, loving relationships integral to their very being.

### **Relationship Ministry is Aligned with God’s Purposes**

From Genesis to Revelation the salvation story revolves around relationships lost and relationships restored. When we minister to the “and” then, we align ourselves with both God’s creation intent for humankind and with His redemptive intent. It is hard to miss that for Christ, loving relationships is the mark that will distinguish his followers from the world. Jesus told His disciples, “A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another” (John 13:34-35; cf. John 15:12’ 2 John 6).

John presses this theme to its full conclusion in the epistle of 1 John, making it clear that how we do relationships with one another is indeed the ultimate litmus test of whether we have understood and responded to God’s love revealed to us in Jesus. “We know,” writes John as a seasoned Christian and pastor, “that we have passed from death to life, because we love our brothers” (1 John 3:14; cf. 4:7-11).

**The mystery of the church.** Ministry to the “and” aligns us directly with the mystery and purpose of the church. Behind Paul’s understanding of church as the body of Christ (1 Cor. 12:12-31; Eph. 4:25; 5:30), are two great ideas. Christ—the Head of the church—is in

heaven. He was visibly taken into heaven (Acts 1:11), and He is visibly present there (Acts 7:56). Paul says that in Christ, we have been raised to heavenly places. We are invisibly present there (Eph. 2:6), but His presence makes our presence there real. On the other hand, believers—the body of Christ—are visibly present on earth. He is no longer visibly present here, but our presence makes His presence here real. This is a staggering reality: The church exists to make real the presence of Christ in the world. We make real the presence of Christ for one another (cf. Matt. 18:20; Heb. 10:25), and we make real the presence of Christ to others looking on (John 17:11, 20-23; 20:21). By the way we do church—by the quality of our “ands”—we help others to come to faith and to dare to believe the good news that Jesus Christ is Lord and Savior of the world (2 Cor. 3:2-3).

**The gospel commission.** Ministry to the “and” also puts us in line with the gospel commission. Paul elaborates on Matt. 28:19-20 with his powerful appeal in 2 Cor. 5:18ff, 20 (NIV): “All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ *and gave us the ministry of reconciliation*. We are therefore Christ’s ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. We implore you on Christ’s behalf: Be reconciled to God” [italics added]. No less impassioned is his appeal to be reconciled to one another (Rom. 12:10; 15:7; Eph. 4:25-32).

And when all is said and done, it is a ministry to the “and”—in the spirit and power of Elijah, the great prophet of reconciliation—that will mark the end time. “I will send you the prophet Elijah before the great and dreadful day of the Lord comes. He will turn the hearts of the fathers to their children, and the hearts of the children to their fathers. . . .” (Mal. 4:5-6).

**A cry for relationship.** The heart cry of people in today’s global village mirrors this fundamental human longing for connection in close relationship. Harry Lee Poe (2001), in his book *Christian Witness in a Postmodern World*, writes,

In a highly mobile society accompanied by the breakdown of the extended family as well as of the traditional family unit, relationship has become an increasingly valuable commodity because it is so difficult to obtain and maintain. The postmodern age is an anonymous age with a yearning for relationship (p. 27).

In this setting, Poe offers a crescendo of hope for the Christian church, despite the evidence that Christianity has been largely sidelined as irrelevant in a world preoccupied with science. He suggests that this age could be Christians’ finest hour if they will minister to the “and,” to use the language of our paradigm. He sees this age as ripe with opportunity for bringing Jesus to the family circle because Christianity is not about an institution. It is a story—a grand metanarrative—about a personal, relational God who has, since the dawn of time, been passionately in love with His creation and absolutely bent on blessing humankind. Christianity offers more than compelling doctrine. Christianity’s greatest gift to the world is God’s ultimate gift, the Person Jesus Christ, who has united Himself with us as sibling, marriage partner, parent, friend, and lover. As Eugene Peterson puts it in *The Message Bible*, He has moved into our neighborhood and made it His home (John 1:14). And even as He draws each one close to Himself, He closes the gap between us—no

matter what it is that divides—and restores wholeness to our broken relationships (Eph. 2:14-18).

It is this understanding of the importance of the “and” that undergirds the world church document, “Family Ministries—Working Policies” (General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, 2004). The core idea that permeates this defining piece is that Family Ministries is a ministry to the relationships that connect people: within the family unit (both in the church and in the community around us) and within the congregation as a larger family of God. This system’s approach is overtly referenced in statements like

The focus of Family Ministries is upon relationships. It is a ministry to the “and,” such as in husband *and* wife, parent *and* child. Thus this ministry concerns itself primarily with relational dynamics rather than the needs of individuals per se (p. 271).

Ultimately, it is the importance of the “and” that provides the reason for our existence as a department of the church and defines the essence of an effective Family Ministries at every level of organization.

When Family Ministries realizes its objectives, then, the relational connections that bind family members to one another are strengthened and enhanced. And, because of the power of ministry to the “and,” the influence of a ministry to families extends far beyond the outer boundaries of extended family—to church, neighborhood, nation and global community. As Ellen White (1942) succinctly expressed it: “The *restoration and uplifting of humanity begins in the home*. . . . The well-being of society, *the success of the church*, the prosperity of the nation, *depend upon home influences*” (p. 349 emphasis added).

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# *Biblical Perspectives on Marriage*

## **God's Original Plan for Marriage**

**The origin of marriage.** According to Scripture, marriage was instituted and divinely blessed as the closest human relationship. On the sixth day of creation week God performed the first wedding, bringing together the first man and woman as equal partners (Gen. 2:18-25). The divine intent was for the first marriage to be the pattern for all future marriage relationships: "Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother, and be joined to his wife and they shall become one flesh" (Gen. 2:24). During His earthly ministry, Christ reaffirmed the creation plan for marriage (Matt. 19:3-6; Mark 10:6-9).

**The defining elements of marriage.** In the Genesis account, marriage is a lifelong, exclusive union between a male and a female. It has three essential elements: 1) leaving father and mother; 2) being joined to each other; and 3) becoming one flesh. "Leaving" implies the creation of a distinct family unit publicly recognized by the couple's families, the community of faith and the society at large. "Being joined" refers to the mutual commitment of the couple expressed in a formal marriage covenant. "Becoming one flesh" describes both the sexual union and the process of growth in intimacy, unity, and fulfillment that God intends a couple to experience in all aspects of their lives.

**The purposes of marriage.** Marriage was instituted by God to meet the fundamental human need for love, companionship and community (Gen. 2:18). It is the divinely ordained setting for sexual intimacy and is intended to safeguard the virtues of purity and faithfulness (Gen. 2:24, 25). God designed the complementary relationship between the genders to enhance the development of human wholeness and a fuller understanding of each other and of God and His love. The first couple was given the shared task of caring for the earth and its resources (Gen. 1:26). They were also privileged to cooperate with God—reflecting His creativity, sharing in the joys of establishing family, providing for the care and nurture of children, and perpetuating the human race (Gen. 1:28). While divine revelation places a high value on children and expresses the joy to be found in parenting, Scripture never presents procreation as an obligation of every couple in order to please God (Matt 19:14; Ps 127:3). The narratives of Scripture illustrate how the tasks and priorities related to these purposes vary over time and circumstances for each marriage.

**The preeminence of marriage.** In Scripture, marriage is recognized as the cornerstone relationship in the family and takes precedence over all other human relationships. The biblical injunction to "leave father and mother" implies that the couple is sufficiently mature to establish and maintain a new family unit. They are to give priority to protecting the boundaries around their relationship, even as they receive support, nurture, or counsel from family members and others who can help them (Gen. 2:24; Song of Solomon; Matt. 19:6; Eph. 5:21-33).

**The covenant of marriage.** The foundational passage on marriage in Genesis 2:23, 24 describes marriage in covenantal language. In the divine plan for marriage, husband and wife as equals make a covenant with each other before God. In the biblical sense, this

covenant is a binding commitment that includes promises, privileges, and obligations. With solemn and sacred vows, the couple seals their covenant, pledging love, loyalty, and dedication to each other as long as they both live (Prov. 2:17; Mal. 2:14). The marriage covenant, which in many respects resembles God's covenant with His people, is grounded in divine grace (Ezek. 16:4-8; Eph. 1:6). Marriage as covenant implies mutual steadfast love, goodwill, fidelity, and commitment to permanence (Ps. 89:28-34; Song of Solomon 8:6, 7; Is. 54:5, 10; Jer. 32:40, 41; Hosea 2:19-23; 3:1-3; Rev. 21:2, 3).

**Sexual intimacy in marriage.** Sexual intimacy between a man and a woman in marriage is an exquisite and sacred gift granted to the human family by God at creation. It is an integral part of marriage, reserved for marriage only (Gen. 1:31; 2:24; Ex. 20:14; Prov. 5:15-17; Song of Solomon 4:12 - 5:1; 8:10; 1 Cor. 7:1-4; Heb. 13:4). The sexual relationship is designed by God as an experience of love, pleasure, celebration, and bonding between husband and wife, a blessing to be enjoyed without shame and received with thankfulness. Sexual intercourse and love-play are portrayed in Scripture as a wholesome, delightful expression of togetherness that promote an ever-increasing closeness, happiness, and security between husband and wife (Gen. 2:23-25; Prov. 5:18-20; Song of Solomon). A loving marriage relationship is God's chosen setting to provide a secure environment for the procreation, care and nurture of children (Gen. 1:28; 4:1; Eph. 6:4).

**Marriage as partnership.** In the creation account, God provided Adam with "a helper comparable to him" (Hebrew, *ezer kenegdo*), an "equal partner." Their partnership was one of equality, mutuality, companionship and interdependence. In this relationship their individuality was preserved (Gen. 2:18, 21-22). As partners, husband and wife bear equal responsibility in the marriage (Gen. 1:26-28). Their partnership is a wholistic one in which spiritual compatibility is vital. Marriage of believer to believer is the biblical ideal (Amos 3:3; 2 Cor. 6:14).

**Marriage as ministry.** When Genesis speaks of God's creation of male and female in His image, it bestows value and dignity on both husband and wife and establishes their place as His representatives in the midst of His creation. The couple bears witness to the relational nature and oneness of the Godhead in their responsiveness to each other, in their capacity for love, intimacy, unity, creativity and procreativity, and in their co-regency and stewardship over all that He has made. With God's blessing, they are empowered to bring order and harmony to their world and by their careful management to be accountable for the nurture and care of their family and their environment. As they respond to this calling, they minister the love and grace of God to one another and to their wider community. Thus they exalt His name and testify of His power (Gen. 1:26-28; 2:15, 18-25; 1 Chron. 16:8-13; Psa. 34:1-3; cf. John 13:35; 1 Tim 5:8; 1 John 3:14; 4:20).

**Marriage and the Sabbath.** Marriage and the Sabbath are the two divine institutions that have come down to humanity from Creation. These twin institutions are paired in Genesis 1-2: the Sabbath forms the climax of the first creation account (Gen. 1:1 – 2:3), while marriage constitutes the apex of the second, complementary account (Gen. 2:4-25). Each illuminates our understanding of the other. The Sabbath provides a special time for the married couple to renew and celebrate their commitment to each other, to enjoy fellowship



with one another and family, and to experience the many facets of Sabbath rest (Gen. 2:2, 3; Ex. 20:11; 31:16-17; Is. 58:13; Heb. 4).

### **Marriage and Human Transgression**

**Responsibility for transgression.** The Scripture holds both Adam and Eve accountable for the entrance of sin into the world (Gen. 3:6; Rom. 5:12-21; 1 Cor. 15:21, 22). They both denied responsibility for their behavior. Their failure to follow God's plan led to separation from Him and from one another (Gen. 3:8-13).

**Effects of the Fall on the nature of marriage.** The sin of Adam and Eve resulted in the loss of intimacy, mutuality, harmony and togetherness. Their relationship was marked by guilt, fear, shame, and blame (Gen. 3:7-12). As a result of the Fall, the delicate balance in their marriage was lost. Under the curse of sin, the woman would now struggle with an inordinate desire for connectedness, even as the man would assume supremacy over her (Gen. 3:16). The curse on the ground and the pain that would now be experienced in childbirth set the stage for strife over work, sexual desire, and procreation (Gen. 3:14-19). Many women came to be regarded and treated as property, even as slaves, and differences in power led to roles being rigidly prescribed and male domination and control being idealized (cf. Ex. 21:7-11; Esther 1:17-22). The sad effects of sin on marriage are often manifested in misunderstanding, neglect, conflict, alienation, and failure to love, accept and forgive one another. Violent and abusive behavior in human relationships are among the most destructive manifestations of the effect of sin (Gen. 4:8, 19, 23, 24; 6:11, 13; 2 Sam. 13:11-20; Ps. 11:5; Is. 58:4, 5; Rom. 13:10; Gal. 5:19-21).

**Effects of the Fall on the permanence of marriage.** God's original plan for the marriage covenant rests on principles of love, loyalty, exclusiveness, trust, and support upheld by both partners in obedience to God (Gen. 2:24; Matt. 19:6; 1 Cor. 13; Eph. 5:21-29; 1 Thess. 4:1-7). When these principles are violated, Scripture acknowledges that the marriage covenant is undermined and may even be destroyed (Deut. 24:1-4; Prov. 5:1-23; 6:20-35; Mal. 2:14; cf. Hos. 2:2-13). In addition to the death of a partner, other factors can lead to the destruction of a marriage. Sexual immorality, including a range of improper sexual behaviors, and desertion by an unbelieving partner are acknowledged in Scripture as circumstances that destroy the marriage covenant (Deut. 24:1-4; Matt. 5:32; 19:9; Rom. 7:2, 3; 1 Cor. 7:15). Other factors, such as abuse and violence in the family, also severely threaten and may break the marriage covenant (Mal. 2:14-16; cf. 1 Tim. 5:8).

**Dissolution of marriage.** Sin has wrought havoc with human relationships and has led to the breakdown and dissolution of many marriages. Annulment, repudiation (the putting away of a spouse), separation and divorce have become customary in many societies. Despite the social and legal support for these practices, they are not part of God's original plan for marriage (Matt. 19:8; Mark 10:5). Scripture expresses God's deep concern for families experiencing the trauma associated with all forms of marital dissolution. Laws were given in the Old Testament to limit the pain and damage such practices caused (Deut. 24:1-4; Hos. 2, 3; Mal. 2:13-16).

**Cultural distortions of the marriage ideal.** Since the entrance of sin, diverse cultural forms of family and sexual relationships have emerged that are not in keeping with

the pattern set in Genesis 1-2. Some of these relationships, such as concubinage and polygamy, though tolerated in Old Testament times, were nevertheless out of harmony with the divine design. While levirate marriage fulfilled specific purposes in ancient times, it did not become Christian practice. Cohabitation, consanguinity, incest and same-sex liaisons are clearly condemned (cf. Ex. 22:16; Deut. 22:23-29; 27:20-23; Lev. 18:7-18; 20:11-21; 2 Sam. 13:11-13).

### **Marriage and the Gospel**

**Restoration of God's creation intent for marriage.** From the beginning of the entrance of sin, God has been actively at work to restore everything that was lost in Eden (Gen. 3:15; Hos. 11:8, 9; Eph. 1:3-10). The Bible consistently upholds marriage as honorable (Heb. 13:4). Many laws were given to protect the marriage covenant (Ex. 20:14, 17; Lev. 18; Deut. 5:18, 21; 22:13-30; 24:1-4). God uses marriage imagery to illuminate the special intimate relationship between Himself and His people (Is. 54:5; 62:5; Jer. 3:1; Hos. 2:19-21). The Bible writers celebrate married love (Prov. 5:18-20). One entire book of Scripture reflects the Edenic themes of joy, delight, mutuality, safety, and oneness experienced in the marriage relationship (Song of Solomon).

**Redemptive work of Christ for marriage.** In Jesus Christ, the fullness of God's redemptive plan was revealed (John 1:16; Gal. 4:4; Eph. 1:10; Heb. 1:1-4). In Him, the kingdom of God has come to us, to rescue us from this present evil age and to enable us to be filled with all the fullness of God (Matt. 12:28; Luke 11:20; 17:21; Gal. 1:4; Eph. 3:17-19; Heb. 6:5). Because Christ has made all things new, the institution of marriage is now part of the new creation (2 Cor. 5:17). With His inaugural miracle at Cana, Christ honored and blessed marriage and thereby signaled His will to effect a radical transformation of the marital experience among believers (John 2:1-11). He reaffirmed the creation view of marriage as a lifelong covenant before God between a man and a woman (Matt. 19:4-6; Mark 10:6-9). He exalted marriage, as did the prophets, by frequently referring to Himself as a Bridegroom (Matt. 9:15; 25:1-13; Mark 2:19, 20; cf. John 3:29; 2 Cor. 11:2; Eph. 5:32; Rev. 19:6, 7).

**Effects of the gospel on the marriage relationship.** The gospel opens the eyes of marriage partners to see one another as persons of value and worth redeemed by Christ, each deserving of dignity and respect. This is manifested in the gracious way they love, accept and forgive each other, their willingness to listen, to understand and to connect with each other. It can also be seen in the way they reconcile their differences and resolve their conflicts. The gospel has the power to transform both natural and cultural practices, freeing each couple to explore their giftedness and develop a partnership compatible with God's original design for marriage.

Jesus taught and modeled the way of spiritual leadership, demonstrating the appropriate limits of power and authority in relationships. He cautioned His followers not to lust after power, or to allow others to exercise undue power over them, as this is out of keeping with the principles of His kingdom. With Jesus came a new paradigm that invited both men and women to reach their full potential and to be responsive to each other's needs. Service to one another, humility and respect, rather than domination and control,

characterize His followers (Matt. 18:1-4; 20:25-28; 23:1-12; Mark 9:35; 10:42-45; Luke 22:24-27; John 13:2-17; Phil. 2:1-8).

The marriage and family relationships of Christians are shaped by these gospel principles (Eph. 5:21-6:9; 1 Peter 3:1-7; 1 John 2:9, 10). At the cross of Christ humankind has been brought together and the barriers that have created inequalities between Jew and gentile, slave and free, male and female broken down (Rom. 2:11; 3:23; 1 Cor. 11:11; Gal. 3:28; Eph. 2:14-18). Unity in marriage is achieved by mutual respect and love. No one is superior (Eph. 5:21-28). Paul's understanding that husbands and wives have equal rights and responsibilities in their sexual relationship exemplifies the larger mutuality to which Christian couples are called in marriage (1 Cor. 7:3, 4). The entrance of sin led to the subjection of the wife to the husband, however, the gospel emphasizes the love and submission of all believers, including husbands and wives, to one another out of reverence for Christ (Eph 5:21). Scripture gives special attention to the accomplishment in marriage of this mutual submission of believers. Husbands and wives are to submit to one another, wives through their love, respect and honor for their husbands (Eph 5:33; Col. 2:18; Titus 2:4; 1 Peter 3:1, 2), and husbands through their self-sacrificing love for their wives (1 Cor. 7:3, 4; Eph. 5:21, 24, 25). Husbands are called to honor their wives as fellow heirs of salvation in a grace-filled marriage (1 Peter 3:7). The principles of the gospel preclude either husband or wife assuming rulership within marriage.

**Singleness as an option.** The gospel allows for both singleness and marriage as valid options for adult living, including ministry as single persons like Jesus and the apostle Paul (1 Cor. 7:7, 8). While some, by choice or circumstance, are single, they may experience wholeness as individuals, connect with others through family and friends, and bring glory to God as single men and women (Matt. 19:12; Mark 3:33-35; 1 Cor. 7:7, 8). Sexual intimacy, however, is reserved for marriage (Prov. 5:15-19; Song of Sol. 2:6,7; 3:5; 8:3,4; 4:12; 8:8-10; Hos. 3:3).

### **The Role of the Church**

As the body of Christ, the church is called to be a faith community that is inclusive of all members, both single and married. In building a sense of community, the church concerns itself with strengthening all relationships, especially the marriage relationship which is foundational to family, church and society. Following the example of biblical leaders, those who lead God's people today are responsible for upholding God's ideal and proclaiming the divine will for marriage. Such ministry seeks to prepare children and youth in the family, church, and school for single or married adult life. It encourages couples to make wise marital choices, strengthens relational skills, and facilitates marital commitment and growth.

Whenever marital distress or breakdown occurs, the church as the family of God seeks to listen and understand, and to minister to all involved. The church respects the couple's responsibility for making decisions regarding the future of their relationship. It also provides encouragement and support for them and their families in their hurt and pain, and connects them with resources as they experience reconciliation or grieve the loss of significant relationships. If the marriage does fail, the church accepts the responsibility to

minister God's grace and forgiveness and shows understanding and compassion as a healing community.

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# *Biblical Perspectives on the Parent-Child Relationship*

## **The Divine Origin of Parenting**

Human beings, fashioned in the image of God as male and female, were given the capacity of procreation by the Creator. The instruction to “be fruitful,” alongside “fill the earth and subdue it,” teach us that parenting belongs to God’s original plan for the human stewardship of creation (Gen. 1:28). As husbands and wives within the covenant of marriage, men and women were empowered to bring forth children who also carry God’s image. Mothers and fathers were to share equally in the joys and duties of parenthood (Gen. 1:26-28; 9:1, 7). This power to procreate is one of the highest privileges given to human beings. It is to be thoughtfully considered and undertaken responsibly.

Though it may be inferred from Scripture that marriages are generally intended to yield offspring, the Bible never presents procreation as an obligation of every couple in order to please God. However, divine revelation considers children as blessed gifts from the Lord. The Bible expresses the joy to be found in parenting (Gen. 4:1; 17:2-4; Ps. 127:3; 128:3, 4; Matt. 19:14). The experience of rearing children helps parents to better understand God and to grow in love, compassion, caring, humility and unselfishness (Ps 103:13; Luke 11:13).

## **God as Parent**

Scripture likens God to a loving parent, thereby elevating the human parental role. A divine template for the responsibilities entrusted to parents can be seen in the attitudes and actions of God toward His children. God cares for the deepest needs of His children (2 Sam. 7:14; Jer. 31:9; Matt. 6:9, 23:37; 2 Cor. 6:18). He protects, helps, comforts and encourages them (Ps. 28:7, 8; 33:20; 46:1; 91:1, 2; Is. 40:11, 29-31; 41:10; John 14:26; 2 Cor. 1:3, 4; Phil. 4:13). From the beginning of human existence, God has known and accepted each individual completely, loved and cared for them as children, and responded to their requests (Ps. 139:13-16; Jer. 1:5; Matt. 7:9-11; John 3:16, 1 Pet. 5:7). God respects the choices His children make, while ever guiding them in the best direction. (Deut. 30:19-20). He instructs, disciplines and empowers them to realize their fullest potential—mentoring them, correcting them and working in partnership with them as they grow to maturity (Ex. 17:1-7; Deut. 1:31; Ps. 4:8; 12:5-7; 46:1; 68:5, 6; 91:1-16; Prov. 3:11, 12; Matt 6:25-34; John 14:12-13; Eph. 1:3-10; 4:13; Phil. 4:19; 1Tim. 6:17). When they fail, He graciously forgives and restores them to a right relationship with Himself (Luke 15:11-32, 2 Cor. 5:16-21). He never forsakes nor forgets them (Isaiah 49:15).

## **The Nature of the Parent-Child Relationship**

**The importance of children as persons.** God places great value on children (1 Kings 17:17-23; Ps. 127:3-5). In His earthly life, Jesus treated children with dignity and respect (Matt. 19:14, 15), welcomed their spontaneous response of joy and praise (Matt. 21:9, 15, 16) and found in their simple trust, powerful object lessons of the faith He yearned to inspire in all His followers (Matt. 18:1-5). Jesus told His disciples that in honoring and accepting children, they in fact honored and accepted God (Mark 9:37). He strongly condemned any action that would

harm children (Matt. 18:6).

**Need for parental guidance.** From the beginning, God placed children in the care of a father and a mother (Gen. 1:26-28). In God's creation design, both parents would provide the guidance needed by children (Gen. 28:7; Ex. 20:12; Lev. 19:3; Deut. 5:16; 21:18, 22:15; 27:16; Judges 13:12; Prov. 1:8; Matt. 15:4; Eph. 6:1-3). Scripture suggests that the effectiveness of parental leadership is closely related to the strength of the marital partnership. A healthy marriage sets the tone for a healthy relationship with children and enhances the parents' God-given authority (Gen. 2:18; 27:1-46; Eph. 5:21-6:4). Even in less-than-ideal circumstances, single parents may rely on God and others for help to parent their children well (2 Tim. 1:5).

**Parenting style.** The parents' style of relating to their children has a profound effect on the short- and long-term health and well-being of their offspring as well as their capacity to enjoy close relationships with God and others and to take up full adult responsibility. Scripture presents two essential components to an effective parenting style—loving kindness and appropriate limits (Gen. 37:3-36; Judges 14:1-3; 1 Sam. 2:12-36; 3:13; Titus 2:4).

**Parenting for interdependence.** Growth and development from infancy to adulthood is acknowledged in Scripture as normative for human beings (Gen. 25:27; Luke 1:80; cf. 1 Peter 2:2). "Childish ways" are to be left "behind" (1 Cor. 13:11; 14:20). A healthy approach to child-rearing focuses not only on meeting the child's present needs, but also on preparing them for adulthood—thus creating the best likelihood for their successful passage from immaturity to maturity (Prov. 19:18; cf. Jer. 29:11). The process of "leaving" father and mother—movement on the part of the young person from dependence to independence and eventual interdependence with others as a responsible member of family and society—is facilitated by parents' "letting go" (Gen. 2:24; Eze. 18:1-4; Matt. 19:4-6; Mark 7:9-13; Luke 2:49; 15:11-13).

## **The Responsibilities of Parents to Their Children**

**Natural and special revelation on parenting.** Scripture acknowledges that human beings generally possess natural, God-given parenting impulses. A mother stays by her baby (Is. 49:15) and provides comfort (Is. 66:13). A father carries his tired son (Deut. 1:31) and gives wholesome food to his hungry child (Matt. 7:9, 10). In His Word, God has also provided parents with special revelation about the responsibilities of parenting (cf. Deut. 6:4-9; Prov. 22:6; Eph. 6:4). Parents who follow God look to Him for guidance (Judges 13:12). Scripture contains specific directives regarding child-rearing (Deut. 6:6-7; Eph. 6:4), stories of both positive and negative parent-child relationships (Gen. 27; Ex. 2; Luke 2), passages using parental imagery for God's relationship with His people (2 Sam. 7:14; Is. 49:15; Hos. 11:1-4; Rom. 8:14-16) and other insights into human nature and relationships that provide essential lessons for parents (Prov. 15:1; 22:6).

**Providing for needs.** A crucial responsibility of parents is to give attention to their children's needs at every stage of their development (1 Sam. 1:23; 2:18-20, 26; Ex. 2:1-9; Phil. 2:4). God intends that the needs of every child for love, security, belonging and significance will be met primarily within the context of the family. Throughout their childhood, children need parents and other adults to affirm them, to protect them and to provide for their physical, emotional, social, intellectual and spiritual needs (Deut. 6:4-9, 20-25; 10:17-19; Prov. 13:24; 22:6; 23:13; Is. 1:17, 23; 49:15; Hos. 11:1-4; Matt. 7:11; Luke 15:11-32; Eph. 6:4; Col. 3:21; 1

Tim. 5:8). Careful consideration by parents of their ability to provide for the full range of these needs must influence decision-making about whether to bear or adopt children and how many to have (cf. 1 Tim. 5:8). The needs of children and the effects of change upon them must also be considered whenever major family decisions are made (Gen. 33:13, 14; Matt. 18:6, 10).

**Creating an environment where faith can flourish.** Each child needs the Savior (Acts 4:12; Rom. 3:23). God desires that every young person come to know and love Him (John 17:24; 2 Cor. 5:20; 2 Peter 3:9). He calls parents to join Him in cultivating the faith of youth in Jesus as Savior and Lord (Deut. 6:4-9; Judges 13:8; Ps. 78:5-8; Mark 10:13; Eph. 6:4). In the nurturing environment of a family, where love is freely offered and received, children are most likely to develop the capacity for close relationships with God and others (Gen. 18:19; Deut. 6:4-9; Prov. 22:6; 2 Tim. 1:5). Primary objectives of Christian parenting, therefore, are to create a warm, nurturing environment in which to introduce their children to Jesus and to share and model the principles of His kingdom in attractive and understandable ways.

As children feel love and grow in their understanding of the Christian gospel, there is an increased likelihood that they will embrace Christian values (Deut. 6:4-10; Matt. 28:19, 20; Luke 2:52; John 8:31; 13:35; 1 Cor. 11:1; Phil. 3:17). When growing children respond with personal faith in Christ, their lives will reflect more and more the qualities of His character (Rom. 8:1, 4, 29; Gal. 5:16, 25; Col. 3:10) and maturity of faith in Him (Is. 54:13; Eph. 4:11-15; 1 Thess. 5:23; 2 Pet. 1:5; 3:18). This maturity manifests itself in an appropriate self-assurance, self-respect and self-discipline. It also demonstrates itself in a positive view of God and healthy connections with others (Matt. 7:12, 22:37-39; Col. 1:10-12; 2 Tim. 1:7; 2 Pet. 1:5-8).

**Building emotional connections.** Loving relationships are foundational to emotional well-being (John 13:34, 35; Rom. 12:10; 1 Cor. 13; 1 John 3:23; 4:7, 11, 12). Parents are enjoined to nurture their children emotionally (Eph. 6:4; Col. 3:21; Titus 2:4), thus developing their capacity to understand and respond to God as a God of love. Through warm relationships with faithful, Christ-like parents and the support of other believers, children are given opportunity to experience God's grace and to be drawn into a saving relationship with Jesus (Deut. 6:4-9; Matt. 19:14; Luke 15:11-31; Eph. 6:4; 2 Tim. 1:5).

**Teaching and instruction.** Parents are given responsibility for instructing their children, guiding them in the process of making wise choices, helping them to develop as persons and to become contributing members of the community (Prov. 1:8; 4:1-11; 6:20; 22:6; Eph. 6:4). Instruction in the Word of God is central to the wholistic nurture of the child (Deut. 6:4-9; 2 Tim. 1:5; 3:14, 15). Parents whose lives reflect the values they profess greatly enhance the effectiveness of their teaching (Deut. 6:17, 18; Prov. 14:26; 20:7). When spiritual heritage is not intentionally kept alive for the next generation, there is a high risk that children may choose non-Christian values from the culture around them rather than embracing the faith of their parents (cf. Judges 2:6-12).

**Disciplining in love.** Scripture gives parents the responsibility for the discipline of children (Prov. 3:11, 12; 13:24). God intends for this discipline to be an act of love that is redemptive in its intent and effects. It helps children recognize their mistakes and weaknesses and calls them to adopt Christian values and behaviors (Prov. 3:12; 6:23; 19:18, 19; 29:17; Rev. 3:19). The Scripture offers instruction for verbal correction (2 Sam. 12; Ps. 39:11; Luke 17:2; 1

Cor. 4:14, 15; 2 Tim. 3:16), correction through the use of consequences (Prov. 6:23-29; Luke 15:11-32) and physical correction (Prov. 13:24; 22:15; 23:13, 14; 29:15). The major emphasis of Scriptural teaching on the correction of children is, however, placed on reasoning with them and allowing them to experience the consequences of their own choices (Prov. 1:8; 2:1-5, 9; 3:1; 5:1-14).

Though some biblical passages regarding the discipline of children may seem very harsh (Ex. 21:15, 17; Deut. 21:18-21; Prov. 23:13, 14), followers of Christ interpret all of Scripture's prescriptions for parenting in the light of His grace. Jesus' warning not to cause little ones to stumble, and Paul's counsel not to embitter children, admonish parents and all who work with children to avoid any treatment that might crush the spirit of a child (Matt. 18:6; Eph. 6:4; Col. 3:21). Consistently in His teaching Jesus calls Christian parents and the church community to move beyond mere reactive punishment to apply the principles of the gospel in all relationships with young and old (Matt. 5:38-15; 22:34-40; Luke 15:11-32; 2 Cor. 5:18-20; Eph. 6:4).

### **Responsibilities of Children to Their Parents**

From their earliest years, children are exhorted to honor and respect their parents (Ex. 20:12; Prov. 1:8, 9; 3:1-3; 23:24, 25; Rom. 1:30; 2 Tim. 3:2). They have responsibilities to their parents throughout all stages of life (Gen. 47:11, 12). In childhood, responsibility to parents includes obedience (Eph. 6:1-3), so long as this does not conflict with faithfulness to God (Matt. 10:34-39; Acts 5:29). In adulthood, when individuals "leave father and mother" (Gen. 2:24; Matt. 19:5, Mark 10:6, 7, Eph. 5:31), the obligation to honor and respect their parents continues, though the nature of their relationship changes. When parents can no longer care for themselves, it is the duty of their children to care for them (Gen. 44:32-34; Prov. 23:22; Mark 7:6-13; John 19:26-27). Lack of honor and respect for parents is condemned in Scripture. It undermines community and diminishes the blessings promised to faithful children (1 Chron. 5:1, Prov. 19:26; 20:20). Failure to care for one's family is likened to a denial of faith (1 Tim. 5:8).

### **The Supportive Role of the Church in Parenting**

Many parents seek guidance as they assume the important responsibilities of parenthood (Judges 13:8, 12; Matt. 19:13-15). God intends the church to provide education and support to parents as they nurture their children (1 Cor. 12:27, 28; 2 Tim. 1:2, 5, 13). Scripture calls believers to instruct one another (Rom. 15:14; Col. 3:16; Heb. 10:25), care for one another (1 Cor. 12:25) and build up one another (Eph. 4:29; 1 Thess. 5:11). Believers are encouraged to bear one another's burdens (Col. 3:12, 13), pray for one another (James 5:16) and refrain from judging one another (Rom. 14:13). When children are drawn into the life of the community of faith—sharing in its fellowship, worship, and spiritual heritage—they are helped to develop a personal relationship with God (Ex. 12:26, 27; Deut. 6:6-9, 20-25; Josh. 4:4-7; Ps. 78:1-8; 1 Tim 4:11-16).



# *A Pastor Speaks Out on FM Special Emphasis Days*

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The church calendar includes a special time for the family: Christian Home and Marriage Week. If properly planned and prepared, this can provide rich experiences and growth for the church and community. There are churches where the Christian Home and Marriage Week is a regular part of their schedule of events. Recommendations in this article give these churches an opportunity to give a new life to the event. At the same time, churches which do not follow this practice are invited to take the first step now. The objectives for this period can be grouped in four areas: gratitude and worship; confession, healing and intercession; education; and service.

The local church should not be seen as the only place for this event. Everything starts with the individual. The heart of the person is the source for our family-centered experiences of faith and love. The next level is our own family. The third is the local church and finally we move into community—friends and neighbors, or even the public square. Here we have the privilege to express our beliefs and to prove the transforming power of grace.

## **Gratitude, Worship and Celebration**

The family is one of the most beautiful gifts God gave us. This special week and the preparation period are an excellent opportunity to refresh our thinking on family, to rediscover God's original plan, to search for new ways to accomplish this plan against the current conditions, to recall beautiful memories about family, to freely express our gratitude toward our Creator and toward members of our family.

On the *personal* level, this is a time to renew our understanding of God's plan for relationships and family, to express our admiration and to strengthen our confidence in it. This is a time to be grateful, to remember the blessings, the joys, the healing experiences and all tokens of love we have experienced in our families.

Having made this personal preparation, we are now able to come close to each other as *family* members in order to express our contentment, to tell and to listen to family stories, to browse through photo albums, to search through old boxes and the dusty attic for artifacts which are heavy with memories, to draw a family tree, to read letters and journal entries from the old times and to write something new.

Next station is the *church*. A special family service should be announced early enough to allow families to attend and to be seated together. The sanctuary should be

decorated to suggest this is a day of celebration and the whole atmosphere will convey an affirming message for the family. A service of praise and thanksgiving may include a cluster of Bible texts and songs on the joys and blessings of the family, along with stories told by families—the most aged and the most recent of them, or families celebrating happy events—and words of appreciation from families to families which have been a blessing for them. The foyer or even the sanctuary can become a one-week exhibition hall with family photos (properly enlarged), drawings by children on a family subject, artifacts to illustrate the history of the families (old family Bibles with dedications and annotations, wedding invitations and pictures, dried bridal bouquets, objects kept from generation to generation). Children and youth from the church would be happy and proud to be asked to take care of the necessary preparations.

And finally we will move to the *local community*. This family celebration in the church can become the family celebration for the whole town, honoring worthy families either in the sanctuary or in the public hall. In this way the church contributes in a significant way to the affirmation of the family in a time when the bizarre, the outrageous and sinful types of relationships usually receive public attention.

There are plenty of negative messages and memories about families; some of them are connected with the church and consequently with God as well. We have the privilege to create positive emotions, favorable experiences, soon to become happy memories and persistent hopes. This is exactly what the Gospel is all about. “Like every other one of God’s good gifts entrusted to the keeping of humanity, marriage has been perverted by sin; but it is the purpose of the gospel to restore its purity and beauty” (*Thoughts from the Mount of Blessing*, p. 64).

### **Compassion, Healing and Forgiveness**

In family we sometimes are easily hurt, even abused. Here we experience the first disappointments and the ultimate humiliations and losses. Some of those coming to the church listen to glowing stories on happy families and these only make them even more bitter, shameful and desperate. We remember how the family celebrations staged by Elkanah triggered crises of depression and helplessness for Hannah.

Our heavenly Father is “the Father of mercies and God of all comforts” (2 Cor. 1:3, *NKJV*). The Old Testament urges us: “Comfort, yes, comfort My people” (Is. 40:1, *NKJV*) and Jesus tenderly invites us: “Come to Me, all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest” (Matt. 11:28, *NKJV*).

On the *individual* level, we have the privilege to place our problems and our losses before our God, to allow ourselves to be searched by Him, and to put all our burden on the great Burdenbearer. Our pain makes us aware of our needs, leads us to admit our failures and to learn from them. Paul speaks of a “godly sorrow” which produces repentance leading to salvation (cf. 2 Cor. 7:10).

When we go through this process, involving God in our personal grief, receiving from Him comfort and wisdom, we can move to the *family* and further to the *church* with tenderness of heart and empathy. We are “able to comfort those who are in any trouble, with

the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God” (2 Cor.1:4, *NKJV*). A week of emphasis for families cannot overlook the pain of the families—losses by death, separation or divorce, estrangement, abuse and violence, infidelity, departure from God and the church. Nobody should suffer alone and nobody should feel that he or she either leaves the pain outside when coming to the church or they had better not come at all. We are members of the same body of Christ and the suffering of one member is the pain of the whole body, beginning with the Head and continuing with us.

The special emphasis days could be a time to mention the names of those who died in the recent past and to allow loved ones to express their love and grief for them. A cluster of Bible texts and songs acknowledging the tragedy of the human experience while placing this in the larger context of hope can release the forces of freedom, healing and new hope.

The next step will move us to those who suffer outside of our church circle. There is such an immensity of pain and suffering in the *community*—untold, unheard, misunderstood and unhealed. A phone call and a visit to the grieving neighbors, with the desire to experience with them their grief, their shame or their frustration—this can be a blessing for them and for us as well. “It is better to go to a house of mourning. . . .by a sad *countenance* the heart is made better” (Eccl. 7:2, 3, *NKJV*). An invitation to a meal in our home, offering a loaf of home baked bread or a basket of fruits from our garden convey the message that life goes on in spite of loss and we can be fully alive even “through the valley of the shadow of death” (Ps. 23:4, *NKJV*).

## Learning

The quality of learning is enhanced when this is done in the atmosphere of authenticity and sensibility created when we mourn with those who mourn and rejoice with those who rejoice. There are two dangers to be aware of in giving family life instruction or education. The first danger is a legalistic, judgmental attitude. Teaching and advice is too often given to families in ways that leave those who already enjoy a beautiful relationship in their family very well satisfied, but those with a troubled marriage or family likely more disappointed and desperate. They hear the verdict: “For to everyone who has, more will be given, and he will have abundance; but from him who does not have, even what he has will be taken away” (Mat. 25:29, *NKJV*). In order to really help, the instruction needs to be imbued with vigorous hope, be realistic and sensitive to the real life conditions and possibilities of the listeners.

The second danger is the conveying of clichés and opinions, uncritically reporting our life experiences, or passing on notions and ideas that we have absorbed indiscriminately. We are warned by Paul: “And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind” (Rom.12:2, *NKJV*). Article 23 (Marriage and the Family) from the Belief Statement and the first three pages of Chapter 15 in the *Church Manual* express the basic understanding of the church on the subject. As *individuals* and *families*, it would be good to return often to these texts and to confront our thinking with what has been carefully formulated and officially voted by the world church. We communicate our ideas, opinions and attitudes toward family issues in many ways, many times without being aware of it. Intentionally or not, we always communicate a theology of the family. And it is so important that our thinking is systematically informed and shaped by the best sources.

*Ministry of Healing, The Adventist Home* and *Child Guidance* are filled with light and power for a variety of situations and convey hope in the power of grace.

Based on the foundation built in personal and family study, the *church* members can enhance their awareness toward family issues, develop greater consistency in evaluating them and create a support network. Each year in my church young families come together for one quarter during the Sabbath School to study together Bible teachings on family. Gradually they reach a higher level of unity of ideas and action. Eventually this is expanded into the *community*. In a time of disorientation, with the unusual and outrageous receiving most of the attention, we have a unique opportunity to manifest the true patterns for family life and to serve as moral guides for many.

### Service

Families grow strong and healthy by service—among the members of the nuclear and the extended *family as well as* in the *church* and in *society*. A special week for the family is a good time to rediscover the joy of ministering together to those in need. Children should experience early in life the joy of helping others. In this way the torch of service will be passed to the next generation.

To conclude, without proper preparation at the individual and family level, a special time for families in church, even if well organized, is not likely to leave lingering effects. It will resemble the bush of Jonah: it “came up in a night and perished in a night” (Jonah 4:10). The Lord is as willing to bless families today as He did during His early ministry, and His blessings have lasting results. “The mothers were comforted. They returned to their homes strengthened and blessed by the words of Christ. They were encouraged to take up their burdens with new cheerfulness, and to work hopefully for their children. . . . He knew that these children would listen to Him and accept Him as their Redeemer . . .” (*Desire of Ages*, pp. 513-515). May these lasting blessings be bestowed on individuals, families, churches and communities as a result of the Christian Home and Marriage Week.

	<b>Personal</b>	<b>Family</b>	<b>Church</b>	<b>Community</b>
<b>Gratitude, Worship, Celebration</b>	Reflecting on Bible texts speaking of the joys of family. Renewing memories of blessings received in the family.	One evening of family stories and memories. Collecting memorabilia (photo albums, objects). A ceremony of gratitude. Family tree.	Decorating the sanctuary, family memorabilia on display. Seating families together. Bible texts, hymns and testimonies of gratitude for the family. Rededication of families.	Joint project with the city hall. Decorating a public place or the sanctuary. Identifying and affirming respected families in the community. Benediction.

	<b>Personal</b>	<b>Family</b>	<b>Church</b>	<b>Community</b>
<b>Compassion, Healing, Forgiveness</b>	Identifying personal loss in the family, prayerful reflection on loss. 2 Cor.7:10	Discussing losses in the family during last year. Asking and extending forgiveness. Words and gestures of empathy. Placing losses in the context of faith.	Identifying and presenting losses in the families of the church for the last year. Compassion in words in actions. Intercessory prayer.	Identifying and visiting families with losses in the community, especially those lacking social support. Presenting them in a public event. Intercessory prayer.
<b>Learning</b>	Prayerfully reflecting on Bible stories and teachings on family. Confronting personal opinion with what the Bible says on the subject.	Sharing together what has been discovered by members of the family. Family council. Selecting discussion subject for the future.	Reading and discussing Chapter 15 in the Church Manual. Presenting and discussing official statements of the church on family-related issues.	Using public venues for seminars and symposia on current issues and presenting the message of the Bible. Using media for making our message better known.
<b>Service</b>	Involvement in action projects.	Involving all members of the family (especially the younger ones).	Involving all age groups in service for needy families.	Initiating projects to help families in need and involving members of the community.

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# *The Foolish Father and the Economics of Grace*

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By both ancient and modern standards, the exemplary father in the Parable of the Prodigal Son is a foolish parent. Nonetheless his foolish actions reveal an economy of grace that opens the door to repentance and reconciliation, by forgiving debts and exercising unaccountable generosity.

The famously misnamed Parable of the Prodigal Son gained new meaning for me when our children left home. Perhaps that milestone was the point when I realized that my parental influence was coming to an end; the mistakes that I had made, both sins of commission and of omission, were irreversible, and their effects would be played out in ways far beyond my control. When, in a chastened frame of mind, I reread the parable from the father's perspective I came to a liberating realization: the exemplary prodigal father was, to all appearances, a resounding failure as a parent. His oldest son was outwardly compliant, but inwardly seething with resentment and rage. His youngest son was out of control. Jesus' story does not tell us what convinced the father to agree to his son's insulting demand for his share of the inheritance, but I can imagine. Did the tension in the house become unbearable? Did the father realize that nothing he could do would change his son's behaviour? Did he decide simply to let the son experience the consequences of his decisions? We don't know. But surely we can surmise that the father's household was not a happy home. His sons were rebellious and his relationship with them almost non-existent.

By almost any standards, either ancient or modern, the father in Jesus' story was far from a model dad. He would not have qualified as a leader in the early house churches, for instance, falling far short of the requirement that a bishop "must manage his own household well, keeping his children submissive and respectful in every way; for if a man does not know how to manage his own household, how can he care for God's church?" (1 Tim 3:4-5). And he is a disaster from the perspective of Jewish wisdom as well. Some time early in the second century BCE, Ben Sira gave the following advice:

To son or wife, to brother or friend, do not give power over yourself, as long as you live; and do not give your property to another, in case you change your mind and must ask for it.

While you are still alive and have breath in you, do not let anyone take your place.

For it is better that your children should ask from you than that you should look to the hand of your children.

Excel in all that you do; bring no stain upon your honor.

At the time when you end the days of your life, in the hour of your death, *then* distribute your inheritance.

(Sirach 33:20-24)

What could be more clear and reasonable than Ben Sira's advice? Do not give your inheritance to your children before you die, lest you end up begging from them. Yet the father in Jesus' story does exactly the opposite: distributing this son's inheritance early, he lets his sons have power over him and he abdicates his own status and honor in his culture. He also absorbs the loss of a substantial part of his property, probably including the sale of that portion of his land that was willed to the younger son.

It would be misleading, furthermore, to picture the father as secure in his wealth, impervious to loss. To the contrary, he exhibits a breathtaking vulnerability to the greatest loss of all, the loss of his child. What is material wealth compared to that? Refusing to bind his son with the cords of the inheritance, he lets him go, but his heart is broken, not hardened. He constantly scans the horizon for the son's return. He listens for the sound of his feet. "When the son was still a long way off, the father saw him. . . ." He eases the son's humiliating return to the village by humbling himself instead, throwing aside his dignity and running down the street to greet him. Cutting short his son's confession, demanding no explanations and imposing no conditions, instead this prodigal father gives his wayward son his ring, his robe and the fatted calf. We are accustomed to praise his extravagance, but in Ben Sira's terms he is weak and shameful, a wimp of a father.

For some reason, I never heard about these parental shortfalls when I first studied Jesus' parable. The first time I taught it in a church I was a naïve young mother who could not imagine such tension between parent and child. My parishioners were older and more seasoned in the ways of childrearing than

I. Innocently I asked, "What would you do if this were your son?" I was unprepared for their answers: "I wouldn't let him in the door until he had paid back every cent." "I'd make him sign a covenant agreeing to abide by the rules of my house." "Well, I *might* let him in, but there would be hell to pay!" and so forth. Clearly throwing a party was the last thing on their minds. I was astounded. Did these parents think they knew better than God, whom the prodigal father obviously represents?

Well, apparently so. Clearly these modern parents, Ben Sira, and the author of 1 Timothy all have an idea of what makes good parenting, and the prodigal father does not fit the picture. He is too lax, too generous, too forgiving. What this father lacks in parental management skills, he makes up in passion. It is as if the emotions he feels for his child override all prudence and wisdom. And so despite the fact that there still is tension in the family after the younger son returns, he insists on celebrating, "for this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found" (Luke 15:24).

What are we to make of such reckless generosity, which goes against all the canons of common sense? In the first place, we should note that the father's abundance is what enables the son's return. When the son finally "comes to himself" in the pigsty, he says, "How many of my father's hired servants have bread enough and to spare" (Luke 15:17). It is the remembrance that in his father's house there is "enough and to spare" that brings the son home and opens the door to reconciliation.

As a parable of what has been lost and now is found, Jesus' story connects with the two preceding parables of the lost sheep and the lost coin. As such, and only

as such, it speaks of repentance. There is nothing here about repentance as a moral turn-around. Lost sheep and lost coins do not make moral turn-arounds, nor does the young wastrel in his time of need. His motives are unclear and to all appearances his reasoning is calculating. All that matters is that he knows where to find help, and he comes home. This restoration to relationship, this return to a place of belonging, defines repentance in these parables of the lost and found, and it is made possible only by the character of the father.

In the second place, as a parable of the father's prodigality, Jesus' story connects with the disturbing story of the dishonest steward that immediately follows it (Luke 16:1-9). What the steward and the father have in common is that they recklessly give away what does not "belong" to them. The dishonest steward "forgives" debts owed to his master; the prodigal father gives away property that is willed to his elder son. But the father does more than this: he calls on his older son to exhibit the same generosity. The subtext of his words to his son—"all that is mine is yours"—is "join with me in giving it away" (Luke 15:31).

The father's foolishness and the steward's dishonesty both demonstrate a reckless abandon that suggests God's economy has a different kind of accounting than ours. In God's accounting, the question at the great assize will not be, "Did you balance the books?" but, "Did you give everything away" to make "friends for yourselves"? (Luke 16:19). So, in the parable of the prodigal father, the initial key to the son's "repentance" is the father's abundance, and the means of their reconciliation is the free gift of relationship that the father gives as he

runs to meet his son. This completely new domestic economy is no longer conducted according to the laws of inheritance, but rather by a bewildering generosity in which there is always enough to go around. It is not "fair" or "equal" when the wastrel son is invited in to share the older son's part in the inheritance. The father simply is not keeping count. Rather, he operates by an economy of grace, in contrast with the zero sum economy of the elder brother, and also of Ben Sira. In this father's household, as in the household of the "dishonest servant" who forgives half of the debts owed to his master, wisdom and faithfulness are exercised by forgiveness, reconciliation and unaccountable generosity.

We do not hear the end of this family story; it remains to be worked out in the communities of the church and of the world. Will the brothers be reconciled? Does the younger son complete his "repentance" by accepting the free gift of reconciliation given by the father? Does the older son recognize and accept the father's generosity and welcome his brother? In the arena of acceptance created by the father's grace, do the sons come to see the destructive selfishness of their own attitudes and actions, to confess from the heart? Or do they coexist in a state of cold war, an orchestrated and carefully constrained dance around the hurts and bitterness that are the legacy of the past?

We don't know. But we can and must ask, how is reconciliation possible if not through such extravagant, imprudent foolishness? The son can never repay his debt; cancel it. The old rights of inheritance will impede the inclusion of the alienated son; override them, and there will be enough to go around. This is what



God's foolish kingdom looks like. It is not about what is earned or deserved, but what is freely given.

In a broken world we live with the carefully constrained dance. We value the wisdom of Sirach, warning foolish fathers against giving too much to equally foolish children. This prudence is all part of raising kids to live in a "real world" with real life consequences. It is a part of good parenting. But Scripture also reveals a deeper wisdom that looks foolish according to this received wisdom: "The foolishness of God is wiser than human wisdom" (1 Cor 1:25). Like the foolishness of the father in the parable, this foolishness looks weak as well. It accepts humiliation, it undergoes rejection, but it cannot let go.

The prophet Hosea speaks of the same wisdom. Repeatedly God recounts Israel's apostasy and foretells their punishment: "The sow the wind, and they shall reap the whirlwind" (Hosea 8:7); "You have plowed wickedness, you have reaped injustice, you have eaten the fruit of lies. Because you have trusted in your power and in the multitude of your warriors, therefore the tumult of war shall rise against your people, and all your fortresses shall be destroyed" (Hosea 10:13-14).

But then the Lord's compassion for Israel overwhelms all other considerations:

When Israel was a child, I loved him, and  
 out of Egypt I called my son.  
 The more I called them, the more they  
 went from me . . . .  
 How can I give you up, Ephraim?  
 How can I hand you over, O Israel?  
 How can I make you like Admah?  
 How can I treat you like Zeboiim?  
 My heart recoils within me;  
 My compassion grows warm and tender.

I will not execute my fierce anger,  
 I will not again destroy Ephraim:  
 For I am God and no mortal,  
 The Holy One in your midst,  
 And I will not come in wrath  
 (Hosea 11:1-2, 8-9)

There is a tension in Scripture—even in this one prophetic book—between the wisdom that links disobedience with punishment, and the divine prerogative that sets that wisdom aside. In the parable of foolish father, we see a tension between the social expectations of good parenting, and the father's profligate generosity and forgiveness. Ben Sira's common sense wisdom of keeping one's power, status, and property, seems more realistic in a world where it seems that there is not enough to go around. The father in the parable, on the other hand, seems wildly out of touch with reality, just as, to the prevailing mindset of realpolitik, forgiving the debts of third world countries, and working for reconciliation rather than retribution, seem naïve and futile. But the foolish wisdom of the father's love, whether in Luke's parable or in Hosea, recognizes a hard truth that we ignore at our peril: the son is unable to repent and repay his debt; the elder brother is too steeped in bitterness and loss to accept his brother back; the nation is too far gone to turn back to the Lord. What then? In the parable, the father refuses to demand an accounting.

Instead, he gives the gift of his relationship, of a home in which eventually the son may be able to be truthful about the past. He can do this because, in the economy of grace, there is enough and to spare—enough forgiveness, enough honour, enough clothing, enough food. This is divine wisdom, masquerading as foolishness. Or, as God declares in Hosea:



# *Making the Church a Safe Place*

by Ardis Stenbakken

While growing up in the Adventist Church, I never heard of abuse. Not that there was none, but I was fortunate to grow up in a safe home. No one talked about abuse then—not in the home, not in the church.

But I have grown older and wiser. And I have discovered that the church is not always a safe place. I have met and heard from victims of all kinds of abuse. When I became involved in women's ministries, I heard of it more and more. Oh, the pain that was shared by women from all parts of the world—women abused at home, and women abused by other church members, even church leaders. Were men abused too? Oh, yes they were. But they were just not reporting it to me.

## **Voices**

I heard from those who had suffered feelings of guilt and hate for years, unable to get past heinous childhood events. I heard from those who had left the church because of what someone in the church had done to them. I heard from those who were hurt, but when they reported it to the church, or asked for help, they were not heard. Or, in some cases, they were hurt further. In a far country, I asked a woman who performed counseling if she ever heard of abuse in the church. I was assured that there was none in that country. I expressed surprise because of the country's history and culture. As we continued to explore the question, she and another male church worker began remembering cases. Finally they mentioned an episode that had involved a whole family. I asked what had happened to them. "Oh," I was told, "they were all disfellowshipped."

I think of a woman on another continent who was badly abused by her husband. When the church became aware that she was leaving him because of it, they disfellowshipped her, and he received no censure. Does one wonder why abuse was something no one wanted to talk about or admit? But what damage had been done!

People are tough—they are survivors. But they are also fragile and vulnerable, easily hurt. It is often impossible to tell from the outside what is happening on the inside. Many with whom you sit in church are broken and crying within. And, unfortunately, many have been hurt in or by the church itself. Their picture of God is devastatingly distorted.

First Corinthians 6:19 tells us, "Do you not know that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit? You are not your own" (NIV). We have been bought with a price, and it is a part of the mission of the church to see that we are protected, and that our bodies as well as our minds and souls are kept soft.

*What is a safe church?* As long as we remain in this sinful world, it will not be a church in which abuse never happens. But it will be a church that teaches prevention, offers support to those who are victims, and holds everyone—including leadership—accountable. Those who abuse may or may not be able to be helped, but they can be kept from hurting others. "Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their

distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world” (James 1:2, NIV).

*How do we make our churches safe?*

First, we must admit that abuse happens. Then we talk about the subject. Secrets hurt; the silence must be broken. First, you keep “the secret”; then the secret keeps you. Once in a while the church speaker needs to preach about how we as God’s children are to treat one another. We can publicly pray for the abused—it may be the first time some members ever hear that someone cares, especially if they are suffering in silence.

Second, we can be sure that the Abuse Prevention Emphasis Day<sup>1</sup> is observed. We can believe people when they tell us they are abused; we can help them access the support that they need. As Karen and Bernie Holford say in this year’s Abuse Prevention Emphasis packet, we can “be willing to take appropriate action and to do something positive, practical, and protective when necessary.” This means that as a church we need to know what resources are available in our church and community.

Church leaders in particular need to be held accountable and model a pure and healing life. When they abuse, it is doubly harmful: they abuse from a position of power, and it seems as though the church itself has abused. Jesus is our example. He was all-powerful. He drew the small and the great to Himself. But He never hurt any of them—physically, emotionally, or sexually. Instead, He reached out to even the weakest and most vulnerable and showed them a better way to healing and wholeness. That is what we are called to do as church members and as church leaders: to make each one in our sphere of influence better. And to hurt no one. We must learn to respect ourselves and also

teach our children that they do not deserve abuse.

We can encourage our church leaders to become aware of abuse and how to help. Telling a victim to go pray or to become a better person does more harm than good. Both of those are good things to do, but they do not solve the abuse. We can make sure that literature is available<sup>2</sup>; (often a good place to put this information is the women’s restroom). We can help to see that there are places in our community where people can get help. And we can help see that laws are passed that help protect the vulnerable in our communities.

I have a 2-year-old granddaughter. I think she is the world’s greatest. I would do anything to protect and shield her from harm. She loves Sabbath School and to sing songs about Jesus. I want to do everything possible to keep her in love with Jesus and safe in church: the place she comes to meet her Jesus.

<sup>1</sup>Emphasis Day: Abuse Prevention Emphasis Day is an officially voted day on the world church calendar—the fourth Sabbath of August. It is an opportunity for your church to talk about all aspects of abuse in a nonthreatening, healing way.

<sup>2</sup>A set of six pamphlets has been prepared by the General Conference Women’s Ministries on abuse; these have been translated into many languages and are available through Women’s Ministries in all divisions.

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Ardis Stenbakken is a former director of GC Women’s Ministries.

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# *God Danced in the Sand--and Only Jacqui Saw Him*

by Noelene Johnsson

It started with a shovel-drawn circle in the damp sand. A flurry of digging turned the circle into a pocket-size pool of constantly disappearing water. After the water ceased, the six-year-olds kept digging, fantasizing over the fun they would have when a wave filled their pool.

But it didn't happen. It couldn't possibly happen; the tide and the deep slope of the beach were clearly against these two little visionaries. Marveling at their unflagging energy and certain of the hopelessness of their mission, I wanted them to start over, closer to the waves. But suddenly, unexpectedly, lacy foam was dancing at my feet, filling their pool.

"Look, God sent a wave!" Jacqui squealed. Screaming with delight the girls rushed to prevent the water from returning to the ocean. After a few moments more of sheer joy, Jacqui turned her face to mine. "Grandma, did God do that?"

"Oh, no, Jacqui!" her playmate quickly and wisely replied. "It was just the ocean."

Not to be put down, Jacqui persisted. "Yes, but in the Bible . . ."

"Oh, I know the Bible." Her playmate confidently responded: "I have my own Bible and I read it all the time."

"Yes, but my Granddad . . .," Jacqui shot back, playing her trump card. Turning back to me, she asked again, "Grandma, did God do that?"

"I don't know, Jacqui," came my limp reply. But after 18 months of thinking about it, I know for sure: Yes, Jacqui, God did it. Thirty seconds before it happened I would not have given her a prayer. But that foam dancing over the dry sand, tickling my ankles, and filling her pool-- what else could it have been? Yes, indeed. God danced in the sand, and only Jacqui saw Him.

How can I be so sure? Because that's the kind of thing God does; He made a donkey talk to get Balaam's attention. God delights in seemingly random demonstrations of unconditional love. The attitude behind such acts we call grace. Grace is always free; we can claim no part in it. We can do nothing to earn it. God is always looking for us, trying to catch our attention, confirming that He is on our side.

That great champion of grace, the apostle Paul, tells us that God predestined us to be His sons and daughters "through Jesus Christ, in accordance with [the Father's] pleasure and will—to the praise of His glorious grace, which He has freely given us in the One He loves" and that "the riches of God's grace" are "lavished on us" (Eph. 1:5-7, *NIV*).

Surrounded by God's abounding generosity, why are we so slow to catch on? Like the Christmas our kids unwrapped their gifts without waiting for the whole family. I went ballistic, and grace flew out the window. Ironic, isn't it; it

was the season of grace! Aren't you glad God is not like I was. He neither excuses nor accuses us of our sin. He just continues pouring on the grace, hoping we will come full circle and learn to show grace to each other.

God wants our families and our churches to be grace-filled places where every person and especially children see God dance in the sand and know for sure it is He.

Below are my 10 best practices of grace filled churches. You probably could add to the list from things your church does and maybe you can find something new to try.

### **Grace Filled Churches . . .**

*1. Make children feel welcome at 11:00 a.m.* They check frowns at the door, so when children disturb the peace, members rejoice that their future is in good hands. (Today's children will run tomorrow's churches—and nursing homes!)

*2. Market church to children.* If children like church, they insist on coming and bringing the entire family. The Carmichael Church, in Sacramento, California, markets church to toddlers by using church chairs. Little ones run out of Sabbath School to choose a soft, colorful chair to perch on their pew. Getting to see in comfort what is going on makes church enjoyable for them.<sup>1</sup>

*3. Call children by their names.* Doing so, according to current research, tells children they are recognized and belong in the congregation. One Alaskan camp meeting paired up children with adults during a service and challenged adults to get to know the children; the kids' self-esteem soared.

*4. Consciously look for grace in Bible stories and share their discovery with others.* The Church's GraceLink curriculum is designed to help parents do this when they study the lesson at home with their kids. But parents themselves first need help understanding and recognizing grace.

*5. Instead of just talking about grace at church, they help everyone experience it.* They reward and affirm all children, not just the few achievers, by saying, for instance: "I love you guys; you are each good at different things. These treats say thank you just for being you."

*6. Teach children to worship out of awe and thankfulness for God's grace.* Grace places aren't afraid to try innovative ways to praise God. They don't listen to the cranky folks who believe everything has to be serious and solemn at church. It's OK to break out the bubbles and balloons as aids to worship, and at the same time teach children that living God's way, in willing and loving obedience, is the truest form of worship.<sup>2</sup>

*7. Are inclusive--they leave no child out.* Children feel included when pastors and teachers show no favoritism, when nobody feels invisible, when kids get to do something up front in church.

*8. Offer outreach programs and advertise them well so as to attract community children, because neighborhood children need Jesus too.* Teresa Rodgers of Michigan's London Church involves church children in Vacation Bible School (VBS) outreach. Some go door to door with Teresa inviting children to VBS. Others go on the puppet bus into neighborhoods, advertising VBS or a health fair. While inner-city children come

out to see the puppets, their parents are drawn to the bus by the sound of favorite “oldies but goodies” tunes with Christian lyrics. The neighbors are not the only ones who experience grace when churches make friends this way.

*9. Reach out to at-risk children and offer intervention programs.* Many Adventist churches offer tutoring programs. Now 20 churches in Ohio, West Virginia, and Maryland are gearing up to offer Rainbows, a program of peer support for kids grieving a loss in their family. Rainbows lets people with loving, listening hearts help kids when they are most vulnerable.<sup>3</sup>

*10. Give children’s evangelism a high priority.* Think of it: most evangelism dollars are focused on adults and with good results. But what if more were earmarked for evangelizing children? Studies show that children are eight times more likely to choose Jesus than are teens, and six times more likely than persons 18 or older. Do the math. Churches could baptize 64 where they now baptize 8. Besides, if you take a child by the hand, you take a parent by the heart.

The One who said, “Suffer the little children to come,” has a special blessing for congregations that have the grace to put children first. Our challenge is to be shaped by grace and then let grace shape our ministry so that we all see God dance in the sand.

\* *Bible references are from New International Version.*

<sup>1</sup>For more information about church chairs, go to [www.churchchairs4kids.com](http://www.churchchairs4kids.com).

<sup>2</sup>Alright, so maybe bubbles and balloons are a bit much for you, so support a monthly children’s church and donate bubbles and balloons there.

<sup>3</sup>You can learn more about Rainbows on-line at [www.rainbows.org](http://www.rainbows.org). The program is expensive to get started, but the North American Division subsidizes training and start-up costs.

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Noelene Johnsson, recently retired Children’s Ministries director, North American Division.

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## *What's So Amazing about Grace?*

by Philip Yancey

Grand Rapids MI: Zondervan, 1997. 292 pages

Reviewed by Ron Flowers

By the author's own admission, this is not a theological treatise on the subject, but a book that seeks to present the experiential side of grace and to do so graciously. "I write as a pilgrim," says Yancey, "qualified only by my craving for grace. . . . I would far rather convey grace than explain it" (p. 16). This said, the author does frequently reference Scripture texts on grace and authentically portrays this expansive biblical theme in a winsome way. The book reflects the thoughtful study and writing qualities of this best-selling author and editor-at-large of *Christianity Today*—an engaging mix of bible study, personal experiences and reflection on grace—all mingled with a generous inclusion of fitting quotations from a wide array of contemporary Christian authors as well as twentieth century Christian classics. Gems from Dietrich Bonhoeffer (*The Cost of Discipleship*, 1959), Søren Kierkegaard (*Training in Christianity*, 1947), Helmut Thielicke (*The Waiting Father*, 1959), and Paul Tournier (*Guilt and Grace*, 1962) are here together with those of more recent authors such as Robert Farrar Capon (*Between Noon and Three*, 1982), Henri Nouwen (*The Return of the Prodigal Son*, 1994) and Lewis Smedes (*Shame and Grace*, 1993). Yancey's retelling of Isak Dinesen's short story "Babette's Feast," (*Anecdotes of Destiny and Ehrengard*, 1993) is a compelling example of how he garners in kernels gleaned from the hearts of others who have grasped grace.

That there is a shortage of grace in the world comes as no surprise, but again and again throughout this book Yancey cites the shortage in the church as well. "Sadly, to a world desperate for this grace the church sometimes presents one more form of ungrace" (p. 30). Grace is Christianity's best gift to the world, yet today the sound of grace in many churches has been muted through the mistaken assumption that the mission of the church is to assert a spirit of moral superiority against the decay of secular society. The hostility between Christian groups and lack of unity among professed followers of Christ further dilute the Master's message of grace and choke off the church's ability to dispense the one thing that uniquely distinguishes it from all other secular and religious entities.

*What's So Amazing about Grace?* takes the reader step by step logically, yet in a manner that appeals to the comprehension of the heart as well as the mind, into an understanding of this essential core to Christianity. The author cites H. Richard Niebuhr, "Great Christian revolutions come not by the discovery of something that was not known before. They happen when somebody takes radically something that was always there" (pp. 13, 14). This handbook of practical theology on grace takes us first where every theological work should—to view the character of God more clearly. The discovery of grace is the discovery of a God who is always there—"the One who loves" (citing Karl Barth), a God of love who is gracious and personally interested in every human being, who poured out all heaven in the quest of one and who rejoices over one. Although Jesus never analyzed grace and, according to Yancey "almost never used the word," it was His central theme. He personified grace, He enacted grace and He taught grace—presenting God as a "housewife jumping up and down in glee over the discovery of a lost coin" (p. 52), as the "Waiting Father, heartsick, abused, yet wanting above all else to forgive and begin anew, to announce with joy, 'This my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found'" (p. 56).



“Lovesick Father,” “The New Math of Grace,” and “No Oddballs Allowed” comprise pivotal chapters, though like a tasty beverage this book is good to the very end. In “The New Math of Grace” Yancey offers a “definition of grace in relation to God”: “*Grace means there is nothing we can do to make God love us more . . . . And grace means there is nothing we can do to make God love us less . . .*” (p. 70). He goes on to help individuals accept God’s grace personally (professed Christians will find new and renewed joy in Jesus here) and then to show how grace must be dispensed—like perfume—for others beyond ourselves to delight in. There is a recursive form to his writing—just when one feels a deeper grasp on grace, Yancey cycles back to show how regions of ungrace in Christian living in home and church persist subtly and surreptitiously undermine joy and detract from gospel freedom. He echoes the Spirit’s beckoning to allow grace to seep even further into us so that we Christians can be true salt and light to the world with its great moral and social challenges.

Some will be especially interested in “Loopholes”—his chapter on the potential for grace to be exploited. Yancey’s discussion is anchored, correctly, in Paul’s discussion of Romans 6 – 7 and in general he makes the points of Paul well, though I believe he misses the meaning of Rom. 7:1-6 (pp. 188, 189). Paul’s emphasis in these verses is not, contrary to Yancey’s inference, to liken spiritual life to marriage (in which loving partners do not abuse one another’s love, but mirror each other’s passion—thus providing the author with an illustration of the way grace also works in the spiritual life). While the marriage metaphor (a “basic analogy” that is “not new” to be sure) is an apt one, Paul’s emphasis in Romans 7:1-6 is rather on a wife’s freedom from the law of marriage when her husband dies. The emphasis is not on marriage, but on what occurs when death takes place. Grace in the gospel abounds because death has occurred. Christ died, teaches Paul, and our old way of life died with Him. “Count yourselves dead to sin but alive to God in Christ Jesus. Therefore do not let sin reign in your mortal body so that you obey its evil desires” (Rom. 6:11, 12). Grace motivates by our love for Christ’s sacrifice for us to be sure; grace compels us thoroughly and motivates us completely when we comprehend that at the cross we died too. “For Christ’s love compels us, because we are convinced that one died for all, and therefore all died” (2 Cor. 5:14). Christ’s death forever ends the death-dealing hold of law upon us. For Adventists, this quintessential teaching about grace is often clouded by another discussion about the need for Christians to live morally by the principles enunciated in the law. However, the gospel teaches us that our thinking about moral and ethical living must be controlled by the paradigm of grace, not the paradigm of law. Yancey’s chapter “Grace Avoidance” takes up this discussion and shows how legalism—our attempts as sinners to be moral—continues to subtly insinuate itself into the lives of professed followers of Christ.

From a background of “ungrace learned from family and church,” Yancey set out to pipe, in his own small way, the tune of grace. “I yearn,” he writes, “for the church to become a nourishing culture of that grace” (p. 42). In *What’s So Amazing about Grace?* he has more than piped, he has orchestrated a must-read book that should awaken every believer’s thirst for deeper drafts of this character quality of God. Whether in personal devotions, in a discipleship study group, in sermon or seminar preparation, if you can only read one book on grace, this is an excellent choice. Under the guidance of the Spirit, wherever the Bible principles it presents are practiced, it will challenge and change the culture of ungrace.

## *The Return of the Prodigal Son*

by Henri J. M. Nouwen

New York: Doubleday, 1992. 160 pages.

Reviewed by Bryan Craig

This beautiful little paperback book is a timeless classic. It's the kind of book you find very hard to put down or ignore. In fact, most people I know who have this book have read it several times. They keep returning to its pages because the story is fascinating and the message of God's grace and forgiveness makes compelling reading.

Nouwen tells the story of how a seemingly insignificant chance encounter he had with a poster of Rembrandt's famous painting "The Return of the Prodigal Son" had touched him deeply and how that captivating moment confronted him in such a way that it threw him irresistibly into a spiritual quest that changed his life. It was only after Nouwen had later visited the Hermitage in St Petersburg to see the original painting that he seriously began to process his deep reaction to Rembrandt's striking depiction of this well-known story told by Jesus. What stayed with Nouwen was a real sense of the prodigal's homecoming and the deep meaning it contained for him. The more he reflected on the personal significance of the experience, the more it profoundly influenced his spiritual life.

The thing that had really captivated Nouwen's attention right from the very start was the way in which Rembrandt had painted the father's embrace of the returning son. That "embrace remained imprinted on my soul far more profoundly than any temporary expression of emotional support. It had brought me into touch with something within me that lies far beyond the ups and downs of a busy life, something that represents the ongoing yearning of the human spirit, the yearning for a final return, an unambiguous sense of safety, a lasting home."

To Nouwen, Rembrandt's painting is more than just a portrayal of a moving parable. It is in fact a story that encapsulates the core message of the good news of God's love and grace, the human expression of Divine compassion, a summary of the history of salvation. And as such, it represents an enormous spiritual challenge.

During the years following his encounter with Rembrandt's masterpiece, Nouwen found himself reflecting on the three main characters in the biblical story, identifying himself and his spiritual journey closely with them. At first he strongly identified with the prodigal son and his heartless rejection of home, his drastic cutting loose, and his running away to search for love in distant places where it cannot be found. And like the younger son, Nouwen feels his sense of estrangement and longs to return home to the Father, "kneel before Him, put his ear against His chest, and listen, without interruption, to the heartbeat of the Father." The love that had let him go now embraces and welcomes him back with open arms.

The second phase in his spiritual journey began when a friend suggested to him quite intently, "I wonder if you are not more like the elder brother." Nouwen had never thought of himself in this way but he quickly came to see how during much of his life he had

been dutifully compliant, craving respect appreciation and admiration, yet lacking completely in joy. Lost in his resentment, bitterness, jealousy and anger, he too, like the elder son, needed to embrace the grace of his father and celebrate his wonderful love and acceptance.

The final stage of the journey came for Nouwen when, in a moment of suffering and despair, another one of his friends said, “Whether you are the younger son or the elder son, you have to realise that you are called to become the father.” This idea was at first overwhelming and one that Nouwen resisted. It had never occurred to him that the father was the one who expressed most fully his vocation or calling in life. Was this truly the final stage of the spiritual journey? The voice of mercy and grace, calling us to come home, calling us to become like the gracious, compassionate father, welcoming God’s “children home without asking any questions and without wanting anything from them in return.”

Don’t misunderstand me! This is not just a book about a wonderful painting and a great parable. It’s a book that stirs your deepest yearning to understand and embrace the grace of God and experience who God really is. It will challenge you to examine your innermost thoughts, desires and struggles and open you up to a whole new relationship with God by inviting you to let go of all your fear of the Father, and embrace His love and become like Him.

For me, the most exciting part of this book grows out of Nouwen’s conclusion in which he suggests that Christianity is essentially an invitation to intimacy with the Father, a relationship of love, a celebration of gratitude for the gift of grace. As we worship, God takes delight in us and we take delight in Him. His love guides and inspires every part of our lives. This is the love that sustains our relationships with one another and helps us to grow strong, vibrant communities.

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Bryan Craig is the Director of the Department of Family Ministries, South Pacific Division of Seventh-day Adventists.

# *The Emotionally Healthy Church*

by Peter Scazzero

Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2003. 223 pages.

Reviewed by Bryan Craig

In 1987 Pete and Geri Scazzero founded New Life Fellowship in Queens, New York City. This new church, planted in a rather challenging working class, urban environment, rapidly grew to become a significant force in their local community. It had a lot going for it – powerful preaching, dynamic ministries, an impressive growth rate, and a vision to do great works for God. After just eight years, things looked really good – but beneath the surface, things were just about to boil over, forcing Peter to confront the needs in his church and in himself that went deeper than he ever imagined.

What Scazzero quickly came to realise was that much of his efforts to evangelise and grow the church overshadowed and ignored the poor relational, emotional, and spiritual health of individuals within his congregation. Many people in his church were struggling in their relationships with one another, and were spiritually unbalanced and immature as disciples of Christ. And, as a pastor, he had to admit that whenever someone had come to him in the past with relational problems or emotional issues, he had simply tried to apply every spiritual remedy he knew. The fact was, many people did not get the help they needed, many had remained sick, and some had even “died” under his leadership.

Wrestling with the unhealthy state of his church caused Scazzero to undergo a revolution in the way he understood and “did church.” It also led him to confront and embrace the truth about the emotional parts of himself, a journey that unleashed a dramatic change in the way he understood God, Scripture, and the nature of Christian maturity. Eventually he had to face the shocking truth that the overall poor health of his church and ministry was being influenced, as it is for all pastors, primarily by his own emotional and spiritual health, and his internal life.

What Scazzero began to realize was that there was little or no difference in terms of emotional and relational maturity between God’s people in the church and those outside it that claimed no relationship with Jesus Christ. He quickly came to recognise that, despite all the emphasis today on spiritual formation, most church leaders, including himself, rarely address what real spiritual maturity looks like as it relates to emotional health, especially as it relates to how we love and get along with other people. This very issue constitutes the heart of the gospel and the reason why so many churches are struggling and having little impact on their world. “Unless,” he says, “we integrate emotional maturity with a focus on loving well into our discipleship, we are in danger of missing God’s point completely—love.”

In his book, Scazzero discusses ways that the post-modern church can get healthy, stay healthy and as a consequence be more effective and mature. He argues that we can build and maintain emotionally healthy churches by following six key principles: (1) looking beneath the surface (the spiritual veneer) to identify the real issues and problems that we need to confront in our lives; (2) being able to articulate our own personal story and find a

way to break free from the power of past wounds, failures, sins, and circumstances that are still influencing us in our present journey; (3) living our lives free from defensiveness, brokenness or a sense of vulnerability and learning to go beyond these to more intimate levels of relationship; (4) recognising and honouring our own personal limitations and boundaries so that we don't go beyond what God expects of us; (5) knowing how to grieve with people in their pain and loss, because we've been there ourselves and embraced our own grief and loss; (6) making "Incarnation" our model for ministry thus enabling us to enter into another's world, love them, and be together with them in ministry.

### **Key Points of *The Emotionally Healthy Church***

#### **Something Is Missing!**

- The emotional/relational dimension is missing in our discipleship and in our ministry. We need a more adequate view of discipleship, a new paradigm that includes the emotional dimension. Spiritual and emotional health are inseparable. The gospel needs to transform the whole of our lives, including our emotions and relationships. (If not, we are left emotionally numb, relationally disconnected—untouched by the gospel. cf. 1 Cor 2:4 "The gospel comes not with wise and persuasive words but with a demonstration of the Spirit's power".)

- There is a lack of healthy relationships within the church. Churches are in trouble because they are filled with people who have superficial connections with one another and who are:

- Unsure about how to deal with their anger, sadness and resentment.
- Prone to withdraw from conflict rather than resolve it.
- Threatened by or intolerant of different viewpoints.
- Defensive and incapable of revealing their weaknesses.
- So involved in "serving" that they fail to take care of themselves.
- Zealous about ministering at church but blind to their partner's loneliness at home.

- Our leaders are not emotionally intelligent. Pastors are not well trained in the emotional/relational domain. They are often not "in touch" with their emotional side and consequently not focused on the emotional life of others either.

#### **Emotions are a Valuable and Important Part of the Christian Life**

- Emotions are the language of the soul. When we discount or neglect our emotions, as the church does so much in its teachings and practises, we lose a wonderful opportunity to know and experience intimacy in our relationships and with God. So, when we overlook the emotional aspect of our humanity, we do so at our own peril.

- The Bible doesn't overlook the emotional aspects of life. New Testament passages clearly show us how the grace of God motivates true believers to be loving disciples who get along well with one another. They also counsel us to allow God's love to change our thoughts, feelings and actions and guide us into a more mature life through the power of His Spirit.

- Much of the church's ministry has been inadequate in addressing the deep needs beneath the surface of people's lives, and in so doing, has kept them emotionally and spiritually immature.

### **Healthy Churches Need Healthy Leaders**

- The overall health of any church or ministry depends primarily on the emotional and spiritual health of its leaders. As goes the leader, so goes the church. All that needs to happen for the pastor and the church members to burn out is for them to become emotionally exhausted.

- Pastors need to develop a theology of self-care that maintains their emotional well-being as well as their spiritual vitality, physical fitness and intellectual growth.

- Pastors need to be "in touch" with themselves emotionally and deal openly and honestly with their feelings, pain, and disappointments. Unresolved or bottled up emotions and emotional brokenness can destroy ministry and people real fast.

- Leadership is always the starting point for change!

### **Leading from a Sense of Brokenness**

- Pastors need to become more self-aware and purposeful by:
  - Embracing God's grace that frees them to admit their own brokenness/ woundedness and how their lives have been shaped by their own family and family history.
  - Understanding how the past affects their ability to love and to lead.
  - Recognising the ways they protect themselves from facing their failures, defeats, and past shame, and how they deal with their need to be in control, rescue, dominate, deny or withdraw from situations.
  - Developing strategies for dealing with their fears, anger, resentment and bitterness.
  - Learning to accept and grieve their losses and become more compassionate leaders.
  - Understanding the process of forgiveness.

### **Accepting One's Limitations**

- Emotionally healthy people understand and accept their limitations. So, pastors need to accept their own limits, and be aware of the limits of their congregations.

- Pastors need to learn how to say NO to "ecclesiastical pornography" (i.e., yearning to be like someone else; the lure of being free from the problems of regular sinners; the lust for power by being the biggest and brightest).

- The need for pastors and leaders to worship and serve according to the gifts God has given to them.

- Scazzero suggests four ways to work “limits” into the life of the church:
  - Emphasise self-care.
  - Give people the freedom to say “NO”.
  - Set limits on invasive people.
  - Teach and model boundaries (responsibility).

### **Develop an Incarnational Ministry**

• Ministry is about intentionally integrating Jesus’ model of ministry into all that we do as church leaders and as a church.

- The dynamics of the incarnational life involve:
  - Joining or connecting with another’s world. By accepting, respecting and listening to others and making it safe for them to openly and honestly share their heart with us, we become a healing presence in their lives.
  - Being able to not lose your “self” when you enter another’s world. The ability to remain faithful to who we are, not losing your essence, while at the same time entering into another’s world. This is the key to being the kind of creative and imaginative leader who is able to respond in a mature and loving way when other people push, challenge and conflict with your goals and values.
  - Holding an open mind as you hang between two worlds. When you make Incarnation a priority it disrupts the church’s priority and definition of success. It is no longer simply doing more, “fixing” people or arranging the world into something we consider God-glorifying. It is about loving well and this love requires a supernatural work of grace in the heart. This is what it takes to lead a congregation to wholeness and maturity.

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