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Our Caring Father Fashions Us Individually

Dear Brethren,

Mr. Richard Ames often reminds us to “claim God’s promises.” How often do we take that advice? God wants us to come boldly before Him, as children do with their human fathers. After all, God is our heavenly Father and Jesus Christ is our elder Brother (Matthew 6:9; Hebrews 2:11–12, 17).

The Apostle Paul tells us, “For as many as are led by the Spirit of God, these are sons of God. For you did not receive the spirit of bondage again to fear, but you received the Spirit of adoption [sonship] by whom we cry out, ‘Abba, Father’” (Romans 8:14–15). God does not *adopt* us, notwithstanding the translators. He *begets* us, as is clearly shown by many scriptures. For instance, the very next two verses tell us that God’s Spirit “bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs—heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ, if indeed we suffer with Him, that we may also be glorified together” (vv. 16–17). Note that there are two spirits—the Spirit of God and our human spirit. By the laying on of hands, we receive God’s spiritual “DNA”: “Whoever has been born [begotten or conceived] of God does not sin [that is, does not practice sin], for His seed [Greek: *sperma*] remains in him” (1 John 3:9). What a remarkable truth God has revealed to us!

If we believe this, why should it seem strange for us to approach our heavenly Father and claim His promises? Little children are often bold in holding parents to their promises, and God wants us to know that He is our caring Father. Because God is our Father and Jesus is our elder Brother and High Priest who advocates on our behalf, “Let us therefore come boldly to the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need” (Hebrews 4:16).

Understanding God’s Promises

Dear brethren, we ought to walk confidently in faith. That does not mean we walk foolishly in this time of trouble, but neither should we be frozen in fear. We should know that no matter what happens to us, our Father and our elder Brother know what is happening and are there with us. After all, “we do not have a High Priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but was in all points tempted as we are, yet without sin” (v. 15).

We ought to trust in the promises God makes to us and remind Him of those promises. At the same time, we must not be as small children who sometimes fail to see the nuances in promises made. Some promises are conditional. Promises are also not subject to a child’s whims. Children can be impatient, and sometimes so are we.

God’s promises to Abraham, the father of the faithful, were certain—but not all were fulfilled during his lifetime. Their ultimate fulfillment will be completed at the resurrection—only an instant from when he went to sleep, even though thousands of years will have passed. Paul made a statement that we may easily forget in times of trouble. Referring to Abraham and others who went before him, he writes, “These all died in faith, not having received the promises, but having seen them afar off were assured of them, embraced them and confessed that they were strangers and pilgrims on the earth” (Hebrews 11:13). These heroes of faith looked beyond the here and now to a heavenly country that will endure forever. “Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for He has prepared a city for them” (v. 16). From this we see that God is pleased with His children when they put their complete trust in Him.

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Later in the chapter, similar statements appear about other faithful servants. “And all these, having obtained a good testimony through faith, did not receive the promise, God having provided something better for us, that they should not be made perfect apart from us” (Hebrews 11:39–40). Yes, they will be made perfect and yes, they will receive the promise—but not yet. God is saying, *Patience, children*. He is working out the “big picture.”

Paul admonishes us in the next verses: “Therefore we also, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which so easily ensnares us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith” (Hebrews 12:1–2). He describes what Jesus endured and then reminds us, “You have not yet resisted to bloodshed, striving against sin” (v. 4). Then follows the reminder, “My son, do not... be discouraged when you are rebuked by Him” (v. 5), for He is a loving Father who cares for each of us.

This is not to suggest that you and I are necessarily or personally being rebuked by the crisis at hand, though surely each of us can learn from the experience. But clearly our world *is* being rebuked. God has allowed this to wake mankind up, and it is apparently waking a few. Most, however, will need an even louder alarm.

Justified Courage

Many of us have read and meditated on Psalm 91 during this COVID-19 pandemic. This beautiful psalm promises protection for those who put their trust in God. Review the whole psalm, but note especially verses 3, 6–8, and 10–11. We certainly appreciate this protection today, but as I pointed out earlier, this does not mean we should walk about foolishly tempting God. Verses 11 and 12 were the very verses Satan quoted to encourage Christ to tempt God (Matthew 4:5–6). So we must not be foolish. We must see the big picture. While it is evident that God has been very merciful to His children during this time, we must face the fact that He allows some of us to get sick, and we will all die from something at some time (cf. Psalm 103:3; 2 Kings 13:14).

We can only address the problems and challenges that we are truly willing to face. Let us face the truth that many people fear: It is true that this pandemic is our enemy and has the potential to kill. Yet, it is also true that God gives us this wonderful promise: “But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore, my beloved brethren, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that your labor is not in vain in the Lord” (1 Corinthians 15:57–58). Do we truly believe this?

How easy it is to see only the here and now, to become fearful over what we see around us, and to fail to see the big picture of God’s plan and how we individually fit into it. Notice this most encouraging passage: “The LORD looks from heaven; He sees all the sons of men. From the place of His dwelling He looks on all the inhabitants of the earth; *He fashions their hearts individually*; He considers all their works” (Psalm 33:13–15). Wow—He fashions our hearts individually! He knows you and me, and He is working with us *individually* as He knows best. He is a Father who is intimately involved in rearing His children.

Most of us will come out on the other side of this pandemic just fine. Some of us may get sick, but most who do will recover. We believe God is our Healer (Exodus 15:26). Nevertheless, we lose members every year from a multitude of causes and illnesses—as of this writing, only one of our members has died of COVID-19—but we can be assured that, no matter the cause, “Precious in the sight of the LORD is the death of His saints” (Psalm 116:15).

Take courage, brethren. Don’t live foolishly. There is a threat out there, but look to God and trust Him that He knows you individually—He is *your* caring Father. If a sparrow does not fall to the ground without Him knowing it, how much more valuable are His children in His sight!



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Planning Your Life

Life never seems to turn out the way we think it will, at least for most of us. Some of us knew from an early age what we wanted to do when we grew up. Others only thought they knew. How many aspiring firemen, forest rangers, and astronauts ended up being plumbers, accountants, or insurance salesmen? Or how many with modest ambitions found themselves in exciting careers? Some of us planned to get married and have three children and a Golden Retriever. We thought we would live in the suburbs with a nice green lawn, a white picket fence, and perhaps an oak tree with a tire swing hanging by a rope from a strong limb, yet now, for better or worse, we live in something quite different.

The reality is that, for a host of reasons, most of our dreams do not turn out exactly the way we expect. Sometimes our likes and dislikes change, but sometimes unforeseen events blindside us. Lives are interrupted by wars. Dreams are stolen by economic downturns and depressions. Marriages do not always last like we had hoped, nor do they always produce children. And when we *are* blessed with children, we sometimes find they are harder to work with than we had expected, leaving us wondering, “Was there a mix-up at the hospital?”

The 2020 coronavirus event is one such disruption to dreams and plans. We know wars and pandemics are going to come, but why *now*? Who foresaw COVID-19? A number of young couples in the Church planned for “storybook weddings” this year. How did those events work out? As the old saying goes, “The best laid plans of mice and men often go awry.” But life-disrupting events are nothing new and, while we shouldn’t minimize the disappointment of these young people, other individuals have had it far worse.

It is hard to determine the exact number, but historians estimate that 50 to 100 million people perished in the 1918 pandemic. Hundreds of thousands of young couples had their plans interrupted by the First and Second World Wars—and for many, that interruption was permanent. Many young men breathed a sigh of relief when that war ended, only to find themselves sent to the Korean peninsula a few years later during one of the coldest winters on record. And Vietnam was no picnic for those drafted and sent to the jungles or rice paddies. Truly, the mettle of every generation is tested.

How Sudden the Change!

Have you ever wondered what Lot’s daughters thought when two mysterious men showed up unexpectedly? The day after they arrived, these angels rushed the girls and their parents out of their city, never to return. But consider—Sodom was where their childhood friends lived. They may have had their eyes on young men they hoped to marry. And then there was the tragedy of losing their mother during their flight. All this came upon them suddenly, in one day, as they fled to a destination unknown. This was not what they had planned for their lives!

We know that Lot’s wife could not leave without looking back longingly at what she was giving up. It was not easy leaving behind the home in which she had brought up her family. There were the beautiful carpets, pieces of furniture, vases and other decorative items, perhaps handcrafted coverings for the windows—all etched with memories. And it must have been even more difficult to leave behind her married daughters (cf. Genesis 19:12–14) and their families, very likely including her grandchildren. It is easy for us to be critical of her for foolishly looking back, but we know the end of the story and how the city was suddenly devastated. Lot’s wife has been a perpetual witness to every generation of God’s people, a warning against clinging to this present evil world (Luke 17:31–33).

A Difficult Choice?

Daniel and his three friends are among the best-known biblical personages. How inspiring are their stories of faith and courage! We love to read to our children about their lives, hoping to encourage them to stand strong with God and against the world. We pick up the account of their lives only after they arrived in Babylon, but can we imagine what it must have been like when their city was besieged and then fell, when foreign soldiers led them on a long, uncertain journey to a foreign land hundreds of miles away? This was, no doubt, not how they had planned their lives.

Consider Christ’s apostles. At least a third of them were fishermen who worked in their family businesses. As many young men do, they probably had ideas about how to grow the business once it was handed over to them. Some of the twelve were devout men, followers of

John the Baptist, but did any of them ever imagine that they would become fishers of men? Did any of them think they would become martyrs for the long-awaited Messiah? This was not how they had planned their lives.

It was the same for many of us. We were going along on our own paths until our heavenly Father called us. What a change that was! Our Friday night parties and the Saturday pursuits we were so comfortable with came to an abrupt halt. Many gave up their favorite grilled meat—you know, the one with the corkscrew tail. Some of you gave up your dream job. A few of you lost a mate who did not appreciate your “new religion.” We are hardly alone in giving up things we loved.

When considering the difficulties of life, we must not forget the prophet Jeremiah. God called him as a youth (Jeremiah 1:6), and the message he was to deliver was not a popular one. His life was threatened by his neighbors (11:18–19, 21–22), his own brothers turned against him (12:6), his reputation was tarnished by “fake news” (18:18), and he was thrown into prison (37:16) and later into a dungeon where he sank in the mire (38:6) and would have perished, had it not been for the intervention of Ebed-Melech the Ethiopian (38:7–13). Perhaps the trial least recognized by most readers was that God commanded Jeremiah not to marry while in the land of Judah (16:2). This effectively meant that marriage was delayed until he was in his late 50s or 60s, so perhaps he never married at all. This was *not* likely how Jeremiah had planned his life!

Joseph’s brothers first intended to kill him, but later decided to sell him into slavery. What must it have been like to be treated so brutally by your brothers, and then end up in prison for *obeying* God’s law? Betrayal is one of the most difficult offenses to forgive, and none of us know Joseph’s private thoughts as he lived through 13 years of slavery and imprisonment. Did he experience sorrow? Most likely. What about anger and depression? Probably. Yet his life was in God’s hands the whole time. Judging by his response when he revealed himself to his brothers, Joseph no doubt understood this—maybe not at the beginning of his trials, but certainly in the end. Life did not work out as either Joseph or his brothers had planned.

Cutting Through the Fog

How we react to life’s difficult times is all-important, and making the best of a bad situation is a choice. Why do people react so differently to horrific circumstances? Some rise to the occasion, while others descend into self-pity. What was it that caused three Jewish lads to rise to the occasion when confronted by a terrifying choice? Author and successful businessman Robert Townsend makes this astute observation: “Values are critical guides for making decisions. When in doubt, they cut through the fog like a beacon in the night.”

For Daniel’s three friends, the decision between living as idol-worshippers or dying as God-fearers was easy. Their val-

ues cut through the fog. There was only one choice to make in what must have been a terrifying situation. When confronted by the powerful king, they boldly responded, “O Nebuchadnezzar, we have no need to answer you in this matter. If that is the case, our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the burning fiery furnace, and He will deliver us from your hand, O king. But if not, let it be known to you, O king, that we do not serve your gods, nor will we worship the gold image which you have set up” (Daniel 3:16–18). They believed God existed and they valued His commands. This gave them courage to make the choice that many would have considered foolish, and that is why—thousands of years later—we read of these three young men by name while their critics go unmentioned.

The late Mr. Carl McNair often remarked, “Everything in life is a trial. If you don’t pass it the first time, God will give you another opportunity.” He meant, of course, that it is better to pass the test the *first time*. We see this when Moses rehearsed the lessons of the years in the wilderness. Deuteronomy explains an important reason why an 11-day journey took 40 years (Deuteronomy 1:2–3). God tests us constantly along the path of life, just as He tested Israel. “And you shall remember that the LORD your God led you all the way these forty years in the wilderness, *to humble you and test you*, to know what was in your heart, whether you would keep His commandments or not. So He humbled you, *allowed you to hunger*, and fed you with manna which you did not know nor did your fathers know, that He might make you know that man shall not live by bread alone; but man lives by every word that proceeds from the mouth of the LORD” (Deuteronomy 8:2–3).

Sadly, few of the children of Israel passed the test. But one individual who learned to adjust to the twists and turns of life was the Apostle Paul, who said, “I have learned in whatever state I am, to be content: I know how to be abased, and I know how to abound. Everywhere and in all things I have learned both to be full and to be hungry, both to abound and to suffer need” (Philippians 4:11–12). And what was it for him that made the difference? “I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me” (v. 13).

Good News: God’s Great Plan for You

Those alive today will look back on this time as a moment of great significance, just as many of us who are a bit older will never forget when man first walked on the Moon or what we were doing on September 11, 2001. The British will remember waking up on 24 June 2016 to learn the majority voted to leave the European Union. We remember precisely where we were when these events happened. COVID-19 may not be remembered as a precise day, but it will be, for many, a defining period in their lives—that is, until something more momentous comes along. We understand from Scripture that “in the last days perilous times will come” (2 Timothy 3:1). In addi-

tion to corrupt and selfish human behavior that brings about these perilous times (vv. 2–5), we read of famine, persecution, worse plagues, wars, and natural disasters on a scale never before seen (Luke 21:10–11).

Along with the trials that came upon Daniel and his three friends, there were surprising blessings and rewards that went far beyond their wildest dreams. How could four Jewish teens in a country on the decline anticipate someday being in the palace of the greatest empire of the time? How could they know that, through them, God would work miracles that had never before been seen and would be spoken of for millennia to come? Just think about being thrown into a fiery furnace or a den of hungry lions and living to tell about it! And remember, they did not know the end of the story when it began.

What must it have been like for Jeremiah to understand near the end of his life that God had used him to preserve the promise made to David of an enduring dynasty, and to know that the throne of David would remain to be claimed by the returning Messiah at the end of the age? There are so many more stories of great men and women in the Bible. What a reward to have your name in the greatest book ever written! But their greatest reward is having their names written in the Book of Life in heaven (Luke 10:20). If we endure to the end, our names will be there, too!

When the disciples recounted to Jesus all they had given up and asked, essentially, “What’s in it for us?” He replied, “Assuredly I say to you, that in the regeneration, when the Son of Man sits on the throne of His glory, you who have followed Me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve

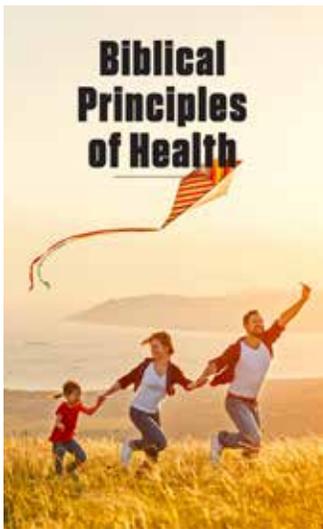
tribes of Israel” (Matthew 19:27–28). What *they* had planned for their lives could never compare with what *God* had planned. Note the amazing promise in the next verse: “And everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or wife or children or lands, for My name’s sake, shall receive a hundredfold, and inherit eternal life” (v. 29). That promise is for you and for me!

It is important to put trials and setbacks in proper context. They may be painful and disappointing. There is the fear of the unknown. Will we permanently lose our job or our business? You may by now know the answer to that question, and the answer may not be what you had planned. In the case of this coronavirus, none of us knows for sure how it will turn out for us. Will you get sick? Will you survive? These unknowns are at least in the back of most people’s minds during this trial.

Can we realize what is at stake here? If we know the truth, have the big picture of what God is doing in our lives, and have genuine faith that—no matter what happens—God is working out a wonderful plan in us, we will come out just fine. The plans we make in this life cannot be compared to what God has in store for us. “There are many plans in a man’s heart, nevertheless the LORD’s counsel—that will stand” (Proverbs 19:21).

No matter the unexpected twists and turns along the way, the outcome for those who remain focused and faithful will be eternal life in the Kingdom of God as born children of God. That is why we must “roll with the punches” thrown at us, learning to rejoice rather than complain. That is why we pray “Thy kingdom come!” That is what we live for. Now, *that* is a plan! (LH)

A Brand-New Booklet from Dr. Douglas Winnail



By now, most members have received their copy of of the Living Church of God’s latest inspiring booklet, *Biblical Principles of Health*. “What we have published in the past has been pretty general and mostly related to the subject of clean and unclean foods,” says Dr. Douglas Winnail, author of this valuable new resource. “In this new booklet, we look at the subject of health and disease and contrast the biblical approach with the world’s approach over the span of history, showing how specific biblical principles that prevent disease and promote health, recorded thousands of years ago, are actually supported by modern scientific research.

“Most people in developed countries are not familiar with the magnitude of suffering caused by disease in other parts of the world. Our new booklet shows that much of this suffering can be prevented by learning to apply biblical principles related to health. These principles are simple, practical, inexpensive, and focused on behavior that can be learned by the individual—not dependent on an expensive medical system.”

Dr. Winnail notes that the biblical perspective is very different from the one many are used to. “Part of God’s intention for religious leaders in ancient Israel was that they should function as health educators who were to explain how to apply these biblical principles of health, while also functioning as public health officials to monitor the physical conditions in the camp of Israel.

This whole perspective has been lost by modern theologians who see their role only as comforters of the sick—not as educators who can play a major role in showing people how to avoid disease and gain better health.”

Christians and Causes

Our compassion for the world often makes us sympathetic to causes and movements that promise change. Should Christians join such causes?

By **Wallace G. Smith**

God's compassion for the world was so great that He sent His Son to save it (John 3:16–17). Moved by the same Spirit, sincere Christians feel that same compassion. They see a world suffering and long to make it right—a longing they will fulfill after Christ returns and they reign at His side.

At the same time, the world offers a host of causes, movements, and organizations, all desiring to improve the world in their own ways, through their own means. Many of their mission statements appeal to that same desire within us. God's Spirit within us is stirred when we see unborn children exposed to the horrors of abortion, hatred unleashed against individuals due to the color of their skin, and leaders casting aside righteous judgment for naked, carnal politicking.

Such causes tempt us to join them in an attempt to make this world at least a *little* better here and now. Should we? Why not add our voice to a peaceful protest outside an abortion clinic? Why not hold up the arms of politicians promising to make a positive difference? Why not use our social media accounts to promote the slogans of organizations seeking change we wholeheartedly believe is needed?

Let's start with a realistic look at the world's movements and causes.

“Great Is Diana of the Ephesians!”

The Apostle Paul reached first-century Gentiles with the Gospel of the Kingdom of God, which includes obedience to God's command against idolatry (e.g., Acts 17:22–31). This facet of the truth did not go unnoticed by idol makers—merchants in an industry we are told was quite profitable.

And about that time there arose a great commotion about the Way. For a certain man named Demetrius, a silversmith, who made silver shrines of Diana, brought no small profit to the craftsmen. He called them together with the workers of similar occupation, and said: “Men, you know that we have our prosperity by this trade. Moreover you see and hear that not only at Ephesus, but throughout almost

all Asia, this Paul has persuaded and turned away many people, saying that they are not gods which are made with hands. So not only is this trade of ours in danger of falling into disrepute, but also the temple of the great goddess Diana may be despised and her magnificence destroyed, whom all Asia and the world worship.”

Now when they heard this, they were full of wrath and cried out, saying, “Great is Diana of the Ephesians!” So the whole city was filled with confusion, and rushed into the theater with one accord (Acts 19:23–29).

What motivated this protest—a riot so great that the local government feared Roman intervention (v. 40)—was not devotion to Diana, but *concern for profits*.

But the crowd did not know this. In fact, the people had different ideas about why they were rioting, “for the assembly was confused, and most of them did not know why they had come together” (v. 32). Yet, for *two hours*, the whole crowd chanted the slogan of the merchants: “Great is Diana of the Ephesians!” (v. 34).

A Modern Example of an Ancient Reality

Too often, the causes and movements of this world mimic the protests of Ephesus. The streets are filled with people passionate about their beliefs and zealous for a particular cause. Yet, when we dig, we find individuals at the core of it all with beliefs and causes most of the effort's “foot soldiers” would not even recognize.

For example, the words “black lives matter” express a truth beyond dispute: Black lives *do* matter! Those who think otherwise defy Almighty God, who made every human life in His own image for His own glory. With a name like that, one would think the Black Lives Matter organization is clearly worthy of support and encouragement.

If only it were. Visiting *BlackLivesMatter.com* reveals the goals of the organization's leaders in their own words. Under the “What We Believe” portion of their webpage, they make clear that they desire to “do the work required to dismantle cisgender privilege.” For those who aren't familiar with the

word *cisgender*, this means they work to make it easier for a man to declare himself a woman, for a woman to declare herself a man, and to convince people that such confusion is normal. They also declare their desire to “disrupt the Western-prescribed nuclear family structure requirement” (by which they refer to the biblical design of the family—married parents and a father serving as head of the home) and to “foster a queer-affirming network” and free people from “the tight grip of heteronormative thinking”—in other words, to aggressively push society to accept homosexuality and other lifestyles as equal to or better than God’s own design.

In the Ephesian “Diana Movement,” those behind the protests had interests that many of the sincere participants knew nothing about. Likewise, if we donate money to the Black Lives Matter organization or add *#BlackLivesMatter* to our online posts, how do we know we aren’t lending support to agendas we would never agree with if we knew the details?

In fact, we *don’t*.

Again, those who disagree with the words “black lives matter” are disagreeing with the Creator Himself. Yet, organizations and movements are not necessarily defined by the label they present to the world. Jesus Christ commands His followers, “Do not judge according to appearance, but judge with righteous judgment” (John 7:24). Following Christ requires a depth of discernment that few are willing to practice, because whatever we do, we bear God’s name (Acts 9:15) and are responsible for what we attach that name to.

Corrupted World, Corrupted Tactics, Corrupted Motives

In a sin-tainted world, *no* side of the political spectrum is without sinful tactics.

Many remember the final weeks of the 2004 reelection campaign for U.S. President George W. Bush. Running as the incumbent Republican, the President began to talk up an amendment to the United States Constitution that would protect marriage as the union of one man and one woman—a timely concern due to the May 2004 legalization of same-sex “marriage” in Massachusetts. That presidential election drew the highest percentage of Americans to the polls in almost 40 years. Many credit this record-breaking feat to the throngs of religious conservatives stirred by Mr. Bush’s stumping for the marriage-protecting amendment.

Yet, after the election was won, before he was even sworn in for his second term, President Bush announced that he was *not* planning to press for the amendment. Marriage was considered safe enough. Of course, the United States now lives in the aftermath, with same-sex “marriage” a reality nationwide.

It’s hard to say whether a push for a marriage-protecting amendment would have worked, yet it is also hard not to suspect ulterior motives in the campaign promise. Regardless,

when all was said and done, many religious conservatives in the U.S. felt used and manipulated.

Even the pro-life movement—wrestling against the obvious evil of abortion—has recently been tainted with questions and controversy. In a May 2020 documentary, Norma McCorvey—the “Jane Roe” in the infamous *Roe v. Wade* case that made abortion-on-demand legal in the U.S.—stated that her later comments against abortion were not sincere. The picture painted is that she made them for the money, used as a “prop” by the leaders of the pro-life movement. She claimed she was giving the documentary interviewer her “deathbed confession.” However, many intimate friends and spiritual advisors who knew her were confused by her statements, as they believed—and continue to believe—that her convictions against abortion were very real.

It is entirely possible that Ms. McCorvey, facing the end of her life, was simply confused and guilt-ridden. Now that she has died, in this life we may never know. Regardless, as movements and organizations grow larger in this world, they often begin to transform into business ventures in ways that should leave us uncomfortable—a fact worth noting. The love of money is, indeed, the root of many evils (1 Timothy 6:10).

Fixing the Devil’s World with the Devil’s Tools?

Such tainted motivations and tactics surely do not characterize every movement in this world, yet neither should they surprise us. Whether deceitful or transparent, too many of this world’s causes and movements share two important characteristics: They are products of the devil’s world, and they generally represent attempts to improve the devil’s world using the devil’s own tools.

To be sure, God created the world and, ultimately, all authority rests with Him. Yet God’s word makes it abundantly clear that the world around us now is *not* as He would have it but reflects, instead, Satan the devil, who reigns over it. The devil said plainly to Jesus that all worldly authority “has been delivered to me, and I give it to whomever I wish” (Luke 4:6). If the devil had been lying, that temptation would have been no temptation at all, since Satan cannot give what he does not have!

But he *does* have that authority in this present world—a fact Jesus supports three times in His own statements, calling the devil the “ruler of this world” (John 12:31; 14:30; 16:11). Paul refers to Satan as “the god of this age” (2 Corinthians 4:4). Revelation 12:9 makes clear that Satan continually “deceives the whole world,” and 1 John 5:19 says flatly that “the whole world lies under the sway of the wicked one.”

Doesn’t “the whole world” include its causes, organizations, and political campaigns? Or does the Bible not mean what it says?

Consider our politicians. We should pray for *all* of our leaders, regardless of our personal feelings about them (1 Tim-

othy 2:1–4). But will reelecting or replacing any one of them somehow remove or even significantly reduce Satan’s stranglehold on the world? God will allow leaders to reign so that His purposes are served (Daniel 4:17), but does the devil *really* care who is elected or which party comes into power?

Ultimately, no. *As long as the leader is not Jesus Christ, anyone will do as far as the devil is concerned.* And Church members who seek to publicly promote or degrade one political leader or another on social media *delight* the devil, regardless of their target. Surely, few things thrill Satan more than seeing God’s people invested in the things of *his* domain.

In all of this oppression and injustice experienced by His own people, **did Jesus Christ join or support any anti-Roman movements? He did not.**

He *loves* it when those who have been separated by God for holy purposes get drawn back into “the course of this world” (Ephesians 2:2).

Of course, while God may not subscribe to a particular party or policy, He certainly cares about human fairness and hates racism. He certainly cares about unborn life. And—while democracy is *not* God’s approach to government—no matter the approach men take, He certainly hates to see leaders abuse those they were appointed to serve.

But does God want us to use this world’s faulty, carnal tools to “fix” the world, now? Should we work to address the sins of the world with the devil’s tools? Or has He called us to address them in a different way entirely?

Psalms 11:3 presents us with a challenging question: “If the foundations are destroyed, what can the righteous do?” The question is rhetorical, because its answer is obvious: Nothing. If the foundations are destroyed, even the righteous cannot build *anything* of value atop the rubble—and the foundations of this world are *shattered*. Since the Garden of Eden, this world has been built upon *sin*.

Yet, God notices and honors those who sigh and cry over the *many* abominations done within this world (Ezekiel 9:4–6). What should we *do* with the emotions and concerns those abominations inspire within us?

Jesus Christ provides the answers in His example and His teachings. After all, isn’t the key question for every faithful Christian, *What would Jesus have me do?*

A Patient and Focused Savior

We *must* believe that, if we are stirred by the wrongs and evils in the world, the *Creator* of this world must be even more so. How eager He must be to, *finally* right all wrongs, lift up the downtrodden, and put an end to wicked influence!

Yet, during His human ministry, He steadfastly *refused* all opportunities to involve Himself in the course of this world. He was sent with a plan and a mission, and He stuck to both.

We should not forget that first-century Judea was rampant with egregious injustices. In Jesus’ day, Judea was an occupied territory. Its inhabitants lived and died under the shadow of the Roman Empire. The Romans brought order, yes, but at the price of subjugation and domination. The Roman government, in some ways, was debauched. Jesus’ own trial shows how easily the powerful could execute the innocent. The first-century Church began amidst the *Pax Romana*, the Roman Peace—yet it was a peace provided by Rome’s overwhelming, iron grip.

The Jews, Jesus’ people, were socially oppressed and heavily taxed. Those taxes helped keep the order that Paul noted in Romans 13:6—order that allowed peaceful worship services, roads on which the Gospel could be spread, and other conveniences of first-century society. But those taxes also funded the crucifixion of Jews, furthered Roman military oppression, and paid for pagan, state-sponsored temples and festivals. If we are concerned that our modern taxes may be misused, we should meditate on what taxes paid to first-century Rome made possible.

Yet, in the midst of this oppression and injustice inflicted upon His own people, did Jesus Christ join or support any anti-Roman movements?

He did not. In fact, a careful review of His ministry demonstrates a *dedicated detachment* from the course of this world and a *complete commitment* to a mission accomplished by no carnal cause or movement.

In Mark 12:13–17, Jewish leaders tried to pull Jesus into their own discussions about the morality of paying taxes. It was a trap, of course, as they were more interested in discrediting Him than hearing an answer. Yet Jesus, in His wisdom, *did* answer—though not in a way that aligned Himself with any worldly cause. Rather, He declared that we should “render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and to God the things that are God’s” (v. 17).

In Luke 12, we read of a man who came to Jesus asking Him to judge between him and his brother concerning their inheritance (v. 13). The Messiah who will one day judge the *entire world* responded, “Man, who made Me a judge or an arbitrator over you?” (v. 14). Keep in mind, Jesus has literally been ordained by the Father to judge the entire world (Acts 17:31). In fact, in the Millennium, “He shall judge between many peoples, and rebuke strong nations afar off” (Micah 4:3). But Jesus refused to take that authority prematurely, even in such a small way. The world would have to wait.

In fact, Christ displayed a complete commitment to His Father’s timeline for addressing the world. For instance,

Scripture records moments where the Savior was moved by compassion to address the suffering of specific Gentiles when their faith was strong—often highlighting their powerful faith to the Jews around Him (e.g., Matthew 15:22–28). Yet, He explicitly resisted opening up salvation to the Gentiles more broadly until it was the Father’s time, which came when Peter was divinely directed to baptize Cornelius (Acts 10 and 11).

Christ was utterly devoted to His Father’s purpose *and timing*. Luke describes how Satan offered Jesus “all the kingdoms of the world” (Luke 4:5–6). Jesus only had to pay the price of worshipping the devil (v. 7) and it all would be His to improve!

Of course, Jesus did not take that bait (v. 8). Christ will not compromise with the devil in an attempt to cure this world using its own means, methods, and institutions. Today is *not* His day to clean up the earth—that day will come in *tomorrow’s world*. He is not going to cut corners in the plan of God!

Drafted for the Most Important Cause

So, what would Jesus have us do?

The answer is abundantly clear. He would have us do exactly what He commissioned us to do—*preach the Kingdom of God to the world*.

Our Creator—Jesus Christ, the Son of God—became flesh and allowed Himself to be tortured and murdered to separate each of us from the world through the forgiveness of our sins and the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. God has called you and me to Him, and is adding us to His very family—so we must be about our Father’s business (Luke 2:49).

Do we believe or not believe that the message of the Kingdom of God is truly the *only* hope the world has? Do we believe or not believe that *only* that message connects *all* the dots and clarifies the *real* reasons for human suffering? And if we do not carry God’s message to the world, who will?

Jesus’ teachings contained in Luke 14:25–33 make plain the level of devotion true Christianity requires. He summarizes that requirement when He says, “whoever of you does not forsake *all that he has* cannot be My disciple” (v. 33). “All that he has” includes portions of our hearts that we would be tempted to devote to other causes, messages, and missions. And “cannot” is a strong word.

In Luke 9:57–62, Jesus uses the requests of three “wannabe” followers to highlight the full costs of discipleship. For instance, He highlights that following Him often means that we are, in a sense, “homeless,” with no place on earth that we can truly call ours (vv. 57–58). And those who follow Him must be committed to completing what they started, looking forward to His purpose for them, with no turning back (vv. 61–62).

But verses 59–60 seem harshest to many readers: “Then He said to another, ‘Follow Me.’ But he said, ‘Lord, let me first go and bury my father.’ Jesus said to him, ‘*Let the dead bury their own dead, but you go and preach the kingdom of God.*’”

It seems cruel, and we often distract ourselves from its meaning by trying to take its edge off—noting that, perhaps, this meant he wanted to wait for his father to die, which could take years. But Christ’s meaning is crystal clear: “The world is filled with those who are lost and perishing, and they busy themselves with the business of the perishing. *But you go and preach the Kingdom of God.*”

The Cause of the Christian

Of course, the obligation Christ presses upon His Church *includes* crying aloud to the world about sin and sparing not (Isaiah 58:1)! The sins of this world—the abomination of abortion, the scourge of racism, and the craven greed of so many worldly leaders—are part of the reason prophesied devastation is coming on the world ahead of that Kingdom!

Yet, are we to represent worldly organizations in our condemnation of these sins? Do we come in their name? *No!* God expects us to work together to provide a *full* witness—one that points clearly and unequivocally to *Jesus Christ* as the Authority behind our message!

In our roles as ambassadors of the coming reign of Christ (Ephesians 6:20), are we to dilute our ambassadorship by serving two regimes? Or will it be clear to those who receive us *exactly* Whom we represent?

Our obligation is clear: We have been called to preach the Gospel of the Kingdom of God. Not the Gospel of Capitalism, Socialism, or Communism. Not the Gospel of Social Justice, Criminal Justice, or Environmental Justice. Not the Gospel of Republicans, Democrats, or Libertarians. Not the Gospel of Conservatives, Liberals, or Moderates. Not the Gospel of CNN, Fox News, or MSNBC. Not the Gospel of the Tea Party movement, Black Lives Matter, or the Pro-Life movement.

It is the Gospel of the Kingdom of God. And we are to preach it unadulterated and unabridged.

Our Savior’s own cause is the cause to which we are to completely devote our lives. The banner in our hands is to be *His* banner, and His alone. And after our resurrection and glorification, when we charge out of heaven with Him to finally take this world from the devil (Revelation 19), that act will culminate lives that were lived walking side by side with our Husband-to-be, looking at the world as He looks at it, and longing to make it right the way *He* wants to make it right.

Jesus Christ will not share our devotion with any man-made social movement, and those devoted to Him will not desire to divide their devotion. They will say with Him, “Let the dead bury their dead. We will preach the Kingdom of God.” ^(LW)

Do We Teach “British Israelism”?

By **Dexter B. Wakefield**

An important and popular booklet that the Living Church of God offers is *The United States and Great Britain in Prophecy*. In it, Mr. John H. Ogwyn shows that the history of the United States and Great Britain has been written in advance in the prophecies of the Bible. God warns, “Beware that you do not forget the LORD your God by not keeping His commandments, His judgments, and His statutes which I command you today... then you say in your heart, ‘My power and the might of my hand have gained me this wealth.’ And you shall remember the LORD your God, for it is He who gives you power to get wealth, that He may establish His covenant which He swore to your fathers” (Deuteronomy 8:11, 17–18).

The above passage emphatically explains that the United States and the other British-descended nations have their blessings not due to their own superiority or virtue, but due to an ancient promise God made to Abraham. No other nations have received the blessings related to these specific promises. *The United States and Great Britain in Prophecy* also shows that God has prophesied the removal of these blessings due to America’s and Britain’s continuing rejection of the very God who gave them. Those who understand this have an obligation to warn these nations (Ezekiel 33). This being so, the Living Church of God teaches both individual and national repentance.

A Kingdom Divided

In biblical history, Israel and Judah separated from each other during the reign of Solomon’s son Rehoboam. Jeroboam became the king of Israel and led it into idolatry, while Rehoboam remained the king of Judah. These two nations fought numerous wars against each other (cf. 1 Kings 12:19–21; 15:32). Israel and Judah existed as separate nations throughout biblical history from then on. Prophetically, they are to be reunited only upon the Messiah’s return, and are separate until that time (Ezekiel 37:15–20).

Because of its sins, the kingdom of Israel, which consisted of the northern ten Israelite tribes, went into Assyrian captivity and, for the most part, was lost to history, becoming known as “The Ten Lost Tribes of Israel.” For centuries, historians have speculated about the history and location of these tribes.

Subsequently, in biblical history, the Kingdom of Judah—consisting of the tribes of Judah, Benjamin, and most of the tribe of Levi—sinned greatly in idolatry and went into captivity in Babylon. They later returned to Judea and were there during the time of Christ. All of this is well-established history, rooted in God’s word.

The Kingdom of Judah—found in the modern-day Jewish people—kept the sign of the Sabbath (Exodus 31:13, 17) and, as a result, have an extensive, well-documented history. Israel, which abandoned the Sabbath, is tracked through time mostly by biblical prophecy, which the Bible treats as future history. The northern ten tribes of Israel have comparatively fewer historical and archaeological reference points.

At least one quarter of the Bible is made up of prophecy, and much of that prophecy is devoted to the future of the northern ten tribes of Israel in “the last days” (Genesis 49:1), which are the times just prior to the return of Jesus the Messiah. The Living Church of God teaches that knowing which nations represent these ten tribes today—particularly the birthright tribes of Ephraim and Manasseh—is the “master key” to understanding the prophecies concerning them and the events occurring at the end of the present age.

The Living Church of God’s primary mission is to preach the Gospel of the Kingdom of God to the world and to feed the flock that God calls in these times. Our broadcasts and literature focus on that Work. But the *Tomorrow’s World* magazine and television program also put current events into the context of the biblical narrative of history, often using this “key to unlocking many Bible prophecies” (*The United States and Great Britain in Prophecy*, p. 1).

This provides a unique illumination of world events.

Knowledge that the peoples of the British Isles are of Israelite origin has been extant for many centuries. For example, in the Declaration of Arbroath written in 1320, the Scottish barons sending that document to the pope in Rome seem to cite Israelite origin as part of their justification for independence from the English king. Additionally, ancient Irish histories record an Israelite presence in Ireland—and there are many other examples, as well. Historians have shown much interest in this subject for the last three centuries.

The Errors of “British Israelism”

However, this truth is sometimes confused by individuals with a different hypothesis, generally called “British Israelism,” a theory that the people of the British Isles are the descendants of *all ten* “lost tribes.” British Israelism is controversial and has been for centuries. The Living Church of God regards it as an incorrect theory for a number of reasons, not the least of which being that while some from the ten tribes settled in the British Isles, most settled elsewhere. Also, British Israelism’s proponents and opponents often view the subject primarily as a matter of secular history, which misses the all-important prophetic, revelatory context of the Bible. While portions of the research done by British Israelism enthusiasts might occasionally be accurate, much is tainted and distorted by their lack of biblical understanding, leading to significant errors.

Because of its long history, British Israelism—also called “Anglo-Israelism”—has split into many different factions, and various groups have corrupted it for political or other

The Church is very much aware of the role of the United States and Great Britain in prophecy, **but we do not accept the terms *British Israelism* or *Anglo-Israelism* as descriptive of our belief.**

purposes with which the Living Church of God strongly disagrees. For instance, modern so-called “Christian identity,” “white nationalist,” and “white supremacist” groups have corrupted aspects of British Israelism to suit their racist and anti-Semitic politics. Sadly, out of either ignorance or bigotry, some mischaracterize the Living Church of God’s explanation of prophecy as *British Israelism* or *Anglo-Israelism* and try to denigrate our faith by falsely claiming it is associated with racist ideas.

Racism Is Sin

The Living Church of God refuses to become involved in this world’s politics and rejects racism, anti-Semitism, and all other forms of hatred against human beings. *Racism is sin*. And although our Church is very much aware of the role of the United States and Great Britain in prophecy, we do not accept the terms *British Israelism* or *Anglo-Israelism* as descriptive of our belief.

To say that we teach British Israelism or Anglo-Israelism as religious doctrine is inaccurate and very misleading. Such terms are not found in our *Official Statement of Fundamental Beliefs* or in our booklet *The United States and Great Britain in Prophecy*—nor are they found in *The United States and British Commonwealth in Prophecy* by Mr. Herbert W. Armstrong, originally published in 1967. In fact, these terms are not found

in any of the literature of the Worldwide Church of God up to the time of Mr. Armstrong’s death. Within Global Church of God literature, “Anglo-Israelism” is mentioned in the booklet *America and Britain in Prophecy*—but in the context of *refuting some of its errors* (Raymond McNair, p. 53, 1996).

All the Families of the Earth

Here is an excerpt from the Living Church of God’s *Official Statement of Fundamental Beliefs*, under the “Overcoming Racial Prejudice” heading: “God’s Word commands all mankind to *love their neighbors as themselves* (Leviticus 19:18; Matthew 22:39; Acts 17:24–29). God reveals that salvation is now freely offered to both Jews and Gentiles (Acts 10:34–35; Romans 10:12–13; cf. Joel 2:32). We believe love and deep respect should be shown to people of all ethnicities (Romans 13:10).”

As Mr. Herbert Armstrong noted long ago, God made both physical and spiritual promises to Abraham and his descendants. Many of the physical promises that were unconditional have been fulfilled already, and the rest will be fulfilled in the future. God also promised Abraham that “in your seed *all the nations of the earth shall be blessed*” (Genesis 22:18). Paul makes plain in Galatians 3:7–9 that in that statement God had in mind the spiritual family the spiritual family He was going to build through Jesus Christ, the King of kings, that would incorporate individuals from all over the world. And that blessing obviously includes the Kingdom of God, which is open to all peoples.

As the Apostle Paul wrote to the Gentiles in Galatia, “For you are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus. For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus. And if you are Christ’s, then you are Abraham’s seed, and heirs according to the promise” (Galatians 3:26–29). Therefore, the Church of God, which is “the Israel of God” (Galatians 6:16), is open to all races and ethnicities—*all the families of the earth*.

Because it is God who does the calling into His Church, it is not surprising that the Living Church of God has a multiethnic and multinational membership and ministry. And we will continue “to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace” (Ephesians 4:3). That is because “There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called in one hope of your calling; one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is above all, and through all, and in you all” (vv. 4–6). We continue to hold to that faith today, and we always will.

For more on this increasingly vital subject, please read “It’s Not in the Database” at LCG.org and “Racism in America: A Thing of the Past?” at TomorrowsWorld.org. 

Dealing with Doubtful Things



By **Mark Sandor**

The Bible makes clear that many decisions in our lives are choices between righteousness and sin. God grants us free moral agency to determine whether we will obey or disobey Him (Deuteronomy 30:19–20). But does this mean that *every* choice we face is a matter of absolutes? Obviously not! Sometimes we must exercise discernment to determine the best choice for our particular circumstances—and it is important to recognize that other sincere and converted Christians may very well come to different conclusions, based on their own circumstances.

Romans 14 makes clear that there are “doubtful things.” In this chapter, the Apostle Paul focuses on some of the doubtful things of his day, such as eating food offered to idols and observing special days of fasting. Those might not be the top issues of our modern society, but they were the “hot button” issues of his day, and Romans 14 gives excellent principles for how we should handle such topics.

What Are “Doubtful Things”?

Before examining these principles, we should address what things are doubtful and what things are not. Whenever the Bible is clear about an issue, it is *not* doubtful. The Ten Commandments are perhaps the most famous example of absolutes in the Bible. There is no reasoning around these commandments. While the Church’s biblical teaching and administration helps to clarify questions and guide us in details concerning the keeping of the Commandments (just as Jesus did concerning the now-proverbial “ox in a ditch” in Luke 14:1–6), there is no debate that the Commandments are to be kept. The same could be said of God’s commands concerning, say, the Holy Days, not eating unclean animals, not getting tattoos, and many others. If the law and the testimony are plain to understand on an issue throughout Scripture, then the issue is *not* doubtful and is not being discussed in Romans 14.

However, not all decisions are choices between righteousness and sin, as defined in God’s law. Some are simply personal choices. One such decision is what young people should do after high school. Should a young person go straight into the workforce, attend a trade school, or enroll in a local

community college or four-year university? This is a very important decision, but there is not one absolute answer that is right for all young men and women and their families! Given the preferences, aptitudes, and aspirations of each individual, the option that might be better for one young man or woman is not guaranteed to be the correct choice for another person who has different talents and plans. This is a matter of individual choice that could be wise or foolish based on any number of factors. (Advice on this particular topic is available in Mr. Gerald Weston’s article “University or Skilled Trade?” in the May-June 2019 *Living Church News*.)

One question you can consider in order to determine if something is doubtful or not is whether a person must repent of that behavior to be baptized. Does someone need to repent of breaking the Ten Commandments to be baptized? Yes. Does someone have to change his or her career path? That’s doubtful—some may need to do so, and others will not.

A variety of issues fall into the “doubtful things” category. The ones with which I am most familiar involve families with young children: Should you use a midwife or go to a hospital? Should you have your children vaccinated or not? Should you homeschool or send your children to public or private school? These are all very important questions for parents to answer, often involving a great deal of research, thought, and prayer.

As important as these questions are, none are necessarily matters of sin or righteousness, and Church leadership has not made a ruling on any of them. Members of God’s Church can attend in good standing whether they vaccinate or not, homeschool or not, or go to college or not. At this time in our society, individuals of good will and sincere intention can disagree over the answers—which represent, ultimately, “doubtful things.” With this in mind, let’s return to Romans 14 to see what principles God inspired Paul to record that can guide us in the decisions we each must make for ourselves while also respecting that other sincere Christians can come to different conclusions.

1. Do not generate dispute and contention.

The first instruction Paul gives us in the matter of doubtful things is “Receive one who is weak in the faith, but *not to disputes over doubtful things*” (Romans 14:1). Issues such as

those mentioned above can be deeply personal and often cause major disputes in the world! Vaccines are passionately debated online and in other media, and the discussions too frequently are not conducted in a loving, friendly way.

Needless to say, God's people should not be contentious with each other over such personal decisions or other "doubtful things"—online or otherwise! That is not to say we cannot discuss them and share our opinions, even when we disagree. Some years ago, during the table topics session of a Spokesman Club meeting in Tulsa, the subject of vaccines was raised and two men expressed completely opposite opinions. Both stated their views respectfully and discussed the issue rather than making personal attacks. While I doubt anyone's mind was changed by the discussion, no friendships were lost either! Neither questioned the other's conversion based on his views on this personal matter. That memory has always stood out to me, because of the stark contrast to what we frequently

Not all decisions are choices between righteousness and sin, as defined in God's law. Some are simply personal choices.

see in the world—and sometimes among members of God's Church, too—when these issues are debated.

2. Do not judge your brothers and sisters.

Sometimes opinions about doubtful things are taken too far and become, to us, the proverbial "eleventh commandment." When looking into issues, we can sometimes cross the line and assume that the best decision for *our* family is the best decision for *every* family. In Romans 14:4, Paul asks bluntly, "Who are you to judge another's servant?" That is, Paul was inspired to remind us that our brothers and sisters in Christ answer to *God*—not to us—about these issues.

Homeschooling or public schooling can sometimes be framed as a choice between righteousness and worldliness. Some parents who public school their children may look down on those who homeschool for "failing to prepare their children for real life." Some parents who homeschool can look down on parents who public school for "immersing their children in godless values all day." Not every parent is this judgmental, but neither are judgments such as these unusual.

God tells us to consider the fruits (Matthew 7:16–20; 1 Thessalonians 5:21). What has God's Church seen regarding the outcomes of homeschooling and public schooling? The answer is probably obvious to anyone who has been in the Church for any period of time: Some homeschooled children stay in God's Church and some leave when they grow up. As for public-schooled children, some stay in God's Church and

some leave when they grow up. Parents have a responsibility before God to consider how best to prepare their children to live righteous lives—knowing, of course, that eventually those children will have to make their own decisions. Many families, examining their personal situations, conclude that it may be a better choice to homeschool; other families, reviewing their own specific circumstances and details about their local schools, decide that their public school provides a good option. The factors involved for one family might not apply to another family in God's Church. We must be careful not to judge those who have made a different decision than we have about a "doubtful thing." Again, they are responsible to God, not to us.

I fell into this trap when my wife and I were expecting our first child. We had the options of using a midwife or going to a hospital. After doing a fair amount of research, we decided that a midwife was the best choice for our family. Regrettably,

I took the decision too far and became generally judgmental of those who chose to use a hospital instead. I had become convinced that the "righteous" choice was to use a midwife. When labor began, I discovered that all my "righteousness" in this matter was pure vanity, as everything went wrong. We ended up in a hospital for an emergency C-section

delivery. Thankfully, my wife and firstborn both recovered, but it was a humbling experience to realize how self-righteous I had become. I was brought to my knees at the terror of potentially losing my wife and child. God eventually blessed us with a successful home delivery by a midwife later in our life. However, by that point I recognized that the choice of using a midwife or a hospital is just that: a personal choice that couples must make for themselves. If another family decides they prefer to go to the hospital for labor and delivery, who am I to judge God's servant in that regard?

3. Take care when sharing your opinion.

With many doubtful things, we must make a choice one way or the other. We either get a particular vaccine or we do not—there is no way to get "half" a vaccine in some futile attempt to find middle ground. We must educate our children in *some* manner, whether public school, private school, homeschool, or some other option (though this decision can be revisited later if our situation or conclusion changes).

In matters that are not clear-cut commands from the Bible or determinations delegated to the Church, another guiding principle applies to each of us individually: Romans 14:23 tells us that "whatever is not from faith is sin." This verse resolves the issue for those who feel strongly that they would compromise their faith by allowing their children to be vaccinated or by putting them in public school—or, perhaps, the reverse of those conclusions. We must be able to make our decisions

about doubtful things with our faith intact. If we cannot hold a conclusion in faith, we should reconsider. As Paul says, “Happy is he who does not condemn himself in what he approves” (v. 22). So, after doing our research and sincerely seeking God’s mind on a matter, we make our decision.

What else was Paul inspired to say? In the same verse, he says, “Do you have faith? Have it *to yourself* before God.” Put another way, we should make our decision and refrain from pushing it on others (Proverbs 17:27–28). The scripture that says “in a multitude of counselors there is safety” (Proverbs 24:6) does not mean we should push *our* unsolicited “counsel” on *others!*

In this era of social media, we may be tempted to put our opinions and personal positions on these matters out there for everyone to see. This often delights those who already agree with us, but it may unnecessarily erect barriers for those who don’t, even when we aren’t making negative comments about the positions with which we disagree.

These days, we stumble across articles that seem “ready-made” for sharing on social media (because they are), such as “The Top Five Reasons You Should Homeschool” or “The Ten Mistakes Most Anti-Vaxxers Make.” Our motivations in sharing such posts—or writing our own—might truly be good, with no harm or offense intended. Nevertheless, people frequently hear only implied judgment: “If you choose not to vaccinate your children you obviously must want them to get polio and die! You are a *bad* parent!”—or, conversely, “If you choose to vaccinate your children you obviously must want them to get autism and die! You are a *bad* parent!”

When specifically and personally sought out for advice, we should feel comfortable sharing our reasoning with another. But we should take great care in broadcasting these personal decisions, rooted in our personal circumstances, to everyone on the planet via social media. Instead, Paul tells us to “resolve this, not to put a stumbling block or a cause to fall in our brother’s way” (Romans 14:13). Let’s strive not to be among those who sow stumbling blocks on social media.

And, on the other hand, we all need to be careful not to *allow ourselves* to be hurt or offended when others make different decisions than we do and happen to mention them online. Personal decisions will vary from one person or family to another. Differences do not necessarily signify disrespect or disparagement, and agreements or “likes,” though they give us a sense of validation, are not the ultimate stamp of approval. It is God’s involvement and approval that we need and want, and that comes through our relationship with Him.

4. Focus on edification and peace.

Romans 14 also contains the following exhortation: “Therefore let us pursue the things which make for peace and the things by which one may edify another” (v. 19).

Sometimes we simply have to know which hills are worth dying on, figuratively speaking, and which ones are not. When things are not doubtful, we might have to die on those hills. Those of us who did not grow up in God’s Church may have lost friends or close relationships when we came into the Church because we refused to compromise on God’s commandments. I was surprised that some people I knew took exception when I began following the Bible’s dietary laws! I was not trying to force my decisions on them, but at the same time I was not about to eat some pork in order to have “peace.” Some have lost jobs due to their commitment to keeping the Sabbath holy. The Ten Commandments and other issues that are not doubtful set us apart from the world.

But, within God’s Church, we should *focus on what we have in common rather than our differences* involving doubtful things. Paul continues his exhortation for peace by commanding Christians, “Do not destroy the work of God for the sake of food” (Romans 14:20). He was referring to purchasing the meat of clean animals that had been sacrificed to idols. For our purposes, we could just as easily say, “Do not destroy the work of God for the sake of homeschooling. Or public schooling. Or midwifery. Or hospitals. Or vaccinations. Or college. Or trade school”—the list would go on and on. The things we have in common should be our focus, rather than doubtful things.

We should have unity about *undoubtful* things, like the Ten Commandments, but they are not all we have in common with other believers. Paul points out, “There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called in one hope of your calling; one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is above all, and through all, and in you all” (Ephesians 4:4–6). Notice his focus on the number *one*. This is not the only time that number is used in Scripture as a call to unity. Towards the conclusion of His final Passover evening with His disciples, Jesus prayed, “I do not pray for these alone, but also for those who will believe in Me through their word; that they all may be one, as You, Father, are in Me, and I in You; that they also may be one in Us, that the world may believe that You sent Me” (John 17:20–21). The things Christians have in common far outweigh our differences of opinion about doubtful things (see also 1 Corinthians 12).

Romans 14 helps us understand that if God has not made something clear and the Church has rendered no determination, then we should “not judge one another anymore” (v. 13). Judging one another in such matters just creates stumbling blocks for our brethren—and for ourselves. Instead, we all should aim for the Kingdom of God, which is based on “righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit” (v. 17). ^(L)



A Biblical Guide for Using Social Media

By **John Robinson**

I never signed up for Facebook. This was not because of any moral stance; as a capable procrastinator, I just never got around to it. I think I have possibly avoided considerable drama by not being on the platform, but I do love the idea of Facebook—keeping up with distant family, sharing photos and stories, reconnecting with old friends from high school and college.

Over the last few years, social media has become the primary form of communication for many. For good or ill, it now dominates the way we connect with the rest of the world. From it we get our news, political takes, short videos provided for distraction, and general entertainment.

The technology available in our modern age is truly unprecedented, and since it's constantly changing, it can be difficult to keep up with. Social media platforms come and go like seasons. Where once was Vine, now there is TikTok. In the early 2000s, MySpace was so dominant the original *Iron Man* movie couldn't resist mentioning it—who could foresee that, just a few years later, it would become a byword for the obsolete as the Facebook juggernaut crushed it in its ascendancy?

By contrast, even the newest passages of the Bible are nearly *two thousand years old*, so one might reasonably wonder what it could possibly contribute to a modern society that is advancing so rapidly. How can the Bible guide us in the use of social media when Twitter and Facebook only started in 2006, and Instagram in 2010? Can the Bible say anything relevant about our communication when its ancient writers couldn't possibly conceive of any of these platforms?

In a word, yes. Not only can the Bible still give us guidance, heeding its instruction is arguably more important now than ever. Discussing what social media is capable of, noted author Jordan B. Peterson said that “we are networked together more now than we ever have been.... the choices you make are amplified and distributed not only far faster than they ever have been, but with far more impact” (“The New Media: My Experience and More,” *YouTube.com*, November 7, 2017). Because of our new ability to reach many more people far more quickly, heeding the Bible's instruction on discourse

and interpersonal relationships has become crucial in an even deeper way.

A *persona*—sometimes called an *archetype*—is an individual character representing a larger group, and in this article, I would like to present to you four personas you will inevitably encounter on the World Wide Web: the Fool, the Teacher, the Busybody, and the Talebearer. It won't take long to run into these personas; you'll find that there are a lot of them using social media.

The Fool

We'll start with the Fool because he probably represents the broadest category—in fact, most human beings fit into this category in one way or another. That being said, fools are found along a spectrum of foolish behavior.

The Bible uses “fool” to denote one who lacks wisdom or judgment, but does so with respect to moral rather than intellectual deficiencies. The “fool,” as *The New Unger's Bible Dictionary* says, is “not so much one lacking in mental powers, as one who misuses them.... one who is rash, senseless, or unreasonable” (“Fool,” 2009).

When we let our emotions start to control us, we venture into foolish behavior. Likewise, if we comment on posts we'd do better to ignore, or even comment on worthy posts in a manner that we know is argumentative, we begin to take on characteristics of the Fool—in other words, we act foolish. This does not mean that we *are* fools, but just that we are making foolish decisions, as everyone does at times.

How do you know if you have encountered the Fool online? Proverbs 10:8–10 makes it clear that “a prating fool will fall.” To “prate” is to talk foolishly and at tedious length about something—which may remind you of the common Internet “troll.” As *Merriam-Webster* defines it, “troll” is slang for “a person who intentionally antagonizes others online by posting inflammatory, irrelevant, or offensive comments or other disruptive content.”

While some fools fall into the “troll” category, Proverbs points out that many foolish individuals are simply bitter and resentful. We're told, “A fool's wrath is known at once” (Proverbs 12:16). How many times have you read a post of some type, scrolled down to the comments out of curiosity,

and found that two comments in, someone was breathing fire over some slight or perceived injustice? Such people make their anger known immediately. Proverbs also notes, “A wise man fears and departs from evil, but a fool rages and is self-confident” (14:16). Again, the Fool can be found in any forum thread or comment section where the conversation quickly becomes vitriolic and starts to demonize a person or group of people. The wise are counseled to depart from this type of conversation.

When we use social media, one of the questions we should ask is “Who am I spending time with in this community?” Is it wise to spend time in a community if it has a high percentage of “fools”? Proverbs 13:20 notes that those who are the companions of fools will “be destroyed” or “suffer harm” (*English Standard Version*).

While sometimes we must correct something foolish being said—especially when vulnerable people are being influenced by the foolish talk—it is often wiser to steer clear of this type of engagement. Proverbs 1:7 and 23:9 point out that the Fool despises wisdom and wants to wallow in foolishness. He will not be convinced by a rational and wise rebuke—he’ll just entrench himself further into his foolish outlook.

In fact, the Bible warns that correcting the Fool usually results in a larger argument. Proverbs 20:3, 29:9, and 29:11 show that “any fool can start a quarrel,” “whether the fool rages or laughs, there is no peace,” and a “fool vents all his feelings, but a wise man holds them back.” This is in part because the Fool doesn’t give much thought to what is right and true—only to his own opinion and expressing his own heart, because in his own eyes, he is always right (Proverbs 12:15–16).

The Teacher

With the reach of social media, it’s never been easier to shower our knowledge upon others—but should we? James 3:1 says, “My brethren, let not many of you become teachers, knowing that we shall receive a stricter judgment.” This primarily emphasizes that teachers in God’s Church, having been given the important task of conveying doctrine, are therefore subject to closer scrutiny.

But this verse also cautions all of God’s people against hastily acting as experts on health, diet, vaccines, homeschooling, personality types, or any other subject in which we consider ourselves knowledgeable. While it’s certainly not wrong to discuss these matters, it’s all too easy to place oneself in the role of the Teacher. Doing so brings a high level of responsibility—and

risk. James goes on to issue a stern warning about the dangers of the tongue:

Even so the tongue is a little member and boasts great things. See how great a forest a little fire kindles! And the tongue is a fire, a world of iniquity. The tongue is so set among our members that it defiles the whole body, and sets on fire the course of nature; and it is set on fire by hell. For every kind of beast and bird, of reptile and creature of the sea, is tamed and has been tamed by mankind. But no man can tame the tongue. It is an unruly evil, full of deadly poison. With it we bless our God and Father, and with it we curse men, who have been made in the similitude of God. Out of the same mouth proceed blessing and cursing. My brethren, these things ought not to be so (vv. 7–10).

This is very corrective language—but again, it provides guidance for our interpersonal relationships. When we take on the role of the Teacher, even if we have the best intentions, we can potentially cause a great conflagration of passionately held convictions and have devastating effects both online and offline. Words

unfitly spoken can cause catastrophic spiritual damage, whether they’re spoken to one person, a crowd of people, or a massive social media landscape.

Words unfitly spoken can cause catastrophic spiritual damage, whether they’re spoken to one person, a crowd of people, or a massive social media landscape.

The Busybody

1 Peter 4:15 says, “But let none of you suffer as a murderer, a thief, an evildoer, or as a busybody in other people’s matters.”

Have you ever wondered why a persona as seemingly mild as “a busybody” is listed among *murderers, thieves, and evildoers*? How did the Busybody end up on such a dreadful roster of sinners?

Three different words are translated “busybody” in the New Testament, and each adds to the overall picture of this persona. Fundamentally, to be a “busybody” means “to meddle,” but one could also add “to judge others rather than the self” and “to go beyond proper boundaries.”

Addressing Timothy, Paul was rather plainspoken about this: “And besides they learn to be idle, wandering about from house to house, and not only idle but also gossips and busybodies, saying things which they ought not” (1 Timothy 5:13).

The Busybody is presumptuous—not respecting proper boundaries—and has knowingly or unknowingly set himself

up as a judge over the lives of others. Many friendships and family relationships have ended through social media because of this character. The danger of becoming the Busybody should not be taken lightly—great harm comes from such people. The Busybody’s place among murderers, thieves, and evildoers should help us to understand the magnitude of his destructive powers.

The Talebearer

Leviticus 19:16 introduces us to the biblical persona of the Talebearer: “You shall not go about as a talebearer among your people; nor shall you take a stand against the life of your neighbor: I am the LORD.”

Thanks to social media, the ability to “go about” has never been easier. A study into the Hebrew word *rakil*, translated “talebearer,” paints an ugly picture of someone intent on gathering slanderous information about others. The word denotes one who is a *slanderer*, an *informer*, a *scandal-monger* traveling about.

Rakil is derived from a primitive Hebrew root that describes someone traveling for trade. This is a person who travels about as if he were on a trade route, looking for scandals and slanderous information he can use to his benefit against other people. The Talebearer looks to swap “dirt” with anyone who is willing, taking pleasure in gathering and revealing injurious or private information.

This behavior is also linked to the Fool, as Proverbs 10:18 notes that “whoever spreads slander is a fool.” And like the presumptuous Teacher, the Talebearer is so devastating to a community that he is compared to a fire (Proverbs 26:20).

The Wise

The Bible also provides us with instruction on how to *deal* with the Fool, the Teacher, the Busybody, and the Talebearer. “He who goes about as a talebearer reveals secrets; therefore do not associate with one who flatters with his lips.... Make no friendship with an angry man, and with a furious man do not go, lest you learn his ways and set a snare for your soul” (Proverbs 20:19; 22:24–25).

Scripture shows us that oftentimes the best course of action is simply to remain silent and remove ourselves from contentious people or situations. In other words, if we cannot use Twitter, Facebook, or Instagram without being surrounded by contentious people who want to argue foolishly or even reveal secrets, the best course of action is to not use such services at all.

What should we do instead? God’s word reveals that, too. “He who is devoid of wisdom despises his neighbor, but a man of understanding holds his peace. A talebearer reveals secrets, but he who is of a faithful spirit conceals a matter” (Proverbs 11:12–13).

The wise are discreet. They understand that all people make mistakes. Concealing a matter doesn’t mean engaging in a deceptive coverup; it just means that when your neighbor stumbles you don’t go running to make sure everyone knows about it—on social media or otherwise.

And thankfully, the proverbs tell us a relatively simple way to conduct ourselves wisely: Simply don’t say anything. “Even a fool is counted wise when he holds his peace; when he shuts his lips, he is considered perceptive” (Proverbs 17:28).

What We Say in Our Hearts

Advancements in our modern world can be difficult to keep up with. But our human nature doesn’t change. No matter the platform, we can hurt with words and be hurt by them. We all say insensitive things, especially when we don’t have all the facts—which is often the case. We all want to be a part of a community, but the irony of social media is that research is showing that such services are making us lonelier than ever.

According to God, the world is filled with the foolish, and they are busy getting their message out. If we spend a lot of time commenting and arguing online, it’s very likely that we are wasting our time. If we are wise, we will restrain ourselves, practice discernment, and comment sparingly.

In Psalm 14:1, David says, “The fool has said in his heart, ‘There is no God.’ They are corrupt, they have done abominable works, there is none who does good.” What’s interesting about this scripture is that whether or not “the fool” is denying God’s existence aloud, he is denying in his *heart* God’s relevance to the physical world. And it is in his actions and behavior that such a denial demonstrates itself.

The Apostle Paul quoted Psalm 14 in Romans 3:10–18 because, even a thousand years after the psalm was written, he still considered it relevant. Building on Psalm 14, Paul ended this section of scripture by saying, “There is no fear of God before their eyes.” Again, this is not a matter of people *saying* God doesn’t exist. “Maybe He does and maybe He doesn’t,” they reason. Theirs is more of a sense that “God doesn’t care what I do.” There is no fear of consequences from a divine being, so “I can get away with any behavior I desire.” In the end, the proverbial “fool” is simply one whose words and actions, online or offline, are not governed by God.

God’s spiritual laws that govern our lives and communities continue to be true and right, regardless of how much has changed about how we interact with one another. The Bible is still as relevant to our world as it has ever been. Let’s be peacemakers, hold our tongue, give people the benefit of the doubt, and avoid foolish behavior. (L)

Beware of Emotional Distancing

By **Lenny Bower**

The rise of the COVID-19 virus has brought requests for social distancing. Governments and public health officials have laid out guidelines advising how far apart we ought to stay in order to reduce the spread of disease. However, along with this social distancing has come an alarming trend—an increase in people lashing out at one another over real or perceived violations of the guidelines. More and more stories of people engaging in this type of behavior are coming to light on social media and elsewhere. At a time when people need *more* love and compassion, some exhibit less and less.

Let's be clear: The guidelines currently set out for us to maintain physical distance from other people do not violate any of God's laws. As Christians, we should follow them to the best of our ability. However, my wife and I have realized that the virus isn't our only reason to be extremely careful about getting too close to others when we shop for food or other essentials. We do not know who might fall into a fit of rage, yelling at anyone who seems to break their six-foot "bubble." Asking around a bit, I have found that we are not alone in this experience. One of the side effects of social distancing and the pandemic is that some people are becoming distant from each other in ways that are not good, and indeed are actually harmful.

An Opportunity for Us

The question becomes, *How do you and I react when someone breaks the social distancing guidelines by coming within six feet of us?* Do we—ambassadors for Jesus Christ—angrily lash out at others? Is that truly the best we can do in showing the love of God? Has the current crisis caused godly patience and general politeness to fall by the wayside? The measure of us as Christians is not only how we treat our fellow man when all is well, but also how we respond to others during times that put us under great pressure. In Matthew 5:46–47, Jesus points out to His disciples that it is easy to love others when circumstances make it easy—such as loving those who love us and those with whom we have something in common. Even the infamous tax collectors of Jesus' day did that. We are called, as He continues in verse 48, to be perfect—to *let the love of God show in us*.

If someone does happen to come too close to us, more often than not it is done in ignorance, in forgetfulness, or simply by mistake. Rather than reacting harshly, we can either politely ask them to back away a bit or simply remove

ourselves from the situation. The age-old question of "What would Jesus do?" fits this scenario perfectly. Would Jesus Christ yell, scream, or be verbally abusive to others in such circumstances? Will the person you or I yell at come up in the Second Resurrection and remember us from the incident? Romans 2:24 carries a warning about how we represent the Kingdom of God today. Do any of us want the name or Way of God blasphemed because of *our* behavior?

Our Response

The challenge goes beyond issues of social distancing. It is becoming more common for people to grow angry, bitter, and unkind toward others for many reasons, not just for getting too close. Since the quarantine was imposed, people have been yelled at or harassed for not wearing masks, even in locations where masks are not required by law. While this current crisis is bringing out the best in some, it is clearly bringing out the worst in others. Face masks may have been in short supply a couple of months ago, but we seem well stocked with short tempers.

How will you and I react if someone angrily berates us for something—anything? Human nature wants to fight back, to lash out against that person. Here again though, we read that Jesus, "when He was reviled, did not revile in return; when He suffered, He did not threaten, but committed Himself to Him who judges righteously" (1 Peter 2:23). We must not return anger with anger, which is exactly what Satan wants. Proverbs 15:1 tells us that "a harsh word stirs up anger." Whether we are reacting to another person's outburst or to someone disregarding pandemic guidelines, we should not react with hostility and anger. We are to be lights and examples of a different and better way.

Avoid Bitterness

There is another danger in all of this. Perhaps we do not angrily react to someone yelling at us, but we simply go on our way. That's good—but will we then "stew" about that person or incident afterward, perhaps for days? It can be very tempting to hold on to anger when someone wrongs us. Human nature wants to vindicate or justify the self, often by disparaging the other person. "What's wrong with that guy?" we may wonder. We might even be tempted to tell others our tale about how we were "wronged." And perhaps we were! But how *should* we respond to such an incident?

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Living Education Class of 2020: Graduating During a Pandemic

Teachers and students worldwide have found new ways to teach and to learn, as COVID-19 has forced them to rely on the Internet for instruction and study. Living Education's graduating class of 2020 was no exception. "Coronavirus issues sort of dominated this past semester," said Living Education's director, Mr. Jonathan McNair. "Certainly, a big part of the challenge was how to proceed during this scenario—how to make a transition into having classes via computer that is as seamless as possible while still trying to emulate the classroom experience."

Such a transition was not without trial and error. "In terms of social distancing, the instructors taught via video-conferencing. At first, we tried to have a camera on the whole room, so the instructor could see all the students through one video feed," said Mr. McNair. "That didn't work so well—you're missing some people at the edges, and you can't really see everybody clearly, because they look small if they're all in view of the camera. We recognized very quickly that the best way was for all participants to have their own screen. Such an approach would allow instructors to see each student's face more clearly, though trying to figure out how best to accomplish that was a bit of a challenge.

"One other challenge we ran into was the 'conference meeting fatigue,'" Mr. McNair revealed. "In a classroom or an in-person conference meeting, no one is looking at each person constantly. On a screen, you feel like you're being scrutinized by everybody else there. It's different from a classroom, where your body language is more expressive and you don't necessarily have to be looking at the teacher every second. Those are some of the logistics that we had to work out."

How Quickly Things Change

"It was really hard to be focused on the classes during the pandemic," said Thibaud Duval, one of this year's graduates. "You're stuck—you don't know what happened, you don't know your future. But we all wanted to finish the program and try to do our best. It was hard, but we did it!"

"They wanted to see the program through," Mr. McNair agreed, "and they were able to cope. The situation was not ideal, but I was really encouraged by their willingness to slog through the annoyances and keep on doing what they needed to do."

As he explained, the unexpected challenges brought unexpected blessings. "I think the students grew closer

because of the circumstances they were in," he said. "Challenges that you face draw you closer to those with whom you face them. That's what happened this year—as the students faced that common battle, it brought them closer together, because now they were practically spending 24/7 together."

And the pandemic didn't just bring the students closer to each other—it also brought biblical prophecy closer to them all. "Before March, when we were learning a lot of prophecies, it all felt like theory," said Mr. Duval. "But in two weeks, everything changed—everything is shut down, you need to stay at home... The theory became reality. Even if it's not the beginning of the end of the world, you can see that God could easily bring that end in a few years."

A Ceremony of Screens

Pandemic-related restrictions on group size brought an innovative twist even to the graduation proceedings. "I think this semester's graduation ceremony went really well," Mr. McNair said. "We limited the physical attendees to the students and a handful of parents who were able to be there. We used the staff room at Headquarters, like last year, but we separated the chairs quite widely. Mr. Gerald Weston, Mr. Richard Ames, Dr. Douglas Winnail, and Mr. Kenneth Frank spoke to the students through a live video feed, but we also made a live feed available to the parents who were home and others who wanted to watch the ceremony. We set it up so that we had one camera facing the audience and one camera facing the speaker—this way, the speakers and the attendees at home could see the audience throughout the proceedings. Around 30 people were in attendance online!"

But the small number of students this year allowed for some healthy *non*-virtual celebrating, too. "We had a short reception on the patio outside the Headquarters building, where we could keep everyone at enough distance from each other for social distancing—and a more relaxed celebration outdoors," Mr. McNair added. "We tried to make it as real and normal as possible. I think a challenge everybody faces today is trying to replicate the old normalcy so we can enjoy the traditions that we have."

Memorable Lessons

At the close of this unique year of Living Education, one lesson the COVID-19 pandemic has taught clearly is that

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ORDINATIONS

Mr. and Mrs. James (Judy) Vaux were ordained deacon and deaconess on Pentecost by Area Pastor James Sweat, Associate Pastor Wilner Pierre, and elder Richard Thomas. These ordinations had been delayed because of COVID-19 restrictions, so it was a particularly joyous occasion, viewed by the brethren via livestream. Mr. and Mrs. Vaux serve in the Naples, Florida, congregation.

Mr. Michael Brown was ordained an elder on Pentecost by Canadian Regional Pastor Stuart Wachowicz. Mr. Brown currently serves in the Edmonton and Grande Prairie, Alberta, congregations in Canada.

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Hebrews 12:15 warns us of the trouble a root of bitterness causes. A key point in Matthew 6 is to forgive others so that we may be forgiven (v. 15). Luke 6:37 tells us to judge not and condemn not, but rather to forgive—lest we be judged, condemned, and unforgiven. But perhaps the most pointed example is found in Luke 23:34: “Then Jesus said, ‘Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they do.’ And they divided His garments and cast lots.” In the very midst of His suffering, He asked forgiveness for others—even while they gambled for His clothing. If someone yells at us in anger, our hearts should be primed and ready to forgive that person, especially in this time of crisis, when people are feeling more uneasy and fearful than ever before.

The New Normal

We must also be careful not to judge others when things do return to whatever the “new normal” will be. In and of itself, wearing a mask does not necessarily signify a lack of faith, just as not wearing one does not necessarily signify recklessness. We will need to be careful not to think less of those who decide differently than we do, within the range of personal choice

we are given. By and large, I am sure we will not have that issue, but Satan certainly does like to prod us, and we should not let down our guard against his deceptions and devices (2 Corinthians 2:11).

We know that whatever happens as a result of the current crisis, there are more troubles to come. So long as this world continues to reject God’s way of life, more plagues and disease epidemics are ahead. Our Sabbath services may need to be modified for a time, and perhaps also some aspects of our time spent at Feast of Tabernacles sites.

Despite the uncertainty of the times we face, we need not be uncertain, “For God has not given us a spirit of fear, but of power and of love and of a sound mind” (2 Timothy 1:7). We can remember that God is in charge, and that those yelling and losing their patience are usually simply afraid. They need love and they need compassion. We may need to be *physically* distant from these people, but we should not be *emotionally* distant from them. We can continue through this crisis with patience, love, and empathy for those around us, and in this way, we can let our light so shine before others that they may see our *good* works and glorify our Father in heaven. May God keep us safe *and* compassionate during the current crisis—and always! (LN)

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we never really have the control we think we do. “You can have all the plans you want,” Mr. Duval noted, “you can have the blueprint of your life clearly printed in your mind—but God will have the last word. We have to make our own choices, but He will have what He wants.”

Looking back on the benefits of his experience, he concluded, “LE

gives you a fire to do the Work. You see what happens behind the telecast, what happens behind the booklets and the magazines. LE gives you the opportunity to meet people you’ve only seen before on a screen during telecasts. It’s really interesting to understand what happens behind the scenes, to understand how everything works. With the classes, you get

a lot of material to study your Bible deeper—you’re given a lot of knowledge that will take years to digest, a lot of spiritual weapons for your life.”

In the end, not even a pandemic could keep Living Education’s second academic year from success. We are grateful to God for His mercy and providence in a very challenging year.

—Editorial Staff

Are You Easily Offended?

Some people are too easily offended, and being around them is like walking on eggshells, never knowing what might trigger them. Some seem always to be looking for something to be offended about. Those easily offended may be anxious, feel inferior, hold grudges, or be self-righteous, yet are vulnerable, insecure, and miserable. Determined to be offended, they may provoke a reason if they can't find one.

This is especially true in our highly polarized society, divided by ideology, politics, race, religion, etc. It seems everybody is offended by everybody else. Some censure and punish others for their assumed thoughts and motives, posting hate-filled comments on social media platforms. Their outraged rhetoric seems to know no bounds.

Still, we all get offended at one time or another. And, very likely, we have offended someone ourselves. If offenses are so inevitable, what can the Bible teach us about handling them?

Ecclesiastes 7:20–22 tells us, “For there is not a just man on earth who does good and does not sin. Also do not take to heart everything people say, lest you hear your servant cursing you. For many times, also, your own heart has known that even you have cursed others.” Yes, we are all guilty, and we shouldn't let our feelings be affected—“take it to heart”—because chances are we all have offended someone at one time or another.

Proverbs 19:11 instructs, “The discretion of a man makes him slow to anger [ever hear of “counting to ten”?],

and his glory is to overlook a transgression.” The smart thing to do is rein in our anger and overlook someone's offensive comments.

Proverbs 12:16 says, “A fool's wrath is known at once, but a prudent man covers shame.” The *English Standard Version* translates this: “The vexation of a fool is known at once, but the prudent ignores an insult.”

We may want to smooth things over, be at peace, and restore a relationship, whether with a spouse, family member, co-worker, neighbor, or even a stranger. But when the other person doesn't want peace and instead wants to hold on to an offense, what can we do?

Jesus taught, “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I say to you, love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute you, that you may be sons of your Father in heaven” (Matthew 5:43–45).

Wow! Blessing those who curse us and doing good to those who hate us is a tall order! That is not our human nature. But Paul repeats these Christian expectations in Romans 12:14, 17, and 19–21: “Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse.... Repay no one evil for evil.... Beloved, do not avenge yourselves, but rather give place to wrath.... [If] your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him a drink.... Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.”

It may be hard to handle offenses as instructed by Jesus Christ, but those are His instructions. Were they really too much for our Savior to ask? Let's show Him they weren't!

—Roger Meyer