

Virtual Christian Magazine

hope and encouragement for the real world

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Virtual Christian MAGAZINE Editorial

What Is Real Christian Fellowship?

Fellowship can be a key to spiritual growth -- or a stumbling block. Here are KEYS to positive Christian fellowship!

By Dean R. Wilson



THINK for a moment of all the challenging, inspiring times you have fellowshiped with brethren and talked about uplifting things, and gone away feeling greatly inspired.

Fellowship is vitally important to spiritual growth! God says in the book of Proverbs, "Be with wise men and become wise. Be with evil men and become evil" (Proverbs 13:20, The Living Bible Paraphrased).

Our fellowship has a lot to do with whether we become wise or foolish, righteous or evil. Says the New English Bible, in another place, "Make no mistake: 'Bad company is the ruin of a good character'" (I Corinthians 15:33). This is, of course, one basic reason good fellowship is vitally important to Christians.

God knows right spiritual fellowship with other brethren is important. That's why He commands us in the book of Hebrews, "We ought to see how each of us may best arouse others to love and active goodness, not staying away from our meetings, as some do, but rather encouraging one another, all the more because you see the Day drawing near" (Hebrews 10:24-25, New English Bible). The Living Bible says, in modern phraseology in the book of Malachi, "Then those who feared and loved the Lord spoke often of him to each other. And he had a Book of Remembrance drawn up in which he recorded the names of those who feared him and loved to think about him.

'They shall be mine,' says the Lord of Hosts, 'in that day when I make up my jewels. And I will spare them as a man spares an obedient and dutiful son'" (Malachi 3:16-17).

God places high value upon those who fellowship and think about Him and His plan often, and who inspire each other with sound spiritual conversation. Right spiritual fellowship, as Solomon wrote in the book of Proverbs, "A friendly discussion is as stimulating as the sparks that fly when iron strikes iron" (Proverbs 27:17, The Living Bible). Spiritual conversation can uplift, sparkle, inspire and energize people to greater spiritual action in their lives. How well we have seen this principle illustrated when visiting God's people! Some people are just filled with enthusiasm, zeal and questions when visited by God's ministers -- they even inspire the ministers who visit them.

Right spiritual fellowship consists of the positive, uplifting kind of visiting, associations and conversation -- not negative grumbling, complaining, gossiping or carrying rumors. Such negative fellowshiping is Destructive to spiritual character, and is also destructive to the Work of God!

When we get together we should do as the Apostle Paul commanded, letting our conversation be seasoned with salt. "No bad language must pass your lips, but only what is good and helpful to the occasion, so that it brings a blessing to those who hear it" (Ephesians 4:23, New English Bible).

Discouraging remarks, vicious rumors, evil gossiping and slandering can not only wreck the character of those engaged in it, but also ruin the lives of other people! As Christians, we have an opportunity to make our conversation positive, constructive, helpful and edifying to others.

Purpose in fellowship

In I Peter 2:17 we are told to "Love the brotherhood." God's greatest single attribute is love -- outgoing concern for others. And He desires that each one of us develop this same attribute in our own lives to the full. He wants us to learn to give and share with others -- to become outgoing and concerned about the needs of others.

But this attitude of outgoing love and concern is totally contrary to our own human nature which is selfish, self-centered and hostile toward others! And so God wants us to overcome our inherent selfishness by learning to share our personality and possessions with others. He wants us to learn how to serve others by giving ourselves in service.

Most people in the world don't know it, but the key to happiness is learning how to give -- learning how to love! We should become well acquainted with this great spiritual lesson -- and Christian fellowship gives us an opportunity to put it into practice!

Did you ever think about it that way? Now what's wrong with this world's fellowship? When we analyze it, there is one basic thing. The essence of the world's fellowship is vanity! The world's constant rigmarole of tea parties, cocktail parties, card games, sports activities, social luncheons, etc., generally speaking, are not held in order to serve or help others. The worldly spirit of backslapping camaraderie is usually motivated by a desire to get, or acquire something from the

other individual. In other words, the whole basis of the world's fellowship is to flatter the ego, to elevate the self, to get ahead for self or to make a business deal favorable to self!

Fellowshipping for vanity obviously is wrong in God's eyes. God doesn't want His people to get together to see who can be "the life of the party," or who can stay in the "limelight" the longest -- to see who can gain the most admiration from the others.

The question is, do we ever allow such motivations to creep back into our minds! The answer, unfortunately, is yes!

Fellowshipping, if not handled properly and with wisdom, can and often does cause problems. All too often some of God's people, with a complete disregard for all decorum and respect, trample under foot and take advantage of the hospitality and cordiality of others.

Take a good look at yourself and analyze your own situation. How many times have you taken advantage of a brother's hospitality and did not pass on hospitality to others!

How to serve in fellowship

It is not wrong to enjoy the company of particular people. Even Jesus Christ, who never sinned or was in error, had a special closeness to the Apostle John above the other apostles (John 21:20, 24). But does this mean that we should be respecters of persons and only associate with those we particularly like? The obvious answer is no!

Declared the Apostle Paul: "Pure religion and undefiled before God and the Father is this, to visit the fatherless and widows in their affliction..." (James 1:27).

Godly fellowship must include the widows and orphans. It should also include others who may otherwise have very few friends. You must not neglect fellowship with these, to encourage them, to make them feel loved, wanted and appreciated.

You can serve and have fellowship by purposely and openly sacrificing your time and personal enjoyment to encourage or help a brother or sister who is ill or alone or afflicted in some way. Visit with the widows and the fatherless because they have less opportunity to get out and be with others. And visit the sick or afflicted in order to encourage and inspire them. This kind of fellowship is well-pleasing to God.

God desires that we be hospitable, friendly, sociable, courteous and considerate. But these good fruits must be intensively cultivated; they don't grow up wild like weeds.

Our most important fellowship is with God!

Important as right fellowship is with our fellow human beings, our most important fellowship is not with them. Our greatest fellowship is with God the Father and Jesus Christ. The Apostle John makes this truth clear. He writes:

"That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our

eyes...that which we have seen and heard we proclaim also to you, so that you may have fellowship with us; and our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ" (I John 1:1-3, RSV).

John continues, "If we say we have fellowship with him while we walk in darkness, we lie and do not live according to the truth; but if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin" (verses 6-7).

Our fellowship with each other--as branches of the one vine, Christ (John 15:5) -- is only in and through our fellowship with Christ and the Father, who have called us into the way of truth. This fellowship comes through drinking in of God's Word by daily Bible study, and through fervent, earnest Prayer several times a day.

If we truly walk with Christ and with the Father, then we will surely "become wise," and inherit the Kingdom prepared for us from the foundation of the world!



A Good Soldier

If Thomas Jefferson, Patrick Henry, Samuel Adams and Benjamin Franklin conceived the framework of a new nation, George Washington navigated it through its greatest crisis. Few know how well he shouldered the heavy task that fell on him in 1775.

By Bruce Gore



THE NEWS of April 18, 1775, dashed any hope of peacefully settling differences between Great Britain and the American colonies. Maj. John Pitcairn of the British Army had fired upon the American militia assembled in Lexington, Massachusetts. Americans from towns and villages in every direction lay among the dead and wounded.

Word quickly spread. The almost-hourly appearance of armed men from near and far soon resulted in a ragtag but determined army gathered around Boston.

The new Congress quickly moved to adopt the army, calling it the Continental Army. It was essential that the troops be given a leader--a commander in chief--for the inexperienced, newly formed Continental Army of the 13 colonies.

Opinions varied on whom to choose. Several were ambitious for the post. Massachusetts representative John Adams rose to nominate George Washington, a colonel of the Virginia forces. Citing Washington's talents and unquestioned character, Adams made the motion to appoint him commander in chief of the armed forces of the American colonies.

Support for his appointment was unanimous. Washington accepted, refusing compensation other than the reimbursement of his expenses. He asked "every gentleman in the room," however, to remember his declaration that he did not believe himself equal to the command and that he accepted it only as a duty made imperative by the unanimity of the vote.

To the day of his death, as evidenced by letters to family members, he was the greatest skeptic of his fitness for his military and leadership duties.

Forging a leader

Little hint of greatness was to be found in the early years of this wealthy landowner, whose time was largely occupied with his large holdings. Washington was slow to endorse independence from the mother country, doing so only when it seemed no other course could work. In a letter to a neighbor, he tended toward peaceful resistance yet faced the reality that force might ultimately prove necessary. He was present when Patrick Henry delivered his powerful speech against the Stamp Act.

Earlier Washington had fought alongside the British in the French and Indian War, distinguishing himself as a courageous leader with little concern for his own safety and comfort. He was appointed commander of the Virginia forces when only 23.

In the early years he learned lessons that would serve him well. He knew the training of the English soldiers was best adapted to the battlefields of Europe and not the woods of North America. He comprehended the value of camouflage and of avoiding meeting the enemy in face-to-face battle lines too often. He was convinced early in his career he could defeat the British army.

Washington faced serious difficulties in surviving his first year. He labored to collect arms and ammunition and bring discipline to a collection of merchants, farmers and hunters, many of whom were suspicious of a standing army. Colonial poverty, lack of material support and short-term enlistments left him with an inadequately equipped fighting force.

Criticism, cold and conflict

Washington's tactics of not seeking face-to-face battles with the British fell under constant criticism. His difficulties could have broken the spirit of most leaders. The fiber of the character of Washington and his men was tested over and over as an impotent and meddling Congress failed to provide the needs of the ragged troops.

Washington painfully witnessed the misery of his men sleeping on the frozen, snow-covered ground. Many had no shoes or blankets and little food as they wintered at Valley Forge and again at Trenton, New Jersey. On one occasion, he pledged his private fortune to help provide pay to the soldiers. His leadership and personal example during these distressing times kept many of them from giving up.

"These are the times that try men's souls," wrote Thomas Paine in 1776. But the next few years were even worse for Washington. Adding to his burdens, some of his officers were involved behind his back in a plot to replace him with one of their own as commander in chief, Gen. Horatio Gates.

Daring leadership

Washington's surprise crossing of the ice-filled Delaware River on a stormy night, marching in the teeth of slashing sleet and snow to attack the Hessians in Trenton, is the stuff of legend. This victory injected new life and hope into the flagging morale of the ill-equipped Continental Army.

His courage in battle frequently led him to expose himself recklessly to enemy fire. To the dismay of other officers, he often rode back and forth in the thick of battle rallying his troops. The enemy shot horses out from under him more than once, yet he finished the war as one of a few uninjured officers.

A fellow officer wrote: "Our army love their General very much, but they have one thing against him which is the little care he takes of himself in any action. His personal bravery and the desire he has of animating his troops by example, make him fearless of danger. This occasions much uneasiness."

Washington's extraordinary escape in one battle led a Colonial preacher to declare in a sermon his belief that Washington had been preserved to be the "savior of his country." Washington was a man who believed in God and the power of prayer.

At one point the Colonial army numbered no more than 3,500 because of desertions and short enlistments. Some historians say the largest number of soldiers Gen. Washington ever had under his command was 18,000 to 20,000. He faced a force of 30,000 well-supplied, seasoned, disciplined soldiers. Yet in the end he cornered Gen. Charles Cornwallis at Yorktown.

Encircled, with his back to the sea and Washington's army facing him on land, Cornwallis sought terms of peace. On Oct. 19, 1781, the proud and once-powerful British units paraded between files of French and American soldiers to lay down their arms in surrender.

A mortal blow had been struck. The British, after arduous negotiations, were generous for the most part and recognized the independence of their former colonies. With a few notable exceptions, the two countries have been close allies since.

Commander to king?

In December 1783 Washington retired to his home at Mount Vernon, Virginia. In spite of the limited newspaper reporting of the time, Washington had become a national hero. Had he wished, he could have stepped into the role of a monarch over this newly formed country. His army, unhappy with its treatment and remuneration at the end of the war, was ready to make him king. Washington quickly and indignantly put a stop to any such plans.

"In plain terms he stated his abhorrence of the proposal; he was at a loss to conceive what part of his conduct could have encouraged such thinking; they could not have 'found a person to whom their schemes were more disagreeable'; and he charged them 'if you have any regard for yourself or posterity, or respect for me, to banish these thoughts from your mind, and never communicate as from yourself or nay one else, a sentiment of the like nature.'" (Encyclopedia Britannica, 11th edition, Vol. 28, p. 346).

Washington proved himself to be a good soldier: loyal and resolute in difficult as well as good times. The Bible describes true Christians as soldiers in the army of Jesus Christ.

The Federal Convention met at Philadelphia in May 1787 to frame the United States Constitution. Washington was present as a delegate from Virginia. As soon as enough states had ratified the document to assure the success of the new government, the unanimous vote of the electors made Washington the first president of the United States of America.

Lessons for leaders

Washington proved himself to be a good soldier: loyal and resolute in difficult as well as good times. The Bible describes true Christians as soldiers in the army of Jesus Christ.

"You therefore must endure hardship as a good soldier of Jesus Christ," wrote the apostle Paul. "No one engaged in warfare entangles himself with the affairs of this life, that he may please him who enlisted him as a soldier" (2 Timothy 2:3-4).

A Christian commits his life in totality to the captain of his salvation, Jesus Christ. A soldier's lot is to endure hardships; he is called to do battle.

Early Christians faced tremendous struggles. In a time of hardship and persecution that would soon lead to his death, Paul reminded Timothy of his calling:

"Therefore I remind you to stir up the gift of God which is in you through the laying on of my hands. For God has not given us a spirit of fear, but of power and of love and of a sound mind.

"Therefore do not be ashamed of the testimony of our Lord, nor of me His prisoner, but share with me in the sufferings for the gospel according to the power of God, who has saved us and called us with a holy calling.

"These are the times that try men's souls," wrote Thomas Paine in 1776.

"For this reason I also suffer these things; nevertheless I am not ashamed, for I know whom I have believed and am persuaded that He is able to keep what I have committed to Him until that Day. Hold fast the pattern of sound words which you have heard from me, in faith and love which are in Christ Jesus. That good thing which was committed to you, keep by the Holy Spirit [which] dwells in us" (2 Timothy 1:6-14).

The patriarch Job asks a crucial question: Will we accept good things from God but get discouraged and want to quit when hard times come upon us? (Job 2:10).

The battles a Christian must face are not physical, but spiritual (Ephesians 6:12), which means they are even more difficult. The enemy, Satan the devil, is powerful. The war will be long and difficult, so we, as good soldiers, must maintain the kind of courage, humility, and dedication to our cause that George Washington exemplified. Above all, we must rely on our Commander-in-Chief. If we do these things, He assures us that we will be victorious and will gain a greater independence -- independence from the powers of Satan and our own human frailty.



Does God Help Those Who Help Themselves?

Does God want us to do our best or to sit back and wait for Him to do it?

By Larry J. Walker



A RECENT WASHINGTON POST ARTICLE cited a Barna survey asserting that the adage "God helps those who help themselves" is not biblical. The author claims that this saying "violates a primary scriptural teaching that only God determines a person's destiny."

Barna's survey (available online at <http://www.barna.org> states that 53% of those surveyed believe this statement, which he refers to as "conflicting with the Bible." Other findings he found shocking were that 41% do not believe "that the Holy Spirit is a real entity" and 40% do not think Satan is a real person.

Barna thus concludes:

"The fact that most adults ... believe the Bible teaches that God helps those who help themselves shows how post-modern thinking is gaining ground, even in churches. That belief exposes our theological cornerstone - that we are the center of all things, that it is up to us to determine our destiny, and that God is merely our assistant, not our foundation. That fits well with the idea that good people can earn their salvation or that everyone experiences the same outcome after death regardless of their beliefs... Throw in the widespread rejection of supernatural forces - such as Satan and the Holy Spirit - and you have the makings of theological ignorance and spiritual chaos in which believers are distracted from the reality of the spiritual battle taking place and separated from the spiritual power that is available to them."

Self-centered society

Barna's point is certainly valid in western society at large. While many give lip service to God

and faithfully attend services at the church of their choice, the power of the church as a life-changing institution has greatly diminished. The Bible relates this as a characteristic of the end of the age: "holding the form of religion but denying the power of it" (2 Timothy 3:5, Revised Standard Version). The Living Bible paraphrases, "They will go to church, yes, but they won't really believe anything they hear."

William Barclay, in The Daily Study Bible Series, traces the source of this condition back to a self-centered worldview: "It is no accident that the first of these qualities will be a life that is centered in self. The adjective used is *philautos*, which means self-loving. Love only of self is the basic sin, from which all others flow. The moment a man makes his own will the center of life, divine and human relationships are destroyed, obedience to God and charity to men both become impossible. The essence of Christianity is not the enthronement but the obliteration of self."

Barna's point, exactly!

Barclay offers the following translation of this prophetic passage of scripture:

"For men will live a life that is centered in self; they will be lovers of money, braggarts, arrogant, lovers of insult, disobedient to their parents, thankless, regardless even of the ultimate decencies of life, without human affection, implacable in hatred, reveling in slander, ungovernable in their passions, savage, not knowing what the love of good is, treacherous, headlong in word and action, inflated with pride, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God. They will maintain the outward form of religion, but they will deny its power. Avoid such people."

Notice that we are admonished to "avoid such people." Our lives must reflect faith and trust in God. God, not self, must be the focal point of our lives. But does this mean we should do nothing to help ourselves?

Proper way to help ourselves

What about those who do believe in the Holy Spirit and the existence of Satan? Is it possible to consider God the center of our existence and still help ourselves as well as to seek his help?

Another popular saying suggests, "God does for us what we cannot do for ourselves." Is this biblically sound? Does God want us to do all we can to help ourselves and look to him for what only He can do for us? Or is that a lack of faith?

Faith and Works

The spiritual principle here is faith and works. Some pit works against faith in a false dichotomy. The idea of justification "by faith alone" leads some to believe that any kind of "works" are counterproductive to God's will. While this may seem plausible conceptually, it doesn't play out very well in practical terms.

We trust God to protect us, but we lock our doors and wear seat belts, don't we? We can ask God

to provide our material needs, but we still work to earn money to pay our bills. In fact Paul admonished the members in Thessalonica, "If anyone will not work, neither shall he eat" (2 Thessalonians 3:10). If we lose our job, we can pray for God to provide new employment. But doesn't He expect us to do all we can to find a job?

Some infer a negative concept of "works" from what Paul wrote about "justification by faith." This doctrinal error soon became prevalent, resulting in a need for clarification by later apostolic teaching. James confronts this reasoning with the challenge: "Show me your faith without your works, and I will show you my faith by my works" (James 2:18). He then concludes, "Faith without works is dead" (James 2:26).

True faith involves trusting God and helping ourselves

There are some things that only God can do for us. Acceptance of the sacrifice of Jesus Christ is necessary for forgiveness of sin. Only God can give us eternal life and resurrect us from the dead.

But between these monumental events, we must do all we can to help ourselves and seek God's help at the same time. Paul tells us to "Work out your own salvation" realizing that "God ... works in you ... to will and to do ... His good pleasure" (Philippians 2:12-13).

King David, whom God described as "a man after My own heart" (Acts 13:22) spoke of God as his helper in many passages in the Psalms (Psalm 28:10, 27:9, 30:10, 33:20, to name a few).

Hebrews 13:6 tells us, "So we may boldly say: 'The Lord is my helper...'" Earlier in the same book, we find this admonition: "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).

An old adage suggests that when we need God's help in a special way, we should pray as if it all depends on God and work as if it all depends on us. That is faith and works in action. God does help those who help themselves.



Through Their Eyes

How can we escape Satan's negative mentality and become as little (as yet untainted) children?

By Joanne Rutis



THE DISCIPLES HAD A QUESTION. To their way of thinking a very important question. They wanted to know who would be the greatest in God's kingdom.

The answer Jesus gave must have surprised them. Jesus didn't give a long list of requirements. He simply called a little child over and placed the youngster in their midst. "I tell you," he said to his disciples, "unless you be converted and become as little children, you shall never enter into the kingdom of heaven" (Mat. 18: 1-3).

If it was true for Christ's disciples then, it is true for those who claim to be his disciples today. Unless we change our ways and become as little children, we won't enter into God's kingdom.

Have you ever watched pre-schoolers play together? Put a group of them in the same room and just stand back and observe for a few minutes. What characteristic do these little children exhibit that we, as Christians, can follow? One important trait is that of acceptance. Little children don't judge others by appearance. They aren't prejudiced against another child's skin color, physical disability, social status, size or shape. Little children are pure in heart.

Unfortunately, as they grow older youngsters begin picking up on Satan's destructive wave length. Anyone who has, as a child, been heckled by other children knows that there can be nothing more hurtful. Unless parents are on guard Satan starts early to plant his seeds of division with the hope of ultimately conquering.

How can we escape Satan's negative mentality and become as little (as yet untainted) children? We must change the way we view others. We must begin to see humanity through the eyes of a

small child.

Paul instructs us to esteem others as better than ourselves, and tells us to put on the mind of Christ Jesus who took on the form of a servant, humbling Himself (Phil 2:3, 5, 8). "Let nothing be done through strife or vainglory; but in lowliness of mind let each esteem other better than themselves. ... Let this mind be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus: ... being found in fashion as a man, he humbled himself, and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross."

When the disciples, who apparently hadn't understood Christ's earlier instruction, were once again squabbling about who among them was the greatest, Jesus said to them, "The kings of the Gentiles exercise lordship over them; and those who exercise authority over them are called benefactors. But not so among you: on the contrary, he that is greatest among you, let him be as the younger; and he who governs as he who serves." (Luke 22: 25,26) Jesus instructs his disciples to behave as the younger, humble, pure of heart. Those who are chief should be those who, like Jesus himself, are willing to serve even the lowliest and most wretched.

*As parents we serve
our children, but
we also watch out
for their welfare.
We set rules for
them to follow.*

We know that God is no respecter of persons (Acts 10:34). That "there is neither Jew nor Greek, bond nor free, male nor female: for we all one in Christ Jesus" (Gal. 3: 28-29). God doesn't divide us into groups. That is Satan's way. Satan has managed to set humanity against itself. You have only to look around to see Satan's handiwork. Young against old. Male against female. Race against race. Belief against belief. Nation against nation. The list goes on. God doesn't want us to become caught up in that mentality. He wants us to view others as better than ourselves, taking on the form of a servant.

Does being a servant mean that one has no control? Jesus came as a servant, yet he claimed that he was the Lord of the Sabbath and he threw the money changers out of his Father's house. Serving doesn't mean abdicating ones authority. As parents we serve our children, but we also watch out for their welfare. We set rules for them to follow.

God too is a parent. And He has rules for us to live by. He has appointed shepherds over us and instructed us to 'obey those who rule over you, and be submissive'. Why? Because they watch out for our souls (Heb. 13:17). Who are these shepherds that have the work of watching out for our soul? Those who preach God's word and conduct themselves in a Christ like manner. (Heb. 13: 7).

Any time we find ourselves thinking along a 'them versus us' mentality we need to step back and take a good look at ourselves. Are we fulfilling Christ's requirement to become as little children? Are we in a humble spirit, viewing ourselves as servants?

Let's stay mindful of Satan's trick of divide and conquer. Instead of giving in to it let's see the world through the undefiled eyes of small children. Eyes untainted by the prejudices of this sin sick world. For, as Jesus said of those who are willing to become humble servants, 'of such is the kingdom of God'.

Extending Our Hand To The Grieving

Lessons from grief teach some important lessons for living.

By Joan A. Osborn



THAT AUGUST DAY STARTED OUT overcast but its promise of rain never materialized. In fact, as we stood in the country graveyard where we were saying good-bye to our dear friend Bill* the sun even began to shine. The day mirrored many of our thoughts and feelings. The clouds seem to echo our sorrow and emptiness but the sunshine paralleled the good feelings we had about seeing other old friends again. None of us wanted to meet again in this way. The death of someone in the prime of life: someone we all valued was in many ways a wake up call. It brought for me some new lessons about grief and perhaps more importantly some lessons for living.

1. Each new grief someone experiences opens up the previous ones. Exactly a year after my father died we lost a dear college friend who finally lost his battle with juvenile onset diabetes. I was more physically upset at his funeral than I was at my father's. But it was compounded grief I was bearing at the second funeral. It was too soon. A widowed friend told my mother she was unable to go to Bill's funeral because it was too soon after she had buried her husband. Remember grief doesn't follow a specific time frame. Reassure those suffering compound losses and be aware that you also can be hit by this compound grief.
2. Let the grieving talk about the person who has died. Those who have suffered loss may find it difficult to speak about their loved ones, especially in the early days of loss. The day after Bill's death his wife Ann asked a friend how she had been able to cope with losing her son. The woman who had lost a son told her to talk about that person. And so they did. They talked all day about Bill. There were times of tears and times of laughter

during that day. These are things that help to begin the healing.

My profession lets me work with children in schools. I was explaining to a parent in a conference why it had been difficult for us to make connections during the funeral week. She was very sympathetic and then went on to relate how she and her fellow nurses had recently lost a co-worker to a battle with cancer. They were all still reeling to various degrees. We talked for several minutes about the people we had lost and death itself. We agreed that it was the prayers of so many that enabled them to make it through those devastating first days. We feel helpless in the face of death. We want to offer words when there are none. When you cannot find any for the family and friends say some to God. Let the family know that there are other hands helping to hold them up.

3. It's okay to be sad. As Christians we have the wonderful surety of the resurrection. This surety does not take away the pain of loss. The Bible says there is a time to be born and a time to die. But, it also says there is a time to weep and a time to mourn. We should not be ashamed to let others even the grieving family see our own pain. As friends we have also suffered loss. In some ways this shared grief gives the family comfort. It is validation of the true loss of the individual from all our lives.

Along with these lessons on grieving came new lessons for me about living.

1. Tell people when they have done something you appreciate -- something you feel is special. You see when Bill died I realized I never told him enough how much I appreciated him. The week before he died, Bill gave a message at church. It was the best I had ever heard him give. He was relaxed, connecting with the audience and he was convicting. I got busy and didn't tell him. Now I will have to wait.

Sometimes it's hard to be open and natural about complimenting even when you know a person well. It can be as simple as a sincere, "I liked that." or "You did a good job." So don't wait. Let people know they are valuable to you.

2. Thank people when they help you. This also sounds simple but we often let it slip. Especially in the little things. There is a gentleman in our congregation who never fails to thank the singers when they give music during services. It is a small thing but it is a hugely encouraging thing for the singers. It lets them know that they are doing something of value for their church.

And let's never slip in the big ones. When my dad was dying we were on the road driving from Indiana to Florida. It had been a rough twenty four hours at the hospital. The family had made the decision to turn off the respirator. My brothers sent my mother home with my sister and together the 3 of them sat vigil with my dad in his last moments in this physical life. I don't think I could say thank you enough times for what they did for me and our family.

3. Love people sincerely and don't forget to tell them. As Christians we are to love one another as Christ loved the church and gave himself for it. Sometimes this can mean sacrificing in large ways. Sometimes it just means dropping a card in the mail, opening a door, or smiling encouragement. This is a world in which the love of many has waxed

cold. It isn't always "cool" to say I love you. But if we mean it there are times and places to say it.

4. Make time for your friends. I said at the beginning of this piece that Bill's death was a wake up call of sorts. My husband and I have tried to make recommitments to old friends that we had begun to let slip through the busy cracks in our lives. The time is now. We are told in Ephesians to "redeem the time" because the world is evil. We are admonished in Hebrews not to forsake the assembling of ourselves together.

It is easy to get sidetracked with work, school commitments, sports, hobbies, etc. and let precious time with friends go. Several of our old friends now attend different churches. But they are still our friends, they are still our brothers and sisters.

5. Reconnect with God. He is our rock and our salvation in time of need. There are two beings in the universe who will never leave us as our physical friends and family can at their deaths. It is God the father and Jesus his son who offer comfort when there is no comfort in this world. They hear and understand every cry. They send comfort and consolation and peace that pass all understanding.

A person who has suffered a loss may even want to talk about the death experience itself. Lynne Caine, who wrote the book "Widow", noted that Jackie Kennedy would ask people if they would like to hear about her husband and how he died. Some people thought it was bizarre. It was somewhat uncomfortable for them. For Mrs. Kennedy it was cathartic.

Death is something we all share and need to talk about. A standard conversational question in our society is "How are you?" Most of us will answer "fine" without even thinking. Being able to say "it wasn't the best day or week you ever had and explaining why can be helpful to you and to the person you are talking to. This isn't called complaining. It's called connecting and it's part of the grieving process.

6. Don't stop praying for comfort. There are times when you can do nothing for the grieving except pray. Several members of Bill's family related that they truly knew e with him. Let's support those who have lost loved ones -- those with precious deaths. But let's also remember to support the living.

* Not his real name.

