

Virtual Christian Magazine

Hope And Encouragement
For The Real World

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How to Find the Right Church
by John Ross Schroeder

Whether to attend church, and which one, are among the most important decisions we can make. What are key factors we should consider?

Page 11

Tengo Famiglia

(Reflections on Our Spiritual Family)

By Linda G. Schreiber



Read the Book
by Scott Ashley

Advertising executive and author Bruce Barton called it "*The Book Nobody Knows*." No other book is more important to you and your future.

Page 16



During my parents' 50th anniversary we saw a play that got me thinking more about our heavenly Father and His family.

Page 6



Youth Violence: Where Does the Blame Lie?
by Howard Davis

Violence has come to roost in the nation's youth. A biblical prophet envisioned a time when children would be our oppressors (Isaiah 3:12). Are we living in those days?

Page 21

Editorial
Christian Warfare
by Tom Damour

Page 3

We are pleased to announce the [January/February 2001, *Good News* magazine...](#)

When Will The Middle East Find Peace?



Why does it seem that the Middle East is in constant turmoil, perpetually on the brink of another outbreak of terrorism or war? What are the roots of the ancient antagonisms that continue to divide people there? In spite of centuries of war, Bible prophecy reveals a peaceful, glorious future for this troubled region. Discover how and when peace will finally come about...

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Virtual Christian MAGAZINE Editorial

Christian Warfare

The Bible describes Christians as soldiers. Like any other soldier, they must learn to survive the inevitable battle to fight another day. What are the weapons of a Christian soldier, and how does a soldier for Christ define victory?

By Tom Damour



THE WORD OF GOD is filled with metaphors which teach important spiritual principles. For example, it speaks of Christians being soldiers of Christ. "You therefore must endure hardship as a good soldier of Jesus Christ" (2 Timothy 2:3). What did Paul mean by this rather straightforward statement?

The notion of Christians being soldiers appears to be a contradiction of terms. Aren't Christians commanded to love even their enemies? Doesn't the Bible forbid the taking of human life? Didn't Christ teach that Christians are supposed to turn the other cheek in a confrontation? How do we put the pieces of this seemingly contradictory puzzle together?

Christianity not for cowards

When looking for solutions to difficult questions, remember the Bible does not contradict itself. At times it may appear to do so, but with continued study you will find it to be a consistent guide for life. Remember, the Bible interprets itself. Within its pages are found the answers to questions that have perplexed humanity for centuries.

However, like anything else of value, you must be willing to commit time and effort to discover its timeless message. "For the word of God is living and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the division of soul and spirit, and of joints and marrow, and is a discernor of the thoughts and intents of the heart" (Hebrews 4:12). It takes tremendous courage to allow God's Word to cut to the joint and marrow of our being. Are you up to the task? As you read the Bible, it is our prayer that you will be moved to take action and begin your journey as a Christian soldier.

Being a Christian is not for cowards. God calls His people to fight the good fight of faith in a hostile environment. At one point in Jesus' ministry great multitudes went to hear Him and to see miracles performed. As strange as it may seem, this displeased Him. He knew they were not really interested in the spiritual truths He was teaching. They were looking for a free ride. "Jesus answered them and said, 'Most assuredly, I say to you, you seek Me, not because you saw the signs, but because you ate of the loaves and were filled'" (John 6:26).



Jesus understood they were not willing to become engaged in spiritual warfare. They had become distracted from seeking truth, by looking for miracles (John 6:27-30). Are you willing to become a Christian soldier? If so, it will require courage, commitment and dedication fueled by faith. "Finally, my brethren, be strong in the Lord and in the power of His might. Put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand against the wiles [schemings] of the devil. For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this age, against spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly [spiritual] places" (Ephesians 6:10-12).

Spiritual warfare on two fronts

Our battlefield is not limited to the external world. There is a second front in this war. It is the battle to surrender the "self" to the will of God. This second front is one every Christian soldier wants to lose. As we do, we experience the ultimate victory. In surrendering the self a wonderful peace, which surpasses all understanding, begins to occur. "Rejoice in the Lord always. Again I will say, rejoice! Let your gentleness be known to all men. The Lord is at hand. Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God; and the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus" (Philippians 4:4-7).

Like it or not, Christians are required to change inwardly if they are to be effective in their spiritual warfare. This process of changing is called conversion. As the self is defeated and we surrender to the leading of the Holy Spirit, a new person is being created. "I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me" (Galatians 2:20).

Take up the armor of God

The weapons of our warfare not designed to kill or maim others. They are spiritual in nature

because ours is a different type of war.

"Therefore take up the whole armor of God, that you may be able to withstand in the evil day and having done all, to stand. Stand therefore, having girded your waist with truth, having put on the breastplate of righteousness, and having shod your feet with the preparation of the gospel of peace; above all, taking the shield of faith with which you will be able to quench all the fiery darts of the wicked one. And take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God; praying always with all prayer and supplication in the Spirit, being watchful to this end with all perseverance and supplication for all the saints" (Ephesians 6:13-18).

We fight this war not only for our own benefit, but for the good of all humanity. Those who respond to God's calling now do so looking forward to the time when they can share God's way of peace with all humanity.



Tengo Famiglia

(Reflections on Our Spiritual Family)

During my parents' 50th anniversary we saw a play that got me thinking more about our heavenly Father and His family.

By Linda G. Schreiber



NICK LOOKED OVER at his grandfather sitting in his favorite chair watching TV. Ever since Nick could remember he had been coming here for dinner almost every Sunday. Even though Nick had been around his grandfather all his life, Gramps was still in some ways a mystery to Nick.

Nick studied the face of the man who had been the first in their family to come to the United States from Italy. Wrinkles had taken the place of the smooth handsome skin he saw in the pictures which hung on the walls of his grandparents' home. Gray had somehow overrun the wavy mass of dark brown hair. Gramps often wore a stern look, but Nick knew that inside was a heart of gold.

Nick also knew that years before, Gramps had built with his own hands the house in which he sat. It was a gift to Nick's Nana. Oh how Nana would go on and on when asked about the house! She would tell about how she had dreamed of it and how hard Gramps had worked to make her dream come true. His grandparents' home gave Nick a cozy feeling even if it was always just a bit too warm. But don't ever try to open a window!

Nick began to wonder about things he never heard Gramps talk about. One thing Gramps always said was *tengo famiglia*, which in Italian means "I have a family." For as long as Nick could remember he had heard Gramps say that. Now Nick began to wonder when and why Gramps had started saying it.

"Gramps?" Nick broke the silence between them. Gramps looked over at Nick and answered, "Yes, Nickie?"

"Gramps, why did you come to the United States?" Nick asked.

Gramp's look was one of surprise. "Nickie, why do you want to know?"

"Gramps, for as long as I can remember you have been telling us, *tengo famiglia*. If family is so important, why did you leave Italy and come to the United States?"

Set adrift

Gramps went silent for a moment and it seemed that sadness along with something very meaningful was on his mind. Then he spoke in a voice that seemed to ring with regret. "Nickie, when I was 13 years old my father took me down to the pier of the town where we lived and put me on a ship. I didn't know why, but I knew it was because he didn't love me."

"But Gramps, why would you think he didn't love you?" Nick queried.



"When I arrived in New York I had nothing but the clothes on my back and a small bag. On the trip I had to work on the ship as payment for my passage. Every night I cried in the dark for my mother. I couldn't understand how my father could hate me so much. My life was hard, but I worked and finally had my own lumber yard. I think part of the reason I worked so hard was to spite my father and be something he never was."

"Gramps, that is awful!" Nick sympathized, holding back tears.

"I remember when I was little and a few times my father would take me out into the market near our home. He would take me around to all the vendors and tell me I could pick out one thing. So I would look at all the colorful, wonderful things and toys. I would look at them and finally pick out the one that I wanted the most. Then my father would buy me some cheap crummy toy and give it to me and take me home. It seemed to be some sort of punishment to me," Gramps lamented.

"I don't understand Gramps. Why did he do that?"

"Well after I grew up and married your grandmother and your mother was born, I wanted to take them to Italy and show them where I had been born. I also wanted to see my mother, who I had not seen since the day my father put me on that boat. I had been in touch with my mother by letters for years. My father had died just before your mother was born and I felt I could now go back there. So we made the trip.

"It was strange and wonderful to see my old home town and my mother. Of course, she had aged

a great deal and I felt very cheated to not have had all those years with her. But I had a family and a life and we were happy. One of the first things I did was take your mother out into the market. We went to many vendors and I bought her everything she wanted. Somehow it made me feel good and it gave me some sense of getting back at my father."

"I still don't understand why your father did those things to you," Nick said.

"Nickie, after I took your mother out into the market and we came back to my mother's house, I learned something. My mother took a look at your mother and me and how happy we were. Tears began to roll down her face. She told me that my father wanted to give me toys like that but we were so poor he could not afford to. She said that he had put me on that boat because he had heard about how great the United States was. He had heard that people could be rich in the United States very easily. He wanted me to have a better life and he did not know how to tell me he loved me.

"That was why he put me on that boat. In his way, he loved me enough to send me away. I don't understand it, but that is my life and why I came to the United States. If my father had not done what he did, you would probably not be here and neither would any of us. Now I am just grateful for that. *Tengo famiglia!*" Gramps said with a shaky, halting voice, holding back tears.

Thinking about God's family

This story is adapted from part of a play I saw recently when we had a 50th wedding anniversary celebration for my parents. The play is called *Over the River and Through the Woods* by Joe DiPietro.

It got me to thinking about our heavenly Father and His family. As part of His family we should remember *tengo famiglia*. Even though this world is often cruel to us and we are sometimes even rejected by family and friends because of the truth, God gives us awesome promises.

Jesus told us that no matter what happened to us in this life, we would become part of a family:

"But He answered them, saying, 'Who is My mother, or My brothers?' And He looked around in a circle at those who sat about Him, and said, 'Here are My mother and My brothers! For whoever does the will of God is My brother and My sister and mother' (Mark 3:33-35).

Jesus also said, "Assuredly, I say to you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or father or mother or wife or children or lands, for My sake and the gospel's, who shall not receive a hundredfold now in this time--houses and brothers and sisters and mothers and children and lands, with persecutions--and in the age to come, eternal life" (Mark 10:29-30).

Nick's grandfather knew what it was like to be a stranger in a foreign land. He knew how it felt to have no family, no country, no citizenship. That is why having a family had so much meaning for him.

"Now in this time" we are part of a family. The scriptures that refer to us as brethren and children and sons and daughters are numerous.

What holds a family together?

"Since you have purified your souls in obeying the truth through the Spirit in sincere love of the brethren, love one another fervently with a pure heart, having been born again, not of corruptible seed but incorruptible, through the word of God which lives and abides forever" (1 Peter 1:22-23).

We see from society that families that do not know how to love each other fail. When families fail we see the pain and the hurt and lifelong effects it has on those who suffer from it. God is showing us many things by our physical families, but even more so by our spiritual family. Nick's grandfather learned to value family when it was taken away from him. He also learned how much he needed a family and how much the family needs each other. How much more should we learn from and value our spiritual family?

We cannot say we do not need a family. We cannot say: "I'm out of here and it's just me and Jesus! I don't need to be part of a congregation."

In 1 Corinthians 12, Paul talks about how every part of a human body is necessary. He shows that even though some parts may not be as pretty or nice to look at, they are necessary. He shows that we all need each other and the gifts we bring to the body, or the family.

The body cannot function the way it should unless every part--large or small, visible or not visible, pleasant to look at or not pleasant to look at--is working together. He also shows that we do not decide what parts are in the body, but God decides this. Our duty is to make the choice to work together.

"That there should be no schism in the body, but that the members should have the same care for one another. And if one member suffers, all the members suffer with it; or if one member is honored, all the members rejoice with it. Now you are the body of Christ, and members individually" (1 Corinthians 12:25-27).

"For no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as the Lord does the church. For we are members of His body, of His flesh and of His bones" (Ephesians 5:29-30).

We all know this is symbolic of God's family as well. We are all part of the same household. It is God's household. Perhaps we should think more about how we would behave if we actually lived in a house, all together, and God was the Father of the household. I wonder how differently we might behave as children in that household?

I like the way the Living Bible translates Ephesians 2:19-22.

"Now you are no longer strangers to God and foreigners to heaven, but you are members of God's very own family, citizens of God's country, and you belong in God's household with every other Christian. What a foundation you stand on now: the apostles and the prophets; and the cornerstone of the building is Jesus Christ himself! We who believe are carefully joined together with Christ as parts of a beautiful, constantly growing temple for God. And you also are joined with him and with each other by the Spirit and are part of this dwelling place of God."

Nick's grandfather knew what it was like to be a stranger in a foreign land. He knew how it felt to have no family, no country, no citizenship. That is why having a family had so much meaning for him. That is why he wanted to constantly remind Nick and the rest of the family how important it was.

Jesus did not give His life for each of us so we could remain individuals. Jesus gave His life for us so we could become part of something much bigger. We are each important. He gave His life for each individual. But, after that, we are to become part of a community. Part of a living, working, healthy body. We cannot say we do not need a family. We cannot say: "I'm out here and it's just me and Jesus! I don't need to be part of a congregation." This flies in the face of everything Jesus tried to teach us.

How important is family to you? How important is family to us all?



How to Find the Right Church

Whether to attend church, and which one, are among the most important decisions we can make. What are key factors we should consider?

By John Ross Schroeder



THE CHOICE OF CHURCHES and denominations of churches has never been greater. A dizzying supermarket of brands awaits the potential churchgoer, particularly in the United States.

To put the puzzling choices in secular terminology, supply and demand drives the religious marketplace. According to The Southern California Christian Times, "More than one out of seven adults change[s] their church each year, and another one out of six attends a carefully chosen handful of selected churches on a rotating basis rather than sticking with the same church week after week" (December 1998). Brand loyalty doesn't carry much weight.

If you were looking for a church, what would you look for? In America, where churchgoers are more fickle about their affiliation than in any other country, what do people look for in a place of worship?

Last year the George Barna research company surveyed American churchgoers about their preferences in a church. In the resulting report the top three factors were:

- Beliefs and doctrines.

- Mutual comfort and care among the members.
- The quality of the sermons.

Mentioned first were beliefs and doctrines. That is a good place to begin. From a biblical standpoint, certainly few if any other points could be as important. But we are getting a little ahead of ourselves. The first question to ask is, Should we attend church at all?

What the Bible says

Most of our readers presumably have a great deal of respect for the Scriptures or they wouldn't be reading this magazine. But, if you are not yet quite sure about the authority of the Bible over our individual and collective lives, we invite you to request our two free booklets *Is the Bible True?* and *How to Understand the Bible*. (You can access these booklets at <http://www.ucg.org/articles/bibletrue/bibletrue.html> and <http://www.ucg.org/articles/bible/bible.html>.)

The New Testament admonishes Christians to assemble together regularly. One epistle specifically tells us: "...Let us consider one another in order to stir up love and good works, not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as is the manner of some, but exhorting one another, and so much the more as you see the Day approaching" (Hebrews 10:24-25).

*God is neither
impressed nor pleased
with empty outward
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religion. He is
pleased, though, with
those who deeply
respect His Word.*

The Old Testament expresses the same thought in the form of a command: "Six days shall work be done, but the seventh day is a Sabbath of solemn rest, a *holy convocation* [or 'commanded assembly,' New International Version]. You shall do no work on it; it is the Sabbath of the LORD in all your dwellings" (Leviticus 23:3; emphasis added throughout).

In terms of choosing a church based on fundamental beliefs, observing God's Sabbath is one of the most basic--so basic that it is enshrined as one of the Ten Commandments. (If you do not understand which day is the Christian Sabbath or are unclear on its purpose and intent, please request our free booklet *Sunset to Sunset: God's Sabbath Rest*. You can access this booklet at www.ucg.org/articles/sabbath.htm.)

To sum up the importance of beliefs and doctrines, the Bible makes it clear that God's Church keeps His law. It is described prophetically as a group of people "who keep the commandments of God and have the testimony of Jesus Christ" (Revelation 12:17).

Its members do not try to get around or do away with the requirements of the biblical way of life. They follow the difficult, narrow and often unpopular way mentioned by Jesus Christ, not the broad, easy path that eventually leads to destruction (Matthew 7:13). Those who really want eternal life are pictured as living God's way (verse 14).

What is the Church?

Early in our study we should understand what the Church is and is not. We must first understand that the church is not a building. The glossary of the Translator's New Testament plainly tells us: "'Church' in NT never means 'building.' It always represents either a group of committed Christians in any given locality [who] met to practice their religion, or the totality of these groups scattered throughout the world" (pp. 557-558).

The apostle Paul defines the Church as simply "the body of Christ" (1 Corinthians 12:12, 27). It is a spiritual organism, not a physical edifice or organization. Members of the Church go to the building where they meet, or a congregation meets in someone's house if the numbers are small (Romans 16:5; 1 Corinthians 16:19), but the Church is still the spiritual Body of Christ.

By way of an analogy, Paul likens the Church to the parts of the human body (1 Corinthians 12:12-27). He shows how each part is dependent on the others. Yet "by one Spirit [the Holy Spirit] we were all baptized into one body... and have been made to drink into one Spirit" (verse 13). It doesn't make much sense for some of the membership to be separated from the rest of the Body, sitting alone at home while the rest of the Body worships together with other members of the Body.

The same care one for another

The apostle Paul urged the Corinthian members to "have the same care one for another" (1 Corinthians 12:25). This is the second point mentioned by the Barna survey: mutual comfort and care.

This mutual care for one another is biblical. But it should always be remembered that our relationships with other members of the Church begin and end in our fellowship with God the Father and His Son Jesus Christ (1 John 1:3, 7).

We have fellowship with each other only in and through our spiritual relationship with the Father and Jesus Christ. The first four of the Ten Commandments express our love for God, the last six our love for humankind. The apostle John points out the folly of trying to have one without the other (1 John 4:20).

The Ten Commandments embody a basic spiritual law. If you break one, spiritually speaking you have broken them all (James 2:10). We express the love of God by keeping every one of the Ten Commandments (1 John 5:3).

Expressing proper love for the membership of the Church is an awesome responsibility on the shoulders of each member. After all, Jesus Christ, the founder of the Christian Church (Matthew 16:18), did say, "By this all will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another" (John 13:35). It is of utmost importance that we extend warmth and friendliness to other members of the spiritual Body that is the Church, especially to visitors and new members.

Quality of the sermons

The quality of the sermons is mentioned as the third most-looked-for quality in the George Barna survey. In the broadest sense this is also a supremely important point. The membership of the

Church has a right to expect certain fundamental qualities from the elders' leadership. First and foremost is loyalty to the Bible and to the teachings and practices of Jesus that He taught the apostles--"the apostles' doctrine and fellowship" (Acts 2:42).

In his preaching each elder must be "rightly dividing the word of truth" (2 Timothy 2:15). Most other versions say "rightly handling" or "rightly explaining," which is a better rendering, but perhaps the Revised English Bible has best grasped the basic sense of this passage when it expresses the need to "keep strictly to the true gospel."

The world's teachers expound many false gospels (Galatians 1:6-7; 2 Corinthians 11:4; Matthew 24:4-5). A British novelist made this comment about many 20th-century clerics: "The modern clergyman has acquired in his study of the science which I believe is called exegesis an astonishing facility for explaining things away."



Explaining things away is *not* a part of the preaching of a true servant of God. The ministry of the Word and prayer are his true priorities (Acts 6:4).

The apostle Paul urged Timothy: "Preach the Word;... correct, rebuke and encourage--with great patience and careful instruction." Why? "For the time will come when men will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear" (2 Timothy 4:2-3, New International Version).

A faithful pastor will preach the truth of God's Word, not his own ideas. A true servant of God and His people "has a boundary set for him," explained one long-time teacher. "When he enters the pulpit, he is not an entirely free man... He is not at liberty to invent or choose his message: it has been committed to him, and it is for him to declare, expound and commend it to his hearers."

The importance of faithfulness to the Word of God cannot be overemphasized. Much less important is the preacher's particular style of speaking or even his basic ability as an orator or teacher. Most who have received a genuine call to the ministry strive to improve their effectiveness as the years go by.

Yet another important factor

One more factor is simply the ability of one's church to make a difference. Said George Barna: "They want substance from their church; they want to make a difference in the world through their church."

Broadly speaking, this is another way of saying the Church is commissioned to take the good news of the Kingdom of God to the world and faithfully teach others God's way of life as Jesus commanded (Matthew 24:14; 28:18-20). Any church that is not dedicated to performing this task is seriously falling down on the

A faithful pastor will preach the truth of God's Word, not his own ideas. He is not at liberty to invent or

job. Jesus Christ said, "Therefore by their fruits you will know them" (Matthew 7:20).

According to Mr. Barna, the sad truth is that "the Christian Church has stagnated, largely due to its comfort with routines and rituals that are neither challenging nor relevant for millions of people."

Many prospective churchgoers do desire to do a work in the world. They would like to find a church actively fulfilling Christ's command to spread the gospel in our age. But they may need some vital background knowledge to rightly evaluate which groups and organizations are obediently following Christ's command.

Of course, there is a great deal more to the overall story. The Church is a big subject well worth studying in much greater detail than can be done in any single article. That is why the United Church of God has published an extensively researched booklet simply titled *The Church Jesus Built* which can be found at <http://www.ucg.org/articles/church/content.html>. This is one of the most important booklets we have ever published. Our booklet *The Gospel of the Kingdom* gives understanding of the message Jesus taught, and which He commanded His Church to proclaim. It can be accessed at <http://www.ucg.org/articles/gospel.htm>.

How to find the right church will entail some serious Bible study on your part. It is not a decision you should make quickly or lightly. You should search out a church that fits the true biblical model.



Read the Book

Advertising executive and author Bruce Barton called it "The Book Nobody Knows." No other book is more important to you and your future.

By Scott Ashley



BRIDES CARRY IT at their weddings. Presidents and judges place their hands on it when they are sworn into office. In legal proceedings, witnesses put one hand on it while they swear to tell "the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth."

In many hotel and motel rooms it can be found on the desk or nightstand. Most homes have at least one, and often it occupies a place of honor on the mantle, coffee table or nightstand where it gives the impression that it's used daily.

If it were listed by booksellers, it would perpetually make the bestseller lists, with millions of copies sold and given away year after year. It's been translated into more than 2,000 languages and dialects.

This book is, of course, the Bible.

But, popular though it is, how many people actually take the time to read it?

Recently, a survey by the Barna Research Group, a religious research firm, found that only one in three Americans read the Bible regularly or could name the writers of the four Gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke and John). Not even half of those surveyed could name even five of the Ten Commandments. Most indicated that they find the Bible irrelevant.

Although Bible sales are surging among some publishers, and dozens of varying versions and translations line the shelves at religious and secular bookstores alike, it appears that relatively few take the time to actually read the Scriptures. And, regrettably, even fewer understand them.

What a remarkable turnaround from earlier years!

Bible-believing leaders

Not long ago Ronald Reagan, U.S. president from 1981 to 1989, said: "Within the covers of the Bible are all the answers for all the problems men face. The Bible can touch hearts, order minds, and refresh souls."

The legendary British statesman Winston Churchill firmly believed in the accuracy and integrity of the Bible. "We reject with scorn all these learned and labored myths that Moses was but a legendary figure," he wrote. "We believe that the most scientific view, the most up-to-date and rationalistic conception, will find its fullest satisfaction in taking the Bible story literally."

Many other great leaders have likewise believed in and tried to order their lives according to the Bible's instructions.

Queen Victoria, monarch of Great Britain at the height of its power, exclaimed, "That book [the Bible] accounts for the supremacy of England!"

Abraham Lincoln, who led the United States through the Civil War as its 16th president, perhaps summed it up best when he said: "I believe that the Bible is the best gift God has ever given to man."

George Washington, Revolutionary War commander and first president of the United States said: "It is impossible to rightly govern the world without God and the Bible."

Substance or show?

What about you? How much attention do you pay to the Bible?

Of the world's six billion inhabitants, about a third claim to be followers of the Bible. But how many follow Jesus Christ's advice to read the Book? (Matthew 12:3, 5; 19:4; 21:16, 42; 22:31; Mark 2:25; 12:10, 26; Luke 6:3).

Notice how God views those who outwardly adhere to His words but neglect to live by them: "These people come near to me with their mouth and honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. Their worship of me is made up only of rules taught by men" (Isaiah 29:13, New International Version, emphasis added throughout).

God is neither impressed nor pleased with empty outward appearances of religion. He is pleased, though, with those who deeply respect His Word: "This is the one I esteem: he who is humble and contrite in spirit, and trembles at my word" (Isaiah 66:2, NIV).

The choice is up to you

How does God view our choice of whether or not to live by His Word?

*"Within the covers
of the Bible are all*

When He revealed His instructions to ancient Israel, formerly a slave people in Egypt, His desire was for them to become a model nation to

the other nations around them. Through His servant Moses God told them: "See, I have taught you decrees and laws as the LORD my God commanded me, so that you may follow them in the land you are entering to take possession of it. Observe them carefully, for this will show your wisdom and understanding to the nations, who will hear about all these decrees and say, 'Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people.' What other nation is so great as to have ... such righteous decrees and laws as this body of laws I am setting before you today?" (Deuteronomy 4:5-8, NIV).

God intends that His way of life be a shining example to others. When we live by them, His laws are to be a model of wisdom and understanding to those around us. Jesus Christ Himself made it clear that we are to live not by physical food alone, "but by every word of God" (Luke 4:4; Matthew 4:4; Deuteronomy 8:3).

But it is up to us whether we will take the initiative to study and live by those words. When God revealed His instruction to Israel, He also set before them a choice: "See, I have set before you today life and good, death and evil, in that I command you today to love the LORD your God, to walk in His ways, and to keep His commandments, His statutes, and His judgments, that you may live and multiply; and the LORD your God will bless you...

"But if your heart turns away so that you do not hear,... I announce to you today that you shall surely perish;... I call heaven and earth as witnesses today against you, that I have set before you life and death, blessing and cursing; therefore choose life, that both you and your descendants may live" (Deuteronomy 30:15-19).

Simply put, God promises great blessings for those willing to study His Word and put it into practice. Failing to live by it will bring its own punishments in the sorrow and suffering that inevitably follows breaking God's laws.

More reasons to read the Book

Besides these reasons straight from our Creator, there are many other reasons why we should read the Book:

- It is claimed as the basis for Western civilization and Judeo-Christian culture and society.
- It is a unique historical document spanning some 4,000 years of history.
- It is a remarkable literary work, studied in thousands of college and university classes for its literary value alone.
- It offers straightforward, practical advice on all aspects of life.
- It is a consistent bestseller year after year after year.

The early American patriot Patrick Henry, famous for his stirring cry of "Give me liberty or give me death!", also said, "The Bible is worth all other books which have ever been printed."

Where to begin

If by now you see the value in discovering the treasures of the Bible for yourself, you may be wondering where to begin. The answer is to start at the beginning, with the first chapter of

Genesis.

Some Bibles contain only what is called the New Testament, plus perhaps Psalms and Proverbs. By omitting the Old Testament, such Bibles are missing about three-quarters of the material God inspired to be written down and preserved through the ages for us.

Be sure you have a Bible that contains both the Old and New Testaments. After all, the Old Testament writings were the Holy Scriptures to which the apostle Paul referred when he wrote to Timothy: "All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work" (2 Timothy 3:16-17).

The writers of the New Testament understood the Hebrew Scriptures to be inspired by God. They included some 300 quotations from the Old Testament and hundreds of allusions to it in their writings.

Read and learn

If you spend only 10 to 15 minutes a day in reading the Bible, you can read the entire Bible through in about a year. Initially you need not be so concerned with studying the Bible or solving problems so much as simply reading through it. At other times you can sit down with *The Good News*, some of our booklets, or our *Bible Study Course* and study the Bible in much greater depth as you examine various topics.

As you read, you'll discover many fascinating stories involving history, romance, danger, violence, intrigue and even prophecy. You'll quickly encounter men and women like Abraham, Sarah, Isaac, Rebekah, Jacob, Rachel, Joseph, Moses, Miriam, David, Solomon, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Daniel, Jesus, Peter and Paul. Their stories were written down as examples for us, preserved that we might learn from their many and varied experiences (Romans 15:4; 1 Corinthians 10:6-11).

And the Bible explains things as they really are--the good, the bad and the ugly. It presents a clear picture of human failings and gives the solutions.

If some passages are unclear, you may want to compare one or more Bible versions to clear things up. Used bookstores are a good place to find inexpensive Bible translations. (To understand the differences in approach among various translations, be sure to request your free copy of the booklet *How to Understand the Bible*. You can access this booklet at <http://www.ucg.org/articles/bible/bible.html>.)

Try to read with an open mind and fresh approach, as though you were reading every scripture for the first time. You may be surprised at what you'll discover. Some scriptures, for example, may directly contradict what you may have always believed the Bible said. You must be sure to rely on what the Bible itself says, not what someone says it says.

Take the first step

If you apply its words, reading the Bible can be the most rewarding thing you could ever do. Woodrow Wilson, U.S. president from 1913 to 1921, compared his success to the application of God's Word. "There are a good many problems before the American people today, and before me as President, but I expect to find the solution of those problems just in the proportion that I am faithful in the study of the Word of God." No doubt, much of the success of "the American experience" can be attributed to its leaders' familiarity with God's Word.

By studying the Bible, you'll gain wonderful and marvelous insights into your relationships with family, friends and others. You'll far better understand why our world is in the condition it's in. You'll come to understand yourself far better than you ever have before.

Recommended reading

Where should you begin in your study of the Bible? How should you approach it? We first recommend that you read *Is the Bible True?* This free booklet examines the Bible from several perspectives--science, astronomy, history, archaeology and prophecy--showing that the Bible is indeed true and trustworthy. (You can access this booklet at <http://www.ucg.org/articles/bibletrue/bibletrue.html>.)

Also be sure to request our free booklet *How to Understand the Bible*. This helpful guide shows you seven keys that will help you increase your understanding of God's Word. It will also help you understand basic biblical themes.

Please also request to enroll in our free *Bible Study Course*. The first two lessons are titled *Why the Bible Is the Word of God* and *The Word of God: The Foundation of Knowledge*. The remaining 10 lessons will take you through the major themes of the Bible, addressing such crucial topics as God's plan for humankind, your ultimate destiny, why God allows suffering and how and why He will intervene in human affairs to change this world forever.

All these publications are free for the asking. You can access these and other publications from our Web site at <http://www.gnmagazine.org>. We hope you'll request your free copies today.



Youth Violence: *Where Does the Blame Lie?*

Violence has come to roost in the nation's youth. A biblical prophet envisioned a time when children would be our oppressors (Isaiah 3:12). Are we living in those days?

By Howard Davis



IN THE 1960S, Bill Roberts went from youthful innocence to the killing fields of Vietnam. Thirty years later, as a grade school principal, he is often reminded of the fact that America is still at war. Once again he feels the adrenaline rush through his body like it did while fighting in the jungles of Vietnam. Bill Roberts' war is against the deadly explosion of youthful violence that began some 20 years ago.

Epidemic of violence

After a 15-year-old confessed to the May 1998 school shooting of 22 students and his parents in Springfield, Oregon, commentators pointed out that explosive violence had crept from the poor, inner-city communities in the 1980s and early '90s onto the manicured lawns of suburbia and the rural settings idealized in the American dream.

The U.S. Centers for Disease Control in Atlanta reported that homicide is now one of the greatest risks to our youngsters. While The National Council on Crime and Delinquency reported that recent mass murder attempts and episodes, "had nothing to do with drugs or guns. And some were from affluent communities and intact families."

In the last six years, 11 of 12 mass shootings with multiple victims happened in cities with populations under 80,000. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention report that nine of these were cities with less than 52,000 people.

Initial studies indicate a shift in violent youth behavior out of the low socioeconomic stereotype. Harvard School of Public Health professor Deborah Prothrow-Stith characterizes the movement of youth violence from poor urban communities to the rest of the population and regions as an

effect similar to any other epidemic. "It's the second wave," she said. "First [it strikes] the most vulnerable community, and then it spreads."

A childhood jungle

Youth violence is, at its core, an outgrowth of a crisis of values. Successful parenting requires values flowing from a firm commitment to children. A commitment that requires time, attention and resources. In their absence, children grow up in a hostile jungle. It doesn't have to be so.

Consistent, nurturing guidance of children works. Demonstrating love works. These parental commitments help stop violence through prevention. They require a child-centered approach that touches the spirit rather than a manipulation of material circumstances masquerading as attention.

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Make no mistake;
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A central theme of Jesus Christ regarding children is that they are to be loved because "of such is the Kingdom of God" (Mark 10:14). He showed that true love works. The explosion of youthful violence is a clear warning that time is running out to begin practicing Christ's approach to child rearing.

Most youth violence comes from environments where violent adult behavior is modeled and acted out in what National Council on Crime and Delinquency president Krisberg calls a widespread "nihilistic (a total disbelief in religion or moral principles and obligations) culture that does not promote community and social values."

Not only are right values ignored, but also wrong values are often celebrated. "Go to the movies and listen to the music," says Krisberg. "It's violent, it has misogynist (a hatred of women) in content. There's gross materialism and no ennobling values celebrated."

A new battleground

The war of youthful violence continues in many communities around the world. At Bill Roberts' Portland school ground, a battle almost erupted because a 12-year-old student had grabbed a basketball from a gang member during recess. A few days later, as school was letting out, gang members arrived with revolvers under their coats. They were ready for the boy.



What surprised Roberts and led him to instinctively sense he might witness a murder was the bizarre readiness of this 12-year-old with no violent history to take on the gang single-handedly.

As the boy raced out the front door toward the gang, Roberts grabbed him, handing him to two assistants who restrained the youth in the principal's office while Bill confronted the gang. This battle, today anyway, was prevented.

In schools across the nation, principals experience such potentially deadly conflicts daily. Although this situation was

resolved peaceably, Roberts is sure he will see similar problems again.

In some British schools violence and disrespect for authority have clearly gotten out of control. One East Anglican instructor wrote an article entitled "How we teachers have lost control of the classroom" (*Sunday Telegraph*). He said that there is only one target that matters: "reducing violence in schools."

Need for spiritually motivated love

Former Chairman of the Joint Chief of Staff, General Colin Powell, said the problem of troubled youth is the greatest threat to the future of the United States.

Youthful violence has its roots in a parental culture that has spiritually abandoned them. More money, expensive schools and government programs run by well-meaning bureaucrats cannot substitute for parental love. Western nations often look to institutional programs for salvation from social crises, but this is one money can't buy.

The 15 million children living in poverty are not alone in a landscape of emotional, interpersonal and spiritual impoverishment. Many children in the world's more prosperous nations are growing up without enriching values conveyed by the intimacy of sacrificial parental love.

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Many of them have no concept of the sanctity of life--even their own. "This is the way we want to go out," read the suicide note from Columbine High School gunmen Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold, who killed 13 others in a rampage of bullets and homemade bombs before they turned their guns on themselves.

Having had materialism substituted for love, many of today's children have no comprehension of an overriding purpose to life, no sense that life is about much more than today's wants and needs. They have scarce knowledge of an Almighty God with endless love who holds out a special purpose and destiny for each person--man, woman and child alike.

Regrettably, these devastating social trends affect almost all segments of society. Even professing Christians aren't immune. Too many political and religious leaders alike have largely abandoned belief in absolute standards such as those that flow from the immutable law of God.

Serious consequences

The Creator of all humankind said He would abandon the nation whose parents refuse to retain the spiritual knowledge flowing from the law of God and His authority to define right and wrong.

"My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge. Because you have rejected knowledge, I also will reject you... Because you have forgotten the law of your God, I also will forget your children" (Hosea 4:6).

Youthful violence is not a mystery. Make no mistake; it is a tragic sin for all concerned. But the good news is that the spiritual principles that have always worked still continue to work. Families, communities, societies and nations don't have to be destroyed if they will only seek the spiritual knowledge that shows us how to truly express love.

Recommended Reading

The United Church of God is very concerned about the direction our families and youth have been taking. We have published a blueprint for stable homes, communities and societies: *The Ten Commandments*. Without a solid understanding of this most basic of all biblical laws, society has little chance of really helping its youth--the next generation--its most treasured possession. You can access this booklet at <http://www.ucg.org/articles/ten/ten.html>.

