Stay Together, Church Of India A John 17 Church Whom God Has United



Unity in Christ Begins Where Denominationalism Ends









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Christian Trends ISSUE 01 April/ May 2020 VOLUME 10

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Printed, published and owned, by Finny Philip and Printed at Anaswara Offset Pvt Ltd, 48/2123-C, Perandoor Junction, Elamakkara, Kochi - 682026. and Published at Filadelfia, Sanjay Park, Rani Road, Udaipur 313001 Rajasthan. Editor: Finny Philip

FROM THE EDITOR



"It is enough! I give thee the right hand of fellowship."

Nearly every aspect of people's lifestyle is undergoing transition with the 'new normal'; the faith of the church is no exception. With the emergence of house churches and the cyberchurch, people's faith activity is no longer guided by parameters such as respect for church leaders, reverence for God, a desire to strive for personal holiness, sensitivity to theological heresy, or appreciation of one's tradition.

What is particularly noticeable is that denominational loyalties are on the decline. Many denominations have lost their way in terms of theological and ethical commitments for some time. Some of these have become detached from their heritage, and even more so from Scripture. Adding to the woe, at least for a short term, networks are replacing denominations for many people maybe the most significant change in this century. Today, we have an increasing number of people whose Christian distinctiveness is shaped by their involvement with a network or a special-purpose group or parachurch group than by a particular denomination. The younger generation is more trans-denominational because they feel that traditional churches don't have much to offer and they rather prefer smaller cross fellowships and groups.

However, denominations are essential, and are a place of belonging—they are our heritage, and distinctively shape our beliefs and behaviour. Denominations help to connect Scripture and tradition, and have been milestones in the history of Christianity. Structures within denominations help give direction, information, connection and coherence to the foundational matters of faith. But an over-focus on the denominational structure may lead to lack of lustre and vitality. On the other hand, too much focus on the 'spirit of denomination' leads to an unwarranted form of Christianity in the public space.

Denominations must maintain their distinctiveness while stressing their commitment to the gospel. Healthy denominations serve the cause of Christ, and collaboratively make headway for the good news of the gospel. Although it is essential to remain in the denominational convictions in their understanding of Scripture, one also needs to explore ways to partner with similar groups and networks. It will help one to tide over personal insecurities and understand the changing world around us. Such conviction comes only when we have mutual respect and humility to serve together with those from a different denomination.

John Wesley's oft-quoted declaration is valuable for our reflection. "I ... refuse to be distinguished from other men by any but the common principles of Christianity.... I renounce and detest all other marks of distinction. But from real Christians, of whatever denomination, I earnestly desire not to be distinguished at all.... Dost thou love and fear God? It is enough! I give thee the right hand of fellowship." Let us trust God to bring a fresh wind of His Spirit to our theological persuasion, to our ministry, evangelism and missions, and our service to the nation as we live in these challenging times!

FINNY PHILIP

GLOBE CROSSING



CONFESS DIRECTLY TO GOD, IF PRIESTS UNAVAILABLE: POPE

Pope Francis told that general absolution of sin—confession of sins made directly to God as opposed to through a priest—can be applied during the worldwide Covid-19 pandemic, as reported in *Christian Post.* Confession, which is considered one of the seven sacraments in the Catholic Church, is usually done to God through the priest but official teaching allows for exceptions for specific circumstances such as a pandemic. Thus, in a Mass celebrated on March 20, which was livestreamed from Rome, Pope Francis told that people who cannot go to church as a result of being locked down because of the coronavirus or another serious issue, can confess directly to God. He said, "If you cannot find a priest to confess to, speak directly with God, your Father, and tell Him the truth. Say, 'Lord, I did this, this, this. Forgive me,' and ask for pardon with all your heart."

ONLINE WORSHIP BANNED IN CHINA AMID PANDEMIC

While churches around the globe started streaming their worship services online in wake of the Covid-19 pandemic, the churches in China continue to face restrictions from the government. The government of China has reportedly banned all streaming services of churches, except those of the Three-Self Patriotic Movement and the Chinese Patriotic Catholic Association—the two state-approved churches. Since these churches face severe government restrictions, millions of Christians resort to worship in underground churches. A Three-Self pastor from Shandong reported that the Public Security Bureau has information on all members of every group on We Chat, a Chinese social media app, and a strict monitoring is carried out especially during the pandemic.

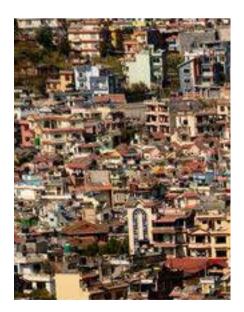


SALE OF THE BIBLE SURGES AMID PANDEMIC

ccording to a report by Christian Post, various major Christian publishing companies witnessed an increase in the purchase of Bibles in the past weeks, likely connected to the fears over the pandemic. In the month of March, Tyndale House Publishers, a Christian publisher based in Illinois, saw an increase in their Bible sale when compared to March 2019, Jim Jewell, an executive at Tyndale, said. He related it to the 9/11 attack in 2001, which also led to an increase in the Bible sales by 57% when compared to the October sales in 2000. He says that it is "not surprising that people turn to comfort and clarity of the Bible in times of trouble and uncertainty." Alabaster Co. of California, another publisher which sells the individual books of the Bible, saw an increase in sales by 143% compared to last year. LifeWay Christian Resources also reported an increase of 62% in Bible sales in the first week of April compared to the same time last year.

PASTORS IN NEPAL ARRESTED ON PRETEXT OF VIOLATING LOCKDOWN

T n two separate incidents, police arrested two pastors in Nepal accusing them of conducting worship services amid the countrywide lockdown to contain the spread of Coronavirus, sources said. In one incident, the police intruded a church building in Surkhet district and arrested a 69-year-old pastor on charges of holding a worship service amid lockdown, when he was actually spending time with his family, assistant pastors and their families who live in the church premises. In another incident, a 46-year-old pastor from the Karikhola area of the same district was arrested on similar false charges. The pastors were later released on bail.



'PANDEMIC NOT A TIME TO RETREAT, BUT SPREAD THE GOSPEL'

enowned global Christian **N**leaders, each leader representing a continent, came together online to pray during the Holy Week as Rick and Kay Warren of Saddleback Church, California, hosted a prayer call on April 6, dedicated for people who are affected by the disease and other concerns pertaining to the pandemic. T D Jakes (The Potter's House), Pastor Carlito and Leila Paes (Igreja De Cidade), Pastor Tony and Mei Yeo (Covenant Evangelical Free Church), Pastor Brian and Bobbie Houstan (Hillsong Church), Pastor Nicky and Pippa Gumbel (Holy Trinity Brompton) and Archbishop Laurent Mbanda (Anglican Church) represented North America, South America, Asia, Australia, Europe and Africa respectively. As it was livestreamed on Facebook, the leaders prayed for health workers, for



economic crisis, for churches to be light, for revival, for the message of hope in Christ to be shared during these times. As Nicky Gumbel prayed, he said, "This is not a moment to retreat, this is a moment for the Kingdom of God to advance." The prayer session was also joined by Tasha Cobbs, Chris Tomlin, Matt Redman and Brooke Ligertwood who led worship in between as the leaders prayed.

'INDIAN CHRISTIAN HEALTH WORKERS CONSIDERED DISPENSABLE'

n April 8, David Curry, the president and CEO of the Christian aid organisation Open Doors, told Breitbart News that they have received reports of Indian government officials sending Christian nurses to tend to the most contagious Chinese coronavirus patients because "they are considered dispensable" because of their faith. Although the patients are thankful for the love and care they receive, Curry expressed his concern for the wellbeing of the Christian health workers who are being assigned to treat in harmful conditions, deprived of necessary medical equipment thereby making them more



susceptible to the virus attack. On the other hand, he said that churches in India have stepped forward to offer help to the community of health workers in India. ROOTS



IT WAS NOT EASY FOR ABRAHAM TO SEND AWAY HIS SON ISHMAEL, BUT HE LISTENS TO HIS WIFE NOT ONLY TO PROTECT ISAAC BUT ALSO GOD'S PROMISE;

A REFLECTION ON GENESIS 21:10–12



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Hagar knew that the God of Abraham and Sarah was a powerful God; she herself had met and obeyed the angel of the Lord (Gen 16:7–11). Indeed, Abraham and Sarah believed what the angel told her, for her son was named Ishmael (16:11). She also could not but recognise that Sarah's elderly birth (21:1–5) indicated God's action, divine favour, and the fulfilment of God's promise. She could not, therefore, have assumed that her son would supplant Isaac's role even though her son was born first.

There was, however, a Mesopotamian custom that complicated matters. If a slaveholder acknowledged as son one born through a slave, that son would be reckoned as son, affecting the inheritance. Yet God's promise and plan was for Isaac to be the heir. The only way to secure that fully now, especially if Abraham and Sarah did not survive until Isaac reached maturity and secured the loyalty of their followers, would be to liberate Hagar and Ishmael and send them away. (Abraham also sent later sons away to avoid any competition with Isaac; 25:6.)

Sarah demands that Abraham protect Isaac and God's promise, by sending Hagar and Ishmael away (21:10). Abraham loved his son Ishmael too much to have considered the idea on his own, but Ishmael was not Sarah's son, and she was closer to her newborn Isaac. Abraham was naturally distressed about sending away his son (21:11); they had bonded for years, when Abraham expected Ishmael to be his only son and heir (17:17–18) for Ishmael's first thirteen years (17:25).

But Abraham discovers that Sarah's advice is not mere jealousy or rivalry, but wisdom. God instructs Abraham to "heed" Sarah's voice (21:12); this is the same verb used for Adam wrongly heeding Eve's voice (3:17) and Abram heeding Sarai's voice in taking Hagar as a concubine to begin with (16:2). Heeding one's spouse can be good or bad, depending on the content of their advice! (Think how much trouble Isaac would have saved his family had he listened to Rebekah's word from the Lord; 25:23.) In this case, however, Sarah has spoken wisely, and God instructs Abraham to heed her. (Sarah called Abraham "my lord" [18:12], a familiar title for husbands in that era; 1 Pet 3:6. But, as Gen 21 illustrates, her valuable example of respect does not mean that godly husbands should not also heed their wives!)

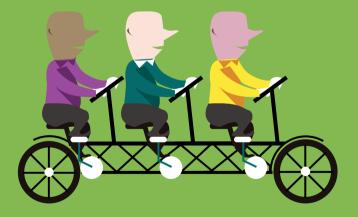
God confirms her warning: the concubine's son will not share Abraham's line of promise or the inheritance of Sarah's son (21:12). God would nevertheless take care of Ishmael (21:13). Was it cruel for God or Abraham to send Hagar and Ishmael away? The next article will reflect on Genesis 21:14.

"BUT ABRAHAM DISCOVERS THAT SARAH'S ADVICE IS NOT MERE JEALOUSY OR RIVALRY, BUT WISDOM."



UNITY IN CHRIST BEGINS WHERE DENOMINATIONALISM ENDS

WHEN OUR FAITH-LIFE IS COMPROMISED, CHRISTIAN IDENTITY IS REPLACED BY A DENOMINATIONAL TAG, BUT CHRISTIANS WHO CAN THINK BEYOND DENOMINATIONS HAVE THE KEY TO CHANGE THE FUTURE OF THE CHURCH IN INDIA





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ne of the root causes of denominational apartheid is institutionalised expression of Christian faith. It demands a believer to be loyal to a particular form of Christianity than the 'faith' itself. It has to be noted that denominational consciousness is more among the clergy than the laity. Perhaps, denominationalism is needed for the survival of structures which bestow the clergy privilege and authority.

Christian faith demands qualitative life and witness in society. Quality is measured in terms of outlook and action informed by the teachings of Jesus Christ. Today, qualitative faith-life has been compromised in various spheres of social life. One of the areas where Christians in India fail to live

up to the calling of Jesus Christ is unity among them (John 17: 20–26). Unfortunately, they continue to remain as 'divided house' vis-à-vis community life, doctrinal position, social involvement, outlook and missional activities. Even some denominations/churches behave like 'caste groups.' They maintain exclusivist attitude with regard to social

"We talk about unity (ecumenism), but secretly promote exclusivism even in ecumenical forums. Is it possible to think and act beyond denominationalism?"

(matrimonial) and ministerial relations. They willfully close the doors of dialogue and common witness. Sadly, Christian identity is also replaced by denominational identity. Instead of identifying as 'Christian' we are 'proud' to say that 'I am Pentecostal, Evangelical, Orthodox, Charismatic, Protestant, Catholic, Lutheran, Baptist....' These categories are again qualified by regional, linguistic and ethnic identities. This division actually contradicts the idea of Christian community as Body of Christ. B.R. Ambedkar articulated the division within Christianity long back in this way, "The Indian Christian is a disjointed—it is a better word than the word disunited—community... Indian Christians like all other Indians are divided by race, by language and by caste...their religion which is their only cement is infected with denominational differences. The result is that the Indian Christians are too disjointed to have a common aim, to have common mind and to put a common endeavour" (*Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar: Writings and Speeches* Vol 5, 476). One of the main causes of disjointedness is denominationalism. No community in India (exemptions are respected) can grow if it does not have 'common aim, mind and endeavour.' We talk about unity (ecumenism), but

secretly promote exclusivism even in ecumenical forums. Is it possible to think and act beyond denominationalism?

The need and nature of Christian unity have to be understood in the light of contextual realities, particularly the challenges faced by the Christians in society.

They continue to experience various forms of victimisation, particularly caused by communal polarisation and subsequent violence. Though the constitution guarantees religious rights, notably 'the right to profess, practice and propagate the religion' Christians in many states experience its violation by the fringe elements/groups that spew venom of hatred against the minorities and perpetuate unlawful activities against them. The Christians are often attacked on the pretext of

COVER STORY

religious conversion. In many places, priests and community workers are arrested on the grounds of the false allegations of inducing conversions. Irrespective of denominations, worship places have been vandalised or forcefully closed down. The Freedom of Religion Act (different versions) passed in some states is mainly aimed to target Christianity which attracts the people, particularly those who are in the lower strata of society. The Christian educational and service institutions face undue administrative interference of the government. They also face the encroachment of their properties by politically influential individuals or groups. Moreover, the social atmosphere is now awfully conditioned by majoritarian religious sentiments. Everything is looked at through the eyes of religion. Even if voice is raised against injustice or corruption, who raises it matters a lot today. The victims of such approach are religious minorities, majority of them are socially and economically poor and politically powerless. These realities are the signs of the times which demand commitment and action towards the unity of Christians beyond denominations. The context warns us that disunity, perpetuated by the spirit of denominationalism, must be overcome by the consciousness of one body, one faith and one Lord. Unity is biblical virtue and mandate, and necessary for the witnessing community in India.

The contextual realities locate the unity of Christians within the framework of Christian witness. Life in unity is embodied in every act of following Jesus. A divided faith community actually questions the unifying power of respective faith. Therefore, as body of Christ, Christians are called to exhibit unity in faith praxis, particularly in responding to the issues within and outside the faith communities. In the words of Gustavo Gutierrez, "To be a Christian is to accept and to live-in solidarity..." Though it is risky and challenging, this experience breaks the walls of denominationalism and generates the power of unity that brings changes in society. In the context of rigid denominationalism which kills the spirit of Christian community, an attempt can be made to build up a convergence of Christian denominational communities for common witness (cause) in respective context. It

is not a 'doctrinal' or 'structural' convergence but a convergence on common agenda to make Christian community a model for just and humane community. It will help the Christians to have collective thinking and initiate life-affirming actions beyond denominations to live out the Gospel of Jesus.

This convergence is programme-centric unity or solidarity than organic unity/ solidarity. Denominations are not going to be dissolved into one entity. While maintaining individual identity the denominations can unite on programme level and respond to the issues of Christian community and the society at large. A consciousness of one body, though spread in different denominations, can bring Christians together to protect their rights in this land. For instance, Christians should stop presenting the common issues related to the Christian community, such as Christian Personal Law, denial of the equal rights of Dalit Christians, violation of the educational rights of minorities and the question of increasing atrocities on Christians as issues of a denomination or section. They must be treated as issues of whole Christian community. The ruling class, who belong to the majority religion may not even understand denominational differences, may ignore any issue if they come to know that particular issue is raised by one of the denominations among the Christians. A divided bargaining does not produce any result. If there is a united action in presenting the issues of Christian community, it will automatically reflect in the approach of administration. It can at least reduce the negative ramifications of the policies and programmes concerning the rights of minorities. While uniting for their concerns, Christians should join hands with other communities or civil societies, and more importantly stand with the victims of caste and religious conflicts. Christian unity is incomplete if they ignore the pain of others. As Jesus expressed His solidarity with the marginalised of His time, so His followers should unite for the cause of the deprived in society. The unity of Christians should not be a tool in electoral politics. It must be 'political'

in terms of taking side with justice, peace and equality. It should raise voice not only for Christians but also for the common good of all citizens.

The power of denominationalism is such that majority Christians are denominationally conditioned to think, act and behave in relation to fellow Christians. If you identify yourself as a Christian, most probably, a non-Christian may not ask your denomination. She or he will be satisfied with your Christian identity. However, if the other person happens to be a fellow Christian, she or he will definitely ask your denomination and, sometimes, may not continue the interaction if you do not belong to his or her denomination or one that comes closer to it. Like caste discrimination, denominational discrimination is a fact among Indian Christians. For instance, in India there are theological institutions which claim that they are 'ecumenical.' If there is any vacancy for faculty/staff position, the advertisement for the same appears to be neutral or innocent in terms of denominational membership. However, selection and promotion to the higher positions are defined by where you belong to. Not your

Christian identity but denominational identity matters! There are denominations which prefer non-Christians to the Christians of other denominations as employees in their institutions or projects. It does not mean that non-Christians must not be appointed, but membership

"While uniting for their concerns, Christians should join hands with other communities or civil societies, and more importantly stand with the victims of caste and religious conflicts. Christian unity is incomplete if they ignore the pain of others."

in particular denomination becomes an obstacle for many Christians to get opportunities in Christian organisations. One of the root causes of denominational apartheid is institutionalised expression of Christian faith. It demands a believer to be loyal to a particular form of Christianity than the 'faith' itself. It has to be noted that denominational consciousness is more among the clergy than the laity. Perhaps, denominationalism is needed for the survival of structures which bestow the clergy privilege and authority.

Yet, a genuine unity is evident among the believers than the clergy. While clergy level unity is often formal and sometimes a 'stage show', common believers have no problem to worship and work together unless they are 'banned' by the denominational authorities. They know the pain of standing divided, particularly in the locations where they are minority. Still denominationalism is injected into the minds of simple folk. It is often perpetuated with political and economic interests also. For example, if Christians are majority in a particular electoral constituency, the candidate, who belongs to the denomination having less membership, may not win the election. Here, not Christian identity but denomination works.

Is there any way out? It is a matter of fact that denominationalism has already crept into Christian community, and badly damaged the image of Christianity in our time. Therefore, the future of Christianity in India does not lie in the hands of denominations but the Christians who think beyond denominations and uphold the values of Christian faith. While denominations perpetuate sectarianism, faith-praxis beyond denominations makes the Christian faith more meaningful in a context. A witnessing community requires a journey beyond denominations and touch the lives of people in society. Denominations domesticate the faith and block its renewing power. It does not mean that denominations should be dissolved in no time (impossible).

> But they should be transformed into faith communities which actualise the faith beyond their established boundaries and facilitate the unity of believers. A genuine consciousness of being Christian enables a person to act beyond denomination. Denominational consciousness is

practically the same as caste consciousness. Being Christian means being united with Christ, not denominations. A Christian is subjected to none, but to Christ who prayed that his followers 'may all be one'. Therefore, a Christian can think, act and experience faith beyond denomination. The biblical unity is not denominational unity in nature and purpose, but unity of believers in Christ.

REFLECTION

ALL HUMAN EFFORTS AT FORGING UNITY AND PEACE IN WORLD CANNOT BEAR FRUIT UNLESS GOD BINDS PEOPLE TOGETHER

"To have the peace of God, you must have the God of peace with you. Yes, if you seek peace, you must have God, who is the source and originator of peace. You must come under the sovereign rule of God. You must have a relationship with God." t was during an era when nations were ratifying peace treaties to end colonial wars that the First World War broke out. When it ended, governments thought that what was needed was a more encompassing treaty among nations and so the League of Nations was formed. About two decades later a bigger and worse World War broke out that ended with the use of atomic bombs. Then the statesmen of the world felt that what the world needed was a better and more inclusive community of nations, and so the United Nations Organization was formed. Everyone knows how unsuccessful the UN has been in peacekeeping. Even though wars haven't been termed "world wars", there have been ever so many wars on so many fronts since then. There have been many more war casualties than the Second World War. And now we have two mad men saying that they have nuclear bombs that they can launch at the push of a finger. The Bible has got it right: "While people are saying, 'Peace and safety,' destruction will come on them suddenly" (1 Thess 5:3).

In this culture of war, in 1971, John Lennon, who was formerly one of the Beatles, gave the world the song "Imagine":

Imagine there's no heaven... *Imagine all the people* Living for today... *Imagine there's no countries* It isn't hard to do Nothing to kill or die for And no religion, too *Imagine all the people* Living life in peace... And the world will be as one Imagine no possessions I wonder if you can No need for greed or hunger A brotherhood of man *Imagine all the people* Sharing all the world... ⇔



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WHOM GOD HAS UNITED



REFLECTION

Well, we all know what happened to the Beatles. They broke up because of interpersonal rivalry. In his personal life, Lennon left his first wife and was estranged from Julian, his son from that marriage. Though he said that Julian would always be his son, Julian was cut out of the will. In an interview, Julian said, "I have to say that, from my point of view, I felt he was a hypocrite. Dad could talk about peace and love out loud to the world but he could never show it to the people who supposedly meant the most to him: his wife and son. How can you talk about peace and love and have a family in bits and pieces-no communication, adultery, divorce? You can't do it, not if you're being true and honest with yourself" (The Telegraph, on May 22, 1998).

Lennon's song has remained popular. But the hard fact is that there's no reality to any of the ideas it projects: not in the world and it wasn't true in Lennon's life.

GOD MUST FORGE IT

That's because unity is not something humans can forge by themselves. That is the point that Ezekiel made in a prophecy. He said that God told him to take two sticks and write the names Ephraim and Judah on them to represent the two divided nations of Israel and Judah. Then Ezekiel was to bind the two sticks together to indicate that God was going to bind them together so that they would once again be one nation under God (Ez 37:15–22).

There was one kingdom under David and Solomon. When Rehoboam became king, people from other tribes rebelled against his rule because he was going to continue the harsh regime that started with Solomon's conscription of people for his building projects. That rebellion led to the kingdom splitting into two (1 Ki 12:1–24).

Later on, King Jehoshaphat of Judah tried to forge an alliance with King Ahab of Israel through a marriage involving their families (2 Chron 18:1). When Jehoshaphat went visiting Ahab, he was asked to join Ahab in fighting an enemy, and Jehoshaphat proclaimed that he and Ahab were brothers in arms (v.3). A prophet was called on to give them what God had to say about the plan. He said that Ahab wouldn't return alive from the battle (v.18). So, Ahab told Jehoshaphat to go into battle dressed like a king, while he himself went disguised as an ordinary soldier (v.29), obviously hoping that the enemy soldiers would not concentrate any attack on him and instead attack Jehoshaphat so that Ahab could escape the prophesied fate. So much for the brotherhood of the two! When the enemy army was pursuing Jehoshaphat, he cried out identifying himself and they left off their pursuit (vv.30–32). A soldier drew his bow and shot an arrow at random into the air, and that arrow found Ahab, fulfilling the prophecy that he was running from (vv.33-34).

Human efforts at forging unity and peace cannot succeed. People can have a marriage of political convenience, but God has to bind people together before they can be one—truly one. That is what God said through Ezekiel, His prophet.

GOD OF PEACE

In the New Testament, we have Paul writing to the church at Philippi, "Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near. Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus" (Phil 4:5–7). Yes, we must be gentle in our dealings and turn everything we carry in our hearts over to God to experience the peace of God. Paul followed that up by saying, "Finally, brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things. Whatever you have learned or received or heard from me, or seen in me—put it into practice. And the God of peace will be with you" (vv.8–9). And when we turn our thoughts to what is good, whatever is from God, we will discover that the God of peace is with us.

Did you notice that? To have the peace of God (v.6), you must have the God of peace (v.9) with you. Yes, if you seek peace, you must have God, who is the source and originator of peace. You must come under the sovereign rule of God. You must have a relationship with God.

Psalm 133 talks of how good and lovely it is when brothers live together. The psalm refers to oil flowing downward from Aaron's head and covers all his robes. In the Bible, oil is a symbol of the Holy Spirit. When people were anointed with oil it was to symbolise the Spirit of God coming upon them (1 Sam 16:13). "Jesus pins the conversion of the world on the unity of those who are His. The only way the world is going to acknowledge Jesus is when Christians show by their unity that God is their Father and that they are all brothers and sisters."

The oil flowing down from Aaron's head and covering his clothes tells us that Spirit flows all over the community of believing brothers and sisters binding them together in oneness (Ps 133:1–2).

In the order of the New Testament, there is no separate class of priests. The entire Church is made up of priests. The whole kingdom of Christ is one of the priests (1 Pet 2:5). All are disciples. All are witnesses of Jesus Christ, the Risen Lord. The "priesthood of all believers" is, therefore, an article of faith for Reformation Churches. The Church is not to be divided into clergy and laity as two separate classes. There is only one "people [Gr. *laos*] of God."

GOSPEL INVITATION

The Apostle John wrote, "We proclaim to you what we have seen and heard [of Jesus], so that you also may have fellowship with us. And our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ. We write this to make our joy complete" (1 Jn 1: 1–4). John said that Christ was proclaimed for the very purpose of initiating fellowship with those who heard the message. Every proclamation of the gospel is thus an invitation to fellowship. If we do not wish to have a community with newcomers, we should not preach the gospel. But if we preach the gospel, we must be ever ready to say to our audience, "Come be my brother, come be my sister."

OUR LORD'S PRAYER

On the eve of His crucifixion, the prayer of our Lord was that His disciples would be one (Jn 17: 1–26). It is significant that Jesus made a distinction between the world and His followers. He specifically said that He was not praying for the world (v.9). The world was hostile towards Him and His disciples. However, Jesus didn't pray that they should be taken out of the world to escape the enmity of the world (vv.14–16). Such hostility is a given for those who follow Jesus.

Our Lord then went on to pray, "I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me. I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one—I in them and you in me—so that they may be brought to complete unity. Then the world will know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me" (vv.20–23). Jesus pins the conversion of the world on the unity of those who are His. The only way the world is going to acknowledge Jesus is when Christians show by their unity that God is their Father and that they are all brothers and sisters.

This prayer of our Lord waits for an answer because it is one that must be answered by those who follow Him. If they don't fulfil the prayer, it will remain unanswered.

Jesus told His listeners that when they come to the altar of worship, if they recall that someone has anything against them, they should not approach the altar but go and make their peace with their brother or sister before returning to offer worship at the altar of God (Matt 5:21– 26). So many families of Christians divide over property and wealth. Brothers forget to be brothers. Sisters forget to be sisters. They grew up in childhood as brothers and sisters. But now they are enemies with daggers drawn. So many followers of Christ will not recognise that the Lord has "other sheep", and that one day, at the last, He will make them and us into one flock (Jn 10:16).

How dare we pray, "Forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us"? How dare we come to the Lord's Table of communion, when the Lord says that we must first make our peace with brothers and sisters before coming to His altar?

Yes, we need unity, if there is to be justice and peace. Are we ready to pay the cost of such unity that demands an end to stopping all our quarrels? LOGOS

A John 17 Church



JESUS PRAYED FOR THE UNITY OF HIS FOLLOWERS MUCH BEFORE ANY CHURCH WAS FOUNDED; EVEN TODAY, THOUGH SEPARATED BY DENOMINATIONS, WE ARE ONE BODY AND SHOULD NOT ISOLATE OURSELVES FROM OTHER BELIEVERS

hen we read the New Testament we can learn quite a bit about the firstcentury church. One thing we learn is that churches were located in a number of different cities. For example, there were gatherings of believers in Jerusalem (Acts 8:1), Corinth (1 Cor 1:2), Thessalonica (1 Thess 1:1; 2 Thess 1:1), and Antioch (Acts 13:1). But this is not an exhaustive list, there were churches in other places as well. We also learn the names of some who served in leadership in these churches, people like Paul, Titus, Timothy, and Priscilla and Aquila. In addition, we find the church referred to as: "the church of God" (Acts 20:28 NIV), "the church of the living God, the pillar and foundation of the truth" (1 Tim 3:15



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"Denominations let us know, in one way or another, that a particular church is different from other churches. Each denominational group has its own particular emphases or distinctive doctrines. **That being said**, *all* **Christian churches should agree on the major** *doctrines.*"

NIV), and "the church of the firstborn" (Heb 12:23 NIV). Interestingly enough, all of these designations connect the church to God.

However, in the New Testament we never find the church referred to with words like these: Anglican, Baptist, Catholic, Congregational, Methodist, Pentecostal, or Presbyterian. The reason we do not find these words in Scripture is because denominations were a later development. Denominations such as we know them today did not exist at that time. These church labels signal the differences that exist among the people of God. They let us know, in one way or another, that a particular church is different from other churches. Each denominational group has its own particular emphases or distinctive doctrines. That being said, all Christian churches should agree on the major doctrines. They should accept the biblical views of God, Scripture, and sin and salvation. Now, before I go any further let me say clearly that I am not against

denominations. They show us that there is diversity in the body of Christ.

The first-century churches also had diversity. There were men, women, and children in them, males and females of different ages (1 Tim 5:1-2; Col 3:18-20). Some churches had Jews and Gentiles in the same congregation (Acts 17:4; see the book of Romans). There were also people from different levels of society, there were masters (Eph 6:9; Col 4:1) and slaves (Eph 6:5; Col. 3:22). And there was other diversity as well (1 Cor 1:26). These people did not always agree with each other, even though they were Christians. At times they had personal conflicts with each other, just like we do. They also, at times, had different understandings of things that related to doctrine and practice. The apostle Paul demonstrates this in Romans 14. In that chapter we learn that Christians had differences of opinion about foods and the day of worship. In spite of these differences

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LOGOS

"THE BLUEPRINT FOR EVERY CHURCH IS THE BIBLE, THAT BEING THE CASE WE HAVE ALL BEEN GIVEN THE SAME INSTRUCTIONS AND SHOULD ALL BE APPLYING OURSELVES TO OBEYING THEM."

the believers had to "get along," they had to function as a congregation.

Wherever you have a gathering of believers, biblically speaking, you have a church. There were churches in many places in the first-century world, there is no denying that. The same is true today. There may be multiple churches in the city where you live, and there are certainly churches in many countries in the world. There are many local congregations. But it is also clear from the New Testament that there is a oneness about the church. This truth is brought out in a number of scriptures.

The apostle Paul is one of the proponents of this truth. On a number of occasions he used the word "one" when referring to the church; he described the church as being "one body" (Rom 12:4–5; 1 Cor 12:13; Eph 4:4 NIV). Even when the word "one" is not used the truth that the church is one emerges. One very powerful text in this regard is found in Ephesians 5. Multiple times in Ephesians 5:22–32 Paul speaks about Christ's relationship with the church, in each reference the church is singular. There is one Lord and one church. These texts show us that the church is a singular entity; this is the revelation of God.

It is also the will of God. We can see this very clearly in John 17, in this chapter Jesus prayed for the unity of His people. Before any of the churches in the New Testament had been founded Jesus prayed for the unity of His followers. He made this request multiple times in the text (John 17:20–23). He prayed for those who were His followers at the time, and for those who would believe in Him in the future. Jesus wants His people, in every generation, to be united until He returns. So, does this mean that we must dispense with denominations? I don't think so. But I do think His prayer has implications for how we, as the church, function.

So what are the implications of Jesus' prayer? In view of what He prayed, we as Christians, are not free to voluntarily isolate ourselves from other believers. Christians are not to absent themselves from the local gathering of believers (Heb 10:25). By extended application I do not believe that as Christians we should shut themselves off from believers who attend other local congregations. We are part of the same body, the one body of Christ. The blueprint for every church is the Bible (or at least it should be), that being the case we have all been given the same instructions and should all be applying ourselves to obeying them. These are the clear directives of Scripture, the things that we generally do not have differences of opinion about. For example, no church can seriously dispute the fact that as believers in Christ we are called to make disciples (Matt 28:19). Since this is so, we should be able to obey this biblical mandate, and others, together with believers who attend other churches. Worship does not belong only to the Pentecostals. Evangelism does not belong only to the Baptists. Social justice is not only for the United Methodists. All believers have a responsibility to minister to the Lord and to the needs of people, whether the people are believers or non-believers. Let us, in this generation, become a John 17 church, a church that works together. Even as we keep our denominations may we labour together for His Kingdom purposes. This is what Jesus wants. May the Lord hasten our ability to both recognise and respond to this vision, His vision, because much depends on it.

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DIRECTION

Stay Together, Church of India



DOCTRINAL DIFFERENCES ARE ONE THING BUT TO DIVIDE THE CHURCH ALONG CASTE, SOCIO-ECONOMIC, LANGUAGE AND ETHNIC LINES IS ANOTHER—IT'S A CHINK THAT PARTICULARLY EXPOSES INDIAN CHURCH TO BOTH INTERNAL AND EXTERNAL THREAT



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he Indian church is hugely diverse in every aspect. There are churches across the nation that adhere to a variety of doctrinal understandings, worship styles, church traditions and denominational affiliations. They also comprise people of various cultures, social strata, ethnic backgrounds and languages. Even as one moves through the length and breadth of the country, one would see how vastly distinct the forms of church are in this one single nation.

The major challenge with the Indian church, however, is that it is heavily divided along caste, socio-economic, language, people group and denominational lines. This creates huge rifts between local churches of various denominations and affiliations even if they are in the same geographical location. Churches are unable to reconcile their differences and work together for the common cause of the Gospel. Many of these differences are

doctrinal but there could be other pertinent issues such as worship styles, church traditions, cultural influences, forms of worship etc. which these churches find irreconcilable. By not seeking to work together in unity and presenting a united front, the Indian church continues to be plagued by internal threats such as disunity and division as well as external issues such as persecution and marginalisation from anti-Christian forces.

Here I would like to present five focus areas all drawn from scriptures for churches in India to give due attention to move towards greater unity across denominational lines whilst aiming for harmony and cooperation at both local and the national level.

KEEP THE FOCUS ON CHRIST ALWAYS

A Christian's gaze should always be centred on Christ. It's easy for individual churches to get distracted with their programmes and activities. However, if Christ is sidelined, then whatever they do, no matter how contextualised or relevant it may be to their intended audience, it becomes worthless and doesn't achieve anything. To this end, apostle Paul urges the Galatian church in Gal 3:26-27 to remind themselves that they are now children of God, having

been baptised into Christ and having put on Christ. Our constant focus should, therefore, be on Christ and not on hollow and deceptive philosophies or thought patterns of the world. In Rom 15:5-7, Paul also says that it is God who gives us endurance and encouragement so that we can live in harmony. The end goal of this harmony is that we can-with one voice-glorify God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. The aim of the church, therefore, is to glorify God in all they say and do. Furthermore, in Col 3:15-17, the believers are encouraged to allow the *word of Christ* to dwell in them richly so that they can teach and admonish one another in all wisdom, psalms and hymns and spiritual songs with thankfulness in their hearts to God. The focus here is on the Word of God which reveals God and the salvific work He has accomplished through his Son, Jesus Christ, When the Word of Christ dwells in us richly, it helps us to be more faithful in living out our Christian faith encouraging the believers within the church as well as being a true witness to the world.

> "BY NOT SEEKING TO WORK TOGETHER IN UNITY AND PRESENTING A UNITED FRONT, THE INDIAN CHURCH CONTINUES TO BE PLAGUED BY INTERNAL THREATS SUCH AS DISUNITY AND DIVISION AS WELL AS EXTERNAL ISSUES SUCH AS PERSECUTION AND MARGINALISATION FROM ANTI-CHRISTIAN FORCES."

"IT'S IMPORTANT TO NOTE THAT GOD'S PRESENCE AMONG HIS PEOPLE IS CONDITIONAL ON THEM LIVING TOGETHER IN PEACE AND TOGETHERNESS. DISUNITY IN THE BODY OF CHRIST BRINGS DISHONOUR TO GOD."

GAIN THE MIND OF CHRIST AND SHOW IT THROUGH HUMBLE UNITY

If church members along with their leaders have the mind of Christ that would help them resolve differences and work towards greater unity and harmony. Phil 2:1-11 is a beautiful summary of the Gospel talking about the incarnation, condescension, humiliation and exaltation of Jesus Christ. Paul's encouragement for the church at Philippi is that they have the mind of Christ, so they need to strive for humility and unity among themselves. They ought to humble themselves and value other people's interests over and above their own. They need to consider others more significant than themselves. Apostle Peter in 1 Peter 3:8-9 also encourages unity of mind, sympathy, brotherly love, a tender heart and a humble mind. He urges the church to be united with each other, showing love and humility and this enables one to bless the other and in turn receive blessings from God. Paul in 1 Cor 1:10 urges unity with the same mind and same judgement. If churches can consider the model of Christ and his humility and seek to emulate the same by having the mind of Christ in them and showing the same love of Christ to each other that they have received, then they can strive for better unity and make progress in things of God.

AIM FOR PEACE, LOVE AND HARMONY IN THE CHURCH

A major issue plaguing the Indian church is the lack of peace resulting in conflicts and growing animosity between churches and Christian leaders. In 2 Cor 13:11 and Col 3:15, Paul is urging the church to live together in peace by agreeing with each other, aiming for restoration and reconciliation. When they do this the God of love and peace will be with them. It's important to note that God's presence among his people is conditional on them living together in peace and togetherness. Disunity in the body of Christ brings dishonour to God. Living together in unity is also a good witness to the watching world and it presents a ready testimony that we who have believed in the Gospel take the commands of the Gospel to heart and put it into practice. Love is another aspect that the church community should have among themselves. This is not superficial love rather deep-seated love that flows from the love for Christ that we have received in the first place. This supernatural love flowing through willing instruments like us will bind us together in perfect harmony with others (Col 3:14, Rom 12:16). Such harmony is glorifying to God and edifying to His Church. Hence, Jesus would pray in such a way in John 17:21 that his followers would be united just as the Father is in the Son and the Son is in the Father and that those who believe would also be in them.

ABIDE IN AND PROCLAIM THE TRUE GOSPEL OF JESUS CHRIST

Many churches have stepped away from preaching as well as practising the True Gospel of Christ. They have twisted and maligned the scriptures to suit their own end and as a result, are heading towards destruction and damnation. The warning to such churches comes out clearly in 2 Jn 1:9 saying that those who don't *abide* in the teaching of the *Word*, don't have God in them. But whoever does *abide* in the teaching, has both the Father and the Son. This goes to show that one who anchors himself in the faithful preaching and teaching of the Word, is anchored in God himself. Even though the storms of life may come against them, they will *stand firm in* *the Lord* (Phil 4:1). 1 Tim 6:3–5 informs us that one ought to teach the right doctrine that agrees with the words of Jesus Christ. Such teaching leads to godliness. But if anything, other than true doctrine and scripture is taught, then it leads to pride, conceit, envy, dissension, slander and evil and this defames the name of Christ and brings dishonour to God. The Gospel has the power to save and transform people as well as communities and nations. Churches should always stay faithful to the preaching/teaching of the good news of Jesus Christ because only that can truly save people from their sins and grow them in spiritual maturity towards Christlikeness.

TRUST CHRIST TO GROW AND MATURE HIS CHURCH

Jesus Christ in Matthew 16:18 said he will build his Church and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. It shows that the Church is Jesus' idea not ours. The Church is his chosen instrument of grace through which He will accomplish his work in the world, drawing people to Himself. Jesus Christ is the head of the Church and through Him, we grow to become in every respect, the mature body of Christ (Eph 4:15). Apostle Paul in Eph 2:19–21 says that we who believe in Him, are members of His household (the church) which was built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone. It is in Christ, that the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. To this end and for the growth and maturity of the church, the Lord has given apostles, prophets, evangelists and shepherds/teachers so that they, in turn, can equip the saints for the work of ministry for building up the body of Christ so that as a whole the body of Christ will attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the son of God to mature manhood to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ (Eph 4:11-13). We need to trust God to build His church and grow it into maturity. We have no liberty to take into our hands, what He has reserved for himself to do. We need to rely on Christ alone and trust in Him, be guided by His Spirit and be willing to grow into greater spiritual maturity in Him.

The Indian Church has many challenges on its hand. But by keeping our eyes on Christ and trusting in Him, as well as by being wise and prudent and sensitive to the voice and leading of the Spirit, we can aim to resolve these many differences between churches and denominations and pursue unity in Christ. Greater unity among the churches and a deep reliance on God and his Word will result in the growth and edification of the Church at large and the ongoing proclamation of the Gospel of Jesus Christ to the unreached masses of this nation.

We can't come together, but our ideas can.



PERSPECTIVE

DO NOT SQUANDER The sanctity of sex

IT IS NOT FOR NOTHING THAT THE BIBLE TALKS ABOUT ONE-FLESH UNION BETWEEN MAN AND WIFE; HERE'S FOR YOU TO 'C' WHY SEX AFTER AND WITHIN MARRIAGE IS WAY MORE FULFILLING THAN UNCOMMITTED RELATIONSHIPS





Duke Jeyaraj is an Engineer turned Doctor of Ministry graduate who is also the founder of Grabbing the Google Generation from Gehenna Mission.

ne would ask why say 'no' to premarital or extramarital sex when live-in relationships are becoming common, popular cinema is endorsing premarital sex and 'freedom' is being equated with right to have sex with any consenting adult irrespective of gender or marital status? I can think of several reasons why one should abstain from premarital or extramarital sex. And, here are the 'Cs' that can help you see the futility of it.

CONSCIENCE

Billy Graham, in his autobiography, writes the following lines about an experience he had in his school days: "Once in my senior year, when we were in a night rehearsal of a school play at Sharon High, one of the girls in the cast coaxed me aside into a dark classroom. She had a reputation for "making out" with the boys. Before I realized what was happening, she was begging me to make love to her. My hormones were active as any healthy young male's, and I fantasized often enough about such a moment. But when it came, I silently cried to God for strength and darted from that classroom the way Joseph fled the bedroom of Potiphar's philandering wife in ancient Egypt" (Just As I Am, HarperCollins Publishers, 1997, pages 16-17). This was before Billy Graham accepted Christ in a Mordecai Ham meeting! Even before Billy Graham knew Christ as His Saviour, he listened to the voice of his conscience to avoid sex before marriage.

I also recall a real-life story which my childhood pastor, Rev SA Sundarraj of the Assembly of God Church, Vellore, South India, narrated. An atheist, he taught Maths in one of the African nations before he came to Christ. During those days, he lived alone. He would often get knocks on his door from girls who were willing to cross sexual boundaries with him. But since it violated his conscience, he drove them away! Here was an atheist with a conscience who refused to have sex before marriage.

СОТ

The second reason, why I said "no" to premarital sex was the "cot" reason. Hebrew 13:4 says, "Let marriage be held in honour among all and let the marriage bed be undefiled, for God will judge the sexually immoral and adulterous." The Broadman Bible *Commentary* notes the following about this verse: "The Bible indicates that sexual intercourse, an expression of the one-flesh union, is only for a man and woman married to each other." When Evan and I got married on July 9, 2001, I dare say that God walked up to the stage and gave us a gift. It was a big box with the word 'Sex' written on it. We had a morning wedding. That night and the following day, in a small village in Tamil Nadu, where we stayed, we unwrapped that God-given gift! We were so glad that we did not unwrap that gift before we got married—thanks to God's grace which enabled us to make some wise choices in this matter. We were not doing anything unique or different. We were only copying Bible's Jacob who waited till marriage to have sex with the girl he knew for years, the Jacob who mouthed to his father-in-law the frankest request in all of the Bible which was this: "Now give me my wife so I can sleep with her" (Gen 29:21, NLT).

COMMANDS

The Bible is full of commands that make sex between even willing individuals a sin. The world tries to tell us that rape is wrong, but there is nothing wrong with sex between two people in love even if they do it before they get married. There is nothing wrong with consensual sex between two adults even if they aren't married—the world tells us that. The 2016 Bollywood movie, starring Amitabh Bachchan and Taapsee Pannu, *Pink* [which was remade in Tamil titled, Ner *Konda Paarvai* (2019) starring Ajith Kumar] drive home this very message, in a subtle way: Rape is horrible, but sex between consenting adults is no big deal. But the commands of God, ➡

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the inventor of sex, is crystal clear. He says, "(My will) for you is to be holy, so stay away from all sexual sin" (I Thess 4:3, NLT). One of the 10 Commandments God gave us was this: "Do not commit adultery". Jesus who gave commands against sexual immorality during his earthly ministry ("Go and sin—commit adultery—no more" John 8:11) also told the woman in the church at Thyatira who was encouraging people into sexual sin to "repent" (Rev 2:20–22). The Holy Spirit through the apostles told church believers of all backgrounds to abstain from sexual immorality (Acts 15:20).

COST

Though Hrithik Roshan has repeatedly denied it, it is widely believed that Hrithik Roshan and Kangana Ranaut (both top Bollywood actors) had a sexual fling. Hrithik allegedly tried to get close to Kangana by telling her that his relationship with his then-wife Suzanne was sour. "We sleep in different bedrooms!" Hrithik had reportedly told Kangana. And Kangana fell for the trap (India Today's post on August 31, 2017 reporting on a Kangana interview with Filmfare). Here are Kangana's words about the consequences of sex outside of marriage: "There are so many things that happen in extramarital things really. Look at what happened in the Malayalam

(actress) case. What that man did to her for a complaint to his wife. He got her raped, got her videos circulated. All this only happened now but girls get pregnant, they get shot, they get killed for things like these. Of course, I feared for my life" (*Hindustan Times*, 1 Sept 2017 post). "Hrithik had my password, when our affair was on. He would send emails from my email id to his email id (to create proof that the affair between us never happened)," Kangana communicated in the same post. Only eternity will reveal the truth about what really happened between them. But the consequences—being embarrassed and being embittered—were there to behold.

Geetika Sharma, an air hostess who lived in Gurugram, near New Delhi, accused her boss—who showered on her many favours, including a BMW car to drive around and fees for an expensive MBA course, etc.—was not just seeking sex, but also unnatural sex, and receiving it regularly. She reached out to speak to her brother over the phone, very early one morning to vent out her utter frustration. Her brother told her that he had a long tiring day and would talk to her after getting some rest, before hanging up the phone. When the dawn broke, it was discovered that the girl who was hung up on (so to speak), when she so badly wanted to talk, was found hanging from the ceiling fan (Sarbani Sen, "I Failed To Read Her Silence", *People* Magazine India Edition, September 21, 2012, pages 60–63)! Yes, sex outside of marriage can have devasting effects!

In the 2012 Bollywood movie, *Cocktail*, there is a moving scene where Deepika Padukone is speaking to Saif Ali Khan, the man she was not only living-in with but also shared sexual intimacy with. As Saif looks for Deepika's friend, played by Diana Penty, ignoring Deepika—his original sexual partner—she is very hurt. And every line she speaks in that scene to Saif is a testimony to the harrowing, heart-breaking effects of premarital sex. Yes, they are a testament to the tormenting after-effects of sex outside of marriage. Here are a few of those heated, hurt-reflecting lines (roughly translated from Hindi): "You want to do test-drive with me and take home as your wife my girlfriend!"; "Yes, walk away. You are bored of me now. There is nothing in me that you haven't seen or experienced!"; "You don't act like a social worker who had sex with me for my own good!"

COOL FACTOR

The fifth reason, why you can confidently say 'no' to sex outside of marriage is the 'cool' factor. If you are a virgin, you can tell your friend, "I can be like any of you. But none of you can be like me!" I love the phrase "but you..." in the Bible (I Thess 5:4; I Tim 6:11; I Pet 2:9). This phrase reminds me that it is quite cool to be different from the crowd. So, dare to be different when it

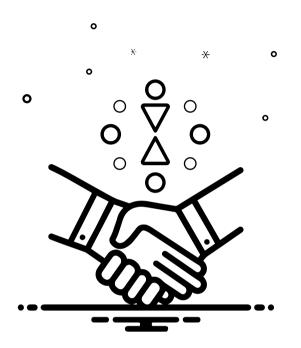
comes to having sex before marriage. Simply refuse to have sex before or outside of marriage!

In case you have already had sex outside of marriage, repent of that sin. The blood of Jesus will cleanse you from every sin, including this sin as you confess it with a repentant heart (I John 1:7–9). What's more, you will be a virgin in His eyes as he is in the justifying business. The word justification which Paul talks about in the book of Romans roughly translated into this: just-as-if-you-have-never-sinned (Rom 5:1–2; 5:9; 8:30). Yes, when we repent of any sin and come to Jesus in confession, Jesus forgives, and to Him it is as if we never ever committed that sin!



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INSPIRATION



PAUL, APOLLOS, CEPHAS: FACTIONALISM IN THE BODY OF CHRIST

A CHURCH MAY NOT BE BREAKING APART BUT FACTIONALISM WITHIN MUST BE ADDRESSED TO UPHOLD THE KOINONIA



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66 od is faithful, who has called you into fellowship with his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord" (1 Cor 1:9). As Paul began to write this all-important letter, the theme that he wanted the Corinthian church to emulate was captured in this particular verse.

Corinth was a bustling city that boasted of its ports, trade and even could be termed as the "onsite" location where many would like to be deputed in today's world. The Isthmian games that consisted of running, wrestling, boxing, javelin, discus throw, long jump, chariot racing and even music were held here. With many pagan revelries centred around the Temple of Aphrodite, there was a new revolutionary movement that started in the house of Aquilla and Priscilla (Acts 18). With Paul joining them, the church at Corinth was established. This counter-cultural movement spread and many became the members of the church. In a culture that magnified humans as demigods, folks in the church took the sides of the giants of the gospel who ministered to them. Some took the side of St Paul, others took the side of Apollos, some became a part of the Peter gang (possibly those with extreme Jewish roots) - "One of you says, "I follow Paul"; another, "I follow Apollos"; another, "I follow Cephas"; still another, "I follow Christ" (1 Cor 1:12).

Well, the good news that we can think of from this verse is none of them tried to split the church and start a new denomination. As Paul wrote this letter, factions were there in the gathering but no one started a new "Paul fellowship" or "Apollos fellowship". The factions were evident divide, leadership divide, linguistic divide, so on and so forth. How do we address this? How do we reconcile to the Lord who reconciled it all in the cross?

We need strong spiritual leaders like St Paul who focus on God's word and discern the plan of God for the church and the generations. Christian life is being united with the life of our Lord Jesus Christ. It's a life of intense sharing and partnership

"We are all members of one body and we should function as members of one another and ultimately grow unto the maturity of Christ when we use the spiritual gifts. It should edify one another and not break or divide."

as they gathered. Thus, Paul had to address the factionalism in the very first part of the letter. He could have started with the other main issues that confronted them. Yet he would have chosen to write on unity the first, as everything else would then fall in place if they gave importance to this.

As we glance at our modern-day church, we see a divided body. Many denominations came into being as a result of racial divide, doctrinal with our Lord Jesus by His Spirit. As Paul looked into the divisions of the Corinth church, he could only be encouraged by the faithfulness of God. The church with all its divisions would undoubtedly taste the faithfulness of God. His *"Hesed"* (faithfulness) is what we can rely on when we feel disorganised in a way from the eternal purpose. He will fulfil what He has purposed. St Paul talks in detail in this epistle on how the church had divisions even in the sac- ➡

INSPIRATION

raments and gatherings that ideally should have united the body.

The Communion Meal was the new covenant meal similar to the Manna that united the whole of Israel. Manna came down from heavens and all who were baptized into Moses had the privilege to eat from that meal, irrespective of their differences in the tribe they were born or leaders they had.

"They were all baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea. They all ate the same spiritual food" (1 Cor 10:2–3).

"Fellowship with Christ and intimacy with Him should result in a greater cohesion with one another in the body of Christ. We who are intimate with Christ are also intimate with one another to perfect one another in Christ."

Now as the church at Corinth gathered for their communion meal, the rich and those who were from higher social strata ate the meal and had fellowship with one another first. The slaves and those of the lesser rank followed later.

"For when you are eating, some of you go ahead with your own private suppers. As a result, one person remains hungry and another gets drunk. Don't you have homes to eat and drink in? Or do you despise the church of God by humiliating those who have nothing? What shall I say to you? Shall I praise you? Certainly not in this matter" (1 Cor 11:21–22). This is the Lord's table, a covenant meal that unites us all unto Him. This should be the thought when we partake of the elements. The communion meal unites us as we eat from the one loaf. This is certainly not the place where we behave divisively and selfishly.

"Is not the cup of thanksgiving for which we give thanks a participation in the blood of Christ? And is not the bread that we break a participation in the body of Christ? Because there is one loaf, we, who are many, are one body, for we all share the one loaf" (1 Cor 10:16–17).

We are all members of one body and we should function as members of one another and ultimately grow unto the maturity of Christ when we use the spiritual gifts. It should edify one another and not break or divide.

"So it is with you. Since you are eager for gifts of the Spirit, try to excel in those that build up the church" (1 Cor 14:12).

When the church gathers together, individuals should no longer be mindful of the family, traditions or backgrounds that they are from. We leave that all and come to the table that unites. The bread unites us irrespective of every difference. It's the Lord's table and He is the host as we partake of the meal together. The bread shows His body that was given for us and when we partake of it, we unite and are reconciled to the plan and purposes of God. No more we are divided but we are one

as—"There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to one hope when you were called; one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all" (Ephesians 4:4–6). Hence, we should, irrespective of every difference in caste, creed, ethnicity or even denomination, "make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace" (Ephesians 4:3).

Fellowship with Christ and intimacy with Him should result in a greater cohesion with one another in the body of Christ. We who are intimate with Christ are also intimate with one another to perfect one another in Christ.

The proper revelation of the communion meal and operation of spiritual gifts should enable us to come out of every denominational divide and work towards the edification and building up of the body of Christ and not the other way around.







FICTION



A NARROW ESCAPE

City of Magic – Part XIII

COULD A LEAP OF FAITH SAVE THE PROTAGONIST, WITH LITTLE INNO IN TOW, FROM THE HAWK-EYED AVARITIA AND HER GUN-TOTING MEN? READ ON THE LATEST EPISODE TO SEE WHERE THE WILD CHASE ENDS

CHALLENGE: CAN YOU DECODE THE HIGHLIGHTED WORDS?



Domenic Marbaniang teaches at Hong Kong Baptist University. He is married to Goosie and they are blessed with two children, Jeremiah and Joanne.

Ope you scraped some fun off the Fair!" Clever smiled and said. He was speaking loud since the sudden siren had also stirred up much commotion that voluminously flooded the range of air.

"Yes, we did!" I answered aloud. "Going to the Centre?"

"Yes," he replied, "Let's be quick!" We hurried to the Centre.

There was a great fountain, lit by colourful and playful lights, in the middle of Fair with a good-sized open space in the front for people to stand. There was a stage set up by the fountain adorned with balloons, ribbons, and flowers. Armed guards stood all around it. A fine-looking gentleman with a red suit on stood at the lectern smiling profusely, as if smiles were all biting at him. Behind him stood an array of five elegantly dressed personages that seemed to be officials. The Lady Avaritia was easy to distinguish by her golden silk vesture and a crown of sparkling diamonds. Also, on the stage were Fate and Chance. We were able to get a little close to the stage. When the people had all assembled, a second siren called, and the man in the red suit smiled even

more torrentially to the extent that his face swelled and his words dropped like celebrative fireworks.

"Ladies and gentlemen," he began, seemingly quite conscious of the presence of Avaritia in all his conduct, "It is our pleasure to have you all at this Fair again. Your presence and participation add to the pleasure and romance..."

"Huh, ROMA: *Radix OmniumMalorumAvaritia!*" I heard someone murmur and I turned to find that it was a rather unkempt man, having

"

meager appearance, short stature, and a worn-out face, his eyes fixated on the stage. "Evil... evil.... Root of All Evil," he murmured again.

"Fate and Chance," the red-suited man continued, "had been appointed by our Honourable Lady to pick the trader who had affected the best business, and so I would call on them to please step forward and announce the winner."

There were cheers and great applause as Fate and Chance stepped forward together hand-in-hand towards the podium. It did seem that the red-suited man didn't feel very comfortable having had to step behind.

"Choosing a winner is not always quite an easy job, when two are appointed to the task," Chance began. The audience joined in cheering again. My criterion of choice was simple: the one with the greatest guts to face the highest risk of loss—the perfect gambler."

"MONEY IS MAGIC; AND MAGIC, MONEY; EVERYTHING ELSE, ITS SLAVE. MONEY IS INFLUENCE, MONEY IS STRENGTH; MONEY IS FREEDOM, MONEY IS TRUE WEALTH."

FICTION

"Mine was a bit different," Fate joined in, "the one with the guts to embrace risk as riches-the apathetic utilitarian"

"Fatal intoxication, fatal entrapment, fatal Fatethe false shadow of false Chance!" the unkempt man murmured again oblivious to all around, as all others were to him.

The crowd cheered again. "So, who wins?" someone shouted. "Yes, who wins, who wins?" they all clamoured.

"The winner is the optician, Clever!" Fate announced as a jubilant crowd cheered uncontrollably.

Clever looked at me and smiled. Then, sprinted towards the stage where he was being welcomed by Fate and Chance and given a little trophy by Avaritia. He, then,

turned and stood at a little corner on the stage.

I heard the unkempt man's murmur: "So shall Curiosity gain hand over risk and finally swallow wallowing greed in his bottomless mire." He seemed to be an

intelligent man to me, but I wondered why he looked so unkempt. I turned at him, and at that instant was taken aback. The man had disappeared. I ran my eyes all over trying to catch a glimpse of him; but, he was nowhere to be found.

"My dear subjects," Avaritia announced and the whole crowd went mad with ecstasy.

"Speak, noble Lady, our lifegiver and ruler!" some shouted.

"The dials of Fate and Chance turn in favour towards those who tap into the Magical power of Mammon. Money is Magic; and Magic, Money; everything else, its slave. Money is influence, money is strength; money is freedom, money is true wealth. So, never stop urging forward, amassing greater; for someone must always top the other. Contentment, fear, and sloth are the greatest destroyers of your power. Contentment makes one impotent; impotence creates insecurity; and insecurity breeds rebellion, rebellion against our Queen, rebellion against the Kingdom of Magic, rebellion against self.

So, never stop short of any higher scale you can fix for yourself; and, when you've reached that, fix a greater one. Don't be compelled by need alone. Be compelled by the glory of your Mother, by me, your Governess Avaritia; for success is defined by prosperity and prosperity is inherited by those who are faithful to me!"

The crowd now, on hearing this, was thrown into uncontrollable ecstasy, calling out, shouting slogans, gesticulating with hands beating the air, some crying tears, and it all seemed to land everything into a heavy confusion.

"Let's go, let's go!" Inno cried. I looked at her eyes. She was afraid. Then, suddenly the siren howled striking the commotion into a dead silence. Two men in black suits ascended the stage and began whispering something in

> the ears of Avaritia. While they did that, I saw her eves turn fierce and hawk-like and I felt a premonition.

"There has been an emergency call," she spoke again with a grave voice. "Our city has been intruded by a number of enemies who are bent on our

destruction. We received news of a young man who has escaped prison and is now target of the search. He is said to have a child with him." I squirmed, but then felt there wasn't any need to be alarmed since there were many men with children in arms there until I turned towards the stage again, and at this moment caught the eyes of Clever; they were unblinkingly riveted on me. I shuddered at the way he looked. The Lady continued, "There are a few more others who have been spotted but not caught yet; however, we anticipate the Final Victory soon and the elimination of all threat whatsoever altogether very soon. In view of all this, the City requests the cooperation of the citizens to nab the criminals. Anyone who cooperates through providing information or help in capturing the intruders in anyway will receive high rewards and honours. Anyone, however, who cooperates with the enemies against us will be counted as traitor and tried along with them." At this moment I noticed a spark in Clever's eyes, and he moved towards Avaritia and began whispering something to her. I began moving away silently through the crowd, and as I moved

"SO SHALL CURIOSITY GAIN HAND OVER RISK AND FINALLY SWALLOW WALLOWING GREED IN HIS **BOTTOMLESS MIRE.**"

I removed the glasses that the optician had given and threw it in a corner. But by then, the whole crowd was in voracious commotion and I also saw search agents spreading all over the place. I reached near the gates and saw that it was blocked by the guards and Ira's agents. The crowd went trampling about in mad warlike passion, and I was gripped with fear now because of Inno. I tugged her closely, and turned around to see Clever, at a distance, accompanied by two or three officers running towards me. I began to run, howling, clamouring, and wildly shouting at all, that for a moment I struck lightning and surprise in the nerves of those around. In a split I had broken through the guards, had jumped on to the road, and was fleeing through the streets, while the mad cursing crowd and angry officers chased me from behind. I ran like a torpedo, crying all along when suddenly it seemed that a mist rose in front of me clouding the ground ahead. I heard the crowd behind me halt as fading voices cautioned, "The poisonous gas... the poisonous gas!" I stopped as well, turned behind and then towards the mist. There was silence. Then, a strange thing occurred. I saw the figure of Faith on the face of the mist beckoning to us with a smile. I turned behind and saw the agents lift their guns towards me. In that moment, I turned round and hurled myself into the mist, leaving the spray of bullets all behind. I had leapt into the unknown.

Decoders:

Matt 6:24 Lk 12:15

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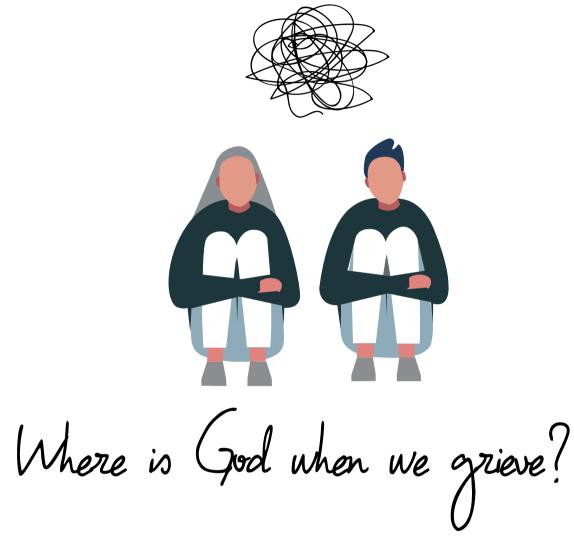
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HEALTH



IT IS NATURAL TO MOURN A LOSS AND GO THROUGH DIFFERENT PHASES OF GRIEF—ANGER, DENIAL, BARGAINING, DEPRESSION AND ACCEPTANCE—BUT THE COMPASS THAT HELPS YOU NAVIGATE GRIEF IS JESUS, THE ONE WHO RESTORES HOPE IN UNFATHOMABLE WAYS



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is not a good friend," wept my daughter.

I remained silent. It was not the right time to be defending God.

My daughter was grieving over a lost relationship. I stayed with my daughter's emotions and the alienation she was feeling. From Jesus as well.

Grief is a natural response to loss and is often associated with bereavement alone. One can experience grief over losses apart from death—loss of relationships, of practices, of possessions, of a future, to name a few. Numerous studies have been done and books written to understand the

process of grieving. There are commonly accepted stages/phases/cycles, however the way each one experiences this journey is unique to them. The commonly recognised stages of grief are anger, denial, bargaining, depression and acceptance. Although these stages have been widely accepted, other studies and practitioners have offered variations or alternatives to the five stages of grief as theorised by Dr Elisabeth Kübler-Ross. Grieving individuals may find themselves at any of these stages at a given time. My daughter was clearly angry. At that point angry with God as well. Why hadn't Jesus protected her? Where was he when she needed him? This wasn't a new theme with her—the apparent lack of a tangible Jesus.

Martha was bargaining and perhaps angry as well, among other emotions that she surely bore at that time. 'Bargaining' is the mind reasoning how things that "IN TIMES OF DIFFICULTIES, SUFFERING AND LOSSES, THE NEED FOR THE PRESENCE OF GOD, ESPECIALLY THE TANGIBLE KIND, SEEMS TO BE COMMON IF NOT UNIVERSAL."

could have been done differently. A response to the helplessness and vulnerability accompanying loss is an attempt to regain control. The process of bargaining assists in bringing more control by identifying what could or should have been done better. Jesus was 'friends' with the Lazarus family. A good friend is usually present at times of loss and bereavement. I wonder what Mary and Martha felt

HEALTH

about Jesus. Their brother had died. This 'friend' apparently loved their brother and them. Where was he in that hour? Their brother had been dead three days and there was no sign of Jesus. So, when he does turn up two days later, we hear Martha saying "If you had been here, my brother would not have died..."

"Where were you when we needed you?"

Familiar?

In times of difficulties, suffering and losses, the need for the presence of God, especially the tangible kind, seems to be common if not universal. Yet, when there has been his evident presence, it has often not been sufficient—God's tangible presence, whether as a pillar of fire, hearing of an audible voice or in the skin of Jesus it did not necessarily increase faith or cause dramatic life changes. Then why do we still want it?

At the bottom of this yearning for presence and tangibility I see a yearning for intimacy. We are built for that and before the fall, Scripture indicates, we had that completely with God. We knew God in a no-holds-no-barriers way. Now, we are left with that longing for it, and left perpetually dissatisfied-both in our human relationships and in our relationship with God. With and through Jesus, that intimacy is in the process of being restored among other things, but it is still a process and it's unlikely we will taste the full measure of it on this side of eternity. Being left to navigate grief with that sense of incompletion, aloneness, and the feeling of never getting to a place where we can say it's 'fully' over, is part of the hopeful yet incomplete journey of rebuilding intimacy with God. Hence, I deliberately use the verb 'navigating' grief for it is a journey, not a destination.

I have often mulled over what this deep intimacy with Jesus looks like. I confess, I am far from understanding it. I wonder if I would recognise it if I saw it. I am so

"Being left to navigate grief with that sense of incompletion, aloneness, and the feeling of never getting to a place where we can say it's 'fully' over, is part of the hopeful yet incomplete journey of rebuilding intimacy with God."

blinded and limited by my humanness, it's hard. All I know, is that when I am hurting, I want him there. I want to be able to curl up into a ball and be hidden in his mighty arms and find refuge in his lap. But I can't.

My daughter can't.

So, when my daughter says he is not a good friend, I wonder what else is she not saying. She did say later that she did not mean what she expressed that day, but I suspect her cry is an echo of many a heart's cry. "Where are you?" "Show me yourself?" "Speak to me! Hold me!" "I want to feel your touch, your embrace!" "Are you real? Reveal yourself!" "Show me Jesus show me! For my faith is not enough. I am not one of those blessed who believe even though they don't see. I am weak. So, indulge me and show me. Will you?"

We may find ourselves grieving over our lack of faith, that may lead us to further despair and anger. It's alright to go to God even over our hurt about him! "I hurt because you weren't there when I needed you but to heal my hurt I come to you! I believe (in you) but help me overcome my unbelief (in you)!"

Seems paradoxical. To go back to the very one who did not protect our heart or who allowed losses causing us grief. And yet that's how we navigate grief. With Jesus. For he does mourn with us. Earlier, I left the story of Martha and Jesus incomplete (John 11). When Jesus saw Lazarus' sister weeping, he was deeply moved in spirit and troubled. When Jesus came to the tomb, he wept. He too mourned. He too grieved. But he can do more. As he did for Lazarus. Martha and Mary. He can revive. Restore. Resurrect.

We can come to a place of acceptance that is more than a resignation to a new reality. In this new reality we may continue to navigate through our grief in different ways. But I believe it is a navigation with a promise of hope. What that hope may look like, I do not know. But this I know: It doesn't depend on Jesus needing to physically evidence himself; and every time my hope flounders in my journey of grief, he will send me a timely lighthouse to help me navigate through. It could be the promise of Scripture, a call from a comforting friend, the love of a dog who licks your tears away, or the warm hugs of a mother who weeps with her daughter in pain.

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THE SHEER NUMBER OF DENOMINATIONS CAN BE BAFFLING FOR CHRISTIANS TODAY BUT *KOINONIA* AND *OIKOUMENE* CAN HELP US NAVIGATE THE CHALLENGES OF CONTEMPORARY FRAGMENTATION



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he month of March 2020 was a shocker in the Indian political circles. It was one of those events that everyone saw coming, but nobody thought would actually happen. Jyotiraditya Scindia, the scion of the erstwhile royal family of Gwalior and the son of Madhavrao Scindia, left the political party he was raised in-for all intents and purposes. His father was a stalwart of the Congress party and he himself was a close confidante of Rahul Gandhi, the former (at the time of writing this article) president of the Congress Party. When the dust around the political storm settled, one question lingered in everybody's mind-was it that easy for him to leave an ideology that he was raised up with, something that he championed as recently as the previous month? While we may not have a definitive answer to that anytime soon, a similar question *must* pervade the mind of every thinking Christian, when they look at the sheer number of Christian denominations out there—is it that easy for people to leave a church/denomination to join or start another?

According to the *World Christian Encyclopedia* (WCE), first published in 1984, "World Christianity consists of six major ecclesiastico-cultural blocs, divided into 300 major ecclesiastical traditions, composed of over 33,000 distinct denominations in 238 countries." Now, the definition of a denomination and the list given by *WCE* has been called into question many times, the reason for which is evident when one goes through

IS IT REALLY THAT EASY?



"Paul spells out the fundamentals of the household of God—One Body, One Spirit, One Hope, One Lord, One Faith, **One Baptism** and One God and Father of all-which should clarify certain theological points when it comes to interdenominational disputes."

the list of denominations given there. But even if we take out all those *denominations* that wouldn't be traditionally considered as *orthodox* from this list and conflate those that should belong together as one, there are still a sizeable number of denominations left. So, the question is-how did we get here, from a tight-knit group of followers that we see as the First-Century Church in the book of Acts? After all, don't we all believe the same thing-that "... "Jesus is Lord," and believe in (y)our heart that God raised him from the dead..." (Romans 10:9)? Is it that easy to break away from a denomination and start one's own? The answer is not as straightforward as one might think. Luther, who's often pictured as an impatient man waiting for a straw to break away from the Catholic church, certainly didn't think so. In fact, theses' 48-52 of Luther's 95 theses clearly show that he was hoping for a renewal, rather than a split, within the Church.

If we go back in ecclesial history and look at the major divisions that happened in the Church, the questions at the heart of each dispute have been theological in nature. Even issues that seem practical in nature have a theological fundamental. For example, when Martin Luther questioned the limits of papal authority and the clergy in 1517 and subsequently split from the Roman Catholic Church, he wasn't disputing the leadership structure of the Roman Catholic Church. The questions that Martin Luther raised in the now famous 95 Theses were primarily theological in nature connecting the doctrines of Salvation, Scripture and the Church, to name a few. Prior to the Reformation, we had the Great Schism in 1054 (also known as the East-West Schism), which was a major split in the Church dividing the Church into two—the Western Church (which later came to be primarily identified as the Roman Catholic Church) and the Eastern Orthodox Churches-due to both theological and political issues.

In such a context, it may seem that we are at a point of no return, where it's just impossible to bring everyone together and the idea of a "one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church" as expressed in the Niceno-Constantipolitan creed seems like a distant dream (please note that *catholic* here doesn't refer to the Roman Catholic Church). However, in this fastpaced world with its plethora of idea and ideologies, where churches and denominations are split at the whims and fancies of individuals and sheep-stealing is the norm of the day, the need of the hour—more than ever before—is for the churches around the world to find a way to come together, despite their differences. Two helpful paradigms can help us navigate the rocky waters of the modern-day intellectual environment *koinonia* and *oikoumene*.

Koinonia, a Greek word that is often seen in the New Testament, refers to communion or fellowship and it is used in many different contexts, perhaps the most significant of which we see in 1 Corinthians 10:16–17, where Paul uses it to signify our communion with Jesus Christ and with fellow believers. Paul uses the term koinonia here to point out that when we partake in the Lord's Table, we have communion and fellowship with believers from all over and not just with ones who are immediately present before us. In fact, the whole of 1st Corinthians is an excellent example of how the believers can come together in communion despite their differences. The Early Church depicted this attitude in Acts 15 when they came together to find a resolution for a theological dispute that arose regarding the faith of the gentile believers. The Lord's Table (or the Eucharist) signifies and must serve as a constant reminder to us that we are all parts of the same body in communion under the *common headship of Lord Jesus* Christ.

The second important paradigm which can help the Church to come together is from another Greek word that we don't encounter as often in the New Testament—*oikoumene*. While the word itself means "the whole inhabited world", theologically it has come to refer (along with *oikos*) to the *household of God* with a global emphasis, as we see in Ephesians 2:19. Paul, in his letter to the churches in the region of Ephesus, affirms that they "are no longer foreigners and strangers, but fellow citizens with God's people and also members of his household." Paul drives his point home about the oneness of the Church as a family under the authority of God the Father in Ephesians 4:3–6. He says,

Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to one hope when you were called; one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.

In verses 4–6, Paul spells out the fundamentals of the household of God— One Body, One Spirit, One Hope, One Lord, One Faith, One Baptism and One God and Father of all—which should clarify certain theological points when it comes to interdenominational disputes. The idea of *oikoumene* reminds us that we are part of God's global family irrespective of where we are, thereby placing the onus all the more on us to find ways to come together as a *family*.

So, to come back to the initial question—is it that easy? It should be as easy as tearing a body apart—which is—it shouldn't be! If we find nothing wrong with such a phenomenon, then there's something fundamentally wrong with our theological outlook. I am well aware that none of the paradigms suggested here resolve any of the theological and practical differences that exist between different denominations (to find help in that area, read the excellent article by my colleague, Stephen Paul, in this issue). I'm hoping that it provides us with the *spectacles of love* to view others favourably, thus helping us to come together as the *body of Christ* and the *family of God*.

"WHEN MARTIN LUTHER QUESTIONED THE LIMITS OF PAPAL AUTHORITY AND THE CLERGY IN 1517... HE WASN'T DISPUTING THE LEADERSHIP STRUCTURE OF THE ROMAN CATHOLIC CHURCH. THE QUESTIONS THAT HE RAISED... WERE PRIMARILY THEOLOGICAL IN NATURE CONNECTING THE DOCTRINES OF SALVATION, SCRIPTURE AND THE CHURCH, TO NAME A FEW." BOOKS



Janet Halford worked as a teacher and education consultant in England. She is currently in a voluntary support role for students in Udaipur, India.

BIOGRAPHIES: LIFE IN WORDS, WORD IN LIFE

GOOD CHRISTIAN BIOGRAPHIES CAN WORK DEEPLY IN A READER'S HEART-CONSOLIDATING FAITH AND, AT THE SAME TIME, EXPANDING KNOWLEDGE OF GOD

Why read a Christian biography? I have read many, mostly *auto*biographies—to be accurate—as they have the immediacy and insight into thought, emotion and relationship with the Lord that has an impact on the reader. For me, autobiographies are vibrant and life-giving; they are personal testimony to the ways of God and His character, and they exemplify in a flesh-and-blood form the interaction between God and a believer.

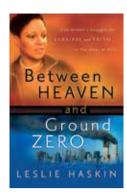
In comparing my life to that of the author, I can follow themes and common experiences, no matter how different the events may be to those of my own life. Isn't that what happens when we read accounts of those many and diverse believers in the Bible? So far removed from us in time, culture and experiences, and yet our common humanity, need of God and desire to walk closely with Him, enables us to receive much from their stories.

I could list over twenty very good autobiographies, but my highest recommendations would go to these writers:

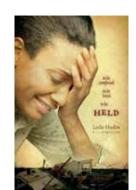
Between Heaven and Ground Zero and Held are Leslie Haskin's accounts of leaving one of the Twin Towers as it fell on 11th September 2001, and then the months after as she handled the extreme trauma. Her ability to convey what is next to impossible to describe is extraordinary. It helps me that she puts into words what escapes my imagination so that I can appreciate a little more what happened, and what it is to witness the unimaginable, shock, and horror that immobilises mind and body. Both books left me in wonder at the way God has designed the human body, mind and emotions, and His healing presence. Leslie weaves into her books the presence of God in unusual ways. There is hope and redemption in the midst of the inexplicable.

Kisses from Katie and Daring to Hope document how God called Katie Davis as a young woman to care for many children in Uganda. Brought up in Tennessee, U.S., she went on mission trip in 2006, at the age of 18. Her books tell of the way that she was convinced that she should settle in Uganda, which led to her giving homes to children, adopting children and creating a small community. Obviously, there were huge challenges, not least her youth and being alone. Through what she writes we witness her growing dependence on the Lord and faith in Him. Her practical and emotional struggles were great, but in them she grew in her knowledge of God.

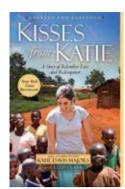
The Hiding Place is one of many books written by Corrie Ten Boom—famous for having sheltered Jews in the Holocaust during World War Two and then being imprisoned in Ravensbruck Concentration Camp. Corrie is humble and honest in describing herself through the very difficult experiences of Ravensbruck in particular. This is yet another book in which we can see how the person grows in their trust and faith, and in the knowledge of God. It is an old book now, but still bears reading in this generation. It is encouraging to read of God at work in adversity and times of great trial, giving us a sure hope.



Between Heaven and Ground Zero Haskin Leslie Publisher: Bloomington: Bethany House Publishers, 2006.

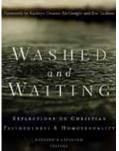


Held Leslie Haskin Publisher: Tyndale House Publishers, 2007.



Kisses from Katie Katie Davis Publisher: Howard Books; Reprint edition (September 4, 2012)

WESLEY HILL



Washed and Waiting Wesley Hill Publisher: Zondervan; Updated and Expanded ed. edition (September 13, 2016)

Two rather different autobiographical accounts are worth including here. Wesley Hill, Washed and Waiting, explains both his experience, and his reasoning and theology, regarding what he terms 'same sex attraction'. A rare honest account of pursuing God and godliness which is all the more helpful because it is bringing together scripture, theology and experience. Then Seeking Allah, Finding Jesus is the testimony of Nabeel Qureshi-how as a devout Muslim he encountered Jesus. Nabeel writes movingly, in detail and depth, about the intense struggles to walk with Jesus whilst loving his parents, family and community. His is rare insight into the challenge of converting from Islam—and the book is beautifully written. Both Wesley and Nabeel enable us to understand a little more of these specific circumstances about which we are often ignorant. They also write in a way that allows us to expect the Lord to be involved in communities that are likely very different to our own.

The subtitles to some of the above titles tell us so much about what the authors received from the Lord through their life experiences, and through walking with Him: -Finding God's Goodness in the Broken and the Beautiful

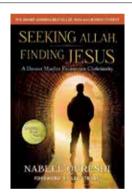
–One Woman's Struggle for Survival and Faith

-To be comforted, to be loved

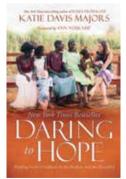
That's what I hope you would gain by reading these and other biographies—faith in God's goodness, love and comfort in your specific circumstances.

Wendy Mann, in her book *Naturally Supernatural*, writes:

'Biographies stir my faith and provoke me to ask God for more... but most of all they remind us of who God is and what He loves to do through normal men and women who choose to say yes to Him.' Such authors as I have referred to would count themselves as 'ordinary' —so I am sure that thousands of other ordinary believers are living an extraordinary life with God. Why not find a biography and see yourself reflected in its pages as you read? I believe you will be encouraged, and your view of God expanded.



Seeking Allah, Finding Jesus Nabeel Qureshi Publisher: Zondervan; 3rd edition (2018)



Daring to Hope Katie Davis Majors Publisher: Multnomah; Reprint edition (October 9, 2018)

MILLENNIAL MUSINGS



Joanna is a psychologist and writer. Her key interests are in the areas of mental health care and sexual trauma.



The Mark of a Christian

Carried to the table each one The limping, the strong, the clean and the filthy—all alike.

Seated by the table each one The rich, the poor, the intellectual and the fool—all alike.

Each one's feet washed and dried The wrecked, the whole, the empty and the full—all alike

Served at the table each one The powerful, the weak, the sinful and the righteous—all alike.

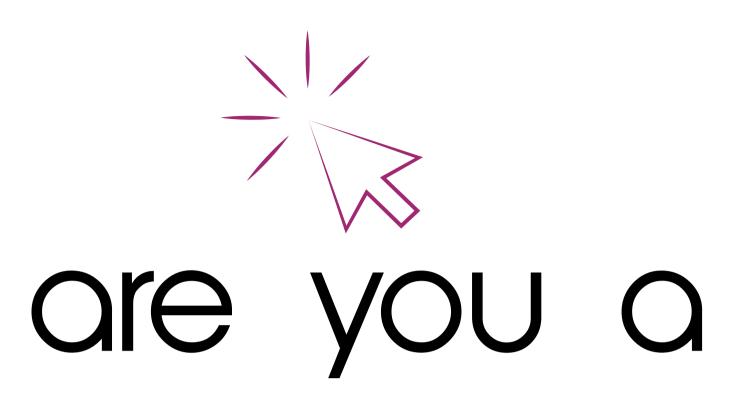
Welcomed each one to the feast of the lamb The judge, the murderer, the faithful and the adulterer—all alike.

Grace granted to each one The first-hour workers, the eleventh-hour workers—all alike.

All alike—men, women, children, every neighbour, every unlikely lot, All at the table deprived yet equally bestowed upon with forgiveness.

The radical call to each one The likely and unlikely both partaking of the same Body. He who receives more at the table ought to give more.

You will be known by what you have received and from which you give— The mark of a Christian is Love.



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TAKE IT **EASY**



YOUR DENOMINATION DOES NOT DEFINE OR DEMARCATE WHO YOU ARE; YOUR BELIEF IN THE TRIUNE GOD DOES!



Stephen Paul is a graduate of SAIACS and is presently coordinating South Asia Study Bible project alongside teaching at Filadelfia Bible College.

his is a tale of three frogs—Tulip, Daisy and Rhema—who live in their own respective wells. Tulip is a Bible-honouring and God-loving Christian. For her, every croak has to be divinely willed and ordered. She takes pleasant pride in her faithfulness to God and in her know-how of Word. God for her is far above, holding the heavens together. Daisy is a happy-go-lucky Christian. She is not too fussy about her Bible but tradition and belief for sure. Her every croak is her song to God. She loves the festivities of her little well and innocently enjoys them all. God for her is here below holding people together to joyfully live their lives. Rhema is a powerful Christian. She is filled with fire for the Lord. Her croak is a unique lingo deciphered by only those from her own well. The fire in her always gives her an edge over her rather staid friends. To her, God is right within holding all faculties of the individual in flaming unison.

One day, the three frogs happened to jump out of their wells only to bump into each other. They were amazed at the possibility of other wells. Life went fairly well till the frogs discovered themselves to be from Christian faith. The girls chose to meet up at the KJV—The King's Juice and Views outlet, proposed by Tulip. For Tulip, if there is ever any food that tastes like manna, it is only at KJV. Daisy suggested that they sit at the east-facing table to eat. Here begins their drama being silently witnessed by an old tortoise, Sophia, sitting on a table right across. "The challenge, in reality, is not denominationalism but the underlying 'self' that chooses to manifest itself in various forms. Denominationalism is but a small expression of it."

Tulip: I never knew there was life beyond my well. I thank God for His sovereign will that enabled me to jump out.

Daisy: Ah! so...soo...sovereign will?! *Almost choked at this verbiage*, she takes a moment to gather herself again. It was your choice to jump out. Why spiritualise your jump?

Rhema: Life can be simple but never powerful without being empowered. You guys probably do not know what it means to actually jump. You must visit my well.

Daisy: Wa...wait! Frogs jump, you see?! That is

TAKE IT **EASY**

us! Why do you girls sound so dogmatic?

Tulip: We ought to be, in the Bible that we believe. I am a Conservative and I love being one!

Daisy: And what do you conserve, if I may ask?

Tulip: The Bible, God, doctrines, faith and...

Daisy: Wa...wai...wait! You safeguard God? I thought only we helpless frogs need that!

Tulip: We are called to contend for the faith which was once delivered to the saints.

Rhema: Hall..lleluj..jjah! Yes, we preserve the gospel. I don't think any of us here intend to corrupt it. Do we? We are all conservatives!

Tulip: No, you are not. You are Pneumacostals.

Daisy: *Having almost choked herself again...* and who am I? The Radicoastal?

Sitting at the table next to these girls, Sophia smiles to herself to see how much discussion can transpire out of a single jump from a well.

Sophia: Hello! Allow me to introduce myself. I am Sophia and I have been listening to your conversation. Can I join you girls as well?

Tulip: Were you eavesdropping?

Sophia: I apologise. You were loud enough not to be unheard!

Daisy: You're free to join us. This is God's sovereign will! Right, Tulip?

Tulip: Huh!

Sophia: So, I presume you all come from various denominations.

Daisy: De..de...denominations, I don't know. But we surely belong to different hells and I don't think we have been able to converge our thoughts so far.

Sophia: I presume you meant wells. Didn't you?

Daisy: Oh! Yes, I'm sorry.

Sophia: So, do you all have a different Jesus for your different wells?

Tulip: Ridiculous! How can we have different Jesus-'es'? Girls, this is why I say we have to contend for our faith!

Sophia: I don't consider myself a false teacher. I merely summarised your thoughts.

Daisy: Please don't mind Tulip's words. She is con...counterproductive I guess... sorry, what is that word, Tulip?

Rhema: Conservative...

Sophia: That's ok. So, whose image and superscription do our wells hold? The one and same Jesus?

Rhema: And the Spirit seals us!

Sophia: You are right. When we all subscribe to a Triune God, why do we yet make Him a piecemeal in our wells?

Daisy: That's a point to consider.

Tulip: You will consider anything since you know nothing of your own well. The very versions of our Bibles don't match; our worship styles, our rhythms, our liturgies...nothing matches! How can our denominations match?

Sophia: Do the various versions of Word and worship declare a different Jesus and a perverted gospel?

Tulip: hmmm...Not really.

Rhema: Amen

Daisy: We usually say that at the end of our service, Rhema. I think Sophia is not yet done!

Sophia: I do understand that we perhaps have our own differences in interpreting certain Scriptures as well. We all have our own different streaks of shades that we love to possess and profess. But there is one streak that none of us denies-the blood of Jesus-do we?

Daisy: Yes, Rev. Frogstor reads that out during the Holy Communion service in my well.

Sophia: I'm sure this scarlet thread binds some foundational values that we all pledge for—the Trinity, the gospel of Christ's death, resurrection and coming and salvation through Christ alone, the Spirit's indwelling work in every believer, the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting. Isn't this the basic rubric of Christian faith?

Daisy: We confess all of these in our creeds back home in my well.

Tulip: From heart, or by-heart?

Sophia: Maybe with heart? If this is what is our heartbeat and our non-negotiables, why then are we at loggerheads over the negotiables? We are various expressions of the same faith that declare Christ. There is a need for this rich symphony to sing out a new song, an anthem of the slain Lamb! Such a voice of harmony is a need of the hour in a land where unity and morality have lost their sanctity.

Rhema: Hallelujah!

Sophia: Honestly, what we need right now is a hosanna!

Tulip: hmm...so who needs to be saved now?

Sophia: Us-you and I! The challenge, in reality, is not denominationalism but the underlying 'self' that chooses to manifest itself in various forms. Denominationalism is but a small expression of it. What once started as a fight for sanctity has now strayed away for reasons of power and possession. If not denominationalism, we'll soon figure out another reason to stay by ourselves so as not to share our thrones! No wonder Christ prayed for our unity! Strangely, the subscribers of denominationalism barely recognise their own tenets. However sacred your cause is, it never hinders you from stretching your sacrificial arms for an embrace with your enemy. How much more for a fellow Christian?

Daisy: Time for benediction?

Tulip: Hold on, Daisy! Sophia is suggesting we sing Bieber as Beethoven for Benediction!

Sophia: *Laughs*...You're looking at the course—to cooperate and coexist—while I'm looking at the source—the cross! Cooperation and coexistence are the fruits of

"My appeal is to reckon to the cross that holds us all together. My call then is for a loving union acknowledging our differences; celebrating our commitments; complementing our expressions."

toleration. My appeal is to reckon to the cross that holds us all together. My call then is for a loving union—acknowledging our differences; celebrating our commitments; complementing our expressions. Tolerance then is no longer our pursuit when love earnestly seeks and serves the differences of others.

Daisy: Your sermon is longer than my Sunday service! Embrace and exit, is that what you mean?

Sophia: *Smiles*...as Volf says, we don't merely embrace others but willingly accept one's otherness that shapes our identity far from threatening it.

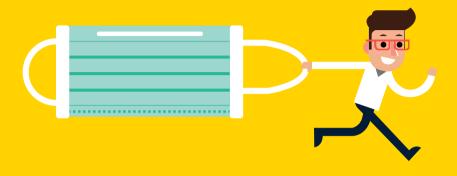
Daisy: *With her eyes rolling all over at this theology...* are you by any chance related to this nerdy Tulip?

Sophia: *With a tone of nostalgia and tears in her eyes,* I am actually related to you, Daisy. I am your godmother who christened you but could never see you again. Thanks to the same jump that brought me to my Saviour and now to you.

Tulip: Hallelujah!

Daisy: Almost falls off her chair at Tulip's expression....Amen!





THE KNOW-IT-ALL CHRISTIAN

DID YOU HEAR ANY CHRISTIAN TALK ABOUT CORONAVIRUS BEFORE ITS APPEARANCE? AND NOW YOU HAVE MANY WHO CLAIM TO KNOW THE WHAT-WHY-WHEN OF THE OUTBREAK, COMPLETE WITH "BIBLICAL" REFERENCES!

eera Nanda begins her book, *Science in Saffron*, with one of the old Rajnigandha advertisements. The commercial reproduces a young Indian man studying in a university somewhere in the West. A professor in mathematics class challenges him, along with other Chinese and European-looking students, to solve a mathematical equation. The other student retorts that solving such a difficult problem could take at least seven hours to three days. Our Indian student, however, is bored and doesn't pay attention to what is going on. Finally, when asked his take on it, our hero takes a spoonful of Rajnigandha pan masala and solves the problem in no time. While the other students cheer him, he humbly says, *"Jawab to hum pehle se hi jaante the, sawal ka intezaar karna hamari tehzib hai*" (we knew the answer all along, but waiting for the question is our culture). Nanda then goes on to argue how this attitude—all that science discovers is already mentioned in our religious books—has become part of many religious narratives that attempt to engage with science.

Though Nanda's targets are those displaying uncritical sympathy to what has come to be known as Vedic Science, the attitude of many Christians prove that the gamut of her argument can be extended to them as well. Take, for instance, the current outbreak of coronavirus. While there have been sincere biblical approaches to engage with it, what has become popular on social platforms such as WhatsApp, Instagram and Facebook is a different story. Some suggest that it is a sign of the wrath of God that certain groups of people



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brought upon the world by not abiding by the dietary restrictions of the Old Testament. Others suggest that it is the "beast", "plague" or the "pestilence" to be brought forth by the rider of the white horse in the book of Revelation that has arrived now to announce the end of the world. Reportedly, some non-Christians have even begun to read the Bible after they heard their Christian friends make these claims!

In this respect, the jingoism of the man in Rajnigandha commercial and our attitude to the Bible run parallel. Both, with their twitchy ears, are waiting for the question. And as soon as it arrives, their fidgety fingers run across the sacred book of culture or the Bible respectively, to find the answer and claim, "Jawab to hum pehle se hi jaante the, sawal ka intezaar karna hamari tehzib hai". This simplistic response saves us from two difficulties: first, we don't have to tell anyone the answer before the question is posed because, or as we would like to put it, it goes against our culture of humility (did you hear any Christian talk about coronavirus before its appearance?); and, second, because it helps us appear intellectual, though in reality it makes us appear dumb (at least to those who, having seen our efforts, are now even more convinced than before about the irrelevancy of the Bible).

But why this twitch? Because, or so we think, the Bible is supposed to have answers to all our questions to qualify as the "true" revelation of God. And by all answers we mean, even coronavirus, and if possible, to foster greater authenticity, the Bible needs to have the exact word etched out in its pages. If we face a question that seems to be outside the purview of the Bible, we feel the trustworthiness and the authority of the Bible is compromised. This leads us to defend it, which in itself is a good motive nonetheless. However, if our attitude of defending the Bible's authority is like that of Rajnigandha's genius, it is tragically wrong.

It is wrong because it thrives on a false pride of knowing all the answers, while being disturbingly ignorant of and detached from the grand godly scheme that undercuts the Bible's very content. This grand scheme concerns who God is, how He relates with humanity in Jesus, and how our relationship with Him changes us, our relationship with others and our world, including our attitude to pandemics like coronavirus. Historically this grand scheme has been summarised in many creeds and endorsed over centuries.

But when the bigger picture is ignored, what follows is easy cherry picking of phrases and concepts that fit our predetermined answers. Theologians call this process eisegesis. Conversely, if we are aware of the macro picture, we may be more informed and, therefore, more modest, earnest and genuine in looking for the micro answers. The attitude then is not so much about giving all the answers because we know them already, but about knowing the design, the framework that can place us in a better position to seek answers to the questions that encounter us. This means that when pestilence strikes us, we don't flip through the pages of the Bible to be blissfully assured that since such a pestilence was mentioned word for word in the Bible, it has to be divinely inspired, but to remind us that "even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me". It is to remind us that God has stood true to His character through all episodes of pestilence, and since this is so, we can face such pestilences without fear and with trust in Him.

In a sense, then, we are, after all, like Rajnigandha's genius—we know all the answers. But unlike him, we know them indirectly—we may not know each answer word for word, but we know a framework that is capable of answering these questions meaningfully. As we grapple with new questions of our times, we can be certainly assured that this framework that has stood the test of time will once again come to our aid in finding answers, in the right direction and with the right attitude.

> "... We think the Bible is supposed to have answers to all our questions to qualify as the "true" revelation of God... If we face a question that seems to be outside the purview of the Bible, we feel the trustworthiness and the authority of the Bible is compromised. This leads us to defend it..."

LEAVING NOTE



CORONAVIRUS AND PSALM 91

AS SCIENCE AND RELIGIONS OF THE WORLD GRAPPLE WITH AN UNUSUAL SITUATION THE CORONAVIRUS HAS THROWN US ALL INTO, WHAT SHOULD BE A CHRISTIAN RESPONSE TO THIS GLOBAL PANDEMIC?



Ajith Fernando is the former National Director at Youth for Christ, Sri Lanka. He has authored several books including Jesus-Driven Ministry, The Supremacy of Christ and Acts: The NIV Application Commentary.

any people are asking today about whether we can quote Psalm 91 to assure ourselves that we will be freed from the coronavirus. Let's look at this issue scripturally.

In the Bible there are promises, principles and commands that are generally true, but which have exceptions. The general commands to obey parents "in everything" (Col 3:20) and to be subject to government officials (Rom 13:1-2) have exceptions in the Bible (Luke 14:26; Acts 4:19–20). We sometimes need to disobey their commands if they clearly go against God's will. Similarly, the Bible is clear that God looks after us, as Psalm 91 says. He can miraculously intervene and does intervene to deliver us. Indeed, he commands his angels to guard us (Psa 91:11). That is always true. He can prevent us from dashing our foot against a stone (91:12). That is not always true, as the noble army of martyrs testify. One-third of the same book of Psalms are laments where righteous people suffer what the world considers as misfortunes and God doesn't seem to be helping them. Psalm 91 teaches that God looks after us. That is an absolute principle. Other passages in the Bible show us that the way God looks after us is not always as is specifically stated in Psalm 91. There may be exceptions to this general rule. But through all of it God is continuing to bless us.

At present I'm reading Job for my devotions. God's plan was to glorify His name through Job going through experiences very distant to what Psalm 91 says. Job's friends who quoted biblical principles regarding how God looks after the righteous are finally proven to be wrong and even unkind. Their speeches were very inspiring in the Psalm 91 tradition. But they were wrong in applying those principles to the suffering that Job was experiencing.

Romans 8 looks at this issue theologically. The whole creation is subjected to frustration (8:20). There is sickness, disappointment, pain, and death. That frustration includes us "who have the first fruits of the Spirit" (8:23). That is, we have a taste of what heaven is like here and now. But we groan (8:23) with the rest of creation (8:22). Through that groaning with the rest of creation, like Jesus, we develop deep ties with the world and have a deep impact on it. Our lifestyle is one of incarnation. When we talk of incarnation, we mean that Jesus took on human flesh with all the frustration that entails. We can have a deep impact on the world by identifying with its pain, just like Jesus did. In a mysterious way suffering helps the church to grow like the death of Stephen showed. ⇒

"WE CAN HAVE A DEEP IMPACT ON THE WORLD BY IDENTIFYING WITH ITS PAIN, JUST LIKE JESUS DID. IN A MYSTERIOUS WAY SUFFERING HELPS THE CHURCH TO GROW LIKE THE DEATH OF STEPHEN SHOWED."

LEAVING NOTE

"YES, WE'RE NOT IMMUNE TO PROBLEMS, BUT GOD'S LOVE IS DEEPER THAN ALL OF THAT AND NOTHING CAN SEPARATE US FROM HIS LOVE."

When the tsunami hit Sri Lanka, some Christians were miraculously saved and testified about it to the glory of God. Others suffered, like the church in Mullaitivu, where the faithful who came to church the morning after Christmas died and those who stayed at home were saved. The pastor of that church lost his wife and, I think, his son. But he stayed on and served his people and now his two daughters have entered the university—a great achievement in Sri Lanka. He brought glory to God through his suffering.

There are some deeper and more important realities that govern us amidst our frustration and pain.

- The Holy Spirit groans with us as we groan (8:26). Not only is it acceptable for Christians to groan; when they do, God groans with them. And that verse says that he helps us amid our weakness. We experience the nearness of God in a deep way.
- God turns everything we experience into good (8:28), making us more than conquerors in all things (8:37). While we mourn and identify with Christians who suffer we don't need to have pity then because we know that out of that suffering God is working out something beautiful.
- Yes, we're not immune to problems, but God's love is deeper than all of that and nothing can separate us from His love 8:35, 38, 39.

 People relishing the experience of loving and being loved are happy people. So like Paul wrote, while he was in prison, we rejoice in the Lord always (Phil 4:4), and we have learned to be content whatever happens. (Phil 4:11)

The happiest people in the world are not those who don't have problems; it is those who are not afraid of problems. As Paul said, again from prison, the greatest wealth we can have is contentment (1 Tim 6:6). A dreary prison is not a place which implies God's blessing. But Paul was blessed, he was rich!

Amid all the confusion of this time, let's relish the wealth of contentment.



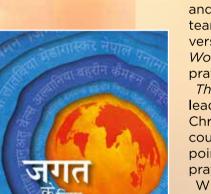
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