

THE ORDINARY CHRISTIAN EXPERIENCE

By

James Thomas Reuteler, Ph.D.

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PREFACE

This is a book about the ordinary Christian experience. By ordinary I mean the experience of common people who simply open their eyes to see the presence of God in ordinary life. Susan Gregg-Schroeder in, *Your Gentle Touch*, says in a few words what I attempt to explain in the pages that follow:

When a person believes in God,
Ordinary everyday life
 is full of miracles.
Our senses awaken to the presence of God in
 ...the song of a goldfinch
 ...the warmth of a fire
 ...the sweet aroma of blossoms.
The common is transformed as
 obstacles become opportunity
 despair becomes hope
 old becomes new.
Everyday becomes an Easter.
Everyday...a Christmas.

For many years I was blind to the above experience. When I finally did have a religious experience, it was dramatic, extraordinary, and deeply emotional. I can name the date and the hour. At the time I thought such experiences should be the norm for every Christian, but I have concluded after many years that the ordinary experience is superior. It can be compared to sight. We might not be able to name the time when we first began to see, but we know whether or not we have sight. Seeing God in ordinary life is not quite as simple as seeing the world around us, but it can be done. I am grateful to a friend who opened my eyes to the presence of God in the ordinary.

INTRODUCTION

The Spiritual Senses

God has to begin with individuals; even though we, as individuals, have been influenced by the society in which we live. If we are going to understand how an ordinary Christian experience operates, we must understand something of how God communicates with us. God can only speak to us through those “eyes” and “ears” he has created in us, mainly the mind, feelings, and conscience of the individual. Although any one or all of these can be distorted, these are God’s means of speaking to us and making himself known. His Spirit touches us through our mind, our feelings, and our conscience, or it does not touch us at all. God has no other entry point into human experience. These are the only “eyes” and “ears” we have with which to perceive his presence and hear his voice.

Mind, feelings, and conscience are very easily distorted. If we place too much importance on the mind, we tend to equate “correct beliefs” with the Christian experience. If we place too much importance on feelings, we tend to equate “correct feelings” with the Christian experience. If we place too much importance on conscience, we tend to equate “correct behavior” with the Christian experience. It should be made clear that we can have a good moral life without being aware of God at all. Our feelings may confirm our Christian experience, but they are not the experience itself. As important as our mind is we cannot make ourselves believe in God. God has to speak to us in some way. Only after he has done that through our mind, our feelings, and our conscience, can we begin to talk about correct beliefs, correct feelings, and correct behavior. Christian experience has to do with thinking and feeling and doing, but they all make up the second step. Insofar as our psychological makeup is concerned, however, there is nothing unique or miraculous about our Christian experience. It is made up of the common

components of physical and psychological life and it conforms to all of its general laws; in other words, Christian experience is quite ordinary.

I have separated mind, feelings, and conscience for the sake of trying to explain how God ordinarily communicates with us; but in fact, these three things are inseparable and interrelated. If any of the three is primary, it is the mind. John Powell, for example, suggests that, “our perceptions cause our emotions and affect our behavior.” When we have a Christian experience, all three of these are transformed. Powell suggests that they are transformed by a new vision, as if to say that our mind begins the process of conversion, which then has an effect on our emotions and our behavior.¹

While we may indeed be seeking such a vision, God is also trying very hard to give us one. As Christians we believe that his communication comes primarily through Jesus Christ. “From almost the beginning,” wrote Albert Knudson, “it was realized that in Jesus’ life and work there was operative not only a human quest after God but a divine quest after man. Of the two the latter was far the more important.”² He is the one who gives us the vision that changes our way of thinking, feeling, and behaving; and all of these things make up our ordinary Christian experience. “This generation,” writes W. D. Weatherford, “needs to see that religious experience is not some vague, dreamy experience, but a genuine form of life, found in living friendship with God.”³ As Christians we believe that it is Jesus Christ who leads us into this intimate friendship with God, which I choose to call the ordinary Christian experience.

The Practical Application

To the church of God...to those who are sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints, together with all those who in every place call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, both their Lord and ours: Grace to you

and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. 1 Corinthians 1:2-3

The two primary purposes of the church are to help people experience the presence of God in their lives and to make reconciliation between persons possible. Every church needs a group in which these two tasks are being carried out. The Parable of Jesus that best describes what I am talking about is the Parable of the Loving Father or what we have commonly referred to as the Parable of the Prodigal Son. The main theme of this Parable is that of reconciliation not only between the prodigal and his father but also between the prodigal and his elder brother. The prodigal son is portrayed as a sinner who has repented and come home, and the elder son is portrayed as a saint who has never left the Father's house. The intent of the parable is to get the religious people (the saints) and the prodigals (the sinners) to be reconciled. Sinners must see the possibility of sainthood in themselves and the saints must recognize the sinners in themselves. This is what Jesus was trying to do with this Parable. He wanted the Scribes and Pharisees to be more accepting of the sinners and outcasts in society. These religious people had a difficult time seeing themselves as sinners and the sinners had a difficult time seeing in themselves the possibility of sainthood. The elder son, even though he never left his father's house, was just as far away from his father as was the prodigal son, who left home for the far country. We all need to recognize ourselves as sinners, and our calling to become saints, but we must be careful not to identify ourselves as *only* one or the other. "Those who think they are (only) saints," wrote Henri J.M. Nouwen, "are demons." On the other hand, those who see themselves only as sinners will never be able to overcome their crushing burdens of guilt and experience freedom in Christ. We need to come to the awareness that saints are also sinners. When the saints, wrote C.S. Lewis, "say that they—even they—are vile, they are recording truth with scientific accuracy." Saints are nothing but sinners who have experienced the loving presence of God

in such a way that their lives have taken on a new direction as a result. Only as we begin to understand saints and sinners in the above sense can the alienation between prodigals and their elder brothers and sisters be overcome and replaced with reconciliation.

It is my belief that the closer we come to experiencing God's presence, the more deeply we will feel the weight of our own sin, but also God's forgiveness. The farther away from God we stray, the more we will rationalize our condition and say, "We really aren't so bad." This means that it is the person who has not experienced God's presence who can swear and use abusive language without any pangs of conscience, and that it is the person who has truly experienced God's presence who finds it difficult to use God's name except with the utmost reverence. Perhaps this was the reason why the Jews could not even say his name, but had to use a substitute word instead. My purpose then in writing these chapters on the ordinary experience of God is to enable all of us—saints and sinners alike—to come to the burning bush and stand with awe and reverence before the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. When Moses experienced the presence of God, he hid his face, for he was afraid even to look at God.⁴ The Psalmist has given us a little more encouragement when he said in Psalm 34:8 (NRSV), "O taste and see that the LORD is good..." Jesus has made God even more personal for us, and so there is no reason to fear an experience with him. It is okay to call him by the personal name, Father. According to Romans 8:15 (NRSV), it is by the Spirit's power that we cry out to God, "Abba! Father!" Paul continues in Romans 8:16 (NRSV), saying: "it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God..." It is his Spirit that makes our experience of his presence real. Let us anticipate with joy the experience of his presence, but let us also realize that there will be as many kinds of religious experiences as there are persons who have them.

It is because of the variety of religious experiences that something must be said about the differences between a gradual experience of God's presence and a sudden, dramatic one. Persons having a sudden and dramatic Christian experience tend to view gradual experiences as less than valid. The difference between the two kinds of experiences can be explained by how we respond to Jesus' knock on the door of our mind and heart. In Revelation 3:20, Jesus says: "Listen! I am standing at the door, knocking; if you hear my voice and open the door, I will come in to you and eat with you, and you with me." The person who throws the door open quickly will experience the presence of God in a dramatic and vivid manner; while the person who inches the door open slowly over a long period of time will have a very different experience. The former will be dramatic and the latter gradual. There is also the case where one's parents begin the process of edging the door open so that although we know the presence of God in our lives, we cannot remember the time when we began to take over on our own. This is because someone else began a process, which we continued without being consciously aware of it. What is important is not how quickly the door was opened, or even whether our parents began the process for us; rather, what is important is whether or not the door is open fully and we are indeed experiencing the presence of God in the fullest possible sense. We do not want partial or one-sided experiences of his presence. It is for this reason that I have attempted to say something about the several ways in which we can experience God's presence. I want us to be able to experience as much of his presence as possible and not to become satisfied with incomplete experiences.

Methods of Christian Experience

The chapters that follow represent my own attempt to define the various ways in which we can experience God's presence in our lives. These may or may not have meaning to everyone who reads them. They should not be thought of as

being comprehensive nor should they be considered as the final word on the subject of the ordinary Christian experience. They are intended to serve as the basis for a discussion within a small discipleship group. I am convinced that Christian experience and discipleship are the primary responsibilities of the church, and so there needs to be regular discipleship groups in the church dealing with the various ways we experience the presence of God and put that experience into practice. I would perceive such groups proceeding as follows:

1. Ask God to be present in the discussion.
2. Allow groups members to respond intellectually to the material they have read.
3. Encourage group members to share honestly their feelings.
4. Have group members make a list of as many details or steps into a positive experience of God as possible.
5. Ask God to help groups members become more consciously aware of his presence and will for their lives.

My greatest ambition for any group discussing these fourteen chapters on the ordinary Christian experience is that the members of the group might come to a continual awareness of God's presence in their lives and that their Christian experiences might be vivid and complete. When that happens, Christian discipleship will be the inevitable result.

1. GOD

“The Source of the Ordinary Christian Experience”

My purpose is to make Christian experience so clear that everyone can have one and know that they have had it. I must begin by clarifying why I have decided to call it Christian Experience and show how that differs from Religious Experience.

Religious and Christian Experiences

Religious and Christian experiences are not unrelated, but neither are they the same thing. The Christian experience is a religious experience, but not all religious experiences are Christian. Adherents of other religions have religious experiences, but other persons than Jesus inform them. As Christians we believe that we experience God as he has revealed himself in Jesus Christ. In this historical person, God came among us to show us what he is like and what he wants us to do. Becoming conscious of his presence, nature, and will is a religious experience; when it has been informed by Jesus Christ it is a Christian experience. Adherents of other religions may also become conscious of the presence, nature, and will of God; and their experiences may be valid, but they cannot be called Christian unless Jesus Christ informs them.

There will be differences between religious and Christian experiences, but there will also be similarities. The similarities point us to the fact that there is only one God who created us all. The differences make us aware of our human frailty and our inability to comprehend whom he is and what he is trying to say to us; nevertheless, all of us may have religious and Christian experiences. We may know something of God.

All of us believe in a god or God. For some of us our god is an idol; for others, he is the Lord. We have a religious

experience when we become conscious or aware of what or who our God is. A Christian experience is one in which we become aware of the God who revealed himself to us in or through Jesus Christ.

Normal and Abnormal Experiences

Becoming conscious of our God can come slowly or it can come dramatically. My own experience was dramatic. This is how I would describe it:

On the night of September 1, 1958, I went to Church with a friend. He asked me on the way home if I were a Christian. I did not know what he was talking about, but his warm friendship and life-style had already won me over. I said, "No, but I would like to be one." We returned to the Church that night about midnight. The preacher of the evening was still there. My friend told him of my desire, and he laid his hands on my head and prayed for me. I did not feel any fireworks, but I did feel my heart strangely warmed. I walked away from there that night a new person. God's presence became a conscious reality to me from that moment to this. No matter what I am doing, I am aware of God's presence. As I got behind the wheel of my car and reached for a cigarette, I found myself throwing the whole pack out of the window. I no longer needed them. Without being told to, I gave up drinking, although, I continued to relate to those who did. Some other kind of Spirit got hold of me that night. I was intoxicated, but had no hangover the next morning. What Paul said in 2 Corinthians 5:17 (NRSV) was true for me: "So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!" As I looked at the moon and the stars that night they seemed different, but it was me that was different. I was seeing them with new eyes. A spark had ignited my heart that grew into a flame and compelled me to seek

fulfillment in the mission of Christ through the Church, his body.

The experience above informed my understanding of both religious and Christian experience for more than thirty years. In college I read William James' classic, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, and I was very much impressed by many of the examples quoted in his book. I could identify with many of them. One of my favorites was the Christian experience of a Mr. S. H. Hadly, whose experience I would like to share, mainly because it was so similar to my own.

...with a breaking heart, I said, "Dear Jesus, can you help me?" Never with mortal tongue can I describe that moment. Although up to that moment my soul had been filled with indescribable gloom, I felt the glorious brightness of the noonday sun shine into my heart. I felt I was a free man. Oh, the precious feeling of safety, of freedom, of resting on Jesus! I felt that Christ with all his brightness and power had come into my life; that, indeed, old things had passed away and all things had become new. From that moment till now I have never wanted a drink of whiskey, and I have never seen money enough to make me take one. I promised God that night that if he would take away the appetite for strong drink, I would work for him all my life. He has done his part, and I have been trying to do mine.⁵

Since this was my first conscious religious or Christian experience, I came to believe that this was normal and that everyone's experience ought to be like it. I did not mean that all Christian experiences had to be carbon copies of mine, but I did believe that all Christian experiences had to be dramatic and vivid like mine. I thought this way for a long time.

Recently I read something that challenged my understanding of Christian experience. George Morris, in his book, *The Mystery and Meaning of Christian Conversion*,

criticizes William James' study of religious experience. He points out that James only dealt with abnormal experiences and did not deal with normal ones. He tended to deal with persons who had dramatic experiences, and for that reason, his work can be considered detrimental instead of helpful.⁶ In the earlier pages of his book Morris describes his own experience which, like mine, was dramatic and therefore of the abnormal type. The problem with having too many persons around who have had these abnormal experiences is that they divert our attention away from the normal experiences. These normal experiences are the ones that need to be lifted up. When we place too much emphasis on the abnormal experiences we confuse people and make Christian experience impossible for many. On the other hand, all of us can have normal Christian experiences, even those who have had only abnormal ones in the past. The latter are by far the ones who are at the greatest disadvantage. Precisely because they have had abnormal experiences, it will be much more difficult for them to become aware of God in normal ways. It is God's intention that we experience him normally. That some of us have to experience him in an abnormal manner is due to our fallen nature and our rebellious spirit.

Images for the Christian Experience

While I basically agree with George Morris' insights, I would like to change the terminology from abnormal and normal to dramatic and ordinary Christian experiences. Dramatic Christian experiences generally come to those of us who rebel against God; but they may also come to those of us who have grown up in the Church, who for some reason or another, have been blinded to the ordinary ways of experiencing God's presence. Lacking the Christian experience such persons think of being Christian as belonging to the institutional Church or being guided by the moral teachings of Jesus. Our rebellious or apathetic attitude is what determines whether our experience will be dramatic or ordinary. George Morris tries to explain why and how the

dramatic experience happens by comparing it to the opening up of the old-fashioned, green, roller-type window shades. This is the first of three images for the Christian experience that I would like to use to better clarify how we have Christian experiences and why some of them are dramatic and others ordinary.

Imagine yourself in a room that is darkened because these shades are drawn. How do you get light into the room? You can stumble clumsily in the darkness until you grasp the bottom of the shade, give it a radical yank, and let it go. The shade goes up in a flash, and a penetrating, almost blinding light suddenly floods the room. Or you can make your way through the darkness more carefully and deliberately until you have found the window, grasp the bottom of the shade, give it a gentle tug, hold on to it, and the shade goes up slowly as light gradually fills the room. Now the fundamental thing is not the speed of the shade but the fact that light floods the room!⁷

Another image that means a great deal to me is that of the door. In Revelation 3:20 (NRSV), Jesus says, "Listen! I am standing at the door, knocking; if you hear my voice and open the door, I will come in to you and eat with you, and you with me." We can respond to that knock in several ways. We can open the door so slowly that we hardly know when the Spirit of God enters, or we can open the door intentionally and be very much aware of his entering. There is also a third way, which I would consider dramatic, and that is to fling the door open in a flash. This latter method is like yanking the window shade and letting it fly upwards allowing the blinding light to enter the room all at once. In one case the room is filled with a blinding light, and in the other, it is filled with the rushing of the Spirit. We cannot deny the presence of the light and the Spirit, but these are dramatic and unusual experiences. We might also say that opening the shade and the door so slowly that we do not know that light

and Spirit are entering are also unusual, even though they are not dramatic. For a religious or Christian experience to be genuine, we must become aware of and conscious of God's presence. The ordinary Christian experience is to roll up the shade and open the door in a manner that we can see the light and feel the Spirit. This ordinary experience is what I hope to clarify.

There is one more image that must be a part of both the ordinary and the dramatic Christian experiences. George Macdonald suggests that image in his "Parable of the House."

Imagine yourself as a living house. God comes in to rebuild that house. At first, perhaps, you can understand what He is doing. He is getting the drains right and stopping the leaks in the roof and so on: you knew that those jobs needed doing and so you are not surprised. But presently he starts knocking the house about in a way that hurts abominably and does not seem to make sense. What on earth is He up to? The explanation is that He is building quite a different house from the one you thought of—throwing out a new wing here, putting on an extra floor there, running up towers, making courtyards. You thought you were going to be made into a decent little cottage: but He is building a palace. He intends to come live in it Himself.⁸

We are to open the shade and let in the light of Christ. We are also to open the door and let in the Spirit of Christ. Christian experience, however, does not end with these two events. It only begins. Once these two things have occurred, everything begins to change inside of us. We may have been satisfied to provide a nice little cottage for God, but he wants to make us into a palace, for he wants to live in us. We are to become, to use the Apostle Paul's words, "the temple of the living God." (1 Corinthians 3:16 and 2 Corinthians 6:16 NRSV)

It would be a mistake to think that God is only interested in living in or rebuilding the life of the individual. The primary message of Jesus, according to Mark 1:15, is the “Kingdom of God.” God does indeed want to rebuild individual lives, but he also wants to transform society in preparation for the final establishment of his rule as Creator and King. “There is no alternative,” insists Jürgen Moltmann, “...between interior conversion and improvement of social and political conditions. There is no alternative...between the vertical dimension of faith and the horizontal dimension of love.”⁹ God wants to rebuild both the individual and the society, and Christian experience affects both at the same time. He is not only rebuilding cottages into palaces, he is also transforming whole communities and nations. At least that is what he wants to do, and so that must be the focus of both ordinary and dramatic Christian experiences.

2. NATURE

“The Environment of the Ordinary Christian Experience”

“How clearly the sky reveals God’s glory!” cries the Psalmist, “How plainly it shows what he has done!” (Psalm 19:1 TEV) What he has done—the creation of our world—is to provide us with an environment in which to live. This environment also provides us with a means of perceiving his presence. God can be experienced in the beauty of nature, whether by observing a beautiful sunset or sunrise, the seashore or the majesty of the stars in the sky. The beauty found in the natural world caused Abraham Lincoln to say at the age of 19:

I never behold the stars that I don’t feel that I am looking into the face of God. I can see how it might be possible for a man to look down upon the earth and be an atheist, but I cannot conceive how he could look up into the heavens and say there is no God.¹⁰

Not everyone sees the face of God in the stars. Some of us feel like Pascal when he said, “The eternal silence of these infinite spaces alarms me.”¹¹ Others only see space as an extension of human effort. William Hamilton illustrates this from a personal experience in which he took his son out to experience the magnitude of God’s creation. It was the kind of thing his father had done with him on a summer’s evening many years before. As the two of them stood staring at the stars, before Hamilton could say anything to his son, the boy asked, “Which one did we make dad?”¹² We look at nature with different eyes. Some of us see God, some see nothing, and others see themselves.

Any one of us can see God through nature, but we must know what we are looking for. Elizabeth Barrett Browning pointed to the problem when she wrote:

Earth's crammed with heaven
And every common bush afire with God.
But only those who see take off their shoes,
The rest sit round and pluck blackberries.¹³

Those of us who see God in every common bush look beyond the bush and see the Creator, but some of us look beyond the bush and see either nothing or the dark side of nature.

The Dark Side of Nature

There are some difficulties with nature, and it would be dishonest to ignore them. We must admit that the revelation of God in nature is very diffused, indirect, and sometimes downright confusing. Tennessee Williams illustrates this in one of his plays in which a young man is watching thousands of baby sea turtles hatch on the beach in the warm sun. Suddenly from out of nowhere come huge black birds with razor-sharp beaks and claws. They swoop down and tear apart the baby turtles, mutilating and killing them until the sand and water are red with blood. The young man in the play turns to his friend and says, "I have just seen God."¹⁴ Many of us find this very difficult to understand. The same natural order, which contains the presence of God in sunrises and sunsets, in the beauties of the seashore, and in the starry skies above also contains "nature red in tooth and claw." When we look at this side of nature we are likely to have grave doubts about God. These doubts are no different from the doubts many people have over severe suffering, which is frequently caused by natural disorder. One of the most well known examples of such doubting can be found in the story of Job who suffered total disaster. He lost all of his children and property and was afflicted with a repulsive disease. Job's suffering was a mixture of human wickedness (the Sabeans and Chaldeans) and natural disaster (the fire and wind). Then there were his loathsome sores. No real answer was ever given to him as to why he was plagued with so much suffering, but Job finally perceived the presence of God through it all. Out of a storm or whirlwind Job heard God

speaking to him. He was not answering Job's questions, but asking him questions. Here is what he said in Job 38:2-7 (TEV):

Who are you to question my
wisdom
with your ignorant, empty
words?
Stand up now like a man
and answer the questions I
ask you.
Were you there when I made
the world?
If you know so much, tell me
about it.
Who decided how large it
would be?
Who stretched the
measuring line over it?
Do you know all the
answers?
What holds up the pillars that
support the earth?
Who laid the cornerstone of
the world?
In the dawn of that day the
stars sang together
and the heavenly beings
shouted for joy.

After hearing God speak through the dark side of nature, the storm, Job's whole attitude changed. In Job 42:3b-6 (TEV), he cried:

I talked about things I did not
understand.
about marvels too great for
me to know.

You told me to listen while
you spoke
and to try to answer your
questions
Then I knew only what others
had told me,
but now I have seen you
with my own eyes.
So I am ashamed of all I have
said
and repent in dust and
ashes.

The Second Dimension of Nature

Nature does not only include sunsets, seashores, and starry skies. It includes all of God's creation, including humanity. This might be called the second dimension of nature. Experiencing the natural order automatically causes us to focus attention on ourselves, as we see from the experience of the Psalmist, who writes the following in Psalm 8:3-5 (TEV):

When I look at the sky, which
you have made,
at the moon and the stars,
which you set in their
places—
what is man, that you think of
him;
mere man, that you care for
him?
Yet you made him inferior only
to yourself;
you crowned him with glory
and honor.

God can be experienced both as we appreciate the beauties of God's natural order and as we look to the center

of our own being. We too are a part of nature and God's creation. We become aware of his presence, as we look beyond ourselves, but also as we look inward. God makes his presence known in every burning bush, but he also makes his presence known in every burning heart.

The presence of God can be experienced both as we appreciate the beauties of God's natural order and as we look to the center of our own being. God makes his presence known in the world around us, but also deep within us. Therefore, when it comes to religious experience, we are without excuse, for it is available to everyone. "Ever since the creation of the world," warns Paul in Romans 1:20 (NRSV), "his eternal power and divine nature, invisible though they are, have been understood and seen through the things he has made." The experience of his presence is available to us all through nature, in both of its dimensions, which includes the inanimate world and all living things, of which we are an intimate part.

Two Dangerous Responses

Even though some of us have difficulty, experiencing God through nature, nature is one valid way that God reveals himself to us. "What nature does," writes Edward Bauman, "is to make me aware of the creative power of God at the 'center' of all things and this evokes the power of God that is already within me."¹⁵

A twofold danger exists. The first danger is that we frequently conclude that all we need to experience God is nature. In this case we become "nature worshipers." We only look for God in seashores, sunsets, perhaps in living beings; and sometimes, we rationalize that God can be experienced better on the golf course or on a walk through the woods than in the midst of the Christian community. While nature is a valid and important way of experiencing the presence of God, we need more than nature. In the Book of Romans, Paul discusses nature as a revelation from God in only a few

verses, but then he goes on to write about Jesus Christ in the rest of the Book. Nature is but one way to experience God, and it must always be understood as a preparation for something greater. Nature is incomplete and indistinct. It needs to be clarified with a purer revelation, and Jesus Christ makes this clarification for us. In him we see the fullness of God's presence. While nature reveals the "hands" of God, Jesus Christ reveals the "heart" of God.¹⁶

This leads us into the second danger and that is the tendency on the part of some to disregard nature altogether. They get so caught up in experiencing God through Jesus Christ that they do not see any need for experiencing him through nature at all. Both of these dangers need to be avoided. Nature cannot be disregarded because we are an integral part of it. Nature is our starting point for experiencing the presence of God, but it cannot become an end in itself. It is not God and it is not to be worshiped. Nature only points to the Creator, whom we then begin to experience through his creative work.

Just as we meet artists in their paintings, writers in their books, we also meet God in his creation, in all the things he has made, but especially in the persons he has made. "The world is God's work," says Jürgen Moltmann, "but man is God's image." "Only the human person was destined to be God's image. God is more visible in his image than in his works."¹⁷ While the knowledge of God in his image is surer than the knowledge of God in his works, there are problems with both. Nature and Jesus Christ work together to restore the image of God in human personality. "From this gracious hand of God," says Moltmann, "faith moves to the open heart of God...."¹⁸ Jesus is our window into God's heart. In restoring the image of God to us, he enables us to see every bush aflame with the divine fire. Leslie Weatherhead, in his book, *The Transforming Friendship*, has captured what happens in this new relationship as we view the world around us.

Heaven above is softer blue,
Earth around is sweeter green:
Something lives in every hue,
Christless eyes have never seen:

Birds with gladder songs o'erflow,
Flowers with deeper beauties shine,
Since I know as now I know,
I am His and He is mine.¹⁹

3. HISTORY

*“The Workshop and Handbook
of the Ordinary Christian Experience”*

The same God we experience in nature is also experienced in history. He who is the Creator and Sustainer of life also acts through the *events* of our past, present, and future. He reveals himself and works out his purpose in these events. “As the centuries go by,” wrote Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, “it seems that a comprehensive plan is indeed being slowly carried out around us.”²⁰ God is at work in our personal and national histories. When our lives and national purposes flow with his will, we find blessings (happiness in terms of purpose, meaning, and wholeness); but when our lives and national purposes flow against his will, we experience judgment (chaos, destruction, and war). When nations do not take God’s way, suggests E. Stanley Jones, “their toil ends in smoke.”²¹ God is at work in our history, sometimes in a positive sense and at other times in a negative sense.

History as God’s Workshop and Our Handbook

Because God is at work in historical events, we experience his presence in those events. History is his workshop, and the record of it is our handbook. This is a very significant claim. “It means that to know God and be known of him,” as Robert McAfee Brown puts it, “you do not need to go into permanent seclusion. God is right where you are, in your situation—not somewhere else....”²² God was experienced in the events of the past, he can also be experienced in the events of the present, and he will be experienced in the events of the future. We study the past to be led into the living presence of God, who alone can enable us to experience wholeness of life. Because we have seen evidence of God’s presence in the past, we will be guided into a living experience in the present. History is therefore a

handbook in which we discover how God has worked in the lives of others, both individually and corporately; and as such, history becomes our guide for the present and the future.

We cannot successfully navigate the future unless we keep beside it a clear image of the past. We need to move forward, but not without the backward glance. It is like driving forward with an occasional glance in the rearview mirror. “History,” says Kosuke Koyama, “is the story of the past living in the present, influencing our lives today.”²³ It is also a race between understanding that past—so that we can safely navigate the path into the future—and the avoidance of catastrophe. “Those who refuse to learn the lessons of history,” said the American poet and philosopher George Santayana, “are condemned to repeat its mistakes.”²⁴ Therefore we must learn how to read the handbook of history so that we can cooperate with God in his workshop.

History as God’s Blessing and Judgment

God’s presence in history is therefore experienced both in terms of blessings and judgment. It all depends upon whether our lives and the purposes of our national life are in accord with God’s will for his created world. When such is the case, God’s presence is experienced in terms of blessings; but when we stand in conflict with God’s will, then we experience his presence as judgment. This twofold experience of God’s presence in history underlies the story of the Exodus described in Deuteronomy 4:32-40 (NRSV).

For ask now about former ages, long before your own, ever since the day that God created human beings on the earth; ask from one end of heaven to the other: has anything so great as this ever happened or has its like ever been heard of? Has any people ever heard the voice of a god speaking out of a fire, as you have heard, and lived? Or has any god ever attempted to go and take a nation for himself from the midst of

another nation, by trials, by signs and wonders, by war, by a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, and by terrifying displays of power, as the LORD your God did for you in Egypt before your very eyes? To you it was shown so that you would acknowledge that the LORD is God; there is no other besides him. From heaven he made you hear his voice to discipline you. On earth he showed you his great fire, while you heard his words coming out of the fire. And because he loved your ancestors, he chose their descendants after them. He brought you out of Egypt with his own presence, by his great power, driving out before you nations greater and mightier than yourselves, to bring you in, giving you their land for a possession, as it is still today. So acknowledge today and take to heart that the LORD is God in heaven above and on the earth beneath; there is no other. Keep his statutes and his commandments, which I am commanding you today for your own well-being and that of your descendants after you, so that you may long remain in the land that the LORD your God is giving you for all time.

To follow this God means blessings in terms of liberation, wholeness, and meaning; but to go against him means chaos, disorder, and judgment. The Israelites experienced God's blessings in their liberation from Egypt; but at the very same time, the Egyptians experienced his judgment.

Blessings and judgment however are not so neatly separated. Even the righteous experience judgment when their nation does not conform to God's will and purpose. An example of how this works is given in Julia Ward Howe's "Battle Hymn of the Republic." This hymn is primarily about the presence of God's righteous judgment in an unfortunate civil war.

Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord;
He is trampling out the vintage where the grapes of wrath

are stored;
He hath loosed the fateful lightning of his terrible swift
sword;
His truth is marching on.

I have seen him in the watchfires of a hundred circling
camps;
They have builded him an altar in the evening dews and
damps;
I can read his righteous sentence by the dim and flaring
lamps;
His day is marching on.

God's judgment is experienced wherever justice is lacking. We do live in a moral universe. There cannot be peace without justice.

The experience of Abraham Lincoln in dealing with national issues instructs us on the importance of justice within the context of a desire for peace and order. Facing civil conflict within the nation, Lincoln declared that his primary purpose was to save the union, and he was prepared to save it "half slave and half free." It soon became evident; however, that the union could only be saved by abolishing slavery. Reinhold Niebuhr pointed out that while order necessarily preceded the nation's strategy for justice, only an order which, actively sought justice could actually achieve any kind of stable peace. "An unjust order quickly invites the resentment and rebellion which lead to its undoing."²⁵ Hence the only path to peace is through justice.

Whenever we attempt to build a world without conforming to God's will and purposes, we face disorder, chaos, and destruction. We experience judgment from a God whose purposes for his created world are different. When we attempt to flow with God, then we experience the blessings of wholeness and meaning. We experience the God of liberation and freedom. We experience happiness. The great difficulty for many of us is that although we are not evil ourselves, we

simply ignore evil all around us. A high price is paid for our sin of omission, as Abraham Heschel has made clear in a comment about World War II:

We have failed to fight for right, for justice, for goodness; as a result we must fight against wrong, against injustice, against evil. We have failed to offer sacrifices on the altar of peace; thus we offered sacrifices on the altar of war.²⁶

God's Purpose in History

God's purpose in history is not judgment. He wants to relate to and bless all that he has created. He himself entered into his created world, although his presence was not widely recognized. This was because, as Kosuke Koyama puts it, "God does not grab history. God penetrates history."²⁷ The failure to recognize his presence can only mean judgment. "And this is the judgment," says John 3:19 (NRSV), "that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil..." God does not want judgment for the world. He wants to bless us. He wants us to experience fellowship with him and wholeness of life. He wants to give us meaning, but these things can only be experienced as we relate to him; moreover, whenever we experience his presence in history, he calls us to a task.

History is therefore the scene of God's call and our responsibility. We get into trouble when we interpret this calling in terms of special privilege. This is why Jan Milic Lochman describes history as "God's Providence" and "man's confusion."²⁸ God does not call us to special privileges; rather, he calls us into a special kind of responsibility, which is beautifully described in I Peter 2:9 (NRSV):

But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.

In taking up this task, we acknowledge his presence as a blessing to all of creation. We proclaim to all that the God of history wants us to experience his blessings and not his judgment. Judgment is the result of turning away from the light of his presence toward the darkness, which symbolizes everything outside of his will for his created world. History is the story of God's continuing creation in the world; and as such, those of us who live in the midst of his creative activity experience his presence as judgment or blessings. His intention is not to judge us but to bless us, but our experience depends upon whether we move toward the darkness or the light of his presence.

E. Stanley Jones, in a devotional piece entitled, "Gathering Up Lessons Learned," illustrates graphically how God works in human history.

The Way is the way to do everything. And everything not-the-way, is not the way. In the Pan-American Airport building in Panama the "seeing eye door" opens as you approach to come in or go out. But when I tried to go out by the door marked "Entrance," nothing happened. The "seeing eye" did not see me, paid no attention to me. I might have become angry or I might have prayed to all the gods that be, but that door would not have opened. Only as I retreated and entered the other aisle did the door "see" me and open. When I obeyed the nature of reality, things began to open. It is so everywhere in everything for everybody. Life is made to work in God's way and only in God's way. If you try to work it some other way, it works its own ruin.²⁹

God does work in history. We experience his activity as judgment when we oppose him. When persons and nations do not take God's way, all their efforts and toil end up in smoke. When we do take his way, we not only experience his blessings, but we cooperate with him in building the future. This is why it is so important to take a backward glance in

the mirror of the past as we make decisions in the present for our journey into the future. We do not want to take any other way than his.

4. JESUS CHRIST

“The Heart of the Ordinary Christian Experience”

The heart of the ordinary, or even the dramatic Christian experience, is Jesus Christ. In him we come to know both God and ourselves.

Jesus as Human and Divine

Jesus, wrote J. S. Whale, “is what God means by ‘Man.’ He is what man means by ‘God.’”³⁰ This is not an easy statement to understand, but it does point us to the heart of the ordinary Christian experience. It tells us that our experience of God begins with our own experience of Jesus as a human being. “Take hold of Jesus as a man,” said Martin Luther, “and you will discover that he is God.”³¹ This means that we must think first of Jesus as fully human. He had a natural mother and grew up in a normal manner. He experienced such things as hunger and thirst. He laughed and wept. He became weary and slept. He experienced everything that we experience as human beings; and in the end, he endured pain, suffering, and death.

Jesus was in every sense a human being, but it was in this human being that God came to live among us. In Matthew 1:23 (NRSV), they called Jesus Emmanuel, which means “God with us.” We call this the Incarnation. The word Incarnation comes from the Latin and means “enfleshment” or “taking on flesh.” It is difficult to explain completely, but it means that God took on flesh in Jesus so that we could experience his divine presence in a human being. “And the word,” says John 1:14 (NRSV), “became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory....” In Colossians 1:15 (NRSV), the Apostle Paul describes what the Incarnation means for us when he says: “He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation....” Jesus is fully human and that enables us to experience the God in whose image,

according to Genesis 1:27, we have been made. We must be extremely careful however not to create our own image of Jesus. “To this one [Jesus as he was and is],” insists Martin Luther, “thou shalt point and say, ‘Here is God.’”³² God is experienced in Jesus, who alone became fully human; therefore, our experience of him brings us in touch with God himself. That is why Jesus is what we mean by God. In him we have seen the visible image of God, but we have also seen the reflection of what God intended for us.

Jesus as a Window and a Mirror

It may be difficult to understand that Jesus was fully human and fully divine, but this is what we claim as Christians. Jesus is a window through whom we gain a vision of God; he is also a mirror to reveal our humanity to us. Through him we experience the presence of God and know ourselves at the same time.

Only Jesus was truly human. The rest of us have achieved only a partial humanity. We have not yet fulfilled the purpose for which we have been created. The closer we come to the kind of relationship Jesus had with God, the closer we come to becoming fully human. We do this by becoming acquainted with Jesus, who more than anyone else, reveals to us what human life is all about. By looking at him we look into a mirror and see ourselves as God intended for us to be; and because of Jesus, God’s love becomes present to us in a new and very human manner. He helps us to know what God is like.

We consider Jesus divine because he represents the most complete projection of God’s love and grace into human life, and we consider him fully human because his life was the fullest response anyone has ever made to God. Hence, it is by becoming fully human, by following Jesus’ example of faith that we come to experience God’s ordinary presence at the very center of our own lives. In the process we not only discover who we are, but also who he is. He is the mirror

through whom we discover our own humanity, and he is the window through whom we see and experience God. If this is the case, and I believe it to be, then we must understand his message. It is his message that helps us to become better acquainted with who he is and what that means for us. We should not create our own image of Jesus. Jesus as a mirror exists so that we might know who God wants us to be, and Jesus as a window exists to enable us to see into the very heart of God to know him as he really is.

The Central Message of Jesus

In order to experience God fully in Jesus Christ we need to understand both his central message and who he is. Let us begin with his central message, which has to do with his preaching about the Kingdom of God. In Mark 1:15 (NRSV) we are given a summary of that message as he begins his ministry. “The time is fulfilled,” he says, “and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.”

The message of Jesus is Good News, but it is only good to those of us who anticipate the coming Kingdom. This Kingdom, about which Jesus preached, does not just lie out there in the future. It is not something we enter only after we die. The Kingdom of God is moving into the very midst of our lives. We experience it while we live. This does not mean that we will build the Kingdom of God on earth. It means only that we are citizens of the Kingdom of God here and now. We do not have to wait until death and the end of history. Our experience of the Kingdom can begin immediately, even though it can only be completed in the future. In Revelation 21:1-4 (NRSV), John describes the connection between this world and the next by writing about the new heaven and earth.

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, the New Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God,

prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them as their God; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them; he will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away.”

Jesus, however, never said that we were to simply wait around for the final establishment of the Kingdom. He identified the beginning of the Kingdom with his own power over evil. This is the significance of what he says in Matthew 12:28 (NRSV): “But if it is by the Spirit of God that I cast out demons, then the kingdom of God has come to you.” This twofold understanding of the Kingdom—present and future—is also described by Jesus in Luke 17:20-36, where the Pharisees ask Jesus just when he expects his Kingdom to come. Jesus responds by telling them, “the kingdom of God is among you.” (Luke 17:21 NRSV); but then he continues to describe how it will finally be completed in the future. The Kingdom of God begins in our midst as we accept God’s Will for our lives. We will not, therefore, be surprised when God’s Kingdom is finally established in the future; for, we will have already experienced its rule in the present, anticipating its final victory in the future. We are the first fruit of the coming Kingdom of God. This was what Jesus called us to be, and he had every right to call us to prepare for the Kingdom, for he himself is its anointed King.

Jesus as the Anointed King

In addition to understanding the central message of Jesus, we also need to come to grips with who Jesus is. We call him the Christ, which comes from a Greek word meaning “the anointed one.” In Hebrew the word for Christ is “Messiah.” As Christians we claim that Jesus became the anointed King through whom the Kingdom of God has been inaugurated. Peter was the first disciple to recognize Jesus as the “Christ”

or the “Messiah,” that is to say, “as the anointed King.” The conversation between Jesus and Peter can be found in Mark 8:29-30 (NRSV), where Jesus asked Peter, “But who do you say that I am?” Peter answered, “You are the Messiah.”

Following Peter’s recognition of Jesus as the Messiah or anointed King, Jesus ordered his disciples not to tell anyone. Jesus was afraid that people would misunderstand what kind of a King he was, and so he ordered his disciples to keep it a secret until it could be made more clear to people. If we are truly to experience the God who reveals himself to us through Jesus, then we must be sure that we understand who Jesus is and we must avoid every temptation to make him into what we want him to be.

The common people anticipated the coming of a new King; but they expected a political or military ruler similar to what David had been. They hoped that such a King would conquer their Roman enemies and reestablish a monarchy in Jerusalem. Jesus did not fulfill their expectation or dream, and so they rejected him as their King. Another mistaken image they had of a King came primarily from the religious leaders, who expected a kind of moral or ethical judge, who would condemn sinners and accept only the righteous. Jesus conformed to neither image; rather, he came as the suffering servant of Isaiah 53, who reaches out to make friends of the enemy and to forgive the sinner. Through his suffering in life and his death on the cross, Jesus reveals the very “heart” of God to us. Through his ministry to us he makes it possible for us to experience the ordinary presence of God. He came neither as a political/military king nor a moral/ethical judge, but as a religious/suffering servant. His purpose was and is to inaugurate and establish the Kingdom of God and to invite all of us to be its citizens. His desire is to make us God’s friends.

Experiencing God through Jesus

We come to know the “heart” of God by getting to know Jesus, who is the King (Messiah or Christ) of the Kingdom of

God. Our first step is to place ourselves under his rule, government, or Lordship; and having done this, we become part of his growing Kingdom. Becoming acquainted with the historical Jesus, however, is another step. William Warren Smart emphasizes the importance of this step in the following passage:

There is probably not a person living who could, over a considerable period of time, spend twenty minutes a day in the presence of Jesus as the Gospels have pictured him without having his life profoundly influenced by him one way or another.³³

His influence over us will be twofold. We will come to know his steadfast love and his continued presence in our lives.

Our acquaintance with Jesus does not come just from the past. His place in God's Kingdom was confirmed by his resurrection from the dead. This was God's way of assuring us that death could not spell the end to what he has begun in Jesus. Jesus also assured his followers that his physical departure would bring about a new spiritual presence for them and for us. "I will not leave you orphaned;" he says in John 14:18 (NRSV), "I am coming to you." Following his death and resurrection, he said it again in Matthew 28:20 (NRSV): "I am with you always, to the end of the age."

How do we experience this constant but very ordinary presence of the risen Christ? Let us first look to the Scriptures to discover how the early disciples experienced his presence. Two of his disciples, who met him on their way to Emmaus, did not at first recognize him; but later, as they broke bread with him, they said to one another: "Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road, while he was opening the scriptures to us?" (Luke 24:32, NRSV) Even after Jesus stopped appearing to his disciples, the Apostle Paul claimed to have met him on the road to Damascus (Acts 9:1-19, NRSV), and this same Paul, years later in a letter to Christians in Colossae, talked about his

indwelling presence. Paul referred to it as a mystery hidden for ages, “which is Christ in you, the hope of glory.” (Colossians 1:26-27, NRSV) Paul is not talking about the historical Jesus, but about the indwelling presence of the resurrected Christ. It is this presence that enables us to see into the very “heart” of God.

When we acknowledge Jesus as the King (Messiah or Christ), the one through whom God inaugurates his Kingdom; and as we respond to what he taught about that Kingdom, we begin to experience his resurrected and continued presence in our lives. Jesus himself taught this long ago when he promised in Matthew 18:20 (TEV), “...where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.” We experience the “heart” and “presence” of God through this one who calls us together into the Kingdom of God, which he himself inaugurated. This presence does not come to us as isolated individuals; rather, it comes to us as we acknowledge him as Lord and Christ, and as we are drawn together into his Kingdom.

5. THE HOLY SPIRIT

“The Power of the Ordinary Christian Experience”

The power for the ordinary Christian experience is found in the Holy Spirit. This was what Jesus promised his disciples in his last words to them: “But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” (Acts 1:8, NRSV). The Holy Spirit empowers us to witness to the “anointed King” (Messiah or Christ) who has inaugurated the Kingdom of God by his own power.

The Purpose of the Holy Spirit

Our modern creeds may not say everything about the Holy Spirit, but they do point to the value of the Holy Spirit in our Christian experience. “We believe in the Holy Spirit as the divine presence in our lives,” says *A Modern Affirmation*, “whereby we are kept in perpetual remembrance of the truth of Christ, and find strength and help in time of need.” An Asian affirmation, *The Korean Creed*, says, “We believe in the Holy Spirit, God present with us for guidance, for comfort, and for strength.”³⁴

The truth of Christ is that God gives himself to us and accepts us, “...because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.” (Romans 5:5, NRSV). In Romans 8:16 (NRSV), Paul claims: “...it is that very Spirit “bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God.” As God’s children we not only believe in the Holy Spirit; we experience its constant presence in our lives and are empowered by it to live for God. Why should we be satisfied with an occasional experience of God when we can experience him all the time? To be baptized in the Holy Spirit means to be “immersed” with God. It means “being filled up inside” with God’s

continual presence and power. Why should we then accept partial, fragmentary, and incomplete experiences of his living presence? The fullness of his presence is offered to us and this gives meaning and wholeness to our lives. He grants comfort, strength, power, and guidance to us as we allow ourselves to be possessed by his Spirit; and his Spirit thereby empowers us to be his witnesses.

How the Holy Spirit was Received

Before dealing with how we can receive the Holy Spirit and its power, we must first look briefly at how others have received it, such as Jesus and the early Church.

With the Gentleness of a Dove

After Jesus was baptized by John in the Jordan River, Luke 3:22 (NRSV) says that. "...the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove." According to Luke the Holy Spirit descended upon Jesus very gently. That is what the symbolism of the dove means. Jesus promised the same experience to those who followed him.

If you love me, you will keep my commandments. And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever. This is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, because he abides with you, and he will be in you. John 14:15-17 (NRSV)

The disciples were told about the Holy Spirit as Jesus prepared them for his own death, for he had greater things for them to do. He knew how much they would need God's power and direction. "I have said these things to you," said Jesus in John 14:25-26 (TEV), "while I am still with you. But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you." With the coming of the Holy Spirit they received a peace, which the world could not understand

and an absence of fear (John 14:27, NRSV). Both of these were due to an inner consciousness of God's abiding presence.

Following his death, burial, and resurrection, Jesus appeared to his disciples in order to fulfill his promise of the Holy Spirit. He came and stood among them. "Peace be with you," he said, "As the Father has sent me, so I send you." When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit." (John 20:21-22, NRSV). When we read of Jesus breathing on them, we are reminded of how God formed Adam from the soil (dust) of the ground and "...breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man became a living being." (Genesis 2:7, NRSV). Here in John's Gospel, a new creative event takes place as God gives fullness of life to men and women through his Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit falls upon them as it fell upon Jesus, with the gentleness of a dove.

With the Drama of Wind and Fire

The Book of Acts opens with the promise of the Holy Spirit to Jesus' small group of followers. That promise is fulfilled in the second chapter of Acts when the Holy Spirit descends upon them in a dramatic manner, symbolized by wind and fire (Acts 2:1-4). Those who received the Holy Spirit that day also began to speak in "tongues" (other languages). Although there were Jews in Jerusalem from all over the world, they all heard the believers speaking in their own languages and understood them perfectly. It amazed, excited, and confused them (Acts 2:5-12).

The phenomenon of "glossolalia" (speaking in tongues) has confused Christians ever since. None of the Gospels talks about it, and there is no indication that Jesus spoke in tongues. The Church that seemed to emphasize tongues the most was the Church in Corinth, where it became a divisive issue. Its content and purpose also changed. In Jerusalem (Acts 2) it was understood, but in Corinth it was

incomprehensible without an interpreter (1 Corinthians 14:27-28). In Jerusalem it was a foreign language; in Corinth it became ecstatic speech. What once united, now divided. This does not mean however that we are not to speak in tongues. The Apostle Paul, who was well aware of division taking place in Corinth, spoke in tongues more than anyone else (1 Corinthians 14:18). He desired that everyone speak in tongues as did he (1 Corinthians 14:18); but he also knew tongues were not spoken by everyone and that there were other more important gifts of the Spirit (1 Corinthians 12:31; 14:5 and 9).

It is more important for us to understand why the Holy Spirit was given than to dwell on speaking in tongues as evidence of its having been given. Scripture does not support the claim that speaking in tongues, is the evidence of having received the Holy Spirit. Tongues is not “evidence for” but “a gift of” the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit came to empower Jesus’ followers to become witnesses and to speak a clear word about the coming Kingdom of God in the world. Receiving the power of the Holy Spirit will come to some, as it did for Jesus, in the gentleness of a dove; while it will come to others, as it did for the apostles, with the drama of wind and fire. However it comes the Holy Spirit is the power of an ordinary Christian experience.

The Way We Receive the Holy Spirit

The Holy Spirit, as the continual presence of God with us, is a pure gift, which cannot be earned. We can only position ourselves to receive it. God can be trusted to give it, for he wants us to experience his fullness even more than we desire it. He wants for us not only what we desire, but also what we need to make our lives meaningful. God does not however give it against our will.

E. Stanley Jones, in *The Way*, has described four steps in receiving and retaining the Holy Spirit: “I must ask, I must

receive by faith, I must give myself, and I must obey.” Let us look briefly at each of these.

First, he says, we must ask for it through prayer. In Jesus’ teaching about prayer he compares God’s willingness to answer our prayers to our human capacity to give good gifts to our own children. “How much more,” he concludes, “will the Father in heaven give the Holy Spirit to those who ask for it.” He wants us to have it. It is the one prayer that is always answered with a “YES.” God never says “no” to anyone who asks for the Holy Spirit.

The second condition is that we accept the Holy Spirit in faith, for it is through faith that we “receive the Spirit promised by God” (Galatians 3:14). We are not to ask for evidence, for all evidence is misleading. The presence of the Holy Spirit cannot be evidenced by speaking in tongues, nor can it be evidenced by our feelings. Not everyone will speak in tongues, and our feelings come and go. His presence however is promised. His Spirit will be with us forever. To doubt this is to doubt God’s ability to fulfill his own promises.

The third condition is that we surrender ourselves to the Holy Spirit. We cannot expect the presence of God’s Spirit without surrendering ourselves to it. If God gives himself to us, then we must give ourselves to him. This does not mean that we must surrender everything before we can experience anything of his presence, but it does mean that we should surrender what we can at the present time. When we become aware of other parts of our lives that need to be surrendered in the future, then we must be willing to turn these areas of our lives over to God as well.

The final condition to receiving God’s gift of the Holy Spirit by faith is to obey God’s known will. God gives the gift of the Holy Spirit “...to those who obey him” (Acts 5:32, NRSV). Obedience must be continuous if we expect our

experience of his presence to be continuous. E. Stanley Jones puts it very well:

He is in control. He uses you as the instrument of His purposes, provided you co-operate. We retain the Holy Spirit as long as He retains control. When we take over, He quietly steps out—not completely out, but He shuts off the sense of His presence and power till we decide to give Him the reins again.

It is not a question of our possessing the Holy Spirit as much as it is a question of being possessed by the Holy Spirit. These four conditions are not a way of helping us to earn the gift; rather, they show us how to appropriate what God wants to give. They show us how to get into the right position for receiving what God has been trying to give us all along.³⁵

The Gifts of the Holy Spirit

The primary gift of the Holy Spirit is the Holy Spirit itself, and that comes as we acknowledge Jesus as the Anointed King (Christ or Messiah) of God's coming Kingdom. It will not do simply to lift Jesus up as a mere teacher, example, or friend. He is Lord of Lords and King of Kings, and until we are ready to acknowledge him as such, we are not in a position to receive and experience the Holy Spirit and its empowering gifts (1 Corinthians 12:3).

The Holy Spirit gives these gifts to us “for the common good” (1 Corinthians 12:7, NRSV). Not all of us receive the same gifts (Romans 12:6-8 and 1 Corinthians 12:29-31), but we are all supposed to receive the highest gift of all—LOVE (1 Corinthians 12:31 and 13:1-13).

Many of the gifts of the Holy Spirit are mentioned in 1 Corinthians 12:4-11 and 28. Below is an incomplete list and brief explanation of some of the gifts of the Holy Spirit:

1. **Preaching.** Passing on the Gospel to those who do not know it, or to those who do not yet know its fullness.

2. **Prophecy.** Speaking God’s word with spiritual and social sensitivity, to bring positive encouragement, not just negative judgment.
3. **Teaching.** Passing on and explaining God’s revealed truths.
4. **Working Miracles.** Performing powerful acts that may be perceived by observers as altering the course of nature.
5. **Healing.** Praying effectively for those who are physically and emotionally ill.
6. **Administration.** Understanding immediate and long-range goals, and devising effective plans for carrying out those goals within the body of Christ.
7. **Speaking in Tongues.** Using unknown languages for personal and communal edification, or speaking to God in a language never learned and to his people through interpreters who can share the message in the vernacular.
8. **Discernment.** Knowing when a spiritual claim is true and when it is false.
9. **Pastoring.** Assuming a long-term responsibility for the spiritual welfare of a group of believers, equipping them for their own work of ministry.

The above gifts empower us by making us dependent upon one another and by sending us out to work together for the common good.

No matter what gift or gifts we are given, none of them alone is the evidence that we have the Holy Spirit. The only *gift* (spiritual fruit) commonly given to us all is love. “Above all, clothe yourselves with love,” insists Paul, “which binds

everything together in perfect harmony.” (Colossians 3:14, NRSV).

The Fruit of the Holy Spirit

We cannot determine whether someone else has the Holy Spirit by demanding that the person possess the same gift, whether tongues or some other gift, as we ourselves possess. All of us, according to scripture, do not possess the same gifts, but all of us ought to be bearing the same fruit of the Holy Spirit. Proof of the Holy Spirit’s presence and power comes only through the bearing of the nine fruit of the Spirit. “By contrast,” says Paul, “the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.” (Galatians 5:22-23, NRSV). If the Spirit has given us life, it must also control and empower that same life. Such is the evidence of the presence of the Holy Spirit.

Although the presence of the Holy Spirit affects our feelings and emotions—sometimes resulting in tongues (ecstatic speech)—we are not to confuse feelings with the presence of God’s Spirit. We all respond differently to important events in our lives, some of us more emotionally than others, and we should not expect everyone to experience the Holy Spirit in the same way. In asking for the Spirit, George Croly puts it quite unselfishly in his famous hymn:

I ask no dream, no prophet ecstasies,
Sudden rending of the veil of clay,
No angel visitant, no opening skies;
But take the dimness of my soul away.

Teach me to love thee as thine angels love,
One holy passion filling all my frame;
The kindling of the heaven descended Dove,
My heart an altar, and thy love the flame.³⁶

Our hearts are to be the altar from which the Holy Spirit can love others through us. The Holy Spirit distributes the

gifts to us and bears fruit through us. To possess the gifts without bearing the fruit is to be immature, but to attempt to bear the fruit without possessing any gifts is to be ineffective. To have both in balance is to be possessed by the Holy Spirit and to experience the full power of Christian faith. Such an experience is quite ordinary, continuous, and lasts forever.

6. THE CHURCH

“The Community for the Ordinary Christian Experience”

The Holy Spirit draws people together for worship (doxology), fellowship (koinonia), proclamation (kerygma), teaching (didache), healing (iasis), and service (diakonia). All of these activities contribute to the ordinary experience of God; and together, they make up the Christian community, which we commonly call “the Church.”

The Social Dimension of the Community

Although we may certainly experience the presence of God in private, God calls us into community to make his presence more deeply known. Both the Old and New Testaments tell the story of God’s revelation of himself through “the people of Israel” and “the community of faith.” One of the very first things Jesus did was to create a “community” by calling twelve disciples to work with him (Mark 1:16-20). He identified himself as being one with God (John 10:30; 14:9-11) and said to them: “...where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.” (Matthew 18:20, NRSV)

We may come to know God as individuals, but God acts primarily through the life of the community. As we participate in the community, he makes his presence known to us in ordinary ways. We can pray, read the Bible, etc., but without being part of the community our experiences of his presence are incomplete. We must get into the community where God meets us, answers our questions, and fulfills our deepest needs. It is in such a community that we experience God as we relate to one another and work together for his glory.

The Birthday of the Community

The idea of a community in which we can experience God's presence begins with the idea of the covenant, which God made with his people in the Book of Genesis. The New Testament "community of faith," which has come to be known as the Church stands in continuity with the "covenant community" of the Old Testament.

The community of faith or the Christian community, called the Church, experienced a special presence and activity of God in its reception of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, but even that cannot be called the birthday of the Christian community. If we look for that beginning, says Jürgen Moltmann, then

...we are led from Pentecost and the "outpouring of the Spirit" to Easter and the visions in which the apostles experienced their calling. But Easter points unequivocally to the cross. In the framework of this question, therefore, it is correct to see the origin of the Church in the crucified Jesus. "Having established the Church in his blood, he fortified it on the day of Pentecost with special power from on high." "It begins in the wounded side of Christ on Calvary, goes through the 'tempering' of the Pentecostal fires, and comes onward like a burning flood."³⁷

This Pentecostal experience was important because, from this time on, the disciples had a vivid awareness of their life together as "the people of God." This was the beginning of the self-consciousness that they themselves were that community in which God could be experienced. The community was given several names, the most common of which are the body of Christ, the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, and the Church.

As Israel had been called to become "a light to the nations" (Isaiah 49:6), this new community of faith had been called to reveal the heart of God. The community was called

the “body of Christ” because it was to do the kinds of things Jesus would do if he were physically present. It was called the “fellowship of the Holy Spirit” because it was this Spirit that Jesus promised following his physical death. Through the power of the Holy Spirit, Christians are to be Christ’s hands and feet on earth today. When we refer to the “Church” we mean “a living community” created by the Holy Spirit to become the body of Christ in the world. In this community we come face-to-face with both God and his Kingdom.

An Inclusive Community

The immediate result of the reception of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost was the creation of an inclusive Christian community, the first fruit of the Kingdom of God. It is the Holy Spirit who creates the kind of community in which God can be vividly experienced and then shared.

Those who received the Holy Spirit began to share their lives—even their possessions—at deeper levels than ever before; and they themselves became the vehicles through which God’s presence was then mediated to others. They became a community, which was actively including others.

They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. (Acts 2:42, NRSV) All who believed were together and had all things in common.... (Acts 2:44, NRSV) Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved. (Acts 2:46-47, NRSV)

We hear the voice of God and experience his presence through those who share their faith with us and encourage us in our own struggles for faith. None of this happens in isolation; it can only happen in an inclusive community under the control of the Holy Spirit.

The Nature of The Community

The nature of this inclusive community was described in the early Church with the use of the Greek word “koinonia,” which gets translated into “fellowship” in the English; but the English word fails to convey the rich meaning of life-sharing intended by the New Testament writers. The koinonia created by the Holy Spirit was entirely different from mere social gatherings or associations of people. It was a community that shared life at its deepest levels, an inclusive community based upon the redemptive love demonstrated in Jesus Christ. Members of the community were so vitally linked together that they saw themselves as the very body of Christ. As Paul pointed out in 1 Corinthians 12:26 (NRSV), this body is so closely joined together that, “If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it.”

We need to be careful that we do not equate this “koinonia” with the institutional Church, which is better defined as the “ecclesia.” The ecclesia refers to the organization and structure; while the koinonia refers to the sense of fellowship and community taking place between persons. Ideally the two are interrelated; but in reality, the Church falls far short of the ideal.

The koinonia and the ecclesia are not the same, but they do have a relationship. Their relationship is similar to the way in which the soul (psyche) is related to the body (soma). The soul of the Church is its sense of fellowship and community (koinonia), while the body of the Church is its organization and structure (ecclesia). These two things are not identical, but it must be remembered that they are indivisible in the same sense as our souls and bodies. Neither can do without the other. The former without the latter becomes a ghost; and the latter without the former becomes a corpse.

When something goes wrong with the soul (psyche), it also affects the health of the body (soma). We call this a

psychosomatic illness. The Church today suffers from such illnesses, and one of these illnesses is the Church's confusion between the clergy and laity. This illness has to do with how the community perceives its ministry, a topic, which needs to be taken up next.

The Nature of the Ministry

The members of the Christian community have been given two names, which have caused great difficulty throughout the history of the Church. These two names are clergy (kleros) and laity (laos). In the Graeco-Roman environment “kleros” referred to “magistrates” and “laos” referred to “the people.” “Kleros,” the word used to refer to the clergy, literally refers to “an object” used in drawing lots to choose a person for a particular position of importance. The noun is also related to the verb, which means, “to call.” In the Greek New Testament it refers to the Holy Spirit’s calling of a person into the fellowship of the Christian community. “Laos,” the word used to refer to the laity, means “people,” and in the Church refers to the “people of God” or “God's chosen people.” In analyzing these two words, the only logical conclusion that can be drawn is that Christians, including the clergy, are “God's people” (laos), and all Christians, including the laity, are “the called” (kleros).

An unfortunate misunderstanding has taken place in the Church as a result of its use of these two words. It has to do with how we understand the nature of ministry, and how our common ministry, has been confused by introducing these political and cultural terms into the Church. The popular misunderstanding is that the clergy (kleros) are hired and paid to perform ministry and the laity (laos) come to receive it. It has given the clergy illusions of grandeur, and it has deprived the laity of its sense of calling to be in ministry.

Martin Luther tried to straighten out this psychosomatic illness by suggesting the priesthood of all believers as one of the foundation stones of the Reformation. While this did not

eliminate the need for distinguishing between the clergy and laity, it did define more clearly the task of the clergy in relationship to the laity. That task is the equipping of the laity for ministry (Ephesians 4:11-12). Both clergy and laity are the people of God called to be full time ministers, even though the latter do not receive wages for their ministry. The focus of their common ministry is beautifully described in 1 Peter 2:9 (NRSV), the classic passage of scripture on the subject: “But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.”

The priesthood of all believers has two implications. First, it means that every member of the Church is a priest, and as such, has direct access to the word and heart of God and is called upon to proclaim the mighty acts of God in the world. People are to be invited into God’s marvelous light, and sent out to minister. Baptism is the sacrament by which believers are ordained into this ministry. While this first implication of the priesthood of all believers is very important, so is the second, which has to do with meeting one another’s needs. As Luther put it, “A Christian must be a Christ to his neighbor.”³⁸ In caring for one another we actually encounter God. It happens in our caring relationships with one another. It is an impossible task for the clergy (kleros) to accomplish on its own. One pastor (kleros) can hardly care for hundreds, much less thousands, of people; but think of how much can be done when the laity (laos), understand themselves to be in ministry. When we are all equipped to carry on ministry, then the presence of God will become real to more people and the community called Church—the Body of Christ—will perform a mighty task in the community and in the world at large.

The Purpose of the Community

One word of caution needs to be made. Just because we are all ministers does not make us all saints, unless of course,

we think of saints as “struggling sinners.” Even in the community of faith we sometimes have delusions of grandeur; therefore, it is necessary for us to recall that Jesus came to save sinners and outcasts (Luke 5:31-32), and that the purpose of the Christian community is reconciliation. We do not exist as a museum for saints. We are to become a hospital for sinners. Martin Luther described the Christian community as “the inn and hospital of Christ.”³⁹ The purpose of the community is not simply to meet, but to include everyone in a loving and forgiving family, where God can be experienced.

In one survey inquiring how people first experienced the love of God, it was revealed that 80% of the responses revolved around a friend or another person. It is for this reason that we must make of the Christian community a true fellowship (*koinonia*), which brings people together to share at the deepest level, for God makes himself known to us in such relationships. Edward Bauman has changed the direction of his counseling techniques and his whole ministry because of this important insight. When persons came to him in the past, he used to deal with them as individuals and try to help them by listening to their problems; but now he invites them into the family of God, where they can experience the presence of God. He describes this new approach as follows:

When others come to me, sharing their personal problems or burdened with the world’s pain, I find myself offering them an invitation into the “family” as one of the most loving and healing things I can do for them. Through our participation in the community, we position ourselves to receive the love of God in special ways. God acts through Christ to call us into the community of faith where he then gives us wholeness of life and prepares us for our ministry of love to others. The good news of the New Testament is essentially news of how God offers us his life transforming presence through the community.⁴⁰

The Christian community is a community of people who exist primarily for the purpose of experiencing God in all aspects of its life. Its worship of God centers in the reading and proclamation of God's Word and in the celebration of the Lord's Supper. This community expects to hear God speak and experience his presence; therefore, this is the best place for anyone who wants an ordinary Christian experience of God. The place however is not in a building, but in the midst of a living community of people tuned into God.

7. PRAYER AND WORSHIP

“The Instruments for the Ordinary Christian Experience”

Prayer and worship make up the instruments for experiencing God. No sharp distinction should be made between these two instruments for Christian experience. While prayer may be generally thought of as a personal or individual approach to God and worship as a corporate or group approach, prayer is frequently corporate and worship personal; therefore, no sharp distinctions should be made between them. I intend to use them interchangeably because they are inseparable. They are complimentary instruments for Christian experience and, apart from them there can be no Christian experience.

The Encounter with God

Prayer and worship are not simply human activities; rather, they make possible an encounter with the living God. The purpose of these two activities is to seek the face of God, that is, to draw near to Him. This is not possible unless God is already drawing near to us. When we read about the encounters between God and his children in the Bible, we become envious and wish that it were as easy for us. It sometimes helps to realize that it was not so easy for them either, and that God often encounters us when we least expect it. When Jacob went to sleep at Bethel, he did not expect to have an encounter with God; but when he woke up from his sleep, he said: “Surely the LORD is in this place — and I did not know it!” (Genesis 28:16, NRSV) On another occasion he struggled for God’s blessing at Penuel, and when he received it, he cried: “...I have seen God face to face, and yet my life is preserved.” (Genesis 32:30, NRSV) We envy such encounters, even if we do not desire the fear that often accompanies them.

We desire such an encounter today for the very same reasons that the Psalmist desired one: "...to behold the beauty of the LORD, and to inquire in his temple." (Psalm 27:4b, NRSV) We do not pray and worship simply for the sake of the encounter; we also want our questions answered and our needs met. Frequently the latter are more important to us than the former, but both are legitimate goals for prayer and worship. For both of these goals to be achieved there must be an encounter with the Lord; otherwise, we are only worshipping idols and talking to ourselves.

The Practice of Listening

Prayer and worship presuppose that God is present. This presence may be as vivid as "the burning bush" was for Moses (Exodus 3:1-6), or as mysterious as the "sound of sheer silence" was for Elijah (1 Kings 19:9-18).⁴¹ The common mistake that many of us make in prayer and worship is to assume that it is primarily "talking to God." This is understandable because the English word for *prayer* seems to imply "asking for" or "requesting something." Sometimes we even act as if it means, "begging." Although Jesus had a very mature understanding of prayer, his disciples found it very difficult to understand; so they asked him: "Lord, teach us to pray..." (Luke 11:1b) He responded by teaching them what we call, "The Lord's Prayer." (Matthew 6:9-13 and Luke 11:1-4) This prayer has two main sections, which have three requests or petitions each. In the first section, which has to do with God, these petitions have to do with God's Name, God's Kingdom, and God's Will. The second section deals with our human needs, such as our need for daily bread, forgiveness, and help in times of temptation. At the beginning there is an address to God as "Father" and at the end there is a "doxology" of praise. What is frequently forgotten is that this is a "model" prayer for beginners, and as such, tends to reinforce our mistaken idea that prayer is primarily talking to God and asking him for things. We need to be careful about making the Lord's Prayer into a ritual, which it can so easily

become, as Dietrich Bonhoeffer has put it, "...an evasion of real prayer."⁴² Jesus never intended for us only to pray this prayer. He expected us to mature in our ability to communicate with God. "To pray successfully without words," wrote C.S. Lewis, "one needs to be 'at the top of one's form.'"⁴³

The mistake we often make with prayer is also made with worship. We think of worship as something we do. We think of going some place where we can perform acts of worship. "I was glad when they said to me, 'Let us go to the house of the LORD!'" (Psalm 122:1, NRSV) We may do different things in the Lord's house than did the Psalmist, but we go there primarily to do something such as praise God, confess our sins, offer our tithes, have fellowship with one another, hear a sermon, and participate in the Lord's Supper. We perform acts of worship. While there is nothing wrong with this, our focus in worship should be on more than what we do. The purpose of worship is to experience God's living presence and to hear his living Word. This may happen in preaching and in the Lord's Supper, to some extent, but it will take a good deal of practice to refine the art. Listening is an art, and listening to God is no easier than listening to another person. Even when we can hear the words, we do not always comprehend them.

As we mature in our practice of prayer and worship, we learn that we can spend less time talking to God or performing acts of worship and spend more time listening to him. In discussing prayer Søren Kierkegaard contrasted these two dimensions of prayer by talking about the immediate person and the true person of prayer.

The immediate person thinks and imagines that when he prays, the most important thing, the thing he must concentrate upon, is that God should hear what he is praying for. And yet in the true, eternal sense it is just the reverse: the true relation in prayer is achieved not when God hears what is prayed for, but when the

person praying continues to pray until he is the one who hears, who hears what God wills. The immediate person, therefore, uses many words and therefore makes demands in his prayer; the true man of prayer only attends.⁴⁴

This emphasis on “listening to God” rather than merely “talking to God” lies at the heart of prayer and worship as instruments for experiencing the presence of God and hearing him speak to us in our time.

The Practice of Talking

Although the very soul of prayer is listening, this does not mean that we should stop talking. What we are after in prayer is dialogue with God, and that involves both listening and talking. As beginners in the school of prayer we have to expect less than perfection in both our attempts to talk and to listen. “The poorest mumbling utterance,” wrote Bonhoeffer, “can be better than the best-formulated prayer.”⁴⁵ The same goes for listening.

Worship involves both talking and listening. We talk in our singing of praises, our confession of sin, our affirmation of faith, and in our prayers of intercession and thanksgiving; but at the same time, we do all this in order to hear God speak to us through the reading of the Scripture, the preaching of the Sermon, and in the Sacraments of Baptism and the Lord’s Supper. “For me,” said C.S. Lewis, “words are...secondary. They are only an anchor. Or, should I say, they are the movements of a conductor’s baton: not the music.”⁴⁶ In the dialogue we expect to have an encounter with God. Both prayer and worship are the instruments for making such an encounter possible. “Private prayer,” said John Vianney, “is like straw scattered here and there; if you set it on fire it makes a lot of little flames. But gather these straws into a bundle and light them, and you get a mighty fire.”⁴⁷ What is true for private prayer is also true, for public worship. We experience God best when we come together to

pray and to worship, to talk to God and to listen to him speak to us.

Unceasing Prayer and Worship

We are not after just occasional experiences of God. These would be nice, but it would be better to have a constant awareness of his presence in our lives. This is possible to those of us who learn the secret of unceasing prayer and worship. This was a favorite idea of the Apostle Paul, who wrote to the Church in Thessalonica: “Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.” (1 Thessalonians 5:16-18, NRSV) It is obvious from Paul’s other letters that he practiced an attitude of unceasing prayer and worship in his life, and that he experienced the presence of Christ constantly. This did not make a hermit of him, but caused him to be interested in others. He said to the Christians in Thessalonica: “We must always give thanks to God for you, brothers and sisters.... To this end we always pray for you....” (2 Thessalonians 1:3 and 11, NRSV) Praying without ceasing never meant for Paul to withdraw from life to spend all of his time talking and listening to God; rather, it meant that in the midst of a very busy life with all of its obligations and distractions, he could carry on a running conversation or dialogue with God.

Henri J.M. Nouwen describes how unceasing prayer worked in the life of Jesus and how it can work in our lives:

To pray unceasingly is to lead all our thoughts out of their faithful isolation into a fearless conversation with God. Jesus’ life was a life lived in the presence of God his Father. Jesus kept nothing, absolutely nothing, hidden from his father’s face. Jesus’ joys, his fears, his hopes, and his despairs were always shared with his father.... Thus prayer asks us to break out of our monologue with ourselves and to follow Jesus by

turning our lives into an unceasing conversation with our Heavenly Father.⁴⁸

It must be emphasized however that this desirable goal of unceasing prayer can only be accomplished after we have first learned the lessons of disciplined prayer and worship. We must begin by setting aside specific times for talking and listening to God. This does not mean taking time out to pray, nor does it mean putting prayer off until bedtime. According to C.S. Lewis bedtime is the worst possible time for the discipline of prayer. “My own plan,” he continues, “when hard pressed, is to seize any time, and place, however unsuitable, in preference to the last waking moment.”⁴⁹ Only after we have learned the “discipline” of prayer and worship at some specific time and place, are we able to structure our lives to the extent that prayer and worship become a natural part of us. The discipline is worth the price because it enables us to pray and worship without ceasing, which brings us into a constant awareness of the presence of the living God.

8. THE BIBLE

“The Inspiration of the Ordinary Christian Experience”

The Popularity of the Bible

Almost everyone has a Bible. Americans have more Bibles than anyone else in the world, followed by the Indians and the Japanese. Millions of Hindus possess the Bible and read them regularly. In Osaka, Japan, an inquiry in a residential block revealed that while only 20% of the people had a Buddhist or Shinto house-shrine, more than 60% of them owned a Bible.⁵⁰ Why is the Bible such a popular book?

The Bible is even more popular in depressed economic times. When things are at their worst, Bible sales actually increase. What is it that causes people to purchase Bibles, even in hard times? The answer lies in our awareness that the Bible is different from every other book. We call it *inspired*. It is inspired for two reasons. Inspired people wrote it, and its sixty-six books describe the events through which God has chosen to reveal himself in a decisive and definitive manner. The Bible is a record of God’s actions in history written by inspired persons, who have experienced him firsthand. Our belief that this is the case makes the Bible the most popular book in the world, but this by no means assures us that the Bible is being read and used properly.

The Purpose of the Bible

Although the Bible is a best seller, it is also the most misused and abused book in the world. “There is dynamite enough in the New Testament,” said James Russell Lowell, “if illegitimately applied, to blow all our existing institutions to atoms.”⁵¹ What Lowell says of the New Testament is true of the Old Testament. For this reason it is very important that we discover the legitimate purpose of the Bible. I would like to suggest that the purpose of the Bible is to make us aware of the presence of God in our lives and in our world;

furthermore, the Bible is only secondarily a book, which guides us in our morality. This is true for the Old Testament as well as for the New Testament, even though it is easier to see in the New Testament. It is just as difficult to make a book of laws out of the Old Testament as it is out of the New, but when we begin to read the Bible to gain insights into ordinary religious experience, our difficulty with the Bible is not so great. The opening chapters tell us about communication going on between God and Adam. The historical covenant with God begins with Abraham. The Law was not even written at the time. Jacob recognizes God's presence at Bethel, and struggles with God at Penuel. Moses encounters God at the burning bush; and countless prophets, such as Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel, have visions of God and speak from firsthand experience.

Even Jesus did not use the Old Testament as a book of morals. While he referred to the Old Testament Scriptures, he never felt bound by them. He saw in them a deeper purpose than that of being a book of laws or rules for living. Starting from Jesus' explanation of the Scriptures to the two men walking towards Emmaus, we discover the purpose of the Bible in their classic response: "Were not our hearts burning within us," they cried, "while he was talking to us on the road, while he was opening the scriptures to us?" (Luke 24:32, NRSV) He was talking about the Old Testament Scriptures, which have never been easy to understand and have often needed explanation. Another example of this is the encounter between Philip and the Ethiopian Eunuch. The Eunuch simply could not understand Isaiah 53:7-8. The Holy Spirit led Philip to ask him, "Do you understand what you are reading?" "How can I," he replied, "unless someone guides me?" Philip explained the passage to him, and he believed and was baptized immediately (Acts 8:30-31, and 36, NRSV).

We do not, however, always need an interpreter; sometimes all we need is encouragement to begin reading the

Scriptures at the right time. In the fourth century Augustine of Hippo was burdened down by guilt and a sense of meaninglessness in his life when he heard a small child cry out, "Take up and read! Take up and read!" He picked up the New Testament and opened it to Romans 13:13-14. His life was transformed by the experience. "I had no wish to read further," he said, "and no need. For in that instant, with the very ending of the sentence, it was as though a light of utter confidence shone in my heart, and all the darkness of uncertainty vanished away."⁵² In the twelfth century there was Francis of Assisi, a rich man's son, who was confused about what he should do with his life. Upon hearing the priest read Matthew 10:8-9 from the Bible, he felt that it was speaking directly to him. Francis divested himself of his wealth and married "Lady Poverty," which meant that he committed himself to serving the poor for the rest of his life. God had spoken to him through the Scriptures.⁵³ In the sixteenth century it was Martin Luther who drove himself to the point of exhaustion in an Augustinian monastery. He was trying to justify himself before God. Then he found Paul's letter to the Romans, particularly Romans 1:17, words which changed his life and triggered the Protestant Reformation.⁵⁴ All of these are important examples of how people experienced God's presence in the Bible, but for United Methodists the classic example is the one about John Wesley in a prayer meeting on Aldersgate Street. Wesley was simply sitting there listening to someone else read from Martin Luther's Preface to the Epistle to the Romans. At that moment the experience of God's presence was felt and Wesley himself said: "...I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone for salvation; and an assurance was given me that He had taken away my sins, even mine, and saved me from the law of sin and death."⁵⁵ In every one of these examples these men felt an inward sense of the immediate presence of God, and these experiences changed their lives and gave them new directions. Although

the Holy Spirit lies behind these experiences Bible reading triggered them.

The Necessity of Bible Reading

Perhaps many of us wonder why we have not had similar experiences with the Bible. One reason might be that we, like so many others, talk a great deal about the importance of Bible reading; but rarely do we find time to do it. Emerson Colaw in his book, *Beliefs of a United Methodist Christian*, refers to the problem:

We are not...a bible reading people. In a certain high-school English class 88 percent of the students could not name the four Gospels. One said that three of them are Christianity, Hinduism, and confusion, but he didn't know the fourth. At the University of Denver, a student was asked on a test, "Tell what you know about Moses." He answered frankly, "All I know about Moses is that he is dead."⁵⁶

Most of us have a Bible around the house, almost like a good luck charm; but we seldom open it, and when we do, we only read it on a superficial level.

The Bible is not a book of morals, nor is it simply a book that gives us information about God. Robert McAfee Brown makes clear to us what the Bible is really all about:

The Bible makes it plain that God reveals himself. He does not simply reveal information about himself. Put another way, what we find in the Bible is not an accumulation of data about God, but rather a living God in living relationship with living people.

So the Bible is not a textbook of doctrinal statements (though doctrinal statements can be derived from it) —the Bible is an account of an encounter between God and his people.⁵⁷

While we can have an experience of God by reading the Bible superficially, our experience will also be superficial. The purpose of the Bible is not to inspire superficial experiences, but ordinary experiences that lead us into Christian maturity. This will take an in-depth study of the Bible so that we can approach the Bible in the right way. When we do that we will no longer be concerned about taking the Bible literally or liberally. The Bible exists to inspire us so that we can experience God's presence and power in our lives. The authors of the Bible never expected to be providing literalistic guidelines for the twentieth century, but they did expect to communicate the presence and power of God.⁵⁸

The Tools for Bible Reading

Reading the Bible however is no easy task. This is not a child's book, and it cannot be treated as one. Several things must be done if we are to get the most out of reading the Bible and especially if we want to encounter the living God with its help.

First, we need a good readable translation; and fortunately, there are plenty of modern translations from which to choose. It would be wise also to purchase a Study Bible. This will make it easier to gain insights into the difficult passages of Scripture. One thing we do not need to do is to stop reading the Scriptures simply because we do not understand them. A Study Bible will improve our ability to understand these difficult passages, but we will need to accept also the words of wisdom from Mark Twain, who says: "Most people are bothered by those passages of Scriptures which they cannot understand; but as for me, I have always noticed that the passages in Scripture which trouble me most are those which I do understand."⁵⁹ A fresh translation, a Study Bible, and perhaps even a Bible Handbook will help us to better understand the Bible; but none of these tools will make it any easier for us to accept what the biblical writers have to say to us across the

centuries. Their words will however inspire us to encounter the living God, and that is why they were written.

A good commentary is another tool, which is vital for our understanding of the Bible. Commentaries can be purchased covering the whole Bible or individual books, and both kinds are important. The Scriptures simply cannot be fully understood apart from their historical and cultural context, and it is very important that we not set these things aside simply to apply the Bible to our own situation. We need to understand the context of the biblical writers before we attempt to apply their writings to ourselves; and besides, the most important thing in Bible reading is not the application of the Scriptures to our lives but a personal encounter with the God of the Bible. Those of us who come to know him personally will have his will inscribed deep in our hearts (Jeremiah 31:33).

Finally we need to approach Bible reading systematically. We need an organized plan for reading the entire Bible, and since this is very difficult, it is best done in the context of a group study. Group Bible Study enables us to glean much more from the Scriptures than we would ever do on our own, and group study also helps us to distinguish what is important from what is unimportant. It is more difficult to be dishonest when we study the Bible with others, but not impossible. The most important thing of course is that the group focuses its attention on an encounter with the God of the Bible in the present. Groups can also misuse the Bible, treating it simply as a book of morals, which is commonly done by conservatives and liberals alike. The purpose of the Bible is to inspire in us an ordinary encounter and experience with God. When we read it expecting such, our whole outlook on life will change. In talking about this inner renewal that comes from Bible reading, Thomas Merton said:

By reading the Scripture, I am so renewed that all nature is renewed around me and within me. The sky seems to be a pure, cooler blue, the trees a deeper

green, light is sharper on the outlines of the forests and the hills. The whole world is suddenly charged with the glory of God and I feel fire and music in the earth beneath my feet.⁶⁰

9. THE LORD'S SUPPER

“The Nourishment of the Ordinary Christian Experience”

We need all kinds of nourishment. Our bodies need food to survive, but so do our minds, our hearts, our wills, and our spirits. The food of our mind is truth. The food of our heart is love and beauty. The food of our will is the search for perfection. The food of our spirit however is the experience of the living presence of God in our lives, and it is the Lord's Supper that points us to that presence. That is why the Lord's Supper is the nourishment of the ordinary Christian experience.

The Lord's Supper is the Christian's spiritual food. What is so tragic today is how so many people try to get by on “junk food,” thinking that it will satisfy. By “junk food” I mean our dependence upon alcohol, nicotine, marijuana, and other drugs. Even sex without love can be defined as “junk food.” These things may give temporary satisfaction, but they always let us down when the effects wear off. They satisfy neither the physical nor the spiritual hungers within us. The Lord's Supper on the other hand points us to the “real presence” of God. Charles Wesley describes this sacrament's purpose as follows:

We need not now go up to heaven,
To bring the long-sought Saviour down;
Thou art to all already given,
Thou dost even now Thy banquet crown:
To every faithful soul appear
And show Thy Real Presence here.⁶¹

All that remains is to determine whether the bread and wine are to be taken literally or symbolically, and whether the Lord's Table is to be open to everyone or reserved exclusively for Christians. Let us take a look at these two very important issues. The answers we come up with affect how we experience the living presence of God.

Literal or Symbolic Food?

The idea of the Lord's Supper comes out of the New Testament and is linked to the Passover Feast of Judaism. This Feast, which is celebrated in the Spring to commemorate the deliverance of the Israelites from bondage in Egypt, is considered to be both a "memorial" (a calling to memory of the saving events of the past) and a "thanksgiving" (an expression of gratitude to the God whose grace made deliverance possible). It was this Jewish Feast that served as the "prototype" for the Lord's Supper. The earliest records of the meal come from Paul in 1 Corinthians 11:23-26, which are in substantial agreement with the Synoptic Gospels (Matthew 26:26-29; Mark 14:22-25; and Luke 22:14-20). There are some minor variations in these accounts, but this only shows that they were written before a single standard order had been established. The Gospel of John has no record of the Lord's Supper, but it does assume its institution much earlier than the other Gospels. It is related to the feeding of the multitude, an event that is present in all four Gospels. Following this event the people followed Jesus to the other side of the Lake until he made some very hard sayings concerning his flesh and blood. "Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood," he said, "have eternal life...." (John 6:54, NRSV) Not only will they possess eternal life; they will experience the presence of Christ himself and God their Father. "Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood," continued Jesus, "abide in me, and I in them." (John 6:56, NRSV) Whether one reads about the Lord's Supper in the Synoptic Gospels or its institution in the Gospel of John, one is faced with the same problem of interpretation. Should Jesus be taken literally or symbolically?

By eating the bread and drinking the wine in the Lord's Supper we symbolize our "identity" with Christ and thus receive "eternal life" through him. What happens when we eat and drink the elements of this Sacrament? Roman Catholics take Jesus' words about eating his body and

drinking his blood literally, and have long held to the dogma of transubstantiation. This means that the “substance” of bread and wine are miraculously changed, by consecration, into the “substance” of Christ’s body and blood; while the “accidents” (taste, color, shape, and smell) remain unchanged. This means that the persons who eat the bread and drink the wine actually take into themselves the “real presence” of Christ and that this can even happen where faith is absent. The Lutheran Churches opposed this idea and suggested what is called Consubstantiation, which means that the “real presence” of Christ is experienced with the “substance” of bread and wine, rather than being in them.

Most other churches understand the bread and wine as being symbols. This does not mean that they do not believe in the “real presence” of Christ. Symbols can be very powerful. “The mystery of symbols,” says Frederick Buechner in *The Magnificent Defeat*, “is that a symbol contains some of the power of the thing that it symbolizes. A piece of colored cloth, a flag, for instance, has the power to move men to the same kind of fervor and action that the nation itself can.”⁶² The “real presence” does not have to be “in” or even “with” the elements of bread and wine; rather, the latter are understood as symbols, which point to the “real presence” in our hearts. These elements are not in themselves the “real presence.” They simply evoke faith in us and put us in contact with the “real presence;” hence, the Lord’s Supper functions in the same way, as does the preaching of the Word. “I look to find Thee in Thy Word,” said Charles Wesley, “or at Thy Table meet.”⁶³

Although both the Word and the Lord’s Supper are “means” of receiving God’s grace, the Lord’s Supper is in fact dependent upon the Word. Bring the Word to the Lord’s Supper and you have a Sacrament. The Word must be present in the Lord’s Supper, for the elements of bread and wine are but symbols of what the Word promises. Upon hearing the Word and receiving the Lord’s Supper, we are enabled to

respond in faith. A faith-response to both the Word and the Lord's Supper is necessary to experience the "real presence," but it is also made possible by them. The Lord's Supper does not put the presence into us; it takes us into the presence. We must learn to think in a new way about the Lord's Supper. Christ is not present in the bread and wine, nor is he simply present with them. The feast is held in his presence and the bread and wine carry its participants into that "presence."

An Open or Closed Table?

The most obvious implication of the "real presence" is that the Lord's Supper must be open to all, for we want everyone to experience this presence. Another implication is that this involves community. No one can celebrate this sacrament alone. It is not something a priest or pastor, or any other Christian, can do in private. This is its secret and its focus. "The Lord's Supper," insists Jürgen Moltmann, "is in its very essence a fellowship meal."⁶⁴ It is an inclusive fellowship meal before it can be a sacramental meal. "There is something almost sacramental about breaking bread with one another," says Alan McGinnis, "Have you ever noticed how difficult it is to have dinner with an enemy and remain enemies?"⁶⁵ It is a feast for the inclusive community of faith, and it is only in such a community that the "real presence" can be experienced. Charles Wesley expresses this in one of his hymns about the Lord's Supper.

One with the living bread divine
Which now by faith we eat,
Our hearts and minds and spirits join,
And all in Jesus meet.⁶⁶

We have no right to exclude anyone from the Lord's Table. This feast is a Sacrament, which is defined as a "means of grace." "By 'means of grace,'" said John Wesley, "I understand outward signs, words, or actions, ordained of God, and appointed for this end, to be the ordinary channels whereby He might convey to men, preventing, justifying, or

sanctifying grace.”⁶⁷ Before we use any of the “means of grace” we should be aware of the fact that there is no power in any of them apart from God. The Lord’s Supper has no more power than does preaching and all the other means of grace. Power is only received as God speaks through them. Wesley also called the Lord’s Supper a “converting ordinance,” which means that we can have a religious experience as we partake of the Lord’s Supper. In the early Wesleyan movement conversion occurred at the Lord’s Supper as well as in the preaching services. John Wesley’s mother, Susanna, was converted at the Lord’s Supper, and Wesley was convinced that one single instance of conversion at the Lord’s Supper was enough to overthrow the assertion that it was only for believers.⁶⁸ “Our Lord,” he insisted, “commanded those very men who were then unconverted, who had not yet received the Holy Ghost, who (in the full sense of the word) were not believers, to do this ‘in remembrance’ of Him.”⁶⁹ If the Lord’s Supper points to the “real presence,” then no one ought to be excluded from participation. Jürgen Moltmann agrees and puts it in the strongest possible language.

Because of Christ’s prevenient and unconditional invitation, the fellowship of the table cannot be restricted to people who are “faithful to the church,” or to the “inner circle” of the community. For it is not the feast of the particularly righteous, or the people who think that they are particularly devout; it is the feast of the weary and heavy-laden, who have heard the call to refreshment. We must ask ourselves whether baptism and confirmation ought to go on counting as the presuppositions for “admittance” to the Lord’s Supper. If we remember that Jesus’ meal with tax-collectors and sinners is also present in the Lord’s supper, then the open invitation to it should also be carried “into the highways and byways.”⁷⁰

Therefore Moltmann concludes:

I find no right to refuse eucharistic fellowship to anyone who hears and answers the invitation of the crucified one. ...what does need to be justified is every exclusion, every refusal, and every holding back.⁷¹

The invitation must go out to all for whom Christ died, and since he died for all, everyone must then be made welcome. Charles Wesley again describes it best in one of his hymns.

Come, sinners, to the gospel feast,
Let every soul be Jesus' guest.
You need not one be left behind,
For God hath bid all humankind.⁷²

The community of faith has no right to make any restrictions, whether according to age, denomination, or even religion. The invitation needs to be clear, but once it is made, it must be an open invitation to come to the Lord's Table, in the company of others, to experience the "real" and "ordinary" presence of God.

10. DREAMS

“God’s Language of the Ordinary Christian Experience”

One cannot read the Bible without becoming aware of the fact that dreams and visions are thought to be one very important way that God communicates with his people. Dreams, or similar experiences, are recorded in almost every part of the Bible from Genesis to Revelation, and no clear-cut distinction is made between dreams and visions in the Hebrew of the Old Testament or in the Greek of the New. They are both considered the language of God and are ways by which we experience the ordinary presence of God.

Dreams in the Bible

The first recorded dream is a vision in which God appears to Abram (later called Abraham) in Genesis 15:1ff. God promises a great future and many offspring to him. In Genesis 15:12-16 God speaks again to Abram in his sleep telling him that fulfillment will not come without a period of difficulty. This was only the first of many occasions when God spoke to Abraham and the other patriarchs in this way. Better known are the dreams of Jacob at Bethel and Penuel. When Jacob woke up at Bethel he said, “Surely the LORD is in this place — and I did not know it!” (Genesis 28:16, NRSV) The incident at Penuel is often cited as an example of someone working with a dream until it reveals its truth to him. (Genesis 32:24b-32) Jacob’s favorite son, Joseph, is remembered for his dream interpretations, for which he relied entirely upon God. (Genesis 40:8) Dreams also play an important role in the lives of many of the prophets. Joel, for example, in a well known passage quoted by Peter on the day of Pentecost, says: “Then afterward I will pour out my spirit on all flesh; your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your old men shall dream dreams, and your young men shall see visions.” (Joel 2:28, NRSV) No discussion of dreams in the Old Testament would be complete without mentioning

Daniel. This book has been called “A Romance of the Dream” because it revolves around Daniel’s ability to interpret dreams and visions. King Nebuchadnezzar has a dream, which leaves him deeply troubled. Daniel not only interprets his dream but does so in such a way as to reveal to the King his innermost thoughts (Daniel 2:30).

Dreams not only play an important role in the Old Testament; they are also present throughout the New. Allow me to mention just a few. In the first two chapters of Matthew, for example, there are five dreams reported, each of them crucial to the birth and protection of Jesus. They are as follows: (1) When Joseph found that Mary was pregnant, he was told in a dream that she was pregnant by means of the Holy Spirit (Matthew 1:18-21). (2) The wise men were warned in a dream not to return to tell Herod about Jesus’ birth (Matthew 2:12). (3) Joseph was told in a dream to take his family to Egypt for safety against Herod’s wrath (Matthew 2:13). (4) After the danger subsided, Joseph was again instructed in a dream to return home (Matthew 2:19). (5) In still another dream Joseph was told to settle in Galilee rather than Judea (Matthew 2:22-23). In the remainder of the New Testament the Greek word which is usually translated “dream” appears infrequently, but it is important to recognize that there are many other words and expressions that describe dream like experiences. Some of the more important examples in the New Testament of course are Pilate’s wife who has a troubling dream about Jesus (Matthew 27:19), and Peter who has a dream with important theological consequences in regard to the inclusion of the Gentiles into the Christian Church (Acts 10:9ff.). Closely related to Peter’s dream is Paul’s vision of the Macedonian man calling him to take the Gospel into Europe (Acts 16:9-10). One cannot discuss dreams and visions in the New Testament without including the Book of Revelation, all of which is the result of one man’s dream or vision (Revelation 1:9-11). All this helps us to realize that this method of communication between God

and his people is as important in the New Testament as it was in the Old.

The Source and Value of Dreams

What about today? Can we still accept dreams as one of the ways in which God communicates with us? Could it be that God has never stopped using this method, and that we were just not listening to him in this way? The contemporary psychological study of dreams can help us to understand why they can still be valued as the language of God. It confirms what Paul understood so long ago, that in the totality of our being we possess a body, soul, and spirit (1 Thessalonians 5:23). The Greek word for *body* is “soma” and the word for *soul* is “psyche,” from which comes the frequently used word of our time, “psychosomatic.” At the deepest center of our being is our *spirit* or “pneuma.” It is in this center that the Spirit of God is directly related to us as the source of our being.

What modern psychology has demonstrated to us is that our “psyche” is partly conscious and partly unconscious and that our unconsciousness has a profound effect on the health of our total being. Carl Jung has suggested that there is both a personal unconscious and a collective unconscious, the latter of which contains the stored-up wisdom of millions of years of life. John Sanford explains:

...consciousness would correspond to the tenth of the iceberg above the water, the personal unconscious to nine tenths below the water surface, and the ocean itself to the unknown extent of the collective unconscious.⁷³

Our dreams are valuable because they arise out of the action of God’s presence within us as he seeks to bring into our consciousness a deeper understanding of what is going on in our unconscious life. “If you could see your brain waves during this time, you’d see what are called alpha waves, the characteristic markings of peaceful meditation.”⁷⁴ These

dreams give us pictures of what is actually taking place within the very depths of our being. John Sanford puts it in this way:

On the psychological level, this means that dreams originate from our inner center or Self, which is the self-regulating and guiding function of the psyche. An experience with the Self is like an experience with God. Experientially the two are indistinguishable, and the Self, while it cannot be said to be identical with the Transcendent Deity, does seem to be, as Jung once put it, “a vessel for divine grace.”⁷⁵

When our conscious is in conflict with our unconscious, the result can be either psychological or physical illness, or both. When the conscious and the unconscious are brought into harmony, then we move toward the kind of wholeness, which God intends for us all. “One of the primary functions of our dreams,” writes Edward Bauman, “is to help us overcome this separation and bring about harmony and wholeness.”⁷⁶

M. Scott Peck, in his book, *The Road Less Traveled*, approaches this from both a psychological and theological perspective. He accepts Jung’s division of the unconscious into a “personal” and “collective” unconscious. “In my vision,” says Peck, “the collective unconscious is God; the conscious is man as individual, and the personal unconscious is the interface between them.”⁷⁷ Peck insists that 95% of the human mind operates in the “unconscious” and only 5% of the human mind operates on the conscious level, and that our “unconscious” mind “contains riches beyond imagination.”⁷⁸ “One of the...ways in which we know of the existence of this vast but hidden realm of the mind and the wealth it contains is through our dreams.” Other ways would be through “idle thoughts” and “freudian slips,”⁷⁹ but dreams are by far the most significant. They produce dramas to help the conscious mind understand problems of which it has been previously unaware; hence, Peck describes the significance of dreams for psychotherapy:

I must confess that there are many dreams whose significance completely eludes me, and it is tempting to wish petulantly that the unconscious would often have the decency to speak to us in clearer language. However, on those occasions when we succeed in making the translation, the message always seems to be one designed to nurture our spiritual growth. In my experience, dreams that can be interpreted invariably provide helpful information to the dreamer. This assistance comes in a variety of forms: as warnings of personal pitfalls; as guides to the solution of problems we have been unable to solve; as proper indication that we are wrong when we think we are right, and as correct encouragement that we are right when we think we are probably wrong; as sources of necessary information about ourselves that we are lacking; as direction-finders when we feel lost; and as pointers to the way we need to go when we are floundering.⁸⁰

Spiritual growth is the “evolution of consciousness.” The “collective unconscious,” to put it plainly, claims Peck, “is God. God within us. We were part of God all the time. God has been with us all along, is now, and always will be.”⁸¹ The interface between us (our consciousness), and God (our collective unconscious) is our conscience (our personal unconscious). Through this interface God tries to speak to us, sometimes in a positive manner, but sometimes in a negative manner. Peck explains the difference:

Being this interface, it is inevitable that the personal unconscious should be a place of some turmoil, the scene of some struggle between God’s will and the will of the individual. I have previously described the unconscious as a benign and loving realm. This I believe it to be. But dreams, though they contain messages of loving wisdom also contain many signs of conflict; while they may be pleasantly self-

renewing, they may also be tumultuous, frightening nightmares.⁸²

Mental or spiritual illness, for Peck, is not the product of the unconscious; rather, it is “a disordered relationship between the conscious and the unconscious.” This means that a major task of mental and spiritual growth is to bring one’s “conscious self” into harmony with reality, and this is done by allowing the “collective unconscious,” which is wiser than we are, to speak to us; and one of the ways in which this happens is through dreams, those little miracles or parables from our unconscious, which try to bring us into harmony with reality and God.

The Problem of Dream Interpretation

One of our biggest problems with dreams is that they are so often disorienting and difficult to interpret. We would like to think that God would use a simpler way to communicate with us, and yet we discover that the disciples were just as confused over Jesus’ use of the parables. Dreams are similar to parables. They are full of imagery and symbolism, which need to be interpreted. They are unique for each one of us, and this means that there does not exist any universal dream dictionary, which can help us with interpretation. What is interpreted in one way for one person needs to be interpreted differently for another. Others may help us to understand our dreams to some extent, but in the end we are the only ones who can verify the significance of a particular dream.

At least three things must be mentioned when we discuss dreams. The first has to do with the purpose of dreams, which is not to tell us about someone else, but to inform us about ourselves. Thus the first question to be asked about a dream is: “What is this dream telling me about myself?” Approximately 90% of our psyche resides in our unconscious. We are not even aware of it. Dreams bring it to the surface, that is, to our consciousness. In this way God communicates something very important to us about

ourselves. This is the primary purpose of our dreams. The second thing that needs to be dealt with is the significance of the re-occurring dream. Repetitive dreams inform us that something is going on in our psyche that needs to be worked out. This is God's way of telling us something about ourselves that needs to be resolved in order to bring about harmony between our conscious and unconscious self. The last thing that needs to be mentioned is the dream that predicts the future. This is the pre-cognitive dream. We have all heard of such dreams. Abraham Lincoln had a disturbing dream of this type just prior to his assassination. He dreamed that he saw his own body lying in state in the White House. It caused him to turn to the Bible, where his eyes fell upon Jacob's dream at Bethel (Genesis 28). Lincoln found other passages related to dreams as well and concluded: "If we believe the Bible, we must accept the fact that, in the old days, God and his angels came to men in their sleep and made themselves known in dreams."⁸³ In spite of the existence of such pre-cognitive dreams, it is usually acknowledged that most of our dreams do not predict the future; rather, they tell us important truths about ourselves. This is one of God's ways of communicating these things to us.

The Psychological and Spiritual Need to Dream

We all have dreams. It is said that the average person dreams for approximately one and one-half hours for every eight hours of sleep. In line with Sigmund Freud, many psychologists contend that without the release of suppressed thought in dreams, our mental health would deteriorate rapidly.⁸⁴ I contend the same for our spiritual health. We seem to have both a psychological and spiritual need to dream. This means that we have an extra hour and one-half to spend with God that does not conflict with our daily schedule. We are already experiencing God's presence, and all we have to do is to learn how to remember and interpret it from our dreams. This same idea is expressed in *Pilgrim's*

Progress when Christiana listens to Mercy's dream and says to her:

God speaks once, yea twice, yet we perceive it not, in a dream, in a vision of the night.... We need not, when a-bed, lie awake to talk with God; He can visit us while we sleep, and cause us to hear his voice.⁸⁵

God calls us out of our brokenness into a whole new life with him through our dreams; thus, we can experience his presence even in our sleep.

It would be a mistake however to consider every dream as a message from God. Some dreams are; others are not. M. Scott Peck, in helping patients see the value of their dreams, comes to the following conclusion:

Some patients, aware of the fact that dreams contain answers to their problems, will avidly seek these answers by deliberately, mechanically and with considerable effort, recording each and every one of their dreams in complete detail, and will literally bring to their sessions reams of dreams. But their dreams are of little help to them.⁸⁶

Peck recommends a passive approach to the unconscious. We should stop searching for dreams and simply allow the unconscious to make the choice as to which dreams should enter our consciousness. This may well result in a decrease in the quantity of dreams we experience, but those dreams which do enter our consciousness will be of a much higher quality and therefore much more valuable to us. According to Peck, we do not have to strive to dream to discover their value for us.

To utilize dreams effectively we must work to be aware of their value and to take advantage of them when they come to us, and we must also work sometimes at not seeking them or expecting them. We must let them be true gifts.⁸⁷

Dreams do not have to be created. We have a psychological and spiritual need to dream. They represent one way God uses to bring us into harmony with himself so that we can experience his ordinary presence in our lives.⁸⁸

11. WORK

“The Arena of the Ordinary Christian Experience.”

Meeting God in Our Work

“God,” said Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, “presents himself to us through the work he has given us to do.” “There is a sense in which he is at the tip of my pen, my spade, my brush, my needle—of my heart and of my thought.” If this is true then work belongs in the same category as Bible Reading, the Lord’s Supper, and Prayer, and all the other ways in which we ordinarily experience God. Work is more than what we do to earn a salary. This understanding of work is not automatic for most of us; therefore, we need to come to a new appreciation of the role of work in our lives. Teilhard de Chardin challenges us to try:

Try, with God’s help, to perceive the connection—even physical and natural—which binds your labor with the building of the kingdom of heaven; try to realize that heaven itself smiles upon you and through your works, draws you to itself; then, as you leave church for the noisy streets, you will remain with only one feeling, that of continuing to immerse yourself in God.

Our first inclination is to say that the above is only true for those of us who have work in which this connection is obvious. Brother Lawrence, however, contradicted any such notion when he spoke of his job in the kitchen. His words have become a classic example of the connection between mundane work and an experience of the presence of God.

The time of business does not with me differ from the time of prayer, and in the noise and clatter of my kitchen, while several persons are at the same time calling for different things, I possess God in as great tranquility as if I were upon my knees at the Blessed Sacrament.

Work is the ordinary arena in which we experience the presence of God. We work in order to provide each other with the basic necessities—and luxuries—of life. The workplace also brings us together in community and provides us with personal dignity. The unemployed know with painful clarity the importance of this community and dignity which work provides, for they have had to do without it. It would be foolish to say that all work provides this community and dignity, but all work ought to perform such a function. There ought to be a connection between human labor and God's will, but that would require a change in our priorities. W. D. Weatherford describes the way in which we need to approach our vocation:

The most important calling is not necessarily the one that pays the most. It is the one that offers the chance to serve the human family most. If we ever become really Christian, every [person] will choose the work where he can render the biggest service, not the task which will serve him most. If we expect to have an experience with God in our work, we must choose it on some such basis as this.

Many of us do not experience God in our work because the vocation we have chosen is simply being used to earn money for us. We do not even begin to associate it with a calling from God. The failure to do so makes us unable to experience him in the workplace.

Many of us are like the man who dreamed that Jesus came to his home to stay a few days. One morning, thinking to please his guest, he said, "I will show you the church where I worship." But Jesus said, "No; show me the business where you work."

How we conduct our business is not only a reflection of our faith, but the place in which we encounter God as well. "To work," according to the Benedictines, "is to pray;" or as Kahil Gibran puts it, work is "love made visible."

It is only as we begin to see work as a calling from God that we can experience him in work. When we think of work as degrading or simply something that must be endured to earn a living, we will not expect to experience him in the workplace.

The Effect of Sin on Work

What is it that enables some of us to experience the presence of God in our work even when the kind of work we do seems to be so trivial? Does the answer lie in making our work more creative or in changing our attitude while we are engaged in such work? Both the work and our attitude are important, for they affect one another.

The story of creation shows us the effect that sin has had on our attitude toward work. After Adam was created, God placed him "...in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it." (Genesis 2:15, NRSV) There was no indication that this work was a curse to him. That does not come until after he has sinned. "Because you have listened to the voice of your wife," said God to Adam, "cursed is the ground because of you; in toil you shall eat of it all the days of your life." (Genesis 3:17b, NRSV) Work gets in our way as a means of experiencing the presence of God only because of our sinful condition, which affects our attitude toward God and subsequently the work, which we do.

Until our attitude towards work changes, we will not be motivated to making work more creative. Our attitude changes as we draw close to God, and the curse is overcome. The work may be the same, but we will not be the same. On the other hand, the change that takes place in us may motivate us to change jobs; and if that is the case, we will gladly do it. Lower wages will not stand in the way of the change, for our new attitude recognizes that money is not the primary reason why we work.

The Purpose of Work

Work enables us to experience fulfillment, and in that fulfillment, God's presence. John R. W. Scott in his article, "Reclaiming the Biblical Doctrine of Work," gives three purposes for work which results in a sense of fulfillment drawing us into the ordinary presence of God. They are as follows: (1) Work is intended for the fulfillment of the worker; (2) Work is intended for the benefit of the community; and, (3) Work is intended for the glory of God. To gain the perspective stated by Scott, we need to see our work in relationship to God. God had a purpose in creating the world, and his act of creation is referred to in the Bible as "work." (Genesis 2:2) We too need a purpose and a sense of creativity in the work that we do. We need to become aware of the fact that we are working together with God (1 Corinthians 3:9). As Martin Luther put it, "God even milks the cow through you."

If we do not see our work as creative and useful, we will not be able to find any meaning and fulfillment in it. It will become a curse. Dostoevsky, reflecting on his prison-camp experiences in Siberia, said:

I have sometimes thought that the way to crush and annihilate a human being completely would be to set him to do an absolutely senseless and useless thing. If he were condemned to pour water from one tub to another and back again or to pound sand in a mortar, or to carry a heap of earth backward and forward, I am convinced that he would either commit suicide within a few days or murder some of his fellow-sufferers in order to suffer death at once and be delivered from his moral torture, shame, and degradation.

Unfortunately, the destructiveness of meaningless work is one of our most pressing problems in contemporary society; moreover, it is what causes us to say at the end of the week, "Thank God it's Friday." This attitude is evidence that we are

not experiencing the presence of God in our work. Compare that attitude with the worker quoted in Kenneth Hilderbrand's book, *Achieving Real Happiness*, who says, "Sometimes it hardly seems right to accept my salary. I have so much fun in my work that I'd pay for the chance to do it."

Creative work fulfills the worker, benefits the community, and glorifies God. It makes us enjoy our work, but a further word of caution needs to be given. It is possible to become so involved in our work that we actually fail to perceive the presence of God in it.

The Importance of the Sabbath

We are not to find work so attractive that we never want to rest from it. This is a real danger for those of us who really enjoy our work, and especially for those of us who can see a relationship between our work and the Lord's. Harry Denman, for example, seldom took any time off. He gave as his reason the following: "I have a vacation all the time. I am enjoying what I am doing so I have a vacation three hundred sixty-five days a year. I am trying to do what I believe the Lord wants me to do."

The danger of becoming a workaholic is even greater for religious workers, but it is still a sickness. Everyone needs a change of pace, even those who work in religion. Some of the most helpful insights come from the so-called secular world. "There's a feeling," said James Dunlap, Vice President of TRW, "that work isn't everything these days. You've got to stop and smell the flowers along the way."

If we do nothing but work we will soon burn ourselves out, destroy meaning in our lives, and make ourselves unable to experience God's presence in our work. The attitude that we have to work all the time is wrong. To say that someone "worked himself to death" is not a compliment; it is a tragedy. We ought not to feel guilty for resting. Even God rested from his creative work:

And on the seventh day God finished the work that he had done, and he rested on the seventh day from all the work that he had done. So God blessed the seventh day and hallowed it, because on it God rested from all the work that he had done in creation. (Genesis 2:2-3, NRSV)

God never intended for us to become workaholics. “Six days you shall labor and do all your work,” he says in Exodus 20:9-10 (NRSV), “but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the LORD your God; you shall not do any work....” In Exodus 31:15 (NRSV) the violation of the Sabbath is taken very seriously. “...whoever does any work on the Sabbath day shall be put to death.”

The above does not mean that we must become legalists and follow slavishly all the laws that grew up around this commandment regarding what can or cannot be done on the day of rest. The Sabbath was made for us, not us for the Sabbath. After healing someone on the Sabbath and being criticized for it, Jesus replied: “My Father is still working, and I also am working.” (John 5:17, NRSV) This does not mean that Jesus never rested. We know that he did, as did God. We do not have to become legalists, but neither are we to give up the day of rest, as many of us have done. We may take days off for a change of pace, but many of us continue to work as hard on our day off as we do on the job. We have forgotten how to rest, and this makes it difficult for us to experience the presence of God in our work. It also makes it difficult to experience him in our play. Just as we need to make our work creative and fulfilling, we also need to nurture “creative rest,” lest we become depleted and lose the sense of fulfillment and an awareness of God’s presence in our work. In *Unwilling Journey*, Helmut Gollwitzer tells a moving story of his five years as a German war prisoner in Russia (1945-50). He describes the unbearable dehumanization that occurred among the prisoners when Sunday was taken away from them as a day of rest and they were given their work

assignments as usual.

The day of rest serves to restore a sense of meaning in our lives so that when we approach our work we can experience the presence of God, even when our work is mundane and unexciting. The fact that God can be experienced in our work gives us a reason for going to work and trying to make our work creative so that we can glorify him through it.

12. SERVICE

“The final test of the Ordinary Christian Experience.”

The Final Test

Service is the final test of not only the ordinary Christian Experience, but of every Christian Experience. Prodigal sons and daughters, who finally come home (Luke 15:11-24), cannot fully experience the love of their Father until, to use Edward Bauman’s imagery, they are willing to walk with the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37) along the Jericho road.⁸⁹ Some of the most important experiences of God’s presence will come to us in this outward journey of service to others. It may well be that when we involve ourselves in the world we will discover that God is more real to us in the midst of our ministry to others than in the solitude of our own personal prayers. Service to others releases the power and love of God in our own lives. Caring about others makes us aware of how much God cares for us. It is in serving others that our experience of God finds fulfillment and completeness.

Jesus paved the way for us by giving an example of what service means. “For the Son of Man,” said Jesus, “came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.” (Mark 10:45, NRSV) Bonhoeffer was so impressed by this example of service, that he called Jesus “the man for others.”⁹⁰ We too are to become men and women for others. The way has been paved for us to enter into union with God through service. The most important scriptural reference to this manner of experiencing God’s presence is Matthew 25:31-46. It does not matter which Church we belong to or even what we believe. Everything finally comes down to whether or not we have loved and served those in need. A whole list of persons in need is given, and our destiny depends upon whether we have done what is on the list.

The Great Surprises

Two surprises surface in this parable. In the first surprise there are those who did not know that they were serving Christ when they fed the hungry, gave drink to the thirsty, received strangers into their homes, clothed the naked, cared for the sick, and visited the prisoners. In the second surprise there are those who are not able to understand how their refusal to do these things had anything to do with their relationship with Christ. Jesus spelled it out for both groups when he said, “Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.” (Matthew 25:40 or 45, NRSV) All this was a surprise for both groups because neither of them realized that there was any relationship between serving others and serving Christ, between making friends with others and making friends with Christ, and between knowing others and knowing Christ.

There is no reason, however, to be surprised as we serve. Christians know that service rendered to others is rendered to Christ and that it is also done in the name of Christ. Christ stands in front of us as well as behind us. We open up the channels through which God’s love and presence can flow, and we meet that same presence in front of us when we become involved in loving and serving others.

Three Kinds of Service

The kind of service in which we become involved is also important. Service is concerned with both persons and the structures, which affect them. It is not simply a question of ministering to persons or changing structures; rather, it is a question of doing both at the same time, although this does not mean that everyone must be fully involved in both.

The example of people stumbling off of a cliff helps to illustrate the dilemma we all face in becoming involved. Where should we be, at the top of the cliff, or at the bottom? Someone needs to be at the bottom administering first aid to

those who have fallen off; but someone also needs to be at the top building barricades to keep people from falling off. Others need to be some distance from the cliff trying to prevent people from even wandering too close to the edge. The same person cannot be in all three places at the same time, but the person at the bottom should not resent the person at the top, or the person farther back. Neither should the person at the top “look down upon” the person ministering to persons who have fallen off the cliff.

Mother Teresa is did a tremendous job on the streets of Calcutta ministering to the dying, but someone needs to find ways of preventing the misery and human suffering that she found there. This means that persons are needed at the top of the cliff to change the structures so that more social justice might become possible; and although this latter task may sound less personal, it is just as important. It is in all three of these ministries of serving that we express the love of God and encounter his ordinary presence at the same time.

Service begins at Home

Many of us find it easier to serve strangers than to serve persons we know, especially members of our own family. Our close friends and our family also need our love. It is very unfortunate that some of those who are most active in service to others have such terrible relationships with those closest to them. Sometimes a bad relationship with one’s husband or wife drives one into finding fulfillment by serving others. While we can experience God’s presence in such service to others, we must also be aware of how important it is to love and serve those who are closest to us. They need our love too.

In summing up the great commandment Jesus draws attention to the fact that we are to love our neighbor as we love ourselves (Mark 12:31). We are not fully equipped to love strangers until we can love our own family, relatives, and friends. Our ability to love others depends upon our

ability to love and receive love from those persons in our own inner circle. The writer of 1 John 4:12 (NRSV) puts it this way: "...if we love one another, God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us." When his love has been perfected in us, then we are empowered to serve others; and in serving others we shall also experience the ordinary presence of God.

The Twofold Direction of Service

The wonderful thing about experiencing God's ordinary presence in service is that it works two ways. The person rendering the service experiences God's presence and the person receiving the service experiences it as well. Sometimes it is difficult to discern who is serving and who is receiving. My wife and I served as missionaries in Sarawak, Malaysia from 1968 to 1976, and more often than not, we felt like the people were serving us. I heard other missionaries say the same thing. We went out to share Christian love with nonChristians, but discovered that what they were sharing with us was frequently more Christian than what we shared with them. It became very difficult to distinguish between who was serving and who was being served.

On one occasion a group of Christians came to the area where we were serving to share their Christian witness with the people. They understood neither the language nor the culture, and so some of us went along with them to translate and interpret what they had to say. Their intention was to witness and then go home. Little did they know, even though we tried to tell them, that the people were going out of their way to make them welcome. They served them the best food they had to offer, and yet, little or no gratitude was shown. What was expressed was a grumbling over the food that was placed before them. We knew that it was the best the people had to offer, and we tried to tell them that, but our words fell on deaf ears.

When members of the group stood up to share their Christian witness, they referred to how God answered their

prayers and provided them with material blessings. Their arrogance got in the way of the ordinary Christian experience because all they did was to disturb the people, who began to question why such a God would bestow upon them material blessings, while they lived in poverty. They too had prayed, but they could hardly grow enough rice to survive; and yet, out of the little they had, they shared their best. Who was serving whom? I have usually interpreted Matthew 25:35 as an act of service on the part of the rich to the poor, but frequently I have seen the poor serve the rich. The final test, of the ordinary Christian experience, will be given by Christ himself, when he says to us all, rich and poor alike, “I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me....” (Matthew 25:35, NRSV) When we can receive as well as give, then we will experience the living presence of God.

The Highest Example of Service

As Jesus became the channel through which others could experience God’s ordinary presence, we too are to follow his model in rendering service to others and receiving it from them. It is through such giving and receiving that both we, and they experience the presence of God. Our calling to service is expressed beautifully in Lois Shank Hertzler’s poem:

He came
giving us an example
of what it means to serve

He comes
when we stoop to help another
lift his heavy load

He came
obedient to the Light
offering to show us the way

He comes
when we kneel in total commitment
giving His Spirit full sway

He came
giving His all for us
without complaint

He comes
when we care so much for others
that self-aggrandizement loses its charm

Come, Gracious Spirit, come
permeate every service we perform
until others feel Your presence here.⁹¹

13. FRIENDSHIP

“The goal of the Ordinary Christian Experience”

The Goal of Life

According to Genesis 2:18 (NRSV), loneliness was one of the first things that God declared “not good.” When God created Adam and saw that he was lonely, he responded by creating animals and birds for him, but they could not cure his loneliness. Eve was destined to be his companion. While this was the initiation of the institution of marriage, it was also the initiation of companionship. Friendship, not procreation, became the first purpose of marriage, and of life itself.

Friendship is a gift from God and every human being’s goal in life. “A friend’s relation to a friend,” said Martin Buber, “is a ‘simile of the relation to God.’”⁹² Friendship is the goal of the ordinary Christian experience because in making friends, we come to know God himself. Leslie Weatherhead, in *The Transformed Friendship*, illustrates the point:

...if God can get near to us in inanimate things, He must be able to get much nearer to us through our fellows? If He can speak to me in the tones of the wind, cannot He say much more to me in the vibrant tones of my friend’s voice? If the sight of a flower can speak to me of tenderness—and I think that is His voice—then, as I look into the eyes of my friend, how much nearer can God come, how much more clearly can He speak?⁹³

If we can see God in beautiful sunsets, in walks by the seashore, and in magnificent mountain scenes, think of how much more we can see God in the eyes of a friend. “Hush, I pray you!” said Browning, “What if those friends happen to be God?”⁹⁴

All of nature is but the expression of God's handiwork, but His dwelling place is in His people, whom he made in His own image. While it is true that many of us do not express that image very well, the imaging of God is our very purpose for living. There is something very social about the image of God. We cannot image God by ourselves. "I looked for my soul," said Susan Polis Schultz, "but my soul I could not see. I looked for my God, but my God eluded me. I looked for a friend, and then I found all three."⁹⁵ The path to God passes through deepening relationships with friends.

Friends and Acquaintances

"There are plenty of acquaintances in the world," says an old Chinese Proverb, "but very few real friends."⁹⁶ Why is this so? The reason is very simple. Friendship takes time and effort. Did you ever consider, for example, that you probably had more friends as a child than you do as an adult? You also had more time to spend nurturing those friendships. More time could be found in adulthood if priorities were rearranged, but most of us find it difficult to do this; and so we go on making acquaintances rather than friends.

The difference between a friend and an acquaintance is clear. Friends have time for you. Acquaintances do not. Overcoming this difference is mighty important. Developing friendships is no luxury; it is a necessity for meaningful living. I would go so far as to say that if everyone of us had at least one good friend, whom we trusted fully, and who genuinely cared for us, we would have little need for counselors, psychologists, and psychiatrists. "Two are better than one," says Ecclesiastes 4:9-10 (NRSV), "because they have a good reward for their toil. For if they fall, one will lift up the other; but woe to one who is alone and falls and does not have another to help."

We do not need many friends, nor are we capable of developing many friendships. One might say that Jesus had twelve close friends, but even among them, three—Peter,

James, and John—stood out. In John 15:12-15 (NRSV) he shared with his disciples (friends) the requirements of friendship. They are worth repeating:

This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you. I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father.

Jesus was only referred to as a friend in two passages. The first one was mentioned above, and the second one can be found in Luke 7:34 (NRSV), where he is called “a friend of tax collectors and sinners!” He was called their friend because he found time for them, but in reality, he did not share the same friendship with them that he shared with his disciples. No one, not even Jesus, had time for more than a few deep friendships.

The Fear of Friendship

Most people have a lot of acquaintances, but few friends. We may desire friends, but we fear either the deeper relationship that comes with friendship, or else we fear losing the friends we have made. In such a mobile society as ours, we are forced to make friends constantly, and for some people that is a very painful process. Who has not encountered families that move so frequently, that to prevent the pain of saying goodbye, they no longer say hello. They may desire friends, but the process of making them and losing them is too painful to bear; and so they have many acquaintances, but few friends. Those who are not constantly involved in making friends will soon find themselves alone. The tragic thing about their loneliness is that it will also be loneliness from God. The fear of friendship works against itself.

We must overcome our fear of friendship. “God,” said Ralph Waldo Emerson, “evidently does not intend for us all to be rich, or powerful, or great, but he does intend us all to be friends.”⁹⁷ Friendship is a gift from God to give us joy and an incentive to carry on his work in the world. Most of us recognize that the pain is not in making friends, but in losing them. This inevitably happens as we are separated by distance and circumstance. I had a friend whom I went through college and seminary with, and when we were separated by distance, his remark was, “Christians never say, ‘Goodbye.’ They say, ‘So long, I’ll see you later.’”

Although distance and death may cause friendships to fade, they do not destroy them completely. I cannot imagine anyone having more difficulty making friends than someone like Helen Keller, both blind and deaf; and how painful it must have been for her to be separated from friends by distance and death. Here is what she says about it: “With the death of every friend I love...a part of me has been buried...but their contribution to my being of happiness, strength and understanding remains to sustain me in an altered world.”⁹⁸

Friendships may fade, but they never end; and they contribute greatly to our personal happiness and wellbeing. They also contribute to our knowledge of God, and so regardless of how painful it might be to make and lose friends, we enter into such relationships with courage and faith, trusting that God will provide the context in which our friendships will last forever. Such was the comment of William Cowper, the English poet and hymn writer, when he ended a letter to one of his friends:

For you must know that I should not love you half so well, if I did not believe you would be my friend to eternity. There is not room enough for friendship to unfold itself in full bloom in such a nook of a life as this. Therefore I am, and must and will be, Yours for ever.⁹⁹

In eternity, true friends are never lost; but in life, new friends must constantly be made. The friends I had as a child were different from the friends I had in high school, and the friends I had in high school were different from the friends I had in college. Each time I changed my residence or my vocation, I was forced to leave old friends behind and form new friendships. We ought not to be afraid of this. Friendships may live on for an eternity, but new circumstances require new friendships. As painful as that might seem, we need to overcome our fear of making new friends, lest we lose them. There is indeed pain as friends separate, but there is even more pain in never forming friendships at all.

How to Make Friends

While everyone needs to learn how to make friends, it must be said at the outset that making “many” friends is not the objective. Friendship costs a great deal, and no one has the energy to pay the price for more than a few close friendships. Those who appear to have so many friends may have only a large number of acquaintances. Friendships are costly, and no one can afford more than a few at any given time.

Since we are constantly changing friends as we change location and vocation, it will be helpful to understand what is involved in forming friendships. “The very effort to go shopping for friends,” writes Alan McGinnis in *The Friendship Factor*, “works against itself.” McGinnis goes on to describe how we make friends:

The birth of friendship occurs not when one gets a telescope or periscope and starts scanning the horizon of acquaintance or looking above and beyond it. Instead it stands its best chance when there has been a renovation of the person, a move toward becoming open. When the first chink of openness appears in what has once been a closed-circle personality,

friendship has a chance. And once it begins its work, more openness follows and the open circle grows. So do the friendships.¹⁰⁰

Thus, friendship, according to McGinnis, is a gift of God, which only becomes possible when we learn how to build more windows and fewer walls. We will find it difficult to form friendships until we have learned the art of being a friend.

What is it that stands in our way of being a friend? Dr. Eugene Kennedy, professor of psychology at Loyola University has written a book entitled, *On Being a Friend*, and in his book he gives several reasons why Americans find it so difficult to form friendships. Some of the reasons include the high mobility of families, rapidly changing social conditions, and the obsession with the superficial things in life. The primary cause of a “friendless society” he insists is the emphasis that society puts on the “self.” In an interview in *U.S. News*, Eugene Kennedy said, “People have difficulty in knowing how to go about making friends because our society has told them that self-gratification will make them successful and happy. ...friendship is a dynamic relationship in which we must yield something of ourselves before we can get back from others.”¹⁰¹ Many of us are unwilling to make the effort or the sacrifice necessary to be a friend to others; and consequently, many of us have no friends. We want to make friends, but we do not know how to be friends.

It is not a simple matter of making friends, or even of being friends. To some extent we discover friends. Forming a friendship does involve the process of getting close to another person, and although it begins with openness, the process cannot be forced. Stephen Johnson suggests what he calls a one-two-three rule: “First, reach out; second, notice the reaction; third, move forward, stop, or back up, depending on the signals you receive.”¹⁰² That is good advice. Happy are they who discover the gift of friendship, for it is one of God’s higher gifts. It involves many things,

but above all it requires that its recipients move beyond themselves and learn how to appreciate whatever is noble and loving in others. “The more we love, the better we are;” said Jeremy Taylor, “and the greater our friendships are, the dearer we are to God.”¹⁰³ It is not the number of friendships; however, that make us dearer to God, but the quality of those friendships.

How We Experience God in a Friendship?

Some time ago my wife put an Argus Poster up in our bedroom which pictures a couple standing together under a tree near a beautiful lake. They are not looking at the lake, but into one another’s eyes. The caption on this poster says, “The closer we come to God, the closer we come to one another.” I would like to change this caption, not because I disagree with it, but because it points to a two way street. We do indeed come closer to one another as we come close to God, but the opposite is also true. “The closer we come to one another, the closer we come to God.” This is the ordinary path to Christian Experience. According to Genesis 1:26-27 God made us in his image, and although we have distorted that image, deep human relationships enable us to see God more clearly. Friendship, whether in or outside of marriage, takes us into those deep human relationships, that enable us to see God more clearly. This is true because we have been created in his image.

When we talk about being made in God’s image, we are talking about personality rather than physical appearance. Many attempts have been made to put the essence of the image of God into a few words, such as self-consciousness, reason, self-determination, freedom of the will, moral capacity, love, and immortality; but it is very difficult to reduce the image of God to one concept. Douglas Wingeier does a better job of describing the image of God as personality when he deals with the biblical teaching of it as a whole:

In the Old Testament, God is pictured as feeling, anger (Exod. 4:14; Isa. 34:2), wrath (II Kings 22:13; Ps. 90:7), hatred (Isa. 1:14; Amos 5:21), sorrow and grief (Gen. 6:6, 7), displeasure (Ps. 2:5; 60:1), jealousy (Exod. 20:5; Zeph. 1:8), pity (Joel 2:18), compassion (Ps. 78:38; Mic. 7:19), steadfast love (Exod. 34:6, 7; Lam. 3:22), love (Hos. 11:1-4; Jer. 31:3), delight (Deut. 1:15), pleasure (I Chron. 29:17), patience (Jer. 15:15), and rejoicing (Isa. 65:19).

In the person of his son Jesus Christ, God felt pain inflicted by Pilate's soldiers, fear in the garden, rejection at the last supper, discouragement over Jerusalem, impatience with the disciples, and loneliness on the cross. On the other hand, he also knew the pleasure of a wedding feast, the security of a carpenter's home, the love of an understanding mother and loyal followers, a sense of achievement from healing and teaching, a feeling of fulfillment in being faithful, and a sense of wholeness through serving as the means of reconciling the world to himself.¹⁰⁴

One has to keep in mind all of the aspects of human personality—anger and love, for example—when one says, as does Colossians 1:15 (NRSV), that “He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation.” We, like him, bear the image of God, but in our case, image implies distance as well as likeness. This was not true for Jesus. In him “...the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth.” (John 1:14 NRSV) We are all children of God, made in his image, but we have distorted the image, and so it is not enough to simply look into the eyes of a friend. Our friendships must include Jesus Christ, who helps us to clear away the distortion, making deeper friendships possible. As the distortions melt away, we have an ordinary Christian Experience; and we see God in the eyes of our friend.

14. SUFFERING

“The Pain of the Ordinary Christian Experience”

Why do We Suffer?

The reality of suffering, challenges the affirmation that God is present and at work in our history. If he is truly present, we think, then why does he allow suffering to take place? If God is present in history, then he must be either powerless or evil to allow suffering to exist. The classic work that struggles with this problem is the Book of Job. Job is a righteous person who is faithful to God, but he is also a successful person for whom everything has gone right. Satan suggests to God that Job’s faithfulness is due to the fact that he has always experienced God’s blessings. God responds to Satan by allowing him to put Job to the test. Through a combination of events, triggered both by natural and human causes, Job loses all of his possessions, his children, and finally his health. His friends—Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar—suggest to him that he is suffering all these calamities because of past sins.

Thus, two of the traditional reasons for suffering are suggested very early in the Book of Job; and these reasons are that suffering exists as (1) a test of faith, or (2) a punishment for sin.

A fourth friend, Elihu, suggests that the existence of suffering in Job’s life has a redemptive purpose. It is corrective rather than punitive. Elihu tells Job that his suffering exists not to punish him, but to rehabilitate him. It is God’s way of getting him to turn away from his sins. While Job admits that he is not perfect, he never admits that his shortcomings were serious enough to warrant all the suffering he has had to endure.

In the end Job finally experiences the presence of God in his suffering, but his question as to why he has had to suffer

so much never really gets answered. He simply learns that “experiencing the presence of God” enables him to trust in God’s goodness and justice and he becomes confident that the last word has not yet been spoken in regard to suffering.

In addition to suffering as a test of faith, as a punishment for sin (punitive), and as redemption from sin (corrective), I believe there is a fourth reason for suffering. This fourth reason has to do with reconciliation. Suffering exists to wake us up out of our apathy, and to make us aware of our dependence upon God. “God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks in our conscience,” writes C. S. Lewis in *The Problem of Pain*, “but shouts in our pains: it is his megaphone to rouse a deaf world.”¹⁰⁵ Suffering therefore exists to reconcile us to God, to make us his friends. It has a purpose, and part of that purpose is to help us experience the loving presence of God.

“But,” someone may ask at this point, “Why should those suffer who are already friends of God? Should not they of all people be spared?” In discussing some of these reasons for suffering, James Cone, in his book, *God of the Oppressed*, suggests that their suffering is for the sake of others.¹⁰⁶ It is not just that we suffer in order to be reconciled to God. We sometimes suffer in order to help God reconcile others to himself. While this may not seem fair to us, this does not mean that God causes the suffering. He only permits it. C. S. Lewis describes the dilemma as follows:

When souls become wicked they will certainly use this possibility to hurt one another; and this, perhaps, accounts for four-fifths of the sufferings of men. It is men, not God, who have produced racks, ships, prisons, slavery, guns, bayonets, and bombs; it is by human avarice or human stupidity, not by the churlishness of nature, that we have poverty and overwork. But there remains, nonetheless, much suffering which cannot thus be traced to ourselves. Even if all sufferings were man-made, we should like to know the reason for the enormous permission to

torture their fellows which God gives to the worst of men.¹⁰⁷

The reason, of course, is that we are human beings and not robots; and God has decided in his infinite wisdom to permit us to make choices that have negative as well as positive consequences. While not all of our free choices cause natural catastrophes, such as tornadoes, floods, tidal waves, etc., many of them do affect nature; and unfortunately, we are not always wise enough to know in advance the effect our choices will have in and on our environment. What we do know is that there is a relationship between human sinfulness and suffering. God did not cause the suffering, but he does permit it; and more important, he uses it to make us aware of himself and his desire to enter into relationship with us.

God Suffers for Us

One of the most well known texts which, deals with the Divine Presence in the midst of suffering, is the Suffering Servant passage of Isaiah 53. This chapter describes the purpose of suffering for Israel, the people of God, the covenant community, but it also alludes to the suffering of Jesus in the New Testament. Unlike Job, the suffering servant suffers silently; but he also suffers vicariously. The purpose of his suffering is to restore all people to God and to one another. The whole chapter is about this kind of suffering, but Isaiah 53:2b-5 (NRSV) describes best what concerns us.

...he had no form or majesty that we should look at him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him. He was despised and rejected by others; a man of suffering and acquainted with infirmity; and as one from whom others hide their faces he was despised, and we held him of no account. Surely he has borne our infirmities and carried our diseases; yet we accounted him stricken, struck down by God, and afflicted. But he was wounded for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the

punishment that made us whole, and by his bruises we are healed.

The suffering servants—who are both the faithful in Israel and Jesus—do not deserve to suffer, but they suffer in order to pass judgment on sin and bring mercy to sinners. The suffering is vicarious; it leads the rest of us into the presence of God.

God Suffers with Us

Suffering however does not seem fair to most of us. We believe that sinners ought to suffer, but certainly not the righteous or the innocent. A modern example of the suffering of the innocent at the hands of the guilty is given in Elie Wiesel's, *Night*. It is an eyewitness account given by a fourteen-year-old boy in Germany during World War II. The example speaks for itself.

One day when we came back from work, we saw three gallows rearing up in the assembly place, three black crows. Roll Call. SS all round us, machine guns trained: the traditional ceremony. Three victims in chains—and one of them, the little servant, the sad-eyed angel.

The SS seemed more preoccupied, more disturbed than usual. To hang a young boy in front of thousands of spectators was no light matter. The head of the camp read the verdict. All eyes were on the child. He was lividly pale, almost calm, biting his lips. The gallows threw its shadow over him....

The three victims mounted together onto the chairs. The three necks were placed at the same moment within the nooses.

“Long live liberty!” cried the two adults.

But the child was silent.

“Where is God? Where is He?” someone behind me asked.

At a sign from the head of the camp, the three chairs tipped over....

I heard a voice within me answer....

“Where is He? Here He is—He is hanging on this gallows....”¹⁰⁸

It is very difficult for us to perceive God’s presence in a child’s suffering. We would rather see him prevent the suffering than to allow it to happen; but God does not interfere with human freedom, even when that freedom is used in a harmful way. Instead, God is present in that situation comforting those who hurt and through them redeeming those who inflict the suffering. Thus, God, can be experienced, by those who suffer, and by those who cause the suffering.

No one understood this better in the twentieth century than Martin Luther King Jr., who used vicarious suffering in the civil rights movement. The whole strategy was based on the suffering love of God as it was expressed in Jesus Christ, even if the primary focus was on overcoming racial prejudice. The tactic was clearly described by King:

We will match your capacity to inflict suffering with our capacity to endure suffering. We will meet your physical force with soul force. We will not hate you, but we cannot in all good conscience obey your unjust laws. We will soon wear you down by our capacity to suffer. And in winning our freedom, we will so appeal to your heart and conscience that we will win you in the process.¹⁰⁹

The uniqueness of what King was doing lies not only in a method that promises to liberate blacks, but also in confronting their oppressors with the ordinary presence of God through vicarious suffering. While not everyone will

recognize God's presence in that suffering, some will; and for them, it will not only mean reconciliation with blacks, but reconciliation with God as well. Matthew 25:31-46 clearly states that our refusal to help those who are suffering is an action against Christ, and that our willingness to help those who are suffering is to be interpreted as an action towards Christ (and God). God is not absent, but present in human suffering. In fact he is the one who suffers the most.

Suffering is Temporary

It is important at this point to say again that it is not God who causes suffering in the world. "A God who suffers," writes Jürgen Moltmann, "cannot be the cause of suffering, he contains suffering in himself. That is the solution to the problem of evil."¹¹⁰ Our rebellion against him and against one another is what causes suffering. God simply uses what we have caused in order to wake us up out of our apathy to him and to one another. While it may be hard for us to understand and accept suffering, even vicarious suffering, God can be experienced in the midst of it. When we understand that, suffering becomes much easier to take. It prompted the Apostle Paul to say: "I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us." (Romans 8:18, NRSV) "We know," he continues, "that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose." (Romans 8:28, NRSV) Those of us who experience God's presence—even in the midst of suffering—are no longer embittered by it. We know with Paul the final outcome and purpose for which we suffer, and we cry with him in Romans 8:38-39 (NRSV):

For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Our Response to Suffering

Suffering can lead us into one of three different directions, all of which were illustrated at the time of Jesus' crucifixion on the cross. There was first the thief on the cross who was embittered by his suffering and rebelled and railed against the Christ who hung beside him. Next there was the thief who cried out to Jesus: "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." (Luke 23:42 NRSV) The response of the first thief illustrates the consequence of suffering in the lives of so many people today as a hardening of their hearts to the grace and love of God. Their suffering makes them rebellious and bitter and eventually destroys them. They are unable to experience God's presence in their suffering. The response of the second thief exemplifies the consequence of suffering in the lives of many others who in the midst of their conflicts and agonies are brought closer to Christ. In the midst of their suffering they find grace, strength, help, deliverance, and salvation. They experience the presence of God through Jesus' words of comfort: "Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise." (Luke, 23:43 NRSV)

In the cross of Christ we also find an example of vicarious suffering. The life of an innocent man ends with the words: "Father, into your hands I commend my spirit." (Luke 23:46, NRSV) He didn't reject his suffering; nor did he rebel against it. He faced it, accepted it, and used it as a means of redeeming the whole world for God. Through his suffering the ordinary experience of the presence of God has been made available to us all.

AFTERWORD

*I will never be quiet until
I can see, and feel, and taste God.*

Joseph Hall¹¹¹

I agree with Joseph Hall. I want to understand religious experiences as much as I can understand human experiences. What I have done in this brief work is to describe the Christian Experience as Ordinary. It is something that is available to us all. Such experiences shouldn't separate us. They should unify us. We should be able to describe our experiences in such a way that others will nod their head and say, "Aha, I've had that experience too. It's quite ordinary." I would like to invite your input and criticism. More than that I would like to have you name and define your understanding of religious experience, and in particular, the Christian experience. This is why I'd like to share with you how to contact me.

James T. Reuteler, Ph.D.
3692 South Quatar Way
Aurora, Colorado 80018

Jim@Reuteler.org

Jim.Reuteler.org

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by John Wesley
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Basic Methodist Beliefs

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- ²¹ E. Stanley Jones. I wrote this down from one of Jones' books, but I can't remember which one.
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⁸⁸ Below are a list of books the reader might consider reading to gain a deeper understanding of dreams: Sigmund Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams*; Ann Faraday, *Dream Power* and *The Dream Game*; John Sanford, *The Kingdom Within, Dreams and Healing*, and *Dreams: God's Forgotten Language*; and Morton T. Kelsey, *Dreams: The Dark Speech of the Spirit*. I'm sure there are many others as well.

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