

# PART ONE

## PERSONALLY FOCUSED

The thirst for personal relationship and the dread of conflict and violence represent the driving themes of the postmodern generation. These two issues work themselves out in terms of the preference for personal rather than institutional involvement, a preference for acceptance of all differences rather than conflict over differences, and a desire for a sense of wholeness in a fragmented world.

In a highly mobile society accompanied by the breakdown of the extended family as well as of the traditional family unit, relationship has become an increasingly valuable commodity because it is so difficult to obtain and maintain. The postmodern age is an anonymous age with a yearning for relationship. Existential isolation has come to full flower as people seek relationship through joining formal small groups and develop anonymous relationships over the Internet. People will talk about emotions, feelings, failures, dreads, aspirations, and inadequacies before perfect strangers in a plea for attention and caring relationship.

In this climate, the central Christian teaching of a God who made himself manifest in human form in order to seek relationship with people stands in stark contrast to the kind of impersonal deity of Eastern religion or the judgmental and condemning God of Islam. The Incarnation was an embarrassment to the modern age, but it makes good sense to an age dying for meaningful relationship.

Christianity has no special status in the postmodern age, but it is as valid as any other worldview and worthy of exploring. Pluralism finally frees Christianity from cultural domination to an extent it has not enjoyed in the

West since the great persecution under the Emperor Diocletian. In a "Christian culture" everyone is a "Christian"; therefore, nothing is expected other than assent. No sense of urgency pervades the church. The concerns tend to be parochial and sectarian in nature. After the success of the counterculture, Christianity lost its respectability in the major cultural centers of the United States.

As this trend increases, Christianity must return to the gospel in order to gain adherents. Christianity can offer no other advantages in postmodernity than Christ himself. While pluralism offers a great opportunity for Christians to return to the gospel as their primary point of orientation, the danger remains that Christians will pursue an ethnic response to pluralism and withdraw to themselves in order to preserve a peculiar cultural orientation to their faith.

Postmodernity has rejected the segmentation of knowledge and the segmentation of experience. Integration and holistic thinking have become hallmarks of the emerging postmodern mind. The church in the West adopted modernity's segmentation and specialization wholeheartedly in the organization of theological education and the administration of denominational bureaucracy. The Academy has the tendency to regard the way it does things as *the* way to do things.

Christianity has the opportunity to show people in the postmodern age what it means to experience peace, *shalom*, not as the world gives, but as only God can give. This wholeness that affects every aspect of life has not been particularly visible in the Christianity of modernity, but those closets of Christianity that are wed to modernity will die out.

# CHAPTER ONE

## I'LL GET BY WITH A LITTLE HELP FROM MY FRIENDS: RELATIONSHIP

Twenty years ago I sat in an oak-lined room on a heavily padded blue leather davenport before a huge fireplace in Oxford. There I talked late into the night with a man who was looking for something. A self-made millionaire, he had retired from a career on Madison Avenue at the age of forty in order to devote himself to the search. Jewish by heritage but not by practice, his family had fled to Australia from Central Europe in the mid-1930s to escape Hitler. His parents died in Australia when he was still quite young.

In his search, he had gone to Israel. Something about the place told him that "it" really could be found, but he did not find it. He spent time in the South of France where he heard a man speaking at a conference in a hotel where he was staying. He decided that the man knew what it was he was searching for. He followed the speaker back to Oxford where he taught and presided over one of the smaller colleges of the university. Being a brilliant man, he enrolled in the professor's college, and there we met. We got to be friendly; but he warned me that when I left, he would not be there to say good-bye. If I wrote to him, he would not answer my letters.

Late into that particular night we talked about religion in general and the God of the Christians in particular. He did not know why Christians spoke so much about the love of Jesus. He did not consider Jesus to be such a loving figure. On the contrary, he considered Jesus rather austere and remote. He wanted to know what Jesus meant by love. Since he commanded his disciples to love, was love just ethics? Then he said that he could not love a



God who would let his own son be killed, even for him. That would be like a father who threw his child in front of a bus. What kind of God is that?

The man I met at Oxford is only one of countless millions who miss something they have never experienced. They only know it exists because of the longing they feel for it. This longing, this poverty, provides the driving force behind what many people call postmodernity. On the surface, the postmodern generation has a fixation with personal experience, but it goes deeper than mere subjectivity. They focus on the personal rather than the intellectual because they feel the greatest loss at the personal level. They miss something personal, something relational; but they do not know what it is.

## HOW DID WE GET IN THIS FIX?

For centuries, Christendom was marked as a time of sedentary lifestyles; people lived in the same place. For nearly a thousand years, people lived in the same place. Generation after generation lived in the same village. Peasants were bound to the land and to their feudal relationships to the lord of the manor who in turn owed obligations of protection to them. Christendom was marked by relationships. Each community had a parish church, which formalized the communal relationship where all came to worship under one roof. The sense of community was very important during the period of Christendom.

With the dawn of the modern age, all of that changed. The Enclosure Act in England and Scotland resulted in a change of how the land was used. Until then a number of peasants worked small farms for the great landowner. When the English economy changed and the great landowners realized there was more money to be made in sheep and wool, they dispossessed the peasants and enclosed the fields for sheep. The nobles did not need as many peasants working the land, and as a result the peasants had no place to go but to the towns. This migration marked the beginning of the growth of cities in England and in Europe, as well as the beginning of industrialization. It also marked the end of what has been called the Social Contract and community relationships. The cities had no Social Contract. People did not have the same kinds of relationships and support systems in the cities. People were taken out of their traditional relationships and out of their family heritage when they moved to the cities.

This changing nature of society, this dislocation, this breaking of relationships and the resulting social problems was a major concern of many social commentators from the beginning of the modern period. John Bunyan in *Pilgrim's Progress* comments on some of the problems in towns that

resulted from people no longer having a place to work, no longer being on the farm. Jonathan Swift and Daniel Defoe wrote about it in the 1700s in some of their scandalous novels that described immorality in the city of London. Charles Dickens wrote about it in the nineteenth century. He wrote about the workhouses and the squalor in the slums of London. Many of the fictional characters in these stories had been dispossessed of the land and had no place to go.

Then the political philosophers Engels, Hegel, and Marx wrote about the problem of workers being separated from nature and no longer being able to enjoy the fruit of their labor. The workers labored for someone else, who derived the profit. This was the beginning of socialism and communism as the solution to the breakdown in relationship, the alienation from nature, and the alienation from other people. People like Kierkegaard carried it one step further and spoke about one's own alienation from oneself, and the term "existentialism" came into being. One aspect of existentialism involves the isolation of people who feel cut off from others, cut off from themselves, and cut off from God. It is a problem that is most apparent in an urban context.

In the United States, rural life characterized this country for well into the second half of its existence. Even into this century, rural life was, for the first half of this century, the standard for people in the United States. Thomas Jefferson had an ideal of a nation of yeoman farmers. He held that "the city is a pox on the body politic." The importance of communities, relationships, and neighbors could not be overstated for Jefferson in terms of a healthy society. Jefferson did not speak from a Christian perspective, but he understood the issue from a political philosopher's perspective.

The "me first" generation does not represent an entirely new trend in the United States. Rugged individualism has always formed a part of the American identity. When I was in the second grade, I learned that Abraham Lincoln's father believed that when he could see the smoke from his neighbor's chimney, it was time to move.

With the industrial revolution, however, we saw entire communities uprooted. People migrated in search of jobs. Especially during the Great Depression, huge migrations took place. People left the rural South of Mississippi and Alabama to go north to Detroit looking for jobs. People left the Appalachian Mountains to go to Ohio and Pittsburgh looking for jobs in the steel and rubber industries. People left Oklahoma and the plains to go to California looking for jobs. We saw three major migrations in the middle of this century: the Depression migration followed by World War II, a second migration related to the war industry and a reshuffling of jobs, followed by a third migration in the 1950s as people coming back from World War II continued to look for new opportunities.



With all of that going on, we saw the development of urban blight in the United States as we had not known it before. There had always been problems in the larger cities, but nothing like we have seen since the 1950s. Traffic, crime, and pollution exploded. We have seen conflict between the inner cities and the suburbs. Continuing political battles occur in metropolitan areas over where the financial resources go. The big money may be made in the inner city in the high-rise office buildings, yet the people who work there flee to the suburbs in the evening and take their salaries with them. The tax money goes to the suburban communities and not to the cities and that creates conflict and alienation between the urban dwellers and the suburban dwellers. We have seen racial strife in the 1950s, '60s, '70s, '80s and '90s. We have seen fear of other races lead to hatred of other races, leading to violence. All of this turmoil leads to a violation of relationships.

## WHERE ARE WE TODAY?

We continue to have a mobile society. The average American moves every three years. This statistic seemed outrageous to me. I could not believe Americans moved so often, until I realized that I have moved every three years. As a result of this sort of movement, the average American no longer has an extended family. They may know of relatives they have, but the children do not know cousins. They do not know aunts and uncles. They do not know grandparents. They may know of them and may have visited them from time to time, but they do not know them. They do not know them well enough to climb up on the grandparents' knees and hug them and talk. They are strangers. As a result of this moving around, people lack the kind of cultural identity that would come from the tradition and heritage of a place.

I grew up in one place, and I drank deeply of what it meant to be from Greenville, South Carolina. I knew the stories and the history and the old heroes of Greenville and the state of South Carolina. My daughters have lived in Kentucky, Minnesota, and Tennessee; and I have noticed that my daughters fiercely say "I'm from Kentucky" no matter where we happen to be living. Kentucky is their state, and they are working to maintain an identity as Kentuckians. My wife and I work hard to continue to make that possible. We make trips back to Louisville regularly, every couple of months. It is important for them; and as long as they realize they are from Kentucky, we want to strengthen that sense of identity. But most people do not have that sense of being related to people in a given place. The latchkey generation is coming of age in a country where one of two marriages ends in divorce. Thus, stable relationship is something that this generation has grown up unaccustomed to experiencing. They even lack lasting friendships

because moving as frequently as they do, they must continually make new short-term friends. I can call my friend Hank Harrison on the telephone; and we can talk for an hour, picking up where we left off six months or a year ago because we started the first grade together. My daughters do not have those kinds of relationships. The postmodern generation does not know that kind of stability. As a result, they crave relationship.

Loneliness is very serious. In God's first observation of his creature he said, "It is not good for the man to be alone" (Gen 2:18). Relationship is a fundamental, absolute need of people. Loneliness is destructive to us. It destroys us. Part of the gift of salvation in the gospel, if not the very gift, is relationship. Salvation is not a commodity that you hold on to. Salvation is the Savior himself who comes and makes his home with us and creates a relationship. One of our greatest opportunities is not offering an organization, but offering ourselves, which is sometimes a scary thing to do for an older generation that has survived by keeping other people at arm's distance.

Oddly enough, people who feel trapped in a crowd sometimes seek isolation instead of the very relationship they crave. It is something that demographers have already noticed with the West Coast. People are leaving California. They are going to Idaho, Montana, Colorado, Oregon, and Washington. They are leaving, and they are opting to give up income. They are choosing to do with less financially in order to have a simpler lifestyle. This is possible for people in a certain financial status. Many people are in a position to choose to slow down and do with less. The people who need it the most, however, often do not have the option. Part of the question that we have to deal with is not just how we take care of our own families, but what do we about the masses of people who are trapped in the cities. Who is bringing the gospel there and how is it coming? These are relational issues. In some cases these are generational matters in the choice of loneliness or isolation, but it does something to a person. There is a toll. Some people choose to pay the price; such is the hermit. It is possible to be a hermit in a neighborhood such that one neighbor does not know who the other neighbors are. But it still takes a toll on us. It is not good that we are alone. It is destructive to us.

Most churches in the United States since World War II have been big meetings. That is, you go to the big meeting, listen to the lecture, and then you leave. There is no real connection with the people in the room with you. Other kinds of churches exist. Some churches grow around small groups or Sunday school, which fosters relationships. But that is almost a peculiarity of the South, which has become a standing joke among evangelicals. You find small groups in other parts of the country, but it is not the norm. I did not realize until I spent time in Minnesota that the average church does not



have small groups for adults. We have a pattern in the United States in which churches regard Sunday school as “kids’ stuff” and home Bible studies as too much trouble. Relationship building has not been a major agenda item embraced by the church in the United States as a whole. There are exceptions; but as a whole, churches are places of isolation. Without this relational dimension at its core, the church looks like just another organization or civic club to the postmodern generation.

The postmodern generation will not visit the church building. They will not go to the lecture. They will not join the organization. The church looks like just one more institution. They are interested not in institutions but in relationships. We have to go to them. For them to listen to us, the sharing of the gospel has to take place in a relational way, that is, a conversation. An interesting study was conducted a few years ago by Kirk Hadaway and Penny Marler, two sociologists who happen to be Christians.<sup>1</sup> They were concerned with the phenomenon of Americans indicating their religious preference in surveys. Most people in the United States will put something down. The Gallup poll and other sociological studies have reported for years that 40 percent of the people in the United States are in church every Sunday. Every pastor knows that statistic; and every pastor also knows, of course, that it holds true in every other community except their own, which they view as abnormal. Marler and Hadaway decided that since every pastor they knew lived in an abnormal community, perhaps the figure needed checking. They studied the figure more closely and discovered that Americans lie, which should not come as a surprise. Actually, less than 20 percent of the people in the United States go to church on Sunday.

The same Americans who say “I voted” and did not will say “I go to church” and do not. They still are holding on to some childhood training that says you ought to go to church on Sunday. So, of course, they say they go to church on Sunday, just not this Sunday. Marler and Hadaway wanted to understand what people mean in a poll when they say “I am Presbyterian” or “I am Christian.” What they mean is their family has always been Presbyterian. They mean that as opposed to Catholic, they are Protestant. They mean that they are American, and Americans have been always been sort of Christian; so they are Christian. As it turns out, the religious self-identification meant very little at all.

Marler and Hadaway discovered something else in conducting this study in which they talked with about 2,500 people. They discovered that everybody will talk about religion, often in intimate terms, the same way that people will get on the *Oprah Winfrey Show* and talk about their deepest concerns. People do the same thing on the Internet in chat groups and have on-line conversations about matters of intimate concern. Very few people



want to be lectured to either about flossing their teeth, or voting, or going to church, or polishing their shoes, or getting saved. Americans do not like to be lectured to, but they love to talk. What Marler and Hadaway discovered was that people would go into detail about their own experiences, about why they do not like church, about what someone said to them, about what happened to their parents, about relationships with a spouse, or about their children and the trouble they are in. They would go into deep, personal, intimate details.

If you have a basis for relationship, you have a basis for meaningful conversation. The implication for how we do apologetics and evangelism is something Oscar Thompson talked about more than twenty years ago. You work within your existing relationships. That is your mission field. You express care and concern, and you modify your approach. Rather than giving the lecture, maybe just listen a little more. The more they will tell you, the more you can understand how Jesus Christ is the solution to the problem they are experiencing. I am very simplistic at this point; I believe Jesus is the answer. Then the problem becomes understanding the question on someone's mind. Only then can I show someone how Jesus addresses their ultimate problem.

## THE INCARNATION

The Christian faith does not deal primarily with the forms of religion. Christianity takes many different forms in different cultures. It has tremendous flexibility because it is not primarily about its form. It is about a personal relationship with God. Not all spirituality is based on this idea. In fact, it is quite unusual among the religions of the world.

The idea of the divine having anything to do with the physical world would have been disturbing to the Greeks of the first century. The Gospel of John declared of the Word:

He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him. He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him. Yet to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God—children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God.

The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth. (John 1:10-14)

This declaration constituted the truly radical moment. This assertion was the great stumbling block: the idea that God had entered into creation. John

insisted that God, who was perfect, holy, unapproachable, totally removed from sin, totally different from creation had come into creation. He had not just come into creation to look around, but had experienced what it means to be human! By experiencing it he laughed, he cried, he hungered, he tired, and he experienced it to the point that he could be nailed on a cross and killed.

Think what it would mean if you had always viewed the physical world as something that God or the Spirit not only would not have anything to do with but could not have anything to do with. Then, all of a sudden, you are told that God came into this world and took on flesh. That view of God is the basis of the Christian message, and it was repulsive to the Greek philosophers who on Mars Hill told Paul he was crazy. It was repulsive to the Jews who had the idea of a God so holy and so unapproachable that they even stopped saying his name. When he came to Moses and called him to lead Israel, he said, "Moses, my name is Yahweh. 'I am who I am' " (from Exod. 3:14). Yet, they felt that God was so unapproachable that when God spoke to them from the mountain, they said in effect, "Moses you go talk to him. We don't want to talk to him. It's too scary" (see Exod. 20:19). God sent prophets to speak to Israel because they were afraid to hear his voice, and through the years they pushed God further and further and further away. By the time of Jesus, whenever they found the holy name written in the Hebrew scriptures they did not say his name, they said, "the LORD." To say that the Lord, the one that only the high priest could approach and then only once a year within the Holy of holies of the Temple, had come in the flesh was truly shocking.

On the other hand, there is an incredible beauty to the idea of the Creator coming into creation. Bishop Stephen Neill, who for many years was a missionary in India, said that God did not just create this world and leave it, but that he loved us enough to come into it. The old Native American expression "walk a mile in our moccasins" suggests the significance of God sharing human existence. The one who created us is sympathetic with us. The book of Hebrews contains the great teaching that because Jesus Christ came into this world, we have a sympathetic High Priest. Have you ever been in a situation when somebody was going through a great difficulty and you said, "I know how you feel." Only, you really didn't because you had never been through that kind of situation. I think one of the most comforting things about the Christian faith is to know that when I die I will be embraced and kept from death by somebody who knows what it means to die. And because he knows what it means to die, I will never find out what it means to die. He knows what it means to be tempted, so he wants to help me when I am tempted. That is his desire. We have a sympathetic God. That's amazing and



it's radical. In the history of religion in the world, there is nothing else quite like it. Instead of form and institutions, Jesus Christ offers relationship with himself.

## BACK TO THE FUTURE

Christians dealing with a major shift in culture like that which appears to be happening with the postmodern generation have the tremendous advantage of the experience of Christians who have gone through such times before. The apostles had to make such a shift when they left the culture of old Israel to bring the gospel message to the pagan world of the Gentiles. The apostles agreed that the Gentiles did not need to adopt the culture of the Jews to be saved, but they did need to know the Savior. The Gospel of John especially captures the principles of communicating the gospel with people with whom we share few if any common values. At the heart of the communication of the gospel lies the teaching of Jesus about the role of a witness who gives personal testimony about him. From the beginning, faith in Jesus was meant to be both personal and relational.

John wrote his Gospel to talk about the personal God who came into the world to relate to people. As soon as he has described the kind of God he intends to talk about, he begins to describe the personal experiences of people. He starts with the experience of John the Baptist. John the Baptist was the cousin of Jesus of Nazareth and one of the most important and influential preachers of his day. He was executed by King Herod for his religious beliefs.

John's testimony was this: "The next day John saw Jesus coming toward him and said, 'Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world' " (John 1:29). John the Baptist equated Jesus with the total sacrificial system of the Old Testament. He is the fulfillment of all of the sacrificial laws in the book of Leviticus. He is the fulfillment of everything that the Law of Moses said concerning sacrifice, atonement, and salvation from sin. He is the fulfillment of everything that the Temple was established to do. He is the fulfillment of the Passover. He is all of the religion of Israel wrapped into one person. A person replaces the forms and institutions of religion.

Then John the Baptist elaborated: "This is the one I meant when I said, 'A man who comes after me has surpassed me because he was before me.' I myself did not know him, but the reason I came baptizing with water was that he might be revealed to Israel" (John 1:30-31). First of all he says, "he was before me." In Luke 1:13, 18-19, 24-27 we find the story of how John the Baptist was born. Luke tells how John was conceived and how the angel appeared to his father and said, "Your wife is going to have a baby, and you

will call his name John.” The father did not believe it was going to happen, so he was struck speechless until the child was born. The neighbors asked, “Well, what are you going to name him? Can you scratch it out or something?” When he finally indicated the name would be John, he could speak again.

The interesting thing is that John was born before Jesus. John was conceived six months before Jesus was conceived. Yet, John says, “He was before me.” When John was in his mother’s womb, we are told by Luke, Mary went to visit her cousin Elizabeth. When she entered the room, the Holy Spirit came upon Elizabeth and that little baby in her womb, and that little baby leaped for joy in the presence of this yet unborn Jesus. John was filled with the spirit from the womb, but Jesus was different. Jesus was conceived of the Holy Spirit.

## THE TESTIMONY OF THE HOLY SPIRIT

John the Baptist bore witness that Jesus was before him. Jesus is the Lamb of God; and the very reason John was baptizing was so that it could be revealed to Israel who the Messiah, the promised one, was going to be. John gave this testimony, “I saw the Spirit come down from heaven as a dove and remain on him. I would not have known him, except that the one who sent me to baptize with water told me, ‘The man on whom you see the Spirit come down and remain is he who will baptize with the Holy Spirit.’ I have seen and I testify that this is the Son of God” (John 1:32-34).

We are told by John the apostle that when Jesus came to his people, they did not know him. John the Baptist also said that he was one of the ones who did not know Jesus. He had known him all of his life. He was his cousin, but he did not know who Jesus really was until at the baptism. Mark described it as though the heavens were torn apart like cloth being ripped and the Spirit descended upon Jesus. John had been waiting. We do not know how long; but since the beginning of his ministry when he started baptizing, he was waiting for something to happen. God had revealed to him that in baptizing God would reveal the one that he had promised for centuries and centuries. So John says that the Spirit revealed who Jesus was.

Now, it is important to see that God had prepared John the Baptist ahead of time to receive the message. John the Baptist is not the only one in human history whom God has prepared ahead of time to receive a message. Regardless of whether persons become a Christian as a tiny child, as a teenager, or as an adult, God prepares them before anyone tells them about Jesus. God’s Spirit was at work preparing John to receive a most miraculous and dramatic thing. The Spirit bore witness that Jesus was the Christ, and we



find this witness and confirmation not only in John's Gospel but also in Luke, Mark, and Matthew. That is one matter about which they all commented. John often talks about things that the other Gospels do not mention. Here is a point that they all wanted to be sure everybody understood, because God had revealed Jesus as his Son through his Spirit at the baptism.

The anointing by the Spirit of God at the baptism began the public ministry of Jesus. It did not mark the beginning of Jesus being the Son of God. Jesus was the Son of God before the baptism. The Holy Spirit and Jesus were together before the baptism. The Holy Spirit did not come to Jesus for the first time at the baptism. That is why John begins his Gospel by explaining that the Word was one with God at the beginning. The anointing at the baptism is a different kind of experience. The British Royal Family gives us a glimpse of what was happening at the baptism of Jesus. Some years ago, Queen Elizabeth took her eldest son to Wales to the ruins of Caernarvon Castle; and there on television and with the nobility of the realm surrounding her, Prince Charles knelt before her. She took a little crown, a coronet, placed it on his head, and declared him publicly the Prince of Wales. The investiture began his formal life of service. At the baptism, Jesus was publicly declared by the Father to be the Son; and the manifestation of the Holy Spirit was the sign to John the Baptist of who Jesus was. John believed because of the testimony of the Holy Spirit.

## THE IMPORTANCE OF TESTIMONY

Testimony is very important. Testimony is the essential method of communicating faith in the New Testament. In the twentieth century Christians developed all kinds of gimmicks and plans for doing evangelism, but John is vitally concerned with the whole idea of testimony. Giving testimony is why he wrote his book. In explaining why he wrote his Gospel, John said, "Jesus did many other miraculous signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book. But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name" (John 20:30-31). Then later he remarked, "This is the disciple who testifies to these things and who wrote them down. We know that his testimony is true. Jesus did many other things as well. If every one of them were written down, I suppose that even the whole world would not have room for the books that would be written" (John 21:24-25). Not only in his Gospel but also in the first letter of John, he stressed the compulsion to give testimony about what he knew from his own experience:

That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at and our hands have touched—

this we proclaim concerning the Word of life. The life appeared; we have seen it and testify to it, and we proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and has appeared to us. We proclaim to you what we have seen and heard, so that you also may have fellowship with us. And our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ. We write this to make our joy complete. (1 John 1:1-4)

Finally, when a very old man and slave on the island of Patmos, John received a revelation. He wrote again about the importance of testimony in the opening verses of Revelation: "The revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave him to show his servants what must soon take place. He made it known by sending his angel to his servant John, who testifies to everything he saw—that is, the word of God and the testimony of Jesus Christ" (Rev. 1:1-2).

Testimony is crucially important, but the remarkable thing about the testimony that Christians give about their own experience of Jesus Christ is that the Holy Spirit does the same thing for them and their testimony that he did for John two thousand years ago. That is, the Holy Spirit is the *other* witness. In ancient Israel, it took two witnesses to confirm and verify the truth. The New Testament speaks of this custom in many places, but one of the promises to Christians is that the Spirit bears witness with them and that conversion to faith in Christ does not simply depend upon techniques. Ultimately, it depends upon how the Holy Spirit takes all our failures, mis-spoken words, stutters, illogical skipping from one point to another, and miraculously brings it to a person. The Holy Spirit takes it to the heart of another person and confirms the truth.

The Gospel of John reveals how things two thousand years ago make a difference today, and how the miraculous work of God in the world two thousand years ago is still going on today. Recognizing this reality involves remembering what God has done and opening our eyes to notice what the Lord is still doing. Recovering the personal, relational approach to faith found in the New Testament provides the basis for understanding how to share the gospel of Christ with a postmodern generation that is more interested in relationship than institutions.

## REPRISE

Twenty years ago as I talked late into the night, I heard a lonely man saying he wanted nothing to do with a God who would kill his own son. I heard a man saying he understood nothing about the personal, intimate nature of God. I heard a man saying he could not fathom the meaning of love. I heard a man saying he was afraid to experience the one thing he wanted most in



life. I heard a man saying that he projected all the violence of humanity onto God.

He heard Christians say, "For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son." He heard Christians say that God killed Jesus. He is not alone. A growing movement of feminists also reject any meaningful atoning death of Jesus because they understand it to mean that God wanted blood. These views have more to do with how people have experienced life than with anything they may have gained from studying Scripture. This view is largely an emotional response to pain.

As my arm-length friend said that the death of Jesus was like a father who threw his child in front of a bus, I heard myself responding almost out of body. I said, "No, it's like a father who sees his child wandering out into the street, ignorant that a bus is bearing down on him; and the father rushes out to push the child out of the way only to be struck by the bus himself, because *God was in Christ reconciling the world unto himself*." It was a strange experience for me, because I had never memorized that verse of Scripture. It was strange also because I had never fully grasped the meaning of the Incarnation of God in Christ.

People searching for ultimate personal experience and fulfillment will only find one religion that teaches about a God who so loves people that he would identify with them completely, even to the point of experiencing death with them. A personal, self-conscious God who created the physical and the spiritual worlds makes meaning and purpose a possibility. Without such a being, everything is an accident of gigantically improbable proportions. With such a God, however, people can find fulfillment, meaning, and the possibility of genuine relationships with others, because that God came into the world to bring people to himself and through that relationship to bring people together.

My experience in that conversation with the man in Oxford also taught me something about the nature of revelation and the Holy Spirit. A personal God has relationship with people and communicates with them. The reliability of Scripture finds confirmation in the personal nature of God. A personal God would communicate. The fact that Scripture came over centuries demonstrates the ongoing interest of God with people. That night in Oxford, however, I was as much in communication with God as I was with the man I saw. The Holy Spirit of God relates to people personally, not as a mere "force" or power. The Holy Spirit taught me things that night about God as he brought from the hidden recesses of my mind a verse of Scripture which I had heard but which had never made an impact on me before.