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So, Go, To, Lo, Ho, Do, No (January-February 2006)

From Uplook, January-February 2006. Article.

Big ideas in two-letter words. How can we miss the point?

John 3:16 is the gospel in a sentence, twenty-five words that bridge the gulf between a loving God and lost humanity. Yet in this wonderful array of Bible words, preachers often stress the little word “so.” “For God so-o-o loved the world,” they intone. And still the question lingers: How could such a God love such a world as this? It was no mere sentiment that moved His heart. The giver-God gave until He could give no more. He so loved the world. Seven monosyllables, but what ringing blows of the blacksmith’s hammer to reshape our iron wills when taken in the context of Scripture’s uncompromising truth.

That massive so inspired a mighty go. At the highest level, the question, “Who will go for us?” was answered by Isaiah’s Lord. The One who told us to “Go into all the world” knew what He was asking. He made a journey much, much farther that any of us have been called to take.

Which reminds me of a story. I was telling veteran goer Ed Harlow (at that time in his 90s) about an old man who, at 85, had professed Christ as Saviour. Getting up off his knees, he said with passion, “I want to go to the Muslims in the Middle East with the gospel!”

Ed listened for the conclusion of the story, but I had already finished. “Well, did he?” he asked. Warm sentiment is fine, high intentions are noble, but did he go?

Since we all are to take the gospel, where is it we are to go? Ah, the little word “to.” “To,” said the Man with a heart big enough for all, “to every creature.” The little preposition, worked hard in daily life—“to work,” “to the store”—was never used more nobly. Go, said the Saviour, to towns and cities, to your neighbor and to the uttermost part of the earth, to highways and byways. Go until there is no palace, no prison, no house, no hut, no adult, no child, to which you have not gone. And this “to” is linked with the “lo.” If we go “to every creature” the Lord has promised, “Lo, I am with you”—and then adds another exhaustive “to”—“to the end of the age.” And “Ho”? Found in one of the great OT gospel appeals (Isa. 55:1), we read, “Ho, every one that thirsteth, come ye to the waters….” From a root pronounced something like “ahahh a-haw,” it is intended to express pain or passion. The word is also translated O!, oh!, ah!, ha!, alas!, and woe! Whatever the case, it is a reminder that the message we proclaim is something that ought to move us deeply. Like John, we should be both burning and shining lights. If the good news touches no more than our intellects, how shall we expect it to reach sinners’ hearts?

Do. “If you know these things,” said the Master, “happy are you if you do them.” Seminars, books, conferences are fine, but now it is time to actually do something. “Lord,” we need to cry out with every intention of immediately responding, “what wilt THOU have ME to DO?”

And what about “no”? Ah, there’s the rub. We define ourselves by what we say “no” to. We cannot, should not, do everything. In a self-indulgent society, we need to light again the altar’s fire and fuel it with all those legitimate (or illigitimate) things that clog our ability to do what we know He wants us to do. “No man can serve two masters…Therefore I say unto you, Take no thought for your life, what ye shall eat, or what ye shall drink; nor yet for your body, what ye shall put on. Is not the life more than food, and the body than raiment?” (Mt. 6:24-25). Whatever that means practically, I’m a long way from it, and need a big pile of “nos” to those other masters to even get me close. How about you? Would today be a good day to restart the fire?

Where Are the Great Men? (March 2006)

From Uplook, March 2006. Article.

And what is the secret of greatness by God's reckoning?

Jesus told His own that we were to do greater works than He had done while on earth. Is that true? Of course it is. And it's also true that the great works we do are done only when we are in vital union with the Lord Himself. As He put it, "Without Me…nothing." That should be clear enough. What isn't clear is this—where are these "greater works" in our day? We might well ask with Gideon (Jud. 6:13), "Where be all His miracles which our fathers told us of?"

On a recent trip to Northampton, England, I had opportunity with my host for some short jaunts to nearby towns to revisit some great men. Our first stop was just outside Northampton town limits at Moulton. Although William Carey was born to the weaver's family in the Northamptonshire village of Paulerspury in 1761, it was in Moulton that he heard the missionary call. While living there, he read The Last Voyage of Captain Cook and the Lord used this account to lay on his soul the burden of the lost. Though an unlettered cobbler, Carey gave himself to study every subject that had any bearing on missionary enterprise. By the age of 21, he had mastered Latin, Greek, Hebrew, and Italian. Yet when Carey asked "whether the command given to the apostles to teach all nations was not obligatory…to the end of the world, seeing that the accompanying promise was of equal extent," Dr. Ryland retorted, "Young man,

sit down! When God pleases to convert the heathen, He will do it without your aid or mine."

Whatever Carey's seeming deficiencies, as he would say of his later ministry, "I can plod!" Plod he did, eventually publishing Enquiry Into the Obligations of the Christians to Use Means for the Conversion of the Heathen. It was a masterpiece on missions, answering objections, surveying the history of missions, and detailing the world by country, population, size, and religion. He called believers to rise up to reach the world for Christ. Emblazoned on the side of the church building he attended are his stirring words: "Attempt great things for God. Expect great things from God." Almost single-handedly Carey inspired the modern missionary movement.

A few miles southeast of Northampton is the quaint village of Olney, remembered as the locale of the ministry of John Newton. By his own description once a libertine and slave trader, Newton began his seafaring life at the age of 12, and, after becoming a slave himself in Africa, escaped to become captain of his own ship. On May 10, 1748, he was caught in a fierce storm and, fearing for his life, called to God for mercy. Later, as he contemplated this in his cabin, he discovered what it was to receive the gift of God by grace through faith. Newton's prolific hymnody includes "How Sweet the Name of Jesus Sounds" and "Glorious Things of Thee are Spoken." But of course the most memorable is "Amazing Grace," the best-known hymn in the English-speaking world. Thus his work still ministers to sin-sick hearts around the globe today.

Further southeast at Bedford, we see the statue of its famed tinker, John Bunyan. Bunyan was imprisoned in Bedford jail for his unregistered preaching—from 1660 until 1672, with only a few weeks of freedom in 1666. He was again imprisoned in 1675 for six months, during which time he wrote the beloved Pilgrim's Progress. Along with his well-known Grace Abounding and The Holy War, he wrote scores of other books and pamphlets, including A Few Sighs from Hell and Vindication of Some Gospel Truths. Next to the Bible, Pilgrim's Progress was the second book on most shelves in early America, influencing generations with the gospel.

A cobbler, a sailor, and a tinker from three small towns in England. Great men because they knew they served a great God, because they rejoiced in being recipients of His great grace, and because they fearlessly proclaimed the great message of the gospel. God give us more like that!

Do You Speak “Brethren”? (April 2006)

From Uplook, April 2006. Article.

People might think we’re talking in a foreign tongue. Often we are.

Anyone sitting at a truck stop beside a big rig driver and asking, “Are you washed in the blood?” or “Are you in the shadow of the Great Rock?” cannot expect to be rewarded with a knowing smile. Both phrases are sound biblical ideas, but they are no longer used in the marketplace where ideas are exchanged. I heard an elder instruct “the unlearned” before the Lord’s Supper to “pass the elements by.” Which elements would they be? Helium? Plutonium? Perhaps “bread and wine” might have been clearer to those not familiar with such terms.

Some words and phrases are understood by our hearers in a different way than we might expect. We know this is true of “church” (and many try to rectify this by replacing it with “assembly,” a suitable switch for the local church, but a word which also should be defined). We also are skittish of “pastor” because it is often used of those who rule at the top of a pyramid of “laymen” rather than modeling the biblical concept of shepherds serving among the flock.

But today such confusion may also exist when we use what we consider to be very basic words like God (to a Hindu, one of thousands of peculiar deities) or justification (to a Mormon, a spiritual elevator through which the “faithful” arrive at heaven’s penthouse).

When a friend in Belfast asked a group of inner city children if any of them knew anything about Jesus, only one boy tentatively raised his hand. When acknowledged by the teacher, he asked, “Why did his mommy give him a swear word for a name?” That was it—the group’s collective knowledge of the Son of God. Welcome to the new Dark Ages.

Or consider the man who came when invited to a Bible talk near Glasgow, Scotland. When the speaker raised the issue of Adam in the Garden and original sin, the man became belligerent and stormed out. Turns out his name was Adam! “That man invited me here,” he objected, “to blame the whole thing on me! And I don’t even have a garden!”

An evangelist told me how he took a young believer for some door-to-door work to show him the ropes. While pouring out a steady stream at one door, he was, to his consternation, interrupted by his understudy. “May I ask the man something?” When grudgingly granted permission by the senior evangelist, he asked the puzzled listener, “Do you know who Jesus is?” The man slowly nodded No. Can you presume a knowledge of Joshua? Not even Jesus.

Notice the difference between the Lord Jesus speaking to Nicodemus and the woman at the well. He didn’t presume on the woman’s Bible knowledge. Instead He used an illustration from her life—the well of water. He could have used the smitten Rock, but didn’t. Yet with Nicodemus He does refer to a Bible story—the serpent on the pole. There He could ask, “Aren’t you a teacher in Israel? Don’t you know these things?”

There are also terms that, with certain audiences, will work as well as a matador's cape in the eyes of an agitated bull. Gospel "crusades" bring back unhappy memories to both Muslims and Jews. Many terms also seem to make those not yet saved into our war spoils: we Christian soldiers "win" souls with the help of prayer "warriors." And I wonder what words like "Evangelism Explosion" bring to their minds. Who actually explodes? Sounds like Iraqi news reports. Our Lord refused to use certain words—good words—that could be misconstrued. For example, rather than calling Himself "Messiah" because the Jews' concept of a temporal warrior was wrong, He used "Son of Man" (see Jn. 12:34 for its understood equivalence). So let us learn from the Master—keep it simple and understandable. Because not everyone speaks Brethren.

By All Means (May 2006)

From Uplook, May 2006. Article.

Evangelism: a role for everyone

If you've been discouraged from being involved in evangelism, maybe you've been trying to do someone else's part. Try your own on for size.

When the Lord Jesus told His followers to go into all the world and preach the gospel to all people, He gave no detailed directions as to means or method. I assume He intended that disciples in every culture and in every age would find appropriate and effective ways to do it. Of course those ways should be both relevant to the unbelievers to be reached and consistent with the character of God and the dignity of the message we bear. The apostle Paul was, to put it mildly, both an incisive thinker and an effective communicator. But he did not assume that his oratory alone was sufficient to win souls. Nor did he think—and this is crucial—that, if the Spirit was willing to work, methods didn't matter. Instead he wrote: "that I might by all means save some" (1 Cor. 9:22). A fisherman uses different bait for different fish, and Paul preached very different messages to the polytheistic philosophers in Athens than to the monotheistic religionists in Jerusalem.

I have recently been impressed, however, not only with the different message styles of the early believers; I have also noted the diverse methods influenced by the varied personalities which we meet in the New Testament. Do you see yourself somewhere in the picture?

1. The confrontational approach of Peter (Acts 2): This style is not for everyone. It demands courage, boldness of speech, and an ability to “think on your feet.” Of all methods, it is the most likely to stir up animosity, but also has the potential advantage of reaching large numbers all at once. Such plainness of speech can bring both clarity and conviction by the Spirit to people we might otherwise never meet. It did so at Pentecost and has throughout Church history.

2. The apologetic approach of Paul (Acts 17; Romans): Here the flamboyant emotion-laden appeal gives way to the deliberate, carefully-reasoned argument. Negatively, it can gender “words to no profit”(2 Tim. 2:14), but positively it is able both to bolster the faith of believers and demolish the strongholds of the enemy, setting free his captives. So it was at Mars Hill. Some object to this method, saying that Paul’s intellectual style is akin to “enticing words of man’s wisdom.” As proof, they say there was no assembly formed in Athens, as far as we know. The argument is specious. It was Paul, after all, who instructed us not to preach with mere human wisdom; he obviously did not consider what he was doing to be in that category. As far as results (not always the defining factor—recall the righteous preaching of Noah), I think I would be very happy to see what Paul saw at Athens. Imagine arriving at Harvard or Yale one morning, preaching one message in the open air, and having a professor, a high society grande dame, and several others trust the Lord that afternoon! Hardly a bad day’s work!

3. The testimonial approach of the man born blind (Jn. 9:25): This way of preaching has the advantage of the evangelist knowing his subject matter—since he was

there when it happened. “I was blind; now I see.” It is, or should be, convincing and almost impossible to refute. It is the favorite of those dramatically rescued from sin’s clutches, and the least likely to be used by those saved at an early age. Those who use this method would be wise to follow Paul’s example: each time he told his testimony there was less about himself, and the light kept shining brighter.

Some testimonies spend too much time on the BC (before Christ) part and too little on the change Christ produces in the life. Still, it can be one of the most convincing methods in the evangelist’s arsenal. Let’s get back to using testimonies; it may result in new ones.

4. The invitational approach of Andrew and the woman of Samaria (Jn. 1:40-41; 6:8-9; 12:22; 4:28-30): Perhaps feeling ill-equipped to carefully explain the gospel, nonetheless such strategic servants have a deep concern for lost souls. Thank God for the bringers. The one disadvantage of this approach is the lack of control over what the ones brought will hear. How many have labored long and carefully to bring someone to an evangelistic gathering only to have the speaker unnecessarily offend the one brought by a careless remark or an unwise criticism of the person’s religion. How careful we ought to be who dare to speak as the “oracles of God.” I’ve had to learn this the hard way, sad to say. Thankfully, Jesus can reattach ears removed by a careless use of the sword!

5. The hospitable approach of Matthew (Lk. 5:29): Many unbelievers who will not venture into a church building would come to your home for a meal. So thought Matthew, who knew his workmates from the tax office

would be persona non grata at the local synagogue. Then why not have them into the less-threatening environment of the dining room? And it worked.

In my judgment, some of the most effective outreaches in North America today involve an open home and an open Bible. It is the winning combination of loving people and telling them the truth. We have never had such nice houses and well-stocked freezers, yet how much do we use them as birthplaces for souls? Jesus thought dinner time was an ideal venue for gospel witness, too (Mt. 9:10; 26:7; and many more). The relaxed atmosphere is ideal for this.

6. The good works approach of Dorcas (Acts 9): How often we are reminded of the strategic role of good works in the life of the believer. “Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father which is in heaven”(Mt. 5:16), said the Saviour. “And let ours also,” wrote Paul to Titus, “learn to maintain good works for necessary uses, that they be not unfruitful” (3:14). Observe the link in Paul’s mind between lack of good works and unfruitfulness. Selah!

There does seem to be a link between the obvious evidence that Dorcas was “full of good works and almsdeeds which she did” and the “many” who “believed in the Lord.” Would a return to being “full” of good works also lead to many believing? Sounds like a wonderful experiment!

7. The lifestyle approach of the healed demoniac of Gadara (Mk. 5:19; Lk. 8:39): These two accounts of the story give two slightly differing instructions from the Lord to the man. Interestingly, Luke records the Lord as

telling him to “show” the great things done for him by the Lord. It is Mark, the author of the Gospel of the Servant, that quotes the Lord as saying he should “tell” others of the Lord’s doings in his life. Yes, it’s “show and tell time” for us. Little use, telling without showing. Like the priestly garments, we need bells and pomegranates —both testimony and fruitfulness.

8. The supportive approach of many in New Testament days: Paul wrote: “Help those women which labored with me in the gospel…”(Php. 4:3). He spoke of Aquila and Priscilla as “my helpers in Christ Jesus: who have for my life laid down their own necks,”and Phebe, “a servant of the church,” of Tryphena and Tryphosa “who labor in the Lord,” and Mary of Rome, “who bestowed much labor on us” (Rom. 16). There are many others as well.

They prayed, and spoke encouraging words, and gave of their funds, and showed up to share the reproach. They may have prepared meals for the Lord’s servants and washed their clothes. They helped with manual labor, assisting Paul in his tent-making business. They helped in preparing manuscripts and transported them from place to place. Many were unknown and no doubt many gave their lives for the cause. We shall meet them some day and thank them for the foundation they laid in beginning the process that eventually brought the gospel to our doors.

But all these rest from their labors. Now it is our turn. Let us “by all means” do it.

Shadow Boxing? (June-July 2006)

From Uplook, June-July 2006. Article.

We need to hit the enemy, and hard.

The apostle Paul often alluded to athletics to illustrate divine truth. In every case, he used it, not as we often think of sports today—for leisure and entertainment—but to call the people of God to a life of rigor, sacrifice, determination, and single-mindedness.

The runner lays aside every weight (Heb. 12:1) in order to run with endurance. The wrestler knows his opponent, not "flesh and blood," but the rulers of darkness (Eph. 6:12). The athlete realizes that striving is not enough; he is "not crowned, except he strive lawfully"(1 Tim. 2:5).

In his first letter to the Corinthians, Paul wrote: "Everyone who competes for the prize is temperate in all things. Now they do it to obtain a perishable crown, but we for an imperishable crown. Therefore I run thus: not with uncertainty. Thus I fight: not as one who beats the air"(9:25-26, NKJV). Notice the preacher's four main points:

1. The intensity of competition on the track demands temperance in lifestyle at all times: If the prize is to be won, it will largely be won when no one is watching. A disciplined life in private shows its benefits in the crisis of the competition. So too, the private life of prayer, meditation, study, personal holiness, discrete good works, and moderation in habits are keys to the winning edge in the Christian life. Raw native talent in place of spiritual exercise, "the gift of the gab" on the platform

instead of hours of study with the open Book, or lengthy public prayers in lieu of private ones—all this will fool no one when our own resources fail us in the Big Race. Don't count the days; make the days count.

2. The seriousness of athletes for earthly prizes should spur us to greater zeal for our heavenly ones: Rain or shine, hot or cold, I see them, sometimes stumbling along the roadside in the early morning. Bundled against the winter chill or glistening with sweat, their dogged example shouts at me as I pass in the comfort of my car: "How serious are you, Jabe Nicholson, about the race you're in, the race whose prize is to 'win Christ'" (Php. 3:8)? Am I pressing—pushing myself—"for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus" (Php. 3:14)? Or is "take it easy" my repeated credo?

3. Since nothing is uncertain about my purpose, nothing should be uncertain about my performance: If the commission is clear—the gospel to the whole world in our lifetime (it's axiomatic that only our generation can reach our generation)—how are we doing? How much closer to the goal are we than we were last week? Last year? Babies keep coming. People keep dying. Has this become some rerun farce with the conveyer belt at full speed? The hapless workers frantically watch the pies land in a heap because they have decided they cannot save them all? Christian, it is not our role to save them all. Jesus saves! But it is our role to be a witness to as many as we can.

4. Shadow boxing will not do in a real battle with a real enemy, and we must make every blow count: No damage will be done as long as we sit in social circles among our Christian friends and talk of conditions outside. We must

engage the enemy in every way, making every penny, every moment, every ounce of energy count. Let it not be said of us what Muhammad Ali once said of fellow boxer George Foreman: “I’ve seen him shadow-boxing—and the shadow won!”

Sioux Falls, But Jesus Saves (August-September 2006)

From Uplook, August-September 2006. Editorial.

The effects of the Fall could be seen there, but a Savior was standing by.

I first visited Sioux Falls several years ago when brother Tim Geske suggested I stop by to visit the Sax family en route between engagements in Appleton, WI and Lawrence, KS. Though that makes two sides of a triangle about 800 miles long, I agreed because I had learned that shepherds don't always travel as a crow flies. They are, after all, caring for sheep, not crows.

When I arrived, I discovered that the Saxes had rented a room in a downtown hotel and managed to get a small crowd from somewhere in for an evening meeting. I thought to myself, "Some day I hope we'll be able to help here—these people are serious." They would prove faithful with the labor invested by others here. This is a true beachhead for the gospel.

Years passed. The Saxes, with others who stayed in Sioux Falls for a while and then moved on, slugged it out week after week, month after month. Sometimes, they told me, they would grow discouraged and think of moving on themselves. At times like that, they would bundle up the family and head to the Twin Cities for a respite. And almost without fail, one brother would be ministering the Word. The message would be so obviously for them that, as they headed back to Sioux Falls, the children would say, "That was for us, wasn't it! I guess we're staying." And stay they did.

Then the Good News team stopped to work for a week in Brandon, SD, the town east of Sioux Falls where the Saxes live. Those of us involved with the team wondered if this was the area for us to return for the year's grand finale. The response from the team members was unanimous on two points: this was hard ground for the gospel, but the Saxes were the kind of servants who were a joy to co-labor with. And from there the Lord seemed to direct every step.

As about 250 eager saints joined to work together in the "Good News, Sioux Falls!" effort, what a thrill to serve with such a diverse group yet hear not one discouraging word throughout the week. And to the team's surprise, the ground proved fertile, not hard as it seemed in Brandon. Many eager souls were discovered—and are still being discovered—among the thousands of the lost in that city.

Those who responded might not have looked like the harvest at first sight. Motorcycle gang members, single moms beaten down by life, those who for years had been slaves to drink, hard-bitten old timers who initially claimed to be atheists, apartments full of Eastern Europeans who barely spoke English, hotel maids, young families uncertain how they could build a solid foundation for their children in a collapsing world . . . and daily the list continues to grow.

Yes, we met opposition. The police were called on us and threatened to arrest the young men preaching in the open air. Some were turned away from public events where they only sought to freely dispense good news. More than a few doors closed abruptly. And the media ignored us.

Overall, however, Sioux Falls was kind to her visiting evangelists, and we joyfully spread the news across the city. Almost 20,000 homes were visited. Children's good news clubs were held twice a day in four or five parks. A musical presentation interspersed with testimonies was given in a city bandshell. Others worked the malls, the downtown shops, the festivals and fairs. On the street, in the Old Courthouse, and at a local school, the message was heralded. There was both sowing and reaping. And the reaping goes on today. The crowds of Christians have moved back home. But the Saxes and a few others are still there.

And so is the Lord of the harvest.

What Lessons Were Learned in SF? (August-September 2006)

From Uplook, August-September 2006. Article.

Evangelism's learning curve is steep. But we can enjoy the climb.

Because so much ground has been lost over the last few decades of evangelistic inactivity or ineffectiveness, we're having to learn the process almost from scratch. With an increasing desire to get back into real gospel work—not just preaching a salvation message to our own people in the comfort and safety of our own buildings—some are venturing out a little way from shore.

At best, however, we have been chumming, throwing bait into the water with no hooks, no means of actually bringing the fish in. Where is the follow-up? How many times in the last year has our baptistry been used for someone saved out of our local community? Ouch!

To use another analogy, scattering seed across the land, like Johnny Appleseed, makes for good fable but for bad farming. We need to methodically cover our own part of the field and then expect to also be involved in bringing in the harvest. Sow. Weep. Wait. Reap. Like that.

It's wonderful to raise our Ebenezer and declare that at Sioux Falls "the Lord helped us" but it's also good to learn lessons the Lord taught us.

Sioux Falls was a good opportunity to see different methods and styles of evangelism at work in an array of venues. Many good suggestions were made by these

believers. And all were willing to regroup and rework things when we were stymied. So what were some of the valuable lessons learned as we labored together in that needy city?

1. We need a more balanced division of labor: We had 250 people at one end of the conveyor belt and a handful at the other. Probably a few hundred hopeful individuals were recorded during the week that required sometimes a dozen visits to make contact. More requests for visits came in by reply cards, and one-on-one Bible studies were arranged by the score.

As well, the kid's clubs in the parks were continued. Plus responsibilities for regular meetings on the Lord's Day and at other times also rested on the same shoulders. No wonder Larry Sax was unable to keep his "day" job and gave himself full time to the work. We need to see a group of exercised and capable people who are willing to follow the sowers and help with the reaping. This is essential.

2. We need to encourage those with the gift of showing mercy to join: We should have had a place on our record pad that read: "Good works required"—a single mom with a broken fence or an old widow with a garden that needed weeding. Many not inclined to join in a gospel effort like this would be eager to do good works—baby sitting, fixing leaky faucets, baking, etc. Linking good news with good works would increase both our visibility in the city, our acceptance with the people—and our obedience to the Word! We would need to explain to recipients that we were not doing this work for them (so they did not feel beholden to us); we were doing it for the Lord because He had been so good to us (and

therefore giving Him the glory). Good works + good news = good success.

3. We need to do this kind of thing regularly and more often: It was suggested that if specific weeks each year were slated for united gospel efforts, more people could plan ahead. That's good thinking, but the rate-determining step is still eager and capable believers willing to move to these needy areas and lay down their lives for the establishment of brightly shining lampstands. This is the need of the hour. Hopefully three couples would begin meeting now to pray and examine the whole array of Bible truth so the Lord could redeploy them when their hearts are beating as one, linked by the Holy Spirit into a beachhead force for the next campaign. See also the information in the article "Where To Now?" on page 30.

Where To Now? (August-September 2006)

From Uplook, August-September 2006. Article.

Once a year is not enough. Do we need to pray, “Lord, increase our faith”?

As mentioned in the previous Uplook, it is our exercise to see two GNOM teams crossing the country with gospel seed in the coming year. (Eventually there should be gospel teams in every state and province throughout the continent, don’t you think?) Part of the reason for this is the faint but distinct cry of struggling assemblies in the south and west who are calling for help. The so-called Sun Belt is the fastest growing region of the land regarding general population, but perhaps the weakest (except New England) for gospel witness from assembly workers.

Yes, there are challenges. I can only imagine the fuel bill for a team traversing the long distances between the scattered assembly outposts. And, quite frankly, many of these small and discouraged groups probably have very little strength or resources to help the team. But we must see the trend reversed in this huge area or else abandon it to the ravages of time and neglect. This we cannot do.

We also should have a few men who can effectively communicate in Spanish as this region has a large Spanish-speaking population. Will you pray with us about this need?

THE JUNE OUTREACH If, in fact, the Lord blesses us with enough men for two teams (and surely He will double our resources to do it), it is our exercise to have a united Orientation at the beginning of the school year (mid–late Sep) and then bring the teams together for a final gospel effort, joined by as many exercised saints as possible. The Lord has not yet shown us where that would be, but the dates for that effort will be, Lord willing, June 2-9 (so you can plan ahead).

MORE OUTREACHES? If one united gospel effort is a good thing, I daresay that two could be twice as good. And there are many exercised saints who for one reason or another would be more disposed to joining in if there was an outreach in the southern states during the winter months.

To this end we are suggesting an additional Good News campaign to be held, Lord willing the last full week of January (Jan 20-27) somewhere in the southern states. We will let you know the location as the time draws nearer and the Lord makes things clearer.

HOW CAN WE PRAY? Obviously this is the key. We need clear direction as to place, the right persons who are exercised by the Lord to attend, the right families/ individuals to reside there to be foundational to a new work, the necessary resources to pay for literature, rentals, advertising, etc. (the literature alone for Sioux Falls provided by Uplook was more than $30,000; others provided for food, and other expenses bringing the total to probably twice that amount).

Wouldn’t it also be good to pray for specific cities that at present have no NT assembly as far as we know? Or cities with the beginning of a work that could use a good

push? Cities like Huntsville and Tuscaloosa, AL; Shreveport and Baton Rouge, LA, Jackson, MS; Memphis, TN; Midland, TX; and the list goes on and on. We would appreciate communication from believers and their exercise about pioneer areas.

We believe that there are many more saints who are eager to become involved in gospel work. One key is to remember that everyone has a unique part to play in the orchestra.

Let’s Get (More) Serious (August-September 2006)

From Uplook, August-September 2006. Article.

Warning: This is a three pepper article.

If the conditions that prevail in many assemblies were true in most evangelical churches, the pastor would have been shown the door. No souls saved? No baptisms? Needy Christians not being visited? No improvement in public preaching? No discipleship for new believers? He’d be long gone and the new candidate would be informed that serious change was expected.

Now the reason we don’t believe in having a contractual agreement with a professional shepherd is not simply because we don’t see it in Scripture. We also don’t see Sunday Schools, hymn books, Bible study courses, gospel tracts, and a long list of other things in the Bible either—all of which we have found useful in their place (and not anti-biblical).

The reason we historically rejected the practice of a man being paid to do the major share of the public work in the local church was this: we believed the model in Scripture of all rising to their full measure of gift and ministry was by far the better way. And by better way, we not only meant more biblical; we meant more beneficial, more fruitful, more efficient, more glorifying to God. We believed it brought out the full potential of all exercised believers; it enriched the church with a whole spectrum of gifts rather than specializing in one; it gave real and strategic opportunities for ministry to

those who would never have a chance in a ministerial system. What happened? Why is there often, as in the Bethlehem of Elimelech's day, a famine in "the house of bread"? Why are families like Elimelech's going to sojourn somewhere else? I will hurry to say that Elimelech's plan was a bad one and his family was lost to the place of God's favor as a result. The better plan was to follow Boaz, submit to God's chastening, and prosper.

1. A prideful attitude that changed "God's way is better than man's way" to "our way is better than theirs": Then it was a short step to the next set of assumptions: "All so-called blessing in denominational churches is just a mirage." "Whatever else we don't have, we have the Lord in our midst." "The smallness of our gatherings isn't something to be concerned about—it's proof of our high spiritual state. We're the little flock. The crowd's always wrong, you know." Such attitudes (and a passel more like them) led to the remarkable situation where lack of blessing equalled evidence of blessing; and where evident blessing was therefore seen as suspect, a work of man.

We're only too old to change when our hearts stop.

2. When confronted with the high cost of overseeing, many in elder's positions were unwilling to pay up. Toil in the Word to feed the saints while others take the Lazyboy-and-TV approach to evening hours? "No, I'm not the teacher type." Make difficult visits to lives cracking apart under the strain? "I've never been confrontational." Spend hours discipling young believers? "The assembly's doing just fine. The ones that left weren't happy anyway." Am I overstating the case?

3. Mediocrity was taken to be normative: It is time to repent and reject this unbiblical model. It is little help to the flock if shepherds have blueprints of ideal sheepfolds or aerial photos of rich grassland. In most cases, we "know these things." But the happiness comes in doing them (Jn. 13:17). So what is the way forward? Do we feel incompetent? The Lord is standing by to help. We must spread our busyness and barrenness out at the cross and allow Him to radically change the landscape of our lives so they become as the Creator intended, not as the world has eroded them. "Return unto Me, and I will return unto you, saith the Lord of hosts" (Mal. 3:7).

Lonely People (October 2006)

From Uplook, October 2006. Article.

Does anybody know someone who could be a friend to them?

Jesus embraced the name Friend of Sinners and reveled in it. Not only did He invite the lower caste—even the outcast—to come to Him for rest, He so convinced them that He was serious about having them as friends that the commoners flocked to Him. He touched their diseased bodies and healed them. He blessed their children when His disciples thought the little ones to be a nuisance, especially when discussing fine points of doctrine. He went into their rude houses, ate their simple fare, sat about their tables for long conversations, and seemed to have endless patience with their questions. He told them stories by the hour, and spoke of hope and forgiveness and peace. Many of them so learned to trust His steady love that they were willing to blurt out their secret longings or sob out their sins to Him. He never brushed them off, never turned one away.

Few titles given by His enemies to the Lord Jesus were intended to contain so much gall and yet delivereed so much sweetness as that of “Friend of Sinners.” To “receive” sinners as a judge or king might disdainfully do to hear small claims cases in their courts was one thing. But to “eat with them”? It was enough to add an extra curl to His critics’ Pharisaic beards!

The West has more stuff than they can cram into their lives. They have entertainment at their fingertips, sports

leagues, country clubs, internet chat rooms, and associations of every kind. They have shopping malls and amusement parks. Yet for all that, so many are lonely still.

A recent Associated Press (AP) article was titled “Lonely Nation” (8/6/06): “In bleak nursing homes and vibrant college dorms, in crowded cities and spread-out suburbs, Americans confront an ailment with no single cause or cure. Some call it social isolation or disconnectedness. Often, it’s just plain loneliness. An age-old ailment, to be sure, and yet…it is worsening. It seems ironic, even to those who are affected. The nation has never been more populous, soon to reach the 300 million mark. And it has never been more connected—by phone, e-mail, instant message, text message, and on and on. Yet so many are alone in the crowd.”

One factor is that people are too busy for intimacy. Another is the changing complexion of the American household. “The trend toward isolation surfaced in the last U.S. census figures, which show that one-fourth of the nation’s households—27.2 million of them—consisted of just one person, compared with 10 percent in 1950.” The author also cites a study released in June by the American Sociological Review. They found that 25% of Americans said they had no close friends in whom they would confide on important matters; another “19 percent said they had only one confidant—often their spouse.” What happens when that spouse dies?

The story is told of one Helen Granath, an 84-year-old San Francisco widow. She says, “It’s a very lonely existence—most of the time the loneliness can be excruciating and painful. I have very few friends.

They’re either ill or they’ve passed away or moved somewhere else.” She says her son “is very busy in the computer business. I don’t see him very often.” The author concludes: “Undoubtedly there are millions who could empathize ….”

And it’s not just older people. “A lot of students go through periods of loneliness,” the article quotes Zanny Altschuler, 20, of Menlo Park, CA. John Powell, an Illinois counselor, says students don’t make “really satisfying connections.” “All the students I work with,” he says, “have incredibly many pseudo-intimate relationships online—but without the kind of risk and vulnerability that goes with sitting across a cafe booth from another person.”

One would have to be in a very dark room to miss the import of this for the gospel. We must take time to make friends with the lonely. Then we can introduce them to that special Someone who said to those who trust Him: “I will never leave you, nor forsake you. So that we may boldly say, The Lord is my helper, and I will not fear what man shall do to me”(Heb. 13:5-6).

The Failed Project (November 2006)

From Uplook, November 2006. Article.

Gravity wins again.

The Bible narrative is full of stories that prove this point: failures can yield the most valuable lessons we learn in life. Don't be afraid of failures. Rather, be afraid of learning nothing from them.

When my truck is in the camper mode for traveling with the Good News team, the truck cap has to be stored somewhere. It is generally known that ability in art and engineering has rarely come in the same person, but this has never deterred me from trying my hand at building things never conceived of, even by the experts at Home Depot. I took a good look at the limited space in my garage and concluded I could suspend the cap on two-by-fours held with a system of cables and pulleys to the ceiling rafters. When completed, it was something to behold. Unfortunately, it was not something to be used. I had not fully comprehended the gravity of the situation. Gravity, as in the law of gravity. Although a remarkable contraption, it came short in only one point—the thing didn't work! After three heroic tries with various family members setting personal bests in the clean-and-jerk department, I caved in and wrote off two days of work and any pride I had left in constructing the gizmo.

Instead, my dear wife quietly suggested a simple table-like framework over the kids' bikes. Simple. Cheap. Functional. Hernia-free. A one-hour job, even for me. Sigh.

But the exercise in non-functional engineering was not a complete waste of time. It set me to thinking about the distinct role of failure and the keys to success in the spiritual realm. Here were some of the bits salvaged from my Rube Goldberg invention:

1. How thankful I am that there is never any weakness in the forces that hold us from above. My “skyhooks” yielded to the weight placed on them, but the One who upholds us and “is able to keep us from falling” (Jude 24) invites us to cast all on Him. He, after all, hung the worlds in place.

2. How thankful I was to have others willing to share the burden with me. Even though they had their doubts about the project, I never doubted my family’s commitment to help me in my need. I was reminded of the scene in Exodus 17. Moses was doing some mighty lifting—his people were under a deadly attack from Amalek, and inexperienced Joshua was leading Israel in battle. “But,” we read, “Moses’ hands were heavy; and they took a stone, and put it under him, and he sat thereon; and Aaron and Hur stayed up his hands, the one on the one side, and the other on the other side; and his hands were steady until the going down of the sun” (v. 12). How much we owe to those, often at a distance from us, who intercede on our behalf like Moses.

However, we also owe a debt of gratitude to those, who like Aaron and Hur, encourage all who grow faint under the heavy burdens of living down here. The word to all such, “Wherefore lift up the hands which hang down, and the feeble knees” (Heb. 12:12), is not given specifically in the context of interceders, but an

exhortation to stand by those who are passing through a serious time of life training and need to be encouraged not to give up under the strain (v. 11).

3. I'm thankful that little, if anything, is lost to the child of God, even in our mistakes. Not only the two-by-fours and hardware, but the lessons learned can all be used in other, often unexpected, ways. So it is in life. God allows us to fail; but when we fail, He doesn't (Zeph. 3:5). And for God's people, failure is not the end of the story. Often it is the beginning of something far better.

Set for the Defense of the Gospel (December 2006)

From Uplook, December 2006. Article.

Some “brights” are calling for the eradication of all religion.

Due to the almost complete retreat of evangelists from the public square, the gospel has become a strange sounding message to many. The term “evangelical” in most quarters now means “We believe the gospel,” not “We preach the gospel.” The certain sound of the trumpet with its convicting and converting power is seldom heard in the marketplace. This—among other reasons, like worldliness in the churches—has emboldened the enemies of God.

The last year has seen a significant sea change in American public discourse regarding God and the Christian message.

Four books—diatribes, really—have risen to the top of the Best Seller list recently. They are The God Delusion by Richard Dawkins, Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon by Daniel Dennett, and two books by Sam Harris: The End of Faith and Letter to a Christian Nation. They have become something akin to the four “Gospels” of atheism. Dennett, by the way, objects to being called an atheist, and suggests the term “brights” instead. Hardly appropriate for “the natural man” who “receives not the things of the Spirit of God: for they are foolishness to him: neither can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned” (1 Cor. 2:14).

Dawkins, England's most pugnacious atheist, is "Charles Simonyi professor of the public understanding of science" at Oxford University, a sort-of Director of Missions for Darwinian evolution. Daniel Dennett is Austin B. Fletcher Professor of Philosophy at Tufts University. Sam Harris is a philosophy grad (Stanford) and is earning a doctorate in neuroscience, no doubt hoping he can prove that belief, love, and morality are merely neurological functions.

If you are not already aware of this new wind blowing across our bow, everyone serious about the Great Commission would do well to batten down for the gale-force storm that is brewing.

This page obviously doesn't allow for any serious critique of the arguments in these books. Most of them have been posed and answered long ago. But there are a few new twists. One repeated theme is a call for the end of religious tolerance. The authors, if possible, despise liberals who compromise the Christian message even more than they do those who take the Bible literally. They object to the way Western society has allowed religious positions to go unchallenged in the name of tolerance. It is not enough to tolerate Christianity because, they say, Christianity is not merely a benign fairy tale. Indeed, all forms of religion are, according to these authors, bringing civilization to the brink of extinction. "We need a world government," says Sam Harris, and "[t]he diversity of our religious beliefs constitutes a primary obstacle here" (The End of Faith, p. 151).

It is no small comfort that the Captain is onboard with us.

Here are snippets from some reviewers who would agree generally with the basic theses of these books. They are not Christian by any means. Their objections have to do with the treatment of the subjects addressed. For example, Terry Eagleton, English Literature professor at Manchester University, reviewing Dawkin's book, writes:

Imagine someone holding forth on biology whose only knowledge of the subject is the Book of British Birds, and you have a rough idea of what it feels like to read Richard Dawkins on theology. Card-carrying rationalists like Dawkins, who is the nearest thing to a professional atheist we have had since Bertrand Russell, are in one sense the least well-equipped to understand what they castigate, since they don't believe there is anything there to be understood, or at least anything worth understanding. This is why they invariably come up with vulgar caricatures of religious faith that would make a first-year theology student wince. The more they detest religion, the more ill-informed their criticisms of it tend to be.

In a New York Times review (Feb 19⁄06), Leon Wieseltier, literary editor of the New Republic, assesses Dennett's attempt to demolish the Christian worldview:

Scientism, the view that science can explain all human conditions and expressions, mental as well as physical, is…one of the dominant superstitions of our day…. For a sorry instance of present-day scientism, it would be hard to improve on Daniel C. Dennett's book. Breaking the Spell is a work of considerable historical interest because it is a merry anthology of contemporary superstitions.

In an October 2006 book review titled “Dawkins the dogmatist” in the British Prospect magazine (prospect-magazine.co.uk) Andrew Brown, author of “The Darwin Wars,” begins by quoting Dawkins as saying:

“The majority of us don’t cause needless suffering; we believe in free speech and protect it even if we disagree with what is being said.” …Does he believe in it himself? He quotes later in the book approvingly and at length a speech by his friend Nicholas Humphrey which argued that, “We should no more allow parents to teach their children to believe, for example, in the literal truth of the Bible or that planets rule their lives, than we should allow parents to knock their children’s teeth out.” But of course, it’s not interfering with free speech when atheists do it.

Dawkins not only believes that Christian parents should not be allowed to teach their children about God and the Bible, he also thinks scientists (and philosophers who agree with them) are the only ones who have any right to speak. In addition, scientists who are Christians have also disqualified themselves. Because they believe in the “God delusion,” they are sufficiently biased that anything they suggest from their scientific endeavor cannot be taken seriously. In this way, only those who agree with his presuppositions ought to speak. We might call this the Dawkins delusion.

But if there is no Purposer, how can life have any purpose? Dawkins addresses the issue in this fashion:

It is a tedious cliché…that science concerns itself with how questions, but only theology is equipped to answer why questions. What on Earth is a why question? (p. 56).

He then proves that some why questions are silly (Why are unicorns hollow?) and then leaves it to us to conclude that he has somehow proven that all why questions are equally silly. But eventually he addresses the atheist's lack of purpose in life by telling a story about himself and fellow scientist James Watson:

I conscientiously put it to him that…some people see no conflict between science and religion, because they claim science is about how things work and religion is about what it is all for. Watson retorted: 'Well I don't think we're for anything. We're just products of evolution. You can say, "Gee, your life must be pretty bleak if you don't think there's a purpose." But I'm anticipating having a good lunch.' We did have a good lunch, too (p. 100).

Such is the result of evolutionary thought, placing brilliant scientists on the level of lost sheep looking for a few tufts of grass to hold death at bay a little longer.

Sam Harris, in the absence of any deity, lays claim to the right to define morality on his own terms. In this he lays a flawed premise as the foundation for his argument. He states: "Questions of morality are questions about happiness and suffering." From this, in caustic terms, he sets about to prove that God, Christians, and their Bible do not maximize happiness and minimize suffering. Therefore, by his definition, the God who—in his mind—does not exist anyway has disqualified Himself from being the arbiter of right and wrong.

At the heart of Christianity is the Cross, the ultimate Right Thing which was also the most excruciating thing that ever happened. Indeed suffering, although a by-

product of sin, is one of God's most effective tools in accomplishing the redemption of lost souls.

These arguments only confirm that "men by their wisdom knew not God." Though God calls us to reason with Him (Isa. 1:18), it is to our ultimate peril, in matters where we are uncertain, if we assume that we are right and God is wrong.

The books, however, can be somewhat helpful to evangelists because they show the present state of atheistic philosophy. We must be prepared to deal with such arguments "with meekness and fear" as we present "a reason of the hope" we have (1 Pet. 3:15). And it should humble us to see how hard such atheists work at maintaining and propagating their hopeless faith. One wonders whether we are as willing to give ourselves to the rigorous task of presenting the case for the true Christian gospel to a generation made skeptical of Evangelicalism by its blatant worldliness and half-hearted devotion.

Why Did the Priest Cross the Road? (January-February 2007)

From Uplook, January-February 2007. Article.

The question is not a joke. On its answer hangs the fate of billions.

The gentleman, says Luke, was an expert in Mosaic law. He asked to “tempt” the Lord Jesus. Whether there was any malice in his query, or whether it was to test what he had heard were Jesus’ unorthodox views, he thought it was a clever question. He posed it, the lawyer did confront the Lord while He was surrounded by a crowd, no doubt to maximize the effect. It seems the lawyer had heard that Rabbi Jesus was teaching a short route to heaven, not based on law-keeping but merely on believing. And so the question: “Master, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?” (Lk. 10:25). The answer was not what he expected. But did you expect it? Is this the gospel you believe? Is the way to eternal life by truly loving God with all your heart, mind and will and your neighbor as yourself? Is this what they preach in your assembly? Was this the message of Paul and of the early church? Surely there must be some mistake.

There was a mistake, but not in the answer of the Lord Jesus, of course. It was in the way the lawyer had framed his question. He was not asking how a person could receive eternal life, but how he could inherit it. A person has a legal right to an inheritance. Now only a fool—or a Pharisee—would imagine he could legally lay claim to eternal life, but this was the question asked and so this was the question answered. Do you want a right

to it? Then it is merely a matter of perfection—in devotedness to God and in unstinting, unselfish service to mankind.

The lawyer had asked for it, and he got it. Now what? The place was crowded with his neighbors, who would be eager to provide him with endless practical opportunities to prove such selfless love! The lawyer now looked to the Man he had come to trap for a way out of the snare he had set with his own lips. “And who is my neighbor?” (v. 29), he asks in desperation.

It is commonly thought by many believers that the Deep South is chock full of Christians. Thank the Lord for every one who is truly saved, but many of those professing Christianity in states like Alabama sadly are not possessors of eternal life. They, too, imagine that they can “inherit” it. Not a chance.

A way of escape was provided by the gracious Savior in a parable full of pathos. Immediately we sense how high the stakes really are for the lawyer, as they are for lost souls everywhere.

No longer is he well-dressed and prosperous but, as Jesus wants us to see every sinner, lying stripped of his temporary riches, wounded and dying by the roadside. He cannot save himself.

But surely all is not lost, for see, here comes a priest out of the holy city! There is no doubt the priest sees the victim where he lies. In fact, says Jesus, it is for this reason that the priest crossed the road! Yes, it was to get to the other side: “…and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side” (v. 31). The dying man despairs of any help—but wait! Here comes a Levite! Surely he will come to his aid. Again there is no question

that the wounded man was seen. In fact, says Jesus, the Levite “came and looked on [inspected] him, and passed by on the other side” (v. 32).

We must not assume that Jesus is belittling the priesthood or the law by His comments. Rather He is appealing to the lawyer, the other listeners that day, and to us, to realize that humanity’s condition is so dire that religious observance and law-keeping cannot help; only a Savior can. And He has come to help, not by crossing the road, but by crossing the universe and stooping to where we lay. Then applying His healing balm, beginning us on our new journey, paying for our care, and promising to return, He shows us the way in true love for God and our neighbor. For He is both Savior and Sanctifier to those who put their trust in Him.

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