



POPULATING HEAVEN

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Why the Book?

1

IT was a warm summer's day. Rigged out in old denims and a paint spattered tee shirt, I was happily painting the white stucco walls at the front of our house. While high up the ladder God spoke to me in a startling way. I must make it clear, that at this point in my spiritual journey I had only heard God speak to me through the Bible. His direct voice into my mind was not a familiar experience. This is what he said "Michael, you know that your next door neighbour Janet has an ear problem. I want you to heal it." If I had healed anyone before, or even attended a church where healings took place, I could have accepted God's message more easily. This was all new to me, a regular Baptist attending a small traditional church. God had seriously upset my day! It is a wonder I didn't fall off the ladder.

What to do? 'Gideon', I thought! He put fleeces out to test God's messages to him. What can I use as a fleece? Inspiration came. The previous day, by coincidence, Brenda my lovely wife had complained about a minor health problem which was causing her discomfort. We had a good prayer life together so, amongst other matters we had brought it up before God. It couldn't really be classed as a prayer for healing, but I had my fleece. I climbed down the ladder and went into the house. "*Brenda*" I called, "*That problem you were having trouble with, how is it today?*" She paused for a moment and said confidently, "*It's fine, I'm not having any bother with it.*" Taking a deep breath, I went back to my painting. I reached the top of the ladder and fresh inspiration came. I thought, "*Gideon put out more than one fleece, so why shouldn't I?*" It is time to talk to God. "*Father*", I said, "*If I am going to do this, please send Janet round to our house. I would be much too embarrassed to go to hers.*" I reckoned I was off the hook for two or three weeks. Though we were very good friends with Janet and her husband, she would rarely visit spontaneously. Five minutes later, I heard the click, click, of high heels. Janet came down the drive and as she passed my ladder called up, "*Just calling round to see Brenda.*" God had me trapped. I spent ten minutes building up courage before going back down the ladder and into the dining room where Brenda and Janet were chatting.

"How are you going on with that ear problem Janet," I asked in a casual manner. *"It's quite serious,"* she replied, *"I'm going to the hospital on Wednesday for an operation."* There was no way out! *"Would you like me to pray for it to be healed?"* I asked hesitantly. Janet was not a believer at this time, but to my surprise she replied with great enthusiasm, *"Yes please, that would be great."* While I was wondering how I should go about this, I looked round for Brenda thinking help would be at hand. She had 'done a runner' as the saying goes. I was on my own. How would Jesus have done this I thought? I suppose he would have touched her ear. *"Is it OK if I touch your ear?"* I asked. *"Fine she said."* I reached over, lightly touched her ear and prayed, *"Lord Jesus please heal Janet's ear."* She duly attended the hospital for the needed operation. The surgeon, on inspecting her ear could find nothing wrong with it. The operation was cancelled and she was discharged. Following this Janet joined our Bible study group, met with Jesus, became a Christian, and was baptised.

Before being able to answer the question, 'Why have I written the book? – I need to tell you two more stories.

Clifford was our other next door neighbour. Our drives ran parallel, so Clifford and I frequently had a chat over the low fence. He was a fine retired gentleman of the old school. Plus 4's for golf, very smart blazer and tie for most occasions. He fitted the typical image of a Major in an Agatha Christie play. He was always very correct and he was a very private man. Soon after Janet's healing, he complained to me one day that he was suffering from a very painful bout of shingles. I said to him, *"You know that we are Christians Clifford. We believe that God is always ready to answer prayer. Would you like me to pray for you to be healed?"* It was very clear from his reaction that I had invaded his personal space. I had got this badly wrong.

Mustering his politeness and good form he replied stiffly, *"I really don't think so Michael."* I tried to recover the situation as best I could by replying, *"That's fine Clifford, I perfectly understand. Brenda and I will remember you in our prayer times."* Interestingly, his shingles did clear up very quickly but I doubt if he would have connected it with our prayers. However, a few weeks later when Clifford and I were having one of our usual chats over the fence, some Jehovah's Witnesses came down my drive and gave their usual presentation to the two of us. I had heard it all before but we both listened politely to what they had to say until they had finished. I explained that I was a Christian, then went on to give a comprehensive account, in a structured way, of what, as a Christian I believed. I used the Nicene Creed for this. They were somewhat taken aback, but the important thing was that I noticed that Clifford listened keenly all the way through. God had most sensitively set him up to hear the gospel message without his personal space being threatened. How else could it have happened? The first Sunday after this

Clifford took himself off to Church and never missed a week until the time he went into a care home. As the apostle Paul wrote to the Church in Rome, **faith comes by hearing.**

Directly opposite our house, just across the road is a bungalow. Claire, a middle aged widow lived there at the time of these two stories. She had no family to care for her so we stood in the gap frequently. A year or so after Janet and Clifford became Christians, while we were establishing a new church in the district, Claire became a Christian too. This is how it happened.

Billy Graham was about to hold a stadium mission in London and we had arranged a video link to our local town hall. To advertise this, I had produced fifty placards fastened to stakes ready to be erected in front gardens and on grass verges around our district. Saturday came, the day we had allocated for this task. I had planned to put the first placard in the grass verge outside our house, opposite Claire's bungalow. She was watering her front garden with a hose. As I hammered the placard and stake into the verge, Claire's hose connection came loose from the tap and water began to spray everywhere. I rushed over in my Billy Graham T shirt and sorted the problem out.

Claire looked at me, then at the placard, then back at me, and hesitantly said, *"Michael, yesterday I was feeling so desperate about my life I found myself praying to God about things. Do you know what I prayed? Please God give me a sign. Here you are the very next morning, hammering a sign in before my very eyes. It couldn't be a clearer sign could it?"* She came with us to hear Billy Graham on video at the town hall. After the Gospel presentation she went forward to commit her life to Jesus. She joined our new church along with others and was soon baptised.

Brenda and I have a long history of leading people to Christ, so many people in fact that we have lost count.

You will see from just these three examples, that all we have to do is to be sensitive to, co-operate with, and serve the plans that God has already perfectly prepared for each individual.

The apostle Paul used an expression, 'That which I have received from the Lord, I pass on to you.' This is why I have written this book. We want to pass on to you all that we have received from our Father God.

We want to equip and motivate you for the task of leading people to Jesus. **Many Christians, most in fact, have never led anyone to Jesus.** The reality is that the church has not been very good at teaching us how it is to be done. Few of us are good at doing things we have not been shown how to do. This book will show you how to be effective in fulfilling the great

commission, given to us by Jesus, to go to all peoples everywhere, and be his witnesses.

**The very first recorded words of Jesus to his disciples were,
“Come along with me and I will show you how to fish for souls.”**

I want to begin with a very simple maths lesson. It only involves multiplying by two so don't worry. It is estimated that at the present time perhaps 5% of the UK population are Christian believers. What would it take do you think for our nation to become 80% Christian twenty years from now?

Suppose that each of the present 5% were to lead just one person to Christ in the next 5 years the nation would be 10% Christian. If the 10% were to do the same, in ten years time the nation would be 20% Christian. The 20% then becomes 40% and the 40% becomes 80%. In effect, if each of us were to achieve the very modest goal of leading one person to Christ every five years, our nation would be restored and transformed.

In 1990 I spent five days at a church in Rockwall, Texas. It had a membership of four thousand. Prayer teams prayed around the clock day and night. Prominent on the agenda was prayer for revival. One lunch-time, in a town centre cafe, I got into conversation with a group of people and the topic of revival came up. I asked the question, *“What proportion of the Rockwall population would you estimate were Christians believers?”* There was a bit of debate which led to general agreement. In Texan drawl, *“Well, Brother Mike, we reckon 90%.”* Struggling to believe this, I said *“Really, 90%?”* *“Yea buddy, 90%.”* *“So what are all these prayers for revival about? Don't you think you've already got revival?”* One or two puzzled looks were exchanged. *“We aint rightly looked at it that way Mike. I reckon when these last 10% is revived, we may think again. But maybe not, 'cause there'll always be new born babies coming along that might turn out to need saving!”*

I hope that this story will help us to begin to see differently. My great hope is that chapter by chapter our perspectives will gradually change. I was speaking at a church recently about leading people to faith. A lady came up to me enthusiastically after my talk, and said, *“Mike, I have been a Christian for many years and I have never heard this before. How can I possibly have missed understanding for so long what you have just explained? Why have I never seen it this way?”* She represented so well what I am attempting to achieve.

This book is a teaching workshop. A very practical place where you can gain knowledge and insight, learn skills, be inspired and motivated. If so far you have never led anyone to Christ, or have not done so for a very long time, I suggest that you set a goal to lead one person to Christ in the next five years. I am aware that in one sense this is quite artificial. But in another it is highly motivational.

I will give my reasons for saying this. First of all, I believe that it is an acceptable offering to God as your share, your investment, in the hope of our nation becoming 80% Christian within the next twenty years. You will see it as achievable, particularly after reading this book.

While vigorously pursuing your goal you will soon begin to see progress and be encouraged. Good teachers work on the dynamic principle that 'success breeds success.' Throughout my teaching career, I encountered many pupils who had experienced so much failure that it was the only way they could see themselves. *"I have failed"* became, *"I am a failure, I'm useless"*, and eventually, *"I'm a nobody."* How tragic. There was a simple solution to this. Provide a task simple enough, and instruction clear enough, to give them the sweet taste of success. The thrill that they experienced was so motivational that they were soon ready to face more difficult tasks with confidence. I promise you that this book has the potential to give you the sweet taste of success and it is likely that you will exceed your expectations by far.

Another powerful motivator is this. You may start a chain reaction! Let me explain. When you play ten pin bowling and get what is called a 'Strike', you only have to hit the first pin, and that pin knocks down the two pins immediately behind it, which knock down those behind them and so on until all ten pins are down. This is the principle of a nuclear reaction only with atoms. Have you ever heard the story of how Billy Graham became a believer? There was a crusade in his town. A big meeting tent, fired up evangelistic preachers, widely advertised, but Billy wasn't interested. His friend Carl, who was a Christian, had asked him three times to go to a crusade meeting and got *"No"* for an answer. But Carl owned a truck that Billy had wanted to drive for some time. So, Carl bribed Billy with the promise that if he went to a crusade meeting with him, and stayed through to the end, he would let Billy drive the truck there and back. It was agreed. Billy went to the meeting and got himself soundly saved. Carl had started a chain reaction. It is probable that more people have found salvation through Billy Graham's ministry than any other evangelist. One of the people my daughter brought to faith a couple of years ago went to University and has shared her faith with almost 50 students many who have come to faith. Revival is not out of reach. Remember what Jesus said in the parable of the seed. One can expect a yield of thirty fold, sixty fold, or perhaps a hundred fold.

Here is further motivation. **Truly get hold of how much Jesus valued the soul.** He said, *"What profit does it bring to a person if they gain the whole world but lose their soul?"* According to Jesus, nothing in the world could be compared in value to a person's soul. He even said, *"Do not be afraid of those who can kill the body. They cannot kill the soul."* He valued the soul infinitely more than the body. If we saw someone's life in danger, we would go to extraordinary lengths to save

them from death. Almost certainly we would be prepared to put our own lives at risk to do so. How is it that there are souls all around us in great danger, yet we are able to stand by unconcerned? **It is not that we don't care it is that we don't see,** I pray Lord Jesus that you will help us to see as you see.

I do hope that this opening chapter has gone some good way to explain why I have given myself to the task of writing this book. May God greatly bless you as you continue.

Why the book title – Populating Heaven?



I was recently asked to give a talk entitled, 'How do I share my Faith?' Given my enthusiasm for spreading the good news of God's Kingdom, I was surprised and somewhat concerned at my reaction. What an uninspiring title I thought. I can't get the least excited about teaching people how to share their faith. I had a time of reflection and gradually began to see, that by making the sharing of our faith an objective, we were placing the focus, the spotlight, upon ourselves. We could be in great danger of believing that once we have shared our faith, we have fulfilled our responsibility to God and to our calling. So I asked myself, if it is not about us, where should we fix our focus? What should our perspective, our viewing point, our final essential purpose be?

The scriptures refer to Christ as the 'Second Adam.' The first Adam, once established in the Garden of Eden and provided with Eve as his mate, was commanded by God to be fruitful and multiply. In other words, go and populate the earth. Adam was of the earth. It seems clear to me that Jesus, the Second Adam, was sent by God to throw open the gates of heaven. His purpose, being the man from heaven, is to populate heaven.

We are the body of Christ and he is the head of the body. Logic tells us that being the body of Christ, we should be aligned and responsive to the purpose of the head. Be fruitful and multiply, have lots of spiritual children, populate heaven. Once I had come to this understanding, my enthusiasm returned. This was a message I could be passionate about. I suggested we change the title of the talk from 'How do I share my faith' to 'Populating Heaven.' This was agreed. As I began to develop the theme, I realised that the only way to do justice to this message was to write a book.

The Bible tells us that as believing Christians we are already ‘Citizens of Heaven.’ We are seated in the heavenly realms with Christ because we are united with him. When Jesus sent his disciples on mission and they came back rejoicing, flushed with success, he changed their focus by saying, *“Do not get carried away, rejoice instead because your names are written in heaven.”* Prior to his departure from this world he comforted his disciples. He told them not to be concerned or troubled. *“I have gone to prepare a place for you in heaven, and will come back to take you to where I am.”* The apostle Paul wrote to the Colossian Church, *“Since you have been raised to new life with Christ, set your sights on the realities of heaven. Make thinking about heaven your priority, not your thinking about earth.”*

During my childhood I became familiar with a cynical expression my mother used. It went like this. “She’s so heavenly minded she’s no earthly use.” She was so wrong. The famous Christian author, C.S. Lewis said this. *“If you read history, you will find that Christians who did most for this present world were precisely those who thought most of the next. It is because Christians have largely ceased to think of the other world that they have become ineffective in this.”* There may be much more truth in saying that we can be so earthly minded, that we are of no heavenly use. John Eldredge, a contemporary Christian author puts it this way. “Life only makes sense against the backdrop of eternity.” I recommend his recent book, ‘Making all things New.’

Heaven is both a future hope *and* a present reality. Paul wrote this to the Colossian Church. *“We keep getting reports on your steady faith in Christ Jesus and the love you continuously extend to all Christians. The lines of purpose in your lives never grow slack, tightly tied as they are to your future in heaven, kept taught by hope.”* When he wrote to the Corinthians he cautioned them about becoming earthly minded at the expense of the certainties of heaven. *“If our hope in Christ is for this life only, we are to be greatly pitied.”* I believe that it is only by increasing the strength of our grip on heaven that will we be able to loosen our grip upon this world and be free to do the works of heaven. *‘May your kingdom come and your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.’* To belong to two worlds at the same time is the greatest of mysteries. We are urged to bring more of heaven down to earth. We are urged to work diligently to make earth as much like heaven as we can, and to encourage as many people as possible to make heaven their destination.

I have to admit that I was daunted by this chapter. How does one communicate matters regarding heaven, except that they come by revelation? If we are finding that heaven is not very real, if it is only a future

vagueness, we can ask God to bless us with fresh revelation. We can receive that, 'sure and certain hope', that enables us to impart to others what we have experienced ourselves. You will remember I am sure, that defining moment in Peter's spiritual journey when Jesus asked his disciples the question, *"Who do people say that I am?"* Various answers were given before Jesus then asked, *"But who do you say that I am?"* Peter was able to pronounce with certainty, *"You are the Christ, the Son of the living God."* Jesus replied, *"Peter, you did not learn this from anyone, my Father has revealed this to you from heaven."*

I greatly value the teachings of the many Godly men and women that have built up my faith over the years. I have increased in knowledge and wisdom because of them, and been greatly encouraged. This is in God's order. We read in the letter that Paul wrote to the Ephesian Christians that God has made gifts to the church of apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers and commissioned them to equip God's people to do his work. But, they were not intended to be a substitute for receiving direct revelational truth from our Father God in heaven.

**Heaven's reality can only come to us from heaven itself.
It cannot be taught.**

The apostle Paul only came to believe in Jesus when he experienced a revelation from heaven on the road to Damascus. He talks in his second letter to the Corinthian Church about visions and revelations from the Lord that he experienced, that were so astounding that they could not be expressed in words. When caught up into the 'third heaven', into 'paradise' he couldn't work out whether he was in his body or not. I am not suggesting that we can all expect experiences as dramatic as that but we can expect God to reveal to us by his Spirit, spiritual truths that cannot be adequately learned from persons. I will share some testimonies in order to reinforce the principles I have been attempting to impart. They are not exaggerated accounts.

Recently, a long standing friend of ours died. Both she and her husband were devoted to God and had worked with dedication for many years to advance his Kingdom. My wife and I, and our daughter, had the great privilege of attending a service arranged to celebrate her life. Words fail. I can only say that heaven opened, heaven came down, heaven mingled. I am convinced that unseen angels were in attendance. We all had the same experience. There was a deep sense that our friend had simply crossed over a lake in a boat, stepped out onto the opposite shore, and was calmly waiting for the time we would join her. It was as though she was enjoying the privilege of going ahead to a beautiful place that was our destination too. We could not think she had died at all.

I remember some years ago visiting a member of our church, a very Godly man, who was in the last stages of dying from motor neuron's disease. He was at home being sustained on oxygen. Each time I visited, the presence of God was awesome. I would leave feeling as though heaven had touched me. On my final visit, when he was very near the end of his life, there was a remarkable peace in the room. He showed no anguish, no fear. I didn't actually see anything with my eyes, but, in my imagination, I could see doors standing open and the light of heaven shining through. Heaven is real. Heaven is being populated.

Brenda and I were married in 1966. Two years later Angela was born. We could not have asked for a more delightful daughter. She was perfectly healthy, intelligent and wonderfully loving, and very well behaved. She loved life. Every day was a happy one. At the age of three and five months she died very suddenly. I had arrived home about six-o'clock one Monday evening. Angela played very happily until we put her to bed. Soon she began to have trouble breathing. Her pulse started racing so we called the doctor. He examined her and immediately called an ambulance which took her to our local hospital. We followed in the car. She was put in a cot, given oxygen, and she settled down quite happily. We were told by the nurse we could go home; all would be well. We insisted on staying until she was asleep. She didn't sleep though, and just after midnight she clasped her chest, cried out "Daddy, Daddy," leaped into my arms and died. It has been very painful to write this, but I do so in an effort to connect us to heaven's reality. As she lay in my arms, I could see in my mind, the flimsiest of flimsy veils alongside us and her soul just slipped through into the next world.

How instantly we can be transported from this world to the next. I have absolute assurance that she slipped out of my arms straight into the arms of God and I have never questioned the promises he has given me that I will be reunited with her the day I die. Even in the midst of the most terrible grief that went on for many years, Brenda and I were able, and are still able, to give deep and genuine thanks to God for his goodness in giving Angela to us for the few sweet years that he did. How much greater is our gratitude for the sure and certain hope that we will spend eternity with her. All our tears will have been washed away. There will be no more crying, no more sorrow, no more pain, and no more death.

The essential purpose of this chapter is that we become heaven minded.

The scriptures insist that we fix our thoughts on heaven not on earth. Once the knowledge of our destiny fully takes root in our souls, we are set free to devote ourselves to the works of heaven upon the earth. What glorious freedom. God has given to us a living hope beyond anything we can imagine. This generates a passion within us to share God's wondrous gifts with others, and to labour

for their salvation. We desperately want them to find what we have found and eventually finish up in heaven. This is our motivation.

Claire, the widow I introduced you to in the first Chapter, died a few years ago. God's grace was upon her passing in a beautiful way. She was struggling with a weak heart when we got to know her in her late fifties. All things being equal, it would have been no surprise if she had died in her sixties. By God's sustaining power she lived a life devoted to God, and lived into her eighties. As she came under pressure from various well meaning friends to move out of her bungalow into sheltered accommodation she became quite upset and asked me to advise her. We settled ourselves in her lounge to wait on God and seek his guidance. When God's peace and presence came to us, I asked, *"What is your heart saying Claire?"* *"I really want to stay here in my home Michael."* Then she used an old fashioned expression, *"I want to be carried out feet first."* In previous generations, when people mostly died at home, they were placed in their coffins, and the tradition was to carry the coffin out of the house with the feet of the corpse, for some reason, pointing towards the door. So, what Claire meant was, *"When my time comes I want to die at home."* She then confessed how afraid she was of dying alone. Living alone made that very likely.

We waited on God a while longer. God's presence was intense. I prayed that God would permit her to die at home and that he would provide someone to be with her when she did. We both knew for sure that this prayer had been answered. She decided to stay in her bungalow and was at complete peace about it. When her time did come, it happened like this. One day a team of workers from her Electricity Supplier arrived to move her Meter. As they began to dig up the drive Claire became very concerned and came out of the house to see what was going on. She was very fearful. Fortunately, I saw what was happening, so I went across and said to her, *"Don't worry about a thing Claire, I will see to everything. Let's go back into your house and you sit down while I make a cup of tea for you."* She took my arm and I walked her round to her front door. I opened it and was just about to help her over the threshold when she fainted. I caught her and let her gently down. She ended up sitting on the mat in the hallway with her legs over the threshold and her feet outside the doorway. Most unexpectedly, at that very moment, my son arrived, and was immediately able to phone for an ambulance. Claire never recovered from her faint and died while I held her. When the ambulance arrived, the crew lifted her onto a stretcher and carried her 'feet first' out of the house. Did she go feet first into heaven? Who can say, but into heaven she certainly went.

I often wonder what heaven will be like. Do you? Of course we will dwell in the very presence of God. His light and love will permeate all.

Happiness will be beyond anything we can imagine. Relationships will exceed by far anything we have ever known on the earth. All the beauties of earth will not begin to compare. But being a very creative and active person, I frequently wonder to myself, “what will I get to do when I am there?” Eternity sounds a very long time.

Will I ever get bored? What are the activities of heaven? There are so many interesting things to do on the earth.

As I was dwelling on these matters one day, considering what kind of heaven would suit me, I thought of the incredible range of workshops at Loughborough University where I was trained. Every possible piece of equipment was available, every kind of material, anything could be designed and made. That would do for my heaven. I could keep occupied for ever, never running out of something to make. Whenever I think of entering heaven, of course, my thoughts always focus on meeting again with Angela, my little daughter who died. I often say to God, *“Please let her be the same age as she was when she left me, so I can lift her into my arms as I used to.* The following day, my daughter, who is very close to God, phoned me. *“Dad, I have a picture for you about heaven. I saw you in this amazing workshop and you were busy making things. You were so happy. Then Angela came in and said, ‘What are you making Daddy?’ You said, ‘I am making all the things I would have made for you Angela if you had stayed with us on the earth.’”* What an incredible joy that would be. Could heaven be any better?

I am not assuming that this is how things will actually be in heaven. I can accept that these lovely pictures may be allegories given by God to let us get at least an inkling of how incredible life in heaven will be. But God surely wants us to know that heaven will far exceed anything we can even begin to imagine. Jesus said, *“My kingdom is not of this world.”* His kingdom is the kingdom of heaven!

Search & Rescue



Jesus said, "I have come to seek and to save the lost."

THAT is why he left heaven, why he died on a cross. We have an astounding opportunity, and privilege, to bless and honour Jesus, by working with him to accomplish his purpose.

Some years ago, Brenda and I were invited to help a church that was losing members at an alarming rate. At the first members meeting that we attended, the finances of the Church were discussed. A Pie Chart was used to explain how the income was being spent. Percentages were printed against each slice of the pie. The evangelism slice was 1%. This reflected the priorities of the church at that time. I am happy to say that this same church has since moved evangelism to the top of its agenda and is seeing many people saved. My appeal is this: That we take a fresh look at our personal life agendas, and our collective church family agendas, and seriously consider how we can move closer to the priorities our Lord set for us.

A few years ago, our local newspaper reported an unbelievable and shocking story. A child fell into one of the lakes nearby, and was in clear danger of drowning. As fortune would have it, there were two policemen nearby, but neither of them undertook to rescue the child. The reason given was that their terms of employment did not permit them to do so. They had not had the appropriate training and certification for rescuing drowning people. Had they attempted a rescue, the newspaper reported, they would have been in breach of contract. They stood there helplessly watching while a member of the public dived in and saved the child. It is not my intention to judge the police. We can each consider for ourselves how we would have acted had we been in their shoes. How tragic though if we Christians helplessly stand by in our neat uniforms watching souls drowning in the mire of the world because we are not able to save them?

As a young man I trained with the Royal Life Saving Society. They taught me how to save drowning people and I received the appropriate certificate for

completing the course successfully. Were I to be confronted with the need to rescue a drowning person, I could confidently attempted a rescue because of my training. I believe that well meaning Christians are often reluctant to attempt the rescue of souls because they don't know how to go about it. We do need to be trained. For some years now I have given myself to the task, whenever opportunity has arisen, of running training courses for those Christians eager to lead people to Christ. If this is you, I trust and pray that by the time you have read through this book, this training manual, you will consider yourself well equipped, and that you will feel very confident.

A good proportion of my time in teaching was spent in workshops. They are great places, very practical places where students get a great thrill from seeing and touching what they have made. The essential method of teaching is the apprenticeship model. It works like this:

- 1. Watch me**
- 2. Now you do it with me**
- 3. Now you do it without me**

I use many testimonies in the book. These are provided as demonstrations. Watch me. See how it's done. Frequently in the workshop I would gather the students round my bench, do a practical demonstration, explaining all the time why I was doing things in a particular way. Then I would send them back to their own work benches. I would wander from bench to bench helping out if and when needed. The happy time would come, when the trainees could design and make items with little or no help from me. I hope and expect that as you continue with this book, you will keep saying to yourself, "I could do that! It's no big deal!"

When Jesus attempted to explain spiritual truths, most of the time he used parables and metaphors. He would talk about the natural world to describe the spiritual world. Expect therefore, when I talk about natural events and use natural stories, it is with the intention of illustrating and explaining spiritual matters. Expect spiritual interpretations to follow.

Jack, a sailing companion of mine, built himself a brand new sailing dinghy. He finished it in March, before the sailing season had begun, but he was so keen to try it out that we took it to Lake Coniston in Cumbria. There were no boats on the lake, neither was there another person anywhere in sight on the shore. A gale was blowing, the hills around were covered in snow, it was freezing cold. It was obvious that we should abandon all ideas of sailing, go find a cafe, and, then go back home. But, we had driven eighty miles, we had the boat and we had the water.

Foolishly, we launched the dinghy. It was a thrilling adrenaline ride as we skimmed over the wave tops as far as the middle of the lake a mile from shore.

With a bang, a main bracket, fixed to the mast, ripped out making it impossible to maintain control. We immediately capsized. Three times we followed the capsize drill, righted the boat, climbed back in, and each time immediately capsized again because the damage prevented suitable control. Finally, the dinghy completely turned turtle. The mast pointed down. Jack and I sat on the upturned hull, soaking wet, exhausted, and freezing. Still there was no one in sight. After some time, hope began to dwindle. We were not wearing wet suits, hyperthermia was setting in.

Swimming the mile to shore was not an option. All I could think about was the very real prospect of leaving Brenda as a widow, and my two young children without a father. I cursed myself for being so foolish. I prayed of course, but with little hope. This was the lake where the famous Donald Campbell crashed Bluebird and went to the bottom. He was somewhere under us.

After about half an hour, a Land Rover appeared on top of one of the hills. It came down a narrow track to a shed by the lakeside. After a few minutes it disappeared into the shed. We had to assume that the driver hadn't seen us. Mobile phones were not in use at that time. Hope faded. Ten minutes later the vehicle appeared again. It came out of the shed towing a trailer.

On the trailer was a motorboat. The trailer reversed into the water, the boat floated off, and in no time at all it was chugging towards us. The boat came alongside. The owner threw us a line to tie to the dinghy, helped us into his boat, and took us and the dinghy to shore. After expressing our exceptional gratitude for saving our lives, I asked, *"What inspired you to come down to the lake on such a terrible day?"* "I don't know really," he answered. *"I just had this urge to check my boat out and get it ready for the new season. It's lucky for you that I did isn't it?!"*

What can we take from this story? Firstly, I am sure that God initiated the rescue. So many times, when Brenda and I are successful in leading someone to Christ, we can see how God initiated the process. It is important to recognise and understand, that God has an individual plan for the salvation of souls. He is doing the saving.

Secondly, whether the boat owner was aware of it or not, he responded to the promptings of God.

Thirdly he was available. God needs available people to serve his plan. Why he doesn't send an angel every time is a complete mystery to me. I think that if I were God, I would make that my first option.

Fourthly, he saw us from afar and recognised that we were in trouble. In this ministry of salvation, we need to be watchful, to keep our eyes lifted up and our ears open.

Fifthly, he was fully equipped for the task. He had a Land Rover, a trailer and a boat and knew how to operate them all with skill. We will consider along the way, what equipment we need and how to use it.

**Finally, I want us to take a firm hold on this:
For the rest of his life, this man who saved our lives will live with the memory of the marvellous thing that he did. What a reward for his efforts. I promise you that the joy and satisfaction that comes from working with God to save souls cannot be exceeded by anything that this life has to offer. I am so looking forward to meeting in heaven, those dear ones that led me to Christ. What a joy it will be to introduce them to the ones that I in turn led to Christ.**

Here is another story which will help to motivate us. Three weeks ago I was out walking by the River Wharfe in the Yorkshire dales when I met a retired married couple doing the same. We sat down together in a shelter and got into interesting conversation. They told me about an ocean cruise they had been on. The cruise was from England to America, crossing the Atlantic both ways on the luxury liner 'The Queen Mary.' On the return journey, the ship sailed into a furious storm. The crew said it was the worst storm they had ever experienced. The waves were fifteen metres high, buffeting the Queen Mary alarmingly, sending booms and shock waves through the ship, large as it was. In mid ocean an announcement was made to the whole ship over the Tannoy System.

"This is the captain speaking to all passengers and crew. We are about to change course and our journey time will be extended. I am sorry for any inconvenience caused. The reason for this is that we have received a Mayday call and must respond. I will keep you informed." The great liner swung off in the direction of the S.O.S. call. When the Queen Mary arrived at the given coordinates, a vast oil tanker was already there. Between their two ships there was a capsized, single handed yacht, with a single sailor clinging to it. It was decided between the two captains that the Queen Mary was best equipped to undertake the rescue. The storm was still raging at full intensity so the liner was first positioned close alongside the little yacht in such a way that it was completely sheltered from the raging winds and towering waves. One of the lifeboats with two crew members aboard was lowered, the stranded sailor was helped in, and the lifeboat winched back up to deck level. The rescued sailor was seventy-four years old!

This story made me think deeply about the immense value that we place on people's lives. Two giant ships abandoned their purpose without hesitation, at enormous cost, for the sake of one man. When it is known that a boat is lost at sea, many countries will together mobilise their air forces to search the oceans for days on end, hoping to find survivors. Someone we know has recently spent a few months in hospital receiving very expensive lifesaving treatment. The hospital staff nicknamed him the million-dollar man.

We know that Jesus attaches far more value to the soul than he does to the body and yet it seems that most of the time, as individuals and church families,

we are feeble in our motivation, and make only half hearted efforts to save souls, if any effort at all. I have asked myself many times why this is so. It is a very difficult question to answer. I don't pretend to have the answers. All I can do is to propose possible reasons.

The physical realm, the natural world, is observed, through the five physical senses and these are easily and clearly impacted through light, sound, touch, taste and smell. The spiritual realm, the spiritual world, can only be observed through the spiritual senses. We talk about seeing by the spirit, hearing by the spirit, being touched by the spirit. There is a scripture that encourages us to taste and see that the Lord is good. We are called to be a sweet smelling fragrance to those who are being saved. We talk about spiritual blindness, and deafness. Jesus speaks a message to each of the Revelation churches and ends each time with, *"He who has ears to hear, let him hear?"*

The eternal soul cannot be observed through the physical senses. Souls in danger cannot be seen with the physical eye, or cries heard with the physical ear. God has provided believers with spiritual eyes and ears. Are spiritual eyes and ears closed? Has sleep come? Is it that spiritual eyes are open but so focused on other spiritual interests that the need to rescue souls is not seen? I think that as Christians it is easy for us to become so committed to each other, to our church communities, services, activities, meetings, conferences, etc, all of which in themselves can be applauded, **that we lose sight of the main purpose given to us by God, which is to look for souls, seek out those that need saving.** Are we ready as individuals, and collectively as church families, to change course as the Queen Mary did to answer the desperate cries of lost souls?

The aim of the first three chapters has been to change perspectives, to help us to see differently and to motivate us. The aim of the next chapters is to equip us.

Seedtime & Harvest

4

JESUS said, *"You know there is a saying, four months between planting and harvest. Wake up and look around. The fields are ready for Harvest. The workers will be paid good wages. The crops they harvest are people brought to eternal life. Imagine the joy that waits for the one who sowed the seed and the one who harvested the crop. The harvest is great but the workers are few. Pray to the Lord of the harvest and ask him to send more workers into the fields."*

As usual, Jesus used illustrations from the natural world to describe the spiritual world. When he first spoke to the fishermen disciples he chose a fishing illustration. *"Come along with me and I will show you how to fish for souls."*

The apostle Paul said to the church at Corinth, "I sowed the seed, Apollos watered it, but God made it grow. As we work with God to produce a great harvest and gather it in, let us learn from the farmer. Anyone who grows crops of any kind will explain that there is a clear process, a step by step progression to be followed. No agriculturalist would expect anything to grow unless he had planted seed first. The step by step progression follows this order:

1. The ground is prepared.
2. The seed is sown.
3. The farmer waters, waits, weeds, and fertilises.
4. When the crop is ready it is harvested.

For a successful harvest of souls, we need to understand the spiritual parallels and work in the same way. When seeking to lead people to Christ, it is important to ask ourselves, *"Am I preparing ground here? Is the ground ready? Is it time to sow the seed? Is it time to be patient, waiting for the seed to take root and become a seedling? Is it time to tend the fragile seedling as it peeps out of the soil and begins to grow, to water it in prayer and kindness? Is this person ready yet to make a decision to accept Jesus? How do I harvest this precious soul?"*

All these questions will be addressed as we proceed through the book. For now, all I want us to grasp is that there is a process, and it has a simple order.

A couple of years ago I decided to experiment with growing vegetables. I bought six very large plastic tubs, six different packets of seeds, three bags of compost, three bags of quality top soil, and a bag of gravel. This was not an exercise in economy! I put a suitable layer of gravel into the bottom of each tub for drainage, then emptied all the bags of soil and compost into one big pile and thoroughly mixed them together. Finally, I filled the tubs to just below the rim. The ground was now prepared. It was done well and required a reasonable amount of work. Next I read all the different instructions on each of the different seed packets and followed them meticulously. Planting the seeds was a cinch. I just poked the dibber into the soft soil at the right spacing and the right depth and dropped in the seeds. I watered and waited, was patient, then to my great surprise and joy the seeds sprouted. I continued to water and finally it was time to harvest.

What I am hoping to get across is this: Sowing the word is very straight forward and often effortless providing that we have worked diligently to prepare the ground first. Later I will offer lots of good advice and many examples on how to do this. Many faithful Christians have built up courage to 'tell people about Jesus' or to 'share their faith' only to be disappointed with the response. We must be wise about preparing the ground, choosing the right time and circumstances to sow God's word.

We will encounter different types of soil with different types of people. Some may be soft fertile loam ready for sowing. Some may be like compacted clay, trampled hard and needing much difficult digging, much time and effort. Other soil may be overgrown with scrub and weeds. I spent some years living on a farm in Western Australia. It extended to ten thousand acres and was located on the very northern fringe of the wheat and sheep belt. Originally it was all virgin bush- land that had been purchased from the government at one pound per acre. When I arrived at the farm, four thousand acres had been cleared of bush and was under cultivation. It had taken about fifty to sixty years to achieve this and there were still six thousand acres to go! Each year, another section of bush would be marked out for clearance. It was fascinating to be involved with this. It provided a spiritual object lesson in dogged determination. First a railway engine boiler, built into a heavy log frame, was towed by a huge caterpillar tractor over the designated area, crushing down the bush and scrub. This was left for a time to die and dry out. Then it was set on fire and burnt off. Next, all the roots had to be dug out by various means. Then the plough was sent in. Then it was fertilised. It was then ready for the wheat grains to be sown. Imagine taking those grains of wheat into the virgin bush-land and scattering it all about. The hard sun baked earth would not receive it. The birds and the ants would carry it off. Any that was

left would dry up and die in the hot sun. This illustration describes some people's lives. Their salvation may have to be hard won. We may have to devote ourselves to them for a lengthy amount of time, showing much understanding, kindness and give practical help. Once we become comfortable with the idea of salvation being a process, we can take our time, waiting to discover where individuals are in this process. We can get into step with them and walk at their pace.

I have a model that I use when teaching this. I have fixed to a board two rotating gear wheels. They can slide together and slide apart. I begin by spinning them at different speeds while apart and then bring them together. Of course there is a grating of teeth as they try to engage. I then spin them at the same speed, showing how they mesh together comfortably. I then make one gear wheel stationary to demonstrate how the other has to stop turning before it can engage. Then both wheels can begin to turn together. This illustrates the coming together of believers and unbelievers. No cringe factor is necessary, no grating of gears, a comfortable relationship can be established where faith can develop at an appropriate pace.

I considered giving this chapter the title, 'Pilgrims progress.' A person's journey towards salvation tends to follow a pattern. It is helpful to discern if possible, where an individual has come to on their journey at any given time. The pace at which people travel, and how long they take to pass from one place to the next, can vary enormously, so our confident patience is needed. Here is a guide:

1. Started just looking:

It is often what we do when considering a purchase, particularly an expensive one. There is no risk, no commitment at this stage. Give people lots of room, opportunity and freedom to 'Just Look.'

2. Begun to get interested

This is a natural follow on.

3. Started questioning and seeking:

This provides great opportunities for us to help them to find faith in Jesus. It doesn't help to pressure people to believe what we believe, or expect them to do so. It does help them when we sympathise with what they believe and show sincere interest. When they recognise that we respect them in what they believe, they are much more likely to respect us in what we believe and be open to hear what we have to say.

4. Has heard and understood the Good News message:

Faith comes by hearing. When this point is reached, people have the

information they need to determine their destiny. They know that Jesus offers them eternal life when they believe in him and are able to make informed choices about how to proceed.

5. Has come to believe it is true:

This is not yet a commitment. People can recognise truth but not want to respond to it. Sharing our personal experiences of God can encourage people to take the next step.

6. Has made a decision:

What a happy day this is. All who receive Jesus have the right to become children of God, experience new birth, inherit God's Kingdom, gain assurance of heaven and know that their names are written in the book of life.

7. Has been baptised in water and filled with the Holy Spirit

8. Has become a disciple:

I have to admit that things rarely work out in such a clear cut fashion. These rule of thumb stages can often overlap, merge with each other, be working out simultaneously, indeed become quite mixed up. But, the concept of journey helps. Expect journey times to differ greatly. It can be a brief encounter, or a long patient road.

In the book of Acts, we find Paul giving his testimony before King Agrippa. This was Agrippa's response: *"Do you think that in such a short time you can persuade me to become a Christian?"* Paul replied, *"Short time or long, I pray that not only you, but all those listening to me today will become Christians."*

After Paul had testified at his trial before Governor Felix, Felix sent for him to explain the Gospel. When Paul got onto the subject of righteousness and judgement Felix became afraid and said,

"That's enough for now, you may leave. When I find it convenient, I will send for you again." We read that later, Felix sent for Paul frequently to talk things over. It is so important that we be sensitive enough to recognise when people like Felix, 'have had enough for now,' and pick things up again when they are ready.

Prior to going into full time ministry, I taught in a comprehensive school for twenty years. I met a senior member of staff when I started and he was still there when I left. Often I talked with him about the things of God as Paul had done with Felix. We formed a very good friendship. I used to say to Brenda, *"He is the most Christ-like man I know who isn't a Christian. If he ever becomes a Christian, I don't know how I will tell the difference?"*

Of the eighty staff at the school, he was the one person I most wanted to become a Christian. When I left the school, having led a number of teachers to Christ, I was deeply disappointed that he had not taken the step of faith I so longed for. However, my patience was truly rewarded, when just a few months after I left, he finally became a Christian. When I was eventually able to go and visit him he had become a very active deacon in his local church!

There is a neighbour we have talked to on and off about his faith for twenty-five years now. He has gone with us to all sorts of events. When he makes a decision to become a believer he will hold our record for the amount of time taken.

By contrast, one day I attended a gathering of Church leaders. During a coffee break a lady came over to me and said, *"You don't know me, but I know you."* I agreed that I did not recognise her. *"You conducted the wedding of some friends of mine."* She named them and continued, *"I was a guest at their wedding. I wasn't a Christian, but when I heard your sermon, my life was completely transformed. Soon after that I gave my life to Jesus."* Pointing she said, *"You see that man over there. He is my husband. I married a Church Pastor and we are at present planting a new church together."* It really made my day. The Bible says that as far as God is concerned, one day is as thousand years, and a thousand years is as a day. It can take great patience to work according to his timing, but then again we read that with God things can happen 'suddenly.'

Who Can I Send?

5

ONE day as Isaiah, an Old Testament priest was worshipping in the temple, heaven opened and he received an incredible vision of angels. The Temple shook and was filled with the overwhelming presence of God. Isaiah cried out, *"It's all over! I am doomed, for I am a sinful man!"* God touched his lips, forgave him, and removed all his sin.

Then he heard the Lord God asking, *"Who can I send as my messenger to the people? Who will go?"*

Isaiah said, "Here I am. Send me."

He became a mighty prophet of God, and spoke God's word over a period of sixty years.

As New Testament disciples we are all sent by Jesus to go to all peoples everywhere with the Good News message. It is referred to as 'The Great Commission'. Like Isaiah, we have been forgiven, cleansed, and made worthy of the task. As we commit to the task, God will touch our lips. We will know what to say.

The apostle Paul wrote this to the believers in Rome: *"The message is very close at hand, it is on your lips and in your heart. If you openly declare that Jesus is Lord, and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For it is by believing in your heart that you are made right with God, and it is by openly declaring your faith, that you are saved. Anyone who trusts in him will never be disgraced. Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved. But how can they call on him to save them unless they believe in him? And how can they believe in him if they have never heard about him? And how can they hear about him unless someone tells them? And how will anyone go and tell them without being sent?"* That is why the scriptures say, 'How beautiful are the feet of messengers who bring good news!'

Just a few weeks ago Brenda and I attended the funeral celebration of a Christian lady we had known for many years. We met many old friends after the service. A lady we knew from way back came up to me. The first thing she said was this. *"Hello Mike, I just want to say, no one ever told me about Jesus until I met you. Thank you."* When she heard about Jesus she became a Christian, and I had the joy of baptising her. Later she met a Christian and married him. I conducted their wedding.

When I spoke with their daughter, who had also found Jesus, she told me that she had just become a worship leader in a newly established church. Faith comes by hearing.

So, where do we take the message? Jesus has given us the answer. To all nations, all people groups, anyone and everyone. Every place where there are people. It is this instruction that has inspired all the great missionary works over the centuries, both at home and abroad. Other nations are now seeing the need to send missionaries to the UK. They are training and sending missionaries to our nation when at one time we sent missionaries to theirs. My vision and hope is, that the spiritual eyes of all believers in Britain, not just a few, will be open to see that **if we are not engaged in overseas mission, we can devote ourselves to becoming missionaries to our own nation.**

But how do we identify our personal mission fields? I want to answer this in two parts. One, the fields we already have access to. Secondly, how we can gain access to new fields. We will consider the second in a later chapter entitled, 'Prayer Opens Doors.' Here are common people groups and places where we normally encounter people.

Close family members	Other relatives	Close friends
Casual friends	Neighbourhoods	Commuting
Workplaces	Education centres	Transport centres
Hairdressers	Shops and retail outlets	Trades people
Cleaners	Leisure centres	Holidays
Pubs	Restaurants	Airports
Cafes	Hotels	Walks
Streets	Hospitals	Clinics
Charities	Church	Libraries
Sports and hobbies	Community events	Etc, Etc, Etc.

You will notice as we progress, that the stories I use about people finding God are set in the context of a broad variety of the fields of opportunity set out above. Be helped by this. As Jesus sent his disciples out on mission he gave them this good advice.

“As you go to a home, offer a greeting saying, ‘Let peace be upon this house.’ If it is a deserving place, let your peace rest upon it. If you do not receive a welcome, or your words are not listened to, let your peace return to you. Shake the dust off your feet and go somewhere else.”

It is important to understand that we are not asked to go where we are not wanted. Be at peace about this. It makes good sense to spend our time much more constructively by seeking out those who do want to receive us, and to take the message to them.

A long time ago I learned a very important lesson from a double glazing salesman. I have never forgotten it. He knocked on our door, stood well back when I opened it, and asked, *“Can I interest you in our special offer January sale?”* I explained politely that at this time double glazing was not on my agenda. I invited him in for a cup of tea to give him a break, but he wanted to be on his way to the next house.

I asked, *“Don’t you get discouraged trailing from house to house, being turned away time after time without a sale?”* He looked at me in a slightly puzzled way that indicated that he wondered why I would ask such a question. *“No, no”* he answered quite perkily, *“We work on a simple and reliable statistic. On average, two hundred house calls produce one sale. We just keep on calling at house after house knowing that we will eventually reach a house where we get a sale.”*

It is a great lesson for us. **We need to gently knock on the doors of the lives of more and more people until eventually someone responds to Jesus’ invitation,** *“Behold I stand at the door of your life and knock. If you open your door I will come in.”*

There is a risk of thinking as you read our many testimonies, that practically everyone we meet finds faith in Jesus. Not so at all. I couldn’t guess how many lives we have knocked on that have not responded yet. All we know is that we have learned to take every opportunity to test people’s responses without causing offence, and while maintaining excellent relationships. The more lives we knock on, the higher the number of people who find salvation. I haven’t worked out a ratio for this but there has to be one. Much better than two hundred to one I would think, but hey, if it takes two hundred, just keep going. We have already talked about how much a soul is worth.

Here is sad story: One day I was in conversation with a very sincere and spiritual Christian who had a leadership role in his church and worked in a university research department. He told me how he had decided to start a prayer meeting

for the university staff in order to pray for his university. He had printed out a suitable invitation giving the time and place where the meeting was to be held and pinned it to the staff notice board. When the time of the proposed meeting came, and having no idea of who might attend, he was surprised and delighted when his closest working colleague walked through the door. Each declared to the other, *"I didn't know you were a Christian!"* They had worked together for three years.

If you were telling me this story I wouldn't believe it. The only reason I believe it, is because he told me first hand. He saw nothing out of order in the situation. For him it had been a happy, coincidental discovery. Even now I feel grief in my spirit, wondering how representative this is of Christians in the work place. It reminds me of a conversation Brenda had with the manager of a local care home. Two ladies in our congregation, sincere in their faith, were staff members.

Brenda was doing her usual 'God talk' with the manager and mentioned that she would be able to continue her interest in the Christian faith by discussing things with these ladies. Puzzled, the manager asked, *"Who are you talking about?"* *"You know, so and so, and so and so."* *"Are they Christians?"* she asked. *"I had no idea."*

H.G. Wells, the novelist famous for writing the *'The Time Machine'*, and *'The Invisible Man'*, wrote a short story called *'The Country of the Blind.'* An adventurer called Nunez gets lost in a remote region of the Andes Mountains and stumbles into a valley where everyone who lives there is totally blind. This had been the case for many generations because of a genetic abnormality. None of them knows that they are blind because they have successfully developed a culture to accommodate their condition. This presents Nunez with a major problem. When he tries to explain to them that they are blind and describes what he can see, they conclude that he is mentally deranged. He knows there is no possibility of returning to his own country and will have to live out the rest of his life with these blind people. In time he is persuaded that his eyes are the problem and submits to having them removed. His eyes are removed and he is able to fit in with the culture he is trapped in.

There are great dangers, and much loss, in permitting ourselves to adapt to and accept a false culture. This is what the ninety-five percent of unbelievers in our nation have done. They are blind to spiritual realities but don't recognise it. It seems normal because it is the norm. However, salvation is at hand because Jesus has come to open the eyes of the blind.

My concern regarding church is this. We have a culture that largely counts it as normal, not to prioritise saving souls. If we go back to the roots of our faith and look at the early New Testament church, we see a completely different culture. Saving souls was the dominant purpose. New Christians saw it as normal, so thousands of new converts were added to the church.

As individual Christians it can seem normal to us not to be leading people to Christ because the large majority of Christians are not doing so either. I am convinced about the need to pray, convinced about the power of prayer, convinced that we need to meet for prayer, but I am not convinced that it can be used as a substitute for introducing unbelievers to the truth of God's word. Because it seems OK to the majority to neglect this ministry, it doesn't mean it is OK.

I know a young man who at the moment is struggling hard to give up his heavy drinking. While discussing this with him, he told me that one of his greatest difficulties was that it was entirely socially acceptable in the circles he moved in. *"I know it's not OK because it's poisoning me, but everyone else does because they are heavy drinkers too. There is no pressure on me at all to give up so it makes it more difficult."* I think the believing community is going to find it hard to give up its apathy towards soul saving because it is socially acceptable.

When Paul spoke to the Athenians in the area where their philosophers debated, one of the things he said was this: *"From one man, God made every nation, every people group, so that they should inhabit the whole earth. He planned the times set for them and the exact places where they should live. He did this so that people would reach out and find him."*

The reason that God has populated the earth, is so that he can populate heaven. After I read about what Paul said to the people of Athens this is how I prayed:

Heavenly Father, I choose to believe that I live where I do because you planned it.

With your help, as far as I am able, I accept responsibility for making Christ known to my neighbours.

I will respond to every opportunity, and seek every opportunity to do this.

Lord God I ask myself in your presence, "If I do not, who will?"

Father I will faithfully pray for doors to open to the message of Christ.

Father please give me constant encouragement, and let me see your hand at work at all times. Amen.

This book started with testimonies of God's grace in answering this prayer. He has continued to do so. I believe that it is because of this prayer that Brenda and I have reached so many people for Jesus. Perhaps you might want to pray in a similar way. Maybe you will want to read the rest of the book first so you can pray with more confidence and faith.

Let me close with the reminder that Jesus said his burden would be light and his yoke would be easy.

**Leading people to Christ will involve us in much work,
but it is not heavy work, it is happy work!**



The Message

THE apostle Paul writes: *“God has not given us a spirit of fear or timidity, but of power, love, and self discipline. So never be ashamed of speaking to others about our Lord Jesus. He broke the power of death and showed the way to life and immortality through the Good News message. I am not ashamed of this message about Christ, for it is the power of God at work, saving everyone who believes.”*

Before we go on to talk about how we can best convey this message of life, it is important that we have a good understanding of what we believe. Let me explain. Jehovah’s Witnesses and Mormons are believers with a message. I admire them for their passion and evangelistic zeal. They believe in God and in Jesus in their own way. I have often been asked by people who we have shared the Christian message with. *“Is there any difference between what Christians believe and what the JW’s or Mormons believe? Are they just another denomination?”* There is a difference of course and this can be explained well enough, but only if we are clear about our own beliefs.

In the fourth century AD the Roman Emperor Constantine, who was a sincere Christian, was disturbed by the fact that different expressions of belief were being contested by various bishops in various parts of his empire. He commanded that representative bishops come together and form a council. Its purpose was to examine what the scriptures taught, and to prepare a clear, concise statement of what all Christians could believe. They were very successful and produced an exceptional document known as the ‘Nicene Creed.’ It has remained a plumb line for Christian belief throughout the centuries. Every Christian denomination and group today would still accept this statement as a true representation of what they believe. It represents orthodox Christianity. JW’s, Mormons, or any other group that is unable to give assent to the full statement of Christian belief declared in the Nicene Creed would not be considered truly Christian, but of a different religion.

This is what the Nicene Creed states:

We believe in one God, the Father, the almighty, maker of heaven and earth and all that is seen and unseen.

We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ, the only Son of God, eternally begotten of the Father, God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten not made, of one Being with the Father. Through him all things were made.

For us men and for our salvation he came down from heaven; by the power of the Holy Spirit he became incarnate of the Virgin Mary and was made man.

For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate; he suffered death and was buried.

On the third day he rose again in accordance with the scriptures; he ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of the Father.

He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead, and his kingdom will have no end.

We believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord and giver of life, who proceeds from the Father and the Son. With the Father and the Son he is worshipped and glorified. He has spoken through the Prophets.

We believe in one holy universal and apostolic Church. We acknowledge one baptism for the forgiveness of sins.

We look for the resurrection of the dead, and the life of the world to come.

Amen.

I felt it necessary to clarify Christian Doctrine for ourselves, for it secures us in the truth, but I am not suggesting that our first approaches to unbelievers be an issue of theology. How we first communicate with unbelievers will depend entirely upon where they are in their individual understanding and readiness. The story I told in the first chapter about how Clifford found God was most unusual. You remember that he listened in to a conversation between me and Jehovah's Witnesses. I took them through the Nicene Creed and Clifford got saved. Never would I have said to him, "Clifford, let me tell you all about the Nicene Creed." I can't think I have ever said that to anyone as a means of leading them to Christ.

What unbelievers, who are open to God want, is experience of God even if they are not yet aware of it. When they see us experiencing God in a real way, enjoying God and putting our trust in him they begin to desire what we have. This allows us to explain how God longs for them to know him in the same way.

We tend to interpret the sharing of the message as a suitable set of words to speak or write. That is true of course, but I want us to fully grasp that we are meant to be the embodiment of the message, the manifestation of the message. We are meant to be the manifestation of Jesus Christ. The scriptures state clearly that the people of God are the body of Christ.

**We should personify the message before we speak it.
We should personify the message as we speak it and we should
continue to personify the message after we have spoken it.**

We frequently hear the expression, *"We must get out there and tell people about Jesus."* There is a big problem with this. On the whole, people don't want to be **'told'** anything. They particularly don't want to be **told** what they should believe. I would much rather that we began to use the expression, *"Let's go and give people an experience of Jesus."* This can be done in many different ways and will be explored in a number of chapters. This is not an alternative to speaking the message but a demonstration of the message in such a manner that it becomes authentic.

If we are going to be effective in leading people into God's Kingdom, we must accept that for many people, maybe most, their experience of, or perceptions of, Christians and Churches, is often their greatest obstacle to faith. This is a tragedy. Essentially they look at the church through their personal lens and in the most part, don't want to know. In other words, the message being sent out by church is not seen by many as attractive. I spoke to a young man a couple of weeks ago about his faith and he came up with this comment, *"Church frightens me."* He is a young man full of courage. In fact, he has a racing drivers licence and is not afraid to face the dangers of the racing track. Many look at church and see a foreign culture that they feel unable to connect with. It may be language and dress, or the expectation of sheer boredom, feeling that they could not fit in or be accepted, wouldn't know how to cope with such a strange environment, or can't see any relevance anyway, etc. etc. For far too many, church is a No, No. People will inevitably associate God and Jesus with the church, so their perceptions of the Godhead can easily be distorted by this. I know I am speaking generalisations and that there are many excellent churches that are representing a loving Jesus in a manner worthy of him. These churches bring salvation to many and their growth is marked by the addition of new believers, while baptisms are frequent.

However, Brenda and I find that practically all the people that we reach out to with the gospel are ignorant of the fact that good churches exist. We have adopted a successful strategy for integrating into church those who have become believers, or are in the process of becoming believers. First we identify two, three or four churches that we have confidence in, and that we think might suit the person involved. We invite them to come with us Sunday by Sunday to explore each one. We encourage them to view this exploration as an adventure, joking that we are taking them on a *'Journey into the Unknown'*. Almost without fail what impresses them are the people they meet and the deep sense of community displayed. When we leave, comments like, "Aren't the people wonderful." are frequent. They meet Jesus in the people. Gradually it becomes plain to them that church is about people loving God and each other, not service styles, government, activities or buildings.

It is usual that they find a particular church that suits them best. When they do, we attend that church with them until they get settled in and feel at home. Yesterday was Sunday. We took a young man to a particular church for his third visit. He had a great experience on each occasion and has now decided to settle there. It is absolutely the right church for him.

A few weeks ago I was viewing a TV God channel program when a prominent speaker, a particularly gracious man said something that I took as quite out of character. He said this, *"Over decades the church has been very good at evangelising. What I mean is, evangelising people away from the church."* I was somewhat shocked at first because he had never displayed a critical spirit. I realised that he was simply being truthful and objective. I thought back to my own conversion at the age of sixteen. It followed the reading of a book by Billy Graham. I was convinced by his message and became a true believer. I tried hard to do church. It required determined will power which I was unable to sustain on a continuous basis. But I would go back and try again every so often for one reason only. I guessed it would please God. The church offered me nothing but discouragement in those early years.

Last summer I was walking by a river in the Yorkshire countryside, when I fell into conversation with a retired couple from Nottingham. After they had talked about the joys of caravanning and their retirement in general, they asked me how I spent my time in retirement. After mentioning my hobbies and involvements with my family, I explained that my wife and I were finding that many people were seeking a meaningful faith, so we spent a lot of time teaching them what the Bible said about how to become believers. The lady asked suddenly, *"Are you a Jehovah's Witness then?"* I explained that I was a Christian but that I greatly admired the J.W's for sharing their faith. *"We think it is important to help people to find God through the Christian faith, and that is what we do,"* I said. *"We have become*

Humanists," she replied. "Do tell me about it," I asked sincerely. "How did that come about?" "Well, the church we attended drove us to it. We tried hard to stay but got so distressed we didn't want anything to do with religion anymore. So, we decided to become Humanists and spend our time just doing good to people wherever we could." What does one say to that?

J.W's active in sharing their faith, humanists seeking to do good, and the church driving people away! Thank the Lord for those Christians and Churches that are working to change things. I asked the couple what had distressed them so much. What a horror story they told, all about priestly aloofness, arrogance, meaningless rituals, political intrigue and power seeking. I admitted to them that if that was all I had known I would probably have been driven to become a humanist too. *"Didn't you think of trying other churches?"* I asked. They had had enough it seems. I did my best to explain that there were good churches and what they were like. I explained, as I have done above, how we helped people to find a good church. *"If we lived in Nottingham,"* I said, *"We would have been very happy to do the same for you."* That seemed to really touch them. *"Look,"* I said, *"You would have nothing to lose by exploring. Most churches have helpful websites these days and you can get a pretty good idea of what they offer. Pick three or four, go and visit them, and see what they are like. At the very least it would give you a much better perspective on church generally. It is tragic that you had such a bad experience."*

The lady had done all the talking so far and her husband had been quiet. *"I think this gentleman is right,"* he said. *"I've been wondering recently whether we should give church another try. This sounds a really good way of doing it."* I got the impression that it had taken some courage for him to propose this to his wife. I felt very strongly that a door had been opened to them and that they would go through.

A letter came through our door about two months ago from the energy company we use. 'Your Smart Meters are coming' it threatened. Fortunately a technician came with them. He was a great talker and during our conversation he picked up on some comment I had made and suddenly asked, *"Are you religious then?"* I do dislike that question. When people suppose that I am 'religious' I feel uncomfortable because of what the term implies. He was a very pleasant and polite person and wasn't intending to be the least bit offensive. However, it was perfectly plain that religion for him didn't rate at all. He went straight on, *"I'm not religious."* He obviously didn't want me to think he might be as though it could be a stain on his character. How sad that religion has come into such disrepute. He then went on to describe his higher calling. *"I'm a union activist,"* he said proudly, *"It means that I can spend my time trying to do good things for the workers."* He couldn't see religion was a means of doing anyone any good.

I want us to remind ourselves that these early chapters are aimed at changing our perceptions. I want us to see, think, and act differently in our efforts to make a way for more and more people to find God. As our perceptions change we will be much more effective in changing the perceptions of unbelievers towards Christians and the Church. Let God's Kingdom come and his will be done on the earth that many may enter heaven. Jesus said, *"Come along with me and I will show you how to fish for the souls of people."* Shall we go with him on that?

I want to talk now about *how* we deliver the message. I suppose we could say that the whole Bible is the whole message, but what parts of the message do we deliver first, how much of the message do we attempt to convey at any given time? I will give some helpful general guidelines, within the framework of understanding, that this is a highly individual matter. It is individual to each one of us according to our personal relationship, our experience with God, and how we are led by the Holy Spirit. Each person that we share the message with is a unique individual with an outlook, experience, and understanding of life and God that is unique to them. This is a way of saying that there is no precise formula for this work. Do it your way in partnership with God. I do believe that God will specifically lead you to the people that you are best equipped to help. I know for a fact that God chose to save me by carefully choosing the believers that I would respect and respond to. Keep it in mind always that God is the architect of salvation. He has a plan for saving each individual, through individuals, and he has a plan to include you the moment you make yourself available.

What I would like you to do is to read this book twice. The reason is this. Each chapter is like one piece of a twenty piece jigsaw puzzle. Each chapter depends on the other chapters for its interpretation within the whole picture. I am confident that on a second reading you will be saying to yourself, "Ah, I get it now." The guidelines that follow will make a lot more sense after you have read the remaining chapters.

Stay in your comfort zone! If you come out of your comfort zone you will make the person you are talking to uncomfortable. In unusual circumstances the Holy Spirit may make them uncomfortable, but at least you won't get the blame!

Ask yourself the question, and where appropriate, ask the person you are conversing with the question, what do they already believe or not believe. Don't make any assumptions. The starting point is always to start from where they are. It could be that bad experiences have turned them against God, or against Christians or against church. If that is the case, there are obstacles to remove by showing sympathy and understanding. Many people have been badly fathered, and find it difficult to grasp the concept of a loving father God.

We cannot assume that when we talk about the love of God, that they even understand what that means. In fact, they may not know what love is, full stop,

because they have never experienced it. It may be that they will only begin to know what love is when we demonstrate it to them.

These people, and there are a lot of them are not going to respond well to, *"Repent, the Kingdom of God is at Hand."* In fact, using such language to the most receptive of people will mostly leave them confused. John the Baptist and Jesus Christ spoke in those terms to a Jewish audience, steeped in Old Testament history, doctrine and theology. They understood the message perfectly. We must learn to deliver the message in the context of today. Of course the truth of the message is unchanging, but the way in which the truth is expressed and the language that is used, has to be tailored to the person to whom it is being spoken. Repentance can be introduced in simple terms as the act of turning to God. No one has a problem understanding that. *"Oh, but they need to be told that they are dreadful sinners don't they, and they have to turn from their sins if they are going to repent properly. Surely they have to say the sinner's prayer, confess their sins and beg forgiveness if they are going to be properly saved?"*

What I have consistently seen is that only when a person turns to God, meets with God, and begins to experience his unconditional love and forgiveness, does conscience, sin consciousness, begin to develop. It is in the context of God's love that people begin to realise what sin is and want to be rid of it.

I believe it is sufficient to give a very simple message in the first instance, and make it our goal to help people to meet with God. Everything can develop from there. They may meet God and then meet Jesus, or they may meet Jesus and get to know God. They may even have an encounter with the Holy Spirit and then have a revelation of God and Jesus. For some, going on an Alpha course so they can explore the major questions of life in relationship to the Christian faith may be the means by which they meet with Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

The Holy Spirit will guide us and give us the necessary wisdom and the right words to say. Further chapters will enlarge on what I have introduced here.

I recommend that in the first instance we keep the message as simple as we possibly can, "God loves you".

We can start with the ABC and go on from there. Jesus said about himself: I am the Alpha (A) and the Omega (Z). I am the beginning and the end. Most people we encounter will be starting from the beginning, but with others we may be able to pick up further on, so it is helpful to figure out where in the alphabet they have got to.

7

Keys that Work

JESUS asked his disciples, *"Who do people say that I am?" After they had given various answers he then went on to ask, "But who do you say that I am?" Peter, who was always quick off the mark, replied confidently, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God." This was a defining moment. "You are blessed Simon because my Father in heaven has revealed this to you. You did not learn it from any person. Now I say to you that you are Peter the Rock, and upon this rock I will build my church, and all the powers of hell will not stand against it. I will give you the keys of the Kingdom of Heaven."*

In the next chapters I want to identify, and demonstrate the use of a whole range of keys that Brenda and I have discovered work very well in unlocking the hearts and minds of unbelievers, freeing them to find and meet with God.

We have all seen at some time or another, a school caretaker carrying about a massive bunch of keys. These keys give him access to every room in the building. He can open any door. He just sorts through his bunch and chooses the right combination of keys. Hey presto, he is through the different doors and able to reach where he wants to be. He has been given authority to do this and his keys allow him to exercise that authority. As I sit here working I can see through my office window that it is a beautiful sunny day. I am tempted to go for a motorcycle ride in the country. To do so, I need four keys. First I need a key to open the back door of my house, then a key to open the garage. Also an ignition key and a petrol cap key for my bike. If I am missing any one of those keys I will be unable to fulfil my intention.

We are very familiar in the natural realm with the need for combinations. If I want to extract money from a cash machine I need my bank card and a four digit pin number. Remembering three digits doesn't help. If we want to open a safe we have to know the combination. If we want our computer online we must remember each and every number and letter combination of our passwords.

I believe that the natural world has spiritual lessons to teach us. I would like to convince you that often our failures to reach people can reside in this issue of not being aware of the natural and spiritual combinations needed.

We may be doing some things very well but are still failing because other key factors are neglected. Three digits of my pin number are not enough.

How often have we got into a panic when we have lost our keys? Life comes to a grinding halt. Is it the case that as individual Christians and as church families, we have perhaps lost our keys, the keys we need to unlock hearts and minds? It would be foolish for me to think that I have anywhere near got all the answers. My life is a constant search to understand why we make such little impact on our nation and to find ways to be more effective.

However, I do think that what I bring next will be a big help. To begin with I will simply name the keys that I see as being particularly important. Having listed them, we can then go on to examine them one by one.

In Partnership with God

Heaven Minded

I will Bless You

Joy and Enthusiasm

First the Natural

Servants not Masters

Prayer that opens Doors

Invitation, Invitation, Invitation

Equipped by the Holy Spirit

The Visible Hand of God

Answering Questions

Hearing God

It is easy to see, even after a quick glance at this list, how detrimental to our purpose it would be to lack any of them. Try reading down this list putting in front of each the equivalent of 'Without.'

I will work without enthusiasm: I will work without Joy: I will work without blessing anyone: I will work without hearing from God: I will work without being in partnership with God: I will work without inviting anyone to anything: I will work without praying: I will work without being able to answer questions: I will work without seeing the hand of God working.

When said like this it alerts us to the need for all these keys.

In Partnership with God



AS I meditated on how to illustrate the marvellous working partnership that we can have with God, I began to see in my imagination a huge derelict mansion. It had been abandoned for many years. The surrounding acres had become a wilderness and the outbuildings were decaying. Continuing in my imagination, I was transported to a town nearby where it had become known that a wealthy landowner, he was indeed a Lord, had moved into the mansion to restore it. He was seeking workers.

I thought how wonderful it would be to be included in such a project, so I took courage, deciding to call at the mansion in the hope of gaining some sort of employment there. After walking some distance up a long winding driveway I arrived at the huge double doors at the entrance and with some trepidation lifted the heavy iron knocker which sent loud echoes through the building. I supposed that a servant or perhaps a butler would open the door, but to my surprise, the great Lord himself appeared. *"Hello, hello Michael, how pleased I am to see you, I saw you coming up the drive."* How on earth did he know my name? It is impossible to adequately describe him. Clearly he was a man of great authority. He radiated a powerful presence, mysteriously making me feel safe, protected. But above all he radiated an intense kindness that seemed to flow right through me. I felt wanted, valued, needed in a way I could not understand. And his smiles, I had never seen smiles like it, knowing smiles, amused smiles, yes, happy smiles. He asked, as if he didn't know already, *"So why are you here?"* Having met him, what had started out as an interest, had suddenly become a strong desire. *"I have heard about your plans",* I explained, *"and was hoping there would be an opportunity to get involved."* *"Come with me,"* he said. *"Let me show you something."* He was full of excitement and I noticed for the first time that he was dressed in working clothes. He virtually dragged me down the long hallway abruptly turning right at the end. He took me into a very large rectangular room. Pointing to one long wall, then, opening his arms wide in a sweeping gesture, he cried out *"What do you think of that?"* My jaw dropped! It was as though my breath was driven out of me. How can I describe the indescribable? The whole wall was covered

with the completed plans for the intended restoration. The mansion, orangery, outbuildings, gardens, lakes, parkland, woodlands, pathways and sculptures were artistically presented in a manner that defies language. Exquisite, marvellous, unbelievable, superb, fabulous, mind-blowing, are inadequate expressions to convey what I was seeing. I stood there dumbfounded for some time trying to take in what I was seeing and gradually became conscious of the arm of the great man round my shoulder. He whispered, *"Will you build it with me Michael?"* I would have been honoured to become his slave, but he wanted me as a friend! I could not reply. I just wept, tears which he seemed to understand better than I did, and it seemed was the reply he was looking for. When I finished weeping I was filled with joy. He said, *"Shall we take a stroll. Let's go and look at all that needs to be done and talk it over."*

In due time, work began. There were other workers who all had similar stories to mine. We marvelled at the way the land owner made each of us feel as though we were his best and only friend. He was a father to each of us and there was no denying his exceptional love. As the work progressed we all acquired remarkable new skills and enjoyed the work immensely.

Never did he overwork us or demand from us more than we could comfortably manage though we often put more on ourselves than he did. Soon it became evident that the scale of the restoration was far beyond the few of us. One day the master called us together. *"It is time to recruit more workers,"* he said. *"I want you to go and tell everyone you know how much you enjoy working for me. Explain this wonderful project to them. Let them know what I am like, and how they can expect to be treated. Tell them there is enough work for everyone and at good wages too."* To my surprise many expressed great concern at this. Some thought that the people they knew wouldn't believe them. Others said they wouldn't have the right words to say. Others thought that the people they spoke to would be offended. There were those who even thought their friendships would suffer, that they would be rejected. Lots of other negative thoughts were expressed. I don't have the time. I don't have anyone to speak to. The only people I know are the people who work here. It's best if we leave this to those who are gifted in it.

I looked at the great man's face. Did I detect sadness there? I think so, but it seemed that this was not new to him. With exceptional patience he began, *"You have some very strange ideas. Where have you got them from? Are they from people who only know how to turn good news into bad? From people who have never known me or the way I care for and treat my workers? From people who have never worked on my estate? From foolish people who don't understand what they are saying? From people who don't really care?"*

Now listen to me. Let me teach you. Let me show you how to recruit new workers. I am always available. Come and talk with me any time you wish. Learn from those amongst you who are good recruiters. Keep asking them how they do it.

Just to take away your fears, I will say a few very simple things right now and then we will talk later about how you can become experts.

Do not bother yourselves by going where you are not welcome. That is a waste of time. Seek around. Explore. Find those who are destined for the work here. They will welcome you. They will become very eager to join us when they realise how happy and fulfilled you are. Remember that clever words do not often impress people. What was it that first impressed you when you met me at the mansion? It was my kindness, my acceptance, my eagerness to know your friendship. Did I Lord it over you? Did I meet you wearing lordly clothes? No. I let you know how important you were to me. Did you feel valued? Of course you did, because I value you more than you can realise. Did I do or say anything that offended you? How could I?

So you see, only when you felt safe with me, did I take you to that big room and show you the vision on the wall. When I invited you with quiet words to join me, you were joyful beyond words.

I have given you an example to follow. Simply set your heart to bless. Show kindness. Become a good friend. Help people in their troubles. Do not judge. Become a servant to people, not a manager. Respect and value them. It should not be a surprise to you that no one is offended by these things. At the right time they will be eager for you to explain the enthusiasm you have for the work of the estate and become excited at the prospect of coming to see what is going on here. You may need to be very patient with some people but there is no hurry. Are you less fearful now and ready to learn?" the Lord finished.

I looked around and could see that what he had said had been a great help to many. There was promise in the air and a marvellous hope for the future.

I have designed this parable story to express as well as I can that this work of restoration is a work of God, not a work of human ingenuity. I want to establish that only a right understanding of our relationship with him will enable us to share his passion. You see in the story how the Lord offered loving intimacy with those that he called, sharing with them his vision and excitement for the project he had in hand. He fathered them, and honoured them, respected and trusted them. This is 'our together work' he proclaims. I want you to be as excited about it as I am. I have no wish to command you as an employer would command his workers. I want this to be a matter of friendship and agreement.

When my mother left my dad to marry someone else, he took my brother and I to the West Australian outback to start a new life in farming. I was eleven years old at the time. It was a great adventure. For the next three years he and I spent a huge amount of time together, just the two of us, doing every kind of exciting thing you can imagine. Though he was my dad, we formed an exceptional friendship. We were true pals. He trusted me to shoot his guns, drive his vehicles, do all kinds of farm work, build a house with him, fight fires, and many other

things. I always loved boats, so he built me a canoe out of corrugated iron so I could to play with it on the farm's dam. We had an ideal working relationship. This allowed me to get in on all the exciting things that he did.

I suspect that my working relationship with God has been strongly influenced by those precious three years before my dad remarried and inherited another son. God is always at work doing exciting things. Because of my friendship with him, I get to do them with Him. He is at work restoring people and populating heaven. What could be more exciting than that? He shares with me his vision for saving individual people or for projects like church planting, setting up home and overseas missions, restoring churches, or getting people healed. As my Father God inspires me with his vision, he blesses me with the opportunity to take part. I become a partner with God. It is his work but I get to help.

One day, as I was building a wall at the front of a suburban property, I noticed a man walking down the other side of the street. God spoke to me very clearly and said, *"I am leading that man into my kingdom."* I was surprised, thinking it unusual that God would just share his heart with me like that out of the blue. However, the man crossed over the road, stopped where I was working and asked, *"Do you do this for a living?"* *"Yes, I do at present. Why do you ask?"* *"I need some walls building and I like your work. I live just two streets away. Would you come and give me a quote?"* I explained that I already had six months of work on my books, so there wasn't anything I could do unless he wanted to wait that long. As he turned away disappointed, an unexpected thought dropped into my mind. *"Wait a moment,"* I called. *"Are you a practical person?"* *"Yes I am,"* he replied. *"Then why don't you build the walls yourself?"* *"I've never built a wall before. I wouldn't know how,"* he explained. *"I'll tell you what, would you like me to teach you how to build walls, then you can do the work yourself and save a lot of money?"* He thought this was a great idea. I thought, *"How have I got myself into this?"* I really could do without the extra pressure.

What followed would take far too much time to tell. I taught him how to build. He was an excellent student and finished all his walls to a very high standard. The main issue was the mess his life was in. He lived alone and had acute reclusive tendencies. I became his life line, friend and counsellor through a very difficult time in his life. He found God through this, gave his life to Jesus, and just as God had promised, came into his kingdom. This is one example of how it is to be in partnership with God.

I have often been asked, *"How do you know when it is God speaking?"* A later chapter entitled, 'Hearing from God' will take a comprehensive look at this. It is a vital and fundamental principle when partnering with God, to know that he speaks and to be able to hear what he says. For now, let me simply say that God is always true to his word. If God says something, God does it. God said in the first chapter of the Bible, *"Let there be light,"* and there was light.

He spoke everything into being and spoke to men and women all through the Bible. On the first page of this book I introduced you to God speaking. *"Heal Janet's ear,"* he said. Janet's ear was healed.

The apostle Peter writes: *"The Lord is not being slow about fulfilling the promise he made to return, as some people think. No, he is being patient, because his patience gives more time for people to turn to him and be saved."*

Sometimes we have to wait longer than we would expect for God to do what he has said he would do, but if he delays, it is for a very good reason. God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit work in perfect partnership in all that they do. The central purpose of their work is the salvation of souls. They are busy saving souls and populating heaven. When we become their partners we will find ourselves doing the same things that they are doing.

When Jesus left heaven and became a human being he provided us with a perfect model of how to work in partnership with the Father and the Holy Spirit. He said, *"I only do what I see the Father doing."* He was obedient in all things and available at all times. It follows that we would seek to follow his example. It is sad that the word obedience, in our present culture, has taken on very unhappy overtones. Being called to be obedient to God can easily carry with it the expectations of what it means to be obedient to man. An expectation that we will be commanded to do things that we don't want to do and that we don't agree with. We assume that we will have to do them against our will because we have no choice. Authority is usually abused by people, but never by God. If we are going to establish a happy, joyful, working partnership with God we have to accept that obedience is part of the deal. The opposite of obedience is rebellion and God has never taken well to that. Rebellion destroys relationships. Even in my teenage years I never was rebellious with my Dad. I cannot think of an occasion when he provoked me to rebel. He was trustworthy and I trusted him. Whatever he asked of me I would do in the knowledge that he knew best. I suppose this carried over into my relationship with God when I became a Christian.

Because the word obedience has become corrupted, let me present obedience in another way. Let's call it agreement with God! My first wood-work lessons at school were given by Mr Thomas. He was a saint to the obedient, but strict with rebels. He never frightened me because I loved woodworking and he was ready to help at any time. He was a gifted teacher showing patience and kindness to those who wanted to learn. Mr Thomas' workshop was a safe and happy environment. I was pleased and willing to respond to all his instructions with enthusiasm. So it is with God.

As God prepared his Son Jesus for ministry, we can see a pattern emerge that provides us with an example to follow.

His baptism in water was a defining moment. God spoke from heaven and said, *"This is my dearly loved Son, who brings me great joy."* I am sure that I would be correct in presuming that most of you reading this book will have been baptised in water by full immersion, but, if you haven't already done so I want to encourage you to partner with Jesus in baptism. Our commission from Jesus carries the instruction, *"Go to all peoples everywhere and baptise them in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit."* If we ourselves have not been baptised, we will be unable to provide an example for others.

Jesus was filled with the Holy Spirit. If Jesus needed to be filled with the Holy Spirit to be effective in ministry I think we can take it that our need is greater. If you are unsure about how to be filled with the Holy Spirit, read Luke 11:9-13. We can simply ask God to fill us. Laying on of hands is a great way of helping this to happen.

After being filled with the Holy Spirit, Jesus was led by the Spirit. Being led and guided by the Holy Spirit is the only way to be fully effective in the ministry of saving souls. The Holy Spirit will lead and guide us to those who are being saved, and guide us in what to say and do. After Jesus had been led into the desert for his time of testing, he was led out of the desert in the power of the Holy Spirit. We can be confident that the Holy Spirit will empower us for the works of salvation.

There we have it: We become friends of God, sons and daughters of God, people baptised in water, filled with the Holy Spirit, guided and empowered by the Holy Spirit and joined in partnership with Father, Son and Holy Spirit to work the glorious works of healing and salvation. Our mission? To populate heaven!

I would like us to picture a large wooden cartwheel. This eighth chapter is like the central hub. All the other chapters are like spokes, each of which is jointed into the hub. The hub is our relationship with and partnership with God. The spokes of a wheel may look very nice but without a hub they do not work very well.

What I would love you to do as you work through this book is to have regular conversations with God about the things I have presented. Do find out what he has to say.

Heaven Minded



Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.

BILL JOHNSON, who leads Bethel Church in Reading, California, has written an exceptional book entitled, *'When Heaven Invades Earth.'* I do hope you will read it. I attended a conference in Yorkshire last year where Bill spoke.

After he completed his address in one of the sessions, he casually announced, *"We have still got half an hour, let's do some healing."* Heaven opened. God's presence was intense. Many, many people were healed. Heaven came to earth.

In chapter two, I tried my best to communicate the reality of heaven as the eternal dwelling place of those who have chosen to believe in Jesus. This was intended to inspire and increase our faith and give us a fresh urgency with regard to saving people into heaven. I tried hard to promote a vision of how wondrous our heavenly home will be. My hope is that if we can catch only a glimpse of the bliss that awaits us, it will energise us in our purpose to lead as many people as possible to share our promised inheritance.

In this chapter, I want to consider the workings of heaven on earth. People get saved when heaven opens. When we are touched by heaven we are touched by heavens purpose. When we are touched by heaven we are touched by heavens joy. When we are touched by heaven we become heaven minded.

The Bible is a catalogue of men and women who experienced heaven while living on the earth. Jacob saw a stairway to heaven with angels climbing up and down. He saw God was standing at the top of the stairs, and exclaimed, *"What an awesome place this is! It is none other than the house of God, the very gateway to heaven!"* Elisha saw Elijah go up to heaven in a fiery chariot. Moses met with God at a burning bush in the wilderness. The ground was so holy he had to take off his shoes.

He met with God on Mount Sinai for forty days. When Solomon's Temple was completed, the glorious presence of God filled the sanctuary with such

power that the priests could not continue with their services. These are just a few examples from Old Testament writings.

In the New Testament we read of many other encounters with heaven. When Jesus was born a vast host of angels visited earth in sight of shepherds. They spoke and sang then went back to heaven. Jesus went to the top of a mountain with his disciples and God's glory came. Moses and Elijah appeared and spoke with Jesus whose face shone like the sun and whose clothes became as white as light. God spoke from a bright cloud.

When Stephen was about to be stoned to death for his faith, he gazed steadily into heaven and saw the glory of God with Jesus standing at God's right hand. *"Look, I see the heavens opened!"* he cried out. *"While Saul was travelling the road to Damascus, light from heaven shone around him and he heard Jesus speak. On the Day of Pentecost when the Christian believers were meeting together, heaven opened. There was the sound of a mighty windstorm from heaven, and what looked like flames of fire settled on them. Everyone present was filled with the Holy Spirit."*

Throughout history and in the present day, men and women have had their lives transformed through the impact of experiencing heaven touching earth. Spiritual revivals are a response to God opening heaven. It is as though God's love and power pour down like a mighty rain storm. His floodgates open.

In the Book of Malachi, the final book of the Old Testament, through his prophet God called the people of Israel to repent and rededicate their lives to him. *"If you do this," God promised, "I will open the floodgates of heaven for you. I will pour out blessings so great you won't have enough room to take them all in! Try it! Put me to the test!"*

God hasn't changed, so we can believe him for this same promise when we turn to him and do what he asks.

I was invited to speak at a healing conference a while ago and chose the topic, 'Positioned for blessing.' I emphasised how strong God's desire was to bless. I explored the question, 'How do we position ourselves to receive his blessings?' I began with a natural illustration. The bathroom shower can be turned on, but we only get wet when we stand underneath it. It is plain logic that we have to move to the place where the water is pouring out. As it is in the natural world, so it is in the spiritual world.

There was a season some years ago, when it was quite common for Christians from Spirit filled churches to come together for what were called 'Times of Refreshing in the Holy Spirit.' A suitable hall space would be arranged and cleared of furniture. Everyone would stand for a period of worship. The Holy Spirit would then be invited to minister to the people according to their need. Some of those meetings were very powerful indeed. People were healed physically and emotionally, filled with the peace and joy of the Holy Spirit, and

often underwent life transformations. You see what I am getting at? People had positioned themselves for blessing and they were blessed. Those who stayed home missed the blessings.

Here is a mystery that I cannot explain, but which serves to reinforce the message. At one of these meetings I observed an unusual phenomenon. I was happily engaged in receiving my share of Holy Spirit blessing, when I noticed that people in one area of the room were experiencing a much more powerful outpouring than elsewhere. I decided to experiment and moved to where they were positioned. It was like moving from the edge of a waterfall to the centre. It was like a physical force. I couldn't help falling to the ground as others were doing. Only because I changed position did I experience a greater blessing.

God explained to the people of Israel through the prophet Malachi that they had particular issues standing in the way of heavens blessings. This gave them the opportunity to put things right and receive the fullness of what God had planned for them. God wants to do the same for us.

After I had shared this message at conference, I called for a time of quiet contemplation and personal communication with God. I suggested, *"Ask him to show you if there is anything that will help you to receive the healing you are hoping for."* Testimonies followed and healings took place. One lady explained that she had come to the conference with a serious physical heart condition and God had just healed it. She said *"While I was seeking God as you suggested, he showed me how much bitterness was in my heart. I repented and asked forgiveness. As I did so I felt my heart being healed. All the pain is gone."*

I remember an occasion when we were praying for a lady in our home group who was suffering a lot of pain in her gums and jaw. We were not making progress at all, which was unusual. God said to me, *"Say the word dentist."* I felt rather foolish. Tentatively I said, *"Barbara, I don't understand if this makes sense, but God seems to be pressing me to say the word dentist."* She was such a sweet and gracious lady that I couldn't believe her response. Her face changed and turned bitter. In a most aggressive manner she said, *"Don't use that word to me! I hate my dentist!"* A tirade followed, in which she made it plain just how much she hated him and why. After she began to calm down somewhat, I said to her cautiously, *"I believe God wants you to forgive your dentist."* Light the blue touch paper and stand back. Another tirade followed. *"I can't forgive him. I'll never forgive him."* *"Just to please me, will you say, I forgive my dentist even if you don't mean it?"* After some huffing and puffing and through gritted teeth, the words eventually came out, *"I forgive my dentist."* Heaven works by its own rules. She was instantly healed. She kept holding her face in disbelief. *"The pain's all gone, the pain's all gone,"* she kept saying over and over. *"It's wonderful. It's wonderful."*

God responds so quickly to our smallest steps of faith. We do not need to crowbar blessings out of heaven. God waits eagerly for every opportunity to

bless us from heaven. Developing a habit of believing and asking gives access to heaven's treasures. A habit of unbelief and self sufficiency severely restricts our connection with heaven.

Before Jesus healed an epileptic boy he asked the boy's father, *"Do you believe he can be healed?" "I do believe,"* he cried, *"but help me to overcome my unbelief."* It is easy to identify with him. We believe, but we need Jesus' help to overcome areas of unbelief. He wants to help and he will help, I can give testimony to that.

I remember clearly the time when I struggled to believe all that was in the Bible. I wanted to, but there was much that gave me difficulty. I had developed a great admiration for Jesus. He was my hero. I was amazed by his selfless devotion to people. I wanted to be like him. I was in a dilemma. I sat down alone one afternoon in our dining room, to have a heart to heart talk with God about things. I explained the conflict I felt between my desire to serve and honour Jesus and my unbelief in much that I read in the scriptures. After meditating for a while I came up with a compromise. I placed my Bible on the coffee table in front of me, placed my hands on the Bible and said to God. *"Father, I really don't know how much of the Bible I believe, but I choose to live by its every word anyway. I make this decision before you right now."* Instantly heaven opened. God gave me a vision of his kingdom. I was filled and surrounded with light. All unbelief was washed away. I knew with certainty that the scriptures were inspired by God, a revelation of his truth. I don't know how long the vision lasted. I can't describe it to anyone.

After I had recovered from this experience, I went into the lounge to find a book called, 'Gods Kingdom'. Brenda was in the lounge counselling a troubled girl. This girl had her back to me while Brenda was facing me.

When she saw me she looked shocked. I took the book back to the dining room and started reading. After the girl left for home, Brenda came into the dining room and said, *"What's happened to you Michael? When you came into the lounge you were surrounded with light. It gave me a fright."* I explained as well as I could.

This happened during a time when I had recently taken over the leadership of the church Bible study because the minister had left. At the next session, I spoke about God's kingdom without giving any mention of the vision. Half the group never came back, and the other half caught fire. People began to come to our home from all over, many got saved and baptised. The group grew, and grew until we had no option but to start a new church.

So what do I mean when I talk about being heaven minded? I am saying that if we have a day by day awareness that though we live on the earth we are joined to heaven and have access to all its resources, we can learn to draw upon these resources.

I Will Bless You

10

WHEN Abraham responded to the call of God, this is what God said to him: *"Abraham, I will bless you, and you will be a blessing to others."* Also he said a little later, *"Serve me faithfully. I will make you extremely fruitful and you will have many descendents."*

This promise is for us. This promise can be our experience. We act as forerunners of God's blessing. When we bless people, their hearts are opened to receive the blessings of heaven. Here are a few things that the Westminster Dictionary of the Bible says:

BLESS:

To bestow divine favour and confer divine benefits:

To adore God for his goodness and return thanks:

To invoke Gods favour on a person:

BLESSING:

Any advantage conferred on a person:

Favours and advantages conferred by God, which bring pleasure or happiness in their train:

Speaking God's favour over someone:

A present or a token of goodwill:

It is evident that we can bless people on the human level and we can bless them in God also. As we bless people in a natural way we can open the way for God to bless them supernaturally.

There are innumerable ways in which we can bless people. What blesses one person may not bless another. Generally, this relates to the different needs

that people have. For example, someone may be deeply discouraged. It is obvious that encouragement will bless them. A lonely person will be blessed by a visit or an invitation to come round for coffee. For now, I just want us to recognise that we need to be sensitive and discerning so we are able to bless people in the best possible way.

Jesus told an amazing story about a Good Samaritan. A man beaten half to death, robbed and left lying at the roadside, was not going to be blessed by a sympathetic word or someone offering to share their faith. He was in desperate need of practical care and financial help. This is what the Samaritan gave. There were those who passed by on the other side of the road because they were so caught up with their own purposes. We live in a time and culture where people generally are so caught up just managing all the demands of life or pursuing their ambitions that the needs of those around them can go unnoticed. People are hungry for love and acceptance. People long for sincere friendship and to be unconditionally valued. As Christians we are well positioned to respond.

People's difficulties may be physical, practical, emotional, relational, or spiritual. So we do have to be wise in discerning how we can best help. Helping in one area will frequently lead to less obvious, but often more important needs being uncovered. The scope of this book does not lend itself to exploring these complexities and doesn't need to. The main thing is that we develop a heart to bless, become a people that bless, and become people who see where others have needs and recognise them.

Heidy Baker, a missionary with a miraculous gift of healing, has led thousands of people to Christ. Only a couple of weeks ago I discovered what she had said regarding this.

**She says that more people are saved by being honoured
than in any other way.**

This needs thinking about. When I heard what she had said, I looked up the word honour in the dictionary. It means, to respect highly, to exalt, to confer dignity. Jesus honoured Zacchaeus, the hated tax collector, by inviting himself to his house for a meal. It was because an honourable man, Jesus, honoured a dishonourable man, Zacchaeus, that salvation resulted.

While we can act in all manner of ways to bless people, it is by honouring them that we will establish the right relationship necessary to lead them to the supreme blessing of knowing God. Reflecting upon my own conversion, I now see clearly the truth of what Heidy Baker teaches about honour. As a sixteen-year-old I met men of God who showed me much honour. This opened my heart to become a believer. It has also helped Brenda and I to understand much better

why people so easily find God through us. We instinctively honour people but haven't until now understood what a major factor this has been in their salvation.

People suffering from rejection find that being honoured with unqualified acceptance is a huge blessing. Unloved people are disproportionately blessed by being honoured with just a little love because they thirst for it. People with a poor self image are greatly helped by being respected, appreciated and trusted. This sets the scene for an introduction to the God who can supply all their needs.

I told the story earlier of a man who wanted a wall building. He came with a practical need. As this need was being attended to, emotional and relational needs emerged. I helped him with those. His spiritual needs followed and he found God.

I will begin a story here and finish it in a later chapter. Some years ago, new neighbours moved into a house on the opposite side of our road. As Asians moving into a non Asian community they were a little unsure how they would be received. They needn't have worried at all. It is a very friendly neighbourhood and everyone was very pleased that they had come to join us. They had just moved in when a crisis arose. Their car was in the garage for repair, when one of their relations was taken ill. This relation lived fifty miles away. Our new neighbours needed to go urgently to stay for a few days. When we heard of their difficulty, I suggested that they take our car and keep it until everything was sorted out. It took a lot to persuade them that this was no big deal on our part. They were quite taken aback by our offer, wondering why we would put ourselves to such an inconvenience, and risk our motor to people that we hardly knew. I clinched it by saying, *"Look, your sick relative is far more important than a car. It's just a metal box on wheels."* At this they agreed that it would be a huge help and accepted our gift. Clearly they were greatly blessed that their practical difficulty was solved, but now I understand that their greater blessing was that we had unconditionally accepted and trusted them. We had honoured them. This led to us forming a most remarkable friendship.

As people of God, blessing should be in our DNA...

but it is a way of life that sometimes has to be learned. Learning to drive a car requires conscious thought for a time. Gradually it becomes instinctive, automatic. The more often we make conscious decisions to bless, the more practiced, discerning and sensitive we become. After a while, it seems that our DNA becomes modified and we know instinctively how best to respond to people's needs. Our desire to bless grows stronger the more active we become. We become more motivated to bless others and less motivated about blessing ourselves.

Earlier, I illustrated the ministry of bringing people to salvation by saying that we need the right combination of keys to succeed. A remarkably effective key

is the smile. It seems so obvious that I was inclined not to bother talking about it. But unsmiling Christians find it very hard to inspire unbelievers with a desire to find God. A disarming smile is just that. It disarms people. They drop their defences when we smile at them. Friend, not foe! It sends all the right messages. I was once teaching on how as Christians we should present ourselves to the world, because in general we are not held in the highest regard. I don't know how it cropped up, but the conversation came round to how miserable and off-hand a lot of shopkeepers were. I suggested that they probably had good reason to be so because of difficult customers. I made a suggestion. "Try an experiment for me, "Whenever you are confronted with a miserable looking shopkeeper, give them a really big friendly smile and watch their reaction. I know what it will be, but you find out." Nine times out of ten the smile is returned and we are served pleasantly. There is always a way of treating people that brings the best out in them, and they feel good about it.

As Brenda and I were driving along a narrow country lane one morning we had to stop the car because a farmer was in the process of reversing a huge trailer stacked high with hay, into a barn. He had only inches to spare, so had to creep his tractor very slowly to accomplish this very difficult manoeuvre. He began to look uncomfortable so I switched off the car engine, gave him a hand wave and a smile that indicated, take your time, no hurry. He smiled back and nodded thanks. When he had completed this highly skilled task, I gave him an enthusiastic, double thumbs up, that said, *'Brilliant driving.'* His face beamed, and we drove on with a wave. He was blessed. We were blessed. I know this is a trivial example, a minor incident, but it illustrates what I mean when I say that blessing should be in our DNA.

We were standing by a lake one afternoon, where families were throwing bread to the ducks. Brenda and I had bread with us for the same activity. A mother with two children turned up but didn't have any bread with her. We did what you would have done, and gave our bread to her children. The point is this. We had much more fun seeing the gratitude of the mother, and watching the fun her children were having feeding the ducks, than throwing bread ourselves.

Neither of these encounters presented an evangelistic opportunity. We didn't expect them to do. But you can see how in a moment, the ground can be so easily laid, a relationship developed, so simply and with so little effort. It is so easy to bless, and a blessing to do so.

Remember chapter one where we looked at how easy it would be for our nation to become eighty percent Christian in twenty years if each of us led just one person to become a Christian every five years. Remember the double glazing salesman who managed one sale for every two hundred doors he knocked on. I hope you are beginning to believe me when I say that these are very easy goals. If we persist in blessing people in small ways and large ways at every opportunity,

we will soon stumble into situations and relationships where it is easy to bless people with God's word. Blessing people doesn't cause offence. There is no cringe factor in blessing people, and there is no difficulty in speaking about God to people when they recognise that our motive is to bring them into blessing.

There is another way of looking at this: You may remember that when Joshua was nearing Jericho, he met a sword carrying angel who stood in his way. Joshua asked the angel a most important question. *"Are you for me or against me?"*

**I believe that either consciously or intuitively this
is the question that we ask ourselves about the people we encounter.
Is this person for me or against me or neither?**

I can't emphasize strongly enough, how powerful our witness is to people, when they begin to understand that we are genuinely 'for' them, not just pretending to be. Lending our car to our new neighbours sent a clear message. 'These people are for us.' The farmer, within a few minutes, knew that we were for him. Something as simple as a smile is saying, "I am for you". What is it that draws us so powerfully to God? He is totally *for* us, even to the sacrifice of his son, who suffered a most horrible death because he was for us. If God is for us who can be against us?

When people become convinced about how much we are for them, you know what? When we talk about God they will understand that the reason for us doing so is because we only want to do them good.

I guess that the retired couple I mentioned earlier, who were driven from the church to humanism, didn't find anyone in that church who was for them. After twenty minutes conversation they realised that we were for them, and were open to giving church another try.

We are strongly attracted to people who are for us. The apostle Paul writes that we Christians are like a sweet smelling perfume to those who are being saved. Let it be!

Joy & Enthusiasm



JOY AND ENTHUSIASM are infectious. This is true in the natural realm, and in the spiritual realm. The Gospel writer John says this. *“Wake up and look around. The fields are ready for harvest. The workers receive good wages and the fruit they harvest is people, people brought to eternal life. What Joy awaits both the planter and the harvester!”*

I want you to notice the closing exclamation mark used in the Bible to emphasise this declaration of Joy. We are talking about a lot of Joy here! I suspect that not many people would link evangelism with Joy. No wonder it is not a popular activity for most Christians, or the people they attempt to share God with. We had a visit yesterday from a young man that we led to Christ. He asked me if I would arrange to baptise him. This brought us great joy. I have baptised many people, and attended many services where others have baptised. These events are always joyful. Visitors who are not used to church are greatly surprised at how much happiness there is.

Baptism services are an excellent witness to the joy of being a Christian. I always ensure that as many people as possible, who are not yet church attenders, are invited along to baptism services.

Luke chapter fifteen is wholly devoted to three parables that Jesus told. There is a lost sheep that is found, a lost coin that is found, and a lost son who is found.

We hear that when the shepherd finds his lost sheep, he joyfully carries it home and calls his friends and neighbours together to celebrate. *“Rejoice with me because I have found my lost sheep.”* Jesus goes on to say, *“In the same way, there is more joy in heaven over one lost person who turns to God, than over ninety-nine others who are righteous and haven’t strayed away.”*

If all this joy is going on in heaven when someone receives eternal life, we need to get in on the act. We can take a full advantage of heaven’s joy.

When the woman who has lost her coin finds it again, she also calls friends and neighbours together to celebrate. *“Rejoice with me,”* she says, *“make merry, be glad, share in my delight.”* Jesus goes on to say, *“In the same way, there is joy in*

the presence of God's angels when just one person turns from their evil ways and finds him."

It seems that Jesus was really intent in getting his point over. To illustrate the point further, Jesus told them yet another story. This is the third one. A man's son had gone astray, gone to live a degenerate lifestyle. Eventually, having wrecked his life, he came to his senses and returned home. *"We must celebrate with a feast, my son is back!"* says his Father. So the party began. How I hope that we will add much more joy to evangelism and start partying.

The apostle Paul, when writing to the Roman Church, makes this comment: *"It is right for me to be enthusiastic about all that Jesus Christ has done through me in my service to God."*

I just love to be with enthusiastic people, don't you? I spent a lot of years in the teaching profession and always gravitated towards those who were enthusiastic. There were some teachers who were not enthusiastic. I didn't see them have much success. The students needed enthusiastic teachers if they were going to do well.

We have people all around us who do not yet know God. If they do not see enthusiasm in those who proclaim him, they are not going to do well at finding him. If we are enthusiastic and excited about our faith, and equally enthusiastic and excited about passing it on, then they will do well.

The word enthusiasm has its origin in the Greek expression 'Entheo,' meaning, In God, God in us, filled with God to overflowing. To enthuse therefore, as originally understood, means to have God pouring out of us. This is a good illustration. If we feel to be lacking in enthusiasm, we can just ask God to pour himself into us so that he begins to pour out of us.

Peter Kreeft, an American author, has written a book entitled 'Everything you wanted to know about Heaven.' I haven't read it myself yet, but the other day I came across a quotation taken from his book. It made me think, because I had never quite seen things the way that he puts it. I pass it on to you to think about too. This is what he says: *"The foggy and vague never inspire. It doesn't matter whether something is a dull lie or dull truth. It is not doubt, but dullness, that is the strongest enemy of faith."* I have a question or two about this statement, but when I think back to my dull teachers, I realise that I began to believe that the subjects they taught were dull. A prolonged period of dull church, after the excitement of becoming a believer, caused me to stop attending for much of the time that I studied at university. Happily, my faith remained strong.

As we offer people 'Life in all its fullness,' being 'full of life' will be a key factor in convincing them about the true life that is available to them.

First the Natural – then the Spiritual

12

WHEN God created the natural world, he said that it was exceedingly good. The apostle Paul, when writing to the Roman Church, says this: *"For ever since the world was created, God's invisible qualities – his eternal power and divine nature – have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made so men are without excuse for not believing in him, thanking him, and glorifying him."*

The natural world already speaks about God. Why ever there should be a suggestion that faith and science are in some way apposed is very difficult to understand. The incredible wonders discovered by scientists continue to reveal how incredible God's creation is.

Jesus explained to Nicodemus the principle that natural birth comes first, then spiritual birth. When Paul wrote to the Corinthian Church about resurrection bodies, he says, *"Our natural human bodies first die and are buried, then they are raised as everlasting spiritual bodies."* When God created Adam he made his body out of molecules, the dust of the earth. Then he breathed his spirit into him and gave him life.

The reason I have shared these principles, is to emphasise that God has created a natural order, a spiritual order, and of course a supernatural and miraculous order. He employs these in various combinations according to his will and purpose. As we seek to save souls into heaven I want us to be very aware of this so we can sensitively work in partnership with God. The later chapter on 'The visible hand of God', will explore the supernatural and miraculous workings of God, but for now I want us to recognise the link between the natural and spiritual. The exhortation *"Get out there and tell people about Jesus"*, can indicate a precipitous leap straight into spiritual dialogue, which can result in tensions of different kinds.

Conversely, the endless pursuit of helpfulness and good works, without introducing people to the fact that they can know God, is not going to be effective in saving souls. When we first establish good natural relationships, have friendly natural conversations, the door will naturally open for talk about the things of God.

The illustrations that follow, will help to clarify the transition from the natural to the spiritual.

A new neighbour came to live on our street. As I walked past his house one day, he was in his front garden pottering. I introduced myself and asked how he was settling in. He was standing on his side of the fence which bordered his property, while I stood on the street side. He began to tell me how he was in the final stages of fitting an oak staircase that he had built.

My knowledge of joinery and cabinet making meant that I could appreciate the skill he had needed for the task. At a certain point in the conversation he asked, *"Would you like to come in and see it?" "I would love to,"* I admitted."

By his invitation and permission, I crossed from outside his property to inside his property. We both had a great time examining and admiring the staircase. It was a great piece of work. Think about this. Had I not waited for his invitation, I would have been a trespasser. I don't think he would have been at all happy if I had said bluntly, *"I'll come in and look at it,"* without being asked. I have noticed that as we develop relationships with people, there comes a right time when they are pleased to invite us into their lives, and are happy to include talk about spiritual matters.

When Brenda and I go for walks, we very frequently get into conversation with people in their front gardens or while they potter with something in their garages. It is surprising how ready people are to engage in conversation, and often to invite us into their houses to look at what they have been talking about. We chat in cafés, shops, on footpaths, in fact, anywhere and everywhere we go.

**To be successful in leading people to Christ, it is vital
to learn how to converse easily with people.**

After all, practically everyone starts their journey to salvation as the result of a conversation. For those who find it difficult to open up conversations, there is only one answer. Practice! And keep practicing! If we ask people about themselves they will do all the talking, which makes it easy. They will usually reciprocate and when they ask us about ourselves, it is usually easy to answer.

One day as we sat in a cafe in the North Yorkshire town of Goathland, drinking coffee and eating scones, a lady came and sat at our table. We passed the time of day and engaged in casual conversation. I asked her, *"Where are you from?"* She replied, *"York."* *"Oh, we were in York just a couple of weeks ago,"*

I commented enthusiastically, *"We were attending Christian seminars at a great little church called 'The Rock'. The people were so friendly and devoted to God. As soon as we entered the building we could feel the presence of God."* She considered for a moment and then said, *"I know where that Church is. It is close to where I live."* She paused thoughtfully, *"It's interesting that this has come up. For some while now I have been wondering whether to start going to church. On Sunday I will go to the Rock Church and see what it is like."*

It really is simple to move from talking about natural, ordinary, everyday things, to talking about spiritual things. Really it is just a single conversation which embraces different topics.

Over the years I have had many different barbers. I can safely say that I have shared the Christian faith with each one. While chatting about different topics, I simply introduce 'God talk' as another matter of interest, usually on the back of the usual question barbers ask, *"So what are you going to do today?"* I am so often engaged in spiritual activities that it is easy to explain what I do and why. If I explain anything dramatic, like a healing for example, anything that I guess they might have difficulty believing, I say with a light hearted laugh, *"Well, you did ask."* We have to be discerning and wise in what we share of course, and pitch things in a manner people can relate to, however we must not be too reluctant talk about the wondrous and powerful ways that God acts in our lives.

Writing this book has already opened up surprising opportunities that I didn't expect. When people ask me what I am doing, I give the honest answer, *"Well, I am very busy right now writing a book."* Always that will be followed up by the question, *"What is it about?"* I answer, *"The title is, Populating Heaven."* It goes on from there. The surprise for me has been how captivated by this title people are. They generally ask me to let them have a copy of the book when it is published. These are people without any pretensions to faith. It confirms my belief that we need to talk more about heaven to people. If I had called the book, 'How to share your faith', I doubt if it would have aroused much interest.

Keep in mind that the most respectful way of introducing conversations about faith is in response to people asking questions. As we chat easily and freely with people, the questions will come. After the early Christians had to flee Roman persecution, it is said that they went about 'gossiping the gospel'. First keep things light, even humorous. A time to get serious will come in God's time.

Servants Not Masters

13

I am going to talk in this chapter about how to relate to people with a servant heart, how to serve them in practical ways, and how to serve them in spiritual ways. When we make any attempt to manage their beliefs, or, to use an old expression 'try to convert them' they will be easily put off. It is our task to love and serve people and let them know how God wants to bless them with his love. Our task is to help people to understand that they have the opportunity to choose to live in relationship with a loving God.

God has given men and women free will to choose him or to reject him but they are unable to make this choice until they know that he exists, that he is real, that he is a loving and merciful God, that they can have an intimate relationship with him. Our task is to make God known through loving actions and loving words, not to try to manage people's choices.

I take my guidance from the apostle Paul. He wrote this to the believers in Corinth: *"Though I am a free man, I have become a servant to all people in an effort to bring them to Christ. Yes, I try to find common ground with them all. I become like them, doing everything I can to spread the good news and see as many people as possible saved."* Traditional translations use the expression, *'I become all things to all men.'*

**A golden rule is this: Relate to people as they are,
not as we expect them to be.**

I have known many teachers who were extremely intelligent and extremely knowledgeable in their specialist subjects. This frequently worked against them. They could find it very difficult to identify with the pupils that they taught. They could risk flying so high they couldn't see the ground. The most successful

teachers were those who could come down from their high perch of knowledge to meet the students at their level. In my early days of leading church, a retired lady who had been a mill worker, said loudly enough for me to overhear at the end of one of my sermons, *"What does he keep using all them big words for?"* Thank you to this lady for giving me a wake-up call. Overhearing her comment made me realise that I needed to learn to preach using vocabulary that everyone could understand. I have had to think very carefully about how to write this book in such a way that as many readers as possible, regardless of background or experience of the Christian faith, can get the most benefit from it. New believers are always in a particularly good position to lead people into the Christian faith. They know lots of people who are not yet believers and can identify closely with them. I have kept this at the forefront of my thinking.

Over the past few years, we have seen a lot of people from varied backgrounds, find faith in God. Those who have done very little reading since leaving school don't take easily to reading the Bible. Even those who are in the habit of reading may find it difficult to cope with religious vocabulary. I have come to realise that for many people in our present day culture, the Bible is a foreign book in a foreign language. And yet, what the Bible says is foundational to our faith. A friend of my daughter, a very intelligent girl who has recently come to faith, read through the four gospel accounts as written by Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. Her comment at the end of this was, *"I didn't realise that Jesus died and rose again four times."* This was a perfectly logical response from someone who had not been brought up in a Christian family, and had not attended church. I could compile a very long list of religious words and expressions that are in common use amongst Christians that would mean nothing to people outside the church. I frequently see church notice boards advertising such events as Matins, Eucharist, Epiphany, Lent, Messy Church and so on. Even the words of many of our worship songs use language that needs explaining.

It is a time for us to consider carefully how we use language in communicating our faith. We must learn to keep asking ourselves, *"What will this mean to the person I am talking to?"* As one born in 1940, the language of the digital age is to me a foreign language. I have a smart phone and a lap top computer that I use at a very basic level, but the moment I need help to manage some function, I am bombarded with gobbledegook. I am spoken to in a language I can't understand. I accept that, but what bothers me is that the people using this language assume that I know what all the words mean. They never seem to ask, *"Do you understand what I have just said?"* I use this to illustrate that for most people now who have no religious experience, religion can be gobbledegook.

In an attempt to bridge people into the Bible, I have translated the four gospel accounts written by Matthew, Mark, Luke and John into every day English and brought them together into one single account. All the events are presented

in chronological order. I have not included Bible chapters and verses. It reads just like a novel. A simple map is included so that the action can be followed from place to place.

**The title of the book is: 'Simply True. The Amazing Life of Jesus'.
For those who prefer to listen to the story,
I have recorded an audio version.**

This particular work is a good preparation for reading the individual accounts of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, in a good contemporary Bible such as the New Living Translation. This is an example of meeting people where they are. It is an extreme example, and few are called upon to go to these lengths. Going back to basics, here are elementary examples of 'finding the common ground', that Paul talks about.

Recently we attended a prayer and vision meeting. As I parked the car in a residential neighbourhood with about ten minutes to spare, I noticed one of the residents tinkering with his classic car. I strolled over and asked him what model it was and we quickly got into a very interesting conversation about his restoration project. He was more than pleased to have someone to talk to about it. We were buddies in just a few minutes. I asked him how long he had lived in the area, so he explained that he lived in a Muslim community home. This community was made up of his extended family and a few others. They shared a large property. Time was up. See how easy it is to start a relationship. We have a few young families belonging to our church, who have moved, or are about to move into adjoining streets. My thoughts were these. If Brenda and I were to move into this neighbourhood, we had already created an opportunity for developing friendship with this Muslim Community. I would have asked for a ride out in the classic car knowing for sure that the guy would have loved to have someone to show it off to. We would have asked him and his wife round for coffee, asked them about the community life of the Mosque and then generally interacted with the extended family and friends, extending blessings as appropriate. The ground would be prepared for God to work.

A Chinese family moved into one of our adjoining streets. They never seemed to be in evidence but one day as I strolled by their house, an ageing Chinese gentleman was outside. It turned out eventually that he was the father of the lady who had taken up residence with her husband and young daughter. He was on a visit from China for a two month stay. He couldn't speak a word of English. I soon found that out when I gave him a cheery good morning, gestured up to the sunny blue sky and said what a beautiful day it was. He smiled vigorously, happily nodding his head because he had someone to 'talk' to. Over the next few weeks I often stopped to say hello, and we began these ridiculous conversations where

I spoke in English and he spoke in Chinese without either of us understanding a single word the other said. It was crazy, but we were both blessed by smiles, hand gestures, and growing friendship. I eventually met his daughter outside the house. She thanked me enthusiastically for befriending her father in this way. He went back to China at the end of the two months.

We invited her and her husband round for coffee. Their ten-year old daughter came with them. Her husband and I had a fascinating conversation about Chinese religions and politics. This included something of a potted history of the development of Christianity in China. Brenda and his wife got on great. To cut a long story short we had a coffee evening at their house and he started asking searching questions about the Bible and Christianity. I gave him a Bible and a reading plan.

Their daughter was about to move to secondary school. They desperately wanted her to get a place at the local Catholic School which had the highest award for excellence. We all recognised the chances of this were pretty well nil. We hadn't even been able to get our own children in when I was the Pastor of a church. Having agreed that there wasn't anything to be lost they decided to make an application to the school. Just as we were about to leave the house, I felt strongly prompted by the Holy Spirit to pray. As we stood in the hallway I said, *"There is only one way to get your daughter into this school. We need God's help. Let's pray."* I prayed out aloud as we stood in a circle, admitting to God that he was the only hope. I asked him to bless this family. The girl, against all expectations, was given a place!

This is an unfinished story. We have lots of them, works in progress. God knows when to harvest. Be comfortable working at God's pace. Work in partnership with God and continue with faith and patience. We reckon it is time to have our Chinese friends round for coffee again.

Here is another story that illustrates particularly well how people open up their hearts to God as we serve them in love.

We have been volunteers for about two years now, at a 'Christians Against Poverty' job club, run by our local church. One of the clients was a lady of Columbian nationality. She had arrived recently in Yorkshire because of her husband's work transfer from Germany. He was of Turkish origin and worked for an oil company. She was a qualified teacher whose first language was Spanish, second language German, and third language English. Her written English was very good but she spoke with a strong Spanish accent. It made some words difficult to interpret. This wouldn't have mattered much except that she was seeking employment as a Spanish language teacher. I advised her to take elocution lessons as a preparation for seeking work. Having said this, I was reminded that in my own teaching career I had done quite enough English teaching in both Junior and Secondary Schools

to be able to offer her lessons myself. Brenda and I decided to invite her round to our house for a couple of hours a week. She gladly accepted.

After the first lesson, which went really well, she asked, *"How much do I pay?"* It was the last thing in our minds. I assured her that we were doing this out of friendship. This blessed her more than the lesson. It became evident that her husband, though fluent in Turkish and German, also had difficulty with English pronunciation. He joined the class.

It has been necessary to give this background for what follows. As the lessons progressed, we reached a point where all we needed to do was practice, practice, practice. I searched for four identical copies of a suitable straightforward, reading book. The plan was that the four of us would each have copy, sit round in a circle, and practice pronunciation. Brenda, being a very clear reader with hardly a trace of Yorkshire accent, would first read a paragraph. Then, each of our new friends would read the same paragraph while copying Brenda's pronunciation as well as possible. I would correct any mistakes. Then it would be read again more correctly, and so on, until we were ready to go onto the next paragraph.

I realised that I had a number of copies of my Gospel presentation, 'Simply True: The Amazing Life of Jesus.' I asked, *"Would you be happy for us to use this translation of the first books in the New Testament. It is simply written, with a contained vocabulary, and has a good print size?"* They were perfectly happy to do this. It was ideal for the purpose. As we progressed, our Turkish friend, who was from a Muslim family, became more and more distracted. He kept asking questions about Jesus. I answered each time and it wasn't long before we were having Bible studies instead of English lessons. He kept saying on arrival, *"Whenever I come to your house I can feel God here. God lives in your house."* There came the happy day when he said, *"I have made a decision. I want to go all the way with God!"* I bought him a Turkish Bible. After studying it for a few weeks he said to me, *"This Bible is a torch that shines through the darkness and shows me the way."* There is much more to this story as you would guess. It is beautiful story with many answered prayers. These precious people were always looking for ways to bless us and presented us with some exceptional gifts. They are now settled in the excellent, believing church, where the Job Clubs are still held. And yes, our Spanish teacher has gained employment teaching Spanish in an English school. Isn't God so good!

Paul asks us to find common ground with all people. I introduced you briefly to our Asian neighbours in the chapter on blessings. I mentioned the exceptional friendship we have. They are a constant blessing to us.

We are in an equally exceptional friendship with our next door neighbours. When we shared the full Christian faith with them they decided to follow Jesus. We studied the Bible together and prayed, and formed an unusually strong

spiritual bond that all four of us hold very precious indeed. Whenever we meet to pray, we know the powerful presence of God.

Brenda and I talked about how wonderful it would be to enjoy the same spiritual relationship with our Muslim friends. I took courage one day and explained this to them. They were surprised, but after thinking it through and discussing it with each other, agreed that it would be a good thing to do. They admitted to us later that they thought we were going to try and convert them. As it was, we honoured them by meeting them on the spiritual ground they occupied and were comfortable with. I started by studying Islam in some depth, and read through the whole of the Koran. I developed a sincere respect for the way in which true Muslims devoted themselves to God. When we met for our first 'Spiritual time' together I asked if we could explore the things that I had discovered about their faith. When we had come to understand what we each believed, we agreed to begin our Bible studies by looking at the life of Abraham who is the father of our two faiths.

As Abraham was known as a 'Friend of God' we were able to explore in depth what it meant to be in that kind of relationship with God. Soon they felt free to go with us to a whole variety of Christian events including gospel presentations and baptism services. This was a great blessing to us all.

Sometimes they bless us by keeping company with us when we attend church. Our hopes have been fulfilled. We have formed a deep spiritual relationship with these friends. This has brought a new dimension to our relationship. When we pray together we always experience the strong presence of God and have seen some amazing answers to our prayers. These dear friends are more in love with God than they have ever been, and have encouraged us in our faith many times.

Prayer That Opens Doors

14

THIS is a good time to tell the story of how I became a Christian. You will see many of the principles I have explained so far being worked out, and the place that door opening prayer played in my salvation. I did not have a Christian family and didn't attend church. When I was sixteen years of age I lived in Perth Western Australia. I joined the YMCA gymnastics club.

At the beginning and the end of each gym session, the instructor gathered us round and said a simple prayer asking for God's blessing. It had a significant impact on me. What had God got to do with gymnastics I wondered? I came back to England later with my step father, my mother, and young sister so I could complete my education. We settled in Leeds where I joined the Young Men's Christian Association.

The first person I encountered when I registered for membership was Mr Ellis. He was about fifty years of age. He welcomed me as though I was the most important person he had seen that day, or week. Kindness just flowed out of him. I suspect that the character I used for the Lord of the Mansion, at the beginning of the chapter on 'Partnership with God', was inspired by this remarkable man. I do think he provided me with an image of God that still influences me.

The Leeds YMCA had a fabulous program of activities, and I got involved with the camping and adventure club. This is where I met Tim, one of the youth leaders. He was very adventurous as you would guess seeing that he led the adventure club. I developed a great respect and liking for him and could easily identify with him. We became good friends though he was perhaps eight years older than I was. He didn't talk religion to begin with but at the end of one of our weekend adventure camps, just as we were packing the tents away he said casually, *"Oh, by the way Mike, we are starting a religious discussion group next Friday evening, would you like to come along?"* It didn't sound like much of an

adventure and all things being equal I would have said, *"No thank you,"* but, because of my friendship with Tim, I said yes, pretending to be eager.

I want to emphasise as strongly as possible that most people find faith in response to friendship.

I duly turned up for the first religious discussion evening. Tim gave us a copy of Billy Graham's book 'Peace with God' and said, *"During this week I want you to read chapter one. We will discuss it next Friday."* So, week by week we read a chapter and then discussed it. By chapter four I had become a believer!

Stafford (who looked exactly as you would expect a person called Stafford to look), was another of the YMCA youth leaders. His gift was hospitality. He had a wife and young child but opened his home to us young lads on any occasion. One evening at his home he said, *"There is a weekend Methodist conference soon at Willersley Castle in Derbyshire. Would you like to come?"* This was my first encounter with a gathering of Christians. As a newcomer, I was greeted with great kindness. I was impressed with these people. I was one of only a few young people attending and they looked after me through every aspect of the weekend. I can't remember anything that we were taught, but I do remember clearly the exceptional friendship shown to me. With hindsight I realise that they were a very select group of believers, the cream of the crop drawn from a wide geographic area and many churches.

Interestingly, it never crossed my mind to start going to church until one day the local Church of England Vicar, having heard that we were a family new to the area, called to introduced himself, and invite us to attend his church. He was a Reverend but for some reason was always addressed as Mr. Franklin. He was a humble and godly man, much like Mr Ellis at the YMCA. My stepfather and mother weren't interested but I decided to accept his invitation. My young sister decided to go with me. It was a typical traditional church of the time. Mr Franklin invited me round to the vicarage for tea. He talked to me about my faith, and encouraged me to take confirmation classes and to be confirmed. He was a gracious and kindly man who was a great help in my journey of faith. My sister must have been schooled by one of the ladies in the Church because we were confirmed together. We were then permitted to take Communion. That part of the church service always blessed me though little else to do with the church did. But what has all this to do with the title of the chapter?

Much later in life, during a Sunday morning service, I was asked to give my testimony. I told my story just as I have above and then returned to my seat. God immediately spoke to me. *"Michael, you have missed telling the most important part of your testimony. Let me show you."* He gave me a vision of all the people I

have named, intently bowed in prayer. They were pleading for my soul, calling out to God for me to be saved. God said, *"It is these prayers that saved you. Stand up again and tell it to the people."* I apologised to the congregation for breaking in and did as God commanded

It was the prayers of these dear faithful men that had opened my heart to God. I talked earlier about the importance of using the right combination of keys to unlock people's hearts and open them to God. **The prayer key is an absolute must.** We can be doing everything right, but if we are not earnestly praying for hearts to open, then they may well remain closed.

Would I have accepted all those invitations, if I had not been prayed for? Would Billy Graham's book have spoken to me so clearly? Indeed, would I have been saved?

When the apostle Paul wrote to the Colossian Church, he asked this: *"Pray for us that God will open doors for our message and give us many opportunities to speak about Christ."*

If Paul understood that prayer was needed to open doors to God's message, let us learn from him. Can you imagine the response of the Colossians to Paul's request? *"Hey guys; Paul wants us to pray for open doors! Let's get to it! Whose house shall we meet in?"* I often hear Christians say that they don't have much opportunity to share their faith. Often they say, *"Well I don't know many people who are not Christians."* Now we have the key. Pray for opportunity. Maybe God is just waiting for us to pray this prayer so he can activate heaven. How many of our neighbours do we have the opportunity to speak to? How many of their doors are open for us to call in and have a chat? However many, we can pray for more. I would like you to experiment.

Choose a selection of streets within easy walking distance. Stroll unobtrusively around, and as you pass each property, pray something like this: Father God, I know that you love the people who live here and want them to know you. Let your kingdom come on this home. Open heaven and send your Holy Spirit. Open the doors of the hearts and minds of those who live here so they are able to let you in. Open the doors of their houses to me so that I may meet them. Oh God I want to see these people saved. What should you expect to happen?

Let's be 'Heaven Minded.' Imagine that God is looking down from heaven. He is pleased and excited that you want to help people into his kingdom. He looks on you with his Father's heart of love saying, *"That's my Boy! That's my Girl! Bless you."* He listens to your prayers, clapping his hands and cheering you on. Now he can get to work! *"Come on Jesus. Come on Holy Spirit. Come on angels. Let's make some plans for this district."*

What should you expect to happen? You should expect God to answer your prayers. Expect anything to happen, particularly the unexpected. I suggest that

you set aside say half an hour a week for the next few months, continue your prayer strolls, and watch for God to arrange meetings. If you bump into any of your neighbours, say hello. Start up a friendly conversation. Ask them how long they have lived in the district. Ask them where they used to live before they came. Ask them how they like the new car they have just bought, etc, etc, etc. Just see where the conversation leads. They may express a need, practical or otherwise that you could help with. Watch out particularly for people who have just moved into their property. Look for 'sold signs'.

Brenda and I at one time started praying for the opportunity to meet with two couples in the next street. Just two weeks after this we were unexpectedly invited to a coffee morning. Who should I find myself sitting next to but one of the gentlemen we had been praying for? We had a great conversation.

When Brenda and I arrived home from church I felt strongly moved to invite this gentleman and his wife to an outreach we were holding at a local Costa Coffee Shop. With invitation cards in hand, I knocked on their door. The door opened. "*Oh, do come in,*" said the lady of the house, I will call my husband from upstairs. Would you like a cup of tea? They were really pleased about our invitation. They came with us in our car to Costa, had a great time, and ended the evening asking for our phone number so they could invite us round to their home for coffee. Would this have happened if we hadn't prayed?

Now to an exceptional story. It concerns the establishment of the charity 'Leeds Faith in Schools.' I became a trustee just after its formation and acted initially as a fund raiser, then as the line manager of our first worker. Later I became the Chairman of trustees. The charity is supported by a large number of churches across Leeds with the purpose of employing young Christian men and women to work in the secondary schools across the city. They do a marvellous work and are greatly valued by all the schools they work in. They serve in many capacities. They take assemblies, help with religious education lessons, run clubs, mentor distressed pupils, teach about relationships, arrange retreats, and do many other things. At any given time there are about six full time paid workers with a team of voluntary youth workers supporting. The reputation of this charity is so high that there are far more doors open in Leeds Schools at this time than can be accommodated. However, it wasn't like this in the beginning. The first and only worker gained access to a church school very easily, but our aim was to bring a Christian presence into secular schools. These schools were approached but showed no interest. There are two large secondary schools serving the area where we live and where some supporting churches are located. We were very keen to establish workers in these two schools, but they failed to respond to our approaches.

A number of us from the church I was leading at that time began to go out in the evenings and walk round the perimeters of these schools praying that God

would open their doors to Leeds Faith in Schools. After a time, I had an encounter with God. It was the day of our evening house group meeting. I was meditating one day when God spoke to me in a very specific way. An evening fellowship meeting had been planned. This is what God said: *“Go to the people attending the meeting tonight and tell them that I am going to open the school in your town next week. Your Leeds Faith in Schools worker will be accepted. For this to happen, you are to divide into four groups. Stand north, south, east and west facing the school. At eight-o-clock, all pray for fifteen minutes and ask me to open the school. Then go back to the house where you meet.”* I did as God asked. I explained to the people at the meeting what I had heard. We all went to the school for eight and prayed according to his instructions. I think these are the most detailed instructions God has ever given me, and I can now more easily understand how God instructed Noah in the building of the ark. My reputation was on the line and I confess that I was feeling vulnerable.

God did what he had promised. We had broken through. Our worker was received into the school the following week. Two weeks later the second large secondary school also accepted our worker. Leeds Faith in Schools never looked back. The team of workers grew, funding came from many places, and schools opened up all over Leeds. This is the prayer that opens doors.

Hannah of the Old Testament, who eventually gave birth to the prophet Samuel, had spent many years as a barren woman. We are told that one day after a meal at the tabernacle, she was in deep anguish about this. She went to pray, pleading with God for a child, crying bitterly as she did so. She poured her heart out to the Lord. When Eli the priest asked her about it, she explained that she had been praying out of great anguish and sorrow. Eli said, *“Go in peace, may God grant your request!”* The next time Hannah slept with her husband she conceived, and in due time she gave birth to Samuel. Her passionate praying caused God to open her womb.

**If we want to give birth to spiritual children, Hannah points the way.
Pour out our hearts to God.**

After our first daughter Angela died at 3 ½ years old, we were childless. On earth that is. Brenda soon conceived but had a miscarriage at four months. Her womb closed. We were six years longing for a child. Unknown to us until later, our minister and his wife decided to undertake a week of prayer and fasting, pleading with God that Brenda would conceive. During that very week she did. In due course our amazing daughter was born. Nine months later she conceived again and our amazing son was born. One is left with the question, would we have had children except that Bill and Marian cried out to the Lord for us. These

indeed are great mysteries! I am convinced that when the church corporate and Christians individually begin to cry out to God, people will be born to salvation. You can imagine how overwhelmed with gratitude we are to Bill and Marion for their compassion, faith and prayer. I am overwhelmed too with gratitude to those dear men of God who prayed for my soul. How can I repay?

For some of us there are other doors to be opened, the doors to new mission fields. When it became necessary for me to leave teaching to work full time in the church, the loss of my school mission field was a great sorrow. It was a comprehensive school of fourteen hundred students and eighty teaching staff. Who could ask for anything more? The opportunities were endless. Before long, the constant round of leadership meetings, prayer meetings, church meetings, trustees' meetings, discipleship training, pastoral care, events organisation, conferences, retreats, away days, Bible weeks and general administration, left me spending practically all my time with Christians. My relationships with those who were not yet Christians got fewer and fewer. All that I had left as a personal mission field was our neighbourhood, and the people we met casually on holiday or in cafés and shops. Retirement takes us out of the workplace as does redundancy or unemployment.

We are familiar with the term 'The Westminster Bubble'. Politicians can become so absorbed with political activities, political thinking, and political ambition that they disconnect with those they are meant to be serving.

**Many of us are at risk of finding ourselves in a
'Christian or Church Bubble', separated from those we are
intended to serve with the Gospel.**

I am frequently exposed to comments from Christians who tell me that they only have Christian friends or that they don't know anyone they can talk to about God. I know that bubbles don't have doors and that I am mixing metaphors, but when we find ourselves in this position we need to pray for opportunities to meet and befriend those outside the bubble. We need to be determined about this. When our focus begins to change, and we begin to plead with God to give us more fields of opportunity to cultivate, we will be ready to accept a change of lifestyle, change our priorities, respond to God's creative ideas and spend more of our time in different places with different people. My time spent helping with Christians Against Poverty job clubs has given fruitful opportunities. Job clubs have been fertile ground for leading people into the Christian faith. For a time I worked as a volunteer in the local school helping to run a Saturday Club for disadvantaged pupils, and working on the building of a peace garden for the school. We can ask God to give us creative ideas for meeting people outside the Christian Community.

For most people, their workplace is their main mission field and their lifestyle already gives them easy access to many who have yet to hear the Gospel. But, for those of us not in employment we need to pray prayers that open the doors of opportunity. Open they will.

Invitation – Invitation – Invitation

15

EACH time I start a new chapter, I get to thinking that perhaps this is the most important chapter in the book. I was thinking that way about this chapter as I sat down to write. What I will say is that it may be the most practical. Every tradesperson carries with them a range of equipment, a set of tools that enable them to accomplish the task before them. Some tools are specialised and are used infrequently. Other tools come into use on practically every job. The invitation tool is like that. My salvation story in the previous chapter demonstrates this. First I was invited to go camping, then to a religious discussion group, then to Stafford's home, then to a Methodist conference, then to church, then to the vicarage for tea, then to confirmation class, then to be confirmed. Brenda got saved because a girl at the place where she worked invited her to a hotel buffet and presentation of the Gospel. She met with Jesus that night. We use this tool constantly. Of all the people we have led to Christ, I can't think of one where invitations were not a key to their salvation.

A while ago there were a few gospel presentation evenings arranged by a group of churches in a nearby suburb of Leeds. Each one was outstanding, ideal events to invite people to who had not yet become Christians. We invited people to these events and were delighted at the help they received on their journey of faith. However, we went away from each event very sad, the reason being that they were attended almost exclusively by saved Christians. We knew most of them. We searched to see if they had invited any of their not yet saved friends. We couldn't recognise any.

Amazing evangelists had travelled miles to deliver the gospel in a loving, sensitive, entertaining and magnetic way, to halls full of saved people.

I really struggle to understand why so few Christians invite their friends and acquaintances. To clarify this simple principle I will use just two illustrations in this chapter. That will be sufficient.

One afternoon a knock came at the door of our house. When I answered, a young man explained that he represented a lawn treatment company and asked if I would like to take advantage of their services. Having been a landscape gardener for seven years I said that I was quite happy to maintain my own lawns. I thanked him for calling and he went on his way. I returned to the dining room and sat down. Immediately, a strong urgency came on me to call this young man back. I seemed to be pushed out of my chair and projected onto the street. It was a very unusual experience. I called him back saying, "Would you like to come in for a coffee and tell me more about your contract." It was becoming clear that God was at work. We discussed the contract over coffee and to Brenda's amazement and my own I signed up. This was ridiculous! I didn't want this arrangement.

The conversation continued and issues of faith became the topic of discussion. Before he left I asked him if he would like to come round to our home one evening and continue the discussion. He accepted the invitation and we met one evening the following week. This became a regular event and we took him through the Christian faith in a systematic way.

It just so happened that Lincoln Bible week was coming up. I invited him to go with me for a day. He accepted. What an amazing time it was. It seemed that every seminar, sermon and worship session had been prepared by God especially for him. The two-hour journey there and the two-hour journey back gave us both an opportunity to talk things through. It had a great impact upon him. We took him with us to various church social events such as bonfires, barbecues, coffee evenings, etc. Also to the gospel presentation events as already described. He decided to follow Jesus but for a long time struggled to settle in any particular church community.

However, he continued to meet with us at different times. His faith and our friendship continue to grow.

We were hugely blessed when I received this text after Father's day. *"Hope you had a great Father's Day Mike. You have been like a dad to me the last couple of years. You and Brenda are awesome and I love you both dearly."*

I am delighted to say that in the last few weeks he accepted our invitation to come with us to a new church that we have started supporting. It fits him like a glove. This is what he was hoping church would be. He is full of enthusiasm and vision and the date for his baptism is now fixed.

Here is a second story. A young man responded to an outreach from our local church. He had a young child, so when mother went out he needed to baby sit. To accommodate this we took him through an Alpha course in his own

home. Mum would come home just as we were about to leave and little by little, snippet by snippet, we introduced her to the idea that she might want to look into the Christian faith also. It came to mind that we should invite this family to go with us to the Sunday afternoon service of a church that had facilities for very young children. It is a contemporary church with an afternoon congregation of maybe fifteen hundred people. Awesome! Much to our surprise, our invitation was accepted. This young mother was hugely impressed by the ladies running the crèche. Her child was integrated immediately, and had a fabulous time. Mum eventually joined us in the main service and her heart opened to God. This family has settled in our local church and her date for baptism is now fixed.

Had we adopted the attitude that our invitation was unlikely to be accepted, and had not offered it, would this lady have found God?

As I have said previously, I continue to find this matter of our personal responsibility for soul saving a great mystery. I don't have any satisfactory answers except to continue to be faithful to God's call to seek and save the lost.

This is a practical book so it won't harm to remind ourselves of what we learned in the chapter called 'first comes the natural.' Here is some excellent simple guidance. Start building friendships with as many people as possible who have yet to find God. It is only as we develop these friendships that opportunities will arise to invite them to hear the good news of God's love and saving power. If you are wondering how to do this, simply ask God. He will show you, and will certainly guide you into the path of those individuals he is reaching out to.

Invitations can take many forms according to each of our interests and life circumstances. Inviting people to our homes is something we can all do. According to my interests I might invite someone to a classic car show or some motor racing event. If your interest is in sport, invite them to a sporting event. If you love to go walking invite them to join you in a walk. Invite people out for a drink or meal at a pub, cafe or restaurant. There are endless options. Just now I am enjoying going out with some guys in the neighbourhood for occasional men's curry nights. I am getting to know some new people, and building new friendships.

Our local church is brilliant at setting up social events that are designed to accommodate invited friends. Anyone can enjoy food and music and good company. Who wouldn't want to go to a barbecue or a bonfire or a barn dance? We need to be clear that when we do this, we are inviting them to church. We keep telling ourselves quite correctly that the church is not a building but a community. Every time we invite people to these events, we invite them to meet with God's people. Almost always they are greatly impressed. Our experience is that when people who do not normally associate with church come into a Christian community, they are amazed by how welcome they feel and how quickly they are accepted. They can't stop commenting on how nice the people are. Their

image of church is fundamentally changed so it is then easier for them come to events that have a spiritual content.

So what if our invitation is refused? So what? Almost certainly the person we have asked will be pleased that we have asked them. We are not out to manage anyone's life but to serve them. If someone invited me to a football match I can say quite surely that my answer would be, *"No thank you, it's just not my thing."* However, I would feel pleased that they wanted me to go with them, and it is most unlikely that they would feel personally rejected because I have no time for football. Why should they? Invite, invite, invite, and keep inviting.

16

The Visible Hand of God

GOD is at work in everything, all of the time. We accept this by faith. We trust him though we sometimes don't understand what he is doing, or why he is doing it. One way of expressing this is to say that the invisible hand of God is always at work. Sometimes though, he permits us to see his visible hand at work. On the first page of the book I told the story of how our neighbour Janet found God and became a Christian because He supernaturally healed her ear and her intended operation was cancelled. It could have been a different story. We could have prayed that her surgery would be completely successful, that she would have no complications and would be home in double quick time. This could have all worked out well and we could have thanked God for the blessing. We have prayed often like this when people go for surgery and we trust that the invisible hand of God has been at work. The outcome is the important thing. However, with Janet, God chose to show her his hand at work, and through this she was saved.

There are many 'yet to be saved' people who need to see God's hand obviously and undeniably at work if they are going to begin their journey of faith. God knows who they are and seems very ready to give them a demonstration of his power in order to convince them that he is real, and that he cares for them. These visible acts of God often take the form of healings and miracles, but include many other forms as well. If we pray 'with' or 'for' people, and the prayer is answered in such a way that it can only be interpreted as an act of God, they will usually find that their faith is ignited. I will give a number of illustrations later in the chapter.

I want us to remind ourselves of some of the principles we have discussed in previous chapters. Beginning in the natural and progressing to the spiritual.

Acting as servants not as managers. Meeting people where they are, not where we are. Making sure to use language that is understood.

Opening hearts by praying. Always blessing. Always inviting. These help to build bridges for people. With a bridge, one starts at one end, spends a period of time walking across it, and finally steps off the other end. One can then be said to have 'crossed over.' We need to learn how to help people onto the beginning end of the bridge, then walk across with them, and see them off the other end. A visible, powerful act of God, an answered prayer, can often be the means by which people are inspired to put a foot on the end of the bridge.

The classic evangelistic pronouncement, *"It's time to get out there and tell people about Jesus."* has the clear intention of getting people to cross over from the World into the Kingdom of God. However, I don't see much appetite amongst people outside the church to be 'told' about Jesus. Often we work on the principle that if we tell them about Jesus and they find him, Jesus will lead them to God. My observation and experience, in the culture in which we now live, is that people see Jesus as a historical figure, remote in time and relevance. I believe that it is easier to lead people to the Father, and let Father and the Holy Spirit and the Bible lead them to Jesus.

Accepting that Father, Son and Holy Spirit are one, does it matter which of them makes the initial connection? Maybe the front end of the bridge for most people now is God or the Holy Spirit, and that Jesus will meet them as they cross?

I was great friends with the physical education teacher at a school where I taught. He introduced me to sailing. We went camping and walking together and developed a strong friendship, but he showed little enthusiasm when it came to matters of faith. I invited him to attend a healing meeting where I knew that God's power would be evident. Many people were healed and then there was a general call for anyone who wanted prayer to go to the front. To my surprise he went forward and one of the team prayed for him. The power of the Holy Spirit fell on my friend in a measure I had never seen, and have never seen since. He collapsed to the floor. I had seen this many times in the past so that wasn't a surprise. The unusual and remarkable surprise was that after the meeting finished an hour and a half later and everyone had left the building, he was still laid out on the floor overcome by the Holy Spirit. He couldn't get up and we had to carry him out of the building so the caretaker could lock up. The consequence was that his life was totally transformed. His encounter with the Holy Spirit left him with a passion for God, and a passion for Jesus, which has never left him. He has faithfully served God ever since and is as dedicated as ever now he is in his eighties. This was the visible hand of God at work, a supernatural encounter that gave him absolute faith. The Holy Spirit revealed Father and Son and enabled him to become a fully convinced believer.

Let us remind ourselves from chapter 13, of what Paul wrote to the Corinthian believers. *“Though I am a free man, I have become a servant to all people in an effort to bring them to Christ. Yes, I try to find common ground with them all. I become like them, doing everything I can to spread the good news and see as many people as possible saved.”* Earlier I proposed a golden rule: ‘Relate to people as they are, not as we expect them to be.’

So spiritually, where is our common ground?

I would say that the closest common ground we have with those outside the church is God and Prayer.

I am convinced that in the most basic terms pretty well everyone believes in God. Even atheists exercise a strange quirk of reasoning. They talk more about God than many Christians do. Sometimes they bad mouth, and are antagonistic towards the God they supposedly don't believe in. The truth is that they have become enemies towards him. I joke about designing a T shirt for atheists. Its logo would be, ‘I am an atheist, I hate God.’ It is intrinsic to human nature to believe in some sort of deity.

How people picture God varies enormously and the picture they hold will dictate their response to him. Our task is to help people to see God as the loving Father that he is, and that he wants to bless them and do them good. When we pray for people, and God does them good in an obvious and visible manner, it goes a long way to helping them to view God in the right way. Their antagonisms towards God begin to melt away and they are often ready to take a first step onto the bridge. The Bible tells us that it is through his kindness that God wants to lead people to repentance, meaning, ‘to have a change of mind.’ In most cases we do not need to persuade people to believe in God but to change their mind about him.

Brenda called round to see a neighbour one day, and discovered that she had a problem with her leg and was in a lot of pain. Brenda asked the lady, *“Would you like me to pray for you.”* She answered in a short and gruff manner, *“Well, I suppose you can do if you want to,”* effectively saying that she couldn't see the point. As Brenda prayed, the pain left and her leg was healed. It is easy to see how that would dissolve her antagonism and bring her to a change of mind. Practically everyone believes in prayer, I am convinced. They may not be praying people themselves, but they always seem to be comforted, encouraged and grateful when they know that we are praying for their situation. At times of desperation many people who do not normally pray, will start praying to God for help. It is instinctive. Some years ago there was a TV series call ‘999 emergency rescue’. It focussed on the very worst life threatening accidents and disasters, where people would tell their horrific stories of injury, near death experiences,

and survival. This was a secular program. In practically every case, they talked about how they had cried out to God in their pain and fear, giving evidence of remarkable happenings that enabled them to survive.

When the apostle Paul arrived in Athens and tried to share Jesus with some philosophers, their response was, *“What is this babbler trying to say with these strange ideas he has picked up?”* They took him to the most learned society of philosophers in the city where they asked, *“You are saying some rather strange things and we want to know what it is all about.”* He answered them in this way, *“Men of Athens, I notice that you are very religious in every way, for as I was walking along I saw your many shrines. One of your altars had this inscription on it: ‘To an Unknown God.’ This God, whom you worship without knowing, is the one I’m telling you about. He is the God who made the world and everything in it and is Lord of heaven and earth. He doesn’t live in man-made temples.”* Paul then went on to preach a sermon about God. Later he preached about Jesus and the resurrection and got a very mixed reception. Some sneered, and laughed in contempt, while others said, *“We want to hear more about this later.”* Some people became believers. They first heard about God, and then understood the message of Jesus.

When Paul wrote to the Corinthians, one of the things he said was this: *“When I was with you, I couldn’t talk to you as I would to spiritual people. I had to talk to you as though you belonged to this world. I had to feed you with milk, not with solid food, because you weren’t ready for anything stronger.”* However, whenever he spoke to Jews in the synagogue, he preached Jesus the Messiah. They didn’t need any sermons about God.

They had two thousand years of history worshiping Jehovah, the one and only God. They were also familiar with all the prophecies regarding the Messiah to come. They were expecting him. Paul’s starting point with the Jews was: *“The Messiah has already come but you didn’t recognise him. In fact you put him to death for claiming that he was the Messiah. He came back from the dead to prove it. He was even seen going up to heaven later.”*

I do want us to be aware of the need to search out the right starting point for each individual and to find out what works in the context of today’s society. It seems that when God answers prayers in an obvious way, this makes a good starting point. I have found that when people are happy for us to pray for them, or to pray with them, it is an encouragement to start praying themselves. I explain how pleased it makes God when they approach him directly. At this point they begin to develop a trusting relationship with the Father. They are on their way.

When Nicodemus, a Jewish religious leader came to speak with Jesus, he said, *“We all know that God has sent you, your miracles are evidence of that.”* I believe that for many people in this secular age, tangible evidence provided by an act of God’s power is something they need to see. Perhaps it is a matter

of, 'seeing, is believing.' I know that it can be sufficient that they see God in us. It is vital that they do. I saw God in the men that led me to become a Christian. I saw God in Billy Graham as I read his book. This was sufficient for my salvation. However as we read through the Gospels and the book of Acts we find that healings and miracles are the norm.

When Peter was ministering, the sick were laid all along the streets so that they could be healed as his shadow fell upon them. In the book of Acts we read: *"God did extraordinary miracles through Paul, so that even handkerchiefs and aprons that had touched him were taken to the sick and their illnesses were cured."* I remember when I was unable to meet with my church one Sunday, because I was laid up at home with pneumonia, and Brenda brought home a handkerchief. *"The folks at church have laid their hands on this and prayed for your healing. They say you have to put it on your chest."* I did so and immediately started to recover.

In many churches today it is becoming commonplace for healings to take place. Often people will be healed during worship and testify to the amazing acts of God afterwards.

However, this book is about what takes place outside the Church and I want us to be confident that God will heal people just as readily as he does within the Christian community. We have many marvellous stories about Christians being healed when we have prayed for them. I would love to tell those stories, but have chosen only stories that relate to people outside the church. These are told to encourage us in our faith, and give us the boldness to pray for healing.

During my days as a landscape gardener, I had endless opportunities to gossip the gospel with customers, and also with people passing by. Being self employed left me free to do this. There was an aged gentleman, perhaps in his eighties, who spent a lot of time wandering around our local town with his little dog. He had been a widower for many years and would often pause where I was working, to have a chat and take an interest in my latest project. There came the time when he came past where I was working for a few consecutive days, always at the same time, looking preoccupied and not stopping to speak. His dog was not with him. After he had passed by for a few days I said, *"Good morning Peter. Where is your dog these days?"* He paused and explained that he had left his dog at home because he was going to the dentist. *"My mouth and teeth are in such a terrible state I have to go every day. The treatment is going to go on for a long time apparently."* I explained that I was Christian, and that I was meeting for prayer with a few friends that evening. I said we would pray for him. His routine changed and I didn't see him for a few days.

When he next came past where I was working, I asked him how he was going on with his treatment. He looked at me a little puzzled, paused and then said, *"Oh, the treatment? That's finished. The dentist said I have had a miracle. All*

my teeth and gums have healed." Interestingly, that was the last time I saw him, so I am sorry to end the story here. I can only trust that God had good reason to bless him in this way and had the rest of his story planned out.

One of our neighbours, who lived alone, was taken very ill. Her son, who was attending university at this time, came to see us in great distress. He explained that his mother had been diagnosed with terminal cancer and he wouldn't be able to care of her when he returned to university in two weeks time. When this lady first moved into her property, Brenda had invited her round for coffee but been firmly rejected. She didn't interact with any of the neighbours, and was happy to let her hedges grow to a prodigious height. No one knew anything about her. God spoke to Brenda: *"Go along and see her."* She was very hesitant after being rudely rejected the first time, but did as God had instructed. Her son answered the door and took Brenda upstairs to see his mother, who poured out all her troubles and worries. I wish this could be a story of a cancer healed but it isn't. She did eventually die. However, in the meantime it became clear that God was after her soul. Every day except Saturdays for four months, Brenda made her meals. On Saturdays, this lady's daughter came over from Bradford to look after her. It transpired that she was a Christian. She and her church had been praying for someone to speak to her mother about God. The pain her mother suffered increased and she was given a cord with an emergency button to hang round her neck. If the pain got too much she could press the button so a nurse could be sent by the call centre to give morphine injections. This happened once while Brenda was present, so she offered to pray. As she did, the pain went. The emergency button went out of use because each time the pain became intolerable, Brenda would get a call to go to the house and pray. Every time Brenda prayed, without fail, the pain went.

Brenda talked God with her, and one day I felt inspired to write a letter to this lady. I explained the gospel to her in the simplest and clearest and most loving terms, showing her how she could receive eternal life and go to the welcome of heaven when she died. I wrote a prayer that she could pray to receive Jesus. Brenda took the letter to her. Two days later she was taken to the hospice and soon fell into a coma. How I would like to have proof of her salvation, perhaps a message from her daughter saying, *"Mum prayed that prayer before she died."* God knows and that is enough.

This was Brenda's conclusion: *"I do know that God cared for her, and her son, supplied all their needs in a practical way, and answered the prayers of her daughter. We are God's hands and voice to this world. We are his servants."*

This story could be a long one but I have made it very short. Much has been left out. This applies to most of our stories. We heard that one of our neighbours

was in great pain with a slipped disc and had been told that she would be laid up for at least six weeks unable to work. We called round to see if we could help and were led by the Holy Spirit to pray for her back to be healed. Healed it was and she was back at work in two days. Coupled with a particular kindness from Brenda a while later they came to our church and heard the Gospel.

A couple of years ago we were walking by the local duck pond when a neighbour we don't see often arrived in her car, got out painfully, and hobbled towards us with the support of two walking sticks. She told us her traumatic story of six months of pain and incapacity because of what seemed to be incurable back trouble. *"I shouldn't be here she confessed, I'm supposed to be laid on my back at home."* She was obviously in exceptional pain. It so happened that we knew there was a healing meeting arranged, to be held shortly at a nearby church. We offered to take her if she wished to go. I fully expected her to reject the offer outright, but had felt obliged to do the right thing and give her the opportunity. At least I could go on my way with a clear conscience. To my great surprise she accepted the invitation. We arranged to pick her up from her home on the appropriate evening, and were ready to depart.

The Holy Spirit came on me and I knew that we had to pray ourselves for her to be healed. Standing beside the duck pond, I prayed an appropriate prayer for healing, but then found myself praying that she would soon experience a visitation of God. We saw her next when we went to collect her for the healing meeting. No sticks! She came confidently down the steps like a new woman. She was completely healed. She had experienced a visitation from God which she was at a loss to communicate, and had been healed during the visitation. She was a changed woman. We assumed that she would not be interested in going to the meeting, not now needing to be healed. *"O yes I want to go. My daughter will drive us there."* Her daughter took us in her lovely Jaguar car and came into the meeting with us. She was deeply moved by the love and compassion shown, and by seeing people being obviously healed before her very eyes. The story continues.

I will finish with this story: A neighbour was in tragic circumstances. His wife had left him on the evening of their daughter's wedding. He had lost his job and company car. He was drinking heavily and had lost a huge amount of weight. He looked terrible. Also, he had been diagnosed with cancer of the nose.

He was not a very approachable person, not one whose door you would go knocking on. Brenda saw him walking past in a dejected state and felt great compassion for him. She prayed, *"If I can help him Father, please send him round to our house."* The very next day he came and knocked on our door. Brenda answered. He invited her to his married daughter's cleaning product party! *"No thank you,"* she answered, *"but I have something to say to you. God has sent you*

round here." As she looked him fully in the face, his eyes filled up with tears. He told her that the night before he had thought about committing suicide. As he had laid on his bed that night he had shouted, *"If there is anyone out there, please help me."* The following week he came to church with us, listened to my sermon and received prayer. His house sold two weeks later and we didn't see him again until three years later. He was in the area, and came to visit us to thank us for our kindness. He was unrecognisable. He had put on weight, looked prosperous, his cancer had been healed and he had found a new job. He had remarried. Also, he had joined a church.

This is a happy note on which to end the chapter. There is a lovely worship song that says, *"One touch from the Lord changes everything."* That just about sums up this whole chapter.

Equipped by the Holy Spirit

17

I HAVE a comprehensive Bible based teaching program on the Holy Spirit which I present in seven sections:

- **The Purpose and Work of the Holy Spirit**
- **Life in the Holy Spirit**
- **The Leading and Guidance of the Holy Spirit**
- **Receiving the Holy Spirit**
- **The Fruits of the Holy Spirit**
- **The Gifts of the Holy Spirit**
- **Ministering in the Holy Spirit**

I only have space here to share a few of the insights that this course presents.

He comes as our helper. The Holy Spirit is described in the Bible as one who comes *alongside* to counsel and to help. He is the comforter and encourager. He comes to us like this on a personal level, but also to those that we come alongside to help. It is logical. If he is alongside us, helping and counselling, and we come alongside people to help and to counsel, we are expressing his heart and getting on with his purpose. Of course he will get in on the act, and with great enthusiasm. We are never alone. The Holy Spirit is always with us. This is the reason Brenda and I see so many people saved. I doubt if we would have led anyone to Christ without the help and counsel of the Holy Spirit. I do get quite disturbed when people say, *"Well you two are just specially gifted."* Listen to me. It is the Holy Spirit who is specially gifted. He is the one working with us and through us to heal and to save souls. We would be nothing without him!

He is available to us all. Jesus said that all we have to do is to ask, seek, and knock on the door of heaven. If needs be, we are to keep asking, keep seeking, and keep on knocking. Jesus said this with regard to the Holy Spirit: *"You fathers – if your children ask for bread do you give them a stone instead? If they ask for a fish do you give them a snake? If they ask for an egg do you give them a scorpion? Of course not! So, if you know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him?"*

James writes, *"You do not have because you do not ask!"* The churches that I attended up to the age of forty never taught about the Holy Spirit. I was like those Ephesians that Paul met who said, *"We have never heard about the Holy Spirit."* It was never explained to me that I needed him, or how to receive him. When my practical role in the church became a spiritual one, I began to feel desperately inadequate. I didn't really understand why.

Though people were very happy with the ministry I brought, I felt increasingly empty spiritually. I asked God to equip me for what he had called me to do. He heard my prayer and I was baptised in the Holy Spirit. God knew what I was asking for even though I didn't.

I presume that there will be many who read this book and say, *"I know that I have been filled with the Holy Spirit, but I am not seeing anyone saved. Why is that?"*

There could be lots of answers, but here are some likely reasons.

- Perhaps you have not seen saving peoples' souls as a priority and have therefore not set your hand to the task.
- Perhaps you have tried and failed. This has discouraged you to the point where you have said, "This is not my ministry."
- Perhaps no one has taught you how to do it. The teaching in this book may be all you need.
- Perhaps you have been filled with the Holy Spirit, but have not learned to be guided by him.
- Perhaps you have been filled with the Holy Spirit, but have not been equipped or empowered by him.

Let's be reminded of how Jesus started his ministry. He was baptised in water, filled with the Holy Spirit, led by the Holy Spirit, and finally empowered by the Holy Spirit.

If you have already been baptised in water, and are confident that you have been filled with the Holy Spirit, perhaps this is the time to seek God for the Holy Spirit's guidance, equipping and empowering: Why not spend time in your private prayer place and explain to the Father what you want from him. Tell him in clear terms that you want to see more people saved so will he please enable you to do it. Remember the words of Jesus, *"Come along with me and I will show you how to fish for people's souls."* Ask him too for his wisdom and strength. Ask him for anything that you believe you need.

Let me illustrate. I could perhaps say that I have the spirit of craftsmanship. I love making things. The spirit of craftsmanship isn't going to make things. I need training, I need knowledge, and I need the right tools to do the job.

Let us look at what the Holy Spirit can provide: Paul writes to the Galatians: *"But the Holy Spirit produces this kind of fruit in our lives: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self control. There is no law against these things."*

If we go to people with our baskets full of these fruits they will, as Psalmist says, *"Taste and see that the Lord is good."* This is the way that we will give people a taste of God. I did consider devoting a whole chapter to just the fruit of kindness. Kindness is so powerful. Who is ever going to reject kindness? It can happen I know, but it is very unusual. If you are asking, *"How can I get started in this ministry?"* you will find that showing genuine kindness to everyone is not a bad way to start. There are endless ways to be kind. Kindness is not just a sentiment. It is active. We do acts of kindness.

These are usually tailored for the particular individual we want to bless. Our relationship with the Father and the Son will determine our fruitfulness.

Jesus explained it well: *"Remain in me and I will remain in you. Yes, I am the vine: you are the branches. Those who remain in me, and I in them, will produce much fruit."*

In the early years of what was called the 'Charismatic Movement', so called because the 'Gifts of the Holy Spirit' were becoming prevalent, I was often distressed by the fact that many Christians were pursuing the 'Gifts' but not displaying much fruit. Whenever I taught about the Holy Spirit, which was quite new at the time, I went to great lengths to convince those I was teaching, that exercising the gifts without displaying the fruit, would bring the gifts into disrepute. Exercising the gifts of the Holy Spirit must always be motivated by love. I always teach on the 'Gifts' at the end of a program, not because they are least in importance, not at all, but because they must be received and exercised in the understanding and context of the whole work of the Holy Spirit.

Below I have set out a guide that you can use for Bible reading and study if you need it. It is a simple list that identifies the Gifts of the Holy Spirit. This can be a help in recognising the gifts that we have already received, and perhaps make us aware of gifts we might want to ask the Holy Spirit for.

Prophecy: The communication of a message given by God. The person prophesying is able to distinguish between his natural mental discernment and that which is inspired by the Holy Spirit. The message can relate to the present or the future.

Serving: A divinely inspired prompting to meet the needs of people in constructive and practical ways.

Teaching: An ability to reveal and explain the spiritual truths and meanings contained in the Bible in a detailed and accurate manner, and to teach people how to live in a righteous manner.

Encouragement: An ability to inspire and motivate others, and to maintain hope and faith in difficult circumstances.

Generosity: A gift of unusual generosity in sharing money, food, clothes, and other material possessions.

Leadership: An ability to preside over others in true Godliness while being able to see ahead, distinguish objectives, and inspire people to achieve them.

Mercy: Acting out of deep compassion, sympathy, and forgiveness regarding the misfortunes of others.

Message of Wisdom: Not to be confused with natural good sense, or intellect. A word of wisdom is usually spoken into a particularly difficult situation, and is inspired by the Holy Spirit to bring resolution where it would not be achieved on the natural level.

Message of knowledge: Insight or information given supernaturally by the Holy Spirit about a person or situation. The one speaking this message does not have access to this knowledge from any natural source.

Faith: This is not 'saving faith,' but the 'faith that moves mountains'. It is the mysterious surge of confidence that gives certainty that God is going to act.

Healing: This is an ability to heal a person by means of prayer. This is done in the power of the Holy Spirit. It may involve the healing of the mind, the spirit, the emotions, the body, or relationships.

Miraculous Powers: The application of this gift releases dramatic acts of God, not just in healing, but in the physical environment. A miracle is an occurrence that has no natural or scientific explanation.

The Distinguishing of Spirits: This is a supernatural ability to judge whether a spirit is human, demonic or divine.

Different Tongues or Languages: This is an ability to speak in a language which is neither understood nor learned by the speaker, but given directly by the

Holy Spirit. The language may be a national language, or a heavenly language as spoken by angels.

Interpretation of Tongues: The ability to understand what has been said by someone who has spoken a message in tongues and to speak it out in the language of the listeners.

There is another category of 'Gifts' referred to as:

People Gifts: These are ministries given to the Church by Christ:

Quoting from Paul's letter to the Ephesians: *"Now these are the gifts Christ gave to the church: the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, and the pastors and teachers. Their responsibility is to equip God's people to do his work."*

There have been many books written about the work of the Holy Spirit so if you wish to know more, start reading.

18

Hearing God

SO God said to Abraham, *"Leave your native country and go to the land that I will show you."*

After his baptism, as Jesus came up out of the water, the heavens were opened and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and settling on him. And a voice from heaven said, *"This is my dearly loved Son, who brings me great joy."*

As for Philip, an angel of the Lord said to him, *"Go south down the desert road that runs from Jerusalem to Gaza."* So he started out, and he met the treasurer of Ethiopia. The Holy Spirit said to Philip, *"Go over and walk along beside his carriage."*

As Saul was approaching Damascus intending to arrest all the Christians that lived there, a light from heaven suddenly shone down and all around him. He fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, *"Saul! Saul! Why are you persecuting me?" "Who are you Lord?"* Saul asked. And the voice replied, *"I am Jesus the one you are persecuting! Now get up and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do."*

In Caesarea there lived a Roman army officer named Cornelius. He prayed regularly and gave generously to the poor. One afternoon he had a vision in which he saw an angel of God coming towards him. *"Cornelius!"* the angel said, *"Your prayers and gifts to the poor have been received by God as an offering! Now send some men to Joppa, and summon a man named Simon Peter."* The next day, Peter went up to the flat roof of the house where he was staying to pray. He fell into a trance and saw the sky open and saw a strange vision. A voice said, *"Get up Peter"*, as Peter was puzzling over the vision, the Holy Spirit said, *"Three men have come looking for you, get up and go downstairs."*

A man named Agabus, who had the gift of prophecy, arrived from Judea. He came over, took Paul's belt, and bound his own hands and feet with it. Then he said, *"The Holy Spirit declares, 'So shall the owner of this belt be bound by the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem and turned over to the Gentiles.'"*

The Bible demonstrates clearly that God communicates directly with people. He uses many different ways to do that. In the quoted passages above we observe God speaking directly through 'a voice from heaven', through angels, through the Holy Spirit, through Jesus, through visions, and through prophets. It is difficult to be sure how much of this was audible, heard as sound through the ear, or whether God spoke mind to mind or spirit to spirit. It has to be accepted that we are dealing with mysteries. We see the spiritual realm invading the natural realm, heaven invading earth.

Jesus proclaimed that his people would recognise his voice. When Jesus spoke to seven churches that are described in the book of revelation, on each occasion he uses the expression, *"Anyone who has the ears to hear must listen to the Spirit and understand what he is saying."*

This book is written to address a broad spectrum of readers. If you already experience God speaking to you, please read what I have to say from the perspective of using anything new that you learn to help others to do the same.

I remember my concerns and scepticism when I first encountered Christians who kept using the expression, *"The Lord told me to do this, and the Lord told me to do that."* With hindsight I think I did have good reason to be sceptical. Some of what these Christians had supposedly been told by the Lord seemed to me to be trivial, superficial, and often had no way of being verified.

But there were also Christians who were very close to God, very Godly people, who I recognised were genuine when they shared what they believed God had said to them. I made the logical assumption that this was based on hearing an audible voice. I took me a while to realise that hearing an audible voice was a very rare thing. What they seemed to be experiencing, was God laying something on their hearts, or when speaking words, phrases, or sentences, God was speaking to mind and spirit. I think that our present means of communicating by text has clues in it. There is no audible voice to a text, but the message is clear. What it may lack of course is any indication of voice tone, attitude or emotion.

I used to frequently puzzle why God would habitually speak to my inner person rather than give me his messages audibly through my ears. I was convinced that I would be better served if he did it that way then I would be left with no doubt that it was him. I have come to the conclusion that God uses the inner voice in preference to the external voice because it is a superior form of communication. The Spirit of God, The Spirit of Jesus, The Holy Spirit, live within us, permeating soul, mind, heart, spirit, and physical being. Why then should I

expect a voice from outside of me? Angels do not dwell within us so I presume that they are restricted to an external voice.

I wonder if, when God chooses to speak through a person's physical ear, it has something to do with that person's unready state of receptivity to the particular message that he wants to deliver. Saul heard the external voice of Jesus while he was breathing murderous threats against the Christians in Damascus. He was persecuting Jesus so would not I suppose, have been receptive to inwardly hearing his voice. When Peter was on the rooftop receiving strange visions, God had a message for him about the Gentiles.

At this time Peter had the typical Jewish viewpoint that the Gentiles were spiritually inferior and outside the purposes of God. Inwardly he would not have been ready for God to tell him to go to the Gentiles with the Good News of Jesus and treat them as equals in the sight of God. In fact, God had to give Peter the vision of the sail cloth, and speak his message three times. Even then Peter struggled to understand what God was saying to him. There is a ridiculous story in the Old Testament of a prophet called Balaam who was not listening to what God was saying to him. God eventually had to speak to him through the mouth of his donkey. That got his attention!

Perhaps God chooses to use the inner voice because it leaves room for faith. Without faith we cannot please God, and he seems to specialise in dealing with us in ways that require faith. However, my experience tells me that the inner voice is not just a message of instruction, but a message that carries with it the heart of God. There is deep relationship involved. God seems to share himself, expressing his emotions and desires as he speaks. A word through the ear would be reduced to an instruction. How do I explain this? It is very difficult but I will try.

My call to full time ministry involved Brenda and I making major life changes that required significant financial compromises. How we would replace our aging Ford Fiesta car became an issue. One day as I walked down a quiet country lane I asked Gods advice in the way you might ask your Dad. *"What do you think Dad? You know I hate taking out loans."*

Should I just keep repairing this car until it finally dies? I was not asking for provision, just advice. He spoke just one word, "Wait." The way he said it could fill a page! It was full of promise and expectation. Full of a smile that said, *"Wait and see what I have lined up for you. Just you leave it to me. I have it all sorted!"* It really did seem as though he was having a chuckle to himself. He was having fun. Had I received this one word externally, it could only have meant, *"Don't make a decision yet."* As it was I was able to rejoice in a problem solved and went on my way with a spring in my step. Does this make sense? Two weeks later, a relation offered to sell me his two year old, low mileage, state of the art, top of the range, seven- seat estate car for less than half its value. It was still more than

we could afford. *"We'll think about it"*, I said. That evening Brenda and I discussed what to do, and decided reluctantly to take out a loan. The following morning, he returned to see us on his way back home. *"We've decided to have the car I said, thanks for letting us have it at such a generous price. We really are grateful."* *"Well"*, he said, *"something really strange happened yesterday evening while my wife and I were dining at the hotel. This really strange pressure came down on us both and we knew we had to lower the price by one thousand pounds."* No loan needed! My relation, who is not a Christian, said at the end of this episode, *"If it goes on like this, I could start believing this God of yours is real."*

At the end of chapter 16, I quoted a line from a worship song. 'One touch from the Lord changes everything.' It could just as easily be, 'One word from the Lord changes everything.'

God communicates in many ways which are not vocal. He may use these independently, or in association with the spoken word to supplement the spoken word. We can take a brief look at some of these. We often say, *"Actions speak louder than words."* A famous historical figure, said, *"A picture is worth a thousand words."* We use expressions such as: body language, sign language, her face said it all, it was beyond words, say it with flowers. A loving touch, a hug, a smile, thumbs up, are great communicators, and speak things for which words are inadequate.

Someone we know very well who was going through a particularly painful and confusing time was sitting in the garden one day praying to God for peace. A dove appeared from nowhere, and settled on her head. What a beautiful gesture from God. He could have spoken his peace to her but chose to speak through a dove.

Some time ago I was praying in our garden cabin. I was considering, having reached the age of seventy four how I should approach life and ministry in the future. I began to feel God's disapproval. Without his speaking any particular words, I began to realise that he was not happy with my becoming 'age conscious'. Then he spoke. *"Do not let your age influence your decisions. Forget your age. Just get on with life the same way you have always done."* Gosh, this was so freeing! It really witnessed in my spirit. Twenty minutes later, Brenda called me in to take a phone call. *"Janice is on the phone, she wants a word with you."* Janice has a prophetic gift. *"Mike, the Lord has just given me a picture for you. I don't know what it means. It's a picture of a clock, but the strange thing is the hands have been taken off. There is no way of telling the time!"* I remembered the proverb, 'As a man thinks, so he is'. I remembered Joshua taking the Promised Land at eighty years old. What a blessing it is to hear from heaven.

What other ways might God give us a message? He loves to use the Bible. Every time we read it God is able to speak to us in one way or another. We can be reading the Bible and suddenly a passage of scripture leaps off the page at

us and we know it is God's personal word to us in our present situation. I call it God's highlight pen.

One evening I was reading what the Old Testament prophet Haggai said to the Jews who had returned to Jerusalem from exile. They were being lazy about rebuilding the temple. To quote: Then the Lord sent this message through the prophet Haggai, *"Why are you living in luxurious houses while my house lies in ruins?"* This was written in 520 B.C. It was written to me in 1973 A.D. I was in the process of restoring a rather nice house we had bought in the leafy suburbs. The church I attended was a ruin. I was filled with shame. I had just started digging the foundations for an extension to my house. I filled them in and devoted the next seven years to restoring the church building. The word of God can change everything.

I don't have the space to pursue this teaching much further, but it might be helpful if I at least list some other ways through which God speaks so you can meditate on them and perhaps recognise how often God has spoken to you.

- **Through the things God has created.**
- **Through the example of Jesus.**
- **Through the example of Bible Characters.**
- **Through the example of other Christians.**
- **Through suffering.**
- **Through healings and miracles.**
- **Through testimonies.**
- **Through the opening and closing of doors.**
- **Through our emotions.**
- **Through dreams and visions.**
- **Through tongues and interpretations.**
- **Through angels.**
- **Through his presence.**
- **Through revelations.**
- **Through a deep knowingness given by the Holy Spirit.**
- **Through the witness of the Holy Spirit.**
- **Through Worship.**
- **Through Books.**
- **Through Words of Knowledge and Wisdom.**
- **Through preaching and counsel.**

Here is a story of an occasion when God used his powerful presence to direct me to a situation where someone could receive salvation. It was the last day of our sunshine holiday on the Greek island of Rhodes. The hotel where we were staying was described in the holiday brochure as a 'Thompson Small and Friendly',

which could be interpreted as 'Cheap but Adequate.' Very good value for money! We had a great holiday. We spent our last day visiting a beautiful inland village. In the morning, as we wandered through the streets, we got chatting to one of the residents who we discovered had been a Fleetwood Mac band member. He invited us into his house to listen to some of their sound tracks. We shared God with him over coffee and went on our way.

After lunch Brenda and I sat down to rest in an incredibly beautiful church garden, bursting with flowers of all colours. The atmosphere of peace was tangible. Quite unexpectedly, the powerful presence of God fell on us. He didn't speak any words, but I became aware that there was a task to be accomplished before our holiday ended. I had no idea what it might be. I even wondered if I was having a flight of imagination. I felt an urgency to pray a prayer of availability. The day went on, and we decided to eat out in the evening, and arrived back at the hotel about 11pm. We needed to be up early the following morning to catch our plane.

As we headed for our room, passing by the outdoor bar tables, a married couple that we had spoken to casually through the week, called us over. *"Come and have a drink with us"*, they invited. We hesitated because of the time, but out of politeness agreed, explaining that we couldn't be long because of our flight. Our conversation lasted until 1am. It emerged that the husband had been dragged to church by his wife on a couple of occasions and been totally turned off. I didn't receive any words from God but was inspired to explain that the church did not always represent God's Kingdom very well. I said that of all the preaching and teaching that Jesus did, he only mentioned church briefly on two occasions, both times in Matthew's gospel. I emphasised that church was not mentioned at all in the other three gospels. I clarified that Jesus preached the Kingdom of Heaven and that this had over two hundred mentions. I had his attention. When we found out that this couple lived in a South Yorkshire town about forty miles from the Leeds suburb where we lived, I offered to visit and teach what the Bible says about the Christian faith. After three visits, the work was done.

This man who hated church accepted Jesus, went to church with his wife, did an Alpha course, and we had the great joy of attending his baptism.

You can see from this, that if God had not drawn me by his presence in the Garden to pray a prayer of availability, I could easily have bypassed the invitation to have a drink, and much more easily bypassed my forty mile trips.

We can expect on occasions to hear God speak while we are praying with people. Always listen attentively. A husband and wife called one evening and asked us to pray with them. A cancerous lump had been discovered in the ladies breast. Naturally she was distressed and fearful. As we began to pray for healing, God gave me these words to speak: *"Come now, let us reason together."* He wanted us to give him reasons why he should respond to our request.

Each of us presented a case. In combination it was a very persuasive case too! How could the Father resist. We laid on hands. The Holy Spirit fell in great power, and the lady being prayed for was baptised in the Holy Spirit and was filled with joy. It was quite a while before she could stand. The lump in her breast shrunk during the next day or two and when she attended her hospital appointment she was diagnosed free from cancer. She gave testimony to this at her water baptism a few weeks later.

We were praying with the same couple recently, at a time when Brenda was suffering pain in her back. They prayed for her to be healed. While they were praying, God gave me a picture of the woman who was healed as she touched the hem of Jesus' cloak. I felt I had to go upstairs and fetch a dressing gown. I held it up in front of Brenda so she could touch the hem. *"Imagine that this is the hem of Jesus' cloak. Touch it and you will be healed."* She touched it and was healed there and then.

There are other stories I would like to tell, but I do hope that these few will encourage us to expect God to speak into our lives and situations. When people ask me how I know when it is God speaking, I have two answers.

Firstly as you will recognise from the testimonies I have shared in this book, God always acts in some remarkable fashion after he has spoken. He speaks and then acts. Secondly, I have learned to recognise his voice. In human terms, people's voices are highly distinctive. One has only to pick up a telephone, and if the person at the other end only says, *"It's me"*, we know instantly who it is. Voices are instantly recognisable. It is the same with God's voice. We don't only hear a message we hear a message filled with the personality of God. When he speaks, we can be aware of his smile or his frown. His feelings about things, come through in his voice.

One thing we can be sure of is that he will never contradict scripture. Any voice that does so, or is not in harmony with the character, nature, and purpose of God, has to be considered as some other voice. It may be our own voice or something more concerning.

How do we respond if a third party comes to us with what they believe to be a message from God? If it is his message, it will usually witness with our spirit and we will be blessed by it. There is a scripture that advises us to test the spirits to see if they are from God. If we have doubts about a message, we can test it before the Father. We can ask him for discernment. Is this human spirit, or a deceptive spirit? I have been helped frequently by godly men and women who have listened to God for me, and spoken messages of confirmation regarding decisions I am considering making. At times when I have been searching to understand what it is that God is trying to get through to me, someone has given me a message and my response has been, *"That's it."* It is in God's order for us to hear God in community, to hear God through each other. If am in doubt about

a message from someone, I feel free to set it on one side and wait for a second confirmation. If I am ever unsure about what God is saying to me I may go to some godly person that I trust and share it with them.

Jesus said, *"Anyone with ears to hear must listen to the Spirit of God, and understand what he is saying."*

Answering Questions

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Stay in your comfort zone! Don't get drawn into difficult debates. Winning a debate rarely helps. We are not in this work to win debates but to save souls. We can only work within the framework of our individual knowledge and understanding. Remember too that when we give people answers to their questions it is with the purpose of serving them, not managing what they believe.

We can be perfectly comfortable in declaring our ignorance when we do not have a suitable answer to a question. A simple response of, *"I really don't have an answer to that at the moment, it is as much a mystery to me as it is to you!"* is fine. Or we can say something like, *"I have never felt the need to work that one out myself, but I tell you what, I'll have a talk with some friends of mine who are really good at answering questions like that. When I get an answer, we can talk about it again then."* And of course, it may be that we can say, *"I don't think anyone has an answer to that, it seems to be one of the great mysteries that will not be understood this side of heaven."*

Where we do have helpful answers, a wise way of giving them is to start with, *"I have come to see it like this."* Give the answer as a personal viewpoint, totally respecting the other person's position on the subject, and their right to hold it. At times it may help to say, *"I can perfectly understand why you would see it like that,"* or, *"That is just how I used to see it before I found God."* **How we answer questions is more important than the answers we give.** A humble spirit with an inadequate answer will be more persuasive than a proud spirit with a clever one.

Harold Wilson, a British prime minister of an earlier generation, was renowned for answering questions by offering one of his own. An impressionist doing a take-off asked, *"Prime Minister, is it true that you always answer a question with a question?"* The reply was, *"Who told you that?"*

It is also important to know why people are asking the questions that they do. It may be appropriate to ask, *"What makes you ask the question?"* If not, we

should at least ask it of ourselves, because questions about faith can be asked for different reasons and may involve us in different ways of answering them. Someone who is genuinely interested in finding faith can really be hoping that we will remove obstacles for them. If we are able to give good, confident answers they can be relieved and helped. On the other hand questions can be asked in a contentious manner because the person asking them is attacking our faith, or even attempting to weaken it. They may be hoping that we do not have satisfactory answers in order to help them to maintain their own position of unbelief. The apostle Paul gives Timothy instruction regarding this: ***“Don’t get involved in foolish arguments that only start fights. A servant of the Lord must not quarrel but be kind to everyone, be able to teach, and be patient with difficult people. Gently instruct those who oppose the truth. Perhaps God will change those people’s hearts, and they will learn the truth.”***

The devil is described as the father of lies, he is the arch deceiver. Deception is his main weapon. He is the master of misinformation. There is much concern right now in the media with what is being termed ‘Fake News.’ The devil has been spreading fake news since he was thrown out of heaven. The work we do in answering questions well, is the work of freeing people from deception and leading them into truth, providing good news in exchange for fake news. Studying the Bible is the best way to guard ourselves from deception and a huge help in equipping us for answering people’s questions.

I also strongly recommend you to watch the online teachings of the Alpha course. This is an excellent resource for equipping you to think about and respond to the questions we may face in helping others on the journey of faith. The course addresses questions such as Who is Jesus?, Suffering, Evil and all the most popular ‘big questions’ that people who are wrestling with the idea of God and Faith often ask... and those of us who do have faith! The information is very accessible with plenty of testimony from leading scientists and professors in many different areas. Of course you can always suggest to people that they attend an Alpha course themselves or watch the sessions online to have their questions answered.

Here are some of the ways that I try to answer frequently asked questions. I do not claim them as ‘the answers’, but answers that I have satisfied myself with. I trust that they will be helpful:

Why does God allow so much suffering?

I have started with the most difficult question first. It is a question Christians struggle with as well as everyone else. It is a question that reaches to the heart of the nature and purposes of God. It questions his character, it questions his compassion. What kind of God do we serve? How can he apparently stand by and watch people suffering without intervening? Interestingly, the fact that we all

struggle with this question could actually be seen as proof of us being created by a God. Why would we even question it in the first place? Why should we expect a world which has supposedly randomly evolved with no designer or purpose not to be full of suffering? Surely that would be a normal expectation in such a system. It seems that deep down in each person there is an inbuilt understanding that suffering is wrong and unjust, and we never adjust to it. However it is almost as though some part of everybody knows that this is not how the world was meant to be. So how and why do we know that? Where does that awareness come from? Maybe the sense of injustice and wrongness we all have about suffering tells us something about our original design and purpose.

First, we must see suffering against the backdrop of eternity. This life, in the context of time, is incredibly brief, just a moment. God's plan for everlasting life is that we finish with suffering altogether when we leave this earthly realm to enjoy a life of bliss in heaven. If we are ever able to look back, I suspect that all of us, however much we have suffered, will be able to say, *"It was worth it."* He did not design us to suffer and he did not put suffering into the world in its beginning.

When God decided to create our planet, to create the life it supports, to create people, he must have given it a lot of thought! Maybe there were lots of options open to him. I used to wonder, *"Why didn't God arrange for us to be born straight into heaven? Why not miss out this messy earth bit? He must have had his reasons."* My belief is that for God to achieve his final purpose, he knew that in creating people that would spend eternity with him, they had to be people with the ability to make choices, including the big choice of whether to accept him or reject him. This would mean that they would be free to make good choices or bad choices. Bad choices would be damaging to themselves and everyone else.

Adam and Eve were given a paradise, given free will, and told by God not to make bad choices. *"You can eat from every tree except that one."* They made a bad choice and ruined everything. In truth it was really a choice to believe that God was withholding something good from them whilst He was actually protecting them in love. We continue to make that same mistake today. They could no longer dwell in that wondrous paradise and had to leave. It seems to me that God has planned it that all bad choices will be confined to the earth. God is not going to have bad choices made in heaven.

There will be suffering for a time but not for eternity. I suppose God could have chosen to make beings without a will, beings unable to choose, always obedient to his every command, convenient little robots responding to every touch on the control box. But what kind of relationship could God have with a robot? What kind of a relationship could a robot have with God? Where could love come in?

A common theme in science fiction horror stories is where aliens come along and take control of humans by destroying their will. They often do this by

putting implants in the brain, or putting people in a processing laboratory with wires fastened to their heads to dehumanise them. Maybe temporary suffering is not too high a price to pay to escape such a fate. Jesus, the Bible says, is an exact representation of God. He said to his disciples, *"If you have seen me, you have seen the Father."* Jesus spent his life doing only good things, never hurting people but healing and comforting them. Indeed he wept tears over the people he saw suffering in Jerusalem. Finally he embraced intense suffering himself when he went to the cross. I do not think God stands dispassionately looking on at our suffering. I can only think that he suffers with us. This leads to another difficult question that is asked:

How can a loving God send people to hell?

I could copy Harold Wilson here and answer the question with another question. "Where would you like him to send them?" The truth is God doesn't SEND people anywhere. Even Hell is a choice. God is Love and Love does not manipulate or control. Even the most loving parent cannot control the choices of their grown-up children, however painful they might be to themselves or others. A parent cannot force a child to love them back or to share their lives with them. Love releases people to make their own choice. God has done everything, including sending his beloved Son to die on earth by those he created in order to make a way for everybody to be in Heaven. But if there are people who choose not to believe, who do not want to live life with Him then there has to be a place for them to live apart from Him. The Bible calls that place Hell. If God is Love then Hell is simply the absence of Love... We have all seen Hell on Earth where that is the case. God cannot force or choose for those to be with Him who do not believe in Him. But, like a loving parent, whatever a person chooses God NEVER stops loving them. I do find it interesting how many of those who don't believe in God worry about the concept of going to Hell... if there is no God then there is in fact no Heaven or Hell to worry about, so the fact there is a concern about this does show some kind of belief.

Jesus did everything possible to open the doors of heaven to people, and warned them not to go to hell. *"Choose God"* he said, *"live Gods way, believe in me. Don't listen to the devil, he will lie to you, he will trick you in any way he can because he wants you to belong to him instead of God. Look, I sacrificed my life for you in the most painful way imaginable so you could escape hell and come to live where I live."* (Paraphrase)

Moses prophesied to the people of Israel just before they were about to enter the Promised Land, saying this: *"Today I have given you the choice between life and death, between blessings and curses. Now I call upon heaven and earth to witness the choice you make. Oh that you would choose life. You can make this choice by loving the Lord your God, obeying him, and committing*

yourself firmly to him. This is the key to your life." God appeals to us to make the right choice. He has no desire for anybody to be in hell and every desire to keep them out.

How can you prove that God exists?

One light hearted response might be, *"A lot more easily than proving that he doesn't."* Start by asking what kind of proof would satisfy them? What kind of proof are they looking for? Invite them to give their reason for asking. They may be hoping that you will come up with something convincing, to make it easier for them to believe. It may be that they are asking with the purpose of demonstrating that you are unable to do so. In any case, a first step in dealing with the question is to clarify the difference between scientific proof and legal proof.

Scientific proof is based on being able to repeat an experiment and come up with the same result each time. This does not have an application in the realm of the spirit. Legal proof is another matter. Legal proof is based on evidence provided by witnesses.

This is why Jesus called us to be witnesses to all people. In a court of law, the evidence must be sufficient to prove 'beyond all reasonable doubt' that a crime has been committed. If one witness is called to give evidence and describes what they saw, it may carry a measure of conviction, but if six witnesses describe the incident in exactly the same way it would be considered conclusive proof.

In answer to the question, *"How can you prove that God exists?"* we can ask, "How many witnesses would you like to hear evidence from, there is an endless supply?

There was a major article in the Telegraph newspaper. The headline read, 'The decline of religion accelerates when Christians hide their faith'. It particularly focused on the fact that the majority of Christian politicians in Britain had become adept at hiding their faith. The conclusion was this. 'In the USA you have to be religious to be elected. In the UK you have to pretend not to be.' I do hope that we can reverse the trend. This will happen when we become open about our faith, become good witnesses, so proving the reality of God.

Having answered in this way, I would suggest to the person asking the question that the best form of proof is to experience God for oneself. *"Why not ask God to make himself known to you? Ask him to touch your life in such a way that you will really know that it is him. Pray about some difficulty and watch for an answer."* Knowing God is all the proof we need.

How can God be both one person and three persons?

The doctrine of the trinity has exercised the minds of theologians for centuries, and many books have been written on the subject. What can we offer those who ask this question? The Bible clearly and consistently presents God as three

persons while insisting that we worship one God and God alone. In the final analysis we accept this by faith recognising that we do not have the capacity to fully understand the mysteries of God. One of the early church theologians used the Sun as an illustration. He proposed that just as the sun was one celestial body, it radiated both heat and light. Heat and light were the sun. If God radiated Jesus and the Holy Spirit they were God. One of the ways that I think about it is that though I am one person with a single identity, I also have the identity of a father and a son. I am my father's son and my son's father. These illustrations are in no way sufficient to explain the mystery but what they do is point to fact that God being God he is able to be who he wants to be.

Above, I have chosen four common questions about God. Other questions concern the reliability of the Bible. People wonder if it is still relevant today. As a baseline to answering any of these questions, explain that the Bible is the world's best-selling book by a very long way. It is never included in best-selling book lists because it is always at the top! Also explain that it is written for a particular purpose just as other books are. There are maths books, history books, chemistry books and so on. You wouldn't expect to find the subject matter of one in the other. The Bible is a book intended to explain life and give us its meaning and purpose. It does this brilliantly. It is because it is so successful at doing this that it always hits the top selling spot every year. It is the most relevant, the most reliable book ever written. The apostle John put it very well when he said at the end of his good news account, that he had written it for the express purpose of enabling people to gain eternal life.

Isn't the Bible full of contradictions?

My response to this is to explain that I have been reading and studying the Bible regularly for over 40 years and haven't yet discovered any. Then I ask if they can tell me what any of these contradictions are so we can examine them. As yet, nobody has responded with anything.

Hasn't science now disproved the Bible?

Once again it is not a bad idea to ask in what way they think science does this. More than likely their reasons will lead to the Creation/Evolution debate. I have always enjoyed science and so this territory is quite comfortable for me and I try to keep well informed regarding developments. With regard to evolutionary theory, I haven't yet found anyone personally who has actually read Darwin's work, 'The Origin of Species' when they question it. I decided to do so myself so that I could speak from a position of knowledge. Like the Bible, people seem able to take a stand-point without actually having read it. Most discussions on science and religion are largely uninformed discussions. When we attempt to help people make sense of these confusing debates it is important to be aware that

many of their ideas have often been assimilated through hearsay rather than first hand, thorough investigation of current science. The simple fact is that some of the top scientists in their fields in Quantum Physics, Medicine, Genetics and Biology and Geography are historically and currently believing Christians. They do not find a contradiction between proven facts and the Bible text. There are also top scientists in all these areas who do not believe in God, although many are converting as their investigations lead them to a belief in the universe being designed and having meaning rather than the result of a billion random mutations resulting in such order and meaning. This shows that faith is not primarily based on intellect but on belief. It is not a blind believing in something delusional but a faith grounded in reality.

When we talk about evolution, we should be talking about the 'Theory of Evolution'. It has now become common to present this theory as fact. There is proof that some creatures adapt but not evolve into different species. Most of evolutionary theory is just that, theory. It is actually a theory with alarming inconsistencies. Darwin, at the end of his writings, draws up a very honest list of the problems his theory presents. One of his difficulties he refers to as the 'missing link' between apes and men. Scientist at the time went on a desperate search to find it but never could, so some resorted to forgeries.

In any case it leaves us with the question, "What did the apes evolve from?" which is the bigger question. The latest theory, now presented as fact, is that we humans evolved from the small mammals that survived the great extinction that wiped out the dinosaurs. What were all the intervening transitions I wonder?

What strange transitional species emerged that eventually evolved into humans. Where are the traces of all these millions of years of transitional species? None have ever been found. I don't reject the theory on religious grounds, but on scientific grounds. There are huge holes in this theory. It certainly takes as much faith to believe in a random sequence of mutations to create such a complex, ordered and finely tuned planet as it does to believe it is created.

What would my response be if the theory of evolution was soundly proved? I would happily accept it! If it became a proven fact then I would simply see evolution as a remarkable work of God, his chosen method of creating people. Though I have thought it important to provide a rational perspective on the theory of evolution, I do not take issue with those who believe it, or more to the point been indoctrinated with it through our education system. **It should not be an obstacle to people coming to faith at all.**

What about Noah's Ark and the flood that covered the whole earth?

Over the years, Noah and the ark with all the animals have often been portrayed as almost comic figures. There Noah is in his little boat shaped ark with the giraffes inevitably taking the highest place in the picture. He has provided

endless material for cartoonists. I saw one cartoon showing all the animals milling about waiting to board the ark with Noah calling out, "Everyone line up in alphabetical order." Two disgruntled Zebras are shown looking at each other and saying, "Just our luck!"

These images can distract us from recognising what a terrible event it was. Questions about Noah and the flood tend to be technical not theological. Understandably, people want to know whether the story is just a myth, or did it really happen. If it supposedly happened, how was it possible? What they are really asking about is the validity of the Bible. It would be simple to explain the events as a series of mighty miracles of God and leave it at that, but we can offer a number of clarifications that present the story as credible on the natural level as well.

World history begins around 3,200 B.C. and we have no idea how long it was before that, in the period of prehistory, that Noah lived. The first eleven chapters of Genesis belong to prehistory, and Bible history begins with Abraham around 2,000 B.C. The flood story is very ancient indeed, so there are no supporting historical records. What do we make of it? The fact that it is so often asked about makes it important that we throw as much light on it as we can.

First the ark was not a boat as such, but a rectangular box construction. Its proportions provided optimum floating stability. It was massive. At 150 yards long, 25 yards wide and 15 yards high it had sufficient volume to accommodate 500 of our present day shipping containers. This is a lot of space for animals. We should ask, does the story apply to the whole of planet earth, or to the peopled area of the earth at that time? I would imagine that the latter was more likely. It is unlikely that the human race would have spread across the whole planet by the time Noah lived.

Likewise, it is unlikely that all of the planet's animals would be involved, but only the animals of the flooded region. We are told in the story that the flood, produced by a combination of rainfall and the bursting open of underwater reservoirs, rose above the mountain tops.

It is not known how high the mountains were during this phase of the Earth's development. It is known that it is the meeting of tectonic plates that gradually produce mountain ranges, pushing them up from low lying land or from beneath the oceans. The remains of marine organisms can be found on mountain tops. How did the animals know when to gather around the ark? We have to assume that God engaged with the natural instincts of animals to migrate and led them to the ark that way. All I am proposing is that we shouldn't make assumptions that stories like this have to be classified as myths. After we have given sufficient thought to them they can be accepted as entirely credible.

Whole books have been written on the answering of questions about faith and the Bible. What I hope for is that the few questions I have considered here will give us the confidence to know that there are satisfactory answers that can be given, and that they can be helpful to people seeking faith. Ultimately, we can pray that God through His Spirit can open the minds and hearts of people to enable them to believe.

Till We Meet Again

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I dedicate this book to Chris and Catharine Parker. I doubt if either of them would realise the important part they played in helping me with my decision to write it. Evangelists at heart, they showed such a keen interest in the few things they heard me teach on the subject, that I began to wonder how I could pass on to them, and to others, the full substance of what Brenda and I have learned over the years. Also they have inspired me with their incredible faith, and with the certainty they displayed regarding their destiny. I haven't met anyone more sure than they, that they would enjoy eternity in heaven, or more hopeful that they would be able to help others to find their way there too. It is such an encouragement to find people who share ones passions so strongly.

One Sunday morning, Chris and Catherine visited the church that Brenda and I had recently started attending. Chris was suffering from cancer and had come from Plymouth where they lived, to see a consultant in Bradford. Chris recognised me from many years past. He came over and asked, *"Do you remember me Mike, you led me to the Lord and baptised me."* Chris and Catherine found temporary accommodation in the area so Chris could continue his treatment in Bradford. Many people prayed, on many occasions, with great faith. We really did believe that Chris could be healed. Chris and Catherine believed for a miracle right to the end.

However, Chris departed this life at 9am on the 13th February 2018 and went to his heavenly home. Catherine knows this for certain. She knows for certain that she will meet Chris again at God's appointed time. Chris and Catherine will be separated for only a short time when set against eternity. They will meet again.

For those who truly believe, the pain and grief of temporary separation can be weighed against the promise of being joyfully reunited for eternity.

The Bible tells us that it was by faith that Abraham confidently looked forward to an eternal city designed and built by God!

The book of Hebrews, chapter 11, lists many Bible characters that lived by faith. Let me quote: *"All these people died still believing what God had promised them. They did not receive what was promised while on the earth, but saw it all from a distance and looked forward to it. They agreed that they were foreigners here on earth. Obviously people who say such things are looking forward to a country they can call their own. They were looking for a better place, a heavenly homeland. That is why God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared a city for them."*

Jesus said, *"I have gone to prepare a place for you, a place in heaven where I live."* Chris is now in heaven and I find it an honour, a privilege, and a great joy to have been used by God in helping to add him to heaven's population. He typifies what this book is all about.

Brenda and I ask God to pour out his blessings on you Catherine, sustaining you in your remarkable faith until that marvellous day when you meet Chris again. Thank you for your example and encouragement.

Much love, Mike and Brenda.

School of Evangelism

Mike and Brenda Towle have spent their lives involved in many exploits for the Kingdom of God, including Church leadership and consultancy. However, their greatest passion has always been helping people find faith and connect with the God who loves them. They have seen countless people healed and transformed.

They have spent their latter ministry focussed on teaching those with faith in Jesus to share Him with others, through a series of accessible and inspiring teaching. Chain reaction is the first of these books. Mike and Brenda live in Leeds and have two grown-up children and three grandchildren and Mike oversees a School of Evangelism with a small team.