



First Pres Challenger

WORSHIP_{grow}
SERVE

Equipping the Family of God at First Presbyterian

April 2008

The Pre-Believers Among Us By Corrie Sands



I wasn't raised Presbyterian. In fact, if you traced my church attendance records back you would find lots of Baptist, some non-denominational, and even a bit of Foursquare (gasp). As a result, I find myself wrestling with the notion of predestination.

I hope I have you hooked into reading a little further, although (alas) I am not intending to open the can of worms I just mentioned. Rather, in my struggle about predestination, it occurred to me that whether or not I believe in chosen versus unchosen people, I serve a largely unsaved population at church every Sunday.

The children who are infants to preschool age often haven't developed a maturity that would allow them to fully grasp what it means to put their faith in Jesus. Occasionally I am privileged to witness or hear about little ones just prior to kindergarten who make the in-



tellectual and emotional leap to ask Jesus to be their Savior, but more often that decision comes after they have moved into the school-aged realm.

The realization that the "regular attenders" that I strive to serve well each Sunday are largely pre-believers causes me to pause. Then I understand a little better the place where Jesus talks about the gravity of being a teacher and the perils of causing



self-aware to understand and receive the greatest gift ever offered to man.

As I sat in the sanctuary on the floor just in front of the chancel on a recent Sunday and watched these 2 and 3 year olds listening and watching intently as the band led the congregation in praise to the Holy One, I thought, "There isn't a better place to be."

Here is my shameless plug: If you want to get in on the "ground floor" of some really exciting projects that God is working on, any place in children's ministry is worth investing in. If you are not an "in-the-trenches kid person" then pray, pray, pray for a child, or a children's parents, or all of the children by name. There isn't a better place to be.



**Jesus said,
"Let the little
children come
to Me..."**

Matthew 9:14

one of these little ones to stumble. Great is the mission of leading these little ones with care to understand what it means to trust the Creator of the universe.

What better job is there in all of the church than to make the path clear and straight for the ones who come after me? What a beautiful and mysterious thing that each one of us gets to decide to believe and that we don't need any special credentials to do that. We only have to be a little bit



Christ Alone Saves Us By Jamie Evans



Heresy is an ancient art. Even in its modern forms it mines old themes. Each generation must battle its familiar and subtle seduction. It always aims to reduce Christ and to elevate us.

The Montonists wanted our effort to count more, and Christ's grace to count less. The Arians hoped we would see Christ as less than the Father, while the Docetists said Jesus wasn't really fully human and fully divine.

Today's modern heresies simply repackage old themes in new wrappers. One such modern theme is that Jesus' death on the cross was not a substitutionary atonement for our sins.

The new belief (heresy) is that our God would not subject His Son to such child abuse as a cross, that sin is not that fatal, and that Jesus really stands as a role model for good living and true love as He leads the way to the Father.

Here Jesus is coach and guide, the cross a mistake of assassina-

tion, and our 2000 years of grace-based belief wrong-headed. Sin is not powerful enough to cast an eternal shadow upon our souls, Paul has been wildly misinterpreted, and humans simply need improving instead of saving.

Original sin is cut out as a key concept. Thus Christianity reverts to reformed Judaism for Gentiles, and Jesus becomes a grand radical rabbi.

Today's modern heresies simply repackage old themes in new wrappers.

This is old thought, part Montanist with human effort enshrined. All we need is to be good enough and eternity is ours. It is also Arian, taking a portion of Christ away from the Trinity.

Seminaries are being lured by it, liberal churches watered down due to it. It didn't grow the

church two thousand years ago and won't now because it is unbiblical. The Word is amazingly clear as to who Jesus is.

Easter is here. This is an evangelical Easter, not an Easter of Jesus Christ as guru, coach, friend or mentor. This is a Jesus of substitutionary atonement. He took the hit for us, the very real damage of sin in our personal and corporate lives. He would carry the penalty for this.

Isaiah 53, written 700 years before Jesus was born, prophesied about the role of Jesus stepping into our place upon the cross, that cross of judgment that we all deserved due to our poor choices and sins. It states that the Suffering Servant, Christ, would be pierced for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities, that the punishment that bought us peace would be laid upon Him.

This is why we take forty hard days in Lent to grieve over our sins. Then we are ready to celebrate Jesus' victory over our sins on Easter morning.

Twenty years after Jesus' death and resurrection Paul wrote in Colossians that Christ would "make peace for us with God by his blood shed on the cross."

In the Gospels we read repeatedly of the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world. This Lamb was born for sacrifice. He becomes our scapegoat.

Sin's massive power is tamed at last, and not by human effort or by God's generalized mercy, but by His specific grace of the Son, "who loved me and gave Himself for me." Galatians makes this crystal clear. His life was given for

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Christ Alone (continued from page 2)

mine, and a debt was paid that was too large for me to handle.

What was the sin of the Fall with Adam and Eve? It was straight-up pride—thinking that we can be like God.

Sinful heresies reduce Christ, and raise us up as co-redemptionists with Jesus. In arrogance they state that the 2000 years of orthodox theology was wrong, that this new generation alone knows the real truth and that we must spread it.

Here another ancient heresy is reasserted: Gnosticism. It preached that we alone know the real truth, that massive secret at the heart of creation, that men and women are the measure of all things, our own redeemers with God's good help. Pride is at its core; the past generations of wise theologians are demeaned as out of touch.

Any seminary or church that buys into this wholesale elimination of Jesus Christ as substitu-

tionary atonement for us will soon wither and die. For when we become our own redeemers we must labor to be perfect, exhaust ourselves and our children, and thus reinvent the yoke of the Pharisee. The joy of redemption is lost forever.

If Christ withers as Savior in our hearts, we die from lack of hope. God will not be mocked; His plan for our redemption was perfect in Christ. He doesn't need us to improve on His brilliant idea.

Hemmed In...By What? By Marcie York

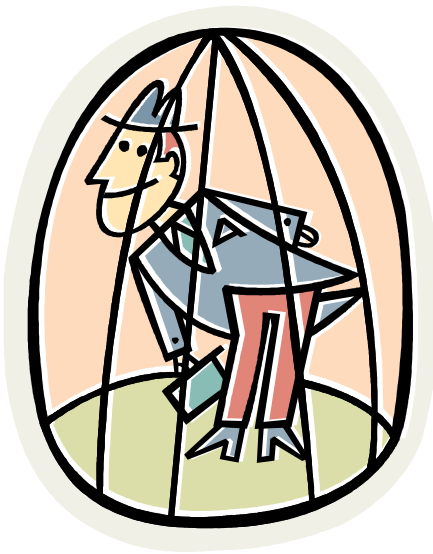
What in your life has you “stuck” today? No matter which way you turn it feels like a dead end. You sigh and turn around, hoping for just a little respite, only to hit another wall. Like an animal in a maze you keep taking the next turn in your circumstances, certain it will lead you out from those dead-end walls, to no avail.

After the week I have just had, I think I understand where the phrase “banging your head against a wall” comes from. I decided to take a short vacation from my day-in-day-out responsibilities. I organized Children's Ministry, cleared my desk and got ready for a few days to just make “space” mentally and spiritually. I needed some “aaaahhh” time. Well, at least I thought I needed it.

As luck would have it, the week I chose to relax was the week the painters we had contracted to do the exterior of our house were suddenly available. I had a feeling my vacation was about to change, but I did not realize how much. The first day, the

cheery painting crew announced they would pressure wash the entire house. Of course that meant they would tape all the windows. Would I please help remove the screens and be sure to close each window tight?

Soon I heard the rustle of plastic and brown paper, and the tearing of masking tape, as one by one the rooms of my house dimmed. I stoically endured the darkened environment, grateful for one corner left open to the outdoors.



Day number two brought more taping and covering, plus scraping and sanding that sounded like giant rodents nibbling at my walls. The dim rooms began to close in and I left for much of the day to wander the city looking for peace and quiet. Of course I did not find it there and muddled through the rest of the day.

The third day I awakened to the cave-like quality of my dim interior with dismay. I attempted to read my Bible and pray, but found little solace as I let my rapidly dimming circumstances hem me in.

I left the house to the painting crew and began to tackle a list of errands in preparation for the coming weekend and two big family gatherings planned for Saturday and Sunday. When I returned home the house was being “primed” and the inside was filled with paint fumes. “Hmmp! So much for spending time inside,” I thought.

As I sat by my little window-
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Hemmed In (continued from page 3)

left-open-to-the-outdoors and began to pout, I heard ominous rustling and ripping and watched as my last contact with the outside world disappeared in a blur of plastic, brown paper and masking tape. Hemmed in! What now?

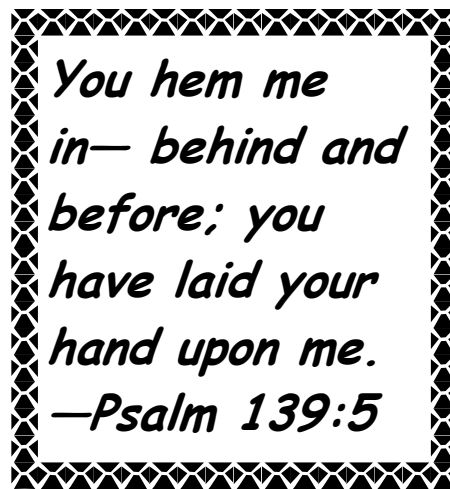


Yes, what now, I wondered? I had a choice to make. I could continue to bang against the walls of my detoured vacation or I could let go and let God, as the saying goes. I was reminded of Jesus' words in John 12:24, when speaking of His imminent death on the cross. "I tell you the truth, unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds. The man [or woman] who loves his life will lose it, while the man [or woman] who hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life."

It was time for me to "take the plunge" and follow Jesus into the kernel of wheat experience. It was time for me to allow my hemmed-

in circumstances to do the necessary work of grating against the seed husk of my "what about me" spirit. Only surrender to the Lordship of Christ in my every moment would allow His new life to flow in and through me.

So I said "yes" to Him and to His way for me as I entered day number four. I sit now in my dim house, unable to see anything outside, listening to the sounds of the painting crew. In my mind I see illustrations from my grade school science book of seeds and their growth cycles. I remember the first picture of the seed, husk intact, deep in the dark ground and I recognize that life is sometimes like the buried seed.



We have lots of questions, and cannot see our way clear to even know the next step. We have to surrender and wait. As we do so the Holy Spirit begins to work new life deep inside us, but from the outside nothing has changed. We may still fret and worry, grumble and complain. I try not to do so as I realize that my house guests will arrive in three hours to a massive mess.

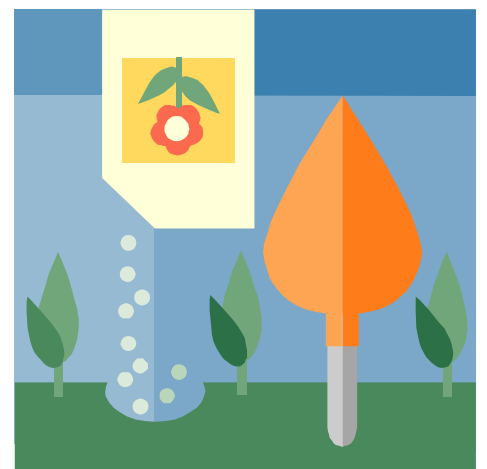
I picture the second stage of the seed's growth cycle and re-

member that the seed is still buried, but the husk has cracked, and a tiny green shoot is poking up towards the surface. In the same manner, new life is at work within me and the power comes from God, not my efforts.

He can take my submission and produce the fruit of His Spirit; love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self control (Galatians 5:22).

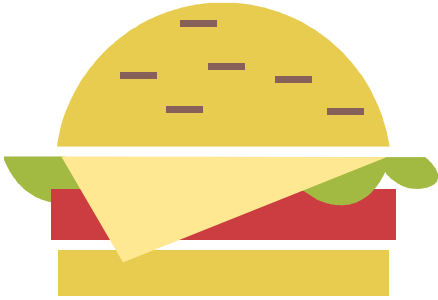
How does this story end? I do not know, because I am so "not the boss of anything" this week. My article deadline looms and I am still in the nail biting stage of wondering myself how this busy weekend, packed with people and celebrations, will work out.

But this I do know, that He who began a good work in me will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus (Philippians 1:6). The new life will burst through the husk, work its way through my hemmed in circumstances, and reach the light of day before long. Then I will say to God, "You hem me in— behind and before; you have laid your hand upon me. Such knowledge is too wonderful for me, too lofty for me to attain." (Psalm 139: 5-6).



The Power of Lunch By Jamie Evans

What are people really hungry for as they search for a church? Is it worship style, sermon length, convenience of location, connection with friends, or is it an abiding hunger for authentic worship that honors the Living God and His Word rightly infused into our lives?



Over the course of nearly seven years here I have seen a very consistent trend emerge as I ask visitors why they come to First Presbyterian Church. The vast majority take the time and the effort to drive downtown chiefly for depth: depth of relationships with believers, depth of investment in the city and mission, depth of time taken to read, mark, learn and inwardly digest the Word of our God.

Most of these visitors are not Presbyterian per se, but are more often evangelical Christians looking for a place that will not scrimp on Biblical orthodoxy. Almost all of these new folk are interested in relationship that is abiding and outreaching; they do not want the isolation that is the norm in many of their suburban neighborhoods.

Those with children require a youth program that is intentional and rock solid in its Spirit-filled teaching. Convenience rarely is a theme they mention.

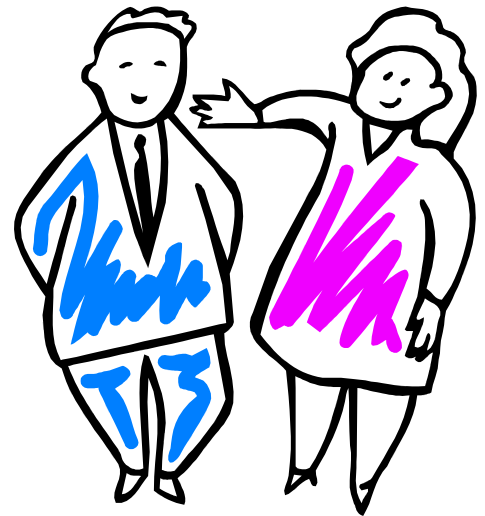
These folks want to connect, make friends and have confidence

in our theology and leadership. They especially desire to have their many questions answered about our direction, future and interactions with our often confused denomination.

As soon as senior leadership learns of new visitors or a family on our campus, our habit has been to invite them to lunch. In this invitation is an opportunity to talk with Pastor David, Pastor Lana, Pastor Terry, or me on any matter of theology that may concern them.

This format allows us to begin to explain our church vision, those six pillars that we stand upon: Prayer, Biblical Transformation, Evangelical Outreach, Authentic Worship, Gifted Grateful Service, and World Mission. It also gives senior leadership access to hear the stories and spiritual journeys of these new folk.

Hopefully they feel honored and sought out, invited to return, and informed as to what this church stands for. Typically once one of our pastors has taken these new ones to lunch we can plug them in to new members classes, age appropriate fellowship groups and occasionally our discipleship efforts. Nothing beats personal time that allows for a leisurely beginning to hopefully a lifetime relationship.



We need your help. Often while I am having lunch with a new couple or individual I will discover that they have been visiting for a number of weeks. Yours truly is just now waking up to the fact that I am not always the most observant man in this church.

I need your eyes and attention. If you have brought friends who are new to our church and may want to become part of our family please give me their names and phone numbers. I will be glad to call them and do the rest.

Perhaps on a Sunday you have met a new visitor and want to help this connecting process. Find out the new person's name and phone number, and give this information to one of our pastors. This will be immensely helpful to our outreach efforts.

And even better, consider inviting our visitors to lunch on your own to welcome them yourself to our community in Christ.

I believe this is the loneliest generation in American history. Isolation is massive in our land. The Lord desires all to become part of His Kingdom and His church family. Nothing beats being wanted, invited and known.

Deadline Information

The deadline for the May Challenger is Friday, April 25 at 5

p.m. It will be mailed out on May 8. Please submit articles to newsletter box in church office. Or, contact Daphne Saul, 252-4064, or daphne4926@sbcglobal.net.

The deadline for “A Place for You” is each Monday at 5 p.m. Please submit announcements to: Cheryl Eaker at 485-6460 or staff@fpcfresno.org and put Cheryl Eaker’s name in the subject box.

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For Your Information



Inside The Challenger

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For it is God who works in you, to will and to act according to His good purpose.
—*Philippians 2:13*



Return service requested

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