

STEPS

A MAGAZINE OF HOPE AND HEALING
FOR CHRISTIANS IN RECOVERY

“PRAY FOR POTATOES,
PICK UP A HOE.”

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What is the difference between *surrender* and *passivity*? Between *taking responsibility* and *controlling*? When it gets right down to the particulars of life these things can quickly become confusing for us. In a situation should I “let go and let God,” or should I “work as hard on my recovery as I worked on my addiction”? Should I surrender, or get busy? Or both? This issue of STEPS will *not* make the answer to these questions obvious. But, hopefully, it will help us to think more clearly about the questions. And, hopefully, it will also reduce our anxiety about such matters. We all share in the confusion sometimes. That’s why it helps so much to talk with others who share the journey. May God grant you the serenity, the courage and the wisdom you need this day.

BEYOND ANONYMOUS



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Send address changes to:
NACR
P.O. Box 215
Brea, CA 92822-0215
Voice: 714-529-NACR (6227)
Fax: 714-529-1120

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CHRIST IN US

BY DALE RYAN

In this issue of STEPS we explore the issue of *agency*. The question of agency is the question of who is responsible for an action and its outcome. Does our hard work in recovery produce our recovery? Or is it God who does the healing? Who does what? And what difference does it make in our daily lives?

As I began to think about these issues I was reminded of our first session of marital therapy. It was painful. I didn't see much hope that we could resolve our problems. But we hung in there. We worked hard—harder than I have ever worked on anything in my life. It was not easy work. It took time. And for too long it seemed like things were getting more painful rather than less. But we kept working.

I also remember the day when it first seemed like we were back on the same team, working together to make our relationship work. It was one of the most dramatic moments of my life. And it was one of those moments when life was completely inexplicable except for grace. I could taste the grace. I could smell it in the air. If, right then, you had asked me to explain what had happened—what we had done to turn the corner—I probably would have laughed.

We had, of course, worked hard for a long time. But the idea that the positive results were somehow the product of our efforts would have seemed laughable to me. It was nothing if not a miracle. Not a word I use casually. But it was clearly a miracle. An impossibility that becomes possible only by the grace of God. We could not fix what needed to be fixed—no matter how hard or how long we struggled. But God...well...God can do lots of things in us and for us and between us that we cannot do for ourselves. And therein lies one of the most fundamental mysteries of the spiritual life and also one of the most fundamental mysteries of the recovery process.

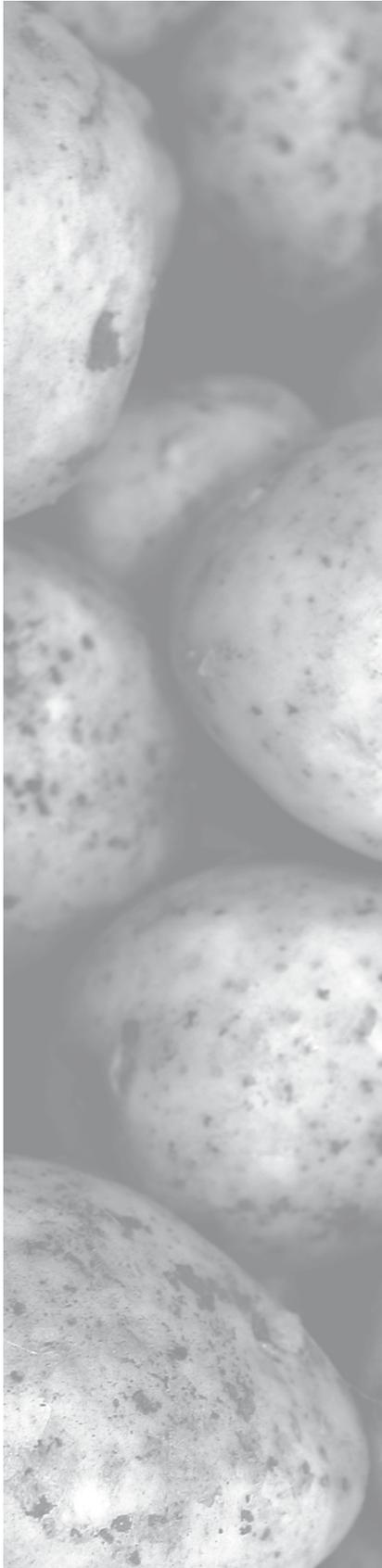
Did we have to do the work and make the needed changes? Yes. Was it God that made the changes in and between us? Yes. Sometimes that can be confusing. My own instincts about how it all works rests on a particular understanding of how God is in us. I am very fond of a poem by Symeon the New Theologian who lived near the turn of the first millennium. Here is his poem about the mystery of God in us:

We awaken in Christ's body
as Christ awakens our bodies,
and my poor hand is Christ,

He enters my foot,
and is infinitely me.
I move my hand,
and wonderfully
my hand becomes Christ,
becomes all of Him
(for God is indivisibly
whole, seamless in His Godhood).
I move my foot, and at once
He appears like a flash of lightning.
Do my words seem blasphemous?
Then open your heart to Him
and let yourself receive the one
who is opening to you so deeply.
For if we genuinely love Him,
we wake up inside Christ's body
where all our body, all over,
every most hidden part of it,
is realized in joy as Him,
And he makes us, utterly, real,
And everything that is hurt,
everything that seemed to us
dark, harsh, shameful, maimed,
ugly, irreparably damaged,
is in Him transformed
and recognized as whole, as lovely,
and radiant in His light.
We awaken as the Beloved
in every last part of our body.

I understand that this sort of mystical resolution is probably not everyone's cup of tea. But it resonates at a very deep level for me and I think that it illuminates some of the biblical texts that speak of "Christ in us." If God is this close to us, this inherent in our lives and in our bodies, it should

Continued on back cover



PRAY FOR POTATOES, PICK UP A HOE

BY
JAMES RYAN

It sometimes happens in the Christian life that we are unsure how to balance prayer and action. Once we've prayed for God's guidance on a matter, should we then take action, or should we wait for God to handle things for us? Are we to be like Gideon, thinning out the armies of our own efforts so that the glory can go to God? Or are we to be like Moses, gathering our people together for a powerful movement? As God's people, how are we supposed to get things done? In the language of theology, this is the question of "agency."

An agent is the party responsible for a particular action. When a woman drives herself to work, she is the agent responsible for the direction of her car. When God intervenes in human history, God is the agent responsible for the miracle that results.

Certain qualities of the experience of recovery can cause recovering people to question their status as an agent. When we experience healing and growth, is it a result of our hard work, or is it something that is a gift of God, independent of our labor? Certainly, change comes only after we take action. But once we have experienced change, it really feels as if we can't take credit for it no matter how hard we have worked. Are we the agent, or is God?

A popular Twelve-Step slogan addresses the question of agency: "Pray for potatoes, then pick up a hoe." Of course, depending on how this slogan is presented, it can mean one of three things.

When the emphasis is on "pick up a hoe," the slogan seems to mean that the really important thing to do is to get to work. God isn't going to just give you potatoes for nothing, so get out in the fields and get dirty. Often, when the potato slogan is used this way, the implication is that prayer is not really an effective way to get things done, as implied in the platitude "God helps those who help themselves." Prayer, in this view, is the equivalent of sitting on the side of the field and doing nothing. If anything good is to happen, it will be us that does the work.

However, when the first phrase of the potato slogan is given pri-

ority, as in, “Pray for potatoes, *and then* pick up a hoe,” the slogan takes on a different meaning. Stated this way, it warns us about taking action without consulting God first. Before we do anything, even something simple like picking up a hoe, we had better get down on our knees and check in. After all, haven’t we made a terrible mess of things in the past by thinking we were capable of handling life on our own? Presented this way, the potato slogan suggests that even if we can take action to forward our recovery, we are much better off turning the agency over to God.

Finally, when “pray for potatoes” and “pick up a hoe” are emphasized equally, the slogan seems to shrug its shoulders at the whole question. We do stuff. God does stuff. Who can sort it out? There is a balance between what we do and what God does in the recovery process, but the nature of that balance remains a mystery. If you are not in the field, you’re not planting potatoes. At the same time, if you’re not praying, the potatoes may not grow. When the slogan is presented this way, the agency is shared.

The agency question is complicated further by a long history of theological debate on the matter. Like the potato slogan, the history of Christian theology covers the full spectrum of possible ideas about the involvement of human agency and its impact on our relationship to God.

In this article, we will look at three theologians who roughly mark the ends and midpoint of the spectrum of views on this issue. Our goal is not to create a perfect map of the theological terrain here. What we are most interested in is how different theological views of agency impact our lives. After presenting the views of each theologian, we will ask how their theology plays out in everyday experience. What does it look like when we live according to a particular idea about agency? What are the consequences for our recovery and for our relationship with God? Once we’ve answered these questions, we may be able to make some evaluation about what kinds of views of agency might work best for us.

Pick Up a Hoe Theology

We begin with Pelagius, about whom little is known except that he was born in England in the mid-300’s A.D. and was shocked by the low morality of the priesthood on a visit to Rome. Pelagius saw corruption and excess and concluded that the only way to reform the Church was to place the full responsibility for sin on the individual free will. The doctrine Pelagius advocated was so strong that it denied the necessity of grace. For all practical purposes, each believer had the power to choose whether or not they committed any sin. Therefore, we also choose our own eternal destiny. According to Pelagius, God in his infinite wisdom granted each of us the natural capacity to attain heaven on our own, the only effort necessary being that we make the effort to practice virtue and abstain from sin.



Pelagius was charged with heresy by St. Jerome, and later suffered a papal condemnation by Pope Innocent I. However, the influence of Pelagius's thought spread in the early Church even after it was declared to be a heresy, and a coherent philosophy that came to be known as Pelagianism gradually formed. Pelagianism emphasized the value of individual effort, willpower and moral strength. The only real grace available to humans is the grace present in us as the faculty of free will.

Though Pelagianism has died out, its influence remains in Christian thought. Anytime an approach to Christian life and belief emphasizes the value of free will and personal effort above all else, we can say that the approach owes something to Pelagius. For Christians in recovery, approaches to our faith that are reminiscent of Pelagianism are similar to approaches to recovery that emphasize the value of personal effort. Pelagius was a “pick up a hoe” type of theologian who encouraged believers to get to work if they wanted to see results in their life of faith. The agency is entirely ours.

Unfortunately, most people find that theologies that emphasize personal effort result in spiritual lives that are highly strenuous. When we believe in salvation by personal effort and worship a God who expects us to work, we end up working really hard to feel assured of our salvation. Any impulse toward immoral behavior must be squelched, and any sign of deviant thought must be hidden from view. The risk of living out this kind of theology is that we end up deeply embattled within ourselves, fighting off all things within us that we feel might be displeasing to God. Instead of a spiritual life based on our dependence on God, we end up in a state of self-reliance, depending on our own efforts for spiritual sustenance.

There is nothing wrong with effort, of course, but approaches to recovery that emphasize personal effort and *only* personal effort usually end disastrously for addicts. By pitting our wills in a fight against the force of our addiction—that force over which we are powerless—we suffer greatly. If we are lucky enough not to relapse, the constant battle with the voice of our disease exhausts us and leaves us irritable and depressed.

Our experience demonstrates that none of us are capable of willing ourselves into perfection. Therefore, when we are trying to work hard to please God, we generally end up working hard to *look* perfect. Not only do we begin living a lie, but the effort required to keep up appearances is simply beyond most of us. We end up just as exhausted, irritable and depressed as if we were constantly fighting off the urge to use. Pelagianism by any name is a “work hard” theology. In our experience, work hard theologies do not work at all for Christians in recovery.

Pray for Potatoes Theology

Our second theologian is John Calvin, who was born in Noyon, France, and then died in Geneva in the 1500's. His *Institutes of*

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the Christian Religion is widely considered one of the greatest works of early Protestantism. Calvin's theology and the schools of thought that followed him (known as Calvinism) emphasized the sovereignty of God and the depravity of man. God's sovereignty, for Calvin, meant that God was beyond the bounds of human conception, and that God's will was absolute law. Calvin's view of human depravity was that we humans are so lost in sin that we can never attain a right relation with God through our own activity. God saves people, not the other way around.

Calvin's thinking on God's sovereignty drew him to the conclusion that salvation operated on the principle of double predestination. Because God saves and humans are incapable of saving themselves, those who are saved are chosen by God. Likewise, those who are not saved are those who are not chosen for salvation by God. The evidence that one has been chosen by God to be saved is revealed in the nature of the believer's conduct. Human depravity naturally leads the unchosen to sin, and they are powerless to do otherwise. The saved, however, are subject to the irresistible and overwhelming power of grace and therefore conform to God's desires.

At first blush, this theology would seem to be the exact opposite of Pelagianism. Instead of working hard and using our free will to gain salvation, we have to give up the idea that our will can save us and let God do the work. The agency belongs entirely to our Creator. This would make Calvin a "pray for potatoes" type of theologian who insists that we are not able to use our free will to any benefit unless we are aided by grace. However, the devil is in the details, and in actual practice Calvinism and similar theologies often lead to the same kind of highly strenuous spiritual life as Pelagianism.

The crux of the problem seems to be in Calvin's insistence that grace is only for a chosen few. In a theological system that draws a clear line between the haves and the have-nots, it becomes extremely important for believers to make sure that they are in the right camp. To feel assured of salvation, believers need some way of knowing whether they have been chosen by God to receive grace. Calvin proposed that the chosen could be identified by their behavior. Therefore, in actual practice, Calvinism often leads to a life characterized by the hard work necessary to be on good behavior and appear as one of the chosen few. Practically speaking, there may not be that much difference between working hard to appear to be chosen by God (Calvinism) and working hard to appear to be perfect in order to earn God's approval (Pelagianism).

To be fair to the Reformed tradition, Calvinism is not the only theology that has the potential for leaving its adherents full of anxiety about whether they have been chosen. This kind of thinking and anxiety are present in many churches and denominations. In fact, it may not be Calvin's theological propositions that are the problem so much as the way we treat them. Calvin's goal was certainly not to fill Christians with anxiety about the status of their salvation, but rather

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to find a way of expressing his conviction that God insists on grace rather than works as the basis of salvation.

Nevertheless, we seem to be able to turn Calvin's insistence on grace into a reason to work hard to earn God's favor. Whenever someone outlines the qualities of those who are graced by God, many of us leap on those qualities and do our best to produce them in our lives by our own efforts, rather than trust that God will deliver those qualities to us through grace.

When a theological tradition emphasizes good behavior as the evidence that one is chosen, some of us work ourselves to death trying to be good enough to feel secure as one of the chosen. If feeling a strong and constant love for Jesus is the evidence that one is chosen, we exhaust ourselves to generate the right intensity of emotion to suggest that we are among the chosen. If being included in the chosen is determined by sharing certain convictions or experiences, we work hard to make sure that we have just the right convictions or just the right experiences to be included.

Laboring to think right, to feel right and to do right are all forms of working hard to earn salvation and/or recovery. Not only are these efforts useless according to Calvin's theology, but they leave us spiritually depleted.

Pray and Pick Up a Hoe Theology

Our third theologian is John Wesley (1703—1791). Wesley lived and died a member of the Church of England, but his work led to the rise of Methodism and the eventual establishment of the Methodist Church. Wesley's Methodism followed on the themes of Arminianism, a system of thought initiated by Jacob Arminius (1559–1609). Arminius held that salvation was available not only to an elect few, but was offered by God to all. An individual could either resist or consent to the action of grace, and therefore salvation was a matter of free choice. Arminius also saw the Christian life not as a static state of being but as a process of spiritual development and improvement in which the soul achieves greater godliness through a deepening immersion in grace.

One of Wesley's many developments on Arminianism was the idea that human perfection was attainable in this lifetime. In 1764 he published *A Plain Account of Christian Perfection*, in which he argued that Scripture identifies perfection as something that could happen after accepting salvation and prior to death. Perfection, for Wesley, meant freedom from sin, both outward (active sin) and inward (temptation and evil thoughts). A Christian was to arrive at a state of perfection through their love of God. By loving God, one expelled sin and became perfect.

Because his take on Arminianism emphasizes cooperation with grace, Wesley can be called an even-handed “Pray for potatoes and pick up a hoe” type of theologian. He acknowledges that there is work that God does for us and that we also have a role to play in that work.

The agency is divided between God and us. Wesley also nuances the idea of working toward perfection in two ways. First, perfection is something that happens after the believer accepts salvation. In theory, at least, this means that the soul's salvation is secure and does not depend on perfection in order to count itself a member of God's family. Second, perfection happens not through the free choice of behavior, but through love. Again, in theory, this means that one cannot will oneself into perfection, but simply consents to the action of grace already present in one's life and then steadily and naturally grows in the love of God.

In practice, however, things never quite match up with theory. Even though Wesley states that perfection happens after salvation and through love, it is all too easy for us to hear the word "perfection" as God's expectation of us. We were not saved to become less than perfect, or so the theory goes, and so if we are not steadily becoming more perfect, we are likely to think that there is something wrong with us. Because Wesley emphasizes love as the means to perfection, we are likely to wrench our hearts trying to love hard enough to attain perfection in this lifetime. Any sign of inward or outward sin is simply proof that we don't love God enough.

A Practical Approach

At this point, we may see a pattern in our own behavior. It seems that regardless of the structure of our convictions, we have a tendency to turn the practice of theological ideas into an effort to earn grace rather than receive it. Given this tendency in ourselves, it may be that, in all the theologies we have looked at, there is good stuff we are not able to appreciate. When we are busy looking for ways to work hard to please God, we tend to overlook more helpful ideas and only take with us those things that encourage us to work harder. This "take what doesn't work and leave the rest" approach to theology will not serve us well.

At the same time, it is clear that some ideas are more likely to lead to a "work hard" spiritual life than others. The idea that it is up to us to earn our own salvation; the idea that we need to think, feel or act a certain way to prove that we belong among God's chosen few; and the idea that we can and should work to be perfect in this lifetime are all ideas that are particularly dangerous for Christians in recovery. These ideas directly affirm our tendency to attempt to earn rather than receive grace. In the language of agency, we have a tendency to try to take as much agency as we can by working hard at pleasing God.

Because we have a tendency to turn all theology into "work hard" theology, the answer to our problems with agency cannot be just an intellectual one. We could try to come up with a theological position that is as contrary to "work hard" theology as possible, but in all probability, sooner or later we'll find a way to turn this new theological position into yet another reason to work hard. The answer to our trouble with agency lies on the level of our tendency to work hard,

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not in the realm of ideas.

In order to find a practical theology of agency that works well for Christians in recovery, we have to first acknowledge our tendency to lean too heavily on “pick up a hoe” types of thought and practice. If we can start to lean away from emphasizing our own agency without giving up completely on the idea that we do have some role to play in our recovery, then we are probably moving in the right direction.

Some parables from Mark’s Gospel might be useful here. In Mark 4, Jesus speaks to his disciples about how to spread the Good News, and he uses three parables that use the metaphor of seeds to help explain the disciples’ task. This is one of the places in the Gospels where Jesus tells his famous “sower of seeds” parable, describing the disciples spreading the kingdom of God like seeds, some falling on good soil, and others falling to birds or rocky soil. Jesus’ second “seed parable” speaks more directly to the question of agency:

“The kingdom of God is as if someone would scatter seed on the ground, and would sleep and rise night and day, and the seed would sprout and grow, he does not know how. The earth produces of itself, first the stalk, then the head, then the full grain in the head. But when the grain is ripe, at once he goes in with his sickle, because the harvest has come.” (Mark 4: 26-29 *NRSV*)

This parable offers not so much an abstract, systematic theology of agency as a practical guide for dealing with agency in our daily lives. There is work for the disciple to do: sowing seeds and harvesting the grain. There is also work for God to do: making the grain grow. The emphasis in this parable is on the mystery and power of God in giving life to the seeds of the kingdom. These verses are a strong reminder that we should not to try to do God’s work. It is not the disciples task—or ours—to make seeds grow.

Jesus uses this parable to tell his disciples that they are simply to share the Good News and let God do what God will with the “seeds” they have planted in people’s hearts and minds. This is good advice to anyone interested in evangelism or sponsorship, but it is also advice that can be applied to the seed of the kingdom that God has planted in our own lives—that is, our recovery.

We can think of working a Twelve Step program as an act of helping God to plant a seed of the kingdom inside us. Knowing that our tendency as recovering Christians is to work hard and try to earn grace, we will want to be careful not to meddle with this seed too much. Once the seed is planted, our job is to stay open to the sun and the rain, and let the seed lie in the field. We don’t have to dig the seed up every twenty minutes to see how it is doing, or replot the field every time we get nervous. For most of us, sitting still in God’s presence and waiting for God to make our seed grow will be really hard. It requires us to fight back against our tendency to try to take control and turn our recovery into an exercise in self-will. Ironically, the hard work of recovery is the work required to stop working so hard.

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TRANSFORMED BY LOVE

EXCERPTED FROM *SURRENDER TO LOVE*

BY DAVID G. BENNER



Transformation is a big concept, not simply a big word. It involves change on a grand scale—bigger than most of us know much about from personal experience.

Typically our experience of personal change is limited to small, incremental shifts that are visible mainly in retrospect. Perhaps as I look back it may appear that I have begun to control my temper better or be a little more disciplined about food. But while changes of this sort are important, they pale in significance when compared to the notion of transformation. In fact, they tend to make the idea of fundamental makeover seem extravagantly unrealistic.

However, if we dare to be honest, we all know our need for radical change. We know the immense difference between our outward appearance and inner reality. Our love is more self-serving than it appears, our woundedness deeper, our self-deceptions more pernicious. Our failures to live up to even our own expectations and ideals are massive. Our failures to live up to God's expectations are profound.

Jesus knew this. This is why his call to leave everything, follow him and experience true life is so striking. It puts us in touch with the reality of our inner world, and it makes us aware of the depth of our longing for real change. So unlike the message of self-improvement gurus who offer the small extra bits of help we think we need to finish off our personal renovation projects, Jesus' offer is abundant life based on death and rebirth. Change doesn't get much more radical than that! . . .

Paul reminds us that the goal of the spiritual journey is being transformed into the image of God—the image we were created to reflect (2 Corinthians 3:18). Christian transformation never settles for cosmetic adjustments. It involves being reborn—remade into who we were destined from eternity to be.

But recall who Paul was and what his authority is to speak of personal transformation. We pick up his story when he was known by another name.

Saul was the champion of a reign of terror against Christians in the early days of the church. With unrelenting zeal he committed his life to hunting down and killing those who followed Jesus. Fueled by hatred and fanaticism, he set as his mission the elimination of every trace of Christianity from first-century Palestine.

How little he could have guessed what lay in store for him when one day he set out to go to Damascus, “breathing threats to slaughter the Lord’s disciples” (Acts 9:1). This day did not find him in the midst of a self-improvement program to which Christian conversion might add a helpful component. This day found him self-preoccupied with his hatred and in the grip of his tyrannical rigidity. It was, for him, a typical day.

“Suddenly, while he was traveling to Damascus and just before he reached the city, there came a light from heaven all around him. He fell to the ground, and then he heard a voice saying, ‘Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?’ ‘Who are you, Lord?’ he asked, and the voice answered, ‘I am Jesus’” (Acts 9:3-5).

This was just the beginning of the changes that led to the death of Saul and the birth of Paul—a man who was to become as famous for his love of Christ and his followers as Saul had been for his hatred. This was the beginning of the end of his arrogance, and the end of his self-preoccupation. This would turn out to be his first day of real life. It was nothing short of conversion—a rebirth. . . .

THE TRANSFORMATIONAL JOURNEY

The Chinese philosopher Lao Tzu reminds us that even a journey of a thousand miles must begin with a single step. What, then, is the first step on the Christian transformational journey?

Christians have applied a variety of words to this first step—*conversion, purgation, repentance*, to name but a few. Jesus also referred to the first step with a variety of terms. Sometimes he encouraged people to repent of their sins. Other times he asked them to follow him. And sometimes he simply asked them to allow him to heal them. All seemed to invite the same response—death to their old kingdom of self and an awakening of a new life of surrender to Perfect Love.

Stepping onto the road of Christian spiritual transformation requires an encounter with the living God. This encounter may be gradual or it may be sudden. But it will always involve a turning and an awakening.

Turning is repentance. Repentance, however, is never simply turning *from* something—sin or a way of life. It must also always involve turning *to* something. Christian repentance is turning to Jesus. . . .

Turning toward Jesus is the heart of repentance, because this is the only real possibility of turning away from sin. Turning toward Jesus also makes clear that repentance must be an ongoing matter. It must become a way of life. . . .

Conversion is the lifelong transformational process of being remade into the image of God. It is so much more than simply trying to avoid sin. The focus of repentance and conversion is Jesus, not my sin nor my self.

My attachment to sinful ways of being is much too strong to ever be undone by mere willpower. There is no substitute for surrender to divine love as the fuel to propel such undoing. Divine love transforms both my heart and my will. Divine love enables me to choose God’s will over mine. Without this, repentance will be nothing more than a

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self-help scheme based on effort and resolve.

Christian conversion is the most radical change process in human history. So much more than a mere change of the externals of our life, it is the refashioning of our entire being. . . .

But if an encounter with divine love is really so transformational, how is it that so many of us have survived such encounters relatively unchanged? It seems that the experience of love—even God’s love—does not always have transforming consequences. It is important to understand why this is the case if we are to allow ourselves to meet divine love in ways that lead to genuine change.

THE NAKED SELF

The single most important thing I have learned in over thirty years of study of how love produces healing is that love is transformational only when it is received in vulnerability.

Suppose that with God’s help I am able to love my son unconditionally. But if he is desperately trying to please me, the unconditional nature of my love will not be noticed. And there will be no deep experience of knowing himself deeply and unconditionally loved. Receiving love while he is trying to earn it will only reinforce his efforts to be lovable. Far from being transformational, this will only increase his efforts to earn love. And any love he receives will only be experienced as the fruit of these efforts.

Genuine transformation requires vulnerability. It is not the fact of being loved unconditionally that is life-changing. It is the risky experience of *allowing myself* to be loved unconditionally.

Paradoxically, no one can change until they first accept themselves as they are. Self-deceptions and an absence of real vulnerability block any meaningful transformation. It is only when I accept who I am that I dare to show you that self in all its vulnerability and nakedness. Only then do I have the opportunity to receive your love in a manner that makes a genuine difference. . . .

Daring to accept myself and receive love for who I am in my nakedness and vulnerability is the indispensable precondition for genuine transformation. But make no mistake about just how difficult this is. Everything within me wants to show my best “pretend self” to both other people and God. This is my false self—the self of my own making. This self can never be transformed, because it is never willing to receive love in vulnerability. When this pretend self receives love, it simply becomes stronger and I am even more deeply in bondage to my false ways of living.

Both popular psychology and spirituality—even popular Christian spirituality—tend to reinforce this false self by playing to our deep-seated belief in self-improvement. Both also play to our instinctual tendency to attempt to get our act together by ourselves before we receive love.

The life and message of Jesus stand diametrically opposed to such efforts at self-improvement. Jesus did not come to encourage our self-transformation schemes. He understood that rather than longing to receive his love in an undefended state, what we really want is

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to manipulate God to accept us in our false and defended ways of being. If only he would do this, we could remain unaware of just how desperately we need real love.

How terrifying it is to face my naked and needy self—the self that longs for love and knows it can do nothing to manipulate the universe into providing the only kind of love I really need. The crux of the problem is that I cannot feel the love of God because I do not dare to accept it unconditionally. To know that I am loved, I must accept the frightening helplessness and vulnerability that is my true state. This is always terrifying.

BEYOND BELIEF

But speaking practically, how are we to know God’s love in a way that meets us in these deepest parts of our vulnerable self? How can we ever come to know that God’s love is, in fact, genuinely unconditional?

The knowing of God’s love that most Christians content themselves with is what I have called objective rather than personal knowing. We believe in God’s love, just as we believe other articles of faith. Since such belief is strongly supported by Scripture, we correctly assume that it is trustworthy. And it is. But we may also assume that it is sufficient. And it is not.

Gerald May calls the sort of knowing of love that is essential for transformation “contemplative knowing.” We could also describe it as *experiential knowing*. It is a knowing that has moved beyond belief to experience. It is a knowing that can be tested by both reason and belief, but it is not a product of either. . . .

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This is the only knowing of love that is strong enough to cast out fear. And this is the only knowing of love that is capable of offering us the radical transformation we need. Mere belief is simply not strong enough to do the job. Relying on belief leaves me clinging to the things I believe. And there is always the threat of doubt, which seems to hold the potential of opening the back door and allowing fear to reenter.

What we need is a knowing that is deeper than belief. It must be based on experience. Only knowing love is sufficiently strong to cast out fear. Only knowing love is sufficiently strong to resist doubt.

The reason May calls such knowing “contemplative” is that it results from meeting God in a contemplative state. It comes from sitting at the feet of Jesus, gazing into his face and listening to his assurances of love for me. It comes from letting God’s love wash over me, not simply trying to believe it. It comes from soaking in the scriptural assurances of such love, not simply reading them and trying to remember or believe them. It comes from spending time with God, observing how he looks at me. It comes from watching his watchfulness over me and listening to his protestations of love for me. . . .

Just as the child who regularly meets her mother’s love in the core of her being knows that love without any effort to believe it to be true, so we may know God’s love in a way that is deeper and more durable than knowing based on belief. Contemplative or existential knowing may be supported by belief, but it is never reducible to it. It is based

in experience, the direct personal encounter with divine love. The goal is, as stated by Paul, that we might know the love of Christ, which is beyond all knowledge, and so be filled with the utter fullness of God (Ephesians 3:16-19). . . .

ENCOUNTERING DIVINE LOVE

The key to spiritual transformation is meeting God . . . in vulnerability. Our natural inclination is to bring the most presentable parts of our self to the encounter with God. But God wants us to bring our whole self to the divine encounter. He wants us to trust him enough to meet Perfect Love in the vulnerability of our shame, weakness and sin. . . .

Jesus' parable about the banquet illustrates this process of meeting God in our places of vulnerability. In Luke 14:15-24 Jesus compares the kingdom of God to a great feast. Many people are invited, but all make excuses for not coming. At the last minute, therefore, the host sends his servants out into the streets and alleys of the town, telling them to bring in the poor, crippled, blind and lame. He makes special places for them at his feast. . . .

Think of Christ as presiding over a banquet at the deep center of our being. His invitation to us is to search out the poor, crippled, blind and lame aspects of our inner self and bring them to his feast of love. Here he stands ready to embrace them with love and welcome them into the family of self that he is slowly weaving together in the ongoing transformation of our life.

What a shame, therefore, when we turn up at the banquet with our most spiritual parts of self, leaving the other parts that really need healing and transformation hidden in the darkness of our depths. . . .

Transformation occurs when we bring all parts of ourselves into the banquet of love provided by our divine host. Our fearful, angry and wounded parts of self can never be healed unless they are exposed to divine love. This is why we must meet God's love in our vulnerability and brokenness, not simply in our strength and togetherness. Only as we do so can our damaged and infirm parts of self be exposed to transforming love.

Transformation demands that we meet God in the vulnerability of our sin and shame rather than retreating to try to get on with our self-improvement projects. But it also requires that we stay long enough in his loving presence to allow our shame to begin to melt away. For love to transform us, not only must we meet in vulnerability, we must also linger long enough for it to penetrate our woundedness. . . .

ALL LOVE IS GOD'S LOVE

The more perfect the love, the more it forces us to encounter our own fear. For this reason we sometimes prefer to meet love in safer places. This easily leads to confusing our longings for divine and human love, so that we expect unconditional love from human beings. Most people probably do this at some point or another on their journey. Some never find their way out of this cul de sac.

Romantic love is especially easily confused with divine love,

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particularly during its moments of flaming passion. The desire for union that emerges from romantic love often makes it hard to separate the ultimate surrender that one longs for in relation to God from the penultimate surrender that one appropriately gives to a human lover. But when the passion dies down, confusion of divine and romantic love can lead to great disappointment. Investing hopes that can be fulfilled only by God in human beings always has this potential.

But it is not just lovers who can mistakenly expect perfect love from humans. Friends can do the same. Once again, the result will always be disappointment. Parents, similarly, are unable to carry the burden of offering perfect love to their children, as are children to their parents. This need can be met only in God.

The deep human longings for surrender to perfect love can never be satisfied by anyone other than God. Human love, no matter how noble, is always contaminated to some extent by self-interest. Narcissistic wounds—particularly if unacknowledged—will always limit the self-sacrificial qualities of unconditional love.

But although human beings can never offer perfect love, human love always carries enough of its source within it that it retains something of the healing and growth-inducing potential of divine love . . . Love always contains sparks of divine presence. Where love is, God is—for God is love and love is of God (1 John 4:7-8). *Ubi caritas et amor, Deus ibi est*—where charity and love are, there is God.

This is why genuine love always calls us to deeper places of trust and connection. Even the love exchanged between people and their pets has health-inducing potential. It is not the pet that is the cause of the benefit but the cosmic presence of divine love—existing in the world as a reflection of the nature of the Creator and present in human beings as they bear his image.

While human love can never bear the weight of our need for divine love, it can support transformation and teach us about divine love. Human love communicates divine love. There is no other source of love but God. Experiences of human love bring us therefore into an indirect encounter with divine love. They also can serve to prepare us to respond to that love by making the idea of God's love believable. The relative constancy of the love of family and friends makes the absolute faithfulness of divine love at least conceivable. Hints of unconditional love from humans makes the possibility of absolutely unconditional divine love imaginable.

Human love also makes divine love trustworthy. Learning limited surrender to relatively trustworthy human beings helps prepare us for more complete surrender to perfect love. Tragically, however, the flip side of this is also true. Conditional and imperfect love from human beings makes the unconditional and perfect love of God seem unbelievable and untrustworthy.

Only perfect love can completely cast out fear. And since God alone is perfect love, there is no substitute for learning what love really is by coming back to the source. God is the original that shows up the limitations of all the copies. His love, and only his love, is capable of the deep transformation we desperately need.

David G. Benner is director of the Institute of Psychospiritual Health, and Distinguished Professor of Psychology and Spirituality at the Psychological Studies Institute in Atlanta, Georgia. A psychologist, spiritual director and retreat leader, Benner is the author of many books in addition to Surrender to Love, including Sacred Companions and Care of Souls. "Transformed by Love" was excerpted from Surrender to Love, InterVarsity Press, 2003 by David G. Benner. Used with permission.

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about addictions*



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not be too surprising that it is sometimes difficult for us to sort out who is doing what. Is it us? Is it God? For Symeon these questions are not appropriately respectful of the mystery of Christ in us.

It is, of course, easy to trivialize the notion that Christ “lives in us” (Gal 2:20). Mysteries are fragile things and can be used inappropriately. But we ignore this mystery at our peril. The God of the Bible, the God revealed in Jesus, is not some distant, abstract, dispassionate deity who only checks up on us periodically. The God of the Bible is a God who awakens us, a God who is in us, a God who is so close as to not miss a beat of our hearts, nor a breath, a whisper of a hope, an intimation of faith. As we gradually increase our conscious contact with this God who knows us so intimately we grow in our ability to sense the many ways in which God is at work in and between us.

May you awaken in Christ's body as God works to make you utterly real. May every part of you, even those parts that seem irreparably damaged, be transformed in him.

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We wrestle ourselves down at the side of the field and wait. We find just enough faith to trust that maybe God really will do something with that seed if we leave it alone. And then, in time, God sends forth a sprout. The earth “produces of itself” and we do not know how. Time after time, we feel compelled to take control of our recovery, to earn grace, and we have to ask God for the strength to surrender instead. As time passes in this way, that little sprout starts to grow. Each time we hold back our own efforts and let God do God's work, we get to have a firsthand experience of grace. God acts in our lives, and we grow in faith. Before too long, we find that the promise of yet another “seed parable” from Mark 4 is being fulfilled in our lives:

“[The kingdom of God] is like a mustard seed, which, when sown upon the ground is the smallest of all the seeds on earth; yet when it is sown it grows up and becomes the greatest of all shrubs, and puts forth large branches, so that the birds of the air can make nests in its shade.” (Mark 4: 30-32 *NRSV*)



“We have ‘defects of character,’ but we are not ‘defective characters.’”

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