

## NINETEEN

## PATCHES OF GREEN



During the volcanic eruption of Mt. St. Helens, intense heat melted away the soil, leaving bare rock coated with a thick mantle of ash. Naturalists of the Forest Service wondered how much time must pass before any living thing could grow there. Then one day a park employee stumbled across a lush patch of wildflowers, ferns, and grasses rooted tenaciously to a strip of the desolation. It took a few seconds for him to notice an eerie fact: this patch of vegetation formed the shape of an elk. Plants had sprouted from the organic material that lay where an elk had been buried by ash. From then on, the naturalists looked for such patches of luxuriance as an aid in calculating the loss of wildlife.

Long after a society begins to decay, signs of its former life continue to assert themselves. Without knowing why, people cling to moral customs of the past, the “habits of the heart” in Robert Bellah’s phrase. Properly seeded, like the animal shapes dotting the blank sides of Mt. St. Helens, these bring life to an otherwise barren landscape.

Victorian England offers one example of a place where patches of green sprang to life, a place where a group of dedicated Christians graced all of society. It was a somber time of history, marked by slavery in the colonies, child labor in the factories, and squalor in the cities. Change came from below, as it usually does, rather than being imposed from above.

Nearly five hundred British charitable organizations formed during the nineteenth century, at least three-quarters of them evangelical in their approach. The Clapham Sect, a small group of committed Christians, including Charles Simeon and William Wilberforce, got five of its members elected to Parliament. While Wilberforce devoted his entire career to the

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abolition of slavery, others took up the cause of debtor's prisons, resulting in the release of fourteen thousand prisoners. Still others led crusades in favor of education, housing for the poor, and help for the disabled while opposing child labor, public immorality, and drunkenness. Opponents mocked "the saints," a label which the Clapham Sect wore proudly.

During this same era William Booth used to stroll through the slums of London's East End as his wife taught a Bible class. He noticed that every fifth building was a pub, where men would loiter all day, drinking away their families' livelihood. Many pubs even provided steps at the counter so that small children could climb up and order gin. Appalled at these conditions, William Booth opened the "Christian Mission" in 1865, serving the "down and outers" ignored by others, and out of that vision grew the Salvation Army. (Imagine an organization forming today with that name!) When traditional denominations frowned on the clientele Booth was attracting, he had to form his own church to accommodate these "trophies of grace."

Many people do not know that the Salvation Army operates as a local church as well as a charity. Yet no charitable organization attracts more financial support, and the Salvation Army ranks at the top on any survey of effectiveness: they feed the hungry, shelter the homeless, treat addicts and alcoholics, and show up first at disaster scenes. The movement has continued to grow so that today these soldiers of grace number a million—one of the world's largest standing armies—and serve in a hundred countries. William Booth's lump of yeast now leavens societies around the world.

The reforms undertaken by William Booth and by the Clapham Sect eventually became public policy. And Victorian qualities of honesty, hard work, purity, and charity spread throughout society, helping to spare England the violent disruptions of other nations.

Europe and the United States continue to draw on the moral capital of Christian faith, the overflow of grace. Yet polls reveal that a majority of Americans are anxious about the future (Gallup polls say eighty-three

percent of Americans believe the nation is in moral decline). Historian Barbara Tuchman, who has won two Pulitzer prizes for her writing and surely does not represent the alarmism of the religious right, worries about moral bankruptcy. She told Bill Moyers of her concern over

the loss of a moral sense, of knowing the difference between right and wrong, and of being governed by it. We see it all the time. We open any morning paper and some official has been indicted for embezzlement or corruption. People go around shooting their colleagues or killing people. . . . I ask myself, have nations ever declined from a loss of moral sense rather than from physical reasons or the pressure of barbarians? I think that they have.

Once a Christian consensus has faded, once religious faith has been stripped away from society, what happens then? We need not speculate, for our century has provided case-study answers to that very question. Consider Russia.

The Communist government attacked Russia's heritage with an anti-religious fury unprecedented in human history. They razed churches, mosques, and synagogues, banned religious instruction to children, shuttered seminaries and monasteries, imprisoned and killed priests. We all know what happened, of course. After tens of millions of deaths and after experiencing social and moral chaos, the Russian people finally awoke. As usual, the artists spoke first. Alexander Solzhenitsyn said:

Over half a century ago, while I was still a child, I recall hearing a number of older people offer the following explanation for the great disasters that had befallen Russia: "Men have forgotten God; that's why all this has happened." Since then I have spent well-nigh fifty years working on the history of our revolution; in the process I have read hundreds of books, collected hundreds of personal testimonies, and have already contributed eight volumes of my own toward the effort of clearing away the rubble left by that upheaval. But if I were asked today to formulate as concisely as possible the main cause of the ruinous revolution that swallowed up some sixty million of our people, I could not

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put it more accurately than to repeat: "Men have forgotten God; that's why all this has happened."

He spoke those words in 1983, when the USSR was still a superpower and Solzhenitsyn was being widely assailed. Less than a decade later, though, the leaders of Russia were quoting his words with approval, as I heard in person when I visited Russia in 1991.

I saw in Russia a people starved for grace. The economy, indeed the entire society, was in a state of free fall, and everyone had someone to blame. Reformers blamed the Communists, die-hard Communists blamed the Americans, foreigners blamed the Mafia and the Russians' lousy work ethic. Recriminations abounded. I noted that ordinary Russian citizens had the demeanor of battered children: lowered heads, halting speech, eyes darting this way and that. Whom could they trust? Just as a battered child finds it hard to believe in order and love, these people were finding it hard to believe in a God who sovereignly controls the universe and who passionately loves them. They find it hard to believe in grace. Yet without grace, what will end the cycle of ungrace in Russia?

I left Russia overwhelmed at the necessary changes ahead of them, and yet I also left with a sense of grim hope. Even on a moral landscape stripped bare, I saw signs of life, patches of vegetation softening the barrenness, growing in the shape of what had been killed.

I heard from ordinary citizens who now relished their freedom to worship. Most had learned about the faith from a *babushka*, an old grandmother. When the state cracked down on the church, it ignored this group: let the old women sweep the floors and sell the candles and cling to the traditions until they all die off, they reasoned. The aged hands of the *babushki*, though, rocked the cradles. Young churchgoers today often say they first learned about God in childhood through the hymns and stories Grandma would whisper as they drifted off to sleep.

I will never forget a meeting in which Moscow journalists wept—I had never before seen journalists weep—as Ron Nikkel of Prison Fellowship International told of the underground churches that were now thriving in Russia's penal colonies. For seventy years prisons had been the repository of truth, the one place where you could safely speak the

name of God. It was in prison, not church, that people such as Solzhenitsyn found God.

Ron Nikkel also told me of his conversation with a general who headed the Ministry of Internal Affairs. The general had heard of the Bible from the old believers and had admired it, but as a museum piece, not something to be believed. Recent events, though, had made him reconsider. In late 1991 when Boris Yeltsin ordered the closing of all national, regional, and local Communist Party offices, his ministry policed the dismantling. “Not one party official,” said the general, “not one person directly affected by the closings protested.” He contrasted that to the seventy-year campaign to destroy the church and stamp out belief in God. “The Christians’ faith outlasted any ideology. The church is now resurging in a way unlike anything I have witnessed.”

In 1983 a group of Youth With a Mission daredevils unfolded a banner on Easter Sunday morning in Red Square: “Christ is Risen!” it read in Russian. Some older Russians fell to their knees and wept. Soldiers soon surrounded the hymn-singing troublemakers, tore up their banner, and hustled them off to jail. Less than a decade after that act of civil disobedience, all over Red Square on Easter Sunday people were greeting each other in the traditional way, “Christ is risen!” . . . “He is risen indeed!”

On the long airplane flight from Moscow to Chicago, I had much time to reflect on what I had seen in Russia. While there, I felt like Alice in Wonderland. The cash-strapped government was nevertheless setting aside billions of rubles to help restore churches damaged or destroyed by the Communist regime. We prayed with the Supreme Soviet and with the KGB. We saw Bibles for sale in the Russian government buildings. The editors of *Pravda* asked if one of us could write a religious column for the front page of their newspaper. Educators invited us to submit a curriculum based on the Ten Commandments.

I had the distinct impression that God was moving—not in the spiritualized sense of that phrase but quite literally packing up and moving. Western Europe now pays God little heed, the United States is pushing

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God to the margins, and perhaps the future of God's kingdom belongs to places like Korea, China, Africa, and Russia. The kingdom of God thrives where its subjects follow the desires of the King—does that describe the United States of America today?

As an American, the prospect of such a “move” makes me sad. At the same time, however, I understand more clearly than ever before that my ultimate loyalty lies with the kingdom of God, not the United States. The original followers of Jesus watched their beloved Jerusalem burn to the ground, and I am certain they looked back through tears as they moved on to Rome and Spain and Ethiopia. Augustine, who wrote his *City of God* to help explain the dual citizenship of a Christian, lived through the collapse of Rome, and watched from his deathbed as flames devoured his home city of Hippo in northern Africa.

Not long ago I had a conversation with an elderly missionary who had spent his early career in China. He had been among the six thousand missionaries expelled after the Communists took over. As in Russia, these Communists too strove mightily to destroy the church, which until then had been a showcase of the missionary movement. The government forbade house churches, made it illegal for parents to give religious education to their children, imprisoned and tortured pastors and Bible teachers.

Meanwhile, the exiled missionaries sat on the sidelines and wrung their hands. How would the church in China fare without them? Without their seminaries and Bible colleges, their literature and curricula, without even the ability to print Bibles, could the church survive? For forty years these missionaries heard rumors, some discouraging and some encouraging, about what was happening in China, but no one knew for sure until the country began opening up in the 1980s.

I asked this elderly missionary, now a renowned China expert, what had happened in the intervening forty years. “Conservatively, I would estimate there were 750,000 Christians when I left China. And now? You hear all sorts of numbers, but I think a safe figure would be 35 million believers.” Apparently, the church and the Holy Spirit fared quite well on their own. The church in China now constitutes the second largest evangelical community in the world; only the United States exceeds it.

One China expert estimates that the revival in China represents the greatest numerical revival in the history of the church. In an odd way, the government hostility ultimately worked to the church's advantage. Shut out of the power structures, Chinese Christians devoted themselves to worship and evangelism, the original mission of the church, and did not much concern themselves with politics. They concentrated on changing lives, not changing laws.

I returned from Russia less concerned about what might happen inside the marble and granite walls of the U.S. Capitol and Supreme Court buildings, and more concerned about what might happen inside the frame walls of churches scattered throughout America. A renewal of spirituality in the United States will not descend from the top down; if it occurs at all, it will start at the grass roots and grow from the bottom up.

I must admit that my return to the United States gave me little reason to hope that Russia and the world might learn grace from Christians here. Randall Terry was pronouncing on National Public Radio that the Midwest floods, which caused thousands of farmers to lose their lands, houses, and livestock, had come as God's judgment against America's failure to support his anti-abortion crusade. The next year, 1992, proved to be one of the most fractious election years, as the religious right flexed its muscle for the first time on a national scale. Christians seemed more interested in power than in grace.

Shortly after the 1992 election I shared a panel with Lucinda Robb, granddaughter of President Lyndon Johnson and daughter of Senator Chuck and Lynda Robb. Her family had just gone through a bruising campaign against Oliver North, in which right-wing Christians picketed their every appearance. "I thought we were Christians," Lucinda told me. "We grew up with Billy Graham as a frequent visitor, and we have always been active in church. We truly believe. But these demonstrators treated us like we were demons from hell."

The panel we shared addressed the topic "Culture Wars" before a large gathering that tilted toward the liberal Democratic persuasion and

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included a strong Jewish minority. I had been selected as the token evangelical Christian. In addition to Lucinda Robb, the panel included the presidents of the Disney Channel and Warner Brothers, as well as the president of Wellesley College and Anita Hill's personal attorney.

To prepare for my talk, I went through the Gospels for guidance, only to be reminded how unpolitical Jesus was. In the words of P. T. Forsyth, "The largest and deepest reference of the Gospel is not to the world or its social problems, but to Eternity and its social obligations." Today, each time an election rolls around Christians debate whether this or that candidate is "God's man" for the White House. Projecting myself back into Jesus' time, I had difficulty imagining him pondering whether Tiberius, Octavius, or Julius Caesar was "God's man" for the empire.

When my turn came to speak, I said that the man I follow, a Palestinian Jew from the first century, had also been involved in a culture war. He went up against a rigid religious establishment and a pagan empire. The two powers, often at odds, conspired together to eliminate him. His response? Not to fight, but to give his life for these his enemies, and to point to that gift as proof of his love. Among the last words he spoke before death were these: "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing."

After the panel, a television celebrity came up to me whose name every reader would recognize. "I've got to tell you, what you said stabbed me right in the heart," he said. "I was prepared to dislike you because I dislike all right-wing Christians and I assumed you were one. You can't imagine the mail I get from right-wingers. I don't follow Jesus—I'm a Jew. But when you told about Jesus forgiving his enemies, I realized how far from that spirit I am. I fight my enemies, especially the right-wingers. I don't forgive them. I have much to learn from the spirit of Jesus."

In that celebrity's life, the slow, steady undertow of grace was at work.

Jesus' images portray the kingdom as a kind of secret force. Sheep among wolves, treasure hidden in a field, the tiniest seed in the garden, wheat growing among weeds, a pinch of yeast worked into bread dough,



a sprinkling of salt on meat—all these hint at a movement that works within society, changing it from the inside out. You do not need a shovelful of salt to preserve a slab of ham; a dusting will suffice.

Jesus did not leave an organized host of followers, for he knew that a handful of salt would gradually work its way through the mightiest empire in the world. Against all odds, the great institutions of Rome—the law code, libraries, the Senate, Roman legions, roads, aqueducts, public monuments—gradually crumbled, but the little band to whom Jesus gave these images prevailed and continues on today.

Søren Kierkegaard described himself as a spy, and indeed Christians behave like spies, living in one world while our deepest allegiance belongs to another. We are resident aliens, or *sojourners*, to use a biblical phrase. My visits to totalitarian states have filled that phrase with new meaning.

For many years dissidents in Eastern Europe met in secret, used code words, avoided public telephones, and published pseudonymous essays in underground papers. In the mid-1970s, however, these dissidents began to realize that their double lives had cost them dearly. By working in secret, always with a nervous glance over the shoulder, they had succumbed to fear, the goal of their Communist opponents all along. They made a conscious decision to change tactics. “We will act as if we are free, at all costs,” Polish and Czech dissidents decided. They began holding public meetings, often in church buildings, despite the presence of known informers. They signed articles, sometimes adding an address and phone number, and distributed newspapers openly on the street corners.

In effect, the dissidents started acting in the way they thought society should act. If you want freedom of speech, speak freely. If you love the truth, tell the truth. The authorities did not know how to respond. Sometimes they cracked down—nearly all the dissidents spent time in prison—and sometimes they watched with a frustration bordering on rage. Meanwhile the dissidents’ brazen tactics made it far easier for them to connect with one another and the West, and a kind of “freedom archipelago” took shape, a bright counterpart to the darkling “Gulag archipelago.”

Remarkably, we have lived to see these dissidents triumph. An alternative kingdom of ragged subjects, of prisoners, poets, and priests, who

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conveyed their words in the scrawl of hand-copied *samizdat*, toppled what seemed an impregnable fortress. In each nation the church operated as a counterforce, sometimes quietly and sometimes loudly insisting on a truth that transcended, and often contradicted, official propaganda. In Poland the Catholics marched past government buildings shouting, "We forgive you!" In East Germany, Christians lit candles, prayed, and marched in the streets until one night the Berlin Wall collapsed like a rotten dam.

Early on, Stalin built a village in Poland called Nowa Huta, or "New Town," to demonstrate the promise of communism. He could not change the entire country at once, he said, but he could construct one new town with a shiny steel factory, spacious apartments, plentiful parks, and broad streets as a token of what would follow. Later, Nowa Huta became one of the hotbeds of Solidarity, demonstrating instead the failure of communism to make just one town work.

What if Christians used that same approach in secular society and succeeded? "In the world the Christians are a colony of the true home," said Bonhoeffer. Perhaps Christians should work harder toward establishing colonies of the kingdom that point to our true home. All too often the church holds up a mirror reflecting back the society around it, rather than a window revealing a different way.

If the world despises a notorious sinner, the church will love her. If the world cuts off aid to the poor and the suffering, the church will offer food and healing. If the world oppresses, the church will raise up the oppressed. If the world shames a social outcast, the church will proclaim God's reconciling love. If the world seeks profit and self-fulfillment, the church seeks sacrifice and service. If the world demands retribution, the church dispenses grace. If the world splinters into factions, the church joins together in unity. If the world destroys its enemies, the church loves them.

That, at least, is the vision of the church in the New Testament: a colony of heaven in a hostile world. Dwight L. Moody said, "Of one hundred men, one will read the Bible; the ninety-nine will read the Christian."

Like the dissidents in Communist countries, Christians live by a different set of rules. We are a “peculiar” people, wrote Bonhoeffer, which he defined as extraordinary, unusual, that which is not a matter of course. Jesus was not crucified for being a good citizen, for being just a little nicer than everyone else. The powers of his day correctly saw him and his followers as subversives because they took orders from a higher power than Rome or Jerusalem.

What would a subversive church look like in the modern United States? Some observers have called the United States the most religious nation on earth. If true, that fact leads to a bracing question, as articulated by Dallas Willard: Shouldn’t a quarter pound of salt be having more effect on a pound of meat?

Surely a peculiar people should demonstrate a higher standard of personal ethics than the surrounding world. Yet, to take just one example, pollster George Barna discovered that born-again Christians in modern America actually have a higher rate of divorce (twenty-seven percent) than nonbelievers (twenty-three percent); those who describe themselves as fundamentalists have the highest percentage of all (thirty percent). Indeed, four of the six states with the highest divorce rates fall in the region known as the Bible Belt. Far from being peculiar, modern Christians tend to look just like everyone else, only more so. Unless our personal ethics rise above the level around us, we can hardly hope to act as a moral preservative.

Even if Christians demonstrated the highest standard of ethics, however, that alone would not fulfill the gospel. After all, the Pharisees had impeccable ethics. Rather, Jesus reduced the mark of a Christian to one word. “By this all men will know that you are my disciples,” he said: “if you *love* one another.” The most subversive act the church can take is consistently to obey that one command.

Perhaps the reason politics has proved such a snare for the church is that power rarely coexists with love. People in power draw up lists of friends and enemies, then reward their friends and punish their enemies. Christians are commanded to love even their enemies. Chuck Colson, who perfected the art of power politics under the Nixon Administration,

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now says he has little faith in politics to solve the social problems of today. Our best efforts at changing society will fall short unless the church can teach the world how to love.

Colson cites a poignant example of a Christian who obeyed the command of love rather than the rules of power. After President Nixon resigned in disgrace, he retreated to his San Clemente compound to live in virtual isolation. Because politicians did not want to sully their own reputations by being seen with him, Nixon had few visitors at first. One exception was Mark Hatfield, an outspoken Christian who had often opposed Nixon in the U.S. Senate. Colson asked why he risked the trips to San Clemente. "To let Mr. Nixon know that someone loved him," Hatfield replied.

I know something of the abuse Billy Graham received for meeting with Bill and Hillary Clinton and for praying at Clinton's inaugurations. Graham too believes the command to love transcends political differences, and for this reason he has ministered to every president since Harry Truman, regardless of politics. In a private interview, I asked Reverend Graham which president he had spent the most time with. To my surprise, he named Lyndon Johnson, a man with whom he had deep political differences. Yet Johnson had a fear of death and "he always seemed to want a pastor around." For Graham, the person was more important than the policy.

During the Brezhnev era at the height of the Cold War, Billy Graham visited Russia and met with government and church leaders. Conservatives back home reproached him for treating the Russians with such courtesy and respect. He should have taken a more prophetic role, they said, by condemning the abuses of human rights and religious liberty. One of his critics accused him of setting the church back fifty years. Graham listened, lowered his head, and replied, "I am deeply ashamed. I have been trying very hard to set the church back two thousand years."

Politics draws lines between people; in contrast, Jesus' love cuts across those lines and dispenses grace. That does not mean, of course, that Christians should not involve themselves in politics. It simply means that as we do so we must not let the rules of power displace the command to love.

Ron Sider has said,

Think of the impact if the first thing radical feminists thought of when the conversation turned to evangelical men was that they had the best reputation for keeping their marriage vows and serving their wives in the costly fashion of Jesus at the cross. Think of the impact if the first thing the homosexual community thought of when someone mentioned evangelicals was that they were the people who lovingly ran the AIDS shelters and tenderly cared for them down to the last gasp. A little consistent wholesome modeling and costly servanthood are worth millions of true words harshly spoken.

A friend of mine worked at a pregnancy counseling center. A committed Catholic, she counseled clients to choose against abortion and let her find adoptive parents for their babies. Because of its location close to a major university, pro-choice demonstrators often picketed the center. One cold, snowy Michigan day, my friend sent out for doughnuts and coffee, ordering enough for all the demonstrators opposing her center. When the food arrived, she went out in person to offer it to her “enemies.”

“I know we disagree on this issue,” she told them. “But I still respect you as people, and I know it must be cold standing out here all day. I thought you might want some nourishment.”

The pickets were shocked speechless. They mumbled thanks and stared at the coffee, though most refused to drink it (had she laced it with poison?).

Christians may choose to enter an arena of power, but when we do so we dare not leave love behind. “Power without love is reckless and abusive,” said Martin Luther King Jr. “Power at its best is love implementing the demands of justice.”

Friedrich Nietzsche accused the Christian church as having “taken the side of everything weak, base, ill-constituted.” He scorned a religion of pity that thwarted the law of evolution and its rules favoring power

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and competition. Nietzsche put his finger on the scandal of grace, a scandal that he traced back to “God on the cross.”

Nietzsche was right. In Jesus' parables, the rich and healthy never seem to make it to the wedding feast, while the poor and the weak come running. And through the ages, Christian saints have chosen the most undarwinian objects for their love. Mother Teresa's nuns lavish care on homeless wretches who have mere days if not hours left to live. Jean Vanier, founder of the l'Arche movement, lives in a home that employs seventeen assistants to work with ten mentally handicapped men and women, none of whom will ever be able to speak or coordinate their hand movements. Dorothy Day of the Catholic Worker Movement admitted to the folly of her soup kitchen: “What a delightful thing it is,” she said, “to be boldly profligate, to ignore the price of coffee and go on serving the long line of destituted men who come to us, good coffee and the finest of bread.”

The Christian knows to serve the weak not because they deserve it but because God extended his love to us when we deserved the opposite. Christ came *down* from heaven, and whenever his disciples entertained dreams of prestige and power he reminded them that the greatest is the one who serves. The ladder of power reaches up, the ladder of grace reaches down.

As a journalist, I have had the privilege of seeing many wonderful examples of Christians who dispense grace. Unlike political activists, this group does not often make the newspapers. Faithfully they serve, seasoning our culture with the preservative of the gospel. I tremble to imagine what the modern United States would look like without the “salt of the earth” in its midst.

“Never underestimate the power of a minority who cherish the vision of a just and gentle world,” said Robert Bellah. These are the people I wish would come to mind when I ask my airplane seatmates, “What does an evangelical Christian look like?”

I know the hospice movement well, for my wife works in one as a chaplain. I once interviewed Dame Cicely Saunders, founder of the modern hospice movement, at St. Christopher's Hospice in London. A social worker and nurse, she was appalled at the way medical staff treated people who were about to die—in essence, ignoring them, as tokens of

failure. This attitude offended Saunders as a Christian, for care of the dying has traditionally been one of the church's seven works of mercy. Since no one would listen to a nurse, she returned to medical school and became a doctor before founding a place where people could come to die with dignity and without pain. Now, hospices exist in forty countries including two thousand in the United States alone—about half of which have a Christian base. Dame Cicely believed from the beginning that Christians offer the best combination of physical, emotional, and spiritual care for people facing death. She holds up hospice care as a glowing alternative to Dr. Kevorkian and his “right to die” movement.

I think of the thousands of chapters based on the twelve-step program that meet in church basements, VFW halls, and living rooms all across the nation, any night of the week. The Christians who founded Alcoholics Anonymous faced a choice: whether to make it a restrictively Christian organization or to found it on Christian principles and then set it free. They chose the latter option, and now millions of people in America look to their program—based on dependence on a “Higher Power” and on a supportive community—as a remedy for addictions to alcohol, drugs, sex, and food.

I think of Millard Fuller, a millionaire entrepreneur from Alabama who still speaks with a cotton-field twang. Rich but miserable, his marriage on the rocks, he headed to Americus, Georgia, where he fell under the spell of Clarence Jordan and the Koinonia Community. Before long, Fuller gave away his personal fortune and founded an organization on the simple premise that every person on the planet deserves a decent place to live. Today Habitat for Humanity enlists thousands of volunteers to build houses all over the world. I once heard Fuller explain his work to a skeptical Jewish woman, “Ma’am, we don’t try to evangelize. You don’t have to be a Christian to live in one of our houses or to help us build one. But the fact is, the reason I do what I do, and so many of our volunteers do what they do, is that we’re being obedient to Jesus.”

I think of Chuck Colson, imprisoned for his role in Watergate, who emerged with a desire to climb not up, but down. He founded Prison Fellowship, which today operates in almost eighty countries. Families of

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more than two million U.S. prisoners have received Christmas presents thanks to Colson's Angel Tree project. Overseas, church members bring pots of stew and loaves of fresh-baked bread to prisoners who would otherwise starve. The Brazilian government even allows Prison Fellowship to oversee a prison run by the Christian inmates themselves. Humaita Prison employs only two staff members and yet has no problems with riots or escapees and has a repeat offender rate of four percent compared to seventy-five percent in the rest of Brazil.

I think of Bill Magee, a plastic surgeon who was shocked to find that in Third World countries many children go through life with cleft palates that never get treated. They cannot smile, and their lips curl open in a constant sneer, making them the object of ridicule. Magee and his wife organized a program called Operation Smile: planeloads of doctors and support personnel travel to places like Vietnam, the Philippines, Kenya, Russia, and the Middle East in order to repair facial deformities. So far, they have operated on more than thirty-six thousand children, leaving behind a legacy of children's smiles.

I think of medical missionaries I have known in India, especially those who work with leprosy patients. On the scale of ungrace, there is no more abused group of people on earth than leprosy victims who come from the Untouchable caste. You cannot descend any lower. Most of the major advances in the treatment of leprosy have come from Christian missionaries, because they were the only people willing to touch and care for leprosy victims. Thanks largely to the work of these faithful servants, the disease is now fully controllable by drugs, and the chance of contagion is minimal.

I think of Bread for the World, an agency founded by Christians who believed they could best help the hungry not by starting a competitor to World Vision but by lobbying Congress on behalf of the world's poor. Or of Joseph's House, a home for AIDS patients in Washington, D.C. Or of Pat Robertson's Operation Blessing that runs inner-city programs in thirty-five large cities, or of Jerry Falwell's "Save a Baby Homes" where pregnant women can go to a loving home for support if they choose to carry their babies to term rather than abort—programs that get far less attention than do their founders' political views.



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Rousseau said the church set up an irresolvable loyalty dilemma. How can Christians be good citizens of this world if they are primarily concerned about the next world? The people I have mentioned, and many millions like them, disprove his argument. As C. S. Lewis has noted, those most conscious of another world have made the most effective Christians in this one.