BEYOND TODAY

Envisioning a Better World Tomorrow

THE TRAP OF FALSE WORSHIP

6 The Monster Among Us

Fear vs. Faith 14

18 Does God Allow Women Pastors?

The Rise of No Contact 22

October 2026–January 2027

Contents

October 2026–January 2027

Cover article

The Trap of False Worship
Many secular holidays are associated with memorable times with family and worshiping God. But could that be a trap for something far more sinister?
by Emma Cortelyou

Articles & Columns

4–5
Comments From Our Readers & Editorial

6
The Monster Among Us
Random acts of evil plague our headlines. But are they actually random? Or is there something behind heinous acts of violence and hatred? There is, in fact, a monster lurking out there that seeks to do us harm.
by Dan Preston

14
Fear vs. Faith
Many things in life can cause us to fear. But is that what God intended? And what role should faith play in establishing our vision of the future?
by Dan Dowd

18
Does God Allow Women Pastors?
God has called both men and women to His Church. But has He called both men and women to do the same work in the Church? Can women be pastors, and what does the Word of God have to say on the subject?
by Amber Duran

22
The Rise of No Contact
An increasing number of people looking for help with troubled relationships are being advised to go "no contact." Is this wise, and is there ever a time to cut someone completely off?
by Lena VanAusdle

27 **Follow Me . . .**
Landing on Gentleness
Like an airplane touching down, our interactions with others can be smooth and gentle—or quite rough. What can we do to grow that gentleness?
by Robin Webber

30 **Compass Check**
What Is Biblical Modesty?
What if modesty is about far more than clothing? With honesty, biblical insight and personal reflection, we need to examine the deeper attitudes of pride, attention and humility that shape how we present ourselves to the world.
by Tarra McGuire

34 **Questions & Answers**
How can you resist the evil influences of Satan the devil?

35 **More Ways to Access *Beyond Today***

Cover: Matt Hernandez; Right: Khanchit Khirisuchalual via Getty

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Comments From Our Readers

Wanting to connect

How can I get your monthly publication mailed to my home? I used to get it and have donated money in the past. I find your publications very helpful and educational. I would be happy to pay for it or make donations.

Reader from Minnesota

You can manage your subscription at ucg.org/user/subscriptions. All our resources are free for the asking!

I am new to the United Church of God. Through *Beyond Today,* I have watched several videos and requested booklets as well as downloaded a couple of them and enjoyed the resources. A friend who is incarcerated told me about *Beyond Today* and asked me for help in getting some of the booklets, which got me connected to UCG. I do appreciate the opportunity to contact you as well as watch the *Beyond Today* episodes; I am learning much.

From the Internet

We're glad you enjoy our Beyond Today *content! To help an incarcerated individual request a free copy, go to ucg.org/user/subscriptions and make sure to include their prisoner number on the same line as their last name.*

Looking for in-depth study material

I would like to request *The Rich Man and Lazarus* booklet. I most importantly would like to thank you for providing me with so many study guides. I thank you for your ministry. Through *true* biblical truth, it has completely changed and transformed my life. I have fallen in love with God's Word all over again, and it has changed me completely. From the way I study His Word to how I walk, talk, I truly live my life for Christ. I've watched so many sermons and feel like I can't get enough of His Word and message. Thank you for that! It has been instrumental to me.

From the Internet

We're greatly encouraged that God's Word is transforming the way you live! You can request the Bible study aid at ucg.org/830. May God continue to guide you as you seek His will for your life!

Needing encouragement and guidance

I'm 32 years old and seeking a closer relationship with God. I attend a Christian church in Parana, Brazil. But since becoming a mother, I've been experiencing symptoms of depression. I became interested in reading the Bible with the intention of feeling God's presence in my life. I thirst for the Word, but I don't know how to start reading it. I want to do devotionals, but I only have a basic understanding of the Word.

Reader from Brazil

Thank you for reaching out. Often the best way to start reading the Bible is to choose a book and simply read. Psalms is a great place to start, as it contains many passages of King David and others reaching out to God and sharing their troubles with Him. You may find our study guide How to Understand the Bible *helpful for your studies. You can read it online or request a free copy at ucg.org/ub.*

Hello, I have been reading through your beliefs and noticed the statement about the commanded observance of the seven annual biblical festivals/Holy Days. I am genuinely trying to understand this teaching better. I can see where those festivals were commanded for ancient Israel under the Mosaic Law, especially in Leviticus 23. Where I am having difficulty is understanding where the Christian Greek Scriptures command Christians today to continue observing them after Christ. How do you harmonize that belief with scriptures such as Colossians 2:16-17, which says not to let anyone judge Christians regarding "the observance of a festival" because those things were "a shadow," while the reality belongs to Christ? I am asking respectfully, because I had considered visiting your church and would like to understand your position more clearly. Thank you for your time.

From the Internet

Thank you for inquiring into this topic! It is important to seek out answers from the Bible, which includes taking in the context of the scriptures we read. In the section of scriptures you mention, Paul was writing to a Christian audience that was surrounded by pagan practices, particularly the practice of asceticism. This philosophy suggests that spirit is good, and matter is evil. Asceticism avoids any physical pleasure, restricting food and drink and other kinds of enjoyment. Paul is warning his readers not to fall into these ways or to let others shame them for rejoicing in God's festivals. You can read a more thorough explanation in the chapter called "Colossians 2 verses 16-17: Are God's Laws Obsolete?" in our Bible study aid The New Covenant: Does It Abolish God's Law? *available at ucg.org/nc.*

Wanting to attend church

I trust you are well. I live in Zimbabwe and I have been looking for a Christian church which aligns with my beliefs. I come from a Pentecostal church which worships on Sundays, and since late last year the Lord has led me to start worshiping on His Holy Day, the Sabbath. I have since been looking for a church which is not Seventh Day Adventist. I came across UCG, and I've been going through your website to find out more about the church, and I believe UCG aligns well with my beliefs and faith in God. I want to find out if there is a UCG church which I can attend.

Reader from Zimbabwe

You can find a map of our congregations at ucg.org/congregations. If you can't find a congregation close to you, you may tune into one of our Sabbath webcasts at ucg.org/watch/webcast or listen to our catalog of sermons at ucg.org/sermons/search.

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Worship God—but on Whose Terms?

Some view God as a sort of vague and elusive being. Why does He do what He does? What does He want from me? How do we know if what we're doing is right or wrong and whether it will anger or please Him?

God is all-powerful and all-knowing. But He's not complicated. He gave us His Word, which outlines both *what* He wants from us and *why* He does what He does.

Let's answer the *why* first: "You shall walk in all the ways which the LORD your God has commanded you, that you may live and that it may be well with you, and that you may prolong your days in the land which you shall possess" (Deuteronomy 5:33). While this command was given specifically to ancient Israel, the fundamental reason for all His commands is the same: They are for our own good.

Beyond that, 1 John 4:8 tells us, "God is love." When a loving father sets a rule for his children to play in the yard and not in the street, the reason for the rule is love and concern for their safety.

So what of the *how* in worshiping God? Is our intent all that matters, or are there rules for how to worship Him?

Once again, we can learn from the commands given to ancient Israel. "These are the statutes and judgments which you shall be careful to observe in the land which the LORD God of your fathers is giving you to possess, all the days that you live on the earth. You shall utterly destroy all the places where the nations which you shall dispossess served their gods, on the high mountains and on the hills and under every green tree. And you shall destroy their altars, break their sacred pillars, and burn their wooden images with fire; you shall cut down the carved images of their gods and destroy their names from that place. *You shall not worship the LORD your God with such things*" (Deuteronomy 12:1-4, emphasis added).

God was very clear: Do not adopt the worship practices of other religions. How do *you* worship God?

God was very clear: Do not adopt the worship practices of other religions (see also verses 29-32). This is known as syncretism, or the blending of religions, resulting in a mixture of truth and lies. A casual search of holidays such as Christmas and Easter will show they are prime examples of syncretism, with practices used to worship pagan gods adapted to the worshiping the true God. This is exactly what He said *not* to do.

How do *you* worship God? Are you following *His* standard or *yours?*

It might sound like an odd question with an obvious answer. But be honest with yourself. Are really following His terms? This might come as a shock, but if you're getting a candy bowl ready for the trick-or-treaters in your neighborhood or beginning to think about how you'll decorate for Christmas this year, you are *not* worshiping God on His terms.

In this issue's cover story, "The Trap of False Worship," we'll take an in-depth look at how God expects us to worship Him.

Dan Preston, Senior editor

P.S. Note that this issue spans four months—from October 2026 to January 2027. In February 2027 we'll resume a three-month cycle.

Aaron Burden via Unsplash

The Monster Among Us

Random acts of evil plague our headlines. But are they actually random? Or is there something behind heinous acts of violence and hatred? There is, in fact, a monster lurking out there that seeks to do us harm.

by Dan Preston

Listen

I awoke

not long ago to a truly horrifying headline. A 16-year-old boy and his dog were shot dead in their own home. A young life and his beloved companion were snuffed out in an instant with a senseless act of violence.

What made this particularly shocking is that it wasn't in a bad area of town or late at night where drug deals often go bad. It was in a rural part of North Carolina on an early Saturday morning, where a boy and his dog should feel perfectly safe.

"There are times in my life when I have questioned the moral compass of society, and this is truly another one of those times," Forsyth County Sheriff Bobby Kimbrough Jr. said in a news release dated May 2, 2026. "When a 16-year-old child and his pet can be gunned down in the quiet of the morning hours, it causes me to question our sense of morality and brings true anguish. Make no mistake about it, there is a monster among us."

Sheriff Kimbrough is more accurate than perhaps he realizes. The monster isn't merely the one responsible for this heinous act. It's not youth violence, guns or drugs. It's not even the moral decay that he so rightly points out is occurring in our world today. This particular monster works behind the scenes on a grand scale, his influence pervading into the details of individual human lives across the globe. The monster's name is Satan the devil.

The monster

While that might sound trite and make you think, *Well, obviously,* our world today often has no clue who the true enemy is.

Scripture warns us, "Be sober, be vigilant; because your adversary the devil walks about like a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour" (1 Peter 5:8).

Make no mistake—Satan the devil wants you dead. Only, it's more than that.

The heartbreaking murder of a boy and his dog in the country, a shootout in a bad part of town over drug territory or even tens of thousands of soldiers killing one another on a battlefield is not enough for our enemy. No, it's actually much bigger than that. His objective is to separate people from God, destroy humanity and thwart God's purpose for mankind.

"How you are fallen from heaven, O Lucifer, son of the morning! How you are cut down to the ground, you who weakened the nations! For you have said in your heart: 'I will ascend into heaven, I will exalt my throne above the stars of God; I will also sit on the mount of the congregation on the farthest sides of the north; I will ascend above the heights of the clouds, I will be like the Most High'" (Isaiah 14:12-14).

The powerful, angelic being Lucifer wanted to be ruler over not just earth, but the universe and its creator, God. After attempting to overthrow God's throne, Lucifer was cast to the earth where he became Satan the devil (Luke 10:18). Unable to conquer God, Satan turned his attention toward destroying everything God loves, especially his greatest creation, mankind. For more on this topic, see our free study aid *Is There Really a Devil?*

The monster's weapons

While Satan uses things like war and greed to get humanity to kill one another, these are but a few of his weapons. The apostle Paul reminded the congregation in Corinth that Satan would use every trick in the book in his war on mankind. Speaking specifically of an attitude of unforgiveness, Paul reminds us to be careful, "lest Satan should take advantage of us; for we are not ignorant of his devices" (2 Corinthians 2:11).

It's not guns or bombs the monster uses to hunt us. The far deadlier weapon in the war he is waging is *sin*.

Remember our enemy's main goal—the annihilation of mankind. Not just now, but forever. He wants us to reject God and our opportunity for eternal life, and the temptation of sin is Satan's weapon of choice. If he can lead us into persistent sins that we refuse to repent of, we separate ourselves from God *eternally* by rejecting Him, His laws and the sacrifice of Jesus Christ. The result is then eternal death (Isaiah 59:2; Romans 6:23). To be sure, Satan's tactic *can* work on us. Although Satan powerfully influences this world, individuals remain responsible for the choices they make and the sins they commit.

Paul put it quite simply in Romans 6:23 that "the wages of sin is death." If we sin, we earn the penalty

Satan's objective is to separate people from God, destroy humanity and thwart God's purpose for mankind.

Rafael Garcin via Unsplash

for sin, which is death. If Satan can persuade us to commit to a life of sin without repentance, then he doesn't need to do anything else.

This of course presents a very big problem. We all sin (Romans 3:23). Thus, we all have earned death.

So, has Satan already won?

No. And he won't.

Given a vision of what will happen, the apostle John recorded: "Then I saw an angel coming down from heaven, having the key to the bottomless pit and a great chain in his hand. He laid hold of the dragon, that serpent of old, who is the Devil and Satan, and bound him for a thousand years; and he cast him into the bottomless pit, and shut him up, and set a seal on him, so that he should deceive the nations no more . . ." (Revelation 20:1-3). Scripture goes on to explain that Satan will be released for a short time, followed by his final punishment in the lake of fire. He will be permanently prevented from ever deceiving or influencing anyone ever again (Revelation 20:7-10).

But why?

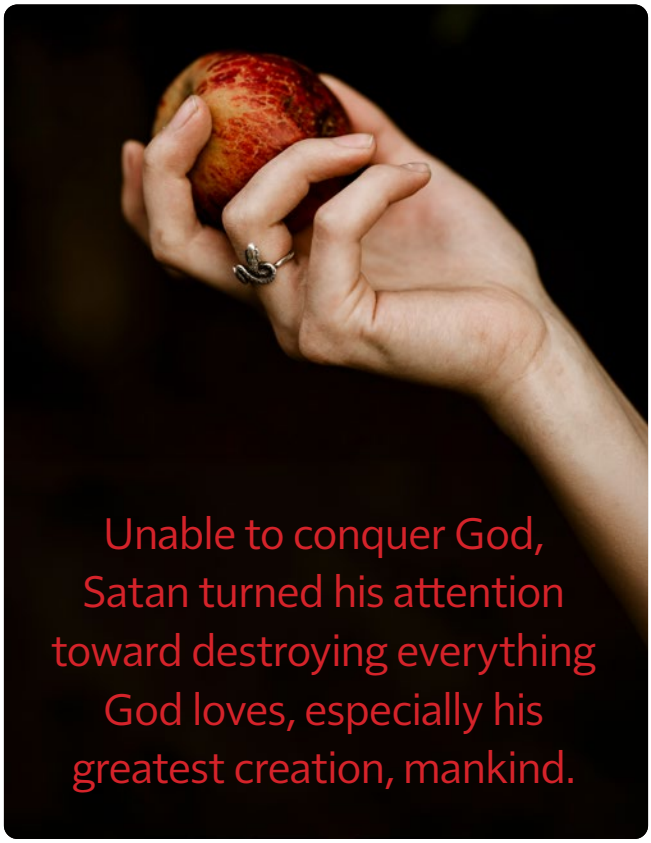
That brings up another question: If Satan will eventually be prevented from causing harm to mankind, why does God allow this enemy to wreak such havoc *now?*

Satan is the "god of this age," and God is allowing—for now—the devil to blind people's minds to the point where they are unable to understand the gospel of Jesus Christ (2 Corinthians 4:4).

So why allow this monster to torture our existence? And what about the damage that he's doing now, tempting and influencing you, me and everyone who has ever lived into sin, which separates us from God?

Satan was not created as an evil monster. In fact, Satan was not created at all. God created Lucifer, who was, quite literally, a perfect angel.

In a passage understood to describe Lucifer, the anointed cherub who became Satan, we read: "'You were the seal of perfection, full of wisdom and perfect in beauty. You were in Eden, the garden of God; every precious stone was your covering: the sardius, topaz, and diamond, beryl, onyx, and jasper, sapphire, turquoise, and emerald with gold. The workmanship of your timbrels and pipes was prepared for you on the day you were created. You were the anointed cherub who covers; I established you; you were on the holy mountain of God; you walked back and forth in the midst of fiery stones. You were perfect in your ways from the day you were created, till iniquity was found in you'" (Ezekiel 28:12-15).



God created Lucifer perfect in his ways. But in time, through his own pride, choices and rebellion, his behavior became wicked. As we saw earlier in Isaiah 14, he determined to exalt himself and attempt to overthrow God.

Lucifer became Satan as a product of his choices. He was then cast out of the heavenly realm (Luke 10:18), and he continues to torment the earth and its inhabitants to this day.

As to why God would allow this for now, the pain and suffering we see do have a point. God permits humanity to experience the consequences of rejecting His way. Ultimately, human beings must learn that they are incapable of successfully governing themselves apart from God. For a deeper dive into this topic, read our study guide *Why Does God Allow Suffering?* linked at the end of this article.

By blinding much of mankind to the gospel and spreading his wrong attitudes, Satan draws society into the moral decay we see today. Without understanding the right principles to guide our lives defined through God's Word, we are left to our own carnal desires, which are amplified through Satan's influence to produce the pain and suffering brought about by sin.

The monster's defeat

As we saw earlier, Satan will ultimately be defeated. But in his path, he will have left a wake of destruction.

Notably, the consequences of sin that humanity has heaped up for itself under his influence.

Just as Satan has a weapon of choice, God provides a means to victory—Jesus Christ!

In lamenting the struggle we all face with sin and its inevitable outcome, the apostle Paul said: "For what I am doing, I do not understand. For what I will to do, that I do not practice; but what I hate, that I do" (Romans 7:15).

He goes on to say, "For I know that in me (that is, in my flesh) nothing good dwells; for to will is present with me, but how to perform what is good I do not find" (verse 18). The challenge isn't just knowing right from wrong; it's having the determination and resolve to actually do it.

Frustrated with this struggle, Paul exclaims: "O wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?" (verse 24).

Then, when it seems the battle is lost, Paul identifies our secret weapon—our deliverance from sin: "I thank God—through Jesus Christ our Lord!" (verse 25).

Paul expands this concept in 2 Corinthians 10:3-5: "For though we walk in the flesh, we do not war according to the flesh. For the weapons of our warfare are not carnal but mighty in God for pulling down strongholds, casting down arguments and every high thing that exalts itself against the knowledge of God, bringing every thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ."

These "arguments" and "high thing[s]" are synonyms for sin of every type that opposes the knowledge and authority of God. A senseless killing of an innocent boy, Lucifer's pride that led him to try and ascend above God, our own faults and shortcomings. These all reflect sin's destructive influence and are spiritual strongholds we cannot defeat on our own. Because sin is a spiritual problem, it can't be defeated by mere physical attempts.

When we accept that God's law is good and right and strive to bring our thoughts and actions into captivity through true, heartfelt repentance and obedience to Christ, God gives us the help and strength to overcome. Through Christ living in us by the Holy Spirit, victory over sin is possible.

Victory declared!

Satan's most powerful weapon, sin, has no power over our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

There is a monster lurking out there. Satan the devil, who chose rebellion and himself succumbed to sin, works tirelessly to tempt us to do the same. The results from his influence on human choices are wars, random murders of innocent children and all sorts of vile acts and evil thinking that violate God's laws and statutes.

In time, all humanity will have the opportunity to know God, understand Christ's sacrifice and choose His way of life. Millennia of hurt and pain brought on by Satan's influence will be healed.

The monster's defeat is certain. While still very active in our world today, the time is coming when his weapon of choice will no longer have power over us. Through Jesus Christ, God provides forgiveness and removal of sin (Mark 2:10; 1 John 1:9). In time, all humanity will have the opportunity to know God, understand Christ's sacrifice and choose His way of life. Millennia of hurt and pain brought on by Satan's influence will be healed.

We do not have to live in fear of Satan or his chief weapon, sin. James 4:7 tells us: "Submit to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you." When we turn to God, repent of our sins, accept salvation through Jesus Christ and yield ourselves to be led by the Holy Spirit, the monster that rules our world is defeated. BT

DIVE DEEPER

To learn more about the monster that lives among us, request or download our free Bible study guide *Is There Really a Devil?* by scanning the code on the left or at ucg.org/rd. To better understand why bad things happen to innocent people, request or download our free Bible study guide *Why Does God Allow Suffering?* by scanning the code on the right or at ucg.org/as.

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THE TRAP OF FALSE WORSHIP

Many secular holidays are associated with memorable times with family and worshiping God. But could that be a trap for something far more sinister?

by Emma Cortelyou

Listen

Halloween, Christmas and Easter are filled with familiar traditions—costumes and trick-or-treating, tree decorating and gift giving, rabbits and egg hunts. Consumer culture never fails to remind us about each upcoming holiday, with stores often stocking the shelves full of spiderweb decorations and ornaments before the summer ends.

These traditions are so ingrained in our society that many people celebrate them without much thought about their origins. For many, they are simply enjoyable traditions that bring family and friends together. But even if you don't view these holidays through a religious lens or observe only the "good" religious elements, that doesn't erase the origins of these days.

As Christians, we are called to follow Christ's example and carefully examine how we walk in God's ways. That includes *how* we worship God. Ultimately, the question to answer is: Who does worship belong to? Is it just a set of traditions that can be bent and adapted based on what society needs at the time? Is it a set of repetitive practices to bring people comfort in routine?

Throughout the Bible, the answer is clear: Worship is for God and designated by God.

Mixing truth and error

This mixing of beliefs and traditional practices actually has a theological term assigned to it. It's called syncretism. Merriam-Webster's dictionary defines syncretism as "the combination of different forms of belief or practice." It is often the result of two cultures coming together, blending language, art and social practices. Syncretism isn't necessarily bad when describing the blending of cultures, but religious syncretism is a serious problem because it introduces practices from other forms of worship into the worship of God. It alters the methods of worship that God specifically outlines.

Traditions surrounding holidays like Halloween, Christmas and Easter provide familiar examples of how different religious and cultural practices can become blended. People participate in these traditions without knowing

where they came from or what they originally represented.

But syncretism isn't just limited to holidays. It happens when we use ideas, practices or traditions from other religions in our worship of God. Syncretism can happen subtly. And without careful examination of our practices, it can take root in our lives.

Only God can designate proper worship, and no amount of human intention or earnestness can make different forms of worship acceptable.

Humanity has found syncretism appealing for about as long as people have existed. It's in our nature to search for new and exciting things, even if it results in turning from the good things God commands us to do.

When God brought the Israelites out of slavery in the land of Egypt, He knew they would have a hard time truly coming out of the practices of the land. For hundreds of years, Israel had lived in that polytheistic society steeped in pagan practices. Upon bringing the people out of the land with a mighty hand and many miracles, God warned them against adopting the practices of the surrounding lands:

"When the LORD your God cuts off from before you the nations which you go to dispossess, and you displace them and dwell in their land, take heed to yourself that you are not ensnared to follow them . . . and that you do not inquire after their gods, saying, 'How did these nations serve *their* gods? I also will do likewise.' You shall not worship the LORD your God in that way; for every abomination to the LORD which He hates they have done to their gods . . ." (Deuteronomy 12:29-31, emphasis added throughout).

It's clear that God doesn't accept just any form of worship. God desires that His people be holy and set apart from the society around them (Leviticus 11:45; Romans 12:1-2).

To intermingle God's commands with surrounding practices is to treat God as common. God adds careful instruction at the end of this passage, telling them, "Whatever I command you, be careful to observe it; you shall not add to it nor take away from it" (Deuteronomy 12:32).

Not only should we not add false practices to God's commands, but we should also be careful not to take away any of His commands. Finding meaning in practices God has forbidden is not a good reason to continue in them.

Only God can designate proper worship, and no amount of human intention or earnestness can make different forms of worship acceptable.

More subtle forms of syncretism

Blending in pagan elements isn't the only way people can distort God's worship. The Pharisees in the New Testament were guilty of this through their development and practice of many traditions that violated the intended nature of the commandments.

One of many traditions that the Pharisees clung to was the requirement to wash their hands in a special way before eating. When the Pharisees noticed that Christ's disciples didn't wash before eating, they called them out: "Why do Your disciples transgress the tradition of the elders? For they do not wash their hands when they eat bread" (Matthew 15:2).

Christ's response probably surprised the group of men who were very religious and highly esteemed in society at the time: "Why do you also transgress the commandment of God because of your tradition?" (verse 3).

The problem wasn't in the act of washing hands but in the way they placed such sacred importance on a practice God never intended nor required. They were transgressing God's commandments by adding their own stipulations.

The dangerous thing about syncretism is that it can start out subtly. It's doubtful the Pharisees deliberately devised ways to make God's commandments a burden and unlikely they specifically thought of ways to add to the law. However, the practice of these traditions became so important to them that they mistakenly thought turning away from them would be sin.

No matter their rationalizations for these traditions or their earnestness in keeping them, it doesn't change God's commands. It doesn't matter how sincere we are in our attempts to worship God. It's important to constantly evaluate how we approach God to make sure we're worshiping Him the way He wants us to.

What syncretism does

Syncretism can divide our allegiance, taking focus away from God. Christ warns against this: "No one can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or else he will be loyal to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and mammon" (Matthew 6:24).

Keeping God's commandments partially, while mixing in other nonbiblical practices, is sitting on the fence, not fully committing to God. God expects complete, pure conversion in His followers. Though we are exposed to a myriad of alternative viewpoints and practices, it is

Matt Hernandez

imperative to remain spiritually separate.

Christ acknowledged that God's followers would be in the world; He didn't pray that they be taken out of it, but rather that God would "keep them from the evil one" (John 17:15).

Ultimately, God must know that His people will follow Him. Our being surrounded by practices contrary to God's way allows Him to see what choice we will make—follow God and obey from the heart, or succumb to the ways of the world?

What we should do about syncretism

Knowing that syncretism is not how God wants to be worshiped, what should we do about it, especially as we see it in our own lives?

Instead of being conformed to the world around us, Paul tells us to be "transformed by the renewing of [our] mind" (Romans 12:2). This involves careful examination and guarding the mind.

James exhorts his audience to cleanse their hands and purify their hearts, avoiding double-mindedness or indecision (James 4:8). Even devout believers can struggle with spiritual one-mindedness—the willingness to focus completely on God and let go of everything that diverts us from Him. This requires continually comparing our attitudes and practices with God's Word.

Syncretism can be subtle. It can creep into our practices with little fanfare and with our best intentions. But just because something is enjoyable, meaningful and well-intentioned doesn't automatically make it right.

Let's walk through some steps to identify and root out syncretism in our lives.

Identify your practices

Practices are our patterns of behavior, sometimes called traditions, but they can look like many things. Celebrating Christmas and other major holidays is a big example, but syncretism can manifest in other ways that don't appear religious at first.

The core of our practices should be based on God's Word and what He wants from us. When we center anything else, we begin to stray into syncretic practices. This can look like fully supporting a political party and taking every policy and party value as truth before comparing it to the Bible. It can also look like dabbling in New Age spirituality such as crystals, astrology, manifestation and spiritual energy that doesn't come from God.

Be honest with yourself: In what ways are you worshiping God, and is there anything you do that decenters God and props up another person or practice?

Sandra Seitamaa via Unsplash

Once you've identified some of your practices, ask: Where does this particular practice come from, and what does it mean? What are my motivations for doing this? If I stopped practicing this, would it feel wrong? Why?

There are many things normalized in society that may seem harmless. But just because others accept a practice doesn't make it acceptable to God.

We are told to "test the spirits, whether they are of God" (1 John 4:1). That responsibility falls on each of us individually to seek out what is pleasing to God and what falls short. Don't let other people discern for you! Search the Bible to see what God has to say about the practices you've identified in your life.

Uproot syncretism

After examining your practices and discerning whether they're acceptable to God, it's time to uproot the practices from your life.

This can be difficult, especially if your customs involve friends or family. However, full commitment to God requires becoming a "living sacrifice" (Romans 12:1) and giving up our old ways in obedience to God. Uprooting parts of our old lives can be painful, and it will feel like something is missing. Thankfully, God has something much better in store for us!

Removing something isn't enough, though. Once we identify and uproot practices that don't belong in our worship, what should take their place?

Mercifully, God didn't create humanity and leave us without instructions on how to worship our Creator. Everything we need to know about how God wants us to live our lives in worship of Him is revealed in His Word.

It's clear that God doesn't want people to worship Him as others worship false gods. Those methods fall short of the rich meaning behind God's structured and clear directives. Instead, God shows us a better and simpler way to follow Him, and we can begin with three main areas.

1. Ten Commandments

God's Ten Commandments in Exodus 20 and Deuteronomy 5 encapsulate the way God wants us to live. They

> Syncretism can be subtle. It can creep into our practices with little fanfare and with our best intentions. But just because something is enjoyable, meaningful and well-intentioned doesn't automatically make it right.

provide instructions on how to love God (commandments 1-4) and how to love other people (5-10).

A commandment widely misapplied is number four: "Observe the Sabbath day, to keep it holy" (Deuteronomy 5:12). This commandment hasn't changed, and no human being has the authority to alter it.

These Ten Commandments are at the foundation of God's expectations for humanity. They show a way of life that leads to success in the eyes of our Creator, and this is the way that leads to a more abundant life (John 10:10). To learn more about these foundational laws, read or request our free study guide *The Ten Commandments*.

2. Holy Days

Leviticus 23 lists the "feasts of the LORD" (verse 2), which include the weekly Sabbath (on Saturday) and God's seven annual festivals. Through these festivals, God outlines His entire plan for humanity—from the death and resurrection of Christ to His return and coming Kingdom, in which God the Father will ultimately bring the New Jerusalem to a new earth.

On each of these days, believers rest from their work and gather for a commanded assembly to worship God and receive teaching from a minister about the meaning of the day. These days are not Jewish days, but God's, and thus still apply today.

Christ and His disciples are recorded in the New Testament as keeping these days, and His death does not annul these commands (see Matthew 26:17-19; Acts 2:1-21; Acts 27:9; John 7:1-14; John 7:37-38).

While society as a whole celebrates major holidays steeped in syncretism, God has a better set of Holy Days He wants His followers to keep. Instead of a focus on earthly pleasures, God's Holy Days point to His Kingdom and give His followers a foretaste of eternity (1 John 2:15-17; Colossians 3:2).

3. Christ's example

The Word, who had existed eternally with the Father, came down to earth in the flesh as Jesus Christ and lived a perfect life, ultimately giving His life to redeem humankind from its sins and eternal death (Mark 10:45; Acts 4:12; Romans 5:8-11).

Only by living a perfect life could the sins of all be atoned for, and through His perfect life Christ our Savior showed us how to put God's commands into action. Christ did not annul the law at His death. Instead, He magnified it and taught the deeper meaning behind it. His death freed us from the penalty of death for our sins but did not take away our responsibility to live by every word of God (Matthew 4:4).

Through Christ's ministry, He taught the application of the law and how to treat others. The gospel accounts—Matthew, Mark, Luke and John—paint a picture of Christ demonstrating and magnifying how living God's law can work in our lives too!

Dig deep and be honest

These are good places to start when seeking to replace syncretic practices with true worship, but this is not an exhaustive list. The more we study the Bible and seek answers from God, the more we learn about how to follow Him and cease from wrong practices.

We all inherit traditions and absorb ideas from what surrounds us. We're not immune to this, but we are responsible for examining ourselves and ensuring that our worship belongs to God alone.

The way He designed worship is perfect, and He desires a pure heart free from outside influences. That may require giving up long-held family traditions involving a Christmas tree or Easter egg hunts. It could also mean ridding our minds of ideologies that deprioritize God.

To engage in syncretism is to misunderstand the primary purpose of worship: Honoring God according to His will. Only God can define what is acceptable in worship, and human attempts at mixing His commands with other practices—no matter how well-intentioned or enjoyable—do not honor our Creator.

It's important for us as Christians to constantly examine our customs and ensure that what we're doing is according to God's will. Beyond our examinations, we must uproot our syncretic beliefs and replace them with the Word of God, making our hearts pure before God. BT

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To learn more about the dangers of syncretism, read "Christmas: The Untold Story," a part of our free study guide *Holidays or Holy Days: Does It Matter Which Days We Observe?*
Scan the code or visit ucg.org/hh to find it.

Fear *vs.* Faith

Many things in life can cause us to fear. But is that what God intended? And what role should faith play in establishing our vision of the future?

by Dan Dowd

Faith is a popular biblical topic in the Christian community. Yet we might find that we lack faith at times. And even if we have it, we can still find ourselves needing more of it.

What is faith? It is certainly trust in God. It's steadfastness. It's a surrendering of our will. But it goes beyond that.

Hebrews 11 records many examples of people who lived lives of great faith. How do we have faith like those men and women?

One major aspect of our walk of faith we don't discuss very often is the very real human tendency to be afraid.

Why do we have fear?

In our walk to come out of sin, we must not be afraid. God doesn't lead us to be fearful, but He can allow situations that make us uncomfortable. In part, this helps us learn to truly trust Him, to have faith that He will deliver us from sin and times of trouble—that He will lead us to eternal life and bring us to a place of having no fear. The connection between having no fear and having complete faith in God is a major component of our calling.

If you are in the middle of something difficult and someone says, "Don't be afraid," does the fear automatically go away? No. Rather, it often gets worse. But

God tells us we have no reason to fear in even the most severe of circumstances.

For example, when trapped between the Egyptians and the Red Sea, Moses told the nation of Israel, "Stand still, and see the salvation of the LORD" (Exodus 14:13). That sort of thinking runs counter to our human tendencies when in the midst of trouble. Normally, we might look to run away and get someplace safe.

"Be strong and of good courage, do not fear nor be afraid," God told the Israelites through Moses in Deuteronomy 31:6. Moses was then further inspired to tell Joshua to have that same strength and good courage (verses 7-8). God directly told Joshua the same thing in the opening chapter of the book of Joshua. Even God's appointed leaders can lack strength or courage in a moment of fear.

What does fear do to us?

Human fear causes us to worry and respond adversely to the unknown. We worry about uncertainty and become overwhelmed. But as Jesus Christ reminds us, worry doesn't change anything: "Which of you by worrying can add one cubit to his stature?" (Matthew 6:27). Trusting in God rests in the certainty that He is in control. We then act accordingly, assured that we are part of the master plan He is working out.

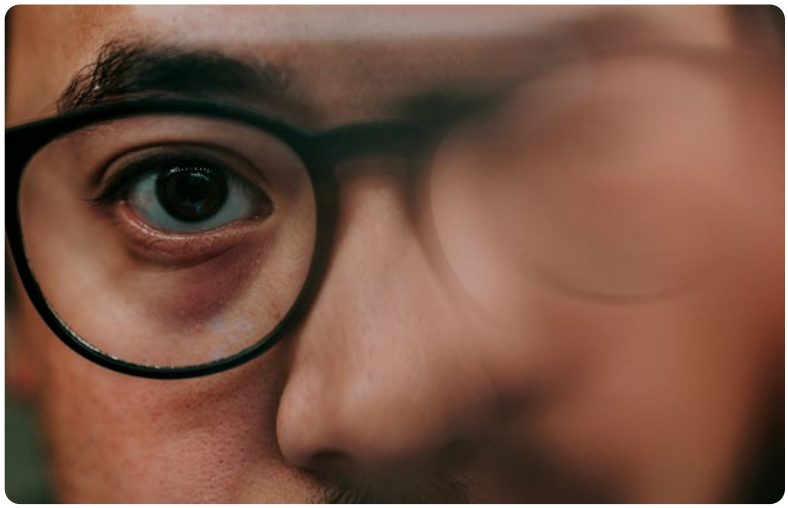
In 1 Kings 18, we read of the great showdown on Mount Carmel between the prophet Elijah and the 450 prophets of Baal who advised Israel's King Ahab. Elijah gives them a challenge: Who can consume the offering by fire, the Eternal God or Baal? God shows His power after a short prayer from Elijah.

Elijah then seizes the opportunity and asks the Israelites whom they are going to serve. They declare that the true God is God, and Elijah tells them to kill the gathered prophets of Baal. Ahab is a weak king influenced into very wrong ways by his pagan wife Jezebel. When she hears about the death of the pagan priests, she swears to kill Elijah.

What does Elijah do? He doesn't start by praying to God for deliverance. Instead, he reacts out of fear. He runs more than 100 miles, getting not only out of town, but out of the country to Beersheba far to the south (1 Kings 19:3). He thinks the farther away he gets, the better it's going to be. After this long journey, he sits down under a tree and finally prays. Not that God would strengthen him, not that God would show him what to do, not that God would fight this battle for him. No, instead he prays that he might die. Elijah has given in to fear at this point and has given up.

We find God's mercy and patience even in these circumstances. In the midst of a trial or great difficulty, we usually are not thinking right. We need perspective. In Elijah's case, God sends an angel to feed him several times. He then goes on the strength of that food another 40 days and 40 nights down to Mount Horeb—that is, Mount Sinai (1 Kings 19:8). God then asks him, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" (verse 9).

Elijah probably thought that was a ridiculous question to ask. He essentially says to God, *Do you not see what I'm going through here?* He's justifying his fear.



> In the midst of a trial or great difficulty, we usually are not thinking right. We need perspective.

God then shows Elijah that he has the wrong perspective on the situation.

In amazing displays of power, God sends a strong wind, an earthquake and a fire. But He then comes to Elijah in a still, small voice, asking once more, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" (verse 13). The question is meant to refocus Elijah and give him the proper perspective. God knew what was going on, but Elijah wasn't seeing it. All he saw was the trouble in front of him.

From there, God told Elijah to go on to other work He had for him. God showed Elijah His work wasn't going to be in the powerful things like earthquakes or fires. It was the still, small voice. God helped Elijah to adjust his perspective and move forward, acting in faith, rather than fear.

From left: Johner Images Royalty-Free via Getty; Nathan Dumlao via Unsplash

Adjusting our own perspective

Human fear often comes from uncertainty. To a degree, that's understandable. Because we're human, we focus on the physical—what we can see, feel, taste and so forth. When we don't have that physical input, it can be very unsettling.

In Luke 12:4, Christ offered a different perspective: "I say to you, My friends, do not be afraid of those who kill the body . . ." Can you imagine the crowd's reaction, especially as Jews living under Roman occupation? They must have thought: *Are you kidding me? Why would I not fear that?*

Christ had a different viewpoint. He went on to explain that if someone kills you, there's no more that person can do to harm you. We might not find that very comforting. But when you're dead, you can't feel pain and there's no suffering. All your worries are behind you.

Christ shares the proper perspective in verse 5 when He says, "But I will show you whom you should fear: Fear Him who, after He has killed, has power to cast into hell [Gehenna]; yes, I say to you, fear Him!" He is of course speaking of fearing God.

Should we fear God? Yes and no. We should fear what God can do, but not who He is. We don't need to fear Him out of uncertainty about what He says or asks us to do.

If we have clear foresight of what God is working out in our lives, then we'll keep in mind that God is in charge and that nothing can prevent Him from accomplishing His purposes.

However, we *should* fear the consequences of ignoring those things. God can permanently end our existence. Men can only take our physical lives in the here and now. Understanding this gives us a *very* different perspective.

Vision for the long run

How do we get to a point of having faith like Elijah? In addition to adjusting our perspective, we have to take the long view of things.

When Jesus prayed to the Father the night before He was killed, He sweated blood. The stress He was under as He submitted Himself was immense. Hebrews 5:7 notes that He prayed "to Him who was able to save Him from death, and was heard because of His godly fear." Jesus did not fear physical death on the cross or eternal death. He *knew* He was going to die because He shared the long-term vision of the master plan with His Father.

He came to offer His sinless life so we could receive the Holy Spirit after repentance and baptism and thus receive the gift of salvation. But notice these prayers were heard because of His godly fear. Young's Literal Translation puts it this way: "having been heard in respect to that which he feared." Christ submitted Himself to what He properly feared and honored.

In Acts 7 we see another amazing account of faith over fear when the deacon Stephen is stoned. Stoning would break bones, tear flesh and kill people. These are rocks big enough that they must be heaved, not merely thrown or tossed.

Stephen goes through Israel's history and then brings it down to a personal level. His audience is very angry at him, not wanting to hear how they are like their ancestors in resisting God. Kneeling under the pummeling with these rocks by those gathered, he cries out to God, "Do not charge them with this sin" and immediately dies (verse 60).

How does a person go through an event like this and remain at peace? It comes back to having the right vision. If all we think about is the here and now, we tend to focus on how things are not fair, and about all the things we don't have. This leads to becoming fearful and angry.

In Hebrews 11:13-15 we read of those who faithfully followed God in the past: "These all died in faith, not having received the promises, but having seen them afar off were assured of them, embraced them and confessed that they were strangers and pilgrims on the earth. For those who say such things declare plainly that they seek a homeland. And truly if they had called to mind that country from which they had come out, they would have had opportunity to return." We too must have a picture in our minds of something bigger—a better future.

What vision motivates *you?* All too often, we can get stuck in fear and not know what to do. Life's challenges may look insurmountable. It may look like we have no options.

Compare this to the outlook we *should* have. If we have clear foresight of what God is working out in our lives, then we'll keep in mind that God is in charge and that nothing can prevent Him from accomplishing His purposes. No matter the circumstances, or even what the immediate outcome might be, we can know with confidence

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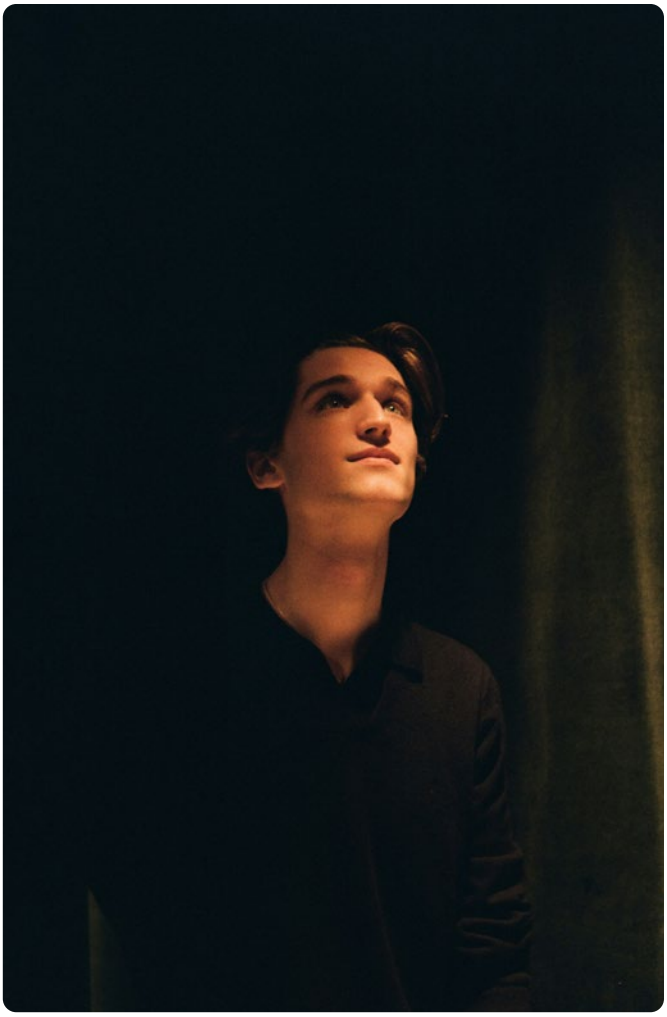

> We need to look at what God is offering—His big picture for our future. Does your vision align with His?

that He is working out His plan of salvation. We just need to yield to Him and can do so with His help.

That's the vision. Everything in between is simply something necessary to go through to get there. That leads to a much different mindset about life than looking at everything we see now as an insurmountable obstacle.

In Isaiah 12:2, Isaiah writes, "Behold, God is my salvation, I will trust and not be afraid; 'For YAH [a shortened form of the divine name], the LORD, is my strength and song; He also has become my salvation.'"

Stop to ponder this. Usually, the human reaction when we face a difficult problem is to try to fix it. We then get scared or fearful when we can't.

Isaiah reminds us that we are to acknowledge who our strength is. It is God. If we trust God to be the strength we need, we can actually relax and have confidence that whatever is going on will ultimately work out for good (Romans 8:28). We can have faith that no matter how long it takes, no matter which way it goes, whatever the outcome is, God is there.

His purpose is being worked out, not just for humanity as a whole, but for us at the individual level. God becomes our salvation, as we do our part. We must repent, be baptized and receive His Spirit, but beyond that, we must remain engaged with Him.

With His help, in the midst of trials, we can keep moving forward. In Psalm 57:1, David wrote: "Be merciful to me, O God, be merciful to me! For my soul trusts in You."

We think we trust God, and we say we trust God, but then suddenly find ourselves faced with something we don't understand or don't want to accept. During these times, don't give up the vision or stop trusting God.

Faith triumphs over fear

Looking back at the ancient Israelites' example, we can see where they forgot God and ended up in terrible calamities with great fear. Yet in God's mercy, He delivered them. From their example, we are reminded that we can't only look at what is directly in front of us. We need to look at what God is offering—His big picture for our future.

Does your vision align with His?

That's not to say we won't, at times, find ourselves being afraid. But we should always remember why the vision is important. The short term will not last forever. God reveals His hand in our lives time and time again. He is our refuge and strength. With Him, our future is secure.

In Luke 12:32 we read, "Do not fear, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom."

God is not working out His plan for mankind reluctantly. It's His good pleasure. He desires that we reach His Kingdom. That is *His* vision.

Whatever we face in life, do not fear, but rather trust God in great faith as we look forward to His Kingdom. BT

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To learn about overcoming fear with faith, request or download our free Bible study guide *You Can Have Living Faith.*
Scan the code or visit ucg.org/If to find it.

Does God Allow Women Pastors?

God has called both men and women to His Church. But has He called both men and women to do the same work in the Church? Can women be pastors, and what does the Word of God have to say on the subject?

by Amber Duran

Listen

There's a question that rolls around time and time again about women's roles in modern Christian churches. Can women be pastors?

While this debate often appears to concern church leadership alone, it is actually closely connected to larger cultural convictions that men and women should occupy identical roles and responsibilities in *every* sphere of life.

This way of thinking did not emerge overnight. It has developed over centuries, gaining momentum through movements that sought to redefine the roles of men and women in society. One landmark moment came in 1848 with the first formal U.S. women's rights convention in Seneca Falls, New York. Many regard its "Declaration of Sentiments," with its call for equality in all areas of life, as foundational to modern feminism.

As these ideas gained cultural acceptance, expectations regarding the roles of men and women changed not only in society but also within many churches.

Positions that were historically reserved for qualified men have increasingly been opened to women. According to a Lifeway Research survey published in 2022, approximately 55 percent of U.S. Protestant churches allow women to serve as pastor and lead the congregation.

In a time when cultural assumptions and modern interpretations often challenge long-held biblical truths, it is essential for Christians to return humbly to Scripture. Rather than allowing society to define the Church's structure and leadership, we must seek to understand God's design for both men and women and the distinct roles He has entrusted to each within His Church.

Having grown up serving in the Church in various capacities since I was a young girl and now as a pastor's wife, I have watched generations of men and women wrestle with what Scripture teaches about a woman's role in the Body of Christ.

I wrestled with the question myself in my youth. Yet over time, what began as a struggle with God's Word became a willing surrender to it and to His intended purpose for me. In that surrender, I have been both blessed and enriched in my marriage, family life and church community. It is my guide through all of life's turns. And it's what I use to determine truth in a time when truth is often seen as ambiguous or open to personal interpretation.

Nataliya Melnychuk via Unsplash

My own journey reflects a question that continues to generate discussion both inside and outside the Church.

What does the Bible teach? Did God design the office of pastor for both men and women, or has He established different roles for men and women in church leadership?

What is a pastor?

Scripture describes a structured Church community in which certain roles—particularly the primary public teaching and oversight role in the gathered assembly—are assigned to qualified men.

The qualifications listed for those who serve as pastor or elder include being "the husband of one wife," along with requirements for character, self-control and the ability to teach (1 Timothy 3:1-7; Titus 1:5-9). Note that "the wife of one husband" is not listed here.

This doesn't mean men are better or somehow earn this position of authority. God created Adam first and later created Eve as a companion and helper for him (Genesis 2:18). Scripture uses this creation order as part of the explanation for distinct roles within family and Church life.

This fits with what Paul notes in 1 Corinthians 11.

"For man is not from woman, but woman from man. Nor was man created for the woman, but woman for the man. For this reason the woman ought to have a symbol of authority on her head . . ." (verses 8-10). This symbol of being under authority, longer hair for women, is distinct from any such requirement for men.

In verse 3, Paul shows that everyone is under authority, even Christ! This is a positive thing. It's only insulting or demeaning if there's a misunderstanding of true, godly authority.

"The head of every man is Christ, the head of woman is man and the head of Christ is God."

This gives us greater context for some pivotal scriptures in 1 Corinthians 14, which details the order and structure of the assemblies God calls.

A call for silence

Christian communities and churches today gather regularly for worship, teaching and mutual encouragement. This isn't happenstance, though. It's God's command (Leviticus 23:3). Since it is God who calls us to assemble for this purpose, it is fitting to also use His Word to guide us in what's proper for this assembly.

In 1 Corinthians 14, the apostle Paul is delving into the subject of the order and conduct of the assemblies. Here we find a couple of verses that are often felt to be controversial on this topic.

"Let your women keep silent in the churches, for they are not permitted to speak; but they are to be submissive, as the law also says. And if they want to learn something, let them ask their own husbands at home; for it is shameful for women to speak in church" (verses 34-35).

This language may sound foreign, harsh or even offensive. Before dismissing this instruction as some outdated human notion, notice what Paul says in verse 37.

"The things which I write to you are the commandments of the Lord."

This wasn't Paul's personal preference. These instructions carried divine authority.

Some may find these instructions difficult because they differ sharply from contemporary views about authority and equality. Yet Scripture consistently reveals that God's commands are motivated entirely by love and intended for our ultimate good (1 John 4:7; 1 Timothy 1:5).

> We can go against the grain of society and embrace the roles God has designed for us.

There are instances throughout 1 Corinthians 14 where both men and women are told to remain silent in parts of the service (verses 28 and 30). But in verse 34, Paul is addressing conduct within God's holy assemblies and reinforcing God's established order for public instruction.

Although Scripture records women praying and prophesying in other settings (1 Corinthians 11:5), it never presents a woman serving in the pastoral or elder role, responsible for overseeing and teaching the Church.

This wasn't just something Paul was saying to the people he was addressing at that time. God preserved these words for us today, and He established this structure at creation.

The congregation's job

While Scripture outlines some things that women specifically should not do during the service, 1 Corinthians 14 also shows what God says *to do* during a service.

"Let two or three prophets speak, and let the others judge" (1 Corinthians 14:29). It's worth noting that a prophet doesn't just mean someone who is telling the future. In this context, it refers to an inspired speaker.

During the teaching portion of a service, really, only a small number of individuals are speaking at all. The majority are there for a different purpose. The Greek word here for judge is *diakrino*. It means to discern or

learn through refinement.

Women, like all believers, should listen carefully and compare what is taught with Scripture, developing the discernment needed to distinguish truth from error. The Bereans were praised for such behavior in Acts 17:10-11.

Hebrews 4:12 tells us, "For the word of God is living and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the division of soul and spirit, and of joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart."

Paul's words in 1 Timothy 2 shed even more light on a woman's role in church services. In verses 11-12 Paul does not permit a woman to teach or have authority over a man, but explains that she should learn in silence with all submission. Women have the duty to be students of God's ways of truth.

This, again, isn't exclusive to women. On the contrary, both men and women alike are called to be students of God's Word and apply what's learned to daily life.

In verses 9-10, women are admonished to be properly adorned, both in apparel and conduct: "Women adorn themselves in modest apparel, with propriety and moderation, not with braided hair or gold or pearls or costly clothing, but, which is proper for women *professing godliness, with good works*" (emphasis added).

Women demonstrate godliness through benevolence, helping those in need, sharing resources, living a life of integrity and kindness. Whatever she may do, she is to do it as if working directly for the Lord (Colossians 3:23).

In close fellowship, women are also told to teach and admonish one another, guiding each other toward the straight and narrow path of God (Titus 2:3-5).

Is God unfair?

There's often perceived unfairness to this subject. While the women of the Seneca Falls Convention and modern feminists may purport injustice, God is not an unjust God. He does not give unjust commands, and His way is perfectly fair (Deuteronomy 32:4; Ezekiel 18:25, 29).

Scripture tells us that everyone has a role to play in the Body of Christ, or the Church, but not everyone can have the same job. Serving in different roles doesn't inherently make one better or worse. On the contrary, those roles that we may humanly see as lower, God elevates (1 Corinthians 12:23-25).

What men and women can take great comfort in is that every person is set exactly where they should be: "But now God has set the members, each one of them, in the body just as He pleased" (verse 18).

This does not mean that everyone God places into a role executes it properly. This is true of both men and women, and the Bible is filled with examples of both.

Any honest discussion of religious authority acknowledges that history contains abundant examples of people in positions of leadership who abused that power—through control, exploitation or the suppression of both men and women.

These failures are not just modern accusations. The Bible itself contains strong warnings against the misuse of authority and holds leaders to a higher standard of accountability precisely because of the influence they wield (James 3:1; Hebrews 13:17).

The existence of these warnings recognizes the reality of the dangers inherent in any system of human leadership. But this highlights flaws in humanity, not His commands.

Christ's example

Though men who are pastors do not carry out perfectly their responsibilities, the life and earthly ministry of Jesus Christ, "the Chief Shepherd [Pastor]," is a flawless reflection of what a pastor should be.

Through His example, He highlighted the proper treatment of women in a period of history where women were often treated as second-class citizens, and where men had lost sight of how they ought to be leading.

It was uncommon for a man during Christ's time to address a woman directly in public, let alone a woman considered unclean with the flow of blood.

Jesus did.

In Mark 5:25-34, a woman suffering with this for 12 years very literally reached out to Christ for healing, having faith that He could remove this unyielding affliction by merely her touching the hem of His garment. A touch almost imperceptible to anyone else in

Abraham Gonzalez Fernandez/Moment via Getty

the thronging crowd, and yet Jesus felt the power leave Him, and He wanted to see who had this kind of faith.

In fear and trembling, she came forward and prostrated herself before Him. Christ lovingly speaks to her directly: "Daughter, your faith has made you well. Go in peace, and be healed of your affliction" (verse 34).

He also spoke freely with a woman caught in the sin of adultery (John 8:10-11). He interacted with and healed many women during His ministry (Luke 7:11-15; 8:1-3; Luke 11:27-28; 13:12; 23:27-31). He encouraged sisters Mary and Martha to sit at His feet and learn, not to be busy only with the physical service of the house as Martha had been (Luke 10:38-42).

Equal opportunity

Christ made clear that both women and men are equally capable of receiving—and equally in need of—the salvation He offers (Romans 3:23, Acts 4:12). This truth was central to the gospel message.

"For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life. For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through Him might be saved" (John 3:16-17).

Scripture tells us that everyone has a role to play in the Body of Christ, or the Church, but not everyone can have the same job.

Christ's interactions were culturally revolutionary, but He never strayed from the structure God established at creation. So even if culture shifts around us, we can remain true to what Christ and all of Scripture have shown us.

A work for the whole Church

While it's a commonly held belief that authority is inherently oppressive, that certainly isn't what biblical authority is supposed to look like. And it's not what the ministry is called to be.

The job of a pastor is equated to being a gentle Shepherd of those he oversees (Jeremiah 3:15; Acts 20:28), as Christ ultimately demonstrated when He laid down His life for all people, both male and female.

The people God places into power—and He is the one who sets up and takes down authorities (Romans 13:1; Psalm 75:6-7)—have been given careful instruction to not misuse their authority, but to serve and sacrifice for the flock they shepherd, just as Christ did (John 10:11-14; 1 Peter 5:2-4).

Men and women alike are called to do the work of Christ and are given the same admonition to use whatever authority they receive as Christ would.

Women—such as Phoebe, who was called a sister and "a servant of the church" in Romans 16:1-2—were entrusted with roles and responsibilities in a different way from an elder or pastor. But the Church in Rome was told to "assist her in whatever business she has need of you: for indeed she has been a helper of many. . ."

Paul goes on to honor and acknowledge several women and men serving the Church in various ways, like Priscilla with her husband Aquila, whom Paul calls "fellow workers in Christ Jesus" (verse 3).

Just because God has established men as pastors doesn't make this distinction in roles inherently unfair nor unjust; it's simply the way God intended it to be. The Bible shows this was by design. And women, too, were designed to do work for the Church, just in a different way.

I love the work that I'm called to do for God's Church, not only as a pastor's wife but simply as a woman, too. Our submissive role is an exercise in humility that I'm thankful and privileged to fill.

Scripture goes so far as to say that the role of a woman or a wife is compared to the Church's role toward Christ. And husbands are admonished to love their wives as Christ loved the Church. Distinct roles, distinct jobs, but all for one purpose (Ephesians 5:22-25).

It's not my role to stand up and give a sermon in front of my congregation. This doesn't diminish my value in God's eyes—nor my contribution. Rather I know that because God designed it to be this way, I honor Him in obeying Him and submitting to His truth.

This may be vexing or off-putting to those who don't see these truths in Scripture. That must not deter us from following what is right.

Just as Christ defied cultural norms in His treatment of women and His example of servant leadership, we too can stand for God's truth without shame.

We can go against the grain of society and embrace the roles God has designed for us, trusting that His wisdom far exceeds any human reasoning and that every member of His Church has a meaningful place within His purpose for us. BT

DIVE DEEPER

To learn more about what Paul teaches in 1 Corinthians 14, check out this in-depth study from The Epistles of Paul series presented at Ambassador Bible College. **Scan the code or visit ucg.org/course/ambassador-bible-college/epistles-paul to find it.**

Listen

The Rise of *No Contact*

An increasing number of people looking for help with troubled relationships are being advised to go "no contact." Is this wise, and is there ever a time to cut someone completely off?

by Lena VanAusdle

When it comes to dealing with others, it often feels like we live in a very black-and-white, all-or-nothing society. There's a good guy, and there's a bad guy. If you're a good guy, you're always good. And if that guy is a bad guy? He's always bad. There's no time for nuance. There's no time for understanding. There's no time for growth.

We see this in the news, on social media, and more and more in our families. This tension isn't new; people have struggled to get along since, well, Cain and Abel.

"And the LORD respected Abel and his offering, but He did not respect Cain and his offering. And Cain was *very angry,* and his countenance fell . . . Now Cain talked with Abel his brother; and it came to pass, when they were in the field, that Cain rose up against Abel his brother and killed him" (Genesis 4:4-5, 8 emphasis added throughout). That's the ultimate "no contact."

Social media is filled with reels and TikToks of people talking about going no contact with their "toxic" parents or grandparents. The comments on these videos reassure those who posted them that they made the right choice. They needed to "protect their peace," or "parents aren't granted access to you just because they're your parents."

These social media echo chambers aren't the only ones promoting such estrangement from parents and other family members; a quick Internet search will turn up page after page of articles supporting the idea.

Some of these articles are just opinion pieces by random writers, but many are from trained psychologists and counselors and even trusted psychological and wellness institutions. One survey cited in Karl Pillemer's book *Fault Lines: Fractured Families and How to Mend Them* found that 27 percent of American adults have cut off contact with a family member (James Dean, "Pillemer: Family Estrangement a Problem 'Hiding in Plain Sight,'" *Cornell Chronicle,* Sept. 10, 2020).

Regardless of the actual percentage who have gone no contact with family, the *celebration* of no contact has made it a prevalent trend.

Why people choose estrangement

There are a myriad of reasons why a person might go no contact with a parent or family member, some very legitimate: physical abuse, sexual abuse, emotional manipulation or addiction. Proverbs 22:3 says, "The prudent see danger and take refuge, but the simple keep going and pay the penalty" (New International Version).

For their own safety, a person may need to cut contact with a family member until that family member addresses what's wrong and no longer poses a danger.

There are, however, other less compelling reasons why someone might go no contact: differing lifestyle choices, opposing political views, finding offense in how someone expresses themselves.

In a study of estranged parents and children, the reasons for the broken relationship varied widely. Adult children reported the primary reason was "toxic behavior or feeling unsupported and unaccepted," while the parents more often stated that they were unsure of the reasons or that the reasons "stemmed from their children's objectionable relationships or sense of entitlement" ("Giving Voice to the Silence of Family Estrangement," *Journal of Family Communications,* April 2015, pp. 130-140).

It is this second category of no contact that this article hopes to address.

> We need to learn to navigate relationships even when we don't agree.

Early adopters of the concept of no contact or "emotional cutoff" (specifically Murray Bowen, who added this to the "Bowen Family Systems Theory" in 1975) did not view it as the first line of defense, but rather as a temporary "pause" or last resort in truly abusive situations. It was recognized that being physically or emotionally cut off in a relationship doesn't resolve the problems; it simply quiets them, or they become dormant. Instead, it was understood that the goal should be to remain connected while learning to manage your own emotions.

We need to learn to navigate relationships even when we don't agree. We see this pointed out in Ephesians 4:2: "Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love" (NIV).

In most healthy relationships, navigating disagreements happens naturally. You treat each other with love and respect, communicate openly and take responsibility for your own actions, so there's nothing to worry about.

But sometimes, when our relationships get a little out of whack, we might start to feel anxious or resentful. It is during these times that we may implement boundaries within our relationships. Clear, healthy and godly boundaries can lower anxiety, reduce resentment and help solve conflicts (see mayoclinichealthsystem.org/hometown-health/speaking-of-health/setting-boundaries-for-well-being).

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> It's important to remember that setting a boundary isn't about trying to control or punish others, avoiding conflict, refusing accountability or expecting everyone to accommodate your preferences.

What's right about boundaries

Boundaries are physical, emotional, relational and spiritual limits that define where your responsibilities, choices and authority end and someone else's begin. Basically, they help you understand what you're responsible for, what belongs to others and what you'll do if someone crosses the limits you've put in place.

First, identify the problem—not simply by accusing the other person of wrongdoing, but focusing on how his or her behavior affects you. For example: "I feel hurt when my mom comments on my weight." A boundary might be: "I'm not willing to discuss my weight with you." In keeping with Matthew 18:15, the goal is not to attack or embarrass the other person, but to address the problem directly and give the relationship an opportunity to grow.

Second, clearly explain what you'll do if a boundary is crossed. Continuing with the same example: "If you bring it up, I'll change the subject. If you continue, I'll end the conversation." The focus is on what *you* will do, rather than trying to control what the other person must do.

Third, follow through and be consistent with your defined boundaries. A boundary repeatedly stated but not maintained will not be effective. That means actually ending the conversation as forewarned: "I'm sorry, Mom. I told you these comments make me uncomfortable, and you've brought it up a second time. So I've got to go. We can speak later."

God tells us to love our neighbor as ourselves (Matthew 22:37-39). When we set boundaries according to godly principles and with the other person's best interest in mind, we can show genuine love—sometimes with a loving "no" and other times by giving a sacrificial "yes." Relationships are not about always getting exactly what we want when we want. Sometimes we sacrifice our time or opinion when it is in the best interests of the other person.

When boundaries become emotional cutoff

It's important to remember that setting a boundary *isn't* about trying to control or punish others, avoiding conflict, refusing accountability or expecting everyone to accommodate your preferences. As noted, there are circumstances where no contact is the right choice for everyone involved. But these cases are extreme, and it should not be the first choice.

Although not specific to a physical familial relationship, Paul wrote to the Christians in Thessalonica: "But we command you, brethren, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you withdraw from every brother who walks disorderly and not according to the tradition which he received from us . . . And if anyone does not obey our word in this epistle, note that person and do not keep company with him, that he may be ashamed. *Yet do not count him as an enemy, but admonish him as a brother*" (2 Thessalonians 3:6, 14-15).

When we set reasonable and godly boundaries in a relationship and the other person refuses to respect them, we may have to step away from that relationship for a time. But that person is not our enemy, nor should they be treated as such. The door should always be open to reconciliation.

Forgiveness ≠ trust ≠ reconciliation

While all related, forgiveness, trust and reconciliation are not the same.

Forgiveness is about how I respond to what someone has done to me. God, through the Bible, tells us again and again that as followers of Him and His righteous way of life, we must forgive each other: "For if you forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses" (Matthew 6:14-15).

"Bearing with one another, and forgiving one another, if anyone has a complaint against another; even as Christ forgave you, so you also must do" (Colossians 3:13).

Like many biblical concepts, showing forgiveness to others has proven to be beneficial psychologically, leading to reductions in depression, anxiety, anger and psychological distress ("Efficacy of Psychotherapeutic Interventions to Promote Forgiveness," *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology,* February 2014, pp. 154-170).

Forgiveness isn't about pretending the offense didn't happen or that you weren't hurt by the other person. It means you've given up the right and desire to personally punish the person for the wrong he or she committed. This also doesn't mean that a person shouldn't be held legally accountable for any crimes committed.

And it doesn't necessarily mean that the person who caused the harm should immediately be trusted again.

Trust is about how another person behaves and whether they have demonstrated that they are trustworthy.

Trust is built through consistent behavior over time. If someone has repeatedly lied, violated boundaries or behaved abusively, forgiving that person does not require us to assume that the behavior will never happen again.

Proverbs 14:15 says, "The simple believe anything, but the prudent give thought to their steps" (NIV).

Again, trust can only be built over time, as a person shows consistent respect for boundaries—godly, healthy boundaries, not arbitrary rules that keep us from feeling any discomfort. Cutting people off completely shuts the door on any opportunity for building that trust. Going no contact should be a last resort and reserved for serious offenses. Keep in mind the difference between forgiveness and trust. Forgiveness says, "*I forgive you for what happened,*" while trust says, "*I believe you will never do it again.*" We can only know this over time.

And what of reconciliation? That's about restoring the relationship. Forgiveness is what the one who was wronged is responsible for. Building trust is what the one who did the wrong is responsible for. And reconciliation is what both are responsible for. Reconciliation cannot be accomplished by one person alone.

Paul tells Christians, "If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone" (Romans 12:18, NIV). We can pursue reconciliation, but we cannot force another person to participate in it.

Reconciliation won't look the same for every relationship, but it may require an acknowledgment of wrongdoing. Reconciliation requires repentance and a change in behavior. Only then can trust be rebuilt and honest communication can occur.

Reconciliation doesn't necessarily mean returning the relationship to exactly how it existed before.

A parent and adult child might reconcile while establishing completely new boundaries. They may see each other less frequently. Certain subjects may remain off limits. Reconciliation doesn't necessarily mean recreating the old relationship. Reconciliation can come from creating a new, healthier relationship.

All of this assumes that the estrangement occurred due to actual abuses and not a simple disagreement or dislike of normal childhood discipline.

Forgiveness isn't about pretending the offense didn't happen or that you weren't hurt by the other person. It means you've given up the right and desire to personally punish the person for the wrong he or she committed.

A move toward the person, not a withdrawal

The first step in all reconciliation is our own reconciliation with God. As Paul writes, "Now all things are of God, who has reconciled us to Himself through Jesus Christ" (2 Corinthians 5:18).

From there, Jesus calls us to reconcile with one another: "Therefore if you bring your gift to the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there

The way of love puts responsibility in the right place: You pursue peace. You do your part. You follow Jesus Christ into reconciliation with God—and, through God's help, with those around you.

before the altar, and go your way. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift" (Matthew 5:23-24).

We are to *go* to our brother or mother or father or sister and reconcile with them. Withdrawing stops us from being able to go to others.

People will often respond differently when going no contact with a family member. Some will grieve. Some will rejoice. For some, it will feel like peace—but an absence of conflict isn't necessarily peace. No matter how you feel initially, a price is paid for going no contact. Sometimes it's missed funerals. Sometimes it's children not knowing their grandparents. Sometimes it leads to other broken relationships as other family members take sides. And there are often negative emotional outcomes.

One recent study showed that estrangement from familial relations "is associated with cumulative disadvantage," including lower life satisfaction and greater depressiveness (Karsten Hank, "Emerging Ideas. Family Estrangement and Its Association With Life Satisfaction and Depressiveness in Adulthood," *Family Relations: Interdisciplinary Journal of Applied Family Science*, December 2024, pp. 2937-44).

Going no contact isn't necessarily the easy fix people hope it will be.

What does love require?

Family relationships can be complicated and messy. A rise in adult children going no contact with their parents has left millions of people feeling hurt, confused and sometimes angry. There are legitimate reasons for going no contact with a parent, but it should be a rare and last resort.

If you are going through a difficult time with someone in your life and one of you has chosen to go no contact, you both need to ask yourselves some serious questions and be honest about your answers.

First, is my hurt due to legitimate abuse, or am I trying to control a narrative or how others think or believe? Or is this a matter of being challenged and not liking discomfort instead of being uncomfortable?

If you're honest and it's not about abuse, you have some work ahead of you in reconciling with the other person. If you have legitimately faced abuse in a relationship, ask yourself, what does love require when a relationship is painful?

Sometimes love requires distance.

Sometimes it requires confrontation.

Sometimes it requires forgiveness.

Sometimes it requires saying, *You cannot treat me this way.*

Sometimes it requires saying, *I'm willing to try again.*

And sometimes it requires leaving the door open for reconciliation while recognizing that you cannot walk through it for another person.

For those who have been legitimately abused, love doesn't mean making peace at all costs or maintaining contact no matter what. But for others, for those who have a difference of opinion or legitimately hurt feelings, it doesn't mean walking away whenever a relationship becomes painful or difficult.

The way of love puts responsibility in the right place: *You* pursue peace. *You* do your part. *You* follow Jesus Christ into reconciliation with God—and, through God's help, with those around you. BT

DIVE DEEPER

To learn more about our personal reconciliation to God through Jesus Christ, be sure to also read "How Grace Reconciles Us to God," part of our Bible study aid *What Does the Bible Teach About Grace?* **Scan the code or visit ucg.org/gr to find it.**

Photos, from left: Joshua Hoehne, Paul Jespers, both via Unsplash

Landing on *Gentleness*

Listen

Like an airplane touching down, our interactions with others can be smooth and gentle—or quite rough. What can we do to grow that gentleness?

by Robin Webber

We live in a time when self-expression and bluntness are celebrated at the expense of kindness and the consideration of others.

Harsh and crude language coupled with overbearing attitudes are increasingly invasive and designed to be verbally and mentally disruptive. Such lack of civility fueled by emotional immaturity is increasingly played out by all ages in many venues, be they at home, school, the public square or social media outlets.

This trajectory in human interaction is rapidly diminishing thoughtfulness toward others' spaces, and the boundaries of civility are being purposefully trespassed.

Is it any wonder? Scripture warns that "men will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boasters, proud, blasphemers, disobedient to parents, unthankful, unholy" (2 Timothy 3:1-2).

Consider our own interactions with others on a daily basis. In doing so, allow me to use the analogy from air travel of takeoffs and landings. As we arrive at our destination we might say, "Now that was a soft landing" and perhaps compliment the pilot as we exit. But soft landings don't just happen! It takes training, awareness and practice.

Of course, not every landing is so smooth. Some leave us shaken, questioning if we ever want to fly on a particular airline, or at all.

Throughout our day, we may "land" in someone's life in small, gentle ways—being friendly, holding the door for someone, expressing gratitude for even the most mundane things. Or perhaps we crash-land, grumpily pushing our way through crowds, impatiently waiting in line, complaining all the while. As quickly as we've entered someone's day, we turn around and take off, often never to see them again.

The big question is: How do you and I personally touch down into and exit the lives of others? Did we crash into their day and shuffle on or land with gentleness, showing genuine care?

Becoming spiritually authentic

There has never been anyone more noted for such perfect landings and takeoffs in others' lives than Jesus of Nazareth. He personally welcomes interactive occasions with people. That was true during His time on earth and it remains so today as He sits at the right hand of God the Father in heaven.

Jesus' invitation is laid out in Matthew 11:28-29: *"Come to Me,* all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for *I am gentle* and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls" (emphasis added throughout).

These are the words of the One who was the most authentic person, inside and out, ever born of woman. As disciples of Jesus Christ, how do we heed this gentle One's call of "Follow Me" (Mark 8:34) and incorporate and display the beautiful quality of gentleness in the rough-and-tumble world around us?

And let's not confuse gentleness with softness. A "soft touch" concerns a person who is easily imposed on or taken advantage of, whereas a *gentle* touch involves someone caring for others with forethought, love and control toward a mutually productive experience for both parties.

In Scripture, gentleness involves strength under control, a willing submission to God and thoughtful consideration for others. It isn't driven by self but empowered by God through His Holy Spirit.

So where do we go from here in becoming an authentic disciple of Jesus Christ? Let's consider four keys that will help us exercise the spiritual muscle of gentleness.

Key 1: God says to pursue gentleness

Let's begin by asking why? Scripture declares in 1 Timothy 6:11: "But you, O man of God, flee these things [wrong thoughts and behaviors] and *pursue* righteousness, godliness, faith, love, patience, gentleness."

Notice the powerful intensity of the verb *pursue*. It means to lean forward, to go for it and give it your all as you draw upon the power and wisdom of God's Spirit to actively nurture the development of His Spirit planted in you, so as to bear fruit in your life and that of others. One fruit developed is that of gentleness (Galatians 5:22-23).

Just as a pilot doesn't become accomplished at smooth landings through wishful thinking, gentleness doesn't just happen. Gentleness is planted in the soil of *humility,* which enables us to knock on the doors of people's hearts before we burst into their lives full throttle.

As the apostle Paul wrote: "Let nothing be done through selfish ambition or conceit, but in *lowliness of mind* let each esteem others better than himself . . . Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus" (Philippians 2:3, 5).

Jess Zoerb via Unsplash

> We can know the gospel—what it says and what it means—but the loudest and most memorable message given is practicing what we know or preach.

I liken encounters with people to a successful celebratory toast. If two parties crash their cups together, their drinks will spill on one another, and their glasses may actually shatter. Nobody wins. But if both parties initiate a gentle *clink,* there's unity, there's peace, and no one's garments are left with stains. Everybody can truly celebrate the toast.

Pursuing gentleness may start right at home with our spouse and children, and extend to neighbors, coworkers, friends and strangers.

Remember, our personal pursuit of gentleness is marked by our entrances and exits in other people's lives, and we can offer a touch of gentleness even if it is unreciprocated.

Key 2: Gentleness allows others to grow

Paul spotlights the lasting effects of gentleness on others when sharing his personal approach to the Thessalonians. He said there were some approaches

that might have been chosen that were well within his prerogative, but he reminded them of the rewarding approach of gentleness: "We were gentle among you, just as a nursing mother cherishes her own children. So, affectionately longing for you, we were well pleased to impart to you not only the gospel of God, but also our own lives, because you had become dear to us" (1 Thessalonians 2:7-8).

One of the greatest tests of gentleness comes when we are met with conflict or a need to correct a fellow believer. Scripture instructs us to restore others "in a spirit of gentleness" (Galatians 6:1). Gentleness doesn't avoid difficult conversations, but it delivers truth in such a way that it seeks restoration and not the humiliation that often results when harshness is used.

We can know the gospel—what it says and what it means—but the loudest and most memorable message given is practicing what we know or preach. That is the full measure of authenticity!

Have you ever considered how God finally got the attention of the prophet Elijah after he fled into a cave at Mount Sinai? God utilized several natural wake-up calls—wind, earthquake, fire—to grab the attention of His despondent servant. But God finally got through to help him serve another day when He used a "still small voice" (1 Kings 19:8-13).

How many hearts are ever truly changed by brute force or harsh words? Proverbs 15:4 uses beautiful imagery to portray the capacity our words have for either promoting growth or destruction: "Gentle words are a tree of life; a deceitful tongue crushes the spirit" (New Living Translation).

Key 3: Gentleness is a mark of wisdom

What is your I.Q.? Sorry to be so personal, but it's necessary to make a point. Not your intelligence quotient, but rather your *identity quotient*—how you measure up as a disciple of Christ in daily response to His invitation of "Follow Me." This is the true measure of authenticity in a world that seeks the inauthentic disguised as the real thing.

Join me in reading the words of James 3:17-18: "But the wisdom from above is first of all pure. It is also peace loving, *gentle at all times*, and willing to yield to others. It is full of mercy and the fruit of good deeds. It shows no favoritism and is always sincere. And those who are peacemakers will plant seeds of peace and reap a harvest of righteousness" (NLT).

Key 4: Spiritual growth does not occur in a vacuum

Applying a gentle touch without favoritism and coupled with sincerity toward all people who come our way in a given day is a tall order.

This isn't accomplished with wishful thinking but by God's powerful Holy Spirit. Yet we still have to take action. There are people all around us waiting for God's gentle touch through you.

A rifleman doesn't hit the target by the sequence *fire, ready, aim*, but by first being ready, then aiming, and ultimately firing. God's Spirit equips us with readiness to extend gentleness to others. Only when we are ready can we aim and effectively direct that gentleness to people around us. Then *bang!* If we've properly yielded to God's Spirit, we fire away and hit the target or goal of true gentleness!

> "Gentle words are a tree of life; a deceitful tongue crushes the spirit."

As we embrace the reality that Christianity is not merely a theory but a steady and unwavering practice of following the lead of Jesus Christ, who is "the way, the truth, and the life" (John 14:6), we experience spiritual growth—not out of thin air but by the grace of God!

For such a time as now

It has been said that actors are known by their entrances and exits—that's what people remember. Of course, we are not acting. Rather, we are imitating Jesus Christ, becoming genuine and authentic in Him.

Be fully advised: We are like pilots landing and taking off, in and out of people's lives every day we interact with them. So buckle up! And prepare to apply the gentle touch of Christ to others as you land in their lives. For who knows whether you have come into someone's life in a Christ-like manner to be a seed of godly calling for them?

Perhaps the gentle exchange you have with an individual today is that seed God will use to draw them to Christ. In the words of Esther 4:14, maybe God has placed you in their lives "for such a time as this." BT

DIVE DEEPER

To learn more about growing in gentleness and other aspects of the fruit of the Spirit, request or download our free study guide *Tools for Spiritual Growth.*
Scan the code or visit ucg.org/tg to find it.

WHAT IS *Biblical Modesty?*

by Tarra McGuire

Listen

On the sixth day of creation, God made mankind in His image. After looking at everything He made, He said it was indeed very good (Genesis 1:26-31). When He created Adam and Eve, they were naked and felt no shame (Genesis 2:25). Only after they sinned by eating of the tree God commanded them not to eat did they feel shame. They hid their nakedness by making coverings with fig leaves. Later, after they had been expelled from the Garden of Eden, God made them clothing from skins to cover themselves (Genesis 3:7, 21).

The Bible doesn't give us the dimensions of their clothes or tell us exactly what was covered and how much of it. If modesty could be achieved with simply the right measurements, God would have given them; He doesn't shy away from measuring when it's necessary. In fact, in the whole Bible there is not much on just how much of our bodies we are allowed to show—which raises the question: What exactly is biblical modesty? Is it all about our appearance, or does it go deeper?

MODESTY IS NOT JUST FOR GIRLS

I should preface this by saying that, since I'm a woman, more of the focus here will be on women. However, gentlemen, you can still apply the principles of this article, so don't ignore it because "it's just for girls." For men striving to be like Christ, principles of modesty are important as well.

The majority of what we read in Scripture about biblical modesty and presenting our bodies is found in the New Testament. I believe this is due to the early Church living among the Greeks and Romans, who were deeply entrenched in sexual immorality and idolatry. They used their bodies not for God, but for pagan rituals and fulfilling lusts. Some converted Christians came from backgrounds like this (1 Corinthians 6:9-11). Today's world is incredibly sexual and treats men and women

Drew Dizzy Graham via Unsplash

as objects to fulfill each other's lusts. The New Testament writings give practical advice about modesty that is applicable today. In the Old Testament, we read more about humility than modesty, but they go hand in hand.

MODESTY IS AN OUTWARD DISPLAY OF HUMILITY, AND ONE OF THE WAYS WE HONOR GOD WITH OUR BODIES.

ATTENTION SEEKING AND PRIDE

The first thing most people think of when they hear "modesty" is not showing much of your body, primarily for women. While apparel is an aspect of modesty (for both men and women), this is not the root of modesty. What clothing is considered modest is subjective since it will change as culture, era and status change. God simply does not give us a universal rule about what is modest and what is not.

But modesty is bigger than just what we wear. Modesty is an outward display of humility—avoiding vanity, pride or boastfulness about ourselves or about our abilities. And it's one of the ways we honor God with our bodies. When we are immodest in our dress, attitude or speech, we dishonor Him.

The world tells us that we have a right to wear whatever we want and that we should dress to feel empowered, confident and sexy and to love ourselves. This sounds fun and liberating!

The Bible says: "Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, which you have from God? You are not your own; you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body" (1 Corinthians 6:19-20, Revised Standard Version).

The world tells us we are free to do as we please with our bodies, but the Bible tells us we are not, nor should we want to be. Independence and freedom in the world really just mean remaining a slave to sin, trapped until repentance (Romans 6:18-23; 2 Peter 2:19).

The world views it as a point of pride to have people lust after you. We can't control other people's desire, but as Christians we should do what we can to not be the object of someone's lust.

"Then let us no more pass judgment on one another, but rather decide never to put a stumbling block or hindrance in the way of a brother" (Romans 14:13, RSV).

There is no shame in attraction or in being attractive, but trying to make others lust after us, or being vain and proud of how attractive we are, is sinful and shameful.

I asked myself: *Why would I imitate the fashion of people I didn't want to be like when I grew up?*

When I was a teenager, modesty was a challenge. I dressed like my friends and got lots of compliments, and I loved that! It was easy to rationalize my clothing by comparing it to others who were wearing more revealing things. Or I would buy something inappropriate and tell my mom I would wear a sweater over it, then conveniently "forget." I would try to convince her to let me wear a bikini because it was "impossible" to find a cute but modest bathing suit, and I didn't want to look like an old lady. I complained frequently about how hard it was to find anything both cute and modest, and I consistently picked cute over modest.

As I grew older, I saw younger girls mimic some of my behaviors, outfits and attitudes. This made me realize that I had been self-focused, not God-focused, in my everyday life and even when coming before God at church services. I realized something as simple as an outfit could impede the good work God wanted to do in me because of the example I was setting for others.

So I started looking at women I admired and what they wore—women whose beauty came from their minds and deeds, not just the clothes they wore. These women still looked fashionable, beautiful and put together. But more importantly, they were gracious, kind and humble and had the right priorities in life—God and family. There was a special elegance

MATERIAL MODESTY IS ABOUT WHETHER OR NOT WE GLORIFY GOD WITH OUR MATERIAL BLESSINGS.

and light in them I wanted to emulate. When I imagined the godly woman I wanted to be when I grew up, I saw her dressing differently than I had been. I asked myself: *Why would I imitate the fashion of people I didn't want to be like when I grew up?*

My intent back then wasn't to be sexually desired or have others envy me, but it wasn't to intentionally avoid those things either. Intent matters, and God cares about our hearts. But we need to be truly honest with ourselves about what our intent is and the why behind it.

REFLECTIVE QUESTIONS FOR MODESTY IN HUMILITY AND ATTENTION:

- How much time do you spend getting ready every day compared to the time spent with God?
- Do you justify wearing things considered less modest because they look nice?
- Do you actively seek compliments on your physical appearance?
- Do you consider modesty when you shop?
- If you were the most modest person in the room, what would that room look like?

MATERIAL MODESTY

In 1 Timothy 2:9-10, we read some principles that apply to both men and women: "In like manner also, [let] the women adorn themselves in modest apparel, with propriety and moderation, not with braided hair or gold or pearls or costly clothing, but, which is proper for women professing godliness, with good works."

Braids and pearls are not what is wrong here, but the habit of dressing ostentatiously and drawing attention to oneself. Both men and women can be guilty of this.

Homes, vacations, cars, clothes, bags, nails, shoes and food—the list can go on and on for ways we spend our money. These things themselves are not bad. God blesses people in many ways, one of which is material wealth. However, He wants to see how we use our blessings. Only for ourselves, or sharing with others?

As the apostle John writes: "But whoever has this world's goods, and sees his brother in need, and shuts up his heart from him, how does the love of God abide in him?" (1 John 3:17).

It is not wrong to look nice or live comfortably, but if we put those things above helping people who need it, that's wrong. If we ignore the needs of our neighbor but drive a brand-new luxury car, maybe we have an issue in our hearts.

Material modesty is not about dressing in the cheapest clothes you can find, always driving an old car or rolling out of bed and not caring about your appearance at all. It's about whether or not we glorify God with our material blessings. Our presentation matters to God, and that includes both how we look and how we treat others. We should never be generous just to appear righteous (Matthew 6:3-4). Rather we should be giving because we have

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compassion for fellow human beings, in line with what God teaches us. God seeks humble, modest and generous people, not conceited or worldly ones.

REFLECTIVE QUESTIONS FOR MODESTY IN WEALTH:

- Do you care a lot about the brand you are wearing?
- Do you examine other people's clothes and deem your own "better"?
- How much money and time do you spend on your physical appearance?
- Do you spend money and time on other people?
- Are you generous and compassionate with people who have less than you?

BE MODEST AS CHRIST IS MODEST

There are many other ways that we as Christians can behave modestly. But in general, we should conduct ourselves as if Christ were right next to us—for indeed He is to live *within* us. If you think it's okay to say something in front of all your friends but would feel like it's wrong to say in front of Christ, consider why that is and whether you should still say it. Apply this principle to your other communications too. Think carefully before you post or send something public, like on social media or in the privacy of personal messages and texts. Jesus Christ is your advocate, talking to the Father about you and defending you. Don't make His job harder by saying things you shouldn't!

John writes: "My little children, I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin. But if anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous" (1 John 2:1, English Standard Version).

Specific ways we can behave modestly are building others up and being truly happy for others' successes. When it is your time for success, share it with others who have helped you get to where you are; nothing we do in this world is accomplished entirely on our own. Even if the people who helped you are strangers who put some helpful research together on the Internet, share the spotlight. Another way is to ask people questions and talk about *them*. And when someone asks *you* a question, make sure to ask one in return and really listen to the answer. There are many other ways to practice modesty, but an important one often overlooked as part of the discussion is avoiding swearing, profanity and crudeness. These things are not acceptable, not modest and not Christ-like, no matter how common we see and hear them in the world. People weakly rely on these for humor, but it isn't okay as "just a joke" either. Minding our mouth is probably one of the hardest but most important things we can do as Christians (James 3:2).

REFLECTIVE QUESTIONS FOR MODESTY IN ACTIONS:

- Do you put others down for a laugh?
- Do you overshare your accomplishments to impress people?
- Do you pretend you know things to avoid looking dumb?
- Do you gossip?
- Does your overall behavior guide people to Christ or push them away?

After reflecting on these questions, I know I still have plenty to work on, and I would be surprised if anyone reading doesn't see something they can improve in their life. I hope that you take it to heart and talk about it with your friends to help each other improve as brothers and sisters in Christ.

For "as iron sharpens iron, so a man sharpens the countenance of his friend" (Proverbs 27:17).

There are many more options now for clothing with online shopping and modesty-focused fashion influencers to help those who need a little inspiration. Being modest while looking great is easier than ever before, so I urge you to take steps in that direction.

The apostle Peter writes: "Do not let your adornment be merely outward—arranging the hair, wearing gold, or putting on fine apparel—rather let it be the hidden person of the heart, with the incorruptible beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit, which is very precious in the sight of God" (1 Peter 3:3-4).

Modesty is not about how much skin you show—not that you shouldn't consider that—but about your attitude and the deeper intentions behind what you do and say. When you start each day, as you get ready and put your appearance together, consider what you will think about and how you will talk to others. If there is an opportunity to put someone down for a big laugh, will you take it? Will you let your emotions rule you and lash out? Will you be patient and work hard? When you get ready each day, dress yourself in mercy and kindness. Stand out from others not because of your clothing but because of God's light and glory that shine through you. BT

DIVE DEEPER

To learn more about how modesty affects both men and women read "Men's and Women's Vulnerabilities," part of our free study guide *Marriage and Family: The Missing Dimension.* **Scan the code or visit ucg.org/fm to find it.**

Q: How can you resist the evil influences of Satan the devil?

A: God tells us in the Bible that Satan the devil deceives the whole world and is the ruler of this world. How can we avoid and escape his evil, satanic influences? James 4:7-8 tells us to resist the devil while submitting to God, drawing near to Him.

How, then, do we draw near to God? His instruction continues: "Cleanse your hands, you sinners; and purify your hearts, you double-minded" (same verse). We must actively seek to eliminate Satan's way of thinking and behaving from our lives.

Satan, however, is so clever and powerful that no human being can successfully resist his influence—not without God's help. Therefore the key to resisting the devil is to sincerely and consistently draw near and remain close to God.

1. Recognize and acknowledge sins and repent of them

Our first step is to allow God to wash Satan's influence from our minds. This takes place through recognizing and acknowledging our sins and repenting of them. The Scriptures compare this transformation from Satan's way of thinking to coming back to life from the dead (Ephesians 2:1-3).

2. Submit to God

When we begin to truly repent and submit to God from the heart, we begin to take His Word seriously and to obey His instruction and commands. Then His Word, the Bible, begins cleaning up our minds, washing away our evil thoughts and motives. All who genuinely repent—who wholeheartedly surrender their will to God and are baptized so that they may receive the Holy Spirit—are placed by Jesus Christ into His Church. (If you are serious about resisting Satan and submitting to God, we strongly recommend that you find a true minister of God to discuss repentance and baptism.)

Now notice Christ's concern for them and how He works with them to remove evil influences from their hearts and minds: Christ "loved the church and gave Himself for her, that He might sanctify and cleanse her with the washing of water by the word, that He might present her to Himself a glorious church, not having spot or wrinkle or any such thing, but that she should be holy and without blemish" (Ephesians 5:25-27). God's Word is the instrument Christ uses—through the power of the Holy Spirit—to wash away Satan's influences from our thinking.

3. Put on the whole armor of God

Listen

But what can we do about the devil's attempts to influence us in the future? Here, too, God provides us with a defense: "Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his power. Put on the whole armor of God, so that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. For our struggle is not against enemies of blood and flesh, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places. Therefore take up the whole armor of God, so that you may be able to withstand on that evil day, and having done everything, to stand firm" (Ephesians 6:10-13, New Revised Standard Version).

The apostle Paul then lists specific elements of the spiritual armor God makes available to us. He compares the defense of God's servants against Satan's influence to a "belt of truth around your waist" and a "breastplate of righteousness" (verse 14, NRSV). He describes their combat shoes as "whatever will make you ready to proclaim the gospel of peace" (verse 15, NRSV). Their shield is their faith in God and His Son, Jesus Christ, "with which you will be able to quench all the flaming arrows of the evil one" (verse 16, NRSV).

Their resolve is protected by "the helmet of salvation" (verse 17)—the assurance that in steadfastly serving and pleasing God they will receive eternal life. The one offensive weapon they can use to cut to ribbons Satan's attitudes and philosophies is the "sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God" (same verse).

4. Be active in daily Bible study and prayer.

Finally, Paul says, "pray in the Spirit at all times in every prayer and supplication. To that end keep alert and always persevere in supplication for all the saints" (verse 18). These are the essential keys for warding off Satan's efforts to regain control over us.

The more our character becomes like God's perfect nature, the less Satan will feel comfortable in our presence, and the more he will be inclined to flee from us. BT

DIVE DEEPER

To learn more about how to resist the devil, be sure to also read "How Can We Resist the Devil?," a part of our free study guide *Is There Really a Devil?*
Scan the code or visit ucg.org/rd to find it.

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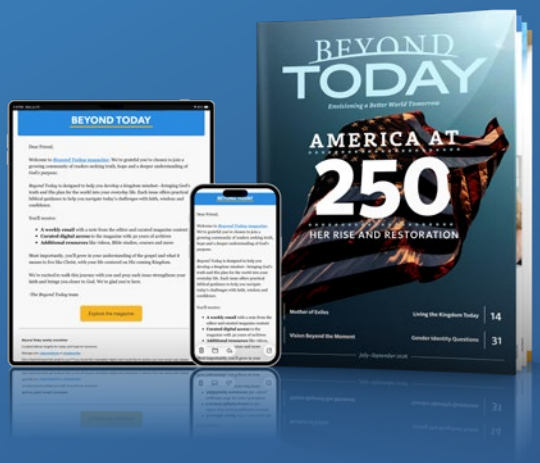

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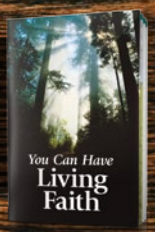

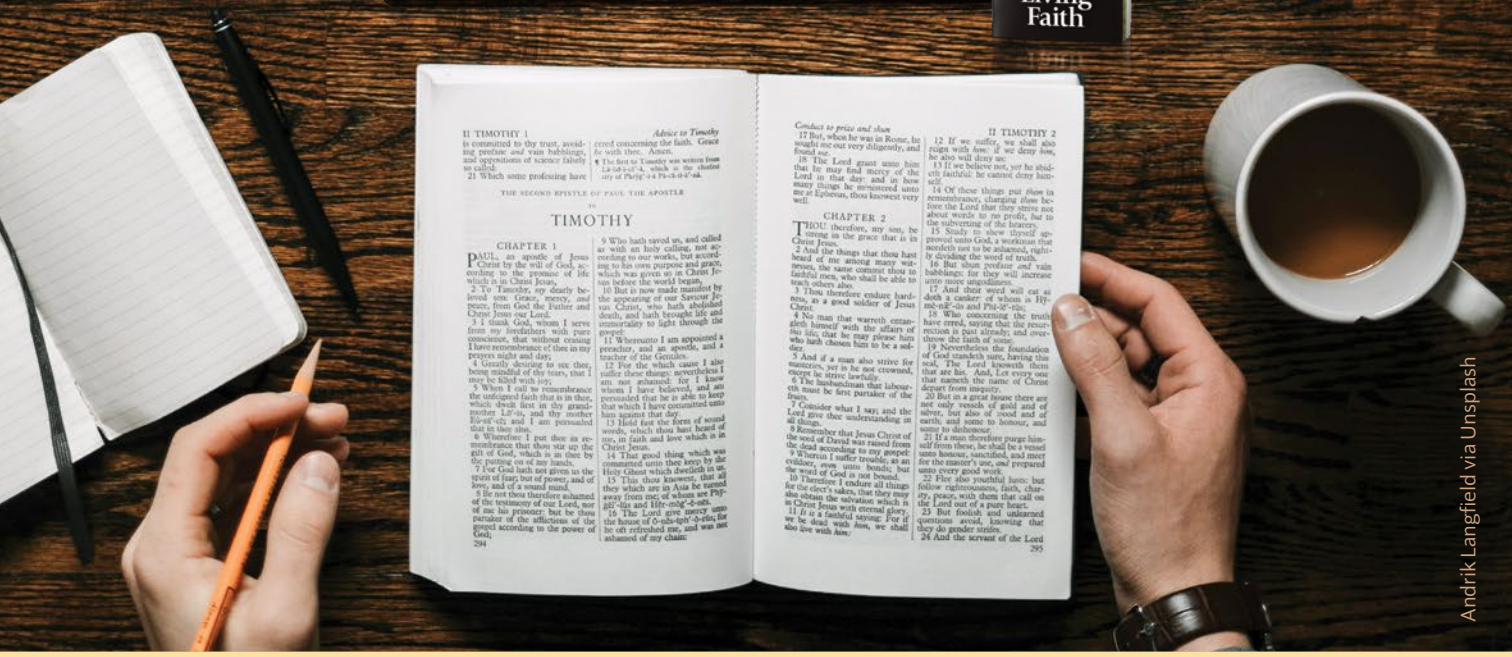

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