






Virtual Christian MAGAZINE

hope and encouragement for the real world

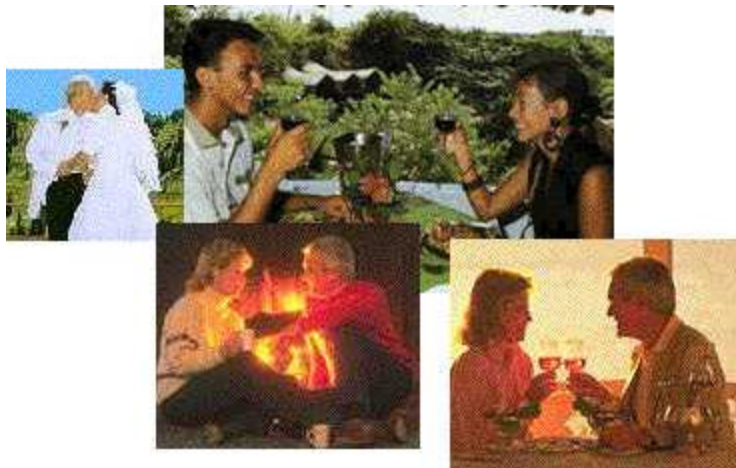
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By Mike and Becky Bennett



What's the test of true, undying love? What are the secrets that allow love to flourish and grow in a world where the love of many grows cold?

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We are pleased to announce the **January/February 2000, *Good News* magazine...**

Are We on the Threshold of a New Age?



As we enter the year 2000, what can we expect in the years ahead? Will we see a man-made utopia courtesy of wonderful new technological marvels, or a time of great crisis? Or might we see something entirely different and unexpected on the world scene--the dawn of a new age unlike anything mankind has ever experienced? Only the Bible can give us the right answer.

To receive your FREE subscription by mail, [click here](#).

Virtual Christian Magazine

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Virtual Christian MAGAZINE Editorial

What's Behind VCM?

by Mike Bennett

The Web is incredible. You can find almost anything you're looking for, or you can come across random fascinating things you didn't even know you were interested in.

But, do you kind of wonder about some of the stuff you see? When Yahoo, Excite, GoTo or some other search engine gives you pages related to "vitamins," "Valentine's Day" or "Venezuela," do you sometimes wonder how accurate the information is? Why the person or organization put the page up there? What angle they are coming from?

The mission statement for VCM is: "Hope and encouragement for the real world. An on-line magazine of practical Christian living and inspiration for the 21st century."

I know I like to have a bit of context when I come across something new. So, in case you're curious, here's a bit about us.

Virtual Christian Magazine, affectionately known as *VCM*, is a little over a year old. In 1999, 11 issues of *VCM* were posted on the Web as a public service, as part of the publishing efforts of the United Church of God.

As Vic Kubik, the managing editor and the founder of *VCM*, explained in the welcoming editorial in January 1999, this Internet magazine uses "the cyberworld to reach those inquiring about answers to life's biggest questions."

The mission statement for *VCM* is: "Hope and encouragement for the real world. An on-line magazine of practical Christian living and inspiration for the 21st century."

Being an on-line magazine has many advantages. Articles can immediately reflect quickly developing events in the world while at the same time dealing with timeless human issues. For example, an article about the shooting at Columbine High School was on -line in *VCM* weeks before it could be printed in our sister print magazine, [The Good News](#). Suggestions from readers can also be incorporated into articles already on -line. The on-line medium also makes it possible to provide Internet links which guide readers to on -line resources and allows interaction with readers via e-mail.

Virtual Staff

Besides Vic Kubik, the virtual staff currently includes two ministerial reviewers, Jack Elliott and Joel Meeker, and seven volunteers: Mike Bennett, Michelle Grovak, Lorelei Nettles, Joan Osborn,

Chris Rowland, John Rutis and Aimee Zahora.

John Rutis lives near Portland, Oregon. "As a software engineer/technical writer, I was on the Internet when the user organizations could be listed on two sheets of paper. When the Web was started I felt this could be a great way to spread the gospel.



"When Vic Kubik asked if I would like to help with *VCM*, I didn't hesitate. My wife and I have written articles for *VCM* and some of my kids have drawn illustrations. I've edited the work of other writers. ... I hope all of our efforts combined can have a positive effect on people's lives."



Aimee Zahora lives in Indiana and works for Dow AgroSciences. She is also a certified teacher of English at the secondary level. She said, "I enjoy being a part of the staff of *VCM* because it's a magazine that's personal. The issues touched upon in it are real ...

"Besides being personal, I appreciate the medium of the magazine. Because *VCM* is accessible through the Internet, its potential audience is extremely diverse. That diversity brings with it enormous possibilities which include a greater capacity for understanding individuals and issues, for reexamining our own perspectives and striving toward a more balanced approach, and also for building bridges within our extended communities."

Lorelei Nettles, who locates graphic images to enhance the message of the articles in *VCM*, lives in Holt, Missouri. She said: "I guess I do it because I just love being involved with something positive. I started in *VCM*'s beginnings and just enjoy being part of the team. When someone tells me they enjoyed *VCM* or that they were inspired by an article, it makes it all worthwhile." She encourages readers to submit articles. "It would be great to have a little more diversity in the coming months. There are so many people out there with great and inspirational stories."



Other virtual editors include Michelle Grovak and Mike Bennett. Chris Rowland formats the whole thing for the Web, combining the text and graphics and producing the final product.

Writers Wanted

VCM always needs more good material, and readers are welcome to submit articles. Vic Kubik's January 1999 editorial described some of the articles the staff is looking for.

"Accounts of faith's power, love's bond and hope's anchor will fill this magazine. Practical solutions to life's challenges will be discussed along with stories about how God has intervened, encouraged or helped us overcome. We hope to include as many first -person true-life stories as possible to inspire and motivate someone to overcome life's difficulties and offer suggestions about how to live a life centered around Jesus Christ. We will talk about solving tough personal problems, and building satisfying relationships with family, friends and coworkers. We will be ready to laugh, but not afraid of tears."

VCM can be entered from the "UCG *IA* Life & Resources" button on the United Church of God Web page at <http://www.ucg.org>, or directly through <http://vcmagazine.org>.

Other Resources

VCM is just one of the helpful resources available from the United Church of God. Whether through the Web, or through the mail, these resources are free of charge. (As Jesus said in Matthew 10:8, "Freely you have received, freely give.")

Most of these resources are available through the Literature Library at <http://www.ucg.org/html/literat.shtml>. These include our full -color print magazine, *The Good News*, helpful publications such as *Making Life Work*, *You Can Have Living Faith*, *Managing Your Finances* and our monthly newsletter about *World News and Prophecy*.

If you want to know more about the United Church of God, you can check out the Church's mission statement, fundamental beliefs and even look through the Constitution and Bylaws. If there are any questions our Web site and literature don't answer, we are happy to respond to your questions.

You (Yes, You!)

So, you've seen a bit of what is behind *VCM*. If you have an interest in helping other people with your words and efforts, you are welcome to get involved. Send us your feedback, your suggestions, your article ideas. You are welcome to provide a link to *VCM* and encouraged to let others know about this free e-zine. Without you, *VCM* would be just a bunch of bits and bytes. You give it life, and help it grow. You are a key member of the virtual staff.

We look forward to hearing from you!

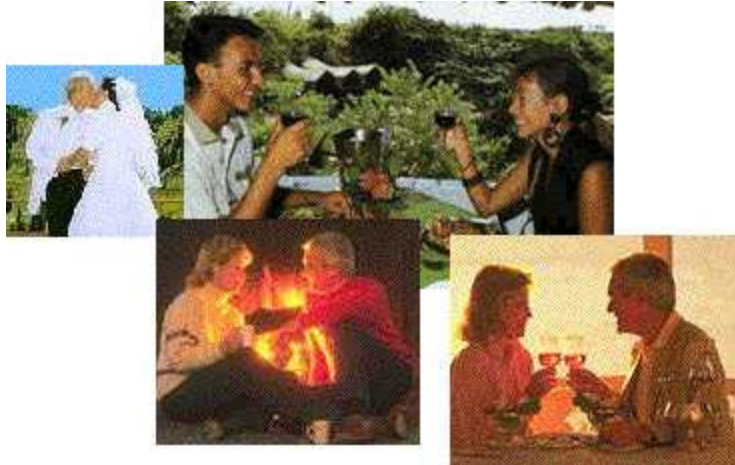


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Secrets of Love

*What's the test of true, undying love?
What are the secrets that allow love to flourish and grow
in a world where the love of many grows cold?*

By Mike and Becky Bennett



LOVE EVOKES MANY IMAGES: high school sweethearts, pledging their undying love; couples separated by war, yearning for each other's touch; lovers making great sacrifices in the quest for the safety and comfort of their beloved.

These crucial moments paint the highlights of the love stories around us. In the background there may be moments, hours, even decades of the daily aches and joys of love, binding the whole beautiful picture together.

Today love seems a fragile, fleeting thing. Too often it seems that love dies in the blossom of its youth. A love that lasts a decade can seem a rare thing anymore. How precious then is a love that flourishes for 50 years? Stories of love that has lasted so many decades are worthy of admiration and imitation. What are the secrets of these couples who have lasted? We asked several couples, whose love and commitment have spanned the half-century mark, to share their stories, their secrets and their advice.

Love Stories

EDWARD AND ANGIE SMITH were high school sweethearts. They met when they were freshmen and started dating their senior year. They graduated in May of 1944, and were married October 8, 1944, on Angie's 18th birthday.

Nine months later, Edward was drafted into the army. Of course, the couple didn't want to be separated, so Angie traveled with Edward as much as possible. But when Edward was sent to

Germany for a year, Angie returned to her parents' home.

During that year, the Smiths did their best to stay close. Ed wrote his wife every day. Angie feels God helped them to be faithful to each other.

Thinking back to those early years Ed says, "Obviously, the early portion of married life can be a 'testing time'--letting your thoughts, moods, emotions and plans blend into a harmonious unit [in an effort] to become truly synergistic. Having to leave my bride of just over a year behind, while serving in the military at the Nuremberg Trials in Germany, was a sad time." Finding a job just after World War II was not easy either, and there was very little pay in those days. With teamwork and careful planning, however, he explained that they were able to buy and pay for their first home.

A love that lasts a decade can seem a rare thing anymore.

Over the years, Ed and Angie Smith survived many other trials, which tested their faith and courage. "It was not easy at all, but our love for God and one other pulled us through," he said.

Every love story has its own tempo and its own temperament. Yet, they all share some common themes and experiences.

Jack and Anne Elliott live in East Texas and have shared 53 years together. Those years have been filled with hard work and trials, as well as joyous times spent with family. "The hardest times we faced were the early years when we were getting to know each other on a deeper level, when finances were tight and the babies were coming, and we were still young and centered on self," said Anne Elliott.

She also reminisced about some of the best memories through the years: "Romantic memories of private times we shared as husband and wife--anniversaries, weekend getaways, special evenings together, times we worked together on projects which sometimes succeeded and sometimes didn't.... All the little things, planned and unplanned, which transformed our relationship from the hum-drum to the sublime."

When asked about the most difficult times, Jean Pulliam, who will celebrate her 50th anniversary in March with her husband Ken, said the "hardest times were the financial problems all newlyweds have. We have had our share of trials. But God and love got us through."

Two years ago Ken Pulliam faced a life-threatening heart condition and the couple went through the trauma of by-pass surgery. Today you'd never know it, as the Kentucky couple walks hand in hand with laughing smiles and a twinkle in Ken's eye. It seems they've learned to look at the bright side. Jean Pulliam said, "My best memories are the whole 50 years...."

Hard Won "Secrets"

WHAT ARE THE SECRETS of the success of these couples, who have survived the ravages of time and trials? How have they weathered the storms of disease, financial strains, being separated for a year and all the daily trials that can wear down a relationship?

Ed Smith summed up his secrets of true love with these Cs: "Commitment, communication, cooperation and compromise for the mutual care and concern of one another is most vital. Planning and doing things together is very necessary. We never wanted to be apart--where one went, the other wanted to go.

"Love must be shown and genuinely expressed. I often tell my wife: 'Honey, when I married you 55 years ago--I thought I loved you, and now 55 years later-- *I know I love you!*' Remain the best of friends and always be faithful to each other," he said.

Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never fails.

Anne Elliott shared these secrets to a successful marriage: "First and foremost there must be an understanding on both hands that marriage is a life partnership--that it was meant to succeed and to provide a stable, safe haven where husband and wife can support and comfort each other through life's good times and bad times, and to raise a family of secure, well-brought-up children for the next generation.

"No marriage of mortals is ever perfect, because we are imperfect. Our selfish natures often provoke each other in a myriad of ways. But if the love for each other is founded on respect for and admiration of character, it will not fail in any adversity."

Jack Elliott adds: "More than anything else, our marriage has held together comfortably since we came to understand and practice God's guidance on marriage from the Bible. After all, God is love and He knows best."

Ken Pulliam revealed some keys he has discovered. "You have to love and respect your wife. Marriage is a lifelong commitment. Young couples today have the mind-set, 'if it does not work out, we will divorce.' You have to work at being married. When you go out together, treat her as your date, show her the same love and concern that you did when you were first dating prior to marriage.

"A sense of humor will go a long way in your marriage and get you over a lot of rough times. See the humor in the situation and you will feel better and things will get better. My wife and I have poked fun and teased each other going all the way back to our dating days.

"Sharing is paramount in marriage--everything is 'ours' not 'yours' or 'mine.' Give her well-deserved compliments, surprise her, when she probably thought you did not even take notice at the time. You have to have a forgiving nature and not pout or hold grudges. We are told not to let the sun go down on our wrath. Kiss and make up--there is a lot of fun and enjoyment in the making up process!"

Jean Pulliam isn't convinced that there are any "secrets" to 50 years of marriage. "Just be sure you choose the right mate and be true to your marriage vows." She agrees with her husband that you "definitely need a sense of humor and lots of love. Be sure to dwell on the positive, never the negative. After 50 years, we still hold hands and love each other."

Invaluable Advice

WE ASKED THESE COUPLES what advice they would have for those thinking about marriage, and for those recently married. Since the early years of a relationship can be the most challenging, having mentors with 50 years of experience can be invaluable!

Ed Smith reminds couples that "prayer is vital. Ask God to guide the decisions. I still remember vividly praying (as best I knew how): 'God, if it is Your will and this is the wife I should have, please let it be.' He graciously answered with the 'best wife in all the world!'"

He encouraged those thinking about marriage to get to know each other. "Even play some type of competitive game in which there is a winner and loser and see how the prospective spouse controls or loses their temper or composure. Look for extreme mood swings. Observe how the prospective mate handles their relationship with their parents, siblings, friends, etc. Chances are you will be handled in much the same way."

Anne Elliott also stressed the importance of getting to know the person in many different situations. "What is his or her attitude toward work? Toward play? Is he or she glib with the truth? Does he or she drink too much at parties? Would he or she rather play than work? Do you share similar interests in religion, music, literature, education, recreation?"

To expect perfection in a potential mate while being imperfect yourself shows as much immaturity as the belief that "I know he'll change because he loves me," said Mrs. Elliott. "Each partner should realize that just as he wants a worthy spouse, the other one does, too, and so he should strive in his own life to live up to that ideal as well.

"Love and marriage do not change human nature. In other words, 'What you see is what you get.' If you enter into marriage blinded by physical attraction, you will be rudely awakened not long after, when the full character of your spouse becomes evident. This is the single most common reason for the failure of marriages today," Mrs. Elliott said. She also encouraged couples to seek the input of their parents. "By involving parents in the process early on, before romantic attachments have formed, the wisdom of their counsel can be invaluable."

"Be sure the one you choose to marry is the one you want to spend your life with," said Jean Pulliam. Then, once you've made the commitment, stick with it. Don't look for a way out, but for ways forward. "Divorce was never in our vocabulary," she said.

Since work plays such an important role in our lives, Mrs. Elliott advised that a wife should make an effort to understand her husband's work, and he hers. "In this way they can freely share their work-related experiences and difficulties and gain the emotional support they need at critical times. This may entail some study, but it will pay dividends in communication, closeness and commitment - the three big Cs of marriage.

"After 20 years of marriage I became an architectural librarian and for the first time my husband could talk to me about his work...the problems his department faced when building, remodeling, getting needed supplies and managing the department. We became closer than we ever were

before. We now spoke the same language."

Speaking of work, Ken Pulliam gave this advice to new husbands: "If the wife works outside of the home, you should share the housekeeping chores with her. She shouldn't have to work eight hours at a job and then come home and do all the housework too."

Jean Pulliam summed her advice up this way: "Your spouse must definitely be your best friend -- one you can communicate with and tell everything to."

Advice From an Ancient Source

THese vintage secrets and advice reflect ancient wisdom--secrets from the Creator of love and marriage. Consider the simple (yet not always easy) keys revealed in what's popularly called the love chapter:

"Love suffers long and is kind; love does not envy; love does not parade itself, is not puffed up; does not behave rudely, does not seek its own, is not provoked, thinks no evil; does not rejoice in iniquity, but rejoices in the truth; bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never fails" (1 Corinthians 13:4 -8).

This love reflects the perfect love of God, and is the ideal that we can strive for in marriage and all our relationships. In good times and in difficult times, when our internal resources run short, we can turn to the ultimate source of real, true, powerful love --the eternal God. With His Spirit growing in us, our love can grow and flourish, not just for 50 years, but forever!



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True Freedom

If you were as rich as billionaire Howard Hughes, you would enjoy great freedom. Wouldn't you?

By John Rutis



HOWARD HUGHES WAS ONCE one of the richest men in America. He made millions in the aircraft industry and designed, built and flew--once--the largest aircraft ever built. That was the Spruce Goose, a flying boat with eight engines and built mostly of birch plywood. The wingspan of a 747 jumbo jet is 195 feet--the Spruce Goose is 320 feet.

Some might think they would enjoy great freedom if they were as rich as Howard Hughes. They could do anything they wanted.

Hughes could do almost anything he wanted. He was staying at the Desert Inn in Las Vegas taking up the top two floors. He stayed so long the management asked him to leave. He was paying the rent just fine, but they don't make much money on the rent and he wasn't gambling in the casino. The Desert Inn wanted to rent the floors to high rollers. Hughes didn't want to leave, so he bought the Desert Inn for twice what it was worth.



But by this time Hughes was obsessed with many fears. He never talked to anyone on the telephone. Everything handed to him had to be wrapped in tissue. He lived the last 20 years of his life, and died, a wretched recluse, unable to really enjoy his great wealth or even the simple pleasures of life.

Most people, rich or poor, in nations that are relatively free or totalitarian, are much more limited in their freedom than they could be. In fact they aren't free at all. They are slaves.

Look at the young man in Matthew 19:16-26. He wanted eternal life--and he went to the source who could give it to him. He asked Jesus how to gain eternal life. Jesus told him there was only one thing holding him back from his goal: "Go, sell what you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow Me."

If the young man had been truly free, he would have joyfully done as Jesus said. But he wasn't

free--he was a slave: "But when the young man heard that saying, he went away sorrowful, for he had great possessions."

This young man was a slave of his possessions--riches. Howard Hughes might have been far happier in later life if he had never been so rich. He probably wouldn't have developed his obsessions and fears. Why didn't the young man Jesus spoke to do as Jesus instructed? Perhaps he was afraid that if he gave away all his riches, he'd end up a beggar. He had become a slave to his riches, putting his trust and confidence in them, instead of God.

Paul, by contrast, had learned to be free whether he was in poverty or in plenty. When he prospered it didn't bother him that he might be poverty stricken next week.

What is true freedom and how can we have it?

In Philippians 4:11 through 13, Paul tells us, "Not that I speak in regard to need, for I have learned in whatever state I am, to be content: I know how to be abased, and I know how to abound. Everywhere and in all things I have learned both to be full and to be hungry, both to abound and to suffer need. I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me."

Riches of themselves do not make you a slave. Most people who are rich make themselves slaves to riches. A few, such as Abraham, don't.

Most of us don't have to worry about riches. But riches aren't the only things that can enslave us.

"Be angry, and do not sin," the scripture says, "do not let the sun go down on your wrath" (Ephesians 4:26). Are you angry with someone for their actions or attitudes for a long time? You are a slave to that person's actions or attitudes. Do you hate someone? You are a slave to your hatred--to your own attitude toward that person, deserved or not.

Most people are much more limited in their freedom than they could be. In fact they aren't free at all.

Do you easily take offense at what other people say or do? You are a slave to those people's words and deeds.

Do you desire to hear "smooth things" rather than truth? You are enslaved by the desire for tranquillity.

Are you overly concerned with what other people think? Are you a woman whose home must always be immaculate because someone might drop by unexpectedly and what would they think? You're a slave to what others might think.

Of course there is just the opposite; the woman who cares nothing about the condition of her home is a slave too. She's a slave to her indifference.

Covetousness, fear, worry, lying, lust, addictions--they all enslave us. How can we be truly free?

A well known Bible verse is John 8:32. It's a scripture we've heard many times: "You shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free." And there's a scripture that goes along with it in John

17:17 (last half): "Your word is truth." That is, the words of the Bible are truth.

Yes, the truth brings true freedom and the Word of God--the Holy Bible--is the truth that brings that freedom. But HOW? Can just knowing the truth and where the truth is to be found make us free?

No, there's another leg to the stool, found in James 1:25, "But he who looks into the perfect law of liberty and continues in it, and is not a forgetful hearer but a doer of the work, this one will be blessed in what he does."

If you know the truth--from the true source, the Bible--and do what the truth tells you, you will be free indeed. Doing what you know is right gives you great freedom. Now, doesn't everyone do what they think is right? No. People often do what they think is wrong, but they justify themselves--they are slaves to justification. You never have to justify yourself when you do what you know God wants. If you're not sure if something is wrong, don't do it, "for whatever is not from faith is sin" (Romans 14:23).

Love casts out fear. Fear was the main thing that enslaved Howard Hughes in later life.

If you know the truth, you will not be overly concerned with what others think of you. You will be concerned with what God thinks of you. God has a higher standard than man, to be sure, but you also know that God understands--He will never put you down or laugh at you as other people might, but will help you in every way.

You will not take offense at what others say about you or think about you--you will not be thinking of yourself so much.

You will not let anger fester in you --you will drop it at the day's end as the scripture says. You won't get as upset when people don't speak smooth things, but will take the rough things to heart.

You will not be a slave to hatred. Hatred may not hurt the one hated, but it enslaves the hater. That's why God says to love your enemies. Love --real love--does not enslave you.

Love casts out fear. And aren't many people slaves of fear? Fear was the main thing that enslaved Howard Hughes in later life. It's true there are many things to be afraid of in this world and a certain amount of fear is healthy. But knowing God's truth frees us from most fear. We know we have God's protection from most of the things the people around us fear. We know that keeping God's laws protects us from many of the penalties other people suffer. We also know that if something terrible does occur, God will support us through whatever it is and that "all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are the called according to His purpose" (Romans 8:28).

The greatest thing that enslaves people is sin.

John 8:31 through 36 tells us: "Then Jesus said to those Jews who believed Him, 'If you abide in My word, [then] you are My disciples indeed. And you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free.' They answered Him, 'We are Abraham's descendants, and have never been in bondage to anyone. How can you say, "You will be made free"?' Jesus answered them, 'Most

assuredly, I say to you, whoever commits sin is a slave of sin. And a slave does not abide in the house forever, but a son abides forever. Therefore if the Son makes you free, you shall be free indeed."

When we repent and are baptized, all of our sins are forgiven. They are no longer shackles on our wrists and ankles. We are free. We are no longer the servant --the slave--of sin. We still sin at times and place those shackles on ourselves again, but we can go to God and have them struck off again. The Son has made us free and we are free indeed!

We are free too because we know God will take care of us.

"Therefore I say to you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink; nor about your body, what you will put on. Is not life more than food and the body more than clothing? Look at the birds of the air, for they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns; yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they?

"Therefore do not worry, saying, "What shall we eat?" or "What shall we drink?" or "What shall we wear?" For after all these things the Gentiles seek. For your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. But seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added to you" (Matthew 6:25 -26 and 31-33).

True freedom gives you peace of mind. "Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God; and the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus" (Philippians 4:6-7).



Learning to Accept What Is

*Life threw me a curve, and I had to consider going back to college.
Would my over-50 brain still work?*

By Elaine Jacobs



IN JUNE OF 1998 my husband, who pastors two small congregations in the Southwest, received a distressing phone call. He was informed that his salary would be cut in half due to church financial difficulties.

My husband had expected this might happen and was somewhat prepared. He had returned to school the previous January to pursue a master's degree in counseling. I, on the other hand, was broadsided by this startling news. I felt a great sense of loss, a feeling of being devalued. I was in mourning.

Our thoughts immediately were how to survive financially. Should we sell our home, which we had only bought two years previously? We knew we would take a loss if we did, but on half salary, we couldn't make our payments.

We sat down and took a long, hard look at our savings and our budget. If we used most of our savings to pay the mortgage down, we could afford the monthly payments. Cutting our budget to the bone, we could keep the house and make it financially for a year. By then my husband would have his master's degree, and would hopefully be able to find work in a clinic.

It was a relief to develop a plan, but the emotional pain was still there. A few friends and family contacted us. Most in our congregations were supportive and comforting. What turned things around for me was a statement made by a friend at church, a lady whose husband had just lost his

job.

I mentioned that I felt like I was mourning a loss and she said, "But think about it, you haven't really lost anything important." At first I thought, "She just doesn't understand." But the next day as I was praying and meditating, her words came back to me. I realized, "She's right! I still have God, His truth, my husband, my children and our pastorate." It was time to think about the positive instead of the negative, to be proactive. I couldn't change what was. I needed to make the most of the situation. I needed to learn to be content in the state I was in (Philippians 4:11).

It was time to think about the positive instead of the negative, to be proactive.

I asked God to help me to not entertain negative thoughts and to know He was there and going to take good care of us. Negative thoughts can lead to anger and anger to bitterness. This is nonproductive and dangerous.

For several years I had been thinking that I needed to be able to support myself if anything ever happened to my husband. My first career was raising our children, being a wife and supporting my husband's ministry. I loved it, but the pay wasn't great and our children were now grown.

The prospect of returning to school was a scary one and had always been put off. Now was the time to make it happen. I prayed for courage, direction and support, then made plans to go to the local community college to seek advice and counseling. My interest was in bookkeeping. My goal was to have a small business in my home.

The day arrived. I prayed, girded myself with courage and went off to school. Things didn't go as I had hoped. I got in to see an adviser, but the extent of the advice was, "Yes, we have a bookkeeping program, but you need to get a catalog, a schedule and turn in an application. You'd better hurry. Classes are filling up fast!"

So, a bit rattled, but still determined, I went and got everything. As I stood there trying to fill out my application, I heard words like "transcripts," "placement tests" and "registration" from the crowd around me. The more I heard, the more overwhelmed I felt. I walked out and went home. I wasn't going to give up, but I had had all I could handle for that day.

My greatest thrill has been seeing that God was with me. He supplied the love and support that was needed.

Later I told my husband, "I don't like it. I feel like a cow being loaded on a cattle car. I want something more old -person friendly. What about a business college?" I continued to pray about it, telling God the same thing I told my husband.

A few days later my husband asked, "Will you go back if I go with you?" I said I would think about it. Then one of my friends mentioned there was another campus of the same community college. It was much smaller and in a quiet neighborhood. And they carried the classes I wanted.

Two placement tests were required: math and typing. Typing didn't worry me, but math classes were a distant memory. My sister, who had also returned to school, had a math study guide. She offered to send it to me.

For three days I studied several hours a day. Then, with my kind and supportive husband by my side, I returned to school, this time to the friendlier, less overwhelming environment of the smaller school. I applied, was accepted, took and passed my placement tests, counseled about my schedule and returned home triumphant to await my registration date.

My first semester I finished with an 'A' in business math. My greatest thrill has been seeing that God was with me. He supplied the love and support that was needed. He answered my prayers, large and small.

Growth in life can be painful and scary. Sometimes we just need to step out in faith. We have to learn to accept things as they are, realizing that our faithful Shepherd will supply every need.

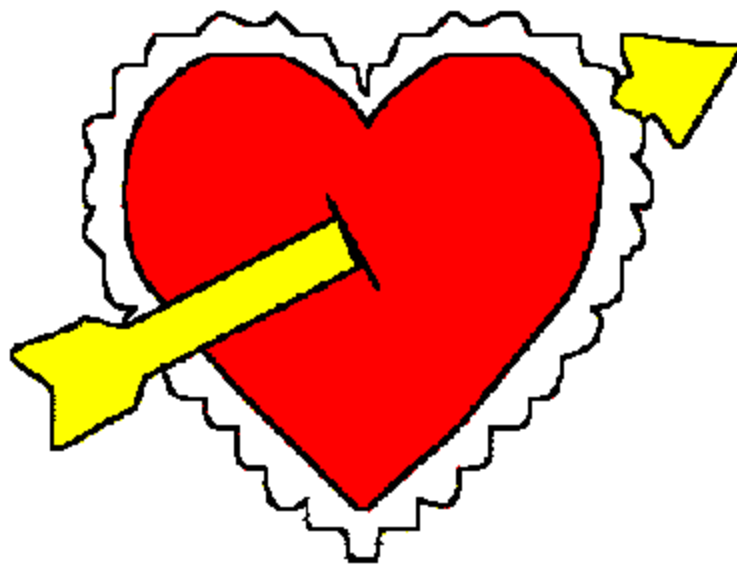


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St. Valentine, Cupid and Jesus Christ

The customs appear harmless, but is Valentine's Day really a Christian holiday? What are its origins? Is it possible that this seemingly innocent celebration actually promotes unbiblical teachings?

By Gary Petty



EVERY YEAR IN MID-FEBRUARY millions of people express romantic desire for each other by exchanging heart-shaped boxes of chocolate, flowers and "valentines." Children reveal hidden infatuations by sending a card as a "secret admirer." Retailers stock their shelves with merchandise covered in stylized hearts and Cupids preparing for the popular observance of Valentine's Day. But where and how did these curious customs originate?

Valentine's Day acquired its name from a Catholic saint, although exactly who he was is a matter of debate. The two most famous Valentines were a Roman priest and a bishop who both suffered martyrdom in the last half of the third century.

Celebrations, The Complete Book of American Holidays, records the story this way: "Everyone knows that St. Valentine's Day is that day of the year when friends and lovers express affection for one another, through cards, candy and flowers, whatever means the imagination can find. But no one is quite certain who this St. Valentine was --or, more appropriately, who these Valentines were. The early lists of church martyrs reveal at least three Valentines, and one source boosted this number to an unwieldy eight, each of whom had his feast day on February 14.

"The various Valentines eventually evolved into one. Lover's quarrels come under his jurisdiction and, naturally, he is the patron saint of engaged couples and of anyone wishing to marry" (Robert J. Myers and the Editors of Hallmark Cards, 1972, pp. 48-49).

During the Middle Ages, Valentine's Day became increasingly popular in Europe. February 14 was significant not only for its religious meaning, but because it was widely believed that birds begin to mate on this date. Geoffrey Chaucer (c. 1340 -1400) mentions the mating of birds on Valentine's Day in his poem *Parliament of Fowles*.

"English literature, following Chaucer, contains frequent references to February 14 as sacred to lovers. Shakespeare, Drayton, and Gay are among those who mention it in this connection, and the diarist Samuel Pepys several times discusses the day and its related customs. The *Paston Letters*, covering the period from 1422 to 1509, contain a letter by Dame Elizabeth Brews to John Paston, with whom she hoped to arrange a match for her daughter, which runs this way:

"And cousin mine, upon Monday is St. Valentine's day and every bird chooseth himself a mate..." (Jane M. Hatch, *The American Book of Days*, 1978, p. 178).

For centuries St. Valentine's Day flourished as a day of romantic superstition. A common belief was that a girl would marry the first bachelor she saw or conjure her future mate's image by visiting a graveyard on St. Valentine's Eve.

The custom of sending valentine cards grew popular in the 1700s. In the early 1800s commercial valentines appeared and soon there was no end to how entrepreneurs could make money from this holiday. Valentine's Day became so popular in the United States that one 1863 periodical claimed that it was second in celebration only to Christmas.

Today, Valentine's Day is as popular as ever with children and couples. It's definitely one of the biggest moneymaking days for florists, candy makers and gift shops.

Pre-Christian Origins of Valentine's Day

But do the roots of Valentine's Day run deeper and further back into history?



In reality, the origins of Valentine's Day predate Christianity. "The most plausible theory for St. Valentine's Day traces its customs back to the Roman Lupercalia, a feast celebrated in February in honor of the pastoral god Lupercus, a Roman version of the Greek god Pan. The festival was an important one for the Romans, occurring when it did, naturally had some aspects of a rebirth rite to it" (Myers, pp. 50-51).

The original festival, celebrated on February 15, is founded in the ancient legend of the infants Romulus and Remus. The two brothers were abandoned but discovered and nursed by a wolf,

or *lupus* in Latin. The two boys are credited as the founders of Rome.

Lupercalia was celebrated in honor of a number of pastoral deities, and ceremonies included the sacrifice of goats and a dog. Young men dressed in the sacrificial animal skins would run from a cave, said to be where Romulus and Remus were cared for by the wolf, brandishing strips of goat skins. Any women struck by these thongs were assured fertility. "These thongs were called *Februa*, the festival *Februatio*, and the day *Dies Februetus*, hence arose the name of the month February, the last of the old Roman year" (*Encyclopedia Britannica*, Vol. XV, ninth edition, 1907, article "Lupercalia").

Over the years many customs were added to the celebration. One custom was for the names of girls to be placed in a box to be drawn by boys. The two were then considered a pair for the coming year.

Lupercalia and Christianity

As Christianity spread throughout the Roman Empire, it was common for pagan converts to retain their earlier religious customs and practices. Edward Gibbons, in his classic work *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, states: "After the conversion of the Imperial city, the Christians still continued, in the month of February, the annual celebration of the Lupercalia; to which they ascribed a secret and mysterious influence of the genial powers of the animal and vegetable world" (Vol. II, The Modern Library, p. 327).

Pope Gelasius is said to have eradicated Lupercalia from Christian observance in the last decade of the fifth century. But in reality, the intermingling of paganism and Christianity had become inseparable in much of the Western world. Saturnalia and Mithraism were incorporated into the church through claiming a December birth date for Jesus Christ. Various spring fertility rites merged to form the basis of Easter celebrations. Lupercalia evolved into the observance of St. Valentine's Day.

Celebrations: The Complete Book of American Holidays, comments: "Everywhere that Christians came into power they immediately adapted the holidays and customs of the people to their own creed. Now it was a simple matter to call the day that this drawing took place St. Valentine's Day... To Christianize the heathen practice of picking lots for sweethearts, all that was needed was to replace the names of the girls with names of saints and to have the young people emulate the particular virtues of whatever saint they drew. Incidentally, this custom is not dead today and is still observed in some religious orders.

"It was always more fun, of course, to pick a girl's rather than a saint's name. Consequently, by at least the fourteenth century the custom had reverted to its original form" (pp. 50 -51).

Roman Gods and Christian Saints

Why would a day honoring pagan gods become associated with Christian saints?

The ancient Romans worshiped gods and goddesses involved with every aspect of life. Jupiter, the chief of the gods, was the god of rain and storms, while his wife, Juno, was the goddess of

womanhood. Minerva was the goddess of handicrafts and wisdom; Venus, of sexual love and birth; Vesta, of the hearth and sacred fires; Ceres, of farming and harvests.

The Greeks considered Mercury to be the messenger of the gods, but the Romans worshiped him as the god of trade and businesspeople celebrated his feast day to increase profits. Others included Mars, god of war; Castor and Pollux, gods of sea travelers; Cronos, the guardian of time; and Cupid, god of love, whose magic arrows caused both humans and immortals to fall in love. The list goes on and on.

Romans would generically call on "the gods," but each deity had its own cult and worshipers would pray and conduct religious ceremonies to a specific god or goddess to implore help. Christianity, with its emphasis on one God, was viewed by many Romans as a strange superstition or even a kind of atheism that denied the "gods."

Members of the early Christian Church considered themselves "saints," meaning holy or separated to God. Paul greets the church at Philippi as "all the saints in Christ Jesus" (Philippians 1:1). However, it wasn't long before "saints" in the Roman tradition began to take on the meaning of a special class of martyrs or performers of heroic virtue.

In the second and third centuries it became common for local congregations to honor the death of a martyr by celebrating the anniversary of his or her demise. The local cult would then offer prayers to the dead for intercession with God. A "saint" could eventually receive universal recognition by declaration of the bishop of Rome.

The Catholic Encyclopedia explains: "As was taught by St. Augustine... Catholics, while giving to God alone adoration strictly so-called, honor the saints because of the Divine supernatural gifts which have earned them eternal life, and through which they reign with God in the heavenly fatherland as His chosen friends and faithful servants.

"In other words, Catholics honor God in His saints as the loving distributor of supernatural gifts. The worship of *latría*... or strict adoration is given to God alone; the worship, or *dulia*... or honor and humble reverence, is paid the saints; the worship of *hyperdulia*... on account of her greater excellence, to the Blessed Virgin Mary" (Vol. II, article "Saints," 1907, Online Edition, 1999, Kevin Knight).

The evolution from the early church's recognition of all members being "saints" to the veneration and worship of the dead is rooted in the early mixture of paganism with Christianity. The populace throughout the Roman Empire was not only accustomed to the worship of the Greek and Roman pantheon, but to cultic worship of local deities. It was an easy step for Christian congregations whose roots were in paganism to replace the customs of local cults with the worship of dead martyrs.

Over the centuries the Catholic church canonized saints for any number of events, problems, illnesses and occupations, each celebrated with his or her own feast day. St. Stephen is the patron saint of stonemasons; doctors are to pray to St. Luke; fishermen to St. Andrew and carpenters to

The evolution from the early church's recognition of all members being "saints" to the veneration and worship of the dead is rooted in the early mixture of paganism with Christianity.

St. Joseph. There are patron saints for farmers, hunters, shoemakers and even comedians. The primary saint in Catholic theology is Mary, the mother of Jesus.

The Danger in a "Harmless" Holiday

What harm can there be in the celebration of lovers in the name of St. Valentine? Besides, what does it matter that some of the day's customs stem back to pagan rites?

Nowhere does the Bible approve of praying to dead saints. In fact, Jesus declared that no one except Him has ascended into heaven (John 3:13). The saints wait in their graves for the resurrection to occur at the return of Jesus Christ. Venerating dead saints propagates an ancient heathen custom that has no basis in reality.

Most people couldn't care less if its origins are in the Roman Lupercalia or early church doctrines that had nothing to do with the Bible.

The apostle Paul wrote to the Thessalonians about the resurrection: "But I do not want you to be ignorant, brethren, concerning those who have fallen asleep, lest you sorrow as others who have no hope. For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so God will bring with Him those who sleep in Jesus. For this we say to you by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive and remain until the coming of the Lord will by no means precede those who are asleep. For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of an archangel, and with the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first" (1 Thessalonians 4:13-16).

One of the roles Jesus Christ fulfills as our resurrected High Priest is Intercessor--one who pleads on behalf of another. The Bible declares, "Therefore He [Jesus] is also able to save to the uttermost those who come to God through Him, since He always lives to make intercession for them" (Hebrews 7:25).

The Bible encourages Christians to pray for each other, but heavenly intercession is reserved for Jesus Christ. At Jesus' death the veil in the temple, a heavy curtain that separated the "holy of holies," representing God's throne, from the rest of the temple, was supernaturally torn from top to bottom. This action revealed a new access to God made available by the sacrifice of Jesus as the Messiah. A Christian's relationship to God is with a personal and intimate Father. The need for another heavenly intercessor would denigrate this primary role of Christ.

Does it Matter to God?

God warned ancient Israel, the people He chose to represent true religion, not to mix pagan customs with worshiping Him as the one true God. "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, after they are destroyed from before you, 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).

In the New Testament, Paul compares mixing paganism with Christianity to worshiping demons:

"What am I saying then? That an idol is anything, or what is offered to idols is anything? Rather, that the things which the Gentiles sacrifice they sacrifice to demons and not to God, and I do not want you to have fellowship with demons. You cannot drink the cup of the Lord and the cups of demons; you cannot partake of the Lord's table and of the table of demons" (1 Corinthians 10:19 - 21).

Holidays like St. Valentine's Day continually secularize into icons of Western culture, creating a caricature of religion. Most people couldn't care less if its origins are in the Roman Lupercalia or early church doctrines that had nothing to do with the Bible. It's this very apathy about how to worship God, and the corresponding moral decay, that is the result of mixing Christianity with paganism.

Jesus said that His followers would "worship the Father in spirit and truth" (John 4:23). Observance of this holiday is just one of many traditions that must be questioned if Christianity is to return to its foundation laid by Jesus Christ.

Recommended Reading

Does it matter which days we keep? Does God care one way or another which days and customs we celebrate or use to honor Him? Why do so many of today's holidays --including many religious observances--have strange and unusual customs found nowhere in the Bible?

Many people are shocked to discover the true origins of today's most popular holidays. They're also surprised to find that the Holy Days God commands in the Bible --the same days kept by Jesus Christ and the apostles--are almost universally ignored.

Does it matter to God? Check out the booklet [*Holidays or Holy Days: Does It Matter Which Days We Keep?*](#) You can download it or request a free copy to be mailed to you.



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Unleavened Recipes Needed!



IN THE APRIL/MAY ISSUE, we are planning to run recipes for unleavened bread (crackers, desserts-anything without yeast, baking powder or other types of leavening).

Your recipes are needed! To enter, include your name, age (for those 18 and under), recipe and a color photo of the delicious food you have made with the recipe.

Send your entry by March 1, 2000, to:

Virtual Christian Magazine
United Church of God
P.O. Box 541027
Cincinnati, OH 45254-1027
ATTN: Mike Bennett.



Or you may e-mail entries to mike_bennett@ucg.org, with photos in JPEG, GIF or TIFF electronic format.

All ages are encouraged to enter. Winning entries will be included in the April/May issue of Virtual Christian Magazine, available on the Web to readers all over the world!