

October 1

Do you fit into one of the following categories? Be honest!

Asked, "What do you feel is the major reason Christians do not read the Bible?" 500 pastors responded they thought 47% lacked time or were too busy, 19% lacked the discipline, 15% thought it irrelevant; 8% considered Bible reading not a priority, 3% couldn't understand what they were reading and 3% had poor reading skills.

Thanks to an organization called "Faith Comes by Hearing" for those stats. In partnership with the American Bible Society, "Faith Comes by Hearing" offers dramatic readings on cassette and CD available around the world. You don't have to read the Bible; you can hear it.

That's actually the way it started. Many Bible books were the writing down of oral messages from the prophets and from Jesus. Other books, like the epistles, were written in order to be read to gatherings of Christians, many of whom could not read. The Good News of the Bible has been called "viva vox evangelii," the living voice of the Gospel.

How much time do you spend sitting in traffic? If you listened to the Bible only 19 minutes a day, you'd go through the whole Bible in 60 days. "Faith comes by hearing" (Romans 10:17). If you're interested, go to <http://www.fcbh.org>.

October 4

Some great Bible verses lie buried, seldom read. Meditate on this one, Zephaniah 3:17. "The Lord your God is with you. He is mighty to save. He will take great delight in you, He will quiet you with His love, He will rejoice over you with singing."

Take this minute to mull that over. "The Lord your God is with you. He is mighty to save." You're not alone and need not feel helpless. God, your strong Savior is with you.

Feeling down? "He will take great delight in you." God delights in you and in all His people. We're the apple of His eye!

Agitated about something at work or home? "He will quiet you with His love." His peace can make you sing, "It is well with my soul, it is well."

And you're not singing a solo. The heavens ring with God's joyous music about you and all His people. "He will rejoice over you with singing." So if things seem to be crashing around you, if the din of business gets to be almost too much to bear, hear the distant echo of that heavenly music!

Explore the Bible and you'll find the greatest of treasures. "I am with you always" (Matthew 28:20).

October 5

Last week the House of Representatives in Washington passed House Resolution 761 congratulating Lance Armstrong for his victory in the 2004 Tour de France. No question, he certainly deserves the praise.

That said sincerely, I'm haunted by a passage from his latest book. "At the end of the day, we were like everybody else. The kids were tired and hungry, and the adults were, too. I'd walk through the door, physically spent. Kik (his wife) would be worn out from a day with three small children under the age of three. ...neither of us wanted to admit to problems or fatigue.... Neither one of us was able to say to the other, 'This doesn't feel quite right.' So we simply drifted on, doing our best" ("Every Second Counts," p. 162).

It's not my business to peer into that marriage, which ended in divorce. As a minister I have talked with couples who didn't realize how critical is the way you handle that time when you come home, tired and weary. That's the time when you're tempted to crash by yourself but it's really the time to listen to and give emotional support your spouse. You may win the "race" at work, but is it worth it if you grow apart from the one you love?

October 6

My friend Bill shared an e-mail about a woman who visited the shop of a silversmith. The silversmith held a piece of silver over the fire, explaining that the silver had to be held in the very middle of the fire to burn away any impurities. The woman, a Bible student, thought of Malachi 3:3: God "will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver."

She asked the silversmith if he had to be there the whole time and he answered, yes. He had to hold and keep his eye on the silver. Otherwise, the silver might be in the fire too long and be destroyed.

"How do you know when the silver is fully refined?" she asked. "Oh, that's easy," he answered, "when I see my image in it."

That anonymous e-mail helps us understand tough days. "The Lord watches over you" (Psalm 121:5). And the refining of Christians will achieve its goal. "He who began a good work in you will bring it to completion until the day of Jesus Christ" (Philippians 1:6). On that day, fully refined, you'll see Him face to face (1 Corinthians 13:12).

How else can we understand this strange statement of James, "Consider it pure joy...whenever you face trials of many kinds?" (James 1:2).

October 7

Carlock is a little town northwest of Bloomington, Illinois. It was named for Abraham Carlock who lived in the 1800's. In those days it was customary for people to put up travelers in their own homes, but Carlock was such a fierce Democrat that he defied custom and wouldn't give shelter to travelers who were Whigs or Republicans. He sent them up the road to his political rival Philip Benson.

In 1850 Abraham Carlock donated an acre to be used as a cemetery...for Democrats only. Not to be outdone, Philip Benson donated land for a Republican cemetery in 1862. You can still see both cemeteries today, only a quarter mile apart, both filled with dead partisans.

Puts our conflicts in perspective, doesn't it? Partisan differences are important. Differences you have with co-workers, neighbors, friends and family might be very important, might be. But taking your arguments all the way to the grave? The One you'll meet on the other side won't smile at that.

It reminds me of a joke. Why are some people buried with their heads out of the ground? Answer: Their heads are harder than tombstones.

"As far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone." (Romans 12:18)

October 8

Mt. St. Helens reminds me...

Years ago in New Zealand, in Auckland to be exact, our tour guide pointed out an extinct volcano with homes built all around. One night, he said, some college students went down into the volcano with truckloads of old tires. Just before dawn, they set the tires on fire. Imagine the reaction when people woke up and looked out their windows!

The prank turned on fear, an emotion always ready and willing to take charge of our lives. Exodus tells about another smoky, scary mountain: "Mount Sinai was covered with smoke, because the Lord descended on it in fire" (Exodus 19:18). "When the people saw the thunder and lightning...and saw the mountain in smoke, they trembled with fear" (Exodus 20:18).

"Let not your hearts be troubled" (John 14:1). God showed Himself gentle on that mountain. He settled where His people were, not some far away mountain. He veiled Himself in clouds of smoke, lest they see Him face-to-face and die (Exodus 33:20). No prank. Not terrible. In all the rumblings, He is "Immanuel," God with us (Matthew 1:23).

So when clouds of fear surround you, remember smoky Sinai. God is near. One more thing. Remember also Mount Calvary. When the dark clouds descended there on Good Friday, Jesus proved the Father's loving presence for you.

October 11

A couple years ago Newsweek did a cover story entitled, "Teen Depression." According to the National Institutes of Mental Health, 3 million adolescents – that's 2 out of every 5 – have symptoms of depression. Depression can lead to academic failure, social isolation, drug abuse, and suicide. Almost 1 in every 5 high school students has thought about suicide and 2 million have actually made plans to take their lives. Most troubling: Symptoms are often waved off as adolescent moods.

Dr. Harold Koplewicz says, "Parents have to know their children. Adolescence is not a good time to introduce yourself. Money should have been put in the bank earlier. Then, during adolescence, it's a continuation of a close relationship" (p. 60)

Isn't that the way of Christian love, not only for depression but for so many other problems in life? Instead of spiritual bromides... "Have faith," "Pray," "You'll be OK; all things work together for good"... Instead of copping out with quick-fix platitudes, which don't solve the deep brokenness of our sinful world, the call is to take up the cross for the long haul. "Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never fails." (1 Corinthians 13:7-8) Spend time with your children!

October 12

Rodney Dangerfield died Tuesday. "I tell ya, I get no respect from anyone. I bought a cemetery plot. The guy said, 'There goes the neighborhood!'"

One reason we liked Dangerfield's jokes is the haunting suspicion that our lives are, on the whole, inconsequential. At the end of the day, at the end of our parenting, of our working years, near the end of life, we realize that the little respect we might get isn't long lasting.

The quick Christian response is to say God loves you and the like. True, but often not convincing. I've said such things and often get this response: "Yeah, but..." There's something deep in us that agrees with Mr. Dangerfield. It is, I think, a buried sense of sin, an instinctive sense of not measuring up to the standards of God and others.

Read the Bible and you often come across the pronoun "you." In our individualistic society we assume "you" is singular. Most times, however, it's actually plural, all you people of God. One implication of that plural is that we are a neighborhood, one where personal esteem goes up, where all edify one another and, yes, give each other the wanted respect. Since the Son of God has come among us, we are of consequence...now and for a long, long time to come.

October 13

Hey! Hey! Tonight the debates will be over! All that rhetoric, admittedly the stuff of a campaign, all that political stuff gets so wearisome.

"How long, O Lord?" (Psalm 13:1)

For my friend the answer is 30 years. He's a pastor who loves his work but struggles with some challenges of congregational life. The other day he lamented that he still has 30 years to work.

Help me here. Cast this net wide enough to include your life. What's going on with you that makes you ask the "how long" question?

So some friends invite Diane and me to the first championship game between the Astros and Cardinals. "By all means, we'll go! Thank you!" We'll sit there tonight

and all the “how long” sighs will be put aside for a few hours. That’s the genius of the Sabbath that God commanded His ancient people and the rest He encourages to His people today. “Come with Me by yourselves to a quiet place and get some rest” (Mark 6:31). It’s unquestionably best when that time is spent in devotion with God, but tonight’s baseball game won’t be bad either.

I wonder... God isn’t the property of any religious denomination, but wouldn’t you think He’ll favor a team with a religious name, the Cardinals?

October 14

Ken Caminiti and Christopher Reeve experienced spectacular peaks and sad valleys in their lives. Caminiti was at the summit as a baseball player but struggled with addiction. Reeve as Superman surmounted human problems but in real life was taken down by a spinal cord injury. Their valleys cry out for further advances in science.

Did you ever tell your chemistry teacher that God was the reason your experiment turned out as it did? Of course not. Our scientific view of the world teaches us to think in terms of natural cause and effect. That’s brought amazing and welcome advances...but when you’re down in the sad valley of problems, of guilt, and finally of death, natural cause and effect is not a source of hope.

The Bible’s message that God breaks into the closed world of cause and effect is full of hope. Without denying the scientific method, the Bible teaches that God sent His Son into the world, that heaven hears your prayers, that Baptism and Communion are God at work, and “I am with you” (Matthew 28:20) is a close, personal, here-and-now reality. We all have our little peaks of success but our valleys go deep. “I lift up my eyes to the hills – where does my help come from? My help comes from the Lord” (Psalm 121:1-2).

October 15

There are some things that make my eyes get misty. This story from a local newspaper got to me.

Title: “No Room in the Bin”

“A record breaking harvest is filling bins, trucks, railroad cars, and even the ground. The Okawville Elevator made a 115,000 bushel pile of corn on the ground last week, and started another this week. A combination of high yields and ideal dry harvest conditions are bringing grain to the Elevator faster than it can be shipped. The Elevator fills 17 railroad cars at Okawville and 7 at Addieville three times a week. Each car holds 3,500 bushels.” (“The Okawville [Illinois] Times,” October 6)

That’s just one grain elevator out of thousands in our blessed country. Attitude readjustment here. Charges fly back and forth about the state of the economy. Like most of us, I’ve got more bills to pay than I’d like. But whoa! We think of ourselves as sophisticated, and in many ways we are. Call up the pictures you have in your memory of people in the third world. Are we out of touch with reality?

"...bringing grain to the Elevator faster than it can be shipped."

God once lamented His ancient people had "not acknowledged that I was the one who gave her the grain...." (Hosea 2:8). Do we? \

October 18

Think you know what someone else believes?

First century Romans misunderstood much about Jews. Because the Jews took every seventh day off, the Sabbath, the Romans assumed they were lazy. Not true. Romans, even Emperor Caesar Augustus, believed the Sabbath was a day of fasting. Again, not true. Scholar Erich Gruen: "Most Romans contented themselves with a half-baked idea, frequently repeated but never examined" (Diaspora, 48).

So when Christians, originally a sect within Judaism, were getting heat for what they believed, Peter encouraged cool conversation. "Be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect." (1 Peter 3:15) Half-truths are the name of the game, witness the current campaign, but when it comes to something as eternally significant as religious belief, assumptions should be explored before being asserted.

When a student asked how to convince someone of the truth of biblical Christianity, I answered that he should put that on the back burner and first find out what that person believes and why. That's a lot harder work than bandying about Christian evangelism slogans. More and more I believe that living according to biblical Christianity is a stiff challenge. But that's the way of the cross. Glory awaits another day.

October 19

With apologies to Luke 10:30-37, the following is prompted by recent stories about waiting in line to get a flu shot.

Jesus spake unto them a parable, "A certain elderly person went down from home to the grocery store where flu shots were being given. Arriving, the elderly person fell into a long line, for there was great demand. Alas, no one in the store thought to provide chairs for the old people to sit in.

By chance there passed by an employee of the grocery store, and seeing the long line, continued on his way for it wasn't his problem.

And likewise a store manager passed by the same way, and seeing the line made a mental note that an underling should do something about this, and then passed by.

But when another employee journeyed to clean up a spill or corral the carts or some other lowly task and saw the line of tortured people, she had compassion. She went throughout the store and found all the chairs that she could so that the waiting elderly could sit.

And Jesus said, "Which of these three, thinkest thou, was neighbour unto them that had to stand in line to get their flu shots?"

And he said, "She that showed mercy on them."

Then said Jesus, "Go, and do thou likewise."

October 20

Last week the Supreme Court announced that it would hear two cases about the posting of the Ten Commandments in government buildings. It's a thorny issue and people of faith can take positions on both sides. I think there's a more fundamental issue for Christians and Jews, one that the Court cannot decide, one that's in us, not external and posted in some building.

It's commonly observed that we live in a time when most people do not believe in absolute truth. In my preaching I've brought this up to my listeners and said, with a smile in my mind, "I know you God-fearing church-goers are different. Why, I could call on anyone of you at random to stand up here and now and you could recite the Ten Commandments from memory. After all, you still believe that there is absolute truth."

You should see the people squirm and look down!

Some people tell me at the church door, "I can't recite them but I know what's right." Now, reader, think about that. "I know what's right." No longer is something right because it's divinely revealed truth but because "I know." I decide. That's a massive shift in understanding reality. Gothic church walls don't insulate church-goers from dangerous, faddish opinions. What's the basis for your opinion about what's right and what's wrong?

October 21

In the current issue of "Time" Jeffrey Kluger explores the possibility that we have genes that make us more or less spiritual. Kluger's article is prompted by Dean Hamer's new book, "The God Gene: How Faith Is Hardwired into Our Genes" (Doubleday).

Some Bible passages agree. From Genesis 1:27 ("God created man in His own image") we infer there's something in us yearning for God. In Romans 2:15 Paul teaches that a basic code of right and wrong is written on the human heart, to which our consciences give witness. Kluger cites Ecclesiastes 3:11: "God has...set eternity in the hearts of men."

That doesn't necessarily land us in traditional religion. People direct, or misdirect, the instinct toward materialism, addiction, careerism, what have you.

Also lurking here is the troubling question of purpose in life. This instinct for God wires us to have purpose and we're unsettled when we have no driving direction.

What kind of steward have you been of the "God gene," of the eternity set in your heart?

Augustine said famously, "Man, this small portion of creation, wants to praise You. You stimulate him to take pleasure in praising You, because You have made us for Yourself, and our hearts are restless until they can find peace in You." (Confessions I.1)

October 22

There's an instructive story buried in the Hebrew Bible. Not suspecting anything was going to happen, Jacob was jumped by an assailant. A long wrestling match followed, a wrestling that lasted through the night, and during which Jacob came to realize he was wrestling with God.

Jacob didn't initiate the match and we don't pick the times; God picks the times and places where He tackles us. "Lord, what's going on here? Why are You letting this happen?" Martin Luther had three words to describe the Christian life, *oratio*, *meditatio*, and *temptatio*. The first two, prayer and devotion, often occur at times and places of our own choosing, but the third, *temptatio*, trial and trouble, chastening and growing, come where and when our heavenly Father chooses. WWF Smackdown time!

Jacob was blessed through that long night of wrestling and when dawn finally came he had received a new name, Israel. Although it's never easy, when we see the troubles and trials of life as occasions to grow in the ways of God, we are blessed at dawn by a new understanding of what it means to carry the name of God's suffering servant, Jesus Christ. (Genesis 32:22-30)

October 25

Many people sincerely seeking to know more of the goodness of God in their lives are turned off by the conduct of some clergy and church-goers.

The October issue of "The New Yorker" tells about the "World Changers Church International" led by Creflo Dollar. "I don't reckon my last name is Dollar for no reason at all," he says. "I own two Rolls-Royces and didn't pay a dime for them. Why? Because while I'm pursuing the Lord those cars are pursuing me." Author Kalefa Sanneh observes the wealth "offers him proof that he's doing the right thing.... He's a restless capitalist." (p. 48ff.)

How do you sort out holy hustle from true religion faithful to God?

When Josh McDowell was not a Christian, he interviewed some Christian college students. He asked, "Tell me, what changed your lives? Why are your lives so different from the other students, the leaders on campus, the professors? Why?" One young woman looked him straight in the eye and said, 'Jesus Christ.' He responded, 'Oh, for God's sake, don't give me that garbage. I'm fed up with religion; I'm fed up with the church; I'm fed up with the Bible. Don't give me that garbage about religion.' She shot back, 'Mister, I didn't say religion, I said Jesus

Christ.” (from “More than a Carpenter,” in Vorhees and Sosnowy, “God Loves Lucy, and So Do I!”)

October 26

These are days of saying “Farewell” for us at Concordia Seminary in St. Louis. Our president, John F. Johnson, is leaving to become president of Concordia University in River Forest, Illinois. His goal, he says, is to prepare every Christian individual, not just clergy, to serve our Lord in the tasks of our various lives. To that end, a liberal arts university educates a Christian laity to carry the faith to places the seminary-trained clergy cannot go.

His decision assumes earthly institutions are important. Any armchair critic can knock the establishment but what’s left if our institutions are weak and ineffective? We could as well be living in Afghanistan or Iraq. Strong and healthy institutions are vital to our well-being, and are worthy of our best efforts so our children and grandchildren can be blessed as we have been. That’s also true of the church. The current fad of being spiritual without being involved in the life of the institutional church does not bequeath something lasting to those who will follow us.

So to our dear friends, John and Ruth Ann Johnson, we thank you for all you’ve done to make our seminary a vibrant institution and we wish you God’s every blessing as you as you take your talents and energy to Concordia University.

October 27

Last week “Roll Call,” the Washington D.C. political newspaper, reported the amazing amount of dollars on hand for the last month of the campaign. Reporter Chris Cillizza wrote that the Democratic Congressional Committee had \$24.1 million available at the end of September while the Republican Congressional Committee has \$25.7 million. Those are for House races. For the Senate the Democratic committee had \$8.8 million and the Republicans \$17.2 million. To say the obvious, it’s all about advancing each party’s cause next week.

Jesus told a parable about how we as individuals use money. The bottom line: “I tell you, use worldly wealth to gain friends for yourselves, so that when it is gone, you will be welcomed into eternal dwellings” (Luke 16:9). There’s nothing inherently wrong with money or, for that matter, with political spending, but do we spend to advance our own personal interests or is our spending ruled by a spiritual guide, by a sense of our total accountability to our Lord? “If you have not been trustworthy in handling worldly wealth, who will trust you with true riches?” (Luke 16:11)

The Chronicle of Philanthropy reported Monday that donations to the 400 largest charities increased \$47 billion last year, an increase of 2.3% (St. Louis Post-Dispatch, October 25; A3). Maybe that’s a good sign.

October 28

The news lately has reported a rash of airplane accidents. Last week a commercial commuter plane went down near Kirksville, Missouri killing 13 people. On Sunday a private ambulance jet crashed near San Diego. Five people were killed. Again on

Sunday, the plane for a NASCAR team went down taking the lives of ten people. Also on Sunday a private plane owned by the Mid-America Sport Parachute Club crashed near Taylorville, Illinois, killing one person.

Flying is safe, we're told, and the numbers suggest that's true. The Census Bureau reported last year that the United States has 612,000 licensed pilots, of whom 121,000 are licensed to fly commercial planes. Those planes fly in and out of 19,000 airports in the United States and carry 612 million of us a year. Yes, flying is safe...but still accidents happen. If not in the air, then driving to the airport, or to work, or what? You can slip on a banana peel. Accidents happen.

So the wise person takes to heart "Pray without ceasing" (1 Thessalonians 5:17). Constantly mindful how much we need God's gift of His protection, we are more in touch with reality and better prepared for whatever may come. Today and everyday we pray, as Jesus teaches us, "Our Father who art in heaven...deliver us from evil."

October 29

Halloween...also the day when Professor Martin Luther in 1517 sparked the Reformation by posting 95 theses, 95 propositions for academic debate. Something Luther wrote in 1529 gives the deepest insight into what the Reformation is all about.

"I believe that Jesus Christ, true God, begotten of the Father from eternity, and also true man, born of the Virgin Mary, is my Lord, who has redeemed me, a lost and condemned creature..."

(Ouch! That hurts! I'm a lost and condemned creature??? But doesn't the brokenness of our world suggest it's true? Who are we to exempt ourselves?)

"...purchased and won me from all sins, from death, and from the power of the devil; not with gold or silver, but with His holy, precious blood and with His innocent suffering and death...."

(Not with gold or silver, and also not with CDs or mutual funds, not with a good election result, not with health and happiness, but with "His innocent suffering and death.")

"...that I may be His own, and live under Him in His kingdom, and serve Him in everlasting righteousness, innocence, and blessedness. Even as He is risen from the dead, lives and reigns to all eternity."

(That means He's a present reality, present reality! Do you see Him in your life?)

"This is most certainly true."

(Do you agree?)

