Into the Future

Years ago I remember watching a story on television about a boy who was stuck in a laundry chute between the second and first floors of his home while playing hide and seek with his siblings and friends. The fire department was finally called when all attempts to free the boy had failed. The boy was finally freed when the wall was dismantled and the chute cut open. The segment ended with an interview with the boy, who concluded his remarks with, “All I could think of while stuck there was, ‘I don’t want to die younger than Elvis!’”

As we enter a new year, what thoughts occupy your mind? Hopefully you aren’t stuck in life. But we can be stuck by attitudes and thoughts that hinder us from experiencing abundant life in Christ. Are you captivated by a fresh, godly vision of life and ministry or snared by the mundane? Are you riding high on the successes of the past year or floundering under the weight of perceived failures? The boy’s reaction to his being stuck in the chute was humorous at the time, but also reflective of a perspective that revealed what was truly important in his life, and probably in the life of his family. We can aim too high or aim too low and miss the peace and joy and blessing of God.

Moving into 2014, I have reminded myself of some things. I share them with you as well:

- Don’t travel alone. We need others to experience the fullness of Christ.
- Be humble. Affirm your strengths. Acknowledge your areas of growth. Give honor and glory to God in all things.
- Be a good steward of your life. Guard your heart, your mind, your emotions, and your body. Maintain boundaries that honor God.
- Be honest with yourself. We need to continually open ourselves to the healing and growth necessary for building healthy relationships and being involved in effective kingdom ministry. What do you keep ignoring in yourself that needs to be dealt with once and for all?
- If you haven’t done so, find your sweet spot and live there. You—and everyone around you—will be glad you did!
- Begin each day with a conversation with God, and then look in a mirror and smile at the person you see, realizing the potential he or she possesses. You may even want to laugh a little; it is a good way to start your day.

Lord, keep us focused on you each step of the 2014 journey, joyfully following where you lead and doing our best to not stray from your wisdom, grace, and love. And help us, Lord, to share those precious gifts with everyone we meet along the way.
When is the last time you worshiped? No, I don’t mean the last time you went to church for a worship service. I mean, when have you done the Romans 12:1–2 worship experience of being a “living sacrifice” for the Lord? Worship in the Bible is not a one-size-fits-all experience or a mono-focused event. It is a multifaceted experience that in many ways is not reflected in what we call worship today.

The Bible does not give us a specific definition of worship. What it does is provide us pictures of various aspects of our relationship with God and how we can express our love for and devotion to God. The experience of worship is expressed variously in Scripture. Both the Old Testament’s and the New Testament’s pictures of worship focus on three things: an attitude of fear and reverence before God, an action denoting submission to God, and service to God and our world in honor of God. Worship is an experience involving mind, body, and soul. The core of worship is our relationship with God—a relationship marked by a humble recognition of divine supremacy and human devotion.

Yet some of us have reduced our understanding of worship to a rather singular focus of what occurs in a specific time slot in our weekly schedule. And that time schedule has been standardized for most Christians: gather, sing, pray, listen to a sermon, all in various formats. It is possible to faithfully attend gatherings we label “worship” and not honor, submit to, or serve the Lord. We can be faithful participants in these gatherings and never really worship God.

It is time that we stop debating the form of worship and admit that we may be missing the heart of worship. God is much more concerned than we think with how we worship him outside the times we have set for our services. In fact, the greatest acts of worship we carry out should happen outside that one or two hours per week we call worship. If we aren’t submitting to, obeying, and serving God regularly in our everyday activities, what we do when we gather will fall short of the worship we truly owe the Lord.

Christ-followers must embrace a future story that moves the life of the church—the body of Christ—from the buildings we occasionally inhabit into our homes, work, and play places; to our Facebook and Twitter accounts; and to our other activities on the Internet. We must think of church not as a location but as a vocation, and of worship not as an isolated event but as a daily lifestyle. In such a life, honoring and glorifying God will be at the center of all that we do.

Unless otherwise noted, SHAPE articles are written by Paul Dreger. He has served the Church of God for thirty-eight years as pastor, area administrator in Tennessee, and currently national director of SHAPE (Sustaining Health and Pastoral Excellence).

Doubt

Daddy, let’s go play!” was the daily cry after the dinner table had been cleared. And play we did. Every evening the girls’ bedroom was transformed into a den of raucous laughter and delight. The mundane activities of the day gave way to shrieks of excitement as games of “The Incredible Hulk”, “Belly Monster,” and “Belly Bouncer” took center stage. “Belly Bouncer” was a favorite as the girls would run from one end or side of the bed to the other, leap fearlessly toward me and bounce off my belly back onto the bed. Time after time, night after night, the play—the bouncing, the shrieking, the laughter—went on.

One night, however, stood out above the rest. On that particular night I was standing between the wall and the side of the bed and play was carrying on as usual. The scene played out almost instantaneously: Tamara ran across the bed; I, not seeing her coming, moved to do something with Gretchen; Tamara, instead of bouncing off my belly, ran face-first into the wall and fell to the floor in a crying heap. I quickly gathered her into my arms, consoled her as I apologized and told her I did not see her ready to jump and that my absence was not intentional. And soon she was better and we were back playing.

But I noticed a change. In the days that followed I sensed a little hesitation in Tamara before she ran toward me. Would I move or would I be there? Would she bounce back delightfully or fall once again to the floor? Up until that night, trust had not been an issue. She had known nothing else but that Daddy would be there. Innocently she had been introduced to the culprit of (continued on page 3)
doubt and her worldview had been altered. Far too often, even in the community of faith, our doubts are confirmed: people just can't be trusted. One of the most common comments shared with me by pastors is, “I can't trust other pastors…” to maintain confidentiality, to not gossip, to encourage and not compete or compare or condemn. Doubt in one another as kingdom citizens is one of the greatest tragedies of the power of sin at work among us. And our doubts are well-founded. We are often not trustworthy people. And because of that, we keep one another at an emotional distance and shelter ourselves from the intimacy that enables us to overcome differences and move together into “unity of faith” and “unity of knowledge of the Son of God” and become mature (Eph 4:13).

It is difficult to obey Jesus’ command to love one another as Christ-followers (let alone think about loving the world) when we are motivated by doubt in one another. Trust is rooted in God. Doubt is rooted in self. Love is the foundation of trust. Fear is the foundation of doubt. Trust is a choice, a willingness to risk in love. Doubt is a response of fear. Until we deal with the internal issues of doubt, we will most likely struggle to build healthy, trusting relationships.

The girls and I no longer play “Belly Bouncer” and “Belly Monster” or “The Incredible Hulk.” But we share loving, trusting, caring relationships that make life’s journey precious. We have learned that none of us are perfect and that we will sometimes make poor choices or decisions. But beneath all of our frailties, there is an undeniable trust in the love, grace, and goodness of one another and the knowledge that we each desire God’s best for one another. Is doubt an issue? The journey of healing begins within. Be courageous enough to trust God to find the healing from past hurts and an unhealthy self-awareness that keeps you at a distance from others.

Do you really want to learn how to trust more completely? Well, that’s another story…

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Here and There: SHAPE happenings across North America

November 6–7, leaders from the North Central Region met in Albert Lea, Minnesota, to begin training as SHAPE cluster leaders. Chris Current (ND), Jesse Elkins (IA), Charles Hundley (IA), Stan Rone (NE), Mike Smith (SD), Dale Steele (MN), and Brent Waldemarsen (MN) will serve as cluster leaders in this geographical region of the United States. This two-day face-to-face meeting was followed on December 13 by a video conference call attended by all of these leaders. While not as effective as a face-to-face experience, this meeting helped alleviate the time and expense of coming together physically; we hope that this will provide the needed opportunity for effective training and preparation for launching SHAPE in the future. Monthly video conferencing will be strengthened by several other face-to-face meetings throughout the training time. At the close of training, each pastor will lead clusters of pastors in their region. Please pray for this group as they undertake a new approach to training. The second video cluster meeting took place on January 22.

Leader training continued in Northeast Ohio (November 10–11) and Western Pennsylvania (November 13 and December 2). Western Pennsylvania’s second cohort will have their orientation retreat January 27–29. Northeast Ohio will launch their first cohort January 30–February 1.

A new SHAPE cluster was launched as a cooperative effort between Colorado and Kansas in Lamar, Colorado, November 18–19. Pastors Larry Borthwick, Danny Jackson, Earl Heath, Gary Murrell, and Mike Schneider, as well as Colorado Regional Pastor Larry Taylor, spent two days being introduced to the core values and practices of SHAPE and building the relationships that will be nurtured in the years to come. Danny Bryant, who is part of this cluster, was unable to attend.

Paul met once again on December 10 with the leadership team of the South Memorial Drive Church of God in New Castle, Indiana, as they incorporate the principles and practices of SHARE (Sustaining Health and Relational Excellence) into their leadership paradigm. A final meeting in this phase of the experience will take place on February 10.