Growing Through Grief
by Diane Bringgold Brown

Among the wider goals of Christians for Biblical Equality is offering our members support in facing crises common to our equal humanity. In the following adaptation of her workshop at the summer ’89 conference, Diane Bringgold Brown helps us understand the grieving process as she presents a Christian approach to coping with loss.

Our biblical text is Matthew 5:4: “Blessed are those who mourn for they shall be comforted,” and in the light of that text we will discuss the following questions:

1. Should Christians grieve?
2. What is grief?
3. What are some of the stages of grief?
4. Moving forward into new life (growing through grief)
5. How can we help?

Should Christians grieve? Yes. In Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount as recorded by Matthew, we hear Jesus say to his followers, “Blessed are those who mourn for they shall be comforted.” Blessed are those who mourn (hoi penouotes). The Greek implies active lamenting, wailing, crying. In the vernacular we might say, “Blessed are those who really express their grief for they shall be comforted.

In I Thessalonians 4:13-14 Paul writes, “Brothers (and sisters) we do not want you to be ignorant about those who fall asleep or to grieve like the rest of men (and women) who have no hope. We believe that Jesus died and rose again and so we believe that God will bring with Jesus those who have fallen asleep in Him.” We are not to grieve as those who have no hope but we must grieve, for grief is a natural response to loss.

We normally think of grief primarily as a response to the death of a loved one but it can be occasioned by the loss of anything that is meaningful to us. However, we cannot be comforted by God unless we are willing to enter into our grief and to be honest about the emotions we experience.

Let’s look at the types of loss which cause us to feel grief. Each type of loss can itself occasion grief, and when a family member or a significant person in our life dies, we often experience several types of loss at once.

1. Material loss can cause grief. The loss of an heirloom or something given us by a friend which may have little value in itself but has important emotional meaning: The loss of a camera on a trip; decreased income when one is widowed or divorced; and perhaps the most profound, the loss of everything in a fire or natural disaster. As Christians we may feel it inappropriate to grieve over lost “things”, but grief is a natural response even to this type of loss for we are material beings.

2. Loss of a relationship is a grief experience, and the deeper the relationship, the more profound the grief. Relationships are broken not only through death but also when one of the parties moves, when one rejects the other, and when changing patterns in our lives make it difficult for us to spend time with that important person.

3. Intrapsychic loss, an academic term which refers to losing an emotionally important image of yourself: We may have pictured ourselves as brilliant scholars only to find we are surpassed in brilliance by our fellow students, or we may have pictured ourselves as perfect wives or as perfect mothers who never yell at our children, and then we hear ourselves yelling. We may have said, “I’ll never be like my mother” and then find ourselves very much like her. This type of loss also relates to losing the possibility of what might have been, of abandoning plans for a particular future. Our grief is related to our external experience but it is truly caused by our inward experience.

4. The loss of a part of our body or of the use of part of our body or of one of our senses causes grief.

5. The loss of an important role: When our spouse dies we are no longer a wife or a husband; when a child reaches maturity our role as parent changes; when we reach maturity our role as a son or a daughter changes; when we retire our role in the workplace is lost. Our roles are constantly changing and with each shift we experience grief.

What is grief? In All Our Losses All Our Griefs Mitchell and Anderson define grief as the cluster of emotions that are associated with our contemplation of the loss itself and of a future without the lost object or person, and our feelings about grieving. How we feel about grieving is an important dimension of our grief.

Grieving is a process. Anderson and Mitchell write: “Grieving or mourning is a process in which the deep feelings aroused by our loss are acknowledged and expressed. A process in which our attachments to the lost person or object are not entirely given up but are sufficiently altered to permit us to admit the reality of the loss and then live without constant reference to it. In successful grieving we gradually become able to make attachments and investments in other people or things once again. As God comforts us through our grieving our
faith which may have been severely challenged by our loss is restored. Often those who have been able to face grief in the knowledge that God still cares, who have discovered with Paul that neither death, nor life, nor angels nor demons, neither height nor depth nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord (Romans 12:38-39) have said that grief can be among the great deepening experiences of life." That has certainly been my experience.

The stages of grief are defined differently by various authors, but they generally include shock and its companions—numbness or denial; emotional release including tears; anger either directed outwardly or directed inwardly as guilt; hopelessness with concomitant isolation and loneliness; nostalgia in which we resist returning to life or altering our attachment to the lost object or person for fear our memories will be lost; somatic symptoms; and finally acceptance, a return of hope and healing. Not everyone experiences all these stages before their grief is healed, and the stages are experienced at different times and in different orders. Each of us is unique, and the way in which we grieve and experience the stages of grief will reflect our uniqueness. In my experience, the most difficult of these stages for many Christians to work through (or sometimes even to admit they experience) is anger. Many of us feel that as Christians we should no longer experience anger, but the Bible does not tell us not to be angry. Paul writes (Ephesians 4:26) Be angry but sin not. Do not let the sun go down on your anger. It is what we do with our anger that is important, and anger is a very common, indeed almost universal, response to loss.

My first husband, Bruce Bringgold, and my three children, Scott age 11, Mary age 8, and Laura age 5, were killed in a private plane crash in which I was seriously burned on December 1, 1975. Of the six types of loss mentioned earlier, I experienced all except material loss. When I got out of our burning plane the afternoon of the accident, knowing my family was dead and that I was burned, my first decision was to die so I could be with them. Through a vision God reminded me that we are not to choose death as long as life is ours. Knowing I could not cope with the grief, loneliness or physical pain, I simply told God that if He wanted me to live, I would give Him everything, and He would have to cope with the grief, loneliness and pain because I could not. I received the gift of faith, the ability to know that somehow with God beside me everything would be all right. Nothing changed in my external situation but everything changed.

From that time fatalism with its concomitant depression were not a part of my grief. I knew from the beginning that my family was dead. However, my own injuries served the purpose that shock and denial often serve. Initially I focused on my own physical recovery and did not allow myself to think about the meaning of my family's death and how it would affect my future. The six weeks of my initial stay in the hospital were my time of transition from wife and mother to woman alone, and I was able to make that transition in a protected environment surrounded by caring people. During the five years after the accident, I returned to the hospital several times, and each time it was like returning to the womb, to a place where I was nurtured and cared for.

Because I was raised not to show emotion in public, at first I found it necessary to do my crying in private. Then gradually I recognized how wonderful it was to cry with those who were grieving too.

I did experience anger. I was furious with my husband. I have learned that is a normal experience for a widow. When our husband dies we feel abandoned, and the natural human response to abandonment is anger. We may find ourselves mad at our husband because he died, and then feeling guilty because we feel angry because we know he did not die intentionally. However, in my case, I was not angry with Bruce because he died. In fact, I felt it served him right. I felt the accident was all his fault. If he hadn't taken off in marginal weather we wouldn't have crashed. I believe God used my anger creatively to help me deal in stages with my multiple loss.

First I grieved for my children, and only as that grief was healed did I let go of the anger I was nursing toward Bruce, and then I grieved for him. Once I forgave Bruce for his part in the accident, I realized that one reason I was so angry with him was that I did not want to accept my own guilt.

The guilt the bereaved feels is often inappropriate but my guilt was, in a sense, an appropriate response. I knew that if I had told Bruce I wouldn't fly until the weather cleared, the worst thing which might have happened was that he would have taken off alone and been killed. My children and I would not have been in the accident. So Bruce and I both made bad decisions that fateful afternoon.

When we find we have made a mistake, even a mistake which leads to tragedy, all we can do is confess it, ask God's forgiveness which is ours through Christ, and forgive ourselves. Therefore forgiving myself was an important part of my healing.

Often we are angry at God but afraid to admit it. God is big enough to handle our anger. The Bible, particularly the book of Psalms, is full of the writings of people who yelled at God when their world fell apart, and in the midst of their cries felt His presence. Recognizing our anger and giving it to God enables Him to comfort us and to heal our grief.
Loneliness too was certainly part of my experience, but was greatly eased by the many people who reached out to assure me of their love and concern. The congregation of the Episcopal Church in the town where I was hospitalized literally adopted me, and later the congregation of my home parish truly made me feel part of a large family—the Christian family—by including me as a family member in their special occasions and in their daily life as well.

I also discovered loneliness is a choice. I could sit home alone not even letting anyone know my needs, or I could reach out to others both to minister to them and to allow them to minister to me. In fact, I discovered that sometimes the greatest gift we can give to those who love us is the gift of allowing them to help us.

Nostalgia did not manifest itself in my experience in a resistance to returning to life, but rather in a small way in my needing to have pictures of my family with me when I returned to the hospital, even though those pictures and the reality of the transitory nature of life were often upsetting to others. Many people do manifest nostalgia, finding it almost impossible to dispose of the belongings of the deceased. I am often asked when one should do that. Again, it depends on the person, but if more than a year has passed, I believe clinging to belongings is a sign the person needs help working through his/her grief. Many people will need a close friend or relative with them as they go through the clothes and belongings of the deceased. If so, offer to help but do not do it for them. It is an important part of their grief work. In my case, I needed to do it alone because I needed to feel free to cry as I held those things so laden with memories, and decided what to do with each one. I found it easier to cry when I was alone.

Two things are indicative of an inability or unwillingness to work through our grief with God’s help. One is removing absolutely everything which might remind us of the loved one. The other is keeping everything just as it was before they died, making a shrine of their room or of the place in the house which was most special to them.

I was enabled to accept the death of my husband and children because of the hope of life we have in Jesus Christ. I know that for a Christian death is not the end but a new beginning. It is the door through which each of us must walk to enter eternal life with Christ, the final healing for those who have accepted Him as Savior and Lord. I was aware that my grief was not for my family but rather for myself. Being able to rejoice in the new life they are experiencing in heaven has enabled me to release them and to go forward into new life.

My grief destroyed my pride and my self reliance. The Psalmist wrote, “The Lord is close to the brokenhearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit” Ps. 34:18. Because I had been raised to be self reliant and to believe that God helps those who help themselves, I had been unable to open myself to Him and to experience the reality of His love until I was brokenhearted and crushed in spirit. Through my grief I experienced God's reality. My faith grew and I have been enabled to minister to those who grieve and also to proclaim the Gospel more boldly.

Isaiah announced, “He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to comfort all who mourn, to provide for those who grieve in Zion beauty instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, a garment of praise instead of a spirit of despair.” God will comfort those who mourn if they ask Him to, if they allow Him to, if they are willing to seek and to find new life through their grief. Therefore as healing occurs we must move from “Why me?” to “How can God use this creatively?”

How can we help? Begin with prayer. Ask God’s guidance and He will show you how best to comfort those who mourn. Paul writes, “Rejoice with those who rejoice and mourn with those who mourn.” Romans 12:15. We must be willing to enter into the suffering of those who grieve. We must cry with them, not tell them it is wrong to cry.

When in doubt, say too little rather than too much. A simple “I want you to know I care” or “I love you, and I am praying for you” really says it all.

Be careful about quoting “helpful” scripture. Don’t say, “God just wanted another angel in heaven.” We don’t become angels, we become perfect human beings. Angels are a different type of being, and it would certainly be difficult to love a God who snatches our loved ones from us because He wants them in heaven with Him. I believe that God welcomes our loved ones home when they die but I do not believe that He “takes” them. Do not say, “It was his/her time” or “Time heals all wounds.” God does heal our grief through time but time alone does not heal.

Share memories of the loved one. We all want to know that the person we love has touched other lives, that his or her life was not without meaning.

Offer advice but only if asked. As time passes encourage the person to begin to plan for the future. Help in practical ways. Do the dishes, the laundry. Help with meals. If the person is working, he or she may not have the energy to take care of basic tasks like cooking and housework. Their energy is expended in their grieving and on their job. Be sensitive and God will show you what help is needed.

Don’t forget that the entire family needs ministry. Often we focus our ministry on the widow or widower or on the bereaved parents and forget that the children or the siblings of the deceased are also
grieving.

Most important, be there six months or a year later. Right after a death, many come to help but as time passes we all too often fail to be aware of the continuing need of the bereaved. Many widows have told me their most difficult time was six months to a year and a half after the death of their spouse. Continue to include them in special family gatherings. Invite them to lunch or to dinner. Let them know that it is not a sin to be single.

If you are the bereaved, help your friends minister to you by letting them know your needs. If you need to talk about your loved one, say so. If remembering is too painful at the moment, share that honestly too. Don’t fall into the error of feeling like a fifth wheel at parties where you are the only single. If your friends invited you, they want you there. Allow God to comfort you through the ministrations of your friends. If someone says something which is not helpful, look at the love that is prompting them to try to help, rather than becoming angry because they don’t know how.

I have often been asked if one can ever get over the death of a spouse or of a child. I don’t know if that is the right question. Yes, our grief can be healed. No, we will never be the same. With God’s help our grief can help us grow into the image of Christ. But without His healing, grief can result in spiritual, emotional and even physical death.

My image of grief is that of a wound. When we are first wounded the wound bleeds. Then a scab forms but it can easily be knocked off and the bleeding begins again. Once the wound is healed there is a scar. The skin is not the same, it is stronger. You can touch it and it no longer hurts. So also when our grief is healed we still remember our loved ones, but the memory is no longer painful. We find ourselves remembering with joy and with thankfulness that they have been part of our lives even as we look forward to one day being with them in heaven.

(K. Mitchell, All Our Losses, All Our Griefs: Resources for Pastoral Care [Philadelphia 1983])

Watch for our Ad

The Statement on Men, Women, and Biblical Equality will be printed during April in Christianity Today, Leadership, and Today’s Christian Woman. This biblical confession, prepared by Gilbert Bilezekian, Ward Gasque, Stanley Gundry, Gretchen Gaebelien Hull, Catherine Clark Kroeger, Jo Anne Lyon, and Roger Nicole, has been endorsed by a great many leading evangelicals, whose names will be printed along with the statement itself. Pray that God will use it to challenge hearts and minds.

Biblical Feminism in Nicaragua?

by Jo Anne Lyon, Adjunct Professor, Asbury Theological Seminary

One of my objectives in visiting Central America—and particularly Nicaragua—was to attempt to see this tragedy through the eyes of women and children. Upon arriving at the Jarmie Mayer Study Center in Managua, my eyes caught the title of a book on a shelf in the entrance hall: Sandino’s Daughters by Margaret Randall. Having been acquainted with the author’s previous writings, I knew her book would provide me with a clear picture of the extensive involvement of women in the revolution (although I would need to work through her personal ideological bias).

In her account, I saw women from all socioeconomic and religious backgrounds united for one purpose: overthrow of the Somoza regime. The life stories were so engaging that I found myself reading late into the night, even following a full day of exploration in the Nicaraguan countryside. Later, these stories gave insight into the words of Anna Maria Carnoles who, when asked what she wanted most for her two-week-old daughter, quickly responded, “I want her to know that she is a child of Sandino, and I want her to grow up to know all about the revolution.” A further question concerning church revealed she had been a faithful Roman Catholic but now viewed the church as an oppressor.

Later that day, a lunch conversation with Rosario, a Health Department official, revealed further conflict. She articulated many of the strides in recent years made by and for women. In their own caucuses, women helped write the post-revolution constitution, which includes statutory equality with men and the right to own property, adopt children, take three months’ maternity leave, earn equal pay, and keep their own checkbooks. One special law even forbids the use of women as sex objects in advertisements.

Were these laws actually enacted and enforced? Rosario answered from her personal life experience. “I am a single parent with three children,” she stated. “My ex-husband is a professor at the university. He believed in the right of women in his head but he couldn’t work it out at home.”

I searched for a response from an evangelical believer. “Maybe these issues aren’t important to them,” I mused. “Perhaps they will be reactionary to the radical feminist and strongly hold to a hierarchical position.” My thoughts rolled on restlessly.

The next afternoon, Rev. Miriam Escoria quietly entered the dining room. Rev. Escoria is an