

# The power of s u r r e n d e r

by Jan Johnson

Surrender isn't easy for those of us who think being a good Christian means being successful. We think we can fix anybody or solve any problem if we roll up our sleeves, pull up our socks and hustle hard enough.

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**T**wice I picked up the telephone to call a woman at church who had made disparaging comments about the way my teenage daughter dressed for church. Should I explain to her why girls my daughter's age dress that way? No, too defensive. Should I tell her to mind her own business? Tempting, but no. Was I stirring up trouble (by calling her) or being a chicken (by not calling)? Was there a better way?

As I pondered the many times I've turned my daughter over to God—her ambivalence toward school, her insecurity after we moved—it occurred to me I could surrender this woman to God, too. All my life my need to get others' approval, to achieve and to make everyone OK have driven my life. One by one, day by day, over and over, I have had to surrender these heart issues.

Surrender isn't easy for those of us who think being a good Christian means being successful. We think we can fix anybody or solve any problem if we roll up our sleeves, pull up our socks and hustle hard enough.

Even in our relationship with God, we strain to be good enough. We read books, listen to tapes and attend seminars to find precise formulas to reshape ourselves into a better "me." All that straining discourages us, wears us out and makes us insensitive to others. We live under the illusion that if we acquire complete control, we can do God's will. Instead we have to abandon control.

**Superwoman image:** To abandon control I must surrender my need to achieve more, look more attractive and own more stuff. I have to present myself as just who I am and find rest in God even if my plain fingernails and faulty memory make me lose the superwoman image I crafted.

Letting go is too simple and too hard. It looks like weakness instead of strength, like losing instead of gaining—and it is. As we relinquish control and admit weaknesses, we remember who we are and why we're here. Life is a journey of coming to know God, not achieving or gaining others' approval. It's OK for us just to be, to love God. Through that being, God will do mightier works than when we try so hard.

Surrendering requires that I learn to recognize my inner neediness and hear my self-absorbed motives. Why must I achieve? Is it because I fear I will live my whole life and never do anything spectacular like the women I read about in magazines? Why do I act as if I

can earn God's grace and approval? Do I think I can manipulate God's opinion of me?

This need to control is rooted in fear, but I need to surrender, which is rooted in faith. It's as if God stops me, an earnest, twirling ballerina, and says, "You don't have to perform for me. I will lead you, and it will work better that way. Give me your hand."

Sometimes I go to church early on Sunday morning and climb the steps to the balcony, where no one else goes. I sit, surrounded by sound equipment, and pray: "One more time, God, here are my children. One more time, here is my hunger for glamour and glory." Sometimes I fall to my knees and offer the things I use to satisfy inner needs but that block my path to God: eating sweets, raising perfect children, defending myself eloquently. I wonder, Will life's failures and disappointments be too much for me if I don't have a stash of chocolate for comfort? Will I be OK if I don't stand up for myself? Will I survive emotionally if other people don't look up to me?

**Open arms:** The more honest I am, the longer I must stretch out my hands, palms turned up, presenting my open arms to God. My fingers tremble at their emptiness. It's such a stretch to remember that all I ever signed up to do in the Christian life is cling to God with everything I've got. I keep trying to get it right, but God says: "Stop trying so hard; abide in me. Let me work in you. Give me your heart."

Responding to God's call to surrender forces me to value my brokenness as well as my strength. Holding a funeral for my own wonderfulness, I accept my limitations and give God permission to work redemptively in my life, just as he did when he molded the apostle Paul, a former murderer, into the author of much of the New Testament. Paul's brokenness kept God's grace front and center in his mind, reminding him, "I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me" (Galatians 2:19b-20a).

That brokenness brings a new edge to conversion. When my teenagers' brokenness and disappointment force me to turn them over to God, praying one more time, "Into your hands," the results are incredible. My heart of stone is transformed into a heart of flesh, and Christ lives in me as the gentle, tender mother I could never be on my own.

At the close of my conversation with God, I leave the balcony free and clean until it's time to return.