

# **Wineskins Magazine**

**Bright Forecast for Sunday**

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## Bright Forecast for Sunday

*by Rubel Shelly*  
*March, 1993*

It had been a horrible week. No sign of the sun. Only dark clouds, storms, and incessant downpours. Then someone heard the forecast for Sunday: clear, bright skies!

A weather report following Hurricane Andrew? No, the promise of Jesus' resurrection from the dead on the third day following his crucifixion under Pontius Pilate.

If Easter Sunday commemorates a real event of history in which Jesus triumphed over death, then all his claims are substantiated, the cross provides eternal life to those who embrace it, and people today can know and be saved by him. The gospel, after all, is not the preaching of a martyred Christ but the joyous proclamation of the resurrected Son of God. "He was delivered over to death for our sins and was raised to life for our justification" (Romans 4:25; cf. 1 Corinthians 15:1-4).

If Jesus did not emerge from Joseph of Arimathea's borrowed tomb on Sunday morning in April of A.D. 30, there is not "good news" to preach. Satan triumphed. Sin is sovereign. Death is the final snuffing out of meaningless human lives. That isn't my dismal analysis, but Paul's. "If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins" (1 Corinthians 15:17).

Occasionally I hear someone say: "Why even if Christianity isn't really true – if there was no virgin birth and no bodily resurrection, if there is no hell to fear or heaven to desire – I'd still want to be a Christian. If there were nothing more than the benefits to be gained in the here and now, I'd want to follow Jesus!" Paul didn't feel that way. "If only for this life we have hope in Christ," he said, "we are to pitied more than all men" (1 Corinthians 15:19).

Everything critical to the Christian faith stands or falls with the doctrine of the bodily resurrection. Can we really believe it happened? Dare we speak of such a thing to people who dismiss the whole idea of miracles as ignorant superstition?

The thing that defies reason is not that such an event could have happened but that Christianity ever could have gotten off the ground – much less survived across the centuries – if it did not happen.

When Paul wrote of the resurrection, there was a confident ring to his words: "Christ died for our sins ... he was buried ... he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures ... he appeared to Peter, and then to the Twelve ... to more than 500 of the brothers at the same time, most of whom are still living ... to James, then to all the apostles, and last of all he appeared to me also."

There is an interesting change of tenses in the Greek verbs in these lines. The aorist tense is commonly used in Greek simply to tick off a series of events, usually in the past; the perfect

tense, however, is used for events of the past that have consequences in present time. So the apostle dashes off a series of aorists: “Christ died ... he was buried ... he appeared ...” Of the resurrection, though, he chooses the perfect tense; thus the meaning is “he was raised up – and continues a risen state!”

Do you get the significance of that affirmation? And do you feel its double impact in that it was made by the man we first meet as Saul of Tarsus in the Scripture?

Saul was an ardent opponent of the Christian faith. He was personally involved in persecuting believers. He participated in the stoning of a Christian evangelist named Stephen (Acts 9:54-8:1a). He led a persecution of the church in Jerusalem by personally going from house to house and dragging both men and women into prison (Acts 8:3). Yet within about four years of the founding of the church, Paul had turned from bitter enemy to passionate advocate.

On his own account of his change of heart, Saul was converted on the basis of a dramatic and unanticipated confrontation with the resurrected Christ. On his way from Jerusalem to Damascus to persecute Christians there, the unthinkable happened. The raised-up-and-continuing -in-a-risen-state Jesus of Nazareth appeared to Saul on the Damascus Road, spoke to him, and took away his doubts about the truthfulness of the resurrection story (Acts 9:1-22; cf 22:6-21; 26:4-23). From that day forward, he never looked back from his commitment to Jesus as Savior and Lord.

He gave up his career in Judaism to become a Christian missionary. He was hunted and persecuted by some of the very people who had once been his colleagues in hounding the earliest disciples. He went to jail. He suffered horrible floggings. He was once stoned and left for dead. Eventually he was martyred at Rome under the infamous Nero.

The only power great enough to turn a man like Saul from his original course is an astounding, life-changing TRUTH. From his experience on the Damascus Road, he found out that the Twelve, Stephen, and others like them were neither lunatics nor deceived apostates from Judaism. He learned they were right to proclaim Jesus as the fulfillment of Jewish anticipation and savior of the whole world.

The meaning of the empty tomb he had heard about came clear for him that day. His own personal darkness lifted, and the light of the Son broke through. The Easter forecast had been validated to another skeptic.

Jesus’ bitterest enemies were never able to build a case against the resurrection. If “reasonable doubt” could have been established, they would have made their case and stopped nascent Christianity in its tracks. They circulated a silly story to the effect that Jesus’ disciples stole his body while the soldiers assigned to guard the tomb slept (Matthew 28:11-15). A group of men moved a multi-ton stone, snatched a corpse, and got away without rousing a single one of the guards? What court accepts the testimony of someone as to what happened while he was asleep anyway? On its face, this tale has no believability.

Within a few weeks of telling the stole-while-the-guards-slept story – and probably hearing snickers from the people listening! – Jewish opponents apparently stopped using it. They simply threatened the apostles and ordered them to stop preaching the resurrection (Acts 4:17-18; 5:28). That's a far cry from disproving what they were preaching, isn't it!

The historical event of the resurrection may be rejected, but it cannot be refuted. He rose and continues in his risen state to save all who will turn to him. No matter how serious their sins or bleak their prospects, the Easter Sunday forecast for all sinners is about light breaking through, new purpose for living, and eternal life.

Because he lives, the clouds, storms, and downpours have given way to The Son.

## The Sounds of Silence

*by Jeff Nelson*  
*March, 1993*

No talking for three weeks! Those were the doctor's words when I visited him for an examination of my vocal cords. The demand on my voice over the last year had "done me in." After three weeks of miserable silence (including Christmas), the doctor laid out my prognosis. Vocal rest for my whole life wouldn't rid me of my dilemma. Surgery was the only path to a "renewed" voice. The doctor assured me the surgery was not complicated and if I behaved and signed on for therapy I could sing again in six weeks. The surgery was flawless (Praise the Lord!) and I was back to new. Not quite! Two more weeks of silence and four weeks of minimal talking and therapy.

What a turn in the road! Me not talk or sing? I am the annoying person who has a song after every thought. I have been squirming through assemblies, gesticulating through conversations and have scribbled messages on at least a dozen legal pads. I hope some rocks have cried out praise in my place, because I have hated forced silence ... but I am learning.

Without a voice I had no control over many situations. I saw that much of life is seeking momentary gratification. I noticed that what happens short-term is miniscule to what happens long-term. I began comparing short-term gratification vs. long-term benefits.

The most obvious abuse of seeking short-term gratification was observing and critiquing worship I had planned but was not leading. I was bothered when someone didn't carry something out as I would have. I wanted to tell them immediately, "You're not doing that right," but I couldn't. By not being able to speak I had time to think. There was nothing wrong with what was being done, so maybe it was just my customary desire to "have it my way" getting in the way. Eternity was still happening and God was still enthroned.

What about you? Can you relate? Have you ever had to leave right in the middle of an exciting football game to attend a Sunday evening service or a small group meeting? "I can go to church any Sunday but this game is only on today." Ever thought you just had to have a certain new car but you realized your income just wouldn't support the monthly payments? "Well, I didn't get the car I really wanted, but I did get a new car." If this reflects our response we have catered to short-term gratification. We try to control life's situations so that we constantly receive self-gratification. We tend to live from one gratifying movement to the next.

Short-term gratification too often defines the standard of personal success. Moods are gauged by how many moments of gratification we have experienced. If our gratification bank has a nice healthy deposit, we're headed for a good forecast. But watch out when the ungratifying storms blow through.

Long-term benefits are the realities of eternity. When caught up in the moment of disappointment, the brief period of rejection dissipates as the long-term benefit comes into focus.

Which would you rather claim – a moment’s gratification to add to your collection, or a view of eternity? The more we choose to dwell on eternity, the less the petty interruptions seem to affect us.

So, I suggest we begin replacing many sought-after moments of gratification with anything that brings a view of eternity closer. Worship places us in the middle of the throneroom where reality is defined. “Just one glimpse of him in glory will the toils of life repay.” Those glimpses of glory are found in worship today. The worship assembly is not the entirety of our spiritual responsibilities, but a pathway to maintain our perspective. When worship precedes and proceeds every activity of life, a proper perspective is constantly nurtured. This perspective becomes second nature and tripping over brief injustice no longer matters. So what if you get a low blow? The big picture remains: God is God and eternity is eternity.

During this period I saw many other self-gratification choices staring me in the face. Not being able to speak, I was passive much of the time. There’s not much a speechless person can do, right? Wrong. I chose to wait out the storm, but I believe God intended for me to walk through it, possibly because there were listening lessons I needed to learn. As my thoughts turned to a positive view of my situation, my disposition also changed. I longed for worship. At first, my desire was to physically enter into worship. Being speechless, I used my heart in silence but it didn’t replace my desire to participate.

In Psalm 51, David had plenty of words, but nothing to express. He was at the bottom, expressionless. I can relate to that, because I had plenty of words to express and no way to express them. I can identify with stroke victims and others, who one day find their verbal communication a sudden physical impossibility. What a humiliating, yet humbling experience.

I became keenly aware of the other sense of worship when the most obvious one was taken away from me. Yes, plenty can happen in the heart of a silent worshipper, but when serving a God like ours, it is difficult to contain the desire to respond in a physical sense. Even though clapping in worship may be unwelcome in some circles, it was the only outward sacrifice of praise I had to offer. I experienced many things differently. I heard expression in voices that I had not heard before. I was ministered to in song. I saw things come to life in a new way as I observed a drama that touched my heart. I heard a sermon more clearly and the message rang true. Taking away my crutch of speaking, I saw more clearly others’ gifts at work. God was being honored in big and small ways that I had not noticed before.

Joining my heart with other worshippers is my favorite pastime. At one very meaningful, yet frustrating gathering, Jane, a woman who sat right behind me, spoke to me afterwards in a way that was spiritually powerful. I had never met her, but she told me she sensed a great level of frustration churning in me and that God could use this for his good. She said I should pay attention to all of these small obstacles because God would use them as lessons to prepare me for something much greater in the future. She spoke a word of scripture to me, and a blessing, and encouraged me to study several passages that would prepare me for God’s use. This is not a common practice in our fellowship but when I had been praying to get quiet enough to listen, the words from a godly woman matched the yearnings in my heart and I worshipped.

I came to the conclusion that anything that honors God and transforms spiritual life, whether it is modeled in the Scriptures or not, is true worship. Scripture and the Spirit prepare the heart so there is discernment. Scripture paints more of a picture for the heart to engage rather than a list of worship rules to implement. God gives birth to new creativity every day.

Spoken words found a new dimension in my silent pilgrimage. I realized how many words are wasted, but I also saw the profound impact that words can have. I hear words of hate that stung. I heard words of hypocrisy that saddened me. I heard words of love for God that warmed my heart. I felt so much better after hearing the words of love that I wondered why I even subject myself to the bad when I can choose the good. Why even go near the words of darkness (bad song lyrics, questionable movies, etc.)? Why not run to words of light? Not just good words – words of worship. Plenty of good words sound right, but God is not interested in them. He is interested in words from the heart, honest words.

As I sat through many assemblies I observed body language. I wondered if the worship atmosphere was invading the heart, or if the mouths were just moving with given words. We're afraid to expose our hearts in worship even though that's where and when transformation takes place. It is possible to be involved in an entire worship service without ever engaging the heart. If hearts were more engaged there would be more joy expressed. There would be more obvious celebration, more tears, more everything. As the heart goes deeper, the harder it becomes to control the surfaces. Don't try to protect the surface. Expose the heart. Only the real heart can see the real Jesus.

My responsibility as a worship leader is to do and say what will help you see Jesus. That's why I want to wear my heart. I want others to wear theirs, too. My first words when I return to leading will matter, at least to me and to God. There is no more time to "play church." The church needs to minister to hearts – broken hearts, happy hearts, honest hearts. The assembly time needs to be planned and prayed over to engage and minister to the heart so worship pours freely. A missed opportunity for the heart to meet with its Maker is a death blow from Satan.

This period of waiting has made me appreciate the voiceless ones who can never shout praise. I have fresh perspectives from this silence, but I can't wait for the day that I reengage every ounce of my energy to worship with fellow worshippers. "I waited patiently for the Lord ... He put a new song in my mouth, a hymn of praise to our God" (Psalm 40:1,3). I'm ready to sing several new songs.

Someone reminded me yesterday to be jealous of my time with God. Time can be your worst enemy if God is not dominant. God rejoices over us with singing (Zephaniah 3:17). If he wants to be my audience, these lyrics by Dennis Jernigan express my sentiment ... for God:

*If I could just sit with You awhile;*

*if You could just hold me.*

*Nothing could touch me.*

*If I could just sit with You awhile;*

*I need You to hold me,*

*moment by moment,*

*'til forever passes by.*

And for Jesus:

*Put your arms around me and hold me.*

*Sing me a melody holding me near.*

*Put your arms around me and hold me.*

*Sing to me the words I'm longing to hear –*

*"It's true. I love you."*

I am renewing my vow to "quiet time" because I know the need; it continually shapes my life, my ministry, my worship, and my perspective of the long-term benefit – eternity.

I'm more than ready to sing again, but I'm grateful too, for the lessons I've learned in silence.

## The Wright Side: Let Their Be Life

by Jeff Berryman  
March, 1993

### Easter

Easter Week. Pink bunnies. Chocolate-covered rabbits. Rainbow eggs. “Santa Rabbit” coming down spring chimneys bearing presents from the North Warren, no doubt without his reindeer. More hard-earned money out the door on weird celebratory paraphernalia.

I must confess that, growing up, Easter was not my favorite holiday. Shiny black shoes and squinting photo shoots in the sun are my childhood markers of this resurrection madness. Any detail of my early Easters is lost, but sadly, I am sure I never thought much about Jesus, or about his rising from the dead.

But one year, with Easter coming, I’d been thinking about Jesus. About his last week, and some of his last thoughts. Don’t get me wrong – meditation was not the cornerstone of my mornings, and prayer and study were not included in the routine any more than usual. Those thoughts of Jesus had tricked me, surprised me, bumped into me, caught me up short. He was in my brain as I rounded the corner of the theater, as I stood in the grocery line, as I held my daughter while she faded into the simple sleep of a child.

Perhaps he wanted me to think of him, to remember, to imagine. Perhaps he was asking me to meditate on *the event* of history.

### Crucifixion

I close my eyes, and place myself on a cross on Golgotha. I try to feel the military hand raking, crashing across my cheeks and nose, blazing with fire and rage. I allow the robe its silken touch on my cherry-red, strip-torn shoulders. The tearing moves to my scalp, and a thorn grown only for this one moment rests just above my eye, and with one wrenching twist the point assaults my skin, digging beneath my bruised forehead. Blood dances with sweat inside my sight, hiding my eyes, and I imagine my wrists on the cross, where they are split apart with wilding pain. The hammer glances off the nail and slams my fingers, and I am a maimed man, a man twisted from life’s axis. I am suspended, listening, muttering, shaking away the Satan, yelling, listening to the pounding agony of my heart. The Angels roar like raging animals, cornered, straining at the leash, wanting the fight, wanting the salvation of God, not realizing its very presence in my cry.

I am John, or Mark, or Thomas. My face is tight with tears, and I stand transfixed by this unbelievable sight. Jesus. His face hangs almost to his belly, his arms joined in a grotesque backwards “V.” Jesus is dead. A memory flashes – of laughing with him. He often joked about death, told us stories that we never quite knew how to hear, let us believe that he might even

“come back from the dead.” But I see the soldier stab the lance through his body. Jesus’ life oozes, slips to the ground, splashing and staining the soldier’s torso. The Roman gestures obscenely, madly wiping at this slime of a man, at the fluid blood and water, and I, as John, Mark, or Thomas watch, afraid and still. This man is dead. This is no joke. I whisper. Jesus!

And I, the disciple, finally close this curtain, and step away, numb, utterly blown out, kicking dust.

I am on my knees, not in adoration or fervor, but in fatigue. In confusion. It rains. I lie face down in the mud, weeping, fusing my grief with the earth’s, sharing the fall, sharing what must be the coming of hell.

## **Burial**

I sit in one corner of the burial chamber. My mind is strapped to the slab of rock on which the body of Jesus rests. I see nothing. Deep, empty dark envelops me. Am I here? Am I alive? This tomb is for quiet, is for death, is for the cracking of ancient bones, the decaying of used-up beings. My senses bulge, faintly grasping for something – anything – to affirm my existence. No air. No motion. Even the minutiae of the small world, the microscopic mourners, the bugs, they too have gone, abandoning this God-forsaken cavern. There is no sense of time. The eternal now. The eternal never. No drip, drip, dripping of the clock.

One sound catches me. Like a child oblivious, my heart thumps senselessly on, drumming a dumb rhythm, a clown pounding on a bucket. Hollow blood sits still in my stopped-up veins, and how can I breathe death? This day is Everyday, the moment Every moment, and the Fall of Man, and God, and reality, comes like a cloud into its temple, and silent howls carom from this rocky black to a silken abyss somewhere just this side of hell.

Where is Jesus? Over on the slab of rock. No. That’s a mummy, wrapped in shrouds and spices, encased in a hundred pounds of dark. But it was Jesus. His body breathed, not 30 hours ago. He bled red, coughed a real phlegm, gasped a real surprise. He was there, and now he’s not. Gone to hell, or to God knows where, and I’m left alone in this damp hole in the ground. I’m stuck, I suppose. I can’t move – if I stood up to walk, my life would explode, and I would vanish into nothing ... nothing. I must wait.

Wait? Wait for what?

There is nothing coming. No change I can imagine. So.

No wonder Jesus is not here.

The tomb of Jesus, at least my corner of it, on this Saturday, feels a lot like hell.

## **Resurrection**

The earth spins along the calendar, rotating to Sunday, while a rising sun marks the day's arrival. But this arrival is special. This sun shakes in apprehension. Galaxies are cracking, and the arch of Time bows in deference to the shouting heavens. The God of beginning is coming, and the Spirit hovering over the dark chaos is beginning to move.

The enemy roams the deepest caverns of space, sulking, beaten, weary, discouraged, disillusioned. His black eyes weep blood red, and his spirit crumples, whining over an inevitable life. An inevitable death.

In my mind, I sit in the corner of the tomb, waiting.

Waiting.

In the dark, something moves. In the stillness, there's a sound. In the quiet, the air begins to shiver, and the tomb stirs. Smells from another world confuse me, and I press against the wall, trying to hide, afraid of the power coming, encasing the cave. I cannot close my eyes, lest my lids be torn away. I am strained to breaking, every fiber fiercely vibrates with an ancient energy. There is something like light – first here, over there, glowing, searing, working. The walls have opened, the hillside has disappeared, and all the universe is pouring in. Specks of dust are planets dancing in a new creation. Stars surround the dead man, and something sounds, a voice, an ocean, an exploding nova, and in now way explainable, I understand the thought in the voice.

“Let there be Life!”

Waking invades the dark, and layers of hell peel away. The burial clothes begin to burn, white flame warring with black, and the enemy's dying cries rise visibly before me. They are skeletal sounds gasping, a gaping wound whose edges vainly grope to hold the blood running from the skin's tear. Death's grip slips, and ghostly fingers, bony, black, wearing Murder's ring, slap onto the slab, pushing against the raging, seething power. A pulse erupts, the heartbeat of eternity, and a visible wind storms the room. This is the breath of life – I know it. It envelops me, touches me – I am transparent, blazing with a before-life, breathing glory, each breath laboring from my terrored chest, creating worlds, singing stars into shining.

All at once, silence. The symphony ceases. An effervescence fills the cavern, a glow, a shimmering; lightly golden air hangs above me, and I work again, straining to see, straining to apprehend a God. On the slab of rock now sits an upright figure, a man, an utter newness. He is present in ways I cannot name. This is creation unlike any before. In his simplicity, in his nakedness, in his presence, resides Forever. How do I explain? In the aftermath of war, in this warm peace, I gaze at the victor, at Jesus, and everything is clear. he embodies. Here is all that is known. He sits in quiet, his chest rising and falling in a process familiar, but strangely unknown. This is essence. This is Life. The room is a window, a door, an opening through which a new reality is pouring, centering itself in the chest and heart of this ... this ... this man, this risen figure, this ... I know not what. This God.

The world of shadow and blaze inhabited by goblins, dreams, angels, devils and gods is now my world. The seen intersects with the unseen, and I have been crushed and raised in the joining.

Jesus raises his face, looking up, looking in, seeing all. Now there are two figures. A third is suddenly beside him. And a fourth. Jesus robes himself with glory, with a white that shouts of splendor with clothes burning, clothes that only God can wear. There are silent embraces all around, and worship, though I cannot say how I know this is worship. A silent language is shared among these beings but it climbs to heaven, filled with praise, filled with thanks, filled with love. Then smiles, then laughter, then glad shouts bounce eternity throughout the room. The place is filled with angels, their bodies pressed forward, all straining to touch the Liberator, the Life, the King.

A sun is rising in the east. Its dawn light filters down the hillside, and spring floods the air, and the angels take their leave, save two. Jesus, silently, calmly, takes the burial cloths in hand, folds them, and holds them for a moment, thinking, musing, praying. he lays them aside and strides for the door.

The tomb is empty of Jesus, filled with Forever.

The angels look at me, and we all smile. Then we laugh, and I am in my car, rocketing down South 1st Street in my Toyota, running to worship, seeking my God, seeking his children, seeking a world to tell.

## Experiencing Easter in the Midst of Winter

*by Mary L. Resner  
March, 1993*

Winter came to me suddenly and unexpectedly with all its heavy, icy stillness six years ago. I had only known lightness, warmth, and motion before the day my most terrifying nightmare became reality and I was forced to say goodbye to my firstborn only son. It was time to leave him on the hospital bed. I laid him gently down. I turned to look at him one more time knowing I had only one more chance to see his precious little body until the day I would see him at God's table. I had only one more chance to take in all that he was and I strained to absorb him into every fiber of my being so he could somehow live within me. All I could think of was, "How long, oh Lord, will I have to wait to see the brightness you bring back to those huge, curious blue eyes? How long, oh Lord, will I have to wait to hear my son say, 'I love you, Mom?' How long, oh Lord, will I have to wait to feel those warm arms around my neck and that feathery hair tickling my nose? How long, oh Lord, will I have to wait until you replace the sterile hospital odors with the sweet scent of my boy? And how long, oh Lord, will I have to wait until the bitter taste of death will end and I will sit at the glorious feast of yours with my son at my side?"

The paradox of the beginning of winter both crushed and exhilarated me. My faith screamed and questioned my benevolent God. And my faith was never stronger, more sure, and evident as my God listened to and comforted me. My hope stood with heels dug into the sludge and fist raised in protest. And my hope leaned toward union with God and my son in heaven while God gave my hope eyes to see heaven even in the people and simple events around me now. In the loneliness of grief, no friend, relative, brother or sister in Christ could understand the cycles, depth, and manifestations of my pain. And in the loneliness of my grief the love of people who cried with me, prayed with me, sat silently with me, rekindled memories with me, embraced me, listened to me, and fed me was the most powerful love from God I have ever encountered. The huge void in me where my son used to be cannot be filled in this life by anything or anyone. And yet this huge void gave me a sense of urgency to share God with people and to recognize our common wounds of loss. The God I could share with people was not bigger. God was no longer the happy, benevolent "daddy" who says YES to my every request. God is not immune to the pain of sorrow – he cries with us. God alone knows the pain of losing that which one loves perfectly. Through my common tears I could see the holy tears of God.

The crushing exhilaration of my winter came in the storm of a memorial service for my son. At this most sorrowful, empty, dark, hopeless moment came traces of the resurrecting God. Perhaps those traces are always around me, but I don't choose or cannot see them until all is darkness around me. The graduate school community in which we lived literally gathered around us as one in all their diversity. One by one they embraced us with tears and gave us some of the most beautiful words I've ever heard. As the days and months passed by, they continued to envelop us and each other. There would be a hot dinner left at our doorstep by someone who must have known how hard it was for me to cook because of the memory of my son sitting in his high chair eating while I made dinner each night. I would go to the daily campus worship service and some

fellow students would honor the dead in a lament service. I would be walking in the snow alone and depressed and a friend would look into my eyes with compassion and say, “How are you today?” The friend would receive an answer of only tears and enfold me in his or her arms. Wonderful notes and poems arrived declaring they had not forgotten. Professors at academic odds with each other would stop and embrace each other. Lives changed. People grew closer to God – some just for a while – others still are.

The one place I needed to be fully myself in all my grief was with my church. After all, that is where God’s person and presence is made known like nowhere else and that is where full acceptance is possible as people honestly open themselves up to God and each other and receive God’s forgiveness and comfort in utter gratitude. Unfortunately, my church was not a place I could find these things. The songs of praise mocked me. The shallow sermons angered me. The prayers represented only a few voices. The eyes which once delighted in my son now avoided contact with my eyes. The lips which once spoke playfully and lovingly to my boy now were silent as if he never existed. It soon came to be the last place I wanted to be was with my church because they seemed to be the least able to face or express the pain with honesty. I’m so thankful to God for my graduate school community which unexpectedly played the role for me that I thought my church would.

Now in the complacency of my winter, with many days of warmth and new children on each knee, I sometimes long for the pains and promises of paradox to be as close to me as they were in the earliest days of winter when the elusive presence of God was as real as my pen and paper are now. I know life cannot be believed on that edge all the time, but I don’t want to lose the tension of waiting for the hope of the resurrection to be realized. I grieve that I forget too often that there is nothing but God that lasts. God alone can sustain me – not any other child, not health, not a comfortable home, not a good marriage, not another academic degree, not any friend or relative, and not any act of Christian service. Only God in Christ Jesus. God is faithful to us, and will give us what we need if we allow ourselves to turn to him in full honesty when winter comes to us.

The honesty I speak of is the darker side of paradox. As a community of faith in God I believe we need to let the winter enter worship, and not deny its presence in the everyday life of the congregation. The believers whom God worked through as they penned our Scriptures believed and practiced this. For example, almost half the Psalms are laments to God. We need to reclaim this missing part of our heritage. It is vital to the health of Christ’s body and the church’s witness to the world that we express our pain honestly to God and to each other. Such honestly expressed pain is not vain because while we wait for the tears to be dried that last time by God’s very touch, we experience God’s healing power and presence now as we weep.

How can we help those who mourn (not just the death of one close to them, but the loss of a job, a friendship, a pet, a physical function, etc.) as they await the fullness of the resurrection? Because we are one with each person in Christ’s body I encourage us to:

- 1) “sit on the mourning bench” with those who grieve (See Nicholas Wolterstorff’s *Lament for a Son*). Even though they are not without hope their tears are valid. Our ignoring them or trying to dry their tears too early puts salt in their wound. Our silent tears are soothing ointment for their wound.

- 2) Listen to the griever's lament and allow it to influence our own prayer life if we honestly can.
- 3) Follow the biblical example of lament even in worship times when we are all together.
- 4) Hear what the mourners say as they interpret the Scriptures from their new and urgent perspective of the eternal.
- 5) Acknowledge the deceased by talking about him or her to the one who can think of little else. Those acts can caress the bleeding heart with the warm oil of shared suffering.

Not many people want to open up the wounds of their own losses because they don't want to go there again; they've bled and scabbed already. I encourage us as the people of God to take the bandages off the scars. The balm of healing that only God can offer cannot salve the wound which one has covered hastily with bandages. Therein in the fearful removing of the bandages, will God's strength be found. We all have lost or will lose everything and everyone around us – all that lasts is each of us naked over a dark chasm with God transparently holding us up. In that humble position we receive the only gift that remains when winter strikes – a relationship with God. And God can raise up even dust and ashes.

All of God's creation (including the church) is groaning as if in labor waiting to give birth to the new creation in its fullness. We've had glimpses of the new creation as it moves about in us, changing our form. We know it's there even though we don't see it. But the pregnancy is not over. The birth process is still happening. We still feel pain even as we anticipate that baby in our arms soon. The Old Testament traditions, Paul the author of the Book of Hebrews, and Jesus all knew of the necessity of groaning. (See 2 Corinthians 4:7-6:10; Psalms 3-7; 10; 13; 22; 28; 38; 42; 51-61; 69; 80; 83; 88; 120; 137; 139-143; Hebrews 4:14-5:10; Matthew 26:36-46; 27:45-50.) In addition, our worship times cannot avoid death. At the Lord's Supper, we proclaim Christ's death. In preaching, Paul exhorts us to preach nothing but Christ crucified. At baptism, we die with Christ. Through our relationship with God and each other we gain strength to die daily and take up our cross. We open up our arms to all the death-filled people who come to our community seeking God. Death is all around us and if we're to be like Jesus we refuse to look away.

Does this mean we're to be a people who sit around groaning? Yes, some of who are in winter do. What do we look like to those seeking to know God?

- 1) A spiritually and psychologically healthy, honest people who can accept in their presence the person who is dying from broken relationship with God no matter how that death manifests itself in lifestyle.
- 2) A people who are transformed in the vision of NOW as being the place where God can and will act powerfully because of the past redemption through the cross and the future hope of Christ's return (See Philippians 1:6 – God working in us transforms us NOW).

If we do not allow people to express the pain of their winter in every area of the church's life, we hinder them from experiencing God's presence NOW. I know many people who have

experienced a loss and feel the last place they could express fears, doubts, rebellion, confusion, etc. is among the body of Christ. They often find a place of honesty and true community support among the self-help groups which are on the rise in our country.

Let him or her who laments to God in the midst of winter know that:

- 1) The biblical tradition wails with you.
- 2) Your outcry from your suffering is the beginning of “healing” or “spiritual wholeness.” To hold in the pain is the beginning of self-destruction.
- 3) You’re experiencing the joy of salvation because you’re facing everything in life with God. This can never be taken away from you.
- 4) You will experience God’s comfort where your wounds hurt most. As you bleed, God’s tears are mingled with your blood.
- 5) Your faith and courage are evident because you’re taking your honest questions to God whose relationship you take seriously. Even if God doesn’t give you the answers you seek, God hears you and gives you his presence.
- 6) You have the freedom now to be honest with people both in and out of Christ because you have the gift of knowing that today is all you have, even as you long for his kingdom fully come.

In the midst of our individual and collective winters, can we experience the resurrection power of Easter? After all, what do springtime flowers, frilly hats, chocolate bunny rabbits, and colored eggs have to do with a graveyard? There is no Easter unless we’re at the graveyard in winter when the only colors we see are gray and light brown, when all is vacant except the wind blowing a few dead leaves around the graves, and when our hope is planted on the one who tore the boulder away from his son’s tomb.

## Resurrection Power in a Self-Reliant Society

*by Monte Cox  
March, 1993*

My fifth grade teacher was Miss Porter. (I remember her name because she got married over the Christmas holidays, which was a big deal to a class full of fifth graders. I'm sure it was an even bigger deal to Miss Porter.) She indirectly introduced me to an important term which aptly describes much of our culture.

It happened during one six-weeks grading period in which, beside my conduct grade, Miss Porter had written the number "17." Now I realize that many of you are not acquainted with the advanced grading system used by my home state. In Georgia, where I grew up, the teacher had the option of saying something more descriptive about the student, either a negative or positive description, by simply placing a number next to the conduct grade, corresponding to qualities listed on the front of the report card. For example, a #1 might be a compliment, such as "very cooperative"; a #10 could be "has short attention span"; and a #25 might correspond to "Have you considered sending your child to boarding school?" This was my first #17, so I was unfamiliar with its corresponding trait. Anxiously, I looked for a #17 in the key on the front of the card, and there I found the new term: "self-reliant." I didn't know whether to be nervous or proud. But as soon as I showed the report card to my parents and received abundant praise from them, I knew that self-reliance was a good thing. I determined then and there to live up to the label.

I could recognize real-life examples of self-reliance all around me, especially on Saturday mornings around the Cox household. While other children were sleeping 'til noon, watching Jonny Quest cartoons, and eating Count Chocula, I spent most Saturday mornings under my Dad's car "helping" him change the oil, the plugs, the points, the engine – whatever. My dad was a dyed-in-the-wool do-it-yourselfer. "Why give my money to some other guy to fix it when I can do it myself? my dad would ask rhetorically as we lay beneath the car together. Somehow I knew that he wouldn't be impressed with my very logical reasons why he should give his money to some other guy and let his self-reliant son sleep later on Saturdays. As I grew up in America, I realized that my dad was not alone in his personal pursuit of self-reliance.

From the self-service gas station, to the discount bag-your-own-groceries store, to the drug store where you can, with some limitations, diagnose a physical problem and treat it yourself, ours is a do-it-yourself society. I didn't fully appreciate this cultural trait until I lived overseas among people who were alternately amazed and perplexed by my desire to repair my own car, build my own furniture, choose my own hardware (you're often not allowed to browse in stores overseas; you have to tell a clerk what you need and let him get it for you), prescribe my own medicine, and own the things in my self-contained home.

Where did this spirit of self-reliance come from? When our forefathers struck off across the plains to eke out a living in the wilderness of the American West, certainly an attitude of self-reliance was common among them. Without it, they might not have survived. But I think the trait

is more likely traceable to the successes of science over the last two centuries, though its roots go back to an even earlier time.

The foundations of modern science lay in the Deistic philosophy which held that God originated the universe, established Natural Law under which the world operates, then stepped away from it all where, according to part-time popular theologian Bette Midler, he watches us from a distance. Given such a world view, the men and women of science explored the universe with the confidence that nothing could prevent them from pushing back the veils of ignorance and unlocking the mysteries of nature. Relatively frequent and impressive successes in scientific exploration eventually convinced us as a society that we humans are capable of exerting a great degree of control over the forces which affect our physical lives. We no longer saw ourselves as victims of natural negative circumstances. Nature, we learned, could be manipulated for both constructive and destructive ends. For example, we could split atoms we couldn't even see – an incredible achievement by itself – and produce electricity as well as nuclear weapons.

This sense of control over natural forces influences our views in other areas of life as well. For example, in American politics we believe that a person can rise from the lowliest position in life to the highest office in the land. Only a lack of will power and personal skill can limit the potential of the individual. In economics, it is this philosophy – the notion that we are in control of our own circumstances – that makes us look condescendingly down at the poor person as if he has some kind of character flaw. Otherwise, he might pull himself up by his own boot straps and overcome his negative circumstances. In medicine, we find it hard to deal with a terminal disease for which nothing can be done. People in other cultures do not resist death to the extent we do, in part because they do not share our confident expectation of finding a remedy for every physical problem. But what does any of this have to do with us, the people of God?

I remember the feeling of embarrassment that would come over me whenever a certain overweight, toothless, single, welfare mother would come forward at our church confessing her sins, her need for help. Hers was obviously a life out of control, I thought. For her, faith and the church were crutches. In my mind, this was no compliment. Yet, all of us had gathered there to worship the one who said, "Apart from me, you can do nothing!" (John 15:5). Our struggling sister, the lone representative in our church of the lower socio-economic stratum of our community, seemed to be the only one among us who was willing to admit that Jesus was right on this point. The rest of us were do-it-yourselfers who were too proud to confess that we could not do it on our own.

It seems to me that Christians, like the culture of which we are a part, have elevated self-reliance to virtue status when, in some ways, it is a spiritual handicap. Yet, there is something good about self-reliance, isn't there? I want my children to be highly motivated self-starters as they go through life. I don't want them to be whiners, weaklings, or pessimists, all of which I see as characteristics which betray a lack of self-reliance in one way or another. But I also want to teach my children how to depend on God. I don't want to pass on to them this illusion of our culture that we are in control. I don't want to wait for a traumatic experience – an accident or a terminal disease – something that reminds us that we are not in control, to teach them this lesson. And I don't want to raise them in a do-it-yourself church in which there is little room for an active God.

What does such a church look like, you ask? Consider the following areas of spiritual life in which an overdose of self-reliance can interfere with our approach to God.

### **Prayer:**

Do you remember in the movie *Shenandoah* the scene in which the family gathers around the table for a meal? As Jimmy Stewart's character offers thanks, he says something like this: "Thank you, Lord, for the food. We plowed the field ourselves; we planted the seeds; we cultivated the crop; we harvested it and stored it in barns we'd built with our own hands, and our women have spent the better part of two days preparing it so we could eat it." And then, with a perplexed look on his face, he concludes with something like this: "We don't exactly what you had to do with it, but we thank you for it all the same!"

What kind of prayer would you expect from people who believe that God is only watching us from a distance? For the do-it-yourselfer, prayer doesn't call on God to do much of anything. It is not uncommon these days to hear folks ask God to heal people, whether or not he chooses to use a doctor to do it. But such a prayer still seems shocking to some. Yes, there is a difference between the dangerous chicanery of televangelists' healings and the genuine power of God. But we must learn to utilize the power God makes available to those who pray with the faith that he is near and active.

### **Growing:**

In a discussion during a Bible class in which we were studying Romans 8, as the majority of us were agreeing that we no longer struggled with such rudimentary sins as alcohol addiction and the urge to use foul language, but dealt more often with the sins of the more mature, like selfishness and anger, one member of the class announced that, as a new Christian, he was still struggling with an alcohol problem. What help, he asked, was God promising him in this section of Scripture? We all looked down dutifully at our Bibles, but sat in awkward silence until finally, the teacher said to this brother, "I guess you'll just have to try harder!" None of us could come up with anything better to add, so that was it! And we had just read verse 13: "If by the Spirit you put to death the misdeeds of the body, you will live." What does the Spirit have to do with overcoming sin? How do I cooperate with God's invisible presence in my life in order to overcome sin? It didn't seem to matter at the time. "You just have to try harder, brother," we told him. Maybe we were trying to avoid sounding overly theological, so we shied away from what may have seemed like an impractical solution revealed in Romans 8. Or perhaps we were assuming that the only thing which stood between our classmate and the conquering of his alcohol addiction was a lack of will power on his part. Maybe we all believed that it was within his power to overcome this sin. I think he was searching for a higher power that he might plug into for assistance. But we couldn't think of one on the spot. No, he had to go to AA to hear about the higher power! I don't say this to criticize others. I was in that class, too! Could it be that, for too long, we have had little to say to those who felt powerless to overcome sin because we ourselves conceived of sin as something we overcome by simply trying harder?

### **Trusting:**

I am the kind of guy who has a hard time letting someone else drive when I am in the car, even if it isn't my car. My wife, for example, is an excellent driver. But if you ever see her driving and I'm in the car with her, you can be sure that I am near death and she is taking me to the hospital. Why do I struggle with this? I think it's because I like to be in control. And if it is difficult for me to relinquish control of my car to someone else, imagine what it's like for me to try to allow God to direct my life, to ask and watch for his guidance as I make decisions. I do want to trust in the Lord with all my heart and lean not on my own understanding, but this is a very difficult thing to do in a do-it-yourself culture.

### **Forgiving:**

I often hear people say, "I just can't forgive myself." While I know that this usually indicates that the person has experienced something in the past which we should discuss, my first inclination is to say, "You're right! You can't forgive yourself! I'm so glad you know that already. What else would you like to talk about?"

### **Serving:**

I know what it's like to prepare a message and to deliver it, calling on the ability God has placed within me "naturally" to communicate it to people, without really including God in the process. And I know what it's like to begin a project by humbly asking God to provide the ideas, the resources, and the people to make it happen. The difference between the two approaches may not be readily observed by others, but I know the difference. I can feel the difference. One sermon or project is self-propelled. The other is fueled by the power of God.

Paul warned Timothy about the kind of people who "have a form of godliness, but deny its power" (2 Timothy 3:5). This power deficiency, Paul said, would be evident in the sinfulness of people. Had God's power been involved in their lives, these people would not have been so sinful. God would have transformed their lives to conform to the image of his son.

The resurrection of Jesus is perhaps the most significant display of God's power, the same power made available to those who believe. This power is at work in remaking us in his image. His power is not reserved for desperate, single, welfare mothers and others whose brokenness drives them to seek it. All of us must learn to lean on his power, to become God-reliant, not self-reliant people.

We face an uphill struggle in this do-it-yourself culture to avoid being a do-it-yourself church. But we must not cut ourselves off from our Power Source, apart from whom we can do nothing. We must rethink our culture's assessment of self-reliance as a virtue and see the inhibiting effect of a self-sufficient attitude on the child of God. And we must resist popular philosophy and affirm the nearness and the power of God in a society which believes that, if God exists at all, he is only watching us from a distance.

## Resurrecting God

*by Gary Selby  
March, 1993*

It is 4:00 in the morning. A rooster crows somewhere in the city. In a small, sparsely-furnished room a woman is sleeping. At the shrill call of the rooster, she opens her eyes. She has slept fitfully for three, maybe four hours. Sitting up on her bed, she forgets for a moment the reason why sleep has been so elusive. There is something shadowy and surreal about tragedy that makes us ask, "Did it really happen?" She sits on the edge of her bed, half-awake, and asks herself, "Have I been dreaming?"

And then, like a landslide, it all comes rushing back and she replays the scenes in her mind as if seeing them for the first time. The angry mob shouting "Crucify!" ... a governor washing his hands ... soldiers beating him senseless ... spit running down his face ... being marched, half dragged out of the city ... the nails ... the thorns ... his cry, "My God!" ... the spear. It all comes rushing back to her – the unthinkable. he is dead.

Strangely, she doesn't cry this time as she replays the scenes. She has wept so much in the past three days that there are no tears left. Instead, she looks across the room in the dim light and sees the spices and strips of cloth lying on the table where she left them two days ago. She stands up and mechanically straightens the blankets on her bed. Then she puts on her clothes and drapes her cloak around her as a shield against the chill of the morning air. She gathers up the materials for preparing the body and leaves the room, winding her way through the narrow streets of the city toward the house of a friend who has agreed to come with her to the tomb.

As the two of them walk along in silence, she tries to remember his face, what he looked like, and at first, she feels panic because the only picture she can conjure up is of a face covered in dirt and sweat, distorted by pain. That picture is so burned in her memory that it is all she can see. But then her mind drifts back to their first meeting. At their first meeting she had been delivered from the prison of demon-possession by the very man whose body she is now going to embalm. In the face of every other person she'd ever met she had seen only fear and disgust and condemnation. But not his face. There had been something kind and sad and understanding in his gaze, and when he commanded the demons to leave her, something stern and powerful. From that time on she had been his devoted follower.

But that is all over now. He is gone. The words keep echoing in her mind, "He is gone." The emptiness that she feels at this moment is so deep, so total, that she could not begin to put it into words. She knows only the dizzying numbness, the tightening in her stomach. But if she were able to describe it, the word she would use is "hopeless."

We have all known what she feels. We have all, in one way or another, peered into that black pit.

Even as little children we experience it. For my eighth birthday, the gift I wanted more than anything else was a pocket watch. I was so proud of that watch that I carried it with me every

day, wherever I went. One evening at the end of a day of hard playing, I emptied my pockets as I always did, intending to set my pocket watch in its special, safe place on my dresser. When I pulled it out, I found that the crystal had broke and the hands were bent, and I could see dirt down inside the face. I was crushed. I remember like it was yesterday lying in bed that night crying over my broken watch. I remember the terrible knowledge that it would never work again. The overwhelming finality of it all. The crushing, helpless sense of loss.

Your puppy gets run over. Your boyfriend breaks up with you. You fail a test. You declare bankruptcy. A person you thought was your friend betrays you. You wake up one day to realize that you hate your job and you're stuck. Your little girl has cancer. Your wife has died and you're all alone. Your dad has Alzheimer's and is slowly going out of his mind. You suffer a divorce – your own, your parents', your child's, someone else you love. You get caught deep in sin.

All of us have known the bitter taste of “no hope.” We have all walked alongside Mary Magdalene and the other Mary, making our way to the tomb where our dreams and hopes lie cold as a corpse. Some of us were there a year ago, two years ago, ten years ago. Some of us are on our way to the tomb right now. All of us will be there, if not now, then at some time in the future, asking ourselves what we thought we would never have to: “How do I go on?”

But then something happens. Mary Magdalene and the other Mary arrive at the tomb. There has been an earthquake. The stone has been rolled away. The women look up to see an angel perched up on the boulder ablaze in clothes so white that it hurts their eyes to look at him! “Do not be afraid,” he says. “I know you are looking for Jesus, who was crucified. He is not here; he has risen, just as he said he would.” They stand dumbfounded, their mouths gaping, too shocked even to take his offer to look for themselves. “Run, tell his disciples.” The women toss the spices and graveclothes and rush back to town – afraid yet filled with joy. “He has risen from the dead.”

Can it be? The Bible is full of stories that, from any perspective other than faith, are just plain whoppers. A baby born to a hundred-year-old man and a ninety-year-old woman. A sea cut in half to allow a nation of perhaps two million to walk through without so much as stepping in a puddle. An army of three hundred routing a coalition of armies camped in a valley as thick as locusts. A prophet told to go marry a whore and to try, desperately, to win her love and faithfulness – in order to act out the love of the Lord of Hosts for his wayward people. A teacher who multiplied loaves and fishes and healed the sick and taught “the rich are the poor,” “the happy are the grief-stricken,” “the blind are those who think they see” while “those who admit their blindness are the ones with 20-20 vision,” “the greatest of all is the servant of all.” But of all the crazy things the Bible tells us, this is the craziest. From any other perspective than that of faith, the whopper of whoppers.

But to us who believe ...

To us who know a resurrecting God the empty tomb shouts, “There is hope!” in all of our hopeless experiences. To us who serve the God “who gives life to the dead and calls things that are not as though they were,” there is meaning in the events of our lives that bring us to face our own need for hope. Not that they are good, for they certainly are not. God's intention was never

that we suffer loss and death. But because a man had incurable leprosy, he went looking for Jesus. And because a woman had spent all she had on doctors to cure her hemorrhage and had only gotten worse, she went looking for Jesus. And because Jairus' precious little girl lay on the verge of death this man – who under any other circumstances would have given Jesus the time of day – fell on his knees before the Lord. Often it's not until we face hopelessness, until all our solutions fail, that we are ready to come to the one who is Hope.

May we never minimize the pain of a fellow human being. God forbid that we ever presume to offer simple answers. Pain and dread and hurt are not simple problems. May we ever affirm to each other that, as members of a community of grace, we have the right and the freedom to be in the body and to hurt, to cry out in our pain.

May we also affirm, as a community of resurrection, that because Jesus came out of the tomb, "There is hope!" And when it finally comes down to it, isn't that all we have? Not gimmicks or quick solutions or promises of no pain and disappointment, but this one ringing affirmation: "There is hope!" It's all we have. But it is so much. To know that the story doesn't end in a grave. Mary Magdalene's, mine, yours. Because he arose, because he lives, there is hope.

## The Outrageous Joy

by Mike Cope  
March, 1993

My nomination for most heretical typo of 1992 goes to the *Abilene Reporter-News*, I was getting a little edgy about all the mistakes in my “Daily Meditation” column – especially since I was doing it for free at their request.

The worst one, though, came about this time last year. I ended a column quoting from the old song, “one step at a time, dear Savior.” But it was printed, “one step at a time, *dead* Savior.” It was an Easter rebuttal!

It makes a difference – a major difference. I remember what a difference it made a couple of years ago as I pulled my daughter in a red wagon around the quadrangular hallway at Children’s Hospital in Little Rock. We thought she was dying. How unfair that encephalitis should strike a child who is already retarded! As Megan and I made the journey we saw many parents with bleary eyes, many siblings with nervous, awkward laughter, and many kids with IVs and bald heads trying to be brave. Oh, yes, it makes a difference whether the Palestinian tomb was occupied or vacant on Easter morning!

It made a huge difference to Dr. Diane Komp. As a pediatric oncologist, she had a very difficult time believing in a loving God. But in her book, *A Window to Heaven*, she recounts how her pilgrimage to faith was guided by her tiny patients and their parents.

She tells of visiting with a mother named Eileen. When this woman’s son was diagnosed with leukemia, she enrolled in graduate classes in religious education, hoping for answers. One day Dr. Komp noticed some books in their hospital room written by theologians who were noted for the skepticism. When asked about them, Eileen explained that she was taking a course titled, “Is the Resurrection of Jesus Christ Relevant Today?” So, what did she think, Dr. Komp asked. With great peace and joy, Eileen looked at her son who was laboring to breathe and replied, “I know that it’s relevant!”

The resurrection of Christ is terribly relevant for all those who have mourned this year. For those who had to sell their houses out of economic necessity. For those who were gutted by a divorce. Those who stood on a wind-kissed hill to pay final respects to a spouse. For those who faced every day with pain – of whatever sort.

“I am the resurrection and the life,” said our Lord. Either he is or he isn’t. It depends on what happened that weekend in Palestine. For those like me who believe that he was raised by his Father, there is wild hope. Suffering and death do not have the final word. A day is coming when pain, failed relationships, bitterness, depression, and death will be put behind us. Jurgen Moltmann had it right: “God weeps with us so that we may someday laugh with him.” That’s the outrageous joy called Easter!



## Movie Review: A River Runs Through It

*Reviewed by Ken Chaffin  
March, 1993*

Last year all the talk in politics was of “family values.” Robert Redford has made a film that treasures the family. Redford has taken some of the stories of Norman Maclean to weave together a beautiful garment that embraces parenting, brotherhood, childhood memories of home, adolescent dreams, and maturation issues of making right and wrong choices in life.

Maclean had in mind to tell the story of his family. Only then his father had once said, would he understand this story and why it happened. Redford is reasonably true to that story and portrays this small family unit as they evolved at the turn of the last century in Missoula, Montana.

Redford serves as narrator for “River,” Norman Maclean’s first-person account of the story. It is the story of a Presbyterian minister (Tom Skerritt), his wife (Brenda Blethyn), and their two sons, Norman (Craig Sheffer), and Paul (Brad Pitt) – the Maclean family. They are of solid, Scottish Presbyterian (read staunch Calvinist) stock. They live through the turn of an era, early twentieth century America, in an area of the country that still has vestiges of the American “old west.” It is the story of the maturation of the two sons, Norman, the elder, the more studious, cautious and reflective brother and Paul, the younger, more brash, adventurous and rebellious sibling. They are boys who check out the town, who love above all else to fish. They develop into adolescents, capable of finding adventure and causing trouble. They mature into adults, making decisions about college, career, and girls. They are truly an American story of young boys growing into young men. Influenced most by their father, they grow up both accepting and rejecting his ideals and values. In the audience, you feel as if you have a window to see into this house of a parson and his family. You muse about your own family of origin as well as your present responsibilities as a parent. I found myself taking side-trips of the mind in the middle of scenes to consider ways my own families were different or the same, better or worse by comparison.

With all this pondering, one might think this a boring picture, but it isn’t. It has moments of excitement, adventure, melodrama, and a love story – all of which fascinate. There is a roller-coaster ride down a rapid river in a canoe that has every element of tension and suspense that one could wish for. And it has Montana scenery. The vistas of mountains, valleys and rivers take your breath away. The cinematography captures the power and beauty of the American Northwest by showing us streams and forests, peaks and meadows, that manifest more of God than of humans.

The metaphor that Maclean (and therefore Redford) uses to describe life is fishing – more precisely, fly fishing (people who use worms for bait are not proper fishermen by Maclean’s standards). The opening line of the story and the movie is, “In our family there was no clear line between religion and fly-fishing.” The Reverend Maclean was the teacher in all things, from academic schoolwork, especially how to write “with thrift,” to afternoon nature walks that taught the “natural side of God’s order,” to fly-casting, a “simple four-stroke rhythm.” In each of these

“schools,” plus matters of morality, all things came from God via the Reverend Maclean. Such subjects were based on the words of God which are beneath the half-billion-year-old rocks” in the bed of the trout stream the boys fished. And if you listened hard enough, said the father to the boys, throughout their lives those words from God would always be there.

Therein lies the intrigue and drama of the story. Norman, who aspires early to either be a minister or writer, does for the most part stay in tune with such wisdom. Norman says at one point in the movie that his father’s words in sermons “made me feel most at home.” Paul, though he stays at home, never leaving Montana, becomes the prodigal. Right and wrong are more confusing for the boys as they get older, and Paul allows his rebellious streak of drinking and gambling to rule his existence. His parents struggle to understand this seemingly unique son that God has given them.

For me, this family love was the ultimate beauty of the film, more lovely than the mountains, more graceful than the river. The Reverend Maclean confesses to Norman that he doesn’t understand people like Paul (the rebels). The father continues, “But we can still love them, love them completely, without complete understanding.” Through the Macleans we learn such love is possible despite the ups and downs of life.

Theologically, it is a rich film experience. It is a delightful reminder that the two themes which dominate Presbyterian thinking are crucial and governing to an ordinary pastor’s view of life and the world. The “sovereignty of God” is at the heart of all thinking for the Reverend Maclean. “The Lord giveth and the Lord taketh away. Blessed be the name of the Lord.” Maclean tells his sons that all things come by grace, and grace comes by art, but art does not come easy. In other words, all things come from God, but humans must love God by continuing to perfect them. That brings up the second theme: “All things are to be done decently and in order.” As noted, fly-casting is learned as a simple four-stroke rhythm. In fact, it is practiced by use of a metronome, so that one will not corrupt the graceful art of casting. Such matters are symbolic of the order of life and the beauty of such order.

Christ is central to such life. Life without Christ is to be pitied, but with Christ, even the poor “can become princes and kings.” Sin is the central problem of life. Sin is disorder, disarray or disobedience. It is dealt with forcefully, but forgiveness is always available.

I am grateful to Robert Redford for moving outside normal Hollywood agendas to bring us this story. It proves that good filmmaking and solid entertainment can come from more than car chases, sexual voyeurism, and murderous violence. He has proved that good stories can provide good films.

May I suggest that you see this film in a full-sized theater. I am convinced the scenery or the mood will not translate well to video cassettes for home television. What will translate is a great story by Norman Maclean – a story of family love and real family values. This is a film that charms, touches, and inspires.

## **Hope Network Newsletter: The New Testament Encourages Special Music in Worship**

*by Calvin Warpula; Introduction by Lynn Anderson  
March, 1993*

This is the second of three columns on the power and place of music in worship. I wrote the introductory article in last month's *Wineskins*, and invited Calvin Warpula to write this installment. Calvin and I obviously tune in to our music on different wave lengths. My style is anecdotal and conversational; Calvin's is more academic, even polemical. But I hold Calvin in profound respect and warm affection. This article is an edited version of the paper Calvin delivered at the Petit Jean Minister's Retreat in 1992.

I believe that all types and formats of vocal music are scriptural and can be used as needed or desired. God is not as concerned about when, where, who, and how many sing at one time, as he is the meaning, purpose, and devotion of their praise. Nor does God care about song books, shaped notes, four-part harmony, communion cups, or contribution baskets.

I believe that to insist on having only simultaneous congregational singing is to make a creedal law beyond scriptural authority. Those who insist on "simultaneous congregational singing only" use several elements which were not in the early church: a song directory, harmony, modern music and poetry, and modern aids such as song books, shaped notes, and pitch pipes.

I believe that the Jews of both the Old Testament and the New, as well as the early Christians, enjoyed various styles of vocal music and we should, too.

I also believe we should let individuals and congregations use the musical format they like without judging them. We do not judge over song books, overhead projectors, and style of songs, whether they are Bach, Bill Gaither, or Stamps-Baxter; neither should we judge over whether one has a solo or choral group.

I believe that simultaneous congregational singing has great benefits and is a rich, meaningful heritage to be preserved.

It is possible for special music to be abused. However, every good thing can be abused, including preaching or congregational singing. The abuse of a good thing by some is no reason to disallow the proper practice of that good thing by others.

### **A Basic Assumption**

Items of worship which God has approved without specifying how they are to be fulfilled can be fulfilled by any method which does not violate some other principle of Scripture. Since singing is an item God has approved without describing the methods by which it is to be done, it can be done any way one chooses as long as the method does not violate another principle of Scripture.

God-approved items that can be carried out in expedient ways without violating any other principle of Scripture must not be prohibited in the church today.

Special music is such an expedient that does not violate any principle of Scripture, and must not be prohibited in the church today.

### **Principles of Use for God-Approved Items**

Singing to praise God and to edify the church is clearly God-approved (Ephesians 5:19; 1 Corinthians 14:26; James 5:13). Congregational singing, special music, preaching, praying, teaching, or serving that violates one of these principles is wrong. Special music does not necessarily violate any of these principles, any more than congregational singing does.

Here are principles of Scripture that govern the use of items which God has approved:

- Do everything in love (1 Corinthians 12:31; 14:1).
- Do nothing for pride or human glory (Philemon 24; Romans 12:1-4).
- Do not divide the body (1 Corinthians 3:16).
- Do everything to the edifying of the body (1 Corinthians 14:4, 5, 12, 17, 19, 26).
- Do all things decently and in order (1 Corinthians 14:40).
- Do nothing for selfish exhibitionism (1 Corinthians 12:7, 25, 26).

Does special music violate any of these principles of Scripture?

### **Special Music is Generally Accepted Outside the Regular Worship Services**

Special music and choruses are generally accepted throughout churches of Christ as long as they are not in the “regular worship service.” Special music is heard at lectureships, youth meetings, funerals, weddings, church-wide area singings, and other special events. Several questions will help us focus on the inconsistency of this practice:

- 1) What circumstances and scriptures permit special music at funerals, Sunday afternoon singings, choruses before and after regular services?
- 2) Can we explain from the Scriptures why special music is scriptural at one time and is not scriptural at another time?
- 3) What is the essential difference between a special singing group singing songs to the congregation at 11 a.m. Sunday during the “regular worship service” and in singing the same songs to the same people at 2:30 that afternoon in a special period of praise?
- 4) Are there other items that are approved by God for all Christians to offer in worship to him outside the “regular worship services” but are not approved by him to be offered during those services?

5) Where do the Scriptures speak of a “regular worship service” in contrast to other gatherings of Christians for the purpose of praising God?

## **Scriptural and Historical Evidences That Encourage Special Music**

### ***I. Praising God is both saying and singing words that honor God.***

The believers praised God (Luke 24:49; Acts 2:46; 13:3; Ephesians 1:3-15). Praising God means saying or singing words that honor God. There is no significant difference in singing praises and saying praises. What can be said in praise to God can be sung in praise to God.

The meaning of the word “hymn” which occurs in 1 Corinthians 14:26 and Colossians 3:16 is “any poetical composition in honor of God or suitable for use in a liturgical setting, i.e., worship. Such poetical pieces could be sung or chanted or recited antiphonally as in a responsive reading” (James M. Efird, “Hymn,” *Harper’s Bible Dictionary*, ed. Paul J. Achtemeier. San Francisco: harper Collins Publishers, 1985, p. 413).

The New Testament does not emphasize the form or style of singing. We have a few fragments of some distinctive Christian hymns (1 Timothy 3:16-17; Ephesians 5:14; Philippians 2:5-11), but no writer has indicated the manner in which the hymns were sung.

Dr. Cliff Ganus III, Professor of Music at Harding University, has well explained what our problem here may be:

*One of the most difficult concepts for most people to understand is that we hear “sing” in a different way than the early Christians did. To use a solo or an ensemble presentation is one that has been rehearsed, that is designed to be musically attractive. To the early church, a solo was a text that was important to the presenter. The music might not have even been rehearsed; rather, it was probably improvised to one of a number of common formulas.*

When we read of someone’s bringing special music to a congregation, we think of music. That thought would have been foreign to the early church. A hymn was a text of praise that was joined with a tune. The hymn was important; the tune was irrelevant. Paul would have responded to shows of musical superiority in Corinth as he responded to shows of superiority in tongue-speaking (Letter to Calvin Warpula, May 6, 1992).

Consider these questions:

- Is there a scriptural difference between a preacher reading a song during his sermon and singing a song during his sermon?
- Why can one person scripturally read Psalm 23 in the assembly, but another cannot sing the same words on the same occasion?
- The New Testament contains fragments of some hymns the early church used (like Ephesians 5:14, 1 Timothy 3:16 and Philippians 2:5-11). If a speaker were reading those verses to the church, could he scripturally sing those verses as well as read them?

## ***II. Psalm-singing by the Jews and early church was responsorial, not just congregational.***

Psalms had been rising from the Jews for generations in their worship to God. The early church used the Old Testament psalms and may have even composed their own in praising God (Ephesians 5:19; Colossians 3:16). These words could be said or sung by one person in a group, by several persons in a group, or by all the persons in a group.

Biblical scholars, Jewish and church historians, and hymnologists agree that the singing in early church for the first three to four centuries was for the most part responsorial and antiphonal – not everyone in the congregation sang all at the same time.

Edward Dickinson says the structure of Hebrew poetry indicates that “the psalms were chanted antiphonally or responsively” (*Music in the History of the Western Church*, 1902, p. 28). The singing of the ancient Hebrews “was not congregational” and “the share of the people, when they participated at all, was confined to short responses” (Dickinson, *Music in the History of the Western Church*, p. 29).

Philo of Alexandria (ca. 20 B.C. – A.D. 50) describes the singing of the Jewish sect Therapeutae: “There is individual as well as choral singing; someone comes forward and sings a hymn to God, whether a new one he himself has composed or an older one by earlier poets, then others follow ‘in due order.’ The rest join in the refrains of the songs sung by individuals.” (*The Contemplative Life*, 29).

Eusebius (ca. A.D. 260-339) quoted Philo on the responsorial chant of the Therapeutae and said that those were the same customs and forms of reciting hymns practiced in the church of his day (*Ecclesial History* 2.17).

## ***III. The early church offered special music in praise to God.***

When the church at Corinth assembled, different members brought their own spiritual offerings to the Lord. “When you come together, each one has a hymn, a lesson, a revelation, a tongue, or an interpretation. Let all things be done for building up” (1 Corinthians 14:26). Paul corrected disorderly behavior but did not forbid the use of such hymns, any more than he did the “lesson, revelation, tongue, or interpretation.” He simply required that all things be done for the edifying of the body. The members offering hymns were singing songs composed under the Spirit’s influence (as in v. 15), or they were ones they had composed or improvised. In either case, the hymns would necessarily be solo offerings since no one else present would know them. The tongue speakers were to speak “one at a time,” and the hymn singers would also speak (sing) one at a time.

In the *Gospel Advocate* commentary series, J.W. Shepherd commented on v. 26: “A graphic picture is given of the assembled church, eager to contribute, each his part, to the services” (p. 213). Jimmy Allen of Harding University says in his survey of First Corinthians on v. 26 that “Apparently, there was solo singing by gifted people in the assembly at Corinth” (p. 177).

Tertullian (A.D. 160-220) says that solo singing was practiced in Christian gatherings. Speaking of the Christian love and worship at the love feast, he says, “then each, from what he knows of the Holy Scriptures, or from his own heart, is called before the rest to sing to God” (*Apology* 39:18, Loeb Classical Library).

G.C. Brewer, a strong leader in our movement five decades ago, said, “It is no violation of anything in the New Testament – for one man to sing to the audience. Nor is it wrong for two persons, four persons, or six persons together to stand before the assembly and admonish them with a song or speak to them through a hymn – provided always, of course, that the singers are themselves worshipers and that they do not do all the singing and thereby take away the right and privilege that belongs to every Christian – to praise God in song” (*The Model Church*. Nashville: *Gospel Advocate* Co., reprint 1969 of 1919 original, 150).

***IV. “Speaking to one another” demands mutual encouragement, not necessarily everyone saying all the words all at the same time.***

Who is authorized to sing in Ephesians 5:19 and Colossians 3:16? Is it the congregation together all at once? Is it an individual in the congregation? Is it an individual in a group any time outside the congregational worship? Or is it all of the above?

If it is the individual only, then there is no authority for congregational singing in the New Testament and we must quit singing in church. If it is congregational only, then there can be no individual singing any time or less than total simultaneous congregational singing anywhere, any time.

Some believe that “to one another” or “reciprocal speaking” demands necessarily that everybody did everything all at the same time. This is not true for the following reasons:

- “Teach one another” in Colossians 3:16 does not mean that everybody teaches everybody else all at the same time or we would have the disorderly conduct forbidden in 1 Corinthians 14.
- Do all the “one another” passages of the New Testament mean that everyone necessarily does the same action simultaneously? If not, then how do you know that Ephesians 5:19 necessarily means we are all to sing simultaneously?
- If one person speaking at a time does not rob others of their privilege of teaching one another, then does one person singing at a time necessarily rob others of their privilege of “singing to one another”?
- If these verses demand that every person in the assembly sing all the words to all the songs all at the same time, then songs would be unscriptural that have predominant parts for altos or basses to sing while others in the congregation are silent. If part of the congregation being silent while one group sings part of one song does not violate the Scripture, then part of the congregation being silent while one group sings the entire song does not violate the Scripture.

In reality, Ephesians 5:19 and Colossians 3:16 do “not tell us who did the singing or when in the worship it occurred” (Ann Draffkorn Kilmer and Daniel A Foxvag, “Music,” *Harper’s Bible*

*Dictionary*, 771). In contrast to the simultaneous congregational singing view, F.F. Bruce says that Ephesians 5:19 and Colossians 3:16 probably recommends “antiphonal praise or solo singing at church meetings” (*The Epistles to the Colossians, to Philemon and to the Ephesians. The New International Commentary on the New Testament*, 1984, 158).

***V. Cheerful Christians were commanded to sing solos and other believers could listen, even in the assembly.***

Christians who were cheerful were told to “sing songs of praise” (James 5:13).

- Would it be scriptural for other believers to hear this solo?
- Would it be scriptural for this believer to share this solo in the assembly? Can one be “cheerful” in the assembly? Then why can’t one obey the command to sing in the assembly?

Howard Norton comments:

*This writer grew up in a church of Christ that had a children’s chorus at every single Sunday service. We also had quartets, trios, and duets; but there are people in our fellowship today who are ready to fight rather than allow an occasional special song to be a part of the worship service. Why? Because their Bible says it is wrong? No, because we have not done it traditionally. Some object to special singing because they fear the entertainment syndrome. We also fear the entertainment syndrome, but even congregational singing can degenerate into entertainment instead of worship (Howard Norton, editorial, *The Christian Chronicle*, January, 1990).*

***VI. Where our opposition to special music originated***

*Since the traditional opposition to choruses among most churches of Christ does not derive from the Bible, then where does it come from? We found that our forefathers (the Campbells, Stone, Scott, etc.) inherited this tradition from their religious ancestors, John Calvin and Ulrich Zwingli. Calvin and Zwingli were Swiss theologians whose religious descendants included Presbyterians, Puritans and Baptists. Almost all of the “Restoration” pioneers came out of this tradition. Calvin and Zwingli placed choruses, harmony, and songs of “human composure” (songs not taken directly from the book of Psalms) in the same category as instrumental music and forbade them all as appealing to the baser elements of human nature and as arising from our desire to be entertained.*

The Restoration Movement came to universally accept harmony and songs of “human composure.” Choruses are also now accepted universally among churches of Christ. They are merely restrained in most congregations from singing in “official” worship services. We find nothing in Scripture that requires (or forbids!) such restraint, and we find historically that such restraint arises out of personal taste or the mistaken belief that Scripture requires they be so restrained (Lynn Mitchell, unpublished paper on choral music in worship presented to the Bering Drive church, Houston, Texas).

## ***VII. A closing admonition***

“For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery” (Galatians 5:1).

Let us speak where the Bible speaks, and be silent where the Bible is silent.

We must be careful that we do not force a “pattern” from our tradition where God has not given one. We must allow the diversity of expression God allows while maintaining the doctrinal oneness God requires.

Jesus did not die for choruses or non-choruses, any more than he died for song books, communion cups, church buildings, baptistries, church dinners, Sunday schools, congregational singing, pitch pipes, visual aids, or Bible translations. These are minor, peripheral issues compared to the needs of our dying world for the gospel of Jesus Christ. May God help us all to put first things first.

Let’s not divide the church over means and methods of doing God’s will. Let’s not force our views on anyone else or write laws for God. We must not make laws on styles and formats of singing any more than only styles and formats of serving communion.

Jesus died for all of us so we could be free from our sins and all human bondage. Let us, as free men and women in Christ, spontaneously, freely, deliberately, and lovingly offer up praises to him who reigns at God’s right hand.

Calvin Warpula welcomes comments, criticism, and suggestions. you may write to him at the *Wineskins* address. Next month’s *Hope Network Newsletter* will contain a sermon by Jack Pape titled *A New Song*. I would like to know about creative music you have heard or used in worship.  
~ Lynn Anderson

## AfterGlow: The Threat of Eternal Reward

*by Phillip Morrison  
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“What do you want to do?” the young boy asks his friend.

“Oh, I dunno ... finish school, I guess ... then high school ... college ... job ... wife ... kids ... retire, hang it up ... tool on down to Miami ... get me some white shoes and pants that come up to my chest ... and complain about the government full time.”

“Nah,” his friend says, “I mean, what do you want to do this afternoon?”

Suddenly their faces light up, and they decide they should just act like kids ... have fun ... go to the beach ... and drink Pepsi.

It may be a brilliant commercial ... more entertaining than the programs it sponsors ... sure to move a lot of product. But it portrays a shallow, misleading image of life. Life is more than what happens in the afternoon, or until we retire, or die. We exist today, and we will always exist somewhere.

This eternal existence became reality when Jesus was raised from the dead, foreshadowing the resurrection of all who die before he comes again. We will die and our bodies will decay, but we will not cease to exist. Whether it is characterized by reward or punishment, eternal existence is real.

Even without the threat of punishment, eternity can be a frightening concept. The late Charles William Eliot, President of Harvard, once exclaimed, “Eternity – for some who can’t spend one half hour profitably!” People who can’t decide how to spend a free afternoon profitably will surely be miserable in eternity. It is not surprising that such people are not impressed with the miracle of resurrection.

For the apostle Paul and for us, the resurrection is much more than a point of debate or discussion. It is the core of Christian doctrine, the center around which all of Christian life revolves.

For some reason – possibly because it seems so abstract and far away – many people have difficulty taking eternity seriously. Someone has observed that when you tell people there are 300 billion stars in the universe, they’ll believe you. But, tell those same people that a park bench has just been painted, and they’ll still have to touch it to make sure. Yet, they are often the people who will diet, exercise, or buy into some health fad which promises to extend life on earth a few more years, while refusing to modify the sinful lifestyle which will affect them for eternity.

Something has to change our point of view and persuade us that life viewed from an eternal perspective looks quite different from life as seen from the perspective of 70 or 80 years on earth. Nothing has so profoundly changed that perspective as the resurrection of Jesus. Friends who thought all was lost when he died had fresh hope when he arose on the third day.

“Easter,” Philip Yancey writes in *Christianity Today*, “gives a sneak preview of how all history will look from the vantage point of eternity. Every scar, every hurt, every disappointment will be seen in a different light, bathed in an eternity of love and trust. Nothing – not even the murder of God’s own Son – can end the relationship between God and human beings. In the alchemy of redemption, that most villainous crime becomes our healing strength.”