

# **Wineskins Magazine**

## **Cradle to the Cross**

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## The Greater Miracle of Christmas

by Rubel Shelly

September – December, 1994

The deity of Jesus Christ is proclaimed at his cradle. And without the truth of *incarnation* proclaimed there, the preaching of an atoning death at Calvary becomes a heartless hoax.

Mary attests his miraculous conception both by her shock at the possibility of being pregnant (Luke 2:34) and by her immediate, innocent journey to the home of a priest (Luke 2:39ff).

Joseph bears indirect witness to the virginal conception by his horror at the idea that the girl betrothed to him could be pregnant (Matthew 1:18ff). He had trusted her as a woman of purity and integrity, and he knew that he could not have fathered a child by her.

But why does it matter? What is at stake with the claim that Jesus was conceived of a virgin? Every child conceived by the normal process of uniting sperm and egg results in the creation of a new individual. By the process of human conception, someone who has never existed prior to that event comes into being. Even if we debate the question “When does the conceptus receive a spirit?”, what cannot be debated is that, from that moment forward, the conceptus has its own distinctive genetic code that is different from (though derived through) the parents.

If Jesus is God in the flesh, though, he cannot be a “new individual.” He is the enfleshment of the extant-from-eternity-past *Logos*.

Thus the virginal conception was a practical necessity if God came to tabernacle in flesh. No icing-on-the-cake miracle this, but a unique means to a unique end. So the very fact of the virgin birth is a proclamation of Jesus’ deity.

Add to that the angelic visitations, revelations to such diverse persons as the shepherds and Elizabeth and Anna, and the fulfillment of biblical predictions through the Old Testament prophets, *and there can be no doubt that the baby born in an animal shelter at Bethlehem that night is Christ the Lord.*

The desire of some to separate the infancy narratives from the later accounts of the Sermon on the Mount or his crucifixion under Pontius Pilate is absurd. If the former is “legend,” the latter cannot be thought historical. If the latter are accepted as “historical,” though, how dare we reject the former as legendary! The story of Jesus’ life is continuous, and to jettison the birth story as myth is to dismantle the whole story beyond any possible reconstruction.

Yet the miracle of that night in Bethlehem was not so much the conception nine months earlier as the sheer mundaneness—no, the utter *impotence*—of the Christ child.

The Creator, Sustainer, and Soon-to-Be-Savior of the world entered his creation as a helpless outcast. He was the child of poor peasants, for Joseph and Mary would have to offer the sacrifice

of the poor for Mary's purification at the temple (Luke 2:22-25; cf. Leviticus 12:8). His first bed was an animal feeding trough, for a manger was the best Joseph could find on the night of his foster-son's birth (Luke 2:7). His first visitors were shepherds, such outcasts themselves that the *Talmud* forbids taking their testimony at formal hearings (Luke 2:8ff).

Why do it this way?

Deity had taken human form to visit Abraham near Mamre and to wrestle with Jacob at Peniel. Perhaps it was the Eternal Word who assumed flesh in those divine visitations. So why not simply take human form as an adult, teach for three and a half years, and go to Calvary? Why go through all the "preliminaries" of birth, adolescence, education, and the like?

It was for us that he took every step from the cradle to the cross. He ran the gamut of human experiences. He allowed himself to be put to the test in every way imaginable. For some who could never bring themselves to identify with a heroic adult teacher and miracle worker *can* identify with a child born as an outcast, born in the context of gossip and whispers, born to poverty. You see, there are some of us who do not see ourselves as heroic and who will never do a heroic deed. And Jesus wanted to save us, too!

So the great miracle of the Christmas Story is less the angels than the straw, not so much the virginity of the mother as her poverty. That God would come so humbly and gently gives even a sinner like me the boldness to believe that he came to redeem me.

By means of this special Christmas issue of Wineskins, celebrate again the coming of the Holy Child to save you!

## Somebody Does Love You

*by Mike Cope*

*September – December, 1994*

Somebody Does Love You!, Editorial by Mike Cope, p. 7, vol. 2, num. 8

Jeremy Bullock seemed to live the kind of life we nostalgically wish for. Growing up in a hillside home in Butte, Montana, he was about as far from gang assault rifles as imagination allows. This eleven year old's life was vintage Norman Rockwell: school, sports, a best friend, and lots of laughter.

But just after Easter last year Jeremy was gunned down while waiting in line to enter Margaret Leary Elementary School. Three bullets were fired: one burrowed into a book bag, another whizzed past the school principal's niece, and the third struck Jeremy behind the ear.

What about the murderer? An escapee from a local prison? Another angered employee who'd been fired? A psychopath who'd finally gone over the edge? No. The killer was a ten year old.

The diminutive murderer had been the object of many taunts on the school playground. His parents, long divorced, were both dying of AIDS. He and two other siblings were being raised by an eighteen-year-old brother. The morning of the shooting, the local paper ran a front-page article about his mother.

A few hours later the boy carried a .22 semiautomatic pistol to his school, calmly loaded it, and fired three times. Shortly after that he sat in the principal's office staring into space. He muttered three heartbreaking words: "Nobody loves me."

What does it do to someone to believe that no one loves them completely and unconditionally? Could it make them reserved? Bitter? Unable to love? Or maybe even angry enough to execute others (with words or bullets)? People who aren't bathed in unconditional love tend to pass all the dirt, grime, and mud on to those around them.

What about you? Are you one of those emotionally crippled individuals who never experienced love without strings attached? If you aren't sure, try answering this five-question exam:

- 1) Do you find yourself being judgmental of the motives of others quite often?
- 2) Do you tend to hold others at a distance and get close only as a way to reward them?
- 3) Do you seem to have a lot of bitterness? (Or, perhaps a better way to ask this, Would others describe you as a bitter person?)
- 4) Do people close to you often disappoint you?
- 5) Do you view yourself as a colossal failure at nearly everything you do?

Healing can only come when you realize that there is no person on this earth who can supply all the love you need! There is no parent, no spouse, no child, no friend who can fully understand you and offer the full, cleansing bath of unconditional love.

Only God can do that. And he has done everything imaginable to tell you how much he loves you! He put in Scripture point-blank statements that scream out like billboards. He has used a variety of word pictures. He has conveyed stories.

But ultimately, here's how you know. God loved you so much that he came for you in Jesus Christ. He came to show you what genuine, uncompromising love looks like. He came to bear your sins and iniquities. He came to carry your sorrows. "This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins" (1 John 4:10).

Christmas is a time of deep healing. God has entered our world so that we, by his grace, might enter his. He has set before us a banquet of unfathomable love.

Feast on it!

## Why Did My Savior Come to Earth?

by Edward Fudge

September – December, 1994

An old hymn asked the question and answered it, in words even a child can grasp: “Why did my Savior come to earth, and to the humble go? Why did he choose a lowly birth? Because he loved me so” No wonder John 3:16 is the most beloved verse in the New Testament, with its simple affirmation that “God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish, but have eternal life.” Three chapters later, Jesus tells us more about the divine love, its recipients, and its results:

*All that the Father gives me will come to me; and whoever comes to me I will never drive away. For I have come down from heaven not to do my will but to do the will of him who sent me. And this is the will of him who sent me, that I shall lose none of all that he has given me, but raise them up at the last day. For my Father’s will is that everyone who looks to the Son and believes in him shall have eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day....No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him, and I will raise him up at the last day. It is written in the Prophets: “They will all be taught by God.” Everyone who listens to the Father and learns from him comes to me....I tell you the truth, he who believes has everlasting life (John 6:37-40; 44-45; 47).*

In these words from John chapters three and six, Jesus points us to six glistening facets of the divine love, sparkling like a many-sided diamond before our wondering view.

**God’s love is passionate.** God so loved that he gave his only begotten Son. “See how great a love the Father has bestowed upon us!” John later writes, challenging our parental imagination beyond all limits (1 John 3:1).

**God’s love is profuse.** As the overwhelming flood of divine love breaks over us, it washes away every pebble of human pride, sufficiency, or merit. Jesus does not save the deserving, but the sinful. He gave himself for the helpless, not the adequate. He died for his enemies, not his associates (Romans 5:6-10). On the cross Jesus removed our sin, made our propitiation, and accomplished our redemption.

Because Jesus fully completed the saving work in his own perfect doing and dying, nothing we ever perform, experience, or accomplish is any part of the work which sets us right with God. That work was finished almost 2,000 years ago—outside of us, but for us—by the eternal God who, for some 12,000 days, came to dwell among us as one of us. All we can ever do regarding the saving work is to believe it or reject it. By God’s grace we can accept it, trust in it, rely on it, and commit ourselves to it—for the rest of our time here and for all eternity.

“Whoever believes” can have life. We might not have any power and we might not have any answers. But the weakest and most unlearned sinner can have salvation and eternal life through trusting the Son of God, as Jesus tells us repeatedly and underscores with his double “Amen”

(John 3:16; 6:40, 47). “Surely we must contribute something,” our flesh cries out. But no—this is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent” (John 6:28-29). We can bring nothing to God’s feast. The table is spread already and the banquet is free for all who will come!

**God’s love is personal.** Indeed, God so loved the world—Jew and Gentile, slave and free, women and men of every tribe and dialect, across every ethnic group and political boundary. Yet this love, so vast and far-reaching, is also intensely personal. God did not love an unidentifiable mass of human beings, but specific, individual men and women with faces and names. “All that the Father gives me shall come to me,” Jesus promises (John 6:37). “This is the Father’s will,” he continues, “that of all that he has given me I lose nothing” (John 6:39; see also John 10:14, 26-28; 17:2, 24). We view the larger, corporate picture and proclaim with Paul, “Christ loved the church, and gave himself for it: (Ephesians 5:25). But we may freely join the same apostle in making that truth our own: “Christ loved me, and gave himself for me” (Galatians 2:20).

There is no reason for controversy here and every reason for awe, since, in retrospect, we will discover that the “whosoever wills” and the “elect” are really one and the same. God cannot rightly be blamed for the lost, and he alone deserves credit for the saved. Sinners are truly responsible for their “No” to God’s grace, while their “Yes” is itself evidence that divine grace is at work (Psalm 110:3; Romans 9:16; Philippians 2:13).

**God’s love is powerful.** When he talked about God’s love, Jesus used unequivocal language, and he spoke in unqualified words that leave no room for exceptions. “All that the Father gives me shall come to me,” Jesus boldly declares (John 6:37). And little wonder, for God himself will be their teacher, just as Jeremiah had foretold (John 6:44-45; Jeremiah 31:34). Jesus fearlessly states what no mere man could dare say, making two statements from opposite perspectives. “No one can come to me,” the Lord exclaims, “unless the Father who sent me draws him” (John 6:44). But, “everyone who has heard and learned from the Father comes to me” (John 6:45).

Here is no room for error, for miscalculation, for loss. Jesus drives a peg from both sides, anchoring our hope firmly in the infallible sovereignty of God himself. How we should praise the Father, who loves us so powerfully and effectively! The Father wills that not one of those whom he gave to Jesus will perish (John 6:39).

**God’s love is perpetual.** The God who gave his only Son will not forsake us halfway to heaven. His plan has always been that the believer “should not perish,” and God always accomplishes what he sets out to do. On this we have Jesus’ own promise. “This is the will of him who sent me, that of all that he has given me, I lose nothing, but raise it up on the last day” (John 6:39). The same God who calls us will confirm us to the end (1 Corinthians 1:8-9). He began a good work in us and he will bring it to completion (Philippians 1:6). Because God is faithful, we can be confident. Indeed, God’s faithfulness is the only basis we ever have to be confident of our salvation. The cross shows us God’s deepest heart toward us sinners. And the resurrection shows us God’s final verdict on the saving work Jesus accomplished there. These gospel facts shine like eternal beacons through the darkness of human weakness and doubt. They remind us, every day, that God will never change his mind about what Jesus has accomplished, and that he will never change his love toward those whom Jesus there purchased for himself.

**God's love is perilous.** Let us make no mistake here. Jesus came to save, not to condemn (John 3:17). Yet, as someone has observed, the purpose of the sun is not to cast shadows—but it does! The wrath of God is the shadow cast by his love. The person who knowingly and persistently rejects God's boundless love in Jesus Christ does not simply miss an opportunity or turn down a good deal. That person rejects life itself. We mortals have no life in ourselves (John 6:53). To reject Jesus is to reject God's life (John 1:3; 1 John 5:11-12).

What love the Father has shown us sinners! Passionate, yet personal. Powerful and perpetual. But also perilous. At such sayings, many of Jesus' original hearers turned and walked away. May we instead, like Peter, have grace to say, "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life" (John 6:66).

## Christmas After Divorce

*by Anonymous*

*September – December, 1994*

I awoke this morning to the quiet of an empty house. There were no sounds of Christmas. No pitter of anxious feet running to look under the tree. No rustling of paper as the gifts are quickly unwrapped. No shrieks of glee as the children finally see what they had been anticipating. This is my first quiet Christmas.

Then the Ghost of Christmases Past comes drifting into my mind and I see scenes of days gone by. I have regrets that I did not seize those moments. That I was too concerned about little things. That I did not live those moments to the fullest. I also see the happy faces of Christmases of the past. It's in the eyes. The innocence, the unadulterated joy of living, the security. I hear the laughter. I feel the bodies as they hug me and say, "Thank you for the presents." Yes, all these things are past.

"It will get better," he says. "Oh, I know it will," I reply, "it already is getting better." But, somewhere deep inside I wonder, "Will it, really?"

I begin, once again, to reflect on the first days. I remember how difficult it was just to get out of bed and move through the day. It was so hard! But they were there for me. They held my hand, wrote me notes, sent me food, called just to say, "I love you and I'm thinking about you." They hugged me, cried with me, and prayed for me. They listened, they encouraged, they supported. No one judged. They just loved me.

He was there, too! Sometimes He was closer than at other times (but that was my fault). He was loving me with His unfailing love through every heartache and every tear. He was there when the days were good and when the days were bad. Every second of every day. Even when I did not feel Him, He was there. He comforted me with His presence, His Word, and His people. He loved me. He never failed me! That's what He promised.

So, as I sit here in my Christmas morning pain, I am comforted by His presence and looking forward to spending the day with special people who are willing to open their lives and share their special day with me.

By the way, as I talked to Him this morning, He reminded me of His promises and love. And as I look to Christmases yet to be, I now know that "it will get better."

## The Hard Side of Epiphany

by Fred Craddock

September – December, 1994

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In some traditions the festival called Epiphany is celebrated on January 6th. More commonly, an epiphany is the appearance of deity or a sudden intuitive understanding or insight. It would do us all good to pause on Twelfth Night to reflect on the meaning of the wondrous Christmas season.

This is January 6th. It's Epiphany. Liturgically, this means that we can, for a few Sundays at least before Lent, announce those marvelous passages that declare the revelation of the divine Son. Those marvelous texts of the baptism of Jesus: "Thou art my Son," the voice from heaven. The Transfiguration scene: "This is my Son, the Beloved. Hear him." Those marvelous, grand, glorious texts. A little breather before Lent.

That's what it means liturgically. I myself do not come from a tradition very liturgical—about as liturgical as corn on the cob. So I have to interpret Epiphany for our family. This is the day we take down the Christmas decorations.

All of our decorations are Luke. They're all from Luke. Madonnas that we've picked up here and there in travel—of wood, one is made of corn shocks, of brass, one made of glass. They're wrapped in tissue and put back in a box like you'd put away crystal or china because they're fragile. Our nativity scene is really cheap, but the kids made it years ago, and we put it out, and it gets prettier every year. But it's from Luke. Straw, and a baby, and Mary and Joseph, and some animals. Sits on top of the television. We fold it back up—the little house, the little stable, folds up into a kind of box, and you just put the animals back inside. If you don't tilt it, it'll be good next year; just open it up. It's from Luke. We have angels, all kinds of angels, around the house, on the mantle. They're from Luke. We put them away. One of them I have to be careful not to store in a place that gets hot in the summer because the face is wax. It's from Nuremberg, Germany, and the face is wax and we don't want it to get messed up. Satin dress. It's almost female, though you know how angels are. This one seems to be female. Luke is mostly female. All of our decorations are Lukan. We put them away today. When I finish class and go home, that's what we'll do. Luke is over now and we go to Matthew.

Exit the women; in come the men. Exit the stable; now it's a king's palace. Exit the shepherds; in the wise men from the East. Exit the angels, and in comes Herod.

We have a little music box. It plays carols—"Silent Night, Holy Night" and "O Little Town of Bethlehem." Just open the lid and it starts playing. It's on the coffee table. It's Lukan. Music is from Luke. Put the lid down on that because exit Mary; enter Rachel. Exit lullaby; enter the scream. "I heard a voice in Ramah. It was Rachel weeping for her children."

It's just so hard to accept that the gospel has enemies, that good news has enemies, but there it is. Herod intimidated, and all Jerusalem troubled, calling in the doctors of law and Scripture, faking, pretending to want to worship while issuing death warrants against the boy babies. The house-to-house search, and the butt of swords crashing in doors, and chariots on the streets, and lamps out early, and mothers clutching babies behind cellar doors. "Shhh, shhh, shhh. Don't even breathe! It's a soldier!"

It's hard to believe. It's hard to accept that good news has enemies. To read Matthew it's unavoidable—those vultures circling over the shallow graves of children. Why? Jesus Christ is born.

Joseph sitting up, bolting up in bed, "Mary, Mary, get ready; wrap the child."

"What's the matter?"

"We've got to go."

"What do you mean?"

"I had this dream. They're coming for the boy. They're coming, yeah, they're coming for the boy. Get ready. We've got to go."

And off to Egypt to hide from his enemies among his enemies. What else was there to do?

It's hard to accept. Rachel crying, refusing to be consoled. "They've killed my children; they've killed my children." Why? Jesus Christ our Lord is born! Good news! It's hard to accept. It's hard to accept that good news has such enemies. But what's even more difficult to accept is that announcing the Good News creates the enmity.

All the wise men said, is, "Where is he? We want to worship, have a little worship service. All we want to do is worship Jesus," and trouble broke out. They weren't revolutionaries. They didn't stop and paint posters and say, "Let's march around the city." All they said was, "We want to worship Jesus." The great revolutions have not been started by revolutionaries but by people who said, "All we want to do is love, worship."

Do you know how to really release the Serpent hatred in the world? Stir that scaly thing to crawl up from the floor of hell and wreak violence in the earth? Do you know how to get him stirred up? Just start loving everybody, and he can't stand it. Do you know how to strengthen and increase the network of lies and deception in our world? Just tell the truth. That's all it takes.

Poor Dr. Golter, old friend of mine—he's eighty now; spent most of his life in China. We tried to call him an agricultural missionary. What he was was a gardener who loved God and people, and he went to China to do it. In central China he taught them how to raise other vegetables and feed the children better and have a cow and have milk. Nice. He told stories about Jesus, and he translated some of them into Chinese. Perfectly at home. Adopted two Chinese girls that he found out in a trash can.

They said, “You’re under arrest.”

“Why?”

“You’re dangerous!” they said.

He couldn’t kill a mouse! He is incapable of violence.

They said, “He’s dangerous!”

Well, he was. He was, because he didn’t know how to love just a few. He just loved because he loved because he loved. He should have known you’ve got to watch whom you love. You love the wrong people....

Now Matthew’s not alone in this. Even Luke, bless his heart, has to say it. When Jesus was six weeks old they took him to the temple. Mary was nervous. I’m sure she was nervous: first time up there, her first baby. “Where do I stand? What do they do? Do I have to say anything, Joseph?”

“No, you just stand there and hold the baby. They’ll have this little ceremony, and then you’ll be purified and the baby dedicated. There’s nothing to it.”

“Well, I’m nervous. What if he catches a cold? We haven’t had him outside yet. He’s only six weeks old. Why don’t they have this at two years? I think it’s too early.”

“Well, just stand up there. You’ll be all right.”

She goes up to the temple, and here’s this old man, Simeon: old as the hills, large rheumy eyes, spittle in his beard, shuffling about, because in his heart, God had said, “You will not die until you see the consolation of Israel.” So here he is, frightening all the mothers. Every time he sees a blue blanket he runs over. “Yeah, it’s a boy; it’s a boy. Let me see.”

He came to Mary and said, “Let me hold him.”

She was scared. Old man—he’ll drop my baby. But her fear that he would drop the baby was not near the fear created by his words. You remember: “Because of this child a sword will pierce your heart.” Even Luke has to stop singing long enough to say, “Good News creates pain, violence, and opposition.”

We know John says it: “This is the crisis of the world, that light has come into the world and people love the darkness. The time will come when they’ll drag you out of the synagogue and they’ll kill you in the name of God. In the name of God they’ll kill you and say ‘Amen.’”

How could he have known? How could he have known that people would, two thousand years after that with a .30-.30 deer rifle, aim it with telescopic sight at the back of a “nigger lover,”

shoot him in his own driveway, go back to the church, sing a hymn, read Scripture, have prayer; and go home. In the name of God, they'll kill and say "Amen."

It's hard to accept. It's hard to accept that the gospel, the Good News, has enemies. But the fact that announcing the Good News arouses that enmity is even more difficult to accept. But it's true. Jesus said in John 15, you will recall, "If I had not come and spoken to them...." What does that mean? It means that the coming of Jesus Christ and the proclamation of the Good News has aroused the ugliness of sin and violence in the world. And 115 crying women lined up outside the little church in Bethlehem and asked the preacher, "It's already bad enough. Our sons are dead. Keep quiet about the child. Herod is still alive. You still want to preach?"

Even more difficult, most difficult for me, is my own poor record in the face of the opposition to the gospel. It wasn't always that way. When first I entered the ministry—or I was dreaming, that's what it was, dreaming of ministry at seventeen years old—I fantasized the enemy. I loved the enemy. I idealized, I needed the enemy, because in my fantasies I was a martyr. I could lie on my little cot in summer camp out beside the lake of Weeki-Weeki-, or Noki-Noki, or whatever it was, and imagine what it would be like to give my life to Jesus Christ, because we'd sung that hymn around the lake that night, you know, holding candles. "Are you able? Are you able to drink the cup? Are you able? Are you able?" I said yes, yes, yes. I'd lie up there in my bed in that dormitory and imagine I'm able to give my life for Jesus Christ. I could picture myself being boiled in a pot somewhere, frozen to death in the tundras of the North, stood before a gray wall early in the morning and someone saying, "Do you still believe Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God? Deny him and live."

I'd say, "I believe."

"Ready. Aim. Fire!"

Flags at half-mast, widows weeping in the afternoon—oh, I fantasized. I needed Herod in those days. I needed an enemy. I needed opposition. Into the arena, king turns the thumb down; the cage opens; in comes the lion to tear me apart; and a monument is erected: Here's Where Fred Gave His Life. People come with their Polaroids. "Stand over there, Charles. Let's get your picture next to the monument where old Fred gave his life." Boy, did I fantasize ministry. "Are you able?"

"Sure! Bring on Herod!"

Then it got complicated. Something happened. I don't know if I got more mature, more cowardly, or what, but I was not able to recognize Herod. I still could hate Herod if I could find Herod, but I didn't know who he was.

In Gethsemane two men approached Jesus. One had a sword in his hand, and the other, a kiss. Which is friend, and which is enemy? As it turned out, the one with the kiss was the enemy. The one with the sword was a friend. How can you tell?

I didn't really want to get into any kind of campaign or project because I could be wrong. It's complex. I've been studying theology; this is complex. You don't just have simple right and wrong, and yes and no. There is a lot of "on the other hand" here. So I was immobilized for a long time, and when the opening came, when the opening came, I didn't say a word.

In graduate school at Vanderbilt, I remember one time distinctly. It's not the only time. I recall studying for those prelims, jumping through all those hoops to get the degree. Terrible experience. I was studying late at night, and the routine was about midnight to take a break, go down to the little sandwich shop, get a grilled cheese and cup of coffee. Grilled cheese, cup of coffee. When I came in, there were no tables, just little stools at a counter—an all-night place, one fellow back there with a greasy cap and apron fixing things. I didn't really know when I was in and out of there. It was routine. I was still thinking of my work. I'd finished the sandwich, I remember. Second cup of coffee, maybe third; I don't know. I was thinking about the important things. Everybody had been served, refill, refill—truck drivers and all of us there.

Then I saw what I had not seen before. Well, I had seen it before, but I didn't notice it before. At the end of the counter—he was there when I went in, I just now noticed—a very elderly black man was standing there. After we had gotten our food, had our coffee, refills, refills, then the one standing there all that time was asked, "What do you want?" He said something. Fellow at the grill reached back on the back side of the grill and got a little dried-up hamburger patty, laid it on dry bread with no condiments, nothing, without a napkin handed it over to him, and took the money. The old man walked out the side door where the garbage can was and sat on the curb. He sat on the curb as in the middle of the night those eighteen-wheelers came whizzing by and blew the salt and pepper for his sandwich from off the street.

I didn't say anything. I didn't say anything. I felt real bad. I felt real bad about it, and when I left to go up the hill, off in the distance I heard the cock crow. But I didn't say anything because I hate hassles.

I hate hassles. I like Luke. I like Madonnas and Elizabeths and Mary and angels. In fact, to tell you the truth, I will trade all 353 days of Matthew for the 12 days of Luke. I just hate hassles.

Today is Epiphany. What that means is, "For God so loved the world that God gave the only begotten Son." Someone stood up and announced that with great cheer and great joy, and Herod heard it and killed all the boy babies in Bethlehem..

Is there anybody here planning to preach next Sunday?

## Birth, Hope and Pain: A Christmas Perspective

by Thom Lemmons

September – December, 1994

When, for the third time, my wife Cheryl and I experienced the birth of a child into our family, it was, as it had been twice before, a time for assessment, a time for an inventory of the soul. It was a time for asking the large questions of life. It was a cusp event, one of those passages so self-evidently momentous that we know intuitively it will become a part of our self-definition.

In reflecting upon these and other considerations, I was drawn again to the words of the prophet Isaiah. Within three chapters, Isaiah speaks of the births of three children, and in these widely divergent nativities are encompassed the two poles of human existence; they move from despair to hope, from rescue to desolation.

The first passage, beginning in Isaiah 7:14, is one that, at first glance and according to modern usage, is an oracle of faith. Indeed, in Matthew's version of the Annunciation, this prophetic word is shown clearly as an allusion to God's final, invincible deliverance of mankind. But see it in its entire context:

*Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign: The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel. He will eat curds and honey when he knows enough to reject the wrong and choose the right. But before the boy knows enough to reject the wrong and choose the right the land of the two kings you dread will be laid waste. The Lord will bring on you and on your people and on the house of your father a time unlike any since Ephraim broke away from Judah—he will bring the king of Assyria (Isaiah 7:14-17).*

In the next chapter, the prophet speaks of another child, whose name not only lacks the comforting nuances of "God With Us," but also foreshadows essentially the same dire results for Isaiah's audience as those shown above.

*Then I went to the prophetess, and she conceived and gave birth to a son. And the Lord said to me, "Name him Maher-Shalal-HashBaz. [Quick to the plunder, swift to the spoil.] Before the boy knows how to say 'My father' or 'My mother,' the wealth of Damascus and the plunder of Samaria will be carried off by the king of Assyria" (Isaiah 8:3-4).*

The third, and by far the most familiar passage, has become irrevocably associated with the Christmas season:

*For to us a child is born, to us a son is given,  
and the government will be on his shoulders.  
And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace  
(Isaiah 9:6).*

But, as we have seen, this hymn to the magnificent prospect of God's deliverance occurs in a preceding context which is anything but hopeful.

In the first case, Isaiah's prophecy reminds us that the presence of God brings the precise opposite of comfort to those who are in rebellion toward him. In the second, the consequences of God's judgment are graphically illustrated. Only in the third place are we permitted to see the healing hand of the mighty God as he visits his faithful people in benevolence and power, in justice and authority. The last passage cited is a joyous proclamation of salvation, the first two are dirges composed to lament a coming devastation. The latter verses are intended to fill us with exaltation, the former to fill us with dread. And, curiously, all are wrapped about the visceral imagery attendant to the birth of a child.

But isn't the experience of childbearing and child-rearing composed of varying degrees of exactly these two opposites? We are at once drunk with joy and sick with anxiety. We are enraptured by the miracle of our children's birth and terrified by their vulnerability. We are moved to ecstasy by their first smiles, and we arise from a sound sleep, during the wee hours, to tiptoe softly into the nursery and make sure the precious little bundles are still breathing. We glance worriedly at every cough, rue every snuffle, consult each other in somber tones over every unusual bowel movement. Like T. S. Garp, the neurotically protective father from John Irving's novel, we gnash our teeth in rage over teenage drivers speeding recklessly down our neighborhood streets—conveniently forgetting the disregard for caution we displayed before parenthood made us acutely conscious of such things. Even as I write this article, I get up to pad quietly into the room of seven-month-old Austin, "just to make sure he's all right." And, thank God, he is. But, while I'm up, I might as well see about ten-year-old Heather and five-year-old Jessica, because there is no statute of limitations on parental concern—ask my mother.

What other human experience can give rise to such excesses of jubilation and trepidation? Why else are the illnesses or deaths of little children perceived so unambiguously by every human society and culture for the dreadful tragedies they are? Is it coincidental that at Jesus' presentation in the temple, the holy man Simeon tells Mary, even as he blesses the sight of the infant Messiah, that, one day, a sword will pierce her heart? What godly parent has not felt, albeit to an infinitely lesser degree, the exhilaration of that benediction, the prick of that cruel blade? And in this season, when our hearts are turned toward the miracle of God's greatest Gift, let us not forget that the ultimate purpose for the manger in Bethlehem was to set Immanuel's feet on the path toward Golgotha. The Almighty put himself in the crib so that he might place himself on the cross.

Perhaps in this juxtaposition of pain and pleasure, of aspiration and apprehension, we may trace the outlines of an eternal truth: those gifts which produce the most profound blessings are those which cost the giver most dearly. To that we might add this corollary: God rarely permits a gift which costs the giver nothing. He himself is the ultimate and final example of such lavish, reckless, self-forgetful largesse.

What are the implications, in this season of giving and receiving, for those of us who have been thrust like wary pioneers, by the birth of our children, into the daunting expanse of that

bewildering frontier, that wide, confusing, trackless country which is called “Parenthood”? I suggest two.

**Our children are gifts from God.** This statement is surely instinctive to most parents. Who can witness the miracle of birth, who can gaze into the wrinkled face of a newborn baby, who can marvel at the blooming of a personality without recognizing the powerful hand of the Creator? In our better moments, we recognize how infinitely precious are the lives and experiences we share with our children. Though we all, from time to time, permit the dulling drudgeries of the daily routine to numb our sense of priorities, God reminds us—in those heart-stopping, entrancing, spontaneous flashes of insight, those fleeting times which my friend Max Lucado has dubbed “eternal moments”—of the incalculable value of these little people He has placed in our care. The vision may show itself in a laugh, a quick, unplanned hug, a joyous greeting at the end of a difficult day. It may come in the relief we feel when the fever has broken, or in the look of unalloyed delight on their faces when a wished-for present is beneath the Christmas tree.

Or it may happen, as it did to me, in a time of burden, of unrelenting financial cares and pressures. Seated in the back yard and submerged in a deep study of all my pressing problems, I surfaced at a moment when my oldest daughter was playing on her swing set, singing a snatch of song I had taught her. And in that instant, when, almost by accident, I was able to look outside myself and beyond the difficulties that seemed so insurmountable, I saw a ray of sunlight gleaming through her blond hair, and realized that God had already given me all the gold any man could want or need. In her gaiety and her childish, simple joy in living, my daughter ministered to me that day. For that brief time, my problems subsided in my mind, and I was blessed, and given respite.

No one can seriously debate the inestimable value of the lives of our children. But if they are precious to us who can love them—however fervently—only imperfectly, imagine how much more precious they must be to the One whose love contains no flaw of possessiveness, no shred of ego gratification. And if God so treasures our children, ought we to withhold them from him? With that in mind, allow me to suggest a second implication of parenthood.

**Our children are gifts to God.** It is this, the second part of the equation, that creates the most difficulty. Being a joyful receiver is the far easier than being a joyful giver. But if we are to be the one, we must be the other. The divine economy is replete with confirming examples of this same fundamental paradox: we must die in order to live; must be humbled to be exalted; must become servants to receive crowns; must give away everything to receive all that matters.

One of the cornerstones of our faith is that the Lord has plans for his chosen ones. Even amid the devastation of the Babylonian captivity, God told his people through Jeremiah, “I know the plans I have for you....Plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future....”If we truly believe that this sovereign God has plans for our children, we must, as loyal caretakers of his treasury, be prepared to release them into his will. This statement may seem obvious to some, but I’m persuaded that it bears contemplation, because if it is true, it then behooves us as parents to surrender ourselves, on behalf of our children, to that purpose for which the Hand of heaven has fashioned them.

This surrender will not come without a struggle—for us and for our children. It may be that they must spend many years and much pain in uncovering that calling, in realizing it within themselves. But that struggle, that very difficulty may be an indispensable part of the divine summons. We will want to save them the pain, spare them the trials and contentions which will inevitably come their way. We must remember that only God can determine the proper course for them; they can't afford the difficulties created by our attempts to ease their way. We can teach them to listen for God's voice; we can't tell them what he will say.

How many times have we witnessed the tragic consequences of the collision between a parent's overly zealous protection or overriding ambition and a child's own, perhaps God-given, inclination? The mangled wrecks of children's self-esteem, the tattered remnants of family relationships litter the landscape like pathetic monuments to battles which should never have been fought.

As parents, we must be faithful stewards of the precious, fragile dreams of our children. Sometimes, this means giving them the freedom and confidence to pursue whatever calling God places on their hearts—regardless of how foreign it may be to our understanding. Must we guide them? Yes. Must we cautiously, prayerfully shepherd their young minds and hearts during the critical formative years? Absolutely. Must we seek to bind them to conformity with our aspirations, our objectives—try to accomplish in their lives the ambitions and goals we missed in our own? Emphatically not! To do so is to intrude our designs upon those of the One who, as he told Jeremiah, knew them before he knit them within the womb. To do so is to be guilty of emotional and spiritual abortion.

Annie Dillard, in her autobiographical work *An American Childhood*, writes of a youthful experience which has a profound effect upon her life. In her elementary school classroom, there was a glass jar containing a large cocoon, along with a section of the tree limb to which it was attached. A classmate had brought it to school for show-and-tell. For weeks the inert, drab, gauzy bundle sat in it jar on the shelf of the classroom, unmoving and unnoticed. Then, one day in the spring, the cocoon began to hatch.

The cocoon proved to be that of a Polyphemus moth, which can have a wingspan of as much as six inches from tip to tip. As the fascinated children watched, the large insect fought its way free from the womb which had suddenly become a prison. Presently it emerged, its wings crumpled and wet with the secretions of its emergence which, after contact with the air, would soon harden, like shellac, into a stiff, durable outer coating.

But there was a problem. Confined in the glass jar, the moth could not fully extend its wings, so that circulatory fluid might distend their capillaries and flush them out properly. Though the moth strained and flapped valiantly, struggling to spread wide its wings so that the hardening secretions would weld them into the sturdy, full mainsails they were meant to be, the jar constrained it, defeating its best efforts to fulfill its destiny. Eventually, the secretions hardened, forever freezing the Polyphemus' wings into crumpled, useless mockeries of what they should have been.

The moral is obvious. God has plans for each of us—and for our children. He intends that we should emerge from the cocoon and spread our wings to the sunshine, to leap gladly skyward and be buoyed by the updrafts of his will. We must not place our children in the jar of our preconceived notions, must not restrain them to the shape of our dreams. While in the jar, the moth was invulnerable to predators, immune to cold and damp. But neither could it fly. Few things are as dangerous to the soul as a surfeit of safety.

So, as we enter this joyous season, may we remember not only the gift of the precious Christ child, but may we also recall the extravagant value of these little ones which we ourselves have swaddled in blankets and held close to our hearts. As we praise God for what he has given us, let us also empty ourselves in surrender to him of all that is most precious to us—knowing that he will fashion of that surrender a victory more marvelous than any of us could ever have imagined. My prayer for each of you is that God will visit your home and manifest his presence among you in this and every season.

## Look Full in His Wonderful Face

*by Jeff Nelson*

*September – December, 1994*

The first time I heard someone say, “I’m looking for ‘in-your-face worship’!” I was startled. I have great respect for the person who said this but I thought the terminology was too strong for reference to a holy encounter with God. I know that someday we will see him “face to face,” but to put eyes, ears, and a mouth on Yahweh at this time seemed offensive to his deity. The words sank in, though, and I have pondered them many times since I heard them. Has God ever suggested that he wants us in his face when we worship so we can look each other in the eye? Has God come close enough for us to envision his face? He probably would have our undivided attention and the encounter would certainly make a remarkable impact if we knew we were making eye contact with the Holy One of Israel.

Our worship team was on a retreat recently and I stumbled across a scripture that so vividly brought this image to life that I can’t stop thinking about it, or talking about it. The retreat was a transforming weekend of worship. We had been trying to clear our schedules for some time and finally landed on a date that most of us could attend. We were at a ranch in East Texas where the only audible sounds were those God made through nature. The beautiful, tall pines surrounding a serene lake stood in awe of their Creator. No city noise, no phone calls, no deadlines, no clock-watching. A time set aside to do nothing but let God speak. And speak he did.

We covered all of the agenda items that I had planned, such as learning new songs, discussing our theology and journey of worship, talking about what a worship team should and should not be, etc. We felt God’s presence in all that we did, but as our mouths began to close and our hearts began to open, his presence and voice became much more obvious. We sat outside at night and gazed at the vibrant stars that are washed out by the city lights where we live. We worshipped and shared with each other for hours. I told the story of my journey of worship, about the freedom and closeness I have found when no man-made restrictions are present. I asked each member of the worship team to tell of his or her own journey. For some it was expressing gratitude for the new-found freedom; for others it was the frustration of searching for that freedom. Others talked of the fear of releasing the comfort of traditional worship for something unknown to them. The moments were pregnant with meaning as both hearts and tears flowed freely.

Oh yes, the scripture! It was 2 Chronicles 7:14-16:

If my people, who are called by my name, will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then will I hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and will heal their land. Now my eyes will be open and my ears attentive to the prayers offered in this place. I have chosen and consecrated this temple so that my Name may be there forever. My eyes and my heart will always be there.

It was a familiar passage that I had read many times and heard used as a prayer scripture for the nation, but I never saw this certain phrase jump out before—“seek my face.” Wow! He does want worship to be so close as to experience not only his presence, but his face. So, a worshipper longing for “in-your-face worship” no longer seemed offensive or intrusive. It seemed appropriate. And more than that it seemed invited and welcomed.

As I let the entirety of the verses sink in, I realized this was solid worship theology. Contemplating one phrase at a time, I saw a pattern laid out here that, even though I didn't realize it, has been the foundation for the most meaningful moments of worship I have ever experienced. Too often, I have given man credit for establishing such an effective order of events to encounter God in a transforming way and now I see that it was His idea all along. We just experience the blessing when we land on such a solid pattern for worship. Look how God instructs us to approach worship. He makes it conditional for our sake. If we will, he will. If we do our part, then he will do his. And what he will do is exactly what we need. He makes some profound implications through some very simple concepts. Children understand these conditional suggestions. They modify behavior very effectively. Look at the jewels seen here as each phrase is isolated:

**If my people, who are called by my name...** This identifies who we are. We must approach worship knowing who we are and to whom we belong. God has laid his claim on our lives, and we now wear his name. We are the set-apart people, the God-fearing Christians under the lordship of Jesus Christ. I want to be known by no other name than his.

**Will humble themselves...** Trying to enter worship with a heart full of pride is a sure way to strike out. No worship will travel to God or from God unless the worshipper's heart is in a humble state.

**And pray...** We don't just stand before God and say, “OK, God, here I am. I'm doing what you told me. I'm talking to you. Now do your part.” Prayer is the language of communication that establishes a real relationship with God, who greatly desires the nearness of his people. Prayer is the avenue of communication once the heart is humbled. The prayer of a heart full of pride goes no farther than the roof. But the prayer of a humble heart echoes through the chambers of God's heart for eternity.

**And seek my face...** This is the most revealing aspect of God's desire for our worship. He doesn't say, “Seek my hands,” or “Seek my heart,” or “Seek my feet as you bow before me.” He says, “Seek my face. Look me in the eye. Get in my face so we can see each other.” He wants intimate worship. He wants eye contact. And you know, when looking eye to eye, you cannot tell a lie. When you are looking in his eyes you will be able to tell God nothing but the truth, either about him or yourself. “Draw near to God and he will draw near to you.” He wants your complete attention when you are involved in worshipping him.

**And turn from their wicked ways...** Worship offers the transforming power of changing something from the way it is to the way it should be. As we're in the midst of face-to-face worship, he asks us to turn, to repent, to confess, to allow the evil in our lives to be changed by

him for something he can make good. We cannot experience life-changing worship and continue to live a wicked lifestyle. Turning is prerequisite for the next step.

**Then will I hear from heaven and will forgive their sin...** What a cleansing thought! When we accept his prescription, forgiveness is the natural result following confession and repentance. What better state to live in than to be forgiven! But wait, there's more.

**And will heal their land...** Does this mean if the ground is not fruitful God will supply the missing nutrients? I don't think so. I believe he means in general that which needs healing will be healed. My tendency would be to rush to the promise of healing every time the clock strikes "worship," but God knows for our own good we must not jump to the "pot of gold" without first experiencing the rainbow. We allow his journey to unfold. We join him and find ourselves different, more pure, more like Jesus—healed, after being lost in him. A promise of healing is there for every believer when his blueprint for worship is followed. Wow!

**Now my eyes will be open and my ears attentive to the prayers offered in this place...** I wonder if we have so ritualistically approached worship from our pious perceived doctrinal accuracy that we actually offer a "freeze-dried" worship service to a God with closed eyes and ears. My prayer is that our worship will invigorate our spirits so that the eyes and ears of God are opened wider than ever. What a comforting thought to rest securely in knowing his eyes and ears are attentive to our prayers.

**I have chosen and consecrated this temple so that my Name may be there forever...** How many idols that crowd out the Name who established the temple do we drag into worship? Pray for His Name to be so highly revered that false gods are checked at the door and forgotten once his Name is lifted above all others.

**My eyes and my heart will always be there...** There aren't many constants in this life. But one thing I know: The Lord is in His Holy Temple. No evil force or act of congress can remove him. Even more exciting and yet a protective responsibility: He has told me my body is also his temple. Does that mean that this pattern is not only a foundation for corporate worship, but also for the worship that daily occupies my heart? His people answer with a resounding, "Amen!"

The spiritual renewal that is spreading across the globe is only beginning. We have only seen the tip of the iceberg. The more receptive we are to what God is doing, the more iceberg we will see.

On our retreat God reminded us that the iceberg is enormous, but he will continue to reveal if we are spiritually ready to receive. Later in the weekend we took a walk down to the lake, and I told everyone to take their Bible and note pad. I asked each person to find a place by themselves and spend some time in the Word and personal prayer and meditation. Then, as they felt the time was right, I asked them to write down what they believed God would say to them about their journey of worship if he were actually writing. After a lengthy period of time, I called them to a nice green, grassy area near the shore. The mood was quiet, yet full of contained emotion. I think each of us knew we were taking another tiny step toward spiritual maturity. We shared our thoughts and words and prayed for each other at the completion of each one. The time that we allowed for intimate worship took us to depths unknown by the hurried heart. In these moments,

seeking God's face was not an abstract assignment but a concrete reality. I want to share a few quotes from the hearts of our worship team as they sensed God's personal touch.

- “There is so much about me that you don't know. Your eyes see only what is directly before you. I want to lead you into new dimensions of who I Am. You are beginning to taste a very small part of me through worship. My people through the ages have poured their souls into worshipping me... the great I Am. When you open your spirit, your mind, your soul to me in praise and worship... I can begin to fill your life with who I Am... lover, friend, Counselor, King of Kings, Lord of Lords, Redeemer, Savior, Omnipotent. You like to travel in realms you can see... where it is safe... please come to me in worship and we will journey the road together hand in hand.”
- “I want you to listen; don't say anything. Your intentions are loving and good. I love you. As you continue your journey, let me help you with some ideas that will allow you to experience me in a way you have never thought of before. I want you to slow down. My words to you teach of love and peace, and you can't do that as well at the speed in which you live and think. Surround yourself with my people, they will help you. Allow yourself to be accountable to them. Tell them your weaknesses. Talk to me, on your knees, that helps your spirit and attitude, search yourself, and understand that I am in you.”
- “Start being yourself more, my child. I am the flawless Creator. I am God. I made you and I long for you to be fully you. I long for your personality to flourish and be nourished and glorify me.”
- “I will never leave you or turn away from you. I know you feel like I'm far away, but I'm not. I'm waiting patiently for your return with arms opened wide. Please don't turn away. I love you, and I want to spend time with you and I want you to spend time with me alone to get to know me more. There's so much I want to show you, so much I want to tell you, if you will let me. I want you to worship me with your whole heart—a heart free from worry and pain. Please don't worry, because I will take care of everything.”
- “Worship is a way of life. You used to think worship was just what you did at church. I'm now telling you to express worship in a new manner—joy, happiness, and even physical worship. Until this year, you didn't know about a physical side to worship. You sat solemnly on the pew and worshipped only from your mind. I am now showing you how to express worship physically. Worship is praising me—bowing down before me. Jumping and clapping with me as you sing a song. Talking with me in quiet prayer, weeping. Worship is showing your emotions. Worship is kneeling your body and heart to me and surrendering yourself to me. Worship is finally letting me take care of you.”

- “Worship me the way nature does. Not by putting up barriers, or worrying about who else is around you. Flowers bloom, trees grow, and rivers run all of which glorify me by doing what I created them to do. Come and worship me with a pure heart. Trust me to remove the things that do not belong. And my Holy Spirit will make your soul bloom and grow until, just like the rest of my creation, the beauty that glorifies me cannot be hidden.”
- “How I love to hear you sing praises to me! I created you for that reason! When you were in your mother’s womb I gave you a precious gift... I put music in your heart and on your lips! And then I waited. I’ll never forget the first time your tiny voice sang of my name... ‘Jesus loves me, this I know...’ The angels joined in with you on that day. I do love you, child. There is so much that I have to teach you, so many ways I want to fill you. I sing over you every day—beautiful melodies full of the message of my love for you. I’m waiting for you to hear my song. If you will just listen and draw near to the voice that you hear. My arms are stretched open ready to hold you close. As you seek to know me, I will reveal myself to you most in times of worship. And I want you to know that you have no restrictions... I give you total freedom. All I want is all of you.”

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Surely the presence of the Lord was in that place the weekend of our retreat. We now pray for and anticipate “in-your-face worship.” We want to see God and experience his presence to the fullest. He has never put the restrictions on worship that we have. He is always ready for us. Are we ready for him? Through His Word, His Spirit, and His Presence we have so much to learn and experience. He is the Master Teacher. As a teacher or parent would say when wanting to get a point across, “Look at me when I’m talking to you.” His eyes are always fixed. They don’t wander. His gaze is upon you. Where is your gaze?

*Turn your eyes upon Jesus  
Look full in His wonderful face.  
And the things of earth  
will grow strangely dim,  
In the light of His glory and grace.*

## In Orderly Life, Pride Runs Amok: A Review of 'The Remains of Daylight'

by Deborah Gohrke

September – December, 1994

In the precise and orderly existence of a proper English butler, the movie *The Remains of the Day*, allows us to witness the high price paid by a life driven by pride. This Merchant/Ivory production is an exceedingly rich, expertly woven tapestry, a banquet, a feast of extraordinary delicacy and generous proportions. The music is haunting, the cinematography lovely, the acting mesmerizing, and the development of the story impeccable. But, be cautioned, it is not for everyone. If your idea of a great movie experience is Sylvester Stallone's *Cliffhanger*, if you found no redeeming value in other Merchant/Ivory productions, such as *A Room with a View* and *Howard's End*, and if you have never seen anything worthwhile on public television, this movie's not for you.

After forcing my friend, Julie, to see this movie with me, I anxiously waited to hear her reaction. She smiled patiently and confided, "I gave up seeing thought-provoking movies a long time ago and I've been much happier. I would rather have seen *Ace Ventura, Pet Detective*."

Mr. Stevens (Anthony Hopkins) is the butler for Lord Darlington, in Oxfordshire, England, in the 1930s. We are allowed into his life to witness the painful sacrifices and choices he makes in the name of "dignity." We watch how he copes with the moral dilemma of the rise of Nazi Germany and the Politics of Appeasement his employer promotes. We see him pass up his opportunity for love and emotional fulfillment. We are privy to the heady pride, posturing, and privilege of the Lords and Ladies, Dukes and Duchesses, The Upper Class, of England. We watch the events surrounding the man and his delusions of greatness as he sacrifices his personal relationships and prostrates himself to an ideal. It is a fascinating portrayal of blind loyalty to a class system.

It is about sin. Not adultery, murder, drug addiction or perversion. But pride. Pride, in this case, in the paradoxical role of service. Add to pride, moral and emotional cowardice. Greatly deceptive sins masquerade here as dignity and nobility. Mr. Stevens' pride, and the resulting self-deception and repression, are so transparent that what is normally a difficult characteristic to see, is painfully illuminated. Traces of which are common in many religions and individuals, including myself. Like Stevens, we often strive for perfection in matters that are not worthy of the effort, while neglecting more important things, hoping to achieve importance, acceptance, appreciation, due to flawless performance. It's a cruel illusion, one, that we can consistently achieve flawless performance and two, that it will give our lives meaning. If acceptance and love can be won by competence, what happens on our day off? How much residual value can be stored from competent performance or your past achievements? What happens as we grow old, or get sick, and our performance begins to diminish? A question Mr. Stevens gets to face in the form of his own father.

In many ways, Stevens' professional zeal is not unlike religious legalism. A lot of time and energy are spent on little things, little questions. Stevens never asks the big questions until it's too late. What is really important? What is life about? He strains out a gnat and swallows a

camel. He is so obsessed with forks and spoons he misses the implications of the International Conference his employer holds with the Nazis. His pride and insecurity drive a rigid adherence to his philosophy—a carefully constructed delusion of purpose, dignity, and nobility. He tells a visiting butler, “In my philosophy man cannot call himself truly contented until he has done all he can to be of service to his employer. Of course, this assumes that one’s employer is a superior person, not only in rank or wealth, but in moral stature.” When the visiting butler observes he’s not so sure about the moral stature of Mr. Stevens’ Nazi collaborating employer, and asks if Stevens is not troubled by what he hears, Stevens absolves himself: “I hear nothing. To listen to the gentleman’s conversations would distract me from my work.”

Life is messy. In Stevens’ carefully constructed world, it’s precise. Neat and tidy with few surprises, few mistakes. The proper location of a vase, the straight appearance of a picture frame, the dust broom in the closet when not in use, take on the utmost importance. The adherence to order becomes the end in itself, becomes “dignity,” not real dignity, but the appearance of dignity. What matters is to adhere to the appearance of greatness, nobility, dignity—without questioning what true greatness, nobility, or dignity really are.

It is a brutal movie. Yet, not a drop of blood is shed. It contains some of the most debilitating and cruel scenes ever filmed. Yet, there is no violence. Instead, devastating blows are delivered by behavior and comments that ignore emotional needs and vulnerability. One of the cruelest lines in the movie is delivered by Mr. Stevens to Miss Kenton (Emma Thompson), the housekeeper, in which he says, “I noticed some dust at the top of the stairs and knew you would want me to bring it to your attention.” I hope you will want to see the movie just to discover how this could possibly be so cruel. It is.

Mr. Stevens and Miss Kenton engage in a war of pride. A challenge is laid down early in their relationship, a gauntlet of professional one-upmanship. These two are only able to connect in their mutual elevation of competence as an end in itself. That becomes a mask for emotional cowardice. It takes courage to be open and vulnerable.

It takes courage to love. And as we find out, if you wait too long to find courage, you may never find it.

It is an amazingly well-paced movie. But not in an American way. There are no fist fights, huge explosions, or high-speed car chases. Carefully calculated everyday behavior and extreme emotional suppression are the “action.” The everyday routine and the evenness of the pace almost make you feel like you are walking in Mr. Stevens’ carefully polished shoes. A flicker of an eye, or the almost imperceptible twitch at the corner of Stevens’ mouth become climactic.

It is an exceedingly sad movie. I wonder why I care so much for poor old Mr. Stevens. I suspect it is because I identify with his obsessive attention to performance, and the corresponding emptiness and disappointment that result. I have been like him on many occasions and know many people like him. Perfectionists, workaholics, religious legalists, the self-righteous with the “cause celebre” who end up with the opposite of what they sought. He is deluded. He has lived his life for a false ideal. Yet, don’t we admire people of conviction, self-control, and discipline? Don’t we admire a job well done, no matter how small: And rightly so. What is missing in

Stevens, and often in us, is a sense of proportion, a balance. It is like the balance between faith and works... or grace and works. We readily concede we are saved by grace, yet it must be accompanied by faithful behavior. We can do nothing on our own, yet, God expects us to use and multiply the talents he gives us. In Stevens' case, there is nothing wrong with perfectly polished knives and forks...or the complicated challenge of running a grand castle flawlessly.

Provided minutiae do not supersede more important matters. Like 1 Corinthians 13. We may excel at the small details and miss the most important commandment in the entire Bible—to love—first God and then each other. Sadly, Stevens' supreme effort at attending to the details, and, most of all, the pride he embraces in the attendance to those details, cause him to miss love. He vaguely begins to question toward the end of his life, when circumstances, the fact of Lord Darlington's disgrace as a Nazi sympathizer, the opportunity to retrieve Miss Kenton back to Darlington Hall, and the lack of appreciation for English propriety in his new American employer, force change upon him. Yet, as he tries to adjust, the magnitude of his past mistakes have reaped life-long consequences.

In a poignant scene with Miss Kenton, reunited after 20 years, they are sitting on a public dock towards the end of the day.

Miss Kenton says, "There are times I think what a terrible mistake I've made with my life."

"Well, yes, I'm sure we all have these thoughts from time to time," Mr. Stevens replies.

The lights of the dock come on and a crowd standing round cheers. Stevens reflects curiously, "I wonder why they do that...cheer?"

Miss Kenton wistfully observes, "Some say evening is the best part of the day, the part they look forward to."

What do you do with what's left of the day when you begin to suspect you may have spent your best energy—the daylight hours—for naught? The sun is setting. Soon the day will be over and you will have to conclude it was a good day—well spent—or perhaps a wasted day, in spite of your best or most noble intentions. Would that we all live so as to enjoy the remains of the day.

## **The Jewish Holidays; Hanukkah: Dedication & Celebration**

*by Terry Seufferlein*

*September – December, 1994*

When God calls a people, he expects them to live according to his rules. When he made a covenant with Abraham to bless him and his descendants, he decreed that every male child should be circumcised as a sign of the covenant. When he led the Israelites out of Egyptian bondage, he gave them guidelines about how they should live, including instructions about how they should dress, and what they could and couldn't eat. Moreover, certain things were declared holy: The Sabbath was a holy day, holy festivals were to be observed, and the place of God's dwelling was exceedingly holy.

For the most part, the Israelites took this covenant relationship seriously, and generation after generation tried to demonstrate their faithfulness by obeying God's commands. Such faithfulness, however, did not always come easily.

In the fourth century B.C., Alexander the Great conquered all of the Near East, including Palestine. But Alexander's policy was to let the conquered peoples maintain their customs and religion, therefore Alexander's conquest made little difference in the daily life of a Jew. When Alexander died (about 323 B.C.), his empire was divided among his generals. Seleucus received Syria, and Ptolemy received Egypt and Palestine. Again, the Ptolemies did not meddle in the domestic affairs of Israel, being content to receive tribute.

However, at the beginning of the second century B.C., Antiochus III became king of the Seleucid empire, and the peace in Judea came to an end. After a period of upheaval, Antiochus III gained control of Palestine. Antiochus III was followed by his son, Seleucus IV, then by another son, Antiochus IV, in 175 B.C. Antiochus IV was no lover of the Jewish people or their ways. He took for himself the name Epiphanes (God manifest), but many of his contemporaries referred to him instead as Epimanes, which means "madman."

During this period some of the Jewish aristocracy favored abandoning Jewish customs in favor of Greek culture. One of those supporting Hellenization, Jason, gave Antiochus Epiphanes a large sum of money, in return for which Antiochus appointed Jason as high priest in the place of his brother, Onias. As high priest, Jason set about introducing the Jews to Greek culture. A Greek gymnasium was built in Jerusalem, and many Jews adopted the Greek custom of performing athletic events in the nude. Greek education and dress gained in popularity, and some Jews even went so far as to have their marks of circumcision surgically disguised.

It wasn't long, however, before Jason was usurped by Menelaus. Menelaus was not from the proper lineage, and had no right to the high priesthood, but Antiochus Epiphanes granted the position to the highest bidder, and Menelaus became high priest. Under Menelaus, the process of Hellenization was accelerated. As high priest, Menelaus went so far as to steal some of the golden items from the temple.

The conflict between Jewish factions intensified, and while Antiochus was in battle against Egypt, Jason made a failed attempt to regain the position of high priest, killing hundreds in the process. Antiochus Epiphanes returned from battle and entered Jerusalem in a rage. He slaughtered several thousand innocent Jews, and sent others into slavery. To add insult to injury, Antiochus Epiphanes broke into the temple and removed all of its sacred treasures.

Soon thereafter, Antiochus issued a decree forbidding any Jewish practices. Observing the Sabbath and participating in religious festivals and sacrifices were outlawed, as was circumcision. Copies of the Hebrew Scriptures were destroyed. Further, pagan practices were forced upon the Jews. They were forced to participate in pagan celebrations, and eat unclean foods. Pigs and other unclean animals were sacrificed to pagan gods. Antiochus had officials scattered throughout Palestine to enforce his policy, and any Jew who refused to obey the king's edict was put to death.

In an ultimate act of humiliation and desecration, Antiochus ordered an altar to the Greek god Zeus to be built over the altar of burnt offerings in the temple, then, on the 25th of Chislev (mid-winter), Antiochus had a pig sacrificed on the altar. The temple itself became a place of prostitution and immoral practices. It seemed that Judaism was on the verge of extinction.

Nevertheless, not all Jews gave in to the pagan practices. Many paid the price for their faithfulness, yet they followed God's instructions to the best of their ability.

One famous story concerns a mother and her seven sons. This family refused to eat the flesh of pigs, preferring to obey God rather than men. When news of this reached the ears of the officials, the family was brought in and beaten with whips. One of the sons defied the king, saying, "What do you intend to ask and learn from us? For we are ready to die rather than transgress the laws of our fathers." The king became furious, and had pans and cauldrons heated over a fire. The king ordered the son's tongue cut out, his hands and feet cut off, and his scalp torn off. He then had the son cast into a pan, still breathing, to be cooked to death in front of his mother and brothers. A second son was brought forward, scalped, and ordered to eat the pig's flesh. He refused, and was likewise thrown over the fire. When they came to the third son to cut out his tongue, he boldly stuck his tongue out, and offered his hands as well, saying, "It was Heaven that gave me these limbs, and for the sake of His laws I disdain them, for I hope to receive them back again." The soldiers were amazed at his bravery, but they tortured and killed him, too. The fourth, fifth, and sixth sons were likewise tortured and burned alive.

Nevertheless, the mother urged each to remain faithful, and with their last words each proclaimed his faith in God to raise them again.

Antiochus, realizing he was being made the fool, turned to the seventh son and offered him great riches and power if he would abandon the practices of his fathers. The son refused. The king, enraged and desperate, implored the mother to talk some sense into her son. She agreed, but, leaning close to her son, she whispered that her son should fear God and bravely accept his death. Thus encouraged, the last son proclaimed his faith in the power and righteousness of God, acknowledging that God would reward the righteous and punish the evil. Antiochus, stinging from this rebuke, tortured this boy more severely than the rest before he was thrown over the

fire. Finally the mother, after seeing her seven sons tortured and killed, was also abused and murdered.

Such was the spirit of the Jewish people. While some succumbed to the pressure of the king and his soldiers, others vowed to follow God at any cost. One such family was Mattathias and his five sons. Mattathias was an elderly priest from Jerusalem who was distressed at what was taking place, so he moved to Modin with his five sons. It wasn't long, however, before the king's officials came to Modin to force the Jews to offer sacrifices according to the king's decree. Many complied, but Mattathias refused. The officials implored him, pointing out that he was a respected leader, and if he obeyed the decree, he would receive honor and riches from the king. Mattathias held fast, saying, "Even if all the nations that live under the rule of the king obey him, and have chosen to do his commandments, departing each one from the religion of his fathers, yet I and my sons and my brothers will live by the covenant of our fathers.... We will not obey the king's words by turning aside from our religion to the right hand or the left."

No sooner had he finished saying these words when another Jew came up to offer sacrifice according to the king's decree. Like Phinehas (Numbers 25:6-15), Mattathias burned with righteous indignation, and he killed the offender, leaving him on the altar, then killed the king's official. Mattathias ran through the town, yelling, "let everyone who has a fervor for the Law and takes his stand on the covenant come out and follow me!" Then Mattathias and his five sons fled into the hills, with many others following.

Thus began the Jewish revolt against foreign control and influence. Mattathias and his followers ran throughout the countryside, destroying the pagan altars, enforcing the covenant, and killing those who sided with the Hellenizers. As news of their exploits spread across the country, others joined the small band of rebels.

Before Mattathias died, he appointed one of his sons, Judas, to lead the revolt against the pagans. Judas was also called *Maccabeus* (which means "hammer"), thus the revolt has come to be known as "the Maccabean revolt," and the books which record these events are called First and Second Maccabees. Many righteous people united under Judas' leadership, and the revolt gained momentum. Slowly the Jews began to reclaim their people and their land.

For several months Judas and his band of rebels fought against the Syrian armies. Although the Jews were greatly outnumbered, Judas encouraged his men: "It is not on the size of the army that victory in battle depends, but strength comes from heaven." With each battle the Jewish army emerged victorious, and they gave thanks to God.

Finally, Antiochus Epiphanes gathered all the troops he could muster, and charged Lysias with destroying the Jewish rebellion. Judas and his troops were vastly outnumbered, but they prayed and fasted, imploring God for his help. The two armies met in battle, and the Jews put the Syrians to flight.

With his enemies temporarily out of the picture, Judas led his men into Jerusalem to restore proper worship. When they reached the temple they were shocked by what they saw. The area

was covered with bushes and weeds, the sanctuary was desolate, the altar profaned, and the gates burned. They tore their clothes and mourned, falling on their faces and crying aloud to God.

Faithful priests were then chosen to cleanse the sanctuary. They tore down the defiled altar and built a new one in its place. The temple was restored, and new vessels were crafted. Finally, everything was in order according to the Law.

On the morning of the 25th of Chislev the people dedicated the temple, three years to the day from the time that Antiochus Epiphanes had defiled the altar. Sacrifices were made on the new altar, and songs and prayers were offered to God. For eight days the assembly celebrated the dedication of the temple.

According to tradition, there was only enough oil to light the temple lamps for one day. Nevertheless, the lamps were lit, but the oil was not used up, and the lamps continued to burn for the eight days of dedication. This is the miracle of Hanukkah.

Why eight days? Two reasons: First, eight days is the period of dedication. Firstborn animals were consecrated to God on the eighth day. Jewish boys were circumcised at the age of eight days. The celebration of Solomon's temple lasted for eight days.

Second, while the temple was occupied by the Syrian army the Jews were not able to observe the Feast of Tabernacles. The Feast of Tabernacles was an eight-day festival ordained by God which involved celebration and sacrifice at the temple. Since they could not observe the festival during its proper time, they celebrated it once the temple had been regained, much like the second Passover (2 Chronicles 30).

Hanukkah, then, is a celebration of the dedication of the temple. In fact, the word *Hanukkah* means "dedication." This event was so significant to the Jewish people that they decided to celebrate Hanukkah for eight days every year, beginning on the 25th of Chislev.

So what? What does the dedication of the Jewish temple have to do with Christians more than 1000 years later? An understanding of Hanukkah is important for several reasons.

First, the events surrounding Hanukkah help us have a greater understanding of certain passages in the New Testament. John 10:22 tells us that Jesus was in the Jerusalem temple during the Feast of Dedication, or Hanukkah. It seems likely that Jesus was celebrating this Jewish festival, as he did the Feast of Tabernacles (John 7) and other Jewish holidays.

In Hebrews 11, the author tells of people who have remained faithful under persecution. Included among these are "women (who) received back their dead, raised to life again. Others were tortured and refused to be released, so that they might gain a better resurrection." It is likely that the writer is referring to some of those persecuted by Antiochus Epiphanes, perhaps the tradition of the woman and her seven sons.

As much as this aids our understanding of the New Testament, however, it seems the greater significance is the meaning behind the festival. What is the message of Hanukkah? The

traditional message is that God's people will ultimately be victorious, no matter the odds. Like Abraham, Joseph, and Daniel, Mattathias and his supporters remained faithful to God regardless of the consequences. They followed God's commands to the best of their ability, even if such faithfulness meant death. And, like Moses, Joshua, and Gideon, they fought for their beliefs, even though they were greatly outnumbered, and they were given the victory.

Hanukkah, then, is a call to faithfulness, and a reminder that the faithful will be victorious in spite of overwhelming odds. This is demonstrated by the way one lights the Hanukkah candles. The followers of the Rabbi Shammai said eight candles should be lit on the first day, and the number reduced by one each day thereafter, following the sacrificial pattern of the Feast of Tabernacles (Numbers 29:12-28). The tradition that gained acceptance, however, came from the followers of the Rabbi Hillel, who argued that one candle should be lit on the first night, and the number increased on successive nights, because light is not overcome by darkness, but overcomes the darkness.

God's people of every century have had to learn that following God may put one in the minority, and it may even draw severe persecution, yet one is to remain faithful, regardless of circumstances. God's people are like lights shining in the dark.

The Christian, however, finds further significance in Hanukkah, for this holiday recalls a period of political turmoil, in which the struggle for God's kingdom took the shape of murder, political maneuvering, and a struggle over a certain area of land. Yet in this context of upheaval, contention, and military battles, came one who established a new kingdom, a kingdom which is not of this world. This Prince of Peace taught that God does not live in a temple, but in human hearts.

The birth of the King was proclaimed by an angel who appeared to some shepherds and announced, "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord." Suddenly the sky was filled with angels saying,

"Glory to God in the highest,  
and on earth peace to men."

## Why Combat Pilots Aren't Necessarily the Same as Aeronautical Engineers (and Vice Versa)

by Lynn Anderson

September – December, 1994

“Man, would you take off in a jet fighter plane put together by a combat pilot?”

“Man, would you ride shotgun into combat with an aeronautical engineer at the controls of your fighter plane?”

They are both in the flying business, aren't they? Planes is planes, Right?

“Would you pay good tuition dollars for a graduate degree in theology put together by a preacher?”

“Would you try to reach secular people and nurture stressed-out, city-dwelling Christians through a church put together by a theology professor?”

They are both Christian ministers, aren't they? Ministry is ministry. Right?

Yes. And they both had better know their stuff. These chaotic and challenging times call for a blend of the best that both can offer. But, unfortunately, we hear murmuring these days about a growing gap between professors and preachers. Between theoreticians and practitioners. Between the aeronautical engineers and the combat pilots of the Kingdom. Gridlock between academia and congregational life. In some cases, a “great gulf” has become fixed.

Of course, we also hear some denial: “No way. The difference is imaginary. Only a caricature.” Few people have the IQ and energy combination to excel both as an effective local preacher/church leader and as a good professor/scholar. Finding an unbiased and perceptive observer of this gridlock scenario is nearly impossible.

*Except* for yours truly, of course. I, you see, am totally objective and unbiased, as anybody would tell you (except maybe my wife and kids. Well, and some preachers and professors). So, if you want the straight scoop, you'd better listen up. Listen and help me evaluate selected quotes from some extremely warped perspectives:

“Now it seems perfectly obvious to me that most aeronautical engineers would make disastrous combat pilots. Most of them don't even hold a pilot's license. Those that do haven't flown in combat, at least not since they traded their USAF uniforms for white lab coats.

“Same with those ivory tower theology professors. They talk with the angels. They play with ideas and split theological hairs, years on end. Everyone knows theology is mostly irrelevant, if not downright dangerous. Theologians read books written by liberals. Just scratch some of these scholars more than skin deep and you'll find they really don't believe very much of anything,

anyhow. They talk in their own code language only understood by other ‘credentialed theologians.’ That way they can control the conversation. Besides, that academic gobbledy-gook hides their liberalism from the financial supporters of their institutions.”

Or another:

“Those few academic types that do still stand for something are totally out of touch with today’s church. If you were to hang a local church around their necks, they couldn’t lead it out of a wet paper bag.

“They escaped to the safe and predictable world of academia. All they have to manage there is the destiny of a few gullible and powerless graduate students. So far, fair enough. If they can’t stand the heat they ought to flee the kitchen. But why disdain the cooks who stayed?”

Or yet another: “Well, yes. There are a few rare professors who have logged effective local church track records, but if you’ll check them out, it was likely in some stable small town, back in the era of mimeographs, gospel meetings, and filmstrips. But today is different, I’ll tell you. Especially in the city. Rampant secularism, frantic pace, the vertigo of pluralism, and the sophistication of today’s marketplace ministry would blow these guys out of the sky. Where do they get off saying ministry is ministry, planes is planes? Their yellowed class notes won’t cut it in my demanding pulpit—especially since they can’t flunk the congregation for absenteeism.”

*Whew! Those are strong points of view! And they are largely untrue and most unfortunate. Is there anything else to be said? Well, let’s eavesdrop on another set of equally impassioned statements.*

“Everybody knows academia never built a growing church, changed a community or saved a soul. And surviving five hours in a library is a whale of a different ball game than surviving a five-hour elders’ meeting. In the local church, you spell tenure t-e-n-u-o-u-s! What do these ivory tower eggheads know about flying under combat conditions?

“Harrumph! Armchair quarterbacks is what these professors are (to switch metaphors again). Put ‘em on the field, in a game. It’s easier to read a playbook than to actually run a play against fire-eating Philistine Goliaths. And teasing a bright-eyed young college student through a semester doesn’t make you an authority on turning around the value system of a Fortune 500 CEO or putting hope in the eyes of a third-generation street person. Keeping a captive audience focused and motivated (who paid \$250 an hour for your course and who fear a dropping GPA more than AIDS) is peanuts compared to holding the lifelong focused attention of volunteers whose pay and survival depend on sources from an alien planet.

“Did you know that some of these academic types have the nerve to tell you that they are ministers? And because they are involved every week in the congregational life of their local church they are local ministers! But let me tell you, serving coffee on an airliner is not the same thing as landing a plane in zero visibility, on one engine, in a crosswind.

“Yes, just because someone is a Sunday school teacher, or a boardroom elder, or even a weekend guest preacher at Pebble Hill doesn’t mean he could lead a flourishing church in our kind of world.”

*With these extremes pulling me in their respective directions, I feel disoriented and confused. Let me see if I understand well enough to be a peacemaker:*

“Look at it through my clear eyes. A totally unbiased preacher like me has a leg up on insight into this gridlock thing, because, you see, I’m also a totally unbiased professor—an academic, if you will. Yeah, I know, I only teach a few Mickey Mouse adjunct ministry courses. But I’ve also read a book or two. Well, at least I read the reviews. So you can trust me as both theoretician and practitioner, with no small expertise on both sides of the street (even if I do have to say so myself). But , you see, the professor in me has those crass practitioners pegged.”

Listen to a voice murmuring another strong point of view: “Just check out those preacher types. Non-academics. Anti-intellectuals. No telling where they’ll take the church if someone doesn’t rein them in.”

Or another: “They posture as authorities, but most of them ‘know not what they speak, nor whereof they so confidently affirm.’ They claim to ‘exposit the Bible’ to their people, but most of them cannot even read the Scriptures in the original languages. Their idea of exegesis is to haul down a concordance and muster proof-texts for their latest gimmick. Or to strengthen their jobs at the consciences of the poor victims in their pews.”

Or another: “These preacher types seem to think spiritual growth comes from some slick leadership skills they picked up at some management seminar or at some exploding megachurch. Raw pragmatism is what runs them. If you scratch below the surface, a lot of them are actually secularists marketing religion. They are part salesman and part politician. Always selling something. Tapes of their latest sermon series. Their latest user-friendly-church gimmick. Or their latest pop book.”

Still another: “What’s that? No, of course I don’t listen to their tapes or read their stuff. Beneath my dignity. But I know what they think. And where they get it. They don’t read anything. They just listen to tapes on the freeway, then wheel up in their expensive cars, climb into their Plexiglas pulpits, and regurgitate a collection of Swindoll stories. It never occurs to them to ask the tough theological questions about their latest programs. They only ask if it ‘works.’ If it doesn’t, they don’t mind trashing it, even if it is fundamental to Christian tradition. If it does work, they will dig up a proof text to get it past the fundamentalists. Too many of them don’t even know the difference between teaching and selling. Between a church and a crowd. Between worship and Woodstock. Between approaching the Holy One and creating a mood with some sad story or some new song.

“Theology indeed! Atheology is more like it. Most of them don’t know the difference between psycho-babble and spiritual substance. They dabble in pop psychology and marketing-level sociology because that stuff pulls a crowd. And pulling a crowd is what floats their boats.”

Or one more: “They just need to ‘let the church be the church.’ Rather than all this tinkering with programs, marketing techniques, fast music, dim lights, and catchy titles.

“Amazingly, some of their careers flourish on this stuff. The ones with savvy have learned the church politics game. Which elders to butter. Which lectureships to be on. Which big shots to suck up to. Which journals to leave on their coffee table (and which ones to harangue). How to make shallow sermons sound deep. How to make demanding people feel placated. What passages and cliches to throw in so as to lend their message the ring of orthodoxy. Or to make it sound hip or smart, or whatever the market calls for. Always an eye to the market.

“These combat pilots are just hi-tech barnstormers. They’re out looking for more stripes. Or another skull and crossbones on the nose of their F16. Or a medal at review time. Or a purple heart. Fire your big guns. Fly the thing at red line. Just jump into your miracle machines and roar off into the wild blue yonder. We engineers are the ones who have got to be responsible for them. One fraction of a millimeter of engineering error on one wing surface and their whole world would come crashing down.

“Why, these throttle jockeys haven’t a clue what it takes to actually design a high performance jet aircraft. Never saw a combat pilot yet that could design even a seat cover! Couldn’t care less about ‘metal fatigue.’ Can’t even spell ‘aerodynamic.’ If it weren’t for engineers, there’d be no fancy airplanes. Then how would they fly?”

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*Well, now that you’ve sat in on the unfair caricatures in this non-conversational un-dialogue, you’re wondering how any military air operation has ever succeeded, as disdainful as some of these guys are of each other. Can’t help but wonder, too, how churches flourish, or broken people get mended, or real worship happens, or hearts get turned toward God, if some preachers and professors are that interested in protecting turf rather than in expanding the Kingdom. Caricaturing each other. Choosing not to listen to each other. Both wanting to be tomorrow’s hope. At the center of God’s action. Really in touch.*

But is this the whole story? The straight scoop? Of course not!

Let’s be real. Obviously these are caricatures—polarized in black and white extremes, largely inaccurate and terribly unfortunate. Actually, we see a growing army of ministry colleagues who span the “great gulf.” We know many excellent scholarly professors who are also skilled in practical ministry and very much in touch with street-level congregational life. Conversely, we see more and more pulpits filled by highly effective contemporary congregational leaders who are also well equipped with theological, exegetical, and research skills. Thank God for a growing middle ground.

But walk carefully here. Seems to me these multitalented, interdisciplinary superhumans will likely remain a relatively rare breed. Most of us will “do well to do well what we do well,” and to network with others who celebrate variety in specialized expertise.

We simply cannot afford leadership gridlock in these challenging days. It is high time both specialized preachers and specialized professors play their God-given and mutually supporting roles in Kingdom business. Both roles are biblical. Both are indispensable. Each really needs the other. And, although both are ministers, in many situations the two roles are very different. The different roles and unique skills are to be mutually celebrated, not mutually disdained.

**The skills of the scholar build the Kingdom theologically.** Generally speaking, scholars supply the tools and resources to church leaders who may not have the expertise or the time to garner them on their own. I thank God for the help scholars give me every week in my preaching ministry, for the thousands of hours of passion and expertise some scholar poured into the pages of each helpful book on my shelves. And scarcely a week goes by that I am not compelled by my own limitations to seek help from some dear scholarly brother.

**And generally speaking, the skills of the preacher or local church leader build the Kingdom organically and** strategically. They supply the scholar with a delivery system for the fruit of his labors. They translate the abstract to the concrete, target the general to the specific. And, the skills of the local church leader can help the professor stay in touch with the grassroots church and its issues. Some of the most widely read theologians do their writing while serving as preachers in the midst of congregational life. And some of the most effective church leaders keep their minds rooted in sound scholarship.

So there is a sense in which dividing ministry into preachers and professors is contrived dichotomy. But local church leadership these days, like scholarship, is both specialized and complex. It requires specific skills. Of course, the local church leader is primarily a spiritual leader so he dare not become biblically and theologically careless. An effective local churchman needs some skills in such areas as education, organizational culture, change management, financial management, vision casting, administration, pastoral counseling, church growth, leadership development, conflict resolution, evangelism, sociology, worship leading, and the like.

The skills for the scholar might include advanced expertise in languages, exegesis, hermeneutics, epistemology, theology, and, above all, in biblical studies. The professor also uses the practical tools of research techniques, writing precision, and classroom skills, just to mention a few. While a local church leader cannot afford to be totally in the dark in these areas, he must rely heavily on the advanced expertise of scholars who are teaching and writing theology under academic discipline. Whatever our role, we must remember that God is sovereign. Both professors and preachers find our mutual portion of strength and wisdom on our knees in brokenness before Him.

Oh, my dear brothers, preachers and professors have so much to learn from each other. The effectiveness of each specialized ministry depends on the expertise of the other. More importantly, God has called us all to throw ourselves into his enterprise with one heart. He is the one who gave us our unique gifts and callings.

We must affirm each other. We must value and respect each other's unique contribution to Kingdom enterprises. Rather than eyeing each other with suspicion, looking for flaws in each

other's work, and critically analyzing each other's motives and modus operandi, we must become students and fans and defenders of each other.

When we do not understand the perspectives of another, rather than taking him publicly to task in print and pulpit, let's take him privately to a restaurant, living room, or golf course with lots of loving, respectful conversation. And then, deal only with real divergency of ideas, not with suspicion of imagined motives or hidden agendas. Let's attempt to clearly understand the minds and hearts of each other. When we do come to those inevitable points upon which we cannot agree, let us hold those differences in respectful and dynamic tension.

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*There is one more point of view we should consider. Meet this West Texas rancher who sounds both bewildered and sage at the same time:*

"Don't know as I understand what those boys are talking 'bout." He drawled. "Neither of 'em throws hay to my cows fer me, but I shore am glad we've got 'em both.

"Let me put it this way: The other day, the hired man and me carried a calf in from the tall weeds in the bottoms. On a pole. My shoulder under one end, his under the other, 'cause nary one of us could handle it alone. But now you tell me, which one of us on what end of that pole was carryin' that calf? We'd both been useless without the other.

"Son, it's like that with the preachers and the professors, too! For a few years, we had a preacher in our little church that put no stock by higher learnin'. And nobody could teach him nothing. He had all the answers. Didn't need to read no books, nor take no classes, nor ask fer no help. Well, sir, followin' him, we got preached to for some time by this drive-out professor who had never led a church. He didn't ask much help neither. Already knew what to do. Got his answers out of books. Son, them boys both helped cripple our church. And each one blames the other.

"Then, several years back we got this preacher that loves this church and this town. He's real down to earth, but smart as the best of 'em. Yet he knows his limits. Him and one o' them scholarly Bible professors has got to be real good friends. Now when he gets stumped, which he says is most every week, he'll pick up the phone and call somebody he thinks knows more than him. Sometimes he calls old Brother Ben There. Figures old Ben's checked out a lot a blind alleys in 50 years of preachin' afore he retired. And sometimes he calls that professor feller: Preacher says the man over at the university has more time to read them hard books and sift out them gold nuggets from the gravel stones. And, my preacher says, 'That professor cares as much about the Lord's church as I do.'

"Understand, our preacher works hard on his sermons. But with all the prayin', and evangelizin', and carin' fer the sick and dyin', he hasn't time to go as far in them books as the professor does. Besides, he jest ain't inclined that way. Same as the professor ain't inclined to the stuff our preacher does good at.

”The preacher says that he don’t always understand where that professor is comin’ from. And the professor says sometimes he can’t figure out what the preacher is up to. But I think they both learn from each other. And I’ll tell you what: The two of ‘em together has carried our church out of the tall weeds. One on one end of the stick, one on the other. That preacher sure ain’t no professor. And that professor, he sure ain’t no preacher, but both of ‘em say they think that’s good, that God meant for both of ‘em to be added up together, not divided apart. Now, once in a while you find both professors and preachers rolled up into one man. Wish we had more of them, but that’s a lot to expect from most folks.

“I shore wouldn’t want a degree from no university that was put together by a preacher who didn’t know nothin’ about what those guys call ‘academia.’ And I sure don’t fancy a church put together by no professor who’s out of touch with local church life. Fact is, in most cases, I wouldn’t give you a nickel for either by hisself. But I went and put my soul in the lap of a church the both of ‘em is buildin’ together. Yep, and my boy that wants to preach—I trust him (and a chunk of my money) to that Bible Department them preachers and professors is runnin’ together.”

## **AfterGlow: Spiritual Schizophrenia**

*by Phillip Morrison*

*September – December, 1994*

Let me be sure I've got this straight: Christmas has become too commercial, but we dare not let it be too religious. Christmas trees are right; manger scenes are wrong. Since nobody knows the date of Jesus' birth, we shouldn't celebrate his birthday at all. Be sure to honor the life, teachings, death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus, but give only passing attention to his miraculous birth.

Is it any wonder that many Christians suffer from spiritual schizophrenia during the Christmas season? The shopping malls encourage both pagan excess and pilgrim excitement. The thrill of December giving is tempered by stacks of January bills.

Christmas is for children. Christmas is for giving. Christmas is joy to the world and peace on earth. Christmas is for being grateful. And the One for whom I am most grateful is Jesus Christ.

I'm grateful for all those who have influenced me for good. But my feelings for them is nothing compared to the gratitude I feel for Jesus. They have all enriched my life; he has given me life.

My gratitude begins in Bethlehem's manger, with a tiny baby too weak to help himself, yet powerful enough to save the world. The most audacious command of God was not for Noah, with no rain in sight, to build an ark, or for Abraham, with no promise of deliverance, to offer Isaac as a sacrifice. No, it was for God to come among us as a baby, weak, dependent, endangered, and ask us to believe that he would deliver us from the awesome powers of darkness and sin.

I am to entrust my life, my future, my all to a baby? Yes, a baby, but what a baby! Conceived by God, born of a virgin, delivered from every enemy that he might deliver me from my greatest enemy. With my whole life depending on Him, I believe with my whole heart the incredible declaration of Scripture: The Virgin Mary, in partnership with God, gave birth to God's own Son.

Had I been alive when Jesus was born, I wouldn't have wanted to be Caesar Augustus, though he was at the height of his power. And I wouldn't have wanted to be Herod, the insecure puppet king, trembling at the news of a baby's birth, and slaughtering innocents in a crazed attempt to remove just one who might be king.

I think I would have enjoyed being a shepherd, though it would mean being an outcast from polite society. No angelic assurance could have kept me from being afraid on that one wondrous night. My teeth would have been chattering, and my knees trembling all the way to Bethlehem. I would have been haunted forever by the sound of the heavenly host praising God.

Had I been there that night, I would have felt compelled to glorify and praise God for the things heard and seen.

And I still am.