

# **Wineskins Magazine**

## **Incarnational Christmas**

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## **Baby, Did you Know?**

*by Rubel Shelly*

*November – December, 2000*

Baby in a manger, do you know how far you traveled to be here tonight? Do you remember what you left behind?

Do you realize that you created the world you are visiting? Do you know you made the universe you passed through to get here?

Can you possibly have any idea tonight of the price you will pay for coming to Earth?

Tiny baby, do you know that there have been rumors about your mother because of your birth? Is your sleep disturbed tonight by the knowledge that those rumors will haunt you throughout your stay among men?

Do you know what agony Joseph went through before he decided to claim you and to let you be known as “the carpenter’s son”?

Baby, can you tell me the identity of your real Father? Can you say his name?

Do you know that your six-month-old cousin John will become a preacher, too? Are you aware that you will some day ask him to baptize you? Do you realize that he will die by having his head cut off?

Do you know that shepherds who live nearby are on their way to see you tonight? Do you chuckle that angels you knew in heaven sent them to find you?

Baby, are you aware that Magi from a great distance are already traveling this way in search of you? Do you know what gifts they will present you when they arrive a few months from now?

Do you know already who will love you before they have even heard of you or seen you?

Holy child, do you recognize any of these names: Anna? Peter? Herodias? James? Pilate?

Do these places make you think of anything tonight: Egypt? Bethany? Jacob’s well? Golgotha?

Do you realize what is at stake for the entire human race with regard to your birth? Is it still in your mind that your coming signals the moment of decision for every one of us?

Do you know where Jerusalem is? Can you possibly have any idea of what awaits you in that city? Do you want to go there? Are you anxious to get it over — and go back home?

Do you know me? Are you aware that I love you?

Do you know tonight that you have been born to be my savior?

Does it register for you now that my life will be directed at every critical juncture by halting and imperfect attempts to do your will? Do you know that we will be together in heaven forever? Baby in Bethlehem, newborn from Mary's womb tonight, do you know who you are?

**Can you possibly have any idea tonight of the price you will pay for coming to Earth**

## The Quarter of Remembrance

*by Mike Cope*

*November – December, 2000*

I actually got to meet Dr. Channing Barrett, though I don't remember the meeting because I was too young. But that doesn't change my picture of him as a young man walking a marathon of miles every weekend. In my mind, I see him returning home to Blissfield, Michigan around the turn of the century.

Channing Barrett was one of eight boys and was the first ever in the Barrett family to go to college. From his medical school, he walked twenty-five miles home each weekend, always returning a couple days later with clean clothes, a food packet, and a dollar.

Dr. Barrett became one of the first ob-gyns in Chicago, practicing at Cook County Hospital. He was known widely both for his innovative surgical techniques and for his ambidextrous skills that allowed him to change hands during long procedures.

There was no patient whom he wouldn't accept. He delivered many "tenement babies" for fifty cents and many babies for the wives of Mafia dons for a good bit more!

With a growing, respected medical practice, a wonderful wife, and three children, this young physician seemed to be living the idyllic life. He enjoyed riding horses and lifting weights, and was an early member of the Polar Bear Society – that "unique" group that takes to the chilly waters of Lake Michigan in January each year to prove – well, who knows what they're trying to prove?

And then World War I interrupted this Normal Rockwell life. Dr. Barrett left Chicago to run a field hospital in France, followed shortly by his 17-year-old son, who fought in the trenches.

As long as he could, Barrett sent money back to his wife and daughters. But by the last year of the war, his funds were nearly exhausted. He had no more to mail home. Mrs. Barrett sold most of what they owned, trying desperately to keep her daughters fed and clothed without having to lose their house.

By the time Christmas rolled around in 1918, there were no presents to place under the tree. They were lucky to have a place to live.

But Mrs. Barrett had managed, despite all the financial scrimping, to save two quarters. So on Christmas morning, when the girls emptied their stockings, under the paper dolls their mother had cut out for them and under a couple pieces of candy, they each found a coin.

Previous Christmas mornings had been more lavish, filled with frilly dresses and expensive toys. And there would be more such mornings in the future. But this was the Christmas the family would always remember.

In the future, even during the years of plenty, when the girls emptied their stockings, they always found — under the apples, oranges, nuts, and candy — a quarter.

It was a reminder — a reminder that some years are good while others aren't too good. Some years deliver new babies, promotions, raises, and great promises. Other years offer sickness, failure, death, and deep disappointment.

The quarter reminded them about both possibilities. It warned them not to write off all the pain of the past as if it didn't exist. It taught them that the sorrows and wounds of their lives had shaped their characters as much as their joys and accomplishments.

Anyone who takes seriously the Christmas stories of Scripture knows that the first Christmas stories of Scripture knows that the first Christmas had more than angels, shepherds, wise men, and a mother nursing her baby. There was also the anguish of childbirth. There were the pungent, impolite odors of an animal pen. There was an old man who held the baby and told his mother, "A sword will pierce your own soul too." There were the voices of many mothers screaming for their baby boys being slaughtered by a demented ruler named Herod. There was a breathless escape to Egypt as Mary and Joseph sought to protect their child, who was the true "Prince of Egypt."

The entrance of God's Son into the world meant peace — but it didn't assure that people would get along. It meant great joy — but it didn't mean we'd always get to grin. And it meant unconditional love — though it never implied that everyone would act lovingly.

And so one family, year after year, continued dropping a quarter of remembrance into the bottom of each child's stocking.

At least one of Channing Barrett's children picked up that tradition. Every year through the '30s, '40s and '50s, her five children, Dr. Barrett's grandchildren, pulled their stockings off the chimney on Christmas morning to find quarters buried under fruit, nuts and candy.

And at least one of those five passed it on to her four children. And at least one of those four is passing it on to his children.

The quarter has mysteriously tied this family together — binding even generations who never met. Together they have remembered that bad year in 1918 and other bad years since.

One year brought the safe birth of a new nephew; another brought the self-inflicted death of a relative who couldn't keep fighting the demons of his life.

One year brought the thrilling news from the gynecologist that a baby was on the way; another brought the news from the pediatrician that the baby wasn't developing right.

Some years brought joy; others brought deep, deep pain. The quarter is a remembrance that the meaning of Christmas is deeper than our triumphs and sorrows. It is a joy that can't fully be expressed, a peace that passes understanding.

For years my children have followed this tradition started by their Great, Great Grandmother Barrett. Together, we've experienced the love of God, woven through the fabric of good days and dark days.

Six Christmases ago the quarter represented a burden that was crushing our hearts. Not long before Christmas of '94 our ten-year-old daughter, Megan, took her last breath. The administrators bent the rules just a bit just before her death so Megan's family, friends, doctors, and nurses could cram in the little room while I read this blessing:

Megan, You have been a blessing from God for ten years. You have worn us out — but as much more you have taught us about the deeper meanings of life. With your joy, your love, and your pure spirit, you have challenged our petty complaints about life. Just as you have lived with great joy, may you die with the joy and peace of the Lord upon you. You have always wanted to march in the Lord's Army. Your mother, your brothers, these friends, and I all release you into his hands. Please save a place in the ranks for us, for we will always look forward to seeing you again. May the Lord bless you and keep you. May the Lord turn his face toward you and give you peace.

Despite being mentally retarded and medically fragile, she seemed to soak in every word as if the blessing was her transportation ticket to heaven.

There was one less stocking on the chimney in our home that Christmas. Her death was surely the darkest moment of our lives. We felt very connected to Matthew's Christmas story, the one that tells of "Rachel weeping for her children" (Matthew 2:17).

And last Christmas, our family returned to that grief, for in June my brother's son, Jantsen Barrett Cope, died suddenly and unexpectedly after lifting weights with his high school football team. I had no idea how we'd all gather in my parents' living room without his big, joyful laughs. Fifteen is too young to die. Our quarters were quarters of grief.

And yet, my sister has given birth again, to a baby girl, and my brother and his wife have adopted a Vietnamese boy. So amid our grief, we share joy. "There's a time to be born and a time to die."

By God's grace we survived.

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Mike Cope narrates "The Quarter of Remembrance" at [YouTube](#).

## Home for Christmas? Really?

by Lynn Anderson

November – December, 2000

Christmas is in the air and I want to go home. I miss my folks. The bard who gave us the nostalgic song “I’ll Be Home for Christmas” was likely not thinking primarily of home as a “place.” Surely it was his people he wanted to see. Most of us have long since decided that “going home” is about people, not about places. Indeed, over a life span, today’s families usually live in a number of different places. One home, many houses. And in the words of the poet, “It takes a heap o’ living’ to make a house a home.” “Feeling at home” is infinitely more about relationships than about real estate.

Come Holiday Season, most of us spare no trouble or expense to get together with our loved ones. *Hark the Herald Angels Sing* sounds best when the whole family sings it together. The more family members are gathered around the Festive Table, the more delicious tastes the turkey and dressing. And on Christmas morning, we wait to open gifts until the whole family is gathered around the tree. Even people who have no family expend much of life’s energy trying to make a family, or to find a family or even to create the illusion of a family. And sadly, many grieve away the holiday season in depression because they have no “home” to go to.

Conventional wisdom surely says, “Family – not place – must be our home, our place to belong.” But is it, really?

Like most folk I go back to see family as often as possible. And, like most folk, I call it “going home.” However, to my profound loss across the decades each visit with my blood kin has seemed less and less like “going home.” With the toll of time, my parents and my siblings and I know less and less about each other’s worlds. Our life-paths grow ever further apart. Different circles of relationships. Different life issues and interests. I am losing track. So are they. For decades now I have felt my family crumbling into history.

The first earthquake came when mother hit the late stages of Parkinson’s. Mom had always loved to cook all sorts of goodies for us. When that stopped, we joked that “Dad wasn’t a bad cook, but not like Mom.” That is what we said, but we meant so much more. The last two years of her life, my mother simply stared into space, showing no signs that she recognized any of us. Except for that last morning in her hospital room when she partly emerged from the fog. She recognized us. Laughed with us. Even talked a bit. We actually all had a great time. But at noon, we had scarcely left the hospital when a nurse called saying Mom was gone! After that, “going home” was never quite the same.

But we still had Dad. At eighty, people took him to be in his sixties. Healthy, vigorous, and fun-loving. But, almost overnight Dad became a withered old man. At eighty-four Dad’s last hurrah was his trip to the commencement ceremonies when I became Dr. Anderson. In a few months after that, we could see he was dying. Cancer. Lungs first. Then bones. Finally the malignancy invaded his brain, leaving stroke-like symptoms. Thinking this was the end, I went to Canada

intending to spend those final days with my father. But he appeared to rally, so I headed back to work – only to get word that Dad had taken another turn for the worse, and the doctors suggested we assemble the family immediately.

So Carolyn and I packed hastily and set out on a rainy Saturday night on the three-day drive from Dallas back to Saskatchewan. Before we even got out of Dallas, on the slick streets we rear-ended another car, inflicting enormous damage to the front end of our Honda. With the help of a stranger, we “duct-taped” the hood down and the lights up and headed north.

This was two and a half weeks before Christmas.

We spent the next weeks at my father’s bedside. I am his only son, so although Dad could not speak, whenever he was awake, his eyes followed me. Day after day his condition remained unchanged, and unpredictable. Christmas was getting closer and our grandchildren were expecting us in Colorado Springs for the Holiday season. We felt torn, wanting to be with Dad, but not wanting to disappoint our kids. Finally we decided to rush to Colorado for Christmas, then hurry back to be with Dad. I sat by Dad’s bed and awkwardly attempted to explain that I was leaving for a few days but would be coming right back. Dad shook his head and finally managed to get out the words, “I – won’t be – here.” “Of course you will, Dad,” I assured him. But Dad turned his face away, and would not look at me again as I kept repeating, “only a few days.”

Oddly, the last words I said to my father, I spoke to the back of his head.

Although we loved each other enormously, Dad and I were turning away from each other. I was leaving him and he was leaving me. I kissed my father goodbye and left. Home was vanishing, slipping away at a dark and frightening speed.

Obviously I am not alone in this experience. It is the story of the human family. This same crushing separation drama has been replayed among human kind from generation to generation. Even if home appears to be “our people,” sooner or later, one way or another, people go away. From Abraham at Ur, to Moses in Egypt, and in Midian and again at Mt. Nebo. From the farewells when our European forefathers looked backward for the last time on familiar places and precious faces – then turned and sailed westward, landless, homeless, to the Africans time after time torn from the bosom of families, and sent to live among strangers. From the day the Sioux and Cherokee were driven from their ancestral hunting grounds, to the long miserable caravans of refugees leaving family and farmlands in Kosovo. Grieving over separation from beloved place and people, over loss of “home”, seems a central theme in the human saga.

Of course home is not a place. Never has been. And by its larger definition, home is not a people! No human relationship lasts forever.

And not all Christmas home-thoughts are happy ones. Christmas eleven years ago is the most memorable, but certainly not the most joyful Christmas I have known. The dreaded call reached me in Colorado Springs the day before Christmas. My father had passed away. I felt dead inside. In one moment grateful that my children and grandchildren were around me in this time of grief.

The next moment, guilt-ridden that I was not with Dad when his last hour came. And while I wished our children and grandchildren a happy Christmas season, at the same time I inflicted a lot of my convoluted emotion on the family. I said foolish and angry things I would long regret.

The day after Christmas, Carolyn and I climbed back in the car (still with its wired-shut hood and its wall-eyed headlights), for the two-day drive back from Colorado Springs to Saskatchewan for Dad's funeral. The first day we made good time in beautiful weather. But shortly after noon the second day, ominous clouds formed on the horizon, a wind rose out of the north, and the temperature began a freefall from about 55 above to 15 below in a matter of two or three hours. Long before we reached the Canadian border, we had driven dozens of miles into an old-fashioned blizzard. Yet. We drove on. After all, Dad's funeral was set for the next day. Between Christmas and New Year's.

Night settled in as we checked into Canada, with snow growing thicker, wind steadily rising, temperature steadily falling – and visibility near zero. But, the idea of stopping seemed to make little sense to us, since “home” was only a hundred miles up the road. So we drove on into the blizzard. Our car radio warned travelers off the highways; said the widespread blizzard was getting worse and was expected to last for days. This only made our destination seem all the more urgent.

With parking lights only, we crept along between those lines where the edge of the dark pavement met the vast whiteness. Periodic flurries wrapped us in total white-out. Eventually the dark pavement disappeared under a layer of slick whiteness and the unthinkable happened. I became confused. What looked like the roadway was actually the smoothly-plowed snow on the shoulder. So I drove straight into the ditch and high-centered in deep snow. The car wouldn't budge.

Our highway was now closed to traffic so no help was likely to come along. And we were miles from the nearest anything. To make matters even worse the light clothing we had with us could not begin to protect from such savage weather. My winter experiences in my growing-up years told me that survival for us would be doubtful in that once-in-a-decade three-day howling blizzard. We would not likely outlast our half-tank of gasoline by more than a few hours. Though it sounds melodramatic in retrospect, Carolyn and I actually began to talk as if these were our last hours on earth; trying to shape a way to say goodbye to each other.

Then out of the lethal white fury, a large grocery truck appeared. With chained wheels and headlights up high, the driver could see over the ground-blow well enough to follow the road. At risk to himself, the driver hooked a cable to our car and snaked us back onto the pavement. Rescued.

By now we had no alternative but to continue toward our destination. Plus, we discovered that ice had gathered on the accelerator cable of our car, freezing the throttle and leaving us only two speeds: wide open and off! So we would crank up the car, yank it into gear, gather speed through the gloom on that slick surface till we reached forty or fifty miles an hour. Then we'd shut off the engine and coast to a near stop – and repeat the process.

We limped precariously along like this for some eight or ten miles, till through the blur we spotted the glow of a light, which turned out to be the lighted cross street of a little village. We could see no buildings, just the circle of whiteness surrounding that pool of light. But out of nowhere a car emerged from the murk, and pulled up beside us. A window slid open and a young male voice spoke pleasantly from the dark interior. "You'd better get off this road. A few yards to your right we have an heated implement shed. Run your car in there and thaw it out. I'll drive you to the house. My mother has a hot supper on the stove. And we have a warm bed upstairs."

That night Carolyn and I fell asleep snug and safe in a warm bed, listening to the song of the prairie blizzard around the eaves.

Next morning skies had cleared somewhat, the highway was freshly plowed, but the temperature was not thirty-five below, with wind gusting to thirty-five miles an hour. With our car now functioning perfectly, we thanked our "angels" profusely and pushed on to Weyburn, Saskatchewan, arriving in just enough time to dress for my father's funeral.

Though I have never lived in this town where my parents lived out the last two decades of their lives, the town had long held special significance for our family. years earlier Weyburn had been the home of Western Christian College, a school which all my siblings and I attended, where my parents both worked for some years and of which I was later to serve on the board of directors. So we had often gathered in Weyburn on the campus or in my parents' home.

However, by the time of Dad's death Western Christian College had moved to a new campus far from Weyburn. Many friends had moved with it. And the once-thriving church had dwindled to a remnant. Present gloom crowded out most fond memories. And due to the brual weather, a mere handful of people gathered for the funeral service. Even without Dad's death Weyburn would have felt depressing to me. But add in my soul-numbing grief and the killing blizzard and this town felt morose beyond expression.

Only the pallbearers and our immediate family barved the trip to the cemetery. Even then, the winds blew between the tombstones with such cruelty that most of the family dared not leave the van. We encouraged the pallbearers, as soon as they set dad's casket on the lowering device to scuttle for cover back in the van. The funeral director and I stayed a few more minutes. When the undertaker tripped the switch to lower Dad's casket into the icy grave, the frozen lowering device would not budge. He fumbled with the mechanism, but I saw the waxen frostbite begin claiming his face. So I urged, "You can come back and finish this when the weather breaks. Dad is all right. he always loved a good blizzard anyway." Then we both sprinted to the warmth of the hearse, leaving the coffin on top of the ground in the vicious cold. For months after, I frequently dreamed that I saw the body of my father dressed in a suit with no overcoat, lying out in a blizzard.

Two days later, the skies were still gray and the temperature still brutal as Carolyn and I said goodbye to those few loved ones assembled, and drove in wordless silence southward through the gloom. A few miles down the road, I mumbled, "I don't think I ever want to come back here again." I left Weyburn that day feeling as disconnected from any known permanent sense of belonging, as I have ever felt in my life. The "circle" definitely felt "broken."

Home is not a people. People just won't stay with us.

Oh yes, years earlier I had begun to learn that home is not a place. Places change. They go away. Or we do. I knew that. So I had come to hope that home was a people, my people. Now I was devastated to discover I was wrong on that score too. Oh, how I longed for a home. Still do. In fact, especially at Christmas I smell the smells, taste the tastes, and hear sounds of that home, with Mom and Dad, like it was when I was a child. But, as precious as our families are, home is not a people. People just won't stay. We all leave each other eventually.

Of course I have often gone back to the places of my roots and to see my siblings. I have gone back again when the grass was green to sit for a while at my parents' graves. One headstone marks the place for both of them. But going there does not get me back home. The first time I went back there an old reality struck me with fresh clarity: No human relationship is permanent. None. Eventually, even Carolyn and I are going to break up. We don't plan to do that before one of us dies. But we will break up.

People won't stay.

What is infinitely more sobering: even if people could stay, no human relationship is ultimately fulfilling. Not the warmest parent-child relationship. Not the closest friendship. Not even the most intimate and "ideal" marriage. Only our heavenly Father stays permanently. And only He fulfills completely.

No, not exactly! For in this life, even our relationship with God is not totally and ultimately fulfilling, because our flesh veils Him from us, limits our capacity for intimacy with Him. We do not see Him as He is, so we cannot love Him, as we ought – not yet. As a line from the old song by the Second Chapter of Acts says,

*"I'm not sayin' you don't give me joy,  
I just need more of you.  
How I long to be there by your side,  
In your love  
In your hands.  
So take me home."*

Ah yes! We are all destined in this world to a certain degree of loneliness and homesickness. Home is not a place. Nor is it a people. Oh, no. Rather, home is in the father's house. Home is where God is. And only when we are with God do we find ourselves at home. "How lovely is your dwelling place, O God almighty. My soul yearns, even faints for the courts of the Lord. My heart and my flesh cry out for the living God ... Better is one day in your courts than a thousand elsewhere. I would rather be a doorkeeper in the house of the Lord, than to dwell in the tents of the wicked." For with you, O my Heavenly Father, "surely goodness and love will pursue me all the days of my life." So I have made a decision. And I have placed my trust. I am resolved. "I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever." Home.  
Take me home for Christmas.

## Book Review: Yet Will I Trust Him

by Greg Taylor

November – December, 2000

The newly published book by John Mark Hicks, *Yet Will I Trust Him*, (College Press, 1999) refines and answers the theological questions about suffering as much as the author's own suffering has refined his faith. Just as bright sun rays beaming through dark clouds during a pouring rain are both rare, noteworthy, and even refreshing, so this book combines rays of the biblical story from an honest exegete and theologian who has experienced the dark clouds of suffering.

Already sold out of its first printing, the College Press book was written for serious university-level students and those who wrestle with suffering and ministering to those who suffer. Through the Bible story, exposition, and faithful lament, Hicks points to a solace in suffering.

Hicks begins the book by telling his personal story about his wife's death in 1980. Marrying again in 1983, Hicks and his wife, Barbara, have three children. Joshua, now fifteen, suffers from a terminal genetic condition called Mucopolysaccharidosis IIIA (San-filippo Syndrome A). While Joshua once was able to attend school, his condition has deteriorated his brain and debilitated his body so that his speech and bodily functions are on the level of an infant.

In the same chapter Hicks asks, "Where is God when we are hurting?" And if he allows such suffering, how exactly does he go about doing that? Says Hicks, "in what ways does fallenness (suffering in this case) manifest itself by God's permission?"

As an undergraduate Bible student Hicks was, by his own admission, arrogant and naive. He and his late wife, Sheila, wanted to be missionaries in Germany, where Hicks hoped to study under a well-known theologian. But the first dark clouds of suffering emerged in 1980 when Hicks' wife died suddenly after a post-operative blood clot stopped her heart. But Hicks, who admittedly believes he had set a wrong course for himself, says with the Psalmist, "It was good for me to be afflicted so that I might learn your decrees" (Psalm 119:71, NIV).

I am both a student and admirer of Dr. Hicks. He taught a course on Systematic Christian Doctrine in my living room in Jinja, Uganda in 1997. The first time I heard him say with resolution and a strain in his voice, "It was good for me to be afflicted," I have to admit I was puzzled. I couldn't understand how someone could say it was good to suffer. Hicks, however, truly believes that God has saved him from the dreadful course Hicks had plotted for himself.

One year after Sheila Hicks died, the 1981 Harold Kushner book, *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*, became a best-seller, giving a whole American culture permission to forgive God for what Kushner views as God's limited ability to prevent suffering. Kushner advised readers to find that God has worked miracles in suffering, even though he may not do exactly what we expect. More definitive theological treatises on suffering also came out that year, but they

flopped at bookstores. Why? Because Kushner's book told a real story of the author's own suffering.

Hicks' book does what Kushner's book did and more. *Yet Will I Trust Him* goes beyond Kushner's work and includes a thorough technological reflection and leading through the biblical texts on faithful lament in Job, Psalms, Lamentations, and Habakkuk. While Kushner's work drew from psychology and experience, Hicks' book draws from scripture and experience.

"Kushner's book was popular because it arose out of his experience and gave us permission to forgive God," Hicks said. Hicks also says the popularity of Kushner's book seems to confirm some of our society's fallen values – that we could believe that God is limited and is not able to stop suffering.

Chapters three and four are the hinges of the book. The section on God's permission was excellent and got me rolling into the flow of the book and thought. The theme of God granting permission for Job to suffer to test his faith was very helpful in understanding the rest of the book. These chapters, says Hicks, "provide the bare outlines of how God permits fallenness to manifest itself, why he permits it, what its goal is, and what actions God takes to achieve his goals."

After writing *The Brothers Karamazov* in 1949, Fyodor Dostoyevsky responded to some reviewers who criticized his obscurantism in writing a novel that deals with suffering but never points to any clear answers. Dostoevsky replied that his critics could not fathom the depth from which his faith has come. He had been an atheist: "...it is not like a child that I believe in Christ and confess Him. My hosanna has come forth through the crucible of doubt," Dostoevsky said. Hicks' book, on the other hand, does not focus on doubt nor does it obscure any questions or attempted answers. In the place of intellectual doubt, Hicks' suffering and "faithful lament" form the crucible through which his faith has come.

One of the most poignant moments in Hicks' story took place at a bus stop. Hicks tells about his son receiving ridicule from his fellow students as he boarded the school bus one day. Hicks had wondered why Joshua, who loved riding the bus, no longer wanted to go, until he heard the jibes and cut-downs as the bus was pulling away. It cut Hicks like a knife to his stomach to hear the older students ridicule his son for needing diapers, mocking him as he stumbled down the aisle to find a seat. The whole day, Hicks said he wanted "to take some of those older kids aside and heap some abuse of my own on them." Anger grew inside, and while he even considered calling the abusive children's parents or speaking to the school principal, he instead took the anger and hurt to God in lament.

"I went to my office and poured my heart before him. I held nothing back. I complained bitterly, and then I complained some more. There was plenty to complain about. Why was my son born with this condition? Why are others permitted to inflict pain upon the innocent? Why hadn't the sovereign God of the universe blessed him with health? Somewhere in the middle of that complaint, in the middle of the lament, I became intensely aware that my complaint had been heard ... It was as if God said to me, 'I understand; they treated my Son that way, too.' In that

moment God provided a comfort that I cannot yet explain but one that I still experience in my heart.”

Hicks takes the reader through God’s story and the models in Scripture of faithful lament (Job, Psalms, Lamentations, Habakkuk, the Gospels). “Faithful lament,” says Hicks, “provided the occasion for my finding God through seeking him, though my seeking was probing, doubting, and questioning. God did not mind; I sought him, and he found me. The biblical story gave me the lens to understand my experience and interpret its meaning.”

The book culminates as Hicks lays out the reason for our hope: that while we live and groan in a suffering world, God’s Spirit is present and real among us. Through faithfully seeking God in lament and by breathing the Spirit of God hourly, God’s people in this “already” world, long for the “not yet” of God’s fuller presence which will satisfy our longings and comfort our sorrows.

In one of the most helpful chapters for those who have experienced or may experience the death of a child, Hicks, through his own story and through the stories of David, Job, and Jereboam losing children, explains how the death of a child is not without meaning, that little children, even in death, testify to the Kingdom of God.

Everyone who has suffered a faith-debilitating loss of a child or spouse or friend, every minister to the suffering, every serious student of Scripture, ought to read Hicks’ book. The last chapter is a practical guide for what to say to the suffering and what not to say to the suffering, to avoid being like Job’s friends, whom Job calls “worthless physicians.” Some examples of what Hicks advises not to say to those suffering a devastating loss are these: “It was the will of God” or “God plucked a rose out of his garden” or “it was for the best – some good will come of this.”

Even after the death of his first wife, Sheila, and the painful experience his family continues to endure with their son Joshua, Hicks says “joy still abounds in our family, but it is a joy that lives alongside of lament, alongside of anger, sadness, and sometimes doubt. It is a joy mixed with tears and refined by suffering.” And, says Hicks, “this is a fuller, greater, deeper joy than a life without faithful lament.”

## Trouble at the Inn

*by Dina Donahue*

*November – December, 2000*

For years now whenever Christmas pageants are talked about in a certain little town in the Midwest, someone is sure to mention the name of Wallace Purling.

Wally's performance in one annual production of the Nativity play has slipped into the realm of legend. But the old-timers present in the audience that night never tire of recalling exactly what happened.

Wally was nine that year and in the second grade, though he should have been in the fourth. Most people in town knew that he had difficulty in keeping up. He was big and clumsy, slow in movement and mind.

Still, Wally was well liked by the other children in his class, all of whom were smaller than he, though the boys had trouble hiding their irritation when Wally would ask to play ball with them or any game, for that matter, in which winning was important.

Most often they'd find a way to keep him out, but Wally would hang around anyway – not sulking, just hoping. He was always a helpful boy, a willing and smiling one, and the natural protector, paradoxically, of the underdog. Sometimes if the older boys chased the younger ones away, it would always be Wally who'd say, "Can't they stay? They're no bother."

Wally fancied the idea of being a shepherd with a flute in the Christmas pageant that year, but the play's director, Miss Lumbard, assigned him to a more important role. After all, she reasoned, the innkeeper did not have too many lines, and Wally's size would make his refusal of lodging to Joseph more forceful.

And so it happened that the usual large, partisan audience gathered for the town's yearly extravaganza of crooks and creches, of beards, crowns, halos, and a whole stage full of squeaky voices. No one on stage or off was more caught up in the magic of the night than Wallace Purling. They said later that he stood in the wings and watched the performance with such fascination that from time to time Miss Lumbard had to make sure he didn't wander onstage before his cue.

Then the time came when Joseph appeared, slowly, tenderly guiding Mary to the door of the inn. Joseph knocked hard on the wooden door set into the painted backdrop. Wally the innkeeper stood inside, waiting.

"What do you want?" Wally said, swinging the door open with a brusque gesture.

"We seek lodging."

“Seek it elsewhere.” Wally looked straight ahead but spoke vigorously. “The inn is filled.”

“Sir, we have asked everywhere in vain. We have traveled far and are very weary.”

“There is no room in this inn for you.” Wally looked properly stern.

“Please, good innkeeper, this is my wife, Mary. She is heavy with child and needs a place to rest. Surely you must have some small corner for her. She is so tired.”

Now, for the first time, the innkeeper relaxed his stiff stance and looked down at Mary. With that, there was a long pause, long enough to make the audience a bit tense with embarrassment.

“No! Begone!” the prompter whispered from the wings.

“No!” Wally repeated automatically. “Begone!”

Joseph sadly placed his arm around Mary and Mary laid her head upon her husband’s shoulder and the two of them started to move away. The innkeeper did not return inside his inn, however. Wally stood there in the doorway, watching the forlorn couple. His mouth was open, his brown creased with concern, his eyes filling unmistakably with tears.

And suddenly this Christmas pageant became different from all the others.

“Wait, don’t go, Joseph,” Wally called out. “Bring Mary back.” And Wallace Purling’s face grew into a bright smile. “You can have my room.”

Some people in town thought that the pageant had been ruined. Yet others – many, many others – considered it the most Christmas of all Christmas pageants they had ever seen.

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*This classic story first appeared in Guideposts magazine in 1966. Used by permission.*

## Religious McCarthyism

*by Keith Roberts*

*November – December, 2000*

“Have you no sense of decency, sir?”

These words rang out in a Senate subcommittee hearing in 1954 from the U.S. Army attorney, Mr. Joseph Welch, signaling the beginning of the end of Senator Joseph McCarthy’s witch hunt aimed at anyone suspected of even knowing a Communist.

Eventually censured by the Senate, McCarthy became a pariah because he fell into a trap common to people who become passionate about an agenda. They become so busy storming the walls of their enemy’s fortress that they forget to ask, “Is this the right wall?” or “Is this the right fortress?” or even “Is this the enemy?”

Politics hasn’t changed much since those days, and neither have the tactics of political destruction. They usually involve choosing and isolating the supposed enemy and then launching a smear campaign to polarize his allies and discredit him, therefore discrediting his agenda.

Sadly, this “scorched earth” political tactic often finds a comfortable home in the church. The very Body that Christ created to extend love and grace to the world can sometimes host ruthless political battles.

### **Agendas in the Church**

We always claim it’s about “truth” or “what’s right” or “false teachers,” but it usually isn’t. If it’s about “truth” then why do we always feel so dirty after the inevitable church split? And why are so many Christians destroyed by it? Because it’s not about truth, but about power and agendas and winning.

I’m afraid it’s always been that way. From the Salem witch trails to the Spanish Inquisition, religious people with a carnal agenda can be ruthless.

It was no different in Jesus’ day. Who were his most ardent enemies? Who hated him the most? Who resisted him with passionate zeal, even to the point of having him arrested, tried, and crucified?

It certainly wasn’t the sinners, tax collectors, and prostitutes with whom he ate and to whom he ministered. It was the religious professionals, those degreed hardliners who had a rigid agenda and who replaced spiritual relationship with legal correctness. They were the ones Jesus spoke about: “You diligently study the Scriptures because you think that by them you possess eternal life. These are the Scriptures that testify about me, yet you refuse to come to me to have life” (John :39-40).

Like so many people today, they missed enjoying a special relationship with Jesus because they wouldn't stop worshipping an agenda! These devout, religious people were so enslaved to an agenda – even one found in the Old Testament – that it destroyed them. Like a terrorist willing to blow himself up to get at his enemies, the Pharisees and their companions self-destructed while trying to silence Jesus.

### **Be on Your Guard**

Jesus repeatedly warned his disciples not to fall for the Pharisees' political intrigues. He said, "Be on your guard against the yeast of the Pharisees and Sadducees (Matthew 16:5). He defined this "yeast" as (a) their teachings (16:12) and (b) their hypocrisy (Luke 12:1). Their narrow agenda ("teachings") led to their devilish behavior (hypocrisy).

Notice how this agenda twisted their spiritual lives and compelled them to destroy people who didn't share their doctrine. Look at the tactics they used:

**Guilt by accusation.** Because Jesus did something on the Sabbath that violated the rules of their agenda, some of the Pharisees said, "This man is not from God, for he does not keep the Sabbath" (John 9:16).

That's always the beginning. When others don't support the agenda, they come under fire as being "not from God." That accusation isolates them into the other camp. They're not like us. They don't have our special connections to truth. They can't be from God because they don't agree with us.

The phrase, "He's a false teacher," or "They don't teach the Truth" is a vintage guilt-by-accusation tactic. It skips past the proof stage right into the accusation stage. And it often works.

Once labeled by accusations, the accused person has an immediate disadvantage. The burden of proof is placed on the accused, and some people will never be persuaded of his innocence. This tactic often works, so be on your guard.

**Guilt by association.** This one is about as old as mankind, but it usually works. To tar Jesus reputation and drive away seekers, the Pharisees accused him of being "a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and 'sinners'" (Luke 7:34). When they saw the masses seeking Jesus out, his enemies muttered, "This man welcomes sinners and eats with them" (Luke 15:1-2).

To further their agenda, the Pharisees tried to sell people on a mental shortcut around logic and proof, having them jump to conclusions about Jesus.

Just as Senator McCarthy implied that if you associated with a Communist then you must be one, today's Neo-Pharisees want you to jump to conclusions about fellow Christians who associated with "unapproved" people and groups.

But how can we teach those with whom we have no relationship? Some are more concerned about protecting the purity of their agenda than about reaching people.

What are we afraid of? Are we afraid that truth will be contaminated by the process of investigation? Are we afraid of learning something that might change our minds? Are we like the preacher who said, "I hate to study; it always forces me to throw away my old sermons!"

If someone tries to influence you to think less of another Christian because of his associations with others, be on your guard.

**Guilt by demonization.** This tactic tries to instill fear by exaggerating the supposed evil qualities of the enemy in question. When Jesus went around healing people and casting out demons, proving himself superior to the Pharisees' agenda, they said, "It is by the prince of demons that he drives out demons" (Matthew 9:34).

By their twisted logic, the Pharisees had painted themselves into a corner. Jesus didn't share their agenda, so he couldn't be from God. If he's not from God, he must be from Satan. Therefore, if he's from Satan, his works (even if obviously good) must be from Satan. And if his works come from Satan, he must be destroyed.

That's why we can destroy each other in the name of religion and still feel justified. That's why Paul warned the legalistic Galatians, "If you keep on biting and devouring each other, watch out or you will be destroyed by each other" (Galatians 5:15).

When Christians demonize people who disagree with them, it proves that their agenda, not the person of Christ, is what they worship, so be on your guard.

**Guilt by polarization.** People who work from an inflexible agenda usually feel that they must polarize others into two camps: those who are for us and those against us.

When Jesus healed a man on the Sabbath, the Pharisees were outraged and demanded that the people take sides. They set up an inquisition, which questioned both the healed man and his family. They had already decided "that anyone who acknowledged Jesus was the Christ would be put out of the synagogue" (John 9:22).

This kind of polarization by the teachers of the law and Pharisees was why Jesus said, "You travel over land and sea to win a single convert, and when he becomes one, you make him twice as much a son of hell as you are" (Matthew 23:15).

The newly-polarized sons of an agenda tend to be much more inflexible than even the aged masters who spawned them. So be on your guard.

### **When Will It Change?**

Where Pharisees rule in the church, you'll find a lack of joy (Galatians 4:15-20) and the hypocrisy of a self-righteous agenda (Matthew 23:1-36). Just as the early church had to grapple with this kind of leaven brought in by Pharisees who had become Christians (Acts 15:5), we still face the same struggle today.

So is there any hope for changing Neo-Pharisees and ridding the church of the choking heresy of legalism?

How was Saul of Tarsus, the Pharisee of Pharisees, the Super-Pharisee who murdered Christians, changed into Paul the apostle? He didn't change because someone argued him out of his doctrine, but because he had a personal encounter with Jesus.

This kind of radical, transforming change comes only by knowing Jesus, not just knowing about him. If we emphasize spiritual growth disciplines – prayer, fasting, solitude, Bible study, etc. – once again in the church, then maybe hard hearts will be changed and personal agendas abandoned for Jesus. “By this will all men know that you are my disciples, if you love one another” (John 13:35)

## Do You Hear the Thunder?

by Vic McCracken

November – December, 2000

*The Lord is king, he is robed in majesty / The Lord is robed, he is girded with strength.*

*He has established the world; it shall never be moved;*

*Your throne is established from of old; you are from everlasting.*

*The floods have lifted up, O Lord, / The floods have lifted up their voice;*

*The floods lift up their roaring.*

*More majestic than the thunders of mighty waters, / More majestic than the waves of the sea,*

*Majestic on high is the Lord!*

*Your decrees are very sure; / Holiness befits your house,*

*O Lord, forevermore.*

Psalm 93:1-5

Have you ever heard the thunder? No, I'm not speaking of the thunder that comes from the west, with the flickering lightning and soft rain that soaks the earth. This is a different sort of thunder. It's deeper. More ominous. Threatening. It's the thunder you hear on the other side of a 3:00 a.m. telephone call with an unfamiliar voice whispering apologies to you because your son has been in a car accident and will never open his eyes again ....

It's the thunder that echoes behind your wife's words, having come home from her doctor: "The doctor couldn't find a heartbeat. We've lost our child."

The thunder you hear when the bills are due, the baby is crying, and the bank account is empty.

The factory closes. The house burns. The church fractures. The parent dies. The cancer lives.

Have you ever heard the thunder? The thunder of a shattering world, the sound of the ground tottering, crumbling underneath your feet – a world once solid and stable, now quivering as if suffering an epileptic fit? Yes, some of you have heard the defening rumble of chaos that threatens to engulf your world, like raging waters that suck you under and refuse to let you up for air. As the Psalmist says, *The floods have lifted up, O Lord, / The floods have lifted up their voice; / The floods have lifted up their roaring.*

However, I would say that many of us can't hear the thunder. After all, we live in a world that has excelled in its ability to insulate us from the roar of chaos. We live in world of backyard barbecues, landscaped yards, and plastic patio furniture. Our world is one of shopping malls, convenience stores, and Wal-Marts where our every need and desire may be fulfilled through the simple swipe of a plastic card. At lunchtime our only question is whether or not today it will be a McDonald's Extra-Value Meal or an Arby-Q with a large order of curly fries, or – for those of us who refuse to give in to our culture of excess – a Veggie Delight at the local Subway. Our evenings are saturated with sitcoms and sporting events, shows gered to entertain us even as they plant latent messages about the latest clothing styles, beverages, food products, and gizmos we need to purchase in order to live a life that is truly “fulfilling.”

Last Super Bowl Sunday, the Budweiser Brewing Company reportedly spent \$4,000,000 for the privilege of being in your home for just one minute to convince you that Bud Lite is less filling and tastes great.

And what about our churches? It's not easy to hear the thunder of chaos' waters inside our multi-million dollar buildings, with the chiseled stone veneer, the multi-media projectors, and the padded pews! And come to my office some time. It's a large office with bookshelves full of scholarly works, a computer, a rolodex, walls covered with Kinkade prints and college degrees, fine leather chairs – all testifying to the ordered world in which we live. It's not easy to hear the thunder of a crumbling world above the drone of the air-conditioner and the clicking of keys on the computer keyboard. No, most of the time we can't hear the thunder, because this world in which we live is an insulated one. A world secured by our desires and our quest to fulfill them. A world built on the rock-solid foundation of wealth, prestige, intellect, and rhetoric. A world built by us, for us, intent on keeping us sheltered from the possibility of loss.

A brittle world waiting to break apart.

A world of illusion. And so many live with the illusion, believing wholeheartedly that we are masters of the universe and makers of our own destiny. But the floods lift up, and our world shatters into a million pieces. Our illusion disappears like a puff of wind. The spouse leaves. The child dies. The church disappears. The house burns. And you were only five years from retirement when you received that note from the company headquarters thanking you for the thirty years of service but telling you that they were downsizing and your services were no longer necessary. Uncertainty swirls around you and the thunder of chaos looms in your horizon. Can you hear the thunder? It's sounding right now, at this moment. Can you hear it?

*The floods have lifted up, O Lord, / The floods have lifted up their voice; / The floods have lifted up their roaring.*

Cary came into the church office a few weeks ago. I was on my way through the front door to my study when our receptionist asked if I would visit with Cary. In his early thirties, well-groomed, obviously very intelligent, a warm southern drawl to his words, Cary is the kind of guy you might pass on the street and mistake for a banker or college professor. And you could smell the alcohol on his breath from five feet away. Certainly not the kind of man that I want to interrupt my busy minister's schedule for. After all, I've got appointments to keep, a day-timer full of phone calls I've got to make before noon, curriculum to write, and a sermon to prepare for

this weekend. And don't we all know that the precise, clockwork function of that church machine will start clunking uncontrollably if we ministers allow our calendars to become frayed by the unending demands of the local drunk wandering in off the street? We've got priorities here. A church to run. Church systems in need of repair. Ministries to administrate.

I entered the counseling room hoping that we could end the appointment quickly. A brief listen, a perfunctory prayer, a blessing, and me with still enough hope left that I can complete my agenda for the day before the evening news begins.

But there was Cary. Slumped in the warm, black leather seat, eyes flushed and wide, staring. Lost, but looking, Cary came to the church. And what can you say to a man like Cary? I sat silent as Cary shared his reason for showing up at our door. Cary is an alcoholic and former drug addict, the son of an alcoholic father. Sexually abused as a child, Cary came to San Antonio seeking hope. He came to our church looking for help. Not excuses for why the minister had too many important errands to run. Not a canned prayer and a pat on the back. He came seeking. What can you offer a man desperately looking for a way out of a world falling down? Drowning in his guilt and pain, Cary was seeking a new life and new world different than the crumbling one in which he lived. So Cary, the receptionist, and I visited. The agenda was put on hold. And at 11:30 a.m. on a Tuesday, Cary entered the waters of baptism. Waters far different than those from his past. On Tuesday, Cary became witness to another world.

Which is, as you know, the world that we in the church proclaim in the name of Jesus Christ. In a world of illusions and lies, we offer another world. It's an unshakable, immovable world. Its stability is founded neither on our accomplishments nor our dreams but on a God who refuses to leave his people drowning in the waters that threaten to consume. And what a strange world it is!

It's an upside-down world where the powerful are humbled and the poor are exalted. It's a world where powerlessness is the essence of life, and leaders become servants. In this world, we sing songs that beckon us away from our culture of self-centeredness to a place where devotion to the Lord is the heart of life. In this world, we offer prayers not to the fleeting gods of fame and fortune but to the Lord, "robed in majesty" and "girded in strength." And in this world, we eat at a table open to all who call on the Lord. Sinner and saint, rich and poor, black and white, in this world the Lord invites all to partake of the same bread and the same cup not because of who we are but because of who he is. At this table, even a man like Cary can partake, alongside other struggling souls looking for a way into a new world where sin, suffering, and death will not prevail. Every Sunday, the church proclaims the existence of "another world." As the psalmist says, so we say:

*The Lord is king, he is robed in majesty / The Lord is robed, he is girded with strength.*

*He has established the world; it shall never be moved;*

*Your throne is established from of old; you are from everlasting.*

*The floods have lifted up, O Lord, / The floods have lifted up their voice;*

*The floods lift up their roaring.*

*More majestic than the thunders of mighty waters, / More majestic than the waves of the sea,*

*Majestic on high is the Lord!*

*Your decrees are very sure; / Holiness befits your house,*

*O Lord, forevermore.*

Our worship is not our way of avoiding the thunderous sound of disorder. Yes, long after the rippling waters of baptism have become silent, Cary – and we ourselves – will continue battling the sin, suffering, and death that threaten our lives. But the good news, the gospel God offers is this: there is a world where we do not have to battle these threats alone. In the worshipping church, God brings into existence a world of hope, and speaks in a voice that is louder than thunder.

## Wishing and Hoping

*by Jeff Nelson*

*November – December, 2000*

Greeting cards say the nicest things. Or do they?

*We wish you a Merry Christmas!*

*May the hope of the Savior fill your holidays with joy!*

Wishing and hoping. Good words. Words that are used often at holiday times. Words that are intended to be a gift or a blessing to the recipient. May times they are used interchangeably. What is the meaning of these two words?

*Wish* – to have a desire for something unattainable.

*Hope* – to cherish a desire with expectation of fulfillment.

Interchangeable words? Nope! Not at all! Notice the difference in the definitions. Wishing leads you to a questionable ending. Hoping leads you to a promise with a guarantee. There is a similarity in that they both contain a desire but that is all they have in common. On which would you stake your life? A questionable ending or a guaranteed promise?

Under the old covenant people had nothing more than a wish. A wish that the Creator would not notice the “special” tree had been disturbed. A wish that their sacrifice would appease God’s judgment. A wish that their obedience to the hundreds of laws would narrow the distance between sin and a just God. But a wish was just that: a desire for something unattainable. What a despondent outlook! “What can I do, God? What can I do that will make you look on me with favor?”

God did look on many of his people with favor but not because of their wishes. It was his choice. It was his goodness. It was his love.

He especially looked on one maidservant with great favor and chose her to give birth to his Son. Births are significant, especially this birth. The birth of Christ put an end to wishing and opened the door to hope. God now allows his people to be assured of their future. A wish list is not necessary. Because of the birth of Christ came the death of Christ. Because of the death of Christ came the resurrection of Christ. And because of the resurrection of Christ we now have a desire with expectation of fulfillment – hope!

“For everything that was written in the past was written to teach us, so that through endurance and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope” (Romans 15:4).

“This is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance (and for this we labor and strive), that we have put our hope in the living God, who is the Savior of all men, and especially of those who believe” (1 Timothy 4:9-10).

“Put your hope in God, who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment” (1 Timothy 6:17).

“We have this hope as an anchor for the soul, firm and secure” (Hebrews 6:19).

No matter how hopeless life’s situations may seem, hope in Jesus brings not only an expectation of fulfillment but a promise of fulfillment.

A family member stricken with inoperable cancer?

There is still hope.

A tragedy where many lives are foolishly lost?

There is still hope.

A grievous sin that haunts your every waking hour?

There is still hope.

Sometimes what we are hoping for actually better fits the definition of wishing. A wish that there was no such thing as cancer ... A wish that death would not take its toll on the innocent ... A wish that a haunting sin struggle would vanish from memory.

In and of themselves these situations may not be attainable but they are not beyond the promise of God’s hope. God’s hope sees beyond the immediate and puts trust in the future.

“Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful” (Hebrews 10:23).

Therein lies the ability to cope, a dependence on hope.

When selecting greeting cards for your family and friends, pay more attention to the message than the pretty picture. Make sure you use the right word, wishing or hoping. One word sounds nice but has a hollow ending. The other has the bright promise of eternity. Consider this statement for the inside of your cards:

“May the God of hope full you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit” (Romans 15:13).

Then sign your name with a flair of confidence. Drop the card in the mail and let God take over from there. “He who began a good work in you will be faithful to complete it” (Philippians 1:6).

This season celebrate “Christ in you, the hope of glory” (Colossians 1:27).

## Shepherds That Lead

*by Lydia M. Guillot*

*November – December, 2000*

In the Old Testament, shepherds that led the flocks were of one or two types. There was the shepherd that, when he saw hurting or wounded sheep, tended to them. For those animals that were doing just fine, the shepherd fed and watered them and made sure they were protected from the elements. What we today would call routine maintenance. This shepherd also looked to the stragglers, providing them with just enough impetus to keep them in the flock, never taking away their freedom, but always making them feel they were a part of the flock. In fact, the shepherd went out of his way to bring the sheep back to the fold, knowing there were scavengers just waiting to devour these sheep. The shepherd led the flock in a way that made you know they understood each individual sheep. That way, each individual sheep was useful to the shepherd and others, for wool, for food, and for sacrificial offerings. This is Jesus' perception of a good shepherd: the one that sacrifices his life for his sheep, who stays with his sheep and doesn't lead them astray. The one that knows his sheep by their name and whose sheep know him. (John 10:7-18)

And then there were the shepherds who only wanted to see that the flock increased, and only wanted to ensure the flock was of the mainstream. He wanted a certain type of sheep, never looked to the stragglers, or those who were sick and hurting. Oh, maybe he looked to the sheep that had superficial wounds, maybe those with bruises. But let his sheep have defects or deeper needs and the sheep were considered outcasts, and were not really looked after by the shepherd. Why? He had to keep the mainstream happy. Besides, looking to those that were wounded or that were stragglers would take away from the shepherd's time with the majority. Deep wounds and stragglers take time to deal with, and this shepherd wanted sheep that would heal quickly and without too much effort. He had to make sure that the mainstream was happy and numerous, rather than preparing them for service. It was a case of the shepherds being led by the flock. It is this shepherd that Jesus refers to as the hireling, and the sheep are not really his.

What according to Jesus is the difference in shepherds? The first difference is show each shepherd saw perfection. The first shepherd had a completely different idea of what perfection was than his counterpart. The first never infringed on the individual thoughts, feelings, etc. He knew his sheep and his sheep knew him and they grew together like family, achieving spiritual perfection. The second shepherd was trying to ensure that all were included and that after a fashion all were happy. While this looks good on paper, it doesn't allow for individuals who may not fit into the perception of what makes everyone happy. And this shepherd was not living up to the purpose of being a shepherd, at least not in the biblical sense.

This brings the reader to the second difference in shepherds according to Jesus: The purpose of being a shepherd. The first shepherd understood that his main purpose was to serve his flock, but serve in such a way that the flock understood how to serve. That is, to lead by serving. It was up to the shepherd to train his sheep to move along the right path without taking away the individual qualities and talents that made each sheep special and important in the eyes of the shepherd.

The second shepherd had a completely different purpose. His purpose was not to see that his flocks served, but to see that his flock grew. But it wasn't just that. Instead of trying to see that each was on the right path, he wanted to ensure each was of a particular type. And so the shepherd enabled his sheep to get them to that point. He controlled his sheep, afraid of losing healthy ones from the flock. Not realizing that attrition happens naturally. Instead of following the Lord's purpose in being a shepherd, this shepherd acted according to his own purpose.

God, through Jeremiah (23:2), warns all shepherds, or pastors, of these differences, to make sure that each person who is asked to serve as a pastor actually sees to the basic needs of his flock, but also to keep them on the right path. The pastors in Jeremiah's day were misleading their people by forgetting the true purpose of being in God's family, so that the Temple financial needs and greeds were attained. Jeremiah was trying to convince his people to return to God, to get back to the basics of doing what God wanted. He wanted them to realize that God provides. Today, we must take that to heart. Our needs, physical emotional, and spiritual, will be taken care of by God (Matthew 6:25ff). Our goal, in the flock, is to serve him, which may be through serving each other, washing each other's feet, instead of being concerned about what we need. The shepherd's goal is to ensure that we never forget that our purpose is to serve him. We may not like the way we are asked to serve, it may not seem to meet our needs. But when we obey God and are seeking to please him, what more do we need? Cannot the Good Shepherd take care of us? It is the pastor's purpose to help us remember that. So many times pastors want to enter the modern age, in order to reach more people, in order that more people could come into the fold. An admirable goal, truly.

But while that sounds good on paper, how is that teaching God's people to have a heart to serve him? How is that relying on God, and not us, to add to the fold? Is that not where our goal lies, instead of looking to what meets our needs? Is it not our reliance on God? Is that not what separates a Christian from someone not in his heart of hearts? By doing things to enter into the modern age, does that not try to fill holes that God should fill? Does that not teach us to forget what reliance on God does, even though in our services we may continually spread his name around? There is a warning in Isaiah about that, as well. God's people were sacrificing and invoking God's name over and over and over but God didn't hear them, because they were not living according to God's purpose, and they were accepting worship at the Asherah poles, in front of strange altars. The modern age has nothing we need to help us survive. By conforming to the world via trying to imitate the modern age, we are not even allowing our minds to be transformed (Romans 12:2).

God must do the adding to our flock, not us, although we can be useful in adding to the flock. May we not sacrifice his word and purpose, for our purpose.

## Faith and the Artist: Is There a Place in the World for a Christian in the Arts?

by Carmen Perry Beaubeaux  
November – December, 2000

### The Trap

Art is not a mirror but a banner – it does not reflect, it shapes.

#### **Bertolt Brecht**

A man of sincerity is less interested in defending the truth than in stating it clearly, for he thinks that if the truth be clearly seen it can very well take care of itself.

#### **Thomas Merton**

Roger Hazelton, in his essay, *A Theological Approach to the Arts*, compares the church to the theater. Both, he says, are “a trap for meditation.” Like the formal assemblies of the church, the theater “has the power of attracting and then holding a soul’s attention, of engaging a spectator for at least a fleeting moment on its own terms, evoking a response.” For a believer, the church is a time and space set aside for believers to gather in community and to engage in the work of meeting with the Divine. It is a consecrated place because something wholly other happens here. In a moment, like Jacob, we are firmly convicted that this place is holy and we leave an altar in response to the moment that placed a being of dust and ashes in the center of the universe.

Many artists of faith insist that art loses its innate creative pulse when it is separated from the Holy. Like fraternal twins, art and faith are counterparts from the same Source. In reaction to the Reformation, many Protestants severed art from the church and sent it packing into the wilderness, scape-goated as an example of all that is “worldly.” Other Protestant groups – the Shakers, for example – purified the altar of Art, and in their silent, ascetic way, reintegrated the soul of art with worship.

As a movement they have not survived, but their altar ... their dialogue with God endures and continues to evoke a response.

In other times, before art was severed from the church, the artist remained unknown and his work was to the glory of God. These days, the individual – or the Self – has become the highest form and a great hindrance of artistic creation. Like a priest, the artist’s sole concern should not be herself, but whether or not the work evokes a response. When a work evokes a response the response is directed toward the truth or the Divine – not toward the artist.

The public’s clamor for attribution of authorship has become an overbearing taskmaster of the creative process. Likewise the church burdens art when it requires Christian authorship to qualify and endorse a work. When we do this we are screening the Sacred by putting not only the Self or “reputation” of the artist before the art, but the Self of the institution as well! Indeed, we have seen “Christian Theater” presenters and their audience become so enamored with “trap-making” that the meditation or response a work is intended to provoke never happens.

The presenter – eager to “get the message across” – discloses too much, too soon. When the spectators quickly become numb, desensitized, and eventually indifferent ... when the presenter does not trust the power of truth and pushes the message so terribly hard, so “meaningfully” that the spectator feels like an intruder and is robbed of a need to respond, we know that the presenter has fallen into his own trap. When everything is geared high through “teaching” and induced emotion, there is nothing left for the spectator to discover ... nothing left to feel ... nothing left to “own.” If ALL is disclosed there is little left for contemplation or meditation. If all is taken by the artist then nothing is “delivered” to the spectator. This is not art, it is self-gratification and self-gratification is the very thing that repels people of faith from the profane world. Art could be described as disclosure. And with the gift of disclosure comes responsibility. The sincere artist is not interested in self-expression or personal truth or promoting an institution, but in truth itself. Art is the creative expression of truth, and truth is Divine.

Because we live in the world, we must trap in season and cultivate in season. We are not interested in the obvious and what can draw the church quick benefits in terms of souls (or numbers of souls). Theater that honors God is interested in carefully and patiently turning the soil of theater ... measuring the moisture ... planting seeds in due season ... letting the work of truth grow upon us and move us toward God out of its own depth ... out of love for the Creator who made that soil: The God of History and Story. Like the church, theater that honors God is interested in purifying the world one moment, one response at a time.

All good theater is godly if it is intent on making possible a seeing of things as they are ... to realize truth and be set free by it. And theater art, I feel, is the ultimate form of communication because with it we have a trap to reveal truth, and truth – when it is respectfully unveiled – demands a response! This is real art ... it is godly art ... it is “deep calling to deep.” The one-way communication we often see in the name of “Christian Theater” or any theater that serves Self is totally incongruous with what happens in real theater, and for that matter, for what happens in real worship. As John Couctou puts it, “Christ wants art with all its teeth.” Any child can tell you that teeth demand a response!

## **The Response**

Where do I find Thee and where do I not find Thee?  
medieval poet-philosopher **Judah Halevi**

Martin Buber, the Jewish philosopher, called this “response” to truth the I-Thou encounter. As with Jacob, God the Revealer – the discloser of truth – is the eternally active “I” who addresses man as “thou” and opens the ear of humankind. Man responds by building an altar to mark the place where truth was revealed.

This I-Thou encounter happens in theater when God remains the Subject and not the object of the work. One reveals or discloses God, the other conceals and protects God. One opens the soul’s eyes to the power of God and the other, as Rilke puts it “encircles God as though he were a fugitive and bewails him as if he were a captured, wounded creature.”

Theater artists who honor God in their work hold up God as the divine Subject – not the object – of everything in the world. Christians dedicated to the theater arts perceive that all stories are either about the misery of man without God or the wholeness of man with God. “In ‘the imitation of human action,’ as Aristotle called it, the spectator is drawn with the actor into a milieu in which the inner meaning of all human action is released and stands forth for what it truly is. By consenting to this imitation, by agreeing to play this game according to dramatic traditions and conventions, we devise a breakthrough for the sharing of experienced truth. It is as if we could really understand our life only by stylizing it, letting truth speak its piece in a highly amplified voice under elaborately controlled conditions” (Hazelton).

Theater reveals the spiritual condition of the world – how the sacred is darkened by the profane and how the profane cannot help but be illuminated by the sacred. God is the Subject of everything!

*The Sacred and the Profane*  
Only a Suffering God can help.  
**Dietrich Bonhoeffer**

We must always hold to the difficult.  
**Rilke,**  
*Letters To a Young Poet*

Sacred and profane are sometimes confused with religious and secular, but the sacred is not always the religious and the secular is not always the profane. When we see works of film like *Children of Heaven* or *Babette's Feast* we see the sacred and divine within the secular. Also, a work is not Christian merely because Christians are doing it – that would be like saying that your jeans are Jewish because they were made by Levi Strauss or that our taxes are Christian because they were prepared by a Protestant CPA. As Hazelton explains, “A work of art is Christian if it holds forth the gospel to humankind; if God in Jesus Christ informs it and lives in it.” The transforming gospel of Christ can be seen in works like Victor Hugo’s *Les Miserables*, Bram Stoker’s novel *Dracula*, van Gogh’s painting of the Good Samaritan, Rembrandt’s painting *The Temptation of Saint Anthony*, Jim Leonard’s play *The Diviners*. Even though these works lift up the Gospel (the sacred) and expose abominations in the religious (the profane), they are almost never recognized by the church or Christian institutions as works of faith.

## **The Subject**

In this little thing (a hazelnut) I saw three properties. The first is that God made it, the second is that He loves it, and the third is that God preserves it.

**Julian of Norwich, Showings**

Tis the gift to be simple, tis the gift to be free  
Tis the gift to come down where you ought to be  
and when we find ourselves in the place just right  
'twill be in the valley of love and delight.  
When true simplicity is gained

to bow and to bend we shan't be ashamed to turn, turn, will be our delight  
'til by turning we come round right.

### **Shaker Hymn**

The revival of the Arts and Crafts movement is an opportunity for artists of faith to navigate and express the relationship of artist and Creator. The work of the Shakers reveals God as Subject of the work. The work in its spare simplicity discloses the heart of an unnamed servant that will not attempt to upstage the Creator of All Things. Shaker art celebrates the elements – wood and metal and stone – as God's servants and witnesses to humankind. Like the Hebrews, the Shakers understood that the world of nature and world of Spirit were not separate but integrated into the Whole which is God.

Protestants tend to protect themselves from art that is passionate and expressive and welcome art that is sentimental and contrived. Hazelton says, "We underplay exuberance of imagination 'to keep art in its place.' We are modest, restrained and hesitant." We certainly do not celebrate the earth! As people of the Word, we have depended upon the verbal to dialogue with God and are uncomfortable with the nonverbal, earthy symbols used in theater and art to explain our relationship to the divine.

The artist of faith has eyes to see the Bible as well as ears to hear ... he wants to see the Word ... see Truth ... see God. "What negligence, what delay is this? Run to the mountain and get rid of the slough which keeps you from seeing God" (Thomas Merton). And so he runs to the mountain. As he runs he sheds the slough ... the conventions, the emotions, the ideals that weigh him down. Once at the mountain he can see the landscape of his journey and understand the sacrifices that brought him there. And all the while his soul is undergoing this revelation ... this transformation ... he must move carefully among his people with respect for the conflicting belief that the community of the church is the only true and valuable source of faith. yes, there is a conflict, but the quarrel is not between the artist and God, rather, it is the historic rift between the church and the world.

It is a paradox that while the arts remain a constant in the world the church expels the arts as "worldly" and eagerly opens the sanctuary to the conventions and strategies employed by media artists to put forth their work in the "secular" world. Modern Protestant sanctuaries are enhanced with "state-of-the-art" tools while they remain mostly devoid of art and natural environment. Just as I worry about people who live in dark rooms, I worry that if we insulate our church buildings against the world we are not far from insulating ourselves against God. On materialism, Thomas Merton, the hermit monk, observes that humans are like crows. We adorn our nests with an abundance of sparkling and shiny things which we will eventually have to abandon for something more practical in which to live. We are hungry – for spiritual nourishment – for the spiritual value of real worship, the satisfaction of being together, the assurance that what we do and how we do it is sustaining our souls.

Like the journey of a disciple of Christ, the life of the artist sacrifices – or purifies – the soul. One exits the process with less baggage – not more – than he entered with. He empties, exfoliates, and strips himself so that he can be filled and clothed with his true essence from his true Source. He does not accept substitutes or empty spiritual calories. The artist and the true disciple of

Christ seeks to be pure and whole “because our happiness consists in the recovery of our true nature: the nature according to which we were made in the image of God, and the fulfillment of our purified natural capacities by supernatural grace and glory. Our happiness consists in being like God – the power to love another for his own sake is one of the things that makes us like God. And the highest perfection of our nature is loving God, the Source of love” (Merton).

The Shakers as artists of faith, understood this process of emptying (the abandonment of the Self) so that one can be filled. They did not retreat from the world, but to a higher place in the world. The more they loved, the more joyful they were. The less they possessed, the richer they were. God supplied eternal truth from the abundance of the world through the poverty of an emptied will. This simplicity ... this gift ... did not come from a dependence or intrigue with the procurement of things and mainstreaming into popular culture. It came from living with God in the world – possessing nothing and releasing all.

#### *The World*

Since everything that is, is good, and since the world is full of things that are good in themselves and which all proclaim the infinite goodness and power of God: if we rejoiced in the good that is possessed by others, formally as possessed by them, we would not be able to look at a flower or a blade of grass or an insect or a drop of water or a grain of sand or a leaf, let alone a whole tree, or a bird, or a living animal, or a human being without exploding with exultation.

#### **Thomas Merton**

Purity does not lie in a separation from the universe, but a deeper penetration of it.

#### **Pierre Teilhard de Chardin,**

### **Essays**

Often what we in the church call “discernment” is really picking and choosing what we find to be more attractive ... more acceptable. But the artist of faith demands something purer. She understands that such “attractions” are merely appropriate distractions. When we “play it safe” to keep ourselves distant from the influence of “the world” we put forth the message for the world to stay at a distance as well. This historic conflict of interest confounds the missionary purpose of the church and, sadly, is not likely to change in the near future.

So, the title question remains: How can the artist of faith who wants to minister in the world manage to do so without getting lost in the world? Hazelton says, “The exercise of Christ-like discrimination, ‘taking forth the precious from the vile,’ is the first step. The long second step is changing our concept that the world is vile. Who should know this more than Christians?”

The world which “God so loved” claims the artist of faith. She understands in the doctrine of creation that it is God’s world. Only to say the word “creation” is to affirm the goodness of the world. The fact that evil has entered into it also affirms the goodness of the world. The Christian faith is world-affirming – not world-denying – at its core. Thomas a Kempis wrote that “all perfection in this life has some imperfection mixed with it, and all our light is not without some darkness.”

### **Christianity Is Elemental**

The coming of Christ to the world is as much about the world as it is about Christ. Everything we call “world” is different because God entered into the world in Christ. This world is where our salvation must be worked out. The world is the theater of God’s grace. If it was good enough for God to dwell in, then we are not at liberty to despise it, if we want to remain faithful. But why reject the world for its appeal to the flesh? Christianity, after all, is rooted in Flesh in the person of Jesus Christ.

### **Hazelton**

Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts: the whole earth is full of his glory.

### **Isaiah 6**

Symbols are something that both the artist and the priest hold up as a substitute for the divine. Symbols and metaphor express, however imperfectly, our connection with someone or something. Symbols are simultaneously an external, rational object to “arise the heart” and the internal – or deeper – subject of God’s divine Presence. Like the priest, the artist employs symbols with a deep concern for their power to evoke a response.

The modern believer’s steadfast attempts to explain God and his character and attributes and power apart from his creation is especially curious when one observes that these are precisely the faces God employs to describe himself. The Lord spoke to Job out of a whirlwind, to Moses out of a fire, to the desert refugees out of a cloud; Jesus introduces himself as light, lamb, water, vine, wine and bread; the Spirit of God moves like the wind.

God describes the elements not as equals but as agents, subjects, witnesses and servants. Psalm 147 reveals that he gives names to each of his stars and calls them by name; He answers the prayer of the ravens when they “cry out” to him for food and to the lion “who seeks his food from God” (Psalm 104) “living things both small and great – these all look to thee.” Is it a coincidence that water, earth, wind and fire had paranormal appearances in the lives of Moses, Elijah and Jesus? If we have eyes to see and ears to hear, the word of God reveals in every moment and in every place, the whole of creation which loves, glorifies, worships and serves by the voice of the one, the Subject of everything!

The Divine Creator extends toward us and draws us to himself through his continuous expression of the elements in creation. God appoints the elements as a place to meet with and reveal himself to humankind; a cool garden ... a fiery bush ... a dry and thirsty wilderness ... a cross of wood.

### **The Altar**

The bread is made from many ears of corn ... therefore it signifies unity. The wine is made from many grapes, and therefore it, too, signifies unity. A unity of similar things, equal and united. Therefore it means truth and brotherhood too; these are things that go well together.

**Ignazio Silone,**

### **The Bread and the Wine**

The difference that separated the Hebrew's concept of God and creation and the pluralist's fascination with Earth was one of experience and faith. What the pluralist saw as a bewildering ensemble of earth mysteries, the Hebrew understood as a concentrated unified Whole. We should not take the Hebrews' scoffing at their blind and deaf neighbors' multiple deities as a cue to deny the witness of God's creation. The modern Christian response to Jesus' statement that bread and wine are his body and blood, is to go through a series of intellectual contortions to demonstrate that these words and statements are not "in reality" intended to mean what they actually say, that the earth provides the basic tools of our faith. But rather than to accept this challenge and delve past the incandescent surface, we lightly dismiss the rich texture and depth of truth as an aesthetic of poetry and figures of speech.

Just as the elements are the basic tools of the priest, they are also the basic tools of the artist. The earth is an altar. It provides a way to meet with God. The creation is accessible to us at every moment and is able to describe God at the immediate and sensual level. The elements are teachers in logic as well and instruct us under the watchful and caring protection of God. Those who express God in the world are called witnesses. So the elements can accurately be described as witnesses of God.

### **The Artist As Priest and Prophet**

Art has to have some dirt on its shoes or it's all air.

#### **unknown**

Since our contemporary understanding of the elements is mostly scientific, to apply that knowledge to a Judeo-Christian theology of God is to many of us, suspicious, hazy, and unreal. Yet, for the artist who has run to the mountain, the mundane hidden world of God's nature is alive with spiritual form and texture.

The artist of faith understands that God, who creates and redeems the world, does not intend that nature and grace should remain insulated and apart. In God's world nature is the geography of grace and grace is the Source of nature. In the Son of Man, God turns the Spirit into the soil of his own creation ... and that soil is the earth ... all of nature and the blood of humankind. Nature and Grace are meant one for the other in the Christian and in the Hebrew understanding of the world. We see this in water baptism and in the Lord's Supper. The elements, at God's command, have their part in the work of redemption. The Word in becoming flesh causes the flesh to become Word. The artist has the gift of seeing – not only reading – the Word. In this divine ability to see the truth, the vocation of the artist may be compared with the calling of priest and prophet.

It is with great joy, love and abandonment of Self that the servant-artist turns the soil of theater with God. Gifted with an awesome responsibility, she persists in the task until some soul has meditated ... until the revealed truth becomes significant to someone and properly embraced or vehemently denied. She persists in this because it is her vocation to do so until the Master Artist calls her home. And that vocation is not for the faith of heart – because the power to do it comes from the very heart of God!

## Religious Christmas Stuff

*by Mark Moore*

*November – December, 2000*

What about all this religious Christmas stuff? Is it really Jesus' birthday? I don't think so. I used to be sure it wasn't, but Donny Parker made me question my thinking.

Donny was the best friend a seven-year-old could ever have. We did everything together. We rode bikes together, ate King Vitaman Cereal together, played war together, and spent the night at each other's house every weekend.

We were blood brothers. We both hated girls, and we stuck up for each other when someone called me fat or him four-eyes. We even had a secret handshake – a true friendship.

Donny looked up to me and rightfully so. I was older than him by two months, a fact I frequently reminded him of, and I out-weighed him by thirty pounds, a fact he frequently reminded me of. Age and weight are two factors that loom large in seven-year-olds' relationships, so when Don had a question, he would often come to me.

One December day, as we played in a snowbank, Donny had a question. We had been talking about Christmas, the number one December topic for seven-year-olds, when he said, "Mike, I was wonderin', is Christmas really Jesus' birthday?"

I must confess now that I rarely, if ever, knew the answers to any of Don's questions. Usually I'd just act like I knew and he would believe me. But this time was different. I actually knew the answer. This was my chance to tell Don something about Jesus other than he was a prefix for various swear words.

"No! No! No!" I blurted out, scorning Don for his blatant ignorance. "It's not his birthday and don't let anyone tell you different. No one knows when his birthday is!"

Don sat there for a while, almost embarrassed that he had even asked.

He knew better than to argue theological issues with a guy who went to church on Wednesday nights, but under his breath he mumbled, "If nobody knew when my birthday was, I wouldn't mind if they just picked a day."

I still remember what Donny mumbled that day in a snowbank. Donny, who had never been to church a day in his life, saw a smiling Jesus who said, "Go ahead, just pick a day!" and I saw a frowning Jesus yelling, "No! no! No! For the last time, it's not my birthday!"

Do we really think that he cringes when we sing about mangers? When he hears songs about Bethlehem and wise men, does he pull his hair and say, "It never says three, it never says three ..." I doubt it. I really doubt it.

All these years later, I wonder if Don remember what I told him. I hope not, because he now has a two-year-old who's almost ready to ask him the same question.

What a shame if that's the only thing he remembers about his friend who went to church three times a week.

## In the Shadow of the Cross

*by Rick Gamble*

*November – December, 2000*

They laid the swaddling clothes in the manger so He wouldn't feel the roughness of the wood on His back. On the cross, there would be no such cushion, from the wood or the consequences of my sins. Sins as numerous as the pilgrims who crowded Bethlehem to be counted among the citizens of the realm.

It was a fitting time for the Savior to be born for He came to take a sinner's census – giving His life so those willing to accept the free gift of forgiveness could be numbered among the people of God.

Despite that holy mission, He would take no one's place in the inn, waiting instead to take everyone's place on the cross. Both times, He was overlooked by those too busy or too narrow in their expectations to recognize who He was. Little has changed in two thousand years, yet He changed everything.

Not surprisingly, shepherds knew the Lamb when they saw Him on that star-emblazoned night of new beginnings. They found Him because they had eyes to see angels and ears to hear their songs. Perhaps the angelic joy was tinged with just a trace of apprehension as the Baby lay helpless in the hands of weak humans, but the holy beings held back nothing in their exultation. Scant years later, they would hold back everything, kept from thundering down in righteous, awful anger as they watched callused hands and hearts drive nails through the wrists of Jesus and the writhing soul of his Father.

But in Bethlehem, the only tears were from a newborn and those seeking to be born anew. God put Himself completely at our mercy, despite the risk. He wants us to return the favor so He can change us from what humanity tends to be to what He intends us to be. Just as Jesus was formed then transformed, so must our faith be.

The choice is yours. Like the wise man who gave a gift of gold, you can honor the Lord with your best, or sell Him out for thirty pieces of silver. Your very life is like myrrh. You can use it to either bury Jesus – much like they used myrrh at the sepulcher – or you can use it to honor Him, just like the Magi who rejoiced at the Messiah's arrival.

That first time believers came to see Him where He lay, they rejoiced because Jesus was there. The last time believers came to see Him where He lay, they rejoiced because He was not. On resurrection day, the only thing laid to rest once and for all were the doubts of his disciples.

But if Christ had come and gone without a willingness to take our sins with Him, the gesture would have been as empty as the rough-hewn tomb. God didn't give His Son to demonstrate loveless power, or powerless love. In Jesus, we see instead the yearning of a Creator to connect

with you and me in an intimate, meaningful relationships bathed in hope, peace of mind and partnership.

In other words, the nativity of Christ is pointless without the creativity of the Holy Spirit. In Him, our minds and lives are made new and made whole. When we allow the Son to be born and borne within us every day, He will “shine on those of us who live in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the path of peace” (Luke 1:79, 80).

So make room for Him in your life; offer Him the gifts that are uniquely yours to give and let Him work within you to carry your faith from the creche to the hill of Calvary to the crowning glory of heaven. The infant Son is seen best in the shadow of the Cross.

## A Different Kind of Christmas

*by Robert Beasley*

*November – December, 2000*

Christmas 1995. A very meaningful Christmas. A very meaningful one, indeed. Because on this Christmas, I was awaiting my firstborn son. While others were eagerly awaiting December 25, my wife and I were eagerly anticipating January 16, the due date for an event that would change our lives forever. While others were scurrying around to do last minute shopping, my wife was achy and tired, ready to delivery the one we would come to know and love as Jackson Robert Beasley.

Our hearts were warmed that Christmas. We felt something different. We felt a bond with Mary, Joseph, and the shepherds. When the carolers sang “unto us a child is born” it touched our hearts in a different way, for unto us our child was coming. When we heard Amy Grant singing “Love has come for the world to know,” we knew what she was talking about. For we were being embraced by Love. My wife was sharing more than her womb with Jackson. Every tender tissue of his body, every sinew, muscle, and bone wound our love more tightly around this little one. The blood coursing through my wife’s veins to his pulsating heart was carried there by more than biological forces. The messenger was Love, a Love we did not initiate or create. It was already there before we arrived. We were being invited to taste more fully of this Love, to share the secret of the Universe, the warm glow of Love. Love was already there, we were just coming to the party.

Because of our son, we understood the Son better. Because we were witnessing the miracle of life being formed from nothing, we had not doubt that a child could be conceived by the touch of God alone. Because our hearts were buoyed by the newness of the life to come for our baby, we sang all the more loudly of the “dawn of redeeming grace.” Our faith in the miraculous, in the “magic” of life itself, and in the sheer power of God was being elevated to new heights.

That December, I understood why Christmas affects so many people. While I realize the real change in this world occurred some 33 years after Jesus’ birth, there is something in the birth of the baby Jesus that touches us like nothing else can. There is something in the singing of “holy infant so tender and mild” and the “the little Lord Jesus asleep on the hay” that tugs at our emotions. Babies. Tender, tiny babies. Babies make us cry! Babies make us laugh! Babies thrill our hearts! Babies touch our souls, because we see in babies the preciousness of life itself. A baby brings such great promise, such renewed hope, such gentle assurance that life is, after all, good. We care for babies because of their helplessness. We coo over babies because of their sweetness, innocence, and beauty. And we are sobered by babies because we realize that we, too, at one time were babies. We too were born with innocence, sweetness, and beauty. We were all babies at one time.

And so, in a way, the birth of Jesus touches us in a way the death and resurrection of Jesus cannot. As we think of the little Lord Jesus lying in a cow trough turned manger, as we imagine him cooing, sighing, and breathing ever so lightly, stillness sweeps over our souls. The angelic

voices of the children's choir singing "O Holy Night" echo off the church walls and down to the sacred solitude of our hearts. Silent night. Holy night. All is calm. All is bright.

God has our attention. Speak, God. We will listen. And he says not a word. He just comes. He comes to us. He comes to us as we are. He comes as a baby. The God whom we thought was far off is near. The God whom we thought could not understand at all understands completely. The God whom we thought was so distant from daily life is involved in every human experience. Our God was delivered through the birth canal into a stench-filled stable. Just as we were all babies at one time, God also became a baby. God is Emanuel. God is with us.

As Chris Rice says in "Welcome to Our World" (Deep Enough to Dream, Clumsy Fly Music, 1995):

Fragile finger sent to heal us

Tender brow prepared for thorns

Tiny heart whose blood will save us

Unto us is born

Unto us is born.

So wrap our injured flesh around you,

Breathe our air and walk our sod,

Rob our sin and make us holy,

Perfect Son of God.

Welcome to our world.

Holy infant, so tender and mild. As I peer into the manger, see the Baby and hear Him coo, a thought rushes over me. I cannot think about it for the shame it brings, but I must. I cannot bear to imagine it, but I must – it is my only hope. Although the thought fills me with the chill of shamefulness and horror, it gives me a joy that bows my head in utter gratitude. For when I think about my son, I think about His Son. As my son was born into the world, I could not imagine giving him away to another family, much less to a family that would abuse him, mistreat him, misunderstand him, despise him, curse him, and kill him. My heart won't let me feel the pain – it is too much. My child would never be given to such a family! Could I do what God did? No, absolutely not! You're not getting my son!

And in that thought, I am awed and amazed by the Love that never quits. By the Love that knows no bounds. By the Love that loves me that much. This Son is the center of the party, the party my wife and I were invited to attend. The pulsating heart of the Universe is the Love of God that

stoops to share every hurt and heartache, every failure and fear, every pain and, yes, every punishment. This is the God that stoops to share every hurt and heartache, every failure and fear, every pain and, yes, every punishment. This is the God who goes to your corner of shame and regret and whispers, "You really are forgiven. Here is my Son. He will receive what your guilt tells you that you deserve. You are free. Please, now, please come to me. Please, come to the party. See, I'll carry you in my arms to the party."

I am on my knees, because all I can do in the midst of such sacrifice is worship.

## AfterGlow: In Bethlehem

by Phillip Morrison

November – December, 2000

Just a few days before Christmas a year ago, Mary Margaret and I were in Bethlehem, the place where Jesus was born. That Bethlehem visit moved us much more deeply than our previous trip more than three decades ago. Perhaps it was just the oppressive heat of a Judean summer ... or our relative youth and inexperience ... or the crass commercialism that hides the holiness of many special places ... or anxiety about small children left behind with grandparents.

In my case, I think the visit to Bethlehem was not more impressive because of the cynical attitude I took with me. In those days, “progressive” churches were those which dared to sing *Joy to the World* at Christmas and *Up From the Grave* at Easter. I was a young preacher who had swallowed and regurgitated the “Christmas is not Jesus’ birthday, and even if it is, we’re supposed to celebrate his death, burial, and resurrection rather than his birth” doctrine.

In my determination to avoid celebrating Christmas as a religious holiday, I joined those who made it a secular holiday. We could have Christmas trees but not nativity scenes. Christmas cards with Santa Claus and reindeer were all right, but those with manger and wise men were forbidden. We could load up on the toys but not the joys of the season.

At some point I made an astounding discovery: I couldn’t preach the lessons of Jesus’ life, and I couldn’t honor his death, burial, and resurrection without giving some attention to how he got here! I suppose God could have come to earth in some form other than human by some means other than birth, but the gospel wouldn’t be the same.

Jesus is God incarnate, God enfleshed. From the miracle of his birth to the perfection of his life to the wonder of his sacrifice, Jesus is – every step of the way the Word that was God and became man. He became like us so we can become like him.

Like a pendulum swinging to the opposite extreme, I am now a Christmas fanatic. The most treasured decoration in our house is no longer the tree ... nor the heirloom pickle ornament handed on to a fourth generation ... but the nativity scene our children gave us. Carved of olive wood, the figures of a young Mary, a more mature Joseph, shepherds, animals – all pay homage to the babe in the manger – and so do we.

I hoped the skies would be dark and cloudless when we were in Bethlehem, because the stars would then be shining in countless number and indescribable brightness. Unfortunately we were there in the daytime, but I imagined standing in Shepherds’ Field, gazing at the stars, looking for The Star, not expecting to see it but never being able to forget it. Because He was born there, Bethlehem is not just another dusty town, still torn by political and religious strife. It is a special, sacred place chosen as The Place where God chose to come among us.

*O little town of Bethlehem  
How still we see thee lie!  
Above thy deep and dreamless sleep  
The silent stars go by.  
Yet in thy dark streets shineth  
The everlasting light;  
The hopes and fears of all the years  
Are met in Thee tonight.*