



Christmas Light

Let the traditional celebration of the birth of Jesus light up your life.



"Oh no...I'm a Mother-in-law"

Forget the jokes and the clichés. This is a very challenging role.

Odyssey

CHRISTIAN

December 2007/January 2008

Exploring Life and Faith



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Letters to the Editor

Your brief article about the Trinity in the October/November issue of *Christian Odyssey* magazine was clever times three. However, the God you present in the Three-Piece Suit, the pieces sending other pieces to other places, seems a bit anthropomorphic. Perhaps the next time you write an article about the Trinity you might try less to entertain and more to highlight the differences between the God of the Trinitarians and the God of the Unitarians. The attribute of love and a plan for reconciliation through his Son sound remarkably similar.

Joe W., email

Mike Feazell responds: Thanks for the kudos on the article! As the article noted, it was not designed to prove the doctrine against all alternatives—it was designed to unfold some of the ramifications of the doctrine for those who believe it. For a defense of the doctrine itself, see the articles on our website, www.wcg.org/lit/God. The Unitarian idea is certainly a compelling one, mainly because it is easy and simple. The challenge we find with a Unitarian concept of God, however, is to reconcile it with the Bible. The biblical revelation is that there is

one and only one God, and that the Father is God, the Son is God, and the Spirit is God. Unitarianism flatly denies the divinity of the Son. The Christian doctrine of the Trinity developed from the demands of Scripture, rather than solely from the dictates of human reason.

We were on our way to Miami, looking forward to a relaxing cruise. On this leg of the journey, we were sitting in the first-class cabin. I looked across the aisle toward my son, who was reaching into the magazine rack for something to read.

Lo and behold, he pulled out *Christian Odyssey!*

I asked, "Did you bring that with you?"

He said, "No, it was in the rack."

How brilliant, I thought. When you're through with a first-class magazine, leave it in the first-class cabin (or anywhere else) for someone else's enjoyment and edification.

Pass it on, pass it on.

GG, email

Just finished reading your article "Too old to be useful?" Awesome! My husband and I

are finding ourselves in the position of parenting our 9½-year-old granddaughter. He will turn 60 this month and I am 56. We are among a growing number of "baby boomers" and older people finding ourselves in this place. It has proven to be a blessing! My husband recently retired and we are both working part-time—a choice, thankfully, that we could afford to do and be able to give her our time and energy.

How she has blossomed since being with us! And how we are learning to love in such a different way than with our four adult children when they were young.

We indeed are never too old to be useful.

Nancy, Minnesota

Letters for this section should be addressed to "Letters to the Editor." Send your letters to Worldwide Church of God, PO Box 5005, Glendora, CA 91740-0730, or by e-mail to john.halford@wcg.org.

The editor reserves the right to use letters so addressed in whole or in part, and to include your name and edit the letter for clarity and space. We welcome your comments.

In Other Words

Sticking together

By James R. Henderson

Having a wholesome breakfast prepares us for the day ahead. In many parts of Africa people eat a corn-based porridge that has various names. In Uganda it is called "Posho," and in South Africa it is "mealie pap."

The Kuria tribe of Tanzania has a proverb about it, and the meaning behind the saying is

"unity is strength." "Omoonto umwi nkiringuuri ababere nitoonga rebukima" translates as "one person is like thin porridge, two people are like a lump of porridge."



Perhaps you have a box of matches. Take out one match and you can snap it easily. Bunch ten or more matches together and you will find them hard to break.

So it is with Christians. Our togetherness in Christ strengthens us for the pressures of life.

If you are going through a difficult time, why not go to church and find fellowship there? Being with others can comfort us and make our faith and resolve stronger.

If you are a Christian in isolation, it is like eating thin, watered-down porridge that has little lasting sustenance.

But when you face trials with your brothers and sisters in Christ, it is like eating thick nourishing porridge that will help sustain you in the dark days ahead.

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How ugly are the feet?

By John Halford

I got a letter the other day from a reader canceling his subscription to *Christian Odyssey*. This letter concerned me. Not just because the reader was dissatisfied with the magazine. Letters like that go with the territory. But it was the reasons this reader gave for wanting to cancel that worried me.

First, he thought one of the articles in the August/September issue was “rather lightweight.” Well, OK. You can’t please all the people all the time. Many other readers liked the article. He also objected to an article endorsing the ordination of women. That actually appeared in our sister publication, *Together*, which is sent to members of the Worldwide Church of God. (He asked us to cancel his subscription to that, too.) And again—OK. That is a controversial subject—though I believe we have come down on the right side of it. Obviously this reader does not, and unless his objections are based on pure prejudice, I can respect his opinion.

But it was his third reason for cancellation that really threw me. I quote: “Also on the back of the issue it shows a picture of a barefoot man looking at the magazine. How tacky!” I had to read that twice. Then I looked again at the offending photograph.



“We must not allow our “druthers” to define our Christianity. Jesus wants us to be bigger than that.”

He’s right. We show a young man sitting on what looks like a bed or a couch, reading *Christian Odyssey*. And yes, he does have bare feet. Why is this a problem?

Sorry, but I just don’t see the difficulty. But I do think it illustrates another one.

As we go through life, we accumulate a collection of habits, prejudices and inhibitions. Some we have inherited from our culture. Others we may have inflicted on ourselves. Some are sensible, some are less so, while some are downright quirky. For example, my grandmother drilled into me when I was young that it was a sin to eat a slice of bread with jelly on it before I had eaten a slice spread with just butter. Why she believed this, I do not know. But to

her it was almost matter of faith.

That is the problem. These individual quirks can become so ingrained that they become items of faith. And we often carry them over into our belief system when we embrace Christianity.

That’s OK. The way of Jesus is big enough to include our foibles. Providing, that is, they do not become reasons to judge and condemn others. Paul, who perhaps more than any other New Testament figure had to deal with his converts’ idiosyncrasies, put this in perspective. Look what he told the Christians at Rome:

“Welcome with open arms fellow believers who don’t see things the way you do. And don’t jump all over them every time they do or say something you don’t agree with—even when it seems that they are strong on opinions but weak in the faith department. Remember, they have their own history to deal with. Treat them gently.

“For instance, a person who has been around for a while might well be convinced that he can eat anything on the table, while another, with a different background, might assume all Christians should be vegetarians and eat accordingly. But since both are guests at Christ’s table, wouldn’t it be terribly rude if they fell to criticizing what the other ate or didn’t eat?

God, after all, invited them both to the table... Or, say, one person thinks that some days should be set aside as holy and another thinks that each day is pretty much like any other. There are good reasons either way. So, each person is free

to follow the convictions of conscience.

“What’s important in all this is that if you keep a holy day, keep it for God’s sake; if you eat meat, eat it to the glory of God and thank God for prime rib; if you’re a vegetarian, eat vegetables to the glory of God and thank God for broccoli” (Romans 14:1–6, Message Bible).

We who represent God face more important issues than what to eat, or matters of the calendar. And certainly more than whether or not it is OK to be photographed with bare feet.

I suppose in the interests of peace-making I could ask our designer to paint in some socks. But that really is not the problem, is it? The problem is that we must not allow our “druthers” to define our Christianity. Jesus wants us to be bigger than that. •



Lovers of Pleasure...

Are we trying too hard to be happy?

By Dr. Archibald Hart

In 2 Timothy 3:3-5, there is a list of negative trends that characterize life in “the last days.” People will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boastful, proud, abusive, disobedient to their parents, etc. And then comes these words: “lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God.”

Over the past dozen years, our modern pursuit of pleasure has skyrocketed. Today we are relentlessly pushing the pleasure button in our brain—and overloading a system that is not designed to be continuously stimulated. The result is *anhedonia*, a condition in which our brains slowly lose the capacity to give us real pleasure.

Pleasure center

About 14 years ago I was approached by the Veterans Administration Hospital of Sepulveda in Los Angeles to help them determine whether cocaine addicts could actually recover. They would hospitalize young men, usually offspring of veterans, for cocaine addiction. But, after six months of treatment they were released, and within one day they were re-addicted!

The question they asked me and a colleague whose field is brain research was whether there is some way to tell, after two or three weeks of treat-

ment, if a patient is recovering. So we began our research, and this is how I began to understand the pleasure system of the brain.

There is, in the brain, a particular point—it’s called the *locus acumbens*—that allows us to experience pleasure. Most people refer to it as the pleasure center. There is no pleasure humans experience that doesn’t come from this small, specialized area of the brain.

It is not the locus for *happiness*. There is not one—it takes the whole brain to give you happiness.

“We need to learn to live “inside the box” of our pleasure limitations.”

That is an important difference.

There is a tendency among Christians, particularly evangelical Christians, to think that happiness, joy, and pleasure exist only in the mind, not the brain. They erroneously believe that the mind and the brain are separate. Such dualism is rooted in Gnostic heresies that go back to the first century.

Limitations

God designed the human body with physical limits. We have a limited amount of strength, for

example. We have a limited amount of time we can go without sleep or food. We must live within those limits. If we step outside them, we're in trouble.

Philippians 4:6 tells us that "the peace of God which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus." But I doubt whether most of us often experience that kind of peace. That's because we so often live "outside the box" of our human limitations.

We need to learn to live "inside the box" of our human limitations. The pleasure system is inside that box, and when we abuse it, when we over-stimulate it or tax it beyond its capabilities, we should not be surprised if we begin to have difficulty finding real joy in anything.

I can hear some people protesting: "But the Lord gives us his joy. We don't generate it ourselves—he gives it to

people say, "I'm bored." They could just as easily have said, "I'm feeling a little anhedonic right now."

It isn't just the children, though. Not long ago, I had a conversation with a pastor during a break on a conference. He admitted, "I can't find pleasure in anything anymore. I used to enjoy preaching, but I just don't find pleasure in it. My children don't give me any pleasure anymore. And just recently, I've noticed that I'm not even experiencing any pleasure with my wife. And what scares me most of all is that I don't seem to be able to take any pleasure in God anymore."

My response: "Join the club."

Causes of anhedonia

The major causes of *anhedonia*, which shuts down a person's pleasure system, are depression, stimulant drugs and stimulating behaviors.

Depression today is typically brought on by the prolonged stress of our accelerated pace of life. We don't know when to quit. Most of us are not sleeping enough. And we don't have enough downtime.

For the last century, the pace of life has steadily accelerated, but about 12 years ago, it suddenly skyrocketed. What was the cause? The Internet! The Internet opened the door to continuous, relentless stimulation, to steady abuse of the brain's pleasure center. Add to this the advent of a steady stream of computerized, hyper-realistic video games that, like the Internet, devour people's time for hours, even days, on end, and the opportunities for numbing the brain's pleasure center rise exponentially.

The second major cause of *anhedonia* is stimulant drugs. The problem with cocaine, for example, is that it totally

hijacks the pleasure system. In whatever form you take it, once it reaches the pleasure center, nothing else can provide pleasure.

The third cause of anhedonia is over-indulgence in stimulating behavior. Stimulating behavior can shut down the pleasure system just as effectively as depression and stimulant drugs.

Behaviors can be as stimulating as drugs. The pathways to the pleasure center use a neuro-transmitter called *dopamine*. In a newborn baby, the pathways to this pleasure center are un-encumbered. There is, so to speak, no grass, no weeds, and no obstacles in the way—pure joy.



“We cannot fully experience the joy that comes from God when our brains are over-stimulated.”

us.” Right—but we need *the brain* to appreciate it.

We cannot fully experience the joy that comes from God when our brains are abused with over-stimulation. We have to live within the box if we are going to live a happy life.

God does not give us happiness outside of our brain. It doesn't work that way. We need a healthy pleasure center to be happy.

Today we are caught up in a world that is pushing the brain's pleasure button too fast and too often. A simple thing, like just being together as a family, doesn't give people the pleasure it once did. You'll often hear young

Abusing the system

Have you watched the joy on a young baby's face as it recognizes its mother? That's the perfect pleasure system.

And it will stay that way for a lifetime if it isn't abused. The problem is, faced with the stress of modern life and the continuous flow of stimulation, we are "pushing the pleasure button" too frequently. So the pathway becomes obstructed, as if someone is building a barrier.

The more we overload the pleasure center, the higher the barrier goes. So we seek bigger and more pleasurable activities to get over that barrier to the pleasure center.

Then, if we just keep pushing it—cell phone in one ear, iPod in the other, eyes fixed on the computer screen, doing homework with one hand while text-messaging someone



with the other—this barrier to the pleasure center grows higher and higher.

We have developed a culture with such a high barrier to our pleasure system that the simple, little things of life can no longer give us pleasure.

I would like to challenge you to think about this. Think about what used to give you joy and pleasure that isn't doing so anymore.

Too much stress, too much stimulation, not enough downtime. The system needs rest, folks. And the trouble with our modern-day lifestyle, especially for our teenagers and kids, is that the pleasure system is not getting the rest it needs.

Multi-tasking overloads our system. Everything in the media, every television program, every movie, every music CD, is designed to give us higher and higher levels of stimulating responses. None of these exciting things are necessarily bad. What is bad is that they are unrelenting.

There is no downtime. That's the problem.

If you abuse your pleasure system, you reduce the capacity to experience happiness. You can't have *anhedonia* and be happy. It's impossible.

What to do?

What can we do to help preserve a healthy pleasure system? It is a paradox. If you pursue too much pleasure, you upset your pleasure system. You have to find a way to maximize your pleasure system, without overloading it. Fortunately, there are things you can do to achieve that.

Excitement is not happiness. In fact, it is the ultimate drug. It is excitement that people seek when engaging in any destructive or addictive behavior. Today's young people have the ability to experience excitement more than any generation in history—video games, digital music players, cell phones, personal computers, cable and satellite TV and radio, not to mention designer drugs.

But what is missing is imagination. Creativity is diminishing.

So the treatment is obvious. Limit the amount of excitement in your child's life. Limit the amount of time spent playing video games, the amount of non-serious television, the amount of music whose only aim is to excite.

If they are bored, help them remedy that by playing with friends, by finding a hobby. Help them learn to engage in activities such as talking to a family member, walking the dog, doing chores, reading a book or magazine, learning a musical instrument, or foreign language, making something from a kit, writing a story, exercising or just playing simple outdoor sports. Or just thinking.

I think the church is actually contributing to the problem. There has been a subtle shift in the last decade or so towards more of a stimulant-driven spirituality.

I think that we in the church need to pay particular attention to how we shape the spirituality of our people.

Youth leaders can play a significant role in this. We must shape a spirituality that preserves the integrity of our pleasure system. No spirituality that abuses the pleasure system can be legitimate—it can't be from God. God does not abuse his own creation.

If we want to experience the joy and the happiness that come from living in Christ, we have to "live inside the box" and not abuse the systems he has given us that offer genuine and lasting happiness. ●



Dr. Archibald Hart is a clinical psychologist and Dean Emeritus of the Graduate School of Psychology at Fuller Theological Seminary in Pasadena, California.

For more information on the topic of pleasure and happiness, we recommend Dr. Hart's recently published book, *Thrilled to Death* (Thomas Nelson, 2007). \$14.99.



Christmas Light

"In him was life, and that life was the light of men" (John 1:4).

By Mike Feazell

Brilliant displays of light and color are part and parcel with the Advent season. For some people, such displays may be little more than another advertising gimmick of modern retailers. But for believers, they can be another reminder of the glory of the One and Only Son of God, the light of the world, who brings the peace and rest for which the whole world aches and pines.

In the days when Jesus was born in Bethlehem more than 2,000 years ago, there was a devout old man called Simeon living in Jerusalem. The Holy Spirit had revealed to Simeon that he would not die before he had seen the Lord's Christ.

One day the Spirit led Simeon into the temple courts—the very day that Jesus' parents brought in the infant Jesus to fulfill the requirements of Torah.

When Simeon saw the baby, he took Jesus in his arms and praised God, saying: "Sovereign Lord, as you have promised, you now dismiss your servant in peace. For my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the sight of all people, a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel" (Luke 2:29-32).

Light to the Gentiles

Simeon praised God for what the scribes, the Pharisees, the chief priests and the teachers of the law could not comprehend: Israel's Messiah was not for the salvation of Israel only, but also for the salvation of all peoples of the world.

Isaiah had prophesied it long before: "It is too small a thing for you to be my servant to restore the tribes of Jacob and bring back those of Israel I have kept. I will also make you a light for the Gentiles, that you may bring my salvation to the ends of the earth" (Isaiah 49:6; cf. 42:6-7).

Jesus: the new Israel

The Israelites were the people of God. God had called them out from among the nations and set them apart through a covenant as his own special people. And he did it not merely for them, but for the eventual salvation of all nations (Isaiah 49:6).

Israel was to be a light to the Gentiles, but their light had gone out. They had failed to keep the covenant. But God is faithful to his covenant regardless of the faithlessness of his covenant people (Romans 3:3-4).

So, in the fullness of times, God sent his own Son to be the light of the world. He was the perfect Israelite, who perfectly kept the covenant as the new Israel (Romans 5:18-26). As the prophesied Messiah, the

perfect representative of the covenant people and the true light to the Gentiles, Jesus delivered both Israel and the nations from sin and reconciled them to God.

Through faith in Christ, giving our allegiance to him and becoming identified with him, we become members of the faithful covenant community, the people of God (Romans 3:27-30).

Righteous in Christ

We cannot muster righteousness on our own. Only as we are identified with Christ the Savior are we counted as righteous.

We are sinners, no more righteous in ourselves than Israel was. Only when we see our sinfulness and put our faith in the One through whom God justifies the wicked can we be counted as righteous for his sake (Romans 4:16, 22-25).

The church needs the grace of God as much as Israel does. All who put their faith in Christ, Gentile and Jew alike, are saved only because *God* is faithful and good, not because we have been faithful, or because we have found some secret formula, some “right” doctrine or the “right” church.

“He has rescued us,” Paul wrote in Colossians 1:13, “from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.”

Trust in Jesus

As easy as it might sound, it is hard to trust in Jesus. Trusting in Jesus means putting your life in his hands, and that means giving up control over your life.

That is not easy to do. We like to be in control of our own lives. We like to call the shots, make our own decisions and do things our own way.

King Ahaz of Judah was no exception. Ahaz rejected the sign God gave him for deliverance, for salvation, for peace. He had his own plans about how to best save the nation (Isaiah 7:1-17).

God has a long-range plan for our deliverance and security, and he has a short-range plan. But, like Ahaz, we cannot receive the fruit of his plans if we do not stand firm in faith.

Some people, like King Ahaz, stand firm in military might. Others stand firm in financial security, in their personal integrity or their personal reputation. Some stand firm in their skill or their strength, their ingenuity, deal-making or intelligence.

None of these things is bad or sinful in themselves, of course. But as humans we are inclined to put our confidence, energy and devotion into them instead of in the real source of security and safety and peace.

Walking humbly

When we commit to God our problems, along with the positive action we take in dealing with them, and trust in his care, provision and deliverance, he promises to be with us.

James wrote, “Humble yourselves before the Lord” (James 4:10). God calls us to put aside our lifelong crusade to defend ourselves, promote ourselves, preserve our possessions, protect our reputations and prolong our lives. God is our provider, our defender, our hope and our destiny.

The illusion that we can get our own lives under control must be exposed to the light, to Jesus, “the light of the world” (John 8:12). Then we can rise in him, becoming who we really are—God’s own precious children whom he saves and helps, whose battles he fights, whose fears he calms, whose pain he shares, whose future he secures and whose reputation he preserves.

“If we walk in the light, as he [God] is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin” (1 John 1:7).

In giving up all, we gain everything. In kneeling, we rise. In setting aside our illusion of personal control, we are clothed with all the glory and splendor and riches of the heavenly eternal realm.

“In these decorative lights we can enjoy a dim reflection of the true light, Jesus Christ.”

“Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you,” Peter wrote (1 Peter 5:7). What oppresses you? Your sins? An enemy? A financial disaster? A crushing disease? An inconceivable loss? An impossible situation that you are utterly helpless to do anything about? A disastrous and painful relationship? A blackening of your name? False accusations?

God has sent his Son, and through his Son, he takes our hands and lifts us up and shines the light of his glory into the dark and painful crisis we are enduring. Though we walk through the valley of the shadow of death, we are not afraid, because he is with us.

God has given us the sign that his rescue is certain: “Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord” (Luke 2:11).

Everywhere we look during this season, it seems, there is decorative lighting—white lights and colored lights and lit candles. In these physical lights we can enjoy a dim reflection of “the true light that gives light to every man” (John 1:9). ●

Managing the postm

Christian Odyssey: Some people think the traditional congregational style of church within a denomination is doomed. Do you agree with that?

Karl Moore: Not at all. Quite the opposite.

I think there are few things as useful to a Christian life as a good congregation. I grew up in a couple of different ones and when moving between three countries found them a great source of strength, encouragement and friendships. This summer my family and I spent six weeks in another part of the world, and what a delight it was for us to meet other Christians in our denomination and begin to develop friendships and a sense of “oneness.” We believe that the congregation is a great institution. But like many other great institutions it needs to “morph” into something a bit different from time to time.

CO: To be successful in the postmodern culture, many institutions are finding it necessary to “reinvent themselves.” To what extent do you think this is true for churches?

KM: Reinvention seems to be the order of the day for our society. Whether it be the way in which families are much more diverse, universities are no longer just for the elite or the voice of the BBC is no longer *the* voice of Britain.

When we think about the auto industry, we realize that GM and Ford are struggling, Chrysler was owned by Germans, Rover is dead all over, BMW makes “British” brands like the Mini, Jaguar is a Ford and Rolls is German. Stunning changes, yet we largely still drive internal-combustion engine-driven vehicles.

The tension is how do we keep what is the core of the institution—the most continuously valuable bits—and what do we see as something that can flex with the times. I believe Christianity is going through this type of process of discarding the Western/European culture parts to rethink what is at the heart.

The growth of the church in Africa and Asia is particularly helpful in this matter. As the center of Christianity, if not in power at least in numbers, shifts south and east, our brothers and sisters in these countries will bring extremely helpful views on what being “Christ-like” in today’s world really means. Humility and profound willingness to listen and learn will be paramount in this process, which will

undoubtedly take a decade or two to fully unfold.

CO: What current management trends are particularly helpful for church leaders?

KM: What we are experiencing in management is the early days of what might be called “postmodern management.” Operating in a turbulent, rapidly-evolving environment, leaders must spend less time relying on their own experience from years ago and spend more time listening to the front-line troops.



These front-line employees are often our youngest and least experienced, but their experiences can help us more rapidly realize when key changes are taking place. Strategy-making still lies with those at the top, but input must be gathered from a more diverse set of people.

Humility and listening strike me as Christian values! Though Christians still hold to eternal verities, the fact is that we are generally much less dogmatic than 20 years ago. We simply “know” less than we thought in the past.

We are also making more room for emotion in the workplace. The “baby-boomers” were overly focused on work, ambition, careers and their high need for achievement. At the same time the MBA-ization of business occurred with its concurrent focus on analysis, spreadsheets and the numbers. This excessively crowded out the human side of management.

Getting this balance is a very considerable challenge for business leaders, perhaps doubly so for church leaders. I believe that the leadership style of churches should evolve over time in concert with

Modern church

A conversation with Dr. Karl Moore



I believe that the leadership style of churches should evolve over time in concert with the changes in how members are led at work. Otherwise we will simply appear to be horrifically out of date.

the changes in how members are led at work. Otherwise we will simply appear to be horrifically out of date and “fuddy-duddyish.” Not that we should follow every fad, but we should change over time to be within the broad direction of management in our particular country. However, the core ideal of “servant leadership” should remain always at the heart of Christian leadership.

CO: The members of the younger adult generation—what some call “Generation X”—are leaving the traditional denominations, although they are not necessarily abandoning Christianity. Do you see this as a problem, or just a trend?

KM: This is a troubling trend. As an active member of a congregation, I certainly feel the loss of too many of the younger generation. We would love to have them around. On the other hand, this action is often not done out of a malicious attitude or even out of a particularly bad experience, but rather as simply a much better fit with their lives. They feel that it is a better way of living out their Christian lives.

Perhaps we may question their wisdom and judgment, but I don’t think we should question their sincerity or desire to do the Christian thing. I wish it was different, nevertheless undoubtedly Jesus is involved and will—and has—turned this to his ends and glory.

CO: How do you define “success” in terms of church leadership in the postmodern world?

KM: Success for me in the church is about changed lives, people brought into a life-changing relationship with Christ, the Father, the Spirit and a Christian community. Many times this is a qualitative rather than a quantitative thing and thus difficult to measure. This can make Christian leadership more trying at times, but when we are part of the process of Christian growth it is wonderfully rewarding.

CO: So if there was just one aspect of leadership that you wish you could get across to church leaders, what would it be?

KM: Recently I did a summer leadership series for the *Globe and Mail*, a Canadian broadsheet, where I interviewed one CEO a week. After eight weeks of this I wanted to hear from younger leaders. So I gathered three young university leaders (20, 22 and 30 years old), whom I knew fairly well, to talk about their view of leadership. They were very critical of the “boomers”—my generation. Subsequent interviews with other young leaders have only reinforced this rather sad thought.

What they did stress at some length was that leaders need to listen more, much more. Not to be so quick to rush to giving the solution, getting it done and dusted.

Of course, younger people often have silly ideas. We did at their age, and to be honest, we still do from time to time. An acquaintance of mine who taught executive courses with me at Oxford worked for the Strategic Planning unit in the Pentagon. It is interesting what the military—or at least parts of the military—do in “after action reviews.” Rather than starting with the General, they start with the newest buck private and let her give her comments. She will have some truly off-the-mark ideas, but she also doesn’t know whose sacred cow she is going, so she presses ahead to say some quite insightful things as well. From there they work their way up the ranks. Better listening is my “number one request” to church leaders.

When you have church conferences, what percentage of time is given over to listening to those from denomination headquarters? Hopefully less and less. If you want new ideas and things that work, make time—plenty of time—for those in the field and their experiences.

Karl Moore is an Associate Professor at the Faculty of Management, McGill University in Montreal, Canada. He also taught at Oxford University from 1995-2000. He has worked as a consultant on the area of study called “Change” to several denominations and this year gives a LW Anderson Lecture at Presbyterian College, on Leading Change in Churches.

“Oh no... I’m a Mother-in-law!”



By Muriel Hacker

I’ve heard a number of women say this, always accompanied by a grimace of distaste. There are many derogatory jokes about mothers-in-law, and it seems to be a relationship fraught with danger. As a result, it is a title few desire.

“With a positive and constructive attitude toward our son-in-law, we were able to make a contribution toward a successful marriage for our daughter.”

Early experience

We married against the advice of both our families, and I must admit, they were right: we were far too young. His family didn’t approve of me, mine didn’t approve of him, and both families were intent on parting us even after we were married, determined to make us choose between spouse and parents.

Each mother-in-law criticised her child’s mate constantly and loudly. On the one occasion when the two mothers and one grandmother met, hostility and enmity were loudly voiced, and they never met again. The fathers simply absented themselves. No help or advice was forthcoming, and no opportunity to create division avoided. Our parents’ approach was to be extremely antagonistic, and as a result, we all missed out on the relationship we could have had.

New direction

When it came time for our daughter to marry, my husband and I were determined not to make the same mistakes our parents did. We decided that instead of losing our child, as our parents had done, we had the opportunity to gain another family member, and so to expand our own horizons.

When our daughter and her fiancée married and moved from our home country of England 35 years ago, I wondered if we would ever see her again. But we knew he cared deeply for her, and that they had known each other for some time.

When I was visiting them some years later, my daughter, who was under some stress, suddenly burst into tears. I automatically turned to put my arms round her, but she turned to her husband. For a moment I felt devastated, but then realized that was right. He was the one she should be looking to, and I was the one who should retreat.

In time, my husband and I also moved to Australia, and for a few years we lived near our daughter and son-in-law. It was a wonderful time, as our grandchildren were by then just entering their teenage years.

What I’ve learned

If I could offer any advice as a long-time mother-in-law and grandmother, it would be two simple rules:

1. As a mother-in-law, never criticise your child’s spouse. Your part is to be helpful, reasonably objec-

tive, positive and supportive. Criticism will only exacerbate any problems and be divisive.

2. As a grandparent, never come between parents and children. There will obviously be times when you think your children are being too harsh with your grandchildren (or too soft), but you are not there to interfere, only support, and, *only if asked*, advise (translated “suggest,” not “tell”).

Blessings

When our daughter married, we gained another son who has been a wonderful husband and father, and he has also been most punctilious in ensuring that we and our daughter get together regularly despite high travel costs, and I am most appreciative of this. Over the years we’ve spent enjoyable holidays together and even shared some crises and problems, something that would have been unthinkable for us with our own parents.

We also gained good friends in our son-in-law’s parents. At first I was apprehensive about meeting them, but we now have a real friendship. We are confident that they, like us, have accepted the others’ child as a family

member in every sense.

No, I’m not being a “Pollyanna” about this. I know my son-in-law has faults, just as I know my own children have, but they can be overlooked in love, and are more than compensated for in other ways. And I realize that not everyone has the blessing of their child marrying a spouse like our daughter’s. But I do know that a mother-in-law can do a lot to help her child’s marriage by being as positive as she can be about her child’s spouse—and a lot of damage to her relationship with her child by being negative.

I like to remember the story of Naomi and Ruth in the book of Ruth. Naomi believed that at her age, life held little more for her. But through her daughter-in-law she gained a whole new life. Being a mother-in-law can add so much to your life, and not least of course is when grandchildren come along. ●



Muriel Hacker, originally from England, now lives in Perth, Western Australia.

I’ve Been Reading...

What About Those Who Have Never Heard?

by Gabriel Fackre, Ronald H. Nash & John Sanders

Reviewed by Paul Kroll

What is the fate of those who died without hearing the gospel or having an opportunity to put their faith in Christ? Can they receive salvation, or are they lost? What about babies and the mentally retarded and those who lived before the time of Jesus?

“These questions raise one of the most perplexing, provocative and perennial issues facing Christians,” writes Sanders.

The book presents three main views in answer to this mystery of the destiny of the unevangelized.

Ronald Nash, the late professor of theology and philosophy at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, presents the view in the book called restrictivism. This view claims that for a person to be saved he or she must know about Christ’s saving work and exercise faith in him before death.

John Sanders, Assistant Professor of Religion at Hendrix College, advocates a position called inclusivism. “In this model God saves people only because of the work of Christ, but people may be saved even if they do not know about Christ” (page 13).

Gabriel Fackre, Abbot Professor Emeritus of Christian Theology at Andover Newton Theological School, proposes the view called divine perseverance or what is often called “postmortem evangelization.” This view suggests that people who die unevangelized can still receive an opportunity for salvation after death.

The book refers to other views regarding the fate of the unevangelized not discussed in its pages. One idea is that God will

ultimately save the vast majority of humans, though proponents sometimes refuse to take a stance on the method God will use to save the unevangelized. Another view is that Christ encounters all people at the moment of death, at which time they receive an opportunity for salvation. Others advocate universalism, which teaches that everyone will be saved.

Sanders points out that the three positions discussed in the book or others referred to are not new ideas. They have had adherents throughout church history. While the three authors disagree about the destiny of the unevangelized, they do agree on the authority of the Bible and that salvation is possible only through Jesus Christ.

The book won’t provide a glib and iron-clad solution to the age-old question of the fate of the unevangelized. Yet, it will allow readers to become better informed about the complex issues involved and the texts of Scripture that are relevant to the topic.

After each author discusses his view, the other two contributors respond. The authors provide a succinct chart of the five main positions and a helpful list of suggested readings for those who want to pursue the topic further.

What About Those Who Have Never Heard? Three Views on the Destiny of the Unevangelized, by Gabriel Fackre, Ronald H. Nash & John Sanders, edited by John Sanders (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1995), paperback, 168 pages.

Small Miracles

By Gianni and Mirella Tarroni

Early last summer, Gianni and Mirella Tarroni had much to look forward to. Gianni could retire in a few months. And they would travel to Sardinia to enjoy their church's annual convention with friends from all over Italy. Life was predictable—and good. Then in one terrible instant everything changed.

On June 14, 2007, our son Giacomo suffered traumatic head injuries in a very serious motorcycle accident. He could easily have died. But thanks to God, Giacomo is alive. This event has changed our lives and set before us some priorities we had not known before.

Looking back over the last few months, we can see how a terrible trial has also been a wonderful blessing, one in which we saw God's hand time and time again watching over our injured son.

Call them coincidences if you like. We don't. We know they are answers to the many prayers of people around Italy and around the world who prayed to our heavenly Father for our son.

At the right time

At the scene of the accident, Giacomo suffered cardiac arrest. But this was reversed right away. The helicopter rescue team arrived at the scene of the accident in time to perform the vital intubation and transfer the main body functions to a machine, and thus to allow Giacomo's seriously damaged brain to rest. And when he arrived at the emergency room, a young and skilled neurosurgeon immediately opted for brain surgery, leaving an open breach in Giacomo's skull.

All these things needed to have happened or our son would have died at the scene or would have been in a coma for the rest of his life. As it was, he slowly began to respond to the treatment. We surely had some moments when the fear of losing Giacomo took hold of our minds. But the Comforter would intervene to remind us that God was with us.

After 26 days in the intensive care unit, Giacomo was transferred to the rehabilitation unit for seriously brain-damaged people at Ferrara, only 50 kilometers (about 31 miles) from our home. It was there that we began to see how, even in our own severe trial, we had



an opportunity to be a witness to the love and mercy of God. In the hospital were many other young people from all over Italy, all of whom had suffered terrible injuries. Some of them had waited several months before they could be admitted to this highly specialized rehabilitation center.

Even in this regard there was another "coincidence." Before Giacomo's accident, I had signed all the paperwork so that I could retire in December. But it worked out so that I was able to retire six months in advance, without any financial penalties, so we could be in the hospital all day, every day.

Helping at the hospital

The hospital at Ferrara soon became the center of our daily lives. Our continuous presence in the hospital allowed us to see the spiritual needs of many other people. The patients had come from all over Italy, and not many had the blessing of having family members close by, so we found ourselves with the opportunity to serve not only our son, but many of the other patients, bringing them a drink of water, peeling fruit, picking up dropped objects or just offering words of comfort.

This taught us a valuable lesson. When God per-

21st-Century Bystander

By Joyce Catherwood

forms a miracle in the life of a believer, he wants to give him or her the strength that comes from faith to witness his grace and bring the good news of the wonderful hope of the fulfillment of God's plan to those who suffer.

We have indeed experienced putting the word of God into practice. Before the accident and our experience in the hospital, we knew it because we had read it. But now we can say that the Spirit would remind us of the scriptures that we needed in order to find comfort and a solution to our fears and human apprehensions. When we were discouraged in seeing Giacomo lying still and unconscious, the Spirit seemed to tell us, "God is almighty and he can make anybody stand." When our own strength weakened, the Spirit reminded us that no trial can be greater than our capability to bear it. When we cried out, "Why Giacomo and not one of us?" the Spirit immediately replied that "everything works together for good to those who love God."

Strengthened by suffering

This trial has helped us understand that God didn't give us this physical life to use all of our time to become accomplished engineers or successful businessmen, as if physical life were an end in itself. God has given us life so that we seek him and love him. He wants to give us eternal life to be lived in his presence. We have been called to live in the faith of Christ in every circumstance of our lives, being fully aware that we haven't been promised an easier life than other people, and fully aware that suffering coming from circumstances and events of this life strengthens us spiritually.

The god of this world tries to destroy believers, but the Creator strengthens them in the faith and sets them ready for the main spiritual mission: to be a living witness and light in a world that is in anguish and spiritual darkness. Every trial and every suffering can help us develop a spiritual perspective.

We know that our Father has rejoiced in the many prayers by many believers from all over the world. To him they were as "perfume," and he has chosen to reach out to us with his comfort, mercy and a peace that "passes understanding."

Giacomo continues to make slow but steady progress. At first it was thought that he would be paralyzed on his left side. But he is now able to make small voluntary movements with his left leg. Everyone is encouraged. Please keep praying.

I wonder if I qualify as a "Bystander," too. For the last several years, I've written about gospel women, bystanders whose lives were touched by Jesus as he walked the face of this earth. These women lived in an oppressive culture that defined them as inferior. I wanted them to come alive, to tell their stories. As a woman, I found myself identifying with their reactions, their feelings and emotions. I stood beside them as they encountered Jesus. Observing how he treated these women brought about a turning point in my life. It showed me what Jesus, the healer of hearts, is like. His unconditional love, tenderness, compassion all became more real to me.

So, yes, I think we too can call ourselves "bystanders." The Son of Man willingly opened himself up and disclosed himself to us through the pages of the Gospels so that our lives here and now can be touched personally. And mine certainly has been.

After years of serving God out of fear and self-interest, my heart broke the first time I truly found myself at the foot of the cross and realized the depth and cost of God's love for me. I wept deep-cleansing tears that softened my hardened and dried-out soul. I couldn't help but respond to such overwhelming love.

And in the same way I stand transformed at the cross of Jesus and the unthinkable rejection and agony he suffered for me, I am also transformed by the Incarnation—God of all creation born as a helpless baby. The very thing we as humans long for, the splendor and glory of the heavenly realm, our Savior readily gave up to become an infinitesimal speck of life in Mary's dark womb. Just as Jesus' death convicts me of his unconditional love, so does his birth.

Who, but Jesus, would abandon greater power and authority than we can imagine for still, quiet moments as a fragile infant nestled in the arms of a teen-aged girl, unable to even lift his head? Who, but Jesus, would trade the praises and adulation of thousands of angels to become a three-month-old baby, whose only claim to fame was a silly, toothless grin?

Some time ago, I came across a book with illustrations depicting Jesus from when he was first born through toddler age. I stared at the images, and again, I wept. On one page, a young Mary is protectively embracing her newborn Jesus. He has wispy hair, wrinkles on his forehead, and dark, searching eyes. This was God, with tiny fingers and toes, who would soon begin to rediscover the world he himself had created through the eyes, heart and mind of a small child. The incarnation is a thing of beauty, of wonder and mystery, of unconditional love beyond our comprehension. Something truly to be celebrated!

As we join the ranks of the first-century bystanders in the greatest story ever told, we enter the divine reality, we encounter Jesus and our hearts are eternally changed. ●



Discovering **Handel's Messiah**

One of the greatest musical masterpieces of all time was written by a man on the edge of despair.

By John McLean

In September 1741, George Frederick Handel (1685-1759) sat down to begin work on a new composition. Just 24 days later, he had finished what some consider the greatest musical work of all time. Composers like Handel were the Steven Spielbergs and Andrew Lloyd Webbers of their day.

Handel was German by birth, but had spent many years in Italy, where he had learned to write operas. By 1738 he already had about 40 to his name. He settled in London, and soon became England's most popular and successful composer. In 18th-century London, opera, and especially Italian opera, was all the rage. Fame and fortune awaited those who could satisfy the popular demand. Handel knew how to do that.

But show business, then as now, is a fickle and capricious trade. By 1740, the public's appetite for opera had begun to wane. Handel had exhausted his popularity and much of his finances by writing and staging two fiascos that played for only four nights before being laughed off the stage. With his reputation in tatters, and facing bankruptcy, his career seemed over.

At this low point in his life, a former colleague, Charles Jennens, sent him an idea for a new composition. Jennens was what today would be considered a scriptwriter, composing the libretto (i.e., the words) of operas and other long vocal works.

What Jennens was proposing was an oratorio. The laws of the time did not allow the performance of religious drama on stage. An oratorio got around this. It is, like opera, an extended musical work, usually with a religious theme. Although based on biblical texts, it is staged without scenery or costumes, and the performers do not play specific roles. In modern terms you could say it was more of a documentary than a play.

Jennens' libretto skillfully blended Old and

New Testament scriptures to tell the story of Jesus Christ from the earliest prophecies of his birth to his triumphant resurrection and return. He called it *The Messiah*.

The idea appealed to Handel. Thus began the incredible three weeks of creative energy. The popular legend has it that he shut himself up in his room, forgetting about food or sleep. His servants would find him in a trance, with tears streaming down his face, totally wrapped in inspiration. When he finished the "Hallelujah Chorus," the story goes, Handel was reported to have said "I did think I did see all Heaven before me, and the Great God Himself."

Some serious students of Handel's life wonder if this story is somewhat romanticized. We may never know for sure. It may be that *The Messiah* was produced more mundanely, although with an unusual display of disciplined and applied concentration.

The *Messiah* premiered on April 13, 1742, and was an immediate success.

Handel's fame and fortune was restored. He went on to compose many more oratorios before his death in April 1759. But nothing surpassed the genius and inspiration of *The Messiah*.

When you think of *The Messiah*, it is probably the famous arias and choruses that come to mind. Why not treat yourself to the whole thing? It lasts about two and a half hours. That may seem rather intimidating if you are not used to listening to classical music, but it is an investment you won't regret. You can borrow the tapes or a CD from your library, or look out for a performance in your local area, or on radio. They are quite popular at this time of year.

People who have known only the highlights are often deeply moved when they first experience the entire *Messiah* in context. Why not discover for yourself how Handel's masterpiece can lift your spirits and fill you with hope?

We have prepared a Listeners' Guide that will

help you follow the performance and know where you are as the story unfolds.

Unlike a play, an oratorio is performed without scenery or costumes. The composer tells his story with a combination of songs (called arias) and choruses. There

are also short recitatives, between the arias and choruses to advance the story line and provide continuity.

Here are the arias, choruses and recitatives of the Messiah, in order, with the scriptural references on which they are based.

PART ONE

Theme: The prophecies of the Messiah, and the birth and ministry of Jesus.

Overture

Recitative: Comfort ye, comfort ye my people. (Isaiah 40:1-3)

Aria: Every valley shall be exalted. (Isaiah 40:4)

Chorus: And the glory of the Lord shall be revealed. (Isaiah 40:5)

Recitative: (Haggai 2:6-7; Malachi 3:1)

Aria: But who may abide the day of his coming? (Malachi 3:2)

Chorus: And he shall purify the sons of Levi. (Malachi 3:3)

Recitative: Behold, a virgin shall conceive and bear a Son. (Isaiah 7:14; Matthew 1:23)

Aria and Chorus: O thou that tellest good tidings to Zion. (Isaiah 40:9; Isaiah 60:1)

Recitative: (Isaiah 60:2-3)

Aria: The people that walked in darkness have seen a great light. (Isaiah 9:2)

Chorus: For unto us a Child is born, unto us a Son is given. (Isaiah 9:6)

Recitative: There were shepherds abiding in the field. (Luke 2:8)

Recitative: (Luke 2:9)

Recitative: (Luke 2:10-11)

Recitative: (Luke 2:13)

Chorus: Glory to God in the highest. (Luke 2:14)

Aria: Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion. (Zechariah 9:9-10)

Recitative: (Isaiah 35: 5-6)

Aria: He shall feed his flock like a shepherd. (Isaiah 40:11; Matthew 11:28-29)

Chorus: His yoke is easy, and his burden is light. (Matthew 11:30)

PART TWO

Theme: The sacrifice of the Messiah for sin, humanity's rejection of the Savior, and the ultimate defeat of all who oppose the power of God.

Chorus: Behold the Lamb of God. (John 1:29)

Aria: He was despised and rejected of men. (Isaiah 53:3; Isaiah 50:6)

Chorus: Surely he hath borne our griefs. (Isaiah 53:4-5)

Chorus: And with his stripes we are healed. (Isaiah 53:5)

Chorus: All we, like sheep, have gone astray. (Isaiah 53:6)

Recitative: (Psalm 22:7)

Chorus: (Psalm 22:8)

Recitative: (Psalm 69:20)

Aria: Behold, and see if there be any sorrow like unto his sorrow. (Lamentations 1:12)

Recitative: (Isaiah 53:8)

Aria: But thou didst not leave his soul in hell. (Psalm 16:10)

Chorus: Lift up your heads, O ye gates. (Psalm 24:7-10)

Recitative: (Hebrews 1:5)

Chorus: Let all the angels of God worship him. (Hebrews 1:6)

Aria: Thou art gone up on high. (Psalm 68:18)

Chorus: The Lord gave the word; great was the company of the preachers. (Psalm 68:11)

Aria: How beautiful are the feet of them that preach the gospel of peace. (Romans 10:15)

Chorus: Their sound is gone out into all the lands. (Romans 10:18; Psalm 19:4)

Aria: Why do the nations so furiously rage together? (Psalm 2:1-2)

Chorus: Let us break their bonds asunder. (Psalm 2:3)

Recitative: (Psalm 2:4)

Aria: Thou shalt break them with a rod of iron. (Psalm 2:9)

Chorus: Hallelujah! (Revelation 19:6; 11:15; 19:16)

PART THREE

Theme: Resurrection and the final defeat of death and evil.

Aria: I know that my Redeemer liveth. (Job 19:25-26; 1 Corinthians 15:20)

Chorus: (1 Corinthians 15:21-22)
Recitative: (1 Corinthians 15:51-52)

Aria: The trumpet shall sound. (1 Corinthians 15:52-53)

Recitative: (1 Corinthians 15:54)

Duet: O death, where is thy sting? O grave, where is thy victory? (1 Corinthians 15:55-56)

Chorus: Thanks be to God. (1 Corinthians 15:57)

Aria: If God be for us, who can be against us? (Romans 8:31, 33-34)

Chorus: Worthy is the Lamb. (Revelation 5:12-13)

The First Church Christmas

By Paul Kroll

“Joy to the world!” That glorious Christmas worship season Christians look forward to each year is here. Yet, surprisingly, for the first 300 years of the church’s life there was no Christmas celebration of Jesus’ birth. Possible reasons include:

- The apostolic church had expected that Christ’s coming in glory was just around the corner and its worship pointed to that event.
- The church’s primary focus was on Christ’s death and resurrection and his presence through the Spirit, which were celebrated during Easter and Pentecost.
- Epiphany, or “manifestation,” another early church festival, afforded a remembrance of Jesus’ Incarnation and birth.
- There was no corresponding Old Testament festival from which Christmas could emerge, as there had been for Pasha or Easter (Jewish Passover) and the Christian Pentecost (Feast of Weeks).
- The date of Jesus’ birthday was, perhaps, not known.

First Christmas at Rome

In A.D. 336 the church at Rome proclaimed December 25 as the *dies natalis Christi*, “the birthday of Christ.” An entry in the Chronograph of A.D. 354, or the Philocalian Calendar, records, “Our Lord Jesus Christ was born on the eighth before the calends of January,” or December 25. It doesn’t state



25, the day of the winter solstice in the old Roman calendar. The cult of the Sun was of grave concern to the church at Rome. It was introduced in A.D. 218 when the teenager, Elagabalus (c. 203-222), became the new emperor of the Roman Empire. Elagabalus venerated the Sun god and introduced his cult into Rome under the title *deus Sol invictus*, that is, the invincible, undefeated or unconquered Sun god.

Emperor Aurelian, Roman emperor from A.D. 270 to 275, decreed the Unconquered Sun as supreme god of the Roman Empire. Mithra, a god of Persian origin, was part of the Sun cult worship. Mithra’s birthday was also on December 25. The Roman



“Christmas celebration was an effective evangelizing event for turning the hearts and minds of people to Christ and away from worship of Sol.”

that Christmas was being observed on that date, but we can be reasonably certain the observance began at Rome around this time.

A generation after the Chronograph was published, church father John Chrysostom (c. 347-407) wrote that Rome was celebrating a December 25th Christmas: “On this day also the birthday of Christ was lately fixed at Rome in order that while the heathen were busy with their profane ceremonies, the Christians might perform their sacred rites undisturbed.”

The “profane ceremonies” referred to by Chrysostom centered around the birthday of the “Invincible Sun,” or Sol, which was also celebrated on December

Emperors Diocletian and Galerius, who ruled prior to Constantine the Great (306-337), venerated the *Sol Mithras Deus invictus* cult. Constantine himself, acknowledged as the first Christian emperor, was a devotee of the Sun cult for a good part of his life.

Struggle against Sun worship

A December 25th birthday celebration for Christ served to compete with and counteract the festival of the pagan devotees of Sol-Mithra. The church was able to challenge the worshippers of Sol Invictus with Jesus Christ, whom they proclaimed as the true Son of God and the Sun of Righteousness (Malachi 4:2; Revelation 1:13, 16).

Christmas celebration was an effective evangelizing event for turning the hearts and minds of people to Christ and away from worship of Sol. It also provided church members with a safe, Christ-centered worship alternative to other heathen festivals, such as the late December Saturnalia. Simultaneously, the Roman church could promote prayerful and moral behavior, in sharp contrast to the licentiousness that accompanied the pagan festivals.

Celebration of Christmas (or Advent, a term referring to Christ's coming) also was effective in combating heresies about Jesus, pointing to his incarnation as a real human being.

It's not surprising that the December 25th Christ-

mas celebration quickly spread from the congregations in Rome to churches throughout the empire. From the fourth century on, every Western calendar assigns Christmas to December 25. By the middle of the fifth century, most of the Eastern churches had adopted the Christmas festival, and by the time of Jerome (347-420) and Augustine (354-430), it is everywhere established in Christendom.

Over the next thousand years, Christmas observance followed the expanding community of Christianity around the world. Today Advent-Christmas is one of the church's most important worship seasons. Have a joyful Christmas celebration and a blessed new year. •

Speaking of Life...



with Joseph Tkach

In the Broadway play, *A Raisin in the Sun*, a father dies and is survived by his wife, a son and a daughter. Each one of them has a different idea about how to use the inheritance from the father's death.

The widowed wife wants to buy a new home. The daughter sees it as an opportunity for her to go to medical school. The son wants to go into business with a friend.

The son persuades them to see it his way. "Don't you see," he says to his mother and sister, "if I take this money I can do all these things for you." So, the son gets the money, and gives it to his friend to start their business. His dream is smashed when the friend absconds with the money and skips town.

Now the son has to tell his mother and sister that all the money is lost. Their reactions are interesting. The mother responds sympathetically. She hugs her son, rubs his neck and says, "Honey, I know you feel so bad!"

The sister is astonished and asks the mother, "How can you love him after what he has done? He doesn't deserve to be loved!"

That's the reaction a lot of people have to the gospel. It's hard to believe that God forgives us and loves us after everything we've done.

Listen to how the mother in *A Raisin in the Sun* replies to her daughter's harshness:

"Honey, when do you think is the time to love somebody? Is it when they get a big promotion? Is it when they're successful? Is it when all their investments pay off? Is that the time you love somebody? Honey, the time to

love someone is when they are down and out. The time to love someone is when they've made a mistake in their life and they feel bad. The time to love somebody is when they have nobody to reach out to. The time to love somebody is when life has whipped and beaten them. That's the time to love somebody."

Isn't that exactly what God does? Jesus described the Father's love for us in these words:

"For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because he has not believed in the name of God's one and only Son" (John 3:16-18).

When we believe and embrace God's love, we have new life in Jesus Christ. Our fear, our grief and our anguish about all our failures are lifted off our shoulders and we can rest in his love, knowing we're clean and forgiven and accepted and loved. And knowing we are safe in his loving embrace, we can extend his love to those around us.

It's a new life, a life of believing what God has done for us through Jesus Christ, and there's nothing else like it. •

This article is derived from *Speaking of Life*, a weekly video program presented by Joseph Tkach on the *Worldwide Church of God* website. You can watch it online, listen online, or download the video, audio, or text. For all these options, go to www.wcg.org/av/spol.htm.

The Boys

By Kerry Gubb

Since I am privileged to be living on an Aussie “bush-block,” my early mornings include stepping out the back door bearing sunflower seeds, bread crusts and assorted food scraps: breakfast for The Boys: Caractacus, Horace, Barry, Larry and Colin. Others might recognize them as Kookaburra, Megapode Brush Turkey, Butcher Bird, Lorikeet and Currawong, respectively. But to me, they have become The Boys.

Is the feeling mutual? Nice to think so, but one can't really know.

Are they at least a bit grateful? They haven't said so. They're wild birds; they can't talk.

I chat while feeding them: an authentic bird-man. But it's all one-way.

I give, give, give.

They take, take, take.

Enthusiastically, for sure. That's what's so delightful. They relish what I do for them. But do they even like me? Just a little?

I sometimes tell them they don't deserve me, nor do they do anything useful enough to warrant my generosity and affection. When the goodies are gone, so are they. And not a word of appreciation from any of them.



Barry the Butcher Bird



Horace the Brush Turkey



Colin the Currawong



Larry the Rain

“We can do nothing sufficient to warrant our Father's generosity and affection. But we can thank Him.”

I'm usually on time. If not, well—let's just say The Boys find an audible way to remind me that they're waiting!

It's a funny arrangement, really. I truly savour the interplay—look forward to satisfying their insatiable appetites. Early mornings are magic in the bush—so alive and busy.

The Boys? I love them to pieces.

Ingrates!

Will I stop feeding them because they can't thank me?

Hardly! I love them way too much.

If you've ever had a wild animal or bird allow you to approach them or eat out of your hand, or even seek you out to play (like dolphins), you know the thrilling sensation of momentary communion across that gulf. And you know why I have to keep feeding The Boys.

Welcome to the world of God

Jesus said (Matthew 6:26) that The Boys “do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them.” That's the way of creation.

The Way of Trinitarian Love

By C. Baxter Kruger

I feed them too. Their Father's using me to feed them each morning. It's him they need to be thanking, not me.

Jesus said one other thing in that verse: "Are you not much more valuable than they?"

We can do nothing sufficient to warrant our Father's generosity and affection. And too often we come to him with "Gimme, Gimme" prayers and pay little attention to him until the next want arises.

Ingrates!

Will he stop providing? Will he withdraw his generosity because we can't thank him?

Ah, but we *can* thank him.

Across all the variety of creation, just one of God's creatures is endowed with capacity to experience and express in conscious language their gratitude, affection, adoration, worship and love



bow Lorikeet



Caractacus the Kookooburra

to the Father. Only humankind can choose to approach him in prayer and fully savour communion with him across that gulf.

Do we?

Will we?

Will he withdraw his generosity because we don't thank him? Hardly! He loves us way too much.

But still, we can thank him.

Powerful lesson, isn't it? That's perhaps why Jesus told us to consider The Boys—"for they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns; yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they?" God loves us even when we don't thank him.

There is something more stunning than the fact that the Father's Son himself came to be among us—and that is that we rejected him. The Gospel narratives do not portray a larger crowd helplessly watching in horror as a handful of wicked men play their power politics and snuff out their greatest threat. The leadership wanted Jesus dead, gone, eliminated—and so did the crowds.

But the shouts, "Crucify, crucify him!" say so much more than simply "we want this man out of the picture." There is deep bitterness here. There is hostility and scorn, wrath, enmity. Give him vinegar. Damn him. "We have no king but Caesar."

It is astonishing indeed that the Father's Son became what we are, and it is even more stunning that we rejected and abused and crucified him, but is it not more stunning still, that Jesus willingly accepted and endured it all, when one word would have unleashed legions of angels to his defense?

Either the Father, Son and Spirit were caught off guard by our hatred of Jesus, or there is a redemptive genius at work here that is too beautiful for words. Was the rejection of the Jews and the Romans not foreseen by the Triune God? Was the Father surprised when we killed the solution? Or could it be that the vile rejection of the Father's Son by the human race

was clearly anticipated and incorporated as a critical part in bringing about our reconciliation? Could it be that the Triune God's way of reconciliation involves his acceptance of our hatred? Could the key to reconciliation be the Trinity's willful submission to our bizarre darkness and its bitter judgment?

What sin could be more heinous than hating—and then murdering—God, and what reconciliation could be more beautiful and personal and real than the Lord willingly submitting himself to suffer our wrath, thereby meeting us in our foul darkness? The Father, Son and Spirit are eternally serious about loving us and about bringing us to taste and feel and know their love (adoption), but how do you reach people so lost in their confusion that they hide in fear from you?

We can become so accustomed to hearing about Jesus suffering the wrath of God that we cannot see the more obvious New Testament point that he suffered from our wrath. And in suffering our wrath, in bearing our scorn, he was actually reaching us in our terrible darkness, thereby bringing his relationship with his Father and his own anointing in the Holy Spirit into our world of flesh.

Christmas is not merely a sweet story about the baby Jesus; it is a story about the staggering love of the Triune God—a love determined to meet the real and broken us, a love that stoops and suffers to meet us, indeed, a love that becomes the scapegoat of our hostility in order to reach us in our pain. Jesus, the Father's Son, the One anointed in the Holy Spirit, bore our scorn, suffered our hostility and rejection in order to bring his life with his Father and Spirit to the real us, forever. And he has done it. ●



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Born of a woman

A study of Galatians 4

By Mike Morrison

How can Gentiles inherit the promises God gave to Abraham? Some people said that they ought to keep the laws of Moses if they want to be part of the covenant people. Paul said *no!* And he connects their inheritance with the birth of Jesus.

Paul ends chapter 3 by saying that Gentiles can inherit the promises of salvation without any need to keep the laws of Moses (Gal. 3:29). In chapter 4, Paul uses two analogies to explain what he means.

The underage child (verses 1-3)

What I am saying is that as long as the heir is a child, he is no different from a slave, although he owns the whole estate. In the analogy Paul is creating, the child is Judaism. Jews had the promise of salvation, but not salvation itself. They were heirs, but had not yet inherited the blessings.

They were like underage children in another respect, too: They were under authority. In wealthy Greek families, children were supervised by slaves, and the children had to obey orders just as much as the slaves did. The child **is subject to guardians and trustees until the time set by his father.**

The law was “put in charge” for a while, but we are *no longer* under its supervision (3:24-25). People who put themselves under old covenant laws are putting themselves back into slavery, when the Father wants them to come out.

Paul includes himself in this description: **So also, when we [the Jews] were children, we were in slavery under the basic principles of the world.** These “basic principles” are the ABCs, the schoolwork done by elementary-age children. Before Christ, the Jews were under all the details of the Mosaic law. God was treating them like children—which was appropriate when they first came out of Egypt. But now the time had come for change.

Coming of age (verses 4-7)

But when the time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under law. For this momentous transition in the relationship between God and his people, God did not send a prophet or a lawgiver—he sent his Son. But the Son did not descend from heaven like an angel—he came as a human being, born of a woman.

There is nothing strange about someone being born of a woman—birth is so normal that it is strange to make a point of it. Paul says that the Son of God was born of a woman because it was not what anyone expected. The Son of God, though divine, became a human infant—an underage child. Moreover, he was “born under the law”—obligated to keep the old covenant.

Why did the Lord of all creation become a child under the authority of the law? He did it **to redeem those under law, that we might receive the full rights of sons.** He became subject to the law so he could redeem people under the law. He had to become *one of them* in order to rescue them. He had to become human in order to rescue humans. Salvation depends on the fact that he was “born of a woman”—fully human. His birth has become one of the most celebrated holidays in Christianity.

Now that he has done this, we have the rights of adult children in two ways: 1) We are freed from the law, and 2) We have begun to experience the inheritance that God offers.

Paul addresses the Gentiles: **And because you are children, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, “Abba! Father!”** (4:6, NRSV). “Abba” is a term of respect and affection, similar to the English word “Dad,” used by children even after they become adults. We are adults who can call God our Dad. Since the Spirit who lived in Jesus also lives in us, we are God’s children.

The Spirit shows that God has elevated us: **So you are no longer slaves, but God’s children; and since you are his children, God has made you also heirs** (4:7, TNIV).

The same two points.

Backwards into slavery? (verses 8-11)

Paul explains that Gentiles were enslaved, too: **Formerly, when you did not know God, you were slaves to those who by nature are not gods.** Idolatry is oppressive.

But now that you know God—or rather are known by God—how is it that you are turning back to those weak and miserable principles? Do you wish to be enslaved by them all over again? In other words, Now that God has treated you as adults, why would you want to go back to kindergarten? Paul is say-



ing, You have been freed from an oppressive religion; why would you want to be enslaved to basic principles again?

Indeed, the people were already keeping some unnecessary laws: **You are observing special days and months and seasons and years!** Have they given up on the grace they had in Christ? **I fear for you, that somehow I have wasted my efforts on you.**

A focus on special times is childish. Our relationship with God is based on Christ and the Spirit, not on the calendar.

Son of the slave woman (verses 21-31)

Starting in verse 21, Paul uses another analogy to dissuade them from the law: **Tell me, you who want to be under the law, are you not aware of what the law says?** Then he reminds them of the story of Abraham, Sarah and Hagar in Genesis 16-21. He sees in it an ironic allegory.

For it is written that Abraham had two sons, one by the slave woman and the other by the free woman. His son by the slave woman was born in the ordinary way; but his son by the free woman was born as the result of a promise. Ishmael was conceived in Hagar in the normal way; Isaac was conceived as a miracle, long after Sarah had passed menopause. One was the product of the flesh; the other was the result of God's promise.

Paul sees in this a useful parallel for the situation believers faced in Galatia. **These things may be taken figuratively, for the women represent two covenants. One covenant is from Mount Sinai and bears children who are to be slaves: This is Hagar.**

The covenant from Sinai (the law of Moses) corresponds to the slave woman. The same religious system existed in Paul's day: **Now Hagar stands for Mount Sinai in Arabia and corresponds to the present city of Jerusa-**

lem, because she is in slavery with her children. In this allegory, the Judaizers and their followers are in slavery.

But we are children of Abraham in a different way, and we are in a spiritual reality: **But the Jerusalem that is above is free, and she is our mother. We, like Isaac, are children of promise.** We are children through faith in Christ, the promised seed of Abraham (3:16).

Paul sees one more parallel in the story, corresponding with the fact that Jews were persecuting people who felt freed from the law: **At that time the son born in the ordinary way persecuted the son born by the power of the Spirit. It is the same now.**

So Paul quotes Gen. 21:10: **But what does the Scripture say? "Get rid of the slave woman and her son, for the slave woman's son will never share in the inheritance with the free woman's son."** We will never inherit the promises of God by looking to the flesh, nor by looking to the calendar, nor by looking to the laws given on Mt. Sinai. We look to the child of promise—Jesus Christ.

In the next chapter, Paul will say more about how our freedom should be used. •

Questions for discussion

- Do we have different rules for children as opposed to adults? (v. 3)
- Many people have had poor relationships with their fathers. What can they do if "Dad" is not a term of respect and affection? (v. 6)
- Do I sometimes long for the ABCs of an earlier age? (v. 9)
- In Galatians, Paul was writing to Gentiles. Would he use a word like slavery if he were writing to Jews? (v. 25)

The Greeks had a Word for it

"Paidagōgos"

"The law was our schoolmaster to bring us unto Christ," says Galatians 3:24. The word "schoolmaster" is the King James translation of *paidagōgos*, from which we get the English word *pedagogue*, meaning "teacher."

But in ancient Greece, a *paidagōgos* was not a schoolteacher. It is difficult to translate this word because it refers to something that does not exist in our society. The Greeks had a word for it because they had "it," and we do not.

Paidagōgos comes from two Greek words: *pais*, meaning child, and *agōgos*, meaning leader. A *paidagōgos* was usually a slave; he made sure the children went to school and did their homework. He taught manners and good behavior, but not aca-

demic topics. He supervised the children, and disciplined misbehavior. *Paidagōgoi* had a reputation or stereotype for excessive discipline, and Greeks rarely had fond memories of the slave who supervised them.

The law was like that, Paul says. It watched over the Jewish people and gave them discipline until Christ came. He extends the analogy into chapter 4, saying that young children are like slaves—under the authority of others until a set time. And the Jews (he includes himself by using the word "we") were enslaved until Christ came (4:1-3).

But now that the true Teacher has come, "we are no longer under a schoolmaster" (3:25).

Hmm...

I have always thought of Christmas time, when it has come round, as a good time; a kind, forgiving, charitable time; the only time I know of, in the long calendar of the year, when men and women seem by one consent to open their shut-up hearts freely, and to think of people below them as if they really were fellow passengers to the grave, and not another race of creatures bound on other journeys.

Charles Dickens

Christmas is a time when you get homesick—even when you're home.

Carol Nelson

There has been only one Christmas—the rest are anniversaries.

W.J. Cameron

In the old days, it was not called the Holiday Season; the Christians called it "Christmas" and went to church; the Jews called it "Hanukkah" and went to synagogue; the atheists went to parties and drank. People passing each other on the street would say "Merry Christmas!" or "Happy Hanukkah!" or (to the atheists) "Look out for the wall!"

Dave Barry

And the Grinch, with his Grinch-feet ice cold in the snow, stood puzzling and puzzling, how could it be so? It came without ribbons. It came without tags. It came without packages, boxes or bags. And he puzzled and puzzled 'till his puzzler was sore. Then the Grinch thought of something he hadn't before. What if Christmas, he thought, doesn't come from a store. What if Christmas, perhaps, means a little bit more.

Dr. Seuss

A scientist said, making a plea for exchange scholarships between nations, "The very

best way to send an idea is to wrap it up in a person." That was what happened at Christmas. The idea of divine love was wrapped up in a Person.

H.E. Luccock

If a man hasn't discovered something he will die for, he isn't fit to live.

Martin Luther King, Jr.

To say, "I don't have to repent because God has already forgiven me," is like saying "Because my lover has forgiven me, there's no need for us to be loving." To say, "I don't have to live a moral life because God has forgiven me," is like saying "Because my beloved loves me and desires me, I don't have to be with her." There is always a possibility that we can reject the divine Lover's love and life, but we should never be under the illusion that this possibility is more than a tragic folly. Rejecting our divine Lover, spurning God's love and life, is possible, but it is insanity. And it is hard to understand why anyone would.

Michael Jinkins,
Invitation to Theology

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