



The Shepherd's Story

Many years later, an eyewitness remembers.



Living Today

How one small Australian congregation engages with its community.

CHRISTIAN Odyssey

December 2008/January 2009

Exploring Life and Faith



Letters to the Editor

I read your article "Revelation: It's No Mystery" with great interest and delight. You made it simple yet profound. I would like to congratulate you on taking some of the mystery out of understanding the book of Revelation. Thank you for a great magazine.

CM, email

I appreciate the articles by Kalengule Kaoma in "In Other Words." Though the article is short, it is packed with great wisdom and insight.

AG, email

I just wanted to share our grandparenting journey with you in response to Jeb Egbert's article "Parenting 'Do Over' for Grandparents."

My husband and I have been raising our beautiful 10-year-old granddaughter for the last 2½ years as her mom, our daughter, is no longer able to due to mental illness. Though it is not a "do over," it is a chance to "do it better." Our four adult children were raised, as was mentioned in the article, with too many rules and too much discipline, and not nearly enough simply loving them.

What is so amazing is the grace they have shown us as they see us parent our granddaughter so much differently than we did with them so many years ago...so much more love shown and so much more time given to just listening this time around. They seem to hold no resentments, just love and support as we parent the second time around. Ahhh...the hearts of our children, when we ask for forgiveness, are so ready to grant it.

FN, Minnesota

I have been thrilled to see that your organisation has taken steps toward truth in honest regard for Bible integrity. However I am alarmed that you are now going too far toward accommodating liberal mainstream church teachings. The article "No Contest: Why the Argument Over Genesis?" (June/July 2007) is teaching liberal Christian views that take away from the truth of Scripture and undermine the whole teaching of original sin and death entering the world through that sin. If we go along with the long-time evolutionary creation nonsense, we agree that death was in existence before

the creation of Adam and Eve, and disagree with many New Testament teachings as well as the Genesis truths. That sin brought death into the world must be set aside if we agree with your article. I am very afraid for your organisation and disappointed for you. Your group is heading from the frying pan into the fire. Wake up before it's too late.

CN, Victoria, Australia

Thank you for your concern. However, we have to agree to disagree over the matter of what you call "long time evolutionary creation nonsense." We are familiar with "Young Earth" theology, and as you probably realize, we do not find it acceptable as an explanation. In this, we are in agreement with many hundreds of educated Christians in scientific fields.

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

"Injila shiboolanga akali mwilia"

By Kalengule Kaoma

The Luhya people of western Kenya have a saying about the uncertainties of future life. It goes, "Injila shiboolanga akali mwilia." In English, that would be, "The path along which a bride walks does not tell her what is ahead of her." The idea is to help brides come to terms with the certainty of future uncertainties.

A few months ago I attended a fabulous wedding, and it struck me that regardless of the expense and preparation that might go into the event, the new bride can never be fully sure of what lies ahead for her. Is it any wonder that her joy might be tempered with a certain degree of nervousness—or even fear?

Although the saying is aimed at new brides, it has an element of general application. None of us knows with certainty what lies



ahead. And that is often a source of frustration, anxiety and worry. But a wise teacher from Nazareth advised: "Therefore, I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear."

We worry because we do not know what is coming tomorrow. The Luhya saying can remind us that although the future is not ours to know, we can prepare ourselves to face it with confidence because Someone greater than we are has our future in his hands.

The new year is rapidly approaching. Are you worried about what it might have in store for you? Ask God for peace of heart. Come what may, we can trust him and know that he will take care of us. ∞

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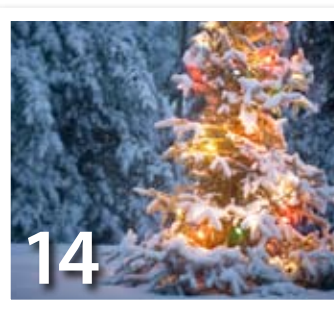
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He's Only Human

By John Halford

Well, the election is over and America has a new president-elect. Soon he will take office, and on his shoulders will fall the full weight of leadership.

President-elect Obama has made promises, and we will expect him to keep them. Of course, he will not be able to—not all of them, anyway. That is too much to expect of any human being. The modern world is too complex and unpredictable. So, once the political honeymoon is over, the new president can expect to feel the wrath of those who feel he has let them down.

So this might be a good moment to remind you of the example of Kjell Magne Bondevik.

Who?

You mean you have never heard of him? Of course you haven't. He was Prime Minister of Norway between 1997 and 2001, and Norwegian politics do not often make the news where this magazine is read. But Mr. Bondevik is unusual—in fact, probably unique—among high-ranking political leaders because he admitted that he was suffering from depression, and asked his people for time out to recover.



It is surely in our own interests to recognize the humanity of those whom we choose to govern us.

Norway's state welfare and pensions are the envy of the world, but apparently some pensioners, some families with young children and people living in rural areas were nevertheless struggling. Bondevik, a committed Christian and an ordained minister, had promised to help them. However, once in office he found that he could not deliver on his election pledge, and it troubled him that he had let his people down. So he asked for some time out to recover.

In most countries this would have been political suicide. But Norwegians are a decent lot, and to their great credit they rallied around their stricken leader. Politicians set aside their own quarrels, and 82 percent of the Norwegian people agreed that the prime minister was right to admit to his human inadequacy. The result was that Mr. Bondevik recov-

ered and went on to become one of his country's most successful leaders.

At the other end of the scale are countries that give their leaders almost divine status. When North Korea's "Great Leader" Kim Il Sung died some years ago, they solved the problem of succession by re-electing him as Eternal President. Maybe there is an idea here. Rather than go through the complexities of electing a president every four years, why not just pick a great one and install him once and for all? Ronald Reagan maybe, or perhaps John Kennedy. How about Abraham Lincoln or George Washington?

But seriously, it is surely in our own interests to recognize the humanity of those whom we choose to govern us. Unless they are callous brutes, they will surely feel moments of self-doubt, fear and anxiety. Their feelings can be hurt, their hopes dashed and bruised. But they are not allowed to show it. Every flicker of doubt, every moment of indecision, is pounced on as evidence of their unfitness for the job. Woe betides the leader of most nations if they dared admit that the strain was getting to be too much and asked for time to recover.

The world has become a dangerous place, and we are heading into some treacherous and uncharted waters. The burdens of office, soon to fall on the shoulders of Barack Obama, will be crushing. He is a decent, intelligent and educated man. But he is only human. There will be times when he will have to admit, if only to himself, that the job is getting to be too much.

The Old Testament Prophet Isaiah described a situation where his nation, tottering toward ruin two and a half millennia ago, cast about desperately for anyone who even looked like a leader: "You look like you have a head on your shoulders. Do something. Get us out of this mess" (Isaiah 3:6, *Message Bible*).

"And he will say 'Me? Not me! I don't have a clue. Don't put me in charge of anything.'" (v. 7)

Thankfully, we are not yet in that state. We have people who aspire to lead. But they are only human. So as the new president takes office, let's remind ourselves of Paul's instruction in 1 Timothy 2:2: "Pray especially for rulers and their governments to rule well so we can be quietly about our business."

President Obama and his team need those prayers. They are, after all, only human. ◻



Christmas

THE REAL Miracle Story

Paul Kroll

Every Christmas season Christians give thanks to our heavenly Father for his love and grace, showered upon us through the birth of Jesus.

The traditional carols we sing memorialize the meaning of Jesus' birth—Joy to the World, O Holy Night, The First Noel, Silent Night, Hark the Herald Angels Sing, O Little Town of Bethlehem, Away in a Manger, God Rest Ye Merry Gentleman—and many others.

"Silent Night" is one of my favorite carols because it speaks so directly to the inspiring scriptural story. Here are some of the words:

"Silent night, holy night, all is calm,
all is bright round yon virgin mother and child...
Shepherds quake at the sight...
heavenly hosts sing Alleluia! Christ the Savior is born...
Son of God, love's pure light...
with the dawn of redeeming grace,
Jesus, Lord, at thy birth...
With the angels let us sing, Alleluia to our King."

How beautiful are the thoughts of this carol, as it points us to the joy of our salvation through his life, death, resurrection and future coming in visible glory. Yet, when you think about it, Jesus' birth was a rather ordinary event. Like the billions of human beings who have experienced the birthing process, he was pushed out of his mother's protective womb, down

the birth canal and into our world.

There was nothing special, extraordinary or miraculous about Jesus' development in his mother Mary's womb or his birth. And that is just the point. Jesus' common birth demonstrates that he was not some kind of hybrid ghost or phantom, but a real human being, one of us in every way.

Jesus not a phantom

It may well be that one reason the church began to have an official Christmas celebration, probably first occurring in the congregations at Rome early in the

Jesus' birth demonstrates that he was not some kind of hybrid ghost or phantom, but a real human being, one of us in every way.

fourth century, was to counter the heresy of Christian Gnostic Docetism.¹ One of the heretical claims of the Docetic movement was that Jesus only appeared to be a real human being, but that he was only a phantom—an illusion. He did not have a real physical existence or a human body, so he was not really born as a baby, did not actually die on the cross and was not resurrected bodily.

Docetists rejected the possibility that Jesus had a body and nature like ours because they refused to believe that God, who is perfect, eternal, and spirit could have anything to do with our fallen temporal existence and matter, which they thought was evil. “Most denied the birth of Jesus, which would have put him under the power of the material world,” says historical theologian Justo L. Gonzalez.²

The church had battled against Docetic heresies from its earliest days. The New Testament letter of 1 John reminds believers that Jesus was a real human being, not a mirage: “Every spirit that acknowledges that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God.” John called every person denying this truth an “antichrist” (1 John 3:2-3).

When the church finally instituted a special

giving gifts, visitations and prophetic pronouncements are all part of this joyous public celebration.

Looking beyond Jesus’ birth

Yet, the fact of Jesus’ human birth is only part of the gospel story of how God has worked out our salvation in him. True enough, Jesus’ birth tells us that the One we worship as Savior lived as a fully human individual in all aspects of his creaturely existence, just as we do.

However, by itself, the birth of Jesus is not the miracle and meaning of who he really is in himself and who he is for us—for all of humanity. As we search for the full meaning and miraculous nature of the “Christmas story,” we are compelled to look deeper into the question of *who* Jesus really was.

Matthew 1:18 tells us that Mary “was found to be with child through the Holy Spirit.” The angel told Joseph, who was betrothed to her in marriage, that she was pregnant not because she had a sexual affair with someone else, but “because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit” (verse 20).

Luke 1:26-38 records the story of the angel Gabriel appearing to Mary and telling her

how she, a virgin, would become pregnant: “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God” (verse 35).

While Jesus would be born a real and fully human person, he would also be “Immanuel—which means, ‘God with us’” (Matthew 1:23). Though a real human being, Jesus is also fully God of true God—the Son of God, Jesus Christ, one of three Persons of the God who is Three in One and One in Three.

The Creator God is free and able to enter his creation as one of us and yet retain his divine identity.

Who Jesus really was

The Gospel of John concentrates on Jesus’ divine identity. John says nothing specific about Jesus’ birth. His interest is to show the true identity and eternal nature of the One who became the human being, Jesus. John begins his Gospel before time began, we might say, in order to inform us about Jesus’ existence.

Though born a real human being, Jesus is also fully God of true God—the Son of God, Jesus Christ, one of three Persons of the God who is Three in One and One in Three.



Christmas festival as a memorial of Jesus’ birth, it fixed in believers’ minds the biblical testimony that he was a real person with a real human body—born as we all are, as flesh and blood, fully human babies. In Christmas, the church was teaching the testimony of the Gospels about Jesus’ humanity. That’s one reason why it’s important for Christians to memorialize Jesus’ human birth as we do during each Advent-Christmas season.

Of course, the church did not invent having what amounts to a public announcement of Jesus’ birth. It was beaten to the punch, we might say, by God himself, who memorialized the birth of Jesus with great public fanfare.

Two of the Gospels, Luke and Matthew, provide many details about his birth. In these accounts, Jesus’ birth is extolled with great pageantry by the announcements of angels, telling the event to common shepherds as well as to individuals of great learning and international religious importance (the “Wise Men”). Singing,

He says: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning.”³

John next tells us that the divine Word underwent an absolutely radical and unique change. John describes this historical creative act tersely in a single sentence in verse 14: “The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us.”

The divine Word (the Son of God or Jesus Christ) became a fertilized egg in Mary’s womb. That cell divided again and again, becoming in time tens of millions of cells, developing into an embryo and then a fetus, and finally resulting in the birth of the infant Jesus, after Mary’s normal, nine-month pregnancy.

Words cannot adequately describe the astonishingly infinite creativity and freedom of God to reach down to us by *becoming one of us*, bringing us the joyous good news of who he is for us and who he has made us to be in Jesus Christ.

From infinite power to human cell

When we turn to the apostle Paul’s letter to the Philippians, we find a further explanation of this profound occurrence—the Incarnation—the “in-fleshing” of the divine Son of God as the man Jesus.

Paul writes, speaking of Jesus Christ: “Being in very nature God, he did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death—even death on a cross!” (Philippians 2:5-8).

Why would the eternal, all-powerful Son of God put himself through such a profound change, taking on our fallen human nature and mortal body? Paul explains why by telling us that this act of pure love was necessary for our salvation. “You know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich [in very nature God], yet for your sakes he became poor [human flesh], so that *you through his poverty might become rich* [receive eternal life]” (2 Corinthians 8:9, italics mine).

What God accomplished in Jesus

There in a nutshell is the greatest story ever told. In this miraculous act of the Word become human flesh, Jesus took on our fallen human nature and recreated it within himself, transforming it into his perfect and righteous human nature. In Jesus’ death on the cross, God wiped away our spiritual fallenness and freed us from the sinfulness that enslaves us. In his bodily resurrection, Jesus was the forerunner of our salvation,

drawing us into the new life of his resurrection. And, finally, at his coming in power and glory, Jesus will end the stranglehold of human death by redeeming our mortal bodies with immortality (1 Corinthians 15:50-54).

All this stems from God’s eternal and inexhaustible love for us. Is it any wonder that Christmas celebration is filled with wonder and awe, as we contemplate the Incarnation of Jesus, our Savior and Lord?

Christian believers do not put their faith in a group of doctrines or a set of logical proofs. They have no faith in fake, ersatz “gods.” They place no false hopes in themselves and do not rest on any “good works” that they perform.

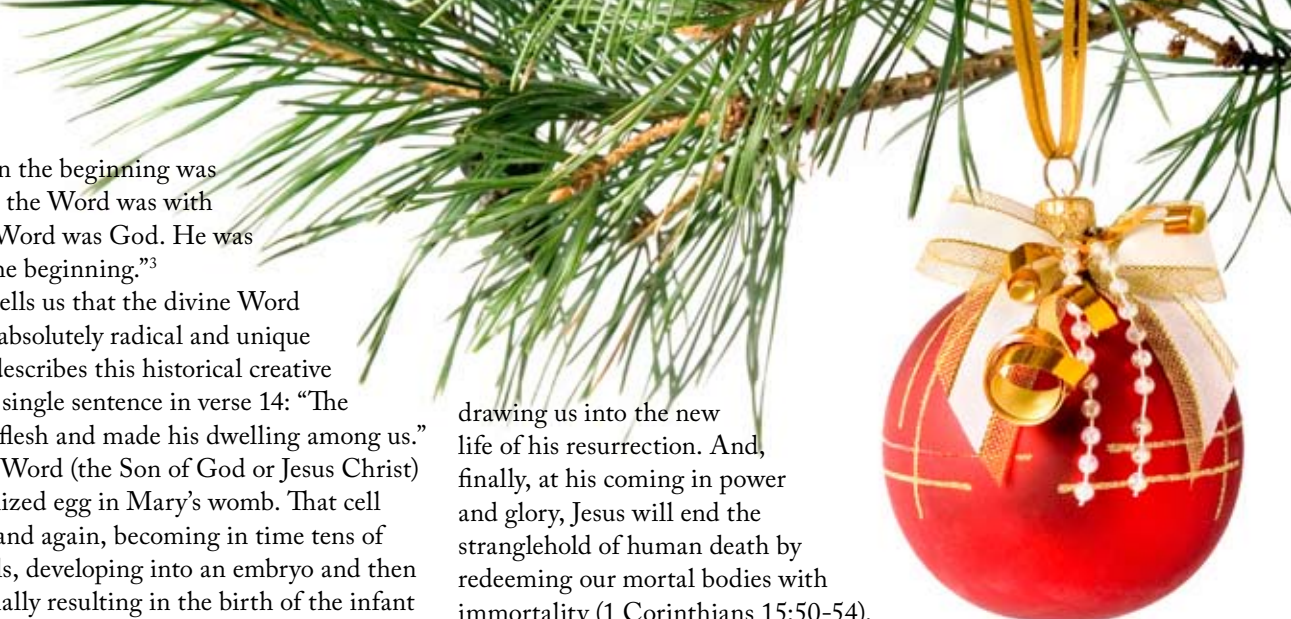
Believers believe in a *living person*—Jesus Christ, who is true God of true God, sent by the Father, and who, with the Father, “lives in” them by the Holy Spirit (John 14:15-21). Each Christian believer says with the apostle Paul: “I am not ashamed, because I know whom I have believed”—Jesus Christ (2 Timothy 1:12).

That is the story of Christmas—the good news of what God has done for us in Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord. ∞

¹ The Greek word *dokētai* that gives us the English “Docetism” means “to seem.” A number of Greek New Testament verses use forms of the word, as in James 1:26: “If any man among you seem [*dokeō*] to be religious, and bridleth not his tongue, but deceiveth his own heart, this man’s religion is vain.”

² Justo L. Gonzalez, *The Story of Christianity*, vol. 1 (HarperCollins, 1984), p. 60.

³ Here we are given a truth about the Being of God that stretches our imagination to the utmost. It was not contemplated by human beings before God acted to reveal himself in Jesus. As it turns out, the one divine Being who is God has existed from eternity in three eternal and distinct persons who are of the same essence—Father, Son (the Word who was born as Jesus Christ) and the Holy Spirit.



Meeting Jesus on The Road to Ethiopia

By Lila Docken Bauman

Few books of the Bible can match the Acts of the Apostles for sheer evangelistic thrill. Acts begins with the Holy Spirit pouring as fire onto the first 120 Christians, then walks with the gospel toward all corners of the known world. Whole families turned to Jesus in this book, manifesting the Holy Spirit in spectacular ways.

The Ethiopian's conversion, though, happened in isolation. His story in Acts 8:25-39 reveals a desolate man with a private ache, pursued and healed by the Savior who knows every heart. The story can be a lesson for each of us, no matter where we are on our own journey.

The story's context not only strongly suggests that the official Philip met was both gentile and castrated, but that these characteristics are central to the story.

The eunuch's conversion interrupted the evangelist Philip as he traveled through Samaria with the gospel, performing miracles. The Holy Spirit suddenly directed Philip south, toward the Gaza road out of Jerusalem. Philip didn't hesitate, perhaps expecting to lead another miracle-filled mass conversion there. But when he reached the Gaza road, all he found was empty desert—hot, dusty, quiet. He must have puzzled over this as he scanned the horizon, spotting only a single cart in the distance. The Spirit spoke: "Go catch up with that chariot and stay near it."

Philip ran to the cart and walked alongside it.

Behind the chariot's driver sat a man, a foreign eunuch in royal uniform. He bent over a scroll, reading aloud a passage from Isaiah:

He was led like a sheep to the slaughter
and as a lamb before the shearer is silent,
so he did not open his mouth.
In his humiliation he was deprived of justice.
Who can speak of his descendants?
For his life was taken from the earth.¹

"Do you understand what you are reading?" Philip asked.

The official peered at Philip. "How can I, unless someone explains it to me?"

Waving him into the chariot, the eunuch pointed at the scroll:

"Tell me, please, who is the prophet talking about, himself or someone else?"

Acts 8:35 tells us, "Then Philip began with that

very passage of scripture and told him the good news about Jesus."

Eventually the pair passed a body of water and the eunuch asked, "Does anything prevent me from being baptized?"

Philip baptized him immediately, disappeared, and the eunuch went on his way rejoicing.



Who was he?

So who was this new believer? Some historical details remain ambiguous, yet we have important clues:

Acts 8 introduces him as Chief Treasurer in the court of a Candace (queen) of the Ethiopians. "Ethiopia" refers to the ancient African kingdom of Nubia, located in what is today southern Egypt. This man was probably himself a Nubian, or of gentile ancestry.

Acts 8 also identifies him as a eunuch. Although this term could describe any royal servant, castrated or not, it's possible the treasurer was a true eunuch. Royal courts in the Ancient Near East frequently

groomed castrated men for high public office, as their barrenness presumably encouraged loyalty.² An actual eunuch would have stood out, as well: Over time he develops unmistakable physical traits. However else Philip could have referred to this man, in this story he recognizes him simply as “the eunuch.” Even the story’s terrain parallels the man’s journey from barrenness (desert) to fertility (water).³

The story’s context not only strongly suggests that the official Philip met was both gentile and castrated, but that these characteristics are central to the story’s heart.

Consider the Ethiopian treasurer’s journey. He had made a long pilgrimage to Jerusalem to observe a feast at the temple. He may have been a Jewish proselyte, or simply had heard about and believed in the God of Abraham. He was wealthy, to be in possession of a precious scroll, and he was influential, having the trust of his queen to travel on pilgrimage. At the point we meet him he is returning from Jerusalem, absorbed in Isaiah 53.

We can only wonder what he had expected a few days earlier when he entered Jerusalem to worship. As a eunuch, he would have been barred from the temple (Deuteronomy 23:1), and as a gentile proselyte, he would have only peripheral access. He was a man of prestige and education, and he loved the God of Israel. But he apparently had not found one scholar in Jerusalem willing to discuss Scripture and answer his questions. He had traveled far to worship the Lord, but came away, through a dry and lonely desert, buried in one of the saddest passages in the entire Bible.

Outcast

Philip, urged by the Holy Spirit to run to the chariot, came upon the eunuch just as he reached the passage about the helpless humiliation of one deprived of descendants and a name to carry on in the world. How could this eunuch not have empathy, considering his own humiliation? He had obviously been able to rise above his circumstances and had achieved great success in life. But the scripture that riveted him in that chariot described back to him his own experience of having been led like a silent sheep to the slaughter. His pain, his disappointment, his loss, leaped out from the page, and he had to know: “Who wrote this? Who is it that went through what I am going through?”

Just a few passages ahead in Isaiah from where the Ethiopian was reading, God promises eunuchs who are faithful a lasting memorial and a name within his Temple, better than offspring. This cannot refer

to a restored earthy temple, with its ritual laws. The new Temple—the body of the resurrected Jesus (John 2:19)—refers to the New Testament church in whom Jesus dwells (1 Corinthians 12:12); it represents intimate communion with God through his Spirit (Ephesians 4:4-6); and it is the creative, redeeming work of God, who restores all of creation to himself (Revelation 3:12).

Meeting our darkness

The good news that filled the eunuch with joy was that he did not have to wait for paradise for his restoration. Jesus himself had entered his pain and isolation, conquered injustice and death, and enfolded him into the eternal family of God (Ephesians 3:14-19). One miraculous encounter changed the eunuch’s life forever. A key passage in his scroll (as Jesus himself declared when he quoted it: Luke 4:21) was fulfilled for the eunuch at that moment; whereas he had been captive and oppressed, blind and poor, he was now free (Isaiah 61:1).

You and I have histories snagged by sins and mistakes, not always our own. How easy it is to accept salvation yet struggle privately with burdens we believe God cannot heal. Our Savior stands over our shoulder as we read this story, and whispers: “I have been there. I know. I understand. I have left the 99 and come out to the wilderness to find you. I am here.”

Jesus didn’t save us just so that we can anticipate wholeness in the next life. His love transforms us now, if we will surrender our deepest aches to him: “If anyone is in Christ,” writes the apostle Paul, “he is a new creation; the old has passed away, behold, the new has come” (2 Corinthians 5:17). Jesus meets us in our darkness, and through the indwelling of his Spirit, draws us into a life defined by the power and abundance of God (Ephesians 3:8-20).⁴ ∞



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¹ Isaiah 53:7-8.

² Warren Gage, “The Ethiopian eunuch finds joy.” www.knoxseminary.org/Prospective/Faculty/KnoxPulpit/wgage_eunuch.html. Downloaded 10-18-07.

³ Ibid.

⁴ For further study read C. Baxter Kruger, *Across All Worlds: Jesus Inside Our Darkness* (Vancouver: Regent College, 2007).

Two Peas, Same Pod?

By Jeb Egbert

Humans have a natural proclivity for creating a routine. Once we find something that works, we tend to do it over and over again.

This concept applies to parenting. Regardless of how many children are in the family, it is *easier* to adopt a one-size-fits-all strategy to parenting. We may think, “I tried this approach with my firstborn and it worked, so now I’ll try that with every other child in the family.”

The trouble with that approach is that our children are different. Often *completely* different. My wife and I have three children and we are not sure how much more different all three could be from each other. As we have mused about their differences, we’ve also wondered how much *we* might have contributed to those differences.

When our children have made mistakes, we’ve reflected over what we’ve done in our parenting that may have led to those mistakes. And when our children have been responsive and responsible, it has been somewhat natural to think that our parenting has been largely responsible for their success.



Our children are free to make their own choices. We have the sacred responsibility to “bring them up in the nurture and admonition of the Lord.”

I’ve known parents who could have won an award for bringing up a precious, responsive Christian child. But in the very same family, another child is unresponsive and rebellious.

The fact is, God is the creator of our children. And, as in everything else that God has created, he has chosen diversity.

I think a lot can be learned about how God chose to create the differences in our children by reading the biblical passages about the first two children born of a man and a woman. We don’t know a great deal about these two children, but in Genesis 4:2, we learn that “Abel kept flocks, and Cain worked the soil.” These two boys were remarkably different, yet evidently they grew up with virtually no outside influences. No television. No public schools. No peer pressure. Initially, it was just them and their parents. But one was a shepherd and the other a farmer. How could these vast differences in vocational choices occur?

Furthermore, the two sons chose different approaches with respect to what they gave God. Verse 3 says that Cain brought some of the fruit of the soil as an offering, whereas Abel brought “fat portions from some of the firstborn of his flock.” This passage implies that Cain gave what was convenient, while Abel gave what was best. Two boys. Same parents. Great differences.

The point is, our children are created by God and made in his image. We are the stewards of our children, but they are made in God’s, not our, image. They are free to make their own choices. They have their own personalities. We have the profound and sacred responsibility to “bring them up in the nurture and admonition of the Lord” (Ephesians 6:4), but as parents, we cannot determine the personality of our children.

We can force them to make career choices, but our children may later resent whatever pressure we apply. And we cannot make them have a relationship with God. Those are all God’s work. What we can and should do is love them, provide guidance and direction, and lead them intentionally towards Jesus. We can and should spend time talking to them about Jesus and reading to them from the Bible. We can and should pray with and for them. We can consistently lead them into a community where others are seeking God’s will.

But whether they choose at this time to respond to our instruction is not something we have control over. If you have several children, one may be responsive and the other may not. How that works is a mystery to me, but not to God. There is no formula for ensuring that our children grow up as we would hope for them to.

The lesson in all this is that we cannot react in pride when it appears our children have developed a healthy love for and responsiveness to Jesus. Nor should we despair when our children do not seem to be responding to Jesus. What we can consistently do is thank God for the gift of stewardship of his children, and pray for wisdom and courage as we engage in the incredible adventure called parenting. ☪

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The Shepherd's Story



"And there were in the same country shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flocks by night."

By John Halford and Mike Feazell

A rough-looking stranger, about 50, trudged into the crowded inn and looked around, squinting into the smoky light from the clay oil lamps set randomly around the room. Abiel and I smelled him before we saw him, and we instinctively shifted our positions to make our little table look smaller. Even so, the stranger made his way over to us and asked, "Could you make room for one more?"

Abiel looked at me. We didn't want him sitting next to us. He looked—and smelled, well, like a shepherd. But the inn was crowded for the Passover and Unleavened Bread season, and our law tells us to be hospitable to strangers, even if they are shepherds. So Abiel offered him a seat and a drink from our wine flask.

"I'm Nathan, and this is Abiel," I said. "Where are you from, stranger?"

"Hebron," he said. "Name's Jonathan."

Hebron was a hard 20-mile trip to the south, the

place where Abraham buried his wife, Sarah, more than 1500 years ago.

"Got here just before Passover," Jonathan went on, "and the way this place is crawling with soldiers I can tell you I'm glad to be leaving." He suddenly swore at the Romans and spat on the ground.

Abiel and I exchanged glances. "If you were here for Passover, you must have felt the earthquake," I said.

"I felt it," said the shepherd. "Some say it broke open tombs and let the ghosts out."

"It damaged the Temple," said Abiel. "It ripped open the veil in the Holy Place. The priests are keeping everyone away until it's mended."

"Well, that won't bother me," Jonathan said. "They don't let the likes of me in there anyway. We're not good enough for them." He swore again, this time at the Pharisees and the temple guard.

Typical of his kind, I thought—no manners. No wonder people don't want shepherds around.

"Let me ask you something," Jonathan said. "Did either of you see those crucifixions up on Golgotha? Who were those three, anyway?"

Abiel caught my eye, then leaned in closer to the

shepherd. “They caught a revolutionary named Barabas and two of his gang just before Passover. But there was also a popular rabbi they called Jesus. A lot of us hoped he was the Messiah.”

“Messiah?” Jonathan said. A frown crept over his face. “So that would explain all the soldiers. But this Jesus is dead now. Wasn’t much of a Messiah, was he?”

“He was a good man,” Abiel said in low voice, glancing around the room. “And the Romans weren’t worried about him until the Pharisees and the elders and the chief priests brought charges of blasphemy against him.” Abiel looked at me, as if for permission to say more.

“Go on,” I said. “Tell him.”

Abiel looked at me, then cleared his throat and said, “There’s talk that he might have been born in Bethlehem, though. And that his mother was a virgin.”

“Bethlehem? You’re sure?”

Abiel nodded.

Jonathan shook his head slowly. “I wonder,” he mumbled, as though to himself. “Born in Bethlehem—to a virgin. *Then it could have been him.*”

“Could have been *who*?” I asked. “What are you talking about, shepherd?”

The shepherd looking meaningfully at our flask of wine. “This Jesus of yours—I *think I know who he was.* Let me tell you a strange story.

“The angel told us to go see this baby, who would be wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger in Bethlehem. Then the whole sky was full of angels singing, ‘Glory to God.’”



“Tell me what?” Jonathan said.

Abiel’s voice dropped to a whisper. “Well, the story got around that if they killed him he would come back to life.”

“Huh?” Now Jonathan quickly surveyed the inn, as if to make sure no one was eavesdropping on our conversation, then leaned in and said quietly, “Go on.”

Abiel continued, his voice barely audible. “Yesterday the tomb was found open and the body was missing.”

“What?” Jonathan narrowed his eyes and stared blankly at the wall behind me. Finally he said, “Tell me, where was this Jesus from?”

“He came down from the north, from Galilee,” I said. “And he was no blasphemer. All he did was go around healing people and preaching about love and kindness. Surely you heard of him—even down there in the hills.”

But the shepherd wasn’t listening. He was staring blankly at the wall behind me. Finally he said quietly, “Where did you say he came from?”

“Galilee,” I repeated. “He was a carpenter’s son from Nazareth.”

“Like I said, I saw those three crucifixions on Golgotha the other day. The one in the middle, whom you say was Jesus, was already dead, and they were about to finish off the other two. Some women were sobbing and crying under Jesus’ cross. But another woman was standing apart a little farther back, and a young man had his arm around her. As I passed, she looked right at me, and I knew I had seen her before. It was a long time ago.”

Abiel refilled our cups and said, “Go on, shepherd. Tell us your story.”

Jonathan drank, then cradled his cup in both hands, staring into it. “It was back in the days of Herod,” he said. “The one they called the ‘Old Fox.’ I was just a young fellow then. Our family was poor. We made a living looking after the sheep of richer folk.

“One night I was in the hills near Bethlehem with my father and a few of his friends. There was a census on, and you know, and everyone was supposed to go back to their homes to be counted so the Romans could figure out how much tax we had to pay. Well, my father and my uncle and I and some of our friends decided to stay out in the hills until it was over. Fewer

heads for the Romans to count.”

We all laughed. Shepherds had the reputation of being rogues.

“Well, this particular night we got the sheep settled down and we were sitting round the fire. The older men were joking and telling stories.

“I was starting to get sleepy when suddenly there was a bright light all around us, and a man dressed in a shining robe appeared out of nowhere. He was glowing, like he had a fire inside him.”

“An angel?” Abiel asked.

Jonathan nodded. “We were afraid, I can tell you. But the angel said, ‘Don’t be afraid of me. I haven’t come to hurt you. I have brought some good news—



wonderful news for everyone.’

Abiel and I gestured impatiently for the shepherd to go on.

“Well,” Jonathan went on, “the angel said, ‘Today in Bethlehem, a Savior has been born to you. He is the anointed One—the Lord.’”

“The Messiah!” Abiel said, his eyes wide.

Again Jonathan nodded. “The angel told us to go see this baby, who would be wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger in Bethlehem. Then the whole sky was full of angels singing, ‘Glory to God in the highest, and peace on earth to those he favors.’ Then, as suddenly as they appeared, they were gone.

“We hurried to Bethlehem and found a man named Joseph and his wife Mary with their baby wrapped in swaddling cloths lying in a manger in the stable of an inn. The animals had been moved to one end, and one of the stalls had been cleaned out. Mary was young—no more than 15, I suppose. She was sitting on a pile of straw. It was all exactly like the angel had said.

“My father told Joseph about the angel and how it told us to come see them. Joseph said they’d come

to Bethlehem for the census, but there’d been no room for them at the inn. The baby was coming, so the owner let them use the stable. Joseph also told us how an angel had told Mary and later told him that she had been chosen to be the mother of the Messiah and that even though she was still a virgin, she would become pregnant with this special child from God.

“Mary had been shocked, Joseph told us, because she had always been a very virtuous person. But she trusted God. Joseph looked at his wife and we could see the love and respect in his eyes.

“I watched Mary while the men were talking, and I was struck by how calm she was. It was like God’s own peace was resting on her. She must have been exhausted, but there was a mysterious beauty about her. I don’t know how else to describe it, but I never forgot her.”

Jonathan looked soberly at Abiel, then at me. “It was Mary I saw at the crucifixion at Golgotha. She was the one with the young man comforting her. She is much older now, but I know it was her.”

“So Jesus...” Abiel began, but Jonathan cut him off.

“Was that baby in the manger, the Savior of his people? I thought he’d been killed years ago when Herod ordered all the boys under age two in Bethlehem murdered.”

Abiel and I must have looked startled. “Oh yes,” Jonathan said. “That old fox heard about the Messiah being born from some wise men from the East. They’d come to honor Jesus, but Herod’s reaction was to see him as a rival and try to kill him. One of my nephews was killed in that massacre.

“But you tell me that this ‘Jesus of Nazareth,’ son of Joseph and Mary, went around doing miracles and people thought he was the Anointed One. And now the authorities have tried to kill him again.”

“What do you mean ‘tried’ to kill?” I asked. “He was crucified. He’s dead, Jonathan.”

“But didn’t you say the body has vanished?” asked the shepherd.

“What are you saying?” asked Abiel.

“Just this. If the woman I saw was Mary—and I am sure it was—and the man they crucified was her son, whom I saw on the night he was born, then this didn’t end on that cross. It was no ordinary night when the angels sang to us, and this Jesus was no ordinary baby. The angel told us he was the Messiah, come to save us. And now, even though his enemies crucified and buried him, his body is missing.”

The shepherd finished his drink and stood up. “Well, I’m just an ignorant shepherd. What do I know about these things? *But I’ve got a feeling we haven’t seen the last of this Jesus.*” ☪

Does God Hate Christmas?

By Joseph Tkach

Spend five minutes surfing the Internet for information about Christmas and you'll find websites calling for an end to its celebration. Some are posted by atheists, of course. But others, surprisingly, are posted by Christians—Christians who believe that Christmas observance is sinful.

At first glance, some of the arguments put forward by anti-Christmas Christians might sound plausible, especially if you've never thought about them before. But we believe that Christians ought to be free to experience the joy and inspiration of Christmas celebration without needless guilt or apprehension that they might be doing something God does not approve of. So let's look at four common arguments against Christmas and explain why each one does not stand up.

Argument 1: "We don't know the date of Christ's birth."

It is true that no one knows for certain on what day or even month of the year Jesus was born. However, we do not need to know the precise date of Jesus' birth to celebrate the *fact* of his birth.

It's not impossible for people to celebrate a birthday on a date other than a person's actual birthday when it is more convenient to do so. For example, the Queen of England celebrates her birthday on June 17, but her actual birthday is April 21.

It is not crucial or necessary for us to know when Jesus was born in order to celebrate his birth.

Argument 2: "Christmas is commercialized and materialistic."

Without doubt the Christmas holiday season has become a commercial rat race for many people. However, the fact that some people engage in ungodly revelry on Christmas does not mean that right and meaningful celebration of Jesus' birth is wrong. If negative behavior on the part of some meant that *all* Christmas celebration should be discarded, it would also follow that marriage, for example, would have to be discarded, because there are bad marriages in which physical and mental abuse takes place.

We are not obligated to discard a celebration,

practice or institution just because some people misuse or distort them.

Argument 3: "Most Christmas traditions originate in paganism."

There is no denying that some of the traditional practices and elements that are part of our Christmas celebration are similar to those found in ancient pagan religious ceremonies. It does not follow, however, that Christians are practicing paganism when they use similar practices or elements in worshipping Jesus.

There are basic elements of celebration common to all peoples of all religious faiths and ethnic backgrounds, whether they are parts of a wedding, an anniversary, a homecoming, a graduation or a memorial. Characteristics of most celebrations might include a special meal, giving of gifts, music and singing, decorations and sending greeting cards or notes. These are not inherently pagan activities; they are simply human activities and common patterns for celebration, even in the worship patterns God gave the ancient Israelites.

Worship in ancient Israel, for example, included the lighting of candles and the burning of incense (Exodus 30:1-9), sumptuous feasting (Deuteronomy 14:25), and offerings of thanksgiving for abundant harvests. In setting up Israel's worship system, God gave them several institutions, elements and practices

Faulty Logic

that were already in use by pagan religions. These included, among other things, the priesthood, the harvest festivals, sacred music in worship, animal sacrifices, circumcision, tithing, and purification rites. God transformed these customs and elements used in pagan religions into a form of worship devoted to him.

Even trees had their place in the celebrations that God gave to Israel. In the tabernacle, lamp stands were made of gold engraved with branches and foliage (Exodus 25:31-36). The Israelites used leafy branches in their religious processions and made temporary shelters of them during the festival of tabernacles (Leviticus 23:40-42). Several times in Scripture, God compares his goodness to the qualities of a tree. In Hosea 14, God compares himself to a cedar tree in verse 5, to an olive tree in verse 6, and to a pine tree in verse 8.

Christians who keep Christmas are not pagans. They do not worship trees or anything in nature as the pagans did, nor do they regard false gods. They honor God alone, who sent his Son to save the world.

Argument 4: “Jeremiah 10:2-4 condemns the use of Christmas trees.”

The King James Version of this passage reads: “Thus saith the Lord, Learn not the way of the heathen.... For the customs of the people are vain: for one cutteth a tree out of the forest, the work of the hands of the workman, with the axe. They deck it with silver and with gold; they fasten it with nails and with hammers, that it move not.”

On the surface it might seem that Jeremiah is describing Christmas trees. But that is to ignore the context. Verses 2 through 4 of Jeremiah 10 are part of a larger context, which includes verses 1 through 16. Jeremiah is not talking about Christmas trees. He is condemning idolatry. The trees in Jeremiah 10 are cut down so that they can be carved into idols and decorated with gold and silver to worship heathen gods.

Where the King James reads “one cutteth a tree out of the forest, the work of the hands of the workman, with the axe” (verse 3), the New International Version says “they cut a tree out of the forest, and a craftsman shapes it with his chisel.” The chisel is not a woodsman’s tool, but that of a wood carver. Most modern English translations agree with the NIV.

Jeremiah 10 condemns idols, not Christmas trees. And no Christian worships a Christmas tree.

Conclusion

Christians must decide for themselves about whether and how to celebrate Christmas. At the same time, it is important that we understand that we do have freedom in Christ to celebrate and worship him in joy during Christmas if we choose to do so.

And one thing is certain: whether or not we choose to celebrate Jesus at Christmastime, every believer knows that there is nothing more worthy of celebration than the coming of our Savior into the world! ☪

Christians must decide for themselves about whether and how to celebrate Christmas.

Dichotomous reasoning. This is also known as polarized, all-or-nothing or two-dimensional thinking. In other words, something must be black or white, and there are no shades of gray.

Example: God hates the worship of idols. Since pagans used trees to carve idols, God must hate the use of trees in worship celebration to him. Therefore, use of Christmas trees is sinful.

Overgeneralization. Generalization, that is, the ability to generalize from a set of facts, is necessary in drawing right conclusions from the information at hand. Overgeneralization occurs when a wrong general conclusion is drawn from a single incident or a small sampling—or even when a misguided conclusion is derived from a large body of facts.

Example: Some people get drunk at Christmas dinners and parties; therefore Christmas celebration is sinful.

Selective abstraction. This error results from focusing attention on one detail without regard to the rest of the facts and principles that should inform a conclusion.

Example: Pagans decorated trees in their worship of false gods; therefore, decorating a Christmas tree is sinful.

Discounting the positive illustration. This is also known as minimization or neglecting proof that contradicts our assumption. It occurs when people do not accept clear evidence because it does not fit their interpretation of the facts.

Example: The Gospel writer Luke records that angels praised God at the birth of Christ, which would indicate that God is pleased with praise and celebration related to Christ’s birth, such as singing Christmas carols. However, a people with an anti-Christmas bias might neglect such information because it contradicts their position. Such information is sometimes called “invisible information.” It is invisible because preconceived conclusions tend to prevent a person from seeing facts and evidence that is contrary to what they already believe.

Arbitrary inference or “jumping to conclusions”: This occurs when someone interprets the meaning of an event based on a *mis*interpreting of evidence or facts at hand.

Example: Since God condemns pagans for worshipping idols, Christians should not use in their worship of Christ any element that pagans used in their worship of idols.

Anger:

A Battle We Can Win

By Neil Earle

The manifestations of the emotion of anger are so numerous that Dr. W.B. Cannon of Harvard required an entire printed page to merely list them," wrote Dr. John Schindler in *How to Live 365 Days a Year*. Those external manifestations are obvious: a red face, bloodshot eyes, stomach muscles squeezing down. But that is only half the story:

"The entire digestive tract becomes spastic, triggering severe abdominal pains. The heart rate goes up markedly...the coronary arteries squeeze down hard enough to produce angina or even a fatal coronary" (pages 25-26).

"A patient man has great understanding, but a quick-tempered man displays folly."



No wonder the Bible counsels: "Refrain from anger and turn from wrath; do not fret—it leads only to evil" (Psalm 37:8). Yet we say: "Don't fret—in this day and age? Surely the Bible is kidding us." But wait! There's more: "Do not be quickly provoked in your spirit, for anger resides in the lap of fools" (Ecclesiastes 7:9). We reply: "But you don't understand. If you lived where I did you'd be stirred up too."

And the Bible replies, calmly, soothingly, like a mother's voice: "A patient man has great understanding, but a quick-tempered man displays folly" (Proverbs 14:29).

In spite of these excellent prescriptions from God's words, millions of us allow ourselves to get entangled with anger every day. Even our slang is dangerous: "She makes me sick!" He burns me up!" "I really blew my stack" and the *coup de grace*: "I could kill him!"

Overt anger/latent anger

This is serious, for bitter and hasty words are often emotional preparation for the most fearsome acts. Jesus had to severely correct two of his own disciples for a vindictive hot-tempered attitude towards a despised ethnic group (Luke 9:51-56).

A common misconception is that all anger is wrong. It isn't. Jesus himself got angry. He was angry when he cleared the money changers from the Temple (John 2:13-17). He was angry at the stubborn Pharisees in Matthew 23. But this was controlled anger. "In your anger do not sin," Paul taught, "Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry" (Ephesians 4:26). But most anger we see about us today *is* sin. People blowing up after the drip-drop-drip of petty annoyances. Husbands retaliating at wives. Bosses "dumping" on their subordinates. That is overt anger, easy to spot and—hopefully—possible to avoid.

There is also another kind of anger that comes from slow, simmering attitudes deep inside. This is latent anger and resentment, a festering kind of attitude that may take a long time coming to the surface. This is why Judas Iscariot, with his critical, resentful spirit, was not suspected by the other disciples of harboring bitterness. Or why, in our time, apparently ordinary people, passed over for promotion or frustrated in some other way, bring a gun to work or school and go on a murdering rampage.

Anger is emotional preparation for murder. This is what Jesus labeled it (Matthew 5:21-22). The consequences can be hidden. "Depression at every phase of its development," wrote neurologist Mortimer Ostow, "includes a component of anger, whether visible or invisible." We all need help in navigating our way

The Irony of It All

By Barbara Dahlgren

So one atheist was Christmas shopping with another atheist. The mall was crowded, but people were jolly. The Yuletide music was blaring and all of a sudden Atheist #1 starts singing aloud to the song, “O come let us adore Him. O come let us adore Him. Christ the Lord.”

Atheist #2 is appalled. “How can you sing that stuff?”
“Oh, I don’t listen to the words. I just like the music,” he answers.

“Yeah, that’s what my 15-year-old says when he listens to explicit rock lyrics, but I don’t believe him either.”

It’s hard to think of Christmas carols containing explicit lyrics, but it might seem that way to people who don’t believe in Christ. There is irony in an atheist singing about adoring Christ the Lord.

Biblical events show that God is not above a little irony. He blessed Sarah and Abraham with their son Isaac when Sarah was beyond childbearing years. A mere shepherd boy named David killed the giant Goliath. Joseph’s brothers relied on him for deliverance, even though they sold him into slavery. And perhaps the greatest irony of all was the birth of Jesus.

People were looking for a Messiah with a flaming sword. Even though Christ’s birth fulfilled numerous Old Testament prophecies concerning everything from his lineage to where he would be born, people did not recognize him. They were expecting someone strong and powerful, not a helpless child. They were looking for a king, not a baby born in a manger. The irony of it all was that this baby in the manger was the King.

He was called Immanuel, which means God with us (Matthew 1:21-23; Isaiah 7:14). Miraculously, God became flesh and lived among us. He brought salvation to everyone—from the poorest shepherd to the richest Magi. In telling us about it, the Gospel of John adds, “We have seen his glory” (John 1:14). But many did not see Christ’s glory. They could not see beyond him being a baby in a manger.

Much of our faith depends on what we see when we look in that manger. Some look and see a prophet or a good, moral teacher. The atheist might just see a baby. The agnostic doesn’t know what he sees. What do we see when we look in the manger? Do we see the Son of God, Immanuel, and the Savior of humanity?

I think God smiles when he hears an atheist sing, “O come let us adore him.” In some ironic way the atheist is giving honor to the one he denies. On the other hand, Christians can be mindful and jubilant when they sing these explicit lyrics: “Joy to the world, the Lord is come!” They are honoring the one who came to save even his enemies, and that might just be the happiest irony of all. ☪

through the stresses and strains of a world tearing at us, a world seemingly designed to make us angry. Here are five principles that can help.

First

Pray fervently when we see bitterness and resentment rising up inside us. We can thank God for showing us our wrong thought patterns. Sin begins in the mind. That’s why we Christians are to renew our minds in Jesus Christ (Romans 12:2). That is a lifelong task. God the Holy Spirit will help us when we turn to him for help.

Second

Keep the big picture of human existence in mind. It’s always good to ask: *Will this really matter 100 years from now?* And what if our adversary died and we had a grudge on our conscience? What then? Peter gave good advice: “Whoever would love life and see good days...must turn from evil and do good; he must seek peace and pursue it” (1 Peter 3:10-11).

Third

Try sincerely to see the other person’s point of view. This is empathy, and oh, how rare it is today! Consider our Great Example—Jesus Christ. What did it take to say, “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing” (Luke 23:34), while they drove nails through his hands and feet? Meditating on this can leave us properly humbled and allow the fresh breezes of humility to cool the fires of anger.

Fourth

Pray for your adversary. Nothing is more diametrically opposite to the human spirit, is it? But it is our human spirit of anger and hostility that often gets us into so many scrapes. The apostle Paul wrote about the coals of fire treatment. Read it in Romans 12:20. Perhaps a simple card, a note, a sincere apology, a small gift or a simple resolve to treat the would-be opponent as a friend rather than an enemy could make all the difference in the world. Christians are not to retaliate in kind. They are learning to walk the hard and stony path that replaces evil with good. This is tough, but Jesus never said it would be easy, and he did offer help along the way.

Fifth

Keep our spiritual vision clear. In the midst of severe tensions and conflicts, when we are tempted to respond in kind, we must remember: God is the God of justice. God is on his throne and he has a way of evening things up, sometimes even in this life. The patriarch Joseph was a living example of this when he ended up with life-and-death power over the brothers who had sold him into slavery (Genesis 42:1-20).

God is our ultimate shelter against the tides of anger that threaten to engulf us. Jesus, our Peace, lives in us, and with that assurance, our victory over anger is a sure thing. ☪

Living Today

By Randall Bouchier

Mooroolbark Christian Fellowship (MCF) in the eastern suburbs of Melbourne, Australia, began to reach out into its community about seven years ago as God provided us with both desire and opportunity.

In the beginning we were provided with small practical opportunities. One was to invite people to join us for occasional interesting day trips by bus. Another was to share our denomination's national magazine, *Living Today*. Our congregation distributed several thousand copies around our community, including advertising about upcoming events we were hosting.

In 2001, financial limitations forced the closure of *Living Today* just when MCF was beginning to be recognised as “the people who send us that magazine” and we had begun to receive responses to inserted advertising about the bus trips. So we wondered what God might provide to help us maintain the momentum.

Humble beginnings

After prayer and congregational dialogue, we decided to nurture these emerging responses by publishing our own community-focused magazine. We started with one or two folded letter-size flyers delivered by hand to local households. Then we took what seemed like a huge step forward by publishing the first four-page edition of what we decided to call *Living Today in Mooroolbark*. Today, we distribute more than 11,000 copies of this full-color magazine each quarter.

A member of our pastoral team serves as editor, and he leads a small team of writers and photographers within the congregation. Another member owns a publishing business and was able to give us favorable printing rates.

We offer the magazine as a gift to the community, so instead of making it a solely religious magazine, we encourage written contributions from the community, including businesses, churches and local government. As our editorial policy states, our goal is “to contribute towards, and to help to foster, a growing community spirit within our neighbourhood.”

We seek to achieve this by:



September 2008 Issue of *Living Today* in Mooroolbark

- Highlighting the many positives within our community.
- Encouraging partnership in community initiatives.
- Contributing to the process of identifying and addressing community needs and concerns.

Our editor and writers plan each edition taking into account feedback and ideas from the community. Each issue contains positive news, stories about local history and personalities, and articles about local government, businesses and community groups.

Each edition also singles out a community or family issue and presents it in a way helpful to our readers. We also include a brief article on the same subject from a Christian perspective that might appeal to a secular readership. Sometimes we adapt articles from *Christian Odyssey*, and in recent issues we've offered a free copy of *Christian Odyssey* to interested readers.

Focus on being a gift, not just giving a gift

As we responded in faith to the opportunities and open doors God provided, he helped us, over time, to learn to be a serving gift from God to the community—with no strings attached—not even membership growth!

We've had many opportunities. For example, we mentor in a local primary school under Kids Hope

AUS and have partnered with the community in establishing a township website (<http://mooroolbark.org.au>) that maps services available within the community.

Additional partnerships with groups such as the Lions Club, Country Women's Association, local schools and churches, the Guides and Scouts, State Emergency

have fostered deep friendships within the community even though, like most WCG congregations, we are scattered through the suburbs, well beyond the bounds of Mooroolbark. In many ways MCF has become a congregation without walls. It's not uncommon for people from the community to attend one of our services in order to catch up with some of the members. We hear regular comments in the community that Mooroolbark would be the poorer without MCF! We've become more sensitively aware of God's hand at work, weaving the congregation into the fabric of the community.



Service, the Community Centre and the local Shire led to us to help organize and grow the increasingly popular annual family festival called "Celebrate Mooroolbark," as well as an annual community tree-planting day, an annual twilight picnic and carols event in the park, and free quarterly film nights at the local Community Centre, where 200-300 people enjoy a popular family movie.

There has been a mutually helpful friendship with the Disabled People's Company—a local group of people with disabilities with whom we share an annual luncheon provided by MCF.

Another interesting development has been our inaugural involvement with local churches in coordinating an annual Mayoral Breakfast on the National Day of Thanksgiving, where we honor and thank those who do so much to enhance our lives within the community.

Being woven into the fabric of the community

During the journey of the past seven years, it has become evident that all the strands of our congregational involvement in the community are richly intertwined. Growing, interdependent networks and partnerships have developed. Some of our members

Even though, like most WCG congregations, we are scattered through the suburbs, we've become aware of God's hand, weaving us into the fabric of the community.

Earlier this year a delegation from the local Country Women's Association attended MCF for their annual church service and, in recent years, during the "Celebrate Mooroolbark" festival, our weekly service has been transformed into an interdenominational festival service.

Financial partnerships have also emerged to help us produce *Living Today in Mooroolbark*. Community groups make occasional small donations to assist with production costs. The local community bank makes a substantial annual contribution. And in the last two years, a local real-estate agent has undertaken the free distribution of the magazine through his private distribution network. These helpful partnerships have enabled us to expand the quarterly circulation.

There have also been unexpected benefits. Interviews with local, state and federal government representatives have led to long-term friendships, enabling some government leaders to generously offer us advice and practical help so that we're able to serve Mooroolbark better. We've discovered, too, that through personal delivery of magazines to local schools, churches, clubs and people or groups featured in each issue has helped to build and strengthen local networks.

As a small congregation, we're grateful for the surprising way God has led us. And along the way, as friendships, networks and partnerships have been formed in Mooroolbark, he's helped us learn to increasingly love and serve people the way he does. ∞

The Second Best Christmas Gift

By Mat Morgan

Sam wakes slowly as the sun breaks through the window. It is a Saturday morning in January. Sam smiles, remembering that he doesn't have to bundle up against the cold and go to the office today. He smells the beckoning aroma of coffee from the gourmet grind-and-brew system (a Christmas gift to themselves). He slides carefully out of bed to avoid waking Susi, his wife, and heads towards the smell, already tasting the coffee in his mind.

Any genuine Christian might dream of doing something magnificent for the Master, but our lives in reality are pretty ordinary.

As he tiptoes down the hall and steps over the remote-controlled monster truck in the hallway, Sam notices that the truck is missing a wheel and the windshield is cracked, as if it had been in a pileup on I-70.

Shaking his head, he remembers how much this Christmas gift had cost, and feels a twinge of frustration at how quickly it had been rendered ready for the junkyard.

After the anticipated sip of coffee and taking a moment to put on his new sheepskin slippers, Sam ventures outside into the brisk winter air, his breath immediately visible in the cold. As he navigates down the icy driveway past the shiny, black SUV, he has to pause to admire the sleek lines. He still enjoys looking at it six months off the showroom floor. Life is good, he thought. Thank God for home equity loans and zero percent financing!

As he approaches the mailbox, Sam notices a red package teetering halfway out of the mailbox, the newspaper carefully balanced on top as a counterweight. He smiles, wondering who might be sending a late Christmas gift.

Looking closer, he realizes that although the package is Christmas related, it is not what he expected. It is a professionally wrapped box of chocolates sent by the credit-card company in appreciation for his being an exceptional customer. Cleverly nestled under the bright wrapping paper is his monthly statement, with the \$300 minimum monthly payment printed boldly at the top.

"Welcome to 2009," Sam mumbles to himself, feeling the fun of Christmas gift-buying drain from

Practical ways to avoid Christmas debt:

Focus on celebrating the real meaning of Christmas, not expensive gift-giving.

Budget for any gifts that you buy and spend only what you budget. Start putting away a little money from each check starting in January, and then only spend what you have set aside.

Shop early, so you don't overspend in desperation just before Christmas. Consider shopping on the Internet, where competition tends to drive prices down and where you don't have to spend money and time driving to a busy mall.

Be creative. Remember that a gift does not

have to be expensive to be meaningful. How about giving a loved one a coupon to spend meaningful time with him or her? A day at the beach, a bike ride together, a hike with dad or tea with mom can be meaningful and inexpensive.

A special photo album containing pictures of memory-filled events or a handmade gift certificate for a service to be provided to a family member (breakfast in bed, a free car wash, doing the dishes or vacuuming without being asked, free babysitting, etc.) can also be inexpensive alternatives.

his body into the ice under his feet. He opens the newspaper and stares in disbelief at the headline, his mind stumbling to comprehend it. Finally, it registers. His employer will be eliminating 2,000 employees starting next week. His body seems to go numb. He glances back at the credit-card bill and suddenly wonders what the new minimum payment on his other credit cards will be. A knot of dull anxiety begins to form somewhere in his chest and radiate down into his stomach.

The real joy of Christmas

Sam is fictional. But his story is all too familiar. He learned the hard way that Christmas isn't about credit-card debt.

Here's something to remember: *The second best gift that*

your family can enjoy this holiday season is a debt-free January.

The best gift, of course, is the awe-inspiring reality of God's love for us in sending Jesus (John 3:16).

The best thing about Christmas—Jesus—doesn't add a lingering burden of debt to our lives; he paid the debt for all our sin once and for all. And we can celebrate and share this love-filled, debt-free life in him without racking up credit-card bills that will dog us month after frustrating month, long after the lights and tree come down.

Why not give your family a debt-free Christmas this year? ☞



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I've Been Reading...

The Jesus Legend:

A Case Study for the Historical Reliability of the Synoptic Gospel Tradition

By Paul Rhodes Eddy and Gregory A. Boyd. Baker Books 2007

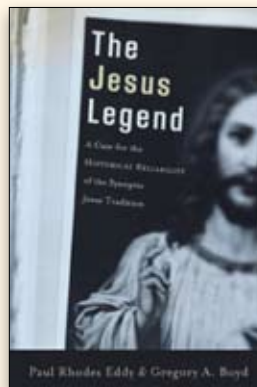
Reviewed by Dennis Gordon

The *Jesus Legend* is the most up-to-date and thorough critique of the notion that the Jesus of the Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke) was not who the Gospels claim him to be, and that only a few of the words and thoughts attributed to him were actually his. The book also critiques the anti-supernatural bias of liberal scholars who reject any supernatural event in the Gospels, including Jesus' resurrection.

Although scholarly, this very readable and logical account patiently, even graciously, considers the various arguments that some scholars use to deny the Gospels' portrait of Jesus and his miraculous works. The authors ask readers "to remain sincerely open to the possibility that the portrait(s) of Jesus in the Synoptic Gospels" are "historically reliable." If that can be done, say the authors, the "appropriate historical method and the evidence at hand" they use will make it possible for a person to conclude that "the Synoptic portrait(s) is ... the most historically probable representation of the actual Jesus of history." It is the reviewer's opinion that the authors truly succeed in their quest.

Eddy and Boyd first address the historical-critical method that some scholars use to study the accounts in the Synoptic Gospels. This method rejects at the outset Jesus' resurrection and other miracles mentioned in these writings. The authors tackle this anti-supernatural bias head-on, pointing out that this view assumes "the perspective of our modern times," which claims it should be "the standard by which all times and cultures are to be judged." They explain why these assumptions are in error when applied to the Synoptic Gospels.

Some critics allege that pagan ideas of a miracle-working "divine man" and ancient tales of "dying and rising gods" were really behind what they call the Jesus "legend" of the Gospels. Others al-



lege that both secular history and Paul were "silent" concerning a historical Jesus, and on this basis reject the Gospels' portrait of who Jesus was.

Eddy and Boyd critically evaluate all these claims and find them wanting. They discuss the critics' contentions that the literary competence of the disciples was lacking, that the eye-witness accounts were unreliable, and the contention that the Gospel writers had little care for historical accuracy.

They not only point out the flaws in the critics' arguments, but, in support of the historicity of the Gospels, they point to the testimony of secular sources as external corroboration.

They also consider the unique nature and literary genre of the Gospels. In this regard, one of the novel strengths of this book is the authors' application of what are called "orality studies," that is, studies that show how traditions of communicating narratives orally can convey these quite accurately.

They apply these studies to an understanding of the Jesus narratives in the Gospels. "The Gospels were primarily intended to be performed orally and heard aurally in a communal setting, not read privately and silently by isolated individuals," the authors point out. They conclude their study by showing how this perspective helps resolve alleged discrepancies and disharmonies in the Gospel accounts.

This book is a powerful apologetic and I found it informative, interesting and helpful in understanding the Gospels. I was cheered by it. ☞

The Coming of the Lord

A study of 1 Thessalonians 4:13-5:11

By Michael Morrison

In almost every one of his letters, Paul refers to the return of Christ. But he rarely gives any details. His letters to the believers in Thessalonica are exceptions. Apparently they had asked for more information on this topic.

The return of Christ (verses 13-18)

Brothers, we do not want you to be ignorant about those who fall asleep, or to grieve like the rest of men, who have no hope. It seems that the Thessalonians had asked about what happens to believers who die before Christ returns. Paul replies that we do not grieve in the way that unbelievers do. Death is still an enemy, so we may grieve, but our sorrow is mixed with hope because we know that we will all live again in far better circumstances.

Paul begins by stating the doctrine: **We believe that Jesus died and rose again and so we believe**



We will be with Christ forever. That is the message that puts all our trials into perspective, and gives us courage to be faithful until the end.

that God will bring with Jesus those who have fallen asleep in him. Because Jesus has been raised from the dead, we will be, too, if we are spiritually united with him. Those who die will come with Jesus. Just what they are doing in the meantime, Paul does not say.

He quotes a saying of Jesus—one that is not in the Gospels: **According to the Lord's own word, we tell you that we who are still alive, who are left till the coming of the Lord, will certainly not precede those who have fallen asleep.** By using the word “we,” does Paul imply that he expects to live until Christ returns? Many scholars think so, and they suspect the Thessalonians had a similar belief, thus causing their worries about those who die in this age.

However, it is not necessarily so. If Paul had used the third-person “those,” he could have implied that he would *not* live until the return, and since he did not know one way or another, he used the more pastorally optimistic “we.”¹ Paul knew that believers *could* die before Christ returned, and simple logic would tell him that *he* might be one of them.

Paul's point is that people who live until Christ returns will not have any advantage over Christians who die. The living ones will not rise to greet Christ while the dead ones are still struggling to get out of their graves!

Paul sketches a simple sequence: **For the Lord himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first.** There will be a loud sound, and the dead will rise. Do they come with Christ from heaven, or do they rise from graves on earth?

Paul is not dealing with that question—he is just addressing sequence. **After that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air.** This is the key verse of the “rapture” theory, which says that Christians will rise into the air to meet Christ and then go with him to heaven while the Great Tribulation savages unbelievers on Earth.² Those ideas are not in this verse; they come from other books of the Bible.

Actually, no verse teaches the rapture—it is only when verses from different sections of the Bible are combined, that anyone can construct the theory. The Bible does not promise that believers will escape the Tribulation, nor does it say that Christ will come once for the saints, and then a few years later for the Last Judgment. The believers in Thessalonica would not understand Paul to be saying anything like this.

What *would* they think? Paul refers to the presence or *parousia* of the Lord; the word *parousia* was also used for the arrival of a king in a city. Whenever the ruler visited, there was a lot of pomp and ceremony. Heralds announced the impending event, and city officials formed a procession to greet the king as he approached, and they would escort him into the city.

By using the word *parousia*, Paul is suggesting that kind of scene: Christ the king will come and his people will go to greet him and escort him as he comes to where they live. The Thessalonian believers were asking about who would be first in the welcoming procession. Those who die are not left out of the party—they'll be raised so everyone can celebrate together.

The bottom line is simple: **And so we will be with the Lord forever.**

Therefore encourage each other with these words. What are the encouraging words? Is it that the dead in Christ will be in the welcoming delegation? That we will be in the clouds? Those are good, but such details pale into insignificance when compared with the eternal result: We will be with Christ forever. That is the message that puts all our trials into perspective, and gives us courage to be faithful until the end.

No need for surprise (5:1-11)

Paul then discusses the timing in more detail: **About times and dates we do not need to write to you, for you know very well that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night.** Jesus also referred to a thief in the night in the Olivet prophecy (Matt. 24:43). This may have been a common proverb about someone coming at an unexpected time.

While people are saying, “Peace and safety,” destruction will come on them suddenly, as labor pains on a pregnant woman, and they will not escape. Labor pains are not *totally* unpredictable, but this was probably another proverb for something that could not be scheduled precisely.

What sort of “destruction” did Paul have in mind? He refers to “wrath” in verse 9, but he doesn’t give us many details about it. Paul may be referring to the turmoil or tribulation that was expected before the day of the Lord, or perhaps to the day of judgment itself, when some people will find that the world is ruled by someone they don’t like, and they will suffer the consequences of their own actions.

Paul’s purpose is not to tell us about destruction, but to encourage us that we will not experience it: **But you are not in darkness so that this day should surprise you like a thief.** They do not know when the day will be—Paul’s point is that they won’t suffer loss, because they are always ready.

You are all sons of the light and sons of the day. We do not belong to the night or to the darkness.

Paul is using “darkness” as a spiritual category, just as some of the Dead Sea Scrolls do. The believers are children of light, children of God, not of evil and darkness, and that should change the way they live.

But since we belong to the day, let us be self-controlled, putting on faith and love as a breastplate, and the hope of salvation as a helmet. Paul here uses another metaphor, perhaps adapted from Isaiah 59:17. Faith, love, and hope should cover and protect our hearts and minds.

For God did not appoint us to suffer wrath but to receive salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ. God does not want us to experience the unpleasant consequences of sin. He has planned something far better for us—salvation.

In this letter, written to people who were already Christians, Paul does not say much about *how* a person is saved. The only glimpse comes in verse 10: **He died for us so that, whether we are awake or asleep, we may live together with him.** This is where the discussion started: Whether we live until Christ returns (are awake), or if we die (are asleep), either way, the purpose and result is the same: we will live with him. That’s the salvation he obtained for us.

Paul concludes: **Therefore encourage one another and build each other up, just as in fact you are doing.** As the young church struggled to hold on to their faith in a time of persecution, they saw that everything, whether life or death, made sense only in Christ. **co**

Taking it personally

- Am I disappointed by the idea that Christ may not return in my lifetime?
- What will I think as I rise into the air to greet Christ?
- Have I used these words to encourage others?
- How does a belief in resurrection lead me to self-control?

The Greeks Had a Word for It

“Παρουσία”

The Greek word *parousia* comes from the preposition *para*, meaning “near,” and the participle *ousia*, which means “being.” Literally, it means “being near”; in everyday Greek it meant “presence” or “arrival.” In addition to these ordinary uses, it also “became the official term for a visit of a person of high rank, especially of kings and emperors visiting a province.”³ Paul referred to his own presence (Phil. 1:26), and the presence of the “man of sin” (2 Thess. 2:9), but when he used this word he usually meant the presence of Jesus Christ, returning visibly and

in strength. As a result, Parousia has entered English as a theological term for the return of Christ.

¹ Ben Witherington III, *Jesus, Paul, and the End of the World* (InterVarsity, 1992), 24. **co**

² For a more thorough analysis of this theory, see the article at www.wcg.org/lit/prophecy/rapture.htm.

³ F.W. Danker, ed., *Greek-English Lexicon* (U. of Chicago, 2000), 781.

Hmm...

Historical research, as I have tried to show in various places, by no means tells us to throw away the Gospels and substitute a quite different story of our own. It does, however, warn us that our familiar reading of those Gospels may well have to submit to serious challenges and questionings and that we may end up reading even our favorite texts in ways we had never imagined. ...It takes a certain courage, of course, to be prepared to read familiar texts in new ways. It is abundantly worth it. What you lose in terms of your regular readings will be more than made up for in what you will gain.

N. T. Wright,

The Challenge of Jesus, p. 27

The Son descended that he might raise us up, he went down to corruption, that corruption might put on immortality, he became weak for us, that we might rise with power, he descended to death, that he might bestow on us immortality, and give life to the dead. Finally, he became man, that we who die as men might live again, and that death should no more reign over us.

Athanasius

Don't waste your life in doubts and fears; spend yourself on the work before you, well assured that the right performance of this hour's duties will be the best preparation for the hours or ages that follow it.

Ralph Waldo Emerson

If I suffer a time of spiritual aridity, of darkness and blankness, should I stop praying until new life enters my prayers? Every one of the spiritual masters insists, "No." If I stop praying, how will I know when prayer does become alive again? And, as many Christians have discovered, the habit of not-praying is far more difficult to break than the habit of praying.

Philip Yancey,

Prayer: Does It Make Any Difference?, p. 195

One-liners

The will of God never takes you to where the grace of God will not protect you.

The task ahead of us is never as great as the power behind us.

Coincidence is when God chooses to remain anonymous.

It is easier to preach ten sermons than it is to live one.

God promises a safe landing, not a calm passage.

Forgiveness is the fragrance the violet sheds on the heel that has crushed it.

Mark Twain

Let there be kindness in your face, in your eyes, in your smile, in the warmth of your greeting.... Don't only give your care, but give your heart as well.

Mother Teresa

Once the game is over, the king and the pawn go back into the same box.

Italian proverb

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